

ELISHA KEMP



THE  
Season

BOOK ONE  
ENDLESS WINTER

---

# THE SEASON

---

---

Endless Winter Book One

---

ELISHA KEMP



The Season © 2023 by Elisha Kemp

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

For information contact the author at her website [elishakempbooks.com](http://elishakempbooks.com)

Cover art and design © Elisha Kemp

The characters and events portrayed in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, businesses or locales is coincidental and is not intended by the author.

*The most important thing is to ride, ride, ride, and not be intimidated by anyone... Ride in front of people, fall down, and fall down again. You're the only one that's learning while they are gawking and judging.*

*Also, ride only with nice people.*

Victoria Jealouse

# Contents

[Content warning](#)

[Typos and Languages](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Languages Glossary](#)

[Thank you!](#)

[About the author](#)

[Also by Elisha Kemp](#)



---

## Content warning

---

This is a polyamorous romance containing some content that is not suitable for young readers, including violence, alcohol consumption, sexual situations and swearing (in English and French).

All main characters are over the age of 18.

There is also discussion of themes that might be upsetting for some readers, such as grooming (prior to our story, the FMC dates an older male character who met her when she was 17 years old), non-consensual drugging and attempted sexual assault.

There is also recollection of a scene where two children are injured on the ski field (no fatalities), and another flash-back to a scene where a convoy of vehicles is attacked / bombed in a combat zone (with fatalities). While both these scenes have minimal details and occur in the past, we see how these incidents affect the MCs and they may be upsetting for some readers.

**Finally, this is the first in a series, and does end on a (relatively low-angst) cliffhanger.**

Please do not hesitate to contact the author directly with any questions or suggestions for adding to the TWs.

---

## Typos and Languages

---

The Season features characters who are ski and snowboard instructors from all over the world. They often speak in their mother-language, swear, and use a variety of slang (including slang from New Zealand, Australia, and France).

While this story is written in American English, non-American words are used where appropriate for the characters speaking. For example, the Kiwi characters would never dare call their mothers anything but ‘mum’, and our French character dutifully refers to his mother as ‘maman’. The Kiwis are also particularly confusing, calling the trunk of the car a ‘boot’, the kitchen counter a ‘bench’ and saying things like ‘sweet as’.

Non-English words are italicized, and there is a glossary in the back with some definitions. However, if in doubt as to the meanings of any slang or words used, use google, or contact me.

This book has been professionally edited and proofread. However, if you do spot errors, please contact me at: [elishakempauthor@gmail.com](mailto:elishakempauthor@gmail.com) or reach out via IG or FB. Please do NOT report it to Amazon (as that can result in this book being taken down).

---

## Prologue

---

### Lily

“Your boobs look bigger.”

Without thinking, I glance down, half expecting to see my breasts spilling out of my bikini, then lift my chin to give Steve a bland, patently unimpressed look.

“Nope. Just the same awesome size as always,” I deadpan.  
“Glad you could make it, Steve.”

I’m not glad.

In fact, I’m seriously regretting the last-minute impulse that had me inviting him to my going away party.

A quick glance at my friends tells me I’m not alone in wishing Steve hadn’t come. Henry looks like he’s going to crush the plastic cup clenched in his fist. Ethan looks like he’s swallowed something bitter, and Summer is shooting me a look that clearly says she’s doubting my sanity. I give her a tight smile.

*You and me both, sweetheart.*

Steve steps close enough to invade my personal space, smelling like coconut shampoo and chewing gum as he tucks a strand of silky, black, shoulder-length hair behind his ear. I swallow against the memories. Memories that should be sweet, but now are tinged with self-doubt and no small amount of anger.

“So, you’re going to Utah?” he wrinkles his nose at the word *Utah*, as if it instantly conjures up images of sister-wives and Mormon missionaries zooming cheerily around on bicycles. “Why?”

So many reasons. One of which is currently standing way too close to me under the palm trees on the sun-kissed grass of Kailua Beach Park.

I shrug noncommittally, like I’m a carefree traveler, and not someone fleeing the island to escape the accumulation of their poor decision-making. “To teach snowboarding.”

He lifts one brow, eyeing me in disbelief.

“Oh look!” I clap my hands together, then turn to face the six-foot-six giant striding across the lawn, giving Steve my back. “Travis is here.”

Travis might be another one of the many reasons that I’ve booked a one-way ticket to snowy Mormon hell, but he’s also nice. Too nice, probably, considering how I’ve strung him along.

I trot over to him, practically leaping up to wrap him up in a hug, then smack a kiss on his cheek. “So glad you could make it!”

He gives me a tremulous half smile. It’s an *awe shucks* sort of smile, the sort that you’d expect on storybook cowboys, and not ex-hockey players studying premed. He’s clutching a leatherbound notebook and—when I finally release him—he presses it into my hands. “I got this for you.” His smile falters, his gaze dropping to his feet. “I know how you like to journal, so...”

I flick it open, my heart stuttering at the hand-drawn artwork gracing the inside cover. His work, no doubt. Intricate penwork of a banyan tree that must have taken him hours.

“Wow. Thank you.” I clutch the journal to my chest, nausea rising in my stomach alongside the warmth.

*He’s perfect. So damn perfect. Why can’t I feel anything for him? What is wrong with me?*

He shrugs, his grin showcasing the dimples in his cheeks. “It’s nothing.”

It’s everything.

“Lily!”

Henry is storming across the grass toward me, a scowl plastered on his face. He pauses when he sees Travis, tips his chin in his direction, then turns his attention to me. “Why did you invite Steve?”

I grimace, my gaze dropping to my bare feet. I can hear the incessant crash of the waves on golden sand, the rhythmic pounding of the ocean interspersed with the occasional cooing of ring-neck doves and chittering of myna birds.

The sounds of a stifling paradise that I can’t wait to escape.

I don’t answer.

“Hey, calm down dude.” Travis throws one arm around my shoulder, his voice never losing its calm, slightly stoner-ish cadence. I want to roll my eyes at his misplaced protectiveness. “It’s not a big deal...”

“He’s a fucking asshole,” Henry hisses.

He’s not wrong. I swallow, tipping my head up to meet Henry’s eyes, my heart clenching at the sight of the protective fury burning there.

He’s such a good friend. Why couldn’t I have fallen for him instead of Steve? I tried. I really tried.

“Everyone hates Steve. You know that.”

Actually, everyone loves Steve. I can’t go to downtown Honolulu without someone running up to him, fawning over him. Steve, the famous musician. Steve, with the charismatic smile and the connections.

I think my friends might be the only people on the island who don’t like him.

“Yah. I know,” I say on an exhale. “But he’s here now...”

Henry gives me an unreadable look, stretching up to his full height as he cracks his knuckles, then rolls his neck. “He’s here *for* now,” he says cryptically, then glances to where Ethan sits next to Summer in the shade.

The two exchange a look, silently communicating in that way that only best friends can. Ethan stands, brushing his hands off on his boardshorts, a feral grin spreading across his freckled face.

“Henry...” I say warningly. But it’s too late. Ethan is sauntering across the grass, his smile at odds with the icy gleam in his blue eyes.

“What’d he do, anyway?” Travis asks, annoyingly directing his question at Henry, not me.

Henry’s nostrils flare, his lip curling back in disgust. “Cheated on Lily.”

I roll my eyes. It’s more complicated than that. He didn’t cheat. Not really. But I don’t say that. If they knew the whole story, they’d either be disgusted with me, or pity me.

I’m not sure what’d be worse.

“Shit.” Travis shakes his head, turning to me with his brow pinched in confusion. “And you’re still friends with him?”

I let out an exasperated sigh. No. I’m not friends with him. I’m not even sure why I invited him. Maybe I internalized too many of those forgiveness sermons from the Sunday school my parents made me attend.

“It’s a small island,” I say by way of deflection. “You know how it is.”

Of course, Travis doesn’t know. He’s from Texas, where you can escape your acquaintances just by driving a couple of hours. Here, a couple of hours will have you taking a slow, scenic journey around the island until you’ve come full circle, right to where you started.

Which is why my bags are currently sitting in the back of Ethan’s rusty pick-up truck, ready and waiting for me to go to the airport.

“Whatever,” Henry grunts, dipping his head in reluctant acknowledgment. He’s a *keiki kama’aina* like me. Born and raised down the street from my parents’ house, in a town where your auntie’s neighbor will tell your grandma if you step one bare-footed toe out of line. “That doesn’t mean you had to invite him.”

He’s right, but I’m not going to tell him that. Instead, I narrow my eyes at him. “I’m going to hang out with Summer.”

I shrug out of Travis’ grasp, then flash him a smile over my shoulder, beckoning him to follow to where Summer and a few of our friends are sharing the remnants of *poke* from Tamura’s.

Beyond them, a handful of others are playing a game of ultimate frisbee in the sunshine. I shake my head in disbelief when I see Steve is among them, looking cocky as always, his smile white against his sun-darkened skin. Across the field, Ethan and Dylan stand close together, whispering conspiratorially and casting occasional dark glances in Steve’s direction.

*He’s going to get fucking pummeled.*

That thought shouldn’t fill me with satisfaction, but it does.

“Hey chica.” Summer knocks her shoulder against mine as I sit cross-legged on the picnic blanket beside her, then scoots the half-empty *poke* container in my direction. “Eat up. Who knows when you’ll next get *ono grindz*, eh?”

I snort in amusement, then grab the spare chopsticks and dig in, closing my eyes in momentary bliss at the delicious blend of soy, wasabi, and fresh ahi.

“They have food in Utah,” I dutifully inform her around my mouthful. “Even *poke*.”

Of course, they’re called poke bowls there, and they’re mostly rice and vegetables with a few pieces of fish. But no point in telling Summer that. It would just stress her out.

Summer wrinkles her nose. “Please tell me you don’t eat seafood when you’re there? You know you should never eat fish if you can’t see the ocean.”

“Not true,” Travis interjects, dropping to my other side, his massive legs stretching out on the grass. He eyes the *poke* with suspicion. “We eat fish back home in Texas all the time. Usually cooked, though...”

Summer gives him a bland, unimpressed stare, her lips curving down in sharp frown. “Look, *haole* boy...” she starts, lifting one accusatory finger in his direction.

Travis shoots me a panicked look and I chuckle, plopping another piece of *poke* into my mouth as I settle in for one of Summer’s rants.

It’ll start with a brief—and probably loosely substantiated—explanation of why raw fish is healthier than cooked fish, before quickly devolving into a history lesson on the *ahupua’a* system of pre-European land division. She’ll throw in the fact that Queen Liliuokalani never ceded control of Hawai’i to America, making Hawai’i legally a sovereign nation, and pepper in examples of the military damaging the precious ecosystems of the islands.

I would feel bad for Travis, but he’s been around my group of friends long enough to know the risks of insulting Summer’s favorite food.

My gaze wanders to the game of ultimate frisbee as I tune out Summer’s familiar voice.

Lani is on Steve’s team, and she’s thrown him a Hail Mary pass. Steve sprints with everything he has across the field—shirtless, of course—his bare feet kicking up clods of dry grass and dirt. The disk floats above the field, hovering in slow motion above the players. He’s lined up to catch it though, and I can’t help but hold my breath as he leaps up with impressive agility, his fingertips outstretched, grasping for the disk...

Dylan leaps at the same time, twisting midair so that his back is to Steve’s front, expertly putting himself between Steve and the frisbee. It’s a standard defensive move. The aim is to knock the disk to the ground, turning it over to the defending team.



Only, Dylan doesn't go for the disk. Instead, he drives his elbow back, right into Steve's face, before the pair of them tumble to the ground. There's a loud thud, a collective intake of breath from the rest of the players, and then...

"Fuuuckkk." The sound of Steve's groans is muffled by his hands as he clutches his face. It's hard to tell from where I'm sitting, but I'm pretty sure he's bleeding.

He rolls to his side, knees tucked to his chest with all the dramatic flair of a professional soccer player. "Aghhh..." When nobody comes to his aid, he rolls again, then pulls his hands away from his face to painstakingly hoist himself to a seated position.

I cringe at the sight. Oh yep. He's definitely bleeding. Gross.

"Whoa," Travis murmurs beside me. "And I thought hockey was brutal."

"Oh yah," Summer agrees unconcernedly. She pops a piece of *poke* in her mouth, then gestures to the field with her chopsticks. "Everyone thinks ultimate frisbee is some hippie sport, but there's a good reason I'm sitting here, and not playing with those lunatics."

Dylan's already on his feet, brushing grass off his knees, ignoring Steve's whimpers. Lani strides across the field, looking between Steve and the grounded frisbee with disappointment.

If Steve were anyone else, Dylan would be helping him to his feet. Lani would be patting him on the back, congratulating him for his effort. Ethan certainly wouldn't be smirking from the end zone, his arms folded across his sweat-slicked chest.

"I think they did that on purpose," I observe.

Summer shoots me a look, one dark brow disappearing behind her thick bangs, but doesn't answer.

"Nah," Travis shakes his head, shaggy surfer hair flopping over his ears. "Dylan's good people. He wouldn't do that."

I frown. Normally, I would agree, but ever since I let Dylan kiss me a few weeks ago, he's been a complete lunatic.

“Hey, L.” Ethan calls out to me, jogging past Steve without a second glance. “We should probably get you to the airport, yah?”

I look to Summer for confirmation. I left my phone in Ethan’s truck, but she always knows what time it is. She rolls her eyes, pulls her phone out of her purse, then shows me the time. I worry my lower lip, then nod.

“Yah, I guess I should go,” I admit reluctantly, my stomach tightening with nerves.

As eager as I am to escape this island, this is the first time I’ve been to the snow without my parents’ financial backing. Financial backing they’ve made very clear I won’t have this time around.

*You should be finishing university, not traipsing off to be a snowboard instructor. I thought you were studying for the LSAT. We didn’t pay all that private school tuition just to have you flush it down the drain...*

I shove the container of *poke* toward Summer, my appetite gone.

“Message me when you get there?” Summer gives me a worried frown, and guilt tightens behind my ribs.

I give her a broad smile. “Of course.”

She doesn’t look convinced.

“Have you found a place to stay yet?” Ethan asks, coming to stand by the picnic blanket.

He’s dripping with sweat, freckled cheeks flushed from too long in the sun, lips parted with exertion. Looking at him, I know my heart should be racing with excitement. I should be dreaming about tracing the lines of his abs with my tongue. But when I kissed him a month ago, it just felt wrong. Like I was kissing my brother or my sister.

“Nah.” I tilt my head back, and give him the same grin I gave Summer. “But that’s all good. I’m sure something will come up. I’ve got a hotel until then.”

My stomach twists at the thought of the limited funds in my bank account, even as excitement hums like electricity under my skin. I might not have much, but for the first time in my life, I won't have to answer to anyone.

I stand up, wipe my sweaty palms on my cut-off shorts, and swallow.

“Babe...” Ethan gives me a look that's full of pity, and fuck if that doesn't make it all worse.

I don't deserve his pity. Don't deserve Henry's loyalty. Don't deserve Dylan's fury on my behalf. Certainly don't deserve Travis's blind sweetness.

“It'll be fine,” I lie.

It has to be fine. Because the truth is, I can't stay on this island a moment longer. With the parents I can't please. With all the boys I've kissed but can't love—can't even feel attracted to. With everything that happened with Steve.

My glance flits to where Steve is wiping blood from his face with a borrowed T-shirt. He gives me a wide-eyed expectant look, his usually brown skin ashen from shock.

A year and a half ago—when I was seventeen—I'd look at him and feel butterflies. My heart used to race when he'd call, when I'd hear the sound of his car rumbling down the long driveway to my house, when I'd see the flash of his smile at a party. He'd been twenty-seven and I'd felt so grown-up hanging out with him.

He'd waited until I was eighteen to kiss me.

Now when I look at him, I just feel sort of seasick. And broken. And really, really stupid.

*I think we should be nonmonogamous*, he'd said, and it had seemed like such a good idea to my barely eighteen-year-old self. So wise. *You're the sort of person who has a lot of love to give*, he'd said, and I'd felt the truth of those words to my very bones. *I just want you to be happy*.

That had been the lie.

A year in, he'd slept with more women than I could name. I'd been on a few dates. *We just want different things, I'd told myself. I'm looking for connection, for love, for something real. He's just looking for something physical.*

I'd been fine with it. Mostly.

Until he told me he was seeing a girl at my old high school. A girl who was still *in* high school.

*She's eighteen, he'd argued. And she's different. Like you. She's so mature for her age.*

He'd said the same thing about me, smiling at me on my eighteenth birthday. And I'd been too stupid to see him for what he really was.

I tear my eyes away from him, and settle another forced smile on my friends. Henry, Dylan, and Lani have left the game behind to come and tell me goodbye, Lani wrapping me up in a sweat-slicked embrace.

"I'm going to miss you, lady," she murmurs against my hair.

I give a mirthless chuckle, and squeeze her back.

I've kissed her too, in a drunken moment of desperation a few weeks ago. I thought maybe *that* was the answer to why I haven't felt the smallest twinge of attraction to a living soul since I broke up with Steve. She had tasted like cherries and vodka and moaned hungrily into my mouth.

It should have been hot, but I just felt... nothing.

"I'm only going for the season," I tell her when she finally releases me. "It's just the winter season, and then I'll be back."

I give her a wide smile, force myself to meet her eyes. To look at the faces of all these wonderful people and smile. Wonderful people I've let down, time and time again.

Hopefully, a season will be long enough to undo everything I've done wrong.

---

# Chapter 1



---

## Liam

“Right, everyone, this run is a free run,” I call out to the group of twenty would-be snowboard instructors, trying to inject a bit of pep into my voice. It falls flat, because I’m not a fucking cheerleader, and I’m about one coffee short for dealing with humans.

Especially newbs.

“I’m just going to set up at the base there...” I wave with one gloved hand to the end of the run, where the black diamond we’re currently at the top of meets an easy, groomed track. “I’ll film you, and we can go over form and stuff at morning tea.”

I pause, rolling my bad shoulder, and make a note to pop another couple ibuprofen at lunch. It always fucking aches at the start of the day. “Wait until I get to the trees to start, and try to space yourselves out.”

“What’s morning tea?”

I narrow my eyes at the speaker, a feminine voice coming from a ridiculously oversized male snowboarding coat, face hidden behind goggles and a helmet.

Huh. I had definitely thought that was a dude, especially since she’s slightly on the tall side for a chick, at least in the snowboard world—maybe my height or an inch shorter. But now I look, I can see the sheen of pink gloss on lips, the hint of curves under the massive coat.

“I think it’s like a snack?” the guy next to her whispers, and I’m momentarily relieved that I don’t have to answer this chick’s inane question. My relief quickly fades because a breath later he flashes a shit-eating grin and adds: “Or maybe it’s like second breakfast. You know, like those hobbits have in Lord of the Rings.”

My jaw ticks from behind my face mask, and I turn to power down the hill.

It’s not the first time someone has compared me to a fucking hobbit. At five foot eight, I’m not exactly a giant, and my Kiwi accent makes it an easy jibe. Still, there’s something particularly annoying about hearing it from a guy like that. An all-American golden boy, with blue eyes and blond hair and a too-white smile.

“I don’t get paid enough for this shit,” I mutter, my voice drowned out by the whisper of fresh snow under my board.

And isn’t that the truth. Even as a trainer, even with all my years of coaching and an Olympic bronze gathering dust somewhere at my parents’ house, I barely make enough to pay rent in a shared flat.

*Actually, I still need to find a flat for the season.*

Irritation intensifies at that inconvenient recollection, and I turn, sinking my edge in deeper than necessary as I skid to a stop beside a copse of pines, then drop to my knees. The first of my overly eager students has already started making his way down the run, and I fumble to get my gloves off, cursing when I drop one in the snow, and pull out my phone to start recording.

The first few students make their way down relatively quickly, and my mind quickly catalogs their abilities, their flaws, their style as I record their movements.

Most of these riders are likely to go into the A group, with Stephanie. They’re all experienced riders, cocky swagger evident in each turn. They’ve got bad habits too though—weight on the back foot, a shoulder thrown out on the toe-side turn, a pelvis not lining up with the board.

Classic flaws Stephanie will drill out of them within a week.

My gaze tracks up to the top of the run, where a handful of riders are slowly, painstakingly making their way down. The chick dressed like a guy and Golden Boy are among them.

I give a little smirk at the sight of Golden Boy trailing at the back of the group, his legs visibly trembling as he makes hesitant turns down the mountain face. His hesitation costs him, his board skidding out from under him as he loses his edge, then scrambles to close the turn before he wipes out.

I chuckle, then frown when I remember I'm going to be taking group B for the next two weeks. And Golden Boy is definitely group B material. In fact, he's the most likely of the cohort not to get hired at the end of the two-week training.

My gaze drops down the slope to where the girl in the oversized gear tracks slowly toward me. She's not quite as hesitant as Golden Boy, but she's slow, and her style needs work. Still, even from here I can see her lips pressed together, a look of grim determination on her face. I nod in reluctant approval. That's good. Determination I can work with.

I shove my phone in my inside pocket, then dust snow off my gloves and rise to my feet, the toe-side edge of my board digging in deep to keep me from sliding down the hill.

"You guys..." I point to the twelve guys who made it down the hill first. "You're in group A with Stephanie. She'll be at the post. You know, where the signs for the lessons are." I nod in the general direction of the base of the mountain, even though it's obscured by trees and several curving runs.

One of the guys makes a face. "Stephanie?" he asks. "I thought we'd be training with you."

Oh, man. This guy. He has no fucking idea, does he?

"What's your name?"

He straightens, visibly preening under my attention. "Tom Davey." He lifts his chin, then adds: "I trained last season in New Mexico."

I resist the urge to scoff at that little tidbit as my gaze flicks over his gear. Oakley goggles without a single scratch, brand new helmet, this season's jacket and pants. I bet his mum wrote his name on the inside tag and packed his fucking lunchbox too.

"Tom," I echo. "Tom Davey." I make a mental note to text Stephanie. She's good enough to spot the wankers herself, but still. This guy has arrogant and unteachable written all over him. A deadly combination

I motion to the remaining eight students—the ones who barely made it down a black diamond run in one piece—and sigh. "You guys are with me. Let's go get coffee and look at the footage."

I turn, snowboard sliding effortlessly across freshly groomed snow as I head toward the base café, making sure to go slow enough for my B-grade students to follow.

"Hey." Tom Davey appears in my periphery, his board riding perilously close to my own. One wrong turn would have him clipping my edge, taking me out. "Is that it? You're dismissing me, just like that? Did you not see me ride?"

I don't bother to look at him. I've got a class to teach, a job to do, and this guy is thankfully not my responsibility.

"Coach. Answer me." I can hear the anger in his voice now.

I roll my eyes. I could tell him that he's been put with Stephanie because he's a moderately less terrible rider than the students following behind me. I could painstakingly explain to him what exactly being in Group A means. Hell, I could even drop Stephanie's last name between us like a bomb and watch as understanding slowly dawns on this idiot's face.

*Stephanie Jealouse.* The most filmed female snowboarder of all time. A big mountain rider who drops into runs that would make me shit my pants. And the literal poster child for this resort.

"You're in Stephanie's class now," I say, because I'm done with this dick. "Don't be late."



I grin mirthlessly behind my mask. Stephanie is going to eat him alive. I almost wish I could be there to watch it.

---

“OH. That’s what I look like?”

“Why is my arm doing *that*?”

“Shit, I’m slow. It felt a lot faster...”

I sip my coffee, silently watching the eight newbies I’m stuck with as they huddle over my phone, watching and rewatching the footage I recorded. Coffee mugs, helmets, gloves, and goggles are strewn across the table among puddles of melted snow.

“There’s no way I’m going to pass the exam, is there?” Golden Boy says mournfully, scrubbing one hand over his flawless skin, then dragging it through artlessly mussed blond hair. “I knew it was a stretch to try, but still...”

I give him a bland smile, but don’t answer. He’s probably right. His chances of passing are about five percent—if his examiner is drunk on exam day.

“I’m pretty sure I was worse,” another guy says, his eyes fixed on the phone. *Akiva*. That was his name.

He pauses the video, then passes the phone to the girl next to him. She takes it with a silent nod, her brow furrowed in concentration as she rewinds the clip to the start.

*Lily*. The only female student in this cohort. Based on her riding this morning, I’d give her a twenty-five percent chance of passing.

With her bulky coat draped over the back of her chair and her helmet and goggles dripping water on the table, there is no mistaking her as anything but a girl now. Thick, sun-kissed brown braids frame wide-set hazel eyes and a tanned face. The faintest brush of freckles peppers a slightly upturned nose and, when she smiles, there’s a little gap between her front teeth that makes her look like some Italian model.

She's not smiling now though. Instead, she watches herself on screen in silence, expression unreadable, then passes the phone to Golden Boy.

“Want another look, Matty?”

Her voice is soft, directed only at him, but I can't help but notice every single guy at the table looks her way when she speaks. For some reason, that observation has my fingers tensing around my coffee mug.

“Anyone going out tonight?” one of the guys across the table asks, looking pointedly at Lily. “There's supposed to be a good party over at the Canyons.”

I shudder inwardly at just the thought of going over to the Canyons to drink. Rival territory, swarming with Canyons instructors and lift-ops, and apparently some of this season's latest would-be instructors. The last place I'd want to let my guard down.

“Oh yah?” Akiva perks up, dark eyes flashing with interest. “Are there chicks there?”

Lily rolls her eyes. The guy across the table nods, a slow grin spreading on his face. “Depends on what your type is.”

“Hot,” Akiva replies instantly, his gaze flicking to Lily. “My type is hot.”

Lily takes a slow sip of her coffee—some disgusting-looking thing full of chocolate and whipped cream—then lets out a controlled breath.

“What about you, Matty?” Akiva asks, elbowing the Golden Boy next to him.

I don't miss the way Golden Boy—Matty—flinches at the sudden movement, his perfect complexion flushing red with embarrassment. “I... uh...” he gives Lily a nervous look, then glances at the six guys staring at him expectantly. He clears his throat, then gives what he probably thinks is a confident, winning smile. “I like blondes.”

There are a few replies in agreement, and I force myself not to look at Lily. I don't want to see her reaction to this, don't want

to see those freckles disappear behind an embarrassed blush, those hazel eyes dropping to her mug to hide her discomfort.

Not that I should care.

“What about you, Coach?” Akiva’s voice jolts me from my thoughts, and I blink up at him. He’s smirking, a curling sort of grin, like a cat who knows he’s cornered a mouse.

I narrow my eyes at him, because fuck if I’m going to be the mouse. I’m not playing this game. It’s not my job to tell these guys what they can and can’t talk about, but I’m not going to sit here and make one of my students uncomfortable.

“I like my girls how I like my coffee,” I deadpan. “Short, sweet, and on the side.”

Across from me, Lily snorts out a laugh, her hand flying to her mouth, eyes dancing. A few of the other guys chuckle too, and Matty visibly relaxes.

Akiva huffs, then turns to Lily. “What about you, sweetheart?” he asks, his voice dropping low, full of false sweetness. “What’s your type?” He leans forward, folding his arms on the table in front of him, flexing his muscles under his thermal top.

Lily blinks up at him, long dark lashes fluttering as she rakes a gaze up and down his torso, then back up to his face. “Well...” she drawls, quirking a sultry grin. “I’ve kind of sworn off guys for the season. But I bet your mom would be just my type.”

Matty chokes on his hot chocolate and some of the other guys hoot with laughter at Akiva’s expense. Akiva forces out a laugh, jaw ticking as he glares down at Lily. She stares back up at him, glossy lips curving into a confident smirk.

I bite the inside of my cheek to hold back my grin. There isn’t a lot that makes me want to smile—really smile—but fuck that was good. I wouldn’t say I like this girl. As a rule, I don’t really like any of my students. Or people in general. But I think she’s going to be the one I hate the least.

“Um...” Matty clears his throat, then swipes the remnants of hot chocolate he spat out off the table with the back of his sleeve. *Classy*. “Is anyone still looking for a place to live?”

The other guys at the table shake their heads, and Matty frowns with visible disappointment.

For the briefest of moments, I stupidly consider putting my hand up, but my momentary internal battle is short-lived. Sure, I'm looking for a place, but there is no way in hell I'd bunk up with this guy and whatever group of new-season Yanks he's collected around him.

I've got standards.

Plus, I'm pretty sure I heard Eddie saying he still had space in his flat in the changing room this morning. I don't know the guy that well, but he worked at Cardrona with me back in New Zealand.

I won't hold the fact that he's a skier against him. Too much.

"I'm looking for a place, actually." Lily leans forward, slender arms resting on the table as she peers past Akiva to where Matty is sitting. "If you don't mind cohabitating with a brunette, of course."

Matty chuckles, a deep-red flush spreading from his forehead to under the neck of his sweater. "Nah. I don't mind." He pulls out his phone, unlocks it, then slides it across to Lily. "Put your number in and I'll message you after training today."

Some of the guys at the other end of the table give a low whistle. Lily pointedly ignores them, keys in her number, then slides the phone back to Matty. Well, at least someone has accommodation in this overcrowded and overpriced town.

Just not me.

---

## Chapter 2



---

### Lily

*Everything hurts.*

The walk from the changing rooms to my car feels like a marathon, muscles I didn't even know I had burning as I trudge through ankle-deep snow, my head spinning with an overload of new information.

The day had started off pretty mellow, with a couple of warm-up runs and a cup of expensive coffee at the café. Sure, I'd had to face the fact that I have a lot of work to do if I'm going to pass the instructor's exam in two weeks, but I expected that. I'm not afraid of hard work.

I hadn't expected everything else.

*What's your type, sweetheart?*

"Hey! Lily, wait up!"

I pause at the sound of a familiar voice, turning in time to see Matty limping across the snow-covered parking lot toward me, a sheepish grin on his face.

"Um, can I catch a lift to my place?" he asks, shoving his hands into the pockets of his snowboard pants. The cuffs are tucked into combat boots, and I grudgingly admit to myself that it's a much better footwear choice than my worn sneakers.

"Seeing as we're going to the same place and all?" his grin falters as he gets closer, and he worries his lower lip with his teeth.

I flash him a reassuring smile. “Of course.”

I’m heading over to his condo to meet some of his roommates, to make sure they aren’t serial killers before I agree to move in. If I’d known he didn’t have a ride, I would have offered before I’d left.

“I’m just over there.” I incline my head to where my beat-up red Jetta sits, looking out of place next to new-model SUVs.

“Nice ride,” he says, sounding completely genuine.

I lift a brow as I open the driver’s door. The car is tepid from sitting in the sun all day, and smells like musty fabric mixed with car freshener. Despite costing me nearly all of my savings, I have serious doubts that this car will last the winter season.

I definitely wouldn’t describe it as nice.

“I’m serious.” He shoots me an earnest look as he slides into the passenger seat beside me, then quickly buckles himself in. “It’s better than what I’ve got.” He holds out his hands, giving a self-deprecating laugh. “Absolutely nothing.”

He sits back, rests his mop of sandy-blond hair against the headrest, and closes his eyes. “Shoot, today was rough.”

I hum in acknowledgment, then key the ignition, relieved when the engine starts on the first go.

I don’t really want to talk about today. I’m still processing everything—the information Coach Liam threw at us. The names of the other guys I’m training with. All the teaching techniques and demos and lesson structures we have to memorize. The millions of ways I have to improve my riding.

And then, that weird conversation over coffee.

*What’s your type?*

The question has run on repeat in my head all afternoon, annoying me for all the wrong reasons.

I don’t really care that Akiva was trying to make me feel uncomfortable—men have been doing that my whole life. I always kind of enjoy watching their reactions when I throw it

back at them. No, what is annoying is that I don't actually know the answer to his question.

*What's your type?*

Steve was my type. At least he was two years ago, when I was almost eighteen and fresh out of high school. He'd seemed larger than life—ten years older than me, a well-known musician, the guy every girl wanted to date. And he'd picked *me*.

I'd been such a little idiot.

"You did pretty good today," Matty says, spreading his knees wide in that way men do. Taking up space. He rubs his hands on his thighs, massaging quads that are probably as sore as my own. "Better than I did. I'm so screwed, man. Totally going to fail..."

My car rumbles out of the parking lot, my phone giving me directions to Matty's place from the center console. Definitely no GPS system in this bad boy.

"... all the other guys are way better riders than I am. And their gear is better too." He gives a mirthless laugh.

I purse my lips. I *had* noticed that. It was hard not to, when most of the ski gear I'm wearing is stuff Ethan lent me before I left Hawai'i and my own snowboard is something I picked up at a secondhand shop in Salt Lake City. My fingers flex and tighten over the steering wheel.

"... and I'm locked into this lease now, so if I fail, I guess I'll just have to pick something up at the rental shop or whatever. Or maybe lift ops or the café," he rambles. "Which would be a bummer, but not as bad as going back to Idaho, you know?"

I do know. Except, unlike him, I don't have a backup plan. I'm passing that exam in two weeks. And hopefully, I'm moving into this condo I'm visiting.

"I hope you like the condo," he says, changing the topic when I don't answer. "It's nothing fancy, but it's got three bedrooms and the guys are pretty cool. Plus, the rent is cheap—at least, it is when we split it—and it's close to the mountain." He sits

forward in his seat, pointing over the dash to a cluster of beige, dated condos perched on the hillside. “That’s it there.”

“Awesome,” I say, casting the buildings a quick glance before turning my attention back to the snowy road. “It *is* close.”

I turn up the driveway, slowing to look for a space in the visitor parking area, but Matty shakes his head and points to a parking space marked for residents only.

“You can just use our parking space,” he mumbles, rubbing the back of his neck. “We... uh, none of us have a car, so...”

I bite back a grin at this tidbit of intel.

I need a room in this condo, almost as much as I need the instructor job. Staying in a hotel is not really a long-term option. Actually, it’s not a short-term option either, not with the rates in this area. Another couple days and I’ll have burned through all my savings.

Having a car, even one that looks like it’s about to fall apart on the road, is a definite bargaining chip.

“That’s cool.” I pull carefully into the parking space and kill the engine. “If I end up moving in, you guys can use my car if you want.” I turn, giving him a broad smile. “I don’t mind.”

He widens his eyes in surprise, then practically slumps in relief. “Wow. That’s amazing. Uh... the guys kinda wanted me to get someone with a car, so this is actually perfect.”

I imagine a scoreboard in my mind. *One point for Lily Dean.*

“Well, let me introduce you to the guys.” Matty rubs his hands on his snowboard pants, flashes me a nervous smile, then climbs awkwardly out of the car.

As I follow him up the icy concrete steps, I’m struck by how tall Matty is. Built, too. It wasn’t so obvious on the mountain, where everyone is dressed in bulky snowboard gear, or when he was sitting in the passenger seat of my car, but Matty is one big guy.

For a brief moment, uncertainty flits through me. My friends are always telling me I’m too trusting, too naïve. That I’m going to get myself into trouble one of these days. I hesitate,



my gloved hand gripping the ice-coated metal rail, watching as Matty takes the steps two at a time.

I only just met Matty this morning, and I have no idea who these other guys are. Matty seems like an okay guy, but I thought the same about Steve. Clearly, I'm not the best judge of character.

"Lily?" Matty pauses, turning to give me a confused look from the top of the stairs. "You okay?"

"Yah. Sorry." I flash an apologetic smile, then jog the rest of the stairs to catch up. "I was just checking my phone."

He doesn't look entirely convinced by the lie, but doesn't say anything. Instead, he pulls out a key and points to the first condo to the left of the stairs. "Well. This is it." He chuckles, then adds: "Home sweet home."

The first thing that hits me when we step inside is the smell. A mixture of stale beer and sweat mixed with food. Pizza, maybe?

"Guys," Matty calls out, "this is the chick I told you about." He steps aside, sweeping one arm in my direction by way of introduction. "She's interested in moving in. And she's got a car."

I plaster on a friendly smile as I take in my surroundings. An open-plan kitchen, dining and living room. Sparse fixtures in varying shades of brown and beige. Surfaces littered with unwashed dishes and empty beer cans. Dim lighting.

A boy stands at the kitchen counter, an open pizza box in front of him. He's halfway through shoveling a slice of pizza in his mouth, and he blinks in surprise at the sight of me before trying to give me a wide grin, his smooth cheeks reddening with embarrassment.

Some of my earlier unease fades at the sight of him. This kid, he can't be more than seventeen. If someone's little brother lives here, these must be good people.

"Lily, this is Eddie. We call him the baby-faced assassin. He teaches skiing at the mountain."

Oh. Okay then. So maybe not someone's little brother.

Eddie wipes his mouth with the back of his hand and scowls at Matty, his expression instantly transforming from cherubic to something almost feral. "Nobody fucking calls me that except you, Captain America."

His scowl quickly fades when he looks back to me, accent thickening as he adds: "S' nice to meet you, Lily."

"And this is Seth." Matty ignores Eddie's outburst, tilting his chin to where a tall, sandy-haired guy leans against a doorframe, a dim, narrow hallway behind him. "I... uh, I don't actually know what he does," Matty adds sheepishly, making me wonder just how recently he moved in.

"I work at the rental shop," Seth drawls, a slow smile curving his lips. Despite his imposing build, his eyes are kind, tipping up at the corners. "I'm hoping to get my ski instructor's cert next winter though."

"And the antisocial bookworm in the corner there is Ant."

My gaze flits to the far corner of the living room, to where a dark-haired, dark-skinned guy is curled up on a worn sofa, a paperback dangling from his fingertips as he frowns at Matty.

"It's Antoine," he says loftily, turning back to his book. The cover has a picture of two shirtless guys on it, but I can't quite make out the title. "A fact you well know, Matthias Webber."

I can't quite place his accent, but it sounds nice, perfectly matching his cable-knit sweater and chinos—and completely at odds with his surroundings.

Emerald-green eyes lift momentarily from his page, landing on me with a searing intensity that almost has me stepping back. "It's lovely to meet you, Lily. If you do decide to stay with these heathens, be warned: none of them knows how to cook, clean or do any of the usual things that grown adults should be capable of on their own. They do like to drink though."

And with that ominous proclamation, he lifts his book, obscuring his face from view once more.

Matty gives a tittering laugh, bending to wipe his palms on his thighs before sweeping one arm toward the dimly lit hallway. “Ready for the grand tour?”

---

## Chapter 3



---

### **Antoine**

*“Harder,” Charles cried out, his eyes rolling back in his head, his mouth lolling open. “Oh, gods above...”*

*“Shh...” Aehaeko dragged one claw along Charles’s spine, eliciting a series of shivers from his weak human lover. “It is I you should be worshiping, Captain, and not the gods.”*

*Aehaeko’s stem throbbed inside the human’s tight hole, the wild tendrils within his hardened length desperate to unfurl, to latch on and pulse out their release. Charles bucked against him, and Aehaeko squeezed his eyes shut as the desire to breed his mate became almost overwhelming.*

*But he couldn’t. Not yet. Not when Charles didn’t know what he was to Aehaeko. Perhaps didn’t even know that his perfect, human body was capable of carrying Aehaeko’s young...*

*“Oh, hey, I forgot to mention earlier but that chick who came by is moving in tomorrow.”*

I blink, looking up as images of Captain Charles getting deliciously railed give way to the unwelcome sight of Matty fresh out of the shower. He’s standing less than a meter away from me, a towel wrapped around his waist as he lifts one leg, resting his foot on the couch and lathering lotion from his calf to his thigh.

*“Putain de merde,” I grit out, lifting one hand to shield my eyes. But it’s too late. I’ve already gotten an eyeful of Matty’s balls, and there’s no unseeing it.*

“I don’t think I’ve ever heard you speak in French before,” Matty muses, pausing midlather to shoot me a dopey grin.

I glare at him, making sure to keep my eyes locked on his face. I’m not going to dignify that observation with a response.

“Matty, I told you to stop doing that,” Seth calls out from behind the kitchen island. I can barely see him from behind the growing wall of empty beer cans. “You can’t just go around flashing people.”

“What?” Matty drops his leg, only to squirt another dollop of lotion into his hands and lift his other leg. “What’d yah mean? I’ve got a towel on. Besides, we’re all guys here.”

Seth rolls his eyes, shooting me an exasperated smile. I don’t smile back.

“Did you say that hot chick is moving in?” Eddie calls out from down the hallway, his head peeking around the doorframe like a gopher. “The one with the boobs?”

“Uh, yah.” Matty blushes, then drops his legs, wiping his hands on his towel. “But maybe don’t talk about her like that? At least, not when she’s here...”

Eddie grins.

“You probably should have spoken to us before telling her she could move in,” Seth dutifully points out, coming out from behind the wall of beer cans to stand in the living room, a bowl of mac ‘n’ cheese clutched to his chest. “Or checked with us. Because I... uh, I already kind of told someone they could have the room.”

“What? Who?” Matty asks, a line forming between his eyes.

“Shit, no way.” Eddie leans against the doorframe, his eyes round with disbelief. He lets out a harsh chuckle, then shakes his head. “That’s fucking hilarious. I just told Liam he could move in.”

I gape at my three idiot flatmates in disbelief.

“Liam?” Matty straightens, clutching his towel to his waist. “What Liam is that?”

Eddie makes a face. “Liam Sutherland. Obviously.”

I feel the blood drain from my face, my fingers tensing around my paperback. *No. No, no, no.* This cannot be happening to me.

“Shoot. I know him,” Matty says. “That’s my coach.”

Eddie waves one hand dismissively. “Only for what, a week? Two? Then he’s just another instructor like the rest of us.”

Matty shakes his head, looking completely horrified. It’s a sentiment I share, for very different reasons.

“What’s wrong with Liam Sutherland?” Seth asks, looking between the three of us with open curiosity. “Is he, like, a dick or something?”

I huff out a mirthless laugh, because that’s the understatement of the year.

I met Liam Sutherland once, four years ago, and it was an utterly unforgettable experience. He’d been eighteen, fresh from his first Olympic victory and already training for his next in Villars-sur-Ollon. I was sixteen, trapped in the gold-plated hell that was my upscale boarding school, where my only escape had been the school ski team and occasional trips home to Paris.

It was on one of those trips home that I’d met him at a club in Montmartre. I’d gotten in on a fake ID. He’d given me a false name—before giving me the most incredible kiss of my life.

*My first kiss.*

Without thinking about it, I press my fingertips to my lips, as if the memory of him still lingers beneath my skin.

The number he gave me was as fake as his name. As fake as my ID.

I’ll never forget the look of horror on his face when he came to speak to my class a few weeks later on the slopes at Villars.

Matty shakes his head vehemently, while Eddie taps his chin in consideration.

“Nah, he’s sweet as,” Eddie finally says, using that bizarre Kiwi saying that I’ve come to understand means something like *génial*. “Just a bit quiet sometimes.”

*Quiet?* I stare at Eddie in disbelief. There’s nothing quiet about Liam Sutherland. Even the way he walked had been loud. Larger than life.

“Okay, that’s good.” Seth shovels a large spoonful of unnaturally orange macaroni and cheese into his mouth, and I can’t help but cringe. No cheese on earth should be that color. In fact, I’m not even sure it qualifies as cheese, since I’m certain it came from some sort of sachet.

“The guy I invited works in the rental shop with me,” Seth continues around a mouthful. “Just hired him today. A guy called Tom Davey. You guys heard of him?”

Eddie and Matty shake their heads. Of course no one has heard of some random Tom Davey who Seth only hired today. *Today. Merde.* He could be anyone.

I let my paperback fall to my lap, momentarily unconcerned about losing my place as I press my fingertips to my temples.

“Let me get this straight,” I say, speaking slowly because—despite my years at a premier international school—my accent always seems to get thicker when I’m angry. The razor-edge of my father’s French blood cutting through the practiced veneer of civility. “All three of you idiots invited someone to move in. To this... *minuscule*... tiny, shithole of a three-bedroom *appartement*. And I’m supposed to—what, exactly? Share a bedroom with some complete stranger? *Putain de merde, mais*... are you all fucking insane?”

Seth stares at me, his mouth hanging open, his spoon laden with orange pasta and cheese hovering halfway to his lips. Matty’s face reddens, a deep flush that dips down his neck and chest, vivid against his pale skin, and he drops his gaze to the threadbare carpet.

“Look, princess...” Eddie’s straight, white teeth flash in a grin that’s more snarl than smile, his eyes blazing with the

anticipation of a fight. “No one is making you stay here. If you have a problem with sharing a room, go find someplace else.”

I glare at him, my nostrils flaring as I bite back the string of curses sitting on the tip of my tongue. He knows as well as I do that I can’t move out. This time of the year, I’d be lucky to find a room to share. Most of the guys I know are sleeping at least three to four people per room in an effort to pay five-star vacation rates on minimum wage.

“Yah. That’s what I thought.” Eddie smirks, then reaches up to flick a lock of hair from his forehead.

Seth worries his lower lip with his teeth, glancing between me and Eddie nervously. I haven’t known him long, but already I can tell he’s the sort that hates confrontation. That he just wants everyone to get along.

Well, it looks like he’s in for a disappointing winter season.

“You can share with me and Matty,” Seth assures me, offering a tentative smile. “Eddie can share with Liam and...”

I lift a brow. And what? They’re just going to throw that poor girl in with some guy no one knows?

Matty scrubs one hand over his face. “I... I kinda told Lily she could have her own room.”

Eddie snorts, and Seth shakes his head. I feel myself staring at him in disbelief. What is wrong with this guy? Why would he promise her that without asking the rest of us?

“Well, that’s not going to happen,” Eddie says flatly. “I can tell you straight up Liam will not be wanting to share with more than one other person.”

I roll my eyes. Of course he wouldn’t. Not when he’s a medaled Olympian and everything.

“You guys sort it out,” I say, swinging my legs off the couch and rising to stand, my back clicking as I stretch.

It probably wasn’t the smartest move to curl up on the couch after teaching skiing all day, but today had been rough. It was my second day teaching on my own and, somehow, I had ended up with twenty children under the age of ten. For an



entire day. One of them had gotten lost for a good hour—we found her, eventually, crying outside the café where we'd stopped earlier for hot chocolate—and one of them had soiled his pants shortly after lunchtime.

The smell had been horrendous.

I'd needed an escape from reality, if only for a few hours. A reality where Captain Charles could be abducted by an advanced alien race, become the object of desire for the alien equivalent of a king, and save an alien species from certain destruction with little more than wit and sheer luck.

Captain Charles certainly never had to deal with snot-nosed children getting lost and shitting their pants.

I point between my three roommates. “You created this mess, not me. So you can fix it.”

Then I clutch my paperback to my chest and stride past them, heading to my room. Well, it had been my room for the past five days. I guess now it'll be Lily and that other guy's... what did Seth say his name was? Tim? Tom?

I sigh as I step inside, casting a glare at the solitary window—a window that would be too small to escape through should there ever be a fire—and my meager belongings. A worn Louis Vuitton suitcase sits open, the contents spilling out onto the threadbare carpet. My bed is a single mattress on the floor, covered in bedding that is a far cry from the high-thread-count Egyptian cotton I grew up with.

It'll take me less than five minutes to move everything I own down the hall.

My phone buzzes in my pocket. I pull it out, lip curling at the name on the screen, then toss the offending device onto my sorry excuse for a bed.

*Maman.*

Of course *she* would call me now. When I'm at my lowest. When I'm doubting the momentary burst of bravado that had me packing my bags and leaving everything behind to follow my dreams.

A couple weeks ago, it had seemed exhilarating. I'd donated every single law textbook I owned and left Oxford, along with its tourist-ridden streets and the half-finished law degree that I'd never wanted in the first place. I'd dusted off the ski instructor certificate that I'd convinced my parents to let me sit for when I was eighteen—for the purpose of making my *curriculum vitae* look more interesting, of course—and booked a flight to the United States.

To Park City, Utah.

Now, I'm cut off from the trust fund that I've depended on my entire life, working as a glorified babysitter, and crammed into an apartment with what will soon be six other people.

To say I'm having doubts about my life choices would be an understatement.

---

## Chapter 4



---

### Lily

“I’m sorry—what?”

Matty rubs at the back of his neck, his foot moving to an almost frantic rhythm where it holds up his snowboard, causing the whole chairlift to swing.

“There are two other guys moving in today,” he repeats, as if his proclamation will be less surprising the second time around.

It’s not.

I stare at him in disbelief, grateful for the ski goggles and face mask hiding exactly how irritated I am. *Two more guys*. The condo was already going to be crowded with four guys. Now, there are six?

Not to mention, two of them are complete strangers. I mean, it’s not like I exactly know Matty, Eddie, Seth, and... what was that other guy’s name? Ant? Anthony? But at least I’ve *met* them.

“That’s seven people in a three-bedroom place,” I dutifully point out, just in case he hasn’t done the math. “Seven people for one bathroom.”

“Uh, yah...” he worries his chapped, lower lip with his teeth, then looks out over the tops of the snow-laden pines. I can’t help but follow his gaze, at the snow glistening like millions of crystals, stark against the rich browns and blue-greens of the

forest. At the mountain range stretching out beyond that, snow-capped peaks laughing like a holiday postcard against a crisp blue sky.

“... so I don’t think you’ll be able to have your own room.” His legs are swinging wildly now, like maybe he’s hoping he can propel himself off the chairlift and away from this awkward situation. “I talked to the guys and... well, they said you could share with Tom. One of the new guys.”

I grit my teeth, and take a deep breath behind my ski mask. Glad they reached that conclusion. Just throw Lily in with the new guy she’s never met before. What could possibly go wrong?

“Okay...” I say carefully, trying my best to keep my voice even. “And what about the other guy?”

“He’ll... uh, he’ll share with Eddie.” Matty’s voice rises in pitch, and I narrow my eyes at him from behind my goggles.

“Have you met Tom?” I ask, even though I’m pretty sure I already know the answer. “Or this other guy—what’s his name?”

Matty coughs out a name that’s completely unintelligible, his face going red where it’s visible beneath his goggles.

“What?”

“Liam.” The name comes out in a breathless croak. “Liam Sutherland.”

I stare at Matty for a long moment before realization dawns, horror icing my already cold limbs. “You... you mean *Coach* Liam?”

Matty nods wordlessly, then flicks up his goggles to give me an apologetic look. It’s the sort of wide-eyed look that should only be endearing on puppies or cartoon characters. Somehow, he pulls it off, because I feel an annoying twinge of sympathy in my chest.

“Shoot, Lily, I’m so sorry,” he says earnestly. “I really am. I swear I had no idea when you looked at the place yesterday.”

He holds two mittened hands out in apology. “I totally understand if you don’t want to stay with us anymore.”

His gaze drops to his lap just as the chair lurches, the distinctive crunching of wheels against the cable overhead telling us we’re nearly at the top. I adjust my position in my seat, kicking the edge of my board absently with my free boot before lining myself up with the approaching ramp.

I could back out. Could tell Matty he’s welcome to keep his overcrowded condo. I could try to find something new.

Then I remember how low my bank balance was after checking out of the hotel this morning. And that my bags are all currently sitting in the trunk of my car.

The chances of me finding something else at this point in the season are almost nonexistent.

I swallow, barely aware of the snow sliding underneath my board as I get off the lift, heading automatically to where Coach Liam is waiting for us. The other guys are already there and Liam is glaring at me and Matty as if we’re personally responsible for the glacial speed of the lift. Like it’s our fault he decided to take us to one of the least-used parts of the resort.

“Now that we’re all here”—he pauses, giving me and Matty a pointed look— “we can start working on the core demos you’ll be using to teach.” Liam lifts one gloved hand, counting on his fingers. “Falling leaf. S-turns. And then carving.” He waves toward the gentle slope behind him—an easy green run that looks like it’s been recently groomed. “This is going to be your home for the day. You’re going to learn how to demo and then teach each of these core steps.”

Beside me, Akiva lets out a derisive snort, and Liam’s glower turns on him with all the accuracy of a heat-seeking missile.

“There a problem?”

“Uh...” Akiva chuckles, then bends to buckle his bindings over his boots. “Not a problem, Coach. Just... that’s a pretty easy slope, you know.”

Liam casts a glance skyward, as if searching for some greater power that will save him from the stupidity of his students, then drags one gloved hand over his face. “Yes. That’s the point. You’re going to be teaching beginners—assuming you pass your exams, which honestly is looking more unlikely each time you open your mouth—so, yes. It’s a green slope. An easy green slope.”

With that, Liam pulls his goggles over his eyes, effortlessly pops his board in some sort of ollie before turning and gliding down to the start of the run. I bite my lip in an effort to stifle my laughter, and can’t help but glance at Matty as I buckle my free foot to my board. He gives me a wide-eyed stare that’s half amusement half horror, and I feel my grin widen.

“What are you fucking smiling about?” Akiva’s sharp voice has me standing up, my smile dropping. “You’re not any more likely to pass the exam than I am.” His dark eyes track down the length of my body, lip curling at my borrowed snowboard clothes, my worn bindings, the dented laminate of my board. “We all saw how you barely made it down that black run yesterday. I would say maybe you’d stand a chance if you spread your legs, but let’s face it—Coach’s cock is jammed so far up his own ass, I doubt he’d pull it out even for you.”

I gape at Akiva, torn between feeling horrified by the sudden vitriol he’s just spewed out and wanting to laugh. Before I can decide, Matty is slamming into him, effortlessly shoving Akiva off balance so that he falls back on the hardpack snow with a thud.

“Shut up.” Matty barks out, shoulders trembling with barely restrained rage as he looms over Akiva. “You don’t get to talk to her like that.”

The other guys standing nearby look between Akiva and Matty, chuckle nervously, then quickly strap their feet in and head to where Liam is waiting.

“Dude. Chill out.” Akiva says, throwing his hands up. “She like your girlfriend or something?”

Matty hobbles forward, snowboard only strapped to one foot, making his attempted advance more awkward than

intimidating. I slide over to him, gently grip his shoulder, pulling him back.

“It’s fine,” I murmur, willing my cheeks not to heat. “Just leave it.”

“But...”

“It’s fine, Matty.” I cast a glance to where Liam and the rest of the class are staring at us several yards away. “Coach Liam is waiting. And I don’t care what this asshole thinks.”

I give Akiva a bland look, making sure he can see just how little his words have affected me.

I do feel the hit of them though, rough as the icy wind cutting against my face.

I know I’m the worst rider here. I’ve got less hours on the snow than most these guys. They grew up here, while I got my experience in two-week slots each year on family vacations. To top it all off, my gear is old, or borrowed, or both.

If passing the exam rested solely on our ability as riders, I know I wouldn’t pass.

But it doesn’t, and Akiva’s outburst kindles something warm and hopeful in my chest, fighting off the chill wind as I traverse across to join the group.

Akiva thinks this exam is all about showing off his skills, about being the best rider. So do a lot of the other guys, from what I’ve overheard them saying. But I listened to Coach yesterday, and I read the course materials last night. The biggest part of the exam is our ability to do the demos, explain how to do each different technique, and assess other riders to see what they need to change in their style.

In other words, to *teach*.

Teaching I can do. I’ve been teaching kids how to swim at the local pool since I was sixteen.

I skid to a stop above Liam and the other students, the warmth in my chest blooming even larger when Matty slides next to me. He didn’t have to stand up for me like that, and I’m not

even sure if I wanted him to, but it still feels nice to know I've got an ally here. That one of these guys has my back.

I keep my eyes fixed on Liam, watching his teeth flash as he talks animatedly about *torsional flex* and *camber*, about the difference between demonstrating a technique to a kinesthetic learner and a visual learner. I tune out the scraping of Akiva's board as he skids too close behind me, ignoring the snow spraying the backs of my legs and the edge of his board knocking against mine before he comes to a stop.

Liam's eyes narrow, his brow dipping at Akiva's arrival, but he doesn't stop talking. His gloved hands move descriptively in front of him, demonstrating the positioning of feet, the movement of weight from heel to toe, and his own knees bending and moving in demonstration.

I watch and I listen, giving him the entirety of my attention, a small smile forming on my windburned lips.

Passing exams, getting good grades—that has always come easy to me. If I can pass 300-level Political Science classes at the University of Hawai'i, I can learn everything Liam has to teach us.

One of the guys standing next to me shuffles his feet, lifting one hand to suppress a loud yawn. Akiva gives a bored sigh. My grin broadens, hope and determination blooming.

Akiva is clearly as dumb as a box of rocks. If he's any indication of my competition at the exam in two weeks' time, I stand a pretty solid chance of passing.

“What the heck is torsional flex?” Matty murmurs, when Liam turns his back to us to give us the first of the demos he wants us to mimic. A heel-side falling leaf, he called it. The first technique we'll be teaching students, once they've mastered putting on their board and skating.

Matty holds big mittened hands out in front of him, his lips curving into a frown as he tries to copy what Coach Liam had been doing with his hands before. “Like what does this even mean? Is this what my feet are supposed to be doing?”



Plastic grinds and squeaks as Matty presumably flexes and points his feet in his boots, trying to copy what Coach Liam had shown us earlier. His frown deepens. “This doesn’t do anything.”

I look up at him, worrying my lower lip with my teeth. Standing slightly uphill from me, he looks even taller than before. Too tall for a snowboarder, probably. His icy-blue eyes are filled with panic—the sort of frantic fear of a student who knows they’re about to be left behind by the rest of the class.

Without thinking about it, I drop to my knees in front of him, my board skidding behind me, my toe-side edge anchoring me in place as I reach for his feet. “Here,” I say, gripping one boot in each hand. His feet are massive, like the rest of him, the toes slightly overhanging the chipped edges of his board.

I push on one foot, then the other, making Matty’s weight shift from heel, to toe, to heel again, his board flexing in the center with the movement. “See that,” I say, nodding to his board. “See how your board twists in the middle. That’s the torsional flex that Coach was talking about. So when you change your weight on the board, it flexes in the middle, and the edge releases or grips into the snow.”

I push on the toe of his left foot, watching the heel-side edge disengage just enough to have him sliding to the left. “See. Like that.”

I glance up in time to see his eyes light up with understanding, lips curving into a tentative smile as he continues traversing across the slope on his heel edge. “Huh. Wow.” He chuckles. “I get it now.” His smile widens, his shoulders slumping with relief. “Thanks, Lily.”

The look he gives me is so full of gratitude, it has something uncomfortable twisting in my chest. I look away, feeling my cheeks heat as I rise to my feet, focusing on brushing snow off my knees and regaining balance on my toe-side edge before turning onto my heel edge so I can do the demo myself.

It’s an easy technique—one I would have mastered years ago and forgotten. The sort of movement that has embedded itself so deep into my muscle memory, doing it consciously feels

awkward. I force myself to concentrate, to accentuate each movement like Liam told us, so that our hypothetical “visual learner” students would be able to replicate it.

By the time I finally get to where Liam and the rest of the group are waiting, I’m the last one down the slope. Akiva rolls his eyes impatiently, while Liam gives me an unreadable look.

“Hike up to the top,” Liam tells the class. “We’ll do it again.”

There are a few grumbled protests, but no one argues. It’s not a massive hill, but hiking in the snow is exhausting. Especially at altitude, when I’m still adjusting from being at sea level. I sigh, bending to unclip my board so I can start the trek back up to the top.

“I saw what you did with Matty.” Liam’s voice is feather soft, barely audible against the crunching of footsteps in the snow around us.

I start, surprised to find he’s standing right behind me. I stand, my board clutched under my arm, and eye him warily. He didn’t say we couldn’t help each other out, and I’m not about to apologize for helping Matty.

“That’s what you’d do for a kinetic learner,” he continues, keeping pace beside me as I start the slow trudge uphill. “You’re going to come across a lot of them. Demos and explanations will only do so much—they need to feel the movement to learn it. Keep that up and you might not fail after all.”

I turn, blinking at him in confusion from behind my goggles. Is he... did he just compliment me?

He gives the faintest of smiles, almost like he’s reluctant to show anything other than a glower, then powers past me, leaving me trailing behind the group. A grin curves my lips, that hopeful glow kindling in my chest burning brighter, spreading warmth down my snow-chilled limbs.

I can do this. I can pass the exam. In two weeks, I’ll be a snowboard instructor.

Matty pauses his ascent ahead of me, stepping back to let Liam storm past, shuffling his feet in the snow as he waits for

me to catch up.

“Uhh... want me to carry your board?” he asks, his windburned cheeks reddening.

I shake my head. “I got it,” I tell him, adjusting my board so that it’s tucked under my other arm.

It’s nice of him to offer, but having him carry my board isn’t going to win me any points with Coach—or the rest of the guys.

“What did Coach say?” Matty whispers, his shoulder brushing against my own as we walk together up the hill. “Was he mad about you helping me?”

“Nah. He was cool with it.” I shoot him a smile, then knock his shoulder playfully with my own. “I think it actually made me look good. So, thank you.”

Matty lets out a breathy chuckle. “Oh, okay. Good. Glad to help.”

We’re nearing the top, and my smile falters at the sight of Akiva’s eyes narrowed on me and Matty as we approach the group. I hold Akiva’s stare for a long moment, silently challenging him to say something. To do something. He gives me a disgusted look, then turns away.

“Um... so what did you decide?” Matty asks, slowing his pace. “About moving in, I mean.”

For some reason, my gaze drifts to Coach Liam. He’s looking between me and Akiva, the traces of his earlier smile gone.

I wonder idly what *he* thinks about me moving in. I guess it’s not that weird—he’s only our coach for the next couple of weeks, and then he’ll just be another instructor. A guy I work with, assuming I pass. Besides, it’s not like I’d be sharing a room with him. Just a condo. Well, with him and five other guys...

“Yah.” I swallow, my throat suddenly dry, my stomach tightening with nerves. “I’ll move in.”

It’s either that or sleep in my car—I can’t afford another night in a resort-town hotel.

“Awesome.” I can hear the relief in Matty’s voice, and I look up in time to see him flash me a broad smile.

I do my best to return it, but it’s hard to share his enthusiasm about moving into a three-bedroom place with six guys I don’t know.

He claps me on the shoulder with one mittened hand. “You won’t regret it. I promise.”

I hope he’s right.

---

## Chapter 5



---

### **Eddie**

I stare at my phone, and pick another strip of label off the shitty low-alcohol beer gathering condensation on the table in front of me. It's the third one I've had, and I don't even feel buzzed yet. Just bloated.

Fucking Utah and its ridiculous drinking laws.

The screen on my phone glares back at me, taunting me. It's only 2 p.m. here, which means it's 8 a.m. in New Zealand. Not too early to call, technically, but I'm pretty sure Mum said she's on night shift at the hospital at the moment. Which means she will have only just gone to sleep.

I take another drink, and struggle to swallow the taste of bland malt around the lump in my throat.

What would I tell her anyway? That I've only been away from home for a week and already I've fucked up?

I squeeze my eyes shut, as the images from hours ago play on repeat in my mind. Two little kids on the chair lift in front of me, laughing away as the other little kid chatted nonstop from her spot at my side. I don't even know what she'd been talking about now—some kids' TV show I'd never heard of, I think.

I can remember the sound of her screams though. The piercing cries of terror as she watched the two kids in front of us fall, one after the other off the chairlift, plummeting in slow motion down to the hardpack snow meters below.

“They’re going to be okay. They’re fine. They’re going to be fine.” I had chanted the words like a prayer, like a mantra. Like if I said them enough times, I could make the lie a truth.

The moments after that are a blur. Time sped up, the other skiers and even the snow itself fading around me. As soon as we reached the top, I picked my student up, tucked her under one arm like she was one of the lambs on my cousin’s farm, and hightailed it down to where the two kids had fallen.

They were motionless. Silent. And so small. I was terrified of touching them—terrified that I’d make whatever injuries they had worse.

All the while, the girl in my arms cried and cried and cried.

I’d never felt so helpless in my entire life.

I take another swig of beer, and push down the rising nausea.

The door to the condo swings open, a gust of icy air penetrating my haze of self-pity, and I blink, turning just in time to see Antoine kicking snow off his boots at the threshold. The second I meet his eyes, I know he knows.

*Fuck.*

I quickly look away and stare at the beer in front of me.

“*Merde,*” he murmurs, his voice heavy with sympathy as he slides into the rickety seat beside me. “So, it’s true then. Those two kids that fell off the lift this morning—that was your class?”

I swallow, tightening my grip on the bottle in front of me. Like this shitty beer will ground me somehow, keep me from floating away. “Yah,” I croak out.

There’s no point in denying it, not when he works in kids’ ski school with me. Except, unlike him, I actually love teaching kids. Especially the little ones, like the class I had today. Little four-year-olds who follow you around like happy ducklings. Little kids with helmets so big, when they look up at the sky, they fall back like bowling pins in the snow. Little kids who can’t put their own fucking gloves on, but can learn to bomb a black diamond in a matter of weeks if you teach them right.

I took extra training back in New Zealand just so I could teach kids under five—learned how their little minds work and what techniques to use to get them skiing. How to use play and games and even damn nursery rhymes to teach them how to get from a wedge christie to parallel turns.

“*Quel bordel,*” Antoine mutters, his arms resting on the table. “I’m so sorry. *Putain.* I can’t even imagine...”

I squeeze my eyes shut. Good for fucking him. Glad he can’t imagine it. It’s all I can think of at the moment.

*The sound of the kids’ mum as she came running up from the base of the learners’ slope, the feel of her fists against my chest again and again. The sound of the snowmobile as mountain patrol arrived, their meaningless words as they tried to calm that poor woman down...*

“Is there anything stronger to drink than this shit?” I ask, tapping my fingers on the beer in front of me. “I’d rather drink horse piss than fucking Utah beer.”

Antoine furrows his brow, then shakes his head. “No. We’d need Seth to go to the liquor store if you want something else. It shuts at 4 p.m. though.”

Of course. Because apparently grown-ass adults aren’t allowed to buy alcohol in this country, and both Antoine and I are on the wrong side of twenty-one.

I give what I mean to be a grunt of dismay, but it catches in my throat.

“I’ll text him.” Antoine assures me. “Ask him to go past the liquor store on the way from the mountain. It should still be open...”

He pulls out his phone, long fingers tapping furiously. “We should really have a group chat,” he muses. Because of course he’s one of those freaks who can text and talk at the same time. “Just for our flat. To organize things like this.”

I snort, because Seth was saying the same thing last night, and I distinctly recall Antoine peering up from whatever science-fiction novel he was reading and saying: “Why would I want

to hear what all you idiots are texting each other? You know I would just mute that shit.”

Good to know the sight of me solo drinking shitty beer is terrifying enough to make Antoine change his mind.

Antoine fires off a couple of texts, his phone pinging in reply a moment later.

“Seth said he’ll pick up bourbon. He’s catching a lift home with Lily and Matty.” Antoine’s fingers drum nervously on the table, like he doesn’t know what to do with his hands now that he’s not texting. “They should be home in the next half hour.”

That’s right. I forgot everyone else was moving in today. Lily, Tom, and Liam. My stomach clenches at the thought of having to face any of them. Of letting them—especially Liam—see me like this.

I scrub one hand over my face.

Antoine’s phone pings again, brow dipping as he reads the text before releasing a shaky breath. “That was Seth.” Antoine gives me what he probably thinks is a reassuring smile. “He said to tell you the two kids are stable. Apparently, everyone is talking about it at ski school, and management agrees it wasn’t your fault. You did everything by the book...”

His words fade against the ringing in my ears.

*Stable. Stable.* The word brings with it the beeping of hospital machines, the smell of bleach and Listerine, sneakers squeaking against linoleum, the flicker of fluorescent lights, the pinch of tape from my IV line...

I tip back the last of my beer, swallowing back half the bottle at once, even though I might as well be drinking water. Even though it’ll just make me feel full without taking the edge off.

It certainly won’t be enough to erase the childhood memories I’ve spent the past twelve years trying to forget.

“I’m gonna go sort out my room,” I mutter, interrupting whatever it was Antoine was saying, rising so abruptly, my thighs clip the edge of the table. “You know, make sure there’s space for Liam to move his stuff in.”



---

BY THE TIME SETH, Matty, and Lily arrive, I'm just getting off a call with my manager—the same Kiwi who recruited me to come to Utah for the season, as luck would have it. She tells me what Antoine did—that I'm not in trouble, that the mountain is handling everything, that I'm not allowed to talk about the “incident” to anyone outside the ski school and, most importantly, that the kids are going to be okay.

*Okay. Okay.*

I run that word over and over in my head, even as I want to scream at her. Especially when she tells me the extent of their injuries. How will they ever be fucking okay after what happened to them? Even when their little bodies heal, they'll have the memories with them forever.

*Like I do.*

“You can take a couple days off,” she tells me, her voice pitched low with sympathy. I know she means it too. She's one of the good ones. “Take some time to recover from everything.”

I grit my teeth, holding my phone a little too tightly as I take in her words. Taking time off is a bad idea. The last thing I need is more time alone with my thoughts.

“I'll be back at the lineup tomorrow morning,” I say, probably a little harshly. “I've got my advanced kids and I'm not letting someone else teach 'em, they'll just fuck it up.”

“Eddie,” she says carefully. Gently. “I don't think that's the best idea...”

“I'm fine,” I retort, injecting forced cheerfulness into my voice. “Totally fine. I'll be on the snow tomorrow.”

I end the call before she can tell me how wrong I am.

I'm not fine though. I glare at my phone, then throw it on the bed.

I wish it had been my mum on the other end of the line. God, it sounds stupid and childish, but I just wish my mum was here to give me a hug, to wrap me up in her arms and tell me that it's all going to be fine. To tell me that I'm not a complete fuckup, even though my brother's a lawyer and my sister's a doctor.

I can't even become a ski instructor without dropping two kids off the ski lift on my first week teaching overseas.

There's a short rap on the door, followed by Seth calling out from the other side, "Eddie? You in here?"

I plaster on a grin, rubbing my eyes with the heels of my hands. "Yah. I'm here." I pull the door open. My gaze drops to the bottle of bourbon clutched in his hand, and I force my smile wider, until my cheeks hurt. "Thanks for picking that up. How much do I owe you?"

I can hear Lily and Matty talking down the hall, can hear Matty's stupid laugh at whatever Lily is saying, and Lily's breathy chuckle in reply.

"There's cola in the kitchen," Seth continues, his rich-brown eyes fixed on me with knowing sympathy. "I'm pretty sure Matty hasn't used up all the ice in the freezer. Want me to mix you a drink?"

I take the bottle from his hand, pulling it toward my chest. "Nah, I got it. Thanks, bro."

I push past him, doing my best to ignore everyone as I head to the kitchen to mix my drink.

The front door flies open, just as I'm lifting my glass of sweet bourbon and cola to my lips, and a guy I've never seen before in my life comes waltzing in. He lingers in the open doorway, the icy wind gusting behind him as he surveys the flat with a look of mild interest, a cocky grin curving his lips.

"Hey," he drawls, running his hand through shaggy, dirty-blond hair. "So this is the condo, huh?"

Brown eyes that are a little too close together rove around the living room, his lip curling slightly at the sight of Antoine

sprawled out on the couch, then pressing into a smirk at the sight of me.

*Whatever the fuck that means.*

I smirk right back at him, take a deep drink of my bourbon and cola before setting the glass on the table. “You gonna close the door or what?” I say, never dropping my gaze from his. “And then, maybe tell us who the fuck you are and why you’re standing there, letting all the heat out.”

I know heating isn’t as expensive as it is back home, but still, rude. You can literally see the snowflakes landing on the doormat at his feet.

He widens his beady eyes, his smile dropping as his lips part in surprise, but makes no move to close the door or explain who he is.

“Oh, guys, this is Tom,” Seth rushes forward, practically sprinting from the kitchen to close the front door, then casts me a look from behind Tom’s back. I can’t tell if it’s a *please be nice* look or *sorry this guy’s such a douche* look, but I decide I don’t care.

Tom is clearly an idiot.

My grin widens as all my ire from my supremely shitty day finds itself a target. “Oh. Hi Tom. Welcome.”

Already my mind is racing, scanning him for all signs of weakness, cataloging them for future use.

Below-average features, slightly pudgy build. Boots that look too new, too clean, considering we’re in the middle of winter. Lots of sports-brand gear—again, new. For all he looks like he’s missing a few brain cells, he stands with his chin jutted out, his hips forward, his brow furrowed in confused disappointment. Like he grew up thinking the world belonged to him, only to find out he actually had to share it with people better qualified than himself.

Dark excitement curls in my stomach, edging out some of the bitterness from earlier, mingling with the warmth of the bourbon.

I'm going to have so much fun with him.

Lily and Matty emerge from Lily's room, pulling my attention away from my target. Her room is the first down the hallway, and I can just make out the edge of her now-inflated air mattress from my seat in the kitchen. For some reason, the sight of it—of that pale purple blanket spread over her bed, and her clothes spilling out from her open suitcase on the floor—it has my heart skipping a beat.

Matty and Lily are both smiling, their cheeks flushed from carrying and unpacking Lily's things. Actually, Matty's cheeks are closer to red, and I don't think it's just from exertion. Not when his eyes are practically heart emojis every time he looks at Lily.

I want to rip him out about it, but I can't blame him. Because Lily really is hot.

She's wearing faded jeans and a cropped sweater that hugs her curves, and when she stretches up there's a flash of golden flesh just above her waistband. The sight of it makes me want to reach out and trail my fingers over the exposed skin, see how warm and smooth it is, see if goosebumps would rise under my touch...

I blink, my cheeks heating when I realize Lily is looking straight at me, expression unreadable, smile gone. I offer her an apologetic smile, but it's too late. The damage is done. She's caught me staring at her like a complete creep, and there's no going back from that. I take a long drink of my bourbon and cola.

"Lily, Matty, this is Tom Davey," Seth says.

"Nice to meet you, Tom," Lily says, extending one hand out like this is a business meeting or something. She worries her lower lip with her teeth, then plasters on a smile. "I think we're sharing a room."

"Score." Tom gives a lascivious grin then takes her hand, holding it a little too long as his eyes rake over her body. "Seth mentioned I'd be sharing with a chick, but he didn't tell me how hot you were."

In response, Lily gives him that same bland look she gave me, the only sign of her discomfort the stiffening of her shoulders, the faintest ticking of her jaw. Matty scowls, and some of the color drains from Seth's face as he looks between everyone, visibly panicking at the possibility of an argument.

Something like guilt tightens in my chest at the thought that I made her feel the same way just moments earlier. But of course, I shouldn't be surprised. I'm my family's failure. Why wouldn't I fuck things up with Lily before we could even exchange more than a few words?

Lily pulls her hand free of Tom's grasp, her eyes sparking with the promise of retaliation as she opens her mouth to speak. I lean forward on my elbows, my blood buzzing with anticipation at watching how she's going to lay him out—because I know she will.

If there's one thing I'm familiar with, it's the look of someone about to deliver a verbal kill shot.

But then the front door swings open once again, and we all turn to watch Liam Sutherland come in on a swirl of icy wind and fluttering snowflakes.

Maybe it's the fact that I've had three beers and a couple shots of bourbon, but everything seems to happen in slow motion. Liam looks between the group gathered in front of the door, his expression going from mildly relaxed to wide-eyed surprise to dark, seething rage in the space of milliseconds.

He raises one pale hand, pointing accusingly at Tom, his lip curling back in disgust. "What the fuck is he doing here?"

Tom recoils, as if Liam is a venomous snake instead of a medaled Olympian. "Why is *he* here?"

There's a faint rustling of paper as Antoine drops his book, emerging from whatever fantasy world he's been immersed in to watch the drama unfolding in the living room. Matty takes a defensive position beside Lily, and Seth wrings his hands.

"I live here, you dick," Liam sneers, just as Seth leaps between them, a falsely cheerful smile on his pale face.

“Guys, hey... hey,” he gives a hollow chuckle. “Um, so I see you’ve already met. That’s good. Liam, I’m Seth—Eddie told us you were moving in. This is Tom, he’s just moved in too. Oh, and Lily, Matty, and Antoine.” Seth points out everyone, his hands waving wildly, his broad smile fragile.

Liam’s flinty gray eyes move from Lily, to Matty, to Antoine, his frown deepening before he turns to me with an accusatory glare. “We’ve met,” he says, answering Seth but keeping his eyes on me.

I slink down in my chair, wishing I could hide behind my almost-empty glass of bourbon and cola. With everything that happened this morning, I completely forgot to tell him about all the other people moving in.

“Lily and Matty are two of my students...” Liam’s gaze swivels to Antoine, his shoulders stiffening, fingers flexing at his sides. “And I met Antoine in Switzerland a few years ago.”

*Well, shit.*

I can’t stop myself from casting a surreptitious glance in Antoine’s direction. All traces of his usual dismissive smirk are gone, his green eyes blazing like emeralds against his dark skin as he stares at Liam expectantly.

“Wait,” Matty drawls, his blond hair tumbling into his eyes as he cocks his head to one side. “You’re doing the snowboard training program too, right?” He’s talking to Tom, completely oblivious to the palpable tension between Liam and nearly every single person in the room. “I think I saw you in our group the first day, before we got split up...”

Tom’s face flames red, making freckles that were previously hidden stand out in stark relief. “Yah. I *was* in the program. Until this dude kicked me out.” Tom thumbs accusingly in Liam’s direction.

Liam snorts, waving one hand dismissively. “I didn’t kick you out. The trash took itself out.”

A vein pulses on Tom’s forehead, his hands clenching to fists at his sides. He looks about two seconds away from throwing a punch, while Liam is just staring at him with that mildly

disgusted, mostly impassive stare that he reserves for pretty much everyone. “You were a dick to Stephanie,” Liam says calmly. “So you were banned from the program.”

My forehead knits in confusion. “Stephanie Jealouse?” I ask, the words tumbling out before I can remember I’m trying to avoid Liam’s notice right now. “Why the fuck would you be a dick to *her*?”

Stephanie Jealouse is like the mother goddess of the big mountain world. The first woman to do pretty much everything backcountry. She’s the instructor celebrities ask to ride with, the literal poster child for the mountain. And probably one of the nicest human beings I’ve met.

Tom glares at me, his lips trembling wordlessly with barely constrained rage.

“Because he’s a misogynist idiot,” Liam deadpans. “And he thought being transferred to a woman trainer was a downgrade.”

I don’t bother to contain my amusement. “Mate. You’re kidding me.” I shake my head, almost hysterical laughter bubbling in my chest. “Shit. That’s too good.”

“Shut the fuck up,” Tom hisses. “What are you, like twelve? Shouldn’t you be at home with your mom or something?”

My smile drops, the laughter dying as my lips curve into a scowl. I might tolerate being called “baby face” by my friends, but I’ve only just met this guy.

“Guys,” Seth interjects, pink spots forming on his cheeks. “Let’s just get settled in, yah? Tom, Liam—do either of you guys need help moving stuff in?” He waves one hand toward the kitchen, where the drinks he’s made are gathering condensation on the bench. “I’ve mixed up some bourbon and cola if anyone wants one. I can make more, and there are some beers in the fridge, if you don’t mind the cheap stuff...” He gives a forced chuckle, but it’s enough to break up some of the tension.

“Oh, I totally forgot my drink.” Lily gives a self-deprecating laugh, then reaches down to tug Matty by the hand, pulling

both of them toward the kitchen before shooting Seth a soft smile. “Thanks so much, Seth.”

Some of the tension drains from Seth’s expression. Tom gives an annoyed huff, his booted feet thudding on the carpet as he hauls his bag into the room he’s going to be sharing with Lily.

Liam turns his attention back to me, his lips thinning at the sight of the now-empty drink in front of me. “Eddie,” he says, somehow making my name sound extremely ominous. “We need to talk.”



---

## Chapter 6



---

### Lily

Whoever said that guys are less dramatic than girls clearly never lived with six of them.

I pull my blanket up to my chin and stare unseeingly into the darkness.

The only plus side to the massive welcome-to-the-condo-blow-out is that—after making Seth help him move his queen size bed into our room—Tom Davey decided to go out drinking. Meaning I’ve had the room to myself all evening.

I roll to one side, the inflatable mattress squeaking faintly beneath me as I try to get comfortable. I tap the screen on my phone where it’s resting beside my pillow, dismayed to see that it’s already one in the morning. Not ideal, considering I’ve got to be on the snow all day tomorrow. But after everything that has happened over the past couple days, my mind is buzzing, humming with nerves and irritation, and something I can’t quite place.

I close my eyes, trying to focus on my breathing...

“So, this is your place?” An unfamiliar feminine voice has my eyes flying open.

“Yah, this is my room here.” Tom’s words are slurred, muffled, his footsteps heavy outside the door to my room. The doorknob jangles, and I shut my eyes against the faint light from the hallway as it streams into our room.

“Don’t worry about her,” Tom drawls, his footsteps uneven as he stumbles into the room. “She’s sleepin’.”

For a brief moment, I contemplate telling him and his would-be guest that actually, I’m not asleep, because it’s pretty obvious why he’s bringing a strange woman into our room in the middle of the night. But for some reason, I freeze, the words dying in my throat, my heart hammering in my chest as I squeeze my eyes shut.

There’s the distinctive sound of clothes rustling, a faint hiccupping burp, the slap of flesh against flesh. I shudder, my stomach churning at the thought of Tom in any state of undress in his bed, just feet away from me.

“Shit yah, so hot,” Tom slurs. “So tight.”

“Hold on,” the woman with him urges. “Uh. Yah. Okay, there... no, not there, *there*...”

I wince at the obvious sound of discomfort in her voice, mingled with the sounds of Tom’s almost animalistic grunts.

For some reason, Akiva’s question from the other day chooses that moment to echo in my thoughts—*what is your type?* I bite back an ill-timed laugh, pressing my hand against my mouth.

“So good. *Hngh*. Yah. Just like that...” Tom’s voice rings out in the darkness.

Well, I think I can safely say my type is not Tom. I can also rule out having a voyeur kink, because listening to Tom pound into his unfortunate date is the opposite of arousing.

I guess it’s always good to learn new things about yourself.

The woman’s cries echo feebly alongside Tom’s, sounding false even to my ears. I don’t blame her. At this stage, she’s probably just desperate to get the whole ordeal over with. I wince in sympathy because, I’ve been there. Well, I’ve never slept with someone quite as repulsive as Tom, but I have slept with guys I wasn’t attracted to.

That wasn’t their fault though. I haven’t been attracted to a guy since Steve. And at least they tried to make it good for me.

Unlike Tom for his date.

“*Hng, hng, ahhh!*” After what seems like hours of cringe-inducing skin-slapping, Tom’s final shouts of victory fill the room, the sound followed by a long moment of awkward silence, then the rustling of bedding and clothes.

“I... I’m going to head out,” the woman murmurs, her voice full of false cheerfulness.

“I’ll call you,” Tom assures her.

“Okay.” The woman’s voice is tight. “Sure.” *Please don’t*, I can practically hear her thinking.

The door latches shut, the sound followed moments later by Tom’s snoring. I grit my teeth, and make a mental note to invest in some earplugs.

---

“YOU’RE JUST STARING at Lily’s ass, aren’t you?”

At the sound of Eddie’s voice, I nearly fall face forward from downward dog and onto the grimy carpet beneath my yoga mat.

“No,” Matty retorts defensively. I look through my legs in time to see the upside-down version of Matty’s cheeks flush, his spoon of cereal halfway to his mouth, his blue eyes wide as a startled deer.

“Oh. Okay.” Eddie continues, turning his back to Matty to rifle through the cabinets. “You’re just up extra early having breakfast with a front-row seat to Lily’s morning yoga session,” he deadpans, then gives a hiss of dismay. “Where the fuck are all the bowls? Does no one do any dishes in this place?”

I take a deep breath, moving from down dog, to plank, to cobra, glad neither of them can see my smile. I already know Eddie won’t be finding a single clean bowl in the kitchen, because I looked. After my terrible night’s sleep, I ended up waking up thirty minutes before my alarm and it was either do some yoga in the living room or listen to Tom’s snores.

I chose yoga.

Eddie washes a bowl, pours himself some cereal, then sits facing Matty at the table, essentially blocking Matty's view of me. "Now you get to look at my gorgeous face instead," Eddie says between mouthfuls.

"Gross," Matty grumbles. "Chew with your mouth closed, you heathen."

Something in my chest tightens, my earlier wariness of the guy Matty called the baby-faced assassin dissipating. I'd thought yesterday he'd been staring at my chest—and maybe he had been—but he's also just called Matty out and is giving me a moment of privacy in this overcrowded space.

I move back to down dog, then drop into child's pose, closing my eyes and trying to ignore the musty smell of the carpet. I might be sleep deprived, but at least I won't pull a muscle on the snow today.

"Why are you eating breakfast anyway?" Matty asks. "I thought instructors got a free breakfast at the mountain?"

"Yah. Sure," Eddie snorts. "If a bagel and muesli bar count as breakfast. I usually just put them in my pocket and eat them on the lift for a snack."

"What's a muesli bar?"

"What?"

"I said..."

"I heard what you said," Eddie interrupts. "How the fuck don't you know what a muesli bar is? Do they not have processed food up in Idaho or something? Are you like, Amish?"

"They call it a granola bar here," Liam says around a yawn. I sit up in time to see him stumbling into the kitchen, rubbing his eyes. "You're not in New Zealand anymore, Dorothy."

He stretches, shirt riding up and sweats dropping low on his hips with the movement, revealing a stretch of pale flesh and the flash of a tattoo on one hip. He's got that dip that some guys have, and the hint of defined abs, and for some reason, I find that just as surprising as the tattoo.

Liam clears his throat. I look up in time to see him frowning at me, an unreadable expression on his face. My cheeks burn, and I quickly turn away, busying myself with rolling up my yoga mat.

“Why is everyone making so much noise?” Tom whines, stomping out of the room we share.

His eyes are bloodshot, and he’s still wearing the clothes he went out in the night before. Liam’s frown deepens and he shoots Tom a look of disgust before giving him his back and opening the fridge.

“Way I heard it, you were the one making all the noise last night,” Eddie says teasingly, not missing a beat.

Tom’s ruddy cheeks darken, and he fixes his bloodshot eyes on me accusingly. Like his being called out is somehow my fault.

I straighten, my yoga mat tucked under my arm, and lift a brow at him in silent challenge.

Despite the fact that I haven’t actually said a word to any of the guys about what Tom was up to last night, I’m not about to apologize. I’ve dealt with guys like Tom all my life—they view politeness as weakness and treat weakness as an invitation.

“What can I say?” Tom says, lifting one shoulder and giving Eddie and Matty what he probably thinks is a winning smile. “Chicks love my cock.”

I feel the weight of several pairs of eyes on me, and the bite of panic turns my fingertips numb. It’s obvious that at least Eddie heard Tom last night, but they have no idea who he was with, and I share a room with him.

My stomach lurches at the idea of them thinking I was the one having sex with him. *Gross.*

“I highly doubt it,” I say coolly. “Seeing as the chick you were with last night faked an orgasm and then ran as soon as she could get out from under you.”

There’s a choked sound from one of the guys in the kitchen and Tom’s smile drops, bloodshot eyes widening in

momentary confusion before his lip curls back in a sneer.

“How the fuck would you know?” he retorts. “Her pussy felt pretty wet to me.”

I resist the urge to roll my eyes. “Tell me you’ve never made a girl come without telling me you’ve never made a girl come,” I reply, pushing past him so I can put my yoga mat away.

“Oh, burn!” Eddie chortles, and I find myself grinning alongside Matty’s deep laughter.

“Shut the fuck up,” Tom grumbles.

When I come back out, with my snowboard pants on and my coat draped over one arm, Eddie is wiping tears from his eyes and Matty is grinning dopily. Tom narrows his eyes at me, checking me with his shoulder as he stomps past me down the hall—presumably to go to the bathroom. Liam watches Tom’s retreat with an unreadable expression, then turns to me, his steely gray eyes flickering with... something.

“Is it cool if I catch a ride to the mountain with you?” he grits out.

“Yah, no worries.” Hopefully that will make up for getting caught staring at his abs earlier like a creep. I give him a small smile that he doesn’t return. “I’m leaving in five.”

“Mind if I catch a lift too?” Eddie asks with a hopeful grin.

“I thought you had the day off,” Liam snaps, rounding on Eddie before I can answer. “After what happened with your class and everything.”

Eddie winces, the color draining from his face. “I don’t need a fucking day off,” he hisses, scowling at Liam. “What I need is to get back on the snow...”

Liam folds his arms over his chest, staring down at Eddie with an implacable frown. “You’re taking a day off.”

“That right?” Eddie rises to his feet, the chair skidding back behind him. “And what? You gonna make me?”

I exchange a look with Matty, wondering what is going on between the two Kiwis. It’s obvious they knew each other

already, but I have no idea why Eddie wouldn't want to have time off work, or why Liam is being so bossy about it. Matty shrugs, looking between Liam and Eddie with wide eyes.

"I don't have to make you do anything," Liam retorts, the faintest of smug smirks curling his lips. "I'll just tell Rachel that I think you're unfit to take a class, and she'll listen to me."

Eddie drops his bowl to the table, the spoon clattering loudly. "You motherfucker." He stalks over to Liam, and I tense, thinking for a moment that he's about to throw a punch, but he stops just in front of him. "You've got to be fucking kidding me..."

"What's going on?" Seth appears from nowhere, looking between Liam and Eddie with concern. "What's all the shouting about?"

Some of the tension drains from Eddie's shoulders, but his hands are still shaking at his sides, and a pink flush is snaking down his throat, dipping into the V-neck of his thermals. When neither Eddie nor Liam answers, Seth looks to me and Matty for a response. I shrug, and Matty shakes his head.

"No idea," Matty says honestly. "Something about Eddie taking today off work, I think?"

Understanding flashes across Seth's face, and he turns to give Eddie a sympathetic look, holding his hands out palm up, as if he's approaching a wild animal. "Buddy..."

Eddie shakes his head, retreating from Seth, nostrils flared. "Stop it. Don't fucking look at me like that."

"You know Rachel isn't going to give you a class if you show up today, right?" Seth says patiently. "If you need to get on the snow, that's fine. Go ski. Antoine and I both have the day off today too—you could ski with us. But don't try showing up to the lineup."

Eddie's eyes are bright, but he tamps down whatever emotions are running through him with a feral scowl.

I shoot Matty a panicked look, then nod toward the door. Whatever is going on with these guys, I don't think I want to be a part of it.

“You ready to go?” I ask him.

Matty shoots to his feet, looking just as eager as I am to escape whatever drama these guys have going on. “Yep, I’m ready. Just let me get my boots on.”

“I’m coming too,” Liam huffs, picking up his coat from the back of his chair.

The space between the kitchen and the main entrance is narrow, already crowded with the table and chairs, and nearly blocked off by Eddie and Seth glaring silently at each other on one side, and Matty fumbling with his boots on the other. Which means Liam ends up pressing flush against me to get to the front door.

For a brief moment, I can feel the heat of his body against my own, his breath warm where it ghosts across the nape of my neck, the scent of fresh linen filling my nostrils. I shiver, blinking in surprise at the answering warmth coiling low in my belly.

I cast Liam a wary look, plastering on a smile as I turn to follow him, praying that my blush fades before we get to the car.

Because of course I would get those feelings now, after a year of feeling nothing. And of course, my untimely attraction would be aimed at my coach-turned-roommate—a person who is not only completely off-limits, but who actively frowns each time he sees me.

I shake my head at the ridiculousness of it. Hopefully a day in the snow is enough to chill whatever plans my stunted libido is brewing.



---

## Chapter 7



---

### Liam

“Right, change of plan,” I tell my class as I trudge out to the lineup, the thick layer of fresh powder squeaking beneath my snowboard boots. Lily and Matty are close on my heels, and I can hear their breathless pants as they struggle to keep pace with me. “It’s a powder day.”

The cluster of students waiting for me stare blankly, fresh snow gathering on their helmets and the shoulders of their jackets. I give an impatient *tsk*, and wave one hand toward the chairlift. Already, blue sky is peeking through the clouds, the snowfall slowing. Another fifteen minutes at most, and then it’s going to be a bluebird powder day.

“We’re heading up to Jupiter lift,” I explain brusquely, because really, it should be fucking obvious. “We’re going to get some fresh tracks this morning.”

Half of the guys’ faces light up with excitement, the other half stare at me with dazed confusion. Matty, of course, is one of the confused ones.

“What do you mean, fresh tracks?” he asks.

I don’t answer. They’ll figure it out.

---

THREE CHAIRLIFTS LATER, and we're strapping in at the highest point of the resort.

"I've never been up here," someone muses. "You can see into the other canyon from here."

"Yah, dude," Akiva says, chest puffing up with the confidence of someone who knows absolutely nothing, "that's Brighton."

"Actually, it's Snowbird," I tell him flatly, bending to tighten my bindings. "Brighton is down that way."

"No, it's not," he argues.

I straighten, cocking my head and fixing him with a stare. Is this guy fucking serious?

"I'm from here," he continues, giving me what he probably thinks is a congenial smile—all white teeth and gums. "I know what Brighton looks like."

I lift a brow, but he probably can't see it behind my goggles.

"Show of hands," I say, turning to the other students. "Who has ridden powder before?"

When everyone raises their hands, I feel something in my chest relax a little. "Good," I say, feeling the ghost of a smile curve my lips. Because this might actually be an enjoyable morning for once. A morning where I can just feel the snow and movement and get lost in the sport I used to love.

"Then let's ride. I'll watch you and offer up some tips if I think you need it..." I bite the inside of my cheek, trying not to laugh, because who am I kidding? The saying "no friends on powder days" is even truer with students, and the chances of me stopping to offer up tips on a morning like this is low at best.

"Just enjoy yourselves, and meet me at the base of Jupiter lift. We'll try to get as many fresh tracks as we can before the tourists arrive."

Thirty minutes. I suspect that's how long we have before they open up for general admission. Then another twenty minutes after that before the muppets start making their way up to the

top of the mountain and destroy all the fresh snow by sideslipping and snowplowing all over the place.

“Try to keep up,” I say, flicking my board up in a little half-oilie so that I’m pointed downhill, the nose of my board hanging over the lip of the cat track. “I’ll meet you at the bottom.”

And then I’m off, the excited whoops of my students falling away, drowned out by the whisper of powder under my board. There must be at least a foot of fresh snow, and I lean back, settling my weight on my back foot to keep the nose of my board from diving under.

Each turn is like flying, like falling, like being cut free of every expectation I’ve ever had of myself. I float past heavily laden pines, their emerald boughs dripping with fresh snow. Past fallen aspens, their white bark smooth from riders who have used them as natural rails. Above me, the clouds part, blue peeking through in hopeful little patches.

The sun lifts over the far ridge, casting the landscape in liquid gold. A reminder that by lunchtime, the morning powder will be gone, trodden out and sun softened.

I give a sad smile against my ski mask, and bask in the movement, in the intoxicating feel of floating faster and faster and faster, of icy morning wind against the sliver of exposed skin below my goggles. Of freedom.

Temporary. It’s all temporary. Like everything else that has ever mattered.

As if in response to that thought, the tattoo I had done years ago prickles beneath the waistband of my ski pants, the *yojjukugo* dancing in brush strokes across my vision.

*Ichi-go ichi-e*. Once in a lifetime.

At the time, I hadn’t known just how true those words would turn out to be.

I’d had my mum paint the *kanji* herself before giving the scrap of paper to my tattoo artist, not wanting to risk him getting the words wrong since—despite my mum’s best efforts—I’d never learned her language.

Soon enough, the base of Jupiter lift comes into view, and I force myself to slow, skin crawling at the feel of the groomed snow scraping beneath my board. The sound carries with it hours spent training for slalom, for half-pipe, for boardercross.

It's the sound of glory when I won my first—and only—Olympic medal. And the sound of failure when I fractured my spine.

I shudder, and look up to watch my students make their way down the face.

Most of them seem to be doing okay, though they're clearly not used to this amount of powder. Not surprising. Most aren't. Even Akiva—admittedly the best of this average group—keeps getting bogged down in the weight of the snow, the nose of his board dipping, his turns uncontrolled and awkward.

For once, Lily is at the head of the pack, and while I wouldn't call her turns graceful, they're certainly more confident than usual, despite the steep pitch of the slope. I watch her, my mind automatically cataloging each fault, noting where she opens her shoulders up too much, too early, the position of her hips as she moves onto the toe-side edge.

My eyes move up her form and my breath stutters in my chest when they land on her face. She's smiling, but it's not the forced grin I've seen her give the guys she's training with, or even the soft smile she occasionally casts in Matty's direction.

She's smiling like her soul has come alive, like it's just her and the mountain. She's smiling like she's floating on pure adrenaline instead of champagne powder. It's fucking incandescent, rivaling the glare of the newly risen sun.

I swallow, clenching my hands in my gloves, and try to tamp down the unwelcome feelings coiling at the base of my spine. It's an echo of the heat I felt in the condo earlier, when I'd mistakenly brushed against her warm body in my effort to get to the door. She'd smelt like woman and shampoo and, for an insane moment, I'd considered pressing my face into her hair and taking in a long, deep breath of her.

Because that wouldn't be at all creepy.

I'm so busy staring at Lily, that I don't notice Akiva hurtling through the powder, beelining it to the base of the slope, until it's too late.

"Fucking slow down, you dumb cunt," I yell, cupping my hands to my face, momentarily forgetting that the c-word is not quite as socially acceptable here as it is back home.

Akiva gives me a panicked look, the whites of his eyes visible because the idiot has forgotten to pull down his goggles. He tries to pull up short, but the powder is too deep. It's not like a groomed run, there's nothing to sink an edge into, no friction to slow him down.

Instead, the move has him turning just enough to barrel straight into the back of Lily's board.

Akiva falls back, landing on his ass in snow so deep, only the top half of his torso and the lower part of his legs are visible. Lily isn't so lucky.

I watch as the smile on her face falls, a fleeting gasp of surprise punching from her lips before she's hurtling forward, the force of Akiva's hit sending her flying head over heels in a somersaulting flurry of snow.

Dread pools low in my belly at the sight of her tumbling wildly down the hill, the sickening feeling growing to a fever pitch when she finally comes to a stop, her body a crumpled heap of worn-out snowboard gear.

"You son of a bitch," I hear Matty curse, the sound of his shout muted by the snow.

Matty pulls to a stop next to where Akiva is still laying prone in the snow, his usual placid expression replaced by a snarl of pure rage. Probably the only thing preventing him from laying into Akiva is the fact that Matty can't get off his board without risking sinking waist-deep in the snow.

I don't worry about that though. My attention is fixed on Lily.

Without thinking, I unstrap my bindings, kicking my board over so it doesn't slide away before sprinting up the hill. It doesn't take long before my sprint becomes a slow, painful trudge, boots sinking deep with each step.

“Lily,” I call out. “Lily, are you okay?”

She doesn’t answer, but I see the faintest of movements in the pile ahead of me, and it has some of my initial dread thawing.

“Matty,” I call out, not taking my eyes away from her, “Stop threatening Akiva and go down to the lift. Have them radio ski patrol.”

Lily gives a groan of protest, her snow-covered form taking on more definition as she rolls over, uncoiling her body from the tangle she’s ended up in. By the time I reach her, she’s managed to make it to her hands and knees in the snow.

“I’m fine,” I hear her gasp, the sound raspy and raw. “Just... just got the wind knocked out of me.”

*Oh, thank fuck.* I tug down my mask, letting out a sigh of relief that clouds the icy air in front of me.

“Here,” I say, my voice almost as breathless as hers from running up the slope. “Easy. Let me help you up.” I’m about to grab under her shoulders, to haul her to her knees, but she shakes her head, lifting one bare hand to stop me.

“I got it, Coach,” she rasps, and then she’s tucking her knees to her chest, her board still strapped to her feet as she rolls to her back in a move that has me recalling just how flexible she was doing yoga in the living room this morning.

“See, I’m fine.” She sits up and flashes me a smile, but instead of sending my heart soaring, the sight makes my vision nearly whiteout with rage.

Her nose is bleeding, her lower lip split, her teeth red with blood. Her goggles are cracked down the middle, and already I can see the angry red lines above her cheekbones from where they’ve taken the impact.

“Fuck,” I breathe, dropping to my knees in the snow in front of her. I grip the edge of her board to steady myself, to keep from gripping her shoulders and pulling her to me instead.

Which is a completely inappropriate thought to have about a student.

I dare a glance to where Akiva is finally making his way to his feet, Matty still looming menacingly over him. Akiva is completely uninjured—barely has to brush snow off his new designer snowboard coat.

And Lily. *Oh, Lily...*

I turn back to her in time to see her swiping the blood from her face with the back of her hand, her smile falling at the sight of her own blood.

“Oh,” she murmurs, then reaches up to lift up her cracked goggles and rest them on her helmet. “Well. That’s gross.” She blinks dazedly at her gloveless hand, now smeared in blood, then at her gloved one. “Guess I lost my glove somewhere.”

She glances back over her shoulder, as if expecting to see it somewhere nearby, but it’s probably long gone, swallowed up in the feet of fresh powder farther up the slope.

“Shit. Sorry dude.” Akiva gives a forced chuckle, pulling to a slow, careful stop a few meters away and looking between me and Lily warily. “I-I don’t know what happened...”

“What happened is you were being a fucking idiot,” I snap, my fingers tightening on the edge of Lily’s board. “If you weren’t one of my students, I’d clip your pass right now.”

I take a deep, steadying breath, and attempt to tamp down the rage, but it’s too late. I can feel it growing, like an avalanche, getting deadlier and deadlier as it travels down the mountainside.

Akiva rears back, the movement causing him to slide downhill and away from us. “It... it was an accident.”

I grit my teeth, fixing him with a glare as I fight back all the words threatening to spill out. *Accidents are what get people killed. Accidents are what end careers. Accidents are what cause people to break their spine, spend six months in rehab, getting told how lucky they are to be able to ride as they watch their dreams crumble before their eyes.*

“You were reckless,” I say finally, my tone flat. “You lost control.”

“Coach, you still need me to get ski patrol?” Matty asks, his voice wavering with uncertainty as he comes to a stop behind Lily. Not close enough to touch her, because he’s probably scared of running into her with his board. But still too close for my liking.

Lily shakes her head vehemently, turning to give Matty a pleading look over one shoulder. His eyes widen almost comically at the sight of her face, his mouth dropping open.

“Do not call ski patrol,” Lily orders, sounding surprisingly authoritative for someone whose face looks like it’s just taken a bashing. “I swear to god, Matty...”

He holds up both mittened hands, shaking his head, then gives me a panicked look. I give him a curt nod in return, then reach out, one hand moving from the edge of Lily’s board to grip her knee.

“Hey,” I say, my voice gentle, but firm. “Look at me.”

She turns, hazel eyes glinting like amber in the morning sunlight, swollen, blood-smeared lips curving into a frown.

“I’ll say whether we’re calling ski patrol,” I tell her, ignoring her obvious displeasure at the idea. Because if I have to strap her onto a banana boat myself, I will, her pride be damned. “You could have a concussion. You could have a minor spinal injury.” I count off the possible calamities on my gloved fingers. “You could have broken or dislocated something.” Although the likelihood of that is low, given the depth of the powder. “We don’t even know if you can ride to the bottom of this slope, let alone make it down the mountain.”

Lily huffs, her shoulders dropping resignedly. I’m about to tell her to try getting up, but Akiva interrupts me.

“So what are the rest of us supposed to do, huh Coach?” he asks impatiently. “Do we just sit around all day because Lily got hurt?” He waves one arm to where the rest of the class stands at the base of Jupiter lift, waiting. “We need to be training for the exam. It’s less than two weeks away. That’s your job, isn’t it?”



I hear the accusation in his voice, the unspoken threat alongside the self-entitled whinging tone. He's paying for this training—or, more likely, his parents are—and he wants to get his money's worth.

My jaw ticks, and I make myself count to three before answering.

My first instinct is to tell him to go fuck himself, since he caused this mess to begin with. But he's right, at least where the other students are concerned. The class can't stop just because of Lily.

Still, the thought of leaving her...

"Go do a run," I say, not bothering to look at him, because I'm tired of his face. Instead, I keep my eyes locked on Lily's eyes. On the flecks of gold and green glinting as she stares back at me.

*I'm checking her pupils for signs of concussion,* I tell myself. That's all. I'm being a responsible coach.

Except, for some reason, my hand is resting on her knee again, the closeness burning my palm even through the thickness of my glove.

"Go do a run, and then meet back at the base of Jupiter lift."

Akiva takes off without a word, but Matty lingers, his too-large form shifting awkwardly as he struggles to stand in place on his board. "You too," I tell him, sounding a little shorter than I would like. "I'll stay with Lily."

He grumbles some wordless protest, but obeys.

And then suddenly it's just me and Lily. Alone. With nothing but the gentle crunching of the snow beneath us and the whisper of powder dusting off the nearby pines.

"I'm fine," Lily says again, but there's a faltering vulnerability to her voice that wasn't there before.

I ignore her, and drop my hands to her boots. "Let's get your board off, and see if we can get you cleaned up," I say, deftly unclipping her bindings so I can slide her board free.

It'll be impossible for her to get it on again in the powder, but if she can't hike down, she shouldn't be riding down. And it's not that far to the base of Jupiter lift.

She winces as I pull the board free, and I eye her with worry before carefully turning it face down in the snow next to her. "Let me see you move your legs," I say, my hands flying to grip her calves for some unknown reason. "Don't try to stand up yet," I caution. "Just see if you can move."

She nods, her split lip trembling as she straightens her legs, then tucks her knees back to her chest. I don't miss the way she winces when she bends her knees, or the way her face pales ever so slightly.

"All good, Coach," she says, injecting enough forced cheerfulness into her voice to let me know there's a problem. I lift a brow, fixing her with a skeptical look.

"All good," I echo dryly. "Except for the state of your face."

She narrows her eyes at me, and I feel my lips tug up into the faintest of smiles in response.

"I don't need my face to get down the mountain," she retorts haughtily, but worry flickers briefly in her eyes.

I move forward without thinking, shuffling on my knees in the snow until I'm right in front of her, practically between her spread thighs.

Of course she's worried about her face, though I doubt she'd admit it. With the amount of blood, she probably thinks it's a complete mess. Which... it kind of is, but only in a temporary sort of way. I've seen enough of these injuries to know that.

"Hey..." I reach up, gripping her shoulder. "Your face isn't that bad. I don't think your nose is broken, and it doesn't look like you've lost any teeth."

Her throat bobs, her bare hand reaching up to tentatively trace her swollen, split lip. I reach up, tugging her hand away before she can do any more damage to it.

"Your face is fine," I assure her. "You'll have some bruising, but it'll fade in a few days." Well, more likely weeks, but she

doesn't need to know that now. "I'm not worried about your face," I tell her truthfully, then reach up to tap my helmet. "I'm worried about your head. If you have a concussion."

"Yah. Okay," she gives me a grim nod, lifting her chin and fixing me with an expectant stare. "Test away, Coach."

The tentative whisper of a smile already ghosting my lips grows. This isn't her first rodeo—or whatever it is the Americans say.

"You've taken a few hits to the head before, haven't you?" I ask her teasingly, as I take off my gloves and tuck them into my pocket.

She gives a little huff, but doesn't balk as I gently grip her jaw with my bare hand to hold her face in place, then move my finger from side to side in front of her, watching her eyes for any flickering as she tracks the movement.

"I might have taken a few balls to the face playing soccer," she admits grudgingly, the words slightly muffled against my grip on her jaw.

"Close your eyes," I murmur, resisting the urge to make a poorly-timed joke. She obeys, dark lashes fluttering.

I could let go of her face—I should, really—but I find my thumb lightly tracing the line of her jaw, momentarily entranced by the smooth, warm skin beneath my fingertips, so at odds with the icy air around us.

"Keep them shut," I remind her, even though she's making no move to open them. She's not pulling away from me either, but that doesn't stop the small voice of reason—deeply buried in my head, apparently—from telling me that I'm not acting appropriately here.

"So, you were a football star?" I ask her.

She huffs out a laugh, then winces when her smile pulls at her split lip. "Definitely not a star," she gives a self-deprecating laugh. "It was back in high school, and I was probably the worst player on the team. Spent most of the time benched. Still managed to take a ball to the head each time we hit the field, though. Not sure what that says about me."

I find my chest tightening at her words, because I've trained enough—and with enough people—to know exactly what that says about her.

She's not a natural athlete. She's not one of those people brimming with raw talent, waiting for some trainer to polish them up and send her on her way to stardom.

But she has grit. She's the sort of person who will show up each day, even when she knows it's going to hurt. The sort who will give it her all, if she's given a chance.

Those have always been my favorite types of athletes to train.

“Okay, open your eyes,” I say, my voice rough.

She blinks them open, staring directly into my own as I watch her dilated pupils constrict against the sudden brightness.

“Your eyes are the same color as the clouds,” she murmurs, staring at me intently.

We're close enough that I can feel the warmth of her breath on my face, can see the little flecks of amber and gold scattered like starbursts in her irises. Heat rushes through me at her words, at the husky sound of her voice, at the feel of her breath on my lips, and those eyes locked with my own. Fire races down my spine, through my limbs, scorching with such intensity, I almost expect to see the snow melting around us.

I drop my hand, suddenly feeling like the touch of her skin beneath my fingertips is too much.

“You don't seem concussed,” I croak out, swallowing around the sudden dryness in my throat. “It's not a foolproof test, but it's a good indication...”

“Cool. I know.” She drops her gaze, her windburned cheeks pinkening. “Thanks.”

“Do you want to see if you can stand now?” I ask, scrambling for some semblance of composure. For the professionalism I seemed to have completely disregarded ever since Lily crashed. Before then, if I'm being honest.

“Sure.” Lily gives me a wobbly smile as I rise to my feet.

I find myself extending my hand out to her, taking her cold, bare fingers in my own, pulling her toward me as I help her to her feet. She winces, rolling her shoulders and shuffling on her feet, but doesn't release my hand.

"Thanks," she says again. She doesn't drop her gaze, and for a long, charged moment, we're standing face to face, her hand clasped in my own with only a few inches of icy air between us.

Close enough that our breaths mingle in wispy clouds between us.

I drop her hand, and take a quick step back, half sliding down the steep incline. "Can you walk?" My voice sounds rougher than I intend. Almost brusque. I tilt my chin toward the base of Jupiter lift. "Think you can make it?"

Her expression shutters, and she tucks her gloveless hand into her pocket before bending to scoop up her board with her other hand. She winces with the movement, and I internally berate myself, because the least I could do is carry her board—it's what I would do for any injured student. But when I offer to take the board from her, she shakes her head, her bloodied lips thinning.

"I've got it," she rasps. "And yah. I think I can walk just fine."

By the time we're almost at the base of the lift, the rest of the class is making it down the mountain, the once-unmarred powder marked with irregular lines from their turns.

I cast a glance over my shoulder to where Lily is trudging behind, one end of her board dragging in the snow. I should be annoyed at her. After all, if she hadn't wiped out so spectacularly, I would be up there with them, getting another fresh powder run.

Instead, I just feel... disconcerted. Off-balance. Queasy with a sickening mixture of desire and guilt. Because Lily is completely off-limits, and I've just used her getting injured as an excuse to put my hands all over her.

I don't think I've felt like this in years. Not since that time I turned up as a guest speaker at a rich high school in

Switzerland, only to come face-to-face with the guy I'd made out with at a gay bar in Paris.

*Antoine.*

I grit my teeth, the thought of him sending my heart thundering until the sound of it drowns out our footsteps in the snow. *That fucking liar.*

And now... now he's my bloody flatmate.

Lily's boot sinks into a particularly deep patch of snow, and she stumbles forward. I frown, wanting to reach out and steady her, disliking how much distance there is between us. Even if I'm the one who's created it by storming ahead. She lifts her head, eyes visible through her cracked goggles, lips pursing at the sight of my frown.

"I think you should sit this run out," I tell her. The rest of the class is rushing past us, the fastest of them already kicking free of their back foot bindings, looking at me expectantly from the base of the lift. "Have a rest while I take the class on another run."

Lily shakes her head, jaw ticking faintly at my suggestion. "I'm good," she flashes me a grin. The same grin I've seen her give the guys in the class before. It's strangely empty, cold compared to her soft smile from earlier.

She tosses her board onto the hardpack snow in front of the lift, her movements stiff but determined as she bends to strap in her front foot. "I'm good, Coach," she says again, lifting her head to give me a look full of unspoken challenge. "I'm riding."

---

## Chapter 8



---

### Lily

“What happened to your face?”

Eddie stares at me with wide eyes as I follow Liam and Matty into the condo. I give him a half-hearted glare, then glance down the dim hallway to the currently empty bathroom with unmasked longing.

I’ve been fantasizing about a hot shower for at least the past three hours.

“One of the guys in our class ran into her,” I hear Matty say as I trudge into my room. “Such a jerk. Barely even apologized...”

I shut the door to my room behind me, then drop my damp coat and helmet in a heap by my bed before stripping off my sweat-soaked thermals. All the while, Matty’s voice rises and falls from the other side of the door, his anger audible even if his words aren’t. Concern flares warm in my chest, alongside a twinge of irritation. The way he’s been going on about it, you’d think he was the one Akiva clipped instead of me.

I wrap a towel around my naked body, my toiletries and clean clothes clutched to my chest, and stare for a long moment at the closed door, silently debating. It’s not like I’m particularly shy or anything—I’ve spent enough time running around in my bikini to be comfortable in my body. And the towel is so big, it practically touches my knees.

It’s more that I know they are still talking about me.

The door flies open and I stumble back, barely avoiding getting hit in my already-mangled face as it thuds with force against the wall. Tom blinks in surprise at the sight of me, then gives a stupid little grin as his eyes track down to my exposed legs.

“Watch it,” I snap, my brow dipping in a scowl at the feel of his beady eyes crawling over my skin. “And if the door is closed, knock.”

I push past him, not waiting for his reply, making a point of not looking down the hall to where Matty, Liam and Eddie are still talking in the kitchen. It’s only a matter of time before someone else wants the bathroom, and I’m not taking any chances. That shower is mine.

I turn on the shower, letting the water warm up as I examine the damage done to my face in the mirror. It doesn’t look great.

My split lip is swollen, like Botox gone wrong, and the outline of my goggles is visible in a purple ring around my eyes. I lean forward, baring my teeth in the steaming mirror, and feel a surge of relief that at least I didn’t do any dental damage. Bruises heal. My goggles and gloves will be expensive to replace, but that’s nothing compared to trying to pay a dentist on my very limited savings.

I give my battered face one last lingering look of dismay, then step into the shower.

“Oh wow,” I gasp, half in pain, half in bliss at the feel of the hot water on my aching muscles.

I tip my head back, letting the water run through my sweaty, tangled hair, waiting for my body to adjust to the heat. When I turn to rinse my face, my split lip stings, but it barely registers compared to the cramping pain in my back, my legs, even the soles of my feet.

“Hmm,” I moan, when some of the tension between my shoulder blades finally starts to ease. “Wow, that’s good.”

I’m not sure if the pain radiating through my body is from my fall, or from spending the past several days pushing myself on



a snowboard, but it's intense. I wince as I bend to pick up my shampoo, shoulders aching when I reach up to wash my hair.

By the time I'm finally done with my usual routine, my legs and arms are trembling with exhaustion. I quickly dry, conscious of the six other people probably wanting the shower, then pull on my sweats, a comfy bralette, and a worn T-shirt over damp skin. I towel off my hair, but the ends are still dripping, wet patches forming down the back of my shirt by the time I relinquish my claim on the bathroom.

I open the door, steam billowing down the hall around me as I hobble to the kitchen.

Eddie is leaning against the counter, his face lighting up in a grin at the sight of me. "My turn," he calls loudly, casting a challenging look around the open-plan kitchen and living room before darting down the hallway to the bathroom.

No one argues with him, and the most reaction he gets is a raised eyebrow from Liam and a chuckle from Matty as they sit eating their dinner in silence at the table. Seth must have arrived while I was in the shower, because he's standing at the stove, stirring a pot of something and shaking his head in quiet amusement.

"Oh, hey Lily," he smiles at me over his shoulder, but the smile quickly fades at the sight of my face.

"Just had a little fall," I say dismissively before he can ask. "I'm fine. It looks worse than it is." I give him a reassuring smile, the movement stinging my lower lip, then roll my aching shoulders and open the fridge.

I'm not sure what I'm looking for, since I haven't exactly bought a bunch of groceries. I sigh at the bag of carrots, the lonely bruised apple, and the hummus I picked up after checking out of the hotel yesterday.

"You can have some of this, if you want," Seth offers, stirring the mystery sludge in his pot. "It's just mac 'n' cheese, but I made extra."

I chew the inside of my cheek, contemplating. I've only just met these guys, and I don't want to start off by being the

roommate who eats everyone else's food. At the same time, I'm starving.

"Don't do it, Lily."

I'm surprised by the sound of Antoine's voice singing out from the couch at the far end of the living room, and I shut the door to the fridge to peer around the beer-can-littered island that separates the kitchen and dining area from the lounge.

Antoine peers over the novel he's reading, the words *Planète de feu* sprawled across the cover featuring a spaceship, a large planet, and what appears to be a purple-skinned man chest. I bite back a smirk at the sight of it, because I'm almost certain I've got that same book on my e-reader, only in English. The adventures of Captain Charles and his alien lover, Aehaeko, were rather memorable.

"That's not cheese," Antoine continues, wrinkling his nose slightly. "And anything that orange should not be consumed by humans."

"*Mais peut-être que ce serait bon pour les étrangers?*" I reply lightly, my gaze dropping pointedly to Antoine's book.

I mean the reference to *étrangers*—aliens—as a gentle joke about his book, and also as a subtle way of letting Antoine know that I speak French too. To my dismay, his eyes widen in alarm, his gaze flicking nervously to the guys in the kitchen.

I give him what I hope is a reassuring smile, and add: "*J'ai lu le même livre en anglais. Et ne t'inquiète pas—je serai discrète.*"

His shoulders slump slightly at my promise of discretion, his expression softening as some of the tension tightening his eyes falls away. "*D'ac,*" he murmurs, shutting the book to rest on his knees and surreptitiously hiding the cover with his hands.

"You speak French?" Seth asks, a note of surprise in his voice. I turn around in time to see him scooping the orange goop—which is definitely instant macaroni and cheese—into two bowls. "That's cool."

I shrug, taking the bowl from him with thanks. "My dad is French," I say by way of deflection.

It's the easiest explanation, and technically true, even if my dad refuses to speak the language. Still, between long afternoons with my French grandmother and studying French at university, I do well enough.

I feel Antoine's eyes on me, but don't dare look at him. I've made him uncomfortable, and I get the distinct feeling the last thing he wants right now is any more attention. Instead, I make my way over to the table, pulling up a seat next to Matty and across from Liam. Seth sits down next to me, the smile never leaving his face.

"Do you guys speak any second languages?" Seth asks Matty and Liam cheerfully, before shoveling a spoonful into his mouth.

Matty shakes his head, his cheeks reddening as he lifts his eyes to meet my own. "No. I took some Spanish in high school back home in Idaho, but it never stuck." He gives a self-deprecating laugh, then shrugs. "Too stupid, I guess."

My stomach tightens at his words, but I tamp down the instinctive urge to tell him not to talk about himself like that. I don't know him well enough for that, not really.

"Bit of Te Reo Maori, bit of Japanese," Liam responds idly, never lifting his eyes from his plate. "Not much though."

He's eating the most appealing-looking meal out of all of us—a pan-fried steak with seared broccoli—and I can't help but stare as he cuts off a bite of meat with expert precision, then pops it into his mouth.

Matty cocks his head in confusion. "What's Te Reo Maori?" he asks.

"I didn't realize you spoke any other languages," Antoine murmurs from the couch at the same time. It's so quiet, he could have been talking to himself, but Liam's head snaps up from his meal as if he's been electrocuted, his eyes glowing with some undefinable emotion as he glares across the room.

"Why would you?" Liam drops the knife and fork on his plate with a clatter, the sound unnaturally loud in the sudden silence.

There's no mistaking the look of disgust on his face, or the angry tone of his voice. "It's not like we know each other."

Antoine doesn't answer, and I stare down at my food, forcing myself to swallow the sticky, slightly dry mouthful I'd been chewing.

Liam stands abruptly, his chair scraping against linoleum as he rises. "You can have my steak," he tells Matty, roughly shoving the half-eaten meal toward him. "I'm going to bed."

"What was that all about?" Matty asks when we hear the door to Liam and Eddie's room click shut. He looks between me and Seth with wide eyes, then slides Liam's discarded plate closer to his own. "Do you guys know?"

I shake my head.

"No idea," Seth says with a shrug, his blue eyes darting over to where Antoine is still sitting on the couch. "Better to just ignore it, eh?"

It's a good idea, considering I just moved in yesterday, and I don't really know any of these guys. Still, the thought of Antoine sitting on that couch by himself after Liam's rude outburst has my chest tightening.

Especially after I made him feel uncomfortable about his book.

"My back is a bit sore, actually," I say by way of apology, rising to stand. "Think I'm going to sit on the couch instead." I give Matty and Seth a small smile, then gather up my bowl and make my way over to the living room.

Antoine's eyes widen in surprise at my approach, but he swings his legs off the seat cushions so I can take a seat next to him on the worn three-seater.

"Thanks," I say, then sigh when I sink into the soft cushions. It is actually much more comfortable than the wooden chair I was sitting in before. "So where are you from?" I ask. I'm usually not too bad at placing French accents, but I haven't heard him speak enough to attempt to place his, and I don't want to embarrass myself by getting it wrong.

“Paris,” he says, with the slightest lift of his chin. “But I did my *bac* in Switzerland.”

“International school?” I guess, raising my eyebrows.

“Yes,” he says, his eyes dropping to my mouth when I take another bite of cheese-coated macaroni. “What gave it away?”

I shrug. “Your English is perfect.” He wrinkles his nose in silent protest, but I continue. “Besides, that’s what most of the boarding schools in Switzerland are, right?”

At least, that’s what I’ve heard from the kids I studied French with—the ones lucky enough to have parents who could pay for them to go on exchange.

“Ouais,” he acknowledges reluctantly, and there’s the hint of a wry smile with that one word. “So... you’ve worked out what I like to read, and what sort of education I’ve had. What other secrets are you going to uncover about me, Lily?”

The way he says my name is full of unspoken accusation. My eyes drop to his book, still half-hidden by his hands, then back up to his piercing green eyes, and I feel my cheeks heat. He’s still smirking, but there’s a vulnerability in his expression that has all my defenses softening.

“I’m sorry...” I start, though I’m not entirely sure what I’m apologizing for.

“Can I sit here?”

I look up to see Seth smiling down at us, motioning to the space on my other side, his bowl tucked against his chest.

I give him a tight smile as I move over, even though it feels incredibly awkward to be sliding closer to Antoine. But it’s not like there’s anywhere else to sit in the living room, besides the floor, and there is technically room for three here.

The couch dips as Seth sinks in beside me. At my other side, Antoine stiffens, his thigh moving away from my own as if the merest brush of my sweatpants burns him.

“I meant to mention, I speak some French too,” Seth says lightly, directing his statement at Antoine before taking a bite of food, oblivious to the silent tension.

“Oh.” Antoine’s response is strained, barely audible.

Seth clears his throat, then adds: “Well, Canadian French. If you count that.”

Antoine gives a derisive snort. “Of course that counts. *C’est... c’est génial.*” He gives Seth a tight smile, his dark fingers splaying protectively over the title of his paperback.

My stomach flips, and I drop my gaze to the bowl of half-eaten food on my lap. I shouldn’t have teased Antoine about his book, shouldn’t have drawn attention to it. Shouldn’t have assumed that no one else spoke French.

*“It’s all good, mec,”* Seth murmurs in impeccable French, his accent staccatoed with the gentle lilt of Quebequois. *“I don’t think anyone will judge you for that here. And if they do, I’ve got your back, yah?”*

*“I... I don’t know what you’re talking about...”* Antoine replies tersely, the Parisian French sharp as glass, his tone brittle.

*“Look,”* Seth waves his empty spoon in the air for emphasis. *“I’m not demanding any confidences. You don’t have to tell me anything. I know what this industry is like, what the mountain can be like.”*

Seth’s smile falls, brown eyes going steely as his jaw tenses. I think it’s the first time I’ve seen him look so... serious. *“If anyone gives you shit here in this house, you talk to me. You let me know. I don’t care if we’re all basically strangers to each other, you should feel safe here.”* Seth turns to me, and his expression softens slightly. *“Same goes for you.”*

I give him a tentative smile, the movement painful with my split lip. Antoine remains silent at my other side, and I don’t dare look at him.

After a long silence, Seth’s usual friendly smile slips back into place. *“I’m ace, by the way. Ace and panromantic.”* The proclamation sounds so light, so carefree, but the French words are relatively unfamiliar to me, so it takes me a moment to register what he’s saying. *“It’s not a secret or anything,”*

Seth adds with a shrug. *“I just don’t tell most people because it doesn’t really come up in conversation, you know.”*

Something in me relaxes at his words, though I’m not entirely sure why. Maybe because I’ve spent the past year—since I broke up with Steve, at least—wondering about my own sexuality. Wondering why I couldn’t feel that spark of attraction that everyone else seems to feel so easily.

At my other side, Antoine lets out a slow breath, his body relaxing beside my own.

“Ace,” I repeat, the word barely a whisper.

The sound of wood scraping against linoleum has my head snapping up, and I blink in surprise to see Matty standing up in the kitchen. I’d forgotten he was there, finishing Liam’s steak at the table, hidden by the growing wall of beer cans lining the island separating the kitchen from the living room.

“I’m going to bed,” Matty announces, his face red. Pale eyes flit between me, Antoine, and Seth. His expression tightens. “Gonna get some rest before training tomorrow...” He gives me a small smile, then adds in a soft, almost wistful voice: “Have fun practicing your French, Lil.”

Guilt churns in my stomach at the sight of his broad shoulders slumping as he retreats down the hallway. His door snigs shut, and I let out a breath, rubbing my battered face between my palms.

God, he probably felt so left out, sitting there by himself while the three of us chatted away in French. Especially after he told us he didn’t speak any other languages.

“You okay, Lily?” Seth asks. He rests his hand lightly on my shoulder, his palm warm through the thin fabric of my T-shirt.

I nod, but shoot him a worried look. “I think we hurt his feelings,” I murmur. “I think he felt left out of the conversation.”

Seth’s brow furrows in worry at my words, his thumb rubbing absently at the muscle between my neck and shoulder. My lips part in a gasp at the intense pain and pleasure that surges through me at his touch, and my arms go limp at my sides.

“Oh wow,” I say, half gasping, half laughing at my own response. “Shit, that feels really good.”

And it does. My muscles are so sore from days of training, from my fall, from a poor night’s sleep on an air mattress, that even the barest hint of a massage is enough to turn me into a puddle of need.

Seth chuckles, the couch dipping beside me as he bends to put his now-empty bowl on the floor. “Turn around, I’ll give you a massage.”

Uncertainty flickers in my mind, the hesitation born of a lifetime of self-censorship. But then his hands grip my shoulders as he gently nudges me over, angling my body so that my back is to him, and I find myself following his guidance with languid complacency.

The move has me facing Antoine, meeting his eyes just as Seth starts to knead the aching muscles above my shoulder blades. My mouth falls open on an exhale, and Antoine’s eyes widen imperceptibly, their green depths flickering with some unreadable expression.

“Is that okay?” Seth asks, his breath whispering against the back of my neck. “Tell me if it’s too much pressure.”

I nod, a wordless garble of agreement escaping me.

“Ant, do you have enough room?” Seth asks, his fingers relentless as they find each painfully knotted muscle. “Do you want us to move over?”

“It’s Antoine,” he replies, his long fingers absently fluttering the pages of his book where it rests on his lap. “And I’m fine.”

“It was nice speaking French with you,” Seth continues conversationally. His thumbs circle rhythmically along the outsides of my spine, drawing a hum of pleasure from my parted lips. “I don’t get enough opportunity to speak it.”

“Yah...” I agree, my voice breathy. “It... was... ugh... it was really good.”

Antoine bites his lower lip, the amber skin of his cheeks darkening. “I... uh, I enjoyed it too...” His gaze flits to where



Seth's fingers are working, expertly kneading the muscles above my shoulder blades, then to Seth himself. "And I appreciate what you said." He clears his throat, his piercing green eyes dropping to the book on his lap. "About you being Ace, and not judging. I.. um... I'm not straight either. *Évidemment.*"

His full lips quirk up into a smile—one of the first I've seen from him—and even though it's aimed at Seth, the sight of it has something warm building in my chest.

Seth's hands work down the length of my spine, stopping about halfway down my back because of the slightly awkward angle of the couch. My eyelids flutter shut, a moan catching in my throat. I can barely think around the pleasure coursing through my body, but I feel like I need to say something. Like it would be dishonest to not reciprocate when Antoine and Seth have both been so open about everything.

"I think I might not be straight either," I admit, the words breathy and tugging at my split lip. It's easier admitting it with my eyes closed, with Seth and Antoine's own admissions hanging over me, like lanterns in the darkness. "I'm not sure what I am."

Neither of them answers, and Seth's hands continue working knots from the muscles alongside my spine. I open my eyes to see Antoine staring at me with unabashed curiosity.

"I don't think I'm ace, but I'm not normal either," I admit, then bite the inside of my cheek and internally curse myself for my choice of words. *Normal. What the fuck, Lily?*

Antoine's lips curl with a hint of mirth at my obvious discomfort.

"No one is normal, Lil," Seth chuckles, the sound deep and vibrating against my back. "And if anyone tells you they are, steer clear of them, they're obviously a psychopath." He stops his massage, then pats me gently on the shoulders. "If you lay down, I can do your lower back as well. There should be room if Antoine scoots over a bit."

“Okay.” I shoot Antoine a questioning look, but he’s already moving over, giving me enough space to lay face down on the couch, my knees bent, feet resting on the armrest. Seth climbs over me, carefully positioning himself so that he’s sitting across my thighs, his weight resting on his knees on either side of my legs.

“Now, tell me all about how you’re not normal,” Seth drawls, his voice light with amusement.

There’s nothing light about his touch though, about the way his strong hands are working my aching muscles and drawing gasps and moans from me. I press my lips together and attempt to stifle a particularly loud exhale into the musty fabric of the couch.

In the back of my mind, I’m vaguely aware that it’s not completely normal to let a person I’ve just met give me a back massage, but it feels so right. Maybe it’s because this is something my friends back home would do—especially Henry, who is training to become a massage therapist. Or maybe it’s because there’s nothing uncomfortable in the way Seth is touching me—nothing that would make me think he’s got ulterior motives. And Antoine doesn’t seem bothered by it.

“I’ve been attracted to guys before,” I admit, my words muffled by the couch cushions. “At least a couple times...”

I swallow back the familiar pain that comes whenever I think about Steve, and I squeeze my eyes shut against feelings of self-loathing, of shame, of embarrassment at being so thoroughly taken advantage of.

“But then after I broke up with my last boyfriend, I haven’t felt anything. No attraction or whatever you call it. I’ve fooled around, tried kissing girls... I...uh, slept with some guys...” I wince, because saying it out loud, it doesn’t sound great. “I wasn’t really attracted to any of them though.”

This last admission comes out heavy with guilt and barely louder than a whisper.

I’d tried. I’d really tried. They’d all been such nice guys. Hot, too. Fun to hang out with. But there had been nothing.

“Oh, sweetie.” Seth’s voice is thick with sympathy, and he pauses his track down the length of my spine, instead trailing soothing caresses along the sides of my arms, like someone calming an injured animal.

“I know.” I mumble in agreement against the couch. “I shouldn’t have led them on like that, right?”

Someone gives a pained groan above me—Antoine, maybe—though I don’t know what that’s about.

“No... what?” Seth’s hands still against my arms, his fingers tightening almost imperceptibly. “That wasn’t your fault. You know that wasn’t your fault, right?”

My brow furrows, the movement causing the bruised skin around my eyes to scream in protest.

“He’s right, *ma puce*.” Antoine’s voice catches in his throat, and then a tentative hand settles against the top of my head, stroking my hair back from my face, tucking the loose, damp strands behind my ear. “You can’t force attraction. *Tu le sais, n’est-ce pas?* You said you read this book, *non?*” His other fingers tap against his book, and I can’t help the rueful chuckle that escapes my lips.

“Yah, I read it. But that was a romance novel.”

“*Et quoi*, romance novels aren’t a good example of relationships in real life?” He retorts, accent deepening.

“That was an *alien* romance,” I point out. “And Captain Charles *wasn’t* attracted to Aehaeko for at least the first third of the book.”

Probably because Aehaeko was a male, and Charles had been straight—or at least, had thought he was. That, and Aehaeko was an alien.

“*Exactement*,” Antoine argues, his fingers twining in my hair, like maybe he’s playing with the loose strands without really thinking about what he’s doing. “But then he was, and he thought he was going insane, or that he’d been poisoned by eating alien food, when really, it was just the bond that had formed between them. The friendship, the trust...”

I can't help but smile at the passion in Antoine's voice, and I wish I could see his face. If I could, I bet those beautiful green eyes would be burning like the revolutionary fires that light up Parisian streets each time some politician tries to cut back on paid vacation days.

"Okay, I have to read this book," Seth laughs, his hands finding their way back to my aching muscles.

"*Ouais*. You do," Antoine agrees, full of the smugness of someone who has just won an argument.

"Maybe Antoine will read it to us," I say teasingly, but even as I say it, I have to admit that would be wonderful. Antoine's voice is deep and vibrant, lilting playfully when he cares about something. I bet listening to him read in French would be incredible.

"Oh, good idea," Seth agrees vehemently, and I can hear the smile in his voice. "Can you read us the first chapter?"

Antoine sighs dramatically, then untangles his fingers from my hair. For a brief moment, my heart sinks at the sudden absence of his touch, but then there's the sound of pages turning as he opens his book, another huffed sigh, and then he begins.

Antoine reads like someone trained in public speaking—which, if he went to the sort of school I'm guessing he did, he probably was. His voice carries the story along, inflection and tone moving like water, and even though I've read the story before, I feel like it's completely new, hearing it in French instead of English.

When Seth climbs off me, repositioning himself so that he's sitting under my legs, and starts massaging my aching calves and feet, I can't help but think that moving in here might have been the best decision I've ever made.

---

## Chapter 9



---

### Seth

“She’s fallen asleep, hasn’t she?” Antoine drops his book to his lap, his voice laced with a mixture of amusement and irritation. “After begging me to read to her, she fell asleep, just like that. Can you believe it?”

I chuckle, and hug the lower half of Lily’s legs against my chest. The cadence of her gentle snores fills the dimly lit living room, mingling with the hum of the refrigerator and the sound of the other guys snoring down the hall. They’re homely sounds that make my throat ache with longing, even as something like satisfaction expands in my chest.

“I don’t blame her,” I say, turning to smile at Antoine. “She must be exhausted after training, and you know what it’s like after you get an injury. Plus, I do give excellent massages.” I can’t help but give Antoine a wink at this, watching as his cheeks darken with color.

“I’ll take your word for it,” he says dryly, shoulders stiffening. “I don’t really like massages.”

I lift a brow, but don’t say anything. Everyone likes massages, being touched, cared for, loved. I don’t think Antoine is any different. I take a breath, basking in the feel of Lily’s legs resting on top of my own, wanting to prolong the moment.

But of course, I can’t.

“Should we wake her up? Or leave her on the couch to sleep?” I ask.

Antoine purses his lips in thought, looking between Lily's sleeping form and the door to her room. A door that is currently open, since Tom went out not that long ago, and hasn't been back yet.

"I don't like the thought of her sleeping in there, with that... that *blaireau*." Antoine finally proclaims, his voice dropping to a low rumble. "How did you find him, anyway?"

I worry my lower lip with my teeth, the persistent hum of anxiety running like electricity under my skin. It's been there ever since I asked Tom to stay. "I met him at the rental shop. He's one of the new hires."

Tom had come to us red-eyed and upset a few days ago, desperate for a job, and I'd hired him. It hadn't been a hard decision to make—we were short staff and he'd needed the work. And I've never been one to turn away someone in need, not if I could help them.

"So you don't really know him," Antoine accuses, fixing those unnervingly sharp eyes on me, his full lips pulling into a frown.

"I don't really know any of you," I defend, then cringe at the flash of hurt in Antoine's expression. I shake my head, then hurriedly add: "I mean, I know you better now, since we've been living together for a couple weeks. And Matty and Eddie."

Antoine gives a one-shouldered shrug, brushing off my words, his gaze dropping to Lily. "I think we move her to her bed," he says resignedly. "She'll sleep better there than on the couch."

Between the two of us, we manage to move her to her bed without waking her. She mumbles incoherent words as I pull the covers up over her, tucking them under her chin. I smile into the darkness, reminded of my brother and sister back home, of helping Mom and Dad look after them. Especially when they were younger.

Those had been the hard years, but also the most beautiful, in a lot of ways.

I think Mom and Dad still feel guilty for how much everything changed when the twins were born. At twelve years old, I'd gone from an only child to the older brother of two babies with Down Syndrome. Mom got hit by post-natal depression pretty bad and Dad had used his work as an escape. I'd been there to pick up the slack, mixing bottles when Mom was too tired to get out of bed, changing diapers, bundling up the twins and pushing them in the stroller down the street.

I'd been angry about it at first—angry, and scared, because I had no idea what I was doing. But then they'd given me their first smiles, their first steps, their first words. They'd wrap their little bodies around my legs when I got home from school, or fall asleep in my arms while I did my homework, and it had been everything.

Mom and Dad don't understand, but for me, having them, being needed by them, I'm pretty sure it saved my life.

"She still asleep?" Antoine asks as I pull the door to Lily's room shut behind me. I blink, surprised to see him still standing in the hallway, waiting for me to come out.

"Yah," I say with a wistful smile, thoughts of my family mingling with thoughts of Lily. "She's sound asleep."

"Good." He gives a curt nod, then tilts his chin down the hallway to the room we share with Matty. "I'll see you in there. Just going to brush my teeth."

For a brief moment, I think of following him into the bathroom, since I need to brush my teeth too, but I stop myself. Because that would be weird. Roommates don't brush their teeth together.

The bathroom door shuts behind him, leaving me alone in the darkened hallway with my thoughts and the familiar ache of loneliness that's been building ever since we left the couch.

Antoine is not my partner, and neither is Lily, no matter how incredible this evening with them both was. They're my roommates, and maybe—if I don't scare them away with my clinginess first—they'll become my friends.

I square my shoulders, and stare at the door, trying not to listen to what Antoine is doing on the other side as I wait for my turn. Like a normal person.

Whatever normal is.

The door to our room swings open, light flooding the hall as Matty stumbles out, his eyes swollen and hair sleep-mussed. I blink at him in concern. It doesn't look like he's been sleeping. It looks like he's been crying.

"You alright, bud?" I ask, keeping my voice soft so as not to wake Eddie and Liam in the next room.

Matty gives me a curt nod, his gaze drifting past my shoulder to Lily's door. "I'm fine." He folds his arms over his chest and, in the narrow confines of the hallway, I'm suddenly aware of what a big unit this guy is. Bigger than me, which is saying something. "Just waiting for the bathroom."

I look between him and Lily's door, then remember the pained expression on his face before he stormed off to his room after dinner, and Lily's concern that his feelings had been hurt.

"She's asleep," I tell him gently, offering him what I hope is a friendly smile. "I think she's pretty wiped out after what happened today."

Matty huffs, then reaches up to rub the back of his neck. "You two looked pretty cozy together on the couch." He narrows his eyes at me accusingly, but there's no malice in them, only hurt and longing and the red-rimmed signs of tears shed in an empty room.

I know that feeling well, but seeing it on him, on this nice guy I've come to know over the past couple weeks, and knowing that I put it there—it's not a pleasant thought.

"I was just giving her a back rub." I tell him, and I have to push back the urge to wrap one arm around him, to pull him into a hug. "I... I'm not into her like that." I bite the inside of my cheek, contemplating whether to tell him more, but hesitate. "I'm pretty sure she's not into me like that either," I say instead. Because if he's crushing on her—and it's pretty clear he is—then that's what he's going to care about.



Matty rolls his eyes. “Right. Of course *you’d* think that.”

I feel my smile drop, my forehead creasing. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Look at you.” Matty waves one meaty hand in my direction, his frown deepening. “You’ve got that look that all the girls like, and you wear those shirts...”

I drop my gaze to the black Henley stretched across my chest, then look back up at him in confusion.

“It’s just a shirt...”

“... you speak French,” he continues, arms folding defensively over his chest again. “You make girls dinner, give them massages. Soon you’ll be taking her on dates, buying her flowers, and how the heck am I going to compete with that...”

He ends on a faint whimper, like a puppy that’s been kicked, and my eyes widen with a mixture of alarm and amusement.

There are so many things I want to say to him. That it’s not a competition, and even if it was, there’s no way I’d be in the running. That even if Lily and I became more than friends—which, let’s face it, is highly unlikely, since no one wants the type of relationship that I want—he’d still have a chance with her.

In my perfect world, a wonderful girl like Lily would date me, love me—even though I’d never be attracted to her, never want to sleep with her. She’d date other people too, and they’d love me too, and we’d all hang out together like one big family.

In my deepest fantasies—the ones known only to myself and my browser history—I’d get to watch them. Watch them flirt and kiss. Watch them touch each other in all the ways I don’t want to be touched, watch them hunger for each other and taste each other. Watch them make love.

The way Lily’s eyes fluttered shut while Antoine stroked her hair, and the way he’d crossed his legs to hide the evidence of his own arousal when she’d let out those little breathy moans on the couch—that had been one of the hottest things I’d ever seen.

I swallow, shifting awkwardly on my feet, hoping the darkness and my gray sweats hide the ill-timed semi I'm sprouting.

"I think you have a chance," I tell him, the words catching in my throat. "I don't know if she's into you or not..."

I pause, thinking of what Lily told me and Antoine on the couch. About her not feeling attraction to most of the people she's been with. For a brief moment I thought maybe she was ace like me. But it sounds like she's probably demi- or gray-sexual instead.

"She definitely likes you as a person though," I add, offering him a reassuring smile. "Which is a great place to start."

Matty's shoulders relax, his arms dropping to his sides as he regards me with a curious, wary expression. "You... you think so?"

I nod emphatically. "Oh yah. She was worried that you felt left out when we were speaking French. And you've seen the way she smiles at you, eh?"

Matty gives a wavering smile, then swipes at his reddened eyes with the back of one hand.

"You just need to hang out with her more," I tell him, powering on now that I see my words are having the desired effect of cheering him up. "We should all go to the Canyons on Monday," I suggest brightly, since I know it's the day they have off training, and it's the day the instructors can usually take off, since it's quiet on the mountain then. "Have a ski day together, with all of us. Then you can spend some time with her outside of training, without the pressure of a date."

The bathroom door swings open behind me, the scent of mint and soap filtering into the hallway.

"What's this about a date?" Antoine asks.

Matty's cheeks flush, the red visible against his pale skin even in the dim light of the hallway, and I turn to give Antoine what I hope is a *please stop talking* smile.

"I was saying we should all have a ski day at the Canyons on Monday," I say hurriedly. "If that date works for you? You

know, roommate bonding and all that.”

Antoine rolls his eyes, his lips curving into a little half-smile. “You’re all about the bonding sessions, aren’t you?”

He’s not wrong. I bite the inside of my cheek, the echoes of my earlier fantasy causing heat to bloom anew. *If only he knew the type of bonding sessions I’ve thought about.*

“First you wanted a group chat, now you want group ski activities. What next—meal plans and chore charts? Should we start wearing matching T-shirts and have a team name too?”

I would be hurt, but there’s a playful glint in his eyes that tells me he’s teasing, so I know he doesn’t mean anything by it. Also, some of his ideas don’t sound half bad. Not the T-shirts, but family dinners would be nice...

“I think a ski day is a good idea,” Matty says defensively, stepping toward Antoine in a way that isn’t quite aggressive, but also manages to remind everyone of how massive he is. He gives me that wobbly smile, and I feel something in my chest crack at the sight of it. “I think a group chat is a good idea too,” he adds. “Then we can coordinate rides and groceries and stuff like that.”

“*Mon dieu,*” Antoine mutters, swiping a hand over his face. “You Americans and your group activities.”

“Hey, I’m Canadian,” I retort, my words full of mock ire that I don’t really feel. If anything, it’s a relief to finally see Antoine coming out of his shell, even if that means being subjected to his teasing.

Antoine arches one brow, green eyes glinting with a spark of mischief. “Even worse,” he deadpans. “Your kind are so...” He wrinkles his nose in mock disgust “... friendly.”

I grin, clapping Antoine on the shoulder as I move past him into the bathroom. “You love it,” I tell him. “You’re just too French to admit it.”

And then I shut the door. And I’m alone again.

I stare at my reflection, frowning at the way my skin looks sallow and tired in the too-bright light. Probably the result of two years of endless winters, interspersed with breaks in Canada's spring and autumn.

*"You've got that look that all the girls like."*

Matty's words come back to me, and I give my reflection a mournful smile. I'm not a bad-looking guy, I guess, even if I don't have Antoine's dramatic features or Matty's body. There's nothing that exciting about my appearance either though, as far as I can tell. I've got sandy hair, brown eyes, and an even smile.

I've never had a hard time getting girls' numbers—or guys, for that matter. But that's the problem. Because I can't give them what they want, and they can't give me what I want.

I sigh, and run my toothbrush under the water.

I let my imagination run away this evening, let myself get caught up in an impossible fantasy and that's my mistake. It had been so easy to do with Lily. She had looked at me like a friend, without any of that hunger that always puts my teeth on edge. I'd been able to enjoy touching her, being close to her, laughing with her, soaking up that affection that I'm practically starving for—without worrying that she'd want something I could never give her.

*Because she's probably demisexual.*

I bend over the cracked sink, taking a moment to splash some icy water on my face after rinsing my mouth, hoping the cold will wash away the heart emojis I can practically feel burning behind my eyelids.

*I can't just go crushing on her because of her sexuality. That isn't right.*

But even as I think it, I know that it's more than that. Maybe it's because I've just spent the last hour listening to Antoine read about alien soul-bonds, but there's something about Lily that calls to something in me. Like some part of my soul recognizes her as *mine*.

It's probably nothing. Probably just my imagination, and I should accept that I'm going to be alone forever.

Still, I can't help but hope.

---

## Chapter 10



---

### Lily

“You going to be okay to ride this morning?” Matty’s face is the picture of concern as he slides into the passenger side of my beat-up car.

I give him a tight smile, taking care not to reopen the cut on my lip. “Totally,” I lie with as much false cheerfulness as I can muster. “Plus, it’s only a half day today.”

And thank goodness for that. I don’t think I could make it a full day today. Not the way Liam has been pushing us. Not the way every muscle in my body is aching from a week’s worth of training and my crash yesterday.

The doors of my car creak warningly as Liam and Eddie slide into the back seat. Eddie is strangely silent, his face barely visible under the oversized hood of his instructor’s coat.

“You working today?” Matty asks, pivoting in his seat to look behind him. “It’s your first day back, right?”

“Yep.” The word is clipped, followed by a terse nod, but I don’t miss the way Eddie’s hands tighten around his gloves on his lap. Or the worried look Liam is giving him from across the back seat.

“I’ll need to get some new goggles,” I say as I reverse out of the icy parking lot. It’s a pointless observation, but it has the desired effect of taking attention away from Eddie. I get the feeling he wants to be alone with his thoughts right now.

“Mine got totally bashed up yesterday. We get a discount at the shop on the mountain, right?”

“Sure, if you call only giving up one limb instead of two a discount,” Liam scoffs. “You’d be better to buy some off one of the other instructors. There are lots of reps, and people are selling used gear and samples all the time.”

“Reps?” I ask, my brow furrowing. The movement has my face throbbing.

“Some of the instructors are reps for different companies, so they get merch at cost.”

“They’re not going to sell to her, though,” Eddie points out. “Not at cost, anyway. They’ll only do that for other instructors.”

“True,” Liam muses.

I bite the inside of my cheek, and fix my eyes on the road. I’m not looking forward to spending a considerable chunk of my savings on expensive goggles, especially when I don’t even have a job yet. When I might not even pass the exam next week.

When I still need to buy groceries.

“Hey, you used to be sponsored by a bunch of companies?” Eddie asks Liam. “I mean, you’re an Olympian, right? You guys get all the free stuff.”

My eyes widen in surprise, and I can’t help but look into the rearview mirror to where Liam sits scowling in the back seat. His frown deepens when he sees my eyes on him.

“Eyes on the road,” he snaps. “It’s icy today.”

I huff in annoyance at his command, but do as he says, since the roads *are* particularly bad this morning.

Still, I can’t help the gentle bubbling of excitement at this new piece of information. I mean, I knew Liam was an awesome snowboarder, since he’s a trainer and everything. But I had no idea he was that good. That he was Olympic-level good. There are so many questions I want to ask him. Like, where are his medals? When did he compete? Does he still compete?

But I can practically feel the irritation radiating off him from the back seat, cold as the ice crunching beneath my tires, so I stay silent.

“I’m still sponsored.” The words come out in a grunted whisper, barely audible over the rumbling of the engine. “At least, by a couple companies.” I can practically feel his teeth grinding. “I’ve got some extra goggles you can borrow.”

A relieved smile splits my face, threatening to reopen the cut on my lip. “Oh, wow. Thank you.”

Liam huffs. “Whatever. I’m not giving them to you. Just until you can buy some off one of the reps in a few weeks.”

It takes a moment for the meaning of his words to register, but when they do, the warmth that spreads in my chest is enough to make up for my faltering car heater.

Eddie said the reps only sell to other instructors. If Liam thinks I’ll be able to buy off them in a couple weeks, that must mean he thinks I’ll pass the exam. I take in a steady breath and grip the steering wheel in an effort to tamp down the squeal of excitement threatening to burst out of me.

“Okay.” The word comes out breathy, pitched with excitement, but Liam doesn’t seem to notice. “Cool.”

---

I FEEL the opposite of cool by the time lunchtime rolls around.

“I’m going to die,” I inform Matty, draping one arm over his shoulders for support as we trudge to the car. Well, I try to drape one arm over his shoulders, but he’s so tall that I just end up gripping one shoulder with my glove.

Matty gives a nervous chuckle, the sound deep and vibrating against me as he wraps his arm around my waist, shoring me up. “I’m pretty sore too,” he admits. “But it’ll be better next week. Trust me.”

I side-eye him dubiously. “Really?”



“Oh yah,” he says, with a level of confidence that is honestly surprising, given he’s just as new to instructor training as I am. “I’m sure.”

I’m just about to ask him what information he has that I don’t when he adds: “I mean, it’s like basic training, right? Where they try to see early on which of the new recruits are likely to break. To weed out the weak ones.”

I blink up at him in surprise and my foot sinks into a deep patch of snow, the movement sending me lurching forward.

“Careful.” Matty pulls me closer against his side, hauling me to my feet. “You’ve got enough bruises, don’t you think?”

I wave off his teasing, focusing instead on what he just told me. “Wait—you were in the military? What, like the army?”

With his shaggy hair and calm, slow smile, he doesn’t look like an army guy. At least, he doesn’t fit the stereotype embedded in my head after years of run-ins with guys from the military base near my town in Hawai’i.

“Marines,” Matty clarifies, his tone heavy with a mixture of pride and embarrassment that I don’t quite understand.

“Oh,” I say, searching for the appropriate response. “That’s, um...”

Honestly, *surprising* is the first word that comes to mind. *Unbelievable* is the second. Because however intimidating Matty’s size might have been on first meeting him, everything else about him just screams relaxed surfer guy. Or it would, if we were in Hawai’i instead of Utah. In fact, I don’t think I’ve ever heard him swear, or raise his voice...

“Neat,” I finish lamely, then instantly want to bury my face in the glove of my free hand. *Neat?* Really, Lily?

Matty just chuckles, that sweet, huffy laugh that rumbles from his massive chest. “It got me out of Idaho, I guess.” There’s the faintest hint of sadness with those words, making his earlier laugh fall flat. “But it wasn’t really for me.”

I give a hum of understanding, because *that* I can believe.

“How long were you in the Marines for?” I ask, hoping the question will make up for my earlier lack of enthusiasm.

We’re at my car now, and Matty reluctantly releases his hold on me so that I can rifle around in my coat pocket for the car keys.

“Four years.” The words come out rough, almost gravelly sounding, his blue eyes dulling before he drops his gaze to the muddy slush beneath our feet.

I gape, quickly swallowing back the exclamation of surprise. *Four years? He was in the military for four years?*

Before I can say anything to embarrass myself further, Matty plasters on a smile and gently pries the keys from my hands before opening the car door for me. “You good to drive, babe?” he asks, holding the door for me as I climb in.

*Babe.*

I bite back a smile and buckle my seatbelt. “Yah. I’m good,” I tell him, not daring to look up at him until he’s gently closing my door, then clambering over the snowdrifts to get to the other side of the car.

Matty is unusually quiet on the car ride home, his large hands gripping his knees as we rumble over lumps of ice and grit on the nearly-empty road. I can’t help darting the occasional glance toward him, wondering what he meant by calling me *babe*, if it was an accident, or if that’s just something he calls all girls he’s friends with.

I also can’t stop thinking about what he told me—that he was in the military for four years. *Four years.*

A lot can happen to a person in the military in a shorter amount of time.

“Are you going on this ski day thing that Seth is organizing? To the Canyons?” Matty asks as we pull into the condo parking lot, the abruptness of his question catching me momentarily off guard.

“I’m thinking about it,” I reply, tapping my fingers on the steering wheel before putting the car into park. “I probably

should, right?”

Seth created a group chat for all of us, and he’s been going on about how much fun it would be to have a “house ski day” at the neighboring ski resort.

As much as I like the idea of getting to know all the guys I’m living with a bit better, I’m also nervous about going riding with them. I get the feeling they’re all a lot more advanced than I am. I don’t want to be the tag-along little sister who they all have to wait for.

I unbuckle my seatbelt, then turn to face Matty. “Are you going?” At least he’s at my level, so if he goes, I’ll have someone to ride with. Someone who won’t be waiting at the bottom of each run tapping their foot impatiently for me to catch up. “If you go, I’ll go.”

His eyes widen in surprise, the blue momentarily brighter than the clear sky behind him, and then a smile stretches across his face. It’s a real, full smile, the kind that has his cheeks dimpling and the corners of his eyes creasing.

Something sparks behind my ribs at the sight of it, and I can’t help but lean just a little bit closer to him, like I’m some sort of moth attracted to the brilliance of his joy.

“Absolutely I’ll be going,” he says, beaming at me. “It’ll be nice to ride with you for fun. You know, instead of just training together.”

His eyes drop to my mouth, and my heart flutters stupidly for a moment—until I realize he’s probably just looking at my split lip. My tongue darts out, self-consciously tracing my cut and swollen lower lip before I can stop myself.

He leans forward, his fingertips twitching where they grip his knee. “I... I never did thank you for all the help you’ve given me this week. With training and... you know, helping me understand Liam’s instructions.”

His voice is low, almost breathy, and he’s close enough now that I can smell the hint of sweat from snowboarding all day, mingled with the cinnamon smell of his bodywash. It’s a nice smell, warm and comforting.

“You don’t need to thank me,” I say, waving one hand dismissively and giving him as much of a smile as my split lip will allow.

I don’t think I’ve done that much, not really. If anything, helping him has given me a chance to use the teaching techniques we’ve been learning. Techniques that we’ll be tested on in a week’s time.

“I think I do.”

With a suddenness that has my entire body stilling, he reaches up, one large palm coming to rest against my windburned cheek, his fingertips brushing under my tangled braid, his thumb stroking the unbruised part of my cheekbone. My breath hitches, and his own eyes widen in surprise, like even he wasn’t expecting to make this move.

The rapping of knuckles against the window has Matty’s cheeks flaming red, his hand flying back as if my skin burns him.

“Hey, what are you guys doing in there?” Tom’s gratingly familiar voice filters through the glass, and I turn to frown at him. “The windows are all steamed up,” he says by way of explanation, a lewd grin showcasing crooked teeth. “You guys getting it on?”

I turn back to Matty and give him a wide-eyed, incredulous look. “Getting it on,” I whisper loudly. “Who even says that?”

Matty chuckles, rubbing the back of his neck with his hand. “I might have. Once or twice,” he admits sheepishly.

I snort out a laugh, then grimace when Tom raps on my window a second time.

“What do you want?” Matty asks, climbing out of the passenger side of the car. “We just finished training for the day.”

Tom’s sneering grin falls at the mention of ‘training’. “Good for you. I bet Liam fucking loves you, doesn’t he?” He looks between me and Matty, so I’m not entirely sure who he’s talking about.

I open my door, forcing Tom to step back or risk getting whacked in the face. He gives an affronted huff, like I've committed some unpardonable offense by daring to climb out of my own car.

"Oops," I deadpan, flashing him a falsely bright smile. "Didn't see you there."

"Man, you look like shit," Tom retorts, staring pointedly at my battered face, as if this is the first time he's seen it. Which, it's not.

I don't bother replying to that, since it's mostly true, and it's not like there's anything I can do about it. Instead, I shoulder past him, ignoring the twinge of protest in my back when my shoulder clips him.

"Hey," Tom calls after us as we trudge up the long, icy steps to the condo. "Hey, I was going to ask if you would give me a lift to the grocery store."

Matty freezes in place beside me, his usual smile gone as he turns to scowl at Tom. "What?"

Tom rolls his eyes. "Come on man," he whines. "You know how expensive gas is. I've got a truck, and Lily only has that tiny thing. It'll be cheaper. I *know* she said you guys can drive it"

*Is Tom serious right now?* I shoot Matty a wide-eyed look, but his brow is furrowed in confusion as he stares down the steps to where Tom still lingers by my car in the parking lot.

"I...I don't really like driving," Matty mutters, his face paling slightly as his gaze drifts to my car.

Tom scoffs. "Whatever. I can drive us then."

"No, you can't," I snap. "Use your own car."

Tom blinks at me in surprise, as if he's only just remembered that I'm standing here. As he talks with Matty about using my car. I feel my jaw tighten. Sure, I might have told the guys they can use my car. But none of them have actually taken me up on the offer. And Tom just wants to use my gas.

Gas that cost me a significant portion of my dwindling savings.

“You serious?” Tom snorts incredulously.

I give him my back, nudging Matty with my shoulder. It’s too cold, and I’m too tired to deal with this. “Come on, Matty,” I murmur. “He’ll be fine. Let’s go home.”

---

## Chapter 11



---

### **Matty**

*This is not a date. This is not a date. This is not a date.*

I repeat the words silently over the cracked bathroom sink, staring intently at my overly hopeful reflection with the aim of talking some sense into myself.

It's not working.

"Matty," Eddie whines from the other side of the door, the sound quickly followed by a succession of frantic knocks. "Can you hurry it up in there? I really need to use the toilet."

I quickly finish styling my hair, rinsing the pomade off as I call back. "Almost done. Just give me a sec."

That reply is met with a groan of dismay, and several more knocks for good measure, but I ignore them. Instead, I uncap my body spray, lifting my shirt before spritzing a good amount under my thermals. Just in case I get a bit sweaty up on the mountain. I want to smell fresh if Lily sits next to me on the chairlift.

And she will sit next to me. I'll make sure of it.

"Seriously. Hurry the fuck up."

"Sheesh. Calm down," I mutter.

I cast one last look in the mirror, cringing at the way my cheeks have reddened with the anticipated embarrassment of coming face-to-face with Eddie.

“Bloody hell.” Eddie stumbles back when I open the door, one hand coming up to cover his face as amusement and horror dance across his features. “You do know those Lynx ads weren’t instructional videos, right?”

He gives a dramatic, wheezing cough. I frown, wondering what Lynx is and turn to give my armpit a surreptitious sniff. I smell alright. Just like Axe body spray.

Eddie shakes his head, then shoulders past me to the bathroom.

“You’re such a simp, dude,” he mutters before pulling the door shut.

My shoulders stiffen at his words, and I quickly cast a glance down the hallway to Lily’s room to make sure she didn’t hear him. I might only understand about half of what the Kiwis are saying at any given time, but this I do understand.

To my relief, there is no Lily in sight and her door is shut, so she’s probably still in her room getting ready. I try not to stare longingly at her door as I walk past it to the kitchen, where the smell of eggs, bacon, and coffee are wafting temptingly.

“Oh, good. You’re ready to go!” Seth pauses whatever he’s doing at the stove to throw me a cheerful smile. “I’m making breakfast. Take a seat.” He nods to the table where Liam and Antoine are already sitting, both glaring intently at their coffee, both looking equally unhappy.

Huh. I guess they aren’t morning people.

“Hey guys,” I say, sliding into the seat between them.

Liam lifts his eyes briefly to give me a head nod and a wan smile. Antoine takes that moment to sip his coffee, bright green eyes flashing in my direction with a hint of something I don’t really understand. But that’s not unusual with him—I don’t understand him most of the time, even when he speaks to me, and I can’t even blame it on his accent.

I think... no, I *know* I’m not the sharpest tool in the shed. I’ve been told that all my life, by my dad, my teachers, my superiors in the military. Antoine, on the other hand, is obviously super smart. Lily mentioned he went to some fancy



boarding school, and I know he speaks at least two languages perfectly.

I can barely speak English. And I grew up in Idaho.

“Morning darlin’,” Eddie says with a fake southern drawl, reaching across to ruffle Liam’s hair before flopping into the seat across from me.

Liam scowls, but seems to tolerate Eddie’s behavior, and I can’t help but stare wide-eyed between the two of them. There is no way I’d try something like that with Liam. But then I remember they know each other from before, from the mountain they both worked at in New Zealand, so I guess it’s not that strange.

“Coffee?” Seth asks.

“Shit yah,” Eddie replies, leaning forward and resting his arms across the table.

“No, thank you.” I pivot in my seat to give Seth a polite smile, clasping my hands in my lap. Behind him, an assortment of pots and pans steam and sizzle on the old stove, and several plates are spread across the kitchen counter. “Do you... um, want me to help with anything?”

“Nah, all good.” Seth gives me that infuriatingly perfect smile—the one that reminds me of how much more likely he is to win Lily over than me—then slides a full mug in front of Eddie. “Milk, no sugar, right?”

“You’re a treasure, mate,” Eddie says by reply, dimples forming as he beams at his coffee. “Keep this up and I might have to marry you.”

I honestly can’t tell if he’s being sarcastic, or if he’s really just that excited about the coffee. But Seth just chuckles, slinging the dish towel over one shoulder before turning back to the stove.

“You’d be lucky,” he says conversationally, flipping eggs with his spatula before turning off the stove. “It’d take more than your scrawny ass to satisfy me,” he flashes Eddie a wink over his shoulder, then starts plating up the food.

“Hey.” Eddie’s smile drops, transforming into that feral scowl he often wears when he lets the mask slip. “What’s wrong with my ass? I haven’t had a girl complain about it yet, I’ll have you know.”

Liam snorts into his coffee, and Antoine widens his eyes with a mixture of horror and amusement.

Me? I’m just confused. Like always. Maybe this is just some weird Kiwi humor that I don’t quite understand.

I scrub my face with my hands and try not to frown.

Seth waves one dismissive hand. “Your ass is fine, I’m sure. Just not really my thing.” He slides a plate of food in front of me, and my frown dissipates almost instantly, replaced by a wistful sigh of gratitude.

“I just meant I’m a more-than-one-person kind of guy, that’s all.” He mutters this last part under his breath, the words so faint I almost think I’ve imagined them. His cheeks are pink. Probably from standing over the stove.

“Good.” Eddie takes a long sip of his coffee, his eyelids fluttering shut with obvious satisfaction.

For a moment, he looks like an angel again, like one of those little cherub statues my gran always has scattered around her house. Until he opens his mouth.

“Because as much as I like to be appreciated for my assets—and they are fine assets, I’ll have you know—I’m not really into dick. Just to clear that up. Not that there’s anything wrong with being into dick...” Another slow sip of coffee, a gentle sigh.

Behind him, Lily’s door silently opens, her eyes bright as she smiles at Seth in the kitchen, then me. I feel my heart squeeze in response, that dangerous heat low at the base of my spine coiling like a demanding serpent. I’m pretty sure I’m giving her that dopey smile again, but I can’t seem to bring myself to feel embarrassed about it.

Eddie keeps talking, his back to Lily, completely oblivious of her walking toward the kitchen. “...I’m just more of a tits and pussy kind of guy,” he says conversationally, reaching across

the table to snag a piece of my scrambled eggs off my plate with his fork, even though Seth is making a plate for him too.

Normally, I would bat his hand away, but I'm too busy staring in wide-eyed horror between him and the beautiful girl at his back. I open my mouth, thinking maybe I can stop him, but nothing comes out.

"Like Lily," he continues, speaking around the mouthful of stolen egg. "Now, that girl is seriously hot. Did you see her boobs in that top when she moved in? Damn." He shakes his head, then adds: "I couldn't stop looking at them."

Liam clears his throat pointedly, and must kick Eddie under the table, because Eddie winces, then scowls.

"M-Morning, Lily," I stammer, my voice coming out weirdly deep, and catching in my throat. My cheeks are flaming, burning painfully with secondhand embarrassment, like I'm the one who has been caught saying all those awful things, and not Eddie.

Eddie just sighs, rolls his eyes then gives a self-deprecating chuckle. "Shit." He turns in his seat, smiling apologetically up at Lily, not even the slightest trace of a blush on his dimpled cheeks. "Sorry, Lil. I didn't realize you were standing there."

Lily just stares at him for a long moment, her smile falling as she gives him that blank look I've seen her give Akiva and Tom so many times before. And then she's striding past him, that beautiful smile reappearing as she approaches Seth, coming to stand beside him at the counter and giving him a one-armed hug.

Jealousy twinges, sharp and hot behind my ribs, and my fist clenches around my fork so tight that the mouthful of eggs I've scooped up tumbles back to my plate.

"Wow, you really went all out." Lily presses her cheek to Seth's shoulder. "This is amazing."

Seth pauses plating up the last of the food to reach one arm around her waist, pulling her closer to him. "Just wanted to make sure we all have enough energy for today." There's no missing the pleased tone in his voice. He almost sounds smug.

The scowl that's been playing across my lips deepens. He certainly didn't sound like that when the rest of us thanked him. "I'm hoping we can hike out and do some backcountry. It's a good day for it, if everyone's up for it."

"That's a fucking fantastic idea," Eddie says, injecting himself into their conversation. "I'm keen as."

"Don't we need special gear for that?" Lily asks as Seth hands her a heaping plate of toast, eggs, and bacon.

"Yes." To my surprise, it's Antoine who answers her, his knife and fork poised delicately above his plate. "We need beacons, at the minimum. Shovels, if you want to be able to dig yourself out in an avalanche."

"Don't be ridiculous," Liam scoffs, the entirety of his ire focused on Antoine.

He's got his plate of food now too, and holds his own knife and fork with the same easy, aristocratic grace as Antoine, the fork pointed down as his knife cuts delicate little bites. Between the two of them, I feel... uncultured. Oafish, almost.

"You don't need that sort of gear if you're just popping under the barrier for a quick run," Liam continues. "The bombs set off avalanches out of bounds, if you're close enough to the resort..."

*Bombs.*

Just that word is enough to have darkness flitting dangerously at the edge of my vision, the scent of explosives and dirt and blood and gasoline filling my head in a nauseating rush. My fork tumbles to my plate, clattering. I blink, my vision clearing, and I silently curse my stupid brain.

Because I know he's just talking about the explosives the ski patrol set before dawn at the top of the mountain to help prevent avalanches. I hear them go off almost every morning, and while I wouldn't say it's a comfortable sound, I'm used to it now.

Mostly.

“...it’s not like we’d be hiking kilometers out of bounds. Not if we did Backyards.” Liam gives Seth a questioning look. “I assume that’s what you were thinking of.” His gaze flits to where Lily stands, leaning against the center island eating her breakfast. Some of the hardness leaves his eyes, his mouth softening as he adds: “Since everyone has different skill levels.”

*Different skill levels.*

I feel my cheeks heat, because if Lily has ‘different skill levels’ that need accommodating, I certainly do.

“What’s Backyards?” I ask, knowing I probably sound stupid. But if I’ve learned anything, it’s that it’s better to look stupid than be ignorant. Stupidity might get you laughed at. Ignorance will get you killed.

Eddie gives me what can only be described as a pitying smirk, but it’s Seth who replies.

“It’s the area just out of bounds at the Canyons,” he explains. “You hike up from Prospector’s lift—that’s the highest lift—and then hike out through the gate along the ridgeline, maybe a mile or so. I mean, you can go farther, but a mile will have you dropping in close enough to cut back to the base of the resort without having to hike back out.”

I nod along, even though I maybe only understand half of what he’s saying. My heart is racing though, and it’s not an entirely pleasant feeling. Like when we’d get sent out on a mission, and we didn’t quite know what we’d find.

I used to like that feeling. Used to live for it.

Now... Now I like plans and clear instructions. I like routine.

“It’s pretty safe,” Liam assures me, and I can tell he’s being Coach Liam now and not my roommate. He’s got that reluctantly professional look about him, like he’d rather be doing anything but helping his students, but he just can’t seem to stop himself. “Deep powder pockets, but not too steep of an incline. There might be a couple meter cornice at the top, but you don’t have to drop it if you don’t want to.”

A blink at him in confusion, and he gives a long-suffering sigh. “You’ll be fine. We’ll keep an eye on you and Lily. Make sure you make it down in one piece.”

“It sounds awesome,” Lily says, the excitement clear in her voice. “I’m definitely down, if everyone else is.”

I turn in my chair just in time to see a smile light up her hazel eyes, and all thoughts of protesting their backcountry plans come to a screeching halt. She wants to go backcountry. She’s not afraid.

*I can be brave for her.*

Some of the nervous anticipation thrumming through my blood takes on the warm pulse of adrenaline as I think about hiking out of the resort, pushing myself, doing something new. Something dangerous. Of feeling her eyes on me and meeting her smiles with my own.

“I’d like to go,” I say, and I almost believe it. “Let’s do it.”

Her smile widens, and I can’t help but smile in return.

---

## Chapter 12



---

### Eddie

Matty clearly thinks he's on a date.

I cringe when he half hobbles, half skates up to Lily in the lift queue, shoving past a group of teenagers and knocking his board into everyone in his desperation to get to her. He's far enough ahead that I can't tell what he's saying, but there's no missing the puppyish expression on his dopey-ass face as he speaks to her, then practically glues himself to her side so they can sit together on the lift.

"What a fucking simp," I mutter under my breath then pull up my face mask. "And why is it so fucking cold?"

I scowl up at the clear blue sky, wishing I could force the sun to make its appearance over the mountains through sheer will alone.

"It's cold because it's winter," Liam replies dryly, and I can practically feel him rolling his eyes in my direction. "Stop being such a girl's blouse about it."

I snort, a soft huff that's muffled by my mask. "You secretly a seventy-year-old dairy farmer?" I retort. I don't think I've heard someone call anyone a *girl's blouse* since my grandpa died. God rest his crotchety soul. "*Girl's blouse.*" I parrot, then shake my head. "Pretty sure Stephanie Jealouse would kick your ass if she heard you saying weird shit like that."

Liam grumbles some inaudible response—probably an agreement—then rubs at the back of his neck, just below his

helmet. I notice he doesn't say anything about Matty though. And, like always, his gaze drifts to Lily whenever he thinks no one will notice.

I notice though. I always notice.

"How'd they get so far ahead in the queue anyway?" Tom asks, his voice pitched with whiny entitlement. "Why are we all the way back here?"

I try to move away from Tom as he comes up to my other side, but there's nowhere I can really go, so I settle for giving him a disgusted look which he, unfortunately, ignores.

Neither Liam nor I reply. The answer to Tom's question is currently wearing designer ski gear, sporting some of the latest technical skis, and whispering to Lily in French while poor Matty stares on in confusion.

*Antoine.*

I have no idea what happened to make Liam and Antoine hate each other, but something must have happened, because the two of them can barely stand to look at each other. Still, nice friend that I am, I stayed back with Liam so he'd have someone to ride the lift with. I'm thoughtful like that.

I shuffle along toward the lift, watching the chair sweep up Matty, Lily, Seth, and Antoine with a small twinge of envy. Not because I'd like to be sitting with them, of course. I just hate having to wait. That's all.

"... so I told her if she was that thirsty, I had something better for her to drink."

Tom's wheezing chuckle at whatever he just said has my attention snapping back to him, and I feel my teeth grinding in annoyance at the sound of his voice.

"I mean, she was happy for me to keep buying her drinks all night long—her and her friends, actually, greedy bitch. But when the bar closed, guess who was too good to come home with me, huh?"

His snowboard clips the edge of my skis, and I tighten my hold on my pole, barely resisting the urge to stab him with it.



Accidentally, of course. He wouldn't feel it. Much.

“You should have seen what she was wearing, too. Short skirt, her ass practically hanging out.” He reaches forward, making the shape of what is presumably a rounded ass with his red-mittened hands. Who the fuck wears red mittens? “Just begging for attention, you know what I mean. And then she had the audacity to turn me down!”

I turn to give Liam a look, my eyes wide with mock disbelief behind my goggles. *The audacity*, I mouth.

Liam shakes his head, his lips twitching, nostrils flaring as he struggles not to laugh.

Tom says something else, which I tune out. For a brief moment, I contemplate shoving him over, or maybe cutting him off in the lift queue and forcing him to go a row back, but then it's our turn to get on, and the lift is hurtling up behind us, and sweeping the three of us up the mountain.

And then I'm trapped beside him on the chairlift.

Tom keeps talking, rambling in his whiny voice about his conquests, peppering us with inane anecdotes of chicks he bought drinks for and chicks he's banged, occasionally taking a break from that to tell us about what a great snowboarder he is. How he won some local competition in New Mexico when he was like thirteen or something.

Of course, Liam is totally silent on my other side. I can hear the faintest hum of music filtering through from his helmet, so I know I won't get any help from him. Good for him, bringing his earbuds. I left mine at the flat because this was supposed to be a team bonding day. Flat bonding day. Fuck. Whatever.

The only thing that's going to be bonded are Tom's lips if he doesn't shut up.

*This is what happens when you're nice*, my inner voice reminds me, sounding irritatingly like my older brother, Nate. *You try to help Liam out by hanging back with him, and what does he do? He leaves you to deal with Tom all by yourself.*

“Oh, thank god,” I say when the top of the chairlift comes into view.

I think it's the first time I've spoken since we got on, and Tom pauses in surprise at the sound of my voice, like he wasn't expecting anyone else but himself to be filling the air with noise.

Lily, Matty, Antoine, and Seth are standing off to the side, just past the ramp, and I focus on them. Well, I focus on Lily, pulling down my face mask to flash her a winning smile. Because after the way Liam just threw me under the bus back there—offering up my earholes in unwilling sacrifice to Tom's monologue—he can count on me putting every ounce of charm I have into absorbing the entirety of Lily's attention.

And I have a lot of charm.

My grandpa—the dead one—used to tell me that I could charm the pants off a nun. I don't think he meant it as a compliment, since that particular observation was made after he asked my father whether I really was his offspring, given my height and my status as a high school dropout.

I don't really want to charm anyone's pants off, but it wouldn't hurt if Lily forgot Liam existed for a day or so. Maybe I'll even find a way to make Liam and Antoine hang out together, force them to sit together at lunch or some shit.

A smile curves my lips, and I push off with my poles toward my less annoying flatmates.

It's time to remind Liam who he's dealing with.

---

DESPITE MY LESS-THAN-STELLAR performance at breakfast this morning, it doesn't take long to make Lily smile. She's sandwiched between me and Matty on the three-seater lift that will take us to the highest point in the resort, and if I look over my shoulder, I can see Liam sitting between Seth and Antoine on the chair behind us. I throw the happy trouple a little wave, then focus my attention back on Lily.

By the time we reach the top of the lift, Lily's smiles have become more relaxed, and she occasionally knocks her

shoulder against mine when I tell some of my more outrageous stories. She might not be ready to join the Eddie fan club, but I'd like to think the ice around her heart has thawed.

"So this is your first time hiking backcountry?" I ask as I push away from the lift and down the ramp. Lily slides effortlessly beside me, her smile wide, hazel eyes glinting behind her goggles.

"Yep." She worries her bruised lower lip with her teeth and drags the toe of her boot into the hardpack snow to slow herself to a stop. "It's not too hard of a run, right? That's what you guys said?"

I pause, looking up from where I've bent to loosen my ski boots, then stand to unclip my skis. I haven't spoken to Lily much in the handful of days that I've known her, but she's always struck me as confident, sure of herself. It never occurred to me that she would feel nervous about today.

She stares up at the boundary sign, with its overly dramatic skull and crossbones symbol, her lips parted as she no doubt reads the ominous warnings of injury and death for stepping a foot out of the resort.

We don't have this sort of thing back home—not at the little club fields I grew up skiing at, anyway. The first time I saw one of these boundary markers, I took a bunch of photos next to it, grinning like I'd spotted some celebrity.

"Totally fine, I promise." I give her what is probably my first genuine smile. "Those signs are just there to keep muppets from going off piste. Don't take it too seriously."

"It says 'risk of death,'" Matty dutifully points out as he bends to unclip his bindings. "That seems pretty serious to me."

I roll my eyes, then grin as I see Antoine, Seth, and Liam coming down the ramp toward us. Liam's face is barely visible between his goggles and ski mask, but I can practically feel his glare boring in through my ski jacket as he makes his way over to me.

"Of course there's a risk of death," I drawl. "If people don't know what they're doing. But we do, so you guys will be fine."

Besides..." I pause to give Liam what I hope is an irritating smile. "Coach Liam has ridden with you guys all week. If he thinks you're capable of going backcountry, then I completely trust his judgment."

Liam's shoulders stiffen at the reminder of his position as coach, but my words seem to have the effect of easing Matty's worries at least. It's harder to tell with Lily. She doesn't seem worried, but she also strikes me as one of those people who doesn't give very much away.

"Where is Tom?" Matty asks, looking at the empty chairs rolling past. "Wasn't he with you guys?"

Seth looks over his shoulder, as if expecting to see Tom coming up on the next chair, but there's no sign of him. I shoot Liam a questioning look, and see his eyes tighten with amusement almost imperceptibly behind his goggles, the faintest of chuckles muffled by his face mask.

"I think he had to use the toilet," Liam says flatly. "Said he'd catch up with us later."

"You don't think we should wait for him?" Seth asks, looking at me for some reason. Like maybe he thinks Tom and I are friends. I shudder at the thought. Seth was the one who invited Tom to live with us, not me.

"Nah," I say. "No friends on a powder day."

Not that Tom is my friend.

The rest of the guys hum in agreement, and we start hiking up to the barrier fence and the out-of-bounds sign. Liam comes up beside me, meeting my eyes with his own and lowering his mask to flash me a rare grin. I shake my head, knocking my shoulder against his own. I wish I knew what he did to ditch Tom, but now isn't the time to ask. I'm thankful for it though, almost enough to feel guilty for my earlier plans of retaliation.

Almost.

All thoughts of petty revenge fly from my head the moment we push through the gate separating the resort from the backcountry.

We're at the highest peak of the resort. To our right is the neighboring canyon, protected by completely unskiable cliffs and slopes that are so steep, they practically scream avalanche warnings at you. To our left is the resort, but beyond that, just ahead, are endless expanses of untouched powder, the slope peppered by massive pines, the unmarked snow glittering in the early morning light.

I let out a satisfied sigh at the sight, my breath clouding in front of my face, and make my way along the ridgeline.

As much as I love teaching, this is what got me into skiing. This feeling—being up in the mountains, being away from all the people. Feeling the burn of cold air in your lungs when you hike at altitude, knowing that the pure exhilaration of making tracks through untouched powder awaits you.

“Fucking perfect,” I breathe, glancing back over my shoulder to make sure the rest of the group are keeping up with me.

Lily throws me a smile in return—a wide, unchecked smile that has her bruised cheeks pressing against her goggles. “Beautiful,” she says, her voice breathless with exertion. Her gaze drifts to the scenery around us, like she can't quite decide what to look at.

I return her smile, but don't reply. Mostly because hiking at this altitude is hard work, but also because I'm starting to feel a little bit guilty about using her as a way to get under Liam's skin. Even if it didn't really work.

It takes us about half an hour to get to the right spot—a sprawling run that stretches between clusters of pine, snaking between boulders and finally curving toward the base of the resort.

“This is it,” I say, the words thready as I struggle to draw in breath at over ten-thousand-foot altitude.

Lily comes up beside me, her shoulder pressing against my own, and I stretch one gloved hand out to the run below us, to where snow sparkles like millions of crystals, silently beckoning.

“You go between those trees there,” I tell her. “Then cut above that boulder and go left. If you try to cut left after the boulder, you won’t make it to the base of the resort, and you’ll have to hike out.” I give a mirthless chuckle. “I did that once, a few weeks ago. Trust me, you don’t want to do that.”

It took me at least three hours to hike back to the resort, wading through waist-deep powder and carrying my skis. My boots had been filled with ice by the time I made it out, the skin on my calves red and burnt with the start of frostbite.

The worst of it was that I’d missed the morning skiing, missed the safe window for hitting the backcountry, and had to spend the rest of the day moping around on groomed runs like a loser.

Liam had been there, of course, getting run after run of perfect powder while I trudged away in the mire by myself.

“Got it,” Lily says with a breathy laugh. “Turn before the boulder. Anything else I should know?”

I tap my chin, considering. “Maybe don’t go too far ahead?” I suggest finally. “Stick close to me or Liam if you can. But also try not to stop and wait for any of us either. And whatever you do, don’t take off your board.”

She shoots me a questioning glance, and with her goggles pulled up on her helmet, I’m close enough to see the gold and green flecks in her hazel eyes.

“If you take your board off, you’ll get stuck in the powder,” I explain, tilting my chin to the glittering run beneath us.

I know this from experience as well. The first time I came here, I made the mistake of thinking I could hike up to help Liam when he wiped out, only to end up getting stuck in armpit-deep snow. It took me thirty minutes to get my skis back on.

She purses her lips, her brow dipping as she eyes the slope warily.

“You’ll be fine,” I assure her, clapping her on the shoulder for good measure. It’s a weird gesture to make with her. I feel like

I've just called her *bro* or *mate* or some shit. It just doesn't sit right.

"That's a big drop," Matty observes, coming up to stand on Lily's other side. Unlike Lily, he's not trying to catch his breath. In fact, the big guy barely seems winded at all.

He carefully shuffles as close to the lip of the cornice as possible, peering over it as if he'll be able to see the bottom. "That... that must be at least six feet," he rumbles, hurriedly shuffling away from the edge.

"Sounds about right," I say with a shrug. "It's a soft landing though."

Not that you'd want to wipe out in such deep powder at the start of the run. Nothing worse than losing momentum and getting mired down.

"Sure. Okay..." Matty gives a nervous chuckle, his baby-blue eyes wide as he looks to Lily for reassurance.

"This looks amazing," Seth wheezes, wrapping one arm around Matty's shoulder and looking around the scenery with awe. "Man, I gotta do this more often. I'm so outa shape."

I grimace in sympathy. That's the downside of working in the rental shop, I guess. He's basically stuck in a sweaty, windowless pit all day long, helping whiny tourists get boots that fit and skis that will be calibrated to their weight so they don't break a leg when they invariably wipe out.

"Where are Antoine and Liam?" Lily asks, leaning against me to peer around Seth, down the trail snaking along the ridgeline behind him. "What's taking them so long?"

I follow her gaze, my lips curling with smug satisfaction when I see Liam and Antoine have stopped walking. They're standing close enough to kiss, but judging by the expressions on their faces, it looks like they're more likely to deck each other. Liam's face mask is pulled down, his teeth bared and face red as he says something to Antoine.

A lot of somethings, judging by Antoine's slack-jawed expression, though they're too far away for me to hear.

“Shoot, Liam looks mad,” Matty observes. “What do you think happened?”

“Who the fuck knows,” I say, feeling suddenly defensive of Liam’s privacy. Which is probably hypocritical of me, since I’m the one who was wanting to shove him and Antoine together in the first place.

I can practically hear my grandpa now. *Such a shit-stirrer, Eddie. One of these days, someone much bigger than you isn’t going to put up with that mouth of yours.*

At which point, he’d remind me that nearly everyone is bigger than me, because apparently stopping growing at five foot seven was just one of the many ways I’d let my family down.

By the time Antoine and Liam reach us, Liam’s face mask is up, his goggles down, and his expression shuttered. Antoine is easier to read—his stark green eyes are red rimmed, his full lips pressed into a tight line, his jaw clenched. Clearly, he’s pissed.

Unfortunately, it doesn’t give me any insight into what they were arguing about.

“What are you waiting for?” Liam snaps, voice icy as the wind beating against our backs. Wisps of snow rise up around our feet, dancing over the edge of the cornice, sparkling. “Are we dropping in, or are we having a picnic up here?”

Seth gives a nervous chuckle, then pushes off with his poles toward the cornice’s edge. “See you guys at the bottom,” he says, then pauses with the tips of his skis hanging precariously over the lip, looking between me and Liam. “You guys will stay with Lily and Matty, right?”

“Yah, mate,” I tell him, and for once, I don’t smile. “We’ll look after them.” I give Liam a hard look, daring him to argue, but he just gives a curt nod in reply.

“Okay. Good.” Seth flashes Lily a tentative smile, then pushes forward, dropping soundlessly, momentarily disappearing from view.

Liam, Lily, and Matty have all strapped on their boards now, and Lily peers nervously over the edge, craning her neck to try



and see Seth's landing. She won't be able to though, not from here.

"Clear!" Seth's voice calls up, distant and muffled sounding, letting us know he's made it out of the landing zone.

"Right. Matty, you go next," Liam orders.

Matty shoots him a panicked look, but then something changes in his face, a look of grim resolve that has his already-pale skin going almost as white as the snow.

"You can do it, Matty," Lily urges, her own voice thready with nerves. "I'll be right behind you."

Matty doesn't reply, just leans forward, putting his massive weight onto his front foot until he's sliding toward the edge, then dropping over it.

We hear a muffled shout, followed by a soft thud as he hits the powder, and then an almost hysterical *whoop* of joy. I grin despite myself, that familiar sense of pride welling up in me. It's the same feeling I get when I coach a student down a black run for the first time, when I see that look of satisfaction on their face, that *I can do it* look.

"Clear!" Matty's voice comes up to us, an almost hysterical laughing sound.

"Your turn." Liam's voice is gentler this time, and he grips Lily's shoulders with his hands, guiding her toward the edge. "You don't have to drop it. You can take it on your heel edge if you're nervous, just like traversing. Like doing a falling leaf."

I feel my eyes widen. I can't tell you the number of times Liam has bitched and moaned about inexperienced riders '*wrecking the snow*' by doing just what he suggests.

"*They shouldn't be riding backcountry if they can't handle it,*" he'd say. "*Look at that flattened cornice. Look at all that powder, scraped away. Such fucking muppets.*"

"I'll be right behind you," he murmurs. "I'll drop in the moment I know it's clear, and I'll be right behind you."

Is he... is he actually *comforting* her?

I blink in surprise, staring at my friend. I don't think I've ever heard him comfort someone in his entire life. In fact, that's one of the things he's known for—being a hard coach who pushes his students to greatness, or whatever.

“I got this,” I hear Lily say, so soft it's almost inaudible, and I'm not sure if the words are for him, or for herself. “I got this.”

And then she's pushing off, a strangled shout dying in her throat a moment later as she drops out of sight, followed by a gasp of surprise when she lands, and then the sexiest fucking laugh I've ever heard.

Her laugh in that moment—it should be illegal. It's deep and breathy, reminiscent of whiskey bars and sunlight, and it goes straight to my dick.

“Clear!” she calls out, her voice still rich with laughter. “Holy shit that was amazing. Oh my god. This snow...” Her words dissolve into laughter again, and I look over in surprise when I hear Antoine chuckling at the sound of it.

I don't think I've ever heard Antoine laugh. Not sure I've seen him smile either. He usually frowns, looks at things or people in distaste, and occasionally smirks.

It's like her happiness is some sort of contagion.

“Right, I'm coming,” Liam calls out, before effortlessly throwing himself over the edge after her.

“That's what she said,” I say, loud enough that I hope he's heard me. Maybe it will be enough to distract him from making his landing.

“Fucking dork,” I hear him mutter, the words guttural as his board hits the snow. I grin in reply.

“Do you want to go next?” Antoine asks, staring at the space Liam just vacated, as if it's some sort of black hole that will destroy him if he passes through it.

“Sure thing, mate,” I reply with a smile.

He doesn't need to ask me twice. I'm not one of those guys who will say “oh, no, you go” just to seem nice. I've waited up

here long enough that my fingertips are icy and stiff inside my gloves, my toes pinching in my tightened boots, and my blood thrumming with excitement for the run I know I'm going to have.

And fuck, if it isn't the run of a lifetime.

I know it the second I drop over the lip of the cornice, the two-meter drop making air sing around my ears, making my stomach flip deliciously, before I land in a cloud of fresh powder.

Snow flies up around me as I sink in, temporarily blinding me in a cloud of white.

*Champagne powder*, that's what we call it back home. Back home, it's the stuff of dreams, the holy grail of skiing, the thing every Kiwi kid wonders about as they're earning their stripes on windswept ice and crud.

It's why I turned down Uni and did a ski instructor's cert at the Polytechnic, much to my parent's dismay. This, right here, this is what I live for.

Gravity pulls me free, and I'm flying, floating through fresh powder, my skis almost a soundless whisper at my feet. I keep my turns open, gentle, settling my weight back just enough to keep the tips of my skis from diving down and sinking me.

“Wahooooo!”

Lily's ecstatic cry echoes around us, and I look up to see her several turns ahead of me, with Liam close at her heels. She turns onto her toe edge, just enough so that she's looking back up the slope, a smile lighting up her face at the sight of me behind her.

“Eddie!” she calls out, lifting one gloved hand to wave furiously at me. “Oh my god, this is amazing.”

“Eyes ahead,” I hear Liam say, that familiar edge of irritation back in his voice. “There's no prize for getting the most injuries in a season, you know.”

His words don't seem to have a dampening effect on her mood, because her laughter is back, singing around us with the

sound of skis and boards on powder, dancing with the sound of our own joy.

She laughs when the terrain gets steeper and when her board cuts through a massive drift, sending snow flying over her head. She laughs when Matty lets out a string of noncurses up ahead of her, and when Liam snarks from behind her, telling her to stay focused.

By the time we reach the boulder and turn toward the base of the resort, I can feel my own cheeks burning, my mouth dry and teeth cold from smiling the entire run.

Somehow, I close the distance between us, passing Liam's grumpy ass so that I'm skiing next to Lily, floating just a couple meters away from her. It's the perfect place, because now I can see her smile while I ski, can see the way her whole face lights up with pure unbridled joy.

"This is so awesome," she breathes, her smile wide. "I can't believe I've never done this before. Thank you guys so much..." She breaks off, focusing on the snow, on her turns, her lips parted with exertion.

When her gaze drifts back to me again, I reach up, tapping the handle of my pole to my helmet like I'm some gentleman tipping my hat to her. "Anytime," I drawl. "Thank you for letting us take your backcountry virginity."

Ahead of us, Matty makes a choking sound. Liam groans from somewhere behind me.

"You're ridiculous," Lily retorts, shaking her head, her cheeks pinkening—though that could be from the cold and the wind and all the snow that's been flying at her face.

She turns her attention back to her riding, but doesn't look annoyed. She looks beautiful and alive.

I feel my smile softening at the sight of her, something unfamiliar tightening in my chest. It feels like desire—which, let's be honest, I've felt that often enough—but different. More dangerous. Like she's one of those deadly creatures camouflaging as something innocuous.

Normally, I wouldn't hesitate to act on my desire, even if the chick in question is waving a million red flags. But Lily...

My whole body jolts forward, my hip and knee wrenching painfully before I hear the distinctive *click* of my ski popping free, and then I'm flying, plummeting, rolling, the world a kaleidoscope of sky and snow and pine and...

"Bloody fucking shit," I hiss, my voice muffled by snow.

I shake my head, swimming my arms in front of my face in an attempt to clear the powder piled up around me, then lift my snow-caked goggles from my face and set them on my helmet.

I'm armpit deep in powder, my legs twisted uncomfortably beneath me, my poles and one ski scattered like easter eggs up the hill behind me. I kick my legs, dismayed to find my second ski isn't attached to my foot.

Which means it's probably under the snow somewhere.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," I mutter, pounding the snow around me like a child having a tantrum—but really, I'm just trying to compact it, to get some sort of purchase to pull myself up on.

"Don't you dare stop to help him, Lily," I hear Liam call out, his voice carrying up from downhill somewhere. "You'll get stuck and..."

His voice is drowned out by the sound of snow crunching close to my head, and then Lily's grunted *umpf* as she plops down in the snow next to me.

"Damn it, Lily," I grit out, turning to glare at her. I'm not angry at her. Not really. But this is fucking embarrassing enough as it is. "Now you're going to be stuck too."

She frowns, looking around at the powder pillowed up around her. With her board in front of her, and her knees pulled to her chest, it's almost like she's sitting in an armchair. "I'll be fine," she says hesitantly, patting the snow around her with her gloved hands. Her arms sink in, disappearing from sight, and her frown deepens.

"You should have listened to Liam," I chide, but with how much I'm fighting to get free of the snow, my words don't

have the hardness that they should.

Lily waves one hand dismissively. “If he didn’t want me to stop, then maybe he should have stopped to help you instead.”

I shake my head, finally pulling my legs free, hauling myself up onto the compacted area of snow I’ve created. “He had to stay with Matty,” I say through panting breaths. “He’s never done this run before. And Liam knows I’ll be fine...”

I twist around, clambering onto my hands and knees, knowing better than to try and stand, turning to look uphill to where my ski and poles are. To my surprise—and epic fucking relief—Antoine is there, slowly meandering through the carnage of my wipe-out, bending to pick up my gear in between turns, moving with all the grace of a dancer.

He flashes me a smug smile, his modelesque lips curving with amusement, and I feel my gratitude for him dissipate like snowflakes in a gale.

“You dropped something,” he says with a smirk. He pulls to a stop beside me, widening his stance so as not to sink too far into the snow, his eyes dropping to the pit I’ve essentially made for myself as he hands me my gear. “Looks like you’re missing a ski.”

“Yah,” I bite out, snatching the poles and ski from him. “Thanks. I kinda realized that.”

Lily snorts, then covers her mouth with a snow-caked glove, her eyes sparkling with amusement as they flick up to meet Antoine’s.

“Do you think it’s buried in the snow back there?” he muses, asking what has to be the most pointless question ever. Of-fucking-course it’s buried in the snow. Where else would it be?

I scowl at the stretch of snow behind him, to where the evidence of my wipeout mars the mountainside, a streak at least three meters long. That’s a lot of snow to search through to find one ski. And I know from experience that it could be anywhere—it could have slid meters under the snow, it could be buried two meters deep.

There’s a very real chance I might not find it.

I glance back down the run to where Liam, Matty, and Seth are now barely more than specks, not far from the fence that marks the base of the resort. That's a long way to go on one ski. If it were a groomed run, it wouldn't be a problem. Skiing on one ski was part of my training back home, and while my quad would burn like a mother, it would be doable.

But powder... I'm pretty sure doing that distance on one ski would be physically impossible.

"I'll help you find it," Lily says, her voice full of the false cheerfulness usually reserved for hospital rooms.

It's a tone that instantly has my stomach tightening, and for a brief moment, I can smell the scent of antiseptic, hear the repetitive *beep, beep, beep* of machines, can feel the stiff cotton hospital gown against my skin. I blink, and then it's gone, replaced by sparkling snow and blue sky. But the nausea remains.

"It'll be around here somewhere," Lily continues, bending forward to unstrap her board before I can stop her.

"*Putain de merde*," Antoine exclaims. "What are you doing?"

Lily's slips her feet free of the bindings, stepping off her board—the only thing keeping her afloat—and sinks into what must be at least two-meter-deep powder.

Lily gives an undignified squawk as she instantly plummets downward, until the snow comes up to her armpits. "Oh wow, didn't realize that would happen." She gives a self-deprecating laugh, cheeks flushing as she looks between me and Antoine with a sheepish grin.

She still has her board though, the bindings gripped tight in her hands, and her expression hardens, surprise replaced by determination as she starts using it to haul herself up out of the snow.

"Let's start where you fell," she suggests, turning to look at me over her shoulder from her half-crawling position. Her arms are stretched out in front of her, and she pushes the base of her board against the snow to keep from sinking back in. "Maybe

it snagged on something under the snow, and that's why you wiped out in the first place?"

It's such an obvious suggestion, I should be annoyed with her. Shit, I *am* annoyed with her, for so many things. For stopping to help me, for being so bloody optimistic, for getting off her board—so now I have to worry about getting her down the mountain as well as myself.

She gives me a grin, like this is some sort of fun adventure, then starts to fight her way through the snow, board out in front, legs behind her, her snowboard pants stretching over her ass in the most distracting way.

My annoyance deepens, twisting and manifesting as something that feels a lot like attraction, only significantly more uncomfortable. Something close to what I imagine Matty feels when he's mooning at her like a lost puppy.

It's unfamiliar and un-fucking-welcome.

"Come on, Eddie," she says, huffing with the effort of wading through powder to find my ski. Her cheeks are flushed now, glowing with exertion, her lips parted and eyes sparking with life as she looks at me over her shoulder. "It'll be fun."



---

## Chapter 13



---

### Lily

“I passed! I can’t believe it — I passed!”

I sprint across the snow, half stumbling, half hurtling to where Matty and Liam are already waiting for me, Liam leaning against the wooden fence under the *Lessons* sign, Matty grinning and clutching a paper reverently in his bare hands.

The sight of that paper fills me with instant relief, because it can only mean one thing: Matty passed too.

Liam shoves off the fence, the hint of a smile curving his lips. “I told you you’d nail it,” he says, just as Matty steps forward and wraps me up in an unexpected embrace.

“Congratulations,” he says, squeezing me so hard that air gusts out of my lungs, then releasing me almost as quickly, taking a fumbling step back. He reaches up, rubbing the back of his neck with one hand, cheeks reddening. “I, uh... I passed too.”

“I knew you would,” I say, and I mostly mean it.

Despite all the progress he’d made this past week under Liam’s coaching, I had been a little worried that his nerves would get the better of him. Especially when he ended up in a different exam cohort than me.

“I heard Akiva failed,” Liam notes, and there’s a hint of dry amusement in his voice.

I narrow my eyes at Liam in mock disapproval. “Shouldn’t you be upset about that? Since he was your student?”

Liam huffs, his gray eyes flashing. “Some people just aren’t teachable, I guess.” He gives an unconcerned shrug, then adds. “Besides, it’s not like I get paid by my pass rate or anything. Doesn’t matter to me if my students fail.”

“But you cared if we passed,” I point out, the words coming before I can stop them. “I wouldn’t have passed if it wasn’t for you.”

Liam’s expression shutters, and he looks between me and Matty with an unreadable expression. “Let’s get going.” He tips his goggles down, even though the afternoon sun has dipped behind the mountains, then pulls up the bandana he’s currently wearing as a ski mask, hiding his face from view. “We can stop by the liquor store before it closes.”

“Liquor store?” I ask.

Liam taps the front pocket of his ski jacket, where he usually keeps his phone. “Didn’t you see the group text?”

I shake my head. I’d come running to meet them the moment the results from my exam came in, clutching that little piece of paper certifying me to teach snowboarding like it was the lifeline to my future. Which, all things considered, it pretty much is.

“Tom wants to throw a party.” Liam’s lip curls in distaste, though whether it’s at the mention of Tom or the prospect of a party, it’s hard to say. Could be both, knowing Liam. “Then Matty here said he passed his exam, and Seth got on the party train too, so it looks like it’ll be—as Eddie described it—a *rager*.”

I lean my board against my side and I pull out my phone, skimming over the group chat as we make our way to the parking lot, then stop when Antoine’s name flashes in the thread—a rare occurrence.

Antoine: Could someone give me a lift home please?

Tom: Sry. Drnk already. Hahaha.

Seth: Check with Lily, she's probably still at the mountain.

Tom: If you see Liam, remind him to get some bourbon. We're almost out.

Eddie: \*Blurry image of Eddie frowning, holding up a nearly empty bottle of liquor.

Tom: Can you tell Liam? He's not answering his phone.

"I think Antoine wants to catch a ride with us," I say.

"Huh." Liam doesn't look at me.

"Shoot, I didn't see that," Matty says, dropping his gloves and his board before pulling his own phone out with fumbling fingers.

"It's fine." I quickly tap out a response on the thread, letting Antoine know where to meet us, then pocket my phone. "There's a lot of chat on there."

I give a nervous laugh, my stomach twisting uncomfortably at the thought of drinking with Tom.

Eddie, I'm less worried about, even though things have been strange between us since the day skiing backcountry. He'd been so friendly, almost flirty that day, but I've been barely able to get two words out of him since then. Last night, when I sat down between him and Liam to have dinner, he'd shoved his plate in Matty's direction and left the table, muttering something about being tired, even though it was only seven o'clock.

Tom though... Tom is a creep even when he's sober. I doubt drunk-Tom is going to be an improvement.

"Thanks for waiting for me." Antoine's voice snaps me from my thoughts, and I turn to give him a smile.

He casts Liam a nervous glance, his eyes dropping momentarily before lifting back to mine. "Did you pass?"

I nod, my smile widening.

Antoine gives me a soft smile in return, easily wrapping one arm around my shoulders and pulling me into a side hug. “That’s excellent,” he murmurs, his chin bumping against the top of my helmet. I’d been in such a hurry to tell Matty and Liam my news, I hadn’t even stopped to take it off. “So proud of you.”

Something warm flutters in my chest at his words, and I hug him back, my bare fingertips skating across the damp cold of his ski jacket as I lean into him, feeling the warmth and strength of him beneath.

Unlike Matty’s awkward embrace earlier, touching Antoine is comfortable, easy. Probably because we’ve been sitting and reading together each night after dinner—me, him, and Seth. And just like the first night he read to us, I usually end up sandwiched between him and Seth, with Seth massaging my aching calves while I lean against Antoine, or Antoine playing with my hair while Seth rubs my back.

Maybe it’s comfortable because I know it doesn’t mean anything more than friendship with both of them.

“When you two are done cuddling, we need to get to the liquor store.” Liam’s tone is sharp with impatience, and he taps his gloved hands against his ski pants. “It shuts in fifteen minutes.”

“Oh, right. Sorry.” I shoot Liam an apologetic grimace, but he’s striding away from me, heading to where my car sits, one of the last cars in the parking lot.

Matty is trudging after him, his snowboard dragging behind him on the ice, his shoulders slumped.

“Congratulations to you too, Matty,” Antoine calls to his retreating back.

“Thanks, man.”

Matty doesn’t turn around, and Antoine lets out a discontented sigh. “I think he’s annoyed with me,” he murmurs, low enough that only I can hear him.

“Why?” I ask, blinking up at him with concern. Antoine is our least abrasive roommate. He pretty much keeps to himself,

hardly talks to anyone except for me and Seth. And Matty is so calm, so even-keeled. I can't imagine the two of them disagreeing about anything.

Antoine stares at me for a long moment, lips pulling into a frown, emerald eyes narrowing slightly. "You really don't know?"

A sinking feeling of dread has my stomach tightening and I swallow. "You think he's into me?"

I've had my suspicions for a while, but it's another thing entirely having them confirmed by someone else. I don't want Matty to like me, not like that. Not when I don't know if I'll ever be able to reciprocate those feelings.

Not when I'll most likely hurt him, like I've hurt all the other guys I've led on.

Antoine lifts one brow in silent answer.

"And what... he's jealous of you?" I ask, even though I already know the answer.

A curt nod.

I wrinkle my nose, tucking my snowboard tighter under my arm, like maybe it can give me some comfort.

"But... it's not like that with you and me," I point out, my cheeks flushing.

Okay, yes, maybe I *have* felt the slightest fluttering of butterflies when Antoine stroked my hair. And yes, I can acknowledge he's objectively a beautiful specimen of a man. But that doesn't mean anything. It's just a normal physical reaction. It doesn't mean I'm attracted to him.

"I mean, you're gay for one thing," I say, keeping my voice a low whisper.

Antoine stumbles, his boot catching on a lump of ice as he turns to look at me with wide eyes, his mouth opening, closing, opening again.

"Can you two hurry up?" Liam snaps.

“Sorry,” I say with a grimace, trotting carefully across the icy asphalt.

“I can do that,” Matty says, not quite looking at me as he takes my board from my hands, placing it on top of his on the roof racks of my car.

“Thanks,” I murmur, casting Matty a searching glance, my mind still racing with Antoine and my earlier conversation.

I frown when Liam heads around to the passenger side of the car, looking like he’s going to take Matty’s usual spot in the front seat. He knows Matty doesn’t fit in the back.

“Nuh-uh,” I say, slipping off my helmet before sliding into the driver’s seat. “You don’t get shotgun. Not when you’re being an impatient grump.”

Liam shoots me a dark look, then slides into the back seat, slamming the door shut with more force than necessary. “I’m not a grump,” he retorts, sounding decidedly grumpy. “And it’s not my fault you were moving at a speed that would rival glaciers for slowness.”

I narrow my eyes at him in the rearview mirror, but he doesn’t look at me. Instead, he’s staring intently out the window, his hair mussed and flattened from his helmet, his scowl unmistakable now that his goggles and mask are off. His body is practically plastered to the door, like he’s desperate to put as much space between himself and Antoine as possible.

Antoine looks just as uncomfortable, staring blankly ahead, sitting straight in his seat with his palms on his knees, like a student terrified of reprimand from a teacher.

*Okay then.*

I start up the car, grateful when the engine revs to life on the first turn, and let out a sigh. I don’t think I’m looking forward to this party.

---

## Chapter 14



---

### **Antoine**

I think I might be in hell.

I sit frozen in the back seat of Lily's car, terrified for my life at being driven in something that certainly cannot be roadworthy. The first man I ever kissed is currently impersonating a contortionist in an effort to sit as far away from me as possible, and the woman I've been slowly falling for believes that I'm gay.

*Putain de merde*, what did I ever do to deserve this?

As if in response to my question, Liam's words come back to me, full of anger cold enough to rival the winds that had buffeted us on top of the ridgeline five days ago.

*You want to know why I'm angry at you? You were sixteen years old. Sixteen fucking years old. Out at a nightclub. Do you think I would have kissed you if I'd known that? And then to find that out, in the worst possible way, when I'd come to speak to your goddamn lycée or college whatever you call your fancy high school. And you wonder why I didn't want to speak to you then...*

He'd let out a hollow laugh, his gray eyes shimmering with rage behind his goggles. *I was disgusted with myself. Disgusted.*

And he'd looked it too, with his lips pulled back and his teeth bared and his nostrils flared. But not at himself. No. At me.

*Liar.*

That's what he'd called me, up on the mountain.

I cast him a surreptitious glance, barely aware of the car jolting to a stop outside the liquor store. As if feeling my eyes on him, Liam turns, fixing me with a scowl, his gray eyes almost as wild-looking as his hair.

"Any requests?" he snaps, but I know he's not asking me. "Everyone fine with bourbon?"

"I... uh, I don't drink..." Matty dutifully reminds us from where he's folded into the front seat, his knees pressed against the glovebox, his head brushing the roof of the car.

It's such a pointless reminder that I roll my eyes and, for a brief moment, a smile ghosts Liam's lips. I could almost imagine that we're sharing a secret joke, laughing at teetotaler Matty and his fear of coffee and alcohol and even caffeinated soda. And then Liam's scowl deepens, becoming more of a sneer as he throws the door open, leaving a gust of icy wind in his wake.

"I'm fine with bourbon too, I guess," Lily mutters from the driver's seat, watching Liam stalk toward the liquor store. She turns to Matty, worrying her lower lip with her teeth. "Do you know what he's so upset about?"

Matty shakes his head, shifting awkwardly and tugging at his seatbelt in an effort to face her, to give her all his attention, like he always does. Even when I can tell it's tearing him up to look at her—like when she's sprawled out on the couch between Seth and me—he can't ignore her.

Given my growing feelings for Lily, that should make me jealous. Instead, I just feel sorry for him.

"No idea," he says, giving her a lopsided smile. It's his version of a forced smile, like only half his face will comply with happiness. "Maybe he's just worried about the liquor store closing in five minutes."

"So ridiculous," Lily sighs, throwing her head back against the headrest. "You know, pretty much everywhere else you can



just buy wine and liquor at the supermarket, right? And on a Sunday, too.”

Matty chuckles. “Oh, yah, I know. I grew up in Idaho, remember, and even Idaho is more liberal when it comes to that sort of thing.”

*Liberal.* I could almost laugh.

Back home, I’ve seen kids as young as ten trotting down to the *tabac* to pick up a bottle of wine for their parents. I’m pretty sure my own parents were pouring a glass for me at dinner by the time I was fifteen or sixteen.

Now, at the age of twenty, I’m made to feel like some sort of criminal, lurking in the car while someone older buys alcohol for us.

I press my forehead to the cold window, craning to see if I can spot Liam inside the store, then sit back, half-afraid that the storekeeper is going to storm out and refuse to sell to him with us sitting in the car.

“Done.” Liam’s voice startles me, along with the grinding sound of metal on metal as he wrenches the car door shut. “Now let’s get the fuck out of here.”

Lily looks at me in the rearview mirror, playfully rolling her eyes at Liam’s tone. I try to offer her a smile in return, but it falls flat.

It’s too late to fix what happened between me and Liam all those years ago. I know that now. Sixteen-year-old me broke his trust, and there’s nothing that twenty-year-old me can do to fix it.

But Lily...

I’m going to have to talk to Lily. To open up with her. To tell her that I’m bi, or pan, or whatever it is. I’m going to have to tell her that I’m attracted to her. That for the past two weeks, while she’s been pressed up against me, or resting her head on my knee, or letting me tangle my fingers in her hair, that I’ve been wanting her.

And *mon dieu*, if that isn’t absolutely terrifying.

---

## Chapter 15



---

### Lily

“Jesus fucking Christ, are we running a nightclub now?”

Matty visibly flinches at Liam’s words, though I’m inclined to agree with his assessment. I wrinkle my nose, almost stepping back when the humid air of our condo hits my face, thick with the scent of beer and sugar and human sweat.

At least thirty people are crammed into the tiny open-plan living room and kitchen, a pile of winter coats heaped against the wall, the rows of snow boots practically barricading us from coming inside as they create pools of melted snow on the linoleum. Music thumps from a speaker precariously perched next to the wall of empty beer cans, the bass notes making the cans rattle.

“*Bordel*,” Antoine mutters. “Who are these people?”

“Lily! Matty!” Eddie’s face emerges from the crowd, his flushed cheeks and wild smile making him look like a caricature of himself. “Congratulations, guys!”

Matty dips his chin, cheeks pinkening with pleasure. “Thanks, bud,” he mutters, the words nearly lost in the hum of the music and people talking.

I give Eddie a wary smile, not quite sure what to make of his suddenly friendly demeanor after nearly a week of silent distance. He doesn’t seem to notice though, and a moment later he’s turning to talk to someone I don’t know, the drink in his hand sloshing dangerously as he moves his hands

animatedly, regaling them with some story that has the people closest to him laughing.

Matty casts a nervous glance around the crowd, then bends to whisper in my ear. “Want to hide in my room?” His voice is a low rumble, his breath warm against my neck, making my skin suddenly feel even hotter beneath my thermals. “We could... um, play cards or something.”

I turn to look at him, my face only inches from his own, his blue eye boring into mine with an intensity that has heat coiling low in my belly.

Yesterday, I might have said yes. Might have fooled myself into thinking that he’s not really interested in me, not as more than a friend. Now, Antoine’s comments from earlier are running through my head, and I can’t help but think that nothing could be more dangerous.

Not because I don’t trust Matty, but because I don’t trust myself.

*He’s so close, I could kiss him.* I wonder what it would feel like, to taste his lips, to feel his big body pressed against my own.

“We shouldn’t,” I say, worrying my lower lip with my teeth. “I think they threw this party for us, right?”

It’s a weak excuse. Tom and Eddie started this party before they found out whether we passed or not. But it seems to convince Matty, because he gives a resigned sigh.

“Yah. You’re probably right.”

He straightens, slinging one arm around my shoulders, and I can’t help but notice it’s the second time today he’s held me like this. I freeze beside him, unsure whether I should wrap my arm around his waist, not wanting to lead him on, but not wanting to hurt his feelings either.

I settle for pressing my palm against his back, like we’re posing for a family photo, then look to Antoine, silently pleading with him to help me. But Antoine’s eyes are locked on Liam, expression pained as he watches Liam bend to untie his combat boots.

“Do you know any of these people?” I ask as we move toward the kitchen. Matty shakes his head, his jaw tensing.

“Hey, Lil, come here! I want to introduce you to someone.”

Matty stiffens beside me at the sound of Seth’s voice, his arm tightening around my shoulders. I smile up at him, giving him what I hope is a reassuring pat before slipping free of his hold to make my way into the kitchen.

“Lily, this is Tessa,” Seth says, before pressing some drink he’s mixed into my hands. “She’s one of the snowboard instructors at the mountain.”

Tessa gives me a broad smile, flashing perfectly white teeth as she leans against the kitchen counter. “Nice to meet you, Lily.” Her accent is thick, though I can’t quite tell if she’s from Australia or New Zealand. “Seth said you passed the exam today.”

I nod, shooting Seth a grateful smile, warmth building behind my ribs.

I confessed to him a few days ago that I was nervous about starting work as an instructor, in part because I don’t really know any of the other instructors, aside from Liam. Whenever I’ve seen them on the mountain, in their black uniforms, walking together or gathering up their students, they’ve always seemed so intimidating. Like a class of humans I could never aspire to belong to.

“Yah, I did. Thanks.” I give Tessa a nervous smile, feeling just a little starstruck. It doesn’t help that Tessa is absolutely gorgeous, blonde hair and freckles, sparkling blue eyes, and a style that makes her look like she’s stepped out of a Roxy advertisement.

I tip back my drink in an effort to hide some of my awkwardness, then quickly sputter out a choked cough when the burn of some spirit hits the back of my throat. “Holy crap, that’s strong.”

Tessa laughs, a rich, lilting laugh that bubbles over my skin, before tossing long blonde waves over one shoulder. My

cheeks heat with embarrassment, and I resist the urge to glare at Seth.

“Yah shoulda warned her, mate,” Tessa chides, giving Seth a disapproving look before clapping me on the shoulder. “I told you they were too strong.”

“You said you liked it,” Seth retorts, pointing one finger accusingly at Tessa.

Tessa waves one hand dismissively. “Yeah, but I’m a slag for plonk. Not everyone likes their bourbon with a shot of cola.” She turns back to me, her smile indulgent. “And Lil is clearly much more sophisticated than that.”

I feel the tips of my ears burning, and my cheeks must be as pink as Tessa’s shirt now. I’m not quite sure if she’s teasing me or not, and the fact that she’s an instructor is doing nothing to ease my nerves.

“You playing nice, Tess?” Liam’s voice is low and gravelly, his arm brushing against mine as he comes to stand beside me.

Tessa rolls her eyes, a little huff escaping her bow-shaped lips. “I’m always nice. Unlike you.”

I bite back a smile, because I’m somewhat inclined to agree with her. Especially today.

“You’ll have to excuse Tess,” Liam says, ignoring her comment and turning to face me. He’s close enough that I can see the dark navy rim around his gray irises. I can also see the hint of dark shadow under his eyes, almost purple against his pale skin. “She’s from Australia.”

“And what’s that supposed to mean?” Tessa frowns, putting one hand on her hip, her other hand waving her half-empty glass menacingly.

“You know what it means,” Liam replies. He keeps his eyes on me though, and there’s the barest hint of a smile curving his lips.

“You wound me,” Tess says, her voice full of mock offense. “After everything that we had...”

I get a sudden flash of white behind my eyes at her words, a strange tightening in my throat, a twisting in my stomach. The weight of Liam's stare is suddenly too much, and I turn to look at Tessa with a growing sense of dread and panic.

*Am I... am I jealous?*

Before I can even begin to contemplate what that could possibly mean, Liam lets out a snort. "Please. I trained you for a week three years ago. You make it sound like we were married."

"You told me I was your favorite student," Tessa retorts.

"No, I told you that you were the most painful student I'd ever taught. Possibly unteachable. And that it was a good thing you had talent, because you had absolutely nothing else going for you."

Tessa widens her eyes dramatically, but doesn't bother to hide her smile, like she's proud of his condemnation.

"Lily, on the other hand..." Liam throws his arm around me, his fingertips dangling precariously close to my chest, his side pressed against my own. My heart stutters, breath suddenly feeling short, like I've just finished hiking at ten-thousand-foot altitude or powering down a double black diamond run. "Lily actually listens to what I tell her. She's a good student."

Heat floods me, my legs suddenly feeling weak under the weight of Liam's praise. I feel myself leaning against him, reaching around his waist and gripping his sweater to steady myself.

I'm equal parts irritated and confused by my reaction—I'm not into Liam. Not like that. At least, I don't think I am. And besides, I'm pretty sure he's only trying to make some point with this girl he knows.

Tessa's grin turns almost predatory, her eyes glinting with a mixture of amusement and interest as she takes us in. "I bet she is."

She takes a long sip of her drink, then fixes me with a smile that is all warmth. "It'll be good to have another woman instructor. It's a right sausage fest at the snowboard school at

the moment—only about six women to fifty men. Ski school is better, but not by much.”

She takes another drink, pausing to dab her lips with the back of her hand. “If you ever want someone to ride with on your days off, let me know. Or someone to drink with. Or shop with.” She pauses, giving me a conspiratorial wink, then drops her voice to a mock whisper. “Or if you want to complain about how moody Liam is.”

“I’m not moody,” Liam grumbles, dropping his hold on me and taking a swig of his beer. “Tell her, Lily.”

A laugh bursts out of me despite my best efforts to hold it back, and I turn to give Liam an *are you kidding me?* look. Just this afternoon alone he’s gone from happy that I passed my exam, to snapping about us running late to the liquor store, and now I’m the best student he ever had.

Liam curses under his breath, shooting Tessa a glare before stalking off to the other side of the kitchen. I let out a sigh of relief when he sidles up to Matty—who is looking decidedly lost, clutching his can of Dr Pepper and staring wide-eyed as Tom regales him and Seth with some story.

“See,” Tessa says, drawing my attention back to her. She waves her drink in Liam’s general direction. “So moody.”

I give her a tentative smile, stumbling closer to her when someone knocks into me from behind. She reaches out, gripping my shoulder to steady me, then gives me a searching look, her blue eyes full of kind intelligence.

“I’m serious about going riding sometime,” she says, dropping her hand. “Or drinking. I live with my boyfriend and a bunch of his mates, and it all gets a bit too *blokey* at times, you know what I mean? Plus, Jason works in park, so he’s out most nights.”

“Park?” I furrow my brow in confusion, and she chuckles.

“He builds the terrain parks—the kickers, the rails, that sort of thing. Drives a groomer too, so they’ve had him grooming the main runs near the park as well.”

“Oh. Wow, that’s cool,” I offer lamely, not sure of what else to say.

I’ve been skiing and then snowboarding my whole life, but never stopped to think about how the runs got groomed each morning, about who was responsible for making the snow fresh and crisp, or who designed the terrain parks and made sure everything worked.

Tessa nods, seemingly unconcerned by my bland response. “It is, innit? He’s one of the best, he did the pipe for the X-Games last season, and the kickers he’s built are the biggest in country, apparently.” She grins, her eyes flashing mischievously. “But enough about him. I want to know about you. Seth said you’re from Hawai’i? How did you get into riding—there isn’t snow in Hawai’i, is there? And how did you meet everyone?”

I give her the very high-level version of why I came to Utah, quickly brushing over the explanation of my privileged family holidays to the snow each winter, and talking instead about what Hawai’i is like, and how excited I am to do a full season in the snow for the first time in my life.

She tells me about the snowboard school, giving me a dizzying amount of information—unspoken rules, names of people to avoid, people to keep on my side. Things I had never thought about before, like the fact that there is only one changing room for all the ski and snowboard instructors, that the sparse number of women get dressed at lockers right next to men.

When I start to tell her about how Matty invited me to move in, and how there were only meant to be five people living here, but we ended up with seven, Tessa laughs so hard she spills her drink.

“Holy shit.” She swipes her eyes with the back of her hand, laughter still shaking her tall frame. “I bet Liam was fucking livid. That’s epic. Seven people. That’s more than we have in our place, and I thought we were packed. Wait…” Her laughter trails off, and she widens her eyes in horror. “There’s only one bathroom?”



I grimace and nod, because that has been one of the hardest parts about this living situation. That, and sharing a room with Tom.

“Oh mate, I’m sorry for yah.”

“What? Why are you feeling sorry for Lily?” Eddie asks, injecting himself into the conversation, and into the small space between me and Tessa. He throws an arm over both our shoulders, putting his head between ours like it’s some sort of sports huddle.

“So many reasons,” Tessa drawls. “And one of them is standing on my toes. Do you mind?” She shoves at him, playfully but forcefully, and Eddie winces before releasing his grip on her shoulders.

“So violent,” he complains. “I was actually coming over to see how we’re doing on mixer, thank you very much.” He cranes his neck, trying to see to the counter behind Tessa while still keeping his arm wrapped around me. It’s littered with half-empty liquor bottles and mostly empty soda bottles. “Looks like we’re out of coke. Want to walk with me to the corner store to get some supplies?”

He turns to give me a blinding smile, and my breath stutters in my chest.

It’s the same smile he gave me five days ago, when we sat together on the chairlift and he told me all about growing up in New Zealand, and what the ski resorts there are like. The same smile he gave me when we were flying through powder, high on adrenaline, our turns in perfect synchronicity, our laughter mingling in the icy air above us.

I haven’t seen that smile from him since, and the sight of it has something like longing pulling behind my ribs. Why did he stop smiling at me?

“Okay,” I say, my voice sounding a little breathless. “I could use the walk.”

I could also use some food. I’m a lightweight, and while I’ve been talking to Tessa, I’ve drunk the entire drink Seth gave me

on an empty stomach. I can feel the effects of the bourbon making my head feel light and my limbs heavy.

“Excellent!” Eddie’s smile widens, and he drops his arm from around my shoulders, only to grab my hand, twining his fingers with my own.

Tessa frowns at Eddie, looking annoyed that I’m leaving, but Eddie lifts his chin, sniffing haughtily in her direction. “Don’t give me that look, Tess. It’s my turn to have Lily. You’ve had her since she got here.”

Tessa rolls her eyes at Eddie, not bothering to respond before pulling out her phone and demanding that I give her my number. “So you can call me if any of these assholes get out of hand,” she explains, and there’s a hardness to her smile that has something in me melting. Especially when she makes me promise to text her when I get to work on Monday, so she can show me around the locker room and help me get settled in.

“Tessa is a cool chick,” Eddie says, as we step out into the icy night air, the crisp scent of snow and concrete replacing the humid scent of sweat, booze, and soda. “Second-ranked female snowboard instructor as well, so a good friend to have. She’ll definitely be able to show you the ropes.”

“Awesome.” I grip the handrail as I carefully navigate the icy steps that snake down to the parking lot, the knit gloves I put on doing nothing to stop the cold. “What does that mean, second ranked?” My sneakers slip on the ice, and I silently curse my lack of snow boots. Something to remedy with my first paycheck, if there’s enough left over. “Like, is that based on how long she’s instructed?”

“Sort of...” Eddie looks over his shoulder just in time to see my feet slip on a particularly icy step, then frowns when he notices my shoes. “Hard out, are those your shoes?” He shakes his head, then continues. “Rank is based on a mixture of things. How long someone has taught for, but also what level certification they have. Tessa is a level three. It’s not quite the highest she can get, but not far off it. Liam has a level four—that’s the highest—and it means he’s a trainer too.” He winces,

then adds. “You and Matty, and the rest who passed today, you guys don’t even have level one.”

“How would I get a level one?” I ask, thinking out loud. But Eddie answers anyway.

“To be honest, you probably wouldn’t get one. Not now, anyway. You’d be looking at minimum six weeks of intensive training. It took a whole season to train for mine, and even then, the exam had a fifty-percent fail rate.”

“Oh.”

A tired sort of disappointment settles heavy in my stomach at his words. I had known that the certificate I got today only enabled me to teach at the mountain. I guess I just hadn’t understood why.

Just then, both my feet slip out from under me. My death grip on the railing keeps me from hitting my ass on the ice-coated cement steps, but that doesn’t stop Eddie from turning fully around, his lips pulled into a feral scowl.

“What the hell?” He climbs the couple steps separating us, reaching out to grab my free hand. “Honestly, those fucking shoes. Are you trying to break something?”

His hand is warm and strong around my own—surprising, since he’s not even wearing gloves—and I step reflexively toward him.

“Come on.” His hand is like a vise on my own, forcing us to walk side by side as we traverse the last set of stairs. “Let’s get to the dairy and back without an injury, eh? Pretty sure Matty would pummel me if I brought you back injured.” He gives a harsh chuckle, keeping his gaze averted from my own.

“Dairy?” I ask, because I’m not willing to try and unpack the comment about Matty right now. “I don’t think there’s a dairy in Park City...”

Eddie stops, turning to blink at me in confusion before giving a sheepish smile. “Sorry. *Convenience store*,” he clarifies. “I’ll try to use more Yank-friendly terminology.”

“It’s fine.” Just when I think I’ve gotten the hang of everyone’s different way of speaking, they go and use some new word I’ve never heard of before. To be honest, I kind of like it. “I don’t want you to be anything besides yourself around me.”

Eddie stumbles beside me, his hand tightening around my own. We’re at the base of the steps now, and I pause, turning to give him a questioning look. He’s staring back at me, his brown eyes wide and reflecting the lamplit snow, his lips parted.

“You don’t mean that.” He closes his eyes, his expression shuttering as he dips his chin. An unruly lock of brown hair falls across his forehead, and he flicks it back. “Not really.”

But I do mean it.

I think I got a glimpse of him that day we hiked backcountry—not when he was openly flirting with me on the lift, but after. When his skis hit the snow, when his laughter danced with mine alongside flying powder. In those moments, he’d let down his guard, and it was like watching the sun rise over icy mountains, brilliant and breathtaking and almost painfully real.

And then after—when Antoine and I had been helping him find his ski, playing and rolling in the snow—Eddie might have been worried, but there was a raw honesty in his smiles. And the look he gave me when I pulled his ski from the powder, where it had snagged on an orange plastic boundary fence that had been hidden beneath the surface—it was like I was Arthur pulling Excalibur from the stone.

I’ve thought about that day all week. In those few snow-sparkled moments, I’d felt like there had been a connection forged between our two souls.

I’d give anything to see him like that again.

I shiver, and his eyes fly open, a hard edge of determination tightening his jaw. “You’re cold.” His eyes track over my worn snowboard jacket, the thin fabric, the too-big fit, and he shakes his head. “Your gear is shit, Missy. I should have had one of the guys come with me instead.”

My stomach drops at his words, a lump of disappointment catching in my throat. But he doesn't release his grip on my hand as we carefully make our way down the street to the convenience store, only letting me go when we step inside.

"You should let me carry those," he grumbles as we leave the shop, frowning when I heft a canvas bag filled with soda bottles over one shoulder.

I shake my head, sidestepping out of his reach when he tries to take it from me. "No way." I look pointedly at his own bags. "Besides, this will help keep me warm on the way back."

He snorts in disbelief, then flashes a mischievous grin, bending to settle his own bags on the icy pavement before reaching into the inside of his ski coat. "If you want something to warm you up, why don't you try this instead?" He thrusts a metal flask into my hands, and I take it without thinking. "It's just whiskey. Nothing too strong."

I huff out a laugh, my breath clouding in front of my face. I'm not sure what he usually drinks, but where I come from, whiskey falls squarely within the *strong* category. Not that I've had that much experience drinking—so far, my alcohol consumption has mostly been limited to a beer or a glass of wine with friends.

"Sure. Okay." I give him a nervous smile, my gloved fingers fumbling with the cap. "Why not?"

I take a tentative sip, nearly gasping at the instant burn in my throat, trying but failing to keep a straight face. My pride bristles at his answering grin, at the flicker of amusement dancing in his eyes, and I give him a pointed look before tipping the flask back and taking another long sip. This time, it doesn't burn quite as much, so I take a third sip before giving him a smug, vindicated smile.

When I lift the flask for a fourth drink, his eyes widen in alarm. "Okay, okay." He reaches out, covering my hands with his own before taking the flask back. "I don't need you legless on my watch. We still have to walk back, and I'm pretty sure the guys would have my balls if I got you wasted."

I wrinkle my nose at his dramatics. I'm not going to get wasted from a couple mouthfuls of whiskey, though I think it is starting to warm me up. Already, I can feel a comfortable heat pooling in my belly, snaking down my limbs, building on that heady, light feeling from when I was drinking with Tessa in the kitchen earlier.

"Right then," Eddie chuckles, pocketing his flask and reaching forward to slip the bag from my shoulder before I can stop him. "Let's get you home."

---

## Chapter 16



---

### **Eddie**

I must have some sort of inbuilt self-destruct mechanism.

That's the only way to explain my decision to invite Lily to come with me. Why after a week of successfully avoiding her, I would willingly put myself in a situation where I would be alone with her.

Why I just can't seem to keep my hands off her.

"Wow." Lily grips my arm, attempting to steady herself as the combination of alcohol and those ridiculous worn-out trainers turn her into the human equivalent of a baby gazelle. "It got really icy all of a sudden."

I grimace, waiting until she finds her footing, then shift the bags I'm carrying to my left shoulder so I can wrap my right arm around her. She gives a little whimper, shivering as she attempts to burrow into my side, teeth chattering.

"You're right, I feel so much warmer now. That whiskey really did help."

"That's good," I say, squeezing her against me, my eyes widening in alarm. How much did she drink? She couldn't have had more than a couple sips. Was she drunk when we left? She'd *seemed* sober...

The windows of our condo flicker like distant beacons at the top of the hill, at least fifty ice-coated steps separating us from warmth. I tighten my hold on her, grip the icy metal railing

with my free hand, and try to ignore the feel of the canvas bags full of soda digging into my shoulder.

“I had so much fun going backcountry with you the other day,” Lily rambles, her feet slipping on the steps. “Was really nice.”

“Yah. It was.” My answer comes out in a grunt, my quads burning as I haul Lily up the steps alongside me.

“But I feel like you’ve been avoiding me,” she continues. “Was it something I said? Or did?”

*Well, shit.* I thought I’d been pretty subtle about it.

“I’m sorry if it was,” she continues. “I like you, Eddie. I want us to be friends. You seem like someone I could really be friends with, you know.”

My stomach tightens at her words, an edge of panic icing down my limbs, making my already-frozen fingertips numb. I’m not the sort of guy girls want to be friends with. I’m the sort of guy who is good for a laugh at a party, good for one-night stands, and that’s about it.

“When I first met you, I thought you were a dick, you know that?”

I huff out a mirthless laugh at her honesty. “Well, you weren’t wrong,” I tell her. “I *am* a bit of a dick.”

She pulls to a stop, feet slipping as she twists in my hold, turning so that she’s facing me. We’re on a wide cement landing, just after the first set of stairs, only about a quarter of the way up what is starting to feel like Mount Everest.

“No. You’re not. Not really.” Her head is tilted back, her eyes glinting amber and green in the lamplight. She’s standing close enough to me that I can see the nearly faded bruises under her eyes, the scattering of freckles across her nose, the hint of white teeth between parted lips. “I think you just pretend to be one.”

She reaches up, tracing one gloved fingertip along the side of my face, her eyes roving over my features, searching. I shiver beneath her touch, at the feel of her breath on my lips, the soft



brush of wool on my cold skin. And, because this is Lily, of course my cock takes that moment to wake up, fighting against icy cold air and restrictive denim as it strains toward her.

“I think that’s just a mask you wear,” she murmurs, and I swear I can feel her eyes boring through my skin, into my very soul. “But you let the mask slip when we were skiing the other day. And I liked it.” Her lips curl into a soft smile, and she gives one of those breathy chuckles that has the blood rushing almost painfully to my dick. “A lot.”

“Lily,” I croak in warning, reaching up to grab her wrist.

I mean to pull her hand away from my face, to step back from her. Instead, I find my fingertips linking with her own, pulling her gloved hand against my chest, tucking it into the unzipped portion of my coat. Her eyelids flutter, her gaze dropping to where I’m pulling her hand inside my jacket, to where her fingertips are spreading against my chest.

“I... I want...” Lily’s eyes flick back up to mine, pupils blown, swimming with hazy confusion and want.

I swallow, and wonder if she can feel how wildly my heart is thundering in my chest, if she can feel the heat of my desire burning through my sweater against her fingertips. She leans forward, her lips parted, her eyes full of hopeful questioning, and I *know*. I know what she’s going to do before she does it.

A desperate groan builds in my throat, coming out in a silent huff that has my breath clouding between us. I should stop this. I should stop her. She’s clearly drunk, and this isn’t what she wants. I’m not what she wants. Not really.

I stay still, my feet rooted to the spot, as if the ice beneath me has snaked its way up my legs.

Lily surges forward, the hand tucked beneath my coat spreading over my chest, her other hand reaching up to grip the back of my neck. Her lips are soft, the warmth of them burning in comparison to the icy air around us. She tastes like whiskey and cola, like sugar and fire, and I groan into her mouth as her tongue delves in, tangling with my own, taking what it wants.

And then I get that feeling again. That almost painful need that is more than lust. It grates against my ribs, tightens in my throat, squeezes my lungs. *Lily, Lily, Lily*, it sings, feeling like anger and joy, like fresh tracks in a perfect powder run. *Lily*.

She pulls back, panting, her lips swollen and eyes wide with surprise. “I... I’m sorry.” She shakes her head, the movement causing her to stumble, and she grips my shoulder for balance. “I... I don’t know what... I just...”

The heat surging along my spine turns to lead in my stomach at the look of bleary confusion on her face. Guilt and self-hatred quickly take the place of desire.

“Hey. Hey,” I tell her, forcing my kiss-bruised lips into a smile. The night air feels painfully cold against them, the absence of her lips a physical loss. “That’s okay. You’re all good.”

She didn’t mean to kiss me. And I should have known that—*did* know it, really. A better man than me would have stopped her before it began.

“You’re just a little drunk, Missy.” I pull her hand from the inside of my jacket, and tuck her back under my arm. “These things happen. No hard feelings, okay.”

If she was another girl, I’d tell her she could kiss me anytime she wanted. That it didn’t have to mean anything. That I’m always up for a drunk hookup. That we could be friends with benefits.

Women have needs just like men and I have absolutely no problem with being the guy that meets them.

The words die in my throat, settling alongside the guilt in the pit of my stomach, tasting like hunger and loss. For some reason, the thought of being a one-night stand for Lily just makes me feel sick.

“Okay,” she says, voice quavering, breathless. “Thanks.”

I pull her closer against me, relishing in the feel of her beside me, in the sweet, heady scent of her. There are only a few more steps until we reach the condo, and then I’ll have to let

her go. Probably forever. But until then... until then, I'll make the most of this moment with her.

I know it's all I'll ever have.

---

## Chapter 17



---

### **Matty**

“What do you mean, you accidentally got Lily drunk?” Liam hisses, cornering Eddie in the kitchen before he can unload the bags full of soda bottles on the counter. “You guys were gone for twenty minutes. How do you accidentally get someone drunk on the way to a corner store?”

Eddie scrubs one hand over his face, but doesn’t respond. I can’t help but wonder if he’s drunk too, because I think this is the first time I’ve seen him without some witty retort on the tip of his tongue. Instead, his gaze drifts to the other end of the kitchen, where Lily is currently leaning against the counter, watching as Seth mixes her another drink.

“Hey, mate,” Eddie calls out to Seth, his accent sounding more pronounced than ever. A few heads turn his way, no doubt expecting him to say something amusing, but Seth doesn’t respond.

My body tenses at the sight of so many eyes turned in my direction—even if they’re looking at Eddie and not me. I instinctively press my back against the counter, my eyes darting to the hallway, the door, the windows. I take a deep breath, and remind myself that this is a party, not a war zone, and that I can see all possible entry points in the condo. That I’m safe.

“Seth,” Eddie tries again, louder this time, his voice sending an almost painful jolt down my spine as the voice of my commanding officer echoes in my head.

Seth stops midpour, looking at Eddie with a questioning smile on his face.

“She should be on water for a bit,” Eddie says, and for once, there’s no lilt of humor to his voice. “Don’t let her trick you into making her another drink.”

Lily’s eyes widen in outrage, her nostrils flaring as she fixes Eddie with a glare.

A blonde nearby chuckles, shaking her head in amusement. “You always did know how to win over the ladies,” she deadpans. “No surer way into a woman’s knickers than telling them what they can eat or drink.”

“Save it, Tess,” Eddie snarks. “I don’t need some Aussie *sheila* womansplaining how to pick up chicks, okay.”

Lily strides over before Tessa can reply, stopping with a lurch in front of Eddie, reaching out to lean on the counter for support.

Eddie pulls out a dented steel flask from his inside jacket pocket, holding it up to Lily accusingly. “You realize you downed half this thing, eh Missy? This is sipping whiskey, not sculling whiskey. Meant for *sipping*.”

Lily rolls her eyes, her lips curving into a smile. “How was I supposed to know that? It’s not like it came with instructions.” She gives a little laugh, a dismissive wave with one hand, then stumbles forward, her hand gripping the counter to keep upright.

Eddie widens his eyes almost comically. “Instructions? Why the fuck would you need instructions? Have you never had spirits before?”

Eddie unloads soda bags onto the kitchen counter with angry *thunks*, and I lean around him, unable to resist the urge to keep Lily in my sight at all times.

Lily shakes her head. “No. Not really,” she admits, and I bristle at the flash of vulnerability in her eyes. At the fact that Eddie put it there. I want to push him aside, to wrap her up in my arms. To tell her there is nothing wrong with not knowing how to drink whiskey.

I don't know how to drink whiskey.

Liam comes to her other side, reaching up and ruffling her hair with one hand. "You're looking a little wobbly there. Maybe you should sit down."

"You should have seen her on the walk back," Eddie continues, glaring at the bottles of soda he's unloading as if they've personally offended him. "Her shoes are completely ridiculous. Absolutely no tread. Actually, that reminds me..."

He spins around, leaving the rest of the canvas bags half-unpacked on the counter and stalks off to the other end of the kitchen, stooping by the front door for a moment to rifle through the pile of snow-sodden boots and shoes. He must find what he's looking for, because he picks up a familiar pair of worn tennis shoes up with a look of dark triumph.

"These are your shoes, right?" he hollers, his voice projecting across the crowd of people packed into the condo, the shoes held up over his head.

Lily's brow dips in confusion, but she gives a stilted nod.

Without further warning, Eddie pulls a utility knife from his pocket, flicking the blade out. A frisson of ice runs up my arms, heart rate ratcheting up at the sound, at the flash of steel glinting in the dim light. The people clustered near the door give Eddie a wary look, shuffling away from him.

Oblivious to their reaction, Eddie flips Lily's shoes over, then forcefully but methodically runs the blade over the soles of her shoes.

"Can someone please explain why Eddie is having a mantrum and cutting up Lily's shoes?" Tessa asks, coming to stand between Liam and Lily.

Liam chuckles, looking completely unfazed, like Eddie does this sort of thing at parties all the time. Who knows, maybe he does.

"He's just giving them better tread," Liam explains. "So they'll grip on the ice."

I give an appraising nod and eye Eddie with grudging respect. That's... that's actually really smart. I wish I'd thought of doing that.

Lily gives a whimper, and my eyes snap back to where she's standing, her face pale as she leans against the counter.

"I... I don't feel so good," she admits, voice thready.

She looks at me, noticing me for the first time since she came back from the convenience store, and gives a wobbly smile.

"Matty..." My name comes out as a question and a plea, her eyes blinking and unfocused.

"You should go sit down," Liam suggests again, but Lily doesn't seem to hear.

She needs to get out of here, I realize. I might not drink, but I've seen what it looks like when someone is about to be sick or pass out or both. That moment of panic that flits across their features, the way all color leaches from their skin, the glazed eyes, and panting breaths.

I look around the kitchen, hoping to see Seth nearby. Lily must feel comfortable with him, since she's cuddled up with him on the couch each night. And as much as the sight of them together has been tearing me up, I know Lily should be with someone she trusts right now.

But Seth's back is to us, and he's busy serving people drinks. Busy being the host, smiling, making sure everything is running smoothly.

I frown. He should be looking after Lily.

"Matty..." she says again, and something in me detonates, the tension that has been coiling under my skin all evening bursting forth, demanding action.

I push off the counter, the sound of the party falling to a hum beneath the staccato of my own heartbeat, the faces of the crowd blurring at the edges of my vision, until all I can see is Lily.

My sweet, lovely Lily.

“I got you, baby,” I murmur, wrapping her up in my arms, lifting her to me.

Her arms sweep around my neck, her face pressing just above my collarbone, her legs parting and lifting to wrap around my waist. I drop one arm under her, my other arm holding tight around her back, just in case she lets go. Holding her close to my body.

For a brief moment, everything stops at the feel of her pressed against me—my breath, my thoughts, probably even the turning of the world stutters to a halt.

She’s heavier than I thought she would be, and softer too, a mixture of lean muscle and swelling curves. Soft brown hair brushes my jaw, the scent of her sweet and heady beneath the scent of whiskey. Most amazingly, I can feel the rise and fall of her chest against my own, can feel the huffs of her breath against my skin. All the little movements that tell me she is real.

That this is real.

And then reality comes surging back, all the sound and color of the party along with it, reminding me of my mission.

“Out of my way,” I bellow, glaring down at the people around me.

There are a few startled yelps of surprise, and I’m vaguely aware of Tessa saying something to Liam, but I ignore them, powering forward through the crowd, for once grateful for my size. For my ability to intimidate, just by existing.

Normally, I hate it, but right now it’s helping me get Lily to safety. So it’s a good thing.

A few steps and we’re in the darkened hallway. At first, I contemplate taking her to her own room, but then I remember I saw Tom go in there a little while ago, a long-legged brunette on his heels, and stride past.

Lily gives another whimper, her lips pressed against my neck, and I shiver, doing my best to ignore the ill-timed surge of heat coursing down my spine at the feel of her lips on my skin.



“Do you think you’re going to be sick?” I ask, pausing outside the bathroom.

The door is shut, and I’m pretty sure someone is in there, but if she needs to use it, I can easily haul whoever is in there out of her way.

She shakes her head, and presses her face against me with another groan. “No. No, I don’t think so,” she whimpers. “I’m sorry...”

“Shh...” I rub her back, my palm pressing soothing circles along her spine as I hold her to me. “I got you, baby.”

I pause, looking nervously at the closed door of my own room, deliberating.

That is where I want to take her—probably where I was planning on taking her this whole time—but now that I’m here, I’m starting to have second thoughts. Lily is vulnerable right now, and even though I can’t fathom ever doing anything to hurt her, I also can’t deny what I feel for her.

Especially now that her body is pressed against mine, that most private part of her only inches from my arm as I hold her up, her core pressed against me...

“Matty, what the fuck are you doing?”

Liam’s sharp voice cuts through the panicked haze of my thoughts, and I blink down as he comes up beside me in the darkness.

“You can’t just go all caveman and haul Lily off to your bedroom,” he continues, his body pressing against Lily’s back as he tries to squeeze past us in the narrow hallway.

“Tom’s in her room,” I argue, clutching Lily tighter against me.

“Ugh, I know,” Liam says with a shudder. “I made the mistake of going in there just before. Harrowing.”

“Tom is so gross,” Lily mutters against my neck.

Liam chuckles, bending around to try to see Lily’s face in the darkness. “Oh. You’re awake still, huh. That’s good.” His

voice has lost its sharp edge from earlier now that he's speaking to her, and he reaches up to rub her back, just above where my arm is banded around her. "You want to go hang out in Matty's room for a bit, love?"

*Love.*

I narrow my eyes at him. I haven't heard him call her that before.

"Uh-huh," Lily murmurs, breath warm against my neck. "Please."

A smug sense of satisfaction wells up in me at her response, and I can't help but grin down at Liam, feeling vindicated. He rolls his eyes at me, then pushes past us, opening the door to my room.

Light floods the hall, and I squint against the brightness as I carry Lily into the room I share with Antoine and Seth, carefully depositing her on my double mattress. It takes up most of the space in this tiny room—Antoine and Seth both only have twin-size mattresses on the floor—but the reality is I just won't fit in anything else.

I've felt guilty about it since the season started.

"Hmmm. That's better," Lily murmurs, pressing her face into my pillow, her hair spreading out around her in brown waves, her limbs tangling with my blankets. Suddenly, I'm grateful for my mattress, that there's enough room for Lily to be comfortable. That I can sit on the edge here and watch over her.

"What are you doing in here?" Antoine's voice is low, an almost-lethal-sounding rumble, and I furrow my brow in confusion, thinking for a brief moment that he's talking to me.

"None of your fucking business," Liam retorts, all the softness that he used with Lily gone.

"This is my room. Of course it's my business." Antoine sits up in his bed and sets the book he's been reading to one side before adjusting the collar of his sleep shirt. Because yes, Antoine is one of those people who wears pajamas that look

like tailored dress shirts and pants, instead of just sleeping in a worn-out T-shirt and boxers like the rest of us.

“Guys...” Lily moans, flinging one hand over the portion of her face that isn’t pressed into my pillow. “Can you not?”

Antoine’s eyes widen at the sight of Lily on my bed, as if he’s only just noticed her, then looks up to me in silent question.

“She got a little drunk,” I say by way of explanation, reaching down to rub soothing circles over Lily’s back. “I thought she could use a break from the party.”

I’m trying really hard not to grin like an idiot right now, but it’s difficult. Lily wanted me. Held me. She’s laying in my bed, and I’m looking after her. Not Seth. Not Antoine. Not Liam.

*Me.*

“I kissed Eddie,” Lily says, the words muffled by my pillow.

“I’m sorry—what?” Liam asks, sinking to sit on Seth’s empty mattress and blinking at Lily in confusion.

“Yep. I kissed him.” Lily lets out a sigh, then rolls onto her back, throwing one arm over her eyes. The move has her sweater riding up, exposing her naval and the soft, tan flesh above the waistband of her jeans.

“I’m such an asshole,” she continues, her words slightly slurred but clear enough. “I don’t know what my problem is. There I was, telling him I wanted us to be friends, and the next minute I was trying to suck his soul out of his mouth.” She lifts one arm above her, pointing one finger for emphasis as she adds: “That is not what friends do. Friends don’t drunk-kiss their friends.”

Liam snorts, leaning back on his hands, kicking his legs out in front of him. “I’m pretty sure Eddie would have been fine with it.”

Lily gives a mirthless laugh. “Um, no. No, he wasn’t. God, I’m such a jerk.”

My mind is racing, trying to make sense of Lily’s words. “You... you kissed Eddie?” I ask dumbly.

“Yah.” Lily says this on an exhale, and I try not to notice the way her breasts rise and fall with the movement, the way her pulse flutters at her throat.

“Wh—why?” I ask, hating how small my voice sounds. My throat suddenly feels tight, and there’s a burning behind my eyes.

“I don’t know,” Lily groans, and she moves her arm, only to press both palms against her face.

“Well, you wouldn’t be the first person to kiss someone drunk and regret it later,” Antoine mutters, pulling his knees up to his chest and leaning his head against the wall, eyes fluttering shut. “I’m sure Eddie will get over it. Or he won’t. Maybe he’ll hold a grudge against you for years. Maybe it’s a Kiwi thing to hate people who drunk-kiss you.”

Lily whimpers, and I narrow my eyes at Antoine, my own hurt quickly giving way to anger on her behalf. He doesn’t have any right to talk to her like that.

“Shut up, Antoine,” Liam says, and there’s an edge to his voice that I don’t quite understand.

Liam scoots off Seth’s bed, scrambling across the threadbare carpet to the edge of my mattress, pulling Lily’s hands off her face.

“Eddie isn’t going to be mad at you, love,” Liam adds soothingly, his elbows resting on my mattress as he leans over Lily, forcing her to meet his eyes. He brushes a strand of loose hair off her forehead, pausing to shoot me a silent look of warning before adding: “No one is going to be mad at you, okay?”

Lily nods, her lower lip trembling as she stares up at him, her hazel eyes flitting to mine with such a look of guilt, it has my chest clenching.

“He’s right,” I choke out, swallowing back my own hurt pride. I don’t have any right to feel possessive of her, to be upset if she kisses someone else. “You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Okay…” Lily frowns, not looking entirely convinced, but probably too tired to argue. Her eyelids flutter shut, and she

lets out another sigh before throwing her arm back over her face. “It didn’t mean anything,” she rambles, speaking more to herself than to anyone else, her words sounding even more slurred than before. “I don’t know what came over me. I’m probably just horny and lonely. I should have gotten myself off in the shower and stuck to cuddling my ace and gay besties.”

Liam sputters out a choked sound that is half-cough, half-groan, sitting back on his heels to give Antoine a panicked look. I furrow my brow, slowly processing the meaning of Lily’s rambling, my eyes widening and lips forming a silent “*oh*” when everything slots together, like a jigsaw puzzle in my mind.

*Her ace and gay besties.* Does she... is she talking about Seth and Antoine?

Antoine stares back at me in silent challenge, enough color draining from his cheeks to make his usually amber skin look ashy, his green eyes burning. I might not be the brightest tool in the shed, but I understand that look. It’s one I’ve seen before.

“Oh... you’re gay.” I say, my cheeks burning at the word, my voice rising in pitch at the end, like I’m asking a question.

It’s a silly thing to blush over. I suddenly feel like an uncultured child, like a country bumpkin who just stumbled out of his small town in Idaho for the very first time.

It’s not an unfamiliar feeling.

When I left Idaho and joined the Marines as a fresh-faced seventeen-year-old, I don’t think I’d heard the word *gay* used in a way that wasn’t an offensive slur. I also hadn’t ever drunk coffee or alcohol, smoked, or done more than kiss a girl.

Calling my upbringing conservative would be an understatement. Sheltered and fear-driven would probably be more accurate.

I still haven’t done most of those things—but I’m not that seventeen-year-old boy anymore. On my first deployment, one of my bunkmates was gay. Not out and proud—because that wasn’t really an option—but not closeted either.

At first, I'd been wary of him, the whispers of my father and church dancing in my ear. That wariness faded the more time we spent together, as I realized he was just like me, really—just a guy desperate to escape his small town, hungry for the promise of a solid paycheck and government benefits, wanting to see some of the world, wanting to be able to afford to buy a new car and an Xbox, maybe a down payment on a house one day...

He didn't get most of the things he dreamt about.

The image of him smiling in the passenger seat next to me is seared into my memory, harsh as desert sunlight, thick with the smell of gasoline and explosives, with dirt and the metallic scent of blood, with the feel of my hands gripping the steering wheel.

I blink, his image rippling like a desert mirage, Antoine's scowling face taking its place. My chest constricts, a mixture of the pressure that's been building all evening pulling like a slipknot against the growing realization that I've inadvertently offended my roommate.

"Sorry." I shake my head, and give him what I hope is an apologetic smile. "It's been a long night." I square my shoulders, lifting my gaze so that I'm meeting his fully, my palms sweaty where they rest on my knees. "I'm cool with that, man."

I swallow, my throat dry as I contemplate how much to say, what's the best way to tell him that I've got his back. That I wouldn't judge him, not for that. That if anyone gives him shit for it, I'll make sure to give them a piece of my mind.

"My good buddy back in the Marines was gay," I say finally, the words surprisingly soft, considering that saying them feels like pulling out shrapnel. They flutter between us like a flag of surrender. "He's...um..." I draw one sweaty palm over my face, and let the words rest unsaid. "Yah."

Some things are too difficult to talk about. And that's okay.

The hardness in Antoine's expression is gone, replaced with a wide-eyed look of sympathy mingled with respect. I drop my

gaze, feeling suddenly uncomfortable, and look at Lily instead.

She's asleep now, her lips parted, dark lashes resting on sun-kissed cheeks. The knot tightening behind my ribs loosens at the sight of her, at seeing her hair spilled out over my pillow. At knowing that she's here, in my bed.

*Safe.*

"Did... did she just fall asleep?" Liam asks, his voice laced with amusement.

"Yah," I huff out a laugh, not taking my eyes off Lily. "I could do the same, to be honest." What with the exam and the party—which is still thrumming, if the sounds coming from the other side of the door are any indication—I'm totally wiped out.

My smile falters. I can't move Lily from my bed. Even if Tom wasn't currently hooking up with some chick in their room, there is no way I'd wake her up. And the thought of putting her in there, with him, when she's vulnerable like this...

"Should we just leave her here?" I ask, looking between Antoine and Liam in question, hoping one of them will know what to do.

Liam gives me a long, appraising look, his brow dipping, lips pursing. "You're into her," he says, and even though it isn't a question, I find myself giving a tentative nod.

"Yah. Yah, I am."

There. It's out there now. I let out a shuddering sigh, feeling strangely like I've just carved out my own heart and held it up for everyone to see. If I did, they would see Lily's name written across it.

"Hmm." His gaze drops to Lily, frown deepening.

*Oh.* Does he think... is he worried that I'd do something? While she's sleeping? Or worse, that I brought her here with impure intentions?

The thought makes me feel slightly sick, and I look to Antoine, wondering if he's thinking the same thing. But he's

just staring at Liam and—as is usually the case—I’ve got no way of guessing what’s on his mind.

“I don’t think she likes me back,” I say hurriedly, my words spilling out in a confused ramble that mirrors my own thoughts. “And even if she did, I’d never do anything. Not like that. I’d never do anything to hurt her. I... I’ll protect her with all my might—mind and strength. I promise. If you’re worried about it, I can just sleep on the floor. I wasn’t suggesting that I sleep with her...” I shake my head, my cheeks burning.

Liam exchanges a look with Antoine who gives a short nod in reply, then Liam gives me one last assessing stare before rising to stand.

“You’re all good, mate.” His gray eyes are flinty, his lips pressed into a flat line as he folds his arms over his chest. “I trust you.” The faintest of smiles curves his lips. It’s not a friendly smile. “But hurt her, and I’ll bury you so deep in backcountry they won’t find your body until spring.”

And with that ominous proclamation, Liam leaves me alone, with an unconscious Lily in my bed and the weight of Antoine’s silent gaze for company.



---

## Chapter 18



---

### Lily

I squeeze my eyes shut against the sunlight threatening to bring me back to consciousness, and press my face into the pillow.

Vaguely, I'm aware that the mattress I'm sleeping on is more comfortable than usual, that there isn't any of the now-familiar squeaking that happens each time I move even the slightest amount on my air mattress.

Somewhere, in the recesses of my mind, I know I shouldn't feel quite so warm, that this gentle but masculine scent shouldn't be filling my nostrils. That there shouldn't be this comforting weight wrapping around me, or these warm huffs of breath on the back of my neck.

I wriggle deeper into the blankets, smiling softly at the feeling of warmth pulsing through me in reply to those little breaths, as if my very blood has been replaced with sun-warmed honey.

Here, in the purgatory between consciousness and sleep, all these little anomalies just make me feel safe. Protected. Loved, even.

Of course, it's just an illusion.

My eyelids flutter open, and I find myself staring at Antoine, his expression soft with sleep as he breathes through parted lips on the mattress across from me. Even on a different bed, he's close enough that if I reached out, I could probably trace my fingertips along the smooth lines of his jaw.

I blink, my mind racing as I try to recall where I am, what I did in the moments before I got here, before I fell asleep. The memories come rushing back, painful as the morning sun, and I cringe.

Unfortunately, while I was apparently drunk enough to word-vomit how I'd kissed Eddie, and then pass out in Matty, Seth, and Antoine's room, I wasn't drunk enough to be spared from remembering it.

I crane my neck, straining to see the rest of the room, my cheeks burning at the sight of Seth asleep on his bed, his big frame curled around a pillow, his knees tucked up to his chest. The weight around me moves, the breath against the back of my neck becoming the softest brush of lips—and the honeyed warmth that had been coiling in my body turns to an inferno.

*Matty.*

After being so careful, after trying so hard not to lead him on, I've fallen asleep in his bed.

"Baby." The word comes out as a whisper, so faint I'd think I'd imagined it, if I couldn't feel the shape of it against my skin.

I bite my lip and swallow back the whimper that threatens to escape in reply.

*Baby.*

It's not the first time he's called me that, but all the other times, I could brush it off. Tell myself it didn't mean anything, that it was a friend type of *baby* and not something more.

The covers wrapped around me suddenly feel too hot, too restrictive, and I squirm against them, only to feel them tighten in response. I frown, and quickly realize that he must be sleeping on top of the blankets, with one arm banded around my chest and his muscular thigh draped over my legs, effectively cocooning me in.

"Matty," I whisper, reaching up to push at his arm through the blanket. "Matty, wake up."

His hips rock against my backside in reply, the feel of him unmistakable even through the thick quilt. A shiver runs through me, hot and white, making my breaths come fast and short.

“Matty...”

The arm pinning me under the quilt lifts, settling with fumbling, sleepy movements in my hair. I take the opportunity to twist, rolling under the blankets until there’s space between his hips and mine, until I’m facing him, staring straight into his sleeping face.

“Lily...”

The word comes out in a whispered pout, his lips looking almost kiss-swollen as he says my name, and the hand that had settled in my hair drops to the back of my neck.

I should push free of his grasp, should wake him up, but laying this close to him, with his eyes closed—I feel like I’m looking at him for the first time.

And maybe I am.

We’ve spent nearly every waking minute training together for the past two weeks, but I haven’t really looked at him. I’ve laughed with him and sat with him on the chairlift or in my car. I’ve cast him smiling glances as we raced through tree runs or made fresh tracks in powder. But I haven’t really looked at him. Not like this.

He’s beautiful, if a giant of a man can be called that. Golden hair tucked around his ears, curling at the nape of his neck, resting across his forehead. There’s the hint of pale stubble along his jaw and cheeks, not a beard, barely even a day’s worth of growth, but enough that it has me wondering what it would feel like between my thighs.

Which is... completely inappropriate.

His eyes fly open, and my breath gusts out of me. Blue eyes meet my own, blinking with warmth and hunger and the dazed but happy confusion of someone who has just been given a gift they weren’t expecting—and I remember why I haven’t spent much time looking at him.

This close to him, with his eyes locked on mine and his expression so open, it's like I can see into his soul, and it's terrifying. He's good—like spun sugar or fresh snow or gold sunlight. He's exactly what my parents probably hoped I would be—pure and sweet and gentle, innocent without being naïve. Kind.

I swallow, and wonder briefly if he can see all the darkness in my own soul, like I can see his light.

*I kissed Eddie.*

“Good morning,” he murmurs, and there's a flash of dimples before his smile falls, uncertainty taking its place. “We... uh... we decided to have you sleep in here. Sorry. Tom had a girl in your room and...” Matty trails off, his cheeks flaring pink, letting me know exactly what Tom was doing in my room.

*Gross.*

“Thank you,” I say, and I mean it.

Despite Tom bringing different women home with him almost every night, he still manages to leer at me every chance he gets, only to laugh it off when I confront him. I'm starting to consider sleeping on the couch, but it feels too much like defeat. Like waving the white flag in the silent battle of wills Tom and I are locked in.

Matty's eyes drop to my lips, his pupils dilating before flicking back up to meet my own. His throat bobs, and the blush staining his cheeks deepens. He untangles his fingers from my hair and tucks his hand under his chin, his jaw clenching as a look of determination crosses his features.

“There... there's something I need to tell you.” His eyes squeeze shut, and he gives a shuddering breath. “I probably should have told you a while ago...”

My heart hammers in my chest, painfully beating against my ribs, making my throat tighten. I know where this is going.

“I... um... I really like you. A lot.” The blush staining his cheeks stretches up to his forehead, dipping down to the collar of his worn T-shirt. “I've never felt this way about a girl

before,” he continues, his voice going deep, raspy. “It’s like... I feel like I’m losing my mind.”

His eyes widen, searching my own for an answer that I can’t give him. I flinch as the familiar feeling of guilt settles in the pit of my stomach. *I’ve hurt him. I’m going to hurt him. Just like with all my friends back home.*

For some reason, the thought of having hurt him—this incredible, precious human—it cuts deeper than anything I’ve done before.

“But I kissed Eddie,” I say, reminding him of why I’m not good. Why he shouldn’t have these feelings for me.

He gives a one-shouldered shrug, the hint of a resigned smile curving his lips. “I know.”

I gape at him, trying to make sense of that response.

“Do you like him?” he asks, his brow dipping, smile falling. “Last night you said you regretted it...”

I bite the inside of my cheek, contemplating.

Do I regret kissing Eddie? That’s... complicated. I know I shouldn’t have kissed him. He’s my roommate, and I’d just told him how much I’d wanted to be his friend before throwing myself at him.

But that kiss... even in the midst of my slightly drunken haze, that kiss had been incredible, driving a surging heat through my entire body that couldn’t entirely be attributed to the whiskey. I’d *wanted* in a way I haven’t wanted in months, maybe longer. It was different than the general neediness I sometimes get—the kind that requires little more than a few moments in the shower to satisfy.

I’d wanted *him*.

“I don’t know,” I admit weakly.

Matty’s heat presses against me through the blankets, and an almost dizzying sense of need courses through me, a desire that goes beyond the need for a physical outlet. It echoes what I felt with Eddie last night—a pull in my very bones, a hunger, an ache.

I swallow, feeling slightly sick.

*You're the sort of person who has a lot of love to give.*

Steve's words from almost two years ago come rushing back, making my stomach churn with a confusing mixture of anger and guilt, hope and self-resentment. At the time, I'd believed him, felt the truth of those words to my core.

Now, I see he only said them for his own selfish aims.

Matty stares at me longingly, and I squeeze my eyes shut. He deserves so much more than that. He deserves someone who can love him and only him. Someone who knows their own feelings. Someone much, much better than me.

"I think I'm going to be sick," I rasp, pushing away from him, clambering out from under the comfortable weight of his covers. I roll off the mattress in the process, landing with a thud on the threadbare carpet before scrambling to my feet.

The noise has Antoine sitting up, his green eyes bleary with sleep. Seth is staring at me too, but there's an alertness in his gaze that has me wondering if he's been awake for a while.

"Sorry," I say, pressing my hand to my throat. I'm not sure if I'm going to cry, or throw up, or both, but I have to get out of here. "Sorry."

And then I'm turning, practically tearing open the door to escape, and scrambling down the hallway to the blessedly empty bathroom.

---

## Chapter 19



---

### Lily

“So, these are the instructors’ changing rooms...” Tessa waves one manicured hand with a flourish, indicating to the rows and rows of lockers and benches, littered with discarded boots, jackets, and helmets.

Men and women in various stages of undress chat with their neighbors as they pull on thermals, sweaters, and socks, or bend to run new laces through worn snowboard boots. There’s an underlying smell of old socks and sweat mingled with cleaner that has my nose wrinkling.

Tessa’s lips curve into a knowing smile at my expression. “Let me guess. Even more charming than you imagined?”

I choke out a laugh. “Exactly.”

She grins broadly. “Come on. I’ll show you where your locker is.”

I trail after her, keeping my eyes fixed on the back of her head, refusing to let my gaze wander down the rows of lockers.

I know Liam, Eddie, Antoine, and Matty are in here somewhere, getting changed and ready for the day, but I’m hoping to avoid seeing them. It’s surprising how effectively you can avoid seeing the people you live with, if you put in the effort.

After all my efforts the past forty-eight hours, the last thing I need is to see any of them in their underwear.

“Two three five, two three five,” Tessa mutters, glancing at a piece of paper in one hand, then squinting down the third row of lockers. “It must be down here... Yes, that’s it.” She points with triumph at my locker, then slides the latch open without preamble. “You can lock it if you want, some people do, but honestly your gear should be pretty safe in here. I don’t have a lock on mine.”

She pauses, eyeing the heavy sports bag slung across my shoulders with mild curiosity. “You got everything you need? Snowboard gear, I mean?”

I nod, clutching my newly-issued uniform against my chest, my mind instantly going to the goggles I borrowed from Liam almost two weeks ago. “I need to buy new goggles,” I admit. “But Liam gave me a pair to use in the meantime.”

Tessa gives a knowing nod. “I’ll ask around and see if anyone has some extras going.”

“Thanks,” I give her what I hope is a genuine smile, silently hoping she doesn’t find anything for a couple of weeks. Until my first paycheck comes, at least.

The state of my bank account is already looking pretty dire. I’ve got enough money for rent until I get paid—if I don’t eat anything for the next two weeks. Instructors get a free breakfast on the days they work, which consists of bagels, donuts, and granola bars. I’ve pocketed an extra bagel for my lunch, so I know I’ll get at least two meals today, even if they aren’t particularly nutritious. But there’s still dinner, not to mention all the days I don’t work...

“I’ll swing past in ten and walk you to the lineup,” Tessa says brightly, oblivious to my internal financial panic. “And we’ll see what lessons you end up getting today.”

I give her a grateful smile, waiting until she’s disappeared around the corner before setting my new uniform and duffel on the bench. I take a deep, steadying breath, my hands trembling with a mixture of nerves and excitement as I unzip my bag.

This is it. My first lesson. My first students. My first day as an instructor.



I swallow, my mouth feeling dry, then trail my fingertips tentatively over the bronze name badge on my new jacket, staring at the crisp technical fabric, black with red trim, at the mountain's emblem embossed next to my name. *Lily Dean. Lanikai, Hawai'i.*

An unexpected surge of pride swells up in my chest at the sight of it.

*I did it.*

My certification might be incredibly limited, as Eddie pointed out the other night. I might not be able to teach at another resort, and I might be at the very bottom of the instructor hierarchy here. But I did it.

For the briefest of moments, I contemplate calling my parents, raving to my mom and dad. Telling them what I did. That their little Hawai'i-raised child managed to pass the exam to become an instructor.

And then I remember how angry they'd been when I told them I wasn't enrolling for second semester. That I wasn't taking the LSAT. How they said I'd be wasting my education.

"It's not going to bite you."

An unfamiliar voice has my head snapping up, my cheeks prickling with heat at the sight of a weathered face smiling down at me, pale eyes crinkling with amusement.

"You're one of the new instructors, I take it." The man thrusts his hand out, his smile widening at my evident surprise and embarrassment. "I'm Pete." He nods to the locker next to mine, then winks. "Your locker buddy for the season."

I take his hand, giving it a firm shake, meeting his eyes with my own, the way my grandpa taught me when I was ten or so.

*You're a pretty girl, Lily. People are going to underestimate you because of it. That can be useful sometimes, but you're going to have to work twice as hard to make people respect you. Keep your handshake firm, maintain eye contact—no, don't smile. A man can smile, and look friendly, approachable. A woman smiles and she looks weak.*

Of course, he'd been preparing me for *his* world—for the world of corporate meetings and courtrooms. Not for this.

“Lily Dean,” I say, injecting as much false confidence in my voice as possible, resisting the almost instinctive urge to smile.

Pete straightens, blinking in surprise before dipping his head, looking almost contrite. He releases my hand, then drops his gaze to where my jacket rests, folded on the bench. “Hawai’i, huh?” He looks back up at me, cocking his head with a mixture of curiosity. “Can’t say we get many instructors from there.”

I give him a tight smile, and am thankfully spared having to reply when he continues talking.

“I’m a local—born and raised in Utah, started teaching skiing thirty years ago.”

He’s opening his locker, pulling out his gear, his eyes pointedly averted away from me as he starts to undress. I follow his cue, and focus my attention on unpacking my duffel, pulling out my thermals and layers before peeling off my sweater and jeans with trembling hands, stripping down to my sports bra and underwear.

“There’s a few of us old guys still teaching,” he continues, huffing slightly with the effort of pulling on his ski socks. “Oh, hey John,” he says. I see him wave to someone in my periphery, but I keep my eyes on my empty locker as I step into my thermals. “This is Lily, one of the new snowboard instructors.”

“Welcome,” a voice rumbles, just as I’m pulling on my thermal top. “Another snowboarder, huh. I thought we’d seen the end of that trend.”

“I told you ten years ago it wasn’t a trend,” Pete retorts, sounding irritated. “You sound like an old man when you say crap like that.”

I bite back a smile and dare a glance up from my locker. Like me, Pete is dressed in his thermals, while the newcomer—John, presumably—is glowering at Pete as he unzips his

windbreaker. Maybe years on the snow have weathered them, but they both look to be in their fifties or sixties.

John grumbles out some inaudible reply that has Pete chuckling, then glances my way, bushy eyebrows lifting. “Oh. A lady instructor.” He blinks in surprise, and Pete chuckles.

“I told you her name was Lily, you old fool. What did you expect?”

John scowls, weathered cheeks reddening as he shoves his jacket into his locker, muttering something about *young people’s names these days and you never can tell*.

I resist the urge to roll my eyes, then quickly pull on the rest of my gear, a surge of fresh excitement coursing through me when I zip up my instructor’s jacket.

“Lily.”

Liam’s voice brushes over me just as I’m pulling on my helmet, and I spin to face him.

His eyes track over my uniform, going from my borrowed goggles—his goggles—to my worn boots, a rare smile curving his lips when he sees my name badge. “You ready for your first day?”

Behind me, John and Pete have gone oddly silent, their conversation reduced to hushed whispers that have me suspecting they’re watching my and Liam’s exchange with unabashed interest.

“Yah. I think so. Thanks,” I say, feeling suddenly breathless. I tell myself it’s just the excitement of starting a new job, the anticipation of teaching my first lesson, but I know that isn’t entirely true. Not when the weight of Liam’s gaze has my skin heating beneath my new uniform.

Liam gives a slow nod, then looks at me in silent expectation. Before I can work out what it is he’s not asking, Tessa rounds the corner, her new-season board tucked under her arm, the lacquer a mixture of pinks and purples that matches her manicure.

“Oh, hey Liam.” Her grin widens as her eyes land on me, taking in my crisp uniform that probably screams newbie instructor. “It fits you perfectly.” She tilts her chin toward the exit. “You ready to go?”

“Yah,” I say, still sounding breathless.

Something that looks a lot like disappointment flashes in Liam’s expression, and I swallow back the guilt that rises up in response. He probably wanted to walk me to the lineup—no doubt felt some sort of obligation to show me around, since he’d been my trainer for two weeks. But Tessa already offered, and I don’t want to offend her.

“Um, see you after work,” I add, shooting Liam a parting glance over my shoulder. “I can give you guys a ride home.”

Despite my resolution to put space between me and my roommates, I felt awful not giving the guys a ride in to work this morning and leaving them at Tom’s mercy.

Liam gives a tight-lipped smile in return but doesn’t reply, and my guilt deepens.

“You’ll probably get given a beginner group lesson,” Tessa explains as we leave the muggy warmth of the changing rooms. Our boots crunch over freshly groomed snow as we make our way to the lineup, to where instructors mill about next to the *Lessons* sign, waiting for the ski-school managers to assign them their classes. “You’re rostered on for group and private lessons for the adult school—that’s ages thirteen and older, by the way—but you’re unlikely to get a private lesson, not unless you get a special request from a student. Or if it gets really busy, which it will do around Christmas.”

Christmas. It’s hard to believe that’s only a few weeks away.

My eyes dance over the lineup as we near the lessons post, searching for a familiar face, recognizing one or two of the guys I trained with. I’m not surprised that Matty, Antoine, and Eddie aren’t here—Matty told me the day we passed our exam that he’d been allocated to the kids’ school with Antoine and Eddie. Still, there’s a pang of disappointment at not seeing them in the lineup.

Tessa pauses, pulling me toward her and giving me a conspiratorial look.

“Trust me, you want to get private lessons if you can. That’s where all the money is—in the tips. Our wages are shit—even for the upper-ranking instructors, but the tips are amazing. Last year, one of Stephanie’s students gave her a car at the end of the season as a tip. *A car*. And even Liam manages to get fifty to a hundred bucks for every private lesson he teaches—which is honestly a miracle considering his personality.”

“Does Liam usually teach private lessons?” I ask, remembering Liam’s disappointed expression in the changing room earlier.

Tessa gives me a strange look, then shakes her head. “Yah. Pretty much exclusively.” She purses her lips, gaze going distant. “He’s a good guy. Comes across as an asshole, but actually a real solid bloke, you know? Surprising considering everything...”

She trails off, giving my expectant look a sympathetic smile. “Come on.” She nods toward the growing cluster of instructors. “Let’s see who you’re teaching today.”

---

BY THE TIME four o’clock rolls around, my body is aching, my brain feels like soup, and I’m fantasizing about what I could possibly put with the instant ramen waiting at home for me to make it more filling.

I taught two three-hour lessons, one in the morning, one in the afternoon. Two groups of ten teens and adults of various levels of fitness whose only common denominator was that they had never been on a snowboard in their entire lives.

There had been a marathon runner who was doing S-turns within an hour, and a fourteen-year-old gamer who lacked the leg muscle required to rise from sitting to standing. A father with his two teenage sons, who seemed to be in an unspoken competition the entire lesson, and a thirty-something-year-old bartender who had just broken up with her boyfriend.

In between it all, I ate the plain bagel I'd tucked away in my pocket, and nothing else.

Still, despite my hunger and dwindling bank account, I feel a sense of hopeful independence that I've never really experienced before. At university, I'd always depended on someone else—on my parents, my grandparents, on student loans. Now I don't have any of those things, and while the complete absence of a safety net is terrifying, it's liberating too, knowing that everything I'm doing, I'm doing for me. Because of me. Without owing anyone anything.

"You okay there, Miss Hawai'i?"

I'm startled from my reverie by Pete's voice and realize I've been standing in front of my locker, my jacket half-off, my helmet and goggles clutched to my chest.

I shake my head, and put my helmet in my locker, then unzip my coat. "Yah. All good."

Black and white spots dance across my vision, but I blink them away, quickly stripping off my sweat-soaked thermals and stuffing them in my duffel to take home, then pull on my jeans and sweater.

"You look a little pale," Pete comments.

I turn to narrow my eyes at him, but the ground shifts beneath my feet, and I find myself slumping onto the bench instead, my eyes closing as if of their own accord.

"Did you drink enough water?" Pete asks, though he doesn't sound particularly alarmed. "Don't want to mess around with altitude sickness, you know."

"She's been at altitude for two weeks. Of course she doesn't have altitude sickness." Liam's voice is sharp, full of the no-nonsense tone I heard him use with his class. *But never with me, I realize with a smile. He never really used that tone with me.*

I feel him slide onto the bench beside me, close enough that his arm brushes against my own. "What did you eat today?" he asks, his voice a low growl.

I sigh, trying and failing to ignore the way that growly tone affects me, how it has me feeling even more lightheaded than before, how it sends heat rushing through my icy, tired limbs.

“Lily...”

Strong fingers grip my chin, and I blink in surprise as he pulls me to face him, his gray eyes full of flinty fire as he stares me down, silently demanding an answer.

“I... I had a bagel,” I reply defensively, my eyes squeezing shut again when the locker room and Liam’s face start spinning around me.

I should pull back from his touch, should push him away and tell him to mind his own business, but his hand is warm and I find myself leaning into his touch instead, like a cat starved for affection, until my cheek is resting against the flat of his palm.

“A bagel,” he repeats, his voice gravelly. “That’s not lunch, that’s...”

“Lily, Liam, there you are... oh...”

Liam drops his hand, and my eyes fly open at the sound of Matty’s voice. I blink, my vision coming into focus just in time to see the hurt flash across Matty’s face before he manages to school his features into a forced smile. “Sorry,” he says, ducking his head. “Didn’t mean to interrupt anything...”

“Do you know all Lily ate today was a bagel?” Liam says, waving one arm and speaking over Matty. “Can one of you guys talk some sense into her, please?” Because of course Antoine and Eddie are there now too, appearing out of nowhere to stand behind Matty—Antoine with a soft frown on his full lips and Eddie with his signature scowl.

I groan, leaning forward to press my face into the palms of my hands. “I’m fine.” Or at least, I would be if they would go away and stop embarrassing me on my first day of work.

On my other side, I hear Pete chuckle.

“What are you guys all doing here anyway?” I ask, lifting my head to frown up at them, hoping I look less like death than I feel.

“What are we doing here?” Eddie rolls his eyes. “Liam said we could catch a ride with you. Seth is already at your car, because apparently Tom had some date he had to go on and couldn’t give anyone a ride home. So you’re it.”

“We can walk,” Matty interjects, wringing his hands nervously and looking between me and Liam. “If you have other plans or...”

“The hell I’m walking,” Eddie hisses. “Lily has a car and is literally going to the same place as us. Why the fuck would I walk?”

“Don’t talk to her like that.” Antoine rounds on Eddie, green eyes sparking. “Lily isn’t your chauffeur.”

“Guys...” I say weakly.

“Looks like you’ve got your work cut out for you, eh Miss Hawai’i?” Pete interjects, sounding gleeful. “Four boyfriends to keep in check. That’s quite the task.”

“Roommates,” I reply flatly, turning to frown up at him.

“We’re flatmates, boomer,” Eddie snaps at the same time. “Not sure if you heard, but it’s been a pretty common practice ever since your lot destroyed the housing market.”

And... that sounds like my cue to go.

“Oh, look, your taxi is leaving,” I say, gathering my last reserves of bagel-fueled strength and pushing off from the bench. I shoot Eddie a *what the fuck is your problem* look, which he pointedly ignores. “See you tomorrow, Pete.”

Pete gives an annoyed huff from behind me, and I cringe thinking about how awkward tomorrow morning is going to be now.

But that’s tomorrow’s problem. Right now, I just have to figure out how I’m going to drive home—and how I’m going to survive the next couple weeks until my first paycheck.



---

## Chapter 20



---

### Seth

The moment Lily steps into view I know something isn't right. And it's not just because her usually golden skin is nearly as ashen as the snow around us.

Liam's lips are set into a frown as he hovers close to Lily's side, scowling menacingly at every stranger who walks within a meter of her. Eddie stomps ahead, his face flushed, a scowl plastered on like a mask. Matty trails behind, feet dragging in the snow as his blue eyes move between Lily and Liam with unabashed longing.

And Antoine... the moment Antoine sees me he shoots me a look of silent desperation, his green eyes wide and full of panic, like he thinks I can fix whatever is going on.

"Hey, Lil," I say, giving her a smile, taking care to keep my voice soft. Even. Calm. "How was your day?"

"Good. Thanks." Lily's smile is tight, her voice flat, and there's a dullness in her eyes that I don't like.

"Can you drive?" Liam asks me abruptly. "I mean, you have a license, right? And you're used to driving on the right side of the road?"

I start at his question, but nod. "Of course, I can." I give Lily a questioning look. "You want me to drive, hon?"

Lily opens her mouth to speak, but Eddie quickly interrupts. "It doesn't matter what she wants. She can barely walk, since

apparently she insisted on starving herself all day. She's not driving."

"I... I can drive," Lily retorts, her cheeks flushing as she frowns at Eddie's back. "I'm honestly fine..."

But she doesn't look fine, and when she goes to step toward the car, she stumbles forward. Liam's there, gripping her arm to keep her upright.

"I don't mind driving," I say, holding my hand out for the keys. "Lil, hon, you hop in the back seat. Matty, front seat." Because that's the only place he'll reasonably fit in Lily's tiny car.

"Isn't it illegal to have that many people in the back seat?" Antoine dutifully points out, looking between Liam, Eddie, Lily, and himself.

Eddie snorts. "Only if you get caught. One of us just needs to lie down across everyone's laps." He holds out his hands, palms facing outward. "Not me, by the way. I might be short but I'm not sitting on you guys' laps. Just so we're clear."

Liam huffs, and as if on cue, Antoine, Eddie, and Liam turn to look at Lily expectantly.

"Fine," Lily grumbles. "But if we get pulled over, I'm not paying for the ticket."

The drive back is tense, filled with the deafening silence of people refusing to speak to each other. Beside me, Matty's shoulders are stiff, his knuckles white where they rest on his knees. Antoine and Liam sit at opposite ends of the back seat, with Eddie squashed in the middle and Lily sprawled out across the three of them, her head on Antoine's lap.

"I was thinking of stopping by the Christian Center on the way home," I say, in part to break the silence, but also because I've spent the last few minutes thinking.

Over the past two weeks, I've been watching what Lily eats—watching her try to make every last scrap of food last, seeing the flash of gratitude and relief every time I cook for her, watching her eye Liam's gourmet meals with envy. Liam's

comment about her not eating enough for lunch has strengthened my suspicions—Lily can't afford food.

Honestly, it's not surprising. Most of us are one or two paychecks away from hunger as well, and Lily is new. She's probably living off savings, holding out for her first paycheck, which will be weeks away.

"The... what?" Lily asks, her voice strained.

I grin, flicking my gaze to the rearview mirror, and catch Liam's eye. He gives me an approving nod, and I continue.

"The Christian Center is like a food bank for seasonal workers," I explain. It's also one of the town's best-kept secrets—a resource that isn't really advertised, but everyone who has done a season here knows about it. "A bunch of the locals get together, donate food and furniture and stuff to keep the rest of us going."

"A food bank." Lily sounds skeptical. I don't blame her.

She's probably never had to rely on charity before. By the sounds of things, she's had an upbringing similar to Antoine and Liam, with private school and expensive family holidays... and all the weight of parental expectations.

"Kind of," I say, hoping to play that aspect of things down as much as possible. "Except it's aimed at instructors, lifties, all the people who work at the mountain." Because the locals know we can't afford to pay resort prices on minimum wage. "It's got a community center thing too, and they do dinners once a week, prize draws. That's how we got our couch and dining table, actually."

Eddie clears his throat, brown eyes sparkling and dimples showing as he flashes me a knowing grin from the back seat. "That's a good idea, mate. I'm keen for some extra food. It's a bit skint at the moment until payday."

"Oh." Lily is silent for a long moment, but hunger must win out, because she eventually says: "Yah, okay. Let's check it out."

---

I SMILE in satisfaction at the paper bags on the kitchen counter, filled to the brim with groceries.

Groceries that will be used to make dinner for all of us for the next couple weeks—a dinner where we sit and eat together, like a family. Lunches for Lily too, if she'll let me make them.

“You... uh, want help with making dinner?” Lily asks, eyeing the bags of food with trepidation.

Her hair is wet from her shower, leaving damp spots on a worn T-shirt that exposes her midriff. Bare feet toe the linoleum floor as she thrusts her hands into the pockets of worn gray sweatpants.

“You like cooking?” I ask in reply, bending to unpack the bags in an effort to hide the triumphant grin threatening to crack my lips.

Lily has been avoiding us for the past couple days—wearing her earbuds in the kitchen, hiding out in her room as much as possible, staring at her phone every chance she gets. At first, I let it go. Figured she was probably embarrassed about kissing Eddie, and then Matty had made his early morning declaration of... well, not quite love, but feelings that weren't far off from that.

But she hasn't just been avoiding Eddie and Matty, it's been the rest of us too.

Having Lily out here, speaking to me, offering to help with dinner—it feels like a win. It *is* a win.

“It's okay,” Lily replies. “I mean, I can cook. It's not my favorite thing in the world, but it's okay. I... I wouldn't mind hanging out with you though.”

This last bit is said so softly, I barely hear it over the rustle of paper bags. The second her words register, my chest constricts almost painfully, a rush of warmth coursing through me that has me wanting to take her up in my arms, hold her close to me, press my face against her hair.

“Oh, hon,” I drop the cans of tomato on the counter with a thud and spin to face her. She’s so damn cute, with her wet hair tucked behind her ears, wearing that little top, and there’s a soft, almost shy smile curving her lips. “Shit, Lil. You can’t just say stuff like that.”

I close the distance between us, wrapping my arms around her, squeezing her tight enough that she gives an undignified squawk, her arms pinned to her sides beneath my embrace.

“Why not?” she asks, her voice muffled against my chest.

I chuckle. “Because. It makes me want to keep you.” I say it like a joke, but the truth of that statement sends a pang of longing through me.

I *do* want to keep her. I’ve wanted to keep her ever since that first night she curled up between me and Antoine. Maybe before that.

I release my hold on her and she huffs out a laugh, shaking her head and giving me the first real smile I’ve seen from her in days. “What are we making, chef?”

“Spaghetti bolognaise.” I turn back to sorting through the bags, pulling out the ingredients. A simple dish that will feed six hungry people. Seven, if Tom comes back tonight. “You could start by chopping the onions,” I say, handing her a bag of onions. “One should be enough, actually.”

One thing I’m good at is making ingredients last. That, and bringing people together. Smoothing over differences.

*A people pleaser.*

That was what the last girl I dated had called me. She hadn’t meant it as a compliment—but she also hadn’t understood why my people-pleasing tendencies wouldn’t extend to giving her what she wanted.

*It’s not like you can’t get it up, she’d said. You like watching porn, what’s the difference?*

“*Pleure pas, ma puce.*” Antoine’s voice jolts me from those less-than-pleasant memories, and I turn with a smile to see him

bending over Lily, amusement and concern written on his features.

“It’s the onions!” Lily snuffles, waving one hand—the one not holding the knife, thankfully—turning to wipe her tear-stained cheek with her shoulder.

Antoine chuckles, then reaches across to swipe at her eyes with the pad of his thumb. Lily’s cheeks flush in response, and she bites her lower lip before staring down at the pile of chopped onions.

“That should be good,” I tell her. “Any more and it’ll be onion paste.”

“Anything I can do?” Antoine asks.

I shoot him a grateful smile, but shake my head. It’s a pretty easy dish—I could probably make it alone, to be honest. But it’s also nice having the three of us together in the kitchen. “Actually, there’s a bottle of wine hidden behind my cereal on the shelf above the fridge.”

I’d bought it a few days ago, when Antoine had been complaining about everyone drinking beer and bourbon. The guy at the liquor store assured me it was good for the price. Which means it might almost be drinkable.

“Oh, *mon dieu*, I think I love you,” Antoine exclaims when he finds the bottle. A wide smile lights up his face, making his eyes turn up playfully at the corners. “Thank you.”

*I think I love you.*

I look down at the saucepan to hide how much those words affect me. “No biggie,” I tell him. “Help yourself, and pour me a glass too, please.”

Before long, the sauce is simmering, the water heating, a loaf of garlic bread is in the oven and the three of us are seated around the table, sipping the decidedly average California cabernet I bought, and speaking in French.

It’s almost like things were a few days ago, except Lily seems more reserved, less affectionate, and Antoine seems more subdued.

*“You’re not still feeling upset about what happened with Eddie?”* I ask her, lowering my voice, even though we’re the only ones in the kitchen, and no one besides the three of us speaks French.

Lily’s face flames red and she lets out an exasperated sigh before throwing back her head to take a long sip of her wine. *“Why are we bringing that up? I thought we were just going to forget about it, pretend it never happened?”* she whines.

*“So, yes then?”* I pry, relentless.

I know I’m being nosy, possibly overstepping the bounds of our newly forged... friendship. But sometimes you have to push people into uncomfortable conversations for their own good.

Lily presses her face into the palms of her hands, her elbows on the table, and groans. Beside her, Antoine chuckles, but it’s hollow sounding, his smile brittle.

*“And Matty?”* I say. *“It sounded like he’s pretty interested in you.”*

Antoine’s paltry effort at a smile falls, and Lily drops her hands to narrow her eyes at me accusingly.

*“You were listening. I knew it.”*

*Oh. Oops.*

I give a one-shouldered shrug. *“Maybe. We share a room, after all.”*

Lily shakes her head. *“Unbelievable.”*

“Honey,” I say, switching to English. My French doesn’t come quite as naturally as Lily’s does, at least not after a glass of wine. I reach across the table, covering Lily’s hand with my own. “What’s bothering you? Talk to me.”

Beside her, Antoine fixes her with an expectant stare, practically vibrating with tension beneath his cable-knit sweater.

Lily casts a nervous glance down the hallway, but Eddie is in the shower, and Liam and Matty are both in their respective

rooms, doors shut. Probably making the most of the rare moment of solitude to relieve some tension, considering Eddie's been in the shower for about half an hour now. But I won't tell Lily that.

"I just feel so terrible," she whispers, following me and slipping back into English. Her gaze drops to our joined hands. "I..." She shakes her head, then gives me a pleading look. "Did I ever tell you about everything that happened before I came out here? With my boyfriend, I mean. Well, ex-boyfriend. And my friends?"

"No." I give her a gentle smile, my heart thundering with anticipation.

For the past couple weeks, our conversations have been, not superficial, exactly, but definitely lighthearted. We talked about books and the mountain, about travel and food, music and movies. All the things that let you peer into another person's soul, without really telling you about *them*.

This, right here, this is a step toward something new. Something deeper.

"Tell me," I say, squeezing her hand in my own.

*I want to know everything about you. I want to know what darkness you've seen, so I can understand why you burn so bright.*



---

## Chapter 21



---

### Lily

“Lily, he fucking groomed you.”

Seth’s eyes are blazing with a fury that is completely at odds with the calm, sweet guy I’ve come to know. I stare at him wide-eyed, clutching my nearly empty wineglass in both hands, and try not to flinch at his words, at the hard edge to his voice.

That... that is not the response I was expecting after telling him and Antoine about my dating history. About Steve—my first real boyfriend—and all the guys I couldn’t muster up a spark of attraction for, but led on anyways.

“Um... what?” My voice comes out small sounding, a weak warble that should be reserved for damsels in distress. Not independent women making their own way in the world.

“Oh, *ma puce*,” Antoine murmurs.

The rickety wooden chair scrapes across linoleum as he edges closer to me, close enough that he can wrap one strong arm around my shoulders, rest the side of his head against my own. I sigh into his embrace, my eyelids fluttering closed for a brief moment.

It’s the first time he’s hugged me since everything happened a few days ago. Since I stopped sitting between him and Seth on the couch, cuddling and listening to Antoine read to us. It feels right. Like coming home.

“You were seventeen years old,” Seth continues. “What a fucking creep. And then to feed you all that bullshit about nonmonogamy...”

I shake my head, my lips pulling into a frown. I’m not some victim. That isn’t me. If anything, it’s the opposite—I *hurt* people.

“But I did it too,” I argue, stiffening defensively in Antoine’s hold. “It wasn’t just him that was nonmonogamous. I kissed a few guys while Steve and I were together. I went on dates and flirted. And then after we broke up, I kissed a bunch of my friends—even hooked up with some of them—and I wasn’t sure I really felt anything for them. Who does that?”

“Quite a few people, you’d be surprised to know,” Antoine says dryly, speaking in English.

I wave one hand dismissively. Of course I know people have meaningless hookups. I share a room with someone who seems to have at least three a week, and those are just the ones he brings home.

“That’s not what I want though,” I say, my voice suddenly raspy with the admission. I drop my gaze to the table. My wineglass is smudged from how much I’ve been holding it.

“And what do you want, honey?” Seth’s voice is lower than usual, almost gravelly, and when I look up, he’s staring at me with an intensity that has my breath catching in my throat.

“I... I want...” I swallow, my mouth suddenly feeling dry.

I don’t think anyone’s ever asked me that before. Not really.

Not my parents, all the times they told me what classes I should take, what I should major in, what clubs I should join. Not Steve—the only serious boyfriend I’ve ever had—who was quick to tell me what he thought I needed, what he wanted.

Maybe it’s a question I should have thought to ask myself.

That thought has me feeling strangely uncomfortable, and I get the sudden urge to change the subject. To talk about something else. Anything else.

“So, you guys don’t think I’m a slut?” I ask by way of deflection, a forced half smile quirking my lips. “After everything that I’ve just told you?”

I mean it as a joke, but Seth’s expression darkens, and he leans across the table, bringing his face closer to mine. “I don’t ever want to hear you call yourself that again,” he growls, his voice low, almost menacing.

I shudder, though not quite from fear, and Antoine tightens his hold around me.

Antoine must shoot Seth a chastising look, because Seth gives an apologetic grimace, then adds, his tone gentler: “You didn’t do anything wrong, Lily. There’s nothing wrong with being nonmonogamous. There’s certainly nothing wrong with being unsure about your feelings, with pursuing things with people before you feel attracted to them. Look...” his cheeks pinken for some reason, and he sits back, his gaze dropping to his hands. “From what you’ve told me, it sounds like you’re demisexual or something like it...”

I nod, biting the inside of my cheek. He’s mentioned that before, weeks ago. Since then, the Google research I’ve done more or less aligns with what he said. *Demisexual*. “Probably,” I acknowledge weakly.

His gaze flits back up to mine, his eyes widening with earnestness. “So how on earth would you know if you were attracted to someone without getting to know them first? And just because someone is into you—that doesn’t mean you owe them anything. You shouldn’t ever feel guilty about not feeling attraction to someone—or about feeling attraction, for that matter.”

I swallow, my heart thundering wildly in response to his words.

Because shit if that isn’t exactly what I’ve been doing the past couple days—feeling guilty about wanting Eddie and Matty and Liam. And even Antoine, though I’d never make him feel uncomfortable by admitting it. And Seth... well, I don’t feel that urgent heat with him, but there’s certainly an ache behind

my ribs, a longing to be close to him, those first tethers of connection threatening to be stronger than ordinary friendship.

“So, what?” I rasp. “Should I just kiss all the boys I’m into?”

I mean for it to come out sounding sarcastic, but with the way my heart is thundering in my chest, it comes out like a breathy sort of plea.

“Why not?” Seth replies evenly. He pauses, then gives a wry smile. “Well, maybe not all of them. Just the good ones.”

A laugh bursts out of me, a strange mixture of relief and longing rushing through me. If only it was that easy—if only I could just follow my feelings like that.

I give Seth a teasing smile. “*You’re* one of the good ones.”

I turn to face Antoine, my cheeks heating when the move unexpectedly brings my face so close to his, I can see the dark brown specks in his emerald eyes, the faintest smattering of freckles on his nose, nearly invisible against his dark amber skin. “You too,” I murmur, dropping my gaze, unable to handle the intensity of his eyes on me. “But I don’t think either of you guys want me kissing you.”

“No?” Antoine says, his voice raspy. “Who says I don’t?”

My heart stutters in my chest, stealing the air from my lungs and my eyes fly up to meet his own. Antoine’s arm is still slung around my shoulders, keeping me close to him, and he reaches up to stroke my cheek with the back of his free hand. I can feel his knuckles trembling against my skin, but his green eyes are blazing with almost willful determination.

“But... you, you’re...” I trail off, the stupidity of what I’m about to say thankfully registering before the words come out.

Antoine never told me he was gay. I just made assumptions.

He shakes his head, cheeks darkening deeply as he bites his lower lip. “I want you, Lily. I have for a while now.” His gaze drops, a shaky breath stuttering out of him. “I should have told you before but...”

Warmth pulses through me, an aching pull that has my vision momentarily blurring. *He wants me.*

For weeks now, I've been shoving down my growing feelings for him, forcing myself to focus on the friendship we've been building, to not get carried away by each innocent touch. Now, it's like a dam bursting, like an avalanche breaking through the tree line, and every repressed desire comes rolling through at once, powerful and dangerous and completely unstoppable.

With a moan that catches in my throat, I'm surging forward, closing the small distance between us, crashing my lips against his. The fingertips that had been brushing my cheek move to tangle in my hair, pulling me closer to him.

Soft lips move against mine, gentle, tentative, pliant, and then a groan rumbles in his chest, an almost pained sound. The arm around my shoulders dips, sliding along the length of my spine, pulling me toward him.

I break our kiss with a gasp, barely pausing to blink at him in wild-eyed hunger before I'm climbing onto his lap, my thighs straddling his waist, one knee resting on the edge of the rickety wooden chair.

"Lily," he rasps, and then he's pulling my face back toward his.

This time, when he kisses me, there's nothing gentle about it. His tongue dives deep, demanding, taking. He pulls back only to nip my lower lip with his teeth before claiming me again. Beneath me, his body is practically vibrating, and when my own hand swipes under his jaw, coming to rest against his throat, I swear I can feel his pulse fluttering wildly against my palm.

Behind me, a chair scrapes, and a different sort of heat rushes through me, making my cheeks burn. I pull back, giving Antoine a sheepish smile. He doesn't smile back though, just stares at me, pupils dilated, his lips parted, breaths coming in soft pants that brush against my own lips.

"Don't stop on my account," Seth chuckles, padding toward the stove. "I'm just putting the pasta in. The water is boiling." He tosses me a smile over one shoulder, and he looks genuinely happy, his cheeks flushed, his eyes sparking with excitement.

Some of my tension eases, and I relax against Antoine, leaning forward to nuzzle my face into the crook of his neck, inhaling the sweet and musky scent of him, pressing light, teasing kisses beneath his ear, along his jaw, his throat.

He throws back his head, a low sigh escaping. “*Mon dieu, Lily. Tu me tues.*”

Before I can respond, there’s the sound of footsteps in the hallway and the simultaneous jangling of keys from outside the front door.

“What the fuck?” Eddie’s voice is a low hiss, and I turn just in time to see him stumble back, a look of hurt flashing in his eyes.

Antoine tightens his hold on me, large hands gripping my waist, thumbs just above the band of my sweats. Eddie’s eyes dip down the length of my body, settling on Antoine’s hands with a look of feral rage.

The front door swings open, a cold gust of air causing the ends of my hair to flutter around my face, sending a shiver through me. “Hey guys, I’m home,” Tom calls out, his voice strangely cheery. “I want you to meet my girlfriend, Eve.”

---

## Chapter 22



---

### **Eddie**

For a brief moment, I wonder if I'm high. Like maybe I managed to get ahold of weed in this puritan hellscape, smoked it all, and forgot about it. Especially when Tom waltzes in, smiling like a fucking clown, announcing that he has a girlfriend.

*A girlfriend. What the actual fuck?*

I turn away from the idiot at the front door to look back to where Lily is sprawled on Antoine's lap, gray sweats stretching over her muscled thighs, his goddamned hands on her waist, on that glimpse of smooth skin above the waistband of her pants. I take in her lips, still wet and swollen from kissing him, her hair mussed, her pupils blown.

My hands curl into fists at my side, and red speckles the edges of my vision.

She looked at me like that. Just a few days ago. She should be looking at me like that now, instead of staring at me with wide-eyed horror.

*But I pushed her away.*

Lily scrambles off Antoine's lap, her cheeks going from pale to red as she slides into the chair next to Antoine, lifting a nearly empty wineglass with one trembling hand.

"Hey guys," Seth calls out cheerily, like everything is totally normal, nothing to see here. "We've made dinner for everyone."

Spaghetti bolognese and garlic bread.”

His eyes dart to Tom’s newly introduced girlfriend, whose name I’ve already deleted from my memory, and I swear I see his eye twitch. Maybe he’s struggling to make sense of her presence too—or maybe he’s just stressed about the extra mouth to feed.

“Aww, that’s really nice,” Tom’s supposed girlfriend coos. “Thanks so much.” She’s got one of those nasally voices that instantly has me wanting to gouge my own eardrums out, and I close my eyes, taking a deep breath and dragging my hand through my hair.

I could leave. Could turn around now, go back to my room, put my headphones on and refuse to deal with any of these people. But the food smells really good, and I’m seriously hungry.

I sigh, and fix Tom’s girlfriend with my most charming of smiles.

“It’s nice to meet you,” I drawl, wishing I could remember what her name was. I give her a wink for good measure, feeling a surge of vindictive pleasure when Tom’s expression darkens, his brow furrowing and making his eyes look even closer together than usual.

The girlfriend titters out a laugh, her face flushing red with pleasure, and I toss Tom a smirk. His nostrils flare, and he stumbles trying to undo the laces on his boots.

It makes me feel marginally better.

“Grab a seat, Eve,” Lily says, her voice surprisingly smooth and calm for someone who just got caught making out with her flatmate five seconds ago.

Lily waves to the empty seat across from her, and Eve babbles out her thanks before shucking off her full-length down parka, pressing it into Tom’s arms, and skipping over to sit by Lily.

“So, you guys are Tom’s roommates?” Eve asks.

Antoine nods, his features schooling into the mask of aloofness he always wears when he’s around strangers, his shoulders straightening, chin lifting. “I’m Antoine. That’s



Seth, Eddie, and this..." he pauses, giving Lily a soft, lovesick look that has the start of my good mood dissipating like mist. "...is Lily."

Eve titters out a laugh, even though all Antoine did was say some names. "And you guys are together?"

Lily chokes on her wine, her fist flying to her mouth, her eyes going wide. Antoine stills, his lips parted, as if whatever he's wanted to say has got stuck in his throat.

"I'm pretty sure Lily's sleeping with all of them," Tom drawls, coming back from the room he shares with Lily, his arms now free of Eve's coat and bags. "Didn't you say she kissed you a few days ago, Eddie?"

I turn to scowl at him. I have absolutely no recollection of telling him about that. Which means someone else told him. Or, more likely, I got drunk and forgot what a douche he is.

"Yep, they're all my boyfriends," Lily deadpans. "Except for Tom, obviously." She pauses, giving Tom an exaggerated wink, then turns to Eve and lowers her voice to a mock whisper. "He didn't quite make the cut."

*Holy. Shit.* I press my lips together to stop the laugh that threatens to burst out and stare at Lily with a sense of renewed awe, that now-familiar ache in my chest deepening.

Eve blinks in confusion, giggling before covering it up with one hand, like she's only just realized Lily is ripping out her boyfriend.

"Whatever," Tom huffs, his face going almost purple with repressed rage as he stomps across the kitchen to pull out a bottle of soda from the fridge.

"In all seriousness, it's cool you guys are doing the whole open relationship thing and making it work," Lily continues. Her voice is soft now, gentle, and she's looking at Eve with unabashed compassion. It's the same look I've seen on our local vet's face, when she's called out to my grandparent's farm and some poor beast is beyond saving.

"Open... open relationship?" Eve asks, her voice rising in pitch as she looks at Tom in silent question.

Tom stills, his features lit by the fluorescent light of the refrigerator. For a brief moment, the only sound is the crunching of the plastic soda bottle in his hand as he glares at Lily, his jaw ticking furiously.

Lily doesn't reply, just gives Eve a little nod.

Eve looks around, at Antoine, Seth and then me. I fold my arms over my chest, my lips pressing together, and stare back at her in stony silence.

Yes, Tom is a man-whore. And yes, I can't stand to be in the same room as him when I'm sober. But it still feels wrong outing him. Like telling on him to his girlfriend would be some unforgivable violation of the unwritten bro-code, and I'd be branded for life as a traitor to men everywhere.

"What is your fucking problem, Lily?" Tom hisses, slamming the fridge door shut.

"Enough." Seth's voice is harsh, eyes cold as he turns from where he's ladling sauce over pasta, knuckles white as he clutches the spoon. He takes several deep breaths, an expression of forced calm washing over his features as he adds tiredly: "We all know you've been having women over. Just own up to it."

"Is that true?" Eve's voice is soft, a pleading warble. "Tom?"

For a brief moment, Tom looks like he's going to deny it. Like he's going to try and plead his case. But then Liam and Matty walk in, completely oblivious to the bomb that's just exploded in the kitchen, and Tom lets out a defeated sigh.

"Fine. Yah. Okay, so I might have hooked up with a few chicks." He gives a dismissive wave, wrinkling his nose. "It was just a bit of fun. What did you expect? You know I didn't want to do long distance."

Liam stumbles at Tom's words, straightening to look at me with sleep-bleary eyes. "I'm sorry, but what the fuck is going on?" he mutters.

I don't think anyone else hears him but me. I give him a tight-lipped grimace and shake my head, because no way am I involving myself in any of this.

“Oh, wow, this looks amazing,” Matty exclaims, completely oblivious as he brushes past Tom, his attention fixed on the plates of food lined up on the bench. He turns to give Lily a bashful smile as he takes a plate from Seth. “Did you help with this?”

Meanwhile, Eve’s eyes are welling up with tears, her hands clasped in front of her on the table as she stares blankly in Tom’s general direction. Of course, he’s not looking at her, just staring at his half-drunk bottle of cola as if it holds all of life’s answers.

“Hey.” Lily scoots her chair closer to Eve’s, placing one hand on her shoulder. “Want to come hang out in my room for a bit?” Her voice is low, gentle. “We can eat dinner in there if you want.”

Eve nods, her lower lip trembling as she rises to stand. Lily gives Seth a look over one shoulder, then guides Eve to the room she shares with Tom.

“That’s my room too,” Tom mutters petulantly, as Seth pushes past him with two bowls of pasta. No one replies, the only acknowledgment that Tom has spoken is a glare from Seth as he pulls the door shut.

“That was out of line,” Tom continues, folding his arms over his chest. He looks at me for some reason, like maybe he thinks I’m going to side with him. “Who the fuck does that?”

I stare blandly back at him.

Sure, I probably wouldn’t have said anything to Eve, but I can see why Lily did. Not just because of female solidarity or whatever. She has more reason than any of us to have it out for Tom. Seeing as he’s been banging random chicks in her room almost every night. Bloody inconsiderate, really.

“Maybe you should go for a walk,” Seth suggests. “And I assume your girlfriend...” he chokes on the word, then clears his throat. “I assume Eve will need to spend the night here?”

Tom grunts out what sounds like an affirmative response.

“I suggest you sleep on the couch and give her your bed,” Seth continues, his tone heavy with finality. “And then you help her

change her flights so she can leave tomorrow.”

Tom’s brow dips, and he rubs at the back of his neck. “But she was scheduled to stay for three nights. I’m sure she’ll come around...”

I give a snort of disbelief, and Tom narrows his beady eyes on me.

“What? You don’t think she will?” he asks, his chest puffing up with bravado. “I’ve cheated on her before and she didn’t care. She’s a solid five. She knows she’s hitting way above her league with me...”

“Just go for a fucking walk, mate,” Liam snaps, his voice full of ice. “No one here wants front-row seats to your drama, okay.”

Tom grumbles out a protest, then looks at Matty of all people. Matty shakes his head, his lips pulled into a frown, his gaze dropping to the plate of pasta in front of him.

“This is bullshit,” Tom hisses, intentionally kicking aside several pairs of shoes as he bends to lace up his boots. “You guys are real jerks, you know that.”

No one replies, and for a long moment, the only sound is Tom huffing and grunting as he struggles with his new boots, and then the slamming of the door as he disappears into the cold night air.

“Well, that was fun,” I deadpan, though in truth, I do feel marginally better. I clap my hands together, giving my remaining flatmates a wide grin. “Now let’s have some dinner, I’m starving.”

---

## Chapter 23



---

### Lily

Tessa: Party on Sunday if you're keen?

Tessa: One of Jason's friends has a girlfriend with a sweet house up the canyon. Like a mega mansion. You have to come. Tell the flatmates they can come too, if they behave.

Tessa: Please don't leave me alone with all Jason's friends (crying emoji)

I snort out a laugh, grinning like a dork at the screen of my phone before flicking back to the message thread I've got with Summer and Lani.

Me: So... remember the hot French guy I was telling you about?

Lani: (wide eyes emoji)

Summer: Which one was he again?

Summer: So many. It's hard to keep track (laughing emoji)

My smile falters, the familiar curl of unease tightening my stomach. I know Summer doesn't mean anything by it, that it's just friendly teasing, but that doesn't stop the guilt from resurfacing.

Since talking with Seth and then kissing Antoine earlier this week, things are pretty much back to normal with everyone. The only difference is Tom hates me more than ever, since, according to him, it was my fault Eve decided to break up with him. We all eat dinner together—usually with Seth cooking and me and Antoine trying to help. And I still cuddle up with Antoine and Seth on the couch in the evenings.

But I haven't kissed Antoine again.

I'm too afraid of what the other guys will think. Eddie had looked horrified when he walked in on us. I can't even imagine what it would do to Matty.

Matty, who practically declared his love to me the other day. Matty, who is everything sweet and sexy rolled into one. Who is definitely too good for me.

I silence my phone and slip it into my pocket, then lean against my locker in the changing room with a sigh.

Outside, the wind howls, the one tiny window visible from the locker room completely white with snow. A blizzard settled in after lunchtime, so quite a few people canceled lessons, leaving me with nothing to do for the afternoon. I was hoping at least some of the guys would be finished for the day as well, but no such luck.

My phone vibrates in my pocket, but I ignore it, choosing instead to sprawl out on the wooden bench, my duffel under my head like a pillow, my feet crossed at the ankles. It's not comfortable enough to take a nap, but after four days on the snow teaching, any sort of rest feels good.

When my phone vibrates for what feels like the twentieth time in the past minute, I relent and pull it out, holding it up above my head and squinting against the neon lights as I read the latest messages. There are a few unread from Tessa, and a bunch from Lani and Summer, mostly nonsense stuff, and I scroll through to the end, then nearly drop my phone on my face.

Lani:Speaking of kissing and telling...

Summer:NO.

Summer:We talked about this. We were going to FaceTime Lily.

Lani:(eye roll emoji)

Summer:(knife emojis)

Lani:Summer and I are dating

Summer:WTF

Summer:Not anymore.

Summer:JK baby. Love you.

I choke out a disbelieving laugh, nearly falling off the wooden bench as I scramble to a seated position, rifle through my jacket for my earbuds, then push the video chat button. I'm greeted by the familiar sound of Lani and Summer's laughter, a thud, a muffled curse and then both their faces coming into view.

"Lily!"

"Were you guys in the same room texting?" I ask through laughter. "You are such dorks."

Summer grins broadly, her face close to Lani's in my screen. Lani cocks her head, looking at the camera with interest. "Where are you? Are those lockers?"

"Oh." I look behind me, at the rows of gray lockers, then back to my phone. "Yah. This is the instructors' changing room I told you about." I narrow my eyes at her. "But that's not what we're talking about. You have goss. Spill."

Summer shoots Lani a dark glower.

"We're together," Lani practically squeals, grinning belligerently at Summer.

I internally high-five myself, but try not to look too smug at her news. Only months ago, when Summer had been lamenting the cesspit that was apparently online dating, I'd suggested she ask Lani out.

She'd given me one of her patented unimpressed looks, then accused me of assuming that, just because she was lesbian and Lani was bi, they would be into each other.

"Don't look so smug," Summer snaps.

I mime zipping my lips, then grin even wider.

"So Henry will be crying and licking his wounds somewhere, I take it?"

It's no secret that Henry has been in love with Lani since middle school, though he likes to pretend it was a passing crush and he's over it now. Recently, Lani told me she 'might have possibly kissed Henry just a little' when they were camping on North Shore the weekend after I left Hawai'i.

Summer and Lani exchange a look, Summer's face going stony while Lani's sun-kissed cheeks flare pink.

"So remember how you and Steve tried the whole nonmonogamy thing..." Lani hedges, looking sheepish.

I can feel the weight of Summer's glare on me through the phone, and I focus my attention on the sweeter of my best friends.

"Well, we're thinking about giving that a try." Lani ducks her gaze, long dark lashes resting on golden cheeks.

"Okay..."

I'm not really sure what to say to that, or if there is anything I should say. What Steve and I did absolutely did not work, but after talking to Seth the other night, I'm starting to think that was a Steve-problem rather than a nonmonogamy problem.

*And what do you want, honey?*

Seth's question runs through my brain, a gentle whisper, reaching into all my secret desires with smoky tendrils.



“Is that what you guys want?” I ask, looking at Summer first.  
“Are you all on board with it?”

“I’m thinking about it,” Summer says slowly, considering.

I can’t help but smile at that, because I know what she really means is she’s researching the crap out of it like she does everything else. By the time she makes her decision, she’ll be able to publish a peer-reviewed paper detailing the pros and cons of nonmonogamy, based on multiple longitudinal studies.

“Can you send me a Cliffnotes version of your research when you’re done?” I quip, only half joking. “For science, obviously.”

Summer lifts one brow, wary consideration giving way to sharp interest. “You’re thinking about dating all of them, aren’t you?” she asks.

I snort, waving one hand dismissively, grateful again that this call isn’t on speaker. “Don’t be ridiculous. Of course not.”

For some reason, my voice raises at least an octave.

I *have* thought about it. Quite a bit, actually, since my conversation with Seth. I just don’t see how it could ever work. And even if it did, even if I dated any of them, what would happen at the end of the winter season, when I fly back home to Hawai’i and they scatter across the globe, like snowflakes in the wind.

“You’re a terrible liar, you know that?”

I narrow my eyes at her. This is why I shouldn’t have friends.

“Lily?” Liam’s voice catches me by surprise, and I nearly drop my phone. He must get a glimpse of Lani and Summer’s faces on my screen, because he cocks his head in curiosity, like he’s trying to get a better look.

I signal to him that I’ll just be a minute, then turn back to my so-called friends with a meaningful look.

“Hey, one of my roommates just showed up. I’ll call you guys back later?”

Of course, they both make obnoxiously loud noises that resemble a cat in heat, and I give a silent prayer of thanks that I'm wearing my earbuds before ending the call.

"Friends from home?" Liam asks, mercifully oblivious to the fact that he's just been the source of their amusement.

I nod, tucking my phone away before one of their inappropriate messages can flash across my screen. "Did your lesson get canceled too?"

"Yah." He shoves his hands into his pockets, and I notice he's changed out of his uniform already. "I was thinking about going to the gym."

I stare at him blankly for a moment, not sure why he's telling me this. He doesn't seem like the sort of guy to broadcast his workouts, post thirst traps on social media and all that, but then I guess you never do know.

"It's... it's a pretty chill gym," he continues, and pink circles flare on his high cheekbones, dark lashes fluttering as his gaze drops to his boots. "It's got a heated pool and hot tub. Not full of gym rats or anything..." His eyes lift to mine, gray glinting under fluorescent lights. "If you wanted to come along."

There's a warm, almost overwhelming pressure behind my ribs as his words register. He wants to hang out with me. This isn't just us sitting next to each other on the chairlift or at dinner, or me driving him around in my car. And this isn't him having to hang out with me because he's being paid to train me.

"Did you say they had a pool?" I ask, smiling brightly and rising to my feet. "And a hot tub?" I grab my duffel, not bothering to keep the excitement from my voice.

Back home, there was hardly a day that passed where I didn't get in the ocean, and I'd show up to most of my university classes with hair salty and damp from an early morning surf. Since I've been here, the closest thing I've had to a swim has been the shower. Usually with one of my roommates banging on the door.

I'm in such a hurry, so preoccupied with slinging my duffel over my shoulder and rustling through my pocket for my keys,

rushing with all the desperate eagerness of a puppy, that I don't notice Antoine rounding the corner until I'm practically colliding with him.

"Lily." He grabs my shoulders, keeping me upright, his green eyes crinkling ever so slightly at the corners as he smiles at me. "You're off early too."

I nod, my breath catching in my throat at having him so close to me, so suddenly, with his lips only inches from mine and his strong hands on me. But then Antoine's gaze moves to behind me, to where Liam is, and his expression shutters.

"Oh. Liam."

"Antoine..."

The silence that falls is terrible, a tense hum punctuated by the ticking of fluorescent lights and the rattling of the building against the blizzard. It's a silence that makes me think of dynamite in snow, like the bombs the ski patrol set each morning to trigger an avalanche, cold and explosive and dangerous.

"We're just going to the gym," I say, turning back to look at Liam.

He gives me a flat, unreadable look, and I cringe inwardly, but carry on. Maybe this will be the last time he invites me to anything. Maybe he'll hardly speak to me again after this.

I turn back to Antoine and give him a wide smile, as if I can't feel Liam's cold disapproval at my back. "Do you want to come too? Liam said there's a pool. And a hot tub."

Antoine opens his mouth, and I can already tell he's going to say no, but Liam interrupts him.

"All good if you want to come. I can get you both a free trial pass for the week."

Antoine blinks, his mouth still half-open as he stares wordlessly at Liam. Then he presses his lips together and nods, a short, crisp movement that is more of a jolt than anything else.

Some of tension running between them starts to fracture, like the fraying threads of a rope pulled too tight, snapping. I take a deep breath, and feel an inexplicable rush of anticipation course through me.

“Great,” I say, my voice suddenly breathless. “I’ll drive us home first to get our swimsuits.”

---

## Chapter 24



---

### **Liam**

This was a bad idea.

To be fair, it wasn't actually my idea, it was Lily's. Or at least, inviting Antoine was Lily's idea.

I suppose I invited *her* all on my own.

"Ohmygod, I think I'm in heaven," Lily sighs as she bursts into the pool room.

She pauses, staring at the water longingly, at the tendrils of steam rising up, a crisp white gym towel wrapped around her body, already showcasing so much tan skin, I think my brain might be starting to short-circuit.

Antoine follows a few moments after, his expression guarded but his chest bare, towel wrapped scandalously low around his hips. Unlike Lily, his eyes track straight to me, like a prey animal seeking out a potential predator.

*He isn't wrong.*

Lily pulls off her towel, dropping it unceremoniously on one of the worn benches alongside the wall, then dips her toe in at the edge of the pool.

"It *is* heated." Her smile widens, those hazel eyes landing on me, and it's like someone sucked all the air out of the room. Like I've been pushed underwater. "No wonder you're just sitting there like it's a hot tub, instead of swimming laps."

Calf muscles flex gracefully as she makes her way down the steps, and my eyes involuntarily track the length of her body with the water line, moving from her calves to her thighs—not quite at the muscle mass of a seasoned instructor, but already starting to take on that powerful thickness that I’ve always loved in women. Then upward, to the soft curve of flesh at the highest point of her thighs, just before the flash of purple from her bikini, then to the gentle curve of her stomach, the dip of her naval, those perfect fucking breasts barely covered by purple fabric.

I’d never thought of purple as a sexy color before, but fuck if those scraps of fabric aren’t going to be emblazoned in my memory forever.

“Thirty-four degrees Celsius,” I choke out, remembering I should probably talk, or breathe, or both, when my eyes meet hers and read the silent mirth dancing there. “It’s a physio pool. Not really for swimming laps.”

It’s a place I’m familiar with now, after my injury. At first, it was the only type of exercise I could do, half floating half walking in endless circles, with one of those stupid little floatation belts around me and those floating barbells clenched in my fists.

Now, I come here out of habit and an ever-present fear of slipping back.

These thoughts should have my heart rate slowing, should instantly kill the semi that’s hopefully hidden under my board shorts and the water.

But then Antoine drops his towel, and... holy fuck. That’s... let’s just say I haven’t seen many guys back home wearing togs like those. Not at the beach, at least. Not just going for a casual swim with mates.

It’s not a speedo or whatever, but fuck if it isn’t close.

I swallow, and force my eyes up from the stretch of impossibly tight, black boxer briefs pretending to be swimwear, and up to Antoine’s face.

“But it’s fine to swim laps if you want to,” I say, voice breathy, words floating around me with the mist of the pool. “It’s not against the rules or anything.”

“Oh. That’s good.” Antoine’s voice is gentle, but his eyes lock on mine in silent challenge. “I would *hate* to break the rules.” And then he saunters brazenly in after Lily, and I think I might just die.

---

“WHY AREN’T you swimming laps with us?” Lily asks, grasping onto the ledge I’ve been clinging to for the past ten minutes, shaking wet hair out of her eyes to give me a quizzical look.

Antoine comes up on the other side of her, takes a deep breath, then spins like an acrobat, water sluicing off the muscles of his back, dark skin stark and vibrant against the blue-tiled pool.

“I can’t swim,” I admit with a self-deprecating laugh, grateful that Antoine won’t be able to hear. “I mean, I can doggy paddle if I have to, so I won’t completely drown.” Well, at least not instantly. I’d probably make it to the deep end of the pool. Maybe. “But I can’t do that.” I tilt my chin meaningfully in Antoine’s direction, where muscled arms dart above the water with the precision of a metronome, timed between breaths and kicks in perfect synchronicity.

“Oh.”

Lily sidles up beside me, her back against the tiles, her long, slender arms bent at the elbows, resting on the ledge. The dripping fingertips of her right arm are only inches from my own, and I can feel the movement of her legs beside mine in the water as she lazily keeps herself afloat.

“I can teach you if you want to learn.” She gives me a teasing grin. “Be your instructor.” She tosses her head, and a lock of wet hair slaps me playfully across the cheek. “That’s what I did back home, by the way. I worked as a lifeguard and taught swimming at the local pool.”

I huff out a laugh. For some reason, I never really imagined Hawai'i with swimming pools. I always just imagined sandy beaches, maybe with those little huts that sit out over the water. People dressed in bright florals wandering between tiki torches.

As soon as the thoughts formulate in my brain, I realize that they're completely ridiculous.

It makes sense that she's taught before, though. She picked up teaching snowboarding so quickly, and has an innate understanding of how to explain the movements. She knew instinctively that sometimes you have to move people's bodies for them, let the muscle memory imbed itself.

"So if you wanted to learn, I could teach you," she continues. "I've mainly taught little kids, but I have taught a few adults too..." She trails off, the playful grin faltering, a shadow of self-consciousness flitting across her gaze when I don't answer. It's like a cloud over the sun, the absence of her smile, and I feel a wash of cold run over me despite the heated water. "Totally okay if you don't want to, though."

"Okay," I say, the word tumbling out before I can really think about it. I've never had a desire to swim. Never even considered it as a necessary life skill. And yet, the thought of turning her down, of seeing that look of disappointment on her face—I don't think I can do it. "That'd be great."

Which is how I end up gripping a kickboard in the shallow end of the pool, my arms stretched out in front of me, the scar from my spinal surgery on show, my legs behind me, and Lily's hands skirting mercilessly over my body as she patiently explains how to kick so that I'm actually able to propel myself forward in the water.

It's surprisingly difficult.

I try kicking under the water, 'boiling the surface' as Lily calls it, and end up—somehow—going backward. Lily's face contorts as she tries to hide her amusement, her hands firm on my calves as she moves my legs for me, teaching my body what my mind is, apparently, too stupid to learn.



“It looks like you’re a kinetic learner,” she muses, and I honestly can’t tell if she’s ripping me out or not.

“You’re doing great,” she adds encouragingly, releasing my legs to float to the front of my board. “A couple of weeks and you could be swimming freestyle across the pool.”

“A couple of *weeks*?” I stare at her incredulously. A couple of weeks, and I could have even the most untalented of students going down a black diamond run.

Lily gives me a sympathetic smile, cocking her head to one side. “You’ve always been good at sports, haven’t you?”

The question catches me off guard, and I find my legs drifting down, my feet resting on the smooth tiles until I’m half standing, half floating in front of her.

“You have,” she says, nodding as if in answer to her own question. “I get that. One of my best friends back home is like that—he’s just naturally athletic. Growing up, there literally wasn’t a sport he wasn’t the best at. Rowing, surfing, rock climbing—even skiing, and he’s from Hawai’i.”

A soft smile curves her lips, her eyes going distant with some memory, and an inexplicable twinge of jealousy pangs in my gut. Maybe because, in my self-absorbed mind, Lily didn’t exist until she showed up on the snow, stumbling her way down that black diamond run and into my life. I’d never really thought of what her life was like before. About who her friends were, or all the little jokes she shared with them.

“...until he tried ice skating on a school field trip.” Lily shakes her head, eyes sparking with amusement. “He just couldn’t stay upright, no matter how hard he tried.” She snorts out a laugh. “He ended up having to use one of those plastic walker things. You know, the things for little kids that are shaped like a penguin...” Her eyes meet mine, full of silent challenge that has my lungs constricting and heat rushing down my scarred spine. “He never got on the ice again. Said ice skating was a stupid sport and a waste of time.”

I lift one brow, pulling the kickboard against my chest as I rise to stand.

“You think I’m going to give up,” I say, my voice dropping low, a mixture of irritation and something darker making my blood heat. “You don’t think I have what it takes to stick to something.”

She shrugs one shoulder, the move instantly drawing my eyes to the curve of her neck, the fluttering pulse at her throat, the water tracking between her breasts as she lifts up in the water, then sinks back down.

“I don’t know, *Coach*...” she says that word with a teasing smile, but for some reason, it has all my blood rushing south and a wild, dangerous flash of heat burning through me. “You tell me.”

“You are such a little shit,” I tell her, throwing aside the kickboard and lunging gracelessly for her in the water. “If you’d spoken to me like that a few weeks ago...”

Her eyes widen in surprise, her arms going out to try and propel herself back, but she’s too slow.

My body slams against hers, like a slow-motion tackle, driving her momentarily under, my hands going to her exposed sides, fingers curling lightly into soft flesh.

I intended to tickle her, to leave her breathless and gasping. To release some of the tension that’s been coursing under my skin since the moment she dropped that towel and slipped into the water.

Before then, really, if I’m being honest. Maybe since that first day I saw her doing yoga in the living room, uncaring whether Matty was drooling into his breakfast at the sight of her.

The sound of gasping laughter fills my ears as we break the surface, her arms pressing between us as she squirms against me, her head thrown back, her mouth open wide, cheeks pink.

“If you think I’ll give up that easily...” I growl, bending forward so that my lips are close to her ear. Close enough that I can smell the saltwater scent of the water coming off her skin, alongside something feminine and warm. “Then you don’t know anything about me, Miss Lily Dean. Not a goddamn thing...”

Her thighs slide against me, smooth and slippery feeling, making my boardshorts ride up as her hands dip to my stomach, delicate fingers digging with surprising strength into my flesh. I think she's meaning to tickle me, like I've been doing to her, but the feel of those fingers against my stomach, right above the waistband of my boardshorts, it has all the wrong signals firing in my brain like lightning bolts.

The arousal that's been simmering just below the surface bursts forth, my cock going fully hard between us, straining for her like some underwater creature with a mind of its own. I should move back, should let her go, put space between us. Instead, as if completely controlled by my hindbrain instincts, my hold on her tightens, my fingers widening as I splay my hands over her hips, my thumbs resting just below her hipbones as I pull her toward me.

Her hands still, her lips parting and eyes going wide as they meet my own. I can feel the soft flesh of her body against my cock, can feel the heat of her searing through our swimsuits. I swear to god, I can even feel the frantic thrum of her pulse beneath my fingertips.

"Liam..." the word comes out as a whisper, mingling with the steam rising off the water around us. It could be a plea or a warning, but my body shudders in pleasure at the sound of my name on her lips.

"I'm going in the hot tub now..."

Antoine's voice cuts through the red-tinged haze of lust clouding my mind, and I drop my hands, stepping back and instantly shivering at the comparatively cool water flowing between us.

"...if you two want to join."

Antoine's formal tone is cold, and Lily bites her lip, her cheeks flaring red with embarrassment. The sight of her discomfort has my own anger rising up again, and I turn to scowl at Antoine.

"The hot tub sounds great," Lily says, turning to give Antoine an apologetic smile. She swims a few strokes toward the stairs,

then pauses, treading water to turn back to me. “Are you coming?”

I reach down, trying to surreptitiously adjust my board shorts, silently willing my throbbing cock to calm the fuck down. “Yah.” My voice sounds gravelly, almost raspy. “I’ll join you guys in a few.”

Antoine gives me a scathing look that tells me he knows exactly why I’m lingering behind. I lift one brow at him in reply, silently daring him to say anything. He’s had his hands all over Lily every single night since she arrived. He can take that judgmental look and...

“Oh wow that’s hot,” Lily hisses as she steps into the hot tub. She lifts one leg out, then the other, shooting me an accusatory look from across the room. “Why didn’t you tell me it was so hot?”

I grin, but my smile quickly falters when Antoine steps into the hot tub beside her, one muscled arm wrapping around her shoulders, his green eyes finding mine.

“Is it always so empty in here?” Lily asks, completely oblivious to me and Antoine’s telepathic showdown. She glances around the pool room before sinking slowly into the hot tub. “We must have had the whole place to ourselves for at least an hour.”

“Yah,” I say, trying not to grind my teeth when Antoine sits down right next to her, pulling her so close she must be halfway on his lap, his eyes locked on mine the whole time in silent challenge. “Hardly anyone comes here, not since that big gym opened up a year ago.”

“Oh,” she murmurs, and I think she’s answering me, but then her eyelids flutter shut, a sigh escaping her lips, and I’m not quite sure. My hands clench into fists at my sides as I stand on tiptoes, straining to see above the lip of the pool, but from where I am in the water, I can’t see below their shoulders.

“You coming in?” Antoine asks, those perfectly shaped lips quirked up in an almost smile, expression icy as the blizzard that’s raging outside this forgotten haven.

My legs move as if they have a mind of their own, propelling me up the stairs and across the worn tile floor, to the sunken hot tub in the far corner. I step into the water, ignoring the searing burn that has every one of my nerve endings screaming out in protest, and take a seat next to Lily, close enough that my thigh brushes her own, giving Antoine a pointed look as I lift my arm and rest it on the ledge behind Lily's head, not caring that his arm is merely inches away from my own now.

Lily blinks at me in surprise, cheeks flushed and lips parted. "Oh. Hey there," she says, probably aiming for casual, but there's a huskiness to her voice that wasn't there before. Her gaze drops to my chest, and for a brief moment, I'm hit by a wave of self-consciousness that I don't think I've felt since high school.

She's probably used to sun-browned bodies and thick muscles. To guys who spend every day building their upper bodies surfing or paddling or whatever else it was that athletic friend of hers was so great at doing.

I don't think my skin has seen the sun for more than two weeks at a time for the past six years. And while I've got good muscle tone, I certainly don't have Antoine's build. I've got a skier's body—massive thighs, a strong core, but my arms... well, it's not exactly like I'm out there lifting weights or anything.

"What was the tattoo on your hip?" she asks, and now that I look, I can see her eyes are focused on the water, not my chest. On the tattoo now hidden below the surface of the hot tub. "Japanese, right?"

I feel a twinge of satisfaction at her words, a silent sort of pride and relief that comes with correct recognition. The amount of times people have asked me about my 'Chinese tattoo' in the locker room at work has been enough to make me keep it covered up.

"Yah, it is." I feel the faintest of smiles curve my lips. "Good guess."

She wrinkles her nose at me. "It wasn't exactly a guess."

Before I can ask her what she means, the arm Antoine has draped over her slender shoulders moves, his fingertips caressing the length of her upper arm, the back of his hand brushing against my exposed side in the process. He doesn't seem to notice, but every nerve ending comes alive at that simple, accidental touch, and I momentarily lose the ability to speak.

I stare at their bodies, at how close the pair of them are to me, since I stupidly positioned myself right next to them in some sort of possessive power play. I should move. Should slide a few inches over, should tuck my arm back by my side...

"What does it mean?" Lily asks, her eyelids fluttering shut as she tips her head back. The move has her head resting on my arm instead of the pool ledge, damp hair draping across my bare skin.

"It says *ichi go, ichi e,*" I mumble, barely aware of what I'm saying.

A smile curves Lily's lips, and she rolls her head, turning to face me until her cheek is resting against my forearm, giving a slow, knowing nod. "Ah. That's the Zen philosophy of impermanence, right?"

I gape at her, momentarily stunned. At her other side, Antoine is staring down at her like she's some sort of a gift, and he isn't quite sure how she ended up in his arms.

"Yah," I choke out. "How did you know that?"

Lily lifts her head, and I instantly miss the feel of her skin against mine. She scoots forward, and Antoine's arm slides into the water behind her, his fingers skating my side again in the process.

"I took Zen philosophy in my first year of college," she says, with an embarrassed shrug. "Along with a bunch of religious studies classes. All about non-Christian religions, of course." Her eyes crinkle with mirth. "It was my way of rebelling against my parents." Her smile drops. "Or, trying to. Turns out, they didn't really care about all that. As long as the classes I signed up for counted toward my major, and as long

as my major led to me going to law school, they really didn't care about the content at all..."

"Is that what you're going to do?" I ask, my chest feeling tight for some reason. "When you finish the season here, I mean? You're going to go to law school?"

It's hard to imagine her in an office, that wild brown hair coiffed, thick lipstick on those full lips, muscle and softness hidden behind the confines of some black-and-white dress suit. It has its appeal, for sure, and my cock stirs beneath the water, registering its vote of approval for a lawyer-Lily fantasy.

But what would happen to her laugh, to her smiles?

She shrugs, her gaze darting away, to the middle of the hot tub. "I have to finish my undergrad first. Just have one more semester..." She swallows, slender throat bobbing, and then her eyes turn back to me, full of an unguarded vulnerability I haven't seen before. "I'm not really sure what I want anymore," she admits. "I don't think I ever stopped to think about it. Don't think anyone ever asked."

I nod, my own throat going tight, my jaw clenching.

I first showed talent when I was ten, and my life has been all about snowboarding for nearly as long as I can remember. Until it wasn't, and the uncharted waters of my future have been staring at me like a blank canvas ever since.

"I know how that is," Antoine says, his voice somehow soft as honey and full of bitterness at the same time. "I was at law school up until a few weeks ago." The skin below his eyes darkens, his mouth tightening. "At Oxford, actually." His mouth twists on the word Oxford, as if the name of that prestigious institution is nothing but a bad taste.

Lily spins to face him, giving me her back, and I instantly feel the loss of those hazel eyes on me.

"And you came here?" she asks, her voice incredulous. "To teach skiing? Why?"

My eyes go to Antoine's face, to the tight set of his jaw and the silent rage in his vibrant green eyes, and I'm suddenly desperate for the answer to her question too. Not just that

question, but all the ones around it—like why is he living in a flat with six other people, eating food from a food bank, never going out, spending all of his evenings in...

Antoine shrugs. “I hated it. Hated every second of it. My classes, the other students, the horrible English weather...”

Lily laughs, then covers her mouth with her fist. Antoine narrows his eyes at her, but there’s no real anger there. If anything, he seems relieved by her response.

“I’m sorry.” Lily shakes her head. “You hated Oxford because of the weather? That has to be the most French complaint I’ve ever heard.”

Antoine grins, the flash of white stark against his dark skin. “Fair.” He chuckles. “I know, I know. I probably sound like a spoiled, rich kid...”

“No.” Lily reaches forward, presumably to grasp his hands under the water. The move has her sliding toward me on the seat, the round flesh of her ass pressing against the outside of my thigh. “You don’t. At least, not to me. I get it. Trust me.”

I get it too, I want to say. My parents might not have pressured me into university or some profession, but that’s only because I had *talent*. I had a *gift*. And the moment it was gone, it was like they didn’t know what to do with me.

“Thanks, Lily,” Antoine murmurs, his gaze going soft as he stares at her.

He’d looked at me like that once, his skin lit up in reds and pinks on the dancefloor in Montmartre. Looked at me with stars in his eyes and kiss-swollen lips, with the words *I’ll call you, I promise*, sitting between us. I’d lied to him then, given him a fake name, a fake number.

I’d been too scared to do anything different. Too scared of what coming out would mean. To my family, to my career, to my fans.

“*Well, you wouldn’t be the first person to kiss someone drunk and regret it later.*” Antoine’s words from last weekend come rushing back to me. He’d been speaking to Lily, but his words had been for me, I know it. “... *Maybe he’ll hold a grudge*



*against you for years. Maybe it's a Kiwi thing to hate people who drunk kiss you."*

I think about the way I shouted at him on the ridgeline when we hiked backcountry the other week. How I called him a liar and a tease. The words I'd thrown at him, the names I'd called him.

*Fuck.* What had I been thinking? What is wrong with me?

Antoine's eyes meet my own, sharp and cutting as he looks at me over Lily's shoulder.

My own widen in panic, my mouth suddenly feeling dry, a churning starting in the pit of my stomach.

Without thinking about it, my leg stretches out under the water, seeking out Lily, as if contact with her smooth skin will make some of this right again. Or maybe I just want her attention back on me, instead of him. Who knows why we do things in moments like these, when feelings and hunger and the heat of the water don't leave any room for rational thought?

Lily jolts in surprise at my leg against hers, at the feel of my ankle hooking around her own, and she turns to give me a wide-eyed look over her shoulder, her hips and ass rubbing against my thigh as she moves toward me. Emboldened, I let my hand drift to her hip, my thumb dragging along the soft flesh just below her swimsuit on her outer thigh.

Another leg rubs against my own, this one decidedly masculine, rough with hair and hard with defined muscle. At the same time, strong fingertips nudge my own where my hand is settled on her thigh, the thick fingertips and blunt nails bumping against my own.

My whole body goes hot and cold at once as everything in me stills. Lily gives a little gasp, her hand coming back to settle on my thigh, as if she's seeking to anchor herself, and Antoine's eyes meet mine with a frenzied panic that echoes my own.

For a long moment, we're frozen like this, three sets of limbs unintentionally intertwined, Antoine and I with our hands on

Lily's body as she's pressed between us. We're closer together than I realized—close enough that I could press a kiss to the back of Lily's neck, suck her earlobe into my mouth. Close enough that I could reach one hand between her thighs, and another between his.

My nostrils flare, my fingertips digging possessively into Lily's thigh, my thumb breaching the fabric of her swimsuit, sliding under the teasing tie on her outer hip. I keep my eyes on Antoine's, staring at him with challenge and hunger, my cock growing impossibly hard despite the insanity of this situation.

Any moment now, he'll move his hand, his leg. She'll pull away and give us an irritated look...

Antoine's ankle locks with my own, an almost violent claim, his eyes never leaving mine as he reaches up, gripping Lily's chin in deft fingers, and pulling her lips to meet his own.

---

## Chapter 25



---

### Lily

*Holy shit.*

The moment Antoine crashes his lips to mine, the world goes momentarily blank, a whiteout to rival the blizzard screaming outside this windowless haven. It's a hungry, possessive, almost violent kiss that steals my breath, that has my vision dancing with stars as fire rushes through my already overheated body.

Legs tangle with my own beneath the water, fingertips press against my thigh, dip under the string of my bikini, trail up my hip. I'm not sure whose legs are whose, whose hands are whose, and right now, I'm not sure I care.

I melt against Antoine, my hands coming up to splay on his chest and I swear I can feel his heart thundering beneath my palm.

Antoine pulls back, leaving me panting, his eyes meeting mine with a searing intensity, and no small amount of uncertainty. "Is this okay, *mon chou?*" he asks.

My heart clenches at the sincerity in his tone. I nod, lips parted and kiss-swollen as I stare at him, my vision hazy with heat and hunger.

Behind me, Liam's strong hands grip my hips, pulling me against him between his spread thighs, one knee bent beneath him on the bench, his other leg tangling with mine and Antoine's. He dips forward, pressing a biting kiss to the side of

my neck as he closes the gap between our bodies, angling himself so that his front is pressed against my back.

Antoine's eyes drop to my neck, pupils dilating and nostrils flaring at the sight of Liam's mouth on me. For a brief moment, I think he's going to try to pull me away from Liam, or maybe say something. Instead, he shifts forward, his knees coming between my own on the bench, causing my thighs to widen to accommodate him. One wet hand comes up to palm my cheek, and Antoine's eyes dart from me to Liam, blazing green and full of a silent question that isn't meant for me.

Behind me, Liam stills, his mouth releasing the skin of my neck with a *pop* as he turns to rest his chin on my shoulder, the faintest scruff of his cheek rough against my own.

A long, tense silence stretches between him and Antoine, between all of us. For a brief moment, I'm reminded of the time a hurricane swept past our island last year, of the deceptive stillness, full of hot humidity, that had even the palm trees trembling in anticipation before the storm hit.

"Go on." Liam's voice is a low rumble that I can feel in my bones. "Tell her."

Antoine lifts his chin, defiance mixing with uncertainty.

"I... I kissed Liam." Antoine's words come out in a panting huff, and he's close enough that I can feel them on my skin, cool against the heat of the pool.

Antoine's throat bobs, but his gaze doesn't falter. "Years ago," he continues, his thumb tracing the shape of my cheekbone. "When I was sixteen, back in France." He bites his lower lip, his cheeks darkening as he gives a brittle smile. "It was my first kiss."

Oh. *Oh...*

Liam lets out a choked sound, his body tensing against my own. "Your first kiss? You never said..."

Antoine doesn't reply, just levels Liam with a look full of wordless challenge.

Suddenly, everything between Antoine and Liam makes so much more sense. The silent tension. The apparent dislike. The little things they said. The way they avoid each other as much as possible or—if forced to be in the same room—pretend the other doesn't exist.

My heart aches at the thought of them silently suffering, silently hurting each other, all these weeks we've lived together.

I drop my hands from Antoine's chest, grasping his forearm where it floats between us in the water, then reaching down to cover Liam's hand where it's splayed across my hip.

"I..." My voice is small, almost a whisper, like I'm afraid even the walls will hear this secret that isn't mine to tell. "I didn't know."

Liam huffs, the sound full of bitter amusement. "Of course you didn't." Some of the tension bleeds out of him, his body molding more closely against my own as he holds me against him. "But now you do."

He presses a tentative kiss to the side of my neck, then my cheek, a brushing kiss that has warmth spreading through my chest. "Are you okay with that?" he asks. "With this? Now that you know our past?"

*Their past.*

A kiss, by the sounds of it, and years ago. But it had to have been more than that to have left them so full of bitterness toward each other.

*Their past.*

But with our legs twined together, and with their hands on me and our faces mingling breaths, it doesn't feel like it's entirely in the past.

No, it feels like it's just re-emerging.

And this... I'm not even sure what *this* is, how we went from swimming in the pool, from talking about university and parental expectations to this.

But I like it.

“I don’t mind,” I admit, my voice going breathless as Antoine grips my knees beneath the water with each of his hands, his thumbs tracing circles on the inside of my thighs. My eyelids flutter shut and I press my cheek against Liam’s, a sigh escaping my lips before I can stop it. “And if you both want that again...”

My words falter, because I’m not quite sure how to say what I want to say. All I know is I’m falling for both of them, careening down the snowy mountainside, out of control. And the thought of them hurting—the thought of them hurting each other—it feels like a physical blow.

I just wish I knew how to fix things.

Maybe words aren’t the best way to do that. At least, not here, with my body pliant as melted honey between them, with the steam from the hot tub rising around us, with Antoine’s hands moving up my legs, so slowly, so slowly, until his thumbs are caressing the soft flesh of my thighs, so close to my heated core.

A whimper escapes my throat, my head falling back onto Liam’s shoulder, my back arching until I can feel the cool air on my bikini-clad breasts, making my nipples peak.

“Fuck, Lily,” Liam growls, teeth nipping at my earlobe. “How did you get here? What are you doing to me?”

Antoine bends forward, pressing searing kisses along the column of my throat, my collarbone, my shoulder, his fingers pressed against my thighs, hot as a brand. Liam’s hands skirt up my sides, moving from my hips to the curve of my stomach, brushing my ribcage until they’re resting just beneath my breasts.

“How long have you two been hooking up?” Liam murmurs, his voice a low growl in my ear. “This isn’t the first time you’ve fooled around, is it?”

There’s a hint of jealousy there, but mostly heat, and the biting kiss he presses to the side of my neck echoes his tone. Sharp enough to leave a mark. Hungry, angry, with no small amount of possessiveness.

“We’ve...” My breath comes out of me in a stuttering gasp when Liam’s fingers dip beneath the fabric of my bikini top, teasing the underside of my breasts.

I’m not sure what he means by hooking up. Does he mean sex? Or kissing? Everything is blurring together in my mind, boundaries and words, rising up with the steam around us.

“We kissed a few days ago,” I breathe. I thought he would have known. Thought Eddie would have said something to him. “Just once.”

Antoine’s hands tighten on my inner thighs, sending a spiral of heat rushing to my core with such force, I think I would slip beneath the water if he and Liam weren’t holding me up. Antoine’s lips, soft but demanding, make their way from my throat to the center of my chest, and he presses one tender kiss to my sternum before pulling back with panting breaths hot against my skin.

“Hmm.” Liam’s voice rumbles through me, sending shivers across my skin. “Just once?”

I get the feeling he’s not asking me though, and when I look down, I see Antoine’s eyes aren’t fixed on me, but over my shoulder. On Liam.

Antoine nods, pupils blow, lips parted.

“Until today.” I can feel the curve of Liam’s smile against my cheek, hear the amusement lacing his words. “What changed, Antoine? Why kiss her again here? Now? In front of me?”

Antoine’s nostrils flare, a flash of white teeth showing. “You know why.”

His face is close enough to my own now that I could dip my head forward and kiss him, could take that full lower lip in my teeth, suck it in, taste it.

Liam gives a mirthless huff. “You were jealous, weren’t you? Tell me, Antoine—who were you jealous of—me? Or her?”

“I... I was...” Antoine narrows his eyes, jaw clenching. He knows he’s being goaded, knows Liam is trying to get under his skin.

At first, I don't think he's going to answer, and then, it's like something snaps in him. Like watching the moment an avalanche breaks through the tree line and rips down a mountainside, leaving only exposed rock and ice and the broken bones of pines in its wake.

*"Putain de merde,"* he mutters, his eyes darkening. *"Mais, c'est trop..."*

He releases his hold on my thighs, one hand flying up to grip my chin, the other reaching behind Liam's head, tangling at the nape of his neck with enough force that Liam gives a muffled grunt of surprise. Or maybe pain? His hand is gentle where it cups my jaw though, fingers firm but soft.

"I was jealous of you both," he hisses, his eyes darting from Liam to me, to Liam again. "Touching each other. Laughing together..." He looks back at me, some of the trembling rage giving way to silent apology. "I want you so much, Lily. I'm sorry. I have no right to be jealous. Not after all we talked about. But he's... he's..."

Antoine's voice falters, his throat bobbing. His eyes fix on Liam. *"C'est complètement fou, mais..."* I've thought about you almost every day since that night."

Liam gives a pained sound, a shuddering breath, as if Antoine's softly spoken admission is a physical blow.

I'm not sure who moves first.

Water sloshes over the edge of the hot tub, darkening the worn tiles. Bodies slide against my own, pressing me between them, until I can feel the sounds of their hunger vibrating through my skin.

All the while, Liam's hands hold me tight, fingers stretching as if they have a mind of their own, skating over the top of my bikini, palms cupping my breasts. Antoine's hand slips from my jaw to my throat, his thumb stroking my pulse point as he swallows up Liam's hungry, desperate-sounding groans. Behind me, Liam rocks forward, and there is no mistaking the hard length pressing against the base of my spine.



I let out an open-mouthed whimper. Antoine and Liam pull apart with a sharp gasp, panting. Moisture lines Antoine's dark lashes, kiss swollen lips tremble. Something within me constricts almost painfully.

"I... that was..." Antoine chokes out.

"I know." Liam presses his lips to the side of my neck, the bridge of his nose rubbing my ear, breath hot on my skin.

"So you're not..."

"Angry? No." Liam's voice is a low rumble. "Do you need me to kiss you again to prove it?"

"I kissed you." The faintest of smiles quirks Antoine's lips.

"Hmm."

Liam's fingers tease the fabric of my bikini, and I can feel my nipples straining beneath the fabric, hard against his palms. Antoine's eyes dip, pupils dilating and lips parting at the sight of Liam's hands on me.

"Does this make you jealous too?" Liam's voice dances across the water, teeth nipping at my earlobe.

His fingers curl, effortlessly slipping the damp fabric to the sides, and I gasp, arching instinctively into his touch, shivering at the feel of cool air on my heated skin.

"*Mon dieu...*" Antoine bites his lower lip, gives a small shake of his head.

"Do you want him to taste you, Lily?" Liam rasps. "Do you want to feel his mouth on these gorgeous tits?"

I nod, a wordless whimper, vision going hazy as I stare at Antoine.

"Please," I say, when Antoine's eyes flick up to me in silent question. "Please."

The hardness pressing against the base of my spine pulses, Liam's fingers giving my nipples the faintest of teasing brushes before his hands slide down my sides to my hips, pulling me against him.

“Don’t make her beg, Antoine.” Thumbs draw spiraling circles on my stomach, fingertips brushing the waistband of my bikini bottoms. “Or should I do it for you?”

Antoine’s teeth flash in warning, hands gripping my thighs as his head dips, expression softening when lips find my peaking nipple, the faintest of sighs brushing against my skin. I arch against him, desperate for more.

“Lily…” Antoine’s breath is hot against my skin.

And then he’s drawing me in, sucking deep enough that I can feel fire racing through my veins, a spiraling need as thick as the steam coiling between us. Fingers tease my other nipple, tweaking and pulling it almost painfully—Liam’s hand, I realize, when Antoine’s strong hands pull my thighs wide.

Liam’s other hand dips beneath my swimsuit, and I let out a strangled cry, arching up, widening my legs even more when he presses against my swollen slit, sliding against the slickness, teasing my soaked entrance with the pads of his fingers.

“Ohmygod, ohmygod,” I chant, my head falling back on Liam’s shoulder. I don’t think I’ve ever needed to come so bad in my life. “Please. Please. Ohmygod.”

“So greedy,” Liam chuckles, and I feel Antoine’s answering huff of amusement on my aching breasts as he lets one nipple slip from his lips with a *pop* before drawing in the other. “Such a needy little thing, aren’t you?”

When I don’t answer, Liam taps my clit as if in reprimand, and my vision whites at the edges.

“Yes,” I agree, my words a raw whisper that dance toward the ceiling. Right now, I think I’d agree with anything he says, do anything, if that would get him to make me come. “Yes. Please. Just touch me.”

“*Merde*,” Antoine rasps.

“So wet.” Liam’s voice rumbles against my spine. “Like that?”

Slowly, so slowly, he circles my clit with the pad of one finger. My legs tremble beneath Antoine’s grip, my breaths coming in

fast, desperate pants.

“Feel her,” Liam urges, dropping his hold on my breast to grip one of Antoine’s hands under the water, pulling it toward my heated core. All the while, he’s rolling my clit in slow, maddening circles that have me breathing through my teeth, whispering wordless pleas. “Feel how hot she is. How hungry.”

Antoine pulls back from my breasts with a gasp, leaving my nipples aching and warm. Trembling fingers slip under my swimsuit, pressing against my swollen entrance, then stilling as he stares up at me with wide, questioning eyes.

I nod wordlessly, my lips parted. Antoine’s throat bobs, and then he’s pressing in, two long fingers curling upward as he drives them deep with one fluid thrust.

All the air rushes from my lungs, white-hot pleasure rising at the unexpected stretch, at the sudden fullness.

“That’s it,” Liam murmurs, words brushing against my skin. He stills his teasing circles to dip his fingers to where Antoine is pressed inside me, groaning when he feels where we’re connected. “Fuck. Fuck that’s hot. Shit yah. Fuck her with your fingers.”

He’s rocking against me now, his cock dragging against my ass in time with Antoine’s slow thrusts. My legs are spread wide, and I’m arching against their fingers, trying to rub against them, to get the friction I need to come, trying to take Antoine in deeper, wanting more now that the initial stretching shock has subsided.

“You need to come, don’t you? Fucking desperate for it, aren’t you?”

I nod, a wordless whimper, a senseless plea.

Fingers pinch my clit, teeth nipping the shell of my ear. “I need your words, baby. Tell us what you want.”

I grit my teeth, rolling my head against his shoulder to glare at him. He stares back at me, pupils blown but expression implacable. Antoine slows his thrusts, stilling his fingers deep inside me until I’m all but writhing against him.

“Fucking make me come,” I hiss, bringing my hand between my own thighs, “Or I’ll do it myself.”

And I mean it. I haven’t come in weeks, not since I got to Park City. Sharing a room with Tom isn’t exactly conducive to getting off. The last time I tried in the shower, I was interrupted by someone banging on the door.

Liam grins, a sharp, dangerous grin that has a new rush of heat pulsing around Antoine’s fingers. “That’s a good girl,” he rumbles, and then he’s gripping my chin, pulling me into a kiss.

The angle is awkward, but the feel of his tongue against my own, his teeth nipping my lower lip, and those words, those fucking words... it’s almost enough to send me over the edge.

He pulls back, panting against my lips, gray eyes so dark, they’re almost black, expression feral, and I know he’s just as desperate as I am, however much he’s teasing me. “Make her come,” he says, never taking his eyes off mine. “Fuck her hard and make her come.”

Antoine obeys, fingers curling, thrusts taking on an almost unbearable pace that has white heat rushing through my veins, up my spine. He’s panting too, green eyes flashing as his gaze darts from where his fingers are buried in me under the water, to my exposed breasts, to Liam.

Liam’s fingers drop to my clit, pressing hard, and suddenly I’m flying, every coherent thought leaving me, a keening cry swallowed up by Antoine’s lips as he crashes them against my own.

“Oh shit, fuck, that’s it, fucking come. Such a good girl for us, aren’t you? So fucking needy...” Liam’s voice drops, a low rasp that becomes a pained groan.

Vaguely, in the spiraling haze of my orgasm, just as color starts to dance into my vision, I’m aware of a sudden stiffening against the base of my spine, a pulsing heat, and Liam’s muttered curses.

“Well. Didn’t mean for that to happen.” Liam drops his forehead against my shoulder, his panting breaths filling the

space between our bodies as he lets out a self-deprecating chuckle. “Frank is going to murder me.”

---

## Chapter 26



---

### **Antoine**

“Frank?” Lily blinks in confusion at Liam’s words, but her hazel eyes are fixed on me, staring at me with a reverence that I’m not quite certain I deserve.

Keeping my eyes on her, I gently pull my fingers from her pussy, then, without thinking about it, lift them to my mouth, sucking them clean. There’s the faintest hint of salt from the pool, but under that, it’s all her, slick and sweet and tangy and *absolument divine*.

Just like I imagined.

“The guy who owns the gym,” Liam explains, dragging one hand over his face. “He’s really obsessed about water quality...”

My lips pull into a grin, even as my cock throbs jealously. “You came in the pool?”

He shoots me a dark glower, and my smile widens, cheeks pulling almost painfully.

“Shut the fuck up.”

Lily bites her lip, eyes dancing with mirth. I feel a laugh bubbling up in my chest, unexpected and rare. It fills the space between us, and Liam stares at me in shock for moment before his pale cheeks darken, and then he’s shaking his head, laughing too, a low rumble I feel against my bones.

I'm floating, effervescent as the little bubbles rising off our bodies. I'm spinning, drunk on heat and steam and Lily and Liam. An hour ago, I doubted Liam would ever speak to me again. Now... it's like all the tension between us has transformed from sharp-edged ice to liquid warmth.

I'm honestly not sure this isn't a dream. Some desperate hallucination born of years wondering *why* and *what if* and *would he ever*. Of weeks of feeling something in me pulling toward Lily, like a planet orbiting the sun.

"Maybe he won't notice?" Lily says hopefully, readjusting her swimsuit and turning to face Liam.

The move gives me a perfect view of the length of her spine, of the sleek muscles of her back, the round of her perfect ass beneath the water, and I palm my cock beneath my swim shorts, hoping to ease the throbbing ache.

"Maybe..." Liam doesn't sound convinced, but he doesn't look too worried. His gaze drops to my lap and he smirks. "Either way, we should hit the showers. It's almost four o'clock."

"Already?" Lily springs from the water, then stumbles, gripping the handrail to steady herself, legs trembling. "I need to pick up the guys."

Liam rises beside her, one hand on her back, his brow dipping. "Careful. You've just been soaking in a hot tub for the past thirty minutes." He bends, nipping at her ear in reprimand. "I'm not having you pass out on me. The guys can wait. Or catch the shuttle. Or walk."

Lily gapes at Liam in mock outrage. "It's snowing." She tosses her wet hair over her shoulder. "I'm not making them walk home. Not when it'll take me five minutes to pick them up."

I don't particularly like the idea of being separated from Lily, of watching her towel-wrapped form slipping through the doors to the women's changing room. After what we just shared, it seems wrong to just leave her on her own.

"Come on," Liam beckons to me, and I follow him, my eyes lingering on Lily until the doors of the women's changing

rooms swing shut behind her.

The moment we're alone in the changing rooms, away from all Lily's lightness and warmth, her teasing smile—all my self-doubts come flooding back. I'm sixteen years old again, staring at that fake name and number, wondering *why, why, why* as I mentally reenact every second of my first kiss. Wondering what went wrong. What I could have done better.

Lights hum overhead, cheap fluorescent that always makes my dark skin look ashy and washed out. I tighten my grip on the white gym towel as I head for the showers, my cheeks burning at the thought of being naked with Liam. Of being alone with Liam.

“Hey.” His hand finds the small of my back unerringly, hot as a brand, and I flinch, casting him a wide-eyed look that's probably reminiscent of a startled deer. “Hey,” he says again, softer this time, edging closer to me, like maybe he really thinks I'll run. “You good?”

I dip my chin, biting the inside of my cheek as I consider my answer.

“Come here.” Liam grips my shoulders, maneuvering me into one of the shower stalls. It's a tight fit with the two of us, my shoulders nearly skimming the tiled walls unless I angle myself right. He latches the door shut then turns to face me, his gray eyes narrowed on me, cat-like, stalking.

It shouldn't turn me on. Shouldn't have my already aching cock going half-hard again beneath my towel.

He drops his towel, then his board shorts, never taking those eyes off me. I swallow, mouth suddenly dry, head still spinning from the hot tub.

“I'm sorry.” He says, the words coming out from behind gritted teeth.

My stomach flies to my throat, breath stuttering, eyes stinging, because for one horrifying moment, I think he's going to say he regrets what happened with Lily. With *me*.

There's the sound of a locker door slamming, the grunting huff of some gym rat unloading his gear, getting ready for a



workout. Liam scowls at the intrusion, then steps forward, caging me in, the chipped tiles cool against my back. Even though I'm several inches taller than him, the move has me feeling small, vulnerable, and my pulse quickens.

He reaches between us, pulling aside my towel, throwing it on top of his on the bench, then turns on the shower.

"I'm sorry about what I said the other day," he murmurs, his voice nearly lost in the roar of the shower echoing off the tiles around us. "I'm sorry I've been such an ass to you."

He strokes the side of my cheek, pad of his thumb tracing the tired circles under my eyes, his lips cutting a sharp disapproving curve at the sight of them.

How many nights have I stayed up reading—too late, far too late—in an effort to escape thoughts of him? It never worked.

I shake my head. "You were right though," I whisper. "I lied to you."

The feel of his eyes on mine is too much, and my gaze dips down the length of his body, his sculpted chest, that tattoo stark against his pale smooth skin, and then—*quel bordel*. I nearly choke on the spray from the shower because... That. Is. His. Cock. Right there. Much larger than I would have expected, given his height. And it's just inches away from my own swimsuit-covered semi.

A semi which is very quickly turning into something much more obvious.

"Antoine." Liam's hand slides from my cheek to my neck, and I draw in a shuddering breath. "Fuck. I'm so sorry. So fucking sorry. If I could go back, change things... I should never have blamed you. Sixteen. You were sixteen." His grip on my throat tightens, thumb stroking my pulse point. "How could I have blamed you? I should have handled it better. Shouldn't have taken all my fear and self-loathing out on you."

I blink at him in surprise, eyelashes heavy with the spray from the shower. "Fear?"

What could he have possibly been afraid of? When I'd met him, even before I knew who he really was, he was all

confident swagger. He'd walked into that club like it was made just for him, and out of everyone there, he's looked at *me*. Singled me out. And then, weeks later, when I found out who he really was—well, I couldn't blame him for giving me a fake number.

He was an Olympian. A god of the snow. I had been barely more than a boy, pretending to be a man.

“Yes, fear.” He gives a low huff, lips cutting a sharp line. “I was fucking terrified. My first kiss with a man, and it blew my mind. You blew my mind. And then, to find out later that you were underage—I felt like such a creep. Never mind being shit scared of coming out. Of seeing my name blasted around on social media, in the snowboarding mags.” He shakes his head, dark hair dripping as he presses his forehead to my own, his eyelids fluttering shut. “None of that was on you.” His words brush against my lips like a caress. “It was on me. It was always on me.”

My heart thunders behind my ribcage, roaring louder than the shower echoing off the tile walls, a steady pulse in my ears.

“You gave me a fake number,” I say, my voice thready. How could he have felt all that? And for me? “I thought you never wanted to see me again. That you were blowing me off. That I was a bad kisser. That... that you weren't into me.”

The moment the words leave my lips, I know they sound pathetic. That *I* sound pathetic.

Liam peels back, lifting one perfectly shaped brow, his eyes lifting at the corners as he narrows them at me. “That's what you're taking from all this?” Water sprays as he shakes his head, a hollow laugh escaping his throat. “No. No. I never wanted to see you again. You'd just shattered my entire fucking world with that kiss.” His voice is an angry hiss, teeth flashing as he speaks. “I thought I'd leave that club and you'd disappear from my world and everything would go back to normal. I'd go back to normal.”

The roar of the shower is a buzzing in my ear, and my heart sinks, stomach along with it, plummeting, swirling with the water in the drain beneath our bare feet.

Liam takes my face with his hands, bringing his body flush against mine. “Thank god I was wrong.”

Lips crash with mine, warm and wet from the spray. Soft. Tongue delving deep, stealing my breath, pushing every last lingering doubt from mind, replacing it with a dizzying cacophony of *Liam* and *wants me* and *is this real*.

His hand reaches between us, palming my cock where it’s throbbing against the soaked fabric of my swimsuit, one finger unerringly finding the tender head and pressing against my slit. I jolt like I’ve been electrocuted, bucking against his hand, then pulling back with a gasp, my back thudding against the slick tiles.

“Is this okay?” he asks, tugging my lower lip between his teeth, his hand stilling on my erection.

I nod wordlessly, a wide-eyed frantic movement that surely must expose exactly how inexperienced I am. Not exactly a blushing virgin, but not far off it either.

“I need your words, Antoine,” Liam rumbles, an echo of what he said to Lily in the hot tub earlier. Then, his tone, the commanding set to his jaw, it had been enough to have liquid fire rushing down my spine. Now...

I whimper against his lips, rocking my hips against his hand, more or less humping him.

Liam chuckles. “Let me get you off.” His nose brushes against my own, and I can feel the shape of his smile against my cheek. “You’re so hard. So fucking hard. One swallow, and I bet I’d have you coming down my throat.”

My vision whites out at his words, at the thought of what that would feel like, his throat around my cock, his lips stretching, those gray sharp eyes staring at me, damp with water and tears.

“Please,” I groan, my eyelids fluttering shut, the back of my head thudding against the tiles.

His hand tightens around my shaft, squeezing almost painfully as his thumb rolls over the head. “Or maybe I should make you come in your pants, like you did to me.” Teeth nip my ear,

my throat, suckling kisses trailing to the juncture between my neck and shoulder. Kisses designed to leave a mark.

He works me in hard, long pulls, wet fabric rubbing against sensitive skin in a way that really shouldn't feel as good as it does. His other hand slides down my chest, thumb circling one nipple before pinching it, tugging.

“*Oh mon dieu,*” I hiss, because everything feels like too much—his lips on me, his teeth, the water pelting my skin, and his hands...

He releases my cock, and for a brief moment, panic surges through me because I think that's it, he's going to stop. Liam takes one look at my open-mouthed expression and grins, and then his hand is slipping under my waistband, fingers wrapping around me, slick with water.

“Hmm.” He tugs his lower lip between his teeth, a look of unaffected bliss lighting up his sharp features at the feel of me in his hand. “You're uncut.” The pads of his fingers gently toy with my foreskin, pulling it back just enough to expose more of the dripping head. “Oh, the things I want to do to you.”

That is, apparently, all it takes to send me over the edge.

Darkness shoots across my vision, heat rushing down my spine, a spiraling whiteout to rival the blizzard outside. I jolt in his hand, my cock kicking against his palm, stretching for him, and then liquid heat is filling my tight swim trunks, sticking to Liam's hand and the fabric and my own skin.

“Liam!”

His name is a plea and a curse, and he swallows it up with a kiss. It's different from his earlier ones, demanding, but less impatient. A slow, deep, lingering kiss that sends a different type of heat down my limbs, all the way to my toes.

It's the type of kiss I imagine boyfriends give, making love on a Sunday morning. It's a kiss that promises a slow study of each other's bodies, tongues and fingers in barely explored places, low moans and orgasms that curl like honey warmed in sunlight.

He pulls back, lips swollen and still parted, his gray eyes soft, the hint of a smile lifting the corners. “We better get going. Lily will be waiting for us.”

---

THE MOMENT we’re back at the apartment—in that dingy brown-tinged space reeking of stale beer and cooked food and old sweat—I almost expect Liam to go back to acting how he used to. To ignoring me or glaring at me. To leaving the room each time I enter. To pretending I don’t exist.

My body tenses, muscles remembering the flare of pain behind my ribs each time he’d look at me, his lip curled up in a sneer, gray eyes flat.

I’m not expecting him to take my hand in his, to lace our fingers together, to lean his shoulder against my own. I’m not expecting that secretive smile as we cross the threshold.

“Oh, hey guys,” Seth calls out from the kitchen, his back to us, muscles bulging under his tee as he chops some vegetables with chef-level precision.

*Surely now Liam will drop my hand, I think.* But he doesn’t. Instead, he pulls me closer, dragging his nose along the side of my neck, sending shivers racing down my spine.

Seth casts us a look over his shoulder, knife stilling and eyes widening at the sight of our clasped hands, of Liam breathing me in. A slow grin spreads Seth’s face. “Where’s Lily?”

“Picking up the rest of the guys,” Liam kicks out two chairs from under the table, pulling me to sit close to him, his fingers releasing my own only to drape his arm over the back of my chair, his fingertips trailing along the spot where my neck meets my shoulder.

A spot Liam thoroughly marked in the showers earlier.

It’s a possessive display and honestly a little disconcerting—not because I think Seth will care, but because no one’s ever handled me like that before. Taking charge of me, moving me, even though I’m considerably bigger than him.

I cast Liam a questioning look, my cheeks burning so much, I doubt even my dark skin can hide my blush. But Liam isn't looking at me—he's staring at Seth with a cold intensity that seems completely unwarranted.

Seth just smiles wider in reply, the corners of his eyes crinkling as they linger on Liam's hand on my shoulder, shaking his head with a little chuckle before turning back to his vegetables.

“Glad you two finally worked things out,” he says conversationally, his back to us. “The tension was getting unbearable.”

Liam lets out a shuddering sigh of relief at Seth's words.

Seth pauses to give me a serious look over one shoulder. “You talked to Lily about it too?” He waves the knife for emphasis as he adds: “I mean, I know you and Lily aren't serious. But I don't want her getting her feelings hurt...”

“Oh, she knows,” Liam says dryly before I can reply. “And she seemed pretty cool with it.”

“Who says we aren't serious?” The words come out before I can stop them, an almost angry rumble.

Sure, I haven't actually *talked* to Lily about what we are, but what I feel for her—it's certainly not casual. We've cuddled almost every night for weeks. I know the scent of her shampoo, the feel of her skin under my fingers, the sound of her voice, that light little laugh she gives when I read something scandalous to her. And then today, I had my fingers inside her, felt her come around me.

I tasted her on my tongue.

Maybe it's just because it's the most I've ever done with a woman before. But it feels pretty fucking serious to me.

Seth's shoulders tense at my words, brows dipping and muscles rippling as he takes a deep breath. Then he lets it out, teeth flashing in a brittle smile as hurt darkens his eyes. “Oh. Well. That's cool.”

And then he's giving me his back, cutting with such force that vegetables are flying off the chopping board in little pieces, a pile of nearly pureed carrots forming beneath his blade.

I stare at him in silent consternation, my fingers reaching up to tangle with Liam's where his hand is draped over my shoulder.

Is Seth upset? At the idea of me and Lily being serious? Why? It can't be jealousy—I mean, he's told both me and Lily that he's ace. Does he think I'm not good enough for her? Or that I'll hurt her, that she'll be upset by this new thing forming between me and Liam?

The door to Lily and Tom's room swings open, banging violently against the wall.

"What the fuck?" Tom comes to a halt in the kitchen, lips curled in a sneer as he stares down at me and Liam—me, pressed close against Liam's side, Liam's arm draped over the back of my chair, our fingers twined.

I feel Liam go tense beside me.

Tom shakes his head, brows dipping over his eyes, making them appear even closer together than usual. "Never mind," he mutters, trudging past us to the fridge. "I don't want to know. Everyone in this condo is so fucking weird."

He rifles around in the fridge, then finally finds what he's looking for—some box of leftovers which looks completely unsanitary, and would probably give an ordinary human fatal food poisoning. He gives the two of us a mildly confused look before sitting down across from us and digging in.

"So. You guys like a couple or something?" he asks around a mouthful. He tilts his head at me, lips pursing. "I thought you were kissing Lily the other day? Is everyone just fucking everyone now?" He wrinkles his nose, pointing his fork at the two of us, then adds: "If that's the case, I'd just like to go on record as being straight, yah? The only person I'll be banging is Lily—or at least I would if she wasn't such a bitch."

He gives a derisive snort, but the sound is cut short by a loud clatter, a crash of something heavy falling in the kitchen, a rumbled curse. We turn in unison, my eyes widening at the

sight of a ceramic baking dish in pieces on the floor, cubed potato scattered everywhere, exploding outward with shards of ceramic.

But that is nothing compared to Seth.

His eyes are dark, face so red it's nearly purple, lips pulled back in a snarl as he glares at Tom. "What the fuck did you say?" His voice is a low growl, the muscles cording along his neck ticking as he clenches his jaw. "You want to repeat that, Tom?"

Fingers flex at his sides, then tighten into fists, and I'm suddenly aware of what a massive guy Seth is. Almost as big as Matty. Certainly bigger than me. Taller, wider, a shit ton of muscle mass. You'd just never know it because he's always so friendly. Approachable.

There's nothing friendly about him now.

He takes a step forward, lithe and predatory despite his size, and I feel a frisson of fear snake down my spine, even though his rage is directed at Tom.

Wood scrapes against linoleum as Tom leaps to his feet, hands outstretched, palms outward. "Dude. Calm the fuck down. It was just a joke, yah. No need to go all psycho about it."

Seth jolts at Tom's words, the faintest of shivers rippling through him as he blinks rapidly. I watch in fascination as the fog seems to clear from his eyes, blind rage giving way to awareness. He drops his gaze, a flush spreading down his neck and to the tips of his ears.

"A joke. Yah. Okay." He lets out a heavy breath, then turns back to the kitchen, kneeling down to start collecting up shards of ceramic in big, trembling hands. "Just a joke." He says the words as if to himself, his shoulders tight with tension, the back of his neck pink.

Tom gives me a *what the fuck just happened* look, which I return with a glare.

"Let me help you with that," I say, squeezing Liam's hand before dropping to the floor beside Seth.



My life up until now might have been notably bereft of any sort of cleaning experience, but I've been making up for it ever since moving in with these guys.

"Here, let's get a paper bag," I suggest, when Seth sits back on his heels, staring at the mess in front of him as if it's some irreparable tragedy. "We'll put everything *juste là*, and then I can run it out to the bin."

I feel almost smug at my newfound cleaning abilities and can't help but smile quietly to myself. If *Maman* could see me now, she'd be absolutely horrified.

Seth's fingers slip over broken ceramic and diced potato, and I brush them away. "It's okay," I murmur, nudging his shoulder with my own. "I've got this. Just take a deep breath, *oui*?"

He does as instructed, drawing one hand over his face as he lets out a shuddering breath. "I'm sorry," he mutters, eyes fixed on the floor. "I shouldn't have reacted like that. I... I don't know what came over me..."

I give a derisive snort. "*Bordel de merde*," I tell him. "What do you mean you don't know what happened? *Ce connard* is a *vrai trou de cul*. Though I'm not sure what these poor potatoes did to earn your wrath."

Seth lets out a hollow laugh at my bad joke, wiping his cheek with the back of his hand. "Thanks, *mec*." He gives me a soft smile that doesn't quite reach his eyes. "You're a good friend."

Warmth floods my chest at his words, alongside a prickling sort of discomfort.

Ever since we moved in, we've all let Seth look after us in some way or another. We've let him bear the weight that comes with so many strangers living together. Organizing meals, setting up the group chat, being the person to try and resolve disputes, or pass on messages when people aren't talking to each other. He's even tried to set up a chore roster—not that any of us have followed it.

I'm probably the closest to him out of everyone here—except maybe for Lily. But after seeing that flash of anger in a man who seems to only ever smile, I'm starting to think there are

entire oceans beneath the surface. And I'm not sure that I've been that good of a friend, really, if I haven't even thought to look deeper.

---

## Chapter 27



---

### Lily

Tessa: Hey mate, hope you didn't end up working in this weather (freezing emoji)

I feel a twinge of guilt when Tessa's latest text flashes across my screen, reminding me of her earlier unanswered messages, and I quickly type out my reply.

Lily: Nope! All canceled. Sorry, just got back from the gym.

The gym. Not where I thought I'd have the most incredible sexual experience of my life, but there you go.

I shiver against the icy drafts coming through my car's floorboards, and squint against the snow piling up on the windshield. I've only been parked here for a few minutes, waiting for Matty and Eddie to get off work, but already it's impossible to see out of the car.

Tessa: So... party? (puppy eyes emoji)

I chuckle, grinning at her insistence. After my video chat with Lani and Summer, and then going to the gym, I'd almost forgotten she'd invited me to a party this Sunday.

Lily: Of course! I'll be there. Will ask the guys too.

By the guys, I mean everyone but Tom.

Ever since I quote-unquote *narked* on Tom, he's been even more of an asshole to me than usual, wielding microaggressions like they're his own personal brand. Banging on the door when I've only been in the shower for two minutes, intentionally leaving the toilet seat up, 'accidentally' eating my granola.

Yesterday, his dirty socks were on my pillow.

The door to the car swings open, snowflakes fluttering and metal creaking as Matty climbs into the front passenger seat.

"Hey." His voice is a low rasp, and he shoots me a tentative smile.

Behind us, the backdoor slams, Eddie cursing under his breath about the cold as he clicks his seatbelt.

"How were the kids?" I ask, shooting Eddie what I hope is a cheerful smile in the rearview mirror.

"Like rabid squirrels in a tin shed," he replies with a shudder, flicking the collar of his coat up to his ears. "It was fucking horrific."

I press my lips together in an effort to stifle a laugh, and turn a questioning look on Matty.

"It was pretty bad," he concedes. "No idea how Antoine managed to get out of it."

"Stupid ranking system," Eddie grumbles. "Somehow the Swiss certification is higher than the Kiwi one. So ridiculous."

*Oh.* I feel my eyebrows lift with surprise as I carefully reverse out of the parking spot, my windshield wipers flailing furiously in an effort to combat the snow.

"The ski school really isn't set up to have that many kids indoors all day," Matty comments carefully. "Don't know why they didn't cancel."

"Because the mountain doesn't want to lose money," Eddie snorts. "And the parents are more than happy to drop their kids off for the day, so they can go get pissed at their hotels or whatever it is that tourists do."

I lean forward over the wheel, squinting through the blinding snow. I can just make out the red taillights of the car in front of me, and there's the occasional flash of yellow as a car passes by on the other side of the freeway.

"What did you end up doing?" Eddie asks, then gives a loud sniff. "And why do you smell like a swimming pool?"

Heat rushes to my cheeks. "I went to the gym with Liam and Antoine." I bite my lip, casting a nervous glance in the rearview mirror, expecting somehow to see suspicion or a look of knowing on Eddie's face.

He gives a bored nod, slumping back in his seat. "Huh."

Matty perks up in the seat beside me. "I didn't know you liked working out," he says, angling his big body toward mine, his hands clasped in his lap. "I mean, I know you're into yoga..."

"Yah, cause you stare at her ass every morning, you fucking perv," Eddie snarks, but I can hear the smile in his voice.

Matty's face flushes red, and he clears his throat, ignoring Eddie. "... but I didn't know you were into the gym." He gives me a hopeful smile, one dimple flashing for the briefest of moments. "If you ever want a gym buddy, I'll go with you."

Eddie huffs. "I bet you would."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Matty asks, twisting in his seat to frown at Eddie.

My wheels hit a thick patch of fresh snow, and for a brief, terrifying moment, my car lurches forward, sliding faster in a slipping rush. My lungs tighten, breath catching as I white-knuckle the steering wheel.

The wheels seem to catch again, and I let out a sigh of relief. *Good thing I bought those overpriced snow tires.*

"Oh nothing. Just that you'd be all..." Eddie chuckles, then lifts his coat-covered arms into a mock body-builder pose, "... have you seen my beach ball? I think it was this way..."

"Are you trying to sound like Arnold Schwarzenegger?" Matty asks, shaking his head in amusement. "Because that might be

the worst impression I've ever heard. And why are you pointing to your lap? That's not even a pose..."

The car slips forward again, faster this time, and a surge of icy panic rushes through me, sending my heart thundering in my chest. I grip the steering wheel, trying to keep the car steady, but it's fish-tailing now, the rear wheels slipping from side to side on the icy packed snow. All the while, the car is going faster and faster, hurtling closer to that set of red lights ahead of me, still barely visible through the whiteout.

With a whimper, I touch the brakes—and instantly realize that was the worst possible thing I could have done.

The back end of the car flails wildly, shimmying back and forth, angry as the tail of a rattlesnake. I grip the wheel tight, trying to keep the car going straight, but that only seems to make things worse. With panic, I press my foot down on the brakes.

The car spins out, gliding silently across the snow-covered highway, turning in a slow-motion arc across the center lane.

In those few seconds, it's like time slows down.

I can see every crystalline edge of the snowflakes covering the windshield, dusted away by the rhythmic *swipe, swipe, swipe* of the windshield wipers. I can see the whites of Eddie's eyes in the rearview mirror, his pupils constricted almost to pinpoints. I can see Matty's big hand gripping the edge of his seat, divots forming in the worn fabric beneath his fingertips.

The car skids to a stop, and for a brief moment, the only sound is the feathering of snow on the car and the rasping sound of my panicked breathing.

"Holy fucking shit." Eddie's voice is tight, and he's leaning forward, resting his elbows on his knees.

Beside me, Matty's face is ashen, and he stares unseeingly out the windscreen, his chest heaving in shuddering pants.

"What the fuck was that, Lily?" Eddie asks, lifting his head to glare at me accusingly. "Why on earth would you slam on your brakes like that?"

“I... I...” My hands are trembling so hard, I can barely hold the steering wheel.

“Have you even driven in snow before?” he snarls.

We’re in the complete opposite lane, on the other side of the freeway, going in the opposite direction. A semitruck comes up behind me, thankfully slow because of the conditions, its yellow lights filling our car as it flashes at me to move.

With shaking legs, I gently touch the gas, carefully edging the car along to the nearest off-ramp.

“You could have gotten us all killed,” Eddie hisses.

I keep my eyes on the road, flicking on my blinker as I search for the best place to pull over. I don’t need to look in the rearview mirror to tell that Eddie is disgusted with me. I can hear it in his voice.

I swallow, and try to tamp down the sick, fluttery feeling in my stomach. He’s right. I could have gotten us all killed.

“I’m gonna pull over,” I say, lifting my chin and forcing my voice not to tremble. I blink rapidly, and ignore the burn behind my eyes, in my throat. “I’ll pull over and one of you guys can drive. You can drive in snow, right?”

I turn to Matty, since I know he grew up in Idaho. He must be used to driving in these conditions. But he’s staring straight ahead, expression slack, eyes unfocused, skin pale.

“I’ll drive,” Eddie snaps. “Just keep your eyes on the road.”

I nod, tightening my trembling fingers around the steering wheel, and don’t take my eyes off the road until we’ve pulled over on the side street of some new development. Wordlessly, I get out, and hold the door open for Eddie to climb in.

“I’m sorry,” I say, as he slides past me into the driver’s seat.

My voice sounds small, muffled by the snow falling around us. Eddie pauses, lips pressed into a frown, fingers curled around the edge of the car door. Snowflakes move between us, soft and cold and fragile.

For a moment, I expect his words to cut through them like a knife. Instead, his expression softens, and he brings one hand to my shoulder, his grip steadying even beneath the layers of sweater and jacket.

“It’s all good, Missy.” He squeezes my shoulder, and it sends an aching sort of warmth behind my ribs. He ducks his head close to mine, his voice dropping to a low murmur that skates across my skin. “I’m just worried about Matty in there. He’s not doing so good, yah.”

My heart drops at his words, and I cast a worried glance to where Matty is sitting, stone-faced and silent in the front passenger seat, his hands white-knuckled on his knees.

Fuck. Of course. Matty. Poor Matty.

“Okay,” I say, my voice small around the lump in my throat. “Yah. Okay.” I slide into the back seat, snowflakes fluttering off my jacket, melting on my jeans and the worn upholstery.

The drive home is eerily silent, the sound of the engine and tires muffled by the thickening snowfall, the hum of the car heater mingling with the thundering of my heart.

I feel so helpless. Useless. Completely out of place in this world.

I’d been so arrogant, thinking I could fly in from Hawai’i, draw on my privileged ski holiday experience and become a snowboard instructor. Because, of course, why couldn’t I? The world has always been an open door to me, with my private school education and my parents paying my way through university. Sure, I worked hard for my grades and I had part-time jobs to pay for extras that I wanted. But I never *really* struggled. And I never expected to.

Well, I’m fucking struggling now.

I squeeze my eyes shut, biting the inside of my cheek so hard I taste metal.

I thought it was this incredible achievement, getting my snowboard instructor’s certificate. It turns out, it’s more or less a joke among the real instructors that I work with. A baby certificate, enabling me to teach newbies at a resort that



probably doesn't want to pay for real instructors. Instructors who have trained for years, who have Olympic-level abilities, who live and bleed the snow.

Instructors who actually know how to drive in the snow. Which, clearly, I don't.

And then, to top it all off, my first paycheck is still a week away. I'm living off food bank donations and Seth's cooking skills, because it turns out I don't actually know how to cook from whole ingredients. It turns out cooking from high-end meal kits once a week does not prepare a person for turning a box of potatoes, vegetables, and beans into an edible meal.

I swipe at my eyes with the back of my hand, willing myself to pull it together before we get to the condo. To put an end to my little pity party.

Matty—a man who has actually lived in the world, who has served in the military and probably seen things that I can't even begin to imagine—he's having a silent panic attack in the seat in front of me. Because of my shitty driving. And I'm over here crying because the world hasn't turned out quite as I wanted. Because I'm not as incredible as I thought I was.

*Selfish*, the little voice inside me whispers, and it sounds a lot like my parents, like the argument we had before I left Hawai'i. *Spoiled*.

That was the last time they spoke to me. Since then, the group chat between the three of us has become a silent thread, a graveyard for my unanswered texts. If I scroll up, it's a shrine to their inane, but strangely comfortable, messages about Thanksgiving dinner plans and what to get my grandparents for Christmas.

*Christmas, which is less than two weeks away now.*

I straighten my spine, nostrils flaring and chin lifting, as if the memory of their last words to me are an argument I can respond to.

The car pulls to a stop, and Eddie kills the engine, tossing me the keys. "Come on, Matty," he says, voice full of false cheerfulness. "Let's get inside, eh."

I climb out after him, but Matty doesn't move, not until Eddie opens the passenger door and pulls him out. Matty obediently follows, his eyes unseeing and expression slack, and I shut the door behind him.

Eddie scoops up fresh snow in his bare hands, forming it into a snowball. "I need you to hold this for me." He presses the snowball into Matty's hands, and Matty takes it wordlessly, jolting slightly at the sudden cold against his skin. "Tell me what it feels like."

For a long moment, Matty doesn't answer, and I stare at the pair of them, wringing my hands, wishing I knew what to do.

"It... it feels cold." Matty's voice is a low rasp, like gravel over sandpaper. He blinks, a flicker of something flashing in his pale blue eyes.

Eddie lets out a breath, shoulders slumping with relief as he covers Matty's hands with his own. "Now, what do you feel?"

"Your... your hands on mine," Matty rumbles, his brow dipping as if he's confused by Eddie's question, or maybe, by his touch.

"Good." Eddie smiles, and it's a genuine smile, soft but real, without the usual cutting edges. "And what do you hear?"

I shift in place, moving from one foot to the other, wanting to be closer, wanting to help, but not knowing how. Matty's gaze flicks to me, his eyes dropping to where fresh snow crunches under my tennis shoes. "Lily. I hear Lily's feet in the snow." There's the flash of a pained smile, and his eyes linger on my shoes.

Shoes that have been much easier to walk in ever since Eddie took a knife to them.

"Now, take a deep breath." Eddie's voice rolls like melted chocolate between us, his breath making warm puffs that hover in the air. "Then let it out. Focus on how it feels."

Matty draws in a shuddering breath, his hands trembling around the snowball as he lets it out.

"And again."

The next breath is smoother, coming out in a soft gust that clouds the air between them. Eddie lets go of Matty's hands, but Matty doesn't drop the snowball.

"You going to be good to get up the stairs?" Eddie asks, tilting his chin toward the snow-covered steps that snake up to our condo.

"Yah, man." Matty ducks his chin, color flooding his cheeks. "Thanks."

Eddie claps Matty on the back. "No worries, mate." His voice is light, like he didn't just pull Matty back from whatever hell he was trapped in within his own mind, but he keeps his hand on the back of Matty's jacket as they climb up the steps, side by side.

I follow behind them, feeling a strange mix of relief and gratitude and longing. And maybe, just a little bit of loneliness.

---

## Chapter 28



---

### Seth

The knife thuds against the chopping board, a steady rhythm that's at odds with the thundering behind my ribs. My hands tremble, and I grip the knife tighter, focusing all my energy on cutting the potato into perfect cubes. Again. Since the ones I cut before are in the trash, along with the shattered baking dish.

*He's a good kid. Just needs to work on his anger management problem.*

That's what the principal of my school had told my parents. I remember hiding my hands under the desk when they came in, not wanting them to see the blood on my knuckles, the swollen and split skin.

*Are you a retard too? I bet you are. Just a whole family of retards.*

By the time I'd realized what was happening, John Gilbert was on the ground, unconscious, one tooth a bloody glob on the linoleum floor by the lockers.

It was the last time anyone ever said that word in my presence for the rest of the school year.

I'd held the twins close that evening, pressing kisses to their golden curls until they were squirming and laughing. 'You're perfect,' I had told them. 'Just the way you are.' At four years old, they were still both small enough that I could lift them up together, one in each arm.

I give a wry smile, some of the tension bleeding out of me at the memory of them. Now, at ten years old, they're more interested in riding their bikes or dressing up as superheroes than cuddling their big brother.

Vaguely, I'm aware of shuffling behind me in the kitchen. Of the door to Tom and Lily's room clicking shut, of Antoine and Liam's whispers trailing down the hallway. And then I'm alone.

I let out a breath, and focus my attention on chopping potatoes. On piling them into the glass baking dish, drizzling oil over top, along with a healthy amount of salt and pepper. Once they're baked, I'll grate cheese over them.

A poor man's *Tartiflette*, my dad would call it.

I huff a laugh, and wonder what Antoine will think of that. Most likely he'll just give me that half-amused, half-indulgent smile, like he did when I explained to him the vegetable and egg pie I made was the Canadian equivalent of a quiche.

The front door swings open just as I'm sliding the potatoes into the oven, and my heart skitters with excitement at the thought of seeing Lily.

That excitement quickly turns to concern when I see Lily's face, pale and drawn, her eyes red-rimmed, as if she's been crying.

"What happened?" I ask, tossing the oven mitt on the counter and crossing the short distance between the stove and the front door in a few long strides.

Eddie kicks off his boots, his face pulled into a scowl. "Lily nearly killed us with her driving. I think there should be a rule that she doesn't drive in snow anymore. She's fucking terrible at it."

My brow dips, defensive anger rising up at Eddie's words, and I open my mouth to say something, but he's shouldering past, one hand pressed against Matty's back as he practically shoves him down the hallway.

"I'm sorry," Lily calls after them, her voice tremulous.

“Holy fucking shit, Jesus Christ. Oh my god.” Eddie’s voice rings out from the end of the hallway, the sound followed by a door slamming shut and then a mumbled: “What in the actual fuck?”

Lily stares wide-eyed down the darkened hallway, then presses her hands to her face, looking up at me with almost panicked amusement. “Did they... was that?” Her voice drops to a whisper. “Did he just walk in on Liam and Antoine?”

I grimace, rubbing the back of my neck. “Shoot.” Should I have done something? Warned them, maybe?

“It’s okay, guys.” Matty’s voice rises almost comically high. “I’m cool with... uh... you know. Just... uh... maybe put a sock on the door handle next time or something.”

“It’s not fucking okay,” Eddie hisses, and then there’s the sound of another door opening. “Jesus fucking Christ, my eyeballs...” His voice is cut off by the sound of a door slamming shut, and I bite back a worried smile.

Lily drops her hands from her face, then steps closer to me, wrapping her arms around my waist and pressing her face into the center of my chest, something between a sob and a laugh bursting out of her.

My heart stutters, a liquid warmth pooling through me at her sudden burst of affection, and I wrap my arms around her, pulling her close, breathing in the scent of swimming pool and shampoo.

“Your hair is wet,” I comment, rubbing soothing strokes down the length of her spine, smiling at how familiar her body is beneath my touch now. “Did you go for a swim?”

She gives a strangled whimper, and squeezes me tighter.

“Honey. What happened?”

“Hmf hmf umpf whpf liamph ampf amphwan hmf uh pff,” she replies, her voice completely muffled by my shirt.

I grin, peeling back from her just enough so that I can stare down at the top of her head. “What was that? I didn’t quite hear you.”

She looks up at me, her hazel eyes glinting gold in the fluorescent light of the kitchen. “I hooked up with Liam and Antoine in the pool,” she whispers, her lower lip trembling.

Oh. *Oh.*

Understanding dawns, and I cast a dark look down the hallway to where Liam and Antoine are currently holed up together, oblivious to the rest of the world. Doing... whatever it is they're doing.

“What?” I growl. “And they've just left you on your own?” I make to step away from her, intending to stomp down the hallway and give the pair of them a piece of my mind, but Lily grabs my hand.

“No. No, that's fine.” She gives me a tremulous smile. “I'm not upset about that.” Her cheeks pinken, her gaze dropping to her bare feet, to her little toenails, painted purple. “They were amazing, actually.”

I feel my shoulders relax, then twine my fingers with her own, loving the feel of her small hand within mine as I tug her over to the sofa. “Okay.” I let out a sigh, and give her what I hope is a reassuring smile. “That's good.”

Still, my mouth feels dry, like it doesn't quite want to say those words. *Good. It's good.*

I should be happy for her, happy for them. I shouldn't feel this possessive curl of jealousy in the pit of my stomach.

She slides easily onto the couch next to me, our hands still linked, her thigh pressing against my own as we sink into the worn cushions. I wrap my arm around her shoulders, but resist the urge to pull her onto my lap.

“Tell me what's going on,” I murmur, pressing a kiss to the top of her damp hair. “Why are you so upset?”

She tucks her feet under her, until her knees are resting over my thigh, and I can't help but feel a rush of pride at being wanted. At having her practically clinging to my side.

“I can't do this,” she says, the words tumbling out in a rush. “I can't drive in the snow. I nearly got us all killed. Honestly, it

was awful. I had no idea what I was doing—apparently, you’re not supposed to use the brakes in the snow? Like, how was I supposed to know that? I’m from Hawai’i. I’m barely a real snowboard instructor. I thought I was awesome, you know, getting my instructor’s certificate. But apparently, it’s only good for this mountain—it’s not a real certificate at all.”

Her voice goes tight, her body shuddering against my own as she presses her face into my armpit.

“Hey,” I murmur. “It’s okay. You’re fine. No one got hurt—that’s the main thing. Did you crash the car?”

She shakes her head. “No. It spun to the other side of the road. But we didn’t hit anything.”

“Okay. Good.” I try not to smile. I shouldn’t smile, not when she’s upset, but honestly, I’m just relieved that it’s not anything that serious. That she’s safe, and in my arms. “And you *are* a real instructor. You worked hard for that exam.”

She gives a derisive snort, reaching up to swipe at her eyes with the back of her hand. “Yah. Maybe.”

I pull back, twisting on the couch beside her and bringing my face level with her own. “You did. Listen to me. You deserve to be here, okay? Just like anyone else. I bet Liam would agree with me.”

Her mouth twists, her hazel eyes flashing with amusement, even as they sparkle with unshed tears. “Well, yah. But he’s probably biased...”

I shake my head. “Nah-uh. No way. Not about snowboarding.” I grin. “Though possibly about you.” I waggle my eyebrows. “So, you hooked up with both of them?”

I know I shouldn’t ask for details. Not just because it’s a complete invasion of her privacy, and theirs, but also because I’m not entirely sure how I feel about all of it. Sure, I’ve always fantasized about being in some sort of polycule relationship, but in my imagination, I was always absolutely certain that I was part of that relationship too. Maybe I was even at the center of it.



Now, with Lily tucked at my side, and Liam and Antoine in the other room, I'm not so sure. Does she just see me as a friend? Someone she can trust and confide in? Would she even think about having something more with me, if that something more didn't involve sex?

Lily presses her palms to her face, then flops back onto the couch with a groan. "I'm terrible, aren't I?"

"What? No." I push down my self-doubt and scramble to face her. "Why would you say that?"

"I'm so selfish," she says, her hands still over her face.

I shake my head, climbing over her until my body is nearly flush with hers, my elbows on either side of her to keep my weight from squashing her into the cushions. "You're not selfish. Not at fucking all."

She gasps, dropping her hands to stare up at me with wide eyes. "I don't think I've ever heard you swear before," she comments.

I roll my eyes. "I swear," I say, almost defensively. "Sometimes."

Mainly when I'm riled up. Like I am right now. I probably need to go along to the gym and let some tension out.

"No, you don't." She shakes her head, eyes crinkling at the corners as she grins up at me. "You're too polite."

I drop my forehead to her own, my stomach tightening at her words.

If she knew how hard it is some days—the way I feel like I'm walking on a knife's edge. Like I'm putting on a mask, just to keep the monster within from rearing its ugly head. Like I'm shining as much light as I can out in the world, just so people don't see my darkness.

Would she still like me if she saw my darkness?

"Not always," I croak out. She squirms beneath me, and I lift up with a grimace. "Sorry. I was squishing you, wasn't I?"

She grins up at me. "Only a little. You're not exactly light."

I huff out a laugh, then sit up, hauling her onto my lap, holding her against me. Already, just having her near me, in my arms, hearing her voice, I feel calmer.

“I can teach you how to drive in the snow,” I tell her. “I grew up in Canada, remember? Driving in snow is my birthright.”

She gives me a wan smile. “Maybe.” Her eyes drop to her lap. “I’m not sure there’s much of a point though.” She shrugs. “It’s only one season, right? Then I’ll be back in Hawai’i.”

My stomach bottoms out at her words, a sinking feeling of dread threatening to pull me through the already sagging couch cushions. “What do you mean?” My voice is thready, edged with panic. “You only just got your instructor’s cert. What about next season...”

*What about me? I want to say. What about all of us?*

She pulls back, giving me a look that I can’t quite read. Only now, her hazel eyes seem more green than gold, watery and sad, like she’s already looking toward the ocean-drenched world she grew up in.

I feel all the dreams I’ve built up in my head start to fragment, pieces scattering like that baking dish against the kitchen floor.

*Lily in Canada with me, meeting the twins and my parents. Me and Lily and Antoine—and maybe even Liam—finding a place, getting ready for another winter season together. Summer hikes surrounded by pines and whispering aspen trees. Sleeping bags under the open stars. Lily on my lap as we roast marshmallows over a fire. A dog. Because, of course we’d have a dog...*

“I don’t know.” Lily worries her lower lip, and I barely resist the urge to reach up and tug her lip from her teeth. “I only ever meant to come here for the season. This was just meant to be a break. A breather from... things. I’m supposed to go back to UH, finish my degree, take the LSAT...”

“Oh.” I stare down at her thighs stretched across my own, her hands clasped in her lap.

Starlight and campfire embers I’ve conjured in my imagination scatter on the wind, caught up in the snowflakes

fluttering against the window, until it's only us. Me and Lily in this living room, the only sound the storm outside and the oven humming in the kitchen and the corner lamp buzzing softly.

I dare a glance up at her, my heart stuttering when I see she's staring right back at me, her gaze open and full of vulnerability. *She's not sure about leaving*, I realize. *She's not sure about going back*.

My shoulders straighten. Maybe she sees a future with me too—a future with *us*. Maybe she does feel this thing that's been building between us for weeks now.

"Is that what you want to do?" I ask her, my voice low, cautious. "Is that what you really want?"

She gives me a wry smile. "You ask that a lot, don't you?"

My brow dips, because I'm not quite sure what she means.

"What I want," she clarifies, her cheeks pinkening slightly, though I can't imagine why. "That really matters to you, doesn't it?"

I blink, confused and a little taken aback. "Of course it matters to me." *She* matters to me. "Doesn't it matter to you?"

Her eyes widen slightly, lips parting in surprise, then closing.

"Because it should," I continue, and I don't sound nearly as polite as I ought to. Not nearly as nice. No, there's definitely some of the darkness bleeding through the cracks now. "You get one life, Lily. Some people think you get more, and that's fine, whatever, but as far as I'm concerned, this is it. You get today, now. Maybe you get tomorrow. Maybe you get ten years from now, fifty years from now. And you know what? There's always going to be people who want something from you, who want you to be something or do something for them, or be the version of you that they've created in their heads..."

I give a mirthless laugh, because I could be speaking to the twelve-year-old version of myself right now. The little boy who stepped up and looked after two gorgeous babies when his parents couldn't. The little boy who gave up his childhood to be the person he thought he should be.

“At the end of the day, when you’ve broken yourself down to mold yourself into the person you think they want, they aren’t going to thank you for it.” At least, my parents never did. Not really. I don’t think they even realize what I gave up for them. For our family. “They’ll just keep taking and taking and taking. Even if they’re the best people in the world.”

I swallow, and wrap my arms tighter around Lily’s strong frame, press my lips to her shoulder, to the slightly damp fabric of her T-shirt, and take a deep breath.

“So, yah. It matters to me what you want. Of course it fucking matters to me what you want. I lo...”

My throat tightens up, the almost nauseating realization rushing forth along with the unspoken words.

*I love you.*

Was I just about to tell her that? When I’ve known her all of three weeks? When I’m about ninety-percent sure I’ve just concocted an imaginary polyamorous relationship in my head. When she probably doesn’t think of me as anything but a friend.

“You matter to me,” I say instead, because friends say that, right? That’s normal?

Strong arms wrap around my shoulders, her face pressing against the side of my own, her body pressed flush to mine. This close, I can feel her body shudder with emotion, can feel the whimper that catches in her throat.

“You matter to me too,” she says.

Those words have me melting beneath her, warmth and pain rendering a Lily-shaped mark in me. Branding me. I hug her back, breathing her in.

“Good,” I say, dragging the words out, like I’m pulling out my heart for her with each syllable. And maybe I am. “Then please—Lily, please, for me—whatever you do, whatever you choose, do it for you?”

There’s a long silence, and I’m not sure if the dampness against my neck is from her hair or if she’s crying. Either way,

her body is tense against mine, like she's holding her breath.

"Yah." The word brushes against my skin, right below my ear.

"Okay." The tension bleeds from her, and suddenly she's all softness in my arms. "I will."

I let out a breath, and try to tamp down the irrational hope that rushes forth at her words.

She might not want me. She might not want the world I've imagined for us at all. Maybe she only wants this season, and then she'll leave us all behind. Leave me behind.

But what if she doesn't?

---

## Chapter 29



### Lily

Seth: I'm at the liquor store. What do you want me to pick up?

Eddie: Anything but Utah beer.

Seth: I mean. Obviously. (smiling emoji) But what do you think Tessa will like?

Tom: What? Why do we care what Tessa likes?

Eddie: ...

Liam: ...

Antoine: I think you'll find it customary in most cultures to bring a gift for the host of the party.

Tom: What party?

Tom: Guys?

Tom: Is there a party? How did I not know about this?

Tom: I'm on my way home from work now. Just stopping past the liquor store.

Tom: The good one. Not the crappy one that Seth is probably at.

Tom: (string of party-related emoji)

I lift my gaze to the rearview mirror to see Liam glaring at Antoine in the back seat.

“*Putain.*” Antoine drops his phone to his lap, then covers his face with his palms. “*Je suis tellement désolé.*” He shakes his head, dropping his hands to give me an apologetic grimace. “I didn’t even think about him being on the group chat.”

“It’s fine.” I turn in my seat to give Antoine a reassuring smile. “I promise. It’s not a big deal if he comes.”

I mean, I might have intentionally not told Tom about Tessa’s party. Partially because I can’t stand being in his presence for long enough to form a coherent sentence. But it won’t really matter if he’s there. It’s not like I’ll have to hang out with him or anything.

“What’s not a big deal?” Matty asks from the front passenger seat, my car creaking ominously as he pivots to look between us. “What happened?”

“Oh, nothing,” Liam quips. “Just Antoine told Tom about the party tonight.”

A few days ago, those words would have carried enough bite to have the rest of us cringing in sympathy for Antoine. Now, Liam’s scowl has been replaced by an indulgent smirk as he gazes at Antoine, their knees pressed together in the back seat of the car.

Matty’s eyebrows lift, then dip. “He didn’t know?”

“It’s fine,” I say again. “Honestly. I don’t care if he comes along.”

“Hmm.” Liam’s hand reaches over, settling on Antoine’s thigh. “You might not care, but I’m pretty sure Seth will.”

At the mention of Seth, I turn back to the brick front of the liquor store, squinting as if that will somehow give me the

ability to see through the thick double doors. To where Seth is currently buying alcohol to take along to Tessa's party.

"Seth? Why would he care?" I muse.

I thought Seth and Tom were... not friends, exactly, but okay. Cordial. In the way that two people who have to work together and live together are.

"Seth was the one who invited Tom to live with us in the first place," Matty points out, sounding strangely annoyed.

"Well..." Antoine presses his lips together in grim smile. "I'm guessing he probably regrets that now. Especially after..."

The back passenger door cranks open, and Antoine falls silent, everyone turning expectantly to watch Seth slide in.

He's wearing one of those leather and fur hats with earflaps. It's probably meant to be ironic, but somehow it actually looks good on him, and he's smiling widely over the collar of his parka. "I got champagne for Tessa," he says. "Sorry if that's not what you guys said, but I had to put my phone away. The guy working behind the counter was giving me that look, you know what I mean?"

Bottles clank in paper bags as he settles them onto the floor, and then he reaches into his pocket, pulling out his phone.

His smile falls as he flicks through his messages, lips flattening and shoulders tensing. "Oh. Right. The group chat, eh?" He plasters on a smile, dropping his phone to his lap as he shuffles to buckle himself in. "I guess Tom can give Eddie a ride to the party then. Since there aren't enough seats in Lily's car."

No one says anything in reply, and for a long moment, the only sound is the crackle of the radio, and the tapping of Matty's feet on the floorboards.

---

"I LOVE YOUR NAILS." Tessa grips my fingertips in her own, beaming down at my pink fingernails, like my home manicure



is some work of art. She looks up, giving me what can only be described as a shit-eating grin before turning to Liam. “Don’t you think they look good, Liam?”

Liam grunts into his beer, scowling at Tessa from across the brightly lit kitchen, but his cheeks pinken, and there’s a hint of reluctant softness in his gray eyes as they dip to my hands. I bite back a smile.

Tessa has been convinced since she met me that Liam was interested in me. Until two days ago, I didn’t believe her. Now...

I shoot Liam and Antoine what I hope is a surreptitious glance beneath my lashes. They’re standing close together around a gleaming marble kitchen island, their heads bent toward each other like flowers bending to the sun, oblivious to the people moving around them.

Unlike most of the other ski and snowboard types who have arrived at Tessa’s party, Liam and Antoine both look like they belong here. Like they were born to inhabit houses with chandeliers and multiple living rooms, with floor-to-ceiling liquor cabinets, with indoor gyms and in-home theaters.

As if feeling me watching him, Antoine looks up, a broad smile lighting up his features when his eyes meet mine. The sight of it has heat rushing down my spine, my toes curling with pleasure against the heated tiles.

“Bubbles or beer?” Tessa asks, knocking her shoulder against mine. “Or maybe one of each? Why choose, right?”

I jolt at her words, a flush of embarrassment stinging my ears because I somehow suspect she isn’t just talking about beverage choices.

“Um, bubbles?” I say, though it comes out more like a question, ending on a squeak.

She chuckles, a lilting laugh that has the people closest to us turning and smiling, like they want to laugh too, even though they aren’t in on whatever the joke is. Tessa is like that. Magnetic. The kind of person who draws people in without them realizing it.

A lot like Eddie, actually, I muse, my gaze drifting to where a circle of instructors gathers around the grinning Kiwi in the neighboring living room.

“Bubbles it is,” she says, turning to pour me a glass with a flourish. “Cheers, mate.” She tosses an immaculately styled ponytail over one shoulder, then flashes me a dramatized wink before lifting her own glass to clink against mine. “Bloody brilliant.” She takes a long sip, then nods to the living room. “Come on. Let’s go sit down.” She lifts one leg, showcasing a muscled calf and quad—and one of the most uncomfortable-looking stilettoed heels I’ve ever seen. “These shoes are for decorative purposes only. You had the right idea, going barefoot.”

My cheeks heat, my gaze dropping to my bare feet, pink toenails peeping out from beneath the hem of my jeans. I’d left my shoes in the hallway, an automatic habit from home, where wearing shoes into someone’s house would be the equivalent of letting out a loud fart in a crowded elevator. I hadn’t really thought that it would be different here.

But of course, it is, and most people are wearing their shoes inside. Apart from a few Kiwi and Aussie guys, who left their boots at the door and are strolling around in socks, I’m the only one not wearing shoes, and definitely the only one going fully barefoot.

I tuck my feet against the couch as I sit next to Tessa, and hope no one notices.

“Right. Important question,” Tessa announces, kicking off her shoes and leaning forward to rest her elbows on her knees, uncaring that with her short skirt, she’s flashing her underpants to half the room. “What are you doing for your offseason?”

I blink at her, cheeks heating as I lift my champagne flute to my lips. “The offseason?”

I never heard of an offseason before. Just like I never knew my instructor’s certification was only good for this mountain. Just like I never knew how to drive in the snow.

My bare toes curl against soft carpet and I rub my thumb over the stem of my glass. Beneath the sparkling chandelier, I feel too brightly colored. Out of place. Like an imposter in this snow-sparkled world.

Tessa nods. “Yah. I get you probably haven’t thought about it much, since this is your first season. But it’s not too early to start looking. Especially if you’re wanting to get a full instructor’s cert and give yourself a higher ranking for the next Northern Hemisphere season. Australia is pretty sweet. The Blue Mountains are epic, and I could put in a word with my old manager...”

“The Blue Mountains are shit,” Eddie announces unceremoniously, the couch dipping as he sits beside me. He doesn’t look at me though, just kicks his legs out in front of him, his gaze locked on Tessa in mocking challenge. “Barely hills. Everyone knows the Southern Alps are better.”

Tessa glares at Eddie in mock outrage. “Is that right?”

“I heard the snow in the Southern Hemisphere isn’t as good as up here,” Tom says, voice full of authority. He plops onto the ottoman so that he’s facing all of us, taking a long sip of his beer, head tipping back as he drains the last mouthful. His gaze roves over Tessa’s bare legs, then settles on me with a smirk. “But I’ve heard the Aussie chicks are hotter than the Kiwis.”

I sigh, and silently wish I’d managed to invite the rest of the guys to the party without Tom finding out and tagging along.

Tessa gives Tom an unimpressed look. “Nice try, Tom. But if you’re trying to flatter me into getting you a drink, you’re out of luck.”

“Huh?” Tom’s face contorts in confusion and Eddie chuckles.

“Aussie chicks would eat you alive, mate,” Eddie tells him conspiratorially. “And not in a good way.” He taps his chin with his finger, considering. “Actually, I’m pretty sure the Kiwi ones would too.”

Tom waves one hand dismissively. “Nah, they’d love me. ’Cause I’d have an accent there.”

Tessa rolls her eyes, and I bite back a smile.

“Let’s dance,” Tessa suggests, straightening in her seat. She gives Tom and Eddie an imperious look. “Not you guys. You can go make us a drink if you need something to do.”

“You’re dreamin’,” Eddie says, sinking into the sectional, his head tipping back, eyes closing as he rests his drink on his flat stomach.

“I’ll get you guys drinks,” Tom says, rising to stand. “I’m out anyway.” He dangles his empty beer bottle between his fingers for emphasis. “I brought a bunch of stuff for cocktails, let me mix you up something.”

He gives what he probably thinks is a genuine smile, though it looks incredibly awkward, almost forced. Guilt curls in my stomach. He probably knows I didn’t want to invite him and is trying to make up for it.

“Yah. Okay.” Tessa regards him with mild curiosity, gripping my shoulder for balance as she slips her heels back on. “Thanks, mate.”

Tom’s smile widens, shoulders relaxing, and he gives me an expectant look. I offer him up a tight smile, but can’t help thinking of how angry he’d been when I’d told his girlfriend he was cheating. The way he’d looked at me, with raw hatred and disgust. Of how only a few days ago, his dirty socks ended up on my pillow. Of all the little looks and comments that, by themselves, hardly mean anything.

He ducks his head, looking almost contrite, and something in me softens. If he’s trying to make amends, I should be forgiving. I should, at the very least, let him make me a drink.

“That’s nice, Tom,” I say, even though the words feel as forced as my smile. “Thank you.”

He smirks, eyes glinting in triumph before heading to the kitchen.

Later, I would think about that look and wonder how I didn’t see it for what it was.

“I love this song,” Tessa says, pulling me to where a group is clustered on a makeshift dance floor in a smaller room connected to the living room. An entertainment room, going by the projector hanging from the ceiling. It’s empty though, music blaring in the small space. Someone has set up a few colorful lights that flash playfully, giving the darkened room an almost club-like feel.

I recognize a few of the other female instructors, and they give me welcoming smiles as Tessa introduces me, even though I’ve spoken to a couple of them before in the lineup.

“Vivian does the offseason in France,” Tessa explains, raising her voice when someone turns up the volume on the music. “Up at a glacier that’s open all summer.”

Vivian tips her head in acknowledgment, her eyes half-shut as she moves to the music, a half-drunk beer clutched in one hand. “It’s a pretty sweet gig,” she agrees, her French accent thick and warm. “Could stay there all year, but ze tips are better in ze States.”

I tip back the last of my champagne, depositing the empty glass on a nearby bookshelf.

“Ashley is another Kiwi,” Tessa continues, her voice full of mock disdain.

Ashley flips Tessa off with a grin, reaching up to pull the brim of her cap down over her eyes, the silver sticker glinting red as the lights change color.

“Lily is a new instructor,” Tessa explains. “I’m trying to convince her to come train in Australia in the offseason.”

Ashley wrinkles her nose. “Don’t do it.” She drops low when the beat of the song intensifies, then gives me a wry grin. “You should train in New Zealand if you’re going to train anywhere.”

I huff out a nervous laugh, grateful for the champagne Tessa gave me warming my blood, for the dim lights hiding my blush.

Ten minutes ago, I hadn’t even considered what I would do in the offseason. I suppose, if I ever thought about it, I just

assumed I'd go back home. Pick up the pieces of my life where I'd left them scattered like sea glass on the sand. Go back to university. Hang out with my friends. Surf. Try to win back the approval of my parents. Visit my grandparents on the weekends.

Now, it's like someone has opened up all these doors I didn't know existed, and places that I'd once only thought of as vacation spots suddenly seem like real possibilities. Not to visit, but to live. To train.

To become a real instructor.

"Here's your drink."

I start in surprise as Tom appears in my periphery, his face shadowed by the flashing lights, the bright doorway at his back casting him in dark silhouette.

"Oh." I take the glass from his hands automatically. "Thanks." I give him a tight smile, but I can't tell if he returns it.

"Sure." There's something uncertain in his voice, as if there is more he wants to say, but silence falls between us, tense and uncomfortable.

"What about mine?" Tessa pouts, bringing her hands to her hips.

Tom clears his throat. "Yah. Sorry. I didn't want to spill them. I'll bring yours next." And then he's darting from the room.

"Such a spaz," Tessa comments idly. "Is he always like that?"

I hum noncommittally, not wanting to say he's actually acting moderately normal for once. Instead, I take a sip of my drink, wrinkling my nose at the pungent tang of alcohol and whatever odd mixer Tom added in. Something bitter and weirdly salty, mixed with some sort of sugar syrup.

"Shit, that's strong," I cough, and the girls next to me chuckle.

My cheeks heat, and I take another sip, determined not to look like a complete wimp in front of them. This time, the bitter flavor is more palpable, and I sway in time to the music, stepping closer to them as a few guys I don't know come in and start dancing too.

“So New Zealand...” Ashley continues, ducking her head close enough to my own that the brim of her hat taps against my temple. “Probably the best place to train is Cardrona. It’s a hard exam though. You’d honestly want to start training this season, if you can find someone to help you.”

“She lives with Liam,” Tessa cuts in.

“Oh.” Ashley pulls back, tilting her head as she eyes me appraisingly. “You do?”

“Um, yah.” I take another long sip of my drink, grateful for the calming rush flooding my veins. “We’re roommates.”

I remember the feel of his hands on me in the hot tub, of his mouth and teeth against my neck, his dark whispers brushing against my ear. *Roommate*. He’s been nice to me since then, smiling at me, sitting close to me. But we haven’t done anything like that since. *Roommate*. I wonder if that’s all I am to him.

“Well, that’s good.” Ashley says with a decisive nod. “He’s a trainer, so he’ll be able to tell you what to practice. What to focus on. If you can get him to talk.”

Tessa snickers. “Oh, I’m sure Lily can get him to talk.”

The song changes, something with bass that vibrates down my spine, in my brain, thudding with the sluggish pounding of my heart. I take a deep breath, my mind grasping for something to say in response to Tessa’s teasing, but come up empty, the words slipping like water through my fingers.

“Ze snow in France is much better though,” Vivian argues. “Even in ze summer. And you don’t have to speak French—most people speak English on ze mountain. For ze tourists, of course.”

“*Je parle...*” I start, wanting to tell her that I speak French. That my father’s language is as familiar to me as my mother’s, even if I don’t know all the modern slang. Even if I speak like my grandmother, like someone stuck in the 1960s. But the words feel like lead on my tongue.

I frown, and take another long sip of my drink, hoping to clear my head.

“You guys.” Tessa all but stomps her foot. “I’m trying to convince her to come to Australia, and you’re not helping my case.”

Both Ashley and Vivian laugh, the sound dancing around me and making me smile. Comments about Australian snow drift through the air, mingling with music and laughter, fragmenting like the light around us. For some reason, their gentle teasing makes me think of Summer and Lani, of sunrise surf sessions and lunchtime picnics. I close my eyes against the flashing lights and lean against Tessa, hugging her close to me with one arm.

“You’re the best,” I tell her, but the words don’t sound right when they come out.

“I think you’ve had enough of that, missy,” Tessa says authoritatively, slipping the glass from my hand and depositing it on the nearby bookcase, next to my empty champagne flute. It’s only half-empty, but it must have been strong, whatever Tom made me, because I feel like I did after drinking all Eddie’s whiskey. Worse, maybe.

“I think... bathroom,” I mumble, swiping my mouth with the back of my hand.

The room is spinning, a mixture of blue and red and green and white dancing around me with the lights. I stumble out of Tessa’s grasp, and her face floats before me, full of concern, but then it’s gone, the bright lights of the living room in its place. Someone knocks against my shoulder, and I mutter out an apology, then a barely intelligible question about where the bathroom is.

“Down the hall. Last door on the left.”

I nod my thanks, and then I’m in the hallway, one hand pressed against the wall in an effort to steady myself. Framed artwork, thick heavy doors, soft carpet beneath my feet, deep as a snow drift. I open a door, and someone curses at me, so I shut it again, shaking my head and blinking in an effort to bring my world back into focus.



And then I'm in the bathroom, heated tiles beneath my feet, bright lights buzzing over the sink, marble and glass and the strange flatness of my reflection. My eyes look too big, my cheeks flushed, lips parted and dry. I frown, hand fumbling at the tap as I bend, cupping water to my mouth, drinking, then splashing the rest over my face.

The room spins, and I grip the sink, trying to draw in a steadying breath, but my lungs feel full already, heavy as my limbs.

I turn at the sound of footsteps on tile, at the snig of a door clicking shut.

"Tom?" I ask, my brow knitting at the sight of him standing in the doorway. At least, I think it's him, but those eyes and that sneering mouth twist and curve, swimming with the spinning lights and gleaming tiles. My eyes drop, and there are his boots, peeking out from the cuffs of his jeans, leather brown and new, with fresh laces I saw him putting on earlier today.

"What..." My eyes drift back up to his face, the question falling off my lips like melting snow off the edge of a roof.  
*Drip. Drip. Drip.*

He doesn't answer.

---

## Chapter 30



---

### **Eddie**

This party sucks.

I plaster on a smile and lift my bourbon and cola in lazy greeting as Jason settles onto the couch beside me. He clears his throat, wiping his palms on crisp jeans, then adjusts the flat bill of the cap he's wearing.

"Tessa's dancing with a bunch of chicks in the other room," I tell him without preamble, tipping back my glass, taking a long drink. I know that's the only plausible reason that he's sat down beside me. He certainly hasn't sat next to me to make small talk.

In fact, I don't think I've ever heard Jason speak, unless it was about the machines he drives or the snow. Or the pub he's planning on opening when they get back to Australia. I presume he talks to Tessa about other things, since she's his girlfriend, but who the fuck knows.

I snort to myself, the bubbles from the cola sharp in my nose.

"Yah. I know." He lifts his beer to his lips—some imported Australian beer that probably cost him an arm and a leg, and likely tastes like horse piss.

I roll my eyes, but for once, I don't rip him out about his complete lack of conversation skills or his poor taste in beer. I don't feel like talking either.

Across the room, Antoine, Liam, Matty, and Seth are huddled together chatting, like they're the best of friends. When Matty catches me staring at them, he smiles and waves me over. I shake my head. If I go hang out with them, I'll end up stuck hanging with Lily too when she comes back. Watching them all flirt with her, watching Matty moon at her and Liam smile at her and Antoine cuddle her.

I don't think I can handle that.

Another cluster of instructors stumble in through the door, wiping snowy boots, exclaiming loudly about "*what a sick place this is*," bottles clattering in bags as they shed layers in the hallway and make their way inside. I should probably get up and say hi. Talk to people. Socialize.

Instead, I take another long drink of my bourbon and cola, ice cubes clinking against my lips as I drain the last of it. I sigh, staring down at the empty glass forlornly, then glance up hopefully to where Tom is mixing a drink for Tessa and Lily in the kitchen. Maybe I can get him to make me one, too.

There's a big archway that separates the kitchen from the living room, and I can just make out the back of Tom's shoulders, cups and bottles lined up on the bench in front of him. He nods and smiles at whatever the person next to him says, his attention fixed on what he's doing. Not particularly promising for getting his attention, but I'm sure if I stare at him long enough, he'll eventually notice me. Plus, he has to walk past me to deliver Tessa and Lily their drinks.

I tap one finger against the rim of my glass, pursing my lips thoughtfully. I don't think he's ever made Lily a drink at home before. But I guess he's wanting to impress Tessa, and couldn't exactly offer to make her one without offering Lily too.

I cast a quick glance at Jason. He might be quiet, but he's built like a brick shithouse. I personally wouldn't be doing anything to piss him off. I mean, sure, I've probably flirted with Tessa in front of him, but nobody ever takes me seriously, so it's fine. I can't imagine Jason would give Tom—some random Yank—the same leeway.

When I look back at Tom, he's pulling a small plastic bag from his pocket. It's too far away to see what's inside, and it's out of view again so quickly, that I almost think I've imagined it. Still, my heart hammers at the sight of it, a strange whooshing in my ears, a tightening in my stomach. His hand slips back into his pocket again, and then he's turning around, one drink fisted in his hand, a shit-eating grin plastered to his face.

"You need something?" he asks, pausing with the drink in hand in front of me.

I stare at the drink. It's pretty, actually. Layers of color in a tall glass, even the sprig of some plant and a lemon rind in there. Like something you'd get at a cocktail bar.

"You wanna make me something too?" I give him a winning smile, but something strange is twisting in my gut. I nod at the drink. "Or you could just give me that?"

He pulls the cocktail against his chest, his face going pale. "Sure. I can make you one next. This one is for Lily."

"Not Tessa?" I ask, my gaze flicking to Jason to gauge his reaction at hearing his girlfriend's name. Sure enough, he sits up like a gopher, pale eyes fixed on Tom with silent intensity.

Tom's cheeks flush, and he licks his lips, glancing nervously at Jason. "Shit. I forgot her drink. I'll make her one next." He gives Jason what he probably thinks is a friendly smile, but it looks more like the grimace of a man about to shit his pants in fear. "I... I can make you one too," Tom squeaks.

Jason frowns, eyeing the drink Tom is holding with confusion. "Why the fuck would I want to drink some girly drink?" His accent is so thick, I can practically taste the red dust of his homeland in the air. "But yah. You can make a drink like that for my missus. The girl likes that crap." He gives what could almost be described as a soft smile, then takes a long swig of his beer, likely in an attempt to stifle any show of emotion.

My lips quirk, but any amusement I feel quickly turns to ice when I see Tom heading to the little side room where the girls are dancing, my stomach sinking when he disappears inside.

For a long moment, I stare at the black doorway, at the flashes of lights and color from within. I stare, sitting on the edge of the couch, although I'm not quite sure what I'm waiting for. But then, a moment later, Tom is traipsing out, giving me and Jason a nod before trotting back over to his makeshift cocktail station in the kitchen.

I sit back with a sigh, shaking my head. Lily is fine. She's dancing with Tessa. I'm not sure what I saw, but it couldn't have been anything. Tom wouldn't be stupid enough to put anything in Lily's drink. Not here, not with all of us around.

I'm just imagining things. It's just Lily getting under my skin like always.

Like the other day, after she nearly killed us all with her terrible driving, and all I wanted to do was wrap her up in my arms, reassure her. Or when she kissed me, tasting like the whiskey I'd given her and shivering against me in the cold, her ridiculous shoes slipping on the ice. I'd almost given her my coat and I couldn't relax until I'd fixed the tread on her shoes.

I stare at my empty glass, at the ice cubes melting at the bottom, and remember the sound of her laughter as we rode backcountry together.

Was it only two weeks ago? It seems like a lifetime ago now.

"Well, I sure as shit wouldn't be hiring him to be a bartender at my pub," Jason comments dryly, drawing my attention back to him. He lifts his beer in the direction of the kitchen, to where Tom's bottles are lined up, a cocktail half-made beside them.

There's no sign of Tom.

"You know I'm opening up a pub back home, right?" he asks. "In the 'Stralian winter season..."

Jason's words fade to a hum against the pounding in my ears and I swallow, my mouth suddenly feeling dry. I stand up, my empty glass falling to the floor, my heart hammering in my chest.

Where is Tom? Where the fuck is Tom?

"You all right, mate?" Jason asks.

I don't reply. I'm stumbling forward, my eyes scanning the dimly lit living room, the bright kitchen. I duck into the room where Lily and Tessa were dancing, wincing when a strobe light flashes directly into my retinas.

"Eddie!" Tessa calls out, grinning. "You here to dance with us?"

I shake my head, giving her a smile so thin, it feels like it might crack, like the sheets of ice on the asphalt of the parking lot in the morning. "I'm looking for Lily."

Tessa looks around, stumbling a little on her high heels, then shakes her head. "I think she went to the bathroom?" she says, then winces. "Sorry. I don't really know. She was just here a minute ago."

I stumble back, my stomach dropping so fast, I have to grip the doorframe to steady myself.

One minute. That's not that long. *She'll be fine. Lily's fine.*

My feet are moving. I push through a crowd of guys from the mountain, beer bottles clattering, knocking against each other. The guys give me quizzical looks, but I ignore them.

When my sister was at university, in her first year of med school, she used to come home and ask me these ridiculous questions like "What does it take to undo years of incorrect assumptions?" Of course, the questions were aimed at showcasing her superior knowledge to her still-in-high-school brother, but I remember wondering about the answers, sometimes for days.

Now I know the answer to *that* particular question, at least, and it sits like lead at the pit of my stomach. I squeeze my eyes shut.

All it takes is one moment. One moment where you know with absolute certainty that you've fucked up.

One minute. Tessa said Lily just left a minute ago. *She'll be fine.*

I draw in a deep breath, steely determination rising up alongside my growing panic. I don't know where the

bathrooms are in this ridiculous mansion but I'm going to find them.

And if Tom has laid a finger on my girl, I am going to fucking destroy him.

"Hey. Watch it buddy," a familiar voice says, though it's missing its usual buttery warmth.

I scowl up at Seth who is, for some reason, blocking my way to the hallway with his massive form.

"Move," I hiss.

"I wanted to talk to you," he says, completely ignoring my request. "About what's been going on with you and Lily, and why you're being such a jerk to her."

I grit my teeth and try not to punch one of the nicest guys I know. I don't have time for this shit. Don't have time to tell him that I've been keeping Lily at a distance because she has gotten under my skin like no other woman has.

"Get out of my way," I repeat through gritted teeth, putting as much force into my voice as possible. "I've got to get to Lily."

Seth folds his arms across his chest. "Why? So you can make her cry again?"

*Cry?* When did I make her cry? I can't imagine Lily crying. I can only picture her smiling and laughing that low, bubbling laugh. A laugh that makes something ache uncomfortably behind my ribs each time I hear it.

"I think Tom spiked her drink." The words come out in a dry rasp, rushing between us with the force of an avalanche.

The two drinks I've had churn in my stomach, beer mixing uncomfortably with spirits.

I should've said something the moment I saw him do it, even if I wasn't sure. I should've said something to Lily. Should have chucked out that fucking drink before Tom could give it to her...

"What?" Seth's voice is all hard steel and barely controlled rage, a rumbling of danger that skitters down my spine.

“I think he followed her to the bathroom.” I point to the hallway behind him and my hand trembles, so I drop it to my side, clenching my hands into fists.

Seth gives me a look that can only be described as blind rage, something more like a snarl than words leaving his bared teeth. And then he’s spinning, moving down the hallway so fast, I can barely keep up with him.

I run behind him, panting, watching him fling each door he passes open, not bothering to knock. Couples—and one throuple—shout in protest at his intrusion, scrambling to shut the doors, but he ignores them, completely unconcerned by the chaos he’s creating.

He opens the last door at the end of the hallway, bright lights flooding the darkness so abruptly, it has me stumbling back, squinting.

“Lily.” Seth chokes, that one word ripping out of him in a painful exhale. I peer around his broad shoulders, and nearly sink to my knees with the rush of relief and an almost dizzying wave of nausea.

Lily is sprawled on the ostentatious marble tiles, her cheek pressed against a bath mat, eyes open but unseeing. Her pants are pulled down to her knees, pink cotton panties only half covering her, as if someone tried taking them off but stopped. Tom stands behind her, his back to us, his red-splotched face visible in the mirror and pinched with frustration. His hands fumble at his belt, then drop to his sides as he jolts with shock at the sight of us.

He spins around, belt unbuckled and hands held out. “It’s not what it looks like,” his eyes dart from me to Seth, dark and hazy, the color draining from his face. “She asked me to come with her and then passed out, like a complete lightweight. Not my fault the girl can’t hold her liquor, you know...”

Tom’s words are cut off with a meaty thud as Seth’s fist connects with his face.

“What the...”



Tom stumbles back clutching his nose, his eyes wide. Already, blood is seeping through his fingers, dripping onto the pristine tiles at his feet.

Seth doesn't reply, doesn't even utter a word. Instead, he reaches out, gripping Tom by the front of his shirt, hauling him out of the bathroom, ignoring his strangled cries of protest.

"Let me go you fucking psycho..."

Another thud cuts off his words, followed by a crash and the distinctive cracking of plasterboard. I watch in a mixture of awe and horror as Seth lays into Tom, fists flying relentlessly, again and again.

The blood is rushing in my ears, a thundering roar. Lily, on the floor behind me. Tom's feet scabble against carpet, his arms above his face, his back against the cracked plasterboard, eyes wide and frantic. Seth, a towering beacon of rage, burning, burning, burning.

Seth's fist glances off Tom's raised arm and connects with his temple, sending Tom's head snapping back, chin up, then down again. I see the moment consciousness leaves Tom's eyes, the moment the black disappears, whites rolling, jaw going slack, his body slumping and dragging down the wall, into a heap at Seth's feet.

"Fuck," I gasp. My fingertips feel icy cold, the roaring in my ears almost deafening. "Holy shit."

Seth stares down at Tom's limp form, his fists clenched, back tense and heaving. For a long moment, all I can hear are the rasping sounds of his breath, the *drip, drip, drip* of the bathroom sink behind me, and the frantic staccato of my own heart.

And then I'm running, all the fragmented thoughts flying together in my mind like broken shards coming together in reverse, like puzzle pieces forming a checklist of things to do.

*Get Lily home. Get Seth home. Don't let anyone see what Seth did to Tom so he doesn't go to prison for murder.*

"Matty," I call out, my voice causing a momentary lull in the now-teaming mass of people filling the living room. Where

the fuck did all these people come from?

“Matty,” I say again, relief flooding me when he turns my way, a head higher than the crowd around him, blue eyes sharp, jaw tense with the alertness he always carries with him, like a burden he can’t quite seem to shake.

“What is it?” he asks, pushing through the crowd, as if the people around him are no more than blades of grass in one of my grandfather’s paddocks.

I glance around, suddenly aware of the eyes on us, of the way the conversation has dipped, low enough that I can hear the lyrics of the music, some remix chanting, “*dance, dance, dance with my hands.*” And down the hall, out of sight, Tom’s blood coats Seth’s knuckles, and Lily is on the bathroom floor...

I give the watching crowd a broad smile, waving a dismissive hand. “As you were, people. Just employing my hired muscle to move the idiot who passed out in the bathroom so I can take a piss.”

Matty’s brow dips in confusion, and a few people snigger, but since it’s the least bizarre thing I’ve said, no one really seems to care, and a few moments later, we’re forgotten.

“Come on,” I hiss, gripping him by the elbow, hauling him down the hall after me.

Matty doesn’t put up a fight, doesn’t even question me or pull his arm free, just follows me dutifully, blindly. *Like a good little soldier*, I think, with a sickening twist of guilt.

“Everything okay?” he asks, voice tight with tension and uncertainty. “Did someone really pass out?”

I don’t answer. He’ll see soon enough.

Instead, I pull out my phone, quickly tapping out a message in the group chat for Antoine and Liam to meet us at Lily’s car outside. All the while, my mind is racing, calculating how long it will be before someone wanders down the hallway to the bathroom and finds Tom’s bleeding form slumped against the wall. Maybe someone slipped past while I was getting Matty...

“Oh my gosh.” Matty pulls to a stop, his blue eyes wide and almost translucent in the glow of the lights flooding the hallway. But it’s not Tom he’s worried about. In fact, I’m not even sure he notices the lifeless body or the blood spattered against the pristine walls or the cracked plasterboard.

No, his attention is solely focused on Lily.

Lily, who is currently in Seth’s arms, bridal style, her head cradled against his chest, pupils dilated between fluttering eyelashes. Her hands are tucked under her chin, the fingers of one lightly gripping the fabric of Seth’s Henley, and her bare feet dangling, looking so small and fragile with those pink toenails.

“Lily.” Matty rushes forward, his arms outstretched, as if he means to pry Lily from Seth’s arms.

Seth bares his teeth, looking barely human as he clutches Lily against him. “Don’t touch her.”

Matty pulls up short, hands hovering midair, confusion giving way to a dangerous, coiling tension, like a bull about to charge.

“Nope,” I say, clapping my hands together to get their attention. “Nah-uh.” I elbow my way past Matty, then shove him back, raising one finger and glaring between the pair. “You can save your territorial display for when we get back to the flat.” I point to where Tom lays limp in the darkened hallway, then looking meaningfully up at Matty. “Terminator over here got a little carried away, as you can see.”

Tom gives a wheezing whimper, the sound muffled by carpet—and probably by the blood filling his sinuses—but doesn’t move. I let out a fluttering sigh of relief, some of the tension in my chest easing at the sound.

*At least there’s not a body to bury now.*

“We need to get Tom back to the flat too,” I say decisively.

If we leave him here, someone is going to find him and call the police. He’ll make a statement—assuming he can talk—and then Seth will get into trouble.

“Matty, you carry Tom.” I nod to the door just beyond the bathroom. “I think that one goes out to the garage. Or the backyard.” Since we can’t exactly haul Tom, bleeding and unconscious, through a crowd of potential witnesses.

My phone buzzes in my pocket and I pull it out to see Liam’s terse response blinking up at me. “Liam and Antoine are at Lily’s car.”

I wince as Matty hauls Tom to his feet, and Tom’s battered face comes into view. It’s... not a pretty sight. But at least Tom is able to stand, and his beady eyes are open now—even if he’s completely out of it, going by the way he’s staring up at Matty with a blank expression on his face.

At my other side, Seth lets out a rumbling growl at the sight of Tom, and I turn to give him a stern look. “You just focus on carrying Lily. Keep an eye on her breathing and her vitals. We don’t know what Tom gave her.”

And now we can’t ask him, because thanks to Seth, Tom’s currently got the mental capacity of a piece of toast.

All the fury bleeds from Seth’s face, and he stares down at Lily with wide-eyed horror, then nods silently, his throat bobbing.

“Okay.” I straighten my shoulders, pull my phone from my pocket, and usher Seth down the hall after Matty and Tom. “I got this.” I spare an annoyed glance at the blood-soaked carpet where Tom was laying, but there isn’t much that can be done about that.

The sound of Tom’s groans filters down the hallway, and I grimace, then lift my phone, quickly scrolling until I find the image of a familiar, suit-clad smirking face that looks annoyingly like my own.

Now to call my asshole lawyer brother, and find out exactly how much trouble we’re going to be in.

---

## Chapter 31



---

### **Matty**

The cold hits the second we step outside, the back door slamming shut behind us, blocking out the drone of voices and thud of bass from the party. A few snowflakes land on my eyelashes, making my nose wrinkle, and I adjust the weight in my arms.

*Tom.*

I try not to look at him, but the metallic scent of blood still fills my nostrils, clawing at the walls I've erected in my mind between then and now, there and here.

“Put him in the boot,” Eddie snaps, giving me a meaningful look, then pointing to the back of Lily's car. He's holding his phone to his ear, and I can hear the indistinct cadence of someone speaking on the other end, even though I can't make out the words.

“Stop being such a drama llama,” Eddie says, his face contorting into a scowl. It takes me a moment to realize he's not talking to me anymore, but to whoever is on the phone. “It's a hatchback. He'll be totally fine—he's not going to suffocate. No, I told you, he's definitely not dead. Now are you gonna help, or you just gonna sit there and whinge?” Eddie rolls his eyes.

My brow dips, and I trudge through the freshly fallen snow to Lily's car. Liam and Antoine are standing close together,

huddled beside the car, and their eyes widen when they catch sight of Tom.

“What happened to him?” Liam asks.

I shrug, not really sure how to answer. To be honest, I’ve hardly thought about Tom. All I can think about is Lily.

“No idea,” I say. “But Eddie said to put him in the trunk...”

Liam snorts out a laugh. “Course he did. Fucking animal.” He shakes his head, then darts around to open the back of Lily’s car for me without question.

I settle Tom between Lily’s gym bag and first aid kit, tucking his knees against his chest so that he fits, and frowning at the fresh trickle of blood dripping from Tom’s temple. I open my mouth to ask whether this is really a good idea, but Liam is already slamming the trunk shut.

“*Putain de merde*, what happened?” Antoine asks.

I turn around, expecting him to be talking about Tom, whose battered face is still visible through the window of the hatchback, but he’s looking toward the house. To where Seth is standing with Lily clutched against his chest, under the shelter of the eaves.

“You guys help Seth get Lily in the car,” Eddie orders, pointing to Liam and Antoine. “And you...” his eyes narrow in on me with all the authority of a drill sergeant. I find my spine stiffening despite myself. “You’re driving, mate.”

I catch the keys Eddie tosses my direction with one hand before I can think what I’m doing, then instantly feel dread twist in my stomach.

I haven’t driven in years. Not since that last time.

*Dust-covered road, the rumbling of the truck’s engine. The guys chattering in the back, talking about some TV show they’d been watching back at base. I could feel the heat of the sun on my face as it came through the window, was barely awake really, under the heat and the gentle lulling rise and dip of the truck over gravel.*

*And then everything tipped and spun, the smell of blood and petrol mixing with nitrates, twisted metal and bodies, the ringing in my ears...*

“Hey.” Eddie’s hand is clasping my shoulder, squeezing tight, almost painfully, his eyes boring into mine. “You got this, okay.”

I blink, the haze of *then* mixing with snowflakes and Eddie’s face.

He gives me an apologetic smile. “You’re the only one who hasn’t been drinking. I don’t trust any of these other fuckers behind the wheel. I know it’s a lot to ask...”

I swallow. It’s not a lot to ask. It *shouldn’t* be a lot to ask.

The keys feel hot and sharp against my palm. I squeeze them tight, focusing on the feel of them. On the snowflakes fluttering around us. On Lily’s pale face, tucked against Seth’s chest as he makes his way toward the car.

“Okay.” The words come out thick, catching in my throat, but there’s a pulse of exhilaration that runs through me too, that burst of *I can do this* that screams in my veins when I’m about to drop down a slope that terrifies me. Like dropping off that cornice, with all the wild backcountry stretched beyond me, with Liam and Eddie urging me forward.

“Good man.” Eddie gives me a sharp smile, clapping me on the shoulder, but there’s a glow of pride in his brown eyes that borders on smugness. “Now, listen dickwad...” he says, turning his attention to whoever is on the phone and climbing into the front passenger seat. “We have a bit of a situation here, okay?”

Liam and Antoine are already climbing into the back, Seth following after them, grumbling and muttering angrily as he carefully positions Lily across the three of them. I slide the key into the ignition, heart thundering but hands steady, take a deep breath, and start the car.

“So let’s say, hypothetically speaking, a guy caught someone about to hurt someone else, and then beat the crap out of him.

To protect the other person. How much trouble would they be in, exactly?"

There's a short silence, the only sound the wheels crunching over snow.

"Don't give me that legal disclaimer bullshit," Eddie snaps into the phone, leaning forward to drum his fingers against the dashboard. "I'm not one of your clients you can dick around. I just want straight answers, yah? Don't forget who knows about the time you got pissed and stole a bottle of wine at that law function when you were a summer clerk. Or that time you vomed in your boss's office and blamed it on that other guy? How do you think your fancy practicing certificate would hold up if I let that little bit of intel slip?"

I wince, unable to help feeling bad for whoever it is on the other line. But Eddie falls silent, and when I dare take my eyes off the snow-covered road, I can see his brow constricted in thought, his expression serious as he nods along.

"Nah, he's all good man," Eddie says. "I mean, he's unconscious in the boot of the car, but he's breathing and all that."

"I could change that," Seth mutters from the back seat, but Eddie ignores him.

"I'm not going into detail with you about it," Eddie says. "You're not getting names. Let's just say the guy was about to do something really bad. Remember Jessica? Yah, like that level bad."

Another long pause, and my fingers flex and tighten around the wheel as I squint through wildly moving windshield wipers and blinding snow.

"Well, that's about as useful as tits on a bull," Eddie hisses. "What am I supposed to do with that? Of course he's probably going to bring charges. He's a whiny, entitled..."

Eddie bites back whatever he was going to say, and I can practically hear his teeth grinding in frustration as he listens to the person speaking on the phone. For several minutes, it's only the sound of the road, wheels on snow, squeaking



windshield wipers, and Eddie humming in agreement or irritation as he listens intently.

He lets out a sigh, slumping back onto the seat, tension bleeding out of him so fast, I find my grip on the wheel loosening in response.

“See. I knew you didn’t have that fancy law degree for nothing.” I can hear the grin in Eddie’s voice, even if I can’t see it. “Fucking brilliant, mate.” He waves one hand dismissively. “Of course I won’t mention you said anything. You know I’m all good with appropriating your ideas.” A dark chuckle. “Well, the good ones anyway.”

I bite the inside of my cheek, trying to ignore the familiar sense of frustration that wells up whenever I don’t know what’s going on. That sense of being in a haze, of not seeing what other people seem to grasp so readily.

“Yah, have fun with your gym workout, you tool. Hate you more. Tell mum her favorite son said hi.”

Eddie ends the call, dropping his phone onto his lap, throwing his head against the headrest with a thud.

“So you going to tell us what the fuck happened?” Liam growls from the back seat. “Like, maybe why Tom is bleeding in the back of the car.”

In my periphery, I can see Eddie drag one hand over his face, letting out a sigh. “Tom drugged Lily,” he says, without any preamble.

I feel ice wash over me at his words, a cold, trembling rage that has every muscle in my body going tense.

“I saw him slip something into her drink—but I didn’t realize what he’d done until after...”

My nostrils flare, teeth grinding. *He saw? He saw and didn’t do anything?*

“He followed her to the bathroom. When Seth and I got there, it was pretty fucking clear what he was trying to do.”

“Trying?” Antoine’s voice is sharp as shattered glass. “He didn’t...”

“No. Thank fuck.” Eddie’s voice is thick with anger, and I feel my own throat tightening in response, a sickening mixture of horror and relief making my stomach churn. “Lily was passed out on the bathroom floor and Tom was... he was trying to undo his pants. That’s when Seth... um... went a little *‘hulk smash everything’* and tried to rearrange Tom’s face.”

White-hot rage rushes through me, making my vision tunnel. *Lily. My wonderful, sweet Lily.* If it had been me there instead of Seth, Tom would be dead right now. There isn’t a doubt in my mind.

“I... I’m going to...” The words catch in my throat, every curse word my father beat out of me threatening to burst forth in an angry torrent. The only thing stopping me from pulling the car over and hauling Tom into the snow is the fact that Lily is stretched out in the back seat. Unconscious.

*She needs me.*

“The turn-off is there, man.” Eddie says, nudging me with his elbow and pointing to the barely visible sign ahead through the snow.

I give him a curt nod, tightening my fingers around the wheel. *He saw. He saw, and he let it get that far.*

“So what are we going to do?” Liam grits out, after a long moment of silence. “I take it that was your brother on the phone. The lawyer one, right?”

“Yah. That was Nate.” Eddie taps his foot on the floor. “It’s... it’s not great, to be honest.” He pivots in his seat, angling his body through to look between the seats to the back of the car. “There’s a real risk Tom will bring charges against Seth. And apparently defending other people only goes so far. I guess there are some rules about excessive force or some shit.”

“*Mais, c’est fou...*” Antoine hisses, but Eddie holds up one hand, silencing him.

“I know. I totally agree. Still, Nate seemed to think the best bet would be to stop Tom from bringing charges in the first place.”

“So we need to kill him?” I ask, cocking my head to one side. “Liam, you’ve got that shovel you use for backcountry, right?”

Eddie snorts out a mirthless laugh. “No. No killing.”

My brow dips, and I dare a questioning glance at Eddie. How else do you keep a man like Tom silent?

Eddie taps his temple, a feral grin spreading across his face. “We just need to fuck with his head a little bit. And, failing that, we use good old-fashioned blackmail.”

---

BY THE TIME we get Lily and Tom inside, my arms are shaking, all the adrenaline bleeding out of me. I barely feel anything as I deposit Tom on his bed, not even a flicker of grim satisfaction at his groans of pain or the trickle of fresh blood on his split lip. No, there’s just a hollow, empty feeling. A numbness that used to be so familiar.

I can’t let it take over though. Not now. *Lily needs me.*

“So, you got his phone?” Eddie asks as I step into the kitchen, one hand outstretched expectantly.

I blink against the too-bright lights of the kitchen, fingers fumbling as I drop Tom’s phone into his outstretched palm.

“And his car keys?”

I nod, pulling those from my pocket. It hadn’t been hard to find the items Eddie asked for—though I hadn’t exactly enjoyed rifling through Tom’s grimy pockets to retrieve them.

“What... what’s the plan again?” I croak, leaning back on the island that separates the kitchen from the living room, my unfocused gaze roving over the growing wall of beer cans. It’s high enough now that I’d have to stand on my tip-toes to see the couch on the other side. “Is this like, a hostage situation?”

Eddie shrugs. “More or less. Or you can think of it as we’re just looking after Tom while he recovers from his unfortunate accident.”

“Accident...” I echo, but the word feels like cotton on my tongue.

My gaze drifts down the darkened hallway, to Liam's bedroom, where Seth carried Lily moments before, Liam and Antoine on his heels.

*I should be there too. I should be with her...*

"You should go lay down, mate. You look like shit. No offense."

I huff out a hollow laugh, and drag one hand over my face. My lips feel numb, my fingertips too. There's a comfort in the numbness, and let my eyelids flutter shut for a long moment.

"Go lay down." There's a bite of command in Eddie's words that has my body reacting, wanting to obey. That's easy too, following orders. Always has been. "I'll stay up with Tom. Make sure he doesn't die or anything." Eddie cracks his knuckles, a dark, almost dangerous look flitting across his baby-soft features, and I shudder. It's a little terrifying. Like seeing one of those angel figurines my grandma always loved coming to life and brandishing a Chucky knife.

"Yah. Okay." I lick my lips, mouth feeling suddenly dry. I should lay down. I've felt like this enough times to know what's coming. The inevitable crash that will leave me feeling hungover—sometimes for hours, sometimes for days.

My vision blurs, and I stumble down the hallway, my feet heavy as I trod to my bedroom. But for some reason, I can't quite make my feet move past Liam and Eddie's room. The door handle gleams at me in the dim light, glimmering like a beacon through the haze of my mind. My hand reaches out, looking like the hand of someone else as it turns the handle. Looking bigger, stronger, and not quite mine.

Liam, Antoine, and Seth are sitting, huddled together on the edge of Eddie's bed. Lily is stretched out on Liam's double mattress, eyes shut, cheeks pale, lips parted. She looks peaceful and perfect, but there's an off-ness about her too. Like Sleeping Beauty in an enchanted sleep.

*I could be her Prince Charming,* I think idly, then almost laugh at myself. Why would she want someone like me—

damaged and awkward. So inexperienced, it's laughable. And so broken, I could barely drive her home safely.

*But I did drive her home. I got behind the wheel for the first time since it happened. And I'm standing here. I might be exhausted, but I'm here.*

That thought has a surge of resolve rushing through me, a solidness that has my legs moving, my knees bending, my body drawn toward her like a magnet. I kneel beside the mattress, feeling for a brief moment like a knight in the stories my mom used to read. Like I could pledge my heart and soul to her, for nothing more than the promise of her smile.

Her eyelids flutter, a garbled sound escaping her lips, and my hand lifts of its own accord, the desire to reach out and stroke the hair back from her face almost impossible to resist.

I don't dare touch her though. Not while she's sleeping. Not after everything she's been through.

"Do you think we should take her to a hospital?" Antoine murmurs from behind me. "Make sure she's okay?"

"Eddie called his sister," Liam reminds him, his voice low. "The doctor, remember? She said it should be fine to keep her here, told us what to look out for..."

Seth is silent, but I can practically feel the nervous energy humming off him in the dimly lit room, buzzing alongside the low-watt bulb overhead.

Lily opens her eyes, pupils blown and eyes unfocused. "Matty?" she rasps against the pillow.

"Yah," I croak, eyes burning. "I'm here, baby."

"Hmm." Her brow dips, expression pinching, eyes closing again.

"I'm not going anywhere," I tell her, even though I'm not sure if she can hear me. "I won't leave you, I promise."

Her expression smooths, a shuddering sigh escaping parched lips, and I feel my shoulders slump in relief.

“That’s good, right?” I ask, turning to give Liam a questioning look. “That’s a good sign, if she’s talking?”

Liam rubs the back of his neck, his mouth pulled into a thin line. “I... I don’t know,” he admits, expression shuttered.

He pulls his knees up, hugging them against his chest, and fixes his gray eyes on Lily. Sitting like that, he doesn’t look anything like the confident coach who urged me down double-black diamond runs. He looks lost, uncertain, and just as terrified as I am.

“You might as well make yourself comfortable,” Seth says, throwing me a pillow and speaking for what must be the first time since we came home. His eyes are fixed on Lily though, with an intensity that mirrors what I’m feeling.

*He likes her, remember?* I think with a sinking sense of resignation. And how could I possibly compete with him?

“She seemed to relax when she heard your voice,” Seth continues, his voice a low rasp. “So I’d rather you didn’t leave.” His gaze flits to me, sharp and full of warning, and my eyes drop to where his hands are folded on his lap, the knuckles swollen and raw, small cuts still bleeding.

“Yes, sir,” I say without thinking, nodding empathetically. “I won’t leave her.”

Seth gives a curt nod, then goes back to staring at Lily. Antoine reaches across, taking Liam’s hand in one of his own, threading their fingers together, pausing to give me a challenging look that I don’t quite understand.

I put the pillow on the floor beside the mattress, then stretch out on the musty carpet, so that I’m lying next to Lily. This way, she can see me when she wakes up. She’ll know that I didn’t leave her, just like I promised.

---

## Chapter 32



---

### **Eddie**

“You’re an ugly fucker, aren’t you?” I observe idly.

I tilt my head, considering the bloodied layout of Tom’s face, half obscured by his pillow. The movement causes Lily’s air mattress to squeak beneath me.

“I mean, you didn’t have much to work with before,” I continue. “But now... you’re a bit of a mess, mate.”

Tom doesn’t answer, and I tap one foot against the ground, a rhythmic staccato that matches the irritated pulse beating behind my eyes, threatening to turn into a headache. He’s taking longer than he should to wake up. A few more minutes, and I’ll have to think about hauling him off to a hospital. Apparently. According to my doctor sister.

“Hmf gra ff.”

The garbled sounds are wet and indiscernible, but they have me sitting straighter, a frisson of excitement rushing through me. *He’s waking up.*

“Wh-where... what...?”

One beady eye opens, the other too swollen to do more than twitch, and Tom’s mumbling cuts off with a groan.

I grin, my smile pulling so wide it hurts, and I drop to my knees, bringing my face level with his own.

“Good morning, sunshine,” I drawl, even though it’s closer to midnight. “You feeling better?”

“Wha... what happened?” he moans, and I feel some of my earlier excitement fizzle away.

I have a whole plan laid out, with varying levels of threats, blackmail, and general mind-fuckery. That plan becomes completely useless if Tom can’t remember anything.

Though, it would make things easier.

“You hit your head,” I say, injecting as much mock sympathy into my voice as possible. “Must have slipped in the bathroom.”

Tom blinks, his one bloodshot eye darting around the room, as if searching for some hidden enemy in the shadows. “Hit... hit my head?”

I sigh, resisting the urge to roll my eyes. “I mean, yah. Going by how fucked up your face is, mate.”

He gives a plaintive whimper, reaching up with trembling fingers to feel his face. I hate that I feel even a little bit bad for him, that I feel even the smallest bit of sympathy for his pain. He deserved it. Deserved everything Seth gave him.

“I saw you slip something into Lily’s drink,” I tell him, my voice low, almost conversational.

His hand stills, his one eye going wide.

“I saw you follow her to the bathroom.”

His throat bobs, a painful-sounding gurgle escaping him.

“I know what you were going to do.”

I see the moment realization dawns, can practically see the memories flitting back to life. His one eye narrows, darkening with defiance, the muscles on his neck cording as he attempts to haul himself up to a seated position.

“We stopped you. And... well, you had a little accident.”

He manages to haul himself to a seated position, his hands fisting the covers of his unmade bed as he tries to keep himself



upright. Fresh blood trickles from his split lip, mixing with the dried blood flaking in a stripe from his nose to chin.

I rise to stand, nostrils flaring in disgust as I stare down at him.

“I’m... I’m going to fucking kill you guys,” he hisses, spit and blood flying out, but thankfully landing on the carpet and not me. “I’m talking to my lawyer and...”

“Your lawyer. Really?” I scoff, even as my heart races at his threat.

*Aiding and abetting assault, my brother had explained to me. Criminal charges. Possibly civil liability too. You know how those Americans like to sue each other. You might never get a work visa for the States again. And your buddy—well, he could easily go to jail.*

“And what exactly is your case going to be? That someone polished the bathroom tiles too much and you fell on your face while you were trying to get your dick out?”

“Oh, come on,” he sneers, waving one hand in irritation. The move has him lurching forward with a wince. “That chick was asking for it. And it’s not like she isn’t fucking the rest of you guys anyway.”

White-hot rage pulses through me, my hands clenching into fists so tight, I can feel my blunt fingernails cutting into my palms.

“You slipped something into her drink,” I say again, forcing my voice to stay calm. “I saw you.”

“Yah. Okay. Fine.” His lip peels back from his teeth in a grimace, and he sways a little, making me wonder just how coherent he really is. “So I roofied her. Not like the bitch didn’t deserve it. You saw how she outed me to my girlfriend. You know that was out of line.”

I wince despite myself. At the time, I had thought that, hadn’t I? I’m pretty sure I even said something to Lily, criticized her decision to tell Tom’s girlfriend he’d been cheating on her.

“And why do you even care?” he continues. “You jealous or something? What, were you hoping that I’d share her with

you?”

I swallow back the bile that threatens to rise in my throat, and force my expression to blank as I stare at Tom. I’ve never wanted to kill someone before. Not really. I’d like to think I’m too practical for all of that. But I think I might want to now.

Tom tips his head back, leaning against the wall and giving me a full view of his blood-crusting nostrils. “Probably good I didn’t end up fucking her,” he adds, his voice sounding slightly garbled. “Probably would have picked up some disease...”

I give him my back, bending to scoop up the phone I’d left on Lily’s bed. The phone that has been recording our entire conversation. I press the ‘stop recording’ button, then turn to face him.

“You’re moving out,” I tell him without preamble. “As soon as you can walk, you’re taking all this shit”—I lift one finger, circling it in the air—“and moving out of the flat.”

He opens his mouth to protest, but I lift my phone, turning it so he can see the voice recording app.

“You better be out of here before Lily wakes up,” I continue, “if you want to be able to walk out of here.”

I step forward, not quite putting myself within arm’s reach of him, but close enough that I’m towering over him.

“And if I ever hear you spewing crap about a lawyer again, I’ll send this recording to every single person in charge of this mountain. When you change jobs, I’ll send it to your new boss, and when they fire you, I’ll send it to the next idiot who hires you.”

His cheeks pale, skin going splotchy, but I continue. “I’ll send it to your mum and your grandma. When you get a girlfriend, I’ll track her down and send it to her too.”

I slip the phone back into my pocket. “Fuck with me, and I’ll be the ghost that haunts you for the rest of your life.”

Tom stares at me, horrified disbelief written across his mangled features. I stare back, my own expression blank, the

excitement from earlier gone.

Now, I just want to get out of this room, away from Tom. I wish I could erase his vile words from my memory, wish I could erase the memory of him standing over Lily in that bathroom.

I wish I could erase *him*.

Instead, I have to hold on to his words forever, to keep that recording like a knife tucked in my pocket. To protect myself. To protect Seth. And most of all, for Lily.

“Fine. I’ll move out.” Tom huffs, squaring his shoulders, then wincing at the movement. “This mountain sucks anyway. Can’t even work as a snowboard instructor here. I was already planning on quitting.”

I do smile at that, a thin, angry smile that has resolve building behind my ribs.

Liam had mentioned that Tom had been in the same training cohort as Lily and Matty, but then he’d had some sort of altercation with Stephanie Jealousie. We should have stopped him from moving in then, because what sort of guy gets in an argument with Stephanie Jealousie? Any snowboarder with two brain cells would have been falling all over themselves for the opportunity to train with her.

My hand settles on the doorknob, and I pause to give him a last look, wondering if I should say anything more. Like ‘don’t fall down the stairs on your way out.’ But the sight of him staring back at me, angry and unrepentant—it has my stomach churning, and for once, the thought of making some cutting remark is unappealing.

Instead, all I can think about is Lily.

Her smile when we dropped into backcountry. Her eyes in the lamplight, before her lips crashed against my own. The sound of her laughter, rich and lilting.

I pull the door shut, blocking out the cloying scent of Tom’s unwashed ski clothes and the metallic scent of blood, and stare down the darkened hallway, to the slice of light peeking out from beneath my bedroom door.

To where Lily is.

The second I step inside my room, Liam, Seth, and Antoine's eyes snap to me.

"He's alive," I say, in answer to their silent question. "And he'll be moving out just as soon as he can walk. Hopefully in a few hours."

I know I should tell them about the conversation, about recording Tom's confession. But I don't want to think about him anymore. Not now. And it feels wrong talking about all of this with them while Lily is unconscious. She deserves to have her say in everything, more than any of them.

"How is she?" I ask, my voice dropping low, my chest aching uncomfortably at the sight of Lily stretched out on Liam's mattress. My toe nudges something solid, and I blink in surprise at the sight of Matty's massive form stretched out in the small patch of carpet between mine and Liam's mattresses. "Why is Matty sleeping on the floor?"

"Not asleep," Matty mumbles, his face pressed into what I am pretty sure is my pillow. "Promised Lily I'd stay..."

My lips quirk in a smile despite myself, and I shake my head, then drop to the floor beside Matty's head, my back resting against the wall. "You did good today, champ," I tell him, ruffling his hair. He grunts in reply, and my smile widens. "I can tell you've driven in snow before."

"Thanks, man," he mumbles, tugging what is definitely my pillow against his head.

"She's been talking in her sleep," Antoine says, dragging one palm down his face. "But she hasn't woken up yet."

I hum, biting the inside of my cheek. My sister did say it could be several hours before she wakes up. *Keep her on her side, in case she throws up. Keep an eye on her, if it sounds like she's having difficulty breathing, call an ambulance.*

"I still think we should take her to a hospital," Antoine continues, his green eyes flashing with challenge. "This... this waiting thing is ridiculous."

“I agree,” Liam says, biting his lip. My gaze drops to where Antoine and Liam’s fingers are intertwined, and I snort. A few days ago, Liam would have been vehemently opposed to anything Antoine suggested, and now he’s siding with him, like they’re some power couple.

“We should wait,” Seth says, scrubbing at his cheek. “If it’s not an emergency, it should be her choice. She’s had enough of her choices taken away from her tonight.”

I rub at my sternum, feeling that increasingly familiar bite of pain behind my ribs at his words.

“You don’t agree with that, do you?” Antoine asks, his hushed tone doing little to hide the irritation in his voice. “Surely you don’t agree with him?”

“I…” I look between the three of them, then at Lily sleeping, and Matty on the floor beside me. Matty makes a sleepy, snuffling snore into the pillow, offering up absolutely no thoughts of value. “I don’t know,” I admit reluctantly, my voice going tight. “I don’t know what to do.”

“The mountain’s health insurance is awful,” Seth continues, his voice growing stronger. “If you take her in, she’ll end up with a massive bill, and what if she can’t pay it?”

“I could pay it,” Liam retorts. “I’ve got money saved up…”

“Your house deposit money?” I ask, incredulous. “You’d use your house deposit money on her?”

Because that’s what he’s been saving for, for as long as I’ve known him—trying to get enough money together to buy an exorbitantly priced shack in Wānaka or Queenstown. Even though he could probably ask his parents for help with a deposit, if he really wanted to.

Liam shrugs, not meeting my gaze. “I’m just saying. I could pay it.”

I stare at him, then look at Lily, then back at him again, his fingers twined with Antoine’s. My brow dips, mind racing to make sense of everything.

“I have some savings too,” Antoine admits, his dark cheeks flushing. “Not much, but I could help pay.”

“Same,” Seth grunts out. “But I still think it should be her choice.”

I scrub at the sides of my head with my fingertips, and stare at the three guys currently taking up the entirety of my mattress, then at the guy snoring into my pillow on the floor next to me, and it’s like all the puzzle pieces fly into place.

“You guys like her,” I blurt out, then instantly regret my choice of words. It’s like I’m seventeen again, at my all-boys school, talking in the boarding house about Chloe Barker. The girl literally every single boy had a crush on.

Turned out she was into chicks, so all our fights about who would ask her out to the next school formal had been pointless.

I clear my throat. “I mean... you guys are all interested in her?”

Liam gives me a sharp look, his jaw tensing, and Antoine gives a haughty tilt of his chin. Seth’s cheeks pinken, his lips pressing together in a thin line.

“Holy shit,” I say, grinning widely, even though the feeling threatening to crack me open is nothing like joy. “Of fucking course you guys are.” My gaze drops to Matty, and I huff out a mirthless laugh. “I mean, I know *he’s* into her. That’s been obvious from day one. But you guys? Seriously?”

“You have a problem with that?” Seth bites out, cracking his knuckles. I shoot him a look of disbelief that has his gaze dropping. “Sorry,” he mumbles. “I didn’t mean... I’m just so worked up from...”

*From when he hulked out protecting Lily.*

How did I not see this before? I should have. I mean, Seth and Antoine have been cuddling up with Lily for weeks. And Liam... well, Liam is about as easy to read as a blot of ink, but even he’s been weird about her.

“Okay...” I scrub my palms on my thighs. It’s not like this changes anything for me. “Fine.”

I pushed her away. She kissed me and I pushed her away. She was never going to be interested in me after that.

“So what? You guys all like her,” I say, lifting my hands, making finger quotes around the word ‘like her’. “So what? You’re all going to ask her out, see who she wants to choose? How do you know she even likes any of you guys back?”

“Who says she has to choose?” Seth retorts, folding his arms over his chest, no trace of his usual overly friendly Canadian smile.

I blink up at him. Did Tom manage to get a hit in on him that I missed somehow?

“I’m sorry—what?” I ask, trying to keep my voice relatively polite, since I did just see Seth beat the crap out of someone a few hours ago.

Seth’s flush spreads down his neck, to the tips of his ears, but he keeps his eyes locked on mine. “If she likes us, I mean. Who says she has to choose?”

“Umm...” I trail off, not quite sure how to reply to that. Of course she’d have to choose. That’s the whole point. Instead, I say: “Who says she even likes you?”

This time, it’s Antoine who answers, a smirk curving his full lips. “Oh, she likes me.” He pauses exchanging a meaningful look with Liam. “And Liam.”

I stare between the pair of them, my eyes dropping to their joined hands.

Honestly, I feel like my head is going to explode. I’ve just spent the past couple of days processing the fact that Liam and Antoine have something going on. And like, sure, Liam never bothered to tell me he was into guys, and acted like he literally hated Antoine until a few days ago—up until the point I walked in on Antoine giving Liam a blow job. But that’s cool. Not like Liam and me are best friends or anything.

And now they’re both interested in Lily?

For some reason, Tom's ugly words choose that moment to echo through my thoughts, making my stomach churn. *It's not like she isn't fucking the rest of you guys anyway.*

"Why do you even care?" Liam asks, gray eyes narrowing to slits as he glares down at me. "It's not like you're into her. You made that pretty fucking clear."

His words have my head snapping back, teeth clenching as if I've been hit.

Not into her? *Not into her?* Is that what he thinks?

I think about Lily's smile, her laughter mingling with my own as we flew through fresh powder.

I think about the way she looked at me when we first met—when I made the mistake of checking her out—like she wanted to reach between us and rip my balls off.

I think about how her hand felt when she gripped my arm so she wouldn't slip down the stairs in her stupid trainers, and the way my heart lurched painfully at that simple touch, like it knew even then that it belonged to her.

And when she kissed me, tasting of sugar and whiskey and her, I'd never been more terrified in my life. Like I'd been skiing the whole time toward the edge of a cliff drop without realizing it—the sort of drop that could break every bone in my body if I didn't land it right.

But if I landed it... It would be the most spectacular thing I'd ever done.

"Of course I'm into her, you dick," I say with a scowl. I pull my knees to my chest, accidentally knocking Matty's shoulder with my foot in the process, startling a sleepy grunt out of him. "How the fuck could I not be?"

Liam's eyes widen, his lips parting slightly at my outburst, and I feel my cheeks heat. "Not like we should be arguing about this anyway," I add, with a twinge of embarrassment. It's a somewhat unfamiliar emotion, and I can't say I particularly like it. "Since Lily is currently passed out."

"Hmm not."



Lily's voice has me jolting in surprise, and I turn to look at her with a mixture of relief and horror.

Dark lashes flutter, hazel eyes roving blearily before landing on me with a hazy sort of focus that has my heart thundering behind my ribs.

"Hey." She gives a little smile, her face half pressed against the pillow. Liam's pillow, I realize with annoyance. "I'm... I'm into you too."

She huffs out a laugh, that throaty, lilting laugh that has heat rushing inappropriately down my spine. "I... um... I like all you guys, actually. A lot." Her words come in a little rasping whisper, not quite slurred, but slow, like dripping honey, and her eyelids flutter shut again. "So you don't need to argue about it anymore, 'kay?"

She rubs the side of her face against the pillow with catlike contentedness, a small smile curving her parched lips. One of the hands tucked under her chin slips out, her arm slinking down the edge of Liam's mattress, fingertips grasping for Matty.

"Oh good. You're still here," she sighs when her hand brushes against his shoulder. Matty lets out a sharp intake of breath in response, then reaches up to cover her hand with his own.

"Always," he murmurs, his voice thick with sleep. "Always."

I stare down at her, at her long, sun-bronzed arm and the dark waves spilled out over the pillow, at Matty's pale hand against her golden skin.

"I'm going to get you some water," I say abruptly, rising to stand so quickly my head spins. Or maybe it was already spinning. "I'll be right back."

I barely make it past Matty's prone body without tripping over him, my feet stumbling over the carpet as I make my way to the kitchen. Vaguely, I'm aware of someone following after me, of the sound of my name.

"Eddie." Seth is standing behind me at the kitchen sink, his hand deftly pulling the glass from my trembling fingers. "Hey. Let me get that."

I relinquish the glass, if only because I don't want to end up cleaning shards of glass from the bench.

"You okay?"

I stare at Seth's chest, at his signature black Henley stretched across broad muscles, and nod. "Yah, man. Fine."

*Lily needs water. She's waking up. She just heard me tell everyone I'm into her. Tom is in the other room, his face bashed in. The recording is in my pocket. Seth won't go to jail. Tom won't press charges. Lily is waking up. I wonder if she'll want to go to the hospital now. Antoine and Liam are holding hands.*

I scrub at my face, the heels of my hands pressing against my eyes, making red sparks dance in my vision.

"Hey, man." Seth's arm settles over my shoulders, a heavy weight that nearly has the breath whooshing out of me. "Everything is going to be fine." He tugs me against him in one of those side-bro hugs that should be awkward but is strangely reassuring, and grips the water glass in his free hand.

"Yah. Okay," I agree, though I'm not really sure I believe it.

*I like all you guys, actually. A lot.*

Lily's words echo in my head, words she probably didn't mean to say but said anyway. But if she meant them... if she does want me... it's like I'm back at the edge of that cliff all over again, adrenaline rushing through my blood with an almost nauseating intensity, my skis pointed straight downhill.

Except this time... this time I'm not going to push her away. This time, I'm going to take the drop.

And it's fucking terrifying.

*To be continued in*

*The Mountain*

# Languages Glossary

# Hawaiian & Hawaiian Pidgin

- *Keiki kama 'aina*. Local kid.
- *Ono grindz*. Good food.
- *Haole*. Foreigner or tourist, especially a white person. Usually insulting.
- *Ahupua 'a*. Traditional Hawaiian socioeconomic, geologic and climatic subdivision of land.

# French

- *Putain de merde*. Literally “whore of shit” but used as an equivalent to “holy shit.”
- *Génial*. Great.
- *Merde*. Shit.
- *Minuscule*. Small.
- *Maman*. Informal version of mother, similar to “mom”.
- *Quel bordel*. What a mess.
- *Putain*. Literally “whore” but used as an expletive like “fuck”.
- *Mais peut-être que ce serait bon pour les étrangers?* But maybe it’s good for aliens?
- *J’ai lu le même livre en anglais. Et ne t’inquiète pas—je serai discrète*. I read the same book in English. And don’t worry, I’ll be discreet.
- *Ouais*. Yah.
- *Oui*. Yes.
- *C’est génial*. That’s cool.
- *Mec*. Mate or buddy.
- *Évidemment*. Evidently.
- *Ma puce*. Literally “my flea” but used as a term of endearment, like “sweetheart”.
- *Tu le sais, n’est pas*. You know, don’t you?
- *Exactement*. Exactly.
- *Blaireu*. Literally “badger” but used as an offensive term, like “jerk”.
- *Mon dieu*. My god.
- *Tabac*. A French-style general store that sells tobacco products, lottery tickets, alcohol, snack food, café items (sometimes).
- *D’ac*. Okay
- *Et quoi*. And what.
- *Pleure pas, ma puce*. Don’t cry, sweetheart.
- *Mon dieu, Lily. Tu me tues*. My god, Lily. You’re killing me.
- *Mon chou*. Literally “my cabbage” but used as a term of endearment.
- *Mais, c’est trop*. It’s too much.
- *C’est complètement fou, mais...* It’s totally crazy, but...
- *absolument divine*. Absolutely wonderful.
- *juste là*. Just there.
- *Ce connard* is a *complete trou du cul*. The bastard is a complete asshole.
- *Je suis tellement désolé*. I’m so sorry.
- *Mais, c’est fou*. But it’s crazy.

# Thank you!

Thank you so much for reading **The Season**, the first book in the Endless Winter series. I really hope you've enjoyed the journey so far.

I would also like to thank my lovely editor, Marcelle from BooksChecked, my wonderful beta readers, Colette Rhodes, Ava Marie and Amanda Watts, and my incredible team of ARC readers. And also a special shout-out to Mon Reyes for the gorgeous artwork he's created for my hardcovers, and his talent for bringing my characters to life.

If you can, I would so appreciate you leaving a review on Amazon and/or Goodreads! Your support is the lifeblood of Indie authors, and provides us with the feedback we need to give you the books you love.

I know how hard it is waiting for the next book in a series to come out, and I promise I'm working on **The Mountain**, the second book in this series, as fast as I can!

You can keep updated on release dates and progress on my [reader group](#), [website](#) and [Instagram](#).

You can also get bookish prints and merch on my [website](#).

---

## About the author

---

Elisha Kemp is an author of young adult and new adult fiction, who writes in a range of genres, including historical fiction, paranormal, contemporary and reverse harem romance.

Most of all, she loves creating worlds you can get lost in, and characters you can fall in love with.

She lives with her partner, two human-shaped wolf pups and black cat by the beach in New Zealand.

Her ideal day would be a powder day on the slopes, then relaxing by the fire with a red wine and a good book.

# Also by Elisha Kemp

## **Tobias Finch Series**

Latent Wolf

Accidental Alpha

Wolves of War

## **Dying Gods Series**

Drown the Sea

Burn the Stars

Wake the Gods

Minas (planned for early 2024)

## **Endless Winter Series**

The Season

The Mountain (planned for 2024)