

Against the Odds



BRITTANY KELLEY

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the Odds*

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For anyone who needs to sink into something soft, cozy, and safe right now— this book is for you.

And for Tiffany White and Ashley Reisinger, for always putting up with and encouraging my nonsense.

AGAINST THE ODDS

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CONTENTS

[Author's Note](#)

[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](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Also by Brittany Kelley](#)

[About the Author](#)

AUTHOR'S NOTE



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CHAPTER I



CAMERON

It's been one of those days—the kind that makes me want to curl up in a ball and eat all the cheese my stomach can handle and play the farming game on my phone and completely abandon reality for the remainder of the week.

In fact, it's not just today. It's the week. The month. The entire winter so far, and it's freaking January.

My jaw hurts from grinding my teeth.

Snow's coming down seriously now, my windshield wipers doing their best to keep up, but it's really getting hairy. The check engine light that's been glowing off and on since November's really getting on my nerves, just like everything else.

And of course I'm out in the Middle of Nowhere, Delaware, after following a lead that turned into absolutely nothing.

I can't say I love this for me.

“Shit, shit, shit.” I squint. Is that smoke coming out of my hood, or is that just, I don't know, steam from the cold? “Please don't be smoke, please don't be smoke.”

I'm so busy staring at the cloud curling from the front of my stupid, piece of shit, total lemon of an SUV that I don't realize I'm drifting into the other lane. An eighteen-wheeler lays on the horn, and my heart leaps into my throat, adrenaline screaming through my veins.

Or maybe that's just me screaming. I yank the wheel away from the semi, only to realize my error too late. My SUV slides on ice as soon as I hit the shoulder.

There's a moment where I think I can control it, the tires finally gripping—until they stop, and I can't do anything but watch in abject horror as my car slams into the ditch on the side of the highway. My airbags go off as soon as the front end crunches, and I squeeze my eyes shut reflexively.

“Fuck,” I whine, my heart beating a mile a minute. My car horn blares, my head aching in earnest now. The horn tapers off, still sounding, but sadder and off-pitch now, and I blink, trying to piece together a plan of action.

“Shit,” I say, my entire vocabulary reduced to cursing. I grope around the center console, trying to find my phone where it was plugged in, charging in one of the cupholders, but it’s not there.

My chest hurts, and when I catch my reflection in the rearview mirror, the seatbelt’s left a huge red abrasion against my collarbone and neck.

I’m alive.

I let out a shaky laugh, and it hits me all at once how much worse it could have been if I’d swung too far into the semi’s lane, if I’d been going faster.

Hot tears stream down my face and I stare at my hands, which shake like leaves in my lap.

I should find my phone. Where is my phone?

I can’t stop crying, and between that and the crack in my windshield and the snow falling faster and harder, my visibility is near zero.

There’s a knock on my window and I yelp, my hand slapping against my chest, which I immediately regret considering the amount of pain I’m in from the airbag and seatbelt.

“Hey, are you okay?” a voice asks, and I didn’t think my body could manage it, but pure shock slaps me in the face again.

I know that voice. Unless my adrenaline-fueled brain is playing tricks on me...

“Yeah,” I manage. “Yeah, I think I am. Sore, but I’m in one piece.”

The car jerks as the man outside forces the driver’s door open, and then I’m looking up into familiar brown eyes, eyes that have haunted my memories for years now.

“Hi, Jacob,” I say tearily, and he stares at me in horror.

“Cameron.” He blinks. “Holy shit, Cameron. Do you want me to call an ambulance? What are you doing out here? Where does it hurt?”

I made him promise not to be weird months ago at the Beaver Ball, seeing as how our friends are dating. It was the last time I saw him, and I’d hoped I wouldn’t run into him again without plenty of warning to prepare.

And yet, here he is, staring at me in shock and terror, like he still cares about me, even after everything, even after all these years a part. After I was so determined to never have anything to do with him again.

“J-j-j-j-jacob,” I say again, sniffing.

I’ve never been so happy to see someone in my life. I’ve definitely never been so relieved to see an ex-boyfriend.

I can’t stop crying, the sobs coming in earnest now, and I hold up shaking arms to him.

“Where are you hurt?” he asks in a low, serious voice, and I shake my head.

“Not hurt, not really. Sore. Just... It’s been a shitty day. Week. Month.”

“I should take you to the hospital—”

“Please, don’t,” I tell him. “I don’t want to go to the hospital.”

“You might be seriously hurt.”

“All that’s hurt is my pride and this stupid c-c-car.” I point at the blizzard outside, barely coherent through the choked sobs that won’t quit. “Let’s just get out of here before it gets w-w-w-worse,” I finally manage, even though it takes me a minute to get out the last word.

“Out of here, yeah.” Jacob doesn’t hesitate, leaning over me and unsnapping my seatbelt, so close I catch a whiff of his herbal pine scent, the smell taking me right back to college,

right back to those endless days of sunshine and happiness with him.

It feels like a lifetime ago.

It feels like yesterday.

“My house isn’t far from here,” he says, lifting me from the seat like I weigh nothing at all, so carefully, like he’s afraid to break me. “Can I take you to my house? We can check you out and go from there if you need to see a doctor.”

“I really am fine.” My voice cracks on the last word.

Jacob’s forehead wrinkles with concern, an expression I know all too well.

“You’re in shock,” he tells me, and I huddle into him, into his broad chest and strong arms and the heat of his body, snow settling in his eyelashes. “Your body won’t even be able to recognize if you’re hurt until the adrenaline’s worn off. Your face is a mess, and so is your chest. What the hell were you doing out here, anyway? Didn’t you see the forecast?”

“Work,” I tell him miserably. “My boss is a jackass. Everything’s all wrong, Jacob. Nothing was supposed to be like this.”

He makes a soothing sound, opening the door to his truck, the hazard lights flashing gently into the snow. Jacob sets me into the passenger seat gently, so gentle despite his giant size, and I can’t stop looking up at him through tear-filled eyes.

“My phone,” I say, my last brain cells finally demanding to be heard. “I need my phone.”

“I got it,” he says. “Don’t worry.”

With that, he buckles me in, and I sniffle as he closes the door. The truck’s on and heat blasts from the vents, the radio playing softly, the announcers telling everyone to get off the roads, to get home and stay put.

“It’s a once-in-a-hundred-years Nor’easter,” one says. “Haven’t seen something like this in at least a decade. Not sure why they say they’re ‘once in a hundred years,’ am I right?”

“My husband just texted to say the stores are all already out of milk and bread and eggs. Everyone’s making French toast, huh?”

They laugh at that, but tears keep streaming down my face, my hands trembling uncontrollably.

Ice pellets ping against the windshield, drowning out the soft noise of the talk radio personalities and the hum of the heater. Sharp ringing starts in my ears, and I can’t stop crying.

Why can’t I stop crying?

I’m vaguely aware of Jacob getting in the driver’s seat and the truck rumbling back onto the mostly deserted highway. I hear him make a phone call, and I know I’m the topic of it, my name and ex-girlfriend all mixed up in the words.

Hospital, I hear. Blizzard.

I don’t bother listening to the rest. My ears are ringing too loud, my sobs slowly dying out.

Snow quickly blankets the thicket of trees on either side of the road, but Jacob’s huge truck has no problem navigating the icy roads.

I glance down at the phone that’s now in my hand, something I don’t remember happening, and there are two missed calls, both from my boss.

Probably wanting an update.

Probably wanting the piece on his desk.

“I can’t,” I tell my phone. “I can’t do this anymore, I can’t do it.”

“What’s that, baby?” Jacob asks.

Baby.

No one has called me that since him, since I was twenty-one years old and we were graduating from college, him drafted across the country and me headed to Philly for the job I wanted more than anything in the world.

“Baby, don’t do this.” Jacob’s brown eyes were huge, fixed on my face, and my whole chest hurt, felt like it was caving in. “We can make long distance work. We can work. I love you.”

“I need to focus on my career,” I said. “So do you. Besides, we both know you’re going to want to go out and have fun. It’s for the best. You won’t have to worry about anything. You’ll be happier like this. I will be too.”

“I won’t be fucking happier, Cameron. You are my happiness.”

I shook my head, convinced of my truth, convinced that we weren’t ready. Convinced I needed to stand on my own two feet and needed the space to do it. Convinced what he said he felt wasn’t real, convinced he’d be happier single in his first pro season too.

For the best.

How much shit have I sacrificed thinking it was for the best?

I’m crying again, tears that haven’t come in years pushing through the floodgates, eager to get out. To be known.

The truth is, I haven’t been happy, really happy, for a long, long time.

CHAPTER 2



JACOB

I fucking hate it when she cries.

Cameron rarely cried the whole time we dated, the whole time I loved her, and now she's sitting in my truck sobbing like her heart is breaking. Or like she's broken a bone, or like something internal is bleeding and she can't tell me what hurts.

I'm terrified.

The truck, thank fuck, seems to be handling the slick surfaces just fine, and I'm driving as fast as I safely can to get home. I've already texted the team doc, and he's agreed to virtually examine her.

"Can you tell me what hurts?" I ask her and she doesn't answer, just stares out the windshield, hiccupping, her eyes massive in her pale face.

God.

She's just as beautiful as ever, everything about her more lovely and sharp than I remembered.

We were just kids then, nearly ten years ago when we met at freshman orientation, and I thought maybe I could get over her when I moved out to Oregon for those first two football seasons.

One look at the tears streaming down her face reaffirms what I already know, what I've known for a long time: there's no getting over her, and there never will be.

I'm an obsessed teenager all over again, all those feelings I thought I shoved deep down inside me, locked up, all of them threatening to explode out of me.

My knuckles whiten on the steering wheel.

The sooner I can get on the phone with the doc, the better. I glance at the speedometer, wondering if I should push it. But getting in another wreck won't help her. She's not bleeding, she's not coughing, and other than the abrasions from the

seatbelt and airbag on her face and neck, I can't see that there's anything wrong.

Other than the crying, which is freaking me right the fuck out.

"Are you hurt?" I ask her for the millionth time.

She shakes her head. "I'm so mad at myself," she says, the words thick and tangled with tears.

"Your car is replaceable. The important thing is you're okay." I cut my eyes to her, willing the car to go faster, needing to get her to my house and take care of her.

It's overwhelming.

"Not about the accident, though that was so stupid too. I'm so stupid."

I blink.

This is not the Cameron I know. The Cameron I remember was confident in everything she did, making her magnetic, irresistible.

"You are not and have never been stupid."

She doesn't reply, just keeps shaking her head. Her sobs have slowed down now, though, and I don't know if that's a good or a bad thing, so I grit my teeth and try to push the truck faster through the heavy snow.

I ask her a few more questions, but all she does is snifle, her hands shaking so badly in her lap that my stomach twists with worry.

Pure relief shoots through me as we make it down the winding drive that leads to the home I share—shared—with my brother. It's huge just for me, and I wince thinking about the mess I've left it while he's house hunting with Savannah.

"Tyler's out of town," I tell Cameron, just to say something. "He's with his new team, trying to find a place to live with his wife."

She cries harder, and I swallow the lump in my throat, glancing over at her with furious worry. What is wrong with

her? God, I should have taken her to the hospital, not to my house. What was I thinking?

Finally, I pull up to the top of the drive, park the truck right in front of the house and yank the keys out of the ignition. As fast as I can, I race around to Cameron's side and unbuckle her. She doesn't make even a sound of protest as I pull her into my arms, feather-light, her heart beating hummingbird-fast.

"I don't want to hurt you," I tell her, hustling onto the porch and jamming my keys into the front door as fast as I can.

Our breath mingles as I unlock the door, a cloud of frozen moisture, and it hits me all at once.

I always imagined carrying Cameron over the threshold of my house. When I thought about it, though, she was wearing a long white dress and smiling.

Now she's sobbing, hurt, and shivering with cold.

Nothing has turned out the way I thought it would.

I shut the door to the house—and the memories—and race her to the living room, ignoring the wet footprints I've left on the hardwood.

She looks so small on the big sectional Ty and I bought, so out of place in this huge house, that it takes me a second to shake off the fact that she's actually in my house and act.

The team doctor's been on speed dial since my ankle injury last season, and he pops up on my screen, answering immediately.

"Tell me what to do," I snarl at him.

His eyes go wide. "Take a breath, Jacob. Let me look at her."

I don't fucking want him to look at her. But I want her to be okay, so I flip the camera on the phone, showing where she's huddled up on the massive couch.

"Can you shine a light in her eyes?"

Wordless, I swipe, turning on the flashlight function.

“Her pupils respond to the light. Hi, honey, can you tell me —”

“Her name is Cameron, not honey,” I growl.

“Okay,” Dr. Abebe coughs politely. “Cameron, are you hurt? Are you in pain?”

“I’m okay.”

“She’s not okay,” I interrupt. “She’s crying.”

“Cameron, I think you’re in shock. Can you tell me how fast you were driving?”

“Not fast. My car... it was breaking down. Forty-five, fifty tops. The whole... the whole front was...” She drifts off, making a shushing noise and miming an explosion. “I overcorrected and ended up in a ditch.”

“Can I see where the seatbelt got you?” Dr. Abebe asks her kindly, and I grit my teeth as she nods, slowly unzipping her coat all the way.

“Okay. Jacob, can you describe the extent of the bruising? Listen to her breathing.”

“I can’t hear her breathing from here.”

“Sit next to her.” Dr. Abebe says patiently.

I do as he says, Cameron watching me with those dark, round eyes. She’s stopped crying at least.

“I’m not having trouble breathing,” Cameron tells me. Then, louder: “I’m not having trouble breathing,” she tells the doctor.

“I would advise getting her checked out, Jacob, in person. There could be internal—”

“I’m not going to the hospital. I am fine. Just shaken up.” There she is. There’s the stubborn, willful Cameron I know.

The doctor sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Jacob, I want you to take her in if she shows any of the following signs...” he rattles off a list, and I blink at his face in the phone.

“You know what? I’ll text it to you. Regardless, she’s going to be sore for the next week or so. You know the drill, rest, ice, heating pads, ibuprofen. Try to have her sleep as much as possible, nutritious, easy to swallow foods. Can you do that?”

“Of course I can. Thank you, doc. I mean it, thank you,” I tell him fervently.

“Cameron, you really should see a doctor as soon as you can—”

“No,” she says, frowning at him. “I’m not hurt.”

“Keep her warm,” he tells me. “Make sure she doesn’t dehydrate. Make things easy for her, okay? You two keep safe, and call me back if anything changes or take her to the emergency room. Got it?”

“Yes sir, thank you, Dr. Abebe.”

He nods, and the call ends.

Without his voice, without the background noise of his house, it’s just me and Cameron, and the silent, swiftly falling snow.

“Cameron—” Her name tastes like honey on my lips, sweet and familiar and everything I’ve wanted for so fucking long.

“I want pizza.”

I blink. “Pizza?” I repeat.

“Can you make me your pizza?” She snuffles, and the question is like a melody straight from our past. How many nights did we spend at my off-campus apartment, letting the yeast rise in the cheap glass bowls we found at a nearby Goodwill? How many times did we argue over pineapple as a valid topping while laughing and watching Netflix and studying, curled up next to each other?

Too many to count.

So many that remembering somehow hurts and feels good all at once.

“Yeah, yeah, of course I can,” I tell her. She’s hungry. That’s a good sign.

“Do you have any—”

“No pineapple,” I tell her, unable to stop the smile that cracks along my face. “I don’t even keep that in the house.”

“Fine,” she says, sniffing. “Pizza. Beer?”

“I don’t keep beer here either,” I tell her. “Tyler would. I have whiskey.”

“Whiskey,” she says, giving me a small, watery smile. “That would be good.”

She stands on shaky legs, and I reach for her, hating the way she’s still so affected by her accident.

“You sure you’re not hurt?”

“I’m not. I’m really not. Just... I need food. I forgot to eat lunch.”

“Have you changed at all?” I say, wrapping an arm around her waist. At first, I think I’ve overstepped, both by touching her again and with the question, but she just lets out a tired sigh.

“I have changed.” Her voice is small and quiet and nothing like my Cameron, and I hate it.

“Is it the car? Is this about the car?”

“No. Yes. No. Kind of.”

Right. “Got it.”

“This house is... really something, Jake.”

Jake.

God. She hasn’t called me that in years. No one’s called me that in years. I don’t know what to say. That I bought it, bought all the places I’ve lived in over the past however the fuck long, with her in mind. Imagining her in the bed with me.

Waking up alone and tired of it.

“Thanks, Cam,” I tell her. I narrow my eyes, searching her pretty head for some sign of an injury, a concussion maybe that didn’t show up with the doc’s pupil test.

“Don’t look at me like that,” she says softly. “I’m allowed to be nice. You’re being nice to me. I’d be awful if I was rude after you... saved me from the side of the road. During a blizzard.” A strong note of self-derision creeps into her voice, and that? That I recognize.

She can say she’s changed all she wants, but my Cameron is still in there.

“Come on,” I say, and I walk with her pressed up against me. “Kitchen is this way. Pizza and whiskey await, my lady.”

A rueful grin plays across her mouth, and looking down at her like this, her body warm against mine... it would be so easy to kiss her. So easy to try to make things right.

“I can walk on my own,” she says, disentangling from my side.

“Right.” The word comes out husky, raw. I cough. “Of course. But if you need help—”

I let the offer dangle, and she crosses her arms over her chest, rubbing her hands along her sleeves. Some of the color is starting to come back into her cheeks, her eyes regaining that mischievous sparkle I remember all too well.

“Do you cook a lot still?”

“Not really,” I say. “Not as much fun to cook for one.”

Nothing’s been as much fun without her.

“Right,” she says slowly, her eyes slightly wider, her lips pursed.

She’s going to bolt. Well, if it wasn’t for the blizzard outside, at least.

“Which is why it was so great when Ty moved in.”

Her shoulders relax, and we finally make our way into the kitchen, which except for the packet of small-batch roasted

coffee beans on the counter, is pristine. Quite a bit of pride fills me at the admiration in her eyes.

“This is really nice, Jake.”

“I’m sure you have a great place too. Hell, Cam, you made all your career dreams come true too.” I hustle around to the pantry, pulling the container of yeast out along with flour and sugar. I’ve made this dough so many times I know the recipe by heart, and I’m mentally calculating how much I’ll need to feed the two of us when Cameron bursts into messy tears all over again.

CHAPTER 3



CAMERON

Dear god. I cannot seem to get my shit under control. Nausea roils my stomach, and I half run over to the huge copper farmhouse sink in the middle of my ex-boyfriend's catalogue-ready kitchen. Water. I need water.

I turn on the faucet, splashing water all over my face, trying to breathe.

"Is it your liver?" Jake's big hand splays along my lower back, rubbing gentle circles. "Your small intestine? Do I need to call 911?"

"My what?" I ask, taken aback. "Why would it be my liver?" Water runs down my neck, and I inhale deeply, feeling a little more centered.

"Internal bleeding. From getting hit with the airbag. Or seatbelt. Hell, Cam, I don't know."

I look back at him, still leaning heavily on the sink. He rakes his hand through his hair, making it stand on end, his eyes wild as he pushes the sleeves of his dark green Henley up.

"I'm not hurt. I feel gross because I'm starving, my adrenaline is going nuts from driving my car into a ditch, and I've really had a week from hell already." And now I'm standing in my ex's house, trying not to have a total meltdown. Well, another one, at any rate.

Though I suppose that ship has sailed.

"Yo-ho-ho and a bottle of rum," I say miserably.

"Now I'm really worried. You hate rum." He glares at me, but I know he's not mad at me. I know him so well. He's worried. *About me.*

God, how is it that so much time has passed and it's like none at all?

"I'll take that whiskey," I tell him, even though a small, smart part of my brain declares that's a very bad idea.

He hands me a bottle and a glass a minute later, and I slug it back, coughing a little after.

“Been a while,” I say hoarsely. “I don’t drink much anymore.” It burns down my throat and chest, warming me all the way down to my toes.

Meanwhile, Jacob watches me over his shoulder, already stirring together yeast and warm water and honey.

“I haven’t made pizza since—” I start to say.

He quickly looks away.

Since that night. The night I ended it, the night he came back to his apartment with a ring, and I told him no.

Without a word, he taps a few times on his phone, turning on the same weather report that was on in the car.

“Most major arteries in the tri-state area have been shut down. The bridges into Jersey are already impassable. It’s bad out there, folks, and according to all reports, it’s going to be bad for the next few days.”

“Get to a safe, warm spot, and hunker down. You do not want to be out in this, and if you are? Stay put and wait for emergency services.”

“But don’t go out in it,” the first radio personality says, and they both laugh, like it’s the funniest thing they’ve ever heard.

“Stay put, stay warm, and stay tuned. We’ll be bringing you up-to-date weather reports every fifteen minutes as the storm bears down on the Philly area.”

I pour another few fingers of whiskey, then tip them back too, nearly choking as reality slams into me.

I’m snowed in.

With my ex-boyfriend, pro football player Jacob Matthews. And I’m not going anywhere anytime soon.

I clutch the glass, inhaling as slowly as possible.

God. And I could have been stranded on the side of the road.

“You probably saved my life,” I say slowly. What are the odds, of all the people that would be driving by right before a huge snowstorm hit, it would be my college boyfriend?

One of the few men I still wholly trust.

“I didn’t know it was you in that car,” he says, weighing bread flour.

“The scale’s new.” I pour another bit of whiskey.

Why not? It’s not like I’m going anywhere.

“Yeah, my mom got it for me. Said I’d get more consistent results with it than measuring cups.”

“Was she right?” I’m not much of a cook myself. Usually more of a bagged salad and microwave leftovers kind of woman.

“Yeah, you’ll see.” He grins at me, real warmth in it, and I try not to let the familiar expression mean anything... but I can’t deny I’m relaxing.

It’s either him or the whiskey, but I have a feeling it’s probably both.

“How are your parents?” I make myself ask. I should ask, right? It’s the polite thing to do.

That, and I’ve inexplicably missed them. Jake’s family was always so much more... supportive than my own. Always sweet and kind, and yes, they had problems, some big and some silly, but they loved each other. Always.

I never once felt weird around them or judged. I was just Jake’s girl, and they only ever wanted the best for both of us.

And then I broke up with him, and he moved out join to his new team and I moved to Philly and the family that was such a huge part of my life for three years was gone.

My throat feels tight.

“Mozzarella?” he asks, and I open up the fridge, the whiskey glass still in hand, and quickly locate the cheese. Jake was always neat, much neater than me, and it makes me grin to see that hasn’t changed. There’s a set of jars full of fresh herbs on the top shelf of the fridge, and I hum to myself as I pull out the basil and set it on the counter.

“The dough needs a bit to rise,” he says, wiping his hands on a blue and white kitchen towel. “We could... play that farming game you like.”

“Used to like,” I correct, even though, yes, I have been known to indulge in some Honeygrove Village as recently as last weekend.

“Oh? You didn’t download the update with the new tropical island expansion?” He quirks an eyebrow, and I nearly fold like a kid’s paper plane.

“Mmm,” I say. “It sounds like you did.”

“I didn’t, I just saw it and wondered if you had.”

His words hit me like a ton of bricks, and I can’t help but watch the small expressions flicker over his face. Hope and frustration and something else I can’t name, all competing for space.

“I... I don’t know what to say to that,” I shake my head.

“I know.” He shakes his head too, and this time, there’s just one emotion. Regret. “I know what you told me at the Beaver Ball, and I fully intended to respect what you want. I didn’t know that was you in the ditch. But...” He steps close, and my heart pounds so loud I can hear it in my ears, a drumbeat. “I’m still glad you’re safe, and I’m glad you’re here.”

His earnest, warm brown eyes flicker to my mouth, and just like that, all I can remember is how well we fit together when his lips are on mine.

“Thanks,” I say, and I take a step back, holding the glass of whiskey to my chest like it’s some kind of armor. “Whiskey?” I tilt my head.

Two syllables have never seemed like such a volatile combination.

Or maybe it's the two of us that are the dangerous ones.

He nods, his eyes dark, then flicks a clean towel across the bowl full of dough now rising on the counter. It's gray outside, a gray and white palette of snow and heavy, thick clouds, and even though I get the vague impression of trees beyond the heavy drifting white, I can't see them.

"It's really coming down out there," I say, then wince because what the hell? Great conversation. A-plus conversation skills.

"You think it will be as bad as they're saying?" he asks, stepping beside me and jerking his chin at the two voices still reporting the weather from his phone.

"Yeah." I turn to him, biting my lower lip, just as he grabs his own glass from the cupboard beside us and pours himself some whiskey. "I can call an Uber. I really am fine, and I don't want to overstay my welcome."

He blinks, then steps closer. "Absolutely fucking not." His hand splays on the counter beside me, and my gaze drops to it.

It's different than it was in college, bigger, and a new scar stands out along the edge of his wrist. It's still his hand though, and he's still him.

"I'm sorry," I choke out. Maybe it's the whiskey, maybe it's the sudden exhaustion tugging at me, but regret and sorrow course through me all over again. "I'm sorry I'm putting you ___"

"Don't fucking finish that sentence," he interrupts. "You're here because I want you to be." He opens his mouth again, like he's going to say something else, but then he gives his head a little shake. "You will be fine here until the storm lets up. You're not going to bother me, or put me out. I have a truck full of groceries, with enough food in there for me and you for the next three weeks." His mouth curls in a sheepish smile. "I might have gone a little overboard at the store."

I snort, amusement drowning out the regret. “Sounds familiar.”

“Listen, this is one time I’m glad I bought way more than I needed.”

“Do you need help bringing it in?”

He steps even closer, his other hand landing on the counter on my other side, caging me in between his arms and huge body. When did he get so huge? He’s always been big, an athlete, but now... he’s got the kind of bulk that comes from years of putting his body through things I can hardly imagine.

I stare up at him, entranced, the heat from the whiskey in my belly turning to a different kind of heat—dangerous, molten.

“You’re going to be sore tomorrow,” he says in a low voice, the depth, the husky quality of it making my breath catch. “The doc said you need your rest. Let me take care of you.” His eyes search mine, his attention flicking back and forth between mine like he can’t quite decide where to look.

I know how he feels. I can’t drag my gaze away from him. How is it, after all this time, the air still sizzles between us, every deep inhalation he takes threatening to push our bodies together?

Maybe it’s the whiskey, but it doesn’t seem like such a bad idea.

I forgot what it was like to be the sole focus of Jacob Matthews’ attention.

“You should sit,” he finally says, pushing away from the counter—away from me.

I suck in a breath, willing my heart to slow back down.

“I’ll bring in the groceries, you sit, drink your whiskey, and then we’ll have pizza.”

I don’t argue, I can’t. I mean, I can barely get control over myself. A muscle twitches in his temple as he gives me a long look, then before I can say anything, before I can crack a joke

and lighten the tension spiraling tighter and tighter, he's gone. The front door closes loudly a moment later.

"Fuck," I mutter, stretching my neck. Pain shoots between my shoulders, and I gingerly massage one. It's definitely going to hurt worse tomorrow. I eye the whiskey bottle and the amber liquid in my glass, but I'm already tipsy.

Bathroom. I should go splash some more water on my face and try to clean myself up.

Yes. That's a plan.

A better plan than getting completely pissed on Jake's whiskey and kissing him.

Seriously, was I *seriously* thinking about kissing him?

"Argh," I mutter, pulling my shoes off and dumping them on the floor next to one of the backdoors in the kitchen-dining area.

Jacob's house is... well, it's a hell of a step up from my rodent-infested apartment that my landlord refuses to repair.

The floor-to-ceiling windows look out on a gorgeous pool, or from what I can tell through the snow, what is likely a gorgeous pool in the summer. There's a huge stone fireplace back there too, but that's about all I can see through the storm. Snow's already piling in drifts along the patio, and I tear my gaze away from it, set on finding the bathroom.

There's a door in the kitchen and I scrunch my lips to the side as I open it, but it's a huge pantry.

I gawk at it.

Damn. Jacob's really stepped up his organizational tendencies. Everything is in a basket, everything is labeled, and everything looks like he took a ruler and level to it in some kind of perfectionist moment.

I resist the urge to mess it up just to see if he notices and close the door. I wander out of the kitchen, down a hallway lined with black and white family photos, smiling at one of him and Ty as kids, both in pads and helmets.

So freaking cute.

I open another door, but this one shows an immaculate guest room, the bed made up in grays and sea-glass greens and blues, a huge window overlooking more snowy gardens. A light turns on automatically as I walk inside, unable to keep from snooping. It has to be a guest room, right? It's too clean.

No way is it anything else.

It's so pretty, the blue-green tones some of my favorite colors, the heavy dark wood furniture contrasting with the lighter fabric colors. There's something familiar and homey about it, and if I have to be laid up here for a few days, I literally could not ask for better digs.

A double French door leads to a bathroom, and I sigh in relief as I make a beeline for the toilet. God, how long have I been holding it? Through two interviews and a road trip from hell, that's for sure.

I'm feeling better, more myself, as I go to wash my hands... that is, until I look in the mirror.

"Holy shit," I moan, pressing careful fingers to my cheek. They're red and swollen from the airbag, my entire neck and collarbone already bruised from where the seatbelt slammed into me. My mascara and eye makeup has straight-up run all the way down my face, and frankly, I look horrific.

No wonder Jacob's been losing his shit—if I knew I looked this bad I'd have been losing my shit, too.

All of a sudden, all I want to do is shower. I want to wash my makeup off, I want to wash off the evidence of this day, I want to get clean and warm and put on something cozy and snarf pizza like my life depends on it. My brain's fuzzy from whiskey and now that I've seen the damage my stupid one-car accident left on my skin, everything hurts.

I sniffle, determined not to cry but feeling sorry for myself all the same.

And grateful.

It could have been so, so much worse.

Without a second thought, I strip off my clothes, turning and staring at the massive walk-in shower that takes up the majority of the bathroom. Weird for a guest bathroom, but I guess when you're a pro athlete making bank you can pretty much do whatever you want.

Hell, I'm not going to complain about it.

I turn on the faucet, and the hot water quickly starts steaming up the bathroom while I stupidly shiver on the cold tile floor.

As soon as I figure out how to get the temperature just right, water flowing in a torrential stream from the giant rainfall shower head, I step inside.

"Good god," I moan. The pressure is incredible, so much better than the ridiculous trickle in my shitty apartment, and I stand there in awe and rapture, letting the water pound between my shoulders, right where it's starting to get tight and sore.

The shower's stocked, too, label-less bottles attached to the pretty tiled walls, and I pump something into my hand then sniff it experimentally, catching notes of lemon and something herbal. If I bothered to cook, I might know what the hell it is I'm smelling, but considering I spend all my time either hanging with Kelsey or working, all I know is that I like it.

I frown at the glob in my hand.

Well, I used to spend most of my free time with Kelsey, but since she's fallen in love with Daniel Harrison, I hardly ever see her.

Water droplets run down the shower walls in glittering rivulets.

My life is a fucking mess.

When did I start getting out of bed for work, and for work alone?

A scream threatens to erupt from my throat, but I clamp my lips shut and squeeze my eyes tight.

It's been a bad few months, yes. But is it that bad? Or am I just... freaking out after landing in a ditch?

I rub the soap all over my body, hissing in surprise as I press too hard on my ribs. Sure enough, dark color has bloomed there, a diagonal line across my chest and another bruise mottling my hip.

Carefully, I finish showering, pleased to find that Jacob actually stocks conditioner in the guest bath, too. Sighing reluctantly, I turn the faucet off, then wrap myself up like a squashed burrito in one of the ultra-soft towels next to the shower. Another towel goes in my hair, and I'm starting to relax, the whiskey and steamy air doing the majority of the heavy lifting.

It's certainly not thanks to my fucked up mental state.

Knuckles rap twice on the door, and when I look up, sluggish and tired, Jacob's leaning against the doorway to the bathroom, an ineffable look on his face.

"There's some arnica cream and antibacterial ointment under the sink you can help yourself to," he says by way of greeting.

I swallow hard, all too aware of the fact that I'm naked under the towels.

"You keep your guest bath well-stocked," I manage. "Sorry for showering in here, I just... I needed to get clean."

"You look... better," he says, then coughs. "And it's well-stocked because it's not the guest room. This is my room."

My eyes go wide. "Oh. Oh, no, I didn't mean to, I thought it was a guest room, I am so—"

He lets out a throaty laugh, and I clam up as he steps closer. The towel's slipping from my chest, and I tug at it, feeling kind of drunk and too out of it to figure out why this news—that this is *his* room—is completely disconcerting.

"Let me get you something clean to put on." With that, he disappears, half-closing the French doors behind him.

God.

I took a shower in his shower. I admired his bed.

His bed, made up in my favorite colors.

Does he know that?

No, no way. I'm sure some designer picked it all out. The house has that look—like someone was paid a lot of money to decorate it.

I make my way over to the sinks, opening up the cabinet underneath. Labeled plastic crates in perfect alignment fill the space, and I pull the one out labeled 'first aid,' grunting as pain slides through me at the motion.

"Let me do it." Jacob gently tugs the container from me. "You sit."

"I didn't realize you were in here," I say, knowing I should be slightly alarmed at how I slur the words, but beyond caring.

"I would give you ibuprofen, but I know better than to mix alcohol with that," he says, shaking his head. "How much whiskey did you have while I was making the dough?"

"Enough," I tell him, cringing slightly. "Is that the pizza I smell?" It smells like my memories of him and me, cuddled up on his second- or third-hand couch in his apartment.

It smells like comfort and nostalgia.

He nods. "It's in the oven. Should be done any second. You were showering for a while."

"Really?"

"Yeah, that's why I came in here. I was worried." He bites off the word, and it hits me then, how worried he really is about me.

"Why?" I ask, plopping down on the floor. The towel around my chest hikes up a little, and Jacob sucks in a breath, his attention going to the swath of my thigh.

"My legs are really hairy," I tell him. "I haven't shaved in a month. What's the point?" I shrug one shoulder, then regret it.

“You know it never bothered me,” he says, his voice low, seductive.

Or maybe that’s the whiskey telling me he’s being seductive.

“I loved that about you,” I say on a sigh.

He goes still, his wide shoulders tense.

“Sorry,” I say meekly. “You don’t have to help me. I can put the cream on—”

My words stop as he turns back towards me, a challenge in his eyes. “I’m not about to let you try to wrangle this between your shoulder blades. The doctor told me to make sure you rest. I always listen to doctors.”

“Right,” I squeak. Anticipation builds in my stomach, and he flicks the lid open with his fingers, never taking his eyes off me.

Jesus. Jacob... he never looked at me like that.

This isn’t my college boyfriend staring me down, heat building between us. Nope. This is a full-grown man with a body that’s a freaking work of art, and even though I thought I knew Jacob, knew him inside out, it startles me to realize that I might not know this man.

And we’re snowed in together.

CHAPTER 4



JACOB

Cameron Brooks, naked save for a towel, is sitting on my bathroom floor, her chin turned up to me, lips slightly parted, the way she used to look at me when she wanted to give me a good luck kiss before the big game.

Fuck me.

I clear my throat, and the timer on my watch goes off.

“Pizza?” Cam asks, her voice husky. God, I know that tone. That’s how she used to sound right before I made her come, and my dick automatically gets hard.

“It can wait.” Slowly, I crouch down behind her, the anticipation of touching her nearly fucking killing me. My hands meet her shoulders, and I rub small circles, trying to work the pain-numbing cream in where I suspect she’ll feel the worst tomorrow.

She gasps, but it’s not the sexy sound I want, not the one I remember. No, it’s a hiss of pain, and I immediately pull away, sick to my stomach at the thought of hurting her.

“I’m sorry,” I say, and the alarm on my watch goes off again.

“Go get the pizza,” she manages to say between gritted teeth. “I’ll do this as best I can.”

“Okay,” I tell her. What the hell was I thinking, trying to massage her? “There are sweats in the bottom—”

“Drawer of your dresser,” she finishes, raising an eyebrow at me as I circle back around. Her poor face is blotchy and red from the airbag, and I make a mental note to find something to help soothe her skin.

“You remember?” I ask, bizarrely pleased that the detail of where I store my sweats has been filed away in her brain all these years, taking up residence.

Just like she’s lived in my memories.

“You’ve changed, Jacob Matthews,” she says quietly, her mouth a tight line. “But I figured you were too much a creature of habit to change where you put your comfy clothes.”

“Right,” I say, then straighten up. “I should leave.”

“No one wants a burnt pizza,” she says.

“Right,” I say again. That’s not it though.

If I don’t leave my nearly naked ex-girlfriend right now, I’m going to do something stupid I’m sure we’ll both regret.

I might not have ever gotten over Cameron, not really—but I’m not about to let her break my heart again. I’ll take care of her for the next... fuck, however long we’re stuck here together, because it’s what anyone would do, and I don’t want her to get hurt worse by trying to leave.

The mere thought of it makes my skin crawl.

Nope.

No way in hell is she going out in this storm, over my dead body. Heaving a sigh, I make my way into the kitchen, where the smell of baking bread and cheese overpowers the lingering scent of my shampoo on Cameron.

I pull the pizzas out of the oven, one margherita, the way she likes it, the basil crisp and green on top, and the other topped with as much greasy pepperoni as pizza-ly possible.

More whiskey.

That’s what I need to deal with this.

Another generous pour’s nearly disappeared from my glass by the time Cameron pads quietly into the kitchen, her hair in a damp braid over one shoulder, darkening the white fabric of the Beavers shirt she threw on, my sweatpants rolled to within an inch of their life and still hanging off of her.

She’s so fucking beautiful.

“What?” she asks, a hint of a smile on her face.

“Your cheek looks better,” I say, cursing myself for staring at her.

“Oh,” she says, nearly touching it but stopping at the last second. “Yeah, I put some Neosporin on the cuts. Weird, huh? I know the airbag kept me from getting hurt, but I didn’t realize it was going to cut my face up.”

She grabs the bottle of whiskey, and I let her, knowing what a lightweight she is but unwilling to tell her to stop. I’m not responsible for her hangover, and if it’s going to help her muscles relax...

“You should drink some water,” I grunt.

“Good point,” she says amicably. “I should.”

I’m already finding a cup for her, a Yeti in her favorite color, robin’s egg blue. I bought it reflexively, the way I used to grab things for her in that color when we were dating without even thinking about it.

Ice clinks into the metal interior, and I hear Cameron behind me, riffling through drawers.

“By the sink,” I tell her, sure she’s looking for the pizza cutter.

“Got it,” she says, and then falls silent again.

It should be awkward, having her in my kitchen, wet and in my clothes, knowing exactly what she’s looking through my cabinets for.

“Oh,” she says when I hand her the cup of water.

“I still...” How do I tell her that I still buy shit when it’s this color I know she’s obsessed with? That I’m not even aware of it until I get home and realize it. That I fall asleep every fucking night on a bed that reminds me of her.

“I still think you should drink it all,” I say gruffly.

Cameron’s sliced the pizza up into neat triangles, and two plates sit next to the pans full of steaming pie, waiting to be filled.

“Thank you,” she says, then tilts her head. A piece of damp hair falls out of the loose braid, caressing her cheekbone, making me jealous. “I don’t think I said thank you enough... before. When we were... together. You were a good boyfriend.”

I don’t know what to fucking say to that, so I don’t say anything. I put a few slices on my plate, then grab the bottle of whiskey and my glass in one hand, heading to the oversized dining table the interior decorator said would be perfect for hosting parties.

Yeah, hosting parties, and besides my parents, I think Cameron is the only person I’ve brought back to my house in the three years I’ve lived in it.

Ty brought back plenty of people for both of us.

We eat in silence, and then both of our phones vibrate at the same time.

“Inclement weather warning,” Cameron reads. “ELCON customers are reporting widespread outages—”

No sooner has she said the words than the room goes completely dark, the chandelier losing power.

“Oh, shit,” Cameron says, and I’m not imagining the real fear in her voice.

“Don’t worry,” I tell her, then take another bite.

“Don’t worry? You live in the middle of nowhere and we just lost power during a blizzard.”

The power kicks back on noisily, and I grin at her through my mouthful of pepperoni pizza.

“You have a generator,” she says slowly, then pours herself some more whiskey, shaking her head. “I should have known.”

“Hard-wired. For emergencies just like this one.”

“You’re very smug about it.”

“You know I love being right. Ty thought it was overkill.”

She snorts, and I breathe a little easier when she finally takes a huge bite of pizza. We watch each other chew in silence, well, silence other than the sound of the heater working overtime.

“I do know that,” she says. “You were right about a lot.”

I freeze, pizza halfway to my mouth. “What do you mean?”

Is she about to tell me I was right when I said letting her go was going to be the worst mistake of my life? When I said it might be her biggest regret, too?

“About the generator, and having me stay with you here. Have you had to use it before?”

Oh.

“Nope. Doesn’t mean I can’t be pleased with myself now.”

She laughs, and god, it’s like a balm to my soul.

“Cheers to being smug and right,” she says, holding up her glass.

I clink mine against it, the whiskey painting the glass gold.

She swigs hers, not even blinking as her throat works.

Uh-huh. I remember that reaction. Cameron is well on her way to being drunk.

“What are you smug and right about?”

“Abso-fucking-lutely nothing,” she tells me, grinning. “I am fucking miserable.”

“Aaaand that’s my sign to cut you off,” I tell her, laughing to cover up my dismay at her admission. “Eat your pizza and drink your water.”

She sticks her tongue out at me, but listens, thank fuck, pushing her drink away and guzzling some water.

“So, is there anyone waiting for you? A roommate?” I stop myself before I ask if she has a boyfriend, but she gives me a sly look between bites of pizza. Busted.

“Besides the rats that hang out in my walls? No. They’re probably running all over the place now, having a grand rat party.”

She says it totally off-hand, with the air of a joke, but there’s a clear current of frustration beneath it.

“You have rats... at your apartment?” I find it hard to believe she wouldn’t be raising hell with her landlord, with city officials, with anyone who would listen.

“It’s a total dream of a living situation. Dream, nightmare, either, or.” She shrugs a shoulder, and then takes a long drink of water. “Feels like it’s time to wake up, either way.”

I raise my eyebrows, trying to make sense of what she’s saying. Cameron reaches up, wincing as she rubs one shoulder.

“What about you? Are you living the dream?” she asks, and there’s a bitter tinge to the question.

“I love playing football,” I tell her, crossing my arms over my chest. “This is all I worked for for so long.”

“Same with me and reporting.”

Icy snow is clinking against the windows again as we stare at each other across the table, as if we’re daring each other to admit how we both really feel.

I’m not drunk enough for that shit.

No way am I going to offer her the keys to my heart again, no matter how much it hurts to look at her and see her unhappiness plainly written across her face.

I did what I needed to do for her today, I did right by the love we used to share.

That doesn’t mean I need to reopen... everything between us.

That’s how you get hurt.

“Hey...” she says slowly, her forehead crinkling up. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” I lie.

“Bullshit,” she says, pointing a finger gun at me across the table. “I recognize that look, and you haven’t gotten any better at hiding your thoughts.”

“I’m proud of what I’ve accomplished,” I tell her.

To my utter relief, her phone vibrates across the table, but when she reaches for it, her slim shoulder slips through the cut-through neck hole of my old shirt.

Relief at the interruption turns to something else, a painful yearning that makes my whole chest ache.

That, or maybe I ate my pizza too fast.

“Hi, yeah. Yep,” Cameron says into her phone, her expression shuttering. “No, I didn’t. You want to know why?”

She goes silent, and I hear a male voice, loud on the other end of the conversation.

“Right, but here’s the thing—”

I raise an eyebrow as she’s interrupted again, the man’s voice growing loud enough for me to make out him saying *your job* and *or else*.

“There’s a fucking blizzard, you asshole,” Cameron yells back at the phone. “Should I put on snowshoes? Should I, oh, I don’t know, go get my car that I wrecked in a ditch somewhere following up on your shitty leads and strap a horse to it and hope I can jingle all the way to a story?”

The phone’s silent.

“This conversation is over. I got in a wreck, I’m hurt, and I’m not listening to any more of this,” Cameron finally says. With that, she smashes her finger on the end call button, then sets her phone down on the table in a deceptively calm manner.

She’s not calm. She’s furious, her nostrils flaring slightly as she stares at her phone like it’s a venomous snake.

“So you are hurt?” I ask slowly.

“No, not like that.” She waves a hand dismissively, scowling. “I’m sore, yes, for sure, despite the whiskey

analgesic, which doesn't bode well for tomorrow."

"Analgesic?" I repeat, unable to keep the small smile off my face. "This is why I never played Scrabble with you. Was that your boss?"

Cameron's always been a spitfire, but that was unlike her.

"He's a fucking asshole," she says, then aggressively bites into her pizza again. "You got a problem with the way I talked to him?"

"No. I think if he expected you to do anything but stay safe in this storm, then he is definitely a fucking asshole."

"Unlubed," she adds, right as I'm taking a sip of my whiskey.

I nearly spit it out, but manage not to spray alcohol everywhere at the last second. "What?"

"An unlubed fucking asshole. Dry and tight."

I stare at her. "Are you drunk?"

"Maybe. Fuck it. Fuck him, fuck my job, and my stupid apartment, and my whole entire life."

I open my mouth to tell her to drink more water, but she does it without prompting, her chin wobbling again.

"Ticket to Ride," I say suddenly.

"Huh?" she blinks at me, then drinks some more water.

"We're snowed in; we're playing Ticket to Ride. That always..." I stop myself from saying that board games and competing always took her mind off shitty stuff in the past. Like her parents, or when she didn't do as well as she wanted on a term paper or exam.

If Ticket to Ride doesn't help, then I don't know what will. I haven't played it in years, but I know I still have it.

I may not want to get hurt by her again, but I don't want to see her hurting either.

I don't want to see it, and I don't want her to be hurt, either.

“I can’t fix your problems, but I can certainly whoop your ass at Ticket to Ride,” I tell her.

“Oh, is that right? Is that right? You think you’re going to kick my ass? Big talk for a player on the worst football team in the league.”

“I’m not doing too bad for myself,” I say mildly, and she glances around the house, her pissed off expression slowly melting. “Just because the team I’m on now isn’t great doesn’t mean shit about me. Just means they got first pick at trades.” I grin at her, because that’s exactly how I ended up here.

“No,” she says on a sigh. “No, you’re not. If our lives were a competition, you’d be winning.”

“Cam, that’s not what I—”

Her phone vibrates again, and this time, I recognize the name that flashes across the screen with an incoming message.

Kelsey Cole.

“Okay, if you want to develop a complex about how bad you are at railroad building strategy, I’m more than happy to give you one,” she says. “Let me just text Kelsey back and let her know I’m okay.”

“I’m glad you’ve got someone to check up on you,” I say quietly, standing up with my empty plate in hand.

“Yeah, because my family’s a joke? Me too.” She’s tapping away at her screen, hardly noticing me still staring at her.

I didn’t mean it like that, or at least I didn’t mean for her to take it like that.

But there never was any bullshitting Cameron. That’s one of the reasons I fell in love with her.

CHAPTER 5



CAMERON

“I drank too much.” I sniff, staring at my rainbow collection of cards, unable to decide how the hell I’m going to finish my Dallas to New York railway route. “We could have just watched Netflix—” I stop myself from saying any more.

It’s too late though.

I can tell from the way a red flush rises in Jacob’s face that he’s thinking about the same thing I am—the first night we got together, when we went back to his apartment and then laughed all night about how we were *actually* Netflix and chilling.

His Adam’s apple bobs in his throat, and then he finishes his glass of whiskey, pouring himself some more.

“How come you get more?” I make myself ask, trying to break the tension between us.

“Because I didn’t drive my car into a ditch today,” he retorts. “Are you going to play, or are you just going to whine about how you want to get even more drunk?”

I glare at him, then throw down a killer streak of green and pink train cards, finishing a key route and effectively blocking him off from the Carolinas. “Fuck you,” I tell him gleefully, placing train after train. “And I’m not drunk, I’m sandbagging.”

He snorts, a glimmer of his competitive spirit flaring to life in his eyes.

I swallow hard, unable to look away from him. I loved that about him—loved how he never backed down, never said no to a dare or a challenge.

I’m not sure that’s in past tense, either.

Now, he moves his plastic group of trains a microscopic amount, until they’re all perfectly aligned.

I jostle the coffee table with my foot—at least, I try to, but it's heavy as hell and all I manage to succeed in is hurting my toe.

“Don't think I don't know exactly what you're doing,” he huffs. “You think you can derail me by messing up my trains?”

“That's exactly what I think,” I say, smirking and ignoring the dull ache in my big toe. I nudge one of his trains slightly off his route from Seattle to Vancouver, then grin at him. “Oh no. Now you've been literally derailed.”

Jacob lets out a long-suffering sigh, then pokes his plastic game piece until it's back on track. “You have to resort to acting like a teenager because you know, deep down inside, you can't beat me without engaging in psychological warfare.”

“Engaging in psychological warfare?” A loud laugh barks out of me, and I pick up my glass, tilting it towards him. “Is that what I'm doing? You're so dramatic. Please!”

“I'm not dramatic. I'm honest.” He nods gravely, then sets down a set of matching cards, along with several rainbow trains. I grit my teeth. Damn it. I'm not sure I'm going to win.

I don't like that. I frown, and then I glance up at him because I can feel his stare on my skin, just like sunshine on a winter's day.

Jacob grins at me, his whole face lighting up with it.

All of a sudden, winning doesn't matter as much as it did a few seconds ago.

My breath catches slightly. How did I forget what it's like to be with him? How did I forget what that smile does to me?

“Your turn,” he says, all arrogance.

“You're going to regret that,” I tell him, trying to shake the strange mixture of regret and want threading through me.

“Is that right? Are you going to make me?” He's still grinning and smug, and god, he looks freaking delicious. “You think you can use all your trains first?”

“Oh, you know I always come first,” I say, then immediately regret the double entendre.

“Only when I want you to,” he growls, his knuckles turning white on his train cards.

“Like you could stop me.” I toss my hair, which I’m sure looks completely wild, considering it’s been drying in a braid for the past hour.

Jacob doesn’t respond, not out loud, but his eyes?

They’re scorching, and I can’t hold his gaze—it turns me hot all over, promising something I don’t know if I want.

I might, though.

I might want to see if things with Jacob are as hot as they used to be.

Maybe I’m just tipsy. Maybe I’m stupid, maybe I’m in the middle of some kind of not-midlife crisis, but... having sex with Jacob suddenly seems like a really, really great way to spend our time.

And take my mind off the fact that my entire life feels like it’s fucking imploding.

“What?” he asks, suspicion tinging the word.

“What do you mean, what?” I ask, as innocently as possible.

“You have a look.”

“Just planning your railroad baron demise.” *And to bone you*, I think.

“In your fucking dreams,” he retorts, pulling a few more cards off the top of the pile. “You know, I have a whole shelf of games in the basement. Along with a pretty sick video game set up, if you want me to spank your ass at Madden later.”

“Mmm, you would love that, wouldn’t you?” I ask airily. “Spanking my ass?”

Jacob flushes, his eyes darkening, and I just smile at him.

“Your distraction techniques don’t work on me anymore.” There’s not a hint of a joke in his voice, the playfulness gone.

I draw a few cards, knowing all too well I’ve only succeeded in distracting myself.

“I’m out,” Jacob yells triumphantly, slamming down his last few trains and closing up his route to Vancouver. He jumps to his feet, and I can’t help laughing, his enthusiasm contagious as he does one of his patented touchdown dances.

I snort, sighing as I realize I’ve been dominated in the board game department.

“Sucks to suck, loser.” He shimmies again, and I can’t even pretend to be mad.

“You’re a horrible dancer,” I tell him.

“You’re a liar. You love the way I move my hips.” He puts a hand on one hip, body rolling.

My throat constricts and I cough, grabbing for my drink.

“Madden?” He raises an eyebrow, carefully putting all the game pieces back in the box. “Or are you afraid you’re going to lose to me again?”

“Halo,” I respond. “I don’t think I can take seeing you perform that same dance virtually. Might make me a little sick.” I pretend to retch, and he glares at me.

“I have the new one,” he says. “You want to do the campaign?”

“I haven’t played video games in ages.”

“Oh yeah? Besides the new expansion pack for Honeygrove Valley? How did you like that mine on the tropical island? I wiped like ten times.”

“Oh my god, it was such a pain in the ass,” I say, rubbing my forehead. “I died so many times, and then I lost all the fucking sapphires I’d mined. I nearly threw my—”

He’s laughing, his eyebrows raised, and I clamp my mouth shut, but it’s too late.

“You’re such a liar. I knew you were still playing it.”

I purse my lips, then pour myself another few inches of whiskey in my empty glass, ignoring the scathing look Jacob’s aiming my way.

“Why did you lie about it?” he presses.

“I don’t know,” I blurt out. “I don’t know why I’m doing half the things in my life, okay? I’m just doing them. Ugh.”

His mouth twists to the side, and he offers me a hand, helping me up from the plush carpeted floor. “Well, it sounds like the perfect time to kill some aliens. You ready to blow them to bits? Little virtual anger therapy?”

“Fuck yeah,” I say. “Unless we can romance them.”

He blinks at me. “What?”

“What?” I repeat innocently.

“You’re wasted,” he accuses, but his booming laughter afterward takes the edge off.

“I am definitely not sober,” I agree in a sing-song voice. “But you know what? Maybe that’ll help keep me limber for tomorrow. You know, so I don’t have such terrible whiplash.”

“That’s so not how that works,” he says, turning around to stack a few dishes in the sink.

I immediately sink into a middle split, which, if I’m being entirely honest, is nowhere near the flexibility level I had back in college when this was my go-to party trick. *That’s gonna hurt tomorrow.*

“I swear to god, Cameron, if you’re in a split when I turn around—” he groans.

I stretch my legs out to the side, rolling my hips as I put my chin in my hands. “What? Whatcha gonna do, Jacob?”

He glances over his shoulder, and his entire expression shuts down. “Fucking hell, Cam. Get your ass downstairs.” With that, he storms to the basement, and I let myself have a little pout, as a treat, just for old times’ sake.

He used to think it was hilarious and sexy when I randomly dropped into a split.

Of course, that's when he used to tell me he loved me every morning, kissing my eyelids and cheeks to wake me up.

I'm an idiot.

And, as I manage to untangle myself and stand up, I know I'm going to be extra sore tomorrow.

I limp to the door Jacob's left wide open, trying to shake off the tightness as I grip the stair rail and make my way into his decked out basement.

Great. Whiplash, a broken hip, probably a hangover, and a pissed off ex-boyfriend on top of a boss threatening my entire career.

Just what I fucking needed.

What the hell is wrong with me lately?

CHAPTER 6



JACOB

By the time I find the newest version of Infinite Alien Realms, still shrink wrapped in plastic, never been played, it's late. Really late. Cameron's investigating the basement, a look of pure wonder on her face as she roams around, opening up cabinets in my bar and playing with the jukebox, her whiskey in hand.

"Is that an old Pacman?" she asks. "Does it work?"

"Yeah," I say, slightly embarrassed she's found it. I pop the game in the console, the projector whirring quietly overhead as it displays the game on the huge screen on the wall.

"I always wanted one of these."

I rub the back of my neck.

I know she always wanted one. Anytime we went out and there was a Pacman arcade game, Cameron would squeal and insist on playing until she got too hungry or bored, and then tell me how much she loved playing with her dad.

Until he left her with her shitty mom when she was ten.

It was one of her few good memories of him, and I remember all of it all too well. When I saw an advertisement for the Pacman game, I couldn't resist buying it.

I always wondered if Cameron would ever see it.

Shit. *Shit.*

Cameron runs reverent hands over the old machine as I watch her out of the corner of my eye, and I know I'm fucking lost for her all over again. Trying to keep my emotions safe while Cameron is around is never going to work, and all it took for me to remember how much of a hold she has on me was her dropping into her stupid split trick and seeing the Pacman machine I bought because I knew she'd love it.

I'm not in danger of her breaking my heart again because I'll never fucking stop loving her.

“What’s wrong?” she asks, plopping onto the couch and smiling at me. “You look all pissy.”

“You look gorgeous,” I tell her.

Cam blinks in surprise. “Huh?”

“But you’ll look even better with one of these.” I hand her a controller, and she barks out a laugh.

“Here I was, thinking you were hitting on me.”

“Nah, you’ll know it when I’m hitting on you.”

“Is that right?” she asks archly, then shivers.

Automatically, I reach behind me, pulling the soft throw off the couch and putting it over her legs.

“Thanks, Jake,” she says softly, her eyes wide and bright. Hopeful.

“Of course. Doc told me to keep you warm.” It comes out gruffer than I meant it to. Fuck. I don’t know what to do with Cameron. I don’t know what to do with myself. I don’t know what I want.

All I know is that the woman of my dreams, the only woman I’ve ever really wanted, is sitting next to me on my couch, looking tired and adorable.

“Let’s massacre some aliens in the name of mankind,” I tell her seriously.

“Hell yeah.”

“Water?” I ask her. “Hydration is key for physical exertion.”

“So is protection,” she says, fluttering her lashes.

“What?”

“Armor? Duh.” A sly grin tugs the corner of her mouth up, though, and I don’t think for a minute that she’s actually talking about the game.

I don’t know what to make of her right now. Drinking used to make her seriously flirty.

That's probably all this is.

If I want a second chance with Cameron, I need to take it slow. That means not buying into any of her drunken silliness.

It means making her remember all the ways we were fucking great with each other.

I know I haven't forgotten. Not for a second. I've spent the past few years thinking it was a curse, that the hold Cameron has over me was something bad, something to get over.

The opening screen flashes, and I select the multiplayer campaign mode, Cameron wriggling deeper into her blanket beside me. The basement's always cooler than the rest of the house, and I make a mental note to bring a heating pad down here for her.

I don't know what's going to happen over the next week or however long we're snowed in, but I have an idea of what I want to happen.

Cameron is mine.

Always has been, always will be.

I'm a goal-oriented guy, and satisfaction rolls through me in a heady wave as I set my sights on my newest goal:

Make Cameron fall back in love with me. Prove that I'm the one for her.

I already know she's the one for me.

"Prepare to die, alien invader scum," she shrieks as the introductory cut scene flashes a view of the aforementioned alien invader scum.

I laugh and it makes me feel lighter before we both fall silent, watching the opening video premise roll across the screen. The campaign begins, aliens popping out from every possible nook and cranny in an abandoned space station, and Cameron's character immediately dies.

I turn to razz her, but my laughter dies on my lips.

She's asleep, her head tilted back against the couch, her controller hanging limply from one hand. I stare at her for a

long moment.

God, she looks young like this, looks so much like the hilarious, outgoing girl who picked me for her team during a freshman orientation event. The worry and stress that lined her face when she got here has disappeared, her breathing deep and even.

I switch the game off, putting on an old favorite movie of mine, and decide not to move her, letting her sleep as long as possible. I'll wake her up when I go to bed, too.

Until then, I'll watch my movie and watch her beautiful face, eyelids fluttering, as she sleeps.

CHAPTER 7



CAMERON

My neck hurts. I stretch, warm and fuzzy despite the pain, a slight headache starting behind my eyes.

I slept better than I have in years. My hands reach further overhead, and I roll onto my back.

At least, I try to.

There's something big and warm in the way.

My eyes fly open, and that weighted blanket I thought was smothering me?

Oh god.

It's not a weighted blanket at all.

It's Jacob, his arms slung around me, his lips parted in sleep, and nostalgia tows me under. Memories of Jacob and I under the threadbare sheets of his bed, daylight filtering through white, casting him in warm colors, softening his jawline. The way he held me close and told me I was beautiful, told me I was everything.

I loved him.

I loved him so much.

Then I gave him up, chasing a dream that's never turned into anything but one of those half-awake nightmares I can't quite seem to escape from.

Emotion closes my throat up, and his fingers rub my back, just like they used to all those years ago, a habit of his own half-sleep.

I missed it.

I missed waking up to him; I missed feeling warm and safe in his arms.

"Hey," he says, his voice rough, his long brown lashes slowly moving as he blinks sleepily at me. "Sorry. I was afraid to move you last night. Thought you needed the sleep."

“Hi,” I manage. It comes out thick, and I clear my throat, hoping he chalks it up to being half awake. “I should move, huh?”

I don't, though, and we both stare at each other for a long moment.

I wonder if he's thinking the same thing I am.

I wonder if he's remembering all the mornings we started like this, in each other's arms, only to end with him inside me and me falling apart around him.

Now I'm just falling apart.

“You hurt?” he asks, concern furrowing his brow. “In pain?”

“Yeah,” I say thickly. It's not a lie, not really. I'm sore, sure, but the pain? The worst of it is in my head and my heart.

He goes stiff, tense, and it takes me a second to realize he's afraid to move. He's afraid to hurt me.

A dry, harsh noise comes from my mouth, an almost laugh, except this isn't funny at all.

I'm the one that hurt us both.

We were never supposed to end up like this.

“What's hurting?” he asks quietly. “How can I move to help you?”

“It's not that,” I make myself say. I can't make myself say the rest, though. I wish I could go back in time, I wish I could fix the thing I shattered between us, I wish I were someone different, someone better, someone less selfish and broken.

It's stupid, though. I can't unbreak this any more than I can fix my own life.

Suddenly, I don't want to think anymore.

I don't want to think about how my life is nothing that I wanted and nothing's turned out the way I thought it would.

He inhales sharply as I move against him. My hand curls against his hip, and his eyes go wide as I push myself up.

I want to kiss him.

I want to kiss him and pretend like that will make me better.

I wriggle up his chest, his hand lands softly on the curve of my back, and desire shoots through me, all mixed up with nostalgia and regret and a deep-seated need to do something that will shut out all the anxiety pinging through my brain.

I need him; in this moment, I need him more than I ever have.

My mouth closes over his, and he exhales, warm breath rushing across my skin as our lips brush.

Gentle hands push against my shoulders, and I open my eyes wide in surprise.

“No,” he says, his voice soft, his expression shuttered.

“No?” I ask, and a hot rush of shame goes through me. “No. Oh, oh my god. Jacob, I’m so sorry.” I brush my tangle of hair from my face, feeling incredibly stupid and incredibly embarrassed and, now that I’m sitting up and untangling myself from his body... incredibly hungover.

“I’m sorry,” I repeat, staring at him in complete horror as I finally manage to get myself off the couch.

Jacob doesn’t say anything though, just watches me through hooded eyes as I stammer another apology, though he finally sits up, too.

“I don’t know what I was think—”

“It’s fine,” he says.

“No,” I shake my head. “It wasn’t fine. None of this is fine. I’m not fine, and I’m tired of pretending like I am.”

He doesn’t say anything, just gives me a look I still know as well as my own face in the mirror. The one that says *I’m listening*.

He shouldn’t have to.

I broke up with him so long ago, and now what? Now... what?

I shake my head. "I think I might be a little drunk still. I shouldn't have tried to—"

"Food," he interrupts gruffly.

"Huh?" I rub my hands down my arms, hugging my chest.

"You need food." His face turns even more serious, and it makes my stomach drop.

"I can eat," I assure him.

"By law," he says slowly, standing up and folding the blanket that covered our bodies in the night, "we're required to eat French toast."

"What?" I huff a surprised laugh. "By law?"

"It's international law," he continues loftily, carefully placing the blanket back on the couch. "When you are snowed in, you must make French toast. Everyone knows this."

"You should apply for a job on talk radio if football doesn't work out." I roll my eyes, but I can't help the small snort of a laugh that comes out.

"Oh, you think football isn't working out?" He raises one eyebrow, then casts his gaze around meaningfully. "Seems like it's working out."

It's so cocky, so Jacob, and so over the top that a smile tugs up my lips. "I'm proud of you."

The words slip out before I can reel them in, and I don't think I imagine the flash of surprise and gratitude in his eyes.

It feels too real, though. Too personal. Like I have any right to be proud of him, like I can claim any part of his accomplishments.

As if waking up together on the couch wasn't already too personal.

I swallow hard, wishing I could put the words back in, wishing I could take back falling asleep with him, trying to

kiss him while half awake and half drunk and all the way sad.

CHAPTER 8



JACOB

Cameron is going to absolutely push my control to the limit. She always did, but I thought I was better now, past that.

Pushing her off me as her lush mouth pressed against mine?

Pretty sure I haven't felt pain like that anywhere but the football field.

Sighing, I flip the French toast, the scent of cinnamon and vanilla floating through the chilly kitchen. Cameron's huddled over the percolating coffee, a blanket tucked around her where she stands, her dark brown hair sticking out at wild angles all over her head.

It shouldn't be so fucking cute.

I flip the next piece of brioche into the egg, milk, and spice mixture, watching it soak it up like a yeasty sponge.

This... having Cameron here, in my house... is the most exquisite torture.

I want her.

Of course I fucking do, it's always been her, and if I thought someday it might not be, I was a fucking idiot.

I am not about to ruin myself for her all over again.

If she wants to kiss me, if she wants me at all, then I'm going to make sure she knows I don't want to get hurt again.

With an expert flick of my wrist, I flip the piece that's done onto the waiting platter and load up the soaked piece, hissing as it hits the hot pan.

I am not squandering this chance with her. I'm not going to let her use me for sexual relief or whatever. It won't be some half-awake sex she regrets five minutes after she gets off.

Nope.

When I make her come again, the only thing she'll regret is all the missed orgasms over the years.

"It smells really good," Cameron says, her eyes huge as she stares up at me, her face half buried in a steaming mug of coffee. "Do you need help?"

What I need help with is the fact I've given myself an even worse case of morning wood than I already had.

I swallow the thought and adjust my pants.

"Coffee would be good," I say instead. "There's syrup in the fridge if you want to set the table, and I bought some fruit too, if you're in the mood for that."

"Yeah, of course. I should have grabbed you some coffee already." Her fingers wrap around one of the mugs, and I watch her from the corner of my eye as she fills it, remembering exactly how much sugar I like in my coffee, and then even remembering to pour just enough milk in, too.

"You remembered." It's stupid, the affection it makes me feel for her, that she knows exactly how I want my coffee, that despite everything, she isn't pretending I'm some stranger.

"Well, yeah. Do you take it black now? Or are you dairy-free or something?" Her mouth twists to the side.

"Perfect," I tell her. I wrap my hand around the mug in hers, our fingertips brushing over the warm surface. "It's perfect."

I don't imagine the way her throat bobs and her eyes widen.

I didn't imagine the sleepy kiss she tried to give me this morning.

And I don't think I'm the only one that misses what we had.

"How long do you think the snow will last?" I ask her.

How long do I have with you? I want to add.

"We could watch the news. Find out for sure." The silverware clinks against the table as she sets it down. Despite

the warmth of the light hanging over the counter, she's painted in cool blues, the winter sun hidden by the heavy blanket of clouds and continual drift of snow.

I turn away from her, adding another piece of eggy bread to the sizzling pan.

"My phone's probably dead or I would check it. I can look on yours while you cook, if you want."

"I put your phone on the charger late last night."

"You have a charger for that thing?" She raises an eyebrow. "Lemme guess, you're still toting around that box full of cords you refuse to go through?"

My lips twist to the side in some combination of a smile and a grimace. "It comes in handy."

"Thank you for charging it. I should have said that first. Sorry."

"Cam, stop apologizing. You don't have to fake it with me," I tell her. "I... missed your sass."

"I'm an asshole." Her voice is tinged with annoyance, but I know—I know—it's not directed at me. She's back at the fridge, pulling a crate of strawberries out and putting them on the counter, and her shoulders heave as she sighs deeply.

"You're not an asshole. You're funny. My box of cords is... slightly out of control."

"Yeah, I am," she interrupts, glaring at me.

It shouldn't be so cute, the way she looks right now, in my clothes that are absurdly oversized on her, her hair all wild and sticking up at strange angles, the knife glinting in her hand as she pulls it out of the knife block.

Her tongue sticks out slightly as she concentrates on washing the berries in the sink, and it's such a fucking familiar look that my heart skips a beat.

"Why do you think you're an asshole?" I force my gaze back to the pan, adding the last piece to what's left of the browned butter. "You never seemed to care before."

“Because I thought I knew what I wanted before. My life isn’t... it hasn’t worked out how... I just am an asshole, okay?”

“Well,” I say slowly. “I happen to love assholes.”

She stops decapitating strawberries and shoots me an incredulous look, a hot pink blush floating across her cheekbones. “Jake!” The note of reprimand in her voice is belied by a faint smile on her lips. “You are unbelievable.”

“You never used to doubt my sincerity on that subject.” *I shouldn’t have said that.*

She looks me full on in the face this time, her eyes narrowed as she studies me. “For someone who didn’t want to kiss me this morning, you sure are full of...”

“Asshole jokes?” I offer.

Cam rolls her eyes at me, then continues chopping strawberries. The French toast in my pan is done, the center firm and the edges nice and crispy, just how I like them.

“Why didn’t you kiss me?” she asks suddenly, and like she so often has, she catches me completely off guard. “Why?”

A split second goes by...

Fuck it.

I turn the burner on the stove off, the house weirdly silent, the quiet amplifying our breathing as I cross the space between us, closing the distance and getting as close to her as I dare.

A muscle jumps in her temple, and my hands fist at my sides from the need to run my fingertips down her forehead.

“Because if I kiss you, Cameron, if I so much as touch you, I’m not going to want to stop there. And I’m not going to do that... I’m not going to open myself up to more pain—not unless you’re sure I’m what you want. Who you want. But if I am? If that’s what you want?” I take a deep breath, raising my hand to hold her in place, to wrap her hair around my fingers, to pull her face to mine—

And drop it.

I don't touch her.

“If that's what you want, then I'm here. I've been here. But if you're just... looking for a distraction, then don't ask me that again. Don't touch me again.” The words are thick and stick in my throat, clogged with an emotion I don't want to name.

I swallow hard against it, and she watches me, unblinking, then nods.

“Okay. I understand.”

For a moment, for the longest fucking second of my life, I think she's going to reach up and hold my face in her hands, the way she used to.

She doesn't, though; she just nods. “I understand.”

My chest gets tight, and I nod too. “Good.” I back up, grabbing the platter of still steaming French toast and set it on the kitchen island counter.

CHAPTER 9



CAMERON

I get why he said it. I get why he doesn't want to kiss me, why he pushed me off of him this morning.

The French toast is delicious—way better than anything I've made for myself for breakfast—and I close my eyes, savoring the flavor and texture.

And also blocking out the fact that I'm embarrassed about... well, everything that's happened between us.

Not just embarrassed, I realize as I swallow.

Jacob's fork clinks against his plate, a barstool between us at the marble countertop. It might as well be a whole continent.

I make myself open my eyes, tilting my neck back and forth as I sip my coffee, trying to loosen up the too-tight muscles. Trying to loosen up my frantic brain, which seems to be stuck on a loop of shame and guilt as I go over and over and over the fact that not only did I try to kiss him, which I could have... brushed off as being half asleep, but then I had to go and ask him, like an idiot, why he didn't kiss me back.

Suddenly, I'm not hungry anymore. I push my chair out from the counter and hop down.

"I need to call my boss," I say, wincing. "I should apologize for being a jerk to him—"

"No, you shouldn't. You should sit down and eat. He is the one who should apologize."

I glare at him, but he keeps eating, a mildly amused expression on his face.

"We don't all have six-figure contracts—"

"Seven-figure."

I stare at him. "Huh?"

"You said six. It's seven." He forks a mouthful of French toast into his mouth, grinning as he chews.

“Grow up,” I roll my eyes.

“I did. And the last time I checked, it seemed like you liked it.”

“For someone who set such a firm boundary about... us,” I swallow the end of the word, “you sure are flirting a lot.”

“Obviously,” he says, then eats another bite.

A frustrated sound comes out of me, and I grab the French toast with my fork and bite a piece off aggressively, still standing on the cold floor. “What do you mean, obviously?”

“What I want, what I’ve always wanted, is you, Cameron. Forever.” He chews slowly, his focus completely homed in on me.

I breathe, careful not to choke, since my cheeks are stuffed like a chipmunk.

“I am going to chalk up you being here now, in my house, to fate. If you just want to relive the past with me, that’s not going to fly. If you want me to make you come like I used to? You’re going to have to be serious about me.”

I blink, chewing as fast as I can, trying to figure out what to say to that.

“Why?” I finally ask. “Why me?”

“Because you’re the only woman I’ve ever loved like that, and you’re the only one I want to.”

“Jake, we’re not the same people we were.” Sadness tugs at me, and I grip the edge of the marble countertop, off-balance. “So much time has passed.”

“I know who you are, Cam. I always have. I don’t want the old you. I don’t need the past. I already have that. I want your present and your future.”

Oh god. I clutch my arms around my body, trying to stop the shiver at the promise in his voice. At his sincerity.

“And you can just forget? Everything that happened between us?”

“I didn’t say that.” He shakes his head, setting his fork down and leaning his elbows on the counter. “I didn’t say I would forget or that I wanted to. Cam, I respect the hell out of you for that choice. You’ve always known what you wanted and gone after it like a dog with a bone. You know I love that about you.”

Not loved. Not past tense.

Love.

Present.

“Jacob,” I say, my voice breaking on his name.

“Cameron,” he says, clearly unbothered by his admission. He takes another bite, chewing slowly.

“That’s like... that’s a lot.” I shake my head. “I thought you... I don’t... after all this time? Still?”

“Take it or leave it. But yeah, that’s why I’m not going to mess around with you. It would never just be messing around for me.” He says it so damn calmly, deceptively normal, like this isn’t the freaking earth-shattering revelation it is.

“When did you get so well-adjusted?”

“Therapy after college.” He grins at me.

“This is so on brand for you.” It’s all I can think of to say. Maybe I should just shut up.

“On brand?”

I shrug one shoulder, then immediately regret it as pain lances across my upper back and neck. “You know,” I finally squeak out, “it’s like, your thing. Your brand. You are Mr. Focus. All in, two-hundred and ten percent all the time.”

“And that applies to people...” he says thoughtfully, then nods. “That sounds about right.”

“It’s not a bad thing.”

“Except when it comes to you.” Jacob sets his fork down, steepling his fingers. “Except when it comes to you,” he

repeats. “Because you don’t want me, do you, Cameron? You aren’t... two-hundred and ten percent in on me.”

I huff, caught between embarrassment and exasperation. “Most people aren’t like you, Jacob. Most people don’t just decide on their life and then,” I slap my palms together, “bam, make it happen.”

“You did. You decided on your life.”

I stare at him, at the smug, self-satisfied hint of a smile turning up one corner of his mouth. “Yeah, and look how it worked out for me.”

“How did it work out for you? You have everything you said you wanted. You have your career. Every time I see you, you’re glittering, lighting up the whole room. Kelsey adores you, and I know Savannah has been grateful for your friendship. What’s so bad about your life?”

I’m miserable.

I want to tell him.

My friends don’t have time for me, my job is hell, and I feel like I’m falling apart more every day. My family, the people you’re supposed to depend on most, the people who are supposed to always be there for you, they’ve never been there.

And now I have no one.

I don’t say it. I keep that truth tucked in so deep that it grows thorns and threatens to shred me from the inside out.

“You’re right,” I tell him. “I have the things I wanted.”

“You miss me.” He raises an eyebrow.

I sigh, raking my fingers through my hair, managing to get them tangled in the knots made from sleeping with it half-wet on a couch.

He raises a hand, and I close my mouth, stopping whatever the hell I was about to say from coming out. “I know you’re going to deny it. But why else would you kiss me? Or try to?”

Shit.

I don't know what to say to that.

“So I'll keep being two-hundred and ten percent in on you, Cam. You've never deserved anything less. And when you decide you're ready to let me love you, you let me know.”

He stands up, unfolding from the counter stool, larger than life, more muscled and bigger than he ever even thought about being in college, and I can't find words.

I always have words.

My whole job is to have the right words.

He's still staring at me, watching me with the stupid, smug half-grin, like he knows I want to tell him he's stupid for still having a thing for me, like it's stupid for him to think we can just... be together again.

It's not that easy.

Nothing is ever easy.

“I'll clean up,” I finally say.

“Great. I need to work out. I'll be in the basement. Phone's plugged in over there. You still want to call your boss, right?”

“No, I really don't.” I shake my head. “But I know I should. Thanks for charging it for me.”

“Help yourself to whatever,” he tells me, and with that, he walks out of the kitchen, moving quietly for such a large man.

I don't think I breathe until I hear the basement door close.

“Fuck me.” It explodes out of me.

Why didn't I tell him he was wrong? Why didn't I tell him that he can't—we can't—fix anything by revisiting the past. What's done is done.

Isn't it?

CHAPTER 10



JACOB

I'm only halfway through my cardio conditioning routine when Cameron walks through the door into my at-home gym.

My heart skips a beat, and it's not from the workout.

I didn't expect to say half the shit, okay, all the shit I said to her this morning, but I'm not sure I can regret it. I meant it, I meant it all.

Better she knows than stays here operating on some kind of false assumption that we could be friends.

I grit my teeth, forcing my attention back to the tread, and raise the incline further.

Friends. Ha.

That's what she told me at the Beaver Ball, six months ago or so. We could be friends. Friends.

I already am her friend. Always. I will always be her friend.

But that's not all I want to be, and I'm not going to fucking pretend, not when she's waking up next to me, her body pressed into mine, her lips a question on my mouth.

I'm not going to be her fuck buddy, if that's what she meant, all serious, trying to keep me from looking at her like she's all I've ever wanted.

Yeah, like she could stop that.

Sweat drips down my back, and I push myself harder, increasing the pace, the music blaring in my AirPods loud enough to drown out the hum of the tread but not loud enough to drown out the sound of my thoughts.

Which all circle back to her.

Why is she down here?

I chance a sidelong glance at her, and she's found a yoga mat that's been rolled up since I bought it. She unfurls it with

an expert flick of her wrists and I stumble on the tread, barking out a curse as I turn the speed down. One of my AirPods falls out, and I grunt in frustration as it tumbles to the floor.

Another stolen look shows her slowly getting on the ground.

I'm supposed to work out while she does fucking yoga?

God.

Now I'm going to be thinking about how flexible she is. How much more flexible she might be than she was before.

How much I want to find out exactly how flexible she is while I hold down her hips and—

“Fuck me sideways and call me Sally,” Cam yells out, then moans.

Not a sexy moan.

A hurt moan.

I tug the safety clip out of the tread and jump off it, the floor doing that weird thing where it seems like it's still moving, thanks to getting off the treadmill too fast, and crouch in front of her.

“What's wrong?”

“I figured stretching would help,” her voice is squeaky and tight, and her lips pinch together in pain. “The soreness, you know? But it doesn't feel like it's helping. It feels like I'm stuck.” She squirms on the floor, one leg crooked at an angle, the other straight in front of her.

“Where? Where does it hurt?”

“Promise me you're not going to make it hurt worse,” she says, her head tilted at an odd angle. “Don't do any of that shit where you like, practically dislocate my goddamn shoulder—”

“I have never once hurt you. Never.”

She looks up at me with her whiskey-brown eyes, frustration clear in them. “I didn't say you did it on purpose,”

she hisses, frustration and pain clear in her eyes. “Just be gentle.”

“Gentle,” I repeat, like I could put my hands on her when she’s in pain and be anything but. “Tell me if it’s too much, okay? Or too rough.”

She makes another odd hissing sound, and it takes me a minute to realize she’s laughing at me. Not at me, but at what I said.

Relief rolls through me, and I grin at her neck and shoulders. If she’s laughing, then she’s going to be okay.

“Pervert,” I tell her.

“You said it,” she says through clenched teeth. Her fingers spasm on the charcoal-gray floor mats, her nails glittering pink-blue in the basement lighting.

I hate that she’s hurting.

“Stop thinking about my dick.”

I run my palms over her shoulders, and she sucks a breath in so sharply I’m sure I’ve already made it worse. “Too much?” I ask. “Maybe I should call Dr. A—”

“No,” she chokes on the syllable. “It just surprised me. Keep going.” The words are breathy and light, and I can’t help getting fucking turned on.

Keep going.

I hadn’t been thinking about sex, not even jokingly, not until she said those two words in that fucking voice.

My ex-girlfriend, the woman I wanted to be *my* wife, is sitting in *my* clothes in *my* basement and expecting *my* hands to solve some of her immediate physical problems.

And I’m hard as a rock at the thought.

Stats. I should think about stats. Football. Daniel Harrison’s retirement. What that means for the Beavers, coupled with the fact that our new quarterback is a mess.

As soon as my fingertips touch her warm body, though, all I can think about is Cameron. The way her breath turns shallow and pained when I hit a knot below her left shoulder blade, the way she tenses under my touch, not because of me, but because she's sore. Cameron, letting me massage her, letting me see her vulnerable and hurt and allowing me to help her.

I thought I wanted her before, yesterday afternoon, last night, this morning, but now?

Now, I want to look inside her pretty head and learn exactly who she's become in our time apart, or find out how she's the same, or get to know her all over again.

Carefully, I massage the tense spot, focused fully on each little breath and sigh she makes, working my way down her back and then back up, trying my hardest not to make things worse for her.

She tilts her head gingerly right, then left as I press both hands into the base of her neck, and then lets out a guttural sound as the vertebrae at the top of her spine pop.

“Better?”

“Oh my god,” she says, her voice husky with relief. “Yes. Thank you. I think that's the second time now you've saved my life.”

I don't stop rubbing, feeling my way across the knotted muscles under her skin like they're a treasure map, helping me unlock her secrets. She twitches as I find another sore spot, and I work at it carefully.

“What do I get for saving you twice?” I ask, then immediately regret the words.

“The pleasure of my company while we're snowed in together.” The last word comes out on a pained huff of air.

“Why did you make that sound like a threat?” My lips twitch, threatening to smile.

“I mean, it's less of a threat since I'm already here.” She winces as she rolls her head around. “More of a promise.”

I frown. “Hanging out with you has always been my favorite.”

“Stop,” she says, holding up a shaky hand, and I immediately let go of her shoulders.

“Did I make it worse?”

“No, that’s not—no. You helped. But Jake, I don’t want to... I don’t want to lead you on, you know? I don’t want you to think that just because I’m here, and because I, er, tried to kiss you this morning, we’re a thing again, you know? I don’t want to get your hopes up and then hurt you. I never wanted to hurt you.”

The last words are so soft I have to strain to hear her—and when they register, it’s like my heart breaks all over again.

“If you want to stretch, there’s an app on the TV you can use.” It comes out gruff, and I point to the screen hanging on the wall.

“Okay.”

“I have to finish my workout.”

“Okay. Thanks for the massage.”

I grunt because I’ve already said too fucking much today, and decide to punish myself by maxing out my heartrate.

CHAPTER II



CAMERON

I'm bored.

Snow's still falling swift and hard outside, the ache in my shoulders and neck's faded to an annoyance thanks to stretching and Jacob's capable hands, and my boss hasn't bothered to email, text, or call me since I yelled at him yesterday.

I don't know if that's a good thing or a bad thing, but there's not much I want to do about it.

It's weird.

I don't care. I don't care about the job I sacrificed and sacrificed for. At the moment, all I care about is the hot mug of tea cupped in my hands, the warm blanket tucked around my feet, and watching the snow come down while the meteorologist on TV drones on and on about record snowfall, plunging temperatures overnight, and the possibility of a melt and refreeze tomorrow before another band of snow comes through.

Long story short?

I'm not going anywhere anytime soon and so I'm stuck here, with my thoughts, with myself, with the loneliness that's never quite gone away, and the pervasive sense that despite all my well-laid plans, I've irrevocably fucked up somewhere along the line.

Suffice to say, I'm in a shitty mood.

The thought that keeps running through my head, like a streaker on the fifty-yard line in the second quarter, is that this life could have been mine.

I could have always had this cozy fleece blanket and hot mug of tea and floor-to-ceiling view of nonstop snow.

But I would have had Jacob at my side, playing with my hair, instead of grunting out reps and sweating in the basement.

I wouldn't be twitching as I compulsively check my phone for a sign from my boss that he's about to fire me. I wouldn't be completely devoured by ennui and self-loathing if I'd just said yes to Jacob.

Would I?

I stretch my feet out, pointing them hard, until it triggers an ache all the way to my teeth.

Stupid car accident.

I can't keep going like this. I can't keep living like this, pretending like everything is fine when it's so not fine I want to scream every morning when my alarm goes off.

When did I become that person?

I don't like that person.

I don't like who I'm turning into.

Snuggling further into the couch, which, frankly, I had no idea came in this huge size, I pull out my phone and open up my notes app. It takes nearly a minute of scrolling past story notes and crumbs of research to find, but when I do find it, I start tapping the screen and words begin to flow faster than the snowflakes blanketing the trees just beyond the glass.

I'm so into what I'm doing, so completely absorbed, that I don't even clock that Jacob's in the room with me until he says my name.

"Huh?" I ask, carefully looking away from my phone. Damn, I'm so stiff.

"What are you doing? Working?"

"Uh, kind of? I mean yes. Working. That is what I'm doing." I cut my eyes to the window, where it's slightly brighter than the dismal gray it's been all morning.

"Are you hungry?"

"I could eat." I blink, trying to rise from the world I've sunk into in my phone, trying to quiet the inner turmoil of my mind.

“You okay?”

“Better,” I say, and I mean it.

“Work helped, huh?” He’s watching me carefully, studying me, like I used to see him do when he watched YouTube footage of famous players while I was cramming for an exam.

“Yeah,” I say. I’ve already lied about it being work. Too late to stop now. Technically, it could be work, I guess.

Something shutters in his expression, and it pains me to put a name to it.

It looked like hope.

The joy I’d been feeling, surrounded by pillows and blankets and disassociating into my own little world, deflates like yesterday’s birthday balloon.

“You know what?” I pull the blanket up to my chin, only my face and arms still visible. “I don’t think I’m ready to eat. I’ll fend for myself.” A polite smile forces its way onto my face, and Jacob blinks, then nods once before leaving me alone with the snow and the glow from my phone for company.

And my notes app, which I’m clinging to like a lifeline.

The funny thing is, I didn’t even know how badly I needed this until I started typing.

CHAPTER 12



JACOB

I blew it.

It's all I can think as I lie in bed that night. Cameron only left her nest of blankets on the couch to eat and drink today.

I might as well not have even been in the room. Talking to her was like talking to the couch we were both sitting on.

What I said, the fact that I admitted how I felt about her, that my feelings never went away—it was too much.

Sheets strangle my ankles and calves, and I kick them off, gritting my teeth and sitting up in bed.

It might have been too much, but I don't regret it.

I've never been one to hide how I'm feeling, never been one to play fucking games or say things I don't mean.

I've known since the day I met Cameron that she's who I want to spend my life with. I only grew more sure of it while we were together, and it never faded. I was happy to watch her be successful and reach her goals, but fuck—if she's not happy? If she's as miserable as she says, then I want to be here to help her figure out her next move.

I blow out a breath, stretching my arms out, which are sore as hell from the beating I gave them this morning in the weight room.

I can't sleep.

Getting out of bed, giving up on sleep with my turbulent thoughts, I remake the bed, pulling the sheets up tight and neat before fluffing my pillow. The vague sense of control it gives me fades as soon as I turn away from it, and I find my feet doing the leading, taking me out of my room and down the hall into the quiet house.

The heater's a low background hum, warm, dry air blowing across my skin.

Maybe I should have taken Cam up on her friends with benefits kiss this morning. The day would have been different. I pause, leaning against the wall and squeezing my eyes shut, imagining a fever dream of her and me in bed all day, the soft expanse of her skin against mine, the way she'd stare into my eyes when I made her come, over and over again.

And all it would lead to is being hurt when she decides I'm not who she wants. That this life is not what she wants.

A long sigh rips out of me, painful.

It fucking hurts to want someone so badly and know you're not the problem.

Cameron loves her work, she loves her career, and it fulfills her.

That's going to have to be enough for me now, taking care of her.

Maybe this is how I can finally let her go. Take care of her while we're here, snowed in together, and make peace with the fact that she's not going to be in my life.

I take a deep breath.

Fuck that.

If that's what she wants, sure.

If not? Game fucking on.

The soft rugs the designer picked out and scattered along the wood floors absorb the sound of my feet, and before long the living room yawns in front of me. To my surprise, the warm glow from the lamp hasn't turned off, and Cameron's still engrossed in whatever she's doing on her phone, just the tip of her nose and her wrists and hands outside the blanket.

"You're awake?" I ask, even though it's obvious she is.

"Ahh!" she shrieks, throwing her phone at me.

I catch it with one hand, barely looking away from her to grab it. "Was that a test?"

"You scared the shit out of me."

“Literally?” I raise an eyebrow. “Might want to talk to a doctor about—”

“Not literally. Obviously.”

“Good. That would be a real party foul.”

She snorts, a slow smile spreading across her face. “Oh, is this a party now?”

“It’s always a party when someone shits themselves.”

Her laugh barks out of her, and she rubs a hand down her face, then fails to stifle a yawn. “What time is it?”

“It’s around three AM.”

“No shit?”

“Well, that depends on what’s happening on that couch.”

This time she groans, and I make myself move, walking to the couch and sitting next to her nest. “Three AM?”

“Three AM,” I agree. “What are you doing? Are you playing Honeygrove Valley? Or are you in that apple grower group, Drama with Derek, again?”

“Oh my god, I haven’t thought about that in years,” she says, laughing, her eyes wide. “Derek of the Apple Grower Group! We must have been seriously desperate for entertainment.”

“Nah, no way. That was grade-A prime entertainment. You started it, if I remember right.”

She emerges further from her blankets, sitting up and stretching slightly. “Oh, I definitely did. Find a niche group on Facebook to infiltrate: that was the most random journalism assignment of my life.”

“Got you an A, though,” I remind her.

“You remember that?” Her eyes crinkle at the corners.

“I won’t forget all the apple grower drama for as long as I live,” I tell her. I won’t, either. I’m still in that damn group, watching Frances and Derek argue vehemently about best

practices for spraying copper at silvertip stage versus dormancy.

I know too much.

“Remember when that guy asked about his pear tree?” she says fondly.

“Still can’t believe he had the audacity to go into the apple growers’ Facebook group and ask about his pear tree.”

“Can’t he read the rules?” Cameron shouts, something we used to yell at each other whenever we encountered a pear.

We grin at each other over the shared memory.

“The pear debacle had nothing on The Great Bear Scat Debate,” she continues solemnly.

“You’re right. I miss watching with you as people dissect crap they find in their orchards and then argue with strangers online about it.”

“That’s the nicest thing anyone’s said to me in years,” she says flippantly, but her smile is real. “You know, it’s bizarre how much I remember from that group. I guess the sheer madness of the apple grower group yelling about apple scab and curculio moths has really rubbed off on me.”

“Like sooty blotch,” I agree.

“Sooty blotch,” she snorts. “God. Don’t even get me started on the lines drawn between cider and juice.”

We laugh for a second, her eyes sparking in the dim light. Outside, icy snow pings off the windows, soft enough to be musical and slightly comforting.

I want to tell her every time I see an apple I think of her. Every time I see a jug of cider or apple juice, I remember those quiet moments curled up and laughing about how venomous the apple growers got with each other over the strangest things, and how funny it all seemed with her at my side.

“So what were you so engrossed in if it wasn’t the apple group?” My heart beats loudly in my ears, and it sounds like

coward, coward.

To my surprise, the tips of her ears and the tops of her cheeks flush a dark pink. She's embarrassed. Whatever it is she was doing, she's embarrassed by it.

"Were you watching porn?" I'm half joking. "Because if you were, I can help you out with that—"

"Shut UP. No. I wasn't watching porn, you perv. Why, were you?" She side-eyes me, and I have a feeling I need to choose my next words carefully.

"Nope. I was just thinking about you. Hoping I didn't fuck up, since you have been... watching porn on my couch all day."

"I have NOT been watching porn on your couch all day. God, that's exhausting to even think about."

"If you're exhausted by the thought of coming over and over again then I can help you out..."

"You already told me your rules about that," she says stiffly, and I wince.

She's not wrong.

"Besides, I was working."

"All day?"

"Uh-huh."

"And all night?"

"Yup."

"On what?"

She throws the blanket over her face the way she used to when she didn't want to tell me something.

"Is it an exposé about me and the Wilmington Beavers? I think Kelsey already took care of that." Our old QB's girlfriend did a huge piece on how the Beaver cheer team was treated that lit that part of the organization on fire.

Good for her.

“No.” Cam’s voice is tiny and muffled by the thick layer of fleece blanket.

“Then what are you embarrassed about?”

The blanket peels down slightly, and she blinks at me as her eyes appear. “You can’t make fun of me.”

“I promise.”

“Cross your heart and hope to die?”

“Cross my heart and hope to die.”

“I will make you post about figs in the apple grower group if you make fun of me.”

“Deal.”

She pulls the blanket down the rest of the way, her teeth gnawing on her lower lip as she stares at me.

“I was writing.”

“Writing?”

“A novel.”

“A novel,” I repeat.

“I just... I’ve had this idea for a long time, and it seemed like a good time to write it, you know? And we were snowed in, and my neck hurts, and I’ve just felt... I don’t know, lost. Or something. And I was sick of thinking about my shit, all my shit that’s messed up, and I thought, what better way to disassociate than to focus fully on some imaginary people?”

I stare at her.

“Don’t you dare make—”

“Why would you think I would make fun of you for that?”

Her brown eyes widen slightly. “Because it’s silly.”

“No, it’s not. Why would you say that? If you’re enjoying it, then it’s not silly.”

“Really?”

“Really. What’s it about?”

“Nope. Not telling you that.”

I tilt my head at her.

She sighs. “If I tell you... it will make it... real. I don’t know. It will take some of the magic away. I don’t want to talk about it anymore. I want it to live inside my head and my phone for now.”

“Okay. Fair enough.”

She squints at me as if she doesn’t quite believe I’m going to let it go.

I don’t blame her. When we were dating, I wouldn’t have let it go. I would have pestered her about it, maybe stolen her phone until I found where she was writing.

But if she doesn’t want to tell me, that’s fine. That’s up to her.

“You should sleep,” I tell her softly.

“You know I always do my best work at three AM,” she tells me, but this time, she can’t stop the yawn that’s cracking her jaw.

“Yeah, maybe, but you’re not twenty anymore.”

“Gee, thanks for the reminder,” she says.

There’s a loud click, and in the next moment, we’re plunged into darkness.

CHAPTER 13



CAMERON

I blink, reaching out for Jacob, and manage to smack my hand into something bristly.

“Ow,” we say at the same time.

“Why did you slap me?”

“I was reaching for your arm—why did you move so fast?”

“Because the generator just died, so I stood up.”

Shit. “The generator died?”

“Yep. That’s why the lights went out.”

“And the heat?” It comes out in a weird high-pitched squeak. “What about the heat?”

“I think you know the answer to that.” Jacob’s voice sounds amused, but no matter how hard I squint at him, I can’t make out his expression in the dark.

And it is really, really fucking dark.

“What are we going to do?”

“Well,” he stretches out the word until it’s long and hammered thin, and I’m groping for the edges of his solution. “I don’t know if I’ll be able to fix it, to be honest. As much as it wounds my ego to tell you that.”

I whimper.

“So you should probably go to my room, help yourself to as many clothes as you want to put on, and get in bed where we’ll have to cuddle to stay warm.”

I blink into the darkness.

“What?”

“Or you can chance it out here, where you’ll get colder and colder by the minute.”

“*What?*” I ask again. “You think we need to cuddle for warmth? Are you joking?”

“No. Though we might not need to yet. Regardless, we should hole up in the same room with the doors closed. It’s going to get really cold in these bigger rooms much faster.”

“Oh.” It makes sense, but I can’t shake the feeling he has an ulterior motive. “Are you just saying this so I have to hang out with you?”

“Yes, Cameron,” he says very seriously, and a tingle goes down my spine. “I master-minded this entire thing. I’ve had the snowstorm in motion for a year now, and then I made sure to be at the exact spot you’d be when you wrecked in a ditch, which happened because I put a spell on your car, all so my generator could blow out and you’d be forced to sleep in my room to stay warm.”

“I knew it!” I cry, clapping my hands together.

We both laugh quietly, and I can’t see him, but I know exactly what he looks like despite the dark.

“I’m going to check on the generator,” he says. “You don’t have to go to my room, obviously, but I really don’t want you turning into a popsicle.”

“Mmhmmm, sure, sure, I believe you,” I say. “All part of your evil plan.”

“To make you fall back in love with me,” he agrees. “Can’t wait to see how it turns out.”

My jaw drops.

A second later, Jacob’s phone casts a beam of light as he swiftly moves across the room. I stand in silence, the quiet even more pronounced without the hum of electricity in the background.

It’s funny how something can be always there, always present, but you don’t notice it until it’s gone.

Snatching all my still-warm blankets off the couch, I carefully pick my way back to Jacob’s room. He’s right. It is

warmer in here, maybe just a couple degrees but enough to be immediately noticeable.

I tuck the blanket around my shoulders, caught between wanting to raid his closet for sweatshirts and wanting to get my cold feet under the covers immediately.

Cold feet win, and I launch myself onto his bed, which is as soft and welcoming as it looked.

And, I find out as I try to get under the covers, made. Made really tight.

I frown, wriggling as hard as I dare without hurting myself, trying to make a comfy spot in his bed. Why is it made? Hasn't he been sleeping in here? Or, at the very least, lying in here?

He remade his bed.

That can only mean one thing: Jacob is stressed AF.

Worry purses my lips, and I stare up in the dark, not wanting to use up my phone's battery. Do I care that he's stressed?

Yes.

I'm pretty sure it's me. Yeah, that might be a little self-absorbed, but I know my Jacob, and he likes routine, he likes structure, he likes things to be the same day in and day out.

I am definitely throwing a wrench in all that.

I'm the one stressing him out.

The worst part is I don't know how to make it better. I don't know if I can be... the Cameron he wants. I am almost thirty and I don't have a fucking clue who I really am anymore.

I don't know if the Cameron he loves still exists.

I do know he deserves better than the hot mess I am now.

Problem is, I'm selfish enough to want him again, too. All of him. My heart falters, and I rub absentmindedly at my

chest. The person I was with Jacob... I liked her. I like myself better with him than without him.

But do I love him? Do I love him, or the idea of who I used to be with him?

Fuck.

I throw the covers over my face, burrowing down into the warm spot where Jacob must have just been. My head's a mess, my thoughts running a mile a minute, but before long, my eyelids get so heavy that I give up and close them.

CHAPTER 14



CAMERON

I'm sprawled across something warm and hard, and it doesn't take nearly as long as it did yesterday morning for me to realize that it's Jacob. I start to lift my head from his chest, as sneaky as possible, when a thick arm clamps around my waist.

"Don't move," he says, his voice low and husky.

I swallow hard. "What?"

"I like you where you are, and I'm not ready to get up yet."

My eyes go wide at that.

"Shh, Cam. You can sleep. I'll always be your safe place."

I'll always be your safe place.

He used to say that all the time, when I woke up with a nightmare or when I was stressed about school or my family or the future.

How is it like no time's passed at all?

My breath catches in my chest, and I lay my cheek back across his chest until his even, heavy breaths lull me back to sleep.



I WAKE AGAIN, THIS TIME SMUSHED AGAINST JACOB'S SIDE, one leg thrown across his hips and his arms around me.

When I open my eyes, his are already watching me, fixated on my face.

"Good morning."

"Hi," I croak, not nearly as suave. My lips smack as I try to get my bearings, and despite the fact it's still pretty dark, I have the bizarre feeling I've slept until midday. I haven't done that in years. "What time is it?"

“It’s just after one.”

“In the afternoon?” I screech.

He shakes against me, and it takes me a second to reorient myself to reality enough to realize he’s laughing. At me.

I frown. “What’s so funny? I lost a whole half a day’s worth of work.”

“It’s Sunday,” he says, a rumbling laugh still vibrating through me. “You could keep sleeping and no one is going to stop you.” His arm twitches against my back, and I momentarily stiffen at the reminder we’re entwined.

Until I look back up at him, at his chocolate-brown eyes and the depth of emotion swirling in them. Then? Then I melt, tucking myself more firmly against him, wanting to live in this moment. In this strange timeline where he’s found me and brought me home, where he wants me all over again, where I wake up in his bed late and find I don’t want to leave it.

“The house is gingerbread, and you’re my gingerbread man,” I say out loud, my voice still sticky with sleep.

“Is that right?”

“Mmhmm. And we’re inside a snow globe, and no matter how hard the world shakes, we’re floating safely in our little bubble.” It makes perfect sense to me.

“Does that make you my ginger-wife?” he asks. His fingers run up and down my spine, up and down, up and down.

I don’t pull away.

I scoot closer until my body’s completely flush with his, and we fit together like puzzle pieces—or like magnets that have been forced apart and are even more drawn to each other now that we’re close.

“Are you asking me to ginger-marry you?”

He snorts, grinning lopsided at me, half his face caught on his pillow. “Sure.”

“May our royal icing never tear asunder,” I intone.

“I love when you’re a weirdo.”

I’m surprised when his mouth finds mine, the soft bristles of his short beard pressing against my chin, his lips soft and demanding all at once. I thought he didn’t want this, not unless I was serious.

I am even more surprised, however, when I kiss him back. I’m even more surprised to find that I do, in fact, mean it. That I am serious.

His hands don’t stop, smoothing across the thick fabric of the sweatshirt I’ve been wearing for the past twenty-four hours, somehow still tasting like peppermint toothpaste and smelling delicious, familiar.

It’s a heady thing, kissing Jacob Matthews. It fills my veins with champagne bubbles, turning me loose-limbed and drunk on him. His tongue slides between my lips, and suddenly, I can’t get enough. I want to drown in this feeling, in this man I thought I knew as well as myself but is all new and shining and irresistible.

I roll him onto his back, or I should say, he lets me roll him onto his back because there’s no way I’m moving this mountain of a man without his permission, and I brace my hands against his shoulders, the kiss intensifying.

It’s gone from exploratory and tender and questioning to something else entirely.

Something demanding and urgent and screaming with need, screaming with promise.

My hand travels down his body, finally finding the band of his sweatpants, and I run my index finger along the inside, on freaking fire and letting my impulses guide me completely. He’s so muscled. He was always in shape, but this body—I don’t know him anymore.

It shouldn’t thrill me as much as it does.

“Cameron,” he groans, and I freeze, pulling away from his mouth to look at him.

“Too far? I can stop.”

“Don’t. Fucking. Stop.” The words are forceful and I love it. I love that I’m not the only one feeling this... wild urge.

My hand travels along his thigh, and he shivers underneath me, one hand cupping the back of my head, pulling me close and tight for another kiss. Lust ramps up in me, and I can’t help grinding against him a little, reaching between us for the hard, hot length of his cock.

“Fuck, Cameron.” He bucks into my grip, and I savor the way he feels against my hand.

Just right.

I know he will feel so good inside me.

“Let me touch you,” he says on a breath, the words shimmering across my skin like stars. “Let me see you.”

I don’t wait, stripping off my sweatshirt—his sweatshirt—as fast as I can. When his hands cover my breasts, a greedy moan slips out from between my lips. He groans, and then his hot mouth covers my nipple, sucking as I rub my hand up and down his dick.

“Jacob.” It’s strangled, and just his name, but he knows me so well, he knows exactly what I’m asking.

In one swift motion, he flips us so he’s on top and I’m under him, staring up at his beautiful, rugged face, so like the boy I used to kiss in college and nothing like him all at once.

“You’re beautiful. Perfect.”

“I’m older now. Old enough to know I’m not perfect.”

“You’ve always been perfect to me,” he says gravely, one finger tracing down the side of my cheek, his other hand lightly stroking my side, sending goosebumps pebbling all over my skin. “Always will be.”

“Kiss me.”

He does, expertly, like he knows what I want better than I do, anticipating when to be fierce and when to gentle his lips against mine. Every touch, every caress winds me higher.

Why did I ever let him go? Why did I ever think it could be better than this?

The truth is, this is better than ever.

Every touch is new and familiar, every kiss a revelation, a window into the man he's become. I wiggle the hem of his t-shirt up his body, and the sheer volume of man above me is slightly intimidating.

"Whoa," I say, pausing to stare.

"Good whoa or bad whoa?" he asks, his eyes crinkling at the corners. "Or whoa like a horse, and you want to stop?"

"Definitely a good whoa, and definitely do not fucking stop." It comes out vehement, and when I run my hands up and down his cut torso, he shivers, closing his eyes.

It makes me feel powerful. I love that he asked, that he's checking in on me, even though I trust him. I always have trusted him, that was never our issue.

It was trusting myself.

I lace my hands behind his neck, tugging him back to my mouth, wanting him, wanting more, wanting to forget everything but his hot skin against mine, his mouth, the feel of his hands.

I let the overthinking, overanalytical Cameron go, fanning the sparks between Jacob and me until they turn into an inferno.

Jacob slides his hands into the rolled waistband of my sweats, pausing briefly to stare in my eyes.

"Can I?"

"If you don't, I might die," I tell him.

"We don't want that," he says, pressing a light kiss on my nose, making my heart squeeze. "Definitely don't want to die before the main event."

He barks a laugh, grinning at me as he pulls my pants all the way off. I bend my knees, wiggling to help him out a little. I'm a giver like that.

“Oh, and what’s the main event?” I ask, batting my eyelashes.

“Telling you about it will ruin it,” he says solemnly, banishing the smile from his face.

“Is that right?”

“Let’s just say I’ve picked up a few tricks since we last... did this.”

It’s cute how he doesn’t want to call it what it is... until I realize fully what he’s just said. I blink, staring up at the smooth expanse of white ceiling as he kisses his way down my body. He’s picked up a few tricks.

God. That’s the last thing I want to think about, Jacob being with other women, and even though I knew of course he had, of course we both had been with other people—

“Holy shit!” I cry out, all coherent, envious thoughts fleeing at the first lick of his tongue against my clit. He found it in record time, like a man on a mission, and there’s nothing unskilled or amateur about what he’s doing now.

Holy shit. *Holy shit.*

It’s so good, so much better than anything I remember him doing before, so much better than anyone that came after him, that I can’t do anything but lie here and hold onto his massive shoulders for dear orgasm.

“I told you you’d like it,” he says smugly, grinning up at me from between my legs as I try not to forget how to breathe. “Here’s what’s going to happen, Cameron,” he says, his voice dark, an edge to it I haven’t heard before.

He throws one of my legs over his shoulder, then briefly sucks my clit again as I start to come out of my skin.

“You aren’t going to come until I tell you you can.”

“You can’t do that,” I say, but it’s a breathless, weak whisper, and we both know I don’t mean it.

“Can’t, or do you not want me to?”

I don't answer, panting and staring at the self-satisfied grin on his face. Moisture clings to his beard around his mouth, and it makes me impossibly aroused.

"I want you to," I finally admit. This is what I wanted, after all. To forget everything, to trade sanity for this stolen moment with Jacob Matthews, this impossible scenario of snow and the last man I loved erasing everything but right now.

"That's my fucking girl," he says, his voice vibrating against my most sensitive parts. He goes after my pleasure in earnest, teasing and tasting and driving me quickly out of my mind. My hands clench in his hair, which is soft and silky and the perfect handhold, to be perfectly honest, as I lose my mind. Safety first!

When he strokes a finger inside me, I pulse around him, my body ratcheted up.

"Not yet," he says, his voice gravelly and delicious.

"Please, please, please, please," I pant, tugging his hair until he laughs again, and I laugh too, until he finds it.

The magical unicorn of my anatomy, something I didn't really think existed until this very moment.

"Now. Come for me."

Rainbows and confetti explode through my mind, and there's no coming back from this orgasm, which is all-consuming, blocking out literally everything else I've ever thought about in my entire life.

"Jacob," I say, and I don't know if I'm whispering or screaming his name, just that it feels so good and I don't want it to stop.

"That's my girl," he says again, pressing kisses along my inner thighs, a sensation I'm barely aware of.

"I need you," I tell him, the orgasm that literally took me to another plane of existence where Pegasus and mermaids hung out together making rainbow chip cookies starting to fade. My body's not done though, and I'll be damned if I'm

going to let him get away with giving me the best orgasm of my life without paying him back in kind.

“I need you too, Cameron. I always have,” he says quietly, and when I recover enough to look into his eyes, there’s a soft vulnerability there that makes my heart skip a beat.

“Jacob,” I say, reaching for his face.

He climbs over my body, kissing me fervently, tucking his arm around my back and holding me close.

I cry out as he sinks into me, another orgasm already ratcheting up.

“Cameron,” he whispers, holding me close as I match his rhythm, his mouth peppering kisses over my lips and cheeks, sweet and sexy all at once. “Cameron, look at me.”

I do, I look at him, and I see it in his eyes. This isn’t just for fun. This isn’t just for old times’ sake or to scratch an itch.

This means something to him.

I mean something to him, just like he’s been saying.

It means something to me, too.

I come again as he whispers my name, whispers beautiful, sweet things into my ear, and I know we’ve taken a step towards something new.

I cling to him after he comes too, both of us sweat-slicked, my fingers digging into his biceps, my legs crooked around his hips still, our breath mingling.

He throws the sheet over us, rolling so that I’m on top, slowly sliding out of me.

“We didn’t use protection,” I breathe.

“You still on birth control?”

“Well, yeah.” I relax a little against him, reveling in the post-orgasm bliss and feeling of contentment despite my momentary worry. “Thank god I had it in my purse.”

“I would have a baby with you,” he says.

I jerk my head up, a slight frisson of panic jolting me wide awake. “What?”

“Why wouldn’t I? You know I love kids. You would make beautiful babies. You would be a great mom.”

“That’s literally so creepy.” I shove at his shoulder, and he lets out a low laugh. “I would make beautiful babies? I’m not a freaking human factory.”

“I didn’t say you were.” A slight defensive note’s crept into his voice, and that’s how I know he’s not joking, not about any of this. He wants me to have his babies.

Why is that kind of hot?

I should check my pill pack and see where I am in my cycle. Or call my therapist.

Either, or.

Both.

Definitely both.

“Listen, Jacob... I am... clearly open to exploring,” I clear my throat, the words surprisingly hard to say, despite the fact that this man in my arms just gave me the best sex of my life, hands down, zero competition, drafting him to my personal fantasy football league.

“Exploring?” he asks, his hand floating down to cup my breast. I can’t help laughing when he gives it a little jiggle. “Exploring what? The Arctic? The apple orchards of the tri-state area?”

“Stop distracting me.” I swat his hand away from my boob. “What I was trying to say before you so rudely interrupted—”

“You stopped talking. I didn’t interrupt,” he tells me cheerfully. “Big difference.”

I glower at him.

“Fine, continue.” His grin tells me he loves getting under my skin just as much as I love getting under his. Always have.

“I am open to figuring out how we fit into each other’s lives right now. I... You—” I scrunch my face up. Why is this so hard to say? “You are an amazing man. You were amazing just now.”

“Only amazing?” He raises an eyebrow.

“You cocky bastard,” I say on a laugh.

“The cockiest,” he agrees. “But my mom would disagree about the bastard thing.”

“Stop distracting me,” I tell him, exasperated. I poke at his pec, but then he twitches it and I get distracted all over again.

“Sorry,” he says, not looking sorry at all. Nope, he looks relaxed, and happy, and utterly pleased with himself.

“What happens if you get traded? Would you expect me to give up everything and move with you? I know that’s what you expected in college.” It’s why I said no. Why I broke things off.

Now, though? Now... moving around with him, having sex like that, enjoying all the perks that come with being a professional football player’s spouse, god, it sounds pretty fucking nice.

Besides...

I really do care about Jacob.

I know I don’t want to do long distance—

“Your mind is going a mile a minute,” he says quietly, running a finger across my temple. “I can practically see the wheels turning in there.”

“You brought up babies!”

“It’s natural to think about babies after raw-dogging a beautiful woman you’ve loved most of your life.”

“How is that simultaneously the most disgusting and romantic thing I’ve ever heard?”

He shrugs a shoulder, his chest shaking with laughter. “It’s a gift.”

I frown at him, or, at least, I try to, but I can't stop the laugh that bursts out as a particularly gruesome-sounding snort. I can't remember the last time I laughed so much, naked and vulnerable in bed with a man.

“We take it one day at a time. Like normal people. We figure it out.”

“We're not normal people.”

“No shit. But we can try to take it one day at time.” He kisses my lips. “Come on. Let's grab a snack, and then there is something I want to show you.”

He throws the cover off, and cold air hits my body in an icy wave.

“Jacob,” I yell. “That is not nice!”

He slaps my butt, then gives it a long squeeze. “Sorry. I just like seeing those pretty nipples look like that.”

“Can't say the same for your privates.” I sniff.

He doesn't get offended though, he just laughs, throwing my—his—clothes at me. “Come on.”

Laughing, I do as he asks, getting dressed as quickly as I can.

If this is the start to our one day at a time, it's a pretty good one.

CHAPTER 15



JACOB

If I were any more pleased with myself, I might explode. Cameron's agreed to take it one day at a time with me. All through our quick cleanup and quick snack, I can't stop fucking smiling.

Not that I would if I could.

I hope that means one day at a time forever, but I know I need to slow down mentally. I'm not going to fuck this up the second time around. I will give her what she needs, I will support her, and I will realize that we both have our own lives.

Laughter and respect were always the cornerstones of our relationship, and I have even more respect for Cameron than ever.

"What the hell is that?" she asks, her eyes huge as I pull out the acid-lemon-colored clothes from one of the hall closets.

"Ty's snow shit. He won't care if you borrow it."

"Snow shit?" Cam repeats, clearly confused. "You think it's going to get that cold in here? Wait, were you able to fix the generator? Should we call 911 for help?"

I bite the insides of my cheeks to keep from laughing. Not because I think her worry is funny, but because she's just so damn cute. I forgot how fast her mind works, how she's onto the next thing after five seconds. I pull her to me, unable to resist, squeezing her so tight she lets out a little high-pitched noise.

"Not a squeak toy," she says, her voice muffled against my chest.

I squeeze her again, and she squeaks. "Not *a* squeak toy. *My* squeak toy."

"Goober," she calls me as I let her go. There's more pink in her cheeks now, and she positively glows.

“Good sex agrees with you. Guess I’ll have to make a point of tickling your g-spot regularly.”

“You are really proud of yourself for that, aren’t you? Also, gross.”

“Not gross. Highlight of my year so far. And yes, to be honest, I am.”

“I do not want to think about how you figured out how to do that.”

“Don’t, then.” I shrug, handing her Ty’s fluorescent snow bib set.

“This is so ridiculously Ty,” she says, tugging it on one leg at a time. Cameron’s not a petite woman, she’s tall and athletic, but Ty’s huge, and the clothes swallow her. “He loves to make a scene, doesn’t he?”

“That he does,” I say. “Savannah is good for him.”

“I like her,” she agrees. I crouch down as she fastens the straps of the bib over her shoulders, rolling the pant legs up.

“I think her boots are here if you want to wear hers.”

“No way do Savannah and I wear the same size shoe. I’ve got like five inches on her.”

“And boats for feet.” I roll up her other pant leg.

“You love my boats.” She wiggles her toes at me.

I reach for a foot, tempted to tickle it.

“Don’t you dare. You know I hate being tickled.”

“I know, but it’s tempting. Ty’s boots?”

“I’ll need extra socks.”

By the time we’re both suited up, extra socks and all, the house is even colder, our breath freezing in clouds around us. Cameron’s face is tiny in a sea of horrible yellow, her brown eyes laughing.

I snort. “You look like the kid from that Christmas movie.”

“I can’t put my arms down,” she yells, then sobers. “No, but seriously, I feel like a marshmallow. I’m not sure how much I’m going to be able to move.”

“I can carry you.”

She looks me up and down. “That’s hot.”

“Thank you.” I kiss my bicep, the effect somewhat ruined by my own snow gear.

“Where the heck are you taking me, anyway? You can just tell me.”

“Oh, like you have places to be today? Did you plan on taking your one-horse open sleigh into town? Did eight tiny reindeer take up residence in the pool house?”

“It’s almost spring. The reindeer are on vacation,” she says loftily. Well, she tries to, at least, but having her face partially obscured by violent yellow fabric doesn’t help. “And no, obviously I don’t have anywhere to go, but I don’t really relish the idea of freezing to death either.”

“I might not have fixed the generator last night, but don’t worry, I have a plan for that. And the plan is showing up very soon, so we need to get going.”

I didn’t plan on taking her out there, I planned on having the diesel for the generator dropped off here, but then we had sex, and she agreed to try... and now I want to show her why I bought this place.

“I promise it will be fun.”

“Are we building snowmen?”

“Do you want to build snowmen?”

“Not really.”

“Maybe the walk will help your back loosen up.”

“Oh, my back is loose from this morning. You already accomplished that.”

She holds a thickly gloved hand up for a high five, and I pull back the oversized sleeve before giving her one.

Cam grins up at me, and I love it.

“Do you really have a plan for the generator?” she asks as soon as we shut the back door. “Are we going to freeze?”

“No. we’re not going to freeze, and yes, I do have a plan for the generator.”

“And the plan involves walking into the snow and hoping we don’t get lost in a sudden blizzard?”

“Has anyone ever told you you’d make a great reporter? You ask a lot of great questions. And it’s barely snowing now. We’re not going to get white-out conditions right now.”

She laughs at that until she hits a slippery patch on the sidewalk, her boots crunching and then sliding as she flails her arms.

I immediately grab her, her eyes round with shock, and pull her into my side.

“If you wanted me to carry you, all you had to do was ask, Cam.” I boop her on the nose, then haul her into my arms.

“Hey,” she protests.

“You’re fine. You love it. This way you can ask me all your questions and not run out of breath while you do it.”

“I’m not going to run out of breath asking questions,” she says, good and irritated now, making her nose crinkle up in the way that makes me laugh. It’s pretty much all I can see of her right now, Ty’s ridiculous yellow snowsuit obscuring most of her from view. It’s like holding a squirmy bag of marshmallows, and the thought makes me burst out laughing.

“Oh, is that so funny to you?”

“You look like an angry Peep.”

“It’s not my fault,” she huffs, tugging the hood back, her gorgeous brown hair spilling out over the shoulders of the jacket. It’s wild and untamed, the way I like it best.

The way I like her best.

“Your brother has horrible fashion sense.”

“Oh, I am not about to argue with you about that.”

We both laugh a little, and then she sighs, snuggling into me.

Snow loudly crunches under my feet.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” she asks.

I don’t look away from her face, my feet knowing the way well enough I don’t have to even think about where I’m taking her. “It is.”

“I love it—the way the world looks new and magical with all the snow. I’ve always loved it.”

“I remember,” I tell her. “That afternoon we were at the library’s cafe on campus and the snow started—”

“I’d forgotten about that,” she says, staring up at me with round eyes, readjusting her grip slightly, likely because Ty’s gloves are a million times too big for her.

“And you kept ordering more coffee and getting more and more wired, and then when we finally left, you ate it on the walkway because you were running around like some kind of over-caffeinated ferret.”

“Over-caffeinated ferret?” she repeats, cocking an eyebrow at me. “That’s rich, coming from you. If I remember correctly, you drank so much hot cocoa that day that you were sick to your stomach all night. I had to walk to the drugstore at three AM—”

“In the snow, to go get me Imodium,” I finish.

“God, it’s so romantic that you’re completing my sentences about your explosive diarrhea,” she says with faux sweetness.

We stare at each other for a long moment as I plod along in the snow, then we simultaneously burst into laughter.

“It was the worst,” I finally manage. “I thought I was going to die.”

“I remember.” She chokes the words out, laughing so hard a little bit of spit flies out of her mouth. “It was hideous. All of

it. The smell. The way you were crying. I felt horrible for you.”

“And yet you took care of me.” I beam at her, still laughing.

“You did your fair share of taking care of me. Remember that party I went to?”

“The one where you challenged some of my teammates to a trash can punch drink-off?”

She nods, looking somewhere between chagrined and amused. “Not my best moment.”

“You beat a fair number of them.” I’m trying not to laugh, because

“That was the stupidest thing I’ve ever done.”

“You were pretty sick that night.”

“And the next day,” she says. “God, how is it that feels like yesterday and a whole lifetime away at the same time?”

“I don’t know,” I tell her. “But I’m glad you found your way back to me now.”

Cameron raises her brow, her lower lip trembling through a smile.

“Are you going to cry?” I ask her, incredulous. “What’s wrong?”

“I just... I don’t know. I missed this. It’s easy.”

“It’s always been easy with you.”

“Did you date? After me?” She winces after she asks it, like she regrets it.

“You really want to know?” We’ve finally made it into the narrow path of trees that mark the way to our destination, and the anticipation is killing me.

“No. Yes. No. I don’t know.”

“I did,” I say, deciding to put her out of her misery.

My gaze jumps to her as she sags in my arms, going fully limp. At first, I think maybe she's having some kind of bizarre belated concussion symptom, nearly sprinting into full panic mode—until she throws her hand over her forehead, sighing dramatically.

“I shall never recover, Mr. Matthews,” she says with a bad British accent. “You’ve shattered my heart into a million pieces. I shall simply wander the moors until I catch consumption and die.” She sighs again, flinging her hair around.

“Am I supposed to know what you’re doing? Is this an impression?” I squint at her, holding back a laugh. “What the hell is a moor?”

“I knew I shouldn’t have helped you write that English Lit essay. That was my Jane Austen heroine impression.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Or Bronte sister. I think they were the ones infatuated with wandering the moors and broken hearts.”

“Right.”

“Was she ugly?” Cameron whispers conspiratorially, waggling her eyebrows.

“What?” I laugh, the question catching me fully off-guard. “No.”

“Dammit. Did she... this woman you dated... did she have an unhealthy fixation on Owen Wilson and only quote his movies? Or did she do a bit as Kristen Wiig too often? Or did she quote the best of Will Ferrell at you night and day until you had to break it off because you had no more cowbell to give?”

I blink at her.

“Was she a stone-cold weirdo, Matthews?”

“Not nearly as weird as you,” I tell her truthfully. “You are the number one weirdo. The coldest of the stone-cold weirdos. The marble slab of strange.”

“Wooooow.”

“Owen Wilson, eat your heart out,” I say automatically, shaking my head and grinning at her.

“You always did know just how to stroke my ego,” she sighs, clearly pleased.

I bite back another laugh because even though I missed Cameron all the time, I forgot what a trip it is to actually hang out with her. Never a dull moment, like being in a room with a mirrorball full of neon signs.

Always, always entertaining—until you saw that she was spinning on pure anxiety, always pushing herself to be better, be funnier, be more, trying to fill some hole inside her with work and school and a craving for life I thought was the best thing I’d ever seen.

“Did you know Tyler started therapy?” I ask her, still trudging through the snow. I’m not winded, even carrying her, and I’m thankful for the fact I’ve been working my ass off in the gym this off season.

“Okay, non sequitur,” she says slowly. “That’s a weird subject change.” She narrows her eyes at me. “You’re fishing.”

“Yeah.” I shrug, and she readjusts her arms slightly. “You want me to put you down?”

“And deprive you of the ultimate pleasure of holding me? I wouldn’t dream of it.”

“Generous of you.”

“I’m a giver.” She flutters her lashes at me. “And yes, I am in therapy, if you’re asking what exactly you’ve signed up for. And yes, I am on medication as well. Turns out while they help, I’m still the same messy me. Still don’t really know what the hell I’m doing.”

“I’m glad they’re helping, Cam. Really glad. Have you...” I stop myself from asking me, but I can tell from the one covert glance I allow myself and the darkening of her expression that she’s followed my thoughts as easily as ever.

How is it that we've changed so much... and we're still the same?

"Have I talked to my mom? No. Not in years."

I can taste the bitterness in her voice.

"How does that make you feel?" I cringe inwardly, unsure if that was the right question. It felt weird coming out.

She's quiet for a long time. The only sounds are a blood-red cardinal alighting on one of the skeletal branches stretching overhead and my boots in the fresh snow.

"Shitty. It makes me feel shitty." Her voice isn't bitter anymore. It's angry. "I don't know what to do. I don't want to enable her behavior. I don't want to be the reason she thinks it's okay to get black-out drunk and be abusive, but she's my mom. What if something happens to her?"

"She's a grown woman," I tell her quietly. "She can make her own choices. You're protecting yourself. You can't play that game."

"I know. I know it's not rational. Trust me, I know. You know, my therapist knows, we all know. It doesn't mean I don't worry. It doesn't mean I don't second guess myself."

She falls silent, and my lips twist to the side as I consider that. "You don't just mean about your mom."

"No. I don't, Jacob. I told you... I'm not in a great place at the moment."

"I'm here for you." It rolls off my tongue, an easy promise. A true one.

"I know. I know you are."

The tangle of naked branches and brambles all around us ends as the pathway opens up to a field dotted with gnarled trees, all growing in neat rows. Some of the more particular species are espaliered to support structures, all to allow the perfect growth.

"We're here." My chest tightens with anticipation.

"Where?" she asks, still looking up at me.

Gently, I set her down on her feet, jerking my chin at the rows and rows of trees in front of us.

“The reason I bought this place when I got traded here.”

CHAPTER 16



CAMERON

I tilt my head, the neck of the huge yellow jacket falling open, cold wind whipping across my neck, sending my hair flying all around my head.

“You didn’t,” I say, slapping at Jacob’s arm in disbelief. “You did not.”

“I did. I so did.”

It’s an apple orchard. Thanks to the strangest journalism class assignment of my life, I recognize it, the textbook way the branches are pruned, the thick trunks surrounded by hardware cloth to protect them from hungry animals in the dead of winter.

“You’ve been brainwashed by them. Incredible. Ye olde apple grower Derek is going to shit his pants with envy.”

“He helped me a lot with figuring out the best spray schedule.”

“You spray them yourself?” I am agog. I am adrift. For some reason, this is blowing my mind. “Crusty old Derek helped you? The meanest apple grower admin this side of the Atlantic?” Derek rules that apple grower group on Facebook with an iron fist, a shining example to totalitarians everywhere.

“No, I don’t have the time these babies need. A farmer takes care of them for me, we have a profit share thing going on. I get a lot of the crop in the fall too. I have a shit ton of apple butter.”

“A shit ton, huh? Appetizing.”

He grins at me. “Wanna see them?”

“Hell yeah, I do.” I follow him at a snail’s pace, greatly hindered by the fact all my clothes are about fifteen sizes too big. I’m pretty sure I’m also making the snow look yellow. Not a cute realization. Maybe burning these for warmth would be a favor to us and to Ty.

“These are my White Pearmains, all heirloom. Next row are the Black Limbertwigs, after that are some, uh, I can’t remember what they’re called, but they all have pink flesh. They’re pretty. You’ll love them.”

“Rootstock?” I pull that question right out of my ass, where I store all the best questions.

“That’s my girl,” he says, laughing, patting the trunk of the nearest tree. “M111. Dwarf. They were here when I bought the place. I love walking around out here as they grow. It’s really cool to see the trees go from covered in flowers to little fruits and then watch them turn into something you can eat.”

He’s lit up, the way he only gets about football or food.

“Like magic,” I say quietly, unable to keep the grin off my face.

“Exactly. Like magic. Do you like it?”

A little laugh of disbelief puffs out of me, freezing in front of my face. “It’s amazing. It’s definitely magical.”

Maybe not the process of fruit growing, but that he held onto that piece of us—of me—so hard, and so tight, that he bought this house for the orchard behind it.

He takes his gloves off, and I shake my head at him, wide-eyed. “What are you doing? Your fingers are going to freeze.”

Snow falls lightly all around us, light drifting through the still-heavy clouds. It’s so quiet, so quiet as he walks back towards me, shoving his gloves in his coat pocket.

The happy smile on his face is reflected on mine as he cups my face, his hands startlingly warm compared to my cold cheeks, his mouth shockingly hot on mine. Snow melts where it lands along my brow, water slowly trickling onto his waiting fingertips.

This kiss is different than the last. It’s not heat, it’s not burning desire and lust.

It’s apple blossoms in spring, the petals falling in summer, bearing fruit in the fall.

It's a promise of things to come.

A dull roar grows louder on the edge of my awareness, and I frown, pulling away from Jacob.

“What is that?”

“That's the answer to our power problems.”

A second later, I see it, a black dot heading out of the woods. Then a bright... pink one? I squint. Is that pink?

“Snowmobiles?” I ask, feeling like an idiot. “Who has snowmobiles out here?”

“The former quarterback for the Wilmington Beavers.”

“Oh my god, is that Kelsey and Daniel?” I squeal, excited to see Kelsey. “Why the hell does he have a snowmobile?”

“Because he's an old man with too much time and too much money.”

“Shut up,” I tell him, laughing, waving my hands over my head.

“Oh, there's no way in hell they don't see you, my little radioactive Peep.”

I snort, looking down at myself. “You're not wrong. What was he thinking with this?”

“It's a good thing he's smarter than his fashion sense implies,” Jacob replies.

“Aw, that's sweet. Brotherly love,” I say.

“You're not the only one in therapy,” he grumbles, and I hardly hear him over the roar of the pink and black snowmobiles zooming towards us at an impossibly fast clip.

I grin up at him though, grabbing his hand in mine. Or trying to. The oversized glove means I just kind of flap my hand at him ineffectively, and we both burst out laughing at the ridiculousness of it.

By the time Kelsey and Daniel have pulled alongside the row of trees, he's kissing me again, featherlight and delicious, as crisp as the snow still lightly falling all around.

“Cameron?” Kelsey screams my name, and I pull away from Jacob, waving at her. Well, flapping my giant yellow glove at her. “What the hell?”

“Oh, you mean me and Jacob? Together again?” I try to bat my eyelashes, but it’s cold enough that I’m starting to have trouble feeling them at all.

“What’s wrong with your eye?” Kelsey asks, adorable in a white snowsuit and hot pink knit beanie with a perfect little pom on top. Her blonde hair’s draped in a long braid over one shoulder, and I am afraid to know what the hell she sees when she looks at me.

“Just practicing my wink,” I tell her.

“Uh-huh. Keep practicing,” she says, laughing, staring between me and Jacob like she’s never seen either one of us before.

“You didn’t tell her?” Jacob asks Daniel, who gives him the patented man handshake-hug move.

“And ruin the surprise? Nah. I thought you two might want to tell us what happened yourselves, so we brought more than just the portable generator and fuel. I thought we could have a little party.” Daniel clasps Jacob by the shoulders, grinning at me through his much fuller salt-and-pepper beard. “Did you not use the tech I recommended to service this fall?”

“Don’t rub it in,” Jacob tells Daniel, and I scrunch my cheeks, trying to get some feeling back in my face.

“I’m just trying to help,” Daniel says, a hand over his heart like he’s never been so wounded in his life. “Next time I’ll make the appointment for you.”

“You’re such a dad,” Jacob grumbles.

“Not yet,” Kelsey says, laughing. “Alright, let’s get the hell out of here. It’s freezing.” She pulls me close, hugging me tight. “You better tell me fucking everything.”

“Well, that’s a lot of fucking to tell you about,” I say glibly.

“I’m serious,” she hisses under her breath. “I thought you never wanted to see him again. I thought you hated him! You wouldn’t tell me shit. So you better spill because if he fucks you over, I’m gonna use the cargo sled on this beautiful Barbie-pink snowmobile to haul his dead body where no one will ever find it.”

“That’s a ride or die right there,” I say, and we both laugh despite the small, blistering worry that’s worming through me.

It’s too new. It’s too fresh. I don’t want to let Kelsey and Daniel into our snow globe.

I’m not ready to be a thing, a couple, in front of other people.

Hell, I’m still getting used to the idea.

But I smile anyway, and when Jacob beams at me, it turns into a real smile, and I climb onto the back of the pink snowmobile, leaving Jacob to climb on behind Daniel.

No way am I *not* riding the Barbie-pink one. It’s called priorities.

Besides, I definitely want to stay on Kelsey’s good side.

Sometimes she scares me.

CHAPTER 17



CAMERON

How Kelsey's braid is staying neat and pretty is absolutely beyond me. Sure, she has on cute little mirrored ski goggles, but the wind alone feels like it's whipping straight through my soul. My eyes are shut as tight as possible, and I didn't think it was possible to feel my pores freezing over, but here we are!

Thankfully, we're not far from Jacob's house, and I tempt fate by peeling one eye open to squint through the wind just as Kelsey slows the hot pink snowmobile. We come to a stop on the circular drive in front of his house, and I'm struck again by how picturesque this place is. And how huge.

It's a huge, icing-coated gingerbread house, and it's stunning with the fresh layer of snow. I barely registered it when we first got here, in shock and out of sorts, and now... now it's hitting me just how big it really is.

It's an absurd amount of space for Jacob and his brother, even if they're hosting their parents every other month or however often they come to visit. This house could easily fit a family of twelve. And their cousins. And grandparents.

It's nothing like how I grew up—shuttled from apartment to apartment, never owning more than I could pack in my sky-blue JanSport backpack. That little backpack saw me through some shit, its suede bottom patched with tie-dye duct tape, the little pins I collected as a kid affixed to the front patch.

It's still in my tiny closet in my own shitty apartment, and sometimes, I have to fight the urge to pack it up, just in case.

Jacob's home situation always was wildly different than mine.

I swallow against the lump in my throat. Kelsey turns the key over, and the noise of the engine dies.

“We'll let the dudes figure out the generator.”

“We should help,” I say. “I don't mind.”

“I don’t mind helping either, but they don’t need it, and besides, if you don’t tell me everything. Immediately. I. Will. Die.”

I cringe, and Kelsey laughs.

“Do not even try to act like you aren’t happy. I have never seen you like that.”

“Dressed like a radioactive marshmallow?”

“That too, but no, Cam, the way you were with Jacob. Don’t think I didn’t see you kissing him. Or the way you two looked at each other.”

Our footsteps crunch through the snow in time, and I turn her words over in my head. “Jacob and I... He was my first love.” My only love, a little voice says in my head, but I keep that for myself, hoarding it like precious treasure.

“Eeee,” Kelsey squeals, clapping her gloved hands together. Her cheeks are ruddy with cold, and her brown eyes sparkle. “This is so damn cute. So why did I think you hated him? Did it end badly?”

I push the front door open, stupidly expecting heat to blast me in the face before remembering the reason Kelsey and Daniel are here at all is because the generator broke. Or something.

“Cam.” Kelsey puts her hand on my wrist. “I meant what I said. You say the word, and we’re out of here.”

I make myself laugh. “I know, Kelsey. You’re a good friend.”

“Nah, I’m your best friend. There’s a difference.”

My laugh is real this time. “I know.”

“The difference is the quality of the alibi.” She wears a devilish grin as she looks around the Matthews brothers’ house. “This place is nice. I’ve been here once or twice to see Savannah.”

“It’s huge.”

“Bigger than your apartment,” Kelsey adds loftily. “Now tell me everything while I build a fire in the fireplace.” She points to the stack of wood next to the fireplace. “We’ll set up our little frosty picnic in here and get comfy while the dudes do their thing outside.”

“I broke up with Jacob. After he proposed. Right after we graduated.” The words trickle out, each accompanied by a painful memory of that night, of his face, of the way it felt to tell him I had to do my own thing. Had to be my own person.

Stand on my own two feet without anyone holding me back or asking me to move.

The overwhelming urge to cry hits me, spiced with a hit of panic, the feeling that informed my every breath as a kid and then a teenager. God, I hated moving by the end. Hated starting over, a new school every year if I was lucky, twice a year if I wasn’t. Finding my mom passed out drunk on whatever sofa we’d found on the side of the road when I got home from meeting teachers, getting paperwork, getting packets, getting picked on.

Making sure she was breathing before I locked myself in my room and studied, studied, studied, determined not to be like her.

To get out.

Getting out, getting free—it was the mantra that informed every painful night. Every time she broke up with some guy, each worse than the last. The way I wedged anything I could against the doorknob when they spent the night.

Just in case.

“You’re white as a sheet. Cam? What the hell is wrong?”

“Jacob and I got together when I was... really young. We both were. I ended it because I just... I wanted to,” I shake my head, the words thick and shakey. “I needed to live on my own. I couldn’t—I couldn’t move around like that. I needed to know I could do it. That I could be successful. That I didn’t need anyone to fall back on.”

Kelsey's eyes go round and she nods, then envelops me in a hug. I barely feel her through Tyler's massive snowsuit, but the panic recedes a bit anyway.

"Your mom is a fuck-up," she tells me. "You know how I feel about that. You did what you had to do to survive. You lived for you."

"I know." A tear slips out, and Kelsey knocks it off my cheek.

"Not on my watch!" she yells, channeling Daniel Harrison's quarterback voice. "It's too cold for that. Your eyes will freeze shut."

I laugh, the sound slightly wet. "You're full of shit."

"No, I had hot coffee this morning." She flips her braid over her shoulder.

"Kelsey, that's disgusting." I snort though, and she beams at me.

"I brought you coffee, too." She pats her chest, and I realize with a start that she's wearing some kind of pack under her jacket. "I probably could have put it outside my jacket but I was worried it was going to fall off."

"Coffee," I breathe.

Kelsey pulls her gloves off with her teeth, then unzips her coat, and a huge Stanley thermos swings out from a strap on her chest.

"Okay, if I know you, and I do, Cammie-boo-boo-bear, you are panicking over whatever is going on with you and Jacob. So why don't you drink some coffee, take a dump if you need to—"

"Kelsey!"

"I am not above poop jokes to keep you from crying," she shrugs, unscrewing the lid to the thermos and pouring me a steaming cup. It's slightly milky and sweet, just the way I like.

"You are the best."

"Takes one to know one."

I gratefully take the little cup from her, and I perch on the edge of the couch as Kelsey expertly builds a fire in the fireplace.

“I didn’t know you could do that.”

“Daniel and I have been camping a lot lately. It’s fun. That’s why we have the snowmobiles, we’ve been taking them up to the Poconos. He taught me.”

“Normal things.”

“Nothing about any of these guys is normal. At all. But that doesn’t mean it’s bad,” she says, shooting me a perceptive look over one shoulder. “Tell me what happened.”

“You know how it started—”

“Car accident, white knight, romantic as fuck, yes, now how did you get here?” She finds a canister of long matches on the mantel and strikes one against the stone. It flares to life, and she carefully thrusts it into the fireplace.

“It was as natural as breathing. He’s... he’s a great guy. Always was. It was never him, never. It was me.”

“They’re so single-minded, right? It’s uncanny.” She shivers, watching the fire catch before turning back to me. “Drink your damn coffee,” she instructs.

I do as she says, draining the cup. She immediately takes it from me, filling it back up. “So when did you have sex? Right away?”

“This morning.” It slips out naturally, before I realize Kelsey’s interrogating me. “Damn. You’re good.”

“Duh. And it was good?”

“Great.” I shut myself up by draining the cup again, and Kelsey fills it back up automatically.

“Now what?”

“Now... I don’t know.”

“You want to be with him?”

“Yes.”

“Then that’s what you do.”

“You make it sound so easy,” I object as she scrutinizes me.

“What part of it is hard? Just... see what happens.”

“I will,” I tell her, and I know it’s true. “I will,” I repeat, this time saying it for myself. “I owe us both another chance.”

“You owe yourself happiness. I know... I see you, Cam, you know that, right? I see you hiding how unhappy you are sometimes.”

“That obvious, huh?” It comes out slightly cold and I sigh, pinching the bridge of my nose and settling back into the couch.

“Not to everyone, no. Do you want to talk about it? Or do you want to talk about Jacob? Sex? Your mom? Or do you want me to shut up?”

I glance side-long at her, a half-smile turning one side of my mouth up. “Please never say the words *your mom* and *sex* in the same breath ever again.”

“Cross my heart and hope to die,” Kelsey promises.

Slowly, I pull my hands out of the massive gloves that are hanging onto my wrists for dear life, holding them out the fire that’s caught successfully on the hearth.

“It’s work. More than anything, it’s work. This new thing with Jacob—it’s too new. It’s not him. My mom isn’t in the picture, not in any meaningful way. So yeah. It’s work.”

Kelsey’s mouth’s agape, her eyes wide. “Work? You love your job.”

“I hate our boss.”

“He’s a grade-A asshole, you know I’m not going to argue with that,” she says slowly. “But the work itself? You’re so damn good at it.”

Sighing, I slump into the couch, flinging my head back—which proves to be a bad choice, considering the fact I’m still sore. “I feel like such a whiny brat for saying this because I

look at where I came from, what I pulled myself out of, you know, and this little part of me says, you should just suck it up and be grateful. Shut up and take it, you know? Look at my life, look where I am, what I have.”

“But you’re not happy,” Kelsey says softly, her pretty eyes full of emotion. “Your heart’s not in it.”

I nod, unable to agree out loud. If I say it, if I actually say it to my best friend, my coworker, it feels like I can’t take it back.

It feels like I should do *something* about it. What the hell do you do when you’re unhappy with the career you spent your whole life trying to get?

I have no idea, and I’m not ready to figure that out.

I’m not ready to do anything but sip the thermos of coffee Kelsey so thoughtfully brought along, enjoy the fire Kelsey made like a real-life Camping Barbie, and wait for Jacob to come back inside so I can bask in the glow of his smile.

CHAPTER 18



JACOB

“**Y**ou seem good, man,” Harrison says, brushing his palms against each other. The portable generator he brought on the back of his snowmobile took no time at all to start up, and coupled with the thick, extra heavy-duty extension cord he brought, Cam and I should be able to ride out the rest of the storm here.

“I am good,” I tell him. “Really good.”

“Cameron’s a catch,” he adds, and that fatherly tone is back in place.

I raise an eyebrow. “I know.”

“I don’t know what happened between you two, but she’s Kelsey’s best friend and—”

“She said no when I proposed after we graduated because she wanted her career. She didn’t want to move around. I would never hurt her. I have loved her most of my adult life.”

That shuts him up.

It might be more than I’ve ever said to him all at once that wasn’t about football or idle small talk, too.

“Okay then,” Harrison says, handing me the extension cord. “That settles that.”

“What?”

“Kelsey told me to kick your ass if you were treating her friend wrong.” He lets out a reluctant chuckle. “I told her I was too old to kick anyone’s ass, and if she didn’t want to stay here with you, we would take Cameron back to my house until the storm passed.”

“That’s actually really nice of you.” I clap a hand on his shoulder. “If I were a jackass, I’d want you to do that for her.”

Harrison scratches his beard for a second, then shakes his head, grinning at me. “I brought a bunch of camping supplies if you want to stay here. Or you could both come back with us to my place.”

“No.” It pops out before I have a chance to think it through. “Unless Cameron wants to,” I grudgingly add.

“I get it. I don’t really want you two cramping our style, either.”

I hold up a hand. “Please don’t say anything else.”

Daniel laughs, and we walk back around to the side door, running the cord to the portable generator behind us.

“There’s a camp shower in there, a nice one with a couple propane canisters to give you hot water. Do you have emergency water?” he asks. “If you’re on well—”

“No, we don’t have well water. And yes, I have emergency five-gallon jugs in the basement.”

“Cool. You can just stick the tube in the jug and have a shower then.” Daniel keeps telling me about all the expensive-ass camping gear he’s brought over, and I listen dutifully, all the while wondering if Cameron and I should go over to his house for a few days.

Together, we hook the fridge up to the power cord, ensuring the food won’t spoil, then we unpack the rest of Harrison’s sled full of camping shit until my kitchen looks like an REI and a survivalist both threw up in it, foil-wrapped MREs and all.

“You must love camping,” I finally say. Some of my sarcasm must bleed through because Daniel skewers me with a long look.

“You’re the one deciding to rough it out here until the power comes back when you could stay with us.”

I have to laugh. “Fair enough. I’ll ask Cam what she wants to do.”

The sound of female laughter ricochets through the house, loud enough to make Daniel smile reflexively, and I jerk my chin in the direction of the living room.

Daniel nods back, and we join the women, who’ve started a fire and, somehow, have managed to put out a full charcuterie board of snacks.

“I helped myself to your pantry,” Cam tells me, sprawled next to the fire, the putrid yellow designer parka Ty bought draped around her like a king-sized duvet. “I hope that’s okay.”

“My food is your food,” I tell her, meaning it. Loving it, that she decided she felt safe enough here not just to get food out, but to find a pretty plate to put it on. “I like the snowflake platter.” Piles of crackers are arranged next to a few hunks of cheese, along with a couple dried sausages and salamis that I guarantee Ty and Savannah bought for something just like this.

“She’s the hostess with the mostest,” Kelsey chimes in.

“Martha Stewart can suck it,” Cam says. “Daniel, thank you so much. Kelsey, you too. Thank you.”

“Let me go get the space heater and we can plug that in, too.”

I tug my phone out of my pocket, jogging to the basement and throwing open the door. It takes me a minute to find the space heater, and when I find a second one next to it, still in the box, I send up a silent thank you to Ty who, now that I think about it, bought it on Black Friday last year... just in case.

I will never make fun of his emergency supply hoarding again.

Unless the occasion calls for it, of course. Then I’ll be forced to make fun of him all over again, according to my universally protected sibling rights.

A bright light shines in my direction, on the floor though, not blinding me, thankfully.

“Hey man,” Daniel jogs over, grabbing one of the heaters and heaving it over a shoulder, flashlight in one hand. “I’ll take this one. Thought you might need a light.”

“You brought a flashlight?” I’m kind of irritated I didn’t think to bring one down here. I make a mental note to stop taking power and heat for granted.

“Never can be too prepared,” he answers.

Grunting, I pick up the second space heater and then grab the infamous box of cords, grinning to myself in the dark, anticipating Cameron’s reaction to them as Daniel waits at the bottom of the stairs,.

CHAPTER 19



CAMERON

As Jacob and Daniel reappear, the first thing I notice is the smirk on Jacob's face. When I catch sight of the navy-blue plastic case overflowing with cords of every kind, I burst out laughing, nearly spitting coffee all over Kelsey.

"Oh my god. I mean, I know you said you still had it, but —" I shake my head, laughing too hard.

"Had what?" Kelsey looks between us, and Daniel starts unboxing what looks to be a massive space heater.

"That box of cords."

"What?" Jacob shrugs a shoulder, putting down another heater and patting his plastic crate protectively. "Had some of these babies since high school. They're collector's items."

"My ass is a collector's item," I say through laughs.

"I don't disagree." He waggles his eyebrows at me, and we grin at each other like idiots until Kelsey clears her throat. "You won't be complaining when I get everything hooked up in here."

"You're not wrong," I tell him.

"Before we do, though, Harrison invited us back to his place to stay until the roads clear. Would you rather do that than rough it here?"

"We'll be fine here," I say, so quickly that Kelsey snorts.

"Smooth," she says, and I stuff some rosemary crackers in my mouth to give myself something to do besides blush in embarrassment.

"Do you need help?" Kelsey asks, halfway through spreading some kind of cheese on a cracker.

"Nah, babe, just sit there and enjoy the show," Daniel responds, flexing his arm, which no one can see, considering we're all still wearing snow jackets. The fire's blazing, but it's

not putting off nearly enough heat to make me want to take off my coat. Not yet, anyway.

Kelsey pops the cracker and cheese in her mouth, sighing in contentment as she scoots further into the couch. “There are worse ways to spend a day. This is kinda fun.”

Jacob pulls one of the heaters close to us, the cord running around the couch, and when it turns on, whirring faintly and fanning heat across my face, I can’t disagree.

Sure, we’re snowed in.

Sure, the power’s out.

But I have heat, I have snacks, I have my best friend... and I have Jacob.

I feel happier than I have in a really, really long time.



HALF A DAY LATER, THE SOUND OF KELSEY AND DANIEL’S snowmobiles fade into the distance, whatever weak sunlight is streaming through the pregnant clouds overhead fading as it begins snowing again in earnest.

Jacob’s arm rests around my waist as we watch the snow fall. “That was nice,” he says.

“Daniel is so old,” I say, and Jacob chuckles. “I don’t mean that badly, like, he’s a nice guy, but I swear, he didn’t get half of our references. I’m glad Kelsey is happy with him, though.”

“He’s only forty,” Jacob says, still laughing.

“Ancient,” I say knowingly. “Wise.”

“You’ll be there in another, what, twelve years?”

“Thanks for the reminder,” I say glumly.

“Hey, guess what, though?” He spins me around. “I’ll always be older than you.”

“By a year,” I say. We walk through the side door of the house, the sliding door not quite closing thanks to the

generator cord in the way. It's dark inside, but not in a bad way—it's cozy, safe-feeling, especially with Jacob at my side.

“A year is a year.”

“I can't believe you want to be—” I yelp, my thought cut off as a popping sound echoes through the house. A second later, the lights turn on, and heat immediately starts blowing through the vents.

“Yessss!” I yell, fist pumping. “Let there be light.”

“I've got the power,” Jacob says mildly.

We stare at each other for a second, then we both burst out laughing.

“That was a terrible joke,” I tell him, finally catching my breath.

“Yours was worse. Some might even say it was heretical. Blasphemous.”

I roll my eyes, still smiling. “That's me. Blasphemer in Chief. Should I go unplug everything? I feel bad they brought that generator over and then we immediately got power back.”

“Did you have a good day?”

I blink.

“Did you have fun on our first double date on our second try?” He rubs my cheek, smiling softly down at me.

“Yeah.” I nod my head. “I did. I loved it.” It seemed so natural, so easy. With none of the usual worry that my date was going to say something god-awful or embarrassing or turn out to be a jerk.

It almost seems like I know Jacob better than I know myself.

“Then it was worth it. Besides, we didn't know when power was going to come back. It could still go back out. Better safe than sorry. Let me just go turn off the generator.” He unplugs the huge power strip, then grabs the loose cord and takes it outside.

I watch him through the huge sliding glass door, unwilling to let him out of my eyesight. It gives me a strange fluttering feeling to be near him, that first flush of excitement at being with someone romantically stronger than ever, like a honeymoon period on steroids.

Because there isn't any worry with him. Jacob is everything he seems to be. He's never had a hidden agenda.

It's me that's the problem, it's always been me.

But I'm... I'm different now. I bite my lower lip, worrying at it as Jacob tromps back through the door, closing and locking it behind him, then pulling his snow boots off.

Oh. I should do that too. I don't have to unlace them or unbuckle them like Jacob. Nope, all I have to do is point and shake my foot and Ty's boots slide right off.

"He brought a camp shower," Jacob says, holding up a weird-looking piece of equipment that was sitting on the counter.

"Huh?" I don't have a clue what that means.

"I was looking forward to having to help you shower with it," he continues, a little glum.

I stare at him for a beat before shaking my head. "You're upset because we can use a real shower?"

He comes close, scooting me back between his big body and the countertop. "Yeah," he whispers, kissing the side of my neck. "I had this fantasy going all day."

"Is that right?" I melt against him, shoving my cold hands under his coat, and he sucks in a breath as my icy little fingers grip his sides. Damn. Obliques for days. "What about?"

"About holding the shower up for you. Rinsing you down, watching you wash that beautiful body."

"You know, I think we can make this happen still."

"But we have power," he says sadly.

I try not to laugh, I really do, but it comes out anyway, a cross between a snort and an oink. Very sexy stuff.

“You can help me shower in your shower. The real one. We don’t need a camp shower. How about that?”

No sooner has the question left my mouth than Jacob swings me over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes, racing for his bedroom.

CHAPTER 20



JACOB

It's like all my dreams come true at once. I don't know what I did to deserve Cameron in my arms right now, whose uncontrollable giggles make me grin as I run her as fast as I can to the bedroom and on through to the bathroom.

When I set her down on the floor, though, she immediately starts to slip, pinwheeling her arms as her dozen layers of socks fail to provide enough traction. Wild, contagious laughter trips out of her as I steady her in my hands, so full of life that I'm laughing too.

"Probably should take those off," she says on a gasp. "Why is this so funny?"

"I have no idea." I love it, though. I love hearing her laugh. It might be my favorite sound in the whole world. "I missed that."

"What?"

"Your laugh." I crouch down, pulling her foot onto my knee and peeling her layers of socks off. I press a kiss against her ankle. "Your stinky feet."

"They do *not* stink."

"Uh-huh." I motion for the other foot, and she holds onto my shoulders as I repeat the process on her left foot. "They do. But that's okay because I'm going to get you really clean before I get you really dirty."

"As long as you find that, uh, spot again."

"Oh, I think I can manage that."

She starts to unzip the hideous highlighter-yellow coat, but I gently pull her hands away and do it myself. "I want to unwrap you like a present."

"A stinky present," she says, another laugh trickling out. "Sweating like I'm late to a final for a class I forgot I was taking."

She laughs harder, and I kiss her mouth, wanting to capture that musical sound. She wraps her arms around my neck, kissing me harder as I continue to take her clothes off.

“You are pretty sweaty,” I finally admit, grinning at her.

“Good thing you’ve been fantasizing about soaping me up.” She pops the P, shucking the oversized pants before jumping over the tile lip of the shower and reaching for the faucet.

“You might want to wait—”

Cameron turns the water on before I finish the sentence, then immediately screeches, shuffling away from the shower head.

“—for the water to heat up.”

“Get in here and get me warm,” she demands, pointing. “Russian winter. Body heat. NOW.”

“Russian winter,” I echo, pulling off my clothes to join hers on the floor. I step into the shower. “Is that right?”

“Yes, absolutely, now come here,” she says, tugging me into her body, clinging onto me like a baby sloth.

“Shit, that is cold.”

“You’re telling me!”

“I did try to warn you.”

“I know.”

“It’s going to take a minute to heat up because the tank hasn’t been on to keep it warm.”

“I know that now,” she says, her face buried in between my arm and my chest. “I was just excited to... well, to not be stinky.”

“I like the way you stink.”

“That is fucking weird,” she pulls away just enough that I can see her expression, a cross between disdain and pure amusement.

“It’s true.”

She raises her arm, fanning her underarm at me.

“Okay,” I say, coughing. “Maybe I exaggerated. You know, you can borrow my deodorant until you leave.”

We both stiffen, staring at each other.

Slowly, steam fills the bathroom, and Cam relaxes against me once again.

“You don’t have to leave.” The words skip out of my mouth like rocks on the surface of a lake, arcing dramatically between us. “You could stay.”

“Do I have to use your deodorant if I do?”

I chuckle, running my hands up and down her back. “I think we could probably make a run into town for your stuff. Or we could just buy you all new things. Whatever you want, Cameron.”

She tilts her head up, regarding me with those big brown eyes. “What if I say yes? What if I move in here? Is that really what you want? Isn’t it too fast?”

“Maybe if I picked you up on the side of the road and you were a total stranger,” I say, unable to stop smiling at her. Is she seriously considering it?

Best fucking day ever.

“But you’re not a stranger. You’re Cameron,” I continue.

“We hadn’t spoken in years,” she says, and a surge of triumph goes through me at the glittering in her eyes. “And you did rescue me off the side of the road. I might as well be a stranger.”

I hold her naked body close, backing us up under the shower head, letting the hot water trail between our bodies.

“You’ll never be a stranger to me, Cam. I have been hoping you’d see that for months now. Since I saw you at the Beaver Ball. And you told me we could be friends.”

“Well, we can be friends,” she says, biting her bottom lip so hard it turns white. I kiss it, moving my hands up to her shoulders, cupping her face.

“Do friends do that?” I ask her.

“I always want you to be my friend, no matter what, Jacob Matthews,” she says, kissing me lightly back. “I never didn’t want to be your friend.”

Unable to resist her, I cup her breasts, running my calloused thumbs across her nipples. “Do friends do this?” Leaning down, I capture the tip of her breast with my mouth, sucking hard, eliciting a gasp from her.

“Cam, I have loved you for years.” My voice is husky. “I have loved you always, no matter what. I always hoped you would find your way back to me, and now you’re here, in my arms, and I might be selfish, I might be stupid, but I don’t want to let you go. I love you still.”

“Jacob.” Her voice cracks on my name, and tears begin to streak down her face as she watches me.

I wipe them away, my gaze darting between her whiskey-brown eyes. “Tell me I’m stupid.” I don’t want her to.

“You’re not stupid, Jacob. I just don’t understand it, I guess. Look at me.”

I do, slowly, dragging my gaze up and down her naked body, getting harder by the second. “Oh, I am looking.”

“No, I mean, I’m a mess. I... Jacob, my life isn’t what I wanted.”

“Why does that mean you don’t understand how I feel for you?” I wipe another tear from her cheek. “I want to be there for you while you figure it out. I always did. I wanted to figure it all out, life, our future, together.”

“What if I want to quit my job? What if you get traded and we have to move?”

I sigh, trying to pick the right words. “Cam, if that job isn’t the one you want, fuck it. I will help you figure out what you want to do next. I will hold your hand while you do it. But you will figure it out because that’s you. I’ve always loved how determined you are, how hard you work.”

She nods, her throat bobbing, her now-wet hair plastered to her throat and shoulders. “And if you get traded?”

“Then you get to pick our new house, or I quit and we stay here.”

“You would quit?”

“For you? Fuck yeah. This is a job.”

“Don’t act like it’s just a job. This is your dream.”

“It was. But it’s not the dream I had without you in it.”

Her eyes get wider, her mouth parting in surprise as she digests that. Then, to my surprise, she slaps me lightly across the chest. “You are not quitting, you poop head.”

“Poop head?” I throw back my head and laugh. “Good one.”

“Jacob, I’m scared.” She shakes her head, frowning, but at least she’s stopped crying. “I don’t want to... hurt either of us.”

“Then you won’t. We’ll take it one day at a time, and I’ll tell you I love you whenever you need to hear it.”

“As easy as that, huh?” She’s smiling, though, and it’s the best fucking thing I’ve ever seen in my life.

“As easy as that. Against the odds, against all the odds, we’ll make it work.” I grin at her, winking slowly.

“Not fair. You know I can’t resist a challenge.” She stamps her little foot, and I reach behind me, grabbing the soap off the shower shelf.

“I didn’t say I was going to play fair. I never said that.” I go to my knees, and she gasps.

“Don’t you dare propose.”

“I’m going to wash your feet because they smell like cheese,” I tell her, trying not to laugh in her face. “I know better than to propose with a bar of soap, too. Next time I do it, it will be just right. You’ll say yes, too.”

“Is that right?” Her smile sparks, and something in my chest catches fire from it.

“Fuck yeah.”

She raises her foot when I motion for it, and I work up a lather as she sighs, relaxing against me. Once I’m satisfied she’s clean, I work my way up her legs.

“You know, I think I might need something different to get this perfectly clean,” I murmur, running my fingers between her thighs.

“You’re not playing fair, not at all,” she says, gasping at my touch.

I fucking love it, I love all the little sounds she makes. I love that I still know what she needs, what she wants, and I love that I’m not afraid to give her everything I have. I love that we had some time apart.

But what I love most of all is that she’s here with me now, and I’m going to do everything in my power to keep her right here. I dip my wet fingers into her folds, and she shudders, clinging to my shoulders.

“Don’t tease me,” she says, all breathless and sexy, and I can’t help the self-satisfied laugh that comes out of me.

“Sit,” I say, then half carry her to the tiled bench in the other corner of the walk-in shower. I prop her legs on top of my shoulders, relishing the way her nails dig into my scalp as I show her exactly how much I want her to stay with me, one lick at a time.

CHAPTER 21



CAMERON

It doesn't take long at all for Jacob to wind me up, immediately falling into a rhythm with his mouth and fingers that has me panting, begging for more.

Which he gives to me, enthusiastically, repeatedly, as I say his name.

“Jacob.” I push at his head, at his shoulders, wanting him to feel as good as I do, wanting to show him just how much he means to me.

It takes him a second to stop, but when his lust-addled gaze meets mine, I manage to squirm far enough away from him that he gets the picture.

“My turn.” The words come out chock-full of devious glee, and I pull him up, the shower still going, filling the air with blissfully warm steam. After a day of trying to stay warm, it's like heaven.

Jacob kisses me as he gets to his feet, and I fall into his arms.

After years of trying to be my best self on my own, it's better than heaven.

He's been there, waiting for me all this time, and knowing that—hearing him say that—it heals so many of the hurts in my heart. It answers a question I didn't even know I was asking.

Am I good enough? Do I deserve to be loved? Do I deserve to be happy?

Every kiss Jacob gives me is a silent yes, that I am enough. That I deserve love. That I deserve happiness, and that while I might be a mess, while I might not know where I'm going career-wise—I can figure it out.

And he wants to be with me while I do.

I couldn't ask for a better man.

I couldn't have dreamed that I'd find my way back to him.

I am so damned glad I have.

I turn around so my butt's in the hot water streaming from the shower head, then tug him forward as I get comfortable.

“You don't have to do that—”

He groans as I take his cock in my hand, giving it a firm squeeze as I lick the head of it.

“I want to,” I say. “I want to make you feel good, too. I want to show you... how I feel.”

“Then I'm not going to fucking say no to it—oh *god*. Cameron.”

I love that reaction, the little hitch in his breath, the way his hands are in my hair now, the way his thighs are twitching as I take him as deep as I dare, sucking softly, then hard, remembering exactly what he likes.

There's no hesitation with Jacob, no wondering if I'm doing what he likes. We figured that out together, a long time ago.

It's even better now. There's no fumbling, no awkwardness—we know each other's bodies, and we're not nervous about sex.

“I need you now,” he grits out, and I pull away from him, feeling triumphant, only to be hauled into his arms. Wrapping my legs around him, I kiss his mouth, flushed with triumph and desire and the heat of the water.

A moment later, he gently thrusts into me and I cry out, so ready for him and still so surprised by how good it feels. He turns me around so my back's pressed against the still-cool tiled wall, and I hold onto him for dear life as I start to fall apart.

“You are everything,” he tells me, his mouth pressed against my ear as his hips drive into me, over and over again.

“Jake,” I manage, barely coherent, floating towards an orgasm, floating on the high of realizing everything I need to be happy is within reach.

“Pretty Cameron. My beautiful Cameron.” The words are so soft and sweet, and every loving thing he says to me soothes my scars, smooths the rough edges of my heart. “I missed you so much.”

It should be rough, sex in the shower, but this isn't just sex. This morning, yeah, that was wild and untamed and about lust.

This isn't.

“I'm so close,” I tell him, and he kisses me fiercely, holding my wet hair in a fist behind my head, protecting it from hitting the wall as he slams into me, filling me perfectly, blissfully.

This is what coming home feels like.

It's not a place, it's being in the arms of the person you love and trust more than anything in the world.

I might not have my life figured out, but I'm so glad I know that, at least.

“I love you,” he whispers, then louder as his motions turn jerky. “I love you, Cameron.”

“Love you so much,” I tell him, and I don't care if it's too soon. I don't care if I'm being stupid.

It's true, and he should know it, too.

I'm going to tell him every day.

EPILOGUE



CAMERON

The last two months have flown by. I can't believe how full my life is now. With Jacob in it, everything feels... right.

The ice finally melted, and we got my poor car towed, but it still feels like I'm in that snow globe full of promise. Every time I step into his house now—our house—life feels magical, charged with possibility.

I'm cuddled up with Jacob on the couch in the basement, where we're playing video games, the laziest of Saturdays before he's gone most weekends. I have so many jerseys with his name on them now, it's ridiculous.

Turns out being his girlfriend is just as fun as it was nearly ten years ago.

My phone vibrates on the cushion next to me, and I studiously ignore it.

Jacob pauses the game. "Check it."

"No." I shoot an alien, and it bleeds out while I run over the body on the screen.

"Check it, Cam."

"It's just going to be another rejection."

"You don't know that. You said your book was good. Is it good or not?"

"It's good. That doesn't mean anyone is going to want to represent it." Querying the novel I started that first day here has not been... fun. Rejection after rejection from literary agents have piled into my inbox, most of them loving the premise and the writing but... never quite being the right fit.

Now my phone vibrates and so does my anxiety. Good times.

Still.

Maybe I *can* make it as a novelist. Maybe I can quit my job, the job I no longer love as much as I love the idea of it. At least I got the boyfriend right. Just looking at him makes my whole body light up with happiness.

“Check it or I will.” He knifes an alien on the screen.

“Fine.” Sighing, I pause the game. “Happy?”

“No.” He squishes me to him, then gives me a purposefully sloppy kiss. “Now I am.”

“Gross,” I squeal, wiping his kiss off mine, then giggling as he tickles me on the ribs.

“Got you smiling, at least.”

“What if it’s another rejection?”

“The Cameron I know is not a quitter.”

“Fuck,” I say, then pick up my phone, which has somehow become as heavy as a lead weight. “Oh god, it’s an email from an agent.” Sweat breaks out on my palms. “I can’t.”

Not just any agent. My dream agent.

“I’m going to be sick,” I mumble, then throw my phone at him and bury my face in a blanket.

“I’m going to read it while you’re being sick,” he announces.

Fuck! I moan, making a noise that encapsulates all my feelings but is completely incoherent.

He’s quiet for a long time, and the stress sweat only gets worse.

God, I can’t remember if I put on deodorant.

“She hated it,” I finally burst out, throwing the blanket on the floor.

“Dear Cameron, thank you so much for sending me your women’s fiction novel. I loved it. Are you free to speak today? Let me know your availability, I would love to talk to you about your work and your vision for your career.”

“Shut up.” I stare at Jacob, and then he shows me the email, a huge, goofy grin on his face as I skim it. “I’m going to barf.”

“What? Isn’t this what you wanted?”

I fold to the ground, flopping onto my back and staring up at the basement ceiling.

“I’m just so happy.” I immediately burst into tears.

“Do you want me to write her back?” Jacob’s laughing. “I’m so proud of you, Cam. I fucking knew you could do it.”

“I did it,” I repeat, crying harder now.

“Do you need chocolate? We should celebrate.”

“I always need chocolate.” I whine the last word, still crying happy tears. “This is so dramatic.”

“I love your drama.” Jacob lies down next to me on the floor, then pulls me into his arms, typing out a response. “Well, look at that. You’re free to talk in two hours. That gives me enough to time to give you an orgasm and some chocolate.”

He sends the email, and I laugh as he plants a kiss on my forehead.

“Which do you want first?”

“Chocolate.”

Jacob makes a sound like a game show buzzer. “Wrong answer.”

He tosses my phone on the couch, kissing my neck, my collarbone. I melt underneath him, beyond happy.

He’s right.

Chocolate can definitely come second.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brittany writes hilariously hot romance.

When Brittany's not writing, she's usually keeping her kids from jumping off things they have no business jumping off of and daydreaming about going on a date with her husband.

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