

for the one you believe

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for the one you believe

by [romanovaly](#)

Summary

blackhawks captain and hometown hero, matt casey, has one goal for the upcoming season: win another stanley cup for chicago. the problem with best laid plans? he never factored in the fiery paramedic who would steal his heart.

(it's the blackhawks/chicago fire au that nobody - literally nobody - asked for)

Notes

happy five year anniversary to this dumb show; thanks for all the memz and friends. also, happy ten year anniversary of toews and kane being blackhakws; thanks for making this last decade so much fun to be a hawks fan.

i make no apologies for this level of self-indulgence, but i do believe we need more au stories in this fandom so here's my contribution.

title comes from "chelsea dagger" by the fratellis

one

He wonders, at times, what he's done to deserve *this*—to raise the Stanley Cup high above his hometown three times, to captain the team he spent his entire childhood rooting for from those same stadium seats that surround him now.

...with our first-round pick, the Blackhawks select Chicago native Matthew Casey...

Ten years on, some days he stares up at the rafters of the United Center from center ice listening to almost twenty thousand fans yelling his name, seeing hundreds of people wearing his number and can't believe that this is *his* life.

Some days, though, he thinks about that two-story house on Nordica right off the Kennedy and tries to forget being eight years old, clutching his stick and skates, wavering on that last step before the front room, unsure if his dad would be wearing his beat up old Cubs hat and a crooked smile or clutching a tin can of Old Style with a furrow set deep into his forehead. He can still remember the shouting, the fighting, the echoing bang of the screen door bouncing against its metal doorjamb as his father stormed out in anger.

A puck whistles past the side of his head, sailing straight into Pete Mills' left glove.

"Heads up, Captain Serious," shouts the team's best right winger and resident charismatic asshole, Kelly Severide, "They don't pay you all those millions to stare into space on game night."

Matt rolls his eyes and chokes up on the handle of his stick, rushing towards Kelly as his teammate does some unbalanced version of a pirouette.

"Aw, man, what the hell," whines Kelly as he overbalances into the boards and waves his arms to stay upright.

"Just keeping you on your toes," Matt replies, spinning out and around the crease. Pete swears at him as he dekes and whacks a puck towards the upper left corner, making it sail into the unguarded space. "Same to you, mountie."

"Fuck off, Cap," Pete yells back, forcing up the faceplate of his helmet to spray some water on his face.

Matt gathers a few loose pucks in preparation for tossing them over the boards to some of the kids who've come early for warm-ups. "I thought your sister was coming," he shouts out over the roar of the crowd.

"Nah," replies Kelly, mindlessly tapping the puck back and forth before kicking it up into the air. "She ditched for some fancy-ass restaurant opening that her roommate scored an invite to. I swear, she should've just ignored what Benny said and put her name down for some fancy-pants culinary school. I didn't go to a real college and, look at me," he spins around, stick raised in the air for flourish, "I'm doing just fucking fine."

“That’s cause you’re an asshole,” Andy Darden calls out as he skates past them, kicking ice up as he takes a sharp turn, braking suddenly.

“Not my fault your sister couldn’t see past my flaws,” Kelly yells back as they skate back to the benches. The clock is counting down from three minutes, letting everyone on the ice know it’s almost game time. “It’s been over a decade, she’s married with kids, now. You need to get over it.”

“You ditched her on prom night,” Andy says, pushing his faceplate up to spray some water in his face from one of the water bottles left on the boards.

“I was gonna ditch the game—but there was a scout coming out and, dude, I couldn’t miss that. Plus, it was her junior year, it doesn’t even count.”

Andy taps Matt on the shoulder and shakes his head “I’m telling you, Cap, asshole. Why’s he on our team again?”

“‘Cause I scored the most goals in the entire league last year, fucker,” Kelly shoots back, grabbing him in a headlock, the two of them jostling on the ice for a few minutes.

Matt rolls his eyes as he listens to the two of them argue. Andy pulls out the same grievance every few months to rile Kelly up, just for the hell of it. They had played in the pee-wee leagues in the northeast when they were kids, Andy and Kelly, and had come up in the league together. It showed too, the familiarity, when they got on the ice even though Kelly was a right winger and Andy played defense. Matt knew a couple of guys in the league like that, left winger Jason Kannell and him had circled the same traveling leagues during high school, but they had never played on the same team.

Boden catches his eye and jerks his chin back, the universal signal for *get off the damn ice*. Matt taps a couple of loose pucks to Kelly and between the two of them, they manage to give a practice puck to a handful of kids who were watching behind the glass. Boden’s stroking his Twitter-famous mustache as he watches on, clipboard shoved under his left arm. Matt makes sure the ice is clear before he heads back to the locker rooms, tapping his glove against a few fans’ fists as he disappears into the tunnel.

Today, he thinks, will be one of those games he won’t believe how lucky he really is to play for his home team.

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Matt finds stadium sounds to always be loudest when the team is losing. The fans were always rowdier and more passionate and too hyped up to bring the noise down to a dull roar. Of course, it never helped that the media team would blare rap music and egg the crowd on, challenging them to *make some noise* and tapping the goal horn a few times for good measure. On the nights they won, Chelsea Dagger was always his favorite way to skate off the ice. It made him grin in the same giddy way as when he saw the C stitched on his sweater the first time or picked up his first professional hat trick.

Tonight, he can feel the disappointment rolling off the crowd as they trek back to the locker room. It was an overtime game; “Free hockey,” Kelly had shouted gleefully before they returned to the ice. It wasn’t anybody’s fault in the same way that all the fans would blame Boden’s coaching or Pete’s glove or, even, his face-offs on Twitter. Three on three always sucked and, tonight, the puck favored the Predators sticks instead of theirs.

Boden makes sure the press stays out of the team’s way long enough for him to get out of his helmet and pads and skates and pull on a hoodie and his favorite Cubs hat, the one with the brim perfectly broken in, its fabric faded to a muted blue. The locker room’s quiet as they get out of their gear. Jimmy Borelli, the rookie brought over from Finland’s league, is whispering under his breath to right winger, Brian Zvonecek, nicknamed Otis by the team after dropping like an elevator on his very first practice in from Russia. Pete’s sitting in his stall, helmet off, but still wearing the bulky leg pads required of goalies. Kelly’s undressed except for a pair of basketball shorts, hair sweat-slicked off his forehead.

The press makes their rounds and Matt finds himself blinded by camera lights with microphones and phones shoved in his face for a thirty-second sound bite on what he thinks the team’s chances are on winning the Stanley Cup this year. His answer is always the same: the game wasn’t their worst showing; it was still early in the season and they had picked up a point; everyone had done exactly what they were supposed to, the Preds had just done it better.

He’s exhausted by the time security shuffles everyone out and he can tell everyone around him is too. Most of the guys have left already. The ones with families waiting — like Andy and center, Joe Cruz, and their new defenseman, Adam Ruzek — had all ducked out after answering a couple of questions, looking to unite with their wives and small kids after a long game. The door to Boden’s office is shut tight, where the coaches are probably already watching the tapes from earlier. He should be in there, as team captain it’s his job to find weak spots and execute better plays. Instead, he leans further back into his stall, closing his eyes and cushioning his head against one of the sweatshirts he leaves hanging for cold nights and early morning practices.

“Who died?”

Matt shifts his head against the wood to see Leslie Shay standing in the middle of locker room, arms crossed in front of her chest, already bundled up in a team fleece and a navy beanie with the word, PARAMEDIC, stitched in red along the side. She’s new to the organization, having joined at the start of team training back in August. In the last two months, she’d managed to win over most of the guys on the team and had somehow become Kelly’s new roommate after two days of knowing each other.

When Matt had asked as they moved her stuff into Kelly’s chrome and brick loft in River North, he had shrugged and replied, “Shay’s cool, chill. Just needs a place to hang since her ex-girlfriend kicked her out.” That had been the end of it and now it was the middle of October. They’re an odd pair, in his opinion, not that he knows Shay all that well. She knows her medical shit, for sure, but he’s called this team home since he was nineteen years old.

“You lost one game. In overtime!” she exclaims, stalking over to Kelly’s spot and yanking off his headphones. “Pretty sure it’s only, like, the sixth game of the season. This doesn’t put you

at the bottom of the league standings, or whatever it is."

"How the hell did you get this job when you clearly know nothing about hockey?" asks Kelly, making a halfhearted grab at Shay who's already scrolling through the music library on his phone.

"I don't need to know what the fuck 'icing' is to know how to check your sorry ass for a concussion."

There's a brief silence and then Chance starts blaring out of the locker room's sound system. Matt goes back to resting his head, not in the mood to listen to Shay and Kelly gripe at one another this late at night. There's a thud and he turns his head to find the blonde staring right at him, "Severide won't go out unless you agree to drag your sorry ass out, too. So! Up and at 'em, Captain. I know a great place open late and they don't even charge me for drinks."

"It's not one of those 4AM train wrecks is it?" asks Jason, exiting the shower room and running a towel over his head. "'Cause I've been to those places and it's not worth the hype."

"It's a good sports bar. Wood paneling, kitschy neon signs, grumpy regulars—the works."

"I'm in," says Jason, zipping up his duffle bag full of gear and slinging it over his shoulder. "You coming, mountie?"

Pete glances up from where he's methodically removing the tape wrapped around his ankles, "Yeah, sure, sounds cool."

A balled-up pair of old socks sails across the room, whacking Matt in the face. "Come on, Captain Serious," Kelly calls out. "Have some fun in your life for once."

Matt groans stretching out his neck until he hears the bones pop, "Alright, fine, one drink. We have a late practice tomorrow anyways."

"Won't stop you from being back here in six hours anyways," Jason jokes, giving him a push on the shoulder to get him moving.

—

"Last call was fifteen minutes ago. So, unless you're here to rob me, we're closed."

Matt peers around Kelly and Shay into the well-lit space. Some brunette stands behind the counter, her focus on the glass tumblers drying on a rack next to her. The rest of the bar is empty, no one's sitting at the tall tables placed strategically around the space or at the wooden bar counter nursing a beer. SportsCenter plays on the handful of televisions hanging from the ceiling towards the front windows. It's recap time and Matt watches as they show the puck sliding between Pete's glove and the post to make the game-winning shot.

"Bullshit," laughs Shay, walking further into the bar to lean against the counter. She's got her head resting on an upturned palm when the brunette finally looks away from her task. Even from the doorway Matt can see her rolling her eyes, mirth written across her face as she tosses a couple of shot glasses Shay's way.

"Tequila, Dawson. the good stuff that I know Herrmann hides way up 'cause he can be a cheap bastard when he wants."

"He only stocks the cheap stuff," Dawson says, sarcasm dripping from her voice. Still, she turns around and reaches up to the taller shelf, shifting bottles to grab one filled with amber liquid. Shay grows impatient and moves behind the counter, too, shifting around to find a couple salt shakers and a bowl of limes. "What can I get the rest of you guys?"

"Whatever's on tap is good, Dawson," says Kelly, dropping his leather jacket on one of the stools and rolling up the sleeves of his dress shirt. The tie that Boden makes them wear on games days is already loose around his neck.

She nods and grabs a tall glass off the drying rack, hip-checking Shay on her way to fill it up. "You gonna introduce me to your other friends?" she asks.

"Kannell, Mills, Casey," Shay says, pointing to each of them in turn. Shay, Matt's learned over the weeks, has a strange aversion to first names. "Watch out for Mills, though, he's Canadian."

"Oh please, you're from St. Louis and I've put up with your shit all these years. I'm Gabby, by the way. Beers?"

Matt notices her eyes first, a warm brown that gleam in the bar's orange glow. It's clear Kelly knows her, but then, Matt's convinced his teammate knows every pretty girl in Chicago. She smiles wide, all cheeks and teeth, at something Pete says, and slides two shot glasses down to him and Jason and tops them off with whiskey.

"Pour a shot out for Casey, too, Dawson. He needs it," says Shay, mouth around a slice of lime. "He's all quiet because he's over analyzing the fact that they lost in overtime tonight."

Gabby smiles at him, but pours out a beer instead. "Shay thinks all problems can be solved with a shot of tequila. It's gotten us in trouble more times than necessary."

"You Shay's bartender or something?" he asks taking the glass. It's an IPA, bitter and hoppy and just how he likes it.

She laughs, bright and happy. "Nah, she used to be my partner on 61 before ditching me for the private sector. Me and some of the guys at 51 own Molly's." Matt figures he must look as confused as he feels because she tacks on, "I'm a paramedic with the fire department."

"Damn right she is," interrupts Shay, slinging an arm around her petite friend and holding up a shot glass. "Best damn PIC in Chicago. Now, take a shot with me."

—

He sticks around long enough for a few drinks and, he admits only to himself, long enough for Shay's friend to finish closing up the bar. He's exhausted from the game, but her energy is infectious as she teases Kelly and laughs loudly with Shay and trades jokes with Pete and Jason. She finds her way to his side a few times, too, brown gaze open and kind as she pours

him another beer; fingers warm against his skin as she hands him a bag of ice for the blossoming bruise to his left jaw.

They all tumble out of Molly's with the clock closer to 3AM than he would like with practice the next day and a game the day after that. Kelly shoves Shay into his Mustang and Pete and Jason grab their Ubers idling on the street. Matt turns towards his own truck to see Gabby stuffing her hands in the pockets of her coat and head down one of the streets.

"You're not gonna walk home, are you?" he asks.

"What?" she turns around and the streetlamp catches on her dark strands turning them auburn for a moment.

"It's basically morning," he says lamely, waving a hand around. "And it's cold out."

She smirks, the left corner of her mouth turning up and scrunching her nose, "Easy, Cap. I'm a big girl, I only live a few blocks away."

He lets the nickname slide, for no other reason than it sounds so much better coming from her than one of the guys. "I know, I'm offering," he replies with a shrug. "It's just a ride home."

Gabby narrows her gaze and raises an eyebrow, "Just a ride?"

Matt nods and gestures to the truck parked across the street. He can afford to update the beat-up silver truck, but it had been the first purchase he had made once he'd been drafted and he's found it hard to part with. It also, he'll admit, makes it easier to hide—no one expects someone like him to be driving around Chicago in something like that.

She seems to weigh her options, before shrugging slightly and hitching her purse higher on her right shoulder, "Sure, what the hell, why not." He hangs back, waiting for her to pass in front of him on the way to the truck, when she turns around her curls almost hitting him the face. He catches the faint scent of lavender as she pulls up short.

"I'm not inviting you in for coffee," she says, "I don't care how many Stanley Cups you have."

"Duly noted," he replies, giving her a small grin. She's different, he thinks, a little unpredictable. "I have to be at the rink in six hours anyways."

She nods, giving him another one of those bright smiles, before sliding into the truck's cab. He circles around and climbs into the driver's seat. They listen to the engine shudder to life in silence, she's humming a vaguely familiar tune under her breath. She wasn't lying when she mentioned living only a few blocks away. He drives east down Cortland for a few blocks before making a right and then left, pulling up in front of an old greystone, the entry light giving off a warm glow in the night. It takes all of five minutes.

"Thanks for the ride," she says, looking at him over her shoulder. "It was nice to meet Chicago's golden boy. You've got good taste in bars."

With that she hops out, hurrying up the walkway to her door. He idles until she makes it safely inside, waving him off as the door shuts securely behind her. He shakes his head and continues to drive south until he hits a street that will take him to the Kennedy and home to his place in Streeterville.

He's climbing out of the truck when he finds a bright yellow post-it stuck to his game day bag. It's blank except for a phone number written in black Sharpie. He laughs, wondering when she had time to do that during their brief ride. He tucks the piece of paper in his wallet and shakes his head. Definitely unpredictable.

two

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Heard you were a knight in shining armor last night,” greets Shay from behind the glass, she’s wearing a pair of sunglasses indoors and she’s holding the largest cup of coffee Matt’s ever seen.

The team’s practicing at the United Center today instead of their usual rink in Rockford. The Bulls are away on a road trip and Boden didn’t see any reason to make everyone trek way out to the suburbs for a scrimmage and some shooting drills. Even though expectations are low, everyone’s got their game face on.

“You and Kelly looked too busy chirping at one another last night to be aware of the world,” he replies, leaning his weight against his stick, watching as Jimmy and Cruz and Otis try out a new play against Pete in the net.

“You should call her,” Shay says instead, taking a long sip of coffee. “She’s not on shift until tomorrow. Could use something to distract her.”

“On shift?”

“You sports guys know nothing, huh?” she teases, peering over the tops of her sunglasses. “CFD is 24 on, 48 off,” she points at him with the coffee mug, “So, don’t do something cute and invite her to the game tomorrow.”

“Does she even like hockey?” he asks distractedly as Jimmy overshoots the puck and skates into Adam Ruzek.

“Who? Dawson? Yeah, sure, one of her ex’s used to have season tickets to the Cubs.”

That doesn’t really answer his question, but it’s not a straight rejection, either. He can’t believe he’s even thinking about calling her. The guys joke about him being Captain Serious, but they have their reasons, even the media’s noticed his lack of dating on a team crawling with longterm couples.

Then again, his last relationship hadn’t ended in the best light.

It wasn’t Hallie’s fault, not really. They had met in college, when he still thought the NHL was a pipe dream. She had stood by his side from the Draft in ’06 to being named captain in ’08 to winning the Cup in 2010. Followed him from North Dakota back to Chicago and enrolled in Medical School at the University of Chicago, turning down offers at Harvard and Stanford and Johns Hopkins. He had bought a ring, hidden it in his gear bag until he found the perfect moment to ask her.

But, he never got the chance.

He had come home after the final road trip of the 2011 season to a note and an empty apartment. She couldn't be a hockey wife the note had said. Sure, she loved him, but not enough to watch him chase his dreams as she gave up her own. That had been a long time ago. While Kelly had hung around bars and clubs in the city and found girl after girl, Matt had laced up his skates, gotten back on the ice, and helped lead the team to two more Cups.

There's a shout and a groan to his left, somehow Joe's on his back on the ice and Otis is spinning in circles around his line mate laughing hysterically.

Cruz's a good guy. He was traded to the team a couple months before their second Cup win from the Flyers and had been a solid presence all postseason. The team welcomed Otis a few months later in the off-season from Russia's Kontinental Hockey League and the two had bonded quickly after that, even sharing an apartment until Cruz had met his wife.

"Why did I think hockey players would be less stupid than firefighters?" Shay sighs as she pushes her sunglasses up onto her head. "Is anything broken?"

Cruz shakes his head and clambers back up on the ice, rotating his left shoulder a few times. "Nah, we're good. Otis is just an idiot."

Shay nods and knocks a fist against the glass, "Call her. I guarantee you she's doing nothing tonight because I just cancelled our drink plans."

Matt turns around to stare at her in disbelief, torn between laughing and saying, "What the fuck."

"How about I text her," he says instead, "Maybe it wasn't her number and it just fell out of her purse."

"Yeah, and I went home and had sex with Severide last night," Shay replies, deadpan. "Was it a 312 area code? And, did it end in 6309?"

Matt nods instinctively, he had memorized the number on his ride from the parking garage to his condo last night before he remembered to enter it into his phone.

"Well then, congrats! It's Dawson's. There's nothing stopping you from calling her. Give me your phone, I'll even do it for you, Captain."

He's saved from rejecting the offer by Boden skating up to him, whistle hanging out of the side of his mouth like a forgotten cigarette. There's a frown on the Coach's face and Matt can't figure out if it's for him or because, like nine times out of ten, someone stupid said something dumb.

Boden jerks a thumb over his shoulder towards the tunnel that leads to the locker rooms, "Get out of those skates, I've got a couple tapes I want you to see."

"As long as it's not one of Kelly's sex tapes," he replies, loosening the strap of his helmet. Boden sighs and hangs his head, following Matt off the ice.

He's heading back to his car when Shay falls in step beside him, Kelly trailing her as he messes with his phone.

Boden let the team out pretty early for a practice day, making a solid argument for rest and family time over drills and futzing with line mates. Most of the guys had cleared out quick, looking to enjoy the rest of an unseasonably warm October day. Matt had hung around the locker room until it was quiet, running the new plays that Boden wanted to roll out over the next few games in the back of his head. Unlike most of his teammates, there isn't anyone waiting at home to spend the sudden free time with. His sister's offhand suggestions about getting a dog sound better the longer he plays, at least he would have an excuse to go for a long run along the lake.

"She won't be at Molly's," Shay says, interrupting his inner debate. "You know, if you were thinking of just dropping by casually."

Kelly snorts and pockets the iPhone while Matt hangs his head in defeat. He had considered doing exactly that, just for a second, before ruling that a stupid decision. He wasn't that desperate for companionship. Really.

"Herrmann was off yesterday, which means he'll make her take tonight off."

They stop in front of the team's motor pool where Kelly slugs him on the shoulder. "This isn't game seven of the championship. Do something I'd do for once in your goddamn life," he says with a laugh.

Matt shoves him back, grinning, "Fuck off, man."

The two wave him off, heading to Kelly's black Mustang as Matt pulls his cell phone out of his jacket. He's got a half-finished text about grabbing drinks and talking, but it still sounds lame even after he's rewritten parts all day long. His finger hovers over the screen for a moment before he deletes the message and returns to her contact information, pressing down on her number to call.

It rings twice before there's a click and, "Hey, this is Dawson."

"Gabby?"

"Yeah. Sorry, who is this?"

He curses silently, she gave him her number, but he never gave her his. "Hey, it's Matt—Casey—From last night?"

There's a brief silence before she says, "Oh yeah, golden boy. What's up? You make it to your practice after last night?"

He laughs, her flippant tone putting him at ease immediately. He recognized it last night, too, could see why Kelly liked her and Shay kept her as a close friend. "Unfortunately, even hockey players have to show up to work on time."

“Well, way to ruin the illusion for us regular people,” she sighs heavily, “I always thought if I was famous I’d be able to spend the whole day in bed if I wanted to.”

“The way Shay tells it, that’s the life of a paramedic,” he responds. He wedges his phone between his shoulder and cheek, jamming his keys into the ignition and making his old truck roar to life.

“I doubt she’s told you about all the drunken co-eds we rescue from their own vomit at UIC.”

“No, she definitely doesn’t embellish those stories.”

“Anyways, I doubt you called about war stories, so what’s up?” There’s a shuffling on the other end, he can hear drawers opening and closing.

“Shay mentioned you had the day off,” he says offhandedly, he can’t remember the last time a girl made him this nervous. “If you weren’t doing anything I wanted to thank you for the ice pack and aspirin yesterday. The bruise from my Nashville would’ve looked a lot worse today.”

“We can’t have your face messed up for the press, you know,” she replies, “I feel like I should be thanking you, though, since you did give me a ride home.”

“How about I drop by, we can settle our tabs,” he says, feeling bold. He glances down at his wrist, checking the time, it was after one in the afternoon. “You eat lunch yet?”

There’s a pause on her end, the background noise has stopped and he wonders what she’s doing, “Oh, you don’t have to bring anything by,” she says and he can feel his heart drop before she adds, “I could use the company, though, if you wanted to come by. I’m just at home.”

“Great, I’m leaving practice now, so thirty, maybe forty minutes?”

They only met last night, but he swears he can hear the smile in her voice as she says, “See you then, Captain.”

—

“I’m pretty sure I said no coffee last night,” she says opening the door to her apartment’s entryway. She’s dressed down in jeans and a well-loved Northwestern University sweatshirt with a bright smile on her face.

Matt grins down at her, noticing that, without heels, she’s about a head shorter than him. He holds up the two coffee cups from her as a peace offering. “I was told your weakness was a vanilla latte and chocolate croissant from Alliance Bakery,” he says.

“Well, you drove all the way up here,” she replies, leaning against the doorjamb, “I guess I could let you in.”

“I was also told I could bribe my way past your door with red wine.” He doesn’t actually have a bottle. Shay wouldn’t tell him what Gabby’s favorite wine was, but he figures she’d

appreciate the comment anyways.

Gabby laughs, turning around and ushering him into the building. He follows her down a short hallway, past an elaborate staircase on the left leading upwards to a white door tucked behind it.

“It’s not quite the lavish luxury I’m sure you live in,” she says, teasing.

She’s right, it doesn’t look at all like his place now, but it reminds him of his childhood home, with its creaky hardwood floors and cream-colored walls. There’s a lived-in feel to Gabby’s apartment that his impersonal condo lacks, with its chrome and steel. He passes a pile of shoes by her front door, a mix of high heels and gym shoes and a pair of sturdy black work boots. She leads him through the apartment to the back, there’s a kitchen and small dining area, where Gabby places her coffee and croissant on the sturdy wooden table. It’s cozy, just like the rest of the place with light wood cabinets and a dining table that’s half covered with letters and paperwork.

Matt wanders around the space, stopping by a chalkboard on the far, back wall that’s covered in pictures. It seems to be a mix of family members, friends and coworkers, if he could guess. The same five dark-haired people show up in a number of shots— he spots an elder couple who look like they could be Gabby’s parents; there’s also a man in his late-thirties or early forties, with a sharp grin and tired eyes, and he appears alongside two children. Then there are a few photos of Gabby with a group of young women that look about a decade old. The handful of pictures seem to be with the same group of ten people. Matt spots Shay immediately, in a group photo in front of a bright red firetruck. There’s others, too, men and women dressed in navy blue and grey with the Chicago Fire Department logo.

“Oh, yeah,” murmurs Gabby, she’s behind him suddenly, peering over his shoulder to get a better look. “Some of those are so old.” He points to a picture of her in a denim dress from the 90s beside the same man with the two children and she burrows her face into his shoulder with a laugh. “My older brother, Antonio. He’s a detective with CPD.”

“City service runs in the family?”

“Nah, my parents didn’t work for the city, they came over from the Dominican Republic,” she says, pressing fingers to a photo adjacent, this one shows Gabby and her brother and the elder couple all dressed up. She looks about the same there, as now, so Matt assumes that it’s recent. “That was taken at my parents’ thirtieth anniversary party. Every decade they do something insane,” she rolls her eyes, “I am not looking forward to the huge bash later this year.”

“Forty years,” he comments, leaning back against her, “That’s a long time.”

“Yeah, they’re the only people who have me convinced of true love’s existence,” she replies, laughing. She spins around and heads back to the kitchen cabinets. “You hungry? If you came from practice, you’re probably starving,” she calls over her shoulder. “I didn’t have time to run to the store, but we could order pizza?”

“Sure, sounds good,” he pulls off his sweatshirt and drapes it on one of the dining table chairs.

She peers around the open cabinet door, smiling wide, “Thanks for the coffee, if I didn’t mention it before.”

“It was on the way.” Kind of, he admits silently, it was close enough. Gabby smirks like she knows he’s feeding her a white lie, but lets it slide.

“I’ll call it in. Lou’s delivers around here,” she picks up her cell phone resting on the counter, “What do you like?”

“What would happen if I told you I liked Giordano’s better?” he asks jokingly. She glares and he puts his hands up in surrender, “Kidding, kidding, I usually get a Chicago Classic,” he pauses, pointing a finger at her, “Butter crust. With the sausage crumbled.”

“Duh,” she says, placing the call. He listens to her rattle off the order and her address as he wanders around her kitchen again. He gets the feeling that she spends most of her downtime in the kitchen.

“There’s cookies on the counter. Do you want a beer?” She’s got her head in the fridge, “At Molly’s, we always get a couple of indie brewing companies thrown onto the regular order just to increase distribution. Usually me or Herrmann bring them home to test before we put it on the shelf.”

“Sure,” he says, accepting an IPA with a brazenly orange label. “This isn’t pumpkin spice flavored, right?”

“Why you think I’d mess with you like that?” Gabby peers down at the label, “Nah, we would’ve just thrown that out.”

“Cheers,” he taps his bottle against her latte.

“They said it’d be around a thirty-minute wait. Lemme just finish up here and we can head up front,” she gestures at the few dishes in the sink and flicks on the faucet. There’s a pile of chocolate chip cookies on the counter and he reaches for the platter, snagging a couple as he settles his elbows on the counter.

“You were busy today,” he says, munching on the cookie. It’s still warm and chips are melty as he tears into it.

“Yeah, two of Herrmann’s kids are in the boy scouts. They’re having a bake sale and I told Cindy that I’d make something for her.”

“Herrmann?” he asks, tilting his head. It’s the third time she’s mentioned the name tonight. Shay’s dropped the name before, too, in stories.

“Oh,” she turns around, suds up to her elbows. “Sorry, sometimes I forget that not everyone knows the guys at the house. He’s the lieutenant on Truck 81 on my shift. Him and his wife,

Cindy, are good friends, they've got five kids. I've helped babysit a few times over the years."

"Sounds like Andy," grins Matt, reminded of the team's best defender. "He and his wife, Heather, have two boys. Perfect American family and all that."

"Yeah, the Herrmanns are a great reminder of why I do this job," she says, turning off the water and drying her hands on a dish towel hanging off the stove door. "All done," she jerks her head to the left and he follows her out of the kitchen, back to the front. There's a door off the short hallway that's cracked open, he can see a mirror and the corner of a messy bed as they pass by. In the front room, he finds a worn couch and pair of chairs surrounding a glass coffee table. A floor lamp bathes the small room in a warm glow and candles flicker on the mantle of a disused fireplace.

He gestures with his beer to the W flag hanging in her window. It's early October and the Cubs are itching for second World Series title in over one hundred years. "I see where your loyalty lies," he says.

"Jealous?" she asks, the bottom half of her face hidden behind her coffee. "You already have three rings. They've gotta catch up."

"Yeah, yeah, I get it," he concedes, dropping into the chair adjacent to the sofa. Gabby curls up on the couch, tucking her legs underneath and wrapping her hands around the disposable coffee cup. He adds, "When I was younger, my dad would take me to Friday afternoon games in the bleachers when he could get time off."

"My family's been huge fans since we got to Chicago. It's generational, by now I can't help it. I might have one lone uncle who's a Sox fan."

"Sounds like most people around here," he says. "Don't worry, come playoffs, I'll make sure the front of your place is covered in black and red."

"Is that a challenge, Captain?" She tilts her head to the side, soft smile on her face.

"It's a promise," he replies, leaning forward in his seat, his own smile wide on his face. She's close enough he can see the candlelight reflecting back in her eyes; can tell when her gaze drifts from his stare to his lips and back again. She pulls short of moving forward and he finds himself hovering between closing the space between them or waiting it out. He watches as she opens her mouth, as if to say something, when a buzzer rings, shattering the tension.

Gabby sighs, lips thinning, unfurling from the couch, "That's probably the pizza."

He waves her back, placing his beer on the table. "I'll go get it, don't worry." He clambers out of the chair, walking the short distance to the door, using one of her boots to wedge it open. She's still sitting on the couch, head tilted towards the ceiling and resting against the back of the couch. He watches as her eyelids flutter shut and a slow smile crawl across her face. The buzzer rings again, reminding him there's pizza he needs to pick up.

“Pizza won’t pay for itself,” she shouts across the room, shifting her head to look at him. He laughs and heads down the hall, pulling his wallet from his pocket on the way. He’s glad, right then, that the delivery guy rang the bell. There’s something building between him and Gabby, something more important than just one coffee invite, something that’s worth doing right.

Chapter End Notes

writing this required rewatching S1 dawsey and, honestly, i ain't even mad about it.

three

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“So, how was she?”

“What?”

“You look as relaxed as Kelly does after an out of town game with a rest day,” Andy clarifies, lounging in front of his locker in the Under Armor the whole team wears beneath their uniforms. “I just assume there’s a girl. Well, and Kelly might’ve mentioned that Shay’s got a friend when he dropped by last night.”

Matt rolls his eyes, shaking his head as Andy just laughed loudly. “Some days, I understand how the two of you have stayed friends this long.”

“Trust me, it was only by sheer force of will and the knowledge that no one else around us gave this much of a shit about hockey. Anyways, I’m just screwing with you,” he pauses. “Unless, it’s all true. In that case, congrats, man, that’s great.”

“It was just coffee,” he’s learned over the years to offer up a little bit of himself, it stops most of the guys from asking too many questions. “Shay used to work with her in CFD. Wanted to say thanks for icing my jaw after that last game.”

Andy doesn’t look convinced, but he lets it go, clapping him on the shoulder, “Still, that’s better than the puck bunnies Kelly typically picks up,” he says, laughing and breaking the tension building in Matt’s shoulders. “She as sarcastic as Shay?”

Matt wobbles his hand back and forth, “Less dark humor, probably.”

“She hot?” There’s a teasing gleam in his teammate’s eyes, letting Matt know he doesn’t have to answer.

Matt thinks back to yesterday. At one point, she had pulled her curls into a bun on top of her head. The later into the night it got, some of the curls had escaped the holder and rested against the sides of her face. When they’d said goodbye in her hallway, all he’d wanted was to pull her close for a kiss and slide a hand through her hair.

Instead, he tells Andy, “Yeah, she’s pretty hot.”

Andy nods, almost knowingly, saying nothing else. He and his wife, Heather, had met in the sixth grade and the way Andy tells the story, he was shorter than her back then with braces and a headgear, while Heather hasn’t aged a day since they were eighteen.

“Good for you, man.”

They sit back against the stalls, watching as guys flow from the locker room into the players lounge and back. Someone—most likely Kelly or Pete Mills—has hijacked the sound system and is playing music. Boden stands in front of one of the large white boards, reworking a play with one of the other coaches for the fifth or sixth time. They're playing the Dallas Stars tonight and while Matt isn't too worried, he knows they picked up a star rookie and a couple of new defensemen in the offseason that are reportedly already bruisers.

Someone flickers the lights, "Warm ups in thirty." There's a collective groan from the guys and Matt's pretty sure he hears Otis swear from the lounge as Cruz cheers loudly.

"Back to the grind," grins Andy as he stands and heads over to the stall with his name, pictures of his two boys covering the whole space. He hooks an arm around Jimmy's head on the way, ruffling the rookie's hair for a moment, "Did you gel your damn hair, Borelli?"

The kid shrugs and yanks on his helmet, letting the chin strap dangle, "Otis said I should."

Andy glances back at Matt, stretching his tacky fingers, "That's the dumbest joke Otis has ever done. Can we trade him?"

"Talk to Boden. Hey, you'd finally get to play forward," he replies, busy checking his skates over. Andy flips him off and goes back to getting ready.

The lead up to game time is probably his least favorite part about hockey. When he's on the ice, it's about him and the puck and taking as many shots at the net as possible. He's had the same routine since his time in the junior leagues. Shin guards, first; then, he tapes up the red and black-striped socks and clips them to the garter belt and pulls on the black pants. He puts on the shoulder and chest pads next and methodically pulls his arms through the elbow pads before slipping the red home sweater over his head. His skates are always second to last, he makes sure to tighten the laces like his father taught him as a kid, and carries the helmet until they reach the ice.

After all these years, he's got it down to a science, but it still takes up most of the allotted warning time.

He's leaning his head back against his stall, mentally preparing for the next sixty minutes when he hears the *buzz, buzz, buzz* making his phone skitter across the wooden surface of the cubby. Boden is well-known to be a hardass at times and one of his only game day rules is silent phones once skates hit the ice. He reaches above to grab the phone and put it on silent; the screen's lit up, showing a picture of him and his sister and niece at the Sears Tower one afternoon. There's a notification for a text from Gabby Dawson blinking at him. He swipes across the screen to unlock the phone and read it.

the guys are placing odds on your power play conversion rate tonight. don't suck, golden boy.

A second message comes in as he's reading the first, a string of three emojis: a laughing face, a hockey stick and puck, and a monkey covering its eyes.

He grins at the blue text bubbles and quickly taps out a reply, *Already sounds better than my Monday night.*

Her response is immediate: *don't get a concussion.*

Be safe out there, he counters back. He's trying to decide what to say next when someone flickers the lights again. He shakes his head and grabs his helmet, tucking the phone into the cubby of his stall. He heads towards the exit, stopping to peer through the doorway to the lounge long enough to shout, "Hey, on ice in ten, get off the fucking Xbox!"

—

It's halfway through the second period and they need one goal to tie. Boden's got Andy and Jose Vargas on defense and he's flanked by Jimmy Borelli and Jason Kannell to try and score on the power play while Dallas is down a defender. He snags the puck on a breakaway and speeds down the ice towards the net. He passes it to Borelli who spins around and sends it back, setting Matt up to make the shot.

There's a metallic *clink* and he knows the puck's clipped the goalpost. Dallas' right winger, the energetic rookie, picks it up and pushes back towards their zone, weaving past Borelli when Andy zips past him, reaching his stick out to try and snag the puck back. He misses and the crowd groans as the puck is passed to one of the defensemen, who takes a shot. It goes wide and so does Andy, sliding past the net and straight into the boards, slamming skates first into them and spinning out on his back with a pained groan. Matt watches frozen at the blue line as the rookie, unaware of Andy's fall, skates around the crease, glancing over his shoulder to try a different play and pitching the toe of his skate into Andy's left thigh, immediately over balancing.

Matt waves a hand, maybe his stick, too, as he frantically skates over to the boards to check on Andy. Dallas swarms their downed rookie, picking him up and skating off to their bench, giving Andy more space.

The guy's lying on his side, motionless except for the blood sluggishly staining the ice red. Matt doesn't even hear the officials sound a whistle or the announcer's declaring a stoppage of play. There's a ringing in his ears and he's sure the stands have gone almost silent as the team crowds around Andy. He recognizes Shay in the melee of the medical team arriving and catches her eye as they work to stop the worst of the bleeding. Andy's legs have settled at odd angles and he can hear the general murmur of *broken leg* and *possible concussion* and *doesn't look like a major artery was hit*.

God, Matt hopes someone's ushered Andy's wife and kids out of the family box already.

There's another sudden commotion and two new people force their way into the huddle. They're rolling a yellow stretcher and he barely catches the Chicago Fire Department logo on one of their jackets. Shay's talking fast but Matt picks up none of it. He should, knows the press will ask him questions after the game about how the team will adjust to the injury, but he can't focus because his teammate, one of his best friends, hasn't cracked a single joke since he fell and the silence is unnerving.

Shay and the paramedics work fast. Between the three of them and two medical assistants, Andy moves from the ice to a backboard and onto a stretcher quickly. He's still quiet, face screwed up in pain. Kelly was on the bench at the time, but he's skated over by now and holds Andy's helmet, gloves, and stick.

He finally finds his voice as the paramedics start pushing the stretcher off the ice, "Where're you taking him? His wife and kids'll want to follow."

"Chicago Med," the voice is familiar, startling Matt as he finally looks up from the spot where Andy first fell. Gabby's staring back at him. Or, maybe, this is Dawson, the levelheaded paramedic in charge that Shay rhapsodizes during downtime. But, when he catches her gaze, she's wearing the same soft smile as she had last night.

There's a younger blonde paramedic behind her. Brett, he thinks is her name. She's guiding the stretcher off the ice, but glances over her shoulder to say, "Don't worry, he's in good hands."

Matt thanks her and grips his stick tighter.

Gabby nods grimly to the group before gesturing to Shay, "You coming along?"

"Of course," she replies, "Just like old times." Then the two race off down a tunnel and out of Matt's sight just as the sounds of the stadium come rushing back, an overwhelming mix of tense whispers, too loud pop music, and the general hum of game night at the United Center.

Someone taps his shoulder and breaks through the noise. It's Kelly, hooking a thumb over his left shoulder. "Ref called the game restart, ten minutes. Boden wants everyone in the back. Think he'll pair Vargas with Ruzek now?"

He shrugs as they skate off together, "Or, maybe Atwater. Coach'll probably bench him 'til the third period."

The stands are getting restless again, now that the ice has been cleared. They're ready to see more hockey, to cheer on the home team. It reminds Matt that they've still got a game to play. A job to do. A teammate to win for.

—

He sits outside of the firehouse, drumming his fingers lightly on the steering wheel. He glances across the street, again. Checking his watch one more time, he sighs and gathers whatever courage he might have to exit the truck, jog up to the door and knock on the glass. Streetlights illuminate the large bay doors and he can see into the firehouse. There are a couple of guys standing beside a bright red firetruck and one walks over at the disruption. He wonders, for a second, if Gabby'll be annoyed that he's dropping by unannounced like this. It's not like they're anything, really, except after last night they seem to be hovering over the edge of a cliff, the point of no return.

"Hey, can I help you?" The guy's middle-aged, with close-cropped hair and sharp blue eyes.

“Yeah, uh, is Gabby Dawson here?” Matt runs a nervous hand along his neck, messing with the bill of the old playoff cap he’s wearing.

The man nods once, glancing over his shoulder, “Should be. Hey, Mouch! Brett and Dawson are back right?”

“Yeah, ambo’s in its usual space. They’re probably in the bunk room,” a voice shouts from somewhere deeper inside the garage.

Matt winces, he knows it’s late. It’d been a late start game and there was always press after a big injury and win like tonight. Not to mention, Boden had wanted to talk strategy with Andy being put on the disabled list. “Hey, if she’s asleep, don’t worry about—”

“Nah, nah,” he waves a hand. “She’ll be up, girl never sleeps on shifts. It’s maddening.” He steps back and gestures for Matt to follow. “I’m Christopher, by the way,” he holds out a hand and Matt shakes it. “That’s Mouch, over there,” Matt makes sure to wave. “So, who should I say—?”

“Uh, Matt,” he says, clearing his throat and stuffing his hands in his pockets. “Matt Casey.”

Christopher pauses and looks up at him, eyes narrowing as he catches the name and number stitched on the black sweatshirt he’d thrown on after the game, “No shit, huh? I’ll go get her, just be a second. You can wait out here, Matt.”

Christopher and Mouch disappear through a set of silver double doors and Matt sighs, leaning against the door of one of the firetrucks.

Most of the lights are off, but each vehicle gleams brightly in the darkness. He can make out a long table surrounded by mismatched chairs by the double doors. There’s exercise equipment off to the side, too, and an odd assortment of gear. It’s slightly eerie, with the boots and pants lined along the trucks, waiting for someone to step into them. He spots a few jackets hanging off doors, the closest one to him has ‘LIEUTENANT HERRMANN’ stamped in bright yellow letters. The ambulance is directly across from him, white with blue and red stripes on the sides. It’s the only vehicle without clothes draped across.

He dozes against the one labeled TRUCK 81, leaning his head against the side window. There’s a sudden noise as a door opens and slams shut, jerking his eyes open.

“You played a hell of a game,” she says. He glances up to see her walking across the apparatus floor. She looks the same as she did on the ice. Her hair is still tied back into a ponytail, but she’s ditched the navy jacket from earlier wearing a grey shirt with the CFD crest and paramedic stamped on it. “I caught the last ten minutes, impressive goal.”

He brings a hand up to rest on the driver’s side mirror of the ambulance, “I wanted to check-in, see how Andy was.”

“The docs were splinting his legs when we headed out,” Gabby says, stopping in front of him. “They needed to set that before they went and fixed the laceration from the skate. They

gave him some pretty impressive drugs, so I think he'll be okay. Just sucks that you'll be down one of your best defensemen this early in the season."

"Yeah, that's what all the talking heads are saying," he replies, frustrated.

"You could've called Shay," she says, instead, crossing her arms and tilting her head. "She said she was keeping the team updated as we drove over to Med."

"Yeah, I—I wanted to say thanks, too. Andy, he's not just a teammate. He's a good friend. His wife, Heather, and his two boys, they looked so scared when they showed up in the locker room," Matt waves a hand distractedly in front of him. "I can, you know, know when to set up a shot or shoot the puck to make sure my team gets a point. But—" he blows out a breath and puts his hands on his hips, hanging his head for a moment. "Thank you. I don't think enough people tell you that."

"You're welcome," she says, voice quiet.

"I forgot your coffee."

It's stupid, but it's a cornerstone to bring the conversation back. She laughs, moving closer towards him so that she's right in front of him, close enough he can run a hand down her arm.

"I think this is more of a red wine night," she tells him, "Sadly, though, I'm on shift." She peers over her shoulder and Matt follows her gaze, there's a heavy shadow in the window of the double doors. "Fun fact, firefighters gossip more than little old ladies." She flips them off and rolls her eyes, "You just made Herrmann's life by knocking on the door, by the way."

"He's not the guy named Mouch, is he?"

"Nah, the other one. What did he say his name was? Christopher?" Matt nods and Gabby grins, "Only Cindy calls him that. And, maybe his parents." He catches a light flicking on in the corner of his eye. It's a large group that's gathered, by now, at least five or six people standing in the window. Someone flashes a thumbs up. Gabby sees the movement, too. "Don't worry," she says, "They're harmless. Like annoying siblings."

He nods, turning away from the door. It's not like he's unfamiliar with people staring at him. Hell, he gets his groceries delivered so he's not accosted at Jewel or Mariano's, but this seems like a different invasion of privacy. "I should get going, it's late, I'm sure you'd rather be sleeping," he says instead.

"Just give it another twenty minutes. Actually," she sweeps an arm around, "I'm surprised we haven't been interrupted by the bells yet." She glances back at the doors again. Matt's pretty sure the crowd has grown in the last two minutes. "Next time, I'll show you around. Maybe I can make them all clean the bathrooms or something."

He huffs out a laugh, "I just wanted to drop by tonight, say thanks. We're traveling tomorrow night, anyways." She quirks a brow and he answers her unasked question, "Got games in Colorado and Arizona over the weekend."

“Travel safe,” she says, “You can’t call CFD in a different time zone.” He can’t quite tell if she’s serious or joking.

“Yeah, will do. See you. Thanks, again.” He’s heading towards the glass door where he entered when he stops and turns around, “Lunch? Tomorrow? We don’t fly out until 3PM.”

She’s still standing where he left her, hands in her pockets and dwarfed by the huge rigs. “Breakfast?” she counters, “I get off shift at 8.”

“I’ll be out front at 7:45. Look for the ugly truck,” he replies, grinning. She smiles back widely, all cheeks and teeth, and even though he knows there’s an audience watching, he jogs the short distance back to her and leans down, pressing a soft kiss to her cheek. “See you in the morning.”

Chapter End Notes

this writer asks for your suspension of disbelief because of all the possible inaccuracies this is the one she wants to admit to: the united center might be close enough location-wise, but it's probably not typically serviced by firehouse 51

thanks for reading!!

chapter four

Chapter Notes

do you ever blink and suddenly two whole months have passed? this chapter has been a work in progress for about as long, but thank you thank you thank you for being so patient and for indulging this author with all her silly notions. anything you recognize from chicago fire canon has been adopted into this world as such and i hope you enjoy the characters who peek in to say hi below.

this is for jenna, for being a fantastic cheerleader and an incredible writer all-around.

She's standing in front of the open bay doors when he pulls up. There's a group of people surrounding her, all laughing in the bright morning sun. He recognizes only a couple faces — Herrmann's and Brett's. But, as he pulls up and taps the horn twice, Gabby waves a hand over and he throws the truck in park, leaving it idling on the curb.

She's changed out of her navy and grey uniform, wearing a pair of jeans and a black sweater, leather jacket thrown on top. She's let her hair down from the ponytail, too, the curls swinging freely around her face. The voices of her coworkers grow louder as he walks up the long driveway, taking in the sight of the looming fire trucks shining in the daylight. The firehouse is a bustling hub, he can see men and women rushing around inside the space, working on the trucks, or talking rapidly at one another.

"Morning, Cap," she greets, breaking away from the group to press a brief kiss on his cheek, the heeled boots she's wearing adding a couple of inches to her height.

He wraps an arm around her shoulders, leaning down to kiss the top of her head, "Am I about to face the Spanish Inquisition?"

Her laugh is bright and clear, "Relax, harmless, remember?"

"They don't look harmless," he replies, following her back to the huddle. He brings a hand up, waving to them.

"Hey, Matt. Good to see you again," says Christopher Herrmann. He's changed, too, wearing worn jeans and a plaid shirt but, his blue eyes are as sharp as last night.

Matt shakes his hand, "Hey, man." He turns towards Brett next, she's still wearing her paramedic jacket, blonde hair falling out of its braid, "Hi, Brett, thanks again for what you did for Andy."

She waves off his praise and goes in for a hug, "Call me Sylvie. And, hey, we were just doing our job."

He glances back to Gabby, unsure who to greet next. She's beaming up at him, at ease and clearly happy that no one's given them a rough time yet. If he remembers the stories Shay's shared correctly, this group isn't afraid of some friendly chirping.

She gestures to the two others. There's Mouch—whose real name is Randy McHolland—who he met last night. And Stella Kidd, with a thick Chicago accent and a wide grin. She greets him with a fist bump and asks after his declining power play stats.

A sudden alarm chime breaks up their conversation and the six of them rush to the side of the firehouse, clearing the way for the ambulance to peel out onto the street, lights and sirens blaring.

"We should go before they think we're working a double," says Herrmann, shouldering his bag and walking towards a mini-van parked on the street.

The goodbyes quickly follow, everyone walking off to their respective cars. Matt grabs Gabby's backpack, slinging it on top of his back as they walk back to his truck, Gabby still nestled into his side. He opens the passenger door, tossing the backpack behind the bench next to his own travel bag. A garment bag hangs off the back, holding the suit and tie he'll change into before driving to the airport.

She jumps in the cab, "You ever been to Manny's?"

He shakes his head no, "I feel like you're silently judging that."

"Best damn bacon, egg, and cheese in the city," she replies, rubbing her hands together, eyes bright. "Take a right on Roosevelt. It's just past the Kennedy."

"Is this some sort of CFD secret where you're breaking the rule of law by sharing it with an outsider?" he asks, teasingly, pulling the truck onto the street and following her directions.

Gabby rolls her eyes and scrunches her nose in what's likely one of the most adorable things he's ever seen.

"Nah, it's a CPD joint," she jostles back, "Watch out for my brother cleaning his gun at the counter."

He laughs, loud and clear, finding her company far more relaxing than staying in bed and sleeping until he has to be at the airport. The drive is quick and quiet with Gabby tangling their fingers together on top of the gear shift. It's still early enough that the worst of morning traffic has only just begun. He pulls into an open space across the street from a nondescript diner. A bright red sign above the building announces *Manny's Restaurant* in white letters. Large windows reveal formica tables and plastic chairs, low counters, and a homemade menu that stretches across the back wall. It's already filled with people eating or grabbing a quick coffee on their way to work. Gabby glances over at him, grabbing the black Hawks hat off his head before leaning over the back of the bench seat to root around her bag.

"Two bacon, egg, and cheeses coming up. Also, coffee," she says, opening the truck's door. "Because, damn I need coffee," she's across the street before he can even process it, swinging

open the restaurant's door and greeting the workers with a wave. He watches through the window as she grabs their breakfast and coffees before jaywalking across the street to the truck.

"Quick service," he says, grabbing the drinks from her and placing them in the truck's holders.

"Shay always grabbed coffee from here at the start of shift, we've been pretty much regulars for the last six years." He's halfway to his condo before she interrupts again, "Oh, we can go back to my place if you want."

He shrugs, tapping the wheel with one hand, "My place is closer. Plus, I can give you a ride back to your apartment on my way to the airport," he can see her glance over at him, a half smile tugging at her lips.

"Oh, okay, that works," she says, softly, reaching out for her coffee cup.

—

The condo isn't the first place he's owned in Chicago. When he was first drafted, he and Hallie had rented a two-bedroom apartment in Hyde Park by the medical school. It wasn't fancy by any means with creaky hardwood floors, an A/C that only worked half the time, and the unfortunate side effect of being surrounded by college students. But, it had been home for the first five years.

When Hallie left, he had moved north to Wicker Park, finding a three-bedroom townhouse with a garage spot. It was far too much square feet for a bachelor and his wasted space of a kitchen had come with marble countertops and stainless-steel appliances. His mother had stayed there for over a year, claiming the first-floor bedroom and overtaking the kitchen. He spent as much time during that period caring for his mother as he did putting pucks away and it showed when they lost their chance for the Cup in 2014. She'd been weak and frail that whole year and his sister, Christie, had thought he was crazy to welcome her back into his life like the last ten years hadn't happened. He had come back to the townhouse after a summer training session, tired and beaten, to his mom settling down gently beside him on the couch.

"I'm moving," she'd said, settling her gnarled hands in her lap. "To Kenosha. You shouldn't have to worry about me." She'd given him a tremulous smile after that, "You deserve to live a full life, Matthew. You also," she'd told him, setting him with a glare, "Deserve to have a sister and a niece. So, fix that mess for Christ's sake."

And, he had. He'd kept the townhouse, even after his mom had moved to Wisconsin, even though it was too large and empty for just one person. He was still living in the townhouse six months later when Violet had shown up at his door, a bright red Blackhawks hat he'd given her once pulled low over her face to hide the bruises that marred her pale skin. The media had been ugly — Hawks Captain's Family Woes — it had put Violet and Christie's personal lives on the front page and detracted from half of the team's accomplishments for the next four months. The three of them had hid away in the towering house, distracting Violet with chocolate chip cookies and her favorite movie musicals as the storm raged on. He moved out after they won the Cup in 2015. It wasn't that he didn't want to live with his sister

and niece. But, he kept a weird schedule—half the time he was on the road and the other half he didn't get home until after midnight. Offseason seemed like the best time to set up a new place. Plus, the townhouse was paid for, it was something that Christie's crap ex-husband couldn't try to take from her and Violet.

The condo isn't nearly as large as the townhouse—a two bed, two bath with floor to ceiling windows overlooking the river and downtown. The Gold Coast location is closer to the United Center and the team's new practice rink and it's still horribly impersonal, according to Christie, with its chrome and brick and glass. He chose the furniture out of convenience over any real design aims. There are a few pictures that hang on the walls, mainly of him and his family and the guys. It's a place for him to rest his head in between games.

The elevator takes them straight from the basement garage up to the thirty-fifth floor. Andy had joked when he bought the place that he should've gotten the open unit on the nineteenth floor to match his number. It's not the penthouse, but it does have a private elevator that bypasses anything below floor thirty.

He watches Gabby on the ride up, her head is resting against the mirrored walls, heeled boots tapping an unfamiliar rhythm against the marbled floor. Her eyes are shut, long lashes sweeping against her cheeks, and she's swiped on some lipstick drawing Matt's stare towards her mouth.

"I can feel you staring," she cracks an eye open.

"Just enjoying the view."

There's a beat of silence, he's even impressed himself with the line, before a hand comes up to cover her face, a snort of laughter escaping, "Damn, that was smooth."

He grins down at her, wrapping an arm around her shoulders and pressing a soft kiss against her hair. She burrows into his side, sliding the hand not holding her coffee into his back pocket.

The elevator dings, slowing to a stop and letting them out onto a brightly lit hallway. There are only two units on his floor and the couple who lives across from him splits their time between Chicago, San Francisco, and London. He unlocks the door, pushing it open and ushering Gabby into the condo, leading the way down a short entryway into a wide-open space where the kitchen, dining area, and living room all blend together. He places his coffee and the bag holding their food on the kitchen counter; his keys, sunglasses and baseball cap join the mess. When he looks up, Gabby's wandered further into the room, standing in front of the long bank of floor to ceiling windows that look out onto the river and downtown. He comes around from behind, snaking his arms around her waist and pulling her back towards him.

"The other place I was looking at had a killer view of the lake," he says. Gabby hums against him, resting her head on his chest and intertwining their fingers. "I would've been able to catch all the fireworks shooting off from Navy Pier." The view he has, however, looks south over Chicago and from this high up they can see the Chicago river meandering through the

buildings, the Hancock and Sears Tower rise above them and there's the hint of green below, with the weak sun glinting off of the Bean in Millennium Park.

They stand together, enjoying each other's company and the view of the city, before Matt tugs his arms free from Gabby's light grip. "The food's probably cold by now," he says, voice low, hating to break the moment. Almost unconsciously, he brings a hand up, curling his fingers around her jaw and lightly pulling her towards him. He feels her grip the front of his sweatshirt and tilt forward, eyes slipping shut as he leans his head down to press a kiss to her mouth. It's soft and hesitant and all too brief. He pulls back only to have her chase after him, pressing her lips against his, hands shifting to wrap around his neck and tangle in his hair. He shifts his hands, too, gripping her waist and she inhales sharply, mouth opening under his. They break off after a few moments, breathing heavily and still wrapped around each other.

He catches her gaze and lets out a slight laugh, loving the giggle that she adds, "I'm just gonna grab the food." He loosens his grip and steps backwards, towards the kitchen, stealing one more kiss amidst her laughs.

"Thanks," her voice is so quiet, he barely catches it in his haste to grab the food off the counter.

He turns on his heel, glancing back. She's moved slightly, close to where her coffee cup sits abandoned on the table next to his favorite recliner, but she's still wearing her light jacket and black boots. She looks so out-of-place and, yet, it's almost like he can't remember what his condo looked like before she stepped inside. Her back's facing the open windows where the sun is streaming in, catching on the dark strands of her hair and turning it almost caramel-colored. He walks over to her, running his hands down her arms and pulling her close.

"What for?"

She shrugs, ducking her head against his chest. "For ignoring what I said and inviting yourself in for coffee anyways," it's muffled against his sweatshirt, but the sentiment brings a smile quickly to his face. "These last few days have been some of the best I've had in years."

"Well you made the first move anyways," he teases, pushing back a curl. "Leaving that Post-It on my game bag."

Gabby glances up, eyes wide in confusion, "What Post-It?"

"The, uh," he pauses, wondering if she's just playing games, but the silence drags on for too long and he clears his throat, "You know, the one with your number on it."

He watches her gaze narrow, mouthing back what he just told her, before she exclaims, "I'm going to murder her." Before he even has a chance to ask, she's rolling her eyes dramatically and pulling them towards his couch. "That has Shay written all over it."

"So, what you're saying is I owe her a beer?"

Gabby shakes with laughter, "Or a shot of tequila."

“I’ll buy her a whole damn bottle,” he says, drawing her close against his side, “Because I’m glad I ignored what you said and invited myself over for coffee, too.”

Kelly collapses on the seat next to him on the plane, “Remember when we were rookies and the old guys used to make sure they stocked their bags with rum and whisky for us to chug before we got to our next game?”

“Can I help you?” asks Matt, slipping his headphones down to his neck and dog-earing the page he was reading. Kelly’s spread out in the chair, left leg stretching into the aisle and arms braced on the sides. He’s staring up at the ceiling with a weird look on his face—Matt’s only seen it a few times—almost contemplative as the plane continues its steady travels west of Chicago.

“Just thinking, we should be doing that for the new kids,” replies Kelly, waving a hand about. “Make sure they feel welcome on the team.”

“By making them chug a mix of shitty vodka and whatever pop is on board?”

“Why not? They’re missing out on all those college experiences anyways by signing their life away to us. Might as well show ‘em a good time.”

It’s only from knowing Kelly Severide for more than a decade can Matt hear the joking tone lacing through his words. He can remember, a couple years ago, when they won their third cup, magazines across the city and country were all asking the same question: *How did the Blackhawks get lightning to strike twice?* Out of all the teams in the NHL, how did the Blackhawks land two rookies, one year after the other, that would become two of the most bankable players of their generation. Boden, Matt knows, always says, *We just got lucky. We gained two guys, both rookies, with impressive stats and were able to take them from the minors into the majors, together.*

Separately, he and Kelly would have been fine hockey players. They were, in fact, back before either of them got drafted, and no matter how much they’ve argued over form or strategy over the years or how many times ESPN has pitted their stats against each other to see who is the better player, Matt doesn’t think they would have been as dynamic or iconic if they had ended up on different teams.

He remembers, years ago, playing in the junior leagues. There was a regional match-up—Midwest versus East—and it had been the first time his and Kelly’s paths had crossed. Back then, Matt had figured hockey was all he had—at sixteen, his family was a mess and the more time he spent on the road for games, the less time he had to spend barricaded in his room, the stereo as high as it could go to drown out the sounds of his parents’ fights. Kelly had been a hotshot kid, with a loud presence on and off the ice, but his attitude was well earned the second he stepped out and maneuvered the puck into the goal within the first five minutes.

He’d been the only player to match Matt shot for shot on the ice back then, it had been shocking enough to get him to pay attention, to make him work that much harder on the ice.

There's a part of Matt that will admit only to himself that Kelly was one of the motivators to get him on the road to the NHL, instead of settling at the college level or landing somewhere in the AHL, playing mediocrity.

Kelly's still staring up at the ceiling, absentmindedly tossing a baseball up in the air, slight frown on his face. Matt waits it out, figures that once whatever's been bothering Kelly coalesces into an actual thought he'll vocalize it—there's no need to press the issue. The rest of the team is split between dozing off for a few hours or relaxing with headphones canceling out any ambient noise. Boden and a few coaches are sitting at the far front of the private jet, laptops and papers spread across one of the few tables. Kelly had been sitting next to Shay before moving further down the plane towards where Matt had settled down on his own.

"Do you know what I did last night?" asks Kelly, finally breaking his silence. Matt shakes his head no. "My best friend had a potentially career ending injury last night and instead of going to the hospital or offer to his wife to watch their kids for the night, I went to some club in River North, chatted with a girl. We went back to her place, had a great time."

"Sounds like a good way to celebrate a win," there's nothing surprising about Kelly's admission and, in fact, Matt figured that's where his teammate disappeared after Boden had dismissed them last night.

"Yeah, except this morning I couldn't remember her name, right? I thought it started with a J, but—anyways, I thought I'd dig around, try to find something with her name on it."

"Let me guess, she caught you?"

"She fucking threw me out," replies Kelly, laughing loudly. Matt's got a grin on his face, too. Kelly's life was never how he would want to spend his time, but it always made for great stories. "She thought I was rooting around for money, or something. Fuck, if I know—it's not like I need the cash or whatever." He runs a hand over his head, mussing the short locks. "I just, I was waiting for my Uber and thinking, what the fuck am I doing."

Kelly swings his head around to stare at Matt. "What the fuck are we doing, man, are we just gonna play hockey until our bodies betray us and we're stuck being a team ambassador or taking on a sportscaster spot reliving the good ol' days to anyone who'll listen. Andy did it right, even if he can never get on the ice again, he's got Heather and the boys. He's got a life to live. What the fuck do I have besides the game?"

"I don't think you're gonna find yourself without contract offers in the next five years, there's still time."

"What if you get injured, who's gonna take care of your sorry ass? Your sister?"

Matt frowns, thinking. He's sure Christie would let him take over her guest room as he healed, but he knows that's not what Kelly's talking about. There's another thing that separates him and Kelly from the rest of their team—they sat on the sidelines as teammates and friends found girlfriends and fiancés and wives. They've watched Family Skates turn from a group of young players fucking around to guys proudly showing off their new son or daughter. He doesn't regret focusing on the team, could never regret bringing home three

Stanley Cups to a team and city that's given him more than he deserves. But, he also remembers being nineteen years old and thinking Hallie was the only person he could imagine spending his whole life with. He remembers Kelly drowning himself in alcohol after breaking off his engagement to Renee at twenty-three.

Ten years is a long time to spend on the same team.

Kelly takes his silence as an answer all its own, asking, instead, "How's Dawson?"

Matt feels a smile creep across his face unbidden and clears his throat, "Good, she's good."

"Shay says you guys have spent every day together," he tries to protest Kelly's words, even though it's all true. It's Tuesday, he and the guys only dropped by Molly's on Saturday, and he's seen more of Gabby than he has the inside of his apartment.

"I'm just saying," intones Kelly, back to tossing the baseball in the air, "Screw what anyone says about this team needing another championship ring. This is the most I've seen you smile in years. Not everything is about your skates on the ice, man," he shrugs, pocketing the baseball and standing up from the chair. "Don't fuck this up," with that dire warning Kelly walks back towards the pair of seats where Shay is taking a nap.

After Hallie left, Boden had pulled him aside and delivered advice that, intentional or not, has governed most of his late twenties. He'd been stroking his mustache with one hand, the other resting on his hip and Matt had been leaning against the boards next to him, looking out on to the ice, still sweaty from the scrimmage game he'd played in. Boden has sighed heavily, lips pressed into a straight line, and looked over at him before saying in his usual gruff manner, "It's not always fun at the top and it can certainly be goddamn lonely, but leaders lead from the front." In the moment, Matt had thought it was complete bullshit—his captaincy simply a consolation prize for losing the girl. But, like always, Boden knew what he was doing and as he'd mended the breaks that Hallie had left, he'd led the Blackhawks onto two more Stanley Cups.

Kelly's words echo through his mind, just like Boden's had all those years ago. It's not that he's opposed to starting a relationship and even though he and Hallie had ended in brilliant flames, there were quiet moments that he'll always be grateful for. He just knows that Gabby's a breath of fresh air—she's so different from Hallie, from most women who've tried to grab his attention—with rougher edges and kinder eyes and maybe it's unfair that he keeps comparing the two in his mind, but Hallie was the last serious relationship he had and he has this gut feeling that Gabby and he are headed down that same path.

five

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

November passes by in a blur with the team spending just as much time on the road as they do on home ice. They play north of the border, picking up a handful of points before barely surviving a blow out game against the Rangers their first time stateside in a week. They dip down south after that, playing DC and Tampa Bay before stopping in Carolina. The Hurricanes are always fun, if only because the team is so flooded with old Hawks players that it feels more like a scrimmage than game ice. It's halfway through the month before Matt realizes that he and Gabby have been passing ships, surviving off of text messages and FaceTime and the occasional Twitter interaction.

He manages to catch up with her a week before Thanksgiving, a rare day where Coach Boden has called for an optional practice and she's not working a shift or picking up overtime.

"So, what made you want to be a professional hockey player?" There's a mischievous gleam in her brown eyes, a smirk pulling at the side of her mouth.

"I'm good at it?" he responds, a glint in his own gaze as he takes a drink from his beer. "Why'd you become a paramedic?"

"No reason," she says. "I wanted to be a doctor. Had it all planned out, in fact. There was a five-year plan."

"Ooh, a plan," he teases, watching as Gabby's gaze dips down, her smile faltering. "What happened?"

"I took a year off. Antonio, he and Laura needed help to watch their kids and I figured I could take the time and study for the MCAT and really work on applications. Antonio knew a guy who knew a guy who got me on the CFD. I'd volunteered for Northwestern's EMT crew all four years and would work for a private ambo company in the summers, so it was easier to get me on a rig right out of school," she picks at the peeling label on the beer bottle. "It was only supposed to be for a year or two. Then four years in med school and by now I was supposed to be starting my residency."

There's silence between them for a minute, muted against the commentary from the basketball game on the television. He finishes off his beer before reaching towards the coffee table to grab another one, "My dad loved hockey."

She looks up at him, eyebrow quirking up.

"He could've played at the college level, but, uh, my mom, she got pregnant their senior year of high school. So, my dad went out and got a job at one of those industrial plants on the west side and then started up this construction gig with a couple of guys he knew," Matt takes another drink, clearing his throat before ploughing on. "We had season tickets at the United

Center when I was a kid, like one of maybe a hundred who followed the team when Rocky's old man was the owner. My dad, he signed me up for the pee-wee leagues as a kid, would drive me to every practice and every game. It's the one thing, the only thing really, we shared together."

He doesn't talk about his family often, usually just in vague themes and subtle references. Gabby reaches a hand out and rests it on his shin. He places his beer bottle on the ground and grabs her hand to pull her alongside him, nestling her in between the couch cushions and his body. She rests her head against his shoulder, throwing her right leg across his thighs.

"I never thought about going pro, y'know," he says, lazily dragging a hand through the ends of her hair. "I had a coach who said I was good enough to get a scholarship and I thought it was my chance to get the hell out of Chicago. I didn't even look into it, North Dakota just sounded so far away."

She nudges him lightly in the side with an elbow, catching his bruised ribs. "You escaped for, like, two years, maximum."

"Yeah," he says with a sigh, "But at least I got out. My old man," he pauses, pressing his face against her hair. "He wasn't a good guy."

Gabby's brown eyes are wide as she stares up at him, lips parted as if to offer reassurance. He can't remember the last time he spoke about his father to someone other than Christie and a part of him wants to snatch the words back, wants to keep his dark, dirty past far away from her teasing smiles and heated glances.

Instead, he finds himself whispering his family's skeletons into the shell of her ear, letting her into the one place he's managed to keep everyone else out.

"He would drink," Matt confesses, twirling her curl around his finger. "I always knew how the day was gonna go if he had breakfast with a beer in his hand. It was never to me, or to Christie, but he'd yell at mom, telling her she was worthless or stupid and, god, she'd just sit there and take it. I walked in on it once, must've been eight or nine and he was all red in the face, screaming at her. It wasn't until later that he started hitting her, gripping her arm hard enough to bruise."

He pauses, staring at the glass windows that look out on Chicago. He can feel Gabby's breath, light puffs of air against his neck, and the rise and fall of her chest below the arm he's wrapped around them.

"He's dead, you know," and, fuck, he hates how causal he sounds, how detached he's become. "He moved out my junior year and my mom, something happened—I don't know what, I'd been gone all weekend for a tournament and was so tired. I'd left all my crap on the kitchen table, thinking I'd go through it in the morning. She took my keys and took the gun he'd left behind and drove off to his place. The cops woke me up a few hours later to tell me he was dead and mom was being detained."

"Not quite the golden boy story that the press likes to talk up, huh," he says, self-deprecating.

“No, not really,” she murmurs into the fabric of his shirt, fingers dragging lightly up and down his side, “But, it’s real. I can’t tell you how many families I’ve driven up to who were like that. Or, people like your mother that my brother’s come across.”

“She got out a few years ago. Lives up in Kenosha now. Has a quiet life, a safe one. It took a lot to keep it out of the press, but, you know, mom deserved that much.”

“Has she gotten to see you play?”

“Mom? No, she doesn’t really like huge crowds and games are always extra rowdy. I tried to convince Christie to take her to one once—in the stands, not a box, no one needed to know. But, well, she and mom don’t always see eye to eye.”

“She should,” insists Gabby, raising up on her arms to meet his eyes, “You always look happiest on the ice. Your mom should see that.”

He shrugs, “Maybe one day, I don’t think she could manage that all on her own.”

She sighs, knowing the topic’s reached its end, and nestles back into his arms, eyes slipping shut. Matt feels only slightly guilty for keeping her up all day after working for twenty-fours straight. But, he has a game tomorrow night and she has work the next and then it’s back on the road for the team. He takes a slight sense of comfort from knowing she feels the same.

“What time do you have to be at the arena tomorrow?”

“Noon. Boden wants all forwards first, then we’ll do a scrimmage with the whole team. Defenders’ll stay behind and run some plays after that.”

“Wanna come out to Molly’s tonight? It’s my turn to close this week,” she’s still got her eyes closed, almost mumbling her words as she slips closer towards sleep—Gabby’s awful sleep habits are the stuff of legend amongst the 51 crew.

“Sure, as long as you won’t judge me for sitting in the back corner with sunglasses and a baseball hat.”

She snorts, “It’s a Tuesday, we’ll be pretty quiet, probably just the guys looking to decompress. It was a bad shift. We had a couple of big accidents, one involved a mom and a baby. Those always suck.”

“Alright, deal, as long as you come out to the game tomorrow. Shay says she’ll get you tickets if you didn’t want to be seen using the Captain’s seats.”

They haven’t gone public—not yet, not officially. This fragile thing building between them is for them and only them and if some of the more aggressive fans find that selfish, Matt figures he’s earned that right. It hasn’t stopped the rampant speculation, however, the Twitter comments that pop up in his mentions—asking if he’s got a girlfriend or accusing him of shacking up with a puck slut—the most offensive ones he forwards to his agent to be dealt with. The team’s been understanding, no one outright prying into his business except for Kelly and Shay, the two of them claiming full responsibility at bringing Captain Serious back

to earth. Gabby's coworkers have kept it all in-house, too, and Matt figures any of the men and women of 51 would be thoroughly offended at the thought of betraying Gabby's privacy.

All of this has, of course, meant jumping through more hoops than is convenient.

"No fancy WAGS box, huh," she jokes. "I'll see if Antonio can get the time off. Or, maybe Kidd and Brett'll be down to change up girls' night—" she stops, cutting herself off with a huge yawn.

"I'll ask Shay or Connie to get the tickets," he tells her, running a hand down her back, lulling her to sleep. "Make sure to leave it at Will Call, just tell me how many."

"Sounds good," she says, nodding off. Matt pulls the blanket off the back of the couch, haphazardly covering the both of them, an afternoon nap sounding like the perfect way to pass the time together.

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The United Center is all loud noises and rowdy fans and too-bright stadium lights and Matt doesn't think there will ever be a time where he won't *love it*—that endless energy that rolls off the crowd on games nights on home ice.

He flicks the puck up and over the glass divider that separates the ice from the stands where a mix of eager kids and overindulging adults wear the team's bright red home sweaters. There's the swell of voices before the puck lands neatly into the hands of a young girl beaming brightly. She turns to wave it at a couple behind her before flipping around to shout, "Thank you!"

Matt nods and sloppily salutes to the fans before skating off. Kelly will come by in a few minutes to perform the same routine with another part of the crowd. It's one of their favorite traditions, started years ago when they were still rookies. It was a treat for both the fans and themselves, a way to interact even with the glass.

He glances up towards the rafters, there's still some time before puck drop, but the stands have begun to fill up quickly. He spots the team's box, overfilled already with wives and girlfriends and kids and parents. It's one of the loudest in the arena. All the way up, he can see groups gathering on the standing room level, can imagine their cups already filled with cheap beer and spilling onto the linoleum floor. He does a half spin and catches sight of blonde hair bracketed by brunette. Gabby sits a few rows up from center ice, off the side of the penalty box. She's wrapped up in a sweater of his from a Stadium Series a few years back and even though the neck is too wide and threatens to slip off her right shoulder with every move, Matt doesn't think she's ever looked better.

Kelly slams into his side just as he's trying to catch her eye. "I thought the whole point of sneaking her in was to keep the two of you under wraps," he teases, "Unless, holy shit," he says, skating backwards, while tapping the puck back and forth, "Is this the first time she's watched you play on ice here?"

Matt shrugs, working his stick against the ice, idly moving the puck. “This isn’t her first game,” he says. dryly.

“That doesn’t count, fuck, man, this spells immediate disaster. Are you sure you’re gonna be able to pick your jaw off the ice in time to actually play some goddamn hockey?”

“Oh, fuck you,” Matt throws back, racing down the ice away from Kelly before breaking suddenly, causing ice to spray up into Otis’ face. Kelly gives chase, circling back around to Matt.

“I’m just saying. Nobody paid money to watch you show-off. They came to see us win against the goddamn Kings. Gotta keep the streak alive.”

“You mean you’ve got a bet with Darden and you don’t wanna pay up,” Matt lines five pucks up in a row before slapping them straight at the goal as Pete Mills tries his best to block each one.

Kelly picks up one of the rebounds, distracting with a few tricky stick maneuvers before tapping the puck in between Mills’ skate and the pole, “Same thing. He’s the idiot who decided to bet on penalty odds. He deserves to lose a couple hundred every so often, anyways, we’re not betting against the Kings. We’re betting against Walsh because he’s an asshole.”

“Fair enough,” nods Matt. The lights flash for a moment, startling the crowd into silence before the swell of music brings with it even louder voices. Boden stands in the Hawks’ bench, arms crossed in front of his chest, clipboard shoved under an elbow. Matt’s pretty sure the Coach’s mustache is bristling from the way he’s pressing his lips into the thinnest line. It’s not that the Coach is always displeased, over the last decade, Matt’s convinced Boden projects an aura of dissatisfaction to make the team work that much harder. Clearly, it’s worked well.

“Boden looks pissed,” observes Kelly, crossing his arms and planting his stick against the boards. “Who fucked up?”

“Probably you,” Matt says, unconcerned, “That was the five-minute warning, we should get off.”

“Someone should warn Boden that our captain’s head’s between the sheets, anyways,” Kelly cackles as he sprints towards the bench, spraying ice as he takes a sharp turn.

“Fuck you,” shouts Matt for the second time that night, already looking forward to the final buzzer and spending the night with Gabby’s wide grin.

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The game is brutal, Matt figures there’s no way to say it lightly. The Blackhawks get on the board once in sixty minutes of play all thanks to a sleight of hand trick by Kelly, almost like a Hail Mary. The fans are certainly despondent as they filter out of seats and stream towards the exits. Matt hangs around on the ice after the final buzzer, tapping gloves with teammates

and offering rallying words to the rookies experiencing their first blowout loss with the team. Pete sits wide-eyed on the bench, head tilted back, as Cruz and Otis spray water onto the goalie.

There are reporters swarming the bench and players, but Boden keeps them away for the time being, batting away cameras and voice recorders. It's a necessary evil, the press, but the team has a rule and—unless it's a big championship game—all post-game player interviews are conducted from the confines of the locker room.

A few groups linger. Red Wings fans crowding around the opposing team benches, hollering congratulations. A few young kids and their parents, still holding out sweaters and caps and pucks to sign. Matt watches as Jimmy and Jeff Clarke stand at the wall separating the stands from the players' tunnel and sign items, giving the kids wide smiles even though the lines of their shoulders are drooping past exhaustion.

He passes them by, waving to the kids and thinking about the team's bank of showers, endless hot water to loosen his already sore muscles, when a voice shouts his name. Gabby is leaning against one of the railings that separate the rows of seats from the open air. She's wearing her dark hair in long curls that contrast dramatically against the white of his old sweater and she's got a wide grin on her face. "Nice game," she shouts down.

"What team were you cheering for?" he teases back, mood already lifting at the sight of her. Brett and Kidd are standing next to her, heads bent and whispering.

"The hometown hero's one, of course,"

"Kelly made sure to say that goal was all for you."

She laughs, bright and happy, and he feels a smile stretch across his face in response. He pulls the helmet off his face and runs a hand through his sweaty hair. "Can you stick around for an hour? I just need to do a few quick interviews and take a shower. I can have Shay sneak you in," he leans against his stick, watching her hesitate above him. He's noticed she'll worry her bottom lip when she's debating something, a rare departure from her typical self-assuredness.

A loud "Yes," interrupts his blatant staring. Brett and Kidd have joined Gabby at the railing, both grinning widely. "I promised Herrmann that I'd cover the closing shift at Molly's if he needed extra help, so she's got all the time in the world," Kidd shouts out. Gabby rolls her eyes, lightly shoving the firefighter. "The better question, though, is if you could sneak us all in, captain."

"Don't enable her," Gabby tells him, "They're just leaving."

"Hey, it looked like number eighty-eight out there took a pretty bad hit to the head. I'm an FPM, I could check him out, make sure there's no concussion."

"Pretty sure they pay people to do that," interjects Brett, her blonde hair down from its customary ponytail. She places a hand on Kidd's arm, "Don't worry, I'll make sure she gets past security and on the way home."

“Just jump,” Kelly says from behind him. Matt looks around noticing that the bench has cleared out and most of the guys are far down the tunnel on the way to the locker room. It’s not a bad drop, around ten feet at its highest point, he’s sure all three of them have handled worse obstacles in their line of work. The arena has completely cleared out by now, the only people still in the stands are United Center ushers and custodians, even the security crews have headed for the main concourses.

The three exchange glances before shrugging. Kidd shouts, “Heads up!” before her small purse falls from her hands. Kelly neatly catches the handle on his blade as Kidd climbs over the railing and drops down. Brett moves next, tossing her own bag over before vaulting the metal dividers, landing lightly. Gabby sighs and shakes her head in something similar to disbelief, making Kelly laugh aloud.

“Oh, come on, Dawson, you chicken? From the way Shay tells it, this ain’t the most delinquent thing you’ve done,” chirps Kelly.

Gabby flips him off, tightening the strap of her purse across her chest and pocketing her phone before pulling herself over the rail, too, and jumping down.

“Wasn’t so bad, huh,” Matt jokes, pulling her close to his side. With his skates, he towers over her, the few extra inches forcing him to crane his neck down to press a light kiss to the top of her head.

“Beats the time I had to talk someone off the ledge of an apartment building in Streeterville. That gave me vertigo, I swear.”

He grins and guides her deeper into the United Center. Brett and Kidd are already a dozen steps in front of them, Kelly charming them simultaneously with crude jokes and subtle intelligence. Gabby leans further into him, her hands wrapping around his right arm, fingers digging into the fabric of his sweater. He knows he reeks from playing sixty minutes of hard hockey, but she smells incredible—a heady mix of vanilla, spice, and something smoky, as if her job has sunk into her skin permanently.

“Thanks for inviting us,” she says, voice quiet in the echoing chamber. “It was great to see you play, even if, you know, you guys didn’t win,” she quirks her lips into a smirk at the end and Matt doesn’t even bother trying to resist pressing a lingering kiss, smearing her red lipstick.

They don’t care enough to pull away when the flashbulbs start going off and the shouts start bouncing around in the narrow space around them, either.

the biggest tragedy of chicago fire is that we were never gifted a scene with shay, kidd, brett, and dawson, honestly.

hope y'all enjoyed it! i promise this wip has an end, i have it all outlined - it just takes time to write it down.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!