
THE WINGMAN

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From my bar stool in Nelly's pub, I scoop my glass up from the long, oaken tabletop and hold it above my head in salute. "Here's to kicking ass and taking numbers," I say to my best friend, the man I call brother, despite the fact that our features are opposite in nearly every single way. Other than our height, and the fact that we both play in the NHL, Kane's longish hair is sun-drenched blond, whereas mine is dark and cropped short. His deep blue eyes have a way of catching the attention of everyone around him. Mine however, with a hint of metal gray, have been compared to an overcast day and help me blend into the background. Being invisible saved my ass a time or two in foster care.

"Here's to coming in first in our division," Kane says as he clinks glasses with me and jabs his thumb into his chest. "The Stanley Cup is coming home to Seattle with us this year, bro," he adds and I swallow half the bubbly soda in one gulp and slam my glass onto the bar top with more force than necessary. The bartender gives me a sideways glance and I grin at him before wiping my mouth with the back of my hand. I glance over my brother's shoulder and take stock of the

crowded bar. In the near distance, the shrill of a woman's loud laugh swirls throughout the congested room and mingles with all the other blaring sounds.

Perfume reaches my nose, and as I feed off the energy in the crowd, I let it fuel my blood. I might be the guy to stand back and blend in, but deep down, I'm a total thrill-seeker. Last October however, shortly after the NHL season began, any kind of noise would have sent me to a dark corner drooling like a damn baby. Christ, that concussion really did a number on me. But it wasn't career-ending, and for that I'm grateful. Without hockey, I'm nothing.

"Where the fuck are the rest of the guys?" Kane asks and gestures for another shot.

I laugh but it has no humor. "It's Thursday. Where the fuck do you think they are?" Christ, except for a handful of the guys, most on the team are married with kids, and those who live in Seattle are home snuggled in with their loved ones on this rainy Thursday night. The others are likely holed up in their hotel rooms skyping and babbling shit about missing home. A sound crawls out of my throat, a half laugh, half snort. It's not that I'm jealous of their relationships, or anything. Nope, I'm a bachelor for life, and not fucking jealous at all.

Or much, anyway.

"Right. Pussies," Kane says, his voice a bit slurred. A couple shots of rum will do that to a guy. We have a game in two days, and while Kane can put the booze back as well as the next guy, and still be on top of his game, for me...not so much. I'm not about to risk anything when it comes to hockey. It's all or nothing for me. And I'll only settle for all.

I turn, lean against the bar, and scan the establishment a second time. "We have a live one," I say when I catch sight of the pretty redhead coming from the hallway. She presses her lips together, smoothing her freshly applied color, and

runs her hands through her thick, wavy hair. I'm good at reading body language, a must on the ice, and if those gestures aren't a sign that she's open for suggestions, I don't know what is. "Two o'clock," I say and Kane spins on his stool.

"She's gorgeous," he says and I grin when his jaw drops.

I nudge Kane with my shoulder. "Do I know how to pick them for you, or what?"

"You sure you don't want this one? I know you have a thing for redheads."

"Nah. I'm just going to finish my soda and head home. I have some shows to catch up on."

Kane shakes his head and I brace for the lecture. "Are you seriously still watching *The Handmaid's Tale*?"

"Shut the fuck up, and it wouldn't hurt you to watch something other than sports once in a while."

"Man, you need to get laid more than I thought." He finishes off his drink. "Go ahead. You take this one."

As the girl approaches, I push off the counter and step in front of her. "So I was thinking..." I begin, and she stops abruptly and stares at me with pretty green eyes.

"About?" Her dark lashes fall slowly as her gaze pans the length of me. While she doesn't yet know it, her leisurely inspection of my body is a waste of time. It's not me she's going home with tonight.

"Well, I was thinking about asking for your number." Before I continue, I cringe, and suck in air like I have something nasty on my tongue. "But I have this thing..."

Her eyes narrow in on me. "You have a *thing*?" she asks, and the fact that she's playing along lets me know she's open to a hook-up.

"Yeah, the doctors are calling it a third nipple." I lower my voice and add, "For now, anyway." Kane chuckles as the girl's eyes widen. "More tests need to be done, of course."

She takes a small step backward, like she might catch what I have. “Ah, why are you telling me this?”

I move to the side to make room for my bro, and right on cue, Kane stands. Her gaze shifts, and appreciatively takes in my brother. “Because this guy only has two nipples. You seem like a girl who would appreciate that, plus he told me you were the most beautiful woman in the room.”

“He did?” A smile curls up the corners of her mouth, and I inch back even more, biting back my grin as the two begin talking.

And that, ladies and gentlemen, is how to be a good wingman. Not that Kane really needs one, but we have fun playing the game.

Since my job here is done, I plop back down onto my stool and let Kane work his magic. I hang for a bit until Kane pulls his car keys from his pocket and hands them to me.

“Get my car home, bro. We’re taking an Uber.”

“You got it,” I say and finish my soda. I grin at my buddy. “Have fun.”

“Take your own advice, why don’t you.” He stares at me for a moment, like he’s truly concerned about my well-being, and I wave my hand to shove him off. He opens his mouth and I snort, turning from him to let him know it’s not a conversation we’re having. Once he steps away, I angle my head and watch them walk from the bar. When he disappears outside, I pull my phone from my pocket and check the hour. Damn, I put that hook-up together in record time. I’m getting better and better at this shit, and if I hurry, I might be able to catch up on two episodes before I crash.

I grab my glass, about to take my last sip of cola before I head out, when the sound of hands clapping reach my ears. I turn to find a girl nodding and applauding me.

I grin at her. “You liked that, did you?” I ask, as I take in her clear skin, sharp brown eyes that are twinkling with

amusement, and dark hair tied back in a ponytail. My gaze drops to her loose-fitting scrubs.

“Yeah, well played. Does your charm only work on girls, or does it work on guys too?”

I arch a brow and cock my head as my gaze moves over her make-up free face. Not that she needs paint. She has that whole girl-next-door thing going on and it really works for her. “You don’t strike me as the kind of girl looking for a hook-up.”

She gives a very unladylike snort as I finish my last gulp of soda. “What?” She tugs on her hair. “Is it the ponytail, or the fact that I’m not showing my tits?”

Her retort catches me off guard and I nearly choke on my drink as my gaze drops to her chest. “Uh, yeah,” I say, instantly liking her. The truth is, women approach me all the time, and while I seem to have an instant rapport with this one, and there’s an undeniable spark between us, she didn’t come over here to get me between her sheets and no way is she really looking for me to be her wingman. So, what does she want?

She laughs at that. “At least you’re honest.” Dark eyes full of curiosity and playfulness narrow in on me, but behind those dark lashes I sense her cautiousness. “What else gave me away?”

“You’re dressed in scrubs.”

She shrugs. “I’m a nurse at Seattle General. I came here straight from work to meet a friend for drinks.”

“You have freckles,” I say, that observation coming out of nowhere and catching her off guard.

She crinkles her nose. “Yeah, I know. They’re awful.”

“I never said they were awful.”

She rolls her eyes like she doesn’t believe me. “Well, you have a dimple.”

I poke my finger into my right cheek. “Wait, you say that

like it's a bad thing?"

She sighs. "It's not."

I lean toward her conspiratorially. "I'm a nice guy, and because I am, I'm going to give you a warning. If you look at it too long, you'll be forever charmed."

"Oh, my God. Are you for real?"

"Sadly yes," I say, and she laughs with me. I glance around. "Where's this friend you're having drinks with? Is she going to hate me for keeping you captive with my dimple?"

"Ah, nope." She casts a sad glance at the door. "She kind of left with your friend."

Oh shit. "Ah, sorry about that."

"Yeah, that was Lindsay. My best friend."

"And now I'm responsible for you drinking by yourself?"

"I'm done drinking. I have a shift tomorrow." She glances around. "She's safe with your friend, right?"

"Absolutely. Kane is one of the good guys."

She nods. "Okay, so I really am curious. Do your lines only work only on women, or do they work on guys too?"

I gesture for the bartender for two more sodas. "Want to find out?"

"Sure. It's not like I have anything better to do."

"Okay. What's your type?"

"You know, the typical, tall dark and handsome." She holds her hand out. "I'm Jules, by the way. You should probably know that much if you're going to be my wingman."

"Rider," I say and take her soft hand in to mine. Damn, her hands are so tiny. Much like the rest of her. After a quick shake, I scan the bar. "What about that guy there?"

"Too much hair gel," she says. "If he moved in for a kiss, it might put my eye out."

I grin. "Okay, what about that one?"

She crinkles her nose. "He hasn't looked up from his phone all night."

“Yeah, he’d probably want you to send boob picture or something.” I eye her teasingly. “Wait, are you into that? Asking for a friend.”

She laughs and whacks me. “No.”

“What about him?” I spot a nice-looking guy—hey, I’m man enough to admit when a guy is good looking—cuts across the floor, his gaze locked on the bartender, and from the interest in his eyes, I’m not certain it’s a drink he wants from the man. Nothing wrong with that, but if she’s interested, it’s still not going to stop me from being a good wingman.

“Yeah, he’s kind of cute.”

I stand, and cut him off. “Hey, bud,” I begin. “I’ve got to get out of here.” I jerk my thumb toward Jules. “I don’t want to leave my friend Jules alone.” The dude looks around my shoulder to take in Jules as she twists on the stool. “We’re just friends because she’s not my type.”

Recognition flashes in the guy’s eyes when they stray back to me. “Wait, aren’t you—?” he begins, and I cut him off by holding my hands in front of myself, like I’m about to cup two perfect breasts. I get it, he’s a fan, and while I’m always up for a picture or an autograph, I don’t want to switch gears right now. I realize I’m loved because of hockey, but I guess I just want to be me right now. Not that anyone loves that guy.

“Her tits you know. They’re way too big. I’m a mouthful kind of guy.”

Jules squeals in horror behind me, and I bite back a grin as the dude stares at me like I’m a serial killer trying to lure him to my basement with the help of my girlfriend. He gestures with a nod to the group of guys behind him. “Uh, yeah, I have to go.”

Jules and I burst out laughing as he zig-zags through the crowd and meets up with his friends. They huddle and cast

suspicious glances our way. Maybe it's time for us to vacate the place. I reserve my fighting for the rink.

Jules gives a slow shake of her head. "You've got no game, Rider."

"Hey, I've got game," I say, feigning offense. "That guy was just more interested in the bartender. Let me try again," I say, although oddly enough, I've lost the desire to hook her up with some random guy.

She gives me a dubious look, stands, and shoves me. "Move aside, rookie. Let me show you how it's done." She scans the room. "What's your type? And yeah, I get it. You don't like big breasts."

"I never said that," I counter as I try to judge the size of hers, but they're hidden so well behind her scrubs I can't tell. "I like *all* breasts."

She puckers her lips. "I bet you do."

"Yeah. I do," I admit and she shakes her head. "What can I say? I'm honest to a fault." When she rolls her eyes, I say, "I like women, Jules. Tall, short, thin, plump. You name it."

"Hair color?"

I glance at her ponytail. "As long as I can tug it, it doesn't matter what color it is."

As soon as the words leave my mouth, her lips part, and wait...was that a fast intake of breath I just heard? I study her closely, examine the fresh flush on her face. Funny, others might find her plain, but the more time I spend with her, the cuter I find those freckles, and the sexier I find everything about her—including her scrubs. I can't even blame it on alcohol since I'm dry tonight. Yeah, okay, maybe Kane was right. I need to get laid more often.

"Did I embarrass you?" I ask.

"No," she says, with a quick jerk of her head.

I part my legs on the stool and since I value my nuts, I

resist the urge to pull her between them. “Then why are your cheeks red?”

She lets out an exasperated breath. “Do you say everything that pops into your brain?”

“Pretty much.” My gaze moves over her pretty pink cheeks. “Oh, wait, maybe you’re not embarrassed. Maybe you’re arous—”

“So you don’t have a type,” she blurts out, cutting me off. “How about the one coming toward you right now. Twelve o’clock.”

I look the pretty girl over. Perfect hair. Perfect makeup. Perfect clothes. “She seems very high maintenance.”

“Yeah, I think you might be right.”

“Hmmm, what about that one?” she says and I follow the direction she’s pointing.

I give a slow shake of my head. “Nope, she’s downing her drinks like she fears there’s going to be an alcohol shortage.”

“What about her friend?”

I study her body language for a second. “See the way she’s scanning the place, her hands braced by her sides?”

“Yeah,” she says.

“I’m pretty sure she fears we’re about to face a zombie apocalypse.”

Jules laughs out loud and when it dies off, she says, “What about the one coming right at you.”

I reluctantly tear my gaze from Jules and make eye contact with the blonde. I stiffen. Shit. I know where this is going, and I’m not in the mood—not when I’ve been having a good time here.

“What’s wrong?” Jules asks.

“Nothing,” I lie.

“I thought that was you, Rider,” the girl says, and puts her hands on my chest as she juts one hip out in a suggestive manner.

“Do I know you?” While I might not know her, I know her type, and I know what she’s after. But what’s really bugging me is Jules and I were having fun, and I wasn’t ready for that to end. Honestly, I haven’t laughed or joked like that with a woman in...ever.

The blonde gives a breathless laugh. “Not yet.” She runs her finger down my chest. “I’m Candy, by the way.”

“Of course you are,” I say.

“Want to get out of here? Go back to my place, or yours if you prefer.”

Wow, how fucking rude to act like Jules doesn’t even exist. Sure, she’s not the kind of girl usually found on my arm, but still.

“Candy, this is Jules. My fiancée.” I tap my leg, a gesture for Jules to take a seat.

Without even missing a beat, Jules takes my cue, sidles closer to me, and extends her hand. “Candy, it’s nice to meet you.” Goddammit, a woman with beauty and brains. If I weren’t a one-night kind of guy, I’d hang on tight to this one. But I’m not into tomorrows, so that’s a stupid thought.

Candy falters and stares at Jules’ hand like it’s about to grow a head and bite her.

“Yeah right,” she fires back, her eyes narrowing as her head bobs back and forth between the two of us.

“Why is that so hard to believe?” Jules asks in a voice so sultry and smooth it could churn butter.

Candy’s head jerks back, her lips pursed so tight they’re beginning to turn white. “Rider Lewis, the NHL’s best wingman, does not date, or do commitments. Everyone knows that.”

In a move that displays possession, Jules settles between my spread legs and sets her sweet ass down on my left thigh.

She blinks innocently at Candy. “I guess I must have missed the memo.”

As we maneuver through the bar, I angle my head and take in Rider's cute dimple. "Why are you grinning at me like that?"

"Like what?"

"Like you hit the boards one too many times."

Rider opens the heavy front door and gestures for me to exit. "Hockey fan, are you?" he asks as he joins me on the wet sidewalk.

I snort. "Not even a little bit."

"Are you serious?" He gives a slow shake of his head, and runs his fingers through his short hair. "I don't think we can be friends any more, Jules."

"We're friends now, are we?" I ask.

He gestures with a nod. "It's over, and I'm afraid you're going to have to walk on the other side of the street."

I whack his stomach—damn, the man is hard—and he lets loose a loud oomph.

"For the record," he says, "I'm not a fan of nurses either."

"What could you possibly have against nurses?" I hold my

hand out and test the skies. Looks like the rain has stopped. For now. I mean, this is Seattle and it could downpour again any second.

“Last year I landed in the hospital—”

“What were you in the hospital for?”

“Nothing important,” he says quickly, and continues with, “As soon as I’d drift off, the damn nurses would wake me up. It was fucking annoying. Then they’d poke and stick me with things and I think they took great pleasure in it. Sadistic, all of you.”

I laugh. “Aw, did the nurses upset the little baby with three nipples?”

He scrunches up his face. “Funny girl.” He gives my ponytail a tug and the second he does, the air around us shifts, becomes a little more volatile...electric. My lips part, and his gaze drops, like he can’t take his eyes from my mouth. Okay, I must be imagining things here. Lindsay is the kind of girl who attracts guys like Rider and Kane. Where she’s adventurous, bold and always up for something wild, I’m the quiet girl, the caretaker, the good girl who always blends into the woodwork. Tonight, the fact that Rider chose Lindsay—not me—for his friend Kane, is a testament to that.

“So...ah. Yeah,” Rider says, shoving his hands into the pockets of his jeans. “You never got to show me how it was done.”

“How...what was done?” I ask, my mind careening off in an erotic direction, imagining all the dirty things we could show each other. Which makes me nearly laugh. What dirty things do I know?

“You called me a rookie when I was trying to find you a guy, and said you’d show me how it was done. You never got a chance to be my wingman.”

“Right, and it’s wingwoman.”

He nudges me with his shoulder, and the intimate contact

sends a ridiculous streak of heat through my chilled body. “What did you think I meant?”

“That,” I say quickly. Too quickly judging by his smirk. With a little more confidence I add, “That’s what I thought you meant.” His grin widens, like he’s a cocky son of a bitch who knows my stupid brain had gone off in a dirty direction.

“What would you have said?” he asks.

“It was a gem. I’m going to save it for next time.”

“Oh, we’re doing this again, are we? I thought you said you didn’t like hockey players.”

I actually said I didn’t like hockey, not hockey players. Truthfully, I’ve never met a hockey player until tonight. But instead of pointing that out, I say, “And you don’t like nurses, so we’re even. And...you did ruin my date night with my girlfriend, so I feel like you owe me date.”

“You want to go on a date?”

“Not with you,” I say, and make a face like the idea is absurd. I pull my phone from my pocket, about to grab an Uber, even though it’s still early and the thought of going home to an empty apartment doesn’t hold the appeal it did an hour ago. Normally I love the quiet after a busy shift. Love to make a hot cup of herbal tea and whip up dinner for one in the kitchen.

“What are you doing?” he asks, and cocks his head to the side as he stares at my phone.

“Getting an Uber and going home.”

He shakes his friend’s keys. “I can drive you. Seeing you home safely is the least I can do after setting your girlfriend up with my brother.”

I lower my phone. “Wait. Kane is your brother?” My God, the two look nothing alike. I never would have put that together. But damn, their parents must be proud to have two professional hockey players in the family.

“Not by blood, but yeah.” He quickly turns from me, but

not before I catch the flash of darkness in his eyes. Why do I suddenly get the feeling that I touched on a sore spot? He holds the fob out, presses it, and in the near distance a car door unlocks.

“Well, I have four siblings. I’m the oldest of five.” Why the hell did I just tell him that?

He turns back to me, and he has the strangest look on his face. I’m not sure what to make of it, and I don’t know him well enough to call it, but for the briefest of seconds I get the impression that he’s all alone in this world. But he’s not. He has Kane, and his entire team, right?

“That’s nice,” he says so quietly I have to strain to hear.

Silence falls over us, and I suddenly can’t remember what we were talking about before I asked about his brother. When he shifts from one foot to the other, the keys rattle.

Right, he’d offered me a ride home, before my brain went off in another direction.

“I don’t get into cars with strangers,” I say with a lift of my chin.

Humor is back in his eyes when he turns to me. “Friends with every Uber driver in Seattle, are you?” he teases, that sexy little dimple on display again.

I give an exaggerated eye roll that seems to amuse him. “Well no. Of course not, but they have safety measures. You could be a serial killer, for all I know.”

“I’m not and I don’t make it a habit of driving random women home either, you know. Maybe you’re not a real nurse.” He glances the length of me. “Maybe you only wear scrubs because you’re an organ thief and it saves time when you’re ready to harvest some unsuspecting dude’s parts,” he teases, as he cups his crotch.

I burst out laughing. “You have a very wild imagination. I’m not after your organs, Rider.” I point downward. “Especially that one.”

“Whew. Okay, what do you do for fun?” he questions, like he’s not ready for this night to be over any more than I am.

“I like gardening, and art, and I like to repair and paint old furniture.” I’m about to ask him what he does for fun, but he slaps his head.

“What a coincidence.”

I fold my arms, and stare at him, wondering where he’s going with this, but entertained with his antics just the same. “What?”

He jerks his thumb down the street. “I was actually on my way to get a whopper wiener at the Bad Art Museum. Join me. We can eat and look at art.”

“Bad art, you mean.”

“Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, baby.”

“And those wieners will kill you. Instead of whopper wiener, they should be called heart attack hotdog.”

He laughs at the joke. “So you want one, too?”

“Well, yeah.”

He laughs harder and I join in as we start down the sidewalk. “After we eat, if you decide I’m not a serial killer, and my intentions are to get you home safely, I’ll drive you. If you’re still not comfortable, I’ll get you an Uber.”

“Deal.”

Light rain drops sprinkle down on us. “We better make a run for it,” he says. “This isn’t looking good.”

He captures my hand, and we hurry down the sidewalk, but the light rain turns to fat drops and soaks our clothes before we reach our destination.

We’re drenched and laughing by the time we step inside the Bad Art Museum. “I can’t remember the last time I was here,” I say, blinking against the glare of the orange wall, the color resembling that of a Cheeto. “Were you really planning on coming here tonight? Be honest.”

“I’m always honest.”

"I get that about you."

"And no, I wasn't." His head dips, and that's when I realize my scrubs are drenched and stuck to my body. I pull on my top and it makes a sucking sound as it breaks the bond with my flesh.

"Average size," he says under his breath. "I think that's my favorite."

"Rider!" I burst out and his eyes cut to mine. "Are you talking about my breasts?"

"Yeah," he says, not a hint of embarrassment about him.

"You need to get some filters, my friend," I say, even though I sort of like that he says what he's thinking. There are no games with this one, and honestly, it's a refreshing break. Not that I'm looking for anything more from him. I'm not looking for a relationship, and according to Candy, he doesn't do relationships. Yeah, sure, he might like my *average* breasts, but I'm average all over, and that puck bunny...she was hands down, over-the-top gorgeous. No way can I compare to the women who throw themselves at him. Nor do I want to. Being his friend, however... that sounds nice.

"Now let's eat and look at art." I follow him to the counter and let my gaze drop to take in the way his low-slung jeans cradle his impressive ass. I don't think the man is a serial killer, but damn, he has a killer body. In my line of work, I've seen many naked men over the years, but I have a feeling I've not seen Rider's kind of naked.

He orders two whopper wieners and two drinks. I reach for my purse and he stops me. "This heart attack is on me."

"Fine, I buy next time, and I get to pick where we go."

"At least I know you eat meat, and you're not going to force me to go someplace where they serve weeds and twigs."

"You don't strike me as the kind of guy who can be forced to do anything you don't want to do."

"I kind of get that same vibe from you, too." As I bask in the compliment, he pays and hands me a can of soda and a hotdog. I grab two paper straws and make my way to the table, but he stops at the condiments. He pours so much mustard on his dog, it's spilling everywhere.

"Would you like a wiener to go with that mustard?" I ask, and make a face that showcases my disgust.

He shrugs, uncaring. "What can I say? I like mustard."

"The bacon, cheese, chilis, and onions don't cut it?"

He swipes at the dripping mustard from his bun and puts his finger into his mouth. "Nope."

I give a slow shake of my head. "The things I'm learning about you tonight."

I slide into a puffy purple booth and he sits across from me. My stomach grumbles loudly, reminding me I skipped dinner. Rider arches a brow when the sound reaches his ears.

"Work was insane tonight. Sometimes I don't get a chance to eat." I bite into my hot dog and as I chew, a moan crawls into my throat. I briefly shut my eyes and when I open them again, I find Rider staring at me, his hot dog poised in his hand, inches from his mouth.

"What?" I ask and grab a napkin. "Do I have food on my face or something?"

"Yeah," he says, the black in his gorgeous eyes bleeding into that strange shade of gray. For the first time since I met him, I'm get the sense he's *not* saying what's really going through his brain.

Deciding I want to know him better, I ask, "What do you do for fun, besides pick up women for your brother? Wait, why do you do that, anyway? Kane doesn't look like he needs any help getting his own girls."

He causally rolls one shoulder. "He doesn't." He licks more mustard from his fingers, and my God, I'm not sure

what is going on with me, but what he's doing should not be one bit sexy. No, it's an excellent way to transmit diseases and infections. While my brain fully understands that, the needy juncture between my legs doesn't much care. Yeah, that damn traitorous juncture is quite enthralled with his mouth, the sucking sounds he's making and how those lips of his would feel...

"Fuck that's good," he says, and my thoughts come crashing back to the present. "And you're right. Kane doesn't need help with the ladies. It's just a game we play."

"Does it work the other way around?" I crack my soda and slide my straw in. "Does he come in as your wingman?"

"Not really."

"You like girls, right?" I bite, and chew and add, "I mean, it's okay if you don't."

He laughs. "Yeah, I like girls. I told you that already. I like all girls, all shapes and all sizes."

"But you're not into hook-ups?"

Mustard pools on his plate and he dips the end of his hot dog into it. "It's hockey season. I keep my focus on the game. I don't let anything distract me."

"Like alcohol or women." He arches a brow and I continue with, "You ordered us both a soda at the bar after I said I was done drinking, and I'm guessing that's what was in your glass before I arrived. And that woman, Candy," I say drawing out her name. "She was an easy mark, Rider. I bet she had a bullseye right here," I say, and twist in the stool to point to the small of my back.

Rider laughs. "What about you? Are you into hook-ups?"

"Not really."

"Then why did you want me to be your wingman?"

"I can talk to a guy, but it doesn't mean I'm going to go home with him, you know." He frowns and takes another big

bite of his hot dog, nearly devouring half of it already. "What? Is that a foreign concept to you, or something?" He looks upward as he chews, like he's thinking hard on that. "Oh, I get it. Puck bunnies. God's gift to hockey players."

He nods, and takes a drink of his soda to wash down his food. "What about you? Every guy's fantasy is to walk into the bedroom to find his woman dressed in a naughty nurse uniform."

"Not yours, though, right?" I take a pull from my straw. "You know, seeing as you don't like nurses."

"That's right." He's about to take a drink and stops, his eyes widening. "Wait. Do you have one of those outfits?"

"No, I don't have one, and even if I did, I wouldn't wear something so ridiculous."

"I don't think it's ridiculous. A lot of guys are into that kind of thing. You must have a ton of *scrub bunnies* after you."

"Scrub bunnies? That's not even a thing, Rider. You're insane."

"What would you call them?" he asks as he kicks his legs out to get comfortable, his feet touching mine under the table. Why the hell does every touch feel so electric?

"I don't think guys are bunnies. Maybe hounds."

His cute grin is back. "Hospital hounds?"

"Yeah, that's more like it. Candy said you don't do relationships," I say switching subjects as I glance at the big velvet picture of Elvis adorning the wall beside me. "Is that just for hockey season, or are you a sworn bachelor for life?"

"Aren't you full of questions tonight." Like we've done it a hundred times before, he reaches out and swipes his thumb over the corner of my mouth. "You're the messiest eater."

"I am not. You are. You've got mustard all over your face. You look like a big Cheeto. You're going to blend in with the walls soon."

He grins and, my God, I want to touch that dimple. “You think I’m big?”

I laugh. Hard. “Really?” I shake my head. “That’s what you took from that?”

“Sworn bachelor for life,” he admits. “What about you?”

“Right guy just hasn’t come along yet?” Or maybe he has, and my regimented ways, the fact that I always try to control my emotions and my surroundings, sent him packing.

Loosen up once in a while, will you.

As my ex’s words ping around my brain—words he’d spoken to me in the bedroom—Rider looks at me long and hard. “Ever been serious?”

I shake all thoughts of Jason from my brain. “Ah, not really.” With the long day taking its toll on me, topped off by the food coma I’m now suffering, a yawn I have no control over rumbles in my throat.

Rider grins. “Am I boring you?”

I cover my mouth and shake my head. No woman could ever be bored in his presence. I know I’m not. “No. Sorry. It’s been a long night.”

“How about I take you home?” He pulls the keys from his pocket. “Kane owns a Ferrari 306 Spider, and I can get you home super-fast.” A fine shiver goes through me and he angles his head, those astute eyes of his assessing me. “Wait, I take it you’re not a thrill seeker like me.”

I crinkle my nose, as my stomach tightens at the thought of flying down the street at supersonic speed. As a nurse, I see the results of such speed, see far too much loss. Perhaps that’s why I’m so cautious and controlled. “Sort of the complete opposite.”

His gaze moves over my face again, then lowers for a low sweep of my damp top. “No worries, Jules,” he says in a low voice that makes me wonder if it’s normally reserved for the pillow. “I can go slow. Real slow.”

Honest to God, if I didn't know better—and I do—the soft way he just said *slow* makes me think he's talking about sex, and not getting behind the wheel of a fast car. Okay, clearly, I'm exhausted and hallucinating, right?