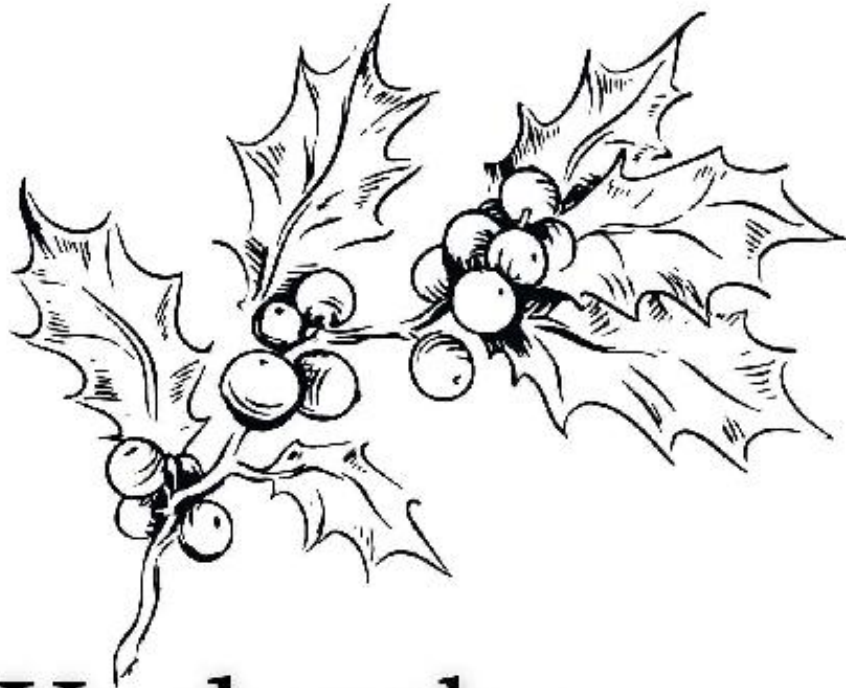


A young man with short brown hair and a slight smile is the central focus. He is wearing a red, white, and grey plaid button-down shirt over a white t-shirt. He is positioned in front of a chalkboard menu for a coffee shop. The menu lists various coffee drinks like Espresso, Cappuccino, and Milk-based drinks. To the right, a whiteboard with some notes is visible. At the top of the image, a festive garland of green pine branches with red berries and white mistletoe hangs across the frame. The overall lighting is warm and indoor.

Under the

Mistletoe

A. E. MADSEN



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Mistletoe

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I brush the snow off my jacket as I step into the warm café, but then my eyes catch on the bright lights and festive decorations that weren't here during my last shift. The smell of cinnamon is overpowering, even mixed in with the normal aroma of coffee. I take a smaller breath trying not to gag. All the decorations assault my eyes; garlands hang along the walls, twinkle lights, and plastic snowflakes. There's even a small fake tree in the corner, covered in tinsel and colorful baubles. Seeing the café transform each winter always puts me in a mood. Not a cheery one, either.

"You've been busy," I say, looking at Elliot and Rachel.

Rachel adjusts the garland she's hanging. Her messy bun dangles off to one side, brown hair spilling over into her eyes. "Can you hand me that?" She gestures to one of the tables nearby.

There's a sprig of green leaves with bright red berries. "Mistletoe, really?" I ask as I hand it over.

“It’s fun and who knows we might even see some fun awkward kisses to break up the chaos of finals week,” she jokes.

“It’s also poisonous,” I mutter, but she ignores the comment.

“Don’t be a Grinch. You never know, maybe you’ll meet someone,” Rachel says with a waggle of her eyebrows.

“I’m not looking. The only thing I wanna do is finish my classes and get through the season in one piece. This place is a madhouse during the holidays.” I hang my jacket on the coat rack for employees and grab my apron instead. I’m not trying to be a *Grinch*, but I’m not going to waste my time dragging up old memories either.

“Speaking of which, we better get ready for customers. We open in a few minutes,” Rachel steps down from the ladder and looks at Elliot, then me. “Elliot, help me clean up the boxes from the decorations. Flynn, can you double-check all the machines are on and everything is ready?”

I try to get in the mindset of opening the café as I go through the motions of checking all the machines. The display of sweets is running low on a few things, but we should get a new delivery from the bakery tomorrow. The bell rings as the door opens and people chatter as they fill the room. My jaw clenches, but I attempt to stop myself from grimacing. *It’s gonna be a long shift.*



“Morning Flynn, happy holidays,” Stella says as she steps behind the counter.

“Mornin’,” I grunt. We’ve been going non-stop since opening, but at least Stella showing up means my shift is almost over. Elliot bumps into me as they reach across the counter. The latte in my hand spills on my shirt, soaking through the fabric. “Shit.”

“Oops, sorry. Are you okay?” Elliot grabs a towel, trying to wipe away the mess.

“Don’t worry about it.” I snatch the towel from Elliot and roughly wipe off what I can, but it’s too little too late. “Can you make a new drink? I’m supposed to get off shift in a few minutes anyway.”

“What was it?” they ask.

“Uh, gingerbread latte.” I pull off my apron, tossing it in the dirty laundry, but my shirt underneath is just as soaked. *Great, now I have to stop by my dorm for a change of clothes before class.* I clock out, pull on my jacket, and grab my backpack.

I almost make it to my dorm when I run into Nicky in the hall. “Hey, Flynn,” he says with a chipper smile. “Did you just finish work?”

“Yeah, I need to get to class, but I had to stop by the dorms first.” I take another step towards my door, but Nicky puts his hand on my shoulder.

“Are you busy later?”

I hesitate. I don't have plans, but if I tell Nicky I don't have plans, he's going to ask to hang out. "I was thinking about watching a zombie movie or maybe a slasher film. I haven't decided yet."

Nicky bites his lower lip; he pales but forces a smile. He's never been big on scary movies, and we both know it. "You want some company? I'll bring pizza."

It's not the first time Nicky has asked, but I've mostly blown him off. I didn't expect him to want to hang out with me. He always hung out around Levi, but after high school my brother went off to California and Nicky came here. He probably misses hanging out with Levi. "Sure. Why not?" I sigh. "Drop by my dorm this afternoon. I'll see you later; I need to get to class." I rush past Nicky to my dorm and quickly change my clothes.

When Nicky shows up later, holding a pizza box, he seems a bit unsure, but follows me into the room. "I was thinking we could watch *No Exit* or maybe *Night of the Living Dead*. What do you think?" I ask. He doesn't answer, he's just biting his lip and staring at me.

"Uh, I don't think I've seen either of those. Whatever you want to watch is fine." He sets the pizza box on my desk, then glances at the TV before looking at my bed, but he stays standing.

I grab the remote and turn on the TV, flipping through the streaming services. I sit on my bed, stretching out a little. "How's Levi?" I ask, hoping the question will break him out

of whatever awkward thought he's having. Or maybe distract him from the fact that he agreed to watch a scary movie.

"He's your brother," Nicky laughs. "Don't you talk to him?" His mouth lifts into a grin as he reaches into the pizza box, pulling out a piece. He finally sits on the edge of the bed and looks at me, waiting for my answer.

"Sure, I mean, we talk sometimes, but it's not the same. You're his best friend. He tells you things." I find *Night of the Living Dead*, but I don't push the button to start it yet. Nicky is still half perched on my bed like he's thinking of leaving.

"He's fine, I guess. I don't know, he's been busy since practice started." He shrugs, looking at me, then scoots in a bit on the bed to face the TV better. "You can start it."

I get up and grab the pizza box, bringing it to the bed. As I sit down I wind up a little closer to Nicky, and he shifts closer to the edge again. Maybe I shouldn't have agreed to this in the first place. "How are your classes going? Any finals you're worried about?" I ask.

"Fine, more or less. I'm not worried about my core classes, but most of my art finals are larger pieces. I'm still working on some of them." He picks at his pizza as his cheeks turn red.

I'm not sure why Nicky's blushing, but I take a bite of pizza and focus on the TV. He goes silent, watching along with me until he jumps. I try not to laugh. Nicky readjusts, scooting a little closer, but the movie is just getting started. We eat pizza, not talking, then he jumps again.

By the time the movie is halfway over, Nicky's leg presses right against mine. *The next time he jumps, he'll probably wind up in my lap.* I don't think he's scooting closer on purpose, but it doesn't make it any less awkward. Usually, being this close to a guy is a lead in to something else, but this is Nicky. Just the random thought popping in my head seems off.

I pause the movie and lightly place my hand on his thigh. "We can call it a night if you want. I don't think you're enjoying this."

He looks at where our legs are pressed together and shifts away from me with a sheepish grin like he just noticed how close we are. "Sorry. I'll, uh, see you around, I guess." He gets off my bed, grabbing his things in a rush.

I follow him to the door. "Goodnight, Nicky."

His mouth opens like he's going to say something before he closes it and grins. Nicky waves awkwardly and walks away down the hall. I shake my head and close the door again. I lie on my bed and turn the movie back on.

Nicky's been best friends with my brother for years, and it's easy to think of him in almost the same way. When Levi left the state on a baseball scholarship, Nicky came to Blue Mountain University. I didn't think much of it until he started working at the bakery down the road from Wired and Tired.

A memory of Nicky's cheeks flushing pops into my head. He looked kinda cute for a moment, but I probably shouldn't think that. He's almost like another brother to me.

My alarm goes off too soon the next morning. I throw on clothes for work and head out to the café for another shift of dealing with short-tempered students in a rush to get their caffeine fix. I'm so busy working that I totally forgot we were expecting a delivery until Nicky walks in carrying boxes of baked goods. A customer nearly bumps into him in their hurry to leave. I rush over. "Careful," I say, grabbing the bottom box to steady Nicky's grip.

Nicky leans around the boxes, smiling at me as he gets a better grip. "Thanks, I couldn't really see where I was going." I grab a few boxes, helping Nicky get them safely to the counter. "I wanted to say sorry about last night, I didn't mean to make things weird." He brushes a stray tuft of hair behind his ear but misses some.

I'm tempted to brush it back myself, but I shake off the thought. "It's fine. Don't worry—"

"Hey Flynn, look up," Stella interrupts. She points above my head with a smirk. Then I realize just where we're standing. "Come on, give the cutie a kiss."

Nicky's eyes widen as he looks from the mistletoe to Stella, then at me. He's blushing as he puts together what she means. I think Nicky is more shocked than Stella when I lean closer and quickly press my lips against his. Nicky gasps, parting his lips. His tongue darts out, licking hesitantly at the crease of my mouth. He melts into my body, pressing against my chest. I'm half tempted to slide my tongue in his mouth and kiss him deeper, until Stella wolf whistles.

The abrupt sound brings me back to reality. I meant to give Nicky a quick peck not almost make out with him. He's my little brother's best friend. I pull back, rolling my eyes. "Knock it off. It's just Nicky."

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Two Nicky

“**W**ait, tell me what he said again,” Levi says over the phone.

“One of the other baristas whistled, and Flynn rolled his eyes then said ‘Knock it off. It’s just Nicky.’”

“But he kissed you? On the lips?” Levi’s voice goes up skeptically.

“Yeah, but I think it was more about messing with his coworker. She pointed out that we were standing under some mistletoe. It was barely even a kiss,” I add miserably. The whole thing was over before I really knew what was happening.

“What did you do after the kiss?”

“Nothing, I rushed out of the café and back to the bakery. I was still on shift,” I explain. Not that it matters, because Levi knows as well as I do I could have stayed longer.

“Do you want my advice or do you want me to encourage you to go for it?” he asks, but his tone is already telling me enough. When I don’t respond, Levi breaks the silence. “Are

we even sure he likes guys? He's never brought a boyfriend home."

It's a good question. Before coming to BMU I was convinced Flynn was probably straight. He had girlfriends, but—"I told you what I saw." I was walking past Flynn's dorm a month or so ago when he opened it and a guy stepped out. I wouldn't have thought anything of it, except Flynn kissed him. "He's gotta be bi, or pan, or something. Straight guys don't make out with other guys like that."

Levi laughs. "Okay, I'll give you that, but you've been crushing on him for years. It's not like you're subtle about it, either. You're his little brother's best friend. I know it's only like a three-year age difference, but he still thinks of us as immature teenagers. It doesn't matter that we're all in college now. Doesn't he still call you *Nicky*?"

"What are you saying?"

Levi sighs. "I'm saying, if Flynn was interested, I think he would've said something by now. It might be time to accept that you don't have a chance and find a real boyfriend. Stop mooning over my brother."

He might have a point ... "But he kissed me." I groan running my hand through my hair. I can't just ignore that.

"Keep talking about kissing my brother and I'm hanging up," Levi warns with a laugh, but if he's laughing, he can't be that worried about it.

"Fine. I need to get to class anyway. I'll talk to you later."

“Later, don’t waste all day overthinking it.”

“Take your own advice and ask Jared out,” I say back sweetly. Levi hangs up on me. *Hypocrite*. Levi has been dropping hints about a guy on his baseball team that he’s been flirting with, but as far as I know, nothing has happened.

I glance at the tabletop easel on my desk along with its half-finished drawing. My eyes trail down the lines of the model’s abs to the vee of his hips and lower. Figure drawing class has been interesting, to say the least. I never thought I’d be sitting in a classroom looking at naked models, but it’s surprisingly not sexual. I’ve been working on a larger, more detailed piece for my final from a quick sketch in class, but I keep getting distracted. I couldn’t even talk about the class around Flynn because half the time I’m looking at the models I’m thinking about how Flynn would look naked. It’s even worse than usual when I get to class because my mind is still firmly on Flynn kissing me this morning.

The whole thing couldn’t have lasted more than a minute. He didn’t even open his mouth. It’s a little underwhelming, after all this time thinking about kissing him. I’ve been friends with Levi since we started seventh grade and right around the same time, I crushed hard on Flynn. Of course, he was already in high school at that point and barely realized I existed. I never had a chance of hiding my crush from Levi, either, with how easily I blush. The first time that summer when Flynn joined us at the pool, my friend quickly dragged me to his room to interrogate me.

I shake off the thought and try to focus on class, but my head isn't in it. *What would Flynn do if I just kissed him again?* A real kiss this time. Would he kiss me back or just laugh the whole thing off again? Maybe Levi is right, and it doesn't mean anything.

My phone buzzes in my pocket, and when I pull it out after class, I notice I've been invited to a group chat with the employees from the café as well as my coworker from Wake and Bake. There are already a few messages to read through.

Hannah: Stella and I thought setting up a Secret Santa gift exchange would be fun. Let us know if you're interested.

Elliot: Is there a price limit?

Stella: We can vote on that. See what people can afford.

I'm typing out a message when another comment pops up.

Flynn: I'll do it. I guess.

Me: I'm in. Are we going to get together to pull names or something?

I'm already hoping I get Flynn, though I don't know what to get him yet. *What kind of gift will make a guy you've been crushing on for six years finally notice you?* Even if I don't draw Flynn's name, I can still get him a gift. We are friends.

Hannah: If everyone is available, we can pull names tomorrow morning.

Me: I have work, but I can stop by after my shift around ten.

Hannah replies to my message with a thumbs-up react, and more messages pop up in the chat as everyone hashes over the details. I turn off my screen and put my phone in my pocket. It's dark out and with the snow, I really shouldn't be looking at my phone as I walk back to my dorm. I make it back without any issues, and luckily it's warmer inside. I pull off my jacket and kick off my shoes, followed by my jeans. I switch into a pair of sweatpants and lie down on my bed.

I search for gift ideas first, but most of what I find are corny ideas for couples that are already dating. I check the group chat again and see that my coworker, Ashley, agreed to the idea. It looks like there will be at least seven of us. One of the café workers hasn't commented on the thread at all.

At work the next morning, I'm still thinking about what to get Flynn and hoping I get his name for the Secret Santa event. "Hey uh, Nicholas, right?" A deep voice pulls me out of my thoughts, and I turn around, finding myself face-to-face with one of the models from my figure drawing class. I'm not used to seeing him outside of class or wearing clothes for that matter.

My cheeks heat up at that thought, but I shake it off and remind myself this is work. "Yeah, I go by Nick. Welcome to Wake and Bake. How can I help you?"

"Sorry, maybe running into you at work wasn't the best plan. It seemed less awkward than after class," he mutters.

"You're not here to buy a cupcake?" I joke.

“No,” his lips turn up into a small grin. “Any chance you’re close to the end of your shift?”

I glance at the clock and bite my lower lip. “I get off in about ten minutes, but I already have plans. I’m supposed to head over to Wired and Tired.”

“Can I walk with you? I want to talk to you and I just need a minute.” He grins and his eyes look lower. *Is he checking me out?*

I’m probably imagining it, but I’m getting more curious. “Sure. Uh, sorry, what’s your name again?”

“Dylan.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to buy something while you wait?” I should probably get back to finishing my shift, but if Dylan wants to buy something, I’ll be helping a customer and I might find out why he wants to talk to me.

He looks over the display case of sweets, then at me again. “What do you suggest?”

“The candy cane macarons have been selling well, but my current favorite is the eggnog fudge.” I point out each treat in the display case.

“I’m not really a fan of eggnog, but the candy cane thing sounds good.” I open the case and grab one of the red macarons. “Can I get one of the gingerbread and hot chocolate ones too?” Dylan adds.

“Of course,” I add his choices to a pastry bag and ring up the order.

After I clock out, Dylan joins me on the short walk to the café. He tugs at his jacket pulling it tighter around him before looking over at me. “So, you said you had something you wanted to talk to me about?” I ask.

“A friend of mine is doing this get-together, it’s not a full-blown party, but anyway I was kinda hoping maybe you’d be willing to go with me.” He rushes through his words before taking a deep breath and clenching his jaw.

“Are you asking me out on a date?” I ask slowly.

“I’m trying to, yeah. Would you want to join me? It’s Friday evening. We’re meeting up in the student lounge,” Dylan adds, looking at me hopefully.

Maybe it’s the reassuring fact that someone who poses naked could be this nervous about asking me out on a date, or Levi’s voice in my head telling me to stop wasting my time crushing on Flynn, but I think I should say yes. “Why me? It shouldn’t be hard for someone who looks like you to get a date.”

Dylan chuckles, “Honestly it isn’t, but I’m not really interested in guys who only want me for my looks. When guys hear I do nude modeling they assume it’s something sexy and risqué, but art modeling isn’t like stripping.”

“Whether you’re trying or not, you look good up there,” I tell him honestly, but my cheeks heat up. “I didn’t mean um...”

Dylan smirks like he knows exactly what I mean. “Then you’ll go with me?” he asks. He puts his hand on my shoulder, stopping me before we can walk inside the café. I can see

inside the large window and my eyes instantly go to Flynn, watching as he treads behind the counter, grabbing ingredients to make a drink. “Nick?” Dylan says my name, snapping me out of my thoughts.

I look at Dylan again. His green eyes light up as the corner of his mouth lifts into a grin. He is cute, and it’s just one date. “Sure, I’ll go. Can I give you my number, and you can text me the details?” I ask. Dylan pulls out his phone and we exchange numbers.

“Great. I’ll let you go do whatever it is you have planned, and I’ll see you Friday.” Dylan pulls me in for a hug without warning, holding me tightly against him for a brief moment, and my arms go around him instinctively.

I press a quick kiss to his cheek before pulling away. “Sounds like a plan. I need to go.” I rush inside the café before I do something else foolish. The morning crowd has thinned out, but the workers are still busily shuffling around to help customers. I know Flynn is on shift but I look around trying to spot Stella or Hannah instead since they’re the ones organizing this. It doesn’t have anything to do with the fact that I don’t know how to react around Flynn after he kissed me.

“Nicky,” Stella calls out in a sing-song voice. She waves at me from across the room as she straightens up from wiping down a table. She walks closer to me and peers out the window behind me. “Who’s the cute guy you were talking to? I thought you had a thing for Flynn?”

“That’s Dylan, and who said I have a thing for Flynn?” I ask in a hushed tone. The last thing I need is for Flynn to hear us.

“Please, no one had to say anything. You look at him with these adorable puppy dog eyes.” Stella flutters her eyelashes, tilting her head to the side.

“Knock it off. I’m just here for the Secret Santa thing. Are we pulling names or something?” I change the subject, hoping to distract her.

“Yeah, some people came earlier and drew a name already, but there’s still a few left for you to pick from. I’ll get the cup.” Stella walks towards the register and I follow her, leaning against the counter as I wait. Then I notice Flynn as he finishes handing a customer a drink.

“Hey,” Flynn says, flicking his hand in a quick approximation of a wave. His brown hair is pulled back in a tight ponytail for work, showing off the shaved undercut. My eyes trail down, taking in the way his plain black T-shirt shows off his broad shoulders. His green Wired and Tired apron is tied loosely, blocking his chest. “Are you ordering something?” he asks, and I snap my gaze back to his. My cheeks heat up. At least Stella isn’t around to witness me checking Flynn out.

“No. I just dropped by to pick a name for the secret Santa thing.” I shrug, trying to act casual.

“Can I get you something while you wait?” he offers. “It’s on me.”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“I want to. What can I get you?” Flynn insists.

“Chai tea latte,” I say with a shrug, and that’s when Stella shows up again holding a small open takeout cup. She glances back and forth between me and Flynn with a knowing smirk then holds out the cup toward me. There are a few scraps of paper folded up inside the cup.

“Here pick. You too, Flynn.”

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Three Flynn

My hand brushes against Nicky's as we both reach inside the cup. "Sorry, you can go first." Nicky pulls his hand back and smiles at me. I quickly snag a piece of paper out of the cup and turn around to finish the drink I promised him.

"Flynn, you have to look at the name. I need to know if you pulled your own name," Stella says.

I roll my eyes and snap the lid on the cup, taking my time as I hand the latte to Nicky. I open the crumpled-up piece of paper and let my eyes glance at the name. *Nick*. Stella already gave me the perfect out, if I say I drew my own name I could draw again. Or I could figure out something for Nicky. "I'm good," I answer.

Nicky looks at his paper, then carefully folds it up and shakes his head. "I didn't get my own name either."

"Great. We're going to meet up next Saturday if that works for everyone." Stella looks at both of us and Nicky nods, then their attention turns to me.

“Uh, yeah. That should be fine.” Now I just have to figure out what to get Nicky. The problem is that the first things that come to mind suddenly seem a bit childish. After our quick kiss the other day, Nicky has been acting differently around me. *Maybe I shouldn't have kissed him.* It was a foolish decision to begin with, and it's made things more awkward between us. I can't entirely forget the way he leaned into the kiss like he wanted more. “Alright well, I'm still on shift.” I avoid the situation, heading for the register to help Hannah.

Nicky grabs my wrist before I can get away. “Thank you for the drink. I'll see you around.” I look at where his hand is still holding mine, and Nicky lets out a soft chuckle, pulling his hand away and pushing his hair behind his ear.

His hair falls back into the same spot, still partially in front of his face and again I have the urge to tuck it behind his ear for him. I shake off the thought. “Yeah, I'll see you.”



By the next day, I'm no closer to figuring out a gift to get Nicky than I was when I drew his name. I have roughly a week to figure it out, and while I could try to hang out with Nicky again to get ideas, he's going to wonder why I want to hang out with him. It might be easier to ask my brother. I pull out my phone and type out a quick message.

Me: What kind of stuff does Nicky like?

Dots pop up as Levi types out a response.

Levi: Why are you asking?

Of course, Levi's going to be nosy too. I shouldn't have expected he'd just answer the question. I roll my eyes as I type out a new message.

Me: I need to get him a Christmas present. Thought maybe you could help.

My phone rings in response. "Hey," I answer.

"Why are you getting Nick a present? You never get anyone gifts. We're lucky if you remember to get gift cards at the last minute," my brother complains. I guess I can see his point. I can't get Nicky a gift card for this, though.

"I drew his name for a Secret Santa thing at work and I thought you could help me."

"You know I heard an interesting story about you and Nick. Something about a kiss?" he hints, his voice getting higher.

"Levi," I groan. Of course, Nicky told my brother. "It wasn't a big deal. Nothing is going on between me and Nicky."

"It wasn't a big deal to you, but it's not fair to mess with his head like that." Levi doesn't sound joking anymore. He almost sounds mad at me.

"Wait, what are you talking about?" I interrupt.

"Flynn, you can't be that dense. You know Nick had a crush on you, right?" Levi's words hit me like a ton of bricks.

Suddenly, the way Nicky's been avoiding me and acting off makes sense. Of course he'd feel awkward around me after I

kissed him then completely dismissed the whole thing like the idea of kissing Nicky would be ridiculous. And the way he gasped and licked his lips, like he was trying to get me to deepen the kiss. Maybe I should've, except then I realize what else Levi said. "What do you mean 'had?'"

"Basically for as long as we've been friends. Throughout most of high school at least, but I guess your little stunt made him change his mind. He told me he's going on a date tomorrow."

"You know what, I'll talk to you later." I start to hang up, but Levi says one last thing.

"Don't fuck it up," he warns me, but I hit the button ending the call. The words he already said are stuck in my head. *You know Nick had a crush on you, right?* How did I not see that?

I guess I never put much thought into it when he and Levi were in high school because we weren't around each other enough, but now that Levi pointed it out everything is clicking into place. Nicky always seemed a little nervous around me and I caught him blushing more than a few times. I never would've even considered it when he was in high school, but he is kinda cute.

I grab a change of clothes to take a shower, but all I can think about is Nicky. *What if I had kept kissing him?* I'm not sure how to feel about any of this. It's pointless to even consider his crush or the possibility of going there. It's obvious Levi wouldn't approve, and Nicky has a date tomorrow with someone else. I try not to think about it as I push through the

effort of showering and getting ready for bed, but my brain won't shut off.

Instead of the conversation with my brother helping me figure out what to get Nicky, I now have a new issue to think about. I toss and turn in my bed until my restlessness gets the best of me, and I turn on a show to watch. At some point, my eyes must close because when I open them again, it's bright outside. I groggily pull on my clothes and head to the café. I don't have work this morning, but I need the caffeine.

Elliot does a double take at seeing me, giving me a quick glance over. "Isn't today your day off?" they ask.

"I need coffee, something with extra caffeine. I didn't get much sleep last night." I lean against the counter and yawn.

"Up studying or out with friends?" Elliot raises an eyebrow as they grab a cup, already making my typical drink and adding an extra shot of espresso.

"Uh, studying," I mutter, pulling out my wallet and fumbling through my cash, counting out enough for the drink.

Elliot gives me a knowing smirk, obviously mistaking my nervousness for something more. "Here you go. Hope none of your classes are any time soon, you look beat."

"Thanks." I take a sip of the drink and the bitter coffee swirls with sweet caramel in my mouth. It's probably dumb, but I pull out my phone and open the recent text chat with Nicky as I walk out of the café. I need to do something to make this whole situation less awkward.

Me: What are you doing tomorrow? Would you want to meet up and hang out?

Luckily I don't have an early class, so I head back to the dorms, drinking my coffee as I walk across campus.

Nicky: I was thinking about hitting a store and doing some present shopping.

It's the perfect opportunity to hang out, and I can try to find ideas for gifts for him while I'm at it.

Me: We could go together, I'll drive.

I half expect Nicky to be suspicious and make a remark like Levi but instead, his message pops up almost immediately, then it's followed by a second one.

Nicky: Sounds great. Maybe around one?

Nicky: I have work in the morning, but I should be off by then.

I send back a thumbs-up emoji and sit at my desk to get in some last-minute studying before class. I probably should have attempted some of this last night rather than overthinking about Nicky.

I manage not to think too much about the whole thing until I see Nicky as I walk to the cafeteria for dinner. He's with another boy that must be his date. They aren't holding hands or kissing, but they keep looking at each other and Nicky is smiling. The guy is decent looking; I'll admit that. A mostly average build, and a mop of strawberry blonde curls on his

head. I don't have any real reason to hate him, but something about this whole situation feels off.

I look at Nicky again, taking in his short messy brown hair. A tuft of it hanging stubbornly in front of his face. He's still on the skinny side, but there's no denying how he's grown. He's fully grown and fully capable of dating any college guy. *Correction: other college guys.* Guys that aren't me. I should be going to the cafeteria, but I follow the pair until they duck into the student lounge.

Maybe I judged the situation wrong and this isn't his date. Or maybe it's none of my business. It gets cold as I stand there debating my options. I make my way to the cafeteria to get dinner, but I don't sit down to eat it. Instead, I find myself taking it with me, and when I open the door to the lounge, I hear Levi's warning in my head.

Don't fuck it up.

There are more people in here than usual. Everyone is amped up about finals being over, and I hear talk about parties as I make my way through the masses. For all I know, they already left while I was getting food, but then I catch sight of Nicky. He's off to the side of the room and now the guy he's with has his arm around Nicky's shoulders, holding him to his side. Nicky is smiling and looks comfortable there as he talks to someone else. I should take the hint and drop this. That would be the smart thing to do. Listen to Levi and forget about this whole crush nonsense. Whatever feelings Nicky might have had towards me, he's not waiting around for me.

Nicky laughs at something, his cheeks rising and filling with color. It reminds me of all the times he got nervous around me and blushed just like that. *Did I really not realize sooner that he had a crush?* All of high school Levi said; sure it probably started as a childhood crush, but that's a long time to hold onto feelings.

Nicky's date leans closer and presses their lips together. Nicky seems surprised by the turn of events, but he wraps his arm around the guy's neck, keeping him there. It's weird, like watching what could've happened if I had kissed him a second longer at the café. My heart beats faster in my chest, and I clench my jaw until it hurts. I could've been the one he's kissing right now. *Why didn't I realize before?*

They break apart and Nicky curls into the guy's side again. The whole scene is so sweet it's giving me a toothache. I turn around and make my way to the cafeteria. I've seen enough for one day. I don't need to waste my time thinking about what Nicky and his date are getting up to. Or on the treacherous thoughts of what might have happened if I had taken our kiss seriously. It would have been so easy to deepen that kiss.



Four Nicky

Earlier that day

“I have kinda a confession to make. I should have told you before I asked you to come with me to this, but my ex is going to be there tonight.” Dylan purses his lips and looks at the ground as we walk toward the lounge.

“Okay, are you letting me know because he might cause a scene, or are you hoping to make him jealous?” I ask.

“Honestly, I don’t know. It was a pretty recent breakup, and he’s the one that called it off. I didn’t invite you just to make him jealous. I noticed you in class, and I do want to get to know you, but I didn’t want to go to this thing alone. Does that change your mind? It’s okay if you don’t want to go with me anymore.” He sighs, dropping his shoulders and letting his arms hang down by his side.

Considering I mostly agreed to the date to attempt to stop thinking about Flynn, it seems almost hypocritical to judge Dylan for this. We might have questionable reasoning for being here, but that doesn’t mean we can’t try it anyway. “I’m

in kind of a strange situation too,” I admit. “There’s this guy I’ve liked for a while, and even though he’s never really looked at me twice, I’ve always hoped something might happen.”

“What changed?” Dylan looks at me, raising one eyebrow.

“He ... well, he made it obvious he doesn’t feel the same. It’s probably best I don’t waste more time hoping he’ll change his mind.” I force my lips into what I hope is a somewhat convincing smile, then brush my hand against Dylan’s. He takes the hint and slowly laces his fingers with mine. “I think what I’m trying to say is; maybe neither of us are starting off on the right foot, but if you want me to be here then I wanna go with you.”

“Thanks, I think.” He tightens his grip, squeezing my hand for a moment. “Let’s just see what happens tonight and go from there.” Dylan keeps holding my hand for the rest of the walk. The warmth of his palm in mine is nice, but it doesn’t excite me. It’s just *okay*.

We both reach for the door at the same time and laugh, pulling back our hands. “You can,” I say with a gesture to the door.

“Right.” Dylan opens the door, and we walk into the lounge. There are a few students here, but I don’t see anyone I recognize. I’m distracted looking around at the crowd until Dylan wraps his arm around my waist, pulling me closer to him. My heart races a little faster, not expecting the sudden embrace. “This okay?” he whispers.

I look Dylan over. There's no denying that he's good-looking. I should be thrilled he asked me out on this date. "Yeah," I mumble.

We make our way through the room to the back corner where a large couch is by a pool table, then someone waves and calls Dylan's name. "And who is this?" Dylan's friend asks, staring at his arm around my waist.

"This is uh—a friend, Nick," Dylan stumbles. Maybe we should have thought of how he was going to introduce me earlier.

"A *friend*, huh? You didn't take long to get over Oliver." He waggles his eyebrows suggestively and Dylan rolls his eyes.

"I don't want to talk about that. I'm here with Nick, and Oliver can do whatever it is that he's doing."

"Or whoever," Dylan's friend jokes, elbowing the guy next to him.

The sound of clapping hands draws my attention, and I turn around. Dylan's grip on my waist tightens. The guy clapping isn't looking at us but at Dylan's friend, who made the remark. "Jealous, Paul? I might have fun sleeping around, but it'd take more than a few drinks to make you fuckable."

The other guys standing next to Paul hold back a laugh or chuckle under their breath. Paul huffs, mumbling something before he rolls his eyes and walks off, leaving Dylan and me with the newcomer that can only be the ex. "Hey," Oliver says, looking only at Dylan and pointedly ignoring me.

“Hey, sorry about that.” Dylan gestures vaguely in the direction Paul walked off.

“About what? You didn’t do anything.” Oliver flicks his wrist, dismissing Dylan’s apology. He finally turns to look at me, and his eyes do a slow sweep over me. Instead of seeming jealous, it almost seems like he’s checking me out. “Cute date. Any chance you’d—”

“Oliver,” Dylan cuts him off before he can finish, his voice a gruff warning.

Oliver chuckles, “Okay, I can take a hint. Let me know if you change your mind.” He winks in my direction then turns and walks off.

“Do I want to know what he was going to ask?” I lean closer to Dylan’s ear to ask the question.

“Probably not, but I’ll tell you if you insist.” He sighs, his arm loosening around me. Whatever the reason they broke up or what Oliver was going to say, it’s clear Dylan isn’t over it. Though maybe I don’t have a reason to complain when I’m not invested in this date either. Maybe I shouldn’t have agreed to go shopping with Flynn tomorrow. I was just so surprised he texted me and wanted to hang out in the first place. I know he wasn’t asking me on a date, but I’m looking forward to it more than the actual date I’m on right now.

“Okay, so, what do you want to do? Anyone you want to talk with?” I ask, trying to shake off the thoughts of Flynn and focus. *I’m on a date with Dylan.*

He looks around the room and leads me to the pool table.
“Want to play?”

I agree and by halfway through our game, it's clear I suck, and we've got a small crowd watching us. I approach the table, lining up my stick. “Raise your elbow a little higher and adjust your angle slightly to the left.” I turn to see who said it, but I don't recognize the blonde. He smiles at me and points toward the table with his chin. “Trust me, just try it. What do you have to lose?”

I guess he has a point. I approach the table again, making the small change of position. The cue strikes the white ball sending it across the table to hit the solid green ball right into the corner pocket. “I did it!” I cheer. “Thank you, uh.”

“Aiden and the game's not over yet. Come on.” He walks around the table to where the cue ball is, and I follow him still unsure why he's helping me. He coaches me on setting up the next shot, and I manage to sink another ball, but I mess it up on the third shot as the ball bounces off the wall instead of going in the pocket. Dylan steps up to the table to take his turn, and I look at Aiden. Only his attention is firmly on Dylan. “Look at how he lines up the shot. See how he crouches down to get a better view?”

“Why are you helping me?” I ask. I'm guessing he knows Dylan, but this feels off.

“Because watching you make a fool of yourself was just sad?” He's grinning, and weirdly, I don't think he means it as an insult. “Pool is all about angles and amount of force behind the

cue ball. It's just math. Anyone can do it. Also, I *maybe* bet someone you could beat your boyfriend."

"You bet on me?" I ask too amazed by that to say something about him calling Dylan my boyfriend.

"Don't freak out. No pressure. Just do what I tell you. Let's go, it's your turn again." Aiden helps me line up to hit a ball. I pocket it, leaving me with two solid balls on the table, but Dylan only has one striped ball. I miss the second shot and move aside for him. In the end, we both get down to the eight ball, and Dylan accidentally knocks it into the left side pocket rather than the corner pocket he was going for.

"Thank you," I tell Aiden. I'm amazed I did that well even if I won by default.

"Hey, don't act like that was a loss. I still won the bet. No one said you had to sink the final ball." Aiden walks off, waving as he goes. I watch as he walks right to Oliver. I'm too far away to hear what they're saying, but when Oliver pulls out his wallet I start to understand. Dylan comes over to me again taking the cue stick from me and lying both on the table for the next players.

"Well, that was surprising. Aiden never plays. Was he helping you?" he asks, wrapping his arm around my waist again.

"Yeah, he said he bet someone he could help me beat you." Dylan follows my gaze across the room to Aiden and Oliver and sighs.

"That sounds more like Aiden. Sorry."

“No, it’s fine,” I answer, but that’s when Aiden comes back.

“No boyfriend tonight?” Dylan asks the blonde.

“I came with Oliver. Liam isn’t big on these things. Where’d you find the cute date? I don’t think I’ve seen him at one of these before.”

“We have a class together,” Dylan answers. It might technically be true, but I can’t stop the laugh that comes out. My cheeks heat up as I think of Dylan’s part in the class we share.

Dylan pulls me closer, then his lips are on mine. From the timing of everything, he could be kissing me just to keep me from saying something stupid about him being naked in our shared art class. I push my lips into his, wrapping my arms around his neck and doing my best not to chuckle. Neither of us opens our lips, and Dylan waits for me to regain my composure and pull away. He’s smiling at me, and Aiden has wandered off again. “Sorry, most of my friends don’t know about my job. I should’ve mentioned that.”

“It’s okay. I didn’t mind.” My cheeks still feel a little warmer and tighter than normal. Overall, the night is fun, but it feels more like I’m hanging out with a friend than on a date. Even with Dylan’s arm around my waist and the strange *kiss* we shared I’m not really feeling anything more. Or maybe I’m still too caught up in comparing it to my feelings for Flynn, as unrealistic as that is. I shouldn’t expect to feel the same way about a guy I just met.

“Did you have a good time tonight?” Dylan asks as he walks me back to my dorm.

“It was fun,” I tell him honestly.

“Fun enough to say yes to a second date?” he asks, coming to a stop in front of my door.

I look him over again. Even though Levi is probably right, I don’t want to give up on Flynn yet. And maybe Dylan isn’t the best option with everything he has going on, either. That whole thing with his ex earlier was off. “What was Oliver trying to ask earlier? I feel like I’m missing a lot.”

Dylan winces, closing his eyes tightly. “Oliver and I had an open relationship and sometimes he liked to share.”

“Is that why you broke up?” I ask.

“No, not entirely. We argued about a lot of things,” he says with a shrug.

“Maybe we should try hanging out as friends first,” I offer. It’s easier than agreeing to a second date when there doesn’t seem to be any connection between us.

“Sure, that might be a good idea.” Dylan nods. “I’ll see you around?”

I move closer and give him a quick kiss on the cheek. “Yeah, goodnight.”



Five Flynn

Nicky: Are we still meeting up? I should be ready in like fifteen minutes; I'm running a little behind.

I was supposed to meet him in his dorm five minutes ago. I'm ready to go, but I'm not sure if I should call the whole thing off. After last night I'm feeling conflicted about the whole situation, but Nicky doesn't know I saw him, or that I might be rethinking our kiss and wanting to try it again.

I walk down the hall to Nicky's door and knock. He opens it with a sweater in his hand, he's got a T-shirt and jeans on, but he isn't wearing shoes yet either. "Hey, sorry I'm late. I lost track of time," I explain.

"It's fine, I just texted you to let you know I'm behind too, but I guess you didn't see it." Nicky opens the door wider, and I follow him in. "I'm almost ready," he says, pulling his sweater on over his head which makes his shirt pull up a little, showing off his waist. There's a small patch of hair under his navel trailing down into his jeans and my eyes follow it down until I'm looking at Nicky's crotch. *Shit, get a grip Flynn.* I look

around the room, trying to stop myself from checking him out, when I notice a drawing on his desk.

“I’ll uh, wait outside until you’re finished.” I rush into the hall again, not bothering to explain. Maybe I should leave. I can just text Nicky that I suddenly felt sick, and I’ll hang out with him another time. It wouldn’t be far from the truth. I wasn’t expecting to see a nude drawing in his room of the same guy he was with last night and now my stomach is turning. Levi must have been off about them having their *first* date last night.

I’ve always known Nicky is an amazing artist but seeing a skillful rendition of his boyfriend’s dick isn’t the best reminder. I’m not going to say something about it when the picture was in his room, it’s not like he was even trying to hide it. The large drawing was in plain sight, Nicky probably forgot it was out when he invited me in.

“I’m ready. Sorry about keeping you waiting.” Nicky steps out of his dorm, now wearing a jacket and his shoes.

I guess I missed my chance to run off. “It’s fine. Did you have any specific store in mind you wanted to go to?” I try to brush the picture out of my mind.

“Not really. I was thinking we could go downtown. Hit up a few shops in case we have different ideas.” Nicky smiles at me and just like that, I abandon the idea of skipping the trip. I need to go shopping and get Nicky a gift, and his dating someone else doesn’t change that.

“Sure. That sounds good,” I agree quickly. It’s a short walk from the dorms to the parking lot and from there it’s just us. *Alone, in my car.* I turn the key and let the engine warm up as my windshield defrosts. I keep picturing the drawing from Nicky’s room in my head. My gut clenches as I imagine the two of them together.

“Are you feeling okay?” Nicky asks, placing his hand on my shoulder in concern.

“I’m fine. So just between you and me, who did you get for this Secret Santa thing?” I ask, hoping to change the subject as we drive away from the campus.

“It’s called Secret Santa,” Nicky says with a chuckle. “I can’t just tell you which name I picked.”

“You think most of the presents are going to be more generic? There’s probably only a couple of people I’d know what to get,” I hint.

“They’re your coworkers,” Nicky chides me. “You have to have some ideas.” He flashes a playful grin at me and suddenly the ideas that are popping into my head don’t have anything to do with the Secret Santa event. The car feels too warm, or maybe it’s just me.

“They aren’t all my coworkers. What if I got Ashley? I barely know her at all.”

“Did you get Ashley?” Nicky raises an eyebrow, and I’m tempted to tell him who I actually got for a moment.

“No.” We’re getting closer to the mall now, but I don’t want to split up and do our shopping separately just yet. “Which store did you want to go to first? I can park more in the middle if there’s a few different stores you want to go to.”

“JC Penney might have the most options for gifts. I know there’s an art store here too. Would you mind if I wanted to go there just to look for myself?” he asks.

“I’m not in any hurry.” *And it’ll give me ideas on what to get Nicky.* He pulls his coat tighter as he opens the car door and steps out. It’s not currently snowing, but there’s enough left over on the ground to make a small layer of gray slush. We trudge through it to the first store, then Nicky hesitates, looking at me.

“Are we shopping together or splitting up and meeting up later?” he asks.

“If you want to split up we can,” I shrug. “I should probably get gifts for my family too, while we’re here.”

“I can help you pick something for Levi,” Nicky says. “I want to check out the perfumes and lotion section too.” His offer is the complete opposite of my brother’s. Levi refused to help me pick a gift for Nicky even after I explained why to him. Nicky is willing to help even without me asking.

“Yeah, that’d be great.” Nicky leads us through most of the store, stopping to look at something so often that I can barely remember everything. He picks out a bottle of lotion and holds it to his nose, trying to sniff it. “What are you doing?” I ask, holding back a laugh.

“I have to make sure it smells good,” Nicky explains. “I can’t give someone a gift that smells bad. Here, what do you think?” He holds the bottle in front of my face for me to smell too.

I take a small whiff, but the smell is more subtle than I expected. I take a deeper breath and catch an almost familiar smell. A sweet flowery scent, but it’s not overpowering. There’s also a hint of orange, I think. I look at the label as I pull back. Orange blossom and honeysuckle. “I like it,” I tell him. Nicky adds the lotion to his growing collection of items, but it looks like he’s struggling to hold it all. Maybe we should have gotten a basket. “Can I help you hold some of that?”

He stops walking to look at me as his forehead scrunches up in confusion. “Sure ... thank you. And not just for helping, but this whole thing. It’s nice going shopping together rather than doing all of this on my own.”

“No, don’t thank me for that. I needed to do this anyway, and you helped me find something for my brother and my mom. I’m sure they’ll like those gifts much better than if I’d picked something. You’re helping me,” I explain. Nicky moves closer, handing over a few things, and for a moment before he pulls away I realize how close together we are.

His face is right next to mine, close enough to feel the warmth of his body and smell that sweet sugar cookie smell on his breath when he thanks me again. I want to press my lips to his, and taste that sugary sweetness again, but that’s exactly what I shouldn’t do. I make myself pull away instead. “Let’s keep moving. There are other stores to hit too.”

We leave that store with a few bags each and head to another department store. I grab a handbasket this time, and Nicky helps himself to it, adding items as we go along. As we walk past the seasonal section of the store, Nicky reaches out and grabs a Santa hat then turns to me with a wide smile. “No,” I say as he comes closer, but I don’t back away.

“Come on, it’s just a hat. Where’s your holiday spirit?” Nicky puts the hat on his own head; the white puffball on the end pulling it over to one side. I might not be a fan of the holiday season, but I can’t deny that he looks adorable with his lopsided Santa hat.

“It looks better on you,” I tell him. “It suits you, *Nicholas*.” It feels weird using his full name even to make a Santa reference.

Nicky laughs, covering his mouth as he tries to hide it. “I think I prefer you calling me Nicky.” The hat has moved again, making that tuft of hair stick out in front of his face.

I reach out and brush Nicky’s hair back behind his ear, slipping my fingers under the ridiculous hat. It’s not until my hand is cupping the back of his head and Nicky is looking at me with his lips parted slightly that I freeze up. His gaze meets mine and I’m close enough to see the specks of brighter gold in his brown eyes. All it’d take is a small step forward and—*Don’t even think about it*. I can’t kiss him again and make all this even more awkward. He’s already seeing someone.

“Sorry.” I pull back, picking up the handbasket from the floor. “Do you want to grab something to eat after this? Then we can

go to that art store you wanted.”

Nicky pulls the hat off, setting it back on a shelf before giving me a tight smile. I know I messed up. I got way too close to kissing him and now this is awkward. We pay for our purchases and leave the store. “We don’t have to stay longer if you don’t want to. I can check out the art store another time,” Nicky says as we step into the parking lot.

“No,” I answer too quickly. I still haven’t bought anything for Nicky, and I’d be lost in a store like that on my own. “I mean, we’re already here. There’s no reason we can’t check it out. I just thought we should have lunch first. There are a few different restaurants around here. What sounds good? My treat.”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“I want to. Think of it as a thank you for helping me pick gifts if you want. Come on, we can put these bags in the car first.” I lead Nicky through the parking lot and we drop our bags in the trunk before he takes a better look around the strip mall.

“That sounds good.” Nicky points out a Thai restaurant across the way.

I expected him to pick one of the fast-food restaurants, but that works too. “Sure.” The restaurant is small and we get seated at a little table across from each other. We’re sitting so close together that our knees are brushing against each other. Maybe offering to buy him lunch was a bad idea because I’m so focused on not rubbing my leg against his that I barely taste my food. I don’t think I’m doing a good job of convincing

Nicky I want to spend time with him. He only eats part of his meal, and we wind up getting boxes for the rest of our food.

All of it is worth it when we walk into the art store. Nicky's eyes light up like a damn Christmas tree as he drags me through the aisles. First through the painting supplies then onto a section with ... pencils? I never knew it was possible to fill an entire aisle with different types of pencils. *Hell, I never even knew there were so many options.* Nicky pauses, looking over a set of colored pencils for a few moments. He already has a few items in his hands and he shifts them around, mumbling numbers under his breath. Then he sighs, reluctantly putting the set back on the shelf.

It looks like I might have figured out what to get him now, but how do I buy it without him noticing?

I wait until we're leaving the store to take my chance. "Here, why don't you go ahead to the car." I pull out my keys for Nicky. "I need to use the restroom real quick."

He looks at my keys for a moment, "You sure?"

"Yeah, it'll only take a few moments." I head back into the store, grabbing the set of pencils Nicky put back earlier. The price is higher than the twenty-dollar limit for this secret Santa thing, but it doesn't stop me from buying it. I want Nicky to have the best Christmas, even if he's with someone else.



I grab the bottle of lotion I bought for Hannah and add it to a small gift bag. There are a few other goodies; some nail polish, chocolate, and a cute coffee mug with a cat wearing a Santa hat. I wanted to get a few things for my money, and I wasn't entirely sure what Hannah would like. Adding all of it to the bag now makes me think of Flynn, though. I could have sworn he was about to kiss me at the store when he pushed my hair behind my ear. I'm probably just imagining it, seeing what I want to see.

Dylan texted me earlier today asking if I'd want to go to a movie with him this weekend, but I haven't replied yet. Even with us agreeing to be friends, I'm too caught up on what's going on with Flynn. I'm supposed to see him this evening at the café for the Secret Santa thing and maybe it'd be easier if I invited Dylan along. He'd probably agree to be my buffer after the weird thing with Oliver.

My phone chimes with a new message, but I'm less excited when I notice who it's from.

Stella: Can you help me with something?

I should probably ask what I'm helping with before saying yes, knowing Stella. I type out a quick response, but her next text message makes me more confused.

Stella: What size pants do you wear?

I hit the call button. I need more answers than she's giving me over text messages. "Hey," Stella says as she answers the call.

"Why do you need to know my pants size?" I ask.

"I got Elliot something for the Secret Santa thing. Obviously, I can't ask them to try on the gift I bought, but I think you two are around the same size." Her voice gets faster as she explains. "Any chance you could come to my dorm and try it on?"

"Is this just an excuse to get me in a dress?" I ask, but she's got me curious now. Since the gift is for Elliot, I'm assuming it's probably something girly. They've been gradually dressing in more feminine clothing lately.

Stella laughs. "No, I like how it looks but it's not the same as seeing it on someone."

"What are you going to do if it's the wrong size? It's a little late for returns. And you still haven't said what it is," I remind her.

"Just come over and see," Stella tells me her dorm number, and I grab my things. When she opens her door, I notice her boyfriend there too. *She really expects me to do this with an audience?*

"Okay, I'm here. What is it?" I ask as I walk into the room.

Stella grabs a shopping bag off her bed and pulls out a pleated green plaid skirt. “It should fit, but it might be too short.”

I take it from her and hold it up to my hips. She’s probably not off about the sizing because it looks like it’ll fit me and completely show off my underwear. “I’m not trying this on. I don’t think it’s long enough to hide anything, but hey, at least if it’s too short Elliot’s boyfriend might get a kick out of it.” Caleb laughs from where he’s sitting on the bed looking at his phone and Stella rolls her eyes. I hand her the skirt and Stella sighs.

“Fine. I’ll see you at the thing tonight. And speaking of boyfriends, are you bringing yours?” she asks.

“I don’t have a boyfriend,” I answer slowly. *Where did she get that idea?*

“You don’t? Flynn said something the other day about seeing you on a date with someone,” she explains.

“Flynn said?”

“Yeah, he seemed kinda off about it, but you know how grumpy he usually is.” She shrugs off the whole thing, but I think I’m starting to understand why Flynn has been acting weird around me. He must have seen me with Dylan and assumed we were dating. *Maybe I wasn’t that far off in thinking he was flirting with me.*

“I’ll see you later. I need to do something.” I turn around, leaving Stella’s room in a hurry. Maybe I’m still off on all of this and making assumptions that I shouldn’t be. I’m probably

overthinking his playful attitude at the mall. I pull out my phone and send Flynn a message.

Me: Are you busy? Can we meet up and go to the thing at the café together?

I pace the sidewalk outside of the dorm building. The cold air hits my face, chilling my cheeks and making me rethink everything. I shouldn't be jumping to conclusions that Flynn kept from kissing me because he thought I was already seeing someone. I don't even know for sure that he was going to kiss me. My phone stays silent, and I reluctantly make my way back to the dorms. I don't get a message until it's almost time for the event to start.

Flynn: Sorry, I was working. We had to shut down the café before tonight, but I'll see you when you get here.

It should have occurred to me earlier that if we're all meeting up at the café it's not fair to have some of them working. The owner must have agreed to let us meet there and close up early for the night. I grab the present for Hannah, slip on my jacket, then head out to the café.

When I get there, a sign on the door reads, "Closed for a private event." I knock on the door and Elliot answers it. "Hey, come on in." They open the door wider, and I notice how empty the café is without all the usual customers. The music is on a little louder than normal, playing Christmas carols. "There's a table you can put your gift on over by the tree." They point toward the corner of the room, and I see Flynn still

wearing his apron and pushing some of the tables over to make room for everyone.

I put my gift on the table Elliot pointed out. then walk over to Flynn and place my hands next to his on the table. “Can I help?” I ask. He looks at me and nods but doesn’t actually say anything. We move the table and chairs to the wall before moving on to the next one. My heart is beating heavier in my chest at the thought of telling Flynn how I feel, but I need to clear the air. “Are you doing anything after this? I wanted to talk to you.”

Maybe I’m way off still, but if I don’t say anything I won’t know.

“Nothing planned.” Flynn shrugs, “I can hang out for a bit if you want.” The door opens again, and more people walk in. I see Stella along with her boyfriend, and it looks like Hannah brought her girlfriend. There’s quickly a small crowd. Too many people to have the kind of conversation I was hoping for with Flynn, but I don’t want to keep putting it off either. “Thanks for helping,” he tells me, as we move the last table out of the way.

After all that movement, it’s a bit warm for my jacket. I pull it off, hanging it on the coat rack near the door, and that’s when the last person walks in. There are more presents on the table by mine. Hannah gets everyone’s attention, pausing the music as she speaks up. “I think everyone’s here. We’re going to get started. Are all the gifts on the table?” A chorus of yeses echoes through the room. “Great. I’ll read the name for each

gift until we get through handing everything out.” She grabs a gift from the table, reading off Rich’s name first.

I zone out as names are called until Hannah reads mine. She hands me a small box wrapped in bright red paper. I pull back the wrapping carefully at first, but then I get a glimpse at the box. *No, I can’t be seeing this right.* I rip the rest off in a hurry until I’m holding the set of watercolor pencils I almost bought the other day. I look up, and my eyes meet Flynn’s. The gift has to be from him, and I know it was more expensive than he was supposed to spend. I barely realize I’ve walked over to him until I’m standing right in front of him. “Thank you, but this is too much.”

“I’m not taking it back. I saw the way you looked at the store. I know you wanted them,” Flynn tells me with a half-smile.

“I do want them, but ...” I bite my lower lip. This still doesn’t mean anything more than Flynn wanting to buy me a gift. I catch a glimpse of green at the corner of my eye and an idea pops into my head. I throw my arms around Flynn’s neck and pull him closer, slamming my lips into his. He doesn’t hesitate or pull away this time. His tongue slides against my lips and into my mouth, kissing me deeper. I hear a moan, but it takes a moment to realize the sound came from me.

Then he breaks the kiss, blinking at me slowly. “What was that for?” Flynn asks.

“Uh,” I point at the mistletoe hanging above us, not sure what to say. That kiss was completely different from the last one we shared.

“Oh,” Flynn says, his voice dropping.

“I didn’t mean, uh, I want—” I kiss Flynn again. It’s easier than trying to find the words to explain everything. His lips move tenderly against mine, then his hands grab my hips, pulling me into him.

“Flynn,” Hannah holds back a laugh as she repeats his name because we’re still kissing. Everyone is looking at us as we pull away from each other.

Flynn looks at Hannah, then back at me. “Go,” I tell him. *This probably wasn’t the best time or place to make a move.* Flynn walks over to Hannah and takes the bag she’s holding out for him. Their lips move as Hannah says something to him, but I’m too far away to hear it.

“I wasn’t expecting that, since when are you two dating?” Elliot asks.

“We’re not,” I answer. “I’m not even sure anything is happening between the two of us.”

“You’re joking, right? With the way that kiss was? You two looked like you were about to start ripping each other’s clothes off,” Stella chimes in.

“Thanks,” Flynn says dryly as he joins us. Stella and Elliot chuckle, but I focus on Flynn. “I think we need to talk. You want to get out of here?” he asks me.

“Absolutely.” My mind is already gone, hoping he plans on inviting me back to his dorm to do something along the lines of what Stella was just saying. Even if I know it’s not going to

be that easy. He's going to make me talk about this first. But hopefully, we can still get to the *ripping-each-other's-clothes-off* part.

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Nicky walks next to me, clutching his gift to his chest, and meeting my eyes every few minutes. He hasn't said anything since we left the café, and I'm not sure where to start the conversation. We should probably go somewhere a bit more private to talk, but going back to either of our rooms might be a bad idea considering what just happened. Another kiss like that could lead to us doing something other than talking. I need to know a few things before we get to that. "Don't you have a boyfriend?" I blurt out.

"No. I went on a date the other night, but it wasn't serious. We decided to try being friends instead." Nicky messes with the zipper on his jacket while he talks, but his answer leaves me more confused.

"I saw a drawing in your room the other day. It was the same guy you were kissing."

Nicky's cheeks go red, but he laughs. "That wasn't what you think. Dylan is one of the models in my figure drawing class. That was for my final."

“Then you’re not ...” I trail off as it hits me how stupid I’ve been. I should have said something the other day rather than rushing out of his dorm room.

“No, I’m not.” He grins playfully as he mocks me. “Can we go to one of our dorms to continue this conversation? It’s a bit cold to stay out here.” His words say one thing, but he’s biting his lip and looking at me like he’s thinking of undressing me. I’m tempted to kiss him again, but we’re not going to get much talking done that way.

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea. I don’t want to ...” I don’t know how to say it. I’m not usually the type to wait with these sorts of things.

“Rush into anything?” Nicky guesses, and I nod. “Does that mean no more kissing tonight?” He steps closer and licks his lower lip.

“I don’t think I can go that slow,” I admit. “How about we go back to your dorm?”

Nicky grabs my hand, lacing our fingers together as we walk to his room. He pulls off his jacket after he closes the door behind us, and I do the same. I look around his room as he sets his gift on his desk. The drawing that was there before is gone now, but then I realize something else. There really isn’t anywhere for us to sit together other than on his bed. Nicky walks over to me again and wraps his arms around my neck. “Before you overthink all of this, can I kiss you again?”

I lean down and press my mouth to his. Our lips meet slower this time, hesitantly exploring each other. Nicky chuckles and

pulls me closer, pushing his body into mine and kissing me deeper. His hand moves down my back until he reaches the end of my sweater and pushes it up to run his hand over my bare skin. As tempting as it is to let him continue, I pull back. “Nicky,” I say his name softly. “What are we doing?”

“Kissing,” he teases with a smirk. “You have no idea how long I’ve been waiting for this.”

“Levi might have mentioned something.” But bringing up my brother reminds me of our last conversation. “That’s not what I meant, though. Where is this going? I don’t think this can be a one-night thing.”

“Do we have to figure that out right now?” Nicky asks, raising an eyebrow. “Can’t we just enjoy this and see where it goes?” Nicky pulls off his sweater, revealing part of his bare back as his shirt clings to it. When he gets everything back in place, he sits on his bed and kicks off his shoes. Luckily, he stops there, keeping his T-shirt and jeans on.

Maybe he has a point. Or maybe I don’t want to fight this new attraction. Either way, I take off my shoes then strip off my sweater and sit next to him on the bed. Nicky moves closer, curling into my side, and I wrap my arm around him. Doing this should feel awkward in such early stages of a relationship, but this is Nicky.

Holding him just feels natural. That’s probably why it’s so hard to keep pulling back from his sweet kisses. Being with him is intoxicating. It’s too easy to lose myself in this feeling. It’s only when Nicky kisses me deeper and whimpers into my

mouth that I fully snap out of it. I probably shouldn't let this go further tonight.

I'm not sure when we laid down but having Nicky under me is almost too tempting. I almost don't want to untangle my body from his and return to my empty bed even if I know I should. "Maybe we should talk about this another time," I say, pulling back from another kiss. "It's getting late."

"Yeah, I guess not rushing means no staying the night, huh?" He shifts under me and his thigh brushes against my crotch. I've been half-hard the whole time we've been cuddling and kissing, but the attention makes my dick throb. "Are you busy tomorrow?" he asks, changing the subject.

Classes officially ended yesterday, and I don't have work. "No, tomorrow's good." I get off the bed to get my shoes. Nicky sits up on his bed to watch me. His lips are all puffy from our kisses, and I have to look away to make myself grab the rest of my things. "I'll text you in the morning. We can go do something," I say vaguely.

"You sure you don't want to stay and do *something* tonight?" Nicky counters. I can't stop myself from kissing him one more time. He's sitting on the edge of the bed as I stand between his legs leaning down to press our lips together, then his hips thrust up as he grinds against my leg with a groan. I might be trying to take things slow, but I'm not a saint. I drop my things and push Nicky back on his bed, lying on top of him. His legs are still spread, making it easier to rock my hips into his and tease both of us. "Can we ditch the pants?" he pleads.

I don't argue this time. I pop open the button of his jeans and slide the zipper down until his underwear tents up as his dick searches for attention. I run my hand over the bulge teasingly as I work his pants off his legs, leaving him in his underwear for now. I don't bother to undress myself any further; we can get to that another time. Right now I just want to help him get off. I kick off my shoes again and kiss my way to Nicky's ear. "You sure about this?" I ask, letting my fingers trail over the waistband of his briefs.

"If you change your mind and stop again—" Nicky warns, but I cut him off by kissing his neck until his words trail off into moans.

"I'm not stopping." I push his underwear down, letting his dick rise to its full length. *Damn, it's a good thing I kept my clothes on.* As it is, it's going to be hard enough not to come in my pants as I get him off. I wrap my hand around his length, giving him a slow stroke, and Nicky rocks his hips into my grasp. I get the message, he's not going to last either. I press my lips to his, swallowing down his moans as I work my hand over his dick.

When he pulls back from the kiss, Nicky is breathing heavily, meeting each stroke of my hand with a thrust of his hips. "This is gonna be quick," he warns me. His cheeks fill with color, but I don't know if it's because he's embarrassed or turned on.

I kiss his neck again. "Good, I want to see you come." It only takes a few more strokes to send him over the edge. Nicky thrusts his dick into my fist, and a pearly line of cum erupts

from him, landing all over my shirt. *So much for taking this slow.* My dick throbs in my pants, but I do my best to ignore it as I tuck Nicky back into his underwear.

He lets out a heavy breath and wraps his arms around my neck keeping me there. “You’re not going to let me repay the favor, are you?”

“Next time,” I promise, kissing him one more time. “I need to go or we’re going to get too caught up, and I won’t end up leaving at all.”

“Would that be so bad?” Nicky asks. I pull away from him and he bites his lip holding back a laugh. “You should probably take that off.” He points at the wet streak on my shirt. I grab the hem of my shirt and pull it over my head. Nicky sighs when I pull my sweater on next. I don’t bother to pull my jacket on, but after I slip on my shoes I’m not sure what to do with my messy shirt. “Leave it. I’ll throw it in my laundry and give it back later,” Nicky offers.

I grab the gift bag I got from the café and make it to the door this time. Nicky leans in to kiss me again, giving me a quick peck. “I’ll see you tomorrow,” I tell him. My dick throbs again as if to ask why we’re leaving when Nicky is still half-dressed, and I haven’t gotten off yet.

“Okay, if that’s what you want. I hope you’ll at least be thinking of me when you’re alone in your bed jerking off.” He barely keeps a straight face, the corners of his mouth peaking higher at his comment.

“Believe me, you’ve given me plenty of material to think of,” I tell him, and Nicky smirks. I open the door, making myself leave before I can talk myself out of it. I hear the lock click behind me and take a deep breath, willing my dick to go down enough to not be completely obvious on the walk down the hall to my dorm. I don’t manage it, but at least the way I’m holding my jacket blocks my crotch.

When I get in my room, I drop my jacket and the gift on my desk then strip off my clothes. It doesn’t take more than a few strokes and the thought of Nicky’s face as he moaned to get me to the edge. My orgasm hits me like a ton of bricks, leaving me shaking in the aftermath. I know Nicky wanted to do more, but this whole night has been overwhelming. I need time to think, even if my body is begging for me to say fuck it. Nicky is too important for me to not take this seriously.

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Eight Nicky

Flynn: Do you want to meet up for a late breakfast at the cafeteria? Maybe in about thirty minutes?

I was hoping for something a little more interesting, but I send back a thumbs-up emoji and place my phone on the nightstand. I reluctantly push the blanket off and walk over to my dresser. I'm gonna have to get dressed if I want to meet Flynn for breakfast.

I go through the motions of getting ready, then grab my phone again when I'm about to put on my shoes. I open my messages to ask Flynn if we're walking there together, but before I finish typing out a text there's a knock on my door. Flynn runs his hand through his messy hair. He looks me over for a moment then licks his lips, "Hey."

"Hey," I echo. He looks half-awake like he just rolled out of bed, and I'm right back to thinking about what happened last night. *How did we go from barely friends to him jerking me off?* I was there, and it still feels like a dream. I place my hand on Flynn's cheek and pull him in for a kiss. Flynn lets me give him a quick peck before he pulls away.

“We should talk about this,” he says, gesturing from my lips to his.

“Can we talk about it over breakfast?” I shove my keys in my pocket and join him in the hall. Too much talking is never a good sign. Flynn probably thinks this will all blow over once we get each other out of our systems, or he’ll decide I’m too immature. Either way, I’m not in a hurry to define what we’re doing as long as it means we get to keep doing it. After finally getting a taste of being with Flynn last night, it only made me want this more. I’m not ready to hear how he thinks this is a bad idea.

It’s going to be messy when everything falls apart, but I’ll enjoy every minute I can get with Flynn in the meantime.

“I want to take you on a date,” Finn says as we get to the cafeteria. That wasn’t what I thought he meant when he said he wanted to talk. “I thought maybe we could drive around town once it gets dark. Check out the different Christmas lights.”

“That sounds great, actually, but I didn’t think you’d want to do something Christmas-related.” I’m mostly teasing, but Flynn clenches his jaw. “I never really got that story. Why is Christmas such a sore spot with you?”

Flynn sighs and looks around the crowded cafeteria before he moves closer to whisper in my ear. “It’s not something I want to talk about here.”

“I’m okay with less talking,” I joke, trying to lighten up the mood. “You haven’t even given me a real kiss yet this

morning.” The person in front of me finishes paying for their food, leaving an awkward break in my conversation with Flynn as we step up to the register.

“I’m fine with talking about it, but do you want to take this back to one of our dorms?” Flynn asks as we leave the line. My mind goes to what else we could be doing in a bedroom, but I’m trying to be good. I want to hear his reasoning.

“Your room or mine?” I ask, but Flynn shrugs, leading me back to the dorm. When we get closer, he veers off to his room and I follow. “Okay, what’s the big deal?” I ask when we’re alone again.

“First,” he presses his lips to mine, kissing me slowly. When we pull apart, he sits down on the bed and pats the spot next to him. I take a deep breath, holding it for a moment before letting it out. It’s going to be hard spending time with Flynn if he keeps kissing me like that. Emphasis on *hard*.

“Did Levi ever tell you we’re half-brothers?” Flynn asks, drawing my attention away from my dick.

“No.” I sit next to him and mess with the wrapper on my muffin as I wait for him to go on.

“My dad came home one afternoon when I was six and started yelling at our mom. Accusing her of cheating. It wasn’t the first time they’d argued, but it was different. He’d had a paternity test done, and anyhow, he packed his things and left. It was right before Christmas and with all the fighting and chaos my parents didn’t have time to worry about making the holiday special for me and Levi. I didn’t understand

everything, but I didn't see my dad much after that. He visited a few times in the following year, but then he stopped coming around all together. I blamed myself for him leaving at first, thought it must have been something I did wrong." Flynn takes a shaky breath and I place my hand on his leg and lean into his side. His arm goes around me, holding me to him.

"I had no clue. I just thought you took after your mom. I didn't know William wasn't your dad. Wait, then why do you all have the same last name?"

"A few weeks after my dad left, his friend moved in. Mom and William tried to act like everything was normal and immediately encouraged Levi and me to call him dad. When her divorce settled with my dad, Mom and William decided to get married, and he wanted to adopt us. After all Levi was his, and my dad was long gone by that point." Flynn shrugs but his jaw is still clenched tighter than normal.

"I'm sorry. That's tough. I don't mind if you want to do something different for our date, you know."

"I know, but I don't want to ruin every December any more with bad memories. I'd rather spend time with you making new ones." His arm tightens around me, and our eyes meet.

"I wonder what Levi will think." I mutter, changing the subject. Flynn raises his eyebrow like he's waiting for me to explain. "About us. I mean it's one thing for him to know I've had a crush on you, but we weren't even sure you were bi until recently." Let alone that he'd be interested in me.

“What makes you so sure I am bi?” Flynn asks dryly. There’s the tiniest hint of a smile on his face, but his words are throwing me off. I’m about to say something about seeing a guy come out of his room all obviously sexed up when he starts talking again. “I could be pan.”

“You scared me there for a moment,” I tell him with a chuckle. “I thought you were gonna say you haven’t dated a guy before.”

“I haven’t,” Flynn says seriously. “I’ve hooked up with guys, but I’ve never dated one.” Flynn trails his hand lower on my side until it rests on my hip.

“Me either. I’ve fooled around with a couple of guys, but ...” I shrug with an awkward laugh. *This isn’t the time to go into detail about how little experience I have.* I lay my hand on top of his and lace our fingers together. There’s a heat in his eyes as we look at each other, and I’m starting to look forward to the date, but we didn’t say when that’s happening. “Are you leaving campus for break? I’m supposed to go home for Christmas next weekend but other than that I’m free all week.”

“I’m going home for a few days. I’m leaving Friday.”

That only gives me five days with Flynn before he leaves.

“Can we do the date tonight?” I ask.

“Tonight?” His thumb stops stroking mine as he considers it.

“There are a few things I need to do first. If we go tonight that doesn’t leave much time for hanging out now.”

“I figured this was just meeting up for breakfast. I didn’t even bother dressing up,” I pluck at my sweats, and Flynn chuckles.

“I’m glad you didn’t. Gray sweats are a good look on you, but I guess I won’t be too disappointed if you change clothes before our date,” he teases, dipping his fingers into the waistband of my sweats.

My cheeks heat up. Maybe I should’ve held off on the date and tried to convince him to let me stay in his room after breakfast instead. “I’ll see you tonight, then?”

Flynn slowly pulls away and focuses on his food again. “Yeah. Maybe around six? I think it’ll be dark enough then.”

“Sounds good,” I agree as I finish eating the rest of my breakfast. “I guess I should leave you to it and get going, then.” I gather up the last of my trash and head to leave. Flynn follows me, giving me one more kiss before I open the door.

I hear my name called as I step out into the hall. “Hey Nick,” I turn around at the familiar voice, but Flynn’s still standing in his open doorway, watching. “You didn’t answer my text the other day,” Dylan says, but then he notices Flynn. “Oh, never mind. Sorry.”

“No, I’m sorry. I should have texted. Maybe we can hang out another time,” I tell him.

“Sure. I’ll let you get back to it. See you around,” Dylan tells us with a quick wave before he walks off in the other direction. I turn to walk to my dorm, but Flynn grabs my wrist and pulls me in for another kiss.

“You’re still gonna hang out with him?” Flynn asks when we break apart.

“Yeah, I said we could be friends. Is that a problem?” I cross my arms at my chest waiting for his answer.

Flynn brushes a bit of my hair behind my ear. “No. I trust you.” I’m tempted to tell him I’m not interested in Dylan like that, but I don’t think it’d make much of a difference.

“I could hang out here a little longer,” I say instead. My eyes move to Flynn’s bed and his gaze follows mine. I trail my fingers down his back until I reach the waistband of his pants, and Flynn kisses me again. Our lips meet with a charged energy until Flynn pulls back with a laugh.

“We don’t need a repeat of what happened last night,” Flynn teases.

“Why not? It was fun, right?” I ask with a smirk. I didn’t end up getting to do as much with Flynn as I was hoping last, but maybe we could fix that.

“It was, but I have a date to plan. I’ll see you tonight.” He kisses me one more time before closing the door.



Nine Flynn

Nicky answers the door wearing a snug pair of jeans and a knitted sweater. It's not sweats, but I can't say I'm that disappointed. The way his jeans fit his ass is almost as distracting. "Hey." Nicky wraps his arms around my neck to pull me in for a kiss, but I stop him, putting my hand on his chest.

"You're going to need a jacket," I tell him.

Nicky rolls his eyes, but grabs his jacket, slinging it over his shoulder rather than pulling it on. "I thought we were going to be in your car the whole time?" he asks.

"Slight change of plans, but I think you'll like it." It worked out in my favor that he wanted to go tonight because it'll probably be less crowded.

Nicky steps into the hall and locks his door. "Do I get a kiss now, or are you going to keep me waiting?" He looks up at me through his eyelashes. It almost seems off to see Nicky so blatantly flirting with me, but why didn't I notice how cute he is before?

I put my hands on his hips, pulling him to me before pressing my lips to his. Nicky wraps his arms around my neck, but I pull away before we can get too caught up in it. Nicky seems a little disappointed, but he pulls on his jacket as we leave the dorms. “So what are we doing then?” he asks.

“You’ll see. It’s a quick drive.” We get in my car, and I drive us downtown until I see the first sign pointing the way to the holiday square.

Nicky moves closer to the window to peek out as we park. “Holiday square? Isn’t this a bit cheesy?”

“It’s not for the event. There’s a decorating competition for houses in the area. We get to look at the decorations and vote for which house we like the best. There’s also stands selling things like hot chocolate in case it gets too cold.” I turn off the car, and we get out.

“And ice skating?” Nicky asks, looking around at all the signs and stands.

“We don’t have to do that,” I tell him.

“What if I want to?” he asks, and I wrap my arm around him again. There’s something about his enthusiasm for the holiday that makes me want to give in. I made the right choice in bringing him here.

“We’ll see. Let’s start with something a little less dangerous.” There’s a booth marked decorating contest and the girl behind it hands us a sheet of paper explaining which houses are part of the event. We walk to the first house, and Nicky curls into

my side as we look at it. White lights and plastic snowflakes are covering the house. An inflatable Frosty the Snowman in the yard and the handrail for the stairs leading up to the house is wrapped with white tinsel.

The next house is decked out in lights of every color. It looks like the decoration area of the store threw up on it. Nicky laughs as we walk up to the third house. I think he's laughing at how it looks like someone forgot to decorate this house until he points it out. There's a wooden Grinch with his hand stretched up to pull down the single strand of lights. On his back is a large Santa sack. "I think he needs to hit the house down the street," I joke. "It was a little over the top."

"I think the Grinch just didn't want to bother decorating," Nicky says. There are a few more houses on the list, but after the first few they mostly blend together in my head. Nicky has something to say about each one, complimenting something about the colors or themes. "Let's get something to drink as we fill out the voting card," he suggests.

Nicky orders a peppermint hot chocolate that comes with a candy cane stuck into the whipped cream on top. I stick to a basic cup of coffee. Nicky borrows a pen to fill out his paper, quickly ranking each house. I vote for the Grinch house as my first place and randomly assign the other houses numbers.

"What do you want to do now?" I take a sip of my coffee as Nicky pulls the candy cane out of his drink. Some of the whipped cream stays on his upper lip after he pulls the cup

away. I wipe it away with my thumb and lick the whipped cream from my finger.

Nicky's cheeks are already red from the cold, but from the way he watches my mouth I know it's something more. "Ugh, can we walk around a little?" He closes his eyes and mumbles something under his breath.

"You okay?" I ask.

"Yup. Just a little distracted." He opens his eyes again and gestures to the edge of the ice skating rink. There are a few booths and stands set up and a small crowd of parents watching children skate on the ice. We walk from each vendor to the next, looking at the different displays. Nicky finishes his drink first then sticks his candy cane in his mouth almost absentmindedly. His hand is holding the hook of it as he sucks on the rest of it, not seeming to realize the picture he makes with his cheeks hollowed and sucking. It's a good thing I'm wearing so many layers right now or it'd be obvious how much I'm enjoying his unintended show.

"Look at that." Nicky pops the candy cane out of his mouth to point out a booth selling ... ice sculptures? He grabs my wrist pulling me along with him. When we get closer, I can tell it's not real ice, but I'm not sure what it is. Nicky sticks his candy cane back in his mouth to free his hands and pick up one of the pieces.

"Do you need some help?" a woman asks, moving closer to us.

Nicky carefully sets the piece down then pulls the candy from his lips again. "What are these made of?"

“Most of them are acrylic,” the shop owner answers. Nicky asks another question about the sculptures, but I get lost trying to follow the conversation between the two of them. Especially when Nicky puts the candy cane back in his mouth to look at another piece. He must decide to buy something because the owner grabs some tissue paper to wrap the piece for him and put it in a small gift bag.

“Are you okay?” Nicky asks me, pulling the candy out only long enough to talk.

“Just distracted,” I echo his answer from earlier. Nicky looks me over slowly, raising one of his eyebrows. I can tell the moment he realizes what’s *distracting* me as he grabs the candy cane again and slowly pulls it out of his mouth, taking his time to curl his tongue around the underside of it. “Yeah, that.”

“What?” He flutters his eyelashes at me going for innocence, but his puffy lips are stained red from the candy. “I’m just eating a candy cane.”

“You ready to get out of here? Or was there anything else you wanted to check out?” I try to change the subject. I don’t want to talk about him teasing me in such a public place.

“I’m good. Maybe we can go back to your dorm.” He raises the candy cane to his lips again and deliberately licks the tip of it.

“Sure. Maybe you can find something else to suck when we get there,” I offer.

His eyes go wider as he grins, clutching his gift bag a little tighter. “I’m sure we can figure something out between the two of us.” We get back to the car in record time. I know I should be taking the time to check in and figure out where we’re heading with all this kissing and fooling around, but the couple of times I’ve tried, Nicky changes the subject.

I’m glad I picked an event that was close to the college because it also means it doesn’t take us long to get back. Nicky manages to keep from attacking me until he sets his bag down on my desk. He grabs the zipper for my coat, unzipping it quickly, then pushing it off my arms. His hand slides down to my pants, toying with the button before rubbing my crotch through the fabric. He drops to his knees and goes to unzip my jeans.

As hot as it is to see Nicky on his knees in front of me, I can’t actually see much of him. He’s in such a rush that he didn’t bother to take off any of his clothes. “Hang on. Let’s get you a little more comfortable,” I say, pulling at his jacket.

Nicky rolls his eyes as he strips off his jacket, followed by his sweater, and kicks off his shoes. “Better?” His hands go to his own pants, popping the button open before he unzips them slowly. “Or should I keep going?” he asks with a smirk as he teases me, pushing his pants slightly lower.

I grab his arm, pulling him up until he’s standing again, and stopping his hands from where they were busy a moment ago. As fun as it is to see Nicky tease me, I need more. I slide my tongue over his lips, and Nicky opens his mouth with a tiny

moan. My hand moves lower, dipping into the open front of his jeans until I can get a firm grip on his erection. I pull it out and stroke him firmly. “I thought you wanted me to ...” he trails off, looking down at my pants.

“I do.” I pull back long enough to strip him of the rest of his clothes, then pull off my shirt, and push my jeans and boxers down enough to free my dick. Nicky kneels down again, fully naked this time, and looks up at me, waiting. I trace the line of his lips with the head of my cock. Nicky’s mouth opens just enough for his tongue to dart out and tease the underside of my shaft. I cup his face with my hand and pull his lower lip with my thumb. “Open.”

His lips part enough for the crown of my dick to slip inside, and he pauses to suck on it. Nicky looks up at me through his lashes as his tongue flicks over the tip. *Shit*. My hips thrust forward without a thought until Nicky gags. I start to pull back, but he grabs my ass, keeping me there with a slight shake of his head. He hollows out his cheeks, sucking on me with the same enthusiasm as when he was eating his candy cane earlier.

“You need to stop,” I tell him. “I’m not ready for this to end just yet.”

Nicky sits back on his heels, letting my dick slide out of his lips before he closes his eyes and sighs heavily. “I need to tell you something, but it doesn’t mean I don’t want this.”



Ten Nicky

Flynn stands there looking at me until I stand up. I probably should have told him before we got to this point, but it's a little late for that now. I'm hoping he's still worked up enough to keep him from thinking this through too much. "I've never had sex."

"What do you mean, exactly?" he finally asks. "You said something about fooling around with guys before."

"Yeah, a little. Hand jobs mostly, a couple of blow jobs, but that's it." Not that I was intentionally avoiding anal, but I never got to that point. Not that I regret it because getting the chance to have Flynn be my first is mind blowing.

"And you want to do more with me?" He looks at me, his eyes trailing lower for a moment before he focuses on my face again. Flynn runs a hand through his hair, pulling on the ends.

"I want you to fuck me," I tell him. There's no point in being subtle here. I'm still stark naked and neither of us has come.

"Jesus," he mutters under his breath, closing his eyes. "Can we sit down?" I settle on the edge of his bed, and Flynn sits next

to me, closer to the head of the bed. “You know sex isn’t just anal, right? Not all gay guys like anal. It’s okay if that’s something you don’t want to do.”

“I know I don’t have to do anything I don’t want to do. I want this, and not just to check off some list of different types of sex. You want to too, right?” *Or at least I kinda assumed that was why Flynn wanted me to stop sucking him off before he came.*

“I want to. I just assumed ... never mind. It doesn’t matter what I assumed. What I mean is we don’t have to do this tonight. There’s no rush.” He sets his hand on my leg and my dick twitches, hoping for attention. He might not be in a rush, but now that the possibility is there, I don’t want to do something else.

“I want you to fuck me,” I repeat slower this time. “I’ve watched porn, experimented on my own, and read things online. I know what I’m asking for—” Flynn cuts me off with a kiss.

His hand moves closer to my hips until he reaches my erection and wraps his palm around it. “Okay, but if you change your mind at any point, say something and we’ll stop.” His thumb traces the ridge at the tip, and I bite back a moan as I nod. We kiss again, and Flynn doesn’t stop me from taking his pants off. Before I manage his underwear too, he pulls back, slipping off the bed to open his nightstand. He pulls out a condom and lube setting the supplies on the bed then pats my hip. “Back up

and lie down.” I move up the bed, spreading my legs to give him better access, but Flynn grabs a pillow. “Lift your hips.”

He slides the pillow under my lower back to lift my ass and my cheeks heat up thinking of how exposed I am right now. Flynn moves between my legs, grabbing the lube and pouring a generous amount on his fingers before I feel a slick pressure against my hole. I do my best to relax and let him in; it doesn't feel that different from fingering myself, especially with how gentle he's being. Feeling his finger inside of me is more of a tease at this point. “You don't have to go that slow,” I complain.

Flynn leans down to kiss me and as our lips go faster his hand does too, another finger pressing in. I moan into his mouth as he brushes against my prostate, sending a jolt of pleasure through me. The position we're in makes it hard to thrust my hips back for more. He moves his finger in and out of me harder and a little faster, but he's still taking his time to stretch me until I'm breathing heavily, and my balls are throbbing. It's almost too much.

Flynn pulls his fingers out and grabs the condom. He pushes off his underwear and grabs his dick, stroking it firmly one time before unrolling the condom down his length. I expect him to move between my legs again, but he pulls the pillow out from under me. “Hang on, I wanna change positions. Sit up, this might be easier if you're on top.”

I move, fully on board with the plan as we switch places. Flynn lies down, and I straddle his chest, lifting my hips.

Flynn grabs his dick around the base, lining it up as I sit back. I barely hold back a laugh at the awkward position until the first inch pushes inside. The stretch is more than I'm used to, but I'm fighting slamming my hips the rest of the way down. Our change in positions gave my body a chance to calm down for a moment, but I want that pressure on my sweet spot again.

Flynn moves his hands to my hips and our eyes meet as I lower my ass. I never knew that watching Flynn watch me take his cock could be so hot. By the time my ass is up against his thighs, we're both breathing heavily, and I'm pretty sure Flynn is fighting to keep from thrusting into me. The fullness of him inside of me is overwhelming. I'm tempted to go slow, but that'd be torturing me as much as him.

I rock our hips together, and Flynn moans. We move together in a disjointed rhythm until Flynn snaps his hips, nailing my prostate. I grab my dick, jerking off as my balls tighten. "Oh, shit." I moan, trying to hold off my orgasm when Flynn thrusts into me again. All the sensations are too much. My body clenches up as I come, making a mess all over Flynn's chest.

I know that was too soon, but Flynn doesn't stop. He tightens his hold on my hips, pulling me in as he thrusts. He's going gentler now, but my body is still clenching and over-sensitive from my orgasm. I'm still riding out the waves of how intense my orgasm was and half-blissed out of mind. He hits my prostate and my cock twitches, trying in vain to rise again at the same time that my ass tightens. It doesn't feel as good now that I'm no longer hard. "Uh, Flynn." I lift my hips, and Flynn slides his hands up to my sides, helping me balance.

Flynn brushes my hair behind my ear and smiles at me. “Too much?”

“A little,” I laugh. “But I wanna get you off.” His dick pops out of me, and my ass clenches feeling tender and weirdly empty. I lie down next to him, curling into Flynn’s side with my head on his chest as I catch my breath. I’m not thinking clearly enough to process everything yet, but I’m reeling. We had sex. *Flynn and I had sex.*

Flynn wraps his arm around me before moving his other hand to his dick. He pulls off the condom and grabs his cock firmly at the base. I slide my hand down his belly to join his, wanting to help. He huffs out a sigh as I move my hand with his, jerking him off. It doesn’t take much before he thrusts into my hand and moans. Cum lands on his abs, mixing with mine and making more of a mess.

I wish for a fleeting second that I wouldn’t have come so soon. That I could’ve felt Flynn come inside of me. Claiming me without a condom. I know he’d think it’s too soon for that, but I’ve already fallen for him completely.

We lie there for a few minutes, neither of us saying anything, but I know this is probably the point where I should be putting my clothes back on. “I guess I’ll see you tomorrow,” I say distractedly as I scoot away.

Flynn grabs my wrist, “Or you could sleep here tonight.”

My heart beats faster in my chest. “You sure?”

“Nicky, you really think I’d have sex with you and kick you out?” Flynn pulls me to him again, and I cuddle into him. “I know we haven’t had the whole *what-are-we* talk, but this isn’t just sex for me.”

“It isn’t for me either, but we’re in college. You’re graduating in the spring. What happens after that?” I want to ignore the thought, but I don’t think I’ll be ready to lose this in a few months.

Flynn’s lips brush against my head in a soft kiss. “We’ll figure it out. I’m not going anywhere, and we’ve got time.” He sighs, and I stretch out with a yawn. “Let’s get some sleep.” I lie there with Flynn, listening to his breathing with my head resting on his chest. He drifts off first, his breaths changing to light snores.

Morning comes too soon along with a blaring noise. “Ugh, did you set an alarm?” I mumble, only half-awake, but I can’t ignore the loud ringtone.

“That’s your phone,” Flynn says back.

Oh, shit it is. I fumble out of the bed, noticing a crusty mess on my belly and crotch. Damn, we forgot to clean up last night. My phone rings again and I shake off the thought to find my pants. My thumb brushes against the screen as I pull it out of the pocket, accidentally answering the call. Levi’s voice comes half-muffled from the speaker and my heart jumps into my throat. “Um, hey.” I move the phone to my ear, holding it there with my shoulder as I grab my underwear.

“Change of plans. I’m coming home for Christmas break. I should get there tonight, maybe late this afternoon.” Levi chatters on and Flynn looks at me with a confused look as I pull my briefs on.

“Okay, what happened to staying in California?” I ask, but there’s a weird noise in the background of the call. “Are you driving right now?”

“Yeah, I started driving early this morning. I tried texting you before I left, but I guess you weren’t awake.”

“I just woke up.” I force a yawn as Flynn mouths *who is it?* “Levi, can I call you back?”

“It’s almost ten, how are you still in bed?” Levi asks at the same time that Flynn scrunches up his face and cusses. “Wait, are you with someone?”

“I’ll see you soon,” I ignore his question.

“You are?! Oh, who is it? I need details—” I cut him off, hanging up the phone.

“Levi’s on his way home for break, and he heard you cuss just now. He’s going to bug me all day now, demanding to know who I’m sleeping with.” I groan and flop back on Flynn’s bed.

“We could just tell him.”

“Yeah, that’ll be a fun conversation. I’m sure Levi will love hearing that we’re fucking,” I say with a laugh.

“You might want to say it a little differently. Something like ‘I’m dating Flynn.’” He sits on the bed next to me, running a

hand through my hair.

“Dating? Is that what we’re calling it?” My voice catches in my throat, but I’m not sure what else to say. My eyes meet Flynn’s as he leans over me.

“I hope so. Will you? Be my boyfriend, I mean.” Flynn bites his lower lip when he finishes mumbling. I didn’t expect him to be this awkward about it, but that doesn’t make this any less monumental.

“You’re not just saying that because Levi is coming, are you?” I ask hesitantly. I need to know he wants this as much as I do. My heart beats heavy in my chest as I wait for his answer.

“Nicky, I’ve known you for years. I care about you. It doesn’t feel like this is new, and I don’t care if we tell Levi or not. I want to date you,” he says. My phone chimes and vibrates with a new text message, Levi’s name pops up on the screen, but I don’t bother to read it. I’m too focused on everything Flynn just said.

“I want to be your boyfriend too,” I tell him. “But I want to be the one to tell Levi.”



Me: How are things going?

Levi should be almost in town by now. He's been messaging and calling Nicky most of the day, but he hasn't bothered to even send me a text. I guess I'm low on his list of potential guys Nicky might be hooking up with. I don't know how to feel about this whole thing. Nicky wants to tell Levi, but he wants to find the right time. I'm not sure I can fake being around Nicky and act like nothing's changed, either.

Nicky: He just showed up. We're gonna hang out for a bit before he drives to your parent's house.

Me: Is he still asking about who you were with this morning?

I was hoping for a chance to relax this morning, maybe do something before figuring out breakfast, but Levi's call threw out that possibility. So much for spending time with Nicky over the break before heading home to see my family; now I'm going to be fighting Levi for his attention. It's hard enough reassuring Nicky that I want a real relationship. Once

Levi finds out, I know he's going to say something about this being a bad idea.

Nicky: Yes, but I can't keep texting you.

Nicky: He's going to notice. I'll come to your dorm after?

Me: Sounds good.

I need to trust Nicky. I think we should just tell Levi but I'm sure he has a good reason for waiting. It's probably better if Nicky tells him than if I do. I grab the remote for my TV and scroll through the different streaming apps looking for something to distract me. I've been re-watching an old zombie show I'm sure Nicky wouldn't like, but it'll pass the time. I start the show, but it's not holding my attention the way it usually does. I keep checking my phone, looking for new messages from Nicky. An hour passes, without any new texts. I'm debating sending him another message, but I don't want to bug him, either.

A knock on the door wakes me up from a half-doze as I watch TV a few hours later. I scramble out of bed and answer the door, finding Nicky alone on the other side. "Is he gone?" I ask.

He answers by grabbing a hold of my shirt and pulling me in for a kiss. Nicky presses his lips hard against mine, not slowing down as he walks forward, forcing me back into my dorm. "Levi asked if he could just crash here for the night. He didn't want to drive longer. I can't stay," he finally says when he pulls away.

“He’s staying in your room?” I clarify.

“We’ve had sleepovers before,” Nicky shrugs.

“When you mentioned fooling around with guys; Levi wasn’t one of those guys, was he?” It’s not the first time the idea has popped into my head, but I’ve been able to ignore it up to now.

Nicky bites his lip and chuckles. “Do you really want to know?”

His answer is enough to tell me without him saying it, but it doesn’t make me feel better about the two of them sharing a bed. I clench my jaw as the thought that maybe that’s why Nicky hasn’t told Levi yet pops into my head. “When?” I ask.

“Years ago. He’s my best friend, and we came out to each other around the same time. It was just messing around, it didn’t mean anything,” Nicky’s cheeks bloom with color, but he still has a small smile on his face. It’s hard to be jealous when it’s so clear he isn’t even taking this seriously.

“I believe you, but I’d rather have you in my bed.” I kiss him again, brushing our tongues together and nibbling on his lips until Nicky moans, grinding his hips into mine.

Only then he pulls back with a wince. “I want that too, but Levi thinks I’m just in the bathroom. He’s going to be more suspicious if I don’t come back.”

“You haven’t told him, then?” I ask.

“I’m getting to it.” He presses another quick peck to my lips. “I’ll tell him. He’s heading home in the morning, and we can

try to spend more time together before you go home for Christmas.”



Or that was the plan. Even after Levi went home the next evening, he showed up at school the next day to hang out with Nicky. Then the next day too. And now it's Thursday, and I still haven't spent much time with my boyfriend other than at night. Even right now he's curled into me on my bed, texting Levi.

I tighten my grip around Nicky's waist and press a kiss to his neck. He melts into the touch, pushing his ass into my crotch, then his phone chimes again. "What are you texting about?" I ask with a sigh.

"Levi wants me to come over for Christmas Eve to your house." Nicky pauses awkwardly. The couple of times I've run into the two of them on campus has been strange enough, but we pulled it off. Spending the whole day around each other and my family won't be easy, but Nicky's spent the day at our house for the holidays before. I shouldn't be surprised that Levi invited him.

"That would be awkward. Are you going to? When are you going home?" I ask. Nicky sets his phone down and turns around to face me, wrapping his arm around my neck.

"I don't know. My mom was going to pick me up on Christmas morning, and Levi knows that already. He offered

to drive me home if I stay the night Christmas Eve. He'll think something is off if I say I can't come." Nicky toys with my hair, running his fingers through it distractedly.

"Or we can tell Levi we're dating. Spending Christmas Eve with my family is gonna be weird if we're trying to ignore each other the entire time."

"You don't think announcing we're dating is going to make it awkward? Do your parents even know you like guys?" Nicky asks.

"No, probably not, it's not like I've ever mentioned it. But that's not the point." I don't know how this turned into an issue about me being bi, but it's a bullshit excuse for not telling Levi. "Why don't you want to tell Levi?"

"We've been dating for a few days. You don't think that's a little early to be telling your family?" Nicky asks. He has a point, but it doesn't feel like this is new. We've spent almost every night together this week, and besides that we've known each other for years.

"Okay, but even if we don't tell my parents, you need to at least tell Levi before he leaves." Nicky doesn't meet my eyes, choosing to curl into me instead and not answer. "Do you want to ride with me in the morning, or is Levi going to pick you up?"

"He offered to drive me, but I'd rather go with you." Nicky trails his fingers over my back absentmindedly.

“You don’t think he’ll find that weird?” I stroke my hand through his hair, and Nicky looks up at me.

“Not really. You’re going to the same place. You can give his friend a ride.” Nicky smirks, moving his hand down to toy with the waistband of my boxers.

“I’ll give you something to ride.” I grab his leg, shifting onto my back and pulling him on top of me.

Nicky laughs, putting a hand on my chest to balance himself. “That was cheesy.” His ass settles right on my dick, but our underwear is in the way of anything fun.

“Are you saying you don’t want to?” I slide my hand down the back of his briefs to grab his ass.

“I want to. We won’t be able to for a few days between visiting family and the holidays.” He lifts his ass, grabbing the waistband of his underwear to push them out of the way. I shove my boxers down and he lines up our hips again, our dicks brushing against each other. I wrap my hand around both of our shafts and Nicky pauses, letting out a little whimper. “I thought you were gonna—*fuck*,” he moans as I stroke us.

“This works.” I kiss him, and Nicky’s hand joins mine, urging me to move faster. His dick twitches in our grasp as his hips thrust forward. It isn’t going to take much, but I’m okay with that. We’ve been doing something basically every night because we can’t keep our hands off each other. Having Nicky sleep in Levi’s room rather than mine is going to be torture.

“Oh, fuck. Flynn.” Nicky kisses my chest, sucking a nipple into his mouth. I tighten my grip on our dicks, pulling on him firmly until he thrusts his hips again. Hot cum hits my chest as he moans out his orgasm. I follow him over the edge, making more of a mess.

Nicky lies on my chest breathing heavily. “We should get up and shower before we go to bed,” he reminds me, and I chuckle. Nicky wasn’t too happy about waking up all covered in crusted-up cum the first morning after we had sex. He’s been insistent about showering after now, even if walking to the communal bathroom down the hall makes things weird. And I’m not going to say no to a chance to get his wet naked body pressed against mine. The stalls are a bit small for two people, but it certainly makes things more fun.

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Twelve Nicky

“**Y**ou still haven’t told me what happened with the date you went on with the art model. Was he the one you were with the other day?” Levi asks, not even bothering to be quiet. Flynn snorts a laugh from across the room but keeps his eyes on his phone. We’re supposed to be watching a movie in their living room, but none of us are even pretending to look at the TV. I’m sitting with Levi on the couch while Flynn sits on a recliner. I doubt he’s even doing anything on his phone.

“No, the date was okay, but we agreed to just be friends. I told you, Dylan mostly invited me, so he didn’t have to show up alone.” I grab a few pieces of popcorn, popping them into my mouth.

“Then who were you with? You don’t really expect me to believe that bullshit about leaving the TV on, do you?” Levi asks.

“How are things with Jared?” I change the subject. I know something happened to change his plans, but Levi’s been keeping secrets too. “Did you ask him if he wants to see your bat, offer to let him take a practice swing?”

Levi laughs and Flynn covers his mouth, forcing a cough. It's obvious he's eavesdropping, but Levi is caught up on my question. "Oh god, that would have been a great pick-up line. Much better than; 'are you a pitcher in bed too?'" Flynn coughs again, doing a shitty job covering his chuckles.

I glare at him until he stands up, shoving his phone in his pocket before heading down the hall to his bedroom. "Did you seriously say that?" I ask Levi.

"Something like that, but he said he's straight," Levi mutters. He shoves his hand into the bowl between us, grabbing a handful of popcorn and crunching on the kernels loudly.

"He's straight?" *Crap*. How can I tell him about me and Flynn now? I didn't mean to keep putting it off, but I knew something was off with Levi's sudden decision to come home. "I thought he was flirting with you?" I was sure it sounded like Jared liked him.

"That's what I thought, but he seemed pretty surprised by the whole thing. He said he was just being friendly," Levi shrugs, but he's not fooling either of us.

"That'll make practice interesting," I mutter under my breath.

"It's fine. I don't want to focus on it, but you can make me feel better by telling me about your hookup. Come on, Nick," Levi pouts, but I doubt he'd be this eager for details if he knew I'm sleeping with his brother. Still, I don't really like lying to him, either.

“Okay, fine, you’re right. I was in bed with someone when you called the other day,” I admit.

“I knew it, but wait, you said things didn’t work out with the art model.” Levi’s forehead scrunches up.

“They didn’t. It was someone else, and we’re kinda dating now, but it’s really new.” This is the part where I should tell him my new boyfriend is Flynn, but I chicken out.

“That doesn’t sound like you, sleeping with a guy that early on in the relationship.”

“I know, but it just kinda ... happened.” I shrug, but luckily a key sliding in the front door interrupts us. Levi’s mom, Angela, comes in holding bags of groceries. “Here let me help you with that,” I volunteer. Levi rolls his eyes, but he stands up too. We grab some of the bags and help put away the food, but I know I’ve only managed to escape the subject temporarily.

Dinner finds me seated next to Levi and across from Flynn. I’ve barely talked to Flynn since we got here this morning, and I know he still isn’t happy about me wanting to wait to tell everyone. “How’s the team, Levi? Everyone excited for the season to start?” William asks.

“Yeah, it should be a good season.” Levi shrugs noncommittally.

“We’ll have to come out for a game sometime,” Angela chimes in. “Nick, it’s great to have you here too. It feels like forever since we’ve seen you. How are you enjoying college?”

You go to BMU with Flynn, right? Do you two see each other often?”

“Yeah, he even got a job at the bakery that’s down the street from the café I work at,” Flynn chimes in before I get the chance. I nudge his leg under the table with my foot, and he smiles.

“That’s great. I didn’t know you liked baking,” Angela says. Flynn slouches in his chair, then something nudges my leg. I peek under the table and get a clear view as Flynn slides his sock-covered foot up my chair, stretching out to rub my thigh.

“I like the decorating more than the cooking part,” I answer. She asks me something else, but it’s hard to keep track of the conversation when Flynn rubs his foot over my crotch. I meet his eyes over the table, but he just chuckles. When he does it a second time, I slide my hand under the table to grab his foot, but Flynn pulls back, rubbing against my leg instead.

The conversation moves on to Flynn graduating in the spring, and that’s when his foot nudges higher again. “Do you have plans for after graduation?” Levi asks sarcastically.

I watch Flynn, wanting to hear his answer, but I’m busy trying to ignore his foot and pretending he isn’t messing with me. “I was thinking of getting an apartment,” Flynn says. “I have some cash saved up from working at the café, but I might have to get a roommate until I can find a better job.” Flynn’s foot nudges my leg again and he looks my way with a grin.

“I need to use the bathroom.” I scoot my chair back, leaving the room in a hurry. It only takes Flynn a few minutes to round

the corner and join me. “This is too much,” I complain.

“No one noticed,” Flynn says with a laugh.

“Not that. Did you mean me?” I ask, but Flynn raises an eyebrow not understanding my question. “The roommate comment; do you want me to move in with you after you graduate?”

Flynn tucks my hair behind my ear and trails his hand to cup the back of my head. “Yeah, that’s what I meant. I won’t graduate for another five months, and I get it if that’s too soon. I can probably find someone else to—” I cut him off with a kiss. Flynn holds my head tighter as he slides his tongue into my mouth. My arms go around his waist, pushing my body into his.

“Nick?! The guy you’re dating is my brother?” I pull back, wincing at Levi’s outraged statement. *This isn’t how I wanted him to find out.*

I try to swallow the lump in my throat, but I can’t find the words.

“He wanted to tell you,” Flynn comes to my defense, but I can’t let him take the fall.

“No, Flynn wanted to tell you.” I bite my lip, take a deep breath, and let it out. “I didn’t want to deal with all the attention.”

Levi looks at Flynn for a moment before focusing on me. “I know you had a crush on Flynn, but I don’t get it. You were going on a date with someone else, and *you.*” Levi looks at

Flynn. “What the hell? You never paid attention to Nick before.”

“I know. Up until recently, I didn’t think of Nick as more than your friend. My feelings might have changed, but that doesn’t mean I didn’t already care about him.” Flynn is looking at his brother, but I’m barely keeping myself from kissing him again.

“Fine. whatever. We need to get back before Mom comes looking for us. Come on,” Levi grabs my wrist pulling me toward the dining room. “I need more details after dinner,” he tells me before we get to the room.

“Everything okay?” Angela asks as we sit down again.

“Yeah, we’re fine,” Levi says, but it’s a few minutes before Flynn walks into the room again. He sits down, giving me a quick smile before saying something to his dad. I push my food around with my fork, but I’m too distracted to have much of an appetite. I just keep playing Flynn’s words back in my head. I know he told me that he wants to date me, and this isn’t just a hookup, but hearing him defend his feelings to Levi makes it somehow more real. It doesn’t hurt that he wants to move in together this summer, either. It’s probably too soon to think about all of that, but I want it.

“Okay, what changed? How did you go from a date with a nude model to dating my brother? Why would you even want to date Flynn with a choice like that?” Levi asks when he gets me alone in his room.

I glare at him, but I can’t keep from smiling slightly. “I told you. Dylan asked me on a date because he didn’t want to show

up alone to that party knowing his ex would be there. While we were there, though, I almost said something about him modeling, and Dylan kinda kissed me, it was more like he was trying to shut me up. It was weird, but we agreed to try being friends instead. I guess Flynn saw a drawing I did of Dylan for my final and assumed we were dating.”

“If he thought you were dating, then ...” Levi scrunches up his forehead.

“He said something to one of his coworkers and she asked me if I was bringing my boyfriend to the Secret Santa thing. I didn’t know if that meant Flynn was jealous or what, but I kissed him. We talked a little and ...” I shrug and Levi shudders, shaking his head.

“Ew, I don’t need those details. So, you’re really dating? Not just fooling around?”

“He wants me to move in with him after he graduates. That’s what we were talking about in the hall.” And I didn’t really get a chance to answer Flynn. I pull out my phone to send him a text message and notice I have a new one.

Flynn: Sneak into my room tonight?

Me: Tempting, I’ll think about it.

Levi is still watching me with wide eyes. “You okay?” I ask.

“Just trying to figure out when we switched personalities. I thought it was my job to fall for a guy right after having sex with him,” he teases.

“It still is,” I joke. “I fell for Flynn before we slept together.”

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Thirteen *Flynn*

A crash gets my attention, I open my eyes as my desk chair hits the floor. “Shit, sorry,” Nicky whispers, closing the door and fixing my chair. “Are you asleep?”

“Not anymore.” I roll over, lifting the blanket for Nicky to climb in next to me. He strips off his jeans first, cuddling into me in just his underwear and T-shirt. I’m still half-asleep, but my dick is quickly waking up as Nicky’s ass rubs against my crotch while he tries to find a comfortable position. I wrap my arm around him, pulling Nicky into me tighter. “It was getting late. I figured you weren’t coming. What time is it?”

“A little after midnight. I got carried away talking with Levi,” he tells me with a yawn.

“How’d that go? Is he mad?”

“No,” Nicky chuckles, “but he thinks I should’ve kept seeing the model from my art class instead.”

“Great. Maybe you can give Levi your final project then, since he likes the idea of an art model so much.”

Nicky turns in my arms to look at me. “You’re not still jealous of Dylan, are you?”

“No. Not really.” I slide my hand lower and grab Nicky’s ass. “I don’t have anything to be jealous about, but it’s weird seeing his naked picture in your dorm.”

“You don’t have any reason to be jealous. I could draw you, if you’re willing to model for me.” Nicky grins and trails a finger down my chest before flicking my nipple.

“You want to draw me? Naked?” I never thought about being any kind of model, and modeling naked is more intimidating even for a personal piece.

“Yes, but what I have in mind would be a little bit more fun ...” Nicky’s hand trails lower until he hits the waistband of my boxers. My dick twitches, tenting my underwear further, but instead of pushing the material out of the way, Nicky teases me through the fabric. I kiss him, pressing our lips together soundly. “Is that a yes?” he asks when we pull back.

“It’ll have to wait until we’re back in the dorms, but it sounds like fun.”

Nicky sighs, moving his hand away and curling up his legs. “Is it bad I’d rather spend Christmas with you than go home and spend it with my family?”

“I don’t know if it’s bad, but I feel the same. I’d rather be with you.” I push back Nicky’s hair from his eyes.

He looks up at me for a moment before hiding his face in my chest. “I didn’t get a chance to answer you earlier, but I want

to get an apartment with you.”

“That’s good because I really wasn’t looking forward to finding a roommate.” Nicky looks up at me again, and I smirk. “We’re probably gonna have to tell our families why we’re moving in together, though.”

“I’m helping out a friend. Rent is expensive,” Nicky jokes. I pinch his ass and he laughs. “We’ll tell them, just not tomorrow.” He yawns, his voice getting softer. “It can wait until after the holidays.”

“And this conversation can wait too. Get some sleep,” I tell him, pressing a soft kiss to Nicky’s forehead.

“Mmm, goodnight Flynn.” Nicky yawns again already sounding half asleep as he mutters, “I love you.”

My dick jumps again and this time my heart does too. It’s probably way too soon to be saying *that*, and Nicky is softly snoring already asleep. I sigh and kiss his head lightly. “I love you too,” I whisper. I close my eyes and listen to Nicky’s breathing until I eventually fall asleep.



“No, Mom, I have a ride. Flynn is going to drive me over; I’ll be home soon. It’s fine, he doesn’t mind.” Nicky holds his phone to his ear as he looks for his underwear, picking up the edge of my blanket and giving it a shake. I hold back a laugh. We probably shouldn’t have fooled around this morning with both our families waiting on us, but that wasn’t on either of

our minds when we woke up crotch to crotch with morning wood.

I see a spot of blue peeking out from under my bed and grab it. “Nicky,” I say his name softly as I hold out his underwear. He covers his mouth, trying not to laugh as he grabs them from me. My phone chimes with a new text message, and I grab it.

Levi: If you don't plan on telling our parents, you probably shouldn't spend all morning in your room. Mom saved you breakfast, but she's starting to get suspicious.

How is it already ten? I grab new clothes, pulling them on as Nicky finds the rest of his from last night. “You want to have breakfast here or do you need to get going?” I ask as he hangs up the phone.

“I can wait, are you sure you want to drive me, though? Levi was already planning on taking me and it might seem a little strange.”

I wrap my arms around Nicky. “I don't care if they think it's strange. I want to spend more time with you. I love you.” I meant it last night but saying it now when we're both fully awake is different.

Nicky blushes and bites his lower lip. “You don't have to say that. I was half asleep. I don't—” I cut Nicky off, placing my finger on his lips.

“I mean it. I love you.” When I move my hand away from his mouth, Nicky wraps his arms around my neck, pulling me in for another kiss. I grab his wrist when his hand trails down my

back, dipping into the waistband of my pants. “We don’t have time for that. It’ll have to wait until we’re back in the dorms.”

“I love you too,” Nicky tells me, but then he sighs. “I guess you’re right though, we better get out of here.” His words say one thing, but his hand moves again, this time grabbing my ass.

“It’s one day,” I laugh, pulling away from him. “I’ll see you tomorrow, come on.”

Nicky rolls his eyes but follows me out of the room. Mom is in the kitchen when we get there, getting things ready for Christmas dinner. “There you boys are. I saved you some pancakes. Nick, are you staying for dinner?” Mom pulls out a plate with pancakes, separating it for Nicky and me.

“I can’t, but thank you. I need to get home and spend the day with my family.” He takes a plate, sitting at the table as I grab the other.

“That’s too bad. It’s been great having you here again. I wasn’t sure we’d see much of you after Levi left for college. I’m so glad you and Flynn are getting along,” Mom says, and I have to hold back a laugh. She has no idea how well we *get along*. Nicky looks at me accusingly, I guess I’m not doing a great job of hiding my amusement. I shove a bite of pancakes in my mouth and he shakes his head at me before doing the same.

After breakfast, Nicky heads to Levi’s room to grab his bag. My brother crosses his arms across his chest, facing me as Nicky grabs his things. I know he’s probably planning on telling me again not to hurt Nicky, or how he deserves better.

“Let us know when your games are. We’ll have to come out and watch you play.” It’s about as close to an olive branch as I can offer.

Levi seems unsure before he hugs Nicky. “I’ll talk to you soon,” he tells him. Then Levi looks at me. I pull my brother in for a quick hug, both of us awkwardly patting each other on the back in true bro style. “Don’t fuck this up,” he says in my ear.

Nicky and I head out to my car, and I turn on the radio as we pull out onto the street. “I saw Mommy kissing Santa Claus” plays from the speakers and Nicky laughs. “It’s kinda funny. All of this started with kissing under mistletoe.”

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Epilogue

Wicky

The Next November

I open the oven to check on the dessert. The smell of apples, cinnamon, caramel, and cheesecake mixed together makes my mouth water. I give the pan a jiggle to check the consistency and see if it's cooked all the way through. It still looks a little early, so I close the oven door to give it a few more minutes. Arms wrap around my waist, pulling me into a solid chest as Flynn kisses my neck. "Is it done yet? It smells delicious."

"Almost," I turn around to give him a proper kiss. "It should be done in a few more minutes, then we can head out to my parents' place."

"Or we can skip dinner and get right to dessert," Flynn says, kissing up my neck to my ear.

My dick perks up, but I try to ignore it. "Are you talking about me or the cheesecake?" I ask with a laugh.

"Both. I can have my cake and eat it too." Flynn licks my ear, sending a shiver down my spine.

“As hot as that sounds, my parents are expecting us. I don’t think you eating cheesecake off my cock is a valid reason for missing Thanksgiving dinner,” I say.

Flynn laughs, pulling away from me. “That wasn’t what I meant, but it sounds like fun.” Flynn waggles his eyebrows with a smirk, and I smack his shoulder with the oven mitt.

“Knock it off. I can’t be thinking about that during dinner with my parents.”

“Hey, it was your idea.” Flynn reaches over to the counter, grabs a sugar cookie, and takes a big bite.

“We’re spending Christmas with your family and Thanksgiving with mine. That was the deal. You don’t get to distract me with sex.” I open the oven to check the dessert again and this time it’s done. “It needs to cool down a bit, but it’s done,” I say.

“Good, then we have time to—” Before he can finish the sentence my phone starts ringing.

I pull it out and see Levi’s name. “Hey Levi, what’s up?” I ask as I answer the call. Flynn sighs and heads to our bedroom.

“Jared asked me to move in with him,” Levi says, his voice pitching higher with excitement. I knew it was only a matter of time, things have gotten serious between Levi and Jared after their misunderstanding last Christmas.

“That’s awesome. Are you bringing him home for Christmas? I still need to meet him,” I remind him.

“We’ll be there, I can’t stay on the phone long, though. I just had to tell someone the news. We’re going to spend the holiday with his family.”

“Have fun,” I say, and Levi laughs.

“Same to you. Enjoy taking my brother to your family dinner. You already live together, you know what questions are coming next. *When are you going to get married?*” Levi pitches his voice higher in his attempt to mimic a feminine voice. “*Are you going to adopt or get a surrogate?*”

“Knock it off. I’m not doing any of that any time soon. I still have another two and a half years of college before I want to think about marriage,” I say, but that’s when Flynn walks into the room again.

“About what?” he asks, and I wince.

“Gotta go, have fun at dinner.” Levi hangs up the phone in a hurry with a laugh. No doubt he heard Flynn.

“Levi was joking,” I explain. “He’s moving in with his boyfriend and thought it’d be funny to tease me about marrying you.”

“Is that something you’d want?” he asks slowly.

“Like I told Levi, I’m not looking to get married any time soon. Maybe one day after I finish college.”

The End

Afterword

I hope you enjoyed Nicky and Flynn's story. If you want a bonus scene of Nicky drawing Flynn in the dorms [click here](#).

Other books by A.E. Madsen

Duplicity Blue Mountain University 1

<http://mybook.to/DuplicityBMU1>

When Daniel's friend sets him up on a date, he accidentally runs into Ian instead of his twin, Aiden. Things get muddled when Ian realizes Daniel's mistake but has also started to develop feelings for him. Ian needs to figure out how to explain he's not who Daniel thinks he is and how to come out of the closet as bisexual. Meanwhile Daniel has his own troubles, he's on the outs with his family after an ex spread some rumors.

Faux Beau Blue Mountain University 2

<http://mybook.to/FauxBeauBMU2>

Aiden and Liam used to be friends as children when they played on the same soccer team but grew apart in their teenage

years. That could've been the end of their story, but Aiden's brother is also Liam's best friend. Liam works at his father's advertising company as an intern, and when the company makes a bid for a gay Pride campaign Liam decides to come out to his father. Only Liam's father mistakenly assumes Liam is dating Aiden. Aiden agrees to go along with the charade, but the lines between fake dating and real flirting quickly start to blur.

Foul Play Blue Mountain University 3

<http://mybook.to/FoulPlayBMU3>

The first time Asher and Hayden met on opposite sides of the soccer field. That night was supposed to be a one-off, until an accidental like on social media. Texting leads to friendship, but it's hard to hope for more when they live in different states. It doesn't help that Asher is dealing with a homophobic teammate either.

You can find out more and get updates by joining my reader group on Facebook A. E. Madsen's Reader Group.

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About the Author

A. E. Madsen lives in California with their wife and three children. A. has degrees in culinary arts and business management and has recently returned to school to pursue a degree in English. They started writing in an attempt to better understand their gender identity and sexual orientation as a teenager, and it grew as a hobby from there. A. spends most of their time writing, reading, and being plagued by plot bunnies.

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