

They say good things come to those who wait . . .



Always Only You



A BERGMAN BROTHERS NOVEL



CHLOE LIESE

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Always Only You

Chloe Liese writes romances reflecting her belief that everyone deserves a love story. Her stories pack a punch of heat, heart and humour, and often feature characters who are neurodivergent like herself.

When not dreaming up her next book, Chloe spends her time wandering in nature, playing soccer, and most happily at home with her family and mischievous cats.

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Always Only You

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CONTENT NOTES

INCLUDES SPOILERS

This is an open-door romance that portrays on-page consensual sexual intimacy. This story includes a main character who is on the autism spectrum and who has a chronic illness, rheumatoid arthritis. With the guidance of my experience, as well as authenticity and beta readers, I hope I have given these subjects the respect, care, and sensitivity they deserve.

PLAYLIST NOTE

At the beginning of each chapter, a song and artist is provided as another optional means of emotional connection to the story. It isn't a necessity – for some it may be a distraction or for others, inaccessible – nor are the lyrics literally about the chapter. Listen before or while you read for a soundtrack experience. If you enjoy playlists, rather than individually searching each song as you read, you can directly access these songs on a Spotify playlist by logging onto your Spotify account and entering “Always Only You (BB #2)” into the search browser.

For the Misfits.
You are wonderfully made. You belong.
Always.

“You want nothing but patience; or give it a more fascinating name: call it hope.”

– Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*

CONTENTS

1. Frankie	1
2. Frankie	14
3. Ren	23
4. Frankie	36
5. Frankie	48
6. Ren	57
7. Frankie	68
8. Frankie	82
9. Ren	93
10. Frankie	104
11. Ren	118
12. Ren	129
13. Frankie	140
14. Ren	152
15. Ren	161
16. Frankie	170
17. Frankie	181
18. Ren	190
19. Frankie	202
20. Frankie	216
21. Ren	227
22. Frankie	236
23. Frankie	247
24. Frankie	258
25. Frankie	272
26. Ren	280
27. Frankie	292
28. Ren	304
29. Frankie	314
30. Ren	330
31. Ren	338

Acknowledgments	345
Exclusive Sneak Peek: Ever After Always	347

FRANKIE

Playlist: “Better By Myself,” Hey Violet

REN BERGMAN IS TOO DAMN HAPPY.

In the three years I’ve known him, I’ve seen him not smiling *twice*. Once, when he was unconscious on the ice, so I hardly think that counts, and the other time, when an extreme fan shoved her way through a crowd, yelling that she’d had his face tattooed on her lady bits because, and I quote: “A girl can dream.”

But for those two uncharacteristically grim moments, Ren has been nothing but a ray of sunshine since the moment I met him. And whereas I myself am a little storm cloud, I recognize that Ren’s Santa-on-uppers capacity for kindness makes my job easy.

As In-Game Social Media Coordinator for the Los Angeles Kings, I have my work cut out for me. Hockey players, you may have heard, are not always the most well-behaved humans. It inflates the ego, getting paid millions of dollars to play a game they love while tapping into their inner toddler. *Hit. Smash. Shove.*

With fortune comes fame and fawning females at their

fingertips—those don't help matters, either. Yes, I'm aware that's a lot of "f" words. So, sue me, I like alliteration.

While the PR department has the delightful privilege of putting out public-image fires, I do the day-to-day ground-work of cultivating our team's social media presence. Glued to the team, iPhone in hand, I make the guys accessible to fans by implementing PR-sanctioned hype—informal interviews, jokes, tame pranks, photo ops, gifs, even the occasional viral meme.

I also document informal charitable outings geared toward our most underrepresented fans. It's not in my exact job description, but I'm a big believer in breaking down stigma around differences we tend to ostracize, so I wormed my way into the process. I don't just want to make our hockey team more accessible to its fans, I want us to be a team that leads its fans in advancing accessibility itself.

That makes me sound sweet, doesn't it? But the truth is nobody on the team would call me that. In fact, my reputation is quite the opposite: Frank the Crank. And while this bad rap is formed on partial truths and ample misunderstandings, I've taken the moniker and run with it. In the end, it makes everyone's lives easier.

I do my job with resting bitch face. I'm blunt, all business. I like my routines, I focus on my work, and I sure as shit don't get close with the players. Yes, we get along for the most part. But you have to have boundaries when you're a woman in the near-constant company of two-dozen testosterone-soaked male athletes—athletes who know I'm in their corner, but who also know Frankie is a thundercloud you don't get too close to, unless you want to get zapped.

Just like rainclouds and sunshine share the sky, Ren and I work well together. Whenever PR has a killer concept and I

come up with a social media home run—pardon my mixing sports metaphors—Ren is my man.

Campy skit in the locker room to raise money for the inner-city sports programs? There's Ren and his megawatt smile, delivering lines with effortless charm. Photoshoot for the local animal shelter's fundraiser? Ren's laughing as kitties claw up his massive shoulders and puppies whine for his attention, lapping his chin while he lavishes them with that wide, sunny grin.

Sometimes, it's practically stomach-turning. I still get queasy when I remember the time Ren sat with a young cancer patient. Turning white as a sheet, given his fear of needles, he told her the world's lamest knock-knock jokes while he donated blood and she had her bloodwork done. So they could be brave together.

Cue the collective female swoon.

I shouldn't complain. I shouldn't. Because, truly, the guy's a nonstop-scoring, smiling, six-foot-three hunk of happy, who makes my job much easier than it otherwise would be. But there's only so much sunshine that a grump like me can take. And for three years, Ren has been pushing my limit.

In the locker room, I scowl down at my phone, handling an asshole troll on the team's Twitter page, while I weave through the maze of half-naked men. I've seen it all a thousand times, and I could care less—

"*Oof*," I grunt as my face connects with a bare, solid chest.

"Sorry, Frankie." Strong hands steady me by my shoulders. It's the happy man himself, Ren Bergman. But this time, he's shirtless, which Ren never is. He's the most modest of the bunch.

I'm tallish, which places my gaze squarely in line with

Ren's chiseled-from-stone pectoral muscles. And flat, dusky nipples, which tighten as the air chills his damp skin. I try to avert my eyes, but they have a mind of their own, drifting lower and lower to his six-, no eight-, no—dammit, his *a-lot-of*—pack.

My swallow is so loud it practically echoes in the room. "I-it's okay."

Well, hello there, husky, sexed-up escort voice.

I clear my throat and tear my eyes away from his body. "No worries," I tell him. "My fault." Lifting my phone, I wiggle it side to side. "Serves me right for traipsing around, nose-deep in Twitter."

Ren smiles which just spirals my mood even further south. The amount of dopamine that this guy's brain makes daily is probably my annual sum total.

Smoothing a hand over his playoff beard, he then brings it to the back of his neck and scratches, which I've learned over the past few years is his nervous tic. His bicep bunches, one rounded shoulder flexes, and I try not to stare at his massive lats, which give his upper body a powerful "V" shape, knitting themselves to his ribs, and a long, trim waist.

The visual feast results in a temporary short circuit, wiping my thoughts clean but for a two-word refrain.

Wow. Muscles.

It must be because whereas the rest of the team are practically nudists, Ren always disappears for a shower and comes back rocking a fresh suit, crisp shirt, and tie. I've never seen this much Ren Bergman nakedness. Ever.

And I'm riveted.

"You're rather unclothed," I blurt.

He blushes and drops his hand to his side. "True." Leaning in, he lifts one eyebrow and says conspiratorially, "This *is* the locker room, you know."

I resist the fierce urge to tweak his nipple. “Don’t sass me, Bergman. I wasn’t finished.” I take a step back because, holy hell, does that man smell good. Fresh soap and a warm spiciness chasing it. Something enticingly male. “You don’t *normally* waltz around naked like—”

Kris streaks by bare-assed on a high-pitched shriek, whipping his towel playfully at Ren as he passes. I lift a hand in the doofus’s direction. “Schar makes my point for me.”

Ren’s blush deepens as he glances away. “You’re right. I don’t normally traipse around like this. I just forgot something I needed.”

“What did you forget? Your suit’s right back there.” I can see it from here, hanging near the showers. Smart man. Steamy air takes out the wrinkles.

Dammit, now I’m thinking about Ren taking steamy showers.

“Well, uh...” he says. “I forgot what goes *underneath* the suit.”

“Oh.”

My cheeks heat. Good grief. Of course. The guy forgot his boxers—*Ooh, or maybe briefs?* I need to stop thinking about this—and here I am holding him up like it’s the Spanish Inquisition.

As if he can read my dirty thoughts, Ren pins me with those unnaturally intense eyes—catlike and pale as the ice he skates on. “I’ll just go get them, then...”

“Great idea.” I step to one side, as Ren goes the same way. We both laugh awkwardly. Then Ren tries for the other side, just as I do, too. “Jesus,” I mumble. So mortifying. Were the earth to open up and swallow me whole, this moment would be significantly improved.

“Here.” Ren’s hands land warm on my shoulders again, his touch gentle, unlike most of the guys on the team, who

seem incapable of not knocking into me like they're the Hulk. While I flinch before incoming contact with them, there's something graceful and controlled about Ren.

"I'll go this way," he says. "You go that way."

Like a revolving door, we finally manage to move past each other. Once Ren's strolling away, I'd like to say I don't glance over my shoulder to ogle the guy's backside from the revealing contours of a locker room towel, but I'm not in the habit of lying.

"Fraaaaankie," an obnoxious voice yells.

That's Matt Maddox. Evil yin to Ren's pure-goodness yang.

"Jesus, keep me strong," I mutter.

In our little nature metaphor, in which I'm the thunder-cloud and Ren's the sun, Matt's the reeking sulfurous geyser that everyone runs away from. While Ren is warm and always gentlemanly, Matt is, in short, a natural disaster of grade-A douchery.

Matt crosses the locker room and closes in on me, not for the first time. Not by a long stretch.

Bracing myself for impact, I pocket my phone and prepare to mouth-breathe. I'm used to the stank of our locker room, but post-game, the guys smell extra ripe, and I have a sensitive sniffer. I gag in here regularly.

Slinging a stinky arm around me, Matt jars my whole body. I clench my jaw and try not to wince. "Where's your phone?" he says. "I think we need a selfie, Frank."

I duck and shuffle backward, out of his reach. "And I think you need a shower. You do your job, Maddox. I'll do mine."

He rakes his sweat-soaked dark hair back from his face and sighs. "One of these days, I'm gonna crack you."

"I'm a tough nut, champ." Turning, I unearth my phone,

swipe open to the camera and angle it over my head so it cuts out Matt and catches the guys behind me. Nobody's in a state of extensive undress anymore—a few bare chests, most everyone almost done putting on their suits. Fans eat that shit for breakfast. “Smile, boys!”

They all whip their heads my way, plastering on dutiful grins as they say, “Cheese!”

I have them so well trained.

“Thank you.” Pocketing my phone, I head toward the exit. “Don't forget, drinks—not in excess—and burgers at Louie's. Uber if you plan on getting shitfaced anyway.”

On a chorus of “*Yes, Frankie*” echoing behind me, I shove open the door, buoyed by the satisfied purpose of a woman whose life is ordered and predictable. Just how I like it.

AT LOUIE'S, I THROW OFF MY BLAZER AND PUSH UP MY sleeves in preparation for the meal I ordered. Suits and greasy bar food aren't the best combination, but there's never time to change after my post-game duties before we head out, so I'm stuck sporting my usual work outfit.

Like the rest of the staff and players, on game day, I wear a suit. The same one, every game. Black peplum blazer, matching ankle-cut dress slacks, and a white dress shirt with black buttons. My cropped slacks show off my Nike Cortez sneakers in our signature black and silver, and my nails are of course painted their usual glossy black with silver shimmer on the middle finger, because it makes flipping people off extra festive. The whole look is very Wednesday Addams, with a similar and intended repelling effect. People leave me alone. Which is how I like it.

“Double cheeseburger,” Joe, our bartender, says.

“Thanks.” I nod and pull the plate my way.

Nice thing about Louie’s is they give our orders first preference—bunch of hungry jocks need food *stat* after a game—so not ten minutes after arriving, sleeves rolled up, grease drips down my wrists as I bite into my burger. I hold it over my plate and lean to trap my drink’s straw with my mouth, taking a long pull of root beer.

Louie’s is one of those hole-in-the-wall gems of an LA burger joint that feels fewer and further between with each passing, granola-crunching year. I swear, even just four years ago when I moved here, LA was still the land of the greasy burger and the world’s best street food. Now it’s all juice bars and whatever shit GOOP says will flatten your stomach.

As root beer fizzes happily in my belly, I extract a pickle from my sandwich and crunch on it. “Life’s too short to give up burgers.”

Willa grunts in agreement from her seat next to me. She’s dating Ren’s brother Ryder and they try to come down for a handful of games each season, so this isn’t the first time Willa and I have talked, but it is the first time we’ve bonded over the sad turn for the healthier that Southern-Californian food has taken. Or more accurately, I’ve been monologuing about it for five minutes straight while she grunts and eats and seems to agree with me. I tend to fixate on something, then talk longer than most people about it, which I’ve learned annoys people sometimes, bores them others, and every once in a while, manages to interest them similarly.

Unfortunately, I usually only recognize in retrospect when I’ve monologued. I swear, I’m not making that up. I cannot tell when it’s happening. Everyone knows the saying “time flies when you’re having fun,” and that’s the only way I can explain how my awareness works when I’m in a groove,

talking about something that I like—I have no sense of how long it’s been.

Because this isn’t my first time around Willa, though, I know she and I are comfortable enough around each other that she’d shut me up or change the subject if she wanted to. We’ve only hung out a few times since, as a professional soccer player, she’s pretty busy, but we’ve clicked at the handful of games she and Ryder have attended.

“Glorious burgers,” she says thickly around a bite. “I could never let them go. I mean Coach would kill me for eating this, but goddamn, there is nothing better than a double cheeseburger after a long day. I don’t care what my carbon footprint is. Kill that cow and get it in my belly.”

Ryder leans away from his conversation adjacent to us and says to her, “I’ll overlook that environmentally insensitive comment because you’re a good kisser, Sunshine, and I cook plant-based for us eighty percent of the time.”

Sheepishly, Willa smiles up at him. “Sometimes I wish those doodads around your ears didn’t work *quite* so well, Ry.”

Ryder wears hearing aids, which I can barely see amid his thick blond hair. Like Ren, Ryder is a handsome guy. Short beard, bright green eyes, and Ren’s cheekbones.

Willa and Ryder live up in Washington State, where Willa plays for Reign FC, and their place is nestled in the middle of the woods. To look at them, you can totally picture it. Ryder gives off an outdoorsy vibe with his plaid flannel shirt, faded jeans, and boots. Willa fits with him in her warm, practical clothes—a UCLA hoodie and ripped-up jeans, no makeup in sight to accentuate her big amber eyes and pouty lips. She has an incredible head of hair that’s untamed waves and curls, no product, no styling. Just wilderness beauty.

Willa’s as *au naturel* on the inside as she is on the outside,

and that is my kind of person. The people I get along with typify a “what you see is what you get” mindset, and in that way, Willa’s very like my two good friends in LA, Annie and Lo. Making friends doesn’t come easily to me, but I feel like I’m becoming friends with down-to-earth, cheeseburger-loving Willa Sutter.

Ryder grins at her, making Willa’s smile widen. I drop my burger to my plate with a splat and drag a fry through ketchup. “Good grief. Just kiss already.”

Ryder laughs. Planting his lips softly on Willa’s temple, he then turns back to his conversation, a half circle of men made up of Ren, Rob our captain, François our goalie, and Lin, a promising rookie defender.

“Sorry about that.” Willa’s cheeks turn bright pink as she sips her lemonade. “We’re still in that I-really-like-you-and-always-want-to-jump-your-bones phase.”

I wave it away, fry in hand. “I’m the one who should apologize. My brain’s an unfiltered place. Most of what it thinks tends to come barreling out of my mouth. I didn’t mean to be rude. You’re in love and happy. Nothing to be sorry for.”

Willa smiles as she picks up her burger. “Thanks. I mean I used to find it gross when I saw people in public looking so in love. I always thought, ‘Is it *that* hard to keep that kind of hanky-panky for home?’” She takes a big bite of burger and says around it, “Then I met Ryder and realized, yeah, with the right person, it’s that hard.”

My burger catches in my throat. What a terrifying possibility, to find yourself so attracted to someone you can’t *help* but love them. I try to smile to show her I’m okay, but I’m incapable of an involuntarily grin. Every time I try, I end up giving the impression that I’m about to throw up.

Willa laughs. “You look like I just told you that’s dog shit between your hamburger bun.”

Bingo.

I finally clear my throat and stare down at my food. “I, uh...” My stance on relationships is hard to explain. And while I like Willa, it’s not something I’m ready to get into with her.

She nudges me. “Hey, I’m just teasing you.” Tipping her head, she stares at me for a long minute. “You’re not a relationship gal?”

I shake my head, then take a bite of food. “No, I’m not. No knocks against them. They’re just not a good fit for me.”

“Yeah. I was very against them myself when I met the lumberjack.” She throws a thumb over her shoulder to the group of men where Ryder stands. Ren laughs at something he says, making Ryder laugh, too.

They’re nearly twins in profile, except that everything about Ren just screams at me to look at him. Unruly russet waves, long nose, and sharp cheekbones. That playoff beard he somehow keeps neat, so I can still see the hint of full lips that twist in wry amusement. His eyes crinkle when he laughs, and he has this habit of clutching his chest and bending over slightly, like someone’s capacity to amuse him goes straight to his heart.

So happy. So carefree. What’s it like to live like that? To be so unburdened?

I have no clue. In past relationships, *I’ve* been the burden. A set of issues to be handled, complications to be managed. Back home, people treated me like a problem, not a person. And so, I came to two conclusions. First, it was time to move away, and second, for the sake of protecting myself from repeating that humiliation, my heart is best left alone, safe under lock and key.

So I wear black. I don't smile. I hide behind a heavy curtain of dark hair and a mile-long to-do list. I welcome the witch metaphors, walk around with a frown, and grunt in response whenever possible. I don't make friends with the neighbors or attend team picnics. I stay safe in my solitude, cold and untouchable.

For damn good reason. I will not be treated how I was ever again.

Willa pats my hand gently, then pops a fry in her mouth. "Want to know what made me change my mind?"

I glance up at her. "No."

That makes her laugh again. "Ah, Frankie. You're a keeper. Rooney's going to love you."

"Rooney?"

"My best friend from college. She's at Stanford now. Biomedical law."

A rare feat for me, I manage to bite my tongue and not mention my own plans for law school. Yes, I sent my application to UCLA months ago. Yes, I obsessed and slaved over my application, and I'm practically positive it's perfect. But I haven't received my acceptance letter.

I keep my mouth shut and suck down some root beer.

"One of the Bergman brood will inevitably have a birthday soon," Willa says. From what I can remember of what he's said about his family, Ren has a daunting number of siblings, most of whom live nearby. He's one of those rare athletes who got drafted by his hometown and never wants to leave it. Which, to this ex-New Yorker who deliberately moved cross-country, is mind-blowing.

"Ziggy, is it?" Willa stares up at the ceiling, going through some sort of mental calendar. "Yeah, I think Ziggy's next. Once Ry and I got together, especially once we moved to Tacoma, Rooney started coming to all the Bergman family

parties to have the most time to see me and catch up. She's an extroverted only child, so she fell in love with the big family, and now she's an honorary Bergman. Come to Ziggy's party, and you'll meet Rooney then."

I choke on my soda. "Uh, I don't know why I'd be there."

Willa pats my back gently. "Because I just invited you. I need solidarity at these things, Frankie. All these Bergmans, Rooney, too—none of them are surly or maladapted enough. Not like you and me."

"Thanks?"

"I need a kindred cantankerous spirit. Seriously, come next time. You and Ren are friends. His mom's always nagging him to bring a lady. I bet he'd love to have you come along."

There are so many stupefying components to what she just said, I'm coming up short of words. I blink away, shuffling my fries around my plate.

Willa picks up her food but pauses before she takes a bite. "Also, from one crotchety soul to another, should you ever find someone who makes you want to reconsider your stance on relationships, I'm here for you, okay? Just say the word."

FRANKIE

Playlist: "How to Be a Heartbreaker," MARINA

BEFORE I HAVE A CHANCE TO RESPOND TO WILLA'S unsettling offer, Matt, The Master of Douchical Mischief, drops next to me at the bar. I can smell beer on him.

Reaching right over me, Matt offers Willa his hand. "You're the soccer star. Renford's sisler-in-law," he slurs.

"Not quite. Just Willa." Shaking his hand, she quickly releases it, then wipes her palm on her jeans beneath the bar.

Matt's arm lands with a hard thud around my shoulders, nearly knocking me into my food. "Frank. Frank, Frank, Frank." He sighs. "When are you gonna stop with the ice-queen act?"

I straighten and try to shrug off his arm, but he just locks it tighter. "Frank," he says. "We both know there's something here—"

"Matt. Get your arm off of me before I crush your nuts with the Elder Wand."

The Elder Wand is what I named my cane.

Yeah, I'm twenty-six, and I use a cane. It looks like smoke glass, but instead it's acrylic and totally badass. It's also great for smacking dweebs like Maddox in the nuts.

Matt drops his arm and frowns. “I don’t get you. You’re so hot and cold.”

“No, I’m not, Matt. I run as consistently frigid as a high-end freezer. Don’t put this on me. Just because I’m a female who’s regularly in your vicinity and not fangirling over you like the many troubled souls who buy your jockstraps on eBay does not mean I secretly desire to screw you into next week.”

Matt frowns. “You don’t?”

“I don’t.”

“What the hell, Frank?” he yells. Loud enough that everyone in the private room we’re in stops talking for a second and glances over at us.

“Matt, I think you should order an Uber now.”

“I drove,” he growls, signaling Joe.

Seeing Matt call him, Joe walks toward us. When I catch his eye and gently shake my head, Joe stops, pivots, then turns back to continue washing glasses.

Matt curses under his breath. “Did you just shut me off, Frank?”

“Yes.” I turn and smile apologetically at Willa as I otherwise ignore Matt. Tipping my cup, I take a drink of root beer.

“Frank.” He grabs my wrist, which sends the root beer flying from my hand and landing with an ice-cold splatter all over my shirt.

I hiss at the shock of it. “Jesus, Maddox.”

Suddenly a large hand grabs the back of Matt’s shirt and wrenches him off the barstool so violently, he tumbles to the floor. Ren bends, sweeping up my blazer, which fell too, and immediately throws it over my shoulders. When he straightens, my mouth falls open.

Ren Bergman is *really* not smiling.

And not-smiling Ren Bergman is a whole new animal. No, *man*.

Move aside, Erik the Red. There's a new enraged ginger Viking come to slay, and Lord help me, cinnamon sexpots are my weakness. I've been relying on the fluorescents we work under to dull Ren's hair to burnished bronze. I tell myself every time I see him that he's not actually a *ginger* god of ice hockey glory. He's a brassy blond god of ice hockey glory. It helped. Marginally.

But now I have to face the facts: Ren's hair is the gorgeous copper of a fading sunset, and the anger radiating off of him is equally breathtaking.

I gape at him, Ren the Red, vengefully sexy, and command my jaw to snap shut. It's time to find my inner feminist. To bolster my walls. Ren throwing down on my behalf should not be affecting me like this. Especially given my history.

Archaic male demonstrations of protectiveness are not sexy. Archaic male demonstrations of protectiveness are not sexy. Archaic—

Dammit, this is sexy, and my body knows it. I can't deny it any more than I can deny my Harry Potter panties are now as wet as a rainy day at Hogwarts. Ren swivels his pale eyes, a stunning wintry blue gray, right on Maddox. They're cold fury as they glare at him, then return to me.

"Joey, a towel, please." His voice holds a tone of command I've heard Ren use on the ice countless times before, but never in any conversation involving me. My belly does a somersault as I watch a towel fly his way, before Ren immediately sets it in my hands. "Here."

"Th-thanks," I mutter stupidly, dabbing my shirtfront. I'm already shivering from this cold-as-balls wet shirt plastered to my skin.

Abruptly, Ren lurches toward the bar. I glance up and realize it's Matt who slammed into him.

"Maddox," I snap. "Stop!"

Ren shoves him off, spins, and deftly grabs Matt by the throat. "You fucking *torture* her. It's enough. Leave her alone."

Wow. Ren never swears. Well, not like that, at least not in public or with the team. Elizabethan oaths are more his speed. *Hugger-mugger. Malignancy. Canker-blossom.* He's subtle about it, muttering them under his breath, but I have exceptionally good hearing, and since I caught the first one, I'm always craning to listen when I'm around him, hoping I'll overhear another.

The worst part? He's good at it. Like, I have to feign a coughing jag every time he uses them, or I'd run the risk of laughing, maybe even smiling, and then my reputation as resident ice-queen hard-ass would be shot.

Ren's still throttling Matt. Perhaps it's time to intervene before our most valuable player gets himself benched for misconduct.

"The chivalry's unnecessary, Bergman," I tell him. Standing slowly off the stool, I swallow a groan as my hips scream in disapproval.

We don't like barstools, Frankie, my joints holler. You know this.

I wrap my hand around Ren's forearm and try to ignore the soft fiery hairs beneath, the powerful tendon and muscle flexing under my grip. "Please, Ren. He's drunk. It's pointless."

"Oh, there would be a point." Ren glares at Matt and shakes him by the windpipe. "He'd learn a lesson if I beat his ass."

"Hey now." Rob slides in.

I sigh in relief. “Where’ve you been?”

“I had to take a leak.” Rob manages to pull Ren’s hand away from Matt’s throat. “Can’t a guy piss and not come back to the kids trying to kill each other? Ren Bergman, resorting to violence. Never thought I’d see the day. I’m sure Maddox deserves whatever you were about to do, but let’s handle this like adults.”

Matt leers at him. “Bergman’s just jealous.”

I rub the pounding spot between my eyes. “*Jealous* would imply he has something to envy between us, Maddox.” Or that Ren even cares who does or doesn’t hit on me. Why would he?

“Now, Matthew.” Rob cups his hand around Matt’s neck and pulls him aside. “You’re catching an Uber home. You’re going to sober up. Then, tomorrow, at practice, you’re going to apologize to Frankie.”

Rob catches my eye and furrows his brow. The first few times he did it after I started working for the team, I thought he was angry at me. That’s because I suck at reading facial expressions.

How, you ask, does someone with that kind of interpersonal hang-up work in social media? She watches lots of sports interviews and sitcoms to memorize the context and meaning for as much human behavior as possible, that’s how. But sometimes even that’s not enough, and I find myself in the dark. That’s when I simply have to ask. Which is what I had to do with Rob. Now I know that this particular expression is a nonverbal check-in.

“I’m okay,” I tell him.

He nods and yanks Matt away. Ren’s still glaring in their direction as they disappear down the back hall. When he turns and looks at me, pinning me with those icy eyes, a shiver rolls up my spine.

“Are you all right?” he asks quietly. His voice is deep, warm.

“I’m fine, Ren.” Except for my soaked Harry Potter panties. And my shredded emotional boundaries, after seeing his pissed-off, fiery alter ego that’s made forgotten corners of me blaze to life.

Leaning against the stool, I reach for my purse and signal to Joe that I want to square up. Ren’s still watching me. I feel his gaze like sunshine, heating my skin. “You’re staring at me.”

Ren blinks away. “Sorry. I’m just...concerned.”

“Concerned?”

“He grabbed you, spilled your drink all over you.”

“Thanks.” I sweep a hand down my drenched front. “I hadn’t noticed.”

Raking a hand through his hair in frustration, Ren tugs at the wavy ends. “He could have hurt you.”

I slide my card across the bar toward Joe and stare at Ren. People normally assume that I’m helpless, let alone when a handsy, oversized drunk athlete throws himself my way. Here’s Ren, referencing that physical vulnerability. This is when the usual embarrassment and anger should arrive.

But it doesn’t come.

Because as Ren looks at me, as I process his words, I can’t recall a single moment Ren’s ever acted or spoken like he thinks I can’t take care of myself. He’s never hovered behind me like I’m going to take a tumble. He doesn’t talk to me like I’m an invalid. Saying that Maddox could have hurt me isn’t a reflection on my weakness. It’s an indictment on Matt’s misuse of his strength.

Ren’s eyes lock on mine. My heart pounds against my ribs, and my throat dries up.

It’s too much. I blink away, and when I glance back,

Ren's gaze has finally shifted to my mouth. A jolt of heat sears my lips, slides down my throat, and lands, warm in my belly.

Someone's hand rests on my back, breaking the moment. I don't know Willa well enough to read her face, but thankfully she speaks before I'm left wondering any longer. "I was hoping you'd get to use the Elder Wand," she says. "You okay?"

"You're not the only one who's disappointed. That guy's overdue for a dick smacking." I thank Joe when he returns my card and receipt, which I sign with a flourish. "But, yeah, I'm okay. Just tired. I should head home."

Not that I'm sure how that's happening. Normally, I drive myself everywhere and burn through audiobooks to pass the staggering amount of time I spend in LA traffic. But my car's "check engine" light was on yesterday, so it's in the shop. Rob drove me to Louie's and would I'm sure gladly drive me home as well, but he's still handling Maddox, meaning I have to wait or catch a ride with someone else. I don't do late-night taxi rides alone.

"Frankie," Ren says. "Let me drive you."

I glance up at Ren and commence a Frankie-stare for the books. His eyes are luminous, gray as fog, the kind that blots out your world but for a few feet in front of you, that makes you question what's up or down. So many times, I've had the unsettling feeling I could get just as lost in them.

"Let him drive you," Willa says. She smiles while threading her arms through her jacket. Ryder steps behind her and helps her get it up over her shoulders, giving her arms an affectionate squeeze as he plants a kiss on top of her head. A small, intimate gesture brimming with so much love, I feel like I just saw something I shouldn't have.

"I may be a little rusty on my LA geography," she says,

“but Hawthorne’s on the way. We’re staying at Ren’s for the night, and he’s driving us, too. It’ll be a dance party in the new van.”

My attention snaps to Ren. “You bought a van?”

Ren’s cheeks redden, but he stands tall. “Heck, yes, I bought a van. There’s no shame in owning a Honda Odyssey.”

Willa clears her throat and grins, while Ryder’s shoulders shake with what sounds like laughter. He hides it behind a cough into his fist.

I recognize Ren’s posture as signifying defensiveness and immediately feel bad for opening my mouth. This happens sometimes. I ask a question, and people hear...*more* than a question. They hear criticism or judgment or teasing. I’ve given up trying to explain that my brain isn’t wired for that subtlety, that I couldn’t imply those kinds of layers of meaning if I wanted to, because one too many times, people haven’t believed me. They hear excuses, rather than context. So, I stopped trying, and told myself to quit caring when I’m misunderstood.

Now, only those closest to me are trusted with knowing the real reason Frankie has dubious success with sarcasm and picking up on jokes. Why she works resting bitch face and deadpan delivery, wears earplugs at the games, and is obsessively fascinated with Harry Potter, root beer gummies, NHL statistics, linguistics, knee socks, and only wearing gray scale clothing, among many other things...

Autism.

“Ooh!” Willa says. “I call dibs on the music.”

Ryder’s laugh-cough abruptly becomes a groan. “When Willa DJs, I wish my ear doodads didn’t work so well either —*oof*.”

Willa slugs him playfully in the stomach, then grasps his

jaw and plants a firm kiss right on his mouth. “Asshole lumberjack. You’re just looking for a fight.”

He grins and wraps an arm around Willa as she drops back on her heels. “Maybe I am.”

They walk out ahead of us, waving goodnight to the rest of the team and their families. A balmy night breeze slips through the door as they head outside, and Ren steps close to me. Carefully, he unhooks my cane off the bar ledge and, bowing with a flourish, tips it toward me. “Your scepter, my liege.”

I feel a rare smile lift my cheeks. “I have heard rumors that you’re a closeted Shakespeare dork, Bergman.”

“They got it all wrong.” He straightens and smiles. “There’s nothing closeted about it.”

A surprised laugh spills out of me, and Ren’s grin widens, brighter than the California noontime sun. But for once, that sunshine smile doesn’t bother this grump one bit.