



She's everything  
he didn't think  
he needed...

FALLING  
*for the recluse*

LIV PRESCOTT

# FALLING FOR THE RECLUSE

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## Book Description

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When Josie Bennett is selected for a once-in-a-lifetime undergraduate penguin research opportunity on an isolated island in Antarctica, she can't believe her luck. The one catch is she'll need to room with renowned ice scientist Dr. Gavin Stark—the **reclusive, famously bad-tempered** glaciologist called the “Ice Prick” by, well, everyone. As if she'd let something like that stop her. This is her dream internship, and the man can't *possibly* be *that* bad...

**Turns out, he's worse.**

When Gavin finds out he has to mentor a bright-eyed college girl he already knows is **too damn sweet** for his inhospitable surroundings (and personality), he can't believe his luck.

Cranky is his default for a reason, and all his pain-filled memories are simply a reminder of why he can't be around, well, anybody. *Especially* not a hard-working ray of sunshine who's as smart as she is scrappy.

**And ten times cuter than he was dreading...**

How's a man like him supposed to deal with that kind of incessant warmth every day—or the **inexplicable, inescapable chemistry** that soon has them burning up the sheets every night? Worse, what the hell is he supposed to do when all that heat and warmth is gone from his life after Josie's internship comes to an end?

*Note: This is a standalone steamy short between a hardened grump and the one woman who somehow cracks his icy exterior by being nothing he expects, and everything he's not.*

*It's all the HOT insta-fun sparks, yummy tension, and falling-hard-and-fast swoon for the busy reader looking for some quick & dirty schmexy good times, with a sweet, feel-good HEA to boot. Enjoy!*

# Chapter One



JOSIE

TO: Dr. Gavin Stark, Needle Island Antarctic Research Station  
<gstark@icecold.com>

FROM: Josie Bennett, Stanford University  
<jbennett@stanford.edu>

Hello, Dr. Stark!

My name is Josie Bennett. I'm the future penguinologist who will be interning with you at the Needle Island station. The Penguin Research Group selected me out of a pool of 540 applications (who knew there were so many aspiring penguin researchers in the world?!), and I'm honored beyond measure by the opportunity.

My research this summer (well, your Southern Hemisphere summer and my Northern Hemisphere winter) will involve studying and counting the newly arrived penguins on Needle Island. Then I'll return to California to analyze and write up all the data, after which I'll have the honor of delivering a lecture at the California Academy of Sciences about my findings. I hope my little contribution to science will help us better understand and protect these intriguing, unique animals.

A little about me—I'm twenty years old, a junior at Stanford University, and I've been fascinated by penguins since I was six years old and received a stuffed penguin for Christmas. I named him Oswald.

I STOP TYPING. Am I telling him too much? Does a scientist as renowned as Dr. Gavin Stark really need to know that Oswald determined my life's path? Will he find such details endearing or just ridiculous?

Probably the latter, but I'm determined to keep my introduction letter peppy and upbeat. I have to make sure I start off on Dr. Stark's good side.

Assuming he even has one.

"You're going to live with the Ice Prick?"

I look up to find my fellow student Carol approaching, her eyebrows halfway to her hairline. The two other biology students working in the lab look up sharply.

"There's an announcement that Josie was chosen for the PRG internship," Carol tells them, waving the biology department newsletter in the air. "Which is fantastic and deserves major congratulations, but...the Ice Prick?"

"That nickname is an exaggeration." I shake my head dismissively, trying not to let the sudden ominous atmosphere quell my excitement. "I'm sure he's a perfectly nice man."

"That's not what I've heard." Hank, a senior, grabs the newsletter from Carol and scans the announcement. "Have you ever met Gavin Stark?"

"No," I admit.

"He's going to eat you alive." Carol scans me from head to toe. "I can't believe they're letting you, of all people, go down there alone."

I bristle a little, even though her skepticism is understandable. With my perfect academic record and reputation for being in bed by nine—not entirely untrue—everyone in the department was surprised that I'd even applied for the highly adventurous internship.

"Josie deserves the opportunity more than anyone," my friend Brenda says, and I throw her a grateful look.

"What about you?" Hank asks Carol. "Have you met Stark?"

Carol shakes her head. "Not many people have. Everyone's afraid of him. He's been alone on the ice for, like, five years. He only has human contact when he needs help with drilling and research or when the supply boats arrive.

Even before he was stationed there, he was always off on some other solo expedition in Greenland or the Arctic tundra. He sends in all his research via email, but he's turned down a bunch of job offers at universities and other institutions. Won't do video calls with other scientists. He's brilliant, but he's a snarly bastard who refuses to actually *collaborate* with anyone. There's a reason people call him the Ice Prick, and it's not because he's a hockey player."

We fall silent in the aftermath of that little speech. Carol is a graduate student, so she's been around a lot longer than us lowly undergrads and knows all the gossip.

But that's what it is, I remind myself. Just gossip. If no one has actually worked with Dr. Stark, then no one really knows the truth about him.

"He must get super lonely," Brenda remarks.

"He wouldn't be there if he didn't want to be," Hank says. He widens his eyes. "Do you think he's, like, one of those people who has to hide away from society because he's super scarred and ugly?"

Carol snorts. "A few old photos of him are floating around, and by the looks of it, he's anything but ugly. At least, he wasn't years ago."

"No one's even seen him for five years?" Brenda asks.

"Just the supply guys or the other scientists doing fieldwork." Carol sits down beside a microscope. "And Josie will be next."

The three of them turn their attention back to me. I try to look nonchalant as if traveling to the southernmost point of the world to live with a scary, bad-tempered, and possibly scarred ice scientist is really not that big of a deal.

Even though it is a huge deal. Massive. The biggest "deal" of my life.

My stomach clenches with nerves and a touch of fear.

"Have you had any contact with him at all?" Hank asks me.

“No, but Professor Rainer has been making all the arrangements. He assured me everything is set up, and he already sent Dr. Stark a folder with all my info.” I turn back to the computer. “I’m typing Dr. Stark an email to introduce myself. Maybe I should ask if he wants me to bring him anything from the Northern Hemisphere. Everyone likes gifts, right?”

Carol snorts again. “From the sound of it, Stark doesn’t like anything but ice.”

“Are you sure you want to spend a whole month with him?” Brenda looks concerned, as if I’m about to walk into a cave and poke a hibernating bear.

Although it kind of sounds like I am.

“This is an incredible opportunity.” I force a bright note into my voice. “I’m certainly not turning it down.”

“You shouldn’t turn it down.” Carol takes a thick book out of her backpack. “Just don’t expect Stark to welcome you with open arms.”

“He knows I’m coming, and I’m sure he’ll be accommodating.” I smile gamely, though I sound like I’m trying to convince myself as well as them. I focus on the email and try to ignore the dire warnings.

While it’s true that Dr. Stark’s hostile reputation precedes him, he’s one of the most acclaimed scientists in the world, with dozens of books, publications, and awards to his name. Now in his thirties, he started making a name for himself in college and has been at the top of his field for well over a decade. He didn’t reach those heights by being a complete jerk. Besides, thousands of scientists work in isolated areas and communicate mainly via email.

On the other hand, not many embark on solo research expeditions for months or years, especially to frozen continents. It’s a testament to Dr. Stark’s brilliance that he always has plenty of funding.

He might not collaborate much with others, but he’s never turned down a request to review students’ papers, theses, and

dissertations. He reads all their work and gives his very thorough and blunt input via email—which means he supports up-and-coming scientists.

So even though I'm not a student in Dr. Stark's discipline of glaciology, he'll surely appreciate my efforts and ambition. He'll technically be my boss, but since the PRG is providing my salary, I won't have to rely on him for funding.

And this internship is the opportunity of a lifetime, one that will fulfill a dream I've had since I was six years old. Ever since I received the offer, excitement has been zinging through me like a pinball, filling me with colors and light.

I've been chosen for the position out of hundreds of other applicants. No way will I disappoint the review board, my professors, or myself by not showing up and giving it everything I have—and more.

So I'm going to ignore all this gossip about how cranky and unwelcoming Dr. Stark will be. He may be a recluse, but he's still a human being.

I return to my email. Despite my internal pep talk, my stomach is still tense. Carol was right—no one really knows that much about “the Ice Prick.”

And I'm actually going to meet him.

No. I'm going to *live* with him.

In the most remote, isolated location on the planet.

## Chapter Two

GAVIN

JOSIE BENNETT'S email practically vibrates with enthusiasm.

A little about me—I'm twenty years old, a junior at Stanford University, and I've been fascinated by penguins since I was six years old and received a stuffed penguin for Christmas. I named him Oswald.

I'm a marine biology major with a minor in ornithology, and I'm studying the relationship of penguins to the earth's ecosystem. I want people to know how much they can teach us about everything from social interactions to climate change. I'm super excited to get to Antarctica and Needle Island!

I drag a hand down my face. What twenty-year-old girl is excited to come to Antarctica? Does she realize the internet connection out here is shitty at best? With any luck, she'll quit and turn tail as soon as she discovers she won't even be able to use her phone.

Judging by the rest of her message, though, I'm not sure how easy it'll be to get rid of her.

I've already completed the required "extreme cold weather" training, and I've spent the past couple of weeks packing and repacking to make sure I have all the right clothes and belongings. Speaking of which, if there's anything you'd like me to bring you from the warmer climates, please let me know! I would be happy to supply you with anything you want or need!

Given her perky tone, I doubt Ms. Bennett was even aware her rambling has a suggestive ring.

I'm well aware, though. Especially since this is the third time I've read her email today.

Why I even read it once is beyond me.

I shift my gaze to the window. Ice crystals border the edges of the double-plexiglass panes. A vast sheet of white stretches out in the distance before falling off into the horizon. Mountains of ice line a ridge to the left, and jagged ice floes skim the water surrounding the rocky island.

Everything is frozen, hard, and inhospitable. Which is exactly the reason I like it here.

Alone.

I negotiated a job at the Needle Island Research Station to get away from people. Now one of them is barging in, a girl who sounds so upbeat and perky she probably believes in leprechauns, unicorns, and happy endings.

In other words, things that don't exist.

I can bring you chocolate, Pop-Tarts, good soap and lotion, fresh fruit (not sure how it will survive the trip, but I'm willing to give it a shot!), or any clothes or toiletries you would like. You name it! Your wish is my command.

All my best, and looking forward to our meeting,

Josie Bennett

I hit the reply button, even though I have no idea why I'm even bothering to respond. I'd gotten nowhere in my attempt to convince the Penguin Research Group to hold the internship on another island, so it looks like I'm stuck with the girl for the next month.

She might as well know who she's dealing with.

TO: Josie Bennett, Stanford University <jbennett@stanford.edu>

FROM: Dr. Gavin Stark, Needle Island Antarctic Research Station <gstark@icecold.com>

Ms. Bennett,

I neither want nor need anything that you can provide.

Though it's good to know my wish is your command.



Gavin Stark

## Chapter Three

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GAVIN

A SHIP PUSHES through the gray waves, the steel-reinforced hull breaking the ice floes as it stops to anchor. An inflatable Zodiac lowers into the water, and several people disembark through the ship's side gate to board the much smaller boat. A few minutes later, the Zodiac powers up and travels toward the island.

My jaw tightens. I pull on a pair of boots and a parka and go outside. Though it's far below freezing, the temperature is nothing compared to the extremes of winter and whiteout blizzards.

I cross the icy pathway leading to the dock. Three heavily clothed figures climb out of the boat. None of their features are visible, but there's no question which one is Josie Bennett—she's much smaller than the two men and practically buried in a bright orange parka, a wool cap, and thick coveralls. At least she paid attention to the extreme cold weather outerwear requirements for Antarctic expeditions. She'd better be wearing layers underneath.

As I start toward them, my brain latches on to the thought of Josie Bennett's possible *layers*. I shake my head to dislodge it. My boots rattle on the wooden pier.

Josie darts forward, her gloved hand extended. I can't see her eyes behind her polarized sunglasses, but her blindingly white smile catches me off guard.

“Dr. Stark, I presume?” Her laughter echoes off the icebergs and glaciers like a bell. “I’m thrilled to finally meet you. I’m Josie Bennett.”

I had no intention of greeting her politely—she might as well know right away what she’s in for—but I find myself sticking my hand out. Even through our thick gloves, her handshake is firm and strong.

“I know it’s traditional for researchers to carry their own stuff in,” she says, her breath coming in plumes of white, “so if you’ll just point me in the right direction, I’ll hurry and get settled so I don’t disturb your routine.”

Yeah. Leprechauns and rainbows, all right. And a stuffed penguin named Oswald.

With a grunt of irritation, I stride past Thornwall and Kasper—the skipper and crewman—and grab Josie’s duffel, suitcase, and one of her travel bags.

“She’s required to check in at least once a day…” Thornwall’s voice fades as I turn and keep walking.

Josie scrambles to get her second travel bag and her backpack. I hear her behind me as I start back up the incline to the field house.

“My goodness, if this is summer, I don’t want to imagine winter,” she calls, hurrying to catch up and huffing in between her commentary. “But the flight in was incredibly beautiful. The sky was so blue it was like someone had spilled a bucket of paint over it, and the landscape of ice and snow was like something from another planet. I’ve never seen anything so stark and pristine. Most people haven’t, which is just one of the reasons I feel so fortunate to be able to experience this. Believe me, I intend to take advantage of every moment.”

Clenching my teeth, I shoulder through the door and dump her bags at the entrance. Though I still have no intention of being polite, I hold the door open for her.

“And would you believe we saw two humpback whales from the ship?” Josie continues, putting her travel bag down.

“They took my breath away. That’s the first time I’ve really understood the meaning of the word *majestic*.”

She gives a happy sigh, like it’s all so miraculous, and takes off her sunglasses.

My heart slams against my ribs. The director of the Penguin Research Group sent me Josie’s file a few weeks ago, but I didn’t bother opening it. Now I wish I had. If it included a photo of her, at least I’d have been prepared.

As it is...I’m not.

I take a step back like I’ve just run into a force field.

Goddamn. The girl is beautiful.

Pale skin with smooth, rosy cheeks; warm, thick-lashed blue eyes brimming with intelligence and curiosity; full, bow-shaped lips, and a tiny birthmark right under her left eye like a pencil point. She’s still smiling, as if everything around her is so amazing she can’t contain her pleasure.

I swallow, flexing my fingers. I feel like someone just knocked the breath out of me. It doesn’t make any sense. I’ve seen a lot of beautiful girls in my time. Not one has made the earth shift under my feet.

But *she* is...otherworldly. Extraordinary. The way she’s looking at me with her bright blue eyes, it’s like she has the power to read my thoughts, slide inside me, and melt my frozen heart.

*No fucking way, little girl.*

I slam the locks and bolts into place. *No one gets in. Not even you.*

“The building next door is the lab,” I tell her sharply. “Then the power shed with the generator, the warehouse, food storage, and the garage. You won’t need those. These are the main living quarters.”

I take off my hat and parka and grab her bags again. When I straighten, I catch her staring at me, her perfect lips parted slightly.

I could kiss her right now. Haul her up against me, crush her lips with mine, slide my tongue into her pretty mouth...

I give her a dark scowl. She snaps her mouth shut.

I turn and stalk farther into the house.

She takes off her parka, then picks up her backpack and follows me. As we pass through to the bedrooms at the back, I point out the rec room—small and stuffed with an old sofa, a few upholstered chairs, an ancient TV, and shelves full of games and books—the communications station, and the small gym.

“It’s small, but it looks like you have everything you need,” Josie remarks, hurrying after me as I cross to the workroom. “I promise I’ll stay out of your way as much as possible. I know you have a reputation for being...um...kind of a...”

“Kind of a *what?*” I snarl, stopping to fire her with another glower.

“An asshole,” she replies bluntly.

Her eyes widen, and she clamps a hand over her mouth.

## Chapter Four

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GAVIN

I STARE AT HER. A chuckle pushes its way up my throat before bursting out in a rusty but genuine laugh. Josie blinks as if the sound surprises her as much as it does me.

“It’s okay if you are an asshole,” she adds hastily. “There are roses and thorns, right? Butterflies and mosquitos. Ice cream and low-fat...anything. It stands to reason that there are also good guys and...um, less good guys. I mean, I realize we’ve never met before, and I’m not saying you are an asshole, just that there’s gossip about you, which you probably already know. I personally prefer to meet people first and form my own opinions about them rather than believe whatever I hear, but it’s pretty clear that you like a great deal of solitude or you wouldn’t be living alone on an island in Antarctica. And I know you don’t want me here, so I want to assure you that I’ll mind my own business, do my work, and not interfere in your life. I’ll also shut up now.”

She presses her lips together. Two bright spots of pink appear on her cheeks.

*Adorable.*

I’m pretty sure I’ve never even thought of that word before, much less used it in a sentence, but I do now. Josie Bennett is not only beautiful, she’s *adorable*.

Christ. She’s been here for less than an hour, and already she’s inspiring thoughts and feelings that are totally foreign. Ones I don’t want.



“Look.” I step closer, getting into her space. She backs up, still blushing.

“You’re right,” I say coldly. “I don’t want you here. But if I’m going to stay on Needle Island, I have to put up with you. And, yes. You will mind your own business, do your work, and stay the hell out of my life. The gossip is correct. I’m a grade-A asshole who wants nothing to do with anyone, least of all a perky little undergrad who thinks she’s going to save the fucking world by counting penguins.”

She stares at me. Hurt darkens her blue eyes.

Fuck fuck *fuck*.

I stiffen my spine, fighting back the stab of regret.

Josie lifts her chin. “Nice try, Dr. Stark.”

“What?”

“I said *nice try*,” she repeats, poking me in the chest with her forefinger. “I get it. You’re trying to scare me off. You think if you’re mean to me, I’ll start crying. You think I can’t handle this. You want me to call the mainland and beg them to come back and rescue me from the big, scary monster stomping around Needle Island, beating his chest and snarling at everyone who gets too close. Well, I have news for you.”

She jabs me with her finger again. “I’m not that easily intimidated. And Needle Island does not belong to you or anyone else. No part of Antarctica does. Which means I have as much a right to be here as you do. I intend to carry out the research entrusted to me...and yes, that includes counting penguins. If you can’t see the value of studying and protecting one of the most important animals in the ocean’s ecosystem, then it’s no wonder everyone calls you the *Ice Prick*.”

She glares at me, her breathing rapid, skin flushed, and a trickle of sweat creeping down from under the knit hat she’s still wearing.

The thick layers of ice inside me are already cracking. Splintering. For all my ogre-like animosity, I might not have the power to withstand the force of this girl.

And if I don't...that's it. I'm done for.

I turn away from her. "Come on."

My voice is serrated like a knife's edge. I feel her brief silence, then hear the clomp of her heavy boots behind me.

We go through the workroom, which is furnished with a potbelly stove, two computers, and several scarred wooden tables. Dozens of maps, photos, graphs, and computer printouts are tacked to the walls, and the big window overlooks the rocky slope leading to the shore.

"Kitchen." I stab my finger toward the adjoining room. "And toilet." Another finger-point to a door leading to the tiny bathroom. "Your bedroom is in the back."

I stride down the narrow corridor and shove open a door across from my room. After unceremoniously dumping her stuff on the bed, I turn to find her peering at the sparse furnishings.

"There's no desk." She indicates her backpack. "Should I set up my workstation somewhere else?"

Though I dislike the idea of us working in proximity—the setup will make her more of a distraction than she already is—I stride back to the workroom. She hurries after me.

I point at an empty table across the room from my equipment. "You can use that desk."

"Look, Dr. Stark, I don't want us to be at each other's throats." She sets her backpack down and holds up her hands. "I realize I'm invading your territory, but there's obviously no way around that since I'm already here. And it's not like I'm trying to get in your way. We're both here for the same reason, right? To work and discover new things about this part of the world. So we might as well find a way to coexist without animosity."

"Well, that was mature and professional," I mutter. "And kind of annoying since I'm the senior scientist here."

Her mouth quirks with a smile. "So maybe you can teach me a thing or two."

Our eyes meet. Electricity crackles through the air. My heart stutters. I almost have to bite my tongue to stop myself from listing all the things I want to teach her.

“You have a lot to learn,” I say.

It’s not a question, but she nods slowly. Her gaze slips over my face to my mouth. It’s all I can do not to cross the room and haul her into my arms.

Dragging my attention from her, I indicate an outlet by the desk. “You can plug your laptop in there. The electricity is reliable, but the internet connection is hit or miss. You won’t be able to use your phone to text your friends.”

“I figured.” She turns away to take her laptop out of her backpack, then sits down to power it up. “Actually, I was kind of looking forward to being disconnected for a while. I find that technology and social media get a little overwhelming sometimes. Makes it hard to think, you know? Back in California, I unplug once a week or so just to turn the noise off. But I admit to being a total nerd about science and technology.”

She throws me a smile that hits me in the middle of the chest.

“This is the application I’m using for the penguin data collection.” She gestures to the app opening up on the screen. “I’ll be employing remote sensing data and modeling techniques to predict occupancy probabilities for the penguin colonies. The graphical outputs will show how penguin populations are changing through time. Kind of like the way your models forecast glacier ice loss. Oh!”

She turns to face me, her eyes lighting up. “We should compare models, don’t you think? I’ll bet we could find some amazing connections about how glacier changes affect penguin populations. We could also use satellite imagery to support the forecasting.”

Consternation suddenly darkens her expression.

“Not that I expect you to take the time with my work,” she adds hastily. “Or that I think I could collaborate with a

scientist of your caliber. I meant it when I said I wouldn't bother you. At least, I'll try not to. I just get a little over-enthused about penguin research. Feel free to put me in my place when I cross the line."

She's already in "her place." Right here. She's already crossed the invisible line I drew, trying to keep her away. And every time she speaks, every time I look at her, the ice melts a little more.

By the time she leaves, the whole damn island will be tropical.

I shake my head to dislodge these unexpected and ridiculous thoughts. Lust. That's all this is. No wonder, given that I haven't been close to a woman in a while, much less one so tempting and sweet. It's like the universe just put an endless feast in front of a starving man.

I clear my throat. "Is this your first time working in the field?"

"Not only that, it's my first time out of the United States." She holds up her hand and ticks the items off on her fingers. "My first time on a ship. My first time on a turboprop. My first time on an island. My first time eating one of those freeze-dried meals. My first time seeing a glacier, an iceberg, and a humpback whale. And I still have so many *first times* ahead of me. It's like my life is just opening up."

A muscle in my jaw clenches. I've had a great career for the past decade and wouldn't want to do anything else, but my *life* has been closed shut.

She could open it, though.

Just like I could open her. Feed my lust. Ease the burn.

"Everyone likes first times, right? Like first kisses, first loves, first..." Her voice trails off, and a flush reddens her cheeks. "Well, you know."

I do. But she doesn't. I'd bet my life on it. "Your first boyfriend?"

The question snaps out of me. Her blush deepens.

“I’ve never had a boyfriend,” she says. “I don’t have much time for socializing, and I’m not in the loop on social media the way my friends are. Though now that I’m here, that’s probably a good thing.”

“It’s a very good thing.” My voice is rough, edged with the hunger I can’t contain.

She pushes her chair back and gets to her feet. Another trickle of sweat rolls down her temple. Except for her parka and gloves, she’s still wearing all her outerwear.

“I should...” She darts her tongue out to lick her bottom lip. “Unpack the rest of my stuff.”

“First lesson.” I cross to her. “Take this off when you’re inside, or you’ll get overheated.”

I reach out and pull the wool hat off her head.

Mistake.

Her black hair tumbles to her shoulders in a mass of thick, shiny strands, some clinging to her damp forehead. There’s a streak of pure white down the right side, like the stroke of a paintbrush.

I want to drag my fingers through all that hair more than I’ve wanted anything in my life.

I grind my teeth together. She’s already getting inside me. Now I want to be inside her. Deep. Hard. I want her spread out naked under me. I want to hear her gasps of pleasure when I push into her. I want her hands on my skin, her cunt wrapped around my dick, her body writhing and bouncing with the force of my thrusts. I want to drink her sharp cry when she comes.

Fucking hell.

It’s like an iceberg breaking away from a glacier. Nothing in the universe can stop it.

Not even me.

“The expedition handbook and training were pretty specific about cold weather clothing.” Josie unzips the high

neck of her fleece and fans her face. “I went to about four stores to ensure I was getting the right stuff.”

I skim my gaze over her shirt, my heartbeat rising. “What are you wearing under that?”

“This?” She looks down at her thick coveralls. “A few thin layers. That’s what they told me to wear outside, as long as it doesn’t make me sweat.”

“Right.” I cross my arms and nod. “Sweating outside can be dangerous. Your clothing size is also critical for safety. Do your layers fit properly? Are they too big or too small?”

“I don’t think so.” She examines her sleeves. “Why? Do they look like they don’t fit?”

“Hard to tell.”

“Oh.” She lowers her arms back to her sides, her inquisitive eyes returning to me. “I guess I need another lesson, then. How do I find out if my clothes fit properly?”

“There’s only one way, Ms. Bennett.” I point my chin to the zipper of her coveralls. “You need to strip.”

## Chapter Five

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## JOSIE

HIS DEEP COMMAND reverberates through me like the vibration of a jackhammer. Even though I'm in the coldest place on earth, I'm overheated from the outside in. My skin is warm, but my blood is close to simmering.

Because of...*him*.

Dr. Gavin Stark is everything I'd expected—scowly, bad-tempered, abrupt, and irritated by my very presence in his remote lair.

He's also nothing like what I'd expected. I thought that maybe he really was some hunched-over, troll-like creature, but that image shattered into oblivion the instant I saw him striding toward us at the dock, his long legs eating up the distance in seconds.

He's tall. Big. His muscular arms and broad shoulders look as if they can carry any weight. Maybe living here at the bottom of the world, he's holding up the entire planet.

His thick hair is the color of chestnuts and shot through with strands of gold. Even with an apparently permanent glower, his face is arresting—dark eyebrows, a beautifully shaped mouth, and cheekbones that could cut glass. When I first saw him, I immediately wanted to rub my nose against the stubble coating his square jaw.

As if he hadn't been captivating enough on the dock, my fascination went supernova when he took off his parka to reveal a gray Henley that fit snugly over his muscled torso and



arms. I still can't stop my eyes from darting back to his chest. The top buttons of his shirt are undone, and the tantalizing glimpse of taut skin and dark hair makes my mouth water.

Which is all so unprofessional. Dr. Gavin Stark is my superior. He's in charge. He's the boss. I was told to do exactly as he orders. Gawking at him is totally inappropriate.

So are the hot thoughts and images ricocheting through my brain.

I should not be thinking any of them, even if the attraction between us is getting so intense it's almost tangible. I've never felt anything like it before. Never engaged in a hot spontaneous encounter with anyone, much less a man like him.

Though I'm courageous when it comes to my career, I've never been aggressive in my personal life. Just the opposite. It's been easier to focus on work and school without the entanglements of a romantic relationship.

So it really makes no sense that I want to dive headfirst into all things Gavin Stark—his intelligence, his experience, his knowledge, and his downright hotness.

Or maybe it makes all the sense in the world. This fierce pull I have toward him might be intensified by the magnetic charge of the South Pole. Still, maybe there are a thousand other mystical, intangible reasons we ended up alone together at the bottom of the world.

He says something else, though his words are drowned out by the increasing thump of my heartbeat.

I rub my neck. "Um...excuse me?"

"Take off your clothes." He narrows his gaze on the zipper of my fleece. "I need to make sure you're dressed correctly before allowing you to do any fieldwork. It's procedure."

I huff out a laugh, but his expression is implacable. Though he's been growly and short with me, I don't really think he's an asshole or even an Ice Prick. A man who shuts himself off from the world and spends all his time studying massive ice formations is bound to have anti-social tendencies.

Maybe Dr. Stark just needs human contact to bring out his more civilized nature. And I'm the only other human in a hundred-mile radius.

My pulse rises. At the very least, I need to find out if my hypothesis is correct. Not to mention, I'm long overdue for a certain kind of human contact too.

"Procedure," I repeat.

He arches a dark eyebrow. "You're a rule follower, aren't you? A good girl."

I wince a little. "Is it that obvious?"

Dr. Stark doesn't respond, but I swear amusement glints in his brown eyes. Then it's gone so fast that I'm not sure it was there at all.

Though he's right, it's not the rule-following good girl in me who finally bends to unlace my boots. Because good girls don't strip in front of their superiors—even if they're following orders. And surely they don't feel a hot flame of excitement quickening in their belly at the thought of doing something illicit and probably wrong.

But wrong according to whom? Dr. Stark is in charge of Needle Island, but not my internship or even me. We're not breaking any rules...at least, I don't think we are.

I take off my boots and line them up beside the wall. Then I slowly push off the straps of my coveralls and unzip the bib, wiggling the thick pants over my hips and legs.

"That's the first outer layer, obviously," I tell him. "Aside from my parka."

He rumbles a noise that could be either approval or... something else.

I kick the coveralls aside and unzip my fleece. No, this isn't like me at all. I've never undressed even halfway in front of a man, much less one I've just met.

Or maybe this is exactly like me. I've already changed from the Josie I was back in California. I was a different person before I flew south like the birds and landed on this

inhospitable but fascinating continent that has its own rules and belongs to no one—exactly like Gavin Stark.

An electric surge fills my blood, a sensation both thrilling and liberating. As if my world has turned upside down and inside out, setting free a side of me I've kept contained for longer than I should have.

“Second layer...” I shrug the fleece over my shoulders and toss it on a chair.

Dr. Stark watches every movement. I feel his gaze like it's a touch. My breath comes even faster than it did when I was slogging up the rocky incline with my luggage.

“I think on the field, I'd wear one or two more layers, but now I'm just wearing this...” I rub the arm of the thin blue insulating shirt. “And these stretch pants.”

“What's underneath?” His voice is faintly husky, and it moves over me like a thundercloud.

God. I'm not just hot; I'm aroused. Between Dr. Stark's shockingly potent allure, the closeness of the room, and the fact that I'm literally taking off my clothes, my tension is ratcheting up by the second.

“Long underwear,” I tell him.

“Show me.”

## Chapter Six

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JOSIE

"YES, SIR."

The response comes out without any thought, and my face heats with a flush. I glance at him from under my eyelashes.

Though he's still standing there with his feet planted apart and his arms crossed, solid and unmoving as a boulder, the barest hint of a smile curves his mouth.

*Sir:* He likes that. To my surprise, so do I. Makes me wonder what else he likes to be called.

I pull the stretch pants over my legs and put them on top of my fleece before dragging the blue insulating layer over my head.

A shiver runs through me. Though my long underwear covers me from neck to toe, it's also close-fitting and clingy, outlining every curve of my body.

Dr. Stark lifts his eyebrows. "That's your base layer?"

"Yes. I mean, except for my bra and underpants."

"Hmm." He slides his gaze over me. "I need to see those too."

My heart is racing. I'm nervous and excited at the same time. He steps toward me, covering the distance between us in two long strides. He reaches out and plucks the fabric away from my waist, rubbing the hem between his fingers.

"Fit looks fine," he murmurs. "Is this silk?"

“Yes. I have some heavier base layers to wear in the field.”

“Good.” He continues rubbing the silk as though he’s assessing its quality.

He’s so close I can smell him. Nothing remotely like the unwashed, stale odor I’d half expected from a scientist who lives alone and goes for months without seeing another person.

Oh, not at all like that. Instead, Dr. Stark smells like musk, fresh wood, and spices—warm, smoky things like cinnamon, nutmeg, and cloves.

His delicious scent slides right inside me, pooling heat in my lower body. I squeeze my thighs together slightly, wishing I could writhe against something and ease the growing ache.

“If you...” I swallow hard. I’m starting to shake. “If you need to see my underwear, I have to take off these layers.”

“Yes, you do.” He grips the hem of my shirt and tugs it up over my torso.

I lift my arms as if it’s the most natural thing in the world to be standing in Antarctica while a renowned ice scientist takes off my clothes.

But god in heaven, I don’t want to be anywhere else. Or doing anything else. Or *with* anyone else. My body is doing things it’s never done around a man before. Throbbing. Clenching. *Quivering*.

He tosses the shirt to the floor. The temperate indoor air hits my bare skin like a blast. Goose bumps prickle over my arms.

Dr. Stark’s breath is audible, fresh tension winding through his muscles. He slides his gaze over my silver pendant necklace, locking on my cleavage swelling over my blue bra with the little satin bow right in the center. My nipples are blatantly hard, protruding against the flimsy material.

“I don’t think that’s regulation.” His voice is strained.

“There wasn’t anything in the handbook about regulation underwear.” I hook my fingers into the waistband of my thermal pants, hardly able to believe I’m actually doing this.

“At least, not that I can recall. But you’d better check my panties too, just to make sure.”

I slither the pants over my hips and thighs, bending to pull them off my legs. As I’m straightening, my eyes catch the front of Dr. Stark’s jeans...and the very prominent bulge pressing against his fly.

A fresh bolt of heat goes through me so fast and hard that I almost gasp. I push my pants aside with my foot, sharply aware of his hot gaze sliding from my breasts to my pink cotton underwear decorated with little bunches of cherries.

I suddenly wish that my lingerie was coordinated—in material at least, if not color—but I’ve never been a girl who matched clothes or anything else really.

Not that Dr. Stark seems to care. The lust radiating from him is tangible. His scent grows stronger as if intensified by the magnetic heat coursing between us.

“Are they regulation?” I ask.

“Not sure.” He skims his fingers over my belly.

I draw in a sharp breath. His fingertips are deliciously calloused, the rough pads sending tingles shooting across every nerve. I shift my thighs together and bite back a moan.

“How do we find out?” I whisper.

“We have to take them off.” He slides his forefinger along the waistband, his eyes locked on my breasts. “And check the label.”

“Oh. Okay.”

I’m losing focus. My knees are weak. He’s *touching* me. Slowly, teasingly, he runs his finger back and forth across my waistband as if he has all the time in the world—which maybe he does.

But god. He’s a wall of masculine strength and heat just inches from me. I desperately want to step forward, press my body to his, and feel my breasts crushing against his chest.

“Is this lesson number two?” I ask.

“Only if you want it to be.” He pauses, giving me the chance to back away.

Which is the last thing in the world I want to do.

“I think we might’ve jumped way ahead in the curriculum, but I do need to learn.” I ease closer to him. “So *yes*.”

The burn in his eyes grows hotter. Then he slides his hands down *into* my panties and around to my bottom. I gasp, grabbing his arms to steady myself as the world tilts wildly off balance. His big palms cover my cheeks, his fingertips practically dipping all the way down between my legs.

“Hmm.” He slides one finger into my damp cleft and edges it right against my opening.

“Ah...Dr. Stark...sir...” I tighten my grip on him, fighting the urge to push my hips back and encourage him to go deeper. As deep as he can.

A rumble echoes in his chest. He lowers his head, his rough stubble scraping my skin as he presses his mouth against the pulse beating wildly at the side of my neck. I close my eyes, inhaling a lungful of his musky scent. As much as I want to touch him, to actually put my hand on the bulge in his jeans, I can’t work up the courage to do anything but cling to him and try to stay upright.

He slides his hands back up to my waistband, then rolls my panties down until they’re a scrunched-up tangle around my thighs.

God in heaven. I’m almost naked in Gavin Stark’s arms. My arousal is like a band around my lower body, aching to be released. He flattens his hand against my belly and slides it all the way down to cup my pussy.

“Open up, honey,” he murmurs, stroking his finger with tantalizing ease back into my cleft. “Let me into that tight little virgin cunt.”

I make a noise that sounds like a whimper of pure need. He slides his lips to my collarbone as he probes my folds. My clit is throbbing. I’m about to sink bonelessly to the floor. When



he presses his forefinger into me, I almost explode right then and there.

“Oh fuck.” His groan vibrates to my bones. “You’re going to grip my dick like a goddamn fist. Clench your pussy around my finger nice and hard. I want to feel you come.”

I struggle to pull a breath into my burning lungs. His body heat radiates through his shirt and jeans. A pulse throbs in the hollow of his throat. With a gasp, I tighten my inner muscles around his finger. He pushes deeper inside me, circling his thumb around my slippery clit.

There’s no stopping it. No controlling this wild crescendo of need. I press my forehead to his chest as the wave rises higher and higher before bursting into an explosion that shoots me up to the stars. I cry out, holding on to him as he rubs my folds and strokes my clit, his low murmurs of approval easing my shock as I descend the other side of the wave.

He’s breathing almost as hard as I am, and lord in heaven, that bulge at the front of his jeans is like stone. Panting, I slide my hand down his chest, feeling the rapid beat of his heart before my palm comes into contact with his erection.

My own heart skips a thousand beats. Although I don’t know anything about men’s penises or their various sizes, he feels absolutely huge, his cock a thick, heavy ridge throbbing against my hand.

He grips my wrist, a grimace twisting his mouth. “Keep touching me like that, and I’ll come in my pants like a fifteen-year-old.”

“Hmm.” I flash him a grin. “Well, your wish is my command.”

A chuckle echoes through him, even as he stiffens even more in my hand.

“Can I take it out?” I start fumbling to unfasten the button of his jeans, my fingers shaking with nerves and anticipation. “I want to see what you look like.”

I manage to get his jeans down to his hips, and my pulse skyrocketed at the sight of the large damp circle spreading over

the front of his boxer briefs. I touch it with a trembling finger and start to pull them down.

For an instant, I feel his gaze slide over my face. “Have you ever seen an erection before?”

“Nope. But that’s another *first time* I’ve been—oh my god.” I stare down at the solid rod of flesh that just sprang free, rising between us like a living creature. *Massive* is a better word for the size of the thing. It’s long and so thick I can’t even get my fingers all the way around it. The shaft is pulsing with veins, the mushroom-shaped head swollen and glossy with fluids.

I’m utterly fascinated. Intimidating as it is, I can’t resist the urge to explore. I slide my hand underneath the shaft like I’m weighing it and brush my fingertips against the heavy, tight sac of his testicles.

Instinct tells me what to do. Slowly, I stroke and squeeze his shaft up and down, lubricating the path with his fluids. His breathing increases, and a dizzying sense of power rises in me when he shoves his hips forward to fuck my hand. People might think of him as a cold, remote Ice Prick, but now I know the truth. Maybe I’m the only one who does.

Dr. Gavin Stark is hotter than a furnace and burning with lust, his desire barely leashed behind his implacable exterior. But *unleashed*, it’s a force of nature.

“Christ, I’m already about to come.” He rests his hand on the wall beside my head, his breath sawing in and out of his lungs. “Tighter...*fuck*, yeah. Spread your legs. I’m going to shoot all over your cunt, and you’ll find out what it’s like to have me dripping down your thighs...harder...ah, shit... almost there...*ah!*”

A rough shout tears from his throat as he thrusts into my hand. Semen spurts out of the tip of his cock in pulsing streams, splashing onto my pussy and lower belly. His shaft ripples and throbs in my grip.

I’m so flushed and aroused again that all I have to do is squeeze my thighs together to put pressure on my clit, and

another orgasm shudders through me.

Gavin curses, his breath rasping against my hair as he slowly pulls away from me and hitches up his briefs and jeans. He grabs a tissue from a box on a table and cleans me off before bending to slide my underwear and pants back up my legs.

“It’s not regulation underwear,” he murmurs, rising and brushing his lips against my forehead. “But I’ll make an exception for you.”

“Hmm.” I adjust the pants around my hips. “Do you often make exceptions for people?”

“Never.” The hint of a smile curves his mouth. “Until now.”

“Careful, Dr. Stark.” I stand on tiptoe to kiss his chin. “Your reputation as the Beast of Needle Island is at stake here.”

I ease away from him. Over his shoulder, my gaze snags on the screen of my laptop. I gasp, my heart plummeting to my stomach like an anvil.

“Oh, my god.” I put my hands over my face as a burn scorches my cheeks. “Is my video chat open?”

# Chapter Seven

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JOSIE

WE DART AWAY from each other so fast the air almost shatters. I veer out of the camera's range, panic clutching my chest.

Gavin strides over to my laptop. Sure enough, the little red camera light is on.

I press my hands to my hot cheeks. Good god. What if one of my professors or the Penguin Research Group coordinator inadvertently saw—

“It's okay.” Gavin lets out a long breath and taps a few keys to turn off the camera. “The application isn't open. But you might want to keep the camera covered, just in case.”

With a groan, I lower my hands from my face, relief flowing through me. “Thank all the stars in the universe. That would have been quite a show.”

He shoots me a faint grin though tension lines his shoulders. My fear slowly ebbs.

“Hey.” I approach and rest my hand on his arm. “You're not my boss. I mean, you're in charge, but you're not supervising my research. So it's not like we're breaking the rules by getting...”

*Involved?* That's probably not the right word.

“Intimate,” I finally say.

“We're not breaking any rules, but this isn't what either of us was expecting.” He strokes my hair, rubbing a few strands between his fingers.

“Well, nothing in Antarctica is predictable.” I shrug. “So whatever we do is right in the spirit of the whole continent.”

I wink at him, and I’m rewarded by what looks almost like a full-fledged smile before he takes his hand from me and goes into the kitchen.

I turn, glancing over all the maps and graphs tacked to the walls. A long table in front of the windows holds his computers and equipment. The impressive and elaborate setup has state-of-the-art computers, three telescopes, two microscopes, electronic devices, and various machines, but what catches my attention are the screensavers drifting over all the monitors.

If I’d thought about it, I’d have expected Dr. Stark’s screensavers to be geometric or abstract shapes. Instead, bright and colorful images fill the screens—yellow sunflowers; lush, green forests; rolling hills covered in orange-and-red fall foliage; and a field dotted with an array of wildflowers.

“You want cream and sugar?” His gruff voice sounds behind me.

I turn. He’s standing in the kitchen doorway, holding a mug of coffee. He points at it.

“Yes, please.” I nod. “A tablespoon of cream and two sugars.” I wince after the request comes out. “Wait, I can get it. You don’t have to—”

But he’s already walking back to the kitchen. He returns and sets the coffee near my computer. “No cream. Only powdered milk here.”

“Of course. That’s fine.” I return to my computer, squashing the urge to ask him about the screensavers. They seem deliberate, as though he created a wall of color against the pure white of the Antarctic landscape.

Or they’re just the system default screensavers, which is a far more plausible explanation.

“Thank you.” I sit back down at my laptop and take a sip of the coffee.

Rather than going to his computer, he lowers himself into a chair close to my workstation.

“What’s in there?” He points his chin at the black bag I’d taken out of my backpack.

“The flipper tags.” I unzip the bag and remove a few metal tags, holding them out to him. “I’m planning to start tagging the penguins later this week. Tomorrow, I just want to observe, take photos, and get the cameras set up.”

He takes one of the tags from my hand. His fingers brush against my palm, sending a ripple up my arm all the way to my shoulder. He studies the tag and indicates my laptop.

“You store all the data in this program?”

I nod and pull up the list of tag numbers and details. Both to my surprise and pleasure, he edges his chair closer and studies the screen.

“Are you working with any other students?” he asks.

“Not on this project, no. But I’m part of a student research group that’s putting together a penguin education website. I’m hoping to connect the webcams to it so people can see penguins in real-time and in their natural habitat.”

“What’s your career goal?”

“Anything that allows me to continue working with penguins. Maybe a job with a conservation science center. I could teach, but I really prefer field research. I’d love to find a way to travel and work on location like you do.”

Something flickers in his eyes that I can’t quite read—though it doesn’t seem like skepticism.

“You shouldn’t do what I do,” he says flatly.

“Why not?”

“You need to work with people and network.” He indicates my computer. “Your professors and the PRG all had great things to say about you. You should collaborate and get involved with research groups. Publish papers, give

presentations, attend conferences. Don't get yourself stuck in one place."

I swivel in my chair to face him, my curiosity rising. "Like you?"

He shrugs, his expression shuttered. "I'm at the stage in my career where I can do what I want. You're just starting. You're new."

I roll my eyes, sensing where this is heading. "And you're old?"

He frowns. "I'm experienced."

"I know." I shoot him a grin.

He huffs out a laugh and pushes his chair back, touching the back of my neck. "You should get some sleep. The blackout curtains in your room will help keep your circadian rhythms stable."

I stand and stretch. Despite the long travel and the shocking wildness of what's happening between Dr. Stark and me, I feel more energized and alive than I've ever been. But since I haven't even unpacked yet, I head back to my bunk.

I take Oswald out of my travel bag and set him on the bed.

"We're here," I tell him, patting his fuzzy head.

Excitement rushes through me. I already like who I am down here at the bottom of the world—or who I'm becoming. I'm bold, adventurous, and brave.

Or maybe I've always been this way. Maybe I just needed glaciers, penguins, and an ice scientist to discover the truth about myself.



# Chapter Eight

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GAVIN

I'M UP BEFORE DAWN. Though the Antarctic sky is never dark in the summer, my internal rhythms have adapted to a regular day-and-night schedule.

I make coffee, get the potbelly stove in the workroom going, then sit down to work. I expect Josie to sleep in after her trip yesterday, but she wakes not long after I do.

I'd been aware of her all night, almost like I could hear her breathing. Now she's shuffling around her bunk. The bathroom door closes. The water runs. I picture her naked in the shower—running her hands over her soapy tits, skin all wet and glistening—

With a groan, I shove the fantasy aside and refocus on the mass balance graph. I want to convince myself that my explosive reaction to her is the result of not having gotten laid in a while. My lifestyle doesn't even lend itself well to one-night stands, much less short-term relationships. Not that I've been looking for one. Solitude is how I live, even if I get sick of my own company.

But it turns out Josie isn't just an outlet for my pent-up lust. I'd come so hard it almost hurt, and there's no way in hell any other guy is taking her virginity, but I want more of her than that. I'm hungry for her smiles, her laughter, and her bright view of the world. I want to fuck her until she screams, and then I want her to tell me about the Christmas when Santa brought her a stuffed penguin.

I've kept my sanity while living in isolation for years. But less than twenty-four hours with Josie Bennett, and I'm losing my mind. Losing my grip, my focus, my drive.

And I might be losing my heart—assuming I still have one.

“Good morning!” Her perky greeting cuts into my thoughts.

I turn from the computer, and my breath almost stops. She enters the workroom looking like the sky and a grassy field in a green thermal shirt, blue stretch pants, and a blue cotton scarf dangling around her neck. Her dark hair practically bounces as she walks, the streak of white spilling like cream down the side.

I'm seized with an urge to cross the room, envelop her in my arms, and kiss her. But if I do, I'll never let her go.

I stalk into the kitchen, which is separated from the workroom by a low counter. After pouring a cup of coffee, I add a tablespoon of powdered milk and two sugars and set it down. I nod for her to take it.

“Thank you.” She flashes me a smile, and my chest tightens.

She takes a sip of coffee, murmuring a noise of pleasure that goes straight to my dick. My control is nearing its breaking point, and all she's done is walk into the goddamn room.

“This is so incredible.” She crosses to the window, letting out a breath of amazement. “I'll bet you never get tired of this view. Look, I think that's a Weddell seal. They have such cute faces. I hope I'll get to see an orca before I leave.”

“Do you want breakfast?” The question comes out almost like an accusation.

“Sure.” She doesn't blink at my snarly tone. “Oh, that reminds me...”

She hurries back to her bunk, returning with a cloth sack. She takes out a bunch of bananas and a couple of bags of apples and oranges. “I brought these for you from Hamilton

station. They just had a supply delivery, so they're still pretty fresh. I know it's tough getting produce down here."

She sets the fruit out on the counter. The smell of the bananas hits me like a wave of tropical air. I curl my hand around my coffee mug to stop myself from grabbing one.

"Thank you," I say grudgingly.

"No problem." She hitches herself onto a stool at the counter. "When can I see the penguins? As a matter of fact, where *are* the penguins?"

"Across the ridge." I nod in the vague direction of the shore as I mix a bowl of powdered eggs. "It's close to an hour's walk. I'll take you over there after you eat."

She blinks. "You don't have to take me. I meant it when I said I won't disturb you."

*Way too late, sweetheart.*

"I only have some data analysis to do today." I shrug like it's no big deal for me to spend the next few hours with her.

She studies me over the rim of her mug. "I know you didn't create your reputation, but why haven't you done anything to change it? Especially when it's so obviously wrong."

"Obviously, huh?"

Two pink spots appear on her cheeks. "Obvious to *me*, I mean. Especially after yesterday."

"Don't get any illusions, little girl." I plant my hands flat on the counter and lean closer to her. "I'm a mean, nasty, cold-hearted son of a bitch who would just as soon send you packing than be nice to you in any way."

She smirks, then hitches herself up and leans across the counter to kiss me. The warm press of her lips ignites my blood.

"Mm-hmm," she murmurs against my mouth. "Keep growling at me, Dr. Stark. It's super sexy, even if I already know you're really just a big ole softie."

Yeah. She's got me. I'm trapped, locked down. There's no way out.

"I've got news for you, honey." Breaking the kiss, I round the counter and grab her hips, turning her to face me. I push between her legs, shoving my dick against her crotch. "I'm not soft around you. I'm as hard as fucking steel, and you're the only one who can do something about it."

"Oh." Her eyes widen, and she wiggles a little against my erection. "But you...um, you must have to rely on your own devices a lot down here."

"That's not the reason I'm about to explode." I spear my hand into her hair, tilting her face up to mine.

Christ, that *look* she gives me—like I'm as fucking awe-inspiring as the glaciers.

I can't stop it—this need boiling inside me like the rumble of an active volcano. I'm caught up in her intelligence, her backbone, her awe of the whole fucking world. She could find wonder and beauty in anything—a rock, a snake, a beetle.

A hostile, reclusive Ice Prick.

"*You're* the reason," I tell her, digging my fingers into her thick mass of hair. "You're hot as hell and so goddamn beautiful that you make my knees weak. There is no way I can survive you living here if I don't make you mine. And I will. In more ways than you know even exist. You want it, don't you? Just the thought makes you wet and hungry."

She stares at me, her face still flushed. I flatten my hand against her cunt. Jesus. Her heat burns through the material of her pants. A thick seam runs right down the center of her crotch. I press my finger against the hard ridge, rubbing it into her cleft. She lets out a sigh and spreads her legs wider.

She's hungry, all right. Ripe. Her virginity is tangible, but she's eager to learn. And yesterday was only the first lesson.

"Did you touch yourself last night?" I push the seam harder against her, finding her clit. "Did you make yourself come again while thinking about me fingering you?"

She sucks in a breath and fists her hand in my shirt. “Y-Yes.”

“Yes, what?”

“Yes, *sir*.” Josie moans and presses her forehead against my chest. “I’ve never...never done this before...never felt anything like this before, but I swear, all you have to do is look at me, and I just get so hot...”

Like now. She’s starting to squirm. I can almost smell her arousal. I take my hand out from between her legs and grab the waistband of her pants. With a few quick tugs, I yank them down her legs and off.

Ah, fuck me. Her panties are pale pink and decorated with pictures of strawberries. The cotton clings to her damp cleft. The sweet, musky scent of her is like a goddamn perfume.

“No way are you escaping me.” I shove her legs farther apart and hook my finger into the elastic of her panties at her inner thigh. I push the material aside to expose her plump little pussy.

A bolt of heat shoots through my cock, pushing it against my fly. She’s wet all right—so pink, glistening, and quivery that it’s all I can do to stop myself from hauling her onto the counter and shoving deep inside her, claiming what’s already mine and marking her from the inside out.

“Look at you all open and ready.” I pull the elastic farther to the side, holding it in place with my left hand while I bring my right hand up to rub her outer labia.

“Oh...” She twitches and grabs the edge of the counter. “I’m really glad there aren’t any rules.”

“None. Not about fucking, at least. And if there were, I’d burn them all to the ground.”

She’s gripping the counter so hard her knuckles are white. She’s trembling. A curse splits through my head. I cover her back up and stroke my palms up and down her thighs.

“Am I scaring you?” My voice is husky, serrated with need. “I may be an asshole, but I swear to god, Josie, I would

never hurt you. Yeah, I can be rough and dirty...and I want to fuck you in ways that haven't even been invented yet, but the last thing I would ever do is hurt you."

"Oh, I know that." She pulls back to look at me, and the trust in her blue eyes breaks my heart right in half. "I'm just... I've never done this kind of thing before."

"I know you haven't."

"I mean...like anything. I haven't even dated."

Hard satisfaction fills me. "At all?"

She shakes her head. "I'm putting myself through college, and I've been so focused on my studies that I just haven't had a chance. Or the desire, really. Not until now."

"Good." The word is a bite of possessiveness. I won't tell her it's fucking fantastic that no other guy has touched her. No one will, either. This girl belongs to me.

"Good that I don't know what I'm doing?" she asks.

I almost laugh. "You definitely know what you're doing." I press my lips between her eyebrows. "Or at least, you're learning. You passed yesterday's lessons with flying colors."

"I've always been a really good student," she breathes.

"You're a star student. A-fucking-plus. Top of the class. Let's move on to lesson number three."

I slide my hand back to her pussy. She opens her thighs. Christ, she's so damn perfect. I pull her panties to the side again and go down on my knees.

She gasps. "Dr. Stark!"

I stroke her pussy again, delving my fingers deeper to find her clit. I can almost see her throbbing with need. I push one finger into her pussy and groan. Fuck, I want my dick there so bad.

Not yet. But soon.

"Dr. Stark..."

"I think you can call me Gavin now."

“G-Gavin.” She stumbles over my name. “But what are you...oh!”

I lick her from her opening all the way up to her clit. The honeyed taste of her fills me, floods me. She drives her fingers into my hair like she’s holding on for dear life.

“This is cunnilingus,” I murmur, stroking my tongue over her folds. “When done right, it’s a fucking paradise for both parties.”

“Oh, my goodness, I can’t believe how it...god...” She writhes her hips, trying to grind herself against my face. “It feels so good.”

Her squirming and moaning have my cock practically bursting out of my jeans. I’m still holding her underwear away from her cunt with one hand, but we’re both so revved up that I don’t stop to take them all the way off. She hooks one leg over my shoulder, tightening her grip on my hair.

“Come on, baby.” I take her clit between my lips and suck. “Give it to me. Come so hard you forget your own name.”

Her whimpers and moans rise to a fevered pitch. I grab her ass with one hand, holding her in place as I keep working her. She tenses, her body stiffening.

“It’s happening...Gav...Dr. Stark...I’m...” The broken words pour out of her right before she gives a choked shout.

*Yes.* She convulses so intensely she almost tumbles off the stool, flooding my mouth with cream. I grip her harder, keeping her steady, drinking her up until the vibrations begin to slow.

“I can’t move,” she gasps, still clinging to me. “That was incredible.”

I straighten, grimacing at the painful throb of my dick, and slide my hand to the back of her neck. Her breath puffs against my lips. I kiss her deeply, sweeping my tongue into her mouth.

“See how good you taste?” I murmur. “How fucking sweet?”



She makes a muffled noise of pleasure and strokes her hand down the side of my face.

An emotion that feels close to tenderness nudges at me. I pull away from her and grab a napkin off the counter, cleaning her up before tugging her underwear and pants back on. Her breathing slows, and she reaches out to palm my erection.

“What about you?” she whispers.

“No.”

“Why not?” A little frown line forms between her eyes. “Did I not do it right yesterday?”

Holy god, she’s killing me. I don’t want to die any other way.

I press my hands to both sides of her head, resting my forehead against hers. “You did it more than right. You did it so damn right I don’t want anyone else to touch me. Ever. Just you. Only you.”

“Then why won’t you let me do it again?”

“Because the next time I come,” I say slowly, “I’ll be buried so deep inside you neither of us will know where you start and I end. Your sweet cunt will be stuffed full of my cock, stretched wider than it’s ever been before. I’ll fuck you until you come like a goddamned earthquake. You’ll think you can’t possibly take any more, but then you will. You’ll tighten your pussy around my dick and beg me to shoot inside you, to fill you up. You’re going to feel me inside you for days.”

She blinks. Stares at me. Opens her mouth, then closes it.

“None of that is in my contract,” she finally squeaks. “But I might be able to make an exception for you.”

I laugh and pull her into my arms. She presses herself up against me and slides her arms around my waist. Though I’m tempted to drag her to my bed right now, work be damned, she’s here for a reason—and it isn’t me.

## Chapter Nine

GAVIN

THE THOUGHT SPLINTERS through my lust. I'm not the reason Josie is here—and I won't be the reason she leaves. She has a deadline. One month. Minus a day already.

I reluctantly detach myself from her and pick up her coffee mug.

“Unfortunately,” I say, “we should get going right now.”

She slides her hands through her hair and swivels back to face the counter. After reheating her coffee, I get back to making her breakfast.

Two days ago, I was looking for a way to stop her from coming here. Now I can't imagine ever letting her go. I don't want to. I want to keep her here, trapped like a princess in a castle, hidden away on the distant island where she belongs only to me.

Except there's a whole fucking world out there past the ice and the cold.

“You have all your research stuff ready?” I ask.

“Everything's in my backpack.” She takes a swallow of coffee and wipes the corner of her mouth. “Have you seen the penguins yet?”

“A few times. They just started breeding. There are hundreds of them.”

She nods eagerly. “That's why the PRG was so determined to start studying this particular colony. They'll be able to tell

us so much about the state of the environment. I'm going to set up some remote cameras so I can continue monitoring them back in California. I want to keep track of their behavior and activity patterns."

Ignoring the idea of her back in California, I load the eggs onto a plate with a few slices of bacon I'd cooked earlier, slather two pieces of toast with butter, and set it all in front of her.

"Eat everything," I say. "And help yourself to whatever's in the pantry. You need to drink plenty of water and take in a lot of calories here."

"You don't have to tell me twice." She picks up a fork and digs into the mushy eggs. Her shirt sleeves are pushed up to her elbows, and there's a little tattoo of an Adélie penguin on her inner right forearm.

"Good thing you became a penguinologist." I brush my fingers against the ink. "Given that you have such an unusual birthmark."

She snorts and giggles at the same time. Her amusement makes me feel like I just won the lottery.

"I guess you don't have any tattoos," she remarks, eyeing my chest.

"No. I don't know what kind of a tattoo a glaciologist should get anyway."

"A snowflake, maybe," she suggests, nibbling on a piece of bacon. "Or an ice cube. Hey, can I ask you something?"

"You just did."

She grins. "And your answer is...?"

Though wariness stabs me, I nod. "Go ahead."

"Why did you say you have to put up with me if you want to stay on Needle Island?"

I toss the dishrag onto the counter. "I'm here on the approval of the US Science Foundation. They don't fund my research, but they're in charge of the Needle Island Research

Station. I have a yearly contract with them to live and work here. But now the USF is extending its budget to wildlife and climate change research, which is why they're partnering with the Penguin Research Group. The USF director told me that if I didn't let you stay here, they wouldn't renew my contract."

She processes that. "And what would happen if they didn't renew your contract? If you had to leave Needle Island?"

"I'd have to find somewhere else to live."

"Like somewhere among people? Somewhere that's not the most remote, isolated place on the planet?" Though her voice is casual, her blue gaze is too penetrating, as if she knows there's shit buried under the ice—and that she's cracking through it.

"Be ready to go in fifteen minutes." I glance at the utilitarian clock on the wall, not caring that my change of subject was abrupt.

"Your wish is my command," Josie murmurs.

I would kill to see her grant all my wishes and obey all my commands. She knows it too. I turn away from her and head back to my room.

*Fire.*

That's what she is. A hot, bright flame burning through my fortress. And though I've spent most of my life avoiding fire, I don't know how to stop Josie's burn. I don't think I even want to.

The door to her room is half open. I stop and look in. Already, evidence of *her* is everywhere. Her clothes are all neatly hung in the tiny closet, photos are tacked to the walls, and a stack of books rests on the nightstand. A patchwork quilt I've never seen before is folded at the foot of the bed, and a stuffed penguin sits on top of the pillow.

I go in and pick the penguin up. It's soft plush with big, sparkly plastic eyes and an apparent grin. It's a little worn around the edges—some of the fur is rubbed thin in places—but it looks oddly happy and well-loved.

Oswald. She's held on to him for over a decade.

I put him back on the bed and cross the hallway to my room, still trying to ignore the strange feeling in my chest. The one telling me I can't imagine returning to a life devoid of Josie Bennett.

She's waiting by the door when I come out, dressed in all her outerwear and carrying her loaded backpack. Her eyes are bright, excitement radiating from her like an aura.

Though I'm not a penguin researcher, I understand her anticipation. The moments before going onto the ice are always loaded with the possibility of new discoveries.

I scan her from head to toe, ensuring she's not only dressed well but that her boots are good for the forty-five-minute hike over rocky terrain.

"Where's your gaiter?" I ask.

"My gaiter?"

"Neck warmer." I indicate her bare neck. "It'll protect your neck and the lower part of your face, plus it stops snow and wind from getting into your clothes."

"I don't have one." Her forehead crinkles. "Well, crap. Did I seriously forget something?"

"You can use one of mine." I dig through the front closet and produce a blue fleece gaiter. I tug it over her head and arrange it around her neck, unable to stop myself from twisting the white streak in her hair around my finger.

"Black and white," I remark. "Is this also an homage to penguins?"

She nods. "I love them."

*Lucky penguins.*

"Then you'd better hurry up and meet them." I take her heavy backpack and push open the door.

Despite the cold, the sun is shining, and only a few clouds skim the horizon. But the clear weather doesn't promise

anything. I know from experience that we could get hit with a bad storm in fifteen minutes.

We slowly make our way over the rocks to the shore housing the penguins' breeding grounds. Josie's breath comes fast, her attention focused on avoiding hazards.

"Don't go to the colony without me," I tell her. "It's dangerous for you to be out here alone."

She shoots me a glance. "But you go on the ice alone."

"Only here on the island, and I'm never without communication. I do a lot of fieldwork with other scientists on the continent. There are always researchers at Hamilton station during the summer."

She climbs over a large pile of rocks. I grab her elbow to keep her steady.

"From the way it sounds, and like I said, I really try not to believe gossip," she says, "but the consensus is that you don't work with anyone."

"Not entirely true." As we walk up the last slope to the beach, the sound of the penguins squawking and rustling gets louder. "I do my own research, but I'd be a lousy scientist if I didn't collaborate to some extent. And I'd be an idiot if I went too far out on the ice alone."

"So if you do any fieldwork while I'm here..." She takes hold of my arm as she balances on the ridge. "Do you think I could go with you?"

I don't know what to say. I've never been too comfortable with other people in the field. Even though I work with other scientists, I'm not really part of a team.

But Josie...I can see her there, peering over my shoulder as I service the GPS units, asking endless questions about the geophysical surveys, exclaiming over the beauty of the ice stream. I see her stripping down to her non-regulation underwear in the tiny field tent, her skin rosy, her eyes getting hot as she waits for me to—

I clear my throat. "Maybe."

She starts to respond, then stops and stares over the ridge. Her eyes widen, and her mouth drops open.

Hundreds of penguins are spread over the rocky, barren beach—waddling, squawking, pecking, eating. A few are swimming in the metal-gray water, and the air is alive with the sound of the animals chirping, honking, and braying.

Josie brings her hand to her mouth. Her eyes are brighter than usual, glassy with tears.

Something twists hard inside me. I grab her around the shoulders, pulling her close and tucking her under my arm.

“Okay?” I ask gruffly.

“I’m just so happy.” She laughs, wiping her eyes on her sleeve. “This is the first time I’m seeing penguins outside of the zoo. They’re absolutely beautiful.”

Though that’s not the word I would use for the chunky little creatures, I love her happiness. I want to give her more of it.

Without thinking, I press a hard kiss on her mouth. “Go on, then. I’ll be here.”

Her smile lights up the whole beach. She takes her backpack from me and hurries to join the penguins.

I watch her go. I’m falling hard and fast. The impact will hurt like hell, but there’s no fucking way I’m getting off this ride.



# Chapter Ten

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ICE PRICK. Ha!

Underneath his forbidding exterior, Dr. Stark is the entire spectrum of heat—from warm to scorching hot and everything in between. Not to mention levels that are exclusive to him.

And I'm not exactly sorry the rest of the world doesn't know the man behind the shield of ice. If people knew what he's really like, they'd never leave him alone. As it is, he's already in enough demand.

I don't want the rest of the world to fight for more of Gavin Stark. I want him all to myself. Selfish? Yes, but true.

Aside from the fact that he shoots me right up into the stars—I'm still throbbing from what he did to me this morning—he's just...well, "nice" isn't exactly the right word, but he's generous. Considerate. Tender, even, though he'd balk at being called that.

He's controlling as hell, yes, but it turns out I don't exactly mind being handled. And I love the contrast between his steely exterior and his chivalrous side. I love that he made me come, then reheated my coffee and cooked me breakfast. I love his low-key humor. I love that he pretended he doesn't have anything else to do today so he could take me to the penguins.

I love—

Well. I just love being here.

I finish setting up another remote camera. I've spent the morning taking pictures of the penguins, recording observations, and just watching them in awe. A few fuzzy baby penguins are wandering around, though most of the eggs haven't hatched yet.

The whole colony is utterly captivating—yes, the penguins are funny with their waddling walk and flapping wings, but they're also a fascinating microcosm of nature and society.

They peck and preen, watch over their nests, defend their eggs from the large, predatory skuas, play, court, and fight. Their clumsy waddle turns fluidly graceful when they dive into the water and swim, porpoising through the metal-gray ocean and sliding on icy surfaces like dancers.

While I almost can't believe I'm being paid to do this, I also know I was meant to be here. This is where my career, life's work, and passion really begin.

This is where *I* begin.

I zoom in on a couple of baby penguins huddling at their mother's feet. She lifts her wings to protect them from the cold wind coming off the ocean. Although the morning was sunny and somewhat warm—comparatively speaking—the temperature has been dropping throughout the day. The frigid wind is starting to pick up, bringing gusts of snow onto the shore.

I pull the neck gaiter up over my mouth and nose. Gavin's musky, spicy scent clings to the fleece, and I inhale a deep breath like I'm pulling him into my blood.

His tall silhouette is visible on the ridge separating the field station from the penguin colony. Dark clouds have blotted out the sun. He's looking out at the vast, gray ocean peppered with ice floes and bergs. A massive glacier looms on the opposite shore.

My heart constricts. He belongs here. He understands all the movements and nuances of this vast ice sheet. He knows the details of the life that exists on, inside, and under the ice. He's studied the mountains, streams, and volcanoes. He can

decipher an ice core to reconstruct thousands of years of climate history.

But how did the ice get inside him? Why did he let the cold freeze his heart—on the outside, at least? Why has he retreated from the world?

Squawking noises tear my attention away from him. A rotund penguin shuffles past, and I lift my camera to take a few pictures. A flurry of activity rises from the penguins near the shore, and they waddle hurriedly across the beach to their nesting areas. Fog boils over the water.

“Josie.” Gavin’s voice carries on the snowy wind. He’s descending the ridge toward me, moving rapidly around the rocks and the chaos of penguins. “Storm’s coming in. We need to get back.”

“Okay.” I turn to put my camera away. The approaching storm explains the penguins’ urgency to protect their nests. “I just need to pack up.”

Gavin pulls my parka hood more securely over my head and tightens the Velcro fastenings. He helps load my equipment into my backpack, then hitches the straps over his shoulders despite my protest that I can carry my own stuff.

“Let’s go.” He takes my hand, hurrying me back over to the ridge toward the field house.

The sky is getting darker by the second—much darker than regular nighttime in the Northern Hemisphere. Whitecaps ripple over the ocean’s surface and the waves splash higher and higher. The penguins are all hurrying to take cover.

I know the weather in Antarctica can change in the blink of an eye, but I hadn’t known storms could come in so fast. Faster than you can outrun them.

Faint panic rises in me. Our walk here took over forty-five minutes. In a storm, it’ll take even longer. And the wind—the most dangerous part of an Antarctic storm—is getting stronger, buffeting across the beach, the rocks, the glaciers.

A sharp gust pushes me sideways, edging under my hood. Ice shards sting the upper part of my face. My hand breaks

away from Gavin's, and I stumble. The rocky ground rushes toward me. He clamps his arm around my waist, hauling me up right before impact.

"Hold on to me." His voice is almost a shout in the increasing wind. "I won't let you go."

I don't have to be told twice. Right now, he's the only secure element in what is becoming a whirlwind of a storm—no, a blizzard.

The fog is so dense I can't see more than two feet in front of me. Icy snow swirls in a vortex around us. I'd taken my sunglasses off to use my camera, and I didn't have a chance to put them back on. The gusts of snow are blinding, and the temperature has dropped at least twenty degrees.

I try to keep my hand clamped around Gavin's, but the cold penetrates my gloves and numbs my fingers. He's there, though, solid as a mountain. His arm comes down over my shoulders, and he pulls me into his considerable warmth. Ice rains down and coats the rocks. My boots slip over the jagged surfaces. My leg muscles ache.

We keep going. Snow stings my eyes. My face—which has been cold all day—now feels frozen. I lose track of where we are and how long we've been slogging through the storm. The whirling snow blocks any view of the field house. If I were alone, I'd be so turned around I might end up walking right into the ocean.

My foot slips on a boulder, and I twist my ankle. I gasp and stumble off balance again. Gavin grips me harder, almost pulling me off my feet. He's the only thing keeping me upright against the fierce wind. He shouts something else, but I can't hear him past my hood and the howling wind.

Finally, the rocky incline levels off, and the blurred outlines of the warehouse and garage appear through the fog and white gusts. Relief bursts through me, propelling me a few more steps.

Gavin grabs me around the waist, shoving me in front of him toward the house. He reaches past me to open the door.

The blast of warm air makes my head spin.

I stagger inside, heaving gasps into my aching lungs and blinking to clear my vision.

“Get your parka off and warm up *now*.” Gavin slams the door, his breath coming fast as he unfastens my parka and pulls it off me. “Sit down.”

He pushes me toward the bench in the foyer. I sink down gratefully. I was too cold to shiver outside, but now the reaction hits me like a punch. My teeth rattle.

“Fucking hell, I’m so sorry.” His voice is hard. He yanks off his parka and goes down on his knees to unlace my wet boots.

A part of me registers that his hands are shaking, his muscles tense with anger. I’m unable to make sense of his apology. He can’t control the weather.

He tugs off my boots and socks, then rises to unzip my coveralls, taking all my outerwear off me with quick efficiency. I’m starting to thaw, the blood rushing back to the surface of my skin and my breath easing in my throat.

“You need to be dry.” Gavin pushes my damp hair off my forehead and throws my clothes in a pile. “Get over by the stove.”

He shoves his boots off, and we go into the workroom, which is warmer than the foyer. He stokes the fire in the potbelly stove and gestures to the sofa.

“Sit and put your feet here.” He plants a stool close to the stove.

“Gavin, I’m okay now.” I touch his leg. “You have to warm up too.”

He stalks to the kitchen, his whole body lined with restless energy. When he returns, he hands me a mug of hot cocoa and steps back, hands on his hips and his expression dark.

“Drink,” he orders.

I close my fingers around the mug and take a sip. The chocolate slides deliciously down my throat, and heat spreads through my chest.

“I’m fine.” I pat the sofa cushion next to me. “Sit down, please. Why are you so upset? It was a freak storm.”

He frowns, deep lines carved on either side of his mouth. Tension grips his shoulders.

I set the mug down, seized with a desire to ease whatever is gnawing at him. I reach over and grab his hand, tugging him to sit on the sofa. He’s taken off all his outerwear, and he’s already so warm that I can feel his body heat in the scant space between us. He probably didn’t feel the cold much at all, and of course, it wasn’t his first storm by any means.

“Gavin.” I slide my hand over his arm. “I went through extreme cold weather training before I came here. I knew what I was getting into. That’s why my layers insulate, ventilate, and protect me from the wind. You approved my clothes, remember? Well, except one, but we won’t tell anyone about that.”

I nudge him with my elbow, hoping for a smile or gleam of amusement. His features are set, his jaw rigid. I shift to face him and settle my hand on his chest.

“In training, they said skin-to-skin contact is one of the best ways to warm up,” I remark.

That elicits a slight huff, though he’s still frowning.

“Skin-to-skin contact will do more than warm us up,” he mutters roughly. “We’ll fucking combust.”

My heart slams against my ribs. “That’ll certainly take care of any lingering cold.”

He slants his gaze to me, his eyes narrow. “You’re getting yourself in trouble here, little girl.”

“About time.”

I slide my hand down his chest to his abs, my heartbeat kicking into gear at the sensation of the hard muscles under his shirt. “I’m tired of being a rule follower.”

He clamps his hand around my wrist so fast I startle. A muscle jumps in his cheek.

“It was my fucking fault.” He speaks through clenched teeth.

I shake my head. “The storm? Of course it wasn’t.”

“I didn’t see it coming,” he snaps, shoving my hand away from his chest. He pushes to his feet and strides to the windows, which are blocked by sheets of swirling ice. “I should have. I’ve been coming to Antarctica since I was a teenager. I’ve been living here almost exclusively for five fucking years. I always pay attention and know the signs of a storm. I *see* them coming. I know exactly when and how to get to safety before they hit. But this time, I didn’t. And do you know why?”

He turns. His glare slices through me, pinning me to the spot.

“Because of *you*.” He stalks toward me slowly, like a predator after a defenseless prey. “I was too obsessed with watching you and those goddamned penguins. I couldn’t take my eyes off you—how happy you were, how much you loved taking pictures of them, how you kept writing every little observation in your notebook, the way you were setting up the cameras, how mind-blowingly beautiful you are out on the ice, like you fucking *belong* here.”

I can’t breathe. My whole body is hot. He’s so close now I can see the feral glint in his dark eyes, the muscle still pulsing in his jaw.

He stops in front of me, his mouth twisting. He reaches out and grabs a fistful of my hair, tugging my head back so I’m forced to look up at him.

“That’s why I didn’t see the storm,” he hisses, lowering his face to within inches of mine. “Because of you. Because you blocked out the ice and the wind and every inch of this godforsaken frozen continent. Because your light is fucking *blinding* me to everything but you. Because all I can think about is how badly I need to bury myself deep inside you,



even though I'll never want to leave. Because half the time, I want to fuck you into the next century, and the other half, I want to wrap you in cotton so nothing and no one can ever hurt you, least of all me. *That* is why it's my goddamn fault."

His breath rasps through his chest, and his eyes are burning. He tightens his grip on my hair. My scalp prickles. My heart is pounding so hard I hear it in my head.

"Dr. Stark..." I dart my tongue out to lick my dry lips.

His gaze snaps down to follow the movement. "You're fucking killing me, Josie. *Killing me*. You know that, don't you? No, of course you don't. You wouldn't know how to tease a man if your life depended on it. You're a sweet little girl who still sleeps with her stuffed penguin, and if anything had happened to you out there, I'd—"

His voice breaks off, like glass snapping in half.

"Something did happen to me," I whisper. "*You* happened to me."

He stares at me, his breath rasping against my lips. I swallow hard, distinctly aware of the deep throb low in my body. The heat coursing from him and into me burns away any remnants of the cold.

"It's been that way since I stepped onto this island." I lift a shaking hand to touch his cheek. "No, long before that. I've been thinking about you ever since I learned I'd be living with you. You've been *happening* to me for months now. I don't want you to stop."

The air thickens. He's already hard; I see his erection pushing against his pants. I squirm, trying to ease the growing ache between my legs. The one only he can ease.

"If I kiss you right now, and I will," he mutters, inching his fist up closer to my scalp, "then nothing—not a blizzard or a volcano or a fucking asteroid crashing to earth—will stop me from ripping your clothes off and fucking you right here. Hard. Deep. You'll open up your sweet pussy and take every inch of my cock. Over and over again."

My mind is so dazed with lust I can't even speak. But I don't have to. He pulls me to him and crashes his mouth down on mine.

Heat explodes inside me. A muffled moan rises to my throat. Oh, he feels and tastes incredible—all musk and spice and pure, intense male. He brings his other hand to my nape, angling my head before urging my lips apart and sliding his tongue into my mouth.

God in heaven, I'm already throbbing. I had no idea it was even possible to crave someone this much. I didn't know this need for him could become actual physical pain.

"I have to see you." His voice is deep and gravelly. He grabs the three layers I have on and yanks them over my head, raking his gaze over my bra. In one movement, he flicks the clasp and pulls the thin straps down, baring my breasts.

"Sweet fuck." The curse comes out on a growl as he palms my breasts, rubbing his calloused fingers over my nipples. "Everything about you is so goddamn perfect."

I feel like I should be embarrassed or self-conscious about him touching my breasts, but I'm so aroused there's no room for anything else. He takes hold of the waistband of my pants and pulls them off along with my underwear, and then I'm totally naked, and he's looking at me like he wants to devour me.

And I want to be devoured by him more than I've ever wanted anything in my life.

# Chapter Eleven

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JOSIE

HE STEPS AWAY from me to shed his shirt and pants. My breath stops at the sight of his sculpted chest, the slopes of his shoulders, the thick muscles of his arms.

A triangle of dark hair covers his chest, narrowing to a trail that disappears into his boxer briefs. I'm seized with the urge to lick that trail downward and nuzzle my face against the massive bulge of his erection.

He pulls his briefs off, his cock so stiff it practically bursts out. I'm dying to know what he tastes like and how much of him I could even fit in my mouth, but before I can ask, he's sitting beside me and kissing me again.

Dizziness washes over me. I swear I could come from his kiss alone. It's like he's caressing and fucking my mouth in a prelude to what he'll do to the rest of me.

I close my hands around his hard biceps and sink back against the arm of the sofa. He comes over me like a thundercloud, his eyes burning, his breath sawing through the air.

The skin-to-skin contact is electrifying. My nipples rub against his hairy chest, shooting sensations right to my core. His cock nudges against my thigh, and though I'm sharply aware of its size—and that I couldn't even get my hand around it—my body feels like it's softening in readiness.

“Open up,” he murmurs, trailing his lips across my cheek to my ear. “Now. My wish. Your command.”

I obey without thought, parting my thighs. He slides his hand up my legs, delving his fingers into my cleft. I drag a hot breath into my lungs as he pushes a finger inside me.

“You’re so tight and small,” he whispers against my ear, his voice thick. “I’m going to fill you to overflowing.”

Although I’m practically creaming all over his hand, a slight worry rises in me. “What if I can’t...what if you don’t fit?”

A choked laugh rumbles through his chest, and he works another finger into my opening. “It’ll fit, baby. I promise. Your sweet little body will open up like a fucking magic portal, and every inch of my stiff dick will slide inside you.” He presses his mouth down my neck and over my collarbone, his deep murmurs vibrating against my skin. “I’ll sink my cock so deep you’ll feel me up to your eyeballs. I’ll go slow, but you make me so goddamn crazy I don’t know how long I can be gentle. I want you writhing and gasping, begging for more. I want your tits bouncing and your cunt gripping my cock. I’ll make you come like fucking fireworks.”

My lungs burn. Sweat trickles down my temples. I grip his shoulders and spread my legs wider as he pushes his body between my thighs. A part of my mind blisters with disbelief when he starts shoving that huge rod of flesh into my pussy.

There’s no way. Surely, it can’t possibly...

“Oh, my god.” With a gasp, I stare up at him as his cock breaches the opening, and I feel the hard crown inside me. I shift my hips experimentally. “That feels...”

“Don’t move.” His jaw is clenched, his eyes burning. Holding his weight off me with both hands, he pushes forward another inch. “If you move now, I’ll lose what little control I have left. And this isn’t going to end until I’ve fucked you well and thoroughly. Because you are *mine*.”

His words devolve into a growl as he tunnels deeper inside me. And then I can’t move at all, can only cling to him in shock and wild, aching need. He stops once, almost abruptly, and brings his mouth down hard on mine.

“Hold on,” he mutters, gripping my hips and shoving forward.

Sharp pain lances through me. I cry out, the sound lost in the hot pressure of his mouth, and buck upward to dislodge him. But of course I can't, and the weight of his body presses me deeper into the sofa cushions.

“Shh.” He edges his hand between our bodies and rubs my clit, circling it with his forefinger. “It'll be okay. Just wait... ah, fuck, you feel so good. So perfect. You were made to take my cock. All of it until I can't go any deeper.”

He drops his head to my shoulder, his chest heaving against mine, every muscle locked in place as he struggles not to move. I dig my fingernails into his shoulders.

The pain eases, and I become aware of the intense throb of his shaft against my inner flesh. Pleasure begins to circle outward, rippling through my belly like a pebble dropped in a pool of water.

“Dr. Stark,” I whisper, bringing my legs up around his thighs. “Please fuck me.”

He gives a hoarse simultaneous chuckle and groan. “Such a polite little girl. But I'd fuck you no matter how you asked. And before long, I want to hear raw, dirty begging coming out of that beautiful mouth.”

My heart hammers. He pushes forward, filling my channel, stretching me so wide a delicious sting mixes with my growing urgency. He pulls out and then goes back in, his slow thrusts getting increasingly fast and hard.

It's strange and shockingly thrilling, this deep, heavy pumping that ignites my blood. I move by instinct, arching my hips up to meet him as he surges forward.

“Ah, goddamn, you're a fucking dream,” he hisses, capturing my nipple between his lips. “I'm never letting you go. Never. *Never.*”

He thrusts into me hard with each word, his fingers digging into my waist. I stop thinking. I'm so hot I'm burning

from the inside out. My whole body jostles against the cushions, and already I'm starting to ache, but I want—

“More,” I gasp, raking my fingernails down his back. “Harder. I had no idea it could feel like this.”

Somehow, impossibly, it seems like his erection swells even more. His flesh slaps against my bottom, the wet smacking noise filling the air in a heavy rhythm. Urgency spools through me. I tighten my legs around his hips as he fucks me into oblivion.

“Oh.” I squirm, writhing my hips and trying to wedge my hand between our sweaty bodies. “I think I'm close. I need to...”

“No.” He grabs my wrist, pinning my arm against the sofa. He thrusts deep. “You're going to come just from me fucking you. So hard I'll feel it all the way to my bones. Show me how much you want it, how much you need it.”

“Yes.” I moan and sink my teeth into his shoulder as the pressure builds to the point of pain. “Make me come. Please, I'm begging...*god*, I feel you all the way up to my belly... you're so hard and thick. Oh, I feel it now...ah!”

A scream wrenches from deep inside me. Shudders wrack my body, so intense my vision blurs, and I arch wildly upward like I'm trying to drive myself onto his cock. My breath stops.

Through the haze of lust, I'm dimly aware of his deep whispers rasping over my skin, his shaft still plowing into me, wringing every last sensation from my nerve endings.

“Incredible.” He pushes back, shoving his hands under my trembling thighs. Sweat rolls down his chest, and his eyes are feverish. “Now take what I give you like the perfect girl you are. I'm going to fill you like a goddamn flood. Oh, *fuck*.”

His rough shout seems to rend a hole in the fabric of the universe itself. His come spurts inside me, his pulsing cock spiking me into another orgasm.

When he lowers himself on top of me, our damp bodies sealed together and his breath rasping against my neck, I close

my eyes and absorb his weight. I don't want him to unlock himself from me.

"I'm warmed up now," I murmur against his shoulder.

He huffs out a laugh and shifts to the side, pulling me against him. "Skin-to-skin contact works."

"Mmm." I rest my head on his chest. "I see the appeal of ice and all, but that fire...wow. No comparison."

If I weren't pressed so close to him, I might have missed the slight tensing of his muscles.

He presses his lips against the top of my head. "I didn't use a condom. Hell. I don't even know if I have any condoms here."

"It's okay. I'm on birth control for female issues, so there's nothing to worry about."

He's silent for a second before he says, "Actually, I wasn't worried."

The remark slides through my growing fatigue. I pull back to look at him as he rubs his hand over my breasts and touches my necklace, lifting it into his palm.

"What is it?" He peers at the pendant holding a little blue flower.

"A forget-me-not."

"A real one?"

I nod. "Pressed and sealed in glass. My mother gave it to me right before I left for college. Not that I'd ever forget her, of course, but it makes me feel closer to her."

"I haven't seen a real flower in a while." He sets the necklace back in place.

I look at him, almost stunned by the remark. I shouldn't be, of course—only two species of plants grow on this entire continent, and neither of them has flowers—but to know that he hasn't seen a real flower...



“Hey.” He puts his hand under my chin, tilting my face toward him. “What’s wrong?”

“I just realized you haven’t seen flowers or trees or anything *green* in a long time.”

He shrugs like it’s not a big deal. But don’t humans *need* warmth, nature and sunlight, and other people to be happy? He’s had none of those things.

“Where do your parents live?” He strokes his hand down my side.

“Indiana. When I went to Stanford, it was the first time I’d ever left the state.”

“Do you get back to see them often?”

“Unfortunately, no. I’m putting myself through college, so I usually work on holidays and during the summer.” I shift and tuck myself more closely against him. “My mom is a grocery store clerk, and my father is a line cook at a diner. They’re wonderful, and I had a great childhood, but we just didn’t have a lot of money. No college fund either, and Stanford costs a fortune. I got a few small scholarships, but they haven’t made much of a dent in the cost. That’s just one of the reasons I was so fortunate to get the PRG internship. If I do a good enough job, I’m hoping it might lead to something more permanent.”

He brushes my damp hair away from my forehead. A shutter comes down over his expression, closing him off from me.

I poke him in the arm. “Now what’s wrong with you?”

He shakes his head, shifting us both around so he can get to his feet.

“Come on. Shower, then I’ll tuck you in.” He kisses my forehead, then lifts me into his arms.

By the time we’re both in the shower, and he’s soaping me down, I’ve forgotten whatever misgivings were nudging me.

## Chapter Twelve

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## GAVIN

SHE'S CURLED up on the old wing-backed chair in the rec room, her legs tucked under her and her hair damp from a shower. She's wearing a fleece shirt that looks soft and fuzzy, a pair of faded sweatpants, and thick wool socks.

For the past few days, she's stayed with the penguins from morning until late afternoon. After checking four weather forecasts, I've kept my eye on her from the ridge.

Much as I want to be within touching distance of her all the time, I don't trust myself to keep my hands off her when she's close to me. So I let her go off alone into the penguin colony, though I relentlessly watch both her and the horizon.

Today, after we returned to the house, she crashed for an hour-long nap before showering and changing clothes. Then she spent another two hours writing a report and making a list for tomorrow, only taking a break when I made her stop to eat dinner.

I'm constantly aware of her. Like she's a heartbeat. She arrived on Needle Island four days ago, but I can hardly remember when she wasn't here, filling the field house with wonder and joy. I didn't even know those things existed anymore—until now.

Until her.

I set a cup of hot chocolate on the table beside her. She looks up.

“Oh, my favorite.” She smiles with delight and picks up the mug. “And with marshmallows too. You sure know your way into this girl’s heart.”

“Nowhere else I’d rather be.” The instant the words are out, a flush crawls up my neck.

Her smile widens. “Good to know, Dr. Stark.” She nudges the ottoman with her foot. “Have a seat.”

I sit down and take hold of her ankle, bringing her foot onto my lap. I press my thumbs against the sole of her foot and rub. She lets out a soft groan and sinks deeper into the chair.

“Have you come to any conclusions about your penguins?” I massage her toes.

“No, but I named a few of them.” She twists her mouth. “Not great science protocol, but I couldn’t help it. Three of them are the spitting penguin images of the Three Stooges.”

I laugh. “Larry, Curly, and Moe?”

She nods, her gaze on my face. “You don’t have much of a chance to laugh when you’re here all alone, do you?”

“I don’t know. I tell myself a lot of jokes and crack myself up. I think I’m pretty funny.”

“Seriously.” She nudges me in the stomach with her toes. “Don’t you get lonely?”

I shake my head, though before she arrived, I was used to being frozen and hollow. I was accustomed to *not feeling*. Then she blasted into my life and filled the empty spaces. Melted the ice. Made my heart beat again.

The light in her eyes dims suddenly. I frown, my spine tensing. I don’t want anything to *dim* her, least of all me.

“What?” I ask.

“I just don’t like the idea of you here all by yourself.” She puts her other foot on my lap. “Everyone wants to be alone sometimes, but we’re also social creatures. Life is about being with other people, having relationships, and *loving*. Even penguins are rarely alone—they live with their families and

colonies. And within those groups, they stay together in pairs. They need each other.”

“Is that what you’re going to write your paper about?” I pull off her thick sock and massage her bare foot. “Penguin monogamy?”

“Maybe.” She pushes her toes against my stomach again, her heel resting on my groin. No surprise that even her foot makes my dick twitch.

She lifts an eyebrow and shifts, running her foot back and forth on my erection. “Foot fetish, Dr. Stark?”

“Josie fetish, Ms. Bennett.” I press my lips against her big toe. “What’s on your agenda for tomorrow?”

She frowns slightly. “I was planning to start tagging some of the penguins, but I didn’t intend for you to spend all your time at the colony with me. I know you won’t let me go alone, so I’ll do some data analysis from here tomorrow so you can get some of your own work done. What research project are you working on?”

“I’m doing a geophysical surveying of the Castille glacier,” I explain. “I’ve been tracking the glacier’s movements and analyzing the chemical properties of the ice. Next year, I’ll need a team to help with drilling so I can take water samples.”

“Where is the glacier?”

“Across the bay.”

“Will you take me there?”

I rub her foot without responding, even though I already know the answer. Of course I’ll take her to the glacier. I’ll do anything to give her what she wants.

I feel her studying me again. I know what’s coming.

“Why do you spend so much of your time alone?” she asks. “Why don’t you work for a science foundation or teach at Harvard? You’re one of the most renowned scientists in the world as it is, so if you collaborated more and mentored

students, you'd have an even bigger impact. Both in the community and on the research.”

“I'm not interested in being famous.”

“News flash. You already are. And think of the discoveries you could make in glaciology if you were more accessible. Climate change, the environment, geological processes—”

“I know what glaciology is about.” I set her foot back on the floor and stand. “And it's not your job to tell me how to advance my career.”

I turn to leave, but not before the flash of hurt in her eyes stabs me in the heart. Clenching my fists, I stride back to the workroom and pull up my reports on the computer. Less than a minute later, her soft footsteps pad behind me.

“Gavin, I'm sorry.” She settles her hand on my shoulder. “I didn't mean to offend you.”

I exhale slowly and drag my hands down my face. “I'm not offended. But this is my life. It's not going to change. Neither am I.”

She hesitates, tightening her grip on me. “I never want *you* to change. I love you exactly the way you are. Oh.”

My heart slams against my chest. I turn to look at her. She has her hand over her mouth, her eyes wide.

“I didn't mean...um.” She presses her hands to her cheeks, which are bright pink. “Well, I guess I...oh, dear.”

I swallow past a sudden constriction in my throat. Feels like my response is trying to shove its way upward.

I look out the window. It's almost midnight, but the sun hovers on the horizon, throwing gold light over the ice sheets, water, and mountains. I've seen this view hundreds of times. I will always love its stark, cold beauty.

But it's nothing compared to Josie's warmth and heat. She could melt the whole damn continent with her fire.

“I would kill for you, Josie.” My voice is rough. “I meant what I said. You're all I can see, practically all I can think

about. But my Ice Prick reputation is not that undeserved.”

“Oh, please.” She sits on my lap and slides her arm around my shoulders. “We’ve been through this before. I’ve discovered the real you under your icy exterior, and I’m not about to let you retreat now.”

She puts her hand on my cheek, turning my head so she can look at me. I want to drown in her blue eyes.

“I love you, Gavin Stark,” she says again. “Yes, you’re like a glacier. It takes a lot of work and drilling to get past your walls of ice, but underneath, you’re incredibly beautiful. You’re filled with light and color.”

I smother the urge to scoff, not wanting my shitty attitude to crush that hopeful look in her eyes. Instead, I kiss her, letting her warmth and softness burn away the cold.

“If this is where you want to stay, then I’ll be with you for as long as I can,” she whispers, pressing closer to me. “You’ve opened up a part of me that I didn’t even know existed. You’re the only one I want to let inside.”

I’m the only one getting inside. If another bastard even tries to get close to her, I’ll rip him apart with my bare hands.

Except she’ll leave one day—sooner than I can bear—and I won’t be able to protect her from all the crap the world will throw at her. The thought makes me insane. I’ll rip *everything* apart to keep her safe.

“Whoa.” She draws away, searching my face. “You went dark again.”

I force myself back to her and swallow hard. “I want you to have everything you need. Everything you want. I’d move the damn universe to give it all to you.”

“I know you would.” She rubs her hand over my chest. “But what I want most of all is *you*.”

Letting out my breath, I look past her out the window again. Miles and miles of pristine, frozen ice.

Not far from here, the ice shelf attaching the Doomsday glacier to land is shattering and breaking apart. Within a few

years, the shelf will collapse, sending the Florida-sized glacier into the ocean.

The glacier's plunge will raise sea levels, change coastlines, create countless environmental issues, and affect other glaciers. It will cause fracturing, melting, and weakening.

We won't know the repercussions until it happens. We never do.

But there's no stopping it. When a massive, unimaginable weight is about to crash down and change everything, there's not a goddamn thing anyone can do about it.

I tighten my arm around Josie's waist. A flame flickers in the reflection of the window.

"I was eleven." My voice sounds like it's coming from far away. An echo.

She goes very still.

"My parents were killed in a house fire." I wait for the barrage of trauma—the acrid smell of smoke, the heat of the flames, the terrifying crashes of falling beams and exploding windows—and the memories come, but they're dimmed somehow. Like I'm looking at them through a foggy pane of glass.

"Oh, Gavin." Josie presses her hand to my chest. "I'm so sorry."

Tension laces my shoulders. "It happened at night. We were all asleep. My father woke first. The smoke was black. Suffocating. But he came into my room and grabbed me, got me out through the front door. Then he ran back in to get my mother. Neither of them made it out."

She stares at me, her eyes wide and filling with tears. I brush my knuckles against her cheek.

"The investigators said it was an accident." I swallow the stone lodged in my throat. "A candle had been left burning in the kitchen. The flame caught on a napkin, and...well. The



smoke alarm by the front door didn't work. And by the time the upstairs smoke alarm went off, there was no stopping it."

I feel her gaze penetrate deeper. I force myself to look into her eyes. Blue, like the ocean, the forget-me-not, the sky, blueberries.

"Gavin?" A tremble runs through her voice.

"It wasn't an accident." My arm flexes against her waist.  
"It was my fault."

# Chapter Thirteen

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HIS WORDS almost don't make sense. I shake my head.

“I don't...I don't understand.”

He shifts his gaze to the window as if he can see something on the ice.

“My parents had both gone to bed.” His voice is low and flat. “I was up late reading a book about this kid who solves mysteries with physics and science. The book had a bunch of science experiments in the back that you could do at home. One of them was called the Swinging Candle. You suspend a candle on a stick between two glasses and light the wick at both ends. As the candle melts and the wax drips, the candle swings like a seesaw. It sounded cool, so I went downstairs to the kitchen to try it.”

“Gavin, you don't have to—”

“I found a candle and set the experiment up on the kitchen counter.” Tension ripples through him. “It worked. Proved Newton's third law of motion. Equal and opposite reactions, combustion, equilibrium. I watched it for a while, then I wanted a snack. Cheese and crackers. Cookies. I put them on a plate and went into the family room to watch TV while I ate. Totally forgot about the candle. After the program was over, I went to bed. Woke up maybe an hour later to the house on fire.”

I don't know what to say. But there is nothing to say. The horror is unspeakable.

“D-Did the investigators know about the candle?” I stammer.

“Yeah.” He lets out his breath. “The napkin holder was near it on the counter, and the flame caught. But the investigators agreed it was an accident.”

“It *was*. You didn’t do it on purpose.”

“I still did it. The fire never would have happened if I hadn’t struck a match and lit the candle.”

“Oh, Gavin.” My heart is a tight ball of pain for him.

He slides his fingers through my hair. “It’s okay. I mean, it was a long time ago. I’ve dealt with it.”

Has he? Does escaping to the ice, the most frozen place on the planet, really mean he’s “dealt with it”?

Antarctica can extinguish a flame in less than a second. Fire can’t get anywhere near a glacier. Where Dr. Gavin Stark goes, ice is the sovereign ruler.

He can’t get burned.

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I’m almost afraid Gavin’s confession about his past will cool the warmth between us and maybe even bring up his shields again. Instead, it does the opposite. We have nothing left to hide from each other, and our openness brings us even closer.

For the next few days, we alternate between going to the penguin colony and staying at the field house to work. He makes breakfast, I make lunch, and we trek out to the food storage shed together to gather supplies for dinner.

I write daily reports about my penguin observations and email them to the PRG board when I can—though the internet connection is awful. Gavin helps me tag several penguins and sets up a monitor for the remote cameras so I can record and edit the activities at the colony.

He already has plans to collect ice samples from the Castille glacier with a team from Hamilton station, so he arranges for me to accompany them.

Half a dozen men meet us on the shore with equipment—crampons, harnesses, axes, and ropes. Though I went through training before even making travel plans to Antarctica, actually walking on a monumental glacier is awe-inspiring, scary, and humbling all at the same time.

If Antarctica is another world, then the glacier is another planet entirely. Gavin stays close to me, pointing out rivers, waterfalls, caves, ice fields, and meltwater lakes.

I'd considered the idea that his life's work was born from his trauma—and on some level, it probably is—but especially out on the glacier, his deep love for ice, the environment, the Antarctic, and science radiates from him like the rays of the sun.

He may have been drawn to glaciology as a reaction to the devastating fire, but there's no question it's both his passion and his calling.

And though I also know his Ice Prick reputation is patently wrong, it's an unexpected joy to watch him with his fellow scientists. They all bring him supplies from Hamilton that he doesn't often get on the island—fresh eggs, chicken, vegetables, milk, and several pints of ice cream, which I determine is a bad inside joke.

They ask for his opinion on their findings, request that he read their papers and reports—his answer is always yes—and want his advice on everything from the ice-drilling equipment to their efforts to publish a collection of ice-related poems.

Gavin is gracious, attentive, and comfortable with the other men. Although he's not easygoing and chummy like they are, he's a natural leader and clearly the most respected team member. He delegates, listens, gives both suggestions and orders, and ensures everyone knows their duties and has whatever they need. There are moments of levity and laughter, shared pride over their successful fieldwork, and a mind-bending amount of glaciological discussion and collaboration.

When Gavin and I return to Needle Island—cold, windblown, sunburned, and exhilarated—we shower and change, then make a dinner of chicken soup and grilled-cheese sandwiches. We sit down to eat by the potbelly stove in the workroom.

The evening sun hovers on the horizon, turning the ice pink and gold. The hot, hearty soup warms me to my bones, and the sandwich is toasty, buttery, and gooey with cheese. It's quite possibly the best meal I've ever eaten.

“How often do you do fieldwork with those guys?” I ask, putting my feet closer to the stove.

“Few times a year.” He tilts the bowl to his mouth to drain the last bit of hot soup. “They're only here for a couple of months in the summer. Different teams come and go.”

“Have you ever joined them somewhere else, like Greenland?”

He shakes his head, rising to pick up our empty plates. “I'm a lone wolf, baby.”

With a snort, I follow him back to the kitchen. “News flash, Dr. Stark. Even lone wolves form packs. And I love you the way you are, scary reputation and all, because it means I don't have to share you as much with the rest of the world.”

I round the counter to approach him at the sink. “But I also know what an incredible leader and collaborator you are. It makes me a little nuts that you're not using those qualities. They're so rare, and you could influence so many other people. You could show them how to do fieldwork and research by leading internships and mentoring programs. Even by accepting a position on a journal review panel or consulting with science institutes. Have you ever *thought* about those things?”

I fully expect him to say he hasn't with zero hesitation. Instead, he's silent as he washes the bowls and sets them in the dish drainer.

“Gavin?” I nudge him in the side. “Your silence is like the ice. A whole bunch is going on under the surface.”

He dries his hands on a dish towel and turns to face me, his expression pensive. “When I was an undergrad, I went on a two-week trip to Antarctica on a Danish polar research vessel. It was pretty amazing. Scientists from all walks of life participated, from emeritus professors to others just getting started, like me. Marine biology, glaciology, atmospheric sciences, geology. Everyone had different interests and projects, but there was so much interdisciplinary discussion. The equipment and electronics were state-of-the-art. That was actually when I decided I was going to be a glaciologist. And I loved the idea of working from a boat, a mobile research center that could take you anywhere on the ocean and to any glacier you wanted.”

I lean back against the counter and study him. “But if you loved that idea, why have you lived alone on an island for so long?”

He shrugs and tosses the dish towel aside. “I guess I fell in love with the Castille glacier. No better place to do long-term research than from here.”

“Have you been back on a research vessel since then?”

“A few times, yeah. But it was nothing like that first time.”

“Well.” I arch an eyebrow at him. “I agree that the first time is often pretty mind-blowing. Nothing else ever quite measures up.”

“I don’t know about that.” He pulls me closer, settling our lower bodies together. “There’s something to be said for experience too.”

“Agreed, sir.”

His eyes crinkle with a smile, and he lowers his head to press a warm kiss on my lips. Though my body responds immediately, he breaks away from me all too soon and taps my nose.

“You were almost nodding off on the way back,” he reminds me. “You need to sleep. Keep up your energy for the penguins tomorrow.”

I slide my arms around his waist. “Can I sleep with you?”

He rubs his cheek on my hair. “Absolutely, even if you’re going to be a tough test of my self-control.”

“I have faith in you.” I pat his flat belly. “And if you lose control...well, then, lucky me.”

He chuckles and scoops me up into his arms. He carries me out of the kitchen, making a quick stop in my bedroom to grab Oswald before going to his room. We tumble onto the bed in a tangle of warmth and blissful exhaustion.

I tuck Oswald under one arm and nestle against Gavin’s wide chest. His heartbeat sounds as if it could outlast time itself. I love him wildly. I never want to leave him.

And he admitted he fell in love with a glacier. Surely that means he can also fall in love with me.



## Chapter Fourteen

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GAVIN

“ARE you sure this is a good idea?” Josie eyes me warily, her hands tucked deep into the pockets of her parka. The air is sharp and cold, the sky bright blue, the sun reflecting relentlessly off the expanse of ice and snow.

“I’m sure.” I finish prying the cover off the metal tube, a couple of feet in diameter and buried deep in the ground. I set the cover aside and look down at the runged ladder descending to the bottom.

“Aren’t we better off staying on the surface of the ice?” Josie approaches the tube and peers into the depths. “I get that this is a super-cool science thing, but I’m really happy above ground level.”

“I’ll be right there with you.” I pull her in for a hug and kiss her forehead. “I’ll go first. Put your gloves in your pocket. Take it slow, and be careful at the bottom. You’ll switch to a rope ladder the last few feet.”

Letting her go, I grab the metal ladder and climb into the observation tube. The hole was drilled into the ice shelf years ago and extends past the sea ice to the ocean. I stop halfway and look up to see Josie following.

At the bottom, a small, plexiglass-enclosed chamber—just big enough for two people—hovers in the ocean, providing a 360-degree view of life underneath the ice. The colors and light hit me before I reach the rope ladder.

“You okay?” I call up.

“Yes.” She descends another few rungs. “Just catch me if I fall.”

“Always.” I wait until she reaches the rope ladder, then put my hand on her back to steady her as she descends the last few rungs.

“Well, I did—” She pushes her hood back, her eyes widening. “Oh, my god.”

I grin, pride filling me as if I’ve created the whole damn scene myself. “Nice, huh?”

“I had no idea.” She pulls in a breath and walks to the window, pressing her hand against the glass. “*Gavin.*”

The water is crystal-clear, teeming with schools of fish and marine life, and the ice formations above are like thousands of wild chandeliers painted green, gold, and blue by the sun. Platelet ice forms sculptures of spiky crystals. The whistles and chirps of Weddell seals echo in the chamber, and one of them sails past the windows, its rotund body moving with underwater grace. Bioluminescent creatures radiate blue, green, and violet lights.

I know Josie is teary-eyed before she turns to face me. Her awe and wonder bubble through every cell in her body.

“This is—” She stops and shakes her head, looking past me to a bright, glowing jellyfish floating upward. “I thought Antarctica was like another world, and then the glacier, but this...there aren’t any words.”

Yeah. I brush my fingers across her cheek. Sometimes there aren’t any words.

The sunlight spiking through the ice illuminates the ocean. Glittering rays create a kaleidoscope of colors and light, and sea anemones wave from the ocean floor.

“So much life.” Josie moves closer to the window, tilting her head back to look up at the roof of ice. “How many people even know there’s a whole world hidden under the ice? It’s like having access to a magic doorway.”

I turn to the other side of the chamber and look into the depths. She comes up next to me and takes my hand. Her skin is warm, her knuckles slightly chapped. I rub my thumb across them.

“Use some lotion when we get home,” I tell her absently, not realizing what I just said until a smile curves her mouth.

“I will.” Her voice is husky. “When we get home.”

My chest constricts, but I don’t release her hand. I can’t.

We stay in the chamber for a couple of hours, watching and listening to the life underneath the ice. Josie takes pictures and listens to my scientific explanation of platelet ice as if she finds it fascinating. She’s right that it’s a magic doorway, but nothing compares to the magic she created when she stepped off the boat onto Needle Island.

Finally we climb back out, putting on sunglasses against the glare. I replace and lock the tube cover, and we return to the field house. Home.

I don’t know if I’ve ever thought of it that way. If I do now, it’s only because of Josie. She could turn a rundown shack into a *home* with nothing more than her presence.

“That was one of the most amazing things I’ve ever seen,” she says, taking my hand again. “No wonder you love the ice so much.”

The tightness in my chest intensifies. I love the ice. But I also love warmth. Sunlight. Flowers.

And most of all, *her*.

# Chapter Fifteen

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## GAVIN

AFTER A DINNER of lasagna and hot buttered rolls, Josie goes to her bunk to organize her equipment for our visit to the penguin colony tomorrow. I've learned more about the flightless birds from her in the past two weeks than I've learned in all of my thirty-three years.

I work for a few minutes on a paper about the surface mass balance of the Castille glacier, but my brain won't focus. I've gotten used to Josie sitting across from me, writing her penguin observation reports and reviewing the camera footage. I can't even concentrate without her nearby.

Pushing away from the table, I stoke the fire in the stove, then sit in an upholstered chair. I pick up a six-month-old newspaper and scan the articles.

"Can I bring you your slippers?" Her amused voice slides over me. "And your pipe?"

"No." I toss the paper aside and crook my finger at her. "But you can bring me *you*."

"With pleasure, sir." She crosses the room, looking like a tempting little flower in a pink fleece shirt and dark green pajama pants. She settles on my lap and rests her head on my shoulder.

And just like that, my world, my life, *me*...are all set right again.

"So I was thinking..." she murmurs.

“Aw, don’t do that.” I nuzzle her strawberry-scented hair. “Thinking is overrated. Trust me.”

“What would you rather do, then?”

“*Feel.*” I squeeze her soft, round ass.

She giggles. I’m not poetic, but damn if her laughter doesn’t remind me of wind chimes and silver bells.

“Actually, I was just thinking I want chocolate-chip pancakes tomorrow morning.” She strokes her hand over my chest. “I also *feel* like having chocolate-chip pancakes.”

“Done.” I pat her thigh. “For the price of a kiss.”

“Done.” With a smile, she lifts her face. “That was easy.”

“I got the better deal.” I press my lips against hers. My heart thuds.

She settles against me and curls her fingers into the front of my shirt. Her ass is nestled so perfectly on my lap that my cock—unsurprisingly—starts to rise.

I rub her hip. “You’re not wearing any underwear, are you?”

“No, sir.” She strokes her tongue over my bottom lip. “It *feels* better without it.”

“Agreed.”

I cup the back of her neck and urge her mouth open. So fucking sweet. Honey and chocolate. Her breathing increases. She nudges her breasts against my chest, her nipples hard. She makes a low murmur of need and shifts, sliding her hands into my hair.

My dick jerks to full hardness. I’m always hungry for her, but when she’s this close, I can’t contain my greed. I’m like a starving man, and she’s a delectable feast. One taste and my control snaps like a twig.

“Oh, Dr. Stark.” She wiggles her ass on my groin. “What in the world is that?”

“Your new ride.” I push my hand under her shirt. She’s not wearing a bra. I tug the fleece off her. My breath escapes in a rush at the sight of her naked tits.

I close my lips around her nipple while fondling her other breast. My cock starts to throb against her ass. She gasps and arches into me, tightening her grip on my hair.

So fucking perfect. So *mine*.

My blood fires up. I grab a fistful of her pants.

“Get these off,” I growl.

“Yes, sir.” She kisses my chin and pulls off her pants.

Christ in heaven. She’s like a painting, all smooth skin and soft curves lit by the glow from the stove. She pushes off my lap and turns to tug my shirt over my head.

Though giving up control—even to her—goes against my instincts, I don’t stop her when she presses her lips to my shoulder and slides her hands across my chest. Her touch is like a thousand fireflies flickering over my skin, igniting every nerve.

She settles her hand on my dick. The heat of her palm burns through my flannel pants.

“Did you say *ride*, Dr. Stark?” A crease appears between her eyebrows as she runs her hand curiously up and down my length.

“That’s what I said.” I move away to yank my pants off, then sit back in the chair. My dick is already like steel, and she’s barely touched me. “You’re going to ride this cock like it’s your favorite fucking merry-go-round.”

“You mean up and down?” She curls her fingers around my shaft and blinks her blue eyes at me. “Around and around?”

A strangled laugh escapes me. “Exactly right.”

“I dunno.” She eyes my cock dubiously. “It looks too big for me.”

“Give it a try.”



“Well, your wish *is* my command.” She returns her gaze to me, her eyebrows lifted. “What happens if I do it right?”

“You get a prize.”

Josie purses her lips like she’s considering the offer. “I like prizes, so I’ll try my best.”

“Good girl.”

Though it takes all my effort not to grab her and shove her down on my dick, I restrain myself from touching her as she slides her hand slowly up and down my cock. My balls are already tight and heavy, my shaft throbbing. She presses her thumb against the head.

“It’s getting kind of slippery,” she remarks, rubbing the fluids back into my skin. “Maybe that’ll help make it easier to ride.”

*Kill.* She kills me. I’ll never let her go. I don’t fucking care if her contract ends. I’ll keep her here until winter when the blizzards will keep all planes and boats away. We’ll be trapped. Alone. We can do whatever we want, whenever we want, for hours and months on end.

She kneels in front of me, nudging herself between my thighs. Then she lowers her head and sucks my dick into her mouth. Heat explodes through me. I dig my fingers into the arms of the chair, fighting the need to thrust, to shoot right down her pretty throat.

“Jesus Christ, Josie.” I stare at her, my chest heaving. Her lips slide over the crown as her fingers work my shaft from base to tip. Her cheeks are flushed, her eyes heavy-lidded and hot.

“Am I doing it right, sir?” she whispers, licking a vein pulsing on the underside.

“More than right, baby. You’re fucking perfect.”

“You taste really good.” She takes me in as far as she can before sliding back and kissing the tip. “Do you want me to ride you now?”

“Yeah.” My voice is a growl.

She rises to her feet, chest heaving and tits quivering. When I reach out and slip my hand between her thighs, opening her stance, she inhales sharply and grabs the arm of the chair.

“I’m pretty wet down there, sir,” she murmurs.

“So I see.” I slide my finger back and forth over her folds. My dick stiffens even more. I flick my thumb over her clit. “What about this little button right here?”

She gasps. “It’s...um, tingling. Like, a lot.”

“Good.” I slip my forefinger into her opening. She draws in another breath, her inner walls squeezing tighter.

“Hmm.” I stroke back and forth. “You’re definitely ready to ride something bigger than my finger.”

“Oh, I hope it doesn’t hurt. You’re so big.” She arches her hips, encouraging me to go deeper. “How do you want me to do it? Should I face forward or backward?”

“Both.” I take my hand away from her and sit back. “Forward first.”

She straddles my lap, bracing her hands on my shoulders before lowering herself just enough that I feel the heat of her pussy.

“I think you’d better guide me, sir.” She edges closer, rubbing her breasts against my chest. “Make sure your cock goes where it’s supposed to.”

“No danger of that not happening,” I mutter. I position my shaft at her slit, then grab her hips and guide her downward.

She envelops me like a goddamn dream, sinking her cunt all the way down my shaft until she’s sitting on my lap again. She digs her fingernails into my shoulders, her eyes wide.

“Oh, it’s a really tight fit, but it doesn’t hurt at all.” She wiggles experimentally, which loosens another knot in my self-control. “I feel you throbbing. It’s making me so excited.”

“That’s the point.” I grip her hips harder. “Now move up and down.”

She braces herself on my shoulders and lifts her body before bringing it back down. Her pussy slides over my dick like wet silk. I grit my teeth.

“Like this?” she asks.

“Just like that.”

“I had no idea the ride would feel this good,” she whispers, her body tensing. “I want to go faster.”

“Yeah.” I can hardly push the words past the heat in my throat. “You go as fast as you want.”

She starts riding me like I’m a fucking bull and she’s a champion cowgirl. I lift her hips and slam back down, her ass bouncing against my thighs and her tits jiggling. Her cunt flexes around my dick, ratcheting my lust higher with every move.

Sweat rolls down my chest. I can’t get enough. I also can’t hold off.

She stops, settling with me fully inside her, her hot breath puffing against my lips. “Can I do it backward now, sir?”

Though I don’t want to be separated from her even for an instant, she climbs off me and turns around. After straddling my lap and presenting me with her round ass, she reaches between her legs to take hold of my shaft.

“I’m going to put it in myself this time,” she announces, then slides right back down where she belongs.

She grabs my hands to brace herself. My head spins. There’s only my cock moving in and out of her pussy, her gorgeous body bouncing up and down, her moans and panting noises filling my ears. Pressure tightens my lower body to the point of pain.

“This feels super good on my little button...” She clutches my hands tightly and rotates her hips. “And when I go around and around, your cock touches me in all kinds of different places. I’m going to...oh, my pussy is aching...I think something big is about to happen.”

“You’ll love it. I promise.”

I slide my hand around to her slippery clit. One hard rub is all it takes for her to come with a shriek of pleasure, her head falling back. Her whole body shakes, her cunt vibrating and convulsing around my shaft. Her ass wiggles and writhes against my thighs.

“Keep riding, baby.” I tighten my grip on her waist. “You ready for it?”

“Am I getting my prize?” she gasps.

“Uh-huh.”

“Oh, please give it to me, sir. I love prizes so much...*ah!*”

I plow into her while pushing her down at the same time. Our bodies slap together. I come like a fucking rocket, shooting such a load into her that her pussy overflows. She keeps moving, milking my dick until the spasms start to ease. Then she falls back against my chest with her head on my shoulder.

Our harsh breathing saws through the air. I stroke my hands up her torso and wrap both arms around her.

“Wow,” she murmurs, wiping a trickle of sweat from her forehead. “Where did that come from?”

I chuckle and rub her breasts. “It’s okay to like dirty role-play. No. It’s fucking fantastic.”

“I didn’t even know I was into that kind of thing.” She turns to face me, bringing her knees up to my lap and curling up against me like a kitten. “But I love that I can do it with you. You make me feel so safe and free at the same time.”

I tighten my arms around her. Darkness encroaches on my lingering pleasure. I’ll do anything to keep her safe and free.

If she stays here, I can keep her safe. Nothing bad will ever touch her.

But she won’t be free.

# Chapter Sixteen

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JOSIE

I'VE KNOWN happiness in my life, but not until now have I realized that happiness combined with *love* takes you to a whole other level of existence. The world is sharper and brighter—even in Antarctica, which is as clear a world as you can find. Colors are more intense, food tastes better, and my heart has an apparently limitless capacity for joy.

After our one trip to the glacier, Gavin insists that I focus on my work, even if it means he has to put his aside for now. Every day, he accompanies me to the penguin colony, helping with cameras, tagging, filming, counting, and whatever else I need for my reports.

In the evenings or when the weather keeps us indoors, we sit at the computers in the workroom, compatibly writing or analyzing data while taking breaks to eat or indulge in a little—or more often, a lot—of lovemaking.

As another week passes, my imagination takes a hundred flights of fancy—I picture us living here on this isolated, barren island together for years to come. I study the penguins, he researches glaciers and other ice formations, and we stay in contact with people through emails and occasional trips to the continent or the States. We work during the day and spend our nights locked in each other's arms.

It's just the two of us and this wild, fascinating land with all of its dangers and secrets.

The thoughts are so vivid, so *real*, that I actually start to believe them, which is the reason I don't even register anything amiss when a Zodiac boat slices through the water from a small polar ship anchored not far off the coast.

I stop on my way back from the food storage shed, my arms loaded with boxes of cereal and powdered milk. I squint against the sun as the Zodiac carves a path to the dock. There are two men aboard, both dressed in bright orange parkas, and they tie up the boat with practiced ease before striding up the rocky incline to the house.

There's something familiar about them. Must be a couple of glaciologists from Hamilton station. Gavin hasn't mentioned getting any radio communication about a visit, but maybe they sometimes arrive without prior notice.

I continue toward the house, deflecting a rustle of unease. My anxiety is understandable. Gavin and I have been the only people on Needle Island since I first arrived, so it's strange to see other men—

*Oh, my god.*

My heart plummets like a stone. Thornwall and Kasper. The skipper and crewman of the boat that brought me to the island...a month ago?

No. It hasn't been that long.

I quicken my pace, almost running up the incline. My breath puffs out in clouds of white. I enter the house through the back door, dumping the boxes on the kitchen counter. Deep male voices, one of them Gavin's, echo from the front door.

Without bothering to take off my boots, I hurry into the foyer. Gavin's back is to me. The two men look past him and smile at me uncertainly. They're both in their forties, longtime Antarctica workers and sailors. Their skin is sunburned and ruddy, their eyes creased under their knit caps.

"Hey, Josie," Thornwall says, glancing from me to Gavin and back again. "How've you been? Sounds like you didn't get the message. No surprise with the crappy internet."

I stop beside Gavin, my hand rising automatically to touch him somewhere, anywhere. But I don't want the other men to know anything about us, so I unfasten my parka instead.

"What message?" Though I try to keep my tone casual, the strain makes it sound thin and high.

"About the storm." Kasper pulls off his cap and runs a hand through his sparse, wiry hair. "Big one's coming in tomorrow. Condition three. Expected to last a while. That's why we're here early. We...uh, we thought you'd be ready to go."

I shake my head. Although I hear what he's saying, I can't process it. "You're here for me? To take me back to the continent?"

They both nod. Gavin is as silent and still as...well, a block of ice.

"We reported the storm, and the Penguin Research Group made the call to bring you in early so you won't get stuck out here." Kasper shuffles his feet awkwardly. "Professor Rainer said he'd email you. Our operator at Hamilton also radioed in our arrival time. You didn't get that message?"

"Doesn't matter." Gavin shakes his head, not looking at me. "Josie, go get your stuff together. I'll bring it down to the boat."

His voice is so flat he might as well be talking about algae.

"Leave any nonessentials, and we'll ship them to you," Thornwall tells me. "We need to get you back to Hamilton. Your flight to New Zealand leaves on Friday. Trust us, you don't want to get stuck in the upcoming storm. It's going to be brutal."

Somehow, I find the strength to move and speak. "I'm sorry, but this is quite unexpected. Why don't you come into the kitchen and have some coffee? I'm going to need a few minutes to get organized."

They glance at each other again and nod. After I get them settled in the kitchen, I hurry to my bunk, certain that Gavin is



waiting for me. Obviously, we have to talk and figure out what the hell is going on.

He's not here. I look at the paper calendar on the wall of my room. There's a blue circle around Friday, November 25th. My departure date. A week from today.

I'd marked it the day after I first arrived so I could keep track of the month and manage my time well, but with Gavin, the actual meaning of *time* has fallen away. The sun shines twenty-four hours a day unless there's a storm. He only has one clock in the kitchen. We follow a loose schedule, but it's frequently broken up by spontaneous touching or kissing, and there are no deadlines.

Except for one. My deadline. Which just slammed against me like a bulldozer, scraping up and throwing away my final week with Gavin.

I go into his room across the hall. He's not there either.

Irritation stings me. Two men arrive unexpectedly to cut short my stay on Needle Island, and Gavin goes missing?

I hurry into the workroom. Outside the window, he's stalking toward the food storage shed with his hands shoved deep in the pockets of his parka and his head down.

I grab my parka and run after him, slamming the door shut behind me. "Gavin!"

He keeps walking, so I run faster. He disappears into the shed.

Goddammit.

I yank open the door. The cabin is temperate but not warm, the shelves lined with crates of canned and boxed foods.

"Dr. Stark." His name snaps out of me.

He turns, his expression shuttered. "I didn't want or expect you to leave sooner than necessary. But now you have to go."

"I don't *have* to do anything." I come to a halt, my heart jackhammering. "It's a storm, not the apocalypse. I'll tell them to go back to Hamilton station. I know it will be inconvenient,

but they'll understand it was a miscommunication. I can wait out the storm here with you. If I can't leave on my actual departure date, then I'll just wait until it's safe to travel again."

It sounds like such a reasonable plan that the tension in my chest eases. Then a shaft of sunlight spears through the windows, illuminating Gavin's face. Shadows carve his cheekbones, and his eyes are glacier-cold.

I take a step back. Dread uncurls inside me. The warm, possessive man I love is gone, retreated behind the shield of the Ice Prick.

He's protected himself with that shield for so many years, but I thought I'd broken through it, melted it, shattered it into oblivion. I hadn't once imagined he'd ever use it against me.

"Josie, you have to go." His hands flex at his sides, and I can feel the walls closing around him. "It's more than an *inconvenience* if you stay. You're bound by contract to follow the PRG's directives, which include the duration of your work and travel. You can't cause problems for the institution providing your funding. You *won't*."

Though part of me registers the truth of his words, surely the situation isn't *that* dire.

"Gavin, asking for an extension of my trip isn't going to damage the rest of my career," I retort. "I'm not the first student to have travel issues because of bad weather."

"You're not going to argue with the senior scientists who have entrusted this internship to you," he snaps. "You're not going to waste people's time and money by being stubborn. You're going to pack your stuff, get on the boat, and go back to the continent. You have reports to write, papers and lectures to deliver, and data to analyze. You need to put together that elementary school action kit you were telling me about, the one with the coloring book and the stickers listing what kids can do to help penguins. Not to mention, you have classes and homework. You're going back."

I stare at him, my breath choppy. Realization hits me with the force of a blow. This isn't just about the PRG and my

internship. This is about...us.

I grab the wooden post of a shelf and shake my head. "I'm not leaving you."

"Yes, you are."

"No."

"You don't have a fucking choice." He stalks toward me. "One week is nothing. *Nothing*. Yeah, we had a great time together, but a few hot fucks don't mean we're going to live happily ever after here among the penguins. I have my life, and you have yours. Maybe we'll see each other again one day. Maybe we won't. If we do, I'd be happy to give you another ride, but until then, you need to get the fuck back to the Northern Hemisphere and move on."

Tears sting my eyes. I blink them away and shake my head. "I know what you're doing. You think it'll be easier to push me away now rather than later. News flash—it won't work. I love you, and I'm pretty sure you love me too."

"News flash." His mouth tightens, and a muscle pulses in his cheek. "I don't love you."

# Chapter Seventeen

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JOSIE

THE FLAT, cold phrase spears me like a blade.

I drag a breath into my aching lungs as memories of the past three weeks fly through my mind. Anger bubbles up, hot and painful.

“Stop lying to yourself.” Without thinking, I stalk over and slap him hard across the face. The impact barely moves him, but he takes a step back.

“And don’t you dare lie to me,” I order sharply, unable to control the surge of fury. “Don’t demean me by claiming our relationship was nothing but a few hot fucks when you and I both know it was so much more than that. You really want me to leave today and forget about you? To *move on*? Fine. I’m out of here. Give me a call if you’re ever in the States, and maybe I’ll spread my legs for you again. Unless, of course, I’m too busy getting fucked by another man, in which case you’ll just be shit out of luck.”

His icy exterior shatters. Rage flares. He lunges toward me in a blur, his eyes blazing. Before I can move, he grabs me and hauls me against him.

His mouth crashes down on mine so hard my head snaps back. At the same time, the heat only he can ignite explodes through me like a firestorm.

“Goddammit, Josie.” He grabs a fistful of my hair, his teeth scraping my bottom lip. “If another man gets within twenty feet of you, I will lose my fucking mind. Rip him apart.

I would lock you up in a tower if I could. Because no matter where you are, you're *mine*."

Dizziness washes over me. I drive my hands into his hair, everything inside me aching and yearning for him. He pushes my lips apart and plunges his tongue into my mouth. The air fires up with lust and urgency.

In seconds, we're pulling at each other's parkas and yanking them off. I kick off my boots and shove my hands under his shirt, desperate for his warm, bare skin. Since we haven't been out in the field, neither of us has on layers, but every stitch of clothing feels like an obstacle.

He pushes me up against the wall, his kiss devouring me. Everything about him—his touch, his scent, his powerful body—submerges me in sensation. My knees weaken, my core swelling with need. With a growl, he pushes my shirt up over my breasts and covers them with his big hands, stroking and squeezing.

"Mine," he hisses, his eyes glinting with feral need. "Say it."

"Yours," I gasp.

He mutters his satisfaction and flicks open the button of my jeans. I arch my hips against the hard ridge of his erection, desperate for him to ease the sharp, violent ache. He shoves my jeans over my hips and flattens his hand on my pussy, digging his fingers into my panties.

"So wet already." He drags his lips over my cheek to my neck. "So perfect. Too perfect for a bastard like me. I will *ruin* you."

"I want you to." I press my head back against the wall, my heart pounding, my chest aching. "You can do whatever you want with me. Ruin me. Fuck me. Own me. Anything. I'm yours."

A harsh groan vibrates through him. He brings his mouth down on mine again, hot and possessive. He rips my underwear off and throws it to the floor before thrusting his arm under my thigh and opening me up.

I grip his shirt, panting. “Gavin, please.”

With his other hand, he unfastens his jeans and pulls out his stiff cock. The sight of it—long and thick, the crown shiny with fluid—floods me with longing. My core clenches.

He shoves his cock into me without preliminaries, driven by desperation. I cry out at the shock of it, the sudden length filling me all the way up to my belly.

“Fucking hell,” he whispers against my hair, a shudder coursing through him. “You destroy any control I have left. I won’t be gentle.”

“I know.” I’m shaking all over, needing him more than I’ve ever needed anything. “I don’t want you to be.”

He clenches his teeth, pulls back, and thrusts into me again. My body jars against the wooden wall. I groan and cling to him, unable to do anything but take whatever he gives me.

This wild, desperate joining is almost more than I can bear, yet I never want it to end. He fucks his cock in and out of me with increasing speed, driven by the same demons tearing us apart. He shoves his arm under my other thigh, lifting me off the ground. I’m spread wide, every part of me—my mouth, my cunt, my heart—open for his violent plundering.

All thought shatters into oblivion. There’s only the thrust of his cock, the slap of our bodies, his grip digging into my thighs, his breath hot on my lips. His shaft abrades my clit, tightening the urgency winding through every nerve.

“Come on, baby,” he growls against my mouth. “Give it to me. Clench that sweet pussy around my dick tight enough to lock me inside you. I want to feel you explode before I shoot so deep you’ll taste me...ah, fuck, yeah.”

I grip his shoulders. My eyes sting. My whole body aches. With one more deep thrust, the painful tension shatters.

“*Gavin.*” His name is a choked scream as I convulse and shudder around his cock.

“Josie.” He buries his face in my neck, his voice a harsh rumble vibrating to my bones. He tightens his hold on me and

surges deep, a groan ripping from him the instant before he comes. Pulses of hot seed flood me, mark me, claim me all over again.

Gasping, I curve my arms around him and press my face to his shoulder. Sobs push up into my throat. I battle them back, struggling to breathe.

He lowers me slowly to my feet, pressing one hand against the wall behind me. His breath saws through the lust-drenched air.

I can't look at him. I'm still hot, my blood boiling, my heart as tight as a fist.

I sense him watching me, dark and penetrating. I lift my head, and our gazes crash with a force that feels like the universe breaking apart.

Not looking away from me, he edges his hand between my thighs again and rubs my painfully sensitive clit. I moan, curling my hand around his arm.

But he knows I need more, and he strokes me to another orgasm that burns through me like a shooting star. As I shatter again, he wraps his other arm around me and pulls me close.

"Christ in heaven," he whispers into my hair. "How do you fucking crush my soul every time you look at me?"

"I don't want to crush anything about you." I press my wet face to his chest, clutching his shirt so tightly my fingers hurt. "I want to fill you to overflowing."

Tension ripples through him. He tugs my pants up and steps away from me, turning to adjust his clothes. Cool air washes into the space between us.

My heart cracks. I scrub my wet cheeks and try to swallow the resurgence of pain.

"I'll go," I finally manage to say because we both know our fuck, no matter how desperate and intense, was a goodbye. "And you can say you don't love me, but don't you dare think I can't see reality. I never thought we would live happily ever after."



My breath hitches as I pull on my parka and boots.

“Well, okay, maybe I might have dreamed about it a little,” I admit, “but I didn’t seriously think you and I could live on Needle Island for the rest of our lives. Maybe you can, but I happen to exist in the real world where people deal with their shit head-on instead of locking themselves away from it all. I live in a world where seasons change, flowers grow, and you can walk in a spring rain shower. A world where people understand how wondrous and amazing love is. A world where they fight relentlessly for each other no matter how difficult things get because they know their love is worth it. So obviously, you and I don’t live in the same world at all.”

“No, we don’t.” His whole body is as rigid as metal. “We never will.”

The halves of my heart start to splinter.

“You were right after all, Dr. Stark.” I turn and walk to the door, my whole body aching with heartbreak and the effort of holding back my tears. “Your reputation as an Ice Prick is *very* well deserved. Good luck with the rest of your life.”

I slam the door behind me. The final bang echoes through me even as I board the boat and leave Needle Island.

# Chapter Eighteen

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GAVIN

WITHOUT HER, the field house is hollow, an empty shell. I tell myself this is how it has to be. She belongs in California. I belong here.

Not that I haven't thought about another way it *could* be. I've had plenty of job offers over the years, both in the States and Europe. With little effort, I could find a permanent position at a university or a research institute, even if I wouldn't be located anywhere near her.

But I've been alone for so long that I don't even know if I'm capable of real life. Of living off the ice. Of being in the hot sun. Of waking up in a world of flowers and green hills.

*Her* world.

She has friends, family, a life. She's young and just starting out. She has a thousand adventures ahead of her. It won't be long before she realizes a hostile, reclusive ice scientist would never fit in her life. Here, isolated from everything and everyone, we're good—no, we're fucking fantastic—and as combustible as hell.

But in regular life? In an ordinary world?

The Antarctic Treaty has strict provisions to keep pests and non-native species from damaging the environment. People can't transport seeds or plants into Antarctica because unknown elements can be destructive. Some things are better left where they are.

So am I.

I walk through the house. Silent as a tomb. Josie's bedroom door is open, but all her stuff is gone.

I cross to my bunk and come to a stop in the doorway. My heart ices over like a glacier. Josie's stuffed penguin, Oswald, sits on my pillow. Just a few hours ago, he was in her room. No way did she just forget to take him with her.

I pick him up and gaze at his sparkly plastic eyes.

He looks as if he misses her as much as I already do.

# Chapter Nineteen

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JOSIE

THOUGH THE BAY AREA is filled with green grass and blooming flowers, the wide freeways, endless cars, and smog are like scars on the landscape. In the month following my return from Antarctica, I feel like an astronaut returning to earth, struggling to readjust to having my feet on solid ground again.

But this is how it was supposed to be all along. Astronauts don't stay in the beauty of space forever. And while I never anticipated falling so wildly, head-over-heels in love with Dr. Gavin Stark—in fact, I initially hoped he'd just acknowledge my existence—I remind myself that realistically, I couldn't have stayed on Needle Island past my deadline anyway. Even if the storm had lingered, I'd have had to leave eventually.

Maybe it's a good thing he forced me to leave early. At least we didn't prolong the inevitable.

It doesn't feel good, though. Even as I compile my penguin data and get back into the routine of classes, my separation from Gavin gnaws at me like a serrated knife. It's not right that we're apart. We should be together.

*How*, I have no idea. The hopeful side of me is convinced there has to be a way, but the realistic side keeps running into obstacles. I can't even move to another state right now, much less Antarctica. And even if Gavin decided to leave Antarctica and come to California, I couldn't reconcile loving him and knowing he wasn't where he wanted to be. Where he belongs.

The impossibilities constantly spin through my mind.

“Next, please.” The university registrar’s voice breaks through my thoughts.

Hitching my book bag over my shoulder, I step up to the registration desk and hand the woman my student ID card.

“I tried to pay my next tuition installment online this morning,” I explain, “but the payment wouldn’t go through. I was wondering if there’s a glitch in the system.”

“Let me check for you.” Peering over the top of her glasses, she inputs my info into her computer. Her eyebrows lift. “Nothing’s wrong with the system. Your payment didn’t go through because your tuition is paid.”

I blink. “My next installment? That’s not possible.”

She turns the monitor toward me. It’s definitely my record, but in the Amount Due box are the words *Paid in Full*.

“It’s not just your next installment,” she tells me. “Your tuition has been paid off completely. Including room, board, books, and all other fees.”

“For...for the semester?” I stammer, still not processing her words.

“For the rest of the year and your senior year.” She studies the screen. “There’s a stipulation that if you want to continue longer than four years or attend grad school here, that tuition will be paid as well.”

“I’m sorry, but there must be a mistake.”

“Not according to your record.” She shrugs and turns her attention to the keyboard. “I wouldn’t question it if I were you.”

She gestures for the next student in line to come forward. I grab my bag and walk out, still not understanding.

How can my tuition be paid in full? For the next two years and beyond? Did my parents win the lottery and not tell me?

The only other explanation makes no sense. Would Gavin pay my tuition? If so, why? Especially after the way we

parted? And full out-of-state tuition to Stanford is a small fortune, so if he paid it out of his own pocket...

I shake my head and hurry to the biology lab. After sitting at the computer, I call my mother on my cell. Before we're even finished exchanging greetings, I mention the tuition payment.

"Did you and Dad strike oil in the backyard?" I ask.

She laughs. "I was going to ask you the same thing about our mortgage."

I sit back, stunned. "What about the mortgage?"

"We received a notice that it was paid in full." She sounds both excited and baffled at the same time. "I mean, we're thrilled and grateful obviously, but we have no idea how it happened, and frankly, it doesn't make any sense. Is there some billionaire running around paying off mortgages and tuitions anonymously?"

"I don't know, Mom." I tell her I'll call her later, then end the call. I put the phone slowly back into my bag.

*Gavin?*

I start to write him an email, then stop. If it's not him, I'll feel stupid for even asking. And if it *is* him, that opens up a whole other slew of questions. I'm almost afraid of what the answers might be.

I turn to the computer and bring up the data on the diving behavior of Adélie penguins. Despite this new shock, I have to focus on my work and upcoming lecture.

"Tonight's the night!" My friend and fellow student Brenda comes into the computer lab. "Are you nervous? Excited? Nervous and excited?"

"A little of both," I admit. "Which I guess means I'm *ner-vited*."

"You're going to be great." She sits in a chair near me, dropping her backpack on the floor. "What are you wearing?"

"A dress."



She groans. “Come on, Josie. Glam it up a little. Tonight is *your* night.”

“Tonight is the penguins’ night,” I correct.

“But you’re their biggest advocate.” She leans forward. “You need to *sparkle*.”

Though I feel anything but sparkly, I know she’s right. Tonight is the final part of my internship—I’ve been invited to deliver a lecture about the penguins at a high-end wildlife fundraiser at the California Academy of Sciences aquarium in San Francisco. I’ll be representing the Penguin Research Group and explaining my research and conclusions.

After the lecture, there’s a cocktail reception—and apparently, many of the guests will be powerful people who can approve future scientific funding and projects. It would be stupid of me not to try to interest them in my work, and dressing nicely won’t hurt.

“Okay.” I push away from the computer and turn to Brenda. “Will you help me sparkle?”

She grins. “I thought you’d never ask.”

## Chapter Twenty

## JOSIE

THE CALIFORNIA ACADEMY OF SCIENCES is located in the heart of Golden Gate Park and houses an aquarium, a planetarium, a rainforest, and a natural history museum. Tonight, the aquarium is closed for the special fundraiser gala, and the exhibition rooms are filled with fashionable women in glittering sequined dresses, accompanied by men wearing designer suits and silk ties.

The illustrious crowd increases my *ner-vitedness*, and I'm exceedingly grateful to Brenda for insisting I wear a cocktail dress—a hunter-green lace sheath that falls to my knees in a smooth, sinuous line. She put my hair into a fancy knot, leaving a few tendrils loose to frame my face. With borrowed heels and my forget-me-not pendant, I feel confident and professional as I approach the podium to present my lecture.

For the most part, it's easy to talk to people about penguins—everyone likes the flightless birds—and audiences are attentive and appreciative as long as I'm not discussing their poop or various diseases. This crowd is no different; they all seem to enjoy my observations, videos, and pictures of the Needle Island penguin colony.

Resounding applause fills the room when I'm finished, and Professor Rainer from the PRG approaches me with a big smile and outstretched hand. Afterward, the guests mingle with cocktails and hors d'oeuvres, and I circle the rooms, gratefully accepting praise, answering questions, and meeting as many people as possible.

It's almost midnight when the party begins to wind down. As he's saying goodbye, Professor Rainer tells me in a low voice that the PRG received "highly substantial" donations from the guests tonight.

"You're on our radar for future projects, Josie," he tells me, turning to hold his arm out to his wife. "Keep up the good work."

They both smile at me before descending the steps to the line of waiting town cars and limousines.

As I wait a few minutes for the crowd to disperse, I wander the exhibition rooms, gazing at the huge tanks filled with hundreds of tropical fish, rays, eels, octopi, and sea anemones. I visit the snapping turtles and alligators, then make my way to the habitat of the endangered African penguins, one of the species that lives in a warmer climate.

"Not a bad choice," I tell them, resting my hands on the railing surrounding their enclosure. "Ice is beautiful, but it freezes your heart if it gets too deep inside you."

"That's why I need a girl whose smile burns away the cold."

The deep voice comes from behind me. A bolt of shock roots me to the spot. I don't dare turn around. I'm imagining things. Surely that's not—

"A girl who is so warm, so downright hot, sweet, and brilliant that she not only thaws ice..." He sounds closer now. "She can melt even the hardest, most frozen bastard on the planet."

My skin prickles with a combination of hope and fear. I turn.

Despite my efforts to protect my heart, it cartwheels with pure joy at the sight of Dr. Gavin Stark. He looks incredible. Tall and broad, dressed in a tailored gray suit—a suit!—and a gray-and-blue-striped tie. His thick, brown hair is brushed away from his forehead, emphasizing the strong lines of his features. He's holding Oswald.

He gazes at me, his expression warm and slightly guarded.

I tighten my hands on the railing. I'm seized with a wild urge to run and leap into his arms, to feel him gripping me and holding me close as if he'll never let go.

Except...he already let go.

"Hello, Josie." He stops a distance away, his fingers flexing on the stuffed penguin like he's restraining himself from coming closer.

I swallow. "Dr. Stark. Sir."

A faint smile tugs at his mouth. "Your lecture was excellent. You have such a love for the field, and it's apparent with every word you speak."

"You were there?"

"I wouldn't have missed it for anything." He skims his gaze over me. "You're beautiful."

"Thank you." I try to suppress the ache of love and need rising in my heart. "Gavin, why are you here?"

"To tell you I don't want to live without you. I can't."

My knees almost buckle. As desperately as I want his words to be true, leaving him had hurt so much. And though I've spent the past month dreaming up scenarios in which our relationship could actually work, nothing has seemed possible.

"I love you, Josie." He walks toward me, holding Oswald out in gesture, almost like a plea. "I'm sorry I couldn't tell you before you left. I'm sorry I was cruel. But you had to leave. I couldn't—" He pauses and shakes his head. "If you'd stayed, I swear I'd never have let you go, which would have been the worst thing in the world for you. You had to come back here, to return to your life."

"And you had to stay in yours." A flame of hope starts deep inside me, ignited by his admission of love. "Is something different now?"

"Everything is different."

# Chapter Twenty-One

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JOSIE

HE STOPS in front of me, and I breathe in his warm scent of citrus and spices. I take Oswald and tuck him into the crook of my arm, where he always fits exactly right.

“I’ve spent the past month trying to figure it out,” Gavin continues. “And I think I have. But only if you give me another chance.”

I press a hand to my racing heart. I would give him a thousand chances, but I’m not going to tell him that just yet.

“What have you figured out?” I ask.

“I was planning to find a job somewhere on the West Coast,” he says. “California, Oregon, Washington. Anywhere I was within a reasonable geographic distance from you. Then I was going to come find you and beg you to take me back. But I knew you’d struggle with the idea of me leaving Antarctica and changing my life, even though I would turn the world upside down to be with you. And I didn’t want to do anything to hinder your success or opportunities, especially since you only have two years of college left. I want you to be free to do whatever you want, whenever you want. I want you to have all the funding you need for any project you want to pursue, even if it means counting every damn penguin in Antarctica. And I want to be there with you.”

My breath is short, my entire soul filling with hope over the beauty of that scenario. “But how...how is that even possible?”

He pulls a piece of paper from his pocket and hands it to me. My hands shake as I set Oswald on a bench and unfold the paper. There's a printed photo of a huge polar research vessel outfitted with cranes, satellites, a helicopter pad, and multiple decks.

“What is this?”

“It's my new investment.” Pride infuses his voice, though his eyes are still somewhat wary.

I stare at him, then back at the photo. “You invested in a ship?”

“I've been thinking a lot about what you said.” He moves to my side and studies the photo over my shoulder. “And you were right that I need to collaborate and be more actively involved in the science community, but I also want to be out on the ice as much as I can. Fieldwork is where I'm at my best and how I can make the most impact. So I found out a Finnish shipping company was selling this ship.”

He indicates the photo. “It was used as a research vessel for about ten years but needs an upgrade. So I contacted the US Polar Institute, and we made a deal. A seventy-thirty split, with me as the majority owner. We bought the ship and are going to outfit it with state-of-the-art equipment for any kind of polar expedition. Laboratories, a long-range autosub and other submersibles, rock drills, work boats, sensors to detect water depth and temperature, and plenty of living space for scientists and crew.”

“Wait a minute.” I hold up my hand. “You *bought* a research vessel? You personally?”

“In partnership with the US Polar Institute. Yes.”

I shake my head. “I don't understand.”

He lets out a breath and walks a few paces away from me, fixing his gaze on the penguins. “I'm wealthy, Josie. By inheritance. My father owned a company called GMS that makes pens and paper products like labels and notepads. He sold it before he died but still retained shares in the company. He left the profits and all the stocks and investments to me. It



was a substantial amount, to begin with, but it's earned a lot more over the years. I haven't done much with the money except fund my education and research, so I have plenty to put into the ship."

I'm so stunned I can't move, but the pieces fit together clumsily in my mind. "GMS? That was your father's company? Their products are in every store. I buy GMS pens and paper all the time."

He nods. "That's the one."

"GMS."

"Gavin Matthew Stark." His mouth twists with a wry smile. "My father named the company after me."

"So, you..." My grip tightens on the paper. "It *was* you. You paid my tuition and my parents' mortgage."

A shadow crosses his face as he turns back to me. "I know I overstepped, but I couldn't stand...I mean, it was so fucking stupid that I have all this money, and people like you and your parents are struggling to go to college and own a house. And when you said you don't even get to see them very often, it just pissed me off. I knew you'd say no if I told you in advance, but I had to take that burden off you. It was nonnegotiable. I'm sorry I didn't tell you."

"Gavin, you're kind of shocking the hell out of me here." I can barely get the words out.

"Take the money. It's barely a dent in what I have."

I shake my head, not even knowing what to do with the emotions roiling inside me with the force of a hurricane. "It's an incredible gift. A miraculous one. I don't know what to say or how to thank you."

"You don't have to." He runs a hand over the back of his neck, the movement edged with frustration. "You never have to thank me. I want to give you the world, and now I can. A part of it, at least. The Antarctic Circle."

"What are you talking about?"

“This.” He jabs his finger at the photo of the ship. “I have final approval about the expeditions. The ship can and will be used for multiple kinds of polar research. Marine biology, chemistry, atmospheric sciences. Glaciology, of course. She’ll be outfitted for all disciplines and can hold up to twenty crew and forty scientists. Scientists and teams from any country can apply for research time and expeditions. And you and I can take her out whenever we want. She’s ours.”

My throat is so tight it hurts. “Ours?”

“I bought her for you.” He finally closes the distance between us and reaches out to take my hands, crushing the paper. “For *us*. I want you to be able to do whatever you want, visit any penguin colony in the Antarctic or the world. I’ll move up here to be with you when you’re in school, and when you have a break, we can either join a polar expedition on the ship, or we can plan one of our own. We can go back to Needle Island or any of the other penguin colonies. If you do an independent study semester next fall, we can live either on the island or the ship. Maybe both. And after you graduate, wherever you want to go, whatever you want to do, I’ll be there. I need you to...to *survive*. Like fire needs oxygen.”

He grips my hands harder. Faint desperation darkens his beautiful eyes.

“Say yes.” His throat works with a swallow. “I love you, Josie. I’m sorry I was such an ass. I’ll spend my life making it up to you.”

I blink back the tears. My entire soul floods with warmth and unbearable, aching love. “Gavin. I love you too.” I untangle my hand from his and press my palm to his chest. “I’ve loved you from the minute I saw you stomping down the dock toward me like a big, angry bear. And every day since then, I’ve loved you more. Yes. Of course. *Yes*.”

A smile breaks over his face, filling his eyes with light and hope. With a laugh, he hauls me into his arms and kisses me hard, our lips fitting together seamlessly, our bodies attaching like magnets. It’s a warm, long kiss, submerging us both in the promise and happiness of our shared future. When we finally

separate, it's as if the summer sun is washing over us, banishing all shadows and darkness.

I unclench my hand from the paper and smooth it out, then notice a list of stats on the back—the length, weight, cargo volume, endurance...and the ship's name.

*THE JOSIE ROSE.*

My breath catches. “You named the ship after me?”

“I wasn't going to name her anything else.” He picks up Oswald and shoots me a grin. “I talked to your parents under strict secrecy. They told me your middle name and invited us to visit them over the holidays. Your mother is already planning to make your favorite cookies.”

“Oh, Gavin.” Fresh tears fill my eyes. “I never want to be without you.”

“You never will be.” He lowers his head to kiss me again. “After all, your wish is my command.”

## Epilogue One

JOSIE

*One year later*

THE SHIP BREAKS through the ice belt covering the surface of the sea, the steel-reinforced hull carving a path toward the continent. Icebergs float like huge sculptures on either side of it, and the sun shines through a thick layer of fog and mist.

I focus the binoculars on three penguins waddling across an ice floe. Flapping their wings, they dive one by one into the white-capped water while skuas soar overhead against the ash-gray sky. In the distance, a massive glacier looms like the gateway to an enchanted kingdom.

Despite the freezing wind, a rush of warmth fills me. I lower the binoculars and move closer to Gavin as he comes up beside me at the railing. He puts his arm across my shoulders, hugging me to his side.

“One more day.” He presses his lips to my temple. “Ready?”

“Always.” I smile and set the binoculars down so I can wrap both arms around his waist. Even through the layers of our clothes and thick parkas, his body heat flows into me.

I’m both excited and nervous about our next adventure—a two-month trip with a group of other researchers to the continental glacier. After unloading all the equipment and cargo, the crew and scientists will stay at a research base

located on a *nunatak*, a flat-topped ridge protruding from the glacier.

Gavin will be teaming up with geologists and physicists to study ice samples and cores, while I'll work on an independent study with two marine biologists studying emperor and chinstrap penguin colonies.

Before we launched *The Josie Rose* from New Zealand two weeks ago, Gavin and I were a little cautious about living and working with thirty other people. But as it turns out, we both enjoy the camaraderie and collaboration.

Between the labs, common areas, rec rooms, sauna, gym, offices, and cabins, the ship is large enough to allow for plenty of personal space. Plus, we have our own private cabin, which affords us a retreat away from others when we need it.

The Rimrock Research Station on the Antarctic continent is much bigger than the ship, so I'm no longer worried about things being crowded. And after the glacier trip, Gavin and I are going back to Needle Island...alone.

"Come on." He wraps his other arm around me and nuzzles my hair. "Dinner's ready."

We walk to the dining room, where our fellow seafaring scientists are lining up for a serve-yourself meal of multiple kinds of pasta, bread, vegetables, and desserts. Gavin was adamant that the food should be of the highest quality, and the chefs onboard *The Josie Rose* already have a reputation for being among the best.

We eat at long communal tables where the conversation ranges from recent research topics to theories about UFOs to debates about Star Wars vs. Star Trek. After dinner, we play a few games of pool and watch an Indiana Jones movie that a grad student brought on DVD. It's close to midnight before Gavin and I return to our cabin.

"C'mere, Mrs. Stark," he mutters gruffly, pulling me into his arms almost before the door closes fully.

With a smile, I wrap my arms around his neck and stand on my tiptoes to accept his kiss. Right before launching the

ship, we were married by the ship's captain in a ceremony that included everyone onboard as well as a whole slate of researchers and scientists from the New Zealand Antarctic Research Center.

Although Gavin and I were legally married at the San Francisco courthouse a few months ago, celebrating our wedding on the ship with the community who shares our love of the work was both meaningful and a great deal of fun. It turns out Dr. Stark is also an excellent dancer, though given his moves in other areas of life, that didn't really surprise me.

Our kiss deepens. Heat fills the cabin. We shed our clothes quickly, our arousal igniting fast and hard. Everything inside me responds to the press of his lips and stroke of his calloused hands. My nipples tighten, budding up against my bra. Gavin makes a muffled noise against my mouth as he tugs my shirt off.

"You're incredible," he says, his gaze going to my cleavage. He flicks the clasp of my pink bra and pushes it off my shoulders. "I'll never get tired of looking at you."

Warmth flushes my skin. My nipples are pointing straight out like they're begging to be sucked, and my clit is already throbbing. My arousal is heightened by the pure, intense lust in my husband's expression—not to mention our proximity. All we have to do is look at each other, and the air molecules light up with a mystical kind of electricity.

With our lips still locked together, he lowers me onto the bed and climbs on top of me, straddling my thighs. He sits back and strokes his hands over my hips up to my belly and breasts. With an exhale of pleasure, he palms my breasts before lowering his head to press a kiss against my belly button.

"Tell me," he orders, tracing the edge of my panties with his forefinger.

I twitch under him. "Tell you...?"

He gives me a wicked smile. "Tell me what you want."

“Oh.” I swallow to ease my dry throat. “I want...want you to touch me.”

“You do, huh?” He slips his fingers under the waistband of my panties. “You’re hot under here, aren’t you?”

“So hot,” I breathe, wiggling my hips in desperation. “Please, Dr. Stark.”

He slides his fingers farther down, finding the damp heat between my thighs. We both groan when his fingers ease into my cleft.

“Ah, fuck, Josie,” he whispers as he pushes one finger into the opening of my body. “I can never wait to sink my cock into all that tight heat.”

Heat flares and sparks through me. I grip the bed covers as he pulls the panties off my legs, then spreads my thighs apart. Gazing down at me, he strokes my folds and circles my clit with his thumb.

Butterflies spin and twirl in my belly. He pushes his boxer briefs off, and his cock rises upward, so long and thick that fresh lust fires through me, and my pussy clenches. I wrap my fingers around his shaft, stroking up and down the length. His breathing increases, sawing through the air. A flush of heat crests his cheekbones.

Anticipation scorches me. I lie back and open my legs wider, letting him position himself. I so love this moment of joining, the head of his cock rubbing against my slit, the growing hunger for all of it.

Closing my eyes, I arch upward as I feel him begin to slide into me, inch by delicious inch, until he fully seats himself. His body strains and flexes.

“Wider, baby,” he whispers, trailing his lips over my cheek to my ear. “Spread those pretty legs so I can drive my cock into you. You’re going to come so hard the world explodes around you. Show me how much you want it.”

With a moan, I wrap my arms around him. Urgency takes over, and we start to fuck. I dig my fingernails into his back, holding him as he surges into me again and again, jarring me



to the core and pushing me to the edge. The pressure builds, coiling around my lower body with every plunge of his cock. I bite down on his damp, smooth shoulder.

“I feel it,” I whimper, straining, aching to reach between our bodies and rub my pulsing clit. “Gavin, I want to...oh, fuck me harder...I’m so close.”

He takes hold of my other wrist and pins my hands to the bed, immobilizing me against the pillowy mattress. He surges deep, hitting the sweet spot that ignites a firestorm. A shriek tears from my chest as explosions rip through me, submerging me in wave after wave of bliss.

Gavin pushes up to his knees with his cock still inside me. He thrusts again and stills, a rough groan shaking his chest as he surrenders to his own release. His seed pulses deep inside me, eliciting another stream of sensations.

“Christ, Josie, it’s always so goddamn good with you.” He rolls onto the bed beside me, his chest heaving. “I used to think you killed me, but I was wrong. You bring me back to life. Every single day.”

I smile, rolling over to tuck myself against him, twin currents of love and satiation flooding me. He pulls me closer. I fit against him so easily, my curves nestling into the planes and slopes of his body. Like we were always meant to be.

He winds the white streak in my hair around his finger. I stroke his chest. The ship rocks and billows over the ocean waves.

Together, we lie there and breathe as forever unfolds all around us.

## Epilogue Two

GAVIN

*Ten years later*

THE SETTING SUN is bright and hot, creating glittering waves on the ocean waters. Shrieks of laughter rise above the sound of the waves rolling and breaking against the sand.

Near the shoreline, Josie and our four-year-old daughter Emma are busy building an elaborate sandcastle with little shell features and embellishments. Josie pats a section into place, then adjusts her wide-brimmed hat and glances in my direction. She lifts her hand, and even from the distance, her brilliant smile hits me right in the heart.

Every. Single. Time.

“Come on, man.” I push to my feet, dusting the sand off my swim trunks. “The women need our expertise.”

Eight-year-old Sam puts down his juice box with a snort. “They won the Sunset Beach Sandcastle Contest two days ago, Dad. They don’t need our help.”

“Yeah, but your mom will act like they do, which is good for our egos.” I grab his hand and tug him to standing.

Together, we head down to the shoreline. After greeting us both with another smile, Josie lifts her face toward me. I slide my hand to her nape and press my mouth against hers, lingering a little longer than is probably appropriate. She smells like sunscreen, coconuts, and salt water.

“Hi,” she murmurs.

“Hi.” I nip her bottom lip. “You look incredible in that bathing suit.”

She slides her mouth to my ear and whispers, “Does that mean you don’t want to take it off me later?”

“It means I want to rip it off you right now,” I whisper back, tamping down the lust that goes into full boil every time I’m near my wife.

She smiles. “Hold that thought.”

“Mommy!” Emma yelps.

Josie breaks away from me to help our daughter fix a section of the castle. Since Sam was right that the women don’t need us to help with any part of their construction, he and I sit down and start digging a tunnel to protect it from the tide.

“What is it?” Sam asks, handing Emma a bigger shovel.

“Guess,” she replies.

He squints at the structure, then grins. “Oh, hey, that’s pretty cool.”

I stand and move to get a better view. Josie and Emma have constructed a large replica of the Antarctic continent, complete with glaciers, islands, and mountains. The islands are dotted with tiny shells representing penguin colonies and smooth stones that look like rotund seals. Rivulets on the surface indicate ice rivers, and the research stations are built of driftwood.

“I love it.” I hug Emma and kiss the top of her sandy head. “You got the Castille glacier just right.”

“This is the Ross ice shelf,” she informs me, carving out a curve in the landscape. “And this is us on Needle Island.”

She points at the island capped with a little driftwood house, with four sticks arranged outside the front door.

“It’s perfect,” I tell her, and it is.

They work on the sculpture for another half hour before we pack up and head back to our beach house to clean up. After a day spent in the Florida sun and sand, we're all tired, sunburned, and hungry. Josie herds the kids into their pajamas while I cook a quick dinner of spaghetti and meatballs.

We eat out on the balcony, which overlooks an expansive view of the coastline. Emma is nodding off before she gets halfway through her meal, and I carry her into her room to tuck her in. Sam eats two helpings of ice cream before he settles down on the sofa with his tablet.

Josie and I stay on the balcony, watching the sunset unfold over the horizon.

Well. She watches the sunset. I watch her.

She's made up of all my best memories, my best moments, the best of my life. Every time I look at her, I see the bright young woman who marched into the Needle Island Research Center and filled it with joy and hope. I see that young woman doggedly pursuing her degree, applying to grad school, earning her PhD. I see her self-confidence, her determination, her ambition. I see the mother of my children, the center of my heart, the love of my life.

Sometimes I can't believe my luck, but then all I have to do is look up, and she's right there. All the luck I'll ever need.

She turns her head and catches my eye. I take her hand, and we both rise to go back inside. Sam is asleep on the sofa. I turn off his tablet, and Josie covers him with a blanket, bending to kiss his forehead.

People say Sam looks like me, but he has Josie's eyes. Both of the kids do.

"One more day." Josie glances at me as I follow her into the bedroom and close the door. "We must be the only family in the world who looks forward to getting back from vacation."

"I don't much care where I am as long as I'm with you." I tug her into my arms and slide my hands around to grip her

gorgeous ass. “Sun, rain, ice, whatever. Josie Territory is my favorite place to live.”

“Aw.” She kisses my chin. “That was so sweet that I’ll forgive you for comparing me to a land mass.”

I grin and tilt her face up to mine, pressing my mouth to hers. Now that I can finally loosen the reins on my lust, it fires through my blood instantly. Within seconds, I’m pulling at Josie’s dress, hungry for the rub of her skin against mine, the crush of her gorgeous body.

I tumble her onto the bed, my dick already stiff against her thigh, and drag my lips over her neck, her shoulders, her perfect breasts. She writhes and moans under me, grabbing at my shirt and opening her legs. I crave all the warm, soft curves and surfaces of her body.

As always, we fit together with mind-blowing perfection, our lovemaking all at once tender and scorching hot. Her gasping cries and the hard shudders of her body send me over the edge, and she digs her fingernails into my back when I shoot deep inside her. I will never have enough of her. I ease off her and pull her closer, loving the press of her against my side.

“Oh, Dr. Stark.” She sighs and strokes her hand over my chest. “You’re always so good at that.”

“Lots of practice with my insanely hot wife”—I brush my lips across her temple—“who’s amazing at everything.”

She smiles, rubbing her cheek against my chest. I breathe her in. Soon we’ll be back in New Zealand, one of our home bases, as Josie completes a research study about the penguin species on the Otago Peninsula.

She and I are also finally starting our own collaborative project about the effect of glacier changes on penguin populations, which we plan to work on for the next few years.

We still go out on *The Josie Rose* whenever we can, and Sam, in particular, considers the ship another home in the vast world. We’ve taken him and Emma on trips to Greenland, Argentina, the Rocky Mountains, Norway, and of course,

Needle Island and the Antarctic continent, though we plan our trips around their school schedules and our family priorities.

As much as Josie and I love our work and collaborations, nothing compares to the discoveries we've made in our life and marriage. There's no greater joy than being at her side, helping our children learn and grow, hearing their laughter, living every day together in our own perfect colony.

With Josie, our children, and the love that infuses everything we do, I've found the place where I truly belong. Home.

# About the Author

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[www.livprescott.com](http://www.livprescott.com)

Liv Prescott is the alter ego of New York Times and USA Today bestselling author Nina Lane, who needed a new outlet for her quick, hot story ideas. Liv writes short, sexy stories about intense heroes who fall hard and fast for heroines who couldn't be more off-limits. They are alphaiciously protective, with their own gruff brand of romance, while their heroines are unapologetic experts at pushing all their buttons. Every swoony book comes with instant sparks, inescapable chemistry, downright *dirty* banter, and HOT steamy goodness throughout. Feel-good happily-ever-afters are a must, along with fun epilogue(s) to leave readers smiling. When she's not diving deep into her smutty imagination, Liv reads, travels, scrapbooks, and hangs out with her family.

You can **sign-up for her email list** [HERE](#) for alerts on her new releases, and other fun extras.

