



A DARK
HOCKEY MM
ROMANCE

MY PUCKIN' CRUSH

AWARD WINNING AUTHOR
TORI CHASE

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Covers by The Author Buddy

Publisher: Chasing Dreams by Deborah A. Garland

<https://www.deborahgarlandauthor.com/blog/tori-chase-romance/>

Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[From the Author/Disclaimer](#)

[DEDICATION](#)

[ONE](#)

[TWO](#)

[THREE](#)

[FOUR](#)

[FIVE](#)

[SIX](#)

[SEVEN](#)

[EIGHT](#)

[NINE](#)

[TEN](#)

[ELEVEN](#)

[TWELVE](#)

[THIRTEEN](#)

[FOURTEEN](#)

FIFTEEN

SIXTEEN

SEVENTEEN

EIGHTEEN

NINETEEN

TWENTY

TWENTY-ONE

TWENTY-TWO

TWENTY-THREE

TWENTY-FOUR

TWENTY-FIVE

TWENTY-SIX

TWENTY-SEVEN

TWENTY-EIGHT

TWENTY-NINE

THIRTY

THIRTY-ONE

THIRTY-TWO

THIRTY-THREE

THIRTY-FOUR

THIRTY-FIVE

THIRTY-SIX

THIRTY-SEVEN

THIRTY-EIGHT

THIRTY-NINE

FORTY

FORTY-ONE

FORTY-TWO

FORTY-THREE

FORTY-FOUR

FORTY-FIVE

FORTY-SIX

FORTY-SEVEN

FORTY-EIGHT

FORTY-NINE

FIFTY

FIFTY-ONE

FIFTY-TWO

FIFTY-THREE

FIFTY-FOUR

FIFTY-FIVE

FIFTY-SIX

FIFTY-SEVEN

FIFTY-EIGHT

FIFTY-NINE

SIXTY

SIXTY-ONE

SIXTY-TWO

SIXTY-THREE

SIXTY-FOUR

SIXTY-FIVE

SIXTY-SIX

SIXTY-SEVEN

SIXTY-EIGHT

SIXTY-NINE

SEVENTY

SEVENTY-ONE

SEVENTY-TWO

SEVENTY-THREE

SEVENTY-FOUR

[SEVENTY-FIVE](#)

[SEVENTY-SIX](#)

[SEVENTY-SEVEN](#)

[SEVENTY-EIGHT](#)

[SEVENTY-NINE](#)

[EIGHTY](#)

[EIGHTY-ONE](#)

[EIGHTY-TWO](#)

[EPILOGUE](#)

[OTHER ROMANCES BY TORI CHASE](#)

[ROMANCES BY DEBORAH GARLAND](#)

[Meet Tori Chase](#)

From the Author/Disclaimer



From the very first Reverse Harem, I was always more passionate about the MM romance within the harem. In *Shared by the Highest Bidder*, I delved deeper than ever before into the MM relationship, past and present. It made sense to write an MM standalone. A new genre is always challenging. I added the hockey aspect and I was out of my depth. Thanks to my editors, it all came together.

This novel is purely fictional, divisions and conferences in this story are simply North, South, East, and West. The final trophy is the Dresden Cup, not the Stanley Cup (which is trademarked). Any existing hockey teams with the name 'Crushers' in either fiction or in reality is purely a coincidence.

For those who read [*Shared by the Highest Bidder*](#), the last scene is re-told here in Max's POV. The timeline may or may not exactly line up from *Bidder* to *Crush* since this book was written later and it wasn't clear where that scene would best work.

The following subject matter list in this book might trigger some readers:

Graphic violence

Poisoning

Adult language

Strong sexual content

Reference to teenage SA by a male relative

Reference to death of a spouse and a child

Homophobic slurs

Parental manipulation

Car accident

There is no cheating, and there is a satisfying, happy ever after.

DEDICATION



If you're here, you've chosen love and freedom to read what you want. Writing this material has caused friction with my family members even though I publish under a pen name.
I hope this book sends them over the edge!

ONE



Max

I breathe in the scent of musk, deep woods, and spice. My head drifts left and my jaw tightens.

No. Not that. I can't.

A handsome, masculine face with high cheekbones and full lips lays a knowing grin on me that probably sends plenty of men into the bathroom for a hookup. I'm not just anyone. I'm a professional athlete, and discretion is vital. Especially with men.

I can't pick up a dude sitting in a musty bar after a game. One where I eviscerated our conference rival and deserve to get my dick wet. When I glare at him, he walks away, but I salivate over the kind of ass that weakens my resolve.

I take a pull on my beer and count to ten.

Whew, that was close. Because I do need relief. The kind of relief only another man can provide. Christ, it's been so long since I've allowed myself to indulge in the taste of a feral male.

To erase that stranger from my mind, I cut my gaze to a table of women. Safe.

Shots. Shots. Shots.

Their cheers ring out like a sweet chorus.

Promising.

Until I see a veil.

Not another bachelorette party. It sickens me knowing a woman about to marry another dude will easily get on her knees and blow me. I know this because it happened once.

Maybe twice. In my defense, I didn't initiate the blowjobs.

A woman wanting nothing but her lips around my cock is a valuable perk at my level of sports fame. And winning tonight's hard-fought game against our rival, Richmond, should offer more of an award.

I could talk up one of the uncommitted BFFs, but tonight at Norwalk City Grill, the bride is the star. With my status as a hockey god, attention to

anyone but her will pivot this into a real shit show.

The team, the league, the press, and the fans all expect me to be with a certain type of woman. But even when I end up with a perfect ten, her looks don't truly matter. Not to me.

It's a body, and it keeps my reputation intact. If people knew the truth, my career would be over. Fans would never accept who I am.

It doesn't matter what I really want. Where my true desires lie. What stirs a fire in my gut and hardens my dick to steel. My needs and wants are still wrapped in shame and confusion.

Doing what's expected of me is my brand. Everyone wins. Except me. My heart.

I'm thirty-six, single, and I've never had a girlfriend. Sure, I've fucked plenty of women. But it's always me going through the motions. It's the means to an end, an orgasm. The culinary equivalent of empty calories.

With the increased high-pitched cackling, I ignore the party. Taking another swig of beer, I wonder if I should just get hammered and go home. Alone. Again.

"Number 43. Max Ryan!" someone blurts from behind me, flattening my smile.

I adore my fans, but psycho enthusiasm is for the arena. I'm here to unwind.

Turning, my eyes widen. Jesus. Talk about utter female perfection. Is she even real?

"That's me, darlin'." The overused and meaningless endearment rolls off my tongue. "And you are?"

"Yours. For tonight. If you want me."

I snort. Too fucking easy. Then again, I like the no-complications, and more importantly, the no-strings aspect of what she's offering. If I were a nobody, some lawyer or finance guy from Manhattan, I suspect I'd relish a little more chase.

I'm a public figure.

A celebrity.

A hockey star.

I can't be too careful these days. As much as I need to bury my dick inside something warm and tight, *anything* at this point, I can't look so easy.

"Wanna tell me your name?" I ask to sound like I care, even though I don't.

“Where we’re going, we don’t need...names.”

I bark out a laugh at the *Back to the Future* pun.

“Do you live around here, Marty McFly?” I ask.

“No.” She downs the shot in her hand and a waft of vodka hits my nose, overtaking her perfume. “I live in California. I’m in Connecticut for business.”

My hockey team built an arena right smack in the middle of Stamford, Connecticut. Even here in trendy Norwalk, a few towns over, I’ve not run into too many out-of-town businesspeople.

“Are you staying long enough to get fucked by a hockey god?”

She leans against the bar. “How many times can you come before my eight-a.m. flight tomorrow?”

Nothing long-term, thank God.

I gulp down the rest of my beer and toss a twenty on the bar. “Let’s go find out.”

Ten minutes later, I’m strolling behind her on the street as she leads me to her hotel room at the nearby Mariner Inn. The balmy late March air seeps in from the harbor a few blocks away.

A hotel room is ideal. And since it’s not mine, I can leave at any time. I don’t have to be rude and ask a woman to leave when we’re done. I’d never go to a strange woman’s house after hearing horror stories of married women wanting to taunt neglectful husbands.

My date makes no attempt to kiss me in the elevator, which I prefer. My eyes stay focused on her lower regions. That ass underneath a tight skirt is all I need tonight.

My speech sits on my tongue: *On your hands and knees, grab the headboard. Yeah, that’s lube on your asshole. Hold the fuck on...*

At the end of the hall, I’m surprised she brings me to a suite. The door opens, and that familiar smell of fresh cotton and citrus hits me, kicking up memories of nearly fifteen years traveling with the Stamford Crushers.

Slipping off her shoes and tossing them aside, my date says, “Make yourself comfortable. I’ll be right out.”

Glancing around at a fancy sofa and two chairs in front of an accented wall with a television, my speech might have to be amended to say: *Grab the back of the sofa.*

Not as sexy, but neither command is very intimate.

The sound of a door opening pulls my attention, and I think I’m hearing

things. It couldn't be the front door to the suite, but when I spin around, my heart lands in my throat.

Two men the size of tanks stand there wearing ski masks. One is wearing a black leather jacket, the other a navy wool pea coat.

Fuck. I try to stay cool. "Look, I just met her."

Leather Jacket Guy brandishes a hockey stick in lieu of a response.

Whose stick is it? It can't be mine. All my equipment is locked up in the arena.

"Whoa, whoa." I step back. "Come on. She wasn't wearing a ring. She invited me here." My frantic brain catches the tape on the handle, the lime green color jogging a memory.

From the enforcer's gear in tonight's game against Richmond. What the fuck?

Leather Jacket Guy lifts the stick and twirls it in a practiced move. When he smacks the wood against his meaty palm, the sound of skin on skin triggers a memory. My sight goes fuzzy for a moment.

"Should we make him beg?" Leather asks Pea Coat, using a Russian accent.

Russian. Oh, dear God, this is a fucking robbery scam I heard about!

I wave my hand and reach for my wallet. "Okay, you got me. How much? I got two hundred and change on me. Or I can go to an ATM. No one has to get hurt."

A few thousand to save my life is a no brainer.

"We don't want money." Pea Coat pulls out a knife from an inside pocket.

The glinting blade should terrify me, but it kicks up the opposite. Anger-fueled adrenaline rushes through my veins like liquid fire.

"Then what do you fucking want?" I bark, eyeing the stick.

"You," Leather says.

All kinds of wicked thoughts momentarily pulse through me. Is this some kind of prank? From someone in my past? Or the guy I turned down?

"Me? Why?" I ask with a tight throat.

"Shut up." Leather Jacket swings the hockey stick at my head.

Decades of instincts shoot my hand up to block the collision, the stick slamming against my wrist. Pain explodes up my arm, but I grab the end of the stick.

We struggle, and moments later, I own the stick.

“Okay, motherfuckers. Come on.” I swing with all my might, smashing Pea Coat’s left shin.

He drops the knife and falls back, crab-crawling toward the door where he uses the handle to get to his feet.

This fight is still two-on-one. Three, if I include the chick, who I’ve lost in the melee.

It all happens so fast. Leather picks up the knife and rushes me, but I grab his arm, my agonizing wrist keeping the blade from... From what? He’s just holding it.

He isn’t trying to stab me in the chest. Or the neck. He’s not trying to...kill me.

To the amateur, a hockey stick against a knife might be useless. But if this came from Richmond, a professional club, the blade part of the stick should be sharp enough to give me a fighting chance.

Before I start slicing these douchebags, something I’ll have to explain if I’m not stabbed, I swing the stick again and take out Leather’s knee. He goes down too, the knife falling to the ground.

I stomp my left foot on the blade and raise the stick over his head.

“Who sent you?” I yell, my gut screaming that this wasn’t random. “Did my uncle send you?”

Confusion pinches Leather’s eyebrows, and I shake that ridiculous suggestion away. It’d been years since I’d seen Uncle Harris. Years since the summer he damaged my soul.

A secret I’ve kept from my father about his sketchy brother.

“Come on,” Pea Coat yells, yanking the door open. “We tell boss he’s too strong.”

Boss? Whose boss?

Leather rises to his feet but sways from side to side, ignoring his Pea Coat friend. He’s got bloodlust in his eyes. He wants another piece of me. But he’s lost his weapon *and* his partner.

Years of watching an opponent trains me to notice the shifting of his weight. He’s not on his front feet to make a retreat, he’s resting on his back foot.

I try to prepare, but he’s too fast. Grunting, he charges forward with the speed of a doped-up Olympic athlete and crashes into me. I drop the stick as my back slams into the wall, knocking the wind out of me. My head snaps back, too. I see stars, and slump to the ground.

“Someone coming down hall,” a voice yells.

I’ve lost track of who’s who, as I’m fading. The room starts to spin, but I catch the two men leaving, and I breathe a sigh of relief. I’m fighting consciousness, and the last thing I see is someone standing over me.

That familiar perfume forces my eyes open.

The woman.

“Sorry, handsome.”

“Oh shit.”

“Nothing personal.” She lifts something, a shadow covering me.

The last thing I see is a metal lamp coming down on my head.

TWO



Luca

“Suck my cock,” I groan to the beast of a man on his knees in front of me. The new male-on-male fantasy room at Club Dare is going to eat away my current savings. But this Manhattan club is miles away from Connecticut where I live and work doing security for the Stamford Crushers hockey team.

And this guy sucking my cock doesn’t mind wearing a red, gold, and black hockey jersey and nothing else.

My team won against their brutal rivals, Richmond, tonight, so I treated myself. I’m naked and watching my cock slide in and out of his full lips. Focusing on any other part of this guy will kill my buzz.

The jersey I requested he wear is number 43, Max Ryan’s number. Max and the other players left the stadium after the team’s win. They headed for one of their usual bars in Norwalk to pick up women to fuck. Irony because my houseboat is docked one hundred yards from the bar, and it would be the perfect place to fuck Max in the dark.

I’m in crush hell, lusting after a player on the team I work for. *And* he’s straight. I’d sworn off straight guys. Was tired of lusting after them with none of the payoff.

I was open to bi, though.

But in comes a beautiful woman, and it’s bye bi.

I have an unhealthy obsession with Max. Five years lusting after someone I’ll never have has ruined any chance of a real relationship. I really have to move on. Find a man who’ll give me what I need. Like this guy swallowing my cock like a pro right now. I imagine Max would give great head if he were gay.

I dream about that thick neck, perfect square jaw, and wide mouth.

“Fuck, yeah. I’m close,” I mutter, seconds from coming down this guy’s throat. But I want to come inside him while he’s on his hands and knees, me railing him like there’s no tomorrow.

A buzzing sound from my jeans laying on the floor jars me out of the

scene. It's nearly midnight. No one calls me this late.

Not anymore.

"Hang on." I yank my dick out of the wet mouth and grab my phone.

"Hey, it's your hard-on." He sits back and strokes his own dick. "I'll wait."

Charming.

I freeze when I see it's my boss, the Director of Security for the Crushers.

Something happened...

"This is Luca."

"Sheppard," Hank Bronwin's scratchy voice using my fake last name snaps me to attention. "Where are you?"

I buried the name Korolev after I escaped the clutches of a bitter Russian pakhan who wanted me dead after my wife and son died in a car accident.

"I'm in the city. Why?"

"Get back to Stamford. Now."

I exhale and reach for my jeans. I changed out of my suit before heading to Club Dare. Team security dresses sharply, just like the players when they come and go from the stadium.

"Why now, sir?"

"Ryan's in the hospital."

Fear skitters across my skin. Did Max have an aneurism? These guys get whacked in the head with a stick and walk away like a fly landed on them. But there's always the chance of a brain bleed that doesn't cripple the player until hours later.

"What happened to him?" I hastily fist money from my wallet to tip my date who can't finish me off. "Is he okay?"

My chance of hot sex stands up and takes my money. Walking out of the playroom, his perfect ass peeks out from beneath Max's jersey.

"Yo, leave that jersey," I mumble.

He shrugs out of the shirt, and drops it on the floor like it means nothing. Without a look back, he leaves me alone in the playroom.

I bend over to quickly pick up the jersey. It means *everything* to me. I'd kill for Max Ryan to suck my cock just once. If he's seriously hurt, my fantasy may never happen.

Not that it had a chance of happening anyway.

"Get to Stamford General." Bronwin's signal starts to break up. "I'll explain everything in detail when you get here."

THREE



Max

“You’re lucky,” an ER doctor says, glancing over the results from a barrage of tests.

For the last few hours, I’ve had every inch of my body examined, short of a colonoscopy.

The blow to the head with the lamp knocked me out for a few minutes. When I woke up, the woman and the men were gone. But the damage was done.

I was out cold, and they just left me. I don’t know if they wanted me dead. That’s a lot to clean up in a hotel.

Avoiding the risk of someone else finding me, I called Coach.

“So, we’re looking at a concussion, facial contusions, and a heavily bruised wrist,” Coach Tatum Beck confirms with the doctor.

The ailments strung together twist my stomach. Wiggling my hands, I feel a shocking sting from my left wrist. I’ve played with broken fingers. But a concussion will keep me off the ice.

My agent and my closest friends on the team stand behind Coach Beck. Stefan Willis and Troy Madison sport lethal grimaces. Beck probably dragged them in here. They’re the only guys who can talk me off the ledge when I wake up enough and try to get out of here.

I’m notoriously stubborn. But as the team captain, I have to think of the other players first.

My vision still wobbly, I notice my two teammates suddenly morph into three. Someone else hovers in the back of the room. He’s a blur, but that familiar buzz in my veins roars to life despite lying here all banged up.

Fuck. No.

My head isn’t screwed on right. I’m concussed. I’m probably just seeing things.

“Do you want me to call anyone else, Max?” my agent, Noah, asks, coming abreast of Coach.

He manages me and Willis, along with a few others on the Crushers.

“No,” I say sharply.

“Not even your mother?” Coach asks, his eyebrows pinched together.

Makes me sound lame. At thirty-six, with no wife or girlfriend, the first person everyone thinks to call is Mommy.

“What time is it?” I ask, my voice losing its battle from pain and exhaustion.

“Three a.m.,” Willis says.

“My mother is most definitely asleep.” I doubt she’d care at any hour.

That goes double for my father, who takes the money I send him, usually without a thank you. And siphons most of it to my younger brother who can’t keep a job.

Don’t ask me when they last showed up at a game, even though they’re sent season ticket passes for prime seats right behind the team bench every damn year.

When Dad found out I was boning my teammate and best friend Jake in high school, my once happy, tight-knit family iced me out. Mom and Dad stopped coming to my games, and it felt like I didn’t exist.

Jake and I never spoke again despite being on the same team for another three years. He never made it to the professional league like me. Not that I would dare to look him in the eye if he was right in front of me. He betrayed me.

My high school coach, Coach Avalon, restored my faith, accepted me for what I was. Built me back up. Got me into an Ivy League college on a hockey scholarship where I ended up going third in the draft in my senior year.

My parents never visited me at college and didn’t go to the draft.

I feel as if my thoughts are being broadcasted on the television as a fresh silence echoes in the hospital room. They moved me in here rather quickly. Celebrities don’t linger on a gurney in the ER.

The man behind my teammates shifts like he read my mind just now. No, he’s not imaginary.

I glance at him, expecting he’d look away as most people do when I make eye contact—me, the hockey star, the celebrity. No, he holds my stare with a smile ghosting his lips.

“What does he want?” I ask, attempting to lift my arm to point, but it’s tugged back from all the tubes I’m tangled in.

Coach glances over his shoulder, and with a hand up to stop the guy from answering me, he says, “When can my guy be discharged, doc?”

“We need twelve to twenty-four hours to watch the concussion.”

“Am I on the list, Coach?” I ask about the dreaded league’s injured list.

Back in the day, it was faxed to all the teams. Now, thanks to the internet, fans ogle at all the benched players. And bookies clean up in dirty bets.

“Not yet,” Coach says. “Reid is waiting to hear from me.”

GM Aaron Reid has his Lamborghini all picked out from the bonus he’ll get if we go into the postseason. He’s not reporting shit if he doesn’t have to. The rule says, if you bench a player for injuries, it must be reported. But teams skirt those rules. Those on the list? They’re really hurt and out for days, sometimes weeks.

“We don’t play again until Friday,” Madison reminds me.

“You’ll be ready by then, won’t you, Max?” Noah sparks my confidence.

I nod to my agent. “Hell yeah.”

We have nine more games in the regular season, and we need four wins to clinch the playoffs. Two of them are against Richmond, our arch rival, who we beat tonight. The late season match-ups were a fluke in the scheduling. It changes every year.

Coach’s gaze lands on his star winger and center. “Willis. Madison. Go home. Get some sleep. You still have morning skate.”

“Sure thing, Coach,” Madison says.

They each stop at the bottom of my hospital bed. “We’re praying for you, brother,” Willis says and leaves.

Madison follows him after giving me a thumbs up.

“Thanks, doc.” Coach shakes the doctor’s hand. “Please close the door on your way out.”

The ER doc looks miffed to be dismissed. For once he’s not the rockstar in the room. But he complies, and when the door shuts, the room gets darker.

It feels like a tomb.

“Now it’s just us in here,” Coach says with a glare. “How do you *really* feel?”

“Like I got attacked by two men with a stick, a knife, and a bitch with a lamp.” I blow out a breath, fighting exhaustion. “Any idea who did this?”

“We’re investigating, but the hotel will only hand over security video to the cops.” Coach seems more rattled than I’ve ever seen him.

“What’s the plan here?” I say.

“So glad you asked,” Coach says and signals for the mystery man in the corner to come forward.

FOUR



Luca

“Luca.” Coach Beck waves me forward to Max’s bedside.

A shiver at the base of my spine wobbles my gait, but I recover. I let my obsession with Max Ryan go too far. Never in a million years did I think I’d be this close to him, even though Crushers security agents travel with the team. They’re the warriors, and we’re the perimeter that keeps the fanatics away. We maintain our distance, never approaching a player except in unusual circumstances.

Like this.

Occasionally, guards wander into the locker room, where athletes are not shy about nudity. Or jerking off in front of each other for fun or to haze new players. How they’re all not raging homosexuals astonishes me the way they all love up on each other’s massive cocks.

I avoid the locker room at all costs, not wanting to see Max Ryan naked, because his dick and ass already show up in every one of my fantasies.

Here he is, in a hospital bed. Hurt. Vulnerable. And naked under that thin hospital gown.

Chin up, arms behind my back, I meet Max’s eyes and nod. “Mr. Ryan.”

“Who the fuck *are* you?” he bites in my direction.

Angry. I like that.

Defensemen are the most brutal on the ice. I hate when I see them out of uniform acting like golden retrievers.

Max’s brooding, grumpy personality sticks with him from what I’ve seen. I’m a masochist for wanting him to turn that anger on me. I top my lovers, but the idea of Max topping me has cranked this obsession into high gear.

Something new. Something filthy. Something forbidden.

“Max!” Beck scolds him. “This is Luca Sheppard. He works security for the team.”

It’s not shocking he doesn’t recognize me. We’re supposed to be invisible.

“Preliminary digging ties the woman who lured you to the hotel room to

Richmond,” Beck reports, summing up the intel work I’ve been doing while Max got treated and tortured with tests.

Hearing he was in a hotel room with a woman initially turned my stomach. Then I traced her to Ivan Belova, and my heart nearly burst out of my chest.

Christ, what does the Chicago Bratva pakhan I clawed myself away from have to do with this? He left me for dead five years ago during an attack on the Italians that went horribly wrong.

I’m praying this is just a wild coincidence.

“That woman set me up.” Max’s eyes slip closed. “She let those guys into the room. They were Russian. Does that mean anything?”

When his eyes stray to me again, I look away. I guess I can’t hide my Russian genes. The dark hair, dark eyes, and beard give me away. But I shed my accent to blend in when I got hired five years ago.

Good thing, because Ivan Belova just bought a damn hockey team that happens to be bitter eastern division rivals with Stamford. Maybe I’m being paranoid. They attacked Max and not me.

It’s not like Max means anything to me—except I’m obsessed with him.

“Luca did some of his own investigating. That hotel room was paid for with a wire transfer from an account that also received money from Richmond,” Beck says.

Max’s jaw tips open. “The tape. On the stick they used to obliterate my wrist. It was the same color tape a couple of Richmond players used. I figured the stick was stolen.”

Beck goes ramrod straight and barks at me, “Did you recover a stick from the room?”

“No, Coach. Those guys were sloppy, but even idiots wouldn’t leave evidence like that behind. They were slick enough to charge the room to a shell company.” One I recognized because I used to work for the man who did this. “I talked to the security guard at the hotel, and he said when his front desk manager asked those low lives why they were carrying a hockey stick through the lobby, they said they knew a few players were at the bar nearby and they wanted an autograph.”

The guard told me off-the-record they’re known local thugs who are more goofballs than anything. Figures they screwed up.

“It’s not a coincidence. Richmond wanted you to know it was them,” Beck grumbles, his anger growing. “We have two more games against them.

It's mental warfare."

"I'm going to slaughter those motherfuckers at the next game," Max says gruffly.

"You keep up that energy, but first, you have to make it to the next game." Beck grips his shoulder. "They got you off the ice. They may try again. Which is why I asked Luca to meet us here."

Max's eyes widen. "No."

Yeah, he figured out why I'm here.

"Absolutely not." Max shakes his head, wincing in pain he's trying to hide.

I see everything.

"It's not up to you," Beck says, and turns to Max's agent. "Noah, back me up here."

"Listen to your coach, Max."

"Why the fuck would Richmond do this?" Max asks, rubbing his forehead. "Cole Ferris—"

"Cole Ferris sold Richmond right at the deadline," Beck informs Max.

"Wait..." Max attempts to sit up, and it kills me to watch him in pain. "Who bought the team?"

"That's not important." Beck shakes his head. "There's no way an owner would condone this type of attack."

Ivan Belova would. The new Richmond owner is known to the world as a European oil baron who loves hockey. It can be just a coincidence, but it doesn't feel that way. I've been listening to my gut for years, I'm not stopping now. It saved my ass in Boston when Belova tried to have me killed.

"We don't have enough proof to go to the league with a formal inquiry," Beck adds, swearing under his breath.

"You don't want things like this on your record, Max." Typical for his agent to worry about his rep more than his health.

"This is hockey, not ice dancing," Beck hammers home the point. "You're a tough bastard who can take a hit. You don't need the league to fight your battles."

Only, Belova is a monster.

I should know.

He's my brother-in-law.

FIVE



Max

I know where *this is going*.

“Spit it out, Coach. I’m exhausted.” I steady my gaze on the man with the most gorgeous and haunting dark eyes I’ve ever seen.

“Luca will be your personal bodyguard.”

Luca... Fuck, that’s a sexy name, but crap, I didn’t think Coach would go *this far*.

“Hang on.” I hold up a hand. “Define personal.”

“He’ll be moving in with you.”

The man, the *guard*, stiffens like this part of the assignment is news to him as well.

“That’s going too far,” I argue. “I’ll let him tail me.”

“*Tail* you?” he speaks to me for the first time with a dark eyebrow raised, his deep voice smooth and velvety.

Oh no...

I do not need this distraction. This temptation.

“Keeping an eye on me,” I say through a tight throat, my balls vibrating. It’s fucking unraveling me. What is this?

“The entire security team already keeps an eye on the players,” Coach challenges me. “This is another layer of specialized security for you off the ice.”

“My apartment building has guards, and my penthouse has a security system.”

“The guards aren’t armed,” Luca points out. “They can be compromised. Paid to look the other way. They won’t fight back for minimum wage. Especially the overnight guards. It irritates me how the building managers skimp on security when the residents are most vulnerable.”

He speaks like he’s already checked out my building.

“Fine. Stake out my building. Sit in the lobby. Knock yourself out.” I’m quite easy to watch. During the day, I work out, go to practice, and... I struggle to finish that. What the hell else do I do?

Nothing. I have no life.

“You have four bedrooms in that penthouse of yours, right?” Coach folds his arms.

I break the stare from Luca. “Three. I use one as an office.”

“Luca will stay in one of those bedrooms. We’ll take it week by week,” Coach intervenes again. “Right now, when you leave here, you’re leaving with Sheppard. He’s taking you home, moving in. Where you go, he goes. When you sleep, he sleeps.”

“Then how does he protect me if he’s sleeping?” I bite back, realizing I don’t know how it works with personal bodyguards.

“I’m a light sleeper,” Luca huffs. “And trained to deal with middle-of-the-night intruders.”

Middle of the night? My world closes in around me.

“Looks like you’re not getting discharged until tomorrow.” Coach shoves a hand through his hair, looking wrecked. “Get some sleep. The GM will keep you off the official injured list. Say you’re dealing with a personal issue for a few days before the Cape May game.”

I exhale. “Sure thing, Coach.”

He smiles and then looks at Luca. “You good to post outside his room until he gets discharged?”

“Yes, sir.”

Tough bastard, dragged out here in the middle of the night and has to stay awake to stare at bland walls. The room is pretty pathetic, too, but moving me to some kind of VIP suite will get people talking.

Coach nods my way. “Get. Some. Sleep. We’ll get through this.”

Nodding, I watch him shake hands with Luca. With the weight of the world already on his shoulders this close to the end of the season, Coach and my agent leave me alone with this brooding man who makes my stomach do flip flops.

I expect the guard to start his post outside the room, but Luca removes his wool coat and drops it on one of the two plastic chairs next to my bed.

His movements stir a flashing memory of my father storming into my bedroom after he found out about me and Jake. It must be the blow to the head bringing back the trauma from my childhood.

Pushing up the sleeves of his dark green waffle shirt, Luca exposes tats, and I scoff inwardly. This guy couldn’t be more different from my father.

I sit up and throw the covers aside, needing to take a wicked piss.

“Whoa, what are you doing?” Luca approaches me.

Holding the bed rail, and looking to see what the hell I’m hooked up to, I say, “None of your business. You were told to post out in the hall.”

“No chairs out there.”

I laugh. Not so tough after all. But it’s a dick move to make a guy stand all night. “Take one of these.” I motion to the one with his coat.

It’s not the dark gray zip-up kind with the Crusher’s logo worn by our security team.

“You need the toilet?” he asks.

“I do.” I motion to the IV line attached to me. “Where the hell does this go?”

Here I am asking for help two seconds after trying to throw him out.

“Hang on.” He strides toward me, his cologne wafting into my nostrils, sending my heart into a free fall. “Here’s the stand.”

With smooth precision, he unhooks a bag of clear liquid from the bedpost, and hangs it on the rolling stand. Then he finds the tube, following it to my arm. His hand brushes against my wrist. “Jeez, you’re ice cold.”

“Get used to it. I’m not a warm and fuzzy guy.”

“Neither am I. We’ll get along perfectly.” He unwinds the tube, freeing me from this damn bed.

Despite the saline drip, my sight goes hazy from the blow to my head and loss of blood.

Luca is there, with a hold that I recognize as a professional way to keep a dude steady.

“I got it.” I shrug away anyway and clench my stomach to make it to the damn bathroom without falling on my face.

SIX



Luca

Planted on one of the chairs, I close my eyes, imagining Max in the bathroom, holding his dick to piss. I assume, unless the dude sits. That would be a blow to my fantasies.

The bathroom door opens, and I shake those thoughts away. I caught how he reacted to me when I got close to him. The way his nostrils flared taking in my cologne would be a dead giveaway if he were gay. But he's not.

Right?

All I want to smell on him is sweat and cum. Mine. All over his body as I run my tongue through it.

Despite looking wrecked, he's still gorgeous with that mop of shiny chestnut hair that looks like someone held him down and fucked him into a cushy mattress.

Right now, I need to be professional and get him to trust me. Rely on me.

Max pauses outside the bathroom and says, "How about we make a deal. You leave here, and I don't say anything."

I stand to my full height, a few inches shorter than Max's 6'4" build, but tall enough to send a message. "If this is a test of loyalty to my boss, it's a pretty pathetic one."

Max gives me the impression I can't seduce him with kindness. If it's a fight he wants, he'll get one. And fuck, I like that.

"Look at me. I don't need a bodyguard. I made a stupid mistake," Max admits, slapping his chest. "If all Richmond has are hookers to lure me to hotel rooms, that's an easy thing to avoid."

"And they know that now," I argue. "They'll get more aggressive. Go on offensive. Oh right, you're a defenseman."

His jaw ticks. "You've been paying attention."

And then some...

"I get it," I argue. "You're the least amenable person to accept a bodyguard."

"Sounds like we agree on something."

“It’s not about a person’s strength. Your job is to play hockey. Not watch crowds for danger and tackle outside threats on your own.”

“Strength is my brand. My fans expect me to handle anything thrown my way.” As he moves, his hospital gown tightens at the waist, outlining a long, swinging cock between his thighs.

Hot. Damn.

“Even if it keeps you off the ice?” I approach Max to help get him back into the bed. “Now lay your ass down, Captain. Your coach assigned me to protect you. I’m not going anywhere. Quit trying to get me to compromise my job.”

“Fine.” He reacts to my tone *and* my argument.

“Thank you.”

Groaning, he pushes the cover aside and barks when I try to help.

“I got it.” He turns, and the open back of the gown reveals a taught, sculpted *bare* ass.

My cock thickens instantly.

Fuck.

Tucked back into the bed, Max clicks off the light, darkening the room to the point I can’t see. My eyes not adjusting, I bump into the bed. I grab the nearest thing my hand can find so I don’t fall, which happens to be Max’s thick thigh.

“Hey!” he snaps.

“Sorry. You cut the lights. I can’t see.”

“You’re a pro. Deal with it.”

“I guess you like it in the dark,” I say with gravel in my tone.

That’s the last thing I’d want if I had this man naked and laid out. I don’t bang straight guys who need it in the dark to get off because it’s a kink. But I’d make an exception for Max. Everyone has a star-fucking fantasy. And he’s mine.

“Like it? What’s *it*?” It took a few seconds for Max to catch my pun.

“Use your imagination,” I say, settling into the chair.

At least with the lights off, I can close my eyes and catch some sleep.

SEVEN



Max

I wake up in a cold sweat, and everything hurts. But my cock throbs with need. Cracking open one eye, the light in the room startles me.

The smell.

I'm not home.

Oh right. I'm in the hospital.

Fuck.

Shooting my gaze left, I find the bodyguard camped out right next to my bed, eyes shut and head sagging forward. The guy fell asleep. Some guard. My guard. My *bodyguard*.

Luca...

My cock thickens, and I'm so confused I don't know if it's from the need to take another piss or something else. Cursing under my breath, I whip off the cover. The thin blanket falls off the side, hitting his leg and waking him up.

"What's the matter? What do you need?" Luca's eyes shoot open as reaches for his hip, like he's carrying.

Damn, that's a turn on.

But this is the second time I needed to piss and feel like a wuss who can't hold it in. "I'm fine."

"Come on." Luca stands and starts unraveling my tubes. Is this guy a guard or a home health aide? "Get your morning business out of the way. I'll get the doctor moving along to sign your ass out of here."

"We agree on something else." I put my hand up. "Seriously. Don't touch me."

His jaw tightens as he steps back, looking like I punched him in the face. "Did I do something to offend you?"

"No." My eyes slip closed, regret swamping me. "I'm sorry. I'm not used to being...babied."

"You think I'm babying you?" He steps out of the way. "My security team protects you guys because you're commodities. I'm doing my job."

“I know. I said I’m sorry.” I brush past him and take care of my morning business, feeling like shit.

When I get out of the bathroom, Luca has a steaming cup of something in his hand and is talking to the doctor.

A meal sits on a tray next to the bed. He got me breakfast.

“You’re being released in an hour.” Luca’s eyes scan me up and down. “You can get dressed. Need help?”

“No.” I twist around, looking for my clothes. “Thanks for getting food for me.”

“I didn’t. It showed up.” He finishes a cup of whatever he’s drinking. “I’ll give you privacy. If it’s all right, I’m going to hit the vending machine.”

“Honestly, Luca...”

“Luc,” he corrects me. “You can call me Luc.”

“Luc, I’m not hungry. My stomach is in knots. Take the food.” I push over a tray filled with yogurt, cereal, milk, and some kind of baked good wrapped in plastic.

Luca scans the tray. “I’ll take the yogurt. You should eat the cereal. The fiber and milk will settle your stomach.”

“You know how to work these tubes, you know about nutrition. Are you a doctor?”

He freezes and doesn’t answer me right away, but after a few seconds, he says, “I know how to take care of people.”

A nurse steps inside, all cheery. “Good morning. I’m here to remove your IV.”

“Thank fuck. I mean. Thank you,” I say to her.

She blushes. “No problem. I’ve heard worse.” Her warm hand strokes my skin, swiftly removing the line and pressing down on the wound dressing, but the touch doesn’t register like it should. “You’re all set. An admin will be here in a few minutes with your discharge papers.” She hesitates to leave, smooths her hair, and smiles. “I hope you don’t mind me saying so, but I’m a big fan of yours.”

My chest tightens, I’m supposed to be laying low. “Thanks, darlin’.” I smile at her, pushing away the pounding in my chest from worrying I’ll be benched for the rest of the season.

Over her shoulder, I catch Luca watching us, his lips flat.

She’s not a threat. It’s like he’s...jealous.

What the heck?

Without another word, Luca snags the yogurt off my tray and heads out of my room, closing the door.

EIGHT



Luca

I should be used to it by now. Watching women flirt with Max and him flirt right back. It's the soul-crushing consequence of having a thing for a straight guy.

I'm tempted to tell my boss to inform Coach Beck he should give this assignment to another agent on the security team. But I can't say why. My name, my background information is fake. GM Reid and Bronwin can't know I used to work for Belova.

And I can't tell anyone I'm obsessed with Max.

He'll love me backing off, though. He doesn't want a bodyguard. No other player on the team has protection like this.

Max got it right, saying it's antithetical for a six-foot mountain of a hockey player to have a bodyguard. Hockey is just different. They're working-class players making decent, but not obscene salaries like football or baseball stars.

Most guys on the team are married and live quietly with their families in the suburbs. The single ones, like Max, live in high rises with doormen and locked parking garages.

A penthouse I'm apparently moving into. While I wrap my head around that one, Coach Beck shows up with the team doctor, and when *he* approves Max's release, we're on the move.

Walking to the elevator, I keep pace behind everyone, taking up my position in the rear watching for trouble. Knowing the bratva wants to hurt Max, my gaze sharpens for trouble. They won't come at him head-on again. They won't send another woman to tempt him. The next attack will be one of stealth.

A guy on a bicycle racing by with a shiv when he's jogging, or a car running him off the road.

A suspicious package mailed to him.

People need to see he has a bodyguard. But I can't have Ivan Belova recognize me.

Catching my reflection in the polished elevator car, I wonder if the beard and longer hair is enough of a change to my appearance. This new assignment makes it more important than ever that I grew out the military flat top. Now my dark shaggy curls cover my ears and flop in my eyes while wearing shades. I need to keep Ivan from suspecting it's me.

He'd never guess on his own that I'd go from his number three enforcer, doing brutal hits, to working security for a professional hockey team.

Yet, here I am.

Outside, Coach Beck instructs everyone where to go and what to do. He drives Max home to his apartment where, according to Beck, his closest teammates, Willis and Madison, are waiting for him. They'll stay with Max while I drive back to my houseboat in Norwalk and pack up to live with the object of my obsession.

Two hours later, I arrive at the snazzy penthouse, and only Beck is still with Max. But after shaking my hand and silently wishing me luck, he takes off.

Max eyes my two suitcases and several garment bags, the color draining from his face. "How long do you plan to live here?"

"For the rest of the season, I assume." I should probably get some kind of idea from Bronwin.

Max shakes his head. "How many suits do you have?"

"In case you didn't notice, we wear suits to every game, like you guys," I answer in the same brusque tone. "For each suit, I need dress shirts, ties, and shoes. The days off I wear jeans, T-shirts, or casual sweaters, but different shoes. Oh, and PJ bottoms for midnight security checks."

Christ, I have to shut the fuck up.

Max raises one dark eyebrow at me. "Bottoms?"

"I'm not a matching top and bottom kind of guy." I gasp, realizing the dirty pun that just fell out of my mouth. "When I wear something to bed at all."

Most guys sleep in the nude, just rarely do straight guys talk about it to other guys.

"I'll show you where you can stay." Max struts by my pile, not lifting anything up to help me, but I don't want his help.

Plus, he's injured.

"The bedrooms are back that way, but there's a—"

"The bedrooms are that way?" I stop him from turning a corner. "Where

are you taking me?”

To bed, I’d love to hear him say.

“There’s a guest room for the housekeeper if she needs to stay over.”

Despite the updated appliances, this building is old, with classic molding and finishes. I bet it has maids’ quarters he’s talking about.

“And what if she does?” I fold my arms. “Do I sleep on the floor, or share a bed with her?”

Max tightens his fists for some reason, then shakes them loose, wincing in pain.

“Where’s your bedroom, Max?” I ask sharply.

“You’re not sleeping in my—”

“Show me.” I invade his space, my face in his to exercise my authority.

As I wait to be pushed, shoved, or punched, I breathe him in. It’s a mixture of day-old, faded cologne and male power. His eyes hit my mouth and my cock throbs.

Jesus H. Christ. Is it remotely possible my obsession isn’t one hundred percent straight? Bi-curious was too much to hope for.

After stalling, Max turns and struts toward another hallway. My mouth twists in disappointment.

What the hell am I doing?

I’m really a murderer who will eventually live in the shadows again. Being in a relationship with a fucking star hockey player isn’t in the cards for me.

After Belova tried to have me killed, I disappeared and faked my younger sister’s death. Samara is twenty-nine, but I’m eight years older and always felt responsible for her. That was until she started freelancing as a cleaner for other mob families. No one who hires her wants to know her name, let alone her background. Or who’s after her.

And she’s damn good, based on the reports I get from her.

I shake away thoughts of my sister and follow Max down a hallway painted gray with crisp white chair rail molding and industrial chic overhead lights.

Max stops in front of a door. “This is my bedroom. Unless I’m screaming for help, you don’t step one foot in here, do you understand?”

Years on the enforcer team for Belova, protecting princesses or mistresses, I’ve heard this before. And always brushed it off. Hearing Max specifically tell me he doesn’t want me in his bedroom stings.

“Let’s get one thing straight.” My insides coil when his brows furrow at the word straight, like it’s a taunt. “My job is to protect you. If I think I need to be in that room, I’m coming in.”

“If the door is locked?”

“I’ll kick it down.”

Max flushes, his jaw trembling, his eyes right on my mouth again.

Try me, bad boy. Please....

“Take that bedroom.” He points to a closed door further down the hall.

I notice a door directly across from his and open it. It’s as if I’ve stepped into a hotel room at the Four Seasons. It has a king size bed, light blue painted walls with bright white wainscoting below. There’s fancy gunmetal gray lacquered furniture. While breathing in a scent of citrus and lavender, I see a bathroom in the far corner.

“I’ll stay in here, if you don’t mind.”

“I do mind,” Max belts out. “That’s too close.”

“Too bad.” I toss in the one suitcase I carried with me and then brush past him to get the rest.

His bedroom door slams, and I shake my head, walking away. If he only knew what I do to men who throw tantrums.

After hauling all my shit into the bedroom, I meet Max in the massive kitchen.

His head is down and for a moment, I think he’s in pain. It guts me, even though he’s being an asshole.

I get it. A stranger has moved into his sanctuary, and I’m going to be up his ass for the foreseeable future.

God, I wish. Him on his back, me fucking him while I kiss the shit out of him.

I clear my throat as well as that useless fantasy from my mind. Nothing good will come from these thoughts messing with my balance.

Max looks up, wearing a T-shirt from a top pub in Norwalk. Looking closer, I see he’s making a list, and not hanging his head from pain.

“You’ve been to O’Malley’s?” I ask, rounding the high counter that divides the working kitchen from the open dining and massive living room areas.

“Sure, all the time.” He glances down at his T-shirt like he didn’t even realize what he threw on. “A few guys from the team go.”

I’m guessing O’Malley’s is where he picks up women and brings them

back here to fuck in that bed.

Jealousy fires through me.

But I can't take my eyes off him. His hair is wet and slicked back. Massive sculpted biceps challenge the T-shirt sleeves. I can't stop looking at his veins and golden skin. That O'Malley's Pub merch barely covers his waist, and the low-riding gray sweatpants cling to his hips.

Not seeing a waistband for briefs or boxers, I assume he's going commando.

All I have to do is reach inside...

"Why are you asking about O'Malley's?" Max comes close to catching me checking him out.

"I live in Norwalk. At the docks. Houseboat."

Max blinks a few times. "Those old, ragged things bouncing around in the water?"

"I'm sure the worst one you've seen is mine." Part of my cover.

"I doubt it's the worst one." He sounds friendlier for some reason. "Hey, what do you drink? I'll put it on my shopping list."

I get closer, glancing at the list. "I don't drink."

He clears his throat. "Problem?"

"That's an awfully personal question."

"I'd like to know if my bodyguard is an alcoholic."

"I've never had a problem," I scoff. "My job is to protect a multi-million-dollar franchise, it's best I stay sober during the season."

He blushes again. "Sorry. Just checking. You're living with me, and I don't know anything about you."

"I know everything about you. That's all that matters."

He tenses, the vein in his neck throbbing. "Everything?"

"Enough," I say to relieve him.

Clearly, Max Ryan has some secrets.

NINE



Luca

Later that night, a parade of hot hockey players marches into Max's penthouse to check on him. It's testosterone and beauty overload. I see these guys nearly every night. Just not this close. One hundred more could show up, all just as good looking, but I'll still want Max more than any of them.

He orders in dinner. They wanted to go out, but my strong objection was seconded by the reasonable forward, Troy Madison, who didn't want anyone to snap a photo of Max's busted-up face. He left the stadium after the last game looking perfect.

They watch the Cape May game on Max's giant widescreen TV. A team they need to beat to move up in the ranks for the best possible position going into the playoffs. Home ice is key.

I keep to myself, sitting at Max's dining table. But I get up in timed increments to patrol like a military trained Belgian Malinois.

Wingman Stefan Wills acknowledges my presence with a hello and asks how I am. The other forward, Damien Carter, looks my way a few times and then back at Max.

He keeps up the on-and-off staring all night to see if we were giving each other googly eyes behind people's backs. And then it hits me. Carter likes dick. Which means he knows I do too.

As far as I know, Carter hasn't gone public about his sexuality.

The night progresses, and you'd think it was a team meeting, not a group of friends enjoying sport. It's all shop talk and strategy.

And fucking hot.

To keep busy, I roll up my sleeves and clean up after the guys. By the time the last Crusher leaves, Max looks wrecked.

"How do you feel?" I ask him, snagging the last empty beer bottle from a wood cocktail table, further noticing stylish coasters.

Hmmm.

"None of your business," Max says, wincing as he walks away.

How the hell will he play?

“Did you take your meds? Or is that none of my business, too?” I get in his face. “I can’t protect you if you’re going to look weak and be a target.”

His right hand curls into a fist, his left wrist in a brace. “Don’t call me weak.”

“What should I call you, by the way?” I ask, folding my arms, loving his eyes all over my thick, tattooed forearms.

Will he like my piercings, too?

“Call you?” he asks for clarification.

“Do I call you Max? Mr. Ryan.” I lick my lips. “Sir.”

When that doesn’t get a rise from him, it signals he’s not into sex clubs. “Max is fine, Luc.”

I nod, loving how he remembered to call me Luc. “This will all be over soon.”

“You got that right,” he says and staggers off to bed.

I’m tempted to remind him about his meds, but the messy kitchen steals my attention. I’m a bit of a neat freak and can’t sleep with dishes in the sink. Cursing under my breath, I get to work.

Will the jackass even notice in the morning?

TEN



Luca

My eyes flutter open Thursday morning, and it takes a moment to remember where I am. The sweet scent of lavender hits me, not the brackish air from the Long Island Sound that usually fills my lungs. There's no rickety creaking of the pilings or the tide knocking against my boathouse.

It's dead silence, which unsettles me.

Fuck, that's right. I'm in Max's million-dollar penthouse. And he's sleeping across the hall from me.

Flipping over, I grab my cock like I do every morning to beat off, sometimes in my crappy bed, or even crappier shower. Knowing Max is only a few feet away, my cock hardens, begging for release.

With little sleep the night before, and the long day moving in here, I passed out the minute my head hit the pillow.

I lift my head. "Shit."

Grabbing my phone, alarmed it's dead, I realize I didn't bother plugging it in. *Fuck!*

The team has morning skate today. The security agents take shifts for non-game-day rituals. But I'm protecting Max Ryan, so if he's on the ice, I'm supposed to be there too, whether it's the practice facility, or the Crusher's state-of-the-art arena.

Security agents like me rotate a schedule for home and away games. Working as Max's personal bodyguard yanks me out of that routine.

With sleep pants hanging low on my hips, I open the bedroom door, startled to see the full view of Max's bedroom. His door is wide open, and instinct tells me he's not inside.

"Max?" I call out to him anyway.

"He left," a voice behind me makes me jump.

I'm seconds away from throwing this person against the wall, when I realize it's an older woman in a messy bun with a dishtowel slung over one shoulder.

“Who are you?” I yell, still worried who the heck this is. I’m firing on all cylinders with just a hard-on and not my other heat.

“I’m his housekeeper, you don’t have to shout.”

“You said he left?” Anger still rockets through my veins. “When?”

“As soon as I got here.” She shifts from side to side. “Can I make up your room?”

Max’s bed is made up, so she’s been here a while.

“I’m sorry.” Shaking my head, I add, “You don’t have to do that for me.”

“You’re a guest. I take care of Mr. Ryan’s guests.”

And probably the dishes in the sink. I hope that’s why Max left the kitchen a disaster.

“I’m not really a guest. I’m working. I’m supposed to be guarding him.”

“Whoops...” She chuckles. “Looks like he gave you the slip.”

“Not for long.” I turn away.

“I have coffee made, unless you prefer tea. And I can make your breakfast.”

“No time.”

“I make Mr. Ryan protein shakes and egg sandwiches for his early practices like today.”

My stomach grumbles. Just as I want Max to let me do my damn job, this woman feels the same way, I bet.

“Sure.” I clear my throat. “I’m sorry, your name?”

“Gilda. You?”

“Luca.”

“Very rugged. I’ll have everything prepared by the time you’re ready to leave.” She doesn’t wait for an answer, just leaves me standing there.

I know I need a shower, but I need to get to the practice facility and ring Max’s neck ASAP.

With Belova owning a team in this division, I have to leave the Crushers at the end of this season. It’s only a matter of time before Ivan or someone from his brotherhood recognizes me. I need my end-of-season bonus. I don’t dare touch my fortune socked away, in case someone found it and is waiting for me to make a withdrawal.

Swallowing my pride, I call Bronwin.

He picks up immediately and says, “Why am I looking at Max skating, and you’re nowhere to be found?”

“He snuck out of his penthouse early,” I hiss, my dick aching. “I’m still

adjusting to this arrangement.”

Max is not exactly cooperating, but I can’t let that jerk get me fired. I’ll tell him tonight what’s at stake. Preferably with my cock in his mouth, punishing him. Whether he likes sucking off guys or not.

“Beck’s on the ice with him, giving him a hard time. He wants Ryan to take it easy. I’ll cover for you. Get here as soon as you can.”

“10-4.” I hang up.

I take a quick shower, skipping the beard trim I really need, and use the time to make myself come so I can think straight. Dressed up in slacks, a white button-down shirt, and a tie, I throw on the team-emblazoned zip-up jacket I wear at practices.

In the garage, I gasp, spotting my Honda Pathfinder with two flat tires.
That prick!

ELEVEN



Max

I get to morning skate, and Coach tries to keep me off the ice, but I fake being one hundred percent. I've pushed away the dizziness and ignored the headaches. I get slammed against plexiglass walls on a nightly basis, land flat on my back, and I'm *expected* to get up and skate away.

Why is what happened any different?

The ice is the only place that invigorates me. The only place I feel like myself. The version of myself that I know best. The guy I trust the most. The eager, greedy defenseman who crushes hopes and dreams of centers and wingers coming at me with their pucks.

After a trainer looks at me, he approves short rounds of ice time. Just to keep my legs loose. Christ, that sounds dirty in my head. I never realized how so many innocent words to describe the game can be turned around.

A sense of dread washes over me, thinking of Luca and the hell I'll pay for sneaking out early. Okay, sneaking is an exaggeration. I quietly left my bedroom, packed my cooler bag with Gilda's high protein shake, a wrapped egg breakfast, and my special electrolyte waters.

The full security staff doesn't show up for morning skate. To be honest, I have no clue what their rotation is. Only, as Luca pointed out yesterday, they dress in suits during a game, and team jackets for practice. Some post behind our benches, some monitor the corridor near the owner's boxes, and there's usually a guy hovering over the penalty box.

Are they short a man now that someone is guarding me? Am I putting my team or owners and their families who watch the games from the boxes at risk?

Lost in thought, I skate right into Troy Madison, my already sore wrist exploding in pain.

"Fuck, Ryan. Watch where you're going. You okay? Should you even be on the ice today?"

I'm ready to throw down my gloves and ring Madison's neck for talking to me like that when I realize I'd zoned out before we collided. I'm still

skating drills while everyone else is done and stretching on the ice.

Nearing the first break, a whistle blows. I wave off Madison, clearly, he's not hurt.

The locker room buzz is palpable. We're looking forward to the game tomorrow and heard one of Cape May's wingmen got injured last night. We have a whole coaching department who strategizes based on that information, but we're the ones on the ice, so it's hard to ignore.

The scent of male sweat warms my chest, as it has my whole damn life, but I don't dare glance around. It's been that way since my high school teammate and I started messing around.

That ended badly enough.

Then it got worse.

After Jake broke it off with me, his father called my mother and said I forced myself on him. I felt so alone and betrayed. I waited for days for cops to show up, but they never did. Maybe Jake came around and told the truth.

But the damage was done as far as my parents' disappointment in me. I tried to explain to my father that I wasn't interested in girls. He told me I was confused, and chose to deal with my 'confusion' another way.

Feeling I had no one to talk to, I broke down and confessed to Coach Avalon about Jake and me. We had an intense one-on-one. He didn't judge me, but brushed off what happened between us as kids experimenting.

Even back then, I knew what we were doing was more than experimenting.

But I respected Coach A's advice and tried to move on.

The first rule of sport is Coach is God. You listen to what he says no matter what. My first coach, whose name I don't even remember, made me skate until I cried from the pain in my ankles.

His words never left me...

Pain is part of sport.

No pain no gain.

Everything I tell you to do is for your own good.

Everything I tell you to do will make you a better player.

The following year, drills included body checking. I went home with bruised ribs and aching hips every damn day.

Trainers taught us how to treat the pain. Ice. Heat. Stretching.

Mostly?

Sucking it up.

Pain builds character and trains your brain to tolerate discomfort. The physical challenges to my body have created a blueprint on my brain, a catalogue of aching limbs and throbbing muscles.

I spent an entire clinic one holiday break from school getting pummeled. That was it. No playing strategies. No skating lessons. Just enduring hits and how to recover.

“Ryan,” one of the athletic trainers calls out to me, knocking me from those memories. “In the treatment room before the break is over. I want to see that wrist.”

These guys watch us like hawks and sometimes catch things we don’t even register. There’s so much happening on the ice. Hits, shoves against the boards, and getting tripped are part of the game.

“Nah, I’m good.” I’ve been playing hockey since the second grade. I know what I need better than anyone.

“Don’t make me talk to Beck and get you benched,” he threatens.

Trainers have license to do it, too. They know most of us are stubborn, proud mules. All while I live with aching worry that the secrets I’m hiding will come out.

I faked not being injured for years. Waited until I was in utter agony and needed a crane to get it up. Having a trainer massage my sore muscles used to terrify me, worried I’ll get hard under any male’s touch. After making it to the big leagues where it’s completely unavoidable, I learned to get through it.

That further confused me, though. Maybe I wasn’t gay?

I strut through the locker room, past my teammates. And damn I feel like I’ve been a terrible captain, focusing on my own problems for a few days.

Coach gave an update to the team yesterday. Said I’d be getting additional security. He didn’t tell the team about Richmond being responsible for my attack, though.

“Ryan will need a bodyguard from me if he doesn’t do his job and keep the puck out of my crease,” a voice from the back snickers.

Jaw tight, I turn in that direction. Kane Plessner, the second relief goalie chides me. He’s new, traded from Atlanta before the deadline. He could have easily said it lower, but he wanted me to hear it.

As the team captain, I can’t haze anyone, but jerks need to be taught a lesson. Only, before I stomp over there and give my wrist a reason to be sore, Damien Carter chuckles darkly.

“They assigned Sheppard to his detail?” Carter snorts. “When will

someone beat me up so that hot bodyguard can be up my ass?”

He’s openly gay, but just to us on the team. And apparently, he finds Luca attractive.

A surge of jealousy rages inside me, stopping me in my tracks. I keep thinking Luca hates me. He never smiles. I didn’t help matters, leaving without him this morning. God, will he punish me? And how?

The rest of the team heads back onto the ice for the second half of morning skate exercises. They file past me, and I hold my breath, not wanting to smell anyone.

Carter smirks at me and slaps my shoulder. “Ha ha. Just kidding. He’s all yours.”

I spin around and wait to see shocked eyes glaring at me. Nothing.

Exhaling in relief, I wipe sweat from my face absentmindedly, the banged-up wrist zinging me with a bite of pain.

Carter’s comment about sucking dicks and fucking around is typical locker room talk. If you’re straight, you laugh it off.

If you’re confused...

Fuck, I’m confused. Or worse... I’m *still* confused. After twenty-plus years and countless hookups with chicks. *And* guys.

I’ve never been in a relationship. Always used hockey as an excuse. During the season, I have to concentrate. Stay focused. The off-season is for training.

That’s what I’d told all the women who tried to get close to me. It’s what I told myself when I’d watch other guys date, get married, and have families.

Why them and not me?

Maybe I want success more. Maybe I take sport more seriously. The Crushers made me captain for a reason.

“Ryan!” Philly, the trainer says. “Wrist. Now.”

My stick nearby, I grab it and shake my head. “Next break.”

On the ice, I’m fighting to get out of my head, doing drills the offensive coach put together to play against Cape May. They’ve been on fire, the way a team lights up when that magical cohesiveness sets in.

Football players make one pass per play. The quarterback throws the ball once to one guy. Or hands it off *to one guy*. Hockey players pass the puck hundreds of times to different players over the course of a fifteen-minute period. Sometimes the puck gets passed to every single position, including the goalie.

We watch for dilated pupils, nostrils flaring, shoulders tensing, and body angles to know what another player will do. Without cohesiveness, the puck feels like it's coated in cooking grease, constantly slipping away.

A shock of dark curly hair that hangs low in the eyes catches my attention. The set of shoulders, strong cheekbones, sexy scruff over a square, cut jaw glues my eyes in that direction.

Luca.

Frowning.

He's pissed.

Good.

So am I. But for reasons I can't explain and don't understand. Mostly all these feelings he's dredging up inside me. Shit that I've worked really hard to stuff down deep and ignore.

Carter likes dick, but I have zero desire to give him mine. So, what is up with these feelings for my bodyguard?

For the life of me, I can't break eye contact with Luca, sending my co-defender, Miles Hayden, who's nearly seven fucking feet tall and three hundred pounds, right into me doing ninety.

I go flying and land on my back, the force of the impact knocking the wind right out of me. Luckily, my helmet took the brunt of the impact when my head connected with the ice.

Through one fluttering eye, I watch Hayden skate off.

"Thanks, Miles," I shout, but I'm ready to snap back up to my feet when shaved ice flies into my mouth.

Who the heck stopped abruptly right by my face causing layers of ice shaving to cover me? That's a freaking massive violation of team etiquette and trust. Sure, as soon as we all learned to do that as kids, it's all we did. Coaches made us skate laps till our toes were ready to fall off, though. *Snowing* was so rude to do to a teammate.

So who...

I shake the powdered ice from my eye sockets and follow the jet-black, matte leather skates under finely pressed trousers and all the way up to that square jaw I couldn't drag my eyes away from earlier.

Luca.

On skates...

TWELVE



Luca

O *h shit. Oh shit. Oh shit.*

Too many instincts roared to life at once watching Max collide with Miles Hayden so hard he flipped into the air before falling flat on the ice.

Max isn't in danger here, so I took a moment to get fitted with skates after arriving at the practice arena. I planned to get in his face on the ice. That's where he seems to want to be all the time. I need to berate him for leaving me in his house. Prove to him that I'm not fucking around.

This is my job he's messing with.

I'm strong enough to take on any opponent who will dare to touch him.

"What the fuck?" Max bites out, currently on his back, moaning in pain.

But a second later, he's on his feet. Hockey players are known for looking dead on the ice one second and skating away like nothing happened the next. A shadow covers me from his height. Those skates and blades add around five inches to this already mammoth of man.

Anger teeming off him, he wipes the ice chips from his face, some already melted down his chin. They take on a pearly hue, and I swear, it looks like cum.

God, I want my cum dripping down his chin.

Stop. Stop. Stop.

It's never going to happen.

"Ryan..." One of the trainers pushes me aside. "What the hell is the matter with you today?"

Max, staring at me, spins the trainer around in my direction. "Is there a problem, Sheppard?"

"There sure is," I answer to get out front. "This tough guy's not happy about having a bodyguard. It's clearly affecting his focus."

"How dare you—" Max roars.

"Ryan!" Coach Beck hikes over wearing ice cleats that he and the rest of us wear during games.

I'm the show-off who wanted to be on blades.

Beck sends the trainer back to the bench and signals me and Max to follow him.

In his office, Beck slams the door. "Max, get a hold of yourself. It's a bodyguard. We're not asking you to give the guy a kidney. What's the matter with you?"

Max slides me a look. "Nothing, Coach."

It's the heat between us when no one's around that's the real problem. The fire he's trying to smother.

"I heard he left the apartment without you." Beck turns to me in an accusatory tone.

"Guilty. It was my first night in a new place. My phone died in the middle of the night and I didn't get up in time."

Beck turns his gaze to Max. "And you just let him sleep? You left your apartment—"

"I was safe in my car," Max argues.

"Is it bulletproof?" Beck asks.

"Don't be ridiculous." Max's cheeks blaze in a rosy shade, and steam looks ready to float out of his ears.

"Are your tires made of lead that they can't be blown out?" Beck adds.

"Stop." Max scrubs a hand down his face. "You made your point."

Beck pulls down Max by the back of his neck. "Richmond hurt you because they don't play by the rules."

"Last I checked, those who choose violence rarely play by the rules," Max smarts off to Beck.

"Bratva and rules don't mix," I say under my breath.

"Max..." Beck points. "If I see you and I don't see him, I'll make sure he's fired. Do you want that on your conscience?"

Beck is bluffing. That would be a shitty thing to do to someone. And strategically ill advised, knowing I could show up on any competitor's doorstep with a shitload of security information about the Crushers to sell in exchange for a big paycheck.

"No, Coach," Max grunts.

"Keep it that way." Beck leaves us alone in the office.

I close the steel door and twist the white metal blinds, giving us privacy.

"What the fuck?" Max steps back.

I want to throw him on Beck's desk, but I don't.

I want to knee him in the balls then suck his dick until he feels better, but I don't.

Instead, I amble to the calendar on the wall. It's a 60-day fill-in type that someone updates with games, practices, travel days, and other events.

Signing my own pink-slip for fucking with Beck's carefully color-coated schedule, I take a black sharpie and circle the days left before playoffs.

"How long have you been playing hockey?" I ask over my shoulder.

Max doesn't answer. With his gorgeous face flushed red, he comically falls into a seat. With all his gear and his jersey, he massively overpowers the metal guest chair made for a normal human.

Not a god.

"Well?" I push.

"Since second grade." Max's answer halts my writing.

"I should have figured."

It makes sense why he's a phenomenal player. When young kids are exposed to sport, what they learn grows into their DNA.

Everything Max does is on instinct like the rest of us muggles walk and talk.

"Have you noticed as we get older, time goes by quickly?"

"Depends," he argues.

"Your time is valuable, let me cut to the chase. I get a bonus at the end of the season. I need that money."

"Jesus Christ, Sheppard," he scoffs, condescendingly. "Do you know how much I make? I'll take care of you."

My cock thickens. *Yeah, take care of me, big boy.*

God, it's like I'm a different person around him. Submissive and wanting to be on all fours.

For him.

I shake that away. "Your money is useless if you're six feet under."

We stare for a moment and with the blinds closed and heat between us, I make the first move.

"Tell me the real reason you don't want me guarding you. Not a bodyguard. *Me*. Be honest," I say through clenched teeth, the way a person asks a question they know the answer to.

Max shifts in the seat, and I take him in. Damn, I already had a massive crush on him from afar. I've followed his career before I worked for the Crushers. In person, it's intimidation and lust overload.

“You...bother me,” he grits out.

Now we’re getting somewhere.

“Bother how?”

He drags his gaze up and down my body. “You married?”

“Widower.”

That jerks his head back. “How did she die?”

“Car Accident. With my son.”

The color drains from Max’s face. “Jesus, man. I’m sorry.”

“It was an arranged marriage,” I say.

His brows dip, and now he looks thoroughly confused. “Arranged? They still do that?”

“In the mafia they do.”

“You’re in the mafia?”

“I was. I got out.”

“Did they...kill your son?”

“No. My wife did.” I draw a fist to my mouth, not voicing if I think she did it on purpose. “She was leaving me and had been drinking.”

“Oh, man. I can’t even imagine. That’s terrible. Did you love her at all?”

“We were friends. We grew up together. Her brother was my best friend.” I don’t say Ivan’s name. It will freak Max out. “He made me marry his sister.”

“Wow.” He shakes his head and winces.

I feel terrible keeping him from a trainer’s healing hands that will make every ounce of pain go away.

“It was a long-time coming.” I fold my arms, ready to drop a bomb. “She left me after catching me going down on her bodyguard.”

THIRTEEN



Max

“**Y**our wife’s bodyguard, as in...”

“A man,” Luca says proudly, crossing his arms.

I ache to feel that confident. But holy shit. He *is* into guys.

Is he gay if he had a wife and a son?

He must be bi.

Like me. But...he was forced to marry her.

Luca leans against Coach’s desk staring me down, begging for a follow-up question.

I selfishly swim in worry that he’ll see right through me. My darkest secrets. Jake ended things because it made him feel dirty. He got a scholarship at the one college I didn’t want to go to. His girlfriend followed him there, and I have no idea what happened after that.

“Now you’re a bodyguard,” is my lame answer.

“I’m *your* bodyguard. I do security for the team. Coach Beck gave me this assignment.” His brows furrow. “But I’m going to leave the team after this season. Personal reasons.”

Sure, *my* life is an open book, but he can keep secrets.

It hits me. He’s leaving after this season. If we don’t make the playoffs, that will be in a matter of weeks. It’s unlikely we’ll get shut out of the postseason, but we have several games with key teams that will finalize the brackets.

I have to focus.

Yet, my eyes stay glued to Luca’s mouth. The idea of a man’s cock sliding in and out of those full, red lips around scruff from his beard has my cock twitching like crazy.

My cock...

“Are you seeing someone now?” I ask, having confusing thoughts about Luca sword-swallowing a dude.

“No.” He shakes his head.

Can I just use him to figure my shit out? To decide if that’s the life I

want?

My history with Jake might turn him off. How pathetic I was my high school freshman year sneaking off to give him blowjobs.

Jake's face flashes at me. How am I supposed to reflect on what he meant to me? I feel like a perv now that I'm an adult, thinking of going down on a high school kid. It suddenly doesn't feel like a solid memory.

Then there's what Uncle Harris did to me.

"What is your problem, Ryan?" Luca uses my last name. "Do you need to get laid? You look frustrated."

I consider how much I needed to get laid several days ago and how that ended up. And my need for sex is still not met. That edge still feels razor sharp.

"I do, actually." I cross my arms to mimic him. "What about you?"

"Always. Damien Carter might like my cock." His words cut a sting of jealousy through me that feels like a Portuguese man o' war. I know because I've been stung by one.

It's goddamn paralyzing.

"If you touch him..." I jump from my chair, still in my skates and lean into him, smelling his aftershave.

But a knock on the door sends me back a few steps.

Coach Beck enter his office and looks from me to Luca. "You two kiss and make up?" His face changes when I gasp into my hand and wince. "How's your wrist, Ryan?"

"I'm fine," I say, as most players lie to Coach.

Then sneak off to the trainers for their magic hands, stretching, massages, creams, tapes, and the occasional *legal* narcotic.

"We're fine," Luca backs me up.

"You ready for tomorrow?" Coach asks me.

"You bet." I push out of the room and tromp with my skates to find a trainer to stop this pain.

But now, the worst ache is *way* lower than my wrist.

FOURTEEN



Max

On Friday night, I return to the ice and have my worst game of the season against Cape May. Heck, maybe since I became captain. That responsibility weighs so heavily on me suddenly. Being so caught up in my own head, I feel like I'm letting people down.

As a defenseman *and* the captain, it's like cheering from the sidelines. Many centers are captains. That's too much pressure in my opinion.

Even though we're ahead by one goal, nothing is working for me tonight. I catch myself flinching whenever the other team's center or wingmen power skate up to me. They're practically snarling tonight. Playoff spots are on the line, so it's understandable.

I'm nursing wounds this team doesn't know about. Not that they'd take it easy on me if they did. They'd come at me harder. Just like I'd do to them.

Our crease is chaotic tonight. Their offense is on fucking fire. I'm not able to get a break and catch my breath except when my line leaves the ice. What used to feel like forever, salivating to get back in the fray, now feels like seconds.

It takes me until the second period when we're down three-goals-to-one to realize I'm being watched.

Luca.

He's positioned right next to Beck in what is arguably the most important spot, right behind the players. Coach needs to see everything on the ice. And apparently, someone decided so does Luca.

Does the security staff stare at us so intently like this? I doubt it. But I can't say for sure. Luca is protecting me from an outside threat. In fact, staring *at me* won't help.

On my next break, I turn around to tell him to knock it off, but this time, he's facing the crowd. Looking high into the rafters where retired shirts and banners hang from steel beams.

Every player imagines their name and number up there. Getting your number retired is a BFD in any sport.

My mind strays to those back-to-back games against Richmond next week. They can shake up where we stand in our division. Coach reminds us not to dwell on first place and how many games we're ahead. Or whether or not a win or loss will affect our position.

We have one job.

Win.

And if we win against Houston before we face Richmond, we clinch the playoffs. But the more we win, the better our position will be to have more games played here in our home arena. Sure, we all travel during the season. By May, after preseason training starts in August, we're bone-weary. It's better to make the other team travel more.

With a free moment to breathe, I spot Luca talking on his radio, then pointing at something. I look up, too. A sketchy looking dude is being pulled out by two guards. He's not yelling like a drunk fan, in fact, he's going quietly. Watching this, I nearly catch a stick in the jaw right after the puck drop.

With Luca facing the ice again, I let it all go. I'll ask him later what happened. Right now, my job is to stop the puck from advancing to my goal.

Like Gordon Ramsey cuts up vegetables, I chop, chop, chop with my stick until the puck is free so I can pass it to the offense. But tonight, the damn thing keeps turning up in my zone like a stray dog I fed once.

Pushing myself, I stop the puck again and again. But Cape May catches a fluke bounce off my skate and scores, tying up the game.

Overtime.

Fuuuuck. I'm done. Sore. Tired.

But Madison, our forward, is hungry tonight as he rockets across the blue line. With Hayden hanging back, I follow the wingers, and we hammer the other team's crease until the puck flies into the net.

I practically faceplant onto the ice. But my teammates drag me into a group hug, others clearing the bench to join us. We wave to the fans. Some throw merch onto the ice. The PR department recently announced that all merch thrown at us gets signed and donated to the local children's hospital.

We clomp off the ice and into our dressing room. The equipment staff are everywhere, helping players off with skates. Trainers are there checking bandages and bruises, shining light pens into the eyes of the guys who took rough hits against the boards.

At the door, Luca stands with another security detail agent. That guy's

looking around the room smiling, reveling in the win. But Luca is only looking at me.

Not smiling.

After we give our interviews, shower, and dress, all suited up, I head for the exit with Luca silently trailing me. I was told I can no longer drive my car to the stadium like I've been doing my entire career. Now Luca drives me in a brand-new armored SUV with tinted windows. It's a custom number the team rented for me.

The alarm chirps, and when I spin around, Luca is there with his fob. He hustles to walk ahead and opens the back door for me like I'm a Kardashian. Being driven around, and all this white-glove treatment, is not my brand.

"I'm tired of this shit." I yank on the passenger door and pop into the shot-gun seat.

In the side mirror, I watch Luca slam the back door and with a sexy-as-fuck gait, stride to the driver's side.

We drive in silence, and I let go of an exhale. "Thank you."

"For what?" Luca asks, not facing me.

"For not forcing me to sit back there so my guys don't see me being treated like a diva."

A few players got into their expensive sports cars, some likely heading to O'Malleys. I didn't even bother mentioning it to Luca, who undoubtedly would have said 'no' to going out. I'm too tired to party anyway.

With a rare weekend off, I plan to rest up. That means locking myself in my penthouse, only leaving for the practice facility's training rooms.

When we reach a light, Luca's gaze cuts to mine and he finally responds to my tantrum. "I know what to argue for and when to give a client space," he says smoothly. "Don't ever think you're getting away with something or that I'll give in if you wear me down."

Wear me down... What a mouthful. And now I'm thinking of his mouth.

Bad. Bad. Bad.

"I saw you looking up into the stands during the game. What were you looking at?" I ask, staring straight ahead.

"The crowd."

"Obviously." I shake my head. "Did you see something in the mezzanine level? You got on your radio and looked stressed out."

Luca yanks this tank of an SUV over two lanes, forcing me to grab hold of the 'oh shit' handle. The car behind us swerves. The driver lays on his

horn, giving us the finger as they pass.

“What the hell?” I ask, loosening my grip on the handrest. I think it will have a permanent indentation of my fingerprints.

“You do *not* let anyone see you *watch* me,” he seethes.

“Why?”

“If this is an ongoing threat and Richmond is plotting another move, they are watching everything. *Testing* everything. To see what I’ll do. To see what you’ll do. If you took your eyes off the game to watch me, they just figured out distracting me distracts you, and that’s when they’ll strike.” He speaks with chilling confidence about the behavior of people who want to hurt me.

I shake my head, still needing answers. “Who got pulled out of the seat?”

Luca swears under his breath. “I don’t know. Stupid police let him go without getting a name before I had a chance to check him out.”

That doesn’t surprise me. “What was the guy doing?”

“Filming you. From what I saw.” Luca gets a good stare going on me, and I feel his gaze heating my skin.

“That’s it?” I ask, pulling at my tie.

“A guy in a suit, that high up, no jersey, no merch, no beer, filming you, right after you got attacked?”

I frown at the implication. “Why film me? The game is fucking broadcasted on live television!”

“Proof he was there.” Luca squeezes the steering wheel. “Typical contract hit behavior.”

The word *hit* twists my stomach. “Hit, as in killing me? One of the Russian guys had a knife that night. He could have stabbed me, but he didn’t. What the hell is going on?” As I beg for more details, I remember I grabbed their hockey stick. In *my* hands, that too is a lethal weapon.

The Russian may have just pulled the knife to defend himself.

“There’s been no communication from Richmond, no verbal or written threats. But I have you covered off the ice. That’s all that matters.”

I think about that. “You think they’ll attack me *on the ice*?”

Luca glances out the side mirror, and swings back into the road. “They tried to get you off the ice and did a half-ass job. Whoever is behind this in Richmond won’t screw it up a second time. They’ll come at you when you least expect it. But with me around, it will be much more difficult.”

“You don’t know much about hockey. You can’t just attack a guy on the ice unprovoked.”

“It’s the only time I can’t physically protect you.” His visceral tone sends shivers through my veins.

“Trust me, if someone did something stupidly illegal on the ice, they’d have four guys and a cleared bench out there retaliating. What you’re talking about just doesn’t happen. It’s too easy to get caught. There are fines. Losing draft picks.”

“But the damage will be done. I’ve seen people get away with a lot of shit they shouldn’t.” His concern has an unexpected weight that keeps me quiet for a beat.

“I appreciate that, and that you bring a level of...” I want to say paranoia, but that’s rude. “Concern to this assignment.”

I still don’t believe I’m in any real danger. The GM and Coach Beck are being overly cautious.

But I’m too tired to argue anymore.

FIFTEEN



Max

When we get home from the arena, I'm ravenously hungry. I only picked at my dinner before the game, too distracted and worked up. I should be sick to my stomach. But games burn thousands of calories.

I toss my duffel on the dining table and hike into my kitchen to look in the fridge. "Damn, nothing but leftovers." I think about who will deliver at almost midnight.

"Hungry?" Luca asks.

"Yep," I say, checking the pantry and snagging a box of instant mac and cheese.

Frowning, Luca tosses his suit jacket onto a chair next to my duffel. Something about the way he rolls up his sleeves, revealing thick, tattooed forearms, tightens my throat. The chaos of colors and shapes etched into his skin suggests his entire body might be covered.

I find that sexy as hell. He's the sexiest man I've ever laid eyes on.

Striding into the kitchen, he takes the box from me. "I cannot in good conscience allow you to eat that in my presence."

"Ordinarily, I would eat something more nutritious, but it's late."

With a level of comfort that floors me, he moves around the kitchen, in and out of my walk-in pantry, and then riffles through my fridge.

A few moments later, he's sautéing fresh cherry tomatoes in garlic and basil on my stove. I'm too shocked and hungry to complain. When that smell hits me, I'm dying for whatever the hell he's making.

With pasta now cooking in boiling water, I head to my wine cabinet. There I choose a bottle of red and open it.

"Wine?" I pour, then backtrack. "Oh right, you don't drink. Sorry."

"I'm used to it."

"Wine isn't really drinking, though," I say after a hearty sip. "It's just fermented grapes."

"And vodka is just potatoes. Whiskey is just malted barley," he says, briskly stirring the cooked tomatoes.

The guy's smart. Articulate. Gorgeous. And can cook.

I sip my wine, unable to stop staring at his body. His white dress shirt tucked into flat-front trousers that hug his ass captures my attention.

Luca plates the food and brings me the pepper grinder, offering to season the food like a well-trained waiter.

"I got it." I take it from him and clutch his arm, the heat of his skin, the solid feel of his muscles sends a blast of lust through me. "You don't need to take care of me like this."

"I'm trying to get on your good side." He glances down at my hand on his arm. "If you like me, you won't fight me."

His words sound dirty, but that's my dirty mind that won't stop going a million miles an hour when I'm around him.

"Wow, this is really good," I say after I wolf down several forkfuls. "What about you? You hungry?"

"Not really."

Embarrassed at my near empty plate, I push it toward him. "Shit. Finish this."

"You eat." He pushes it back. "I'll grab something after I clean up."

"Leave it for Gilda." I point to the sink. "Makes her feel like she's being paid for something."

"I'll rinse everything." Luca grabs the sautéing pan, but I stop him.

"Please, Luc, eat something."

"You need it more than me."

"I'm full," I say, ignoring how I want to be full of his cock. And startled these feelings are flowing so freely. Twirling the pasta on a fork, I hold it to him. "Please. Eat."

He quirks a brow and takes the fork. "I got it."

I watch him slide the food from the fork tines into his open mouth past full lips. Something glints in his mouth. Oh my God. His tongue is pierced.

Damn that's hot.

Luca's eyes flutter, and I wonder if that's how he'll react when my cock slides into his mouth. How will that piercing feel when it hits the sensitive underside of my shaft?

When?

Whoa, is hooking up with this guy a foregone conclusion?

His groan doesn't help.

"Good, huh?" I ask to get out of my head. "You made it."

“I learned to cook.” He puts down the fork, but I slide the bowl in front of him to finish. Eating more, he continues, “My wife didn’t cook, and we didn’t have a chef.”

“You have to elaborate. You’ve been so cryptic.”

Luca blows out a breath. “What I’m about to tell you can’t leave this penthouse. Not yet.”

Shivers run down my spine, but my tolerance is so low at this point. “Hit me.”

“A man named Ivan Belova bought Richmond, that’s public knowledge.” Looking me right in the eye, he says, “What no one else knows is, my wife was Ivan Belova’s sister. Belova runs the Chicago Bratva. That’s the Russian *mafia*.”

Alarm bells go off in my head. There’s so much there to unpack, and now with a full stomach, I’m ready to vomit. Luca knows what my stalkers want because *he* used to be one of those guys sent to hurt people.

Fuck.

“Did they hurt me to get to you?” But as I say the words, they sound ridiculous and self-centered of me.

Luca guffaws. “They don’t know where I am, and Belova would never think to look for me *in Connecticut* as a security agent for a hockey team.” His dark eyes draw me in. “My name’s not really Luca Sheppard. And no one else on the team knows this. Not even Bronwin. I’m trusting you, Max.”

“How?” I shudder. “How can you just have a new name?”

“A hacker in the Manhattan Italian Mafia gave me a new identity.”

“What’s your real name?” This unsettles me.

“No.” He swears under his breath. “I’m not putting that information in your head. Experts know when people are lying.”

“That’s terrifying. The Russian *mafia*?”

He nods. “And I doubt Richmond will be the only team bought by a crime syndicate.”

“Hockey teams cost millions of dollars.”

“Belova and other bosses have *billions*.”

“Yet you had to cook for his sister?” I fold my arms. “What did you do for Belova?”

“Kill people,” he deadpans, finishing the pasta.

“Jesus.” My breath whooshes from my lungs. “Don’t hold back or beat around the bush.”

“I was third in line on the enforcer team. Hold your praise, it was a nice title, but a shit job.”

“What happened?” I swallow. “After your wife died?”

“A month after the accident, Belova sent me to Boston on a hit with mercenaries. More families are using them. They’re cheap, and great for one-and-done jobs. They usually get paid through a third party. That’s how I identified the shell company that paid the broad who lured you to the hotel. Mercs are given minimal instructions. They didn’t know me or my relationship to Belova. The job was simple, until we were ambushed, and they all died.”

“All of them? How many?”

“Eight. I was set up. The hit was on me, not our target, who didn’t exist.” He stares at the wine, his jaw tensing.

“I can’t even imagine.”

“Belova wanted to cleanse my family name. But they trained me well. I shot my way out and laid low.”

If working for a professional hockey team counts.

“How did you know about the hit and that you were the target?” I ask, stunned.

“One guy on the team gave a deathbed confession as he bled out. That I was set up. He’d been told the whole operation. That meant Belova planned to kill them. These mercs didn’t realize that Belova plays dirty like that.”

Play dirty... He’d said that before. He wasn’t kidding. Suddenly his being assigned to protect me doesn’t sound so excessive.

With the dish empty, Luca takes it and rinses it out. Despite suggesting he leave it for Gilda, he cleans up the entire meal and loads the dishwasher.

“Is Belova the reason you’re not renewing your contract?” I turn and face him.

He studies me with steady scrutiny. “In a way. I can’t risk him figuring out where I am. It’s not fair to bring that heat on the team. I had a good run. Five years. Now it’s time to move on.”

“Where?”

He smirks. “Find another mafia house, a family, a brotherhood. For protection. Loyal bosses punish the death of their capos and soldiers with a vengeance. If the right don takes me, I won’t have to worry about Belova. Even if he finds me.”

“You have a *house* in mind?” I bring the goblet to my mouth, surprised

how easily I adapt to the lingo.

He stares at my lips like he's wondering how the wine tastes on them, and I'm warmed by the thought. "I do. In Manhattan."

The city that never sleeps.

I'd been tempted to head down to the city. I'd heard about all the sex clubs on that tiny island. Figured it'd be easy to find one and get my urges satisfied by the right male who has no idea who I am, guys I'll never see again.

Luca satisfies one of those two elements. As soon as the season is over, I'll never see him again. It strikes me how much that bothers me. But also drives my desire to get this man into my bed. Just for one night. Get it out of my system. Get *him* out of my system.

"In your professional experience, is this threat against me long-term?" I ask to refocus on my safety.

"I can't say. Are you thinking of retiring?"

I stiffen, shocked at how well he can see right through me. I'm not bouncing back from injuries like I used to. "How old do you think I am?" I snap.

Luca spits out my birthday with a teasing grin. He knows *exactly* how old I am.

"How old are you?" I ask, because it's not a crime punishable by death to ask a dude his age.

"I was twenty-seven when I married Lia, that was ten years ago." Odd how he calculates his age based on that one event. But he'd said he didn't want to marry her.

Yet, they were married five years and had a son.

"As far as Richmond goes, if the new owner thinks hurting me creates a path for his team to win the finals, he's in for a battle. No one is chasing me from the only team I ever played for."

It's been a personal goal to stick with this one team. See my name and number on a jersey high up in the rafters. It's part of the criteria. I can only have ever been a Crusher.

Luca smiles. "I definitely prefer to guard a fighter. Just not a reckless one."

"No problem there." I smile back, and we're caught in a moment. Clearing my throat, I ask, "But if you leave at the end of the season, what happens to me and my protection after you're gone?"

“The security division will reassess the threat and decide if you need protection during the off season and next year.”

That sets me back. I’m only letting them put a guard on my ass 24/7 now because the playoffs are in a couple of weeks. I refuse to live like this forever.

I won’t have a bodyguard for the rest of my career. Especially if it won’t be Luca, or whatever his real name is. The idea of another side of Luca, under a different name, living in the shadows amongst killers in Manhattan leads to a rock-hard boner.

Great.

My killer bodyguard stands in my kitchen figuring out the ice machine on my fridge. I’m not even the least bit afraid of him. In fact, all I’m focused on is how hot his ass looks in those trousers. Is he faking the confusion so he can stand there and let me drink in his amazing body?

“I got it.” I cross the room and take the glass from him, our fingers brushing.

The spark of electricity and the sudden shock of lust has me lurching back. The glass heads for the floor, ready to shatter.

Luca intercepts it with his foot, kicks it upward, and snags it midair.

“Whoa.” I breathe in relief, not wanting to clean up glass at one in the morning.

“Cat-like reflexes,” Luca boasts. “You develop them by sneaking into someone’s house to kill them in the middle of the night.”

Okay, now I’m a *little* afraid.

“Shit.”

“Don’t worry.” He hands me the glass.

“Cubes or crushed?” I ask.

“Crushed, always crushed,” he says with a smile.

I laugh. “Because you work for the Crushers?”

“Sure, that’s the reason.” He takes the ice water from me. “Get some sleep, Max Ryan. I’ll lock the doors and arm the security system.”

My bodyguard struts past me, and his shadow dances on the far wall before it cuts out when he turns for the control room.

Crush.

Yeah, I get it.

SIXTEEN



Luca

It's Fan Appreciation Night, and for the first time in five years, I hate the fans. I trust no one at this point.

For the last several days, Max and I settled into a routine. He keeps to himself in the apartment, spending much of the time in his media room watching videos of the opponents coming up.

Game days are hectic, but a few hours before the puck drops tonight, the team hosts a meet and greet with a group of die-hard fans who won radio station contests. My security team ran a background check on all the winners and cleared Max to participate.

This event means nothing to me until I see a five-year-old on skates hit the ice with his father, their hands clasped tight.

My legs give out, and I grip a nearby chair before I fall into the seat. I don't remember if this happened any other year. I never notice kids. I certainly don't notice them at the games. There's so many.

This year, it guts me for some reason.

I took Elijah skating a couple of weeks before his death. The raw memories of little Eli tear my heart out again. I can't imagine a parent ever gets over losing a child. I've managed to exist without the crippling sadness or flames of anger eating away at me. Maybe I've just stuffed them down so deep they can never find their way back to the surface and destroy me.

Perhaps having Ivan Belova so close has brought back all those unwanted memories.

"Are you okay?" Max's voice pulls me from my meltdown.

"Yeah." I clear my throat.

Max wrinkles his nose at me and then cuts his gaze across the ice. "The kids. Shoot. This has to bother you."

"I'm fine," I say, gripping the back of the seat to stand.

"You cleared me for this event. I'm fine. I don't need you—"

We lock eyes, and I can't wait for him to finish that sentence.

Need you. Need you now.

“You want kids someday?” I hear myself ask.

He blinks. “Never thought about it.”

Would I want another child? With a man? My throat tightens, thinking I couldn’t handle something happening to another child. Working for the Crushers has been my way out of the darkness. A chance to live a normal life without blood and death at every turn.

There was always the chance to be in a real relationship with a man and have another child. I’ve had five years, but all I’ve done is fantasize about Max.

Now I’ll be headed back to the life I escaped.

Giancarlo Byrne of House Domenico created Luca Sheppard for me. I wonder if I crawl to his queen for sanctuary and a job, will I stay Luca? Or return to the real me?

Daniil Korolev.

Mafia Queen Rebecca Domenico is married to Giancarlo. Along with him, she has three other husbands. The men are all lovers, too, and two are members of my club, which is how I know them.

If nothing else, my lifestyle would be accepted. How long can I live like this? Especially now that Belova bought a fucking team. I thought I was safe in this world, and that came crashing down around me.

“Luc?” Max’s voice brings me back.

I glance up at him fully dressed in his uniform. He’s awe-inspiring up close, even if their jerseys swim on their toned, cut bodies.

Max keeps his distance in the penthouse, but whenever he’s near me, an electric charge crackles in the air. The way he shudders suggests he feels it, too.

And hates it.

I don’t dare ask what his stares mean. I’m his bodyguard. Even if he were into me, Max is off-limits.

“I’m fine. Go be with the kids. This means a lot to them.” I know this because my son loved hockey.

At his age it was all colors and heroes gliding up and down the shiny ice. Eli especially lit up when the scoreboard buzzed and honked. Fuck, *that’s* the gnawing feeling I get each time I hear it.

Max has opened me up, chipped away at my walls. Living in the face of this attraction for him has exposed me to feelings I’d never had before. For any man.



STAMFORD WINS THE GAME, but the following night, loses against Aspen. Max broods like a spoiled brat, but I let him stew in the large penthouse where he keeps to one side of the place and me the other.

I need a mental break, but a message from Bronwin about the upcoming road trip hits my phone.

“Pack up, you’re traveling with Ryan to Houston and Kansas City.”

Fuuuuck.

SEVENTEEN



Max

Friday morning, I get up early, shower, and strut to my kitchen for a light protein breakfast. Gilda packed my bags like she usually does for this road trip. Two more suits, four dress shirts all pressed and wrapped in tissue, four ties, lots of underwear, jeans, casual button downs, T-shirts, sneakers, and slides.

The equipment team packs our gear. I literally just show up at the airport. Fuck, I'm pampered.

We're flying to Texas this morning for the Houston game. After Houston, we play Kansas City.

We didn't win against Aspen last night, but losses are expected. Luckily, Aspen isn't in our division, and the loss won't affect our standing.

It still pissed me off.

I passed *again* when the guys on the team decided to go to a strip club on the outskirts of Stamford to drown their sorrow in booze and pussy. The single guys need release, and strippers love giving hockey players lap dances in the private lounges.

They busted my chops urging me to go. Luca would have to go with me. Watch me get a lap dance and stand outside the door listening to a woman give me head.

I have mixed emotions over that.

The regular season is winding down, and once the playoffs start, all bets are off. Personal lives come to a grinding halt. It's hard enough to focus on anything other than hockey in the regular season, which is long and grueling. The playoffs turn my life into a black hole.

Hole...

I can't stop thinking about Luca, all parts of him. I consider my thought last week of using him to get my head straight about what I feel for him. I convinced myself there's nothing I can do about my feelings for men. I can't act on the attraction. I'm well-known. I have a career and a brand to protect. I'm haunted with thoughts that my sexuality will get out. Then what?

No one knows.

Carter is dealing with the same dilemma. But he's living half in and out of two worlds. I can't risk a group of people knowing my secrets if I don't want the world to know.

When Carter got called up, he told us all right away. I glanced around, hiding shock, waiting for that look of disgust in my teammates' eyes, the same one I saw in my father's. Not one guy did. And I'm so damn proud of this team.

I never catch Carter staring at anyone, he's cool and professional. He's been a Crusher for two years, so why hasn't he figured *me* out?

Or has he? Does he know I'm living with torturous worry day in and day out?

Damn, that makes him even cooler for not forcing me to open up, but it also pisses me off that he hasn't tried to help me.

Wearing my usual Tom Ford suit for the plane ride, I catch my reflection in my kitchen's wall oven. It's like I'm seeing myself for the first time. My set jaw, flat lips, my girth. Maybe I'm not approachable.

The team chat pings, forcing a frown to build on my mouth, reading the messages about a player on one of the rival teams. He's a severe trouble maker, coming off an eight-game suspension. He'll be out for blood tonight.

Mine. Wingers get extra aggressive in my zone.

But not like this Belova guy. I'm still trying to wrap my head around *that* one.

"Something wrong?" Luca asks me, striding into the kitchen, cool and collected.

"Guy on the Houston team is trouble."

Luca scoffs, taking a drink from my refrigerator. "You're all trouble. Heck, *you're* the biggest pain in the ass." When I look up quickly, he waves a hand. "Bad choice of words."

I haven't figured out if he tops or bottoms. Blowjob go both ways.

Yeah, bad choice of words.

Does he take it up the ass? Was he blowing his wife's bodyguard to get him off before he fucked him? His confession leaves me questioning.

Everything.

I discreetly adjust my growing hard-on when I think of this man's mouth around a swollen cock. "Finish," I say, putting my phone in my suit jacket's inner pocket.

Another innuendo...

"Hockey is the most violent sport I've ever seen. Besides actual hand-to-hand combat sports." He's not wrong. "You're all beasts, with hunger in your eyes and trash talk on your lips."

"Did you ever play?" I ask him.

"No."

"But you skate." I hadn't addressed his ability on blades.

"I did a little speed skating at university." He has no accent, but working for the Russian mob fuels my curiosity about him.

"Where?"

"Not important."

"More unnecessary details. Got it," I say, and for a second, I relax talking to him.

"And I know all about the Houston guy. We investigated him," Luca says confidently. "No contact with Belova. Just your average douchebag on ice."

"Good to know." My phone buzzes. "Car is here."

Luca grips his luggage and glances around. "Anything special to do here since we'll be away for a couple of nights?"

"No. Gilda still comes by. She finds projects to keep her busy."

"I like her. She's been very good to me."

"Good." I nod sincerely. "She's been with me since I moved here, a few years after the Crushers signed me."

"They got you in the draft, right?"

I stop, wondering if knowing my history was part of his job. Or was it his fascination with me that made him dig into my past? "First round, their first pick."

In the elevator, we stand on opposite sides.

I tilt my head. "Have any more questions?"

"No."

"Know all about me?"

"I know everything about you," he says, low and husky, tightening my balls.

"Is that so?" I smell his cologne, and mouthwash. It's wrapped in a delicious heat I want to fall asleep in.

What. The. Hell?

Luca looks down and with a tight frown, says, "Sorry. Don't mean to make you uncomfortable."

“You don’t make me uncomfortable,” I say quicky. “In fact, you’ve been unbelievably easy to live with.”

The psycho sexual tension aside.

Everything should feel off because now I have a damn bodyguard following me everywhere. Watching me. With eyes that drink me in.

We engage in polite conversation in the apartment. I can’t escape his presence.

“I grew up around people who need bodyguards,” Luca says with no emotion. “Seen many jerks come and go, but the ones who the bosses kept around...” He clears his throat. “Let’s just say, I know how to handle people like you.”

I’m not sure what to make of that. “And this new job you said you’re getting?”

He tightens his fist. “Not a bodyguard.”

“Ah...” He killed people for his last boss. Who then tried to kill him.

We reach the main floor where a Town Car is waiting with the driver standing by the open trunk. He reaches for my bag and I hand it over, but Luca doesn’t take the man’s help.

He makes me feel like a spoiled wuss.

It’s a short ride to the airfield where our team plane sits in a hangar. Every road trip is like a weekend bachelor party in Vegas. The team is all high-fives and fist bumps.

A few guys are married, but most are single. Some of the husbands look miserable because they miss their families. Others are thankful for the break.

What kind of husband would I be?

And... Nothing.

Nothing comes into my head. No picture of a faceless woman with a baby forms in my imagination. My brain has no idea how to put that together. Because it won’t happen for me. Not with a woman. That’s so fucking clear.

Maybe I’ll have a husband...

My eyes stray to Luca with the security team. Those guys are serious. Most are ex-cops who already have firearm licenses.

All the guards dress in suits like him, but *they* look like funeral directors. Luca looks like a runway model.

I sit with Troy Madison, who I also usually room with. In the minors, my coach changed it up to keep guys on their toes and always out of our comfort zones.

Five hours later, the plane lands, and a wall of warm, muggy Texas air hits me as I descend the airstairs.

Sweat drips down my back on the short walk to the coach bus waiting for us. It takes us right to the stadium while our bags are stored at the hotel for our one-night stay.



IN A WHITE-KNUCKLE nailbiter, we win against Houston clinching our spot in the playoffs. There are eight teams in our Eastern North Conference, but only four teams make it to the postseason.

As we're celebrating in the locker room, my mind drifts to Richmond, stealing my joy. The only way they can claim their spot is if they beat us this weekend.

I don't want to beat them. I want to *eviscerate* them for what they did to me.

We reach the hotel, and I struggle to keep my eyes open. The game against Houston was brutal.

Madison sat next to me again on the bus while Luca sat with a guy whose name I don't know. No big deal until this dude's shoulder bumps his and burning jealousy snakes up my spine.

The travel manager goes into the hotel first to collect our keycards. Once he comes back and hands them out, the bus moves to a private entrance, and we file out.

In professional hockey, we're famous and anonymous at the same time. When you play team sports, you accept this. Sure, I get a little more glory because as the team captain, I'm on the ice first and exit it last.

Exhausted, I follow Madison, not paying attention to Luca. I don't feel threatened. I'm surrounded by seventeen bruisers, coaches, trainers, and the team's fully armed security staff.

Lance Reynolds, the goalie, Madison, and I amble down the hall looking for our rooms. We all stop at room 610, where Madison and Reynolds both reach for the keypad.

"Dude, you in 610?" Madison asks Reynolds, who nods. "Ryan, guess you're bunking with someone else this time."

Snapping to attention, I look at my card sleeve. 630.

"What the hell?" Down the hall, posted next to a door I assume reads 630,

a dark, suited familiar figure with broad shoulders waits.

Luca.

No.

No. No. No...

EIGHTEEN



Luca

A chuckle rumbles in my chest, watching Max figure out we're sharing a room. His face is priceless. Only, he's stomping angrily toward me. I've seen that look in a man's eyes.

Just when I think Max shares the same attraction I feel, it all circles the drain, knowing he'll never be open about what he feels for me.

Physical or otherwise.

But everyone in the hall is watching Max. The idea of a showdown tightens my gut. I don't care to get yelled at by everyone's favorite teammate. Most of the players don't take notice of the security staff. They don't know our names, and that's by design. We protect the team from the shadows and let them be stars.

Ari Kelsey, the tour manager, who handed me my key earlier and gave me the heads-up about the arrangements, steps into Max's path. He's in charge on road trips as far as off-ice issues.

"Coach requested the room arrangements," Kelsey says to Max, and then glances at the crowd watching us. "Guys, get in your rooms and get some sleep. It's late," he barks, sounding like a cop.

Nothing to see here.

A sea of faces gives us one last glimpse. After several noticeable shrugs, the whole team disappears into their rooms.

"This is bullshit," Max says through gritted teeth.

Kelsey glances from me to Max. "Isn't he living with you?"

"That's not the point." Max exhales.

"I don't see the problem then," Kelsey argues.

I wasn't thrilled when Kelsey mentioned this to me earlier, and knew Max would hate it.

"Ari," I say to interject. "I didn't request this. Just get me another room, please."

"There aren't more rooms. There's a damn jewelry show in their ballroom tomorrow. They're full up."

Max rolls his eyes. “Next time, give me a heads up. This looks suspicious as hell. Like there’s such a crazy threat out there against the team that their captain needs 24/7 protection.”

“There is,” I mutter.

“But it’s against me,” Max bites out at me. “Not them. They don’t need to worry about me, or for themselves. Some guys have wives and families.”

It’s an intelligent argument even if I see right through him. He just doesn’t want to share a room with me. For a moment, I consider if his objection is because of my confession. I have to respect that.

But Max gives up and shoves the door open, and surprisingly holds it for me.

“Thank you,” I say, passing him. “I didn’t ask for this arrangement, and I’m not sure why your coach wanted it. The hotel has decent security, and you’re surrounded by your guys.”

“Exactly.” He stalks into the room and then gasps. “What the fuck?”

I follow him and stop dead in my tracks.

There’s only one bed...

NINETEEN



Max

The universe is telling me something. This can't all be fucking random.

"There's a sofa," Luca says, pointing.

"I wouldn't call that a sofa. It's an over-sized chair masquerading as one." I let go of my suitcase and start emptying my pockets. A second later, I realize I dumped my shit all over the desk.

It's a typical chain hotel room with a credenza for clothes that holds a television, and a writing desk with an ugly lamp.

I stare down at my phone, wallet, and the keycard. "Sorry. Habit. Madison usually uses the credenza for his stuff."

"I don't have a preference. I'm not here to make your life miserable," Luca says, sounding pissed off.

The guy's doing his job. He didn't ask for this assignment. And it's not his fault why he bothers me. Or maybe it is. Perhaps he should have told Beck and the GM that he's gay, or bi, whatever, and it isn't a good idea for him to be rooming with a player.

Only, that's terribly unfair. And bias.

He's been a gentleman. When he's not eye-fucking me, even though I drink in his stare. He's been professional, except when I ask him personal questions and he graces me with brutal and salacious honesty.

I consider my thought the other day, just let something happen between us. Test out who the hell I am. He's leaving. Even if I decide to pursue guys full time, it won't be with him.

My heart twitches, thinking that.

Fuck, this confusion is torture. And I don't even know if he's into me. Maybe the eye-fucking is just how he looks at people.

Why shouldn't he be into me?

One second I'm pissed that he may want me, and the next, more pissed that he may *not* want me.

"You know what?" I step back and kick off my shoes. "This doesn't matter. Sleep on the sofa, the floor, the bed, your call. We're adults. I need a

shower.”

Stripping in front of Madison never blipped my radar because we see each other in the locker room. It dawns on me that Luca has probably seen me naked. I’ve caught security around the locker room for reasons I never questioned. And never thought: *What if they’re into dudes?*

I’m fighting an attraction to men, but I’ve not wanted to fuck any of my teammates.

I strip out of my suit until I’m down to my briefs. Which have to go, and I mean in a broader sense because if I get hard around Luca, he’ll know.

But he’s ignoring me, opening his suitcase, and then hanging his suit jacket in the stand-up wardrobe next to the television.

I pass him and he turns. We collide and he jumps back.

“Shit. Sorry. Didn’t see you,” he says, sounding guilty.

“I’d rephrase that. You’re supposed to be watching me.”

“You’re not a two-year-old.” He steps toward me. “I’m *guarding* you.”

Chain hotel rooms are not built for hockey players who are almost all over six feet tall with a wide girth. But I never felt the walls close in on me with Madison like I feel them with Luca.

Maybe I want them to close in. Shove us together, force me to act on these feelings. See if he’s receptive.

More sweat trickles down my back and I step away. “I’ll be in the bathroom. Do you need the toilet?”

“No,” he says sharply.

I scoff. “I’ll leave the door unlocked. I’m not a dick.”

“Could have fooled me.” His mouthing off to me has me confused as fuck.

I don’t know if I want to punch him or kiss that smart-ass mouth and suck on his wicked pierced tongue. I want to feel it on my ass. *In* my ass. Only, that’s where my trigger points lay.

Anal penetration. All of my secret encounters have been me on top, or just blowjobs. I haven’t even let a guy finger me. Memories of Uncle Harris still sting and make me sick.

I’ve made peace with that abusive vacation. Even though he held me down, threatened, beat, and brutalized me. I’m no victim. I’m stronger than that.

In the bathroom, I close the door but leave it unlocked. There’s no worse feeling than having to pee.

Okay, there are. A stick across the jaw. A skate blade cutting your cheek. Oh, and an adult man's cock in your young ass, taking you for the first time against your will.



UNDER THE HOT SPRAY, my mind drifts to Jake. The situation with him is intrinsically connected to the rape. His telling on me led to the weekend with Uncle Harris.

Jake had a girlfriend. To her, I was just his best friend and teammate. I became much more when I climbed into his bedroom window at night. He let me fuck him, moaned, and clawed at me like he loved it.

I thought maybe he loved me. I still don't know what turned everything so upside down. Why did Jake lie to his parents out of nowhere? My mom was so distraught, but nothing like my father. He was so fucking livid and sent me for a weeklong fishing trip with his brother, who got a set of instructions: *Butch up this pussy.*

I.e.: Rough the gay out of me.

Whether or not Dad knew his brother would spend all week raping me is a question I haven't been able to ask, and it's caused a resentment I've long buried to survive. Especially after I got signed to the Crushers.

My parents started asking for money when I made it big. I worried they'd go to the press if I denied them. Worried they would give those hungry vultures a juicy scoop of my past with Jake.

I write those checks every month to keep them quiet.

With my hand on the shower wall, my head sagging in exhaustion, I push away all those terrible memories. Only, I'm hard. Some kind of sick reaction to my past trauma.

That, and I haven't been laid in weeks.

Swallowing, I reach down and stroke my cock.

"Fuck," I mutter, it's so hard and sensitive.

It won't take long to come.

As I pump it, using the soap to keep it slick, I fight to think of the last woman's lips wrapped around my shaft. But a face won't come to mind.

The only lips I see are Luca's.

His mouth.

Why is he into men? Did it just happen? Who was his first? What's his

story other than the bodyguard? Now I have a visual to get off by.

His wife's bodyguard. Oh, Christ, that's a good one. Except the wife probably didn't think so.

I picture Luca naked. His body looks perfect in a suit. A suit he fills out to perfection. Even the dressed down version of tight T-shirts that hug his pecs and abs make him so damn sexy.

God, that ass... It's high, round and looks tight as hell. Would he take it up the ass? I won't. *I can't.*

I want his mouth around my dick. Feel it slide across his hot, pierced tongue while he takes me deep into his throat. He's got a thick neck, and if he's been blowing men for a while, he can swallow me down.

My legs shiver, every cell vibrates, and my balls tighten as I squeeze my cock with the water sluicing across the length. It's hot and soapy, slick like a guy's saliva.

"Yeah," I mutter. "Luc, right there. You fucking jerk. Take my dick in your mouth."

Angry sex... Yeah. We can take out our frustration by getting sweaty in the sheets.

Hot cum crawls up my dick, and next I'm shooting ropes of it on the shower wall. It's the best climax I've had in a while, and it shatters me.

Breathing heavily, I turn off the water, which has gone cold, and push the curtain away.

Luca is standing there holding a toothbrush watching me, his face pale.

TWENTY



Luca

“Luc, right there,” Max groans. “You fucking jerk. Take my dick in your mouth.”

I freeze, squeezing my toothbrush so tight it nearly snaps in half.

Did I hear right? My brain must be playing games with me. The steam and the sound of the hot spray of water are bouncing off the tiles, teasing me with impossible promises.

This must be a dream. Max *is* into guys? And wants *me*?

The curtain opens, and I turn around. Max stands there naked and wet, glistening droplets kissing his tanned skin.

Fuck me, the sight of him steals my breath. Every inch of him is built, but with soft curves of muscles. Oh my God. His dick. Long. Thick. Veiny. Brutal.

That would hurt... But my own cock thickens at the sight of him, as well the idea of what he can do to me with that cock. Right here I realize lusting after a hockey player, who’s clearly an alpha male, means subconsciously I’m willing to switch for him. Let him own me.

“Oh shit,” Max says, breathing heavily. “I didn’t... Did you...”

“Hear you call my name when you came?”

“Shit. It was...”

I wait for him to say it was a mistake.

“No big deal.” I turn away to tease him, play it cool. “You’re not the first man to fantasize about me.”

“Your wife’s bodyguard did, I bet.” Max grabs a towel and knots it around his waist. “I needed to come. And you... That story about you going down on that bodyguard was a good image.”

Really? *That* was the visual that got him off. Me blowing Nero of all people.

I rinse out my mouth and face Max. “Has a guy ever sucked your dick?”

“Yeah,” he says, breathless.

The earth’s axis shifts with his admission. I’m *not* just a curious fantasy.

“Did you like it?”

“I came down his throat.”

My cock tightens at his confession. “And have you... Ever sucked a cock?” I reach for my zipper.

“Yeah.” He bites his lip, watching my hand.

“Did you *like* it?” I ask forcibly.

His eyes cloud up and darkness comes through. “Eventually.”

“Pleasing a lover gets me off.”

“A lover.” Max clears his throat. “That implies a relationship.”

“So you never had one? Even a regular fuck boy?”

“In high school, sort of. Freshman year.”

“Do you want one now?” I ask before better sense stops me. “I mean, now at your age?”

His eyes cut down my bare chest to my waist where I hope he can’t see my blooming hard-on. “I... I don’t know what I want.”

My hand leaves my trouser fly as confusion and frustration reddens his face. “I only came in here to brush my teeth. I didn’t mean to invade your privacy.”

“It’s fine.” His eyes drink me in.

“Do you have a question for me, Max Ryan?”

He stiffens and grips the towel tighter. “I have a lot of questions. You know so much about me, and I really don’t know anything about you.”

“It’s best to keep it that way. A client can’t know too many details about a bodyguard. You’re already a target.”

“What does that mean?”

“Some bodyguards have a shady past and do this work because it takes a certain type of person.”

“I know what kind of person you are, as far as this job and your previous one. What kind of *man* are you?”

I consider kissing him to show him exactly what kind of man I am.

“The kind of man who punishes a smart mouth with mine. When my lips meet his, my intentions are crystal clear. There’s panting and throat vibrating, whimpers from my lips and tongue. There’s begging for me. There’s aching and hunger. More of my kiss. More of my touch. More of my cock. When he staggers off after a good fucking, he doesn’t remember his name. That’s the kind of man I am.”

Max’s lips quiver like every word hits a nerve. “What... What are we

doing about the bed situation?” he asks, gripping the towel.

“I’m open to suggestions,” I answer like an idiot, but fuck, flirting with this guy gets my heart racing.

He rearranges in front of me as his hand brushes the front of his towel, the outline of an erection forming. Eyes blazing with lust, he drops the damn thing. “Get in that bed, Luca.”

My heart seizes and reason steals any shred of sanity I have left. I’m his bodyguard, and have to protect him until the end of the season. What if taking this further clouds my judgment in a dangerous situation?

“You top guys?” I ask him, sliding off my pants and kicking them across the bathroom floor.

“If that’s what it’s called.”

“That’s what it’s called.”

“No one fucks me. I...” He shakes his head. “That’s a deal breaker.”

And a red flag for me, hinting at some kind of sexual trauma. Anger clouds me. There’s something dark in his past, and I suspect taking my dick up his ass might trigger him.

“Did someone hurt you in your past, Max?”

“Yes,” he answers quickly, and changes to a sickening laugh. “But I don’t want to talk about it now. You’re the only person besides my high school coach that I’ve admitted that to.”

“You can trust me.”

“Apparently.”

I fist my cock. “I think you need some kind of massive reset.”

“Reset,” he repeats. “Jesus, nothing’s ever been so right about me.”

“I mean reset your brain and give yourself permission to feel what you want to feel.”

“I have so many fucking questions,” he admits, like the wind’s been knocked out of his lungs.

“Then ask.” I strut into the bedroom, my tight black briefs feeling smaller by the second.

The turmoil behind Max’s eyes forces me out of my comfort zone of using a man just to get off. Out of all the hockey players I’ve watched these past five years, only Max has drawn me in and held my interest in a sexual way. And he’s the only guy I can’t technically have sex with.

Yet, he’s standing there completely naked and I’m about to get into bed with him.

To...answer questions.

I sigh, Max looks like he needs a friend more than a lover. Odd how everyone's favorite person on the team can be so lonely.

Confusion over liking guys isn't unique, but at Max's age, it's perplexing. And probably something I shouldn't even try to unravel.

Yet, he just came calling out my name.

TWENTY-ONE



Max

I have to take control of this situation right now. I drop the towel on the floor of the bathroom and strut into the main room, feeling Luca's eyes on my ass.

"I usually sleep naked," I say.

Luca leans against the doorjamb. "Me, too."

"Can I ask you something?" I say, nerves pooling in my stomach.

"Anything."

I scrub a hand down my face. "Do you...kiss guys?"

"The ones I fuck at my club?" He slowly prowls toward the bed. "No."

"Ever like anyone enough to kiss?"

"No." His curt reply stings.

I liked Jake. He wouldn't kiss me either.

"I've never kissed a guy." My gut tightens. "Willingly."

Luca cocks his head, fury igniting in his eyes. "What do you mean?"

I shake my head. I can't bear to tell Luca how Uncle Harris stuck his tongue down my throat while raping me. "A story for another time."

"We're going to be two naked guys who, in one fashion or another, like men, in bed. All night." He fists his pants from the bathroom floor and neatly folds them on top of his luggage that sits on one of those racks.

"Sounds that way," I say, low and throaty.

We stare, the tension as thick as my cock. Blowing him or letting him blow me will push this too far too soon. Mouths on dicks is a big step.

"Max..." he calls out as he closes in on me.

My heart spikes and I grab my cock because it will spear his stomach if he gets close to me. "What?"

"Can I kiss you?"

My knees literally weaken. "Um. Okay."

His eyes stray to my hands around my cock, it's so thick and hard right now.

"You take care of your cock. I'll take care of your mouth." He pushes one

hand into my hair, gripping the ends.

A fucking shudder runs through me. Right there, I know he's a top. This can't work. I can't do it that way.

"We can take care of ourselves and watch." His mouth crashes into my lips, and I forget *everything*.

The world fucking disappears, and I only know Luca's full, wet, soft lips. The contrast to his scratchy facial hair is such a damn turn on. I deepen the kiss and he moans into my mouth.

Luca's other hand grips my ass cheek and squeezes. "Jesus, this is firm."

It's yours, something inside me whispers.

His breathing goes ragged against my mouth as our tongues tangle. It's not crazed. It's slow and sensual.

Fuck, he's wooing me.

And I'm falling for him. Hard.

We settle into a rhythm of him sucking my tongue while I jerk off. Feeling that piercing against my tongue sends flashes of heat to my balls. I've never experienced such a raw, aching need from a man. One that's pure and not from rage, twisted hate, or shame.

It takes a few moments to realize the tip of my leaking, hard, throbbing cock is rubbing against his stomach. It massages my skin, right against a trail of hair from his navel down to his cock. Those coarse coils of hair do me in, and I start coming.

I try to step away, find a tissue, a sock, anything, but Luca's grip on my ass tightens.

He's pulled his briefs down just below his ass to jerk off, too. We look down in unison, moaning, coming, painting each other's skin with our cum.

It's hot as fuck and feels so damn taboo. This is the most powerful orgasm I've ever given myself.

"That's hot how you come. God, there's so much." His drawl sounds so sexy.

"Yeah, I'm a heavy ejaculator." I don't know a sexier word for it. "I hope you can handle all of it when it's sliding down your throat."

Luca's eyes pop open. He steps back, red in the face, anger curling his kiss-bruised lips. "Fuck." He reaches for a fresh towel to clean his cock and stomach.

"What?"

"That can't happen again, Max. My protection of you can't be

compromised.”

I would think if he liked me, he’d work harder. Or maybe he’d be irrational. “I get it.”

“I can get fired for what I just did.”

“I’m not telling anyone,” I say, and regret how it sounds like I’m ashamed. Maybe I am a little.

“And if someone found out...” I close the distance between us, feeling my alpha kick in after being kissed like a slutty bitch. “In case you didn’t realize, I’m the star of this fucking team. I won’t let them fire you.”

Breathing heavily, Luca slips off his watch and places it on one of the nightstands. “Good to know.”

He goes into the bathroom and closes the door. It feels like a slap in the face. Even though I don’t know what the hell *I* want.

I glance at the king-size bed thinking we need a pillow wall to stop wandering hands in the middle of the night from finding their way around swollen dripping cocks from wet dreams.

When Luca comes back into the bedroom, I can’t help but keep talking to the guy. “Look. I guess I’m not a cuddler.”

Luca laughs, strutting to his suitcase. Folding his pants on a hanger, he says, “I kick in my sleep, so good thing.”

“Face away from me then, if you can.” I laugh, too. “I kind of need all my limbs unbruised.”

“No problem. I’m gonna take a quick shower.”

While he’s in there, I get into bed, still naked. If he comes back to bed wearing briefs, we’re safe.

Yeah right.

I lay on my back, heart still pounding. I just kissed my bodyguard. A man.

And I fucking loved it.

Not sure how much time has passed, but I go on spiked alert feeling the mattress dip. Twisting, I say, “Is that side okay?”

Fuck, he’s naked... I keep my eyes on his, though.

“I’m a single guy, there’s no side really. It’s all the same.”

“Okay.” I hadn’t thought of it that way, but I realize I’ve been clinging to one edge.

Why do I do that? Had Uncle Harris snuck into my bed after that trip and raped me again? Had I blocked it all out?

Fuck, all these memories are finding their way back and I hate it.
I shake them off and turn away.

Luca is a manwhore who uses clubs and doesn't need a mess of a guy mooning over him.

TWENTY-TWO



Luca

My heart pounds in such a chaotic rhythm, I fear I might code right here in the bed. I *kissed* Max Ryan. While he jerked off. We jerked off together. After years obsessing over him, wondering, and hoping, I got my wish. He wants me.

It feels surreal.

He's all I want. All I think about. Obsess about.

Here we are.

Fuck, that was a great kiss. Fresh and sincere. Not practiced or going through the motions. For a guy who's never kissed a man, he was fantastic. His lips were firm and warm, opening and closing with no hesitancy.

Max swallowed my moans, and I didn't feel ashamed, showing what he did to me. He's so new at this, I have to take it slow. Whatever the hell 'it' is.

Max faces away from me and man, that stings. Guess I'm not *good enough* to cuddle. What the hell am I saying?

I lift the top cover, keeping a sheet between us. Like that would stop my cock from punching a hole in one flimsy layer of cotton to fuck him if he begged me.

Christ, this is going to be a long postseason.

TWENTY-THREE



Luca

The following day, we check into another hotel room for the Kansas City game, and the two beds draw a look between us. We drop our suitcases on opposite sides of the room. Max needs to change into workout gear for pregame practice. Keeping my suit on, I give him space and wait in the lobby.

The wall of glass opposite the rooms on our floor catches my attention. The view stretches out across Kansas City. Worry settles into my gut.

I'm too close to Chicago.

I check on my sister, but she doesn't answer. The messages don't get returned, and panic crawls up my spine.

One by one, the team gathers in the lobby while my brain tackles several tasks that include watching *all* the players because I'm still team security. I also keep my eyes peeled for Max while checking my phone, scrolling through the special encrypted app I use, updating it, and restarting my phone hoping it's a platform glitch.

"What's wrong?" Max tugs my arm, startling me out of nowhere.

I'm suddenly crippled. I honestly don't know how much time has gone by. "My sister," I gulp out with more vulnerability that I can hold in.

Max's face hardens. "Is she all right?"

"I talk to her through an encrypted app. Her message failed."

Max's gaze cuts across the team in the lobby, his jaw opening and closing like he's considering making some kind of announcement on my behalf. "Let me talk to Coach Beck. This is crazy. I'll be fine for a couple of days. Go find her, be with her."

The concern in his eyes guts me. He took my confession about the bratva seriously.

"No," I blurt, dueling responsibilities warring in my head.

"Then stay here at the hotel and figure out another way to get in touch with her." He grips my arm, his touch soothing and possessive. "We're just practicing, and then I'll be back here to shower and nap."

I think about him sleeping in a different bed. Will he face away from me again?

The app finally *finally* beeps.

Samara: Hey.

I clench my stomach when I type:

Me: Where's Fina?

...

...

...

Fina's in Miami.

Fina is our other sister. Who's dead. Died when she was four.

Miami is our code for *everything is all right*. If she said 'Salt Lake'...

Jesus what would I do? I push those thoughts away, because my sister is fine. For now.

Me: All good?

Samara: All ways. (smile emoji)

Me: Brat.

Samara: Miss you.

Me: Same here. Talk soon.

Samara: (kiss emoji)

"Hey, there's your smile," Max purrs to me. "It's nice, you should do it more often."

I glance up at him. Was I smiling? "I'm pretty sure I was smiling last night."

Max's thunderous gaze of lust sends waves of submissive desire through me.

Fuck, he'd top me really good. "But we can't mess around again."

"Right." His breathy concurrence throws me off.

I lift my head and set my shoulders back. "The bus is loading, Max."

Nodding, he turns from me. Our moment crashed when he remembered how I recoiled after I kissed him and made him come. God, I'm losing my mind over this man.

Heck, I'm already there.



THE CRUSHERS WIN AGAINST Kansas City, but Albany won, too. Now Richmond has to beat *us* to get into the playoffs.

In the hotel room that night, Max and I go back to being distant. All our tension blew up last night because we were forced into one bed. But *I* tapped the brakes after because I'm his bodyguard.

It was just a jerk-off session, I've had them before.

It didn't mean anything.

I don't mean anything.

That dread sticks with me on the entire flight back to Stamford, where as soon as we get into the penthouse, Max goes right into his bedroom and closes the door.

TWENTY-FOUR



Max

The following Saturday I slog off to the annual fundraiser for Stamford Children's Hospital. It brings out the full team every year. You'd think we would enjoy hanging out together. After nine months and eighty games, I can use a little time to myself.

Yet, a wicked craving hits me that I don't want to be away from Luca. Even though he's been distant since Kansas City. Maybe he's still worried about his sister.

I dress in my tux—all the players wear one. Just like when we're in our jerseys, I don't think I stand out or look special until Luca's jaw nearly hits the porcelain tiles when I step into the kitchen for a glass of water.

I almost mimic his response. He wears a suit to every game and sexy black trousers to practices. His suits are much nicer than mine, cut better, tailored better, and look more expensive. But this thing he's wearing tonight fits him differently. It's more severe, more dramatic.

It's double-breasted, and the charcoal color matches his gray eyes. He's dark and dangerous with a black tie and jet-black shirt. He doesn't look like a bodyguard. He looks like a freaking model.

A model I kissed and came all over. Like a fucking amateur. God, what he must think of me. No wonder he pulled back.

But the way he looks in that suit, I can't help but gush at him. "That's..." I say, twisting the lid off the hydration tracker bottle. "Is that new?"

"No." He struts my way. "Nice tux... I took you for a rental guy."

"Nope. We do this gala every year. Made sense to buy one. Plus, I go to a few other charity events in the summer."

"Really?" He sounds surprised. "Where?"

"East Hampton. I have a house there. I live there in the off season. I grew up in Marine Harbor." My throat goes tight.

It never mattered that I avoid my parents. But explaining that to a... To a lover, or someone I'm lusting after, will lead to confessing what happened to me.

My life has drilled down to one equation. No lovers, no confessions. Just secrets and railing strangers in the dark who mean nothing to me.

“Hey,” Luca says. “Where did you go just now? Your face turned... I can’t describe it.”

I watch my expressions on the ice. Now I have to control my emotions in my damn house? What if I opened up to Luca about what happened to me? I’ve met a lot of guys who were abused by male relatives, but they’re all straight. Or so they’ve let on.

At this point I’m just so tense, worrying I’ll lose everything. It’s naive to think it won’t matter. There are too many haters. It’s why Damien Carter hasn’t formally come out.

“Nowhere,” I say to answer him, and check my watch. “The limo should be here.”

“I’ll wait for you downstairs.” He heads for the door, and an ache settles in my chest.

“Why?”

He spins my way. “It’s a different company. I cleared the driver who is scheduled to pick you up. Need to make sure no one did a bait and switch.”

“I think you’re massively overestimating Richmond.”

“When people underestimate Belova, they die. Like I almost did.”

With the final playoff schedule not set yet, a chill runs through me. “What if the Crushers match up against them in the playoffs and we win, pushing them out? You said the threat is on the ice.”

Luca goes still. “Then it won’t matter.”

“It matters to me!” I taunt him.

“I assume they want you hurt for team position only.” He rubs his chin with soft brown coils of hair. “But it occurred to me, they might try to strike after for...”

“For?”

His eyes darken to a place I’ve not seen before. “Vengeance.”

I shake my head and step back. “I... I can’t live like that. I’ll talk to Coach and the GM. They have to get into a room with this Belova asshole. Or go to the league lawyers with that evidence you have connecting Richmond to the attack.”

Luca’s phone buzzes, and he ignores me. “Limo is here. Meet me downstairs in ten minutes.”

I check my watch and shake my head. “No. We’re already going to be

late.”

Luca steps in my path as I head for the door. “You’ll make an entrance.”

Laughing, I say, “I thought you wanted me to lay low.”

His throat bobs in a rough swallow, and just when I think he’ll give in, he says, “Either your ass hits that lobby in ten minutes, not a second before, or we don’t go at all.”

I grip the water jug, tempted, wanting to empty the thing over his head. Make a run for it. Only, he’ll catch me and drag me back inside.

Then do what to me? And why is my cock suddenly swelling at the idea of him punishing me with his mouth?

TWENTY-FIVE



Luca

Max struts around the ballroom, talking to mega donors who bought 10K plates for Stamford Children's Hospital. With all the money in this room, he's the star. Everyone's darling.

He can never date a killer like me. *Sigh.*

He gave in and let me check out the driver first, who ended up being legit. Then he kept his head down, his gaze locked on his phone the entire time on the drive here. Now he's ignoring me.

An outside investigative firm cleared the guests and gave me access to their data. The attendees are so rich, many of them have their own protection. Other bodyguards are hanging out in a lounge or outside with their limos indulging in a smoke.

The entire Crushers security team is here, and with no credible threat to Max right this moment, I melt back into the background with my guys.

"You and Ryan getting along better?" Bronwin asks me, fisting a crystal tumbler of scotch.

"I guess so." A low chuckle in my chest breaks free.

If jerking off together counts.

I shove my hands deeper into my pocket to look bored.

Bronwin is drinking, but he's the boss. He can do whatever the hell he wants. It's not like he's going to spring into action if something goes down.

He studies me. "You sure? He had on a big smile when he walked in here."

That strikes me, but he walked in ahead of me. "He did?"

"Yeah, kept looking back at you, too."

If I had a glass, I'd drop it. But I play it off like it means nothing. "Probably making sure I'm keeping my distance. He doesn't like me getting too close."

Unless he's threatening me with a good time. My heart dances in my chest thinking of that fucking kiss and feeling his hot cum hit my stomach. God, I want more of that. But I can't touch him again.

“Keep up the good work, Sheppard.” Bronwin pats my shoulder and ambles away.

I watch Max from the edge of the ballroom near the doors that open to a lavish lobby. When I’m about to turn away, I catch it. Those sneaking looks under his golden lashes to find me in the ballroom.

To make him work for it, I change my position more often than usual. Every time I casually glance back, he’s watching me with a frustrated set to his jaw that satisfies the hell out of me.

This goes on for an hour, but I’ve run out of places to plant myself.

We finally lock on a stare and when I think *he’ll* look away this time, he crosses the room headed right for me. I brace myself to be yelled at for fucking with him.

Not wanting to be scolded by a client in front of people, I step into the lobby and wait for him in a quiet corner near the coat room, which is empty at the moment.

Watching Max burst into the lobby, I cross one ankle over the other preparing for his wrath. I guess I deserve it. I’m taunting him when he’s doing team PR. Shit, I can’t help it. I adore seeing what makes him tick. How far I can go.

“A word, guard.” He grabs me by the lapel with both hands and practically hauls me off my feet.

Breaking free from his grip, I bite out, “What the hell is wrong with you?”

He growls and pushes me into the coat room. “What are you doing to me?”

“Watching you.” I set my feet apart, steeling my spine for a punch in the face.

“That’s not watching. You’re *stalking* me. From every corner of the room.” His red, flushed face suggests he’s more pissed than I took him for. “With eyes that aren’t looking for trouble. You’re...”

“You keep checking me out, so I moved. Remember what I told you about people watching your eyes and then finding me?” I cover my game, but Max sees right through me.

“Bullshit.”

“Maybe I like looking at you.” I give him a once-over. “You like being watched. You play professional hockey. You’re a god on the ice and you know it. You *want* the glory and the fame.”

“I had no choice.”

“What?”

“There was literally nothing else I was good at. I didn’t choose this. It chose me.”

“Same with me.” I argue, making him see we have more in common than he thinks.

“I doubt it was exactly the same.” Max pushes me up against the wall.

“Wait,” I mutter.

“For what?” His fist closes around my tie. The touch sends electricity through me, and I have to catch my breath. “What do you think I’m going to do to you?” he snarls.

“Yank my face down and knee me in the nose?”

“Ha!” Max barks a laugh. “Caught that move on the ice a few nights ago, huh?”

“Yeah, I know you love playing dirty.”

He swallows thickly. “Interesting choice of words.”

“Got something to say to me, or are you just intimidating me?”

When he doesn’t answer, I grab Max by the throat, surprise widening his eyes. I pull him in for a punishing kiss, but damn, he meets me fucking halfway. My mouth crashes into his and he hungrily accepts my kiss.

A second later, he takes over. Takes *me* over, takes what he needs from me. And he can have it. He can have all of me. God, what am I saying?

But I’m too lost in his mouth. We’re a sloppy, grunting mess of gnashing teeth, wet tongues, and swollen lips. Much different from the other night.

I feel the rage he wants to let out of his system, how he hates longing for me the way he does. But fuck, he wants me. It’s hard against my stomach, the long steely length of him.

“God, yes,” I murmur like a fool, and it breaks the spell.

Max shoves me away, gasping with wetness dabbing his lashes. His cheeks stained with a dark blush, he grinds out, “What the fuck? You said this can’t happen.”

“Apparently it did.” I’m so fucked.

Turmoil boils in his blue eyes as he backs out of the coat closet.

“Max, it’s okay,” I say, my voice small. Christ, I’m so down with giving him what he needs.

“No. This is not okay!” He grips my shoulders, pressing his face to mine again. But he doesn’t kiss me.

Who the fuck hurt him? I'll fucking kill the man who did it.

"Lurking in the shadows suits you, not me." Max storms away, leaving me a wrung-out mess, but wanting him so much more.

Fixing myself, I return to the ballroom to see the crowd has thinned out. I get caught in a stream of guests trying to exit the ballroom at the same time. Too many damn people!

When I reach the lobby, my heart crawls into my throat.

Max is...gone.

TWENTY-SIX



Max

I'll catch hell for this, but I grab a ride home with Damien Carter and a guy he picked up. They laugh in the front seat like they've known each other forever. I hide how jealous I am of Carter.

I keep telling myself life would be different, better, if only I came forward about what my uncle did to me. But I'd be ripping open a wound that my family will only use to return deadly fire on me. Repeat the lie that I assaulted Jake and deserved to be raped for it.

But it doesn't change the way I admire how Carter knows himself and is so secure with his sexuality. I still second guess every flip of my stomach, every pinch of my heart, and ache in my pants when I look at...

Luca.

I can't get that fucker out of my mind. I can't get the taste of his mouth out of my head. It was so fucking selfish of me to kiss him when he made it clear nothing can't happen between us again.

Damn, I don't like anyone telling me no.

But why *him*? Other than he's the most beautiful fucking man I've ever laid eyes on. Is it the close proximity? Is it how he looks at me? How I feel challenged to talk about my feelings and what happened to me?

All I know is to keep quiet.

Never say another word.

My father blames my sexuality on what I did to Jake. When I defended it as consensual and just kids figuring shit out... Well, that's when the sick bastard hatched his plan with his child-molester brother to prove me wrong.

Only, it was never clear if Dad told Uncle Harris to rape me. Or did the fucker come up with that all on his own? Throat tight, I push those useless memories away because that was the past, and I have bigger issues in my life at the moment.

Carter's Benz comes to a stop, jerking me further out of my thoughts.

"Thanks, man. See you tomorrow." My eyes glance at his date. "Have a good night."

They each return the sentiment, excitement bubbling in their tone. I'm so fucking jealous. But I've seen Carter's cock, I hope that dude can handle him. I strut through my lobby, and nod through the guards' greetings.

"Good evening, Mr. Ryan."

"Good evening. Have a good night." I take note if any of them sound like Luca. They're basically in the same profession.

"You too, sir."

Nope, nothing like Luca.

I ride the elevator staring at my phone. There's not one text from him asking where I am. Did he give up on me? And shoot, why does that hurt? He's *seriously* not looking for me? What the hell?

Now I'm mad he's *not* stalking me. Not up my ass. I freeze, thinking about that. Waiting. Waiting for the sickening dread to wash over me. No. There's nothing. Just...want. Damn.

My apartment is deadly silent, and I know in my bones, it's empty. Carter made a couple of stops. The pharmacy for condoms and lube. Then the guy's place for an overnight bag. Luca should have beaten me home. Where the hell is he?

Is he out looking for me?

I stomp to the bedroom wing. His door is closed, so I knock. When I don't get an answer, I open it, startled by the darkness and the lack of any trace of his cologne.

Is he meeting with Coach Beck and the GM complaining about me? Wanting off my detail?

I gaze down at the bed he's been sleeping in. He hasn't been here long, but the bed looks like it's molded to his body. Shaking, I reach down and bring one of the pillows to my face and inhale deeply. The scent of him nearly makes my knees give out.

A noise in my kitchen makes me drop the pillow. I twist and spin, wondering what he'll do, catching me in his room. Sure, it's my apartment, but guests have the right to privacy.

Then I remember, I'm mad at how he's forcing me to feel things that make it impossible for me to *not* fucking kiss him. That's why I left the gala in the first place.

I kick off my shoes and sit on his bed, my back against the headboard.

After soft footsteps sound down the hall, raising goosebumps on my arms and chest, Luca fills out the doorframe. He's shadowed at first, and I shiver at

the sight of him. After a step, the small wall sconce shines on his face, and the beauty there takes my breath away.

What is happening to me?

“There you are?” he purrs, breathy but not surprised.

“Good of you to notice. Thought you were trying to keep track of me.”

“I do keep track of you.” He struts up to me. “Wallet.”

“What?”

“Give. Me. Your. Wallet.”

“If you need cash, just ask.” I reach into my suit jacket and throw it at him.

Fucker catches it with one hand. Impressive.

“I don’t need a penny from you.” He reaches into my wallet and takes out what looks like a dime. “Tracking device.”

I sit up and reach to take back my wired-up wallet. “Who did this? You?”

“Yes. In case someone got to you.” He places the tracking dot back. “Please don’t remove it. But now you know. You can’t escape me.”

“But I did.” I lean back.

“I *let* you escape. I knew you were with Damien Carter. It’s part of the job. Giving space to a client when they need it.” He removes his suit jacket, slow and controlled. “Tonight, you needed it.”

“Why did you let me kiss you.?”

“Let you?” He cocks an eyebrow. “I guess you needed that, too.”

“You were right the first time. That can’t happen again,” I bite out.

“Are you sure?” He removes his tie and tosses it on the dresser. “I’m thinking I may have been wrong.”

I don’t counter that, shock and excitement racing through me.

Luca removes a gun from his holster, the loud clang on the dresser kicking up my excitement. With my eyes back on him, he strips off layer after layer of his sexy suit. His bare chest is a work of art. Muscles. Tattoos. More piercings.

My head was spinning so badly in Houston, all I could see was his mouth.

I have some ink, nothing elaborate, but Luca has the etchings of a warrior. The words ‘Freedom and Choice’ are boldly scrolled in thick calligraphy, one on each hip.

His nipple piercings make my mouth water, wanting to tug them between my teeth. His trim waist flares out to hips with a V-cut muscle. His biceps are beautifully sculpted with sexy veins running up and down both arms.

He drops his trousers and the bulge in his briefs makes me blink a few times. “See something you like, Mr. Ryan?”

“Actually...” I lose my breath.

“Care to take that kiss in the coat closet further?” He tugs on the waistband of his briefs.

I swing my legs across the bed and get to my feet, standing at my full height. “I’m sorry for leaving the gala without you.”

“You’re forgiven.” He grabs my arm as I try to pass him. “Are you sleeping in my bed tonight?”

“No,” I blurt.

“It’s your apartment, but if you’re not staying, I’d like to get some sleep.” Luca’s fingers slip into his waistband, and I freeze. “Well? Are you staying?”

I huff out a breath and wait him out.

He calls my bluff and slides them down.

The room lighting glints off metal, and staring closer, I see rows of bolts. I was robbed of this view in Houston. His big hands had gripped his cock, hiding this surprise.

His fucking cock is pierced.

And it’s goddamn huge. Even flaccid. Long and thick.

I amble up to him until we’re sharing breathing space, and release a long, teasing answer.

“No. I’m not staying.”

TWENTY-SEVEN



Luca

The air in my bedroom now tastes like Max's spicy cologne and raw male heat. I breathe him in, grateful that he doesn't smell like perfume.

He *wasn't* with a woman. I wasn't sure.

I wondered if he snagged one of the women ogling him all night for a hot hook up to taunt me. I hate myself for caring. I knew he caught a ride with Damien Carter and the tasty twink he picked up.

Only that twink is the son of Aspen's head coach. I wonder if that fact comes up while they're fucking. Or after. If rumors are true, Carter is likely to be traded there next season. But I can't think about Carter, and the hell he'll catch for fucking his future's coach's son.

The here and now demand my attention.

"Why are you even in my room?" I say to Max's back before he steps out into the hallway.

I just can't help myself. My words bring him up short. Max is a hockey god, famous, and not accustomed to answering to anyone.

Especially his conscience.

He turns to me, and his blue eyes lower to my aching cock, twitching in the glow of his stare. "To see *this* reaction."

That kiss in the coat closet surprised the hell out of me, but I'd been sending out signals that must have been hard to turn down. He tasted of delicious curiosity.

"You're right about one thing," I admit with a teasing stroke. "Nothing more *should* happen between us. I'm not worried about the team. I'm worried about you. I'm gay and you're...straight-ish." Even if I don't want that to be true. "The gnashing of your mouth against mine twice and jerking off with my tongue in your mouth aside."

Max swallows hard, his Adam's apple bobbing in his thick neck. It's so wide, my cock will slide down the column so sublimely.

"Good night, Luc."

"Without you in my bed, it won't be."

“I wish I could argue with you.” Max swings open my bedroom door and gasps.

I spin around, and a man in a long black trench coat, shades, and a head shaped like a Neanderthal lunges from Max’s bedroom and into mine.

With a knife.

Max stands frozen, and before he yells, which is the normal human reaction, I’ve already grabbed my Glock and screwed on the silencer.

I shove Max out of the way, aim, and squeeze the trigger as the knife comes down, catching my bicep. The shot at close range pops this jack-off in the shoulder, his rotator cuff practically blown off. I only shoot to kill when I know the enemy. A dead man can’t confess anything.

I knock the blade out of his hand. He caught my arm in a messy flesh wound. Bloody as hell, but not deep.

The guy drops to his knees, holding his shoulder in a guttural cry. We have him on camera, breaking in with a knife. A knife he lifted to stab Max. I’m a hired bodyguard. My actions are justified. His aren’t. Not that I’m likely to leave this aggression to law enforcement.

First two guys with a hockey stick and a knife. Now one guy with a knife. If Belova wanted Max dead, a gun would have been put to his head already.

This is pure bratva torture. This is about pain. Prolonged agony is meant to keep him out of the game. Make him sit and watch his teammates blunder and fail without him. Max would take that personally. It’s his team, and he feels responsible for everyone and everything.

After I kick the knife away, I jam my foot down on his uninjured arm, so he can’t grab my leg. I don’t aggravate his blown-up shoulder. I don’t want any more blood on me than I already have, and his adrenaline from the pain will give him superhuman strength to fight me.

“Who sent you?” I don’t bother asking *his* name.

He groans and shakes his head.

I point the gun at his cock. “I’ll ask again. Just give me a name.”

“Fuck you,” he grounds out, his voice tilting.

The accent ever so slight, but I recognize it.

Russian.

I know Belova is behind this, but I want to know who in Ivan’s organization is calling these shots to hurt Max. *My Max*.

Belova is busy in tuxedos and waving to cameras. He’s a figurehead at this point, and has brigadiers making these reckless transactional decisions.

“Who do you owe your life to?” I switch up the question. “You had to know you’d die. That I couldn’t let you live.”

His eyes, red from the pain, close as he waits for his demise. Not yet, asshole.

“Max,” I mutter. “Grab my phone from the dresser.”

He’s frozen at first, but when I catch his reflection from a mirrored closet door turning away, I punch the guy in the throat, leaving him gasping for air.

When Max gets back and sees all the blood up close, he drops my phone. “Oh God,” he chokes out.

I hop off this animal and try to hug Max, but he backs away.

Could be because he saw how violent I get when provoked.

Could be because I’m naked.

Could be because I have blood all over me.

I lay down my gun on the bed, and hold up my hands. “It’s going to be all right.”

“Who is that?” he asks, fury overtaking him more every second, the angry defensemen emerging sexy as hell.

“I’m going to find out.” I bend down to pick up my phone.

Max stares at my hands, blood already seeping into my fingernails.

“Go into my bathroom, close the door and—”

“No,” he cuts me off. “I’m staying. Right here. With you.”

“You don’t need to.”

“I can handle this,” he says sharply.

So fucking tough. I love it. *And* hate it. Acting too tough can lead to being overconfident and mistakes get made.

“Fine. Stay right there.” I finally notice my ragged breathing.

“God, Luc, your arm. You’re bleeding.”

“He caught me with the knife. It’s not deep. I’ll be fine.” I look down at myself. “Can you grab me a towel from that bathroom?”

Max is still in his tux, and blood can travel up to twenty feet. He’s got to get rid of those gorgeous threads.

Fuck. I need... I need my sister, Samara.

With the towel, I clean my hands as best I can. I don’t want to get rid of this phone. It will need a thorough cleaning, but Sam can do that, too.

“If you’re staying, can you please remove that tux. In here. We can’t contaminate any other room.”

Max looks down with a pained expression. “I like this tux. I don’t see any

blood. Can't I just send it to the dry cleaners?"

"No. I'll buy you a new one."

"That's not..." He stops and biting his lower lip, he shucks off the jacket.

"Leave the clothes in a pile on the floor."

"Who's going to—"

"Max... I'm kind of crazy about you, but shut the fuck up." I scroll through my phone until I get to the fingerprint app.

I take the unconscious guy's hand and press his thumb, his forefinger, and his side palm into the screen. The app photographs the prints and then runs them through databases I subscribe to. The double beep stops my heart. I seriously didn't think I would get a hit, but I had a shred of hope.

"Who is it?" Max asks.

It makes sense he wants to know who tried to hurt him. He doesn't realize I see this as my problem. One hundred percent. All of this came from my backyard.

"He's a ghost."

"Looks real to me."

"Someone whose prints aren't registered. He had an accent. Could be a fresh recruit from Siberia."

"Belova."

"Most likely. Like 99.9 percent."

"What do we do now?" Max looks around. "He came into *my home*."

"He's going to die for that." I soak in Max's stare, my visceral instinct to protect him growing deeper every second.

But we have a clean-up task to deal with right now. "The blood splatter should be isolated to this room. That's why you can't leave until you're clean." My eyes run across his body. "Take off your clothes and get into my shower."

His fingers stop unbuttoning his shirt and his hands drop. "I can't believe this is happening."

I glance down at the body on the carpet. "It's happening."

"You're going to kill him, aren't you?" It's just hitting him.

"He tried to hurt you. He was sent by a criminal organization that can't be negotiated with."

"But *why*?" Max argues, tearing off his dress shirt, the buttons flying in different directions. Crucial evidence if they contain a spec of blood.

Fuck.

“They want you out of the game,” I keep talking in the language I know Max will understand. Sport. “Would you give them that? Sit out?”

“No. I mean. I don’t know. If my fucking life upended on it, maybe I would.” He keeps undressing but turns away from me, teasing me with an ass I’m going to need to fuck soon. “I’m not insane.”

It shouldn’t be a time for lust, but it’s coursing through me. I see it in his eyes, too. Maybe he’s beyond curious.

What the fuck is he?

Confused?

At thirty-six?

“I’m going to call someone to help me clean this up once I finish him off,” I say to do something with my mouth and not drop to the carpet and blow him.

“Who are you going to call?”

I guffaw hoarsely. “It doesn’t matter. Just someone I trust. Completely. She—”

“She?”

I cock my head to him. “There *are* female cleaners.”

“Cleaner. A cleaning lady?”

“Samara isn’t a maid.”

“What?” Max spits out. “What *will* she do?”

“Cut up and get rid of the body.”

TWENTY-EIGHT



Max

I remind myself that Richmond's owner came after me before Luca was involved. This situation isn't his fault, even though he's frighteningly adept at protecting me from yet another attack.

"Go shower, Max," he orders.

Without another word, I finish stripping, leaving my tux in a pile on the floor like he requested. I tromp naked to his guest bathroom and turn on the shower. The hot spray doesn't ease my tense shoulders right away.

Of all the men I pictured I'd have a relationship with, the dark fantasies that ran through my head alone in my bed at night when I couldn't sleep, or when I watched gay porn, I never considered a mafia man.

A killer.

I'm crazy about you.

Luca's voice slams back into me just as the glass shower door opens.

"You did it already?" I bark. "I... I didn't hear anything."

"No. He's still lying there. In pain. That guy wanted to hurt you. That deserves extra punishment. Let him writhe in agony while you give me the most exquisite pleasure of the flesh."

"I'm seriously questioning my attraction to you." Yet, I feel myself getting hard.

The size of his cock has me hesitating. All the metal. And right there I know I want him in my mouth.

What the hell is wrong with me?

"That's smart of you. Question everything, Max." Luca steps inside. "And trust no one. Just me."

The wide stall has dual shower heads, the right-side spout raining down on me. The left side starts, the sputtering water capturing my attention.

"Did you say you were crazy about me?" I whisper to break the tension.

"I did." Luca's wild eyes scan my body, and his hungry voice sounds like he's ready to devour me. "Turn around." Before I can think of a reason not to, I face the shower wall.

He's being paid to protect me. He won't hurt me. Even in the steamy shower, Luca's masculine heat envelops me, pressing his chest into my back. He's a few inches shorter. But his cock lines up perfectly with...

Oh, God...

"Max..." Luca breathes a whisper of heat across on my back. "I am crazy about you. But it's a fan crush. Don't read too much into it."

Fan. He's a fan.

"However..." His hands find my hips.

I wait for the dread and the disgust of being overpowered to hit me.

Nothing.

Just... More. I *crave* more of the way he touches me with feather light, yet demanding fingers.

The scent of soap hits me and the warmth of the shower radiates off him.

"Can I fuck you?" he asks, boldly.

My jaw tightens. "I've never..."

"What? You've never taken a cock?"

"No." Not willingly. "You... You want me like this? You want to fuck my ass?"

"Oh, baby," he groans in sympathy. "Your *ass* is all I think about."

"Really?"

"And not to just have sex with. It's a fucking work of art." His hands move down and grip each ass cheek. "But I'd also love to see my cock pumping in and out of it. If you want that too," he whispers.

"I... I don't know."

"Please?" His cock slides through the seam.

Memories of how he kissed me, how he touched me are all blurry and hazy. But sharpen intensely when his stiff cock breaches my hole. My body goes rigid in alarm, and sensing my hesitation, he pulls back and uses a wet thumb to massage my hole. The sensation is incredible.

It's growing more difficult to say no. God, I *want* him to fuck me. That's a first. *Wanting* a dick in my ass, after being forced.

"Oh, God," I mutter, lost in the decadent sensation of a finger teasing my hole.

"You're the god," he keeps whispering. "Let me do this. Let me worship you."

But the minute his fingertip slips into my hole, the disgusting cigarette voice from my past fills my head.

“Stop!” I spin around and pin Luca to his side, his faucet drenching my face. “No one. I can’t. No one fucks me there.”

Luca’s jaw slacks open, his lush lips too much for me to deny.

I crush my mouth to his. Even though I’m not strong enough for him to fuck me, I want him like I’ve never wanted any other man. I like him enough to kiss. Trust him enough to live in my house. To touch me in a place that once caused me so much pain. But that’s it. For now.

Luca’s hands explore my abs until one finds my cock. “So you... You do the fucking?”

“Yes. I have to.” My eyes roll in the back of my head from Luca stroking my cock. “Fuck, that’s good.”

“Christ, you’re huge.”

I smile, and bite my lip. “You look like you’d be able to handle me.”

“I can handle whatever you give me.” He leans forward and pulls my lower lip between his teeth. “Guys don’t usually fuck me, but—”

“I’m not a guy, I’m a god like you said,” I flirt, questioning my sanity.

“For you, I’ll make an exception. You’d have to suck me off good afterwards.”

“I can do that.” I’m ready to come from his jerking me off. “Fuck, don’t stop. That’s so good.” I throw my arms across his shoulders, giving into the being jerked off like this.

By my bodyguard.

I lose myself to this soapy, wet hand job, and next, ropes of warm cum shoot from my slit and coat the sides of Luca’s hand.

“Fuck, that’s hot,” he rasps.

“No kidding.” I get my breath back and stare at his cock with all the piercing, especially the ring hanging off the tip. “How do you fuck with all that hardware?”

“The bolts are strategically placed to hit all the right nerve endings.” He smiles. “And a lot of lube helps. I can get us so fucking slippery and dirty.”

I have lube in my bedroom. Christ, would I let him?

Holy shit, I’m seriously thinking of letting him bone me. My asshole throbs, not in protest. In want. “You need to come,” I say to close off this business transaction.

“I do.” He strokes his own cock. “I have hours of clean up left. I can use a little pick me up.”

His massive cock bobs, hard with angry veins that need release. The

glinting of metal snaps my awareness of his piercings, and that taking him down my throat means navigating around all that metal.

Challenge accepted.

He kisses me again and our lips move in perfect sync. It's wild and feverish with Luca moaning into my mouth. He said he doesn't kiss people, but I feel he's hungry for this connection with me.

Fuck, so am I.

Luca strokes his dick. As it gets hard, it gets shiny and the bolts glisten. His fingers leave his cock and cup my cheek. "Think you can take all of me?"

"Shove your dick down my throat and find out."

He curls his hips, and his erection presses into my abs, the dripping head of his cock slicking up my skin. The pearly precum fills the ridged contours. He's marking me.

Luca cups the back of my head and writhes up and down, bringing his chest level with my mouth. With his nipple piercing in reach, I lean forward and grip it between my teeth, while I squeeze his ass. I bite down, testing the pressure, this is a first for me. Exacting purposeful pain on a lover.

It's...glorious.

"Fuck, yeah," Luca pulls me back in for a brutal kiss.

When I'm drunk from his mouth, I pull off, tasting a small hint of blood from my sharp teeth piercing the flesh. "Show me," I hiss.

Luca spots the blood on my mouth, and his eyes turn fucking feral. "Show you?"

"Show me how you'd fuck me."

Like a bomb went off behind his eyes, Luca lifts a knee to anchor his foot on a cedar bench so he can fuck my mouth.

Oh shit...

He smiles and presses down on my shoulders. I willingly kneel on the shower floor.

"Are you ready for me to fuck your mouth?" he rasps.

"Yeah. So ready." I breathe in and lick my lips.

"Take it. Take my dick into that bloody mouth." With one hard shove, he fills my mouth with his staggering length. "Christ, that's so warm and wet."

He invades my soul with waves of musk and sweat and pure male heat as his cock slams into my mouth in a furious rhythm. I smooth my hands up and down his thighs until I reach the base of his cock and fist it while I suck him.

"Take my cock, filthy boy. Eat it. Swallow it. You're mine to choke." His

head falls back as he rocks his hips back and forth, his massive cock sliding in and out of my mouth. "Fuck, you're taking me so damn good."

He bucks harder, making me gag around the metal bolts, but that pours gasoline on the fire as he fucks my mouth even harder.

It's hot as hell.

The further down my throat his cock slides, his breath grows more rough, hoarse, and ragged. He fists my hair, what little I have to grab. My head is his handle to use while my mouth gives him unbridled pleasure.

I drink in the taste of him, the smell of him, and I grow painfully hard all over again.

"That's right," Luca growls. "Christ, you're good at taking a cock down your throat."

Being a relentless overachiever, I tighten my throat and the pressure on his dick spills muttered curses from Luca in Russian.

He grunts, his cock contracting. "Fuck, I'm coming."

Hot, salty release spills down my throat.

He lifts me up and we settle into a new round of kissing against the tiles. The water's gone cold, but we're so heated, it's refreshing.

"Fun's over," he groans, pulling away. "I have to finish off the guy out there."

Like we just didn't fool around, he steps out of the shower and puts on sleep shorts he kept folded on the vanity.

I watch him strut confidently to my attacker, his back muscles flaring to life. I tie a towel around my waist and find Luca in the bedroom with that gun in his hand again.

The guy's empty eyes are open slightly as tiny moans and blood seep from his mouth.

"He's going to die. Was this torture necessary?" I ask softly.

"For you? Yes." Luca stares down at him. "Yeah, fucker. How's the pain? That's what you get for coming here thinking you can hurt my..."

He doesn't finish that sentence, but wipes his mouth, looking at me. Keeping his eyes on me, with the gun pointed to the floor, he pulls the trigger to end the guy's life. The sound is a tinny zip through the air that ends with a thud into the guy's skull.

"Max," Luca moans my name, dangerous and feral at the moment. He came down my throat and then killed a man for me, nearly all in the same breath. "See what I'm willing to do for you?"

Jesus, it gets me hot.

Is this who I really am? Did hockey make me this violent? I consider the things I've seen on the ice. How brutal the game is. We lose some of our humanity on the ice. That had to be by design.

Luca straightens his back, fresh blood splattered across his chest. "Ooops. You'll have to clean me again."

"With my..."

"Washcloth."

"Right." Shaking, I make my way into the bathroom and soak a washcloth in warm water.

Luca stands there, legs spread. I consider myself a masculine guy, what I do on the ice takes power. This hits differently.

And he's crazy about me.

He just shot a guy for me.

I clean him and he groans, his arms on my shoulders again. "Fuck, that's good."

"You look so brutal," I say softly. "Are you that brutal when you fuck a man?"

"Depends if he wants it that way."

"And if he doesn't?"

He lifts his eyes to me. "I only fuck men in my club who want what I want."

"Got it." He's also brutally honest.

"For you..." He lifts my chin. "I'd be gentle. I'd do it slow. Sometimes it feels so much better that way. Being on the edge. Dying to come. Dying to be fucked."

"God," I mutter and lean in to kiss him when his phone buzzes.

"Shit. She's here."

"Who?"

"The cleaner." He takes a deep breath. "My sister."

TWENTY-NINE



Max

Dressed in Luca's sweats because he wouldn't let me go to my bedroom naked or in a towel with his sister in the apartment, I sit on the edge of his bed.

In walks what I can only describe as a female version of Luca without the height, and a long vanilla ice braid under a baseball cap. Samara slinks into my bedroom in a black skin-tight jumpsuit under a dark burgundy leather jacket.

"Max, this is Samara. My sister," he says with pride. "But this meeting didn't take place. Belova thinks she's..."

"Dead," Samara says with a teasing grin. "Plane crash."

"Which commercial flight?" I ask like an idiot.

"Private plane," she corrects me. "Some sleazeball trafficking young girls."

"Between doing hits for Ivan Belova and marrying his sister, I couldn't risk that Sam wouldn't be used as a way to hurt me."

The layers of the world Luca comes from and the sacrifices he's made gut me. He'd found peace with the Crushers. I feel like I've ruined that. Even if it wasn't my fault.

Luca, who's now in jeans but shirtless, folds the attacker into a black body bag while Samara holds it in place. Wearing plastic gloves that go up to their elbows and sanitized plastic over their shoes, they lift the bag and carry the guy away.

Luca returns with a knife, and I step back.

"Relax." He starts slicing away the carpet from the corner of the bedroom. There's only a dresser and one nightstand.

How he'll get rid of two hundred square feet of carpet...

While Luca and I move the furniture to lift the carpet away, a muffled buzzing rumbles from the other guest bathroom. Oh God, Samara is cutting up the body and it sparks my gag reflex.

"Samara will spray everything down."

With the carpet rolled up, Luca pulls the linens off his bed and shoves them into a black plastic bag. Good thing I let the designer talk me into several extra sets of everything.

Luca bends down and slips plastic booties on me.

“This is so unsexy,” I say, gripping his shoulders.

“It’s just from here to your bedroom.”

My head snaps up. “I’m...”

“You have practice tomorrow. You need your sleep. Sam and I will finish up.”

“That will take all night.”

He shrugs.

“Luc,” I whisper. “Thank you.”

His sister comes back and she stops short, staring from me to him. A smile curls her lips. Guess she approves of me.

Damn, I like that.

THIRTY



Luca

Passing me to go back to his bedroom, Max squeezes my arm. It sends electricity through me. Even though I wince in pain from the knife wound.

“Shoot, can I patch that up for you?” he drawls in a sexy voice, so black-cat of him.

Mine...

“Get some sleep. That’s more important. Sam will stitch me up.”

His eyes adorably widen at that. Like every second that passes, he gets more of a glimpse into what life would be like with me. A murdering husband with a sister who patches up his wounds then dumps the body.

When he leaves though, it all washes away into a useless fantasy that will never happen.

With Max gone, I turn my attention back to Samara who’s watching him go. When the door closes, Sam lets go of a whistle.

“That is one hot motherfucker,” she says, like she too isn’t wanted dead by Ivan Belova because of our joint defection from his house.

I was *not* leaving my sister behind.

I silence her with a look and then pounce on her, gripping her throat. “When I text you, you fucking text me back.”

We play a game of how much she can take. It’s to make her strong. Being married off was never in the cards for her. A bratva husband would have killed her for being so bratty and hard to handle. Guys in the brotherhood don’t exactly like outspoken wives.

I recognized that and had no interest in changing her. She might have killed me.

Finally, she gasps and I let go. Red fingerprints bloom on her throat.

“Fucking anyone?” I ask.

“Not at the moment. Care to share your friend?”

I bark a laugh. That would be a first, but I peer at her. “No.”

“That’s okay, the way he looked at you, he clearly wouldn’t want me.”

She fans herself.

“How’s Pennsylvania?” I ignore her comment.

“I want to kill myself,” she scoffs.

“I cashed in a lot of favors to get into that safe house.”

“At least it’s close to Manhattan so I can do jobs.” She looks restless.

“Belova bought a hockey team,” I blurt.

She visibly staggers. My sister is a badass, but she’s also smart enough to understand what she, *what we’re* up against, having the head of the Chicago Bratva out to get us.

“Not the Crushers.”

“No.” I shake my head. “After this, I’m going to swear my allegiance to another house. I want you to come with me.”

“Who?” Her cheek twitches at the idea of being sworn to another king.

In this case, a queen.

“In time,” I say, because she’ll do all kinds of snooping in places that might get her hurt. “Do you not trust me?”

“It’s not that.”

I see it in her eyes, how she knows I got us into this mess. I’ve been in adjustment mode all this time. I have to consider something more permanent for Samara. I can’t expect her to live in the shadows and be a cleaner for the rest of her life.

But really, our father sealed our fate, owing Yuri Belova so much money. When our parents died for that debt, she became my responsibility. Yuri Belova took us both in.

Yuri trained both me and his only son, Ivan, to work for him. Made me do things to make sure I couldn’t go anywhere else.

When Yuri Belova was killed, Ivan took over. I expected he’d give me my freedom. We were best friends.

Instead, he made me marry his sister who had a crush on me. That brought me deeper into his web. Branded me family, knowing enemies punish family when they can’t get to the head of the snake.

“Swearing to another family is what’s best for us, Sam.” I’ve been worrying about her for five years.

She loves this work, and God knows her skills are in demand. She’s almost thirty. I want her to have more, but I’m not even sure she knows what she wants in life.

“I’ll worry about that tomorrow,” she says, all snide and snarky.

I trained her. She can handle herself. And being a female gives her an advantage because most motherfuckers don't know what hits them when *she* strikes.

"Let's get this mess cleaned up. Max and I have to travel again for a couple of days."

"Be careful," she says to me. "I don't want you to get hurt."

I watch her walk away, thinking, *That's a given, sweetheart.*

THIRTY-ONE



Luca

A few days pass and we're off to Aspen. Max stays focused on his game, turning inward. Maybe seeing me kill a man and that I have a feral hellcat for a sister turned him off. I accept we may have taken this as far as it can go.

As far as it *should* go. I'm his fucking bodyguard, I know better.

After the solid win against Aspen, and to get everyone's minds off the two games against Richmond coming up, Coach Beck flies the team to Las Vegas for one night.

Where Max and the team go, so do I.

Some players, ones with wives and kids, fly home.

Damn, I respect that.

GM Reid is loving his players, so he pays for several suites. Each has two bedrooms, but Max gets one all to himself. He watches me with steady scrutiny while I retreat to the end of the hall where Duncan, my fellow guard, and I are scheduled to stay.

Max deserves a night off from me. Duncan and I plan to post in the hallway in shifts throughout the night anyway.

The player who took the free trip, waste no time hitting the hotel's casino and private lounges. Coach Beck warned the players to not leave the property.

Max removed his travel suit, and changed into a pair of dark jeans, a white T-shirt, and charcoal blazer, looking hotter than any human male has the right to be. His chestnut hair with glints of gold is thick and styled away from his face. His blue eyes are the color of the Aegean Sea, and I want to swim in it. Drown myself, really.

In the hallway, he gives me a once-over. "Don't you ever dress down?"

"I'm working." I adjust my tie. "When I'm with the team, I'm on duty."

He looks to make sure we're alone in the hallway and leans into my ear. "Is kissing me and shoving your dick in my mouth part of your job?"

My cock twitches at what he's implying. "If I'm not in a suit, I'm not

working.”

“Pity, I like you in a suit.” He brushes a hand over mine, also tugging my tie.

Considering I could get fired and lose my bonus, I say, “And I like you *out* of your suit. But we have to be careful.”

Pursing his lips, Max strides toward the elevator. “Maybe I’m tired of being careful.”

I step in his path. “That doesn’t mean you can go near anyone else.”

“Are you laying claim to me?” His eyes blaze with a hunger I wasn’t expecting, maybe it’s adrenaline from the win. “Are we in a relationship now?”

I’m not looking for one. I like to play at my club, and if I were to be in one, it wouldn’t be with a professional athlete whose first love and priority will always be to sport.

Max Ryan is my dream guy, but there’s a reason he’s a fantasy and not reality. Even if I’ve tasted drops of heaven when his mouth is on mine and he’s sucking my cock.

Maybe we can just relieve stress until I leave the team.

Max hasn’t given me any kind of clue that he’s fucked a guy recently. It’s not something I want to peel back the curtain to know. I don’t need those images in my head.

The elevator arrives at our floor, and I motion for him to step inside first.

“Well?” he asks, standing over me, challenging me to answer if we’re in a relationship.

“Usually, two people decide together if they’re in a relationship.” I don’t give him a chance to hurt me. “You’re not sure what you want, Max. Or who you really are.”

“Got it,” Max says and leans against the rear elevator panel.

I know *myself* all too well. If my plan works out, I’ll be working for Sebastien Daria, a mob boss in Manhattan, and sworn to Queen Domenico’s house. If he needs me to kill people for him, I will. *That’s* not the kind of life to share with a hockey star who can’t exactly lay low when I’m trying to live back in the shadows.

I’ll find relief at Club Dare until something else changes. They were meaningless encounters anyway. That’s just a place to get off when I get bored with my hands.

The door to the casino floor opens, but Max doesn’t move.

“Max?”

His eyes flutter. “I get nuts when you say my name.”

With no one around, I steer him out of the car and toward a darkened corner where I kiss the shit out of him. His mouth opens for me and we go at it like our lives depend on it. My suit and his blazer have us both sweating.

I’m ready to suggest we go back to his suite when a voice behind Max has fear and loathing skittering down my spine.

“Daniil?”

Max whips around at the voice because of how I stilled. Danger is at our doorstep. All I can do is hope he didn’t quite hear my real name with the loud music and the blood pounding in our ears from our heated kiss.

“Go back to your games,” I say to him, brushing him off with a look of fury. “Forget you met me, pretty boy.”

Looking confused, Max wipes his mouth and storms away. I’m not sure if he’s playing a part like I am. Has what I’ve been telling him all this time finally gotten through?

With a clear view of Gideon and Dev, L.A. capos who work for Belova, I fold my arms. “What do you want?”

Dev glances in the direction Max left. “Who is that?”

I snap my fingers, relieved he didn’t recognize Max. Then again, Belova’s brotherhood is a large organization and rarely a target from the top gets broadcast to a wide net of people.

Just the assassins, and Gideon and Dev aren’t assassins. They run the west coast for Belova. Max is an east coast problem at the moment.

Right now, these two knuckleheads are *my* problem. They’re looking at a ghost. The guy who disappeared from a room full of dead mercenaries in Boston five years ago.

I never had an issue with these two, only saw them occasionally when they’d show up to one of Ivan Belova’s annual meetings at his multi-million-dollar lake house in Winnetka, right outside of Chicago.

They knew me as Lia’s husband, Belova’s brother-in-law, and third in line on the enforcer team. They had to have noticed I disappeared. Or figured out I’d been targeted for destruction.

“How much do you two want to turn around and forget you saw me?” I consider my finances.

I have a few million in an offshore account, money I stole from Belova, *according to him*, when I collected Lia’s life insurance. It’s the account I

worry is booby-trapped. But I found a way to siphon small amounts at a time.

Ironic that Ivan forced his sister to marry me, take oaths, sign a marriage license, and when I take out a dual life insurance policy to make sure my son is protected, thinking I'd go first, Belova says Lia's payout belonged to him and not me.

I said otherwise and hence the start of our war. But it felt hollow. He has billions.

Gideon and Dev love Las Vegas and are probably in debt. Only, I don't know if I can trust them.

"Pay my cage bill?" Dev says with a shrug. He knows I'm heading back to where I disappeared, and he doesn't have the resources to figure out where I'll go. His cage bill is more important to him.

"I can use a few grand," Gideon chimes in.

Thirty minutes later, I'm out seven thousand dollars, but they accept the money in exchange for leaving the hotel and not mentioning me, or there will be hell to pay. Gideon and Dev wisely disappear. They know *I* have resources to hurt them.

They leave happy to go run up tabs in another casino, and consider themselves lucky for spotting me. No point in ruining their karma by killing me.



AFTER CIRCLING THE casino to confirm those two losers are gone, I case one of the lounges where Willis and Madison sit on a velvet sofa talking to a couple of women who I know are hookers.

Not seeing Max, I scan deeper into the room, until I see him. With a guy. Who is clearly gay, and flirting with him.

The thing about being into guys, I sense deep inside who else is. This fuckface, whoever he is, zeroed in on my man.

After making eye-contact with the other players, I stroll inside. The way Max takes me in and lights up, brings me to my knees.

I found you...

You're mine.

Max whispers something to the man and eyes immediately dart my way. Looking pissed, the guy moves on to someone else in the lounge.

I stand tall, my face hard as granite and not giving away the dirty

thoughts going through my head. It could make a corpse blush, the things I want to do to Max behind closed doors.

I crook a finger toward him and we leave the lounge. The other players don't even look up. I'm his bodyguard, he's supposed to be with me.

In the elevator, Max and I stare at each other, a drunk crowd separating us all the way to our floor of suites.

The elevator door opens, and Max gets out, politely excusing himself. No one notices him, and I breathe a sigh of relief.

Inside Max's suite, I text Duncan, who's taking the first hallway shift, that I'm posting tonight in Max's room. Duncan will think I'm sleeping on a sofa.

I close the door behind me with purpose. I slide the security lever in place and add an extra bolt I carry with me. Gideon and Dev could get drunk and do something stupid. I doubt it, but being careful is part of the job.

"Who was that before?" Max asks. "Daniel, is it?"

I stride toward him, not correcting the pronunciation of *Duhn-eel*.

"Forget you heard that name." Even though it's my dream for him to pant it to me while I fuck him. "I told you what that can do to you."

"They work for your...brother-in-law?"

I wonder if Belova will be that for the rest of my life? Or just until I marry someone else? Lia and I didn't divorce.

Till death do you part doesn't include relatives.

"They're from L.A. They're here fucking around. I paid them to leave."

"How much?" Max drops his arms.

"Don't worry about it."

He takes me in with a full sweeping gaze. "You have money for very expensive suits, you walk like you come from wealth, and you pay off mobsters."

"I'm comfortable. Don't let the fact that I live on a crappy houseboat fool you. It's to throw off someone looking for me."

"If you paid them off for me, I want to reimburse you. I make eleven million a year."

My eyes flutter, because I can't comprehend guys who are essentially blue collar from middle class homes making that much money. Guys like Belova in his mansion built from dirty money, sure.

Max's penthouse obviously set him back some serious green. He dresses well, but he doesn't look like a millionaire. Or act like it. He acts like a

bruising, glove-dropping defenseman, and dedicated to sport above and beyond anything else.

“They set me back seven grand.”

Max scoffs at the amount. “A small price for my safety. I’ll write you a check when we get home.”

Home.

I’d only had a home with Lia. Built on lies.

“If it pleases you.” I give him a once-over. “Who was that guy at the bar? Did you want to hook up with *him*? Let him fan boy all over you? Quick, no strings. No death in the air when you fuck him?”

Max’s jaw tightens. “No.”

“No to what?”

“No to all of that. All I want is you.” His words shift something inside me, but I play it cool.

“Good.” I smooth my tie, wanting to wrap it around his wrists and bend him over the sofa arm, I’m pumped with so much adrenaline. “I really want to fuck you, Max, but you’re not ready, so I’ll break my rules...for you. I’ll let *you* fuck *me*. On one condition.”

“What?” Max asks with a tight jaw.

But, holy fuck, that wasn’t a *No way*. Or a *Go fuck yourself, Luca*.

“Let me at least finger you there. Earn your trust.”

Max’s lips twitch, his breathing ragged. “How?”

“While I blow you.”

Fire rages in his eyes. “Get your ass in my bed, Sheppard.”

THIRTY-TWO



Max

I can get laid, or I can get answers.

Luca circles me in the bedroom like I'm his prey.

He's strong and built like me, but he moves in a different way, so masculine and sure of himself.

Because I identify as a top, I believed I should be attracted to a...a twink, for the lack of a better term. Luca challenges everything I stupidly believed because he's massive, cut, and strong.

I've been assuming he tops his lovers, and it blows apart my belief system that this alpha will get on his knees and take my dick.

"Tell me about your first kiss. No names," I bite out that last part.

"A professor at university," he answers with a tilt to his voice.

"Was it forced?" I ask through clenched teeth. The idea that someone hurt him the way my uncle hurt me floods my veins with rage.

"No," he answers with a smile. "He came off as this playboy, a confirmed bachelor. It was completely consensual, but I was a secret, and I hated that."

Wow, I'd be asking him to do the same thing. "Was he also your first...sex?"

"Yes." Luca glares at me, not liking my intrusion.

"Did your parents know about you?"

"No, Ivan Belova's father killed my parents before they found out."

"Why... Why did Ivan's father kill your parents?" God, their tragic history runs so damn deep.

"They owed him money. Sam and I were young."

I nod, not knowing what else to say or ask. The world he came from is unfathomable, and I feel like shit thinking I had it so rough. Sure, I'd been raped by my uncle, but before that, I lived in an idyllic childhood fantasy.

My misery now is this confusion and anger bottled up inside me. "Did you *like* your professor?"

"Other than the sneaking around, I did. I had stars in my eyes. He was...brutal. I was raised to be tough, and I wasn't sure how that would fit

with being gay. *He* took the lead, and I decided I liked it. Liked being pleased.”

Jealousy burns through me. “Has anyone ever fucked you besides him?”

“No.” Luca slowly starts to undress, unbuttoning his shirt, unraveling the tie first. “Who was your first sex, Max?”

“That kid in high school.”

“What happened to him?” Luca asks.

“Don’t want to talk about it.”

“Did he play?”

“Me, yeah.”

“Shit.” He grips my package. “He walked away from this deliciously distracting dick?”

I see stars from the forceful contact. Good stars. “We were kids, I’ve gotten a lot bigger since then.”

“Prove it.”

Strength and clarity wash over me. Courage, mostly. “What if I decide I want to take this further after the season ends?”

Luca glides a hand up my torso and over the T-Shirt until he reaches my mouth. Stroking my lips, he says, “Why would you want to take it further?”

My heart pounds. “I’ve not been able to stop thinking about you.”

“I can’t be in a relationship with you.”

My eyes slip closed. “Because I’m a pro athlete and I live in the spotlight?”

“That, and I’m in between worlds right now, can’t give you what you need. I’m secure here with the team. But Belova can figure out who I am any minute.”

“You’re running away.”

“I don’t like the term running,” he hisses. “Or hiding. I had guns pointed at my head. It was either take off or be killed. When you swear an oath to a criminal organization, it might as well be in blood. It’s the air you breathe but it’s also the fire that burns you if you make one false move.”

I think about his son and wonder how to broach that topic without causing pain. But ignoring it feels wrong, too.

“Where is your son buried?”

Luca’s lips twitch, and I think I’ll be told again that I can’t know his truths, but he whispers, “Vermont.”

My head pitches back with surprise. “Of all places...”

“Exactly.”

“Does Belova want you back?”

“All I know is he wanted me dead.”

“Why exactly?”

“He said it was because of money. But I know it was out of vengeance for making his sister so miserable that she killed herself *and* my son. Elijah was his heir. Belova has two daughters. His wife kept having miscarriages. It was either he got a new wife who could give him a son, someone he can groom to take over, or make my son his heir. He chose the latter. But I told him he could never have my son for that. Next... they’re both dead.”

“That accident took everything from him,” I say, feeling sympathy, but anger brews in Luca’s eyes.

“And me.”

“And you,” I exhale, seeing how something so tragic can’t be fixed.

What is there to negotiate?

“Belova backed me into a corner when he made me marry his sister. He set me up to fail. Fail her. Fail him. It’s been five years, and I’ve managed to elude him.”

“But he just bought a hockey team.”

Luca steps back. “And I’m deciding if that’s a coincidence or not.”

“Hey, we got off track.” I grip his fingers and kiss them, my wet mouth drawing his eyes to mine.

“I can’t change the past,” Luca whispers. “Right now, until the season ends, you’re stuck with me.”

THIRTY-THREE



Luca

“I think I want to unstuck myself,” Max says, shucking off his pants and pulling down his briefs in a hurried but sexy way.

Like he can’t wait, he makes a practiced turn as if he’s on the ice, and strides confidently to the bed.

The view I have from behind is truly the most spectacular thing I’ve ever seen. Men walk around naked at the club all the time. I thought I was immune. Max has re-awakened me.

“By?” I’m stripped from the waist down but left on my dress shirt to set a certain forbidden, taboo mood. “How do you want to unstuck yourself?”

“By burying my cock deep inside you.” Max sits on the edge of the bed and pulls me onto his lap, my thick thighs straddling his waist. “Are you showering?”

“I can. If you need that. If you need me to be clean.”

“I need you to be clean,” he mutters flatly.

Jesus fucking Christ, we’re doing this. We’re fucking.

“Then I’ll get clean,” I say, standing up, keeping my eyes trained on his hard cock.

“Wait...” Max stops me, gripping my wrist. “It’s a habit. A hang up. About being clean.”

“It’s okay. We all have hang ups.”

“It’s from my past. I want to get over it.” He runs his hands along my shirt. “I’m...messed up about a lot of things.”

“Don’t do this unless you want to.”

“I want to. I wanted you from the moment I saw you in that hospital room. I’ve conditioned myself to mistrust what I feel.”

I think about the guys in my club who come in confused, and most leave in worse shape.

Max has a game tomorrow night. I don’t have what it takes to be a shrink.

“I’m going to be your bodyguard until the end of the season no matter what. I won’t be run off—”

He pushes me down on the bed, and laying on top of me, his mouth lands on mine. One hand snakes around my waist and cups my ass. Claiming it. Claiming me.

He's warm and wet and tastes minty. His tongue swirls with mine and the ache inside me grows. His mouth, his tongue tasting my lips, is heaven.

Groaning, he deepens the kiss, and I welcome it eagerly. Too eager, as my heart pounds wildly. Everything shivers. My chest. My fingers. My cock.

Fuck, he's good at this. And I feel like it's setting the pace for whatever happens next. His kiss has meaning. I use a sex club. I know the difference.

Maybe I have hang ups, too.

"Are you sure you're confused?" I break the kiss, needing to breathe and pinch myself. "Because you fucking kiss like a man kisses a man. Not a man figuring out how to kiss a man."

"There's something about you. Something about this mouth." Max grips my jaw. "I can't stop thinking about it."

"We can stop right now."

"Don't want to stop." He kisses down my chest. "I appreciate this tight body of yours. I see six packs and thick biceps all day. We have to look this way. But you..."

"Me," I let out a groan.

"You don't have to look like this."

"As a gay man, yeah, I do," I say with a chuckle.

"Gay," he utters. "Not bi."

"No. I was forced to get married and slept with her just to give her a child, or Ivan would have thought something was wrong with her and hurt her. It was expected of me and I got through it."

"Fuck, that's sad."

"Did you say something about burying your dick inside me? Because that will make me less sad."

He laughs and palms my cock. "I did. Now you touch me. I need it."

My fantasies didn't do this man justice. I hadn't dared to look at him in the locker room, worried he'll see right through my stare.

My free hand skates around to his ass, and there's not an ounce of fat, but two firm, rock-hard glutes.

"How the fuck do you get an ass like this?" I mutter against his neck.

"Skating nearly every day since I was six." He pushes his cock into my stomach, the wet tip blowing my mind. "Defensemen have to skate backward

more than any other position, that tightens the ass.”

“You definitely have a tight ass.” I spread his cheeks.

“Wait.”

“It’s okay, Max. It’s me. I’m not going to hurt you.” I wait a breath for him to relax. “The pleasure is unbelievable, and it doesn’t mean you’re not in control.”

To take his mind off my fingers, I slide down and kiss his cock, the long length of him challenging my sanity.

“God, yeah,” he moans.

I grip the shaft at the base with a tight fist, the way only a dude would dare try on another man’s cock. It’s to remind Max, he’s with *a dude*.

Me.

“Suck me, please,” he groans.

“Oh, I plan to.” I settle between his thighs and swirl the salty tip with my tongue. Peppering kisses on his cock, I stroke his hole gently, and it stiffens his shaft even more.

“That’s... Good,” he chokes out.

“Oh, baby. It’s just a taste.” With that, I finger his hole, which has him pulling my hair. “Can you be my filthy boy?”

“Yes,” he chokes out. “Please.”

After licking my finger, I gently push further into his hole, up to the knuckle.

He groans, but doesn’t tell me to stop, or push me away.

“Yeah, take it, filthy boy,” I groan into his skin. “Take it from *me*.”

“Only you.” He rocks his hips.

“That’s right. *I’ll* give you what you need, Max.” I lick and suck on him.

Max is turning my world upside down.

But I shouldn’t let it. We can’t be anything. He doesn’t want a relationship with a guy, and if I get out of this alive and unscathed, I’ll hopefully be working for another criminal organization where I’ll be washing blood off my hands on a nightly basis.

That’s no life for a star like Max Ryan. I wouldn’t even ask him.

“You see this body?” He runs thick, veiny hands across a chest that should be on a calendar. “I will fuck you hard and rough. Just keep blowing me.”

I relax my jaw to take him deeper into my mouth, shuddering when he growls a low, throaty moan of approval. He fists my grown-out hair with one

hand and rocks his hips, thrusting his erect cock in and out of my mouth in a pace that stiffens him even more. With each heavy thrust, the tip hits the back of my throat.

“Who’s the slut now? Sucking off a hockey god,” he groans, his back arching off the bed. “Aw, fuck. You fit all of me.”

I stop to take a breath and grip the long shaft, pushing it against his stomach while I lick the underside, letting his balls find their way into my mouth.

While licking, I say, “That’s the best part of letting a man suck your cock. Big mouths, thick tongues, and a tolerance to be choked.”

“Oh yeah?” He flips me over and straddles my face, fucking my mouth.

As if I *can’t* take this.

But I don’t want to be a tool for his orgasm. I still use my hands, guiding his cock in out with intermittent sucking on the crown.

At this angle, though, I have unbelievable access to the thick vein under his throbbing shaft. I use my teeth, adding a bite of pleasure, something to zing the life out of him.

“Easy, my stud,” he warns.

My. Mine. I’m *his*. It’s a topsy turvy arrangement since I’m protecting him. Someone tried to hurt him, yet behind closed doors I could be his toy.

“That’s so damn good,” he praises me. “Really good. Perfect.”

“This is so fucking easy,” I say after pulling off and licking the underside again. “With you.”

Because I’m not judging him.

“Since when is easy your brand?” Max turns the tables and shows me a playful side I didn’t know existed.

He pushes into my mouth and fucks it forcefully, not allowing me to answer. Deep growls erupt from his chest. The tips of his fingers dig into my scalp, harder and in proportion to the strength of the orgasm building in his balls.

“I’m close,” he murmurs. “I need to come, and I need you to swallow me.”

While he’s thrusting like there’s no tomorrow, I finger his hole again.

Max fucking loses it. His head tilts back, his throat muscle chorded. “Fuck, so good.”

His tight hole sucks in my finger deeper. It wants this. It wants *me*. “That’s right, little paradise. Daddy’s coming for you.”

I hum against his cock, and with a final swallow, Max roars his climax, pushing in so deep, his cock slides down my throat.

He spills everything he's got, filling my mouth with cum.

I'm a heavy ejaculator...

Salty release drips from the sides of my mouth and down my chin. Max stares at me, at the mess he made of me. Part of me fears I'll see horror in his eyes, his doubts taking over. No, it's a smiling, lust-filled grin.

I swallow what's in my mouth. Clearing my throat, I say huskily, "Like what you see? What you did to me?"

"I love what I did to you." He breathes heavily. "Are you taking your finger out of my ass anytime soon?"

I give his balls a final lick. "Do you like it?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"It's you." He stretches his neck, his face a mask of pure pleasure. "But damn, I'm not hard enough to fuck you. Wonder what we can do while we wait?"

THIRTY-FOUR



Luca

I smile and palm my cock. “Get on your fucking knees and suck *my* dick.”

Max pops off the bed and pliantly lowers to his knees.

I swing my legs around and spread them wide. Max lowers his face to my cock and breathes on my dick.

Fuck.

I tease his lips with my pre-cum. His tongue swirls around the top, and my asshole throbs. His hot and thick tongue wipes my engorged, weeping head.

My hands move from the back of his neck to thread into his soft golden waves. He lets out an approving groan, liking my forceful touch. Without any kind of warning, he takes me all the way into his mouth.

“God,” I groan. “Yeah.” I love how he sucks me down to the root so easily.

Max bobs up and down my length hungrily. “You like that?” he asks with a dark, husky voice.

A sound of affirmation hums from deep in his throat, and I feel the vibration on my shaft. We settle into a sexy rhythm while I fuck his mouth.

Everything about Max is huge. His mouth is wide, his throat, a cavernous bottomless pit. My piercings don’t affect his ability to suck me off.

I consider Mask Night at the club coming up. No one would know it’s him. I pray he’s not on the road. *We’re* not on the road, but the playoff schedule isn’t set yet.

“Fuck, you’re cut and beautiful,” I gush.

“Are you close?” he hisses.

“I can be.” I take a deep breath.

“Don’t be. I want to torture you.” He sucks on the head of my cock, his tongue playing with the tip ring.

The thing about a guy going down on you, they know the male anatomy and all the erogenous zones.

“Spread your legs wider for me.”

I do, and before I ask why, his fingers trace the seam of my ass, landing on my hole. Leaving his finger on my sensitive ring of nerves, his lips close around my cock once more, and I see stars.

Jesus...

“You’ll really take it up the ass just for me?” he says, looking up at me.

“Yes, my filthy boy.” I lick my lips. “Not sure how long I can last with your mouth on me and you fingering me.”

This good boy, this golden boy of hockey with the clean-shaven face and even cleaner rep, likes a dick in his mouth.

With every release of my cock from his lips, saliva spills down my balls. I won’t last much longer. In between the masterful sucking, Max grabs my shaft and licks the underside of my balls.

“Oh, Jesus.” My hips lift as if I want to feel his tongue on my taint.

He hums against my dick, and heat flares in my chest. “I’ll edge you another night. Right now, I want to taste your cum.”

He pumps fingers in and out of me, blowing me at the same time. It’s hot and messy. There’s a pool of saliva running down my shaft, and I feel my toes beginning to curl.

“Stretch me for that giant cock of yours,” I say to get him off.

“Mmmm,” he moans against my veins.

“Max... I’m...fucking...close.” I grip his head, pushing my cock deeper down his throat. “I’m going to come in your month.”

He groans in response.

My breath clips in short pants and I mumble successive moans, feeling the climax draw my nuts in. “Yeah, yeah, yeah.”

That does it. My balls turn to granite, and throbbing starts at the base of my spine. Cum shoots up through my dick, hot and on fire.

Max doesn’t back off, he keeps sucking me as I come, my release spilling out of his lips. It’s the fucking dirtiest thing I’ve ever seen.

I’m so turned on, I keep coming. And he keeps sucking. Swallowing some, but it’s too much. The rest squirts out like volcanic lava and down the sides of his face, and onto my stomach.

More spills out of his mouth, making me even slicker against his lips.

“Fuck, yes,” I hiss, wanting to yell, but the team is in suites all around us. I pray they’re still gambling, putting the other security agents through their paces.

The last ropes of my cum land on Max’s tongue, his open, greedy mouth

wanting more.

I tip forward, unsteady on my feet.

“Jesus, that was...” The best blowjob of my life.

I am so fucked.

Max pushes me down on the bed, flat on my back.

His hips settle between my legs, and I’m surprised when he pulls the covers over us, tangling us in the sheets.

“Wrap those fucking legs around me,” Max pants against my lips.

“Are you sure you want to do this here?”

“Here as in Vegas?”

I give him a love tap upside the head. “Here in the bed. Where you’ll sleep.”

“Yeah. The bed we’ll sleep in.” His husky voice floats across my skin, like this is who he really is.

It’s the most natural I’ve heard him talk since I met him.

Max grips my thigh, jerking my hips into an angle to fuck me. “Condom?” he asks.

“You clean?” I choke out, my mind swirling in different directions.

“We get tested regularly,” he reminds me. “I only use condoms. With women *and* men.”

“But not with me?”

“I want to feel you.” His lips quiver as he looks down, studying me. He sits up and reaches toward his nightstand where lube sits waiting.

I watch as Max strokes his long, thick erection, lubricating it. For me. God, that thing in my ass will be my undoing.

“So, your first time, you took it up the ass. And now you only fuck guys in a club.” He consolidates my sexual experience to two salacious sentences.

“But you’ll give *me* the honor of penetrating you?”

Honor.

That chokes me up.

“I want to give you what you need,” I say, fingers wrapped around one of my sculpted biceps, the skin slick with sweat.

He lowers himself over me, his eyes meeting mine.

“Because you’re crazy about me.” His voice trails off like he’s not sure of himself, or thinks it’s impossible for a man to have real feelings for him.

This started out as a fantasy crush, but I see the man behind the mask. And fuck, this is real.

“I am, Max. I’m lunatic crazy for you, and I’m going to need you to fuck me before I lose my mind.”

He lines up the head of his cock with my hole. “Open for me,” he growls. I shift, and the pressure of his cock hits a nerve as he’s sliding all the way in.

“Fuck. That’s tight. Hot.”

“Slick,” I moan at how he’s buried himself so deep, so easily.

“Damn right. My cock was made for this ass.” He pumps in and out, watching his dick penetrate me.

“Hey, look at me. You’re fucking *me*.” I worry he’s thinking of someone else.

He smiles. “Of course I’m fucking you. Only you…”

For a second, I think he’s going to say my real name.

I’m so confused about who I want to be with him. He knows me as Luca. “Say my name. Say Luca,” I moan.

Max pushes his chest against mine and makes love to me. “Luca. Luca. Beg me to keep fucking you.”

Adrenaline spikes in my chest. “*Keep* fucking me, you hockey god of ice.”

“God, I’m gonna come.”

My brutal talk busts his nut. He yanks out of me and pearly cream shoots from his dick as he angles it to land on my stomach.

I’m laying spread eagle, and my hockey god obsession just came all over me. I grab myself and jerk off. In less than a minute, I come again all over my chest.

Our puddles of cum mix together so beautifully.

Max sweeps a finger through it, coating my skin. “You think I’m yours?”

Fear spikes through me, thinking I’ve been played. I shift my hips, but he holds me in place. “Max,” I hiss.

“I’m not just yours. You’re *mine*.” He exhales, biting his lip. “And I’m gonna need to fuck this ass again to prove it you.”

We make love for a few more hours, never making it to the shower. We fall asleep wrapped up in each other’s arms. Not just physically.

But when I wake up, Max is screaming.

THIRTY-FIVE



Max

U*ncle Harris's thick, meaty hand held me down on the bed while the other yanked my jeans past my ass.*

"Your daddy said you like dick." He shoved himself inside me.

The white-hot pain ripped a cry from my throat.

I scream, not sure if I'm dreaming.

Fingers stroke my forehead as a soft voice whispers, "It's okay, baby."

"Stop crying, you crybaby. You're getting my cock all week."

I bolt up and slap the hand away. "Don't touch me."

Go away. Go away. Let me live my life. Alone, miserable, hating myself.

"Whoa. Max, what's going on? Who..." The voice next to me stops.

I'm in bed with Luca in my dark but fancy hotel suite, not at a dark campsite with my uncle. I grunt and push the covers away to sit on the edge of the bed. Dropping my head in my hands, I mutter, "Nightmare."

Uncle Harris's voice in my head as he... As he...

I've not had that dream in years. Why? Why now?

"Wanna talk about it?" Luca rolls closer and strokes my shoulder.

I'm torn between wanting to spill out my horrific secret, my worst shame, to see what Luca is made of. Can he handle being with a rape victim? Either I tell him and let him bow out of this, whatever the hell we're doing now, or risk falling for this guy. And risk that he'll find out somehow, run some background check on me. Then dump me for this, and not his excuse that he's leaving the team.

Like when Jake left me.

I can feel my heart being ripped out of my chest.

"It's some heavy shit," I say in warning.

"I can handle it," he says, his hand firm on my shoulder.

"Um. Okay, here goes." I swallow. "When my father found out about me. The real...me. He felt I needed some butching up."

"You?" Luca sounds astonished.

"I was fourteen. Scrawny, but strong," I defend myself. "My father saw

all gays as weak.”

“Fuck,” Luca mutters. “If you tell me...”

“Yeah... He asked his brother to toughen me up. Not realizing my uncle was a child molester.”

Luca hops up to sit beside me. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

“I wish I were.” I clear my throat. “I don’t want to go into details, other than he forced himself on me...for an entire week.”

“What the hell?” A murderous scowl creeps across his lips. “And you’ve had nightmares about him ever since?”

“I used to, but not lately.” I shrug. “I think sleeping in the same bed as you awakened them.”

“Ouch.” Luca’s hands hover over me but he doesn’t touch me.

“I’m fine,” I murmur, catching my breath.

Luca leaves my side to go into the bathroom. A slice of light brightens the otherwise pitch-black room. Water runs in the vanity, and when I look that way, the outline of a naked man tightens my chest.

Beautifully sculpted shoulders and curved pecs. Not skinny arms and a chest of coarse hair that reeks of cigarettes and booze.

Luca is a god in his own right. Tough but elegant. Classy and sincere.

Returning to my side, he wraps a cool washcloth on the back of my neck. I flinch, but he doesn’t react.

“Don’t push me away,” he whispers. “It’s me. I want to help you. I *care* about you. Listen to my words and process them. I *won’t* hurt you.”

I feared being in the same house with Uncle Harris, and after that weekend, I installed a bolt on my door for whenever he visited.

I eventually give in to Luca’s touch and drop back onto the bed. I hide the emotion of what having sex with Luca, who I know wants to fuck me too, stirred up in me.

I find Luca incredibly hot. That brooding attitude and the way he takes no shit from me is bringing me to my knees.

Literally.

Having him come down my throat and fucking him should have made sleeping with him less awkward, but I’m facing something I didn’t expect. A growing attachment to a man I don’t have a future with.

“Is he the reason you asked me to take that shower?” Luca asks, figuring out where the fear of toxic male body odor comes from.

And it’s not the same as pure, male sweat from the rush of playing

hockey.

“You are perfect, Luca,” I say with a scoff. “And dammit, you always smell good.”

Every morning, his curly hair is slicked back, wet from a fresh shower. I like his commitment to hygiene. His fresh, clean smell is like cat-nip to me.

“I guess it’s not that unexpected that what happened with my uncle would come back to haunt me now,” I say. “It’s been a long time since I was with a man.”

“Probably too long,” he says, nodding.

“How long has it been for you?” I ask.

He crinkles the washcloth in his hand. “I was with someone the night you got attacked. I was at the club when I got the call.”

That startles me. He got called while getting laid, or sucked, or sucking another dude off. And he rushed to the hospital. For me.

“And since you’ve been with me, you haven’t snuck off to—”

“I don’t sneak. Bronwin knows about my sexuality.” His strong voice gets the point across. “And no, I’ve not been with anyone else since then.”

I nod. “I have so many questions about that club.”

He tosses the washcloth aside and reaches for me. “Ask me whatever you want while I hold you in bed. *Our* bed.”

I roll into his arms, facing him, welcoming his warm solidness. “Hey. I’m sorry.”

“Nothing to be sorry for.”

“I mean everything. Being a dick when we first met.”

“You’re forgiven.” He strokes my mouth. “And you’re not the first person to have a tantrum over a bodyguard.”

“Tantrum?” I say with humor.

“How do you describe how you behaved?”

“A tantrum.” I exhale. “Why do you like me?”

“I used to like just the idea of you, the hot hockey god, but now, after knowing you, I like...you.”

His arms tighten around me, and a wave of emotion rides over me. “I... I like you, too. I never had feelings for a *man*. The last time I felt like this I was a kid who liked another kid.”

“That’s a startling difference.”

I’d tell him that’s a mouthful, but he might give me a mouthful, and right now my nerves are shot, Uncle Harris still in the forefront.

“I also never had feelings for a woman,” I confess. “I thought I was asexual.”

Laughing, Luca says, “After that top-tier blowjob, I can certify you are not asexual. But before you made your move on me, I figured you were straight.”

“I had to make it seem that way.”

“You just haven’t found the right person until now.” He spouts these undeniable truths so easily, and everything feels like it’s going to be okay.

Only... I know that’s not true. Something always goes wrong.

When I fidget, trying to calm down, Luca gets out of bed.

“Where are you going?” I ask, worried when he gets dressed.

“Gym. Walk off this heart attack you gave me.”

“You’re leaving me?” I sit up. “You’re supposed to be protecting me.”

“You’re surrounded by the team. Duncan is posted in the hall.”

I don’t want extra security. I want *him*. But feeling his body against mine triggered nightmares.

“Relax and go back to sleep.” Luca slips on shoes and then...leaves.

I slam my head down, different emotions warring in all corners of my brain.

“Fuck this.” I get out of bed and dress in my running gear.

I find the hotel gym and am stunned at Luca running shirtless at a speed of 12 MPH on the treadmill. His back is coated in sweat, calf and thigh muscles pulse and bulge.

My cock thickens, which will make for a painful run. But I get on the machine next to him.

He turns his head to me, his face red, veins popping and sweaty.

Our eyes lock and I hold my breath until he...

Smiles at me.

THIRTY-SIX



Luca

Back in Stamford, the pregame routine for the first of the two Richmond games unfolds. Morning skate. Team meeting with videos of the opposing players. Lunch. Then back home for Max's nap, which he and I take together.

He's working through issues. He still screams when he wakes up in my arms, but with me there, he calms down quickly.

Fans greet us at the stadium when we arrive for the game, and I hang back, letting Max do his red-carpet walk looking like a million dollars. And not like he just sucked my dick.

When he emerges from the locker room each time, it always takes my breath away. With his shoulder pads, helmet, and skates, he's nearly seven feet tall.

Is this guy actually mine? Can I think like that? Do I dare?

"Halt, Crushers," the coach says. "There's an unscheduled presentation."

With a few minutes to linger, Max stretches against a wall. He looks like he's got the weight of the world on his mind, and it pains me. These guys are under so much pressure to endure and play at their best and to win. Sure, they're paid well, but I guess these players don't stress any less about wins by thinking about all the commas in their bank accounts.

Damien Carter rounds a corner. I hadn't even realized he wasn't with the team. Carter catches Max's attention and motions for him to follow him.

Uh oh...

I suspect it's team captain-related, but where Max goes, I go. I weave around these monsters who walked in as mere mortals an hour ago, but now have a wave of riotous energy coming off them. They are ready to destroy Richmond.

Carter stops in the hallway where it's quiet. "Heads up, Ryan," he says to Max and glances back at me. "One of Richmond's players is all over social media ranting about secret gays in hockey, and how they need separate locker rooms."

My spine tenses.

“Who?” Max asks, fury on his face.

“32, a guy by the name of Quinn,” Carter responds. “Just called up from a farm team.”

Max’s jaw drops. “*Jake Quinn?*”

“Heard of him?” Carter pivots to Max.

Jake... That name. His high school fuck buddy. Who treated him like shit.

“I...” Max looks at me, and I nod for him to answer. “I went to high school with him. He’s talking shit about LGBTQ?”

“Apparently.” Carter’s eyes drop to his phone. “He’s not exactly in isolation. A lot of people feel the way he does.”

Max looks Carter up and down. He’s a forward, but not on the same line. “You want to sit this out, Damien?”

The comment stuns me, and I don’t know what to make of it. For some reason, I thought Max would come out right there and then.

Fuck, how do I feel about that?

Carter’s face scrunches. “What? Are you kidding me?”

“We have playoffs coming,” Max talks like a team captain and not a player with something at stake. “We’re going to kill these brats. I need you healthy.”

“Me? What about you?”

Max straightens. “What about me?”

“You don’t know?” Carter pauses to shoot me a look. “That night in the Vegas lounge, you looked chummy with a dude.”

“Oh shit,” I mumble, and get on my phone to start searching for Max Ryan hits. Sure enough, there’s a photo of Max and the guy he was with at the bar.

How fucking ironic.

“Here.” I show Max, and hate that it seems like I’m rubbing it in his face.

“I was having a drink with a fan,” Max bites out.

We share a look, but protecting his rep or going after people who try to hurt him online isn’t part of my job. I thought that faced with a blatant attack on a teammate and questionable photos, Max would confess to his team to stand in unity with Carter.

That was a fucking fantasy.

“Quinn was a dickhead. And apparently still is,” Max grumbles, dealing with the unruly opposition instead of owning up to his lifestyle. “We can deal

with a little taunting.”

“The organization has a stance against racial slurs,” I say, thinking out loud.

“Exactly, *racial*,” Carter clarifies. “They haven’t expanded that to sexual orientation.”

“Well, they need to.” I’m faced with stares.

“We have to be realistic. Not everyone is okay with homosexuality,” Max says. “It’s a fact and no matter what, no team will ever shove it down the fans’ throats.”

I swallow thickly and give him a sly look. Carter catches how we look at each other, and his entire body changes.

He knows.

Shit.

The meeting comes to a halt with no resolution other than the plan to ignore Asshole Quinn. I wouldn’t be surprised if Carter sends the guy flying into the boards a few extra times tonight.

Richmond hits the ice first, and I get an extra bitter chill just from their steely gazes. Stamford takes the house down, though. Max raises his stick in the air skating loops around the entire rink, and the crowd goes berserk.

The puck drops, and Max shines as team captain. He’s everywhere on the ice. I have a hard time keeping track of him. The Crushers are all over the Richmond players.

I whisper to Duncan to watch the stands for anything extra suspicious while my eyes focus on one target. Jake Quinn. He’s third shift. So he doesn’t get near Max on the ice.

They can only get you on the ice.

That doesn’t happen.

The argument plays in my head.

Max and Quinn are only on the ice at the same time for seconds each period. I catch him arguing with their coach, who only answers with a shaking head. He’s asking to be moved up.

Part of me wants him to try to hurt Max, who unless the guy’s got some kind of weapon on him, or just out and out takes his stick and bashes it in Max’s face, won’t hurt him with petty hip or shoulder checks.

Typically fighting comes to an abrupt halt as the regular season winds down. With playoff slots limited, everyone is out for blood. Not tonight. Sticks are everywhere they’re not supposed to be. Shins. Chests. Faces.

Everyone takes some kind of hit. I've loved hockey my whole life. The epic Russian vs The United States Olympic games played on a loop on Soviet State Television.

I've never seen a more brutal game. Until this one.

It's fucking World War Three tonight. More gloves hit the ice during this game than I've ever seen. To my shock, Stamford is down by one point in the fourth period but comes back in the last five minutes with back-to-back shots.

Richmond loses their shit with retaliation hits that break the refs' whistles. Max skates toward the bench, raising his stick in the air, and gets tripped by...

Jake Quinn.

A collective gasp quiets the stadium. I grip the rink door ready to go rip him to shreds, realizing I was watching Max being glorious and didn't realize Quinn was on the ice, too.

When Max gets up, blood trickles from his nose. I dig into the rubber floor mats to hit the ice on my cleats, ready to make Jake Quinn wish he was never born.

Max beats me to it. He goes after Quinn in a way I've never seen another player out for blood. This is personal.

The bench clears and I lose sight of Max, until a ref has his jersey in his fist, blowing the whistle to throw him out of the game. No big deal since there are only seconds left.

The game officially ends with a cheering crowd, and the Crushers leave the ice as bitter winners, fury humming off their helmets.

Everyone gets treated by the trainers for some kind of injury, including Max's shot to the nose. It turns out he's also nursing a busted lip.

While the team celebrates with champagne for beating their rival, Bronwin pulls me, Duncan, and the other guards into a meeting with the GM in a war room to deal with the fallout of Max's game ejection. Only, officials in New York call in and suspend him for one game, which usually in these situations can be served out the following season.

However, they tell Reid Max's suspension can't be delayed. He's off the ice tomorrow.

"Who's gonna tell him?" Reid says, looking at Beck.

A man I don't envy. This guy has a lot on his plate. Injured players, a suspended captain, and now he needs to stay up all night shuffling the deck to replace Max.

"I'll tell him," I say to a collective sigh of relief.

"You're carrying a gun." Reid makes a bad joke. "You're the safest person to tell him."



MAX SAYS ABSOLUTELY nothing to me when we leave the stadium. And the silence is even more nerve-racking on the drive home. In the garage, he pushes to get out of the car, anger simmering from him like deadly radiation. He's already beside himself, so here goes.

"Max, wait." I grip his arm.

"What?" The way his eyes blaze with rage that he's being touched sends chills through me. But I don't let go.

"I know you're mad, but I have to knock you down further, baby."

"Don't call me that," he grits out.

He's a live wire now. I get it, so I ignore the dig.

"Sorry. Habit. Tops care for their bottoms, you should know that." I justify how I feel about him.

"I can't think about that right now. What do you want?" he snaps.

"You have to sit out tomorrow."

"What?" He yanks his arm from me and reaches for his phone.

"League reps called during the postgame meeting with the GM." I ball my hands into fists. "I offered to tell you."

"That's just fucking great." Max storms from the car, and being a dick, leaves the passenger door open.

Breathing steadily, I close it and follow him.

Duncan is posted in the lobby of his building, doing an extra security sweep given tonight's events and how Richmond was tied to Max's initial attack. I nod my appreciation and he makes a slicing motion with his fingers across his neck.

Yeah, I'm screwed.

Max doesn't waste time. He hits the liquor cabinet and starts slamming back tumblers of scotch. I watch him with deep sympathy. Considering all I went through, I can recognize a man who must feel like a bear ripped his throat out. This game is his life. He has nothing else.

But he has me.

By the third glass, I try to wrestle the bottle from him. His snarl triggers

me, making me remember my drunk father beating me with a belt. I push it away.

“Come on. That’s enough. You’re banned from the ice. Not the stadium, the guys still need you. You need to show up.” I push our faces together, and to my surprise, Max kisses me.

It’s a wild kiss. My soul shatters from it. I drop the glass, he drops the bottle, and everything crashes around us.

That also kills the mood.

Max grabs me. “What are you doing to me?”

“Clearly, I’m bringing out who you really are.” I kiss his neck, the smell of fresh soap from his postgame shower hardening my cock.

“I don’t want that life.” He wants to stay in denial.

He’s a man who’s chosen to be in the closet for a reason. Max is an unmoored boat thrown against the waves in every different direction. He doesn’t know who he is. He doesn’t know what he wants.

That kiss tells me he at least wants to fuck me.

Do I let him? Even if it’s punishing me for showing him a side of himself that he’d rather hide?

“Touch me,” Max says, and kisses me.

Stunned, I reach for his belt.

“Mmmm. No. Over my pants. I can’t do more. Not now.”

Breathing heavily, I lay my palm against the hardness throbbing behind his zipper.

“Christ,” Max mutters, his head thrown back. “Yeah. Keep going.”

I stroke him over the silk trousers, trying to grip the thick girth. Getting my hand around it, I squeeze.

Max growls and grips my shoulders as his cock pulses. Seconds later, I feel dampness in his pants.

He staggers back. “Shit. Shit. Shit.”

Without any acknowledgement, he storms past me, and the only sound to break against the blood roaring in my ears is his bedroom door slamming shut.



AFTER AN HOUR, I HAVE my composure back and call Bronwin.

“Jesus, is Ryan okay?” My boss thinks I’d just casually call him if

something happened.

“Yeah,” I answer. “Something’s come up, and I have to go to Manhattan.”

“Can’t your club wait?” he says with an edgy tone.

My eyes slip closed. “It’s not for *that*. I need to meet with someone.”

Bronwin sighs. “Check in with me when you get back and confirm our team captain is well.”

“He’s *not* well. He’s furious about the suspension.”

“It’s one game, he’ll get over it.”

Given the anger he showed, it may not be good for him to be in the same room with anyone from Richmond.

Maybe I’ll offer to blow him while he watches the game at home.

THIRTY-SEVEN



Luca

The smell of Club Dare brings me back to the night I got the call about Max's accident. How simple everything looked. It was a mirage.

I'm more exposed than ever. If someone posted photos of Max talking to a guy, it's possible someone got a shot of him and me, in one setting or another.

Belova has Max Ryan on his radar. I'm days away from being exposed. I can't bring extra heat down on Max or the Crushers.

I wait on a blue velvet sofa in the seating area when the security guard gets my attention.

"There he is." He points to the man I came to see.

A shirtless male with a sculpted chest in leather pants struts toward me. Anthony Messina, one of the four mafia kings in Manhattan, stops short spotting me. But his guard whispers in his ear, announcing who I am.

Just not what I want.

A job. A home. Protection.

But I'm not here to see *him*. I'm here to see the completely naked man crawling on the floor behind him.

On a leash.

"I have an office," Messina snarls at me, petting the other man's head.

"I'm here to see..." I turn my gaze to the man crawling. "Mr. Daria."

The man hears me and grabs the leash from Messina. Standing to his full height, Sebastien Daria is imposing at six-foot-something with wide shoulders, contoured abs, and a long thick cock hanging between sculpted thighs. He wears a full-face mask with hammered slits around the eyes, and a zippered mouth to breathe.

Other men in the club are completely nude, so he doesn't look out of place.

He unclips the leash from his neck and tears off the mask. Light brown hair shakes out, rakishly falling over his face.

I'm crazy about Max, but this man's male beauty reaches another level.

“That’s me,” he says, unashamed of his nudity. “Who are you, and what the fuck do you want?”

But he doesn’t wait for an answer. He pushes Messina down on the sofa.

“A job,” I say, since he asked.

He turns his head toward me, and his once-over strokes every inch of my skin. “Name?”

“Daniil Korolev. Formerly of the Belova Brotherhood in Chicago.”

“A turncoat?” Messina hisses.

Sebastien slaps him across the face. “Did I say you can talk? Your mouth is for one thing right now.”

Without looking at me, Daria lifts one leg and wedges a massive foot on the sofa next to Messina’s thigh. With rough hands, he kisses Anthony Messina then lines up the mafia boss’s face to his cock. “Now suck me off.”

Messina’s mouth opens, and Daria taps his lips with a cock that hardened in seconds.

Wiping the wet, engorged tip across Messina’s lips, he growls, “Yeah, bitch.” Daria’s cock slides into his lover’s waiting mouth with a lusty groan while fisting Messina’s inky dark hair.

“You want a job? With us?” Daria asks, fucking Messina’s mouth, his head thrown back.

I was not expecting *this*. Or that it would turn me on to watch them. But as hard as my dick is, all I want is Max.

“You, Mr. Daria,” I clarify. “I want to work for Daria Enterprises, specifically.”

The four mafia kings of New York each run separate criminal organizations disguised as legitimate businesses. It’s Daria’s gambling halls that appeal to me. They’re underground and filled with other levels of security.

Messina’s hands curl around Daria’s curved ass, flexing as he gets off. Others stop to watch and run a hand across Daria’s slick back. But these guys don’t stray. They come here to be open about their sexuality, so no one talks shit about them behind their back.

If I work for them, I can live how I want. Spend my nights here at Club Dare, and no one will give a fuck who gets me off. I’ll never be able to have the man I want, so I might as well just fuck my life away with someone who also just wants sex.

“Jesus, fuck. Yes. You’ve been sucking my dick since college and it’s

still so good,” Daria hisses. “Christ, I’m gonna come.”

I sit there, awkwardly watching as Daria pulls out and comes all over Messina’s waiting lips. Next, they’re kissing, and Daria is sitting in the man’s lap. Messina will fuck Daria next, since *he’s* the top.

But they’re not gay. They’re bi. Married to the Mafia Queen of Manhattan. The house that rules both the Messina, Daria, and their other partners, the Byrne and Russo families. All four mafia bosses share Queen Rebecca Domenico.

I heard they’re *all* fucking each other at this point, but only Messina and Daria belong to this club.

“Are we done talking?” My heart and my underwear can’t take much more. I need to steal their focus.

Daria faces me with a body glistening with sweat. “No. Keep talking.”

“Ivan Belova wants me dead.”

“Bringing that heat to my door?”

“He’s not found me. Not yet. But he’s close.” I stand and meet his eyes. “I don’t want to take up too much of your time. Your partner Giancarlo Byrne gave me a new identity when Belova tried to have me killed. He’ll confirm exactly who I am and what I can offer as far as services and loyalty.” And hopefully overlook the bounty on my head. “I’ve been a member here for three years. Lincoln Dare can vouch for me, too. I need a job in the shadows.” I straighten my back. “I have a younger sister, a cleaner. You can use her, too.”

Daria’s lips twitch. “Cleaner. Messina, do we need a cleaner?”

“Always.” He strokes Daria’s chest.

“I’m lethal with a gun, stealth against my prey, and ruthless with my fists. I obey orders and don’t ask questions.”

“And you have no problem with this?” He strokes his cock. “What I do with Messina? What we do with our wife? All four of us?”

“Not at all. Although, I stick to men.”

He studies with me with steady scrutiny. “Daniil Korolev, you say?”

“Da,” I answer in Russian.

Daria grins and turns to Messina. “I’d love some bratva blood working for us.”

“A sister, too.” Messina pulls down his leather pants and strokes his hard-on. “Finish up with this guy, so I can fuck you.”

“He cares about one thing. Fucking me.” Daria steps back. “I’ll speak to

Giancarlo, and if he vouches for you, I'll be in touch."

I eye the path out of the VIP area to the sound of Daria and Messina's moans as they begin fucking on the blue velvet sofa.

As I walk away, I think, I would love to curl up on Max's bed at home and tell him what happened. The crawling. The leash. How Messina and Daria are open. How they're also fucking the same woman *and* two other guys!

Max needs to know he's not alone.

One last glance, I sigh. He'd never come here to play with me.

THIRTY-EIGHT



Max

Being suspended means I can't participate in morning skate, the team meeting, or go into the locker room.

I lay in bed and stare at the ceiling. My eyes slip closed and I touch my cock, remembering Luca jerking me off last night and how I came in my pants so hard, I nearly collapsed. It was all I could handle with the raging flashbacks of Jake fucking with my head.

Right now, all I want are Luca's lips on mine. On my cock. He's hot and intense. And not...dirty.

Christ, I'm like a lovesick puppy with a busted lip who can't stop thinking about my bodyguard.

Luca.

Not Luca, Daniil. I shake that name away. I like Luca or Luc better. But I'm guessing he'll want his identity back when he returns to his hitman gigs for a mafia organization operating in the Manhattan shadows.

I'm tempted to put on a pair of briefs and find him. Let him see my hard-on. My dick twitches at that, but I'm not going to make it.

I jump into the shower, and bracing against the icy water, I wait for it to warm up to make myself come. Breathing heavily against the shower wall, my shoulders relax when the hot spray soothes my back muscles.

Cleaned up, teeth brushed, but shirtless with track shorts, I wander into the hall. With Luca's bedroom door cracked open, I see inside. His bed is unmade.

Fury churns my gut. There's also no trace of his cologne anywhere, and my spine stiffens.

He's not here. He left and never came home. Where did he go? He's supposed to be protecting me.

The monitor on my kitchen counter beeps.

Front Door Open. Front Door Open.

When the shadow gets closer, I grab a kitchen knife and raise it. I'm ready to hack into the person when that spicy cologne scent hits me and

nearly brings me to my knees.

Luca struts into the kitchen and jumps back at seeing me with a knife. "Where's Mike?" he asks the code phrase he gave me.

I have two answer choices.

Mike's at the gym = Someone's in the apartment.

Or...

Mike's getting gas = All's clear.

"No one's here," I say instead. "Where the fuck did you go?" I notice a brown paper bag in his grasp.

The aroma of something delicious hits me.

"I called my boss after you went to sleep and told him I had to leave for a few hours."

Leave. For a few hours. "How could you leave me here alone?"

Luca places the bag on the counter and folds his arms. "For someone who didn't want a bodyguard, you complain a lot when I'm not around."

"You convinced me I need one." I swallow. "What's in the bag?"

"Where did I go? What's in the bag?" Luca removes his suit jacket, a gun holstered under his right arm makes him look so damn sexy. "You sound awfully possessive."

I'm not sure why I'm dying to know where he went. He insisted I need his protection then he leaves me. "Tell me. Please."

"Aw, fuck, Max if you're going to beg, save it for when you want me on my knees."

My cock stiffens back to life. And my running shorts will give him the show I wanted earlier. "Don't fucking tease me."

"I met with a man about that job I told you about."

My jaw unhinges. "Already?"

"I need to secure a place for me and Samara."

Hearing his sister's name, my anger softens. Even though she's a badass who scared me a little. A contractor she hired is recarpeting Luca's guest bedroom and giving the entire condo a cleanup when we're not home. My condo association wasn't pleased with the unscheduled maintenance.

"That's where you were all night?" I move toward him. "Meeting with the...mafia boss you want to work for? What's his name?"

Luca shakes his head.

"Another name I can't have in my head?"

"You're catching on." He rolls up his sleeves and goes into my fridge like

he lives here.

The visual tears at my soul, then puts me back together. A gorgeous, working man, living with me. Sharing a home. Opening my refrigerator like it's his.

Ours.

He takes out a container of orange juice and my eyes stray to the bag of food he brought home.

It's warm to my touch, and as I bring the lumpy contents to my nose, I damn near rip it open. "Bagels?"

"From the city. Right out of the oven."

"And loaded with carbs." The freshly baked dough makes my mouth water. "I hate you."

"Good thing only one of us will be the death of you."

"You bought the bagels, I'll cook breakfast."

After I change into something appropriate for frying bacon, I cook Luca and I two amazing bacon, egg, and cheese sandwiches on the warm and crusty New York bagels. I have so many more questions about this new job, but Gilda walks in and looks upset that she didn't get to make me breakfast on a rare day that I'm still at home during the season.

My busted-up face opens the conversation, and I close it with my suspension. She doesn't even let us clean up, but Luca's eyes look like he's drugged.

He's been up all night.

I haven't been suspended since college and have no idea what to do with myself. Coach Beck left me a message saying he and Bronwin don't want me at the game. I'm too wiped out to argue. But I call the defense coach, and he uploads videos for me to watch from home all day.

Luca sleeps until around two and finds me in my office sprawled out on the leather sofa looking at my iPad. He's in sweats and a T-shirt. And looks fucking delicious.

"Gilda gone for the day?" he asks, adorably rubbing his eyes.

"Yeah. I reset all the alarms." I sit up. "Tell me about the job."

"Why?" He leans on the chair, crossing one ankle over the other.

To see if I can still fuck you after you leave.

But I don't say that.

"Curious. I don't know anyone in the mafia. It's a word that gets thrown around a lot. I'm thinking it means a lot of different things. Different

businesses.”

Luca takes a seat. “Very good. It is a catch-all. Different syndicates deal in different forms of illegal activities.”

“Can you tell me about the work you want to do for the people in Manhattan?”

He tilts his head, his jaw twitching. “My wife never asked me what I did for her brother. Specifically. Never cared.”

“I care.”

He smiles. “One of the families runs underground gambling halls. The places are secure. Playing is invite-only. Cameras everywhere. I’d like to take care of collections for them, so I can move around a lot.”

“Isn’t gambling legal now in New York?” I ask.

“Electronic games went legit years ago. Not table games. That’s why Daria is still underground.” He grumbles, cursing himself. “Max, I swear, erase that name from your brain.”

“What name?” I smile and cross my legs. “No one’s ever tried to fuck with these guys?”

“No,” he chuckles.

“Why?” I lean forward, truly interested.

“Rarely do five families bond the way they have.”

“How have they bonded?”

He holds a hand in front of his face for a minute, then he says, “Four heads of the five families are male and they’re all married to a lady boss of the primary family.”

“Wait.” Something catches in my throat. “Four mafia bosses married four sisters from one family?”

“Close. One daughter of a don, who’s dead. She married all four mafia bosses. Just her.”

My brain spazzes out on that one. “Come again?”

“I’m sure there’s plenty of that with four dudes and one lady.”

I did hear right. I don’t bother asking how that works since I know plural marriage is illegal in every state.

“The guys... Uh... They mess around, too,” Luca adds, grinning. “With each other.”

Just when I thought this conversation couldn’t get any more interesting. “Really?”

Then something sinks in. Getting to my feet, I stand over Luca. Jealousy

coils up my spine. I grip his hair and push my track pants down. “Do I have to punish you for going behind my back to get laid?”

He grips my cock. “They only fuck each other. Not that I would have joined them if they asked me.”

“You’ve been out all night with a potential new boss who’s also gay.”

“Two. And they’re bi. Married to a woman.” He brings his face to my cock.

“Ouch,” I choke out, feeling his teeth graze along my length.

“Do I have your attention?”

“Yeah. Suck me. Please.” My breathing goes ragged and when he closes his lips around my dick, I forget everything else.



AN HOUR LATER, WE'RE in my shower, kissing, cleaning all the lube off from us fucking for an hour.

“What’s the plan for the rest of the day?” I ask.

“More of this.” He grabs my cock.

“The game starts at 7. I need to watch it.” I tense up, and I can see he thinks I’m pushing him away.

“Sure.” He gets out and knots a towel around his waist.

“I have a few more hours of videos to watch. Watch with me? I can use an opinion from the bench.”

“Sure.” He finger-combs his dark curly hair, looking so damn sexy.

I’m suddenly starving. “Do you know how to make chili?” I ask, playing the sympathy card. “I have a real hankering for it.”

“With or without cornbread?”

I can fall in love with this guy.



WE EAT AND WALK OFF the meal down at Stamford Harbor while the sun sets in a blaze of reds and purples on the horizon.

“You know, with that arrangement the four bosses have with their lady boss and each other, in that world, I’ll be accepted,” Luca breaks the silence. “We’ll be accepted.”

Acceptance. What a fucking concept. My throat tightens. People know

me. How... How can I do this?

"You know, you can do so much better than me, Luc," I mutter, turning inward.

"You are a moody son of a bitch."

"Then why do you want me?" I lean against the metal railing, the tide lapping against the pilings. "Do you just want to fuck a hockey player?"

"You're right." His words drop my heart into my stomach. "But not just any hockey player. You. *You're* the hockey player I want to fuck. You could have been a quarterback. A tennis star. You could have been the goddamn bag boy at the grocery store."

"That's a good one." I double over, laughing. "So, New York... It's more open than Connecticut, isn't it?"

"That I can't argue." He steps back. "What are you suggesting?"

"Nothing. Just a little punch drunk from the lack of sleep." I feel my face heat up, and I wonder if he notices in the hazy twilight settling on the pier. "Are you going to keep sleeping in that bedroom which is basically a construction site?" I tear down my wall to see if I can knock down his.

"Do you have another bed to offer me?" he asks.

"Yeah. Mine." I pull him in for a scorching kiss that I get totally lost in.

Hearing the planks creak, I break the kiss. For once I don't care who sees me. Me. But I'm still sensitive to people's comfort levels seeing two men making out. I grab Luca's hand and return to the car.

Scorching sexual tension hums off us on the ride home from the harbor and in the elevator, I push him against the wall to taste more of his mouth. But the game is starting any second.

Inside the apartment, I head to my media room where the tight space feels more intimate. Living rooms with a wall of windows invite spies. It's not wise for either of us right now to be caught in a compromising position.

Luca joins me, and his mouth dips open looking around. For a moment, I'm embarrassed. It's garishly decorated in memorabilia. My circle of friends are all players, or ex-players, and agents. To an outsider, it feels like I'm bragging.

There's a reason all of this is in a room that only I use. And not the living room where I host guests.

"You've lived the dream, you realize that?" Luca says, looking around.

"I do." I'm reminded that while I've experienced moments of trauma, I've had years of glory and success fading compared to those horrible seven

days with Uncle Harris are a blip to the months I've had with Luca.

I never considered having a partner until this very moment, and wonder how a room only dedicated to me will fly in a home that I'll share with someone else. The man who shares my refrigerator.

"What's on your glory wall?" I ask Luca.

"I don't need a wall." He taps his forehead. "My successes are up here. The moments I felt proud."

Scoring goals feels hollow compared to a life of real consequences. "You're proud of killing people for Belova?"

He ambles toward me, slow and measured. "Surviving horrific situations and to come home and kiss my son was the success part."

He called the sport I love violent. "We share the same primal instincts to survive. To get what we want."

Luca's eyes blaze with heat. "I know what I want right now."

Fuck, I hope it's what I want.

"Tell me." My hand instinctively drops to my pants as my cock thickens. We're in our own world right here.

"I want to taste you. Go down on you while you watch the game."

My chest seizes at the promise of Luca sucking my cock while I watch my team play. Can a fantasy ever match up to reality?

"You might regret that." I lower my zipper. "I might want to get suspended more often."

THIRTY-NINE



Max

With my teammates skating in the pregame warm up, Luca kneels on the carpet in front of me.

An intense hockey game playing our rivals on the television-
Check.

Stomach full on a great meal- Check.

The most gorgeous man I've ever seen ready to suck me off because I asked him- Check.

I grab Luca by the back of his head. "Aren't you worried you'll be too distracted to properly protect me if my cock is in your mouth?"

"Duncan is posted in the lobby tonight because of the fight with Quinn. You can consider me off duty." He kisses me. Hard.

"God, I was a fool for trying to resist you," I mutter, deep and gravelly.

"Tell me what you want," he groans.

"Suck me like I'm one of those whores in your club?" My heart races, blood roaring in my ears.

"That's fake. This is real. For me," he confesses.

"Yeah, this is real for me too." God, how I want him.

"More..." His lips trail down my body, pulling my shirt out of my jeans. "Elaborate."

"I came so hard thinking of your mouth around my cock when you left last night," I say, gripping his hair tighter. "Everything about you screams power and intensity. I want to feel you unleash that power on me."

"Oh, baby. Just you wait." He looks up at me, his tongue lashing against the contours of my abs. "You are so fucking perfect."

"Now suck my cock." I reach into my pants and release my aching cock. "Make me come."

Luca doesn't take me into his mouth, though. He licks the underside, his pierced, wet tongue coating my length with his saliva.

So fucking wet.

He licks the bulbous, throbbing head of my dick as his warm hand grips

the base of my shaft. Everything twitches, and my balls tighten. When he closes his lips around the tip, I nearly bust my nut.

Here I am, with my pants around my ankles getting blown by my bodyguard.

The power imbalance blurs and after a few sucks, he takes me entirely into his mouth. My whole world narrows, and for a second, the room is stripped of all my glory. All I want is Luca's mouth getting me off. *He's* all that matters.

A man, this man, sucking my cock ignites a passion more than any woman ever did. I grip his hair with both fists and fuck his mouth, pistoning my hips, deep throating him until I'm lost all over again.

He gurgles, his throat vibrating from his gag reflex. I stop pumping and allow him to come up for air. Then I make eye contact and push him back down to suck my greedy cock.

My eyes stray to the television, the screen filled with my skating beasts out for blood and revenge. All while I'm getting my dick sucked. It's hard to feel sorry for myself for the suspension when I'm balls deep in euphoric erotic agony.

My control snaps, and my orgasm shatters any composure I had. I cry out, a loud moan ripping from my throat as I spill down Luca's throat. He drinks me down. Every damn drop.

"Fuck," I roar. "Fuck. Fuck. Fuck."

It's a war cry, booming and aggressive. I don't give a shit if all of Stamford hears me.

"Good boy." I yank Luca up by a mess of glossy brown curls and kiss him, licking the inside of his mouth to taste myself on his tongue.

We breathe heavily, our foreheads together. His eyes lower and he licks his lips. "Wow," is all he says.

The game comes back into focus as the commentator shouts, "Madison passes to Willis, he shoots, he scores. 4-1, Richmond!"

Sitting up, my attention pivots to the screen. *Four-One?* How the fuck long was Luca sucking my dick? Christ, did he keep going since my team was losing?

Are they getting creamed because I'm not there?

Luca bristles, getting to his feet. In jeans and a tight gray sweater, he looks sharp, and not like a man who just sucked a dick. "I'll be right back..."

"Wait," I say, my eyes back and forth from his to the game. "You..."

“I’ll take care of myself. Watch the game.”

I get to my feet. “You don’t want to watch it with me anymore?”

He glances around. “You like your space. I respect that.”

“I like you in my space more,” comes out before I can stop myself.

FORTY



Luca

Max's words still me. Every moment turns into a surprise with him. And he *wants* to hang out with me.

"You need to get off. Come here, you hot-as-fuck bodyguard." The edge in Max's voice makes my cock throb and pulse. "I need something else on my mind other than these motherfuckers creaming my guys."

"I hope they're not creaming all over our guys."

"Ours," he whispers. "I like that."

For now...

I push my jeans down and stroke his busted face while he licks my balls and taint. I worry my piercings may pinch his injured lip, but with me pumping my cock, I get off in less than a minute.

We stroke my cock together as I climax, the warm cum spilling over our joined hands. I clean up in his bathroom, while he heads to the half bath off the kitchen.

When I return, there's a beer on the coffee table and Max pats the sofa inviting me to sit.

The Crusher's second game against Richmond, this one without Max on the ice, makes our team look like they are skating around with sopping wet blankets over their heads. They're failing miserably.

"How does this end?" Max asks me.

"What do you mean?"

"When do they stop?"

I look at him and understand immediately that he isn't talking about the game. The mafia rarely stops when they want someone out of the picture. They won't kill Max, that's too extreme.

But the question makes me stop and think. It's not my job to make Belova stop.

Or is it?

Why does he want his team to win so badly? Other than the obvious drive of every owner—for the bragging rights of owning a champion team. But

there's more going on behind the scenes with Belova than I dare to speculate. I have to keep my distance.

Belova invaded my world. It's a hazard of being on the run. No matter how safe you are one day, you have to pull up the roots and keep running.

Once I'm embedded with House Domenico, I can stop. Belova won't start a war with five Italian Mafia families with direct ties to the Byrnes—the *Irish Mob* of Boston.

Not over me.

I think about how to answer Max's question, *when does it stop?*

"Depends," I say. "They tried to get to you once. And they failed."

"They put me in the hospital. I hardly call that a failure."

"They wanted you injured for the rest of the season. You didn't even miss one game the first time." I glance at Max, trying to make some lemonade from these venomous lemons. "Some predators take a lucky shot. Miss. And give up."

"It's not just me. They can hurt one of my guys next." Max paces, pointing to the television. "This game showed them who can step up when I don't play."

"When I get to the stadium tomorrow, I'll hold a meeting with Bronwin about hiring an investigator to prove the attacks were premeditated so they can go to the league. Sanction Belova, force him to sell the team. Take his poison somewhere else." It's all I can offer.

"I never thought it would come to this. You said this sport is violent. But this was goddamn unprovoked." He pokes his face. "Is unsportsmanlike."

"I want to argue, but a sport that stops a game to let two players brutalize each other until their blood coats the ice is anything but sportsmanlike."

Max looks ready to give me a matching shiner, but Willis shoots and misses, drawing his attention. The game ends with a 6-1 slaughter. Richmond goes nuts celebrating on the ice. They made it to the playoffs by getting Max kicked out of the game.

Regions play their best teams in the first round. A thought has ice shooting down my spine.

In three weeks for the second round, we may very well play Richmond again and be right back here.

FORTY-ONE



Luca

Before we retire into Max's bedroom, his hair wet and slicked back from a shower, he says, low and controlled, "I'm so fucking jealous of you."

"Me? Why?"

"You live unapologetically."

"I was forced to marry a woman and have a baby with her."

"You were in the mob."

"Bratva, I correct him. Russian mafia is bratva. Mob is generally the Irish."

Max finally cracks a smile. "Noted. But now you live how you want."

"I use a club. I'm not as out as you think. I work for a hockey team and can't lose my job because they think I'm ogling the players." I sit down on the bed. "I was only ogling one."

"Me?" He smiles.

"Da," I answer in Russian. "For years. I took this job because of you. I love hockey. I applied to several teams after I broke from Belova."

After I left, the idea of sitting on an island somewhere with all my money left me feeling too exposed. And anyone living in a fortress or surrounded by guards just draws attention. Belova would always outgun me.

I chose to hide in plain sight, and killed two birds with one stone. I indulged in my love of hockey. Being part of the organization, I melted into their sea of staff, coaches, trainers, and security.

With my dark gray suits, white shirts, blue ties, shades, close-cropped hair, and a menacing scowl, I looked like every other guard.

But behind my shades, my gaze tracked Max Ryan. It worked for five years. It's still working, if Gideon and Dev can be trusted. They saw me in Vegas. So far, they've kept their traps shut.

In a few months, I'll be back in the shadows. Hopefully, as part of Daria Enterprises. A place where Belova won't dare to touch me. He's got no reason to. It won't bring his sister back. And if it comes down to it, I'll give him the millions I got from Lia's insurance.

Of course, I have one loose thread to snip.

Looking down at Max in his bed, I ask, softly, “Is that piece of crap uncle of yours still alive?”

“Yeah.” Max’s eyebrows pinch together, his voice cold and dead.

I climb into the bed next to him and his head falls into my naked lap, his warm breath on my cock. “He won’t be much longer.”



MAX DOESN'T QUESTION my promise to take his uncle out. Or ask details. Not that I'd give him any and put thoughts in his head that a savvy detective can force out of him.

Smiling, Max sleeps calmly in my arms all night long. Holding him is the only thing I can do to comfort him, even if it's short-lived.

Max and I don't have a future. He's not ready to be out. His confessions reveal a darkness that lurks within him. A darkness from his past that I can't change.

That uncle is going to pay, though.

Then I'll bend the knee to House Domenico for my safety and that of my sister's.

I glance at Max's handsome face, relaxed in sleep, painfully aware that there's no place in that life for a famous hockey player boyfriend.

Well...fuck.

FORTY-TWO



Max

Days later, I'm still livid that Richmond's win against us put them in the playoffs, most likely playing against Cape May. A good team, who will get mowed down with every trick in the book, just so Richmond can face us again.

Even though I'm back on the ice, we play the last two games halfheartedly. Coach Beck brings up some players from the farm team to get major league ice time for their contracts. They're our support system when a player goes down for any length of time. We have to keep them happy and engaged.

The regular season ends, and we have five days until Game One against Albany here in Stamford.

I grow a beard in the postseason, I follow brutal dietary rituals, and in the past, I've woken up in the middle of the night to run ten miles on the treadmill. I growl, I curse, I slam shit. Every loss is the end of the world, and Gilda looks at me with a glimmer of fear in her eyes.

Now I have a bodyguard who is paid to be, for the lack of a better word, up my ass. It feels like we're in some kind of relationship. Even though it's temporary. I have to incorporate him into my playoff routine and rituals.

Sweating from a brutal workout, I stare at the Sound. Luca left early this morning before I woke up. His cryptic note worried me, but I'll have to get used to it. Maybe he started working for the mafia guy.

Or maybe my cold attitude and drive to win has already driven him away.

FORTY-THREE



Luca

I'm alone on this two-lane road in the backwoods of Vermont. One that makes me crazy. But not as insane as Max has been.

He's turned into another person. Hyper-focused and intense. Speaking in one-word sentences and not looking me in the eye.

We might have taken what we have as far as it can go. I have a new life waiting for me across the border in Manhattan. In the shadows. Max loves his life of fame and glory.

Only he's living a lie of the heart.

Maybe he'll hook up with Damien Carter when I'm gone. I squeeze the steering wheel to the point of denting the leather with my fingers thinking of another man's mouth around Max's cock.

The Crushers made it to the postseason before. I'm prepared for the schedule. Four rounds, sixteen days each to play seven games with back-to-back travel. It's a security nightmare on a good day.

My love of hockey will also come to an end when this season is over. I've let my obsession with Max go too far. I know every expression on his face, and now that I caught his sexual attention and saw how that changed him, I'll notice it again. But it will be because of another man.

My stomach revolts and I pull over to vomit. God, I'm so pathetic. Here I am, on the side of the road, on my knees in the grass, vomiting because of a guy.

When I get back into my car, I keep driving, holding it together. The sign for Harlow comes into focus and I want to be sick all over again.

"Shit," I mutter, pulling off this fraud of a highway and start driving through the small town where I buried what was left of my son from the fiery car crash.

Lia named him Elijah, but after they died, I stole his remains from the funeral home with a team of brigadiers. It took weeks before the medical examiner confirmed it was him based on dental records. They were the most excruciating weeks of my life.

With his little body, I drove him here myself and had him buried in a place where no one would ever take him from me again. I come here once a year on the anniversary of the car crash. I hate that Eli is here all alone. Belova flew Lia's body back to Russia.

One day I'll have Eli moved. Closer to where I end up settling down so I can visit more often.

I've not given up on the idea that I might have a family again. But on my terms. Elijah was of my blood, and I get that having a child with a man I love might mean giving up that element. But I know that regardless of whose blood he or she has, that child will still be precious to me.

The small memorial park, filled with a sea of handsome gravestones, catches my watery eyes as my car crests a hill. It fills me with the same sense of sadness every year. I steer the car into the cemetery and park, sniffing as I slog to the site where my tiny son is buried.

I don't bring flowers. I wire money from a shell account to make sure the gravesite's planting is maintained.

Standing in front of the headstone, his name etched in the granite sits in my stomach like a lead weight. His death is a symbol of my failure. Had I been the husband Lia needed, he'd be alive. As much as I blame myself, I know the true culprit is her brother, Ivan, who forced me to marry her when he knew full well that I was gay and could never love her the way she deserved.

Lia knew this too and convinced herself she could change me. She thought if she were the perfect wife, I'd fall in love with her. Despite me telling her my inability to love her wasn't her fault.

"You love our son. I gave you that little boy," she cried. "He's a part of me. Why can't you love me?"

She'd been drinking during this particular fight while Elijah was being looked after by a nanny.

I never answered her. Maybe if I had, things would be different.

I open my wallet to the photo of him I keep there. In my jewelry box on the houseboat is a lock of his soft brown hair like mine. These are the only things I kept. All I took with me when I fled.

I stopped wearing my wedding ring after the accident. I hope Ivan found it. I hope the abandoned gold band hammered into him how I was done with him long before he chose to have me killed.

A chill in the air clings to everything this far north for late April. Unlike

cemeteries in large cities with offices and security, only a low white horse fence lines the perimeter of this one. Arrangements for burials and groundskeeping issues are handled at the town center building a mile away.

Standing here, I fill my mind with happy memories of Elijah's four short years. I clutch my chest, readying myself for the barrage of apologies I'll make for not being there that night to stop Lia from getting into the car with him.

Before a single word slips from my lips, an Escalade pulls up next to my Pathfinder. And three other black sedans idle behind that one.

It happens in slow motion. Ivan Belova gets out.

FORTY-FOUR



Luca

I van waits by his car, likely respecting that I drove several hours to see my son. How long has he known Elijah was here? Did he follow me?

I place my hand on the headstone and say a final prayer. “I might be seeing you soon, my son.”

Shoulders back, I march toward the SUV.

Belova leans on the door, and when I get close, he motions for me to sit on an iron bench near the entrance.

I’m outnumbered, and compliance is my only option. I didn’t do anything wrong except escape his assassination attempt. And take Eli’s remains. *He was my damn son.* I had the right to bury him anywhere I wanted.

“Daniil,” Belova’s rough voice hisses. “Vermont? Of all the fucking places.”

“Hey,” I snap. “My son is buried here. This is holy ground. Watch your mouth.”

“Your accent is gone?”

“Everything you knew about me is gone.”

A smile ghosts his lips. “Yet we once again have something in common.”

“If you mean hockey...”

“Da.”

“Why? Why buy a hockey team?”

“Diversification. Legitimacy. And the fu...” He censors himself. “The profits are unbelievable. If you include the illegal gambling.”

I lower my head. “I’m sorry I asked.”

If he instructed his coaches to have players purposely attack stars like Max Ryan, he’s probably fixing games and cleaning up from the odds.

“Why Richmond?”

“Low salary market.” He rubs his fingers together. “Good players, though. They always sell out. Tickets and concessions make ten times bank every game.”

“You do realize that your team made it into the playoffs and now those

players will be asking for more money.”

He shrugs lazily. “Then I get rid of them.”

I roll my eyes thinking he means kill them. “I know it was you who sent that woman and those goons to hurt Max Ryan,” I say with a little too much emotion in my voice.

Something Ivan sees right through. “You’re not enjoying babysitting him?”

“I work security for the team.” I stick to what I’m sure he knows.

“I’m pulling strings to make sure Richmond plays Stamford in the next round.” Ivan stands up.

“Have at it.” Now I shrug. “They won’t make it to the finals. There’s only so much your players can do on the ice.”

“Your boy is going down Game One. Without him, Stamford can’t win a postseason game. Check the stats.”

I freeze, not believing I just heard a direct threat. Why would he say that? None of this makes sense. Not responding to the Max comment, I shove my hands into my pockets. “Aren’t you more interested that I’m standing right here even though you tried to kill me?”

Ivan shakes his head. “I was devastated.”

I grab his suit jacket and ignore the gun hammers clicking around me. “You? I lost *my son*.”

“You can have another son. *I won’t have another sister*,” he roars.

“That’s not my fault. She knew what I was. I told her not to marry me. To go to you and ask to be freed of the obligation.”

“She loved you,” he says from the same brokenhearted place I live in.

And he’s right. I can have another child. Doesn’t look very likely now.

“Come home, Daniil,” Ivan whispers. “You can’t like living in that crappy houseboat with one eye over your shoulder.”

My throat tightens. Only, I’ve been living in a penthouse, getting laid nearly every night. Jesus, I’m...happy. And it’s about to all be stolen away from me.

“I would have worked for you until my dying breath. The bratva was my life. You forced me into an impossible, miserable situation.”

“And we both suffered the consequences.”

It occurs to me that Ivan knows *everything*. Knew it all along. Where I work. Where I live. Where Max lives.

“You always loved hockey,” he keeps going. “I’ll give you the team.”

I scoff. “You’ll just sign over a hockey team to me? I have no idea how to run a professional sports team. And I don’t want to learn.”

“Then name your price.”

“Why do you want me back so badly?”

“Pride. Perception. You got away. That made me look weak.”

House Domenico sits on my tongue, but I won’t drag them into this. I’m not working for them yet. And I haven’t heard from Giancarlo Byrne to find out if I passed Daria’s background checks.

“Here is your boy.” Ivan sticks his phone under my nose.

Max runs passing drills at the practice facility.

Anger fills my vision. “You have a mole with the Crushers?”

“No.” Ivan laughs. “Just a few cameras I paid some maintenance people to plant. They think I’m a snooping tabloid rag.”

“Those cameras are being ripped out when I get back.”

“If I let you get back.”

“Kill me,” I sneer. “Go ahead. I’m not working for you again.”

“I can get a sniper into that building in ten minutes. Take your boy out.”

“Why are you calling him...” I stop and close my eyes.

He saw us at the harbor a few nights ago. Saw us kiss. God, I’m so stupid.

“I’ve learned my lesson, Daniil. You were a good enforcer. Orlov is useless.” He hisses toward one of the cars. “Come home. Take your place at my side. You can have all the men you want. I have no more sisters to force on you.”

My body goes rigid.

“Underboss? You’re offering me, the man you tried to kill, the underboss job?” I get in his face. “And how do I know you won’t try to kill me again?”

“You don’t.” He stands up. “Just like today. You will never see me coming next time.”

Hard sell me, why don’t you. I shiver against the cool twilight air from the setting sun. The long drive back to Connecticut in the dark will be miserable.

“Keep your eyes on your boy,” Ivan taunts me. “He’s going down in our playoffs. It can be graceful, or he’ll leave on a stretcher. Either way, the Crushers are losing. We’re taking home the Dresden Cup.” He signals his driver to open his door. “And you’ll be fired with nowhere to go.”

Fury floods my veins, and I consider putting a bullet in his head. His men will kill me. I’ll be with my son, but Max will live.

Or maybe he won't.

"Five days, Daniil." Ivan steps toward his car. "You have five days to come home after the Crushers' season is over, or you will be forcibly dragged back. Bring your lover boy with you. After this season, he'll never play hockey again."

I grab Ivan around the neck to choke him. But before I can, he laughs out loud. "Try that again. You don't even want to know what I'll do to your sister."

Vomit bubbles up in my throat and I shuck him away. "What?"

"A sister for a sister."

Ivan waves a gloved hand, signaling to the men in another car. A door opens and they pull out a woman, tied up and gagged.

Samara.

FORTY-FIVE



Max

Luca has been quiet for days and staying out of my way. I don't blame him. I've been an asshole since playoffs started. It may look like I maintain a rigid schedule during the *regular* season, but I'm a damn cyborg now.

Extra-long workouts at dawn.

A protein-packed hot breakfast cooked by Gilda, who starts earlier than usual.

Morning skate.

An hour in the weight room.

An hour of yoga to get loose.

Home for lunch and a nap.

Reporting back to the locker room by four p.m.

There's a sense throughout the season that a loss isn't catastrophic. We play so many games, there's always a chance to catch up. That perpetual optimism keeps me going.

All of that evaporates and the world shrinks in focus to seven games per playoff round. To take the Cup, we must win four of those games. Four times in a row.

Luca and I make polite conversation like he understands I need to be a different person, and to his credit, he doesn't give me shit about my steely and hyper-focused mood.

He's been sullen, too. He looks worried. I've gotten to know this man. The stress in his eyes doesn't have anything to do with me. But what?

I can't deny how I feel about him anymore. Every night when I slip into my bed alone, I ache for him. With his room repaired, he's sleeping back in there. He doesn't come to me. But I know it's mostly because right now, I'm totally unapproachable.

It's clear. I want him in my life. One way or another. I have a connection to him I've never felt. He understands me. He knows everything about me. All my secrets.

And he still wants me.

I remember what he said about my uncle. We haven't talked about it. Maybe he'll let it go.

If he goes through with quitting the Crushers, it opens up possibilities. No more sneaking around. He'll be living down in Manhattan. I can make that work. Especially if everything goes my way in the postseason.

Just like the last five days, Luca shadows me throughout my daily routine. I expect a man who isn't athletically trained to drag his ass, but he is with me one hundred percent of the way.

I've been running on fumes for years. It's time to let myself have something that will fuel me. That something is Luca. What we can have together. I'll confess when the season is over. And hope he's still crazy about me.



IT'S EXTRA BUSY TODAY. Game day. Game One against Albany. It's also a Friday night. Those games are always extra packed and insanely loud.

I show up to a frenzy of activity, equipment people inspecting our gear, and trainers inspecting *us*.

Coach seals off the team once we're all in the dressing room for his pregame talk. Luca stands near the locked door, his eyes behind shades. He's hot as fuck wearing a flashy suit, an earpiece, and a gun on his belt that no one sees. But I know it's there.

"You know I'm not a super religious guy," I say, looking around at my teammates, kneeling in a circle, suited up like battle warriors. The transformation from human to machine never fails to take my breath away when we're all in a closed space like this.

"But let's thank God," I continue, "or whatever higher power you believe in for getting us here. And let's also give thanks for every breath we suck in tonight to play the game we've all loved since we were kids."

Everyone quietly chants something, and I say, "Let's send Albany home early and then cheer our asses off for Cape May."

Voodoo, anything to *not* play Richmond.

"Here, here," Willis, my center hoots, and the team thunders in agreement

Coach Beck says a few words, handing out specific shout-outs to players who got us here. He looks at me, but I shake my head. I don't want any

recognition tonight.

The others cackle in response to Coach's pep talk as we line up at the double doors leading to the rink. It opens, and we roar down the narrow hallway. Muffled announcements from the ice vibrate the cement walls. Our march across the rubber floors is caught on a pregame show thanks to the cameras all around us.

I'm used to it.

The arena is dark but loud, with deafening howls from the crowd as I step onto the ice. My blade connects to the slick surface. I always sigh a little when the teeth of my front blade, that tiny groove digs into the ice and gives me the power to skate like I was born on blades.

My legs pump as the team warms up, skating in practiced circles before a crowd of eighteen thousand, not including media and the private corporate boxes or staff.

The cheers and foot pounding make the damn place shake. It hits me that we pulled it off. Richmond tried to keep us out of the playoffs, but here we are. And without anyone outside of the organization knowing I was hurt.

I survived. I thrived. Luca had something to do with that. As he's done at all the other games we've played, he takes his position behind the players' benches and watches the crowd.

He's talking on a radio and pointing to the seats directly behind the team. Long rows, several deep for family are cordoned off with a black, red, and gold ribbon, the team's colors.

Someone must have told Luca to seat someone important. My heart lands in my throat when I see...my parents.

Every year, I send them the family tickets I get for each game, usually giving the rest to other players with big families.

"It's too long of a drive to Stamford," Mom complains when I ask her about why they never come.

I'd offered to send limos and put them up in hotels. The excuses just evolve from there.

Now they're here. Luca gets them settled and my gut twists seeing him with them. God, they'll hate him. They hate me for giving in to my baser needs for a man. That I couldn't pray away the gay, or suck it up, and just take a wife for appearances.

Instead, I chose to look like a manwhore to the hockey world. Something they hadn't said boo about.

Singer Kris Peters, a Stamford native and Broadway star, belts out a version of the National Anthem that nearly brings me to tears. The refs go through the motions with the forwards before dropping the puck. I take my place with Hayden on my left.

Our forward, Willis, doesn't get the puck, but it's early. Like a thoroughbred thundering out of the gate at the Kentucky Derby, I won't tire myself out, or kill my team's stamina two seconds in.

During my first break, I get to my seat and look for my parents, expecting to see them looking for me. No, Dad is looking at the program, and Mom is scrolling on her phone.

Luca watches them, his brows furrowed. Maybe it's because I'm not on the ice. I can't be staring at the stands when I'm skating. I'll catch a stick to the face.

But minutes into my next shift, Paloma, the Albany right winger, cracks my helmet's vision guard with his stick in a lucky shot. The bench clears out, including the trainers. Luca is the first on the ice to lunge for Paloma.

"God, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I miscalculated the shot. It wasn't intentional," Paloma pleads with me.

I have no reason not to believe him. It happens.

The time clock stops while officials watch the replay to see if it was premeditated. I breathe easier when the hit was deemed unintentional.

Paloma takes a standard penalty during a crucial time of the game. A horrible thing to happen in the playoffs.

Luca finds me and crouches in front of me. "You okay?"

"Yeah." I nod. "Paloma's stick caught my helmet frame and rattled my brain for a second." I don't vocalize that it reminded me for the first time in a week I'm mortal. Even made me a little afraid that I could get seriously hurt.

Luca called it from the beginning. They'll get me on the ice if they want to. But this is a player from Albany, and I've never known him to be malicious.

The game resumes and the patience we started with pays off. By the end of the second period, we're up by two goals.

During that last intermission, I make the most of the eighteen minutes to hydrate and focus. With a few minutes to go, I approach Luca waiting near the tunnel. He stares agog at me in full gear, and my cock thickens instantly.

"You sure you're okay?" he asks again, his eyes cutting across my face looking for damage from the Paloma hit. "I could have fucking killed that

guy.”

It’s the first time I think he’s going through something, and not just being more guarded because of the intense back-to-back games.

“That would be a problem.” I nudge his arm and smile like he said something hilarious. “I can’t visit you in prison for eight months of the year.”

He looks at me like I’m crazy.

“Your parents are here,” he says, changing the subject. “I got a call on the radio to make sure they got to their seats. You should have mentioned—”

“They never told me they were coming.”

Luca cocks his head. “Is that...normal?”

“For them, yeah,” I huff out.

Not caring who’s watching, I reach for his suit jacket sleeve and tug him near me. “I’m sorry if I’ve been distant for the last week.”

Seeing how he ran to the ice to go after Paloma stirred the life back into me. Got my warm blood moving again. And that blood is moving south.

“Tonight,” I breathe out.

“Yeah?”

“Tonight, I want to fuck you,” I mutter.

His jaw tightens. “You mean if you win?”

“You better hope we win.” Oh, we’re winning this game. I feel it. I see it. It only took about five minutes to see what Albany brought tonight, and we’re masters at defeating it. “If we lose, I’m still going to fuck you, but I’ll make it hurt so much more.”

FORTY-SIX



Luca

The Crushers win 4 to 2. The two goals Albany scored were flukes in my opinion. Just bad timing from the goalie.

“Would you like to see Max after the game?” I ask his parents when the house lights come on.

His mother sets her shoulders back. “How... How long will he be?”

I never timed how long it takes the players to do their postgame meeting, shower, dress, and interviews. Fuck, it will be a long time. But true fans love to wait. Me, too. The time flies because I’m usually thrilled to see Max exit, showered, and in his suit.

Moody parents apparently don’t share that excitement.

“A while. But I can bring you down to the locker room and—”

“Mom. Dad.” Max’s voice booms over my shoulder.

His mother looks utterly terrified of him. His helmet is gone and his wet, golden brown hair sticks to his face. His cheeks are flushed and he’s breathing heavily, finally letting all the tension go.

“Maxwell. Good game.” His mom speaks like he’s a ten-year-old who lost miserably. Not a warrior who just won Game One of the professional hockey league playoffs.

Max steps closer to me, our hips connecting. His father catches it instantly and he gives me a glare that sends shivers up my spine. I’ve been stared down by mob bosses, enforcers, hitmen, and mercenaries holding a gun at me. But this is Max’s father.

I don’t know if we have a future, but parents who do not support their adult children’s sexuality are a nightmare.

After making space between us, something Max notices, he says to his dad, “Are you staying?”

“No. No. We need to get back.” His dad takes his mother by the arm. “Like she said, good game. When is the next one? Next week?”

I stifle a laugh. This guy doesn’t know anything about hockey or the schedule.

“The day after tomorrow,” Max says. “Why don’t you—”

“Oh no. This was a nightmare trek,” his mom says.

Some players *flew* their family in. Everyone in the players’ rows were smiling, having a ball, wearing team merch.

These two look like they attended a funeral.

“Well, it’s just the first round. I’ll email you the full schedule so maybe you can...” He stops talking when they fidget.

Why did they even come tonight?

“Maxwell, can we talk to you for a moment?” his father asks, his eyes telling me to go away.

Max catches the stare and folds his arms. “Luca is my bodyguard. He’s not to leave my side except when I’m on the ice. I’m not on the ice. He stays. Talk.”

“James, I’ll call him tomorrow.” Max’s mother tugs his dad’s arm.

They don’t even ask why he has a bodyguard.

“You’re here. What do you need?” Max asks like he knows. He’s seen this movie before.

“Jimmy got into some trouble,” his mother takes over.

Jimmy, I’m assuming that’s a brother.

Samara comes to mind. All week, I’ve thought about her, how Belova is holding her. There’s nothing I can do, except agree to a complete surrender. I take comfort in knowing Belova won’t hurt her. He just wants to scare me. I have a deadline. So long as I stick to it, she’ll be fine.

Plus, if she tells me he mistreated her, I’ll kill him. And he knows it—because he knows me.

Max dumps his head in his hands, his movement bringing me back to this moment. “What kind of trouble?” he asks.

“Another DWI. Jimmy got passed over for a promotion again. Even though he’s the best janitor that school has ever had.” His father puffs out his check, proud as fuck.

Prouder of a screw-up son than the highly accomplished son standing before him.

All because Max likes guys.

Fuck.

“Where is he?” Max asks.

“In county lock up. The bond was pricey and—”

“How much?” Max bites out.

“Ten thousand,” his father bravely answers.

“I’ll have my accountant wire you—”

“We need money for a lawyer this time, too,” his mom says like she’s talking to a bank. “Jimmy says it’s not his fault, and he’s going to plead not guilty.”

Max looks ready to explode. “Have Jimmy call me. You’ll get the ten grand for the bond but I’m not paying for a lawyer until I talk to him.”

“Seems like you don’t have time to talk,” his father says, irritated.

“You’re the ones who don’t seem to have time for anything. What the fuck do you do all day? Dad, you work mornings at the golf course, and Mom, you left your teaching job five years ago. You don’t have grandchildren.”

“Doesn’t look like we’ll ever have any.” Max’s father sneers in my direction. “What are you looking at? You got kids?”

“My son died in a car accident,” I say, locking eyes with him.

“Oh no.” His mother sinks back, covering her mouth. “James. Let’s go. Let our boys talk it out.”

“Maxwell.” His father runs a hand through his thinning gray hair. “Just please—”

“You’ll get the money.” When his father turns to steer his mother out, Max barks, “You’re fucking welcome.”

His parents’ steps falter, but Max doesn’t wait for a half-hearted apology. He spins and stalks off.

Any joy from the team’s win is gone from his eyes.

And maybe the sex he promised me, too.

FORTY-SEVEN



Max

I'm seething and holding it together, but my ire slips to the rude sports reporters who love to push our buttons. Athletes and celebs behaving badly get more clicks and comments.

All I see is how Luca's throat corded when my father asked if he had kids. In fairness to my asshole father, the death of a child is not an answer anyone expects when asking an innocent question. But the prick loses points because I could tell he saw the energy between Luca and me.

And it made him sick.

They had to have seen the way Luca shot onto the ice and lunged for Paloma after he struck me.

I finish up all the postgame events and find Luca waiting for me outside the locker room. My center shifts and it all feels so easy. This heat between us isn't cooling. This flame won't die out.

And tonight, I'm pouring gasoline on the fire when I get him into my bed.

FORTY-EIGHT



Max

We sweep Albany in four games. Too bad, they're nice guys. Gentlemen. Unlike Belova's brutal dogs trying to decimate Cape May.

"Anything change?" Luca returns to my living room with a bowl of popcorn.

Cape May put up a good fight against Richmond. But they're holding on for dear life. The series is tied 3-3.

This game determines the next twenty days of my life. Either we take an easy trip to the Jersey Shore and play a worthy team in a beautiful state-of-the-art stadium, or burrow to the depths of hell in Richmond's shitty excuse for an arena.

And I'll have to prepare for a war.

"Cape May tied it up, but they're exhausted." I know how that feels. Skating on fumes, drained, and emotionally wrecked.

Luca sits in a chair and not next to me on the sofa. Probably because I'm ready to detonate.

"You haven't said anything..." I lean back and throw my arm on the back of the sofa, facing him. "Any credible threats from Richmond if we play them?"

His eyes narrow on me. "I would tell you. Especially if they're strategizing in an unsportsmanlike manner."

"Do you have a spy on their team?"

"No." He leans forward. "If we got caught..."

"Sounds like it's been discussed."

"My security team checked the locker room and other common spaces for bugs just to nail them."

Teams spying on each other happened before, so I'm not shocked to hear this.

I study Luca. "Is there anything you're not telling me? For my own good, perhaps?"

I have enough to deal with. I trust Luca and the additional security they hired will keep me safe the second I step foot out of this apartment. Playing and winning are my job. I don't try to play every position. I don't try to be the coach. Sure, I mentor. Sure, I collaborate. But I stay in my lane.

That includes letting the protection team keep me and the rest of us safe.

"Luca?" I stand up and position myself in front of him. God, I can use his lips around my cock right now.

He grabs my belt and pulls me onto his lap, the sharpness of the move, the sudden loss of balance hits me like a blow. Strikes a nerve of being manhandled as a kid.

My legs tense, and I fight to get off him, but he holds me down.

"Hey," he says, keeping me in place with the kind of strength that shocks me.

Maybe it's a center of gravity thing. I have a few inches on him and more muscle. He's finely cut too, just leaner. But this hold he has on me has my teeth grinding.

"Let me go," I mutter.

"Look at me," he says sharply. "It's me. Not anyone else."

Fighting ghosts from my past, I give in and look at him. I worry I'll see Uncle Harris. And that will set me back.

Luca sings to me softly. In Russian. The sexy sultry timbre of a foreign language steals my breath.

"What... What did you just sing to me?" I ask, my voice devoid of emotion.

"No man will ever hurt you again, baby."

"You can't make that promise. I'm bound to get another stick in the face ___"

He grips my collar and pulls my mouth close to his. "I meant in the despicable way that animal uncle touched you."

That I believe. Because I'll fight off anyone who tries to assault me. I doubt anyone would even try, given the monster I've turned into.

"I want to get past that. I know you need more from me emotionally," I choke up.

"I'm willing to wait. But you need to know..." Luca continues. "I like it rough. I like to be rough. I want you to get comfortable with that."

"Rough how?" I stupidly ask.

"Do you really want to know?" He grins wickedly.

“Yes, but kiss me first,” I answer, needing his lips.

He devours me. But it’s sensual and loving. Something I didn’t think two men could do because we’re both so aggressive. But it works between us.

Luca glances at his watch. “It’s not too late.”

“Too late for what?”

“We can take a drive to my club.”

The hairs on the back of my neck stand up. “Club? Are you crazy? I can’t let anyone see me there.”

“You mean with me?”

“Not you.” I get to my feet. “Any man. I’m not out, Luca. There are cameras everywhere.”

He grips my face again. “Do you think I’d bring you to a place where you could be spotted and hurt?”

I think about that. “No. But how do you know?”

“It’s a club rule. We sign NDAs.”

“That doesn’t mean I won’t be recognized. Or you.”

“Not if we’re wearing masks.”



TWO HOURS LATER, LUCA signs me into his club as a guest. In their adjacent shop for sex toys and other necessities for a good time, he snags two masks. Matching to signal I’m his.

“How does this work?” I ask, fingering the soft leather mask that covers half my face, my mouth exposed. “Remember I can’t...”

“You fuck me. That’s our deal. That’s how I like it between us. Nothing will change.”

“Then how?”

“The first thing we’re going to do is walk around. Hand in hand, you and me.” He grips my wrist. “Feel the acceptance of everyone around us. Sure, no one knows it’s you, but they don’t care who you really are.”

My jaw tightens. “How many men have you been with here?”

“I won’t lie. Quite a few. But they never meant anything.” He pulls me in closer. “I’ve never held anyone’s hand. *You* mean something.”

My phone buzzes, and I yank it from my back pocket. “Shit,” I say filled with dread.

“What?”

“Richmond won.” I hadn’t waited to see the final score. I let Luca drag me out of the apartment with two periods left to play. It was too gut wrenching to watch.

They won their round. I can’t believe we have to go through that shit show again with them.

My expression slacks behind the mask.

Luca notices and says, “Do you want to leave, we can—”

“No.” I stop him. “I need this more than ever. Make it go away, Luc. Make the pain leave my body.”

FORTY-NINE



Max

Every nerve ending feels like I've been zapped. I can't believe I'm in a damn sex club.

With my bodyguard.

In Manhattan.

During *the playoffs*.

I should be on a massage table, mainlining protein shakes.

I slide the mask on my face, and when Luca does the same, a shiver of lust snakes down my spine. We're already fucking in secret, this just brings it to another level.

He grabs my hand and steers me into the open room beyond the private dressing quarters he rented for us. We removed our shirts but left our jeans on.

I watch for recognition in people's eyes. But with the mask, I'm not too concerned. The few tattoos I have aren't usually on display in any kind of public way. I don't pose for magazines, and I don't make thirst trap videos on social media.

Luca leads me past curved sofas, some with naked bodies openly going at it. Males on females. Males on males. Two males and one female. Two females taking turns sucking a man's dick. Two men double penetrating a woman. The view and the sounds are getting me hot.

I have no idea what Luca plans for me, how he wants to show me the rough side of his lust.

We stop near a row of people, and when I get a closer look, my breath leaves my lungs. Their hands are tied up and over their heads bound by a rope hanging from the ceiling.

Luca gives a code to a bouncer standing by, monitoring the rope play. He must have reserved this spot. At least it means there's a measure of safety. Now that I see what the club's bouncers dress like, I glance around and see several men dressed just like him. This place is secure.

That relaxes me. Until a rope loop gets tightened around my wrists and

my hands are hoisted above my head.

Shit.

The first thing I notice is, the rope is insanely comfortable against my skin. It's not coarse, but there will be a mark on my skin. That excites me.

The music blurs in the background. There's no DJ, but instrumental fuck music pumps from speakers on the walls. The music and every other sound around me fall away when the rope powered by a hydraulic lift yanks my hands taut. But my feet stay planted on the square metal platform.

Luca bends one knee to get eye level with my dick. His hot breath fans against my stomach. Warm hands grip my waist, then fumble for my zipper. Luca roughly yanks down my pants, leaving them around my ankles.

I should feel embarrassed, but fuck, it's wonderfully erotic.

My eyes scan the room again, the crowd this time. A few people watch us with curious, lustful looks.

A whack on my ass steals my focus. "Eyes on me," Luca commands.

"Yes, sir," I answer, licking my lips.

"Whose ass is this?" He grips my cheeks.

Fuck, it's yours. All yours.

These words come to mind, and while no one knows who I am, I don't want to look so yielding. "Why don't you put that smart mouth to work on my cock and you'll find out."

Luca's right eyebrow raises in surprise.

"You heard me. Suck my cock already, you bastard." I sound tough, my gruff warrior-on-ice voice coming through.

Like a predator toying with his prey, Luca circles me. When he's behind me, he splays my ass cheeks even wider.

A rush of shame hits me, and I kick my legs out. "Stop. No."

Luca gets in front of me, kissing my stomach. "No isn't a word that makes me stop. Not here. Your safeword is Crush."

My stress level immediately lowers. "Okay. But what are you going to do to me?"

"I'm doing anything I want to you. And you're going to trust me not to hurt you."

After I nod, he kisses every inch of my torso, until he's behind me again.

He peppers kisses on my ass, eventually finding my hole with his tongue. The tip spears my anal ring, the wet probing making me see stars.

"Christ, that feels so good," I utter.

“Wait,” Luca growls.

Something cool hits my hole and I think it’s for his fingers.

No, it’s a... A steel anal plug.

“Relax,” Luca says, wedging the tip past my sensitive nerves. “It’s me. I won’t hurt you. You mean the world to me.”

With these words of trust, I give myself over to the feeling of fullness and complete submission. Releasing my tension, my body comes alive. All the scar tissue around my heart is wiped away so I’m no longer a coarse layer of skin, but baby smooth, absorbing every shockwave.

It feels so fucking good.

After several minutes of sensual penetration that has me ready to come, Luca’s lips close around my aching shaft.

Fuck.

My entire body shudders, coils of heat building in my nut sack.

Luca pulls off and licks me root to tip. If these ropes weren’t holding my hands up, I might fall forward. After a searing look, Luca takes me back into his hot, greedy mouth. The crowd watches, but everything else around me vanishes. All I can focus on is this man’s mouth around my dick, and the slick anal plug slipping in and out of my ass.

In fucking public.

Christ, this is exhilarating.

Uncle Harris’s dirty mouth flashes at me... *Stop!* That asshole means nothing.

I love fucking men and getting blown by a rough man’s mouth. My uncle stole those pleasures from me. I won’t let him keep me from living my life. Not anymore. This is who I am.

I still feel so fucking filthy, but good filthy as my orgasm teeters on the edge of my sanity.

“Fuck, that’s good,” I roughly whisper, wishing I could feel his hair.

“Just good?” His voice is barely audible and muffled by my cock. With his nose pressed into the underside of my shaft, he inhales deeply.

“No. This is perfect. You’re perfect.” I can’t take my eyes off his lips closed around my dick, working up and down my length. All while anally penetrating me.

When my head tilts back, I’m ready to surrender to the orgasm.

Luca barks, heat flaring in his eyes, “Hey. Watch me. Or I stop.”

“Don’t you fucking dare,” I hiss, and keep our eyes locked, the room

once again fading away in the background.

With amazing precision, he sucks me and fucks my ass with the plug at the same time. It's too much. Pleasure overload pulls me under.

The orgasm crashes over me. My body knows what I need and fights my damaged brain for it. If I embrace this as my life and let men like Luca have their way with me, they'll want my hole.

No, not men *like* Luca...

Luca.

Only Luca.

Fuck, what am I thinking?

But all thoughts are again stolen from my brain as he sucks every last drop of cum out of me. When I'm done, his volcanic glare, a swollen mouth, dripping with my cum says two words to me.

You're mine.

FIFTY



Max

I'm tingling and limp when Luca eloquently loosens the knot until my hands are free. He crashes his mouth on mine and I greedily submit to his kisses.

He leads me to a curved, blue velvet sofa. Except for the mask, I'm completely naked. It's a glorious break from every second in my life when I'm center stage, in charge. When I'm responsible. This is what I need. To get lost in Luca's demands. My control gloriously snaps, and I completely unravel, letting Luca fashion me into the man he wants in this moment.

Over the next two hours, Luca and I kiss, fondle each other, and watch others who use this club as a place to get off. I'm submitting to this community and being a positive participant.

Luca is right, I feel so accepted.

When I have him bent over on his knees and I'm fucking him, Luca's mouth hangs open, as I watch him unravel.

The precum-saliva cocktail drips out of his ass while I keep thrusting. The wet slick mess hits my balls and next, I'm coming again. I pull out, my cum squirting with such force, it hits his shoulder blades. I swirl a thick finger through the dripping cum on his ass, and push it into his hole.

"Now put that mouth to work on me, my filthy boy," he rasps.

Regaining my focus, I lay down and let him fuck my mouth while straddling me. "Sit on my face."

All I smell is his skin and his arousal. He shoves his ready-to-burst dick back into my mouth, the ring tip bumping against my tonsils. I suck him so hard he cries out, and within seconds his warm salty cum hits the back of my throat. I want to swallow it all, but there's so much, it ends up spilling out, making my mouth slick.

It's so filthy and hot at the same time.

When he pulls out this time, he kisses me hard, his tongue tasting his cum.

"Good boy," he mutters. "Such a good boy for your bodyguard."

FIFTY-ONE



Luca

I'm wound tight with Richmond in the house for Game One of the second round of playoffs. I keep it together, walking shoulder to shoulder with Bronwin on our way to GM Reid's suite.

The practice facility doubles as the official headquarters, and management keeps luxury offices there. Reid's message to meet with him already has me rattled. But I nearly collapse to the floor when I step inside and see Ivan Belova standing there.

"Luca." Aaron Reid stands up. "Come in."

I close the door and remind myself where I am. This is not some dusty backroom in Chicago where one of Ivan's goons can take a shot at me and get away with it. This is a professional goddamn arena with cameras and other security guards crawling all over the place. Not to mention Stamford's Finest who send extra cops to playoff games.

I'm also still within Ivan's deadline to go home. I've done nothing wrong.

We stare at each other through his intro with Bronwin. Even if we didn't already despise each other, Ivan was caught red-handed by my security team attacking Max. Reid just didn't want to press charges or get the league involved.

Hockey politics.

"I'd rather beat them on the ice. Not trust some already shady-as-fuck team with slick lawyers to weasel their way around the evidence and then we've hung our dicks out to dry looking like crybabies over a few cuts and bruises."

But a severe head injury put Max in the hospital. Reid never reported that to the league, keeping the team captain off the official injury list. I guess we're all a little shady.

After the introductions, Reid gets to me. "Luca, this is Ivan Belova, the new owner for Richmond."

Clearing my throat, I nod in his direction. "Sir."

"And this is my assistant." He steps out of the way. "Samara Korolev."

My legs go weak, but I study every inch of my sister.

“Samara, how are you enjoying working for Mr. Belova?” I ask, my stomach in knots.

“It’s great.” She shifts from side to side. Not a hair out of place or a bruise on face. “My sister got me the job.”

Heart pounding, I mutter with a tilted head, “And how is your sister?”

Ivan’s shocked glance bounces between us. He knows Fina is dead.

“Great. She’s in Miami.”

I breathe in relief, despite the fucked-up reunion. My trust and assumptions that Ivan wouldn’t hurt her are holding true. For now. Plus, he always thought of Samara as his little sister, too.

“Glad *that’s* cleared up.” GM Reid motions for all of us to sit. “Our lawyers reached out to Richmond’s general counsel with the alleged wire payment details to Max’s attacker. Ivan is here to personally give a report on the incident.”

“Why didn’t we have this meeting weeks ago at our last game?” Bronwin folds his arms.

“We had nothing to report,” Ivan answers smugly.

“And now?” I turn his way, smiling, looking forward to what he comes up with to get out of what he did.

“We hired an investigator to do an internal audit,” Ivan says, his accent thicker than usual to throw people off. “A rogue element in the coaching staff hired the perpetrators who attacked Mr. Ryan. We handed him over to the Richmond authorities and have notified the league.”

Rogue element is code in the bratva for a ghost who doesn’t really exist. Poor Reid. He’s a decent man who plays by the rules, and thinks others do, too. Thinks owners like Ian Flacco, whose family has owned the Crushers since the expansion made the team pro, have the same love of sport.

Reid’s just the general manager. He doesn’t see the rot taking hold of this league and others with greedy owners. Ivan Belova is a ruthless bratva boss who kills people in Chicago.

I smile, though. Ivan’s passive-aggressive audit report is meant to relax our security. I’m not buying it for a minute, but I know Ivan needed to face Reid now that something is really at stake.

“Thank you for your report,” Reid says, sliding a glance my way.

“My pleasure.” Ivan straightens his tie and steers my sister to the door.

Outside, when no one’s around, I mutter, “Touch a hair on my sister’s

head and you're dead."

"I'll slit his throat before you," Samara talks back.

"Just like old times." Ivan laughs. "Don't you miss this, Daniil?"

For a split second I consider the question. How simple my life would be to just go home. But nothing feels like home if it's without Max.

"Good luck tonight, Mr. Belova," I say with a salute as I walk away.

You're gonna need it when my boyfriend hits the ice tonight.

FIFTY-TWO



Max

To my teammates, this is another game. An important one, but still just Game One in Round Two of the playoffs. Seven more chances to get one step closer to glory.

I highly doubt any of the players know our investigators connected my attack to Richmond. They might get on the ice and try to slit throats with their skates.

The pregame routine unfolds as usual.

Gear.

Equipment.

Hydration.

Coach Beck makes a speech about strategy based on how Richmond decimated Cape May. His assistant coaches watch games to notice patterns. He uses the white board to illustrate a unique passing sequence that goes against everything we learned since holding a stick twice the size of our little bodies.

I look down at myself. With all this gear, no one can hurt me unless they play dirty. The game suspension raised the stakes. We lost when I wasn't playing. Of course, we lost plenty when I had. But the opposition got fed some chum and now, they're ravenous for more blood.

My blood.

"I'm sorry this information is late." Coach clicks the marker. "The defense team just isolated this. Now we know these weren't random events. Go out there and get a feel for what this looks like on the ice in real time. We'll go through tapes of the game tomorrow."

Movement shifts by the door.

Luca.

Tomorrow. There needs to be a tonight before we get to tomorrow. Then we go back on the road, and we'll be sharing a room again.

Time passes, and next, I'm walking through the tunnel to a deafening crowd. We skate out and get loose on the ice even though we were on the

practice rink hours ago.

This is real.

Richmond takes the ice, and I avoid zeroing in on any one player. Shift changes happen so often, and it usually feels like there's always a different guy in my face trying to score against me.

It's the usual warm up. Skating around and stretching on the ice. The goalie scuffs up the crease so pucks can't slip into the net.

The game starts, we pass, we shoot, we score.

Over and over.

Who the fuck are these guys?

We cream them 6 to 1, and absolutely nothing out of the ordinary happens. Richmond's guys aren't playing like usual. They don't even breathe my way on the ice.

Did the botched attack and the guy with the knife at my condo *who died* get through to Belova that he can't get to me?

What's with this shitty playing?

Still, taking Game One of a series is a high like no other. And I can't wait to see Luca to celebrate.

It makes me realize that I'm living two different lives. One as a focused player working aside my teammates in the locker room, in the weight rooms, video rooms, buses, planes, and practices. The other is a gay man who lives to fuck another man every night. My bodyguard who works for the team. If my teammates knew, what the hell would they think?

Who do I want to be? These thoughts don't find answers in my soul, but next I'm dressed in my suit, and Luca joins me in lock step heading toward the arena exit.

"Congratulations," he says stoically, like a polite but detached bodyguard.

"Thank you." I keep my stride, eyes forward.

Hand-picked fans wait for us, lined up behind barriers right in front of the players' and employees' parking lots. We always stop to sign sticks, programs, and jerseys, letting them take selfies. Even though we're in suits and not our uniforms. They love up on us after every game. A playoff win spikes the energy to a frenzied level. But hockey players aren't prima donnas. Every person in the organization contributes to our success.

The PR team keeps the postgame signings to a reasonable timeframe. Luca and the six other security agents keep a close eye on everything. We're outside, and the environment can't be completely controlled.

Next, PR is clapping and moving fans back through another maze of metal barriers toward the general parking lot. Luca watches me, his face even until a smile ghosts his lips.

I reach him and we walk to the SUV Luca has been driving for us. The doors chirp to unlock and I get into the passenger seat. My designated spot is in the middle of the lot. There aren't any cars around. Many of the employees already left.

The tinted windows come in handy, too.

The minute I'm trapped with Luca, he grabs the back of my head and kisses me. I don't think. I just act. I want his mouth on me.

"You were on fire tonight," he pipes out, sounding so fucking happy for me.

"The night's not over," I rasp, swirling our tongues together. "Have you heard of superstitions?"

"The beard?" He strokes the facial hair he told me he loves feeling on his cock when I go down on him.

"Not just that. We fucked last night."

"Not something I'm likely to forget." He rubs his ass like he's sore.

"You and I fucked. And my team won. That means we have to fuck again."

"The same way?" He bites my lower lip. "Me on top, riding your dick?"

"God, yeah. Get us home." I lean back and roughly buckle myself in.

Luca needs to buckle up for what I'm going to do to him.

FIFTY-THREE



Luca

A week later, the Crushers are up 3 to 0 in this round, and my asshole is sore from Max fucking me like a warrior each night. He's high on adrenaline.

He won the final championship before. Some people check off a goal and then move on. I don't want to call Max greedy for wanting this again so badly, but his drive is near animalistic.

I watch his brutal morning skate routine, then he pumps iron in the weight room. We don't discuss plans more than a day out. Max is living in twelve-hour increments. I've turned into a robot, too. Only stopping to eat, shower, and get fucked by Max.

I wonder if the way he craves me is to get his fill because it can all go up in flames at any moment. He knows I'm leaving the team. But what are his plans?

Game Four in Richmond goes as usual as far as prep. In the practice arena after Richmond's morning skate, I'm called to a conference room by Bronwin. My heart always jolts, thinking one of his other security guys figured out Max and I are fucking. Or that Belova *twice* sent someone to hurt Max.

Stepping inside an office filled with the other agents tightens my chest.

"Sheppard," Bronwin acknowledges me and calls me over to a table with a laptop. "This guy, right here." He shows me photographs on the screen. "He's been at every game this round so far."

"A rabid fan?" I offer.

"Who traveled from Richmond to Stamford and shows up at games that cost thousands of dollars. In a suit?" Bronwin argues.

"Did you check to see if he's the dad of a Richmond player?" I ask.

"He's not." My boss shakes his head. "We cross-matched everyone. Players have season tickets for family. They sit in the same seats. We went back to all their home games and identified people who are here for Richmond families."

“An agent of theirs?” another guard suggests.

“No.” Bronwin keeps shaking his head as we offer up ideas.

“Did you do facial recognition?” I ask.

“The shades are messing up the software.” The lines of frustration in Bronwin’s face make him look older. This is all on him if Max gets hurt due to a security failure in the stadium.

“And he’s not on Richmond’s security team?” I finally offer even though that should have been the first guess.

Bronwin snaps up. “Sitting in a seat?”

“A backup?” I’m annoyed that I can’t ID this guy either, but my job has been to protect Max. Not do intel at the same time. That’s their job. Hunting down these leads.

They’ve known about this guy for a week and are only telling me about him now? I feel betrayed. Looking at Bronwin for any sign he’s been compromised from Belova, I come up empty and relax.

“Trinity.” Bronwin looks at our tech guy. “Match this guy if you can to Richmond security.”

“Will do.” Trinity takes the printed photo and gets on his own equipment he travels with.

Being in this arena creeps me out. While he’s busy, I give Bronwin updates that bore the hell out of him. Telling him about the guy with the knife I killed would give him a heart attack.

If I know Belova, he thinks the ghost mercenary disappeared because he failed. Or maybe Ivan knows I killed him.

“Contractor,” Trinity pipes up. “Outsourced security.”

Bronwin shakes his head. “You called it, Sheppard.”

“Who is he protecting?” I ask Trinity. “He’s sitting in the stands like a fan.”

“I hacked the guy’s phone. He’s a hired guard for Quinn’s family.”

“His parents?” I ask.

Trinity shakes his head. “Wife and kids.”

Jake Quinn has a wife and kids? Did I know this? Did Max tell me the guy got married?

“Why would Belova hire a bodyguard for a third shift right winger he’s called up from the minors?” I pace around the room like a caged tiger.

“I didn’t say Belova hired him,” Trinity deadpans. “Jake Quinn hired him.”

We all stop and it's like we got hit in the face with a stick.

I look again. In front of Jake's hired guard, sits a stunning blonde woman in a Richmond jersey and four kids, also blonde. Two to the right, two to the left. The guy who sucked Max's dick freshman year of high school is...straight? Turned straight? In the closet? Bitter?

We've been in this stifling, sorry excuse for a visiting team office, and the game is about to start. Other guards leave to watch the players do their pregame meeting with the coach. When Bronwin and I are alone, I yank him by the tie.

"Quinn is being paid to hurt Max. Belova threatened him with *something*." I wonder if Belova knows Jake and Max have history and threatened to expose him.

Fuck... *That's* it!

With the photo in hand, I yank the door open and run for the tunnel, but Max is gone. He's on the ice. And he's a target.

Bronwin comes up behind me, breathing heavily from chasing my ass.

I grab him by the jacket. "Tell Beck to pull Max."

"He'll never pull his starting defensemen when we're up 3-0 and we can clinch this playoff round tonight and sweep the series."

"Then we need to warn him," I say.

"Warn him of what? A winger who wants to attack him? Hurt him? Check him into the boards? That's what wingers do."

"Could he have a weapon on him?" I ask, thinking how desperate could a team get to avoid elimination.

"No." Bronwin would know, he's a former player and knows the uniform.

"We have to stop the game," I say, running a hand through my hair.

Silence rings out.

"It's a playoff game." Bronwin takes out his phone. "It's being televised. They won't stop it."

"It's a security matter," I bark.

"Your hunches are valid. But we don't know for sure," Bronwin argues and stares at me.

"So we wait for him to get hurt?" My voice cracks.

Bronwin tilts his head like he sees through me. "Are you fucking him?"

My body goes rigid. He knows I'm gay.

"Fucking who?" I ask.

His jaw tightens. "Are you kidding?"

“It doesn’t...” I don’t know how to finish that. *It doesn’t mean anything* crosses my mind. Now I’d be as bad as Max. “It has nothing to do with anything.”

“You’re being irrational. You’re putting him in more danger.”

“He’s alive right now because of me.” My voice turns as sharp as a blade. “And no, I won’t elaborate.”

Bronwin steps back and gives me a chilling stare. “That *private* security work on your resume...”

“I know what I’m doing.” I straighten my tie and hold my head high. “I have to go protect my client.”

And make sure he leaves this building alive...

FIFTY-FOUR



Max

Only four teams in professional hockey history have come back from a 0-3 deficit in the postseason to win all four following games.

It's unlikely. Not unheard of. Not impossible.

This situation with Richmond and what they're capable of, though, means these next four games will be nothing short of brutal.

Unless we end this tonight.

We've backed them against the wall, and they have nothing to lose since they're already statistically eliminated. This is where gentlemen are separated from the goons. The spoilsports who don't see you as the team that will go on to represent the East Coast united against the West. Richmond has all the makings of sore losers who want to send us to the finals bruised and broken.

It's just a game, right? There's always next season. Not for me. I'm aching to win the finals one last time and secure my legacy with this team.

My phone rings as I'm about to put it away in my pants, and I cringe seeing my mother's number. Under my name, of course, because I pay for their phones.

Why are they even calling? Do they want tickets to the next game? I doubt it. And if they do, too bad. I gave the next game's tickets to Willis who's got eight siblings and they always come out to see him play.

I can't get two fucking people to show up. Right now, I don't care what Mom and Dad want so I let the call go to voicemail.

FIFTY-FIVE



Luca

During the first intermission with Max safely behind closed and guarded doors in the locker room, I decide to take a stroll to the home team's side of the stadium's underbelly. Stupid, since I'm in enemy territory. And not just as a Crusher employee.

The first twenty minutes of play felt like being circled by sharks. No attacks, just Richmond preying on my team. It's 0-0, both teams choosing caution over destruction.

The chilling feeling all around me on this side of the stadium isn't the ice. Knowing the risks of Belova giving the signal and having me dragged away outweigh my need to keep Max safe. Part of my job as enforcer was to interrogate enemies. Before I killed them. I'd gotten so good, I could take one look in their eyes and know everything.

I just need to see this Quinn guy up close.

And let him *see me*. Let him see what I will do to him and his family if he hurts Max. Christ, it's come to this, threatening innocents. Feeling unhinged, I pick up my pace.

Before I know it, I'm at Richmond's locker room. The guards at the door are clearly *bratoks*. Russian mob soldiers.

"I need to talk to one of your players," I say to the trio of menacing looking men.

"No can do." One of the guards shakes his head

I glance at them. Are they in on it? If Belova is running this team like his brotherhood, these guys are in the dark. For deniability. Given a strict set of instructions, punishable if the rules are broken. Harshly.

In a moment of weakness, I say, "Is Mr. Belova's assistant around? The cute brunette?"

Samara isn't Ivan's assistant, and I doubt she's here in Richmond. He's got her locked up in his Chicago mansion. If he's smart.

They look at each other. "Mr. Belova doesn't have an assistant," one of them says.

My throat goes tight.

Just then the door opens. Warriors dressed in lime green and white saunter out of the locker room. I lean against the wall and let them pass. My eyes sharpen for #32. Quinn.

If only *I* had a shiv. I'd love to fuck Max with this guy's blood on my hands.

When I see Jake, adrenaline floods my veins. I could jump him, break his neck. It would be all over. And for me. I'd be shot, no doubt those *bratoks* are carrying.

But Belova would kill Samara.

Death is final. Threats and fear can live forever. Poor Max is an example of that. What is Quinn's weakness? His family. He hired them a bodyguard.

I take out the photo of them, and with a pen in my pocket, I circle his wife.

With so many people, players, trainers, and coaches filling the hall and the team unsuspecting of anything, I cut through until I'm in front of Quinn. Using skills I've perfected, I wait for the perfect moment and spin around, stopping him.

Glaring into his eyes, I know what's deep in his soul. Where his passions lie. He's *not* straight. And I hate to fuck with someone who's been forced into a marriage like I was. But Max's life is more important.

Confusion rakes over Quinn's features. I shove the photo into his chest. And in the accent I long buried, I say, "Good luck tonight."

When he looks down to take the photo, I use that time to disappear into the sea of people all around us. Another specialty of mine.

I just need to plant the seed of doubt in Quinn's head.

And God, I hope Stamford wins tonight and eliminates these fuckers, even if it's here in enemy territory.

FIFTY-SIX



Max

After the intermission, we approach the tunnel to get back on the ice. This time I opt to go last, giving Troy Madison, who I'll suggest take over as team captain, the lead.

Lingering in the back, I feel eyes on me. Also last in Richmond's line is Jake. Our gazes lock and I feel nothing but burning anger in his eyes. I've been playing this game all my life, and I've had some pretty intense rivals throughout the years.

I've never felt such visceral disgust from another player.

What happened with Jake was so long ago, and I never spoke to him again after freshman year. He never once reached out to me.

But still, I wondered if what we felt for each other was all in my head. Or did all kids experiment with their best friends?

I can't stop thinking there's a connection between the threats against me and Jake fucking Quinn being on the team owned by the guy who wants to hurt me.

Don't get mad. Get even.

Living well is the best revenge.

Don't let an opponent live in your head.

I'm torn between wanting to ignore Jake and hurt him more than I would any other rival. Especially during playoffs. He's on their third shift, I've barely faced him this entire series.

I put it out of my head. But it won't stay gone.



THE GAME IS A DISASTER. For us. And me. I can't match the speed of their forward's dribbling. It's like he's on performance enhancing drugs. Or maybe my setting is stuck on a slower speed. I don't know where to put my stick, and when I do get the puck to pass, it hits the wrong stick.

Lance Reynolds, the goalie, is also off his game tonight.

Like football blitzes, Richmond is sending their men across the blue line in an onslaught of shots. Three get in by the third period, and we've barely gotten out of our zone.

I reach that place where I give up. Where I unclench every muscle and put this game behind me to look forward to the next one. This is hardly a surprise. Many sports teams play a best of seven games, and almost always, the team facing elimination gets a second wind.

In Richmond's case it's an F5 tornado.

In the spirit of sport, I want to be happy for them. There's a reason we shake hands before and after the game. Your rival on the ice one day can be your neighbor in the locker room the next.

The game ends, the scoreboard flashing the Crushers defeat. Richmond hugs each other, the entire bench emptying onto the ice to celebrate.

Triumphant music blasts from the speakers. I leave the ice and look at the bright side. We could win the series back in Stamford.

Christ, I'm so happy we're flying home tonight. I need to sleep in my own bed with my hot Russian bodyguard.

FIFTY-SEVEN



Luca

We land back in Connecticut close to midnight after the bitter Richmond win. I'm walking Max to his car, when he gets a call.

"Fuck, I have to take this." He stops in his tracks. "Hi, Mom. What? *When?* Mom, I can't just leave. It's *the playoffs*. You'd know that if —" He holds the phone away from his ear, as yelling on the other end grates my nerves.

I open the car door for him like I'd been doing for months. This time when our hands touch, he yanks his away.

His parents trigger him. Fuck.

Meanwhile, I'm keyed up about the Jake Quinn intel, but I *can't* share it with him.

Max shakes his head and says he'll call his mother back. Shoving the phone into his pocket, he gets in the car, but doesn't say a word.

We drive for a while, and finally, Max's hand drifts to my thigh. "Sorry."

"It's okay." I glance at him. "I'll forgive you if you blow me."

He laughs. "I would have done that anyway."

I love that I got him to *love* giving blowjobs.

"Can we stop at the waterfront?" His words raise alarm bells in my head.

"Plan to throw me in?"

"No." He squeezes my leg. "You'd swim right back to the shore and break into my apartment, wouldn't you?"

"Da," I answer. "But it's late. I'd rather keep you safe in your penthouse."

Max exhales and stares straight ahead, not arguing with me.

We reach his apartment building, and he immediately slogs to the windows that face the downtown harbor. Max's head hangs low, fingers rubbing his eye sockets. My feet move toward him before my brain tells them to stop. A fire ignites in my gut seeing him emotionally struggle through so much pain.

He's mine and I can't have this.

"What happened, baby?" I cup his shoulder. "What did your mother

want? Something with your brother?"

As far as I know, Max wired the ten grand to bail out his brother, but the fucker never called him to discuss legal fees. How dare they abuse this amazing man?

"My high school coach died." Max shifts on his heels. "Coach Avalon."

"Hockey coach?" My brows furrow together.

"Yeah," he says with a laugh. "It's only ever been hockey."

He squeezes my hand with the kind of grip that signals he'll let go a second later.

"Are you going to the services?"

"My mom expects me to. But we've got games to play."

"Where're the funeral services?"

Max looks up at me. "Long Island, where I grew up."

I stand abreast of him at the windows. "Just across the Sound? We can take the ferry over, go to the service, and be back in time for the next game."

He spins toward me. "You're my bodyguard, not my personal assistant."

"I'm not either right now." I grip his arms. "Right now, I'm your..."

His eyes soften. "You don't know how to answer that either." He doesn't know what the hell we are either. Or what we're doing.

"I'm your friend. Your bodyguard with benefits at the moment."

"Is that enough for you?" Max twists his tie around one hand. "Do you want more?"

"Don't fucking tease me," I say through clenched teeth.

Can I work for Sebastian Daria and then return here every night? Max already saw me full of blood, taking out his attacker.

"I was thinking..." Max reaches for my hand and holds it over my head against the window. "When you're with that family in New York, get them to take out Belova."

"The idea hadn't even crossed my mind. You don't just kill a mafia leader." Especially not one holding my sister.

Belova might have a love for Samara that's rooted in our growing up together, but that doesn't apply to the savages who work for him. They wouldn't hesitate to take her out as revenge on me for killing their leader.

Max kisses my neck, holding me against the window. "Then we hide you. Stay here. Be my..."

"Be your what? Your wife?"

A vision forms in my head. I'm coming home to this apartment with

blood on my clothes from degenerate gamblers who needed to be taught a lesson. Adrenaline rushing through my veins from the kill. Max sucking my dick and fucking me to ease the ache of taking a life. But can it really happen?

Max reaches for my belt, masterfully has it undone, and opens my trousers. "I have money to protect you. To protect both of us."

"I won't live like that," I say, but groan when his hand closes around my cock.

"Always so fucking hard for me." He nips at my ear.

Max steps back and removes his suit, one seductive stitch at a time. I do the same, but don't know if it has the same effect on him.

His eyes light up more when I'm fully undressed, when my tattoos and piercings tease him.

He tosses his clothes aside, and I add mine to the pile. "Come here," he says gruffly.

I'm aching to kiss him, but I need to be myself, not always giving in to him. I grab his dick and squeeze. "Get on your knees and suck me first."

Max grips my hips with bruising strength and lowers to the living room carpet. The room would be pitch black if it weren't for the shining, bright full moon. His mouth is only around my cock for a few minutes, the mindless pleasure making me forget every sick fucking thing I learned tonight. Do I tell him about Quinn hiring his own protection? Or the risk I took for him.

Certainly not now.

Max pulls off and says, "I want to fuck you rough."

Someone's found his wings and is loving dick.

Max brings me into his bedroom and collapses onto the bed. "Ride me, bodyguard."

Before I crawl to him, he squirts lube all over the head of his cock. With our eyes locked, I get on top of him, and I guide him toward my hole. As I slide down inch by torturous inch, pleasure shudders through me.

"Hold on to the headboard, tough guy," he rasps. "Take my cock like the killer you are."

I grab a wooden slat with both hands and let my body open to him. Sleeping with a client I'm protecting is reckless. I've been breaking the rules every day to be with Max. Consequences be damned.

"Look at me," he whispers.

My gaze finds his, the raw emotion gutting me. I keep easing him into

me. That familiar burn has me trembling, but when he reaches my prostate, my body rocks like it's DEFCON-1.

That's when I need to go crazy *on him*. I push down until he's fully seated inside me. Max's tight jaw lets slip muffled curses, his fingers gripping my ass.

My white-knuckled grip on the headboard cracks a slat and I have to let go.

"Jesus! Breaking my bed from such a good fucking?" Max huffs out.

Just don't break my heart in return.

"I'll break more than that," I say instead.

We haven't used condoms. Some guys say they can't feel the difference when they're getting fucked. But the enjoyment from every inch of Max's bare cock inside me, the slickness of the lube, the heat from our friction, his throbbing, veiny texture drives me wild.

With every rock of my hips from fucking him, his face gets redder, more stern, more primal. "I'm close," he says, gripping my cock.

The left-over lube from his hands slicks me up, and it feels like I'm the one buried inside him.

"Kiss me," he demands.

I lower my head and give him a filthy carnal kiss. His tongue and mouth are so wet and warm, welcoming my tongue inside.

He strokes my dick, and I lean back, my hands on his thighs right behind my ass.

"I want to come with you on top," I mutter.

His eyes sparkle as he grabs my ass, lifting me. He lays me out on the bed, all while staying buried inside me.

Was that arm strength? Core strength? Lust fueled adrenaline? Can he lift a car next, just to get me off the way I want?

Max settles himself between my spread legs. I've never felt more open and vulnerable. He strangles my hips as he savagely fucks me.

I jerk my own cock, watching his narrowed eyes as he chases his orgasm.

"Come," he grunts and pumps faster.

I feel so full. He's everywhere. But another hard thrust hits that spot inside me again, that impossibly deep zing of erotic pleasure that can cripple a man like me. Now I'm chasing an orgasm, too.

The heat of his cock fucking me raw recedes the burns and brings me to that razor's edge of pleasure and pain. But it's never felt like this. Max's

fullness and satisfying fuck feels like a drug.

With one hand stroking my cock at a fevered pace, I run my other hand down the planes of Max's abs. "You are so fucking hot."

"Fuck," he bites out and throws his head back again. "Keep touching me like that and I'll blow before you're ready to come."

Our skin connects and the warmth finishes me off. This is real. I'm done for. Hooked.

Cum shoots from my dick, coating his abs. The pearly ropes slide down the ridges and fuck, I can cum again just looking at it.

His eyes roll into the back of his head, and he loses it.

When he faces me again, his cock thickens to a painful width in my ass. His pupils fully dilated, he groans, "I'm gonna..."

"Fuck me with everything you have, baby. I can take it. Destroy me." My cum-drizzled fingers pinch his nipples.

He surprises me when he leans forward to hold me. His teeth graze my neck while he keeps bucking and thrusting.

After hitting a spot behind my ear that I really can't take, I mutter, "Kiss me. Kiss me when you come."

FIFTY-EIGHT



Max

I *'ve never felt this goddamn alive.*

With our lips pressed together, I keep thrusting, and the air crackles. Waves build inside me again. I'm with a man who truly cares about me. Fuck, he killed for me.

That heightens my pleasure, and now I'm at the brink again. The tension overlaps, compounding the ecstasy.

"Luca," I rasp his name.

The friction of my cock in his ass is an unbearable but addicting heat, and I don't want it to end. The room spins and Luca's thighs tighten around my waist to the point of pain.

He mutters something in Russian and it's so fucking sexy. His lips look bruised from my rough mouth, the skin reddened and grazed from my playoff beard.

And just like that I'm falling over the edge. But I don't come inside his ass, I pull out and jerk off, letting him see what he does to me.

He grabs his own dick, dripping and ready to come again. I push the heads together, dual slits erupting at nearly the same time.

I roughly grab Luca's jaw and crash my mouth on his. I kiss the shit out of him. My tongue tastes every inch inside his mouth, sweet and sultry. The grainy feel of his tongue sparks another memory, but I fight it. Paint it over with a man who would never hurt me that way.

Luca.

Luca.

Luca.

I scream his name in my brain, washing away Uncle Harris. I push all of that away, feeling my orgasm fade. I only want to give every climax to this man beneath me.

Luca sucks on my tongue, his arms wrapped around me. It's the first time I feel like we're not just fuck-buddies, but lovers.

That *this* is love.

Sweat beads trickle down my back, spilling over the sides. This is the hottest night of my life.

When I open my eyes, Luca stares at me. “You are the most gorgeous man.”

I heave a sloppy laugh, spittle dripping from my mouth. I didn’t need to hear that, but I know he’s sincere.

“You take me so good. My cock is home inside you,” I whisper in a hoarse voice. How I feel is more important than spewing a reciprocal compliment.

I sit back, drained. Like I can sleep for a week.

But I can’t. I can’t even take a break.

My mother expects me to come home tomorrow to pay respects to Coach Avalon. Who of all people would rather me be training and prepping for a game than looking down at his dead body in a useless casket.

To my mom, me not showing up is a negative reflection on her. Everything is about them. Not Coach Avalon, whose death is slowly catching up to me.

I have to break it to Luca—that we have to wake up in a few hours to get on the road. Before I mention the trip, which will make him wrench away and start the taxing process of figuring out how to protect me in an unknown environment, I hold him. Nuzzle against his neck.

His arms come up around me and he squeezes. “Hey, you okay?” His gruff voice from the massive orgasm hasn’t reset yet.

“Yeah.” I sink into his embrace. “This was incredible. And now you’re going to hate me.”

FIFTY-NINE



Max

Raw memories flood my veins with venom, pulling up to my childhood home in Marine Harbor, a rural blue-collar town on Long Island. In one of my more casual suits, slate blue with a gold Crushers tie, I get out of the car.

Luca steps out a few seconds later. He's dressed to the nines. With a dark charcoal freshly pressed suit with a black shirt, matching black tie. With those shades, he looks more like a Fed.

On the street, Luca checks the perimeter as usual. When we leave the busy stadium in Stamford there's plenty to assess. Here, there's just colonial homes with nice lawns under a canopy of oak trees.

I knock on my parents' door and wait outside even though I have a key. Even though I pay for this house. The taxes, repairs, upgrades. Anything they want. The mortgage was paid off three years ago after I signed my largest renewal contract with the Crushers.

Mom answers with only a weak smile, shame rightfully all over her face. At least her expression reflects an acknowledgment that she and my father are using me. Taking advantage of me. "Maxwell. You look good."

I bend down and kiss her cheek, smelling whiskey on her breath. *You look like shit*, I want to say, but don't. I step inside with Luca on my six and catch my father in the doorway of the kitchen.

Dad folds his arms. "Who's that with you?"

I step aside. "This is Luca, my bodyguard. He works for the team. You *met* him."

My father's eyes narrow, the memory refreshing in his head.

"Sir," Luca addresses my father with respect. None of which he deserves. My gay bodyguard who fucking kills people has more grace than my father.

"Look at the lovely article the newspaper printed about Coach." Mom thrusts the local Marine Harbor Gazette at me. "His photo is on the cover."

This is a big deal for my hometown.

"He was a good man. A decent one," my father says wryly, studying

Luca.

“We’ll go to the second service tonight as a family,” she says casually.

“A family?” I choke out. “I’m thirty-six. Not ten. I just stopped by to—”

“To what?” Dad looks at my feet. “I don’t see any luggage. You’re not staying here?”

“Of course he’s staying here,” Mom says, looking at me to confirm.

“Where’s *he* sleeping?” Dad points to Luca with so much disrespect I want to slam him into the refrigerator.

“I’m not sleeping *here*,” I say with disdain.

“This is your home,” Mom says with an astonished tone.

No shit this is my home. I fucking paid for it. But I don’t voice these irritations that only eat at me when I’m here.

“*Stamford* is my home now,” I say, and my eyes stray to Luca. “And we’re staying at my beach house in East Hampton.”

“Both of you?” Dad sneers at Luca.

“*He*’s my bodyguard. Where I go, he goes.”

“You don’t need a bodyguard here in Marine Harbor.” Dad sends more icy glares Luca’s way. “My colt and shotgun—”

“Stop,” I cut my father off.

I hate that he’s probably right about this small town not being a danger to my safety. A professional killer isn’t likely to try to take me out here.

My father doesn’t understand, even if I don’t need Luca to protect me, I won’t send him away. I...want him. Near me. On me.

“How’s...” Mom clears her throat. “The team?”

“The hockey team that I play for? The team that’s been winning playoff games?” My anger is showing through, and I have to calm down. I’m paying these people off to keep them quiet.

Mom gives me a rare smile. “You clenched your division?”

Luca snickers.

“Clinched,” I correct her, calming down. “Yes.”

“That’s great.” Mom attempts to touch me, but I back away. “Coach Avalon was so proud of you.”

So proud of the lie of a man I’ve been all these years. “I’m going to the afternoon service.” I turn to leave, bumping into Luca.

His face is flushed, the snarl of his lips suggesting he’s thoroughly appalled. Here I am thinking about being a family with him and look at what I’d be subjecting him to.

At the door, I swing around. “Do you need anything else? Past the allowance I send?” I wired the bond money and Jimmy never called, so he isn’t getting money for a lawyer.

So much for *rah rah rah* hometown spirit for a coach. My lowlife brother isn’t around.

Mom and Dad trade glances and Mom, to her credit, tilts her head to Dad to speak, not taking the fall for whatever the hell they’ll ask for now.

“Car’s on its last leg,” Dad mutters.

It’s like they don’t even try to pay for large expenses. Just assume I’ll pick up the tab for everything. Last year the house needed a new roof.

“Pick a new one out and tell me the name of the dealer.” I slide on my shades and leave.

I stomp to the car, but stop midway for Luca to catch up to me. Walking side by side feels so much better.

“You could cut the tension in there with a hunting knife,” Luca says, letting go of his breath like he’d been holding it all that time.

“Mighty appealing being with me, right?” I pull out my phone, but it falls out of my hands.

Luca picks it up and gives it to me, our fingers tangling. Every fiber screams to pull away. Keep hiding, especially here, but I can’t. I need his touch. It calms me.

“I don’t care about that.” His sexy, gravelly voice is warm honey over my raw nerves.

My neck heats and I want to kiss the mouth that says such amazing things to me. But my mother is at the door watching us. I really want to kiss him in front of her. In front of the neighbors. Everyone who whispered about me and Jake, wondering if it were true.

“Get in the car,” I growl seductively to Luca.

“Yes, sir,” he says with a smirk.

SIXTY



Luca

I find the funeral home on my GPS and we drive there in silence. Shuddering at the crowd, I feel like a jerk for not asking Bronwin to send other agents to back me up.

“Max,” I hiss. “This...”

“I have to do *this*. Coach meant the world to me. Everyone here knows I made it and that he had a lot to do with my success. I have to show my face.”

“Got it.” I park in a strip mall lot across the street when I see the lot out front of the funeral parlor is full. The line to get in wraps around the building and down a side road. “Stay here.” I push my way out of the car before he can stop me.

He won’t like what I’m about to do. But I have *a job* to do.

Crossing the street, I eye the men standing out front in dark suits. “Can I speak to someone who’s in charge?” I say, glancing from man to man.

“Is there a problem?” A guy steps forward, the senior usher in this group, I gather.

“I’m a protection agent for Max Ryan, he’s the captain of the Stamford Crushers. Coach Avalon trained him in high school. He just wants to briefly pay his respects.”

The man’s jaw loosens and glances at the crowd, considering my request. “The family is inside viewing the body first. That’s customary.”

I have no fucking clue.

“Can Mr. Ryan pay his respects after them? He came all the way from Connecticut, but he has to get back to Stamford as soon as possible for the next playoff game. It will mean a lot to Mrs. Avalon to see him.”

“Sure, no problem.” The man says something to another guy in a suit, who goes inside the building. “You can bring your client to the side entrance.”

Great, where the bodies are brought in.

I’m not sure how Max will feel about this, but I don’t care. I don’t know who the fuck these people are. For all I know, Jake Quinn might show up and

do what two Russians, a whore, and a knife-wielding prick haven't been able to do. Take Max down.

Quinn *should* still be in Richmond right now, training. It's four hundred miles away, but thanks to private jets and helicopters, anything is possible.

Belova did his homework on Max, that's for sure. I cringe to think what records in this world exist about Max and Jake.

I step away, and before I reach the car, Max is already across the street.

"You should have waited for me," I grumble when he's in close range.

He ignores me and asks, "What did you do?"

I steer him to the side entrance, so no one sees him. "I got you an early viewing. I don't know who's in that line. I may be fucking you and crazy about you, but I'm not your date to this thing. I'm still your goddamn bodyguard and I'm being paid to protect you. Now get your tight ass into that building, pay your respects, and let's get the fuck out of here."

He stares at me. "All in one breath. I'm impressed."

"I'm serious, Max."

His gaze lingers on the crowd and then he nods with an exhale.

Only, by the time we get inside, and he's had his moment at the casket, mourners have started lining up in the viewing room, too. Some have taken seats and there's no clear path out of here. Max turns around and stifles a gasp at the eyes on him.

"Max?" a man in a suit who looks his age, approaches.

"Hey, Cory," Max greets him comfortably.

"Great games in the series so far." They shake hands.

"Thanks," Max sounds modest, like his parents have punched his ego down a few notches.

And he doesn't introduce me, even though I'm standing right there. That's the irrational side of me clocking in, and I have to tamp it down. Know my place, even if I hate it.

"Kieth and Paul are here. We're broken up about Coach. Can we buy you a beer at Celtic House?" Cory smiles, running calloused hands with stained fingernails together.

These may be old teammates, but Max dwarfs them. His eyes stray to the crowd waiting while they loiter in front of the casket. "Give me a minute," he says to this Cory.

My heart drops because he's considering having a beer with these guys. They're strangers to me who could be friends with Jake. And want to take

him to a place I have no idea if it's safe.

"I'd like to stick around," Max whispers to me.

"Here?" I point to a seating area, hoping that's what he meant.

"No, in town."

"We have a six-p.m. ferry booked to get to your house on the south shore." It's a better excuse than saying no.

"Change it then."

"To when? Eight is the last one." I really am an assistant now.

"Please. I turned my back on this place because of Jake and my parents. I let their refusal to accept me keep me away from people who were once good to me. I don't want to be seen as a snob."

I exhale and want to argue, but he's the client and it's my job to make him safe in the environment *he* wants. "Did anyone waiting to see your coach look suspicious? Do you know *all* these people?"

"Pretty much." He shoves his hands in his pockets. "I'm going out with my friends. Stay or come with me, your choice."

No pressure.

I'm facing the fact that I have to guard Max in a social setting that has nothing to do with me. That I have to pretend we don't have what we have. That I don't mean something to him. That he hasn't been fucking me for weeks.

That's the part of this I hate the most.

SIXTY-ONE



Max

After the stifled confrontation in front of Coach's casket with Luca, I wait for Mrs. Avalon to look up from the front-row sofa to acknowledge me. Like most people from my past, I look for a flicker of truth in her eyes.

It sucks not knowing who knows my darkest secret.

Mrs. Avalon only has tears in her eyes, though, and I'm relieved her mind isn't on me.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. A." I bend down to offer her my hand to shake.

"Max Ryan!" She stands up, looking elegant but wrung out. "We're both adults now. Call me Robin."

"Robin, I'm so sorry about Coach." I crack my first smile since arriving in my hometown. "He'll always be Coach to me."

"Coaching you and watching you grow into the professional athlete you are, the *star* on your team, the captain, too, was all he talked about," she chokes up. "He watched all your games."

"My parents..." I struggle with words that taste like acid on my tongue. "They never understood me. Why I kept wanting this. I don't come back here often, and now I feel terrible."

Especially knowing a few doors down from the shame, guilt, and abuse, a world of praise and acceptance waited for me.

"It's nothing to feel bad about." She brushes my arm, looking like she can't believe it's really me. Not the scrawny kid who played in her pool.

"If I had known Coach felt this way, I would have given you my season tickets." *They* would have come to my games, given me some sense of family support. "My parents never wanted them."

"We never wanted to bother you to ask." She puts her head down.

And now it's too fucking late.

"You're welcome to come to the house after this showing," she offers.

"I'd love to, but I can't stay. I'm sorry. We have our next playoff game in two days." I adjust my tie.

“I understand.” She glances behind me. “It means so much that you stopped by.”

I go to turn away, but she adds, “Who’s that man in the nice suit watching you?”

I freeze and glance over my shoulder. “He’s my bodyguard. There’s been some threats against me. Nothing unusual,” I say, feeling awful for denying who Luca really is to me.

“Oh...” She exhales. “I guess that comes from being famous.”

“Yep,” I say, glad she dropped it.

She leans in and whispers, “I thought he was a...boyfriend.”

My heart stops, and I feel like the biggest fool. Is it *that* obvious we’re fucking? I’m in a room full of people who know me. Knew about me and Jake.

Now I’m sick to my stomach, wondering if Coach told her what my uncle did to me. Not wanting *any* of this to be about me, I smile wryly. “He *is* my protector.”

Her wink soothes me, but my guard shoots right back up when a trio of women enter. They gasp seeing me. I don’t wait for them to gush and ask for selfies. I slide on my shades and get the hell out of the funeral parlor before I suffocate.

SIXTY-TWO



Luca

I follow Max out of the funeral parlor, wanting to ask why his shoulders are up around his ears. Waiting to cross the street, I exhale and ask brusquely, “Where’s this pub?”

My tone gets Max’s attention. “What’s wrong?”

He reaches out to touch me, but a voice nearby jerks his hand back. It feels like I’ve been slapped. Our gazes lock. We’re each wearing shades, but the stare still wrecks me. I know what’s behind those mirrored lenses.

His shame. Of me. Of what we have.

“Nothing.” I motion for him to cross the road and walk to the car while I take up the rear.

Very different from last night when we walked side by side like equals. Will I ever really be his equal if he’s a superstar and I’m an assassin for the mafia?

Turning on bodyguard mode, I get him into the armored SUV and drive to the pub where, we sit in the parking lot, waiting for his old friends to show up, the blaring silence rattling my nerves.

“I’m going to check out the place first, make sure nothing looks off.” I push to get out. “Please stay here.”

“Sure thing,” he says coldly.

I don’t know where this distance is coming from. All these reminders of his past perhaps. It feels so tangled, but I just know I need to keep Max safe through the rest of the games against Richmond. We haven’t discussed what happens if those fuckers lose.

Will Belova want revenge and try to hurt Max or another player for the next two rounds of play? I don’t know how much more I can take.

I’m not going *home* to Belova. When the champagne bottle cork pops after the final Stamford win, I have to leave. Disappear into Sebastian Daria’s underground gambling world, and ask the Byrnes, the *real* ruthless savages, for help getting Samara back.

Inside, the pub is fairly empty, but it’s only four p.m. I can spot a shady

character from a mile away, and nothing here looks amiss.

I step up to the bar and offer the server my hand. “I have a high-profile client coming in soon with some local buddies.”

“You carrying?” He shakes my hand, looking me up and down.

“I’m his security.” I reach into my wallet and show my permit with a twenty underneath.

“No need for that, mate.”

I drop it on the bar regardless “Do you have cameras?”

“Not yet.” He shrugs.

If something does go down, I can’t check the footage. I exhale and nod, watching the server head to the other side of the bar where locals sit.

With one last look around, I step back to the entrance, horrified to find Max already outside the SUV, shoulder to shoulder with his old buddies. The difference in their suits is comically obvious. Cheap and ill-fitting compared to Max’s finely-cut, designer number. He struts toward me, so devastatingly handsome, I have to remind myself to breathe.

A horn honks, and I reach for my piece, but Max waves. He’s not used to being in danger. But it’s all I know.

I step outside and hold the door open for Max and his friends, keeping my face even, secretly hoping he will introduce me, but he doesn’t.

They take a seat at a round table near the front window. I think of his head inside an Uzi scope from a nearby building and start to sweat. Max catches my sharp sigh and figures out what has me stressed.

“Let’s sit at the bar,” he suggests, and the group follows his lead like puppies.

They don’t sit on stools, just stand in front of the bar. Max puts his credit card on the scarred mahogany surface, signaling he’s buying.

After the bartender brings a round of beers, each guy gives a synopsis of their life and families including blue-collar jobs, though one is a lawyer in Manhattan. Max talks about college and being drafted to the Crushers. He sings Coach Avalon’s praises, making it sound like Coach was responsible for his success. His modesty floors me.

The conversation is going smoothly, and I relax, sitting further down from them at the bar. They’ve figured out I’m with him, and I’m his protection. He’s a famous hockey player, so they don’t question him. Maybe they think all star players have bodyguards.

Max’s shoulders drop and I feel his relief. He needed this sense of

normalcy, this centering. Despite still feeling wound up over the unscheduled stop, I'm happy he's enjoying himself. It's a selflessness I've never known and it smacks me in the face. I've totally fallen for this man.

I wonder if he'll come around here more often. Try to patch things up with his parents. But those rude people don't deserve him.

"How's Oliver?" Max asks, sipping his beer.

His friends go deadly quiet. Oh shit, did this friend die and Max doesn't know?

"You haven't heard?" Cory says. "He's a queer. Came out a few months ago. Was banging a guy he works with."

Max turns still as a statue.

Right there, I know none of these guys suspect that Max is gay. You don't call another guy queer to a *queer* six-foot-four warrior who wears razor sharp blades, carries a stick, and fights for a living.

My throat goes tight, waiting to hear Max defend Oliver. Whoever the hell he is. Snap at Cory for calling him queer. Even though it's not really a slur, his tone didn't sound very supportive.

"Fucking fag," Kieth mutters into his beer, confirming my earlier assumptions. "He goes to my gym. He's seen me naked. I canceled my membership because they wouldn't do anything about it."

"What did you expect them to do?" Max asks, sounding breathless.

"Kick him out," Kieth answers.

"For being gay?" Max huffs. "I don't think they're allowed to do that. It's discrimination without cause."

I grip the seltzer water the bartender gave me. He's at the far end talking to someone else, paying no attention to Max and his friends.

Come on, Max, say something. They worship you. Their tongues are hanging out.

"There's plenty cause," Kieth keeps talking. "He used the locker room as a place to cruise men."

"That's a strong allegation." Max finishes his beer and roughly sets the glass on the bar. "Wouldn't you say so, counselor?"

Paul, the lawyer, rolls his eyes. "If he gets in trouble, I hope he doesn't ask me to defend him."

That's three for three.

My heart breaks for Max. He wanted to reconnect to the place he grew up, but it's going down in flames. Does he really want to live in the closet the

rest of his life? We never discussed if he would come out. For himself. His own piece of mind and pride. *I'm* temporary.

"I have to get going. I'm staying at my house in East Hampton tonight," Max says with an edge in his voice and signals for the bill.

Max signs it and when Cory tries to leave a twenty, Max throws down a crisp Benjamin. "I got it," he says bitterly.

I'm off the stool and nod a thank you to the bartender.

Max gets to the car, and holds out his hand. "Keys."

"No, sir. You've been drinking."

"Fine." He gets in on the passenger side.

In the driver seat, I ask, "What's the address to your house in East Hampton?"

"Just get on the expressway."

With a tight jaw, I say, "Maybe we should just drive out to Orient and catch a ferry to New London. Sleep in Stamford tonight."

Max's gaze shoots to mine. "I... I want to show you my house."

My hackles rise. "Does your house in the Hamptons have security?"

"It has an alarm."

"Cameras?"

"No."

"Fuck me," I snap. "As your security expert, I suggest you get them. You can afford it."

I see the vulnerability in his eyes, and while my anger seems aimed at his lack of security, I'm actually pissed that he didn't stand up to those so-called friends.

Max *is* the client, so I begrudgingly comply. Like an idiot. He is going to see a different side of me in East Hampton.

SIXTY-THREE



Max

“Italian okay?” I ask Luca, who I’ve convinced we needed to stop for dinner. “I’m famished. This stretch of the North Fork has some really great family-owned restaurants. Quaint.”

“Fine,” he answers sharply.

I’ve been around this guy long enough now to know spur-of-the-moment stops throw him into a tailspin. When the season is over, if for some reason I want to make a go of this with Luca — *Daniil* — whoever the hell he is, this is a side of him I have to accept.

The dangerous man who will always consider first how to keep me safe. Only, I won’t be in an enemy’s scope forever. I hope he learns to dial his grumpy setting way down.

We stop to eat, neither of saying much. In fact, Luca doesn’t say anything at all. Just stares at me. Like he’s waiting for *me* to say something.

Honestly, my head is still messed up. I’m processing how my old friends reacted to Oliver being gay. The disgust in their eyes leveled me out. I know there are haters, but I hoped that close friends would accept you no matter what.

Sure, it’s naïve to think they still consider me a close friend. But Oliver? Fury storms through me as I stab a meatball.

“Problem?” Luca says, breaking the awkward silence.

“Nope.”

Outside the restaurant window, a bright light flashes, momentarily illuminating the dimly lit restaurant. A collective gasp rings out. Luca hops out of his seat ready to throw himself on top of me, when a crack of thunder rattles the place.

The sonic-like boom is followed by a whoosh of heavy rain, and the windows look like we’re in a car wash.

“Aw, fuck,” I say and drag out my phone.

Luca’s hand sits in his suit jacket, clutched around his piece no doubt. “What?”

“These roads flood. We’ll miss our ferry to the south shore.”

“Then how do we get down there?” He sits back down.

I forget that he doesn’t know the topography of Eastern Long Island. The easiest way to get from the North Fork to the South Fork is through Shelter Island, via two short ferry rides. But with this weather and the likelihood that the roads to the ferries are flooded, services will be suspended.

“We have to drive back around.” And not until the rain stops.

“No problem.” He sips a glass of club soda. “Where you go, I go.”

His cold voice draws my stare. The lines in his face, hardened from a harsh life, down to the hand on the table, balled into a fist, is stressing me out. After a quick glance around, I reach out to hold his hand.

Luca stops drinking, his eyes shooting to my fingers as I attempt to make the contact I need so badly from him.

“Do you have a problem with this?” I ask him, feeling him pulling away.

“Are we on a date?”

“Maybe.” I bark a laugh. “We’re having dinner. We’re fucking.”

“Careful,” he warns me.

I think about getting caught versus coming out. Admitting my sexuality versus explaining it. Telling people to mind their fucking business versus holding a press conference to save my reputation.

“Max Ryan?” someone says my name.

I yank my hand from Luca’s so fast that his wrist hits the table, his chunky watch clanging to the wood surface. Our eyes meet and he’s furious.

It’s so terrifying, I turn away to address the complete stranger who might have a gun and wants to shoot me. “Yeah?”

“I just want to say good luck on Friday against Richmond.” The man smiles while speaking, but his eyes land on Luca’s open and empty hand still resting on the table. “I grew up in Mystic. Always been a Crushers fan.”

Did he see us holding hands? Shivers run down my spine, but I hold it together. I stand up, and like most times I’m faced with a fan, I tower over the guy. “Thank you.”

When I go to shake the guy’s hand, he oddly just looks down at it. I quickly shove it in my pocket. “Do you want an autograph or a selfie?”

The man rocks from side to side. “Not much of a selfie guy. But I’ll take an autograph.”

I don’t keep notepads on me. “Um, having anything you want me to sign?”

“Nah.” He lifts his hand to give me a masculine knock on the shoulder but looks down at Luca, who’s not another player, or someone else who’s famous. Shit, it does look like we’re on a date. A secret one. My attack wasn’t made public. No one knows he’s my bodyguard. “Don’t worry about it, man. Just beat Richmond.” The guy strolls away.

I sit down and close my eyes before looking at Luca. “Look, I’m sorry. That was—”

“Save it,” he cuts me off.

“You don’t understand,” I say and regret it because it’s the stupidest fucking thing I can say. Of course he understands.

I’m learning that being in a relationship with another guy means I have to temper my emotions. Luca takes my dick, but he’s no beta male. “I mean... It would be unfair to the team if I—”

“It’s *fine*, Max. *I* don’t want to get fired. One day I might want to work back in the real world and I don’t need a client-fucking incident on my record.”

I wait a beat for him to calm down before changing the subject.

“How’s Samara?” I ask, realizing he hasn’t mentioned her.

Luca’s eyes raise to mine, and the prolonged silence guts me. “*She’s* fine,” he finally says, but it rings of something untrue.

Did something happen to his sister that he’s not telling me? Luca doesn’t say much else for the rest of the meal. A meal I pay for, along with everything else. For everyone. But I don’t mind paying for Luca. My generosity for him is pure.

We’re not chased away from the table after the dinner rush slowed due to the weather. A baseball game plays on a TV over the bar, and I relax watching a sport I have absolutely nothing emotionally invested in.

The rain stops, and we leave. The dark roads heading back west on the narrow state highway that lead to the South Shore has Luca crawling along. It’s close to freaking midnight by the time we reach my house in East Hampton.

My block is quiet, all houses dark except for one. A neighbor I haven’t met has their lights on with a few cars in the driveway. The houses back up to the beach off a winding road with no sidewalks. The front of the house is blocked by a row of twelve-foot skinny Emerald Green trees.

Luca’s silence is wrecking me. Maybe the way my father glared at him twice now caught him off guard. My heart climbs into my throat. Christ, he

saw the abuse I grew up with. Came face to face with the man who sent me off to be brutalized and didn't care what would happen to me. My fucked-up past is all too real. And he's...dumping me. Now. Tonight.

Shit, why does that hurt?

At least right now, he can't *leave* me. He's hired to stay on my ass. Oh God, that's another sacrifice he's making. He's a top, but he's letting me have that control.

Holy fuck, I have real feelings for the man. Deep and pure. My heart faintly recognizes the feeling. I had more than a guy crush on Jake. And it was more than fooling around.

I thought I was in love with Jake. His betrayal wrecked me. I still remember the constant pain in my chest. That same ache is tearing down the walls I put around my heart when it comes to Luca.

I've been lost in my thoughts and forgot to tell him to park in the garage where we could have entered directly into the kitchen. He already unloaded our bags and is carrying them up the walkway of large shale stepping stones that leads to the front door.

I'll move the car later. After we fuck. I need him. I need to be inside him, connect with him.

Fishing my phone from my pocket, I unlock the door with the security app my contractor installed for me.

When the click sounds, Luca yanks around. "This house is all electronic?"

"Yeah. I did it in case I wanted to stay here and didn't have a key."

"I'm gonna need to see that app and secure your passwords."

"No one knows about this house. You need to loosen up," I say and open the door.

I want to push him against the door and jerk him off right here, breathing in the ocean air.

"I need to check out this place first," Luca bristles, stepping ahead of me. He forces me to stop with a stiff vibe that screams he doesn't want to be touched.

"I'll take my bag." My hand brushes his to take my duffle—carrying my luggage for me is going too far.

He pulls away and drops my bag on the floor.

"Is something wrong?" I finally ask.

He can't be mad about the guy in the restaurant who saw us holding

hands. I've been nothing but consistent about my need to keep what we have a secret. I exhale, though, the fight in me draining. It's been a long day and we didn't get much sleep last night.

I probably exhausted his cheery protection mode for one day. First the shit show with my parents, the wake service with more than one hundred people Luca doesn't know, then the bar with my old friends.

Luca ignores me as he surveils the house. He goes room to room, switching on lights, and opening closets, swinging them with a little more force, and slamming them shut.

I rack my brain about what can be wrong. That conversation with Cory, Kieth, and Paul rings back to me, how they shitted on Oliver and other gays. Luca had to have overheard them.

But he's my age. That kind of bigotry isn't anything new. It didn't faze me. I've been dealing with that for years in professional sport.

College was rough, too. Lots of slurs and shaming. For that reason, I *only* dated women for four years, believing Jake and I were a ridiculous phase. With the right motivation, I responded sexually to girls, but it felt empty. My heart never beat for any woman the way it beats for...Luca.

Only Luca.

He has to understand, I'm *not* out. I wasn't going to fucking stick my neck out for a guy I haven't seen in years. I can't risk being labeled gay and then have to answer for it, with either a denial or an immature 'outing.'

"Huh?" I say, lost in my head again.

"I said, give me your phone please," Luca asks calmly.

Our eyes locked, I hand it to him. He walks away, tapping different screens. I know he's changing my passwords, but I'm too tired to argue.

"It's been a long day." I rub my forehead. "Come on, my bedroom is this way."

"Your bedroom?" He emphasizes the possessiveness.

"What's wrong with you? Your eyes are wild. There's no one here." I stop short and spin around at the foot of the stairs. "You've been sleeping in my bed in Stamford. If you don't—"

"I want that," he says, softening. "In fact, I have to have you right now." He shrugs out of his suit jacket and starts loosening his tie.

I drop my bag and consider how hot it would be to just fuck him on my sofa, the bare windows exposing us. That's a hollow fantasy, though. My trees wrap around the house on three sides. And only if someone came up on

my back deck would they see me.

Now if we went outside...

My cock thickens at the idea of fucking Luca in the hot tub. "I have an idea."

After kicking off my shoes and peeling layers of clothes when I walk, I shove open the sliders to the deck. I pay a maintenance company to send someone once a week to keep the property neat and chlorinate the hot tub. There's nothing worse than needing a good, hot soaking and lifting the cover to find green slime waiting.

I glance to the left at the occupied house I noticed earlier. The design is nothing like mine, just on the same size lot with the same privacy trees. But his house is a little longer, his deck shorter.

His window shades are down, but I detect several bodies behind them. Damn, I hope he's not having a party with stargazers who will come out to look up at the sky and then see me sucking Luca's dick.

Realizing it's rather late and maybe my neighbor will be calling it a night soon, I walk with no shame naked on my deck toward the hot tub. Unsnapping the canvas tarp reveals crystal clear water. I flip on the switch that heats the water with powerful jets. Those feel great on my cock and my asshole.

"That hot tub looks amazing," Luca says, coming up behind me, his hands roaming up and down my back.

I'm perplexed at his sudden change in attitude, but growling, he yanks me down for a kiss, and it's the most fevered I've ever felt from him. Even if it feels angry. He's going to punish me. Maybe fuck my mouth the way we did at Club Dare.

Damn, I liked that. Especially since he's going to be rough with me. I'm moody, like he said.

We're a wreck of messy kisses, teeth gnashing, clothes stripped away, tweaking nipples, and grabbing cocks. Fuck, I like this man so much. His hands all over me signals he's mine just as much as I am his. I love how he shows no hesitancy of being nude out on my deck. God, I can't wait to get my mouth around his cock.

Luca dips a toe into the hot tub. "Warm as fuck."

"Feels good, right?" I say, getting in on the opposite side.

The humming spa jets and the gentle fragrance of water softener invigorate me. I don't give Luca time to acclimate to the bubbles, or drift

toward me. I claw at him until we're chest to chest, my hand immediately closing around his thick cock. It hardens instantly in my water-slickened hand.

"Fuck, that's good," he moans. "But I need to blow you, Max."

Puts a dent in my plan, but I never turn down a blowie. I kiss him again and sit my ass up on the edge. It's late Spring and the chill in the air cools my heated skin, especially my ass cheeks.

Luca closes his mouth around my cock, and I'm close already. "I'm gonna fuck you so good, my hot, dirty bodyguard."

I'm not going to let him finish, but I want him to bring me to the edge so I can shove my cock in his ass and brutally fuck him. Lose control.

"Yeah. Christ, Luca, that's..." The words die in my throat, when teeth clamp down on my dick. "Ouch, you *asshole*."

"Not tonight." Luca hops out of the hot tub and stomps toward the patio door.

"Fuck, what's wrong?" I glance around, thinking he's gotten some kind of danger signal and is getting his gun to blow someone's head off.

"I'll tell you what's wrong," he says, angrily.

Uh oh...

He looks like he might blow *my* head off.

I stand up, my hard cock bobbing. "What the hell?"

"You really don't know," he bites out with a loud voice.

"We should have this conversation inside."

When I take a step toward him, he holds up his hand blocking the door. "You let your so-called friends shit on the gay guy. You let some stranger who didn't even want your autograph ruin an important moment for me."

"Important?"

"To be with you in public. Feel like you're mine and I'm yours. Without caring who saw."

My throat swells with heat. "Seriously?"

Rage fires in his gray eyes. "Excuse me? Yes, I'm serious. You're fucking gay, Max. Queer. Homosexual. *Homonormative*. It's who you are."

"I'm not denying that. I mean, I..."

"You should have stuck up for Oliver. Standing up for a gay friend doesn't automatically mean you're gay. You can just be the bigger, decent person who doesn't want to see someone discriminated for who they fucking love."

So, Luca had heard the conversation. Fuck, he makes it sounds so easy. Shaking my head, I choke out, “Why didn’t you say something?”

He narrows his eyes. “You’re glad I didn’t say something because you would have seen my knee meeting that guy’s nose then shoving my cock into his face while I come all over him.” His visceral passion stuns me.

“Look...”

“No. *You* look. Go take a walk, Max. I need a break from you.”

“Fine. Let me put my clothes on.”

He cocks his head. “I think not.”

My shocked eyes watch him stomp to my house and close the patio doors. “You’re not fucking serious, are you?”

He smiles, clicking the lock.

I frantically look around. Surely, I brought my phone out here. Nope. It’s in his hand and he’s waving it at me.

“Open this fucking door!” I yell, ready to say more but stop fearing I’ll get my neighbor’s attention. That’s not how I want to meet him.

These houses are insanely expensive, the guy could be a shark lawyer from Manhattan who likes to sue people for indecent exposure. I spin around, search for any loose cushions I may have left out to cover my cock while I figure out what to do.

Luca activates the shades inside the sliders, so I can’t see him. He’s fucking serious all right. I sit in the hot tub for a while, brooding over the fight until my skin prunes and I’m chilled. I knock on the door, but after a few minutes, it’s clear Luca isn’t going to answer.

Holy shit. Looks like I’m meeting my neighbor.

Please, don’t let it be a damn bachelorette party...

SIXTY-FOUR



Max

It's that damn naked-in-public dream come true. And it's even more terrifying being awake for it. At least I have two hands to cover my junk.

My eyes feverishly look on the deck of my neighbor's house for a stray towel. Nothing. Who the fuck lives there?

This is what I get for being anti-social.

My heart rate spikes as my skin cools. My neighbor's back sliders are sans any window treatments. Fuck, they'll see me before I see them. Great. Staying out of their vision, I peer in and notice several bodies. Very tall. All dudes. Thank fuck.

I take one last glance at the ocean, and breathe in to steady my nerves. When a roar of distant thunder cracks, I spin around. My foot wobbles from something unsteady lying on the ground. I lose my balance and my ass hits the patio door.

That's one way to knock.

Instincts force me to turn around, and four sets of eyes are trained on me. One set belongs to a woman and the others, three men. A very mean looking dog bares his teeth at me. Fuck, make that five sets. This could be a problem.

The wide, surprised eyes from a guy with sandy-blond hair, tied up in a manbun registers familiarity. He rushes to the door and opens it for me. "Max?"

"Ashton Ives?" I say, breathless and thankful. But his friends are looking like they want to murder me.

"Max Ryan?" the lone female pipes up from a sofa, her jaw dropped. "The hockey god, I mean, player?"

It's hard to feel like a god after being thrown out of my own damn house.

"Don't mind her, we've been giving her too many orgasms." Ash pulls her in and kisses the side of her head. "She gets feral now and then. I went to college with Max."

The word 'we' sticks in my brain. Did I hear that correctly? They *all* give her orgasms? She's sleeping with all of them?

I know Ash is bi. Is he also fucking one of these guys eyeing me with a death glare?

Just like on the ice, I assess my adversary. Not that I'm the enemy, but I'm standing here naked in front of a woman with three boyfriends and a severe-looking black lab padding toward me, growling, like he wants my nuts as a snack.

I clear my throat, thinking of what the hell to say next, when a soft-as-fuck blanket whips at me from across the room and whacks me in the face.

"Cover up, Gretzky," the tallest guy barks.

Gretzky... Cute. I get it. And right there, I know *that's* who Ash is fucking in this interesting foursome.

Wrapping the blanket around my waist, I relax, even take a seat. The dog puts his head on my lap and pants. I pet the soft, warm fur that relaxes me.

"Max, what are you doing here?" Ash asks, staring at his dog looking ready to hump me.

"Yeah, what are you doing on my deck, naked?" The other man in a suit is not as amused as his girlfriend. "My *daughter* stays here from time to time."

Shit... Here come the pedo accusations.

"Yeah," the girlfriend echoes him, but it sounds adorably forced.

"I got locked out of my house," I say to explain that I'm not some pervert roaming the beach. "*Someone* locked me out of my house."

"You don't say." Tall-as-fuck guy doesn't sound convinced as he swigs a drink from a fancy glass.

"Have any more of that whiskey?" I point to the guy.

"It's the playoffs, Max." Ash should get a job as the team doctor.

I just roll my eyes. "One drink won't kill me."

"No, but *I* might if you ever show up at my house like this again." The dad sounds ready to murder me. "Where do you even live?"

"Stamford Connecticut, mostly, during the season. But I have a beach house next door." I motion that way, thinking of how to succinctly describe how this night went. I don't want to bring up Coach Avalon's wake service or my parents. "I was on a...date that went badly."

"I'll say," Ash scoffs.

Ash and the tall man, who I think he's fucking, make the kind of eye contact that screams what an amazing connection they have. I'm jealous as hell. I don't know if they're out. They look so damn comfortable with each

other.

Ash breaks the silence. "Come on. We'll get you back into your house. Ford will sweet talk your girlfriend."

His words still me. Ash never had any idea about me. They think a woman did this to me. I consider letting them believe that. Should I just ask for a phone to call Luca to open the door? I could download my security app, but Luca changed my password! I could call a locksmith, but that will take hours. Should I call Bronwin to come get me? That will also take hours. And get Luca into trouble.

Hiding.

Lying.

Smiling through the pain.

I'm so fucking tired of it all.

"It's not a...girlfriend." Heat soars through my body. "It's a...*boyfriend*. Sort of."

Jesus, I admitted it. I said *I have a boyfriend*. Luca feels more than just a boyfriend if I'm being honest. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

"Now I'm ready to pass out." The woman shoves her dainty hands up in the air as the three men spin around to face her. "Did I say that out loud?"

"Yes, you did, baby." Ash laughs at her and cuddles her head.

"Boyfriend, huh?" The tall guy crosses his arms over a massive chest, but softens his eyes on me now.

I'm one of them.

There is a place for me in this world. It's so hard to remember what acceptance looks like when you mix professional sports into your life cocktail. Playing hockey is my whole world, my echo-chamber.

"Don't worry. Maverick and I can handle a dude." Tall guy makes a clicking sound with his teeth and the dog snaps up.

Funny, I thought Maverick was the angry dad. Cool name for an attack dog.

Attack. Dog. Luca.

Hell no.

"Wait. I don't want to throw him out." I block the door. "I fucked up. Bad."

"He locked you out of your house without clothes." The dad still looks angry. "I'd say you fucked up. Who is the guy?"

I bite my lip, realizing saying I have a boyfriend isn't the headline. It's

that I have the Russian mob after me. And my *boyfriend* used to kill for them.

Yeah... Not telling them that.

“My, um...bodyguard.”

“You’re six-foot-four and play hockey,” the woman says high-pitched. “Why do you need a bodyguard?”

“*That’s* a long story.” One I’m not divulging. I’ll go to another house first and start over. Heck, a bachelorette party won’t be so bad after all.

“So, what do you want us to do?” Tall guy barks, clearly losing his patience with me.

All of Luca’s hurtful words ring in my ears again. But he was so right. I should have snapped at Cory. You don’t have to be black to punch a guy who’s racist. You can have principals and be decent, inclusive, and accepting without an agenda. Without skin in the game.

In this case, a dog in the fight.

Sticking up for Oliver was the right thing to do and I failed. Failed him *and* Luca. The only man I really give a damn about.

I glance out at these guys again. They don’t look ashamed for the life they’re living, and it’s a breath of fresh air. Ash is a star pediatric surgeon. The other two are wearing expensive suits, suggesting they’re successful too.

“Well?” Ash prompts me for a response.

“Start. Talking,” the dad says through clenched teeth.

I have no idea what the hell I’m doing, but Ash and his tall boy toy have figured it out. I have to apologize to Luca. I’m not a guy who says sorry very often. Not even on the ice when I leave a man bloodied and bruised.

Asking for help isn’t a sign of weakness.

Coach Avalon’s words my freshman year in high school sound off in my head.

Help... My throat tight, I ask, “Do any of you guys know how to grovel?”

SIXTY-FIVE



Luca

I pace around Max's living room, hating myself. Plenty of reasons are fighting for the number one position. I've fallen for Max. What was a harmless crush, a frenzied obsession with a hot hockey player on the team I worked for, has mutated into something I've never felt before.

Love.

But I just threw him out of his own house naked. Made him vulnerable and likely to find a helpful woman who he may very well fuck as a thank you. Hell no. That man is mine and no one touches *what is mine*.

Yet, knowing Ivan Belova wants Max hurt enough to not play, I still threw him out of his own house to wander around East Hampton. Naked. Like an idiot.

Fuck. Me. What the hell have I done?

I yank off the low-slung towel from my hips and quickly slide on my trousers. Bare chested, I open the patio door and call out, "Max!"

Hearing nothing but the crash of waves, I rush to the railing of his deck and look both ways. Footprints in the sand head left. "Aw, *fuck*."

I rush back into the house and grab a flashlight, my piece, and my shirt, but I don't bother buttoning it up. I close the door and keep it unlocked in case he gets back. I deserve to be locked out at this point. I deserve to be punished.

God, I want to be punished with his cock.

I follow the footprints, assuming they're Max's since they started at the bottom of the deck stairs and looked like his meaty bare feet. "Max!" I call out again.

The angry ocean to my right tightens my chest, my heart soaring into my throat. What if he ducked into the water because he was naked and got...swept away?

"Holy shit, I'm in trouble."

"Looking for someone?" a voice sounds out from above me.

I whip my piece in that direction. "Who are you?"

A woman giggles. "I'm guessing *you're* the bodyguard."

"Where's Max?" I point my piece at them. I'm in *trust no one* mode.

Only, these two don't flinch. They know who I am. They're a few steps ahead of me.

"Let's start with some introductions." The man who called out to me holds the woman against his chest. "I'm Emery Austin and this is my fiancée, Bernadette Armstrong."

A dainty hand waves to me.

I lower my gun. "Yeah, I'm Max's bodyguard. Where is he?"

"Some bodyguard." Emery gives my disheveled hair and open shirt a curious glare.

"Can I come up?" I point to the stairs. "I know he's here. Those are his footsteps."

"He *was* here," Bernadette says to me with sympathy *and* mischief in her eyes.

"Was?" I choke out. "Where the hell did he go? He's naked."

"Not anymore," Emery says.

"You gave him clothes?"

"My other fiancé did," the adorable woman says.

"*Other* fiancé?" I'm definitely not hearing her right.

"That's not important." Emery shakes his head. "Your boyfriend is our fiancé's old college roommate."

Our fiancé...

I'm so wound up that my hearing is fucked. "Who went to college with Max?" I ask.

"Ashton Ives. My fiancé," the guy answers. "And hers. We're getting married. All of us."

My jaw practically hits the sand. Then it clicks. Like Queen Domenico. Four guys married to one woman. I didn't know that was a trend. Good for them.

They got their happy ever after, and I can't even find the man I love. "Where are they? Max and Ash?" I ask.

"And Ford," Bernadette says. "Ford Montgomery."

"Please, Bernadette." I'm ready to sink my knees into the sand.

"Call me Bernie," she says like we'll be friends.

"Like the movie? *Weekend at Bernie's*."

"Exactly!" she chirps while Emery smiles at his fiancée. A woman he

shares with two other men.

A ding sounds to my phone. I hope to fuck it's Max, but it's a text from an unknown number. I open it and my heart stops, seeing Max on his knees, his hands tied behind his back, his ankles bound, too.

Belova! My head is ready to explode until I read the text message:

Maxwell Ryan requests your presence at Club Dare to hear one hell of an epic apology- Ford Montgomery

"They're at Club Dare?" I look back up at the couple who started making out. "In the city?"

"We're members," Emery says, nuzzling her neck. "We hear you are, too."

It is the best sex club in Manhattan. "How did they get there so fast?"

"My helicopter dropped them off." Emery grins.

Before I respond, the wind kicks up and the whirring of blades slicing through the thick briny air turns me around. The sand is packed so tight on this part of the beach, it doesn't fly into every crevice. I'm hoping Max will hop out. That this was all a joke.

But nooooo.

"What the hell is going on?" I spin back around to the couple fucking with me.

"It's your ride, silly," Bernie says, so cheery it's impossible to be angry at her.

"And please get on it to be with your man so I can fuck my woman." That Emery asshole will be my enemy neighbor if things work out with Max.

"Got it." I step toward the sleek silver bird with a purring engine. "Have a good night. And...thank you." My head spins as I'm running for a helicopter owned by a complete stranger.

Inside, I button up my shirt and check my back pocket, relieved I have my wallet and my phone. But I also have my gun. I can't bring that into Club Dare.

"Mind if I leave my piece here?" I say into the mic after I slide on a headset.

"There's a storage locker under your seat," the pilot says like I asked for a bottle of water.

I pack the gun away. "How long until we're there?"

“Twenty minutes to the helipad, sir.”

“Any chance you can wait for me to bring me back to East Hampton?”

“My orders were to wait, sir.”

I sit back and watch the lights of Long Island pass beneath me as I head to Manhattan. I have no idea what the hell Max thinks he’s doing at Club Dare without me *and* with two other men, but I’m glad he’s tied up.

I’ll be dragging him out of there by those ropes...

SIXTY-SIX



Max

Naked.
Kneeling.
Tied up.

Waiting.

Waiting for Luca.

In *his* club.

Without a mask.

Ash's fiancée called to say he's on his way.

Time stops for me. Just me. Apparently, this isn't something new. Public groveling. Offering myself in this submissive position as a way to apologize.

While I play these thoughts in my head, someone stands over me. I sigh in relief recognizing the shoes and the spicy scent.

"Max..." Luca sounds frantic.

Fuck, I scared him. "Permission to stand, sir."

He scoffs. "I'm not a dom, and you're not my sub. That's not the relationship I want."

"What do you want?" I look up at him. "Tell me. I'll do anything."

"Stand up, Max." He grips my forearms to help me.

I shrug out of his hold and snap from kneeling to standing in one swift move. Something that takes a lot of different muscles. At my full height, I'm inches taller than Luca. "I'm sorry," I say, staring down at the man I've fallen in love with.

"Sorry for what?"

"For not standing up to my friends," I bristle at that, tasting bile on my tongue. "No, they're not my friends. Not anymore if that's how they feel about people like...us."

Luca glances around, fury in his eyes. "I brought you in here with a mask on to protect you."

"I don't want to be protected. I don't care if anyone here recognizes me. Not anymore. Not at the expense of losing you."

"I care," Luca snaps, and starts to untie me.

"These are my people, too," I admit, feeling so relieved. "I want to be accepted. By them. But more importantly...by you. Even if it means groveling at your feet."

Luca exhales and yanks me into a corner. "I never expected this. I never wanted *this*."

"What do you want?"

His jaw ticks, the war in his head fighting for the right answer wears visibly on his face.

"Me, do you want me?" I ask, vulnerability drenching my tone. God, it feels so good to let go like this and to give him the control.

"I'm going someplace dark, Max."

"Take me with you," I whisper.

"What are you saying?"

"If I win the finals this year, I'm retiring. With this last win, I'm the GOAT."

Luca scoffs at my reference to being the greatest of all time. "You're certainly stubborn like one."

"I want you. I want us," I stress. "I want to be yours, Daniil," I whisper his real name. "And I don't care what kind of darkness is in your heart. So long as I'm in there, too."

"Max," he rasps. "Please. Let's go home. I can't keep you safe like this."

"I'll leave on one condition," I whisper.

"I don't like preconditions," he growls.

"Tell me you forgive me."

"Max." He grips my face. "I did something incredibly stupid. I shouldn't have locked you out of the house."

"I'm glad you did. It cleared my head. Walking around naked really puts your problems into perspective. To feel exposed and get through it. I want to walk out of here holding your hand. I'm talking to Reid and Coach Beck tomorrow."

"They'll fire me."

"Then I'll quit the team," I say with no hesitation.

"You'll give up the GOAT for me?"

"Yes."

"Max, I don't want that," Luca says, grunting. So fucking adorable. "I appreciate you wanting to take these risks to your career for me. I don't want

my boss to know I fucked you while I was trying to protect you.”

I think about his objection and finally nod. “There’s something else I want.”

“I’ll do anything, so long as you let me get you out of here.”

I smile. “Fuck me, Luca.”

It’s dark in here but I see a deep blush staining his cheeks above the beard line. “What? What do you—”

“Your cock in my ass. I *want* that.” I grab his cock over his pants.

He draws in a ragged breath, knowing this is a game changer for us and a big step for me. It’s the ultimate sign of how much I trust him.

“Why would you let me do that to you?” he asks with gritted teeth, his cock hardening in my grasp.

“Because I love you.”

SIXTY-SEVEN



Luca

I freeze, hearing those words out of Max's mouth.

What? I scream in my head, but don't dare ask him to repeat it, fearing I didn't hear right, or he'll take it back. Call it a mistake.

Call *me* a mistake.

I'm floored at what he did to prove how he really feels about me. And as the shock wears off, I get why he stayed silent about Oliver.

Max wants me to fuck him. I was expecting an apology, but didn't know he'd actually say he loves me. This entire gesture blows me away. And Christ, yes, I want to fuck him.

But...

"Not here." I turn to the two men standing behind him. "Where are his clothes? How dare you parade him naked—"

"Ford Montgomery." The towering lawyer I've seen here before dips an eyebrow at my tone.

"Right here. They're *my* clothes," the other man, who I've seen *with* the lawyer says, folding his arms.

"That's Ash. I went to college with him," Max says softly.

These guys look anything but soft. But they're a couple—that I gathered a while ago. And they're pissed at what I did to Max. I appreciate how they've helped him.

"Get dressed." I tweak Max's nipple and slide my hand down until my fingers close around his dick. "I'm taking you home before someone figures out who you are."

"You won't fuck me?" His eyes flutter as I squeeze his cock.

"For our first time? Not here. I want to fuck you in your bed."

"In Stamford? The car is in East Hampton."

"Then I'll fuck you there."

"I want you to christen my bed there."

"No one's been in that bed? Not even a woman?"

"No, Luc." He kisses me. "Just you."

I glance toward Ford and Ash. “I’m taking your friend’s bird back to the beach house.”

“It’s last call in a few minutes.” Ford grasps Ash’s hand. “I have to warn you about something.”

My heart spikes. “What?”

“I need this man.” Ford kisses Ash, hard and rough. “I’ve been waiting all damn day. You may have to deal with seeing my ass while I fuck him.”

“I can handle that.” Maybe.

I watch Max get dressed, making sure he covers up every inch of perfection that belongs *to me*.

He fucking loves me.

Club Dare feels differently now that what we have is real. I’m not sure I’ll want to bring Max back here. This place was a tool for me to get off.

I look at the love in Max’s eyes and I know, I’ll never return here, not without my boo.



FORD DOESN’T DISAPPOINT in the helicopter. He and Ash sit on the opposite sofa in the luxury compartment and despite the risks, Montgomery lowers his pants and yanks Ash’s hips toward his massive body. Within seconds they’re fucking.

Ash disappears underneath Ford, but I hear his moans and grunts. He’s taking it up the ass, but he’s not a passive lover by the sounds of it.

Max steals my focus by kissing me. We make out to the rhythm of delicious gay sex on display for us.

When Ash cries out that he’s coming, I whisper to Max, “Did you fuck him?”

“No,” he answers quickly, but doesn’t offer why.

It’s not important.

The helicopter lands in a small airfield a mile from Max’s beach house. We get in a car driven by Ford, who even though he came, still looks feral for Ash.

After getting dropped off, I follow Max to his front door, energy and lust storming through me. I’m going to fuck him.

Max pats his borrowed jeans. “Shit, the front door is locked.”

It hits me. “I left the back patio door open in case you got back here

before me.”

Max holds my hand as we walk across a stone path to the back deck where there’s a set of stairs. “Don’t worry, no one would break in.”

I stop when we reach the patio door and see the place is pitch black. “I kept the lights on. Do you have them on a timer?”

“No.” He shakes his head. “Maybe Emery came by and shut them.”

Figuring that makes sense, considering the hour, I let Max go inside without me checking it first. I’m dying for him. Max struts through the living room. Knowing the layout, he flicks on a lamp.

When my eyes focus from the sharp sting of light after darkness calmed my eyes, four men dressed in black have guns pointed at Max’s head.

SIXTY-EIGHT



Max

I wake up, lying on a concrete floor with a single light overhead, hurting my eyes. It swings, making the floor feel unsteady. The place reeks of mold, sweat, and something else. My throat stings and my eyes feel like they've been dipped in fire. I touch my neck to find a painful bump.

"Propofol," a voice in the darkness says to me in a brutally sharp accent. Russian.

I turn over to vomit as my head clears up a little more each second. My eyes roam across the cold cement with cracks and blood stains.

Uh oh.

"What the hell day is it?"

"Thursday." A man in a mask emerges from the shadow. "Evening."

My heart stops.

"I have a fucking game tomorrow," comes out of my mouth because I'm a programmed robot.

I missed morning skate, practice, the Richmond videos, coach's lunch/strategy meeting. All it took to get one damn day off to go to Coach A's wake. Now this?

Horror freezes my brain.

Luca...

"Where's my..." I breathe heavily, the damp, disgusting air making me choke.

"Care to finish that?"

"Where is Luca?" God, I'm pathetic. Even in this situation I can't claim him in front of a stranger.

A light on the other side of the room illuminates with a pump-action sound of an industrial circuit breaker. Luca sits in a chair, *chained* up. His glossy curls fall woefully out of place against his face, but he looks unharmed.

He squirms against the bindings. "Max, keep your fucking mouth shut. Do what they say."

I try to get up and help him. But someone appears out of nowhere and kicks me in the ribs. Pain explodes down my spine and I collapse.

Luca goes ballistic. “*I will fucking kill you.*”

“Stay down,” the man in the mask says to me. “Don’t fight. Or I’ll hurt you until you collapse again.”

“What do you want?” I bark.

“You. Broken.” The man removes his mask.

Ivan Belova.

“You.”

“Da. I told you, I’d get to him,” Belova sneers at Luca.

With Luca chained down, I’m at their mercy. A war breaks out in my head. Do they want to send me back battered and bruised, too hurt to play? Or keep me from playing all together?

Fuck that. I don’t care what they do to me. If I get out of here, I’m *playing*.

I roll over and try to stand, but Belova pushes me down. Wincing in pain, I mutter, “What the fuck? Why *hurt* me? Just fucking keep me here.”

“I’m not paying five guys to keep you hostage for ten days while the teams play. Feed you, give you bathroom breaks. For all I know, if you’re officially *missing*, they might postpone the games.”

“You’re really giving me way too much credit with my team,” I say, even though he has a good point.

“I studied this game carefully.” Belova strokes my head, a finger gently brushing my sore cheek.

“Get your fucking grimy hands off him,” Luca bellows. “He’s *mine*.”

Belova’s jaw tenses. That admission might have signed my death warrant if he also wants to hurt Luca for what happened to his sister. The way Belova studies his elusive brother-in-law with a tight jaw, however, suggests just how deadly Luca is. No one knows Luca better than Ivan Belova.

“As I was saying.” Belova focuses on me. “Do you remember two seasons ago?”

“Keep kicking me and I won’t remember anything.”

“Your brother’s drug trial in California.”

My stomach threatens to revolt. “That’s fucking low.”

“I thought it was brave and honorable for you to miss several games to be there for him. It didn’t go unnoticed how your team fell apart without you.”

“My shift is tight, we’re highly in tune. There’s only five of us on the ice

at one time. When one of us..." I stop.

Oh, no. He's figured it out.

"I'm surprised other teams have not surmised that without you on the ice, the Crushers would be in last place."

"It's called being decent and honorable and training to be better than me. Not fucking cheating." I struggle to get to my feet, but I'm kicked again.

"One more time, and you die," Luca screams blood-curdling cries from his throat.

Holding a gun, Belova hikes over to Luca. I cringe, thinking he'll pistol whip him.

"Stop. No, please," I beg. I'm trained to take this kind of pain. Luca isn't. I'll take ten times the agony I'm in now to keep him perfect.

Belova bends down and kisses Luca.

On the mouth.

Belova won't hurt Luca. He's hurting me. He *hates* me, or how good I am and how I can beat his shitty players. He doesn't hate Daniil. Shit, he...he loves him.

But that wasn't a lover's kiss, or I'd get to my feet and head butt him so hard he'd stroke out on the spot. That kiss meant something else. But what?

"We were raised like brothers," Belova says to Luca. "I trusted you with my sister. Over *anyone* in my organization. All you had to do was keep your man-fucking in the shadows."

"Why are you doing this?" Luca asks, his voice shot.

"Your fucking sister escaped," Belova grinds out.

"Good. You were a fool to think you could keep her." Relief vibrates from Luca.

My heart squeezes that she's okay.

"Now that I have you. She'll come back. We'll be a family again."

"You said I had until after the season."

"What?" I glare at Belova. "What the hell is he talking about?"

"Luca and I shared a nice afternoon." He smiles. "In Vermont."

Vermont. Where his son is buried. That guts me. He didn't bring me there. He didn't want to share that with me. All this talk about *me* getting over trauma. Luca is holding on to mountains of it.

"When was this?" I ask.

"Weeks ago. On the anniversary of his son's death," Belova senses how I feel slighted. "I gave him an ultimatum and for insurance, I kidnapped

Samara. But she's crafty and figured a way out of my mansion and off my property undetected."

"How many people did she kill?" Luca asks.

"Two," Belova says with an odd source of pride.

We grew up together.

"Good. I'm glad she got away," I sneer.

"It seems your precious obsession cares about you." Belova reaches for my face, but my head snaps back. "I think it's time he knows the real you, Daniil. What Max Ryan *truly* means to you."

He shoves a phone under my nose where a video is playing. From an overhead camera I'm looking down at a massage parlor.

"*Tell me your fantasy,*" the masseur coos, squeezing Luca's bare ass cheek, a signal he's down for some male-on-male fun.

"*Do you follow hockey?*" Luca asks.

"*Not at all,*" the hot masseur who...looks like a hockey player says.

Wait. What?

"*Come on, pretend for me.*" Luca's voice sounds dark and lustful. "*Can I call you Max while I fuck you?*"

My eyes fly to Luca who looks away in shame.

SIXTY-NINE



Luca

“That was one of your guys?” I bark at Belova.

“I know your type.” He struts over to me and strokes my cheek.

“Orlov scoped out the place and set up the cameras when we saw you had an appointment. I never pass up an opportunity to get dirt on an adversary.”

“You sick fuck.” Max gets to his feet.

“Max,” I bark. “Sit your ass down. Ivan, give me a few hours. I’ll take Max home. And then...”

“Luca, no. It’s just a game.” Max wobbles to Ivan. “Break my arm. I won’t be able to play. You can have this round. Good luck against Portland.”

“And pass up a good game of violent toxic masculinity?” Belova sneers.

“Why do you want me back so badly?” I argue. “Is it Lia’s insurance money? You can have it.”

I’d give up anything for Max.

“I was blind with grief over my beloved sister.” Belova lights a cigarette with a silver butane lighter. “Not thinking straight. Months later, brigadiers hinted that the ranks grew weary of a leader who tries to kill one of his own.” He stares at me with regret in his dark eyes. “How can anyone ever be safe. Most work for me for safety.”

His reasoning sounds fucked up, but it’s valid.

“Ivan,” I bite out. “Where’s my phone?”

“One of my men has it. All your tracking apps have been deleted before we got here.”

There goes the hope that someone could find me. “Check the Trip app,” I say, smiling.

Belova glowers at me and snaps his fingers. “Phone. Now.”

Nero emerges from the shadows and I freeze. Lia’s bodyguard is dressed in a finely cut suit, better than he ever wore protecting my wife.

He gives me a wry smile. There was nothing between us, except two men living in secret who had needs. A glint on his lapel dries up my throat. The

fucking Viking Penannular pin?

He's Belova's new enforcer?

"Where's Petrov?" I ask about the man I worked for.

"Dead," Belova says with no emotion. "Makov, too. Your sister murdered them."

Oh. Shit. And he'll probably kill Orlov in order to elevate me to underboss.

"Is the phone unlocked?" Belova asks Nero.

"Da, boss," he answers, lips pursed seeing me.

This freak acts like we'll just pick up where we left off. The thought of touching anyone again or someone else touching me makes me sick.

"Where is this app?" Belova waves my phone at me. How they got it unlocked is the least of my concerns.

"Last page," I answer.

He scrolls and by the way his face changes, I can tell he recognizes what app I'm talking about.

My Tripwire app.

If I don't feed it a code every twenty-four hours, it assumes I'm dead and follows my last instructions. Which includes sending files to the FBI. I set it up when I learned Ivan bought Richmond.

His jaw drops. "Deactivate this. *Now.*"

I shake my head.

"I will only ask you one more time." Belova waves his hand until Nero gives him his Magnum.

"Shoot me." I shrug. "I get to be with my son, and years of murder evidence will be sent to the FBI. *And* the TSA. Good luck using one of your fake passports."

Belova shoots a few thunderous rounds at my feet. The bullets hit the scarred, dirty concrete, sending sharp chunks flying up. One lands in my left cheek, nearly hitting my eye.

"Ah," I mutter past the sting of pain, but shake it off. "Five years, Ivan. I've kept your secrets for five years while I've been away. I have nothing to gain by handing that over as long as I'm alive. I just want to be free."

"I have a hacker who—"

"Giancarlo Byrne programmed it," I deadpan.

Mentioning the son of Irish mob boss Patrick Byrne tightens Belova's jaw to the point it might crack. Huffing, he tosses the phone back to me, but I

can't catch it because this fucker chained me up like a dog.

I see no way out of this, so I give in. "Let Max go. I'll leave here with you. Right now."

"No," Max says, kneeling under the swinging light.

God, I had him kneeling for me. Submitting to me. Loving me. Wanting me to fuck him. Now he's beaten and broken. Because *of me*.

"It's what Ivan wants," I say coldly. "I was going to leave you anyway. I told you that."

"You told me you loved me," Max grinds out.

"I lied so you'd let me fuck you."

Men snicker all around us.

Max shakes his head, trying to get to his feet again. "You want a win, Belova. I'll fake being sick."

"This is no longer about you," he laughs. "My team will win. Or lose. Doesn't matter anymore. With how they ended the season, I can charge more for tickets and the networks have already offered me double for coverage rights."

At the end of the day, it's about money. Honor only casually threads in and out of that equation.

"Why did you grab me if you just wanted him?" Max points to me.

"He'd put up too vicious a fight if taken alone. You were my insurance that he wouldn't go completely ballistic on me. He didn't want to risk you getting hurt," Belova answers. He's right.

"You have me." I struggle against the metal holding me down. "Now get these fucking chains off me so I can bring him home and collect my things from—"

"Things? On your houseboat?" Belova laughs and shows me his phone. "This houseboat? The one on fire?"

Aw, hell.

"Did you think I'd allow you to go back to a place where you've stored weapons and poison darts to take my men out?" Belova grips my face. "We found your stash."

I shrug away from his hands. "Nothing in there was important," I say, even though I'm dying inside at the loss of little Eli's hair.

Everything else I care about is in Max's penthouse. Including him.

SEVENTY



Max

The guy wearing the Viking pin removes the chains from my Luca. My love. I'm... I'm losing him.

The rest of Belova's murderers sit perched on the roof of this dirty warehouse watching us as Nero escorts us to the car Luca's been driving me around in. I guess they didn't want to leave it in East Hampton if someone went to the house looking for me.

Damn, these guys think of everything.

The image of Luca on his knees sucking that man's dick twists my stomach. No, not Luca. Daniil. That's how everyone knows him.

I like Luca better.

My God. My light. My hero.

"Keys," Luca says to me. "You're hurt. You can't drive."

"Where are you taking me?" I hold the keys someone slammed into my palm a few minutes ago.

"Home. Like I said to Ivan."

Getting my bearings, I'm stunned to see we're in...Stamford. "Then what?"

"Give me the fucking keys," he says through clenched teeth. "Get in the car."

Swallowing and pissed off, I toss them to him. It's so odd that we're just driving out of here. It hits me.

Gentlemen.

The bratva are savages, but they respect the word of one of their own. Luca was always one of them. He promised to drop me off and return. They believe him.

Fuck that.

When we drive away, I look behind me. "Cut over to Route 15. We can drive to the airport and—"

"No. You're going home. You're playing hockey tomorrow."

I fold my arms and wince, yet I consider grabbing the steering wheel.

“What about you?”

“I’m going back to Chicago,” Luca says with a catch in his throat.

“You’re really leaving me?”

“If I don’t, he’ll kill you just to destroy me. He’ll hunt down Samara and hurt her this time. No offense, I’m more valuable to him than both of you.”

I don’t know if he’s saying these things to hurt me. Belova can sell the team for a profit now. Forget about hockey. He still needs Luca to save face. To repair his reputation after his grief-fueled mistake of trying to kill his own brother-in-law caused mistrust among his men.

“I’m worried about you, Luca.” I touch his leg, but he pushes it off.

“Just forget about me,” he scoffs. “Go play your game and get your trophies. Seriously, I loved hockey my whole life. After watching it every night for eight months out of the year, it makes me sick.”

He’s just saying that... He’s closing himself off.

My building comes into view, and I start to tremble. “I love you, Luca. Daniil. Whoever the hell you are.”

He goes rigid. “I don’t care.”

“Yes. You do. You’ve been obsessed with me for—”

“Exactly. You’re an obsession. A fantasy. It’s not real.” Luca parks the car outside my garage. “I thought it was. But it’s not. I’m sorry.” He opens the driver’s side door and my stomach flips violently.

This is it. All those men with guns, and the car following us... I can’t fight.

Swallowing a lump, I ask, “How are you getting back?”

“With them.” He nods to the rearview and the glare of the headlights stings my eyes. “Park your car in the garage. Take a shower. Get some sleep. Forget about me and beat that damn team tomorrow night.”

I have no idea how I’ll play. But I don’t care.

“Your things...” I hold it together. If I fall apart, he’ll fall apart, and they’ll hurt him.

“Throw them away.” He pushes out of the car.

I sit there stunned, but I don’t know what else to do. I get out, and without looking at Luca, I plop into the driver’s seat and peel away to get my car into the garage.

Dazed and on autopilot, I ride my elevator, and when I’m inside my apartment, I take stock of my injuries. The soreness in my ribs *should* keep me out of the game. But no matter what, I’m playing tomorrow.

And sending as many Richmond players as I can to the hospital.

SEVENTY-ONE



Luca

I watch Max drive off and down the hill to his garage. My heart aches in my chest to the point I can't breathe.

He... He loves me.

He knows every awful thing about me and he loves me. Even after what Belova did to him because of me, he still wants me. He even offered to skip the games so Belova's team could win. That's more of a sacrifice than anyone could ever imagine. It gutted me.

Max doesn't understand that growing up in the bratva is all I know. I tried a life outside. But it found me. I'm still wrapped up in Belova's world. It's like Stockholm Syndrome. Our captor becomes our universe and we can't exist anywhere else.

The horn of the BMW that followed us knocks me from my thoughts. One of Belova's lackeys drove with Nero, and when I approach the car, he opens the door to the backseat.

Chivalry.

Only, Nero gets in next to me.

Ugh.

"Keep it clean back there until we get to the hotel," the lackey cackles.

What? A hotel?

This was Nero's price to become Enforcer.

Me.

But I immediately throw my arm over his leg to play along.

"Miss me, huh?" I ask. "Miss my mouth around your dick?"

He turns to me. "So fucking much."

I rub his groin and he hardens on the spot. "Give me my phone."

He narrows his eyes on me, but reaches into his pocket. To ease his suspicion, I don't even look at it. Just tuck it away and continue my hand job.

"Fuck, yeah." Nero sits back and undoes his pants.

"You guys gross me out," the driver says.

"Ivan doesn't seem to mind his underboss and enforcer fucking. Belova is

your king,” I say even though I’m the one with the name that means king.

Nero fists his hard but rather small cock. “Suck it, baby.”

I grip his face to the point I might crack his cheekbones. “Don’t fucking call me baby. Ever.”

I sound like Max, but that will always be what *I* call *him*. Because he will always be mine to love and to protect.

I close my hand around Nero’s cock and use my other hand to trail up and down his torso. He smiles, thinking I like his body, but I’m checking to see where his gun is.

Feeling it on his waist, I quickly grab Nero’s throat. “I want the favor returned in the hotel.”

“Anything.” He breathes and juts his hips out. “Anything for that glorious mouth of yours.”

Stupid moron. And he’s the enforcer? Maybe I just give that good head.

I lower my mouth and swallow his dick. Deep. I need him on the edge. I need him close. And with just a few pumps of my lips up and down, his cock twitches. I’ve sucked his dick enough to know when he’s coming.

I let him come. Not because I’m a nice guy and think his last moments on earth should be in the throes of a euphoric orgasm. I need him distracted.

I pull off, his hot cum spilling over his dick.

It takes Nero a second to open his eyes and when he does, I put a bullet right between them with his own gun. Blood splatters all over the place. And that’s the messy flaw in my plan.

“What the fuck?” the driver cries out, looking behind him. He reaches for his gun, all while swerving into oncoming traffic. Not knowing what he’ll do, I have no choice and blow his head off, too.

Now the damn windshield is covered with blood.

I reach forward and try to steer. With my knee firmly on the console, I use my hand to wipe away the blood.

“Oh shit!” The first thing I see is the guardrail for the bridge over Bay Street Canal.

Water. Fuck.

We smash the guardrail to pieces, and the nose of the car hits the water with such force that we begin to sink to the bottom at an alarming rate.

SEVENTY-TWO



Luca

The force of the car hitting the bay tosses me into the front dash like I weigh nothing. I break the closest window with the butt of Nero's gun, cracking it enough to kick my way out. Water pours in at an unbelievable rate as I squeeze through. Holding my breath, I swim to the surface.

People are gathering on the bridge, and lights from Stamford's Bravest are already headed this way.

I keep my head down and swim in the opposite direction, away from the debris. The darkness hides me as I float down the canal, thanking fuck this isn't Florida. An alligator would have chewed me up by now.

Studying each of the houses, I find a dark one and push myself up on their dock. I check that I still have my phone. My *waterproof* phone.

I break into the nice house and cut off the alarm system as well as the cameras. One of those electronic calendars sits on a fancy granite countertop.

"Thank you... Whoever the hell lives here, who's at a play in Manhattan. And won't be home for a few more hours."

Checking out the rest of the house, I make my way to the second floor. I remove my clothes and put them in a plastic bag I grabbed from the kitchen. This is an expensive house and the guy who lives here is close enough to my size.

I don't bother with a suit that could be recognizable. I don't bother with track pants and a hoodie. That's too shady. I grab a pair of designer jeans, a nice sweater, and lay them out on the bed.

Like I own the place, I take a shower to remove blood, bone fragments, guts, and bay water off my skin and out of my hair. Finding a spare unopened toothbrush, I brush my teeth and rinse with mouthwash.

Dressed and refreshed, I make a call using the encrypted app on my phone.

"Who the fuck is this?" Giancarlo Byrne answers.

"Daniil Korolev. Do you remember me?"

“I do. Messina and Daria mentioned you dropped my name as a reference.”

“I want to work for Mr. Daria.”

“Calling me on this app means you’ve gotten yourself into trouble.”

“I just killed two of Belova’s men.”

“Nice,” he praises me, sounding impressed. “Where are you?”

“Stamford. A house on the bay.”

He tells me to get my ass out of there and rattles off a street nearby. “A car will pick you up in fifteen minutes.”

SEVENTY-THREE



Max

“Where in fuck’s sake have you been?” Coach Beck’s voice hollers from my phone’s speaker as I peel off bloodied and smelly clothes that aren’t even mine.

Sorry, Ash.

“Someone broke into my East Hampton house and kidnapped me *and* Luca.” It burns to say that name now, knowing he’s being welcomed *home* as Daniil. The murderer.

If that’s who he is, that’s not who I want.

“Jesus Christ,” Coach says. “Is he okay?”

“Yeah, they didn’t hurt him. Just tied us up.” I lie, checking out my bruised ribs and cringe.

I can’t admit I’m hurt. Coach will pull me from the game.

“Who... Who kidnapped you?”

“Ivan Belova himself.”

“Are you kidding me? Can you prove it was him? Did you get a photo of him?”

“No, I didn’t get my phone back until we got out of there.”

“Where the hell is Luca?” Coach cries out.

“Gone.”

“*What?*” he hisses. “I’m texting Bronwin right now. What do you mean gone?”

“Turns out Belova is Luca’s brother-in-law. He may have wanted me benched with injuries severe enough for his team to win, but when he realized Luca was my bodyguard, he changed his mind and decided he wanted Luca more.”

“I can’t believe this. Are *you* hurt?”

What a fucking question. I’m heartbroken and devastated, and I want nothing more than to crawl into this bed with painkillers and sleep for a week. Luca left me. Or did he save me? Is he really gone forever?

My robotic programming to win hockey games at all costs wars with the

flesh and bone man Luca forced me to be. “No, they just drugged me.”

“Thank God, they tested you before the Albany game.”

It’s called random for a reason. Not that I think a drug to make you sleep would keep me out of a game. “Are you reporting any of this, Coach?” I hold my breath.

He sighs. “Report that my star player was kidnapped by the opposing team? With no physical or photographic evidence that it was Belova?”

My first-hand witness statement won’t mean much when Ivan Belova can program his whereabouts to be somewhere else.

To Coach, the show must go on. It would be an outrageous allegation. The league might investigate, but investigations take months. They won’t stop a game with twenty-four hours to go.

Professional hockey is a business first and foremost.

My team is up 3-1. Why would I lie about being kidnapped? We’re going to eliminate them. But as I breathe in, everything hurts.

“It sucks, but like you said, this isn’t ice dancing,” I throw his words back at him. “I need to get some sleep. I just wanted to check in.”

Belova was right, the Crushers may not win without me. It’s not fair for my team to suffer that kind of loss when they worked so hard to get us to this point.

I squeeze my eyes shut and want to tell Coach that this is my last season. That he better figure out a way to win without me. Now isn’t the time. He sounds like he’s ready to have a heart attack. My retirement announcement will make his head explode.

“Fuck, Max,” he whines. “And you really don’t know where... Oh shit.”

“What?”

“Bronwin just texted me back.”

“Yeah?”

“Luca quit.”

SEVENTY-FOUR



Max

I sleep for nearly ten hours straight, shocked my brain let me. I showered last night, but could only let the water glide over my bruised skin. I could barely lift my fucking arms to cleanse myself.

This morning, I'm feeling a little better, but I nearly scream in pain when suiting up in my Armani, challenging very sore muscles.

At the stadium, I make like I'm too busy to let trainers get a look at me. I don't let anyone fucking touch me. I'm the team captain, so I do what I usually do. I focus on the team.

Coach Beck holds a pregame meeting focusing on his new play strategy. It mostly affects the offense. I have a secondary meeting with each wingman, then the centers.

Whoops, there's no time for anyone to check me out, so I get dressed for the game. And I feel like I'm going to die. But I've been doing this forever. I hold my breath strapping on the shoulder pads, then I look down and cringe.

My skates.

"Guys, go on without me. I have to answer these texts." I wave my empty phone, lying to them. When I catch an equipment intern rushing by, I bellow, "Hey!"

The shadow creeps back toward the locker room entrance. "Um, yeah?"

"Can you help me with my skates?"

The guy pales, and jams his finger into his chest, making a permanent dent in his Crushers golf shirt. "Me?"

"Yeah, you." Especially him because he's so low in ranks, I can vomit all over him and make him promise not to tell anyone. "Come on. I got caught up in the strategy meeting. Lost track of time."

"Okay," the guy says, and tosses the equipment bag on the floor.

I sit and walk him through the lacing-up process. Turns out the guy's pretty good.

"Do you skate? Or play?"

"In a church league. Been playing since I was a kid." He sounds so proud.

But he's only an equipment intern. I look around, realizing how lucky I've been. That I made it. I'm raw at this point and will start blurting shit I need to keep inside.

"You're still fucking around with your skates?" Stefan Willis says from the entryway.

The intern snaps up. "Um."

Willis stomps inside. "What the hell are you doing?"

I get to my feet, blocking the intern. "He helped me with my skates. Everyone else was busy. He did a great job."

Willis looks dumbfounded. It's the most important game of the season. We can clinch the round, right here at home. Send those Richmond assholes back to Virginia as the losers they are.

As I mull over those words in my head, something doesn't sit right. I'm blaming innocent guys who are victims of a bad owner, misinformation, and gaslighting.

"I'm good, Willis." I turn and give a nod of approval to the intern.

Shoulder to shoulder, Willis and I clomp through the tunnel. I make my way to the front of the line to take the ice like every other game. There's so much in my head competing for attention, but I have to shove it all aside.

Luca is gone, but he sacrificed himself for me.

My job is to win hockey games, and make what he did worth it. I'm going to do my job tonight, and hopefully have a week off to heal my head, my body, and my heart.

"Listen up," Coach calls out above the hum of the cheering crowd in the stands. "Send these losers back to Richmond empty handed. You're the better team. You deserve this. Keep that in your head with every rush to the goal and every swing of the stick."

"Send the puck to the goal. Good things will happen," I repeat a famous line from the 1994 season.

The announcer calls out both teams, starting with Richmond, and I catch a signal from the coach that I haven't seen in...forever. Richmond is refusing the opening greeting.

Holy fucking shit.

The booing in the stands startles me and it's so unsportsmanlike. It's not who we are under these uniforms, and when we're not beating the crap out of each other. We're gentlemen. That's why once we're out of these sweaty and bloody jerseys, we wear suits.

The Richmond players look lost as their names are called. I feel their embarrassment from this side of the ice. God, my heart goes out to them. Then one set of eyes catches mine. The one guy not looking down.

Jake Quinn.

He looks like he wants my head on the end of his stick. Steam practically floats out of his ears. What the hell is wrong with him?

He's a winger. As soon as the puck drops and his forward has it, he'll race into my zone and eviscerate me. The adrenaline rushes through my body, and I feel my wounds heal. I feel my muscles relax, and it doesn't hurt as much to move.

Our names are called and the crowd cheers at a near-deafening level. The screaming for me feels hollow considering my plans to leave at the end of the season.

Whistles, cowbells, and airhorns all combine to only make me feel worse. The rest of the team is announced, and I'm thankful the energy level is the same.

The national anthem plays, and I zone out. Center myself, but my heart aches. I stupidly thought Luca and I had a chance. Even if he worked for that mobster in Manhattan. He made it seem like some night job we could work around as far as his hours.

He left you to protect you, the second half of my brain pipes up.

At the puck drop, Troy Madison aggressively gets possession and shoots across the neutral zone. Madison's energy can level this place. He's done with these motherfuckers. He takes a shot before Richmond even realizes their forward doesn't have it.

Jake, who's been miraculously promoted to first shift, got lost in my eyes. He shakes his head comically to chase after Madison. Richmond's goalie whacks it away instead of covering it, but Willis catches it, stealing the puck from Jake and uses the opportunity to shoot.

Bounce, click, clang. The sounds of the puck hitting sticks, blades, and even the goal get absorbed into my head. After Willis shoots, I wait for the silence that comes from the puck flying into the nylon net.

Nothing.

Jake gets possession and that creep races right for me. He should be heading toward Reynolds and the damn goal. I'm protecting the left flank. It's painfully obvious, Jake wants a piece of me, and fought for that puck just to confront me.

On the ice. The only place someone can hurt me, according to Luca.
Who I'm aching without.

Jake roars toward me, and my fingers itch. My blades dig into the ice to be part of what becomes chaos in the crease. Jake shoots the puck from an impossible left flank angle. With the black biscuit no longer in his possession, he slams me into the boards.

Stars would pop out behind my eyes from the pain on a good day. All my bruises wake the fuck back up, as my game adrenaline starts to fade. I'm winded and disoriented as Jake skates away.

But my game health kicks back in and my body reacts from muscle memory. My ears are ringing from the pain, and I doubt I'll remember any of this.

The period ends and Coach eyes me, looking for a signal that I'm fine. I shake my head and go through my usual break routine. I check in with my guys and talk about their missed plays. Then we meet about what to look out for during the next period.

We line up to take the ice again, and a hand on my arm turns me around.

"Let The Ace take your shift," Coach suggests the second shift D-man, who even I'm a little afraid of, take my place. No one knows his real name. The back of his jersey just says The Ace.

"What? Why? No." I shake my head.

"You think I can't tell when a player is injured after doing this for so many years? That's a fucking insult." He looks me up and down. "I might have initially bought that our enemy would kidnap you and not hurt you."

"I'm fine," I admit, even if my lies insult him. The team needs *me*.

"It's actually my call, you know that right?" Coach *can* bench me. "Just a few rounds. I want to see something."

"See what?" I ask, intrigued.

"How Richmond plays when you're not on the ice. Get it on film how they're targeting you."

"Fuck, that's smart," I say, shaking my head.

I agree to forfeit playing with my usual line. I don't mind avoiding Jake for twenty minutes, but my absence on the ice seems to have made him angrier.

And that's when it happens.

He goes after Damien Carter.

Uh oh.

They can be wearing the same uniform. Jake is all over Carter. Chirping in his ear, looking like he wants to kiss him. What the hell?

I pull aside Roarke Keegan, a new winger called up. He skated close enough to hear them on the last shift. “What the hell is Quinn saying to Carter?” I ask.

They’re not even supposed to be tangled up like that, given their positions.

“He’s calling him a fucking faggot,” Keegan says, his voice even.

I shoot to my feet. “What?”

“Let it go,” Coach yells, hearing us. “Carter can handle a minor-leaguer like Jake Quinn.”

Beck doesn’t know about Jake and me.

Richmond’s other winger, Jensen, gets in The Ace’s face so their forward can take a shot. It bounces off the goal, but Carter gets it, and with Madison on his flank, they race back across to Richmond’s zone.

The Ace digs in to follow, but Jensen is relentless. I watch for any foul plays, when I hear a collective gasp from the crowd. Even Jensen looks surprised. I see Jake grab Carter by the nuts and punch him with a right hook.

What. The. Fuck?

Coach screams from the bench to call a penalty, but the gasps turns to cheers when Carter blows it off and steals the puck.

He shoots, he scores!

Forgetting everything else, they all huddle and hug. I fight being jealous, but they have to learn how to win without me.

I tell Coach the break helped, so I’m back to my usual shift.

Then the game gets *really* ugly.

SEVENTY-FIVE



Max

What happens during the second period will be talked about and watched in replays for years to come.

Jake starts this round in the penalty box from the illegal contact. I make a point to skate by it and taunt him like a big brother threatens to beat the crap out of a little brother's bully.

I wait for a reaction. It's all vacant stares like he's a programmed cyborg. And Carter has completely shaken off the rude behavior.

We're up 1-0. Part of me wants insurance goals, but there's no loss more bitter than by one damn point.

It all could have been different with ONE more goal.

So, we crank the defense into high gear. Quinn's penalty is finished and he skates to the bench. In between defending my zone, I watch for the dynamic. Is their coach on board with Quinn's cruelty?

"Max," Lance Reynolds, the goalie, bellows at me. "Incoming."

And oh boy. Richmond may not mind losing, but they will not go down by one point. Their entire line heads for us. My body on fire, sweat dripping into my ass crack, I rush toward the goal, and it turns into a street fight.

Sticks slapping, blades tripping, punching, yelling, and the next thing I know, I'm on my back and Jake is wailing on *me* now. He lands a punch to my mouth, my lip immediately swelling and my nose leaking blood.

"You bastard," he yells at me. "It's all your fault!"

What the fuck?

The refs stop the game and Quinn is hauled away by his team. They don't even drag him to the penalty box, they eject him.

A whistle blows and the period ends.

We go through the tunnel. But instead of making a right to the locker room, I hook a left, my anger driving me to act irrationally.

"Where you going, Ryan?" Philly, the trainer barks from my six. "I need to see your nose."

"I'm going to the Richmond locker room."

“Are you crazy? Coach!” Philly bellows, but I keep going.

I know this is illegal. I know this will get me thrown out of the game, fined, and who knows what else. With Quinn off the ice and us poised to win, I know the threat is over. I need fucking answers. I don’t care about me anymore.

Jake’s anger goes beyond the game. He wants to hurt me. He doesn’t want to win.

As I get closer to the visiting team’s locker room, I’m shocked that no one stops me. In fact, it’s eerily empty in this corridor.

That’s when I hear shouting. Like a...bar brawl. I’m Irish, I know the sound.

I pick up the pace and stand in the doorway to the visiting team’s locker room. I can’t believe what I’m seeing. Quinn is on the floor and he’s getting the shit beaten out of him.

Why is their security allowing this? I look closer because it’s happening so fast. Men in Crusher’s security jackets are holding back the Richmond guys. But I don’t recognize any of the men in those jackets.

Holy fucking shit. *We’re gonna get disqualified.*

I roar with my team captain voice. “Hey!”

All movement stops. The man beating Quinn to a pulp hops off the guy, his knuckles chewed up and bloody.

My heart lands in my throat. Luca...

SEVENTY-SIX



Luca

It took a lot of maneuvering and cash, but I convinced my old Crushers' security team to go for a cigarette break during this final intermission. I told them about Belova, and gave them an out.

I've got solid evidence against Ivan. Texts and wire transfers about Max's first attack, courtesy of Giancarlo, sit on a thumb drive in my pocket. If what I'm doing gets to the league and they try to disqualify the Crushers, I'll drop the bomb against Richmond.

Watching Jake Quinn hurt Max, *my Max*, fueled me with rage. My fist lands easy punches—surprising for a hockey player. But they're used to fighting on skates, not flat on their backs. And just not against someone with nothing to lose.

Quinn's team is too stunned to react, and might even feel he deserves it. Fighting is part of this sport, but not the way Quinn went after two innocent rivals.

Who happen to be gay.

I'm grabbed from behind and practically lifted off the rubber floor tiles. Only one person can handle my weight like that.

Max.

"What the fuck are you doing in here?" I yell at him.

"*Me?*" He looks at me, stunned.

"You're not supposed to be in the visiting team's locker room! Your team will be disqualified. Presley, get Ryan the fuck out of here," I scream at one of my guys.

The catatonic Richmond team and their security agents with their player writhing on the floor, gape up at me.

Flashing my gun at all of them, I say, "You didn't see any of this."

Max drags me away, like I've lost my mind.

I have.

I miss him.

I'm dying without him.

He throws me against a wall in the corridor. “What the fuck? Where did you go?”

“New York.” I breathe him in. Musk and sweat and blood. My fucking favorite hat trick. “I killed Nero and his driver.”

Max’s jaw drops. “You *left* me.”

“I had to. It was the only way Belova would let you go.” I try not to collapse. “Presley, get Quinn over here. He’s out of the game, it doesn’t matter.”

“Yes, boss.”

I give Max a look. “How long until the intermission is over?”

“Five minutes, maybe,” Max says with a tight jaw. “Talk. Fast.”

Presley drags Quinn out into the corridor. The men I brought with me follow. The Richmond locker room door closes, and I suspect someone is gaslighting the team, saying Belova wanted Quinn punished for getting thrown out during such a crucial game.

“I’ll meet you all outside,” I say to the ops unit I brought with me.

They shuck off the security jackets I stole and toss everything into a dumpster. Presley stays with me, holding Jake.

Max glances around. “Equipment room.”

I follow Max on his skates walking like a warrior. We get in the room, and I throw Quinn down on a metal chair. “Talk.”

“What?” he spits out.

“I have your messages with Ivan Belova.”

His face crumbles. “Those can be faked.”

“And the photos of you with a guy, too?”

“Christ.” Max’s eyelids flutter. “We were in fucking high school.”

“This was three months ago,” I say to Max, shocking him. “Quinn being caught sucking dick put Belova’s plan into place. He was looking for someone he could blackmail. And found a player with a wife and four kids who doesn’t want anyone to know he likes dick, too.”

“Not, too,” Quinn mumbles. “Just...dudes. My marriage is a sham.”

“I’m sure Katie always knew—” Max starts.

“Katie dumped me in college,” Quinn spits out. “I fucked around with guys on the side, she couldn’t take it. The coach there told me to keep quiet about liking guys and then set me up with his daughter. Told me to marry her, and he’d make sure I’d make it to the big leagues.”

Twenty years later, he’s still on a farm team. Christ, he must be

miserable.

“That’s a fucking terrible thing to do to a woman. Does *she* know?” Max snaps.

“No,” Quinn scoffs.

“Are those kids yours?”

He tries to stand but Presley pushes him back down. “Yes, they’re mine. And I fucking love them. That’s why I did this. I can’t risk losing them.”

My jaw ticks, and I completely get what he’s saying. That was me. I slept with Lia out of obligation. My son made life with her, life with Belova, bearable.

Until he was taken away from me.

“None of this is Max’s fault,” I argue.

“It’s his fault, all right,” Quinn spews through clenched teeth.

“You said that to me on the ice,” Max speaks up, shaking his arms loose. “What the hell did I do?”

“You made me this way,” Quinn cries out. “By fucking around with me in high school, forcing me.”

“I didn’t force you and you know it,” Max yells.

“Doesn’t matter,” Quinn’s head falls into his hands.

Max and I exchange glances. Shaking my head, I grip Quinn’s shoulder. “I understand you more than you think,” I whisper. “I’m gay, but I had a wife and a son. They both died because she couldn’t handle who I was. You’re bitter about something that happened in high school. You’re a fucking adult now. Take responsibility. If you’re not happy in your marriage, get a divorce.”

Jake Quinn has options I never had. “I’ll lose my kids.”

“For being gay?” Max scoffs. “Dude, what year do you think it is?”

“I’ve been unfaithful,” Quinn mumbles.

“That doesn’t matter much either, so long as you were a good father,” I say, again wishing I had the chance to set Lia free.

When he looks lost, I step back. I am not here to solve Jake Quinn’s marital problems.

A rumble from the stadium means Max has to get back on the ice. Our eyes lock again, and my heart pounds with every second I have left with him.

“Don’t...leave,” Max says, backing up to the door, blocking me.

“I’ll do you one better.” I fit a cap on my head, and slide shades on. “Presley, deal with Quinn. I have to walk my boyfriend back to his locker

room. He has a hockey game to win.”

SEVENTY-SEVEN



Max

We hold Richmond to that one lousy point and win, nearly sweeping the series. The crowd roars, damn near knocking out my eardrums as shit gets thrown onto the ice. Hats, flowers, stuffed animals, and pucks.

We accept our trophy for this round. When I lift it, my game health fails and my body screams in pain. I can taste those ten days off in bed. With Luca.

He stands on the sidelines with the other agents, watching me, smiling.

The postgame events unfold as usual, champagne showers in the locker room and then interviews. I'm usually the center of attention, being asked about my game, but the questions for this win are very different.

Why did Jake Quinn attack you?

Are you filing a complaint with the league?

Are you pressing charges?

I have mixed feelings about Jake, but I saw his situation through Luca's eyes. How he too married a woman out of protest. But has children he loves. There's no doubt in my mind Luca would have hurt someone innocent to keep his son.

A child...

Does he want another one? Could he bear that? A question for another day.

When I remove my uniform, Damien Carter is the first one at my side. "Jesus, man. What happened? Did Quinn do this?"

"No." I shake my head. "Got into a little trouble yesterday."

"Coach Beck let you play like this?" Carter hisses, showing loyalty to me.

"He didn't know. I hid it." I pull Carter aside. "Are you okay?"

"Me?" He grins. "I'm great."

"Anyone special?"

"Maybe." He winks and helps me undress.

After, we walk to the showers completely nude, and there's not an ounce of awkwardness between us. But I look up and Luca is standing there. In a

towel.

We're breaking all kinds of rules. I guess Duncan, the other security agent who protected me with Luca, let him into the locker room.

"Excuse me, that man belongs to me." Luca smiles at Carter.

Damien raises his hands and saunters to the other shower stall. The idea of Luca seeing *him* naked pinches my heart, but Luca's eyes stay on me.

My eyes go south when he drops the towel.

"What can I do?" he purrs.

Fuck me...

It's all I think about. It's all I want.

"Wash my hair? I really can't lift my arms right now."

Luca steers me into the far stall and turns on the faucet. The hot water initially stings my sore muscles, but melts into blinding pleasure. Luca presses the shampoo dispenser and runs his hands through my hair. His bulging biceps thrill me, and those thick tattooed fingers feel like heaven against my scalp. All the pain fades away.

My body is fine-tuned. It will come around no matter what by the next round. But Luca feeds my soul and heals my heart.

"When we get home, we're getting you a masseuse," Luca says softly. "And a PT guy to work through these injuries. You have two rounds left."

Those ten days until round three just got shorter.

"A masseuse?" I ask.

"You think I'm letting a *man* give you a massage?"

"Where?"

"East Hampton," he says. "We can drive there right now. The ten days off will be better spent there. I saw how the ocean invigorated you."

"God, I love that idea," I whine, letting him take care of me. "I'm not worthy of you, Daniil."

"You are. I'm *not* perfect."

"You're fucking perfect for me." I smile. "What now? For us?"

His spine straightens. "I'm working for Sebastien Daria. In Manhattan. I'll live in the shadows, but I won't love in secret."

"I don't want to live that way anymore either." I fist his cock, loving how the bolts settle between my fingers. "Will loving you put me in danger?"

His breath hitches. "You still love me?"

"Yeah," I say on a laugh, because it's true. "And I know it's true because I never felt anything like this. It has to be love."

Luca gently presses his lips to mine. "I love you, too."

"Do I call you Daniil now?"

Hearing his real name raises his eyebrows. "You can call me Luca."

"Who do you want to be?" I'll adjust to whatever name makes him feel complete.

We've only known each other for a short amount of time. It feels like this is now the start of our story.

"I just want to be yours," Luca says and deepens the kiss under the hot spray.

SEVENTY-EIGHT



Max

We arrive in East Hampton two hours later. I'm too exhausted to do anything, so we fall into my bed. Sleeping next to Luca is the best medicine.

The next morning, a knock on the back door perks me up while getting coffee. I smile seeing Ashton Ives.

"Still here?" I ask, letting him in.

"Yeah, Bernie has a break for a few weeks. She and Ford are...busy right now." He blushes.

"Cool," I say behind my mug. But it's hard to wrap my head around *that* relationship.

"We watched the game last night." Ash gives me a once-over. "Are you all right?"

I lift my T-shirt. "These bruises aren't from the fight, it's the hassle I had the night before."

"Mother... Come on. Get dressed, I'll take you for an X-ray."

Just then Luca struts into the kitchen wearing a pair of my sweats, hanging dangerously low on his hips. His V-cut is prominent and very tempting. Ash almost jumps back at how lethal Luca looks.

"Good morning," says *my boyfriend*.

"Morning," Ash returns the greeting.

"I'm in good hands." I glance at Luca.

Ash nods. "If you need anything, some kind of medical referral or meds, let me know."

I take a sip of my coffee, a thought hitting me. "Hey, do you and your... Um..."

"Family," Ash says proudly. "We're a family."

I smile at that. "Do you and your family want my tickets for the next set of games? I know it's north of here."

"We'd love that. Can you spare *four* tickets? What about your parents?"

I shrug. "Not interested."

Luca wraps an arm around my waist. "I'm his family now."

Ash smiles. "I look forward to seeing you at the games, Luca."

They shake hands, and Ash leaves with a hitch in his giddy up. I wonder if he'll join Ford and Bernadette in whatever they're doing.

Luca's chin on my shoulder and his warm breath on my neck completes *me*. There's no one else *I* want.

SEVENTY-NINE



Max

I have a whole new respect for salty waves and moonlight dappling on the Atlantic Ocean the way Luca takes me bent over the railing on my bedroom's balcony.

I'm the one getting railed tonight.

I love it.

I love him.

And he loves me.

"Max," Luca says with tears clogging his throat. "Open for me, baby."

"I'm trying." I breathe through the trauma storming through me.

It's not his fault.

It's not his fault.

Luca won't hurt me.

"Just one finger, baby. We've done this before." Luca's high-octane arousal can be felt from a mile away, but he knows I need preparation before taking a man of his size.

I unclench a little, but Luca doesn't shove his finger inside. God, he's so gentle. He massages my ass, peppering kisses on my shoulder.

"I want you so much. I'm gonna make it so good for you, I promise. You're mine and I cherish every fucking inch of you."

His slick finger penetrates me and my head falls back. I fuck him on his back and take him like a warrior pillaging a prize. But I can't handle the same right now. I need to be upright. Like on the ice. If I'm vertical, I'm in control.

Luca stretches me, one digit at a time. It's so good I lose track of how many fingers are inside me. It's all decadence, a warm swirl of pleasure in my chest.

"Are you ready for me?" Luca whispers in my ear.

"You tell me."

"You feel so good, so open for me." He breathes on my neck. "I'm gonna wear a condom this first time. I don't want any worry in your mind. Just let your body feel me. Feel my cock hit a spot that will make you spiral. I need

to warn you, it's addicting."

"I'll let you do this to me all you want. All you need." I exhale. "Please."

"I'm in no rush, baby."

The waves in the distance hit the shore in the rhythm of my heart, but the beating is lower.

"I'm in a rush. Fuck me, Luca. Do it. Take me right now, please."

"God, I love when you beg." With shaking hands, he rolls on a condom.

Then the head of his cock lines up with my entrance, breaching my anal ring. The pierced tip sinks deep into my body. Like it's meant to be there. My heart wants him, and where the heart goes, the body will follow.

Where you go, I go...

"Fuck," Luca mutters softly until another language falls from his lips.

My hand wraps around my cock, swollen and throbbing.

"No, baby, let me." Luca's hand closes around my shaft. He's so big, he can fuck me from behind like this *and* jerk me off, too.

I know this would be easier if I just let him get on top of me. I'm ready to suggest it, but Luca settles into a rhythm that has me seeing stars.

"Fuck, yes. Baby, you're taking me so good. Christ..." Luca finds every nerve in my ass.

"So fucking good. Don't stop." I'm raw with unbridled lust.

"Oh God, baby. Hold on. I can't. It's too good. Too tight. So perfect for me." Luca begins thrusting.

"Luc," I groan. "*Please* don't stop. I'm close."

"Never." His cock inside me expands to a near painful width, those bolts lighting up a line of several nerves in my channel like I'm a fucking pinball machine. "We're coming together. Me and you. This is so perfect."

My cum spills over Luca's hands around my dick. "God, that was incredible."

He slips his cock from my ass, and the fullness is gone. The immediate need to weep overtakes me. But Luca's lips find mine. We both turn part way so we can be face to face. His heated and slick chest slides against mine.

Our hands are everywhere as I get lost in his kiss.

Luca's wet cock softens against mine. "Just give me a few minutes and I'll—" His phone rings in a tone I'd not heard before.

He looks up at me as everything about him rearranges. Luca answers his phone sitting nearby. "Yes, Mr. Byrne. What?"

Luca leans on the railing next to me and pushes a hand through his glossy

curls. He chokes out a few, *uh huh, uh huhs*. Then emits a sob-filled, “Thank you.”

“What happened?” I cup his shoulder.

He faces me. All the lines in his face that made him so broodingly lethal vanish.

“Belova is dead.”

EIGHTY



Luca

Max and I ride the elevator in Giancarlo Byrne's Warwick hotel where he runs his cyber command center from a penthouse. He lives somewhere else with Rebecca Domenico, Sebastien Daria, Anthony Messina, and Julian Russo. They keep that location a secret to maintain their safety. Especially since they have two children.

Holding hands, Max and I step off the elevator. Giancarlo sits behind a set of glass doors on a white leather sofa with a hand-held device, and waves us into his office.

I get a small briefing and then Gian digs into the meat of what happened to Belova.

"I've been spying on Ivan's brotherhood since I knew we were taking in a defector. They're not happy with him. He won't be missed."

This lines up with Ivan's confession at the black site that night. How trying to kill me turned his people sour and suspicious.

"Now I have *his* death on my conscience," Max says with regret. "But he started this, not me."

"No one's talking on the channels I used in the past." I squeeze Max's hand, already preparing to give him extra care later. "How did Belova die?"

Giancarlo laughs darkly. "It was so easy. Too easy."

Max stiffens at how someone can take a life so easily. And laugh about it. *Welcome to my world.*

"I hired a new specialist who wanted Belova dead as much as you," Gian says. "Got into his Chicago mansion and slit his throat."

"Ivan had a wife and kids," I say.

"His wife hates him," Gian scoffs. "She's been in secret meetings with Italian mafia lawyers figuring out a way to divorce him. Claims spousal abuse. Is that a man you want raising daughters?"

"No." I shake my head. "How the hell did someone outside his organization get into his mansion?"

"Not sure." Giancarlo shrugs. "But my specialist didn't even charge me

for the job. Only wanted one thing.”

“What was that? If I may ask, Mr. Byrne,” Max asks, showing respect to one of my bosses.

“I was hoping you would.” Gian turns his chair toward me, his hands tented between his legs. “She wanted a plane ticket.”

“A ticket where?” I ask.

“To visit her sister Fina.” Gian smiles at me. “In Miami.”

All the stress leaves my body. Samara is not only safe, but she killed the Chicago Pakhan.

“Does anyone suspect your specialist?” I ask with a tight throat, ready to lose it.

“Nope,” Gian says and smiles at our joined hands. “Maybe you should take a trip down there, too.”

“Miami, huh?” Max strokes my chest.

I pull him in for a kiss. “Sounds like a cool place to have a honeymoon.”

“I couldn’t agree more.” Max kisses my hand. “Give me three weeks.”

EIGHTY-ONE



Max

I hoist the Dresden Trophy over my head after seven brutal games against Portland. The benefit of being team captain: I get to touch it first.

And it's my last time.

I skate around with it, fisted in two hands and high in the air, like it could hit the rafters. Visions of every hockey god before me doing the same thing flashes through me.

But now, I'm the GOAT.

The crowd roars, and I soak it up even though it was hard *teamwork* to maintain a win record that allowed us to share this with our fans. Here in Stamford. I worried my last shot at this glory would be in front of an angry crowd who watched their team lose.

When a reporter sticks a mic in my face, I thank GM Reid who signed me fifteen years ago out of college. I thank Coach Beck for being the kind of man a player needs. I thank the players. Even the ones who are angrily trashing our visiting locker room.

Then I start my prepared speech...

EIGHTY-TWO



Luca

Working for a mafia organization makes a man think he's a god. It's why they're usually not the best husbands. The power imbalance. Max...

He's the hockey god. And I'm just the working assassin who comes home with blood on my clothes. But Max is there for me with a washcloth, chilled vodka, and his warm lips around my dick.

This is *his* moment, and I'm so happy for him.

"This was my last hockey game," Max says.

Wait. What? I lean on the glass, our new best friends, the Montgomerys, lined up next to me.

"My name is on this cup more than any other player. And I want to go out like that. I'm in my mid to late thirties. And before I get traded, I wanted to secure one thing..." He removes his jersey and fists it in the air.

Max stands there shirtless, his bucket pants hanging low on his waist. God that body. The place erupts in camera flashes. There will be photos of him like this on the internet forever.

When anyone Googles *Hockey God* from now on, *that* photo will top the search results.

"I'm announcing my retirement," he says to gasps and clapping. "I hope that makes my number eligible to be retired."

He's the most winningest man in professional hockey, of course Stamford will give him that honor.

Even more reporters crowd him on the ice. His announcement means we're not going home for several more hours.

"Oh, one last thing," Max says into the array of microphones in front of him. "I'm married. I'm in love."

I feel a warm blush spreading through me. Max's friend, Ash, knocks my shoulders with a great smile.

Before anyone snidely asks, *who's the lucky girl*, Max grabs one of those mics in a death grip. "With Luca Sheppard-Ryan. My bodyguard."

EPILOGUE



Luca- One Month Later

“**Y**ou raped *another* kid?” I pistol whip Uncle Harris on the cracked linoleum floor of his disgusting doublewide trailer.

A shaking twelve-year-old boy cowers in the corner, but Max covers him with a blanket near the main door.

“Take the boy out of here,” I mutter to him.

The kid’s been through enough trauma. He doesn’t need to witness more violence.

“Make his last breath choke on blood,” Max says, and carries the kid outside.

I manage to tie his uncle’s hands behind his back with coarse rope, then break his legs with a sledgehammer. Harris moans at such a high pitch, the pain must be cresting into numbness. Soon, everything will turn black, and the torture won’t matter.

I could have just come here while he was sleeping and put a bullet in his head, but that was too good for him. I wanted him to suffer. I wanted him to know *who* is ending his pathetic life and why.

With a final crack of my gun on his already broken nose, I slip on the silencer and empty my clip until there’s nearly nothing left of his head. Some hitmen castrate rapists to let authorities know the reason for their demise. I don’t want any of this to ever come back to Max.

Now Harris is a bloody pulp with half a head, and there’s not a talented mortician in the world who can put this scumbag back together for an open casket. Who would show up anyway?

Maybe Max’s dad. I don’t give a fuck. Max hasn’t spoken to his parents, who hung up on him when he told them we were getting married.

My husband stopped sending them checks, too.

Warm hands on my shoulder spin me around. Max looks wrecked, his eyes taking me in.

“Oh, baby.” I don’t hug him, though. I’m covered in this asshole’s toxic blood.

"I'm fine. The kid. He ran off. And went into one of those trailers." Max pulls down a cheap metal blind and points to a row of sad, mobile homes in a ragged, uneven row.

I sigh in relief, worried that we had to drop off the kid at a police station.

Harris was a maintenance manager here and had unfettered access to all the homes. He used his authority to stalk his prey. He must have been luring kids here with candy and video games. One was playing on the television while he raped the kid in his dirty kitchen.

"Is he dead?" Max glances over my shoulder.

I have the stomach for this brutality. Max doesn't. I don't want that vision in his head. "Yes, my love." I cup his cheek, his eyes straying to the blood on my hands.

"I fucking love you." He kisses me wildly, biting at my lower lip, the final edges of his rage taken out on me.

"I love you more. Come on." I pull Max out of the trailer I'm tempted to torch, but don't want any other homes to burn. Or anyone else hurt.

These people have been through enough with this monster.

We get to the rental that I parked in a shadow. I remove the bloodied clothes and put them in a plastic bag. In fresh jeans and a T-shirt, I drive out of the trailer park. Max told me he'd been there as a kid, so finding his DNA there won't be suspicious. Me? I'm a ghost now. My prints and DNA won't show up anywhere. Ever again.

When we hit the highway, Max opens the car window and breathes the muggy Georgia air deeply into his lungs. "Thank you," he says softly.

"Ha! Nothing gave me more pleasure." I grip his hand and kiss it.

"Nothing?" he asks.

"I only wish we fucked in front of him."

"Asshole would get off from it."

"True."

My phone rings, and I stare at it. I'm off the grid as far as my work for Sebastien Daria. He happily gave me the time off to end this disgusting man's life.

Seeing the number flash across my screen, I pull over. "Sam? What's up?"

"Where are you?" my sister asks, her shuddering voice icy.

"What's wrong?" I growl, thinking she's in trouble.

"I asked where *you* are?"

“Marietta, Georgia.”

“Get your ass to Chicago.”

My hands shake. “Is *that* where you are? Does the bratva have you?”

“No, brother.” She sounds like she’s crying. “I’m perfectly safe. But please. Just get here. I’ll text you the address. Bring your husband. You’re going to need him.”



WE LAND IN CHICAGO four hours later, after finding a private plane. I stop at an armory run by a man I still trust and load up on guns, ammo, hand grenades, and anything else they’ll sell me.

“Please go to a hotel,” I say to Max, checking everything.

“No. I stay with you. Besides, your sister said to bring me.” He takes the Glock on the counter and puts it in his jacket.

“Stubborn son of a bitch,” I say, but I love how strong he is.

We get to the address Samara texted. It’s a nice house a few miles from where I used to live with Lia. There’s something familiar about it, but these colonials are all over the place. My brain is nearly offline worried about my sister and wondering what the fuck she’s gotten herself into that she needed me so desperately.

And why the fuck did she demanded I bring Max? He’s not soft, but he’s not combat trained either.

The block is quiet, and my keen experience assures me the parked cars up and down the street are empty. Samara knows what she’s doing.

On the wooden steps, I motion Max to stay behind me. I gave him a crash course on how to protect himself, taught him basic hand signals, and anything else I could think of to keep him safe, short of sending him back to New York without me.

I knock on the door, and nearly collapse seeing Samara while Max hovers behind me. My sister looks...perfect. Not a hair out of place. Beautiful as ever. Designer clothes, even. A new look for her, but nothing that indicates she’s in danger.

“Oh, Daniil.” Samara jumps into my arms. “I couldn’t tell you on the phone.”

My heart slams against my ribs. “Tell me *what*?”

“Who’s that?” a tender male voice says, standing under an arch.

That voice...

It's like I've fallen down a well. Am I reliving what the fuck I just saw in Marietta? I stagger back and Max catches me.

"What the hell?" he mutters.

"Oh my God," I choke. "Is that...?"

"Come on, angel." Samara coaxes him to stand in front of her. "Elijah, this is my brother, the man I told you about. He's your papa."

My stomach threatens to revolt, but the second I see him, I know without a doubt, this is my son. He's taller with darker hair, curlier just like mine now, but it's *him*. I know every curve of that face. A face I made.

I hold out my arms, waiting for Eli to come to me, but he eases back behind Sam. He doesn't remember me, and I'm gutted.

Max's hand cups my shoulder. "Give him a moment. Speak to him like you did the last time you saw him. Remind him of something in the past that you two shared."

I think about that and hum a nursery rhyme I always sang to him at bedtime. Eli's eyes grow wide and he gently sings the song with me.

My voice shakes as the memories flood me. Slowly Elijah steps away from Samara.

"Papa." My son runs down the hallway and into my arms. "You came back."

I bend down and smooth the lock of hair back from his forehead as I always did. I kiss his warm, sweet-smelling skin. He's healthy and clean. And perfect. His arms wrap around me, and I know he remembers me. Me, his father.

I collapse to hold him, my knees hitting the carpet, squeezing him so hard I'm worried I'll crush him. Tears clog my throat, and I pray this isn't some fucked-up dream. Or a nightmare I'll eventually wake up from.

Someone must have switched the burned body I identified. Let me bury someone else. Made me live with a torn-out heart these last five years. Until this amazing man behind me put me back together.

Now...

Now I have it all.

Holding Eli, I stand up as I let him cry and shake in my arms.

Glaring at Samara, I say, "*Talk* to me. Who lives here?"

Samara steers me into the living room and the blows keep coming. Sitting on a chair, her hands wringing a handkerchief, is Zoraida. My son's nanny.

“How did you find them?” I say to Sam through clenched teeth.

“I was doing a job here,” my sister begins. “I heard someone mention *Zoraida and the little boy*. It stopped my heart. I had to check it out. It took weeks, but I found them this morning.” Samara smiles sadly, watching my son in my arms. “Belova hid him out of revenge because of Lia. That’s the real reason he wanted you dead. Ivan knew if you found out what he did, you’d kill him.”

“And that’s why you killed him.”

Samara smiles.

Whimpering breaks the silence. “I’m so sorry,” Zoraida cries, thinking I’ll kill her.

She only knew me as a killer. I *should* kill her.

“We need a doctor,” I say, trying to think rationally about what Eli needs, knowing someone can show up any minute to kill us. “I need to have him checked out.”

“Ashton will examine him,” Max says, getting on his phone. “He’s a pediatric surgeon.”

“He’s perfectly healthy. I promise, Mr. Korolev.” The nanny bows to me. “Ivan never hurt him. Or me. Your son wanted for nothing.”

But he’s technically Belova’s heir and the bratva will come for him.

“Why hasn’t someone else collected him if he’s the heir to the Belova dynasty?” I ask Samara.

“Ivan’s cousin took over,” Samara whispers. “Defied the council. Didn’t want Elijah as the heir. A war is about to break out here. Belova loyalists will be coming to install him. And the opposition is coming to kill him,” she whispers.

I shudder. Still holding him, his little legs wrapped around my waist, I realize Max is stroking his hair. “Hey, you’re safe now, little Eli. We’ve got you.”

It’s almost too much.

“Can I trust her?” I ask Samara, who’s had more time with this situation.

“I don’t know. I don’t think she’d do anything to harm Elijah, but she didn’t reach out to you. I think everything she’s done has been out of fear. I expect that won’t change. But if you’re gonna take her with us, we better leave now,” Samara says low.

Someone will kill Zoraida for handing him over to me. She can tell them I took him back to save her life. I won’t be hunted down, not when I have this

precious angel to protect.

I'd rather bring her to New York, take my time considering what to do. Zoraida is from South America, and if I think she's a liability, I'll put her on a plane and dump her there.

"She comes with us." I kiss my son's forehead. "Let's get you packed, my little prince."

"Already done." Samara points to a set of luggage near the door. "His ID is packed up, too. They didn't change his name. And she's been homeschooling him. Take Elijah. I'll guard her while she packs, and meet you back in Manhattan."

To the townhouse Max and I share.

"You coming to New York?" I've been begging Samara to work with me.

"I am now. I'm his aunt, I want him to know me." Elijah's mother is gone, Samara is all he has in that department. "Can I live with you and your hubby?" she asks, playfully.

"Absolutely," Max answers from behind me.

"Eli?" I look down at him and go weak at his soft gray eyes like mine. "Can I take you home with me? Me and Max, your new step-dad?"

"Okay, Papa." He smiles at us.

I turn to Max, fighting tears. I want so much to walk into the sunset with my son *and* my husband. "You good with this, Max? With raising my son with me?"

Max puts his arm around us. Both of us. "Where you Korolevs go, *I* go."

Thank you for reading

My Pucking Crush

Want to read how Max proposed? Read the Bonus Chapter [HERE](#)
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*Newsletters subscribers get notified of Sales, New Release Notifications, and Audiobook Announcements including the Narrators Reveal for *My Pucking Crush Audio* coming in January 2025.

Giancarlo Byrne (and the mention of the Boston Byrnes, headed by his father Patrick), Anthony Messina, Sebastien Daria, Julian Russo, and Rebecca Domenico first appear in [The Queens Game](#),

released in November 2021.

Ford Montgomery, Bernadette Armstrong, Ashton Ives, and Emery Austin appear in [*Shared by the Highest Bidder*](#), released in January 2024.

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