

A man with a beard and sunglasses, wearing a red and black jacket, holding a tennis racket. The background is a blurred outdoor setting.

*Play
With Me*

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USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

WILDER

Play With Me

A SINGLE DAD FRIENDS TO LOVERS ROMANCE

CLAIRE WILDER

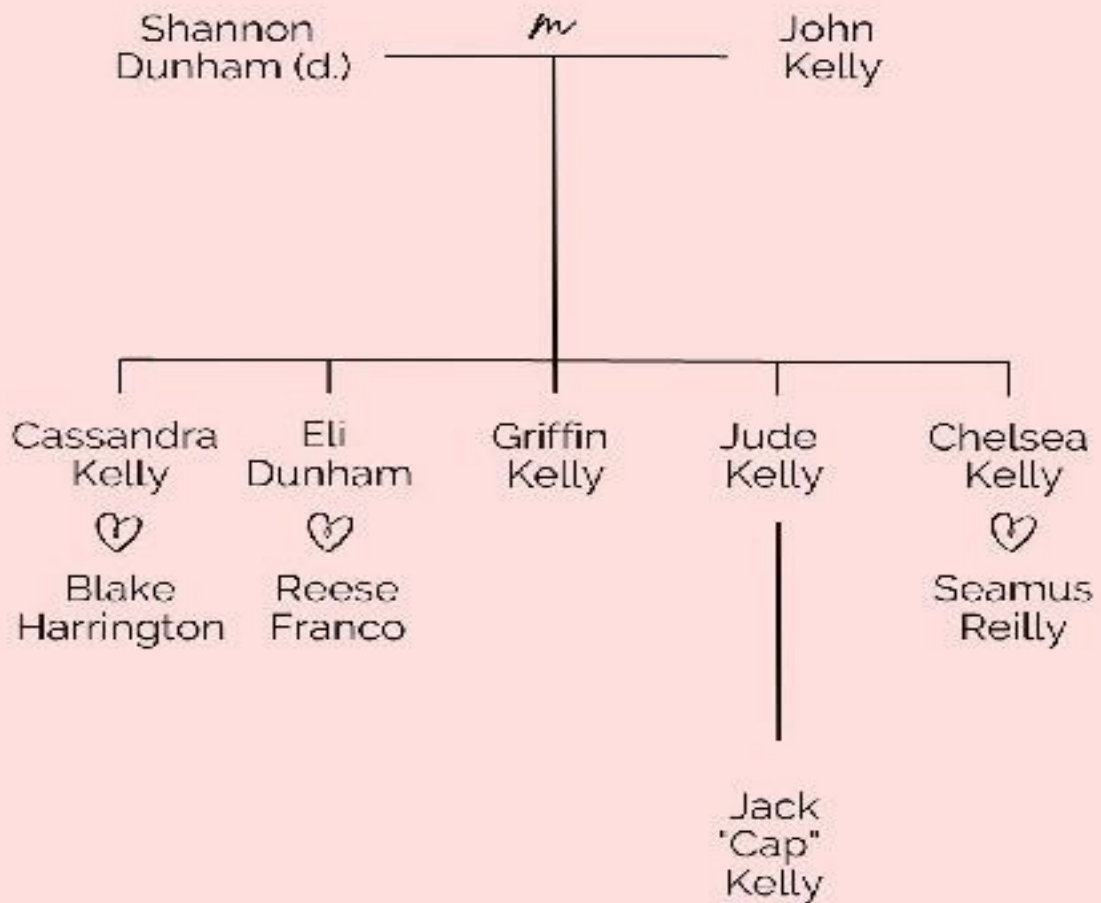
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*To anyone who ever felt they weren't smart, pretty, or good enough for love.
You are. You always have been.*

The Kelly Family



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About the Author

CHAPTER 1

Jude

ONE YEAR AGO

I met the glinting-blue eyes of my foe with a narrowed gaze, my muscles tense. A strand of blond hair fell into my eyes. I tucked it back into its tie lest it distract me during battle.

Around us, the night air was biting cold, the sky speckled with a thousand stars. A small crowd had gathered, their breaths puffing steam into the night sky.

The tension in the air was taut as a tightrope.

“You got this, Cap!” my sister cheered.

My dark-haired opponent squinted, mirroring my stance. He sneered. “Victory will be mine.” Then he pulled his lips back, revealing a fierce grin of not one, but two missing teeth.

We formed our hands into tight fists, raised them up in the air, and chanted our battle cry.

“ROCK, PAPER, SCISSORS!”

My six-year-old son Cap’s arm swung down, his hand balled in a fist.

Quickly, I stuck two fingers out, shifting my play from paper into scissors.

“Noooooo!” I yelled, dropping to my knees in the icy snow covering the wide expanse of lawn next to the entrance of the Rolling Hills resort, my family’s luxury hotel perched in the hills over the town of Quince Valley, Vermont.

Next to us was the resort’s parking lot, and over that and down the slope past the resort’s golf course, the curving length of the Quince River twinkled in the moonlight.

My sister Chelsea and her partner Seamus whooped. My best friend Nora—rounding out the group—quirked her lips behind the video camera she was holding.

“Ah ha!!!” Cap exclaimed. He smashed my hand in victory, then raised it up in the air. Save the shield and age difference, he looked every bit his Marvel namesake.

Last year, Jack had become so obsessed with Captain America, I’d started calling him Cap. But he’d loved it so much that he politely requested everyone call him that. Even as he’d moved on to other heroes, the nickname

had stuck.

“I win! You lose! You’re a loser, Dad!”

Nora giggled behind the camera as Cap began his victory lap. But when he passed me, he shouted, “On your left!” like Cap did in the movies, and we all lost it.

I got up and brushed off my now-damp jeans, my eyes shifting to my best friend, who’d lowered the video camera she constantly had on, laughing too hard to film. She was clad in a puffy black jacket and jeans and her red hair streamed in two braids from her wool hat like Anne of Green Gables—if Anne of Green Gables was a thirty-year-old woman who wore thick Coke-bottle glasses and liked making home movies.

I loved watching Nora behind the camera, which she used constantly since Cap and I bought it for her birthday last year. It was a top-of-the-line handheld I special-ordered from Japan on the advice of a producer friend. Before that, she’d been taking phone videos.

Unlike how she normally appeared—shy, reserved, and like she wanted to shrink into the wallpaper—behind the camera she looked like I’d felt on the tennis court: in her element. The only other place I saw her like that was at the library where she worked.

It’s where we’d met two years ago. Cap and I had gone in because I had a local mystery I needed help researching: the story of a woman who’d been murdered at our hotel over a century ago. Her ghost was said to haunt our hotel, and while the actual haunting part was debatable, the story was incredible. Nora had heard of the legend and jumped at the chance to investigate with me. She was brilliant—a thousand times better at mystery-solving than me, and kind of adorable in her nerdy Anne of Green Gables way. The best part about Nora was besides the fact that she and Cap had fallen instantly in love with each other, she seemed immune to my bullshit. She didn’t giggle when I talked or try to flirt with me. I mean, she turned red when I first talked to her, but I soon learned she did that with everyone. Our friendship was easy, and because Nora wasn’t into me like that—and I didn’t date, full stop—there was none of that awkwardness that could have happened with anyone else.

I mean, I didn’t love it when *she* went on dates, but that was just because she dated boring chumps. None of them really deserved her. And sure, sometimes my brain would picture her in scenarios that weren’t entirely friend-appropriate, but that was just my ridiculous distractible brain. And

hormones.

Overall, our friendship was perfect. I never wanted anything to change.

But when she glanced at me now, her smile faltered.

My stomach tightened. I hadn't been able to shake the feeling recently that something was off with her. She'd promised there was nothing wrong, but it had been days of this. I vowed I'd pull her aside at the dinner we were all going to tonight and get her to spit it out. Nora and I could talk about anything.

Well, almost anything.

"I wonder where Cap got his competitive streak?" Chelsea mused. Chelsea was the baby in our family of five kids, the only one younger than me.

I turned back to her. "Listen, when I did that shit on the court, the crowd ate it up. Just like y'all are doing right now."

"He's definitely got your pizazz," she said.

"It doesn't bother me when you call it that, you know."

This, of course, only made her burst out into laughter.

A decade ago, when I'd been playing pro tennis, I'd been known for my exuberance. That and my blond man bun, which I wore simply because it drove my older brother Eli bonkers. Some sports reporter once said I played with "pizazz" and none of my family had ever let me forget it.

"Do you still do that, too?" Seamus asked. I followed Chelsea's partner's gaze to see Cap on his knees now, playing air guitar like I'd used to with my racket after the victory lap.

"Okay, buddy," I called. "I think you made your point."

"Yeah, the winning point!" he quipped.

I scooped up a snowball and lobbed it at him, aiming for his butt as he fainted left.

Next, we were all at it, except for Nora, who'd lifted her camera again. I was tempted to throw one at her. But then a hail of snowballs hit me at once—from Seamus, Chelsea, and Cap—a coordinated attack.

Everyone whooped.

"Unbelievable!" I gathered up the fallen balls that were still intact while they continued their assault.

Running behind my best friend for cover, I shouted, "At least Nora's on my side!"

"Not today!" Nora said in her signature soft voice, before squatting low.

Cap's ball hit me square in the forehead.

"Ow!" The kid's aim was as good as mine. In fact, that was how my dad had gotten me to a tennis coach when I was in kindergarten: I smoked him in the stomach with a ball, winding him. He hadn't even been mad, just kind of agog.

Cap had adamantly stated he had no interest in tennis, which I understood and respected. He was his own little dude and I'd follow his lead, just like my parents had followed mine, letting me live and breathe tennis from the age of six.

The snowballs kept coming, so I hooked my arms under Nora's and hauled her back up to standing, using her as a human shield—and knowing no one would throw a ball at sweet Nora and her video camera.

She shrieked, stumbling back into me. I lifted her off her feet, my arms around her waist.

"Mwa ha ha!" I gave an evil villain laugh and spun us around, forgetting she was supposed to be shielding me from the others. But I suddenly realized her butt was pressed against my crotch, and as she squirmed in my arms, laughing, a surge of heat shot through me, right where we were pressed together.

I closed my eyes, telling myself to put her the hell down.

Luckily, the others weren't paying attention to us anymore and had turned on each other, because Nora stiffened in my arms as something else stiffened in my jeans.

"Jude!" she squeaked.

Whoops.

I lowered my best friend to her feet. She looked up at me, breathing hard, and for a terrible, wonderful moment, with the feeling of us touching still rippling through me, I pictured my best friend naked.

Stop!

But my stupid brain wouldn't. It just made the picture clearer. Nora, breathing hard as she tossed her long red hair out of her eyes, her tits bouncing as she rode my hard—

I pressed my fingers to my eyes. *Tennis. Jock itch. Toe fungus.*

That did it. When I looked back, Nora was eying me strangely.

Sometimes this happened. It was only natural—my best friend was a beautiful woman, even if she didn't think so. And I hadn't been with one of those in approximately one million years.

On purpose.

Her pale, freckled cheeks pinkened. Or could she somehow have known what I was thinking about?

SWEATY GYM SOCKS!!!

But Nora just smiled. “That was low, buddy.”

Relief flooded through me. It was fine. Just like the hundred other times Nora and I had accidentally brushed against each other or hugged, or any other time I remembered my friend had boobs.

I grinned. “That’s what you get for being a traitor.”

She rolled her eyes, but still smirked. Then she lifted her camera again.

For a moment, it was like everything was back to normal. She was my best friend. Completely platonic. And she seemed happy. I’d been imagining her weirdness over the past few weeks, that had to be it. Maybe it was the stupid idea I’d emailed my agent about that was making me nervous. I’d stepped way out of my comfort zone for that.

But Nora lowered the camera again and pressed her lips together. “So... when did you say your dad was going to be here?”

That’s why we were still out here. The reality TV show that had taken over our hotel’s restaurant for the past six weeks just had its finale. We were waiting for Dad and my sister Cass, the hotel’s CEO, to come outside before heading to the restaurant downtown. Cass had kept Dad away so he didn’t barge on set or talk the crew’s ears off about the history of the hotel or the ghost who haunts it. Seriously, he would. But now that it was over, she’d relented.

“Any minute,” I said, frowning.

She nodded, but when I met her eye, she quickly looked away.

Nope, it wasn’t me. “Nora, speak.”

She smiled again, but this time it wobbled. She was nervous. Shit, I’d thought she was going to tell me someone had asked her out at the library again. Or her brother was coming to town. That always threw her off. But suddenly, I wondered if it was something far more serious.

“Do you want to grab coffee tomorrow? At Betsey’s?” she asked.

“No.”

“No?”

“I want you to talk now.”

Nora glanced over at the door where my father was set to come out of, then the others, still wailing balls at each other.

“You’re scaring the shit out of me. Are you dying or something?”

“What? No!”

My relief at that was short-lived. She was okay. But something wasn’t. “Is it Christian?” Her brother was a pilot. I knew she worried about him.

“He’s fine.”

I wanted to keep grilling her. But right then, my phone buzzed.

I would have ignored it, but I knew it might be my agent. It was a call I’d been anxiously awaiting.

“Don’t go anywhere,” I warned Nora as I patted my coat for my phone.

But Nora was already backing up toward the others. “It’s fine, Jude. We’ll talk tomorrow.”

I didn’t want to wait, but I’d found my phone. There was a plus sign on the screen, followed by a string of numbers across the top, indicating a foreign call.

“Jer,” I said as I picked up the call, unable to contain my nerves. I’d been waiting for my agent’s call. I’d pitched him about an idea, which wasn’t normally the way we operated.

“Allo? Jude?”

Everything in the air seemed to contract at the sound of the woman’s voice, those words coming out in heavily accented French.

No. Not her.

I looked over at Nora, desperately needing an anchor. But Nora had rejoined the others, her back to me. Cap lobbed a snowball at me, but I didn’t even watch it go by, or smile like I normally would. I was too stunned to move.

“Ave I reached Jude Kelly?”

Nora lowered her camera, her face angled in concern. “Jude?”

I swallowed, my mouth dry. But Nora’s gaze gave me the strength I needed to finally speak.

“Hello, Farrah.”

I didn’t recognize my tone. It was hard. Cold. Unlike me by a thousand degrees. “Nice of you to return my calls, six years later.”

“Jude, I am...uh...”

What was she, nervous? How dare she be nervous when she was the one who’d walked out on me, and worse, our son? I’d spent weeks trying to soothe a helpless baby who wouldn’t stop crying for his mom, trying to get him to forget. Then I’d spent years trying to convince him it wasn’t his fault

his mom wanted nothing to do with him.

Blood roared in my ears. “What do you want, Farrah? Do you want to talk to your son? You know he’s six now, right? You’ve missed six years of his life and now you’re calling out of the goddamned blue to—”

I hesitated first because everyone was staring at me. I didn’t get mad like this. I was the happy guy in the family. The easygoing one. Midway across the open space along the side of the hotel, I saw my dad, next to my sister Cass and her husband, finally out to meet us. But Dad had gone stiff, staring at me with his eyes wide like I’d been replaced by some evil twin.

Which, apparently, I had. Because I heard crying on the other end of the line.

“I’m sorry, Jude. *Désolée*. I want to explain. Please let me.”

It was Cap who broke the spell. Because of course it was. My six-year-old son had just heard me ream out his mother over the phone. I was being the opposite of the father I swore I’d be when I took him into my arms all those years ago, the ink still drying on the non-disclosure agreements Farrah’s parents had made me sign. I could still hear him wailing over my dulled promise that they’d never hear from us again. And every time I ignored that promise and tried to get in contact with my son’s mom, late at night, when I felt so lost and alone, a brand-new parent on my own.

“Dad?” Cap said, his little lip wobbling. “She found us? Why are you yelling at her if she found us?”

My heart seized then, into a tight, hard knot. Then it released, shattering at my feet as I took a step toward my son. But instead of running toward me and jumping into my arms like he normally did, he shook his head, then turned and ran the other way. “Cap!” I exclaimed.

“I’ll get him,” Nora said. She didn’t hesitate; she sprinted after him.

“He is there?” Farrah said on the other end of the line, her voice wobbly. “Jude, our son—Jack—is there?”

“It’s Cap,” I said, my voice wooden. I held the phone away from my face, Farrah’s voice tinny now in the night air. Then I reared my arm back—my tennis arm, the one the press said devastated on the court—and threw my phone as hard as I could. I’d been aiming at the streetlamp fifty feet away, and I hit it with a crash, my phone exploding into pieces.

Then, for the second time that night, I fell to my knees.

CHAPTER 2

Nora

I found him tucked up in the tree on the side yard of the resort, sniffing.

“Hey, Cap.”

“Leave me alone.”

“Okay,” I said. “Maybe I’ll just sit here in this bush next to you. Is that okay?”

I saw movement that I thought might be a shrug, but it was tough to tell in the dark.

Why I’d suggested I sit directly in a bush next to his tree, I wasn’t sure. It had looked like it might hold me well enough, but now it poked my butt through my jeans. Plus, I was kind of suspended by a web of feeble branches that could go at any minute. Luckily, I didn’t think I was going to fall through. Guess there was some benefit to having been called “bony legs” my whole life.

I cleared my throat. Talking was the best way to calm Cap down enough to come down without his dad.

I wasn’t a talker. I was a listener. An observer. I liked making videos of other people talking. When I talked, I said the wrong thing.

But for Cap, I’d do anything.

I glanced over at Jude, but we were too far away, and it was too dark over here to see anything except his family crowded around him.

My heart clenched. He’d looked like a gallant prince or something when he’d been focused in mock battle with Cap, his arm outstretched behind him like they were fencing. Now he just looked broken.

I pushed my glasses up my nose, trying to get a comfortable position in the bush.

“You know, I had a tree like that in my backyard when I was a kid. Back

home in North Carolina, before we moved here.”

Silence.

“I fell out of it.” I realized my mistake the moment I said it. “I don’t mean...it’s not like it’s inherently dangerous to sit in a tree. I just wasn’t as good a climber as you.”

More silence. At least he was listening.

“It wasn’t even the tree’s fault. It was my big brother’s. His name was Christian, and he was much braver than me.” Foolhardy, more like it. But still. I cleared my throat, continuing. “The tree branches were way up over our heads, but Christian stacked two chairs on top of each other to try to get me to climb up myself. ‘You can’t be a scaredy-cat your whole life, Nora!’ he said.”

My chest twisted at the memory. I used to get so mad at Christian for trying to knock the timidity out of me. He’d been a real jerk back then, even though I knew he was trying to help.

“He used to tell me that the only time I ever had any fun was when I was sleeping. I was a sleepwalker. Did you know that? Still am.” I glanced at the tree but saw no movement. Maybe I should have told a sleepwalking story. Jude loved those. He was also better at telling stories than I was, though I’d learned from him that once you had a captive audience, you needed to stay on track and make a point.

Stick to the chairs, Nora.

“It wasn’t very smart of me,” I said, “but I decided to do it just to get Christian to be quiet. The chairs were wobbly, though, and by the time I got onto the top one, they were starting to fall.”

I shuddered. The memory of those chairs giving way still rattled me, even all those years later.

“I yelled at Christian to hold them, but he told me I had to be brave and do it myself. I jumped up and grabbed a branch, but I was never very coordinated, and I didn’t grab on properly. I couldn’t hang on, so I fell out of it. I broke my arm. Can you believe it? My dad was so mad at Christian, but also at me, for listening to him.”

So was I. I don’t know why I’d told that story when it still bothered me so much.

Growing up, I’d always been the quiet kid with her nose stuck in a book. I looked like one too: my childhood photos are characterized by corduroy pants and argyle sweaters, my hair in the same two long braids I wear today.

I watched as the adventurous kids rode skateboards and swung on rope swings. I didn't do those things myself. Christian was like that. My childhood best friend Callie had been like that, too. She always ran the races and acted in the school plays. Later, she dated the bad boy in town, while I stayed home and covered for her. Now, she was mayor of our hometown.

As an adult, I chose a sensible, quiet career, and had hobbies that kept my feet safely on the ground. The men I dated—who were few and far between—were quiet and timid like me. I never felt much for them, but I knew they wouldn't break me, either.

The fact was, whenever I took risks, I got into trouble. Just like Christian and the chairs.

So, I didn't take them. Instead, I lived my quiet life behind flashy people like Callie and Jude, wondering if there was something more for me, but not willing to stick my neck out to see for sure.

Until now.

A crackle sounded in the tree and Cap's face appeared as he bent down to look at me, maybe to check if I was still there.

"Hey, buddy." I waved.

His face quickly retreated.

Another wave of guilt threatened to wash over me, but I reminded myself of the mantra I'd been repeating for months, ever since I'd hit submit on the application for the Waldorf Archival College in London. And especially in the last few weeks, when I'd gotten the acceptance & full bursary confirmation email, along with an invitation to start early on their fast-track program, due to my previous schooling and work experience.

No more living in everyone else's shadow.

I wished I had all the time in the world to sit here with Cap. But I didn't. Not when I was leaving Quince Valley in a matter of weeks.

"For the record, big guy," I said. "I think you're like Christian. And your dad. You're brave and smart. You're going to do great things with your life." His shiny brown hair fell over his eye as he retracted his face back into hiding. He'd be gorgeous too, like a dark-haired version of Jude. He had the same thick lashes, the same high cheekbones and long nose. The same smile.

A sudden wave of sadness washed over me as I looked back at Jude sitting on the ground, his arms resting on his raised knees, head hung low. To my surprise, his dad had sat down next to him, patting his back. If this were a documentary, I'd get that shot. They were lit up by the streetlight a few feet

away. Jude was the picture of pain. And soon, I was only going to make it worse. It had been excruciating being around my best friend lately, knowing I had this big hairy secret I couldn't tell him. One that would break his and his son's heart.

Callie visited me last year—it's what precipitated me applying to Waldorf College. She'd asked me why Jude and I weren't together. I'd laughed out loud.

Jude and I had been at dinner with her and her husband. She'd cornered me in the bathroom.

"Jude's—Jude," I'd said. "He used to date supermodels." I didn't add that it seemed to be a short phase in his life, and that I hadn't seen him date anyone since I'd known him. Still. "He's been on the cover of magazines and traveled the world first class. I'm Nora." I looked down. "Quiet, shortsighted, shy librarian Nora."

Maybe I was a little tipsy from the wine Jude bought us, but I couldn't remember saying that out loud before. It sounded pathetic.

"He doesn't do all those things anymore though, does he?" Callie asked. "You're like two peas in a pod."

"Yeah, one big and shiny and one small and hiding in the shell."

I hadn't meant to sound so self-pitying, but Callie grabbed me by the shoulders. "You still deserve a big life, Nora. You deserve happiness just as much as anyone else. And no one's going to get hurt if you go out and spread your wings."

I hadn't been able to get that conversation out of my head. I know she'd been talking about me and Jude, which I still thought was laughable, but she'd been right about me keeping my wings clipped. Maybe I didn't need to take the kind of risks that got people hurt. Maybe I could take sensible risks.

But I'd realized something else, too. Callie thought Jude had been focused on me—and she'd been right. But not in the way she thought. It wasn't that he was interested in me in any way other than a friend. But I knew so long as I was around, he'd never have to find a woman to love the way he deserved.

He'd never give Cap the mom he needed.

Jude confessed to me once that he had never had a real relationship.

The man was thirty-two years old, and he'd never let himself get close to anyone in that way. And after he found out he was going to be a dad, he hadn't let himself get close to a woman at all.

I think finding that out was the turning point in our relationship. The point where I knew our close friendship wasn't just bad for me. It was bad for him, and by extension, Cap, too. The conversation with Callie confirmed it.

That's why this call from his ex—as terrible as it had gone—was serendipitous. I never believed she ran out of there by choice. And her calling tonight proved it. If anyone could knock him out of his self-imposed austerity, it had to be the mother of his child.

They deserved to be a family again. That made my heart hurt with the sting of a thousand arrows, but I told myself it was just me missing something I'd probably never have.

There was a rustle of leaves, then a thump as Cap jumped out of the tree. “Can I sit with you?”

“I thought you'd never ask.”

He looked at the branches, then crawled onto my lap.

My chest bloomed with warmth. I loved this kid. So freakin' much.

“You know when I met your dad,” I said, “I thought he was really silly, the way he was always smiling, and with his hair in a bun on the top of his head, like a ballerina.”

Jude's hair was only shoulder-length, so it wasn't actually a neat, twisted bun, but Cap still giggled, hopefully picturing his dad pirouetting. Which, God help us, he'd probably be amazing at. “I still think he's pretty silly.”

I hesitated, thinking for a moment about what it was like when I was his age. “But sometimes...when people who're usually calm and kind get angry, it's really scary. Especially if they're people you love.”

Cap nodded.

“My dad was like that.”

A beat passed. Then, “Are they lost?”

Cap had said the words so softly I wasn't sure I'd heard him right. “Lost?”

“Like my mom. She was lost since I was a baby.”

My heart tightened, and I clamped my lips into a line. So that's where *your mom isn't here right now, but she still loves you so much* had shaped itself into in his little mind. Of course. What else would make sense?

“No,” I said, honestly, swallowing a lump in my throat. “My dad—he died a few years ago.” My chest tightened. My dad had been a single father too. He hadn't been nearly as amazing as Jude was to Cap, but he'd managed. Christian and I had come out of childhood relatively unscathed. I think. “My

mom,” I hesitated. “She’s not lost. She’s just far away. Just like your mom. She left when I was little.”

“When you were little like me?”

“Sort of.” My mom had taken off when I was about his age, but I wasn’t about to tell him that. I had only the fuzziest memories of her. “I was like you growing up. No mom, only a dad. Except I didn’t have all those aunts and uncles you have. Or a grandpa. Just one big brother who helped me fall out of trees.”

That got a smile out of him. But it vanished as he spoke his next words.

“I thought when Dad found Mom, he’d be happy,” Jude said. “He always looked sad when I asked him about her. But he was yelling at her.”

Poor Cap sounded stricken.

“Sometimes...” I hesitated. “Sometimes people don’t know how they’re going to react until they’re faced with a problem.”

Jude had talked to me several times about his ex—but I never got more than a few words out of him after the basics. She’d been a model or an actress, maybe both. It had been a brief affair—he said he wasn’t interested in a relationship. I remember being surprised. I thought it was the brief tryst with Farrah that ended in a child that had turned Jude off relationships, but apparently he’d always been that way. She just made it worse.

But he’d only found out after she’d had the baby that she’d lied to him about her age—she was barely legal when he’d gotten her pregnant. Her parents were devastated. Furious with Jude.

The whole thing had messed him up. I knew he blamed himself for not only getting someone pregnant, but someone her age.

“Do you think he made her too mad to call back?” Cap asked now.

I shook my head, a lump in my throat.

Over across the snow, I saw a figure separating from the others, walking toward us, head hung low.

Jude.

My heart hurt for him. My heart hurt just looking at him, too. I knew he was ashamed of how he’d acted in front of Cap. But I also knew the only thing that could fix it was holding his little guy, just like I was doing right now.

“Nora,” Cap whispered. He’d looked up, as if sensing his father’s approach. I guess that’s why I’d looked up too. I’d sensed him. I always did. I sat up a little straighter.

“Yeah, buddy?”

Cap’s eyes went to his dad, who was maybe a hundred and fifty feet from us still. “Do you have any secrets?”

I was surprised at the question, but answered honestly. “Yes.” One big one. Because I still hadn’t told Jude about London. Had Cap sensed it? “Why are you asking?”

He hesitated. “Because I have one. But I don’t want Dad getting mad at me about it.”

“Oh, Cap. He won’t—” I cut myself off. I didn’t know what the secret was. For all I knew, maybe Jude would get mad at him, though I couldn’t believe that would ever be true.

“Okay, baby, it’s okay. As long as no one’s getting hurt—”

“No.”

“I want to tell you.” He swallowed.

I wondered what it would be like to have one more thing stuck between me and Jude. But I wouldn’t betray Cap’s confidence. Not unless there was real danger...

Jude was getting close now.

“Okay,” I said.

Cap looked up at me. Then he whispered, “Even though Dad said we were a team, just the two of us, and we didn’t need anybody else...I always wanted a...” His voice cracked. “I always wanted a mom.”

I smiled, my eyes watering. I’d made the right choice. As much as this would hurt leaving them, it was the right thing to do. “You should have one, Cap. You’re going to make a mom so proud one day.”

But then Cap surprised me by looking up at my face.

“That’s not the secret,” he whispered.

“Oh,” I whispered. “What is it?”

He looked away as if shy. “I want *you* to be my mom.”

I was so stunned, it wasn’t until I heard him clear his throat that I realized Jude was standing only a few feet away.

CHAPTER 3

Had he heard?

My heart thundered against my ribs.

When Jude's eyes met mine, I felt a shock of something go through me—something I hadn't felt since the day Jude and I met, when he'd asked me for my help at the library.

That day, I'd pretended like I'd never seen him before in my life. But the truth was, I'd known exactly who he was. Quince Valley was a small town—I'd passed him on the street. I noticed him. How could I not? Tall, lithe, a smile that made my stomach feel like melted butter. But he never noticed me. That time, though, looking at me—talking to me—he'd given me that wide smile of his, and it had unraveled something deep inside of me.

Jude Kelly, ex tennis pro and ambassador for various colognes and sports brands. Smiling at me. A no one.

His smile was different now. Sadder. But my whole body threatened to melt into a puddle all the same.

"Hey," he said.

"Hi," I whispered back.

Then I looked at Cap.

That was enough to settle the ridiculous hormones. Cap was the one I needed to focus on. Jude was my best friend, and I was happy with that. More than happy.

This wasn't about me.

I gave Cap another squeeze, then angled him so he was facing his dad.

Jude came over to us, and I had to close my eyes to will away the scent of him. Shampoo and soap and *Jude*.

He squatted down. "I'm sorry, Cap." Jude's voice cracked slightly. "I

shouldn't have gotten so mad like that. I just...I only want people in our life who are going to love the heck out of us, you know?"

Jude glanced up at me. My stupid heart threatened to burst once more. It was fine. It was true, anyway. I loved these boys with my whole heart. They were as much my family now as me and my brother.

Even though I was leaving them.

"We want our friends and our family," Jude said, brushing his son's hair from his eyes. "That's it, right? Just the two of us. That's what we decided."

"Yeah," Cap said, folding his little arms. "That's what we said. But...I also want a mom."

Jude blinked, looking at me, slightly confused.

A mix of emotions ran through me all at once: Relief that Jude hadn't heard what Cap had said a moment ago. Admiration at Cap's bravery. Mortification that now Cap probably would say what his secret wish was. Because I knew what would happen when he did. Jude would laugh. And I would want to shrink into these bushes and disappear.

But for once in his life, Jude seemed to have run out of words.

So, I stepped in. Even though my voice shook, and it made me sick, I said, "Maybe you could give her a chance, Jude. For Cap."

Jude looked shocked. I could tell he wanted to say no, hard and fast. And I could tell he was mad at me for stepping in. But he didn't know this was the right thing for him. For them both. Cap needed a mom—why not his own mom? She was reaching out, sharing an olive branch, right at the time I was planning on snapping the bond between us. But this was my perfect out. Maybe there could be some kind of fairy-tale ending for them—absorbing and wonderful enough to forget about me.

"I'm not interested in a relationship with her." His voice was harder than I'd ever heard it. He meant it.

But before I could say anything, Cap stood up.

"I want to see her," he said.

"No," Jude said, his voice taut with anger.

"Why not, Dad? She's my mom!"

Jude ran a hand over his face and turned away. He was going to freak out.

"Hey, Cap?" I asked, gently interrupting. "Do you think I could talk to your dad for a bit? I'll make sure he answers all your questions about your mom, okay? But I think he still needs to get mad first—not at you—but at other stuff, and I don't want you to have to feel sad about it."

Cap blinked, then looked back at his dad, who'd turned back around, looking...betrayed. And wounded. And slightly devastated.

But then Cap rushed to his dad, throwing his arms around him. His hug was hard and fierce. Despite his anger, his dad was still number one. My throat went tight. They had each other, no matter what.

Jude picked him up, his arms holding his boy tight. "You go see Grandpa, okay? I'll be there soon."

While they hugged, I texted Chelsea and asked if she'd be okay to take Cap with them to the restaurant—we'd meet her there. She texted back with a thumbs-up just as Cap wriggled to get out of his dad's arms. I let him know what the change of plans were, and Cap ran back to his aunts and uncles.

For a moment, we both watched him go, seeing Chelsea in the distance, separating from the others to meet him.

Then Jude turned on me. "Why didn't you back me up?"

I struggled to get out of the bush. Any other time, Jude would have laughed at me, then helped me out. But not this time. He was furious.

"Because you're being bull-headed about this!" I said, unable to find a branch to grab that wasn't too spindly. Little leaves fluttered all over me.

Jude took my hand and lifted me out with one swift pull, so fast I nearly stumbled when my feet hit the ground. Sometimes, I forgot about how strong Jude was. He wasn't huge like his brother Griff, or even their other brother, Eli. But he was tall. Hard. An athlete through and through.

For a moment, we stood with our hands still clasped. Then I tugged mine away, shoving it in my coat pocket as I mumbled a thanks.

"I don't want to see her," Jude said. His anger appeared to have cracked, just a little. "Our life is good now. Everything is perfect."

"No," I said. "It's not."

Jude frowned.

"Didn't you hear him? Cap wants a mom, Jude. And he *has* one who wants to see him."

He scoffed. "He doesn't."

"But they both want each other. Besides, you told me about her parents—how controlling they'd been. I bet they're the reason she's not in Cap's life." My chest hurt, saying all this, but I wasn't going back now. Not when this was the best course of action for all of us.

Jude frowned. "Even if that's true, she could have just ignored them."

"You said yourself she was a young, naïve girl back then."

Jude grimaced. I knew I'd triggered his guilt again about what had happened. How he and Cap had happened. But this wasn't about protecting his feelings.

"Jude..." My throat felt choked now. "There's no reason why you shouldn't find someone new. Why can't it be her?"

Jude studied me for a moment with an incredulous expression on his face. Behind him, his family was piling into their cars with Cap.

"Since when do you care who I choose to be with, anyway?"

"You never choose to be with anyone," I threw back, my voice tight. But I hated this. I didn't want to fight with him. I took a breath. "I'm your best friend, Jude. I care if you're happy."

"I just told you, I *am* happy! You've never mentioned this before. Is this what you wanted to talk about? Did you...did you have something to do with her calling?"

"What?" I reared back. "Do you really think I'd do something like that behind your back?"

"I don't know. Apparently, there's a lot I don't know about you."

My heart cracked painfully. It was now or never. "Jude..." My voice was so soft I could barely hear myself.

"Speak up, Nora. I can't fucking hear you."

Hot tears burned in my eyes at the sharp jab. He was lashing out. He knew I was sensitive about speaking softly. Fine. If this is what it took for him to accept what was happening, and for me not to miss him, so be it.

I stuck my chin out, folding my arms tight against my chest. "I'm leaving, Jude."

"What?" His face paled. He knew this was serious. He looked at me so intensely, with such panic, I swallowed, my mouth dry.

"I'm going to Waldorf College."

Jude's eyes widened. "The one in London?"

Jude knew where it was. We'd talked about the Waldorf College in London when my colleague at the library first sent me the email. They were the most prestigious archival school in the world, and they were opening a scholarship program. I'd laughed when I told Jude about it. But he'd shrugged and said maybe they had an archival program here in Vermont. He'd never thought I'd actually apply to Waldorf. Why would he? Nervous, pathetic Nora.

"Yes," I said. "I applied, and I got in."

“You didn’t think to tell me?”

Anger rushed through me. “What would you have said, Jude? Would you have cheered me on?”

The way he looked down, I knew he wouldn’t have. And he knew it, too.

Jude lifted his arms and dropped them to the side again. “So that’s it. You’re leaving us. And you want me to, what, reunite with the woman who ruined my life?”

“This isn’t just about you, okay? I’ve spent my whole life hiding behind other people, afraid of what was out there. This is a good opportunity for me.”

“Do you even care about me?”

Now, it was my turn to gape. He hadn’t heard a single thing I’d just said. He was only thinking about himself. My voice was cool when I said, “It’s the best thing for all of us.”

But to my surprise, Jude’s eyes went wet. He looked quickly up into the night sky, away from me, his hands sliding over his hair. “You’re going to break Cap’s heart,” he said, his voice choked.

Not his, just Cap’s. I wasn’t sure why that hurt even more.

“It’s going to be hard, yes, but he’s going to have his mom to focus on. If you hear her out. Will you do that, Jude? For him?”

He said nothing.

I glanced over to the parking lot. Thank God we’d met here and didn’t have to have an awkward ride home. Because I wasn’t going to the dinner anymore, that was for sure. I was going home. My lease was up in a couple of weeks, and I was nearly done packing. I’d stay with a friend from the library until the New Year, then I was getting on a plane and not looking back. At least not until we’d all found our own paths.

“Jude,” I said. He was looking down now, but still not at me. “You get to be happy, you know. You don’t have to eternally punish yourself for whatever it is you think you did wrong. This is your chance at redemption, and you need to take it.”

When he still wouldn’t look at me, there was a sharpness in my chest. I knew then that I’d said what I could.

“I’m going to go now, okay? I leave on New Year’s Eve, so maybe we can see each other a few times before then.”

“New year new you, right?” Jude said, his voice cracking.

I swallowed down my own tears, willing myself not to fall apart until I

was alone, in my car, away from him. But the thought occurred to me that maybe he wouldn't see me again after this.

Maybe this was truly goodbye.

I walked around so I was facing him. I was going to give him a hug, even if he didn't hug me back. I was going to kiss him on the cheek and remember the feel of him close to me. I reached up and placed my hands on my best friend's shoulders. But when I closed my eyes and leaned in, it wasn't his cheek my lips hit.

It was his lips—warm and full against mine.

For a moment, time seemed to stand still. Then Jude's hands rose to my waist, pulling me close.

The whole world seemed to spin as he slid his hand behind my neck, tipping my face back as my heart surged in my chest. If I weren't standing on my toes, they might have curled with the heat rushing through me.

Pull away! my head screamed. But I didn't want to—I wanted to stay right here, to melt into his arms.

That's when he broke the kiss, his hands suddenly dropping to his side. The expression on my best friend's face was something I'd never seen before. It was hard. Almost spiteful. It would have taken my breath away if it wasn't already gone.

"Goodbye, Nora," Jude said.

Then he turned and trudged across the snow, away from me.

CHAPTER 4

Nora

PRESENT DAY

A wad of paper hits me on the shoulder, causing the woman next to me to huff out loud.

I look over to the other side of the giant mahogany table, where Sasha, my young American friend, has her hands clasped under her pointed chin.

“Sasha! I’m trying to study!” I whisper.

Sasha sighs dramatically but looks back at her book without wadding up another piece of paper.

We’re at the Central Library of Waldorf College, a two-hundred-year-old building made up of all dark wood and brass railings and smells deliciously of musty old books. Overhead, cathedral ceilings are topped with a dome glass roof, cold December London rain running down its length and blurring the night sky. Everyone coming into the library is dripping with it. Including the child and their parent who come in wearing matching yellow rain jackets and now stand with their backs to us on the other side of the giant open space, looking lost.

I miss my cozy library at home. Especially the children’s section.

The librarian, a quintessentially English man with his tweed vest and twitching gray mustache, shuffles over in their direction, likely to rudely inform them that this is not a children’s library. I’m half tempted to get up and tell them there *are* children’s books here, though they’re close to two hundred years old and half of them can only be read on the digital collection. Not even Sasha knows this, but sometimes I go and read them just to feel like I’m back home doing story time.

The librarian’s absence, of course, is the only reason he doesn’t admonish Sasha for the second time tonight when she sends another paper ball in my direction.

This one sails over my shoulder, skittering across the floor behind me.

“Sorry,” I whisper to the man in the armchair as I reach over him to pick it up. He harrumphs, but otherwise ignores me.

“You’re going to get us kicked out,” I whisper to Sasha when I get back to my seat.

“You weren’t even reading your book,” Sasha says. “So you should

answer my question!”

Sasha Macklin’s like a glittery star next to me. Besides her coiffed blonde curls and glossy red lips, tonight she’s wearing high heeled boots and a black rain jacket so glossy I can practically see my reflection in it. She always dresses like the paparazzi might be around the corner at any moment, which honestly, they could be. One of her older brothers is a flashy Wall Street guy back in New York, and all her family members get calls when he says something controversial or steps out with an actress. They surprised us once on the high street last spring. I ducked behind a fruit stand while she yelled at them to get lost.

“Well?” Sasha asks, taking one mitten off—the only thing not flashy, because I gave them to her—and tapping her manicured nails on the tabletop with a little smile.

“Nope.” I tug my wool hat down on my head. This library is housed in an ancient building with a serious lack of heat. The old boiler constantly craps out, which means everyone tends to keep all their winter clothes on in here.

Sasha sighs and pulls her mitten back on, looking back down at her book as if it’s pure torture. It isn’t like she needs to study. She’s in a different program than me, and her exams are over. She’s already on holiday time, just keeping me company because she said she needs a break from planning the big Christmas party she’s hosting this weekend. Of course, a break for her means redirecting all her energy into trying to convince me to come. I’ve already turned her down several times, even though it’s only a few doors down from me. I’m going to spend a quiet month on my own after exams, finally getting a chance to make some progress on the videography series I’m doing at the local retirement home for my thesis.

It pains me not to be in the States over Christmas. I usually spend it with Christian, though last year I spent it with Jude and his family. But Christian, a pilot now, will be working Christmas Day, and my closest friend, Reese will be with her partner—Jude’s brother Eli—and her family in New York. The only reason to be home now would be Jude and Cap. And as much as I miss them with my entire heart, the whole purpose of leaving was to put space between us. I know it won’t be forever—just until he finds himself a girlfriend or wife. Or at least until that thought doesn’t make my heart feel like it’s caught in a vice.

When I look up, the tourists are gone, and the librarian is bustling back toward his station.

I turn a page in my book. It's about the preservation of various paper types through the 19th century, which normally I'd geek out over. But I can't seem to stay focused.

Sasha's returned her attention to her book for the time being, so I discreetly pull out the flyer I've been fretting over for weeks. It's for an amateur documentary contest run by the film school. The theme is "love and loss."

SHOW US YOUR BEST! the flyer cries.

It was Sasha who first saw the stack of them at the coffee shop near our apartment building. "You should enter something!" She'd said. It'd been off the cuff. She knew as well as I did I'd never do it. The contest involves an awards ceremony, and the winner gets their documentary shown at theaters all over London, along with several public events to talk about it.

I can't even talk to myself in the mirror. The thought of getting up in front of anyone to talk about my work makes me break out in a cold sweat.

But I haven't been able to stop thinking about it. The seniors' stories I'm cataloguing and filming for my thesis definitely hit the theme.

But even if I did want to enter, initial proposals are due two weeks from now. The judges pick the proposals they want to see, and from that pool they pick a winner after the films are made. I don't even know if they'd like my concept.

"What's that?" Sasha asks, eyeing the paper.

"Nothing!" I stuff it back in the book. If she knew I'd gone back and picked one of the flyers up, she'd never let me hear the end of it.

"Really. Come on, Sasha. I'm trying to study."

Luckily, she drops it. "Why? You already know everything."

"No, I don't." I turn back to my book. *Parchment retains its texture even under considerable duress, notwithstanding—*

A ball hits me in the shoulder.

I narrow my eyes. "Seriously?"

I sit back and fold my arms while Sasha covers her mouth to hide her laughter. I can't help my own lips turning up. She's deeply irritating, but she reminds me of someone else slightly ridiculous. Someone I left behind.

Sasha's the closest friend I've made since I arrived in London eleven months ago, but she doesn't exactly take her studies seriously. Then again, she's writing a dissertation on Victorian erotica, so her study materials are slightly more interesting than mine.

She lowers her hand. “So anyway, I got that disgusting pâté you like, and that stinky cheese, too!”

I frown to keep her from seeing my smile. Okay, that was really sweet of her.

Maybe I should go. It’s not like I’d have to stay long. Maybe I’d even meet someone.

But that thought makes me feel physically ill. I’ve been on a couple of dates since I got here—at Sasha’s insistence—and they went as well as I thought they would. Which was not at all.

“What are you gonna do on a Saturday night after exams are over, anyway?” Sasha pushes. “Hang out with Murray?”

I make a face. “Ugh!”

Murray’s our building manager. He’s in his thirties but with his preference for polyester and pallid complexion, he somehow seems older. He also always has his nose in everybody’s business, especially mine.

“I mean, I bet he’d love that,” she says, giggling. Sasha’s convinced he’s in love with me. She never fails to tease me about it. The sad part is, I actually considered going out with him when he once suggested it. That’s how desperate I was to forget Jude. But the thought of going through with it made me slightly ill, given how very, very far from attracted to him I was.

Maybe Sasha’s right though. Maybe a party is just what I need.

Sasha gasps, her eyes widening. “Hey! You’re chewing your pen! You’re thinking about it!”

I jerk my pen out of my mouth and clap it on the table. “I’m not!”

I chew on my pen whenever something’s troubling me. A complicated exam question. Christian forgetting to call me back when I check in.

Whenever I think of Jude.

Sasha claps, grinning like a madwoman.

“Shh!” The librarian glares at us once more. He’s reaching the end of his tether, I can tell.

I stand up and do a chin-point to the stacks off to our side. Sasha skips after me, letting out a whoop as she slips on a streak of water left by someone’s boots.

“You okay?” I ask, grabbing for her arm so she doesn’t fall. I don’t even tell her to be quiet this time, given she almost fell.

“Never better!” She grins. Then she hip-checks me, nearly knocking me over too.

This is why I love Sasha Macklin. She's silly, fun-loving, has an infectious laugh and is flirtatious with men and women, only not aggressively—she just makes everyone feel special. She brightens up my life, just like Jude did.

Only, aside from my favorite snacks and how to make me laugh, she doesn't know me like he does.

No one does.

"When do your parents get in?" I ask. I just need to keep her distracted while I figure out what to do.

Except as I watch her, all I can see is Jude. While Sasha chats about how her travel-agent sister booked their flights and a whole Christmas itinerary throughout the Scotland Highlands over the holidays, her arms gesticulate elaborately the way they always do when she starts talking. And my mind goes straight back to my best friend. The truth is, I miss him so badly that sometimes I stare at his name on my phone, my thumbs hovering over the messages he sent when I first got here.

He's given up on me responding the way I used to though. My last message from him was from a month ago, when he asked without preamble or niceties if I was coming home for Christmas. When I told him I was staying in London, he didn't say anything else. I've read the message a thousand times, as if looking at it might change it.

The only time I find out about what's going on with him now is during my weekly video chats with Cap. The calls were my promise to my favorite little guy when we said goodbye.

Cap's grown so much over the past year; I swear, he's a different boy each time I see him. Jude never joins us on the chats, though sometimes he'll walk by in the background, or Cap will talk to him off-screen.

Each time feels like a tiny cut.

But things are better like this. Maybe, after Jude's happily settled down with Cap's mom—or if that doesn't work out, some other perfect, beautiful woman with a vibrant personality to match his—maybe then we could be friends again. Nothing like we were of course, but maybe more than this.

But it sounds like things with Cap's mom might actually be happening. At least back in the summer they did.

"She came to our house for dinner!" Cap had told me excitedly back in July.

"Oh!" I'd said, smiling, hoping it looked as bright as I was trying to make

it. “That’s great, Cap!” It was what I wanted, after all.

“We went on a walk together after, and tomorrow I’m going to Aunt Chelsea’s house so they can go have a grown-up dinner.”

My heart ached. I’d smiled and repeated how great that was. Like an unfeeling robot.

Only I wasn’t unfeeling. I was dying inside.

That’s when I knew I wasn’t over Jude.

My vow, over my second half of the program next year, is to cut back on those calls with Cap, too. It feels like death to think of it, but I know I’m standing in the way of Cap building a relationship with his mom, even from way over here. He should be sharing his excitement about life with her, not me.

It’s fine—the archival program intensifies next year, and I’ll need to spend all my time studying.

Like I’m trying to do now.

“Nora?” Sasha’s leaning forward, her brows quirked.

I blink, realizing I haven’t retained any of what she’s just said. *Shit.*

“Nora, were you even listening? I told my brother you’d be there!”

“Sasha!”

“Don’t worry, it’s not Sam.”

Sam’s the Wall Street shark. Her other brother is much more subdued. A finish carpenter apparently. Handsome, of course. He sounds great, but I do not need to be set up with him. Or anyone.

“No pressure, but he’s arriving the day before with my parents anyway, and since you don’t seem to be into any of the English guys I’ve been throwing your way, you’re available. Just for a fling.”

I push my glasses up my nose, exasperated. Finally, I sigh. “You’re not going to give up, are you?”

“Nope.”

I let out a long breath.

London Nora takes risks, remember?

“Okay. I’ll come to the party for a few minutes. But no matchmaking!”

Sasha squeals, then throws her arms around me. “Thank you, thank you, thank you! Also, I didn’t really hear that last part.”

I gasp.

“But don’t worry, he’ll be absolutely drawn to you without interference from me. You’re just his type.”

My stomach turns, though I smile, if only because she's happy.
But what about me and my type? Is he tall and blond and silly and fun?
After firming up details, Sasha walks backward, blowing me kisses.

"Watch the water!" I call after her.

Sasha laughs, then backs smack into the stodgy librarian, who lets out a whoosh of astonished breath.

"Young lady!" he exclaims.

"Don't worry," Sasha says in her sweetest voice. "I'm the problem, and I'm leaving."

The librarian scrunches up his nose, but finally stands aside with a warning look at me as Sasha disappears around the corner.

I smile as I take a moment to stretch my legs. But instead of heading back to the desk, I stand there a moment, realizing I'm next to the tiny section of "juvenile texts."

The closest thing this library has to a children's section.

"You're really moving away?" Cap had managed to squeak out the last day I saw him in person. We were in Jude's car, on our way to the airport after Jude told me he'd sent my taxi away.

I'd reached back with my throat thick with tears and held his hand. "It's not forever," I promised. "Just two years."

Of course, there was the possibility of a post-doc certificate, and work in London too. But I didn't need to tack anything onto two years. To a six-year-old, two years was an eternity.

This is what you want. You need to spread your wings.

With the sound of planes roaring and airport announcements echoing in the icy wind around us and Cap rolling my suitcase back and forth up the sidewalk, Jude had turned to me, his expression serious. I thought he was going to talk about the kiss. That it was an accident. Or it was no big deal, and he didn't care.

But he just shoved his hands in the pockets of his coat and said, "Are you sure this is what you want to do? This archival thing?"

I'd blinked. "Of course, it's what I want." It was. It was perfect for me, and it meshed my hobby of documenting things on film with my librarian skills.

More importantly, it was a nice surgical removal of me from their lives.

Then I realized what he was really asking me. If leaving him was what I wanted.

To that question, I didn't have an answer. So as usual, I said nothing, just fiddled with my camera, which I hadn't turned on at all. I didn't want to preserve the pain of that day.

Jude had studied me for a moment, then pressed his lips together. "Okay."

Normally, I'd have told him that *okay* didn't sound okay. I would have poked at him, demanding he tell me what he was really thinking.

But I knew what he was thinking. He knew my story, how I set my expectations low, and ducked and covered when things got hard. He was shocked to see me sticking my neck out and doing something risky.

"You'll thank me once I'm an archivist," I'd said, as if that was really the question at hand. "I'll be way better equipped to actually solve this hotel ghost mystery."

The ghost story—less so a story of haunting than a cold case over a hundred years old—was what had brought us together.

Jude had come into the library with Cap and had casually mentioned how he wondered if there were any books or articles about a woman called Eleanor Cleary.

Though I'd been sweaty-palmed at having to talk to *the* Jude Kelly, I'd immediately perked up. The hundred-year-old murder at the Rolling Hills was a local legend. Her husband George Cleary—a cruel oil baron with a bad business reputation and apparently a woman in every port—had discovered her body. But the killer was never found.

Over the weeks, as Jude kept returning, I'd learned that he and his siblings had not only found Eleanor's room walled-up in the hotel's closed-off east wing, but that they'd found a secret diary kept by George Cleary's driver hidden in the grate.

Jude and I started our friendship researching everything we could about George, Eleanor, and the mysterious driver, identified only as JEQ in the diary.

But research had turned into park dates with his adorable son, and hangouts at his place. Then movie nights and long phone calls and daily texting. We still talked about the cold case, but we talked about everything else too.

We'd become friends.

It had never become more than that, simply because Jude was way out of my league.

Our ghost-hunting had eventually led us to finding a cache of papers

buried by the resort's golf course, where JEQ confessed his private love for Eleanor.

The last pages in that diary ended with mention of both of them accompanying George on a year-long trip to Switzerland. Jude and I were convinced that was where the affair had started, and if we could prove George had discovered their affair—it would be clear George had the motive for murder.

Only we never talked about what we'd do once we found proof of all this—I don't think either of us thought we'd really bring this story to its conclusion.

Jude always talked about following the trail to Europe, but by then I'd already felt like I couldn't see the point. Finding those papers had broken my heart.

In truth, they were the catalyst for me applying for this program. I knew what it was like to love someone from afar. And I didn't want to know more, because Jude's and my story wouldn't lead to what my heart cried for. Jude and I are just friends.

And we aren't even that anymore.

I pull my cap down hard on my head, turning from the scant assortment of children's books. This party will be good for me. Maybe Sasha's brother will be wonderful. Maybe I'll fall in love with someone new.

"Dad!"

I was on my way back to the study table, but now I freeze at the sound of the child's voice, loud for the library.

"Shh!" the parent gently shushes. "You can't yell in the library, remember?"

I smile. Yes, it's the books I miss from the children's library, but mostly it's the kids.

Mostly, it's Cap.

The tourists must have wandered into this section of the library. I'll get my chance to tell them about the children's books, after all. They're so close to them. I turn around and begin walking down the long aisle adjacent to the shorter rows. They're somewhere in here; I can hear whispering now. I smile, my chest light. But as I get closer, I can make out their words.

"Dad, she has to be here. The guy said she always goes to the library on Friday nights."

I go completely still. There's something about the tone of that child's

voice; the cadence of their words.

No, it's impossible.

I take a tentative step, then another. But when I hear the rustle of rain clothes, I chicken out and duck into the row beside me.

It could be anyone. There are lots of American tourists in London. Thousands, at any given time.

But how many come to the archive library? And stick around after the librarian practically gave them an escort out?

“Cap, she’s not here, okay? We need to get back to the hotel. Your lips are blue.”

My chest seizes. I back up.

It’s them.

Jude and Cap. Here, in my library. Some unbelieving part of me still thinks it could be someone else. Some other kid coincidentally named Cap...

But my heart knows.

My back hits the bookshelf, and several books come sliding out, clapping on the ground. I whirl around, trying to catch them, but my foot hits a puddle of water.

My legs fly out from under me.

For a long moment, I’m airborne. Then I land, hitting the hard floor with a crack straight on my back, unable to stop my head from thwacking hard after it.

Then everything goes black.

CHAPTER 5

Jude

I sprint over to where Nora lays sprawled on the ground.

Both her hat and her glasses flew from her head in the fall and lay strewn down the row of books. The hat was why I hadn't recognized her before. We'd almost left.

"Nora!" I exclaim, reaching down and peering around her head. No blood. I take a long deep breath, forcing myself to calm down. She's knocked herself out. That's all.

Vaguely, I notice my knees are wet. We're in a puddle of water.

We were in this row before, our coats dripping onto the floor.

It's our fault.

"Dad?" Cap asks, his voice shaky. He's standing a few feet back from us, staring at Nora in horror. "Did we kill her?"

My chest heaves.

Fuck, I'd said that out loud.

"No, buddy. She's gonna be okay."

Please, let her be okay.

"Maybe you can get some help, though?"

My guy nods vigorously but doesn't move.

"Like, over there? Where all those people were?" I point out to the main area.

"Oh," he says. "Okay, yeah."

"Just tell the librarian guy, okay? Don't talk to any—"

But he's already disappeared. Worry cramps my chest. I remind myself Cap knows all about stranger danger; he'll be fine. Still, this is a shit situation. I thought I'd feel bad if I showed up and she didn't want to see me. But this is worse.

I lean down and stroke Nora's cheek. "Nora? Can you hear me?"

Nothing.

I've been around plenty of guys who'd been knocked out on the tennis court before, including me. Plenty of other people need first aid of other types at the hotel, too. I once had a guest have a heart attack on the golf course. I did chest compressions, and somehow, he made it.

I'm good in a crisis situation. I can handle it.

Except...those people weren't Nora. Nora isn't helpless, but shit, I don't know. She is so little and so soft and so much more...breakable.

"Fuck, Nora, please wake up," I whisper. "I knew I was going to shock you by showing up here, just didn't know you'd faint at the sight of me." I grimace. "Wake up and slap me or something, Nora."

That's what I deserve after the way we left things.

"Sorry. That was supposed to be a joke."

It's what I do when I'm nervous, which isn't often. I played pro sports without so much as a flutter of nerves, at least by the end.

Not at the beginning.

As I sit there praying for Nora to wake up, I hear my old coach's voice. The one who nearly broke me.

Your brain can't handle more than one thing at a time, Jude, do you hear me? Focus. That's the only fucking way!

But he was right. When I don't focus on what's most important, I lose. I do things like kissing my best friend. I need to hold that focus so tight, nothing gets in at the seams.

My hand wrapped around the racket.

My son.

Nora throws that all out of whack.

"Nora," I whisper. "I need to know you're okay."

I'm not focusing. But I'm scared shitless I've done some kind of permanent damage to our Nora. I bend down, ostensibly to whisper in her ear, like that'll make her register my words. But for a moment I'm stuck—her shampoo smells different. Something floral and spicy. But she still smells like her underneath that, and it makes my whole chest hurt. And instead of asking her to please wake up, I say, "This has been one of the worst years of my life, Nora, and I vowed I wouldn't have bad years after the accident. I miss you."

Then I kiss her on the cheek.

When I pull away, her eyes are open.

“Nora!” Relief floods through me like a goddamned firehose.

“Jude?” she croaks.

“Yeah, Nor. It’s me. Thank Christ.” I cup her face. “How’s our Anne of Green Gables?”

“I’m not wearing the braids, Jude,” she whispers.

Her hair is spread out behind her like orange fire.

“Yeah. Well. You made me watch the show, so now you’re stuck with it.” Without meaning to, I brush her hair back from her face once more, feeling the silky strands slide through my fingers.

“Two different versions,” she whispers.

“You know I’m still mad the latest one was cancelled.”

I’ve missed her so much I tried reading the Anne of Green Gables books last summer when Farrah was around, needing to remind myself of what it was like to spend time with a woman I actually wanted to be around. Who wasn’t one of my sisters.

But it hurt too much to read more than a few pages. All I could think about was Nor.

She smiles. Her eyes are wet.

“Let’s get you up,” I say. “Unless you’re hurt?”

She stretches, and I try not to look at the way her back arches off the floor, how it sends this hot little tingle down low like Nora’s movements sometimes do.

“I think I’m okay.”

I help her to sitting. I’ve got long fingers, and they span nearly her whole back. Has she always been this little? She used to complain about being scrawny, but to me, she’s perfect.

“Where’s Cap?” she asks, making me snap quickly out of wherever my brain had wandered off to. It does that a lot, especially around Nora.

Cap. Shit. “I’m not actually sure,” I confess.

“What?” She moves to stand, then cries out, cringing, with a hand to the back of her head. “Ow.”

She *is* hurt. Fuck. I ease her back down.

“He’s here somewhere; he went to get help.”

As if we conjured them, footsteps patter down the hallway, and a moment later, Cap appears with that grouchy-ass librarian who tried to tell us to get lost earlier.

“Good work, Cap.”

“Cap!” Nora exclaims, but she isn’t quite looking at him. She can’t see him without her glasses, I realize. Cap runs toward her and jumps.

I have to wrap myself against her back to keep them both from falling, and for a moment, I’m holding both of them in my arms.

My heart feels like it’s melted into mush.

“Oh buddy,” Nora says, her voice cracking. She’s crying. “I missed you so much.”

The librarian stands there a moment, his mouth opening and closing like a fish. Then he squints down at Nora. “Your friend promised there’d be no more trouble!”

He doesn’t care that she nearly cracked her head open. “Hey!” I say, moving to stand, but Nora puts a hand on my thigh as she gets up, completely distracting me.

“Sir,” she says, clutching Cap against her. “I slipped on the floor in your library. That’s not exactly causing trouble!”

For a moment, both of us stare at Nora, so different with her hair and no glasses. I’ve never heard this level of assertiveness from her.

“Yeah,” Cap says, “we should sue you!”

The librarian rears back. “Sue!” He takes a step backward, and I noticed a vague crunching sound, but I’m too distracted by the sight of Cap’s wet eyes.

He was crying too. How could I have missed that? I get to my feet, coming in close beside him.

I should have tried harder to see her before this. Cap needed her. We should have visited in the summer. Except...she didn’t want to see me. She’d made that clear.

She probably still feels the same way; I’ve just knocked it out of her temporarily.

“I—I” the librarian sputters. “We don’t...that’s not—”

“Do you want to sue?” I ask Nora.

She sighs, squeezing Cap again. “Maybe later.”

“You’re off the hook,” I tell the librarian. “But maybe send for someone to mop up these floors so no one else gets hurt?”

The librarian presses his fingers to his brow like he had a handkerchief, but forgot he wasn’t holding it. Clearly, he’s relieved the litigious Americans have backed down. “Yes. Yes, a mop...”

He bustles off, leaving the three of us alone.

After we make sure she's really not hurt, Cap reverts to his excitable self. "Nora, you wanna see our hotel room? It's really big and there's a giant TV and a pool and a window where you can see the bridge where they used to put the chopped-off heads!"

"Cap!" I clear my throat, standing. Inviting Nora back to our hotel room is awkward, to say the least.

"Sounds awesome," Nora said. "But I can't see anything right now."

Her glasses. I scan the floor, then grimace as I take in the pile of crunched glass where the librarian was standing. "Uh-oh."

"He broke them!" Cap exclaimed. "We should definitely sue!"

I frown. "How do you know so much about suing?"

"Uncle Eli!" Cap says as if it's obvious.

Of course, the oldest of my two brothers, the hot-headed Eli, would be the one to talk to a kid about litigation.

"They're broken?" Nora squeaks. "Jude, you know I'm blind without them!"

"We'll get them replaced," I say, picking up what's left of them. They're completely shattered, arms and lenses. Nothing salvageable. Guilt runs over me as I glance at our still-slick jackets. "Sorry, Nor. You've got more at home, right?"

Nora's blind without her glasses; at home she kept a dozen pairs stashed all over her place. Some at my place too. I left them where they were when I found them, as if she'd be back at any moment.

"Of course, but first I have to get home—" Nora screws up her face. She's going to cry again. This is some kind of record, and it's all because of me.

"Uh, buddy, can you grab Nora's hat? And go tell that grumpy librarian to hurry up with the mop? I'll meet you by the place we came in."

Cap nods, looking proud to have a real job to do, and after he tosses me her hat, he disappears around the corner once again, hopping nimbly over the puddles.

"I only have three pairs at home," Nora says. "They're custom made and if anything happens to them—" She paws at the air, taking a shaky step.

I catch her hand in mine. "At least it's not the apocalypse."

Nora's terrified about the concept of apocalypses, not because of the fire and mayhem, but because of her bad eyesight.

Nora lets out a breath. There's a hint of a smile there. But that's all it

takes to make my heart buoy.

“Anyway, if it was, I promised I’d take care of you, remember?” I let go of her hand to pull her cap over her head. “In the apocalypse, I mean,” I clarify, brushing her hair from her eyes before I remember myself.

I need to stop touching her damn hair.

“Come on,” Nora says. “I need to get my books.”

I smile to myself. Her books come next in importance after glasses.

I reach for her hand again, squeezing it tight.

“You look different with your hair down,” I say as we begin walking. “Cute, too, glaring at me without your glasses.”

“You talk too much,” she whispers.

I grin, even though she can’t see it. God, I missed this.

“Well, at least now we have to help you home.”

Nora’s hand goes stiff in mine. I know it’s because I figured out where she lived.

I’d asked for her address via text a while back, so I could send her some drawings Cap made. She hadn’t responded. I think she thought I’d show up on her doorstep. Hell, I probably would have.

“Unless you want to come back to our hotel?” I continue as I lead her around the corner. “Cap’s right, it’s pretty awesome. You could come feel it for yourself.”

But Nora doesn’t laugh at my dumb joke.

My heart sinks.

I lead her down the aisle, my hand beginning to sweat with hers in it.

“Jude,” she says as we round the corner into the main hallway. We’re almost back at the open area, with all the people. “Why are you here?”

My stomach flops. I’ve thought about how to say this a million times over the past year. How to tell her how hurt I was that she’d applied for this school without saying anything to me. How I’d sensed she had a secret but hadn’t thought much of it because what kind of secrets did Nora Albright have? I knew everything about her. She could trust me with anything.

But she hadn’t been able to trust me with this.

I’d thought I’d gotten all the anger out. I kept reminding myself I’d behaved like a dick when she told me she was leaving, and that had to cancel out her not telling me sooner. But feelings didn’t just disappear because I wanted them to.

But my words fail me. I’m good at running my mouth off, except when

things really matter.

“We’re here to see you,” I say finally. “Cap misses you.”

She pulls her lips tight. “I miss him too.”

I have to bite my cheek to keep from blurting out *But what about me, Nora? Did you miss me? Because I’ve missed you like I’ve lost a fucking limb.*

I will my feelings to calm down. “I thought if I told you ahead of time, you might say no. Like you were too busy.”

She starts moving again. We have to hold hands so she doesn’t fall, but I feel like she’d rather put several feet between us. And that fucking stings.

“You didn’t come all this way just to visit me.” We move toward the open room. Cap’s standing on the other side of the seating area with his hands on his hips, looking up at the bewildered librarian, who looks like he’d rather be in Bermuda.

“Farrah just moved to London. So, you know, two birds.”

Nora’s hand stiffens in mine once more.

That was an asshole thing to say. But the truth—that I’d travel the world a hundred times just to spend a moment with her again; that she’s the only person who sees me and she left, and I’m a wreck without her—is too pathetic.

“Well, that’s great,” she says. “I’m glad you’re making it work with Farrah.”

I jerk us to a stop. “There’s nothing to make work, Nora. It’s not like that.”

I don’t know why I’m so adamant about her knowing that. But it’s complicated. If she wasn’t Cap’s mom, I’d arrange it so I never had to hear her name again, let alone see her. Getting to know Cap’s mom again through calls and texts had been so awkward. At first, I’d still been so pissed. Then, when she visited, she asked if I wanted to be a family again. It was weird as hell, and I’d told her no, straight out. That part hadn’t been hard. I didn’t have an ounce of feelings for her. And honestly? I didn’t think she really did for me, either. Mostly, she wanted to be a part of Cap’s life. Which I couldn’t exactly ignore. I wouldn’t do that to either of them, as much as it pained me.

“It just worked out with you being here too,” I say.

We’ve reached the table with her stuff on it. I get her coat on her, carefully pulling her hair out from its back.

Because she hasn’t said anything, I say, “You were right, you know.”

About her parents.”

“Oh yeah?”

“They convinced her that being a mom would ruin her life. They made her sign that modeling contract in Tokyo right after Cap was born.”

“So, she didn’t actually want to leave you guys?” Her voice sounded weirdly tight.

“Well, she didn’t exactly put up a fight. She was an adult. Sort of. She had a choice to leave her son and she took it.

I’d finished stuffing her books in her bag and gripped it in my hand.

I missed the way her eyes were always amplified behind those bug-eye lenses, so I felt like I always knew what she was thinking. Now, I couldn’t tell.

“Do you think there’s a chance she might move to Quince Valley?” Her voice is almost timid.

“I fucking hope not.”

Several eyes turn our way.

I ignore them. I’m used to eyes on me. But Nora’s lips have pulled tight. “What does Cap want?”

I glance toward my son, still in a heated discussion with the librarian. “He wants to spend time with her. But only because she asked him to,” I add quickly. “She invited him to come on his own, to take a trip with her.” I laugh with no humor. “I don’t think she knows how kids work. Or parents. Like hell I’d let that happen.”

“So you’re going with them.” She always did put things together faster than I ever would have.

“We leave next week.”

“Where are you going?”

“Not far.” I hesitate. It’s long enough that her eyebrows fly up.

“You’re going to Switzerland!”

I clear my throat and look down at the table, suddenly wishing we were going literally anywhere else. “Yeah.”

This was the trip I always wanted to go on with Nora, and she knew it. As soon as we found that lead about Eleanor and JEQ spending time in Switzerland. She always thought I was joking.

But the more I think about it now, the angrier I get. Nora bailed on me with this trip, just like she did our whole relationship.

“Well, that’s great,” she says brightly. “I hope it’s fruitful.”

“Fruitful?”

“You know, that you get some good clues. Or at least that it’ll be fun.”

Fun? Farrah’s sucked the fun out of it. My irritation heats up then, without me seeing it coming. It’s bullshit that I’m going on my own, without Nora. This was always *our* thing.

“It’ll be good for Cap to spend time with her though, right?” Nora asks, thankfully not reading my thoughts this time.

“Yeah, it will, even though the last fucking thing I want to do is spend a whole week with the woman who dumped her own son like—”

I cut myself off, looking toward Cap, whose eyes are on me, though thankfully he’s out of earshot. I hope.

“So, you still haven’t forgiven her.”

I gather up her books. “Come on, Cap’s waiting.”

We cut across the open space toward him. “I know we showed up unannounced, but Cap’s really hoping you’ll hang out with us a bit before we go. The guy said your exams would be over by Monday, and—”

Nora makes a frustrated sound, then snaps her head up. “Wait, what guy?”

“The guy in your building. The same one who said you always go to the library on Fridays.”

“Murray?” she exclaims. “How did you—”

“He told me a surprising amount about you.” She doesn’t need to know I had to ask my brother Griff to help me find out where her apartment was. He’s good at stuff like that.

Nora presses a palm to her forehead, grimacing, and that old familiar punch of screwing up lands in my gut.

“Nora, I’m sorry, okay?” I hate how defensive I sound. “I knew you weren’t going home for Christmas, so I figured you might have some time.” She doesn’t say anything, and somehow this means I can’t stop. “You wouldn’t return my texts! How else was I supposed to know where you’d be?”

“That wasn’t an invitation to come over here and make plans without telling me!”

Heat flares in my chest. “Well, what would you have said? ‘Sure, Jude, no problem. Let’s hang out like we used to before I took off across the fucking ocean without telling my best friend my plans!’”

Nora’s jaw is set, but I see the slightest tremble in her lip.

Oh shit.

But now the whole library is staring, Cap included. And for once, I feel self-conscious about it. I wasn't expecting to have this fight at all, but especially not here.

Finally, I say, "Let's just get Cap and go. We'll take you home, then get out of your hair."

A moment later I'm dragging a bewildered Cap away from the librarian—he'd been trying to talk him into buying Nora a new pair of glasses, apparently—and heading down the stairs.

CHAPTER 6

Jude

Even though it's only a twenty-minute walk back to her apartment from the library, between the rain now coming down in sheets, Cap's constant yawning, and her inability to see, Nora agrees to let me call a cab instead of walking.

Nora says it's only a seven-minute drive, and luckily, Cap launches into an immediate discussion about the Marvel universe with the cabbie. He's sitting between me and Nora, and keeps leaning forward, gesticulating wildly. I steal glances at Nora whenever he does, but she doesn't look my way at all. Just sits there with her hands clasped tightly in her lap, as if she'd rather be anywhere else in the world.

My stomach knots.

She's wearing dark green nail polish, I notice. Since when does Nora wear nail polish?

Cap's still talking, but I notice he's leaning back in his seat now. He's got shadows under his eyes.

We only got in late last night and I made him wake up at nine this morning so we could beat the jet lag. But the kid's exhausted. He doesn't even lift his hands to describe the fight scene he's talking about.

My anger from back in the library deflates like a sad balloon.

This angry version of myself is not one I like, and now I feel like a shit dad on top of everything else. I should have insisted we stop looking for Nora hours ago. But we'd both been desperate to see her.

It hadn't gone anywhere near to plan.

I lean my head back against the seat.

"You can just drop me off at the door," Nora says to the driver as the car pulls up to the building a few minutes later.

“No.” I sit up fast. The word comes out hard enough that Cap looks confused.

“You need to get to your hotel,” Nora says. “Cap’s exhausted.”

“I’m not tired!” Cap says, lifting his head from the seat like it weighs a thousand pounds.

“I know he is,” I say. “But we’re walking you to your door, okay? You can’t see shit. Don’t argue with me.”

“Dad!” Cap hisses, glancing at our driver, then Nora.

“It’s all right, mate,” the driver says. “Heard a lot worse in here!” He guffaws loudly.

Normally, all of us would have laughed alongside him, but none of us are laughing now. The tension between me and Nora is palpable, and Cap’s not just exhausted now, but worried.

I put on a smile for the driver, but mostly for Cap. “Thanks,” I say as I hand him cash before Nora can even think about trying to.

Maybe buoyed by my softening, Cap waves amiably at the driver as he stumbles out of the car. “Yeah, thanks for the ride, Tim!”

The driver smiles happily, obviously surprised to have received a personalized thanks from a seven-year-old.

“Here,” I say as Nora reaches the door. She’s holding her keys inches from her face, clearly struggling to see which is which. And her hands are shaking.

I’m such a fucking asshole.

Reluctantly, she lets me take them, though she sticks her hand out to get them back the moment I’ve unlocked the door.

Nora’s building is an old brick walk-up with a large parquet lobby and a wide set of wooden stairs leading up across from the door. “I’m on the fifth floor,” she says. “Or do you already know that?”

I grimace. “Murray might have let it slip out.”

Cap peers at the stairs with confusion. “Where’s the elevator?”

“No elevators when these buildings were made, buddy,” I mumble, eyes still on Nora.

She’s headed straight for the stairs, saying, “I’m fine, thanks,” to my outstretched arm.

My stomach drops. This is all my fault. Nora left, sure. But the reason was me. And by coming here, what, did I figure we could just gloss over everything? Why do I just assume everyone will think my ideas are as great

as I did?

Out of nowhere, I think of this time Dad had asked all five of us kids to put ideas for what we should do with Mom on the weekend when she wasn't at work managing the hotel on a little scrap of paper. Then we were to fold them all up and stick them in the SUPER FUN ACTIVITY jar he kept on the kitchen counter.

"They have to be super special," he said.

I think I was the only one who took the job seriously.

Where my siblings said stuff like hikes, picnics, and various local attractions, I wrote down things like "spelling our names in river rocks on the sidewalk that we spray different colors" and "sushi-making with fresh trout we catch ourselves."

Whenever one of my ideas was pulled—which was frequently, given I'd often sneak extra ideas in the jar at night when no one was looking—my siblings would groan; or worse, outright object. My oldest siblings, Cass and Eli, would even straight-up say they were a waste of time.

But not Dad. He was as enthusiastic about each of the ideas as I was, even though sometimes he'd let the other kids veto them.

"Dad?" Cap asks now. He's looking at the stairs like they're Everest.

Nora's already halfway up the first flight, gripping the banister to guide her.

I crouch down. "Come on."

"I'm too big for piggybacks, Dad."

"Listen, even Captain America had to be carried sometimes."

"When?"

"In one of the comic books."

Cap frowns. "Which one?"

"One you don't have." I lean in close. "Nora can't see you, remember? I'll put you down before we get up there."

That's good enough for Cap.

He hops on, looping his arms around my neck, and immediately sags against my back. He's light enough that I could still jog up the steps, but I keep it slow to give Nora space. I wonder if she's hoping I'll give up and let her go the rest of the way on her own? Or if she knows there was no way I'll leave without knowing she's safely in her apartment.

"Dad?" Cap asks.

I thought he'd nodded off. Cap could fall asleep at the drop of a hat, just

like me. “Yeah?”

“What’s going on with you and Nora?”

My stomach tenses. I’d wanted to shield him from what was going on between us, but he’d seen right through me.

“I’m not actually sure,” I confess.

“Is she mad we’re here?”

“No,” I say quickly. “She loves you, Cap.” My throat goes tight at that truth. “She was so happy to see you, remember?”

“Yeah. But she doesn’t seem happy to see you.”

I glance up at Nora, but she’s rounded the corner, her footfalls sounding from up the next flight. “I didn’t tell her anything about us coming.” That was the part I could share with Cap.

He rests his cheek on my shoulder. “Why not?”

“I didn’t want her saying no.”

“But you always tell me not to do that!” Cap admonishes, lifting his head up for a moment before dropping it again.

“I know. I should listen to myself more, huh?”

“Grandpa said you always used to do that when you were a kid.”

“Oh yeah? What else did he say?”

“He said you were the troublemaker in the family.”

“Oh really?”

“You weren’t?”

I turn my face to the side so he can see me wink. “I never said that.” I jostle him so he giggles. It’s good to be distracted from Nora for a moment.

“Let’s see...back then Aunty Cass and Uncle Eli were the boring know-it-alls; Uncle Griffin was like, a mysterious genius who would take stuff apart in his room and disappear for long stretches. And Aunty Chelsea, the only one younger than me, was quiet and liked to draw. They were all smart and good in school where I couldn’t focus to save my as—butt. So someone needed to make things fun, right?”

“Yeah,” Cap sighs against my back. He’s quiet a moment as I continue up the stairs after Nora. Once more I think he might be falling asleep, until he says, “But Dad, you’re smart, too.”

My heart squeezes. Still, I almost laugh, given what a stupid idea this trip has been. Cap’s being kind. Kinder than I deserve. Luckily, whatever brilliance gene my siblings got, I’d manage to pass on to Cap. Even though getting a young girl pregnant was the stupidest thing I’d ever done, it had

given me Cap. And being Cap's dad was the best thing that had ever happened to me.

"Thanks, buddy," I say softly.

A beat passes before Cap says, "Dad?"

"Yeah?"

"Is that why you don't have a girlfriend? Because you have to be smart to have one, right?"

My stomach twists hard. This little psychoanalyst has me nailed. Sort of. I don't have a girlfriend because I want to be the best at being Cap's dad. Just like I wanted to be the best at tennis. It was the only way to keep my eye on the prize. I'm not the kind of guy who can do both and not fuck everything up.

"Yeah, Cap," I say, because it's easier that way, and because he's kind of right. "I guess that's why."

Nora pauses halfway up the next flight of stairs as I round the corner onto the landing.

Our eyes meet, and a spark goes through me. Until I remember she can't see me.

Has she heard? She's the only other one who knows Jude Kelly has insecurities.

"You okay?" I ask.

She nods, then turns around again. "Just making sure you're still there," she says softly.

Her words are the first bit of olive branch she's handed me since the library. But I can't tell with her back to me whether she's still mostly upset.

What I can tell is that this aspect gives me a bit of a too-good view of her backside.

I shouldn't be looking at her backside, but everything else has gone to shit so might as well enjoy the view. I'd forgotten about how attractive it was. Heart-shaped and round, the perfect size for wrapping hands around...

That's been a weird side effect of Nora being gone. I've started feeling inappropriate things when I think of her. Things I could easily brush aside back when she was around or write off as hormones.

Now, when our emotions are so high...it's weird, but it's like those wrong feelings have been amplified too.

God, do I want to fuck her?

I curse myself for even having that thought, especially with my son

literally in my arms.

Luckily, my inappropriate thoughts about my best friend—maybe ex-best friend, I think, slightly panicky—are interrupted by a door bursting open on a floor above, followed by a clattering of heels.

I round the corner at the landing at the same time as a pint-sized blonde woman appears above us. She's wearing heels that look like they could kill a man, but she smiles warmly.

"Nora!" The woman throws her arms around Nora like she's been away at sea.

"Hi, Sasha," Nora says, looking happy to see her.

Suddenly, my mood jumps up. This is a new friend of Nora's. Someone from this version of her life. I realize how desperately I need Nora to remember I'm not just the asshole who showed up all wounded on her doorstep. That I'm a fun guy. A person people like.

The woman's eyes dance down to me. I've been moving slowly, but now I'm caught up, halting a couple of steps below Nora's peachy butt.

I smile widely. "Hello."

The woman—Sasha—smiles curiously back at me. "Nora, I think we're in this man's way—"

"We're together," I say, cheerfully. "You a friend of Nora's?"

The woman's eyes widen. She's pretty, with freckles across her little nose, which has a small crook in it. She's kind of intense though. "Are *you* a friend of Nora's?"

"I hope so."

Nora's hand grips tight to the banister. "Sasha, meet Jude."

"Wait, *Jude-Jude*?"

So she knows about me. I grin, my mood finally shifting back to my normal stasis point. Nora talked about me with her friends. "That's me."

"Sasha Macklin!" The bubbly woman thrusts out her hand, then sees mine are occupied. "Oh my goodness!" She lowers her voice. "I am so pleased to meet you! Nora didn't tell me you were in town! And your little boy! I've heard so much about you both."

Nora's jaw is tight, her cheeks pink. She's embarrassed.

I love it.

"Well, I think I'm fine now, Jude," Nora says abruptly. "I'll call you tomorrow. Let you know if I can fit you into my schedule."

Game.

I bite my cheek, knowing this is a little callback to our fight. It's fine, I deserve it.

Part of me likes this new, more assertive version of her. But I miss the silly version of her too. Nowhere is that big dimply grin she used to give me—the one I never saw her give anyone else. So if I can't have that, I can at least play with her a little.

"I'd feel better if we saw you inside."

Nora purses her lips. I love that, too.

Sasha goes around my other side to look at Cap's face and presses her hand over her mouth. "He's so precious," she whispers when she comes back around. "God, you two must miss Nora, huh? She's incredible, isn't she?" She beams at Nora, who grows even pinker.

"She is," I agree, solemnly. And we do.

Nora's eyes meet mine and her mouth opens slightly. Something fizzes in my guts at that. *She can't see you, dumbass.*

"So," Sasha said, her eyes going between the two of us. Clearly, she's picked up on the tension. They land on me. "How long are you two here for?"

"Just a week."

"Nora, you didn't tell me!"

"Jude and Cap made a surprise visit," Nora says before I can answer. "They're just seeing me to the door because I lost my glasses at the library."

Sasha's blocking the door to the hallway.

"Oh my gosh, yes, of course," she pulls it open. "Let's go!"

I guess she's joining us now. I get a little too much amusement from knowing Nora's gritting her teeth. She doesn't like being around people when she's having feelings.

"Oh wow." Sasha loops her arm through Nora's, and this time when she looks at me, it's with unveiled appraisal.

"There you go," she says to Nora, pausing at the door at the end of the hall.

As Nora jams her hand in her pocket and pulls out her keys, Sasha looks back at me. "Are you two staying here?" she asks, bubbly as soda.

But before I can answer, the woman sucks up a breath. "Omigosh, you can come to my party this Saturday!" she squeals. "This is a fantastic development! Jude, I have a lot—and I mean a *lot*—of single girlfr—"

There's a loud clink as Nora drops her keys on the wooden floor.

"I've got them," I volunteer.

“It’s fine,” Nora says.

But I’ve already shifted Cap onto one arm and squatted down to pick them up.

“Girlfriends, huh?” I ask Sasha as I press the keys into Nora’s hand.

Nora plucks the keys from me, a little too quickly.

“Yes,” Sasha says with a coy smile. “Lots of them.

The keys crunch in Nora’s fingers.

Is she jealous? For a moment I’m too surprised to do anything. I silently add *seeing her all worked up* to my list of new Nora traits I deeply enjoy.

“I mean, it’ll be a bit late for Cap, but his mom did want to spend the night with him. So, yeah, I think that could work?” I return my gaze down to Nora. “Unless you have plans, Nor?”

Set.

Nora looks like she’s going to explode. “Nope,” she squeaks. “Not at all. In fact, Sasha was going to introduce me to her brother.”

Match.

Damn, didn’t see that one coming. My neck prickles with heat. “Oh yeah?” If he looks anything like his sister, he’s going to be some kind of handsome blond All-American type.

I can practically hear my sisters rolling their eyes from across the ocean. Fine, some people would say that’s me, too. Still, I don’t like it.

Sasha’s eyes are darting between the two of us. “I mean, I won’t if you two are like...a thing.”

“What?” Nora says sharply. “No! Please, introduce all your girlfriends to Jude. He could have a little fun while he’s here.”

All right. If she wants to play it like that, damn straight I’m coming to this party, and she can see how she likes it when I’m there standing between her and whatever red-blooded American or Brit who tries to come near her.

“Thank you so much for the invite, Sasha. I’m looking forward to it.” I lay on the Jude Kelly charm as thick as I can with a kid on my back. I give her the full sparkling smile, adding on a little wink for good measure.

Sasha giggles.

Nora rolls her eyes so hard I’m surprised her head doesn’t go along with them. “Sasha, do not humor him, please.”

I almost laugh. That’s why I was first drawn to Nora—why we went from being a librarian and a patron to acquaintances to best friends. She’s always been immune to my nonsense.

“Yeah,” I agree. “You really shouldn’t.”

Nora struggles with her keys once more and I shift Cap onto one arm again and reach forward, covering Nora’s hands with mine and guiding the key to the door.

We stand there a moment too long, heat dancing up my arm.

Then she pulls her hand away. “I’ve got it,” she says tightly. She turns the lock and pushes the door open.

Sasha’s eyes are on the two of us, one eyebrow up. She might be susceptible to my charm, but she’s sharp, too. “Guess you’ve got it from here. I can’t wait to see you guys!”

Nora nods. “Bye, Sasha.”

After a quick furrowed brow to me, she spins on her heel and heads back for the stairs.

“Thank you,” Nora says after her friend has disappeared. “For helping me up here. You okay to get Cap home? There’s a taxi stand right outside.”

Any hope of her inviting us in voluntarily flitters into the dim hallway light like dust. I could have pleaded exhaustion or used Cap as an excuse to crash here. But I’m not that pathetic.

“I can not go to this party if you want. But I was serious about Farrah wanting to spend the night with Cap, and I was hoping you might have wanted to hang out just the two of us anyway.”

Okay, I’m a little pathetic.

“If you weren’t doing anything,” I tack on quickly, then clear my throat. “Just to go over some of the research before I go.”

Nora stands in her doorway, looking defeated. “Let’s make a plan tomorrow, okay?”

I grin, feeling like the clouds have parted.

“No takebacksies,” I say. Then, because I can, I lean forward and peck Nora on the cheek.

Nora freezes. The last time we did that—tried to do that—I’d kissed her for real. The way friends weren’t supposed to do. The way *I* wasn’t supposed to do. I’d hated myself for that then. But now, I’m too happy about this turnaround to care. Our faces are inches apart; so close I feel her breath on my cheek.

“Dad?” Cap shifts on my back.

I quirk a smile, my eyes on Nora’s. “Bye, Nora.”

Before she can say anything more—or change her mind—I turn and head

down the hall. “Sorry, buddy. We’re going home.”

Then I carry my boy back downstairs, biting my cheek to keep from whistling a tune.

CHAPTER 7

Nora

I emerge from the tube station into a cold, pattering December rain. The high street is beautifully decorated for the upcoming holidays—each lamppost adorned with holly and cedar boughs, and most of the shop windows are cozily lit up and filled with sparkling ornaments and tinsel.

I jog across the street toward the coffee shop where I'm meeting Jude and Cap, holding my video camera against my hip, nerves dancing in my stomach.

I haven't seen them since that awkward trip to my apartment, and with my last exam done, I'm ready to finally relax and try to enjoy my time with them. It's only a few more days—I can stay strong for a few more days. Plus, Jude let me know we've only got a couple of hours before they're meeting up with Farrah today.

A couple of hours will be easy-peasy.

I can't deny that I'm still upset with Jude. After a whole year of dedicated avoidance, I was finally feeling mostly okay with my life without him. Then in classic Jude style, he just had to come barging back into my life like a force of nature. I still couldn't believe he'd just shown up in London. The least he could have done was tell me he was coming, full stop. Give me time to prepare.

To pretend I had a life outside school and the seniors center.

But he's not wrong about how I would have reacted—that is to say, not well, given how we left things.

I approach the cafe fifteen minutes early, just as I planned. I wanted to make sure I got a good seat near the back where we can talk a little more freely, and where I can mentally prepare to see them walk in. I smooth down my rain-frizzed hair outside the door. Maybe I should have listened to

Sasha's ridiculous advice.

"If you don't want to be friends with him anymore, what about showing him what he's missing?"

"What are you talking about?" She'd rescued me yesterday after my exam, when she'd heard Murray accosting me in the hallway to give me the all-important update about the laundry room opening changes over the holidays. She'd insisted on me telling her what my plans were with Jude while he was here.

"I mean, you should dress up!" she'd said when she saw my outfit. "Let your hair down, wear a little lipstick, walk with a sashay. Talk about the most-promising archival student award you won, and that the school has already offered you a post-doc position when you're not even done with your first year. Don't be the same girl who left home, Nora. Be the new, incredible Nora I know you are now."

But I'm not a new, incredible Nora. I'm the same Nora who likes the smell of old books and eats the same salad for lunch every day. Who wears wool tights and below-the-knee skirts and would probably get lipstick on my teeth if I tried to wear any. So I didn't do any of that. I'd told her no thank you, and put on my same old wool sweater, corduroy knee-length skirt, and flat boots for the rain. Sasha sighed as I guided her out of the apartment when it was time for me to go.

"Fine, but I'm dressing you up for the party!" were her last words as I darted down the stairs.

I'm hoping she'll forget.

When I push open the door to the sound of the little bell, I have to grip my camera strap to keep from gnawing on my fingernail. The Sip is a gorgeous, expansive space with brick walls, dainty white tables, and right now, a fresh holiday arrangement of holly boughs on every table. But apparently, I'm not first, because there, right in the middle of the cafe amongst the strains of Jazzy holiday music, soft murmur of conversation, and rich scent of espresso, sits the most adorable father-son pair in the world, a checkerboard between them.

Jude's wearing a light blue button-down that I know even from here makes his eyes pop. His blond bun is loose, a strand of hair falling across his cheek, and he's laughing as he reaches across the table.

He's almost painfully handsome. And Cap—the way he looks adoringly at his dad, on his knees in his chair, his hands clasped together. I'm thrown

back to when I used to meet the two of them like this all the time. I loved seeing them first, before they saw me. I loved watching their easy dynamic; how Jude is so easy with his son, and Cap so like a little man.

I love them, is the truth of it. The anger I came here with is diluted with this thought. My heart squeezes, my throat aching with the unshed tears I've been holding on to for a whole year. How did I ever think I could exorcise myself so completely from their lives?

Even so, I can't help the smile on my face as I see they're in the middle of a game of attack checkers. It's a game Cap made up last year when, after I taught him real checkers, he declared we needed to "jazz it up." Jude and I had both lost it at that, particularly because he'd added jazz hands.

The game involves moving around a board your opponent has set up like an obstacle course. You need to skip your pieces as fast as possible over the others while you undergo an attack. The way this plays out is Cap, who as I watch, bangs his white pieces all around the board, which is dotted with black pieces in no semblance of order. Jude, meanwhile, is tossing the other half of his black pieces like Frisbees into Cap's giggling face, adorned with Jude's sunglasses for eye protection.

The man next to them is staring at them with his mouth hanging open.

I can't help it—I pull out my camera and film them, trying hard not to laugh.

It's only when a large group comes banging through the door behind me—and Jude's run out of pieces—that they both look in my direction.

"Nora!" Jude calls, in a voice far louder than necessary.

Cap, meanwhile, has leapt from the table, upending the board and nearly the table too as he barrels toward me like a miniature football tackler.

"Aaah!" I cry, lowering my camera just in time for Cap to throw himself on me, his little arms squeezing tight around my waist.

"Nora! Can we get hot chocolates now? Dad said we should wait for you, but I really want this one this lady got with THIS MUCH whipped cream on top." Cap arcs his hands over his head.

I can't help laughing. "That sounds amazing."

Before I can even take a step in the direction of their table, Cap's tugging me toward the counter. Good, I can have a little breather before making awkward conversation with Jude. But just then Cap freezes, slapping his forehead dramatically. "Wait. I almost forgot." Then he's dragging me to the table, to where I land with a plop in the seat Jude's pulled out for me.

Suddenly, here I am, directly in Jude Kelly's orbit.

When he smiles at me, my whole body seems to flutter. I felt the same way I did back when he first walked into my library in Quince Valley. Like a gorgeous, larger-than-life celebrity had shone their light directly on me.

Like I might have a heart attack.

"Are you okay?" he asks, frowning.

I realize I've gone speechless. No, this isn't like the beginning of our relationship. This is worse. This is that, plus our years of friendship. The closeness we've forged over movie nights and popcorn fights and fretting over a feverish Cap together. This is me remembering how he sobbed when telling me about that year of his life when he lost his career, and later when Farrah told him he was going to be a father and disappeared. How he always asked me about my day at the library, even when it was mostly the same. How he drove me home from the eye doctor whenever I got drops in. How he walked me out of a movie when it triggered a traumatic memory, held me out there in the lobby in a sea of moving people while I cried into his chest, not demanding I calm down.

This is the beautiful, kind, hilarious man sitting in front of me, his brows slanted in worry.

"Nora, hey, what's wrong?" Jude reaches for my hand, which makes everything worse. It's warm and broad and feels like coming home.

Tears brim and spill before I can stop them. I pull my hand from his to reach up, awkwardly, under my glasses to wipe them away. "I'm sorry."

"What is it?"

Nothing. I'm just still hopelessly in love with you, Jude, and I don't think any amount of time or distance is ever going to change that.

"It's just emotional, seeing you two again."

When I lower my hands to the table, both Jude and Cap reach for me.

My freaking heart.

I look up to the ceiling, breathing deep. "I'm okay, guys!"

"Dad, maybe she's sad about...you know what," Cap says in a loud whisper.

I'm not sure if I was supposed to hear that, so I just take a breath and come back to myself.

But when I do, I see Cap's looking at Jude like he's in trouble. "Dad has something to say to you."

I raise my eyebrows.

When I meet his eyes, I bite my cheek so hard to be unaffected, I taste blood. Being the center of Jude's attention is intoxicating. I learned to live with it when we became friends. Now, it's painful. I try to conjure up my go-to image for when this used to happen: that time I took care of him when he had stomach flu—pale, sweaty, his hair lanky and greasy; everything smelling vaguely of puke.

It doesn't matter. He never stops being Jude.

"Right," Jude says, his voice low. "Thanks for meeting us."

Cap huffs, then gets out of his chair and walks around to Jude, cupping his hand over his ear to tell him something.

"I know! I was getting to that," Jude says.

Cap stands beside his dad, hands on his hips.

"I'm sorry, Nora, for yesterday," Jude says.

Cap whispers in his dad's ear again.

Jude clears his throat. "We made you bonk your head and lose your glasses. And even though the librarian smashed them, that was our fault too."

He checks with Cap, who gives him an encouraging nod.

"Also..." Jude meets my eye, and I can see that this part is from him. "I'm sorry for springing this trip on you. It's just—"

"We missed you so much, Nora!" Cap explains, looking impassioned.

"You're going to make the tears come back," I say, blinking fast. Too late. They roll down my cheek.

This time, Jude whispers something to Cap, and he nods, then heads for the counter on the other side of the restaurant with lids and stir sticks.

"Nora," Jude says quickly. "This week, we can make it all about Cap, okay? And you can just see us as much as you're okay with. We'll stay out of your way if that's what you want. I don't have to go to this party—"

"No," I say quickly, blubbing as I see Cap pulling approximately one hundred napkins out of the dispenser across the room. "I'd be happy if you came, Jude. You know how I feel about all that small talk. But only if Cap's okay with spending the night at his mom's."

"He's excited," Jude says, almost grimacing. He glances at his phone. "She is too, apparently. She keeps asking where we are."

"I thought you weren't meeting her until—"

"Four. Yeah."

"Oh, if you want to meet her early, we can keep this quick?"

Jude presses his hand on mine on the table. "You shut your cake hole

right now, Nora Albright.”

I’m distracted by the way his hand feels against mine. I pull my hand away, wiping the wetness from my face as best as I can as Cap stops to inspect a little lapdog on his way back to the table.

“Anyway…” Jude is clearly unperturbed. “I told her we were meeting you first, so she can just hold her horses. But I’ll remind her again.” He taps out a quick text, reading it out loud:

“Having blast with best friend right now. We still need to order our hot chocolates, so will walk down to meet you. Original plan still on. Leave us alone.”

“Jude!”

He grins. “I didn’t write that last bit.” He shoves his phone in his back pocket.

I shove him on the shoulder, making him laugh. Still, I can’t help the little wave of jealousy that goes through me thinking of the three of them flitting about London together. And then Switzerland, which I’m envious for other reasons, too. “You should know Sasha’s serious about trying to set me up with her brother.” I’m just fine about Jude. “When she gets her sights fixed on something—”

Something flashes over Jude’s face, but it’s gone in an instant, replaced by that megawatt smile. “So you mean I get to witness your nerdy dating rituals in person?”

I shove him in the shoulder. “Hey!”

But Cap’s back now, and I take a napkin from him, giving him a squeeze while I’m at it. I wipe at my face, which I know has to be a pink blotchy mess. But I don’t care. Jude’s seen me at my very worst, and I don’t hold a candle to the women in Jude’s league, if he actually dated.

Cap whispers something to his dad, and Jude nods. They’re planning something, I realize too late, as Jude bends down under the table and lifts up a gift bag, festooned with colorful tissue paper.

“We got you a present!” Cap says.

There’s a card stuck to the side with my name on it in Cap’s careful, childlike hand. “It’s from home, but also we got something this morning and I picked it out and it’s—”

“Dude,” Jude says. “No spoilers, right?”

“Oh yeah.”

“Guys,” I say, my throat tightening again. “You didn’t have to do this.”

“Of course we did,” Jude says. “You’re our Nora.”

“I didn’t get you anything.”

“It’s okay,” Cap says. “You didn’t know we were coming.”

I pinch my lips to hide my laughter.

The card, when I open it up, is a picture of the three of us—I only know the woman is me because the woman’s got her camera strap around her shoulder like me. The inscription says FOR NORA LOVE FROM CAP AND DAD.

It’s so cute it hurts. I pull out an oblong package hastily wrapped in newspaper before I start getting emotional.

“Sorry we didn’t bring any more wrapping paper,” Cap says.

“This is perfect.”

I unroll the newspaper and my mouth falls open. I clap a hand over it, afraid I might laugh. It’s the most ridiculous pair of glasses I’ve ever seen. They’re bright blue, a cat-eye shape, frames fully bedazzled with jewels of varying sizes and colors. There’s even a jeweled neck chain attached to the arms. “Oh!” My voice is muffled behind my hand. I hold them up, pressing my fingers tighter against my lips. They look like clown glasses.

“There’s a glasses store right next to our hotel!” Cap says excitedly.

“They were display glasses,” Jude clarifies. “Betsey something. Cap picked them out.”

“Betsey…” I inspect the inside arm. Betsey Johnson. “Jude, these are…” I was going to say expensive, but clearly Jude doesn’t care.

“…Awesome?” Jude finishes for me.

I can’t help but laugh. “Yeah. Exactly.”

“The lady said they could fix the glass part so you can see,” Cap says. “Your subscription, I think, right, Dad?”

“Close enough,” Jude says.

Cap looks eagerly at me. “Do you like them, Nora?”

I realized I’m still just staring at them, so I set the glasses I’m wearing down and pull this pair on. The prescription is all off—my eyesight is terrible, and these are not even close to strong enough—but I can take in enough to see Jude’s got a fist against his mouth and looking sideways, his face going pink.

“I don’t like them. I love them!”

“Wow!” Cap says. They’re so cool!”

“So cool,” Jude gasps.

“You think so?” I lift my chin.

When Jude manages a *mm-hmm* that’s so tight I can tell he’s pinching in a laugh, I look down my nose at him.

Of course the frames nearly fall off. I shove them right back up. It doesn’t matter that they don’t fit and are the most absurd things I’d ever seen.

“They’re perfect,” I tell Cap. “Just need a tiny adjustment to the prescription so I can see a little better.”

“Here.” Jude reaches up to grasp the glasses in his fingers. I catch the scent of his soap at his wrist and fight the urge to turn into it.

“Thanks.” I grope for my regular glasses and affix them back on my face.

“Okay!” Cap claps. “Open the rest!”

The rest of the present is an assortment of items from back home in Quince Valley. A metal bookmark bearing the logo of my favorite bookshop. A miniature painting of the Quince River Jude says his sister Chelsea made for me. A mug from Betsey’s Cafe, and—I gasp, pulling out a mangled pastry in a plastic sandwich bag. “Is this—?”

“Your favorite muffin from Betsey’s!” Cap says, beaming.

“Cap’s idea again,” Jude says.

“But you told me what her favorite was, Dad.”

The muffin looks far from edible, but Cap looks so pleased I pull a piece out and pop it in my mouth, moaning appreciatively before helping it down with a giant sip of water. I dab at my mouth with a napkin, swallowing the last of the dry pastry. “This is the nicest gift I’ve ever been given.” I press my hand against my camera. “Except maybe for this.”

“We got you that too!” Cap exclaims proudly.

I laugh. “I remember. I love all of it. Thank you, sweetheart.”

Cap throws his arms around me. I want to stay just like this.

“So can we get the hot chocolates now?” Cap asks, pulling away and bouncing up and down.

“Yeah,” Jude says, his face yet again holding an expression I can’t read as he looks at us. “I’ll get them.”

He abruptly stands up.

Then Cap’s on me, asking if I want to play a round of attack checkers with him.

The next thing I know we’re lobbing chips all over the table, both of us laughing our butts off.

Cap wasn’t kidding, the hot chocolates are monstrous, and for the next

while we load up on sugar while getting caught up on everything back home—and not at home. We talk about my friend and Jude’s future sister-in-law Reese Franco taking the world by storm with her singing career. About Chelsea and Seamus’s new baby—“Finally, I have a cousin!”—Cap says, his voice exasperated. “But she isn’t even old enough to do anything yet.” Jude informs me his oldest sister Cass and her fiancé Blake are finally getting married this spring, and how even though the renovations are done at the hotel, they’re going to get married at Blake’s brother’s place. “He’s a kazillionaire,” Cap reminds me.

They ask me about school, and what I’m taking videos of these days. I tell them about the work I’m doing at the senior’s center, but when I think about mentioning the documentary contest, I bite my tongue. I don’t even know if I’m going to enter that.

We’re nearly done with our hot chocolates when Jude glances at his watch, and I’m reminded how short our time is together. Not just today, but over the next few days.

My heart already hurts at the thought of them leaving.

But I’ve done it before. I can do it again.

“Where are you meeting?” I ask Jude as Cap slurps the last of his hot chocolate.

Jude blinks, but his eyes aren’t on me. They’re at the door, where a woman who can only be described as stunning is standing, looking right at us.

“Here, apparently,” Jude says stiffly.

CHAPTER 8

Nora

I cancelled my social media accounts when I moved away. I didn't do much with them anyway, and I knew I'd be too tempted to scroll through photos of Jude and Cap, feeling sorry for myself. Fresh start and all that.

Except because I did that, I had no idea what the woman now walking over to us looked like.

And it's not what I expected.

She's tall and skinny and gorgeous, of course, making me feel at first like a fleck of dust in the wind, especially since my face still feels puffy from crying.

But the way she's walking isn't the confident strut of a model. She's pulled into herself, her hands fidgeting in front of her as she comes over.

A group of people get up right in front of her and she has to pause, looking almost timid.

"She looks sad," Cap says.

He's right; there's a sort of somberness to her that looks permanent. She's pale, with brown hair so dark it's nearly black, cut into a short bob. Her big brown eyes look slightly shadowed. She looks kind of like a long and lanky Wednesday Addams.

Jude's jaw is working, his temple pulsing alongside it. But he stands as she approaches. I do too. Cap, meanwhile, rushes toward her.

"Cap!" Farrah says, brightening. She opens her arms.

But Cap comes up short. Then he looks back at me, chews his lip, and sticks out his hand. "Hi."

No matter how I might feel about this impromptu meeting, I cringe at that. Farrah lowers her arms, her smile dropping briefly before she clearly works to hoist it up again. "I'm so happy to see you, Cap. And so excited

about our trip.”

“Me too,” Cap says, pure and sweet and completely unaware of how that rebuff must have stung her. He throws a glance back to his dad.

God, this little boy is trying so hard to balance his parents’ feelings.

“Jude,” Farrah said, smiling warmly. She lifts her arms up—for another hug maybe? But Jude places his hands on Cap’s shoulders, bringing him in front of him. It looks very clearly to me like he’s using his son as a shield.

“I told you we were meeting down by the river,” Jude says, instead of returning her hello. “How did you know where we were, anyway?”

Suddenly, I feel terrible for this woman. She’s trying so hard. But her lip nearly wobbles as she takes in the two people who are probably the closest thing she’s ever had to a family, considering what I know about her parents.

“Oh,” she says. “I know this is the place with best hot chocolate near the Eye... I thought... I am sorry. I...I could not wait. I was excitement to see Cap. And I wanted to meet Nora.” She smiles hopefully at me. Her English isn’t perfect, but she’s trying there, too.

I never introduce myself first—I’m the furthest thing from an extrovert. But Jude’s hopeless right now, so I can’t wait for him to help out. I thrust out my hand across the table, proud of how steady it is. “It’s lovely to meet you.”

Farrah’s eyes are deep with relief as she grips my hand. What kind of life has this woman led?

“Cap and Jude tell me everything about you, Nora.”

When I look at Jude, his eyes are on mine, his jaw set hard. He’s being a jerk. It doesn’t look good on him. I tilt my head, throwing him a look that tells him so.

He looks down.

“Well, we’re finished anyway,” I say, my voice tight. “I should leave you three to—”

“No!” All three of them say it at the same time, shocking me to stillness.

“Oh...”

It’s Farrah who speaks. “Please, I interrupt your visit. Stay with us.”

This is so awkward, it’s like knots tightening in my stomach. But I sit down with them. “I...guess I can stay for a minute?”

Cap’s chewing his lip, and instinctively, I reach for his hand. He takes it, smiling gratefully.

Farrah sees, her big eyes blinking. “They are sad you have moved to here,” she says. “Yes.”

It's not a question, just a statement. "Oh," I say. "Yes, well, I couldn't pass up this program I'm doing. It's perfect for me, you know?"

"Books?" Farrah says.

I catch Jude's little snort at her summation of my life in one word. I throw him a glare.

His mouth flattens. Has this always been what he's like with her? I can picture it, suddenly. They met right after his knee injury. When according to him he'd fallen into a deep depression. Started drinking heavily, risking a dependency on his pain meds too, until he flushed them down the toilet and switched to ibuprofen, the one-track determination that got him into professional athletics being the thing that saved him too. But that was the only time, he told me, that he gave in to the brainless sex his teammates took part in. He said all of that time was a blur, until Farrah came back to him with that little plus sign on a stick.

"Books," I say to her in agreement. "What can I say? I love them."

Farrah smiles widely. "And the camera?"

I look down. I'm gripping my camera strap with my free hand like a life preserver. "That too," I manage. Oh how I wish I were behind the camera right now. Then I wouldn't have to talk.

Jude clears his throat. "Well, what should we do?"

"The Eye!" Cap says. He's talking about the giant pod-like Ferris wheel only a few blocks from here. "You promised, Dad!"

"Yes, good," Farrah says. "And I am thinking to talk about the train trip, the activity and hotel?"

"Yeah!" Cap says, enthused. "I was looking at a book about Switzerland. And did you know the train goes faster than the fastest car? Let's go, Farrah!" He takes her by the hand and suddenly we're all up on our feet, Cap and Farrah walking out ahead.

Jude and I follow, a few feet behind.

"I should let you guys go," I say again. "I don't need to be a third wheel here."

"Fourth wheel," Jude says with a smile that doesn't meet his eyes. "Please don't. Have you been on the London Eye?"

"No."

"Then it's perfect. Just stay for that. Then you're free."

Out on the sidewalk, the rain has stopped, though the clouds still hang low and dark. Cap and Farrah walk briskly ahead of us, chatting happily,

hand in hand.

“Why are you being such a dick to her?” I ask Jude the moment I’m sure they’re out of earshot.

His jaw tightens and he jams his fists in his pocket. “Why do you care?”

“Because that’s not you.”

“I just don’t like being around her.”

“Cap can see it.”

Jude takes a deep breath. “I don’t know how to stop it.”

“Maybe try to let go of the anger you’re holding on to? Isn’t that what the therapist you saw said? To remember the past is gone. The only time now is the present.”

“Yeah, well, I didn’t have to interact with her back then.”

I clutch my camera case against me as we walk, skirting sideways to avoid running into a rack of postcards outside a tourist shop. “She seems lovely.”

“She crashed our coffee date.”

“We were almost done.”

Jude scowls.

“I think you need to give her a chance.”

“I don’t—”

“Not romantically, Jude. I know you don’t do that with anyone.” Jude looks sharply at me. He told me that a couple of years ago when we first met. I thought he was making it clear he just wanted to be friends. But he was just telling the truth. “Well, it’s not like you need to say anything. Women hand you their phone numbers on the street and I’ve never once seen you do anything except throw those napkins out. I might have even thought you were gay if you didn’t have that big crush on Gillian Anderson.”

“The hottest woman alive.”

Jude’s crush on the *X-Files* actress was a constant source of amusement for me, given he was a baby when the show was on TV.

Up ahead, we’re already approaching the lineup to buy tickets. It’s long. Once again, I wish I’d had the guts to give them all a hard no. But they seemed like they needed a buffer, someone to tag along with them so they didn’t feel so alone.

Story of my life. I got dragged along to all kinds of social engagements my whole life because I had a rubber arm, and my friends always seemed to need a wing woman. Always a plus-one. Never just the one.

“You don’t date either,” Jude says now as we approach the line.

“I do too.”

Jude barks out a laugh. “Not since Blandface Breaddough.”

I gape. “Are you talking about Todd?”

“Yeah, or the one before him. What was his name?”

“You never even met Miguel. How do you know he was like Todd?”

Jude does an exaggerated head roll, landing on me. “Please.”

I hold back a laugh, even though it’s not funny, not really. I saw a therapist too, a while ago. She said I date predictable, boring men I don’t love because they’re safe. They won’t scare me; they won’t make me cry. They won’t rip my heart out.

They won’t look at me the way Jude is now, like he sees right inside of me.

“Fine,” I admit. “They had some similarities.” The truth was, they could have been the same man. They had the same outfits I was pretty sure they bought in bulk. They liked the same movies. They even used the same no-name soap. It was kind of uncanny.

“What you need is a real man, Annie.”

I twist my braid in my hand, my heart suddenly skipping. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me. Someone who knows what a privilege it would be to be with you.”

My stupid heart does a full-on high jump in my chest.

But Jude won’t look at me. He’s heading to the queue, where Cap and Farrah are deep in conversation. And I don’t know what else to do but follow.

As it turns out, the London Eye is pretty fun. More than that, I actually have a blast. The pods fit up to two dozen people, and we get paired up with a huge extended American family who of course are immediately star struck by Jude.

Once we settle down and autographs are signed, the dad asks if we’d mind if they sing some Christmas tunes during our ride. They’re wearing matching Christmas sweaters and are apparently heading up to Edinburgh for the holiday. So, right there at the very top, we all start singing along. Farrah, as it turns out, has opera training, but refuses to sing because she says it will be too loud for the pod. I have the camera turned on—my handy excuse for non-participation as always. But Jude and Cap have no problem belting it out with the family, and when it comes time for the modern classic “All I Want for Christmas Is You”—at the very top of the ride no less, with the whole of

London spread out like a backdrop—Cap takes on the solo. With his still high-pitched little boy’s voice, he sounds remarkably like Mariah Carey. Plus, he has all the moves down.

He has us cheering so hard, we’re hoarse. It’s only when the cheering dies down that Jude, standing next to me, leans in, saying, “Come with us.”

I snap my face up to his. “What?”

“To Switzerland.”

I look at Jude like he’s lost his mind. Because he has. “What are you talking about, Jude?”

“I’m talking about you coming with us on this trip. I’ll buy you a ticket, hotel room, everything. Look how much better this is when we’re together, Nora. Do you know how awkward things were this summer when she was in town? I could barely speak, and you know how bad that is when I can’t speak.”

I do know this. Too well.

“Cap acted like he was having fun. But he went to bed in tears every night because of me. And I couldn’t stop it. This? He’s going to remember this day forever and it’s all because of you.”

“It’s not because of me!” I whisper-yell.

Cap is fully preoccupied with the family, who’s getting him to hit notes as high as he can and then falling over cheering for him. “It’s you two—can’t you see that? You guys are the life of the party. I’m just back here taking videos.”

“No.” Jude takes my hand. “It’s your presence, Nora. You and me and Cap, it’s just like it was before. We’re a unit together.”

“Are you forgetting the other person in the room? I mean, pod?”

The wheel turns and we lower, quickly. It’s almost time for us to get off.

We both turn to see Farrah, standing only a few feet away from us. Her eyes are wet. She’s heard everything.

Shit. I yank my hand away from his. “Farrah, he doesn’t mean it—”

“No,” she says, her voice small. “He does. But he is right. You should come with us. Please. You can show me how to be with Cap.”

The words break my heart and ignite an angry flame in my chest at stupid Jude.

“You just need to get the opportunity to be with him like that—”

“She’s never going to be the same as you,” Jude says, loud enough that Cap turns from where he was looking out the window with the family.

His little eyebrows furrow. “Dad?”

My freaking heart cracks. I look to Jude, and God fucking help me it splits even wider. He looks so lost. But we can’t keep going like this. This whole conversation has made it abundantly clear how this is a regression, back to where we were, where it wasn’t working. Where Jude leaned on me and used me as a partner-replacer. Worse, it’s hurting all of them for me to be here.

The pod is one stop away from us disembarking, and I go over to Cap, kneeling down next to him. “I’m going to go, little man. I’ve got to give you guys some time to be together as a family, okay?”

“You’re our family,” he says.

My chest clenches. “I’ll see you again, Cap. It’s not forever.”

Cap swallows, his little throat bobbing. Then he leans in so the others can’t hear. “Dad’s like this around Farrah. I’m scared.”

The pain ripping through me almost has me saying forget it, I’ll come—if just to protect him. But I know that won’t help. “He’s going to be okay. I’m going to make sure of it,” I whisper. “I’m going to see your dad tomorrow, and we’re going to have a long talk, okay? And we’ll make things right. We’ll make it so you have the best trip you ever have in your whole life.”

I shouldn’t be making promises. But I want to promise Cap the moon.

“Will you wear your new glasses to the party?”

“Even better. I’ll wear them right now.” I reach into my bag and pull out the bedazzled glasses, replacing the ones on my face. “How’s that?”

Cap beams. “Perfect.” He looks over to Farrah, who’s staring out the window, chewing on her fingernails. She’s like a little kid, that’s what it is. It’s like she never got the chance to fully grow up. Jude sees it too, and it only reminds him of how fucked up he was when they had their fleeting moment. The one that made Cap.

The pod is landing at the bottom, the doors swishing open.

“We gotta go,” Jude says, his words low. I can see how sorry he is. How ashamed. I wrap my arms around Cap, squeezing him tight, my eyes on Jude.

“I love you, Nora,” Cap says.

I blink with surprise. Then my ruined heart breaks the rest of the way.

He’s going home. They’re both going to be going home, our time left together dwindled to hours. I open my eyes again and it’s only Jude, Cap, and me in the pod. Farrah’s outside with the family.

“Gotta get off, please,” the employee says. The pod is still moving,

gliding slowly along.

I meet Jude's eyes, still crushing Cap to my chest. "I love you too, sweet boy." My words come out choked. "See you later, okay?"

When we let go, he runs outside to Farrah. I give her a little wave, which she returns, her smile looking grateful. Then Cap's pulling her along to the stand with the trinkets and photos.

I stand up. "Don't you ever do that again," I tell Jude, my voice wobbling. "He needs to see you giving her a chance. Be the person we love, no matter how hard it is. You have to do it for him."

"Sir, Madam, I must insist," the employee says. "Passengers are waiting —"

I look up—there's a whole crowd of people waiting to get on, some of them calling at us. God, we're making a scene. Why is it always like this with him now? I mumble an apology as I go past.

Jude follows. "I know we don't live in the same city right now, but why can't we go back to how things used to be?"

I wait until we're past the crowd, Cap and Farrah in sight. Then I whirl on Jude. "Because it wasn't working, Jude."

"Yes, it was. It worked perfectly—"

"It wasn't working for *me*!" I say, my voice high and tight with emotion. Then I turn and walk away, not looking back.

CHAPTER 9

Jude

There are a group of women getting buzzed into Nora's apartment building just as I arrive. They turn to stare at me with that look that still makes me crack up. The *Is that...?* look, which is also sometimes *How do I know that guy?* look. I flip my still-damp-from-the-shower hair off my forehead just because I feel like playing it up today, and give them a prize-winning grin.

"Hello."

"Oh!" says the one closest to me. Then she bursts into giggles.

People think I don't notice the way women—and men who lean that way—act around me. I do. It's just weird for me to do anything about it. Besides, my years in the spotlight taught me they only want what they see. They don't know me. It was actually Nora who made me feel like there might be more than just the way I look or how I hit the ball on the court—although I did work hard as fuck at making sure I was the best at that. Her friendship was everything to me.

Is everything to me, which is why I'm here, trying to salvage it.

Still, I flirt when I need to.

"Please, after y'all," I say when we reach the stairs, swinging the bottle of wine I'm holding by the neck to the side to insist they pass. I've been playing up the American accent while I'm here too, just because it seems to get a bigger reaction. She giggles even harder.

Bingo.

The rest of them are now cracking up too. They're going so hard, for a moment I wonder if I've got shaving cream stuck to my chin or something. But they can't meet my eye. They keep batting their eyelashes and ducking their faces down. The quieter one near the front of their pack even has a dark

pink blush creeping up her cheeks.

She reminds me of someone. She's pale, but not so pale and freckly as a redhead.

That's the blush I suddenly really want to see.

Nora texted this morning, asking if I was still planning on going to the party. At first my heart had flown up like a fucking balloon. Maybe she was forgetting about being mad at me and my idiotic suggestion that had blown up in my face. We never fought before, and now it seemed like it was all we ever did.

But when I confirmed I was going, adding a little winky face, she'd just replied, "Good. Need to talk."

So that felt like shit too.

But she's not wrong. Cap and I are leaving for Switzerland tomorrow, and I can't go without figuring out what the hell is going on between us.

I'm so lost in thought as I make my way up the first flight of stairs on the way to Nora's flat, I'm startled when one of the women breaks out of their hushed conversation to blurt out, "So, I have to know. Are you—"

"Oh my God, Marissa!" her friend cuts her off.

People have all kinds of reactions when meeting celebrities—not that I really am one anymore, but I'm still recognizable thanks to a few billboards and a little modeling my agent had me doing last year. But the embarrassed one is the funniest to me. It scrapes at least a tiny bit off the top of my worry about Nora.

I broaden my smile. "Am I going to the party?" I supply, even though I know that's not what she was doing to ask.

"Yes!" says the one who shushed her friend. She's got smooth dark brown skin and long braids that swish around her as she climbs up the steps. She's attractive. They all are. But it's like something's broken in me. I don't *feel* any attraction to them.

"Yes, I believe we're headed to the same place," I say, somehow coming back to this conversation as we round the landing. The one with the big smile looks back—she seems nice—and I give her a wink, making her eyes go buggy and her skin flush hot.

Only playing with her doesn't make me feel anything at all. There's only one person I want to get a reaction from right now, and that person's probably going to ream me out when I get upstairs.

It wasn't working for me.

I picture Nora's eyes on mine, her lip trembling.

"Anyone ever tell you you look like the Witcher?" the one with the braids asks me as we reach the door. There's thudding music on the other side.

"Oh my God, yes!" they all agree.

"What's a Witcher?"

She bangs on the door. "It's a show."

"Should I be insulted?"

They're still laughing at that when the door to Sasha's flat opens, spilling raucous Christmas music out into the hallway. But it's not bubbly Sasha at the door. It's Nora.

Only, it's not the Nora I know.

This Nora's wearing this fuzzy dark green top with satin straps that pushes her chest up like her breasts are on a platter. Her camera's slung across her chest, the strap cutting into the plush flesh of her cleavage. Along with that, she's got on a leather miniskirt and black stockings so transparent I can see her red toenails through them. Her hair falls down her shoulders in soft waves I want to stick my hands into. Even her glasses—slightly different black-rimmed frames than she wore at home—somehow look sexy.

I never got the sexy librarian look until right this moment.

My dick just got it too.

"Hey, Nora," I say. "I...uh...that shirt. Christmas."

This is ridiculous. I've been backstage at fashion shows, on film sets; hell, once I had a heart-to-heart with this actress Eli used to have a poster of on his wall. Nobody makes Jude Kelly tongue-tied.

Yet here the fuck I am, this close to blurting out *Boobs. Pretty.*

Nora backs up against the door to let everyone in. "Sasha's in the living room," she tells them with a smile that makes my stomach flip.

I run my hand through my damp hair. I'm feeling all kinds of weird. The fuck is going on with me? This is the woman who assured me that bump on the back of my neck last summer was a pimple and not a tick bite. The woman who literally held my hair back during a truly disgusting stomach flu. The woman I've fallen asleep next to countless times on the couch, feeling as comfortable to be around as my favorite jeans. And now all I can picture is turning her around, pushing up that little skirt. I wonder if she'd like a little smack there? Some women do. That little tinge of pain mixed with pleasure...

"Jude, are you okay?"

No. I'm not. I'm picturing you naked and I can feel my crotch inflating. I need a drink.

"You look good," I finish with, as the other women file in.

Nora eyes them as they giggle and wave at me and I smile back.

"You've made friends," she says.

"When have I not?"

She gives me a half smile. "Cap's at Farrah's?"

I grit my teeth at the mention of Farrah's name. But nod. "He's pumped. You know he loves a sleepover." I wave my phone. "But I'm ready in case he wants to make an escape."

Nora nods. "Good."

"Good I might take off at any moment?" I regret the words the minute they're out. I'm being uncharitable. But being around Nora has put me in a mood again, like I have ever since I got here.

"Good you gave her a chance." Then she lifts her chin as if this part of the conversation is over. "You'll want to say hi to Sasha?"

Before I can say anything else, she turns to head down the hall. A wave of anger rushes through me. I hate being like this with her. I hate that I don't know what she's thinking. But she's already rounded the corner, and the group of women are calling me from down the hall.

The living room is packed with people perched on all seating surfaces, and several more standing around in little clusters. They all look smart. A bunch of them wear turtlenecks and blazers. I feel dopey in my dark green button-down and jeans, even though Cap assured me I looked great. Maybe I should have worn better socks. I'm wearing Santa socks. Cap insisted. Maybe I need to stop taking fashion advice from my seven-year-old. Though he's usually on point.

Sasha breaks free from one of them when she sees me, coming over and throwing her arms around me like we're old friends. "Jude!" Her hair's done in ringlets like Shirley Temple, but she's wearing a little black dress and spike heels. "I'm so glad you came. And you met my friends!" Her eyebrows waggle. The women I met are the girlfriends she was talking about. Despite her wanting to set me up, I'm glad for her exuberance. At least someone seems genuinely happy to see me.

"Oh my gosh!" she exclaims when she sees my socks. "Those are adorable!!"

Hah.

I hand her the wine. “Thanks for having me.” My eyes scan the room looking for Nora, but I’ve lost her.

“Jude, help yourself to a drink, or some snacks...” Sasha says. “But first, let me introduce you.”

Normally, I wouldn’t care about that; I’d even give a little royalty wave. But right now, I don’t know if I can put on my normal fun-loving persona. Sasha grasps the bottle of wine, holding it like a microphone. She even taps it. “This thing on?”

“Everyone, we have another celebrity in our midst.”

Another? I follow Sasha’s gaze to where a dude in a tweed jacket and beard is smiling and waving a hand.

“Meet tennis star, Jude Kelly!”

The women I was with gasp.

“Former tennis player,” I correct. But I still can’t help smiling at their reaction. That is until I glance to the adjoining kitchen and see Nora standing next to not one, but two youngish professor-type dudes. One leans in to say something to her and she smiles.

I feel a pressure at my temples. Who the fuck are those guys? And what did they just say to her?

But now I’m swarmed by a handful of people, all of them shaking my hand and telling me they watched my games, and do I still play? Do I offer private lessons? How’s my knee?

Normally, I’d be on the top of my game here. I feed off attention. I can fly with any conversation. But now everyone’s talking about books and libraries and politicians and countries I’ve never heard of. And they’re blocking my view of the kitchen. All the words blur around me, and I feel myself nodding and smiling blandly, only half trying to look like I’m paying attention. All I can do is stare at Nora and those two fucking guys.

“Jude, what do you think about Guy Plimpton’s motivations in the Span-Tek corruption scandal?”

“What?” The question is loud enough that it cuts through my distraction. I turn to see a woman with frizzy dark hair and black-framed glasses looking at me pointedly. She’s serious.

The man behind her smirks. “You’ve obviously heard the chatter?” he asks. “Their shareholders are up in arms. Wouldn’t you be?”

Heat floods my cheeks.

He thinks I’m a dumb jock, and hell, he’s not far off.

“Sorry, I don’t do much chattering,” I toss back, which at least makes the woman giggle.

I feel a tug on my arm. “Jude, wanna dance?” It’s one of the women from the hallway, shooting a look at the couple who were talking to me. “Jingle Bell Rock” is playing, and the middle of the living room has turned into an impromptu dance floor. I’m a good dancer. I like dancing. I couldn’t give a shit about it right now, but I appreciate her rescuing me.

I smile. “Of course.”

But as I move onto the dance floor, I find I can’t move my limbs. My eyes go back to Nora, as if drawn by a magnet. She looks away quickly, like she was looking over here. Then she laughs. One of the men leans back on the counter, arms folded easily now, the other telling a story. It’s probably about fucking Socrates or something. Is one of them Sasha’s brother?

The man telling the story lowers a hand on her shoulder. His hand. Her bare skin.

And suddenly, I see red. I don’t care who he is.

“Sorry,” I mumble to the woman, who looks disappointed but doesn’t stop me as I move toward the kitchen at a clip. I have to cut through a dozen clusters of people to get there and ignore my name more than once. That is, until Sasha steps directly in my path.

“Hey!” She’s all bubbly smiles.

I force myself to smile back. She’s not the issue here; I am.

“You look like you need this.” She hands me a glass of amber liquid. “Don’t worry, I haven’t touched it. It’s whiskey.”

I hesitate a moment, my eyes going back to Nora, who’s now folded her arms as she talks to the men.

“Yeah, that’s why I poured it for you.”

I look back at Sasha. She’s holding it out with a look that says she’s waiting for me to catch up. She reminds me a little of my sister Chelsea with that look.

“Thanks,” I mumble. I do need a drink. I toss it back, my throat burning. Immediately, I’m filled with warmth, my body seeming to relax just a hair.

Sasha props a hand on her hip. “You know, I’ve been watching you.”

“What?” For a moment concern washes over me. Is she hitting on me? She’s flirty, sure, but I pegged her for the kind of woman who’s like that with everyone without really meaning it romantically. I should know.

“Staring at Nora,” she clarifies.

Right. Definitely not hitting on me.

“I’m not staring.” I try to get the last couple of drops out of my glass, my eyes darting back to Nora.

“You’re literally staring at her right now.”

A flame of irritation heats my cheeks.

“Listen, it’s fine. I just wanted to check in with you. You know, to see where you guys stand.”

I open my mouth to speak, but she holds up a finger. “And don’t give me any of that ‘we’re just friends’ malarkey.”

“Malarkey?”

“You heard me. I have friends. Lots of them. And none of them look at me the way you look at her.”

That heat burns now. She’s reading into things that aren’t there.

Isn’t she?

I shake the empty glass at my throat again.

“Here.” She holds up a bottle I hadn’t noticed she’d been holding, and refills my glass. “Now listen,” she says, before I can find the words to argue. “I don’t want to speak out of turn, but I feel like if you wanted to take things in a different direction, you could just ask her.”

I take a sip of whiskey. “What do you mean, a different direction?”

She folds her arms, the bottle sticking out the bottom. “Do you need me to spell it out for you?”

“Maybe.” I think I know what she’s getting at, but what if she’s trying to tell me to leave her alone?

Sasha sighs heavily. “Men. I swear. Listen, what I’m saying is I don’t think she’d hate it if you, you know, kissed her.”

My stomach jumps. I take another sip of whiskey to hide my face. Nora wouldn’t want that. Would she? I hate how excited the thought makes me. How it immediately brings back the feel of her lips on mine that time back home before she left. But I remember how upset Nora was with me. *Is* with me. “She’d probably hit me,” I say bitterly.

Sasha snorts with laughter. It’s a surprising sound coming out of her. “I’ve never seen Nora act with violence once. Have you?” Before I can answer she says, “My girl had ants in her apartment this summer. They were getting in the window and onto the counter. You know what she did? She didn’t get an ant trap or poison or whatever you’re supposed to do for those things. No, she made a honey-trail.”

“A what?”

“She dribbled honey in a little line outside the window and onto the bricks. She had to climb up on the counter and use a little stick to get it the right thickness and far enough away that”—she must see my confused face because she waves a manicured hand. “It doesn’t matter. Point is, she’s the sweetest thing since...well, honey, and she likes you, and no she wouldn’t hit you if you kissed her Jude. She’d probably enjoy it very much. Of course, you can’t tell her I said any of this, okay?”

“Yeah, sure,” I say.

“I mean it!” She plants her hands on her hips again, cocking her head.

For some reason I think of Griff, and how she’s exactly the kind of woman that would spur a reaction out of him. Not a good one, either. Nothing ruffles that guy, but I think Sasha would.

I shake my head. “No. of course.”

Sasha follows my gaze back to Nora. From the corner of my eye I see her smile. “Just think about it, Jude.”

My skin itches seeing those guys still there. I swallow the rest of the whiskey. “Yeah. You too.”

She snorts again.

I think of one of those guys trying what she just said on Nora. Testing out a kiss.

The thought makes my whole body burn. “I’ll just...uh...take this to the kitchen.”

But Sasha’s already gone.

CHAPTER 10

Jude

Nora's words from the other day echo in my mind as I move toward the kitchen.

It's not working for me.

Is Sasha right? Would Nora be happy if I kissed her? Or was she dancing around something else? Something I'm too dense to understand?

When I reach the entrance to the kitchen, I suddenly don't know why I came this way. I want to turn heel and get the fuck out. This is too much. I can't do feelings. Not these kind.

But it's too late. Nora and the two men have turned around and are all staring at me with wary expressions.

For some reason I think back to my last conversation with my agent, when I finally pitched him my idea. "Just stick to what you're good at, Jude. I've got you set for life, and this will just ruin a good thing."

"Jude," Nora says, her voice clipped.

"Ah the famous Jude Kelly," one of the men says. He's got a little mustache I'd like to knock off his face. "We've heard a lot about you."

"I'm sure it's all good. Nora, can we talk?"

"Jude, these are—"

"I don't really care who these are, Nora. I need to talk to you."

Her eyeballs go wide. "Jude!"

"You okay, Nora?" the man who touched her says.

He looks nervous. Still, I have to admire his chops, that he's looking out for her. When I look down at him, I think I finally understand my brother Eli. He broke his now-fiancée's ex's nose once. But Nora would never speak to me again. Plus, I'm a lover, not a fighter. A lover who doesn't know how to love.

Shit, how many of those whiskeys have I had?

“I’m fine,” Nora says. “But maybe we could have a minute please?” She looks apologetically between the men. They both nod and scurry out like the room’s on fire.

“Nora, I—”

“No, Jude.” Her voice is still that signature soft caress that makes me feel like I’m home. But I know better than to think she’s okay. She’s like she was in the library, only this time I feel the heat of her gaze on me. “You listen to me. You can’t come barging in here like a fucking caveman.”

And God help me, as I’m staring at her, my eyes drop south. I can’t help it. It’s the whiskey and her sex-on-a-stick outfit. I drag my idiot gaze over the curve of her breasts, the dip of her waist, the slight roundness of her hips.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” she asks, her voice wobbling.

She told me she got called bony and flat when she was a teenager. That’s bullshit. But I already knew that, from the odd stolen glance back home.

I bring my eyes back up to hers.

“Maybe I am a caveman,” I bark out. I look out into the living room. “I feel like one in here. Who were those assholes?”

“Friends, Jude. Students, like me.”

I suck my teeth and turn around, looking for a drink. “They look a little old to be students.”

“They’re PhD students. You can do it anytime. I’m older than half my class.”

“Met a few of them out there,” I say bitterly.

“Were you Nice Jude? Or this Jude?”

Heat curls in my chest. Embarrassment, maybe. I hold a bottle up to the light. Peppermint liqueur. I don’t want to puke, so I reach for the open bottle of wine behind that, pouring it into my crystal glass.

I ignore her question and hold up the glass. “Classy, right?”

“Stupid.”

“Exactly.” I take a swig of wine, then lean both hands on the counter, the wine still between my forefinger and thumb.

Nora sighs. “Jude, would you stop?”

“Stop what?”

“I was hoping we could talk like adults.”

I turn on her. “Sure, Nora. That’s what we are, right? Two adults; a man and a woman, who somehow managed to have a friendship that was fucking

everything. Then, the woman left, and it's fallen into fucking pieces. Now, that guy out there—"

Anger heats her cheeks.

"Sorry, I forgot, it wasn't working before, apparently."

She doesn't say anything. But maybe that's because I've stepped so close I'm in her personal space. I should back up. But goddammit, I can smell her. It's a scent so familiar it makes my breath catch. I can't help it; I dip my face. "You know, I still smell it at home sometimes?"

"What?" she whispers.

"Your shampoo. Just the ghost of it on a breeze."

"Jude," Nora says, softly laying her hands on my chest. She gently pushes me away and I feel something inside of me crack.

Sasha has it all wrong. We're friends, that's all. If we weren't, she'd be pulling me to her. The way I suddenly want her to.

"I'm sorry," I whisper. "I think I'm a little drunk."

Way to fucking go, Kelly! my old coach's voice rattles in my ear.

When I back away, Nora takes my hand in hers. But she won't quite meet my eye.

"You know what Cap said to me that day outside the hotel when I told you I was leaving?"

It feels so good to have her touch me, I have to work hard to focus on her words. But she's talking about Cap. My son. The only other person in the world I care about besides the woman in front of me.

"What did he say?"

She swallows, the length of her pale throat bobbing. I can't look away.

"He told me he still wanted a mom."

I freeze, my chest seizing. "What?" I'd thought he'd moved past this.

"He told me he couldn't tell you because you'd get upset with him."

My already tight heart feels like a knife has gone through it. My own son couldn't tell me what was still burning in his little heart.

The world seems to close in on me. I pull my hand from hers. Then I drink my wine too fast. I'm going to be shit-faced at this rate. But it's the only thing keeping me from spinning out of control.

"He tells me everything."

What was it that therapist told me years ago when I was a dad and Farrah left?

Disbelief is the first stage of acceptance.

I grip my fingers tight around the glass.

“He didn’t tell you that,” Nora says softly. “He was worried about you.”

“He was six when he told you that!” Almost seven. But still, so young. And protecting my feelings.

“He’s smart.”

I scoff, draining the wine. *At least one of us is.*

Nora takes the glass away from me. “Jude, do you get it now? I couldn’t stay. How could I, when I was the one thing standing in the way of Cap having a mom?”

“Cap has a mom!” I say, the words coming out harder than I meant them to.

“Who you can’t stand to be around.”

“I’m trying! We’re going on this trip, aren’t we?”

Nora nods. “Yes. But that’s not what I’m talking about, and you know it. I know you have so much love to give, and I know you could be happy with someone if you just gave it a try. You just have to show them the real you.”

I grip my hand into a fist and lean my head down. “What, the good-time guy who sometimes gets real dark? Nobody wants that.”

A long beat stretches out where all I can hear is thumping music and people shrieking with laughter out in the living room. There are people out in the hallway just outside the door, too.

Her eyes are so big behind those glasses, her green irises as dark as her velvet top. She blinks. “Someone might, Jude.”

My eyes go to the pulse at her throat, the delicate line of her collarbone.

“Like who, Nora?” I can’t help asking. Curiosity, that’s all.

Her cheeks flush.

My cock stiffens. I flirt, sure. But not with Nora. And I never take it this far. Nora deserves the world. Not a mess like me.

“Anyone, Jude.” Nora looks down, swinging her camera from her hip around to her front.

But that dark part of me can’t let it go. I could probably cross the line with her. I bet there’s a 50/50 chance she’d say yes.

I reach up and cup her jaw, running a thumb along her cheekbone.

Nora sucks in a breath.

Okay, 70/30. In my favor. We could go to bed together; I could touch her like this and more. The way I suddenly want to right now. Our friendship is pretty much ruined anyway, so no risk there.

I draw my thumb lower, brushing it across the plump softness of her upper lip.

Then the voices outside amplify and a couple comes in, laughing, looking for booze.

I drop my hand.

“Sorry, we disturbing you?” the woman asks.

The man lets out a whistle. “Of course we were, sweetheart!” His eyes are dopey and drunk. “You could cut the tension in here with a butter knife!”

She shrieks like this is the funniest thing in the world. “A butter knife!”

I swing to the side to give them room, leaning my back against the counter next to Nora.

Jesus. What was I thinking? I haven’t touched a woman like that in years. I promised myself I wouldn’t. Women make me lose focus. Bad things happen when I lose focus.

“Sorry,” I say under my breath as they laugh and bash around in the cupboard. “I shouldn’t have done that.”

“No,” Nora whispers. “You shouldn’t have.”

“I shouldn’t have kissed you, either.” I slide my hand over so it’s next to hers on the counter behind us and cross my pinkie over hers. She blinks, her chest rising and falling hard with each breath.

“You didn’t.”

I look over at her. “The other time.”

Nora’s eyes meet mine. They’re wide. Beautiful. Questioning.

“There!” the woman cries. They’ve finally found something to use for wineglasses. Someone else comes in behind them, opening the fridge and digging around in the beer bottles.

I lean in. “I just wanted you to stay.”

I wait for her to say something, to get mad again maybe. But all she does is swallow. Then she says, “I need a drink.”

CHAPTER 11

Nora

I wake up to the sound of a chainsaw. A repetitive chainsaw starting and stopping. But somehow, I feel good. Cozy.

Except for the press of something behind my eyes. A headache maybe. Stupid chainsaw.

My mind tries to focus. There are no chainsaws in London, are there? I blink my eyes open.

The chainsaw rips again. Only, it's not a chainsaw. There's someone sprawled on his back in my bed, his chest lifting with a giant inhale.

Adrenaline explodes through me and I scramble backward. Only when I reach my hand behind me I hit only air. Then I gasp, because I'm falling backward.

I land with an ungraceful, painful thud of limbs on the wood floor of a bedroom.

My bedroom, I register.

Thankfully, my mattress and box spring are on a platform on the floor, so it's not far to fall. It still hurts like a bitch though. I groan, pityingly as I pat around over my head for my glasses. I barely manage to pull them on when Jude's face appears over the side of the bed. "Shit, Nora. You okay?" His voice is gravelly and he's squinting. I don't think he's really awake.

Outside the sounds of the city are in full swing, though the morning light is dim. It has to be early still.

"Not really," I croak. "I thought..." I thought I'd sleepwalked and ended up in someone else's apartment. It had been years, but I had that same panicky feeling after waking up.

But was this any better? Jude was in my bed.

Jude.

I don't remember how he got there. "How much did I drink last night?" I'm a known lightweight.

But before I know what's happening, Jude's long arm is reaching down, and he scoops me up and onto the bed.

My heart's pounding in my chest as I look up. Jude's eyes are closed, but he's got a dopey smile on his face. He's still drunk, it's the only explanation.

"A lot," he murmurs, answering my question.

A moment later, his mouth falls open slightly and the snoring starts up again.

My whole body zings, both from the shock of him being here, and...well, that's it. Him being here. I'm lying almost toe-to-toe with him, if my toes reached further down than his shins. I can feel the heat coming off of him.

I need to extract myself from this situation, but for a moment I don't move.

The part of me that's screwing everything up with him tells me to savor it, because this is probably the one and only time Jude Kelly will be in my bed.

I relax slightly, trying to remember how this transpired.

Think.

After a moment, it comes to me. Vaguely, I remember stumbling down the hall with him to my flat, insisting he stay over instead of trying to get a car back to his hotel. That's crazy, because that means I knew we were going to have to sleep in the same bed. I only have a tiny love seat for a couch in this flat, and it's way too small even for me to comfortably sleep on.

"I'll take the floor," Jude had said. It's coming back to me now. I smile as I remember him stripping off his clothes, not seductively, but nearly tripping on his pants. He immediately laid on the hardwood floor in the living room. But not before plucking a tissue from the box on the coffee table and laying it over his chest like a tiny blanket.

I'd nearly cried laughing, but eventually managed to urge him up and to the bed. By the time I got back from getting my PJs on in the bathroom, he was sawing logs.

I'd been disappointed, I remember now. I'd lain here on the sliver of bed next to him recalling standing in Sasha's kitchen earlier.

His hand on my face, his blue eyes like molten metal on mine.

I touch my face now. Last night I thought I would orgasm from him looking at me like that. Touching me, barely. After the years of pretending I

was fine just being friends with him.

Nothing happened between us. I know not just because we're fully clothed, but because I know he'd never try anything with me, period. Especially not while we were both drunk.

I don't think. But what if I did something in my sleep? What if I...said something?

"Jude," I whisper.

He stops snoring and grunts.

Jude moves then, but instead of opening his eyes, he hooks a hand over my waist and pulls me against him. He slides his hand under my head so my cheek is resting on his arm, his other one settling heavily over my hips. "Okay, Nor?" he murmurs, not opening his eyes.

My heart thuds in my chest, heat zinging down to my lower half. I'm weak with Jude. Pathetic. But I don't think I said anything. He'd be acting differently, wouldn't he? Maybe it's the alcohol. Maybe that knocks me out too hard to sleep-talk. I wouldn't know, I rarely get drunk like I did last night. "Okay," I whisper.

Jude makes a low growling sound that tickles something deep inside of me. Then his breathing gets immediately deep again.

Damn this man. And damn my body for responding to him.

My breasts are pressed up against his forearm wedged between us, and I feel my nipples stiffening. I swear I can even feel the brush of the blond hair there through the thin fabric of my pajama top.

Move, Nora.

But I can't. All I can do is stare.

He looks like a Viking with his blond hair ruffled, loose across his cheek. His arm is heavy; thick with long, lean muscle, just like the rest of him. It's not the one that won all those championships. That one is curled up between us, his long, tapered fingers only an inch from my jaw. He's beautiful, even on that brink of drunk and hungover, and even with his mouth hanging open snoring like an outboard motor.

The whole of his torso is only inches from me, broad and tight, skin smooth, though his body is slack now in sleep. I inhale his scent. His fresh and athletic smelling soap—he took a shower last night before coming over. I know he did because his hair was still wet, and he looked like a god.

Not that he doesn't always look like that.

My stomach flips at the same time as my chest aches. I really do need to

get out of this bed. I can't think like this. It feels too good. I move slightly, but his arm is pinning me down. I lift my hand up like I'm going to touch him, to draw my fingers along the flat front of his chest, down his stomach.

I won't; I know that's not right. I press my hand on the sheet between us, but that only draws my eyes down to where brown hair fuzzes a line below his belly button, disappearing into the waistband of his boxer shorts. Only a thin layer of cotton is separating us right now.

Heat surges between my legs.

Oh God, Nora, you pervert!

A sharp buzzing startles me back to my senses. I wince. That pulsing in my head is now the beginnings of a monstrous headache. My phone is facedown on my glass-top side table. Jude stirs at the second buzz, rolling slightly onto his back, twisting the sheet over his legs as he does. My eyes drop back down to his shorts.

How can they not, with that tall tent right at their center.

My mouth goes dry. Oh my God. He's got a—

My phone buzzes for the third time, and I slide out of Jude's arms as quickly as I can without disturbing him. He could wake up, and I wouldn't be able to keep from staring at his hard-on. Then what?

I climb out of bed, swiping my phone up from the bedside table.

When I look at the screen, I realize I don't recognize the number.

UNKNOWN: Don't forget! Train travel today to Zurich,
Switzerland - Two Hearts Booking

I'm so confused, I stand there a minute, trying to register what I'm reading. Two Hearts Booking—that's Sasha's sister's travel agency in Connecticut. How would she have my number instead of Sasha's? And why is...

My stomach drops as a hazy memory comes back from last night: Jude, Sasha, and I out on the little balcony off her living room.

Jude sputters. I nearly drop my phone, catching it with a swing of my arm.

I run from the room, barely remembering to switch the deadbolt as I leave my apartment so I don't get locked out. I'm sprinting down the hall in my bare feet. Murray is readjusting the potted plant at the far end of the hallway, of fucking course. His jaw practically falls open and I remember I'm in only a T-shirt. Braless, of course, though thank God I'm wearing underwear.

I land at Sasha's door, banging on it hard.

"Ms. Albright? Everything okay?"

"Not now, Murray!" I say. Then I bang on the door again.

"If you're locked out—"

"I said not now!" I yell, startling him to standing. He's never seen me like this. Good.

The door swings open, an alarmed and thoroughly hungover Sasha standing there, confused. "Why are you yelling at Murray at"—she checks her watch—"seven thirty in the fucking morning!"

"You say that like it's the crack of dawn!"

"It is the crack of dawn, on holidays!"

"Sasha," I say, holding my phone out to her. "Why do I have a train booked today for Switzerland?"

Sasha frowns, reading my phone with a squint. Then, to my shock, she grins. "Don't you remember?"

"What, your sister getting my number by accident?"

"Last night, dummy. Laila booked you and Jude train tickets."

My stomach lurches. "No."

"She did!"

"You said you'd go with him on his trip. Laila did some weird back-end magic to move his existing ticket so he could travel alone with you, give Cap and his mom some alone time. Jude was so happy he picked you up, Nora. Swung you around the room like you'd said yes to his marriage propos—"

"Sasha, that's insane."

"Yeah, it is. But I was so proud of you."

I lower my phone, trying to scrape the dull fuzz in my brain to remember what had happened. I did remember some of it. Barely.

But it's coming back to me. Jude, spinning me around the room. Everyone laughing. Me, sliding down his body after all that weirdness in the kitchen, actually excited about this trip.

"How—" I begin.

"You guys were talking about how you'd have to say goodbye today. Something about picking Jude's son up and having only a few minutes to hang out before you don't see them again for—"

"Six months," I whisper. I remember. Jude told me how the timing of where Farrah's place was meant there wouldn't be much time to hang out before they caught their train. I didn't want it to end. I didn't want the night

with Jude to end and I didn't want to have only a few minutes left to see Cap before who knows when. "The summer!" I'd said, nearly in tears. I knew it was the two glasses of wine that were making me weepy, but Jude had said something like "it doesn't have to be like that," and Sasha had been there, ears perked. Then somehow, she had her sister on the phone.

"Laila said her booking agent was going to kill her when she got home for waking her up at five Connecticut time to book everything," Sasha says, sighing as she leans against the doorframe, practically swooning. "But we told them how romantic it was and—"

"Romantic!"

"Ladies," Murray says, appearing like some kind of ghost next to us.

"Jesus, Murray! Don't do that!" Sasha exclaims, standing up.

"I really must ask you to keep it down; this is the holidays—"

"And I really must ask you to quit eavesdropping!" I say, walking up to him so fast he stumbles backward.

Murray sputters, then turns on his heel and heads for the stairs in a huff.

Sasha's hand is covering her mouth when I turn back to her. "I've never seen you like this, Nora!"

And I've never been so frazzled, thanks to Jude. "So you're serious?" I ask, my hands shaking. "You got your sister to book train tickets to Switzerland for us?"

"You were excited last night! You kept talking about this video you were going to do—something about romance..."

My memory ticks forward. My thesis project. I had been planning on using my videos I was taking of the seniors and their stories. But last night I'd had a lightbulb moment about making it on Eleanor instead. I didn't have quite the unbridled enthusiasm of last night, but it lit me up, I had to admit. Still, going on a trip with Jude would just protract this weirdness between us.

I shake my head. "We have to cancel the tickets."

"What? No way! Besides, it's too late."

"I'm sure Laila can figure it out, right? Jude can just take his original ticket and—"

"Nora?"

The sleepy male voice comes from down the hall. Both Sasha and I turn.

"Holy shit," Sasha says under her breath.

Jude is standing in the hallway in his shorts, a confused expression on his face. The whole view of him from thirty feet away is just as delicious as up in

his arms. Almost. His long, lean form is strong and sleek and...pretty much almost naked.

“He has no idea how incredible he looks, does he?” Sasha whispers.

My eyes drop to his crotch, but his...situation has abated. Except now he’s lifting his arms, tying his hair up as he stands there. It’s a particularly Adonis-like pose, his arms up and on display, his rigid chest and stomach flexed.

He still plays tennis all day long at the resort, getting in there with his staff and guests, playing a lower-key version of those moves that brought home all those trophies.

His quads, I notice inanely, are paler than the rest of his legs. I have the strangest urge to draw my tongue up that particular stretch of skin...

“No,” I say weakly, unable to deny it. “He doesn’t.”

“Everything okay?” Jude asks, his hair loosely in place.

“Even his bedhead is sexy,” Sasha whispers.

Jude takes a step toward us.

“No!” I say quickly, holding a hand up. “I mean yes, just...uh, I’ll be right back. Give us a minute?”

Jude furrows his brow but nods. “Okay. Hey, Sasha.” He gives a polite smile, but it makes his damn dimples pop, and Sasha sighs. “Hi, Jude.”

When he disappears inside my door, Sasha grabs me by the collar, suddenly intensely serious. “Nora, you listen to me, and you listen good. I know you guys are just friends, or whatever.”

“We’re not even really friends any—”

“Right, perfect. So you’re not even friends anymore, which means you need to tap that man immediately.”

“Excuse me?!”

“You heard me! You need some action. You have probably the world’s most beautiful, kindest, funniest man nearly naked in your room now, and you get to spend a whole week in close quarters with him.”

“Why don’t you ask him out if you like him so much?”

I’m being difficult, I know. Sasha doesn’t even give me an eye roll. “Nora, you’ve been in love with him for years.”

“I’m not in—”

“Come on. I know you think he’s not going to be like that with you, and maybe you won’t. But I saw you two last night. There was so much chemistry I was getting hot under the collar! Even before then when we met

on the stairs.”

“Is this why you didn’t invite your brother?” I ask suspiciously.

A look crosses Sasha’s face that I can’t read. “No, he had to help out our other brother with something he’s dealing with back home.” Her brother turning around and flying home when he just got here seems like a big deal. But before I can grasp onto the change of subject, she brightens again quickly. “Anyway, it worked out for the best, right? No one to get in the way of you and your hot God future fuck buddy.”

“Oh my God, Sasha.” I’m slightly dizzy and have to brace myself against the doorframe.

“All I’m saying is a little forced proximity with Jude wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world, would it? You said you’re not really friends anymore, so what do you have to lose? Nothing! And you get to spend time with Cap, too, who I know you love just as much as his dad.”

“It’ll be so awkward,” I say, feeling defeat slipping in at the edges. “Cap’s mom—”

“You said yourself there’s nothing between her and Jude, right?”

“Nothing at all. She just wants a chance to spend time with Cap.”

“Right, so you’re giving them the gift of time together. You know Jude would be breathing down her neck—this way they can bond while you and Jude...you know.”

My heart skips. “Follow the trail of Eleanor Cleary.”

“Right. And fuck.”

I gasp. “What? No.”

“What, yes! Ever hear of friends with benefits, Nora? Besides, you can finally put that IUD to use!”

My face heats. I told Sasha once when we were talking about birth control how I got an IUD after my last boyfriend. He’d begged me to get it, even though I already knew I didn’t love him and never would. I didn’t end up getting it for him, but I got it after, feeling extra strongly like I wanted to make sure I wouldn’t make any bigger mistakes with the duds I was dating than dating them in the first place.

But I’d never put it to use.

Now, Sasha was suggesting I should—with Jude! I clutch my phone to my chest. “Sasha, I could never.”

“Nora, it’s laid out before you on a fucking platter. It couldn’t be easier.”

I think back to that conversation I had with Callie way back before I left.

I think back to all those times I said no to perfect opportunities. All those times I was scared, missing out on life because I refused to stick my neck out even a little bit? She's right, this is easy.

And I could end up sleeping with Jude.

Would that be so bad?

There's a dull ache in my chest at the thought of being with him that way, but not actually *being* with him. Because I know it's not just sex I want with Jude.

But my body, thrumming with excitement over all the ways this does make sense, takes charge. "Okay," I whisper.

"Okay?" Sasha grabs my hands. "You're going to go? Yes," she corrects herself. "It's not a question. You're going to go." She throws her arms around me, squeezing me so tight I nearly gag. "Now if I recall correctly," she says, pulling away, "your train leaves in a matter of hours. So I'll be over in an hour to help you pack."

"Sasha— "

"No arguments!" Then she grins and slams the door in my face.

I walk back to my flat with sweaty palms. What if Jude doesn't remember I'm coming?

You'll remind him.

I grip my hands into fists, urging that brave voice in my head to grow louder. Because the truth is I'm sick of being scared, and timid, and waiting for things to happen instead of making them happen myself.

I push into the room, ready to make plans with Jude about everything. But when I get inside, I hear the distinct splatter of water on tile.

And I see the door to my bathroom is slightly ajar. Oh God. He's even more naked. I crane my neck to the strip of space where the door should be closed, then slap myself to turn away.

"Jude?" I call, my voice not quite loud enough as usual.

"Nor?"

Except Jude hears me. He always hears me. "Just a sec, Nor. I'll be right out."

The water goes on another couple of minutes. I hustle into the kitchen and quickly rinse out my coffee pot, scooping coffee into the filter with a slightly shaking hand.

"Hey," Jude says just as I'm pouring the water in. It splashes on the counter. I make a ridiculous squawking sound and turn around.

Jude's standing in my kitchen, a towel slung low on his hips.

Sasha's words echo in my ears. *Holy shit.*

He's more covered up than he was in his shorts, but somehow this look is much more...sexual. Water streams down his chest, running in rivulets over the ridges of his—

“Sorry, I'm dripping, aren't I?”

Jude grabs the part of his towel folded into itself and lifts it up, swiping at his stomach. The whole thing is dangerously close to falling apart, and I truly don't think Jude would even notice or care, until he saw I was offended.

I turn back to the coffee as much to avoid perving on him as to hide the flame in my cheeks. How did I stand being around him before?

“Jude, you're standing naked in my kitchen, aren't you?”

“No, my towel's on. Want to see?”

I pinch back the smile, even though he can't see it. *This man.*

“So you remember last night?” I ask.

“Yes. Do you? Wait, which part?”

Sweat breaks out along my temple as I flip the machine on. My pulse skips fast. I turn, squinting.

But Jude was telling the truth, of course. He's properly covered. Sort of. The towel's tightly reknotted. He's leaning against the doorframe now too, his arms folded, wet hair slicked back and falling to his shoulders. He looks so hot, I have to stare at the bridge of his nose to make it appear I'm able to look him in the eye—and to keep my eyes from going anywhere else. “So... do you remember what Sasha did?”

Jude nods. “I do.” I can hear the smile in his voice. “You wanna back out?”

I let out a breath. “You want me to?”

“No.”

I can tell he's holding back. He already asked me to come, and I said no.

“Just think of it as a game, Nor. A fun adventure. Come play with me.”

He's being cheeky, but he still has no idea how that inadvertent double entendre makes my lower half swirl. I bite my cheek, saying it fast. “I don't want to back out.”

“Fuck yeah!”

Jude crosses the floor and a second later his damp arms are wrapped around me, my face squashed up against his warm chest.

Okay, now I'm going to melt.

“Cap’s going to freak out! Speaking of which...”

Jude goes on about how this morning would work best, and we agree he’ll go now to pick up him and Farrah and get them to the train station. I manage to calm my body down, mostly by gently extracting myself from his arms as he talks.

We’re on a different train, arriving an hour after them.

“Maybe we should see if we can get the same train?” he asks, looking concerned.

“Both of them are direct, Jude. Just make sure Farrah knows to wait in the station for us in Zurich before we get in the car.”

“Right. Okay, good.”

“You’ve made this trip, Nora,” Jude says. “I mean it.”

“I can’t believe I’m doing this,” I say, meaning that, too. But the figurative train has left the station, and the literal one is going to soon too.

“Okay, well...I’m going to shower and get packing,” I say, already thinking of the removable showerhead with an extra strong jet I specifically bought to...relieve pressure. “I’ll see you soon?”

“See you soon,” he says. Then I practically run from the room before I have to deal with any more half-nude Jude.

CHAPTER 12

This is all happening so fast.

Literally so fast—outside, the snowy fields of northern France zip by so quickly I feel almost dizzy. Or maybe that’s being cozied up next to Jude in our plush business class train seats on our way to Zurich.

This morning after my shower I felt slightly less sexually frustrated, and the excitement and nerves set in. I was distracted, briefly, by calling Christian. Incredibly, he actually picked up the phone, and I told him about my plans. He’d given me a long pause, then said, “It’ll be good for you to spend time with Cap again.” A rush of love for my brother came over me at that—we didn’t talk a lot about our personal lives these days—he was busy and had his own life. But he knew I’d had a single dad best friend, and he seemed to sense my tension. “Yes,” I’d agreed. “I’ve missed Cap more than life itself.”

I was a little devastated to miss Cap en route, but I needed the time to pack, and I’d be seeing plenty of Cap over the course of our trip.

This was the right decision, I know it was. But I still had a good ol’ minor panic attack about it with Sasha as she helped me pack my bag. It didn’t help that she threw in a gift bag of lingerie she’d bought recently that she’d never worn. Or the fancy dresses and high heels.

“I’m not going to need any of these,” I said. They also looked ridiculous tucked in next to my hiking boots and jeans and argyle sweaters.

“You’re going to make sure you need them,” she insisted. “Besides, Laila told me the resort Jude booked is beyond five-star. It’s a favorite among European billionaires.”

I groaned. “I still can’t believe we’re not just renting a cottage in town. It would be way easier to do everything from there.”

But I know Jude wants Farrah and Cap to have access to not just all the fun stuff at the resort, but the safety of all its staff, too. “None of us speak a word of French,” he’d said as we were boarding the train.

“Or German, Italian, or Romansh,” I added.

He’d gawped. “They speak four languages there? But the country’s so small!”

After that, we started the train ride with a quick geography lesson, along with some Swiss history. I pulled up all my librarian-only access sites and considered doing a slide show.

By the time the train emerged in France, I was confident he knew twice as much about the country than the average American, and filmed Jude reciting some of the facts he’d learned.

I’d been turning my thesis project over in my mind. It wasn’t really conventional to do a video project for my thesis in the first place, but my advisor had approved it after I nervously showed her some of the film work I’d done on my own. I knew making Jude my main focus was the best choice from a documentary perspective, given it was his hotel Eleanor was said to haunt—and that he was such a personality.

Now, though, with my camera away and the day waning into dusk outside, nerves tingled in my stomach. If I had a pen with me, I’d be chewing it. Instead, I wove my braid through my fingers.

“You okay?” Jude asked.

I nodded. “I’m okay.” I pretended to turn back to my book.

I was not okay. I’d been trying so hard to get Jude out of my head over the past year, and now for the next week, I would be with him 24/7.

Worse, I couldn’t get the words *friends with benefits* out of my head. Each time he looked at me, I was sure he’d be able to tell, but as I look over at him now, he stretches. He sets down his book and yawns languorously, looking completely unaffected by anything like the jumble of feelings gnawing at me.

When I’d met up with him again at the station, he’d forgone his usual man bun and was wearing his shiny blond hair down. He looked like Brad Pitt in that old 90s movie *Legends of the Fall*. All he was missing was an open white shirt, some pec cleavage, and a horse.

“Excuse me,” a woman says now. She’s stopped next to our seats. I recognized her from the pack of middle-aged Canadian women we’d run into at the train station. “I texted my husband in the station that we met you, but

he still hasn't forgiven me for not getting your autograph."

She says that, but her beet-red face tells me she's here for herself. I can relate, honestly.

"Of course," Jude says. "Babe, you got a pen?"

It takes all my strength not to react to that. I smile politely while trying not to break a molar as I reach for my pen in the pocket of my corduroy blazer.

"Here you go, love bug."

Jude snorts.

I pick up my book again, burying my face in it. He used to do this at home all the time, pretend I was his girlfriend if someone approaching him was particularly friendly. I hated it, partly because I knew no one would buy that nerdy Nora was Jude Kelly's girlfriend.

This woman's just nervous though. And she's not lying about her husband. Or if she is, it's an elaborate lie. She'd told us all about his favorite matches of Jude's for a five full minutes while he took smiling selfies with her and her friends, grinning at me between shots as I glanced increasingly anxiously at the departures board.

"Miss, I just have to know... Are you his assistant?"

I lower the book. I can see the fake girlfriend thing hasn't seemed to register. Or maybe she thinks this is how celebrities talk to their assistants.

Jude looks like he's holding in a big laugh.

"No," I say politely, smiling.

"Oh! His agent then?"

Jude looks more rapt than she does. He's not going to rescue me.

"I'm his handler." I smile.

"What's that?"

"Oh you know, a little bit of everything. I make sure he remembers to go to the bathroom on time. And that he takes his fiber pills, to you know, to *keep* him on time. I get him his teddy bear at night when he feels scared—"

"Okay," Jude says, clearing his throat. "She's kidding."

The woman's eyebrows are halfway up her forehead.

"I'm not, actually," I say under my breath to him. "I believe I've done all those things for you at one time or another."

"Hey, I was sick that time I needed Mr. Glug-glug!"

"Mr. Who?" the woman asks.

"It was lovely meeting you," Jude says. "Please do say hi to your husband

for us.”

She seems to finally get the hint and nods.

“I am going to kill you for that,” Jude says as she moves on, looking deeply confused. When she looks over her shoulder, we both smile and wave. “I mean it, Albright. You’re dead meat.” Jude clamps a hand on my thigh and tickles, making me shriek.

“Shh!” he says when I wrench his hand away, barely breathing.

“Not fair,” I gasp as heads turn.

I shrink down in my seat.

“Payback is always fair.” Jude gives me what can only be called a panty-melting grin.

I roll my eyes. “What are you, an athlete?”

The deep rumble of his laughter behind me was even sexier than his grin. But I’d never let him know that.

“I’d almost forgotten how annoying you were.”

“You mispronounced *sexy*.”

“Oh my God.”

“You don’t think so? What am I doing wrong? Should there be more winking?” He flicks both his eyes open and closed at varying speeds.

I have to work hard to keep from laughing. “You look like you’re having a seizure.”

“How about the grin? Open mouth?” He flashes his pearly whites. “Or closed?” A smirk following that makes my stupid hormones light up like a fire station.

But I shake my head. “It doesn’t matter what you do, Jude. I’ve seen you sleeping.”

Jude’s beautiful mouth falls open in mock insult. “I *knew* it.”

I can’t help laughing. Jude’s ridiculous when he sleeps, and last night just proved it. It’s like his personality can’t stand to be quiet. “You know you snore like a sea lion and take up far more room than even a six-foot-three man needs to.”

“Listen, I can’t help it if I have very vivid dreams.”

“I thought it was bad seeing you passed out on the couch at movie night. With free rein on my bed, you were a nightmare.”

My cheeks prick with heat at the mention of Jude in my bed.

He lifts an eyebrow, clearly amused.

“I’m just impressed you didn’t drool last night.” Despite myself, a bubble

of laughter rises in my throat.

He narrows his eyes. “You’re thinking about the tie-dye, aren’t you?”

I lean back in my seat, choking on laughter now.

A couple of summers ago, we’d taken a trip with Cap to a local artisan’s market. He’d become obsessed with this handcrafted tie-dyed bedding and had ignored the seller’s strict instructions to wash them first as we walked away from the booth.

“Why would I wash brand new sheets?” he’d scoffed.

I’d picked him up for brunch the next morning, and when he’d answered the door, clearly fresh out of bed and yawning, I’d had to bite my fist to keep from bursting out laughing.

“What?”

“Jude, your face.”

Jude had frowned, then turned to look in the hallway mirror. His whole cheek was stained blue. Apparently, the pillowcases weren’t colorfast, and he’d done a bit—a lot—of drooling. “‘Why should I wash brand new sheets?’” I’d said while dying from laughter.

I’m crying now I’m laughing so hard at the memory.

“Hey, I’ve seen *you* sleeping,” Jude said. “Macaroni girl.”

I sit up, wiping my tears away and going serious. “You wouldn’t,” I warn.

“Oh yes.” His voice is a sexy moan.

I shrink down into my seat. “Oh my God.”

I didn’t usually fall asleep away from home—I’d conditioned myself not to, thanks to my sleepwalking tendencies. Where Jude told me once his dreams were not only vivid, but lucid—sometimes he could control his dreams—I was at the opposite end of the spectrum. Not only did I not know I was dreaming, sometimes I’d sleepwalk. And sleep-do other things. But one night I’d fallen asleep next to him anyway, when we’d stayed up too late while having a Ron Howard marathon. Apparently, he’d only noticed I was asleep when I started moaning and writhing next to him. Intensely.

I’d woken up to Jude leaning over and shaking me. “Nor,” he’d said, his face screwed up in laughter. “You can’t have sex dreams in my living room!”

“Sex dreams!” I’d sputtered, still half asleep.

“Yeah! As much fun as it is to watch, you’ll wake up Cap, and it’d be a weird thing to explain.” I’d peered down at Cap’s door down the hall, which, thank all that was holy, looked closed tight. “It wasn’t a sex dream,” I insisted, still foggy. “I was eating macaroni! It was so good!”

I glare at Jude now, even while trying not to laugh.

“Oh God, yes,” Jude moans. “Give it to me, more!”

He isn't loud enough to turn more than the closest heads, but they're the same heads that turned before. “Stop!” I squeal, feeling like I might disintegrate from embarrassment.

“With ketchup!”

I clap a hand over his mouth next. “You do need a handler!”

Then I realize I'm on my knees, my hands on his mouth and my chest pressed up against his shoulder.

Jude seems to realize it at the same time, and for a moment, neither of us moves.

The doors behind us whoosh open in a hiss of pressurized air, and the clinking sounds of the meal car follow. I quickly pull away.

Jude grins. “Well, that was fun. But I could use a drink after that!”

What the hell just happened? Something shifted between us last night at the party. Even though we slipped back into our usual nonsense, I can still feel it. It's like everything is amplified. “Can you get me some water, please?” I squeak. “I'm going to go to the bathroom.”

“Water? You sure? You're on vacation.”

I hesitate only for a moment. Maybe a little alcohol would calm my nerves. Two days of drinking in a row isn't the norm for me. My headache only disappeared a couple of hours ago. Still, I find myself nodding. “One drink. Your choice.”

CHAPTER 13

Nora

I nside the tiny but well-appointed bathroom, I let out a long breath. “Friends,” I reassure my reflection. “We can still be just friends.” I glance quickly to the door as if someone might be standing there hearing me talking to myself. But I guess that would be weirder than me talking to myself.

I take another breath and count to five. I feel marginally better. Still not back to the headspace I want to be in, though. My braids are all frizzed up from sliding around on the seat laughing, so I pull them out, finger combing my hair.

“Or maybe more,” I whisper to myself.

But that’s ridiculous. I’m not coming onto Jude, not in a million years.

Friends it is.

I scrub my face down with a packaged wipe from the little basket. Then I go back to our seat with the intention of just enjoying myself.

But Jude hasn’t ordered beer for us like we used to drink from time to time at home, mostly by his pool in the summer. No, he’s got two flutes on his tray filled with bubbly champagne.

“I decided not to keep the whole bottle, seeing as we’re meeting Cap after,” Jude says.

“Good,” I say, genuinely relieved. I don’t need a repeat of last night.

“But look at this.” Jude pulls the silver dome off his dinner plate. “Lobster and scallops.”

I swallow hard. It looks delicious. But I can’t find the right words to tell him this is too much. Too extravagant, too loud, too...romantic for this situation.

“I got one for you too. Unless you’d rather the filet mignon? But I know

how you love seafood.”

I hear Sasha’s voice in my head. *Just go with it. Be brave, Nora.*

“What, you don’t think it looks good?” He looks stricken.

I sit down. “No.” I pull the lid off mine, too. “It looks amazing.”

“So, enjoy yourself, Green Gables!”

Despite myself, I smile. I cut myself a bite of food and close my eyes at the delicious flavors swirling in my mouth.

“Oh my God.”

“Exactly,” Jude stabs a pile of green beans with his fork. “Besides, if you think this is good, wait’ll you taste the food at Diamant.”

Jude smiles, his mouth full of beans, and suddenly we’re back in our easy, comfortable friendship place.

Jude’s right. If this is what train food tastes like, the meals at a high-end ski resort are going to blow my mind. And maybe Sasha’s right, too. If this is all I have left with Jude, maybe it can be a taste of what I’ve wanted for so long. Maybe I can just taste what life can be like with a person I love? The thought still feels rocky, but I know I’m just getting used to it. I just need to let go of trying to control myself and how I think things should go. That was the whole point of spreading my wings and coming over here. I’ll get my practice here with Jude doing brave things, then maybe that’ll make me better about doing it on my own when he’s gone.

My stomach clenches as I think of him going back home, but I brush that aside with a bite of delicious creamed potatoes.

Jude inspects me, his eyes roving over my hair. “What happened to Anne of Green Gables, Nora?”

I reach up and pat my hair. I’d forgotten to do my braids up again.

Screw it. I look Jude in the eye, pick up the flute, and toss half of it back, all at once. I wipe the back of my mouth with my hand in an extremely unladylike manner. “She’s on vacation.”

I have to press my fingers to my mouth to suppress a burp.

Jude throws his head back and laughs. It’s the most heart-filling sound.

Through the final leg of our trip, I don’t think anything could be better than the relaxed state we’ve found ourselves in. We drink and eat and just enjoy each other’s company. Jude shows me photos of the place we’re staying and laughs when my jaw hits the floor. It’s all glass and Nordic-style structures and furniture, and the spa looks like it easily rivals the world-class one Jude’s family built in their resort.

Sasha waved her hand at me when I tried to pay her back for the train tickets, reminding me her sister runs her travel agency for fun—her family comes from old New York money. Now, Jude’s arranged for me to have an extra room here for a whole week...it’s a bit much.

But Jude waves it off too, even going so far as to look at me like I’m crazy for suggesting I help pay for it. Jude has money too. Lots of it. Not that he flashes it around much. But he thinks nothing of investing tens of thousands of dollars on a cool crowdfunding project or eating lobster on a Tuesday if the mood strikes him.

It still feels weird to have him spend it on me though.

“Jude, I can’t believe this place!”

“Yeah. Griff told me about it, actually.”

“Your brother doesn’t seem like he goes for resorts this fancy. He barely spends any time at the Rolling Hills.”

“Yeah, I don’t think he’s ever stayed here. He knows the people who run it somehow. And he knows my tastes.” Jude grins. “It’s nice, right?”

“A little too nice! Is it close to town? I’ll need access to the town archives and the library, if there is one. Oh God, what if there’s no library?”

Jude laughs. “What a nightmare that would be!”

“Excuse me, it absolutely would!”

“The town’s only a few minutes down the hill. They do it all up for Christmas. It’ll be pretty.”

Even though it’s all around me, in all this I’ve almost forgotten about the holidays. I do love a town done up for the season. It’s one of the non-people things I’m sad about missing back home in Quince Valley.

The attendant comes by and clears our trays.

“Can I see photos of the Rolling Hills?” I ask, reminded I haven’t seen his family’s hotel since the renovations completed earlier this year.

Jude indulges me, flipping through photos of the new east wing, and some upgrades to the recreation facilities, which Jude manages.

“It’s gorgeous,” I say, feeling myself growing sleepy.

“We have a new tennis dome too!” he says.

It’s cute how excited Jude is about how much better this new dome is, even though from the pictures, it’s indistinguishable from the old one.

“Beautiful.” I yawn.

“Right, the minute I start talking about tennis!” Jude makes an exaggerated show of putting his phone away.

“No,” I laugh. “I’m just...that was a lot of rich food.”

“Get used to it.”

I narrow my eyes at him, but that only makes me sleepier. “We had an early morning too, in case you forgot.”

“I didn’t forget,” Jude says, making something tickle in my stomach.

“Hey,” I say, sleepily. “Whatever happened with your agent?”

Jude shifts next to me, suddenly slightly stiff.

I look up. “The idea you had for the non-profit?”

Jude shrugs. “He didn’t think it was a great idea.”

“What? Why not? You like, lit up when you talked about it.”

Jude’s jaw ticks slightly, but he puts on a smile. “Nah. He’s right, it would be too much for me.”

I frown. Jude was so excited about his idea before I left. Had he really just backed down when his agent steered him away? Would he have if I’d been there to support him?

“Well,” Jude says, in a tone that says he clearly wants to change the subject. “You should rest. There’s an hour still before we get to Zurich.” He stretches like he’s tired too.

Another attendant comes by then, with what looks like a pile of blankets. I yawn at the sight of them and take the two he hands me. I’ll try to bring up the tennis camp again later.

“Shoot,” I say, shaking out the blankets. It looked like two, but it’s only one enormous cashmere-like throw, meant for couples.

“We’ll survive sharing a blanket, Nora. It’s not like there’s only one bed.”

I open my mouth to argue, but there isn’t much point. I’m sleepy, the blanket’s here, and we have a whole hour before we’ll be in the back of a car for the rest of the ride.

“Fine,” I say, pulling the blanket up to my chin. “Just don’t hog it like you do the bed.”

Jude does the same on his side. “I would never!”

I laugh as I close my eyes, then lean against the window. But the rattling of the train is too jarring, so I lean back against the seat.

“Come here, Annie,” Jude says, wrapping an arm around my shoulder and pulling me against his body. “Maybe I should call you Annie Oakley? She didn’t wear the braids, did she?”

I like that nickname better than innocent Anne of Green Gables. “I don’t think so,” I smile, leaning into him and trying not to overthink it.

“How about Shotgun Annie?”

I laugh softly. “I like that.”

I didn’t know if it’s the champagne, or the familiar way Jude gently tucks my head under his chin, but for a moment, the last of the tightness inside of me seems to uncoil. That is, until I think about the risks of sleeping like this.

“Jude?” I ask.

“Mm-hmm?”

“Thanks for waking me up that time. You know, with the macaroni.”

He’s quiet for a moment. “What do you mean? Of course, I’d wake you up. Who wouldn’t?”

I look up at him, trying not to inhale his scent too deeply. “When I was a kid once, at a sleepover, they watched me when I thought I was chasing the dog. I only woke up with them laughing over me as I flailed, yelling ‘here boy!’ I never”—I yawned—“I never slept in front of anyone else after that.”

“Little shits! I promise to wake you up if I see you acting weird, okay?”

“Thanks.” I smile, but I can’t keep my eyes open. It’s fine. The champagne is my magic bullet. I won’t say or do anything weird. I’ll close my eyes, just for an hour. It’ll be fine.

But just as I’m drifting off, he says, “So wait, you never even let your boyfriends sleep over? Chad? Chip?”

I laugh sleepily. “I never had boyfriends with those names.” I yawn, big and long. “But yeah, you’re the first, Jude.”

Jude doesn’t say anything to that.

“I’m just going to sleep like this for now,” I murmur into his shirt. His heart beats softly under my ear.

“Just for now,” Jude whispers into my hair.

CHAPTER 14

Jude

Nora grips my shoulders; her long red hair falling against my face. “Jude,” she whispers in my ear, sending a hot ripple of pleasure through me.

This isn’t real. I knew it the moment I felt her climb on top of me. It’s a dream.

I’d first discovered I could lucidly dream when I was a kid. I’d be on the tennis court, then something weird and out of place would happen, like the ball would be a donut or something. This time, it’s Nora riding me.

Still, it feels real as hell. I inhale the scent of her familiar shampoo. I feel the pressure of her little hands on my shoulders, and an urgent, delicious heat in my groin. Nora’s straddling me, rolling her hips, her soft mouth at my ear. My dick is hard as a rock, pressed up against my pants under the pressure of her grinding pelvis.

It’s been a few months since I’ve had a dream like this about her. Must be the hormones popping up since seeing her again. I keep wanting to touch her. I *did* touch her, that night at the party. I got hard right next to her.

Fuck.

I never should have kissed her that day she told me she was leaving. It’s like it set something off in me.

But I wanted to.

And it felt fucking good.

“Oh Jude,” Nora whispers. Her breath is hot in my ear. My dick grows impossibly hard now.

I should make myself wake up—I can do that. Whenever I realize I’m in a dream I can just tell myself to wake up. I do that if the dream is shitty.

“I want you, Jude.”

I groan.

This dream is not shitty. It's a dark and dirty fantasy I pretend I never have come to life. Before Nora left, I'd always leave sex dreams with her if they came up. It was too weird to dream about fucking my best friend and then seeing her and trying not to think about it.

But since she left...I'd had more than a few. Maybe it's an act of rebellion—me being mad that she left me—but I always stay in. I tell myself it has nothing to do with her, that the only action I let myself have is in my dreams.

But even dream-me knows that's a lie. These are the best sex dreams I'd ever had.

Right now, I feel like a thousand nerve endings are all on alert. Her soft body pressed on mine feels like a fucking orgasm already.

But shit, we're on a train. I shift under her, knowing the boner's probably real. But there's a blanket.

That gleeful reminder has me relaxing a bit. *Let it happen.*

Nora's tongue flicks along the edge of my ear as she angles her hips low once more, making me shudder with pleasure. I'll just stay here a bit longer.

"Oh God, Jude," she whispers. "I've been thinking about this for so long..."

"Yes, baby," I breathe. "Me too."

"Jude?" she whispers again.

"What is it? Anything, I'll give you anything you fucking want, Nor."

I mean it too. Not just sex stuff. I'll give Nora the fucking world if she'll just stay with me.

"Touch me."

Oh shit. Some small, tiny part of me is still screaming that this is my best friend, that this will be weird when we wake up. She'll see it on my face.

Right now, I don't give a fuck. I want to feel myself inside of her like I've never wanted anything in my fucking life.

And I was a pro athlete.

That voice wins.

"I said *touch me*, Jude," Nora says, her soft voice growing demanding.

"Yes ma'am." My hands slide to her waist, hitching up her sweater. Ah fuck, her skin is so soft, so warm under my palms. I slide my hands up higher, reaching the lacy cups of her bra.

I'm going to jizz. I'm going to come right here in my pants on a train.

There's a blanket! that strangled voice reminds me. Damn, it's hard up. *I'm hard up.*

Nora grinds against me again and I'm momentarily distracted as her body squeezes against me. I swear I can actually feel the edge of her pussy lips through her tights, sliding against my dick.

"Oh, Jude," Nora says, her voice hitched. "Yes. Touch me there."

She arches her back and I draw my hands up higher, feeling the hard points of her nipples under my thumbs.

Nora bites down on my ear now, making me grunt with pleasure.

"Jude?" she asks, my lobe springing from her teeth.

"Yes, baby?"

"Jetzt Ankunft am Bahnhof Zürich," she breathes.

I pause. I'm about to pull her bra down, to grasp those gorgeous little tits in my hands without the bra in the way—I've always wanted to know if they'll fit perfectly in my palms. But I hesitate. I'm pretty sure that was German. Why's she speaking German?

"What?" I ask.

"Arrivée en gare de Zürich."

Now that's French, which I can understand a little of. She's saying something about the station...the train.

My eyes fly open. It wasn't Nora.

It was the announcements over the speakers.

I would be bummed out I've been woken from my dream, except suddenly my stomach drops. I wasn't alone in my dream. Nora was having the same one. She's straddling me, still grinding herself against my hard dick.

Pleasure shoots from my crotch even as panic takes over. "Nora!" I whisper, yanking my hands down out of her sweater.

Oh fuck.

I glance over her shoulder, which is tough given Nora's hair is blocking most of my view.

"Yes, Jude," she asks, cupping my face, which makes turning even harder.

I part her hair, and see a woman staring at us, her face pinched in disdain. Beyond her, a couple of teenage boys are shoving each other to see around her. There are more behind us, too, I can hear them whispering.

"Nora, wake up!" I say.

She doesn't wake up. She grinds against my erection once more. Even

though lights are flashing through the windows now—we're arriving in the station—I bite back a groan. My dick is so confused.

"Excuse me, sir," a sharp female voice says.

My stomach turns. I can see slices of a gray-haired attendant's uniform through Nora's hair.

"I'm afraid we're getting some complaints."

"Yes," I grunt. "I'm sorry, I—"

I grip Nora's hips, preparing to lift her off of me and onto her seat, but Nora chooses that moment to bring her face down then, presumably to kiss me, and I just barely manage to duck aside. Her forehead knocks painfully against my skull.

It's enough for her to wince and pull backward.

"What—" Nora looks down, then at me, her eyes wide. Huge behind her glasses, which she's managed to keep on while dream-making out with me.

"I'm sorry, I tried to wake you," I say, remembering her words from right before she fell asleep. Guilt rips through me.

Stupid, Jude.

I do lift her up then, setting her down on the seat next to me.

"Thank you so much for understanding," I say to the attendant, who must moonlight as a nun the way her whole face is pursed.

"I did not say that I did," she snaps. But mercifully, she steps aside, beckoning the people who apparently hadn't wanted to walk by a couple dry humping on the evening train to come through the aisle.

"You okay?" I ask Nora, shifting to try to rearrange my junk.

Now that we're decent, a whole stream of people start walking by toward the doors as the train slows. Several of them sneak glances, while others stare outright.

Nora's eyes are growing wider by the second, her face crimson.

She shakes her head, her ruffled hair shaking. "I can't—I didn't—"

"Hey," I say gently, "it's fine. You're never going to see these people again."

She reaches into the seat pocket in front of her and grabs her water, guzzling it down like she's just come out of the desert.

When there's a gap in people, I pull her coat out from the rack above our head—it's an oversized beige parka. She pulls it over her head like a blanket. "What happened?" she whispers, her voice muffled.

There's no easy way to say this. "You tried to kiss me," I say into the

coat. I decided not to add *you also rode my dick and told me to touch you*. Instead, I waited for the crowd beside us to thin. “There was a little more, but that’s most of it.”

She pokes her head out of her coat. “More?”

I clear my throat. The train’s coming to a stop now. “I’ll get our stuff.”

I’m not avoiding her so much as giving her a moment to digest this information. I realize, as I grab our luggage, that the guilt I feel isn’t just about not keeping my promise to her. It’s also for breaking my promise to myself. Because if I’m being honest, that non-dream felt incredible because it was her.

My corduroy and tights best friend Nora.

The same Nora I swear I heard moaning in the shower at her place before I snuck out the door.

And some not-so-little part of me hoped it was real.

Even though all I can think about right now is my best friend—in the most carnal way—I turn it off as we step off the train with only a little effort. Nerves jangle in my stomach as the unwarranted fear that something happened with Cap and Farrah. I texted when Nora was in the bathroom though, and Farrah had assured me that they were getting off the train momentarily.

“Dad!”

Just like that, everything loosens up again as I kneel down to catch the kid flying at me faster than the train we just got off.

“Hey, buddy,” I laugh, nearly toppling backward.

“I missed you, Dad,” Cap says into my shoulder.

“We were only apart for an hour,” I laugh. “But you know what, I missed you too. So much.”

I throw a glance to Nora, but she’s hiding behind her camera, filming our mini reunion.

“Nora!” Cap yells, jumping on her next. She laughs, lowering the camera.

“Cap is so very excited,” Farrah says from where she’s standing a few feet away, hands twisted in front of her, while Cap chatters to Nora all about the train ride.

I stand up, straightening. “How did it go?” I ask, my voice harder than I mean it to be.

“It was good, Jude. Fine.”

“Did he eat his dinner? Like, his vegetables? And did you remember all his books from the seat pocket? He always forgets them, or his crayons.”

Farrah holds up the bag we packed with all Cap’s road trip activities. “They’re all here. And yes, he ate the carrots, though he said they were... what is the word? Mushy.”

I let out a breath. I’d been worried about them.

Twenty minutes later, we’ve got all our bags, a quick snack from the shop in the station for Cap, and are piling into the sleek stretch SUV that will take us the rest of the way to the resort.

It’s an awkward hour of driving, but when the town finally comes into view, we all stare out the windows like a bunch of kids hitting Disneyland for the first time.

The town is nestled in the bottom of a valley surrounded on all sides by snow-blanketed mountains. The main street is all done up for Christmas, with the lamps festooned in fat ribbons and giant novelty bells. High up on the mountain in the distance, Diamant sparkles like a glistening jewel.

It’s another half hour from the town to the resort, and by the time we arrive, I’m itching to stretch my legs, but by now it’s well past Cap’s bedtime, and I need to get us sorted into our room.

“So,” Farrah says as we step out of the vehicle. “Our room is close to yours, no?”

I frown as the bellboys take our luggage, welcoming us to the resort. “What do you mean, our room?”

“Me and Cap.” She frowns back.

“Yeah, Dad,” Cap says. “I can’t stay alone.”

Typical seven-year-old logic.

“You’re not staying alone. You’re staying with me. Nora’s on the other side and Farrah’s...close by.

I’d had my travel agent book Farrah a room on a separate wing, but I hadn’t mentioned that.

“I thought you and Nora would be in one room and me and Farrah in the other one?” Cap says, his voice breaking.

My head nearly spins at that. “You thought...what?”

“Sweetie, your dad and I have separate rooms,” Nora smiles at Cap. “My friend got mine right next to yours though...or, your dad’s, I guess...” She looks awkwardly at Farrah.

But Farrah's standing stiffly next to Cap. "Jude, we talk about this, it is our chance to be together. The room is important to us."

"Yeah, Dad, we talked about it at the sleepover!"

I grit my teeth, running my hand over my head.

"Sir, would you like to check in?" the bellhop with our cart of luggage says.

"Not really," He looks confused.

"Listen," Nora says next to me, piping up for the first time. "How about I take Farrah's room, and you guys do the adjoining room—"

"No."

Everyone looks taken aback, even Cap.

"I..." I don't want to not have my son in my room. But if he does stay with her, I don't want to be that close to Farrah.

There's nothing I can do here that doesn't make me look like a total dick.

"Dad," Cap says, his tone plaintive. He takes my hand. "Let's go inside."

Once again, my son is being the better person.

We head into the foyer, which is huge and open and lined with a red carpet that stretches all the way to a giant Christmas tree in the center of the space. To the left is the check-in desk.

"Why can't you share a room with Nora?" Cap asks. "Then me and Farrah can be next door? It's one of those rooms like at your work, right? With a door we can open so it's like we're all in the same room?"

I grimace. "Yeah, it's going to be like that. It's complicated, Cap, but Nora needs her own space. I think it's because..."

"Because you snore, isn't it?"

My lips tug up. "Yeah. Something like that."

"Dad, Farrah and I are gonna be fine, okay? We'll see you like, all the time. We can have breakfast and lunch and dinner together."

I pinch the bridge of my nose as I reach the desk. When I turn back, I see Nora and Farrah have given us a good amount of space. I also see they're chatting amiably, like friends.

I don't know whether I like that. And because I don't know, I feel like a dick about it. I feel like a dick about all this stuff.

"Okay," I say softly, kneeling down beside Cap. "I'll do the rooms like your mom wants, okay?"

Cap grins, then looks back before leaning in again. "I call her Farrah, too, Dad. I told you she's not my mom."

“Right.”

“Nora’s going to be my mom.”

For a moment I’m not sure I heard him right. “I’m sorry, what?” I croak.

“Nora and you are going to get married. She’s going to be my mom.”

Holy shit. “Cap, dude—”

“Next, please!” the person at the counter says, smiling warmly like my son hasn’t just lobbed a grenade at my feet.

I look back to see Nora coming up behind me, and God help me I get the sudden image of her riding me just like she did in the train. I squeeze my eyes shut. “Jesus Christ,” I whisper under my breath.

“Dad, are you okay?” Cap asks.

“Sir? Are you ready to check in?”

“No.”

“Oh?” the woman at the desk says.

“I mean, yes. No, I’m not. Goddammit.”

“Here,” Nora says, stepping up. “Hi!” she says, smiling sweetly. “We have several reservations.”

CHAPTER 15

Jude

Cap insists that both Nora and I come to their room first, so we know exactly where it is. So the completely awkward four of us—three, really, given Cap’s so happy he’s practically whistling—head there first. Cap runs around the two-bedroom suite, opening and closing all the doors and drawers, while I grill Farrah on all the same stuff I grilled her on yesterday ahead of their sleepover.

I can tell she’s getting annoyed, but hiding it for Cap, and finally Nora tells Cap it’s time for us to go, rescuing both of us. After copious hugs and kisses, I promise to pick him up right here at his door for breakfast tomorrow morning, where we’ll discuss all our plans over the next week.

On the walk to Farrah and Cap’s room, which is on the third floor in the west wing, while ours is on the fourth on the east wing, the bellhop was quiet as he followed behind us, clearly trying to figure out our dynamic. One bouncy kid and three adults who could barely look at each other.

Now, with just Nora and me, he chatters in heavily accented English about the activities happening at the hotel this week. There is some kind of dance lesson happening tomorrow, plus sleigh rides, and champagne on the cable car up the mountain. “And that is not even talking about the skiing!” the eager boy says in careful English. His nameplate says his name is Gunther, and he’s chipper enough that for a moment I don’t feel the awkward twisting in my gut when I looked at Nora, who stiffly faces the door of the elevator.

Our rooms are gorgeous, of course, and Nora would be agog if she were actually looking around at everything Gunther’s pointing out. But she’s looking around without seeing, and not meeting my eye, either. Our rooms are indeed adjoined by two thick doors. They’re mirror images of each other,

each with a lush king bed, giant TV, a modern black leather love seat, and at the end of the room, a wall of glass with a freestanding tub in a glass alcove next to it. The toilet and bidet are the only thing behind a closed door. Outside, there's a sleek wood deck with a hot tub, and beyond that, thick, dark trees. To the right, the slopes are lit up for night skiing. They're kind of like the rooms in the Rolling Hills, only slightly more Scandinavian inspired, and perched on a ski hill.

"Do not worry about the bathing," Gunther says, indicating the tub. "The glass is a mirror on the other side for the privates."

Nora pinches her lips between her teeth and looks down. So at least she's not so upset she can't laugh.

Gunther lays both sets of key cards on the table and props the dividing door open between our rooms before leaving. At the door I hand him a folded bill.

"Can you please get someone to check in on the other room in a while to see if they need anything?"

"Yes, sir!" Gunther says, practically saluting me when he sees the size of the euro note I've handed him.

Then he's gone.

"I'll take the other room," I say, pulling my suitcase through the open interior door into the adjoining suite.

Nora won't look at me; she just stands in the doorway across from me and pushes her glasses up her nose. "That's fine. Great."

"Nora, can we talk about—"

"Jude, I've had enough humiliation for one night, okay?" she snaps, surprising me. Then she twists her hands in front of her, not meeting my eye. "I'm just...tired, okay? And still thinking it's ludicrous that I came along with you guys."

"Don't think that, please. We all want you here."

When she looks up, her eyes look pained.

"We'll do some ghost hunting tomorrow, yeah?"

She nods. "If that's okay with Cap."

"Of course." I hesitate. "Nora, can we just forget what happened on the train?"

Her cheeks flush, and she looks almost stricken. Was that the wrong thing to say?

"Sure," she squeaks.

Before I can say anything else, she hands me a key from the table and shuts the door between us.

I clench my jaw. God, how had I managed to screw this up so badly?

I toss my suitcase on the bed, running my hand through my loose hair. What I should do is go to sleep. It's only nine, but it's been a long day.

I don't like myself this way. It's not my natural state to be grumpy as shit. My brother Eli's the grumpy one. He takes everything too seriously and doesn't know how to have a good time.

Except, now that he's hooked up with the love of his life, he does.

The realization that I, Jude Kelly, the happy-go-fucking-lucky one of my five siblings, is probably the grumpiest out of the bunch at this moment in time, has me in a sudden panic.

I pull out my phone and send a text to my only other single brother, Griffin.

JUDE: I'm in Switzerland. Got any sightseeing tips?

It's a moment before he texts back. I'm surprised, actually, that he didn't just ignore me.

GRIFF: Are you in trouble?

I consider answering yes, but Griff might send me a fucking chopper out of nowhere knowing what he considers trouble, so I write back:

JUDE: No. Just ghost-hunting.

GRIFF: Seriously?

JUDE: Sort of. Awkward co-parenting situation with me and Farrah and Cap. And Nora.

Griff then has the audacity to send a gif of a woman spitting out water in shock. I tsk and toss my phone on the bed, grumbling. He's never in his life sent me a gif. So it's true, I'm king grump.

I decide I can't lie around here—I'll never fall asleep knowing Nora's right next door, pissed off or upset with me or whatever she is. Instead, I grab a key card from the table and head downstairs.

I spend the next fifteen minutes wandering the hotel, but not really seeing anything. It's a waste, because I love Christmassy stuff as much as Nora, and

intellectually, I know the place looks incredible. There are gorgeous lounges covered with holly, and Christmas music pumps from invisible speakers throughout the main floor. Up close, the Christmas tree in the lobby rivals the size of the one in Rockefeller Plaza, and the scent of delicious food and din of voices spills from the open doors of the restaurant and bar as I pass.

I want to be exploring this place with Nora. Hell, I want to be doing anything with her. I could stare at a wall with her and I'd have a better time than I'm having right now.

But that's out of the question. I consider going to the bar and getting a whiskey, but even that doesn't interest me.

I realize, suddenly, what I need: to jerk off.

That's what my problem is. I can't relax with all that pent-up sexual energy from the train.

I feel relieved just to have a plan, crude as it is. I head back upstairs, practically jogging. Never have I been so cheery about heading to my room to fuck my hand.

I scan the card and step into my room, already pulling off my sweater as I stride through the little hallway at the entrance.

Except that's when I heard the running water, followed by a soft moan. Like a moth to a fucking flame, I pop the neck of my sweater back down to free up my view.

Nora's in the bath—the open bath, directly in front of me. Only, she isn't *in* the bath. She's sitting on the edge, her feet in the tub, her pale, naked body slick with water and bubbles. Her long braids are wet, sticking to her skin, and as I stand there dumbfounded, she arches her back, her bare tits pointing out.

Her eyes are closed, which is why she hasn't seen me.

Move. I need to move.

But I can't. I'm frozen as her hand slides down her stomach. Her other hand, I see now, is holding a retractable showerhead, and it's aimed directly between her legs, the spray flying everywhere like the hottest fucking fountain I've ever seen.

Except *she's* the hottest thing I've ever seen in my life.

“Jesus Christ,” I say, before I can stop myself.

Nora screams, her eyes popping open. She drops the showerhead in the tub. That was the only sound in the room, and it was loud. Now, it's dead silent. Nora's dropped down after it, hiding all the way behind the wall of the

tub, her eyes wide.

Heat rushes to my groin. That image of her—it's superimposed on my brain for the rest of my life. I know it.

"You're in my room." It's all I could think to say.

"No, I'm not! This is my room!" I can't see her, only hear the wobble in her voice.

I look up, panic beating a drum in my chest. Fuck. She's right.

"The key cards..." I say.

Nora's hand goes to her lips. She must have handed me the wrong one.

And I was so preoccupied I didn't even think about which door I was going into.

"I'm sorry, Nora."

Except...I haven't moved. And Nora hasn't asked me to, either.

"Nora," I say, my tongue moving like it has no business doing. My dick too, because I shouldn't be standing here with it already rock hard, painful as it presses against my zipper.

She sits up, her eyes on me. Except she's not wearing her glasses, so she's a little unfocused. Maybe that's a good thing. She sits up high enough that the tops of her breasts are floating on the water, suds shining on their surface. I want to walk over there and dip my hands in the water, to run my thumbs along her collarbone and palms across her nipples.

But I can't do that. We can't, and I definitely can't. I made a promise to myself, years ago, and I can't break it. Can I?

"Show me."

My best friend swallows, her mouth parting slightly. She seems to hesitate, to mull this over, and I'm about to take it back, to apologize and bolt, when she snaps her mouth shut again.

And stands up.

My groin swells. I don't think. I walk toward the tub, my eyes fixed on her now-naked body standing there, sudsy water streaming from her shoulders down over the length of her arms, the delicate stretch of her chest, the soft peaks of her nipples. They go hard under my gaze, which only makes my cock surge.

She likes me looking.

I stop a few feet away, letting my eyes drift down her belly. It has the slightest, most beautiful curve to it above her hips. Below that is the apex of her thighs, where a damp triangle of red hair drips with water.

I have to fight the urge to move, to either touch her or myself.
“Were you thinking of me, Nora?” I ask, my voice strained.
She takes a breath. “Y-yes.” Her skin prickles into gooseflesh.

Oh fuck.

“What were you thinking of?”

“You. Touching me.”

I meet her eyes as I reach the edge of the tub. “Tell me to go.”

“What?”

“If you want me to go, just say it. I’ll go.”

She pinches her lips between her teeth but shakes her head. Her wet braids slide over the slick peaks of her tits, and somehow, that’s what does me in.

I kneel at the far end of the tub, resting my arm on the edge. I’m trembling, I want to touch her so badly, but I can’t. I won’t.

“Show me what you were doing,” I rasp. “Show me that pretty pussy, Nora. The one I’ve—” I close my eyes, cutting myself off. This is bad enough. No time for confessional. “Show me.”

Nora lowers herself on the edge of the tub, her legs parted slightly. Only a hint of her pussy is visible. She takes a breath, then opens her legs wide for me.

I suck in a breath. Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck. I can’t.

“I—” I begin, but my tongue flicks out along my lips, and I find my hand lowering into the water, fishing around for the hose. I won’t touch her. This won’t count.

My excuses are paper-thin, but my body doesn’t give a shit.

“Can you keep going for me?” I ask as I wrap my hand around the showerhead’s handle. My voice is hoarse with my need—my overwhelming desire to touch her. “Please.”

Nora nods.

I lift the hose up. It’s still shooting a hard stream. Knowing it’s going to be hitting her clit makes my cock throb.

She spreads her legs wide for me, so fucking wide. I haven’t seen a woman like this in years, but I know it’s the most perfect pussy I’ve ever seen.

“You’re gorgeous, Nora.” My voice is hoarse. “Fucking perfection.”

Nora reaches her hand out, and I transfer the showerhead to her, careful not to brush her fingers, as if that would be the biggest issue here.

She turns the jet around in her hand.

I grip the edge of the tub like I'm hanging off a fucking cliff, my eyes wanting badly to stay glued to her lower half, but instead I look up, meeting her eyes. "You can tell me to go anytime," I whisper. "It's still me."

Nora nods nearly imperceptibly. "I don't want you to go." Her voice is so soft. But I heard it, even over the spray of water hitting flesh.

The water's beating off her belly right now, but she brings the stream down so it hits her soft curls, then lower, to her swollen clit nestled at the top of her slit.

When the water hits, she gasps, and I nearly come right there.

"Fucking beautiful," I breathe. I slide my hand down to readjust myself in my pants. It's not even close to what I want to be doing, but still a shudder of pleasure ripples through me.

Nora's chest heaves, her tits pointed up as she arches her back like she was doing before. Her bottom lip is sucked in between her teeth, and now she's rocking her hips, rolling them under the pressure. "It's the only way," she whimpers, her hips tilting even more.

I look up, unsure of what she means. This is the only way we can do this?

She must sense my hesitation because her lip pops from her teeth where she's rolled them and says, "This is the only way I can—" she gasps, sucking in air like she can't breathe.

Come. That's what she was trying to say. And now she's going to do it for me.

"Yes," I rasp, my hand sliding down again. "Come for me. Show me."

As if that was all it took, she does. She comes like such a good girl. She bucks and gasps, her mouth parted wide. Her orgasm rocks her body, but she still stays quiet. The only sound she makes is a sexy little whimper that has me clenching my jaw so hard I'm going to crack my teeth.

Her skin is tinged red all around her pussy and she grips the showerhead so hard her knuckles are white.

Her head tips back and all I see is the long column of her throat, her pulse flashing, her other arm sliding up between her breasts...

It's too fucking much.

Finally she tips her face back down, her eyes meeting mine. She looks, for the first time I've ever seen her, like she's completely confident. Completely sure of herself.

Completely in control.

And I'm fucking putty.

"Thank you," I croak. I stand up, and her eyes drop to my very clear fucking boner.

Then I turn around and walk out without another word.

Thank Christ I left my adjoining door open so when I go through hers, I'm in the safety of my room in seconds.

I don't even wait until the door clicks shut before I unbutton my pants, reaching into my shorts and pulling out my thick, throbbing cock.

I stroke myself fast and hard, seeing only Nora and that gorgeous pink pussy gleaming under the jet, hearing the little sounds of her coming so hard for me.

My own orgasm explodes a moment later—it's been such a long time since I even did this, so it comes fast and easy, and I shoot my hot load into the palm of my other hand, my best friend's name on my lips.

CHAPTER 16

Nora

When I wake up the next morning, my whole body's buzzing, and I'm not sure why.

I sit up fast, slightly dizzy. I know something happened yesterday, but it takes my mind a moment to catch up.

Jude. Me, in the tub.

My stomach twangs with nervous energy. My pussy even has the audacity to clench at the memory, sending a little shock wave through me.

That actually happened. My best friend watched me get myself off.

How am I supposed to face him this morning?

How am I supposed to function, period?

I do the first thing I think of. I text Sasha.

NORA: Something happened with Jude last night, sexy 911

My phone rings only a few seconds later.

“Nora, what? Oh my God. Tell me everything.”

I let out a nervous laugh, then I do. I tell her about the absolutely humiliating sex dream on the train, how I had to pretend none of that happened on the drive to the hotel with Farrah and Cap, and how Jude and I were kind of...fighting over it. How I still, despite all that, couldn't stop thinking about it, and decided it would be a brilliant time for a little self-care.

“Wait, and he asked to watch you?”

I bite my lip. “Yes.”

“Holy shit, Nora. That's the single sexiest thing I've ever heard of in my entire life. So did you...you know...”

Sasha knows about my troubles. Telling her about how I can't “arrive”

with a partner, only with mechanical help and on my own was the only way I could get her off my back when she asked why I kept breaking it off with the couple of men she'd insisted on setting me up with when I first got here. Somehow, that had been easier to me than telling her no one held a candle to Jude, my ex-best friend I'd left behind.

Of course, she'd gotten me to confess that eventually too. Sasha is nothing if not persuasive.

She's also a steel trap though and would never share my secrets with anyone. Not that there's anyone to tell.

"So did you?" she asks.

"What?"

"You know, fly off the cliff of ecstasy?"

I would roll my eyes, but I'm too buzzy about this truth. "Yes," I say.

"Oh my God! His hotness was just too hot!"

"I thought I was defective, Sasha."

"Of course you're not. You just needed the right situation. You were super turned on, right?"

I lie back on the bed. "I felt like I might just arrive by him being there. Oh God, do you think I'm a...voyeur person?"

Sasha laughs. "Maybe. Is that so bad?"

"Yes!"

"Okay, well, I guess the only way to find out is to sleep with him, right?"

I bolt upright on the bed. "What? No."

"What do you mean, no? This is exactly what we talked about. Friends with benefits, remember?"

"I know. It's why I didn't scream at him to get out. It's why I..."

"Was brave."

I smile, but it doesn't last. "Yeah. But Sasha, he pretty much ran out the door when we were done. I don't know if *he* can do it. Also...he didn't touch me. He just watched."

"Okay, I don't know what's up with that. But listen, it doesn't mean he didn't like it. If you want to do this, just talk to him. You guys are best friends, aren't you?"

"Jude and I haven't even talked about what happened yesterday on the train."

I swallow, getting up and walking over to the long rectangle of window that overlooks the ski hill. The early morning sun is high enough over the

mountain that the bottom half is lit up, and there are several skiers already cutting through the swath of white next to the chairlift.

The truth is, I'm not sure we can do it. We have so much history.

And I love him too much to pretend that's all I want with him.

Sasha's uncharacteristically quiet on the other end of the line. It's like she heard my thoughts. "Are you there?"

"Yeah, Nor, I'm here."

"Tell me what to do."

"That's the thing, Nora. I don't know. I think this is one you need to figure out on your own."

"But you always know what to do!"

Sasha laughs softly. "I'll tell you this much. I know Jude cares about you. A lot. Like, I know he loves you. I can see it in the way he's with you. None of that put-on charm he has with everyone else."

"There's a difference between love and *in* love, though."

"Yeah. It's true. And I don't know him well enough to know about that second kind. But I'm pretty sure he'd never do you dirty."

"No, he wouldn't. But that doesn't mean he won't break my heart."

"Isn't it already broken, Nor?"

I swallow, tears pricking at my eyes. She's not wrong.

"At least we know he's game for fooling around, if that's what you want."

After I hang up with Sasha, I check the time. I still have an hour before we're supposed to all meet downstairs for breakfast. We didn't make a plan for the rest of the day yet, but we were going to bring our activity guides and decide together.

My stomach churns at the thought of seeing Jude after what happened last night, but I swing my legs out of bed and stand up. I can do this. Things might have changed between us, but it's not like we can go back to where we were. I don't *want* to go back to where we were.

I'm just padding out of bed to head to the bathtub—or should I say the scene of the crime—when I hear a commotion outside. Voices—specifically Cap's and a knock on a door. First muffled—they're knocking on Jude's. Then loud and sharp. Mine too.

Did something happen? I rush to the door.

"Cap?" I exclaim as I open the door. "Are you okay?"

Cap and Farrah are standing there fully dressed in their winter gear—Cap

in a full snowsuit, and Farrah in a big red parka and snow pants of her own.

Cap's grinning widely. "We're going snowshoeing!"

Cap explains excitedly that there's an "ex...exc..."

"Excursion," Farrah says, having a little trouble forming the word herself.

"A trip, to a neighboring village. Cap saw the notice in the book—" She gestures into my room, where there's a binder I vaguely remember Gunther showing us last night. "And that we need to be there early. Sorry we did not tell you sooner."

"They had room for one kid and I'm the kid!" Cap says excitedly. "We already ate breakfast."

"Wait, you want to go on your own?" comes Jude's voice. My stomach flips at the sound. I can't see him—he's in his doorway. But I can picture him, sleepy, hair all mussed up. Is he wearing a shirt? I step out into the hallway, unable to stop myself.

Nope, no shirt. Jude's got his arms folded over his bare chest, his hair as mussed and loose around his face just as I'd pictured.

When he sees me, his eyes meet mine for one long, liquid second.

"Yes, on our own. It is professional tour," Farrah says. "We are home at three o'clock."

Jude grills her, but after a minute, Farrah looks at her watch. "We will be fine, Jude. You think so, yes, Nora?" She's looking to me for help.

Cap's bouncing up and down. "We'll be safe, Dad, promise!"

"It's not up to me. But it looks perfectly safe. This is why your dad chose this resort—well-trained staff, guided excursions."

Jude glares at me but his shoulders drop. "Fine. Okay. But you need to text me the minute you're done."

"We will text you," Farrah says. I can see her frustration. But it's gone in the next moment as Cap gives both of us big puffy hugs. I see the thanks in Farrah's eyes and smile directed toward me. Then they're off down the hall and Jude and I are standing awkwardly at our doors.

For a moment, we say nothing, then we both speak at once.

"I—"

"Do you—"

I grimace, and Jude runs his hand through his hair. "I was going to say I'm going to go down to breakfast anyway at nine."

I nod, trying to think of my own thing to do. Maybe I'll order room service—

“You’re coming, right?”

“Oh..”

“Maybe we can go to town after that? Start the Eleanor hunt?”

Relief spreads through me. He’s right; we suddenly have a day to ourselves, and going on the ghost hunt—while I film footage for my thesis—is exactly what I want to be doing.

We need to talk about last night, but now we have a whole day to do it.

“Yes. Perfect. See you soon,” I say, then mercifully retreat from topless, sexy, best-friend, single-dad Jude.

CHAPTER 17

Nora

Jude's travel agent arranged for the Range Rover to be at the resort this morning. After a breakfast which started out poorly, where we talked awkwardly about the weather and our plan for the day, and then proceeded to chow down like we hadn't seen food in days, we headed to the front desk to grab the fob, then strode out the door with something like ten feet between us.

It wasn't until we reached the vehicle that Jude turned in front of me. "Nora, I know stuff happened last night that's made us all...weird, and yeah I know we need to talk about it. But for right now, can we just pretend it's like the old days? Can we focus on Eleanor and our research?"

"And my thesis?" I asked.

"Yes. Just for now."

I let out a breath, my shoulders relaxing for the first time this morning. "Yes," I say. "Sounds good."

After that, things get a lot easier.



"So this is where the love story first started," I say as we rumble into town. I don't even care that saying *love story* to Jude feels a little weird, I'm too excited to be here working on Eleanor again.

As Jude pulls up in front of the town hall, I turn on my camera and feel nothing but jittery excitement that we're here, doing this. Jude was always serious about going to Switzerland to follow the trail that ended in the cache by the golf course, but I never thought we'd actually do it. After I left Quince

Valley, I was certain my part in this mystery hunt was over.

But now here we are, jogging up the steps in the crisp winter sun, pushing open the door to the quaint little stone hall, where the town's archives were stored.

The woman at the desk perks up, standing as we walk in. She looks thrilled we're here, like her workday isn't all that exciting. Behind her, there's a hallway that opens up into a room where I can hear someone talking on the phone. Otherwise, it looks to be pretty quiet in here.

Can I help you?" she asks in heavily accented English.

The woman looks to be in her thirties, very tall with strong features and short, curly dark hair. I'm not sure how she knew we didn't speak German, but I was glad not to have to use the translator I'd downloaded on my phone.

"Hi!" I say, as upbeat as possible, given I'm going to be asking for permission to spend some time in their archives.

I explain that I'm an archival student at Waldorf College in London, doing a project involving a person or persons we believe were in this town in the 1920s. "I'm really hoping we might be permitted to access your archives. We believe one of the people did quite a bit of business here."

The woman pulls her lips into a regretful expression. "I'm so sorry, but one must make an appointment to view the items in the archives, I'm afraid."

My chest falls.

But Jude looks over at me and winks. Of course this sends a little tinkle of electricity over my skin, which I try and fail to ignore.

Jude leans on his elbows on the high desk.

This is exactly the kind of thing he lives for. "Hey," he says, very close to the kind of tone one might say *Hey, girl* in.

The woman maintains her straight face, but I see the slightest tinge of pink creep up her neck.

I wish I had half the charm he does.

"Do you mind if I film?" I ask her, holding up the camera. "My thesis is all on video."

"Well..." she says.

Jude grins. "I love being on camera, don't you?" He puffs out his chest and she giggles. He tied his hair up in his sexy little man bun this morning and has his parka open to reveal his dark V-neck sweater. Even though I can't see it from here, I know just the way the smooth skin of his neck dips into the collar of that sweater. I know how powerful not only his flattering words are,

but also his cut jaw and gorgeous blue eyes. Especially when he lays it on thick.

And damn, he's laying it on thick now.

"I suppose that's fine," she says, flattening her hair with her hands.

I shake off the jealousy like I always do and slip Jude the release forms before making myself scarce, stepping sideways to look at the photos printed on hard boards on the wall, each with captions in multiple languages, including English. I walk along the wall, examining the photos without really seeing, as Jude launches into Eleanor's story.

The best thing about Jude's charm is that it's pretty much entirely genuine. He puts on a show that people truly enjoy. He also fixes them with his intense gaze, making you feel like you're the only person in the whole world. Who doesn't love a man as beautiful as Jude doing that? It's a thrill. And even though he flirts when he needs to, it's never sleazy, and it's not manipulative. At least, not entirely. In fact, I've never once seen him do it with the aim of getting into a woman's pants.

I've never seen him try to get into a woman's pants.

In fact, last night and yesterday with me was only time I've ever known him to use that powerful sexual energy for actual...sex. Kind of.

My stomach goes loose, heat riding down between my legs.

No. This is not what I'm thinking of right now.

I think of dusty books and that grumpy librarian back at home in London. That helps.

After a quick peek over my shoulder tells me Jude's gotten her to sign the release forms I'd printed off in the business center before breakfast, I pull out my camera and begin filming.

As I alternate between capturing Jude and the staff person, Jude tells her about Eleanor.

"Her parents forced her to marry her evil husband when she was very young. He was a bad man, and a horndog, too," Jude says.

"A horn...?"

I have to bite my cheek to keep from laughing.

"He had mistresses. Dozens of them."

"*Arschloch*," the woman says derisively.

Jude raises his eyebrows.

I don't need to know what that means to know it's related to George's character.

“But her husband George had a driver, who kept a diary documenting his boss’s evildoings,” Jude says. “We can’t find any records on this driver except for his own notes, and that he called himself JEQ. But here’s the best part.” Jude leans in and the woman does too, totally enraptured. “JEQ made a ton of side notes in his diary about his boss’s wife. He called her ‘fetching’ and said...what did he say, Nor?”

“That her ‘scoundrel of a husband’ was undeserving of her,” I say, without looking up.

The diary alluded to JEQ’s feelings toward Eleanor. But we didn’t know how far it went until we found the cache by the golf course.

Jude gave me credit for that one, seeing as I took that first diary and read it about a thousand times. I knew we were missing something. Then one day Jude and I were watching the old movie *Shakespeare in Love*. Or rather, I was, while Jude was half asleep. Listening to the way they spoke and remembering how when reading Shakespeare in college I’d learned to decipher each line for its meaning, I woke up the next morning with an epiphany. “The product of the trees o’er the woods by the game” wasn’t just a poetic turn of phrase JEQ had used.

As it turned out, JEQ had hidden a second diary.

The diary, we discovered after combing the trees by the golf course, was a stack of papers we found in a metal box hidden in the woods edging the Rolling Hills resort’s golf course.

“That diary was a two-hundred-page story of unrequited love,” Jude says.

The woman’s practically swooning, her fists curled under her chin.

She gets me.

Jude is obsessed with this story because he wants to prove that Eleanor’s husband murdered her after finding out about her affair. I also wanted to get these answers. But mostly, I’m obsessed with JEQ’s love story. Those papers tell a tale of an unrequited love that went on for years.

I can relate.

“And that’s where the trail runs cold,” Jude says, sighing.

The papers, just like my life when I left Jude for London, ended in a cliffhanger: JEQ noted that all three of them would be traveling to Switzerland for a year, where George planned on dumping Eleanor in a remote cottage he owned in the Alps.

“The last note in the diary is that JEQ said George told him his job would be to ‘mind’ Eleanor, by checking in on her every so often over the course of

the year,” Jude explains. “We think that’s where the affair started.”

“Here!” the woman says.

“Yes,” I tell her, zooming in.

“So,” Jude concludes, “we know this is the town George Cleary did a ton of his business deals in during the first world war, so we were hoping—”

“Wait, stop,” the woman says. “Cleary?”

“Yeah,” Jude says, standing up straight. “You heard of him?”

The woman opens the pony-door beside the front counter and comes out, striding briskly past us to the photos I was looking at when we first walked in.

“George Cleary,” she says, pointing to an old black and white photo.

We join her, and I aim the camera at the photo, slowly zooming in. The photograph is of a portly man with a thick black mustache and long black coat lined with glossy metal-looking buttons. He’s standing with his foot on a shovel in front of a slew of other men, some with their feet perched on rocks, stumps, and one, a wagon, all posing for the camera. Behind them mountains stretch into a clear sky.

“American businessman G. W. Cleary,” Jude reads from the English portion of the plaque, “breaking ground on what would later be Brehmsbruck’s official town hall.”

A thrill runs through me as I look up from the camera, meeting Jude’s eye.

“He built the building we’re standing in,” I say, unable to keep the excitement from my voice.

“He is in many documents and photographs,” the woman says, sounding as excited as us.

I look up from the camera at Jude. He grins widely, again setting that flutter off in my stomach. My brain chooses that moment to show me an image of his face, at the side of my tub, his hands gripping the edge as he watches me...

I bite my cheek hard to stop my wild train of thought. We didn’t come all this way to get distracted.

“Let me just see if Herr Mueller is available after all,” the woman says, then disappears down the corridor.

Ten minutes later and we’re being led down the stairs toward a surprisingly bright and well-lit hallway by an older gentleman who looks considerably less impressed by us than the woman upstairs.

This man doesn't speak English, but after he asks us a question in German as we're going down the stairs and we just blink like fish, I pull out my phone, cuing up the translator app.

I pass it to Jude so I can film, which thankfully, he doesn't object to. Herr Mueller repeats himself, loudly, into the speaker.

Words pop up on the screen and I read it out loud for the benefit of the camera. "Can you two be trusted to search for your items with small help?"

Jude whispers, "What the hell does that mean?"

"I think we get free rein?" I say, hopefully. The man's muttering to himself now, and as we come up behind him at the door he's stopped at, pressing buttons on the keypad, Jude holds up the translator.

I HAVE BETTER TIME TO DO WITH MYSELF

DAMN KNEES DAMN STAIRS FUCK DAMN

I can't help it; I snort with laughter. The man looks up as Jude smoothly brings my phone behind his back, but the door is open now, and he tsks before pushing through.

The archival room is plain but neatly organized, with boxes lined up on steel shelves with wheels.

The man starts rattling in German and Jude whips his phone up but only catches the second half.

I zoom in on the phone.

NO GLOVES BUT WASH HANDS REPLACE ITEMS WHERE THEY ARE, YOU WILL BE EXPELLED WHEN ITEMS DAMAGED. 1900-1950 SHELF EIN.

I think that's a threat. The woman at the desk must have passed on my college name, which luckily is a prestigious college in our circles. Which is why, after he punches something into the computer at the desk, then angles the monitor our way, he's currently hobbling out of the room, leaving us alone with the records.

"I can't believe he's not breathing down our necks!" Jude says.

"Thank God," I say. "My first trip to the documents room at the library

you guys met me at, that librarian followed me around like I was going to use documents to save my gum.”

“Are you going to be like him when you grow up?” Jude asks. He’s grinning, so I give him an elbow.

“Come on, let’s start digging.”

Our first stop is the computer, where I pull up a list of all the records I can think of that might be related to Cleary. There are over a hundred. None for JEQ, but a dozen that list Eleanor Cleary.

After printing off the digital list, we move to the files themselves.

I get some shots of Jude at the computer moving the mouse around, then him walking over to the file boxes, opening one and thumbing through it. After that, I set my camera down. It’ll be faster going if I’m participating in the hunt.

We search through several boxes of files. It’s very well kept for a tiny operation like this one, with all documents inserted into plastic sleeves. It makes me doubly surprised that the man let us be in here ourselves, but I guess my school has enough weight. That and the cameras in all four corners in the room.

We pull out newspaper clippings, building applications, and other records, and everything’s extra slow thanks to our need to translate with the phone.

There are a ton of mentions of George Cleary, especially during the period of 1919–1922.

“That’s right up until the year she was murdered,” Jude says when we have our little pile assembled. We’ve inserted the supplied markers in every file in the box so we can easily put the numbered sleeves back in the right spot, but for the time being we head over to the wide desk in the corner.

Jude and I stand next to each other, putting the documents in chronological order. Then we start taking pictures with our phones. We have to step around each other to get the best angles, and at one point, Jude places his hand on my hip as he steps around me to get a particular shot. His hand grazes a strip of skin at my hip revealed by my sweater riding up.

It’s the faintest touch, but it’s enough to make tingles run across my skin, and my hand shaky when I take my next picture.

“Look!” Jude says, thankfully not noticing my skin is flushed.

He points to a file that contains several photocopied pages. It was one Jude pulled out, so I didn’t see it contained multiple photos at the back.

I flip through the pictures, then freeze on one, sucking in a breath.

“Eleanor,” I whisper.

I’ve seen her photo before, in the newspaper articles about her marriage, and later her death. But never like this. Unposed and happy looking.

She’s taller than average height, with light-colored hair in pin curl waves. Her face looks familiar to me, like I know her. Which sometimes, I feel like I do, with how much I’ve thought of her over the past couple of years. But I’ve never seen her looking like this. She’s not looking directly into the camera. Instead, she’s standing next to a stone building with flowers growing by the front door. George stands several feet away. He’s got his hands on his hips, and his expression is one of indifference.

“The self-importance of this man,” I say.

“Don’t look at him,” Jude says.

I look up to Jude, confused.

His eyes meet mine. “Nora, you don’t see it?”

“What?”

I search the photo desperately, especially at her throat, looking for the clover necklace JEQ said he’d given her.

He leans in, pointing his finger to the glass of the cottage’s front window. There’s a reflection there I didn’t notice before. A person, standing in front of a car.

It’s better than a necklace.

“JEQ!” I whisper.

“And look at her eyes,” Jude says.

I thought she wasn’t looking at the camera, and I was right. But I see now why. She’s looking at JEQ.

A tingle goes over my spine. “They met.”

“They more than met. Look,” he says.

I lean in, following his finger once more. There, on her wrist, there’s a glint of sunlight hitting metal. It’s the clover necklace, wrapped around her wrist. My chest clenches. “Jude,” I whisper. “You know what this means?”

“That he told her how he felt,” Jude says.

Jude’s eyes meet mine. For a moment, my stupid heart pounds. Is he going to say something? To me? About me? Does he feel the raw electricity I do?

He opens his mouth as if to say something, and I feel my breath catch in my throat.

Then there's a bang outside, and cursing in German, and we jump away from each other. The moment is gone as quickly as it came.

After we're sure we've found everything we need, filing everything back where we found it, we leave the town hall, promising the woman at the desk we'll email her if and when we get to the bottom of our story.

But neither of us says anything about what we found. It's like we both want to keep it private, for now. Between us.

We get back into the Range Rover in silence.

I'm thinking about what we found. But I'm also mostly thinking about that moment between Jude and me.

He told her how he felt.

We're pulling into the parking lot now, and Jude kills the engine.

For a moment, there's only the sound of the engine ticking. Jude clears his throat, and my stomach spasms with adrenaline.

"That was a good first day, huh?" Jude says.

I look at him. "Yes. Very good."

My mind swims with all the things we need to say. But for some reason my mind skips past that moment to the one before, when he brushed his hand along my back. Why did he touch me today but not yesterday? Why was he so careful to not come close to me, while still he was clearly interested in what was happening? I saw the bulge at his crotch.

No. I can't think about Jude's penis while we sit here awkwardly.

Sasha's face appears in my mind. *Did you just think the word PENIS?*

I press the heels of my palms to my eyes. "Jude, we have to talk about—"

"Last night," he finishes.

I chew my lip, relief running through me. Somehow talking about yesterday feels safer than addressing what happened just now. The touch. I twist my hands in my lap.

"I'm sorry about barging in on you," he says.

I swallow, my mouth dry. *Take a risk, Nora. Don't close the door.* "You didn't seem sorry last night."

Jude raises his eyebrows. "I wasn't. I'm not. I just...wasn't expecting it."

My stomach rolls. He's going to say it shouldn't have happened. That it can never happen again.

I speak up before he can. "I was all...wound up," I say.

Oh God. I'm explaining why my best friend caught me masturbating. This, right here, is the most mortifying moment of my life. But I can't stop. "On the train, I dreamed I was..." Oh God. My cheeks are on fire, I can feel it. "I guess I dreamed we were having sex."

Jude nods.

"And then I tried it because I thought it was real. I'm sorry, that's not cool at all. It's—"

"It's okay, Nor. I was obviously enjoying myself," Jude says. "Actually..." He rubs his hand over the back of his neck. "I was still thinking about it, then when I saw you last night. It's why I...did what I did."

"Did you enjoy it?" I whisper. "Last night?"

Jude meets my eye. "Yes, Nora. Couldn't you tell?" He shifts in his seat. Is he thinking about it again?

"But you didn't...I d-didn't touch..." *Oh God, don't say penis.* My damn soft voice stutters for the words.

But it's okay this time, right? Jude—*my* Jude—is sitting there looking at me, having just told me he liked what happened between us last night. My pulse throbs in my throat, my heart hammering.

Brave, Nora. Be Brave.

I don't think then. I unbuckle my seat belt, rise up on my knees, and cup Jude around the cheeks. Then I lean in and plant my mouth on his.

He's so shocked that at first, he doesn't move. My lips are tentative on his, soft. Testing.

Be bold!

I press my tongue against his lips, coaxing them open.

Then he shifts, taking over, his mouth urgent, his tongue dancing against mine.

His arms lift, and I feel his hands on my ribs. Heat spreads all over me, from my heart to my stomach to that hot point between my legs. This is really happening. It feels incredible.

I lean into him. "Oh Jude," I say when he breaks the kiss.

"Nora," he says. I lean forward to kiss him again, except then I feel myself being lifted up and back. He's pulling me off of him. I watch, unable to move, as he guides me back to my seat.

My stomach thuds all the way down, like a broken glass on the floor. His expression. It's not filled with lust and yearning like mine. It's pained.

Tortured.

“Nora, I’m sorry, I need to—”

He may need something. But I don’t need to hear the rest. Humiliation burns as hot as the sun. I yank open the door and run.

CHAPTER 18

Jude

For a moment, I can't move. She just bolted. Right when I was going to tell her why things are so complicated with me.

Right after she kissed me, and I pushed her away. I physically smack my hand against my forehead. "Fucking idiot," I say out loud. "Stupid Jude being fucking stupid."

Go after her, idiot!

I know Nora. I know she doesn't take risks, but it seems like she's trying to change that. And I let her crash and burn.

I reach our rooms and knock gently on her door. "Nora?"

Nothing, not even the sound of movement. Would she even tell me to fuck off if she was there?

I give her a minute as I go into my room, then knock on the inside door. "Nora, please, let me explain? I swear it's not that I didn't want you to kiss me."

This time I do hear rustling on the other side of the door, and I hold my breath, waiting for her to open it.

But she doesn't. And after knocking, and then texting, both with no response, I start to get frustrated. She needs to give me a chance to explain, doesn't she?

After last night, I know I'm the one in the wrong, but this stubborn little boy part of me is mad she won't let me talk to her.

Out in the hallway, I bang on her door again. "Nora, goddammit, please let me explain."

"She is not home," a voice says. I whirl to see our bellboy from last night, Gunther. He's strolling down the hallway like he doesn't have a fucking care in the world.

For a moment, I panic. Was that rustling I heard her packing her bags? Did she leave?

“How do you know that?”

“I see her that way, in robe.”

Relief washes through me. She’s still here. “Sir, is everything okay?”

“Peachy, Gunther!” I yell, but I’m already breaking out in a run.

I spend 50% of my waking hours in a hotel, so I know the lay of the land. I follow the signs in the lobby and am down at the pool in five minutes flat. I’m sweating my ass off from racing around the warm hallways in a winter parka, but I hardly notice.

I open the door to the pool, walking fast through the men’s change room to abject stares. I know I look insane, in my boots and coat, especially when it’s dong-city in here, but I don’t care. I emerge onto the pool deck, scanning the water for her. It’s huge; twice the size of the pool back home at the Rolling Hills. “Nora!” I yell.

There are a few heads bobbing around in the pool, and a family over in the kid’s area. Everyone turns to look at me. She’s not here.

“Sorry. As you were.” I wave.

It takes me another five minutes to find the spa thanks to the labyrinth of hallways that aren’t laid out the way they should be. By the time I get to reception, I’m soaked through and starting to feel slightly dizzy.

I grip the counter like it’s a life buoy. “Woman. Red hair. Glasses. Is she here?”

The woman at the desk’s eyes are like dinner plates. “Sir, are you—can I help you take off your coat—”

It’s approximately one thousand degrees in here but I don’t care. I need to see Nora. All I can see is her face, looking horrified as I pushed her away.

“Sorry, can’t wait.” I run past her, toward the signs leading to the steam rooms. “Sir!” she cries, but I don’t stop.

All the steam rooms are arranged around a central space with lounge chairs looking out past a cold plunge pool and onto the ski hill. It’s not quite as elaborate as ours but it’s still big.

I open the first door, peering inside. There’s one guy in a speedo. I open the next door, then the next. Nora’s not in any of the rooms. I’m beginning to lose hope when I finally open door number seven and there she is, sitting in a cloud of steam at the back of the room. She’s wearing the same prim-looking red bathing suit with little frills over the top and butt she’s had forever.

“Nora!” I say, gasping. The room spins a little, but I’m so relieved I barely notice.

“Jude?”

I close the distance between us and get down on my knees so I’m eye level with her. I have to brace myself on the bench, my arms bracketing her legs. This might be sexy if I didn’t feel so fucking woozy.

“You ran out,” I pant, “before I could explain.”

Nora’s staring at me with her eyes wide. She’s not wearing her glasses, I realize. Of course not, they’d get all fogged up in here. The fur from my coat’s hood, I notice vaguely, is sticking to my cheek. Or is that my hair?

“You pushed me away,” she says, folding her arms. “What did you expect?”

“I haven’t touched a woman in seven...almost eight years, Nora.”

Her mouth hangs open. “That’s not true.”

“It is true.”

“You’ve dated—”

“I went on a couple of dates.” I’m breathing like a dog now, gasping almost between sentences. “I didn’t do anything with those women, Nora. We didn’t even kiss.”

“Why?”

“When—” I take a breath, suddenly swaying. I finally clue in that I need to shed some of this gear. When I take my arms off the bench I nearly fall. Between the fog and her lack of eyeglasses I don’t think she can see me, but she’s frowning at my movements.

“Jude, are you okay?”

“When I played...the championships...I didn’t...” I swallow, trying to stay upright as I aim my fingers at my coat’s zipper. “I didn’t have sex with anyone. It was the only thing that kept me sane under that pressure. Kept me focused. All I cared about was winning. I thought maybe it isn’t for me? Then knee, and lots of sex, and...”

Shit, I’m not making sense. I’m trying to tell her I went to a dark place after my injury. I started having sex with anyone who offered. It didn’t last long, and it felt like shit, but I could barely remember any of it through the haze of painkillers and booze.

I grasp the bench again, giving up on my coat. “Farrah, I couldn’t remember her, and she was...” The world fades a little. *Fucking finish, Jude.* “She had a baby.”

Can she hear my shame through my puffy-feeling lips? Because it's the greatest shame of my life. That I can't remember sleeping with the woman who had my son. Worse, I'd hoped, for a moment back then, that Cap wasn't mine. I'd insisted on a paternity test, which showed he was. It also showed me Farrah's age for the first time. She was eighteen. My math told me she'd only just turned eighteen when we slept together. I'd thrown up after that.

In my delirium, I suddenly picture that old TV talk show, the host holding up the results of the test. *Jude, you are the asshole!*

"It was all my fault, Nora."

"Jude—"

Nora puts a hand on my shoulder, then gasps. "Jude, you're still in your coat?"

"She left. Nora. She left. I had a baby and no fucking clue how to handle it. I didn't, I can't touch, no sex after that."

"Jude...are you telling me you're celibate?" She whispers that last word.

"A priest," I say.

I lift my hands to make a praying symbol, a bad, unfunny, delirious joke.

Then I feel myself toppling. The couple sitting on the adjacent bench, their faces agog, are the last thing I remember before the room turns upside down.



"Jude!"

The voice is distant at first, but I know it's my Nora.

I reach up and tug my hair. It hurts, but her voice continues. "Jude!"

My eyes flutter, and when I open them, Nora's face is the first thing I see. She's wearing her glasses, and her eyes are slanted in concern and relief. "Oh God, Jude! What the hell!"

She stands up. The light behind her is so bright for a moment, I have to squint.

"I think he's okay," she says to someone out of my line of sight. I lift my head up. I'm in a medical-looking office. The resort's clinic room, just like we have at home. I drop my head back down.

"Sir," a man's voice says. He appears beside me, a middle-aged man with neatly combed gray-blond hair who looks sternly at me. "I'm the house

nurse. You have heard of heat stroke?”

I groan.

“It’s why you fainted.”

I blink open my eyes. “I didn’t faint. I passed out.”

“There is no difference.”

“There’s a big difference!”

“Thank you, nurse,” Nora says.

He gives instructions to see him after I feel well enough to walk, then thrusts a bottle of water at Nora. “Have him drink this, and do not enter the spa with your parka on, sir.”

“I think he thinks I’m stupid,” I say, when he leaves the room.

“Maybe you were this one time,” Nora says. “What were you thinking?”

I sit up and the room spins only a little. “I’m fine, by the way.”

“I know. But I guess we’re even for that little head bonk in the library.”

I smile. She does too, but it fades quickly.

“Nora, I’m sorry. I needed to tell you what was going on before you thought anything was wrong.”

Nora folds her arms. She’s still in her bathing suit, and when her breasts squish together, my dick twitches. He’s the real idiot.

“Have you really not been with a woman in almost eight years?”

“Really,” I say.

“Do you think Cap would want you to punish yourself endlessly for having him?”

My stomach does a full roll at that. Leave it to her to get right to the point.

“I told you a long time ago I’m not cut out for relationships, Nora. It was just easiest if I cut out the other part too.”

She looks at me for so long I wonder if she’s seen right through me. If me not having sex was yet another of my ideas everyone else would think I was an idiot for coming up with.

“What would happen if you had sex again?” she asks.

I’m surprised by this question. But her eyes are on mine, and of course all I can think about is her, on the edge of the tub, coming so hard for me.

My dick swells further. “I don’t know.” That’s the truth.

“Have you sworn yourself off sex for life?”

“I don’t know,” I repeat, dumbly.

Nora pulls her lips into a straight line, then says, “Okay. Well, it’s your

choice.” Then she spins on her heel, heading for the door.

“No!” I say, jumping off the table. “Don’t walk out on me again, Nora. Please.”

She spins back around. “What was last night, Jude?”

Heat swirls in my belly. I can’t say I don’t know again, not only because she’d storm out for sure, but because it’s not true.

This room is tiny. I’m close to her now, only a foot away. And only a little dizzy. But not too dizzy to take a step. “It was you, Nora. If you think I don’t think about sex with you, you’re dead fucking wrong. You know what I did after I left your room last night? I didn’t even make it two steps before my dick was in my hand. I thought about your face while you came and imagined it was me making you feel that way. That it was my tongue on you, making you scream my name. That good enough for you?”

Nora’s eyes are wide, her lips parted. I can hear her breathing. I can see the pulse at her throat going off.

“I want you, Nora, and it’s confusing as fuck.”

“Then show me, Jude. I dare you.”

I lean in. “Don’t test me. You won’t win.”

I wait half a beat for her to protest, but all she does it let out this sexy little moan as I press her up against the wall. I grasp the back of her neck in my hand and press my lips to hers. I stroke her tongue with mine, pressing myself against her so she can feel how much I want her. Fire roars through me, my need so deep I can’t think. I can’t rationalize what I’m doing.

I glide my free hand down her neck, her collarbone, the damp fabric of her suit between her breasts. I want so badly to slide my hand between her legs, to see if she’s wet for me. But at the last minute logic gasps a breath, making me slide my hand sideways. I dip my fingers under her hip cutout instead, pulling her suit out and releasing it to snap against her skin.

It’s enough to break my focus at least long enough to back away.

“I want you, Nora, okay? And I’m a fuckload of fun in bed. In case you’re wondering.”

Then I lift her out of the way and walk out the door before I give in and show her exactly what I mean.

CHAPTER 19

Nora

NORA: Help

SASHA: OMG are you okay? I'm at the theatre with my family but I can call?

NORA: No, not urgent. I'm just hiding out. Can't see Jude RN. Couldn't see him last night either.

SASHA: Did you bang?

NORA: Rude!

SASHA: Well?

NORA: No. Sasha, he told me he hasn't touched a woman in almost 8 years.

SASHA: ...

NORA: He's celibate, Sash. But then

I 'm about to type more, but there's a knock on my door. I freeze, the phone in my hand.

SASHA: !?!?!?

SASHA: THEN WHAT?!?!?!

“Miss? Room service!”

I let out a breath, my shoulders relaxing. When I answer the door, Gunther's eyes bug out.

I look down. I'm wearing my favorite shirt for sleeping in, a threadbare T-shirt with Mickey Mouse on the front in black and white.

“You like Mickey Mouse?” I ask inanely as I hold the door open for him to pass through with my food.

“Uh, yes? I do very much,” Gunther says, not meeting my eye as he wheels the cart in.

“Great. Me too.” This has to be the weirdest conversation. “Why are you doing room service today?” I ask. “I thought you only helped with bags.”

“I am swimming,” he says, looking back down at Mickey and blushing furiously.

What is with him and Mickey Mouse? Did he kiss his first girl at Disneyland Paris or something? Then I register what he said. “Swimming?” I screw up my face as he sets down the tray on my little side table.

“Floating?” Gunther asks.

“Oh, you’re a floater,” I say, understanding.

Gunther stands there inspecting my ceiling. He’s embarrassed I’m in my PJs, that’s all. It’s only a top after all; my bare legs stick out the bottom.

Just then there’s another knock on the door. But this one comes from the interior door.

Jude. He’s been knocking periodically every few hours, even once at midnight last night before he got the hint.

I know I’m being a chicken. I just don’t know what to say to him yet. Not since that kiss that completely destroyed me. The only real communication we’ve had is me texting him to let him know I wouldn’t be making it down for dinner last night.

“Nora?” Jude calls, his voice muffled.

“I will get that,” Gunther says, spinning.

“Oh, that’s okay,” I say. “You don’t need to—”

But Gunther must take that as me being polite because he goes ahead and does it anyway, swinging the door open to find Jude standing there about to knock on his forehead.

“Oh,” Jude says. Then he looks over his shoulder to where I’m standing next to my table. “Nora, you’re in your pajamas.”

“Yes, Jude.” I sink down, giving up. “It’s early.”

I’m hungry. I only ate from the minibar last night. As I dig into my waffles, Jude reaches into his pocket for a euro note, and hands it to Gunther. “Thanks G, that’s all.”

Gunther looks at me a beat too long, and Jude claps a hand on his shoulder, manhandling him in the direction of the exit.

Gunther scurries out, and after the door clicks behind him, I'm alone with Jude.

I hear the snap of my bathing suit, somehow the sexiest sound in the world. After the clinic room, I ran straight back here and got myself off in the tub again, this time staring at the door between our rooms, praying he'd somehow find a way to bash through it.

He couldn't, of course, and when he did knock later, I ignored him.

He comes back to the entrance to the room, and for a moment, we lock gazes.

Then his eyes drop. I can feel his gaze on my body.

Heat rushes between my legs. Is he going to come over here? Will he kiss me again? The ball has to be in his court; I can't throw myself at him again. I just can't.

But his eyes dance away from me, looking sideways.

"Wonder what that was about?" I ask, my voice overly chipper. I stuff my face with a bite of waffle to hide my nerves.

Jude leans against the wall. "Those are your see-through pajamas," he says matter-of-factly. "Gunter was staring at you because he could see your...you know."

"My what?" I squeak. I look down. All I can see is Mickey. "No, they're not."

"Okay," Jude says. "They're not."

Then his eyes go pointedly to my breasts.

I've seen myself in the mirror with this pajama shirt on. It's innocent. Though I haven't worn them since I got to London...and my mirror in my apartment back in Quince Valley had bad lighting. Oh God. I walk over to the desk/vanity combo on the side of the room and look in the mirror over it. My nipples are clearly visible. The whole curve of my breasts are visible. I swallow the mushy bite of waffle before I've properly chewed it. Then I cough, nearly choking. I have to reach for the glass of water on the tray. Jude comes over, clapping me on the back.

"I know how you feel," he says. "It's how I feel every time you've worn those around me."

"You're teasing me," I cough.

"I am, but I'm not lying. How else would I know you're wearing those pink underwear you wear when you're feeling out of sorts?"

I drop the fork I'm still holding with a clatter. Then I fold my arms across

my chest. “Why haven’t you ever told me?”

“I tried. I said, ‘You need new pajamas’ more than once. I bought you some, remember?”

I remember. I remember him saying that too, and him never looking at me when I wore them. “I thought you just really didn’t like them.”

“I like everything you wear, Nora,” Jude says, his mouth muffled.

He’s sprawled out in the chair next to mine at the table, eating my waffles. “Hey!” I run back to the table, grabbing my plate back. This is just like old times with us, only not really, not after these past few days.

And now I’m sitting next to him in see-through pajamas. But I’m too proud to get back up and cover up, so I sit there with my arm folded over the table to try to hide my chest.

My cheeks are hot as I stuff a bite of waffle in my mouth. I swallow, then ask, “Why are you here, Jude?”

“Because you can’t hide anymore. Cap’s been asking about you nonstop.”

Guilt twinges. I miss him. And this thing with Jude is getting in the way of me seeing him.

“Well, I’m all ready to hang out with him today. Maybe I could take him out somewhere, give Farrah a break.” It’d be a good break from Jude.

“I already promised him you’d come tubing with us today.”

I freeze. “What?”

“You heard me. He can’t wait. We’re meeting at the chair lift in”—he glances at his watch—“twenty minutes.”

“Jude, flying down a mountain in an inner tube isn’t exactly the kind of thing I’m any good at.” It also sounds terrifying. “Besides, the book says it takes ten minutes to get over to the lift from here!”

“Guess you should have answered my texts sooner then.”

I don’t have to look at my phone to know there’s a whole string of texts from him. And probably Sasha too. She’s going to murder me for dropping that and running. I make a mental note to text her later.

I take a breath and look over at Jude. He’s examining me with what looks like a smirk. “You’re enjoying this.”

“Maybe.”

“Did you choose tubing as today’s activity?”

“Maybe.”

He did, too. He’s playing with me. Fine. I can play. “Why did you kiss me yesterday?”

Jude doesn't miss a beat. "Because I wanted to."

Irritation flickers through me. "So it's okay for you to kiss me but not me to kiss you?"

"You could kiss me now, see how it goes?"

My stomach flips. This is a risky game. I don't play these. Do I? Heart thumping, I ask, "What happened to your vow of celibacy?"

Jude finally looks away. "I don't know. Maybe kissing doesn't count."

Feeling bold, I sit back. "How about watching me?"

Jude looks rattled for the first time. He plucks a slice of cantaloupe from my plate—"I don't have all the answers, Nor."

I feel that urge again, that little tingle I'm starting to recognize as me doing something daring.

"Would you really give up eight years to sleep with me?" I ask. "If the opportunity presented itself?"

Jude freezes, the cantaloupe half eaten in his hand. "Are you asking me to sleep with you, Nora?"

Am I? "No," I say. The tingle's stronger now. An urge. Is this what playing pro tennis was like? "I'm asking if you would. If you want to." I don't ask that in a self-effacing way. I ask it like I'm completely neutral on the subject. If Sasha were here, she'd be hooting.

Emboldened, I choose that moment to lower my arm from my chest. I may not have Jude's natural charm, but I have some assets.

Jude swallows, his eyes locked on my chest. Then he quickly closes them. "Yes, Nora. I want to."

It's not the same as going ahead with it, but I still love the thrill of having the upper hand for what feels like the first time ever.

"Good to know," I say. Then I stand up. "Guess I better get ready, huh?"

I walk away from the table toward the bathroom. I know he won't be late meeting Cap. It's a thing with him; he hated it when his dad was late. He said it used to make him anxious. So he never leaves Cap wondering where he is.

I know all this, so it makes me bold enough to do what I do next: I peel off my shirt, tossing it on the bed as I pass so Jude can watch me walk away from him in only the little pink underwear he's apparently so familiar with.

This time the clatter of the fork isn't from me.



Of course, the day on the mountain turns out to be exactly what I need. Cap and Farrah are around, so there's no way for Jude and me to interact without their eyes on us, and it's just the four of us hopping into inner tubes, throwing ourselves down the side of the mountain.

I was nervous at first—extreme sports aren't really my thing. But I still went ahead to show Cap it wasn't too bad. A few runs later and I even stopped screaming.

Cap wouldn't go on his own the first few runs. He'd sit in Jude's lap mostly, though he did a couple with me once I'd gotten used to it, and one with Farrah.

By lunchtime we were all having a blast, and Cap begged us to go back up afterward. None of us could say no—it was thus far the least awkward us adults had all been together, and I think none of us wanted it to end. By the second half of the day, Cap was doing spinning tricks and even a jump off a little lip of snow on the far side of the track while we were barely standing.

It was also a relief to just laugh and not have to think about any of the sexual tension between Jude and me—or the faint layer of sadness that lay just underneath. The one I only thought of when I wasn't right next to him. The one that told me whatever happened next between us was just what it was. Flirting, maybe. Sex, maybe. But the bigger part of me—the one that didn't only want Jude physically—knew this was going to end and I'd be worse off than I was before.

But I refused to focus on that. I focused on Cap and on having fun. Watching Jude wipe out on a snowdrift more than once helped too.

By the time they shut down the hill, we were all exhausted, though Cap was still buzzing.

"I wish I have the energy of a seven-and-half-year-old," Farrah says as we ride the lift back down to the hotel. Cap wanted to ride with his dad, so they're in the chair in front of us.

Farrah and I haven't spent any time together, and mostly I'm glad. It's not that I feel jealous or threatened at all. The opposite, really. But I can't tell her what's going on with Jude, why he's still so stiff around her and weird around me.

"I am hurting all over," she says.

"Yeah, I'm pooped too," I agree.

"You..." She looks down at the lodge. "Need the toilet?"

"Oh my God, no, I—" I burst out laughing, then explain to her that being

pooped has nothing to do with the bathroom.

Jude and Cap are too far ahead to hear what we we're saying, but they still turn around at the sound of both Farrah and me laughing.

When Farrah sees them, she joins me in waving at Cap, who waves back. Then she grows somber. "Nora, I am glad we are on the lift together right now because I want to ask you what I can do to make things better with Jude. What does he like? We can do what he wants if this is not the thing."

My heart squeezes for this poor girl. "Oh...he's having fun," I say. I'm not lying—he laughed as hard as the rest of us today.

But I know I'm copping out.

"He is sometimes, but he does not speak to me too much."

God, what am I supposed to say? That he blames himself for what happened between them all those years ago? That he's punishing himself for it to this day?

"He's just not good at talking about his feelings," I tell her honestly. "Which doesn't make it okay."

Farrah nods.

I remember then that I promised Cap I was going to have a talk with Jude too. I'd completely forgotten, having been too caught up in whatever was going on between us. "I'm sorry, Farrah. I'm planning on having a talk with him about it," I promise.

She smiles, then brings her finger up to her mouth to gnaw on her cuticle. "I think he will be more mad when I tell him why I wanted to spend this time with Cap."

"Why's that?"

She shifts in the chair. "Because I am taking another job in Japan."

I raise my eyebrows. "Oh?"

"I still have my contact there and they want me to work for designer...not only to model but to help with drawing the clothes. After that, maybe I go to school again. Like you."

"You're going to be a designer?"

She nods, smiling almost like a little kid. Then her smile drops. "But I cannot travel to see Cap too much, and I know Jude will not take him to see me so"—her voice cracks—"I know I am too late, but I want to soak him before I go."

Idioms are tough when English isn't your first language. I think she means soak him up? "I think it was a great idea," I say.

“But Jude will be angry. He will say I am disappearing again.”

“Listen, the world doesn’t need to revolve around Jude’s feelings.” I should know that.

To my surprise, a tear escapes Farrah’s eye. “My whole life, I am making people angry. My parents, all the time. Now Jude. I am glad Cap is sweet boy. And I am glad for you, Nora. You make them both so happy.”

I’m not sure about that, but I’m run through with a renewed anger at Jude. She’s trying her best, and he has no reason to keep behaving the way he has been. Not with her and not with me, either.

“I’ll talk to him,” I promise as the chair nears the bottom of the lift. “I’ll talk to Cap, too, so he understands why it’s so important that you follow your dreams.”

I hesitate. “But Farrah?”

“Yes?”

“Maybe for now you should forget about Jude and just focus on having fun with Cap?”

Farrah smiles gratefully. “Thank you, Nora. I did not tell Jude yet, but I am taking Cap on the three-day, two-night trip they are doing tomorrow. It stops at all the neighboring villages.”

Damn, she’s ballsy. Jude’s going to flip his lid. But I grin. “Good for you.”

The chair careens into its flat section where we need to hop off.

“Maybe when we are gone,” she says as we jump, “you can tell Jude you are loving him, too. Maybe he will be happy then.”

I’m so dumbfounded I don’t move.

“Miss, watch out!” I turn to see a man on the chair behind us swinging his legs sideways to avoid hitting me. Unfortunately, he manages to swing himself right out of his chair, toppling onto me at the same time. Both of us fall forward, sliding slightly down the mini slope together.

“Oh dear,” the man says, wheezing.

Of course, it’s Jude whose face appears over me when I manage to roll over. “Thought I’d ski what all the trouble was about!” he quips.

I narrow my eyes. “You are insufferable.”

“But you love me,” he says, reaching down to help me up.

To that, I don’t have a comeback.

CHAPTER 20

Jude

What a fuckin' day.

I'm in the bathroom, drying off after a shower, and strongly considering jacking off before dinner. My dick swells at the thought, of course, so I splash a little cold water on my face and then toss some on the little guy too. "Chill out, dude. What makes you think you're getting any action? How do you even remember what to do?"

I'm talking to my dick.

Maybe I *should* have sex, since not having it doesn't seem to be working at keeping me sane anymore.

My phone lights up on the bedside table as I step out of the bathroom.

NORA: Are you ready yet?!

Heat shoots through me picturing her on the other side of that wall, holding her phone in her hand, while I'm doing the same. Only naked.

JUDE: Five more minutes, geez

JUDE: Unless you want to come over here now and help me get dressed?

I don't know why I'm teasing her when I can't even follow through on it.

Three dots pop up, then disappear.

"Speechless, huh?"

I toss the phone on the bed, happy to make Nora wait a little longer. She deserves it after the stunt she pulled this morning. I was already riled up trying not to stare at her tits through that see-through shirt while she ate waffles, pretending like it wasn't the hottest thing I've ever seen. Luckily

later, tubing required so much energy that I spent whole minutes forgetting how much I liked the feel of her tongue against mine, or how soft her body was when I pressed her up against that wall in the nurse's office.

But then she tipped her head back and shrieked when I sent her spinning down a run, and I was back to picturing her with her legs wrapped around me.

When I look down, that little fucker's standing at attention again.

I'm losing my goddamned mind. But damn, it feels good to slip away to her.

I pull on a black dress shirt and dark jeans, then knock on the door to Nora's room.

"It's open!" she calls from the other side.

I push the door open to see her standing by the front door, pulling a pair of heels on.

"Finally!" she says.

She's wearing this short black dress that hugs every curve, and I have to stop myself from actually growling.

"Where's the argyle sweater?" I tease instead, looking away so I don't stare.

"Maybe I'll bring one just in case," she throws back. Then she grabs one of those damn sweaters out of her bag and ties it around her waist. She looks so hilarious I turn away again, trying not to burst out laughing. It's a contest at this point, pushing each other to see who'll break first. Though I'm not sure it's just about making each other laugh.

"Don't forget your special glasses."

She purses her lips. She's hiding a smile. But she takes the bedazzled frames Cap chose for her and sets them onto her face.

"You look like a hot version of that mean office lady in *Monsters Inc.*"

This time she's the one turning away, her shoulders shaking. "I'll just put these in my purse for safekeeping," she says, sounding short of breath.

A few minutes later we're walking down the hall together and it's all I can do not to take her hand in mine. It feels natural, given we're going out to dinner. Especially when we pass Gunther, who looks like he swallowed a golf ball when he sees her.

"Gunther," she says sweetly.

He turns a bright shade of pink and chokes out a sound I'm not sure is in French, German, English, or Pig Latin. Then he ducks out an exit door like

he's going to combust.

She looks at me, mildly concerned. "You don't think—"

"He was picturing your tits," I say matter-of-factly.

"Jesus, Jude."

"I don't blame him." I lean in because we've entered the lobby and there are people everywhere. "They're beautiful."

Now, she's choking.

I chuckle.

"You laughed," she says finally in her quiet little voice. "I win."

Dammit, she's right. I suddenly want very badly to bring her around the corner, press her up against the wall, and tell her *No. I win*. Maybe urge down the top of her dress and see what I only got hints of yesterday. Take one of those nipples into my mouth and—

But we're approaching the restaurant now, where I can see my little guy standing with Farrah, waiting for us.

The last thing he needs is to see me acting like a fool for his...whatever Nora is to him.

He spots us and comes sprinting over.

Despite her fancy dress, Nora gets down on one knee, never too bothered to give Cap all the attention he deserves. "My best guy!" Nora says, laughing as he nearly knocks her over with a hug.

Nora pulls away, holding him gently by the shoulders. "You okay? It's only been a couple hours since we saw each other!"

"I'm great. I just missed you, is all."

My chest contracts a little. What's it going to be like when we have to leave her behind again?

I want her to be my mom.

I wrote it off before as just an awkward kid thing. But watching them together now, and earlier today, her arms around him as they sped down the hill shrieking with laughter—it's enough to make my breath hitch.

"Hey, what about me?" I ask, throwing my hands up in the air.

Cap sighs. "I live with you, Dad."

"Unbelievable."

Still, he takes pity on me and throws his arms around my waist. "Fine. I missed you too, Dad."

Nora laughs and I throw her a mock glare.

Then, to my surprise, Cap wraps one arm around her waist and one

around mine and guides us to the restaurant as one little unit.

When I look over at Nora, her laughter's gone, replaced with a look I can't place. But she quickly averts her eyes, brushing Cap's hair as she walks.

"Where's Farrah?" Cap asks.

The spot where they were standing is now empty. *Who cares?* is my first thought. But a spike of guilt hits me at the callousness of that.

As we cross the remainder of the space to the restaurant, I spot her ahead of the others, tucked inside the entryway. She's looking at us with a sad kind of smile. Does she wish it was her here instead of Nora? She's never given that vibe, but how could she not?

"Right there," I say.

"You going to be nice tonight, Jude?" Nora asks softly as Cap runs inside. I frown. "I guess."

She puts a hand on my arm. "Please? For us?"

My stomach drops. Not just for Cap. For her too. Jesus, I've been a dick if she needs to ask that.

I already know that. Except I just can't seem to shake that old anger at her. But I'll try, for them. I nod, unable to say the words. Because I don't want to be made a liar.

The four of us at a table is a little awkward at first, especially when the waiter comes and doesn't know who to ask about whether he should bring a special drink for Cap.

"I'm his dad," I say, and the waiter, a diminutive man with a trim salt and pepper beard, nods, looking relieved.

But once the drinks come—a lager for me, white wine for Nora, some kind of fizzy cocktail for Farrah, and a whole fishbowl of sugar for Cap—we all start to relax.

Cap surprises me by asking Farrah to help him decipher the menu to find the stuff he might like. Meanwhile, Nora pores over the menu like she's studying an ancient textbook, while I briefly skim the entrees and decide on a chicken tagine. Delicious. Sounds good to me. I snap my menu shut.

"What do you think *concassé* is?" Nora asks. "Is it a method of preparation, maybe?"

She pulls out her phone, clearly looking it up. She's always like this at

restaurants, studying the menu like it's an ancient text and weighing each option against the other like she's going to be tested on it later.

"Why don't you go back and observe the chef?" I suggest.

Nora rolls her eyes at me before returning to her menu.

I laugh. "I missed your eye rolls."

She doesn't look up, but I can tell she's smiling. "I've got lots more if you want them."

Eventually, she makes a decision and closes her menu, setting it down on the table.

You'd think that after all the years we spent going to restaurants together, I'd be annoyed by her indecision, but I can't help finding it cute as hell. Now, as Farrah tells Cap about what it was like living in Japan, I watch, completely bemused, as Nora reaches a hand out for the menu as if she's going to look again.

"Don't do it," I warn.

She snaps her gaze to mine. "I'm not. I know what I'm getting."

"But what about your second choice? What if they could change the sauce for you?"

Nora huffs. "Hey, lots of places say it's a béchamel when it's actually a Mornay sauce, and sometimes the cheese in Mornay makes me itchy, if it hasn't been cooked all the way through."

I love it when she gets like this. "You could make hives look sexy," I say, just to tease her.

Nora pinches her lips together, scowling, but I can see the laughter in her eyes.

"What are hives?" Cap asks.

I hadn't noticed he and Farrah had stopped talking to each other.

Nora's cheeks go pink.

"Big itchy red marks," I say, relieved he picked up that word and not the other.

Farrah furrows her brow. "Like the disease?"

I nod. "All over your body!"

Nora looks like she wants to sink down into her seat. "Not really—"

"Oh yeah!" Cap says, his excited voice a little too loud. "Like the chicken pox you got on your butt, Dad!"

Now it's my turn to heat up as several restaurant patrons turn and stare. I never should have told him that story.

“All right, that’s not dinner table talk, is it?” I whisper.

“You started it,” hums Nora.

“Let’s move on,” I suggest, leaning on my hand in an exaggerated show of embarrassment.

Nora giggles, but Cap takes the lead, talking animatedly about all the cool moves he did today on the hill. They all laugh at me for that one epic wipeout into the snowbank.

I frown. “Are we not going to talk about Nora falling off the ski lift?”

“Excuse me, I didn’t fall. I was knocked over.”

“Literally no difference.”

Cap looks like he’s trying to nobly contain his laughter at the memory. “Sorry, Nora. It was pretty funny because you looked like a starfish when you went down the hill. Then that guy was like, really sorry, but Dad picked you up and the guy kind of just walked away.”

“Maybe he thought you were going to sue him, Cap,” I say.

Cap looks serious. “Should we?”

Now we’re all laughing again.

“Sometimes, people just do silly things, like stand still in front of a moving chair lift,” Nora says. “But maybe you should think about being a lawyer, Cap?”

Cap considers. “Can I be a professional fisherman and a lawyer?”

“Griff took the kid fly fishing this summer and he’s got a whole career path planned out,” I explain.

“It was awesome. Uncle Griff got a fish this big.” Cap stretches his arms as wide as he can, then leans from side to side to stretch the length.

“I think he’s got what it takes,” Nora says, laughing again.

After we order our food, Farrah and Cap tell Nora about their snowshoeing adventure—she missed out by hiding in her room last night.

I’m only half listening—I heard the stories yesterday. Plus, I’m still buzzing from teasing Nora. She looks beautiful, listening to my son. How had I never noticed before?

How had I never felt the way I did when I had her in my arms yesterday?

But I did, didn’t I? I just shoved it down. Ignored it. Pretended it was my pent-up sexual energy I swore I didn’t need to deal with. But now that the real possibility is here, with Nora, I wonder if it *is* time to break it?

My dick threatens to make itself known, so I switch my thoughts to old tennis matches. It usually works. But now there’s Nora on the court, running

after the balls, a sweat breaking out across her freckly skin.

Now she's naked, trying to cover herself with a tennis racket.

The absolute fuck is wrong with me!

I polish off the last of my beer just as our food arrives. I ordered a Moroccan dish, and it smells like heaven. I'll be fine, I just need to eat. I take a bite of the piping hot food, dripping with sauce, and nearly moan at how delicious it is.

Then I chomp down into something mildly firm that squishes in my teeth.

I grimace. "Ugh, this has olives in it!"

"Why'd you order an olive thing when you hate olives?" Cap asks around his slider, as if genuinely confused.

"Did you even read the menu?" Nora asks, her lip curled up in a smile. She knows I didn't.

"It's fine. I love vile salt nuggets."

Nora laughs, and it's the most beautiful sound I've ever heard. "I'll eat them. I love salt nuggets." She reaches across the table and spears one of my olives with her fork, popping it into her plump lips.

Ugh, how is she making olives sexy?

Somehow, we make it through the meal without me ogling my best friend too much, and without inserting Nora into ridiculous scenarios in my head. It helps that I've angled my chair so I'm pointing mostly at Cap, and focus all my attention on him.

But then Cap asks if he can have dessert, and when I look up at the others to see if they want to go, I'm suddenly so distracted by Nora swirling her finger around her wineglass, I nod. "Sure."

"Jude," Farrah says, interrupting Nora's hypnotic movement.

I have to fight not to scowl. I promised I'd try. "Yeah."

"Cap and I—we have something to ask you."

I snap my gaze to them. They're looking at me intently. This can't be good.

"Before you say no, I need you to know the snowshoe instructor says Cap is the best they have seen in a long time. There is a longer, private excursions with the instructors."

"Overnight, Dad!"

"What?" I'm so confused by this it takes me a minute to understand what I think is happening.

"It's a two-night trip," Nora says.

“How do you know that?” I feel accosted.

“It’s in the guidebook. The same instructors as the daytrip they already went on.”

“Are you asking me if you can leave the hotel with my son?” I ask, my voice steely.

All three of them stare at the abrupt shift in my tone. But I don’t know how to not be upset about this.

“Yes, Jude,” Farrah says, lifting her chin. “We are doing good. We are friends.”

Her voice sounds slightly wobbly on that word, but I don’t have time to register what that means. I don’t really care.

“Not a chance.”

The waiter comes by then, asking about dessert. Cap orders something—I don’t know what, I’m too busy fuming.

“You can’t be supportive of this,” I say to Nora.

Nora seems to harden slightly. “I don’t have any say in this.”

“But you can tell me your opinion. You think it’s a good idea for her to take my son away for two nights on some...wilderness adventure? In a country where they don’t speak the language?”

“I speak the language,” Farrah says tightly. She’s getting upset too.

I scowl, grabbing my glass before remembering I said no to another beer. I want to toss the glass aside. We were having a perfect night, then she had to go ahead and ruin it. Christ.

“Well? What do you think?” I ask Nora. I need her to be on my side here. I’m this close to spitting out the words I’d have no trouble saying if Cap weren’t here.

This is the woman who abandoned my son when he was a baby.

It’s like Nora hears me, because she takes her napkin and lays it on the table, her voice calmer than I’ve ever heard it. “Jude, it’s just like the day trip, except they stop at chalets along the way. They wouldn’t be alone for a moment; they’ve got trained professionals with them and—”

“And you’re being ridiculous!” Farrah says.

I’m so surprised at her outburst, for a moment I don’t speak. She looks down. “I am sorry, Cap. Maybe this was not a good idea—”

But when I look at Cap, I’m shocked to see his eyes glistening. “Why are you being mean, Dad?”

My heart fucking cracks at that. In my head, Coach is looking at me like

he's never been more disappointed.

My son has never known me to be like this.

It's Farrah.

It's you! Coach yells.

No, it's her!

The waiter chooses that moment to appear with a plate the size of a turkey platter, with a massive vertical-looking cake on it.

Cap should be bouncing out of his seat, excited about it. Instead, he's looking at me with his eyes big and wet and like he doesn't know me.

"Cap," Nora says softly, standing up. "Your dad and I are going to have a quick talk, okay? You enjoy that dessert—just maybe don't overdo it?"

I cross my arms like a petulant kid.

"Get up," Nora says.

I almost protest, not wanting to leave Cap alone with the woman who has such poor judgment. But Nora looks like she's going to blow her top, and Cap still looks like he's going to burst into tears. So, feeling like the world's biggest asshole for the hundredth time on this trip, I stand up, letting Nora lead me out of the restaurant.

CHAPTER 21

Nora

I'm wearing my glasses, but I can barely see straight, I'm so furious.

When we reach the lobby, Jude says, "Nora—"

"No," I say. I do a quick scan around to see where we can go where I can feel free to lose my shit on him. There's nothing in this place. The lobby is huge and open and there are people everywhere. Except...there's a bar on the far side of the space, behind thick glass doors. Inside, there are lights flashing, and I can hear the thud of loud music even from over here.

I walk over there at a clip, looking over my shoulder to make sure Jude's following. He is, head hung low. When we push inside, the music is deafening. But the place is dark, filled with only a couple of people at this hour, all of them looking more interested in each other than us. I stride to the back of the space, where there's a wall next to an empty dance floor, disco ball spinning overhead.

It's a weird place to have a talk, but I don't think about it. I just spin on him and yell.

"Jude Edmonton Kelly! You are being an absolute piece of shit and it needs to stop!"

Jude looks so taken aback, that for a moment he just stands there sputtering. "You said you'd never use my middle name!" he shouts over the thudding electronic music.

His sister Cass named him after hearing about a place in Canada with the name. He never shared it; not even the media had ever picked it up.

"The situation called for it. Now, listen. Did you see your son in there? Did you see what this never-ending anger toward Farrah is doing to him? He's trying. She's trying. Hell, even I'm trying. You're the only one who isn't."

A couple comes out on the dance floor, laughing and twirling. People in love. Great.

“This place is too loud,” Jude shouts.

“That’s the whole point!”

He runs a hand over his head and lands with his hands on his hips.

“You know you’re in the wrong here, Jude. I know you do. I know you have empathy. I know you want to help people. I see the way you are with kids at your resort. I know all about how you desperately wanted to run a foundation of your own. Think about the naïve young girl she was, and the mistakes she made. You were both there together. You—”

“I know, okay? I fucking know it.”

Even through the din, I know his voice is hoarse with emotion. I know it’s him he hates. Him he blames.

“Do you regret it happening, Jude? And think long and hard about answering that, because you know what it would mean if it never did. You know the person you would be if you hadn’t met her.”

His eyes bore into mine, but I can see the answer. When Farrah turned up with the baby, he’d pulled his whole life together. Without her, he might still be a washed-up ex-celebrity floating around far from home, feeling sorry for himself.

But most of all, without her, there’d be no Cap.

Jude leans back on the wall, his face a picture of agony. He mumbles something I can’t hear, so I step toward him and lean in.

“I’m sorry,” he says in my ear. His hands go to my hips, and it feels so good for a moment I’m dazed by the heat rolling through me at his touch. But I make myself pull back. “You need to say it to them first. And you need to let them go on this trip.”

Then I turn and walk back to the restaurant.

When I get there, Cap and Farrah are just leaving. Cap still looks so upset, and when he sees me, a tear does fall. I kneel down and give him a hug. “Your dad is coming to talk to you, okay?”

“Is he going to say no?” Cap’s voice cracks. It breaks my heart, and I have to work to keep that anger for Jude in check.

I don’t want to make him any promises, so I just brush his tear away. “Listen. I hope not. But if he does, how about we do something amazing, okay? Something right here at the resort. Maybe with the three of us?”

I look up at Farrah, who looks like she’s containing a thousand different

emotions. This poor woman. When I stand up, I tell her I did my best with him, and I sincerely hope he does the right thing.

She nods. “Thank you, Nora. You know the trip—it is for him too. For him and you.”

My stomach plunges as I remember what she’d said on the lift—the thing that had gotten me knocked over.

She was trying to help me and Jude figure our shit out too. All I can do is nod.

Then Farrah’s eyes go over my shoulder. When I turn, I see Jude, looking hangdog, coming across the lobby.

“Good night, sweetie,” I say to Cap, kissing his forehead. Then I leave them on their own.

I consider wandering the hallways at the resort before going back to my room. I haven’t really explored it yet. But I’m wearing these uncomfortable heels, and what if I run into Gunther or worse, Jude?

My stomach does a jump at the thought of him. Tonight was so intense. I feel the stretch of tension in my lower half at how much I physically want him, but also this tug on my heart from how easy it was to hang out with him again at dinner. Then that heat in my chest at how careless he was being with Cap and Farrah’s feelings.

I end up heading back to my room in my stockinged feet, my heels hooked over my fingers. I take the long way, so I at least see a little more of the hotel. This will only be our third night here, but it already feels like so much more.

But I don’t take anything in. All I can think about is Jude.

Jude. Jude. Jude.

He texts me when I’m back on our floor, heading toward my room.

JUDE: I apologized. To both of them. Cap and I cried. I’m so sorry, Nora. I’ve been an idiot.

I hate when he talks about himself like this, but honestly he’s not wrong here.

JUDE: I said they could go on the trip. You were right. I have to trust her more.

JUDE: I have to see you, Nora. Please.

I don’t answer. I don’t know what to say. I go into my darkened room,

tossing my shoes in the closet. My intention is to head to the shower. But instead, I walk to the door connecting our suites. I stand there, my arms braced on the doorframe.

I can't knock. I won't. But it's like I'm pulled to him. Some magnet in my center is drawn toward him, needing to meet its match.

I lean my forehead against the door.

And then there's a knock.

My stomach jumps.

It was a slow thump, vibrating through my body. The side of his fist hitting the door. A desperate, metered-out plea.

"Nora." Jude's voice is muffled. "Please."

My hand shakes, but it acts separately from my brain. Or rather, my brain has powered itself down to only one single word: *Jude*.

I open my door.

Jude's standing there, his shirt unbuttoned at the top, his hair coming loose from its tie, his eyes burning into me like fire.

He reaches a hand out, but instead of something gentle and soft like taking mine, he grasps the fabric of my dress at my waist and pulls me toward him, crushing my lips with his.

The kiss is hard, deep, and so intense my whole body electrifies—across my skin and inward too, in a sharp jag to the very core of me. Jude's lips are soft against mine, his tongue urgent and needy. My dress is still fisted in his hand, and he pulls me backward, not breaking our connection until he's slid me sideways, against the wall.

"Nora," he rasps as he leans in and nestles himself into my neck. "Nora, Nora, Nora." His lips graze my skin, his free hand pressed against the wall over my head. "You're running through my veins, Nora."

He wedges his knee between my legs, urging them apart. Finally, he lets go of my dress, sliding his hands down my sides, grasping my hips like he did before, only this time, his touch isn't gentle and tentative. It's raw and demanding. Needy and hard and soft at the same time.

"Is this okay?" he asks as he slides me onto his thigh. "Us? This?"

I whimper as heat zings up my legs, centralizing where my body meets his, in my very center. "I don't know, Jude," I gasp as my body moves on its own, rocking against his rock-hard quad. He's so hard, all of him; the long lean body of an athlete still. I tip my face up. "I can't answer that for you."

Jude's grip tightens on me, his fingers pressed against the flesh of my ass.

He lowers his forehead onto mine. “That’s not what I was asking, Nor. I mean, is this okay for you, us doing this?”

Heat curls between my legs, but a warmth spreads deep in my chest, too. “Yes,” is all I can manage, my voice breathless. “Yes, I want it. But what about you? Your priest status?”

Jude grins, running a thumb along my temple. “I’m a bad priest.” Then he dips his head down and kisses me again, his tongue against mine, his hands sliding up my ribs.

“Wait,” I breathe, breaking the kiss. “You didn’t say it was okay with you; those still aren’t the words—”

“Nora.” Jude’s hands slide up to my face, cupping it in his hands. “I want to fuck you. Is that clear enough?”

My insides clench against the onslaught of fiery heat, and I nod. “Yes.”

Jude picks me up then, lifting me easily, and I wrap my legs around his waist. “I want to fuck you too,” I manage as he carries me over toward the bed.

“Nora Albright, was that a curse word?”

I laugh, and it loosens the nerves I didn’t realize were keeping everything coiled up tight.

Jude pauses as he reaches the bed. “You just tell me if you want to stop, Nora. Anytime, okay?”

I’m wrapped around his body, my forearms on his shoulders, my face an inch from his. And my need is so intense I can’t breathe. “I don’t want to stop,” I manage.

“Good,” Jude growls. “Because this is going to be fucking glorious.”

Then he tosses me onto the bed.

CHAPTER 22

Nora

As Jude stands above me, unbuttoning his shirt with agonizing slowness, a grin planted on his beautiful face, I have the most horrible thought.

“Jude!” I prop myself up on my elbows. “What if this is a dream?”

It sounds so stupid when I say it out loud. And Jude laughs, too. But it’s not cruel. He kneels on the bed. Straddles me, still unbuttoning his shirt.

“I have a little trick for when I think I’m dreaming and need to be sure.” He’s finally got the shirt undone, and slides it over his shoulders, revealing the gorgeous expanse of his lean, hard chest, and stomach.

“Maybe you shouldn’t do it,” I say. “I don’t want this to end.”

Jude laughs again. “Fuck, Nora. You couldn’t get any better, you know that?” He pulls his shirt off one arm, then the other, his shoulders flexing as he does, and it’s all I can do not to melt back into the bed.

He falls forward suddenly, startling me. He lands on both arms next to me, so our faces are only a few inches apart. “Want to see the trick?”

I’m not sure if he’s still talking about the dream trick or some kind of sex trick, but either way, all I can do is nod.

He slides a hand up my throat, along my jaw and into my hair. But then he pauses. “Wait. Just in case you’re right.”

He retracts his hand and brings it to the top of my dress, slipping his fingers in the top. I shiver at the feeling of his knuckles against my bare skin, then gasp as he pulls the top of the dress down along with the top of my strapless bra. He exposes one breast, then with a slide of his hand to my other side, the other.

“Fuck, Nora. I knew these were beautiful.”

He dips his head down, pulling my nipple into the wet warmth of his mouth, sucking softly at first, then harder, flicking at its tip with his tongue.

I make a choking sound—it’s all I can manage as his hand cups the flesh of my breast to better his access.

Jude gets down on his elbows, grasping the other one too as I fall back, practically dissolving under the feeling of him lavishing attention on my breasts.

“Perfect,” Jude announces before switching to the other side, tugging at that nipple with a nip of his teeth, making me cry out.

I’ve never cared for anyone touching me here—besides the little zing of excitement at someone touching me in a place normally covered, but all I can remember are crude squeezes and kisses. It was always so uncomfortable. But this? This is straight-up erotic. His hands and tongue are making me writhe under him, arching my back so he can get better access.

“I didn’t know—” I breathe.

His teeth clamp down on my nipple again, tugging gently, and I cry out a second time. “Jude, I didn’t know this could feel that good.”

Jude’s head pops back up. “We’re just getting started, love.”

Okay, now I *am* going to melt.

“I wanted to make sure I at least got a test before we see if we’re dreaming. But maybe we should wait until we’re done.”

I laugh, despite myself. “I don’t think we are. God, I hope not.” I get back on my elbows, growing serious again. “Show me your trick.”

Now it’s Jude’s turn to laugh. But he brings his hand up behind my head again, threading his fingers through my hair. He grips it like he did my dress and pulls back, gently, but firmly, so my head tips backward, my chin up.

“This okay?”

“Yes,” I gasp.

Then he gives a quick hard tug that’s got just a hint of pain in it. To my surprise, it feels like his mouth did on my breasts. Shockingly good. I gasp, my head hitting the palm of his hand on the bed. “Jude!”

“Sorry, it was the only way. Are you awake?”

“Yes,” I say, almost giddy. “And…” I hesitate.

Jude hovers over me, waiting for what I have to say.

My heart thunders. *Brave. Be brave.* “I liked that,” I say, almost whispering.

“Really?” Jude pulls his hand away and lifts himself back up again, his arms once more bracketing my head. “You like it a little rough, Nor? I never would have guessed.”

“Me neither,” I confess.

“I’m not a Dom or anything,” he says, almost apologetically.

I smile. “I don’t know if I’d like it if you were. I just like you... manhandling me a little.”

“Fuck,” Jude groans. “I didn’t think this could get any better,” he whispers. “But in that case...” He rises back up to his knees. “Let me see what I can do for the pretty lady.”

He brings his hands low, to my hips.

“Wait!” I whisper. Then I pull my glasses off, handing them to him. “I don’t want to have to wear the bedazzled ones for the rest of the trip.”

Jude laughs. “Shit, I wouldn’t mind that.” But he takes them from me and I hear a clink as he sets them on the side table.

“Ready, baby?”

My heart flutters. “Yes.” The feeling of finally doing this with Jude, after all these years of being completely convinced he’d never see me this way, is heart-pounding enough. But there’s an added thrill of only being able to see vague shapes, of having to trust Jude so completely as I can’t anticipate what he’s doing.

But I do trust him. And when I feel his hands on my hips, I shiver. “What are you going to do, Jude?”

“I’m going to turn you over, sweetheart.”

My stomach flips and I nod. “Good. Yes.”

Then he does it. Flips me right over so I’m on my stomach, my loose hair flipped over across the bed.

“Then I’m going to pull this beautiful ass up,” he growls, hooking his fingers under my hips and lifting, so I’m on my knees. “And see what’s underneath.”

He grasps the dress in his fists and does exactly what he promised. He pulls it up, over my flesh, so I feel cool air dance against my pantyhose-covered lower half.

Jude sucks his teeth, and I feel his hands trailing over my cheeks. “Fucking perfection. Just like a peach.”

“Oh God,” I let out in a shaky breath, as his fingers dance over my most delicate parts.

“Fuck,” Jude rasps. “You’re wet, Nora. I can feel how wet you are.”

I’ve soaked my panties. I read about that in books, but I didn’t know I could do that. I’d never felt this aroused before. Not once.

Jude's fingers trail up and down my covered pussy and I lean into him, groaning.

"Are these stockings precious to you, Nora?"

I consider, tipping my face toward him even though I can only see an outline. "I mean, I only brought a few pairs..." My breath hitches as his other hand joins the first, plucking gently at the seat of my pantyhose. "I do like to have extra—"

I'm interrupted by the rip of fabric, the air hitting the bare flesh of my inner thighs now.

"Sorry," he grunts. "I'll buy you more."

Then without any more pretense, one of his hands rests on my back as he slides the gusset of my panties aside with the other. Jude's fingers slip into my wetness, making me gasp.

"Fuck, Nora. You're soaked for me."

I'm already seeing stars. Could I possibly...could he make me...

I don't want to get ahead of myself. But I also want him to do more, so I widen my stance on the bed, opening myself for him.

"You want more, baby, don't you?" Jude asks.

I nod. "Yes," I whimper. "Touch me more. Put your fingers..." I can't finish, suddenly shy.

"Inside this pretty pussy?" he finishes for me. "Fucking gladly."

Then he's dipping a finger into me, and it feels so incredible, I push back onto him. "More," I whisper.

Jude adds another finger, and I can't help myself, I pull up and slide down on that, too. "I have a...toy at home," I whisper. It's shaped like...you know. And it fills me completely—"

Jude growls, adding a third finger now. "Fuck, Nora. You're telling me you fuck a dildo at home?"

I nod. I can't believe I'm telling him this. I've never told anyone this. "And a vibrator too, a little thing I put on my clit and—"

Jude presses down on my back suddenly, so my chest hits the bed, my body more exposed to him. "Keep going," he growls, before pulling out his fingers and replacing them with his tongue.

I cry out at the sensation of his face being there, too excited to be embarrassed. "Oh God, Jude!"

He pulls his mouth away. "I said keep going, Nora. Please."

Right. "I—" I gasp as his tongue slides up my length, landing on my clit.

I shudder at the feeling of his tongue there, the swirl of sensation where he's circling me. "Oh my God—" I manage. "I...I have a little toy that touches me there, and vibrates and that's how I come, Jude. I need both those things and I fuck the dildo while I let the vibrator press against my clit and—"

Jude's tongue intensifies. I'm panting now, the feeling of his face there so good I can't breathe. But I think of my setup at home, how elaborate it is, and how the only other way I can come is with a showerhead.

I'm so into this I can't speak; the words are gone; I just moan. Jude pulls away. "Nora? You okay?"

"Yes," I pant, my head spinning from his touch and now its absence.

Jude hooks his fingers over the waistband of my pantyhose and underwear and gently tugs them down. "Still okay?"

"Yes," I moan.

Once they're down around my thighs, Jude pulls his hands away. Then one comes back, firmly, on my ass. The smack makes me gasp. It's not hard enough to hurt, not really. "Jude," I say, my heart pounding.

"Still okay?"

I never understood the appeal of this. Now, I do. Very much. "Do it again."

"As you wish." His hand comes down again, harder this time, making my ass sting.

"Again!"

He complies, and this time I shriek, it feels so good. "Can you...I want you to..." I chew my lip, nerves spiking. "I want you to do it while you're inside of me."

Jude groans. "Fuck, Nora. You have no idea how hard it is for me not to fucking come right now, and my dick is still in my pants."

"Then get it out."

"Nora," he warns. He grips my ass where he smacked it before, and the heat there is almost too much.

"I'm not going to fuck you until you come, Nora. Over and over again, if I can help it."

I tense. Those words should thrill me, but instead, I find myself suddenly self-conscious. I have to tell him. "Jude, I can't—"

His hands are caressing my ass now, but he pauses. "You want me to stop?"

"No. Don't stop anything. It's just, I can't...you know. Do it like this. I

don't think."

For a moment, Jude doesn't move. "You mean you can't come?"

"Not without...accessories."

"Does it still feel good for me to touch you there?"

"Yes!" I blurt, maybe too fast.

"Then let's do more of that. Then we'll do whatever it takes to make you come. Because I need to see you do that again, Nora. Only this time, with me touching you.

"Okay," is all I manage. Jude turns me back around then, gently this time. "I need you more naked, though," he says.

"Then you have to be, too."

"I don't know, maybe keeping my pants on will help keep me from coming."

"You just said you were going to do it in your pants!"

"There's always the possibility."

"Jude." I stand up on the bed, which isn't easy with the pantyhose and underwear caught around my thighs. But I manage. "Pass me my glasses."

"You sure?"

"Just give me them!" I hold out my hand like we're at movie night and he's hogging the popcorn.

Jude laughs, but a moment later I feel the press of my glasses in my hand. I put them on my face, and Jude's beautiful face comes into focus. For a moment I almost lose my nerve. But I see the way he's looking at me, a smile quirked on his lips. Then at the way his eyes drop to my breasts, still exposed for him. He looks like he wants me. And I'm emboldened once again. I pull my dress over my head, along with my bra, then step out of the pantyhose and underwear.

When I'm standing fully naked before him up on the bed, Jude closes his eyes. He's still on the floor, but with his height, his head is as high as my chest.

"Jesus, Nora." He opens his eyes again. "I'd be lying if I said I never pictured you naked. But now that I see it...fuck. You're stunning, Nor. Fucking perfect."

His hand is sliding down the front of his pants, gliding over the long, thick bulge there.

"You want to fuck me?" I ask, proud that my voice keeps steady.

"More than I've ever wanted anything in my goddamned life."

“I thought you used to be a pro athlete.”

“I was. And I’d throw all that shit away for this.”

I smile. “Don’t say that.”

“Don’t be so hot.”

I laugh. Then I sober again. “Okay, Jude. It’s time. Show me your—” I wave a hand at his crotch. How was I that bold but wasn’t able to say the word for it?

Jude waggles his eyebrows. “Penis?”

I bite my cheek but can’t contain the laughter. “Yeah. That.”

“Don’t call it that when we’re having sex, okay?”

“What should I call it?”

“I dunno.” He unbuckles his belt, sliding it out of the loops. That movement makes my skin prickle with goose bumps, but I focus on watching. “Maybe...Little Willy?”

I snap my eyes up. “Jude, what?”

He laughs. Not just a little either. He tips his head back and lets loose. “I’m sorry,” he says finally, pulling me close to him. “I’m sorry. Just call it whatever you want.”

“Penis?”

Jude dips his head, his shoulders shaking.

I laugh. “Okay, fine.” I push him away. “Cock. How’s that?”

When Jude looks up, he’s still smiling, but his pupils have widened at the sound of that word. “I like that.”

“So show me your cock, Jude.”

Jude’s expression is devilish. “You want my cock, Nora? Is that it?”

Suddenly we’re back to business, and I’m not upset about it. It’s exactly where I want to be. “Yes.” I massage my breasts for him, and he catches one of my nipples in his mouth, claspng it gently between his teeth and flicking at it with his tongue, before releasing it.

“Good. Because I want to give it to you.”

Jude backs up then and unbuttons his pants; his zipper makes a sharp sound as he pulls it down, then his pants fall to the floor.

“You want to see?”

I nod, my tongue darting out over my lips. “I want to taste.”

Jude’s eyes roll up slightly. “Fuck me.”

He drops his shorts.

His cock is nothing short of gorgeous; as beautiful as the rest of him.

I drop down to sitting, sliding to the edge of the bed. “Can I?” I ask.

Jude holds his stiff length in his hand. “You want to suck my cock, Nora?”

“Maybe.” I smile. Then I reach forward and grasp it with both hands. It’s big and thick; about the size of my dildo. Only I don’t have to pretend it’s Jude anymore. Because that’s the part I didn’t tell him. That the only way I can come as easily as I do with the tools is imagining it’s him.

I take him into my mouth—just the tip; just enough to taste the salty slickness at its tip.

Jude groans, sliding his hands in my hair. He pulls me onto him, sliding himself into my mouth.

It’s so hot I feel my pussy clench.

“Can you take it all, Nor?” Jude asks. “Can we try? Just for a minute, because I’m going to find a way to make you come before...”

He pauses. “Oh fuck.”

I take him deeper, feeling his head hit the back of my throat.

“Nora,” he says, moaning for a moment as I keep him there, flicking my tongue on the underside of his cock.

Then he pulls out of me. “Nora, I don’t have any condoms. Do you? I didn’t think...”

I’m still holding his cock. “You haven’t had sex in eight years, right?”

Jude nods. “And I got tested after.”

“Well, the same thing for me...only not that long.” I look away. Long enough though. It’s been two years since I had sex. “I’m clear too, and I’ve got an IUD...”

“We can wait, if you’d be more comfortable,” he says, though I saw the way his nostrils flared when he realized what I was saying.

I don’t answer him with my words. I just take him in my mouth again and shake my head. “No,” I say around his dick. “I want you to fuck me tonight, Jude. Now.”

Then I loosen my jaw and my throat and take him all the way down.

Jude grunts, pressing his hands into my hair, pulling me off and slamming me back down. “Nora,” he manages as he fucks my face. “We need to stop this or I’m going to come before—”

But it’s too late. I feel him tense. “Shit, Nora, I’m sorry. I’ll pull out. You don’t have to—”

He tries to pull out of me, but I don’t let him. I hold him against me, and

then he's shooting hot spurts of his release into my throat. He grits his teeth, making a guttural sound as he comes, urging his dick as far as it will go into my throat.

"Goddammit," he gasps as he finally slackens in my mouth.

I pull away, licking my lips.

"Nora, I'm so sorry, I—"

"No," I say vehemently. "That was amazing."

He drops to his knees then, his hands still in my hair. Then he kisses me, his tongue sweeping my mouth, where his cock just was.

Then he pulls back. "It's been so long. I knew I wouldn't last long, but that was...damn. It was too good."

I smile. But I wonder if now that's going to be it? If we're going to go back to our separate rooms and—

But Jude's hands are already moving down my body, pushing me gently back on the bed. "The good news is, I'm basically twenty-four in dick years. So I'll be ready to go again momentarily."

I lift my head up, my heart soaring. How could I ever think Jude would be a selfish lover? Just because those were all I'd ever known?

CHAPTER 23

Jude

I'm still reeling from the feel of Nora's lips wrapped around my cock. More than that, from the feeling of letting my load go down her throat. She took all of me, then she swallowed. My best friend has turned out to be a hot fucking minx in bed—and now I get to show her how good I can make her feel.

“No pressure,” I tell her as I spread her legs wide for me. “This is my favorite part, okay? I'm just going to eat this beautiful pussy for as long as you'll let me, then we'll make you come together.”

“Okay,” she whispers. I'm not sure I'll ever not associate that soft voice with sex now. I'm fucking done for.

I lift her legs so they're hooked over my shoulders, then I go to fucking town.

I've never understood men who say they don't like this. It's the most delicious, sexy, carnal fucking privilege to go down on a woman. And Nora?

The last women I saw were, granted, a total blur. But this is the prettiest pussy I've ever seen. Pink and swollen with need, topped by a thatch of little red curls.

I lift my head up, inserting two fingers inside of her. Then a third, making her moan my name. “I haven't been able to stop thinking about your pussy, Nora.” I tug my fingers against her G-spot. “Ever since you let me see it. Fuck, I thought I'd died and gone to heaven then. But this...Jesus.”

I dip down, taking her clit with my tongue.

I don't ever remember it being this good. As I slide my tongue up her slick pussy, already soaked with her sweet wetness, I know I've never tasted anything so delicious.

“You taste like a peach too, baby,” I say against her lips. Then I thrust my

tongue inside. I play with her, teasing her clit with my tongue, making her arch her back, all the while working my fingers inside of her.

I know I can make her come like this. Maybe not now, but later. Her thighs are tense around me, she's overthinking things, just like a menu. If I can spend the rest of this trip learning how to make her come, I'll leave a happy man. I shove aside the sharp pain that comes with the thought of us separating again. It's not hard to do now, not with my face buried between her legs. She's gasping, moaning, writhing, but I know she's not going to come. So I pull out, reaching for her hands instead.

"Come on," I say. I pull her off the bed. "You're going to finish for me."

"Jude, it's okay—"

"Unless you don't want to, I fucking insist, Nora. Nothing would make me happier."

Nora nods, letting me lead her, naked and fucking glowing, toward the tub. I help her inside, then get the water to the right temperature.

"Open your legs for me, baby."

I'm still standing at the head of the tub, like I was before. Only this time, I'm naked too. And I've got my cock, fully engorged again like I knew it would be, in my hand.

I hand her the showerhead.

"Show me again, baby," I say. "And this time I'm going to touch, if that's okay."

Nora nods, aiming the jet directly at her pussy. I preside over her as she lets the water pound into her flesh, stroking my cock while I watch.

Her eyes meet mine, and I nod, reassuring her. "You're perfect, baby."

I didn't put the plug in, so it's just her, naked and wet in the bottom of the tub. I'm not going to let myself come, just her, but fuck it feels good to stroke it like I wanted to that time. I pull on my balls with my free hand, gritting my teeth as Nora writhes under the water, her moans intensifying. But she doesn't take her eyes off mine.

"Jude," she says, her voice anxious, barely audible above the splatter of the water. "Don't come, please."

"I won't, baby." Still, I stroke. It's better this time; I'm not so keyed up. "I'll wait for you."

"Don't come after, either."

She's close, I can tell. She's breathing hard, pulling the hose up closer. Fuck, I don't want to be made a liar—I slow down. *Stroke*. "Why not, love?"

I ask, even though I think I know what she wants. *Stroke.*

“Because I want to f-feel you...” She gasps. “I want to feel you...”

“Say it, Nora. I know you can.”

“I want to feel you come inside me! I want to feel you shooting yourself into me. I want to feel it dripping out of me after, I—”

Fuck. I stop stroking, because she comes then, and I was about to too. She bucks and shakes, her back curved, tits heaving.

Oh my fucking God—this woman was next to me this whole time? She put up with my shit and watched me blather away to servers and guests and the guy at the grocery store and supported my son and me through everything big and small we went through for years, and this was her underneath it all?

I already knew she was brilliant and funny and caring behind that soft-spoken exterior. But now I know she’s a fucking smoke show who knows what she wants in bed, who uses a dildo to get off at home—Christ, has she thought about me when she does that?

Finally, Nora settles down, though her neck is still pulsing, her chest rising up and down. She’s looking at me—no, she’s looking at my cock. She turns off the jet and puts the hose back in its place. Then she reaches up and grasps me in her wet hands, taking me into her mouth once more.

“No,” I grit as I feel myself slipping down her throat, her lips brushing my base. “You should come again.”

She shakes her head but doesn’t release my cock. I groan at the feel of her, knowing if she does this for any more than a minute, I’ll be fucking it up again.

“Nora—” I can’t stay here arguing, so I pull away from her, my cock throbbing with the loss of her.

“Come here, baby.” I help her out of the tub and lift her up so my cock is brushing the back of her ass. I carry her, still dripping, to the closest place I can find—the window looking out over the hill.

I know no one can see inside, but there’s still something indescribably hot about pressing her up against the cool glass. She gasps, looking nervously behind her at the flood lights on the hill, the night skiers carving arcs down the white slope. “Jude, are you serious?”

“Is this okay? They can’t see us.”

I grip her ass and line my cock up with her swollen pussy. Her eyelids flutter.

For a minute I feel that familiar pang: that this was a terrible idea. “We

can move to the bed.”

But Nora shakes her head, making the wet ends of her hair slide around her chest. “No. Stay here. I can’t really see.” She laughs then, and it sends waves of warmth through me, knocking up against the heat still roaring below.

“Now, Jude,” she whispers.

I grin, not waiting. Then I slide her down on my cock, filling her completely.

The feeling of her warmth around me is nothing short of fucking bliss.

“It’s perfect,” I say, kissing her neck. I meet her eye. “You’re perfect.”

Then my body takes over. My mind loses itself to the fucking ecstasy of fucking Nora. She cries out with each thrust, her still-wet back sliding easily on the glass, her tits bouncing as I fill her and pull out and fill her again. My arms start to tremble from holding her up, but I don’t stop. I keep going, until Nora cries my name. “Jude...”

I meet her eyes, wondering if this is what it will take to make her come, but she just smiles at me and that’s when I lose it, my orgasm cresting over me like a hard surf, making my whole body tense as I release everything I’ve got into her. I stay there for a moment afterward, unable to move, even as I know my arms are going to give out.

“I’m going to pass out,” I say as I pull her off of me. “Right here, I’m going to fall down, and you’ll have to drag me to the nurse’s room and then I’ll have to write an apology to the hotel and—

Nora laughs. “Come on, big guy. Let’s get you to bed.”

I really do pass out pretty soon after we fall into bed together, Nora’s legs tangled in mine under the duvet. All my senses are taxed, every one.

“Are you glad we did it, Nora?”

“Hmm?” She’s sleepy too; I can feel her eyelashes flutter against my chest.

“Are you glad we did that, or are you going to wake up tomorrow and think this is the worst decision of your life?”

“You sound like me, Jude. Overthinking things. There’ll be plenty of time for that tomorrow. Nearly a whole week left. Or something.”

I stroke her hair and don’t say anything, but the lightest brush of worry slides over me. Nora sighs and rolls off of me, resting her head on the pillow.

But she backs her ass up so it's pressed against me, and I curl around her, pressing my lips to her shoulder.

She's right, we've got less than a week left. Then I'm going home and she's staying in Europe for a whole other year and then what? Do we stay friends who fuck? I don't know if that would work.

But I don't know if anything else would, either.



“Jude!” Nora’s voice cuts through my sleep.

At first, when I blink awake, I’m deeply confused. Nora’s got her hands on my shoulders, shaking me.

And she’s naked. In my bed.

There’s a trilling noise, which has me sitting bolt upright.

“Jude, I’m going to answer it. It might be important.”

Before I fully grasp what’s going on through the haze of sleep, Nora’s reaching over me, picking up the receiver of the phone on the bedside table.

“Hello?”

Nora meets my eyes. There’s concern there. “Yes, you did call him. No, it’s okay.” There’s a pause. “We’ll be right there.”

She hangs up, grabbing her glasses. “Jude, it’s Cap. He’s sick.”

“What?!” I explode out of bed, searching madly for my clothes.

Nora’s wrapped a towel around herself, and if this were literally any other time, I might admire the view. But it’s not. My son is sick, and I’m not there.

“Jude, it’s okay. It’s his stomach—she thinks he just overdid it at dinner.”

I relax only slightly, grabbing the jeans and underwear I threw over the back of the chair yesterday when changing for dinner. “What does that mean?”

“It means he’s not feverish. But he is throwing up.”

I freeze with only my shorts on, my stomach roiling in a very bad way. “He’s barfing?” Even the word makes me gag.

“Yes, Jude.”

“Oh fuck. Nora, I can’t do barf. You have to come with me.”

“I was going to come anyway. If that was okay.”

I give her a quick hug, kissing her forehead. “You’re a lifesaver, Nor.”

Something passes over her face, but she smiles and nods. “I’ll go get

dressed.”

Both of us manage to make it into clothes and reconvene outside within what feels like approximately thirty seconds, and in another couple of minutes, I’m banging on Farrah’s door. She answers, looking frazzled as hell.

“Oh thank you,” she says, holding open the door for us. This is a two-bedroom suite, and all I can see is the living area.

“Which room is he?” I ask, knowing I sound abrupt. But I need to see Cap.

“There,” she says, pointing at a door slightly ajar. I stride toward it, hearing, “I don’t know what to do. I help him to change, but then he is vomit again.”

I step inside the dark room, where there’s a tiny lump on the bed. But I only make it to the threshold—the smell of vomit hits me then, sending my stomach rolling.

“Oh God—”

I step back out, whirling around, fairly close to panic.

“I’ll check on him,” Nora says, seeing my distress.

“No! I mean, yes, come with me, but I have to see him myself.”

“He is okay. I think he is sleeping,” Farrah says. “But he was asking for you before.” I only register now just how frazzled she looks. Her hair is everywhere; she’s got sweat on her forehead. And—I squint—a blotch of multicolored...

I gag.

“Is Jude sick too?” Farrah asks behind me.

“He’s not good with vomit,” Nora says.

Farrah frowns. “He is scared?”

“I’m not scared!” I bark. “It’s just...that’s not meant to be on the outside.”

Nora’s got the barest hint of a smile on her face. “I’m going to go in.” She doesn’t wait for me, just disappears into the room like a soldier.

“You can wait out here?” Farrah points to the sofa.

“I’m fine,” I manage, covering my mouth with my hand. I take a breath of the relatively fresh air in the living room, then another, then barrel into Cap’s room.

Nora’s squatting next to him on the bed. There are towels, and the hotel’s

ice bucket next to the bed. I don't inspect it too closely. She was right, he's asleep.

"Poor little guy," Nora says, stroking his forehead.

I cup his head, forgetting everything for a moment except how beautiful this child is. How much I love him wholeheartedly.

My stomach clenches, only this time, it's not from the stench, which I can't currently smell anyway, given I'm still holding my breath. It's the gravity of my love for my son. He and my family—they're the only ones I know for sure love me and me them, because they're stuck with me.

Nora, her tousled red hair loose, her whole body leaning toward the boy who's like a part of my heart walking around on the outside—she could leave me at any time. She already did leave me.

I let out my breath, and when I inhale again, the stench is overpowering.

Nora sees. "I'm going to crank up the air con; maybe that'll help." Damn hotel windows that don't open. I nod, wondering if I need to run to the bathroom myself, my stomach's churning so hard.

Just then Cap opens his eyes. "Dad!" he says, weakly.

The urge I had to run vanishes. "Hey, dude," I say, leaning in and kissing his barf-scented cheek. My stomach squishes, but I just focus on Cap's face.

"You came," he says, his voice crackly.

The hum of the HVAC comes on then, and I breathe a little easier just knowing the scent will at least be chilled in a few minutes.

I glance over to where Nora's closing the little control panel by the bedroom door. "Of course I came. I'm always here for you. Nora's here too."

Cap lights up as Nora comes back around the bed. Then he grimaces. "I barfed."

"I know, buddy."

"A lot."

"That's okay."

"Can you stay with me?"

"I'm already taking off my shoes."

"Nora, can you stay too?"

Nora looks to me. "Please stay," I say, trying not to sound desperate. I can't help noticing how these are the words running through my mind back when we drove her to the airport that day.

Does she see? Is she scared off by my need for her?

"Of course I'll stay. Jude, maybe you guys should go wash Cap off? I'll

go tell Farrah what's going on."

The relief coursing through me is outsized for the situation, and it's not just about having help with Cap.

Half an hour later, Cap is bathed, the barf shampooed out of his hair, and in clean pajamas. Luckily the bed seems unscathed, and Nora has mercifully cleaned up the bucket and towels, so the space is clean by the time we're done.

"You need anything else, honey?" Nora asks my boy, holding his hand as she sits on the bed on the opposite side of him from me.

"No." Cap yawns again. "I have you guys. I don't need anything else in the whole world."

My chest fucking clamps at that. I don't dare look at Nora. Instead, I sit down next to him, stretching my legs out, and flick off the bedside lamp.

"Wait," Cap says tentatively.

"What is it?" I ask.

"Nora, can you sing our song to me?"

Nora and Cap have a song? Since when? I've never heard Nora sing, except for the odd time I've caught her singing along to a song on the radio. I'm tempted to ask, but I don't want to shatter the moment.

I want to hear her sing.

Nora's quiet, as if deciding, her back against the headboard like mine. The only light is what's coming in from the window outside—moonlight and the low glow from the exterior lighting. Her features are bathed in the cool light, but I can't see her eyes because of her glasses.

"Okay," she whispers finally.

She's as unable to refuse as I am when he asks stuff in that sweet little sick kid voice.

I hold my breath, waiting.

Then she begins.

*Sail bonny boat, like a bird on
the wing...over the sea to Skye.*

I actually know Skye. I spent some time in Scotland after Wimbledon

way back when, and know it's an island up in the Highlands. Nora's voice is soft and sweet, delicate and almost sad. I mean, it's probably the song, too. But I picture her standing by the sea, her red hair on the wind with those dark gray clouds mirroring the gray surf.

Cap is holding each of our hands, and by the time Nora's finished, his little sweaty hand has gone slack in mine. Nora turned off the air con while we were in the bathroom, so the only sound I hear now is the soft hum of air in the system and Cap's little breaths.

But Nora's voice echoes in my mind.

"When did you sing that to him?" I ask.

"All those times he wanted me to put him to bed when I was over at your place."

"How did I never hear?"

A beat passes. "I always made sure to be quiet."

The words land like stones in my heart. Had she always been keeping quiet? Had I made it that way because of my blathering presence?

"You have a beautiful voice."

"Please. Reese is much better." She's talking about her best friend back home, my brother Eli's partner. She's a famous singer currently blowing up the charts.

"Your voice is yours, Nora. I like it best."

Nora's quiet, and I switch the hand holding Cap so I'm able to reach over and touch Nora too. I brush her hair from her cheek. When she turns to me, her expression is kind of faraway. "My dad's mom used to sing that song to me," she says. "Her grandmother came over from Scotland as a scullery maid. Grandma said her Nana used to hum that song to her when she put her to sleep. She'd hold her Nana's hand, calloused from the years of hard work, while Nana sang a song from the home she left behind."

I thought I knew Nora inside and out. We talked almost every day back home. I know her dad is buried in the cemetery in Greenville, not far from Quince Valley, and that she visits him every couple of months. I know she has a brother who's a pilot who she loves but doesn't see much of as he's based in Cincinnati and does mostly long-haul flights. Her mom left them when she was too young to remember much of her, and she and her brother were raised in North Carolina but moved to Vermont when she was a teenager. I know she likes green beans and zucchini but can't stand any other squash, unless it's pumpkin pie. But even then, she prefers sweet potato.

She's timid and scared of change and speaking out loud and sometimes the dark, and she'd rather read books than watch TV but loves recording videos and watches endless movies with me—the latter because I love them. Her favorite musical piece is Chopin's "Raindrop" prelude. And I know she loves Cap and loves me, at least in some way.

But it's not enough. I don't know the story of her family. I don't know her favorite book when she was a kid or what she wanted to be when she grew up or whether she misses her mom like I do. I didn't know she had a great-great-grandma from Scotland. As I cup her cheek, my son between us, I feel a kind of desperate sadness, like the time for learning all that is past. Because it is—we're parting ways in a matter of days.

"What are you thinking about?" Nora asks.

I don't hesitate. "You," I whisper.

I swear I feel her cheek warm under my hand. I pull her toward me then and brush my lips against hers, inhaling her floral scent and feeling the soft splay of her hair against my fingers.

When I pull away, Nora presses her lips together as if unsure what to say. A tear rolls down her cheek, glistening in the low light. She quickly swipes it away with her palm.

My heart starts to crack. "Why are you crying?"

"Because we can't stay here forever."

Then it fully does.

But I take Nora's hand, holding it tight on her lap. "You know when I was really young, when I first started competing, I used to have to go away for weeks at a time. I missed my family. One time I was having a shit day on the court, and my coach was sick. We had this stand-in, and he caught me crying after losing a match. I think I only let myself do it because my regular coach wasn't there."

My regular coach would have screamed at me for crying. This one treated me like a human being. "You know what he taught me about feelings?"

"What?" Nora whispers.

"He said feelings are your brain trying to get you to change something that sometimes can't be changed. That the only way to keep them from affecting my game, was to remember there was no past, no present. Nothing except the game I was in."

"Are you saying I should be playing tennis?"

I smile because I know she's joking to try to deflect. "No, Nor. I'm

saying let's just have these moments right now, without worrying about where we came from or what's going to happen next. Right now, we're here in our little fam—our little unit. And I can't think of any place I'd rather be."

Nora's hand feels almost stiff in mine. Maybe I shouldn't have used a tennis metaphor. But then she looks over at me. "You're right, Jude. We have tonight, and maybe tomorrow. I'll just keep my eye on the ball."

"That's my girl," I say, running a thumb over the back of her hand.

She doesn't say anything after that.

CHAPTER 24

Nora

The four of us wake up a little worse for wear—though I think Jude and I are feeling the worst of it, given the length of last night.

We woke up only a couple of hours after we fell asleep, sometime around five, and Jude hasn't stopped yawning yet. He insists he's fine though, and we all head down to breakfast together.

"I would like to go to town today, to pick up some supplies for our trip," Farrah announces.

"And I need new mittens!" Cap says, fully recovered from last night and chipper as a cheerleader. "The other ones got all wet and my fingers were freezing, but Gerrard gave me a hot pack thing to warm them up and—"

"Who's Gerrard?" Jude asks, his bacon suspended where he'd been about to take a bite.

"He's the tour leader," I say, stifling a yawn. Farrah and Cap told us all this when they recounted their first trip.

"He is very good at his job," Farrah says, and is it just me or do I notice a little blush on her cheeks? She looks beautiful, even after the exhausting night, though she did get a solid sleep after we took over with Cap.

It's only when we run into Gerrard in the lobby on the way back to the elevator that I confirm it had to be a blush.

"Farrah," he says, reaching out two hands to cup her shoulders and giving her two European kisses on the cheek.

She titters. "Hello, Gerrard."

The man looks like a stand-in for James Bond with his almost comically chiseled cheekbones and dimple in his chin. He even has a little mustache.

"And Cap, my fearless explorer." He kneels down next to Cap, who gives him a hearty high five.

Jude stands there next to me, practically gaping. “This is their tour guide?” he whispers.

“He looks pretty capable,” I say, smiling broadly.

Jude glares at me, but then Farrah’s making introductions and we’re all chatting about their trip tomorrow.

Despite Jude looking like he wants to possibly pick a fight with the guy, Gerrard tells him all about all the safety precautions they take, including a satellite phone, heat source, and emergency camping equipment, and after reassuring him that the route will only ever take them one mile out of range of civilization at any given time, Jude seems to relax. That is, until he catches me eyeballing Gerrard’s bicep as he gives Cap a handshake when he leaves.

“Excuse me,” he says as Cap and Farrah head toward the elevator to the parking garage. “Did I see you staring at that man who wasn’t me?”

“I wasn’t staring,” I say, laughing.

“Listen, I’m taller than him, and I could wipe a tennis court with him with my eyes closed and right arm in a sling.”

“I know you could,” I say, loving this slightly jealous side of him.

Jude leans in. “Plus, I bet he can’t fuck.”

I gasp, grasping onto his arm. “Jude!”

There are people everywhere. I also can’t help noticing that Jude’s bicep is just as impressive under my hand as Gerrard’s. Plus, it’s attached to Jude.

“But I can fuck, can’t I, Nor?” Jude says in my ear.

I shudder, waves of pleasure from just his breath in my ear running through me. “I don’t know. I can’t really remember.”

Jude slides a hand over the back of my neck. “You little minx,” he says, nipping at my ear. “Guess I better show you when we get back, huh?” The three of them are going into town while I plan on spending a couple of blissful hours reading in the bath.

But before I can answer, Jude plants his mouth on mine, his tongue in a proprietary sweep against my lips. I hope Cap and Farrah are already out of sight, not just because of the very public kiss, but because right there in the lobby, Jude’s free hand slides down and squeezes my ass hard enough to have me squealing against his lips.

“Wait for me,” he says as he walks away from me.

“We’re not meeting up until dinner, remember?”

Jude points fingers at his eyes and then me. “I remember. You better be ready.”

He grins and winks, then turns around, a little skip in his gorgeous step. And me, I just stand there in the lobby of this fancy hotel, my insides having gone to complete jelly. Jude Kelly's a fool if he thinks there's anyone on this planet sexier than him.



A day on my own is just what I need. I consider doing something relaxing like a pedicure or a massage, but my mind is running all over the place, and I know I won't be able to relax. Instead, I call Christian to check in—he seemed tight-lipped about his own life when we'd last talked, but he doesn't pick up, as usual. Probably over an ocean somewhere. I write a ridiculously long text telling him about our progress with Eleanor and ask him to check in when he has time. Then I spend an hour swimming laps in the pool, then order a sandwich and sit down to go over the notes and footage I took the other day in town.

There's so much to read, but as I go through all the articles, I grow a little more deflated with each. There's some good information, especially around the specific dates Eleanor and her husband were here, and some mentions of some of the other towns they visited. But there's nothing that doesn't tell us more than we already know. Worse, there's nothing pointing to the specific location of that cottage. For all I know, it could be an image of them anywhere.

But it's not just the lack of useful information making my heart sink. It's that when I turn in frustration from the articles and notes to the video, after taking some of the spread of articles on my table and go back to yesterday's, I realize almost all of the footage is of Jude.

My hands tremble as I rewind and fast forward through Jude on the train leaving London, laughing at the town hall, and later, zooming in on that photograph of Eleanor Cleary and her mysterious lover in the window reflection.

I'm not even properly editing the footage yet—I have lots more to take—but I already feel sick knowing I'm going to have to keep looking at it long after this trip is over.

Even though I've already decided the video will only comprise a portion of my thesis, I feel so ridiculous for having switched from the seniors' stories

project to this romantic ghost story.

It's not too late to switch back.

I consider the possibility of going back to the old project. It's a good project, and I loved talking to the seniors about their pasts.

But as I pause the video player on my laptop, first to Jude's face, looking at me with that mischievous grin, knowing the pain he holds on to underneath, and then pausing again on the photograph of Eleanor, I know this is the project I need to do.

It would make an incredible entry for that contest, too.

I shake that thought off. This is purely for my thesis, no matter how good a fit this is for the contest's theme. It's highly unlikely they'd even accept my proposal let alone that I'd win. Even if I did, the mere thought of standing up on stage and talking all over London about not just my work, but *Jude*, feels like actual death.

No, I'm going to use it for my thesis. This is the project that speaks to my heart.

I heard Jude switch from family to *unit* at the last minute when he spoke about us. He might have some feelings for me, but they're not the big heart-ripping feelings I have for him. He doesn't have those with anyone.

But giving up on this project would be the chicken thing to do. And I won't keep doing that, not when there's this much to lose.

I get a text from Jude an hour before we're supposed to meet for dinner saying they ran into Gerrard again in town. Jude suspects it wasn't a coincidence.

JUDE: I don't think I can take his moony eyes. But he's invited us to dinner and like, I can't say no if he's going to be looking after my kid for two nights??? Remind me why I said yes to this trip again!

NORA: Because you're loosening up and being a cool dad.

JUDE: Excuse me, I'm already THE cool dad. But fine. I'm sorry. Do you want to join us still? I can come and get you? Or you can bail on us. I might forgive you.

NORA: You go ahead and have fun with double-O Gerrard. I'm going to go on a date here instead.

JUDE: ???

I was kidding—was going to add the caveat that my date was going to be with myself. I love having dates for one, just me and my book at a nice restaurant.

But suddenly, the joke feels off.

What if I did go out and get a date? Or at least go out and flirt with someone? There are plenty of handsome European men all over the resort. I've been so lost in the dreamy part of being with Jude, I keep forgetting that we're not really together. That's not what friends with benefits are. We're just two friends having sex. Who won't be again in a matter of days.

My stomach does a strange little drop at that.

This is what you wanted.

My phone buzzes again, startling me.

JUDE: I said: ???

NORA: Don't worry, I'll let you know how it goes. That's what friends do, right? Talk about their dates?

There's a beat of silence. Three dots pop up. Then they go away again.

I should tell him I was joking. But some petty—or maybe pathetic—part of me wants to see what he says.

But he doesn't respond.

Annoyed, not just with Jude but myself, I decide I'll make this a proper date. Never mind that it's with myself. Jude's going to be gone next week, and if I come away with only a battered heart, I refuse to slip back into the same sad sack student persona I was. I had world-class sex, with a world-class athlete. Never mind that for me it goes way deeper than that.

It's Sasha's voice that echoes in my mind when I think *you need to capitalize on that*.

I think of Sasha's easy laugh, her flirtatious giggle. I pull another of her dresses out of the closet. This one's a form-fitting hunter-green tweed with a boat neck, no sleeves, and knee-length skirt with a slit at the back. She calls it her "slutty professor" dress because it shows all the curves without revealing all that much skin.

She's not wrong. Once I manage to get it zipped up—a feat considering how little give there is in the dress, I admire my look. My meager curves have all been amplified so I actually look like I have an hourglass figure,

which I'm pretty sure I don't. Plus, I feel like it's the first dress I've ever worn where my glasses look like a sexy accessory.

I do up my eye makeup and pile my hair in a bun on my head, and at the last minute, swipe on the ruby-red lipstick Sasha insisted I bring along too.

The whole effect—with the sheer black tights and heels—I'd call more slutty librarian on me, but I think it works.

I make my way down to the lounge—an adult-oriented place with a long wood bar in the center of the space with several tables on either side. Like everything on the main floor, the spot features a sky-high ceiling, along with a sheer glass window which gives a panoramic view of the ski hill outside.

Of course this gives me a flashback of Jude railing me against the glass looking out over this same hill, which makes my cheeks heat as I sit down at the bar.

“Madame,” the bartender says, gravitating to me immediately, setting a coaster and drink menu down before me. He's very handsome—tall and slim with deep brown skin and soft curls that dust the collar of his shirt. He asks me in French if I'm expecting anyone, and when I say no, he responds in English.

“That is a surprise to me, miss.”

He gives me a wink.

On any other night, in any other universe, that would send a tingle of nerves down my spine.

But that would be a universe without Jude because that man has cornered the wink market. No other winks stand a chance after Jude bestows his dimpled smile and briefly blinks one of his sapphire blue eyes right at you.

But I'm here to not think about Jude. To enjoy a nice meal, read the murder mystery I haven't cracked open in a full week, and maybe, possibly, use my newly awakened sexual prowess to see if I've magically been given the confidence to actually flirt with a stranger.

I order myself a gin martini—might as well live large—and the ragù. Then I scan the room, just to see who's here.

And maybe to see if there's anyone worth practicing my newfound game on.

The bartender is off making a group of woman giggle down at the far end of the bar, so it won't be him. It's early still, and I know this place doesn't really get going until later at night. But there are still a scattering of guests throughout the space—a handful at the bar like me, and several groups at the

tables.

While I'm looking, I hear the creak of a barstool behind me.

I force myself not to turn right away. The sound wasn't right next to me.

But the bartender comes swaggering back, giving me a little grin as he passes, and I hear him greet the newly arrived patron.

I pull my book out and pretend to read, not daring to look over. But I sense a large shape a couple of stools down.

The voice that responds is deep and gravelly, the French accented. He's ordered a beer and a steak.

Something ticks in me—a level of familiarity.

I bet he's American.

While the bartender pours his beer, I sneak a peek.

The man is large all right, and wearing an impeccably tailored dark suit. He's looking down at something, has got a swoop of auburn hair, along with a neatly trimmed beard, and on his broad hand on the counter, no wedding ring. His fingers though, they're rough. Scarred. The faintest hint of grease in the creases of his knuckles. A mechanic, maybe? But why's he in a gorgeous suit at a bar?

At this point, my interest is more investigative than anything else. What's this guy's story?

I think of Jude's hands: his long, tapered fingers and neatly clipped nails. They look sexy when he holds anything. Especially parts of me.

Focus.

Nerves schism in my stomach. I should say something. I should be flirtatious. This is just practice. I close my book, angle my legs sideways, and cross one knee over the other, my heeled foot dangling. I'm about to open my mouth when I see an angry blond man striding toward me.

He's still wearing his parka and boots from outside, which makes him look a lot wider than he is.

"Excuse me," he says, dropping in on the seat on my opposite side. "What the fuck are you doing sitting here on your own looking sexy as fuck without me?"

I can't tell if he's joking or actually angry.

The man on the other side of me makes a coughing sound and lowers his beer. Is he laughing?

I turn to Jude, keeping my voice low. "Okay, buddy. Since when are you Mr. Possessive?"

“Since you told me you were going on a fucking date, Nora. Are you with this fucking guy?”

My stomach clenches. “Jude! Shh!” I glance toward the man on my other side, but he’s looking down at his phone. Is that a smile on his face? I can’t tell. He’s still turned slightly the other way. “No. I’m not.” I lean in. “Also, that guy looks like he could probably kill you, so maybe keep your voice down? Where’s Farrah and Cap?”

“They’re having dinner. So you’re not on a date?”

I meet his eye. “You missed dinner?”

“I went to the restaurant, made sure that fucker wasn’t some kind of psychopath. I’m going to pick them up in an hour. You didn’t answer my question.”

“What?”

Jude looks at me, his eyes narrowed. “You’re not on a date? You were just fucking with me?”

“I am on a date, Jude, with myself, and you just crashed it. You know you don’t get any say over whether I was on a proper date though, right?”

Jude looks taken aback. “Why not?”

Exasperation runs through me, but I’m keenly aware of that guy so close to us, very likely able to hear every word we’re saying.

“Can we have this conversation later?” I whisper.

“Why?”

I grit my teeth. “Jude, seriously? Have you always—”

“Yes,” the man on my right says.

We both turn his way.

“My brother’s always been this dense.”

He turns and fully faces this way for the first time, and that’s when my jaw drops.

“Griffin?” Jude says, incredulous.

My eyes go wide. Jude’s other brother is here? In Switzerland? Next to us at the bar in our resort??

“I didn’t mean to interrupt,” Griff apologizes. “Not that I did, you just came barreling in here.” His eyes are on Jude, but he angles them to me. “Sorry, Nora. I was going to make myself known, but it seemed like you were going to say something to me before golden boy came in like a bat outta hell.”

My cheeks heat. I was going to hit on Jude’s brother, is what I was going

to do. “Hi,” I croak.

Jude’s on his feet, striding over to his brother. “Can’t just call first like a normal person?”

Griffin’s up too and they’re doing a big bear hug embrace with back pats. Jude’s got an inch or so on his brother, but Griffin’s broader, his muscly form more rough and wide while Jude’s is strong and lean.

Griff thrusts a hand out to me after, and when he shakes it, I feel like my arm’s going to wiggle off. “Hi,” I squeak.

I like Griff, I just hardly know him. I’ve only met him a few times. The rest is apocryphal.

“What the hell are you doing here, man?” Jude asks, coming back around to my other side. “Were you just in the area?”

“Sort of. Liechtenstein,” Griff says.

Jude frowns. “Licked her what?”

I press my lips together, trying not to laugh. “Jude, you must remember it from our geography lesson on the train, right?”

“Nora taught me a thing or two on the train over,” Jude says, winking.

My stomach flips and I know my face is red.

Luckily, Griff doesn’t seem to give a shit what our status is. “I’ve got a client who was looking for a place to lay low.” Griffin’s eyes go across the room to where a nerdy-looking man in his fifties, with glasses as thick as mine, sits hunched in the corner of the room, his menu held up in front of him. The man’s eyes dart over to Griffin’s, and he seems to stiffen when he sees us. But Griffin gives him a hand signal and he nods, looking back at his menu.

“This seemed like a place with discretion.”

“Yeah, this is a strict no-paparazzi zone.” Jude nods. Only Jude would know that.

Nobody knows what Griffin does, and Jude says he thinks there isn’t just one thing. He’s got a cabin out in the forest near Quince Valley, with a big garage or workshop attached to it where he makes stuff. For a while, Jude and his siblings speculated that he worked for some kind of security firm. At one point, Jude was convinced he disarmed bombs. He built his own radio when he was seven years old and always knew right away who did it in any whodunit.

But it’s clear to me that right now he’s playing protector to this guy.

“So are you his bodyguard?” Jude asks, pointing his chin at Griffin’s

charge.

“Nah. Just transport.”

Now the man is digging through a messenger bag next to him. There’s something familiar about him at that angle, looking slightly away. “Gosh, he looks almost like—” I say, peering closer.

I snap my eyes back to Griff’s. “Wait, is that…”

“Yeah,” Griff says.

The man’s hair is a different color, and he’s shaved the goatee, but I recognize him as the man who’s been plastered all over the news back in the UK—a whistleblower for a big corporation accused of corporate fraud.

“Who?” Jude asks.

“The most wanted man in Europe right now! Not for a crime,” I clarify, explaining the situation to Jude as best I can.

“Oh yeah, they were talking about him at that party,” Jude says.

“But he *is* in danger,” Griff says.

“Is it safe for him to be out in the open like this?” I whisper, glancing around us. There’s no one sitting too close. But still. “Everyone’s looking for him.”

“Probably not,” Griff says, unaffected. “But I was hungry.”

I exchange a glance with Jude. He rolls his eyes. “Don’t even try to understand my brother.”

“Anyway…” Griff takes a swig of beer. “I came to say hi to you guys too. Was hoping to see Cap but I understand he’s in town.”

“How do you know that?” I ask.

“Don’t ask questions you want answers to, either,” Jude tells me. “He just knows shit. Also, since when do you drop by to say hi?”

“Since I found this for you.”

Griff pulls out a manila envelope and slides it across the table to us. Jude reaches for it, but Griffin clicks his tongue. “Wasn’t talking to you.”

Jude scowls.

I take the envelope, grinning.

The bartender comes back then with my food and Griffin’s.

Jude eyes the bartender, then me, then narrows his eyes in an exaggerated look of suspicion. He slips his hand over my stockinged knee and whispers in my ear, “Were you trying to make me jealous, Shotgun Annie?”

A flutter runs through me that I try to ignore. I open the envelope. “No. I didn’t expect you to be here, remember?”

“Well, I am,” Jude says. “Have you even noticed the other men staring at you? Makes me want to show them who you belong to.”

My stomach swirls, and I look quickly to Griff. The bartender’s off helping someone else now, and he’s not looking at us, just chewing contemplatively on his food. But I swear I see a hint of a smirk on his face.

“I don’t belong to you, Jude.” I’m smiling, but there’s a trace of seriousness in my voice as I recall the reason I came down here in the first place.

“This week you do,” Jude says. There’s a hardness to his voice, like he’s been thinking the same thing I have, about how little time we have left.

Is he thinking about what comes next, too?

Jude looks down as he slides his fingers around my thigh, his hand slipping under the hem of my dress.

My heart flutters. His hand is warm up my skirt, and he’s so brazenly touching me in public with his brother right next to us. I place my hand on his and guide his hand out and back on the bar. “I can’t think like that,” I whisper.

I focus on opening the envelope as Jude curls his hand on the counter. After a moment, Jude pulls my plate toward him, stealing my fork too.

I don’t even try to stop him though, because I’ve emptied the contents of the envelope onto the bar top, and my jaw falls at what I see.

It’s a photograph of a cottage, nestled in some trees. Under that is a map, with coordinates, and some handwritten notes—or copies of them.

“Hey, is that...” Jude spins the photograph so he’s looking at it upright.

“The love shack,” I whisper.

CHAPTER 25

Jude

The next morning, I wake up with my dick so hard it hurts. It's not just regular morning wood, either. I was dreaming about Nora—and yanked my hair before anything could get good. It feels weird, dreaming about her now. I want her to be a part of it.

But I know my dick feels deprived, too, because last night she didn't come over, after I spent all day fantasizing about what we'd get up to.

But that wasn't all I was feeling yesterday, and that's carried over to today too. This weird heaviness in my chest when I think about her after I'm gone, back in London on her own.

Maybe curled up against someone else the way she was with me the other night. Some other guy tangling their hand in her silky red hair.

My dick starts to deflate, finally.

When I picked Cap and Farrah up from dinner last night, my boy asked if he could stay over with me. I met Farrah's eye in the rearview. Did she make a date with Gerrard or something? But Cap turned to her and apologized.

"I think Dad might get lonely when we're gone, and I..." He looked up at me in the rearview. "I'm not used to being away from him so much."

My whole chest ached at that. How could I say no?

When we got back to the hotel, he immediately banged on Nora's door, filling her in on his "sleepover" with me and begging her to play attack checkers with us. It was a bit like old times, only that heaviness grew wider, setting a dark cloud over me that wasn't unlike the one that had formed when we were back in Quince Valley that day Farrah had first called.

I should have been enjoying the moment, and even with the ache in my chest I couldn't stop stealing glances at her. She'd just been getting out of the bath when Cap banged on her door, and her hair was still wet, soaking damp

patches into her T-shirt. She wore these little sleeping shorts and looked sexy as hell.

But we didn't say much when she said goodbye, begging off early to do some more editing on her video footage.

This morning, Cap and I indulge in breakfast in bed, though Cap's more bouncing off the walls. I texted Nora to invite her over, but she said she was heading downstairs for an early swim, and she'd meet us in the lobby to say goodbye to Farrah and Cap.

I shake off my disappointment, focusing on spending my last morning with Cap for a few days, before checking his backpack full of clothes and supplies for the hundredth time.

"I'm going to be fine, Dad," Cap assures me as we set out down the hallway.

"I know," I say begrudgingly, my arm hooked around my little guy's shoulders. I'm surprisingly less nervous about it than I was yesterday, despite a fresh dump of snow outside. I know a good part of that is because before he left, my brother vouched for Gerrard.

"Wait, you know that guy?" I'd asked, shocked. Nora, in that hot fucking librarian outfit, had smirked as she dug into her dessert. I was asking questions of him like I'd told her was pointless. Still, I waited for my answer.

"I've contracted him before for work. He does this tour guide shit when he needs a break. They're in good hands, Jude, and you know I wouldn't just say that."

He wouldn't, especially not when it related to the safety of his nephew. I didn't bother asking about what he'd contracted him for. And for what work.

"But if you change your mind about being there at any time you just phone, okay? Gerrard has a satellite phone and can be reached no matter where you are. I'll come get you, just say the word."

"Dad." Cap turns and grips my arms. "You're gonna be all right without me, okay? Nora's going to take care of you."

I bite my cheek so I don't smile. "Do I look that worried?"

"Duh."

I give my guy a squeeze so hard he coughs, then another one downstairs after he's all suited up and about to climb on the little minibus that will take them to the trailhead.

Cap pulls Nora aside before they leave, whispering something in her ear before she bends down and gives him a kiss on the cheek that has my chest

warming. She's wearing her old clothes again, a corduroy skirt and black turtleneck, her hair in braids, but somehow, she looks more beautiful than I've ever seen her.

I tear my eyes away from them as Cap climbs the steps onto the bus, waving briefly. God, I remember when he was a toddler and used to blow me kisses. My chest clenches.

After a nod at Farrah and Gerrard, they're all inside, the bus rumbling away.

Even though I know everything's going to be fine, worry grinds a hole in my insides.

"I need a drink," I mutter as the bus rounds the corner out of sight.

"It's nine in the morning, Jude," Nora says softly.

"Later, then. I need a drink later." I look down at Nora, who smiles, her eyes big behind her glasses.

I frown. "What?"

"You ready?" she asks.

I turn fully to face Nora, my spirits lifting considerably. Somehow, in all the worry about this excursion, I lost sight of the fact that Nora and I now have three days and two nights to ourselves. I slide my hands over her hips, pulling her close to me. Heat expands inside of me as I feel her warm body pressed against mine.

But Nora places her hands on my chest, laughing.

"Wait, ready for what?" I ask.

"To go to the love shack!"

"Is that your way of telling me you want to have sex, Nora? Because, yes. I'm ready. I was born ready."

"Okay, that's weird—"

"I know. I meant to say I woke up ready."

Nora looks down, laughing. The sound is so beautiful I bring a knuckle to her jaw and tip her face up. "I'll go wherever you want, Nora."

She blinks, her smile falling briefly, before reappearing. "Then let's go."

I lean in, my eyes focused on her soft, plump lips. "Kiss me first."

"So demanding—"

But I cut her off by pressing my lips to hers, gently urging her mouth open so I can access her tongue. It's soft and silky against mine, just like her hair in my hand. My dick jumps in my pants, and I know she feels it, because she snakes her arms up around my shoulders, pressing herself into me.

I break the kiss. “Can we do both?” I ask against her lips.
Nora nods. “Yes.”

I’m not sure we’re going to make it back to our rooms. I have to stop every few steps—the moment each person we pass is out of sight—to press her up against a wall so I can taste her, feel her body under my hands.

“Jude,” Nora breathes as I palm her breast through her sweater, her nipple pebbling under my touch.

“Nora...” I nip at her ear. “I don’t think I’m ever going to get enough of you.”

There’s someone else waiting for the elevator when we get there, so I tug her along to the stairs. The moment we’re inside the concrete stairwell, my hand is yanking the shirt she’s got tucked into her skirt out so I can touch the soft, plump flesh of her breast with my skin.

“Fuck, Nora. You feel incredible.”

Upstairs, a door opens, voices echoing down the stairwell.

I separate from her to peer up the gap and see hands on the railing, but they’re a couple stories up still.

“We should get upstairs,” Nora breathes.

“We have a few seconds.” I slip my hand under her bra, my fingers finding her hard nipple and pinching it between my thumb and forefinger, making her gasp.

“Wish I could take you right here, Nora,” I say, nipping at her collarbone. “But since I can’t—” I push her sweater up and drop to one knee, taking her nipple in my mouth. She lets out a yelp and claps her hand over her mouth, her eyes on the door we just came through. It’s risky, I know, but I can’t think with the feel of her soft bud in my mouth, the way it resists as I pluck at it with my tongue.

Footsteps sound from above and I stand up, yanking her sweater down. Two men in suits pass us; one I’m pretty sure I recognize as an Olympic skier from Norway.

They give us a curious glance, but pass by with quick nods. It’s only when I reach our floor and guide Nora through the door that I see how she looks: her sweater is only pulled out at the front, her cheeks pink, her lips parted.

“I think they knew you were about to get fucked,” I say as I thread my

hand through hers, pulling her to my door.

“Jude!”

“I’m glad. I want everyone to know.” We barely make it inside my door before I’ve got her in my arms, hoisting her up so her legs are wrapped around my waist. “I want to get a billboard with you on it, Nora,” I say, tossing her gently on the bed. I drop to my knees, sliding her skirt up around her hips.

“You going to endorse me now?” She giggles, making reference to the ads I’ve done over the past few years. Everything from cologne to sneakers to cruise lines.

“Yes. It’ll be my best deal yet.” I hook my fingers into the waistband of her tights and underwear and work it down over her hips, revealing the tight spring of red curls between her legs.

I growl, dipping my face down and kissing her there.

She squeaks my name, and I pull the tights down to mid-thigh, then bend her hips so her knees hit her chest, and her beautiful pussy is on display for me. I spread it wide with my fingers and she moans for me.

My cock swells.

“Can I endorse a pussy?” I muse, before stroking my tongue along her slit, drawing the flat of my tongue teasingly against her clit. She shudders.

“I’ve never seen it done,” she gasps.

I bend down and stroke her again, relishing in the sweet taste of her. She cries out.

“Guess I’ll be an innovator. Sweetest, most beautiful pussy in the whole fucking world.”

She rises up on her elbows, her face strained as she looks at me over the stretched fabric of her tights across her thighs.

I meet her eyes as I stroke her clit with my tongue, loving the way she shivers at my touch, her eyes rolling upward.

“But Jude,” she gasps.

I pause, an eyebrow up.

“No one’s going to buy something that’s broken.”

I sit up. “Broken?”

She nods, lowering her legs. “You can’t make me...arrive like this. I can’t do it.”

I climb up next to her on the bed, resting my head on my elbow. “Nora... Annie...my sweet girl. We’re going to get you there.”

She shakes her head. "I've tried."

"I haven't." I drag a hand up her thigh next to me, dancing my fingers in the wetness where my tongue was a moment ago. Besides, I got us some supplies, yesterday. In town."

"Supplies?"

I leap up and head for the closet. From up on the top shelf I pull down four giant shopping bags, filled to the brim. "To help bridge the gap, until I can make you come all on my own."

She shrieks as I upend the bags next to her. I help pull her skirt down to cover herself as she gapes at the dozens of boxes on the bed, each with an image or name on its side indicating that yes, I'd cleaned out an adult shop of nearly every vibrator and dildo they owned.

"Jude!" She laughs. "I can't believe you did this."

"Neither could the clerk. '*Mon Dieu*,' I think were her words."

Nora laughs through her hands covering her mouth.

"Now, no pressure, but I thought we might try this one first." I pull out the biggest box of the bunch, a comically oversized dildo, that when I pull it out flops from side to side.

"Just kidding. This one's just for fun."

Nora laughs so hard she cries.

We spend the next few minutes combing through the assortment of toys until she shyly picks out two: a rosebud-looking thing, and a fairly straightforward vibrating dick.

I clear the rest of them off the bed with a sweep of my arm, then roll up my sleeves to get to work.

In the end, we try out more than two. I use six of them on her, testing between different settings and angles. I never much liked science when I was in school, but I fully change my mind during this sexy-as-fuck experiment.

She gets the most mind-blowing orgasms, it turns out, from the regular dildo, and this little suction thingy on her clit, and it works best when I get her on her hands and knees, with her holding the vibrator on her clit and I work the dildo in and out of her gorgeous pussy.

"You sure you don't want to try swapping out?" she breathes, looking over her shoulder at the thick bulge in my pants.

"Not now," I grunt, as much as I want to fuck her so badly my cock aches. "This is science."

I can't help bringing my tongue to the tight pucker of her asshole right as

I sense she's going to come though, and I'm not too proud to suspect that's what brought her fully over the edge, coming so hard her whole body arches as she screams.

An hour later, I've got her curled up in my arms while I try hard not to stroke my still-straining dick. "Jude, let me touch you," she whispers, her hand grazing down over the fabric between my legs.

I gently guide her hand away. "Later. I wanted this to be all for you, Nora."

She looks up at me, her eyes in that wide, blinking state they get when she's looking perilously close to crying.

"Hey, that's the look you gave me when we watched that ASPCA commercial I did last year."

"They still played that Sarah McLachlan song!" she exclaims. "It was unfair."

I tuck her head against my shoulder. "I'll just think about dogs," I murmur.

"What?"

"Just one of my tricks. When you go as long as I did without sex"—which in hindsight, I consider, is insane given Nora was right there being sexy as hell next to me for so long—"you come up with some tricks."

Nora rises up on an elbow. "I know another good trick."

"You sure? It really doesn't look like you get how these tricks work," I say, drawing my hand down her bare chest, my thumb brushing her nipple. My cock strains painfully.

Nora laughs, then scrambles around for her bra, pulling it on and hiding those magnificent little tits.

I frown. "I guess that's a good one."

"I was thinking more along the lines of a two-hour drive in the snow to find a hopefully-still-standing cabin."

I laugh. "Right. That."

CHAPTER 26

Nora

I clutch the map against my chest, peering through the snowy trees lining the lane we're currently driving on. "Are you sure we shouldn't just park back down on the road?"

Jude angles the steering wheel sharply to the right to nudge the Range Rover to the side, narrowly avoiding a boulder half-obscured in the snow. "Don't worry, Nor. We've got chains on. Plus, it's at least a couple miles up this road."

He's right, the walk would have been brutal. The road down below was already winding straight up the lower part of a mountain, and this lane is even more treacherous. It obviously hadn't been used in ages because there was a locked gate at the bottom. At least, it looked locked at first. There was an ancient padlock—one of those heart-shaped things with an old-fashioned keyhole in it—but it had been broken, with force it looked like. There were dents around the keyhole, and the rusted-over locking mechanism appeared bent.

"Someone broke in before us," Jude says, peering at the heart-shaped lock.

I swallow at the broken, battered heart, reaching my fingers up to my own chest.

"Years ago," I say softly.

"Who?" Jude wonders out loud.

I don't have an answer to that. Her husband? JEQ?

Griffin told us the cottage was owned by George Cleary. But he went bankrupt a few years after Eleanor's murder, and all his assets sold. This was one that didn't. "Nobody wanted it," he said. He told us it's now owned by a holding company that buys up old properties and foreclosures. "They

normally flip the properties or hold them as investments—this one looks like the latter. The property taxes are paid every year, but there’s no utility service to the building.”

“So it’s just sitting there?” I ask.

“There’s no record of anyone living there in decades, or even the company doing any assessments in the past several years,” Griff said, contemplating as he chewed his food.

This man was so different from his enthusiastic, effusive brother, it was almost comical.

“Why hasn’t it been sold?” Jude asks.

Griff took a sip of beer, his eyes on the man he was protecting across the room. “Real estate isn’t exactly bopping in that area. Especially not for a property twenty miles out of town, and with this kind of profile. Way up a rocky mountain. No service. Far from any useful amenities. The closest neighbors are a swear-to-God functioning convent a couple of miles away.” Griff had paused. “Shit, it sounds like my kind of place. Too bad I’ve got this business to take care of, or I’d join you.”

I had the feeling this was Griffin’s version of excited.

“So you’re saying it’s safe to do a B&E?” Jude asked, grasping my hand, which was holding a forkful of torte and halfway to my mouth, and guiding it to his instead.

“Hey!” I exclaimed, laughing. Classic Jude. Luckily, he was as generous with his food as he was sneaky with mine.

But Jude had just licked chocolate from his lip and winked. Suddenly I didn’t care about my torte anymore.

“I never advise anyone to break the law,” Griff said in answer to Jude’s question. He threw back the last of his beer, then paused, looking in the empty glass. “I implied that the place is effectively abandoned, the company holding on to it for land value only. Of which there isn’t much.” He shrugs. “But who am I to stop my reckless little brother from doing anything he damn well pleases?”

So here we are, about to do a B&E on a cottage that we hope might shine more light on Eleanor and JEQ. It’s beyond far-fetched to think we’ll find anything, I know, but it would be foolish not to try now that we’re here.

Besides, Griffin dropped another zinger on us, answering the question we never thought we’d have to ask—what were we going to do if we found strong evidence George killed his wife?

“I’ve got connections with a detective back at home,” Griff told us as he pulled on his coat to go. “If you find evidence you think is compelling enough to get them to reopen the case, I’ll make sure they do.”

Now, our investigation wasn’t just for fun. We could actually see justice served for Eleanor.

And JEQ, if George had killed him too.

Up ahead now, through the trees, I see a line too straight for nature. Then another. “There!” I exclaim, my spirits suddenly leaping again. I train my camera through the windshield.

It was a long drive out here—four hours instead of the two we’d planned on because a minor rockslide had traffic blocked on the highway we set out on. Not to mention Jude needed more than one “stretch break” and I had to find somewhere suitable to pee. I was a little nervous we wouldn’t have enough time to get back to the resort before dark, but there were already crews on scene at the rockslide cleaning it up.

But now, all that flies from my mind. Because emerging from the trees before us is the very same cottage pictured in the photo in my hand.

“The love shack,” Jude says, grinning wildly. He didn’t seem as enthusiastic about going out here as I was, but I think that’s because he was having too much fun back in the hotel room.

I mean, I was too. More than him. But this is the whole reason we’re in Switzerland.

“It’s definitely abandoned,” I say as I zoom in on the house. The stone walls are barely visible—they’re snaked over completely with bare brown vines, several of which still have brown leaves still twirling in the wind. The windows are boarded over, but it looks like it was done years ago—the wood is weathered and gray, warped and chipped. And all of it’s covered in a thick layer of snow.

I should be creeped out—the place looks like the definition of a haunted house. But for some reason, all I feel is an ache in my heart. For Eleanor and JEQ...and yes, for me and Jude too. Is this the last adventure we’ll ever go on together?

When we get out of the car I can see my breath, and there’s the scent of more snow in the air. The forecast said there’d be no more falling until tonight, but I can’t help wondering if that estimate should be bumped up.

It doesn’t matter. It’s only early afternoon, and we won’t be here more than an hour.

Unless we find anything. JEQ had a penchant for hiding items of great interest everywhere he went.

I hear Jude trying the front door, which is ridiculous, because it's covered over with vines. But it would be ridiculous not to try it either, I guess.

"I don't even know if it's locked so much as jammed," he says.

There's a split in one of the boards at the front window—the very same one we saw the shadow of Eleanor's lover in—and I cup my hands over the wood. But it's too dark to see anything.

There's a crack behind me and I whirl, my stomach jumping.

"Easy," Jude says, laughing and holding up his hands. "You scared, Nor?"

"A little," I admit. "You?"

"Shit yeah," he says. Then I rise up and kiss him. A warm glow spreads over me.

"Better?" I ask when he pulls away.

"A little," he says, grinning dopily. "Remind me why we left the hotel again?"

I narrow my eyes. "Because this is the mystery we've been trying to solve since quite literally the day we met."

"Right," he says. "Better stop kissing me then, horndog."

I laugh, shoving him. Then I pick my camera back up. But I hesitate before hitting record again. "Jude," I say, my breath hitching. "What if we can't get inside?"

"We'll get inside," Jude says confidently.

He walks over to the side of the house, and I hit record, following him. I'm zooming in on his face when he turns to me and grins. "See?"

I go over to see what he's looking at.

There's the slope of a cellar door there, layered over in snow.

Both of us get down on our knees and sweep the snow from the surface, revealing a latch and a lock attached to a rusted bar spanning the width of the door. I keep filming with one hand while I grasp the lock with my other. This one holds.

"Shit," I whisper.

But Jude's unbothered, and it only takes me a moment to see why: he lifts the metal bar clean off the door, taking the lock with it. The hinges were completely corroded.

My heart dances in my chest. We're going inside.

The door opens up into a root cellar. Like an actual root cellar: dirt floor and dirt walls, with roots protruding from both. It smells like damp decay, and is only about five feet in height, so both of us are hunched over—Jude more so than me.

I don't know about Jude, but my heart is thundering in my chest.

"It's like a horror movie down here," I squeak. Luckily, I'll be cutting out all this audio when I edit this footage later.

Jude reaches for my free hand. "This was your idea, Shotgun Annie."

His voice is strained. Jude's not a fan of horror movies.

Our only light is Jude's phone flashlight, sweeping left and right. I follow it with my camera, telling him to go slow. There are mostly only crates down here, and ancient jars filled with black sludge.

I shiver, and I'm just starting to think there's no way to get upstairs from here when I spot a glint up above: a latch on the ceiling, directly over Jude's hunched shoulders.

"There!" I whisper, pointing up.

Jude has to twist his body to see, but I hear him mutter, "Thank Christ," as he reaches up and twists it open. The trap door swings easily up, and a moment later, Jude's upper half is gone up the opening.

"Holy shit!" he exclaims.

I lower the camera as he hoists himself up.

A moment later, I'm by myself in the basement, and suddenly, I'm terrified. "Jude!" I exclaim.

Nothing.

I don't have a light, and the only source of it now is the faint light filtering down from the hole.

"Jude!" I cry again, my voice pitched high.

I rush to the hole, and the moment I stick my head up, Jude's hands are under my arms, hoisting me up onto the floor.

"I've got you," he murmurs when we're both up.

I lean into his chest, ashamed of how terrified I got for a minute there.

Then I look around.

The space is small and dark, but not so dark as the crawl space downstairs. Light streams in from cracks around the plywood on the windows and under the door. Otherwise, it's dim, freezing, and dank smelling. But

there's furniture draped in sheets, just like in an old haunted house.

I can't help shivering a little.

"Yeah," Jude says. His voice has a little reverence in it.

"Should we look around?" I ask.

"I guess? It feels a little weird being here, knowing this is someone else's place."

"Technically a holding company's," I say. "But yeah, I agree. Let's be quick."

Even if we do find anything, I don't think we'd feel right keeping it. Still, I pick up my camera and begin filming, following Jude around with his light like we did downstairs.

The main room is the biggest. The tour is quick: there's what looks like a couch and table and chairs, something low that might be a chest, and a kitchen area with a giant wood oven and a tall structure Jude peels the sheet back from.

"A buffet," I say of the shelves. They're lined with plates and dishes. Somehow this evidence of someone living here—eating off those plates—makes this place more real.

Jude looks at each of them like he's going to find something there. Then he goes to the low piece of furniture. He pulls off the sheet—it's a chest like I thought. But inside, there's only ancient quilts and blankets.

Jude wrinkles his nose. "Mothballs."

"No notebooks?"

Jude gets to the bottom, then shakes his head.

Disappointment squeezes at my chest. I know it would have been too much to hope for after finding two diaries already.

I aim my camera at the other side of the cabin, where there's a closed door.

"The bedroom," I whisper. If this really was a love shack, would that be where JEQ and Eleanor would have holed up? I cross the floor—it's only a few feet—and push tentatively on the wood door. It gives with a loud creak.

This room is darker than the main room—only one window, and barely a crack at the top letting light in. Most of it comes from the main room. But my eyes and camera adjust.

There's a bed frame and chest of drawers, neither of which are covered, and a tiny iron-grill fireplace.

But on the other side of the bed there's something that makes my breath

hitch.

“Jude!” I cry out.

“Nor?” Jude comes thundering over in a few quick strides. “You okay?”

“Yes,” I breathe. “But look!” I point to the corner.

There, nestled in the corner under a wilted mobile of birds hanging from the ceiling, is a baby’s cot.

CHAPTER 27

Jude

“We’re sure this is the right place?” Nora asks.

“Griffin wouldn’t have sent us on a wild goose chase,” I say.

For a moment, I take the distraction of Nora chewing her lip. I love it when she looks like this, her gaze unfocused, her mind ticking. But soon she’s talking again. “The photo where they’re standing in front of this cottage is a year before she was murdered back in Vermont. She could be pregnant here. Her dress is kind of...billowy.” Nora looks up at me, her face flooded with something that looks like hope. I feel it too. “A love child would be the ultimate proof they were together.”

“And good reason for her husband to want her dead,” I add.

“Exactly. But what happened to the baby? In all the records I read, there was nothing to indicate Eleanor had been pregnant, or had a child. There’s no mention of one when she died.”

I run my hand over my head, thinking. “Did her husband have a baby with someone else, maybe? Was she forced to look after *his* love child?”

“No,” she says, adamant. “George died with no heirs, remember? Even illegitimate. JEQ mentioned in the diary that their lack of children was something he blamed Eleanor for.”

I feel overwhelmed, suddenly. “Maybe we have enough to go to Griff’s contact at the police. You’ve got the cot on video, right?”

“I do. But how are we going to explain to them that we got it?”

I grimace. Shit. I hadn’t thought about how a B&E probably wouldn’t work as evidence.

“What we need is hospital records,” Nora says. “A birth certificate.”

“Would they have gone to the hospital? What if she had the baby here?”

Nora frowns. “What, like, right here?”

“My mom had all of us at home, except the twins. It wasn’t common, but it happened.”

“So there wouldn’t be any record at all of this baby. You don’t think...”
Nora looks panicked.

People used to lose babies all the time. But I can’t believe the worst, not before exploring every other option.

Then an idea hits me, as I remember the sign we passed on the way up here. Excitement lifts my chest. “Nor, what about the neighbors? That was a thing people did, back in those days, right? They took babies to churches when they couldn’t care for them themselves.”

Nora’s eyes go wide. “The convent! Jude, we have to go!”

Just then there’s a rattling sound from outside. It’s loud, and the slit letting light in wobbles.

Nora yelps, and my stomach flips hard.

“Just the wind,” I say hopefully, gathering Nora in my arms again. I pull my phone out, glancing at the time. It’s nearly three.

I don’t want to let Nora go, but we can’t stay here either. We don’t know if the road’s going to be clear by the time we head back—if it isn’t, we could end up driving the long way again.

“We should probably head back to the resort,” I say. “Catch the last of the light.”

Nora looks up at me hopefully. “Could we at least stop at the convent? See if they have any records at all?”

I tuck a strand of hair that’s come loose from her braid behind her ear.

I know she’s not asking my permission. She’s reasoning with me, like friends do. This is like old times with us in the library; when we were on the hunt for anything at all related to Eleanor Cleary, and then on the physical hunt for the cache that took us all summer to find.

My chest does a strange squeeze. We were friends then. I thought things couldn’t get any better. But this is better.

As if to prove it to myself I frown. “Let me think for a sec.”

Then I dip my face down to hers and kiss her, taking her mouth against mine. Because I know now that this is where I feel most at home. Even in this dark and slightly terrifying place, with the wind rattling the plywood and my extremities starting to go numb despite my giant parka and boots, I feel an indescribable warmth with the press of her against me.

“Yeah,” I say, breaking the kiss. “Let’s go see the nuns. But I’m going to

need 100% more kissing on this trip.”

Nora laughs, slightly breathless. “If it’s like that, definitely.”

But another rattle has me glancing to the window again. “I need to check on Cap.” Thank God for Gerrard’s satellite phone. We don’t have service here, but hopefully when we get back down to the highway we will. Still, a little knot of worry begins to grow in my stomach.

Nora nods.

The trip back through the dark basement isn’t half as bad as it was going in, mostly because there’s more light down here than there was upstairs, given the top of the cellar door has blown open.

But that knot tightens as we get outside. It’s snowing, and the wind is blowing in hefty gusts. I’m suddenly worried about driving all the way back to the resort. But I don’t show Nora that. She pulls her hood tight around her, heading for the Range Rover. I stick the bar back on the door, wedging it as best I can into the old hinge, then look around and grab a small, snow-covered boulder, thumping it onto the door to make sure it stays closed.

The drive to the convent is tense, with snow coming so hard my wipers can barely keep up. The prediction for that dump tonight has definitely come early. Nora is looking as worried as I feel. I tap my fingers on the steering wheel and even go so far as to whistle before Nora says, “Jude, it’s okay to be worried. Hopefully they have a phone, and we can at least check on Cap.”

I stop tapping. “Thanks, Nor.”

But all I can think is, *you lost focus, you fuck!*

The drive up to the convent is shorter than the one to the cottage; the building is visible from the road. It’s an old stone church with a long stone building attached to it, with a large van parked off to the side.

“There,” Nora says, pointing to a door on the longer building. There’s a light on over it.

We run to the front door with our jackets pulled tight against us. I bang on the door, my heart now thudding with concern. I grip Nora’s hand while I wait, and she squeezes tight.

“He’s trained, remember? Griff vouched for him.” She has to practically shout to be heard over the wind. But she knows exactly where my brain is going.

I smile, gratefully, but all I can think about is Cap, out in this snow.

Without me.

I’m about to bang again when the door opens, and a small round woman

with a leathery looking face appears. I guess I expected an old-school nun in a habit, but she's wearing a dull gray sweater and navy skirt not unlike the kind Nora normally wears. Her eyes go wide when she sees us.

"*Güte Güte!*" She reaches out and takes both our hands, pulling us inside and slamming the door shut behind us. The foyer is tiny, the walls a pale yellow, with ancient thin red carpeting on the floor.

"*Wer bist du? Was um alles in der Welt machst du bei diesem Wetter draußen?*"

"Please," I say, my voice strained. "We need a phone."

I realize I'm speaking in English, and she's not going to understand me.

"Phone," I say, holding my thumb and pinky fingers in the shape of one to my ear.

Nora's fumbling for her phone, pointing at it and frowning with a thumbs down.

"I'll get the translator," she says to the woman, who clearly can't understand.

"Carolina!" the woman cries out.

She tsks, then beckons us to follow her. We do, up a couple of stairs to a long hallway, then through a door to what looks like a lounge area, with an ancient couch, several easy chairs arranged around an elderly looking TV set on a stand, and shelves lined with books. There's even a ping-pong table and a little kitchen. And sitting all over the room are half a dozen women of various ages and sizes, almost all of whom startle at the sight of us. Almost all of them stand up, too, except for an ancient-looking woman in a rocking chair with a book in her lap. She just watches curiously.

"Carolina!" the woman who let us in cries again, and a skinny young woman with short black hair comes scuttling over.

The woman speaks briskly in German and the woman—Carolina, I guess—nods.

"Hello," she says in a thick German accent. "Can we help you?"

I breathe a sigh of relief and explain the situation as briefly as possible. I only realize I'm rambling when the woman looks deeply lost, and Nora places a hand on my arm.

"Our phones—they don't work here. May we use your phone to call his son? He's outside."

"Yes." Carolina nods, looking relieved herself. "Please, come. Mrs.—?"

"Nora, please," she says. "And this is Jude."

She moves quickly to the kitchen, pointing to an old landline phone on the wall.

Nora helps by reading out the number from her phone, then I'm dialing with wobbling fingers.

It rings. Twice, then a third time, and I'm about to break the goddamned receiver in my hand when a voice comes through on the other end.

"Hallo?" The line is crackly, but I recognize Gerrard's voice.

I slump against the wall, my throat choked with relief.

Nora looks at me questioningly and I nod, pulling her against me, tipping the phone so she can hear. "Gerrard. It's Jude. You guys are okay?"

"Oh, yes, Jude, hello. We are very good. Just dinner, you know. Sorry for the volume." I realize then I can hear raucous laughter in the background. "We saw the weather coming in at noon, so we stopped at an inn here. Farrah, she said it was good. Is that okay? Would you like him back to the resort? We can go, maybe when the weather clears..."

"No," I say. "No, we're just glad he's safe."

"Oh yeah. He's teaching us some game where you throw the pieces at our face? It's rather shocking. But the patrons here love it."

I laugh softly. Fuck, I miss him. We've only been apart for the day and all I want is for him to be right here, with Nora and me. "Is he available to talk?"

My arm is hooked around Nora's neck, her head tucked under my chin. I dip my face down as we wait. Her scent swirls in my nostrils, and for the first time since we got here, I start to relax.

It's only then I notice every set of eyes in the place are fixed on us, half of them looking kind of swoony. I also see what's on the TV.

"Dad?" Cap's voice is breathless, like he ran over.

"Yeah, buddy. It's me and Nora."

"Hey, Cap," Nora says, her smile a little wobbly like she's on the verge of happy tears. I get it, my throat's thick with them too.

"This place is so cool!" Cap goes on to tell us about the inn, which apparently has various taxidermy animals all over the place, and light fixtures made out of skis. "There's this lady here, and she's teaching me how to yodel! Wanna hear?"

He doesn't wait for us to respond.

"YODELAY HEE HOOOOOOOOO!" Cap screeches into the phone.

Nora and I both bite down to keep from laughing. I press my forehead to hers. "I'm so glad you're good, Cap," I say. "I miss you so much."

“Yeah, me too, Dad! I’m really sad we have to go home in three days, but Christmas is coming, remember? And you said I might get that golf game...”

As Cap goes on about his Christmas gifts, I can’t break my gaze from Nora’s.

I lift my forehead up. Three days. That’s all we have left. I knew that, but hearing it, especially from Cap, makes it more real than it’s ever been.

“Dad, it’s my turn again! I gotta go.”

“Yeah,” I say, my voice tight. “Hey, Cap, can I talk to Farrah before you hang up?”

“Yeah, Dad. Love you!”

“Love you too.”

“Love you, Nora,” Cap says.

“Me too, Cap,” Nora says. “Love you so much.”

She pulls away from me then, turning and straightening her hair, nodding at Carolina, who’s been hovering a few feet away.

They speak to each other softly as Farrah comes on the line.

“Hello, Jude?”

“Hey, Farrah,” I say. My voice is stiff, and I make an effort to soften it. “I uh, just wanted to say thanks for looking out for him. Cap.”

“Of course, Jude.”

“He’s...your son too, and I’m sorry I didn’t properly appreciate that before.”

There’s a long pause. “It is okay, Jude. It was a difficult...everything was difficult.”

I nod, pinching the bridge of my nose with my thumb and forefinger. “You guys still on track to come back the day after tomorrow?”

“That is what Gerrard says. We are having a good time, and we are being very safe, Jude. Please don’t worry. Please...enjoy your time with Nora. She is being Cap’s mother, Jude.”

“Yeah, okay,” I say, copping out completely. “See you in a couple days, Farrah.”

“Bye, Jude.”

I don’t know if it’s Farrah’s broken English, or the fact that she’s speaking the truth, but I swallow hard, looking over at my best friend as I hang up. I hate how the thought of Nora being more than just my best friend both feels so right, and yet scares the shit out of me too.

CHAPTER 28

Nora

After we thank the sisters for the phone, I remember what we came here for in the first place: to ask if they know anything about the baby at the cottage next door.

But they crowd around us, taking our coats and insisting we eat—and Jude comes away from the phone still looking slightly pale—I'm not sure this is the best time.

But what other time do we have?

I'm also increasingly concerned about the weather.

"Jude," I say as Carolina sits us down at the big round table next to each other and the rest of them fuss around in the kitchen, chattering to each other in German. "I don't think we have time to stay."

Jude follows my gaze out the window, to where the sky is darkening fast, and the snow continuing to fall. It's beginning to gather on the windowsills.

"Oh, you cannot go," Carolina says. She's wiping the table next to us with a damp rag. She says something to the woman still sitting in her rocking chair, and the woman responds with a gesture to the hallway.

"Yes, Sister Elke says you must stay here. It is too dangerous on the highway in this weather."

"We couldn't impose," I say.

But Jude's already nodding. "Thanks, that'd be awesome."

He sees my raised eyebrows and frowns. "You seriously want to go out in that?"

"No," I whisper. "But we could have offered to stay at a hotel or something."

"Oh, there is no hotel here," Carolina says, clutching the rag. "The closest is Diamant, and that is quite far."

When I tell her that's where we're staying her eyes go wide. Then she leans in. "Is it very beautiful? I've always wanted to see it."

I wonder what kind of life Carolina's lived. She's so young and already a sister. She speaks English and is entranced by the glamor of Diamant, but lives in a rural convent on a mountain in the Alps.

"It's very nice," Jude says. He seems to have perked up from how he looked on the phone a moment ago. The worry about Cap receding maybe, knowing he's in good hands. "Though we haven't seen all that much of it, have we?" Jude asks me. He has the audacity then to give me a wink, and I feel my cheeks blushing furiously.

"Jude!" I squeak.

He laughs. "Sorry. You know how it is. Vacation time."

Carolina looks confused. Because of course she doesn't know how it is. She's a nun. I want to slide down in my chair or at least change the subject, but just then the rest of the nuns come crowding around, bringing plates of steaming food they seem to have thrown together out of nowhere.

We eat our food—they even have wine—while the women pepper us with questions, translated through Carolina.

Where are you from? Where are your parents? What's America like? Why is your son not here? They're all very curious, and very clearly without many visitors.

"And how did your wife agree to let your son go on a trip on his own?" Carolina asks a moment after I've shoved a forkful of schnitzel in my mouth.

"Um..." I feel heat rise up my neck as I desperately try to swallow. Why did I take such a big bite?

"My wife?" Jude asks. "Oh, I don't have a"—Jude sucks in a breath as I kick him under the table—"Ow!"

I cringe. Under my breath I remind Jude that this is a convent. "You know," I whisper. "A religious convent?"

Someone says something in German, and Carolina clears her throat to translate. "You are married, yes?"

I can tell this question came from a prim, older sister who hasn't said much, but looks slightly alarmed as her eyes dart between us and our naked fingers.

Jude looks slightly panicked, like he doesn't know what to say.

My stomach drops. Is it because he's truly confused? Or does he that badly not want to even pretend to be married to me? I know that thought is

unreasonable, but I can't help thinking it.

I lift my chin. Fine then. We can tell them the truth. My pulse picks up. "No—" I begin.

But at the same time, Jude says, "Of course."

For a moment an awkward silence extends. Then, out of nowhere, the woman on the rocking chair, the oldest of them all, bursts out laughing.

It's the strangest sound—a dry cackle—but it disarms me. It seems to relax everyone. Her face has completely transformed, smile lines spreading across her weathered place. "*Lass die jungen leute in ruhe.*"

Carolina smiles. "She says, 'Let the young people be.'"

The rest of the group laughs then, all except that uptight nun who asked the question. She gets up, huffing and mumbling something under her breath. The sister next to her hands her her dish, which only makes the grumpy one pinch her lips together.

I offer to help, but Carolina insists we stay put. To my surprise, the woman in the rocking chair is ambling over to the table now.

She slides into a seat next to Carolina with the help of the younger woman and says something to her.

"Sister Ilsa asks if you've been to the cottage next door," she says.

Jude and I exchange a glance. Do we admit it? Technically, we were trespassing. But we have questions, too. That's why we came.

"Yes," I say quickly. "Do you know it?" I direct my questions to the old woman, who takes a sip of tea another sister brings over for her. The rest of them are in the kitchen.

Carolina translates her next words. "I know some things. I was born in this convent; my aunt was a sister here before me. She knew more."

"Do you know the people who lived there?" I add eagerly.

"No," she says.

My heart sinks. Then again, it makes sense. She's very elderly, but even if she were a hundred years old, she wouldn't have known Eleanor Cleary. She still would have died before this woman was born.

"But I knew their daughter," the old woman says.

My pulse jackhammers. Jude and I exchange a wide-eyed glance. "Their...daughter?" Jude asks. "What were their names? All of them?"

The old woman takes another sip of her tea. "It was my aunt who knew them. She brought the child to the orphanage. The child, she was called Clea."

“Their parents...” She closes her eyes as if trying to remember.

“Eleanor?” I say, hopefully.

“Eleanor.” The woman nods. “And...”

She considers, while Jude, Carolina, and I look at her anxiously.

“James,” she says after a moment.

We don’t need that translated.

“James!” I exclaim.

JEQ is James.

I hook my hands in Jude’s collar, my eyes growing wet. “He was a real person. *James.*”

We knew he was real, but George never mentioned him. There were no records of him. Only his own diaries proved his existence. By all accounts, he’d been a ghost. But learning his name has somehow changed everything. “Jude,” I say, my voice tight. “Eleanor and James fought for their love against all odds. They were brave. They even had a child and had to do the hardest thing in giving her up because of their circumstances.”

Jude grins almost dopily. “I like it when you get like this.”

I tip my face up for a kiss, and Jude obliges, pressing his beautiful lips to mine.

They were certain about each other and their lives. Just like I am about Jude, I realize.

When I pull apart, my heart thumps in my chest. I can’t let him go, can I? Not to go back to how we were? This is too good. Too perfect.

Across from us, Sister Ilsa is giving us her beautiful, toothless smile. She says something in German, and at first, Sister Carolina doesn’t translate, just asks her a question as if she didn’t hear her right.

But Sister Ilsa nods.

“She says,” Carolina says tentatively, “that a man came by looking for information on Clea years ago.”

Both of us are stunned. “Who?” I ask.

But when they exchange words, Ilsa shakes her head.

“He only spoke to her aunt when she was alive. We don’t know who he was. But he asked after the baby.”

“When was this?” I ask, my heart in my throat.

She confers with the older sister.

“About thirty years ago.”

My shoulders drop. Not all that helpful. “He could have been a

descendent of Eleanor's baby, following up on the adoption," I say, trying to sound hopeful.

"Or of George Cleary," Carolina says. She's as caught up on this as we are.

I shudder. "We never followed up on his lineage—maybe we should."

Jude brushes hair from my cheek. "Don't worry. There's still lots of mystery to solve. With Griff's help we jumped way ahead on our timelines."

I nod, hope coming back. He's right. We still have hopefully enough evidence to at least get the police to open up the case again.

Just then, Sister Ilsa puts a fist to her mouth as she yawns widely.

"Oh, we should let her get to bed," I tell Carolina, who's looking at Jude and me with an almost dreamy expression.

She clears her throat. "Yes."

Out the window, the light's falling as quickly as the snow.

Carolina speaks briefly to Sister Ilsa in German and then nods. "Right. If you'll follow us, we'll show you to your room."

The woman who answered the door goes to the wall, where our coats are hung, and picks them up, struggling to bring them over to us.

"Oh, let me help," Jude says. He crosses the room to take them from her and hugs them under his arm. When he grins at her, she flutters her eyelashes.

I shoot Jude a look. *Seriously? Even nuns, Jude?*

He knows what he's doing.

To my utter surprise, and Jude's great delight, we discover every single one of the nuns—with the exception of Sister Ilsa, who kisses us both on the cheeks and murmurs good night—are accompanying us to the room they're giving us.

So we travel down the hallway in the middle of the pack of them, giggling and chattering to themselves. Near the end of the hall, the one in front opens a door and we all file into a spartan room with two twin beds on opposite sides of a single bedside table, a crucifix hung over top.

"Here you are," says Sister Carolina.

Jude's looking around like he might find something else in here, but there's nothing except a plain desk and chair on the other walls. The rest is bare walls and floors.

"Thank you so much, again," I say. "Jude?" He's still eyeing the beds and himself, as if wondering if he might fit. It's fair, I don't think he will, totally. But they're all waiting on him to say something.

“Jude!” I whisper again, elbowing him. Only I don’t elbow him, I elbow the pile of our coats under his arm, and the moment I do, a loud buzzing emanates from his.

My stomach jolts. *He didn’t.*

All the sisters are looking around, confused. One of them points to the jacket.

My face heats up like a furnace. “Jude!”

Jude grins. “Whoops!” then pats around in his coat. But he has to juggle both of our coats, and they’re all over the place.

“Jude, we have to make it stop!” I hiss, my heart pounding in my ears. There could not be a worse place for a vibrator to go off. Not in the whole world.

I grab my coat from him trying to help, but in doing so I jostle his upside down, and just then a purple silicone lump drops to the floor, bouncing as it buzzes at a seemingly deafening volume.

I think I’m going to barf. The only saving grace is it’s one of those rosebud-looking things, and not a giant dildo. Because I would not put accidentally bringing a giant dildo into a house of God past Jude Kelly.

I go to grab it, but it bounces under one of the beds.

“Let me,” Jude says, dropping to his knee and reaching under the bed. Several of the nuns skip sideways, giggling to get out of his way.

I’m standing there, mortified, my hands over my mouth, but realize none of them know what the thing is.

Except that one nun...the uptight-looking one who asked if we were married. Her face is aghast, her jaw tight and eyes wide. I meet her eye and she quickly looks away.

I’m almost doubly embarrassed by this, not just for me but for her, too.

“Got it!” Jude proclaims finally, holding the thing up like a trophy, still buzzing wildly.

I grab it from him, switching it off. “Okay! Well, thank you so much again!” I say. I feign a big yawn, and thankfully, Sister Carolina takes the hint, smiling innocently. She speaks in German to the rest of them and they all titter and wave and shuffle out of the room.

Carolina lets us know where the bathroom is before closing the door behind us, leaving Jude and me alone in the room.

“I am going to *kill* you!” I exclaim, letting out a pressure-relieving laugh.

Jude grins, flopping down on the bed behind him. “Will you fuck me

first?”

I gasp, my eyes going to the crucifix. “Jude!” I whisper.
He grins wickedly. “It’s fine. I’m a priest, remember?”

CHAPTER 29

Nora

I try. I really try to get us to sleep in separate beds and go to sleep like a good little girl and boy. But when Jude strips down to his shorts and tosses me his T-shirt, I'm already going gooey at the sight of his long, lean form lying sideways on the narrow bed, his poor feet hanging off the end.

He looks so sexy in next to nothing, his hair mussed up from the day and his eyes twinkling with mischief.

"Hey, Shotgun Annie."

I bite my lip, my heartbeat picking up. "Hey, Jude."

When my eyes dart to the door, Jude gets up and wedges the chair under the doorknob. He comes back and sits on the side of his bed, his legs wide, elbows on his knees.

Maybe it's the Shotgun Annie, a name I now realize I've inhabited when I need to feel brave. Or maybe it's Jude steepling his hands under his chin, his pupils-wide gaze and quirked lips as he rakes his eyes over my still mostly clothed body. Probably it's the fact that we definitely shouldn't be doing this here, not in a holy building in the middle of nowhere. Whatever it is, I know I'm already wet; already wanting him inside of me so badly my mouth parts as he sits up straight, widening his legs and pulling me toward him.

"Jude, we probably shouldn't," I whisper.

"You're right. We shouldn't."

But his hands dance along the waistband of my jeans.

And I don't stop him as he begins to undress me.

He doesn't have to stand as he reaches up and pulls off my sweater, and just the sound of it hitting the floor makes heat spread in my lower half.

Jude works his way down the buttons of my collared shirt underneath, slipping it over my shoulders, then kissing my newly bare stomach and top of my hips. “Fucking beautiful,” he murmurs against my skin. I can’t help gasping as he closes his teeth over the top of my hip.

Next, he undoes my bra, tossing it aside, and immediately nuzzles his face between my breasts.

“My happy place,” he says, nipping at my flesh as I laugh.

I stop laughing when he takes a nipple into his mouth, twirling it with his tongue and releasing it with a wet pop before giving the same treatment to the other.

I’m breathing fast by the time he unbuttons my pants, slipping them down over my hips and helping me out of them. I toe off my socks so I’m standing there in just my underwear, chest heaving, the air deliciously cold against my nipples still wet from his tongue.

“This is definitely a sin,” I say, even as I tilt my chest out, needing him to touch me again.

Jude curls his hands around the back of my thighs, obliging me with a flick of his tongue over one nipple, then the other.

He looks up and smirks. “Your body is a sin, Nora.”

I half laugh at his corny joke and half shiver at his hand sliding up and over the lace-covered triangle between my legs.

“You’re terrible,” I breathe.

“I’m going to get worse.”

He slips both hands around my backside. But he pauses, snapping his eyes up at me. “Nora Albright, is this a—”

He turns me around and sucks in a breath.

I’m wearing a G-string. Granny panties are my go-to, but this is the last of the pairs Sasha packed for me, and I wanted to keep feeling sexy. For Jude.

For me.

“Is it ridiculous on me?” I whisper. “It is, right? A G-string under the kinds of clothes I wear...”

“It’s the hottest thing I’ve seen in my life.”

He says it so definitively, I can’t help smiling.

Then he slips his finger under the thin strip of fabric and plucks it like a string on an instrument.

I yelp at the delicious little snap. *More. I want more.*

“I’m never going to stop picturing these when I see you now, Nora.” Jude grips my left hip with one hand and glides his palm over my right ass cheek with the other, and all logical thoughts flee my brain. My nipples tighten and I point my ass back at him. I can’t get enough.

“Jesus, Nora,” he groans, gripping my hips.

“Don’t say that here!” I admonish, looking over my shoulder at him. I went to church as a girl, and though I don’t go now, I still feel keenly aware of where we are.

He stands up and walks me across the floor to the other bed. “You love this, don’t you? A good girl being so naughty.”

Admittedly, it’s what’s turning me on even harder than I’ve been with him before, which I didn’t think was possible.

“No comment.”

Jude keeps his hand on my hip and lays his palm between my shoulder blades, gently but firmly pushing me down so I’m forced to catch myself with my hands on the top of my bed.

“What if I insist?” he growls.

Then he smacks a hand across my ass.

I suck in a breath. “Jude, they’re going to hear!” But I’m already whimpering, pressing back into him. The little sting is so hot, I feel my arousal spread slick between my legs.

“Sorry,” he says.

Then he does it again.

I moan, pressing my ass into him. I’m only at the tops of his thighs, so I rise onto my tiptoes, and feel the soft press of his balls beneath his shorts.

“Show me,” I say. “I want to feel it.”

Jude draws a hand down my back and a moment later I feel the hot heaviness of his thick cock smacking down on my tailbone.

“Just a little thread standing between me slipping right inside of you right here,” he murmurs, his fingers sliding once more under the G-string.

“Please,” I beg. It feels so good having him inside of me it doesn’t matter if I come. But Jude only gives me two of his fingers, sliding them softly inside of me and bending them just right, so I spurt more of my wetness on him.

I bite my lips, trying not to make a sound.

“Do you want me to try to make you come in different ways, Nora?”

He means breaking me out of only needing a vibrator or showerhead, I

know. “I don’t think you’ll be able to,” I say. I think of the near tears of frustration I’ve put myself in just trying on my own, with no equipment. Wishing it were easier for me. “But you can try.”

“There’s no losing,” he says, withdrawing his fingers and drawing circles on my clit.

I moan in response to his touch.

He groans, speeding up for a moment before sliding his fingers back inside of me. “Every part of this is fun for me,” he says.

Even as my body throbs with his touch, my heart swells even more for Jude and how caring he is. How earnest and willing to work with what I need.

“Then show me,” I gasp as he curls his fingers against my G-spot.

“Stay like this,” he rasps. I see, upside down, as his shorts drop to the floor, then he turns. A moment later he’s back, and I hear a buzzing sound. I look over my shoulder to see he’s holding not the same vibrator from before. It’s only a blue blur in my vision, but I recognize it from the great unwrapping back in the hotel room as an oblong one about an inch thick.

I gasp.

“This okay?” he asks, sliding the vibrator along my slick opening.

“Yes,” I breathe, pushing against him. “But Jude, isn’t that one meant for...you know...”

“Butt stuff?” he asks, a wicked grin in his voice. “Yeah,” he says. “This okay?” He slides it up, running it over my back entrance.

I gasp slightly from the shock of sensation there. “I’ve never done anything there,” I whisper.

“I can stop,” he says, withdrawing it.

But with the lack of sensation there, I realize I liked it. “No, put it back.”

He uses his fingers to shift more of my wetness to the area—there’s plenty of it—then brings the vibrator back. “Tell me when to stop at any time, Nor. Any of it. But I think trying new things might be good, yeah?”

“Yes,” I whimper as he increases the pressure of the vibrator.

At the same time, I feel the hot head of his cock notched against my pussy.

“Should we try both?” he whispers.

I nod. “Yes.” Yes, why fucking not when it feels so good. I feel naughty, and bold, and like a bigger, badder, braver version of myself when he slips the small vibrator inside my asshole. I pinch my lips between my teeth so I don’t make a sound.

Which is a feat when he slides himself inside of me to match.

The sensation of being filled in both places is intense, and incredible. But when Jude brings his hand not holding the vibrator around front, touching the place we're joined and then my clit, I feel a deep, raw shudder of pleasure. He moves all three parts in a magically coordinated dance, increasing his tempo to the intensity of my breaths.

"More," I grit out, my hands splayed on the mattress, my whole self - exposed to him, heat and pleasure radiating from the triple contact.

But just as I feel the wave building, Jude slows, his circles with his fingers growing languid, his cock slipping nearly out of me, and the vibrator out and running circles around my asshole.

I slip back onto the pads of my feet. "No," I beg. "Don't slow down, please."

"You want it harder, Nora?"

"Yes," I whimper.

"You want me to make you come like this, Nora?"

There's still that wavering doubt that he'll make it happen, but it felt so good, and I was so close. "I want you to try."

"Tell me to make you come, Nora."

He leans over me, sinking his cock into me so slowly, I clench myself around him, making a high-pitched sound I hardly recognize.

He pulls out.

"Fucking demand it, Nora. I'm here for you, for your pleasure."

He thrusts deep into me again, lifting me back up to my toes. "And I don't lose."

I grit my teeth, feeling almost like I'm absorbing his energy. His pro-athlete, single-minded focus. His determination and absolute confidence that he can take something all the way.

"Make me come," I say, my voice low and liquid. "Make me fucking come, Jude, right fucking now."

"That's my girl," Jude says.

Then he's on me. With all the things, all at once. He's fucking me hard with his cock, the vibrator humming just inside my tight back opening, and his fingers pulsing against my clit, pinching it between his fingers and gliding circles over me.

The orgasm comes like a freight train as Jude pounds into me. My whole body arches as I stand up, bracing one hand against the wall and the other

biting down on my own forearm to keep from screaming.

It comes and it keeps coming, making me shudder and clench around Jude, the waves so powerful I think I'm going to fall.

Jude never stops. He keeps all of it going, and somewhere in the powerful waves washing over me I know he comes too, because I hear his grunt and feel the new hot wetness of his release where we're joined together.

Finally, it dies down and I do fall then, backward into his arms.

Jude gives a victory whoop.

I shush him, but I'm laughing too.

But he's breathing hard, and he groans as he slides out of me. "I don't want to get this mess on the bed."

"Here—" There's a box of tissues on the table between the beds and I grab as many as I can, handing them to him. He cleans both of us up and we pull on his clothes: his shorts for him, his T-shirt for me.

Then he flops backward onto the bed and opens his arms, and I lie like a rag doll on top of him.

For a moment, both of us are completely out of words.

CHAPTER 30

Jude

We lie like this for a long time, Nora's soft body fully on top of mine, my fingers stroking Nora's spine over my T-shirt. I'm still buzzing from both the pride at making Nora come like that—still with a toy but now me knowing what she was capable of—and from my own earthquake-level orgasm.

She may never have come like that before, but I hadn't, either. I know only part of it was due to the hotness of the situation. I was feeling things in my chest that had me flying in the moment, and even now in the afterglow, it's like I'm bathing in some kind of celestial cloud of happiness.

It wasn't just the sex, either. It was watching her take risks alongside me, without holding herself back. It was the way I needed her in my arms while reeling from the fear and relief of knowing my son was safe. It was this quiet girl growing loud in the safety of my arms, in heart and body.

I just wish it could feel completely right, the way I know it could be. But it's like that perfection—that assuredness that all is well—is just out of reach. There's a fear that still lingers, telling me I don't get to have it all. It's the tiniest shadow hanging onto this moment with the tiny tips of its fingers. But it's there.

I want it gone. I want to be able to be with Nora without it inching its poison into me. But I don't know how to do it. I don't want to ruin this moment either, with the wind howling outside and the soft weight of Nora's body on mine.

Nora runs a thumb along the edge of my ear, tugging gently on my lobe. It's the kind of touch I'd craved while we sat on the couch next to each other after Cap was tucked in bed. When only our knees occasionally brushed together, and I felt the touch like a spark of electricity. A promise, I realize

now.

I always wanted you to touch me.

Nora's fingers pause, and a beat passes.

I said that out loud.

"When?" she asks.

Nerves dance across my stomach. I could play it off. But she deserves my honesty. "When we were together, back at home. When it didn't make sense."

She shifts on me, sliding off to the side in the space between me and the wall. She props her head on her hand.

I stare up at the ceiling. It's lumpy plaster up there, old—a century old or more, probably.

"Maybe it would have made sense back then," she whispers.

I shake my head. "I wouldn't have been able to handle it, Nora. I'd have fucked it up and hurt you and we would have lost everything."

I still will. What happens when we go back to normal, if we ever do? This is the life I never dreamed was possible. That the terrified part of me insists isn't. But we don't have a normal to go back to. She's still here, and Cap and I are going home.

She draws her hand across my chest, slipping her fingers up along my collarbone in a featherlight touch that feels so good, I close my eyes.

"It's working now," she says softly.

She's right; the addition of this new dimension of us *has* been seamless, slipping in around our friendship with only a few bumps at the beginning as we felt each other out.

"But we're not at home," I say. "This isn't regular life. And when this trip is over, you're still going to be gone."

I hate the way that wounded little boy still comes out when I say that. Like I still haven't forgiven her for leaving.

"Jude," Nora says. She shifts her body to a sitting position, her legs sideways along the side of my body like a landed mermaid or something. God, she's beautiful.

She swallows, her eyes shifting away for a moment like she's scared. "This is what I wanted. For the longest time. But you...you made it clear you never wanted to be with someone like this. That you couldn't."

I meet her eyes, something sharp entering my chest. The truth that I'm still too ashamed to admit is I still don't know how to do it. Even with the

most perfect, funny, brilliant, beautiful woman in the world.

I should tell her that. I *need* to tell her that. Because it's not her fault. She couldn't be any more perfect to me.

I told you that you have to focus, Jude! You're just a loser until you win!

I'd forgotten that one.

"What is it?" Nora asks.

I look up at her. She'd seen the thought cross my mind. Or she was just reading my mind. "I...I used to have this coach when I played. He was with me from when I was a kid and started training seriously."

Nora touches a hand gently to my shoulder, and I'm not sure if she's indicating I don't need to speak or if I should go on.

But it's out now, so I talk. I've never told anyone about Coach. "He made me a star," I say. "And he was so nice to my parents—they never knew what he was really like." I meet her eye, in case she gets the wrong idea. "It wasn't horrible. Like, I've heard horror stories about kids in sports." I grit my teeth. "So I don't really have anything to complain about."

"Whatever it is, you're downplaying it, Jude."

I pop my jaw. "He just...he was a dick about everything. When I didn't perform the way he wanted, he'd act like he was kind and understanding on the court, but the minute we were out of sight, he'd lose it on me. Tell me exactly how badly I fucked up because I wasn't paying attention, or I was 'too stupid to see a neon ball flying at my face.'"

My chest is tight thinking about him—aside from his voice that rings in my ears every time I fuck up, I try never to think of him.

"I mean, it's what I needed to get to where I got."

Nora's quiet, watching me, her face so open and caring I have to look away.

"When I was twelve, he caught me flirting with a girl and lost his absolute shit on me. He was obsessed with my focus. No space for emotion. But he screamed so hard I started to cry. And fuck, you can't cry when you're almost thirteen, especially not in front of him."

One thing at a time, Jude! Your little pea brain can handle one thing at a time.

His face was red, he was so mad, spit flying from his mouth as he spoke.

You might—might—have what it takes for the pros, but you'll never get there if you don't live, breathe, eat, and shit tennis. I don't want you so much as reading a goddamned pamphlet. Do you hear me? That canoodling shit,

that's for the losers who don't succeed, Jude. Focus. That's the only fucking way!

“No adult ever swore at me like that, you know? Right up in my face.”

I laugh, but the sound is bitter.

“Is that why you don't date, Jude?”

I shrug. “No. Dating was just never for me. My family used to joke I'd get married to a tennis racket if I could.”

I play it off with a smile, but the sting at that joke is still there. But I think we both know Nora's nailed it as usual. Between my family, my coach, and then getting a young girl pregnant—it's always been safer to do what Coach told me to do: focus on one thing and hope to get it right.

Nora brushes my cheek with her thumb, and it feels so good, I catch her hand there, holding it against me.

She opens her mouth like she's going to say something and suddenly I panic. I can't have her tell me they were all wrong. That I did deserve to be with someone. Because that would just make me pathetic, wouldn't it? I'd have wasted all those years.

“Jude, I couldn't have figured all the Eleanor stuff out on my own.”

I laugh. But she's serious.

“I mean it. You're the one who got us into the archives. Who saw James in the photo. Who thought Eleanor might have brought her baby to the convent.”

I didn't think about it, but when she puts it that way, I'm a little stunned.

“I'm sorry you ever thought you weren't good enough, Jude. They were wrong about you. All of them. And your coach sounds like he was a real piece of shit.”

I feel something inside of me loosen. She's looking inside of me, telling me exactly what I've always needed to hear. But instead of making me feel better, I feel something like panic. These walls have been up so long, I don't know how to lower them. And if they're gone, who am I under it all?

So I deflect, pulling her hand away. “Hey, when we get back, I'm going to take you out, okay? We'll go on a date. Just you and me. Cap and Farrah will be back the last night and he's going to want to hang out and play. Then we'll be busy packing and getting ready to leave the next day...”

Nora smiles, but there's a sadness in her eyes I can't stand. Because I know I put it there.

Suddenly, I realize the tables have turned: I'm the quiet, scared one, while

Nora's forging ahead, the better person.

"Well? I asked you out. You going to leave me hanging?" I joke. All smiles. But it doesn't sound jaunty. It sounds desperate and sad.

"Okay," she says, her voice a soft whisper. But it's not the same tentative softness she used to have there. It's something else. But I can't quite figure out what.



When I wake up the next morning there's a strange sound that's incongruous to the soft silence of the convent.

I open my eyes—early morning light is streaming in through the gap in the curtain, and I catch a glimpse of blue sky at the top.

But that sound—it's a thundering, rhythmic sound, growing louder by the second.

"I TOLD YOU TO QUIT PLAYING THAT GAME SO LOUD!" Nora yells at the very top of her lungs, causing me to fly out of bed, heart pounding.

"I'M TRYING TO READ!"

I'm confused as hell, but I look up to see Nora standing on her bed, fists planted in her hips. Her eyes are glassy. She's asleep. I go up to her and place my hands on her shoulders. "Nor—"

"CHRISTIAN!" she yells directly in my ear.

"Holy shit," I breathe, stumbling back and landing on my ass. The room's practically vibrating. I had no idea Nora was capable of setting her voice at that volume.

I get to my feet, gripping her shoulders again, wincing as she takes a breath.

"Nora! Wake up!" I say before she can yell. I shake her gently, which at least makes her mouth close. But when she still doesn't respond to her name, I press my lips to hers.

It works. This close, her face is blurry, but I can see her open her eyes. She yelps, jumping from surprise. Unfortunately, this makes her forehead collide with my nose. A splinter of pain shoots through my face.

"Ow, shit!" I exclaim, cupping my nose with my hand.

"Oh my God, Jude, I'm sorry!" She claps her hands to her face and spins

around. She's looking for her glasses. "What happened?"

I grab them from the table, my nose still killing me. "Here," I manage. "Sleeping. Did your brother play video games or something?"

"What?"

"Your brother—never mind."

She pulls her glasses on, then freezes, her head tilted. "Is that a helicopter?" She jumps off the bed. I don't think she realized she was standing on it. What must it be like to spend every night with Nora Albright?

But before she can pull the curtain, there's an even louder banging on the door. "Madam! Sir!"

The handle rattles and the chair slips easily loose, banging on the floor as the door opens. Sister Carolina comes in, looking frantic, though she's momentarily confused by the chair on the floor.

I grimace. "Guess that only works in the movies."

Nora's cheeks are pink. "Hello, Sister!" Her voice higher is pitched than normal.

But Sister Carolina is staring at me, her jaw wagging but no sound comes out.

I look down. I'm in only my shorts, and those are riding low enough to be nearly indecent.

"Jude!" Nora whispers.

I hitch the shorts up.

She lets out an exasperated sound and takes her sheet, wrapping it around me like a toga, all the while the sound outside is close to deafening.

I love her fussing over me.

Carolina seems able to breathe again because she trains her eyes on Nora. "Madam," she shouts. "We received a call this morning indicating a transportation will be arriving for you outside. We did not understand this meant now, or that it would be"—she points her hand to the window—"this."

The helicopter must be landing because it sounds as if it's in the room with us. I pull open the curtain to see a giant, shiny black bird just lowering itself onto the giant expanse of snow behind the building.

Snow whirls everywhere, flying so high it obscures the craft from sight.

I wonder, inanely, what kind of helicopter that is. Griff would know. Then it hits me, a moment later than it should. "Uh, that's probably my brother."

Carolina still won't look me in the eye. I peek down to see if I've got

morning wood or something, but everything's in place.

"We'll be out in a minute," Nora assures her.

Carolina nods and lifts the chair back to its feet before slipping from the room. Somehow, it's this part—the sister setting my failed door lock back on its feet—that makes me crack. When I meet Nora's eyes, we both grin, then we both lose it, falling over each other as we laugh so hard we can't breathe. This goes on several seconds before I say, "Guess we better see what Griff wants," which only makes Nora laugh harder.

Until she sucks in a breath, crying out in almost a shriek. She bends down and picks up the purple vibrator, the one we didn't use.

She throws it at me. "I can't believe you brought these!"

Of course it bounces off me and lands on the ground and goes off again, then we're both wheezing. I pick it up and turn it off. "Want to test it out?"

"Jude," Nora manages after a moment. "We have to go!"

I nod, then I toss it over my shoulder dramatically and pull her, laughing, into my arms. It's the most glorious release after the tension, and thank God it shifts the tone from what could have been an awkward-as-fuck morning.

We're both dressed and out at the entrance of the building a few minutes later, the nuns all tittering as they gather around us. Even Sister Ilsa is there, with a fuzzy orange coat wrapped around her shoulders. She smiles at both of us and laughs when I try to hand her some euros for their trouble.

Nora has her camera out, filming the sisters as they swarm around us and point at the helicopter.

I exchange her information with Sister Carolina so they can stay in contact.

Carolina blushes as she takes the pen and paper I asked her for. "I hope you and Nora have many more happy years between you," she says over the sound of the rotors. "And many more babies, too!"

My stomach clenches as Nora and I exchange a look.

Carolina looks confused, so I nod. "Thank you. You too."

"Jude!" Nora exclaims.

Shit. I just wished a woman married to God many babies. "I mean, no kids for you. I hope. Right? Unless you want them?" Can nuns have babies if they want?

Carolina's looking at me like I've lost my mind, which I probably have.

“Well, bye!” I say, then wrap my arms around the stunned nun.

When I release her, her face looks so shocked I wonder if I accidentally left the vibrators on in my pockets or something.

Oh shit.

I pat my jacket. My hand claps down on only one additional lump besides my dead phone and wallet.

I lean in and whisper in Nora’s ear. “I forgot the purple rose.”

Nora’s eyes go wide. “We have to get it!” she says between her teeth.

I glance to the chopper, where Griff is leaning out, throwing his hand up at me.

“No time,” I tell Nora. I hold a finger up at Griff, then scan the crowd of women. I don’t see the one I’m looking for.

“Where is the sister with the face like this?” I ask Carolina, scrunching my expression up like an angry raisin.

Carolina pinches her lips. “Sister Ada. I am sorry if she was unkind to you.”

“Nah. She was fine.”

“She’s probably tidying something—she likes to clean better than she likes people.”

“Well, that’s perfect. If she tidies our room, tell her I left her a little present, would you? It might have rolled under the bed.”

Carolina is confused, but readily agrees. “I will.”

Nora’s looking at me with her whole jaw unhinged.

I grin. “Maybe it’ll soften the sourpuss up a little!”

Nora closes her mouth, but I can tell she’s trying not to laugh.

Griff shouts something I can’t hear, but clearly means get the hell on the chopper.

“Thank you!” we call to the sisters as we trudge through the snow to the bird. They all wave and shout their goodbyes.

When we get inside, Griff closes the door and hands us a pair of headsets, which we pull on. “Buckle up.” His voice is crackly over the speaker.

Nora hands him her camera while she gets everything on; he holds it like he might a newborn baby, which is to say like he’s afraid it might poop on him.

“Thanks for coming,” I say once we’re all settled. “It wasn’t necessary, but thanks.”

“It was necessary.” He points to a lump in the snow down below. The

sisters are filing back into the convent, looking very tiny now as we rise fast.

“Shit.” He’s right. What would we have done if he hadn’t come to rescue us?

“It’s all right,” Nora says. “Farrah would have waited with Cap back at the hotel.”

She’s read my mind, of course. I feel like an idiot, but Nora’s hand slides over mine. “It was me who wanted to go just as badly as you.”

“And I gave you the information and didn’t warn you off of going. So quit blaming yourself for everything, brother,” Griff says, his voice hard enough that it doesn’t make sense to argue.

I run my hand over my hair. “The car’s a rental.”

“We’ll take care of it.”

I really don’t know what I’d do without Griffin. He’s so rarely around, but when he is, he just...takes care of shit. It’s hard to believe we’re related sometimes.

I nod a thanks, deciding not to question it.

“Where’s your guy?” Nora asks a few minutes later, her lens back on her camera.

“He’s in a safe place,” Griff says. “Classified.”

“They know about Plimpton?” a fourth voice chimes in. The pilot.

“They’re family,” Griff says. “You trust your family with your life, remember?”

The man makes a sound kind of like a grumble, though it’s tough to say with the background static.

“That’s Ford,” Griff says by way of greeting. “He’s got a little sister who’s almost as much of a pain in the ass as you.”

“Half sister. And she’s more of a PITA, I can tell you confidently,” Ford grumbles as he tips us sideways, making me clap my hand against the window.

Nora’s skin looks a little green.

I grip her hand. “You okay?”

“I’ve never been on a helicopter before.”

“Well, shit,” Griff says. “This is a helluva bird to be your first.”

She laughs nervously but grips my hand tighter as Ford does another dip. All around us are jagged white mountain peaks as we loosely follow the path of the highway down below to get through them.

“So? You guys together now or what?” Griff asks.

I could fucking kill him. I give him a look to tell him as much.

“Still up in the air, I see.” He nods, thoughtfully.

“You seeing anyone right now, Griff?” I ask.

The question’s pointed on purpose. Griffin is the only other person in our family besides me who I can’t remember ever actually being in a relationship. He has women he’s dated, I know that much. But the guy is allergic to staying in one place for more than a minute, and doesn’t tell anyone anything about his life, ever. He’s the definition of no commitment. To literally anything.

He doesn’t even deign to answer my question.

“We’re picking up Cap tomorrow,” he says instead. “Gerrard asked as a treat for Cap. That okay?”

I meet his eye, suddenly sorry I reacted that way to his question. “Of course. Thank you,” I say, with all sincerity. “Seriously. You saved the day.”

“I know,” Griff grunts. Then he pulls out a laptop and I know we’ve lost him.

I look over to Nora, who’s still gripping my hand tight. “Sorry about my brother,” I say. “He’s denser than I am about some stuff.”

“You’re not dense,” Griffin and Nora say at the same time.

“So fuckin’ quit it,” Griff adds, without looking up.

My chest feels warm and fuzzy looking over at my big brother. And at Nora.

I pull off my headset and lean in, gently sliding Nora’s aside.

“Thank you,” I whisper in her ear so only she can hear me.

“For what?” she mouths, holding her hand over her mouthpiece.

“For trusting me. For everything. This whole week. For coming with us and hanging out with Cap’s mom and making it somehow not the weirdest thing that’s ever happened.”

She smiles, lifting her hand to my face. But she doesn’t say anything at all.

CHAPTER 31

Nora

Jude and I spend the morning recuperating on our own—I have a bath and a nap, and I suspect Jude must have done the same, because when he knocks on my door, his hair is damp and he looks fresh and sparkly.

He gives me a hug and a kiss so soft and sweet it takes my breath away. We linger a moment too long, then we're entangled in each other's arms, our clothes coming off piece by piece. Later, we lay sprawled on my bed with my laptop and a few images we've printed off. Jude rubs his thumb on my bare thigh as we go over everything Eleanor.

And I try not to get too hung up on the fact that this might be the last time we do this.

"So," Jude says, recounting what we've just gone over, "James and Eleanor had not just a love affair at George Cleary's cottage in Switzerland, but a love child." He pushes back his index finger.

"Who they named Clea," I agree.

He counts off his middle finger next. "And the sisters put her up for adoption."

"Correct."

He adds his ring finger. "And someone came looking for Clea thirty years ago at the convent, but Sister Ilsa didn't know what they were told."

"Yes."

"That's it."

I sigh again, closing my eyes and leaning back on the pillow. "Is that it then? Do we pass this all onto the police and give up on finding anything new ourselves?"

"We could," Jude says. "Or we could convince Griff to help us going forward."

My heart clenches. “Jude, we’re going home, remember?”

Jude takes my hand in his, threading his long fingers through mine and holding our joined hands against his chest. “We don’t have to decide what to do about what we’ve learned yet.”

He doesn’t acknowledge what I’ve said. But I realize it doesn’t matter. I need to say goodbye to Eleanor and James’s story, and I need to say goodbye to Jude, too.

“You know what I think?” I ask, my throat thick.

“What’s that, baby?”

“You know how George Cleary was an asshole with mistresses everywhere and warehouses full of people he underpaid and overworked?”

Jude nods.

“He cheated, lied, and boozed his way into bankruptcy, and he murdered his so-called wife when he found out she sought refuge in the arms of his driver, who’d been in love with her for years.”

Jude meets my eyes, waiting.

“I think maybe they got married in that cottage. I think when she died, her heart belonged to James.”

“Is that enough for you? Don’t you want to know what happened to him? And Clea? And how do we know it was George who killed her?”

“We’re out of time, Jude. Maybe it’s enough for us to know they were in love. That Eleanor and James’s descendants are out there somewhere, living and breathing.” My throat is thick suddenly with unshed tears. It’s Eleanor’s story that had me starting this adventure with Jude years ago, but it’s James’s that’s become mine.

“Jude,” I say softly. “What’s going to happen tomorrow?”

Jude’s eyes linger on mine a moment, then he looks away. “We’re going to hang out with Cap and maybe Farrah. Then we’ll pack for the train the next day.”

“Then what?”

“Then we’ll take you back to London and we’ll...” Jude swallows. “We’ll catch our plane.”

“Right,” I whisper.

“Nora, I don’t know what to say,” Jude says, threading his hand through mine. “I keep everything light and happy because, well, you’ve seen me when I don’t. It’s ugly.”

“There’s nothing about you that’s ugly, Jude.”

He scoffs. “You’re the one person who knows that’s not true.”

“Jude...” I meet his eye. “You could consider letting up on yourself, you know. I know how you are around other people, and I know who you are when no one’s looking. More now on this trip than ever before. Both of them are the Jude I know and love. You showed me all of you and I’m still here.”

I hesitate. I swallow down the tears threatening to rise. I want to tell him it’s more than just love the way he thinks I mean it. I’m this close to saying the words that float around me every time I’m near him. *I’m in love with you, Jude. I’ve been in love with you what feels like my whole life.*

But he’s not there yet. Maybe he never will be.

My heart feels as heavy as lead. But my mind—my mind is strangely clear.

I thought that would be the bravest thing I could ever do—to tell Jude how I feel about him. But now I know I was wrong. The bravest thing I can do is to let myself love Jude Kelly and know that’s enough. I won’t fill in the blanks for him. And I won’t fill in that empty space in his life if he doesn’t love me back. The thought that this feeling will always go unrequited hurts—it nearly shatters my life—but it won’t define me.

I’m going to keep taking risks whether Jude’s there or not. Because look how good it gets when I do?

I smile, leaning over and kissing my best friend on the cheek.

“I’m going to go, Jude.”

He sits up straight. “This is your room—I’ll go.”

“I mean, I’m going to leave. Tonight, if I can. I’m going to head back to London early. I have something I need to do. I’ll text Farrah to see Cap again before you guys go. But it’s time for me to go home.”

Jude looks stricken, so I cup his cheek. “It’s okay, Jude. I’m not upset with you.”

Jude stands up, following me to our adjoining door like a lost puppy dog. It’s almost enough to get me to forget the plans percolating in my mind.

Almost.

Jude rubs his hand against his chest. “I don’t want you to go.”

“Do you want to be together with me? For real?”

Jude grips his shirt, anguish on his face. “I don’t know, Nor.”

My heart hurts, more than it did when I left. But when he looks at me almost wincing, I smile, rising up to kiss him on the cheek.

I remember in that moment how he’d turned his face the last time I did

this. How he'd given me a kiss that sparked it all. But this time I don't feel unsure. I feel a clarity I never felt before in my life. I hold open the door for him.

"It's okay, Jude. We'll be okay."

Downstairs half an hour later, Gunther is working at the little stand by the entrance.

"You are leaving?" he asks me, looking crestfallen.

"Yes. Can you get me a car, Gunther?"

"Of course, miss, there is one outside now that will take you to the station." He makes a snapping motion and some hand symbol that must mean "to the train," and in a few seconds flat, the driver is loading my luggage into the trunk.

Gunther stands next to the door, looking forlorn.

I smile at him. "Is there a girl in your life, Gunther?"

"I—"

"Someone you like?"

Gunther blushes and looks down, making me think the answer is yes.

"Tell her, okay? Tell her now. Be with her if she'll have you. Have fun, and don't wait around being too scared to do anything until it's too late and you make a fool of yourself."

His brows bunch together. "Miss, are you okay?"

I sound unhinged.

"I'll be fine," I say. Then I rise up on my toes and kiss his cheek. I'm clutching Gunther's shoulders, but I'm looking into the hotel, to the room next to the empty one that was mine. I look to the man inside, who maybe I'll one day get over, but who'll hold the biggest piece of my heart till the day I die, when I say the word, "Goodbye."

I text Farrah from the train, telling her what's going on and asking her to tell Cap so he won't be too upset. This is the part I know is not ideal, but I can't hang around the hotel with Jude right there beside me. I'll be too liable to slip, to tell him I'll take him anyway he wants. And I won't do that anymore. Besides, the three of them need some time on their own, to see how it fits.

Farrah responds in only a minute. They must be at the inn.

FARRAH: Don't worry, I will tell Cap. We will call you when we are back. Please let me know if you need anything at all.

She's a good person. I wonder, briefly, if Jude had gotten his shit together back then if he might have entertained a relationship with her?

It's neither here nor there.

I have a few hours before I arrive back in London—enough time to write up a rough draft of my *Love and Loss* submission proposal. By the time I get home, I'll have just enough time to polish it off and get it in by the 11:59 p.m. deadline.

CHAPTER 32

Jude

“**M**ost of all, I’m thankful that every single one of my children managed to come home for Christmas this year, I—”

Dad swallows, holding a finger up.

Eli leans into me, rolling his eyes. “The old guy’s gonna cry again.”

It sounds heartless, but I can see the way my brother grips his fiancée’s hand on the table and looks up, blinking slightly, that he’s affected too. The guy is just as emotional as Dad these days, straight-up tearing up when he talks about their wedding coming up this summer.

Dad goes on with his epic toast, but his words fade out of focus. Everything’s been out of focus since Cap and I got back stateside three weeks ago.

Eli’s twin, Cass, on my other side past Cap, kicks my foot under the table, and I look up. “Yeah?”

“We’re waiting on you, son,” Dad says.

“Something you’re thankful for,” Chelsea says, bobbing her one-year-old, Kev, on her knee as he gurgles.

My stomach twists. “Didn’t we just do this at Thanksgiving?”

Dad looks personally wounded, and guilt washes over me like it does every other minute these days.

At least Coach is blissfully absent. He’s been gone ever since I told Nora about him.

“Jude,” Cass says. “You’re the one who came up with this tradition!”

“Yeah, since when do you not have something to be thankful for?” Eli asks.

I look down at my son, who looks stricken.

I wrap my arm around his head. “I’m grateful for Cap. My one and only

guy. My best friend.”

My stomach twists, and Griff gives me the strangest look.

But Cap squeezes me around the ribs and Dad moves on to Chelsea, last on the list by age.

“Dad, you have to have a sip,” Cap reminds me when everyone’s lifting up their glasses.

“Right,” I say, holding up my glass of water. It’s been like this ever since we got home. I can’t remember how to fucking function.

After the cheers, I pull my phone out of my pocket for the five hundredth time. I texted Nora this morning. In the middle of the night, actually, when I knew she’d just be waking up.

Still no response.

“Dad?” Cap asks. He was asking me something. Guilt rockets through me. I shove my phone away.

“Sorry, buddy. I’m here.”

It’s been three weeks. I need to give it up.

CHAPTER 33

Nora

I'm in the kitchen making myself a cup of coffee on my first Christmas morning ever on my own when my phone buzzes.

I thought it would be Sasha. She's with her family at some seaside cottage in Norwich. Or at least, her sister and parents are. Her brothers are dealing with whatever crisis is going on back at home, apparently trying their best to shield her parents from it.

Sasha won't elaborate, but I can tell it is bad. She hasn't been sleeping well, and I even saw her wearing pajama pants out to the shop one day before they left, which was unheard of for a woman who never leaves her apartment without lipstick.

On the radio in the living room, the BBC is talking about the royal address that will be happening later today, and my little Christmas tree is twinkling. It will be a nice quiet day. Never mind that it will be lonely.

My phone buzzes a second time as I pick it up.

JUDE: Merry Christmas, Nora.

JUDE: Miss you.

I freeze. *How am I supposed to respond to this?* Then I silence my phone, set it down, and go back to finish making my coffee, my heart churning. I have to write him back. We've only texted a few times over the past several weeks, and it has mostly been perfunctory.

I'm just heading back to the living room with my coffee when I get my second surprise of the morning: a knock on the door.

My heart flies up to my throat. I actually consider, for the briefest second, that it could be Jude. The only other person who might be knocking first

thing Christmas morning is Sasha. Or—

I pull open the door, my heart sinking when I see who is here.

“Merry Christmas,” Murray says.

I’m supposed to be getting over Jude. I *am* getting over Jude—which is a feat considering I’ve spent the past couple of weeks working with film footage of the man. I decided after hitting submit on my proposal for the *Love and Loss* contest, which I’ve called *Finding Eleanor*, that whether or not I get in, I’m going to make Eleanor Cleary my thesis project. It is perfect, and hard, and feels right.

Murray thrusts out a little package at me.

“Oh!” I take it, too surprised not to. “I didn’t get you anything, Murray.”

“It’s fine,” he says in the kind of tone that indicates he’s used to it. “It’s just a mousetrap.”

I pinch my lips. “How thoughtful!”

“We’ve got a mouse problem, as you know.”

I nod, then think frantically about what I can give Murray. “Hang on,” I say. Then I dash into the kitchen and grab the box of hot cross buns I bought yesterday to have for breakfast. It’s fine, I’m just being sentimental. I prefer corn flakes anyway.

Murray looks like I’ve given him a new car. “Gosh, thank you, Nora!”

“You’re welcome. Why aren’t you home with family right now?”

To my great surprise, Murray smiles, revealing his extremely crooked teeth. “Can’t. My girlfriend’s expecting me.”

“Girlfriend!” I say, trying not to sound shocked.

“She doesn’t celebrate Christmas,” he explains. “So anyway, I’ve gotta run. We’re going to see *Braindead Zombie Invasion* down at the Bijou.”

I bite my cheek this time to keep from showing anything but pleasant surprise. “Well, that’s great, Murray. I’m so happy for you.”

I really am. It explains why Murray hasn’t been lurking around the hallways since I’ve gotten back. I thought he was taking an eavesdropping break. I can’t wait to tell Sasha.

“Well, Happy Christmas,” I say, and go to close the door.

“You too,” Murray says.

Except just as I begin closing the door, he clears his throat.

“Was there something else?” I ask, both hands on the edge of my door.

“Your man friend isn’t here?” Murray asks.

My stomach twists. I forgot he saw Jude that day he slept over here. “No,

he's..." I swallow, surprised at the knot in my throat. "He's back at home, with his family." I think about how the Kelly family will be crowded around the table tonight, laughing and teasing each other. Will Cap put on a show for them with his little karaoke set like he did last year when I went there for dinner? Jude invited me over and even though things were awkward between us then it was the best Christmas I can remember in...ever.

"Well, that's good because there's another gentleman calling for you."

My stomach jolts, my head clearing in a second. "What? Like right now?"

"Yes. He's downstairs. Made a racket banging on the glass. Was going to shoo him away but he said he knew you. Thought I'd come and check, and give you my gift. Two birds and one stone, as they say. Anyhow, he's got stripes on his shoulders and a wheelie bag. Is he staying?"

"Murray!" I'm aghast at him, waiting until I'm about to close the door to tell me. But my heart soars because I know just who it is.

"Bye, Nora!" Murray calls after me as I race down the hallway in my socks.

I burst into a grin when I reach the bottom of the stairs, because there, holding his hat and looking irritated, is my big brother, Christian.

I open the door and practically leap on him.

"Damn, Nor!" he says after he hugs me back. "It's only been a couple of months!"

"You didn't tell me you were coming," I say. To my surprise, tears begin streaming down my cheeks.

Chris looks panicked. He comes into the foyer and places a hand on my shoulder. "Shit, what's wrong? Why are you sad?"

"I'm not sad," I say, my voice wobbling. "I'm happy. So happy." Then I begin to sob.



It's a whole day before I tell Christian what's going on with me.

We're at the pub down the street from my place, and I'm honestly the happiest I've been since coming home. But telling the story still makes my heart hurt.

While we still check in when we can, my big brother and I were closer

several years ago, when I was in college. But he got hired by a huge airline and spent a lot of his time traveling. He moved with his wife to Cincinnati to be close to the airport, and since then, I haven't seen much of him at all. I miss talking to him. Which must be why I tell him the whole thing, going back all the way to the beginning of Jude's and my friendship, which may be unnecessary. But I feel like our story makes the most sense when you start at the beginning.

I tell him all the way to the end, when I met Farrah and Cap at a board game cafe and the three of us had an amazing time playing a game the way it was supposed to be played (Cap insisted this was one of the few he'd do this with). We'd had a surprisingly great time, like Farrah and I were old friends with one of our sons.

When Cap had gone to the bathroom—with no chaperone, he insisted—Farrah said she'd told Jude about Japan on the train ride home.

"How did he take it?"

"He was nice. I was very surprised."

I'd smiled, relieved. Jude had come a long way in his relationship with Farrah compared to the beginning of the trip.

"Have you told Cap?"

"No. But I'm going to today, after we see you. I wanted to make sure I could tell him we would both be there for him—on the phone or the computer. Will you be... Are you going to talk to him still?"

I thought about how I'd planned on cutting back on my calls with Cap back before the trip. I knew in my heart I could never do that now. I wasn't standing in the way of Jude moving on and finding a family by breaking Cap's and my heart too. "I won't be ending my relationship with Cap," I said. "Not so long as he'll have me."

Farrah smiled. "Cap will be so happy. And also...Jude is *très stupide*."

I laughed, despite the pain of thinking of him. I hadn't let that wound crack open yet though, so I clapped my hand over my mouth. Otherwise, I might fall apart right there in the cafe.

"He will change his mind," she said, with such assurance the deeply pathetic part of me rose up in hope for half a second before shattering.

"No," I said. "I don't think he will."

Now, I thank the bartender as he hands me my second pint of Guinness.

"I'm fine," I say to Christian.

He looks at me skeptically, like he knows I'm not telling him everything,

even though I just did.

I take a big swig of my beer. I've grown to like the bitter stout that made me purse my lips when I first got here. Not that I drink it all that much.

"Really?" Christian asks.

"Really!" I insist. "I think."

Christian's on the stool next to me, his knees sticking out sideways. He looks every bit the handsome pilot, even though he's in jeans and a sweater. His dark hair is neatly trimmed, his gray eyes examining mine, and his broad hands are wrapped around his own Guinness. "Nora, I have to say I'm totally impressed with how you handled all of this, even though I never want you to mention you having you-know-what ever to me again."

I laugh, then sober. "I don't know if I really handled it all that well. I mean, I'm proud of myself for how I left it. I know"—I swallow—"I deserve more than just being stuck on the side, hopelessly in love."

All around us the bar is filled with people laughing and talking loudly. The night outside is glittery and wet with traffic and resellers, even though New Year's isn't for a few days yet.

Christian considers me for a moment. "Did he lead you on?"

I smiled at his big brother protectiveness. But shook my head. "No. He was always clear about his stance on relationships."

"Then you did a brave thing in walking out."

I smile, feeling if not still terribly sad, so glad he told me that. "I think I've come a long way since we were kids. I was too scared to even stick my hand up in class half the time."

"Even though you always knew the answer."

I smile. "Not always."

"You're selling yourself short, you know," Christian says after a moment.

"How?"

"You think you were always a scaredy-cat. You were about little things."

"Like climbing trees on a stack of chairs."

"Yeah, not my brightest moment." He grins. "But I'm talking about the big things." Christian turns serious. "I've never forgiven myself for lending you my car that night, you know."

My stomach twists. He's talking about the night I borrowed his car to go see a movie with my best friend Callie, back when we lived in North Carolina. "That wasn't your fault," I say softly.

"Of course it was. I was an idiot kid. I didn't think about the risks."

The car had broken down on the side of a lonely road, and we'd been stranded in the pitch black. Two guys had come along in a truck had found us, two helpless teenage girls on a lonely road. They were making their intentions known before another person happened to come by. The person happened to be the guy Callie would end up dating and later marrying, which was a happy ending for them. But it had been traumatizing. I'd had nightmares for months afterward.

I hadn't thought about it for years now though. "It's not your fault, Chris. Besides, I've had a good amount of therapy." I smile, though Chris doesn't return it.

Christian shifts on his stool. "Dad and I wanted to go on a witch-hunt for those guys. Remember?"

I did remember. It was the first time I remember losing it on them. Those guys had been mean, and I wouldn't have anything bad happen to the people I loved. "I didn't do anything brave though."

"Sure, you did. You could have hidden away after that happened. Never left home. Jumped anytime a guy said 'boo' to you. But you remember what you did?"

I laugh, without humor. "I went to the library."

"That's right. You got out all those books on car repair and made both of us work on the car together so we'd both know what to do if it broke down again. Then you went out and took that self-defense course."

I smile. "Remember—"

"When I said self-defense courses were only good if you actually knew how to do the moves?"

I'm already laughing.

"So you kicked me in the nuts."

"You cried!" I laugh.

Chris claps his hand over his heart. "I can't believe you're mocking my pain!"

It feels so good to laugh again. Jude and Cap always make me laugh like this.

I don't realize I've stopped laughing until Christian does too. He examines me a moment before looking down, twisting his wedding ring around his finger idly. "It's okay to take a while to get over someone, you know," he says softly. "And to still love them even if you can't have them."

It feels like he might be talking about himself—I know it's hard on his

marriage for him to be away so much. But I'm already swallowing down the lump in my throat because I know he was really talking about me.

He's right; I'm still in love with Jude. I think I might always be. And maybe that's okay.

But he's also right, I realize, in telling me what Jude always made me feel when I was around him. That I wasn't always scared. That some part of me, some important inner core part of me was brave, and always had been, in my own way.

CHAPTER 34

Jude

It's that weird stretch of time between Christmas and New Year's when everyone's gorged themselves on chocolates and cheese, no one's working—except Cass and Blake, they're always working—and no one knows what day or time it is.

I do. I know exactly what day it is—December 27th, seven p.m. Exactly twenty days since I last saw Nora Albright.

My whole family's crammed into Dad's living room watching some family movie, while I'm standing in the kitchen, tapping my fingers on the counter, my mind all over the place and body too tightly strung to sit still. I feel like I need to work out, but I already spent three hours on the squash court this morning smashing a ball by myself. Then this afternoon, Cap and I built a whole igloo outside. I wanted to stay out there, but Cap's teeth were chattering. So we went in for hot chocolate and now I've got ants in my goddamned pants again.

“What are you doing, Jude?” a gruff voice barks, making me spin around. “You look like you drank two gallons too many of coffee.”

“No coffee,” I say to Griff, who's standing in the doorway, his face grim.

He inspects me a minute, then says, “All right, come with me.” He's using that tone that makes him sound like an army general or something.

“Where?”

“We're going outside.”

Even though I'd be happy to go outside, I don't like him talking to me like I'm a damn foot soldier. Or a child. I push back just because I can. “It's freezing.”

“Then put on your fucking mittens. Let's go.”

I consider telling my brother where to go. He may have fifty pounds on

me, but I'm still strong. And fast. I could outrun him in a second. But he's already in the hallway pulling on his coat and boots. He glances at me like he might just sit on me if I don't do the same.

I grumble, but a few minutes later, I'm trudging along in the snow next to him.

"So?" Griff asks.

"So what?" I say, kicking snow.

"Don't be cute."

"I'm always cute."

"Do you want me to toss you in a snowdrift, or help you?"

"I never asked for—"

I'm interrupted by two giant gloved hands shoving me backward so hard I don't have time to catch my balance. I land on my ass in the snowdrift beside me.

"What the fuck?"

"You didn't answer," he says. "You ready to actually talk now?"

Heat gathers in my chest. "You're being a bully, you fuck!"

It's always Eli who I got into wrestling matches with as a kid. Griff never had time for any of that. But now he's looking at me with his lip curled up and all I feel is anger.

Not really at him, but he's there for it.

"Fine, you want it?" I shove up from the snow and tackle him, my shoulder in his solar plexus. Maybe he wasn't expecting that, or he was underestimating my weight—I'm not the skinny, wiry kid I was at twelve—but he lets out a low sound and stumbles backward.

I grin. "Not so tough now," I grunt as I try to push him back. I don't get far though. Griff digs his heels in and hooks his arm around my waist.

Then he flips me upside-fucking-down.

I land with a thud on my back. "The fuck?" I wheeze. I'm not a small dude. No one should be able to do that to me.

"You done?" Griff asks, his ugly mug hovering over me.

I growl and flip my legs up, surprising him. I think. I rush him, grabbing him around the waist and tugging down. Or at least, I try. He tips forward the tiniest bit, but the bastard doesn't fall. He uses some weird move behind his back on my wrists, so I grunt out in pain, my arms suddenly useless. Then he knees my legs, and I find myself on my stomach.

He's kicking my ass, frankly, and I should know better. But it only makes

me madder. I spit out snow, getting up on all fours. “It’s cheating, you know. All your Jiu-jitsu shit.” Griff was into martial arts when he was a teenager. He doesn’t talk about it, but he obviously didn’t stop there. The guy is a trained fighter.

“You don’t know what Jiu-jitsu is.”

I stand up, lifting my fists in front of my face and hopping like a boxer. “I know what these are.”

“Put those down,” Griff says.

“Hell no.”

“I’m not going to hit you.”

“You should.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because I fucking deserve it, that’s why!” I shout.

The words seem to surprise us both.

Griff’s expression changes, going from tight to kind of sad. “No, you don’t.”

“I do.” I’ve stopped bouncing, though my arms are still up. “I’ve fucked up everything in my goddamned life. No one else did that to me. It was all me.”

I swing at him, just because I’m mad at myself, and knowing he won’t let me hit him.

He doesn’t. He catches my fist in his hand, easily, though his hand goes back a little. My arm is reliably strong. Another man would have fallen over. But Griff just hangs onto my fist. “Stop, Jude. For the first time in my life, I’m asking you to fucking talk. So just talk, okay?”

It’s that word, *okay*, that has my arm dropping finally, my shoulders sagging. I look around to see we’re right next to the park half a block down from Dad’s place. Eli used to play t-ball here.

I sigh, nodding.

Griff leads me over to the little dugout, one of two built on the side of the ball field. We sit down in the concrete and chain-link bunker, looking out over the snowy field.

It takes a few minutes, but finally I speak. “We had the best week, Griff. It was just like old times. Only there was...well, we were having sex, too.”

Griff still says nothing. So I keep talking.

“We probably shouldn’t have done that, but when I first saw her again, it was different. I think I was always attracted to her, but I just stayed away

from that stuff. This time, there was this...I don't know. An *edge* between us. I was pissed. So was she. You remember me last Christmas right, where I was so fucking miserable because she just told me she was leaving?"

"Yeah, I remember. I thought you looked like a sad sack then."

"But now it's worse, right? It's a thousand times worse."

I lean back with a clink against the chain link behind us. "When we saw each other, it was like that whole year never happened. We just hung onto the weird feelings, and things were off. But then we talked about it a little. Then some more. I guess we both kind of knew things weren't the same anymore, and it suddenly became so obvious that we were...you know, we had a little chemistry.

"A little?" Griff scoffs. "I saw you two at the restaurant."

"Okay, a lot."

Griff raises a brow.

"The most I've ever felt. The sex was incredible. And it fixed whatever was between us, at least at the time, because we *did* go back to the way we were. Best friends again, on the Eleanor Cleary case. It was fucking heaven, actually."

"So you liked how it was between you?"

I look at him like he's insane. "If things could have stayed exactly the way they were, everything would have been perfect. Me, Nor, Cap. Full stop." I lean forward like Griff is doing, resting my elbows on my knees. But my old injury twinges with the angle of my elbow and I sit up again.

"I think..." I swallow, because this is the part I haven't admitted even to myself. "She wanted to talk about a future, even with us being so far apart."

"And you didn't?"

"I want her in my life. But she doesn't want it to go back the way it was. So she left. She wasn't pissed or anything, which was the weirdest part. She looked... Fuck. She looked beautiful. Like she'd finally seen how perfect she was. How she deserves the fucking world. But she left me, and it feels like it's for good."

"Do you blame her?"

That heat comes back. "She knows I don't know how to handle that shit. She knows I have no idea how to love someone."

"Who told you that was true?"

"I did. I know it. I was always too much for everyone. Too enthusiastic. Too distractible. Too many dumb ideas. Things only work when I focus on

one thing at a time.”

“So you can’t chew gum and walk at the same time.”

I know how stupid it sounds. “You know what I mean. It’s the only way I got to where I did with tennis, and tennis is the only thing that I was ever proud of. That and Cap. When I take my eye off the ball, I lose.”

Griff is quiet so long I say, “What? I know you’re thinking something.”

Griff nods. “You stuck to your old shit on this one and you look like a fuckin’ loser to me, anyway, Jude.”

That heat flares to anger again. “You’re really good at pep talks, you know that?” I say sarcastically. “No wonder you dole them out so often.” A beat passes. “Besides, you’re wrong. I let myself get distracted with Nora, that’s why everything went to shit.”

Griff sits up, leaning his head back. “Is it? Or is it because you were too chickenshit to tell her you loved her?”

I balk. “I’m not in love, Griff.”

Griff gives me his bullshit look.

“I’m not. I would know.”

“Because you’ve been in love so many times before.”

“What, and you have?”

My brother looks down.

He has. Shit. I had no idea. “Wait, you were? Who was she? Is she?”

“Was, and it doesn’t matter now. What matters is I guess you’re right. You wouldn’t know love if it punched you in the face. Maybe I *should* hit you.”

“I told you, I’m not—”

“Do you care about her?”

I fold my arms. “Of course. She’s my best fr—”

“Like really fucking care about her. Like if she called you right now and said she was scared or hurt, or missed you, would you hop on a plane?”

I would. In a heartbeat. “She could tell me she needed a peanut butter sandwich and I’d bust ass to the airport.”

“And are you attracted to her?”

I harrumph. I already told him I am. The sex dreams have been out of control since I got back. I’m surprised I still have my full head of hair with all the times I’ve yanked it to GTFO of those dreams. I picture her now, draped over me, bent before me, or that first moment, on the edge of the tub.

“Well?”

I squeeze my eyes shut, scrubbing my face with my hand. “Fucking yes, I’m attracted to her,” I say through my fingers. “She’s the sexiest woman I’ve ever met. But she’s also the smartest, always figuring things out before anyone else, always full of ideas that I wish I would have thought of. She’s funny, and she laughs at my jokes, and she loves my son, and yes, I can’t stop thinking about her every second of every day. I picture my future and...” I swallow. “I can’t see it without her in it. It’s like a giant black hole.”

“That’s what love is,” Griff says, so soft I almost miss it.

For a moment, I have no words.

Then I turn to my brother, my chest as tight as a drum. “I can’t be. I’ll just fuck it up.” My voice is a whisper.

“You already did.”

I shake my head. “I’ll *keep* fucking it up.”

“That’s what relationships are about, Jude. You fuck up, you apologize, you talk it out, you’re happy.”

Since when is my stoic older brother so wise about love? But I don’t linger on that thought. I linger on the word *love*. My heartbeat increases in speed now, clattering like I just ran a marathon. “I’m in love with her,” I say with almost wonder. “I’m in love with my best friend.” Then the panic sets in. My breath comes fast and shallow as I turn to Griff. “But she already left me, and it nearly fucking broke me. If I tell her I love her and she leaves me again—”

“Goddammit, Jude, that’s the whole fucking point! Love is about sticking your neck out like a chicken on the block, knowing you’re going to lose your head and doing it fucking anyway. Do you know how goddamned lucky you are?”

Griff’s voice is strained with more emotion than I’ve ever seen in him. I didn’t know he had real feelings like the rest of us.

Griff leans over, his elbows on his knees. “Jude, I don’t think you’re stupid. You always know the right thing to say when some of us struggle to string a sentence together. You saw your gift on the courts and you took it. You met an amazing woman and somehow got her to fall in love with you and your son, after you probably showed her more than you’ve ever shown anyone.”

“She saw me at my worst. You think...”

She’s in love with me.

“I have to go,” I say, standing up.

Griff grins at me. I haven't seen him smile like this in years.

"You look like a psycho when you smile, you know."

Griff smiles harder, only it's kind of a grimace.

"Just stop."

He chuckles.

"Get up."

"Why?"

"Because I said so." I say it in his general voice.

Griff frowns, but stands.

I wrap him in a bear hug. "You really should give pep talks more often," I mumble, before letting him go.

Then I'm sprinting out of the dugout, back to Dad's, not even waiting to see if he's coming with.

I burst back into Dad's place a few minutes later, heading straight for the living room where I stand directly in front of the TV.

"Hey!" everyone shouts. I turn around and pause it.

"Jude, you're getting my carpet wet!" Dad admonishes.

"Sorry for the interruption. I have to talk to Cap, and then you guys."

Cap stands up from where he was sitting on the floor playing with his little cousin. "Yeah, Dad?"

His look of importance at being called on is so fucking cute I can't stand it.

"Hey, buddy," I say, pulling him away from the crowd. I whisper in his ear, and he meets my eye, then nods, grinning. "I don't mind," he says to my next question.

"Okay," I announce. "Cap is going to need to spend a week with one of his aunts or uncles or Grandpa's over New Year's. Who volunteers?"

Everyone in the room puts their hand up. All five of my siblings, even Griffin coming in the door, breathing hard.

I grin at him, and he does that little lip curl back.

Cap beams. "Dad, I can't choose! I think we're going to have to do rock paper scissors!"

CHAPTER 35

Nora

“So that’s when I told them, ‘You can call me that when I’m an OBE!’”

The man across from me at The White Cloth chortles at his own joke. He just told this long-winded story about how his father is an *OBE*—Order of the British Empire, which apparently is a low-rent kind of knighthood—and how it’s his primary life goal to not only become one himself, but apparently tell everyone he knows all about it for the rest of his life.

“Did you know you can sign your name ‘Richard Hatfield, *OBE*’ once you have the designation? It’s a silly thing, I know, but I rather like it.”

This date was the worst idea in the history of dates. Not only is Richard a pompous ass, but he’s taken me to the stuffiest restaurant in the city, where everyone scans each person walking through the door as if to assess their value, before turning their noses up and picking delicately at their food.

The only exception is the little boy and his parents on the other side of the restaurant. They seem to be laughing and having a good time, even though their neighboring tables keep giving them withering glances for daring to have a child in the restaurant.

I’m going to personally throttle Sasha when she gets back home, for hooking me up with him. Christian, too, whenever I see him again. My brother was the one who suggested I go on some dates to cleanse my palate of Jude. Sasha, meanwhile, sent me this guy’s info. She’d apologized that she didn’t know him, but as the friend of a friend, could vouch for him not being a creep at least.

“Are you not enjoying the food?” Richard Hatfield, future-*OBE*, asks, seeming to notice me for the first time in the past ten minutes. He glances left

and right as if worried other people might notice.

“Oh, the food’s fine,” I say. “I’ve just suddenly lost my appetite.”

“Excited about tonight then?” he asks, relaxing. “I’m so glad you reached out.”

My stomach turns at the reminder that I was the one who instigated this thus-far disaster.

Richard is supposed to be taking me to some gala his parents are hosting tonight. When he’d suggested it over email, some small, sad part of me had hoped it would be like a fairy-tale ball, that I could wear a ball gown and meet a prince—because I knew only a prince could hold a candle to Jude.

I should have known better.

The gala, Richard informed me after I’d already agreed to go, wouldn’t be a black-tie affair but a “business casual gathering” with several of his dad’s cronies.

Now I’m trying to think of a way to tell him I’m definitely going back home before midnight, because if this is what Richard’s like, I can’t imagine anyone at the party being any better.

I stop rearranging my food in front of me and lay my fork and knife down on my plate. “Richard,” I begin, knowing I need to just nip this in the bud.

But across the room, that little boy with his parents, dressed up in an adorable sweater vest and trouser situation, catch my eye. His dad, I notice for the first time, is wearing a matching bow tie.

And all I can think of is Cap and Jude. That’s totally something Jude would do.

But I know I can enjoy my life without Jude. That day with Cap and Farrah, even with reminders of Jude right in my face, was wonderful. A thousand times better than tonight.

“Richard, I’m sorry, but I’m not going to be able to come to your party tonight.”

Richard laughs. “That’s a laugh. Keeping me on my toes, eh?”

“No, I’m serious,” I say.

Richard’s face falls. “Why not?”

My first thought is the one I didn’t think I was thinking but comes up bright and shiny to the forefront. *Because I’m in love with Jude Kelly.*

The thought is so real, Jude appears before me like an apparition, making my heart clench.

“There’s someone else,” I blurt out. I’d planned on making something up,

but now I can't stop staring at the man I thought was Jude who's just burst into the restaurant from outside. What can I say, I'm inspired.

"Are you serious?" Richard's hissing the words at me, leaning down and shading his face with his hand.

But I'm not looking at him. I squint, the words I was looking for drying up in my throat, because the man who just came in is crossing the restaurant, and if I'm not mistaken, he's heading directly for us.

"Nora!" Jude shouts, so loud that the heads that weren't already turned his way have now joined the rest.

"No," I whisper. I'm so stunned I can't say anything. He's here. He came. For me.

Jude arrives at our table, leaning on it with his fingers, his eyes pinned on me. His expression is filled with an intensity I've seen before on him, the last time we spoke in my hotel room. Only it's different. There's no angst there. No confusion. They're clear. He smiles at me and my heart flutters like a bird.

I almost laugh, it feels so free.

Jude looks over at my date, then back at me. "Is he important to you?"

"Excuse me!" Richard says, aghast. "Sir—"

"With respect, I wasn't talking to you," Jude says, sparing him a quick glance.

Jude's wearing a suit. It's black and trim and damp at the shoulders from the rain outside. His slicked-back hair, too, is glistening with beads of water. Rain even clings to his beautiful full eyelashes.

"No," I say, my voice cracking. "No, he's kind of dull." I look across at Richard. "Sorry."

Richard moves his mouth like a fish.

"I'm really sorry, guy. I know this isn't cool, but please, can you get the fuck out? I'll pay for your food."

It's this that has Richard snapping his jaw shut. "I don't need assistance with the bill," he huffs. "Is he serious, Nora?"

"It sounds like it."

"Is this the other man?" Richard stands up abruptly. He leans in, whispering harshly, "Would have been nice to know before I went to the trouble of procuring you a ticket for this absolutely exclusive event."

Then he spins on his heel, and storms from the room.

I think I know why he didn't have a date two days ahead of this thing. I

feel guilty, somewhere, but when I turn back to Jude, it washes away like water.

“Can I sit?” Jude asks.

I nod.

He slides his long, lean form into the spot where Richard was sitting.

“Jude, what are you doing here?”

“I came because it’s not okay.”

“What’s not okay?” My heart thunders in my chest.

“When you left. You said it would be okay.” Jude reaches across the table but hesitates. “Can I—?”

I nod.

He takes my hands in his. They’re warm and dry and make my skin zing with the current of our connection. I knew I would never feel this way with anyone else. I knew it with my whole heart.

“Nora, I was scared shitless. Still am. It was one of those bad times where I didn’t know what to say. But I’ve done a lot of thinking—and talking—over the past three weeks and I know what to say now.”

He leans in, and the simple gesture of speaking low enough so the rest of the restaurant doesn’t hear is so thoughtful, so *him* knowing *me*—that I feel my heart fall like a rock in a river, tumbling through clear water to its rightful place in the stream.

“Can I tell you or do you want to say anything first? You can say anything to me, Nora, anything. Even *get lost*.”

He winces slightly at those words, but I know it’s true. He’d do whatever I want, I know it in my heart that’s already his.

“I don’t want you to get lost,” I whisper.

“Okay then.” He gives me that broad smile and those kind eyes with more depth than anyone gives him credit for. “Well, here it is. I love you, Nora Albright. I’m in love with you and I have been for a long time. I just didn’t know it, because I didn’t know what love was. Or I was in denial. I think it’s why I kissed you that day you said you were leaving. It’s why I made every excuse I could to walk by that screen when you were talking to Cap, needing desperately to get just the barest glimpse of you. It’s why I want to kiss you now, and it’s why I want to kiss you for the rest of your life, to when our hair goes silver and every part of our life together is a warm and beautiful memory.” Jude swallows. “I want you to be my son’s mom, and I want to make more—” He cuts himself off. “I want to make more babies with you,

Nora, but I know that's a lot, especially when you haven't said anything because I've been rambling this whole time and—

I stand up then, nearly knocking my glass over as I reach across the table and grab his suit lapels. I pull Jude's handsome face toward mine and when my lips are only inches from his, I whisper, "Tell me again. The very first thing."

Jude grins.

I melt.

"I love you, Nora."

"I love you too," I whisper. Then I pull him hard against me, pressing my lips to his. This is the man I love, and I'm brave right now not because he loves me, but because he helped me remember I already was.

"Damn, Shotgun Annie," he says after I break the kiss. "You realize everyone's staring at us, right?"

"And they're too damn polite to applaud," I say.

So Jude backs up and does it for us, clapping like a madman while I laugh, my cheeks hot with embarrassment. "Oh my *God*, Jude."

"Sorry." He grimaces. "Forgot I was supposed to play it quiet."

"It's okay. You can embarrass me just this once."

The diners look much more mortified than I feel, all except that young boy in the sweater vest. He's grinning like a little angel. His parents are too.

Jude sees where I'm looking and gives a little salute, and the parents gasp as they must realize who he is.

Then Jude takes my hand, squeezing it tight as he leads me from the restaurant. "Come on, Annie," Jude says. "You think that was embarrassing, wait till I show you the rest of our lives!"

Epilogue

NORA

SIX MONTHS LATER

The crowd hushes as I take the steps up on stage. Nerves jangle in my stomach like bells, but this isn't my first rodeo. I know how to breathe through them. I should have worn something lighter, but Jude was looking at me in some kind of way with the corduroy skirt and tights. "You know it's summer, right?" he asked, snapping my tights against my thigh with a wicked grin.

"Is that why you're still buck naked?" I asked.

Jude pulled the sheet back and gasped like he hadn't noticed.

I laughed, but I still had to tear my eyes away from him. "A London summer is hardly summer."

"Still, it's warm enough I should probably strip those off of you right now."

I'd laughed and let him do it, seeing as Cap was still asleep out in my living room in the little bed I'd set up for him. But when we were done, I'd pulled the tights back on again. Good thing, too, since it's drizzling outside now.

But it's comfortable in this auditorium. Or at least the people seem to be. Me, I'm shaking a little, but happy.

I'm here to introduce my documentary film, *Finding Eleanor*, which to my absolute shock, was announced as the jury prizewinner in the *Love and Loss* contest just last month. I screamed when I found out, then I called Jude, who yelled and hooted nonstop for a full five minutes, running around the Rolling Hills telling everyone he could find.

Since then, it's been a whirlwind of meetings, screenings, and talks all over London, including a feature in the *London Times*.

This is the last talk I'm doing—tomorrow, Jude, Cap, and I fly home to Quince Valley for the summer. I can't wait—I've missed home almost as much as I've missed Jude and Cap. Well, not almost as much, but a lot. Coming back in the fall to finish my degree will be a challenge, but I'm excited to finish and defend my thesis. It's *Finding Eleanor* plus a written component I decided to add on, exploring record-keeping in European convents, particularly as it relates to adoptions. I'm doing the extra work partly because I'm deeply interested in the topic—and it'll go a long way to

helping us continue to unravel the mystery of Eleanor's murder as well as her baby's adoption. But if I'm being honest, it's because I need to keep busy being so far away from Jude and Cap. But if it's anything like the last six months, we'll survive.

Jude and I texted each other all day over the months, through all our ups and downs. Like when Jude fired his agent. And after that, when he had his first meeting with a non-profit to talk about his idea for an inner-city kids' tennis camp at the Rolling Hills. When I learned my submission had been accepted into the doc contest, and later, when I'd won. We had video calls both alone and with Cap more times than I can count. Between that constant contact and the two-week stay over spring break, we got closer than ever. And I learned a thing or two about long-distance sex.

I meet Jude's eyes now as I pull the mic down to the right height. He's standing over in the aisle, where he'll help me get to my seat after I've finished my talk. I've done this before. I can do it again. He reminds me of that in one little wink. Warmth rushes through me and I smile, scanning the audience to give Cap a little wave. My sweet boy bounces in his seat, waving back like he's delighted to be here, even though this is the third screening of my film he's been to. Farrah took him and Jude to the last one, on her brief visit back to London. He tried calling me mom the other day. It was strange, but good, but strange, and he said he'd try again next week. It was adorable and perfect.

"Hello, everyone," I begin. "I'm here today to introduce a film that's near and dear to my heart. The unfinished story of Eleanor Cleary, called *Finding Eleanor*."

There's a whoop from the crowd, and my eyes dart to Christian, sitting with Cap and Sasha. This is the first time my brother's been this way again. I haven't talked to him yet except to briefly hug hello outside before rushing in to meet the theater's crew and get set up. It was a quick hello, but long enough I noticed the ring missing from his finger. I'd have to ask him about that later.

As I begin my short talk, where I get the crowd excited for the documentary and describe how it got made, I finally begin to relax. I'm always nervous getting up here, but this is the last of over a dozen talks I've done at screenings for my documentary, and the words feel comfortable now.

I feel comfortable now. Especially when I talk about my work.

The crowd cheers when I finish. It's a packed house—my film has the

honor of being part of the smaller opening receptions for the documentary film festival starting this week—an amazing sendoff for what might be the last documentary I’ll ever make. After I graduate, I’m planning on going back to the Quince Valley Library and providing online consultation for archival projects around the world.

I might change my mind when we finish Eleanor’s story, though, which it sounds like Griffin is now invested enough to help. With his access to police records and my research skills, I know we can solve Eleanor’s murder...and just maybe find out what happened to her daughter.

When the lights lower and the film comes on, I head down the steps, where Jude’s waiting for me.

But before I can get there, I see Sasha squeezing out of the row, her phone clasped in her hand. “Nor!” she whispers. She’s slow going—she’s grasping an oversized handbag and her coat and a sweater, and though I can’t see her feet, know she’s likely in sky-high heels. She never knows how to dress for weather.

I give a glance to Jude, who steps through the still propped-open doors into the dimly lit lobby. Even from here I can see him leaning against a pillar, his arms crossed over his chest and mouth twisted in a little smile that makes butterflies dance in my stomach.

He’s waiting for me.

And he also knows not to get in front of Sasha when she’s on a mission.

I mouth an apology that he probably can’t see and wait for her to come out. They’re all in the middle of the row so she’s still got a handful of seats to get past. Everyone shuffles their knees for her, some of them making little tsks.

Finally she reaches the end of the aisle, where a large man wearing a beanie—which is weird for summer, though it is cool and rainy out—angles his long legs out of the aisle for her.

Sasha glares at him, but because of all the stuff in her arms, she can’t easily get by him. I want to offer to help, but the situation is already extremely awkward, and I don’t want to block anyone else’s view of the screen.

“You know,” she whispers to the man, “it might be helpful if you actually got up to make room for me.”

“It might be helpful if you didn’t carry half a closet of clothes into a movie theatre,” the man retorts. It’s hard to tell with his voice so low, but I

think he has an American accent. And there's something familiar about that low grumble.

"Unreal!" Sasha says. She hesitates a minute, still stuck behind his legs, then to my utter shock, dumps her stuff on his lap, braces her hands on his shoulders, and steps over him one leg at a time, practically straddling him in the process.

"Thanks for being such a gentleman!" she whispers once her second high-heeled foot has cleared his tree-trunk thigh.

The man looks slightly stunned, and Sasha flips her hair before grabbing her stuff and stalking up the aisle, jerking her chin at me.

"Can you believe that guy?" she whispers once we're out the back door.

"So rude," I say as we approach Jude.

He slips his arm around my waist, kissing my temple, and I lean in, having to concentrate so I don't close my eyes and sigh, swooning.

Of course I don't mention her part in the little confrontation, or the fact that even from here I can see the man throw a glance at Sasha over his shoulder, a scowl to end all scowls on his face.

I gasp as recognition hits.

"I see you met my brother," Jude says to Sasha.

"That oaf is your brother!?" Sasha says? "I'm so sorry!"

It's not an apology. It's sympathy.

I bite back a smile. "You leaving, Sasha?"

"I'm sorry." Her expression shifts to one of deep regret that I know is genuine.

"It's okay, Sash!" She's been to almost all my showings—she has nothing to be sorry for. "Everything okay?"

I'm slightly distracted by Jude's thumb tracing a line across my hip, but I can't help be a little worried for Sasha too. Her brother has blown up in the news lately, and I can tell it's taking a toll on her.

"Fine. Laila texted with a 911, but she does that a lot. It's probably nothing. We'll meet up at the afterparty later, yeah?"

I give her a squeeze. "Love you, Sash." Sasha's been an amazing friend these past six months. Just like she was before. But she practically became Cap's new best friend when he and Jude were here in the spring, giving Jude and I lots of opportunities for...reacquaintance. And she's been there for every bit of my stress around the documentary.

Sasha disappears around the corner with her phone tucked under her ear

as she calls her sister.

Once we're alone, he pulls me to him, his hands sliding over my hips. "Finally."

"Did you know your brother was going to be here?"

Jude grins as the sounds of the movie echo out into the lobby. "He wasn't sure if he was going to make it. Guess he did."

I'm touched, truly.

"You were incredible up there."

I blush.

"I think you could give a speech to royalty now and not even blink."

"I don't know about that," I laugh.

"I do. In fact, you already have."

I freeze, my stomach dropping. "What?"

But Jude doesn't answer, just drops a soft, perfect kiss on my lips that sends a ripple of heat over me, almost distracting me from his words.

But I break the kiss, gripping his shirt. "Jude, what are you talking about?"

"Come back inside and I'll show you." He wraps an arm around my shoulders and leads me back into the theatre. On screen are images of the two of us finding that cache back in Quince Valley—scenes that worked perfectly during the backstory portions of the documentary. No matter how many times I see it, it's surreal to see us up on screen.

Jude doesn't say anything until we get back to the row Sasha came out of. Griff gets out for us, grumbling at Jude, but he gives me a wink. The rest of the people in the row smile and nod, happily stepping aside for the filmmaker, apparently.

Finally, we sit down next on either side of Cap, who grips our hands.

"The prince is in the back row," Jude whispers in my ear over Cap's head with no preamble.

My stomach flips and I go to turn, but Jude shakes his head.

"Don't look!" he whispers. "Royals don't like to be perceived."

"You're playing with me!"

"Maybe," he whispers. "Maybe not."

"Hey! No talking!" Cap admonishes.

"Sorry," Jude says under his breath.

I pinch my lips shut.

We're both trying not to smile.

On screen, Jude and I are on the train, our adventure just beginning. I don't know if Jude was joking about the prince being back there, but it doesn't matter. I never needed to make this film for anyone except myself. The fact that other people are loving it is still a constant surprise to me.

"We didn't know what their future held," my voice echoes across the room. "But I knew we'd figure it out together."

I'm talking about Eleanor and James then, but when I look over Cap's head, it's my own prince watching the screen, his arm hooked on his son's chair, his hand stroking my back.

I realize, just now, that even then I knew I was talking about us. And I knew I'd said just the right thing.



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About the Author



Claire Wilder first discovered romance books as a preteen: while staying with family friends, she uncovered a giant stash of old Harlequins languishing in a basement. A ho-hum trip suddenly wasn't long enough! As an author, she writes for both the traditional and indie market. She loves being on a boat in calm water, a good thin-crust Margherita pizza, and tearjerker movies. She lives with her husband and three kids on the west coast of Canada.

Claire loves hearing from readers. The easiest way to reach her is through her through her mailing list (clairewilder.com/subscribe).