



POWER

by J. M. Snyder

PLAY

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Lulu Press
Morrisville

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For the Sun God. And the Little Prince.

power play, *n*: a situation in ice hockey in which one team has a temporary...advantage because the other team has one or more players in the penalty box.

—From: *The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition*

Acknowledgements



This time last year, I was new to the publishing gig. My first book, *Operation Starseed*, was in the process of being published and I was already hard at work on the novella that would become the title story of my second book, *Scarred*. The year before, I had only dreamed of seeing my words in print, of holding my own book in my hands. How I got from there to here still amazes me.

Along the way I've met a lot of great people...and I've lost a few, as well. I've been touched by nameless readers who will never know how much their short emails meant to me. First and foremost, I want to thank those people who took the time to write and say thank you, because some days I didn't think I could make it through without that small affirmation of their belief in me.

With this book especially I want to thank my family and their endless hours spent in front of the hockey games on TV. My sister in particular helped me whenever I had a question about the sport, and she actually broke down and read the first few pages, which means the world to me because I know it's not her style. This story is the serendipitous result of being in the right place at the right time—if my parents didn't have the TV on and I hadn't come over during a speedskating competition, it may have never been written at all. Funny how things work themselves out, no?

I also want to thank my beta readers, Billy and Megan and Summer. Their criticisms and comments were invaluable, as well as was

Billy's, "So what's going to happen next?" and Summer's artwork of Dante and Ryan to cheer me on when the writing got tough.

Finally, I want to thank **** who graciously sponsored this book, making this part of my dream a reality when I wasn't able to do it alone. For that I am eternally in your debt.

CHAPTER 1



Clear ice all the way to the goal, perfect. Matt Jacoby on the outside if he needs to go wide, but Ryan Talonovich doesn't think it'll come to that. He has a feel for the game that the others seem to lack, it's in his blood, he breathes and lives hockey and he knows a sure shot when he sees one. This is just practice, one of the last times they can get together before their first game of the spring semester, but he makes it count. He makes them all count.

Five men in his path, his teammates, his friends. He skates a tight line, keeps the puck close to his stick, watches the guys that hem him in on either side. Jacoby signals for a pass but Ryan doesn't want the help—this is *his* shot, *his* goal. He feels the bite of chill air on his cheeks, wind like cold fingers brushing through his short-cropped hair. No helmet—he lost it somewhere along the way and hasn't stopped to put it back on yet. No pads—this is practice, only long bottoms and shorts taped in place. It's just him and the ice and the puck, the way hockey was meant to be played. The goalie hunkers down in the crease, waiting for the shot.

One of the guys behind him comes up fast, tries for the puck, but Ryan blocks his stick and sends him on his way with an elbow to the stomach. He's coming in fast, *too* fast his coach would say, but that's the way Ryan is, it's like playing chicken with the goalie, it intimidates his opponent and always gets him the goal. *Always*.

He pulls back, hits the puck, gives it that signature spin he has that sends it spiraling above the goalie's head and into the net. *Score!* He hears his teammates cheer and imagines the stands filled with a crowd calling out his nickname, *Talon! Talon!* He imagines there are scouts in the crowd, minor leaguers or someone from the Devils maybe, or someone great like Gretzky. It's his dream, he can play it out however he wants.

Only it's not a dream, it's a memory, and the next part always plays out in slow motion. He's seen it hundreds of times, thousands, every night since it happened. He sees himself as if *he's* in the stands now, he sees his own name on the back of his jersey, he sees the ice spray around his skates as he starts to skid to a stop. He sees the guy he elbowed, a big kid named Ashlin that Ryan never did quite like, he's as graceless as a truck on skates and he's barreling down on him now, trying to stop the goal two seconds too late. And the ice has begun to melt a bit, they've been practicing for over an hour nonstop and water's begun to pool in spots, they'll have to crank up the refrigeration unit when they're finished to get it up to par again.

And Ashlin's going too damn fast on the slush to be safe.

Ryan sees his teammate go down, hard. He feels the ice shudder beneath his feet as Ashlin strikes the surface, he's that close. Ryan starts to turn, still sliding towards the crease, two other teammates already skating to help the big oaf back onto his feet.

But Ashlin's going too fast and when he hits the ice, it doesn't slow his momentum one bit. He rolls onto his back, coming at Ryan skates first, disbelief and surprise written across his face. *Talon!* someone cries. In these dreams, Ryan thinks it might be his coach, but he's not sure.

Ashlin's skates dig into Ryan's long bottoms, slicing the tape and fabric away. The blades scrape into his skin but he can't feel them, they're too sharp. He's thrown back against the net and the post unhinges beneath him, falls away. Then Ashlin's right up on him and Ryan hears the crunch of bone as he's driven into the boards. His

head cracks against the ice, his hair grows damp, he sees the red light above the box spin with another goal, even though this is the practice rink and there are no buzzers here, no flashing lights. He sees them anyway. It's his dream, he can play it however he wants.

Score! he thinks. It's his last coherent thought on the ice.



His legs, crushed. Thirty-two stitches in one, twenty-three in the other. His right shin bone shattered into a million pieces like his dream of playing pro one day—he's off the team for the rest of the semester, probably the rest of his college career. The doctors assure him that he will walk one day, yes, and maybe even skate, though not with the speed and surety that he had before.

Four weeks in the hospital, three surgeries, his left leg mending and his right still a twisted mockery of what it once was. Physical therapy every other day, pain so intense he doesn't even feel the tears anymore, they burn his eyes and course down his cheeks and he just blinks them away, keeps at it. At nineteen, Ryan is nothing if not tenacious. He *will* skate again, he'll show them. He'll come back better than ever, just wait and see.

But he missed too many classes, missed too many games. He has to withdraw from his courses—just for this semester, his mother assures him, but he sees the haunted look in her eyes and he knows she thinks he's confined to this wheelchair for life. When he's released from the hospital, it's back home again, not the dorm for him, he's not ready for that yet. His parents have converted the den into a makeshift bedroom, it's in the back of the house and has its own entrance, private enough but level, that's the main thing. It's on the first floor, no steps to navigate, and the bathroom's right there, perfect. His dad puts in a steel ramp off the porch, Ryan sees it from the van as they pull into the drive, his first time home from the hospital after the accident. No one mentions it, but he can tell by his

mother's tight smile that she's waiting for his reaction. He's supposed to love it.

He doesn't. He hates the way his wheelchair sounds over the steel, he hates the slope, he hates the brace on his right leg that keeps it immobile and he hates the fact that he can't walk into his own damn house anymore. He hates that he has to sleep in the den with the hospital bed his parents purchased for him, spared no expense, anything to help him heal faster. He hates that he can't go upstairs to his old room. He hates the bars that have appeared in the bathroom as if by magic, they look like towel racks but he knows better. He hates having to sit all the time, everywhere, he's always sitting anymore. He hates that.

The team sends him flowers. He expected as much. The things from his dorm room are stacked neatly in one corner of the den, waiting to be unpacked. When his mother moves towards them, though, Ryan tells her, "Leave that. I'll get it."

"But honey—"

He hates that tone of voice. "I'm not a baby," he says, angry. "I said I'll get it."

Before she can reply, his dad is there, smoothing over the situation. "Sure you will, sport." *Sport*, as if he's eight again. "You let us know if you need anything, you hear?"

Ryan glances at the flowers that are on his desk, a large vase of chrysanthemums and carnations. A card peeks out from between the bushy petals—he can read the words *Get Well Soon* on it from here. As if it's that easy. There's a balloon, too, but it's turned away from him so all he can see is the silvery finish, and he doesn't really care what's written on the other side.

Ashlin got off with a bruised kneecap and a knot on his ass that made it uncomfortable to sit for long periods of time. And Ryan? Well, they tell him he'll walk again one day. Until then, he has physical therapy three times a week, and a few of his professors have agreed to let him audit classes via the web, but it's the middle of Jan-

uary and from the window above his desk he can see ice frozen in his mother's birdbath, a tiny skating rink. He wheels over to the window, stares out at that ice, imagines himself whole again and skating across the surface.

It's his dream, he thinks. He can play it out however he wants.



The coach stops by the first week he's home from the hospital. Jacoby's with him, the guy was Ryan's roommate the past three semesters and his best friend on campus, more or less. Ryan wheels into the living room to meet them, his mother already smiling—she's always smiling anymore. No one looks at his wheelchair or the brace on his leg, and when the coach talks, it's to a spot just above Ryan's left shoulder. He has to resist the urge to turn around and see who's standing there behind him.

"Very sorry," the coach says, as if the accident were somehow his fault. "Whole team misses you. Greatest player we ever had."

"We're hurting this season," Jacoby tells him. "Could really use some of your magic out there on the ice."

"There is no more magic," Ryan mutters. They're talking as if he decided to quit but this isn't a decision he made, it's not like he can be convinced to come back. He *wants* back, and the doctors say he'll be out there one day, but Ryan's seen the scarred skin on his legs, he's seen the twisted bone. He's not holding his breath.

His mother smiles so hard, he's sure her face will crack. "Thank you for the flowers," she says, not looking at him. The coach nods, grateful for her presence. It's like Ryan's not even there. "They're lovely, simply lovely. Ryan really enjoys them, don't you, dear?"

He doesn't answer, just glares at the coach and Jacoby and wonders how he can get them to look *at* him, to really *see* him. If only someone would mention the wheelchair, or ask how he's doing, or if he'll ever walk again. But they don't, they're scared of the answers, they're scared of *him*, they're scared of what they don't know and

they're afraid he's not the same boy he used to be. Even his parents are scared, they don't talk about the injury, they use euphemisms and oblique phrases when they speak of his handicap, and then only in low voices so he won't overhear, as if he's a child dying of a dread disease that no one wants him to know about. He wants to shout out, *Look at me! Look*—but he's afraid, too, afraid of what they'll say then, afraid of the stares, afraid that maybe their fears are true and he never *will* walk again, and when they *do* look at him, he'll see that in their eyes, he'll see himself reflected back, he'll see the wheelchair and the rest of his life and his legs, his hopes, his dreams destroyed.

So he says nothing at all.

They sit in an awkward silence, Jacoby scuffing his feet along the carpet, the coach frowning at his folded hands, his mother smiling through it all. "Can I get you men something to drink?" she asks suddenly. *What a brilliant idea*, her smile says. *Something to drink, glad I thought of it.*

But the coach shakes his head and Jacoby follows suit, they're trying to find a way to say they have to leave without sounding overly rude and a drink will just prolong the agony of this visit. Finally the coach clears his throat, speaks to his fingers twisting in his lap. "We were thinking," he starts, and then he looks at Jacoby, who nods as if in confirmation. "The guys and me, we really want to do something—"

"That isn't necessary," his mother says. *Shut up*, Ryan thinks. Anything that makes them feel as uncomfortable as he does now in this chair *is* necessary, anything at all.

"We've collected some money," Jacoby tells them. "Not much, but we hiked the ticket price up a dollar for home games and the students are more than willing to pay it. They call it the Talon Fund. It's in a jar in our room..." He trails off, then corrects himself, "My room, I guess, now, though housing isn't going to give me a new roommate just yet. They said in case you come back."

It's the closest anyone's come to saying he might not be able to return to college. Classes, maybe, but his room was on the third floor of the dormitory and with no elevator, he's not going to be living there any time soon. As if to cover over Jacoby's *faux pas*, Ryan's mother says softly, "That's real nice of you kids, real nice. Every little bit helps."

"We sort of retired your number," the coach says. "Talonovich twenty-eight, it's hanging in the rink, you should see it." He stops when he realizes that Ryan probably *won't* see it. He hasn't been out in weeks, and the rink's out of the question. What, they think he can just get in the car and *drive* there? They think it's that simple? "The guys have a jersey for you," the coach continues, as if he realizes Ryan's not going to answer so he wants to fill the silence between them somehow. "All the team signed it. It's back at the locker room but we'll bring it next time, promise."

Ryan hopes there isn't a next time. They've retired his number, so now what? "What happens when I come back?" he asks.

The coach looks up, surprised, and Jacoby glares at the floor as if he blames it for Ryan's question. "I'm still a part of the team, right?" Ryan asks. "What happens when I get back on the ice? You bring my number out of retirement, or what?"

Confused, the coach glances at Ryan's mother, whose smile threatens to slip under such scrutiny. "I thought—" he starts, and she laughs like Ryan's just told a joke. "Ryan, honey, that's not really—"

"I'm still part of the team, right?" Ryan asks again.

"Of course," the coach assures him, but there's something shift-y in his face, something that Ryan doesn't care for one bit, something that suggests he's simply humoring the boy, they all know he'll never go back on the ice, the thought is absurd. As if to convince himself, the coach says it again, "Of course you are." Then he leans forward, steeples his fingers in front of his chest and for the first time since he said hello, he looks Ryan in the eye. "We were thinking," he says, lowering his voice, "the guys and me. How'd you like it if we turned the

official web site over to you, hmm?” He glances at Ryan’s mother, sees her relieved smile, and grins at Ryan. “What do you say, Talon? You got a computer, right?”

“Sure he does,” his mother replies. Ryan wonders what he’s even doing in the room, if they can carry this conversation on without him. “You’ve got that brand new Dell your father bought, you remember, dear?” To the coach, she explains, “It’s on the desk in the den, right by your flowers. That was such a sweet gesture. He’d love to do the web site.”

“Why don’t you do it, mother?” Ryan asks her. *The web site*. So he can what, update it with the team’s scores and photos, pour salt on his wounds, rub in the fact that he’s not the one out there on the ice? He starts to wheel away—this visit is over for him. “Thanks for the offer, coach, but I don’t need your pity.”

“Ryan,” his mother starts, but he’s not listening. Why should he? No one’s listened to him. He hates the door frame where his father removed the molding so his wheelchair can just barely squeeze through, he hates the nail holes filled with spackling, he hates the fresh paint. He didn’t ask for this, for any of it. He hates it all.

As he heads down the hall to the den, he hears his mother tell the coach she’ll talk to him some more, he’ll work on the site, he won’t let the team down. He hears the coach’s low voice, hears Jacoby say, “Thank you, Mrs. Talonovich,” hears footsteps as she walks them to the front door. He wonders if they take the ramp, just for convenience, the way some people have a tendency to do. He hates that ramp.

In the den, he closes the door and locks it behind himself. Then he wheels over to the hospital bed, which he hates. He pulls up the brake on the wheelchair, hating the faint squeal of rubber on the tire. He climbs into the bed, careful not to hit his knees on the edge of the mattress or get his brace caught up in the leg guard of the chair.

He buries his face in his pillow and tells himself he’s not crying, but he hates the image that’s burned into his mind—his jersey hang-

ing above the goal box, *Talonovich* and under that, 28, retired. He's nineteen and already retired from his game.



When he wakes up later, he thinks he should at least *look* at the team web site. It occurs to him that in the year and a half he's been on the team, he hasn't really ever visited the page, but that's because he spent too much free time at practice, devoted to his game. Studies came second after hockey with partying a close third. He never really turned on the computer unless he had a paper to write, and the only time he ever used the school's ethernet connection was to listen to live broadcasts of the Devils' games. Besides, he reasons, checking out the web site is *not* agreeing to work on it. It's interest, that's all. Mild curiosity. That's it.

His mother, ever resourceful, doesn't think it necessary to put a chair by his desk—what for? He's *in* a chair, though it probably never occurred to her that he hates it. The best money could buy, she told him when she wheeled it into the hospital room to take him home. He doesn't care how much the damn thing costs, he still hates it. Even if it were electric, which it's not, he would hate every little thing about it, from the skid marks it leaves on the hardwood floors to the way the seat creaks when he shifts in it to the muscles in his arms that have built up from wheeling himself around. But it's the only chair in the den, and his mother has made room for it throughout the house, removing one of the dining room chairs so he can just wheel right on up to the table, taking out the extra wingback chair from the living room, even having a plumber reposition the sink in the bathroom so he doesn't have to switch seats to brush his teeth. What he wouldn't give for the plush comfort of a sofa, or the hard wood of an Adirondack, or even the leather cushion of a barstool. Anything but this canvas stretched between metal bars across his back.

Still, it's the only chair he has, and his parents have rearranged the den so he can wheel himself around easily enough. When he positions himself in front of his computer, he has a great view of the backyard and his mother's birdbath, iced over. He could sit for hours and stare out the window at that miniature pond, where he sees himself whole again and skating. He can almost feel the ice beneath his feet, hear the *shush shush* as he moves across the surface, hear the crowd go wild as he sinks another puck. Daydreams, that's all they are anymore, like the ones he used to have as a child, watching hockey on TV. He'll never play again, who are they kidding? He can't even walk. The doctors, his parents, his coach and teammates, they're all just humoring him.

As he waits for the computer to boot up, he glances at the flowers on his desk. Wilting now, they didn't last long. That's how he'll be in the minds of his friends, the other students—sure, they're all about raising money for him now, his jersey flies above the goal box so they have to remember him, but how much longer will that last? Another player will come along, someone to steal his spotlight, and he'll just be that kid in the wheelchair who got messed up at practice. He'll fade away. One day they'll take his jersey down to wash it and simply forget to hang it back up again. Someone will want his number and no one will remember quite why it was ever retired in the first place. He's not the Talon anymore—he's just Ryan Talonovich, who used to play on the team.

Used to. He hates that phrase.

Beside the flowers are a handful of floppy disks, a book on HTML, a digital camera. Presents from the coach, given to Ryan's mother when she assured him that Ryan would do the web site. That seems like days ago. She gave them to Ryan, told him he could at least *try* to help out the team, it's not like he has anything *else* to do. And that's just the thing, isn't it? He has nothing to do. Sit in this chair, stare out at that birdbath, imagine himself skating again. Physical therapy Monday, Wednesday, Friday. And now this.

He's not going to do the web site, he knows that in his heart. But when he logs online and the page loads in his browser, his breath catches in his throat. It's himself staring back, one of the photographs the team had done at the end of last season with him in full gear, stick in hand, helmet, pads, jersey, the whole works. He's posed on the ice, puck in front of him as if he's about to shoot for the goal, grinning at the camera and there's a cocky expression in his eyes that says, *I'm the best, I know it. The Talon—I AM this team.*

Or rather, he was.

Above the picture, his name. Dates as if he's dead now, though it's just the seasons he played. His dorm room address, where concerned students can send donations. He scrolls down.

A photograph of the rink with his jersey above the goal box, looking as forlorn and out of place as he imagined it would. Another photo, this one of the whole team, taken shortly after the first game of the new season, and the players in the front row hold a banner with his name on it, *Ryan Talonovich*, he's there in spirit if not body. A short blurb about his accident, the same thing that appeared in the campus paper. A handful of links along the bottom of the page, directions to the rink, practice times, team roster, game schedule for this season. But those are almost hidden, an afterthought, like someone realized this wasn't a Talon tribute page and thought maybe they should add a little something about the rest of the team as well. Ryan scrolls back to the top again, looks at his picture, his legs wrapped in padding but whole, he's standing and that's so out of date, he doesn't stand anymore, he hasn't in over a month, not without the help of his therapist. He doesn't *stand*. That picture is wrong.

This whole site is shit. It's not a team page, it's dedicated to him. He hates that. His hands start to tremble as he slips the first disk into the drive, just to see what all's on it. Maybe he can just do some minor tweaking, get that stupid picture off the main page at least. Maybe...

This whole damn site needs to be redone, he thinks.



At dinner he tells his parents he's going to the rink tomorrow. He doesn't ask if they'll take him. He's gone through the crappy photographs stored in the digital camera, looked over every file on each disk in the pile the coach left for him, and he's got an idea of what he wants to do on the web site, if he can just get a few decent pictures. Morning skate's at 8:30 on weekdays. He'll drive himself if he has to.

His mother begins, "Honey, I don't think that's such a—"

"Good idea, son," his dad interrupts, silencing her with a look. *Humor the boy*, that glance says. Ryan feels as if he's been told he has six months left to live and his parents want to make every last second count. *I'm not dying*, he wants to tell them, but if it gets him out of the house, he should take advantage of it.

The next morning he's up by seven, his body already humming with energy. *Out*—he hasn't been outside since he came home from the hospital, and the bitter chill of the morning air nips at his face and hands like an eager puppy, happy to see him after all this time. His mother insists on taking the van, which has been outfitted with a chair lift and braces to lock him into place. Heaven forbid he ask to sit in the front seat, that just wouldn't do. But he's out of the house, finally. From the window on the side of the van, he can see ice-tipped trees bent low to the ground, as if he's a visiting dignitary and the branches bow in respect as he passes. At the rink, the parking lot is more than half empty, and there's a rosy tinge to the sky that hints at snow in the forecast. As he waits for the lift to set his wheelchair on the ground, Ryan resists the urge to laugh. He feels like a kid again, six years old and brimming over with excitement. One of his knees shakes nervously, vibrating his whole chair.

"You have the phone?" his mother asks, reaching for his backpack. "You call me when you're ready to be picked up, you hear? When's practice usually over, an hour or so? About that? You sure you don't want me to stay?"

Ryan pulls the bag away from her, wraps his arms around it protectively. “I have the phone,” he says. She starts to fiddle with the straps on the back of his chair and he wheels out of reach. “Mom, I’ve got it. I’m fine.” When she moves towards him, hovering, he raises an arm to ward her off. “How old am I here?” he asks.

She hears the anger in his voice and stops. “I’m sorry.” Folding her arms against the morning chill, she looks around the deserted parking lot and asks, “You want me to go get one of your friends? The coach, maybe? Just let someone know you’re here?”

“They’ll know soon enough,” Ryan assures her. There’s a ramp leading up to the front doors of the rink, a gradual slope that he can navigate easily, and he doesn’t look back to see if she follows. She doesn’t.

He hits the button for the automatic door and waits while it opens out of his way. “Call me when you want me to come pick you up!” his mother shouts, and he nods, yes, he’ll do that. But this is his first time alone, away from the house and the constant reminders of his accident, the hospital bed and his mother’s strained smile. He’ll call when he’s good and ready to come back.



He takes the service elevator down to the first floor, ice level. Past the locker rooms, the pungent odor of stale sweat, it hits him in the gut like nostalgia and he has to blink away sudden tears that blur his vision. He hears the scrape of skates on ice, hears his teammates laughter drift through the empty corridors, and he’s almost at the player’s entrance before he realizes he doesn’t need to be down this far. He’s not playing, he’s here for pictures, and he needs to be in the stands to get clean shots. Besides, the wheels of his chair probably won’t do him a whole hell of a lot of good out there on the ice. Reluctantly he heads back for the elevator, back to the lower concourse.

It takes some fumbling before Ryan can get through the heavy double doors that lead out into the stands—he has to pry one door

open, wedge his foot into the opening, push on the other door as he wriggles the chair inside inch by inch. He's sweating when he's finally through, and his left foot aches where the door slammed into it. If he's going to be doing this often, he'll have to talk with someone about propping these doors open. He shouldn't have to wrestle with them just to get inside.

Below him, the ice stretches away like a promise, clean and glistening and still slightly damp where the zamboni just passed. A couple of guys secure the goal posts to the crease, a few more skate warm-up laps around the rink, the coach leans out of the player box for a stick that's fallen to the ice. Ryan sees his jersey hanging right where they said it would be, above the goal box, *Talonovich 28*. In a game, the letters will burn from the red strobe light beneath the jersey whenever a goal is scored.

From this height, the team doesn't see him. He's not sure what he was expecting—a welcome reception, pats on the back, jokes and smiles and laughs—but whatever it was, he doesn't get it. No one even notices he's here, and he toys with the idea of calling home right now, leaving a message for his mom, telling her to turn around and come back to get him, he's ready to go. *So you're not the one out there on the ice*, he thinks to himself, lurking in shadows that drape the stands. *So you're not the one calling the shots. Go home now and what'll you do then? Stare out the window at that damn birdbath and wish you were here.*

Slowly he wheels behind the last row of stands, careful not to catch his feet on any of the seats. The last thing he needs is to cry out as pain shoots through his battered legs, *that'll* get their attention. Everyone will stop out there on the ice, shield their eyes and look up at him, and he doesn't want that, much as he thought he did. He doesn't want their pity or their awkwardness, or their silence when they don't quite know what to say or do. He can live without any of that, thank you very much.

He's actually not far from the ice, and when he wheels out onto the small landing above the player box, the coach sees him, gives him a thumbs up that's not really as encouraging as it's meant to be. He nods, positions himself at the end of a row of seats like he's just another fan in the crowd, rummages through his bag for the camera and his notebook. Last night he started drawing out designs for the web site. After practice he plans to just sit here for awhile, stare at the ice, maybe doodle some more, anything to keep from rushing back home.

Morning skate is never very long—his mother was right, just a little over an hour, and when the players file off the ice into the locker rooms, Jacoby climbs up over the railing and plops down into the seat beside him. “We didn’t think you’d come,” he says by way of hello.

“I didn’t think I would, either,” Ryan admits. Then, forcing a smile, he adds, “Have you seen the site?” At Jacoby’s nod, he laughs. “Jesus, that thing’s ugly. How long has it been like that?”

Jacoby shrugs. “Since the accident.” He stares at Ryan’s jersey above the goal box and doesn’t elaborate. *Ask me something*, Ryan prays, watching his friend avoid his gaze. *Ask me if I’m tired of sitting all the time. Ask me how I shower. Ask me anything, just so I know that you see me, just so I know that you care.*

But he doesn’t. Instead, he frowns at the jersey and tells Ryan, “Ashlin’s benched for the season. He threw his knee out when he ran into you, can’t play worth shit now.”

Ryan smirks. “He never could before.”

“We have a new kid,” Jacoby continues. Ryan gets the idea that his friend isn’t really talking to him, he’s just sitting here speaking out loud, it wouldn’t matter who was in Ryan’s place. “Name’s Clovsky, straight from Europe. One of those exchange programs, I don’t know. He’s our starter now.”

“What’s his average shots on goal?” Ryan asks. He tries to ignore the jealousy that flares in his chest. *He* was the starter, up until the accident. Best damn player on the team. “How many per game?”

Another shrug. “I’m not sure,” Jacoby tells him, but Ryan gets the impression that he’s lying. He doesn’t want to make him feel bad, that must be it. Still, he doesn’t feel any better when his friend says, “He sinks almost every puck he shoots, though. Like you—” He stops and corrects himself. “Like you used to.”

Before Ryan can reply, Jacoby stands, stretches, swings one leg over the railing to the back of the seat below. “Number 15,” he says, as if saying goodbye. “Make sure you get some good shots of him out there. The coach’ll want to see him on the site, I’m sure.”

Then he’s gone and the stands are empty, the ice bare. Ryan frowns at the camera in his hands and thinks that he’s always hated the number fifteen. He hopes he didn’t get any pictures of the kid today. He’d call his mom now but he likes the cold air on his face, his hands—they freeze this moment into his memory, catching it, locking it into place. He doesn’t think he’ll be coming back tomorrow.



Jacoby stops by again after dressing, sits with Ryan for a little while, neither of them able to find something to say to fill the space that’s opened between them. *Just go*, Ryan prays as he fiddles with the camera. *You don’t want to be here. I don’t really need your company. You’ve done your good deed for the day so make up some excuse and get the hell out of here.* As if hearing his thoughts, Jacoby stirs beside him and mumbles, “I have Chem lab in fifteen minutes. You gonna be okay here by yourself?”

Ryan nods, a little too quickly. “Fine,” he says, nodding again. “I’ll be fine. You go on.”

“You want me to call your mom or something?” Below them, a few people have appeared on the ice, bodies encased in skin-tight spandex. Figure skaters, maybe, or an ice skating club, one of the

two. A handful of girls, a couple guys, teenagers or older. Probably college kids, Ryan thinks, if they're here now. Younger and they'd be in school at this time of the day. Jacoby watches them stretch on the ice and tells him, "Speedskaters. They get the rink after us."

Just what Ryan needs, kids on skates zooming by him, a painful reminder of his own damaged legs, this confining chair. Maybe he *should* call his mom now. "You better get going," he tells his friend.

Jacoby nods. "You'll be—"

"Fine," Ryan says again. He'll be fine.

After Jacoby leaves, more skaters take to the ice. They stick to small groups, teams of three or four with yellow helmet covers that stand out bright against the dark stadium. Each cover has a three digit number on it—the lowest is 152, it belongs to a girl whose hair hangs down her back in one long, blonde braid. She's fairly quick, skates a tight circle around her giggling friends, glances over her shoulder at Ryan and then skates away. The other girls trail behind her, whispering together. Ryan's certain they're talking about him.

The lower stands start to fill up, mostly parents and what looks like an elementary school class trip, two teachers and a gaggle of knee-high munchkins laughing and shrieking as they throw popcorn at each other. Ryan looks around—is this a meet? Trials? He wonders if someone will come by and ask him for a ticket. He's not paying to watch this.

A loudspeaker crackles to life as a young, sexless voice calls for silence. No one listens—the skaters don't even appear to hear anything, they're too busy warming up. Undaunted, the announcer starts to read off a list of events—five hundred meters, thousand, fifteen hundred, races Ryan has no concept of, they're not his sport. As names are called, skaters start to line up on the ice, and a few cheers rise from the crowd milling in the stands. "First heat, men's five hundred. Johnson—"

Mild applause for the skater with number 234 written on his helmet. "Dietrich." More applause, a few catcalls when this guy breaks

into an impromptu dance on the ice. He keeps turning to work the crowd and Ryan can't read his number. "Pennock." Someone actually boos for this one, a tall, lean skater too big for such a short run, really, almost gangly. He raises both arms, middle fingers extended, and flicks off the crowd. Ryan rolls his eyes, disgusted. "Espinosa."

The crowd goes wild.

Interested in spite of himself, Ryan leans forward in his chair, trying to get a good look at the last skater, a short kid with dark hair that curls out of the back of his helmet and bronze skin, clear and smooth. His eyes are wide in his face and he looks almost disinterested, despite the fans calling his name. *Dante! Dante!* Ryan's never heard anything like it before, except maybe during one of their hockey games when the crowd used to call out his *own* name.

Finally the shouts taper off, and almost as an afterthought, the announcer adds, "All others off the ice."

The four skaters remain, poised at the starting line. One leg behind them, one skate leading off, arms and body bent and ready. Waiting. Unconsciously, Ryan holds his breath. Four skaters, five hundred meters around the ice. He's not sure what to expect, but from the crowd's reaction, it's going to be good. The whole rink, the fans, the parents, the kids on their field trip, the skaters, Ryan, they all wait.

A gunshot, and the skaters are off.

CHAPTER 2



Dante Espinosa. He's a few inches shy of six feet and hell on skates. The crowds love him, the girls especially—they swoon over his dark eyes, his wavy hair, his quick smile. He's always smiling, it seems, in the midst of a race or when he's the first across the finish line. Magic on ice, that's what he is. The fans know it, he knows it, and it's the only thing he's counting on anymore to get him somewhere in this world.

Eighteen, graduated last May from a local high school in the bad part of town, one of those places where the latest budget included metal detectors at all exits. He's too short for basketball, too small for football, and the only thing that kept him out of the gangs and the drugs and the trouble was skating. He can outrace the wind itself on a good day. When someone asks how he got so fast, he tells them it's from outrunning bullies on the way home from school. He's only half kidding.

If life were fair, he'd be able to skate 24/7, round the clock, day in and day out and there would be nothing he couldn't do on the ice. He was born with skates on, he's almost sure of it, though his mother tells him not to be *loco*. It's just the two of them, and she works long hours at the DA's office as a legal assistant, something she hates and can't quite describe when Dante asks her what exactly it is she does for a living. He's raised himself since middle school, came home

afternoons and cooked his own dinner of Ramen noodles or Chef Boyardee, cleaned up the dishes without being told, tucked himself into bed at night. Graduating from high school was sort of anti-climatic after that. It's the same things, only he's at the skate shop full-time now, twelve to nine most every day, longer hours if there's a meet coming up and he needs the extra cash. He pays for the training himself, pays for the club, fifteen dollars each time he gets to the rink just to participate. If the rent's due or his mom can't afford food one week, he gives her money from his skating fund and has to train twice as hard the next time he gets on the ice.

But it's what he wants to do. College? No, not really, not unless they offer short track programs, which they don't. None of the local ones do anyway, and he can't afford to go out of state. Maybe further up north, but he was born and raised in New Jersey and if he goes anywhere else, it'll be Lake Placid, that's it. That's his dream...well, one of them, to train with other athletes and make the Olympics one day. He knows it's probably futile—he's already getting too old for the sport, most short track skaters burn out before they're even twenty-five—but it's his dream, even if it never comes true. He'll strive to reach it until it slips completely out of his grasp.

He's got another year or so before he can go out for the US team, though—it's only the end of January, and the next Winter Olympics aren't for another two years. He hopes to be in Lake Placid by then, skating rings around the judges. His best race is the five hundred, he's great at short distances, and he's not too shabby with the relay, either. Just give him some good teammates, let him skate anchor, and he can almost *taste* the victory and the gold.

Before that, though, State championships, and he's a sure win for the club's nomination. This is his second meet today, the club's third but he had to miss the last one because his mom needed his fifteen bucks to help pay the water when the city came around to cut it off. Dante's been practicing though, worked over at the skate shop each night last week, came to the rink first thing every morning, even

before the hockey team claimed the ice. At the shop Bobby likes him, *really* likes him, Dante should take up fencing for all the warding off he's done of that man. He's in his late twenties, an old school skateboarder who still sports thick dreadlocks and wears his pants down low. He tells Dante if he ever needs a few extra bucks, he can show him how to make it. Off the clock too, under the table, it'll be good for both of them. Worth his while, Bobby promises.

Dante always says no.

It's not that he's not interested, because he likes boys and Bobby's not hard on the eyes, he's even toyed with the idea of maybe hooking up with him later on down the road, but right now someone steady will distract him from skating and that's the last thing Dante needs. He's easily distracted as it is, the first off the ice after a race, wins and losses are all the same to him. It's the speed he likes, the freedom, the sense that if he goes fast enough, if he pushes himself just a little more, he'll somehow manage to slip free of the brownstone projects where he lives with his mom, he'll break out of this sedentary life that tries to suffocate him, he'll soar with the best.

That's all he thinks about when he skates. He wants to be the best.



Distractions. The girls in the crowd don't bother Dante—he waves at them when they call out his name, gives them a smile to swoon over, and then it's back to the race at hand. Only today, when his gaze drifts over the stands he sees the guy on the landing, strawberry blonde hair that's parted straight down the middle, hanging to the tops of his ears on either side of his face, half in his eyes. A smattering of freckles across his nose that probably gets worse in the sun, pale skin that looks like porcelain from here. He's sitting down, leaning onto the railing, watching the race—Dante fancies he's there to watch *him*, that sends a thrill through his body, he'd like that. Knowing that someone out there today is someone he'd be interested in, someone he might want to meet afterwards, just to talk to the guy,

get to know him better. The only guy he knows is Bobby Trevor and he's almost ten years older than Dante is, not to mention he owns the skate shop so he's technically his boss—

The starting gun goes off.

Shit! Dante tears his thoughts away from the boy on the landing and Bobby and everything else that isn't this race, the ice beneath his skates, the chill air against his face. He's the last off the line, *dammit*, that's what he gets for looking around. *See?* he tells himself as he hurries to catch up with the others, his skates *click click clicking* on the ice. *This is why you don't need to be messing around with anyone right now, chico. Keep your mind on the heat. You have to at least place second to make it to the next round and look at you, trailing the pack.*

Four and a half laps around the rink, that's all he gets. Around the first curve he slips in front of Pennock—that wasn't hard to do. The kid's too damn big for this sport anyway. When he pulls up from the turn he sees Pennock stumble over one of the track blocks, he goes down on one knee, comes back up, falls again. As Dante takes the next curve, he notices Pennock skating to the edge of the ice, his helmet thrown down in disgust. Pissed, and he's not even giving himself a chance just because he screwed up in the first lap. Dante can't believe that—he knows this sport well enough to know anything can happen, anything at all. Quitting just because he might not win isn't an option.

For Dante, winning is the *only* option.

The stands are a blur around him, the ice speeds away, he watches for an opening up ahead but Dietrich and Johnson are too close, one on the inside track, one going wide, there's no room to squeeze by. One lap down, two, and he tries to pass Dietrich but the other skater sees him from the corner of his eye and cuts him off. It's an illegal move but Dante's not going to push it, he'll wait for the referee's call at the end of the race. Instead he comes out of the next turn on the outside track, and he's just about to overtake Johnson when a hand touches his hip. It's Dietrich again, coming up too fast for either of

them to pull away. Dante feels the guy's skate slip beneath his blade a second before he's thrown head first to the ice.

Somehow he manages to turn onto his back and when he hits the boards, he hardly touches them before he's struggling to his feet again. The crowd's roar is a deafening surge in his ears as he regains the ice, but the other skaters are already across the finish line, he's out of the running for a chance at the state competitions. *Because you were slow off the gun*, he tells himself, gliding over the line. The crowd calls out his name, even though he finished last. *You weren't paying attention and you didn't get the speed you needed from the start. Distracted by a cute hombre—*

"Johnson finishes first," the announcer is saying, and then, incredibly, "Espinosa second. Two disqualifications, Dietrich and Pennock. Both skaters are out of the heat. Johnson and Espinosa advance to the men's quarterfinals."

Already unbuckling his helmet, Dante nods at the fans as he skates to the sidelines. He leans against the boards, laughs at Johnson's thumbs up, nods again. He can't speak, he's winded and it was a fast race, just under a minute—he looks up at the scoreboard and winces at the number by his name, 00:55:03. Definitely not his best time. *Doesn't have to be*, he reasons. *It got you in the quarterfinals, didn't it? You'll do better there. You'll have to.*

But that race isn't until the weekend, and he might have to ask Bobby to let him work over a few nights between now and then to get up enough money to practice. His skating fund is getting low—just a few crumpled bills wadded up into an old Mason jar that he keeps in his closet, most of the money in his jacket right now because he needs to pay half the rent for his mom. "You're out of school," she told him last night, when she came home from work in one of her evil moods, the kind he knows to avoid. "You have a job, you're not a little *chivato* any more. You want to live here? That's fine, but you have to help me out, Tay. I can't do this alone."

He can do that, he thinks, slipping skate covers over his blades. It's cheaper than moving out on his own, at any rate. One of the skaters on the women's team, Josey Banks, holds the small door open for him as he enters the player's box. "You were real good out there," she says, leaning back against the door to close it. Flipping her golden braid over one shoulder, she adds, "Good form."

Dante laughs. "Thanks." He's not interested in talking about his form, though—the race is over and the results are in, he's not going to dwell on it any longer. He got what he wanted, he's in the quarter-finals now, still has a shot at State. Already his mind is flitting back to what distracted him out there on the ice, and he looks up to see if that guy with the light hair is still on the landing above.

He is, and it may be Dante's imagination but he thinks the boy is still looking at him. There's a camera in his lap, a notebook on the seat beside him. A school project on speedskating? A reporter for a local paper? Dante wants to find out.

He slips on his leather jacket, the one with *L8R SK8R* embroidered on the back—he couldn't afford something this nice but Bobby's his only sponsor, and below the skate shop's logo reads, *Anyone Else is a Poser*. Good for business, Bobby tells him, but Dante's not too sure about that, since his is one of the only shops in the city, and the only one to cater to all skaters, inline or ice or hockey, even boarders. Unconsciously he pats the inside pocket to make sure his money's still there—it is—and when Josey starts to say something else, he cuts her off with a smile. "Thanks."

She grins. "You going to hang around a bit?" she wants to know. "I skate in the third heat."

With a shrug, Dante grabs onto the railing above the player box and hauls himself up into the stands. "I'll be around," he says, swinging first one leg, then the other over the railing. Leaning down, he snags his bag from the bench and shoulders it. Then he flashes Josey another smile. "Good luck."

“Thanks.” Her eyes say more. Dante’s used to that lovesick look. He doesn’t think he’s all that, really—it’s his hair mostly, thick black waves that fall to his shoulders and frame his face, girls really seem to like it. And his eyes, he’s been told he has pretty eyes, Bobby’s even mentioned it once or twice, for all the good it’s done him. But Dante’s not interested in Josey’s schoolgirl crush, or her girlfriends giggling further down the bench.

Instead, he hurries to the end of the row, his skates not as agile on the concrete stands as they are on the ice. Up a short aisle to the back of this section and the landing is right above him now. When he looks up, he sees the guy—reporter? student?—bent over his notebook and studiously ignoring Dante. This close Dante sees the steel brace around one of the boy’s legs, and for the first time he notices the wheelchair.

Before he can change his mind, he jumps up, grabs the railing with both hands, pulls himself up over it onto the landing. *Now* the boy looks at him, surprised, and Dante gives him a bright smile as he picks up the camera on the seat beside the wheelchair. Then he sinks into the seat with an exasperated sigh. He lets his bag slip to the floor between them and toys with the camera. “God, what a race.” Offering his hand, he says, “Dante Espinosa. You skate?”

The kid looks at the hand, at Dante, then at the hand again as if wondering how to respond. *Of course he doesn’t skate, you idiot*, Dante thinks. *He’s in a wheelchair. Open mouth, insert foot.* When the boy looks at him a second time, Dante whispers, “Don’t leave me hanging here, man. I ain’t gonna bite you. Most anything else I’m willing to try at least once but biting’s no fun.”

That gets him a laugh and a shy grin. “Ryan Talonovich,” he says, shaking Dante’s hand. He has a firm grip that belies the wheelchair and the brace on his leg. “You don’t think biting can be fun?”

Now it’s Dante’s turn to laugh. He settles back in his seat and props his feet up on the railing, his skates reflecting the light from the ice below. “I don’t know,” he admits. “I never really tried it.” *Tal-*

onovich, that name sounds familiar for some reason he can't quite place. He should apologize for that skating remark but doesn't want to bring it back up again if he can help it.

But Dante's mouth is faster than his skating sometimes, especially when he's nervous, and this Ryan makes his stomach flutter in a way Bobby only wishes he could. "I feel like I should know you," he says, tapping the arm of his seat to work out the energy coursing through him after the race. "Talonovich..."

Ryan points out over the ice and Dante sees it, a hockey jersey with that name written across the back, hung above one end of the rink. "That you?" he asks, surprised. Ryan simply nods. "What happened?"

Turning back to his notebook, Ryan tells him, "Accident at practice just before the start of the season. Another player ran me into the boards."

"I'm sorry." It's an automatic reply, something he says because he thinks it's expected of him, but Ryan just shrugs like it's no big deal. There's something Dante likes about this boy, something he can't quite put his finger on, maybe the way his hair falls in front of his eyes, or the freckles across his nose, or the hoop earring high up on his right ear, almost hidden beneath his hair and so incongruous with everything else about him. That earring hints that there's more to this boy than his twisted legs, his sad eyes. Dante waits for Ryan to look at him—when he doesn't, he leans closer and asks, "You're not paralyzed, are you?"

Ryan blinks quickly as if surprised. "I can move my legs," he says, almost defensive.

That touched a nerve. Dante senses Ryan's sullen anger and tries to think of some way to take it back, start all over again. *I don't know why I like you*, he thinks, studying Ryan's bunched jaw, *but I do*. This close, his skin still looks flawless, and Dante fancies he can see faint blue lines just below the surface. He thinks maybe Ryan needs to get out more—he's in a wheelchair, true, but he's not *dead*. Looking over

Ryan's shoulder as if he's interested in the notebook in his lap, Dante lowers his voice and whispers, "Can you still get it up?"

Ryan's eyes go wide and then he starts to laugh, breathy giggles that make Dante grin. "No one's asked me *that* yet," Ryan admits. Now he's looking at Dante, finally, really seeing him for the first time, and the ice, the skaters, the crowd, even the race below all dissolve in the boys' breathless laughter.



"So does it hurt?" Dante asks. He pokes at Ryan's denim-clad knee, just above the brace that stabilizes his lower leg. It's only been what, fifteen minutes? A half hour? But he feels as if they've known each other for years, it's like they're the only two in the whole rink. Down on the ice the heats are still going on—they need to whittle the ranks to just four skaters in each group before they can start on the quarterfinals. The skating club has eight divisions in all, four groups and each broken down by gender. Dante's in Group A. The quarterfinals will narrow it down further—only one skater in each event will advance to the state competitions. Dante's sure he'll be among those, as long as he gets in some more practice time this week. He should really be practicing now, but he likes sitting here by Ryan, he likes the guy's laugh, and he can't get out on the ice until today's heats are over anyway. Another hour or so, if he waits around that long. If *Ryan* stays here that long.

Ryan swats at Dante's hand. "Of course it hurts," he says. With the tip of his pen, he pokes at Dante's own knee, a ticklish sensation through the skin-tight bodysuit he wears. "Does that hurt?"

With a laugh, Dante catches Ryan's hand, pries the pen from his grip. "Hey!" Ryan cries, reaching for the pen. Dante holds it out at arm's length, where Ryan can't get it, but he tries. He leans across Dante's lap, digging his fingers into the satiny sleeve of his jumpsuit, laughs when Dante tries to move further out of reach. "Gimme it."

"You didn't say—" Dante starts.

"Please?" Ryan asks. He looks up at Dante, his eyes a hazy shade of blue, the color the sky gets just before it snows. From this angle Dante can see thick lashes like a girl's, so light he didn't notice them at first. Those freckles flecked across his nose and cheeks, just below his eyes. If he wore glasses, they'd be hidden. His lips a nice ruddy shade and not chapped like so many of the skaters out on the ice, healthy lips, curved just right...

Skating, he thinks. That's why he's here. Skating, and the championships, and if he's not going to practice he should at least catch the next bus home so he can run the errands his mom expects of him. This playing around is just another distraction.

He lets Ryan take the pen. "I should get going," he says, but he doesn't move. Ryan frowns at his notebook and doesn't say anything. "You gonna be here tomorrow?" Dante asks.

Ryan shrugs. "Maybe," he mumbles. Dante gets the impression that he doesn't want him to leave. *That makes two of us*, he thinks. With a sigh, Ryan adds, "I don't know. I have therapy at ten."

"For your legs?" Dante asks, before he can think better of it. He shakes his head, disgusted at himself. He never was one for good first impressions. "That's a stupid question," he says. "Don't answer it."

"Okay," Ryan laughs. "I won't."

Suddenly there's an awkwardness between them, a *what now?* feeling that Dante doesn't like. He should say goodbye, he knows this, and they just met, that should be easy enough to do. But no one's ever really managed to hold his attention for as long as this boy has, and Dante would be lying if he said he *wanted* to go. In fact, he thinks that there's nothing he'd like more than to simply sit here for the rest of the day with Ryan beside him, though Bobby wouldn't like that much. His shift at the skate shop starts at noon.

Leaning over Ryan's shoulder, Dante asks, "What're you drawing?"

“Layouts,” Ryan says. Dante must look confused, because he explains, “I’ve got to do the team web site. Since I can’t play this season, I guess they thought it was something I could handle.”

Dante’s impressed. He moves Ryan’s arm away from the notebook, very much aware of the elbow resting against his stomach, the sweatshirt sleeve warm with Ryan’s body heat. “You do web sites?” he asks. “You have a computer?”

“I don’t really use it much,” Ryan admits. “This is sort of my first site—”

“I need a web site,” Dante declares. That’s just the thing, isn’t it? Everyone’s online nowadays, *everyone*, and if he had a site out there he could post his meets and pledge sponsors, make a little bit of money on the side to help out with his skating expenses. “How much do they cost?” he wants to know. Probably more than he can afford. Absently his fingers rub a smooth spot into Ryan’s sleeve as he tries to figure out just how much he could put aside every pay for a web site. He’d have pictures of himself racing, and banner ads to click on and raise money, and when he *does* get to State, he’ll have more than enough cash to cover the racing fee. “Are they expensive? You need a computer to have one, don’t you?”

Gently Ryan extracts his arm from Dante’s grip. “You can hire someone else to make it for you,” he explains. “Most schools give students free space on their servers. If you want—”

“I’m not in school anymore,” Dante tells him. “I work full-time at Later Skater.” He turns in his seat so Ryan can see the back of his jacket. “Bobby spells it with the eights. Can I get sponsors through a web site?”

“You could.” Ryan looks at the logo on his back, then at Dante’s face, his hair, the bare strip of his throat that peeks above the top of his neck guard. “I should have some space on the college server. If you want, I can put a page together for you.” Meeting Dante’s gaze, he adds, “No charge.”

“Why not?” Dante wants to know, suspicious. That’s something Bobby would say, no charge, and then later on down the line he’d come back with something he’d want Dante to do, no charge because didn’t he remember that time...? It’s happened before, when he needed to do inventory, and Dante ended up missing a heat because of it. If this is just charity work for Ryan, Dante would *hate* that. “I work, you know,” he says. “I can pay you if you do it.”

Ryan drops his gaze to the pen in his hands. For a moment Dante thinks he’s not going to speak. Then he thinks he’ll say something like, “I was just trying to be nice.” He’s not sure what it is he wants from this boy, if anything, but he’s certain it’s not pity.

But when Ryan does reply, his answer surprises Dante. “Since the accident? No one’s asked me anything. Not, how are you doing, Ryan? Not, what’s it like to sit all the time? Not, how the hell do you take a piss anymore?” He forces a wan smile. “Nothing. No one mentions the chair or my legs. Like they’re scared they might offend me.”

“The doctors,” Dante suggests, settling back in his seat.

Ryan shrugs. “Sure, the doctors ask. Where’s it hurt? How’s this feel? Can you do this?” With a lusty sigh, he says, “For all their talk of me walking again, it hasn’t happened yet. All I do at the therapist’s are sit-ups and leg-lifts and damn warm-up exercises. I want back in the game, you know? I don’t want to sit on the sidelines, I don’t want to warm up with the rest of the team just to *watch*.” He looks at Dante, his eyes pleading for empathy. “You know?”

Dante nods—he knows. He doesn’t want to watch other skaters, not when he can be out there on the ice himself. Ryan’s smile brightens. “I don’t even know you, and despite the chair, the first thing you asked me was if I skate.”

Covering his eyes with one hand, Dante groans. “That was a stupid question,” he tells Ryan. “I’m full of them. Get to know me, you’ll see.”

Ryan laughs. “Stupid or not, it gets you a free web site. I’m not guaranteeing the best...”

Dante peeks between his fingers at Ryan and smiles to see those eyes lit up with laughter. *Such a cute boy*, he thinks. “You strike me as the type who doesn’t settle for less.”

“Well, I’m just warning you now,” Ryan tells him. “It’ll only be my second web site, so I’m not promising miracles. You’ll be back here tomorrow?”

Mentally Dante pictures the jar that holds his skating fund—he thinks there’s enough in there for the next two days, at least. He’ll practice in the morning as soon as he gets to the rink, let Ryan snap a few photos for his page, his *site*, on the web, he can’t believe that. Then they’ll do this again, just sit like this and talk, or maybe they’ll go out and get something to eat, or Ryan will invite him back to his house, and whatever’s bloomed between them today will grow into...something more, that’s as far as Dante will let it go for now. He has the quarterfinals to worry about, and State championships. He doesn’t really need a boy to distract him from that. Still...

“I’ll be here,” he promises Ryan.



The bus was a little off schedule, that’s Dante’s excuse when Bobby asks him why he’s fifteen minutes late for work. To be honest, though, he lingered at the rink for another half hour after he told Ryan he needed to go, and he would’ve stayed longer but Ryan’s mother showed up to make sure he was doing alright. “I really should go this time,” Dante said. As he left, he heard Ryan’s mother say he seemed to be a nice boy, and Ryan hushed her quickly. That brought a smile to Dante’s face that stayed in place for hours.

He stopped by the apartment complex to pay the rent, then ran up to his place for a quick lunch. Ramen, that’s about all he eats anymore, but the starch is a good source of energy and the noodles are so damn cheap, five for a dollar at the grocer’s down the street. He ate straight from the pot, leaning over the sink so he wouldn’t make a mess, and as he shoveled the last of the curled noodles into his

mouth, it occurred to him that he didn't know Ryan's number. *You'll see him tomorrow*, he told himself, but it would've been nice to at least *ask* for it. It might have shown he was interested in the boy, and not just because of the web site he planned to make, either. Maybe he could check the phone book, or call information—

But he was running late. Dropping the pot into the sink, he caught the noon bus down to Bobby's and ducked behind the counter while his boss was with a customer. He didn't say anything then—Bobby's the type to let something fester before he mentions it, another reason Dante doesn't think a relationship between them would work out. He's blunt, painfully so, doesn't dwell on anything. If it bothers him, he gets it out in the open and moves on. Bobby though, he broods over the littlest things, Dante hates that. Like now, he waits until the shop is dead, twenty minutes until they're ready to close, before he leans on the counter and, watching Dante flip through the phone book, says, "Quarter past twelve isn't noon on the dot."

Dante glances at his boss and doesn't respond. Bobby's near thirty, too old for Dante's tastes, but the guy likes to think he's still hip. His word, *hip*, which dates him right there. He wears his dark hair kinked into dreadlocks, even though the color that tans his skin isn't ethnic—he's purebred Long Island, through and through, as Rastafarian as Santa Claus. But the dreads are clean and short, twists of hair that shoot up like sprouts from the top of his head and hang down to his eyebrows, they don't go much farther than that. He wears more earrings than Dante can afford, five in one ear, three in the other, all solid gold. An eyebrow ring too, and he's hinted that he's pierced in places he'd like Dante to see, if he ever gets the urge. So far, he hasn't.

He feels Bobby staring at him, trying to will him to look up, meet his gaze. He doesn't. Bobby's got quick eyes and thin lips twisted into a perpetual smirk, and a little tuft of stubble down the center of his chin that he's trying to grow in. "Looks like you missed a spot,"

Dante told him once. The glare he got in return was enough to keep him from commenting on it again.

"Dante," Bobby says softly. He steps closer, Dante knows what's coming. The shop's well-lit, true, but this isn't exactly the best part of town and no one's passed by their windows in a good five, ten minutes. No one to see the hand that finds its way into the back pocket of Dante's jeans. The fingers curve around his ass with a familiarity that bothers him. Sidling closer, Bobby brushes against his arm and murmurs, "We can make up that time, if you want."

Dante steps easily out of his embrace. "And if I don't?" He finds the page he wants, *TAL-TAN*, and starts to scan through the numbers listed. How many Talonovichs can there be in the city anyway? When Bobby's arm starts to snake around his waist, Dante warns, "Don't."

The arm stops, Bobby's hand resting high on Dante's hip. "How'd the heat go today?" he asks, probably hoping to distract Dante long enough to get further than this. "You qualify?"

"You know I did," Dante replies. He runs a finger down the listings, hoping Bobby clues into the fact that he's busy here and drifts off to find something else to do.

No such luck. Leaning over his shoulder, Bobby glances at the phone book and breathes on Dante's neck. *Is that supposed to be sexy?* Dante wonders. Is it supposed to turn him on? Because if so, it's failing miserably. "What 'cha looking for?" Bobby wants to know.

Dante shrugs him away. "Someone's number." Before Bobby can ask, he adds, "Talonovich? He plays hockey for the college."

"Played," Bobby corrects. Folding his arms on the counter in front of him, he leans against Dante and frowns at the phone book. "Isn't he crippled now? Paralyzed for life, or something?"

"His legs are messed up," Dante tells him, "that's all. It's nothing permanent."

"Why do you care?" Glancing up at Dante, that frown still worried into his face, Bobby says, "I didn't know you guys were friends."

Dante finds the name, *Talonovich*, and then an address in one of the classier suburbs. It's the only listing so it has to be him. Memorizing the number, Dante closes the book and steps away from the counter, away from Bobby and the press of his hip against Dante's own. "We're not," he admits, "not really. I just met him today." He slips the phone book back into place beneath the register and remembers the way Ryan laughed when he asked if he could still get it up. That sure broke the ice between them. "He's real nice."

"He's playing again?" Bobby asks, incredulous. "Already? He just got hurt what, a month ago? I heard he broke his back. Snapped his spine right in half."

With a grin, Dante shakes his head. "You heard wrong. He's just got a brace on one leg, that's it."

"He's in a wheelchair," Bobby points out.

"He'll walk soon enough," Dante tells him. "Jeez, Bob, he's not an invalid. He just got hurt during practice, it happens to the best of us." Dante himself has a scar on the inside of his left arm, almost seven inches long from end to end, stretching between his wrist and his elbow where he took a tumble with another skater during a heat last year. The other guy's skate caught him as he slid on the ice, and the razor-sharp blade sliced into him, he didn't even feel it until he saw the blood. He can place his whole hand over the slit, it reaches from the tip of his pinky finger to the tip of his thumb, and he was off the ice for weeks before the stitches finally came out. Stuff like that happens all the time—it's one of the risks of sports. You fall, you get up again, you get back in the game. And Ryan's going to do that, isn't he? He wants back in the game.

"So you gonna call him now or what?" Bobby asks. Propping an elbow up on the counter and chin in hand, he stares at the middle of Dante's chest with a look on his face that suggests he's thinking thoughts about the two of them that Dante would rather not know about. "You like him?"

“He’s nice,” Dante says again. Later on tonight, after his mom comes home from the office, he’ll make her some soup and tell her he met a boy—he can almost see the disappointed set of her mouth, the tips of her fingers whitening as her grip tightens on the spoon, but she knows skating still comes first. “At least that can’t get you into much trouble,” she’ll mumble. “As long as you take care...” That’s as close as she’ll come to telling him to use protection. He’s eighteen, what else is she going to say?

But he’s not going to tell Bobby he likes Ryan, he’s not going to even hint at it, because as much as he’s not interested in the older man’s advances, he’d be stupid to lose this job. It’s his one and only sponsor, and he knows he won’t make better money anywhere else, Bobby pays him well to keep him here, gives him incentives like free blades when he needs them, the racing suit he wears, his helmet, that jacket. He even fronts Dante cash from time to time, when he’s between checks and his skating fund is running low. As long as there’s the hope that one day Dante might give in, take Bobby up on his offer to meet with him after work, then he’s fine. He can come in late every now and then, he can take off when he has to for his skating, he can work extra hours to pull in some more dough for the championships.

That’s going to set him back, if he makes the cut. *When* he makes it, he knows he’ll win, he’s the best skater in the whole club, any division, any gender. But the state competition is held in Atlantic City, which means group trip, hotel expenses, bus fare, dining, the whole works. Skaters who make it into the championships have to come up with a couple hundred dollars, Dante’s not sure on the exact amount just yet, but it has to cover two people, the skater and another traveler of their choice. He’s already thinking he can maybe talk to the skate club committee, see if he can just pay for himself. They want each skater to bring along a friend or family member, someone for support, but he knows his mother will be too busy to go. She’s always so busy with work—she’s never even seen him skate.

“Nice,” Bobby says, bringing Dante’s mind back to the present. Five minutes until closing now, they should start cleaning up the shop. Grabbing a broom propped up against the counter, Dante starts to sweep the floor behind the register. He feels Bobby’s gaze on his arms and shoulders and he’s glad he wore long sleeves, he hates to feel like eye candy when he’s trying to work. “You think he’s nice?”

“Yeah.” Dante wonders how he can change the subject, but nothing comes to mind.

Bobby steps around Dante and for a moment he thinks the guy’s going to touch him again, just ease an arm around his waist and press against him, he’s done it before. But not this time—he rings out the register, starts to count the till, and there’s an angry air about him that makes Dante think he’s mad at him. Because of Ryan, how silly. He just met the boy, and it’s not like Bobby has much of a chance anyway... “So you gonna call him?” Bobby asks again.

Dante shrugs—he hasn’t really given it much thought. “I doubt it,” he says. “I’ll see him again tomorrow anyway.”

Icy silence. Dante suppresses a smile, he can almost *feel* the ire radiating from his boss in waves, as cold as the air in the rink when the refrigeration unit is going full blast. With a dramatic sigh, Dante says, “Don’t be pissy, Bobby. He’s making me a web site, okay? That’s it.”

“A web site?” Bobby asks. The way he says the word, Dante wonders if he’s ever even heard it before. “I didn’t know you wanted one. My sister can do it—”

Dante laughs. “I don’t think so, Bobby.”

“Why not?” Bobby wants to know. Dante just gives him a sardonic look over his shoulder and continues to sweep. He’s not even going to answer that.

Marnie Trevor made the Later Skater site, over three years ago now and it’s not all that great. She has flashing graphics, *Welcome!* across the top of the main page in sparkly text and graphics she swiped from all of the skating sites she could find. It’s not a very cre-

ative page, to be honest, and Dante wants something a little more professional for his own site. Something like what they have for the Olympics, maybe, or one of the major league hockey teams. Plus, Marnie just turned fourteen—every page she makes has to be linked with the phrase *Another Marnie Marvel* to her own web site, which is pink and flowery and full of cutesy little anime girls with wings. Not to mention the fact that she has a crush on Dante, almost as bad as her brother's, and there's no way in hell he's going to spend any amount of time over at the Trevor place, not if he can help it. It's hard enough eluding Bobby most days, but Marnie too? *No thanks.*

"Why not?" Bobby asks again.

"Just no," Dante tells him.

"She'd do it for free," Bobby says, as if that's added incentive.

"Ryan's doing mine for free, too." Dante sweeps around the counter, away from the register and the threat of Bobby's hands straying to his ass. "He says he has the time—"

Bobby snorts. "Not doing much else now, is he?"

Shut up, Dante thinks, but this *is* his boss, he's not going to say that. Instead he ignores him, concentrates on the broom across the floor and Ryan's smile, his freckles, his thick, reddish-blond eyelashes and the fact that he's going to see him again tomorrow.

CHAPTER 3



Ryan skirts his mother's questions about Dante. Yes, they just met. Yes, he's in the skate club. Espinosa, that's his last name, that's all Ryan knows. He works at the skate shop in town—no, Ryan doesn't remember seeing him there before. If he had, he would've gone down to Later Skater more often, every day in fact, but he doesn't tell his mother this. She doesn't know he's like *that*. He personally doesn't plan to inform her, either. She must notice he doesn't date girls—he was never Mr. Popularity in high school and he's not one of those guys with the drop-dead looks, not like Dante is—but she's never said anything, she's never come out and asked him if he's gay. He thinks she doesn't really want to know. That's okay, though, because he doesn't really want to tell her.

Actually, he doesn't think *anyone* knows. His dad doesn't, definitely not, and there wasn't anyone in high school he fooled around with—he was the shy sort, wasn't given to experimentation, the only guy he liked was the school's center on the basketball team and he wasn't about to approach *him*. He wasn't that gutsy. Jacoby might suspect something, he's Ryan's roommate at the college...or rather, he was, before the accident. The only guy Ryan's ever been with was a boy he met at a frat party he went to last semester—Jacoby said they should have a good time before the final game of the year, just let loose before exams, what would it hurt? The guy's name was Noah

something or other, Ryan can't remember his last name, but from the moment he walked into the party, he felt the guy staring at him, watching him, waiting. After three or four beers, Ryan managed to make eye contact across the smoky room, and with a nod of his head, Noah indicated the darkened hall that led to bedrooms at the back of the house. Another swig of his drink to bolster his courage and Ryan followed him.

Noah was tall and skinny with a mop of blonde curls on the top of his head, not really Ryan's type but he was the first boy to ever show interest in him, and the alcohol made him bold. When Ryan closed the door to one of the bedrooms behind him, Noah was there, pushing him up against the door, his hands on Ryan's chest, smoothing their way down to his waist, his mouth hot and wet against Ryan's own. Fingers fumbled at his belt, his zipper, his crotch, rubbing and kneading until Ryan moaned, his arms coming up around Noah's neck, his hands fisting in thick curls. He felt hands slip into the front of his pants, into his underwear, grasping at flesh that had never felt another's touch, and he never thought it'd feel like this, furious and eager and needy. Noah's lips were softer than he imagined, his fingers probing and gentle and his knees went weak, he had to grip the boy's hair to keep himself standing, he had never felt *this* before. Then Noah knelt before him, took him in his mouth and Ryan gasped his name, yes, yes, yes—

A knock on the door, and suddenly Jacoby's voice interrupted them. "Ryan? You in there, man? We're heading back to campus."

Almost reluctantly, Ryan pushed Noah away. He struggled to get his zipper up over his swollen erection and wondered how bad it would look if he just told the guys to forget it, leave him here. But they had a game the next day, which meant practice at first light, and he was already going to be hung over. "Sorry," he mumbled. Noah wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, shrugged like it was no big deal, didn't bother to give him his number or even a kiss good-bye. Ryan wanted to ask if he could see him again but who was he

kidding? It was the heat of the moment, the feel of another's mouth on his dick, the kisses and the hands and that was it, this guy meant nothing to him.

When he opened the door, Jacoby saw Noah's disheveled hair, Ryan's shirt pulled free from his jeans, and frowned. On the way back to the dorm, he told Ryan to be careful. "Noah's got a reputation," he said darkly. "You don't want to mess with him."

"I wasn't—" Ryan started. His lips still burned with Noah's kisses.

"I'm just saying be careful, that's all." Jacoby didn't elaborate, he didn't ask if Ryan was getting it on with the guy, he didn't want to know and Ryan didn't offer up the information. He did notice that his friend stopped dressing in their room, though, preferring to take his clothes into the bathroom, and in the locker room he stayed out of the showers until Ryan was finished. But Ryan's not interested in Jacoby, he's not into any of the guys on the team, he's not even into Noah and he really hasn't seen the guy again, once or twice on campus and not at any of the games and that's just fine by him.

And then the accident. Who'd look twice at a boy in a wheelchair? A boy who's not even all that to look at normally, but with the chair and the brace on his leg, no one wants to be caught staring, no one wants to *gawk*. Sometimes his mother can't even look his way when she talks to him—in the van she glances in the rearview mirror as she speaks but she's staring at the window out the back, she's not seeing him. She's not even listening to his answers when she asks about Dante, she doesn't care. She's simply trying to fill the gap between them that grows wider by the moment, and he gets the feeling that he could tell her he thinks Dante's the hottest boy he's ever met, he could say he'd like to get with him and not just about the web site either, and she'd simply smile and nod, "That's good, dear. I'm glad you made a friend."

But he doesn't say anything, and in the quiet of his mind he hopes Dante becomes something more than a friend, because he's never really had a boy—Noah doesn't count—and Dante's not just

cute...with that wavy hair that falls back from his face, that dusky skin, those big dark eyes, the girls weren't the only ones swooning over him at the rink. *He's probably not into guys*, Ryan thinks, but he felt something when they were together, something he can't put his finger on, can't quite describe, but it put a hope in his heart, anticipation that wasn't there before. For the first time since he woke up in pain in the hospital weeks ago, he's looking forward to tomorrow. He already has an idea for Dante's web site, and he'll fill the camera up with pictures of the boy, racing over the ice like the wind, dressed in that skin-tight bodysuit...and he actually had the audacity to ask if Ryan could still get it up.

How can he *not* like him for that alone?



His mother drops him off at the rink the next morning by 7:30, same as the day before. He suspects she's all too happy to be rid of him for a few hours—as long as he's not wheeling around the house or holed up in the den, she can pretend that things are still the same, he's still at college and he's still whole. When he does walk again and things *do* go back to normal, he suspects that she'll never mention the accident, as if it didn't happen at all.

But going to the rink gets him out of the house, at any rate, and today she stands by the side of the van but doesn't try to help him, just watches silently as he wheels up the ramp into the building. He wonders if he'll get a chance to talk with Dante much before she'll be back to take him to therapy at ten. He hopes so.

The doors he had so much trouble with yesterday are propped open now—his mother's doing, more than likely. She probably called someone late last night, pulled the whole “My son is handicapped” routine that got her the parking sticker at the DMV, guilt-tripped someone into making sure the doors stay open. She had a fit the day before when she discovered he had to push through them himself. “You can't be doing stuff like that, Ryan,” she said in clipped

tones that left no room for argument. “A boy in your condition...” Like he’s pregnant, or something.

Cautiously he wheels down to the landing, watching the hockey team already in the middle of a warm-up skate around the ice. Yesterday he got some great shots of the practice, even a few of that new kid, number 15, Clovsky or whatever Jacoby called him. He seriously considered cutting him out—probably would have, too, if he hadn’t met Dante. He was in a better mood after that, and he couldn’t stop thinking about the skater, still can’t, he can close his eyes even now and see that hair, that smile. He laid awake last night, stared at the ceiling in his darkened room, watched Dante skate circles around his mind. Hopefully he’ll get to at least say hi before he has to leave today—

Dante’s already here.

He’s slouched down in the last seat of the first row, right at the front of the landing, where he sat yesterday to talk with Ryan. Wearing sweats and that leather jacket, the one with the skate shop logo on the back, sneakers instead of blades, his wavy hair hidden beneath a dark blue bandana and his feet propped up on the railing, head buried in the collar of his jacket, cheek pressed against one shoulder, eyes closed. Asleep. *Waiting for me*, Ryan thinks, and that makes him grin foolishly. He’s glad his friend’s eyes *are* shut, so he doesn’t see how goofy he makes him. He winces when the wheels of his chair squeak as he comes closer.

Dante stirs, stretching awake. “Hey,” he murmurs, his voice low. “I didn’t know how early you’d get here.”

With a nod at the hockey team below, Ryan tells him, “Practice starts at 7:30. I’m running a little late.” He positions himself at the end of the row beside Dante and wonders if the boy can hear the pounding of his heart. *I didn’t know how early you’d get here...* was he *really* waiting for him? Ryan doesn’t dare believe that. He hopes he sounds nonchalant when he asks, “So what are you doing here?”

Dante answers with a question of his own. “You have to leave at what, ten?” When Ryan nods, he shrugs, a gesture that settles him further down into the seat. “I didn’t think I’d get a chance to talk to you before then,” he explains. “I don’t know. If you want me to leave—”

“No, that’s okay.” Ryan shakes his head for emphasis and then, because the sudden intimacy between them makes him nervous, he says, “I didn’t think you had to race again until this weekend.”

“I don’t, but I need the practice.” Dante looks at him in a way no one else seems to be able to, looks at the chair he’s in as if it’s nothing to be ashamed of, looks at the brace on his leg with nothing more than a cursory glance, looks at his face and not some spot just to the left of his shoulder, looks him in the *eye*—that’s what Ryan thinks he likes most about his new friend. The fact that he can look him in the eye when he talks to him, it makes him feel human again.

Dante reaches out, touches the brace that encircles Ryan’s lower leg. “How are you feeling this morning?” he asks.

Ryan’s all too aware of that hand hovering above his leg—he can almost feel it through the worn jeans he wears. “Fine,” he whispers as he watches Dante’s fingers trace down one of the cool metal bars of his brace. There are two such bars, one on either side of his leg, thick, ugly things that he hates. They’re attached to his knee and ankle with hard rubber grips to keep his leg immobile—when Ashlin’s skate cut into him, it sliced through his muscle easily, tore the ligaments in both legs, and shattered the bone of his right calf into a million tiny pieces. He’s had three surgeries to reconstruct the lower part of his leg and the doctors assure him that as it heals, there are cosmetic procedures they can do to smooth out the bumpy ridges, cover over the red, angry skin. He’s not so sure, though—he’s seen the naked flesh and it hurts his heart just to look at it. He doesn’t think he’ll ever wear shorts again.

But last night he didn’t dream of the accident, he didn’t relive the pain, he didn’t toss and turn in his sleep and when he woke up, he

was too distracted to notice his legs. For the first time in weeks, he had other things on his mind, like this boy sitting beside him, so unabashedly touching his brace. “Better, actually,” he tells Dante, and it’s the truth. He feels a *lot* better than he did this time yesterday. “It doesn’t hurt so much today.”

“Does it usually?” Dante wants to know.

His fingers trail up the brace, circle around the hinge at the top that connects the two pieces of metal, his thumb brushing against Ryan’s knee almost absently. Watching that hand, feeling the faint press of flesh through the thin denim, Ryan thinks about the way it felt when Noah touched him in places just inches from where Dante’s hand is now, and he doesn’t remember quite what it is they’re talking about here. “Does it what?” he asks. His voice is thick and soft, like cotton candy.

Dante laughs. “Does it usually hurt?” he asks, and then he looks up at Ryan and grins. “You’re not paying any attention to me.”

Oh no, Ryan thinks, *you have my undivided attention, I swear*. But he doesn’t say that, he *can’t*, and when Dante laughs again, Ryan simply smiles back. “So you gonna take my picture today?” Dante asks.

Ryan digs into his backpack, grateful for something to do. Extracting the digital camera, he says, “I dumped the memory last night so it’s ready to go. Do you think you’ll get out on the ice before I have to leave?”

“Are you coming back?” Dante keeps doing that, asking him something when he asks first, as if his answers depend on whatever Ryan has to say. It’s a heady thought, that Dante’s planning his responses around Ryan’s, he likes that. When Ryan doesn’t reply immediately, Dante adds, “I mean, after your therapy. How long does that take anyway?”

“About an hour.” Filled with torture, too, the therapist smiling like an evil clown in a funhouse, pushing him through another set of sit-ups, another leg-lift, another painful squeeze of his knees. He hates therapy, hates the fact that he needs it, hates the way they all tell him

he's doing good and he can't see any difference, he's still in this damn chair, isn't he? What kind of an improvement is that? He can't walk, isn't strong enough yet to even *try* to walk, and by the time his session is over he'll hurt so bad, in so many places, that he won't even notice the tears that fill his eyes and spill down his cheeks. He'll go home, lie down, bury his face in his pillow and he'll be in no mood to come back here, he doesn't want Dante to see him like that. Lowering his voice, he whispers, "No, I don't think I can...I mean—"

"I understand." He glances up at Dante and sees that he *does* understand, somehow, incredibly, he knows what Ryan's going through, and it makes Ryan fall that much harder. *If I wasn't in this wheelchair*, he thinks, but he stems that before it goes any further because what exactly *would* he do then? He'd leave the rink right after practice and never even know someone like Dante exists in this world, in this city, here, with him. And if he somehow *did* meet the boy, he'd never in a million years gather up the courage to approach him. His whole experience with guys is summed up in a few heated moments at a party, grasping hands and hot lips, that's it.

Dante stands, shrugs out of his jacket, tosses it to the seat beside him. He has a sweatshirt on underneath, *Crosskeys Skate Club* written across the front, the shirttails of a flannel shirt hanging down to cover his butt. When he pulls the sweatshirt off, the flannel shirt comes up with it and the t-shirt beneath that, exposing a smooth stomach, dusky skin, the band of his underwear above sweatpants that hang a little too low on his hips. With a guilty start, Ryan looks away. Below them a practice game has started and he sees number 15 go for a goal, Jacoby on assist. A familiar ache opens in his chest—that should be *him* out on the ice, *him* bearing down on the goalie, *him* sinking the shot. His throat closes up as the puck sails effortlessly into the net.

Tugging down his shirts, Dante flops back into his seat, his sweatshirt balled up in his lap. "Look at this," he says, and when Ryan obeys, he pulls the sleeve of his shirt up over one slim arm. Ryan sees

tanned skin marred by a thin scar that runs the length of Dante's forearm, from the base of his thumb to the crook of his elbow. Tracing the scar with one finger, Dante tells him, "Semi-finals last year, I got tangled up with Dietrich in the final stretch. Those blades are sharp, you know?" Ryan nods—he knows.

Tentatively, he touches the scar, Dante's skin warm beneath his...will his legs heal this completely? Will this pain that rattles his bones narrow down to something as simple as this? A scar, a memory, a battle story told to another skater down the road? He hopes so.

His finger almost glows next to Dante's dark flesh, he's that pale. Self-conscious, he curls his hand into a fist to hide his ragged nails, but he can still feel Dante on his fingertips, softer than a boy has a right to be. *I want you*, he thinks, and he's not sure what all that would entail but he sure as hell would like to find out. Desire shoots through him, as poignant as the loss he feels when he looks at the players on the ice, and he has to turn away before Dante sees that need, that want, in his eyes. "I wasn't in a wheelchair," Dante tells him, "but I had a cast on for weeks, and I had some therapy, too, but not much. My mom's insurance wouldn't cover more than a few visits."

Ryan doesn't know what to say. *I'm sorry* doesn't seem to cut it, and he's afraid if he opens his mouth then other words will tumble out, words to describe the images in his mind, the emotions swirling through him, the memory of another's hands on his body, another's lips on his mouth. The silence grows between them, cloying like thick perfume.

Suddenly Dante laughs. "They didn't retire my number, though," he says, nodding at Ryan's jersey hanging above the goal box. "They just gave it to someone else, and I had to buy a new cover when I came back."

The laughter breaks the tension that envelops them and Ryan laughs, too. "I saw the crowd go wild when they announced your

name.” He nudges Dante playfully, grinning when his friend giggles and squirms away. “You can’t tell me they don’t love you.”

“Okay, okay, they do!” Dante cries. He catches Ryan’s arm when he tries to elbow him again, and his hands burn through Ryan’s shirt sleeve, he holds his breath, *don’t let go*, he prays. To his surprise, Dante doesn’t—instead he smooths down the fabric that’s bunched along Ryan’s arm, his touch gentle. He watches his own fingers as they flatten out Ryan’s sleeve, and with a slight frown he says, “The crowd does, anyway. The girls, yeah, they’re cool, too.” Ryan feels a stab of jealousy at that, *the girls*, of course they’d love a boy like Dante. Softly Dante admits, “But I’m not so sure about the rest of the team.”

“Why not?” Ryan can’t imagine anyone not falling for Dante’s bright eyes, his quick smile, his vibrant personality. He’s only known him one day and he’s already gone.

But Dante shrugs. He releases Ryan’s arm, sinks down in his seat, bites his lower lip and looks away. Ryan doesn’t think he’ll answer, or if he does it’ll be with another question—for some reason this bothers him, Ryan can see it in the set of his jaw, the hunch of his shoulders, and he wants to take the question back, he wants to return to the laughter and the smiles and the touching, he liked that, Dante’s hand on his arm. He wonders what he can say or do to get back to *that*.

“That’s not entirely true,” Dante tells him with a wry grin. “I’m lying. The team’s great. It’s just Wil who hates me.”

“Wil?” Ryan leans over and whispers loudly, “Who’d hate someone like you?”

That brings a smile to Dante’s face, and when he turns, his eyes shine and Ryan can almost believe he sees a reflection of his own emotions in those brown depths. “You remember yesterday?” Dante asks. Ryan nods, and his friend continues. “Wil Dietrich, he’s the one DQ’ed for knocking me off the ice. I thought they’d call him on cross-tracking in the second lap but then he ran me into the boards.”

Ryan remembers the crash—his heart leapt in his chest, memories of pain flooded his mind, he saw his own accident, his own body crushed into the boards, a deadly *déjà vu* that almost made him choke in anger and grief as Dante went down. But he barely landed on the ice before he was up again, scrambling to get back in the race, shaking off the fall as if it were nothing, the way Ryan had done a dozen times before. He saw Dietrich's hand on Dante's hip, it was a deliberate push, and the crowd booed when the other skater crossed the finish line first. He doesn't know much about speedskating, but he was pretty sure any referee worth his zebra stripes would have to call on that one.

And he was right. "He pushed you," Ryan says. Dante's smile fades, and his gaze drops to Ryan's hand gripping the arm of his wheelchair. "I saw it from here, Dante."

"That's short track," Dante murmurs, but he doesn't sound too convinced. "Happens all the time."

Ryan doesn't buy it. "What's his problem with you anyway?" he wants to know. At Dante's slight shrug, anger soars in him, blinding him. "Dammit, you're the best skater the club has—I've seen you on the ice, you're amazing. The crowd thinks so, *I think so...*" Dante looks up at that, and Ryan turns away from those dark eyes that search his. *Careful*, he warns himself. He doesn't want to scare off his new friend. "All I'm saying is you're good. You *know* you're good, everyone knows it. What, he hates you because you're better than he is? How old is he anyway? Two?"

For a few moments, neither of them speaks. Ryan holds onto his anger, it's a comfortable emotion for him now, he feels at home in the hate and the pain. His hands are balled into unconscious fists and if he wasn't in this chair, he'd ask that Dietrich kid just what the hell his problem is—he's not one for fighting but he's a *hockey* player, for Christ's sake, he's good with his fists and quick on his feet and just let him get that bastard out on the ice, he'll show him...*only you're not getting out there any time soon*, he reminds himself, his

anger turning into helpless rage. *You're stuck in this chair whether you like it or not, and you can't go picking fights with some guy you don't even know just because he doesn't like Dante. How old are YOU?*

"I'm sorry," Ryan mutters when Dante doesn't say anything. His friend picks at the sleeve of Ryan's shirt and doesn't respond. "I didn't mean—"

"It's okay," Dante whispers. With a sigh, he explains, "It doesn't bother me much, I'm used to it. My mom's not exactly well off, you know? It's just me and her, and sometimes kids bully you just because you don't wear what they wear, or you don't have the shoes they do, or you're not cool enough, you're not smart enough, you're not what they want you to be." The corner of his mouth pulls up in a halfhearted attempt at a smile, and he laughs. "So I became fast enough, and then faster, and one day I'm going to skate out of here, you'll see. Olympic gold, that's where I'm headed. Just wait."

Ryan wants to cover Dante's hand with his, stare deep into his eyes, tell him he believes that, he *knows* it'll happen, he feels it in his soul, this boy was meant for so much more than this town, the projects where he lives, the minimum wage job he holds to pay his skate club fees. But he can't find the words and he doesn't dare touch his friend that intimately, they just met, he has to keep reminding himself of this. Another sigh and then Dante says, "I don't care. He can get his father to buy his way into the quarterfinals, but we'll see who's the better skater—"

"Wait." Ryan holds up one hand and shakes his head, confused. "You said yesterday only two skaters from each race advance to the quarters. You and that other kid—"

"Wil's *father* is the club sponsor," Dante tells him. Biting his lower lip, he rolls his eyes and says, "Seems he threatened to pull his funding because he thought it was a bad call. Wil finished second, that was his argument."

"So he's going?" Ryan asks, incredulous. "They didn't bump you out—"

Dante shakes his head quickly. “Oh no,” he says, “they can’t do that. They charge good money to people who want to see me skate at the heats. And after yesterday’s crowd? They can’t say I’m not going to race this weekend now, no way.”

That’s a relief. Ryan glances down at the team still on the ice and wonders briefly if he should be taking pictures of this, but he’s saving the camera for Dante. He wants this web site to be the best out there, he wants it to help people notice Dante, to help him towards that gold medal at the Winter Games years from now. He doesn’t really care about the hockey team’s site—he just wants his pictures off of there, that’s it. But there’s a daydream playing out in his mind, Dante and him in his makeshift bedroom at his parents’ house...he turns from the computer to show Dante the page he’s designed, Dante’s eyes go wide, he says he loves it, he *loves* it, and the next thing Ryan knows, the boy’s in his lap, kissing him, his hands on his face and neck and chest and his knees a sweet weight against his crotch. A wonderful image, one he shouldn’t be thinking. They’re barely even friends and he’s already hungry for something more.

Just to clarify, Ryan asks, “So you’re in the quarterfinals?”

“Yeah.” Dante gives him a sunny grin. “You coming to that? It’s this weekend, it’d be great if you could. Take some pictures for my web site—how’s that coming along, anyway?”

The web site. Is that the only reason Dante wants him there? Ryan tells himself he shouldn’t be disappointed, he did offer to do the site, but he’s having trouble reading Dante—the boy skips from topic to topic, from skating to his site to Ryan’s legs and back again. Sometimes he seems interested in Ryan, sometimes he looks at him with a light in his eyes that Ryan *knows* means what he hopes it means, it *must* be the same dizzy nervousness spinning inside of him, the same crush of emotion, *has* to. When he touches him, there’s a spark that tickles Ryan’s skin, doesn’t Dante feel that? When he looks his way, Ryan feels the rest of the world eclipse—surely he sees that too? But then, sometimes, Ryan thinks Dante’s just being friendly, this is just

the way he is, chatty and giggly and open, it's nothing to get excited about. *Tell that to my body when he touches me*, Ryan thinks. *Tell that to my heart.*

"You're coming, right?" Dante asks again.

Who am I kidding? I'm like those girls that come here just to see him—HE is the only reason I'm here today, right? Does it matter if Dante doesn't feel the same? *At least I have something*, Ryan tells himself. Dante *did* show up early today just to talk to him after all. Matching his friend's smile, Ryan assures him, "I'm there."



Today after practice, Jacoby doesn't stop by to say hi. He looks up at Ryan, laughing with Dante about something silly—that boy is *always* laughing—and when he catches Ryan's eye, he just nods before leaving the rink. That's it. No *how you doing today, kid?* No *we miss you out there on the ice*. Nothing at all to let him know they're even thinking about him. So much for staying a part of the team.

"You should get out there," Ryan tells Dante after the zamboni has cleaned the ice. He fiddles with his camera, adjusting the lens so he'll be able to zoom in on his new friend as he skates. "Get in some laps before the rest of the club shows up, you know?"

Dante nods. "Are you going to take my picture?" Before Ryan can reply, he leans against the railing and flings open the collar of his flannel jacket, exposing the white t-shirt underneath. Striking a haughty pose, he asks, "How's this?"

"Ooh, work it for me," Ryan says, playing along. He snaps off a shot, two, three, each click of the shutter prompting Dante to move into another position as he tries desperately not to laugh. Soon they're both giggling, Ryan reeling off pictures before the last one even saved and Dante pulling up his shirt, rubbing his hands across his midriff, blowing kisses into the camera. "Can you give me sexy?" Ryan asks as Dante sits up on the edge of the railing and leans back dangerously for another shot.

“You don’t think I’m already sexy enough?” Dante counters. He says it with a laugh that doesn’t quite make it to his eyes, and his smile slips a notch as Ryan searches for an answer to that. *I think you’re damn sexy*, he thinks, taking in his friend’s slim body, the hair that has begun to curl beneath the bandanna he wears, the slight bulge at his crotch that his sweat pants accentuate perfectly. “Ryan?” Dante sinks to the edge of his seat, concern written all over his face. “I’m just teasing. You don’t have to answer that.” With a self-conscious laugh, he adds, “I told you I say stupid shit all the time.”

Anything he says now might broadcast the myriad of emotions churning in him, making his stomach flutter and his hands tremble and his gaze drop to the ground. He can’t look at Dante, not when his friend’s staring at him so intensely, he’ll see the same lovesick crush in Ryan’s eyes that he must see in every girl he meets, and Ryan doesn’t want to scare him away, not when he’s the only person who really *sees* him now, who talks with him and laughs and isn’t afraid to touch him. *Touch me again*, Ryan thinks, and he presses his lips together tightly to avoid saying it out loud. *Change the subject, safest thing to do*. Frowning at his hands, Ryan watches the saved images parade across the display on the back of the camera, tiny pictures of Dante in various poses, all of them pretentious and silly and fun. “Ryan?” Dante asks. He touches Ryan’s arm, *touches* him, it’s more than even his mother does anymore. “You okay?”

“Fine,” Ryan murmurs, even though he’s not. Hoping to lighten the mood, he takes a deep breath and asks, “So are you going to get out on the ice and strut your stuff, or what?”

Dante studies him a moment longer and Ryan thinks he’s going to ask again, *you okay?*, because he doesn’t believe him, it’s evident in the thoughtful twist of his mouth. “I’m fine,” Ryan assures him before he can say anything else. “Really. Just a little...I don’t know, nervous I guess.”

That gets a smile. “I make you nervous?” Dante asks. His hand’s still on Ryan’s arm and yes, he has to admit the boy makes him ner-

vous. And giddy and invincible and thrilled and awkward all at once, like the latest, greatest roller coaster ride. “Little ole me?”

“Stop it,” Ryan tells him. Dante laughs, a gorgeous sound that manages to make everything alright. “I mean about my therapy.”

Sobering up, Dante rubs his arm softly—Ryan could grow used to so gentle a touch. “It’s that bad?” he whispers. Ryan nods. Yes, most days, it is.

Ryan nods at the ice, now empty and smooth, the hockey players gone and the skate club not yet arrived. “You’re losing practice time,” he says.

“I know.” Dante stands and stretches, then gathers up his jacket, his sweatshirt, and a duffle bag that’s hidden beneath his seat. Looking down at Ryan, he asks, “You’re going to be here tomorrow?”

“Yeah,” Ryan replies. He has nothing else planned and already he can’t wait to see Dante again. He’s going to dream of him tonight, he knows it, and during his therapy session, he’ll focus on his friend’s face just to chase away the pain. “I’ll be here. You?”

“Yeah—no, wait.” Dante frowns and digs in his pocket, pulls out a handful of crumpled dollar bills, and starts to count them out. “Damn,” he murmurs. “Not tomorrow. I only have eight dollars.”

Ryan doesn’t get it. “For what?”

“It’s fifteen to skate for club members,” Dante tells him. Shoving the money back into his pocket, he shrugs and asks, “Maybe Friday? I get paid tomorrow.”

Ryan thinks about the money in his own wallet, a twenty, some fives, a few ones—he hasn’t been anywhere to spend it since the accident, and living at home means no more late-night calls to Domino’s. Reaching behind him for his wallet, he says, “I can spot you. If you get paid tomorrow anyway—”

“No, really, it’s cool.” Dante shakes his head quickly. “I need to save for the quarters, too. I’ll practice today and then get some time in on Friday, I’ll be good to go.” *Which means you won’t be here tomorrow*, Ryan thinks as he shoves his wallet down into the back

pocket of his jeans. Maybe Dante didn't *want* to see him again, maybe this is the beginning of goodbye. *He came here early just to talk with you*, he reminds himself, but it's a cold comfort. Hell, he'd *give* Dante seven bucks if it'll bring him back here, he doesn't need to pay it back.

Suddenly Dante sits down again, his knee almost touching Ryan's as he leans forward and asks, "Can I call you? Like tonight or something. I have to work but I'll get a break around seven. We could just talk, say hi, I don't know. If you want?"

"Sure." Ryan nods, relieved. *He wants to call me...he's more* than relieved, he's ecstatic, he'll sit by the phone tonight and will it to ring. As he pulls his notebook and pen out of his backpack, he asks, "You won't get in trouble for calling me at work?"

Dante laughs. "Nah." Then, thinking about it, he adds, "Well, maybe, but what the hell, you know? It's off the clock. Bobby'll just be pissed I'm calling another guy. He'll get over it."

He'll be pissed about another guy...why? Ryan wishes fervently that he were bold enough to ask. Scribbling down his number on a blank sheet of paper, he tears it out of the notebook and hands it to Dante. Shyly, he hands him the pen, as well. "Can you give me your number?" he asks, his voice hesitant. "Just in case."

"If I give it to you, you better use it," Dante says, writing it down. He hands back the notebook and the pen is warm from his hand. "You'll be here Friday though, right?" When Ryan nods, Dante hefts his bag in one hand, swings his coat and sweatshirt over his shoulder, and tells him, "I'll talk to you tonight. Seven okay for you?"

Anytime, Ryan thinks, but he simply says, "Yeah, that's fine." He turns as Dante leaves, watching the sway of his friend's hips, the way the tail of his shirt pulls taut across his butt as he walks, and wonders if he can wait until seven. He imagines Dante's voice in his ear, so close through the phone, and he thinks he'll undress completely, turn off the lights, lie naked beneath the cool sheets on his bed and

listen to that voice, that laugh, curl into him. *You're falling hard, Talon*, he thinks.

At the door, Dante turns and looks back at him. There's a smile on his face that Ryan can just make out in the shadows, and then he's gone.



Dante's amazing on the ice. He moves effortlessly, zipping around the rink, bending low on the corners and picking up speed on the straight tracks. Watching him, Ryan feels as if he's out there, too—he feels the cold breeze stinging his face and numbing his lips, he feels every chip in the ice beneath his feet, he tastes the slush flung up from the blades. He wants to be back out there again, he wants to be that free again, he wants to be chasing after Dante with their laughter streaming out behind them, hurrying to catch up.

He manages to take another ten or twelve pictures before the rink starts to fill up, other members of the skate club trickling in, a few fans already picking seats close to the ice. Dante moves to the side-lines to let other skaters practice, and he's not even sitting down before a couple of girls are already leaning against the player box, flirting with him. One Ryan recognizes from the day before, that pretty blonde with the braid down her back—she stands closest to Dante, batting her eyelashes and flipping her hair over one shoulder as her friends giggle into their hands. Jealousy stabs through him, a stupid emotion, he has no right to feel this way, but he can't help it. He can hear Dante's laughter from here when the girl says something witty and cute, and he jams the camera into his backpack, shoves the notebook in after it, turns his chair around and wheels outside.

In the parking lot, he waits for his mom and tries not to think about the way that girl was looking at Dante, the same way he himself looks at the guy, he's that far gone on him already. *But he's calling me*, he reminds himself, and that's some consolation, at least. *Not her, me. Tonight. Seven o'clock, he'll call me.*

He can make it through the therapy session now, no matter how bad it is, because he knows he'll talk to Dante tonight.

CHAPTER 4



Ryan's number is the only thing Dante thinks about as he skates. The slip of paper is in the inside pocket of his jacket to keep it safe, the same place where the rent money was yesterday, but he doesn't need it—he's already memorized the seven digits. He wanted to call last night when he got home from the skate shop, but it was late and he thought it might be awkward, explaining how he got the number. What would Ryan think if he knew that Dante looked it up in the phone book? Or that, as he ate dinner before going to bed, he stared at the phone in the kitchen, the one that hangs on the wall by the fridge, and mentally dialed it over and over again? He knows he needs to focus on his skating and when he arrived at the rink this morning at seven, he should've put on his blades and taken a few turns on the ice, he needs to practice, he *paid* to. That's where his dreams lie, in short track. He doesn't need to get distracted.

His last boyfriend was distraction enough. A skater, a boarder like Bobby, a full head taller than Dante with a broad chest, narrow waist, and choppy hair bleached an unnatural shade of orange. Jared. This was back in high school, junior year, and he was in Dante's study hall, a brooding, moody guy who wrote really bad poetry about road kill and laughed when anyone fell, off a skateboard or down steps, he didn't care. He was cute though, and a good kisser, and could get his

hands into Dante's pants within seconds of getting him alone, *that* was nice. He had strong hands, and he knew what he was doing.

He was Dante's first, three weeks before junior prom, which they both swore they wouldn't be caught dead at and Jared ended up going to anyway. It was on a Saturday, Dante remembers it clearly, a day his mother got called into the office. Jared slept over the night before and they stayed up late, fooling around beneath the covers of Dante's twin-sized bed, the two of them pressed together and their hands clasping each other tight. Sometime before noon, the kisses and caresses became something more, something urgent and heated and Dante didn't think he wanted to go that far, he tried to say no, but his words were lost in Jared's mouth, his body crushed beneath his boyfriend's, his hands held up above his head and out of the way. "It's okay," Jared kept whispering between kisses. "It's okay, Dante. I love you, it's okay."

Only it wasn't, not really—it was quick and painful and when it was over, Dante rolled out of bed and stood beneath the hot spray of the shower for almost a half hour, trying to wash the stench of sex away. When Jared asked if he wanted to come watch him skate, Dante begged off with a headache, told him he'd catch up with him later, but he knew that wasn't quite true. He felt it in Jared's goodbye kiss—whatever they had together had snapped apart, broken in the instant Jared went too far.

At school he stayed polite to the guy, smiled in all the right places, let him touch him in the boy's bathroom between classes, stole kisses outside when waiting for the bus. But Dante didn't call him anymore, and the more he thought about it, the more he realized he needed to focus on his skating, *that* was his dream, not some small-town boarder with a quick laugh and big hands. They never officially broke up, not really, and they did have sex again, twice in fact, once in Dante's living room when his mom was at work and once behind the skate ramp in Jared's backyard, but the words of love that Jared muttered when he came meant nothing to Dante. Their senior year

they didn't share any classes and sometime after that, they drifted apart. Dante hadn't even looked at a guy since.

Until Ryan.

Dante doesn't know what it is about the boy—he's not really much to look at, to be honest, a bit plain and pale. With that light hair the color of a deep blush wine, those freckles over his nose, he'll never really tan, even if he spends the rest of his life out in the sun. He's the type to burn and then peel, his skin pinked to pain and his freckles dissolving like dew in the morning sun. But he has strong arms, Dante likes that in a guy, he likes to feel safe and protected when he lies with someone, as if those arms and hands can keep the rest of the world at bay. And Dante can see in his eyes a smoldering anger at his accident, a stubborn streak that won't let this get him down. He likes that fire, guttering low but still burning, he *knows* Ryan will walk again. He'll skate again, and he'll be better on the ice than before, he'll be the best damn hockey player ever, Dante feels that in his heart as much as he feels his own Olympic dream.

He likes Ryan's smile, the shy way he looks at Dante, the easy camaraderie that's sprung up between them. It's as if they've been friends forever—Dante knows just what to say to get Ryan to laugh, he feels comfortable with the boy in a way he's never felt with anyone else before. Sure as hell not with Jared, and not with his mom or Bobby or any of the girls in the skate club. There's just something *right* between them, something that clicks into place—Dante feels like he's been struggling to solve a puzzle for years, searching piece by piece, hoping to find something in this dead-end town that will fit for him, and then he sees Ryan and it all comes together, everything, his future, his skating, his life. It has him wondering if maybe he *can* allow a little bit of distraction right now. Maybe Ryan's exactly what he needs—maybe there's more to living than skating and striving for dreams. If so, he'd sure like to find out.



He barely makes it to seven—at work, his gaze keeps wandering to the phone on the other side of the counter, and once he even picked it up when Bobby went in the back for a minute, almost dialed Ryan’s number, but then a customer came in and he hung up with a guilty start. Seven, he can wait that long.

No, he really can’t. At ten til he asks Bobby if he can take a quick break. “We’re swamped,” Bobby tells him, though that’s not quite true. They have three customers in the shop and since it’s a small store, it seems more crowded than it really is. But with the upcoming quarterfinals just two days away, people are buying up replacement blades and buckles, skate covers, helmets and gear. They’ve been steady all night, which is good—it keeps them both busy, and it keeps Bobby’s hands off Dante’s body. Still, it’s not like there’s a line leading out into the street or anything. Ten minutes, what will it hurt?

“Let it die down in here first,” Bobby says. With a wink, he adds, “We can get a moment to ourselves once everyone leaves.”

You can get a moment to yourself, Dante thinks, toying with the phone cord. That makes him grin, the idea of Bobby holed up in the shop’s tiny bathroom, jerking off into the sink on a ten minute break. For all he knows, the guy does just that. He probably watches himself in the mirror while he does it, too.

Five after seven, and two of the customers have left but another’s come in. “Bobby,” Dante sighs, glancing at the clock. He’s late now. Ryan probably thinks he’s not going to call. “Five minutes. I have to use the phone—”

“Right this second?” Bobby asks. His frown suggests that he knows Dante’s waiting to call another boy and that’s the reason he’s dragging this whole thing out. Most nights Dante works right through his breaks...without getting paid for them, either.

“I’ll be real quick,” Dante promises. Just say hello, tell Ryan he’s busy and can he call him later tonight? After he gets home from work maybe. Since he’s not going to the rink tomorrow, he can stay up a little later—he doesn’t have to be into the shop until two because he asked for more hours and Bobby’s being a dick, he cut him back Thursday and Friday he’s off completely. At least he’ll have a check in hand when he leaves tomorrow, and that should be able to get him a spot on the ice to practice on Friday—all day, too, which is good because he needs it. Fifteen to skate then, twenty to register for the quarters, and if he’s lucky, he’ll have enough left to put in a few days next week at the rink. Here’s hoping, at any rate.

Before Bobby can refuse, Dante ducks through the doorway behind the counter into the back—a narrow storage room, lined with metal shelves of overstock. There’s a desk by the back door where Bobby sits to pay the bills and watch Dante at the register. Dante wonders if he thinks he’s being slick when he does that, leaning back in his chair, watching, probably touching himself, thinking thoughts Dante would rather not know about. He hears the creak of the chair when Bobby’s back there, a slight, steady sound that tells him more than he needs to know.

He heads for that desk now, pulls the chair out and winces as it creaks beneath his weight. But there’s a phone on the desk, and despite the open doorway, the storage room is a little more private than the front counter. He dials Ryan’s number from memory. Somewhere across town, a phone rings in his ear.

One ring, two—“Hello?” It’s Ryan’s voice, expectant and a little loud.

Dante feels a silly smile pull at his lips, and he glances up to make sure Bobby’s not hovering over him. “Hey there,” he purrs. “I’m sorry I’m late.”

Ryan laughs with relief. “Don’t be,” he says. He sounds young on the phone, no more than thirteen, but he played for the college team so Dante thinks he’s about his own age, maybe a year or two older, if

that. He *looks* young, though. Dante should ask him how old he is. Not over twenty, can't be. In his ear, he hears even breath, and then Ryan asks, "How's work going?"

"We're busy," Dante admits. Lowering his voice, he adds, "I can't talk long."

"Okay."

Dante imagines his friend sounds disappointed to hear that—maybe he *can* call him later? That would be nice. Searching for something to say, he asks, "How was your session?"

With a groan, Ryan mutters, "Let's not talk about that."

Dante frowns, sympathetic. "That bad?"

"Worse." More silence, more breathing. From the main room, Bobby calls out his name but Dante ignores him. He hasn't even been back here what, two minutes? If that. Bobby can wait. "So what are you doing tomorrow?" Ryan asks him. "Work?"

"Not until two," Dante replies.

Bobby calls his name again. Then he peeks into the storage room, glares at the phone in Dante's hand. "You about done?" he wants to know. *You're just pissed it's not you I'm calling here*, Dante thinks, narrowing his eyes at his boss. "I'm not paying you to chat."

"You have to go?" Ryan asks in his other ear.

"Not yet." Covering the mouthpiece, he tells Bobby, "I'll be off in a minute, okay? One minute, jeez." Bobby rolls his eyes but leaves. Into the phone, Dante sighs. "Damn. What's a boy gotta do to get a little respect here?"

That makes Ryan laugh, a warm sound that washes over him like the tide. "Tell him to leave you alone or he can answer to me," he says.

Dante likes that image, Ryan coming in here, wheeling up to Bobby, *What the hell's your problem with my boy? My boy*, Dante likes that. Jared never used that phrase—once he said they were fuck buddies, and then he laughed like it was a funny joke, but Dante didn't see any humor in it. Mostly he just said *mine*, a phrase Dante didn't

particularly like. *Mine*, like he was property, a piece of furniture or a shirt or a book. But *my boy*, he can almost hear the words in Ryan's voice, see the indignant anger flash in those light eyes.

"What are you doing right now?" Dante asks. *Say you're thinking of me*, he prays. *Say I'm on your mind, please. Give me something to grasp onto, Ryan. I know you're feeling this, you have to be, you look at me the way those girls do so I know you're interested. Just give me some sort of indication and I'll take it from there.* What if he makes the first move and Ryan backs off? He gets the idea that the boy's overly shy, not used to guys, probably never even had sex. The wrong move, the wrong word, and he'll run away. Dante's not sure how far to go.

Ryan's reply gives him an inkling of hope. "Waiting for you to call," he whispers, and then he laughs, self-conscious. "Working on your web site. I've got the first page done."

"Cool!" Dante laughs—a web site, he has an official *web site*. What other skater in the club can claim *that*? Maybe Wil but Dante doesn't think even he's got one yet—if he did, the URL would probably be sewn across the back of his racing suit.

"You should see it," Ryan's saying, excited. "I'm not real good yet and I've only got the main page done, none of the links work, but I like it. Hey! I have an idea."

"What's that?" Dante cringes when Bobby calls his name again. "Shit. I gotta go. What's your idea?"

Ryan sighs. "Well, I was thinking..." He trails off, unsure.

"Thinking what?" Dante wants to know. He sees Bobby pass in front of the doorway and rolls his eyes. "I'll be right there, Bobby. I'm hanging up now."

"You don't have a computer, right?" Ryan speaks in a rush to get the words out. "And you're not going skating tomorrow, so maybe you can come over here instead? If you want to. I can show you what I've done on the site." *He's inviting me to his house*, Dante thinks, suddenly light-headed. So hopefully he's not wrong about Ryan after

all. Mistaking his silence for reluctance, Ryan adds, “You don’t have to stay long.”

“No, that’s great,” Dante tells him. “I really have to go, though. Bobby’s having a fit up there. Can you call me tomorrow? In the morning maybe? I get up early—”

Ryan laughs. “Me too. Nothing like a morning skate, is there?”

That brings a smile to Dante’s face. *See?* he thinks. *You’ll be on the ice again in no time.* “Damn straight,” Dante replies. As Bobby looks into the storage room again, he says quickly, “Call me. First thing.”

“I will,” Ryan promises. “I’ll talk to you then.”

“Bye.” When he hangs up the phone and stands, energy courses through his legs and arms, tingles his skin, he’s going to Ryan’s house tomorrow. His mind rushes away into a million different scenes, kisses and touches and hugs and the two of them on Ryan’s bed, giggling beneath the covers. *You’re just going to see the web site*, he tells himself. *There’s no use getting all excited over nothing.*

Still, he had thought he wouldn’t get a chance to see his friend tomorrow and now they’re hanging out. Even Bobby’s angry stare as he comes back up front can’t wipe the grin from his face.



When Dante gets home, his mother is already in the kitchen, warming up a pot of soup. Another late day at the office—he didn’t even get to see her the day before, she came home well after he was already in bed—but they need the money, that’s why she works the way she does. At the DA’s during the week, part time at the mall on weekends, she rushes around the apartment in the mornings when Dante wakes up and comes home most nights just as the bus drops him off in front of the complex. No free time for herself—Dante hopes the bastard who left her saddled with an infant boy eighteen years ago has to work twice as hard as she does just to make ends meet. He prays his own life isn’t so hectic down the road.

It won't be, he'll make sure of that. He has his skating, that dream will never die, it'll take him out of this tiny apartment complex, out of this small town, that's one thing he knows. And maybe somewhere along the way he'll find a boy to keep him company, someone to hold him nights and cheer him on in the races, someone who understands his love of the ice and knows how free the skates make him feel. Maybe he's even already found that boy, who knows? He doesn't want to push it but in the back of his mind he has an image of Ryan in the stands as he crosses the finish line first for an Olympic medal.

Closing the door to the apartment behind him, he kicks off his shoes and drapes his coat over the back of a nearby chair. From the other room, his mother calls out, "Tay, is that you?"

With a laugh, Dante leans over the counter that divides the small living room from the kitchen. "You're expecting someone else?" he teases.

His mother gives him a tired smile. She looks like him, same wavy dark hair, same dusky skin, but now her hair is tied back from her face with a broken shoelace and her skin has an ashy, worn out look in the bright lights above the stove. Stirring the pot of soup as it comes to a boil, she asks, "You want some of this? I can open another can."

"I'm fine," he tells her. He sees a loaf of white sandwich bread on the counter and settles for a few slices of that instead. "How was work?"

She sighs—that's answer enough. As she dishes out the soup, her voice is weary and thick. "I'm getting too old for this crap."

A heavy silence envelops them. Dante pulls out one of the chairs at the bar and sits down, watching as she sets her bowl down on the counter and blows on it to cool the soup off. When she takes a tentative sip, he tells her, "I made the quarterfinals. They're on Saturday."

"Congrats." She's not overly enthused, but he doesn't expect her to be—she thinks his skating is just another distraction, she sees no reason to waste good money on practice time and heats and finals. A

good solid job, that's what she thinks he needs. All the money he's spending on the ice, he could save up to take courses at the community college—she's told him that before.

But he would like some support, would that be too much to ask? He knows it's just the way she is—if he were a musician or a writer, she'd call such pursuits silly dreams as well, gossamer webs spun to keep him from hard work. Many times she's mentioned the man who fathered him, said he thought basketball would make him rich, and sure he had a great hook shot but he was barely six feet tall and the game never got him anywhere in life. "You see him on TV?" she asked. "No. Playing in the NBA? No. That was his problem, Tay, always thinking of his balls, on and off the court. You'd do best to get a job and put an end to this skating nonsense."

But it's not nonsense to him, it's life, as much as breathing and eating and sleeping. Even though he already knows the answer, he crumbles the bread between his fingers and asks, "Maybe you can come by and see me race? In the quarters—"

"I have to work, honey," she says, in a voice that tells him no without her having to say the word. "You know that."

Dante nods. "I know." He lets his hair fall in front of his face so she can't see the disappointment in his eyes. He should get to bed—Ryan's going to call him in the morning. *He'll* be at the races on Saturday. At least there will be someone in the crowd that Dante knows, someone more than just another smitten fan calling his name as he speeds around the track.

As if reading his thoughts, she asks, "Your friends will be there, won't they?"

His mother has no concept of his life beyond this apartment. She uses the term *friends* as if he's popular, which he's not. He *could* be, if he weren't so dedicated to his sport—he's got the looks, he knows that, and he likes to have a good time, he's friendly, he meets people easily enough. *Look at Ryan*, he thinks as an example. He just walked right up to that boy and now he's the only thing on Dante's mind.

But he doesn't know anyone really, just the few regular customers he talks to at the shop, Bobby, the girls in the skate club. Ryan now, and he's the only one who Dante's talked with on the phone, the only one he's *wanted* to talk with outside of brief niceties. Carefully, he tells his mother, "I met a boy at the rink. Yesterday. His name is Ryan."

She takes another sip of her soup and doesn't answer right away. He thinks maybe she's ignoring him or she doesn't want to know and he stands up, about to head into his room for the night. "Ryan," she echoes, startling him. Without meeting his gaze, she asks, "He skates?"

"He did." Eager to talk about him, Dante sits back down on the edge of the stool and grins. Just thinking about Ryan makes him giddy. "He plays hockey for the college team but he got hurt before this season started, so he's off the ice until his legs heal up."

His mother nods. "A college boy," she says, and Dante can tell from the tone of her voice that she's impressed. "Cute?"

That makes Dante's grin widen. "I think so. He's making me a web site, so I can get sponsors and stuff." He thinks of Ryan's reddish-blond hair, the way it covers the tops of his ears, the single hoop earring he wears, those freckles. "Yeah, he's cute."

"He knows you're..." She gives him a pointed look—she doesn't like to say the word *gay*. Dante doesn't think he's ever heard her admit it out loud. When he told her back in high school, he simply said he was into guys. "Like that?" she asked, flipping her wrist in a stereotypical gesture that he didn't care for at all. But he nodded, yes, and that was the end of the discussion.

Now Dante laughs. "He *better* know," he tells her. Then, because he's still not sure if Ryan is on the same wavelength as himself, he adds, "I *hope* he knows. I mean, I just met him but I think he likes me. I *hope* he does."

His mother stands and turns away—this conversation is over as far as she's concerned. "Well, that's good, Tay," she says, and Dante knows she won't say anything else about Ryan tonight. She's never

come out and said she doesn't like him with other guys, but it's in the set of her jaw, the way she doesn't quite look at him when she says, "You should get to bed."

Dante slips down off the stool and walks around the counter to kiss her cheek. Her skin feels like crushed satin beneath his lips, old and worn and soft. A stray curl has slipped free from her ponytail and Dante tucks it behind her ear. "I'm going over his place tomorrow," he says softly. "Bobby cut my hours back the rest of this week."

With a slight frown, she scrapes the soup from her bowl into the sink and asks, "Why?"

He doesn't like me seeing someone, Dante should say. *He's jealous, and he doesn't even have any reason to be, because I'm not interested in him anyway.* But that would make her angry and he doesn't want that, it's late and he's not up for an argument right now. So he simply shrugs and mumbles, "I don't know."

She looks at him sharply—she knows when he's not being fully honest with her, it's almost an odd superpower of hers, it's eerie. But then she nods and asks, "Did you pay the rent?"

"Yesterday." She nods again and Dante heads down the hall. "Night, Mama."

He doesn't turn on the light in his room, just closes the door behind himself and pulls his shirt off over his head as he stumbles to the bed. His sweatpants and underwear come down in one fluid motion and are left in a heap on the floor, the shirt discarded somewhere along the way. The sheets are cold on his naked skin as he crawls between them and he imagines Ryan staying the night, curling up behind him, warming him. He imagines arms around him again, lips on his, whispers and giggles in the dark. Closing his eyes, he pictures himself in Ryan's bedroom tomorrow, which looks suspiciously like his own—he's on the edge of the bed, Ryan beside him. He doesn't know what he says but it makes his friend lean close, closer, and the kiss is so sweet that Dante replays the scene in his mind over and over again until he finally falls asleep.



Dante's waiting in the kitchen when the phone rings a little after eight the next morning. He's been up and dressed since quarter to seven, staring at the phone, willing it to ring. Twice he picked up the receiver to call Ryan—twice he set it back down, sure he missed the call just because he had the phone off the hook. God, when was the last time he was this anxious? He can't remember.

He answers the phone on the first ring with a breathless, "Hey," that makes Ryan laugh. Dante grins at the sound. "About time you called."

Is it just him, or does Ryan sound coy when he replies, "You been waiting long?"

All my life, Dante thinks, but he doesn't say that—great way to scare someone off, no? "I've been up awhile," he says evasively. "How are you feeling today?"

"Better," Ryan admits. Silence fills the distance between them. Dante listens to Ryan's breath and wonders if this is what it would sound like, lying beside him in bed. The thought surprises him—after Jared, he didn't think he'd *want* to share his bed again with anyone else.

Finally Ryan clears his throat and, hesitant, asks, "Did you still want to come over today?"

Dante laughs. "Of course! I'm already halfway there." Looking around, he spots a pen on the counter and stretches to get it. No paper, but that's okay—he holds his hand out like a tablet, scribbles on the fleshy heel of his thumb to get the ink flowing, then asks, "So how do I get there?"

He writes the directions down on his palm—Ryan lives out towards the mall, on a side street in one of the subdivisions where Dante's never been. He can't even afford to look at most of the houses in that part of the city, but the bus stops over near there and he takes his roller blades so he can get a little skating in on the way.

When he gets off the bus, he sits on the curb, changes his sneakers for the 'blades, and they aren't the same as his ice skates but the wind still stings his eyes and pinks his cheeks. He navigates through the twisting streets of the subdivision easily enough, checks the map he drew on his hand once to make sure he's headed the right way. Ryan told him he couldn't miss it—the only house on the block with a handicap ramp leading onto the front porch. "It's ugly," Ryan told him. Dante laughed and Ryan cried, "It is! It looks like part of an aluminum roof flew off and landed on our steps. I hate it."

Now Dante sits on the curb at the end of Ryan's driveway to swap his 'blades for his sneakers, and he tucks the skates into his duffel bag, hitches the bag over one shoulder, heads up the driveway to the house. It's a large home, with a two-car garage and bay windows in the front room. Bare bushes like tumbleweed surround the house—Dante suspects they're azaleas, in another month they'll begin to bloom. He sees the ramp—how can he miss it? It's bigger than Ryan described, and he skirts it to take the steps. Beneath his feet, the wooden slats of the porch creak softly. The neighborhood around him is unearthly quiet—in the distance he can hear traffic from the main road but these streets are still, surrounded by barren trees, the homes like stone sentinels watching him, waiting. He holds his breath when he rings the doorbell. The chime echoes away into the depths of the house.

Ryan's mother answers, all smiles and wide eyes. "You must be Dante," she says in that overly cheerful tone of voice mothers use when meeting their children's friends for the first time. She has the same hair Ryan has, thin and reddish blonde, and she's only about Dante's height, shorter than he expected. Dante smiles back, glances past her, sees stairs leading to a second floor and wonders where Ryan is. As if reading his thoughts, she asks, "You're here to see Ryan, aren't you?"

"Yes, ma'am," Dante says, following her into the house. His smile falters when she closes the door, cutting off the bright sunlight and

drenching the hall in shadow. It's dark in here and chilly like a museum. Dante can't picture someone with a laugh like Ryan's growing up in such a somber home. The stairs stretch away above him into darkness—to his left is a sitting room of sorts, with a fireplace and furniture that looks as if it came from the pages of an expensive catalogue. To his right is a formal dining room—intricately carved chairs hem in a cherrywood table set with classy dishes and cloth napkins. *Cloth*, not the disposable paper towels that his mom keeps around the house. Maybe he's in too deep here. Maybe he's wrong, maybe he and Ryan have too many differences to come together. Skating is all they have in common—Dante can't invite Ryan to his apartment, even if the complex *did* have an elevator to his floor. His mother's furniture doesn't match, they don't even *have* a kitchen table, their cups and plates are plastic, Day-Glo colors that were on sale at K-Mart years ago. What would Ryan say to that?

He knows you're not rich, Dante tells himself. He doesn't like you because you have money, or your bed matches your dresser. You've never let stuff like this bother you before.

Ryan's mother leads the way down the hall and past the kitchen, down another hallway to a closed door. "Ryan's old room is upstairs," she explains, lowering her voice as they approach the door. "He was living on campus but after the..." She motions with her hand and gives Dante a pointed look so he knows exactly what she's talking about. *The accident*, that's what she wants to say and can't, Dante sees the words in her eyes. "We set him up in the den until he gets better."

She raps on the door quickly, then calls out before she gets an answer. "Ryan? Your friend's here."

From the other side of the door, Dante hears the unmistakable sound of rubber wheels over a hardwood floor, and then the door eases open. Ryan grins up at him, opens the door wider. "Hey you," he says. As Dante steps around Mrs. Talonovich into the room, Ryan gives his mother a quick look. "Thanks, Mom." She starts to say

something but he closes the door on her. Rolling his eyes, he tells Dante, "She'll sit in here all day if I let her."

Dante laughs and looks around. The room is obviously a den, complete with a fireplace along one wall, though the grate's closed and the hearth screened off. A hospital bed by the door fills most of the room and when Ryan nods at it, Dante sits on the edge of the mattress, dropping his bag at his feet. Long vertical blinds cover a sliding door to fall behind a desk complete with a computer and a vase of dying flowers. "From the team," Ryan explains when he sees Dante's raised eyebrows. "My mom won't let me throw them away."

"They bought you flowers?" Dante asks. With a dramatic sigh Ryan nods, and Dante has to laugh again. The awkward discomfort he felt out in the hallway is gone—Ryan wears tattered jeans and an old sweatshirt, sneakers as worn as Dante's own, and it's warm in this room, well lit, the blinds pulled back to look out on a brick patio and covered swimming pool. Ryan's chair is close enough that Dante could reach out and take his friend's hand, if he wanted to. "So does that mean I have to buy you flowers for doing my site, too?"

He likes the blush that climbs up Ryan's neck and colors his face to the roots of his hair. "Oh God, no," Ryan says, ducking his head into one hand to hide his burning cheeks. "Dante—"

"I'm just teasing," Dante tells him. He swats at Ryan's knee playfully, which makes his friend giggle. "What kind do you like? Roses?" Ryan doesn't answer, too mortified to reply. Rubbing his friend's knee, Dante says softly, "I'm kidding, Ryan. You don't have to answer. Are you always so easily embarrassed?"

Ryan's voice is thick when he responds, "I didn't think so." Dante wonders if it's him doing this to the boy, making him bumbling and cute. He likes the blush and the way Ryan can't quite meet his eyes, the way his fingers pick at the threads along the hem of his sweatshirt. He likes the faint smile that tugs at the corners of Ryan's mouth as his hand rests on his friend's leg. *If it's me, he thinks, give me a sign so we can get past this touch and go stage, please.*

But Ryan runs a hand down his face, wiping away the blush and the grin. “Do you want something to eat maybe?” he asks suddenly in a thinly veiled attempt to change the subject. “Are you thirsty?”

“I’m fine.” Dante watches Ryan carefully. When he removes his hand from his friend’s knee, he imagines he sees a slight frown, gone in an instant, and was that enough of an indication? Does that mean he likes the touch? Dante’s never been great at relationships but when someone’s interested in him, they’re usually overt about it, like Josey at the skate club who follows him around with puppy-dog eyes, or Bobby with his not-so-subtle requests to hook up. Even Jared was easy—“Do you like guys?” he asked, and when Dante shrugged, nodded, Jared nodded back. “Me too.” And that was it.

Ryan turns his chair around with an easy grace that belies the bulky metal frame. “You’ll have to sit on the bed,” he says, wheeling over to the desk where the computer is already turned on. “My mom doesn’t think I need any other chairs cluttering up the room.”

“It’s okay,” Dante says. He rolls onto his stomach and stretches across the foot of the bed so he can see the computer screen. Ryan slides his chair into the space beneath the desk, close enough that Dante can trace the tread on the chair’s tire with one finger. “Have you done a lot to the site yet?” Before Ryan can reply, he smiles and adds, “Did I tell you how much you rock for doing this for me?”

Ryan laughs. “I told you it’s not a problem,” he murmurs, but the blush is back, thin and pink and unbearably cute. Dante wonders if his cheeks are hot right now—he imagines pressing his hands to Ryan’s skin, feeling the flushed flesh beneath his fingers, cooling it with kisses. As Dante watches, Ryan opens a web browser and the sound of a modem dialing up fills the quiet room. “I worked on it a bit last night but that’s it,” he says as they wait for the computer to connect. “I got a few pictures up that I really like but I don’t have any of your stats or anything.” When a page starts to load in the browser, Ryan adds, “I got the idea for the layout from another sports site. I was up all night looking at athlete pages.”

Dante's impressed. What he knows of the Internet he can count on one hand, stuff he learned in high school because his senior year he was required to take a computer literacy class to graduate. He thought it was cool, but it meant nothing to him really—it wouldn't help him pay his skate fees or the rent, it wouldn't put food on the table, it wasn't something necessary. He doesn't even have a computer at home—what good was it to him outside of school?

But a thrill races through him as his own image stares back from Ryan's computer screen, a great shot really, him leaning against the railing at the rink, the ice lit behind him, his hair falling gently to frame his face. He has a faint smile and even from here he can see the smoldering look in his eyes, the *come hither* look that was meant for Ryan—is the boy *blind*? Can he not *see* that, the way Dante looks at him? Every picture should be like that, every shot he was staring through the camera, willing Ryan to see something more in the lens than just a friend. What else does he have to do to clue Ryan into the fact that he *likes* him?

“Wow.” Dante crawls across the bed to sit up on the edge by the computer so he can get a closer look. Almost unconsciously, he leans on the arm of Ryan's chair, leans close to the screen, until he can see his own goofy grin reflected back at him over the picture. “You did this last night?” When Ryan nods, Dante laughs. “It's awesome.”

His name across the top, *Dante Espinosa*. Beneath that, *The Hottest Thing on the Ice!*, a tagline worthy of any major newspaper. Then his image, filling the main part of the page. A little write-up about him—*When he's on the ice, the crowd goes wild. With that mane of dark hair, those heartthrob eyes, he's more rock star than speedskater, but he can fill the stands and never disappoints. Dante Espinosa skates like the wind, whipping across the ice and leaving his opponents behind...* “You wrote that?” Dante asks. Ryan used the word *heart-throb* to describe him, Dante likes that.

“It's just something to fill up space,” Ryan says softly. Dante turns to smile at him and suddenly he's all too aware of how close they

really are right this moment, mere inches apart—he can feel Ryan’s breath on his neck, and his hair casts a shadow across his friend’s face where it falls to block the light from the computer screen. *I could kiss you now*, Dante thinks, studying Ryan’s mouth. *What would you do if I did that? Push me away, kiss me back?* Ryan’s tongue licks out between his lips, wetting them, and Dante tells himself he’s going to do it, he *has* to. He’s never been this shy before. Ryan’s eyes slip closed—*see?* Dante thinks, leaning closer. His hand covers Ryan’s on the arm of the wheelchair. *He wants you to.*

A knock on the door stops him, and then Mrs. Talonovich’s bubbly voice calls out, “Ryan, dear? I have milk and donuts for you boys. Open up.”

Ryan sighs. “Mom,” he starts, but the moment is lost and he pulls the chair away from Dante, heading for the door. “She’s going to be interrupting us all day long, I just know it.”

Dante forces a thin laugh as he stands. Pushing the hair out of his eyes, he sits on the edge of the bed again, smiles at Ryan’s mom when his friend opens the door and she comes into the room, a tray in her hands. *Almost*, he thinks as she sets the tray down on a coffee table. *He was going to let you kiss him, he wanted you to. Almost.*

He wonders what he can say or do to get the moment back.

CHAPTER 5



Ryan wonders how they can possibly get back to where they were before his mother interrupted them. Mere inches apart, he *saw* the look in Dante's eyes, he *saw* the way his friend studied him, his nose, his mouth. He could almost taste the kiss, and it would be a hundred times sweeter than Noah's hurried press of lips, it would be amazing. He can still feel Dante's hand on his, the fingers curling into his palm.

He closed his eyes, so sure this was it, one kiss and the words would come tumbling out, Dante would say the things Ryan himself feels in his heart and the nervousness between them would fade, the awkwardness would disappear. Then Dante would kiss him again, they'd lie together on the bed in each other's arms, their faces close and their noses touching, and Dante would kiss him *again*. Ryan's lips tingle in anticipation.

But his mom had to ruin the moment. How old is he? Nineteen, and she comes knocking with donuts and milk like he's two. She'll probably knock again at noon with sandwiches and lemonade, ask Dante if he wants to stay for dinner. If he wasn't in this chair—

You would have never met him, he tells himself and that's true, he probably wouldn't have. But he shops at Later Skater, eventually he would've seen him, and given the easy friendship that's bloomed between them, he's positive they would have struck up a conversa-

tion. And he'd be in the dorm, with a little more privacy, and he could have invited Dante there...

But if you weren't stuck in this thing, a voice inside his head wants to know, *would you have the time to get to know someone like him?* Before the accident, if it wasn't hockey, Ryan wasn't interested. Now he has nothing *but* time, and Dante has slid into place in his life almost effortlessly, as if they're simply meant to be friends. *Or more...* He tries to think of anything, anything at all, to get Dante leaning back over him again, to get his friend looking his way, to get him to go through with the kiss this time.

If that was Dante's intention all along—as the morning wears on and Dante doesn't make another move, Ryan begins to wonder if maybe he's misread the signs. Maybe Dante's just very friendly, maybe Ryan saw more in his smile than he intended—when Ryan closed his eyes, so sure the moment was right, this was *it*, maybe Dante pulled back and it's a good thing his mother interrupted them after all. Maybe Dante doesn't feel the same way Ryan does.

And maybe he's just scared. Ryan watches Dante flip through the scrapbook his mother compiled of his first year on the hockey team, a book of photos and news clippings and programs from the games, and wonders if someone like Dante *gets* scared. He wonders if he's anything to be frightened of. *Maybe he's scared you'll turn him away. Maybe he doesn't want to go further because he's afraid of losing what you've already gained.* Ryan doesn't know, and he hates that little voice inside and its *maybes*. Would it be so hard to just say, *look, I like you, do you like me too?* Like in elementary school, write a note to a crush and pass it around the room during class, *circle yes or no*. Would that be so bad?

Only he's not brave enough to be that blunt and the later it gets, the more his courage shrivels inside of him like the dying flowers on his desk, until he's convinced himself that Dante's simply being a friend, nothing more, and that near-kiss was just a figment of his imagination.



Ryan creates a stats page for Dante's web site, scanning in an old hockey card and editing it until Dante's picture fills the border. "Now you're a collector's item," he tells his friend, who lies on his stomach on Ryan's bed, leafing through the latest issue of *Sports Illustrated*. Ryan glances at him and his heart stops in his chest to see that wavy hair fall so gently over Dante's shoulders. He wonders if that dark length is as soft to the touch as it appears.

Looking up from the magazine, Dante grins at Ryan. "How much do you think I'm worth?" he jokes.

Ryan's smile falters. *It's stuff like that*, he thinks, staring at his friend, *that makes me think you want more than this*. Is this just the way he is, this open, this flirtatious? Or does he mean something by it? Ryan wishes he knew.

"I'm just kidding," Dante says, sitting up. He climbs across the bed to look at his makeshift sports card on the computer screen. At the edge of the mattress he reaches out, leans on the back of Ryan's wheelchair to support himself, his hand resting lightly against Ryan's shoulder. "I like it. Do you?"

Ryan likes the slight touch. He likes the closeness, his friend in the space that no one else seems to want to invade now that he's in a wheelchair. Even his mother doesn't want to hug him or touch him when he's in it, as if it's an armor locking him away from the rest of the world. Dante's the only one not afraid of the contraption. He's the only one this barrier doesn't seem to keep out.

"Ryan?" Dante prompts, rubbing along his friend's back with a quick motion as if to rouse him. "What do you think? Are you gonna put it online?"

"Yeah." It's the only word Ryan trusts himself to say. His eyes slip close at his friend's touch.

Dante's hand cups the nape of his neck, his fingers working at the muscles behind Ryan's ears, stiff and sore from sitting all the damn

time. His other hand finds a tense spot between Ryan's shoulders and rubs it away. "You like that?" he murmurs, his voice low, his hands working, working into Ryan's flesh. Ryan nods, yes, he loves it, he'll dream of this tonight, these hands on his neck and shoulders and lower, these hands on his body.

Continuing his massage, Dante moves his hands over Ryan's shoulders and down his arms, kneads through the sweatshirt he wears. The tension slips from his body—he's never felt like this before, this relaxed, this soothed, therapy *never* does this to him. *You should talk to my doctor*, Ryan thinks, but he can't find the words, he can't speak, he doesn't want to scare this moment away.

As Dante's hands move up to his shoulders again, his thumbs rubbing at the hard knots tied into his muscles, Ryan leans back, savoring this. He imagines the both of them naked, he lying on his stomach and Dante straddling him, bare skin pressed against bare skin, his friend's legs on either side of his hips and secret flesh sitting tight against his buttocks. He imagines these same hands working into him then, kneading him, massaging everything else away. He leans his head back further, the hint of a smile curved on his face, and feels Dante's hands rub into the fold of his neck.

Tender lips close over his, softer than he believed possible. Could a boy be this gentle? This sweet? His only experience was a heated exchange in the dark but this, this barely-there kiss, these hands on his shoulders, *this* is nothing like that was, this is simply wonderful. Dante's hair falls to brush along Ryan's cheeks, his hands continue their slow and steady massage, his mouth covers Ryan's and with every breath he takes, he can smell his friend's scent, a mix of sweat and sharp, clean soap that reminds him of the ice. He doesn't dare open his eyes.

When Dante pulls away, his voice is gruff with an emotion Ryan can only guess at. "I'm sorry," he starts, standing.

"Don't be." Turning in his chair, Ryan looks at his friend and hopes everything he can't say can be read in his eyes. *Don't stop*, he

prays. He catches Dante's hand before it can slip away from the back of his chair, holds the warm wrist tight to keep him here. *Do it again*, he wants to add. *Kiss me again, Dante. Please.* But he can't.

He can't.

But Dante smiles now, a sunny grin that melts away all of Ryan's indecision and fear. He sits on the edge of the bed and takes Ryan's hand in both of his, strokes his fingers and stares at him, studies him until Ryan thinks he's going to beg in a minute if he has to, anything for another kiss. Then Dante looks down at the hand in his, watches his fingers smooth down the lengths of Ryan's own, and he says softly, "You know I like you, right?"

It feels like there's a balloon in his chest, swelling until Ryan can't breathe, rising in him until he's sure he'll simply float out of this chair and up to the ceiling—the only thing holding him down is Dante's hands on his. *You know I like you, right? You know*—with a laugh, Ryan tells him, "I guess I sort of do now."

That makes his friend smile. Ryan likes the feel of Dante's fingers stroking his, it makes him imagine them curving along other places, hidden flesh that's beginning to throb for the touch. Ryan feels himself blushing again, he's not usually this bad, but those eyes, that smile, it's like looking into a mirror and seeing his own whirlwind of thoughts reflected back. *You know I like you, right?* How easy would it be to tell Dante he feels the same? Why can't he think of anything witty or sexy or coy or hell, anything at *all*, to say in return?

He doesn't have to. Dante reaches out, touches Ryan's face with one tentative hand, and Ryan leans into his friend's palm, closes his eyes again. This time when lips brush over his, he's ready, and he holds his breath as a gentle tongue licks into him, eager and hungry and bracing like the ice on a hot day in August. He tastes sugary from the donuts they ate earlier and as they kiss, he holds Ryan's chin in his palm to keep him close, as if he doesn't want to let him go. His other hand tightens in Ryan's then rubs at his forearm, the crook of his elbow, his wrist.

When they break apart, Dante rests his forehead on Ryan's and stares into him, his hand curving around the back of Ryan's neck to keep him here. A smile toys at the edges of his mouth and under that intense gaze, Ryan feels his cheeks heat up again. "Damn," he whispers. Dante laughs, breathless.

"You ever been kissed before?" Dante wants to know. He speaks low because it's just them—the rest of the world has disappeared.

With a shy smile, Ryan admits, "Not like *that*."

Dante's response is another kiss, this one just as tender, and then another, and another. Somewhere between one kiss and the next, Ryan's nervousness slips away and the next time their lips part, he tells Dante that he likes him, too. "I sort of figured that out," Dante replies.

That sets them both giggling and leads to more kisses.



The web site is forgotten. Ryan sets the brake on his chair and climbs onto the bed beside Dante who lies him down, props himself up on one elbow above him, runs his fingers through Ryan's thin hair. More kisses, sweet and lingering, nothing rushed, nothing fast. A hand on his chest, warm and heavy, caught between both of his. Fingers laced together, a gentle tongue, the length of Dante's body pressed against him. He wants to stay like this all day, if not forever.

But Dante glances at the clock and sighs, he has to get to work. "Can I call you tonight?" he asks, kissing the freckles on Ryan's cheek.

"What time?" Ryan wants to know. He brushes the hair back from Dante's face, tucks a strand behind his ear—yes, it's just as soft as he imagined, and it smells clean and fresh.

Dante leans into Ryan's hand, kisses his palm, his thumb, his wrist. "After work," he whispers. With a laugh, he adds, "I don't need Bobby to bitch me out again."

Bobby. Ryan knows the guy by sight, he owns the skate shop, but he's never really spoken with him before. But after what Dante's said about his boss's silly crush, Ryan already knows he doesn't like him. Tracing the curve of Dante's jaw, Ryan tells him, "One day, when I'm out of that chair? I'm coming down there and telling him to keep his damn hands to himself." Dante laughs again and Ryan smiles faintly, not sure what his friend finds so funny. "What?"

"You're cute," Dante murmurs. When Ryan tries to protest, he kisses the words from his lips. "I'll call you tonight, about 9:30 or so, how's that?"

Ryan nods. "I don't want you to go yet," he admits. "Maybe tomorrow—"

Another kiss. Ryan likes that Dante feels the need to punctuate every other word with a press of his lips to some part of Ryan's face, his lips or his chin or his cheeks, he likes the way Dante's breath tickles across his skin, how his mouth feels hot and damp on him. "I'm off tomorrow," Dante says. "I gotta practice, though. Can we meet at the rink?"

Ryan has therapy at ten and that usually wipes him out for the rest of the day, but he's never had someone like this waiting for him afterwards, he's never had anything to do after his appointment before. "I can meet you early," he says. "Like yesterday? I have to leave by ten—"

"Therapy," Dante says, nodding. "I know."

Ryan likes that he remembered. "But I'll try to come back, how's that? It's only about an hour or so, usually. How long does the skate club stay?"

With a shrug, Dante tells him, "Most everyone leaves by noon, but I need all the time I can get out on that ice." His lips cover Ryan's again, impossibly soft. In a whisper, he adds, "But when it's just you and me after they're gone..." He trails off, letting Ryan's mind finish the thought.

He thinks of the stands, row after row of darkened seats draped in shadow. He thinks of the wrestling mats stacked up along the halls leading to the locker rooms, of the benches in front of row after row of lockers, of the showers and he has to stop there, that's too much thought right now, it's overwhelming. Dante naked beneath the hard spray of water, his body covered in suds, his hair slicked back and wet. No, he *definitely* shouldn't be thinking *that*.

Dante sees his smile and grins. "You're thinking what I'm thinking," he purrs, his nose rubbing against the earring Ryan wears high on the curve of his ear. "I'll call you tonight."

"Tonight," Ryan agrees, but it takes another ten minutes for Dante to pull himself away. As he stands, he steals another kiss or three, Ryan's not sure, he's lost count.

At the door to his room, Dante gives him one last, long look, that slight smile still on his lips. "I don't know if this is sudden to you," he starts. Ryan shakes his head, no, it feels as if he's wanted the boy for *years* already, there's nothing sudden about this. "But maybe?" Dante continues. "Maybe I can call you my boy, if that's okay with you."

Ryan laughs. "That's fine," he says. *My boy*, he likes that.

Dante leans across the bed for one last kiss. "So now you're my boy, too," Ryan whispers, and that gets them giggling again. "Go on," he tells Dante. "You're going to be late."

"I have a good excuse," Dante replies.



He calls a little before 9:30, like he said he would. Just came in the door too, from the sound of it, he's breathless and tired, Ryan can hear it in his voice. "You need to get to bed," he tells Dante. "If you're going to skate tomorrow—"

"I'll be fine," Dante promises. Lowering his voice, he says, "You're all I thought about tonight."

The words trill through him. Ryan's never had a guy tell him that before. After their interrupted tryst last semester, Noah never men-

tioned it the few times he passed Ryan on campus, never stopped to tell him he thought about him, never stopped to ask if he wanted to get together again. Ryan lies on his bed, stares at the ceiling, listens to Dante's breath in his ear and remembers his kisses like candy, so sweet and so damn addicting. *This* is what he's always wanted in a relationship, this rushing into the house to call him, this thinking about him all day long. Even though he's alone in his room and the lights are out, he whispers as he admits, "I can't taste anything else but you."

That doesn't come out sounding quite the way he wanted, but it gets a laugh from Dante, one that brings a faint blush to Ryan's face. "I didn't mean—"

"Have I told you how cute you are yet?" Dante asks. Ryan feels his cheeks burn and before he can answer, his friend adds, "You're blushing, aren't you? Don't answer that if you don't want to. I miss you."

"You'll see me tomorrow," Ryan reminds him but to be honest? He misses Dante, too. He's already wondering if he can talk his parents into letting his friend stay the night sometime. It sounds childish and the last thing he wants is to encourage his mother's current belief that he's reverted back to a helpless baby again, but there's a lock on his door and the hospital bed is big enough for two.

"Tomorrow's not soon enough," Dante says with a sigh. "Do you know Bobby tried to put me back on the schedule tonight? He goes you're not doing anything tomorrow, are you? And I'm like um, I have plans, *muchacho*. Me and my boy—"

Ryan laughs. "You told him that?" he asks, incredulous. What he wouldn't give to see Bobby's face at that moment, *my boy*, as if *he* ever stood a chance. *You didn't think you did, remember?* a voice inside says, but he stifles it quickly. Dante likes him, *him*, not Bobby and not that girl with the blonde braid at the rink and nobody but *him*. "You're going to get fired."

“For what, because I won’t put out for him?” Dante’s laughing, too—through the phone it’s a wondrous sound that fills Ryan with the desire to see him again, now, tonight. If he wasn’t in the chair, he could take the car and get with him right this second, taste those lips again, feel those hands on his body, fist his hands in that hair.

“I want to see you again,” Ryan admits. “Like now.”

“You sound like me,” Dante tells him. “What did you say? You’ll see me tomorrow?”

His own words, dammit. “How early?” Ryan wants to know. “I can be there by seven—”

“I can’t,” Dante says, “unless I get to bed now. Seven? You sure?” When Ryan murmurs his assent, Dante warns, “Don’t leave me hanging, *novio*. Seven sharp, or I’ll hunt you down and kiss you breathless.”

“That might not be such a bad thing,” Ryan laughs.



The next morning, the city bus leaves Dante at the curb just as Ryan’s mother is parking in front of the rink. “There’s your friend,” she says when she open the van’s side door and activates the mechanical lift. Ryan hates the whine of the motor as it works to set his wheelchair down on the pavement.

“Hey,” Ryan calls out. Dante, wearing sweats and that leather jacket of his, kicks at the ground as he walks. When he looks up and sees Ryan, his smile warms the cold morning air.

Coming up to their van, he winks at Ryan. “Hey yourself.” With a grin at Mrs. Talonovich, he takes Ryan’s backpack from her and throws it over his shoulder, where his own bag rests. “How are you two doing?”

“Fine,” Ryan’s mother says with a laugh—she likes Dante. Ryan wonders how much she’d like him if she knew they were together now. *He’s my boy, Mom*, Ryan wants to say, but he doesn’t think that’ll go over too well. As far as he knows, his parents don’t know he

likes guys. He plans to keep it that way for as long as possible. After this accident, it's the last thing they need on their minds.

Leaning down over the back of Ryan's wheelchair, Dante whispers, "And you? Are you doing fine today, too?"

Ryan feels Dante's hands folded against his shoulders, he smells his friend's shower fresh scent, and however well he thought he was doing before is increased tenfold. He's falling, plain and simple, and if his mother wasn't standing right here, he'd lean back and kiss his boy, he's eager for those lips again, that mouth, that tongue. Falling? Who's he kidding? He already fell.

When it's obvious they're waiting for an answer, his mother and Dante both, Ryan flashes them a sunny grin and says, "Doing good. Better, actually." He looks up at Dante and tells him, "A *lot* better." He hopes his friend gets his drift.

Leaning over his shoulder, Dante presses his lips to Ryan's ear in a quick kiss. "Me too," he whispers, and did his mother see that? Ryan glances up at her, his heart in his throat, but she's busy with getting the lift folded back into the van, she's not paying any attention to them.

"Dante," Ryan warns, and he shakes his head just slightly. He doesn't know what his friend's mother is like, if she knows about his sexuality, if it bothers her or not, but he doesn't want to have to explain anything right now. Still, it's hard to look into Dante's sparkling eyes and not feel a rush at the tiny kiss, or a hunger for more.

With a laugh, Dante wipes Ryan's ear as if wiping the kiss away. "Sorry," he murmurs. Then he takes the handlebars of Ryan's chair in both hands and asks, "Can I push?"

Ryan starts to object. He's not used to anyone helping him along. But this is *Dante*... "Sure," he says.

Dante grins. "We'll see you later, Mrs. Talonovich," he calls out. Ryan grips the arms of his chair as Dante pushes him towards the ramp that leads into the rink.

"I'll be back at 9:30," his mother says. "Ryan, don't forget—"

“Therapy,” Ryan sighs. “I know, Mom.” Lowering his voice, he mumbles, “Jesus.”

Dante laughs. “You’re coming back, right?” he asks. He holds the door to the rink open so Ryan can wheel himself inside.

“I’m going to try,” Ryan tells him. He knows therapy usually wipes him out, and today he plans on telling the doctor in no uncertain terms that he wants to walk again—he finally has a boyfriend and can’t do shit with him because he’s stuck in this damn chair. So he doesn’t know how he’ll feel after the session is over, but he thinks he *might* be able to come back to the rink, if he tells himself he can. It’s all in the way he looks at it, right? If he thinks he can do it, he shouldn’t have any problems getting his body to obey.

And he wants to come back, more than anything else. He wants to be alone with his boy, with Dante, watching him on the ice from the player box, stealing kisses when he skates close, that skin-tight suit he wears accentuating every plane of his body, every muscle, every curve. He wants to feel the chill air off the ice on his face again, and he wants to see Dante’s cheeks pinked with exertion, his hair damp with sweat. Yes, he’s definitely going to come back this afternoon. There’s no *try* about it.

Inside the rink, Ryan waits while Dante pays his skate fee at the ticket booth. “I can get that for you,” Ryan tells him. He has plenty of money now that he can’t really go anywhere to spend it himself.

But Dante won’t hear of it. “I’m fine,” he says, shoving a small wad of dollars into a pocket inside his jacket. “Just got paid, remember?” He eases Ryan’s chair through the open doors that lead to the seats. Below them, the ice glistens wetly in the lights, the zamboni finishing its round as Dante stops in the shadows, behind the last row. When Ryan looks up at him, confused, Dante drapes his arms around Ryan’s neck and breathes into his ear, “Finally.”

And then his mouth is on Ryan’s, demanding, his tongue insistent as it parts Ryan’s lips and licks into him. Ryan leans back against Dante’s shoulder, fists a hand in his friend’s thick hair, moans softly

into him. Yes, finally, *this* is what he's been waiting for since they said goodbye yesterday afternoon, this insatiable press of lips, this kiss. He doesn't want it to end, he doesn't want to break away—

They hear the telltale *clack clack* of skates on the ice and Dante pulls back. He looks at Ryan with hooded eyes, his hair falling in waves on either side of his face, his lips pursed and damp. "If I didn't need to practice," he murmurs, his voice low and throaty, "we could just blow this off and go somewhere private, you know?"

"If I didn't have therapy," Ryan adds. They could go back to his room, lock the door, lie together like they did yesterday, maybe go further than the day before.

But they can't. Dante sighs and pushes Ryan down the aisle to the landing. As he takes the seat beside him, Ryan notices Jacoby out on the ice, looking their way, and he can almost hear what he'd say. "*You should be careful about that guy*," like he did with Noah. Ryan wonders if Jacoby saw the kiss and if so, what he's thinking now. He'll have to talk to him about it if he moves back on campus—when he's out of this chair—because he'll invite Dante up to the room and Jacoby's just going to have to deal, that's all there is to it.

You're jumping ahead of yourself here, he thinks. Sure, he'll be out of the chair, though he doesn't know when, but Jacoby might get a new roommate by then, it might not even come to that, he just has to wait and see. And he really hates waiting.

Like now, he can't touch Dante, not in this faint light, not where someone might see. He can't take his hand or run his fingers through his hair, he can't kiss him again. Why are they even here? *He has to practice*, he reminds himself. *Quarterfinals are tomorrow and if he wants to go onto State, he has to practice*. Digging out the digital camera from his backpack, Ryan asks, "How much does it cost to skate tomorrow?"

"Twenty," Dante says. Before Ryan can offer, he adds, "Don't worry, I've got it. You're coming, right?"

"Oh yeah," Ryan assures him. "And you're going to win."

Dante laughs. “Damn straight.” Sobering up, he frowns at the hockey players on the ice and admits, “Then I just have to come up with the money for State.”

“How much is that?” Ryan wants to know. He has money if Dante needs it. He knows he’ll pay him back. Is it asking too much to let him help out a little?

With a shrug, Dante says, “I’m not sure. It’s a few days in Atlantic City, actually. Registration covers you and a guest, the bus, the hotel, and the competition. But my mom won’t go—she can’t take three days off of work—so maybe they’ll give me a discount if I drop the guest? I have to find out. It’s like two hundred dollars for two.”

Ryan fiddles with the lens on the camera. He’s seen Dante skate, he knows the boy will make it to State. And he can’t imagine his friend *not* going—to get that far and not be able to go just because he doesn’t have the money? That’s unfair. Softly, he asks, “Can you afford it?”

Dante shrugs again and picks at the leg of his sweatpants, a slight frown still worried into his face. “I don’t know,” he whispers. “They’re next week. If I work hella overtime at the shop and don’t skate at all until then, I might make it. I might.”

Despite the fact that they aren’t alone, Ryan covers Dante’s hand with his own, slips his fingers into his friend’s palm, squeezes until he looks up at him. Then he smiles and says, “I can spot you, if you need me to.” When Dante starts to protest, Ryan cuts him off. “I’ve got some money—the school reimbursed my tuition when I had to withdraw from my classes this semester. I know you’re good for it.”

“Thanks,” Dante murmurs. Then he leans close and grins, a wicked gleam in his eyes. “I’m good for a lot of things,” he adds with a wink. “If you know what I mean.”

Ryan thinks he does.



When the team leaves the ice, Dante stands and stretches languidly. “How long do you think we have before someone else comes along?” he asks, and as Ryan starts to answer, he leans down over him and kisses the words away. A quick kiss, secret, and he runs a hand over Ryan’s hair, smiling. “You’re coming back.”

“I am,” Ryan agrees. He touches Dante’s arm before his friend pulls away. “I’m going to fill this camera with pictures of you.”

Dante laughs. “Your coach will wonder why you’re not working on the team’s site.”

Poking Dante playfully in the stomach, Ryan tells him, “I’ve found something better to do.”

Dante catches his hand. “You found me.” Raising Ryan’s hand to his face, he presses his mouth to the smooth knuckles and grins, his lips curving against Ryan’s fingers. “Maybe after I’m done skating we can do something later. Go out somewhere, maybe, or just hang out together. If that’s cool with you?”

If. “Of course it is,” Ryan says. “As long as you kiss me—”

“As long as you let me.” Dante’s eyes dance in the light off the ice, so alive, so humorous, as if he knows Ryan can’t possibly say no to that. Another kiss and then Dante says, “I should get down there. The skate club will start coming in another half hour or so.”

“Go.” Ryan gives Dante a gentle shove and as he passes by, he swats at Dante’s butt. Dante laughs again and slaps his hand, and Ryan turns in his chair to see him leave. At the doors, Dante looks back, gives him a wink, and Ryan calls out, “See you in a little bit.”

Then he’s gone. Ryan settles back in his chair, watches the images in the camera scroll across the LED display—mostly player 15, the one Jacoby says is the team’s next big star. He can be gracious about that now, he’s not so angry at the coach for replacing him so soon. The game has to go on, right? The world didn’t stop just for him.

He looks up as Dante takes the ice, his sweats discarded, his jacket gone. Now his hair is hidden beneath the football-shaped helmet that the speedskaters use, the yellow covering bright and sunny out there against the white ice. Ryan smiles at the skinsuit his boy wears—*his boy*, God, that sounds wonderful. He likes the body-hugging fabric, the second skin that shows off Dante's strong legs, his round ass, the bulge at his crotch. As he starts around the rink, he waves up at Ryan, who raises a hand in return. *My boy*. He raises the camera to snap off a few shots as Dante picks up speed.

Behind him, footsteps echo down the aisle. Ryan looks up from the camera, surprised, when Jacoby sinks into the seat beside him. "Hey," he says, nodding at the railing in front of them. He doesn't look Ryan's way.

"Hey," Ryan murmurs. He didn't expect Jacoby to stop by after practice. Truth be told, he's begun to wonder if anyone on the team even remembers him—the coach hasn't called, none of the other players look at him in the stands, he doesn't even get e-mails about the changes he's made to the web site. Lowering the camera to his lap, Ryan closes the lens cover and thinks maybe it isn't a good idea for Jacoby to see him taking pictures of Dante. It's not really his camera.

Frowning out at the ice, which Dante's begun to circle at a break-neck pace, Jacoby asks, "Who's your friend?"

Your friend, the way he says it, Ryan knows what he's thinking. *Your boyfriend*, he should just come right out and say it, get it out in the open between them and wait for Ryan to confirm or deny it. "Dante," Ryan whispers. "He's in the skate club."

Jacoby nods as if he already knew that. "They've assigned someone else to my room," he says softly. "Since you're not coming back this semester...I just thought you should know."

A new roommate. This is it, Ryan thinks wildly—the end of their friendship. They met two summers ago when they both went out for the hockey team, he and Jacoby, and it was just luck of the draw that

housing stuck them together as roommates in the dorm their first year. They have nothing in common other than sports and the fact that neither of them has a declared major yet. But Ryan's not one to make many friends, and he spent time off the ice with Jacoby because it was easier than getting to know anyone else on campus. *But admit it, he tells himself, the end was that party, when Jacoby knew you were in the room with Noah, you're almost a hundred percent sure that he knows what you two were doing in there. He's been distant since then, hasn't he? Not inviting you out anymore, not really talking to you much in classes or the cafeteria. He knows you're gay and that makes him uncomfortable, and he's only here now because he doesn't want anyone else to tell you they've moved someone into your side of the room.*

Ryan sighs—he figured they'd fill his space, sooner or later. “That’s good then,” he murmurs, not looking at Jacoby. “I mean, right?”

With a halfhearted shrug, Jacoby tells him, “Yeah. I guess.”



Jacoby leaves before his mother arrives, which is just as well. Ryan suspects this is the last time he'll talk to his roommate—*ex-roommate*, if there even is such a thing. Sure, he might see him around campus, they might wave in passing, but they'll both keep walking, they won't look back. He almost thinks this might be the beginning of the end of his time with the team, too, but he hopes not. He'll walk again, he's planning on it, and he'll come back next season bigger and stronger and faster than ever before.

But he has to get back on his feet first. In the van, he stares out the window while his mother drives, stares at all the people walking on the sidewalk, milling at the curbs, standing and jogging and even the little girls skipping rope, the boys playing basketball, everyone's *up*. On their feet, using their legs, taking every step for granted. What would he give to be where they are right this instant? To be standing,

and running, and racing on the ice after Dante? What *wouldn't* he give?

At the doctor's, he tells the therapist he wants to walk. "You will," she tells him in that tone of voice nurses seem to have perfected, the one that assures you that everything will be alright even when you're bleeding to death. "You just have to build up your muscles again—"

"I want to walk now," Ryan says. Is that too much to ask? It's been a month, he's done his time, he wants his legs back.

He's overheard what she tells his mother—"So resistant at first," which he was. He was bitter and angry and hated therapy, hated the fact that he needed it, and the first few weeks out of the hospital, they had to use machines to work his legs, he refused to do it himself. "You need a little time," the therapist tells him now, holding his feet as he struggles to pull himself into a sit-up. He feels hot pain sear down his legs and he cries out in frustration but he's going to do it, he *has* to do it. If he's going to get better...

"I want to walk," he says again, and again, and again. Through the stupid exercises with the ball between his knees, squeezing until his legs quiver with exhaustion. Through the painfully brief stint where he stands upright, the therapist holding his arm as he grips the metal bar like a wounded ballerina. When the therapist lets go, Ryan starts counting silently, *one Mississippi two Miss*—and then he crumples into her arms, tears coursing down his cheeks. Not even two seconds, he can't even stand for two fucking *seconds* and he hopes to walk? What is he, crazy?

When it's over, he should tell his mother he wants to go back to the rink, but he can't. His body aches, his legs are engulfed in flames, his muscles scream inside of him, he hears their cries, they echo in his head and he can't see Dante like this, no matter how badly he wants to. He can't let Dante see *him*, see the pain shine in his eyes, see the tears on his face. He'll just go home like he always does after therapy and Dante will understand. Maybe he'll call later, and Ryan can tell him he just couldn't do it, he's sorry. *Sorry I can't walk*, he

thinks, glaring at his reflection in the window of the van. He ignores the people passing beyond the glass, the people *walking*, he hates them. He hates their legs, and their feet, and the fact that they're just waltzing around while he's in pain. He hates his own legs, this chair, the two damn seconds he stood alone before he fell. He hates that most of all.

At home, in his room, he closes the door and wheels to his bed, throws the brake on his chair, climbs on top of the covers and stretches out. He hates this bed, it reminds him of the hospital and therapy and he hates these pillows, cold against his skin, they warm too quickly to his heat. He hates the dampness he feels on their clean covers, the tears he's not even aware that he's shed. He hates these tears, this crying. He hates this pain that keeps him from going back to the rink today. He hates that he's let Dante down.

CHAPTER 6



The rink starts to fill up shortly after the hockey team leaves the ice—Dante has almost forty-five precious minutes to himself before the first of the skate club members come out to circle around the track with him. Josey and her girlfriends, they giggle as they follow behind Dante. But he’s fast, faster than they are, and he skates rings around them over and over again. He doesn’t even see them, really—all he sees is the ice and the track markers, all he feels is the blood pumping in his ears, the heart beating in his chest. He’s going for speed here, trying to see how many laps he can do before he gets winded, and he makes thirteen and a half in five seconds over two minutes, that’s his best time in the 1500 meters. He keeps going, takes another two laps before he feels the beginnings of a stitch in his side, but he pushes himself further, he goes farther, he takes the curves as low as he can and picks up another second on the straight track, he’s doing *awesome* time. Dimly he’s aware of other skaters keeping out of his path and the crowd already gathering to watch the practice, and at some point he sees Ryan leave, but he’s focused on his sport, the ice beneath his skates, the heat coursing through his legs. In his own mind, he’s already won the race tomorrow, he’s going to State. There’s no doubt about that.

Ten laps and he starts to slow down a bit—the ice is getting crowded now, more and more skaters taking to practice before the

first heat. By fifteen laps, he's weaving around slower skaters, losing his momentum, getting distracted. He's so easily distracted. After twenty laps, he calls it a day. He can get back on the ice once the heats are over with, when most of the skate club members head home. Ryan should be back by then. He glances at the time clock above one end of the rink and sees that it's a little after ten already—yeah, Ryan should be coming back in what, another hour? He can wait that long.

As he skates to the player box, he hears Wil Dietrich's voice behind him, over the rush of skaters passing by. It's a laugh, painful to hear, and then the word *faggot* spat like a challenge begging to be answered. *Faggot*. Dante's jaw bunches in anger and he jams the covers on his skates so hard, he slices the thin plastic easily.

But he's not going to rise to the bait. He's better than that—no use fighting with someone like Dietrich, who's just looking for an excuse to get Dante suspended from the club, and there's no quicker way to do it than to get in a fight on the ice. They're speedskaters, not hockey players. A fight and he'll be barred from racing tomorrow. Then Dietrich takes his place at State and there go his dreams. No, he's not going to fall for it.

Inside the player box, Dante shrugs into his leather jacket and refuses to look around. He can almost imagine Dietrich behind him, waiting for him to turn, waiting for his chance to say the word again and see what it does to Dante. If there wasn't so much at stake he might take the guy on, but it's him against Dietrich and one or two of his friends, he's sure they don't fight fair, and he's made it this far because he's smart. He knows when he's outnumbered, he knows when he can't win. The school he went to, he knew the bullies by sight, knew who to avoid and he's not afraid to run, if it comes to that. He has a plan, doesn't he? Win the quarters tomorrow, win State, go on to win the Olympic gold in four years, be somebody more than what everyone else here is resigned to be. He has to keep

that in mind. Getting kicked out of the skate club, getting into a fight because some ignorant bigot doesn't like him, that's not in the cards.

So he ignores Dietrich, but when the unmistakable click of skates come up behind him, he tenses for another hateful remark. Only it's not Wil this time, it's Josey who says, "Two five. That's killer, Dante."

He smiles at her over his shoulder, his eyes searching the ice for Dietrich. He sees the other skater lining up for an impromptu heat, what they call scrimmages, an informal, off-the-record race around the track, usually a short sprint like the 500, just a handful of friends trying to best each other. It keeps him away from Dante, at any rate. Seeing Josey for the first time, her eyes wide as she looks up at him and her face shiny with a thin sheen of sweat, Dante's grin takes on an embarrassed twist and he murmurs, "Thanks." He didn't think anyone else had clocked him around the track.

At Josey's bright smile, Dante nods up to the stands where Ryan had been and asked, "Did you see my friend leave?"

"The kid in the wheelchair?" Josey asks. Dante frowns at that, it sounds crude put that way. *The kid who's my boyfriend*, he should tell her. He still can't quite believe he finally found the nerve to kiss Ryan yesterday but damn, he's glad he did. Look where they are now? *My boyfriend*, and already more to him than Jared ever was. With a flip of her ponytail, Josey shakes her head. "Is he coming back?"

"Should be," Dante says. He doesn't really feel like chatting, but when he sits on the bench, she takes that as an open invite to sit beside him, close enough that she's on the edge of his jacket. He hopes it looks nonchalant when he tugs it out from beneath her leg. Nodding at the ice, he asks, "Do you race today?"

Josey shakes her head. "I'm waiting for the heat to be over," she tells him. "I need to practice. Did you see I made it to the quarters?"

Actually no, he didn't know that, but Josey's one of the faster girls in Group C so he's not surprised. "That's good," he tells her, unbuckling the helmet strap beneath his chin. When he takes the helmet off, he runs a hand through his hair to shake it out, and he's painfully

aware of her watching him with those wide eyes. He knows what she's thinking. *Ryan, please*, he prays, glancing at the clock again. If he were here, Dante could brush Josey off easily, but what's he going to tell her now?

Another hour, if that. Then he'll be with his boy again. It's not that far away at all.



By quarter to twelve, the ice starts to clear, the heats over for the day and the skaters heading home. Dante glances up into the stands at the empty landing and wonders where Ryan is. Therapy's only an hour, right? And he said he'd come back, he said he'd *try*, but maybe it was too much for him, maybe he's worn out and doesn't feel up to returning to the rink today. How would Dante know?

He could call the house, see if Ryan's there. Just tell him he understands if he can't make it out again, he knows how debilitating therapy can be. When he cut his arm, the therapist wanted him to work the muscles by writing his name, over and over and over, until he was sure that the stitches holding his skin closed would pop. Simply holding the pen was excruciating. If Ryan's legs feel like that, Dante knows he won't be coming back anytime soon.

Still, he'd like to talk to him again. A few minutes on the phone, what would it hurt? The ice isn't completely free yet, he can take a quick break, run out to the phones in the lobby, call and by the time he comes back, maybe everyone will be gone. As he stands he sees Josey in a scrimmage with a couple of boys from Group A, laughing as she whizzes by the player box, and on the far side of the rink, Dietrich leans against the boards, talking with Pennock but looking his way. Dante ignores the hot stare, the half-heard whispers he swears reach out for him across the ice. *Faggot*, he still hears the word. He hears Dietrich's mean laughter—from the corner of his eye, he sees him nudge Pennock, nod his way, and as the racers com-

plete another lap, the two skaters start circling the rink. Watching him. Coming over here.

Dante doesn't want to know why.

He's changed from his blades to sneakers, and sweatpants once again cover his legs. He can just leave now, really—he got in a few hours' practice this morning, that's all he needs. He doesn't need to linger here, not if Dietrich is going to stay on the ice looking for a fight. His heart quickens in his chest as Pennock climbs over the boards at the far end of the player box. When Dietrich says something that makes him look at Dante and laugh, it's time to go.

The lowest level of the rink, where the locker rooms and showers are, is too vacant at this hour for Dante's tastes—the skating club officials are gone now, just a handful of skaters left, no one to stop Dietrich from doing anything if he catches Dante alone. Not that Dante's worried—he's not, he tells himself he can take on Dietrich and hell, Pennock too, if he has to—but he'd rather not take the chance. In the locker room, with no witnesses? What's to stop Dietrich from claiming Dante started it?

No, he's not going to give that jerk the satisfaction of seeing him kicked out of the club. Instead of heading through the locker rooms, Dante swings his bag over his shoulder, grabs onto the railing above him, and pulls himself up onto Ryan's landing. As he swings his legs over, he glances down and sees the anger in Dietrich's face...yeah, he has that kid pegged. A fight in the back where no one can see, Pennock there to corroborate his tale, that's what he's planned and Dante's not playing his game. *Tough shit*, Dante thinks, hurrying up the aisle to the double doors that still stand open. *I've got better things to do today than fuck around with you.*

Like find out how Ryan's doing. He'd be lying if he said he wasn't worried, and just talking to his boy again will set his mind at ease. *His boy*. He still can't believe they're like *that*, and so quickly, too. Every guy who ever looked his way, Jared and Bobby and everyone

else in the entire world, is gone. There's just Ryan, and that's all Dante needs.

He hears footsteps, quick and eager to catch up with him, and he doesn't have to look back to know it's Dietrich. Picking up the pace, Dante begins to fumble through his pockets for spare change while he looks around for a payphone—surely there's one on this level. Near the ticket office, maybe? Near the elevator? Near—

He's suddenly aware that this level, too, is deserted. The girl he paid his skate fee to earlier is gone, the ticket booth empty. Something clatters down the corridor, a janitor making his rounds maybe, but Dante doesn't see anyone. It's just him and the two guys behind him, closing the distance quicker than he'd like to admit.

So forget the phone. Forget the ice, forget practice, forget *everything* but getting out of here while he still can. He doesn't need to be kicked from the team because of a stupid fight. And what if things get out of control? He's not going to be another statistic. He's made it this far in life despite the mean streets and the tough kids he grew up with and he's not going to let some rich ass like Dietrich take him out. He has too much riding on the race tomorrow to take any chances now.

He crosses the lobby with long strides—not too fast, he doesn't want to look like he's running away, but he doesn't dawdle either. He hears the squeal of Dietrich's shoe on the linoleum flooring, hears Pennock laugh again under his breath. The doors are ahead and beyond the glass, the parking lot. The bus should be coming by any minute...

He hits the glass, hard, shoves out into the bright winter sun and turns his collar up against the cold wind that tickles down his neck. "Hey Espinosa!" Dietrich calls out, pushing through the door after him. "Where you going? We just want to talk to you."

Yeah, right. Dante's pretty sure he doesn't want to hear whatever it is Wil Dietrich has to say. Huddling into his jacket, he starts out

across the parking lot, sees the bus turn onto the street a few blocks down, *thank the Lord*—"Hey, Dante!"

Dietrich's close now, *too* close, and when Dante glances over his shoulder, he sees his fears written out in the other skater's hard eyes. Dietrich would take one of his arms, Pennock the other, they'd look like three friends out for a walk until they got to the Corvette that Dietrich's father gave him for graduation. Then these two, they'd shove him into the back, take off with him kicking and screaming while they laugh—it'd be fun for them. Fun, when they stop the car somewhere isolated, the woods outside of town or a back alley somewhere, a place they won't be seen. Fun, when they start to hit him, or when they use the blades on the ends of their skates to cut him open. *Fun*, when they leave him there alone and bleeding and crying out for help.

"Come on, Espinosa," Dietrich hisses, reaching for him. His fingers close over the sleeve of Dante's jacket and that's all he needs to spur him into action. Twisting free, he takes off, racing across the parking lot and he doesn't care if he's running away, he doesn't care who sees him, he's fast and he knows it, he's always been faster than the others, *always*. He hears an angry shout behind him—this surprised them, Dietrich didn't think he'd run—and then the wind rushes in his ears, erases the day around him, the boys hurrying to catch up, the *whoosh* of air brakes as the bus slows at the curb. The pounding of his heart fills him, blocks out the thoughts whirling through his mind and the images he saw in Dietrich's face, images of himself lying in his own blood and the guys standing over him, laughing and calling him words like *faggot* and *queer* because he's in love with Ryan. *In love*, yes, he's in love, and *fuck* Dietrich and Pennock for making him feel this fear, fuck them both for making him run.

Breathless, he races onto the bus just as the doors start to close. The driver glares at him in the mirror above her seat—she's told him before she has a schedule to keep, she can't be waiting for him all the

time. That's because Bobby keeps him late in the evenings, just so he can give Dante a ride home after the last bus, and Dante asked the driver if she would wait three extra minutes for him one night, just three minutes, that's all. "I do it for you," she told him, cracking her gum, "and I have to do it for all of them. Sorry, kid. You can't make it to the stop in time, you can walk home."

Now, though, Dante's glad she's such a hardass, because the bus pulls away from the curb just as Dietrich and Pennock reach the stop. Sinking into an empty seat right behind the driver, Dante stares at them through the window, his heart hammering in his throat, his hands shaking in fear or anger, he's not sure which. "There's another bus in five minutes," the driver tells him, as if he asked. "Your friends can take that one. I told you I ain't waiting."

They're not my friends, Dante thinks, but he doesn't bother to tell her that.



He doesn't go home. He'll only pace the small apartment, there's too much energy coursing unspent through his body right now and he doesn't want to be alone. He could go by the shop, replace the blade cover he split, but then Bobby might change his mind and ask him to come in for a few hours, and Dante's not ready to give up his day off just yet. *Ryan*, he thinks, and he knows where he wants to be.

When the bus stops in front of Ryan's subdivision, Dante gets out, his legs still trembling slightly. He can't believe Dietrich chased him—he doesn't even want to *think* about what would have happened if they actually caught up to him. He's going to have to watch himself now. The last thing he needs is for Wil to pull a Tonya Harding on him before the quarters, take out his one shot at State. He *won't* let that happen.

Without his roller blades, the walk to Ryan's house is longer than he remembers but he navigates the streets easily enough. The van is parked in his friend's driveway, where he suspected it would be, and

at the sight of it, Dante breaks into a run again. Suddenly he wants to hold Ryan close, let his hands and kisses smooth away the bitterness pooling in his heart. Up the steps, *clomp clomp clomp*, ring the bell, stand back breathless as Mrs. Talonovich answers the door. She takes one look at Dante and her smile falters. Looking past him, she asks, “What’s got into you?”

Dante can’t answer. “Is Ryan here?” he asks instead, even though he knows he is, he has to be. Before she replies, he adds, “Can I see him?”

“He’s not feeling real well,” she starts, but she stands aside and lets him into the dark hall.

This time when the door closes behind him, Dante feels safe for the first time since he heard Dietrich mutter the word *faggot* beneath his breath at the start of practice. “Did something happen?” Dante asks as Mrs. Talonovich leads him to Ryan’s room.

She shrugs weakly, and Dante gets the impression that she doesn’t really know. She probably doesn’t know much about her son, and Dante’s sure she doesn’t know what he is to Ryan, because she might be the type of mother who might not be understanding on the matter. It’s in the high chisel of her cheekbones, the way her smile doesn’t quite reach her eyes. If she knew what they did on the other side of that closed door, Dante doesn’t think she’d be so eager to leave them alone.

But she doesn’t know, probably doesn’t even suspect. When she knocks lightly on the door to Ryan’s room, his reply is muffled and indistinct. “Go away.” Dante’s heart hurts to hear the pain in that voice.

“He’s not up for visitors right now,” Mrs. Talonovich whispers in the darkened hall.

Dante frowns at the closed door. “Can I try?” he asks. *Just give me a few minutes alone with him*, he thinks, watching the indecision play across her face. *Let me talk to him and kiss him and I’m pretty sure I can get him in the mood*. Of course, he doesn’t tell her *that*.

Just when he's sure she's going to refuse, she nods and steps away from the door. "I'll be in the kitchen," she tells him, "if you need me."

He doesn't think he will, but he gives her a bright smile and that seems to ease her mind a bit. He waits until she disappears down the hall before he leans on the door, listening for some sound from the other side. Nothing.

He tries the knob. It turns in his hand and he opens the door just enough to slip inside the room. The only light slants through the vertical blinds where they gap open behind the desk, affording a view of the stunted azaleas and the frozen birdbath outside in the backyard. Ryan lies on his side on the bed, facing away from Dante, curled into himself, his legs pulled up as high as he can get them to his chest. "I said go away," he mumbles as Dante closes the door behind him. This time he presses in the knob to lock it, as well.

Without a word, Dante sets his bag at his feet, then slips out of his jacket. Dropping it to the floor, he steps out of his sneakers and kneels on the bed. As Ryan starts to roll over, Dante wraps his arms around his friend's waist and snuggles up close against his back. "It's me," he whispers, kissing Ryan's neck. His hair is soft and damp against Dante's cheek.

Ryan sighs his name. Lacing his fingers through Dante's, he half-turns in the embrace, until his temple rests against Dante's forehead. Even in the low lighting, Dante can see that he's been crying—his eyes are red and swollen, his cheeks blotchy, the freckles on his nose almost dissolved in the angry skin. "It's okay," Dante tells him, smoothing the hair back from his fevered brow. Ryan sniffles and clings to him desperately. "It's okay, Ryan, shh. It's going to be okay."

Now isn't the time to tell Ryan about Dietrich and Pennock chasing him, or about Josey's flagrant flirtations, or about how he did the 1500 in two minutes five seconds flat. He's not sure what he says as he strokes Ryan's cheeks, wipes the tears away, his lips finding Ryan's own again and again. He tells him it'll be okay, it has to be, he'll walk and he'll skate and he'll take back his position on the team, just wait

and see. "I can't walk," Ryan mumbles, and that brings fresh tears. He fists his hands in the front of Dante's sweatshirt, hides his eyes in the fabric.

Dante doesn't know what to do so he does the only thing he can *think* of to do—he holds on. Until the tears dry up, until Ryan's breath grows steady, until the worst is over. He holds Ryan tight, kisses his face and hair, anywhere he can press his lips to skin, murmurs softly until Ryan sighs against him, all cried out. "You'll walk," Dante tells him. When Ryan tries to protest, he kisses the argument from his lips. Such a pretty mouth, he missed this taste of tongue and cheek, these lips on his. Ryan's fists unfurl from Dante's shirt as they kiss, his hands smooth up his friend's chest, his fingers comb through the wavy hair that lays against his collar. Strong kisses, demanding, eager. Dante can't believe this boy in his arms thinks he's capable of giving up so soon. No one who fills Dante like *this* can be that weak.

Finally Ryan pulls away slightly and whispers his name. He studies Dante's eyes, the curve of hair that falls back from his face, and says, "I'm sorry—"

"Don't be." Dante kisses his eyes closed, kisses away the tears trapped in his thick lashes. "I understand."

"I just couldn't," Ryan tells him, and the rest of it's lost in another sigh. "Couldn't come back today. I'm sorry."

Dante covers his mouth with his hand, a bold move that makes Ryan look up at him with wide eyes. His skin is so pale beneath Dante's hand. "I said I understand," he whispers. Kissing Ryan's temple, he tells him, "You don't have to explain, baby, really."

Baby. Ryan's eyes soften at the term of endearment and Dante feels lips pressed into his palm. He's never called anyone that before, *baby*. He likes the sound of it so he says it again, "Baby," giggling as his mouth forms the word against Ryan's forehead.

Taking Dante's wrist in both hands, Ryan raises the hand that covers his mouth and rubs at the damp imprint in his palm. "I'm sorry

you skipped practice for me,” he murmurs. When he looks up at Dante, there are fresh tears in his eyes. “I know how much tomorrow means to you—”

“I’ll be fine,” Dante assures him. He got a few hours in this morning, that’s enough. And it’s just the quarterfinals, nothing *serious*. Eight skaters will go on to State after the race tomorrow—four girls, four guys. He just has to be one of the best male skaters in the whole club...nothing to it, really. He’s already wondering how he’s going to come up with the trip fee for Atlantic City next week so he can compete. Two hundred dollars, and from talking with Josey earlier, he’s fairly sure he can’t cut that in half by going alone. Everyone *has* to bring a guest, she told him—most skaters bring their parents or older siblings, and the skate club can relinquish some of the responsibility that way. Dante knows his mother won’t go—he doesn’t even have to ask her, he can already hear her response, she’ll have to work—and he doesn’t have anyone else, no older brothers or sisters, no father, no one...

But Ryan.

His boyfriend must see something change in Dante’s eyes because he sits up a little in Dante’s arms and asks, “What is it? Dante—”

Before he can think it through, Dante kisses the corner of Ryan’s mouth and says, “Come with me to State.”

Ryan’s eyes widen in surprise. “Next week,” Dante hurries on, “Wednesday through Saturday, that’s it. I can bring someone—”

“Dante,” Ryan sighs, but there’s excitement in his voice even as he explains, “I’m in a wheelchair here—”

“They can accommodate you!” Dante cries. It makes perfect sense. He wants someone to be there with him and the more he thinks about it, the more he realizes it’s *Ryan* he wants there, more than anyone else. “They have handicap facilities, and we can share a room—I have to pay for two anyway, you know?” Ryan’s eyes light up at the *share a room* part, he’s thinking what Dante’s thinking, it’s evident in the way his hands grasp at Dante’s shirt. They share a

room, share a *bed*, Dante would love to lie with a boy again, to feel someone in his arms, to feel a warm body pressed against his in sleep. “What do you say?” Dante asks. When Ryan doesn’t answer immediately, he adds, “Please say yes.”

Ryan laughs. “I want to,” he admits. He leans his head against Dante’s chest and sighs. “I can pay half. There’s no reason to make you pay my way, too. But my mom won’t like it. You leave Wednesday?”

“Next Wednesday,” Dante confirms. Sitting up, he scoots back against the headboard and rubs Ryan’s shoulders. Ryan shifts into a more comfortable position, his arms folded in Dante’s lap, his head resting against the slight swell of his crotch. It’s a sweet pressure that Dante almost forgot existed, someone pressed into him *there*, and he imagines a shared hotel room, the two of them lying together in the darkness of night, tentative fingers and gentle kisses and no interruptions at all. “I can talk to your mom, if you want,” Dante suggests. He knows he has a beguiling smile that most women can’t resist. “You’re going.”

In his lap, Ryan nods. “I’m going,” he agrees. Then, wrapping his arms around Dante’s waist, Ryan hugs him tight and looks up at him. His chin rests on the bulge that’s begun to form in the front of Dante’s sweatpants, an aching touch that makes Dante close his eyes in sudden pleasure. “You promise we can share a room?”

Dante’s grin is promise enough.



Their talk dissolves into more kisses, soft hands thrusting beneath shirts, Ryan giggling when Dante brushes his fingers across his nipples. “Don’t,” he laughs, twisting away. “I’m ticklish there.”

That turns him on. With a growl in the back of his throat, Dante rolls onto Ryan, straddling his hips, attacking him with earnest. Ryan laughs, tries to block his hands, tries to pull away and can’t, Dante has him trapped. “Ticklish?” Dante asks, digging into Ryan’s ribs.

Beneath him, Ryan squirms as he tries to keep Dante's hands from slipping beneath his t-shirt, his fingers pinching at his nipples playfully. "You're ticklish? You sure?"

"Dante." The name is giggled breathlessly, and the body moving beneath his is doing terrible things to him, making him hard for something he hadn't thought he missed. "Dante, stop."

Stop. He remembers himself what, two years ago? Giggling and laughing and playing like this, and then things got out of hand and he said stop and Jared didn't. He said no, and Jared told him yes. The memory freezes him in place, his smile like ice melting away. *Stop.* He does.

As Ryan gasps for breath, Dante strokes his boyfriend's arms, long, slow motions that relax the tense body beneath him. When he reaches Ryan's hands, he takes them in his and stretches his arms over his head, laying down above him on the bed. Eye to eye, he grins at Ryan and then kisses him between his eyebrows. "I stopped," he whispers.

"I didn't mean—" Ryan starts, and then Dante's mouth covers his upper lip, kissing the faint peach fuzz that struggles to grow there. "Dante," he sighs, giving into the kiss. When Dante pulls back slightly, Ryan leans up after him, hungry for more. "Don't stop."

With a laugh, Dante reminds him, "You just said—"

Ryan extracts his hands from Dante's, wraps his arms around his neck, pulls him down on top of him. "Shh," he whispers, his lips telling Dante more than words ever could. This time when Dante slips a hand into Ryan's shirt, he doesn't squirm away, and Dante's careful not to tickle too much, he doesn't want this to end just yet, these kisses, this soft skin beneath his. Gently he eases a knee between Ryan's legs, the brace on the right one hard and unyielding, but when he shifts onto Ryan, his boyfriend moves beneath him, grips his leg between both of his, moans as Dante's knee presses up against hidden flesh, an erection already growing from their eager kisses. Dante licks down the length of Ryan's neck, one hand in his shirt

rubbing his smooth back while the other caresses the tender skin below his belly button, and he moves lower, lower, kissing Ryan's exposed stomach, swirling his tongue around his navel, nipping the flesh between his teeth as Ryan hisses in delight. "Please," Ryan sighs, his fingers fumbling with his zipper. "Dante, please."

Dante catches Ryan's hands in his, holds them out at his sides, and doesn't go lower than the waistband of his jeans. "Dante," Ryan sobs, he wants it, Dante can feel the need radiating from him, the desire, the *hunger*, it matches his own. But he doesn't want to rush through this, he doesn't want something fast and hurried that will wedge itself between them so soon—if they do anything now, then they'll have to do it again the next time they're alone, isn't that the way it worked with Jared? Once the touching began, it spiraled from there, they *had* to get freaky every single time they got together, and look what that led to. Where's Jared now?

No, he doesn't want that—he's not going to lose this feeling he has when he's with Ryan just because they're too horny to wait. So he kisses his way up Ryan's chest, licks one nipple quickly and stops before Ryan can tell him to, then lays down beside him, stretched out, his hand still rubbing low on his stomach. With glazed eyes, Ryan frowns at him. "What's the matter?" he asks.

"Nothing," Dante tells him. He snuggles up close to him, burying his head against Ryan's neck and breathing deep his scent. He wants to just lie here for the rest of the night and not worry about anything else.

But Ryan raises himself up on his elbows, concern written across his face like the freckles that smatter his nose. "Don't you want to?" he asks.

Dante knows what he's talking about—the front of his jeans bulge with an erection and Dante's sweatpants strain against his own. *Kisses can lead to so much more*, he thinks, studying Ryan's reddened mouth, his flushed cheeks. "Of course I do," he replies. He snakes an arm through Ryan's and hugs his strong bicep tight. "Just not yet,

okay?” It may feel as if they’ve known each other for years now but it’s only been a few days, that’s it.

For a long moment Ryan looks at him, chewing on his lower lip and Dante can almost hear the thoughts he’s thinking right now. When Ryan speaks, his words don’t surprise him in the least. “Is it me?” he wants to know. “Is it because of my legs?”

God, Dante sighs, clenching his eyes shut against sudden tears. The thought that Ryan could even *think* such a thing pains him, but it’s been hard for him since the accident, Dante understands that. Sitting up, he takes Ryan’s face in both hands and leans close, until their foreheads touch and Dante can feel the heat from Ryan’s skin sear his own. “Ryan,” he murmurs, “baby, no. It’s not that, not at all, you *know* that. You know *me*.”

Ryan stares into his eyes, his gaze wavering, he wants to believe Dante but so many others are so different to him now that he’s in the chair, Dante knows he doesn’t trust everyone not to be that way. But he must see something in Dante’s face, conviction or the beginnings of love, something of the way he feels for this boy beside him, because he takes Dante’s wrists in his hands and when he closes his eyes, tears form between his lashes. “I know,” he whispers. He kisses Dante’s palm and his words are muffled against Dante’s skin. “It’s just—I’ve never done this before. I probably shouldn’t tell you—”

“Why not?” Dante kisses the tip of Ryan’s nose, which makes those pretty eyes open and those delicious lips smile at him. “You can tell me anything.”

With a slight blush that colors his cheeks, Ryan admits, “I’m not exactly Casanova here, you know. You’re only the second boy I’ve ever kissed.”

Dante whistles low, brightening that blush. “Well, damn,” he drawls. “You put up a good front, boy. You’re a hell a fine kisser, let me just tell you.”

Ryan's laugh eases the tension between them. Kissing him tenderly, Dante murmurs, "I don't want to hurry things up, that's all. I want us to last as long as we possibly can."

"Me too," Ryan tells him. Another kiss and he says it again, his lips forming the words against Dante's own. "Me too."



It's hard to leave, but Dante has to stop by the skate shop on his way home to pick up a new blade cover and he should really get some sleep if he's going to be at his best tomorrow. Ryan sees him to the door, much to Mrs. Talonovich's surprise—she's used to her son being uncooperative and moody after therapy, not this laughing boy who lets Dante push his wheelchair onto the porch. "She's watching us," Dante says, nodding at the bay window in the sitting room. The lace curtains ruffle closed.

"I'd say kiss me but that might give her a heart attack," Ryan jokes. Still, he frowns at him—Dante's on one of the porch steps so he's eye-level with his boyfriend—and it's written in his face, he *wants* another kiss, which will lead to another, and another, and Dante will never get home. "I'm going to wait until tomorrow night to tell her about State," Ryan says, just to fill the silence between them. They're both reluctant to say goodbye.

With a grin, Dante asks, "Just in case I don't advance?"

Ryan swats at his shoulder playfully. "Don't talk like that, you're going. If I have to get out there on the ice myself and push you, you're winning tomorrow, you got that?"

"Yes sir." Dante snaps to attention, a brisk salute that makes Ryan giggle. "I should go."

"You should," Ryan agrees.

It still takes everything Dante has to walk away. "I'll see you tomorrow!" he calls out when he reaches the end of the driveway. Ryan waves when he looks back from the curb, and again when he turns halfway down the street. As he rounds the corner, he walks

backwards so that Ryan's the last thing he sees, then the van, then the house in front of him and he should get moving. It's after four already, he's been here for hours, and if he's lucky, maybe Bobby will let him come in for the rest of the night, just to make a few extra bucks. He's going to need it for the State fee.

At the bus stop, Dante wonders if Ryan's still on the porch, still watching after him. He should have told him to call later, he already misses the sound of his voice. After nine, perhaps, if Bobby lets him work tonight—he could even call the shop, that would get his boss pissy. “Who's on the phone?” he'll want to know.

“My boy,” Dante will tell him. Oh yes, that would go over *real* well. But he'd still like to hear Ryan's voice again, low and breathy through the phone. He wonders if it's too early to say he might love him.

Yes, he tells himself as he waits for the bus to arrive, too damn early. Jared *never* said the words except when they had sex, and then only to get Dante in the mood. “Come on,” he'd say, the grin on his face like a little boy who's found his father's *Playboy* stash and is trying to coerce his friends into leafing through the dirty magazines with him. He'd run a hand up Dante's thigh, squeeze his dick through his jeans, leer at him wolfishly. “You know I love you. Come on, I said the words. I love you, okay? So can we do it now?”

Not his idea of romantic, to be honest. Love is something else entirely—it's walking into the kitchen when his mom's stirring soup on the stove, coming up behind her and slipping his arms around her waist and smelling the hot broth she's cooking. It's leaving a few extra dollars from his paycheck on the kitchen table so she can treat herself to lunch one day. It's someone in the stands, watching him race, shouting his name to the rafters when he crosses the finish line first.

Love isn't grabbing his crotch and saying, “Let's fuck.” *That's* not love, no matter what Jared tried to tell him. He thinks everyone's got it all wrong—making love isn't sex, not at all. If anything, it's kissing. It's what he's been doing the past few hours, lying on Ryan's bed with

his boy in his arms, talking low, touching, kissing. Nothing he ever did with Jared comes close to that.

He doesn't like thinking about Jared—wouldn't be except for the fact that he almost went too far with Ryan today, that *stop* still echoes in his mind like vibrations lingering on the skin of a drum when the beat is over. When they finally do go farther, Dante's going to listen for that *stop* again, he's not going to push Ryan to do something he doesn't feel comfortable doing. He's going to stop when his boyfriend says so, he'll respect that no, unlike *someone* he can mention.

But he won't, he's not thinking of Jared, remember? He's not.

CHAPTER 7



Ryan waits until dinnertime to ask his mother to take him to the quarterfinals. He knows what her reaction will be before he brings it up—she grips her fork a little tighter because it’s an inconvenience for her, always having to cart him around, he thinks she hates driving the van as much as he hates riding in it. And the first race starts at eight, he promised Dante he’d try to get there as early as he possibly could, and he knows his mother won’t want to wake up at that hour to take him, not on a Saturday. So she sighs—he sees that coming—and in a weary voice begins, “Ryan, tomorrow? Do you *have* to—”

That’s as far as he lets her get before he throws his own fork to his plate and wheels away from the table. “Fine,” he tells her, already upset. He expected this. “I’ll just drive myself, I guess. If that’s what you want...”

His dad frowns across the table at his mother. “Laura,” he warns, with a sideways glance at Ryan. “I thought we discussed this.”

“Should I take the bus?” Ryan asks. Every ounce of anger and hatred he’s felt since the accident adds venom to his voice, and his mother winces at the tone he uses. “Let me know, so I can head out in that direction now—”

"You're not taking the bus," his dad says. He returns to his food—the conversation is over as far as he's concerned. "Your mother will take you."

She sighs again, a lusty, *I don't want to do this* sigh that pisses Ryan off. *Here's a newsflash for you, Mom*, he thinks, glaring at her. *I don't want to do THIS, either, this whole handicap routine, it's gotten old and I'm sick and tired of it, but I have to deal with it and so do you.* "What time is it?" she wants to know. Ryan's acutely aware that she hasn't agreed to take him yet.

Thinking quickly, he tells her, "Seven thirty." That'll give him time to talk to Dante before the first race—

She stares at the food on her plate and doesn't meet his gaze when she says, "That's too early."

"That's when I have to be there," he replies. His voice hardens as he adds, "If I could, I'd drive myself. Do you think I *like* having to hitch rides with you all over the damn place? Do you think this is *fun* for me?"

"Laura," his dad says again.

"You're acting like I'm doing this on purpose," Ryan interrupts, his gaze shifting from his mother to his dad and back again. Neither of them look at him, he *hates* that. What the hell does he have to do to get someone to *see* him here? "I'm in a goddamn *wheelchair*—"

His mother's hand jerks, knocks into her coffee mug, splashes tepid liquid the color of mud onto the tablecloth. "Don't use that word in this house!" she cries.

"What, wheelchair?" Ryan asks. He watches as she sops up the spilled coffee, her hands trembling.

"Ryan." His dad's voice, carefully calm amidst his mother's nervous anger, it stops him from saying something else, something he might regret. "Let us talk about this, okay, sport? You just go on to your room now. Are you finished eating?"

For a long moment he debates ignoring the request, just sitting here and goading his mother until she looks at him, until she sees the

chair and the brace on his leg, until she understands how it is for him. She's trying to pretend everything is still fine and it's not, can't she see how much that hurts him? It's not and it might never be and her refusal to admit that is just tearing him up inside, because what if he doesn't walk again? What if the doctors are wrong and he never gets out of this damn chair? Will she still ignore it then? Will she ignore *him*?

But his dad's waiting, actually looking at him and waiting, and when Ryan frowns at him, he says softly, "You'll get to the rink tomorrow, son. Now go on, okay? Have you had enough to eat?"

"I'm fine," Ryan mutters. He glances at his mother studiously mopping the spill on the table, then at his dad whose nod says again, *go on. Go on...* turning his chair around with tight, controlled movements that he's perfected by now, Ryan heads out into the hallway. He hates the squeal of his wheels on the polished floor—his mother took up all the carpet runners in the house so he wouldn't get the chair caught in them. "I'll be in my room," he tells them.

He doesn't get far down the hall before he hears his mother's ragged tears and his dad murmuring that it'll be alright.



Ryan doesn't want to lie down in his hospital bed just yet—he aches to talk to someone, to Dante, he wants to call his boy and tell him how unfair this whole thing is, he knows that his friend will understand. But it's getting late and Dante needs his sleep—he's winning tomorrow and he'll go on to State and Ryan can't believe he asked *him* to come along, too. He knows his mother will balk about that as well, but he'll pick at the same wounds he gouged open tonight if he has to, he's *going* to Atlantic City with Dante. And sharing a room, and sleeping next to him, and they won't leave until they get a little further along than sweet kisses in the bed, Ryan will see to that.

He has no doubt that Dante's experienced—most anyone is more experienced than Ryan himself, having never had a boyfriend before, never even kissed a guy until Noah. When Dante started kissing his chest and stomach, his hands just inches from the throb at Ryan's crotch, he was so sure it would lead to something more. He expected soft lips on his skin, firm fingers around his hard shaft, biting the back of his hand so his mother wouldn't hear his moans when he thrust into Dante's mouth. He was ready for it, he *wanted* it, he still does and it hurts to think how close they were until he got overeager and tried to unzip his pants only to have Dante stop him. *Don't you feel it?* he wanted to say, a scream of frustration caught in his throat. *Don't you want me too?*

Dante says he does and Ryan believes him—in his eyes are mirrored Ryan's own lust and desire. But there's something else there, something Ryan can't quite get a bead on yet. When he tickled him and Ryan told him to stop—just teasing really, it's what you say when you're being tickled, *stop* even if you don't mean it—only Dante took it literally, stopped so suddenly that it almost scared Ryan. *Stop* and he did, and then later when they were nearing a point Ryan was so sure they both wanted to reach, he stopped again. Why?

In the bathroom, Ryan fills the bathtub with water so hot, it numbs his skin. From his wheelchair, he watches the water slowly rise, soap like foam coating the surface. Thoughtfully, he pulls his shirt off over his head, tosses it to the floor beside his chair. Then he unbuttons his fly, unzips his jeans, loosens the brace from his right leg and lets it clatter to the tiles. *Maybe he doesn't want to go that far with me*, Ryan thinks, leaning over to tug off his socks, but that can't be right. He can feel it when they kiss, Dante likes him, he *does*. What did he say? He didn't want to rush into it.

But it doesn't feel like rushing to Ryan—it feels like holding back, trying to cool off the emotions that threaten to burn him up inside, and he doesn't want that. He's been waiting nineteen years for a boy like Dante to finally come along, he doesn't want to take things slow.

And true, he hasn't had much experience with guys, but he sort of thought they were pretty much the same, all hands, horny and hard and just looking for someone to get with. He has someone, Dante. So what's the problem again?

He doesn't know.

When the suds reach the top of the bathtub, Ryan turns off the water. With the help of the cold steel bars his parents installed around the toilet and tub, he manages to shuck his jeans down, his boxers, until his bare ass sits on the warm leather seat of his wheelchair. Then he pulls the jeans and boxers away, throws them aside with the rest of his clothes. Carefully, he uses the bars to lift himself out of the chair and into the scalding water—he's getting quite good at this. The hot bath brings beads of sweat like tears to his face and neck, stiffens his cock as it encircles him with intense heat, sears through him as he settles against the hard porcelain.

He leans back, breathes in bubbles that sway around him, lets his whole body relax and his mind go blank. One hand starts to stroke at his inner thigh with slow, lazy motions, touching himself in places he wants to be touched, and in his mind he sees Dante above him, naked, suds clinging to his stomach and nipples and balls like a layer of lace. He imagines that hand on his leg is Dante's hand, those fingers that press into him Dante's own, and he sighs in the hot bath, his lips parting, his eyes closed, as he finds his own hardness in the water.

Savoring the daydream, he kneads himself hard, rubs below the soft skin, rims around flesh that quivers beneath his ministrations. Stroking harder, squeezing, tightening his fingers around the thick length, tugging, *harder*, his other hand drifting down there, rubbing and kneading and stroking as he sinks down in the tub, imagines Dante above him, kissing him, loving him. Harder and faster and *more*—in the small bathroom his soft moans are echoed back to him, so stark, so real, so urgent, and when he comes, he slips beneath

the water to stifle the cry that escapes his lips. Dante's name, that's what he calls out, and it rings around him off the tiles, *Dante*.

Ryan sits up in the water, wipes the soap away from his face. "Dante," he whispers, and then he laughs, one hand still working at his groin to hold his interest. The one good thing about this past month is that boy, definitely. Leaning back in the tub, Ryan thinks about the two of them in a hotel, huddled beneath the covers, Dante's hands in places his own are now, and they'll go further then, he'll make sure of it.



His mother takes him to the rink the next morning, just as he knew she would. On the way, she tries to ask him about the races, about Dante's chances at winning, about anything to get him talking to her again, but Ryan stares balefully out the window and answers in guttural, one-word replies. He's still mad at her about last night, even if she did wake up early to take him to watch Dante skate.

In the parking lot, she stands by the chair lift and keeps up a steady stream of babble that Ryan ignores. Finally the chair is set on the ground and he hurries to get the safety harness unstrapped before she can help. "I'll see you later, Mom," he says as he starts to wheel towards the ramp that leads inside the rink.

"What time do you need me to pick you up?" she calls after him.

He doesn't know. "I'll call you," he tells her—he's not sure how long this thing will last. He's never actually gone to a skating competition before.

Today he's stopped at the ticket booth by a pretty girl he recognizes from his bio lab last semester. "Hey!" she says, as if she remembers him, and she leans down over the ticket counter to smile his way. She looks at the wheelchair with furtive glances but doesn't mention it, doesn't ask how he's doing, doesn't ask when he's coming back to campus or the team or anything like that. Instead she forces a brighter smile and tells him, "It's eight fifty a seat."

Ryan wonders what she'd do if he told her that he doesn't need a seat—he brought his own. He thinks then her smile would falter, her eyes would widen, she'd freeze and stutter through a reply and although that might be fun to watch, it might be nice to have someone *else* uncomfortable for a change, Ryan isn't in the mood today. Now that he's away from his mother's nervous apologies and on his own, he's beginning to feel the crowd, the people jostling each other for a place in line, the kids running through the corridors with squeaky sneakers, the rich smells of thick pretzels and hot dogs and popcorn and under it all, the souging sounds from those already gathered in the stands. Even though there's an empty space around him, a boundary line no one dares to cross, Ryan doesn't let that bother him. This is a crowd of sports fans and he feels at home among their ranks. For the first time since his accident, he doesn't feel singled out and alone.

So he smiles back at the girl as he pulls his wallet from his back pocket, and when she asks if he needs any assistance—her term, she actually uses the word *assistance* as if she's been coached on how to be politically correct with customers—he doesn't glare at her or get angry or indignant. He just says no, he's fine, thank you, and takes the ticket she hands him. The crowd parts like the Red Sea before Moses as Ryan wheels through the turnstile and towards his usual spot.

There are kids lined up along the railing, but when he wheels his chair into place, a mother calls the children away, affording him a view of the ice below. Skaters already swirl across the surface, warming up for the races—bodies sheathed in skin-tight Lycra, brilliant colors that reflect the lights above, a rainbow against the white ice. Ryan spots Dante easily enough but he's surprised to see that his boyfriend isn't matching the others for speed. It's almost as if he's still half asleep—he glides like oil over water, graceful and slick but there's no haste in his motions, no wasted moves. As Ryan watches, he yawns and shakes his head, his arms, shaking himself awake. *Ner-*

vous energy, Ryan thinks. He gets that way too, before a game. Real quiet on the outside, slow, conserving himself for the upcoming event, while inside his heart beats rapidly and his body hums with adrenaline.

Behind Ryan, a group of girls up in the stands shout out Dante's name. He turns, half-frowning, to see four or five giggling high schoolers, holding between them a sign that reads, "Dante—Inferno on Ice." *Excuse me*, he thinks, *but that would be MY boyfriend, kids*. He wonders what they'd have to say to *that*.

But their shout did get Dante's attention, and when he glances up into the stands, he sees Ryan and smiles. *Eat your heart out, girls*, Ryan thinks, raising a hand in greeting. Even from here, he sees Dante wink back. Then he skates to the player box where a few others mill about, stretching and lacing up their skates. Leaning over the boards, he says something to one of the girls from the skate club, Ryan's seen her before, the one with the braid down her back and the gaggle of girlfriends who follow her like shadows. Ryan wheels closer to the railing, trying to see what's going on...Dante nods up at him, still talking to the girl, and whatever he says makes her turn around and look up at Ryan, too. Then she grins and flips her hair over one shoulder, gives Dante a smoldering smile, and disappears beneath the stands in the direction of the locker rooms.

The next thing Ryan knows, someone comes up behind him and asks, "Are you Ryan?"

It's the skating girl. Up close he can see she's younger than he is, probably only sixteen or so, and she wears pale blue eyeshadow and brown liner that makes her look like a child playing dress-up. She smiles nervously at him, as if acutely aware of the form-fitting bodysuit she wears, and out of habit, one hand finds the braid draped over her shoulder, her fingers twining into her hair. "I'm Josey. Dante asked me to come up here and get you."

"Why?" he wants to know, turning his chair around.

She starts down the aisle again, looking back once to make sure he's following. He is. "The skaters have reserved seats on the ice," she explains, leading the way out to the main concourse again. In the corridor, she heads for the stairs before remembering he's in a wheelchair, so she stops at the elevator and leans on the call button. "Dante wants you to sit there."

Ryan frowns as the elevator doors open and Josey stands aside to let him in first. "I'll fit down there?" he asks, unsure.

Josey nods. "Oh yes," she says as the doors close again. "They're just chairs along the ice. You know, inside the rink. Like behind the glass at a hockey game—he says you used to play?"

Now Ryan knows where she's taking him, down to the lower level and out by the player box. With the crowd guards down, he can fit his chair easily into the empty space where the penalty box would be erected during a game. "Yeah," he says softly. "I used to." He doesn't tell her that's his jersey hanging above the ice and she doesn't ask how long it's been for him or if he'll ever play again. She just looks at the floor and hums tunelessly to herself as the elevator descends.

Down on the lower level, Josey leads the way passed the locker rooms to the ice. "How long have you known Dante?" she asks over her shoulder.

"Few days," Ryan admits, but he amends silently, *Forever*. That's what it seems like to him and he thinks Dante feels the same way. It's not a question of whether or not their sudden friendship can stand the test of time—for him, it's knowing in the instant they met that neither of them would ever, ever forget the other.

"He's amazing," Josey gushes, like Ryan needs her to tell him this. As she holds the door open for him, she smiles and asks, "Isn't he? I've never *seen* anyone skate like he can. He's heading for the Olympics for sure." Ryan wheels out beneath the stands and Josey lets the door close behind them. It's dark here but he can see the light off the ice ahead, rows of chairs stretched out around them, skaters flying by. "He'll make State," Josey continues, following Ryan out to the

chairs, already filled with parents and friends. “I just know it. And then it’s Regionals, that’s in another month or so, and I *know* he’ll win that.”

They come out from beneath the stands, down a narrow aisle between the rows of folding chairs that Ryan barely fits through, into the chilly light by the ice. Ryan closes his eyes and savors that blast of cold air—he’s missed this, the heady scent of frost, the faint sound of the refrigeration unit motor running, the dampness that settles in his lungs. Tears well up in the back of his throat and he swallows quickly to keep the nostalgia at bay. God, he’s missed the ice.

“Here,” Josey says, stopping at the first row of chairs, right up against the boards. There are a few people at the far end near the player box but here the seats are empty. She removes one chair, then frowns at the tight spot and takes a second away, as well. “Is that enough room?” she asks as she folds the chairs, leans them against the row behind her. “I can take another one, if you want.”

Ryan shakes his head. “This is fine—” he starts.

The hiss of skates skidding to a stop silences him, and then strong hands ruffle through his hair. “Hey there, boy,” someone says, and Ryan turns to find Dante climbing over the boards, all smiles. “Thanks, Josey.”

“Anytime,” she replies. Ryan doesn’t have to turn to see the loves-truck look in her eyes—he hears it in her voice when she speaks. *Anytime*—does she have any idea how transparent that is?

But Dante doesn’t notice. He sinks into the chair beside Ryan’s wheelchair, stretches his arms out along the back of the seats, and one finds its way nonchalantly across his boyfriend’s shoulders. He can’t seem to look away from Ryan’s lips, his mouth. A hand runs through Ryan’s hair again, just a quick brush along his collar like Dante wants to do more but can’t, not here, not with the crowd gathered in the stands and the skate club out on the ice and Josey still lingering nearby like a servant waiting to be dismissed. When Ryan grins at Dante, his boyfriend mouths the words, “Missed you.”

Ryan laughs. "I almost couldn't make it," he says. "My mom didn't want to get up this early."

That hand touches the nape of Ryan's neck, soft, gentle, and then gone. "I told you let me talk to her," Dante says, his smile widening. "I'm good with the ladies." Looking up at Josey, he winks and adds, "Ain't I?"

Josey giggles and rolls her eyes. "You need to practice yet?" Dante asks her.

"Oh no," she says, shaking her head. Her braid flops off her shoulder to disappear down her back. "Not yet. I'm fine."

Ryan clears his throat, looks at his hands twisting together in his lap, and prays, *Go away*. Sitting up, Dante jerks his head in his direction and asks, "You *sure* you don't need to go?"

From the corner of his eye, Ryan sees her smile falter. Then she figures out what Dante's asking and her face brightens. "Oh!" she cries. With a self-conscious laugh, she starts to back away down the aisle. "Right, yeah. Okay, I can practice, yeah. Sure."

Dante flashes her a disarming grin—Ryan feels his own knees weaken at that smile, he knows every muscle in Josey's body has to be mush by now. "Thanks again," Dante tells her.

"No problem," she says, a little too loudly. "Anytime. Really."

But Dante's already turned his attention back to Ryan. Leaning closer, he murmurs, "Morning, sexy. I dreamed of you last night."

"Good dreams, I hope," Ryan says with a coy smile.

Dante winks at him. "Wet ones."

His blatant reply makes Ryan laugh. "Honest!" Dante cries, laughing as well. "I had to change the sheets when I got up, I swear. I just hope my mom doesn't look in the washer, you know?"

"You're bad," Ryan giggles.

Dante leans against his chair and grins at him. "You know you love it."

I do, Ryan thinks. This is what he's been waiting for, this sort of relationship, where just seeing his boy makes him giddy, where his

smile and his eyes manage to make everything right in the world for the moment they're together. Ryan's pretty sure this is what love is because it's everything he's been dreaming of, from the flutter in his stomach to the throb in his groin to the memory of lips pressed against his in tender kisses. Suddenly he wishes they were beneath the stands, back near the door or maybe out in the locker rooms, somewhere alone just so he could feel Dante's mouth on his. "How long is this thing today?" he asks. Not too long, he hopes—he's wanted Dante's touch since they parted yesterday, and seeing him now makes everything ache with want for it again.

But Dante shrugs. "Couple hours," he says. "I'm not sure. Why, you got a hot date tonight?"

Ryan grins. "Maybe." Elbowing his boyfriend playfully, he asks, "What are you doing later?"

Dante looks at him for a moment, smiling faintly. "You asking me out?" he asks, bemused. When Ryan shrugs, he tells him, "We're doing things backwards here. You're supposed to go on a date before you're boyfriends, you know?"

"You can go out after you're together," Ryan says, but now he's not so sure about that. His grin disappears and he starts to toy with the hem of his shirt, uncomfortable. "I mean, I don't know the exact protocol but—"

Gently Dante tugs a lock of Ryan's hair. "I'm kidding, baby," he murmurs. *Baby*, Ryan loves the sound of that. He never thought a boy calling him *baby* would make everything inside his heart somersault the way that word in Dante's voice does. He's going to have to think up something to call him now, something just as endearing and loving as that. "We can go out. Where do you want to go?"

How can he do that? A smile, a touch, a few kind words and everything's alright again. "Where do *you* want to go?" Ryan counters. He's never gone on a date before—already he's wondering if he can somehow wrangle the car from his mother. Does Dante drive? "Someplace to eat, the movies, whatever you want to do."

"I don't have much money," Dante tells him.

Ryan knows this. "My treat," he says. Before Dante can argue, he adds, "I'm the one asking you out here, right? So I pay. You can get it next time." When Dante laughs, Ryan asks, "You don't happen to have a car, do you?"

"No." Dante's smile twists into a halfhearted grin. "We can take the bus."

The bus, how romantic, Ryan thinks as a buzzer rings out across the ice, silencing the crowd. "Gotta go," Dante whispers, standing.

"Good luck," Ryan tells him. He wants to say more—he wants to kiss him, or hug him, or *something*, but he doesn't know what.

"Thanks," Dante sighs. He covers Ryan's hand with his own and gives it a quick squeeze that no one else sees and then, with a smile, he climbs back over the boards, his skates clacking softly on the ice. "Think of something to do later, okay? Doesn't matter what really, as long as I get you to myself for a few hours." Ryan laughs, but he's thinking the same thing. Dante's grin widens. "What?"

Ryan laughs again. "Go skate," he says, shooing him away. "You're going to win today, remember?"

"I remember." As he glides away, he calls out, "I'll be back."

Ryan watches him cross the ice as if the boy was born on skates—he's so graceful, it hurts to stare after him when Ryan's whole body yearns to hold him close. *Tonight*, he tells himself. Movies, dinner, who's he kidding? They can sit in his room and watch TV, order in pizza, make out on the bed. Dante was right, as long as they're alone.



Four skaters line up along the ice but Dante isn't one of them. Ryan cranes his neck, trying to find his boyfriend, and he catches a glimpse of dark hair among the skaters in the player box—that might be him, might not. He thinks it is. *Why isn't he skating?* Ryan wonders. He wishes there was a program of sorts, or maybe an

announcer explaining what was happening—all he hears over the loudspeakers is a list of heats and races and times, not even any names at this point. He'd like to know what's going on.

He hears someone behind him, and then Josey climbs over the back of the seat beside him. Sitting down, she gives him a wide grin and in a bright voice says, "Hi."

"Hey." Ryan's sure Dante didn't send her a second time—he knows why she's here. He's Dante's friend and she's thinking if she's nice to him, then Dante's sure to notice, it'll give her brownie points with the boy. Still, it's company at least, and who better to ask about the events out on the ice than someone from the skate club? Nodding at the skaters on the starting line, Ryan asks, "Shouldn't you be out there?"

"Men's heat," Josey explains. With a sideways glance at Ryan, she adds, "Do you know anything about speedskating?"

"Not much," he admits. "When's Dante skate?"

"Next heat." Scooting her chair closer to Ryan's wheelchair, she points at the scoreboard above the ice—there's a time clock set at 00:00:00 and beneath that, four lines, a first initial and last name on each. Dante's isn't among them. At the bottom of the board, the phrase *Men's 500m Heat 1* blinks slowly in green lights. "This is the five hundred," Josey tells him. "There are four races today—five hundred, thousand, fifteen hundred, and three thousand. Each race has two heats." At Ryan's slight frown, she clarifies, "Like pre-races? To qualify the skaters."

"Oh." Ryan's still not quite clear on that but he nods as if he understands. "I thought that was done during the week?"

Josey laughs. "Okay, here's how it goes." The starting gun goes off, spurring the skaters to life and igniting the crowd, but she doesn't seem to notice. Ryan's not too interested in this race—Dante's not in it—so he turns his attention to the girl beside him. "The skate club has four divisions," she explains. "We call them groups. I'm in C,

Dante's in A. They're divided mostly by age, and then inside each group we have the men and the women skaters."

Four groups, Ryan's following her. "For the quarterfinals," Josey continues, "we need four skaters from each group, two men and two women, to qualify for the heats. That's what we did last week. Dante made that cut by winning the five hundred." She flips her braid over her shoulder and smiles out at the ice as the skaters whiz by their seats—the second lap around the ice, according to the scoreboard. "Today you have four groups, two men from each, total of eight skaters for each race. And only four skate in a race."

Now Ryan understands. "So you have heats of four skaters each," he says, and Josey nods happily. "And the top two times in each heat advance to the race. And four races today?"

"Eight really," Josey corrects, "because the women run the same ones the men do, but they don't compete together. So you have men's five hundred, women's five hundred, you know?"

Ryan laughs. "We'll be here all day," he says. By the time the quarters are over, Dante will be too damn tired to go out.

But Josey shakes her head. "Not really. You don't have to stay the whole time. Dante's up for the five hundred and the thousand, I think—he's not a distance skater. I mean, he can do it, but he's fast and that's what counts in the short runs. He just needs to win one of those races and he's going to State. If he wins the five hundred, he won't skate in the thousand."

Frowning, Ryan looks up as the crowd erupts in fresh cheers, the current heat over. One of the skaters circles the ice, his arms in the air, grinning in victory—Ryan recognizes him as that Dietrich kid, the one Dante told him about, had his father pay his way into the quarterfinals. Ryan doesn't like his smug air, the cocky way he bows at the crowd. *Get off the damn ice already*, he thinks, watching the guy ham it up. *Jesus, you won, isn't that enough? Do you have to rub it in, too?*

As if hearing Ryan's thoughts, Dietrich skates around the ice, staying close to the boards as he heads back to the player box. But he slows down as he approaches Ryan and Josey, gliding to a stop in front of their seats. Out on the ice, four more skaters are already lining up for the next heat, Dante among them. He glances their way, sees Dietrich, and glares at the other skater.

Dietrich leans over the boards and, in a loud whisper, says, "You better watch it, Josey. That's Dante's boyfriend you're hitting on."

Anger colors Josey's cheeks and she turns away, disgusted. "Get off the ice, Wil," she says, her voice strained. Ryan feels his throat close up, his hands clench into fists, and if he wasn't in this chair, he'd reach out and throttle that asshole, *Dante's boyfriend—oh, you are so dead*, he thinks, struggling to keep the words from escaping. *It's none of your fucking business anyway*. "Ignore him," Josey mutters.

The announcer calls for clear ice. With a cruel laugh, Dietrich hurries to the player box and even from here Ryan can see the concern in Dante's eyes, he looks from them to the other skater and back again, helpless. *So that's why he hates you*, Ryan thinks, forcing a tight smile to put his boyfriend at ease. It doesn't appear to work. *Damn homophobe. When I get out of this chair, I'll take that jackass on myself*.

"He's just jealous," Josey tells Ryan, watching after Dietrich. "He's not half the skater Dante is and he knows it. The only reason he's even in the club is because his father's our biggest sponsor. He's got half the kids running scared, that's the only way he wins."

The starting gun goes off a second time and the rink fills with the signature *clack clack clack* of blades on ice as the skaters take off. Ryan leans forward, his heart racing. One, two, three skaters fly by and Dante's last on the line, his face clouded and closed. "Dammit," he mutters as Dante skates passed them. There's only what, four laps in this race? He needs to take up a better position if he wants to win.

Two and a half laps later, Dante shoots through an opening, easing gracefully into the second position. Shouts threaten to bring down the roof, the crowd wild at the move—Ryan turns to Josey and

she's beaming back at him, Dante's going to win. *Just the heat*, he reminds himself, but that doesn't keep him from biting his lower lip or holding his breath when the two skaters at the back try to jockey for Dante's place. One glides in front of the pack effortlessly, putting Dante into third, but when the other tries to snag a lead, he hits the track marker and goes down, skidding away from the skaters and into the boards. Dante's last now.

With a surprising burst of speed, Dante rounds the final curve and comes out of it first, ahead of the other two. He leans low, pumps his arms to drive him faster, crosses the finish line a half second before the others. "He's in!" Josey cries, surging to her feet like the rest of the crowd. Ryan's smiling so hard, his cheeks hurt.

Dante doesn't appear to hear the applause. He glances up at the scoreboard as he coasts on the ice, waiting for the times to appear. When his name comes up first, he nods like that's what he expected, then he leans on his knees and gulps for breath. Somewhere in the back of the stands, a chant starts up, *Dante Dante Dante*. He gives them a weak smile and a halfhearted wave as he pushes across the ice to where Ryan sits.

"You're in!" Josey claps as Dante approaches the boards, her braid bouncing along her back with each move she makes. "Awesome, Dante," she gushes. "You were great."

"It's just a heat," Dante replies, unbuckling his helmet. He wipes sweat from above his upper lip and frowns at Ryan. "What did he say to you?"

Before Ryan can reply, Josey rolls her eyes. "He's just being a jerk," she tells him.

Ryan glances at her, then at Dante, waiting. Already the other three skaters are lining up on the ice, Dietrich one of them—this is it, the 500 meter race. Dante doesn't need to be worrying about anything but winning right now. "Nothing," Ryan says with a shake of his head. Dante's frown deepens, and he promises, "I'll tell you later. Go win."

"Tell me now," Dante says. He leans on the boards as if he has all the time in the world to wait.

"They're waiting for you, Dante," Josey points out.

Ryan gives Dante a gentle shove—his arm is warm and his bodysuit damp beneath the slight touch. "Later," Ryan tells him. "Now go." When Dante doesn't move, he sighs and adds, "She's right, he was just being mean, okay? I'll tell you after you win."

That makes Dante laugh. Wiping his sleeve across his mouth, he asks, "And what if I don't?"

With a wink, Ryan says, "Then I won't tell you."

"That's not fair!" Dante cries. He sounds so upset that Josey and Ryan both laugh at the wounded expression on his face. "Ryan—"

The announcer calls for all contestants to take their positions. "That's you," Ryan says. Touching Dante's arm again, he squeezes the fleshy bicep quickly and then gives him another shove. "Go."

Reluctantly, Dante obeys. At the starting line, he takes the track next to Dietrich and doesn't look at the other skater as he hunkers down into position, one foot forward, one arm held out protectively in front of his chest. Beside Ryan, Josey mutters, "He doesn't need to be worrying about Wil."

Ryan wonders if she knows how close to home Dietrich's remarks really were. He doubts it, the way she moons over Dante. Still, it's not his place to say anything—he doesn't know the girl, doesn't know if Dante wants her to know about them, doesn't even feel comfortable admitting it himself when he's not sure what her reaction will be. So he doesn't say a word, just crosses his fingers where his hands rest on the arms of his chair and prays for his boy to win.

Suddenly Dietrich takes off, setting the other skaters loose. *Clack clack clack*, and the announcer calls out a false start. Ryan turns to Josey, confused. "What—"

"Wil jumped the gun," she explains. "The starter's holding them too long and he's probably nervous because he knows he can't beat

Dante fair.” Then she laughs humorlessly. “If we’re lucky, he’ll do it again and get DQ’ed.”

Ryan doubts that’ll happen. He’s right—this time it’s a different skater who false starts, sending the others after him for a few feet before they realize the gun hasn’t gone off yet and they circle back to the starting line. That’s got to tear someone’s nerves up inside, waiting and waiting and *waiting*, and then racing off just to catch up with someone else who bolts from the line. Yeah, no movie and dinner tonight—Dante will need to unwind, and Ryan’s pretty sure he can figure out how to smooth away the tension in his boyfriend’s muscles with his lips and hands alone.

Finally the gun sounds and they’re off, Dietrich pushing ahead with his elbows out at his sides like he’s trying to block the others. He leads the pack for a half a lap, that’s it, before Dante abandons his usual strategy of holding back and slides into first place. On the long stretch of track, he uses controlled bursts of speed to widen the distance between himself and the others, and around the curves he has to bend low, one hand trailing over the ice to keep his balance. Faster, he flies by Ryan once, twice, three times, a good three seconds in front of Dietrich. Almost as one the crowd holds its breath when he comes up from the final curve and takes the last half a lap...

And sails across the finish line, arms above his head in triumph. Josey shrieks like a teenybopper at a boyband concert, jumping up and down, her braid threatening to smack Ryan’s head with each bounce. Without thinking, she leans down and hugs him, Ryan’s laughter joining with the crowd. *He did it!* he thinks, his chest swelling with pride as Dante’s name appears on the scoreboard above the ice. Over the din of the crowd, he can barely hear the announcer proclaiming Espinosa the winner.

All he can think about is the two of them sharing a hotel room in a few days, and how he’ll cover his boy with congratulatory kisses when he finally gets him alone.

CHAPTER 8



After the race, Dante hurries off the ice—he's leaving. He's about had it with Dietrich and there's nothing he can say or do about the harassment, who'll listen to him? *His* father's not the club's main sponsor...hell, he's not even sure who his father is, and his mother's never been one of those sports moms who attend every practice, she's never even seen him skate. So if he complains, what good will it do? It might get Dietrich in trouble and then the kid will *really* come after him, and Dante doesn't need that. He can live with the slurs, he can stay out of Wil's way long enough to get a little further on his way to the World Championships. Then he'll be seen by a national sponsor, he won't need the skate club to help fund his way into events. That's the only reason he's still with them, he tells himself. Without their discounted rates, there's no way he'd be able to afford the entry fee into the State finals.

And he's going to State—he won out there on the ice, a stunning display, he *knows* he was good and the crowd still rings in his ears. That's where he's going to best Wil Dietrich, out there on the ice where it counts. He doesn't have to prove himself to the guy, doesn't even have to talk to him or give him the time of day. He's going to State, that's all he wanted out of today. He can leave now, take his boy home and try to erase whatever hateful words that jerk might have said after the first heat.

On the sidelines, Dante swaps his skates for his sneakers, ignoring Dietrich's evil glares. He doesn't look up, doesn't smirk or smile at the other skater, doesn't rub in his victory or say *I won*—he's better than that. If anything, he should thank Dietrich, because he skated his best just to beat him, something he never does. In a race he usually blocks out the crowds, the competitors, everything but the wind in his face, the ice beneath his feet. But today anger swirled through his veins—he doesn't know what kind of remark Dietrich made to Ryan but he saw the flushed color his boyfriend's cheeks, he saw those strong hands clenched into fists, he knew it was something petty and disrespectful and mean. One thought clouded his mind during the race, canceling out everything else. He had to beat Dietrich, just to show him up, and he had to beat him *good*.

So he came off the line fast, which he never does, and he pumped hard on the track, which would've cost him in a longer race but he didn't let it bother him until after he won. *Now* he feels the quiver in his thighs, the sharp spikes of overexertion shooting through his calves. He pushed himself just to prove to Dietrich that *he's* the one the crowds come to see, *he's* the one who'll win the 500m at State. And secretly? He's glad it's over with, he's thrilled his spot there is secured, because the way he feels now, wiping the sweat from his face and neck and wringing it from the ends of his hair, he won't be any good on the ice for the rest of the day.

But he won—skaters at the quarterfinals can only win one race, no matter how many others they're entered in. You win one, you're pulled from the remaining heats, simple as that. He won so the day's over for him. Time to get his boy alone. He hopes Ryan doesn't have any grandiose plans for tonight—he wants nothing more than to just lie together on the bed, arms around each other, his head on Ryan's chest as he listens to the beat of his heart. He's not really up for much else just yet.

Only it seems the coaches have other plans. Before Dante can leave the player box, he's snagged by the head coach of the skate club,

an older man with acne scars that sear his hollow cheeks. “Amazing,” the coach is saying as he pumps Dante’s hand, over and over again. “Simply amazing. You do that at State and you’re a shoo-in at Regionals.”

“Thanks,” Dante mumbles, extracting himself from the coach’s tight grip. The guy drapes an arm around Dante’s shoulders and it takes all he has not to shrug it off—he just wants to get out of here, is that asking too much? Desperately he looks out across the ice where the women have already started their heats and can see Ryan glance his way. With a smile, Dante thinks, *I’ll be right there, baby*. As if Ryan hears the thought, he grins and waves.

The coach leads Dante out into the corridor where a temporary press box has been set up outside of the locker rooms. Reporters from the city newspaper and one or two of the local television stations jostle for position and when they see Dante, the questions come in a barrage like bullets. “How do you feel?” “What’s going through your mind right now?” “Think you can do it again?” Turning to the coach, Dante whispers, “I don’t really want—”

“Just a few minutes,” the coach replies, beaming at the reporters. Then a thought occurs to him and his smile disappears. “Oh wait, you probably have to get to work, don’t you?”

Well, no, he doesn’t—Bobby gave him the day off for the quarter-finals, and last night on his way home from Ryan’s, he stopped by the shop to pick up new blade guards and ended up working for a couple hours anyway, just to get a few extra bucks because he’ll need it for State. His plans from now until Monday afternoon include just two people, himself and his boy, that’s it. But if it’ll get him out of this circus sooner...hedging around an answer, he replies, “Well, I have to get going.”

The coach nods—he knows Dante keeps a tight schedule. “Quick statement,” he calls out, and the reporters grow quiet. Suddenly they’re all looking at Dante with eager, hungry eyes. He wonders if the fire alarm could go off right now, something, anything to break

free from the weight of this collective gaze. With an avuncular squeeze of Dante's shoulders, the coach explains, "Our star skater here has to get to work."

Dante smiles wanly because that's not true but it sets him free. With a sincere smile into the nearest camera, Dante tells them the race went the way he knew it would. "It's my event," he says, without sounding egotistical because it *is* his event. "I'm happy, I skated my best, and that's all that matters to me." Then he winks, which makes one of the female reporters fan herself with one hand in an exaggerated gesture. "Going to State is just an added benefit."

The reporters clamor for more but the coach lets him slip away. He hurries into the locker room where he pulls his bag out from under one of the benches—he doesn't even bother to shower, just undresses quickly, pulling his bodysuit off like peeling away a second skin, then stepping into his briefs, his jeans, tugging a t-shirt down over his head. Then the jacket—*L8R SK8R* big across the back, he hopes the cameras get a glimpse of it, Bobby will like that—and shoving everything back into the bag, he's ready to go. A quick peek out of the locker room doors shows the reporters now fawning over one of the girls that follows Josey around, obviously the winner of the women's 500. At least they don't pay much attention to him as he slips around the edges of those gathered and back into the rink.

He walks quickly, trying to see into the shadows that cling to the stands as he makes his way down the aisle to where Ryan waits by the boards. Dietrich's probably pissed at him for winning, even though he's got a better chance at the thousand now that Dante's not racing against him, and the last thing he wants is a confrontation. *Please*, he prays. *I just want to get out of here in one piece, preferably without making much of a scene, do you think we can pull that off?*

Ryan doesn't hear him approach—the first men's heat for the thousand meters is already underway and Dante sees Dietrich at the head of the pack, pushing himself harder than he should in a race of this length. Hopefully he'll be able to talk Ryan into leaving now,

before the heat's over, and they'll manage to disappear before Dietrich starts their way. Mean as it sounds, Dante prays Wil doesn't win this race because the last thing he needs is that jerk bothering him at State.

Coming up behind his boyfriend, Dante leans down over the handlebars of his wheelchair and purrs, "I told you I'd be back."

Ryan turns, already grinning. "Dante!" he cries, and the next thing Dante knows, he's caught up in a tight hug, his nose buried in Ryan's clean hair. He breathes the fresh scent in deeply, well aware of the sweat drying on his own skin—he must stink. Maybe he'll ask Ryan if he can shower at his place. That thought starts a sweet stirring in his groin and even though he shouldn't, he gives Ryan a quick kiss that's hidden in his hair. "You were wonderful," Ryan murmurs, letting him go. As Dante stands, his boyfriend looks up at him and asks, "Do you race again?"

With a shake of his head, Dante tells him, "I'm free to go. Did you want to stay—"

But Ryan's already maneuvering his chair into the aisle. "We don't have to," he says. He folds his hands into his lap when Dante takes the handlebars and pushes him towards the exit. "Did I tell you yet that you were awesome out there?"

Dante laughs. "You might have mentioned it." Out in the corridor, he guides Ryan's wheelchair around the reporters and over to the elevator by the stairs. It seems like years before the lift arrives but inside the car, the doors close on the sounds of the crowd and they're alone, at last, even if it's only for the short ride between floors. Before he can stop himself, Dante plops into Ryan's lap, wraps an arm around his boyfriend's neck, and turns his face up for a tender kiss. This is more than quick lips pressed to secret skin—this is lingering and soft, arms easing around Dante's waist, hands slipping beneath his shirt, his fingers curling through Ryan's hair and a soft moan when he shifts in Ryan's lap, his thigh finding the budding hardness coiled at his boyfriend's crotch. When the elevator stops, Dante kisses Ryan

once, twice, three times and he barely makes it to his feet before the doors slide open. Ryan looks up at him with parted lips and murmurs, “Damn, boy.”

With a self-conscious grin, Dante pushes Ryan out of the lift, through the throng of people milling around the concourse, towards the exit. “You okay?” he asks playfully as Ryan digs in his backpack for his cell phone.

“Woo,” Ryan replies. He dials a number and puts the phone to his ear. “You take my breath away,” he admits.

When Dante laughs, Ryan turns his attention to the phone. “Hey Mom! No, not you.”

“Tell her I said hi,” Dante whispers, easing Ryan’s chair through the turnstile and passed the ticket booth. The girl behind the counter waves at them, a few kids call out Dante’s name—everywhere he looks, someone’s smiling or waving, congratulating him, telling him how great he was out there. His own grin grows strained, his whole body begging to be left alone.

In the chair in front of him, Ryan tells his mother that they’re finished here. “He won the five hundred,” he’s saying, smiling up at Dante. He must see something in his face, exhaustion or weariness, because he reaches back and pats Dante’s hand where it grips the handlebar. “Yeah, we’re ready.”

At the glass doors leading outside, Dante stops the wheelchair and hits the automatic release button nearby. “Tell her—” he starts.

“Dante says hi.” Ryan pokes at his stomach and Dante laughs, dancing out of reach. “Are you leaving now? We’ll be outside.”



Dante sits on the curb by Ryan’s wheelchair, picking at tiny stones caught in the crack of the sidewalk and skipping them across the parking lot. They’re not in front of the doors, where a steady stream of people still pour into the rink—it’s not quite noon yet and the races will probably last the better part of the day, this place will be

busy until after six this evening. Beside him, Ryan watches the road, on the lookout for his mother's van. "So you have off today, right?" he asks as Dante pegs another stone across the empty parking space in front of them.

"All day," Dante replies. The stone skips once, twice, then pings off the rim of a nearby car. His ass and thighs are numb from sitting on this sidewalk—the cold seeps through his sweatpants and he wishes he had left his skating uniform on, it would've cut the chill a bit. That makes him think of the race, and Dietrich, and he tosses another stone away from him as he asks, "What did Wil say to you after his heat?"

Ryan shrugs like it's no concern of his. "Nothing really."

"Why don't I believe that?" Dante counters. He looks up at Ryan, studiously watching the road. The late morning sun plays across his boyfriend's pale skin, bringing more freckles to life across his cheeks, and a slight breeze ruffles the hair back from his brow. When the wind is right, Dante catches a glimpse of gold from that earring Ryan wears high up on his ear. *I love you*, Dante thinks, and the thought is so sudden and so unexpected that he knows it's true, it fills him up inside, warms away the cold that eats into him and it's real, he loves this boy beside him, he does. He opens his mouth, sure he'll say the words, but instead he hears himself point out, "You said you'd tell me when I won."

Ryan sighs. "Dante—"

"Tell me," Dante says.

Another sigh, and Ryan frowns at his hands in his lap, toying with the straps on his backpack. "He just made some crack about me being your boyfriend," he mutters. "He wasn't even talking to me."

Josey. Dante closes his eyes so Ryan can't see how upset that makes him. He knows Josey has a crush on him, he'd be blind not to see it and he knows he should say something to her, tell her how it is with him, how he likes guys and now he has someone he's falling for, but she's sixteen and his only friend in the club and truth be told, he's

afraid she won't understand. It's hard enough as it is to put up with Dietrich but what if Josey turned on him, too? "What did she say?" he wants to know.

With a shrug, Ryan admits, "She just told him to go away. I don't—" He laughs bitterly. "I don't think she believed him."

No, she wouldn't. That's another reason Dante never said anything to her—he knows how girls are. Back in high school, he wasn't really popular but the girls liked him, of course—he's got that hair they seem to want to plunge their fingers into, and a tight body, an easy smile, eyes that can set hearts fluttering. When he was with Jared, there was one girl in particular who chased him, Maria Leoni, pretty with dark hair and dark eyes—her parents run an Italian restaurant not far from Bobby's shop. When Dante finally told her he was with Jared, she laughed, *laughed*, and told him that he just needed to find the right woman. "I'll take the queer right out of you," she bragged. After that, he avoided her, ducking into the bathroom whenever he saw her in the halls, and eventually someone else caught her eye. Thank God it wasn't him.

Dante doesn't think Josey's that crass but he doesn't really want to find out, either. He only sees her at the rink and sooner or later she'll lose interest in him, when he doesn't flirt back or when she can't get him alone because Ryan's always around. She'll move on, girls always do. Picking up another stone, Dante hefts it at the hubcap and asks his boyfriend, "What did you tell her?"

"Me?" Ryan asks, surprised. "Nothing. What was I supposed to say? That he's right?"

Dante shrugs. It would make things easier on him, wouldn't it, if Ryan was the one to say something to Josey? There would be nothing else he *could* say, just smile sadly and tell her it's true, he's in love with someone and it's not her, sorry. Ryan looks at him sharply and adds, "She's not *my* friend."

"I know," Dante murmurs. It'd be easier, yeah, but it wouldn't be *right*. If anything, he has to be the one to tell her himself. *If she asks,*

he thinks silently. He has no qualms telling his mother, Bobby, the kids in high school that he's gay, because he's not ashamed of it. But he already has one enemy on the skate club—he doesn't need two.

Ryan turns back to the road but from the corner of his eye Dante can see his boyfriend's face in profile, the lines worried around his mouth, creased into his brow. "It's okay—" Dante starts.

"I didn't know if you wanted me to say something or not," Ryan explains, interrupting him. "I mean, we haven't really talked about this."

With an exasperated sigh, Dante says, "We did, Ryan. I asked if I could call you my boy and you said yes. I don't know what that means to you—"

"It means a lot," Ryan admits.

"But to me that means you're my boyfriend," Dante continues. He sits up a bit, pulls his legs to his chest, leans down over his knees and frowns at his sneakers. "It means you're with me," he says softly, so no one passing behind them will overhear. "It means we're exclusive, no one else. It means if someone starts putting the mack on you, I tell them to step off."

Ryan laughs at that, and it's such a wondrous sound, unexpected and carefree, that whatever tension had begun to build between them shatters. Dante grins up at him and thinks that *that* laugh was what did him in—the first time he heard it, he was lost. "I like boys," Dante says. "I like *you*, Ryan, you're *my* boy, and I don't care who knows it. I'll shout it out right now if you want..."

He stands, wiping dust from the back of his pants, but Ryan sees his mother's van turn onto the street and he catches Dante's arm as he draws in a deep breath. "Dante," he warns, glancing around the parking lot—there aren't many people loitering outside but they aren't exactly alone, either. Dante's sure that when he shouts out he loves Ryan, most of them will think he's just goofing off, two boys trying to embarrass the hell out of each other. None of them even know who they are.

But Ryan shakes his head, concerned. “It’s okay, I believe you,” he says as his mother navigates the parking lot to where they wait. His hand fists into the sleeve of Dante’s jacket, tugging at him to keep quiet. “Look, no one knows, okay? I mean, about me.” Dante frowns at him—he doesn’t like the sudden fear in his boyfriend’s eyes or the plea in his voice. “Like my parents? They don’t...I mean, I never...”

He knows what Ryan’s trying to say. *They don’t know I’m gay*, that’s what Dante sees in his boyfriend’s eyes—the words are caught in his throat and he can’t seem to get them out. *I never told them, they wouldn’t understand*. Ryan sighs, tries a different approach. “If my mom thought we were...like *that*...well, she might not let you come over, you know? Not into my room, anyway, and God, not with the door closed. And she’d never bring me to the rink to see you skate.”

The van pulls up to the curb, and as if she hears them talking about her, Mrs. Talonovich flashes them a bright smile. Then she waves—when Dante raises a hand in greeting, she toots the horn, her smile widening. He imagines that same smile freezing into place if she were to know what he’s thinking right now, himself and Ryan on the hospital bed in her den, hands caressing hidden flesh and lips pressed together as if kisses were the very breath they needed to survive. He imagines her bubbly voice hardening, her words angry as she tells him to leave, Mr. Talonovich brooding over the back of Ryan’s wheelchair with stormy eyes, a hateful frown. Then what would he do? His boy’s already such a part of his thoughts and his heart that he doesn’t want to know how he’d manage to go back to a life without him.

So he returns Mrs. Talonovich’s smile and before she can get out of the van, he tells Ryan, “I understand, baby.” And he does. If he has to keep their relationship hidden from Ryan’s parents—and the skate club—he can do that.

Ryan tugs on his sleeve again. “Thanks,” he whispers. With a grin, he adds, “I like it when you call me that.”

Then Mrs. Talonovich is there, asking how the race went and what Dante's time was and did the boys want her to stop somewhere for lunch? She opens the side door to bring the wheelchair lift out, tells Dante to climb on in the back, he can sit with Ryan if he's coming over their house? Did he want to stay for dinner?

No, Dante doesn't want to ruin this, and when Ryan gives him a quick wink, he reminds himself to call his boy *baby* every damn chance he gets.



It's another half hour before he can close the door to Ryan's room, lock out Mrs. Talonovich and the rest of the world, and get his boy to himself. Dante barely has a chance to drop his bag to the floor before Ryan has both hands fisted in the front of his jacket, pulling him down for a hungry kiss. "Come here," he murmurs against Dante's lips as his fingers unsnap the jacket. "I've missed you."

"I smell horrible," Dante tells him when Ryan's hands slip inside the jacket and push it away. He lets his boyfriend help him out of it—it falls to the floor in a rustle of leather and then Ryan's fingers are picking at the hem of Dante's shirt, smoothing across the flat muscle of his stomach, toying with the waistband of his pants. Despite the desire rushing through him, Dante catches his hands and manages to pull away from the insistent kiss. "Baby—"

"You smell good to me," Ryan tells him, trying to shake his hands free. "Sweat and ice, I like it."

With a quick kiss on the tip of his nose, Dante says, "I want to get cleaned up a bit. Then we can fool around, okay?"

"Promise?"

There's a mischievous gleam in Ryan's eye that makes Dante grin foolishly. "I promise," he says.

So Ryan points out the bathroom down the hall, hands him some clean towels, and tells him to ignore the aluminum rods that line the

walls. “My dad installed those for me,” he says softly. “Just hang the towels on them, or something.”

Inside the bathroom, Dante strips off his pants and shirt, his underwear, his socks, dropping the clothes into a pile in the middle of the floor. Then he turns on the spigot in the tub, hot water to soothe his tired muscles, just enough cold to take away the sting. When the water’s where he wants it, he pulls out the shower knob and a hard, driving spray rains down around him. He turns his face up into it, savoring the beat of drops against his skin.

There’s a washcloth hanging from one of the railings and Dante soaps it up until suds run down his arms and drip from his elbows. Then he lathers his body, rubbing his nipples and stomach and further, rubbing hard enough to pink the skin, thinking about his boy in the other room and how maybe with Ryan, sex could be something more than it ever was with Jared. This time *he’s* the one who knows what he’s doing, *he’s* the one who will whisper *it’s okay*, and if Ryan says stop, he will. No matter how far they go, he wants Ryan to know that he’s the one who calls the shots. Dante won’t push it, he doesn’t *want* to push it, because look what happened with Jared—they did it when Dante wasn’t ready and look at them now. He doesn’t even know where the guy is.

And he doesn’t care. He has his boy, Ryan, and he’s worlds better than Jared ever was. He makes Dante laugh, and he has amazing eyes, sexy hands, strong arms. Just being with him makes Dante feel like he did when he was eight years old, before he knew they were poor, before he had to work and worry about money—when all he wanted to do was skate and he’d spend his days on the streets with his friends, boys his own age with roller blades and skateboards, when nothing else mattered but having fun. Ryan gives him that carefree feeling again—it’s in his smile, his laugh. And here Dante thought he didn’t need anyone, didn’t need the distraction from his skating. Who was he kidding? He needs someone who understands how he feels about his sport, he needs *Ryan*, and when he’s out of

that wheelchair, they'll both be on the ice. Dante knows Ryan will skate again. He'll make sure of it.

As he thinks about his boyfriend in the other room waiting for him, Dante begins to slow his strokes, the washcloth rasping over his groin, the soap beading in the hair at his crotch. Slower, his fingers slipping between his legs, rubbing, circling, kneading. He holds onto a nearby rail and lets his eyes slip closed, his hand working below his hardening shaft, the washcloth soft and sudsy and warm along hidden flesh. When a moan escapes his lips, it startles him, his hand clenching himself in a sudden ardor, and in his mind's eye he sees Ryan on the bed, naked and pale, beneath him and raising his hips to meet Dante's gentle thrusts.

Suddenly he hears the door open and a rush of cold air swirls around his legs. "Don't mind me," Mrs. Talonovich says. Her voice tightens his fingers, he grips himself painfully, his eyes fly open, she's in the bathroom, she's here and *talking* to him and can she see his silhouette on the shower curtain? Does she know he's in here thinking of her son and *touching* himself? What the *hell* is she doing here?

"Just came for your clothes," she's saying. Dante's mind is a whirl, he doesn't know what she's talking about, he can barely hear her over the rush of blood in his ears. "You can wear something of Ryan's while they're in the wash."

Go away, Dante prays. Water rains down like tears, pounding into him. His legs are cold from the air coming in from the hall, it slices through the shower curtain easily, licks along his thighs and prickles his cock, still hard, standing up from a patch of soapy hair, his fingers fisted around his balls. "Dante?" she asks, concerned. "I'll just—"

"Fine," he manages, and when he clears his throat to say it again, his voice is stronger this time, louder, more sure. "That's fine. Thanks."

"No problem," she laughs, but he doesn't move, doesn't breathe, doesn't dare *blink* until the door closes again and she's gone. Just to make sure, though, he peers around the corner of the shower cur-

tain, wipes the water from his face, stares out at the tiny bathroom. He's alone. His clothes have disappeared from where he left them on the floor and on the edge of the sink is a small pile of fabric, a plaid flannel shirt and a pair of boxers, some socks, sweatpants.

She's gone.

God. He's hard and aching now, ready for release, but what if she comes in a second time? *Oh, don't mind me, I just forgot something...* he should've locked the damn door, he didn't know she wanted to wash his clothes, and she walked in while he was—

No, he's not going to think about it. As quickly as possible, he rinses the soap from his body, his hair, the washcloth. By the time he turns off the water, he's already starting to cool off a bit, he's not quite as stiff as he was when she came in and his hand encircled his dick, but there's a lingering throb in his balls that he wants to take care of. He doesn't dare, not until he knows the door is locked and he won't be interrupted. *Jeez.*

The last of the soap swirls away down the drain and Dante dries himself off, briskly rubbing the towel down his arms, his chest, his legs. Then he pulls on the boxers but they're a little large for him—Ryan has a stockier build and his shorts ride low on Dante's narrow hips. At least they're clothing, they cover his nakedness in case Mrs. Talonovich decides to pop back in, maybe to wash the towels now that he's finished with them. While he was jerking off, he can't get over that. Even his *own* mother doesn't just bust up in the bathroom anymore.

He rolls the boxers down a bit, the way he's seen girls do on TV, rolling the top down until the fabric bites between his legs and the shorts aren't in any danger of falling off. Then he tries on the sweatpants, but they're just too much. He doesn't think he'd wear them for long, anyway, given the way his wilting erection still tents the boxers. Yesterday Ryan wanted to go further, didn't he? And Dante stopped because he was scared of rushing through it and losing his boy, but if they're both willing, that can only make it right, no?

So he kicks the sweatpants away and pulls on the flannel shirt, buttoning it halfway up his chest. The shirttails cover his groin and ass and the sleeves are a little long—he didn't think Ryan was that much broader than he is but that's okay, he likes the way this makes him feel, wearing his boyfriend's shirt, breathing deep his faint scent that still clings to the material. He hugs the shirt close to him, savoring the feel of warm flannel on damp skin, imagining this same shirt on Ryan's body, warming to *his* skin. Yeah, he's willing this time.

He hangs the towels on the rails like Ryan suggested, scoops the sweats up off the floor, grabs the socks still on the counter. The hall is empty, the darkness cool on his heated skin, Mrs. Talonovich nowhere in sight. When he opens the door to Ryan's room, he's greeted with sounds from the TV, a *fzzzt* of static and then suspenseful music, *fzzzt*, a commercial, *fzzt*, a cheering crowd. This time when he closes the door, he makes sure it's locked behind him. He doesn't need any more surprises today.

Ryan sits at the foot of his bed, flipping through the channels. His leg with the brace sticks off the edge of the mattress, kept straight by the metal rods that hold it in place. His other leg is propped up to his chest, his foot on the bed, his arm wrapped around his knee as he watches television. That's a good sign, Dante thinks, his leg up like that—even if Ryan doesn't notice, it's supporting *some* weight at least. *See?* Dante thinks, setting the sweatpants and socks on the top of Ryan's dresser. *You'll walk again, I just know it.*

Noticing him, Ryan glances up from the screen and Dante can feel the weight of his gaze, the way he stares at him, his shirt puckering open to reveal smooth skin, his legs beneath the length of flannel. When Ryan speaks, his voice is quiet, almost awed. "I like you in that."

With a laugh, Dante admits, "I like me in it, too." He crosses the room to stand in front of Ryan, blocking the television screen. His boyfriend doesn't seem to care—his foot slips off the bed, the gap between his legs inviting, and he pushes the remote away as he fum-

bles with the last button on Dante's shirt. Kneeling on the bed between Ryan's knees, Dante combs his fingers through the reddish-blond hair and whispers, "Your mom walked in on me in there."

Ryan undoes another button, his fingers fluttering over Dante's stomach like butterflies. "She's like that," he says, pulling Dante closer. He kisses the spot in the middle of Dante's chest where his ribs meet.

"She does that to you, too?" Dante wants to know. When Ryan kisses him again, damp lips cool on his flesh, he laces his hands together behind his boyfriend's head and holds him close.

Ryan laughs and admits, "I lock the door." He takes a quick glance behind him at the door to his room.

"Don't worry," Dante says, "I locked it this time." Ryan turns back to him, continues to unbutton Dante's shirt, kissing his chest and stomach as the dusky flesh is exposed. When the shirt's completely undone, Dante opens it and guides Ryan's mouth to one nipple, dark and hard like a chocolate kiss. "Lick it," he says. Ryan does as he's told, running his tongue across the nipple, and it stands up in his mouth, a wondrous sensation. Dante arches back, draws in a hiss of breath, feels that touch all the way down into his groin.

With a grin, Ryan murmurs, "You like that?"

"Unlike *some* people," Dante teases. Ryan's lips close over his nipple again, his tongue tracing a path around the darkened flesh, and Dante presses into him, the tip of his erection chafing against his boxers where he rubs into Ryan's stomach.

"Hey!" Ryan laughs. "I'm ticklish there." He folds his hands against the hollow of Dante's back, pulls him closer, works the shirt up and eases his fingers into the waistband of Dante's boxers. "Come here," he moans, pulling Dante towards him as he lies back to the mattress, his fingers curving around Dante's ass, slipping between his cheeks, brushing against secret flesh.

Dante stretches out above Ryan, their lips meeting in a velvet crush, their tongues licking together, and Ryan's hands are every-

where, it seems, on his ass, on his back, on his crotch and working the snaps there free, until he holds Dante's hardening shaft in his palm. Dante lets his body take over, thrusting into Ryan's eager hands, his mouth closing over his boyfriend's lips, his chin, his throat. Another thrust, he's close now, a few minutes more and he'll find release, they'll lie together and it'll be different this time, he knows it will, he *wants* it to be.

Between them, he hears the quiet hiss of a zipper, Ryan's pants pushed out of the way. Inexperienced fingers fumble beneath his balls, grip him a little too hard, squeeze uncomfortably. "Ryan," Dante mumbles, pulling back. Sudden doubt courses through him. Is this what his boyfriend *really* wants? Are they moving too fast?

The hand on his cock falls away as he sits up and he sees Ryan's open fly, his boxers unsnapped and pushed aside, light hair kinked into strawberry curls around a thick, red shaft that's already begun to weep. Dante's own erection sticks out along Ryan's thigh, his shirt and boxers open to reveal a smooth expanse of skin from his neck down to the dark hair around his dick. Ryan's eyes are hooded with lust and he reaches for Dante, trails a hand across his stomach, catches him between his palms. "What's wrong?" he asks. With a gentle tug, he tries to get Dante back over him again, but Dante doesn't take the hint. "Dante, please. Don't tell me you don't want to."

Dante runs his fingers up Ryan's abdomen, flicking his t-shirt up out of the way. "I do," he murmurs, he *does*, but what happens when it goes further than this? What happens when the blood roiling in his veins drowns out Ryan's voice, when he can't hear his boyfriend tell him no? When is further too far to go?

Ryan must see something's bothering him because his hands become soothing, his caresses gentle and loving, and he wraps his arms around Dante's waist, tries to pull him close. This time Dante obeys, lying down in Ryan's embrace, their erections pressing together with an almost painful ache between them. Tenderly, Ryan

rubs along Dante's back, holds him tight, kisses his forehead and whispers, "How far have you gone before?"

Easing his arms around Ryan's shoulders, Dante snuggles up to him and admits, "I've done it. It's just..." He trails off, unsure. "I'm just afraid of losing control," he admits.

He can feel Ryan's frown against his temple. "What do you mean?" he asks. One hand trails down his arm, working the thin muscles beneath the flannel shirt, warming him with the touch. "We won't do anything you don't want to do," Ryan promises.

"I'm not worried about me," Dante whispers. He tightens his grip around Ryan, unwilling to let go, and there's a part of him that enjoys the throbbing at his crotch, it's almost a penance for getting lost in the moment before.

For a long while, Ryan doesn't speak. Dante can almost hear him thinking things over. If he's gone all the way with another boy and doesn't want to do much with him, it must be because of his legs, and that's so not the case, Dante doesn't want him to think that at *all*, he even opens his mouth to say that's not the problem here. It's not Ryan, it's himself, he's still hung up on what happened with Jared, but before he can speak, Ryan turns Dante's face up to his, stares into him, and his frown deepens when he asks, "What did he do to you?"

Dante struggles to sit up but Ryan keeps him close. "Nothing," he says, suddenly self-conscious. Is he talking about Jared? How does he know? "Ryan, who? Nothing, we did nothing, it's—"

"The guy who made you like this," Ryan says. His hand smooths down Dante's arm, catches his wrist, rubs at a spot just below his thumb. It's comforting, that touch, loving and Dante's never felt anything like it before, it makes him feel safe in a way he can't quite explain. "How many guys have you slept with?"

"Just one," Dante mumbles. He doesn't like talking about this, about *Jared*. "Ryan, it's not what you think—"

But Ryan kisses him quiet. "It's okay, Dante, really. Tell me, please." He kisses him again, his lips lingering against Dante's own,

and when he speaks, Dante breathes in the words as they're set free. "I'm not going to judge you or hurt you or hate you. I just want to know what he did to make you like this, okay?"

"Like what?" Dante replies, but he knows.

"You're trembling," Ryan points out. He rubs along Dante's arm briskly as if to warm him up, and then his hand slips into the open flannel shirt, beneath Dante's arm, around his waist until Ryan cups his ass, kneads the cool flesh. His eyes plead with Dante. "Trust me."

Dante ducks his head against Ryan's neck and whispers, "I don't want to talk about it." But Ryan's patient—he seems to have forgotten about their stiff cocks, their naked flesh pressed together, the lust still curling through their bodies. Dante remembers that morning when Jared straddled him, like he did Ryan not moments ago, his fingers picking at Dante's nipples, his dick laid out along the length of Dante's own. He remembers kisses, and laughter, and then those hands hardening on his wrists, holding his arms up above his head, out of the way. *It's okay*, Jared whispered, his knees forcing Dante's thighs apart. *It's okay, Dante. I love you, it's okay, just let me...like this...see? It's okay.*

Bright pain, clenched muscles, a fullness that felt wrong, and later, alone in the shower, he couldn't wash it away. "I just wasn't ready," Dante mumbles into Ryan's hair. "He wanted to and I said no, I didn't think..." He sighs, exasperated. "I didn't want to and he did it anyway, and I don't want to do that to you, okay? I don't want to rush through it if you're not ready."

Now he sits up, sees the frown still on his boyfriend's face, and because he can't read the thoughts behind those blue eyes, he wishes he hadn't said a word. "I want you to be sure—" he starts.

"He raped you," Ryan mutters, anger hardening his voice. His hands fist at Dante's back.

"It wasn't—" Dante argues.

But Ryan cuts him off. "You're not like that," he says. "Nothing like him, Dante, *nothing*. I know you're scared but look at me. *Look*

at me.” Dante does, and Ryan’s eyes blaze with an emotion that’s hard to decipher. “You won’t do that to me, I know you won’t, you *can’t*, because I want you to touch me there, I want you to love me—”

“I do.” It’s a small whisper but it’s true, he loves Ryan, and suddenly his heart quickens in his chest, he holds his breath, waits for the realization to set in. “I do, Ryan,” he says, when his boyfriend doesn’t respond. “I love you, and I know it’s probably too soon to say that, but—”

“It’s not,” Ryan assures him. “God, Dante, I’ve wanted to tell you since the first time you kissed me, I love you, too.”

He pulls Dante down beside him again and with his lips and hands, he begins to erase Jared and the memories that have haunted Dante for so long.

CHAPTER 9



Somehow, Ryan manages to get them back to where they were before Dante pulled away. He's not too sure what he's doing—he's never been this far before except in dreams, but his body reacts to Dante's and his hands seem to know just where to touch, his lips just what to kiss. Every sigh, every moan, every gasp echoes Dante's words, *I love you*—Ryan hears them in the rasp of skin on skin, feels them in the lips on his neck, the hands on his stomach. *I love you*. Ryan never imagined sweeter words and he whispers them himself, sighs them into the hollow of Dante's throat, kisses them into the palm of his boyfriend's hand. He imagines the words like water, washing away the pain and hurt trapped inside Dante's heart, and his tongue licks along Dante's collarbone, his nipples, his chest, as if cleansing him of everyone else before, making him new again, making him whole. *I love you*.

Their erections flare to life with the press of bodies, the rub of flesh, and Dante trails a hand down between them, grasps Ryan in his hand, squeezes and kneads until his boyfriend arches against him. "You have any lotion?" Dante whispers, sitting up. Numbly Ryan nods, fumbles for the table beside his bed, somehow gets the top drawer open and extracts a small tube of hand cream. When he hands it to Dante, his boyfriend pops it open and giggles. "Jerk-off

Jergins,” he says, grinning as he squirts a small dollop into the palm of his hand. “Gotta love this stuff.”

“It’s unscented,” Ryan points out. He puts the tube away again and tries to push the drawer closed, but it gets off-track and sticks and he’s not about to fuck with it now. “I don’t like that flowery shit when I’m getting off, you know?”

With another laugh, Dante rubs the lotion between his hands, lathering them. Then he takes Ryan’s dick again, his slick fingers slipping over the hard skin easily. The other hand finds his own thick shaft, and he works them both in a steady rhythm, watching Ryan closely. Each stroke sends shivers of delight through him and he leans back, closes his eyes, moans Dante’s name as that hand slides up and down his length. Those fingers ease beneath his balls, rubbing in gentle circles, fondling him, massaging, caressing, and when one fingers glides into him, Ryan gasps, tightens his muscles, tries to keep it inside where he’s hot and tight and it feels oh so amazingly *good*. “Dante,” he pants, trying to pull him in further. “Oh Jesus, Dante, *please*.” This is worlds better than that halfhearted attempt at a blowjob with Noah.

But Dante pulls out of him, returns to his stiff cock and throbbing balls, works him until he’s sure he’s going to come, any minute now he’ll cover himself in his own juices and that’ll be the end of this. He thrusts into Dante’s hand, harder, faster, his buttocks clenching as he pushes up from the bed, hungry for release. One hand is fisted in the bed sheets and the other in Dante’s shirt, still open above his gaping boxers. “Come here,” Ryan sighs, struggling to sit up a bit. He wants that warm mouth on his, that soft tongue in him, that sweet taste of lips.

As if reading his thoughts, Dante leans towards him and they meet in a desperate kiss. Dante lies Ryan back down, straddles him, lies down above him and laces his hands together, creating a circle around their slathered cocks. With each thrust, they rub against each other, the tips bumping Dante’s fingers, their balls crushed together.

Dante kisses the moans from Ryan's lips, his hands squeezing their erections, his hips riding above Ryan's. Both of Ryan's hands cradle Dante's face, holding him close, his butt arching up into him over and over and over again. He still feels the ghosts of fingers tracing along hidden flesh, rimming him, slipping inside, and when Dante comes in a heated rush, Ryan's not far behind. Another thrust, two, and then Dante's hands are filled with their mingling juices and their kisses lose their urgency, their ardor, until it's just their mouths resting on cheeks, their breaths short, quick gasps, their heartbeats returning to normal. "I love you," Dante whispers again, kissing Ryan's ear. "I've never told anyone that before."

Ryan's mouth finds his in reply.



Dante doesn't want to leave him to wash off his hands—Ryan doesn't blame him, the last thing he wants is his mother to run into his boyfriend in the hall, all smiles, *that* would be horrifying. So Ryan pulls off his t-shirt and gives it to Dante, who wipes his fingers on it before tossing it to the floor. "Lie down," he tells Ryan, curling up beside him on the bed. His own shirt is still undone, his boxers open, the span of his flesh dizzying. Ryan obeys, lying down beside him and trailing a hand down that smooth stomach, over tight muscles, he likes his own pale hand against Dante's dark skin. Further, he slips down further, until he touches cooling flesh and coarse hair, and Dante rubs against him like a cat, responding to Ryan's inquisitive fingers. "What are you doing down there?" Dante teases, poking at Ryan's own dick, still exposed because neither of them wants to bring this intimacy to an end yet.

"Just feeling around," Ryan admits. He likes the weight of Dante's balls in his hand, the slick shaft that stiffens beneath his touch, the hair that kinks around his fingers. He imagines them in a hotel room and not just down the hall from his mother in the kitchen. There they can do more, if they want to. He could take Dante's length in his

mouth, taste the forbidden flesh, feel the spongy tip against the roof of his mouth, drink down the tangy saltiness when his boyfriend comes. Or Dante could press him back to the bed, kiss his chest and stomach and lower, take Ryan into *his* mouth, or better yet, ease into him and whisper that it's okay, each thrust a hundred times the pleasure he felt for the brief moment when his finger slipped inside.

Another couple days, Ryan tells himself, watching Dante's eyes slip shut as his hand fondles tender flesh. *We'll be alone at the competitions and I'll have you all to myself then*. No mother hovering just beyond the closed door, no interruptions, nothing but each other. Kissing Dante's forehead, Ryan murmurs, "When does the money need to be in for State?"

Only half-interested in conversation, Dante shrugs. "Tuesday or so," he mumbles. His arms find their way around Ryan's chest and he hugs him close. "Don't talk just yet."

But Ryan's mind is already turning. How will Dante ever come up with the money in three days? "Let me pay it for you," he says. At Dante's sigh, he hurries to explain, "You can pay back your half if you want. How else are you going to pay it?"

"I can work overtime," Dante tells him, resting his head on Ryan's shoulder, but his eyes blink open slowly as he thinks about that and Ryan can see he's doing the math in his head, three days and what, twelve hour shifts each day? Will that be enough to cover the expense? "If I go in when the shop opens, work til close, beg Bobby to pay me a few days early and maybe give me what I'd make on the weekend in advance..."

"Maybe you can just let me pay it," Ryan says. He doesn't see what the big deal is, but Dante's slight frown and furrowed brow suggests it's not a good idea. "What?"

Dante shrugs, which settles him closer to Ryan. He curls his legs up around Ryan's knee, above his brace, and his abdomen presses against Ryan's hip, catching his hand between them. "You can pay me back," he says again. When Dante doesn't respond, Ryan raises

his face up to his and this time he kisses him on the mouth, sweet and tender. "You're going to State," he whispers against Dante's lips. "I'm going with you. I've got the money so I'll put up the cash and you can pay me in little bits, five dollars a week if you want. Shh." He kisses away the protest before it even starts. "We're done talking about it, okay? No arguments, I won't hear them."

"I don't want you thinking I'm here because you have money," Dante tells him. His hands come up to cradle Ryan's face and he stares into him with dark eyes that are too bright to be real—they remind Ryan of glossy pinups in magazines, shiny eyes that belong in print or on television or in the movies, not here beside him, staring into him so intently, devouring him almost. He wants to lose himself in those eyes. When they do have sex, he's going to ask Dante to keep his eyes open, stare at him like *this*, and with each thrust he'll open wider, take him in further, take him all the way in until Dante can't find his way out again and he's as lost as Ryan. "I'm not here because your parents are well off," Dante's saying, his voice earnest. "I didn't come up to you at the rink because I wanted handouts."

Ryan squeezes the thick erection in his hand and grins. "You just want me for the sex, I know," he jokes.

But Dante doesn't laugh. "That's not it at all, baby," he says, pleading. "God, don't think that—"

"I'm teasing," Ryan tells him with a quick kiss on the tip of his nose.

"I'm not," Dante counters. His fingers start to stroke Ryan's cheek softly and he leans into the touch. "Ryan, babe, I like you. I *love* you, you're the first person I've ever met who knows how much skating means to me because it means the same to you. Finally someone understands the ice and the blades and the wind on my face, you know? Finally I know there's someone who doesn't think my sport is just a distraction and my dreams are stupid—"

"They're not stupid." Ryan kisses him so he can't say that again, he doesn't want Dante even *thinking* it. "Who's been telling you that

shit? Bobby? Dietrich? You listen to me, Dante. You've got something out there on the ice, you know you do, and you can't lose it." He studies Dante, his eyes, his mouth, and he doesn't like the sudden sadness he sees in those brown depths, those curled lips. "I'm going to pay the State fee, listen to me. Don't shake your head. I'm going to pay it and we're going to Atlantic City, and you'll be the best damn skater out there on that ice, you're going to blow them away. And go on to Regionals, and Nationals, and World Cup, and whatever else there is down the road, you're there, you hear me?" He covers Dante's lips with his thumb to keep him from disagreeing. "And I'll be with you, okay? All the way to the Olympics. As long as you'll have me—"

Dante holds him tight and whispers, "I'm never letting you go."



Dante is exhausted—though he won't admit it, Ryan thinks his boyfriend harnessed a lot on this race, and the past few days have been a whirlwind as he juggled work and skating and their new relationship. Now everything has taken its toll, Ryan can see weariness in the lines that crease Dante's brow as he lies in his arms, watching the TV while Ryan flips through the channels. Every few minutes his eyes slip shut and he'll stir himself awake, blink around owlishly, grin when he sees Ryan and snuggle closer to him. "You can take a nap," Ryan tells him, smoothing a hand along Dante's back.

But his boyfriend shakes his head and yawns. "I'm not tired," he murmurs, his voice already dreamy. Still, he snuggles into Ryan's shoulder and when his eyes close the next time, they don't open again. His breathing grows even, hot and soft along Ryan's neck.

Asleep. Ryan thumbs down the volume on the remote, lowering the sound on the TV. He waits another few minutes and then sits up slowly, careful not to disturb Dante. His boyfriend moans, frowns in sleep, his fingers clutching at Ryan's arm as he pulls it out from beneath Dante's head. "Shh," Ryan sighs. "I'm not going anywhere."

“Ryan,” Dante whispers. When he starts to stir, Ryan pulls his pillow down to where they lie, eases it beneath Dante’s head. Then he smooths the hair back from Dante’s forehead and leans down, kisses the line that creases his brow. A boy asleep in his bed, *his* boy, how did this happen? This time last week he hated the world, couldn’t imagine anything more heinous and unproductive and stale as his life in that wheelchair and now this. *This*. His fingers comb through Dante’s hair, so soft, so unbelievably soft, like a child’s hair, thick and shiny, falling back from his ears and face in gentle waves. Dante’s cheek like the skin of a peach, fine hairs only hinted at beneath Ryan’s palm, golden and faint and curving along his jaw. His eyelashes like those in mascara ads, bushy and full, a million different lashes Ryan can’t begin to count. Arched brows, so black, almost as if they’re drawn on with India ink—Ryan imagines wetting his thumb, rubbing over one eyebrow, smudging the line into the skin. So beautiful, this boy, his boy, *his*.

Leaning down, Ryan presses his lips to a spot just below Dante’s navel, where a thin trail of dark hair leads the way down into his boxers. This close, Dante’s skin smells heavenly, a scant whiff of musk and sex and beneath that the scent of Ryan’s own shampoo. His tongue licks out, inquisitive, traces the line of hair to where it disappears beneath the open fly of the boxers, and he’d go further, he *wants* to, but Dante’s sleeping and his boy needs his rest. Still, it takes all the strength he has to pull away from that warm darkness coiled between Dante’s legs. He thinks of the last boyfriend Dante had and that’s enough to restrain him—his fingers fumble angrily as he snaps the boxers shut, he can’t believe someone could hurt Dante like that. *Fuck being out of the chair*, he thinks, buttoning Dante’s shirt. *If I ever find that bastard, he’s dead, plain and simple*. In his mind he sees Dante stretched out on a bed, held down, struggling to get free—that image hurts, and Ryan balls his hands into helpless fists. No, he’ll not touch Dante there without his permission. No one will, if he has his say.

He's my boy, he thinks, rubbing a hand down Dante's leg, feeling the hair stand beneath his touch. This time last week he hated everything and now? Now he's in love, in *love*. He's still not sure how things have managed to get this far, he doesn't know why he's the lucky one all of a sudden...but he sure as hell isn't complaining.



Some time later, Ryan's mother raps on the door, a loud, annoying sound that threatens to wake Dante. Ryan, dressed again, is at the computer, and on the bed, Dante is buried beneath the covers. When Ryan wheels around the end of the bed, his boyfriend mumbles something incoherent and pulls the blanket up over his head. "Mother!" Ryan hisses, opening the door before she can knock again. "Jesus, he's trying to sleep."

"I didn't know—" she starts.

Ryan takes Dante's clothes from her, washed and folded and still slightly warm from the dryer. "Well, now you do," he mutters. When she tries to step into the room, he blocks her path with his wheelchair. "What? He's lying down." He practically closes the door in her face.

Setting the clothes at the foot of the bed, Ryan returns to the computer where he's working on Dante's web site. He can't believe his mother, coming in like that. They have to talk about this if he's going to stay here because Dante's a part of his life now and he's not going to put up with these interruptions, not when his boy's here. She actually barged in on him in the bathroom! Ryan wouldn't believe it except that she used to do the same damn thing to him when he was younger. Yeah, he's definitely going to lay into her for *that*.

But not now, he's busy and Dante's here. *Back to the site*, he thinks, shaking his head in irritation. He has a few good action shots from the quarterfinals, one in particular that he likes where Dante crosses the finish line and Dietrich's right behind him, the other boy's face

twisted in disappointment and anger. That one's going on the front page—Ryan thinks it's great.

He looks over the list he made shortly after Dante dozed off, things he wants to do to the web site before the State competitions. He's already e-mailed the local radio and television stations, sending them a brief write-up about Dante's performance on the ice this morning, a few of his pictures, the link to his site. Maybe one of the reporters will mention the site in an article, generate some hits. Then maybe a few companies in town will offer to sponsor Dante at the championships—"Hey sexy."

Ryan turns to find Dante starting out at him from beneath the covers. With a grin, he asks, "Did she wake you up?"

"Come over here," Dante says in reply. For emphasis, he scoots over to make room on the bed beside him, then flips the edge of the blanket back, exposing an empty space. "Who said you could get out of bed?"

"I'm busy," Ryan answers. He hopes it sounds coy, which it does. From the corner of his eye he sees Dante's quick frown and he laughs. "I'm working on your web site."

Dante sighs. "Ryan—"

"She brought your clothes back," Ryan says. He laughs again—he likes this act, the frustration that flits across Dante's face, the need he hears in his boyfriend's voice. He's decided he quite likes having someone to love on, to kiss and hold and talk to and joke with and cuddle. This is what he's always wanted, what he was always too scared to pursue because he was so sure he'd never find it, this comfortable air, this camaraderie, this love. Nodding at the foot of the bed, he tells Dante, "They're right there, if you want to get dressed."

"You're being mean," Dante declares. He rolls over on his side and fists the covers beneath his chin, lets his eyes close as if he's going back to sleep. Then he moans Ryan's name, loud enough that Ryan reaches for the remote to turn the TV up to cover the sound. "Come *here*."

“Dante,” Ryan warns. “My mother—”

Suddenly Dante sticks a hand out from under the blankets, his boxer shorts dangling from one finger, and whatever words Ryan wanted to say dry up in his throat. *My God*, he thinks, watching as Dante lets those shorts fall to the floor. *No shorts on, no pants, nothing at ALL and I have to sleep there tonight*—The flannel shirt follows, and the idea of Dante *naked*, utterly and completely nude in his bed, it’s enough to make Ryan forget what he’s doing to the web site. “Now who’s being mean?” he asks, turning his chair away from the computer. If he could walk, he’d already be in the bed, burrowing into those sheets like a pirate digging for treasure.

With a laugh, Dante slips off the far side of the bed, holding the blankets to his waist in some semblance of modesty. “Oh, that’s not fair,” Ryan tells him, setting the brake on his chair. Dante keeps one eye on Ryan as he drops the covers and for a tantalizing moment he stands gorgeous, half-hard from the teasing, his skin almost golden in the light.

Ryan climbs onto the bed, mindful of his legs. “Now *you* come *here*,” he says, but Dante laughs and shakes his head, and when he reaches for his underwear, Ryan’s already holding onto them, unwilling to let go. “Dante—”

Leaning forward, Dante kisses the top of Ryan’s head quickly. “God, you’re cute,” he says, his fingers easing into Ryan’s to work them free of his briefs. “When we’re alone next weekend—”

“We’re alone now,” Ryan points out. He wraps an arm around Dante’s hip, his hand curving around his boyfriend’s firm ass, his fingers finding a place that makes Dante gasp. “You wanted me back in the bed,” he points out. “Here I am.”

Dante steps out of Ryan’s reach long enough to pull his briefs up. Once his naked flesh is hidden, he tugs his t-shirt on over his head, steps into his sweatpants, pulls them up, as well. Then he lies across the foot of the bed, propped up on one arm and facing Ryan. When he kisses Ryan’s knee, his lips feel warm and damp through his jeans.

“You’re evil,” Ryan tells him, rubbing a hand along Dante’s inner thigh. “Doing that to me...”

“You’ll be walking in no time,” Dante says. “If that’s not incentive—”

Ryan laughs. “I’ll have to suggest it to my therapist. She’s been trying so damn hard and I can’t even stand two seconds in her office.” His hand slips between Dante’s legs, eases up his thigh to the V of his crotch, until a hard thickness presses against his wrist. “Just get my boy in here, I’ll say. Take off his clothes, stick him on the other side of the room. I’ll grow wings and *fly* to him if I have to.”

In front of him, Dante shifts until his head rests against the top of Ryan’s knee, just above the brace encasing his lower leg. His shining eyes grow serious and he stares at Ryan for so long, he’s sure he’s said something wrong. “I like calling you my boy,” he whispers. His fingers trace a tiny circle in the crease where Dante’s pelvis and thigh meet.

Dante’s steady gaze is hard to meet. *Say something*, Ryan prays. He has to remind himself that his boyfriend just woke up, maybe he’s not very coherent right now. *Or maybe he doesn’t like how possessive you sound*, he thinks, frowning at the pattern his hand has worn into Dante’s pants. *Or he’s thinking that all you talk about is sex*. But he’s nineteen, sex is foremost on his mind, and with a boy like Dante by his side, how’s he supposed to think of much else?

Before he can stumble through an apology, Dante pokes at the zipper of Ryan’s jeans and asks, “Why can’t you walk?”

That makes Ryan laugh. “There was this accident,” he says, squeezing Dante’s thigh. He can feel the tip of his boyfriend’s dick beneath his palm, and he likes the smile that appears on Dante’s face when he rubs over the encased length. “I could’ve sworn I told you about it.”

Dante rolls his eyes. “I mean—I know that.” When Ryan laughs again and moves his hand, Dante moves it back. “Stay there,” he tells

him. “I mean why can’t you *still* walk? Is it something physical or mental or what?”

Sobering up, Ryan admits, “I’m not sure.” His own stubbornness, that’s what the therapist says when she thinks he’s not listening. Up until now he had no *reason* to walk—he was off the team, out of school, friendless and angry and alone. But now he has Dante, he wants to get back on his feet again, and he still can’t. He doesn’t know why.

“This leg,” Dante says, running a forefinger up and down Ryan’s left thigh. “What’s wrong with this one?”

“Ashlin’s skate cut the muscles open.” Sometimes Ryan thinks he can feel a tight pulling inside that leg, though the doctors assure him that the sutures have dissolved by now, the tendons healed. “I had twenty-three stitches in it, right here.” He draws a line on the side of Dante’s lower leg to show him where his wound is.

“And this one?” Dante asks. He taps Ryan’s right leg and leans back against the brace. The slight pressure is almost painful—Ryan shifts uncomfortably and Dante repositions himself quickly, moving a little further up Ryan’s thigh. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Ryan tells him. His right leg—crushed between Ashlin’s fat-ass weight and the boards. It wouldn’t have been so bad if they hadn’t *just* sharpened their blades, and Ashlin had been on the ice a little longer, if he’d been able to wear the skates down a bit. But no, he plowed into Ryan like a semi and the blade cut into his right leg, cut deep, the weight behind it enough to shatter his calf bone into a million fragments. He’s had three surgeries on it, and the last time they just stuck a steel shaft in there, told him he’ll set off metal detectors in airports for the rest of his life but it was the best they could do. “They put a rod in it,” he says. He traces the curve of Dante’s leg. “Right back here. The muscles have to attach themselves to the metal before I can walk on it again.” With a wry grin, he adds, “They’re ugly. You should see the scars—”

“Can I?” Dante asks eagerly, sitting up.

But honestly? The last thing Ryan wants is for Dante to see his legs, marked and red and bruised, pocked with indentions from where the black stitches had crisscrossed over his angry, swollen skin. There's nothing pretty about them, nothing sexy, nothing anyone should have to see. "No," he whispers. He shakes his head for emphasis. "I don't want...I'm not—" He hides his face in the blankets, cool on his hot cheeks. He's blushing now, dammit the hell. "No."

Dante's hand is gentle where it rests on his thigh. "It's okay," he murmurs as he rubs along Ryan's hip, beneath his shirt, across his stomach. He changes positions and leans down, smooths the hair away from Ryan's ear, noses the earring aside as he kisses the burning skin. "It's okay, baby."

It's *not* okay, though—he told Ryan about that jerk who raped him, didn't he? He showed Ryan *his* body. But Ryan's too embarrassed to say anything, he hates his twisted legs, his damaged skin, and he's afraid Dante will see the scars and that'll be the end of this, they'll turn him off and he'll never want to be with Ryan again. *He's not like that*, Ryan tells himself, but it's a cold comfort. He's seen the scars—he knows how bad they look.

Another kiss, this one breathy and ticklish along the sensitive skin below his ear, and then Dante whispers, "I like it when you call me your boy, too."

Ryan raises his face from the mattress and smiles as a third kiss finds his mouth. "When you're ready," Dante tells him.



Over dinner, Ryan's mother goes on and on about Dante and the race, as if she were there to see it. "Amazing," she tells them, smiling around the table at her husband and son, until her gaze rests on Dante. "You're like an angel out there on the ice, Dante. I bet your parents are so proud."

From across the table, Ryan sees the discomfort flicker across his boyfriend's eyes. "That's enough, Mom," he says around a mouthful of spaghetti.

"We go to every one of Ryan's home games," she continues. "Or we did. And next season we'll be front row center. I'm so glad he found a skating friend—"

"Mom, stop." Ryan glares at her defiantly.

"I'm just saying," she starts.

"Well don't." Across from him, Dante looks up gratefully, the hint of a smile on his face. "You weren't there—you didn't see it."

His dad speaks up. "Then you tell us, son."

But Ryan thinks maybe Dante's uneasy over all this attention, and he saw the look in his boyfriend's eyes at his mother's words. *I bet your parents are so proud.* He doesn't know much about Dante's home life—he knows it's just the two of them, him and his mom, and he knows his mother works long hours, he knows she doesn't come out to watch him skate. He suspects that's a sore spot for Dante—hell, it would be for him, if his parents didn't watch him play.

So Ryan doesn't talk about the race. Instead, he mentions the web site and the e-mail he sent to the news stations—he calls it a *blurb* and he likes the way that sounds, official almost, as if this is a breaking story and all the reporters are clamoring for it. He talks about how he hopes the stations will carry the URL, how local merchants might visit the page and offer to sponsor Dante at State, how he has a good week left to practice and hone his form. He doesn't mention that he's going with Dante to the competitions—he doesn't think this is the right time, since he knows his mother will get upset and Dante doesn't need to witness one of her scenes. Ryan knows how it'll end, with himself pissed to all hell, her crying, and his dad telling him to just let them talk about it, even though he'll get his way. He always does.

After dinner, Dante says he should get going, but when Ryan's mother offers to drive him home, he declines. "I can take the bus," he says. He's in the hall, polite enough to stand there and talk with her when all Ryan wants to do is get them back to his room. "It's still early enough."

"She can take you," Ryan tells him. He tugs on Dante's pants leg, impatient. "You have to leave right now?"

"My mom should be home soon," Dante explains as he lets Ryan lead the way down the dark hall to the den. "If I'm not there, she'll think I'm at the shop and she'll be mad when I'm not." Once inside Ryan's room, he closes the door and leans back against it, pushes his hair out of his face, smiles down at his boyfriend and says, "She'll think it's a waste of time, being here when I can be at work."

"You can't work all the damn time," Ryan sighs. He wishes there was a way that Dante didn't have to run himself ragged, that he could just focus on his skating and their relationship and let all other worries disappear. A foolish dream, he knows, but one day it'll come true. "What about tomorrow?" he asks. "Do you work tomorrow?"

"Shop's closed on Sundays." Dante kneels beside Ryan's wheelchair and takes one hand in both of his. Looking up at Ryan, he says softly, "Maybe if you're not too busy, we can hang out again, or something."

Ryan laughs. "If," he giggles. "Jeez, like I might not want to." Before Dante can respond, Ryan leans down and kisses him, his lips closing over his boyfriend's tenderly. "Like I have something better to do," he murmurs.

Grinning, Dante whispers, "You might."

Another kiss. Ryan never knew this sweet press could be so filling and yet still leave him so hungry at the same time. "There's nothing better than you," he replies.



Ryan knows Dante's not well off—he doesn't expect a house like the one his parents own, a quiet neighborhood, a fancy car. Still, he can't help but wonder if Dante feels some sense of inadequacy as Ryan's mother navigates the van through the crowded, narrow streets downtown, heading for the government subsidized housing complex that his boyfriend calls home. *It's okay, baby*, Ryan thinks, but his mother's in the front seat, she'd hear that, he can't say the words out loud. Instead he touches Dante's knee, and when his boyfriend smiles at him Ryan takes his hand, a gesture his mother can't see in the darkened van. "Almost there," Dante whispers.

"Don't remind me," Ryan says. He doesn't want today to be over—it feels like weeks since the quarterfinals, years they've spent together now, he's not ready to give that up. *You'll see him again tomorrow*, he reminds himself. And then next weekend in Atlantic City, it'll be just the two of them, no one else. They'll share a room, they won't *have* to say goodnight.

The apartment looks like Ryan thought it would, a cramped, two-story brownstone with steps leading up to a stone stoop, one in a series of identical buildings that look as old as the earth itself. The sidewalks are cracked and covered with chalk drawings, hopscotch boards—the brick walls are crumbling, sprayed thick with illegible graffiti. When his mother eases the van to a stop at the curb, Ryan hears breaking glass, angry shouts, the distant wail of a siren. He doesn't like it here and he grips Dante's hand almost painfully—he doesn't want to let him go, he doesn't belong in a place like this. "Dante," he begins.

Dante pats his hand as Ryan's mother steps out of the van. She disappears from view, around the side so she can open the sliding door for Dante, and it's a brief moment but Ryan seizes it, pulls Dante to him for a quick kiss, slips a hand into his boyfriend's lap and squeezes gently. "I love you," he breathes. "Tomorrow—"

With another kiss, Dante cuts him off. “Love you, too,” he murmurs, pulling away two seconds before the door opens and Ryan’s mother is there, glancing down the street nervously. “I’d invite you up but there’s no elevator,” Dante says.

“I don’t think that’s a very good idea,” Ryan’s mother mutters. She shifts from foot to foot, keeps looking behind her as if she expects an attack. “It’s getting late.”

No shit, Ryan thinks. Leave it to her to make him feel like a child again, helpless and dependent on her to tell him what to do. He should surprise her, say he *wants* to go up to Dante’s apartment, see how anxious she gets when she tries to tell him no. *I’m nineteen*, he wants to remind her, *not eight*.

But Dante’s already climbing over him to get out of the van and Ryan touches the back of his thigh as he passes, his hand curving between his boyfriend’s legs in a move his mother doesn’t see. “I’ll call you first thing,” Dante promises. He jumps down from the van and gives Ryan’s mother a bright grin. “Thanks for the ride, Mrs. Talonovich.”

“No problem, Dante.” She pulls the door shut without even looking at Ryan, plunging him into a sudden lonely darkness. Outside he can hear her saying something to Dante but he can’t make out the words, just her worried tone of voice, a nervous laugh, Dante’s own voice fading as he hurries up the steps to his apartment. Ryan watches her walk around the front of the van—she looks up and down the street before she hurries to the driver’s side door, and when she climbs in behind the wheel, she locks the door behind her. “He’s a nice boy,” she tells Ryan as she starts the van.

Ryan waits. She’s tense, he can see it in the set of her shoulders, in the way her eyes keep flickering between the rearview mirror and the road ahead. She doesn’t like driving downtown, especially at night, so he waits. Just until they’re back on the boulevard, heading away from the tight streets and the tumbled shops, heading for the suburbs and the mall and the places she feels comfortable again, *then* he

clears his throat. She glances at him in the mirror, looks away, but she saw something in his face that makes her glance back and she forces a smile that doesn't quite make it to her eyes. "What's on your mind, hon?" she asks. It's the first time since the damn accident that she's wanted to know.

So he tells her. "Dante gets to take a guest to the state competitions next weekend," Ryan says. Her reflection frowns at him and the van slows, her foot on the brake. "I told him I'd go."

Here it comes. "Honey, I don't think you're ready for something like that—"

"Mom," he sighs, exasperated, "I'm nineteen years old. I've been to Atlantic City before—I lived on campus for the past year and a half. I'm not a baby."

"I'm not saying you are," she concedes. "But you're—"

"In a wheelchair, Mom, I know. But I'm not dead." He didn't think she'd let him go without a fight. When she starts to reply, he hurries on. "I need to move past the accident, you know? If you keep me locked up in the den, I'll never get over it."

She sighs, and in the mirror he sees her eyes well up with tears. "We don't keep you *locked up*," she tells him, her words like chips of ice. "I just don't think you're ready yet, hon. Maybe if you were more responsive to therapy—"

"This has *nothing* to do with therapy!" he cries. "That shit does nothing for me!"

"Ryan," she warns. She doesn't like to hear him cuss, says it's a bad habit he picked up at college—before that she thinks he never said anything worse than *drat*...nothing she heard, anyway.

"I'm not going to get better doing sit-ups and leg lifts," he says. He's pouting, he can feel the downward pull of his mouth, and he crosses his arms in front of his chest, bitter. "I have to get back out there, Mom. I have to start *doing* things again, things that don't involve you and Dad watching over my shoulder, waiting for me to fuck up so you can come running to my side."

Her mouth twists into an angry scowl. “Watch your mouth,” she mutters. “You don’t use words like that, Ryan, not with me.”

He switches tactics—it’s obvious meanness won’t work. “All I’m saying is I need this, Mom,” he pleads. It’s true, he *does* need it. He needs to get out of the house, away from his parents and the hospital bed and therapy three times a week. He needs to be alone, with Dante, he *needs* Dante, and his hands and his lips and his laughter, *that’s* what’s going to get him better, not working his muscles or squeezing his knees but having a reason to go on. Dante gives him that. Can’t she see how he’s improved since they met?

In a strained voice, she tells him, “You’re in a wheelchair, Ryan. You can’t just hop in a car for a weekend road trip with your pals—”

“It’s a club sponsored event,” he explains. “Dante needs support, Mom. He has no one—his mother can’t take the time off work to go with him. You’ve seen where they live. She’s never even seen him skate.”

That gets her—he sees her eyes waver with uncertainty and he knows he’s found the tool to manipulate her into letting him go. She’s the biggest sports mom he knows, always has been since he was four and on the Tiny Tots Soccer League in his preschool. Always on the sidelines, loudest voice in the crowd, out on the field in junior high when the umpire called Ryan on a foul ball just to yell in his face about how her son *never* fouled, *ever*. At the rink every home game, she told Dante as much tonight over dinner, and when he went down on the ice, he knows Ashlin’s skates tore into her heart as well as his legs, he knows this wheelchair disturbs her more than she’ll admit, he knows she wants him to not only walk again but play, get back in the game. The thought of someone like Dante not having that kind of support from his own mother, *that* will eat at her, Ryan knows it. He can almost hear the nagging jaws of sympathy gnawing at her now. “She hasn’t?” she asks in a small voice he barely recognizes.

He shakes his head. “He has no one, Mom,” he tells her.

She's quiet for a long time. Outside the van's windows, streetlights push back the night, tucking it like a blanket of stars around the houses in their quiet subdivision. He lets her mull that over—*no one but me*. He has to go to State with Dante, can't she see that?

Finally, they reach the house and she pulls into the driveway, cuts the engine on the van. As the sounds of the motor fade away, she toys with her keys and asks, "When is it?"

"Wednesday." Ryan wants to say more but doesn't. She's mulling it over and he lets her think.

"How long?" she wants to know, fiddling with the keys in her lap.

"Four days," Ryan replies. "We leave in the morning and come back late Sunday afternoon." He sees the frown on her face, he knows she's thinking of carpools and the chair lift on this van, how he'll maneuver around without it. "They have a bus," he explains. "Dante says it's handicap accessible. We stay at a hotel—"

She interrupts him. "I don't want you staying alone."

He almost laughs. "Dante and I will share a room," he tells her. *And a bed, as well, but you don't need to know that.*

More silence. Finally she sighs, defeated, and Ryan fights the urge to pump a fist at the ceiling and cry, *YES!* He's going—he knows just by that sigh alone.

But he also knows the routine. "Let me talk with your father," she says, as if that's going to make any difference now. He's going.

CHAPTER 10



When he unlocks the door to his apartment, Dante hears the television on low and knows his mother is already home. An early evening, then, which means she either left with a headache or was sent home because they didn't need her to close. Whatever the reason, it'll put her in a bad mood—she's probably in the living room now, brooding over the fact that she's here watching TV and not making money to pay the rent or put food on the table, and she's going to want to know why he's not at work, either. What did Ryan say? *You can't work all the damn time.* But no one ever told that to Torres Espinosa, and Dante's not about to be the one to break the news to her now.

As quietly as he can, he closes the front door behind him, locks it, looks down the length of hall that leads to his bedroom. He wonders if he can possibly sneak through the apartment without her hearing him—"Tay?" she calls out from the living room, and he sighs, defeated. "Is that you?"

"It's me." He steps into the living room and perches on the arm of the couch. His mother sits at the far end in front of the television, still dressed in the black skirt and white blouse she wore to work. In the harsh light cast from the TV, Dante can see how shabby the hemline of the skirt has become, and a few spots shine where the material's worn thin. She looks old, too old to be working part-time at the

mall on weekends—it pains him to see the lines creasing her cheeks, a few strands of silver lacing her dark hair. She's too young to look this tired, this worn down. "I love you, Mama," he says suddenly. He wants to tell her that things are going to change when he becomes a famous skater. He wants to say he'll take care of her then, when he has national sponsors and she won't have to work to pay the bills. In his mind he sees a sprawling mansion on the shore—she'll have her own rooms, maids and cooks and everything she wants. He sees Ryan there too, in a room of white, lying back on sheets as pale as his skin, and that's all Dante wants out of life—his mother cared for, his skating career, a boy to share it with.

But he knows her too well, and if he mentions that mansion on the beach, she'll tell him to stop being silly. "Dreams," she'll scoff, like they're bad things he shouldn't heed. "You show me that ice can make you rich and I'll believe it. Til then, keep your job, Tay. Keep your head on your shoulders and out of the clouds, and keep the other one tucked in your pants, you hear? I didn't sacrifice all those years just so you can turn out like your father."

So he stopped telling her his dreams long ago, and now when she glances up at him, he just returns her sad smile. No words. She looks at him, his clothes, his hands resting on his knees, and then she pats the cushion beside her. "Come sit with me," she says.

He does. She drapes an arm around his shoulders in half a hug, brushes the hair away from his cheek, her motherly touch sure and firm. "The quarters were today," he murmurs.

"Oh?" she asks. He's not surprised she didn't remember. "How did you do?"

"I made State." She nods as if she's impressed but Dante knows that she doesn't understand the sport. Still, he likes talking with her, he likes her hand smoothing back his hair, so he explains, "I won at the five hundred. That's my best race. Now we have the state competitions at the end of next week." When she nods again, he adds, "They're in Atlantic City."

And there's her frown, just as he anticipated. She turns back to the TV and glares at the screen like she thinks he's going to hit her up for money. "How much does *that* cost?" she wants to know.

"Two hundred," he admits. Her hand freezes, her frown deepens. "It's for two people, Mama. Me and a guest, that's why it's so much."

"A guest." Her voice is distant—he can barely hear it over the sound of the TV. "I hope you're not planning to ask me," she says. "You know I can't miss time from work. How many days does that two hundred buy you?"

Dante tells her, "Four. Ryan's coming with me—"

"Ryan." Now her hand falls to his shoulder and he can almost hear her thoughts turning over in her mind, *Ryan*, he hopes she remembers him. How could she possibly forget? Before he can jog her memory, though, she asks, "That crippled kid?"

"He's not crippled," Dante sighs. "It was an accident, Mama. He's getting better." Her hand falls from his shoulder to rest on the cushion beside his hip—he thinks she's probably trying to nonchalantly extract herself from this intimate moment. "He's my boyfriend," Dante says. "We're sort of dating."

"They'll let him go to this thing?" she asks, but she doesn't elaborate, does she mean his parents? The skate club officials? "So you have to pay for him, too? This isn't such a good idea, Tay. What about the shop?"

"Bobby knows," Dante assures her. "It's just a few days, that's all, and there's prize money if I win. Nothing big but it'll make up for the time off."

"And how are you going to get there?" his mother wants to know. "Don't tell me you have two hundred tucked away in that skate jar of yours?"

Dante says, "Ryan's fronting me," and that's enough to make her pull her arm away completely, she even shifts on the cushion so her hip's not touching his. "Mama, it's not—"

“I thought I taught you better than that, Tay,” she mutters, angry. “I thought you were too proud to take hand-outs.”

“It’s not a hand-out, I’m paying him back.” When she gives him that sideways look of hers, the one that suggests she’s not buying it, he sits up, indignant. “I am! Mama, you know I don’t beg for money. I don’t even want to let him pay for it but he insists. I’m paying him back.”

“And he just happens to have that kind of money sitting around,” she says, resentful. “Must be nice. You didn’t tell me he was rich.”

His mother has no respect for people with money, not unless they’re like herself and work themselves to death for every cent they have. Dante’s not sure how Ryan’s family makes it—he doesn’t know what his boyfriend’s parents do, though now Mrs. Talonovich stays home with her son, he knows that much. Ryan told him he’s sick of her hovering over him, said he started coming to the rink just to get out from under her constant care. But this isn’t a charity bit for Ryan, paying for him to go to State. He’s doing it because he loves him and he knows how much this means for Dante, how much it could mean for his career in skating. And Dante’s paying him back, the whole two hundred, despite whatever Ryan tells him. If he has to work the rest of his life, he’s making good on this loan.

“He’s not *rich*, Mama,” Dante says, exasperated. “The college reimbursed his tuition when he had to drop out this semester. After the accident? He’s using that money and I’ll give it back before he has to pay for classes in the fall.” She stares at the TV and doesn’t look his way, still frowning like she hates the idea. “I’m paying him back,” he says again.

She doesn’t reply. He thinks she probably won’t—the conversation is over for her, he might as well just say goodnight now. Standing, he stretches towards the ceiling, feels his spine pop with the movement, and is just about to tell her he’s going to bed when she says, “Bobby called earlier looking for you.”

"He did?" Dante smooths his shirt down, suddenly nervous. Was he on the schedule today? He didn't think so, but Bobby's pulled that shit before, writing him in and then getting pissed because Dante didn't know about the change and didn't show up to work. Or maybe he wanted Dante to come in and because he missed the call, Bobby'll get all bent out of shape now. He'll want to know where he was, and he won't like the fact that he was with Ryan all day. Won't like that he has a boy, *that's* going to be a sore spot between them once it comes out. Glancing at the clock on the wall above the TV, he sighs and wonders how bad it'll look if he doesn't call him back tonight. He's not in the mood for Bobby's bullshit. "Did he say what he wanted?"

His mother shakes her head. "Just said call when you get in," she says. She sees him look at the clock again and adds, "It's early enough."

The last thing Dante wants is to hear Bobby's voice now, especially if he only called to bitch him out. But Bobby won't like it if he waits until tomorrow to return the call, and Dante doesn't need a strained relationship with his boss, not when he has two hundred dollars he needs to pay back. So he heads for the kitchen, where the phone is—the only one in the apartment, the only one they can afford—and he dials Bobby's number, which is taped to the door of the refrigerator just in case he ever needs it.

So far he hasn't—Bobby usually calls him when he wants Dante to come in early, or if he's in a mood and cut his hours. When Dante first started at the skate shop what, two years ago? Right when he started hanging out with Jared, Bobby would call him all the time, ask him if he wanted to get together, do something after work, shit like that. Dante always said no, and if his mom wasn't home he didn't even bother to answer the phone, just let it ring until Bobby gave up. Can't he see he's too old for Dante's tastes? *Can't he see I'm in love with somebody else?* Dante thinks, listening to the phone ring in his ear. *Hey Bobby, I spent the day with my boy. He's as refreshing as summer ice and laughs like the wind. He tastes sweeter than forbidden fruit,*

his skin is finer than the softest silk, his eyes are endless and his touch is forever and my mom said you called? Somehow he doesn't think that will go over too well.

The ringing stops abruptly, and then Bobby's sister giggles, "Hello?"

God. "Bobby there?" Dante asks, his voice brusque. He hopes she doesn't recognize it—he doesn't want to talk to her. Hell, he doesn't want to talk to Bobby, either, but he sort of works for him, he can't avoid that. For a breathless moment he thinks Marnie knows it's him, she's swooning on her feet or primping in front of a nearby mirror, trying to come up with something witty and sexy and cute to say in reply. *I have news for you, kid*, he thinks, waiting. *You're thirteen, a girl, and Bobby's sister. Three strikes and you're out.*

But then he hears the phone drop and Marnie's voice rings out. "Bobby! Telephone!"

Through the receiver he hears heavy footsteps hurry down a staircase, *thumpthumpthump*, then his boss asking, "Who is it?" His sister telling him she doesn't know, some guy, one of his gay friends, and Bobby does something nasty to make her squeal, hits her or pulls her hair, Dante's not sure. Finally the phone is scraped along the floor and Bobby's angry when he asks, "Who's this?"

He hates that tone of voice. "Dante," he replies. This is going to be short and sweet. "My mom said you called earlier? What's that all about?"

"Dante!" Bobby laughs, and in his mind Dante can almost see the face he's making at his sister, something along the lines of *he called me and not you so nyah*. *Grow up*, Dante thinks. *She's a teenager—what's your excuse?* "Hey, man. I was hoping it was you."

I'm sure you were. "So what's up?" Bobby asks, like they're friends and Dante just called to shoot the shit.

"I'm kinda beat," Dante admits. "I was just calling to see what you wanted? I have to get to bed—"

"How'd the quarters go?" Bobby wants to know.

It's a ploy to keep him on the phone, Dante knows this, but he likes to talk about skating and he's still excited about the race, so he leans back against the counter, props the phone between his ear and shoulder, crosses his arms and says with a smile, "Kick ass, man. I'm going to State. I came in fast on the five hundred, blew everyone else away."

"Do you always come fast?" Bobby asks, then he laughs at his lame attempt at a joke. Dante doesn't think it's very funny. When he clears his throat, uncomfortable, Bobby tells him, "I saw you on TV. Damn, boy! You in lycra. You have a tight ass."

"You called to tell me that?" Dante asks. He hates the angry quiver in his voice, and he balls his hands into fists to keep them from trembling. "Look, Bobby, I gotta go—"

"Don't you want to hear about you on TV?" Bobby's stalling now, he wants to keep Dante on the phone—he's probably leaning against the wall, watching out for Marnie as he touches himself through the pocket of his pants, rubbing his dick hard at the sound of Dante's voice. The thought disgusts him. "It was on the news—"

"Not really," Dante admits. He wants to hang up the phone. He wants to call Ryan and let his baby's words and laughter drown out Bobby. He's going to be stuck with the guy's voice in his head all night, dammit. He *has* to call Ryan now.

But Bobby's still talking and Dante's not one to be rude. "They flashed your web site up there," he's saying. Dante's only half listening. "It looks okay. I guess that kid can't help but fix it up nice. He's got nothing else to do, stuck in that chair."

Shut up, Dante almost says—the words are on the tip of his tongue, he's about to set them free, when he remembers this is his boss and sure, he's not on the clock, but Bobby's one to dwell on things. "You guys still friends?" he wants to know. *Stop talking about him*, Dante thinks. *You have no right. He's my boy, so leave him alone.* "Did he take those pictures of you at the race?"

“Yeah,” Dante mutters. Boss or not, he’s hanging up this phone in two minutes, that’s it. “Bobby—”

“Those’re some good shots,” Bobby continues. Is Dante even talking here? He’s beginning to have his doubts. “Hey, you think he could get me prints?”

Prints. Of him skating. *So what, you can jack off to them?* he thinks bitterly. “No,” he says. He doesn’t try to hide his irritation. “They’re from a digital camera. I’m sure he’s already deleted them.”

“Oh.” Bobby falls mercifully silent, and Dante’s thinking of ways to start something that will end in goodbye when his boss tells him, “I’m going to need you at the shop tomorrow.”

He knew it. There had to be *some* reason for this call, something he wouldn’t like, Dante just *knew* it. “We’re closed,” he points out.

“Big shipment came in today,” Bobby says, as if that’s an added incentive to work. “Just a few hours, man, ten to two, that’s it. I’ll pay you overtime.”

Even though he hasn’t worked a full week. How can he say no to that? He needs the money for State—even though Ryan’s covering the trip fee, he’ll need cash for food, and he’s going to pay his boyfriend back. Thursday he only worked a partial shift, last night just a few hours after leaving Ryan’s, and nothing at all today—yeah, he needs the money. Time and a half for four hours...part of him wonders why Bobby’s being so damn generous. *Don’t question it*, he counters. *I could use it*. “Dante?” Bobby prompts. “I’m not asking here.”

“I’m thinking,” Dante answers. Of Ryan—how they were going to get together tomorrow, how he wants to see him again, taste him, touch him, love him. How he wanted to put in some time on the ice and Ryan said he’d come to the rink with him. “Four hours,” he says, just to make sure. “We’ll definitely be out of there by two?”

“I promise,” Bobby replies, but he’s said that before and never stood by his word so Dante doesn’t put much faith in it anymore.

“Sooner, if we can. I just want to get the new stock put out, that’s all. Come on, man. I need you.”

You want me, Dante thinks. *There’s a difference*. But he doesn’t say that, doesn’t say anything. When Bobby prompts him again he mutters, “I’ll be there. But I gotta be out by two. I have to practice.” *And see my boy*, he adds silently.

“Deal,” Bobby says. “See you at ten.”

Dante hangs up without saying another word. He glares at the phone, pissed, but if he leaves the shop at two, that should give him plenty of time with Ryan, and maybe they’ll even make it to the rink, as well. Picking up the phone again, he dials his boyfriend’s number from memory and hopes Ryan’s not too disappointed that they have to push their plans back.



The next morning Dante gets to the skate shop early—a little before nine thirty, and he’s thinking if he can get started before ten, maybe he can leave before two if he’s lucky. The front windows of the shop are dark and he presses his face to the glass but doesn’t see much inside. If Bobby’s not here yet, maybe he can get most of the stock up himself.

An alley runs down one side of the building between Later Skater and the deli next door. Shoving his hands into the pockets of his leather jacket, Dante ducks his head into his collar and hurries down the narrow strip of broken tarmac, past the cluster of garbage cans that smell of salami and stale bread, past pallets propped up against the wall, out into the back where the sidewalk ends in a short loading dock a few feet above another street. The door back here leads into the supply room right by Bobby’s desk and Dante has a key that’ll get him in. He sees Bobby’s battered pick-up, so old it still has chrome bumpers, half-eaten with rust, and he groans as he tries the door to the shop. Locked. Why did Bobby have to come in early? *Because he has no life*, Dante tells himself, and that makes him smile a little. He

toys with the idea of banging on the door until Bobby gets off his lazy ass and opens up, but his keys jangle in his pocket and it's just easier to let himself in. Maybe Bobby's asleep somewhere, he woke up too early and he's snoozing until Dante shows up, and if that's the case then Dante doesn't plan on making any noise if he can help it. He'll get so much more done if he's not fending off Bobby at every turn.

Only he's not that fortunate, because when he unlocks the door and steps into the supply room, he sees Bobby out in the main room behind the counter. There is a large carton at his feet and he's squatting beside it, digging into its depths. When Dante closes the door behind him, Bobby looks up at the sound of the latch, a frown already on his face. "Hey," he says, pushing on his knees as he stands, the way old men will do. Dante can almost hear the creak of joints from here. "What are you doing here so early?"

With a shrug, Dante tells him, "I need to leave at two. On the dot. I thought we'd get started as soon as possible." Dropping his duffle bag on the floor by Bobby's desk, he shrugs out of his jacket and asks, "Is that okay?"

He's painfully aware of Bobby's gaze on his arms, his chest, his waist—he wears a white t-shirt tucked into his sweatpants, and he should've known better than that, these pants make everything hang a little lower and they pull in all the wrong places. He wore them for Ryan, actually, because he's seen his boyfriend's eyes go wide when he's in them and he likes that. He also suspects that once he gets to Ryan's room, he won't be in them for long—the t-shirt, either, or the jockstrap he has on beneath the sweats. But now Bobby's staring at him, he can almost feel that gaze boring through the material, scarring his flesh like acid. *Note to self: don't bend over*, he thinks as he pulls the shirt out from his waistband. He hopes the movement looks nonchalant. *That's all he needs today, so don't bend over around him, don't give him that pleasure*. "Bobby?" he asks, smoothing the wrinkles out of his shirt. "Is that okay?"

“Fine,” Bobby tells him. Then he laughs, runs a hand through those short dreadlocks that Dante swears have never grown in the two years he’s known the guy. “I’m just getting started myself.”

By noon, they have most of the stock up. Bobby checks each item in the shipment against the invoice before he sets it on the counter so Dante can put it out on the sales floor—mostly replacement blades and wheel parts that go on the pegged wall, but one box contains a whole display of new boards that Dante has to assemble. It goes in the front window, and Dante feels Bobby’s hot stare on his back and ass as he works. In the glass he sees his boss’s reflection, invoice forgotten in one hand, as he leans on the counter and all but salivates over Dante’s backside. *Stop it*, he thinks, glaring at the cardboard display—Bobby makes his hands fumble and he can’t get the damn thing together, the pieces keep slipping out of place and in another minute or two he’s just going to throw the whole thing down in disgust and take a break, somewhere Bobby can’t see him, the restroom or the closet in the back, *somewhere*—

“Hey Dante,” Bobby purrs low, and does he think that’s sexy? Because it’s not.

Dante shoves the display together a little too roughly and the cardboard falls apart around him like a house of cards. “What?” he asks, exasperated. He hears the tight anger in his own voice and sighs. “I’m sort of busy here—”

“You getting hungry yet?” Bobby asks.

Something in the way he says it suggests he’s not just talking about food and Dante wants to tell him about Ryan, he wants to say, *Look, I got a boy now, back off*. But there’s nothing overt there, nothing he can pin down and object to—Bobby would put his arms up as if he means no harm and then get pissy and Dante doesn’t need that. He is a *little* hungry, but he knows his boss well enough to know that if he runs next door to get sandwiches, it’ll come out of Dante’s pay. “I’m fine,” he says, turning back to the display.

But Bobby's not listening. He rings up a no-sale on the register, pulls a twenty out of the till, slides it across the counter at Dante. "My treat," he says. Dante's heard that before. "Get us a couple of cheesesteaks, what do you say?"

How about no? Dante thinks. He doesn't say that, though. That'll make Bobby mad. Instead he concentrates on the display and tells his boss, "I'm kinda in the middle of something here." No answer. "I'm not really hungry," he adds. "If you want a hoagie, go get one yourself. I'm fine."

"You want hoagies instead?" Bobby asks.

"I'm fine," Dante says again. He doesn't turn around—he doesn't have to, he can feel Bobby's irritation from here.

"You don't have to pay me back," Bobby mutters. "Jesus, I know you don't have the money. I said I'll treat."

Before Dante can respond, Bobby ducks into the supply room, and the sound of the back door slamming shut echoes through the empty store. *Alone, finally.* Dante sits down on the cold floor, wipes his shaking hands on his pants, takes a deep breath, another, to still the anger in his heart. God, he hates this—he feels like one of the products on the shelves around him, a pretty decal or colorful helmet or decorative blade guard, something on display. Bobby does that just by looking at him, puts him under the glow of his gaze, objectifies him, makes him feel disgusted and wanted and used. First thing once he's back from State, he's looking for a new job, there's nothing else he can think of to do. He can't live like this, afraid to come to work just because his boss can't keep his hands to himself. And now that there's Ryan, well, Dante just won't stand for it anymore. He suspects that his hockey playing boy won't, either, once he gets the use of his legs back, and the last thing Dante wants is Ryan down here in Bobby's face, *that* won't do. So he'll look for something else—he's not sure what, because Bobby's good with his schedule and he pays him better than anyone else will, but he can't do this forever.

This time when Dante assembles the display, it pops together easily. It's because no one's watching him, there's no pressure from someone looking over his shoulder, and Bobby always makes him so damn nervous. He hopes his boss doesn't come back with two sandwiches because he really doesn't want to owe him for lunch. Bobby has funny ideas of payback, and Dante knows that it doesn't have to be money he asks for in return. Yeah, he needs a new job. Maybe his site will drum up a few sponsors and he'll be able to quit and spend more time on his skating. *Sure*, he thinks as he finishes setting up the display. *And while we're at it, let's dream that you and Ryan can get a place together soon and he'll sleep in your arms every night.* Now *that* would be nice, and maybe one day, but not any time soon.

Without Bobby staring at him, Dante can work quickly—he gets the display up, puts out the stock piled on the counter, empties the rest of the carton Bobby was working on behind the register and starts on the next when he hears the back door open again. He looks up from the packing invoice as Bobby comes in from the supply room, carrying two hoagies wrapped in white deli paper. “I know you said you weren't hungry—” he starts.

“Then why did you get me anything?” Dante asks. He frowns at the sandwiches as Bobby sets them on the counter.

Bobby shrugs and unwraps one sandwich, a cheesesteak that smells heavenly. Against his will, Dante's stomach rumbles—okay, so maybe he is a *little* hungry. But he doesn't want to owe Bobby. “You didn't have to buy me one,” he mutters, watching Bobby take a bite of the sandwich. Hot grease runnels down his fingers, pools on the deli paper, *God* that looks good.

Nodding at the second sandwich, Bobby tells him, “Eat up.” Dante doesn't need to be told twice—he unwraps the sandwich, a warm Italian hoagie that smells of olive oil and onions, and digs in, suddenly starving. “Is it good?”

Dante nods, barely noticing when Bobby sidles closer to lean against the counter beside him. Another few hours here, two at the

most, and he'll see his boy again, he can't wait. Though he thinks he'll have to run home first, brush his teeth, he can't be kissing on Ryan and tasting like capicola, *that* won't be sexy—

Bobby's elbow brushes his. He tries to play it off as an innocent gesture, but Dante jumps and moves over, putting some much needed distance between them. When it happens a second time, Dante stumbles over the box at his feet in an effort to get out of reach. "Careful," Bobby says, one hand finding Dante's hip.

"Don't," Dante tells him, twisting away.

"Aw, c'mon," Bobby murmurs. He takes another step closer, his arm slipping easily around Dante's waist, his hand rubbing against Dante's pelvis, his fingers picking at the jockstrap through Dante's sweatpants. Any move Dante makes now will end up with him touching Bobby's chest or stomach and he doesn't want that. He doesn't want *this*, this arm around him, this guy trying to put the moves on him. Why did he let Bobby buy him lunch again? How stupid is he?

"Bobby, no." He pokes an elbow into Bobby's stomach, gently, just enough to get his point across. When Bobby doesn't move away, he adds, "You know I'm not interested."

That doesn't seem to phase him—he doesn't back off, doesn't remove his arm. Setting his hoagie down on the counter, Dante places a hand against Bobby's chest and pushes slightly, uncomfortable. "Bobby—"

"You've let me touch you before," Bobby says. His grip tightens on Dante's waist and his mouth turns down in an ugly pout. "Come on, Dante, it's just the two of us. You don't have to be like this."

Like this. As if Dante wants more but just not here. This time he shoves harder against his boss, but Bobby's not letting go. "It's that kid, isn't it?" he's saying, catching Dante's hand. Now he's trapped, he can't break away, and Bobby nuzzles against his neck, his breath hot like an inferno, reeking of grilled onions. "How can you do this to me, Dante? You know how I feel—"

Dante struggles to get free. “And you know how *I* feel,” he counters, pushing against Bobby as hard as he dares. “Let me go, Bobby. What the hell is this all about? Let me go.”

Without warning, Bobby does just that. Dante staggers back, away from his boss, and trips over the carton at his feet. The next thing he knows, he’s on the floor, his butt stinging from the fall, and Bobby looms above him, larger than life. “Get away from me,” Dante growls, scurrying back until he hits the wall behind him. When his boss advances, Dante kicks out at him, his sneaker connecting with Bobby’s shin. “Bobby, don’t even *think* it.”

Rubbing his leg, Bobby glares at him. “What is it about him?” he asks. Is he still talking about Ryan? “What’s he got that I don’t, Dante? He’s in a fucking *wheelchair*, for Christ’s sake—”

“Shut up!” Dante cries. He’s sick and tired of everyone pointing that out, as if the chair is the only thing they notice about Ryan. Scrambling to his feet, he smooths his t-shirt down and doesn’t think about what he’s saying, he just lets the words tumble out. “Shut the fuck up, Bobby, okay? I’m not going to listen to you tear at Ryan just because of his accident. You want to know why I like him better than you? Because he’s cute and he’s funny and he didn’t grope all over me, he didn’t even *touch* me before we got together. I’m tired of this shit. I come here to work, to make money, to pay the god-damn rent and skate and earn some sort of *living* here, and the last thing I need is for you to be feeling me up.”

Bobby narrows his eyes, opens his mouth to object, but Dante’s not hearing it anymore. Kicking the carton out of his way, he heads into the supply room and over his shoulder says, “I’ve had it with your crap. You want me to stay here? Keep your damn hands and your opinions about my boy to yourself.”

“Your boy,” Bobby echoes, following Dante into the back. He watches as Dante empties the pockets of his leather jacket—keys, scraps of paper, bus tickets, a handful of change. Without a word,

Dante hauls his duffle bag up off the floor, unzips it, dumps everything inside. "So it's like that, is it?"

"Yeah, it's like that." Dante shakes the jacket just to make sure there's nothing else in it, and then he folds it over the back of Bobby's chair. When Bobby reaches for it, Dante steps away. "Don't touch me," he warns.

"I wasn't going to," Bobby sneers, but his hand drifts to his own waist, forgetting the jacket, and Dante wonders where it would have landed if he hadn't said a word. "What are you doing?"

Dante doesn't answer. Instead he riffles through his bag, under his skates, looking for the keys he just dropped in. His fingers brush over cool metal and with a muffled jangle, he pulls them out again. As he takes the Later Skater key off his ring, he tells Bobby, "I'm leaving. I don't need to sit here and have you gawk at me all damn day. Ryan's waiting."

"I thought you were going to practice," Bobby says. When Dante tosses the key onto the desk, he adds, "You walk out now, man, don't bother coming back. You leave like this and you're fired."

"And what'll you tell people when they ask?" Dante wants to know. Nervous anger swirls through him, making his hands tremble and his fingers clumsy, he jerks too hard on the zipper of his bag, it catches in the material, threatens to tear. "You gonna say I quit because you're too horny to let me do my job? You gonna tell them I got sick of the harassment and walked the hell out?"

Bobby scowls at him, *that* hit a nerve. "I don't fucking harass you," he starts.

"Bullshit," Dante spits. He whirls on his boss, takes in the ratty dreads, the patch of hair clinging stubbornly to his chin, his hard eyes—was he really scared of this man? Did he really let all those advances slide, the touches and comments, just because he was afraid of losing his job? *Too late now*, he thinks, and there's a part of his mind that reminds him of the two hundred dollars he owes Ryan, the next four days' worth of skating at fifteen bucks a pop, his half of

the rent that's due in another week. *I'll find something else*, he promises himself. *After State, I'll manage to find a better sponsor, someone who doesn't want my body in return.* "I've had it," he says, shouldering his bag. "You want something to rub up against every five minutes, get a dog."

He pushes through the back door, steps out into the bright sunlight, blinks back tears that sting his eyes. *I'll find something else*, he thinks again, but it doesn't ease the rapid pounding of his heart or the sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. Two years down the drain, just like that. *Thank you, Bobby.* He's not sure how he's going to tell his mom.

Halfway down the alley, he hears Bobby call out, "Wait!" His steps falter, but he doesn't stop. Footsteps echo off the tarmac as his boss jogs up to him, breathless. "Dante, wait up, man. Stop."

A hand touches his shoulder and Dante whirls away. "I told you—"

"Sorry," Bobby says, holding up both hands as if to show he won't do it again. "Sorry, look, can we take this back inside? I could really use your help."

Dante doubts there's much more to do—another carton or two, that's it. And he knows Bobby, he knows that if he gives in now, follows him back to the shop, then nothing will change between them. Sure, at first he'll keep his hands to himself, he'll look at Dante from the corner of his eye and only when he thinks he's not paying attention, but then the comments will start again, the noises he makes in the back of his throat when Dante bends over, the blatant stares, the touches. He can live with most everything else but those hands on his body, curving into places he doesn't want others to touch. *No one but Ryan*, he thinks, and his boy is waiting for him, isn't he? "No."

Bobby starts as if slapped. Dante gets the impression he's never been called on his obnoxious flirtations before. "No," he says again, his voice stronger, and he turns away from his boss, hurries down the alley and out into the sunlight again. Here in front of the store, the

street is still mostly empty but there are a few people around, he's not so alone. When he glances over his shoulder and sees Bobby following, he tells him, "I'm not going back in there with you, Bobby, not until you stop this jealous act—"

"I'm not jealous," Bobby scoffs. He catches Dante's arm, tries to pull him back. "Dante—"

He shrugs Bobby loose. "And learn to stop touching me," he continues.

"Dante, wait," Bobby says again. "It's not like that—look, I didn't know it bothered you."

Yeah, right, Dante thinks. Ahead he sees the bus stop, a young mother with two little girls waiting on the bench, huddled together in the chilly winter sun. In the light Sunday traffic he can hear the bus in the distance, one street over and heading their way. He stops at the bench, gives the mother and her daughters a bright smile, and turns away from them so they won't hear what he has to say. Bobby is right behind him. "I'll give you a week," Dante says. "I know I'm in no position to bargain with you, but you know I need this job and I know you need me."

"I could hire someone else," Bobby tells him, sullen. He crosses his arms in front of his chest and pouts like a petulant child. "Start them less than what you're making now—hell, hire two people for what I'm paying you."

"But you won't." Dante knows this, feels it in his heart, his bones. Bobby wants *him* in that shop, he trusts *him*. He already knows the stock, the customers, the daily routine. It'd be too much of a hassle to train someone new. "So you think about this, Bobby. You think real hard, and when I get back from State next Sunday, we'll see where we stand. Until then, don't call my house, understand? I don't want to talk to you until you decide what you want to do."

A few blocks away, the bus turns onto the street and Bobby sighs dramatically. "I *want* to unload that stock. I want your help with that, you said you'd give me til two."

"We'll talk next week," Dante says. Now he turns away, a trick he learned from his mom—this conversation is over.



By the time he gets to Ryan's house, he's crying. Just what he needed, to lose this job. Another week and Bobby will find someone else, someone who will work cheaper, who will put up with his roaming hands, his bitter mouth. He should just tell the skate club he's sorry, he can't make it to State, spend the next week looking for another job. Who's he kidding? There aren't any businesses clamoring to sponsor him, he doesn't have the money saved to practice the next few days, he'll be stiff and out of shape by the first race in Atlantic City on Friday and he'll let everyone down. *Should've kept your mouth shut*, a voice inside whispers. He hates it but Ryan's neighborhood is so quiet, he can't seem to drown it out. *Should've let him touch you like he did before—*

No.

He starts up Ryan's driveway and catches a glimpse of himself in the tinted windows of Mrs. Talonovich's van—red eyes, tear-streaked cheeks, runny nose. He can't knock on the door looking like this, she'll ask what's wrong and what can he tell her? Nothing, not a damn thing. Maybe he shouldn't even be here. Maybe he should just go home.

But he sees a cobbled path leading around the side of the garage and he remembers the sliding glass doors in Ryan's room, hidden behind vertical blinds. Wiping at his eyes, he shivers in his thin t-shirt and takes the path before he can think better of it. In the backyard he skirts the edge of the inground swimming pool, covered this time of the year, and steps up to the doors. The blinds are pulled aside, letting the sun fall into the den, and he can see Ryan on the other side of the glass, staring at his computer screen. Without thinking, Dante knocks.

Ryan jumps, startled. Then he sees Dante and with a sunny grin turns his chair away from the computer, wheels to the door. Sliding it open, he takes Dante's hand—so warm, his touch, so loving—and pulls him inside. "Dante?" he asks, his smile slipping. He sees the tears, he knows something's wrong, and his arms find their way around Dante's waist and shoulders, he eases him down into his lap, his hands smoothing away the memory of Bobby's touch. "Jesus, you're freezing! Where's your coat? What happened?"

Dante can't answer. Wrapping his arms around Ryan's chest, he just curls into his boyfriend's lap and buries his face in his shoulder.

CHAPTER 11



Ryan hates the tremors that shiver through Dante's body and he holds his boyfriend close, rubs his back and arms and legs as if trying to wipe away whatever happened to bring him to this. "It's okay," he murmurs, his lips against Dante's temple, his hands brushing the hair away from his face. "Shh, baby, it's okay." The *baby* comes easily enough and he likes the way it sounds so he says it again. "Everything's okay now, shh. Calm down."

When the trembling subsides, Ryan wants to know what happened. In his mind's eye he can see Dante getting off the bus in front of his neighborhood and suddenly Dietrich is there, gunning the motor of his Corvette and chasing after him, laughing like a demon from hell. Or one of the other boys from the skate club, mad about the competitions and harassing him. Or Bobby—

Dante confirms his fears when he mumbles his boss's name. He's been crying, Ryan hates the redness around his eyes, the puffiness, the tears on his cheeks. He wants nothing else in this entire world than to see his boyfriend's smile, his sparkling eyes—even more than he wants to walk at this moment, he wants to see that grin. "What did he do to you?" Ryan asks, anger boiling inside of him. "What the hell did he say?"

Dante rests his head on Ryan's shoulder, his forehead hot against his neck. "Nothing really," he mumbles with a sniffle. "I'm just sick of him touching me, you know? All the damn time."

"I'm sick of him touching you, too," Ryan growls. He hates this Bobby—the next time he's in that skate shop, he's going to give the guy a piece of his mind. *Keep away from my boy, you hear?* he'll say, and fuck being in a wheelchair, he'll kick Bobby's ass if he messes with Dante again. "Do you want to tell me what happened?"

"He bought me lunch," Dante sighs, and his arms clench tighter around Ryan's chest. His body is a comforting weight in Ryan's lap—despite the tears and the pain he knows his boyfriend is feeling right now, he has to admit that he likes this, holding him in his lap, Dante's legs curled up over his thighs and his breath tickling his ear. "I told him no, I knew he'd want me to pay him back, but he insisted. He started..."

Dante trails off and Ryan hugs him close. "It's okay," he murmurs again. "He's not here, it's just me and you know you can tell me anything. I'm right here."

With a sad sigh, Dante wipes his eyes again and his voice quivers when he speaks. "I told him hands off and then he started in on you—"

"Me?" Ryan asks, incredulous. That's unexpected—Bobby picks on Dante because of *him*?

Nodding, Dante presses his lips to the hollow of Ryan's throat. "It pissed me off. All he knows of you is the wheelchair, my mom too—I'm sick of people thinking you're an invalid or retarded just because you can't walk." Ryan doesn't know what to say—he feels the same way and his chest swells with a sudden, uncontrollable love for this boy in his arms, the first person who has managed to see past the chair. "So I told him to shut up and I left. I...I couldn't deal with it anymore. I just couldn't so I left." In a tiny voice, he adds, "God, I needed that job."

Ryan raises Dante's chin until they're face to face, inches apart, and he kisses the tears from Dante's smooth cheeks. His lips find Dante's own, close over them with a tenderness that makes him ache, a need that consumes him. "I love you," he whispers between Dante's parted lips. When his boyfriend starts to say something, Ryan kisses the words away. "Shh. It's going to be okay, I promise."

"I owe you for State," Dante reminds him. "I have like two days' worth of practice saved up in my skating fund, and my half of the rent is due next week. The *last* thing I needed was to walk out today." He looks at Ryan with beseeching eyes. "What am I supposed to do now?"

Thinking about the money sitting unused in his savings account, his tuition for the fall if he can get back on his feet by then, Ryan asks, "Practice is what, fifteen bucks a day?" When Dante nods, he says, "I can cover you—don't say a word, you know I have some extra money right now." He places a finger to Dante's lips to quiet him, and his boyfriend kisses his knuckle in response. "You don't have to rush to pay me back. I'm hoping we have years and years together ahead of us."

"We do," Dante promises. "I told you, I'm never letting you go."

That makes Ryan smile—he hopes not. Dante's his first boyfriend, and he's smart enough to know it might be naive, but he hopes their relationship lasts forever. It's already consumed every aspect of his life. Where would he be if they hadn't met what, less than a week ago now? How would he ever make it through all the days ahead, recovery and learning to walk again, learning to *live* again? He can't imagine a future without Dante in it. He doesn't want to.

"So don't worry just yet," Ryan tells him. "After we get back from State, you'll find a new job—"

Dante nods. "Or talk to Bobby. Maybe he'll stop fucking around, you know? I don't think he expected me to just leave like that. Maybe it'll make him realize what he's doing to me."

Ryan's not so sure about that. Personally, he doesn't want his boy anywhere near that pervert but he knows Dante needs the money, he's good at his job, he loves skating and working at a skate shop is a dream job for someone like him, so he doesn't say anything. He thinks Bobby might come crawling to Dante by next Sunday, true, but he also thinks that nothing much will change between them.

He doesn't like thinking of Bobby and his lecherous hands on Dante's body, so in an effort to change the subject, he asks, "When's your rent due?"

Dante shakes his head, no. "You're not paying that, too," he says, adamant.

"And what happens when it's late?" Ryan counters. He hates this stubborn pride that keeps Dante from wanting his help.

"I don't know," Dante admits with a sigh. He shifts into a more comfortable position in Ryan's lap, turning so that his back rests against Ryan's chest and his legs drape down over his boyfriend's to dangle inches above the floor. He leans his head back on Ryan's shoulder and takes one of his hands in both of his own. Lacing his fingers through Ryan's, he asks, "My mom kicks me out?" With a brusque laugh, he tells Ryan, "She'll do that, anyway, once she finds out I'm fired."

"Then you can live here," Ryan says, hoping to lighten the mood. "My mom can put you up in my old room, no one else is using it. And you can sleep down here—"

"Oh God," Dante sighs, and when he giggles, Ryan knows the worst has passed. "Don't tempt me, baby. I might never work again."

Kissing Dante's ear, Ryan murmurs, "You say that like it'd be a bad thing."



"You should practice today," Ryan tells his boyfriend, who lies on his bed curled into himself. Ryan is back at the computer, and he's waiting for just the right moment to tell Dante what his mother said

last night about State. It's because Dante's own mom isn't into his sports that Ryan's agreed to let him travel to Atlantic City with the skate club, despite the wheelchair and the two days of therapy he'll miss for the trip. She only spoke with his father briefly about it—her mind was already made up, a skater as good as Dante *needs* support and if his parents don't give it to him, then she has plenty to go around. Especially now after the accident. Ryan suspects she misses sitting on the sidelines cheering him on just about as much as he misses being out there on the ice.

So last night she made a few phone calls—the skate club officials never dealt with someone as persistent as Mrs. Talonovich when she's in full glory, and not only did she pay for the entrance fee, but she also made sure the bus, the hotel, and the skating rink where the competitions will be held are all handicap accessible. She even made the room reservations, and when one of the coaches began to object to Dante and Ryan sharing a room, claiming it's against skate club policy for skaters and guests to stay together if they aren't related, she tore into him about Ryan's needs and how he can't be left alone, how her son is in a *wheelchair* and would the skate club want to be responsible if something were to happen to him? He slips in the bathroom, falls out of bed...she didn't think there was enough money in the entire state of New Jersey to settle *that* lawsuit. From his room Ryan heard every word, mortified, but in the end she got her way, she always does, and that's more good news Ryan's just waiting to tell Dante, that they are definitely staying together, the room has already been reserved, thanks to his mother.

And then there's the e-mail he received first thing this morning, which led to a telephone call that he's sure will raise Dante's spirits. On the monitor, Ryan can see his boyfriend's reflection, and he looks so lost and forlorn that Ryan turns off the computer, wheels to the end of the bed, throws the brake on his chair and climbs up beside him. "Oh Dante," he sighs, lying down until their bodies are spooned

together. He wraps an arm around Dante, hugs him close, brushes the hair from the back of his neck and kisses the soft skin.

In his arms Dante sighs, a sad sound that ends in a forced laugh. “You know,” he murmurs, taking Ryan’s hand in his, “I can’t even begin to think out what I’m going to do. My mind just goes around in circles—it’s like I’m not comprehending this yet. I don’t have a job. I have no money, State’s coming up and I have no sponsorship, no funding, nothing.”

“I’m going to help,” Ryan begins.

Dante cuts him off. “You’re right, I should practice. But I don’t feel like it right now, okay? I’m just not in the mood.”

Pressing his lips to Dante’s shoulder, Ryan whispers into his shirt, “I know.”

With another abrupt laugh, Dante tells him, “I keep thinking I can practice tomorrow. Then I think no, I have to work. Then it’s like, no wait, I don’t have a job, remember?” His laugh dissolves into a sob, and Ryan closes his eyes, holds onto Dante as hard as he dares. “Oh God.” Squeezing Ryan’s hand, he says softly, “Tell me something happy, baby. Anything, just talk to me.”

Anything. Ryan kisses Dante’s neck and breathes, “I’ve got some news for you.”

Interested, Dante turns in his embrace, rolling onto his back, and he looks up at Ryan with wide eyes. “Good or bad?” he asks. Then he laughs. “Well, I guess it can’t be any worse, right?”

Ryan smiles, taking in Dante’s dark eyes, his smooth skin, his full lips. “No more bad news,” he promises. “Only good, better, best. Which do you want first?”

“Let’s start low,” Dante says, his eyes glistening. At the suggestion, Ryan’s hand trails down his boyfriend’s stomach, slips into the waistband of his sweatpants, rubs across his lower belly. He feels the sheathed cock stir beneath his touch and Dante’s lips part with a slight moan. With one hand he covers Ryan’s through his pants. “Yeah,” he sighs. “That’s about low enough. This is the good news?”

"The good news," Ryan murmurs, kissing Dante's cheek as he kneads the stiffening dick in his hand, "is that my parents are cool with me going to State." His fingers ease into the tight confines of Dante's jockstrap, stroking soft flesh, kinked hair. From the look on his boyfriend's face, he doesn't know if he'll get all the way up to the best news before they're both too distracted to speak.

A slow smile spreads across Dante's face, and his hands rub at his crotch as his hips arch up off the mattress a little, just enough to press his thick erection into Ryan's palm. "That *is* good news," Dante purrs. "So this must be the better news, right?"

"The better news." Ryan shifts closer to Dante, plants tiny kisses along the curve of his jaw, over his chin, around his mouth and across the tender skin above his upper lip. When Dante tries to catch those kisses on his lips, Ryan pulls away. "Did you know that guests can't stay with skaters if they aren't related?"

Narrowing his eyes, Dante shakes his head and asks, "You call that better news? Damn, Ryan, I'm not—"

Ryan kisses him quiet. "My mom took care of that," he tells him, and he feels Dante smile against his mouth. Another kiss, two, and he whispers, "I'm almost embarrassed to show up now, but at least we're in the same room."

"I love your mom," Dante announces. "Was she that bad?"

"You don't want to know," Ryan replies.

Rubbing into the hand that still toys in his pants, Dante closes his eyes and moans, a low, guttural sound that does wonderful things to Ryan's stomach. "Then this is the best news," Dante sighs, already turning in his boyfriend's arms. Ryan's hand slides away from Dante's groin, over his hip, until he cradles the bare ass in his palm. "What can be better than this?"

"I got an e-mail this morning," Ryan says. Dante kisses him, a gentle crush of lips that grows insistent. "Listen to me—"

"I am," Dante replies, but Ryan's hand has made him forget about this morning and Bobby and his money troubles, his breath quick-

ens, he wants Ryan, his hands and mouth and body say everything he doesn't put into words, and it's so hard to ignore that, so hard for Ryan to concentrate on talking when his whole body wants him to shut up. "I'm listening, baby. Can we talk about this later?"

An e-mail. Ryan remembers the thrill that coursed through him when he logged online this morning and saw the subject line, *Regarding your web site*. He opened the message, read it twice before he could breathe again, wanted to call Dante immediately and even dialed the first three digits of his boyfriend's number before he realized he was probably still at the skate shop. When he looked up from the computer and saw Dante on the other side of his door, the news was on the tip of his tongue, he almost blurted it out until he saw the tears. Since then, he's been waiting to bring this up, he's waited for the right moment and this is it, Dante's focused entirely on him now, Ryan can't hold back any longer. "I got an e-mail this morning," he says again, smiling as Dante tries to distract him with kisses and the gentle press of a leg between his. "From Rio del Oro? That new restaurant downtown?"

"Ryan," Dante sighs. He lays Ryan back to the bed and crawls onto him, mindful of the brace on his lower leg. Nuzzling his neck, he mumbles, "You gotta tell me *right* this second?"

I did this to him, Ryan thinks. A few touches in the right place, his breath on Dante's cheek, tiny kisses and that was all it took to turn his boy on like this. He's just as horny, another minute and he won't want to talk about the e-mail either, so between kisses the words tumble free, eager to get out and be over with so they can move on to more important things. "They want to sponsor you," Ryan says. Dante stops, pulls back, looks down at him with such an incredulous expression on his face that Ryan can't help but laugh. "They'll cover the fee for State and give you another hundred for expenses, and they want to use a video of you on the ice in their next commercial—"

"You're shitting me." Dante's voice is hushed, awed, and he searches Ryan's face for the hint of a joke.

“Am not,” Ryan tells him. Trying to sit up, he says, “Let me show you the message—”

But Dante doesn’t get up—instead he lies down on top of Ryan, folds his arms on his boyfriend’s chest and laughs. A pure, happy laugh, the first all day. “Stay here,” he says, his voice soft, and Ryan wraps his arms around Dante’s waist again, his hands curving beneath his boyfriend’s ass as he pulls him close. “So what’s this all about now?”

“His name is Vasquez,” Ryan says. He likes Dante’s weight on him, but it’s too much pressure on his brace so he eases his boyfriend’s legs apart, rubbing down his inner thighs until he gets the hint and straddles Ryan. This morning after he read the e-mail, once he believed it, he called Marco Vasquez at the restaurant and confirmed the fact that he wanted to sponsor Dante at the State competitions. “Loves sports, family man, always wanted a restaurant of his own. Claims his wife is only *the* best Mexican cook this side of the border—”

“He’s never tasted any of Mama Espinosa’s home cooking,” Dante interrupts, but he’s grinning like a cat and Ryan suspects it has little to do with his hands tracing small circles in the tender spot between his legs. When his fingers slow down, though, Dante wiggles above him and says, “Don’t stop, I like that.” He waits until Ryan starts up again, maddening patterns that smooth his pants flat against the skin below his balls, before he prompts, “So he opened this place and then thought, you know, this Dante kid’s pretty good, or what? How’d he hear about me?”

“Can I tell the story my way?” Ryan asks with a laugh. Dante’s grin widens if that’s possible, and he leans forward to kiss the tip of Ryan’s nose. “He’s been looking for a player to sponsor—was actually going to ask *me* but you know what happened there—”

Splaying his fingers on Ryan’s chest, Dante kisses the space between his thumbs, his breath hot and ticklish through Ryan’s shirt. “You met me,” he says.

Ryan laughs again. That's one way of looking at it, he met Dante—the chair doesn't matter to him, or his twisted legs, or his retired number. "Listen!" he cries, and Dante giggles breathlessly. "The sooner I get this out, the sooner we can get on with *this*." To emphasize his point, he thrusts his hips up against Dante's, their erections pressing sweetly together.

"Hurry up, then," Dante tells him. "He was going to ask you..."

With a nod, Ryan continues. "And after my accident, he was going to go to Clovsky, the new guy on the team, but he hasn't been too good the last few games, so he was sort of shopping around for someone else—"

Dante kisses him, a quick peck on the lips that stops him. "Just get to the point, baby," he whispers, grinding his hips into Ryan's. "Please."

"You're just easily distracted," Ryan murmurs, but he's tired of dragging this out, too. "So *anyway*—"

"Anyway," Dante agrees.

"Anyway," Ryan says, "he was watching TV on Saturday, saw you at the quarters, and thought you weren't half-bad. His daughters thought you were cute—"

Dante winks at him. "I can be all bad if you want me to," he interrupts. When Ryan gives him a harsh look, he ducks his head and mumbles, "Sorry. His daughters? How many's he have?"

"Three."

Dante opens his mouth to say something else and Ryan slaps his ass, hard. "Hey!" Dante laughs and then he smirks. "Do it again."

"You want to just read the e-mail?" Ryan asks, exasperated. He thought Dante would be thrilled to hear about the sponsorship—he knows he is, because now he's playful and coy and the sadness that gripped him when he showed up at Ryan's door is gone. Still, maybe he should just drop the subject now, take care of their raging libidos, and come back to it when they're not so worked up.

But Dante shakes his head, whispers that he's sorry again, and before Ryan can apologize as well, Dante kisses him, a gentle, probing kiss that makes Ryan clench at his boyfriend's pants and forget about the e-mail himself, *yes*. A gentle tongue licking his, eager lips, sweet breath, the body above him pressing him into the mattress until he wants to just sink into this embrace forever. "Tell me," Dante murmurs, pulling away. "I'll shut up, I promise. Three daughters?"

"They thought you were cute," Ryan sighs. What are they talking about again? The Rio del Oro, Vasquez and his daughters, the sponsorship request... "They saw your jacket and wanted to rush down to Later Skater right that second to meet you, and that got him thinking. Then he saw your web site address, e-mailed me about sponsoring you, and the rest is history." Kissing Dante again, he says, "Okay, that's over with. Where were we? Right about here?"

With a laugh, Dante asks, "So do I have to meet with him, or what?"

But Ryan's through with talking. His arms encircle Dante's back and ass possessively, he rolls him over, presses *him* to the bed with hungry kisses, thrusts against him as Dante's hands fist in his hair and his legs wrap around Ryan's hips. "We'll talk about it later," he whispers.

This time, Dante agrees.



Dante's in a better mood now, and Ryan suspects the e-mail from Vasquez is only a small part of the reason why, because his boyfriend moans beneath him with each touch, each kiss. Rolling off of him, Ryan lies down alongside Dante and rubs his chest, his stomach, lower, pushes his sweatpants below his hard cock, moves his jockstrap aside, takes him in hand and begins to work at him with slow, even strokes. When Dante breathes his name, it's lost in their kisses and he grasps at Ryan's shirt, tugs him close as he thrusts into his hand.

Pulling Dante's shirt up a little, exposing the dark muscular flesh around his navel, Ryan bends down and licks at the thin trail of hair that curves over the slight mound of his boyfriend's belly. He's never done this before, touched a boy so intimately—never nipped at the skin puckered around a belly button, never wetted down soft hair like this with his tongue, never smelled this miasma of musk and sex and lust that stirs his own groin until he's as hard as the shaft in his hand. "Ryan," Dante gasps as he moves lower, his tongue finding its way down to thick curls, black as shadows draped in the hollow between Dante's legs. His fingers clench in Ryan's hair, toy with his earring, massage his scalp and gently push him down further, to the throbbing erection that brushes against his cheek. Dante's words are mere whispers of thought. "Oh God, yes."

With a stifled giggle, Ryan admits, "I'm not quite sure what to do."

"It's not that hard," Dante tells him. Ryan looks up to find his boyfriend staring back, his large eyes dark with desire. "Just lick it, that's all. You can't mess up too bad."

That sets them both laughing. Sitting up, Dante pulls Ryan to him and whispers, "Come here." His mouth finds Ryan's and he kisses away his doubt and uncertainty. "It's okay, baby. I understand. You want me to show you how it's done?"

Ryan gives Dante a gentle squeeze, eliciting a moan that makes his spine tingle deliciously. "You can do it yourself?" he jokes, impressed. "What do you need me for then?"

Confusion flickers across Dante's face, and then he smacks Ryan's shoulder playfully. "I meant I'd do *you*, silly," he says. "I can't suck my own dick."

"Some guys can," Ryan points out. He kneads Dante's hard member, keeping him interested. Now that they've been talking about it, he wonders if he can actually take his boyfriend into his mouth without laughing. He hopes Dante's right about not messing up—he's never had a blowjob before, doesn't even really think a bad one can exist, but now he's worried.

Dante gives him a sardonic look. “If I could reach down there,” he starts, and that’s as far as he gets before Ryan goes down on him. He doesn’t know what he’s expecting but the sudden thickness in his mouth, like velvet wrapped around steel, it’s enough to make *him* moan. He takes it in as far as he can, his tongue licking around the hard shaft, his lips closing over the spongy tip, his own saliva coursing down the length and over his fingers, still working the base. Lying back on the bed, Dante arches up into him, gasps his name and *God* and *yes*. As Ryan begins to suck at him, already tasting bittersweet cum, he thinks maybe he was right after all, it’s not brain surgery here, his boy feels right in his mouth. His hand strays to his own crotch where he’s aching for release, but Dante brushes it away and grasps at him through his jeans, fumbles with the zipper, slips his fingers into Ryan’s fly and a few minutes more, that’s all it’ll take for them both, they’ll come in one glorious rush—

The door knob rattles, and then Ryan hears his mother’s voice, bright and perky, the way she talks now that he’s in a wheelchair, like she won’t let that get her down. “Ryan? Honey? You awake in there?”

Oh Christ. Dante’s eyes go wide in horror. “Your mom,” he mouths, and Ryan pulls back, letting the cock slip from his lips, dripping and so hard, it almost hums with need. “Ryan—”

“Shh,” Ryan hisses, his mind racing. “She doesn’t know you’re here.” Right after the accident, she had issues letting him move into the den simply because of the sliding doors in the back, as if he would come and go as he pleased. If she knew Dante came in that way, she’d think they were sneaking around on her and *that* wouldn’t look good. It might lead her to reconsider letting him go to State, and he’s not about to let that happen. “You have to go.”

“What?” Dante tucks himself back into his jockstrap, lies down to pull his sweatpants up where they belong. “Ryan, I don’t wanna—”

“Just back outside,” Ryan explains. He climbs over Dante and swings into his wheelchair. When his mother knocks a second time, he calls out, “I’ll be right there, Mom!” To Dante, he says, “She can’t

know you came in this way, it'll piss her off. So just go out and come around the front, okay? Ring the bell like you just showed up." Nodding at his boyfriend's erection, which his sweatpants do little to conceal, he adds, "You're coming right back. We can take care of that—"

"Ryan?" His mother sounds concerned, and in another minute he thinks she might go back to the kitchen for the key that opens his door, and *that* won't do at all. "Are you okay?"

"Fine!" he shouts as Dante slides off the bed. "Jesus. I'll be right there." Catching Dante's hand, Ryan points at a railing hung with shirts and jackets that runs along one wall. "Get one of my coats, baby. It's cold out there."

"I'm coming right back," Dante says, but he snags a flannel jacket off one hanger, shrugs into it, smooths it down over his crotch. Ryan knows that's uncomfortable, that hard dick crammed into his pants like that—he can see it in Dante's step, the way he picks at himself, tries to shift into a better position. Ryan feels the same way as he shoves the bulge of his own erection back into his jeans, zips up his fly. The denim bites into him with a terrible ache. Leaning down, Dante gives him a quick kiss. "See you in a few," he murmurs.

"Ring the bell so she'll hear you," Ryan tells him, straightening the sheets on the bed. Quietly Dante opens the sliding doors just enough to squeeze through, and from the other side of the glass, he blows Ryan another kiss before he disappears.

His mother starts to jiggle the knob again. *God*, he thinks—what if he hadn't locked that door? It's a habit he's gotten into now that he's home, one he picked up in the dorm because some of the guys on his hall used to just barge into a room, any room, looking to bum shampoo or money or food. Ryan edges his chair around the bed, presses at his crotch in an effort to stop the pounding that throbs through him...

"Dammit," he mutters, unlocking the door. His mother is on the other side and the concern written across her face just fuels his irrita-

tion. "Give me a chance to get over here next time, will you?" he asks. "I can't just hop up and answer the door." *Please, Dante*, he prays as his mother drops her troubled gaze to the floor. *Ring that damn bell now*. Before she can reply, he barks, "Well?"

"I thought you might be..." She trails off, doesn't look at him, doesn't look at the chair or his room or anything but the carpet between her feet, and he knows what's going through her mind as if she speaks the thoughts out loud. She thought he was hurt, fell out of his chair or rolled off the bed or got hung up in the electrical cords beneath the computer desk and then couldn't extract himself, couldn't call for help. Only she doesn't say that, she *can't*, because that would be admitting his handicap, which she doesn't do in front of him. The only time he hears her talk about it is with his father in hushed tones or on the phone to someone like the skate club officials, wielding his wheelchair like an weapon to get her way. But she doesn't mention it to him, she never has and he thinks she never will. Switching gears, she asks, "Were you talking to someone?"

Shit. "I hit my knee," Ryan lies, thinking quickly. He rubs his kneecap for emphasis, the one with the brace, and sudden pain flares in her eyes. "On the corner of the bed. I told you to hold up but you kept banging on the door—"

"I'm sorry," she mumbles.

Ryan ignores that. "And I hit my knee. What do you want again?" *And where's Dante?* he adds silently. He can't imagine the boy got lost on his way around the house.

"I wanted to know—" his mother starts but the doorbell rings, *finally*, and now she looks at him, her eyes lighting up, the hint of a smile on her face. "Is that your friend?"

His groin throbs at the thought. *I hope so*, he thinks but he plays it off, glancing at the clock with a shrug like it doesn't matter to him one way or the other who's come to visit. "Should be," he says. "He had to work until two—"

The bell rings again. “Coming!” his mother calls out, for all the good it does. No one outside can hear that, but then she turns and hurries off down the hall and Ryan sighs in relief. It’ll be Dante, and they’ll pick up right where they left off before his mother interrupted them—he can feel the heavy weight of his boyfriend still in his mouth, can taste him lingering on his tongue, and he can’t wait to get back to *that*.

In another part of the house, a door opens, and he hears the smile in his boyfriend’s voice when Dante says, “Hi, Mrs. Talonovich! Is Ryan home?” Then she’s leading the way back to Ryan’s room, Dante behind her. When he sees Ryan, he winks and his hand drifts to cup his crotch suggestively, a bold move that makes Ryan smirk. “Hey there, *amigo*.”

“Hey yourself,” Ryan replies. As Dante passes by to sit on his bed, he murmurs, “Took you long enough.”

“Had to walk off the wood,” Dante says, dropping his bag at his feet as he sinks to the mattress.

Ryan feels his cheeks start to burn. His mother’s right *there*, Dante has to learn to watch what he says. What if she heard that remark? What if she asked what he meant by it? *Walk off the wood...* with a barely perceptible shake of his head, he slaps Dante’s leg and glares at him. *I don’t know how it is with your mom*, he thinks, hoping his boyfriend can read the thoughts written out in his eyes, *but God, please don’t joke like that around mine*.

With a laugh, Dante glances up at Ryan’s mother. “I’m just teasing.”

“Well, don’t,” Ryan grumbles. Then, remembering his mother, he turns his chair away from the door. “Okay, thanks. You can leave now—”

“Are you all ready for State?” she asks instead, smiling down at Dante. “I bet you’re terribly excited. Ryan says you have a new sponsor?”

“Mom,” Ryan sighs. “Can’t you leave us alone?”

His mother's smile locks into place as she falters for something more to say. "I just want to say I think you'll do well at the races. If you need anything—"

"We need you to go," Ryan mutters. Does he have to spell it out for her?

Dante flashes her a winning grin. "Thanks, Mrs. Talonovich. I think I'm fine."

"I'm going to the store shortly," she tells them. "If you guys want—"

"Mom!" It's times like this when Ryan wishes he had the use of his legs back, if only to kick out at the door and shut it in her face. "Just get out of here, will you?"

"I'm leaving in a half hour," she says, stepping out into the hall. She starts to close the door behind her, then ducks her head back inside the room just as Ryan's rolling his eyes. "What I was *saying* is you can tag along and I'll drop you off at the rink afterwards. Don't roll your eyes at me, Ryan." Dante covers his mouth to keep from giggling.

Now she closes the door. Ryan sighs dramatically. "Lock that door, will you? Keep her the hell outta here."

Dante rises from the bed, locks the door, then takes Ryan's hands in his, holding his arms out at his sides as he sits on his boyfriend's lap. Curling up into him, he kisses Ryan tenderly and whispers, "You're so cute when you're mad."

"I'm not—" Ryan begins, but Dante kisses the argument away, his hands smoothing the lines that crease his brow. When they part, Ryan sighs, "I'm not mad."

"Are too," Dante murmurs. He traces the curve of Ryan's cheek, and Ryan's hands fold beneath his boyfriend's buttocks, holding him in place. "Your freckles turn red when you're angry."

Ryan laughs, surprised. "They do not!" he cries, and he knows he's going to start blushing in a minute, he's not sure how Dante can

do this to him, make him foolish and bumbling and self-deprecating with a few choice words and a well-placed touch.

Dante rubs over his freckles, as if rubbing away the color that rises to his cheeks. “So cute,” he purrs, kissing Ryan again. One hand slips between them to poke at his erection. “Someone’s still hard.”

“Someone can’t just walk off the wood,” Ryan replies. He smacks Dante’s thigh and tries to frown at him, but it’s so hard to look into his boyfriend’s face and be angry with him for long. “What if my mother heard that remark?”

“I told you I can be all bad,” Dante whispers with another kiss. “I was going to blow off practice today and just stay here but if she’s taking us to the rink, I guess I should go.” More kisses, and Ryan’s body responds for him, he doesn’t want to leave here, he doesn’t want to leave Dante—he likes holding him in his lap, he likes the sweet crush against his groin, the hands on his face, the lips on his. “I don’t really want to go to the store, though.”

Hugging him close, Ryan rests his head on Dante’s chest and says, “She’s the one who brought it up. If she’s in a spending mood, don’t tell her no. Do you have the money to get what you need for next week?”

“I don’t really need anything. I already have you.” Dante lays his cheek on the top of Ryan’s head, picks at his earring with gentle fingers, and sighs. “I don’t want to owe her anything else.”

“You have a new sponsor,” Ryan reminds him. “You can pay her back now if you want. Besides, I’m sure you need lots of stuff.”

“Like what?” Dante wants to know.

Ryan thinks for a minute. “Shampoo. Soap, deodorant, condoms, razors, snacks, soda—”

With a laugh, Dante sits up. “Condoms?”

Ryan grins. “Did I say that?” he asks innocently. Dante laughs again. Yes, he’s definitely looking forward to State, and a hotel room to themselves, and no interruptions this time.

CHAPTER 12



At the store, Dante pushes Ryan's wheelchair up and down the aisles and pretends that Mrs. Talonovich isn't with them. He imagines that they're just two guys on their own, lovers for many months now and living together, at Target to do their weekly shopping. When they're finished here, he sees them maybe stopping by that Rio del Oro place downtown for a quiet dinner—just the two of them—and then back to the apartment they share, they'll cuddle on the couch in front of the TV, talk of skating and fool around before they head off to bed. Not a hospital bed like Ryan's, not a narrow twin like Dante's own, but something larger, something they both fit in comfortably. They'll sleep twined together, naked, and Ryan isn't embarrassed by his scarred legs in the daydream—he's simply beautiful against the bed sheets, his pale skin amazing and freckled in places that Dante loves to kiss. He can imagine how wonderful it'd be waking beside a boy he loves, one that listens when he says no, one he'd never *want* to say no to.

If Ryan's mother wasn't behind them, pushing the shopping cart and asking every five minutes if they need anything down this aisle, then he'd lean over and whisper his sordid thoughts to his boyfriend just to see him blush. He loves the thin color that rises to Ryan's cheeks and dissolves his freckles. He never knew a boy could flush that easily before. As it is, he takes the corners a little too fast, trying

to put some distance between them and Mrs. Talonovich, if only to steal a quick kiss down the next aisle before she follows them. But the store is crowded for a Sunday, every single aisle is filled with people, and when he tries to kiss Ryan's cheek, his lips land on his boyfriend's ear or in his hair, thwarted. "Ryan," he sighs at one point in the shampoo aisle—there's only one other person here, a girl their own age with short, pixie-ish hair and more piercings in one ear than Dante's ever seen before on anyone, and he seriously doubts she's the type to get all freaked out over two boys in love. He takes Ryan's chin in his hand, turns his face until he's looking at him, and then kisses him on the lips, *finally*, a brief peck that makes him want more. "That's all I wanted," he says, pulling away.

"My mom," Ryan says, as if that's explanation enough. His gaze drifts over Dante's shoulder and when he turns, he sees the end of Mrs. Talonovich's shopping cart edge into view.

So Dante contents himself with small touches—brushing his hand along the back of Ryan's neck, feathering his fingers through his boyfriend's hair, leaning against his arm when he stands next to the wheelchair. He hangs back when Mrs. Talonovich starts asking what they'll need for their stay in Atlantic City—it's only for a few days, he doesn't see what the big deal is here. He was just going to pack what he has at home, he didn't know he needed *new* stuff. He doesn't, not really, and it seems a waste to him to buy two bottles of shampoo, two tubes of toothpaste, two bars of soap... "Do we need two of everything?" he whispers to Ryan.

"Let her pick out what she wants," Ryan replies. His mother is further down the aisle, out of earshot, debating over tubes of analgesic gel. "Shit like this means a lot to her, you know?"

No, Dante doesn't know—his own mom isn't like this. Picking up one of the bottles of shampoo from their cart, he sets it back on the shelf. "We'll only be there four days," he says, doing the same with the soap, the toothpaste, the deodorant. "We can share."

Ryan reaches for the deodorant. “Much as I love you, babe,” he says softly, so his mother won’t overhear, “I’m thinking we might not want to share *everything*.”

With a laugh, Dante takes the deodorant from Ryan and drops it back into the cart. “All the other stuff, though,” he starts, rooting through the items Mrs. Talonovich has picked up throughout the store. “I can’t pay her back for all this—”

“You don’t *have* to,” Ryan sighs.

Dante frowns at the floor and mumbles, “I’m not like that.” His mom was right, he learned better than to take hand-outs, even from friends. And now he has no job, no way of paying this back, no way of paying for practice and all at once everything just rushes in at him again, can’t he escape it? He should call Bobby tonight, beg for his job, he needs it too badly.

Ryan must see something in his face, some of the turmoil twisting his heart, because he catches Dante’s wrist and squeezes gently until he looks at him. “Come here,” he whispers, pulling Dante closer.

“Your mom,” Dante reminds him, but it’s halfhearted because more than anything, he wants Ryan’s arms around him right now.

A glance down the aisle shows Mrs. Talonovich intent on her shopping—they could disappear and she’d never know it, for all the attention she’s paying them. Ryan’s fingers lace through Dante’s and he pats his knee. “Sit down,” he says, but he’s watching his mother closely. She’s still not looking their way.

Dante perches on Ryan’s knees, grateful to be off his feet. He’s tired from this shopping trip, exhausted from the fight with Bobby this morning...too worn out to practice today, he thinks, and it’s getting late, the rink will close soon, it always locks up by six on Sundays. Maybe he’ll just go home when they’re finished here, but his mom should be at the apartment by then and what’ll he say when she asks how his day went? What if she asks about the skate shop? He doesn’t want to go home.

Ryan's hands slip beneath his shirt and suddenly they're on the small of his back, cool and strong and gentle, rubbing into him, massaging his weary muscles. "Hmm," Dante moans, relaxing into his boyfriend's touch. Tension falls away from him as Ryan's hands move higher, up his spine and below his shoulder blades, a soothing rhythm that makes everything else vanish. He wants to lean back against Ryan now, let those hands work around his waist and over his stomach, let those fingers find his nipples and tease them erect, shift until he's fully in Ryan's lap and he can feel his boyfriend hardening beneath him. *We're in Target*, he thinks, and that's the only thing keeping him from giving into this moment completely. Still, he closes his eyes and imagines they're alone, this impromptu massage giving way to the two of them naked and hard. In his daydream Dante sees himself sitting down on Ryan's thick length, holding onto the arms of the wheelchair as his boyfriend fills him again and again, those hands on his chest and cock, those arms holding him tight.

"You don't need to be worrying about this," Ryan tells him. When Dante starts to speak, he continues. "No, listen. You need to focus on State, okay? Let someone else worry about the other stuff for a change. Let *me* worry about the money and the sponsor and you just concentrate on winning, you hear me?" Dante laughs, but he nods—yeah, he thinks he can handle that. Ryan's hands trail down his back, around his waist, soft and ticklish on his stomach, and he finds himself in a quick, tight hug that makes him feel worlds better. Then Ryan pulls away, smooths down Dante's shirt, gives him a slight push. "My mom."

Dante looks down the aisle at Mrs. Talonovich, heading their way, but she studies a blue jar in her hand and doesn't look at them. "This says it's good for pulled muscles, hon," she says as Dante slides off of Ryan's lap. Now she looks up, sees them looking back at her almost guiltily, and she smiles. Holding the jar out so they can read the label, *Blue Heat*, she winks and says, "You never know when you'll need this stuff." When they don't answer, her smile slips a notch. "What?"

"I don't really think..." Dante starts, but Ryan clears his throat and he turns away. They don't need that stuff, she's buying things just to spend money. Four days and she has to pack a pharmacy for them? Ryan gives him a slight shake of his head and Dante sighs. "Okay," he concedes. "Fine. Thanks." Shoving his hands into the pockets of Ryan's flannel jacket he still wears, he walks away.

At the end of the aisle, he hears Mrs. Talonovich ask what's wrong. "You're spending too much," Ryan tells her—Dante toys with the display on the endcap and feels tears prick his eyes. He loves that boy, who explains in soft tones that Dante's not used to such extravagance. "He's not made of money, Mom," Ryan says. "He's more worried about how he's going to pay the rent next week than he is about pulled muscles, trust me."

"I didn't mean," she begins.

"Just keep it in mind," Ryan says. Dante hears the tell-tale squeal of wheels on linoleum and blinks away the swirl of emotions raging through him. "This is only a couple days. We don't need to take a whole damn drugstore with us."

Dante waits until Ryan turns the corner, then flashes his boyfriend a quick grin. "Love you," he whispers, two seconds before Mrs. Talonovich steps into view. Before she can apologize, he shakes his head and says, "It's okay."

She smiles gratefully at him. "Push me," Ryan says, and Dante laughs. When he steps around the wheelchair to the handlebars though, he feels Ryan touch the back of his thigh, a secret gesture that courses through him like fire in his veins. As he leans over the back of the chair, Ryan breathes, "Love you, too."



"Let me help you with that," Dante says, taking two heavy shopping bags from Mrs. Talonovich as she tries to lift them from the cart. She bought so much *stuff*—he still can't quite believe all of this is just for himself and Ryan. What are they going to do with it all?

But Mrs. Talonovich shakes her head and swings the bags easily into the open tailgate of her van. “I’ve got it, dear,” she tells him. Glancing into the back of the van, Dante sees Ryan already inside and turned around in his wheelchair, watching them, and from behind his mother he blows his boyfriend a kiss. “I can get it from here,” she says. She smiles at Dante, who flashes her a quick grin. “Why don’t you climb on in and keep Ryan company?”

Good idea. Dante doesn’t need to be told twice—he squeezes between the shopping cart and the car parked next to them, then climbs into the side of the van, pulling the door shut. “Hey,” he breathes, sliding across Ryan’s lap to sit in the seat beside him. His boyfriend grins and takes his hand. “Your mom told me to keep you company.”

“She did?” Ryan asks with a laugh. His eyes sparkle in the dim light of the van’s interior—outside the sky is already darkening, it’s getting late, and if not for the sounds of Mrs. Talonovich rustling around in the back, Dante could almost believe they’re alone. Ryan’s hand tightens around his and Dante scoots closer, rests his head on his boyfriend’s shoulder. It’s an awkward position, with the back of his chair pressing into Dante’s neck, but it won’t be for long. Ryan’s mother will come in any minute and they’ll have to be just friends again.

Brushing the hair back from Dante’s face, Ryan kisses his forehead and asks, “Are you getting sleepy?”

Dante nods, wraps both arms around Ryan’s own, and sighs. “It’s been a long day,” he admits. From here he can see the digital clock on the van’s dashboard and it’s almost quarter after five—too late to practice now. “I’ll just get to the rink early tomorrow,” he says. He doesn’t have to work, right? So he’ll get up at dawn, head to the rink, skate after the hockey team leaves the ice. He won’t have to leave by noon, or two, or even four if he doesn’t want to—he has nothing to do but practice. It’s just as he’s always dreamed, isn’t it? All the time in the world for his skating. So why doesn’t it feel as great as he

thought it would? With another sigh, he mumbles, “Maybe I should call Bobby—”

“No.” Ryan pulls away, shrugging to get Dante to sit up. His eyes blaze with a fury Dante never suspected could burn inside such a quiet boy. “Don’t you dare call him, Dante,” Ryan says, anger trilling through his voice. “You hear me? He’ll just start the same shit he was doing before. You go back there and I’ll have to fuck him up when he starts hitting on you again.”

I’ll have to... Dante laughs—Ryan’s so earnest! His heart swells with emotion at the thought of someone, of *this* particular boy, going after Bobby, wheelchair and all. He has no doubt that Ryan would do it, too—despite appearances, there’s an aggressive streak that runs through his boyfriend, a competitive nature that helped make him as great a hockey player as he was. *Is*, Dante corrects himself, *is*, and Ryan will get out on the ice again, he’ll skate again, and when he’s finally out of that chair, Bobby better watch out. Dante has no doubts about *that*, either.

Ryan’s anger dissolves into a shy grin. “What?” he asks. “Don’t believe me? I will, I’ll hurt him if he touches you.”

Dante rubs Ryan’s chin with his thumb. “I believe you,” he whispers. Behind them, the tailgate slams shut, rocking the van slightly, and Dante leans towards him. His eyes close as he sighs Ryan’s name, and a strong hand encircles his wrist, holds him tight as their lips meet in a tender kiss. Ryan wants more—he leans into Dante, his tongue easing between his lips, licking into him as his other hand cradles his neck, holds him close. “Ryan,” Dante sighs. How long will it take Mrs. Talonovich to put up the shopping cart? “Your mom.”

Ryan doesn’t listen, kisses him again, a third time, tugs on his lower lip and moans into him until he can’t pull away. What is he worried about again? Who could possibly object to this?

Suddenly Ryan sits back, his eyes wide. “Oh shit,” he murmurs.

Dante frowns at him. “Oh what?” He looks over his shoulder, sure Mrs. Talonovich is there, staring at them through the driver’s side

window, mouth open in shock. But there's no one there, no one at all...maybe she fainted? God, if he gave her a heart attack just by kissing on her son—

"The condoms," Ryan says. When Dante turns towards him, his frown deepens. "We forgot to buy condoms," his boyfriend explains. "Remember?"

"I thought you were just kidding," Dante admits, but just thinking about the two of them actually *needing* condoms sends a shiver of excitement through his body. Though, to be honest? He never used them with Jared, never really thought about them much, except they're lubricated and that might take a little of the pain of Ryan's first time away. Jared didn't have much use for lubrication, not even lotion really, another reason Dante never enjoyed sex with that kid. In the shower, when he tried to wipe away the sting and hurt Jared had left with him, Dante burned in places he didn't want to think about, didn't want to even *touch*, and for the longest time he thought he never wanted anyone else feeling around down there, he didn't think it could be something loving and pleasant. After Jared, he never thought he'd want someone else in him ever again.

But Ryan's different. He's anxious, yes, but he's never been this far with anyone and it's all new to him, he wants it to be wonderful, he wants it to be right. In Dante's mind he sees his boyfriend as a skittish colt, overly eager and so damn sweet. He makes Dante ache for want of him—he wants to hold him tight, never let go, and that intensity, *that's* what scares him. What if he can't pull himself away if Ryan changes his mind? What if *he's* the one this time who won't hear no?

"Dante?" Ryan prompts, smoothing a hand along his cheek to catch his attention. Shaking those thoughts away, Dante frowns at the fear he sees in Ryan's eyes. "If you don't want to, it's okay. I just thought since we'd be alone maybe..." He trails off, unsure. "I mean, I understand if you don't want to—"

"I do," Dante assures him. He kisses away the doubt that clouds Ryan's face, rubs his hand between both of his own, raises it to his lips and kisses the blunt fingertips as well. Trying to lighten the mood, he says, "We'll just tell your mom to run back in, we forgot something. Maybe she can pick out some good ones for us."

Ryan's eyes widen in terror and Dante laughs. "I'm kidding, baby," he murmurs, kissing him again. Ryan doesn't look convinced. "It's just a joke."

"You're not asking her," Ryan tells him, shaking his head for emphasis.

Dante laughs again. "No, I'm not. God! You should see the look on your face!"

Now Ryan laughs, too—a shaky sound but at least it's something. As he relaxes, he starts to giggle, relieved. "Oh damn," he sighs, breathless. "I thought—shit, I was so sure—"

"Do you think I'd do something like that?" Dante wants to know, but he's laughing as well, the mere *thought* of asking Ryan's mother to pick out *condoms* for them—

The driver's side door opens and Mrs. Talonovich slides behind the wheel, grinning at them in the rearview mirror. "What are you boys carrying on about back there?" she asks. That just makes them both laugh harder.



In the back seat of the van, Dante leans against Ryan's wheelchair just to feel his boyfriend's arm pressed to his. They're halfway to the rink before he remembers to tell Mrs. Talonovich that he won't be practicing today. "They close at six," he says. "I'll just get out early tomorrow."

"What time?" Ryan wants to know. He watches his mother's reflection in the rearview mirror closely and when she looks away from them, his hand finds Dante's knee, a warm weight through his sweatpants.

Dante shrugs. “Eight?” he asks. He has all day to practice, doesn’t he? Why get out there too early? “Oh, wait—you have therapy at ten.” Frowning at Ryan, he asks, “Do you think you can come to the rink tomorrow?”

Ryan’s laugh suggests that he wouldn’t miss it for the world, but there’s a playful light in his eyes as he says loftily, “I don’t know...”

“I’ll ask your mom,” Dante whispers. Sitting up, he grins at Ryan and mouths, “About the condoms.”

Ryan shakes his head and starts, “Dante, I’m just playing—”

“Mrs. Talonovich?” Dante leans on the armrest between the front seats, ignoring the hand that tugs at the waistband of his sweats. Ryan’s mother half-turns in the driver’s seat, already smiling at him. “I’m wondering if you can do me a favor?”

Behind him, Ryan says, “Mom, no.” His voice takes on a sharp note. “Dante, stop it.”

With a wink over his shoulder, Dante assures him, “I’m just playing.”

Ryan frowns, uncertain, but his fingers slip into Dante’s waistband, tickle along the downy skin of his lower back. “What is it, Dante?” Mrs. Talonovich asks. In the rearview mirror, her gaze flickers between the two boys. Dante doesn’t think she can see that hand working its way into his pants—in the mirror he sees himself, his back slightly arched, Ryan’s hand on his waist, but his shirt bunches up where it pulls free from his pants and he can’t see the soft patterns Ryan is tracing into his flesh. “Ryan? What?”

Tension fills the air between Dante and his boyfriend—*he actually thinks I’m going to ask about those damn condoms*, Dante thinks, grinning at Ryan’s reflection in the mirror. *I love you, baby. Smile.* Ryan doesn’t, his eyes are clouded with sudden distrust, he’s not sure quite what to expect. Dante watches his boyfriend’s expression as he asks, “Can you bring Ryan to the rink tomorrow to see me practice?”

Relief floods Ryan’s face. His fingers rub down further, into the tender skin where Dante’s buttocks meet and around one hip before

easing free from his pants. With a laugh, Mrs. Talonovich says, “I don’t see why not.” Dante wonders if she’d be so willing if she knew about that hand and where it’s been on his body, where he wants it to go.

“You did that on purpose,” Ryan whispers, but he’s smiling now and that’s all Dante cares about. His hand smooths Dante’s shirt down, and then he tugs at it gently. “Get back here.”

“Thanks,” Dante tells Mrs. Talonovich as he sinks back in the seat. “What did you think I was going to say?” he asks, grinning at Ryan. When Ryan punches his arm, he laughs and catches the fist before it can strike again. Working his fingers into Ryan’s, he admonishes, “Be nice.”

Leaning towards him, Ryan lowers his voice and murmurs, “I’d be much nicer if we were alone.”

With another smile, Dante asks, “You want me to ask her to leave?”

Ryan laughs. “Stop it.”

Dante does. He lets Ryan’s hand fall to his lap, his fingers trailing over his boyfriend’s with a soft rasp. “I didn’t mean—” Ryan sighs.

“I know,” Dante says, a little too quickly. He knows what Ryan meant, or rather, he *thinks* he knows, but he said stop so he did. He won’t push anything in this relationship—he wants it to go right too badly.

They sit in silence for long minutes that drift away like the faded songs on the radio, Dante staring out the window beside him and Ryan watching his mother’s reflection, their hands still laced together. Along the road, the houses start to come closer and closer together until they’re shoved up on top of each other, crumbling brownstones with rickety fire escapes dangling from second-story windows, and the sidewalks turn a dingy gray, clogged with litter. Cars line the curbs, narrowing the streets until there’s just one lane in each direction separated by a thin yellow stripe that glows faintly in the streetlights. When did it get so dark outside? Dante’s not sure

but it's still winter, they have another month or so of this early dusk. The van navigates easily into the heart of the city. He doesn't want to go home. He wants to stay with Ryan, to be held tonight as he falls asleep, to have someone there beside him when he wakes. For some reason, he's never felt so alone.

He recognizes his street as Mrs. Talonovich guides the van to a stop at the curb. "Tomorrow then," Ryan whispers, squeezing Dante's hand.

Dante studies the shadows draped across his boyfriend's face and forces a grin. *I don't want today to end yet*, he thinks. Mrs. Talonovich says they're here and parks, gets out of the van, disappears around the back. "Dante?" Ryan asks, concerned. "Give me a kiss goodbye?"

Closing his eyes, Dante leans against Ryan's shoulder, turns his face up and touches Ryan's cheek as their lips meet in a secretive, soft kiss. "Love you," Ryan murmurs. Kissing one of Dante's eyelids, he asks, "Are you okay?"

"Just..." Dante sighs. He doesn't know, sad? Upset? How is he feeling right now? What is he supposed to feel? "I don't know," he admits, fisting a hand in Ryan's hair. Ryan kisses him again and he tastes salty tears in the back of his throat. *Empty*, he decides. For some reason when he tries to focus on anything, he feels completely empty inside.

"I told you let me do the worrying," Ryan says. Outside, his mother fumbles with the sliding door, the sound of a key scraping into the lock loud in the darkened van. "You hear me, Dante? You just concentrate on winning at State. You don't need to let anything else bother you."

Dante stares into his boyfriend's earnest gaze. *Easier said than done*, he thinks but he nods, yeah, he's right. Ryan caresses his cheek, his temple, his hair, and kisses him one final time before the door opens and he has to pull away. Dante doesn't want to let him go. Gripping Ryan's arm, he says, "I want you to meet my mama. She should be here by now." He leans past him to ask Mrs. Talonovich,

"Can you guys wait a minute? My mama's upstairs. I can introduce you...please?"

"Mom?" Ryan prompts.

Doubt crosses her face, but she must see something in the two boys staring back at her so beseechingly because she sighs and steps aside so Dante can climb out of the van. "It has to be quick," she tells him, but he's already racing up the steps to the apartment building.

Inside a bare bulb lights the hallway, illuminating water-stained floors and peeling wallpaper. Dante takes the stairs two at a time—he's never done this before, brought someone home he wants his mama to meet, to *like*. More than anything else, he wants her to like Ryan as much as he does, he wants her to see past the wheelchair to the boy he's fallen for. *Please be home*, he prays, stomping up the stairs. It's Sunday and the mall closes at five, so she should be in already...*please*. With trembling hands, he unlocks the door to their apartment. Bursting into the foyer, he calls out, "Mama? You here?"

From the kitchen, she answers. "Tay?" And then she's at the counter, wooden spoon in hand and flour smudged across her cheek, frowning at him as if he's gone mad. "Are you alright? Who's chasing you?"

"No one," he gasps. He leaves the door open as he crosses the room. "Come on, Mama. Ryan's here—"

"Ryan?" she asks. Her eyes narrow until they're just dark crescents in her face. "That boy in the chair? Where is he? What's wrong?"

Dante sighs, tries to catch his breath. "Nothing's wrong. He's downstairs, his mom brought me home and I want you to meet him. I'd bring him up here but—"

"I'm in the middle of making dinner, Tay," she tells him, as if the comforting scent of warming tortillas didn't clue him in. "Is he staying to eat? Because I'm not sure I have enough—"

Dante could cry in frustration. "No, Mama!" Stepping around the counter, he turns off the stove and tells her, "I just want you to meet him, that's all. He's not coming up here. He can't." When she starts to

object, he gives her his most pleading look—big eyes, trembling pout, she can't hope to refuse—and begs, "Please? Two seconds, that's all it'll take. How many other guys have I wanted you to meet?" He lets her think about it—doesn't take her long, the answer is none. He's not even sure if she ever met Jared really, just passed him on the stairs once or twice. A friend from school, Dante told her when she asked. Nothing like Ryan. "Please?"

For a moment she holds out, but then her lips tighten and when she wipes her hands on a nearby towel, he knows she's given in. "Just a few minutes," she tells him, letting him lead the way to the door, still open. "I'm in the middle of dinner—"

"I know," Dante concedes. As she steps out into the hall and pulls the door shut behind them, he takes her hand. "I really want you to meet him, Mama. He's...he's just amazing."

The set of her jaw tells him just how amazing she suspects this kid to be, but she holds her tongue and follows him down the steps. He trots ahead of her, tries to hurry her along, but each step is slow and deliberate, one at a time, almost as if she's afraid of what she'll find down below. *My boy*, Dante thinks, pulling ahead. *He's on his way to being everything to me, Mama. You'll see.*

On the second flight of stairs, he warns her, "His mom's here, too. She's not like you—"

"I'd imagine not," his mother says, her voice terse. He doesn't like the way she smoothes down her shirt self-consciously, as if Mrs. Talonovich will care about a few wrinkles.

"You look fine," Dante whispers. Brushing away the flour on her cheek, he explains, "I mean she doesn't know Ryan's with me. She thinks we're just friends."

There's that tight frown, the one she wears when he mentions the fact that he's gay. At the foot of the stairs he stops, forcing her to stop on the step above him. Taking both of her hands in his, he looks up at her and asks, "Mama? Please don't mention it, okay? I don't want to lose him."

“Your mama knows how to keep her mouth shut,” she tells him as she cranes her neck to see out the tiny window set high in the door to their building. “You said he’s waiting?”

Dante leads her outside. Mrs. Talonovich has opened the passenger side door of the van to sit in the bucket seat, and from here Ryan is nothing but a vague shape in the dark interior of the vehicle. “There he is,” Dante tells his mother, dropping her hand to race to the curb. When Ryan sees him, he smiles nervously. “Hey,” Dante sighs, climbing up into the van. He sits on the floor by his boyfriend’s wheelchair and thanks Mrs. Talonovich for waiting. “My mama,” he says, holding out a hand as she steps up cautiously to the van.

One look at Mrs. Talonovich’s short, styled hair and Sunday clothes, and Dante’s mother reaches up to pat at her own mussed ponytail. “He talks about your son continuously,” she tells Mrs. Talonovich, glancing into the van at Ryan. She speaks as if he’s not right there. “He used to play hockey, is that it?”

“He *plays* hockey,” Dante corrects. One hand finds its way around Ryan’s ankle—the right one, so he has to thread through the brace and he’s careful not to put pressure on it, but he wants any touch at the moment. “He’s just recovering, Mama. Like when I cut my arm, remember?” Looking up at Ryan, Dante flashes him a quick grin and says, “You’ll be back on the ice in no time, tell them.” Ryan turns away, embarrassed, and with a reassuring squeeze on his ankle, Dante smiles at him. He loves that blush. “Mama, this is Ryan.”

She places her hands on the top of the van and ducks inside. “*Hola* Ryan,” she says gently, the way she might speak to a frightened deer. “You’re all my boy talks about anymore.”

“Mama,” Dante chides, but he can’t quite seem to stop grinning.

Ryan looks up at her, suddenly shy, and Dante remembers the way he was less than a week ago when they first met—this tentative, awkward and unsure. “Hello,” he says, his voice so soft, Dante barely hears it. “Nice to meet you, um...”

“Ms. Espinosa,” Dante prompts. He knows that’s what he’s floundering for—it’s her maiden name, actually, she took it back when his father left, gave it to him, as well. Ryan looks at him gratefully.

But his mother surprises him. “Torres,” she says, holding out one hand for Ryan. When he takes it, she pumps his hand once, a curt shake, before letting go. “Just call me Torres, Ryan. You’re a cute boy. A little pale but that’s okay. Pretty hair.” Turning to Mrs. Talonovich, Dante’s mother nods and tells her, “Lovely boy, really. Is he good on the ice?”

“The best,” Mrs. Talonovich says proudly. Holding out her own hand, she takes Dante’s mother’s and shakes it not once, not twice, but three times, short, quick pumps. “Your Dante’s wonderful,” she tells his mother, beaming at him. “Such a nice boy, Ryan’s really taken with him. I hear he’s simply marvelous on skates.” With a titting laugh, she adds, “It’s fortunate they found each other when they did. Ryan was so down after...well, you know...”

“Mom,” Ryan growls. Dante rests his head on the side of his wheelchair and Ryan’s hand comes down to brush across his hair before sliding away. “You don’t need to tell them—”

“Soul mates,” she continues, speaking over him. She shakes Dante’s mother’s hand again, won’t let go. “That’s what they are, Torres, is it? Beautiful name. You have a beautiful boy, really you do. He’s great for Ryan, just what he needs. Simply wonderful.”

Dante’s not sure how his mom will react to such a nervous rush, but she just smiles and murmurs, “Soul mates.” The look she gives Dante suggests that she thinks maybe Mrs. Talonovich knows more than she’s letting on after all.



Over dinner, Dante’s mother says, “So that’s Ryan.” It’s not a question and he’s not quite sure how to answer it, so he doesn’t reply. Instead he cuts the tortillas on his plate into tiny triangles, flattens them with his fork until the refried beans inside ooze out in a brown

paste, and wonders what she thought of his boyfriend. What did she say? *A little pale but that's okay. Pretty hair. Lovely boy.* "Is he always that shy?"

"Not around me," Dante tells her.

She nods as if that's what she expected. "That's good then," she says, scooping a forkful of rice into her mouth. As she chews, she watches him thoughtfully and he wants to ask her what's on her mind. "You say he's in therapy?" she asks. "For his legs?"

"Yeah." Dante pushes the food around on his plate and the words come out in tumble, he's always ready to talk about his boy. "Three times a week. He'll miss the sessions when we're at State, though, but I think he's doing good. He was pretty tore up last week because he wants to walk again so bad, I don't blame him. He wants to skate, I know he does, but it's just going to take some time." Thinking about Ryan, the determination that burns through him, the stubborn pride, Dante knows he'll walk again. "It's only been about a month," he says softly. "He wasn't real responsive at first but he's doing good now."

"Cause he has you." Dante looks up to find her staring at him across the small table they share. One corner of her mouth twitches as if she wants to smile but won't. "And he thinks his mom doesn't know? What does he think, she's blind?"

Dante laughs. "He says she doesn't. He never told her."

She gives him a sardonic look that makes him laugh again. "Do you think I didn't sort of clue in before you told me?" Dante shrugs—he never really thought about it before. "Tay, *honesto*. Who do you think you're talking to here? I'm your mama."

Frowning at his plate, Dante asks, "So you think she knows?" When she starts to speak, he shakes his head. "No, she can't. She's..." *She argued to get us in the same room at the hotel, he thinks. She bought me all that stuff this afternoon—she doesn't think we're like that, she can't, she wouldn't be so nice to me.* He's sure she wouldn't even let him come over if she suspected what went on between them

behind Ryan's closed door. "I love him, Mama," Dante says suddenly. "I do. I know it hasn't been very long at all but I also know he feels the same about me. We're good together. He's so supportive of my skating it's not even funny, and he got me a new sponsor today—did I tell you about that?"

She shakes her head. If she notices the change in topic, she doesn't mention it. She knows how he is when he's excited, and he forgot all about the guy at the Rio del Oro, what did Ryan say his name was again? *I should call him and find out*, he thinks, and that's just what he needs right now, to pick up the phone and hear Ryan's voice in his ear, to hear his boyfriend tell him he loves him and he'll see him tomorrow. Yes, he's in love, so much so that it fills up the empty spaces left inside of him from the fight with Bobby this morning—just thinking of *that* makes him want to crawl into bed now, despite the early hour. What if his mother asks how his day went at the shop? What can he possibly say to that?

"Tay?" she prompts. He looks up with a guilty start, sure she knows, but she only gives him a cursory glance and asks, "A new sponsor? What's wrong with the skate shop?"

"Nothing's *wrong* with it," he mumbles. He's not hungry anymore even though he hasn't eaten much but if he leaves the table now, his mother will *know* something's amiss. "This is a Mexican restaurant downtown. The guy saw me on TV at the quarters and wants to put his logo on my suit at State." Carefully, he adds, "He's paying the trip fee, too." She sighs and he hurries on. "It's not a hand-out, Mama, this is how sponsorship works. They pay for advertising, that's all it is, like commercials or billboards or something. You see the athletes with Nike all over their suits, right? Gatorade and Pepsi and stuff like that, it's the same thing. It's not charity. It's not."

For a long moment she doesn't speak. He watches her eat, sure she's finished with this conversation, she's miffed that someone's paying his way to State when she thinks he should earn the money himself, that's just how she is. If she does say anything else, it'll be to

ask him about the shop and how Bobby feels about another sponsor, and then he'll have to tell her that this is his *only* sponsor now—he can't lie to her. Then the bond that's formed between them this evening will snap and they'll go back to being roommates, not really mother and son, just two people who live together and pass each other as they go about their day. He doesn't want that. He likes this intimacy, the easy way she talks about Ryan, the way she didn't flinch or frown when he said he loved him. "Mama?" he asks. "It's not—"

She sighs. "I know, Tay," she whispers. "It's just the way things are done, I know." Looking up at him, she forces a smile and says, "So maybe you've been right all along, hon. Maybe this skating of yours is really going to get you somewhere after all." When he grins at her, relieved, she adds, "You hold onto that boy of yours, this Ryan. You need someone like him who's going to be there for you through all this. God knows I can't do it, much as I'd like. You just don't let him go, you hear me?"

"Si, Mama," Dante replies.

CHAPTER 13



Ryan gets to the rink early the next morning, well before Dante. He knows his boyfriend told him eight but he's interested in seeing the hockey team's morning skate—he caught the scores on the late news last night and God, they're doing just awful. An away game, four nothing, *four*—when he played, he never let anyone in their end zone that many times. Lying in his bed with the lights out, he stared up at the darkened ceiling and imagined himself whole again in another month's time, back on the ice and back in the game, and he'd bring the team up out of this losing streak, he'd single-handedly take them on to the playoffs. He'd be the Talon again, swooping in on the crease like a hawk, hitting hard and hitting fast without letting anything stand in his way.

In these dreams Dante was in the crowd, his voice drowning out the others when Ryan scored another shot and everyone went wild. He looked around the rink until he spotted his boyfriend, then gave him a grin that promised more after the game. When the final buzzer sounded, it was off the ice to get his boy, and then the two of them made a quick getaway in his Jeep, the one his dad has garaged at the office now because Ryan still can't drive it yet and his parents don't want it in the yard, as if the sight of it might depress him. They drove somewhere quiet in his mind, out to the edge of town maybe, out where the woods start and the road seems to stretch away forever,

and they climbed into the back seat, cuddled beneath a thick blanket, watched the stars wink to life. There were kisses, soft and warm, eager hands, gentle touches and breathless giggles and low talk, and Dante let Ryan erase the memories that his last boyfriend left with him—Ryan imagines it will be astronomical, the first time they make love, and before he fell asleep last night, he saw himself kissing the worry from Dante's face, heard himself telling his boyfriend it would be okay, they don't have to if he doesn't want to but Ryan loves him so much...

And then Dante nodded and hugged him close, and he was so tight and hot and amazingly wonderful that Ryan got hard just *thinking* about it. And he replayed the scene in his mind, again and again, each time staring into his boyfriend's deep eyes, until he fell asleep with the look of love staring back.

He almost called Dante first thing this morning, just to tell him he'd be early and if he wanted to come by the rink a little after seven, Ryan would be there. But his boy needs his sleep, almost as much as he needs to practice—the whole thing with Bobby yesterday took a lot out of him, Ryan realizes this, and he knows that no matter how much he tells him not to worry, Dante's going to do just that. At least the whole thing with the sponsor is behind them now—Ryan has to call Vasquez this afternoon when he gets back from therapy, set up an appointment tomorrow for Dante to stop by the restaurant and pick up his first check along with whatever other propaganda he has to promote. There's another email Ryan needs to reply to, a local automotive place that wants to put a patch on Dante's suit for State...this is just the start of something big, Ryan can feel it. After this weekend, when Dante blows the rest of the competitors out of the running, nothing will be able to hold him back.



The team is already on the ice when Ryan takes his usual spot on the landing, but today he doesn't see the players as a unit, working

together, assisting shots on goal and helping each other out. No, they're just a group of kids skating circles around the ice, chasing after an elusive puck, every man for himself out there. Not one of them stands out from the others—not one shines above the rest. That's their problem, they have no one to rally behind, no one to carry them to win. Time and again the puck skids around the net amid the clamor of skates and sticks but there's no cohesiveness here, nothing holding this team together. He doesn't see number 15 at all and off to the side Jacoby stands like a sentinel, watching the puck whiz by with nothing more than a perfunctory swipe as it passes. Above the goal box, Ryan's jersey flutters in the cold breeze blown up off the ice every time someone misses another shot.

By quarter to eight Ryan's thoroughly disgusted with this charade. He wants to get down there himself and yell at the guys, give them a good pep talk, get them motivated—how can they win like this? They can barely skate, let alone play. So they lost the last few games, so what? Does that mean the season's over for them? *If you're waiting for miracles*, he thinks to himself as another shot flies painfully clear of the goal, *then you might as well give up, guys. It's not just handed to you—I'm learning that the hard way. You want to win? You have to do it yourself. Look at me—I want to walk again and I've finally begun to realize that no one else can make that happen but me.*

In the player box the coach throws his hands up in the air at another missed goal. When he turns, Ryan sees the angry eyes, the bunched muscles in his jaw. Then the coach looks up, notices him, and with a sudden determination, disappears beneath the bleachers. *Coming up here*, Ryan thinks, putting away the digital camera. He's only taken a few pictures today—nothing's happened on the ice to warrant more than that. *Just what I need. The team sucks so come reminisce with me about the way we were. Great.*

He hears footsteps behind him and then the coach is there, sliding into the seat beside Ryan's chair. Dante's seat. Running a shaky hand

through his thinning hair, the coach sighs and doesn't quite look at him as he smiles a little too brightly. "How's it going, Talon?"

"Better," Ryan admits. He busies himself with the straps on his backpack because he doesn't like the nervous tremble that runs through the man next to him, a quiver just beneath his skin that hints at a breaking point. "I'm doing a lot better."

"Good, good." The coach nods, yes, that's good. Searching for something more to say, he tries, "The web site looks good." He nods again, stares out over the ice at the players below, and his voice grows distant. "Real good."

Trepidatiously, Ryan asks, "The team's not doing so hot, is it?"

The coach barks a quick laugh that he stifles before it can get away from him. "Our offense sucks," he says. Now it's Ryan's turn to nod—he's seen that. The defense isn't all that great, either, but he doesn't mention it. "We could really use you out there," the coach continues. "A little bit of the Talonovich magic, you know?" Ryan doesn't tell him there *is* no more magic, at least not yet. With a sigh, the coach rubs at the stubble on his cheeks and says, "It's good for them to see you here. Maybe it'll boost their spirits, remind them what we're out there fighting for. Did you catch the game this weekend?"

"No," Ryan admits. He's been busy—with Dante in his life, he hasn't really given the team much thought lately. He misses the ice, true, and he misses the game, but when he holds his boy close he can smell the crisp chill on his skin and when they kiss he tastes the freedom and power that the skates always gave him before. Right now he doesn't need the team or the hope of playing again to help him get better—he has Dante for that. Still, he thinks the coach is waiting for something more and he forces a laugh. "I heard about it though. Four to nothing? How is that even possible?"

"I don't know," the coach mumbles. Then he thinks of something and he sits up in the grip of the idea, turns to Ryan, his eyes blazing with a plan. "Friday," he says suddenly, nodding like Ryan knows

what he means. “We’re playing Newark CC here, home team advantage, we *have* to win. What say we get you down there in the player box for the game? Just so the crowd can see you’re still with us. That *has* to raise the guys’ spirits, you know? It’d be good for us, real good. What do you say?”

Friday. “I can’t,” Ryan tells him, and when the hope falls from his coach’s face, he turns away, he can’t bear to see it die. “I...I’m sort of going out of town? To the short track state competitions. With the speedskating club? I’ll be gone all weekend. I’m sorry.”

“You’re going...” The coach trails off in disbelief. *I’m sorry*, Ryan thinks again, frowning at the hands that twist in his lap. “You can’t...” the coach tries a second time. He doesn’t go farther than that.

Soft footsteps echo around them and a gentle hand sweeps across the back of Ryan’s neck, just below his hairline. He turns—no one in the aisle, but someone sits down in the row behind him and he looks the other way as Dante sinks into a seat directly behind the coach. His boyfriend wears a t-shirt and sweats, with Ryan’s flannel coat for warmth, and his hair is hidden beneath a black bandanna that matches his dark curls. He glances at Ryan, at the coach, then back at Ryan again, a warm smile on his face. “Hey,” he whispers.

“Hey yourself,” Ryan replies. Now he turns to the coach—are they finished here? Because he’s sitting in Dante’s seat and Ryan’s wanted to talk to his boy since they said goodbye last night. “Maybe the next game?” he asks, hoping to start something that will end with his coach leaving them alone. “It’s just that this weekend is booked for me—”

The coach nods quickly. “Sure, next game. That’s good, too.” He grins at Dante, starts to clap Ryan on the back but remembers the wheelchair and stops, his hand hovering for a moment above Ryan’s shoulder before it falls useless to the armrest. Disappointment sparkles like tears in his eyes. “Playoffs are in few weeks,” he says with a nervous laugh. “I can’t believe this season’s almost over already.

You're coming out for the trials in the spring, right?" He pins Ryan with a fixed stare, asks again, "Right?"

"I'm hoping to be there," Ryan says. Trials are held two weeks after the final game of the season, a way to keep the team in shape and round up new blood. Ryan hasn't really given them much thought—they're still a ways off, another month at least, longer if the team makes the playoffs but he doubts *that* will happen. By that time he should be back on his feet again, though he's not sure how well he'll do on the ice. "We'll see," he tells the coach. "You know I'm gonna try my best."

The coach nods sadly, as if he's afraid that won't be enough to help them now. "I know." Standing, he shoves his hands deep into the pockets of his khakis and sighs. When he speaks, he talks to the ice, the players down in the rink, and doesn't look at Ryan. "Keep up the good work on the site, Talon. And keep us in mind, you hear? You're still a part of this team. You're the best damn player we've ever had, don't let anyone tell you different." With a curt nod at Dante, he skirts Ryan's chair and is gone.

Ryan watches him walk away, wondering just how much he'd inspire the team to score by sitting on the sidelines in a wheelchair. He's sorry they're doing so poorly, true, but he'd be lying if he didn't admit to that tiny part of him that *likes* the fact that they're struggling without him. It'll just make his comeback that much sweeter.

Dante climbs over the seats beside him. "Hey baby," he murmurs, sitting down where the coach was a few minutes before. He touches Ryan's arm to get his attention and Ryan turns to him, already smiling. "That your coach?"

"Yeah." Ryan takes Dante's hand in his, wishes he could steal a kiss but he can't, the hockey team's still out on the ice. "I missed you," he tells him. "How'd you sleep last night?"

Leering at him, Dante wiggles his eyebrows and says, "Alone. I can't wait til Wednesday night. Just you and me and—"

"Condoms," Ryan interrupts. Dante starts to laugh. "What?"

“You’re cute,” his boyfriend whispers. Before Ryan can think to stop him, he raises their hands to his mouth and presses his lips to the inside of Ryan’s wrist. “My mama says I have to hold onto you because you’re just what I need.”

Ryan feels his cheeks burn at the compliment. To be honest, he was terrified when he met Torres Espinosa the day before and after she left, he had been so sure she hated him, positive she thought he wasn’t all that Dante talked him up to be. On the drive home he stared out the window, moody and pensive, and when his own mother wouldn’t stop talking about Dante’s, he finally asked her to please just shut up, would she? He’s not good at first impressions and he just *knew* the one he made on Ms. Espinosa was the worst. He could barely look at the woman—how could she possibly like him? “I sort of thought she was disappointed in me,” he admits. Why wouldn’t she be? He’s a kid in a wheelchair who used to play hockey. Nothing all that great anymore.

But Dante slaps his thigh and tells him, “Hush up, *mi novio*. She knows I think you’re all that and a bag of chips.” Ryan laughs—he likes that phrase. Wrapping his arms around one of Ryan’s, his boyfriend hugs him in a tight squeeze, kisses his bicep, rests his chin on his shoulder. “Look at me,” he murmurs. Ryan forgets about the team and the coach and the skate club coming in another hour to practice. He forgets the fear and doubt that plague him. All that exists is this boy beside him, leaning against him, watching him with deep chocolate eyes. “I told her I love you,” Dante says, his voice so soft, Ryan feels the words on his face rather than hears them spoken. “You keep telling me not to worry about money and my job, but I want you to stop worrying about yourself, okay? Stop worrying if you’re good enough, or wondering if you’re doing this right.”

Ryan bites his lower lip to keep it from trembling. “I just don’t want to mess this up,” he whispers. “I don’t want to ruin us.”

“You can’t,” Dante assures him with another squeeze of his arm. “You won’t, I won’t let you.” Ryan’s heart aches in his chest with the

sincerity of his boyfriend's words. "If we were alone, I'd cover you with kisses and show you just how you make me feel."

From far below, the faint *clack clack* of skates drifts up to them, the players leaving the ice now that practice has ended. "Oh look," Dante says with a mischievous grin. "I think we're alone now."

Ryan laughs. A quick look at the rink assures him that yes, they are alone, for the moment, so he gives Dante a brief kiss, trying to pour all the love and gratitude and emotion swirling through him into the light press of lips. "You need to practice," he whispers. "I'll try to come back this afternoon if I can, but you know how that is..."

He trails off. He's not looking forward to therapy today, more pain, more hurt. Since Friday, he's tried to put some pressure on his left leg whenever he can—he pushes his foot against the wheelchair's stand every chance he gets, he sits with his leg propped up in front of him, he even sat on the edge of his bed this morning and put his feet flat on the floor, tried to stand, managed to get up a half inch off the mattress before his muscles screamed in protest. But the smallest effort leaves him sweating and weak, makes his leg quiver for hours. He knows he probably won't be up to coming back to the rink today but he doesn't want to say that and have Dante give up his practice just to be with him. He knows his boy needs the time on the ice if he's going to win at State.

Standing, Dante stretches for the ceiling, his t-shirt pulling free from his sweatpants to expose the white and blue bodysuit he wears underneath his clothing. "Maybe?" he asks as he turns to lean against the railing so he can look at Ryan. "If it's cool with your mom, and if you don't mind—feel free to say no, baby, okay? You know that won't bother me—but if you think it'll be okay, maybe I can...I don't know, maybe come with you guys? This morning. To the doctor's?" He props one sneakered foot on Ryan's chair in the space between his knees and shrugs. "I mean, I would really like to go. If you don't...if you don't mind."

Ryan looks past Dante at the empty ice and chews on his lower lip, thinking. When he goes to therapy, he makes his mother wait in the lobby—in the doctor’s office, it’s just him and whichever one of the therapists he gets that day. He doesn’t want his mother to see how low he’s reduced by simple leg-lifts, he doesn’t want *anyone* to see him like that, but this is Dante... “It’s okay,” his boyfriend whispers, touching his knee, the one with the brace on it. His hand is so gentle that Ryan’s throat closes up to feel it. “I understand, Ryan, really—”

“No, you can come,” Ryan tells him. He covers Dante’s hand with his own and when he looks up, his boyfriend leans down for another quick kiss. “But you have to get in some practice first...”

“Going now,” Dante assures him.



If Ryan’s mother is surprised that Dante’s coming with them to therapy, she doesn’t show it. Ryan doesn’t ask if it’s okay—he just tells her when she shows up, he’s going, and she nods, that’s fine. In the back of the van, while his mother’s still outside and can’t see them, Ryan leans close to Dante to smell his scent, a mingling of sweat and ice as intoxicating as alcohol in his veins. Before his boyfriend can tie his bandanna back around his hair, Ryan runs his fingers through the damp curls at the base of his neck, the thick strands dark like lines of ink across his palm. “Thanks for letting me come,” Dante whispers, turning to kiss Ryan’s wrist when he starts to pull away. “It means a lot to me.”

“It’s not a pretty sight,” Ryan says. “After an hour I’m cussing and yelling and crying. You might not like me much then.”

Dante laughs and starts to lean over to kiss him, but Ryan sees his mother at the driver’s side window and turns away. “Hold that thought,” he mumbles as she slides behind the wheel. He feels Dante’s hand on his, a comforting touch that sears his skin long after his boyfriend pulls back. *Love you*, that touch says, Ryan can almost

hear the words aloud and when he smiles at Dante, his boyfriend mouths, "Later." It's a promise Ryan can't wait to keep.

His therapist's office is near the mall in a long, low building that looks more like a trailer than a physician's office. He hates the place, hates the light rose-colored brick, the gray concrete ramp, the dead bushes that wave skeletal limbs as his mother parks in the first handicapped spot she finds. Dante must see the nervousness in his face because he takes Ryan's hand, squeezes reassuringly, and this time manages to make good on that kiss before his mother can open the side door. "It'll be okay," he assures Ryan.

"I know," Ryan concedes. It will hurt like a bitch during the session and he'll ache for hours afterward, but Dante's with him so yeah, it *will* be okay. Eventually.

They wait in the lobby while Ryan's mother checks them in. The sofas here are overstuffed, in colors like cucumber and celery and bay leaf, pale pastels that look washed out where the sun comes in from the windows to streak across the cushions. The tables are stained a light oak with magazines stacked on them and Tiffany lamps turned down low. There's a TV but it plays the same damn video every single time they come here, something about physical therapy that is turned down low so even if he wanted to, Ryan couldn't hear it. Dante guides his wheelchair to an empty space at the end of one loveseat. "Is this cool?" he asks. "Right here?"

"This is fine," Ryan tells him. He pats the cushion closest to him, watching his mother at the counter. She turns, looks around the empty lobby until she sees them, and flashes him a wide smile he doesn't return. "Sit down, babe."

"You want to sit here, too?" Dante asks, perching on the edge of the cushion as if afraid the sofa will suck him in. "You can sit next to me, if you want."

But Ryan shakes his head. "I'm fine," he murmurs. He always speaks low out here in the waiting room. It feels like purgatory to him, an eternal waiting, heart in throat, as he grips the arms of his

chair with sweaty palms. He hates when they call his name. It's torture, plain and simple, and it's even worse because he knows what to expect, the pain to come, the hurt, the embarrassment. Maybe letting Dante see him like this wasn't such a good idea after all...

His mother picks up a magazine at random from the coffee table before sitting in a wingback chair across from Dante. "A few minutes, hon," she says, flipping through the magazine. It's an old copy of *Kids Illustrated*, something from last season, judging by the baseball player on the front. Smiling over the top of the magazine, she tells Dante, "I'm so glad you're here. Ryan gets so bad at these things—"

"Mom," Ryan warns. God, she knows just how to make him feel childish again, doesn't she?

"It's okay," Dante whispers, touching Ryan's knee briefly. He glances at his mother, but she's got her nose back in the magazine and she didn't see the gesture.

Ryan smoothes a hand down his thigh and can still feel Dante's warmth through the denim. Searching for something to say, anything to take his mind off the coming pain, he clears his throat and mumbles, "I'm sorry you're missing practice now."

Dante shrugs, disinterested. "I got a few hours in," he assures him. "It's all good. Josey said hi, by the way. She made State." Ryan nods—he saw her out on the ice earlier, trying to keep up with Dante, but his boyfriend raced circles around the rest of the team. By the time the skate club started to show up, Dante had already been practicing for about an hour, short, fast races that Ryan clocked in just over half a minute. Then Josey showed up, waving at Ryan as she took to the ice, and Dietrich was there, a few others Ryan recognized from the quarters but he doesn't know their names. Just before Ryan's mom showed up, Dante participated in a group race, 1500 meters, getting off of the line as if he only had four laps around the rink and not fourteen, and he circled the pack twice before slowing down. After that, he took up a position in third place, though he fin-

ished a lap and a half ahead of everyone else. Ryan could see the hateful look Dietrich threw Dante's way from where he sat in the stands, and even now he grows angry remembering it. "I can't skate anymore today," Dante admits. "I'm worn out."

"You started too fast in that last heat," Ryan tells him. "You have to pace yourself—"

With a laugh, Dante asks, "I won, didn't I?"

Ryan grins. "That's all that matters, isn't it?" He looks up as a nearby door opens and a nurse peeks out, calls his name. "That's me," he mutters, starting to wheel towards her.

"Let me push," Dante says, standing. He takes the handles of the chair and navigates easily around the furniture. "Do you want me to come back with you?"

Ryan glances at his mother, who has lowered the magazine and watches him now but he can't read the look in her eyes. When he raises his eyebrows at her, though, she gives him a sad smile and turns back to her reading. "You can," he whispers. And then, as they approach the door and the nurse stands aside, he adds, "Please."

The wheels on his chair squeak when Dante pushes him through the door, off the plush shag carpet and onto the rosy tile in the hall. Ryan hates how everything here is just a tad too much—the chairs too soft, the tile too clean, the walls an eggshell white stucco in too perfect a pattern. The frames that hang at even intervals down the hall house paintings of the same neutral pastels, images of palm trees bent beneath tropical winds he can't feel, houses made of adobe and clay baking in a summer sun he doesn't see. He hates it here, has he mentioned that?

The nurse closes the door quietly behind them and smiles at his chart. "Hello, Ryan," she says, and he hates her bright white scrubs, her blonde pouffy hair. He doesn't remember her name, is this Nancy? Or Donna? He's not sure. A hand goes to her hair unconsciously when she notices Dante. "And who's this we have with us today?"

“Dante,” his boyfriend says, holding a hand out for her to shake. She giggles girlishly—he has that effect on women, Ryan’s noticed...hell, he has that effect on *him*—and she takes the offered hand. “It’s okay if I’m here, isn’t it?” Dante asks.

“Of course it is,” Ryan growls. He’s already slipping into his evil mode, he can feel it descend upon him like a shroud. He glares at the nurse, daring her to contradict him. “I want you here so you stay.”

Her smile falters—they know him all too well. “Room three, dear,” she says, pointing down the hall at an open door a few yards away. “Tish will be right with you.”

Tish. Of all the therapists here, she’s actually the one Ryan can deal with, if he has to. She reads his mood the moment she walks through the door and she never fakes a laugh or a smile just to try to cheer him up. With her short red hair and her big-framed glasses, she reminds him of that secretary in the *Ghostbusters* movie, and she has the Long Island accent, the eternally cracking chewing gum, to match. “You don’t want to get better?” she said to him the last time he saw her, a few weeks ago now. “Fine by me. I get paid either way. But I’m not the one in the chair here, Ryan. I’m not the one who can’t walk. You’re not hurting me any if you don’t want to cooperate.” This was before he met Dante, when he was still angry at his body and refused to heal. He hated her at the time, hated her words and her huge eyes behind those thick glasses, hated that spiky hair that he just *knew* had to be dyed, but today he thinks he could use some of her no-nonsense attitude. He wants to walk and she’s hard-ass enough to make him prove to her that he can.

Room three reminds Ryan of an adult playground with its waist-high parallel bars, huge rubber balls scattered about, the floor covered in thick mats and a two-way mirror along one wall that reflects the room back to itself. There’s a bench to one side where Dante steers him, taking a seat as they wait for Tish to show up. “So this is it,” Dante says, his voice hushed. He looks around like a little boy, eyes wide, trying to take everything in at once.

"Welcome to hell," Ryan mutters.

Dante laughs and takes his hand. The nurse didn't follow them into the room and the door's still open, but he leans over and kisses Ryan's cheek as if they're alone. "When we get home, I'll kiss away the pain," Dante promises him. "I'll massage your back and legs, how's that? And make you forget all about this place. What do you say to that?"

"Ryan Talonovich," a woman says behind them. "So it's you again." They look up as Tish enters, a petite woman with that shock of hair a hundred shades brighter than Ryan's own. Her glasses are black circles around her eyes and her lips draw into a tight bow as she frowns at his chart in her hands. "I hear you've been non-responsive lately, no surprise there. Who's the cutie?"

My boyfriend, he almost says. He doesn't think she'd be surprised by that, she doesn't strike him as the type who's easily shocked by much of anything, but Dante interrupts. "I'm Dante," he says, holding out a hand. She looks at it like he's kidding, and then takes it, shakes it once, lets go. "I'm a friend."

The look she gives Ryan says she saw that quick kiss when she walked in and she thinks they're a whole hell of a lot more than just friends. "Dante," she echoes. With a curt nod, she closes the door and says, "Here's the way it goes. You stay on this side of the room and let Ryan do all the work. He's not going to get back on his feet again if you interfere."

"Can I hold his hand?" Dante asks, ever blunt.

Ryan smirks at Tish's frown—if she had her doubts about them before, they're gone now. "If you *have* to," she sighs. "As long as you keep out of the way. You can't make him better. That's up to him, if he even *wants* out of that chair."

I do want out, Ryan thinks, his anger simmering. Had he actually thought he liked this woman? Who was he kidding?



Dante stays on the bench during the first part of Ryan's therapy—from his position on the mats Ryan can see his boyfriend out of the corner of his eye and just knowing he's there makes the leg-lifts and sit-ups bearable. Tish isn't one of those cheerleader therapists—she doesn't egg him on, doesn't give much encouragement at all. She gives him a countdown as he works, that's it, and when he's just about ready to quit, she'll give him a stern look and say, "Two more, Ryan. You've already done eight, what's two more?" Yes, he hates her. With a passion.

Next comes that damn ball between his knees, he hates that, too. He hates when he can't squeeze his legs together hard enough and the ball drops down to hit his crotch, and that's not as painful as it is humiliating, feeling the smack of rubber against his cock before the ball rolls away and he can't even go get it to bring it back, Tish has to do that. Today he's just not very coordinated because he drops the damn thing twice in a row and when it falls a third time, Dante comes over to kneel behind Ryan on the mat. He places his knees on either side of Ryan's head, takes his face in his hands, his fingers cool on Ryan's cheeks, and as Tish retrieves the ball, he leans down over Ryan until his hair falls like a curtain, hiding them. "You're damaging the goods, baby," Dante purrs, stroking Ryan's chin and nose. "You better knock that off or we won't be able to do much of anything this weekend."

The earnest look in his boyfriend's eyes makes Ryan laugh. It's a breathless sound, forced through the pain that tears up his legs, but it manages to bring a smile to his face. "She said you have to stay over there," he whispers as Tish approaches them, the ball in her hands.

Dante rocks back on his heels but his hands don't leave Ryan's face. His touch is soft and warm on his tear-stained cheeks. "She said I have to stay out of the way," he corrects, looking at Tish for confir-

mation. She doesn't reply. "I'm up here. You're doing all the work down at the other end of the mat."

"I'm tired of this," Ryan announces. Struggling to sit up, he leans back against Dante and sighs. "I want to walk, Tish. Isn't that what I'm here for? Why can't we spend more time on that and let this other shit slide?"

Tish's lips tighten into a thin line of disapproval. "I'll tell you something, kid," she says as she pitches the ball away from them. It bounces off the mat, rolls to the wall, starts to roll back but stops. "You can't just jump on a treadmill, you know? You've been out of commission for over a month now and your muscles will lock up if you don't strengthen them first. Babies crawl before they learn to walk. You can't even do that yet."

Anger swirls through Ryan. Is she calling him a baby? After all he's been through today, after all the pain that's eating away at him, all the progress he's made? "Fuck you," he spits. Dante covers his mouth with one hand to shut him up.

If Tish is surprised, she doesn't show it. Instead, she scribbles for a moment on his chart—he wishes he knew what she was writing, *arrogant kid* or *stubborn bastard*, has to be something along those lines—and then she turns away. "Your mother paid for an hour, fine. But I'm not paid enough to be spoken to like that. You stay here and work out, if you want, or you leave, it's all the same to me. I have full use of *my* legs, remember. I don't *have* to be here."

Ryan stares at her in disbelief. *I didn't mean it*, he thinks, his mind racing wildly, but he can't say the words, Dante's hand keeps him silent. None of the other therapists ever called him on his bitter language before. *Can't you see this hurts me?* he wants to shout. *Can't you see how much you're putting me through?*

As Tish heads for the door, Dante asks, "So that's it? Wait—"

"You can tell your mother why I left," Tish calls out over her shoulder. Opening the door, she says, "Make sure you use that direct quote. What was it? Fuck you?"

She shuts the door when Dante starts to reply.

For a moment Ryan lies in Dante's arms, stunned. *She didn't*—he thinks, and that's as far as he gets before a voice inside him whispers, *So now what? How are you supposed to walk if she's not here to help you? What the hell do you do now?* Lowering Dante's hand from his mouth, he murmurs, "Oh shit."

"It's your own fault," Dante tells him, but there's no malice in his words, no accusation, and Ryan knows he's right. His fingers brush over Ryan's neck, across his chest, an almost ticklish touch before they trail down to his stomach. Rubbing gently through his t-shirt, Dante sighs. "Maybe I can go talk to her? Or ask for another therapist? Would that work?"

Ryan doubts it. They all hate him here, he's so resistant to their help and he doesn't know why—he *wants* to walk, more than anything, he wants to run and jump and skate again, he wants to surge to his feet when his boyfriend sails across the finish line in a race. But the moment he wheels into this office, he throws up a wall between himself and everyone else, he refuses to do anything anyone asks of him, he refuses to heal. "Fuck this," he scowls, tears pricking his eyes. He won't cry, he promises himself as he wipes at his eyes, he *won't*.

"Come on," Dante whispers. Standing, he tugs at Ryan's arms to help him up. "Baby, please—"

"What's the use?" Ryan counters, but he lets Dante help him into the wheelchair. His boyfriend unties the bandanna he wears around his hair and rubs at Ryan's cheeks as if trying to erase the freckles scattered across his skin, the scent of his sweat heady and wonderful in the cloth. Once the tears are dried, he raises Ryan's chin and kisses him, sweet and tender. Then he pushes the chair over to the parallel bars, a chore because the wheels keep catching in the mats and Ryan's not helping any. What's the use?

Dante stops the chair at one end of the bars. Effortlessly, he vaults over the first bar to stand in front of Ryan. With a hand on either bar,

he pushes up until his feet come off the mat, and then he starts to swing back and forth slowly. "Can you do this?" he asks.

Ryan frowns. His last attempt at these things ended in a crumpling defeat two seconds later. But Dante's not using his legs, is he? He's holding himself up with his arms and Ryan knows he can do that, his arms are nothing but muscle, this chair has seen to that. Leaning forward, Ryan grabs the bars and pulls himself up from his wheelchair, careful not to hit his legs. His arms tremble with his weight, his legs dangle uselessly, but he's upright, isn't he? Not sitting. Not standing either, but he's out of that damn chair, at least.

Dropping to the floor, Dante places his hands on Ryan's hips and says, "Ease up a little, baby. I've got you."

"Dante—" Ryan starts. The muscles in his forearms stand out like cords and his palms are starting to sweat.

"I've got you," Dante says again. Looking up at Ryan, he smiles in that way he has that makes everything right in the world. "Trust me."

Ryan does. Slowly, oh so slowly, he eases down, further, until his left foot rests flat on the floor. His right doesn't want to try it—when his toes touch down, pain flares to life along the back of his calf, where the muscles are still healing around the steel rod, and he holds that leg behind him. As he starts to put some weight on his left foot, he feels the familiar hurt rip through him and he starts to slip but Dante's there, leaning against him, holding him up. "You're taller than I expected," his boyfriend whispers, wrapping his arms around Ryan's waist. They're almost the same height but Ryan stands a few inches taller and when Dante looks up at him, his hair falls back from his face in soft waves.

"I didn't know you were so short," Ryan jokes. With Dante's hands on the small of his back, his body pressed so close, Ryan can forget the pain in his legs, the ache in his arms, and he relaxes a little more. He leans forward, their lips meeting in a soft kiss. "I love you," he murmurs.

Dante steps back, the hands at Ryan's waist pulling him along. Ryan shuffles after him, ignoring the pain that flairs to life when he sets his right foot down for a brief second. "Kiss me again," Dante whispers, taking another step back. Ryan slides his hands along the bars with stiff, jerky movements as he hobbles closer to comply.

And Dante moves away again. "Stand still," Ryan laughs, following him. Dante's hands slip below his waist to knead his ass and Ryan moans into his boyfriend's neck. "Wait," he sighs when Dante puts more distance between them. He lurches forward to claim another kiss.

Finally Dante stops, his eyes gleaming with desire and delight. "Love you, too," he whispers, his hands coming up Ryan's chest to cradle his face as he kisses him hungrily. *This* is what Ryan's been waiting for, these lips, this tongue against his, *this* is what he's been chasing since Tish left. "Look behind you," Dante breathes.

Ryan glances over his shoulder to see his wheelchair at the other end of the bars...*the other end*. "How—" he starts, but Dante's mouth closes over his and the words disappear. *I walked the length of these bars*, he thinks, amazed, as Dante kisses him again and again. "What—"

With a laugh, Dante hugs him tight. "You just need the right incentive," he whispers. "See? I knew you'd walk again."

CHAPTER 14



“It doesn’t count,” Ryan grumbles from his wheelchair in the back of the van but Dante ignores him. “It wasn’t really *walking*—”

“It was close enough,” Dante says, leaning forward to hang over the driver’s seat. Mrs. Talonovich laughs when he rolls his eyes at Ryan’s halfhearted protest. “It was being out of that chair. It was holding yourself up on the bars—”

“You helped me,” Ryan points out.

“Not much,” Dante counters. He sees Mrs. Talonovich’s smile and shakes his head, bemused. “All I did was spot him, honest.” With a grin, he turns and points at Ryan. “There you are.”

Ryan slaps his hand away. “It wasn’t walking,” he mutters.

Dante studies him for a long moment, until he’s sure he sees the hint of a smile trying to break through the scowl clouding Ryan’s face. Then he falls back to the seat beside his boyfriend and whispers, “Was too.” When Ryan starts to argue, Dante covers his ears with his hands like a little boy who knows he’s right and isn’t listening to any other opinions anymore. “Your feet were on the ground and that makes it walking so there. End of discussion.”

Laughing, Ryan tugs at his elbow to remove one hand from his ear. “Was not,” he says, grinning as Dante squirms away in a fit of giggles. When Dante tries to scoot to the far end of the seat, Ryan crawls after him, tugging at his shirt to keep him close. Dante’s

laughter rings out around them and he loves this, his boy's body crushed on top of his, his fingers digging into his ribs and tickling him silly—it's turning him on something fierce and in another second he'll just give in and lie here and let Ryan do with him whatever he desires—

"Ryan," Mrs. Talonovich warns, her sharp voice a splash of cold water dampening their fun. Ryan clears his throat and sits back in his chair while Dante smooths down his t-shirt and looks at the floor, chastised. "You can't horse around like that," Ryan's mother says. Her hard eyes stare at them from the rearview mirror, her gaze flickering from Ryan to Dante and back again. "Someone might get hurt."

Dante twists the hem of his t-shirt in his hands and murmurs softly, "I won't hurt him."

"She means me hurting myself," Ryan replies. He glares back at his mother until she looks away, and then he covers Dante's hands with one of his own. "I'm nineteen, Mom—"

With a sigh, Mrs. Talonovich begins, "I know—"

"Not nine," Ryan continues, talking over her. "Not five. You don't have to tell me what the hell to do."

In the rearview mirror Dante can see her chin crumple, the way some people's will when they're not going to let themselves cry, and he looks away. "Ryan," he whispers—he doesn't want to see this fight. He doesn't want to be caught in the middle of an argument between them, he hates confrontations of any kind, he hated snapping at Bobby the other day but his boss simply pushed him too far and he couldn't hold back any longer. Still, he likes Mrs. Talonovich, and he's afraid if Ryan starts fighting with her over something as silly as the two of them goofing off, then she might think it's all Dante's fault to begin with and she'll say he can't see Ryan anymore. God, he couldn't handle that.

But Ryan doesn't let the matter drop. "I can't wait until I really *can* walk again," he mutters, half to himself but loud enough that his mother can overhear. "Then I can move back on campus and not

have to deal with this shit. Then I won't be treated like a baby just because I'm in a goddamn wheelchair—"

"Shh," Dante murmurs. He sees Mrs. Talonovich's knuckles whiten on the steering wheel and he nudges Ryan with his elbow to quiet him. "You don't have to keep it up."

"I'm just saying—" Ryan starts.

"Just don't." When Ryan pouts at him, Dante whispers, "Please. For me?"

Slowly, Ryan sighs, the anger bunched in him leaving as quickly as his temper flared. "Fine." He turns to glare out the window, his hands curled into fists on his thighs.

Dante glances at the rearview mirror and meets Mrs. Talonovich's gaze before she looks away. Then he takes one of Ryan's hands in his, works his fingers in between his boyfriend's, rubs at the soft skin, the palm, the wrist, anything to work out the tension coiled there. He wants to apologize—to Mrs. Talonovich for Ryan's hateful words, to Ryan for making him concede the fight, to both of them for interrupting the argument, it was something private, he shouldn't have interfered. But he loves Ryan and doesn't like to see him this way, so bitter at the world because of his accident, so bitter at himself. *What can I do to show you that's not the way it has to be?* he thinks, stroking Ryan's hand and arm. His boyfriend relaxes beneath the touch. *How can I prove that you don't have to hate yourself? That you're wonderful to me?*

Just as he's about to say he's sorry, Ryan's fingers tighten around his and, turning from the window, he gives Dante a wink. It's gone in an instant, but the gesture makes Dante grin foolishly. Raising his voice, he asks Mrs. Talonovich, "Did I tell you he walked today?"

She laughs, and suddenly everything's right again. "I did not," Ryan says, but he's grinning and that's all Dante wants, to make him smile.



In Ryan's room with the door closed—and locked, Dante's sure to check the locks now whenever Mrs. Talonovich is around—his boyfriend stretches out on the bed, easing his legs out one at a time as if he's an old man with arthritis in his joints. "You okay?" Dante asks, moving the wheelchair aside and climbing onto the bed to kneel beside Ryan.

Discomfort flickers across Ryan's features. "Fine," he groans, lying back on his pillow. Sweat beads along his brow and Dante wipes it away with his bandanna, smooths Ryan's hair back, kisses his light eyebrows. One of his boyfriend's hands strays to Dante's leg, brushing along his thigh to rest against his crotch, the fingers curling behind his knee. "Are you going back now?" Ryan asks.

He means to the rink, to practice. Dante knows he should but he doesn't want to leave Ryan like this—with his eyes closed, his breath shallow and his voice weak, he's starting to feel the healing burn from his legs, the overworked muscles aching in response to therapy. Dante knows that feeling all too well.

"I can practice tomorrow," Dante tells him as Ryan winces. "You sure you're okay?"

Now Ryan shakes his head, just a slight motion, but it's enough to wrench Dante's heart. "I think I overdid it," his boyfriend admits. When Dante trails a hand across his stomach to soothe him, he adds, "I'm sorry I'm not in the mood to do much right now."

"Don't be." Absently, Dante traces the zipper of Ryan's jeans. He feels the hint of hardness beneath his fingers and he presses once or twice, just to hear Ryan's thin moan. Then his hand moves lower, up one thigh, down the other, until he reaches the cold brace at his boyfriend's knee. Climbing over Ryan's legs, Dante unhooks the brace, lets it fall to the floor. "There," he says, rubbing at the worn spots where the brace has chafed Ryan's jeans. "That feel any better?"

Ryan reaches for him. "Much better. Come here."

Laughing, Dante tells him, "I'm not done yet."

With gentle fingers he massages Ryan's lower legs, careful not to hurt him—he watches Ryan's face to gauge his response and the parted lips, the closed eyes, the smooth brow tell him more than words alone could. He works up one leg then turns to the other, rubbing and kneading the pliant limbs through the thick denim. He's tempted to pull the fabric up out of the way or maybe ask if Ryan would be more comfortable without the jeans on at all, but he remembers the way Ryan reacted when he asked to see the scars, he knows his boyfriend's probably too self-conscious to let him see the damage just yet. He can't imagine why—it's not going to turn him off, not when every single thing about this boy turns him on so damn bad. He does let his hands slip into the leg of Ryan's jeans to dance over the downy hair but when he feels the first trace of a scar, a frown crosses Ryan's face and he pulls away as his boyfriend admonishes, "Dante—"

"I won't," he promises, and it's back to above the fabric, he won't push it. When Ryan's ready, no sooner than that.

He works his way up to Ryan's knees, and then his thighs. He can feel tremors beneath his hands, muscles still trembling from earlier exertion, and he digs in deep here, working the knots out. Ryan spreads his legs a little, just enough for Dante to rub at his inner thighs, though from time to time his hand presses the pillowy softness at Ryan's crotch. He likes the faint smile on his boyfriend's lips—straddling his thighs, Dante leans down over him to kiss that pink mouth, sits up when Ryan tries to kiss him back. Now his hand is at Ryan's groin, he rubs wide circles into him, feels a stiffening under his ministrations in response. "I thought you said you weren't in the mood," Dante purrs.

"You're getting me in the mood," Ryan tells him. He opens his eyes, dulled with lust, and arches into Dante's hand. "Whatever else you've got in mind," he sighs, "please don't stop doing that."

Dante laughs. "You like it?"

Ryan nods, thrusts into him again, and Dante lies down alongside him, drapes a leg between his, presses a knee into his crotch while his arms encircle Ryan's waist. Cuddling close to him, Dante kisses his underarm, his side, his chest, through his shirt—when he nears a nipple, he licks out quickly before Ryan can twist away. "That tickles," Ryan warns with a giggle.

"Does this?" Dante nips at his chest, his teeth scraping across the nipple, raised now and straining his thin shirt. He likes the way Ryan squirms beneath him, the way his boyfriend's hands find purchase on his hips, the giggles his mouth elicits.

Ryan swats at him playfully. "You know it does," he laughs, trying to turn away but Dante holds him tight. His hands slip beneath his boyfriend's shirt, tickling up his chest, over thin muscles, the material bunching at Dante's wrist to expose a flat, smooth stomach. Leaning down, he kisses the pale skin, licks his way up to the taut nipple. When his hair brushes against the tender bud, Ryan tries again to move away. "Dante, why—"

"I like it," Dante tells him, running his tongue around the hard nipple. "I like the way it tastes. I like the way it feels in my mouth."

Ryan pushes against him. "Maybe I don't like it," he says with another laugh. "I keep saying it tickles and you keep insisting—"

You keep insisting... Dante rolls onto his back, away from Ryan. "I'm sorry," he whispers. *You keep insisting—see?* he thinks, staring at Ryan's ceiling. *Why can't I hear him say no?* "I'm sorry, I didn't mean it, really." When Ryan reaches for him, Dante moves away. "God, I'm..."

"It's okay," Ryan says, breathless. "Really, Dante. Come back here."

You keep insisting... Dante can't get those words out of his head. He lays on his side, curled into himself, and thinks of Jared and the way he didn't want to and he did anyway, the way he felt when it was over, like something inside of him had broken and he couldn't shake the pieces free no matter how hard he tried. Maybe inviting Ryan to State was a bad idea. Maybe they should get separate rooms so he'll

have to leave at the end of the day and he won't get caught up in the moment. "It's not a big deal," Ryan's saying, and no, *this* isn't, but what if he can't hear Ryan's protests if his boyfriend isn't ready to have sex? What if he *won't* hear them?

Ryan touches his shoulder, his hand warm and gentle. "Dante, please," he sighs, gripping Dante's upper arm, burrowing his head in the space between Dante's shoulder blades. "Baby, please. It's okay."

"It's not," Dante mutters, and he's surprised to hear his voice crack. His eyes sting with the beginning of tears and he wipes at them roughly. "It's not okay."

Ryan doesn't respond. Instead he scoots closer, slipping his arms around Dante's waist, and he hugs him tight. "I'm afraid I'm going to go too far," Dante whispers. "I'm afraid I can't help it, and you'll hate me. I don't want to make you feel the way I felt when Jared—" Now his voice fails completely, doesn't just crack but crumbles and he wraps his arms around himself, Ryan's arms beneath his. "I don't want that."

"I'm not going to hate you," Ryan replies. "I love you, Dante. You're not going to do anything I don't want you to do, I promise." Thinking a minute, he adds, "Well, except that tickling thing. It doesn't do anything for me."

Dante laughs, a sniffling, halfhearted sound, but a laugh nonetheless. "You're ticklish, aren't you?" Ryan asks coyly. He strums his fingers across Dante's stomach, the touch fluttering his skin. "You're ticklish here, right?"

Dante laughs again and turns to find himself in Ryan's embrace. His boyfriend leans above him, his blue eyes earnest, his hair like wine where it falls back from his face. "And when you want to get it on," Ryan says softly, "doesn't this distract you?"

"Not really," Dante admits. He runs one arm beneath Ryan, the other around his boyfriend's waist, and pulls him closer. "I like you right here," he whispers, kissing the hollow of Ryan's throat.

A phone rings, startling them. Ryan's cordless sits on the bedside table, within easy reach. When Dante shifts beneath him, Ryan tightens his arms around him and tells him, "Stay here. My mom'll get it."

But two seconds later Mrs. Talonovich calls out Ryan's name, her voice muffled through the closed door, and Ryan groans as he reaches over Dante to snag the receiver. "This better be good," he mutters and Dante laughs, kisses his shoulder because it's the nearest part of his body that he can reach. He can hear the irritation in his boyfriend's voice when he answers, "Hello?" Probably the coach, trying to talk him into coming to the game again, but they have plans—

"Hey!" Ryan's voice brightens, and he shifts into a more comfortable position alongside Dante. "I was going to call you today actually."

"Who is it?" Dante whispers.

Smiling down at him, Ryan says into the phone, "Sure, that's great. Yeah."

"Who—" Dante starts again.

Then Ryan asks, "Today?" His smile fades and he leans back, smooths Dante's t-shirt down his stomach before lying on his chest. "Well, I told you about my legs, right? I had therapy earlier so I'm sort of out of commission for the rest of the day, you know?" He falls silent, and Dante's just about to ask again who it is when Ryan glances up at him and says, "He's right here, you want to ask him yourself?"

And then he's handing Dante the phone. "Mr. Vasquez," he whispers as Dante takes the receiver. "From the Rio del Oro?"

Now he's grinning, too. "This is Dante."

He isn't sure what he expects, but it's not the soft, slow drawl with the Mexican accent on the other end of the line. "Dante," Mr. Vasquez says. It's almost a sigh, he talks that low and drawn-out. "I'm sure you hear this all the time, son, but you're amazing out on the ice."

Dante laughs. “That’s what they say.” Ryan lies down as Dante sits up and scoots back to lean against the wall at the head of the bed. Once he’s comfortable, Ryan’s arms find their way around his waist again and his boyfriend rests his head on Dante’s hip, his elbow a sweet crush where it covers Dante’s crotch. “Ryan says you’re sponsoring my trip this week. I just want to say thanks—that really helps me out.”

Now it’s Mr. Vasquez who laughs. “You’re helping *me* out,” he tells Dante. “My Mila says the best thing I can do is find a local athlete. She’s my oldest, in the marketing program at the college. I don’t know if Ryan told you I was looking to approach him about it earlier?”

Running a hand through his boyfriend’s hair, Dante smiles down at him and says, “I think he mentioned something along those lines, yes.”

“But then he had that accident,” Mr. Vasquez continues. “Horrible thing, terrible really. The team’s hurting without him.”

Mr. Vasquez starts to recap the last game, and Dante’s only half listening. “He’ll talk your ear off,” Ryan whispers. When Dante laughs, Ryan grins at him. “He will! He kept me on the phone the other day for almost an hour.”

“Shh,” Dante admonishes. Then he nods—a wasted gesture, since Mr. Vasquez can’t see it—and murmurs something that encourages the man to keep speaking. He thinks maybe Ryan’s right—now the man’s going on about his other daughter, not the one at college but another one, Bonita, who saw him skate and suddenly wants to take to the ice. Dante has a feeling he might be on the phone awhile.

At his waist, Ryan presses against the small bulge in his sweats, the start of an erection that began before the phone rang, and Dante lets his eyes slip closed at the sensation. Hands on his waist, easing into his pants, encircling his stiffening shaft and what’s this guy in his ear going on about? All Dante knows are the gentle hands cupping his balls, pushing his pants down out of the way, the cool air on his hard

cock. Fingers twine through kinked hair, light breath tickles along his length, Ryan kneads him with a steady rhythm and any moment now he's going to just hang up the phone, tell this Mr. Vasquez he appreciates the sponsorship and he'll skate his best at State and wear whatever insignia he needs to but he can't talk anymore, he can't even listen, his boy's getting busy and Dante's all about *that*. He covers the mouthpiece and moans softly, breathes Ryan's name, tells him can't he just wait two seconds until he gets off the phone—

And then warm lips cover the tip of his dick, soft cheeks rub against him, Ryan's tongue licks down his shaft and over his balls and gasping, Dante thrusts up into the hot mouth. Through the phone he hears Mr. Vasquez's laid-back voice, asking if he can stop by the restaurant today? "Just to pick up a few things we have here," he's saying, and Dante nods again, anything to get him off the phone. "There are a few t-shirts left from our grand opening. I have a couple of windbreakers with our logo on the back. Maybe you can stop by this evening? We can talk over dinner—don't worry about paying, you eat here for free. I'd say bring Ryan but he told me he couldn't make it later."

"What time?" Dante manages, but it's hard to concentrate with Ryan's lips and tongue sucking at him, working him, bring him closer and closer to release. He clenches his buttocks each time he arches up from the mattress, tries to hold onto some semblance of control, but he has to hang up, he has to hang up *now*.

"Five?" Mr. Vasquez asks. At his crotch, Ryan's watching him with large eyes, watching the way his cheeks grow slack, his eyes dull with lust, his lips part and his jaw bunches. When he doesn't answer, Mr. Vasquez amends, "Five thirty? What time is good for you?"

"Five's okay," Dante sighs. "Five thirty. Yeah, okay. Sure."

Ryan lets his dick slip from his mouth, blows along the wet length, kneads the hard shaft and whispers, "Tell him you have to go."

"I have to go," Dante says, his voice almost mechanical. "Five thirty. Thanks again."

As he clicks off the phone, Ryan goes down on him again and somehow Dante manages to fumble the receiver into its cradle without slipping free from the hot mouth. He falls back to the bed, thrusts into his boyfriend as strong hands massage his hips and thighs. A few minutes later and he comes in a thick rush—he thinks Ryan will let go but he doesn't, just takes him in until there's nothing left, nothing more to give. With fumbling hands Dante pulls his boyfriend over him, his wilting cock crushed between their bodies, the length cold and damp where it lies against his skin. Then he kisses his own salty juices from Ryan's lips, whispering he loves him. Over and over again, he loves him.



In the bed Dante lies on his side, Ryan beside him, their legs spooned together. With his back on the mattress, Ryan faces Dante and they can't seem to keep their lips apart. To Dante it's almost as if he's drowning and Ryan's kisses breathe life-giving air into him, he can't get enough of them, he doesn't want to stop. "My turn," he whispers, reaching for the front of Ryan's jeans, tented beneath an erection he wants to take care of.

But Ryan's hands stop him. "Just this right now," he sighs into Dante's mouth with another kiss, and another, and a dozen more until it's just their lips pressing together.

This time when Dante's hand strays for Ryan's crotch, he meets no resistance and his fingers ease the zipper down, push the denim out of the way, unsnap his boxers and slip inside the dark warmth of his pants. Ryan moans into him, his hands caressing Dante's face, his chest, his hair. His kisses are still salty, Dante thinks, and he likes that, he likes the lingering taste of himself on Ryan's breath, it turns him on again, makes him grip Ryan tighter, pull him closer, kiss him harder. "I could kiss you forever," he murmurs, and it's the truth.

Only they don't have forever, they have a few stolen hours before Dante has to meet Mr. Vasquez, and five o'clock comes around too

damn soon. When they finally break apart, his lips are red, slightly swollen, and they tingle with the memory of Ryan's mouth pressed to his. In his hand, Ryan is hard from Dante's continuous stroking, and if they just had more time...as they sit up, Dante leans down and licks the tip of Ryan's dick, tastes the hint of cum, and tells him, "Five minutes, baby. That's all it'll take."

"You'll be late," Ryan says, but when Dante looks up at him, he sees the shine in his boyfriend's eyes and knows he wants him to.

"Have you ever had a blowjob before?" Dante asks. He takes the tip into his mouth, his fingers working the thick shaft before kneading the hard base. He likes the spongy feel of the tip against his tongue and as he traces the curved head, he watches Ryan from the corner of his eye.

His boyfriend grips the bed sheets in both hands, leans back against the mattress, gasps his name loudly—if Mrs. Talonovich were in the hall, she'd have no *doubt* what was going on in here, she could hear her son perfectly. "Shh," Dante laughs as he lets Ryan's cock slip from his mouth. "You're going to get us caught."

"Jesus," Ryan sighs. "Do it again. Please, Dante. Oh God please."

"You didn't answer my question," Dante says, grinning. When Ryan begs a second time, though, he licks his own saliva off the wet shaft in his hands, sucks at the base, his lips moving up the length to find the tip again. As he's about to take him in, though, Ryan spasms in his hand, squirting his chin and lips with thin white cum. Dante laughs as he wipes it away. "Ryan!" he cries. "You're supposed to wait—"

"I couldn't," Ryan breathes. "Dante, I'm sorry, I didn't mean..." Then he starts to laugh, too, and Dante runs his tongue over his lips, licking them clean. "Oh shit. You have it in your hair, and in your eyelashes, and—"

"Everywhere but in me," Dante says. He rubs at his face, shakes his hair to dry it. "You could've warned me you were going to jump the gun."

"You've been playing with it for the past hour!" Ryan cries. "I'm not Superman here. I don't have balls of steel. I just couldn't hold it in any longer."

Sitting up, Dante kisses his boyfriend and whispers, "I'm just teasing."

"I know," Ryan whispers back. As Dante climbs over him and off the bed, Ryan lies down, his head hanging back over the side of the mattress, and tucks himself into his jeans, zips up the fly, watches an upside-down Dante straighten his shirt and sweats. "My mom can take you, if you want."

"Yeah," Dante laughs, "that'll go over big. Why are you all wet? she'll want to know. What am I gonna say, your son can't aim when he shoots?"

With another laugh, Ryan tells him, "No one taught me how. I had one dick-licking in the past, babe, one. It's not something I'm good at yet."

Leaning down, Dante kisses the underside of his chin and promises, "You will be soon. I'll see to that." Ryan wraps his arms around Dante's legs, holding him close. "The restaurant's on the bus route," he says, extracting himself from the sudden embrace. "I'll call you when I get home, okay? No later than nine, I promise."

Ryan catches Dante's hand as he moves away. His eyes are large and dark in his pale skin, eclipsing his freckles and the hair that falls away from his face straight like copper wire. "You're not mad, are you?" he asks, uncertain. "I didn't mean—"

"No!" Dante laughs. This time when they kiss, he tries to pour everything he feels into the press of lips, tries to erase Ryan's doubt with his mouth alone. "It happens, baby. Don't worry about it."

Ryan purrs against him. "Hmm-kay. Wash up before you leave. And don't forget to call me."

"I won't," Dante promises.



The Rio del Oro is far enough into the heart of the city to be considered downtown but it's in a classier section than Dante's used to. The streets here aren't as congested as those near where he lives and the sidewalks are swept clean, there's little graffiti marring the buildings, trash cans and dumpsters are kept behind the stores, out of sight. The bus stops a good two blocks from the restaurant but Dante finds it easily enough—with its fake adobe façade, plastic cactus planted at the edges of a sanded parking lot, and an enormous red, white, and green Mexican flag painted along one wall, the Rio del Oro is hard to miss. Because it's barely five thirty yet, there are only a handful of cars in the lot and Dante suspects they belong to the hired help. Still, his heart pounds in his throat as he pushes through the door and into the darkened interior of the restaurant.

The smell of roasted peppers hits him as he steps inside, filling him with a sudden longing for his mother. She cooks like this when she can—when she's not worn out from working, and the apartment fills with such heady scents, cayenne and jalapeños and cilantro and warm tortillas. His stomach growls appreciatively. He hadn't realized he was hungry.

A bar runs along the far wall, the mirror behind it framed with bottles of amber liquid, each reflecting Dante back to himself. High stools hem the bar, and red and white checked tables fan out around the room. Sawdust covers the floor, a few peanut shells crack beneath his sneakers as he walks into the main room, takes in the deep red booths around the walls, the silverware folded into napkins on the tables, the salt and pepper shakers that surround bottles of Texas Pete. There are no customers, no one at all, nothing to hint that the place is even open at this hour...tentatively, Dante calls out, "Hello? Mr. Vasquez?"

He hears girlish laughter and the clap of a swinging door on the other side of the bar. Turning, he catches a glimpse of long black hair

and black eyes before whoever it is whirls back through the doors and is gone. More laughter, he hears his name, and then a man appears, pushing through the doors and smiling apologetically. “Mr. Vasquez?” Dante asks again.

The man is almost a head shorter than Dante, his short black hair flecked with silver. When he grins, his face crinkles like leather, his skin dark and weathered, mere half-moon slits where his dark eyes should be. He has a moustache, also mostly grey, and despite his ironed jeans and bolo tie, Dante gets the impression that he should be wearing a sombrero and multi-colored poncho instead. Yes, there’s no doubt about it, this *has* to be Marco Vasquez. “Dante,” he says, his voice even lower, more drawn-out than it was on the phone. “Never mind Bonita. She’s easily excited.”

Dante laughs. “I’m used to it,” he says, and he’s not being egotistical or cocky—he’s telling the truth. It’s his hair and his eyes—what did Ryan call them? *Heartthrob eyes*. Just thinking of his boyfriend makes him hungry, and not for anything that will stop the rumble in his stomach. “Bonita? She’s your youngest, right?”

If possible, Mr. Vasquez’s smile widens. “You remembered,” he says, motioning to a nearby booth. As Dante slides behind the table, he feels someone staring at him. There, by the bar, two girls peek at him over the top of the swinging doors. When he smiles their way, though, they vanish. Seeing Dante’s smile fade, Mr. Vasquez explains, “Juana and Bonnie. Mila would be there, too, I’m sure, but she has class tonight.”

Ryan said the man had three daughters, right? As he places a menu in front of Dante, Mr. Vasquez tells him, “Anything you want, it’s yours. I’d suggest the *pollo con queso*—it’s our specialty.”

“That’ll be fine,” Dante agrees. Anything right now, anything to fill the empty ache in his stomach and get this moving so he can go home and call Ryan.

Mr. Vasquez calls out something in rapid-fire Spanish that Dante can’t follow, and then the older man slides into the booth across

from him. Folding his hands on the table, Mr. Vasquez studies Dante for a moment before he says, “Tell me about your skating.”

So Dante tells him about the phys ed teacher he had in fourth grade, the year of the Lillehammer Olympics, who thought it would be cool to take the whole class down to the rink on a field trip. The skating club was there running practice heats and as the skaters flew by, Dante felt the chill breeze ruffle his hair and he knew that’s where he was meant to be, out there on the ice. He knew the skates would give him the freedom he yearned for—it hit him like destiny, his whole existence up until that moment faded and his future shone within reach, he was *born* to skate, he just *knew* it.

The first few lessons, his mother paid his skate fee, a mere five dollars back then. He took to the skates like an angel takes to flight—it was an innate ability, something he had done in a previous life and it all came rushing back at him the moment he stood up on those thin blades. He felt the ice beneath his feet as intimately as any lover’s body, the air on his face like the breath of God, the race in his blood. Skating became as essential to him as eating, sleeping, breathing. He took the job at Later Skater when his mother told him she couldn’t afford the skate fee any longer, and some days he ran from sun up to sun down, school then the rink then work, an unending cycle. Any day he didn’t skate was wasted in his mind.

He doesn’t mention Jared or how he rededicated himself to his sport after he broke up with the guy, and he doesn’t mention Ryan or how he’s finally found someone who understands everything the ice means to him. Instead he lists off titles he’s won—local competitions, mostly, because school always kept him out of the larger events. This is his first run at State but he’s the fastest in his division, he’ll bring the house down in Atlantic City. Then it’ll be Regionals, then Nationals...World Cup eventually, and the Olympics, and who knows where he’ll go from there? This weekend is only the beginning.

Mr. Vasquez asks about his parents and Dante tells him of his mother, how she's always working and hasn't seen him skate. He doesn't mention his father, and after a few carefully worded questions, Mr. Vasquez drops the subject. By then his meal has arrived, delivered by the two teenaged girls from the kitchen—they look like twins, with the same slim build, the same long black hair, the same inky eyes. He's not sure which one sets the plate in front of him and which one fills his glass, but they giggle nervously when he thanks them and linger by the table when he starts to eat. With a glance at his daughters, Mr. Vasquez asks, "Do you have a girlfriend, Dante?"

Dante looks at his daughters—one's barely twelve, the other not much older—and then smiles at Mr. Vasquez. "I'm seeing someone," he says evasively. From the corner of his eye, he watches the girls' faces fall in disappointment.

"A boy like yourself," Mr. Vasquez replies, "I'd be worried if you weren't. So long as it doesn't distract from your skating..." The way he trails off suggests he's just trying to protect his own interests. He doesn't want Dante thinking with the wrong head under *his* sponsorship.

"That's how we met," Dante admits. He remembers the first time he saw Ryan—*that* was a distraction, yes, and if Dietrich hadn't pushed him in the final lap, he might not be going to State at all. But look at them now. Ryan's the best thing that ever happened to him, really, because he loves being out on the ice and looking up, seeing someone out there he knows, seeing someone he loves looking back. *He's so supportive of my sport*, he wants to say—now that he's rambled on about skating, he's all too eager to talk about his boy, as well. But with the girls nearby, that might not be the wisest thing to do. If Mr. Vasquez ever asks, he won't lie, but he won't offer up the information, either.

The meal is chicken covered in a cheesy salsa, served with rice and refried beans. "Good," he mumbles around a mouthful of food. Mr. Vasquez nods, encouraging him to eat. After a few minutes he

remembers his daughters and barks something to them in Spanish that makes them scurry into the kitchen. Frowning at his plate, Dante starts, "I can pay you for this—"

"My treat," Mr. Vasquez says. "You eat here free, Dante. Bring your mama sometime, or Ryan if he can get out—"

"He can," Dante assures him. He nods, confirming that. "He just had therapy today. That tends to wipe him out. Did I tell you he walked?" When Mr. Vasquez shakes his head, Dante laughs. "He says it doesn't count because I helped him but he'll be back on the team in no time, I'm telling you. I know he misses it. When I cut my arm a while back, I couldn't wait to get on the ice again." Just talking about his boyfriend makes him grin foolishly, and he's well aware of the fact that he's beginning to gush. Ryan makes him get that way. "He's coming with me to State. My mama can't make it and I don't really know anyone else, and it'll be good for him, I think."

He looks up as the girls come back, one carrying white t-shirts folded to her chest, the other with green windbreakers draped across her arms. "Good thing I have two of everything," Mr. Vasquez says, rising from the booth as his daughters approach. He takes the t-shirts, shakes one out so Dante can see the logo on the front—a sketch of the adobe building embroidered in gold thread, the Mexican flag painted proudly in red and green thread on one wall. The words *Rio del Oro* above the building, and in English beneath it, *River of Gold*. On the back of the shirt, *Espinosa* stitched in red like a jersey. Under that in gold, *Rio del Oro*, the restaurant's address and phone number. The second shirt is the same, only *Talonovich* replaces Dante's name. "What do you think?" Mr. Vasquez asks. "My girls did this."

"They did a great job," Dante says, awed.

The windbreakers have their names on the left breast, the logo and contact information for the restaurant on the back. There's a patch, also, something that will fit nicely on his right shoulder, the cameras will get a good shot of it when he races. "I've bought a com-

mercial, too,” Mr. Vasquez tells him, handing over the shirts, the jackets, the patch. “Thirty seconds after the five hundred is aired, so the name will stick in the minds of the people at home watching the race. And we’ll have the TVs here tuned into the competitions—there’s a mariachi band coming in, tequila on the house, fried ice cream to everyone if you win.”

Dante feels the first stirrings of excitement course through him. For a second he thinks of Bobby and the Later Skater jacket that’s probably still draped over the chair in that tiny supply room at the back of the store. But Bobby never offered to pay for his entrance fee and the only thing he had to say about State was that it would be four days Dante missed from work. He can’t worry about that now, not about Bobby or the shop, Ryan was right. He has an upcoming competition he has to win, and there will be people in this very room watching him on the TVs above the bar, cheering him on. He always dreamed it would be like this.

“I’ll win,” he tells Mr. Vasquez, and it’s not just an idle promise—he *knows* he’s going to win. This is just the start of something huge, he can *feel* it.

CHAPTER 15



At the rink the next morning, Dante shows Ryan his jacket. “You have one also,” he says, turning so Ryan can see the logo on the back.

He must admit, he’s impressed—it’s not leather like the one from Later Skater, true, but the design is professionally done and he particularly likes the last name on the front, that’s a nice touch. Dante points it out again, in case Ryan missed it the first time. “Does mine say Espinosa also?” Ryan jokes.

With a laugh, Dante slaps his knee. “You don’t like it,” he says.

“I like it just fine,” Ryan tells him. They’re in the main concourse and it’s still early—the hockey team is on the ice but they should be off any minute now. Then Dante will head down to the lower level, change into his bodysuit, slip on his skates. Ryan likes the jacket, yes, and he likes the way Dante described the restaurant, he likes the fact that Mr. Vasquez made them matching shirts and he likes that the man basically told his daughters to back off of his boy. He wonders how much Mr. Vasquez suspects about them, if anything—knowing Dante, he didn’t hesitate to just blurt it out, he’s impossibly blunt like that. Still, if Mr. Vasquez wants to sponsor him and doesn’t mind that they’re together, then Ryan won’t let it bother him, either. *I’m going to have to get used to it*, he thinks. *Even though it’s no one’s business but ours, he’s nothing if not open and I’m just going to have to learn to live with that. I love him. What else can I do?*

But for the moment they're alone, and Ryan doesn't feel self-conscious when he reaches out, takes the bottom hem of Dante's jacket in his hand to toy with the zipper. "You should come by my house first thing every morning," he murmurs, his voice low. "Just so we can kiss on each other before coming down here."

Dante laughs. "Come on," he says. Before Ryan can protest, he circles behind the wheelchair and pushes it towards the elevators.

"Where are we going?" Ryan asks, laughing as well, and when Dante hits the call button for the lift, he has a pretty good idea of what his boyfriend has in mind. "You're bad."

Giving him a quick wink, Dante says, "I keep trying to tell you that." In the elevator he doesn't even wait for the doors to close before perching on Ryan's knee. "Love you," he breathes as his lips close over Ryan's own. "Tomorrow night I'm going to finally have you all to myself."

Ryan lets his hands remember the feel of Dante's chest and back as they kiss again. "That sounds like a plan," he whispers between kisses. But suddenly Dante's standing up, the elevator's grinding to a stop, when did the ride between floors get so damn short? When he was playing hockey, he could've sworn it took years for the elevator to move from the upper concourse to the lower level where the locker rooms are and that's why he always opted for the stairs. He would take them two at a time, sneakers squealing over the linoleum on his way down. He never had *time* to wait for the elevator. And now that he wants to take it slow, savor these few moments with his boy, he can't. He wonders how long the ride will seem when Dante stays down on this level to skate and he has to take the elevator back up alone. "Dante," he sighs as the doors slide open.

Dante runs a hand over the top of Ryan's head, mussing his hair. "I know, baby. Just think, this time tomorrow—"

"My mom will be racing around the house," Ryan tells him with a wry grin, "making sure I've got everything packed. She'll check my bags three times at least and ask me over and over again to call when

I get in. So I don't really want to think about this time tomorrow if I can help it, okay?"

Wheeling Ryan out of the elevator, Dante laughs and says, "I like your mom."

Ryan grins as they head for the locker rooms. "She likes you, too. Where are you taking me now?" Before they go much farther, Dante stops. He leans back against the wrestling mats that line the wall and crosses his arms, frowns at Ryan until he asks, "What?"

"She likes me?" Dante wants to know. When Ryan nods, Dante chews on his lower lip and pouts at the floor, admitting, "I thought maybe she was getting tired of me."

Now Ryan has to laugh. "Tired of you?" *That'll* be the day—who could possibly tire of this energetic and enthusiastic boy? "She likes you more than she likes me most of the time, I'm sure."

Smiling, Dante kicks at the wheel of Ryan's chair. "Hush up," he admonishes. "She likes you okay. She has to." He thinks a moment, then adds, "Even though you can be evil and mean and ornery—"

"Hey!" Ryan cries. Despite his laugh, the words cut into him, he *knows* he's all those things and more. He can't help it, though. He's never been the perfect son—his grades were never the best, he wasn't really a social butterfly, and when it came time to move onto campus, he couldn't wait to get out of the house. His parents' house. But this sudden anger that runs through him whenever he talks to his mother now, that stems from his accident and he can't seem to curb it. For the past month, no one's said shit about the chair, no one's asked how his legs are doing or how he passes the time now, if he misses his game, if he misses his classes, no one's seemed to care.

Until Dante.

He knows that his accident hurt his mother almost as much as it hurt him. She has no one to cheer on now, no reason to go to the games, nothing to do but sit at home and watch him suffer. He knows she doesn't want to remind him of what happened, not when he's living with it every minute of every day and night—that's why

she never mentions his legs or the chair except in thinly veiled euphemisms that piss him off. But would it hurt for her to at least *admit* that it happened? To look at him without that fake smile for once and tell him she's sorry he's hurting so bad? To treat him like he's still capable of doing all that he used to do instead of acting as if he's too inept to fend for himself?

No. She doesn't say anything overt about the chair, doesn't look at it, didn't even really say congratulations yesterday when Dante told her that he walked. She just gives him that insincere smile, the one that doesn't quite reach her eyes, and she nods in all the right places—and he lashes out at her just so she *has* to respond, just to get *some* kind of reaction from her. She's the only person he can gouge into like that—his father works all day, comes home too tired to argue, he's never been much in Ryan's life. He sits on the sidelines, watches the play between his wife and son, steps in when Ryan goes too far or when his mother threatens to crack. He's the referee in this game and it's a position he settles for all too happily. Ryan's the star and his mom? She's the goalie he has to get his shots past, she's the defenseman on his stick, she's the rival he has to best.

Dante kicks at his wheel again to get his attention. "I didn't mean—"

Forcing a tight smile, Ryan shakes his head. "I know, it's okay."

Behind them, cruel laughter echoes in the stairwell, and then a guy's voice rings out. "You know he's queer, Josey. Admit it."

It's a voice Ryan's only heard once before but he's never forgotten it. Dietrich, that ass on the skate club...Ryan's hands clench into useless fists at his sides. There's no doubt in his mind who he's talking about and a glance up at his boyfriend's clouded face confirms it. *Dante.*

Josey's voice is filled with self-righteous anger. "Shut up, Wil."

"Shut up, Wil," Dietrich mocks in a high, girly voice, and there's more laughter as they come into sight. Josey's first, stomping down the stairs with her head held high, trying her best to ignore the three

or four guys behind her. Dietrich leads the pack, and when he reaches out to tug at Josey's braid, his friends laugh. "Are you a fag hag, Josey? Do you like guys who get freaky with other guys? Do they turn you on?"

Twisting away from him, Josey doesn't respond. Instead she glares ahead, fuming, her gaze flickering around the concourse in search of someone, *anyone* to help. She sees Ryan and Dante but doesn't register them at first, she's that ticked off. Then she looks back, relief flooding her features, and she hurries in their direction. "Queer," Dietrich whispers loudly, so intent on his prey that he doesn't notice they're no longer alone.

His friends see Ryan and Dante, though, and stop. Despite the wheelchair, Ryan's whole body hums with the thought of a fight. *Just let them get close enough*, he prays—he'll take them down. Kicking and screaming if he has to, he'll crush Dietrich's balls into a bloody pulp for the shit he's saying about his boy. There's enough anger and hatred in him right now to take on the whole lot of them.

When his friends don't respond to his latest taunt, Dietrich stops as well. He sees Dante and grins wolfishly. "Well, look at this," he purrs, *purrs*, Ryan hates that voice. "Is it true you two are sharing a room at State? Sharing a *bed*, that's what I hear."

Flipping her hair over her shoulder, Josey says again, "Shut up. It's a double suite. They all are."

Jesus, Ryan thinks, his fingernails biting into his palm. *Does everyone know?* He has his mom to thank for that. She *had* to raise a stink about her son in a room by himself. Couldn't just rent two and share one, oh no. Had to tell the whole goddamn *world* she wanted someone with him 24/7.

He hates Dietrich's laughter. "What the fuck is it to you?" Ryan asks, the words free before he even realizes he's going to speak. Dietrich looks at him, stunned. *Yeah*, Ryan thinks, smug, as he sees the fear leap into the skater's eyes. *This kid's got a voice, and I may be in a wheelchair but I can kick your ass any day, just bring it on.* Josey

slips behind his chair almost as if seeking protection and he adds, “Just because he skates better than you *ever* will, you can’t keep your goddamn mouth shut? What kind of fucked up shit is that?”

Dante kicks his wheel, an almost absent gesture like a warning. Yeah, he has a mouth on him. Yeah, he has an attitude. He plays *hockey*, for Christ’s sake. He can hold his own with the best of them.

For a moment he doesn’t think Dietrich will reply—he doesn’t know *how*, he didn’t expect anyone to stand up to him, he didn’t expect Ryan to fight back. Behind Dietrich one of his friends titters, a nervous laugh that reminds him that he has to save face here. Ryan’s seen guys like him before, chickenshit by themselves but give them a few friends at their back and they’re suddenly bulletproof. *Anything you dish out*, Ryan thinks, pinning Dietrich with a hard stare, *is coming right back at you, I promise.*

But guys like Dietrich never fight fair. “Listen to the kid in the *wheelchair*,” Dietrich laughs, a wicked sound, mean, it fills the concourse and reverberates around them until Ryan’s sure he’ll never hear anything else again. He says the word like it’s on par with Ryan’s cursing, it’s that derogatory. Nudging one of his friends, he nods at Ryan and says, “I gotta watch it or he’ll run me over when I’m not looking.”

Ryan rolls his eyes, disgusted. How low can you go? *I mean, really*, he thinks—it’s not even worth it to get pissed about that one. The dumbass can’t think of anything else to make fun of but his wheelchair? Puh-*lease*. That’s like picking on him because his eyes are blue. It’s not his fault he’s in this thing.

“That’s just lame,” Josey mutters behind him.

Ryan turns around to tell her it’s not lame, it’s stupid and uncreative and if the kid wants to fight, he better come up with some better artillery than *that* before Ryan even gives him the time of day. But suddenly Dante pushes away from the mats, his eyes blazing, his frown deeper than Ryan’s ever seen before. He starts for the other skater, bristling with anger. “You know what, Wil?”

Without thinking, Ryan grabs his boyfriend's wrist to keep him in place. "Dante, don't," he whispers. "It's not worth it."

Dante's not listening. He stops, true, but only because Ryan's holding him back. "It was an *accident*," he shouts, his voice ringing like judgment around the hollow hall. "I don't know what you have against me but don't you *dare* bring him into it."

"Dante," Ryan warns again. His boyfriend strains at the hand on his wrist and it takes all Ryan has to keep his grip. "Look, it's really not all that—"

Leveling a finger at Dietrich, Dante cries out, "You leave him the fuck alone, understand?"

Josey reaches around Ryan to take Dante's elbow in both hands. "Okay, you guys stop it," she says. "You hear? I'm turning you all in if you don't just stop it right this second." Dante doesn't back down but Dietrich's smirk fades as Josey goes on. "Let's see how your daddy buys your way into State when you're kicked from the club for fighting, Wil. How much do you think that'll set him back?" His eyes narrow as he glares at her, but she flips her hair over her shoulder and stares back at him defiantly. "I'll do it, you know I will. One more word and I'll scream bloody murder and you won't make it to State, so just stop it right now."

Her words seem to have a diffusing effect on the situation. Maybe it's the threat of suspension that keeps Dietrich silent or maybe he's simply out of insults, Ryan's not sure, but he doesn't speak again, just glares at Dante, at Josey, at *him*, and doesn't say another word. As he storms by them, heading for the rink, Ryan can't resist one final dig. "It won't matter if you get to State or not," he mutters as Dietrich passes his chair. "We all know who's going to win there and it sure as hell ain't you."

Dietrich's step falters and Ryan braces himself for a hit. He's not in the skate club—they can't suspend *him*. If Dietrich comes at him, there's nothing holding Ryan back, and when's the last time he took his aggressions out in a fist fight? The end of last semester at the

game against Trenton, *that's* when. He aches to take all his pain and frustration and anger out on *somebody*.

But one of his friends takes Dietrich's arm, pulls him towards the rink. "He's a cripple," he whispers, Ryan hears it clear as day. "Don't go there, man."

From the corner of his eye, Dietrich gives Ryan an evil look that he matches perfectly. *Try me*, he thinks, but the skater isn't up for it today. He takes one step, another, and then he's gone, shoving through the doors into the rink and muttering something to his friends that makes them laugh again. Ryan lets out a breath he didn't know he held and his fingers start to rub at Dante's wrist in a soothing gesture. "Jesus," he says, his voice shaky now that the threat of a fight has passed.

"Fucking *ass*," Dante spits suddenly.

Looking up at his boyfriend, Ryan is shocked to see the hatred shining in those soft eyes. "It's okay," he murmurs, working his hand into the sleeve of Dante's jacket. He throws a worried glance at Josey, who's staring at the doors as if she could tear them down with her gaze alone, but she doesn't seem to notice his hand on Dante's wrist or the way Dante's fingers curl into his palm. "Calm down, Dante. It's okay."

"He's such a prick," Josey says, her voice loud like she hopes Dietrich can hear her. "I should tell on him anyway. I don't know why they bother to let him race. He isn't any good."

"He's going to State?" Dante asks. When he notices Josey's hands on him, he extracts his elbow carefully from her grip. Now she looks at Ryan's hand still on his wrist but she doesn't say anything, simply nods. Dietrich's going to State. So they'll have to put up with him all weekend long. *God*, Ryan thinks. There goes his good time. Frowning at Josey, Dante wants to know, "Who told him we're sharing a room?"

She shrugs, uneasy. "Everyone knows," she mumbles, and then she explains, "I'm not sure who told who, but once it sort of got

around, the club officials decided to make everyone double up anyway, just to cut costs. I'm cool with it because I'm taking Becca but I hear Dietrich has to bunk with his mom now."

"His mom?" Ryan asks, laughing, and Josey nods. "Oh shit, that's classic." He grins up at Dante. "He's sleeping with his *mom*."

That cracks Josey up and brings a smile to his boyfriend's face. "No wonder he's in such a pissy mood," he says softly, squeezing Ryan's hand once before letting go. "She probably snores."

"You better not snore," Ryan jokes.

Dante ducks down, lowering his voice so Josey can't overhear him say, "I'm not planning on sleeping much anyway."

Then he gives Ryan a wink that says everything he can't right now, and Ryan knows that sleeping will be the last thing on his mind, too, when he finally gets his boy all to himself.



Dante wears his skinsuit under his clothing and as he strips down in the hall, he tells Ryan about today's practice. "It's the relay," he says, handing his jacket to Ryan so he can take off the skate club t-shirt underneath. Ryan folds the jacket into his lap and glances at Josey but she's turned studiously away. Pulling his t-shirt off over his head, Dante hands it to Ryan as well. "The whole team skates, forty-five laps around the track. Each skater gets a good one and a half, two laps at a time while the other three teammates stay in the center of the rink. When it's time to change skaters, the next guy comes up in front of you and you have to give him a push—you *have* to touch him, or the pass doesn't count."

He shucks off his sweatpants, bends to push them to his ankles, and if it wasn't for Josey standing right there, Ryan would reach out and trace the curve of his boyfriend's ass, so taut, so tempting through the skin-tight bodysuit. "The skater pushes you?" Ryan asks, uncertain. The last thing he wants to see is Dietrich launching himself at Dante out there on the ice. "What if they knock you down?"

Dante shrugs. “It happens.” When he sees the frown on Ryan’s face, though, he grins and tells him, “Don’t worry, it’s not like *that*. You skate as a team—there are three other teams out there and you have to work together to beat them. No matter how much Wil hates me, he won’t shove me down during the relay. He wants to win too badly.” Stepping out of his pants, he tosses them at Ryan and gives him a quick wink. Ryan loves that, the way Dante makes everything seem okay with that small gesture alone. “Besides, I skate anchor and he’s second. The other two skaters are between us. He never touches me.”

“Good,” Ryan grumbles. As he folds Dante’s pants into his lap with the rest of the clothes, he asks, “Anchor?”

“Means he’s the final skater,” Josey explains. She picks at one of the mats against the wall and smiles at Ryan when he looks up at her—to be honest, he’d almost forgotten she was still there. “I’m anchor for the women’s team. It’s the fourth skater in the line-up and at the end of the race, you have to skate the final two laps by yourself. The anchor’s the one that crosses the finish line for the team.”

Ryan can see how Dante would get that position. With his speed and finesse, he can pick up any slack left by the others during the relay to bring the team in first. “Well, you stay away from that jerk-off,” he mutters, glaring around them. “You don’t need him bringing you down. Don’t get in a fight just because he says shit about me. I’ll handle him myself.”

“You’re in a wheelchair,” Dante reminds him gently. “You can’t exactly kick his ass—”

“I’ll be up on my feet soon enough,” Ryan growls. He hates this invalid feeling like chains that tether him to this seat. “I was walking yesterday. He better just watch the fuck out—” Dante laughs. Ryan frowns up at him, confused. “What? I’m serious.”

Kneeling beside him, Dante places a hand over Ryan’s, rubs up his arm, gives him a sunny grin. “You just admitted you walked,” he whispers. “I *told* you it was walking.”

Ryan stares into those chocolate eyes and laughs. "Did I say that?" he asks. Dante's smile brightens. He looks at those dark eyes, that smooth skin, those lips he wants to taste again, to feel pressed against his own...

Josey. Pulling his hand out from beneath Dante's, Ryan clears his throat and glances up at the girl. She's still picking at the mat, frowning at the fraying threads that come loose in her hands, and doesn't look at them. Ryan nods at her and Dante stands, smooths his skin-suit down his stomach, his thighs. *You should tell her about us*, Ryan thinks, but he can't say that now. Later, when they're alone. Dante needs to tell her, if only so they don't have to feel so awkward around her, not when she's the only member of the skate club who doesn't seem to resent him.

Around them the loudspeakers blare to life as an announcer calls for all skaters to hit the ice. "That's us," Dante mumbles. "You go on ahead, Josey. I'm just going to walk Ryan to the lift, okay?"

"I know the way—" Ryan starts.

But Josey nods, thankful for something to do. "Sure," she says, heading for the doors and the rink beyond. "See you later, Ryan. Don't let those guys get to you, okay? Much as I'd like to see Wil suspended, I'd hate for you to get hurt."

Ryan laughs. "I can handle myself," he assures her. As the doors swing shut behind her, he tells Dante, "I know where the lift is, baby." It feels good to be able to call him that, to not cower under the fear of someone overhearing the simple term of endearment.

"I'm not listening," Dante tells him. He guides the wheelchair to the elevators, almost secluded beneath the stairs. With no one else around, he wraps his arms around Ryan's neck, kisses his ear, his cheek, before his lips find Ryan's own. "God, I hate that guy," he sighs, meaning Dietrich.

Ryan runs a hand through Dante's hair, so soft, so impossibly soft. It smells fresh and clean and he can't wait to lie beside his boyfriend and breathe in this scent, to feel these long strands against his face

when he's trying to sleep. "You keep away from him," Ryan says. "No matter what he says, you hear me? You worry about winning and let me take care of everything else, okay?"

Another kiss, tender and sweet, before the elevator doors begin to open and Dante has to pull away. "Okay," he agrees, ruffling Ryan's hair. "Coming in first at State and you, that's all I'm going to care about from now on, I promise."



The relay is amazing—Ryan's never seen anything like it. He has trouble following it and he's only in the stands, looking out over the ice. He can't imagine how the skaters themselves do it. All of the skate club is there it seems, sixteen skaters on the ice at the same time, twelve in the center of the rink with the two judges and four skating laps around them, the scoreboard above keeping track. Ryan loses count early on, until all he's doing is watching Dante, waiting for his boy to skate onto the track, holding his breath at each pass that threatens to send him flying into the boards. Two of the teams are made up of skaters going to State—men's and women's, Ryan keeps one eye on Dante at all times and can recognize Josey easily enough by the braid flying out behind her when she skates—and the other two teams are the rest of the club, out for the practice and to make the relay more realistic for those who will be doing this at the end of the week in Atlantic City. Too many people out there at one time, Ryan can't watch them all. He doesn't even know who's winning—all he sees are skaters, milling around in the center, racing around the track. How do they keep up with this?

Five minutes later, it's all over and Ryan's still not quite sure what happened. The coach lines the skaters up again, runs them around the relay again, and a third time, and a fourth. Finally she calls a break and Dante slips on his blade covers, climbs over the railing to sink into the seat beside Ryan's chair. "Oh jeez," he sighs, tearing his

neck guard off and using it to wipe at the sweat on his forehead and upper lip. "That event always wipes me out."

"You did good, though," Ryan tells him. Dante's team came in first place for the first two races, but Dietrich tripped on a track block in the third and they were disqualified in the fourth when another skater, Johnson, fell during the final pass and didn't touch Dante. "You only run it once at State."

"But we run it last," Dante points out. "I'm not a distance skater. I'll race in the five hundred for sure, I might make the finals for the thousand, but I'm not holding out for much more than that. The only thing going for me is the fact that I tend to come in third in the heats for the fifteen hundred, so I'll get a chance to rest before we have to do the relay."

Ryan pats Dante's knee, his boyfriend's skinsuit damp from sweat. "You'll do fine," he assures him. With a smile, he adds, "State, then Regionals, then what, Nationals? World Cup? The top of the world?"

Laughing, Dante says, "Only if you come along."

"Anywhere you go," Ryan promises.



After practice, Ryan's mother drops Dante off at his apartment. Ryan steals a few sweet kisses in the time it takes her to walk around the van, then the door opens and Dante climbs over him to get out. His hand presses high on Ryan's thigh as he passes, dangerously close to a place that aches for that touch, but his mom is right there, smiling at them and asking if Dante wants her to swing by in the morning to pick him up? "It's no problem," she says, nodding to show that yes, it's no problem at all. "What time do you boys need to be at the rink?"

"Eight thirty," Ryan tells her. The skate club coaches ran through the schedule this afternoon and because he knew his mother would ask about it, Ryan wrote everything down. Meet in the skating rink parking lot at 8:30 Wednesday morning, buses leave promptly at

nine. Bring spending money and the entrance fee if they haven't paid it yet, but Dante doesn't have to worry about that, Ryan's mother paid it over the phone with her credit card and Mr. Vasquez mailed her a reimbursement check, it came this morning. They should reach the hotel by eleven, noon at the latest, and they have an hour to unpack and settle in before a catered luncheon at one. Then it's a few scheduled activities that Dante says they should be able to sneak out of and lights out at eleven. Up at eight the next morning for practice, a cultural event of some sort that night, practice again the *next* day, *another* event, Ryan doesn't think they'll have any time to themselves—he doesn't know how these skaters are going to do it, run ragged all week long in practice and be expected to skate their best in the races on Saturday. And when will he get a few hours alone with his boy? That's *his* whole reason for going. He's already hoping they can skip out of more than just the activities tomorrow night—the only events he's interested in are the ones he has planned for Dante and himself between the sheets.

The competitions start Saturday and there's a party planned that night, a sort of all-out bash that Dante said usually involves alcohol and loud music, from what he's heard—then he leaned close and whispered, "I'm a horny drunk. Just you wait and see." And Ryan *can't* wait. He wants to be out of here already, out from under his mother's constant presence and with his boy, free. He won't even let himself think about coming home again Sunday.

So tomorrow, eight thirty sharp. Ryan already asked Dante if he wanted to spend the night, just so they could leave for the rink together, but his boyfriend leered at him and said, "You really think we'll get a good night's sleep if I stay over?"

He's right, of course, and what would happen if Ryan's mother found them sleeping in the same bed? Arms around each other tight, naked, what then? Ryan doesn't usually sleep with his door locked and if she should check on him, find it locked and go for the key? No,

another night and they'll have the rest of the weekend together. No need to rush it.

As Dante climbs out of the van, he tells them that he can take the bus. "There's no need, honey," Ryan's mom says in that tone of voice she has that doesn't leave room for disagreement. She walks around the front of the van, heading for the driver's side door. "I'll be here at quarter after to pick you up."

When Dante opens his mouth to speak, Ryan tells him, "Don't bother arguing with her. It's no use."

"You do it all the time," Dante says.

"Hey!" Ryan cries.

Dante laughs and starts to close the door, but he blows Ryan a kiss and mouths the words, "I love you."

Then the door slides shut. He waves at Ryan through the window. As Ryan's mother opens her door, she says, "Quarter after eight, Dante! See you then!"

"Just get in the car," Ryan mutters, waving after his boyfriend.

His mother doesn't reply but at least she slides behind the wheel and starts the engine. She waits until Dante disappears inside the apartment complex before she pulls away from the curb and into the flow of traffic. "He's such a nice boy," she says to no one in particular.

Because he thinks Dante is so much more than simply *nice*, Ryan keeps silent.



Later that evening after dinner, Ryan goes through his closet to pack. Well, through his dresser—he doesn't have a closet. All of his clothes are neatly folded into drawers, thanks to his mother—anything that needs to hang is within easy reach on a short railing his dad installed along one wall of the den. Heaven forbid he should strain himself. Nothing in this damn makeshift bedroom is higher than his head when he's in the wheelchair, and he hates that.

His clothes are in the top three drawers of the dresser, that's it. Nothing in the bottom drawer because his mother thinks he might fall out while leaning down. And everything is so neatly folded away, from his socks matched together and rolled tight to his t-shirts to his goddamn *boxers*, each snap snapped, each pull-string tied, each fucking hem ironed down into place and folded into the drawer. This isn't his room, it's his mother's, everything in here is where she wants it, every piece of clothing folded the way *she* folds it. Nothing out of place, nothing amiss. Perfect because he isn't.

Angry, he pulls clothes from the drawers at random, throws them onto the bed—boxers and t-shirts and jeans, socks, a few nice shirts in case they have to dress up somewhat fancy for the events the club has planned. No pajamas, he sleeps in boxers and he's not even sure he'll be in those for very long. By the time he's finished going through the drawers, there's a pile of clothing on his bed, rumpled together, begging to be folded neatly. He's not going to do that. Can't he have a little disorganization in his life? Can't he have *something* not the way his mother wants it, just once?

He'll shove everything into a duffle bag, that'll show her. He can live with wrinkles, he relishes them, everything he wears is wrinkled anyway from sitting all the time. But the only duffle bag he has is the one full of his hockey stuff, his guards and pads and skates, half-hidden behind the dresser as if his mother set it there to keep it out of sight. *Out of mind*, he thinks, pulling it into his lap. He'd forgotten how heavy this bag was—he used to just toss it over one shoulder without a second thought. Now it sits in his lap like deadweight and his heart pounds in his throat as he eases the zipper open, notch by notch. He doesn't *need* to use this bag, not *really*...

He feels like an archaeologist as he opens the bag and sees his skates inside, artifacts from an ancient civilization. Battered and scuffed and worn, but the metal shines up at him like new, glistens through tears that he doesn't even know fill his eyes until he tries to blink them away and the world blurs. "Fuck," he mumbles, wiping at

his face. He doesn't need to do this shit to himself, he thinks as he tugs at the zipper, trying to get it closed. It catches in the fabric of the bag, skips off track, screeches across the thin teeth and he just shoves the bag off his lap, onto the floor, *away*. Not a good idea, going through that. Had he really believed himself ready for it? Had he really thought he could *use* that thing this weekend? *Who am I kidding?*

A light knock on his door disrupts him and he wipes at his eyes again, snuffles, shakes the emotion away. "What?" he asks, his voice gruff. *Go away*, he prays. It's his mother, he knows it is, and she'll see the clothes on the bed, she'll start to fold them, she'll fucking pack *for* him and he doesn't need her to do that. He's nineteen, isn't he? Why can't she seem to remember that?

The door eases open and he was right, it *is* her. She peeks inside, sees his blotchy face, the bag on the floor, the clothes tossed negligently on the bed, and he waits for the forced smile, the fake voice, the overly bright words she'll use to cover *this* up.

Only she surprises him. "Oh honey," she sighs, slipping into the room. She carries one of her good suitcases, another surprise, and she sets it down on the floor by his bed before she comes over to his chair. Her fingers tremble as she picks his duffle bag up from the floor, and he sees the tears in her own eyes when she opens the zipper enough to fix it, zip it up right. "Did you want to take this with you?"

Ryan turns away. "No," he mumbles. What the hell does he need that for? He can't fucking skate, does he have to remind her of that fact? "I was going to use the bag to pack," he tells her, wheeling to the bed. "But I changed my mind."

"I brought you something you can use," she tells him, like he didn't notice the suitcase when she came in. Pushing his clothing aside, she sits on the edge of his bed, his duffle bag in her lap, and toys with the tattered straps. Without looking at him, she frowns

slightly and says, "I thought maybe we could talk. A little bit? Before you leave? If it's okay with you."

Ryan glares at the clothes on his bed and shrugs, disinterested. "Fine."

Here it comes. Call when you get there. Don't drink, don't get hurt, don't fall in the bathtub. Don't *breathe*, if you can help it, and above all else, don't have fun. For the love of *God*, don't have fun.

For a long moment, she doesn't speak, and Ryan feels his irritation grow. Can't she see he's in the middle of packing here? So she brought him a suitcase, great, thanks, *okay you can leave now*, he thinks, and the words are on the tip of his tongue when she sighs. "I know this trip means a lot to you," she starts, but that's not what she really wants to say, Ryan can see that when she shakes her head. "I want you to have a good time, honey, really I do. I think you need this. I think it'll be good for you."

"I plan on having a good time," Ryan mutters. She came in here to tell him that?

Her nails rasp against the thin vinyl bag in her lap. "I know you will," she says softly. Ryan wants to tell her okay then, thanks for the pep talk, she can leave now, but she's obviously not finished, she's searching for the words to say what else she came to say and she's still not looking at him, that has him worried. From the corner of his eye he watches her in profile, the way she bites her lower lip, the single tear that runs down her cheek. *We had this talk already, Mom*, he thinks. *Before I left for college, remember? The one about how much I've grown up and how I'm not your little boy anymore? I don't need to hear it again.* "Nineteen," she whispers.

Did he call this one or what? "Mom," he starts. "We've gone over this before."

"I can't protect you forever, honey," she says, as if he hasn't spoken. "I know you don't want me to, either. Just...be careful, Ryan, please? This weekend—"

"I will," he sighs.

She continues. "I can't tell you what to do, Ryan. And I know I can't tell you what *not* to do, I'm not going to be there. I can't..." She takes a deep breath, lets it out slowly. Now she looks at him, and he sees something in her eyes that makes his heart beat faster, he knows what she's going to say, he knows that she *knows*. "I can't tell you which bed to sleep in," she whispers. "I know that. You're nineteen and he's an amazing boy, I know that, too. But please, Ryan. Please promise me you'll be careful."

She knows. The words ring in his head, she *knows*. "How—" he begins, but that doesn't sound right so he stops. "What—" No, where's he going with that? *What do you mean?* When it's damn obvious just what the hell she's talking about here. Finally he sighs, closes his eyes, presses his thumb and forefinger against his eyelids until red sparks shoot through him, and his voice is shaky and small when he whispers, "You know. Jesus."

"I'm not blind," she replies. She's still speaking softly, as if afraid to raise her voice. "You could do a lot worse. I know, I read the papers."

"Dad?" Ryan chokes. The thought of his dad knowing—his *father*... "Does he know too?"

But a warm hand covers his knee, above the brace, it's the first time she's touched him while he's been in the chair. "I haven't told him," she whispers. "It's not my place." When Ryan doesn't say anything, she asks, "Do you love him?"

He considers lying. He considers saying she's wrong, what's she talking about? They're just friends. Or maybe he'll be coy, ask, *Dad? Of course I love him.*

But he doesn't. She means Dante, and *he* means Dante when he answers, "God, yes. More than I ever thought possible."

She pats his knee again. Then she stands, and he moves his hand away from his face so he can look up at her but he doesn't see anything different, just the mother he's always known staring back. When she leans down and kisses his cheek, he thinks, *nothing's*

changed between us. Her lips are as soft as her voice when she murmurs, “Just be careful, that’s all I ask, okay? I like him, too. I don’t want to see either of you get hurt.”

Ryan nods. “Okay,” he mumbles. “Sure.” As she heads for the door, he calls out, “Mom?”

She stops and turns to look back at him, the hint of a smile on her face. “Thanks,” he sighs. “For...everything, I guess. Yeah, thanks.” When she starts to speak, he adds, “Love you. I know you don’t think I do—”

“I know,” she says, and for the first time in forever, the smile she gives him isn’t forced or fake or tight. It lights up her eyes and she looks at him the way she used to, when he was on the ice and just scored a winning goal. “I love you, too, hon.”

Ryan whispers, “I know.”

CHAPTER 16



When the phone rings a little before eight the next morning, Dante thinks it's Ryan, calling to say he's on his way. *Hey sexy*, he thinks, dropping his duffle bags in the hall as the phone rings a second time. *I dreamed about you again last night. My sheets are still tumbling dry.* The words are on the tip of his tongue and he gets as far as "Hey," before he thinks it might be his mama calling from work. He's sure she doesn't want to know he's running a load of wash because he came in his sleep.

But it's not his mama and it's not Ryan, it's Bobby's low voice that breathes into his ear. "Dante, hey man. What's up?"

Like they're old friends or something. Like he didn't tell the guy not to call him before Sunday. "Bobby," Dante sighs. "I thought I told you—"

"I know, I know," Bobby concedes. He sounds older than his almost-thirty years, he sounds downright *ancient*, tired and worn out and run down. "Here's the deal, man, okay? I can't wait til next week, I need someone in the shop now. How about you come on by today and—"

"Can't," Dante tells him. Why is he even wasting his time on the phone with this guy? He knows how it'll go, Bobby will beg and plead until he agrees to come back, and things will be the same as they were before simply because he gives in. He's not giving in. Not

after what his boss said about Ryan... “My ride will be here in fifteen minutes,” Dante says, glancing at the clock on the wall in the other room. Eight on the dot. “In an hour I’ll be on my way to State. I can’t come by today.”

Bobby doesn’t reply but he breathes into the phone and Dante can hear displeasure in that sound. “I’ll be back Sunday,” Dante adds. “We can talk then.”

“You’re with him, is that it?” Bobby’s voice is tight, almost strained, and Dante doesn’t have to ask who he means—he’s talking about Ryan. “Look, I didn’t know, man. I didn’t mean to bust on your boy. Just come down here and we’ll talk—”

Dante sighs. *Yeah, right*, he thinks. Coiling the phone cord around one finger, he asks, “Do you know it took everything I had to keep him from coming down there and kicking your sorry ass? I don’t like you touching me, Bobby, I’ve told you that, and when he found out you can’t keep your damn hands to yourself, he about went ballistic.”

“He’s in a wheelchair,” Bobby scoffs.

“He’s walking now,” Dante tells him.

Silence. *That* has him scared, Dante’s sure of it, because Bobby’s worked around skaters his whole life, he knows how hockey players are. They never shy away from a fight. Dante’s seen fists fly in games of street hockey, and Ryan’s with the college team, those guys are tough. “Walking, huh?” Bobby tries to laugh but the sound comes out strangled and sad. “Shit.”

Dante closes his eyes, suddenly too tired to talk anymore. He’s not up for this, really he’s not. “I have to go,” he mumbles. “He’ll be here in a few minutes to pick me up.”

“Can’t we just—”

“No.” Dante hangs up...on his boss, his *ex*-boss. *I told him not to call me*, he thinks, returning to the hall and his bags, one full of his skinsuit and pads and skates, the other bulging with clothes for the next few days. All of his toiletries and whatnot, Ryan has that, Mrs. Talonovich made sure of it. Late last night Ryan called and told him

that his mother was *still* going through his bags to see that he had everything. “*Everything*, baby,” he said, and Dante laughed because he could so see Ryan’s mother tearing through his stuff, checking for lotion and soap and shampoo. “She even packed my skates. I’m like what the fuck? But she thinks I might want them so they’re under my towels. Towels, Dante. We’re going to a hotel and she’s making me bring my own *towels*. Jesus Christ.”

Dante smiles at the memory of his boyfriend’s bemused voice and wonders what it’d be like if his own mama was that way, but he can’t see it. It’s always been more of a roommates type situation at the Espinosa household—even growing up, he mostly took care of himself. He cleaned up his own mess, made his own meals, tucked himself into bed at night. He’s never had someone like Mrs. Talonovich two steps behind him everywhere he went, so ready to wipe up anything he spilled, to buy him anything he needed, to take on the world when he was ready to give up.

Then again, maybe the reason he’s fallen so hard for Ryan is because he’s never had all of that—his boy is spoiled, true, but Dante loves the way his eyes shine and the way he makes him laugh, and he wants to be the one Ryan turns to now, he wants to pick up where Mrs. Talonovich has left off. Maybe that’s just what he needs, too, someone to care for, someone to look after, someone to show him there’s more to life than skating and practice and work. *Someone like Ryan*, he thinks, hefting his bags, one over each shoulder to balance the weight. *Someone to make the day to day crap worth living, to make it fun.*

At the door, he shifts both bags to one side and is digging into the pocket of his windbreaker for his keys when the phone rings again. “Bobby,” he mutters—it has to be him, *has* to be. “*You hung up on me*,” he’ll moan, and Dante doesn’t need to hear that right now. Let the damn thing ring off the hook for all he cares.

But each ring jars his nerves and he can’t get his keys out, they catch on his pocket and threaten to tear the fabric, the bags start to

slip down his arm, he can't even *think* with the phone going on and on like that. So he drops the bags to the floor and tugs at the keys, hard enough to send them flying out of his hand and skittering across the hall. And the phone continues to ring, over and over again. Dante storms into the kitchen, snatches up the receiver, dammit the *hell*. "Bobby," he cries, "I told you no—"

"Dante?"

It's his mother. "Mama, hey," he sighs, his anger gone in the instant he hears her voice. His hand shakes as he runs it through his hair to push the dark strands from his face. "I thought you were Bobby."

"Should I be?" She speaks in a curt, professional tone that she's perfected working at the DA's office, one he's grown accustomed to over the years. He used to hear it every day after school when she'd call home to check up on him. "Tay? Are you alright?"

"Fine, Mama," he replies. Another glance at the clock tells him he's going to be late. "I sort of have to go. Ryan'll be here any minute."

In his mind's eye, he can almost see her slight frown. "I just called to say take care," she says and then, lowering her voice, she adds, "Don't get in trouble, Tay. I'm not just talking about on the ice, either. You know what I mean."

He knows. What she's talking about is in her silence—she means someone finding out about him and Ryan, she means the two of them getting caught doing...whatever it is she thinks they're going to do. Two teenaged boys in love and on their own, what *won't* they do? He can almost imagine what sordid things she envisions. "I'll be fine," he assures her.

"Be careful," she says.

"I will," he promises.

But she presses the issue. "You *both* be careful."

With an exasperated sigh, he says, "Okay, Mama. I gotta go already."

For a moment she doesn't answer and he's sure this is the end of the conversation, he's pushed her to the limit, she won't say anything else. Just hang up in his ear, that'll be it until he calls her from the hotel late tonight. But lowering her voice even further, until Dante barely hears her over the open air of the connection, she murmurs, "Good luck, Tay. I'll see you Sunday."

Good luck.

"Thanks," he replies. He holds his breath until she hangs up and then listens to the emptiness that yawns in his ear, her words running through his mind, *good luck*. She's never told him that before, she's never really cared all that much for his skating. Be careful, he can do that. And good luck.

When the phone starts to ring in his ear, he hangs the receiver back in the cradle, retrieves his keys from the floor, shoulders his bags. He locks the door behind him, checks it twice, gets halfway down the first flight of stairs before he doubles back and checks it again just to be certain it's locked. There's a window in the hall that looks out on the street and from the corner of his eye he sees movement, Mrs. Talonovich's van sliding into a spot alongside the curb. His boy's in there, thirty seconds and they'll be kissing their hellos—Ryan was right, they *should* hook up first thing every morning, he could get used to starting each day with a kiss.

Good luck. His mother's words haunt him as he takes the steps two at a time in his haste to get downstairs.



When Dante comes outside, Mrs. Talonovich is already at the back of the van with the doors open wide, rummaging through Ryan's suitcase. "Hey, Mrs. T," he says, swinging his bags onto the floor of the van beside his boyfriend's. "Thanks again for picking me up."

She looks over her shoulder and gives Dante a wide grin. "It's no problem, hon. Hop on in—Ryan's waiting."

As Dante hurries around to the open side door, Ryan's voice drifts out to him, the first hint of anger already in his tone. "Mom, I told you it's in there. Just trust me, will you?" When he sees Dante, he rolls his eyes and sighs dramatically. "She's looking for the fucking camera."

Laughing, Dante climbs over Ryan to slide into the seat beside him, but he doesn't make it that far—his boyfriend catches him around the waist and pulls him down to his lap. "Kiss me," he whispers, and he doesn't wait for Dante to reply before their lips meet. Dante shifts into a more comfortable position, draping his legs over the arm of Ryan's chair, pressing him back as their kiss deepens. Ryan's hands smooth up his back and down his thigh while Dante cradles his face, giving into the moment and the kiss. They don't break apart until the rear door slams shut, and then Dante reaches out to pull the sliding door shut, too.

This time when he crawls over Ryan to get to his seat, he feels his boyfriend's hand curve around his ass and between his legs, copping a quick feel before Mrs. Talonovich opens the driver's side door. "Who's being bad now?" Dante laughs, swatting his hand away.

"I missed you," Ryan admits. He takes one of Dante's hands, laces their fingers together, pulls him close and holds his arm in his lap. When Dante frowns at Mrs. Talonovich in the front seat, Ryan whispers, "It's okay. She's cool with it."

"You told her?" Dante keeps his voice low, just in case he's thinking the wrong thing...didn't Ryan say he didn't *want* to tell her? It wasn't any of her business, she didn't need to know about the two of them together? When did all this change?

In the rearview mirror, Mrs. Talonovich flashes them a bright smile. "I found the camera, guys—"

"Told you I packed it," Ryan mutters.

She ignores him. Turning her gaze to Dante, she asks, "Are you excited yet?"

"About what?" he asks, confused. "Ryan—"

Ryan laughs. “The race, silly.” Reaching over, he tucks an errant strand of Dante’s hair behind his ear, squeezes the hand that rests in his lap. “We talked last night,” he says softly. “She sort of figured it out herself.”

Dante frowns at his boyfriend, unsure of what to do or say now. “And you’re okay with it?” he asks. He’ll take his cue from Ryan. If he doesn’t mind holding hands in front of his mother, or a brief touch, an occasional kiss, then Dante won’t let it bother him, either.

“I’m fine,” Ryan replies, running a hand up Dante’s arm. Raising his voice to include his mother, he tells her, “Dante doesn’t worry about the race until he’s out there on the ice, isn’t that right?” When Dante shrugs, Ryan laughs. “He’s not easily excitable.”

With a gleam in his eye, Dante winks at his boyfriend, tightens his hand in Ryan’s, and murmurs, “I’ll tell you about easily excitable.”

Ryan’s eyes go wide and then he laughs, a sound as clear as crystal bells. “Oh shit,” he sighs. “Don’t you dare.”

Glancing at Mrs. Talonovich to make sure she doesn’t overhear, Dante leans against Ryan’s shoulder and whispers, “So did you ask her to buy us condoms yet?”

Ryan gives him a playful shove. “No,” he says. Before Dante can speak, he adds, “And don’t you ask her, either.”

Dante laughs, leans back in the seat, and closes his eyes, content. This is the best he’s felt all morning, sitting next to his boy, holding his hand, the next few days stretching out like a promise ahead of them and at the end of it all, the State competitions. He’ll come back here a winner, he can feel it.



“Here it comes,” Ryan mutters as they pull into the skating rink parking lot. Dante gives him a quizzical look and his boyfriend explains, “Time to morph into Sports Mom mode. Just duck down and try not to look *too* mortified.”

Dante laughs. "She can't be that bad," he says, squeezing Ryan's hand for reassurance. He likes being able to sit here like this, touching his boyfriend, without worrying if Mrs. Talonovich will see them or say something about it.

But Ryan gives him a look that says yes, she's that bad and more, and he tells Dante, "Just wait."

He doesn't have long before he gets a glimpse of Mrs. Talonovich in action. She guides the van through the parking lot, around groups of skaters gathered together, parents in line to pay the competition fees at the last minute, cars everywhere. A huge bus waits at the far end of the lot, its doors open, inviting. Dante sees Josey with her girlfriends and there's Dietrich, leaning against his Corvette, studiously pretending that the woman next to him isn't his own mother. Mrs. Talonovich slows down as people pass in front of the van and she cranes her neck, looking for a spot...*there*. She angles for the handicapped parking spaces but a small sedan cuts her off. "Jerk," Dante murmurs.

"It gets better," Ryan whispers.

Mrs. Talonovich eases up next to the other car, so close that the driver can't open his door to get out. Then she rolls down the passenger side window, leans across the front seat of the van, and in her bright, perky voice, asks, "Excuse me, sir? Are any of the people in your car handicapped? Because my son's in a wheelchair and we need that spot more than you do."

Oh God. Dante buries his face in Ryan's shoulder to stifle sudden giggles. "Told you," Ryan purrs, the hint of a smile in his voice.

Dante doesn't hear the other driver's reply, but with a curt nod Mrs. Talonovich reaches for her purse. Extracting a cell phone, she calls out, "Do you know what the fine is for parking in a handicapped spot without a tag, sir? I can have a police officer here in five minutes to explain it to you."

Apparently the driver knows the fine and doesn't wish to pay it, because he rolls up his window and peels out of the spot, leaving it

for them. With a satisfied smirk on her face, Mrs. Talonovich backs the van up, angles into the spot, and ends up parking more or less in both spaces. "Alright then," she says as she climbs out from behind the wheel. Sliding the side door open, she grins at Ryan and Dante and wants to know, "You boys ready?"

Ryan rolls his eyes. "Didn't you ask us that already?" he asks.

Dante climbs over his boyfriend to exit and suddenly Ryan's hand is curving around his thigh, pressing against flesh that thrills to the touch. Do they have to get out right now? Dante wonders what Mrs. Talonovich would say if he closed the door on the noise and confusion and crowds outside just to sit in Ryan's lap again, taste his kisses, feel his hands in places he dreamed of last night. But when he hesitates, Ryan gives him a gentle shove. "Keep moving, babycakes. You got a nice ass but—"

"Ryan," his mother warns. Dante laughs as he jumps down from the van.

"He does!" Ryan cries. The look she shoots his way silences him. Dante's surprised he doesn't push the issue, he seems to like to get under his mother's skin, but this isn't the time or place to start arguing and for once Ryan seems to agree. Still, Ryan's pout is unbearably cute, it makes Dante grin again, and from behind Mrs. Talonovich's back, he winks at his boyfriend. *Soon*, he thinks, looking around the parking lot. *We'll be on our own soon enough.*

Only there's so much bustle around them, so much activity, that he's not really sure what exactly he has to do or where he has to be. He's paid for the trip already, right? So does he just go to the bus now? No one else seems to be loading up, though. For all the moving about, no one seems to be getting much of anywhere at all. Are all skating club trips this disorganized?

As Mrs. Talonovich activates Ryan's chair lift, Dante frowns and says to no one in particular, "I'm not quite sure where to go from here." Turning to Ryan, he asks, "You haven't done anything like this before, have you?"

Ryan's chair comes to a rest on the tarmac and Mrs. Talonovich gives Dante a sympathetic smile. "I'll take care of everything," she tells them, reversing the lift controls to fold it back into the van. Then she runs a hand through her short hair to fluff it, clutches her purse to her shoulder as if it's a machine gun slung across her back, and sets off into the crowd, a determined look on her face. "You boys just wait here."

With a nod at his mother, Ryan says, "The best thing to do is just stand aside and let her take over. It's like a mutant power, I'm telling you. She's good at things like this."

Good idea. Taking a seat on the floor of the van, Dante stretches his legs through the open door and props his feet on one wheel of Ryan's chair. As Mrs. Talonovich vanishes into the crowd, his boyfriend asks softly, "Are you nervous?" His hand brushes Dante's knee, a tender gesture, and is gone.

A piece of rubber skidding has begun to pull loose from the door's track and Dante picks at it just for something to do. "Not really," he admits with a shrug. "Not about the race. I just want to be there already, you know?"

Ryan leers at him, wiggling his eyebrows until they disappear beneath his long bangs. "I just want to get you alone," he murmurs. Dante grins—yeah, that's foremost in *his* mind, too. Locking that hotel door behind them and getting in a few more kisses before that damn luncheon thing, and then finally sharing a bed, their bodies spooned together. Even if they don't do anything at all, just holding Ryan will be enough. That's all he wants, to feel his boyfriend curved against him, to hold him close, to whisper he loves him in the dark and feel the feathery touch of that strawberry hair against his face as he sleeps. Dante's arms ache with anticipation of the coming nights.

"Hey, guys." Dante looks up as Josey approaches them. She looks different out of her skating skinsuit and helmet—she wears jeans and a bulky jacket, and for once her hair isn't pulled back into that braid she favors on the ice, it hangs over her shoulders and down her

back in long blonde waves. When the wind blows, her hair flies out as if trying to get away, and she smooths a hand down her cheek to keep it out of her mouth when she speaks. “I saw you pull up,” she says, giving Dante a shy smile. “Eight thirty on the dot, you made it just in time.”

He nods. “Yeah. Oh Ryan—” Pushing against his boyfriend’s thigh with his foot to get his attention, Dante says, “I forgot to tell you Bobby called before I left.”

Ryan’s smile fades and he folds his hand over the toes of Dante’s sneaker, pinches him playfully before Dante moves his foot back to the wheel. “What the hell did he want?” he mutters.

Before he can answer, Josey sees someone and starts waving frantically. “Becca! I’m over here!” Dante looks up as an older girl extracts herself from the crowd and heads in their direction. She looks like Josey—same flyaway hair, same bright eyes—but she doesn’t have that loopy grin Josey wears whenever she’s around him. This girl has a perpetual scowl that he swears deepens as she approaches. “My sister Becca,” Josey explains, threading her arm through the older girl’s. “Dante and Ryan. I told you about them.”

I’m sure you did, Dante thinks. From the way Becca looks him over, he has a good idea just what was said, too. “Hey,” he murmurs with a halfhearted wave. Ryan’s right, he needs to talk to Josey about their relationship. Maybe he’ll get a chance this weekend.

Becca glances at Ryan with that distant sort of politeness people wear when meeting someone they aren’t really all that interested in to begin with, but then she sees him, *really* sees him, and her perfunctory smile widens into something genuine. “Talon!” she cries, raising a hand for Ryan to slap in greeting. Her voice is deeper than Josey’s, almost husky, as if she’s been sick and is just now recovering—a smoky voice, one that makes Dante think of Kathleen Turner. “We had Comp 101 freshman year, remember?” Ryan nods, a slightly dazed look on his face, as if he knows he should know the girl but

can't quite place her. "I heard about what happened. The whole team's pulling for you."

"Team?" Dante asks, confused.

Sidling around her sister, Josey tells him, "Becca plays lacrosse on the girl's team for the college." When Dante nods, she eases down beside him on the floor of the van and Ryan throws him a quick glance. *I know*, he thinks, scooting over so Josey's leg doesn't press against his. *I know, I have to tell her, I know*. "So," Josey sighs, staring at him with those lovesick eyes.

He forces a smile and pushes against Ryan's thigh again. He wonders how bad it'll look if he asks Josey and her sister if they have something else they could be doing? Because he really wants to tell Ryan about the phone call now, he forgot about it earlier and he wants his boyfriend's reassurance that he doesn't need to worry about Later Skater or Bobby or anything but the competition ahead.

Searching for something to say, Josey asks, "Where are you guys sitting on the bus?"

"As far away from Dietrich as we can," Ryan mutters. When Dante grins, his boyfriend slaps at his foot again. "I'm serious. You want to spend two hours on the bus with that jackass nearby?"

"Which one's Dietrich?" Becca asks, glancing around the parking lot. Josey points at the Corvette, far enough away that they can speak without worrying he might overhear. "Oh, him. The one with the sugar daddy."

"The one sleeping with his mom," Dante mumbles. That sets them all laughing.

"Speaking of moms," Ryan says, his voice low.

Dante looks up as Mrs. Talonovich approaches. The crowds part around her and the three skate club officials who follow in her wake. "I was *assured* that my son would have no difficulty on this trip," she's saying. Ryan ducks his head and tries his hardest to pretend he can't hear her. Coming to a stop, Mrs. Talonovich gives Josey and Becca an indulgent smile. "Girls, hi. Can I maybe get your help?"

We're going to board the bus now and I need a few extra hands. We have a lot of luggage."

Luggage. Dante's never heard it called that before, it sounds pretentious and exotic, as if this is a safari they're taking and not just a weekend trip to Atlantic City. "How much is a lot?" he asks, stretching as he stands. He hopes it looks nonchalant when he leans down over the back of Ryan's wheelchair, his arm resting along his boyfriend's shoulders, but he's grateful for any touch no matter how innocent. "I can get some—"

"You help Ryan," Mrs. Talonovich tells him, in a tone of voice that doesn't give him any other option. Turning to the club officials with her, a woman and two older gentlemen, she picks up her previous conversation right where she left off. "I don't see a wheelchair lift on that bus. My son can't walk."

"Jesus Christ," Ryan groans into his hand.

Dante rubs his boyfriend's back, massages his shoulders, wants to kiss him but thinks better of it with the audience they have. "For the money I'm paying," his mother continues, "I hope the hotel is better equipped—"

"They have elevators," one of the men is quick to assure her. "And handrails in your son's room. We thought the bus was outfitted, as well..." He trails off, uncertain. Dante gets the distinct impression that Ryan's not the only one uncomfortable around Super Mom here.

Mrs. Talonovich dismisses that with a wave of her hand. "Girls?" she prompts, signaling Josey and her sister to follow her to the back of the van. Dante thinks that he should be helping, but Ryan's mother has effectively distanced him from Josey and for that he's thankful. "You're both sporty," she's saying, her voice drifting around to where he and Ryan wait. "You shouldn't have any problem carrying these bags."

Dante buries his nose in the top of Ryan's hair and, breathing in the clean scent, whispers, "I love her."

Ryan sighs lustily. “Wanna trade? She’s yours.”



Dante pushes Ryan’s wheelchair behind the small procession heading for the bus. It’s Mrs. Talonovich in the lead, of course—she’s in her element here. As they walk, Ryan tells Dante she lives for this stuff. “Every single away game,” he says over his shoulder, “and she’s in the parking lot, helping the team pack up. God, playoffs last year? I thought she’d end up coming *with* us. *That* was scary.”

Ahead of them, the skate officials follow Josey and Becca, right behind Ryan’s mother and laden down with their bags. Nearing the bus, Mrs. Talonovich nods at the open luggage compartments. “In there, girls. Thank you *so* much. Ryan appreciates it.”

“Ryan can talk for himself,” Ryan mutters.

Dante senses his boyfriend’s anger beginning to brew so he slows down, widening the gap between themselves and the others. “Ryan can keep his mouth shut,” he murmurs, running a hand across the back of Ryan’s neck, just below his hair. “A few more minutes and we’ll be on the bus, okay? And you won’t need to worry about her for the rest of the week.”

No reply, but Ryan sighs and leans back against Dante’s stomach, grinning up at him, his throat a glorious stretch that Dante wants to stroke and lick and *soon*, he reminds himself as he grips the handlebars to keep from reaching out. He can imagine his fingers splayed across that smooth flesh, trailing down the length with his tongue, flicking into Ryan’s shirt where the neckline puckers away from the hollow of his throat and hearing his boyfriend moan as he arches up against him, his own hands roaming Dante’s hair, their bodies twined together in sheets as white as Ryan’s skin—

Then Ryan sits up and the spell is broken, though the images that flood Dante’s mind make his underwear bite into the sudden swelling at his crotch. *Soon isn’t soon enough*, he thinks, easing the wheelchair to a stop beside Mrs. Talonovich. Ryan’s mother stands with

the club officials, and the four of them stare at the bus, the open door, the narrow steps leading into the darkened interior. She doesn't need to say a word—Dante can read her thoughts in the slight frown on her face. The chair's not going to fit.

"We thought it had a lift," the woman from the skate club says, giving Ryan a wan smile.

Mrs. Talonovich's frowns harder, and she plants her hands on her hips as if this is a fine turn of events and she's not the least bit happy about it. "I told you when I called that my son has special needs and I was *assured* they would be met."

Ryan groans and covers his face with his hands, embarrassed. At least none of the other skaters can overhear this terse argument—Dante has a feeling that if Dietrich were nearby, he'd never let them live this down, and he knows his boy well enough to know that Ryan would probably rather die than have Josey and her sister listen to his mother go on and *on* about how he can't just walk up those steps himself, now can he? Dante doesn't have to see his boyfriend's face to know that his freckles have disappeared and his cheeks rival his hair now, he colors so easily...a quick look at Mrs. Talonovich tells him that she doesn't have any idea how to get her son into the bus and until someone comes up with something, she's going to make damn sure that the skate club officials are well aware of that fact.

Stepping around in front of him, Dante squats down and looks over his shoulder at his boyfriend. "Come on," he says, holding his hands out behind him. "Time to ride."

Confusion flickers across Ryan's face for a second before he realizes what Dante's asking. Setting the brake on his chair, he leans forward, wraps his arms around Dante's neck, and climbs onto his back. "I'm heavy," he warns, as Dante snakes his arms beneath Ryan's thighs.

"You're not that heavy," Dante assures him. When he shifts into a more comfortable position, Dante grins at the erection poking into

his lower back. “Oh damn,” he breathes. “You didn’t tell me about *that*.”

Ryan laughs. “You didn’t ask.”

“Must be contagious,” Dante tells him, “cause I’ve got it, too.” Then he stands, his legs screaming in protest to the weight on his back—his boyfriend *is* heavy, thick leg muscles, upper arm strength built from being in that chair, an easy what, hundred eighty pounds? Two hundred? He doesn’t know but he staggers back a step in surprise and Ryan’s arms slip up against his Adam’s apple, cutting off his breath. “Ryan,” he chokes, hefting the legs up above his hips when they start to slip.

His boyfriend’s grip loosens and Dante gulps in air. “Sorry,” Ryan whispers, his lips brushing Dante’s ear. Now he grabs fistfuls of Dante’s jacket. “I didn’t mean it, I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Dante assures him. *As long as I can breathe*, he thinks. Yeah, that’s one of the important things. Breathing, getting Ryan onto the bus, taking care of their erections later—turning to Mrs. Talonovich, he asks, “Can you fold up Ryan’s chair? Maybe stow it with the bags?”

She’s still arguing with the club officials about the necessity in this day and age to be sympathetic to those with disabilities but Ryan calls out, “Mom? Hello? Can you put up the chair or what?”

“Ryan—” she starts, turning. When she sees Dante, Ryan riding on his back, whatever she hoped to say dries up in her throat. Dante braces himself for a reprimand—*put him down, you’ll drop him, you’ll both get hurt*, something along those lines—but instead she smiles at them, at *him*. “Thank you,” she murmurs, grateful. “Dante, I don’t know what we’d do without you, really. What a brilliant idea. Ryan—”

Ryan sighs. “Mom, I’m breaking his back here. Can you just put up my chair already?” When she nods, he pushes against Dante to get him moving. “Good. See you Sunday.”

“That’s it?” Dante asks, but he’s not complaining. Instead he stumbles to the bus and up the steps. For a few hairy minutes he wavers at the top step, sure he’ll fall, Ryan will land on his back and crack his head open on the pavement and it’ll be all his fault, he’ll lose the one boy he’s ever loved because he thought he could carry him and he can’t, he’s not strong enough, he *can’t*—but then Ryan grabs the steel bar and steadies them and Dante makes it into the bus. A fine sheen of sweat beads across his forehead and his arms begin to ache, his legs tremble, he feels like he does when he’s been on the ice for too long and he needs a break but he’s making good time so he keeps pushing himself despite his body’s protests. “Remind me *not* to try this again, baby,” he huffs, hoisting Ryan as he starts to slip. “Damn, you weren’t kidding when you said you were heavy. I’m on top, you hear me?”

With a laugh, Ryan releases his jacket and places his hands on the backs of the seats on either side of the aisle. “I’ve got it from here,” he says, pulling away from Dante. “Drop my legs, hon. It’s just like the bars at therapy. I can do this part.”

Dante complies, letting Ryan’s legs down gently. Then he steps out of the aisle, watches as Ryan swings himself from seat to seat. “You’re putting more weight on your left leg,” he points out as Ryan passes him. “When Bobby called this morning? I told him you were walking. I think he thinks you’re gonna come over there and kick his ass.”

“I am,” Ryan agrees. Dante falls into step behind him, his hands on Ryan’s waist. “Right here,” Ryan says, pointing at a pair of seats, and Dante helps him into the one by the window. Sitting down, he pushes the hair out of his eyes and sighs. “You hung up on him, right?”

Dante nods. “Don’t worry, I did.” He frowns down at Ryan, then straightens an errant strand of his boyfriend’s hair, sweaty from exertion. “You okay?” he asks.

“Fine,” Ryan assures him. He nods, runs a hand through his hair to get it out of his face, and forces a tired smile. “Fine, hon. I’m fine,

really, sit down.” He pats the seat beside him, then tugs at Dante’s jacket. “Down, boy.”

Someone taps on the glass beside them—Mrs. Talonovich. As Dante opens the window, he feels Ryan’s hand ease up beneath his jacket, his fingers curving into the waistband of Dante’s pants. “You boys be careful,” Mrs. Talonovich is saying, looking up at them, her gaze shifting from Dante to her son. “Call me when you get into the hotel, I’ll be waiting. Remember, I want pictures, lots of them. The camera’s in your bag.”

“Close the window, Dante,” Ryan mutters through a tight grin. He waves at his mother and, raising his voice, calls out, “See you Sunday.”

“Make sure there are railings in your bathroom!” his mother cries as Dante starts to close the window. “If there aren’t, you have them switch rooms, you hear me? Dante, good luck. We’ll be watching you on TV. Ryan, don’t forget—”

“Mom!” Dante presses his lips together to keep from grinning at the agitation in his boyfriend’s voice. “I know already. We have to leave. Bye.” He tugs at Dante’s pants and says again, “Close the window.”

Mrs. Talonovich starts to say something else, but then turns away to yell at someone Dante can’t see. “Careful with that!” she says. “Those things aren’t cheap, mister. Do you have any idea how much a wheelchair like that costs? It’s top of the line. We spared no expense.”

“Close it,” Ryan mutters. This time Dante obeys. As he sinks into his seat, his boyfriend takes his hand and holds it until Dante looks up at him. With a shy smile, Ryan whispers, “Thanks.”

Dante laughs to set him at ease. “Did you think I’d let anyone else carry you?” he asks with a wink. “The wood you’re sporting, you would’ve run ’em through.”

“Hey!” Ryan pinches one of his nipples playfully. With a laugh, Dante twists away.

CHAPTER 17



The bus trip is uneventful—Ryan knows this routine all too well. How many times did he hit the road with the hockey team in a chartered bus like this one, heading out to away games, tryouts, the play-offs? Everything about this trip now makes all those others come flooding back—the rowdy kids in the back of the bus, candy and paper airplanes flying across the seats, a coach pacing the aisle in the futile hope of settling everyone down, music drifting through the bus from a radio someone smuggled in. And the endless chatter, girls giggling, boys shouting to each other, someone’s raucous laughter...Ryan closes his eyes and imagines he’s whole again, riding with the team to another game where he’ll get out on the ice, he’ll shoot the winning goal, he’ll be the Talon. He feels tears in the back of his throat and he clenches the armrest in sudden frustration. How much longer will he be like this? *Haven’t I done my time?* he thinks, angry that he’s letting this get to him. *Don’t I deserve to be better already? To be back on the ice again?*

A warm hand covers his and when he looks up he finds Dante smiling sympathetically at him. “You okay?” his boyfriend whispers.

Boyfriend. The word comes easily enough to his mind but he still can’t quite believe it. Looking at this boy, *his* boy, he wonders what it was that ever made someone as plain and ordinary as himself catch Dante’s eye. Yet his hands are the only ones that plunge into those

waves of black hair, his lips are the only ones that taste Dante's mouth and skin. *I love you*, Ryan thinks, even though he can't say it right now. *More than I can possibly know how to tell you. My mom's right—what would I do without you?* He hopes he never has to find out.

Returning Dante's smile, Ryan tells him, "I'm fine."

Dante watches him a moment longer, then squeezes his hand before letting go. But his arm rests alongside Ryan's and the touch is enough to remind him that he's not alone in the midst of this crowded bus.



At the hotel Ryan's the last off the bus, and Dante helps him down the steps again piggy-back style. He's afraid of hurting his boyfriend—he knows he has a lot of bulk, it comes from playing sports and he's big, he knows that, too—but Dante tells him not to be silly. "It's just for a few minutes," he says, hefting Ryan higher onto his back while they wait for the skate club officials to figure out how to open the wheelchair out again. Much as he hates to admit it, Ryan would give anything for his mother to be here right about now. She can flip that thing out in ten seconds flat, he's seen her do it. He's all too aware of the skaters lining the sidewalk in front of the hotel lobby, watching them, watching *him*, like some freak show reject, riding Dante's back. He's sure Dietrich has a few words to say about *that*.

But Dante's not embarrassed in the least—he waits patiently, talking and joking with Ryan as if he senses his discomfort and is trying to put him at ease. When the chair's finally together, he tries to set Ryan down gently but just as his butt hits the seat, Dante loses his balance, falls back on him, lands in his lap amid a fit of giggles. "Hey!" Ryan cries, giving him a quick push. He likes the weight on his thighs, the press of his boyfriend's body against his, but they *do* have an audience, he can't enjoy this moment. "Get up."

"I'm up," Dante says as he stands. Then he winks at Ryan, and the way he smiles tells him that his boyfriend doesn't just mean he's out of his lap, either.

As Dante circles the wheelchair to take the handlebars, Ryan notices the bulge in the front of his sweatpants—how can he not? He's looking for it, he loves sweatpants for that sole reason alone, the way the fleece makes everything seem to hang just a little lower, swing just a little more, and he's glad Dante favors them. "I can see that," he murmurs with a faint smile.

"Hush up," Dante admonishes, but there's no mistaking the grin in his voice.



Inside the lobby Ryan waits by the couches with the rest of the guests, away from the skaters who clamor around the check-in counter for their room keys. He sees Josey jockey for a position beside Dante, who tries his best to look nonchalant when he moves away. *Just tell her already*, Ryan thinks, watching the way she follows his boyfriend like a loyal puppy. *Tell her you hate to admit it, but Dietrich's right. Tell her you love me. Tell her she doesn't stand a chance in hell so she can get over you already and move on.*

Somehow Dante manages to snag his key in the midst of the fray and, extracting himself from the crowd, he heads over to where Ryan waits. "Got it," he says with a grin as he holds the key up in one hand. "Now we just need our *luggage* and we're all set."

"You sound like my mom," Ryan laughs. *Luggage* is one of her words, up there with *soufflé* and *dormitory*. She actually says *dormitory* every time she speaks of where he lives on campus—never *dorm*. He's never heard anyone else use the word before.

All the bags from the bus were unloaded into one corner of the lobby, and as the skaters get their keys, they head over in that direction. When Dante gets the wheelchair as close as he can to the make-shift pick-up area, Ryan throws the brake and points at his suitcase,

on the bottom of the pile. "There's one," he says. Dante grabs it, pulls it free, and Ryan pats his lap. "Stack it here. I'll carry them."

"All of them?" Dante asks. He spots one of his bags and gets that, as well. With a dubious look at Ryan's legs, he asks, "You sure?"

"Just set them here," Ryan tells him. "What, are you gonna carry everything and push me, too?"

"I could come back for them—" Dante starts.

Ryan gives him a wicked grin. "Once we get into that room, I'm not letting you go," he promises. "Unless you'd rather leave me all alone and troop back down here—"

Dante swings the suitcase up onto Ryan's lap, plops the duffle bag on top of it. "I'm going to pretend I didn't hear that," he says.



The whole third floor has been reserved for the skate club—Ryan holds onto his suitcase and cranes his neck to see over the duffle bags that wobble precariously in his lap as Dante heads for the elevators. A few other skaters already wait for the lift, their arms filled with their own bags, and Ryan has this terrifying image of everyone rushing through the doors when they open and leaving him out in the lobby. But Dante angles him into a good position and before the bell even dings to announce the lift, he's pushing Ryan towards the door. "Coming through," he says, not caring who he shoves aside. "Watch out, guys. We're first."

"My mom's a bad influence on you," Ryan murmurs.

"I like her," Dante tells him. He turns the wheelchair around and stops in the center of the elevator—there's hardly room left for anyone else in the lift. "They can take the stairs," he says. "Their legs aren't broken."

"Mine aren't either," Ryan points out.

As the other skaters try to squeeze into the elevator with them, Dante pulls Ryan's chair back until he's trapped between the handlebars, the wall against his back. When he props a foot up on one

wheel, his knee brushes Ryan's elbow, moves away, comes back again to press against him. It's something, at least, some touch, and Ryan likes that no one sees it in this group of people. When they reach the third floor, he's surprised that Dante holds back and doesn't just barge his way out into the hall. Instead, he lingers until the last skater leaves and it's just the two of them, and *then* he wheels Ryan out. "Three twenty-eight," he says, reading the key he holds. "Which way, boyfriend?"

No one's around to hear him—the skaters have dispersed down either end of the hall, their laughter and shouts echoing back like distorted sounds heard in a funhouse. Peeking around the bags, Ryan sees a sign on the wall, 301–320 with an arrow pointing left, 321–340 and another arrow pointing right. "This way," he says, nodding towards the right corridor.

Dante tousles his hair and laughs. "Can you tell this is the first time I've ever been in a place like this?"

"What do you mean?" Ryan asks. It's not a fancy hotel—his parents have stayed in classier places on family vacations, and he used to get dragged along like just another piece of luggage before he moved onto campus. But it's not an Econo Lodge, by any stretch of imagination. This is Atlantic City, gambling capital of the east, and a mere two hundred dollars will go a long way. The city wants tourists' money spent in the casinos, at the card tables and slot machines, so even a hotel like this is fairly inexpensive. Nice plush carpets, mirrors strategically placed at the end of corridors to give an illusion of depth, a mauve and gold wallpaper, it's all just decoration. Ryan's pretty sure the gold on the lamps is painted on, as well as the gilded trim that edges the glass tables along the hall. Even the plants are fake, huge golden pots overflowing with dried Spanish moss that he's seen at craft stores and large tropical blooms that are too gaudy to be real. Leaning back to look up at Dante, Ryan jokes, "It's no Ritz Carlton, you know."

"I've never even been in a *hotel* before," Dante admits.

“Never?” Ryan asks, incredulous. He sees their door and points at it. 328 in big gilded letters above a tiny peephole and below that, the unmistakable blue and white wheelchair sticker, the one he’s come to hate. This *has* to be it. “Here we are. You’ve *never* been in a hotel before?”

Stopping the wheelchair in the middle of the hall, Dante approaches the door, key held out like an offering, and shakes his head. “Never went anywhere to stay in one,” he says. He frowns at the door knob and leans closer, his hair falling to hide his face. “How’s this thing work?”

“Let me see.” He stands aside and hands Ryan the key—it’s a key-card, actually. “It’s not hard at all,” Ryan tells him. “Just slide it into the slot like an ATM card.” Dante follows his directions and the card disappears into the slot. There’s a faint *pop* from inside the door and then it opens a few inches, waiting. The card eases out of the slot. “You can take it back now.” When Dante doesn’t move, Ryan looks at his boyfriend and smiles to see the sheen in his eyes. “What?”

Grinning at him, Dante says, “That’s damn cool. I want to do it again.” Before Ryan can object he takes the card, pulls the door shut, sticks the card in the slot again. Like a little kid, so eager, wide-eyed as the door opens and the card slides back out. “This just rocks.”

Ryan laughs. “Dante,” he warns, as his boyfriend starts to close the door a second time. “These bags are getting heavy...”

“Oh! Sorry.” Pocketing the card, Dante backs Ryan’s wheelchair into the room—it fits through the door but just barely, the wheel hubs threatening to scrape the molding when Dante jiggles the chair a little to clear the jamb. With his left foot, Ryan pushes the door shut and looks around as Dante keeps moving. A bathroom on the left, the door partially shut so all he sees is darkness inside. Two rods with hangers stretch across the wall on the right, one at a normal height, the other where Ryan can reach it. A thin partition separates the closet and a recessed sink, also low enough for Ryan to use while in the chair. Maybe this won’t be so bad after all.

A little farther and he sees a dresser, a large mirror above the drawers reflecting the rest of the room—two full-size beds and between them, lamps set into the wall above a nightstand, a phone on top of that. “Which bed do you want?” Dante asks, easing Ryan to a stop.

Ryan laughs. “The one you’re sleeping in.”

“You better be sleeping with me,” Dante growls as he takes his duffle bags off of Ryan’s lap. He tosses them onto the bed closest to the door—it’s pushed against one wall, and Ryan suspects Dante chose the other one to sleep in just so he’d have plenty of room to maneuver his chair into position when he wants to climb into bed. Then Dante takes Ryan’s bags, his overnight full of the toiletries his mother packed and his suitcase...an honest to God *suitcase*, he’s the only kid on the bus who brought one, everybody else used bags or backpacks and he has a Samsonite large enough to pack all of Dante’s stuff in on top of his own. *My mother*, he thinks, shaking his head. *Gotta love her.*

With his lap free, Ryan turns the wheelchair around to get a look at the rest of the room. Beside the dresser is a small fridge and next to that a large, nineteen inch TV in an alcove by the window. There’s a coffee table in front of the TV and a long couch that looks like something his mother would pick out for their family room. It has those same overstuffed cushions she likes, that scalloped back, a white and gray striped design that makes it look as if it’ll never see cleaner days. A remote control sits on the coffee table, along with a channel listing and *TV Guide*.

Behind him, Dante opens the bag of toiletries and dumps them out onto the bed. “Damn,” he mutters over the clank of bottles. “We bought all this crap?”

“My mom did,” Ryan says. Wheeling across the room, he sets the brake on his chair and climbs onto the couch. Stretching his right leg out, he rests his feet on the coffee table and sits back against the

cushions—it feels good to be out of that chair. “Come over here, baby,” he murmurs, patting the seat beside him.

Dante laughs. “In a minute.” Ryan leans his head back against the couch and lets his eyes close into thin slits, but he can still see his boyfriend from the corner of his vision, scooping up their toiletries in both arms. He heads into the bathroom—Ryan hears the light click on, hears a clatter as Dante sets everything down on the sink. *Never been in a hotel before*, Ryan muses—he can’t get over that. *This summer we’ll take a trip, just the two of us, hop in my Jeep and head on down the shore. Stone Harbor or Cape May, or Wildwood even. We’ll get a room with a balcony that looks out over the beach and we’ll lay awake at night, listening to the tide.* He can envision it now, Dante’s skin dappled with moonlight, dusky against white sheets, his flesh smooth and soft against Ryan’s own, their bodies fitted together like two halves of one whole. Why wait until summer? The minute he’s walking again, the second he’s out of that chair, they’re gone.

He hears Dante approach, his footsteps faint on the carpeting. Through half-closed eyes Ryan sees him skirt the table, and then his boyfriend sinks down to the cushions beside him, one hand rubbing along Ryan’s inner thigh. “Baby,” Dante whispers, kissing him tenderly. “I’ve waited *hours* for this.”

Ryan’s hand comes up to stroke Dante’s face, his neck, his chest. It fists in the front of Dante’s jacket, pulling him closer as their kiss deepens and Dante moans into him, presses him back to the couch, straddles his leg with one knee against his crotch where he’s already begun to throb. *Now*, Ryan thinks as Dante covers his chin and cheeks and lips with hungry kisses. *Now*, as he gets his hands beneath Dante’s jacket and pushes it back, down his arms, away. *Now*, when Dante fumbles with the waistband of Ryan’s jeans, working the button loose, pushing the zipper down, rubbing at him through the taut material of his boxers. *Now—*

Someone knocks on their door and Ryan can hear muffled giggles from the hall. “Go away,” he moans, arching up into Dante as his boyfriend pulls back. “I thought we said no interruptions.”

“It’s gotta be Josey,” Dante tells him. He sighs and climbs off of Ryan, sits down beside him, picks up Ryan’s arm and drapes it around his shoulders before snuggling up close. “I’d know that laugh anywhere,” he says, rubbing at the erection that tents through Ryan’s open jeans. “Tell her to go away.”

Ryan laughs. “You tell her,” he says. “She’s your friend. Tell her she’s busting up our groove.”

The knock comes again. “Dante?” someone calls out and it *is* Josey, Ryan recognizes her voice. “Ryan? You guys in yet?”

“Maybe if we don’t say anything...” Dante whispers, hopeful. His fingers are doing such wonderful things to Ryan, kneading his hard flesh, stroking his length, pressing in all the right places and he thinks that’s a wonderful idea, just sit here quiet until Josey goes away, he can do that.

A third knock before someone down the hall calls out her name. Becca more than likely—Ryan hears the disappointment in her voice when Josey calls out, “Coming!”

Footsteps moving away from their room, shouts from other skaters down the hall, slamming doors, the distant hum of the elevator, and Ryan lets out a breath he didn’t know he was holding. It comes out in a rush of giggles and Dante starts laughing, too, squeezing his dick through his underwear until Ryan moans again. “Now we’re alone,” Dante purrs, his lips finding Ryan’s. Beneath his touch, the fly of Ryan’s boxers unsnaps as they kiss, a warm hand grasps him, rubbing and kneading and loving him until he comes.

Three more days of this, Ryan thinks, gasping Dante’s name. He plans to savor every single moment.



Some time later, after Ryan's heart stops racing and Dante's cleaned his lower abdomen with a hot washcloth, he reaches for the wheelchair only to have his boyfriend push it away. "Dante," he sighs, sitting up. His boxers are still damp and his jeans feel clammy where they're zipped up over the shorts. "Next time, we take it all off. Now I'm going to have to sit through that damn luncheon with wet pants. My chair—"

Sticking out his leg, Dante gives the chair another slight push to send it further out of reach. "No," he says, wrapping his arms around Ryan's waist. He buries his head against Ryan's chest and sighs, "Stay here."

Ryan would love to. But a glance at the clock on the dresser tells him it's been a good half hour since they checked in and knowing his mother, she'll be calling the hotel soon to see if they've arrived. If he doesn't call her first, she'll want to know why. Somehow he doesn't think *Dante gave me a handjob* is a good enough excuse for her. "I have to call home," he says as he sits up. Dante clings to him stubbornly. "Come on, baby. We can cuddle over on the bed but if I don't tell my mom we're here, she'll have a fit." He gives Dante a slight shove. "Can you get my chair?"

"No." Dante stretches as he stands, his t-shirt pulling up to expose his flat stomach, and Ryan bites playfully at the bulge in the front of his pants. When his teeth close over empty air just inches from Dante's crotch, his boyfriend laughs and dances away. "You want to take care of that for me right now?"

"After I call home," Ryan promises. Looking up at Dante with large, sad eyes, he pouts and asks in a small voice, "My chair?"

But Dante shakes his head. "I said no. You're walking."

"I'm not—" Ryan starts. It's as far as he gets before Dante grabs his arms and hauls him up. Suddenly he's standing and pain rips through his right calf, up his thigh, across his groin to pool in his

lower back. "Dante," he hisses, putting all of his weight on his left leg. That hurts, too, but not as bad, and Dante's there, holding onto him, his arms around Ryan's waist. "Jesus."

"I'm sorry," Dante murmurs. "God, I didn't mean—Ryan, I thought...I didn't know it'd hurt like that, I'm sorry."

Ryan fists his hands into the back of Dante's shirt, hugs him close for support. "It's okay," he sighs—the pain is beginning to fade now, or maybe he's just getting used to it, he doesn't know, but as long as he keeps his right foot up off the ground, it's okay. *I'm standing*, he thinks, and he doesn't know whether to laugh or cry, he doesn't know what to say or do or feel. All he knows is that he's standing, *standing*, and he's holding his boy in his arms and he's burrowing his face into Dante's neck and after all this time, he's finally on his feet. Now he *does* laugh, a shaky sound that makes Dante pull back to make sure he hasn't cracked. "I'm fine," Ryan assures him. Touching his boyfriend's face, he murmurs, "I love looking at you and not *up* at you."

Dante leans into his palm, then kisses Ryan's thumb as it smoothes down his cheek. "I don't know what I was thinking," he whispers. "I didn't mean for it to hurt but maybe you could try to walk some? When it's just you and me alone. If you want."

"You're too good to me," Ryan says, though his body disagrees. His left leg is beginning to tremble and when the toes of his right foot touch the floor, pain sears through him again. Still, he's on his feet, Dante's doing, and he likes the way he has to duck his head just slightly to kiss his boy, he likes that he's the taller one now. He loves Dante's upturned face, his eyes looking up at *him* for once, and they kiss until his knee buckles beneath him. "Damn," he mutters, staggering back. His right foot hits the couch, sending a fiery pain along the muscles of his leg.

Dante catches him before he can fall. "Watch it," he says, helping Ryan stand. "Let me get your chair—"

“Just hold me,” Ryan tells him. Glancing over his shoulder, he sees the bed a few feet away—he can make it. “It’s not that far.”

Together they manage to cross the room, Ryan hobbling and Dante holding him upright. When they reach the bed, Ryan sinks to the mattress with a grateful sigh, then lies back, stretching out on top of the cool comforter. He stares up at the ceiling and blinks away sudden tears. *I walked*, he thinks, turning his head so he can see the couch. It looks so far away. *From there to here, I walked*. If not for the pain subsiding in his legs and the memory of Dante’s hands on his waist, he wouldn’t believe it.

Dante climbs over him onto the bed, his legs draped across Ryan’s as he lies down, props his head up with one hand, and smiles at him. “You’ll be out of that chair in no time, baby,” he says, poking Ryan in the side. He laughs and slaps at his boyfriend—when Dante tries to poke him again, Ryan catches his hand and laces their fingers together. “I know, I know,” Dante concedes, kissing Ryan’s elbow. “You’re ticklish there. Call your mom.”

The phone’s on the table between the beds and Ryan can just barely reach it without moving. He snags the cord and pulls it towards him, knocking the receiver off the cradle. “Fuck,” he mutters, tugging at the cord, but the phone’s secured to the table and doesn’t move. “Piece of shit—”

“I’ll get it.” Sitting up, Dante retrieves the receiver from the floor and hands it to Ryan. Then he dials Ryan’s home number from memory without being asked, Ryan thinks that’s cute. “Tell her I said hi.”

“I will.” Ryan listens to the phone ring in his ear while he strokes Dante’s thigh absently. “Answer already, will you?” Dante slides off the bed. “Where are you going?” he wants to know.

“I’m gonna start to unpack,” Dante says. At the other bed, he unzips one of his duffle bags and up-ends it onto the mattress. “Tell her—”

“You said hi, I know.” Ryan watches Dante riffle through his clothes, enjoying the way his boyfriend’s sweats pull tight across his ass when he bends over. “If she ever answers the fucking—” The phone stops in mid-ring. “Hey, we’re here.”

It’s his mother—he knew it would be. “Hi, honey,” she says, her too bright voice tinny through the connection. “Did you get there alright?”

Ryan rolls his eyes and reaches out for Dante—his fingers scrape across the back of his boyfriend’s thigh but that’s it. “No, Mom,” he says, smiling when Dante turns around to grin at him. “The bus ran into a ditch and half the skate team went up in flames. Of *course* we got here alright. Would I be calling you if we didn’t?”

She doesn’t answer. He can almost feel the ire brewing in her and with a dramatic sigh, he says, “*Mom*. I’m only joking.” Still nothing. He reaches for Dante again, but his boyfriend eludes him this time, carrying his clothes to the dresser to put them away. Another sigh, and Ryan adds, “Dante’s being mean to me.”

“I am not!” Dante cries. He kneels in front of the dresser and looks up at Ryan in the mirror, laughing. “Tell her—”

“He says hi.” Ryan sticks his tongue out at Dante and cups his crotch, still damp from his own cum.

Dante winks at him. “Anytime, anywhere,” he says, causing Ryan to laugh. *Right now*, he thinks—he’s nineteen, and look at his boyfriend, he’s amazing. He can’t get enough of him. Right now is a damn good time to get it on again.

But his mother’s stern voice sobers him up. “Mean how?” she asks. “Hi Dante.”

“She says hi back,” Ryan tells him. In the mirror, Dante smiles at him and nods before returning to the task of putting their clothes away.

“Mean how?” his mother asks again. “Ryan, maybe this wasn’t such a good idea—”

“Jesus,” Ryan sighs. “I’m kidding, Mom. He pushed through everyone else to get me on the elevator first, okay? And he put all the crap you bought into the bathroom for me, and now he’s putting away my clothes, and he helped me walk from the couch to the bed—”

“You walked?” He laughs and nods, even though she can’t see the gesture. Excitement fills her voice. “Oh, honey, that’s great! You didn’t hurt yourself, did you? Are you okay? What—”

“I’m *fine*,” he assures her, exasperated. Damn, the way she’s acting, he thinks maybe he told her he flew instead, she’s that worked up. “It’s nothing all that great. We’re not talking miles here. I can fall off the bed and land on the couch, okay? Which I *didn’t* do,” he adds quickly, before she can ask. “I’m fine, Mom, really. I just called to say hi. I have to go.”

His mother sighs. “What about your room? Is it okay for you?”

“It’s fine,” he says. “There’s a clothes rack where I can reach it, and a low sink, and Dante’s putting my clothes in the lower drawers. It’ll be fine. He’s here to help me if I need it.”

“What about the bathroom?” she presses. “I told them specifically—”

“I *know*,” he sighs. Doesn’t she *ever* let up? “I didn’t look in the bathroom,” Ryan admits. “Dante was in there, not me.” Raising his voice to include his boyfriend, he asks, “Does it have bars?” When Dante nods, Ryan tells her, “He says it has bars so it’s all good.”

Out in the hall, people race through the corridor, hitting the doors as they pass. “Come on, you guys!” someone calls, a kid by the sound of the voice, but then a coach comes by, knocking door to door. “Lunch in the first floor banquet room,” she says, tapping on one door, then crossing the hall to tap on another. Outside of their room, she says it again, “Lunch in the first floor banquet room. Come on, guys. This is a mandatory event. Come on.”

“I’ll call you later, okay?” Ryan asks, sitting up. He should’ve known he couldn’t make this quick with her—she never lets him off

that easily. “They’re telling us it’s time for the luncheon now, remember I told you about that?” He knows she remembers, because she made him give her the schedule he jotted down at the last club meeting, and knowing her it’s probably stuck to the fridge with magnets so she always knows where he is at any given moment. “I’ll call you tomorrow, first thing, before we go down to breakfast. How’s that sound?”

“Ryan—” she starts. She’s heard that from him before.

“I promise,” he assures her. Down the hall, the coach calls out that lunch is in the first floor banquet room, how many times does she have to say that? “I’ll talk to you later, Mom. Thanks again. Bye.”

When he hangs up Dante is there, leaning over the back of Ryan’s wheelchair. “Your ride, *señor*?” he asks, motioning to the empty seat. Before Ryan can get into it, Dante stops him with a gentle kiss. “Love you,” he whispers, his lips lingering on Ryan’s own.

“Love you, too,” Ryan breathes. Stroking a hand through Dante’s hair, he rests his forehead against his boyfriend’s temple and sighs. “Can’t we just order something from room service and stay in bed? Eat naked, what do you say?”

“I say it’s a great idea,” Dante laughs. Then he jerks a thumb at the closed door and the noisy hall beyond and says, “But you try telling *them* that. Saddle up, boyfriend.” Ryan gives him a sad look and Dante laughs again. “Don’t pout, baby. It makes you irresistible.”

Ryan’s frown dissolves into a grin. “I’ll have to keep that in mind,” he says, climbing into his wheelchair. It seems easier now, he puts more weight on his left leg and there’s only a hint of pain when he bumps his brace on the side of the chair. Maybe Dante’s right, maybe he should use this time to work on walking again. Perhaps when they arrive home on Sunday he can take the bus’s steps himself, and the look on his mother’s face when she sees *that* will be simply priceless.



The luncheon is everything Ryan dreads and more. He's seen it before—all sporting event luncheons are the same, aren't they? The banquet hall decked out in the team's colors, card tables scattered around the room and draped in white plastic cloth, the buffet table along one wall. Dante guides Ryan around the side of the room to the front, where a long head table with placards is set up for the skate club officials. The wheelchair can't possibly fit through the small aisles between the tables and Ryan doesn't want to be in the way. "This good?" Dante asks, stopping at an empty table along the aisle. When Ryan nods, his boyfriend moves one of the chairs aside and eases him up to the table. Then he takes the seat across from him and smiles. "You want me to get you something to eat?"

"I think we have to wait," Ryan tells him. Usually with things like this, they have a few speeches they want to get out of the way first, then they go on and on about sportsman-like behavior, what's expected this weekend, and what's not allowed. Drinking, that's up there number one, and Ryan's been on enough of these trips to know that someone here will get caught with alcohol before Sunday, that's just the way these things go. No switching rooms—the hockey team did that at the playoffs last year, just to fuck with the coach's head, every single player switched with another and they would've never been caught if not for Jacoby's mom calling his room and getting Ryan instead. *That* was funny though at the time, he thought the whole damn team would be suspended. "What if I needed to get in touch with you in an emergency?" his own mother had asked. "Would you think this stunt was so funny then?"

But looking around the room at the skaters who are filing in, Ryan doesn't think this bunch is that rebellious. Yeah, maybe someone will get drunk—his bets are on Dietrich, he seems the type and if he gets into the booze, Ryan wants to make sure he and Dante are far away from the bastard then, guys like him tend to get mean-spirited when

they drink—and someone might lose their virginity here, but that’s about it. *Correction*, he thinks, and he fiddles with his napkin as his cheeks heat up, *someone WILL lose their virginity this weekend, and it sure as hell better be me*. Seeing his blush, Dante leans across the table and wants to know, “What’re you thinking about?”

“You,” Ryan admits. He’s just about to ask if maybe they should check out the hotel gift shop for condoms after lunch when he sees Josey enter the hall, Becca right behind her. The girls look around and Ryan thinks maybe they could duck under the table to avoid being seen but it’s already too late, Josey’s heading their way. “Your girlfriend’s coming over.”

“She’s not my girlfriend,” Dante says, turning, but he smiles as Josey comes up to their table. “Hey Josey, Becca.”

“Hey guys.” Josey pulls out the seat between them and asks, “Mind if we join you?”

Dante looks at Ryan, who simply shrugs. “Why not?” he asks.

“We stopped by your room,” Josey says, sinking into the chair. She grins at Ryan before turning her attention to Dante. Becca glances at Ryan, her mouth twisted into a halfhearted attempt at a smile, and then she looks away. *What’s that look for?* Ryan wonders. He’d ask but Josey’s already talking a mile a minute. “I knocked but maybe you weren’t in yet? Three twenty-eight, right? That’s what the guy at the counter wrote down when he handed you your key and there’s a handicapped sign on the door—”

“Josey,” Becca warns, her throaty voice low. When her sister gives her a quizzical look, she shakes her head in a tight, subtle gesture that Ryan doesn’t miss.

Josey frowns at her. “What? I just said—”

“Don’t,” Becca murmurs.

Before it can go any further, one of the officials at the head table stands and calls for silence. Ryan shoots Dante a quick glance, one that says he needs to take care of this business with Josey and he needs to take care of it soon—she actually *watched* the guy at the reg-

istration desk write down Dante's room number? That's almost pathetic.

Ryan recognizes the club official as one of the men his mother badgered about the damn bus, an older man with thinning hair and thick jowls. He wears a windsuit that's stretched over his paunch and rustles with each move he makes. "Ladies and gentlemen," he says, and everyone laughs.

With an indulgent smile, he nods and motions for the room to quiet down, his jacket *swish swishing* as he moves his arms. In the back of the hall, someone hollers out, "When do we get to eat?"

The official's smile grows forced and he says, "In a minute, son, just settle down. We have a few things to go over first..."

Ryan tunes him out. It's all the same stuff he's heard before. No drinking, no smoking, no sex. *Well, two out of three ain't bad*, he thinks, suppressing a grin. *That guy's right—just get to the food already*. The sooner they're done here, the sooner they can get back to their room and he can get Josey away from his boy.

"You have a few hours to yourselves after this luncheon," the official continues, his voice beginning to drone on. "There's a rink set up just a few blocks away if you want to practice, but I know you're probably all very tired and skating is the last thing on your mind. Still, if you head out of the hotel, take your guest with you and don't travel alone. We're not responsible for anything that happens outside these doors, you know."

Ryan knows—his mother almost didn't want to sign the release form that the skate club provided. "What if something happens to you?" she kept saying. "This piece of paper says they're not liable for anything. How safe is that?" He had to keep reminding her he's nineteen, Dante's eighteen, they're not kids anymore. Nothing's going to happen to them.

"We have a shuttle running tomorrow," the official tells them, what's his name again? Ryan didn't catch it and doesn't really care—when he looks at the food set out on the buffet table, sand-

wiches and pasta and things that smell heavenly, his stomach growls and he just wants to eat. “It’ll run every hour between here and the rink. And yes, it *is* handicap accessible, we made sure of that.”

God. Behind him someone snickers, and Ryan doesn’t have to look to know it’s Dietrich. If his mother were here, she’d turn around and pin the jackass with an evil stare, or maybe march right over to his table and lay into him about her son and his feelings and didn’t his mother raise him better than that? To make fun of someone less fortunate than him, he can almost hear her now.

Only it’s because of her big mouth that they even feel the need to mention the fact that the shuttle has a wheelchair lift. He’s the only person here who needs it. *Thanks, Mom,* he thinks, glaring at his hands, which have shredded his napkin into thin strips. Just more artillery for Dietrich to use against him. He’s definitely staying out of that guy’s way, at least until he really *can* walk again and can kick that loser’s ass for talking shit to his boy.

CHAPTER 18



Dante's not too impressed with the lunch—after Mama Espinosa's cooking, most everything else pales in comparison. But he paid for it, or rather, Mr. Vasquez did, and he isn't one to let a free meal pass him by. It would have been nicer if they had the table to themselves, just him and Ryan across from him, they could look into each other's eyes as they ate and pretend they were two lovers on an weekend trip, dining at exquisite restaurants and taking in the town.

But they're not alone, Josey's here with her sister, and she keeps talking talking *talking* until Dante just wants to ask her to shut up, please? Every now and then he smiles past her to ask Ryan something but she's quick to answer, ever eager to snag his attention again. By the time they're finished eating, Ryan doesn't bother to say anything at all, just sits with his arms folded in front of him and frowns at a spot in the flowered display at the center of the table. "So what are you guys planning to do now?" Josey asks, pushing her plate away to signal that she's done. She says *you guys* but Dante knows she only means him. She hasn't looked in Ryan's direction since she sat down.

He shrugs, glances across the table in the hopes of catching his boyfriend's eye, and sighs when Ryan doesn't look up at him. "I'm not sure," he admits. "We still have to unpack—"

"Oh, me too." Josey laughs, a sound that's grown more and more annoying over the past hour, and she flips her hair over her shoulder

to get it out of her face. “But I might head on over to the rink in awhile, just to check it out.” Her voice takes on a hopeful tone when she asks, “Did you want to maybe practice later? I know you’re tired—”

“I’m sure they’re exhausted,” Becca says. She hasn’t spoken much at all, except to try to curb her sister’s endless prattle, and once she asked Ryan how he knew Dante. His boyfriend answered in clipped tones that told him Josey’s schoolgirl crush is getting out of hand. “Skating,” he said, and didn’t elaborate.

Now Josey gives her sister an annoyed look. “I know that,” she says again. “We’re all tired.”

“Then why don’t you practice tomorrow?” Becca counters. She glances at Ryan, hunkered into himself as if he’s not paying attention to them, and then at Dante, who forces a tight smile and looks away. *Don’t get into it here, he prays, and please God, not over me.*

Josey sighs dramatically and flips her hair again. “We’re going to practice tomorrow, *Becca*. I’m just saying maybe we can get a few hours in tonight, okay?”

So it’s we now, Dante thinks. He’s sure Ryan’s picked up on *that*. Stretching his foot out beneath the table, he nudges his boyfriend’s left leg and asks, “Ryan?”

He wants to ask, “Baby?” He wants to reach across the table and cover Ryan’s hand with his own, give him one of his sunny grins, rub the smooth flesh along his wrist and up his arm and ask him what *he* wants to do. He should do that, really, because then Josey will get the picture without him having to say the words, she can’t deny proof if she sees it with her own eyes, she’s not *that* delusional, is she?

Slowly, Ryan raises his gaze to meet Dante’s. One corner of his mouth twitches into a half-smile that disappears when he speaks. “What?” he asks, his voice gruff, unused. He hasn’t had much chance to talk at all since Josey sat down.

“Do you want to practice tonight?” He asks as if Ryan’s the one who will be out on the ice with him, not Josey. He wonders if she even notices.

Ryan shrugs, not interested. “If you’re up to it,” he says softly.

That’s not what I want to hear, Dante thinks, staring into piercing blue eyes that stare back. *Tell me you want to come with me. Tell me you want me to stay in with you. Tell me what you’re thinking, baby. Tell me what you want me to do and I’ll do it, please.* With a glance at Josey, Ryan mutters, “Didn’t they say the shuttle won’t run until tomorrow?” Becca nods, and Ryan shrugs again. “It’s a few blocks away.”

A few blocks, one or two, it’s not that far to walk, but what about the wheelchair? Does Ryan want to troop through the city in that? *Tell me*, Dante pleads silently. All Ryan says is, “If you want to, sure. I guess.”

If you want to. You, not *we*, Dante doesn’t like that. “So do you want to?” Josey presses.

Dante ignores her. “Are *you* up to it?” he asks. When he doesn’t answer, Dante nudges him beneath the table again, and the frown on Ryan’s face starts to pull into a slight pout, his chin crumbles the same way Mrs. Talonovich’s does when her son has pushed her far enough. That settles it, they’re staying in. Shaking his head, he stands up from the table and says, “I don’t think so, Josey.”

“Well, we don’t *have* to—” she starts.

“You go ahead,” he says, walking around behind her just to get out of her constant stare, but she cranes her neck back to watch him. At Ryan’s chair, he leans down and asks, “You about ready to go now?”

“You can practice,” Ryan whispers, his voice trembling slightly. “You don’t have to let me stop you.”

“You’re not stopping me.” Gently he eases Ryan’s chair out from under the table, flashing Josey a quick smile. “We’ll see you girls later, okay?”

Before he can object, Josey rises to her feet. “Hey, we’ll head up with you,” she says. “Becca? You’re done here, right?”

“God,” Ryan groans under his breath. Dante’s smile freezes in place—can’t she take a hint? “You want to help us unpack, too?” his boyfriend asks in that bitter tone of voice he usually reserves for his mother. “Or hey, maybe just camp out in our room until dinner, what do you say?”

Dante rubs a hand along Ryan’s back to soothe him. “Shh,” he murmurs.

“We don’t mind,” Ryan growls.

Josey frowns at her sister. “Do you think—”

“I think *we* need to unpack,” Becca says, rising. When Josey starts to object, Becca cuts her off. “Thanks for letting us sit with you guys.”

“No problem,” Dante tells her. *Just don’t make a habit of it*, he adds silently.



In the lobby he tries to put as much distance between himself and Josey as he possibly can, pushing Ryan’s wheelchair at an almost breakneck speed towards the elevators. “I’m sorry,” he whispers over and over again. “I didn’t know she’d be like that. I am *so* sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Ryan tells him. He grips the sides of his wheelchair and laughs when Dante takes a corner on two wheels. “Can you ease up just a little? I don’t want to lose my lunch.”

“I’m sorry,” Dante says again. He slows down, then glances back to see that Josey and Becca are still a ways off, they’re far enough now, so he slows down to a normal pace. “I didn’t mean—”

Looking up at him, Ryan forces a deep frown. “Stop apologizing or I’ll have to whip you.”

Dante grins. “Now *that* sounds promising,” he purrs.

“No biting though,” Ryan says. “Isn’t that what you told me? You’d try anything once but not that, it’s no fun.”

Dante thinks back to when he said that, when they first met and he offered Ryan his hand to shake—what, just a week ago? Was that all? *And look how far we've come*, he thinks, a silly grin tugging at his lips. *Look how far we have left to go*. Leaning over Ryan's shoulder, he murmurs, "Maybe we can *make* it fun."

The elevators loom ahead. It's just a short ride to their floor and *then* they'll be alone, and he can apologize with kisses instead of mere words, he can erase the last hour with Josey and make Ryan realize how much he means to him—

Cruel laughter echoes down the corridor and Dietrich's voice rings out, impossibly close. "Hurry, Espinosa. Maybe if you're lucky, you boys can have the elevator all to yourselves."

Dante slows down even further, turns and sees Dietrich at the head of a pack of skaters, three or four guys from the team who have never been overly friendly towards him. Because he outskates them—Dante knows that's why they don't like him much, the girls wouldn't either except they don't race against him and they like his good looks. But the guys take offense to his speed and his appearance, he's heard other skaters grumble about him, he knows he's not a club favorite. The crowds love him, yes, but his own teammates? They want to be the ones to win out there on the ice, not him. They want to hear their names shouted with fervor as they cross the finish line first, not his.

Josey walks a few steps ahead of Dietrich and at his words, her face burns with anger or embarrassment, Dante's not sure which. "Just ignore him," Ryan mutters.

Dante thinks that's a hell a good idea, just ignore the bastard and get back to their room, don't rise to the fight. When Dietrich sees him, though, he closes his eyes and thrusts out his hips. "Uh uh uh," he moans, clawing at his crotch. "Going down on each other while you're going up."

"Dante," Ryan warns, his voice tight with emotion. Dante feels his hands curl into fists and *God* what he wouldn't give to get the chance

to hold his own against that asshole. Get in one good punch, that's all it'd take, knock him straight the fuck out and—"Just come on."

And ruin your change at Regionals, he reminds himself, turning away. And Nationals, World Cup, the Olympics, all gone. Just ignore him.

In a high falsetto, Dietrich calls out, "Daaaaannnte! Suck it, Dante. Oh yes, oh yes—"

Josey's voice breaks through his. "Stop it!" she cries. Dante glances back and sees her in Dietrich's face, shouting up at him, her face blotchy and red with anger. "Just stop it, Wil! Jeez, can't you lay off? You're just jealous because you'll never be anywhere *near* the skater he is and you know it so just shut up and leave him alone!"

For a minute Dante thinks Dietrich will drop it—indecision wavers across his face, he didn't expect her to stand up to him, not when his attack wasn't even aimed at her. But there are too many others in the lobby now, too big a crowd, and he can't stand down. Sneering, he tugs at a lock of Josey's hair and tells her, "*You're just jealous because there's nothing he wants between your legs, sweetie.*"

"Oh God," Dante sighs. From the corner of his eye he can see Ryan's hands on the armrests of his wheelchair, his knuckles white from the grip, and his boyfriend shifts his legs anxiously, as if toying with the idea of launching himself up at Dietrich. *No. That's the last thing Dante wants, Ryan doesn't need to get into this, he's not ready yet, his legs aren't healed enough for him to tangle with anyone now. He starts to push the wheelchair, hoping to keep Ryan out of the fray. I'm doing it to save your sorry ass, Wil, he thinks grimly. Wheelchair or not, I'm sure my boy would have no problem wiping this floor with you.*

"Can't you just face the facts, Josey?" Dietrich is saying, his voice traveling the length of the hall to reach Dante. "You're a fag hag. Tell me, do you think about them getting it on when you rub one out?"

Suddenly there's a sound like the smack of skin on skin, and the skaters gathered gasp as one. Dante whirls around, so sure that Dietrich's gone too far this time, he hit Josey or something worse—

But Dietrich's rocked back on his heels, held up by two guys behind him, a dazed expression on his face. He holds his hand against his nose and as Dante watches, he pulls away fingers wet with blood. "Oh shit," Ryan murmurs. Dante turns the chair slightly, just enough so his boyfriend can see what's happening, too. "She didn't—"

No, *Josey* didn't, Becca did—the older girl stands over Dietrich, her face flushed with anger, her hands balled into fists at her sides. "You fucking *bitch*," Dietrich spits, his teeth flecked with more blood.

"You leave my sister alone," Becca tells him. She plays lacrosse, doesn't she? Dante thinks that was the sport Josey mentioned, and he's not sure what it's all about but *damn* it must make for some tough girls. Josey stands behind her sister, just as shocked as Dietrich seems to be. "You can pick on anyone else you want to here, I don't care," Becca says, "but if you so much as *speak* to her again, you're answering to me. Got that?"

Dietrich shakes his head, stunned. Pinning Josey with a hard stare, he swears, "I'll have you kicked off this team for this, Banks."

But Becca just laughs. "She didn't hit you, idiot, I did. I'm not on your damn team. What are you gonna do, tell Daddy some big bad *girl* punched you in the face?"

He lunges at her but his friends hold him back. "You're suspended," he promises, looking past her to Josey. Then his gaze drifts to Dante and Ryan, and he forces a harsh laugh. "And you're dead," he snarls. He shakes his friends' hands off of him, wipes his nose with the back of his hand as he stands. His sleeve comes away streaked with blood. "Both of you. Fucking queers."

Ryan opens his mouth to say something but Dante turns him away. "Don't," he warns, heading for the elevators. He grips the wheelchair's handlebars tight and still can't seem to keep his hands from shaking.



Upstairs, finally, *alone*. By the time their door closes on the rest of the world, Ryan's settled into a deep funk, hands in his lap, gaze glued to some spot on the floor. When Dante asks him something, *anything*, Ryan just grunts in reply. "Do you want to lie down?" *Eh*. "Do you want to watch TV maybe?" A barely perceptible shrug. "Baby, talk to me!" Nothing.

Frustrated, Dante sits on the bed and stares at Ryan, willing his boyfriend to look back. He doesn't—the floor's so much more interesting right now, and Dante would give anything to know what thoughts are whirling behind those stormy eyes. Looking around the room, Dante tries to find something that will get Ryan's attention. He's dwelling on Dietrich, has to be, it's in the angry clench of his jaw, the way his hands bunch into fists on his thighs. With a sigh, Dante says, "Ryan, don't let him get to you. He's an ass, plain and simple. Do you maybe want—"

"I don't want to do anything," Ryan mutters bitterly. "Jesus, Dante, I can't fucking *walk*, there's nothing much I can do anyway."

Dante bites his lower lip and doesn't respond to that. *He's hurting*, a voice inside his mind whispers. It sounds suspiciously like his mama's. *Just let him be*. Taking a deep breath, he nods slowly and says, "Okay. I'm not going to answer that. I'll just..." He looks around, sees the suitcase and his other bag on the bed behind him, and nods again. "I'll just unpack, and when you're in a better mood, then we'll talk, okay? How's that?" Ryan doesn't reply—Dante didn't expect him to—but he looks away as Dante stands and for a brief moment pain shines bright in his eyes. *Oh baby, I know*, Dante thinks, walking around Ryan to the other bed. *Believe me, I know*.

He starts with Ryan's suitcase just because it's big. And locked, but the key's attached to the handle with a tiny plastic loop, so it's nothing to pop it open. Inside are more clothes than Ryan can possibly wear between now and Sunday—heh, more than they *both* could

wear, Mrs. Talonovich really went all out. She even packed a few pajama bottoms, though Dante hopes they won't need those. He's never slept nude before—even with Jared they kept their boxers on in case his mama came in his room during the night—but just thinking of sliding between the sheets to curl up against Ryan's naked body makes him shiver with delight.

T-shirts, sweats, boxers, socks...*tons* of socks, Mrs. T must think Ryan's going to wear them out or something, she packed so *many*. Towels, like Ryan said, and pillowcases? Dante can't imagine why. A laundry bag, that's something he wouldn't have thought of, a thin blanket, a camera and a handful of film. Behind him, Dante hears the faint *squee squee* of Ryan's wheels, and he glances over his shoulder to see his boyfriend maneuvering his chair to a spot near the couch. Maybe he'll watch TV, Dante hopes. Anything to take his mind off of Dietrich's hateful words. *Fucking queers*—why does he make it sound like such a *bad* thing that Dante loves another boy? That he can stare into Ryan's eyes and see his own soul staring back? What's it matter to Wil Dietrich, anyway? "I love you, baby," Dante says, turning back to the suitcase.

He doesn't expect a reply, given Ryan's mood, but he hears a muffled response, "Love you, too," and that's enough for him.

Tucked into the suitcase, beneath all of the clothes, is a duffle bag very similar to Dante's own. Curious, he extracts it, surprised at the sudden weight, the familiar clank of metal. With a laugh, he unzips the bag and peers inside—the heady scent of sweat and leather and ice drifts up to him, *skates*. Ryan's hockey skates, he mentioned his mother packed them, didn't he? Gingerly Dante picks up one of the skates, smiles at himself in the polished blade—shorter than his own blades and thicker, made for easy movement and not necessarily speed, but still sharp enough to be covered with a thin plastic guard. "I thought you were just kidding me," he says, putting the skate back into the bag. "When you said she stuck them in here—"

Something heavy hits the floor by the couch and Dante whirls around. “Ryan?” he asks, his heart pounding in his throat. *Oh my God.*

His boyfriend lies twisted at the foot of his wheelchair, his face red with exertion, his eyes squeezed tight against sudden pain. “Dante,” he gasps—he lies on his stomach, one arm trapped beneath his body and the other struggling to lift his weight. His legs, his *legs*, Dante thinks, dropping the bag to hurry to his side. *Jesus please, his legs don’t let his legs be hurt worse don’t let him be hurt PLEASE I’ll do anything just don’t let him be hurt.*

“Ryan,” Dante sighs as he falls to his knees beside his boyfriend. “Don’t, baby. Oh God, don’t move, okay? Just don’t move.”

But Ryan rolls onto his side and Dante guides his head into his lap. “Shh,” he murmurs, smoothing the hair back from the fevered brow on his thigh. “Shh, baby. Shh.” Ryan’s right leg lies beneath him at an awkward angle, the brace caught in the foot rest of the wheelchair. His left leg, his good leg, kicks out feebly, trying to connect with something, trying to find purchase, and only succeeds in pushing the chair. “Shh,” Dante says again, covering Ryan’s face with his hand. He feels tears in his palm, hot breath along his skin. “Oh Jesus, what happened?”

“I can’t *walk*, Dante,” Ryan mutters, and he kicks at the chair again, pushing it further away. Where it’s caught on his brace, it tugs at his leg, and he cries out in pain and frustration. “He talks all that shit about you and I can’t even *stop* him. She gets in one good swing and I just have to sit there and take it? God.”

When he kicks out again, Dante catches his ankle, eases his leg to the floor. “Honey,” he chokes, blinking back tears of his own. *You can’t walk yet, baby*, he thinks, but he doesn’t say the words—he doesn’t *have* to, Ryan knows that already. *You can’t just stand up by yourself and not expect to fall down.* “You’re not healed yet—”

“*Fuck*,” Ryan sobs. He buries his head in Dante’s lap, fists his hands in his sweatpants, his face a hot pressure against his crotch. “I

can't even fight *back*. It's just not fair." Against Dante's body, his voice cracks like fine china.

Dante pets down Ryan's mussed hair, rubs along his neck, his back. "Shh," he whispers. "Shh." As carefully as he can, he tries to unhook the brace from the chair, but at Ryan's sharp intake of breath he settles for loosening the brace, and he rubs along Ryan's leg, feeling for any bruises or breaks. Nothing, just trembling skin that scares him. "Are you alright?" he asks, tracing small circles into Ryan's back.

Sniffing, Ryan rests his head on Dante's thigh and stares past him at the blank TV screen. "I'm fine," he mumbles, his voice thick with tears. "Just can't fucking *walk* but other than that—"

"It's going to take time," Dante tells him. His vision shimmers with his own tears. "Baby, you can't pull stunts like this, you're going to hurt yourself."

Ryan squeezes his eyes shut like a small child will when told something he doesn't want to hear. "God," Dante sighs. "When I turned around and saw you on the floor..." He can't continue, the image strangles him. His whole body aches at the memory—for a moment he thought the worst, an aneurysm or blood clot to the brain, he'd lose Ryan forever, before they even really started he'd be gone. He can't keep the tremors from his voice when he murmurs, "Don't do that to me again, please. I don't...Ryan, just please. Don't."

Leaning heavily on Dante's arm, his boyfriend struggles into an upright position. With slow, jerky motions, he untangles his legs, straightens them out, until they stretch along the floor towards the bed. He rubs at his arm, the one he landed on, works it back and forth and up and down until he's sure nothing's broken and the socket is limber again. Even that slight movement causes sweat to bead along his upper lip and Dante wipes it away with his forefinger, tracing the curve of Ryan's mouth as it puckers to kiss him. "I didn't think I'd fall," Ryan admits, leaning back on Dante's shoulder. Dante wraps his arms around him as tight as he dares, holds him close. "I

thought I'd stand two seconds, maybe three, and then sit back down and it'd be enough for me. It'd be a start."

With a teary smile, Dante smooths the hair out of his boyfriend's face and replies, "Instead you hit the floor and give me heart failure." Ryan grins at that. "Don't try that again, *muchacho*, please don't. If you want to walk—"

"I do," Ryan says, determination strengthening his voice. "I want to walk right up to that bastard and kick his fucking ass for all the shit he's saying about you."

"He's sort of right," Dante points out. "I mean—"

Ryan shakes his head. "He's *not* right," he growls, angry. "Yeah, we're together, but the way he talks about it makes it horrible and wrong and there's *nothing* wrong about us, Dante. *Nothing*."

Pressing his lips to Ryan's shoulder, Dante sighs. "You can't change his mind with your fists," he mumbles into Ryan's shirt.

"No," Ryan agrees, "I can't. But I can shut him the fuck up."

Dante buries his face into Ryan's neck and kisses the tender flesh. "If you want to walk," he whispers, "let me help you. I'm right here, Ryan. You don't have to do it alone."



They sit on the floor for hours, Dante against the couch with his knees up and Ryan in the space between his legs, leaning back on his chest. His head rests on Dante's shoulder and Dante's arms encircle him, keeping him close. He's not letting go.

The tears have passed, though Dante still trembles when the scene flashes through his mind unbidden, Ryan on the floor, his legs twisted. He can't seem to push the image away, can't seem to let it go, even though he holds his boyfriend tight and he knows Ryan isn't hurt. But it shook him up more than he'd like to admit and every time he thinks of it, he kisses Ryan again, his neck, his cheek, his lips, anywhere to prove to himself that he's okay.

On the other side of the room, the suitcase lies open on the far bed, clothes strewn about, in the midst of being unpacked and waiting until Dante can finish putting them away. Right now though, he's not moving, and he talks to Ryan in half-whispered tones designed to soothe them both. He's not even sure what he's saying anymore—just talks about whatever comes to mind, high school and Jared and Bobby, the skate club, his mama, the way he felt the first time he ever got out on the ice. He talks about things they can do once the weather warms up and Ryan can walk again—he *will* walk again, Dante *knows* this, just as he knows the sun will rise in the morning and the stars will shine at night. He feels it in every beat of his heart, it's there with his Olympic dream, the two mingled together as one.

His words weave pretty images of the two of them, together and away from this small-town skate club, these small-minded folk. They'll travel—regional competitions are in Philadelphia in another two months' time, and nationals are at Lake Placid, Dante's always dreamed of going there, skating on the same ice that a hundred Olympic hopefuls have skated before him. Ryan will get back in his game, he'll be the best damn player *ever*, and scouts will come from as far away as Canada just to see him score. He'll have his pick of teams when he graduates, offers from everyone, maybe *he'll* be in the Olympics too. Every nation will beg for him to play on their team. "Maybe we can be in the same games," Dante murmurs, kissing Ryan again and again. "We'll stay in the same room in the Olympic village and when you sink the puck for a gold, I'll skate out on the ice and cover you with kisses. In front of millions. They'll all know you're my boy then."

Ryan laughs—he's feeling better now, his face isn't as red and his freckles have reappeared on his cheeks as if drawn out by the sun. "You have such wonderful ideas," he breathes, his hand rubbing along Dante's thigh, long fingers in long strokes that move ever

closer to the sweet ache in his crotch. “I hope they all come true, baby, every one of them.”

“They will,” Dante sighs, and Ryan’s hand drifts down, presses against hidden flesh, drifts away. “As long as you stay with me—”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Ryan promises, “as long as you’ll have me.”

“Forever, then.” Dante’s kisses sear the words onto Ryan’s lips.



Dinner isn’t organized by the club, but meals in the hotel restaurant are included in the entrance fee cost and a little after six o’clock, the hall fills with noise, skaters clomping through the corridors, shouting to each other, calling for their friends, heading downstairs to eat. Dante doesn’t move from his spot—he likes Ryan pressed against him, he doesn’t *want* to move—and he doesn’t really think his boyfriend is up to facing anyone else right now. He knows *he* isn’t, especially Josey. The last thing he needs is a rehash of this afternoon’s eternal luncheon and her never-ending chatter. He definitely has to tell her that he’s already taken, if only so he won’t have to avoid her for the rest of this trip.

So instead of going out to eat, Dante calls for room service. He’s never done it before and Ryan laughs at how studiously he pours over the menu, trying to decide what to eat. “It all tastes the same, baby,” his boyfriend tells him, plucking the menu from his hands. “Hotel food is like school food—blech.”

“I liked the spaghetti they had at my school,” Dante says with a laugh as he takes the menu back. When Ryan tries to take it again, Dante strums a hand across his boyfriend’s ticklish chest. “Let me look a minute, hon. Do you know what you want?”

“You,” Ryan whispers, wrapping his arms around Dante’s waist and resting his head on his shoulder. As Dante reads over the menu, Ryan kisses his neck, small damp pecks at first, but his mouth begins to linger and soon his lips suck at Dante’s flesh, his tongue licking

gentle circles into his skin. It's a maddening sensation, so wet, so warm, so amazing that Dante lets his eyes slip closed and the menu drop from his hand so he can hold Ryan against him. Eager hands rub at his stomach, the small paunch of his abdomen that folds over when he sits, his cock straining his sweats, and still that mouth keeps on him, hungry. When Ryan's hand closes over his crotch, Dante arches up against him, all thoughts of food gone.

But suddenly Ryan's pulling away. He snatches the menu where it's fallen to the floor and laughs at the consternation that flickers across Dante's face. "What—" he starts, groggy with lust. Seeing the gleam in his boyfriend's eyes as he looks over the menu, Dante slaps his shoulder. "Ryan! That's not fair."

"More loving later," Ryan tells him with a grin. "I'm starving. So did you want the spaghetti or what?"

Dante pouts. Wiping the saliva from his neck, he mumbles, "I want you to keep doing whatever it was you were doing two seconds ago, is that too much to ask?"

"You know I'll gladly pick up right where we left off," Ryan says. "*After we eat. Spaghetti?*"

They get the spaghetti, two huge plates overflowing with noodles and thick red sauce. And there's salad, bread, strawberry cheesecake for dessert—not as good as the stuff back at Barrett High but damn close, and Dante doesn't realize how hungry he was until he's staring at his empty plate, wondering where his food went. They eat sitting on the floor, Ryan's legs stretched out beneath the coffee table and Dante cross-legged at one end, like the people in anime he's seen on TV. All that's missing are the pillows, still on the bed, and by the time Dante thinks of it, they're already finished eating. Stacking their dirty plates onto the room service cart, he asks, "What do I do with this now?"

"Set it outside the door," Ryan explains. He tries to hoist himself up from the floor to the couch, leaning heavily on the table. "Someone will get it—"

Dante drops the plates and rushes to his side. “Baby, don’t,” he admonishes, catching Ryan’s elbow in a death grip, his heart pounding all over again. “Oh Jesus, every time you do that, it scares me.”

“I’m fine,” Ryan laughs, but he lets Dante help him up onto the couch. Easing back against the cushions, he points at his wheelchair and asks, “Can you bring that over here? I need to start getting ready for bed.”

Wheeling the chair into position by the couch, Dante says, “It’s still early.”

Ryan gives him a sardonic grin. “Oh wait, I forgot, I can just hop in the shower in the morning.” His voice is caustic and biting, and Dante’s just about to apologize when Ryan sighs. “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to take it out on you.”

“I know,” Dante murmurs. It’s Dietrich making him like this, and the pain in his legs, and the fact that he can’t walk. Dante was the same way after he cut his arm open—hated everything, and he couldn’t shower either, for fear of wetting the bandages. He had to settle for a hot washcloth all over his body, which left him feeling dirtier than before he cleaned up. How his mama put up with him while he was recovering, he’ll never know. She’s a saint, no doubt about it, Ryan’s mother too.

“I hate baths,” Ryan mutters, kicking at the coffee table with his left foot. Taking Dante’s hand, he tugs until his boyfriend leans down, then kisses him tenderly. “Hit me when I’m being an asshole, okay? Just pop me across the mouth and I’ll stop.”

Dante laughs. “You’re just evil,” he jokes. “But I like you like that.”

“I’m not evil!” Ryan cries. He punches out playfully but Dante dances away. “I play hockey.”

“Same thing.” Dante laughs as Ryan lunges for him, stretching as far as he can without getting up from the couch, but his fingers merely brush against Dante’s leg. “Don’t hurt yourself,” he warns.

“You sound like my mother,” Ryan growls. “Get back here and take it like a man.”

But Dante pushes the room service cart towards the door, well out of Ryan's reach. "Take your bath first," he says. "Then we'll play."

"You promise?" Ryan asks.

With a nod, Dante grins at his boyfriend. "Cross my heart."



Dante sits on the edge of the bed, flicking through the TV channels as he waits for Ryan to finish his bath. It's been almost fifteen minutes since he left the room service cart outside their door and Ryan disappeared into the bathroom—how long does it take to clean up? *He better not be jerking off in there*, he thinks grimly, flicking to the next channel, then the next. If that's the case, what about him? He wants in on the fun, too.

Then a wicked thought occurs to him and he smiles. Maybe he can speed things up and take matters into his own hands, literally. He pictures Ryan in a tub full of suds, his pale shoulders against the white porcelain, his hair dark and wet. *Speaking of wet...* clicking off the TV, Dante stands and pulls his shirt off over his head as he stretches. If his boy's going to spend half the night in the bathroom, there's no reason why he can't *join* him, is there?

He's outside the bathroom door and hunched over, pushing his sweatpants down past his knees, the beginnings of an erection tenting his briefs, when there's a knock on the door to their room. *Of course*, he thinks with a groan—leave it to someone to interrupt them at a time like this. As he pulls up his pants, whoever it is knocks again, and it doesn't even surprise him when Josey calls out his name. "Dante? It's me, Josey."

Who else? Suddenly he wishes he had his shirt back on. He toys with the idea of retrieving it from the floor beside the bed but she knocks a third time and he sighs as he answers the door. All he has to do is tell her goodnight, that's it. He's not inviting her in, not when his body is already thinking ahead to slipping into the hot bath water with Ryan.

She stands in the hall wearing an oversized t-shirt and leggings, her hair pulled up on the top of her head in a floppy ponytail, and she breaks into a wide grin when she sees him. “Hey!” she cries, like they’re old friends who haven’t seen each other in years. “We missed you guys at dinner.”

Dante holds the door open just a few inches and stands behind it so she can’t gawk at him half-naked. “We ate in,” he says through a forced smile. “Josey, this isn’t really a good time...”

“You guys okay?” she asks, her brow furrowing. “You know, maybe you should talk to someone about Wil. He’s so *mean* to you, saying all that horrible stuff. I mean, jeez, who’s he to talk? He’s rooming with his mother.” She laughs, a bright sound that echoes away down the hall, and Dante notices her lips are shiny with gloss. And is that eyeshadow she has on? “Can you believe Becca *hit* him?” she asks, shaking her head. “Pow, right in the nose. He tried to say I shouldn’t race cause of that but basically the officials told him to stuff it. It wasn’t *me* that hit him.”

“Josey,” Dante sighs—he doesn’t want to deal with this right now. *I want to lock this door, he thinks, and take off all my clothes and hold my boyfriend in the bathtub, is that asking too much?* He imagines that Ryan’s skin is pinked from the hot water by now, his fingertips wrinkled, his body relaxed and just waiting to be touched... “We’re fine, and that’s good that you can still skate Saturday, but I really—”

Glancing past him into the room, Josey asks, “Where’s Ryan?”

“In the bathroom,” he explains. He wants to tell her to just go away but his mama taught him better than that. Still, he can’t think of any way to tell her they want to be alone without telling her what he’s hoping they’ll do. *I want to sex him up, Josey. Dietrich’s right, okay? He’s my boyfriend and I’m not interested in you like that, I’m sorry. But that seems a little rude.* “We’re sort of...” He sighs again. “He’s kind of tired and he wants to get to bed, so I don’t really think it’s a good idea for you to come in.” *There*, he thinks. That was diplomatic enough.

“Oh! I see.” Disappointment clouds her features for a moment, and he thinks maybe he can say goodbye now, he’ll see her in the morning, but she doesn’t get it. Smiling sweetly at him, she asks, “Maybe you can come down to my room then? If you want, Becca won’t mind. We’re watching *Scream*—did you know we get HBO?”

Dante shakes his head. “No,” he says, weary, “I didn’t. Look, Josey, thank you, but...” He trails off and she looks up at him, hopeful, *God*. “I’m sort of tired, too,” he mumbles. “I’m just going to call it a night. I’m sorry.”

“Oh.” Her voice is tiny like a little girl’s, and when she looks down at the floor he can see that it *is* eyeshadow she has on, light blue sparkles that wink at him on her eyelids. “I see. Okay. I just thought...yeah, I understand, you’re sleepy, okay.” With a sigh, she looks down the empty hall and murmurs, “Me too, I guess.”

Jesus. Now he feels like shit. Trying to cheer her up, he suggests, “Maybe tomorrow night, what do you say? Maybe you and Becca can come over and we’ll watch something then, okay?”

The smile she gives him says she knows he’s humoring her, even if she wants to believe otherwise. “Sure.” She waits a moment more and then tells him, “Night, Dante. Sweet dreams.”

“You too, Josey.” When she doesn’t move, he starts to shut the door. “Night.”

“Night,” she whispers.

As he closes the door, he hears her footsteps running down the hall. *I’m not interested*, he thinks—he wishes he could just tell her that already. *I wasn’t before and now I have someone and I’m sorry. I don’t like you like that, Josey. I’m sorry.*

Outside the bathroom he slips off his sweatpants, his briefs, his socks. Then, naked, he taps on the door as he eases it open. “Ryan?” he asks. “Can I come in?”

From inside the room comes a splash of water and his boyfriend’s muffled reply. “Okay.”

That's what he hoped to hear. His smile's the only thing he wears when he steps into the room.

CHAPTER 19



In the bathtub Ryan's eyes are closed. He lies back against the cool porcelain which has warmed to his skin, his legs stretched out beneath the sudsy water. He used a capful of shampoo for the suds, he wanted something soothing, something to relax his body and work the kinks out of his mind, and the bathroom is filled with a clean, fresh scent now, foamy soap covers the hot water that pinks his flesh. He may hate baths, true, but after the day he's had, he needs this.

First Josey. *Oh my God*, Ryan thinks, he never *knew* a girl could be so damn annoying. Thank the Lord he never had one crush on him like *that*, he'd have to hurt somebody. All through lunch, blah blah blah, she wouldn't shut the fuck *up*, wouldn't take her sister's hints, wouldn't even look his way—she only had eyes for Dante. He doesn't know how many times Becca kicked her under the table, but he saw Josey glaring at her sister now and then, and once he felt a leg swing by his so he knows she tried, at least. Tried to keep her little sister from making a fool of herself but it was too late. *Didn't try hard enough*, he muses, sinking lower into the hot water, until the suds tickle his chin. *Should've tied a napkin around her mouth, that might've worked.*

Then Dante apologizing like it's his fault. If he just talks to the girl, tells her how it is, she'll have to give up on him, Ryan knows that.

He's not losing his boyfriend to someone like her, it's no contest. The way Dante makes him feel, the way they are together, no one can hope to get in on that. And Dietrich's right, much as Ryan doesn't want to admit it—there's nothing she has that Dante wants. It's him somehow, miraculously it's him and he's never, ever going to lose that boy. Sure he's his first, but there's a part of Ryan that fervently hopes he's also his last.

And Dietrich. God, just *thinking* about him makes Ryan's blood boil, his hands curve into fists, his jaw bunch in anger. He's never hated anyone as much as he hates that kid. When he was talking all that shit in the lobby earlier, Ryan wanted to grab one of the marble ash cans along the wall and pitch it at him, knock him to the floor, bash his skull open until all the hate and meanness and evil inside seeped out onto the plush carpet. He might have, too, if he could've reached them, those ash cans can't be *too* heavy and he's got strong arms, they come from playing hockey and from that damn chair of his. He has muscled biceps, thick wrists...if Dietrich gets close enough to him, he better watch the fuck out, that's all Ryan has to say. He's fairly certain he can crush that asshole's hand in his fist, and he'd give anything to find out.

The worse part, though? Becca, getting in a good swing, protecting her sister when *he* should've been in Dietrich's face himself, *he* should've been twisting that fucker's arm until it snapped, *he* should've made him bleed for the shit he said about his boy. It should've been him.

And those words stung like a swarm of bees, buzzing around Ryan's head until he didn't know what else to do, he couldn't think, couldn't breathe, couldn't do anything but prove to himself that he wasn't cowardly, wasn't an invalid, wasn't helpless, and he surged to his feet in a fit of determination that still makes him shake with anger to remember it. Only to fall—how humiliating! To lie there on the ground, so much swirling around inside of him, so much he couldn't even *grasp* at because he couldn't stand. Because he can't.

Thank God for Dante. Somehow that boy can just look at him and make everything alright, his words and hands and kisses erasing everything else in this world until it's just the two of them. Ryan doesn't know how Dante can do that but he loves him for it. Without his boyfriend's influence, Ryan doesn't think he'd be able to put weight on his left leg yet, he probably still wouldn't want to. And now he's planning to ask his therapist next time if he can have a pair of crutches for around the house, just to get used to walking again.

The sooner he's out of that chair, the sooner he can hunt down Dietrich and show him just how pissed *this* faggot is.

Only he's not going to let it get to him tonight. Dietrich isn't here, Josey's gone, the pain in his legs has subsided and it's just him and Dante. He won't let anything else bother them. He slipped into the tub in the hopes of washing everything away and when he pulls the plug and the water spirals down the drain, all that goes with it. When he gets out of this tub, there's going to be only one thing he'll focus on and one thing only. His boy.



When Dante enters the bathroom, Ryan thinks maybe he needs to use the toilet. It's really selfish of him to just camp out in here all night. But the last thing he expects when he opens his eyes is his boyfriend standing by the tub naked, every glorious inch of skin uncovered, and *damn* but he needs to get out of this tub *now*. For a moment he's speechless—his gaze trails up over strong legs curved with muscles and covered in thin hair, a tight ass rounded out beneath the arch of Dante's lower back, narrow hips, a tapered waist, a hairless chest the delicious color of *café au lait*...and then back down to the dark hair kinked at his crotch and the reddening hardness already jutting out at him, for him, *Jesus*. "I'm done," he murmurs when he finds his voice. He looks up at Dante's smoldering eyes, his black hair falling back from his face in soft waves, his seductive smile—oh yes, he is *quite* ready to get this party started.

But Dante has other plans. “You’re not done,” he says with a laugh and before Ryan can object, he raises one leg, easing a foot into the tub. “Move your legs, baby.”

Ryan obeys, spreading his legs apart until they’re out of the way along the sides of the tub. Carefully Dante steps into the space between his knees and turns, and Ryan can’t keep his hands from rubbing up his thighs, his waist, his back as he sinks down into the water. Lying back, Dante settles against him, his body a sweet press against Ryan’s crotch and chest, his hair ticklish on Ryan’s neck where he rests his head on his shoulder. “Hmm,” he sighs, closing his eyes. Ryan can feel his body relax against his. “The water’s still warm.”

Wrapping his arms around Dante’s shoulders, Ryan kisses his jaw and purrs, “It just got a hell of a lot warmer.”

Dante laughs and wiggles closer, each movement sending slivers of pleasure through Ryan’s groin. Beneath the water, his hands brush along Ryan’s thighs, twirling over the light hair that grows along his legs like peachy fuzz. Rather, along his upper legs—the hair on his calves has grown back in spots, patchy and stubbly where the doctors shaved it before his surgeries. He hates his lower legs. He hates everything about them.

They sit together for long moments that stretch out like the water that drips from the spigot—a tiny drop at first, it hangs from the metal, grows larger, grows longer, until it reflects the room and themselves and then falls to *plink* in the tub, another one already in its place. Ryan savors the moment, the feel of Dante’s bare buttocks tight against his balls, his cock warm and wet and pressed between their bodies. Dante’s back against his chest, his nipples hard in his boyfriend’s shoulder blades. His face right next to Ryan’s, they barely have to move to kiss, and the ends of Dante’s hair grow damp where they trail in the water like ink. With slow, easy movements, Ryan strokes along Dante’s chest, his hands dipping into the water to caress his stomach, his abdomen, lower. So soft, every single inch of

this body in his arms is so damn soft beneath the soapy water. Ryan kisses away the beads of sweat that have cropped up along Dante's cheek from the heat of the tub. "Who was at the door?"

"Guess," Dante groans.

The way he says it can only mean one thing. "Josey." When Dante nods, Ryan sighs. "She's really starting to get on my nerves."

"Yours?" Dante asks, grinning up at Ryan. "Kiss me again."

Ryan laughs. "You're so demanding," he jokes but he complies, he likes the taste of Dante's tongue, the press of his lips, the way his breath feathers against his nose. Soon he's pretty sure it's not just the water making them sweat, it's their bodies lying together, the heat of their kisses, and when he finds himself trying to roll onto Dante, he wants him so bad, he knows they need to take this somewhere else. *Like the bed*, he thinks, rubbing along Dante's inner thighs. His boyfriend's erection pokes into his wrist and his hands find it, kneads until Dante moans into him. "I think we're about done here," Ryan whispers.

But Dante disagrees. "I like this," he says, sitting up. "Tight and cozy—"

Winking, Ryan promises, "I'll show you tight."

Dante leans forward to kiss him again even as his body moves away. "I need to wash my hair," he says softly. "Then we're done."

"I never thought I'd hear someone use that excuse on *me*," Ryan laughs. At Dante's grin, he places his hands on his boyfriend's head and tells him, "Hold your breath."

Dante squeezes his eyes shut and gulps in air until his cheeks puff out comically. Then Ryan guides him down beneath the water, mussing his hair to get it wet. And suddenly soft lips encircle his hard shaft, a tender tongue licks down his length and he reaches for the sides of the tub in surprise. Water splashes like rain to the tiled floor, soaking the mat and his clothes. "Dante!" he gasps. Oh sweet *Jesus* that feels good.

Rising up from the water, Dante playfully spits a small stream into Ryan's face. "You're as hard as a rock," he says as he flings his hair out of his face and wipes water from his eyes.

"No shit," Ryan says, his voice shaky with lust. "Let's make this quick."

Dante shakes his head, spraying water everywhere. "I'm not rushing through it." He wrings the excess water from the ends of his hair, then reaches for the bottle of shampoo on the floor by Ryan's chair. "Don't worry, baby. If you come too soon this time, we'll just keep working it until we get it right."

Ryan's cheeks color with a thin blush and he slaps the water, splashing his boyfriend. "Til we get it right," he grumbles, but he likes the way that sounds. Maybe if he's lucky, it'll take all night.

Handing him the bottle, Dante turns around again and asks, "Can you wash my hair?"

Can he? Ryan's never heard of anything sexier or more romantic and his fingers tremble as he squirts shampoo into the palm of his hand. It lathers when he rubs his hands together, and then he delves into Dante's hair, his fingers massaging his boyfriend's scalp. Beneath his ministrations Dante moans, sliding further into the tub, one hand gripping Ryan's thigh. He can only imagine where that other hand is. "Are you playing with yourself?" Ryan asks, laughing.

Dante leans back into him, and the hand on Ryan's thigh slips up further along his leg. "Hush," he murmurs as his fingers work between Ryan's legs to keep him aroused.

When soap begins to runnel down the sides of his face Dante ducks beneath the water again, surfacing at the other end of the tub. Turning on the water, he sticks his head beneath the spigot and rinses his hair clean. Water gurgles into the overflow drain and Ryan tells him, "Take the stopper out for a minute, hon. You're gonna flood the room."

Dante plucks out the stopper and the water level dips a few inches before he plugs the drain up again. "Your turn," he says, standing.

Ryan looks up, up, water dripping from Dante's arms, his hands, his cock, and to be honest? Washing his hair is the *last* thing on his mind right now.

But Dante climbs over him and he scoots out of the way as his boyfriend settles into the water behind him. "Down," Dante tells him.

Ryan ducks into the water quickly, feels hands rub along the nubs of his spine, and comes up sputtering. "Make this quick," he says, wiping the water from his face. "I'm getting blue balls here."

Dante's hand eases around Ryan's waist to grasp at the balls in question. "Soon," he swears, kissing Ryan's shoulder. Then he squirts cold shampoo directly onto the top of Ryan's head. Tenderly, he massages Ryan's scalp, lathering his hair and rubbing over and over until Ryan's sure this has to be the best feeling in the whole world. Strong fingers in his hair, gentle hands on his head, he closes his eyes and leans back into Dante's touch. *This* makes his dick throb until he wants to beg for release.

Too soon, Dante's finished and he stands again, dips Ryan down into the water before guiding him to the faucet. "Here," he says, turning on the water. Ryan runs his hands rapidly through his own hair, shaking the last of the soap from it, and he hears Dante step out of the tub with a small splash of water. When he looks up, Dante's already rubbing himself dry with one of the hotel towels. "You about ready to get out now?" he asks, grinning. His erection stands up from the patch of curled black hair, pokes into his navel when he bends to dry his legs.

"I'm ready," Ryan says. He cuts off the water and starts to pull himself up onto the side of the tub when he remembers his legs. Remembers? How can he forget? The scarred, twisted flesh on his lower legs is repulsive, one look and any lustful thoughts Dante harbors will dry up and blow away like dust. Just thinking of them makes *Ryan* sick...what makes him think Dante won't feel the same way?

So he slides back against the side of the tub and shakes the water from his hair, and he frowns at the last of the suds that coat the cooling bathwater. "You go on," he says, hoping Dante can't hear the change in his voice. "I'll be right out."

Only this is Dante, he doesn't settle for something like that. "Let me help," he says as he leans down into the tub, feeling for the stopper that plugs the drain. His hands fumble over Ryan's feet and he winks at him, laughing. He's so self-assured, he seems to have forgotten the fact that he's naked. "Is this it?"

Ryan forces a laugh. "No, silly." He pulls his feet away and stares up at his boyfriend, suddenly so close. Ryan can see the water that clumps his eyelashes together. "I'll be fine," he whispers. "You go on."

Beneath the water, Dante's hand finds Ryan's right leg and before Ryan can object, it trails up to squeeze his knee gently. "Is this about your legs?" he wants to know. *Damn* him for being so empathic at times. "Baby, it's really okay—"

"Not to me," Ryan tells him. Why can't he just leave and let Ryan pull himself together? Out in the bedroom they'll get back the moment, the fun, but right now his vision blurs with tears that he blinks away rapidly, he won't let himself cry over this. "You said when I was ready, Dante. I'm not."

He waits. Just when he's about to say something else, Dante leans closer and kisses his forehead. "I'm not going to laugh at you," he murmurs against Ryan's skin. "I'm not going to be disgusted, or upset. They won't turn me off. You're beautiful to me just the way you are—"

"These aren't who I am," Ryan snuffles.

Dante kisses him again. "I know that. I know you're still healing. I know that one day years from now we'll be lying tangled together after making love and you won't even be able to see the scars, they'll be so faint." Taking Ryan's chin in hand, he raises it until they're face to face. There are tears in his own eyes, as well. "I love you, Ryan.

You. Your legs don't really have much to do with that one way or the other."

Ryan's chin crumples, his lips pulling down into a harsh frown as he struggles to hold back tears. "If you still want me to leave—" Dante begins.

"You can stay." This time Dante's kiss lands on his lips, and his boyfriend wipes away a stray tear that courses down his cheek. Taking a deep breath, Ryan sighs. He can do this. For Dante... "Okay."

Leaning heavily on the sides of the tub, he pushes himself up out of the water. Dante tries to help, holding onto his upper arms as Ryan sits down on the cold porcelain edge. Then he pulls the plug and the tub begins to empty, the water level receding lower, lower, below Ryan's knees and then lower still, exposing his legs. In the harsh light, the skin is red and mottled, crisscrossed with deep scars. Ryan can even see tiny holes where the stitches were, and his hair sticks up around the puckered flesh at odd angles. One knee sports a purple bruise where he hit the floor earlier. *Ugly*, he thinks, he *knows*, and he waits for Dante to say something.

When he does, though, he catches Ryan off-guard. "I like your balls," he says, toweling off Ryan's shoulders.

He laughs in relief. Leave it to Dante to diffuse his emotions so easily. "What?"

"They're almost the same size," Dante explains. He runs the towel down Ryan's back, up one arm, down the next, then leans against him to dry his chest. "With most guys, one hangs higher than the other, you know? It looks funny. And some are wrinkly and small, like walnuts. But you've got a good size..." To emphasize his point, he covers Ryan's crotch with the towel and cups his balls in his hand, gives them a quick squeeze before continuing on down his legs. "They hang together, that's good. And they're round and smooth and tasty."

"Tasty?" Ryan asks, grinning. Dante nods and leans further into the tub, wiping the water off of his boyfriend's legs gently. His erec-

tion prods Ryan in the back, *poke poke poke* each time Dante rubs down. Kissing Dante's neck, Ryan whispers, "Thank you."

"For what?" Dante wants to know. "Saying you have nice balls?"

For not mentioning my legs, Ryan thinks. For not letting me make a big deal out of it. For putting me at ease. For all those things and more, Ryan kisses him again. "For loving me," he replies.



By the time Ryan crawls between the sheets, he's anxious and giddy. His heart beats double time, he can feel it in his fingertips, hear it in his ears, and he can't seem to stop grinning. He's harder than he's ever been and the comforter lies over his naked body like an oppressive hand, chafing his swollen cock. When he tries to think beyond Dante lying down beside him in the bed, his mind overloads.

He's not a hopeless romantic—from their talk in the locker rooms, most of the hockey players he knows aren't ones for rose petals in the bed sheets, and he's been to the proctologist before, he knows it's going to hurt. But it can't hurt *too* much, he reasons, or guys would've stopped giving it up to other guys long ago, unless they're the type to get off on pain. But the thought of lying in Dante's arms, of giving him something he's never given anyone else before, of feeling Dante come inside him and kiss him and whisper that he loves him and then in the morning they'll be more than boyfriends, they'll be lovers—*that's* what has his stomach all tied up in delicious knots.

The light in the bathroom clicks off, and then Dante peeks around the corner to smile at him. "Turn on the lamp," he says, waiting while Ryan reaches up to comply. Soft golden light falls around him, creating a sudden intimacy when Dante flicks the main switch and plunges the rest of the room into darkness.

His boyfriend's eyes smolder with lamplight and lust as he leans against the wall and stares at Ryan, hidden beneath the covers. Shadows pool at his crotch, drape over his shoulders like extensions in his

hair. "Come here," Ryan whispers. His voice cracks slightly with anticipation.

With slow, calculated moves, Dante sidles to the foot of the bed, his gaze never leaving Ryan's face. He climbs onto the bed—hands first, then one knee, the other, carefully crawling in the empty spaces around Ryan's legs until he holds himself suspended above his boyfriend. Ryan looks up at him, his skin now dusted with gold, his hair so black that it seems to absorb the light, his eyes glistening like obsidian. *Mine*, he thinks, his whole body trembling at the thought. *He's mine, he wants me, I don't know how or why but thank you, God. That hunger I see in him is only for me.* "Dante," he breathes. He can't form any other words.

His boyfriend kisses him, a tender press of lips, the only part of their bodies touching. A gentle tongue slips into him as his hands find their way to Dante's chest, his fingers rubbing over nipples as hard as ice. "Dante," he sighs again, the word lost in their kisses, and his hands smooth up over taut muscles, around his boyfriend's neck to fist in the waves at his nape. "Please."

Dante eases down beside him, the covers keeping them apart. Ryan doesn't think he's ever wanted anyone or anything as much as he wants this boy right now. "Please," he says again when Dante pulls away to look at him. He's close to begging, his throat thick with emotion, his eyes tearing until the room around him shimmers like stars. Here's the part where Dante slips beneath the blanket and his naked flesh kisses Ryan's own. Here's the part where he takes Ryan in his arms and pushes into him. Here's the part where they make it love.

Only Dante doesn't pull the covers back, he doesn't slide between the sheets. Instead, he stares at Ryan as if trying to memorize every single freckle, every hair, every pore. One hand pets Ryan's cheek in long, slow motions and he rubs into the touch, he'd purr if he could. The other hand brushes the hair back from his brow, the ends of Dante's own locks tickling Ryan's face. "Dante?" he murmurs, fisting a hand over his boyfriend's shoulder to keep him close. "What—"

“Are you sure this is what you want?” Dante asks.

How can it *not* be? It’s all he’s dreamed of, a boy who loves him, a boy holding him tight, a boy like Dante himself—confused, he frowns and nods, saying, “I’m sure, Dante. Aren’t you?” When he doesn’t answer immediately, fear fills Ryan. “Baby—”

“It’s not you,” Dante assures him. His hands on Ryan’s face and hair reinforce his words. “Ryan, you know how I feel about you, I’ve said it over and over again. Please don’t think this is about you or your legs, it’s not.”

“I know,” Ryan whispers. He sees it in Dante’s eyes, a love that mirrors his own shining back. But this hesitation, this is about the first boy Dante was with—he sees *that* pain in Dante’s face, too, it fills him with anger all over again at the thought of anyone taking advantage of his boy. “It’s him, isn’t it? The guy who raped you.”

With a sigh, Dante hangs his head, his temple resting on Ryan’s shoulder. “Ryan, it wasn’t—”

“It *was*,” Ryan persists. “You said no, he did it anyway—what do you think it was, a misunderstanding? Look at me.” Dante doesn’t, and Ryan lifts his chin until their eyes meet. He hates the hurt he sees in those chocolate depths now. “I’m not saying no here, honey. I’m so sure this is what I want, that *you’re* what I need. It won’t be like it was the last time, I promise you. Please.”

Dante studies him for long moments, struggling against a pout that tugs at his mouth. His eyes search Ryan’s for something, and Ryan imagines they’re windows in his face, showing Dante the depths of his heart, his soul, showing him nothing but love and desire and need. *Please*, he prays. He’ll understand if Dante says no but *please God, please don’t let him turn me away, not tonight. After all we’ve been through today, I need him more than words can explain.*

With quivering lips, Dante whispers, “There is no last time. I don’t...I’m just going to...I don’t want him to be my first. I want you.” Ryan’s heart swells in his chest until he can’t breathe, he can’t

think, *I want you*. “So I’m just going to tell myself he never happened. I’ve never been with anyone before. There’s only you.”

Ryan doesn’t know what to say, but his kisses tell Dante all that he can’t.



“If you change your mind,” Dante says between heated kisses, “tell me, okay? Don’t be scared to tell me no. I’ll listen.”

Ryan sighs lustily. “I’m not going to change my mind, baby.” He finally got Dante beneath the covers and there’s no *way* he’s saying no, it’s not in his vocabulary, not with his boyfriend lying alongside him, his erection huge against Ryan’s thigh. How that’s going to fit where Ryan wants it to is the question of the night, but neither of them has asked it yet. “I’m not saying no.”

“But if you want to—” Dante starts.

“I won’t,” Ryan tells him.

But Dante’s hands are trepidatious on his body, hovering as if waiting for Ryan’s approval before drifting over his stomach and legs. “This is what I want,” Ryan assures him. “Do you want me to shout it out, top of my lungs?” Drawing in a deep breath, he moans out, “Yesss.”

Giggling, Dante covers his mouth with his hand and hisses, “Shh! Damn, you’ll get us in trouble. I believe you already.”

“Then what’s the problem here?” Ryan asks, grinning. His voice is muffled beneath Dante’s hand. When he moves away, Ryan says, “You have to get *some* sleep so you can practice tomorrow. I didn’t know sex had to take all night.”

“It doesn’t,” Dante says. Then, with a wink, he adds, “Not that I’d know. But from what they say...”

Ryan laughs—he likes thinking he’s Dante’s first. It doesn’t matter that he isn’t, he likes that Dante wants him to be, that’s enough for him. “So now what?” he asks, his stomach fluttering beneath Dante’s stroking hand.

“Now you relax,” Dante tells him. “If you’re too wound up, it’ll hurt. Just relax, baby.” He starts to kiss him again, long, lingering kisses that unwind the nervousness inside him, and his fingers strum along Ryan’s skin, rubbing the tension away. Soon he feels like honey, melted and spread out across the bed. Kissing the tip of his nose, Dante murmurs, “Be right back.”

“Where are you going?” Ryan sighs. The bed shakes as his boyfriend climbs off. “We never bought condoms, did we?”

Dante disappears into the darkness of the room and his voice drifts to Ryan from over near the dresser. “We don’t *really* need them,” he says. Ryan can hear a drawer pull out, the subtle *chink* of bottles rattling together, the drawer close. Coming back to the bed, Dante tosses him a small jar of Vaseline as he climbs beneath the sheets. “All we need is a little loo-bree-*caaay*-shun.” He leans above Ryan and nuzzles into his neck, kissing and licking and nipping playfully until they both dissolve into giggles. “You like that?” he murmurs. Ryan can feel him grin against the hollow of his throat. “You can say no.”

“I’m not saying no,” Ryan replies, breathless. “I’m going to beg in a minute if you don’t—” Suddenly a heavy weight leans on his lower right leg, sending pain like bolts of lightning shooting through him. “Oh *fuck*. Jesus, Dante.”

Dante’s smile fades. “What—”

“My leg.” Ryan tries to shift out from under him but his boyfriend has him pinned—in his haste, Dante caught Ryan’s leg beneath his and didn’t realize it. Ryan shoves against his chest, trying to ease the pain. “Baby, you have to move...”

He rolls aside, and when Ryan reaches for his leg, he understands. “Oh shit,” he cries, catching Ryan’s leg in both hands and rubbing the tortured flesh gently. “Oh God, I didn’t know, Ryan, I’m so sorry.”

Ryan closes his eyes as the pain recedes beneath Dante’s loving touch. “It’s okay,” he sighs.

"I'm sorry," Dante murmurs again. His hands work their way up Ryan's shin to his knee, where he kisses the bruise that bloomed earlier. "I didn't mean it."

"I know." As Dante's hands smooth up his inner thigh, rubbing towards his still aching erection, Ryan begins to relax again. The pain's gone as fast as it appeared, and each long stroke of Dante's fingers helps get them back to where they were just moments before. With a shaky, humorless laugh, Ryan mutters, "How's this going to work? You lay on me like that again and I'm going to be a bundle of hurt by the time we're through."

Despite Ryan's teasing tone, Dante winces. "I'm sorry. Here—" He lies down beside Ryan, still holding his thigh, and he nudges Ryan's shoulder gently. "Roll over a bit. Just onto your side, like that."

Ryan stares at the other bed, still covered in their clothes, and wonders what Dante has in mind. "What—" he starts, but then fingers curve beneath his balls, rub at flesh that's never been touched before, and his mind goes blank. "Oh sweet *God*," he moans, gripping the mattress in both hands. "Please don't please don't *please* don't stop."

With a laugh, Dante leans against him, his fingers working into secret places. "Where's that jar?" he asks, kissing Ryan's shoulder.

He doesn't know, doesn't care, and doesn't really want to take the time to figure it out now. But Dante spots it on the bed and reaches over him, never slowing the rhythm he's found between Ryan's legs. Using his teeth, Dante unscrews the lid and for a brief second his touch is gone as he scoops out a dollop of petroleum jelly, then he's back on Ryan again, his fingers cold and slick as they glide over hidden flesh. Ryan whimpers in delight, *Jesus* that feels amazing, and when one of Dante's fingers slips inside of him, he moans low and guttural, there's no mistaking his wishes now. "Dante *yes*. Oh God, oh yes oh please ohpleaseohplease."

Carefully Dante pulls Ryan's right leg up over his hip. "Lie back a little," he whispers, and Ryan half-turns into his arms. Dante kisses

him back against the pillows, eases one hand beneath his waist, the other leaving a damp trail as it slides up over his balls, his hard dick, his stomach. His ass is back against Dante's crotch, he's practically sitting on the erection that rests between his buttocks, and he's twisted at the waist, his right leg up over Dante's thigh and out of the way. "Will this work?" Dante asks as Ryan drapes his arms around his boyfriend's shoulders.

"Perfect," he replies.

Dante slathers them both with the jelly, his hand never drifting far from Ryan's body. His fingers work at Ryan, tickling his balls, the tender skin beneath them, sliding inside one two three at a time until Ryan's arching into him, trying to find release in that alone. Just when he thinks he can't possibly hold it any longer, he feels a thickness press against him and then Dante eases inside, slowly, oh so unbelievably slow. "You can still say no," he whispers, kissing Ryan's tightly shut eyelids. "Any time you're uncomfortable with this, you tell me and I'll stop, okay? Just say the word and I'll stop."

Only there *are* no words, everything's emotion right now, everything's sharp and bright. When Dante's completely inside him, Ryan dares to breathe again, it's not so bad, it's filling and tight but it's not so bad at all. And then Dante pulls out slightly, thrusts in further, his hand finds Ryan's cock and he squeezes and kneads, fondles his balls, strokes his belly, his mouth closes over Ryan's own until they're breathing the same air and moaning together, he thrusts into him again and again and somewhere in the midst of it all, he discovers that this is exactly what he wanted, what he hoped it would be. His lover moving in him with a dreamy tidal rhythm, in and out and in and out, loving hands on his body, loving lips on his. Soon each thrust brings another wave of pleasure breaking over him, until they both come in a heated, wondrous rush.



Afterwards, they lie together beneath the covers and Dante holds him tight. Ryan feels stretched out, loose, like a rubber band that's lost its shape and can't snap back into place. It's a heady feeling, actually, and from time to time he imagines he can still feel Dante inside, filling him, moving with him, bringing him to an orgasm that escaped his throat in a breathless cry of love before Dante could quiet him. Whoever has the room next to theirs surely heard that, they *had* to, it was an outpouring of such raw emotion that it left Ryan trembling and weak and satiated. For some reason, his mind keeps thinking back to his accident, that was the only other time he ever felt so overwhelmed from everything swelling inside his heart and body and mind that he couldn't even think clearly. Then it was a miasmic pain smothering him with hate and anger and now? Now it's Dante, filling him with a love and warmth that feel fragile inside his chest, like a tiny kitten or baby bird, something he wants to shelter and protect. Forever, that's what it is, a feeling of eternity that he never, ever wants to break.

Dante snuggles into the space beneath Ryan's arm, strums a thumb over one nipple, kisses the spot then moves away before Ryan can object. "I love you," he sighs against Ryan's skin. He tightens his arms around his waist and says it again. "I love you, Ryan."

The lamp is off now but Ryan can see tears glisten in the darkness in Dante's eyes. "Love you, too," he murmurs, rubbing along Dante's back and shoulders. He kisses the top of Dante's head, breathes deep the clean shampoo scent of his hair, and whispers, "Get some sleep, baby. We have a long day ahead of us tomorrow."

With a faint snuffle, Dante raises his head to kiss Ryan goodnight, then he cuddles into him again, his head resting on Ryan's chest. "Practice," he whispers, his voice growing drowsy as he speaks. "If you don't wanna sit there all day and watch—"

"I do," Ryan says. "And I'll take a ton of pictures. You saw how much film my mom sent."

Dante laughs softly. "I never told you about Bobby," he sighs. But he's sleepy, another minute and he'll be out—Ryan doesn't think he'll hear about his boyfriend's former boss tonight. *Correction*, he reminds himself, *my lover. As in we've made love. As in he loves me. Lover.* "He called this morning before you picked me up."

A dull anger threatens to throttle Ryan at that but he swallows it down, he won't ruin this moment. He's proud of how even his voice is when he asks, "What did he want?"

With a lazy shrug, Dante admits, "I don't know. Just to talk? He wanted me to come by so he could convince me to come back." Another breathy laugh and Dante says, "I hung up on him."

"Good." Ryan doesn't want to think about Bobby or where those lecherous hands have touched Dante's body. He's healing now, isn't he? Another couple weeks at the most and he'll be back on his feet, he'll walk into that skate shop, lean over the counter, look the guy in the eye and ask, "Are you the fuckhead sleaze who can't keep away from my boy?" Then *he'll* be the one to talk things out with Bobby, he'll set that asshole straight. "*Touch him again and you die.*" He likes the sound of that, and in his mind he sees fear fill Bobby's muddy eyes as he says it. He likes that a lot, so he runs through the scene again in his mind. "*Touch him and you die.*"

He's about to share the daydream with Dante, give him something to smile over while he drifts off to sleep, when Dante adds, "My mama called, too, just to wish me luck. She still doesn't know I quit."

Just to wish me luck—there's something in the way he says the words that tells Ryan his mama calling meant the world to him, and he kisses Dante's temple tenderly. "It must've worked," he teases, "because I don't know about you but *I* sure got lucky tonight." When Dante laughs, Ryan tells him, "Don't worry about Bobby or the skate shop, okay? If nothing's changed by Sunday, you'll find something else, I promise. Hell, I'll have my mom hire you as my therapist, you

know? You've already done more good than all those doctors put together."

CHAPTER 20



Dante wakes to kisses.

Tender kisses, soft lips, a gentle tongue that eases into his mouth with the familiarity of an old lover, a breathtaking sensation, and when he opens his eyes, Ryan's staring back at him, so close on the same pillow that his forehead rests against Dante's own. "Hey," his boyfriend murmurs—his lover.

Lover. With Jared, it had never been love. Sex, that was it. Fuck buddies maybe, and though he never liked that phrase, it sums up perfectly what they were to each other. There was never this afterglow that feels like the morning sun warming his body and igniting his blood, never these pale eyes watching him sleep, never these lips kissing him awake. "Hey yourself," he whispers. When Ryan smiles, he says, "Kiss me again."

Ryan does, and again and again, his body pressed alongside Dante's beneath the covers. He lays on his stomach, his arms curled up beneath his chest, and Dante edges closer, wrapping an arm around Ryan's waist to hold him tight. "How do you feel?" he wants to know. He was sore for what, two days? After his first—*last night was my first*, he reminds himself. *That morning in my bed all those years ago, that never happened.* Jared never held him down, never told him it'd be okay, never covered him in burning kisses and never lied because he never said he loved him when he pushed his way

inside. He never *was* inside, he never thrust into Dante, and there was no pain, no embarrassment, no hurt when it was over. Dante never stood in the shower afterwards, letting the water beat down on him like rain, never scrubbed at his body until his skin turned red and never felt so unclean and used in his life. That never happened, none of it. His first time was last night with this boy beside him, and it was slow and wonderful, everything it should always be, it was love. He can still feel the tightness around his cock, the body leaning back against his, the kisses—God, kisses that make him ache for more. It *was* love and there was never anything else before. He's pretty sure there will never be anything quite as amazing ever again, either.

With another kiss Ryan tells him, "I'm fine, baby. A little loose but okay." When he smiles, Dante can't help but grin back. "I really thought I'd hurt more, you know? Did you—" He sees something in Dante's eyes that makes him stop and he kisses him again, before he can say whatever it was he started to ask. Instead his lips form the words, "I love you," against Dante's mouth.

"Love you," Dante replies between kisses. His hand slips down to cradle one of Ryan's buttocks. Squeezing the firm muscle, he asks, "You're sure you're okay?"

"Fine," Ryan assures him. "You?"

"Wonderful," Dante laughs. He kisses Ryan's shoulder and stares up into the blue eyes shining back at him, and suddenly all he wants is to spend the day in bed, his lover beside him, reliving last night over and over again. "Can we just stay here?" he asks. Ryan giggles and Dante says, "Seriously! There's nothing else I'd rather do."

But Ryan reminds him, "Practice. We're here so you can win State, remember? Not so we can get laid."

Snuggling closer, Dante admits, "I like this better." Right now the thought of getting out of this bed, away from Ryan's warmth, is enough to make him burrow beneath the covers and never come out. True, he loves skating, and he *should* practice, he knows this, but

once they open the door to their room, this moment will be lost. There's a tiny part of him, the part that stubbornly clings to the hateful memory of Jared, that fears they'll never get it back.

But look at them, look at Ryan—his eyes are filled with love, a silly grin plays across his face, even his freckles seem to glow. That's not the face that looked back at Dante from the steamy bathroom mirror after Jared. That was a stranger's face, Dante's own eyes like peach pits in the hollows of his face, dull and empty and dead. There had been no grin, not even the ghost of a smile, nothing but a thin-lipped mask he put on to convince himself it never happened to him. Nothing ever happened.

"You're okay," Dante whispers, just to clarify things. Ryan's fine, he still loves him, he said the words first this morning, didn't he? *I love you*—he said them first.

"I'm fine," Ryan answers with a kiss. So sweet, so kind, so unlike anything Dante's had before. *I love you*. Out in the hall, shouts begin to echo down the corridor, the first skaters to wake up, running down the length of the floor to ensure that no one else continues to sleep either. "We'll pick this up tonight," Ryan promises. "Same bat time, same bat channel. Okay?"

Dante grins foolishly and kisses the tip of Ryan's nose. "Sounds like a plan to me."



Sitting on the edge of the other bed, Dante watches Ryan dress and resists the urge to ask if he can help. *He's done this before*, he tells himself, frowning as his boyfriend lies back on the bed they shared the night before and tugs his jeans up over his hips. *Every morning since the accident, over a month now, he doesn't need your help*. Still, it pains Dante's heart to watch him struggle—he has to pull the jeans to his thighs, arch away from the bed and inch them up further, fall back to the bed and try again, and again, until finally the damn pants are around his waist and he can zip them up. Probably had to do the

same with his boxers, but Dante was in the bathroom brushing his teeth at the time and didn't see that. Maybe he should've stayed in the bathroom until Ryan dressed. Maybe he needs a little privacy.

His hips rise off the bed, the jeans move up his legs a little further, he falls back. Even though he swore to himself he wouldn't, Dante can't help but ask, "You need some help, hon?"

"I've got it," Ryan tells him, gritting his teeth as he tugs the jeans up again. His voice sounds angry and Dante's not sure if it's at him or not. He shouldn't have asked.

Just like he shouldn't rise and stand above his boyfriend but he does anyway, looking down at Ryan's reddened face, the sweaty hair that sticks to his temples. The jeans are still a good five, seven inches from his waist. Holding out his hands, Dante tells him, "Get up."

With his left foot, Ryan nudges Dante's leg. "I've got it," he says again, but when Dante motions for him to come on, Ryan sighs lustily and takes his hands. "I told you—"

"You've got it, I know." Dante pulls him into a sitting position, and then says, "Stand up."

Another sigh like this is all a big inconvenience, but Ryan obeys. Carefully, he sets his weight on his left foot and rises up beside Dante. His right foot touches the floor, testing it, and Ryan's sharp intake of breath fills Dante's ear, a painful sound. "That still hurts?" he asks softly. Ryan nods and doesn't have to answer.

Letting go of Dante's hands, Ryan clutches at his shoulders, leans against him, holds on tight. Quickly, Dante tugs his jeans up completely, tucking the legs of the boxers down where they've bunched up around Ryan's crotch. "There," he says as he zips the jeans. There's another sharp intake of breath when his fingers press against his boyfriend's dick, but there's no pain in *that* sound and it makes Dante smile to hear it. Slapping Ryan's ass, he asks, "Was that so bad? Let me help you, baby. That's what I'm here for."

"I thought it was just the hot sex," Ryan jokes.

Dante seems to think it over a minute. Then with a wink, he replies, “Yeah, that too.” As Ryan sinks back down to the bed, Dante asks, “Are you sure—”

Picking up his socks from the mattress beside him, Ryan rolls his eyes. “If you ask if I’m okay again I’ll scream, I swear I will.” He shakes the socks out, gingerly crosses his right leg over his left knee, starts to roll the sock onto his foot. “I’m fine, Dante. You’re nothing like that guy, okay? You didn’t do anything I didn’t want you to do.” He stops and looks up at Dante, frowning slightly. “Are *you* okay?”

Surprised, Dante starts, “I’m—” *Fine*, he thinks, but is he? Is he really?

I am. Looking into his lover’s face he knows it’s true. For the first time in forever he’s great, incredible really, he feels complete now. It’s odd, thinking that—he never realized he didn’t feel whole, didn’t feel something missing in his life. There was school and work and skating, his mama, that was it. After graduation, just work and skating, wake up early to get to the rink, come home late from the shop, sleep and do it all over again. He never thought he needed anything else in his life—he never knew he was missing anyone. Until now. *Now* he realizes what he thought of as dedication to his sport, his job, that was nothing more than loneliness manifesting itself in the only things he did. Were there actually times he thought Bobby might not be all that bad? Had there honestly been moments when he didn’t mind his boss’s hands so much, simply because it was another’s touch? And did he truly ever believe that, after Jared, he didn’t need anyone else at all, he could make it by himself?

Lies, all of it, lies he told himself because he didn’t want to admit that he wasn’t happy. His Olympic dream, he knew *that* would make him happy, but would it have been enough? Would he, years from now, come to discover that all the gold medals in the world would be a cold comfort when he had no one to share them with, no one to show them to, no one to kiss him and hold him after the races and

tell him how proud they were of him? Did he really think he could get that far alone?

I'm not alone, he reminds himself, running a hand over Ryan's thick, wine-colored hair. As he traces the curve of his boyfriend's cheek, Ryan leans into his palm. "I'm fine, too," Dante whispers, bending down for a kiss. "Never been better, actually. You keep saying how good I am for you but you know what? I think you're the best damn thing that's ever happened to me."

Ryan grins. With a twinkle in his eye, he asks, "Do you know what that does to me?" When Dante shakes his head, he adds, "Do you *have* to go to practice today?"

"You promised me tonight," Dante points out.

Ryan sighs dramatically. "That's so far *away*," he groans, pulling his sock on completely. "I don't know if I can wait that long."



They run into Josey in the hall—she's coming out of her room just as Dante's pulling the door shut and beside him Ryan mutters, "Great timing."

He turns as Josey calls his name. "Dante!" And she waves like he could possibly miss her somehow in this narrow corridor. Almost as an afterthought, she adds, "Hey Ryan."

Ryan raises a hand halfheartedly, throws Dante a look he can't quite interpret, and lapses into stony silence. "You guys," Josey gushes, heading their way, "have you heard? Jeez, it's hil-*air*-ious, really, you just have to—"

"Josey," Becca warns, stepping out into the hall. *Thank you*, Dante thinks with a sigh of relief. When Josey turns, Becca shakes her head quickly and lowers her voice. "Not here. Damn."

"Sorry." Josey turns back only to find Dante already behind Ryan's wheelchair, his boyfriend like a wall separating them. With a tentative smile at Ryan, she steps up to the side of his chair and whispers loudly, "It's about Dietrich. You haven't heard, have you?"

“Heard what?” Ryan wants to know.

Josey grins at him and then turns back to Dante. “Well, they say—”

From in front of the girls’ room, Becca interrupts. “I said not here,” she mutters. “You want the whole club to hear you?” When Josey starts to speak, Becca shakes her head and turns away, heading down the hall towards the elevators. “You keep talking it up, he’ll come after you again, Josey, and it’ll be your own fault this time. Can’t you wait until we’re alone?”

“I’ll tell you later,” Josey whispers, nodding. The gleam in her eyes makes Dante wonder what this is all about—did he get kicked from the team for the fight with Becca? Somehow he doubts they’d be so lucky. As Josey starts after her sister, she calls back to them over her shoulder. “Are you guys coming to breakfast? You can sit with us.”

Dante has to stifle a grin when Ryan grumbles under his breath, “Woo fucking hoo.”

“Be nice,” Dante tells him, pushing his chair after the girls. Taking his hands off the handlebars, he rubs Ryan’s shoulders briefly, the chair moving as he walks. “You had me to yourself all last night—”

Ryan folds his arms defiantly across his chest and Dante can hear the pout in his boyfriend’s voice when he mumbles, “Doesn’t count. She shouldn’t get you at all. You’re *my* boy.”

Josey’s just a few feet away, Becca not far ahead of her, and if they weren’t talking amongst themselves, they might’ve heard that remark. Then Dante wouldn’t *have* to worry about telling her anything, she’d already know. *Not that she’d believe it*, he thinks, leaning down to rest his chin on the top of Ryan’s head. *She’d think it was a joke, or maybe she heard wrong, or something.* “I’m your boy,” he murmurs, and he laughs when Ryan turns to smile up at him. “And you’re mine. Now that we’ve got that cleared up...”

“Tell *her*,” Ryan says, jerking a thumb at Josey. She and Becca have reached the elevators now, and when she sees Dante glance up, she grins and waves again.

Through a forced smile, Dante replies, “Just give me some time, okay? I will.”



In the hotel restaurant, Dante finds an empty booth they can share. “You first,” he says, holding Ryan’s chair steady as his boyfriend climbs out of it and slides into the booth. Then he folds the wheelchair the way he’s seen Mrs. Talonovich do and leans it against the side of their seat. “Scoot over,” he whispers, edging in beside his lover. Beneath the table, his hand curves around Ryan’s thigh, his fingers easing into his crotch before Ryan slaps them away.

“What are you doing?” he asks, but he speaks quietly and when Dante looks up, his eyes shine above a wicked grin. “I thought we said later.”

“*You* said later,” Dante reminds him. He moves closer, until their thighs press together and he thinks they should always sit side by side in a booth, *always*. He likes these forbidden touches in public, no one around them knowing where his hand is. “I said now and you said no.”

Ryan laughs but before he can come back with a quick reply, some innuendo to make Dante ache for him all the more, Josey and Becca are there, sliding into the other side of the booth. “Can I tell you now?” Josey asks. She sits directly across from Dante and leans over the table with an almost conspiratorial air. Glancing at Becca, she persists, “Can I?”

Becca shrugs. “Can’t we eat first?” she wants to know.

There’s a buffet table along one wall, filled with sausages and eggs and fruit, but no one’s in line yet. “I don’t think so,” Josey says. Turning to Dante, she smiles brightly, glances at Ryan, back at him. *Lucky me*, he thinks, and beneath the table he squeezes Ryan’s knee. “Okay, so last night? Remember I told you I can still skate?” At Dante’s nod, she continues. “Wil threw a fit about that, let me tell you, but the coaches were all like I wasn’t in the fight. Everyone they asked said

that I never sicced Becca on him like he claimed. She punched him herself.”

Beside him, Ryan sighs. *We know this*, Dante thinks, rubbing his hand along his boyfriend’s thigh. “Well,” she continues, her eyes sparkling with excitement, “guess who calls Daddy dearest last night? He wanted me pulled just because of that, can you believe it? And two of his friends were in his room, so this is just what Aaron said, he was watching TV when Wil called his dad and told him my sister hit him. He was in the lounge this morning, telling everyone because it’s so funny.”

“What is?” Ryan asks. He doesn’t sound amused in the least, and when Dante gives him a sympathetic grin, Ryan doesn’t smile back. “Who was in the lounge?”

“Aaron.” Josey thinks a minute, then says, “He’s that tall kid who skates the fifteen hundred and the relay? You know him, Dante.”

He nods—he knows Aaron. Another one of the guys who doesn’t talk to him in the club, one of the quiet ones who follows Dietrich around like the jerk’s some kind of demi-god. It’s the money, Dante knows it—Aaron’s family is well-off, too, and he’s discovered that has a lot to do with the friendships that have formed at the rink. Dante’s the only one on the skate club from the hood really, and the only one he knows of who pays his own skate fee. So he’s never hung out with the others, the rich kids—he was never welcome around them. He found more friends in the skateboarders on the street than the skaters on the ice. *Except for Ryan*, he adds silently. Thank God for that.

To his boyfriend, Dante explains, “The one with the bad skin. You’ve seen him, he looks like a bird? Tall, skinny, that nose...” He hooks his finger into a beak and Ryan laughs. “You know who I mean. Him.”

“I’ve seen him,” Ryan says. He grins at Dante and laughs again. “Looks like a bird?”

"He does!" Dante cries. He looks at Josey for confirmation, but she just giggles at him. "He looks like a bird, you guys, honest."

Josey shakes her head. "All I know is he's ugly," she says. "Not at all like—"

"Josey," Becca warns. The look she shoots her sister stops that train of thought in midsentence. With a gentle shove, Becca says, "Let me out. They're serving now."

Sliding out of the booth, Josey glances over at the buffet and says, "We'll be right there."

"I want something to eat now," Ryan mutters.

Dante's hand moves further up his thigh. Yes, he *loves* booths. "I'll get you a plate," he says. "Josey—"

"Real quick," she says, sitting back down. "I'm almost done."

He suspects there's nothing quick about anything she wants to tell him, but he nods, okay, real quick. *Real* quick, because his boy is hungry and he's getting there himself, he'd forgotten how much sex worked up his appetite. Continuing where she left off, Josey tells them, "So Aaron says Wil's on the phone with his dad, telling him about the fight, and he's all, I want her kicked off the team, and then he goes, she didn't kick my ass. He's like, Dad, she didn't—and the phone goes dead! His dad hung *up* on him, can you be-*lieve* it?" She laughs, claps her hands, swings her hair back from her face and says, "Then he bitched about how he wasn't a damn sissy, no *girl* beat him up. I would have *loved* to see the look on his face, you know? His dad called him that, it's just classic."

Dante can imagine the rage clawing at Dietrich after that phone call, but it *is* funny, actually, to picture him trying to save face in front of his friends. He wonders how much of that Aaron made up. He's sure by the time the story gets back to Wil, it'll be so out of proportion that it won't even closely resemble the truth. Still, the thought of his father hanging up on him is enough to make Dante laugh out loud, serves the jerk right. *If Ryan wasn't in that chair*, he thinks, grinning at his boyfriend beside him, *he would've been calling*

his dad from the hospital. Just how hateful will Ryan be towards Dietrich once he starts to walk again? When the tables are turned...Dante has a feeling Wil doesn't want to find out.

"Isn't that great?" Josey asks. She looks up as Becca approaches, an overflowing plate in hand, and then she grins at Dante. "Want to get something to eat?"

Turning to Ryan, Dante asks him, "You want to come?"

Ryan glares at Josey and shakes his head. "You go," he says softly. "Get me a plate, okay? Something good."

"I've got something good right here," Dante replies with a wink. Beneath the table, he cups Ryan's dick through his jeans and his boyfriend swats his hand away playfully. He laughs as he stands up from the booth, Josey following suit. "You like eggs?" he asks. "Pancakes? Waffles? What do you want?"

"Whatever you have," Ryan tells him. "Be quick. I'm hungry."

The look he gives Dante suggests he wants him to hurry back for other reasons—Josey standing so close to him, for instance. Dante doesn't like that much, either. "Be right back," he promises, heading for the buffet line. Josey hurries to keep up.



Somehow another skater manages to squeeze behind Dante in the buffet line, putting much needed space between himself and Josey. He's as quick as he can be, juggling two plates in one hand, scooping double helpings of the food onto both of them before moving on down the line. When he gets to the eggs, though, there aren't many left, and he empties the serving platter between his plate and Ryan's. "I'm sorry," he tells Josey as he hands her the ladle. "You didn't want any, did you?"

For a second she frowns at the empty platter and he's sure she'll just say no—what other choice does she have? They're all gone and besides, *he's* the one who emptied them, she wouldn't say anything

about it to *him*. Taking the ladle from him, she scrapes at the platter and sighs. “I guess not,” she murmurs.

Behind the table, a woman from the hotel staff carries a full platter of pancakes in her hands and glances at Josey. “Give me five minutes, sweetie,” she says, setting the pancakes out on the table. Dante reaches for the serving fork on the plate as she moves away. Over her shoulder, she tells Josey, “There’s some more eggs coming right up.”

Looking up at him, Josey says, “I guess I can wait.”

He sees what she doesn’t say reflected in her eyes—she wants *him* to wait, too. *No problem*, she’d like to hear, *I’ll wait with you*. Instead, though, he snags a couple of pancakes, plops them onto the plates he carries, and says, “At least they’ll be hot. I’ll see you back at the booth.”

You could be nicer, a voice inside his head whispers, and it sounds like his mama, she raised him better than that. But maybe now Josey will take the hint, maybe she’ll see how much more important Ryan is to him than *she* is, and she’ll move on. More than anything else, he wants her over him already, he wants her crushing on another guy, someone nice and cute and her own age, someone who can like her back. She’s a great girl, she deserves someone who can make her happy. Someone, Dante decides, moving down the table as he fills his plates, who isn’t him. *Because I’m already happy*, he thinks. *I’ve got a boy who is everything to me. I’ve got Ryan*.

“See you,” Josey calls out as he passes on the way back to their table.

He nods at her, a plate in either hand, and he’s glad she isn’t bold enough to actually ask him to stay with her. Back at their booth, he sets one plate in front of Ryan and the other in front of his seat, then slides in beside his boyfriend, scooting over until their thighs touch again. “Here you go,” he says, dishing out silverware wrapped in napkins. “I didn’t know what you liked so I got one of everything.”

Ryan laughs. “Thanks,” he says. Nodding at the glasses of orange juice in front of them, he tells Dante, “Becca got us drinks. Is juice okay?”

“Fine,” Dante replies. He grins at Becca across the table and before she can ask, tells her, “Josey’s waiting for some more eggs. I took the last.” Pointing at Ryan’s plate with his fork, he amends, “*You* took the last, really. If they’re cold, let me know and I’ll get you new ones.”

“They’re okay,” Ryan mumbles around a mouthful of the eggs in question. “Hot enough for me.” Then he winks at Dante, and the image that comes unbidden to his mind is the two of them in the bathroom last night, after the bath and before they crawled into bed. Naked, Ryan sat perched on the closed lid of the toilet and leaned over the sink, brushing his teeth while Dante stood beside him, naked as well, brushing *his* teeth and grinning like an idiot at his boyfriend in the mirror. Without warning, Ryan’s hand snaked between Dante’s legs when he bent over to spit, and the sudden fingers rubbing the back of his balls almost made him choke with surprise. Now, swallowing his food, Ryan leans forward and whispers, “I know what you’re thinking.”

“How?” Dante laughs. He glances up at Becca, watching them closely. “You don’t know.”

“I can guess,” Ryan says.

He laughs again, well aware of Becca’s gaze on them, and nudges Ryan’s knee with his beneath the table. *Watch it*, he thinks—see, this is why he doesn’t like eating out. Last night they ate in the room and it was just the two of them, they could say anything they wanted, make randy comments, blow silly kisses over their plates, exchange bawdy touches while they ate so that by the time they were finished, they were both starving for each other and there was no one else around to stop them from making out afterward. But here it feels as if everyone’s watching them, and when Josey comes back to the table, she’ll start talking to him again and drown out everything else. He

just wants Ryan all to himself—he's going to suggest they order in more often.

Thinking of Josey makes Dante turn around to look for her. She's still at the buffet table, still waiting. When she sees him, she smiles and waves, and he raises his fork in greeting. "How long does it take to scramble a few eggs?" Becca wants to know. Dante shrugs and turns back to his plate. *As long as we get a few minutes to ourselves*, he thinks. He wonders how horrible it'd look if he asked Becca to maybe go wait with her? Just so he can talk to his boy for a few minutes alone?

He's playing out different ways to approach her about it when she leans forward slightly and clears her throat, causing both Dante and Ryan to look up. "I want to tell you something," she says, fixing Ryan with a steady gaze that Dante can't read. "About my roommate? Her last name's Michaels. Michelle Michaels."

Ryan and Dante exchange confused glances. "I don't know her," Ryan admits with a slight frown. "Your roommate where, in the dorm?" When Becca nods, Ryan asks, "Does she know me?"

For a moment Becca studies him, then she bites her lower lip and asks, "You don't know anyone named Michaels?" When Ryan shakes his head no, she adds, "Noah Michaels? That's her brother." Dante looks from Josey's sister to his boyfriend and sees Ryan's eyes grow wide at the name. Becca nods. "He's a freshman."

In a tiny voice, Ryan whispers, "Oh shit."

"Oh what?" Dante asks. He frowns at Becca—who's she talking about? "Ryan? Who's that?"

No answer. "Ryan?" Dante asks again. His boyfriend's face has blanched, if that's even possible, and his freckles stand out stark like chicken pox all over his face and neck. "Who's Noah?" But when he looks at Dante, the answer's written out in his fear-filled eyes.

You're only the second boy I've ever kissed... when did Ryan tell him that? Last Friday, wasn't it? *I had one dick-licking in the past, babe, one. It's not something I'm good at yet...some boy at a frat party went*

down on me but Jacoby interrupted us, I never even got off on it—it doesn't bother him, the fact that Ryan was with someone before because he's with *him* now, no one else matters, but if Becca knows this Noah kid then that means she knows or at least *thinks* she knows about...*about us*. "He's the guy..." Dante starts, and the look in Ryan's eyes is all he needs to confirm what he's thinking. Closing his eyes, he swallows back the implications. "Oh shit."

"He told us he got with you last semester," Becca says, speaking softly. She talks as if she's discussing the weather here, or the eggs, or which flavor of jelly would taste best on her toast. "Right after your accident, he was over to see Michelle and we had the TV tuned to the campus station, and after the little blurb about you in the hospital, he said he hooked up with you at a party. Just fooled around, nothing major." She shrugs like it's no big deal, and really it isn't, but Dante's heart beats like a stallion's hooves in his chest, *thumpthumpthumpthump*, it terrifies him. What has she told Josey? Who *else* here knows? "Eh, who cares, right? You're old enough to do what you want to. This isn't high school, you know? If you like guys, that's cool."

Now she looks at Dante. "I didn't really put two and two together until yesterday," she tells them, "when that jerk-off got nasty in the lobby. I mean, I can tell you're not into Josey, I'm not blind." She laughs, a sad sound that matches the half-smile on her face. "I'm also not sixteen and in love with a boy who doesn't even know I exist, but I've been there before. I know what she's going through. She's not going to listen to me when I try to tell her you two are..." She trails off and, raising an interested eyebrow, asks, "You are, aren't you? I mean—"

Ryan glances at him and nods. "We are," he says. Beneath the table, his hand slips into Dante's. "I told you we met at the rink, about a week ago now. It's—"

"It's nothing against your sister," Dante hurries to explain. He gives Ryan a brave smile and squeezes his fingers. "She's a great kid,

Becca, really. But this...I mean, we're..." He sighs—why bother dancing around the issue? She already knows. Glancing around to make sure no one overhears, he whispers, "Yeah, we're together."

Becca's gaze shifts somewhere behind them and Dante turns to watch Josey shovel eggs from the freshly stocked platter onto her plate. "I tried telling her," she admits, her voice still low. "Last night, when she came back from your room and said you were both going to bed. So early? I asked. You were tired, she explained—a girl gets good at that, you know, explaining things away to suit her needs. She desperately wants to believe she stands a chance with you, Dante. She talks you up until I want to shout at her maybe that kid is right, ever think of that? Maybe there's something going on between those two boys, something you don't see, something you *refuse* to see." With a sigh, she tells them, "But I know she won't listen. There's only one person she'll hear it from." *Don't say it*, Dante prays. He doesn't want to hear it—"You."

Ryan's hand is warm in Dante's own. "He'll tell her," Ryan says. Josey's at the end of the buffet table now—she grabs a bundle of silverware and starts in their direction, all smiles. "This weekend, he's promised me he would."

"I will," Dante swears. He'll tell Josey, definitely, and soon. But the last thing he needs is Becca getting involved—what if she mentions it to Josey and someone else overhears? What if Dietrich realizes his accusations are right and tells one of the coaches or the officials or God, heaven forbid, his *father*? Would they be forced into different rooms then? Would Dante be allowed to skate? Glancing at Becca, he asks, "You're not gonna spread it around, are you?"

She shakes her head. "Doesn't bother me," she says, watching her sister cross the room. "Just be gentle, okay? When you tell her. It's going to break her heart as it is."

Which is what scares me, he thinks, forcing a smile as Josey sits down beside her sister.



After breakfast, Dante guides Ryan's wheelchair to the hotel lobby. "Jesus," his boyfriend mutters.

He doesn't have to ask what he means—he's thinking of what Becca's said. Is it that obvious they're together? Does *everyone* know? Suddenly it seems like a hundred eyes are watching them, a dozen whispers rise as they pass. Everyone knows they had sex last night, everyone knows they're in love, everyone *knows*—his stomach churns and he thinks he's going to be sick. Glancing around the lobby, Dante's so sure everyone looks away from his gaze. Well, everyone but the girl behind the registration counter, she sees him and smiles sweetly, then looks at Ryan and her smile widens, he should mention *that* to his boy the next time he says he ain't all that to look at. "Is it just me," Dante whispers, "or does everyone know about us?"

Ryan laughs. "It's just you." Leaning his head back, he looks up at Dante and reminds him, "Becca knew I like guys and she didn't put it together until Dietrich started picking on you, remember? And no one else knows. Relax, baby. No one knows."

With a nod, Dante tries to calm his racing heart. The last thing he wants is to have to explain to his mama that he was kicked out of the competitions for sexual relations on a club trip. That's one of the offenses listed in the club bylaws, up there with fighting, it just isn't condoned. *After this race, I'll be in Regionals*, he thinks grimly, *and that won't be sponsored by the skate club, it'll be a state-wide event*. It'll be New Jersey he represents there, and he knows they don't have the same stupid regulations, they're more interested in beating out New York for the coveted title than they are about their skaters getting freaky at the hotel. He just has to make it through Saturday, that's it—he promised his mama he'd stay out of trouble. And as long as he stays away from Dietrich, he thinks he can live up to that promise.

Halfway across the lobby, Dante glances behind him and sees Josey following them, Becca in tow, a duffle bag slung over one shoulder. "Dammit!" he mutters as he stops Ryan's chair. When his boyfriend turns to frown at him, Dante explains, "I forgot my skates. Can you believe it?" He laughs shakily. "How am I supposed to practice without them? What the hell was I thinking when we left the room?"

"You were probably thinking what *I* was thinking," Ryan starts, but the look Dante throws his way makes him giggle. "Wrong head, that's all. Go up and get them."

"You'll wait here?" Dante asks, dubious. He doesn't like the idea of just leaving Ryan here in the middle of the lobby but he can rush up to the room and be back in five minutes without having to worry about the wheelchair...

With a playful punch in the arm, Ryan says, "No, I'll get on the shuttle bus and wait for you at the rink. Of *course* I'll wait here, silly. Go on."

"Don't get smart with me," Dante laughs, mussing Ryan's hair. His boyfriend laughs and ducks away. "Or you won't get any tonight."

Ryan laughs again. "Yeah, we'll see how long you can hold out."

Not long, Dante thinks as he jogs to the elevators. When he passes Josey, he explains, "Forgot my bag. You guys wait with Ryan, okay? I'll be right back."

The elevator is empty on the way up to his floor—he didn't expect to run into anyone, actually, and he doesn't, which is just as well. He doesn't even think about what he'd say or do if Dietrich caught him alone until he's already back in his room, rooting through the clothes on the bed and looking for his bag. He should really put this stuff away. Tonight, definitely, before he and Ryan start anything that distracts them both and keeps them busy for the rest of the night. Was he *serious* about not getting any later? Dante sure as hell hopes not, because right now that's all he's holding out on, coming back here after practice and having another taste of his boy before they're

needed at any other club function. Maybe they can eat dinner in? That spaghetti wasn't half-bad, or they can call for pizza, sit on the couch and feed each other from the pie while they watch TV...

There. He finds his duffle bag and extracts it from beneath Ryan's clothes. He can't believe he forgot it—Ryan was right, he *was* distracted this morning, too busy stealing another kiss before they got out into the hall to even remember the whole reason he's here. Unzipping the bag, he checks to make sure everything's inside, his skinsuit and his skates, his helmet, his pads—all there. He hefts it over his shoulder and starts for the door again when he sees another duffle bag on the floor beside the bed. *Ryan's.*

With a grin, he bends down and retrieves the bag, the skates in it heavier than his own. He likes that Mrs. Talonovich thought to stick this in with the rest of Ryan's things—it says more about her optimism than any words she could've said. Ryan *will* skate again, that's what these skates tell him, it's written in the gleaming metal, the worn leather, every inch of the skates themselves when Dante opens the bag to look inside. His boy's already walking, isn't he? With help but it's more than what he was doing two weeks ago, more than he did before they met, and he *will* skate again, Dante's sure of it. He just needs to get out on that ice one time and it'll all come rushing back.

Without thinking, Dante unzips his own bag and shoves Ryan's skates inside. He's not sure why—maybe at the rink he'll pull them out and hand them to Ryan, just to give him encouragement. Maybe he won't even mention he has them, he doesn't know, but Mrs. T packed them for a reason, right? Maybe simply holding them on the sidelines will be enough.

Zippering his bag again, Dante shoulders it and hurries down to the lobby to rescue his boyfriend from the Banks sisters.

CHAPTER 21



In the hotel lobby, Ryan picks at the hem of his jacket and waits for Dante to return. It's the jacket that Mr. Vasquez gave him—*Rio del Oro* on the back and his name, *Talonovich*, embroidered on the front. He likes the stitching, gold on green, and he keeps running his finger over the raised letters as if they're written in Braille and he can read them with his fingertips alone. *Talonovich. The Talon.*

That's what Becca calls him, Talon, because that's what he went by on campus. Everyone knew him there—star of the hockey team, who *didn't* know who he was? When he stepped out on the ice, the crowds cheered for him the way they do for Dante, chanting his name, psyching him for the game. And here, now, who is he here? On this trip he's just Dante's crippled friend, the kid in the wheelchair. He hates that.

He's the one Dietrich picks on. He hates *that* more.

This morning when he woke up, he laid in bed and watched Dante sleep for hours it seemed, his lover's eyes closed, his brow smooth, his lips slightly parted and damp where his tongue licked out to wet them during the night. His breath was faint puffs against Ryan's face and when he sighed, his body shuddered into Ryan's. The memory of their sex the night before still warmed him—never in a million years could Ryan orchestrate something more perfect between two men, *ever*. He still feels Dante inside him, still feels the

hot rush like flames shooting through him, mingled with pleasure when they came. Lying beside him in the bed, Ryan imagined the two of them living together—maybe next semester after he's out of the chair, they could get an apartment near campus and he'll wake beside Dante every day, they'll make love every night. In these day-dreams he's whole again, the Talon, swooping down off the ice and celebrating with his boy after winning another game or cheering from the sidelines when Dante brings home the gold.

He had another idea, one that made him grin wickedly in the gray morning light of their room, one that made him snuggle closer to Dante and kiss him awake. No one knows how he tests his feet every chance he gets, no one knows how Dante helps him stand. And no one, not even Dante, knows about the way Ryan holds himself up against the bathroom sink, moving slowly, carefully, almost afraid of breaking something. But he does it, every single time he uses the toilet—wheels the chair around until it faces the sink, sets both hands on the counter, eases himself up until he sees his own reflection in the mirror. It hurts his left leg to stand for *too* long, and his right calf screams when he puts his weight onto it, but it's up out of that chair, it's standing by himself, without anyone else's help. When he falls back into the wheelchair, his legs trembling with exhaustion, he dries the sweat from his brow and laughs breathlessly because it's standing by himself. It's that much closer to getting out of this chair for good.

So lying there beside his lover this morning, he thought about how he's trying, how he *wants* to try now that this wonderful boy has suffused every aspect of his life, and he imagined himself in the wheelchair harboring his secret. He'd wait until the perfect moment to show Dante, only in his mind Dietrich came along before he got his chance. He waited, letting the insults build, letting the anger fester inside, until it was too much for him and he surged to his feet. Out of the chair, a good head taller than that asshole, and the faint pain in his legs was forgotten at the look of fear that flooded Dietrich's face. "What did you say?" Ryan demanded, and he liked

the way Dietrich stammered a reply so he played that part of the day-dream over again. He'll have to remember to mention that image to Dante, he's the dreamer. *God*, he thought, studying his lover as he slept, *I don't know what I did to deserve him but thank You, thank You so much.*

Looking around the lobby now, Ryan tunes out Josey's endless prattle and prays that Dante hurries up. How could he forget his skates? *That boy...* he thinks, shaking his head with a bemused smile. He's so easily distracted, and this morning it was all about the two of them getting another kiss in, another touch, another little bit of loving before they absolutely, positively had to go. No wonder he left his skates behind—he was too busy trying to convince Ryan they could wait another five minutes, really they could, just enough for a few more kisses and a few more and a few *more*. To be honest, Ryan's surprised they managed to make breakfast at all. And what excellent timing too—if he had known Josey was going to step out into the hall at the exact same moment they did, he would've taken his boy up on the offer of another few minutes, definitely. He almost hopes Becca snaps and tells her they're fucking just so the shock will shut her up. It'd be crude and it'd hurt, but at least then she'd be *quiet*.

But no, he's not so lucky. Becca told them that Josey won't listen to her and Ryan knows this. He knows there's only one person who can tell her, Dante himself, and even then she might not want to believe they're together. *Tough shit*, Ryan thinks, picking at his jacket. *He's my boy, honey, so you just best step off.*

As if she knows he's thinking about her, Josey turns to him and asks with a laugh, "Did he *really* forget his skates? He was probably going back in to get them when I called out to you guys."

Yeah, it's all you, Ryan thinks sourly. Becca meets his bitter gaze, then quickly looks away. *Sorry to bust your bubble, girlfriend, but my hand on his ass two seconds before we opened that door, that's what distracted him.* Can she honestly think Dante likes her? He's nice but he definitely doesn't *flirt* with her.

Quietly, Becca suggests, “Maybe he had other things on his mind.”

Around them, skaters have begun to gather in the lobby—not just their club but others as well, speedskaters from all over the state, the best at their sport. A few wear skinsuits already but most are dressed in sweats or jeans, with jackets sporting a myriad of sponsors’ names and logos. “It’s getting crowded,” Ryan mutters. What’s taking Dante so long?

“We get the rink first,” Josey tells him. “Eight thirty to eleven, that’s our time. Group practice, then there’s a club from south Jersey that has the ice until two. I think it’s free skate after that. There are two rinks, actually, but the other one’s not open til this afternoon.”

I don’t care, Ryan thinks. Did he ask for a detailed schedule? Frowning at the clock on the wall, he wonders if he shouldn’t go after Dante, it’s almost quarter to eight, they’ll want to load the bus up soon and one of the coaches already told him he has to board first, what with the chair lift and all, but he’s not leaving without his boy—

Suddenly he gets a glimpse of a navy blue bandanna weaving through the crowd and then Dante’s grinning at them, heading their way. Ryan’s heart skips in his chest—“I was getting worried,” he admits as Dante approaches, duffle bag slung over one shoulder. Reaching for the bag, Ryan takes it, sets it in his lap, and asks, “You didn’t have any problems, did you?”

Dante laughs. “No, don’t worry—I didn’t run into Wil.”

With a grin, Ryan tells him, “I didn’t necessarily mean *that*.”

“Yes you did.” Dante nods, then leans over the back of his wheelchair and smiles at the sisters sitting nearby. “I know you too well, Ryan. That’s exactly what you were thinking.” Looking around at the crowded lobby, he asks, “Are we about ready to go?”

Ryan starts to reply when he sees Dietrich step out of the elevator, his buddies behind him, and whatever words he wanted to say dry up in his throat. He *hates* that guy, hates his braying laugh, hates the way he leers when he grins, the way he looks around the lobby and

spots them and nudges his friend beside him, he hates everything about that jerk. “Speak of the devil,” he mumbles as Dietrich heads in their direction, an evil smirk already spreading across his face like oil over water.

But then Dietrich notices Becca and stops. Ryan feels dull anger curl through him—the dumbass should be that scared of *him*, not Josey’s sister. *He* should be the one whose wrath Dietrich hopes to avoid, *he* should be the one who makes the skater turn away and disappear into the crowd. He clenches his hands into useless fists and wants to scream in frustration—it should be him, he needs his chance, he should be the one to make that fuckhead pay for all the shit he says about Dante.

As if feeling his frustration, Dante massages Ryan’s shoulders and whispers, “It’s okay. Just ignore him.”

Only it’s *not* okay, and Ryan fights against every instinct that wants to pull him to his feet just to show Dietrich how terrified he should be.



“I’m going to hurt him,” Ryan says for the hundredth time since they got on the shuttle. His hands are still fisted on his thighs and he stares out the window at the desolate gray streets of early morning Atlantic City.

“I know,” Dante replies. He pats Ryan’s knee quickly and pulls his hand away.

A few minutes later, when Ryan can’t stand the anger swirling around inside, he mutters again, “I’m gonna hurt him.”

Dante’s hand finds his knee again. “I know, baby,” he murmurs. “I know.”

He’s reaching a boiling point, dwelling on this, but he can’t get that damn smirk out of his head. “Where the *fuck*—” Ryan starts.

“Shh.” Dante looks around to make sure none of the coaches overheard that. “You can’t just start cussing here,” he tells Ryan. “It’s against the rules.”

With a short laugh, Ryan winks at him and says, “So’s sex.”

“No one saw that,” Dante giggles. “If we got freaky right here, though, I’d say we’d probably get in trouble, you know?” The thought of getting freaky with his boy *anywhere* improves Ryan’s mood, and fuck Dietrich for his ignorant, homophobic comments. What’s it matter to him that they love each other? Who’s it hurting when they hold each other tight? Who’s damn business is it when they kiss? Grinning, Dante nudges him and whispers, “I know what you’re thinking. Stop it.”

“Stop what?” Ryan asks, trying to sound innocent and failing miserably.

“Stop undressing me in your mind,” Dante replies. He laughs at the expression on his boyfriend’s face and asks, “See? I knew that’s what you were doing. You’re bad.”

Ryan tells him, “You’re wrong. I wasn’t mentally undressing you.”

“You weren’t?” The tone of Dante’s voice suggests that he knows better.

Brushing the hair from his eyes, Ryan shakes his head. “You were already naked,” he says matter-of-factly. He laughs as Dante pokes him in the ribs, tickling him. “Hey!” he giggles, squirming away. But his anger fades and leave it to Dante to make everything okay. It’s a talent and Ryan’s not sure how the boy does it, but it’s one of the things he loves most about him. *That*, he thinks, laughing as he tries to keep Dante’s hands from pinching at his nipples, *and his smile and his mind and his body, and every other little damn thing there is to love about him.*

And fuck Dietrich for trying to make that wrong.



The rink is about the same size as the coliseum back home where the club skates but there are no hockey markings on the ice—just the short track, blocks around the curves, a deep blue oval in center rink, red lines marking the start and finish. Despite the early hour, the stands closest to the ice are already filled with guests and fans out to watch the practice. At the locker rooms, Dante asks Ryan if he'll be okay for himself by a while, as if he hasn't been doing this wheelchair gig for over a month now. "I'll be fine," Ryan assures him, and at the forlorn expression on his boyfriend's face, he gives him a push with the toe of his left sneaker. "Don't give me that look. I'll shout your name every time you come by me."

With a sexy grin, Dante lowers his voice and asks, "Isn't that what you did last night?"

That earns him another playful kick in the shin. "I mean out on the ice," Ryan says.

"You want to do it on the ice?" Dante asks. He seems to mull it over a minute, then tells him, "It'll be a little cold, don't you think?"

"I'm not—" Ryan laughs, exasperated. With his foot, he pushes Dante towards the locker room. "Get in there. The sooner you're done, the sooner we can head back to the hotel."

Dante catches Ryan's foot and tugs gently, just enough to pull the wheelchair forward an inch or two. "Can we do it there?" he asks. "If I ask real nice?"

"If you win," Ryan replies.

"If," Dante laughs, like there's any chance he might not.



Ryan finds a spot near the ice where his chair fits easily between two rows of seats and Becca sits with him just because she doesn't know anyone else here. On the ice, skaters race through a few warm-

up laps, Dante grinning at him every time he zooms passed. “He’s fast,” Becca remarks, watching the clock on the scoreboard when Dante goes by again. “Damn.”

“Yeah.” Pride swells in Ryan with each lap, his boy going faster and faster until he has to lean down on the turns, one hand trailing over the ice to hold himself steady. When he comes back up on the straight lanes, he makes it look so easy, effortless, like flying. *One day it’ll be me out there with him*, Ryan thinks. His legs ache to chase after Dante on the ice.

A little before nine, the ice clears and the first practice race gets underway. The fifteen hundred and even though it’s not Dante’s forte, he keeps up with the pack and is second across the finish line. Around them, people in the stands surge to their feet with a roar like the tide, and Ryan feels insignificant and lost amid the standing crowd. But somehow Dante sees him. He skates over to where Ryan is, leans on the boards, shouts out, “Second! And I suck at this race.”

“You don’t suck,” Ryan laughs, raising his voice to be heard over the din of the crowd.

Dante gives him a saucy wink. “I can, if you want,” he replies, and Ryan feels his face flush at the remark. He walked right into that one, didn’t he? “Tonight,” Dante promises, and with a wave at Becca, he skates away.

The women’s race is next, and though Ryan cheers for Josey, he has to admit that it’s boring when Dante’s not on the ice. But he’s back for the thousand, nine laps around the track, and he’s just inches from the finish line when that bird-guy Aaron trips on a track block and barrels into Dietrich. They’re moving too fast, all of them, and Dietrich reaches out as he falls, snags Dante’s skinsuit, pulls him down, too. The three of them skid out of control, smack into the boards, Dante back first and Dietrich caught behind him. Ryan holds his breath and leans forward, *please*, he prays, *please don’t God please don’t hurt him please—*

Dante struggles to his feet to finish the race, pulling Dietrich along with him. He gets third, one skate ahead of another kid who didn't fall but who trailed the pack for the whole race. At the line, Dante twists out of Dietrich's grip, skates a little ways from him, turns to glare back and the look on his face is one of such righteous indignation that Ryan feels his own anger boil. This time as Dante approaches the boards, he calls out, "What the hell happened out there?"

"Nothing," Dante mutters, tugging at his skinsuit to straighten it. He glances back at Dietrich, standing in the player's box with an ice-pack on one hand. "Aaron took a dive, Wil caught me up in it, we went down, that's all."

Somehow Ryan seriously doubts that's all. Judging from the look on his boyfriend's face, he thinks something else went on, something he couldn't see from here. As Dante starts to leave, Ryan grabs his elbow and pulls him close, until he can speak without having to shout to be heard. "Why don't you just tell me what happened already?" he asks, searching Dante's face for answers.

Anger flickers through his boyfriend's eyes, an unfamiliar emotion for the laid-back skater. "Nothing," he growls, and he tries to free himself from Ryan's grasp but he holds on tight. With a sigh, Dante admits, "He was just being an ass, hon. I have to get back—"

"What did he do?" Ryan persists. When Dante shakes his head, he amends, "What did he say to you? Don't tell me nothing."

Dante tugs halfheartedly at Ryan's hand, but he won't let go. "Just made some stupid comment," he mumbles—Ryan has to lean forward to hear him, he speaks so low. "It's not even worth getting upset over—"

"It upsets you," Ryan points out. "And that's pissing the hell outta me. Tell me. What—"

"He asked if I liked going down on him, okay?" Dante's words come out like a slap in the face, harsh and bitter, and this time when

he pulls away, Ryan lets him go. *Oh no, he didn't*, he thinks, staring at his boyfriend in disbelief. "I told you it was stupid."

Ryan reaches for him. "Baby—"

"I gotta get back," Dante tells him. He stares at the ice for a moment, his lower lip trembling. When Ryan touches his arm, he turns away. "At least I came in third," he says, as if that's any consolation.

He's dead, Ryan thinks as Dante skates back to where the rest of the club sits. He sees Dietrich and if looks could kill, he wouldn't need that icepack on his hand to soothe his pain—he'd feel *no* pain, ever again, because he'd drop to the floor from the hate in Ryan's eyes alone. Dante approaches the player box, ignoring the other skater, but Ryan sees Dietrich's evil leer, the way he looks at Dante as he passes, he can almost hear the thoughts whirling through that asshole's head. *If he touches you again*, Ryan swears, curling his hands into fists, *he is so fucking dead*.

He doesn't, but he looks across the rink and meets Ryan's gaze with a self-satisfied smirk that just *begs* to be wiped clean off his face. *One day—*

Ryan hopes Dietrich can read the promise of pain in his eyes.



Dante's fuming over Dietrich's comment, Ryan can see the anger from where he sits on the other side of the ice. It's in the set of his lover's jaw, the way he keeps tugging at the strap on his helmet. When Dietrich sits down on the bench near him, Dante stands, walks away. When Dietrich laughs, Dante leans over the boards to watch the women's race and scowls at the ice.

The five hundred is their last practice run, just four and a half laps around the track but Dante's so damn pissed that he false starts twice. The next time he waits for the gun and he's off, fast and hard from the line, a good two, three feet ahead of the others. Dietrich scrambles to keep up but Dante's fucking *livid*, he sets a quick pace,

takes the first curve at such speed that Ryan sees his skate wobble unsteadily, he's going to fall.

But he doesn't, thank God—he was born to skate, he feels the ice beneath his feet and lets the race consume his soul. By the second curve, he's a full half lap ahead of the pack, and he pushes himself further on the straight track, he comes up behind the others, skates wide and passes them. When the bell rings for the final lap, he doesn't slow down even though he can, he doesn't take it easy, he doesn't glide across the line a winner. Instead, he drives himself harder, pumps his arms, picks up speed and flies over the finish line so fast, he has to circle the track again just to slow himself down.

Ryan cheers with the crowd—this place will be *wild* on Saturday, already these people know Dante's name, they chant it until it's the only word that exists and if he skates like this in the competitions, there's no *way* he won't get national sponsorship, no *way* he can't win. Ryan's cheeks hurt, he's grinning so wide, and when Dante looks his way, he waves like a maniac. *My boy!* The only thing that keeps him from shouting that out at the top of his lungs is the emotion closing his throat.

This time, though, Dante doesn't stop by where he sits—he retreats to the player box as the crowds grow quiet, and Ryan cranes his neck to watch his boyfriend throw himself down on the bench. Ripping off his helmet, he tosses it to the floor, claws at his neck guard, wipes a shaky hand across his face. He glances at Ryan, exhaustion warring with the anger that haunts his eyes. If he could just walk, he'd hurry to his lover's side, kneel down beside him, take him in his arms and whisper to him, everything will be okay. And if he could just walk, Dietrich wouldn't have said shit, Dante wouldn't *be* so drained, he wouldn't push himself so hard. Ryan's heart twists in his chest to see pain color the eyes he loves. *Baby*, he thinks—the fact that Dante didn't come over to him after the race only fuels his own anger more.

On the opposite side of the rink, a zamboni eases out onto the ice. “Are they done?” Ryan asks Becca. What time did Josey say they finished? It’s not quite eleven yet and they haven’t run the relay, but all along the side of the ice, members of the skate club begin to trade skates for sneakers and sweats are pulled on to hide skinsuits. He watches as Dante slips into the shadows beneath the stands and disappears. “That’s not very long. How are they supposed to be ready for Saturday if they just get what, two hours out on the ice?”

Sweeping her arm to indicate the people in the stands, Becca reminds him, “Every skate club in the state is here. They all have to take their turn.”

“The other rink’s free skate,” someone pipes up behind them. Turning, Ryan sees Josey, hair pulled back in her signature braid and skinsuit hidden beneath a long coat. Her face is sheathed in sweat and she has her bag over one shoulder. Behind her is Dante.

Ryan wants to reach out to him but he’s closed off, his dark hair hiding his eyes, his own bag dangling almost forgotten from one hand. *Look at me*, Ryan prays. Dante doesn’t. He stares at his feet and simply stops when Josey does, like a robot shutting itself off. *Baby, look at me, please.*

“We can go after lunch,” Josey’s saying. “If you guys want?” *You guys* means Dante—she turns to nod at him, smiling brightly, but he just shrugs. *Can’t you see he’s hurting?* Ryan wants to yell at her. His boy’s torn up inside and she wants to fucking skate. “We can get a few of the others to run through the relay, what do you think?”

Before Ryan can let loose any bitter words, Becca suggests, “I think we should just maybe take a breather for a minute?” She looks at Ryan, who nods, then at Dante. “You two are wiped out. Sit down, Josey—I saved you a seat.”

She removes her coat from the seat on the other side of her, away from Ryan. “Dante, here,” Josey starts, patting the chair beside hers.

Dante ignores her. Instead, he swings one leg up over the back of the seat next to Ryan’s wheelchair and sinks down, stretching his legs

out in front of him. From up his sleeve he pulls out a bandanna, shakes it, then ties it over his hair gangster-style to keep his bangs out of his face. Leaning his head back, he closes his eyes and pulls his bandanna down over them. Ryan pats his thigh in what he hopes is a comforting gesture. Dante hasn't spoken to him yet, hasn't said a word. Is he mad at *him*, maybe? For insisting on knowing what Dietrich said?

When he moves his hand away, though, Dante catches it and sets it back on his knee. He's not mad then, not at Ryan, and his fingers rub along the inner seam of Dante's sweats, soothing. *When you're ready to talk about it*, he thinks, hoping Dante somehow understands without his having to say the words. *I'm here for you when you need me to be.*

Quietly, Dante sighs, "Love you."

Two words, that's it, but they manage to set everything right between them. Ryan gives his lover's leg a gentle squeeze and thinks, *I love you, too.*



By noon, Josey's antsy to get something to eat. "We can take the shuttle back to the hotel," she says, watching skaters from the south Jersey club race over the ice. "The food there's covered in our fee. Or hey, I think I saw a deli just a few blocks away, we could try that."

Ryan doesn't tell her that he's not pushing this damn chair of his down the streets of Atlantic City like a kid in a stroller. He just rubs Dante's leg and frowns at the skaters whizzing by and waits for someone else to say something, someone other than Josey. *If she'd let anyone get a word in edgewise*, he thinks. Much more of her chatter and he'll tell her himself, in mean language so there's no mistaking the point. *Dante fucks me, bitch. He's my boy, not yours. He likes it from me.* He's about ready to snap.

"You guys?" She leans across Becca and looks at Dante reclined in his seat, his eyes still covered with his bandanna to block out the world around him. "You getting hungry down there?"

With a sigh, Ryan asks, "Why don't you two go on, hmm?" He directs his words to Becca, she'll get his drift. "We'll head back soon."

"The shuttle runs every fifteen minutes," Josey tells him. *Was I talking to you?* he thinks, glaring past Becca at her sister. "We can wait—"

Beside him, Dante mutters, "Just go."

Josey's eyes widen. "You sure?" she asks. "Because it's really no problem, Dante—"

But Becca takes the hint and she's already on her feet, pulling her sister up, as well. "We'll see you back at the hotel then," she says, shaking her head when Josey starts to speak. "Come on. They'll leave when they're good and ready to."

It seems to take years for Josey to get her stuff together—she dawdles like she hopes Dante might decide to come with her anyway, or maybe sit up and tell her he'll see her later, or anything really, anything at all. But Dante's hurting right now, Ryan can almost feel the pain radiating from his lover, can't Josey be a little more sympathetic to that? Sure, she doesn't know why he's pissed, but she *has* to be able to sense the change in his usual manner, unless she's just too damn dense to figure it out. He hasn't said crap to her since they got here—does she really think he's going to jump at the chance to eat lunch with her? God, talk about torture.

Becca touches Ryan's shoulder and when he looks up, she forces a tight smile. "You two take care," she says, looking from him to Dante. *Take care of him*, that glance says.

Ryan nods. "We will. See you." He waves at Josey, fakes a grin as if they're old friends. "See you."

"Bye," she says, following Becca down the aisle. "Bye Dante."

She looks over her shoulder as she walks, waiting for him to respond, wave, smile, something, but he doesn't. Ryan sees her turn

around, grab the back of Becca's jacket to keep up with her, turn around again, still nothing. *Clue in already, honey*, he thinks, Dante's knee warm beneath his hand.

A few minutes later, Dante whispers, "Is she gone?"

Ryan nods. Then, realizing his lover still has his eyes closed, he says, "Yeah, finally." Frowning at Dante, he asks, "Are you alright?"

His sorrowful sigh answers that question. "Can we just get out of here?" he asks as he sits up, pushing the bandanna off of his face.

"You want to go back to the hotel?" Ryan asks. "They just left. If we go back now, we'll get the same shuttle—"

"I mean somewhere else," Dante explains. He rubs at his eyes until they're red-rimmed and bloodshot. "I mean somewhere not here. Just the two of us. Maybe that other rink? Is it open yet?"

Ryan shrugs. "I don't know," he admits.

Rising to his feet, Dante climbs over the seats and then takes the handlebars of Ryan's wheelchair to back him down the aisle. "Let's find out."



The other rink is small, probably reserved for private skate parties and local competitions. The sign on the door says the ice is off-limits until two. Still, there's no one down in this part of the concourse yet, and when Dante presses his face to the window set up high in the door, he says he doesn't see anyone in the hall. Ryan tries the door—unlocked, and he holds it open as Dante guides his chair through. "We're going to get caught," he says softly, watching Dante pull the door shut behind them. His heart pounds in his chest at the threat of discovery.

"Tough shit," Dante mutters. He's still in that mood of his and Ryan swears he'll do something about it as soon as he gets a chance, Dietrich's not going to get away with much more. He'll see to that himself. Pushing Ryan's chair down the short corridor, Dante tells

him, “If they really wanted to keep us out, they would’ve locked the door, you know?”

Further down the hall twin corridors branch off to the right and the left—men’s and women’s locker rooms, according to the signs. And at the end of the hall double doors lead out to tiers of stands folded up against walls that line an ice-covered floor no larger than a high school gym. The boards around the rink are nothing more than wrestling mats tied to a wooden rail—there’s a metal gate at one point, and beyond that a row of benches where skaters can wait. “This is *tiny*,” Ryan says, doubtful. Is that ice even completely cooled yet?

But Dante tells him, “It’s perfect.”

He leads Ryan around the side of the rink to the benches, pushing the wheelchair as close to the gate as he can. Then he drops his duffle bag to the floor, the skates inside clanking together softly, and he kicks off his sneakers. Watching him unzip the bag, Ryan asks, “You want to talk about it now?”

Dante shakes his head. “I’m over it,” he says, but his clipped tone of voice suggests otherwise. Extracting his skates from the bag, he ties them on quickly, without removing his sweatpants first. “You said it yourself, baby, he’s an asshole. Can we just drop it?” He slips out of his jacket, folds it up on the bench beside him, then leans into Ryan’s lap. “Kiss me.”

With a laugh, Ryan complies. Dante’s hands smooth over his thighs, around his knees, the one on his left leg traveling down his calf while the one on his right grips the brace he wears. Another kiss, this one hungry, pressing Ryan back as he rubs at his legs, and Dante’s earlier comment about sex on the ice makes him wonder why his lover wanted to get him alone in the first place. His hand caresses Ryan’s ankle, slips up into his pants leg to brush over his scarred skin, and then fingers pluck at the laces on his sneakers, untying first one shoe, then the other. “What do you have in mind?” Ryan sighs as Dante kisses along the curve of his jaw.

"You'll see," Dante assures him. He sits back on the bench and tugs off Ryan's shoes, first the left and then the right, careful when Ryan winces in pain. Setting the shoes on the floor beside his own, he digs into the duffle bag again, roots around in there until he pulls out...

My skates. Ryan can't believe it, his hockey skates, right there in Dante's hands. "Why—" he starts, but words fail him as he watches his lover unlace one skate. He works the opening wide, spreads the shoe to stretch it out a bit. When he raises Ryan's foot to his lap, Ryan chokes back sudden tears, his *skates*. "Dante, what—"

"Shh," Dante murmurs, rubbing Ryan's ankle as he eases the skate onto his foot. With nimble ease, he laces it up quickly, secures the Velcro strap that covers the laces, taps the blade to settle the skate in place. Then he takes Ryan's right foot, does the same, taking it slow to keep the pain at a minimum. *My skates*, Ryan thinks, feeling the familiar snugness encasing his foot. Dante folds the chair's foot stands up to let Ryan set the skates onto the floor, and the sound of his blades tapping on the concrete is heavenly, like music made by choirs of angels. *My skates*.

Rising, Dante holds out his hands. "Step up, baby," he says. His face blurs when Ryan blinks and wipes at his eyes to clear them. Gingerly, Dante takes his wrists, helps him stand. His arms snake around Ryan's waist, strong and loving. "I've got you," he whispers. Pain sears up Ryan's right leg and he bends his knee to keep that skate off the floor. "Don't worry, Ryan. I'm not going to let you go."

Somehow they make it through the tiny gate together. Dante's patient—he lets Ryan grasp at the boards, keeps his hands on his boyfriend's waist as he gets used to the idea of standing again. On the ice—*on the ice!* Ryan's mind races and his legs ache to fly after it, a myriad of images tumbling through his soul. The first time he stood on skates and promptly fell flat on his ass, knocking the wind out of him. College tryouts, every single shot on goal a score that landed him the coveted position of starter for the team. The time he got into

it on the ice with one of the refs from the Crest and spent five for fighting in the penalty box. The solid thud of his stick on the puck, the roar of the crowd, the buzzer that rang each time he sank a goal, it all comes back to him, makes his knees weak and his legs tremble. He used to be great out here. He used to be amazing when he was on the ice.

And now I'm back again.

When he turns to grin at Dante, his boyfriend catches him in a tight hug, kisses his neck, his ear, his temple, until his mouth finds Ryan's own. "I'm on the ice," he sighs, and Dante's kisses give the words added weight, his hands fist in Ryan's jacket, he's on the damn ice. "Oh Jesus, I never thought in a million *years*..." Did he bring the camera? Wait til his mother hears about *this*.

Ducking beneath his arm, Dante comes up between Ryan and the boards and wraps his arms around his boyfriend's neck. With another kiss, he whispers, "*I* knew you'd do it. You're too stubborn to stay in that seat forever, you know that?"

Ryan laughs. "I have the best encouragement," he replies. "I told you you're good for me." It's one thing to stand in the bathroom but this, *this* is what he's wanted to get back to, these skates on his feet, this ice beneath him. *This* is what he's been afraid he would never find again. *This*.

Taking one of Ryan's arms, Dante starts to skate away. "Follow me," he says, and he glides slow enough that Ryan can keep up, his movements stiff, unsure. He keeps his weight on his left foot, just barely touching the ice with the tip of the blade on his right, but Dante helps him along, keeps hold of him even as he clings to the boards. What were the doctors thinking, he *might* skate again? This is easier than walking, easier than breathing—this is being *alive*. "You're doing great, baby," Dante says with each slide of his feet, encouraging him. "Come on, just a little further, I've got you. Trust me, Ryan, I've got you."

Ryan *does* trust him, implicitly, and he ignores the pain in his legs, the quiver in his calves. Instead he savors the chill off the ice, the faint *scritch scritch* of his blades, the slush that dampens the boards beneath his hands. They don't go far—Ryan looks back and the gate's still so close, it's almost disheartening to see it just what, a yard away? If that. But it's *definitely* out of the damn wheelchair, which sits on the sidelines like a memory he's outgrown, a forgotten piece of his past that, with Dante's help, he's finally managing to put behind him for good.

CHAPTER 22



Dante doesn't want to push Ryan too hard—it's his first time back on skates in forever but he's not invincible, no matter what he seems to think. He insists he's fine but Dante knows better, he sees the thin lines of exertion crease the skin around Ryan's eyes, and he doesn't even get a quarter of the way around the rink before he leads his boyfriend back to the gate. This is just the beginning—they have tomorrow too, and Saturday, and when they get back home, Dante promises to take Ryan skating every single morning. "Right after the hockey team leaves the ice," Dante says, holding tightly onto his boyfriend's arms for fear of him falling. God, what would Mrs. Talonovich say if she knew what they were doing? It's crazy, he can't even walk and he's out here on the ice, *skating*, but there's a gleam in his eyes that Dante put there and the smile on his face, that's real, it tells him that this is doing more for him than all the hours of therapy he's had combined. "Another week or two," Dante tells Ryan as he plops down into the wheelchair again, "and you'll be skating rings around me, I just know it."

Ryan sighs, weary, and when Dante unlaces his skates, he feels the muscles in his boyfriend's legs tremble beneath his hands. Gently, he rubs at Ryan's calves, massaging them. "You're incredible," he says, kissing his boyfriend's knee through his jeans. "Back on the ice, can you believe it?"

"It wasn't much," Ryan murmurs, but Dante hears the excitement in his voice and laughs. "When I can let go of the boards, *then* we can celebrate."

Leaning over Ryan's lap, Dante kisses the sweat beaded along his boyfriend's upper lip and whispers, "And here I was hoping to celebrate now. You and me back at the hotel, what do you say? We can order in and eat naked in the bed, wasn't that your idea?"

"Something like that," Ryan agrees with a grin.

The shuttle between the rink and the hotel runs every fifteen minutes, and it's boarding when Dante guides Ryan's wheelchair out into the parking lot. The chair lift is a godsend at this point—Dante's tired from practice and doesn't think he has the strength to carry Ryan up the few steps into the shuttle. There are only a couple of other skaters onboard, and thankfully none of them is anyone Dante knows, not Josey or her sister or even Dietrich or any of his pals. Just some kids from another club, no one Dante recognizes, and because they aren't near him, he dares to hold Ryan's hand on the ride back. "You did great out there," he murmurs, rubbing his thumb over Ryan's knuckles. He loves the feel of soft skin on his.

"*You* did great," Ryan tells him. Giving Dante's hand a slight squeeze, he smiles and says, "You get off the line Saturday like you did today and no one else stands a chance out there."

It was anger that made him reckless like that. Last heat of the day, he really shouldn't have wasted his energy in the five hundred, but after Dietrich's comment, he couldn't stand still if he wanted to, his emotions were a whirlwind just begging for release. The race calmed him some, especially when he sailed over the finish line a full lap and a half ahead of everyone else, Dietrich included. *Fuck* him. Dante can't *wait* until he wins this race and heads onto Regionals because he knows Wil's daddy won't be able to pull any strings to get his son into those competitions, and he's not skater enough to make it on his own. It ends here, Saturday, and after that Dante won't have to look

over his shoulder during every race, he won't have to worry about rude comments or hateful remarks or the fear of a fight.

He feels his boyfriend studying him but Dante can't meet his gaze. Instead he looks at their hands entwined on Ryan's thigh and tells himself not to worry about Dietrich. He still placed third in the other race, even if Wil dragged him down just yards from the line. That only means he'll have to be more aware out on the ice, is all. He'll have to make sure he knows where Dietrich is at all times, and he'll have to keep a cushion of space between them that the other skater can't hope to broach. That shouldn't be hard—if he pays attention to the starter, gets off the line fast, pumps ahead of the pack, he should be fine. And he'll win. He'll win.

Ryan's voice is intimately quiet when he speaks. "I thought you said you weren't thinking about him anymore."

"I'm not," Dante replies, but he doesn't have to ask who Ryan means, he knows. Dietrich. It's almost scary how well his boyfriend can read him, he seems to know exactly what Dante's thinking before the thoughts even go through his mind. Forcing a halfhearted smile, Dante assures him, "I'm not, baby. I'm just..." He laughs. "I'm just thinking of winning, that's all." *And how good it'll feel to know that it will piss the fuck out of Wil.*



At the hotel, Dante heads straight for the elevators, keeping his head down as he pushes Ryan's chair past the restaurant just in case Josey's in there trying to catch his eye. "Don't look," he says when Ryan glances in at the tables crowded with skaters. "If she sees you—"

"She's not there," Ryan tells him, craning his neck. "I see that jack-ass, though." He means Dietrich and Dante doesn't want to see *him*, either, so he doesn't look. "But no Josey. We're in the clear."

With a short laugh, Dante reminds him, "Unless we run into her upstairs."

But they don't. They reach the door to their room without incident and Dante hurries them both inside, afraid of hearing another door open down the hall or his name called out in a bubbly voice. As Ryan stretches out on the bed, Dante retrieves the room service menu from where they left it by the TV, then lies down on his stomach beside his lover. He gives the menu a cursory glance before laying it on Ryan's chest. "You order this time," he says, resting his head on top of his folded arms.

With a frown, Ryan picks up the menu and asks, "What do you want?"

"You," Dante replies. He sits up long enough to kiss Ryan's elbow, then lies back down again.

Ryan laughs. "I mean to eat, silly," he says. When Dante starts to respond, he warns, "Don't."

Grinning at him, Dante wiggles closer, until his body's pressed alongside Ryan's. "Don't what?" he asks, as if he doesn't know.

Ryan ignores that. He rubs at the space between Dante's shoulder blades, a soothing rhythm that makes his eyes slip closed. "Hoagies, maybe?" he asks. Dante purrs an incoherent answer, savors the touch on his back, Ryan's warmth along his side. "Why do I have to pick something?" his boyfriend asks. "What do you like to eat?"

"I picked last night," Dante reminds him. He snuggles closer, drapes an arm around Ryan's waist, buries his face into his lover's side and sighs, content. He could lay like this for the rest of the night. "Get anything you want. Hoagies are good."

Hoagies it is. Ryan calls in the order, then pulls Dante into his arms, until his head rests on his boyfriend's chest and he can hear the steady *thudthud thudthud* of Ryan's heart. They lie like that for hours it seems and Dante never wants to move, right here is where he always wants to be. Soon they're both dozing, the afternoon stretching out around them like taffy, warm and sweet. When someone knocks on their door, Dante stirs slightly and asks, "Can't we just tell them to come in?"

“Door’s locked,” Ryan says, rousing himself. Dante pushes up from the bed and sighs. Did they *have* to get something to eat? And of course the food’s delivered just as they start to get comfortable. The knock sounds again, someone calls out, “Room service,” and his boyfriend asks, “Are you going to get that? Or should I?”

Dante slaps Ryan’s leg playfully as he rolls off the bed. “Don’t get smart with me,” he jokes, heading for the door.

Before he can get too far, Ryan snags his t-shirt and pulls him back for a quick kiss. “Or what?” he wants to know.

Grinning, Dante promises, “I’ll think of something.”



They eat on the bed but fully clothed, which Dante hopes to remedy soon. Now that they’re alone, he keeps rubbing Ryan’s legs where his boyfriend has them stretched out beside him and he can’t stop staring at Ryan’s eyes, his lips. He wants to cuddle up to him, hold him tight, giggle breathlessly and touch him in places that make those blue eyes gloss over. Finishing his hoagie, Dante balls the deli paper up in one fist and tosses it at the trashcan by the dresser but it lands pitifully short of the basket. “This is why you don’t play ball,” Ryan laughs.

With a wink, Dante lies down beside him again, his hand drifting towards Ryan’s crotch. “Speaking of balls...”

Ryan swats his hand away. “I’m eating here,” he says. “When I’m done.”

“Aren’t you done yet?” Dante asks. When Ryan shakes his head, he sighs and presses his face against his boyfriend’s hip, breathes in the crisp scent of clothing, the sporty aroma of the cologne Ryan wears, and beneath that a lingering chill from the ice. Above him comes the rustle of deli paper as Ryan eats, and when his boyfriend caresses his back in a loving gesture, Dante asks, “Are you done now?”

Laughing, Ryan tells him, “Not yet. Damn, boy. Watch TV or something.”

Good idea. Rolling back off the bed, Dante catches himself before he can fall to the floor and staggers to his feet. The TV remote is on the coffee table, and he turns the TV a little before he returns to the bed. Now he can see the screen when he lies down on his side, and he backs up against Ryan, clicks the TV on, thumbs through the stations without even paying attention to what he sees. He doesn't really want to watch TV, he wants to play with Ryan and he doesn't really want to wait. He *wants* to maybe take a nap, he's worn out from practice—shouldn't push himself so hard, he knows that, but Dietrich just makes him so goddamn *mad* that he can't help it. But he's not going to think about that ass, he won't let himself get angry again, he'll just lie here and wait for Ryan to finish up and then they'll fool around a bit. Maybe they can nap together? He likes that idea.

There's nothing good on TV, why did he even bother turning it on? For the noise, that's the only reason, and because Ryan suggested it. "Oh wait," he says, flicking back to a previous channel. "Look, *Clerks*. Have you seen this?"

"Good movie," Ryan replies, but he doesn't sound overly interested.

Instead, the crumble of paper tells Dante that he's finally finished eating, and Ryan leans heavily on his hip as he swings his legs over the side of the bed. Sitting up, Dante frowns at him and asks, "Where do you think you're going?"

"To throw this away," Ryan says. He looks back over his shoulder and raises an eyebrow. "If you'll help me. Please?"

Dante grins. "If you'll wait a minute." Climbing off the bed, he helps Ryan to his feet. When he leans against him, Dante smells a mingle of olive oil and Ryan's own sweet scent, and the skinsuit he wears beneath his clothes bites into a sudden erection. "I love you," he sighs, cradling Ryan's face in both hands to kiss him hungrily.

"Dante—" Ryan warns as they stagger back against the other bed. Dante sits down in the open suitcase that he *still* hasn't put away and

Ryan leans above him, speaking between kisses. “Baby, this isn’t...” Then, “Okay, you know what? We shouldn’t really—” And finally, “Jesus, Dante,” this last punctuated with strong hands lying him back, eager lips on his throat and chin, his name dissolved in a breathless gasp. Nimble fingers slip into his sweats, glide over the Lycra skin of his suit, fist around the bulge of his dick. Ryan laughs as he pulls away. “How am I supposed to get into that?” he wants to know, picking at the skinsuit.

“It has a zipper,” Dante tells him, sitting up to pull at the front of his suit. For a scary moment he can’t find the zipper...until he realizes he’s still wearing a t-shirt, and he almost knocks Ryan over in his haste to get it over his head. “Take it off,” he whines.

“Calm down,” Ryan tells him, giggling. He lifts Dante’s shirt, waits until his boyfriend raises his arms above his head before tugging it off. “You’re so damn horny.”

“Me?” Dante pokes at the front of Ryan’s jeans, where a hardness meets his touch. With his other hand, he unzips his skinsuit down to his navel, then tries to shrug out of it. “Look at you. Help me out here, will you? I’m sort of stuck.”

Ryan laughs. “You were helping me, remember?” But he holds Dante’s sleeve so he can extract his arm from the suit—only one, because the hand at Ryan’s crotch is still there, working *his* zipper down, and he really doesn’t want to move his fingers away long enough to take off his other sleeve, not when the only thing that separates him from his lover is the thin material of his boxer shorts. He’s never wanted anyone so bad—after Jared, he never believed he’d ever feel such rampant need for another boy again.

“Dante.” He looks up as Ryan removes his hand from where it’s eased into his jeans. “Baby, please, this is starting to hurt...” He sways slightly, his weight on one foot, the other raised off the floor because he can’t lean on it much yet.

How stupid can he be? He *knows* Ryan can’t be up for long and here he is, sitting down and making his baby stand—“I’m sorry,” he

says, rising to his feet and guiding Ryan to the other bed. "I'm not thinking, hon, I'm sorry, you sit down and let me just—"

"Let *me* just throw this away." Ryan holds up the paper from his hoagie as if to remind Dante that they *were* in the middle of something before they both got distracted with each other. When Dante tries to take the trash, though, Ryan tells him, "I can do it, just help me over there."

Dante takes Ryan's elbow, runs his arm around his boyfriend's waist for support, and together they hobble to the dresser. Ryan leans down at the trashcan, retrieves Dante's own hoagie wrapper, throws both of them away. Turning, he leans back on the dresser and grabs Dante's waist, pulls him close for a quick kiss. "Thanks," he murmurs.

"Can we play now?" Dante wants to know. He kisses Ryan's mouth, his chin, his jaw, and he's about ready to climb up on him here, he gets one knee against the dresser, Ryan's hands curve around his ass and pull him *closer*, another minute and they'll be in the mirror—

Ryan turns away. "Dante, my legs," he sighs. There's pain in the words, Dante can hear it all too well. "Dammit."

"I'm sorry." Standing back, Dante takes Ryan's arm, helps him to the bed. "God, I'm just...I'm sorry, baby. I'm just not thinking."

"You're thinking of your dick," Ryan jokes, sitting down at the foot of their bed. He unbuckles the brace on his leg and lets it fall to the floor, then lies back, unbuttons his jeans, starts to shuck them off. "It's okay, I am too." With a laugh, Dante grasps the bottom of Ryan's pants legs and helps pull them off. His lover's erection tents his boxers and Dante can see the hint of light hair curled through the gapped opening. Discarding his shirt, Ryan scoots back onto the bed to lie against the pillows and kicks at Dante playfully when he picks at his socks. "Get up here, silly."

Dante doesn't need further prompting. In one fluid motion, his sweat pants are gone and his skinsuit is unzipped down to his crotch,

he climbs out of it easily enough, peels off his undershirt and the jockstrap he wears. Naked, he crawls onto the bed, on top of Ryan, his mouth finding his lover's as he straddles Ryan's hips, feels a hard thickness press up against him. Ryan's hands smooth down his legs, around his ass, tender and gentle. "Love *you*," Dante sighs, rubbing his erection into Ryan's stomach. "Love me, baby. I've been waiting all *day* for this."

Ryan laughs. "Like it's been so long," he says, but it has, it *has*. Dante fumbles for the jar of petroleum jelly still on the bedside table and unsnaps Ryan's boxers, pushes the material out of the way.

This time he slathers Ryan with it, covering his hard shaft with the lubricant, rubbing it over his lower belly and balls, squeezing and kneading until his boyfriend begs for release. Then Dante takes Ryan's hand in his, covers his own fingers with the jelly, guides him to the places where *he* wants to be touched, and he gasps as his lover rubs into him, slowly, carefully, unsure. "Oh God," Dante moans as Ryan works into him, one finger, two, it's been so damn *long* since he's felt anyone's hands there and he'd forgotten how wonderful it could feel, fingers rubbing at secret flesh he almost didn't remember he had. When he eases down onto Ryan's thick cock, his hands fist in the sheets and now it's *his* cries that fill the room, *his* desire, *his* pleasure. Ryan holds Dante's hips down as he thrusts up into him, his uncertainty and doubt falling away the deeper he goes, until he's completely inside and Dante never thought it could be like *this*—all the times before, that other boy, everything he did up to this moment is gone, until it's only him and Ryan and the words of love his boy kisses into him when he comes.



Later Dante pulls on a pair of Ryan's boxers, rolling the waistband down to make them stay up on his hips. Bare-chested and barefoot, he pads around the room, finally unpacking the rest of their belongings. The clothing goes into the dresser after he shakes out the wrin-

kles and Ryan's skates go back in his own duffle bag. On the bed, Ryan lies on his stomach, his arms crossed beneath the pillow under his head, and watches him. "Do you have to do that right this minute?" his boyfriend asks as Dante rummages through his clothes. "Come here."

"I'm almost done," Dante tells him. He is, too, another couple pairs of jeans, a few undershirts, the socks and he'll have Ryan's suitcase emptied. When he passes the bed Ryan reaches out and snags his boxers, pulls him back against the mattress and kisses his lower back. Dante feels wet lips on his skin as he tries to get away. "Baby!" he cries, laughing. Ryan's hand snakes around his waist to rub at his lower belly. "Two seconds, that's it—"

"Time's up," Ryan says. He pats the bed beside him in invitation. "Didn't you say you were sleepy? Come lay down and take a nap."

"I will—" Dante starts.

Ryan sighs. "Please?" he asks in a small, little boy voice that Dante's never heard him use before. A glance over his shoulder at his lover and it's hard to believe this boy is a year older than he is himself, what with those freckled cheeks, those curved eyelashes, those pinked lips. His reddish-blond hair falls across his forehead like strands of copper wire, glints of light winking in it when he moves. How can Dante possibly hope to resist this? As if sensing victory, Ryan grins and kisses his back. "You know you want to."

No contest, he *does* want to, and Dante isn't one to dwell on *maybes*. Tossing the jeans he holds to the other bed, he crawls onto the mattress next to his lover. "Scoot over," he says, slipping easily into the space beneath Ryan. "Let me in here."

"Right here?" Ryan laughs, but he makes room, rolling onto his side so Dante can fit into the span of his arm. Hugging him close, he nuzzles against the nape of Dante's neck and murmurs something incoherent.

Dante likes this sudden intimacy, the warmth of Ryan draped around him, the arms holding him tight. He notices the hardness

pressing against his buttocks and with a laugh, he wiggles back into Ryan. “What’s this?”

Ryan slaps his hip. “You know damn well what it is,” he says but he laughs, too. “Jesus, you troop around here half-naked, you don’t think I’m gonna get hard watching you?”

To be honest, Dante likes that Ryan wants him again—he likes the thickness pushing into him, likes that he can turn him on without even trying. With Jared—

There was no Jared, he reminds himself. There was no one before, got that? No one ever, no one but Ryan, he’s all you need, all you’ve ever needed. You told him he was the only boy so why can’t you start to believe that yourself?

Ryan. Words can’t describe how Dante feels in his arms, or when they’re kissing, or when they’re just lying together and talking quietly like they are now. Every single thing about the boy makes him feel like rushing off in a dozen different directions all at once, he’s that excited, like a wound-up toy just waiting to be set free. Ryan makes him feel the way he does when he’s on the ice and flying past the other skaters, the crowds just a blur he sees from the corners of his eyes, that breathless, that amazing, that sense of timelessness that takes over his soul. Snuggling into Ryan’s pillow, Dante murmurs, “You’re mine forever, you know that, right?”

With a laugh, Ryan kisses his neck. “I do now.”



After a short nap, Dante wakes to the sounds of the TV turned down low. Ryan’s still beside him but he’s turned away, up on one elbow to watch TV, and when he senses Dante’s awake, he reaches back blindly and pats his ass in greeting. “Hey baby,” he says, thumbing down the TV volume. “I didn’t wake you up, did I?”

“No.” Dante rolls onto his back and stretches like a cat, first his arms reaching above his head and then his legs straightening until his feet point towards the end of the bed. The boxers he wears pull

down along his hips, and Ryan's hand tickles over his stomach. Sitting up, Dante folds his legs to his chest and catches that hand between his knees. "Got you," he says with a laugh. As Ryan twists free, Dante asks, "How are you feeling?"

Ryan shrugs. "Okay." Clicking off the TV, he lies on his stomach and looks up at Dante, weariness in his eyes. "How should I be? How are you?"

"I'm fine." Dante trails a hand down Ryan's spine—his skin's so soft, so pale, and against the freckled flesh, Dante's fingers look dark and exotic. "You look tired. Did you sleep?" When Ryan shakes his head, Dante sighs. "Baby, you're worn out. I shouldn't have taken you on the ice—"

Ryan kisses Dante's ankle. "Hush. That's just what I needed and you know it."

"What if you fell?" Dante wants to know. The thought makes him tremble in fear—what the hell had he been thinking? "I don't know what I'd do if you got hurt worse. If it was *my* fault."

"I didn't fall." Ryan kisses him again, smooths down the hairs that curve along his lower leg. "What happened today means more to me than anything else that's ever happened before, *ever*. You just don't know—"

Laughing, Dante nudges him with his foot and jokes, "I didn't know sex meant that much to you."

Ryan nips at his ankle and growls, "You know what I mean." When Dante laughs and pulls away, Ryan sighs. "Stop being contrary. Getting me on those skates means I'm that much closer to getting out of the wheelchair for good."

Dante wiggles his toes into Ryan's side, grinning when his boyfriend squirms away. "What's the first thing you'll do?" he asks. "When you can walk."

The answer surprises him. "Kick Dietrich's ass," Ryan replies, and it's so out of the blue that Dante bursts out in laughter. "Seriously!"

Ryan cries. "When I can walk, he better watch the fuck out, I swear it. Don't laugh at me."

"I'm not," Dante assures him. Leaning down, he kisses the pout from Ryan's face and murmurs, "That'll be priceless. I can't wait to see it."

Ryan frowns so hard, Dante's heart hurts at the pain he sees in his lover's eyes. "If he says another word to you," he promises as Dante climbs onto him, straddles his hips, and begins to massage away the tension in his lower back, "fuck the chair, I'll fight him now. I can *still* beat him, he's nothing but a damn pussy. And what'll his dad say then? Whipped by a girl *and* a crippled."

"Hush," Dante whispers. He's sorry he said anything. Ryan's anger swirls beneath his hands, he can feel it in the muscles along his lover's back, and his fingers dig into the stiff flesh, working it loose. "Don't think about him, baby. Don't let him get to you."

Sighing into the pillow, Ryan grumbles, "I mean it. I'll hurt him for all the shit he says to you."

Dante doesn't press the issue. Dietrich's not here, is he? No, it's just the two of them and if they let that ass in, Ryan gets angry and Dante feels frustrated and this moment is lost. They don't need anyone to come between them like that, especially not Wil Dietrich. *I'm not going to let him ruin this*, Dante thinks, massaging Ryan's lower back. *I'm not going to think about him, and I don't want you thinking about him, either.*

As his fingers knead Ryan's back, he studies his boyfriend's face, closed and bunched like a fist, his brow clouded and his eyes shut tight. His lips, drawn into a bitter pout, part beneath a sigh while Dante works the knots out of his muscles. "It's okay," he murmurs, scooting down Ryan's thighs. His hands brush over Ryan's boxers, then Dante pulls the thin material down over Ryan's buttocks, kneads the pale skin that pinks beneath his touch. With his knuckles, he rubs into tight muscles, moving in circular patterns until Ryan moans from his ministrations. "It's okay," he says again, speaking

softly, one hand slipping into the darkness between Ryan's legs to fondle hidden flesh.

Ryan's reply is another moan, and his hips arch away from the mattress to press his ass into Dante's hands. "God," he sighs. Just to be funny, Dante wants to ask if he's talking to him. But then Ryan rises into his hands again and Dante laughs as his boyfriend says, "I'm hard enough to drive a hole through this damn mattress."

"Explain that one to the hotel staff," Dante tells him. Playfully, he smacks Ryan's ass, watches the skin redden, the freckles disappear. He likes the sound of his hand on the taut muscles so he does it again, and a third time, until one handprint stands out on each cheek. Then he lies down on top of his lover, stretched along his back, his own erection pressed between Ryan's buttocks. His head fits easily in the space between Ryan's shoulder blades, and each breath his lover takes raises Dante up slightly, like the rise and fall of the tide. Easing his arms around Ryan's waist, Dante closes his eyes and sighs happily. "If I never move again—" he starts.

A knock on the door interrupts him. Dante sits up to look at Ryan. "Did you order dinner?"

Ryan's eyes fly open as he glances up at him. "No. Did you?"

Dante laughs. "I was asleep, remember?" Whoever it is in the hall knocks again and Dante slides off of Ryan's back. Maybe it *is* food, for whatever reason—Dante's hungry again, sex does that to him, and now he's all worked up and he wonders if Ryan's too tired to fool around some more. Maybe he'll just wait, his boy needs to rest, but they'll do it again tonight, definitely. Was he this bad with Jared? *With who?* he thinks with a smile. As he climbs off the bed, he smacks Ryan's ass again, just because it's there and it's so damn inviting. *This* is his boy, he tells himself as he leans down to kiss the ruddy flesh. Rubbing at his handprint, he wonders if it's too early to order dinner, or maybe a snack. Isn't there some kind of club event they have to go to tonight? Because he's thinking they should really stay in—

Another knock, and then Josey's voice, *God* he should've realized it'd be her. "Dante? Ryan? It's me, Josey."

"Who else?" Ryan mutters. He wiggles his hips to shake Dante's hand away. "Stop playing with my ass and get rid of her already, will you?"

Dante laughs. "You have a nice ass," he says, reaching for his sweatpants on the floor beside the bed.

"Tell her we're busy," Ryan says.

Dante laughs again as he pulls on a t-shirt—Ryan's *Rio del Oro* tee, it's the first one he grabs and it's a little big for him, but he likes it. "I'll tell her I'm kneading your ass," he says, tugging Ryan's boxers up to cover his buttocks. "You think that'll go over big?"

With a grin, Ryan closes his eyes and replies, "Tell her you need my ass, I don't care. Tell her something so she'll go away and we can get back to what we're doing here."

Good idea. Before Josey can knock again, Dante calls out, "Coming!" He trails a hand down the length of Ryan's leg as he skirts the bed, then tickles the soles of his feet before hurrying to the door. Unlocking it, he opens it quickly and hisses, "Shh."

In the hall, Josey's still dressed in her practice sweats and she carries her bag over one shoulder like a purse. "Hey!" She lowers her voice, looks around him into the room, sees Ryan's legs on the bed and whispers loudly, "Is Ryan laying down?"

What does it look like? Dante wonders. But he just nods. "He's a little worn out," he explains. "Look, Josey, I don't think—"

Hefting the bag's strap up onto her shoulder, she gives him a grin. "That's cool. Hey, did you want to head back to the rink maybe? Get in a few more hours on the ice?"

No. He wants to close the door and lie down on top of Ryan again, feel his boyfriend's heart beat in his ears, his breath settle their bodies closer and closer together, until it feels as if he's inside and he never wants out. Another excuse is on the tip of his tongue—I'm tired, too, or maybe *how about later?* or even *Josey, please, not*

now...but he sees the hope shining in her eyes and Ryan's right, he needs to tell her about them, he needs to put an end to this nonsense. He likes her, yes, as a friend, but that doesn't mean he wants to spend every waking hour with her, not when she moons over him the way she does. He wants to spend this time alone with his boy—that's why he invited Ryan to the competitions, to be with *him*, not to share these moments with a girl he talks to at the rink. Glancing over his shoulder, he sees Ryan watching him, waiting. He needs to tell her. "Josey," he sighs, turning back to her. He forces a thin smile that she meets with a bright grin. "We need to talk."

Her face freezes, her grin locked in place. "Okay," she says, and he's sure a million different things are going through her mind right now, hundreds of reasons he might want to talk with her, and probably not one of them is even close to what he really hopes to say. She looks down the hall and asks, "We can go to my room? If you want."

What he *wants* is to close the door and go back to Ryan but he can't. He needs to tell her. "Sure," he agrees. As he steps out into the hall, he calls out, "Ryan? I'll be right back."

No answer. Peeking into the room, Dante frowns at him and prompts, "Ryan?"

His lover fists the pillow beneath his chin. "Hurry," he murmurs.

Dante nods. He doesn't want to be long. Carefully, he closes the door behind him and holds out an arm to indicate that Josey should lead the way. "Becca's reading for her Medieval Lit class," she says, heading down the hall. Dante follows. "But she'll give me a few minutes, I'm sure. She needs to run down to the gift shop anyway. We're out of hairspray."

Josey opens the door to her room, holds it for Dante to enter. Inside it looks like a mirror image of his own room, the beds on the opposite wall but the same closet space, the same couch and TV, the same small sink and bathroom door. The dresser is covered in paraphernalia he's not familiar with, bottles of strange perfumy scents, hair dryers, brushes and little ponytail holders and nail polish, lip-

stick tubes, eyeshadow compacts, so many colors, so much makeup. A girl's room, he's never been comfortable in places this feminine. He's always afraid he'll spill something and come away reeking.

Becca sits on one bed, a book open in her lap, and Dante notices the light blue pillowcases, flowered bed sheets, a handmade quilt on the other bed. Home away from home, it's nice. There's a stuffed animal on Becca's bed, an aged yellow bunny propped up against the pillow, and a locked child's diary rests on the bedside table by Josey's. Dante wonders if his name is in there. He's sure it is, and tonight she'll cry ink into the pages after he's had his say. The thought of her lying on the bed writing into the diary makes him want to turn around and leave right now without another word. He wishes he hadn't seen the book or its tiny gold lock. He wonders where she keeps the key.

"Hey Dante." Becca looks up from the book to glance at him, and something in his face tells her what he's here for—he sees it in her eyes. She looks at her sister and frowns. "Where's Ryan?"

"Lying down," Dante murmurs. *Please don't want to chat*, he prays. He just wants this over with already. He just wants to go back to his boy.

Josey drops her bag onto her bed and flops down beside it. "Becca, can you maybe give us a minute?" she asks, her eyes sparkling. She twists her hands together in her lap, nervous. When Becca looks at Dante again, he shrugs and Josey tells her, "We need to talk a minute. Alone. Please?"

"Sure." Becca climbs off of the bed, taking the book with her as she leaves. In the mirror above the dresser, Dante catches the way she looks at the back of his shirt, *Talonovich* embroidered above the image of the Rio del Oro, and he knows she knows what this is all about. To Josey, she says, "I'll be right outside."

Then the door closes and it's just the two of them. Josey looks around the room, suddenly nervous, and Dante wipes his hands on

his hips, hating his sweaty palms. “Well,” she laughs. Pointing at Becca’s bed, she tells him, “Have a seat. What’s on your mind?”

Ryan, he thinks, but he doesn’t say that. Instead he sits on the end of Becca’s bed and looks at Josey in the mirror. It’s easier that way. “Dante?” she asks, and before he can reply, she moves from her bed to Becca’s. If she notices the name on his shirt, she doesn’t mention it. “You wanted to tell me something?”

With a sigh, Dante gathers his courage and stares at his hands as he says, “I know how you feel,” he begins. “About...about me.”

Josey giggles, one of those girlish sounds that suggests she thinks this is the time when he turns to her and admits he feels the same. Isn’t that how the daydream plays out? Isn’t that the way the fairy tales go? “Did Becca tell you?” she asks. “I didn’t...oh jeez, I don’t know what to say.”

Shaking his head, Dante says, “It wasn’t Becca. It—it’s a little obvious, really. I’ve sort of always known you liked me.”

She moves closer. Doesn’t she get it? He’s not leaping into her arms here, he’s not going to kiss her, it’s not going to work out that way. But she smiles at him as if she doesn’t realize this yet. There’s a faint blush high in her cheeks like twin roses have bloomed beneath her skin. She’s a beautiful girl, really. She’ll be wonderful for someone else. On the bed, her hand drifts towards his, her fingers brush his wrist. “I *do* like you,” she admits, her voice barely a whisper. “Dante, I’ve liked you from the moment we met. I think...” She laughs, shakes her head to chase that thought away. *Don’t say you think you love me*, he prays. He doesn’t know how he’d handle that. “Yeah,” she breathes. “I like you. I do.”

Now the hard part. “I like you, too,” Dante starts, but he moves his hand away from hers, stands because he simply can’t sit any longer. Walking to the dresser, he watches her watch him in the mirror and says, “You’re a great friend, Josey. You’re pretty and smart and I like you, I do. You’re one of my only friends in the club, you know?”

Her smile widens, her blush deepening. “You think I’m pretty?” she sighs. He’s sure that’ll go down in the diary, he can almost see it written out in his mind, *he said I was pretty*. “Dante, I never thought—”

Closing his eyes, he tells her, “I’m not done.”

“Okay,” she whispers. Does she see the shirt he’s wearing yet? The name across his back like a brand?

“I like you,” Dante says again. He opens his eyes, looks at her reflection, wonders why she can’t see the pain and torment tearing him up inside. “But...Josey, but not like...not the way you like me.”

“Oh.” Her lower lip starts to tremble even as she struggles to keep smiling. “You mean—”

He turns, leans back against the dresser, hopes he looks sincere when he says softly, “I don’t want to hurt you, Josey. I don’t—I don’t want this to change things, between us, because I *do* like you. But I’m sort of...well, I’m seeing someone.”

She blinks rapidly, her eyes suddenly red and filled with tears. She wipes at the skin beneath them so she doesn’t smudge the makeup she wears. “Who?” she asks. She takes a deep breath to steady herself but it doesn’t work. “I didn’t...is it someone I know?” When Dante nods, she chokes back a sob. “Oh.”

As gently as he can, Dante tells her, “It’s Ryan.”

She blinks, surprised, and he nods to confirm it. “I love him,” he says, it’s that simple. “I’m sorry, Josey. Really, I am, please believe me. I don’t want this to change things between us. I don’t want—”

“Ryan,” she mutters. He nods again, yes. With a short laugh, she sighs as a stray tear treks down her cheek, leaving a dark smear in its wake. “Jeez. Ryan.”

“I’m sorry,” Dante whispers again.

No more words—she just nods, yes, she’s sorry, too. This time he knows she sees Ryan’s name across his back. He feels her gaze burn through him as he leaves.

CHAPTER 23



When Dante comes back to their room, Ryan is sitting up against the pillows with the TV turned down low. One look at his lover's face as he closes the door quietly behind him and Ryan knows that they won't get back to wherever it was they left off—there's too much hurt in those chocolate eyes, too much pain in that pretty frown. Without a word, Dante crawls onto the bed, curls up against him, wraps his arms around Ryan's waist and hugs him tight. Ryan doesn't need to ask how Josey took it, he already knows the answer. He can feel it in his boyfriend's trembling shoulders when he holds him close.

They sit like that for awhile, Dante snuggled up to him, Ryan flicking halfheartedly through the channels on the TV and holding his boy in a one-armed embrace. Finally Dante sighs, a pitiful sound, and his fingers caress Ryan's chin, turn him away from the TV so their eyes meet. Ryan gives him a hopeful smile, maybe it'll be enough to take away the pain, maybe it'll make everything better—

Dante kisses the smile away, his mouth demanding, his lips eager. "I love you so much," he breathes, running a hand through Ryan's hair to brush it out of his face. "Nothing is going to change that, I swear. It's you, Ryan, only you, and no one else, ever."

His reply is another kiss, and another, and when Dante rests his head on his shoulder, Ryan kisses his jaw, his neck, anything he can reach. He scoots down a little on the bed until they're lying side by

side, and sometime between an old episode of *Seinfeld* and the Flyers' game against Montreal, his boy falls asleep in his arms.



By seven thirty, Ryan's stomach begins to growl, and he turns away from Dante so the rumblings won't wake his lover. He needs his sleep, he's worn out, exhausted, and his little talk with Josey didn't help matters. Ryan wonders what happened in there, but he won't ask. If Dante wants to tell him, he will, when he's ready to and not before, and Ryan won't push him. *I'm here when you need me*, he thinks, smoothing the black hair away from Dante's brow. Tenderly, he plants a kiss on his lover's dusky cheek, grinning at the faint sigh that tickles his neck before he pulls away.

The room service menu is still on the bedside table—he snags it without disturbing Dante, leafs through the pages, hungry for...well, he's not sure, but he'd like something hot and runny and fun, something they can giggle over, something to take Dante's mind off of Josey and Dietrich and the upcoming competitions. Something...*pizza*, he thinks as he turns the menu over and sees a photograph of a decadent, cheesy deep-dish pie. Careful that he doesn't wake Dante, he extracts himself from his lover and swings his legs over the side of the bed. Maybe it's the low lamplight, or maybe he's just grown used to the scars, but his lower legs don't look *too* bad today. Maybe he's finally getting better? Starting to heal? Or maybe it's more than that, maybe it's Dante—because *he* sees nothing wrong with Ryan's legs, maybe it's changing Ryan's own perspective, as well.

Whatever the case, he's happy that the reddened skin doesn't look quite so angry anymore, and he likes the feel of the plush carpet beneath his toes, he likes the memory of the skates on his feet. Part of him wants to call up his mom and tell her he was back on the ice but he knows that won't go over well, it'll make her worry and she won't want him to go to the rink once he's home for fear he'll get hurt.

He'll wait then, until he can walk without assistance, until he can let go of the boards and skate on his own, *then* he'll tell her, *then* he'll say, "Look what Dante helped me do." He smiles at his boyfriend still asleep behind him and tugs down Dante's shirt where it's pulled up to expose his slim stomach. *Love you*, he thinks. He imagines his lover hears the thought and it brings a hint of a grin to his face, though that's probably the result of Ryan's hand lingering on his belly.

There's a phone book on the bottom shelf of the bedside table—Ryan can reach it without getting out of bed and he thumbs through the yellow pages quickly, looking for the restaurants. This is Atlantic City—there are only fifty million pizza parlors in town, every single one of them family owned, but he has a specific one in mind. Big Al, the Steak King, on the corner of 19th and Atlantic. The last time his parents dragged him down the shore for a vacation, back when he was still in high school and years from the college hockey team, they got a pie from Al's and even now he remembers the runny cheese, the way the grease dribbled down his chin when he bit into a slice, the spicy pepperonis. Would they still be in service after all this time? A place like that, he can't imagine why not.

And yeah, here's the number, the biggest ad on the first page of the restaurant section. He dials it quickly and, speaking low into the phone so he doesn't wake Dante, orders two pizzas, one cheese, one pepperoni. When the woman asks for his address, he's not sure of the exact street so he gives her the name of the hotel. "You'll need to be in the lobby," she says. "Our drivers can't really go to your door."

In the lobby. Which means getting dressed, getting in his chair, wheeling himself down the hall and to the elevator and waiting for the delivery guy to arrive, who knows how long that will be. Hell, he'll probably be struggling with his jeans and the driver won't wait, and when Ryan *does* get downstairs, he'll be gone and he'll have to call back, beg him to return. Or he could send Dante...a glance at his lover and he rules that option out. He's not waking the boy just

because some lazy ass doesn't want to hike it up to the third floor. In a peevish tone of voice that he knows he gets from his mother, he tells the woman, "I'm in a wheelchair. I can't just rush down when he buzzes at the front desk, you know? Your ad doesn't say you discriminate against the handicapped."

A long pause, and he can almost hear her trying to stay professional. He can mention the Better Business Bureau if he has to, threaten to call Domino's, or demand to speak to Big Al himself, but finally she asks, "What floor, sir?" When he tells her, she promises it'll take no more than a half hour—he suspects she just wants to get rid of him, the sooner, the better.

Moving slowly, he half-hobbles, half-slides down the length of the mattress until he can reach his wheelchair, which Dante moved to the foot of the other bed. Ryan pulls it close, leans heavily on the armrests as he stands, *standing*, he's up on both feet even though pain shoots through his right leg, and he counts off ten seconds before he lets himself fall gratefully into the seat. He winces at the slight *squee* of the wheels, but Dante sleeps through the noise and he makes it to the dresser without waking his lover. His shirts are in the top drawer, at a height where he can get them from his chair, and he finds a t-shirt to cover his naked chest. He toys with the idea of pants but eh, boxers are enough. When the delivery guy knocks, he'll just pull the shirt down over his crotch in some semblance of decency. He's sure the minute Dante's awake, the shirt won't stay on long. The boxers either, for that matter. They could even eat the pizza naked, but the idea of dripping hot cheese onto his dick and burning his balls kills that thought—

Out in the hall, someone knocks on the door.

Ryan frowns at Dante's reflection in the mirror, as if his slumbering lover might know who this could be. The pizza? Too early. Josey? Ryan doubts it. The way Dante came in here moping, he doesn't think that girl will have much to say to them anymore. Oh well, her loss, his gain. Is it his fault Dante loves him? Sure, he's sorry she's

hurting, but Dante's *his* boy and he wouldn't change *that* for the world.

Another knock. Ryan turns his chair around as quickly as he can, wheels to the door, flings it open before a third knock. "Do you mind?" he asks, glaring up at the coach who stands in the hall. It's the same woman his mother bitched out back at the start of this trip and she flinches when he speaks as if afraid of the same treatment from him. Ryan feels his whole face pull down into a bitter expression and he jerks his head back to indicate Dante on the bed. "He's trying to sleep."

"We're going out," the coach tells him. He notices her dressy slacks, her ironed shirt, white with a gold-threaded design running through the fabric. High heels, not her usual sneakers, and her brown hair's combed back, it flies out from static. *Going out*—he vaguely remembers scheduled events, a local theater production one night, a club-sanctioned visit to a mock casino for teens the next. "The bus leaves in fifteen—"

Thinking fast, he interrupts her with, "Dante's not feeling well." It's not quite a lie.

The coach frowns past him at the bed and murmurs, "Him either? What's wrong?"

"His stomach," Ryan tells her. "I think it was something he ate."

"Must be the buffet," she muses out loud. Ryan nods, yes, the buffet, that sounds good. "Josey says she's sick, too. I hope there's nothing going around." *You just don't know*, he thinks—of course Josey wouldn't be up to a night out, not after the boy she's been crushing on for years just came out to her. Ryan would love to know exactly how *that* was handled. Narrowing her eyes, the coach looks at him and asks, "Are you feeling okay?"

"I'm fine," Ryan assures her. "And Dante will be fine in the morning, I'm sure. He just needs to sleep it off." She nods and leaves. As he closes the door, he hears the elevator bell ting down the hall, signaling a stop on their floor. *Please don't be the pizza yet*, he prays. He

doesn't want to try to explain the hot cheese and greasy pepperonis when she thinks Dante's under the weather.



When the pizza does arrive, it's just what Dante needs to cheer him up—the two of them sit on the couch and go through both pies while watching TV, feeding each other and laughing until there's cheese dribbled on their legs, their arms, their shirts, the couch and table and everywhere. Ryan even finds some in his hair later on, he's not sure how *that* happened. He's decided he loves pizza-flavored kisses, Dante's greasy lips and hot tongue, the taste of oregano on his lover's breath chased with the fizzle of ice-cold soda. Even after they turn in for the night, he can still smell the heady scent of cheese draped over their room, though in the darkness, Dante's kisses are fresh and toothpaste sweet.

In the morning, Ryan's stomach churns nervously as he waits for Dante to finish getting dressed for practice. What will Josey say to him now that she knows Dietrich's right? Will she make a scene, throw a fit, yell at him because Dante's who he is and they're in love? Or will she ignore him, turn the other way when he says hi? He's not sure which would be worse, really, and he holds his breath as he opens the door, tries to look everywhere at once when his lover guides his wheelchair out into the empty hall.

Empty. As in she's not waiting for them. As in they're alone.

Downstairs the skaters crowd around the buffet tables again but no one joins Ryan and Dante at their booth. While Dante's in line, Ryan looks around the room, sees a half dozen faces he recognizes, sees a couple of Josey's girlfriends, hell, sees *Dietrich*, but no Josey, no Becca. He didn't think he'd miss them. *I don't*, he tells himself as Dante approaches their table, a heaping plate in either hand. He likes being alone with his boy, he's glad the girls aren't here to disturb them.

But secretly? He's afraid of what she has to say—he knows it's silly, but what if she takes their relationship the wrong way? His mom used to tell him, "A woman scorned..." and then she'd shake her head cryptically, she never would finish that thought. And he knows Josey had it bad for Dante, still does probably, a crush like that doesn't fade overnight. Until he sees her again, until he knows for sure what she's thinking, what she'll do or say, until *then* he'll be on the edge of his seat, ready for anything at all.

"Relax," Dante tells him. that's easy for him to say, he doesn't dwell on shit like Ryan does. Take the whole problem with Dietrich—sure, it pisses him off the moment that ass makes some wisecrack, but then he forgets it, he moves on. Ryan can't just let it go that easily. He wants a shot at that kid, one good punch in the face, knock his ass flat on the floor and maybe he'll be able to just drop it then. Or maybe he'll just run his chair over Wil's arm as he lies there in pain. The sound of bones cracking would *really* help him move on, he's almost positive. The thought makes him grin and Dante smiles at him from across the table. "What?"

Ryan shakes his head. "Just thinking of you," he replies with a wink that makes Dante's eyes shine.

When they're finished eating, they head for the lobby with the other skaters but Josey isn't there. She's not on the shuttle either, and she doesn't come rushing out at the last minute, braid still wet from her shower, laughing about how she overslept. Ryan's beginning to think maybe she just went home, packed her things and left in the night like a runaway teen, and he has an awful image of her standing beneath the halo of a streetlight, duffle bag over her shoulder and bus ticket in hand. Jesus, it's not *that* bad, is it? At least Dante didn't turn her up for another *girl*, right?

The ride to the rink seems longer than it did yesterday and the shuttle is quiet, all talk muted, as if tethered down beneath a meniscus of anticipation. This is the last practice before State—the first qualifying heats take place this afternoon, after the clubs have run

through the relay. Not every skater will get a chance on the ice tomorrow. There are only what, eight races total? Four men's, four women's, including the relays, and Ryan hasn't counted but he's pretty sure there are roughly a hundred skaters here for the competitions. Only four will race in each heat tomorrow—sixteen heats, four skaters each, that's only a little more than half the number who turned out. And of those, only the four best will advance to the actual race itself. When faced with those odds, Ryan's heart hammers in his chest, his throat swells shut, his hands start to sweat. Dante's the best, he assures himself, he simply *has* to be.

Ryan picks the spot where he sat yesterday, right on the ice, but the seats to either side of him are empty. He doesn't see Josey in the player box with the rest of the skate club nor Becca in a quick scan of the crowd. So this is how it is, hmm? Fine. He wasn't all that crazy about the girls anyway, he only talked to Becca because she called him Talon. He just hopes that Josey doesn't make Dante's remaining time with the club unbearable. *Only a few more weeks*, he thinks, watching his boy stretch on the other side of the ice. *Then you'll be heading to Regionals and this club won't be able to hold you back.*

For the relay practice four different clubs skate together to simulate how the race will run tomorrow. Dante skates to the center of the ice with the rest of his team, and for a breathless moment Ryan sees Dietrich leer at his boyfriend and he thinks the worst. But Wil stops at the starting line—what the fuck? *It's not the starter who carries this race*, he assures himself as Dante skates inside the blue circle where the other team members wait. *It's the anchor, the last guy over the line and that's Dante, so just because Dietrich's first doesn't mean all is lost.* He hopes not—as long as the passes are clean, as long as all skaters stay on their feet, and as long as Dante gets in there the final two laps, they have a chance at winning. Even though this is just practice, Ryan wants them to win, wants *Dante* to win. He deserves it.

As four skaters line up at the start, Dietrich among them, Dante glances over at Ryan and gives him a tight grin. Ryan waves back.

“Hey there,” someone says, sinking into the seat beside him. It’s Becca, and she gives Dante a quick wave too, before smiling at Ryan. “Sorry we missed you guys at breakfast.”

Ryan doesn’t know what to say. In the player box he sees Josey, hair pulled back in a severe braid, her face pale and neutral, but he can see the red of her eyes from here. “How’s she taking this?” he asks, nodding across the ice.

Becca follows his gaze to her sister and sighs. “Eh,” she replies with a shrug. “What can she do, you know? If you were a girl, she could try to be prettier, dress nicer, talk sweeter, the magazines are full of ways to win the guy of your dreams. But how do you get him away from another guy? How can you hope to steal his heart *then*?”

“Is she...” Ryan trails off, unsure of how to say what he wants to, unsure of how it’ll sound once it’s free. “She doesn’t blame me, does she? I mean, is she mad at me because of it?”

Becca shakes her head. “Not mad. Disappointed, yes. Heartbroken? God, don’t even go there, please.” She gives him a wan smile and says, “I thought she’d never stop crying. By three I was like, can’t this just be over with already? Just go to sleep, right? It’ll be better in the morning.” Her eyes glaze over with compassion as she looks across the ice to where her sister sits with the other girls on the club. Josey glances at her, at *him*, Ryan feels the weight of her gaze, then she turns away. “Well, not better,” Becca admits, “but—I don’t know. Something like this happens and you think it’s the end of the world, but when you wake up the next morning, you realize the world’s still turning, things haven’t stopped for you, nothing’s really changed all that much and you have to move on. She’s sixteen, she’ll learn how it goes.”

Because he can’t think of anything else to say, he whispers, “I’m sorry.” *Sorry she hurts*, he adds silently. He’s not sorry he loves Dante, or that Dante loves him back.

“Don’t be,” Becca tells him. “I think part of her knew and just refused to admit it. You don’t know how blind girls can be when it

comes to love.” With a short laugh, she amends, “Or what they think is love.”

Somehow that doesn’t make him feel any better about the whole thing. Still, at least Becca’s talking to him and they only just met two days ago. They aren’t even friends. So maybe things can be okay for Dante and Josey, too.



The relay starts out slow—forty-five laps, the skaters conserve their energy for the end of the race. Passes come every two or three laps and Dante’s taking it easy out there on the ice. When he’s not the current skater, he mills around in the center of the rink with the others, watching the track and keeping as far away from Dietrich as he can. Fortunately, his teammate seems to be ignoring him today, focusing instead on the race and barely glancing at Dante whenever he skates by. Ryan has to admit that Dietrich *did* get off the line well, a nice, clean start, and the first pass to his friend Aaron was flawless, even though one of the skaters from Cherry Hill skidded out of a turn and almost sent them all tumbling down. Maybe Dante was right about Dietrich wanting to win so bad, he won’t bully him during this race. Maybe that jackass has *some* inkling of what the word *sportsmanship* means.

About thirty laps into the relay, the race begins to pick up. Dante starts it—this pace is too laid-back for him, he’s used to short, quick sprints, and he leans into the curve in front of Ryan’s chair so tight, his boyfriend can hear the scrape of blades over the ice from where he sits. Coming up from the turn, Dante sprints ahead, long strides that cut seconds off his time, get him to the other end of the rink and around that turn and on the other side of the track well ahead of the other skaters. He’s widening the gap, getting a half a lap ahead of the pack, a full lap, two, before he has to switch off to one of his teammates, someone the announcer calls Mahone. Back in the center of the rink, Dante leans over, hands on his knees, to catch his breath

while he waits for his next turn. He doesn't look over at Ryan, doesn't take his eyes off the skaters that spin around him, and Ryan doesn't call out, doesn't wave—his boy's too wrapped up in this race right now. When he wins, though...when he wins, Ryan's voice will be the loudest in the crowd, cheering his name.

Dante's team moves fast to keep the lead they've gained, and the other three clubs struggle to narrow the distance. Another ten laps or so and Ryan can't even keep up with the action, the skaters whizz by him so fast, leaning as low as they dare through the turns, pushing hard on the straight track. He just watches Dante as he waits for his chance to skate, gauging the race the way a kid watches a skipping rope, waiting, waiting, waiting for the right moment to hop in. Ryan can almost feel the clock ticking as Dante eyes an opening, his heart beating in rhythm like the slap of rope against the sidewalk, waiting, waiting—

Then Dante moves into place, gliding easily in front of the others to his own teammate, leaning over the track even as Aaron skates into him and gives him a slight push to complete the pass. And Dante's off, starting fast to widen their lead, passing on the outside track to keep the other skaters out of his way. Ryan feels the blood pound through his veins and he wants to surge to his feet, he has to bite back the cry that strangles at his throat when he sees his lover take to the ice, so free, so unhindered, so *alive*.

While Dante's on the far side of the ice, something in the middle of the rink snags Ryan's attention—Dietrich and that damn smirk of his, it's back, he's watching Dante, too. *He has to*, Ryan tells himself, glowering. *He has to keep an eye on his teammates, that's all. That look on his face is just because he's an ass, he's thinking hateful thoughts but he won't pull any shit out there, not in the middle of a damn race.* Afterwards, though—Ryan's going to watch out for him *after* the race.

A few laps left, a couple more passes, that's it. Mahone steps forward, ready to slide into the race, but because Ryan's watching him,

he sees Dietrich catch Mahone's wrist and shake his head. His mouth forms the words, *Let me*, and before Mahone can object, Dietrich's skating onto the track, hunkered down on the ice, waiting for Dante to pass to him.

No. Anger fills Ryan, curls his hands into fists, that fucker did *not* just—Dante assured him that he'd never even *touch* Dietrich in this race, how can that jerk change position just like that? Coming down the track, Dante realizes it's Dietrich in front of him and not Mahone. A brief look of disgust flickers across his face and is gone. Dietrich grins at him over his shoulder, already picking up speed, but Ryan can't see if he says anything from the way he's turned. Barely touching Dietrich's back, Dante completes the pass and hurries to the center of the ice, a scowl on his usually calm face.

"Okay, you know what?" Ryan turns to Becca, pissed. "He pulled that stunt just to throw Dante off. He's not supposed to pass to Wil, is he? Did you *see* that?"

"I saw," Becca says, nodding.

"What's he trying to pull?" Ryan wants to know. "Where the hell does he get off calling shots like that? He's not the fucking coach."

Grimly, Becca agrees. "But it's just practice," she points out. "I'm sure someone will say something to him about it when they're through."

"*I'll* say something about it," Ryan mutters. He crosses his arms in front of his chest and glares at the ice as if he can melt it with the heat of his angry gaze alone. From center rink Dante gives him a helpless shrug, what could he do? Nothing, and it's over with, it was just Dietrich being stupid and nothing more, but that doesn't change the fact that it still pisses the *fuck* out of Ryan. The kid is just *begging* for Dante to say something or start a fight, anything to get him thrown off the team. *What he needs is a good ass-kicking*, Ryan thinks, simmering as Dietrich skates by. He imagines his eyes like daggers stabbing into Dietrich's back, or lasers searing his skin away. What he needs is to get *his* ass thrown from the team, bounced out of State.

What will he do then? How could Daddy dearest possibly get him back into the club *then*?

A fight would get him out, definitely, but Dante's not the type to start something like that and Ryan has to admit that's part of his boyfriend's appeal, his easy-going attitude. Playing hockey, he's met too many rough-and-tumble guys, too many just looking for a brawl, and though Ryan likes a fair fight as much as the next, he loves that Dante doesn't feel the need to talk with his fists. *And admit it, he tells himself, watching Dietrich pass to Mahone, you like the idea of rushing to his rescue, standing up for him. You'd love to fight for him, it's that whole superhero complex, you rush to his side and kick down the bad guys, and then claim a kiss as you ride off into the sunset.*

Why can't it be that simple? *Because you're stuck in a wheelchair*, he thinks. Out in the center of the ice Dietrich skates up to Dante, says something low and mean that makes him move away. *Because you're not a hero, you're not even whole, you can't fight for your boy when you can't even fucking walk.* Dietrich follows Dante, says something else, something that makes Dante's face redden, and didn't Ryan say he'd hurt that fucker if he said another word to him? Didn't he promise it to himself? Wheelchair or not—

"He's dead," he mutters to no one in particular. Becca glances warily at him, sees the hate shining in his eyes, and looks away. Will Dietrich won't have to worry about the competitions, he's not going to get the chance to race—Ryan doesn't know how yet, but he's ending this today.



Ryan isn't sure what Dietrich's said this time but it makes Dante fly around the ice at top speed, and he's still a full lap ahead of the others when he crosses the finish line. Hands on his knees, he glides off the track, nodding at the crowd that calls out his name—and these are just other skate clubs, their guests, a few local fans. Wait until this place is slam packed tomorrow, wait until they cheer him

on *then*. While the other skaters finish the race, Dante keeps to the edge of the rink, slowing to cool down after the relay, and he coasts to a stop in front of Ryan. "Hey," he sighs, breathless, as he leans on the boards. "That one always does me in."

Forcing a tight smile, Ryan strokes the back of Dante's gloved hand and asks, "What happened this time?" Dante shakes his head and Ryan demands, "Tell me. You weren't supposed to pass to him."

"I know." He nods at Becca and with a helpless shrug, Dante asks, "What can you do? Stop the race? That's bad form, baby. You just roll with the punches out there. It's short track. Anything can happen."

Ryan doesn't buy that. "I'm sick and tired of that shit happening," he growls. "You know he did that just to fuck with you. What did he say—"

"It's nothing, Ryan," Dante assures him, but his reply is too quick and Ryan knows he's lying.

He tries again. "What—"

"Baby," Dante sighs, covering Ryan's hand with his own. "I said—"

The *scritch* of skates cuts him off as Dietrich comes up to them. He stops in front of the boards, keeping Dante between himself and Becca, and grins wickedly at Ryan's hand trapped between both of Dante's own. "Tell him," Dietrich says in an eerie echo of Ryan's words. "Go on, Espinosa, tell him what you did out there."

"Nothing," Dante replies, bitter.

"What the fuck do you want?" Ryan asks Dietrich. His boyfriend starts to skate away but Ryan grabs his wrist, won't let him go. Skate club rules might prevent Dante from fighting back but what about him? What regulation keeps Ryan from taking this jerk on?

Dietrich has the audacity to wink at Ryan as he says, "You better keep a tight rein on this boy. You saw the pass, right? Don't tell me you didn't notice his hand on my ass." Dante's face colors with anger and his hands clench Ryan's tight. *You only wish*, Ryan thinks but before he can say the words, Dietrich leans close to Dante and whis-

pers loud enough for him to overhear. “Copping a feel out there where everyone could see it. Does that get you off, Espinosa? Do you think about *me* when you’re sticking it to him?”

Without warning Ryan surges from his seat, not thinking of his legs, not caring about the pain that buckles his knees and throws him against the boards. He grabs a fist full of Dietrich’s skinsuit even as he falls, and vaguely he hears Dante cry out his name, feels Becca pull on his shirt to tug him back. Fear fills Dietrich’s eyes for a second—*didn’t think I could stand, did you?* Ryan thinks wildly. *Didn’t think I was taller than you, bigger than you, didn’t think I had it in me to fight back, did you? Did you?*—but then Wil twists out of his grip. “You watch your goddamn mouth!” Ryan shouts as he skates away. Dante climbs over the boards, his skates sharp on the concrete floor, and it takes everything he has to ease Ryan back into his wheelchair. “I’ve had it with your shit, asshole—you better fucking run! You better—”

“Shh,” Dante murmurs, wrapping his arms around Ryan’s shoulders. “Shh, baby, please, not here, okay? Everyone’s staring at us, not here.”

Ryan doesn’t care. Why not here? He deserves a good shot at that fuckhead for what he’s said, what he *insinuated* about Dante—“Doesn’t that piss you off?” Ryan wants to know. Dante sinks into the seat beside him and watches his boyfriend closely, his lower lip trembling as if he’s afraid Ryan’s lost it. “Doesn’t it piss you the *fuck* off to hear him talk that shit when it ain’t fucking *true*?”

“Ryan, please.” Dante rubs along his arm, trying to soothe him, but it’s not working.

That’s it, Ryan thinks. *He’s gone too far*. Across the ice in the player box, Dietrich is gathering his stuff together like Ryan’s anger is *nothing* to him, it doesn’t mean shit, it doesn’t bother him in the least. *It will*, Ryan promises himself. Backing his wheelchair up, he turns around in the narrow aisle and starts away from the ice. Dante trails after him. “Ryan, where—”

“Get on the ice,” Ryan tells him. The *clack clack* of Dante’s blades on the flooring tell him he’s not listening. Over his shoulder, Ryan mutters, “Get back on the ice, Dante, you’ll fuck up your skates.”

“Where are you going?” Dante wants to know. “Ryan—wait, please, where—”

Ryan doesn’t answer—he concentrates on the double doors ahead and in his mind navigates the corridors to get him from this section of the stands to the locker room. He has no clue what he’s going to do once he gets over there, but he hopes he’s not too late.



Skaters linger in the hall outside the locker room, some from Dante’s club but most from other parts of the state, people Ryan doesn’t recognize. Everyone wears skinsuits like leotards, and they lounge against the mats that line the walls, lean in doorways, stretch where they stand to limber up. Ryan’s reminded more of a ballet troupe than a skating event, the way skaters tug at their legs to work the muscles or twist at the waist to keep their blood flowing between races. One or two glance at him as he wheels down the corridor but they see the chair and look away as if he’s not even there.

At the far end of the hall, twin doors lead to the player box and the ice beyond. As Ryan eases his chair to a stop well away from the gathered skaters, the doors burst open and the relay teams appear, neck guards pulled loose like open tuxedo collars, helmets and skates slung over shoulders, skinsuits unzipped to expose tank tops and smooth skin. Dante’s not with them but Dietrich is, he walks a little ahead of the others, a smug expression on his face that Ryan can’t wait to wipe off. Raising his voice, he calls out, “Wil.”

Dietrich stops, frowns as he looks around, the furrow in his brow deepening when he glances at Ryan and then quickly looks away. “Hey, fuckhead,” Ryan says, and the corridor falls silent, all eyes turned to him. *Now* they see him, *now* they notice he’s here. When Dietrich tries to duck behind someone, skaters move aside, keeping

him in the spotlight of their gaze. "I'm talking to you, asshole." Ryan's voice carries through the silent corridor easily, and suddenly Dietrich looks like the world could end right now and he'd be grateful.

Glancing around for his friends, Dietrich finds himself alone in the middle of the crowd. No one meets his fevered eyes. "I'm not—" he starts. He takes a step back but the double doors have closed and he can't exit gracefully without looking like a coward in front of everyone else. So he tries for a mean glare, but his voice quivers when he mutters, "What the hell do you want?"

"I want you to stay the fuck away from Dante," Ryan says. He doesn't raise his voice—he doesn't have to. Every single person here is hanging on his words. To his right he hears someone whisper the word *fight* and it leaps through the crowd like wildfire, *fight, fight*. "You don't talk to him, you don't touch him, you don't fucking *look* at him without asking me first, you understand?" Dietrich smirks but Ryan's not through. "I don't know what your goddamn problem is," he continues. "What, you're jealous he's a better skater than you are? Or is there more to it than that? Maybe *you* want to get with him, is that it?"

A thin blush rises into Dietrich's cheeks and Ryan knows he hit a nerve. Jerks like this kid, homophobic to a fault, they *loathe* anyone suggesting that *they* might be the gay one. Even though he hates to imagine it, Ryan lets his own thoughts run free as he says, "Jesus, that *is* it, right? You want him for yourself. Do you think of him when you jerk off in the shower? Picture his hands in your hair when you dream of going down on him? Taste him in your mouth when you lick your fingers—"

That does it. The blush turns a deep red, the color of bricks, and Dietrich's voice rings out through the corridor like a banshee's shriek. "Shut up!" he screams, *screams*, Ryan never knew a boy could hit such a note. Taking a step forward, he levels a finger at Ryan and cries, "Shut the hell up, you *faggot*. You're the one who—"

Ryan raises his own voice to drown out Dietrich's. "Do you call out his name when you come?" The mere *thought* of it makes him shake in anger, but he's getting under Dietrich's skin, and here in front of everyone, he's hurting him more with these sick images than he ever could with his fists. "Do you think of him sticking it to you when you finger yourself? Do you want it from him, Wil, is that it? You can't leave him alone because you want him to fuck you up the ass until you—"

Dietrich rushes him. Ryan has two seconds to wonder what kind of corner he's backed himself into and then the kid rams into him, hands grappling at Ryan's shirt. "Shut up," Dietrich mutters, his face mottled with anger and tears. "Shut the fuck *up*, I'm not queer, I'm not like you, I'm *not*."

This is the moment Ryan's been waiting for. He feels the adrenaline pump through his veins, animal instinct, he doesn't even think as he throws himself out of the chair and knocks Dietrich back. His fists connect with solid muscle, he feels the break of fragile cartilage beneath his hands, and when they hit the floor he ignores the pain that flares in his legs, his hips, his back. *Finally*. His mind whirls out in a blinding fury, *finally*.

They tussle, fists striking without reason, legs bucking, feet connecting with mats and the walls, the floors, whoever's nearby that can't move out of the way fast enough. Ryan gets his hands around Dietrich's throat, chokes him until the skater kicks him away, then the kid climbs onto *him* and straddles his hips to keep him down. He starts pummeling Ryan's face and chest with inexperienced punches. "I'm *not* gay," he cries. "You fucking *queer*, you fucking *faggot*, you're the one who likes it up the ass, you're the one that goes down on him, not me, not me. Not *me*."

Shielding his face with his arms, Ryan brings his left knee up, drives it into Dietrich's back, again, to no effect. He tries raising his arms, exposing his chest to draw Dietrich's attack down, and when the fists move lower, he lashes out, his arms stronger than the

skater's, his own punches driven and sure. Each fist connects with Dietrich, his neck, his jaw, his already broken nose, until Ryan feels blood like water between his fingers. Is that his own? Dietrich's? He's not sure but it doesn't slow him down, he rams his knee into Dietrich's side, his kidneys, his back, he punches his chest and face and arms, he grasps at his hair and tugs until tufts of the greasy locks come away in his hands. If he can just get this fucker off him, he can get better leverage and take the fight—

Suddenly Dietrich is hauled up and away, off of him, and Ryan struggles to follow but Dante's there, holding him back. "Oh Jesus," his boyfriend cries, his eyes wild when Ryan glances at him. Two coaches hold Dietrich back, blood streaking his face like tears. Ryan tries to lunge at him but Dante holds him down. "Oh God, Ryan, what..." His deep eyes waver and he smooths a cool hand over Ryan's face, trying to calm him down. The hand comes away bloody, *his* blood, Ryan's dazed to see it. Before he can speak Dante holds him close, tries to stop the slight trembling that threatens to shake Ryan apart. His body is alive with adrenaline, his blood pounding in his ears, it's hard to focus on what Dante's saying when the thrill of the fight still courses through him. "What did he do? You're okay, right? Tell me you're okay, please—"

"I'm fine," Ryan gasps. He tastes blood pooling on his tongue and when he spits out the mess in his mouth, his saliva is bright red. Experimentally, he runs his tongue over his teeth—none missing, but his arms burn now, his chest aches, his legs, God his *legs*, he hasn't felt this much pain in his lower body since right after the accident. If that motherfucker messed up his *legs*—

"He started it," Dietrich blubbers through blood-flecked lips. There's a cut above his eye, and his nose sits almost sideways on his face, *that* has to hurt, and the arms of his skinsuit are torn, bloody scratches can be seen peeking through the material. *I did that to him*, Ryan thinks, triumphant. *Me, not Becca, not anyone else, ME. Let's see you fuck with my boy again.* "His fault." Dietrich winces as one of the

coaches dabs at the cut on his forehead, and triumphant hate shines in his eyes when he glares at Dante. "You're out of the club, Espinosa. You're not skating tomorrow, my dad'll see to that."

For a moment, Ryan's heart stops in his chest. *I fought with you*, he thinks, but he can't find his voice, he's still struggling to catch his breath, Dante's holding him so damn *tight*—

Then someone in the crowd speaks up. "The crippled kid attacked you, is that what you're gonna say?" Laughter erupts around them, and even though the words hurt, Ryan grins at the fear that leaps into Dietrich's face. "He was just talking, dude. You're the one who jumped him."

"I didn't—" Dietrich starts.

A girl nearby nods at Dante. "He just showed up. It wasn't *his* fight."

Around them, skaters murmur their assent. Someone else calls out, "*You're* the one who shouldn't skate. Fighting disqualifies you, no matter what." More agreement. Dietrich looks around the crowd with wide, disbelieving eyes. "The boy's in a *wheelchair*," someone cries, as if no one else noticed this. "You pulled him out of it. That's just not fair."

Not fair. Ryan thinks he got in a few damaging blows, regardless. He broke Wil's nose, that's for sure, and it'll hurt like a bitch healing, too. And those scratches on his arms and chest, *those* are his handiwork. And he's no doctor but he thinks that cut above Dietrich's eye might need a couple stitches to close it up. *And he's covered in bruises, I'm sure*. Ryan leans back in Dante's arms and lets his eyes slip shut, worn out. *I'd say I did damn good for a crippled kid*.

"His fault," Dietrich mutters again, even as the coaches that lead him away shake their heads in disagreement.

No one is listening to him. *Let's see your daddy buy your way out of this*, Ryan thinks. He needs to get into his chair again—he's on the floor and it's cold down here, the tiles are like ice seeping through his jeans. But when he tries to get up, Dante's there to hold him down.

“Shh, don’t move,” his lover whispers, cradling him close. “Ryan, try not to move your legs.”

“My legs are fine,” Ryan assures him. At least, he *thinks* they are. Already the rush is leaving him, the heat of the moment, and with a weary sigh, he asks, “Do you know where first aid is?”

Grimly, Dante nods. “I can find it,” he says.

CHAPTER 24



The image of Ryan's empty wheelchair haunts Dante, even after his lover is back in his seat and he's leaning on the handlebars himself, heading for the first aid station at the rink. But he can't stop thinking about what he saw when he came through the doors leading from the rink to the locker room. His coach was scolding him about taking risks like he did out there in the relay, picking up the race at thirty laps when he knows the team can't maintain that speed for the duration, and he nodded, yes, he knows that. Then he saw Ryan's wheelchair backed up against the wall like a forgotten toy, for the first time he noticed the skaters lining the hall, he heard the scuffle of a fight and *oh my God*, he thought, his mind numb. *Oh my God, Ryan, no, please no, he can't walk, he can't be out of that chair, he can't fight please God don't let him be—*

And then he saw Dietrich on top of his boyfriend, pounding into him, and he pushed through the crowd, called Ryan's name, almost hit Dietrich himself just to stop those fists. But the coach got there first to pull Dietrich away, and all Dante could do or think of doing was hold Ryan close. He didn't care who saw, who said shit, he didn't *care*—he saw the blood, the cuts, the bruises. *Baby*, his heart sobs as he hurries Ryan through the concourse. "Almost there," he murmurs. Behind them a few skaters follow, and a couple run ahead when they see the first aid center, up near the ticket booth. When

Dante sees it, too, he sighs in relief. "There it is, Ryan, just up ahead. We're almost there."

Ryan sighs, his hands gripping the wheelchair's armrests tightly to keep from falling out, Dante's going so fast. "I'm fine," he whispers, but his voice is hoarse and there's blood on his lip. If Dietrich messed with his legs, Dante swears he'll take the bastard on himself, skate club or not. His boyfriend's too close to recovering to have a setback like this, too damn close.

Inside the first aid center, a nurse is already waiting for them. She lets Dante into the lobby but closes the door on the other skaters before they can fill the room. "How's he doing?" she asks, leading them down a hallway that branches away from the reception area.

"He's doing fine," Ryan grumbles—he hates it when people speak as if he can't answer for himself. His voice sounds wet like he's talking around a mouthful of blood and Dante rubs his shoulders, partly to soothe his lover and partly to assure himself Ryan's here with him. That image of the empty chair—

He shakes the thought away and guides Ryan around the nurse's desk, mindful of his lover's legs, before hurrying to an open door the nurse points out. There's another door across the hall, this one closed, and he hears thick sobs from the other side. As he wheels Ryan into their room, he wonders what's happened to Dietrich—he doesn't remember if he was as battered as Ryan is, he didn't get a good look at the other skater. Did Ryan get in a few swings, at least? What's going to happen now?

The examination room is sparse, a table, a counter, a sink, a small stool that the nurse moves in front of Ryan before sitting on it. She's young, barely thirty, with dark mousy hair pulled back in a loose bun, and she wears a small pair of granny glasses that hang around her neck. Perching them on her nose, she tries to look at Ryan's lip but he pulls away from her hands. "I'm fine," he says again.

Dante has his doubts. There's a bruise swelling above his lover's cheek, the cut on his lip, another bruise on his neck, blood crusting

over his eyebrow, he has to keep one eye shut because of that. At the sink, Dante wets a couple of napkins, wrings them out, then presses them to Ryan's forehead, gently cleaning away the blood. "It's okay," he whispers, even though his heart still hammers in his chest and he can't get the memory of the empty chair out of his mind. "It's going to be okay. Let me just..."

Trailing off, he wipes at Ryan's temple, his cheeks, his lips, while the nurse runs through a series of questions. Any breaks? Ryan doesn't think so. Any allergies? No. What happened to his legs? The accident, and yes they hurt again, and no he doesn't think Dietrich hit them but he's not sure. Any known diseases? This one asked while she watches Dante's hands, tender on Ryan's face. "Like what?" his boyfriend wants to know, his voice hard. Before she can answer, he tells her, "No HIV, if that's what you're asking. No AIDS, no STDs, nothing like that. Jesus, just because I'm—"

Dante covers his mouth with the cool napkin, cutting off his words. "Hush," he admonishes, wiping gingerly at the blood on his lip. She's just doing her job. If Ryan hadn't goaded Dietrich into attacking him in the first place, they wouldn't be here right now.

"I need you to fill out some consent forms," the nurse replies, ignoring Ryan's outburst as she rises from the stool. "I'll be right back."

She leaves the door open slightly but Dante pushes it shut. Finally, alone. "You scared the shit out of me," he admits. His hands shake as he dabs the damp napkin along Ryan's jaw. "I saw your wheelchair and didn't know what the hell to think."

"I'm sorry," Ryan murmurs. When Dante's hand nears his mouth, he kisses the wrist. "I didn't mean to. I just...I'd had enough. The shit he was talking—"

"Shh." Leaning down, Dante kisses his lover's temple, sighs against the smooth, heated skin. He wraps his arms around Ryan's head and holds him to his chest. "God, Ryan," he whispers. Ryan's arm comes up around his waist to hug him tight. "If I lose you..."

"You won't," Ryan assures him. "It was just a fight. I've been in worse, I'm fine, really. He hits like a girl, I'm telling you." When Dante kisses his mouth, his boyfriend winces at the pain in his lip. "That was just a lucky punch. Did you see what I did to him?"

Dante kisses him again, softer this time, carefully staying to one side of his mouth. How long do they have before the nurse returns? Dante's whole body rages with unbidden lust, this boy in his arms stood up for him, fought for his honor—he wants to give into the feelings swirling through his blood right now, give himself to his lover as a reward, love him until the pain and anger fade and he's the only thing in its place. "I love you," Dante breathes, kissing Ryan's chin, his jaw. He feels an arm around his waist, a hand smooth along his thigh, fingers easing between his legs and he knows Ryan wants him just as bad. His lover pulls him halfway onto his lap, Dante moans into him, eases him back, presses a knee into Ryan's crotch and maybe they can lock the door, all they need is fifteen minutes on the examining table...hell, ten really, they can be quick—

The door opens as the nurse comes in and Dante stumbles away from Ryan, hard and horny and dammit the *fuck*, a few more minutes, is that asking too much? Running a hand through his hair to push it out of his eyes, he takes a trembling breath and doesn't meet the nurse's gaze. "I have the forms," she says, her voice overly bright, as if she didn't just walk in on the two of them getting frisky. She busies herself with flipping through a clipboard of papers, ignores Ryan's hand snaking around Dante's thigh again, seeking hidden flesh. Dante swats it away. "Consent to attention, brief medical history, all standard procedure, you know how it is. Can't give you a Band-Aid without your signature, you understand." With a smile, she adds, "Though from what I've seen, I think you're going to be alright."

Dante scuffs his foot against the wheel of Ryan's chair, embarrassed. As the nurse hands Ryan the clipboard, he asks, "Do you want me to fill those out for you?"

Ryan shakes his head. Looking over the papers, he says, "I can do it. I'm fine, really." He gives Dante a sunny grin and despite the nurse standing right there, purses his lips into a quick kiss. "I want *you*—" And he leers at him, there's no mistaking his intent, but when Dante nods at the nurse to remind him they're not alone, he turns back to the clipboard and finishes the sentence, "—to call my mom. She'll hear about it sooner or later, I'm sure, and I'd rather she got a heads-up from you first." With a coy glance, he adds, "If you don't mind?"

Of course he doesn't. There's a phone in the reception area and Dante's already dialing Ryan's home number as he sits down behind the nurse's desk. What's he going to say? How can he possibly explain what happened when he's not really sure himself? *Tell her the truth*, a voice inside whispers. The truth, yeah, that's good. But when Mrs. Talonovich answers, he barely gets a chance to say hello before she asks, "Dante? What's wrong? Where's Ryan?"

"He's fine," Dante assures her. "Nothing's wrong, really. It's just..." Taking a deep breath, he lets it out slowly and closes his eyes. Might as well come right out and say it. "There's been some...there was a fight."

"A fight?" she shrieks. With a grimace, he holds the receiver away from his ear. "Oh my Lord, what happened?"

He tells her. About Dietrich and his hateful comments, about the way his words ate at Ryan, about the stupid things Dietrich did to push him too far. He mentions what he saw of the fight and what the other skaters are saying, how Ryan was talking trash and Dietrich attacked him, pulled him out of the chair, threw him on the floor and laid into him before the coaches could drag him away. He describes Ryan's cuts and bruises, tells her that he doesn't think anything's broken, and no, he says his legs are fine. "What about the other boy?" Mrs. Talonovich insists. "What did Ryan do to him?" Dante has to admit he doesn't know.

When he's finished, she's quiet for a long time. Now she'll say he's a bad influence on her son, or she thinks they shouldn't spend so

much time together, or maybe she doesn't want Dante to see Ryan anymore. He holds his breath, coils the phone cord around his fingers and waits. Waits. Finally she asks, "What's his name again? The punk who started the fight?"

Her voice is clipped and determined. Dante stammers out, "Dietrich. Wil Dietrich. I'm not sure—"

"Dietrich," she interrupts, and even though she can't see him, he nods in agreement. "John Dietrich's boy?"

"I don't know," Dante mumbles. "I'm not—his dad has money, I know that. His mom's here at the competitions and his dad's company is one of the club's main sponsors. I don't know their names, though."

"My son is handicapped," Mrs. Talonovich says in a tight, strained tone. "I'm not mad at you, honey, don't think I am. I know Ryan's a little hot-blooded, he plays hockey and I'm sure he's been itching for a fight this past month or so, but you said this Dietrich boy started it?" Without waiting for a reply, she hurries on. "I'm going to call John right now and let him know that my son is in a *wheelchair* and he'll be lucky if I don't bring up assault charges against his kid. Who's head of the skate club?"

Assault charges. Dante swallows thickly. *Jesus.* "Dante?" she presses. "I know it's not your fault, sweetie. Don't think I'm upset at you, I'm not. But this—we're getting this nonsense taken care of tonight. Dietrich like the actress, right?"

So this is where Ryan gets it from, he tells himself as he answers Mrs. Talonovich's questions. His boyfriend's not the only hot-blooded person in that family.



The nurse wants to send Ryan to the hospital for an X-ray but he refuses. "My legs are fine," he tells her, pulling away when she tries to touch the bruise on his cheek. "I just want to go back to the hotel, can't I do that already? Jesus, what time is it? I've been here forever."

He's right—it's after three now and it *does* feel like forever. After looking Ryan over one final time, the nurse concedes that there isn't anything else she can do for him. A handful of pills to ease the pain and she lets them go. On the way out to the parking lot, Dante keeps glancing over his shoulder, sure that Dietrich is right behind them, sure the guy will jump Ryan again. He wonders if Mrs. Talonovich really called Wil's father or the skate club officials. What can she say? What can she possibly do? Ryan's not a member of the club—the rule is expulsion for fighting with another skater, from their club or any other when at a competition or event. But Ryan's simply a guest. What can the officials do about the fight then?

He has no clue.

But Dietrich's not following them, thank God, and the skaters they pass seem to know them now, they wave at Ryan or stop and ask how he's doing. A few tell Dante they saw the whole thing, starting with what happened in the hotel lobby the other day, and if he needs their support... "Thank you," he says, easing Ryan's chair through the concourse. "I just really want to drop it, you know? But thanks."

Somehow they make it outside. Miraculously the shuttle is already there. Dietrich's not on the bus, either. That can't be good—is he still in the first aid center? Did he have to go to the hospital? What happened to him and, more importantly, what's going to happen to Ryan? To *them*?



The hotel lobby is empty, everyone still at the rink. The first qualifications start tonight but Dante's not on the schedule until tomorrow morning for the five hundred and thousand meter runs. He could race in all of the events if he wanted to, if he could qualify, but he knows his strength is short distance and after all that's happened this afternoon, he's glad he'll only race tomorrow. He doesn't think he would do well on the ice tonight.

When they get upstairs, they find their floor deserted—faint voices drift out into the hall from behind closed doors, ghosts that haunt the corridor as they head for their room, but once the door is shut and they're alone again, Dante forgets the rest of the club to concentrate on Ryan, on *only* Ryan. "Are you sure you're okay?" he persists, helping his lover lie down on the bed.

Ryan doesn't need the help but he lets Dante's hands ease him back to the pillows. "I'm fine, baby," he says. "If you ask again, I'm going to have to hurt you."

With a grin, Dante sits on the edge of the bed and asks, "Will you spank me? That can be kind of fun."

"I'll hold out on you," Ryan tells him. "That'll hurt more."

Dante laughs. "You wouldn't." To assure himself, he runs a hand down Ryan's chest, his fingers tickling a path to his lover's crotch. Ryan catches his wrist as he cups the already stiffening cock through his jeans. "I don't think you could hold out for long."

"Probably not," Ryan admits. Sighing, he scoots over on the bed and pats the spot beside him. "Lie down."

Dante does as he's told, cuddling up against Ryan and resting his head on his boyfriend's chest. He can hear the beat of Ryan's heart, so steady, so reassuring, and it makes him feel safe in a way he's never felt before. From this position he notices a small red light pulsing in the mirror—turning, he finds that it's the message light on the phone. Probably Mrs. Talonovich calling to check up on them. As he's about to point it out, he sees the room service menu propped on the bedside table behind the phone and asks, "Should we order in tonight? You're not really up to going downstairs, are you?"

Sitting up, Ryan glances at the menu, sees the message light blinking, and rolls his eyes as he reaches for the receiver. "That's my mom, I bet you anything." He dials the voicemail number and says, "No, we can go down." When Dante starts to protest, he tells him, "Hon, if we stay up here, it'll look like I'm hiding. I'm not. I didn't start that fight. Anyone else wants to talk shit, I'll take them on, too."

Dante wants to mention that Ryan shouldn't be taking anyone on, not in his present condition, but he doesn't. Instead, he climbs out of the bed and starts to undress, pulling off his sweats, unzipping his skinsuit, stepping out of his jockstrap and tossing it aside—from behind him, Ryan whistles low. “Jesus, boy. You're beautiful.”

Laughing, Dante digs a change of clothing out of the dresser drawers. He looks at Ryan in the mirror and winks at his lover, still on the phone. “*You're* the beautiful one,” he says. “You just don't know it. Is that your mom?”

Ryan nods. “How'd you guess? Let me call her back real quick and then we'll go down.”

“You're going down on me?” Dante jokes. “Hell, and here I thought you'd be too tired to get it on tonight.”

One of the pillows strikes the back of his thighs and he laughs as he steps into a pair of underwear. “I'm on the phone with my *mother*—” Ryan reminds him, and then his tone shifts as he says, “Hey Mom. No, I'm fine.”

Dante's smile slips away as he listens to Ryan's side of the conversation. “It wasn't much—I'm well aware of that fact, Mom, I fucking *live* in that thing...You don't—no, you...” He sighs, and Dante glances his way as he pulls on a clean pair of sweats to cover his naked legs. “You don't have to play the crusader here, I'm quite capable of handling things myself.” Covering the mouthpiece, he shakes his head at Dante and mutters, “She has to get right in the middle of this.”

Dante doesn't see a problem with that. Truth be told, he's glad Ryan's mother is so adamant about seeing justice done. Sure, Dietrich had it coming, he deserved everything he got at Ryan's hands, but Ryan can't walk. It wasn't a fair fight, not by any stretch of the imagination.

A fair fight and Wil would've been dead long ago, Dante thinks, tugging on a t-shirt, one of Ryan's. He loves wearing his boyfriend's clothes, the shirts are so roomy and they smell heavenly, a sporty

scent that is all Ryan's own. A fair fight with Ryan on his feet would've left Wil Dietrich hurting worlds more than he hurts tonight. The nurse wouldn't have been able to do anything for him. An intensive care unit might not have been enough.

When he's dressed, Dante curls up on the bed again beside Ryan, wraps his arms around Ryan's waist and rests his head on his lover's hip, closes his eyes as he waits for the phone call to end. He listens to Ryan sigh dramatically. "Mom, I *know* this. Just don't blow it all out of proportion, okay? I know how you are—yeah, okay, I have to go. I *have* to. Yeah, later. Bye." Nudging Dante to rouse him, his boyfriend says, "Ugh, she's called the officials already. It was just a fight, you know? Jesus, nothing to get all riled up about."

"He could've hurt you—" Dante starts.

"He didn't," Ryan says, cutting him off. He nudges Dante again and tells him, "Come on, baby. I'm hungry."

Grinning, Dante kisses him quickly and asks, "For me?"

"After I get something in my stomach," Ryan promises.



Down in the hotel restaurant, none of the skaters look at them. Dante feels like an outsider, just him and Ryan against the others, and he knows people are watching them, he can almost hear the whispers behind his back. Coming down here wasn't a good idea, no matter what Ryan says. Thank God tomorrow's Saturday, and then they'll head home and he won't have to deal with this sudden notoriety any longer. *No*, he tells himself as he fills two plates from the buffet, *then you'll have to deal with Bobby, and if you don't win tomorrow you'll have to deal with Mr. Vasquez, and Dietrich will still be around. Nothing's going to be any easier just because you're not here.*

True, but he's not worried about Bobby—once he hears what Ryan did to Dietrich, he won't touch Dante again. And he'll hear about it soon enough, the whole skate club buys their supplies at the shop. And he's not worried about Dietrich, either—he won't dare

fuck with him again, not with Ryan getting back on his feet. And he'll win tomorrow, he knows it, so there's no reason to think Mr. Vasquez will regret spending sponsorship money on him. He'll go onto Regionals and leave Crosskeys Skate Club behind. He'll win, his boy will walk again, and everything will work itself out, he just knows it.

At their table, Ryan glares around the room as Dante sets a plate in front of him. "Damn, you'd think we're contagious or something," he mutters, picking at his food. Dante looks around, notices no one meets his gaze, and reminds himself things will be different at Regionals, it'll be a different class of skaters, it'll be people on his own level, people who won't judge him because he's with Ryan, people who won't *care* about that. As long as he has what counts out on the ice, they won't think twice about the boy sitting across from him, the boy he loves.

Still, it'd be nice if *someone* smiled at him. At the rink, they were all ready to stand beside him, but now the novelty of the fight has worn off and they're scared of doing or saying anything to draw Ryan's anger down on them. Or maybe they know something he doesn't, maybe he's a pariah in their eyes because he's *not* skating tomorrow, the officials have decided it's all his fault and they won't let him on the ice—

"Hey."

He looks up to find Josey standing beside their table, a tray in her hands. When their eyes meet, she drops her gaze to her plate, shuffles her feet on the floor, suddenly embarrassed. Becca stands behind her. Then she nudges her sister gently with her own tray and Josey clears her throat to ask, "Mind if we join you guys?"

Dante glances over at Ryan, who shrugs. "Have a seat," he says, nodding at the chair beside his.

Josey sits down gratefully and Becca circles the table to take a seat in the other chair. "Have you guys heard the latest?" Josey asks. She leans across the table and looks from Dante to Ryan, and it's like

nothing happened between them, nothing changed. She's still wide-eyed and giggly, but the light that used to shine in her eyes when she looked at him, that's faded, and the thoughtful way she studies Ryan seems almost sad and forlorn. But she has gossip, which she's always eager to share. When Dante shakes his head, she grins and tells them, "Wil's gone home."

"What?" Ryan asks, turning from Josey to Becca. "When did this happen?"

"This afternoon," Becca confirms. She cuts the slice of roast beef on her plate and nods at her sister. "Josey has the scoop."

"Right after the fight," Josey tells them. "You guys were in the nurse's station and he came out before you, his mom was *livid*. Oh jeez, I never saw anyone so pissed off in my life. He kept saying he didn't mean it but she wasn't listening." Her eyes sparkle as she turns to Dante. "The girls' relay had just finished and I was right there, I heard it all. She said something about the wheelchair and how you just don't beat up on people like that, and Dietrich almost started crying. His nose was all bandaged up, too, it looked so stupid." Looking at Ryan, she asks, "Did you break it?"

"I think so," Ryan says.

Becca agrees. "It looked broken to me. And he has little butterfly stitches above his eyebrow, and his arms are all scratched up. Bruises on his neck, like hickeys almost. Damn, you did a good number on him."

With a laugh, Ryan winks at Dante and tells her, "I tried."

"So he's gone home?" Dante asks, confused. He frowns at Josey and wants to know, "Why?"

"Ryan's mom called the president of the club," Josey says, shoveling food into her mouth. "Threatened to sue them big time for letting one of their skaters attack her handicapped son. She really laid it on thick, I'm telling you. From the way I hear it, she was all ready to have the *club* disbanded if he wasn't suspended from State."

Yeah, that sounds like Mrs. Talonovich. Ryan smirks at his plate, shakes his head, a thin color in his cheeks that Dante thinks is too cute. He has no doubt Mrs. T would've pulled every string she could to get Dietrich away from her son, but to ban him from the State competitions? Dante's speechless. "Is he out of the club?" he asks.

Josey shrugs. "Not that I've heard, but I think there's going to be an investigation or something like that. I think he's suspended until then. They left right before you guys came back."

Exchanging glances with him across the table, Ryan asks, "So what about Dante?"

The question Dante himself is dying to have answered. "He wasn't there," Josey tells them. "You have two dozen witnesses who heard Dietrich saying all that crap to you the other day. The whole locker room heard you getting back at him, half of those skaters were in the lobby after the luncheon that first time. And every single one of them saw Wil knock you out of your wheelchair. Two coaches were with Dante when it started, they know he wasn't even involved in the fight. So what *about* him?" Smiling his way, she adds, "You still get to skate. If they threw you out, I don't know how we'd hope to win *anything* tomorrow. You're the best skater we've got."



That night Dante dreams of the competitions. In his mind's eye he sees himself on the sidelines lacing up his skates, the other skaters already on the ice. He's late for some reason, and he can't seem to get his fingers to work right, they fumble with the laces and the Velcro closure won't stay shut, he's running late and the whole rink is filled with people waiting for him. Finally he stands, his skates *click click*-ing on the concrete floor. At the boards he stops, takes the protective covers off his blades, and somewhere near the roof, the first chant starts. His name, *Dante, Dante*, it rushes through the crowd, *Dante*, and he can hear Ryan's voice like a golden thread through the tapes-

try of noise, his boyfriend's out there watching him, he'll win today for *him*.

But the moment his skates touch the ice, he falls. Cold bites through his skinsuit, his gloves, and he struggles to his feet only to have his legs slide out from under him again. The crowd falls silent, watching as he clammers to his feet. Only he can't get up, he can't stand, he can't even *skate* and on the line someone starts to laugh, a haunting sound that he recognizes all too well. Dietrich's laugh, braying and loud and filling the rink, the entire *world*—

He wakes with a start. The sudden darkness is disorienting, the heavy arm across his waist, the faint *whirr* of the refrigerator. Ryan's steady breath tickles the back of his neck and in the mirror he can see the reflection of the bedside clock, digital red numbers that tell him it's almost three in the morning. Another four hours before he has to be up, another six before he's on the ice. *Falling...*

He won't fall. *Just a dream*, he thinks, and to reassure himself, he rolls over in Ryan's embrace. "Baby?" he murmurs, poking at Ryan's chest. His lover stirs, settles closer into him, murmurs something Dante can't decipher. "Baby."

This time he lets his hands drift over Ryan's bare chest, exploring, his fingers finding Ryan's nipples and picking them erect. The arm around his waist tightens. "Don't," his boyfriend mumbles, brushing Dante's hands away.

Kissing Ryan's chin, Dante whispers, "Love me."

He doesn't think he'll get a response. But then Ryan sighs. "Now?"

Dante's answer is in his kiss, *right* now, and it's not long before Ryan's fully awake. He moves against Dante with exquisite care, still sore from the fight, but the sheets twist around their legs and when Ryan enters him, Dante bites his lover's muscled arm, moans into him, keeps their pace even and slow. No rushing through this time, despite the late hour. He lets Ryan's sweet lips kiss the dream away, his strong hands promise to catch him if he falls. He won't fall. He'll

win out there tomorrow, he'll win for Ryan and for himself. He won't fall.



The morning is rushed—Dante sleeps until 7:30 and wakes thinking he's already running late, his dream is coming true. As he tumbles from the bed, the sheets still twined around his legs, Ryan turns from the sink, toothbrush in hand, and tells him, "Watch it. You'll hurt yourself."

"I'm late," Dante says, shaking free from the sheets. When does he have to be at the rink? God, if he misses the first heat—

"You're not late," Ryan assures him. He turns back to the sink and starts to brush his teeth, stopping long enough to look up when Dante plants a quick kiss on the top of his head. "You're not late," he says again.

Dante isn't so sure. In the bathroom, he leaves the door open so he can talk to Ryan, and as he washes his face, he asks, "What time do we have to leave? God, I don't have time to eat—"

"You can eat," Ryan sighs. "Jesus. The shuttle leaves at nine, you have plenty of time."

Nine. Plenty of time, or so Ryan says, but Dante can't find his skinsuit, he troops around the room in his jockstrap and t-shirt looking for it, and his boyfriend's not helping, he sits on the couch and whistles when Dante walks past. "Come here," he growls as he grabs Dante's waist, pulling him into his lap. Nuzzling his neck, Ryan murmurs, "I love you."

"I'm going to be late, baby." Dante struggles in Ryan's arms briefly before conceding defeat. He lies back against his lover's chest and sighs dramatically—can't he start today all over again? Just crawl back into bed and rewind the clock, is that asking too much? "Love you, too," he murmurs. Then he tries to get free. "Let me up."

Ryan's hand strays to Dante's crotch, cupping his dick and squeezing gently. "Did you say you want to get it up?" he jokes.

"I want to *get up*." Dante pushes against Ryan—it'd be so easy, just give into him now, blow off the race and stay here in his lover's arms, but then what? He'd give up his future too, and Ryan's just playing around, Dante knows if he suggested foregoing the competitions his boy would drag his sorry ass down to the rink himself. Still, it's tempting... "Baby," he sighs, straining against Ryan's eager hands. "Please."

Ryan lets him go, but as he stands, he gets a playful smack on his ass and Ryan tells him, "Just calm down, honey. You're getting yourself all worked up for nothing. You'll win today, you know it."

His cheek stings from Ryan's hand, but Dante can't deny how the smack turned him on and he's just about to say maybe Ryan could do it again because he sort of liked it when he notices his skinsuit lying discarded on the floor, where he left it when he took it off yesterday. Crossing the room, he bends to pick it up and Ryan whistles again. "After the race," he promises, stepping into the suit.

"You're mean," Ryan pouts—Dante can see his reflection in the mirror, he grins at the turned-down lips, the crossed arms, so pitiful! "I think *you're* holding out on *me*."

"Hey, I gave it up last night," Dante reminds him.

"You *woke* me up," Ryan mutters.

Dante sees the ghost of a smile tug at his boyfriend's lips and points out, "You didn't complain at the time."

"After the game?" Ryan asks, using that little boy voice that does terribly wonderful things to Dante. "You swear?"

Zippering up his skinsuit, Dante gives Ryan a sunny grin. "After I win, I'm all yours."



Breakfast is a blur. Dante's not sure what he eats, eggs? Pancakes? He doesn't know, doesn't taste anything going down, doesn't hear half of what Josey babbles about when she and Becca squeeze into their booth. He remembers Ryan's leg pressed against his, his lover's

hand on his thigh, an orange juice toast for luck but everything else is lost in the pounding of his heart. *It's just a race*, he tells himself. He's raced before. It's like sex, nothing to get worked up over. *That's what you used to think. Just sex, woo-hoo. But you have Ryan now, it's so much more than just that, it's love and heaven and amazing and it's everything in the world to get excited about. And this...this is State, not some rinky-dink little quarterfinals, not some hometown race. State.*

So what? Same concept. Just forget about the TV cameras and the people back home at the Rio del Oro and Ryan's parents...at least Dietrich's not going to throw him off today. That ass isn't going to race, he's not even going to *be* there, it'll be nothing like Dante's dream, no falls, no Dietrich, no laughter. "Don't worry," Ryan tells him, his hand warm on Dante's knee beneath their table. "You'll do fine, baby."

Across from them, Josey winces at the word *baby* but she doesn't say anything, just stares into her eggs and sighs. Becca gives them an apologetic shrug and says, "You'll both do fine. You skate all the time. This is nothing new."

True. But then why do Dante's palms sweat as he guides Ryan's chair to the shuttle? He has to keep wiping them on his pants, and when he sits beside Ryan on the bus, his boyfriend gives him such a long, sad look that he asks, "What?"

Ryan just shakes his head. "I wish there was something I could say or do to put your mind at ease, but I'm not like you. I don't have the words to make everything better." Lowering his voice, he murmurs, "I wish I did."

"You make it better just being here," Dante tells him. Before Ryan can object, he takes his boyfriend's hand and laces their fingers together. He's beyond caring who sees—he's nervous as hell and Ryan *does* ease that a little, so what if someone says something? After yesterday, who would dare?

At the rink, the parking lot is full, not a spot left empty, and people mill about outside buying tickets, chatting with skaters, snapping

pictures and none of that improves Dante's mood. *I can do this*, he assures himself—what happened to the carefree boy he used to be, who wouldn't worry about a race until he was out on the ice? *That boy came to State*, he thinks, helping Ryan unhinge his wheelchair from the shuttle's lift. *That boy never had this opportunity before*. Today changes everything, whether he wins or loses, it changes everything he holds sacred. If he wins, he's that much closer to getting to the Olympics, to winning the gold, to being someone more than just a kid in a skate club in New Jersey. But if he loses...

I'll still have Ryan, he thinks when his boyfriend leans back and gives him an encouraging smile.

Somehow, he thinks that if he *does* lose, that might still be enough. *But I won't have to find out*, he tells himself, *because I'm going to win*.



The locker rooms are crowded—he's glad he wore his skinsuit beneath his sweats so he won't have to change. The heats for the five hundred are first and because of his last name, he's in the first run. Nothing like a baptism of fire to...*well, to break the ice*, he tells himself, stepping through the double doors. The rink is filled to capacity, people stretching away above him to the ceiling, he never *imagined* such a crowd, not in his wildest dreams. As he slips on his skates, he tells himself it's nothing, these people, nothing different from the fans back home, but that's a lie. This is in *addition* to those fans who are watching him on TV as if he's some kind of superstar. He wonders if his mom took the day off to see the race, if she's at the Rio del Oro right now, grinning as the camera pans over the player box and pointing him out, *That's my son*. The thought almost paralyzes him with fear.

But the moment his skates hit the ice, everything changes. The crowds disappear behind the lights and his mind clears, it's just him and the ice and Ryan, he sees his lover's face in his usual spot across

the rink, it soothes him to find something familiar in all this. He leans forward, one foot ahead, one arm crooked in front of him as if he's holding a shield, the typical speedskater's stance. He waits. He can do this. He was *born* for it.

At the sound of the gun he's off, first from the line and halfway into the turn before he hears the other skaters catch up. It's only a heat, he should take it slow, but there's too much energy swirling through him right now, too much nervousness, he has to work it out. One lap, two, a skater behind him hits a track block and falls, narrowly missing Dante as he spirals into the boards, but he keeps his feet. This is his game, right here, this race. It belongs to him.

He crosses the line in just under a minute. Not his best time, no, but for the heat it'll do. He doesn't return to the box right away, though—he skates a little further to cool down, his hands on his knees, breathing raggedly because he took that heat too fast but he came in first, didn't he? He advances to the race. Some of the crowd must remember him from training because his name rises up to the rafters in a cheer, but Dante ignores it. He's looking for...

There, he sees it, Ryan's smile, his boyfriend cheering him on, and Dante nods at him before he skates off the ice. He's in the race.

The second heat's not quite so fast, but another two skaters advance and it's time for the race itself. *I can do this*, he tells himself. And the minute he takes to the ice, the doubt disappears again and it's just him and the chill breeze that slices into his cheeks, the slush flung up from his skates. He slows down for this one, last off the line and trailing the pack until the bell lap, when he passes all three skaters on the inside track, a smooth move that brings the crowd to its feet. He crosses the finish line two seconds ahead of the others and before he even coasts to a stop, they're calling his name. *Dante*, just like his dream last night. *Dante*.

Across the rink, Ryan's applauding with the rest of them, his voice drifting out over the ice like an arrow aimed straight at Dante's heart. From here, Dante can see his lover's mouth move, he can read the

shape his lips make, “I love you.” Sweeter than victory, the memory of those lips, and Ryan’s silent words drown out the crowds, the race, the world.

THE END

About the Author



Still on the upside of thirty, J. M. Snyder lives and writes in a small city in central Virginia. Blink and you miss it, I swear. This novel was intended to be published in the winter of 2002 but life has a nasty habit of getting in the way sometimes. Nevertheless here it is. Not the most literary of books, but surely a fun read, and that's all I ever wanted.

My other books are *Operation Starseed* (March 2002) and *Scarred: Four Novellas* (June 2002), both available online. Another novel is in the editing stages and might see print before the end of this year, or I might tackle another batch of short stories, I'm not sure yet. This is only the beginning for me, God willing.

For updates, exclusive online fiction, and excerpts from published works, visit my website at <http://www.jmsnyder.net>.

Ryan Talonovich is the star of his college hockey team...until an accident during practice leaves him confined to a wheelchair. The doctors say he'll walk again but a new season is already underway and he's been replaced on the team, which leaves him feeling alone and betrayed. What's the use of fighting to get back on the ice now?

Then he meets Dante Espinosa, a short track skater on the city's speed skating club. Though he has to work overtime to afford his sport, Dante is hell on ice. The crowds scream his name as he skates circles around the competition...the same way the fans used to shout for Ryan whenever he scored.

It's their love of the ice that brings them together. Dante gives Ryan a reason to heal, while Ryan is just what Dante needs cheer him on to qualify—and win—the state championships. But too many obstacles stand in their way: Ryan's struggle with therapy. The memory of Dante's first boyfriend. Lack of funding to cover Dante's fee for the event, his harassing boss, a friend with a schoolgirl crush on him, and Wil Dietrich, who will do anything see him fall.

P O W E R P L A Y

J. M. Snyder's other books are *Operation Starseed* and *Scarred*. For more info, visit jmsnyder.net.

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