



THE  
PUCK  
AND  
THE

*International  
Bestselling Author*  
Tara Brown

 Girl Next Door



# GIRL NEXT DOOR

---

PUCK BUDDIES SERIES

TARA BROWN

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## **GIRL NEXT DOOR**

Book Four in the Puck Buddies Series

Part One of the final books in the series!

As the cast and crew of the Puck Buddies series is so extensive, I've had to cut the final story for these guys into two parts to ensure all the happy endings.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

Copyright 2020 Tara Brown

This is a work of fiction.

All names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

Text Copyright © 2020 Tara Brown

This work is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This work may not be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the express written consent of the publisher.

Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author. No alteration of content is permitted.

Published by Tara Brown.

Printed in the United States of America

Cover Art by Dark Tree Designs

Edited by Andrea Burns

All rights reserved.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

Want to know when the next book is out?  
Or get free and exclusive content ahead of the line?

Join Tara's *Scream Queens* [here!](#)

Get in touch with Tara Brown!

Instagram - [Here!](#)

Facebook - [Here!](#)

Website - <https://www.tarabrownauthor.com>

Blog - <http://tarabrown22.blogspot.com>

Email - [tarabrownauthor@hotmail.com](mailto:tarabrownauthor@hotmail.com)

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# CONTENTS

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

The End

ALSO BY

About the Author

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

**T**uesday, June 13, 2017  
Jenny

The key ring jingles as I reach over the top of the fence with one hand and struggle with the gate latch while balancing two to-go cups of steaming coffee in the other. My boyfriend's extra hot latte burns my wet fingers through the damp sleeve over the paper cup. But the smell of java mixing with the early summer rain hints the miserable experience will be worth it as soon as I'm inside and out of this sudden downpour.

"Oh come on," I grumble at the bolt when my wet fingers slip trying to grab hold. I just get it, balancing and lifting the old gate with my boot to level the weight, but the leather slips on the drenched wood. The gate drops back down, pinching my finger in the rusty bolt.

"Ow!" I shout and pull my hand away, sending the key ring tumbling to the ground where it lands in the huge puddle on the other side of the fence.

Taking deep breaths, I whisper, "Shit," staring up at the cloudy sky and fighting my temper. I close my eyes as the rain tickles my face, certain this moment can't get worse.

Giving up on being careful, I spring into action. "You son of a—" I adjust the weekend bag on my shoulder and reach over again, roughly jerking back the latch, swinging the gate open wide, and hitting it on the fence, hard.



When I step over the deep puddle containing my key, I kick the stupid gate closed. It slams, vibrating from the impact.

With a slight sense of vindication, I blow some of the running rainwater off my face and squat with the coffees sloshing on my soaking wet clothes. It's a dark moment spent balancing and promising myself a quick shower and change before leaving for work after this. At least I've left enough of my work clothes at Ben's house that finding a suitable outfit won't be difficult.

His showerhead is better than mine; the water pressure is amazing. I'm daydreaming about it with my fingers deep in the dirty puddle, my manicure scraping along the cold mud, when I hear it.

A door and then a voice. A woman's voice.

"I swear I heard something, Ben, but I don't see anything," the woman speaks from the back door of Ben's house.

My blood runs as cold as the puddle I'm fishing in. I turn, certain I'm hearing things, but the barbecue and stairwell I'm crouched behind block my view of the back door.

The sky responds violently and the rain comes down harder.

"You sure?" Ben calls out over the pounding drops.

"It was a loud bang. I heard it, twice!" The voice is familiar.

"As, it was probably a car hitting a pothole." His voice is closer.

*As? He said, "As" like it was a name. The voice—oh my God.*

It's Aslin, his coworker. Why would she be at his house at eleven in the morning on his day off?

"The roads here are brutal in the spring. Come back to bed, babe." Ben chuckles that sexy, throaty laugh.

Bed?

*Babe?*

“Okay.” She giggles and I lose my grip on the coffees, spilling and sending them toppling into the puddle. They burst, adding brown liquid and an unsettling warmth to the water.

My whole body shivers with pins and needles.

Aslin is at Ben’s.

He told her to come back to bed.

He called her babe—he calls me that.

*Stupid Jenny.*

He probably calls everyone babe.

Actual comprehension of the situation hits but it isn’t gentle. It smacks me so hard I fall back, landing on my butt in the wet mud of his side yard.

Ben calls us all the same nickname like that fucking Reese Witherspoon movie so he doesn’t mix us up.

*Shit!*

*Shit!*

My stomach drops and my heart breaks. Tears stream my face, joining the rain but my tears are warmer.

As it always does, my traitorous mind tries to rationalize this. Somehow, I end up adding justifications like my surprise visit to his house was stupid when I should still be in Halifax. I’m stupid. This is somehow my fault. Were we officially exclusive? Did we decide that? I mean, it was implied but was it ever said aloud? Were my expectations grander than reality?

My relationship is a lie. A joke. I’m a joke.

Pathetically, I sit in misery for a whole minute, rain and tears pouring down my face. I’m drenched and smelling of dirt, coffee, and heartbreak. Does heartbreak have a smell?

Of course, this is the moment I recall the looks between him and Aslin at his Christmas party.

Clearly, those hadn’t been my imagination. Nor did our fight a week later, when I saw Aslin call his cell phone at ten at night, mean I was crazy. I wasn’t irrational. Or jealous. Or

imagining things. My accusations that he was trying to come up with reasons not to move in together, although my lease was up, were solid.

Rage tiptoes through me.

Oh, and when he convinced me we should wait a little longer to introduce our families to each other in person? That was a con I fell for because I'm not close with my dad or stepmom. Something I bet he's used to his advantage.

There are so many red flags, I stop feeling sorry for myself and realize I am an idiot. An angry idiot.

"Get up," I whisper to myself, fighting the urge to find the key, storm inside, catch them in bed, all in a hope of reclaiming some of my pride. And while vindication would be fabulous, I'm not certain I'd accomplish anything beyond appearing insane, considering my fingers are covered with sand and dirt. My boots are drenched in coffee and mud. My pants can't get wetter. My hair is flat and sticking to my head. My makeup's no doubt to my chin. And I'm fresh off a morning flight.

I look like hell. This is not how I want to be when I catch them in bed, validating his behavior in their shallow minds.

I force myself up. My heart is heavy, akin to a fat lifeless slug. I swear it falls inertly down my body, dropping out the bottom of my pants into the puddle where I leave the key to his house. I shoulder my weekender bag once more, leaving the gate open but taking the coffee cups with my name on them, and say goodbye to every single thing I've left at his house.

I don't know what to do. How to deal with this.

Using my filthy hand, I wipe my face, feeling the grit of sand and dirt against my cheek.

An idea creeps into my mind but it's insane. Complete madness.

Words I once read in a story flit about with the idea, *radical sabbatical*.

With heavy doubt and grimy trembling fingers, I call my cell phone company, angrily typing in my PIN and snarling, “Customer service,” at the poor robotic voice as I stomp toward home.

There’s no turning back.

I need a radical sabbatical.

And this is a one-way street.

“Hi there,” the customer service rep says. “My name is Randall. I’ll be assisting you today. Thank you for entering your PIN. Can I verify your name?” He sounds pleasant, but I can’t mimic it. My whole world, mind, body is hanging on by a thread.

“Jenny Snowdon, and I need my number changed, immediately,” my voice cracks but I refuse to cry.

“Okay, and for our records can I ask—?”

“Look, Randall”—I take a shuddering breath—“I don’t want to be rude, but I’ve just caught my boyfriend of three years”—angry hate tears burst through the dam, making me a seething and sniveling mess as I trudge through the puddles—“with another woman. A woman he specifically told me he didn’t have a thing with.” And I am now squealing, “And I need to change the number so he can’t reach me. He’s probably one of those gaslighting sons of bitches they do *60 Minutes* specials on.”

“Oh—uhm—of course. Do-do you have a preference for your new number?”

“No, thank you. I—I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.” I am losing my mind. “I shouldn’t have said any of that. It’s just that I saw this story once about this man who needed to lose weight so he went on a radical sabbatical, and he changed his life by leaving it. He simply walked away from it all. And I might need to do that.” I wipe my face again with my wet and dirty hand, hating the six blocks back to my apartment.

“Okay. Of course. It’s no problem. I’ll be one moment and we will change that for you. And—I’m very sorry this is

happening to you.” He disappears into the weird void all call center people go when they put you on hold.

The racking sobs slip from me, assuming the silence is a safe place as the vile fury turns into foolishness and self-loathing.

Eventually, he comes back, speaking softly and sounding unsure, “Ms. Snowdon?”

I hold back my weeping and squeak, “I’m here.”

“I have your new number. Would you like to reset your PIN on the account as well?”

“No, he doesn’t know it.”

“All right. Well, I’ve sent you an email with your new number and instructions to ensure you activate it properly. Is there anything else I can help you with?”

“No, thanks. You’ve been excellent,” I cry pathetically and hang up. Then I log into my Netflix and change the password. By the time I’m back home, I’ve also changed my Apple password on the account so the Apple TV I bought him won’t work.

The moment I’m inside, staring at my apartment, memories of us here hit hard and fast. The rage and realization of the betrayal overwhelms me and I start to clean.

It’s a second blast of furious energy made up of a need to cleanse him from my life.

Flinging open drawers in the bathroom, I shout at myself and him and everyone as I move with speed and viciousness to ensure anything he touched is gone.

I storm to the bedroom, ripping his clothes from my closet and drawers and tossing them into the garbage bags where I put his toiletries. I’m blind with fury as every piece of him is purged and dumped into a bag which I place in the hallway of my building.

I can’t imagine how the scene looks: a filthy, crazed, desperate, broken, madwoman rage-stomping around her

apartment, ransacking it. And when I've put the last bag in the hall and it's over, I'm grateful no one witnessed this.

Closing the door, I lean against it and cry loudly, giving myself the necessary moment before I go to my laptop and begin the online purge. It's after one and I should be at work already, but I need him gone. Erased.

Tears choke me up as I change my name on Facebook and Instagram and block him on all social media. Having set up my dad's joint Facebook for him and my stepmother, I log in and block Ben from them as well, not that they were friends.

It takes less time than it should to delete him from my life as I remove every photo, every memory. Instagram is filled with us so I delete the account and app completely. The tears have stopped but they're close by, ready to pounce.

Once I'm finished, I hope he can't get in contact with me.

Maybe it's evil.

Maybe it's cruel.

It's totally immature.

But there are only two outcomes of this story.

One, I end it by ensuring he's gone forever from my life. Or two, I go to jail charged with assault for beating his ass with one of my shoes.

While the latter is more appealing, I've worked too hard on my career to sacrifice it for maiming him, and I like my shoes.

Sniffing, I pick up my phone and begin a mass text message to my contacts, close friends, and family: *Good morning, this is Jenny. Sorry about the mass text. This is my new number. Please don't give it to anyone. Just changing some things in my life. My Facebook status says it all. I don't want to discuss it, to be honest I shouldn't have to. But I expect you to unfriend him. Thanks.*

I stare at the message for a minute, certain it's a mistake. It will lead to questions. And the last shred of self-respect I have can't handle those right now.

Sighing, I attempt to talk myself out of it, but I press “send.”

It’s done.

Instead of wallowing, I shower and dress to start my day over.

A new day.

A new life.

As if none of this has happened.

The last three years haven’t happened.

Not with him at least.

Him who?

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

**L**ori  
The end of the downpour makes me miss home, the way the air there clears after a storm. Here in New York it gets heavier. As much as I wouldn't want to live on the West Coast again, I wish I could bring the cold feel of the ocean breeze with me.

As I climb out of the car, I notice my right thigh is still a bit sore from the charley horse I got in the last game. Our last game of the season. I make a mental note to roll my leg out before I go to bed. Maybe adding a bunch of beers to the rolling will help eliminate any tension and assist in my wallowing as I study the gameplay videos.

Getting knocked out of the playoffs by the Senators is going to sting for a while, but at least it means I can go home for a couple of weeks and get the stink of the city off me.

The door to the pet store rings with a bell as I open it, alerting the clerks that someone has entered. The neighborhood is rough enough that the windows are barred. Something my usual pet store doesn't have but this stop was on the way home, and if I show up empty-handed, Millie, my housekeeper, will make him a fillet again. The damned cat will end up with heart disease. He's too old for fillet, but Millie's too old to try to change her mind on how pets should eat. She's raised ten cats and four kids in her lifetime and quite comfortable reminding me of it.



“Can I help you?” casually asks a girl with blue hair and piercings in enough places on her face that I can’t help but imagine where more are. She doesn’t lift her gaze to mine.

“Yeah, *Purr* Bistro for my cat. He’s a senior.” I even emphasize the stupid *purrrr*. The things I do for Simon.

“By Merrick? Yup.” She walks away, leaving me at the till. She comes back almost instantly with the medium-sized bag in her hands, flumping it onto the counter with as little effort as possible. She rings it in, her eyes never meeting mine. “Twenty-five seventy-nine.”

I hold up my card. “Charge.”

She taps the machine and glances at the door. “Did it freshen up with the rain?”

“Nope.” I finish the purchase and lift the bag of food. “Just more humidity.”

“Shit,” she laments and hands me my receipt.

“Thanks,” I say and walk out. The indifference should be refreshing coming from a girl her age, but I like eye contact in customer service at least. Another thing I miss about home.

“Some change for food?” a small voice asks from somewhere nearby. I stop and spin, scanning for who asked. There’s always a tiny whisper of hope that I’ll recognize the face, except I never do.

Especially not this time.

It’s an old man with a grizzled beard and dark hair. His filthy clothes are wet from the rain, accenting the skinniness of his body. He’s skeletal.

“Yeah, my man. Give me a minute.” I cling to the bag and take in my surroundings. The old strip mall is mostly abandoned except for a few places. Fortunately, there’s a shitty-looking sandwich shop at the end, a couple of doors away from the pet store. I jog down to it.

The door to the sandwich shop rings with almost the same bell as the pet store when I fling it open. The guy behind the counter, a small teenaged boy, flinches when he sees me hurry

in but speaks as if his manager is watching, “How can I help you?”

“You got premade sandwiches?” I ask right before I spot them. Walking over, I peruse the fridge under the counter and nod at the BLT on sourdough. “I’ll take that BLT with a water and a cookie.”

The kid moves with almost as much zest for life as the blue-haired girl. I try not to do the thing my mom does where she widens her eyes and sighs in displeasure at how slow someone is moving. He rings it up after several minutes of bagging and wrapping in napkins. “Eighty-five,” he says quietly.

In the same way as at the pet store, I lift the card. “Charge.”

He slowly taps his fingers on the machine and I enter my card. When it goes through, I don’t wait for the receipt but grab the food and hustle out. “Thanks!”

I jog back to the old guy, sweating now from my effort in the humidity. “Here, man.” I hand the homeless guy the food carefully so he can see it and understand what it is.

His eyes lift and he’s the first person to meet my gaze since I arrived here. “Thanks, brother.” His eyes are hazy as though maybe the drugs have been out of his system for a while but he can’t seem to get back on his feet. It was too much for too long and there is no fix now.

“Of course. Stay safe.” I stand, carrying my cat food to the car and climb in, laying the bag on the passenger seat.

I start the car to drive home when my phone rings over Bluetooth, announcing who the caller is. “Yeah?” I answer.

“Where are you?” Sami barks from the other side. Her voice makes me smile, even when she’s being sassy.

“I had to get Simon some food. I’m on my way home to ice my thigh. What’s up, Mrs. Brimstone?” She hates it when I call her that.

“Oh my God, stop. This is important. I’ve been texting you for like half an hour!” she shouts at me the same way my sister, Callie, does, as a little brother, a role I never wanted but somehow ended up with. “We’re waiting outside your place in the limo. Can you hurry the hell up? Charles is double-parked in the drop-off parking and your doorman is giving us the look like it’s time to go.”

“What?” I’m lost. “Did we have plans?” Of course I forgot. My post-playoffs depression is still going strong.

“Yes, today!” Sami shrieks. “I told you the moment the season was over, the team was mine. Well, it’s over, bitches. You lost and I want my time.” I hear the smile in her voice, even as she’s razzing me and the team.

“What are you talking about? Is Nat there, can she translate?”

“Bro, don’t provoke her. She’s in a dangerous place,” Matt says with a laugh. “Just haul ass home.”

“I’ve arranged your bags. You’re packed and ready to go. Grab your essentials and meet us out front ASAP!” Sami barks and I swear I hear Nat laugh.

“You packed for me?” I turn into an alley to get to my place faster, and it dawns on me what she’s talking about. “It’s today? You didn’t warn me,” I shout. “Really? Now?”

“Yes,” she squeals and Nat definitely laughs.

“Okay. Holy shit.” I pause, not sure how to handle her springing this information on me. “Just give me five minutes.” I hang up and drive faster, speeding through several alleys and cutting off a car as I skid out onto the avenue. It takes me five minutes to get five blocks home and park the car. I lock it up and race to the servants’ elevator with the cat food, ignoring the nagging thigh.

“Millie!” I shout at my housekeeper.

“Mr. Eckelston, Ms. Ford was here, she insisted.” Millie hurries to the kitchen as I get inside. Her cheeks are flushed, how all staff members appear when Sami is finished with them. “I’m sorry. She’s been in your room, she insisted—”

“It’s fine. Apparently, I’ll be gone for a few days.” I laugh as I pass her the food. “You cool to stay here and keep my little homie company?” I ask as I walk into the breakfast room where Simon is sitting in the window, his typical perch during the day. He yawns as I roll him onto his back and nuzzle against his face.

“Of course. Happy to. My husband is away on a work trip for the weekend anyway.” Millie smiles wide and takes Simon in her arms.

“He can come stay here if you need him to.”

“That’s fine.” She offers a wry grin. “A few days apart after twenty years of marriage is good for the soul. Anyway, back to business. Your bags are already in their limo downstairs. When she said you’d be gone with them for the week, I also packed your toiletries and workout gear.” She lifts her eyebrows, giving me that motherly look. She might be the only person who has ever offered it to me. My own mother certainly hasn’t.

“Perfect. Then I guess I’m out. Can you get someone to move the car?” I ask and leave the car keys on the bureau as I hurry for the fridge to grab one of the sandwiches from the stack she always has for me. “Since I won’t be home, if you don’t eat the sandwiches, there’s a not-too-creepy-looking homeless lady hanging around the block by the park. I bet she’d love them. See ya Sunday.” I wave and dash to the main elevator.

As the doors close, I realize how exhausted I am and that the ride is the last of the calm moments I will have for six days. When the elevator opens to the lobby of my building, I take a deep breath of the air-conditioned air and march through a mass of people for the front doors where Seb the doorman is standing.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Eckelston,” he greets me warmly.

“Hey, Seb.” I slap him on the arm and hurry for the double-parked limo.

Brady scowls from inside the limo as a valet gets the door for me. “The fuck took you so long to get home, Lori?”

“He showers after he works out,” Sami says with a laugh and an attack-style leaned-in hug for me, overwhelming me with her perfume and soft skin brushing against mine. “Unlike you.”

“Whatever,” Brady grumbles and closes the door. He hands me a cold Guinness, but his eyes linger on my other hand. “Is that one of Millie’s sandwiches?”

“Maybe.” I crack the tall can and take a massive swig of the cold beer.

“Gimme half. These assholes are starving us on purpose. Sami wants us to eat at some froufrou bullshit place, but we have to wait.” He leans forward. “I’m starving.”

Not wanting to share food, I hesitate, catching a grin from Matt. “It’s only six inches, there’s not enough for all of us.”

“That’s what she said.” Nat takes the sandwich from my hands. She unwraps it and takes a big bite.

“Come on, Nat,” I groan.

“You guys are going to spoil your dinner!” Sami shouts.

Brady takes the sub and bites down, handing it to Matt who does the same. He closes his eyes and nods as he chews.

“Oh my God, you never make that face. How good is that sandwich?” Sami snatches it from Matt and takes a dainty bite. She moans, meeting my gaze as she hands what’s left of my sandwich to me. “Is that pesto?” she asks with a mouthful. “This is so good.”

“It was,” I stare at the sad bit of bun that’s left.

“God, I have some locker room jokes to go with that badly abused bun, bro,” Brady winks at me.

Nat slaps him.

“Anyway.” I take a bite and chew, washing it down with beer. The sandwich is another home run. It’s pesto, bacon, chicken, mayo, sweet tomato, and Havarti with crisp lettuce.

There's something else, maybe a weird relish of some sort. It adds the zing the sandwich needs.

"Right, back to the important stuff. Are you excited?" Sami gushes. Her eyes are wide and brimming with enthusiasm.

"Fully joyed." I take another bite. I need to be on and forget that I'm bummed out.

"Do you know where we're going?" She waggles her eyebrows. The other faces in the limo are unreadable.

"French Riviera or Italy?" I guess and finish what's left of my meal, still starving.

"Nope!" She claps her hands and bounces on the leather seat. I try not to stare at her chest as she does it. "You'll never guess this. I am so excited. We'll arrive today and everyone else comes tomorrow. Mike and Liz can't come until Friday night. She has a doctor's appointment that can't be missed."

"Is she okay?"

"She's better than okay," Sami gushes as her eyes widen with the secret she clearly isn't bent on keeping. It takes me a minute to realize she means Mike and Liz are expecting a baby.

"Oh yikes. How's Mike?" I ask Brady but he doesn't get the chance to answer.

"You can ask him Friday." Sami scoffs. "Stop interrupting. I think I've managed to keep this whole thing top secret. No one in the media will know until it's over." She beams, barely breathing. "By that time, I'll have leaked it through my Instagram to ensure top clicks."

"That's important." Matt already seems annoyed because this is not how he wanted to get married.

"It's going to be the wedding of the year," Nat gushes but it sounds weird coming from her. She's the opposite of Sami. Not showy or fancy at all. She's the epitome of down-to-earth. The sort of girl who wouldn't show up to the wedding of the year.

“Did you think of someone to bring as a date?” Sami flutters her long lashes at me, always aware of the effect she has. “If you did, we can send a car and pick her up tomorrow.”

“Nat’s my date,” I say with a laugh and wink at Brady. “You told him, right?”

Nat instantly goes along with the joke and slides over to my side of the limo and snuggles into me. “Babe, I told you we’re sharing our accommodations with Lori, right?”

His eyes inadvertently flash that savage jealousy Nat and I are so fond of provoking in him. It takes him a second of self-control and something else, maybe rifling through his caveman comebacks for an appropriate one, “Fine, but you’re in the middle, Lori.”

“My favorite position, BJ,” I retort and finish the last of my Guinness in a couple of big gulps.

Nat moves back to her side, laughing at the big baby Brady becomes whenever she is around. When it’s just us guys, he’s funny and light and cool. Add Nat and he starts paying attention to every dude in the room and puffing out his chest.

It’s no one’s fault but his own, getting engaged to a girl like her. She’s a triple threat and will likely be the death of him.

But Brady has nothing to worry about with me. Nat’s more of a sister to me, the sister I never had.

“I can’t believe you’re doing this secret wedding right after our game,” Brady gripes. “My whole body is still sore. The team is too.”

“Yeah, I’m low-key dying over here,” I add.

“Sami says it’s going to be relaxing,” Matt jokes, flaring his eyes but Brady doesn’t appear convinced. I’m not. The secret wedding of Sami-fucking-Ford and Matt Brimley will be everything except relaxing.

But we all agreed. The moment playoffs were over for us, we were hers. Almost the entire New York Rangers team, Coach included, though I warned her he wouldn’t be coming.

Our coach is a stick in the mud and the loss didn't sit well with him. And he'd never come to a wedding with no warning and little instructions.

"Hey, Sami, which part of the weekend has relaxing on the itinerary?" Brady asks, making Nat roll her eyes.

"Thursday, jackass," Sami says firmly. "Wednesday is meet and greet. Friday is rehearsal. Saturday is the wedding. Sunday you're free after brunch." Her eyes flicker in my direction. "I assume you're going home to Canada after that?"

"I was thinking I might. Go and spend a week in Van with the family and then go see Gramps." I try not to fidget with my beer tab. "Oh, and he already sent condolences on our loss. Asked me to ensure I gave them to you two in particular." I pull out my phone and show Matt the text conversation where my grandpa called our team a bunch of pussies who need to buck up. Sami laughs but Brimley is still too sore to respond favorably.

"Pop your balls back out, boys," Nat reads as she takes the phone and Brady presses his lips into a tight line.

"Yeah." I chuckle. "He's such a grumpy ass."

"Billionaires all are, apparently," Sami offers cheekily, eyeing up Matt who pretends not to notice her dig. "Party poopers and grumpy bastards."

Matt's jaw clenches. "I'm not grumpy. Lori's never grumpy."

"That's not true and I don't quite have billionaire status, so I get to remain classified as a delight for about six more months," I joke.

"Oh my God, I was teasing. You better perk up," Sami demands but leans in, planting her gloss-coated lips on his cheek. "It's our wedding. And I have planned everything. It'll be perfect."

"It's going to be so romantic." Nat cuddles into Brady. The four of them melt into a snuggle fest. And again, I'm surrounded by it. I can practically smell the sex in the air.



“We picking up Rich and Carson?” I’m hopeful.

“I can’t get ahold of them. I’m going to kill Carson.”

“How long is this drive?” I ask, trying not to sound bitter.

“About an hour,” Sami answers without taking her eyes off Matt.

“Right.” I bang on the glass separating us from Charles, Matt’s driver. He stops the limo.

“What now, Lori?” Brady scowls. “You find some homeless dude to feed? You Canadians are weird.”

“Stop!” Nat slaps Brady.

Without answering, I jump out and close the door, climbing in the front seat with Charles who grins. “Evening, Mr. Eckelston. I’ve been expecting you.” His English accent always makes me feel like I’m in a James Bond film.

“Charles,” I say back politely.

The divider comes down, revealing the four faces in the back seat. “If I’m not allowed to ride up front with Charles, neither are you. You get your sweet ass back here.” Brady points a meaty finger at me.

“You wanna trade Nat for Charles in that back-seat circle jerk, you give me a shout, Coldwell. Until then, I’m up here, with my main man.” I press the button and challenge him with my stare as he glares at me while Nat works at solving the term “circle jerk.” The window is more than halfway up when her eyes widen and she realizes what I’ve said, but I lose them in the tint. I wish I might have seen the full reaction.

“Circle jerk, sir?” Charles asks.

“This fifth wheel thing is getting painful, Charles,” I groan and get comfortable. “It’s worse now that Carson and Rich are living together. I’ve become the seventh wheel. Three happy couples and me.”

“You could always settle down, young man.” Charles gives me a bit of side-eye.

“I’m not even twenty-three yet.” I scoff. “Who gets settled down that young?” I say before I consider the four in the back. “Besides them. It’s unnatural, Charles. They’re weird. I’m the normal one.”

“I suppose so, sir.” He calls me sir, even though he’s a hard forty years older than I am. And I let it slide though I hate it, but this is how it is. It’s also why I don’t have a driver. I’ve managed to avoid the typical staff, beyond Millie who I tell myself is for the cat and not me at all. Even if the sandwiches are amazing.

“I think I’ll stick with playing the field and sleeping with my cat every night,” I say softly as he rounds the curb.

“Sound plan, sir.” Charles doesn’t go for the low-hanging fruit in the form of pussy jokes he could torment me with. Instead, he nods like the gentleman he is. “At least until the right girl or boy comes along.”

“Hopefully, that never happens,” I mutter and try not to acknowledge the fact this is going to be the hardest week of my life. Getting knocked out of the playoffs sucked. Spending the one time a year when I like to be alone—roaming my apartment in my underwear with my cat, day drunk and eating my feelings—at a wedding, with hundreds of people expecting me to be funny and on, is hell.

Pure hell.

**J**enny  
It takes every ounce of strength and venom in me to walk out of my apartment, dressed and presentable, but I do it.

In new heels and a cute pencil skirt-blouse combo, I rush for my train, noticing the rain has let up and the sun is shining. A promising sign for my fresh start. A fresh start I'm aware I'm not truly comprehending, but I don't need to do that today.

Not yet.

Right now, I need to make it through the day. And tomorrow, I have to make it through that day. And eventually it will hurt less. Or not hurt at all, since I'm totally numb by the time I reach the station. Not peacefully numb but cut off from my emotions and rational maybe.

Fortunately, it's an off-peak time to ride the train and none of my morning-commute usuals are here. I sit and stare out the window, trying not to let my mind wander. It has one destination and it's a stop I refuse to make.

A text from my older brother, Josh, hits my phone.

*You ok?*

*Yup*, I answer back, aware he doesn't have time to get into this, and I have no desire to.

*If you're not ok, I'm here.* He finishes with a nerd emoji.

I send a fake kissy face. I can't talk about this right now.

But before I can turn off the phone, it rings as the train nears the halfway mark of the journey, about fifteen minutes to the city.

“Hello?” I answer, assuming it’s him forcing the issue in a big brother way.

Thankfully, it’s not him. “Hey, how’s it going?” My friend Claire sounds a little hesitant.

“I can’t talk about it. How’s Wisconsin?” I ask as I slip my earbuds in and plug them into my phone so I don’t have to hold it to my ear.

“Cold. It’s still early spring here. Are you at your dad’s in Halifax or have you flown the coop already?”

“Escaped early,” I kid—sort of. “I flew home this morning at like six, and now I’m headed to work to put in a few hours.”

“No, it’s your week off, Jenny. And it’s already four in the afternoon.” She sighs. “And your text—are you okay?”

“Honestly, I don’t want to talk about it. It’s a whole thing.” I don’t say his name or explain anything.

“Okay, then we won’t.” She’s curious, I can hear it. “How was the trip home?”

“Magical as always.” The pity party for one has begun, and I have to laugh at the week I’ve had. “Judith made sure she let me know that twenty-eight is over the hill.” The memory of my stepmother’s smug expression makes me want to punch her in the throat. “And forget kids, unless I start freezing my eggs now. She had a brochure for it.”

“She did not.” Claire gasps.

“She did.” I press my eyes shut. “And while I don’t want kids, it still stings a little extra today.” The confession is forced and painful.

“I’m sorry, Jenny,” her voice softens.

“Apparently, coming home early from my parents’ was a bigger surprise than I intended on giving.” It’s all I’m about to

say. I can't speak. Tears well in my eyes and my throat feels like it's on fire.

"Fuck Ben and Judith. You're successful and brilliant and beautiful. You have amazing hair, and you don't need a man or a relationship or babies." She pauses and smiles, I hear it in the tone. "And if you change your mind, then we'll go freeze our fucking eggs together!"

We laugh. Hers is real and mine is empty, but it's better than I hoped for.

"One thing though." I'm serious again. "If he tries to reach you in any way, I do not want to speak to him. And I don't want him to have my new number."

"Of course. I'll spread the word around to the girls, making sure everyone understands he is dead to us." She's upbeat and firm, strong for me. I want to be too, but my empty chest burns from its losses.

"Thanks. I'm moving apartments this month, my lease is up anyway. I'm hoping to start the hunt this weekend. So if you hear of anything—" My work phone in my other hand buzzes with a text. "I better go. Stan's texting which usually denotes some sort of emergency. Last week it was because he couldn't get ahold of Victor, my boss, and he needed me to spin our way out of a retired soccer star who was caught marrying his sixth wife and not divorcing any of them."

"How is that possible?" Claire asks with a giggle.

I cover my eyes. "Apparently, he uses a random friend to pretend to be a minister and marry them all, so it's not legal. His first marriage isn't even legal. Then he leaves them, kicked out without a cent. They're banding together now in some ex-wives club, trying to sell their story. It'll ruin him and he's taken a coaching job in Madrid."

"You have the weirdest job." Claire sighs. "Anyway, are we still on for sushi on Monday? I'll be home around three Sunday," she changes the subject.

"Next week? Yeah." I recall the date we made. "Text when you're home and safe so I don't worry."

“Okay. Try not to work too hard. Good luck with the apartment hunt. Love you.”

“Love you too,” I say, not promising anything as I hang up and my other phone rings immediately. “Mr. Levisohn?” I can’t hide the worry in my tone. Stan rarely calls me.

“Jenny, I’m glad I caught you. Are you on your way into work, on the train?”

“I am, sir. I realize I said I would be there by two but something came up.”

“Get off the train and go back home. I need you to pack for a trip. It’s first thing in the morning. I’ll have a car waiting for you.”

“A trip?” I’m lost. “Where?” I’ve never been asked to travel for this job. That’s something the senior people do. And why today of all days?

“I can’t say.” He’s firm. “It’s a secret location. It’s a secret event. I need you to go in my stead and take care of things.” He sounds distracted which isn’t surprising. He’s a busy guy. “You don’t have to work there, merely be there in case things go south. In fact, I’m choosing you because I think you’ll have fun.”

It sounds weird and his lack of actual answers has me worried.

“Uhm, sir, this isn’t a great time for me.” I close my eyes. “I’m planning on moving my apartment. My lease is up at the end of this month, and I was hoping to shop for a new one all weekend.” It’s not entirely untrue.

“I see.” He goes quiet for a moment. “Does this have anything to do with the fact your personal number has been disconnected?” Stan asks, his tone no longer sounding distracted.

“Uhh, yes.” I swallow hard, terrified. “Sorry, I was going to update my contact information when I came in to the office today.”

I pause and he doesn’t respond.

It's silent on the line.

I'm speechless.

Do I explain the whole thing and humiliate myself or let him think I'm unreliable in any way? My stomach is aching and sweat is forming on my brow.

"You're in Yonkers?" he finally asks quietly.

"Woodlawn Heights."

"Right." He pauses again. "That's quite a commute to the office every day." His comment confuses me.

The train is coming to a stop at Melrose.

"It's not too bad. It's nothing to worry about, sir. This will not affect my work at all, and I will take care of it." I'm grateful for the empty train as I'm sweating and talking too loudly.

"I'll tell you what, Jenny, you do this favor for me this weekend, and I'll have a company take care of your move for you—"

"I have to find an apartment first, sir. It's not until the end of the month." The whole idea of such a short-notice move is already stressing me out, regardless of it needing to happen, and this isn't helping. Especially not after the day I've had.

"I can do you one better. We own a building in Midtown. There's an apartment that's come available. I'll have the movers arranged, everything will be taken care of. You just go home now and pack a bag for the weekend. Very formal and swanky. Think spa retreat and black tie."

"What do you mean, sir?" I hurry off the train, trying not to have a heart attack. I don't know what spa he's talking about; I'm stuck on the apartment. "Midtown?" I accidentally blurt when I reach the platform, holding my handbag and my phones, stunned. "I can't afford Midtown, sir. Please don't worry about this." I admit defeat internally. "I can have it sorted right away. If the trip is that important, of course I'll get a friend to hunt for apartments for me. I'm sorry to have been a bother."

“No, no.” He laughs. “Jenny, you’re doing that Canadian thing again. I’m the one bothering you. These are my orders: Go home. Have a glass of wine. Pack a bag for five days of fancy resort life. Swimsuits and dresses and whatever else you girls need. Get in the car that will be waiting for you in the morning. Give your house key to the driver. I’ll have movers come to your apartment, pack your things, and move everything into the new place, so when you arrive home Sunday, you’ll be all moved in. Take Monday off and unpack your house. I’ll see you Tuesday, all right?”

The train going home arrives, creating noise in the background, leaving me not entirely sure what I just heard, but it has to be wrong.

“Jenny?”

“Sir, I—I can’t accept this. It’s—” My cheeks flush as more sweat bursts from every pore on my body. “I can’t afford it.”

“How do you know? You don’t know what the rent is. What are you paying currently?” He ignores my pleas.

“Uhhh—twelve hundred a month with everything included.” The answer is flat and cold. I’ve never been this discombobulated in my life.

“Okay, well that is the rent on this place too. And I’ll set it up with Accounting that you pay half of that from every paycheck. You’ll pay less income tax this way. It’s good.”

I’m frozen.

How do I get out of this?

Can I say no to my boss?

“Jenny?”

“I’m not sure how to respond, Mr. Levisohn.” Tears well in my eyes but this time it’s shame. I don’t want his pity but I don’t see a way out of it.

“Don’t worry, just say thank you and have fun. Honestly, you’re the lifesaver for doing this. It’s the least I can do. Enjoy that wine, kid. You sound like you need it.” He hangs up and



I've never been more confused. To top it off—the shit icing on the shit cake—I've missed the train home. And now I have to stand here, sweating, half crying, and speechless.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

**W**ednesday, June 14  
Lori

Waking at the chalet is peaceful. I can't remember the last time I slept so well. The resort isn't at all what I expected for Sami and Matt's wedding. But I think that's her plan. She'll have the last laugh at the paparazzi, despite the cost being her sanity. And Matt's. And everyone else's. Though when we arrived, Brady, Matt, and I got excited. We genuinely enjoy the outdoorsy location and hope to make the most of the five days here.

Fishing, hiking, paintball—though Sami's forbidden that—boating, and swimming sounds like a majestic way to spend a wedding week.

Still in my boxers, I take a cup of steaming hot coffee to the deck and sit in the large wooden Adirondack chair that has a fluffy blanket on it. I savor the feel of the fresh woodsy air. It's already blowing the stink of the city off me. I sip and sigh, loving that there's nothing but squirrels, birds, and a soft breeze.

Sami and Matt and Nat and Brady are staying in the biggest house here with her parents to help out with Eli.

It's weird we're at a resort that plays at farming and camping, all the while catering to the rich with service that's second to none, including personal chefs.

As a member of the wedding party, Sami wanted me in one of the huge houses next door to them, but this small chalet with one room suits just fine. It almost feels like camping, but more like glamping which secretly I prefer. I've never been a sleep-on-the-ground kind of guy.

A foreign sound catches my ears as I'm midway on my coffee. It's a funny hum that takes a second to recognize as a golf cart gets closer. I brace for the party to start. Guests will be arriving all day, over a hundred people who woke up with no clue they'd be attending a wedding this weekend. People, with plans and appointments and important schedules, all dropping everything as a driver shows up at their house with a secretive invitation to the most anticipated wedding of the decade.

Sami-fucking-Ford is getting married.

It's a big deal.

Carson waves from the cart as he and Rich drive up, both too dressed and way too designer for the landscape. "Can you believe Sami chose fucking Kentucky?" Carson blasts as he jumps from the cart.

"Tennessee," I correct him with a laugh.

"Whatever, like where are we though? Honestly?" Carson is already drinking. "This is the middle of nowhere."

I tilt my head at the flask in his hand. "It's ten thirty in the morning, buds."

"It's a wedding, Lori. If we don't day drink, we might not make it through the bridezilla antics scheduled for after lunch."

"He has a point," Rich agrees quietly as he comes in for a hug. "Also, sorry about the playoffs. That was a rough blow."

"Thanks, man. It sure was."

"Oh right." Carson winces. "That was this week? Anyway, I can't believe we're here. And Sami and Matt are finally getting married." He rolls his eyes and I understand his point. It seems like Sami and Matt have dragged on for years,

decades, with their bullshit. Something I don't understand. If they'd talked to each other instead of being ridiculous martyrs, none of the misery would have happened.

“What time did you get here?” Rich asks.

“Last night. They abducted me from my apartment in the afternoon. My bags were packed and my shit was already in the limo. They were seriously sitting outside my place waiting for me to get home from the final team workout.” I laugh. “It was crazy. What about you guys? How did you avoid coming early?” I ask and sip my coffee.

“We missed a bunch of calls and texts from Sami yesterday—I'm assuming it would've been something similar to your experience—but we were at a deprivation chamber. So we got the wakeup call this morning and caught the first flight out of LaGuardia at six am. Arrived here half an hour ago.” Rich shakes his head, stifling a yawn. “That was intense.”

“It was bullshit. The driver was at the house at five am, waking us up with Sami's insanely secretive invitation. I went to bed at two last night.” Carson lifts the drink. “Hence the liquid breakfast.”

“And we arrived here at the worst time,” Rich adds. “As we walked in the door of Sami and Matt's place, there was an incident with the wrong color napkins for the rehearsal or something? Sami was losing her shit. We escaped out the back door before Her Highness saw us. Brady tried to follow but he got caught making the escape. We stole his golf cart and left him behind.”

“Jesus.” I laugh bitterly. “The Princess and the Pauper needs to come second to the wedding. She's going to drive everyone nuts and ruin the whole thing.” Sami and Nat's influencer company makes us all crazy.

“But Sami will never allow the cameras to stop rolling. She wants everything recorded and photographed,” Carson groans. “Matt will eventually lose it and become a bear. You mark my words, he will eat someone this weekend. I just don't want it to be me.”

“Me either.” I laugh, stunned he agreed to this publicized wedding in the first place. Brimley is a private guy.

“Have you seen the guest list?” Carson asks with a grin that screams he has.

“Nope.”

“There’s some single girls coming. No bridesmaids worth giving a second look, besides Nat, but I heard a couple of attendees are smokeshows.” He nudges me. “Just don’t let the cameras catch you up in that. There’ll be hell to pay.”

“There’s always hell to pay.” I finish my coffee. “Speaking of which, has Matt’s mom arrived yet?”

“A few hours away still.” Carson sighs. “She’ll be a bitch the entire weekend. And she’s bringing Matt’s sister-in-law and the kid. I don’t understand why people bring kids to weddings. It’s rude and inconvenient.”

“You mean besides little Eli?” Rich lifts an eyebrow.

“Obviously, Sami and Matt’s infant son should be at their wedding. But no one else needs to bring their little brats.” He finishes his drink. “I need a nap.”

“Are you guys staying over here with us peasants?” I motion toward the cabins smattered in the woods around us.

“Yeah, we got a cabin. I think we’re neighbors. The old guy checking us in said we had the option of being in one of the houses near Matt’s mom or a cabin kind of out of the way.” Rich snorts. “Needless to say, this was our choice. He gave us a key and brought our stuff over already.”

“Plus, we know Brady and Matt are gonna come over here and hide out the whole time. Might as well be where the action is.” Carson winks. “I think all the hockey players are here in the cabins.”

“That makes sense. Well, why don’t you guys go on and settle in on your side and I’ll get dressed and head over to see if they need my help with anything.” I point at the cabin attached to mine. They’re all built to be single-story duplexes.

“I was saying to Carson, we should take a hike into the hills after our nap.” Rich points to the mountains across the little valley from us. “There’s trails over there.”

“And I was saying count me out,” Carson sneers. “If the golf cart doesn’t go, neither do I. You guys are gonna get eaten by a bear, and Sami will bring you back from the dead to kill you again.”

“Don’t be such a pussy.” I grin at Carson. “If we find any bears, I know a trick.”

“Oh, I can imagine the tricks you Canadians have regarding wildlife.” Carson waves and walks back to the cart. “No, thanks!”

“Ignore him. We’ll meet you at Sami’s in a bit. Give us a couple of hours to get a small nap in.” Rich chuckles and follows his boyfriend to the golf cart, though they only have to drive a few feet to their driveway.

“That works. I think Sami wanted to do a picnic photoshoot anyway. I heard Brady talking about it. Lord knows I won’t be allowed to miss that.” I wave back and head inside to get changed, grateful at least Carson and Rich are here now too. Between them, me, and Brady, this should be an interesting weekend.

**J**enny

The thick forest on either side of the road makes the afternoon drive through the mountains of Tennessee that much more suspenseful. I have no idea what to expect. I know one thing: I've been forcefully bribed with low rent into attending Sami Ford's marriage to Matt Brimley. Beyond the weirdly vague phone call on the train, I've been given no warning, no instructions, and only those few wardrobe suggestions which weren't helpful. Spa resort with black tie?

I assumed it would be at a castle or something equally glamorous erected in her honor, until we landed in Tennessee. I seriously doubt there are any castles here.

"Why did Stan choose us to come to this?" Sukii, my partner in crime for the weekend and Stan's assistant, asks again softly.

"He said he thought we might have fun."

"Who the heck invites their PR company to their wedding?"

"Celebrities. I don't think they have real friends. They have other rich people they hang out with, staff, and family. We're staff." I take another sip of the complimentary champagne we were served the moment we climbed into the limo. It's a Dom Perignon rosé, because that's a complimentary champagne?

“At least the drinks are guaranteed to be top-shelf all weekend and we have each other. I can’t imagine coming here alone. No clue what to expect and not a friend in the crowd.” She adds with a smile, “And the single dudes are certain to be hot and rich. Even if you’re dating someone.”

That is the very last topic I want to discuss, considering the past forty-eight hours I’ve had.

The idea of hot dudes makes my stomach ache, but I haven’t told her about my situation. Something I must do before we arrive so she doesn’t think I’m being shitty on purpose. I take a deep breath and begin, “I need to tell you something.” I pause, hating the effect this conversation is already having on me and I haven’t even started yet. “I’m not dating anyone anymore. I mean—I—I’m single.”

“What?” She gasps. “You and Ben broke up.”

His name makes me flinch. “I don’t want to get into details about it, but yeah. Yesterday.”

She reaches forward and takes my cold hand in her warm one. “I am so sorry, Jenny. I wish you’d said something. I would have nattered less on the ride. You must be so upset.”

“It’s fine. I’m okay. And this whole trip is probably the weirdest-best thing I could be doing. Distracting myself with something completely off the wall.” I force my stare to meet hers. Her warm gaze is like a hug and it forces out a piece of the truth I didn’t want to share. “He was with someone when I went to his place in the morning yesterday, a girl from his work. So I left and changed my number. And now I’m here.”

“Oh my God, he doesn’t know that you know he’s having an affair?” The sentence makes it sound complicated but it isn’t.

“No.”

“Girl, you ghosted him?” She smiles wide, her eyes and lips glistening.

“It sounds super petty, but it—”



“It’s epic. Not petty. You found him with another woman, you owe him nothing. Fuck him! We’re almost thirty years old for God’s sake. We don’t have time for bullshit guys who have commitment phobias.” She says it enthusiastically.

“You’re right. And it’s done so I am closing that chapter.”

“Good. I’m glad you want to move on and forget him. What a piece of shit. And you’re right, at least you’re at this wedding and maybe if we’re lucky there will be some serious shenanigans this weekend to keep your mind off it.” She waggles her eyebrows, sinking the icky feeling deeper into my guts.

“I was hoping for more of a relaxing distraction, not guys.”

“Nonsense. With Brady Coldwell, Matt Brimley, and Lawrence Eckelston, it’s almost a guarantee there will indeed be some shenanigans. That’s one hot, dirty roster. And I imagine most of the team is coming.” She swoons. “Hot hockey players needing help to forget they just got booted from the playoffs. What more could two single city girls want for?”

“Except, Stan most likely sent us here to ensure nothing nasty happens, and if it does, we can clean it up right away. I doubt he wants us to be part of the story.” I sound like a mom. I am the fun killer. The death of joy. This is who I am now. This is what Ben made me.

“Yeah, that’s true, I guess,” she agrees but clearly isn’t seriously considering behaving. “Sami has been nothing but a nightmare for our firm from the minute she and Matt started dating, even when their relationship was a secret. But I think we can have fun and still be professional. Keep your misadventures to the dark corners and shadowy parts of the castle.” She laughs. “Like you said, Stan doesn’t expect us to be on duty the whole time we’re here. More like disaster cleanup crew. And it’s a wedding, not their last trip to Rome.”

“I guess.” I shrug. “I mean it does help that Brady Coldwell is engaged. Not much of a chance of issues from him. One less thing to worry about.” I wrinkle my nose at that one. The guy is a pig, engagement or not.

“Indeed. I’m glad that’s over.” She winks. “We’ve cleaned up a lot of his messes, if you get my drift. Not that I’d be averse to meeting Mr. Clinton.”

“Out!” I point at the door of the moving car, only half joking. “Take your filthy humor and walk the rest of the way.”

“Shut up,” she says with a giggle. “We both know you think he’s hot too.”

But she’s wrong.

I played hockey my whole life, like most Canadian kids, and have met dozens of Brady Coldwells. Because of it, I would never date a puck. The idea of it brings back the responsible side of me, and her joking has me worried.

“Okay, real talk. We need a pact. I’m not saying don’t have fun. But I am saying, we need to behave and remember we’re representing the firm. We don’t need Stan murdering us when we return to the city. That’s not how I want to die.” Not to mention, I’m now indebted to the company for life.

“Hey, I think we’re here.” Ignoring me and my advice, her gaze flickers to the right as the car slows to an almost stop. She lowers the tinted window to get a better view of a small brick wall with a white farm fence running along the road.

We’re in the middle of nowhere.

“The Blackberry Farm?” The sign makes my already tender insides tug. “There’s no world in which I imagined a farm being Sami’s wedding venue of choice. This must be a mistake. I didn’t pack for a farm.” So much for spa resort. Thanks, Stan.

But the car turns into the farm where at first there’s not much; fields, tennis courts, and trees.

As we enter a wide valley, we begin to see the rest of it. While it’s meant to resemble a farm, this is much cleaner and prettier. Pristine actually, with freshly mowed lawns and perfectly kept gardens—a fake farm. Or rather a show farm, complete with a massive and modern red barn up the hill to the right, but I suspect it’s a restaurant of sorts.

Stunning houses of varying sizes are tucked into the woods surrounding us and range from huge to cottage, though they all appear quite fancy. In the small valley, there's a swimming pool with a cute pool house and a lake with an adorable white dock and boathouse. If Norman Rockwell were alive now and possibly a designer on HGTV, he would have created this. It's picturesque.

We drive to the main house, which is marked with a cute sign welcoming us. It's the same as the rest of the resort, rustic chic and stunning. It's rich people's version of camping with a parking lot filled with Bentleys and limos sitting next to the horse-drawn carriages.

When the limo stops and the valet gets the door for us, we both stare at everything. "It's like stepping back two hundred years into Austen's time, but bringing all the best of our time with us," I whisper to Sukii who nods.

"This place is freaking adorable," Sukii gushes as she spins and takes in the small area that's visible to us. Up close, the main house reminds me of a white cottage you'd see in England which would of course be an inn or a pub.

The air is heavy and cool in the Smoky Mountains, not at all like New York in June. You can feel the moisture of the forest around you but the air is so clean in comparison.

"Guests of the bride or groom, madam?" a man asks as he approaches us with a proper British accent to complement the charming surroundings.

"Uhhh—"

"Both," Sukii answers for us cheerfully. "We're with Levisohn and Shuster." She pulls out our invitation I now assume has a watermark which becomes visible with the small penlight he has in his hands. "The PR firm."

"Excellent, of course. Mr. Levisohn called and made us aware that you would be taking his place." He smiles differently now that he knows who we are.

"Has the location been revealed? Did they come here as a second choice?" I have to ask. The whole thing is a curiosity

to me. A secret wedding at a mystery location is of course how Sami Ford would be married. But not a farm.

“Not yet, as far as I am aware. Ms. Ford has taken every precaution possible to ensure total privacy this weekend. And we are certain no one will leak the details. All guests were told in the limo, as you were, and the cars were equipped with mobile phone signal jammers.” He offers his hands to us expectantly. “As for that, your phones and all digital devices are required for the weekend.”

My stomach drops. We were so nervous and excited, neither of us tried to use our phones in the car; we didn’t notice they weren’t working.

“Phones?” Sukii has lost her bubbly charm.

“It is mandatory that all guests turn in any form of electronics in order to check in. Miss Ford’s rules, I’m afraid.”

“Oh my God,” Sukii mutters as she switches off her personal phone and hands it over. Her fingers cling to it a little at the end. I do the same. I’m instantly naked and afraid. This makes sense and yet I’m scared. I left my work phone at home, as Stan instructed via text this morning, which means I will have nothing.

“Laptops or tablets?”

Wide-eyed and chest thumping, I fish my laptop from the bag. It’s an icky feeling handing it over, one that makes me shudder. How can I be out of contact with the world while Stan and his movers pack and move my entire apartment?

The man carries our devices inside and we follow, leaving our bags on the ground. He puts them into a locker and passes us a small coin with a number. “Don’t lose this. It’s essential you hand it in to retrieve your belongings.”

Sukii takes the coin as if it might explode in her hands and gently places it in her purse, zipping the side pocket she put it into. She gulps and gives me a worried stare.

“You ladies are in the Singing Brook Cottages. Your welcome bags are there with maps and itineraries. Your personal cart is also waiting for you both at your cottage.

Enjoy your stay. If any of our staff on the grounds can be of assistance over the next five days, do not hesitate to ask. My name is Marcel and I am happy to help in any way I can.” He hands us both a small envelope with numbers on it. “Sam will help you to your cottages.” He points to the front door we entered through. An older man with a thick mustache and a kind smile is waiting for us at the door.

“Ready to get going?” Sam asks boldly. He’s clearly a character, the same way my grandpa is, feisty and funny.

We follow, both a little lost, a lot confused, and quite scared.

No information on the wedding beyond the plane ticket, pickup, and the number of days.

No phones.

No friends here beyond ourselves.

And five days of being cut off from the outside world while my boss and a moving company uproot my whole life.

“This is like some *Get Out* shit,” Sukii whispers.

I want to argue there’s no way this is a horror movie, but the start is too bizarre for me to say a word. And we are with the elite wealthy; God knows what they want us for.

“These are your people, is this normal?” she asks so quietly I barely hear it.

“My people? I’m Canadian, these are not my people. Or do you mean because I’m white? I don’t know these kinds of white people.” My pulse pounds so aggressively I feel it in my throat. “Besides, who gets murdered at a three-hundred-thousand-dollar wedding?”

“Stan said closer to five hundred thousand. And I meant because of the hockey, weirdo,” she adds as we put on fake smiles for Sam while he helps us into the golf cart. “They’re your people.”

“Not my people,” I answer back quickly, certain my stare confirms all her suspicions. There’s a small fear that she’s right; five hundred thousand or not, we’re about to die. Is that

why Stan wanted to move my apartment? So he could hide my things and make it seem as though I never existed?

Oh God.

On the verge of a slight panic attack, I'm saved when Sam distracts us, soothing my nerves. "Well, ladies, you must be excited. This is a lovely spot for a wedding. We have heaps of them every year but this must be the most extravagant we've seen."

"Yes," we agree at the same time with those weird telephone voices that scream how nervous we are.

"You friends of the bride or groom?"

"Sort of both," I lie.

We are friends with neither.

Matt Brimley is an elite rich dude who for some unknown reason played hockey his whole life. And Sami Ford is the ultimate "it girl," a fashion and lifestyle icon everyone wants to be or emulate as closely as possible. This is the wedding of the year and decade, and we should be grateful to be here. Just to breathe the same air as these people.

"Have you worked here long, Sam?" I ask, changing the subject and doing the thing I do where I say his name so I don't forget it.

"About five years. It's a retirement gig for me." He chuckles. "I was a police officer for thirty years in Nashville, and when I retired I thought I might do some fishing and play a little golf, so we moved to the country. But I got bored. And I know what happens when men my age get bored—they die." He drives the golf cart around the tennis courts and onto a small path in the forest. "A friend told me about this place and voila, here I am."

"I imagine they must let you use the facilities and whatnot," Sukii adds.

"Indeed, and we eat for free. Which, let me tell you, in all my sixty years on this planet, I have never had food like here." He whistles. "You girls are in for a treat." He drives into a

thick wooded area and up a small path to a quaint cabin. It's beautiful and modern as well but has that charming little cottage feel. "Here's your cabin, Miss Snowdon." He steps out of the cart and picks up my bags.

"I can get those," I say, liking Sam now. He reminds me of my dad.

"Nonsense." He waves me off and carries them to the adorable front door with the cute porch. It matches the cabins next door, though they're laid out differently to trick the eye into not seeing similarities.

My cabin is a modern craftsman style with huge windows and a rustic chic decor. The front porch has sofas and blankets and screams comfort. I imagine a cup of Sukii's weird British coffee she imports and listening to the rain.

He opens the door and beams. "Enjoy your stay."

"Thanks, Sam."

I hand him some cash and step inside, glancing back at Sukii. I'm still a bit frightened of being alone here. Separating us seems like what they'd do in this type of scenario. And the way the week's been going, dying in a horror movie would fit.

Sukii looks scared too until Sam drives on the small path to the cottage across from me.

"We're neighbors!" she shouts.

I grin wide, letting myself relax a bit about the whole thing. "I'll unpack and come over."

"Bring wine," she says with a laugh and hurries into her cottage.

"If I may offer advice, forget the wine. Head over to the Dagwood and get a charcuterie and a stout," Sam offers as he climbs back onto the golf cart. "You won't regret it."

I wave at him. "Thanks, Sam!"

Once I'm back inside, I close the door and lean against it, taking it all in.

The horror vibe dies as I realize the room is gorgeous. It's luxurious while being delicately played down to help the rich people feel like they're camping. We have definitely been brought here to ensure there are no mess-ups and not to die in some weird hunt-the-poor-people game in the woods. It's too nice.

On one side of the room there's a king-sized bed with a bag on it.

The bag is Louis Vuitton, a large multicolor weekender with cream handles. It has to be worth twenty-five hundred dollars. I rush to it, unzipping with trembling fingers to discover treasures inside.

There are mini bags, also Louis Vuitton, five with the days of the week written on them. I open today's, Wednesday's, and stare at the contents.

There's sunscreen, matching Gucci sunglasses and flip-flops, a cute scarf from Hermes with English sightseeing destinations in the design, a beach towel, bath salts with lavender pieces, and a bottle opener.

My fingers reach for the next day but I resist. I'll open them one day at a time.

Carefully, I put the bag on the small dresser and turn, jumping on the bed and bouncing with my butt to test the firmness of the mattress. "Oh my God!" I lie back and decide the pillow top is otherworldly.

I close my eyes and let the images of the last two days flash through my mind like painful fireworks.

Ben.

Aslin.

The mud puddle.

Randall the phone dude.

Gutting my apartment in a mad frenzy.

Stan's offer.



Meeting Sukii in the limo when it picked me up before driving us to LaGuardia.

Arriving here.

I take a deep breath and try to calm my frazzled mind, reminding myself I promised not to let him ruin one more day. That pathetic moment spent sitting in a puddle sobbing was it.

I force myself up to take in the gorgeous room.

“You’re going to do your job, have a little harmless fun,” I whisper and climb off the bed. I walk to sit on one of the fluffy sofas in the living room with the fireplace. The windows are positioned in a way that you see the forest, hills, and fields. I can’t look into the other cottages placed perfectly in the woods around me. Whoever built this place was a genius.

Ridiculously, I pull one of the long matches from the box and strike it, tossing it into the fireplace to start the fire. It’s far too warm to have it going, but I’m living in microseconds of wonderment as I take it all in.

I sit for a moment before getting up to wander into the hallway where I find the most shocking thing.

A walk-in closet.

A huge walk-in closet.

A sigh escapes my lips.

I wish I had my phone to take pictures and send them to Claire and the girls. Sami stealing our phones makes sense. Even if I miss touching mine.

Forcing myself to continue the tour, I make my way into the bathroom and stop dead in my tracks.

“Oh wow,” I say to no one, stunned by the spa soaker tub, massive two-person shower, white tiles, and sparkling glass and marble. The window in the bathroom overlooks the woods, which is the only color in the whole room. Everything else is bright white, including the double sinks and fluffy towels. The counter is filled with products that are not only high end, but full sized. There’s hundreds of dollars’ worth of it all. Maybe thousands.

Touching the soft robe on the wall next to the shower, I could kiss Stan for forcing me to do this. He's as old as Methuselah's goat, but I could for reals have a make-out session for a room this nice. This is akin to winning the lottery. I've died and gone to girlie heaven. Rustic girlie heaven. It's the sort of setting I needed for a work trip.

The bathroom lighting is some kind of magic. Or maybe it's the fresh air. Whatever it is, I look good. Better than I should for how much crying and sweating I did yesterday.

Impressed beyond belief, I walk to the fully stocked pantry, gasping at what I find. Every snack food imaginable, including chocolate-covered jujubes, is here. Every kind of beverage sits next to them. I open the mini fridge to find ice cream bars in the freezer. Häagen-Dazs ice cream bars.

I have daydreams about the assault I'll commit on this minibar, but first I tear myself away to explore the last door. I turn the knob and open it, finding another hallway. It's crazy how big this place is. It's a basic-bitch Narnia.

I stroll past another pantry as the door to the left opens, revealing a naked guy wiping his face with a fluffy white towel while he walks from the bathroom. Steam and the scent of men's bodywash floats after him.

Pins and needles cover me.

My jaw drops and I'm about to scream when he lowers the towel and his eyes meet mine. I know him.

He narrows his gaze for a second, processing my frozen body in front of him, before a smirk slowly crosses his lips. "Are you part of the welcome gift? Because Sami got this one right. I mean, I'm as much a fan of lavender bath salts as any guy, but this is more my speed. Hello, gorgeous."

"I—I'm—you're in my room!" I manage to shout as embarrassment flushes my cheeks.

"This is my room, Red. But if you want, we can think of it as our room." He winks and I step back, horrified. He loses the smug charm at seeing my reaction, which is no doubt sheer disgust. "Oh shit, don't panic. I'm kidding—they're adjoining

doors! I thought Carson and Rich were my room neighbors so I didn't lock it." He lifts his hands, still holding the towel. My eyes are stuck on his penis.

"Cover yourself up!" I shout at him and turn, rushing back into my room. The door slams as I fling it back and lock it.

Lawrence Eckelston.

That was Lawrence Eckelston.

That was Lawrence Eckelston's penis.

Fan—fucking—tastic.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

**L**ori  
“So did you guys get a random redhead in your room as a welcome gift from Sami?” I joke with Nat, trying to throw her off her game as we play on the PlayStation she somehow snuck onto the property. God knows where it was stashed.

“What?” She isn’t distracted by talking. “You got a redhead in your room? Like a real one or a blow-up doll from Brady?”

“Yeah no, real girl. Though I’m surprised Brady missed the opportunity to leave a blow-up doll in my room.” I move quickly but she steals the puck. “Shit. Anyway, some chick I’ve never met showed up in my room when I was showering. It was weird.”

“No, we never got a girl. But I got you, baby!” Nat shouts, moving her player to the right and scoring again.

I clench but manage not to bitch, it only eggs her on. She loves gloating and talking smack when she’s this into a game.

“I’m going to spank you, Lori!” she says with a throaty chuckle.

“Just what a guy doesn’t want to hear his fiancée say to another guy,” Brady grumbles, coming into the room with a sandwich he no doubt convinced the private chef to whip up for him.

“Especially, when the guy is as handsome as me.” I grin and manage to steal the puck and skate for her end. My thumbs are killing me, but I can’t go down with this big of a loss.

“Just let her win, man. Save yourself some dignity and carpal tunnel.” He takes a massive bite and moans into the thick bread. “This is almost as good as Millie’s.”

“Like you do?” Nat taunts him. I swear she hasn’t blinked in the two hours we’ve managed to play, and her fingers and wrists have to be some kind of cyborg upgrade. “Don’t eat all that, I want a bite.”

“Brady, do you know who the mystery redhead is?” I ask. “Hot, tall, maybe twenty-five. I didn’t recognize her, which is weird considering this hundred-and-fifty-person wedding is supposed to be strictly close friends and family.” I laugh and hope talking about the wedding and the possibility of a stranger here will take Nat’s attention.

“Huh?” Brady asks, mid bite. “What redhead?”

“I don’t know. She came into my room when I was showering. I thought maybe Sami got me a date since I refused to bring someone.”

“Got ya again!” Nat gloats, completely ignoring Brady’s and my talking.

I throw down the controller when she scores.

“Boom and it’s over!” Nat blinks finally and puts down the controller. She flexes and stretches her fingers. “You want to get beat down next, big boy?” she asks Brady.

“No.” He grimaces. “Banks, it’s time to put that away. Your eyes are bloodshot, and I kinda want to go back to talking about the redhead running around looking for a date.” He winks at Nat, no doubt avoiding gaming with her.

“Are you assholes for real?” Matt’s voice interrupts before Nat can lay down her mean comeback. “Sami will be here any second. Her meeting with the security team wasn’t supposed to be long. Hide that.” Pointing at the game console, he sounds exasperated already. Not that I blame him, we’ve been

suffering through Sami planning this for months. And now that it's here, everyone is exhausted and Sami is somehow still going strong.

A normal billionaire wedding is a lot to prepare for.

A Sami Ford, Princess and the Pauper, billionaire wedding is a whole other ball of wax. Last time Matt mentioned it, he was close to tears telling me she was nearing half a million dollars on renting the location for six days. Not including anything else.

I didn't have the heart to tell him that Nat revealed this entire wedding would end up around five million, at least. And that wasn't counting the honeymoon. It's insane and I can't imagine spending that kind of money on one day. Getting married, even to Sami Ford, shouldn't be this extravagant.

"Hey, guys," Sami shouts from the hallway as the door closes with a thud. "I'm back."

"Shit." Nat scrambles, stuffing the PlayStation under the table as I unplug the cables and hide the remotes.

"Should we head over to—" Sami pauses as she enters and gives us one of her suspicious stares. I avert my gaze, avoiding eye contact and revealing anything. I'm the worst liar and my eyes always betray me. "What is going on in here?"

"Nothing, Lori thought he saw a spider." Matt is also not a great liar.

"Is that a PlayStation under that table?" Her eyes grow wild and scary as she tilts her head to get a better look.

"What? No!" Nat moves in front of it.

"Your eyes are bloodshot, Nat! What did I say about electronic devices this week?"

"I have to go see about the—uhh—extra towels I ordered. See you guys at dinner. We're setting up at six, right, Brady?" I stand up quick and hurry for the door.

"I'll help. We need more towels too," Brady shouts after me, abandoning his sandwich. We rush from the house.

“Brady!” Nat yells but he slams the door and bolts down the front steps with me.

We run for my golf cart and climb in, grinning at Brimley’s face in the window of the door. I start it up and put the cart into reverse, driving fast to the road.

“Beer?” Brady asks as the wind hits our faces.

“Yes, anything is better than that.” I point at the house behind us. “Did you see the steam coming out her ears?”

“Yeah, bro, we need to avoid her wrath.” He nudges me in the arm. “I’m bunking with you tonight. Maybe the redhead will come back.”

“We can hope.” I laugh but I honestly doubt I could have sex with anyone right now.

We drive across the farm which is anything but a farm. They call it that, but it has a craft beer brewery, Michelin-starred restaurant, and the cheapest hotel rooms are five hundred a night. Sami said it’s riding the trend of rustic chic weddings and doing well. Which is why she’s getting married here. It’s perfect for the Princess and the Pauper. Everything is for the Princess and the Pauper, Sami and Nat’s influencer business.

“So are you gonna bang the redhead and tell me all about it?” Brady nudges me and I nudge him back. “You could film it and let me watch.”

“Absolutely not.” I chuckle. “Firstly, I don’t bang girls at weddings. It’s like shooting fish in barrels, but not normal fish, more like those farmed fish. They’re hopped up on marriage steroids and start thinking things. Relationship things.”

“You gotta put it in their butt and play the back nine. They don’t think relationship things when you do that. Makes the sex taboo. It’s for sure a one-night stand then. In fact, they never want to see you again. You made them dirty.”

I laugh because he’s the only person I know who would say that aloud and not crack a grin. “I’ll keep that in mind, bud. But the other reason is, I’m not looking for some chick. I’m exhausted from the end of the season. That was a shit year

for us which has me a bit bummed. And adding to it all, Sami's weird wedding planning where she refused to tell us anything while forcing us to help was too much. All the secrecy, drama, dress shops, and cake tasting during playoffs and all our road trips. It's been intense. I need some down time. Not a clingy girl."

"Yeah, that's fair." He doesn't joke, he likely feels it too. "Plus, if you're staying at the same hotel or resort, you always end up sleeping together. Like actually sleeping."

"Yeah, I have a rule about that too. No sleepovers."

When we park at the main house and climb out of the golf cart, I turn back to the hillside where the house is. "Is Nat going to murder you for abandoning her?"

"Yes," Brady admits freely. "Hence the sleeping at your cabin. Guess you're breaking that sleepover rule."

"You're stupid." I start walking next to him and trip him. "And when she breaks up with you, I'm moving in for the kill. Nat's a score."

"Whatever, it's her own fault. I told her not to bring the PlayStation. I am not taking any of the Sami wedding week heat." He scoffs and trips me back, but I grab his arm and spin over his back and keep walking like nothing happened as he staggers next to me.

"You two need to bang and get it over with. All this flirting isn't healthy," Cap, the captain of our team, jokes as he strolls up, rubbing his eyes. He must have had one of the surprise early morning wake-up calls too. Though his wife is missing, something I've noticed a lot lately.

"Maybe we already have, bro. You want in?" Brady teases.

"I do," Carson says as he and Rich jog over from the far side of the parking lot. "It's weird we're all meeting here right now. Kismet and shit. Which is lucky since I feel so out of touch. The no-phones thing is kinda killing me. My fingers have no idea what to do with themselves."

"I can think of a few things they can do." Rich's joke makes Brady and I chuckle but Carson scowls at him.



“Hey, where’s your cabin?” I ask Carson. “I thought we were room buddies.” I lower my voice, “Ended up with some crazy hot redhead who has already attacked me once.”

“I’ll need that story.” He laughs. “We thought we were next to you too, but we’re across from you. We’ve got some cute little brunette next to us. I’m trying to convince Rich we need to add her to the mix maybe.”

“So she can convince Rich he can do better,” I bug Carson.

“Hey! Wait up,” Matt shouts as he parks his golf cart and hurries over. “You two suck.”

“How bad was it?” Brady asks.

“I don’t know. I was on your heels. Tripped Nat on the way out so she had to stay.” He seems ashamed but not enough to stay there and listen to bridezilla. “At least Eli is with Sami’s mom and dad right now. Nat can handle meltdown number fifty-three on her own.”

“Poor Nat,” I mutter and thank the gods of all that is holy my little crush on Sami never went anywhere. She’s too much.

“Yikes, what did we miss during our nap?” Rich asks Matt and me.

“Well, first there was a fake picnic where we all sat and pretended to eat and drink but didn’t. We smiled a lot and changed clothes several times. Pretty sure I have sunstroke from that. Then we went for a small hike without you two, since you didn’t show up. Sami bitched the whole time so it was like you were there,” I say to Carson. “Then Nat and I played some PlayStation while Sami met with the security guys. Got busted and ran for our lives.”

“So she’s still full influencer instead of a bride?” Rich asks as he leans in for the answer.

“No, she’s bridezilla the influencer. It’s been a real treat,” Matt grumbles. “When this is over, I’m taking away all her electronics for a month.”

None of us touch that.

When we get inside, it seems like all the guys have shown up to get a drink, sans the wives, and I'm not sure if this is fate or a scheduled meeting. The Dagwood, the casual place to eat and drink at the farm, is loaded to the ass with hockey players on one side of the room and rich people hovering at tables on the other side, closing themselves off from the peasants and ruffians over here.

Of course, a few of them wave at Carson, Rich, and me while ignoring the rest of my teammates who are below their societal class.

We wave back but take our seats with the team as Matt goes over and does his obligatory greetings, though the official meet and greet will be in a couple of hours.

At our table, the talk starts off with hockey contracts, playoffs, and summer schedules for training.

Talking shop is what we do, but I'm not in the mood for it. I'm not sure what I'm in the mood for, if anything.

My eyes take in the room as a cute little server comes to our part of the massive table. "What can I get you all?"

"I'll have whatever locally made beer you think is the best," I say, earning a nod from Cap. "Me too."

"Me three," Brady agrees.

"Me four, please," Matt chimes in as he comes to sit.

"I'll have a large margarita," Carson orders. "I started the day with tequila. I should keep the trend going."

"And I'll have a gin and tonic, extra lime," Rich says.

"All right and something to eat?"

"A charcuterie board every four people, please," Matt orders for us all.

"Of course, Mr. Brimley." She smiles wider and hurries to the next set of guys.

"So, Mr. Brimley, I have a boner to pick with you." Brady leans in across the table to Matt. "How come Lori got a

complimentary redhead in his gift basket, and all I got in mine was listening to Sami yell at you?”

“That’s the single-player upgrade. As you’re already married according to common law practices in the state of New York. You don’t get one,” Matt answers way too quickly, considering I haven’t told him the story yet. Sometimes he makes my head spin.

Brady takes a minute to let it sink in before he grins. “What if Banks likes redheads too?”

“The complaints department is up my a—”

“Tell me that’s not her,” Brady cuts Matt off and hits me as he stares at the door where the tall drink of strawberry water has graced us with her presence.

“That’s her.”

“She looks like one of the elves off *Lord of the Rings*,” Rich whispers.

“Holy shit, you weren’t kidding.” Brady stares at me. “You better fuck her. I need details. Look at those legs—she does not miss leg day, my dude. Forty bucks she rips the cock right off you.”

Cap spits a bit of his drink with a snort.

“How do we know her?” Carson’s eyebrows lift.

“We don’t,” Matt answers quietly.

“She walked into Lori’s room naked earlier.” Brady is obsessed.

All the eyes at the table turn from her to me, even the guys not paying much attention to our section. “No, I was the naked one. She was shouting and fully dressed and in my room. I think she’s kinda high strung.”

“She’s seen you naked already?” Cap cuts in with a dry question as he wipes his mouth.

“Yup.”

“Well, as someone who has seen you naked more than I care to, sorry about your luck, buds.” He’s quick too. “She is not going to sleep with you after seeing that little guy.”

“I’m a grower, Cap. I already told you that.” I constantly have to defend my penis for not getting hard in the public showers in our locker room.

“Mmmhmm,” Brady adds with a disbelieving expression.

“It’s a thing,” I insist, sounding like I’m genuinely worried about my dick size, which I’m not.

“A thing guys with small dicks say,” Rich murmurs, earning a knuckle pound and a laugh from everyone.

“Guys with small dicks need love too. I say go get her,” Carson offers, nudging me. “And I mean, she’s seen it. So she knows all about the disappointment she’s in for.”

The redhead and her friend, a cute brunette, seem uncomfortable and out of place as they try to pick a seat with their eyes.

“Who are they?” I have to ask. This wedding is supposed to be made up of the most exclusive group of people in New York. There’s no way a stranger is here accidentally. Unless she works at the farm, but why would she have a cabin then?

“Not a clue,” Brady and Matt say at the same time with the same tone. They’ve been friends way too long. “Must be friends of Sami’s,” Brady adds.

“No way, I would know her.” Carson eyes the ginger. “She is—sexy.”

Rich lifts an eyebrow at him.

“I mean, not that sexy,” Carson corrects himself.

“Here you are,” the server interrupts and starts placing our drinks down. “This is my favorite.”

The beer is a pale ale called Yallarhammer served with a thick head and a bitter hoppy finish. It’s not my favorite, but pale ale isn’t my kind of beer. I like a stout or porter, but when in Rome.

We lift our glasses. “To Brimstone,” Brady says.  
“And Lori’s small dick!” Carson adds.  
“Inside that redhead’s back nine!” Brady finishes.  
I nod, realizing how this weekend is going to go.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

Jenny

The casual dining room is the kind of nightmare I expected from the moment we were told what we would be attending. The rich and powerful on one side and hockey players on the other. And as luck would have it, Lawrence Eckelston is staring right at us. I want to crawl under a rock and die.

“Where do you want to sit?” Sukii asks, sounding as nervous as I am.

“I don’t know, maybe at that smaller table.” I motion my head in the direction of a two-person table in the corner.

“Okay.” She walks to it, sitting carefully. “So this day has been awesome. We got those killer bags filled with the best of Sami’s favorites. And you saw Lawrence Eckelston naked.”

My cheeks are likely the same color as my hair. “Why is this my life?” I whisper.

“How was it? I imagine he is a smokeshow naked. You’re all like, ‘Sukii, I don’t think we should have fun this weekend,’ and then you go for the cock right out of the gates. Well, game on, sister.”

“I never should have told you. You’re going to fixate on this.” I cover my eyes and try to take deep breaths.

“The hockey player table is staring at us again. I bet he told them and they’re all ‘shipping’ you guys.” Sukii is tormenting me.

“Hockey players don’t ship people, weirdo.”

“They totally do. I need details. Like abs and dick size, small, medium, large?” She’ll never let go of this. I have to give her something.

“He just got out of the shower—” I keep my eyes closed and relive it, shaking my head in embarrassment. “It was—he was visibly cold.” I open my eyes and cringe. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“A grower not a show—er.” She wrinkles her nose and ignores me. “I’ve been on that date. You feel so let down at first because the guy’s always got big-penis cockiness, and you see it’s a raspberry in the bushes. But then something happens and it just shoots out of his body, coming from nowhere. Like magic. So weird.”

The best part of this moment is her miming the penis growing from the body so not a single person in the room has to guess what she’s talking about. If she makes a jerking-off motion, I’m leaving.

“And what can I get you ladies?” a bubbly server asks, saving me from Sukii and the growers.

“A charcuterie board to share and two beers.” I glance at Sukii who nods.

“We like stouts, apparently.” She remembers what Sam said too.

“We have a great stout from Belgium. Sounds good.” She turns and leaves as more people pour in.

The small restaurant is becoming packed and noisy and the hockey player table is still watching us. Lawrence’s gaze constantly finds its way back to me, bringing with it the realization that I have to apologize. He was right, it was his room. I walked in on him naked and shouted at him like an asshole. I need to be the bigger person here and apologize so it’s not completely weird all weekend. And the weekend after at the fundraiser we’re planning.

“I don’t understand why they didn’t put us in adjoining rooms,” I mention to Sukii. “Why they gave me Lawrence.”

“Maybe they know you’re both Canadian and thought you might feel better together.” Her eyes widen. “Or it’s a setup.”

“Oh my God,” I groan. “I’ve heard that about Sami. Meddlesome in relationships.” I lean in. “That’s how Brady and his fiancée met.”

“Natalie Banks?”

“Yeah, supposedly Sami set them up as roommates, and they hooked up and now they’re getting married.” My tone is hateful and filled with disgust. I hate Brady Coldwell.

Sukii’s answer is the opposite, “Oh my God, what if that happens to you? What if Sami matchmakes you and you end up marrying Lawrence? Two Canadian success stories, and you both play hockey—”

“Uhh, can we keep that between us this weekend?” I ask quietly. “I don’t want them to know we are anything beyond Stan’s assistants.”

“But you’re not Stan’s, you’re in charge of the NHL contract.”

“No, Victor is,” I correct her. “I’m his assistant.”

“Yeah, but he rarely comes home from Europe.” She rolls her eyes. “We both know the NHL is yours. What if they recognize you? Loads of people do.”

“No, hockey players are narcissistic, and they don’t know who anyone is beyond the models they want to bang. Their world is everything to them.” My eyes dart to the players who continue to glance this way. “And I don’t want them to know I play hockey. It always gets weird. Girl hockey players are a joke to them.” The admission makes my face steam more. “It’s hard to do your job and be serious when everyone is laughing at you.”

“Mum’s the word.” She zips her lips. “But I still think you should have sex with him.”

“That’s not a good idea.” I steal a glimpse at the hockey players again as Lawrence gets up from his table and peers around, visibly confused about direction.



The server points him toward us. He smiles and walks by.

“But I should apologize.” I wait a minute, trying to summon bravery. “I’ll be right back,” I say to Sukii as I stand and follow him. We can’t spend five days with that as our introduction, and it’s better the conversation is had straightaway and in private. I don’t need one more thing looming over me right now.

When I reach the hallway where the bathrooms are, he’s gone. Did he sprint for the bathrooms? I stare at the doors for men and women and decide to wait and go over what I should say.

But standing in the dimly lit hall outside the bathroom begins to make me uncomfortable. Realizing how this must look gives me a bit of anxiety.

I’m already tense so it only takes a second of discomfort for my face to be blazing hot and I’m sweating again. God, why do I keep sweating? I lift my arms and ruffle my blouse to air it out. At least I still smell like deodorant.

The thought of him coming out of the bathroom to find me here sweating causes the sweat to pour more. This is a terrible idea. Why did I think I should follow him to the bathroom and wait for him after peeking at him naked?

This is my worst idea ever.

Deciding to abort but hearing footsteps coming from the restaurant, I push into the ladies’ room to hide, gasping when I find Lawrence standing and peeing in the toilet.

My mouth drops, again.

My heart races, faster.

My villainous eyes drift to the reflection of his penis and I’m staring at his cock, again.

And I’m frozen.

And sweaty.

“You again?” he says with a bitter chuckle. “You’re a stalker, aren’t you? A puck bunny who snuck into the

wedding?” He’s staring at me in the mirror and for some reason my lips won’t work. “I’ll tell you a secret, I don’t normally go for the puck buddies. But I could do this. Just let me finish up here.”

I manage to tear my eyes away from him, pointing to the woman on the door. “This is the ladies’!” I shriek.

“The men’s was busy.” He shrugs and finishes with a few spurts of pee. He tucks himself back into his pants, and I’m stuck watching the entire act.

“Why don’t you ever lock the doors?” My voice is shrill and I’m humiliated.

“I don’t know. Why don’t you ever knock?” He calmly washes his hands. “Look, it’s cool that you wanted to watch me pee, but fair’s fair. It’s my turn now. So come on in and close the door. Unless you want to leave it open like you did for me.” He dries his hands and folds his arms, leaning on the counter with that smug grin.

Realizing I did just hold the door open and watch him pee, I gasp.

*Fuck!*

Finally able to move, I run for the exit at the side of the building.

My mind is racing and my body is pins and needles.

Instead of going back to Sukii, I run to the boathouse and stare at the small lake, pacing and panicking and wiping my face.

How can I be this unlucky?

Or even better, how can I get a car to come get us so we can go home?

But there are no cars. No phones. No internet. No escaping. And I don’t even have an apartment right now. Or a boyfriend to cry on the shoulder of.

“Red!” a voice shouts after me.

For a second I'm certain I'm hallucinating. This is all a bad dream, like when you're naked at school and then you wake up. I pinch my arm hard but when I glance back, he's there. Lawrence Eckelston is running after me. And he doesn't appear happy. Unfortunately, I can't blame him for that. Had it been him walking in on me naked and watching me pee, I would have murdered him already.

I want to fall into the lake and sink but it's shallow and weedy, and I don't like when things touch me in the water.

"We didn't finish our conversation!" he shouts. "I need to ask you something."

"Oh God," I whisper and spin back to the water, focusing on the reflection of the clouds and wish I could run away, but I'm trapped at the end of the dock. Coming this way was a bad idea. "Look, I'm sorry. I followed you—"

"I knew it! You're a hockey fan and you thought you could crash the wedd—"

"What? No!" I shout back but pause.

This is not how I want to behave here. I need my Zen.

Closing my eyes and trying to regain my self-control, I lower my voice to sound rational, "I followed you to the bathroom to apologize for walking into your room. I didn't realize it wasn't my room or that they were adjoining." I open my eyes, feeling stupid but forcing the words out, "When I got to the hallway just now, I realized that standing outside the bathroom while you were peeing after coming into your room when you were naked wouldn't improve things. So I chickened out and tried to duck into the ladies' to hide from you."

"Okay—well that makes sense. So you're not a stalker groupie? Who the hell are you then?" he asks, losing some civility.

"Are you kidding me right now? Can you focus? I'm trying to apologize." I also lose my patience as his accusations begin to land in my head. "And no, I'm not some puck bunny,

you asshole! Not every girl prays for the day one of you perverts will grace us with your penis—”

“And yet you’ve seen mine twice in one day.” He laughs bitterly.

“I work for a PR company—”

“How did you find out about the wedding?” He steps closer, his eyes narrowing. He’s menacing this close up. The boyish good looks are gone and fury is left.

“Find out about the wedding? What is your problem? I was invited, you dick.” I blow past him, hurrying for the restaurant.

“Who invited you?” He isn’t letting it go. He grabs my arm and spins me to face him again. “Who?” His face is bright red, but I’m sure mine matches in anger and color.

“Sami Ford!” I tear my arm free, glaring and praying looks can kill.

“Why would Sami invite some fucking PR firm to her wedding?” He scoffs and there is almost no humor in the sound.

“Really?” I lift an eyebrow, ready with both barrels. “Can you think of no reason for PR to be at the wedding of the decade? How about the wet tee shirt contest in London?” I step into his face, snarling up at him. “What about the Clinton escapades? How about the time you got so drunk you let someone post a ten-minute video of you dancing in your underwear in a fountain in Spain? Even better, what about the time Matt Brimley got a blow job in the locker room while someone filmed it, only to be caught by *TMZ* at Sami’s later that night?” I tap my lip furiously. “Hmmm, such a mystery.”

His red face pales and he steps back but offers no apology.

“I don’t know why my firm was invited. My boss didn’t discuss it with me at length. If I had to guess, it’s in case one of you decides to shit the bed again, as you always do. Now, if you’ll excuse me, my beer’s getting warm.” I turn to stride away, my heart beating wildly.

But it doesn’t end there, of course it doesn’t.

I'm fired up and ready to go, over being called a stalker and a puck bunny, and the red rage is taking over. I spin around and offer my angry version of an apology, "And just so you know, Lawrence, I am *really* sorry I walked in on you naked, twice. Couldn't be sorrier if I tried." I flip him a middle finger and turn back toward the main house before he can respond. "Puck bunny," I seethe and storm inside, finding my seat while ignoring all the staring faces of the hockey players.

"What was that?" Sukii asks, her voice is high-pitched.

"He called me a puck bunny and I saw his dick again. This time I watched him pee." My voice cracks and I realize I'm close to angry crying but also laughing absurdly. The combination will be deadly if I don't get it under control. I lift my beer and take a massive swig. The cool liquid slides down my throat, tasting like heaven and helping me calm down after the horrible encounter. It's refreshing and exactly what I need to put the fire out. I drink the entire mug in one go.

"No," Sukii whispers and shakes her head, her eyes wide. "Why? Why would you do that?"

Putting down my empty mug, I close my eyes for a second with my lips pressed into a firm line. After a moment, the words fall out, "I followed him to apologize for breaking into his room and shouting at him, but I'm not sure what happened. He went into the ladies' room, it's a single room. No stalls. He was peeing. The mirror—reflection—" I'm rambling and sweating again because, apparently, this is my fresh start. My new me. A sweaty awkward mess. "Then he accused me of being a stalker"—I wince and swallow hard before the next words—"and a puck bunny." I take her beer and drink it too, also in one shot.

"Oh God, he called *you* a puck bunny? Oh no, he's coming back." She lowers her eyes on our table, and I freeze holding her empty mug and praying to the gods of all that is holy we don't make eye contact. "Don't look up," she whispers, and I'm positive I catch a hint of a grin on her face.

"Don't laugh!" I gasp.

Her lips press into a line, fighting the giggles.

“Remember when Stan’s grandkids’ bunny died and we had that funeral,” I say softly, trying to stop her from laughing. “And you were so sad.”

“I hate you,” she mutters and manages to fight laughing in his face as he stalks past us, taking his seat. Instead of being humbled by the entire thing, he lifts his beer in my direction and smiles wide. A twinkle of hatred still burns in his eyes.

I smirk back, hoping my horns are showing.

“It’s going to be a magical weekend,” Sukii says with a bitter chuckle.

I have a bad feeling she’s right.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

**L**ori  
My mind is stuck on the redhead.

Seeing her flip out over being called a puck bunny makes me want to torment her more. Ladies never talk to me like that. She wasn't impressed at all. Which gets me going.

Fortunately, Sami's tasked Brady and me with a Princess and the Pauper job, setting up the meet and greet. I've used the hour we've been doing it to figure out things to say to the redhead to see if we can keep this banter going.

The spot where the meet and greet is taking place is not what I expected at all. It's a wooden pavilion with heavy beam construction along the shore of the lake. There's a massive fireplace in the middle of the one wall that's solid. The others are open, overlooking the farm. Besides the elegance and huge chandeliers, it reminds me of the West Coast, the cool cedar structures built around North Vancouver Island near the beaches so people can have cookouts without getting rained on.

A camera crew takes photos as we set up the bar and hang lanterns from the trees, as if Brady and I are a decorating crew. Sami decided it was what she wanted for the setup, an Instagram photoshoot.

"Dude," Brady interrupts my internal monologue. "Is the team really calling off paintballing tomorrow?" he asks as he struggles with hanging a lantern on the beam at the entrance.

“Just ‘cause Sami vetoed all fun because she’s worried about bruising in the pictures, doesn’t mean we have to listen.”

“As far as I know it’s on. I was planning on going.”

“Good, Sami’s hired a fleet of makeup artists. If anyone takes an actual injury, it will be covered by makeup. Matt’s cousins said they’re playing no matter what, and they challenged the team, so if we don’t play, we look like little bitches.”

“That’s true.” I laugh.

“Besides, the paintball course here is sweet and I haven’t played in years. I think it’s a good idea for us guys to blow off some steam while the girls are at the spa. It’s better than creek fishing or horseback riding.” Brady makes a jerking-off motion.

“And I have zero interest in shooting clay disks. But shooting you and Carson, now that is highly enticing.”

“Don’t say enticing, it makes you sound like a rich douche,” Brady mocks me.

“I am a rich douche.” I step back to check our handiwork. Brady comes and stands next to me, holding up the picture Sami gave us. We look at it, then the tables, then the picture again. “Looks right, eh?”

“Yeah *eh!*” He mimics that stereotypical Canadian accent to mock me.

“Oh my God, you guys,” Nat squeaks and rushes up to us from the trail in a smoking white summer dress. “It’s perfect.”

I tear my stare from her dress and turn back to the pavilion. It’s nice.

Rustic chic is what Nat and Sami call it.

And I have to admit, it’s impressive the way the rustic pavilion and lake shore and fresh-cut firewood balance against the pretty tables, ambient light, and designer dishes and accents.



“When Sami said she wanted pictures of you boys doing the setup to capitalize on your fame, I had no idea you could accomplish this.” Nat slings an arm into Brady’s and rises to her tiptoes, kissing his cheek. “Well done.”

“She gave us a specific photo with a map and detailed instructions.” I hold up our picture. “Chimps could have done this.”

“Blindfolded chimps,” Brady laments. “And she picked us because we’re the only ones here who know how to light a fire.” He points at the bonfire we have readied and will light the moment this starts.

“No, this is awesome. And just imagine, girls all over our Instagram will be gushing about the super sweet hockey players who participated in the wedding set up.” She kisses him again. “I’ll help you put the throws on the backs of the chairs; if, Lori, you want to finish setting up the rope lights and paper lanterns lining the walkway in?” She takes over, directing us as if we haven’t been doing this whole thing alone all along.

Brady winks at me because we had already agreed we were doing that next.

“Roger that.” I salute and skip to it while Brady and Nat place the lavender throw blankets on the backs of chairs, for when it gets cold later. As I finish, I help them arrange the canister candles along the stairs to the pavilion.

“They have to finish the tent and we’re done.” Brady folds his arms, taking it in. “I hate to admit it, but this is going to be impressive.”

“Yeah, dude. Sami and Nat have an eye,” I agree.

“What?” Nat calls from the other side of the pavilion.

“Nothing. Just mentioning how worked we’re getting,” he jokes. “Speaking of getting worked, how’s it going with that redhead?” Brady asks. “What happened earlier? Because she looked pissed off when she came back inside after yelling at you by the lake. Is that some foreplay you guys have going on? Or do you know this girl from somewhere else?”

“I don’t know her at all.” I take a deep breath and hang the last light. “She walked in on me taking a piss, watched me pee, and then yelled at me for being a dick while staring at my dick. I tried to figure out who she is, and she yelled at me some more and flipped me off.”

“Hot crazy scale?” Brady asks.

“Oh, I suspect she’s a ten in both categories, which I will say is also enticing.” I laugh bitterly as he rolls his eyes. “But I checked with Sami, she’s genuinely a PR rep sent here by Stan Levisohn. I thought for sure she was a puck bunny, stalking me constantly in bathrooms like some hot crazy nut.”

“Who’s hot crazy?” Nat asks as she comes over to us.

“You, Banks.” Brady scoops her into his arms and runs for the lake.

“No!” she screams and hits his back, but he doesn’t slow until the last second, feigning throwing her in the water but holding on. She screams and he laughs. It’s my turn to roll my eyes.

He slides her down his body, kissing gently. She hits him but gives into the kisses. They melt into each other and I avert my gaze to the cone-shaped tent being erected by the guys who brought the tables over for us to set up. It’s more of a linen teepee than a tent and will sit on the shore and house the band.

“Hey, guys! Stop slacking off. It’s time for you to go get ready for dinner,” Sami shouts at us as she marches over with an entourage of lackeys, not bothering to compliment the hard work.

I forgive her since she looks hot. She’s dressed to the nines and yet somehow manages to pull off a fresh-faced vibe, as if she just happens to look this way. Having seen her sans makeup and hair product, I can say without a doubt she does not.

She’s wearing a pale gold-colored summer dress that’s off the shoulders, revealing flawless tanned skin and a glow I’m sure has something to do with the sparkly lotion she forced me

to rub on her shoulders and back before. Her hair is a little more silvery than normal. She said it was toned out for the wedding. I'm not sure what that entails but it sounds bad. The result is stunning and with the lacy wedding dress she has, she will be the hottest bride I've ever seen.

"Seriously, you need to go get ready before the guests arrive." Sami claps her hands at us.

"Get ready for the cookout dinner?" Brady glances down at his shirt and shorts. "You want us to dress up for the campfire? What's wrong with what I'm wearing?"

"Brady—" Her tone is warning. "You will go and put on the clothes I've labeled in your bag and be back here in eleven minutes, or I *will* kill you."

Tense isn't the right word for her and this isn't the moment to discuss it.

"Lori?" Her eyes dart to mine.

"All right." I lift my hands. "Eleven minutes, got it!" I walk to my golf cart but am unable to resist poking her from this safe distance. "Do I have clothes labeled as well or can I choose for myself?"

She growls but I can't understand the words. Not that I need to. She packed my bag. And Nat's. And Brady's. And Matt's. Carson was allowed to pack his own clothes, as was Rich, but with our crowd there was a specific look she was going for. The rest of the guests were also given detailed packing instructions in the few hours of notice they received for the wedding. I think it's too much to expect to control what people wear, but Sami is extra.

I dress quickly, putting on the clothes she labeled "Wednesday Night," and head back to the pavilion to get seated. Luckily, I'm put with Cap, Carson, and Rich in the middle of one of the long wooden tables.

We sit down as beers are brought out in samplers, a selection of Sami's choosing to go with the gourmet barbecue.

Guests pour in. Everyone is punctual and dressed appropriately. They must know Sami well enough to be afraid

of her. Sami's dad carries in little Eli, giving him kisses and holding him gently as the kid sleeps like a log.

Matt's mom and sister-in-law walk in with a demure demeanor. I haven't seen his mom like this, ever, but maybe she's been humbled by Matt being her keeper.

Her eyes are glossy, hinting she's still taking the prescription meds, unable to cope with her husband and son's death. Matt's sister-in-law is similar. Neither seems interested in the wedding, beyond seeing their few friends Matt invited. They sit together in one section of the tables and don't interact with anyone else. I haven't seen his mom hold Eli yet and the sister-in-law has a nanny who always has the kid.

Matt escorts his grandparents to their seats. His father's family from the South is put closer to the team, keeping them as far from the rich folk as possible, likely a smart plan. Gran will say whatever she's thinking and the wealthy elite don't tend to enjoy that.

Cousin Bev winks at me as she sits. I have to grin back. She's easily the coolest girl I've ever met.

She's followed in by the least cool girl I've ever met, the redhead from next door, and her little brunette friend. Of course they end up seated across from us, right next to Bev. I prepare myself for an evening of banter.

"Ladies," Cap says, standing as they walk to their nameplates. He's being weird. "I'm Nick Belamy. Everyone calls me Cap." He holds a hand out to the brunette and his game becomes clearer. He's setting up to score later. On the sly. "This is Lawrence Eckelston. Carson Bellevue. Rich Fairfield." He introduces our close circle.

"Jenny and Sukii." The brunette points to the redhead first and then herself.

"So you all are part of the PR team that saves people like us on the reg?" Carson jokes.

"Indeed," Sukii says, beaming. She is stunning. Big dark eyes, long glossy hair, glowing skin, and high cheek bones.

“That must be some job.” Rich laughs. “Between Sami and Matt you must have had your hands—”

“Brady,” the redhead mutters. “Sami and Brady. But you’re no slouch yourself, Lawrence.”

“Oh, the Clinton,” Rich agrees quietly. “I can see that being a bigger problem than Matt being drunk.”

“Well, let’s not forget about Laramie,” I add before I think about it.

Quiet nods surround me as no one wants to talk about it. Not this close to Sami and Matt. That was the blow job heard around the world.

“So where are you ladies from?” Cap asks, changing the subject.

“I’m from Miami, she’s Canadian.” Sukii motions her head toward Jenny who flinches as if she didn’t want us to know that.

“Canada, eh?” Cap points at me and does the fun “eh” thing for sport. “Lori’s from Canada too.”

“Oh I know,” Jenny’s eyes meet mine for the first time, narrowing for a microsecond before she smiles but there is no kindness in them. It’s all piss and vinegar. This girl hates me.

“Where in Canada?” I have to ask. She doesn’t want to speak to me which makes me want to talk to her more, provoking her and refusing to let her off that easy.

“British Columbia, same as you.” She knows me. I almost take it the wrong way before I remember she’s my PR rep, of course she knows where I’m from. That’s her job.

“Vancouver?” I ask.

“Van Isle. The northern end.” She doesn’t want to say her town on Vancouver Island, which means I have to grill harder.

“Oh, near Port Hardy?” I refuse to let up. I’m grinning at the flicker of disappointment when she realizes I know the island well enough.

“Port McNeill,” she clarifies.

“Right, of course. I had a buddy from there. We went to Notre Dame together.”

“Cool.” She smiles, turning to glance down the line of guests, not asking me who the buddy was.

But again, I don’t let her off the hook. “Brent—”

“Doesn’t sound familiar,” she cuts me off and offers her fake smile once more before she turns to Bev and smiles genuinely. “Jenny.”

“Bev.” Bev smiles wide, her twangy tone is soft. “Matty’s my moron. So you’re the one spending your life wiping his ass and cleaning his messes?”

“Something like that.” Jenny laughs, lifting one of her beers.

“Wait, Jenny?” Cap leans forward. “Not Snowdon?” He squints. “Holy shit.” He points at her and true terror fills her gaze.

She is pleading with him to stop. “You must know my brother’s band. Yeah, Josh Snowdon, is my brother,” she offers quickly. “The lead singer of Twin Peeks—”

“Errr, yeah. Right.” Cap doesn’t lie as well or as fast as she does, but he gets her drift. What the hell is happening? How did he know her brother and her last name?

No one else is noticing this weird exchange except the little brunette next to Jenny who cuts in, “So, Cap, are you guys bummed about the playoffs? That was a brutal loss to the Senators.”

It’s his turn to cringe but he answers with the exact diplomacy a captain needs, “All we can do is learn from the loss and move on. We’ll get them next year.”

She smiles at him and I get a weird twist in my guts.

If anyone is playing the back nine tonight, it’ll be Cap.

Not sure I ever saw Cap as one of the guys who cheats, but as far as the brunette is concerned, it’s game on.

**J**enny

The setting for the meet and greet is amazing.

The rustic farm tables have cream lace runners with burlap woven around the leaf-covered olive branch centerpieces placed throughout, adding a splash of color. Pale wooden lanterns are set every few feet, creating a warm glow. They match the chandeliers and are offset perfectly by the white flower bouquets placed here and there between the lanterns.

The small speeches, toasts, and awkward beginnings are over, thank God, and we are eating. The food is incredible. A feast of barbecued meats, amazing salads, and the best roasted potatoes.

Cousin Bev, the coolest girl I've ever met, is a blast and has been filling me in on the story of Matt and Sami, the behind-the-scenes version.

She's affectionately drunk as she leans in, shouting her blissful Southern twang over the band's weirdly good version of "Summertime" by George Gershwin. "So then Matt and Sami patched things up." She motions her head at asshole Lawrence who is deep in jolly conversation with Carson and Rich. "If not, Lori and Sami might be the ones getting married. He offered to be her baby daddy and save her reputation." She lowers her voice and leans in more, her words brushing against my ear, "Deep down, he's always had a thing for her."

“No way!” I shout back, stunned but also seeing the predictability of someone like Lawrence being into Upper East Side girls.

She lifts her finger to her lips. “He doesn’t know I am onto his feelings.”

“I won’t say a word.” I do the stupid thing Sukii always does and lock my lips with a zip.

“So changing the subject”—she pauses and sits back, eyeing me up—“what’s your deal? How are you here?”

“At this party or this point in my life?” I ask with a weird beer giggle, realizing it’s hitting me.

“Both.”

“The short answer is my boss didn’t want to come.” I scan the lively group of people eating, drinking, and laughing. “He’s eighty. So this isn’t really his scene.” It’s the understatement of the year. “He kinda forced it on me. I didn’t want to, but he’s helping me find an apartment in Midtown for cheap if I came in his place.”

“What?” She laughs again. “He bribed you?”

“Yeah.” I laugh too. “Cheap rent in Midtown is unheard of. And I was desperate and I’ve only been with the company for six years. I couldn’t say no. I feel awful but he’s moving my apartment this weekend.” I hiccup, regretting bringing this up. “I’ll come home to a new place to live on Sunday. But it’s a debt I owe now.”

“Damn, he must hate weddings.” She finishes off her mug of beer and lifts it up. “Garcon.” It’s the worst French accent attempt I’ve heard. “More beer!”

I follow her gaze to Lawrence who smiles and nods. When he looks at her, there’s something handsome about him, beyond the obvious gorgeousness. It’s a kindness and respect in his gaze I haven’t seen before.

“And one for my lovely friend here.” She points at me. As his eyes flicker to me the smugness finds its way back.



I part my lips to say I'm fine but he turns and waves at the server. He points in our direction, moving his finger in a circle as if asking for drinks for the group around us.

“And you were saying?” Bev nudges my attention back to her.

“What?” I'm lost.

“How did you end up here, at this place in your life? Single, living in New York, taking bribes for cheap rent, and attending weird celebrity weddings with zero notice?” She hiccups as she finishes the question.

“That is a long story.” I run my finger around the rim of the empty mug.

“We ain't got nothing but time.”

“Well, starting at the beginning,” I laugh, “when I graduated from university, I was offered a position in New York for a PR firm. I've been here since—”

“No, the part about you being single.” She lifts a finger and points at my nose. “It's new. What happened?”

“How can you tell?” I am stunned at her guess. I thought I was doing well hiding it.

“You haven't hit on or flirted with a single dude here. No ring. And your eyes are a tiny bit puffy, like maybe you've been crying recently but you're good at covering it up.”

“That's impressive,” I say flatly.

“Spill!”

“He cheated.” It falls from my lips before I can stop it. Realizing I have admitted the worst part, I continue, laughing at the stupidity of the story. “Yesterday,” a tense giggle interrupts, “I was bringing him a coffee from his favorite café. I'd just come from my dad and stepmom's house. And she was so mean to me, and I needed someone to listen to me vent. I thought I'd see him and complain for a minute and then maybe we'd have sex and I would feel better.” The giggle ends and the cruel reality stings.

“And when you got there, he was with someone else?” She’s psychic, I’m convinced.

“Yup,” I squeak, certain I’m the most pathetic person she’s ever met. “Aslin, a girl from work.”

“We hate Aslin,” Bev says flatly. “Did you bust in and kick some ass? Are you wanted by the police for assault and that’s why you’re here? Your boss is hiding you?” She waggles her dark eyebrows with excitement in her eyes.

“I wish.” I snort. “Actually, I ran.” My face lowers with shame but the words don’t stop, “I took the coffee cups with my name on them and left his house key in a puddle and ran home. I changed my number and deleted him from my social media, erased the last three years of my life, except work.” The humor is gone and I’m ashamed of what I’ve admitted and who I am right now. “I’m moving apartments and I hope I never see him again.”

“He has no idea that you know?”

“No.” I swallow hard.

“That’s amazing. You are my fucking hero, girl.” She grabs the beers from the server as he begins handing them out. “I need your attention please. We have a toast, everyone!” Bev shouts at the people in our area. “Lift your glasses to my new friend, Jenny. She is a boss ass bitch.”

The table of hockey players, rich kids, and Sukii lift their glasses.

“To Jenny!” they shout in unison, knocking glasses. I laugh at the ridiculousness of it all. They have no idea what they’re toasting. And no one cares. They just want to drink and have fun.

Bev hugs me and plants a juicy kiss on my cheek. “I’m so sorry that happened to you, but I’m glad you’re here. This bunch of assholes is normally unbearable.”

I kiss her back. “No, thank you for making me feel welcome. I was worried about coming to this. I’ve been a ball of nerves since Stan asked me to take his place. I keep sweating for no reason.”

“Stick with me, you’ll have a blast.” She takes a long drink off her mug. “In fact, tomorrow is supposed to be a spa day for the girls. But I can’t do Sami and Nat and spa day. I’ll kill someone. And it just so happens this place has a premier paintball course. So me and Matt’s other hillbilly cousins from the sticks brought our gear. We play at home.” Her eyes sparkle with delight and mischief. “You wanna come play?”

“Won’t they be angry if we crash the guys’ thing?” I lower my voice.

“No, they’re terrified of me so we’re doing it. Not one of them will talk shit to me. They know what’ll happen.” She lifts an eyebrow. “Watch.”

She turns her head toward the head table, giving a shitty look to Brady. He catches the stare and winces, nudging Matt who glances over. He scowls but there is definite worry in his eyes. Brady mouths something and Bev turns back to me, leaving the two of them hanging.

“See? Terrified.” She starts drinking again as if it didn’t happen and offers nothing to Brady and Matt who now clearly believe they’ve done something wrong. Matt is visibly uncomfortable and Brady is trying to get her attention, but she doesn’t bother to turn back. “Have you paintballed before?” she asks.

“Yeah.” I don’t bother to lie. “I was on a team in college. My roommate was into it. He was a big nerd and they had a quota of girls they needed. So I’m pretty good.”

“Of course you are. Look how muscled your arms are.” She flexes her thin arms and we both laugh.

“What’s your story?” I ask. “Who’s the person in your life?”

“Why do you think I have a person?” She tilts her head and cocks that grin.

“You haven’t flirted with a single guy here tonight, not one, and like you said, this table has nothing but talent.” I motion my head toward the Southerners. “I get that you’re related to that part of the table, but the rest of these guys?”

Her eyes dart to the far side of the room where a camera guy films Sami smiling at Matt as Nat tells a story.

“Ah.” I nod at the cute guy behind the camera.

“That’s another thing I’ll ask you to take to the grave. My cousin would lose his goddamned mind.” She rolls her eyes and tucks her long hair behind her ear.

“How long?”

“Since last summer. We try to see each other as often as we can, but the distance thing is sucking.” Bev widens her stare. “So I’m moving up to New York to be with him, Geoff. I’m going to tell Mr. Grumpy then.” She motions toward Matt who’s still checking with her for what he’s done wrong. “No point in working him up before the wedding. Sami’s done that enough for all of us,” she teases but leans in more to whisper again. “What’s the story with your friend there and Cap?”

“No clue.” My eyes dart to Sukii and Cap. He’s switched sides and is now sitting beside her, regaling her with something that’s making her laugh. “Where’s his wife?” The question sobers me up. If this were to go public, Sukii’s putting me in a compromising spot as it would be my job to clean it up. At least there aren’t any phones here.

“Not a clue.” Bev wrinkles her nose. “Hockey players.”

“Yup.” I sit back, realizing I have to say something to Sukii about it.

Which is not a happy thought.

Bev’s stare darts to the right as the camera guy starts packing up. “Well, I guess I’m out of here.” She smiles back at me. “You’re next to Lori, right?”

“Yeah.” I wince but try to hide it.

“I’ll come get you before the game.” She finishes her beer and stands, swaying a little.

“You all right, Bev?” Carson calls to her.

She lifts a thumb and winks. “Night, boys.” She waves and walks between the crowded rows of people and chairs.

“I’m going to head too, Sukii. You want to walk with me?” I stand and feel the room shift but hope I manage to hide it.

“Lori will walk you back,” Carson says with a mischievous grin. “He was just saying he wants to go to bed, and you guys are cabin mates, after all.”

“Oh uhm.” I glance at Sukii who can’t seem to take her eyes off Cap.

Lawrence makes a weird face, hesitant maybe.

“It’s fine. I know the way.” I reach over and squeeze Sukii’s shoulder. “See you tomorrow.”

“Oh, you’re leaving?” Sukii clues in. Cap’s eyes dart to her face, likely hoping he can convince her to stay out with a look.

“Yeah, I need to pace myself.” I wink at her, trying not to be obvious that she needs to rethink her plans.

“Okay, I’ll see you at breakfast.” She squeezes my hand, signaling for me to beat it and mind my own business.

Rich stands as a gentleman, likely the only one with us. “Night, Jenny.” Everyone else joins him, smiling and wishing me goodnight.

“Night.” I step through the rows of chairs and people. In my peripheral, I catch a glimpse of someone moving nearby. I hope it’s Sukii changing her mind, but when I leave the pavilion and pass the tent with the band, I see it’s not. She’s still seated and laughing with Cap.

Sighing, I try not to be the death of fun and the moral police, and turn to head toward the cottages.

“Red, wait up!” a familiar voice calls to me over the music. I cringe but fight the urge to walk faster and instead smile and turn, seeing Lawrence running after me. “I just want to say—”

“No,” I cut him off. “I want to say something to you first.”

“No, me first.” He frowns and for the first time when he looks at me I don’t see that smug, shitty attitude. “We got off to a bad start.”

“Which was my fault—”

“I should have locked the door.”

“Okay,” I relent. “The door should have been locked. But I shouldn’t have reacted so badly.” I cover my eyes with my hand for a moment. “And the bathroom—”

“Can we start over?” he asks, sounding genuinely interested in a fresh start.

“It’s my week for fresh starts,” I say though he can’t possibly know what I’m talking about. “I’m Jenny. I’m also Canadian. I like short walks in the city and donairs from Halifax.”

“Oh my God!” He brightens up instantly. “I love Halifax donairs. The sweet sauce.” He places a big hand on his chest. “I would kill for that right now. A bunch of beers is best followed by a greasy donair and a Coke.”

“Yes!” I burst. “You have to bite the paper it’s wrapped in at least once or it’s not a complete meal.” I hold out a hand. “It’s nice meeting you.”

He takes my hand in his, wrapping it in warmth. “I’m Lawrence. My friends call me Lori.”

“Okay, Lori.” I shake his enormous hand and smile up at him. “Have a good night.”

“You too, Jenny.” He holds my hand for a second too long, but we’re drunk and laughing about donairs so I don’t pay attention to it. He finally lets go, releasing me. His face has all the schoolboy charm it held when he looked at Bev.

“Night,” I say again and walk away, waving back over my head.

It’s a better end than I expected to an awful day.

Maybe tomorrow will be my fresh start.

**T**hursday, June 15  
Lori

“One more minute, Lori!” Cap shouts, standing next to the treadmill where I’m sprinting so hard I want to puke or pass out or both. “Thirty seconds, you got this. Stay with it! You wanted to get drunk and have fun, you have to earn it.”

I have no idea what he’s talking about. He’s the one who got drunk and banged the cute brunette, but I’m pushing it so hard I think I might die until he smacks the “stop” button and it ends. I walk until the treadmill dies. I’m gasping for air and lightheaded.

“Nice,” Cap shouts and nudges me in the arm.

“Earning those beers, buddy!” Brady hits me too.

I’m breathing so heavily it feels like I’m sucking jam through a straw, and it’s hard to give a proper comeback. My hands grip my hips as I pace the small gym and nod.

Brady jumps on the treadmill for his turn.

Cap starts him light the way he did me. “Where’s Brimstone?” he asks.

“Slacking in his workouts for wedding week,” Brady says with a husky laugh as his feet hit the treadmill a little faster. “But as someone who is staying in the same house as them, don’t worry, Sami is working him out plenty. He’s been rage pacing for days.”

We all laugh.

“Speaking of rage, you bang that ginger last night?” Brady asks. “I saw you talking to her at the end of the night.”

“He’s talking an awful lot for someone working out, Cap. It’s clearly not going fast enough.” I point at the treadmill and start my stretches. “Speaking of the ginger, Cap, how do you know her?”

“Not my story to tell,” he says flatly, meaning he won’t. Cap’s a gentleman, but I assume there’s some dirty puck bunny story behind it. Hence the reason she got so weird about me calling her one. “But her brother’s band is awesome. You know, Twin Peeks.”

“Yeah, they’re cool. I saw them on *Saturday Night Live*. They’re funny. She doesn’t seem like the kind of girl who has a funny brother like that.”

“Maybe she’s playing hard to get.” Brady will never let his weird obsession with Jenny go.

“I don’t think that’s a thing, bro,” I reply sarcastically.

“I agree,” Cap adds. “Girls are either into ya or they’re not, and she is not into you, Lori. Every time she looks at you, her eye twitches.”

“Hard to get is so a thing. Sami played it with Matt forever. I thought he’d die from exposure, he iced his nuts so much.”

We all laugh.

“Well, I’m neither a fan of icy nuts nor girls who play games. So the redhead is not going to happen. Sorry, man.” I switch legs as Matt enters the gym. He’s got that crankiness in his eyes. “But speaking of icing nuts, how’s it going, Brimstone?”

“Never get married,” Matt grunts and walks to the other treadmill to warm up.

“What stage are you at? The ‘we can’t have sex before the wedding even though we already have a kid,’ or the ‘should



we even be getting married if we can't agree on anything'?" Cap asks as he turns up the treadmill for Brady.

"A little of column A and a little of column B." Matt sounds bitter. "She's making me crazy. I swear to God, I'm losing it. I thought we would get here and she'd chill out. But that Princess and the Pauper nonsense is killing me."

"Ah, you'll be fine." Cap slaps him on the back and turns back to Brady, bringing more heat on the speed. "Once this is over, it'll be back to normal."

"Don't threaten me with that." Matt laughs. "It's just this whole influencer gig is making me want to smash things. I can't take a shit without Geoff the camera guy in my grill. They're all over us. Filming everything. We're living when the camera is on and zoned out when it's off. Like living for posing for pictures. Getting married is stressful enough, adding cameras, film crews, and Sami is like tossing water on an oil fire."

I feel sorry for the guy. On a good day, I can't handle Sami constantly working her brand. And this is clearly not a good day.

"Did you tell her about paintball yet? I told everyone we should meet there for one," Brady says, sounding as if he's getting winded.

"No, we're not paintballing. My redneck cousins are doing it, but if someone in the wedding party gets injured or bruised, Sami will lose her—"

"Bro!" Brady pauses the machine. "She's goners, my dude. The girl's mind is lost. She can't get more annoying and she's dragged Nat right down to crazy town with her." He walks off the treadmill and hits Matt's machine, stopping it. "So pop your balls back out and stop being a little bitch."

"Watch it," Matt warns.

Brady laughs. "Or what? You'll ask Sami if we can fight in the yard?"

I stifle a laugh as Cap steps closer, ready to hit pause on the two of them as they huff and glare at each other.

“No, man, it’s the last couple of days before you get married. This isn’t like getting strippers to rub their coochies all over your face. It’s paintball.” He hits Matt in the balls with a little swat. “Buck up, Nancy. We’re fucking paintballing and we won’t tell Sami. It’s need to know and none of the girls need to know.” He hops back on the treadmill and starts running again. “I refuse to turn down a challenge from the hillbillies.”

Matt glares.

“He has a point. It’s just paintball, buds. A friendly game between us and your cousins.” I try to smooth over Brady’s typical crassness. “And if Sami is stressing you out that badly, maybe we can help out more. Is there anything we can do?” I ask, not actually wanting to do more, but I’m good at putting on the face.

“Yeah, man. We’re all here for you,” Cap adds.

Matt takes a deep breath before starting up his machine again. “We’ll never get away with it. Sami doesn’t want to go to the spa now. She’s freaking out about some butterflies that won’t be arriving in time. If she doesn’t go to the spa, how will we sneak off and paintball?”

“Lori, you’re the Sami whisperer,” Brady manages to say. “You should pull the little-brother act and convince her to relax so Matt can stop tiptoeing around. Get her to go to the spa.”

They all turn to me.

“Okay,” I agree. Taking one for the team is my thing anyway.

“Honestly, I don’t get women, man,” Matt says, slowing down the treadmill. “We planned and paid to have a relaxing experience here, where every single thing is thought of and our every whim is catered to, and she’s still acting like she’s planning.” Matt continues, “This morning I told her if she wasn’t done planning by now, maybe she should consider it too late to fix whatever isn’t done.”

Brady, Cap, and I all grimace at the same moment.

“Right, I knew it was a mistake to say it, she just makes me so nuts.” His eyes dart to mine in the mirror. “So yeah, if you can get her to chill out, please. Be my guest. But I don’t think paintball is a good idea. That’s all I’m saying about that.”

“No one wants to hear your shit, man. Lori will take care of it.” Brady waves me off.

“Yeah. I’ll catch a shower and see if I can’t persuade her to have fun.” I get up and nod at the guys. “Thanks, Cap.”

He waves and I hurry to the golf cart waiting for me. If I had my phone, I’d text Carson and Rich to come help me deal with her, but no phone means a solo attempt at mellowing Sami.

As I park at my place, I catch a glimpse of the red hair in the window on her side of the cottage. I turn off the cart and slowly step toward the flash of red flinging in the air. A sound and a beat make their way out of the living room where I see something I don’t expect.

Jenny is dancing to a song I’ve never heard before. It’s fast paced and old-school sounding. She’s singing her guts out, dancing in a Montreal Canadians tee shirt and some tight white butt-hugging underwear. Her arms are in the air and she’s got killer moves.

A grin spreads across my lips as she spins around, shaking her ass. It’s perfect, like she’s done serious presses all her life. She’s muscular and fit as fuck. She’s singing into her TV remote and then she’s strumming a fake guitar. The drums hit and she’s playing them in the air in a way that makes me think she’s played before.

This is the sister of a famous musician.

Her head is back, she’s singing into the ceiling as she drums for her life, and shaking her ass.

“What you got there?” Carson shouts, seeing me in the bushes. He pulls his golf cart up next to mine and jumps out. “Oh sweet God, look at that ass! I love this song.”

Somehow, God being against me as far as this chick is concerned, she hears him over the loud music, and turns. Her mouth drops, as it always does when she sees me, and her eyes narrow.

I have nothing.

I'm sweaty from working out, smiling like an idiot, standing in the bushes, peeping in her fucking window, watching her air band in her underwear.

She lifts her middle finger at us.

Carson claps, offering applause. "You're awesome!" he shouts.

She smiles and offers a curtsy to him but loses her smile as she glares at me and stalks away from the window.

"What song is this?" I ask.

"'Need Never Get Old' by Nathaniel Rateliff and the Night Sweats. Saw them live last year. We did some speed first, it was magic," Carson says in his weird way of being excited without sounding it. "Why is she always glaring at you? I thought you guys patched things up last night," Carson jokes and goes back to his golf cart.

"We did but obviously that was before she caught me peeking in her windows like a pervert. She probably assumes you're strictly gay since you're with Rich. You get a pass and I get the stink eye." I sigh. "But I have other fish to fry. I have to talk to Sami and get her to mellow out and go to the spa."

"I'm not coming, don't ask."

"Matt's ready to kill something."

"Told you he was coming to the end of his patience. Paintball will be good for him. Blow off some steam." Carson wrinkles his nose at my sweaty shirt. "You need a shower. We'll meet you at the paintball place at one."

"Fine." I walk to my front door as he drives away.

The music continues to play on Jenny's side. I wish I had my phone so I could Shazam the song. I've never heard of the

band, but I leave my bathroom door open so I can hear it faintly through the walls. She's rocking it out in there, which is surprising since she comes across as one of those uppity spin-class girls who leaves with the bike seat lodged in their arse.

I struggle to focus my mind back on Sami and how to solve that. I don't know what I'm supposed to do to fix this. Do I kick the door down and force her to get a pedicure?

Unfortunately, I don't have an answer by the time I arrive at the house so I decide to wing it. Matt and Brady aren't back yet, likely giving me time to work some magic or Xanax on her.

Inside, I find Sami in the living room pacing in short shorts and a tee shirt. She has no makeup on yet and her hair is in a messy bun. "What are you doing? You don't look ready for the spa," I say as I enter, a bit afraid.

"Have you seen Matt?" Sami snarls, no greeting. "Did he tell you the butterflies that are supposed to be at the photoshoot aren't going to make it until brunch on Sunday?"

"Firstly, Matt's busy running off his blue balls," I joke, sort of. "And the butterfly thing doesn't sound like that big of a deal. Your brunch dress is stunning. It'll look awesome with the insect show."

Her lips twist into a grin but she's fighting it. "Shut up, Lori." She cracks an actual smile but there's exhaustion in her eyes.

"Why aren't you ready for the spa? The schedule says it's spa day. Is it really the insects?" I ask with a lot of doubt in my tone and sit on the sofa as Nat strolls in eating a plate of nachos. She sits next to me and lets me steal a chip.

"Lori, you don't understand, I want everything—"

"Yah, yah. You want everything to be perfect. But at this point it seems like you're being a dictator and your wedding day is two days away. By now, you should be done all your hard work at making it perfect and enjoying the vacation part."

She wrinkles her nose and I wait for the blast, but she deflates into a whiny baby. "Lori, I just want everything

seamless. I don't want the world to be disappointed. I want my fans to think I knocked it out of the park, not half-assed it because I had too much rosé the night before. My whole life I've been a screwup and this is the first thing I've done right."

"Hey, that's not true. I saw the wet tee shirt contest footage. You were amazing," I tease and she covers her face to hide the laughing.

"I hate you."

"You don't. At all. Come here," I pat the sofa.

She walks over, defeated but still anxious. She snuggles in, smelling me. I hate it when she does that but I let it happen.

"It's your wedding, Sami. Yours. The people who need to think it was perfect are you and Nat 'cause we both know us guys are nothing but decorations."

"At least you know your place, Lori," Nat says.

"I do. I also know you're running yourself ragged, Sami, and for what? So you can ruin your happy day with some bullshit brand you'll be working on for the rest of your life? Is that worth hating your wedding?"

"But—"

"No buts. You're going to see this day as a job, part of your work. And that critical eye will ruin everything by second guessing your choices instead of sitting back and having fun. Trust the decisions you've made and let them be enough."

"Another one for Lori." Nat strikes the air as if she's tallying points. "How did you get so smart for such a cute guy?"

"Focus, Nat." I wrap an arm around Sami and force her head onto my shoulder. It's my turn to smell her. "The rooms are perfect. The farm is stunning. The food is outrageously good. The drinks have been some of the best I've ever had. The guests are hand selected and the exact people you want here to share in this magic. You worked so hard to plan every detail, trust your instincts. You hired all the right people and they are rocking this job and no longer need you. So it's time

now to let the cameras catch you enjoying the fruits of your labor.”

“He’s right again,” Nat says with a little taunting song in her voice.

“I’m always right.”

“We’ve all been trying to tell you this.” Nat lifts her eyebrows. “You’ll be haggard on your wedding day at this rate. We need a spa day. Everyone is meeting us there at one.”

Sami pouts, not relenting.

Taking a deep breath, I decide the time for asking is over. She needs to be told. “You want the world to see that hard work pays off and the reward is the next three days being bliss.” I climb off the couch and drag her with me. “So I am telling you now, go and enjoy that spa day you have planned. Relax and have fun. Real fun. And if the cameras catch it, cool. If not, fuck it. You don’t exist for your fans. You think I play hockey for everyone in the rink screaming at me? No. I play because I love the game.”

“Amen!” Nat raises a hand with a chip coated in queso.

“What are you saying amen to? Get your ass off the sofa.” I snap my fingers at Nat impatiently. “Nat, seriously, chips down. Sami’s ready for spa day,” I bark.

Nat scrambles up and grabs Sami’s hand.

“When you look back on this, Sami, what do you want to remember? Planning nonstop or smiling and laughing and eating and enjoying? And you also need to ask yourself if you planned this for us or for you. Because we’re having a sweet time and you’re in your room yelling at insect people.” I cock an eyebrow.

“Fine.” Sami loses her fight. “You’re right.”

“Do not let her plan or stress one bit. Every one of us has a friggin’ itinerary. There isn’t a second that isn’t planned. It will be perfect. Fun. Relax. Enjoy.” I point at Nat. “Don’t fuck this up.”

“Yes, sir!” Nat’s lips turn up into a wide smile. “Have fun fishing.” She obviously knows we’re going paintballing but keeps the lie. She winks at me as we walk out and they get into their golf cart.

“Have fun, girls.” I wave as they drive off, relieved it went as well as it did but certain there will be five more pep talks before this is all over.

The sound of another golf cart comes around the corner as Sami and Nat disappear. “How’d it go?” Brady asks as Matt parks it.

“Good. She’s off to the spa. I might have convinced her to settle down.” I pause and stare at them. “Were you hiding in the woods waiting for them to leave?”

“No.” Brady scoffs but Matt nods.

“Maybe it’s time you pop your balls out, Brady—”

“How is she?” Matt has no time for our shit.

“Good, *ish*. But I also think we’ll be back at her by tonight. She wants to control every aspect even though she’s hired perfectly capable people and overexplained her vision.” I have to grin at the misery on his face. “Ready for paintball?”

“Fuck you, Lori,” he says with a laugh and we’ve clearly won. Paintball is on.

“You are grumpy.” Brady elbows him in the ribs. “I’m on your team, Matty. Look at the cranky face.”

Matt growls.

“We should have brought our cups. He’s gonna shoot us in the dick.” I climb into my golf cart and follow them as Brady whooos and whistles all the way to the course.

When we get there, it’s packed with the team and Matt’s family. The hillbillies are raring to go with all their own equipment. And I see why. The course is as epic as was sold to us. It’s huge, has to be two acres, at least. It resembles a military training site with massive trees amongst the bunkers and fences and burned-out tanks and trucks. There’s even a tree house for snipers.



“Damn,” Brady moans.

“Yeah, my family is pumped,” Matt says, glancing at his cousins as we walk into the massive arena.

“This is some badass shit!” Brady reminds me of a kid in a candy shop. I don’t think I’ve seen him look at Nat like this. He grabs my sleeve and shakes me. “I am going to kill everyone!” He points at Carson and Rich who stick out like sore thumbs next to Cap and the boys. Carson is wearing a pale pink polo and Rich has on a silvery one. Rookies. “Everyone!”

Carson does a jerking-off motion at him, making Rich sneer and Cap laugh.

Brady rushes forward to the poor guy who is outfitting people with gear and trying to go over rules.

“This is about to get dirty,” Matt mumbles. “I already regret it. She’s going to murder me. And then I’ll have to come back and murder you two.” He eyes Brady who is pretending to shoot everyone in the crowd with crappy sound effects.

“You might need to remind everyone no face shots. One swollen ear will lead to a lot of other injuries when Sami sees it.”

“I’m going to shoot you in the dick at least once, Lori,” Matt admits softly before he follows Brady in.

“Yeah, I figured.” I take a deep breath before walking over as Matt begins reading the rules to the amped-up masses.

“No face shots. If Sami sees one injury, we are dead. You’ve all seen how tense she is.” Matt spins in a circle. “I want a friendly game, no cheap shots. Wear masks or goggles —”

“I’m not wearing goggles or a mask.” Brady scans the whole group. “I’m kicking the shit out of anyone who shoots me in the face.”

“You’re wearing the mask, everyone is!” Matt snaps.

“It’s—it’s actually the rules, Mr. Coldwell,” the poor guy handing out gear stammers. “Everyone has to.”

“This is shit,” Brady takes the mask and grumbles.

“Brady’s already crying? This should be interesting,” Bev says as she saunters over in camo pants and a heavy long-sleeve tee shirt. She has a weapon and a mask already.

“It’s going to be—” I pause. “Wait, aren’t you supposed to be with the girls at the spa?”

She lifts the gun, clearly her own gear, and offers me a fierce stare as her reply.

“Fair enough.” I don’t need her to defend her desire to shoot a bunch of dudes. She is a hundred percent that bitch and there isn’t a man here who doesn’t fear her.

“You ready?” she calls behind her. I follow her gaze to where Red is walking along. She has on black jeans and a thin camo hoodie. She and Bev are dressed like they went to a metal concert before coming here. She too is holding a personal rifle.

“You can’t be here,” I say.

“Oh, so I’m good enough to peep in my windows and watch me dance in my underwear, but not good enough to play a friendly game of paintball with?” She’s faster than I expected. “Maybe you should sit this one out, if you can’t handle girls beating you.” She walks past me coldly as if the donair bonding never happened.

Bev steps into the crowd, barking at everyone over Matt who is still talking. “Listen up, morons. This is a fight to the death. You little city bitches better bring your A-game.” Bev nods at Cap who stands in front of the team. “It’s us Henderson crew against you pucks. May the best woman win!” She lifts her gun and treks past the guy in charge, ripping the bundle of her team’s vests from his hands.

She and Red head onto the course, choosing a side with Matt’s cousins trailing behind them.

“Was that the ginger?” Brady perks up.

“You’re in charge of him.” Matt glares at me and points at Brady. “I’m joining my family so I can shoot you both in the

dick fairly. Good luck!” He stalks off, leaving the rest of us standing here.

Brady makes a crazy excited face, and I have a bad feeling this is about to get real.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

**J**enny  
Bev's cousin Eddie hangs a large red flag on our team's flag house as Bev reads us the riot act while she hands out the dark-red pinnies—or vests as the Americans call them—to our team, “I don't care what Matty says, every shot goes in the face or dick. We are not getting beat by some flashy, fancy-ass pucks. Those assholes have never played a Henderson game of paintball.”

The crowd cheers and I realize we are not the only girls. There are a few of us.

“Jenny, Eddie, Branson, and me will go after their flag. Everyone else stays here. If they get our flag, you have me to deal with, and I'll tell Gran how you betrayed the family and let some Yankee swine whoop us!”

Eyes lower, making me wonder about the grandma who seemed so nice at dinner the night before. Although, if she was any part of raising Beverly, it all adds up. She must be terrifying once you get to know her.

Branson starts filling everyone's guns and handing out grenades. “This is just like home. Stay to the sides of the course. Don't be a hero. No middle action. I better see some sliding out there, if you get taken out by a New York Ranger, you have to wear that badge of dishonor your whole life.”

Matt comes and stands next to us. Beverly sneers, “Get back with your team, soldier. We don't want no hockey player traitors on our side.”

“I’m one of you.”

“No, you aren’t.”

“Let him stay, Bev,” Eddie comes to Matt’s defense. “But you better not suck.”

“You’re letting her stay but you have a problem with me?” Matt points his thumb at me. “I’m family.”

“I like her, Matty. You, I’m still not convinced about. Especially, not against them.” Bev points across the field.

He sighs but doesn’t budge.

“Fine, but if this is some kind of sabotage, I will eat you for breakfast and I’ll tell on you.” She points at him and turns back to the guy in the middle of the course. We can’t even see the other side or their flag, it’s so far.

Matt glances at me as he puts his mask on, speaking low as Bev barks at everyone else to get into position. “And how did you end up in her good graces already?”

“You don’t want to know.” I wink at his wide-eyed stare and pull on my mask. It takes a second to get used to the feel of it.

The horn blows and Bev and I run to the right, hugging the tape line as Eddie and Branson go left. Matt follows us, trying to stay low but the guy is enormous, even compared to Bev and I who are both tall.

Music starts playing loudly over speakers high up in the trees, making it impossible to hear anyone else.

My heart races and I’m on high alert. We’re running and ducking, scanning and rushing forward.

Movement to the right catches my eye. Someone is out of bounds. I run and superman slide along the grassy ground, hiding under the cover of a large bush. A player from the blue team comes around a tree, and I plant a perfect shot right between his eyes, soaking his mask in yellow paint.

“Fuck!” he cusses and I roll to the left, getting up fast and catching up to Bev. She’s shot down someone else, and Matt

shoots another person who has Bev in their sights. She nods at him, making him beam in a weird way. He clearly needs her approval, which endears him to me a little.

“Walk the trigger, Matty.” She holds up two fingers on her hand and wiggles them back and forth. “Stop curling your fingers, you’ll be too slow.”

Bev and I hustle forward, sprinting and stopping behind an old car. Paint blasts the car near us. I shove Matt down, tripping him to save him. As he’s falling, I swing my gun to the right and fire, hitting the chest and face of the person, soaking them in yellow.

Bev takes down two guys who are running up the middle like idiots.

Matt struggles to get up while Bev and I make our way to the bunker on the left, close to the tape. She walks the trigger to give me cover as I pull a grenade. I don’t know if anyone is in there, but I toss the bomb in and run.

As we run to the right, clinging to the tape, the bomb explodes, blasting yellow paint out the small windows and doors.

I’m heaving my breath as we each hug a tree with our backs. She turns my way, but I can’t see her expression through the mask.

Matt catches up, muttering, “What the fuck?”

We ignore him and run, moving with speed and stealth up the line to hide behind a fence. She takes a different section of fence than I do. I check the right side first, keeping my body tight so as not to chicken wing and stick an arm out.

When I see no movement, I rush to the left, switching my gun mid jump and sneaking out the left side. Movement and a bright silvery shirt sleeve catch my eye. I shoot, blasting with rapid fire up his whole torso. Someone with a pink shirt sleeve runs for him, and I blast him with yellow paint too. Bev sees what I’m firing at when she comes right and tosses a grenade at them. It explodes and soaks them in paint.

“Oh shit,” Matt says with a breathy laugh.

“I’m hit!” Eddie screams from the left.

“You’re with him!” Bev shouts at me and points at Matt as she sprints off to the left. “Cover me!” She tucks behind a shack.

I don’t look, just shoot. Matt joins me, realizing too late what we’re doing. Bev moves fast across the field and forest until we lose her in the course.

“Come on!” I shout at Matt. “Stay low!” When I get to the next bunker, I say, “Cover me,” and reload. When I’m done I lift my gun. “Reload.”

He follows my lead, speaking softly as if he’s talking to himself, “How are you so good at this?”

“Let’s go.” I ignore his question and move forward, catching someone hiding behind a bunker. I run at him, firing so he has to take cover. I blow past him shooting, hitting his side and face.

At the next bunker, Bev and Branson are with us. She offers a quick thumbs up and moves forward.

“Go, I’ll cover!” I say to Matt, waving him past me. He doesn’t know I’m using him as bait. And he’s lucky I’m a good shot. He’s so huge that when he moves forward, he brings all the boys to the yard. I shoot one in the arm and face, another in the back. I drop three of them and catch up to him.

Someone shouts, “I’m hit!”

Branson moves from the field with his arms up, gun in the air.

“Fuck!” Matt yells, drawing my gaze. A shirt I recognize comes around the corner painting Matt’s body with blue. I run and football slide coming up on a bush. I lean back as I’m sliding, shooting and skidding, painting Brady’s face completely. He screams, drawing attention.

As I jump up, I snatch Matt’s gun from his hand and leave mine. It’s almost empty and he’s hardly shot anything. No wonder Bev didn’t want him.

Paintballs are flying over my head as I duck into a bunker. “Bev!” I shout as balls explode all over the building, drawing their attention to me. “Go for it!”

I shoot through the window, seeing movement and trying to draw more fire on me. The build of the person getting close is familiar.

It’s Lawrence.

As I scan the bunker for something, a glimmer of hope in the form of a flicker of light in the back catches my eye. I hurry to it as he gets closer, realizing it’s a trap door. I slip out the small door backward, slithering on the ground and backing up. I stay in that spot, my gun aimed at the door. The little door lifts, moving like a cat door, and I fire, shooting him in the face point-blank. His mask is completely covered in yellow paint.

“Fuck!”

“Got it!” Bev screams. Our team cheers from the sidelines and I pull off my mask, wiping my sweaty face and grinning as Lawrence lifts off his and rubs the slimy paint from his ears.

“So much for no face shots, huh, Red?” He lifts an eyebrow, and I can tell he’s pissed. He’s a sore loser.

“Two tough losses in one week is prone to make you bitchy. I get it.” I wink and stand up, walking away, strutting a little.

Bev is dancing on the tower with painted-up dudes all around her. “We win!”

I’m beaming at her and clapping when Matt comes up to me. “You used me as bait.” He sounds offended.

“Thanks, your sacrifice was necessary for the win. Your grandma would be proud.” I slap him on the arm.

He snorts.

“How the hell did you learn to play like that?” Brady asks as he storms over.



“I told you this was a bad idea.” Matt lifts his gun and shoots, hitting Brady in the groin. He drops to his knees, cupping and groaning. He’s wheezing as Matt calmly turns and waits out front of the bunker for Lawrence. But he doesn’t come out.

“Come on, Lori,” Matt says. “You and Brady forced me to play. You’ve likely caused the next big fight in my relationship. Come and take it like a man. BJ did.”

After a second, Lawrence walks out, wincing as if he knows how badly this will hurt. His eyes flicker to Brady who is cupping his groin and moaning.

Matt shoots once but the gun clicks.

Empty.

Lawrence smiles and sighs, but I hand my gun to Matt while maintaining eye contact with Lawrence.

We don’t speak as Matt takes it, bringing fear to Lawrence’s face as Matt fires and drops his other friend.

Bev rushes over, hugging me and waving the flag in Brady’s face while he struggles to stand. He’s having a problem breathing but he manages to wheeze, “Fuck you, Brimstone.”

“I’m going to shower and we will pretend this never happened. And none of us will speak of it in front of Sami.” Matt drops my gun on the ground and walks away.

“We sure as fuck aren’t.” Bev hugs Eddie and Branson as they arrive, both with blue paint splatters on them.

“That was some fucking shooting, girls,” Cap says, wiping paint from his face. “I’ve never seen gameplay like that.”

“My secret weapon.” Bev wraps an arm around my shoulders and grins.

Lawrence stands, holding himself.

“Want me to drive you home in your cart, Eckelston?” I offer meekly. “I got a ride here with Bev so my cart’s at home anyway.”

He glares but when he tries to take a step, he pauses and nods.

“Come on.” I walk to him and sling his arm over my shoulder so he’s fully leaning on me. “Bet you’re rethinking playing against Matt’s family again, huh?” I ask as we limp to the golf cart.

He doesn’t say anything for a minute after he sits and sighs with shaky breath. “No, I was rethinking ever peeking in your windows. You’re an assassin.”

“Don’t forget it.” I gently pat his knee and drive off, smiling again when he whistles through his teeth on the bumps.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

**L**ori  
“Let’s go, Lawrence,” Brady shouts into my cottage as if it’s a mansion and not the single room and bathroom that doesn’t require anything beyond a whisper. “The fire’s going, bro. Sami and Nat sent me to get you. They want some casual photos of the whole crowd casually drinking before the sun goes down.”

“Coming.” I walk from the bathroom, pausing to carefully adjust my tender balls in my Thursday evening chinos.

“Yeah, my dick’s still sore too,” he commiserates and adjusts himself in the spiffy pair of bespoke navy slacks. “And these pants can’t get tighter. Fucking Sami and her assigned clothes.” He grins and I know what’s coming next. “Bet you’re glad about that small dick.”

“Anyway. Is Sami better after her spa day?” I lift my middle finger and hold it out as I walk to the pantry.

“Yeah, she’s better. You can still see her eyes darting around at the workers getting shit done. She wants to say something but she doesn’t. And Nat’s babysitting her now, making sure she stays calm and kinda drunk until Sunday.”

“Good. Here.” I grab bottles of water and toss him one. “Hydrate.”

He catches it and cracks the lid, taking a huge gulp, draining the bottle, and tossing it into the blue bin next to the

small desk. “Nothing but net!” He does a mock cheer as it lands.

“All right, let’s go, LeBron.” I laugh at him.

“Oh, you’re finally ready? You don’t need to spiff that hair up for a few more minutes so you can impress the ginger assassin?” He toys with my hair. “I saw you after paintball. Slinging your arm over her shoulders all pathetically. I admire playing the wounded lamb.”

“I was wounded!” I hit his hand back. “And her name is Jenny.”

“Who?” Carson asks as he comes into my cottage.

“The savage redhead Lori’s dying to fuck.”

“Oh, please fuck her. And film it. I have all kinds of ideas how it’ll be. That was hot to watch her playing paintball.” Carson shakes his head slowly. “Her and Bev.”

“Yeah, I legit almost died watching them take us down.” Brady lifts a dark eyebrow at Carson. “But this thing is scared of her.” He points his thumb at me. “He’s intimidated, knowing she would be the man in the relationship. I mean, how do you even impress a girl like that? Her cock is bigger than yours and if this were caveman days, we both know you’d be the gatherer.” He slaps my ass.

“Ouch.” Carson winces and takes my water, cracking the lid and drinking it back.

“Fuck you both.” I turn back for the fridge and grab two more waters, certain Rich will want one. We walk outside and I close the door, pausing on the porch when I hear someone laughing on Jenny’s side of the cabin. It’s a girl but it can’t be Jenny. The laugh is loud and real. It’s the kind of laugh that brings a smile to anyone who’s nearby. Infectious and fun.

But when we round the corner, I’m stunned to see it’s her. Jenny’s eyes meet mine as a warm wind blows by at exactly the right time. She’s sitting on the railing of her porch with a wide beam spread across her bright-red glossy lips. The wind catches her hair and lifts it, toying with the heavy locks that are styled in soft waves. I stop walking and stare.

She's gorgeous and so altered from two hours ago when she was destroying us like a toon in a video game with that goth getup. Now she's lighter and sexy. Her eyes squint a bit when she laughs again, and before I realize it, I'm grinning like an idiot at her.

I try not to stagger or drop the water as we walk closer. If my dick wasn't broken, it'd be saluting her.

"Oh hey, guys. You going over to the fire now too?" Jenny asks as she stands and I suck my inhale a little loud, mesmerized by the amount of pale creamy skin showing. Her legs go on for days, revealed by the short, flowy black skirt she's wearing with huge black heels making her taller than Rich by inches. Her hair is around her shoulders and arms which are also bare. She has on a sleeveless cream-colored blouse that's ruffled around her chest, adding emphasis to a spot she doesn't need added to.

"Fuck me," Brady mutters then speaks louder, "Yeah, you wanna ride over with us?"

"Sure." She stares at us and the cart. "Is there enough room?"

"Rich can sit in my lap." Brady nudges Carson who glares.

Jenny ignores him as her eyes dart across the path to the brunette's cabin.

If I had to guess, the brunette hasn't come out since Cap returned from paintball this afternoon and now Jenny is solo with us. An uncomfortable position being around strangers who all know each other too well. Though looking at her now, I assume the tension is melting away. Shooting everyone in the face must have helped.

"Why don't you sit up front with Lawrence? He can drive since it's his cart. The three of us can figure it out in the back," Rich says, as always the gentleman amongst us and likely wanting to suggest something before Brady offered her the comfy position of sitting on our laps in the back.

"Okay." She smiles wide and my poor wounded dick does twitch. Her outfit and the red hair is making me think of

cherries and cream, and oddly I'm overcome with the need to eat her up, suggesting she might be the cure to my post playoff slump.

I'm imagining how she smells and feels when Brady offers me an elbow in the ribs and whispers, "If you don't fuck her, I will."

"Liar." I scoff, knowing he's full of shit, but also that Jenny would never sleep with someone like him. She isn't one of his typical puck bunnies and definitely not a Clinton kind of girl. She's got a girl-next-door vibe to her like Nat has, but more confident and mean. Like a combination of Sami and Nat and Lara Croft.

She climbs into the four-seater cart with Rich's help. "Milady."

"Thank you." She settles her skirt and sits.

I'm tense when I climb in, awkward around her now that I do kinda want to see that pale skin flush with sweat and color.

*Holy fuck.*

I need to get it together and stop being weird. Unfortunately, a mouthwatering scent hits me when I climb into the driver's seat. It's just as I expected, fleshy black cherries, juicy and sweet. There's something else and whatever it is, it's drawing me in. And I'm not the only one who notices it.

Carson leans in, smelling her delicately. "What is that?" he asks.

"Tom Ford, right?" Rich answers. "I've smelled it before but not on a person. How did you get it? It's not even available to the public yet."

"It *is* Tom Ford. Lost Cherry, comes out next year." She spins around to face the back seat. "My brother got an early bottle for me. That's creepy and impressive."

Rich shrugs. "What can I say, I know my lady perfumes."

"You mean you like wearing lady perfumes," Carson jokes.

“You’re not an easy man to please, Carson, but I do what I can,” Rich comes back flatly.

Brady and I laugh at Carson.

Jenny turns back and gives me a look, wrinkling her nose a little. “My perfume’s not too strong, is it?” she asks quietly as if suddenly we’re girlfriends.

“No,” I manage to say while worrying I look as constipated as I feel. But the smell of her has gotten into my head and I’m fairly sure I’m high.

“You can tell me if it is. I’ll go scrub a little off.” She nods her head at the cottage, her gray eyes dazzling me. I thought they were green, but up close they’re totally gray and framed by thick black lashes. Her lush lips lift. “Lawrence?”

“Sorry, no. It’s fine.” I start the cart and drive us away from the cottages, heading back for the pavilion where a fire has been set up for drinks and s’mores. “Which way is it again?” I’m actually high and fighting getting hard.

“The pavilion is that way. Dude.” Brady slaps me on the shoulder, squeezing too hard. “You still a little punch drunk there, buds?”

“Yup,” I lie. “Getting shot in the face point-blank must have rattled my brains.” I try to be cool and glance in her direction. But that’s not it. I’m drunk on the shiny gloss and creamy cherry-scented skin next to me. I bet she’s soft and has pink nipp—*fuck!*

“Oh come on, Lori, you know getting shot in the face is your thing,” Carson jokes.

“So, Jenny, you gonna tell us how long Bev’s been planning this paintball situation with you?” Brady is painfully crushing on this girl, but I’m glad he’s talking since my tongue is suddenly frozen and my cock is midway to bursting through my pants. While it would be nice to end the small dick jokes once and for all, I doubt it’s how she wants this ride to go. “Because that felt like a setup.”

“Last night she asked me to join her in the assassination of the team.” Jenny laughs. “She somehow knew where the

wedding venue was, so they all brought their gear. She's probably been planning crushing you guys for a while."

"Yeah, Bev was one of the few Sami trusted enough to tell wedding details to. I think she helped a lot," Carson adds. "But back to the paintball, you are weirdly good at that for a girl living in New York."

"I went to college in Montreal and my roommate there was huge into it. He forced me to join the team. They needed one girl on the team according to the rules. And I had already played"—she pauses and swallows hard—"sports my whole life. So it was easy to take a strategic sports brain and put it in the course."

"Where in Montreal?" I ask, trying to sound normal.

"McGill."

Her sentence, the fact Cap knew her, Montreal, and paintball hit and I blurt, "Holy fuck! You're on Team Canada!" Her face behind a helmet flashes with her stats through my mind. She's still one of the top scorers in the league.

"What?" Brady asks. "Team Canada?"

Jenny's eyes widen and the humor and fun are gone. The girl she was on the porch with the cute smile and carefree attitude has vanished and the tense ball of stress is back.

"Team Canada?" Brady asks again. "What sport?"

"She's only one of the best hockey players in the world." I turn to her as I park the cart near everyone else's at the pavilion. "You're a killer. That's how Cap knows you. You're Jennifer Snowdon from Montreal on Team Canada, Number Twenty-two."

Her cheeks flush as Brady leans right in. "You play hockey?"

"I haven't played in a while," she confesses.

"Goddamn. Is there anything you can't do?"

She bites her juicy lip but the red lipstick doesn't budge. It's sorcery. Of course she has magic lipstick.



“Team Canada, what the hell? That’s what Cap was talking about when he said your story wasn’t his to tell.” Brady laughs and climbs out, offering her his hand. “Fuck, I thought he had some nasty band groupie story about your brother’s band.”

“Nope.” She laughs nervously and takes it, letting him help her off the cart.

“I can’t believe I didn’t recognize you. I had your poster in my room,” I say as I climb out after them, completely baffled that she is the—no THE—Jennifer Snowdon from Montreal whose hobbies include paintball.

“What?” She wrinkles her nose.

Brady winces because that’s the least cool thing I’ve ever said but there’s no recovering now. I said it. It’s out there and they’re all staring at me.

“Yeah, not like last week.” I laugh and realize how nervous I sound. Jesus, help me. “I was fifteen. And it was the whole Team Canada in full gear. They had just won the gold. You played two years, right? 2010 and 2014?” I change the subject from me.

“Yeah, two gold medals.” There’s pride mixed with the hesitation in her voice.

“How old are you?” Carson asks Jenny, earning an even more astounded look from Brady.

“Guys—” Brady mutters.

“Twenty-eight,” she answers that easily, but her voice wavers for the next part, “I played for Canada when I was twenty-one and twenty-five. They used my Montreal address because my first year on the team, that’s where I lived.”

“Will you play next year?” Rich asks.

“No, I’m officially retired.” She tries to sound nonchalant but is visibly uncomfortable. I don’t understand why. She’s an all-star and a legend.

“Fuck me. You’re the coolest girl I’ve ever met. Team Canada. What the hell? How did you end up being our PR rep? So random.” Brady walks into the pavilion. Rich and Carson

follow him, leaving Jenny and I standing by the lake. She doesn't move so I don't either.

“Sorry, I didn't mean to blurt that out.”

“It's okay.” She eyes the pavilion.

“Why didn't you say something before, when Cap mentioned it?”

She bites her lip again and I try not to stare. “Honestly, it's embarrassing.” She blushes.

“Embarrassing to be a superstar?”

“No.” She's nervous. “It's just—I'm overseeing the NHL PR contract for my boss who handles a bunch of sports contracts in Europe. So in a way, I'm in charge of the entire NHL while he's away. At twenty-eight. It's kind of a big deal.” She pauses and sighs heavily.

“Ohh, you don't want people to think you got the job as a perk?” Of course, I understand that.

“Exactly.” She lightens up a bit. “I don't want people to think I got my job because of the gold medals and being a hockey celebrity. I worked hard in university, even with playing on the team and working out and doing all the sponsor bullshit. I earned this job and I work hard every day to keep it and climb the ladder. So I try to keep my past separate.”

“That makes sense.” I completely understand her secrecy. “I swear, the fans and whatever will haunt me the rest of my life.”

“Well, and you are *the* Lawrence Eckelston,” she teases and seems to relax a bit again.

“So you handle all the NHL and no one ever recognizes you?”

“They do but rarely.” She starts walking to the pavilion. “Like how Cap did almost right away. But I don't bring it up and I avoid talking about it if someone else does.”

“It's cool. I was hoping to play on the team next year.”

“We both know you will.” She rolls her eyes and laughs.

“Maybe.” I smile and almost wonder how the two of us got off to such a rough start, but there’s no forgetting that first day.

When we reach the pavilion, it’s obvious Brady has revealed her secret identity. Beverly’s eyes are wide and the rest of the team have their mouths open.

“I knew you were awesome but two gold medals? That’s badass.” Bev points to Jenny.

“I mean, it’s Canada,” Jenny brushes it off. “If we don’t win hockey and curling—”

“Oh my God, stop! This is huge and you’re not downplaying it.” She walks over, stealing Jenny to go sit with her, ignoring me completely.

The seating is less formal but the crowds are separated accordingly, so I find my way over to sit with Brady and Matt where I interrupt a Jenny discussion.

“Team Canada?” Nat’s eyes are wide when she focuses over at Bev who is chatting Jenny’s ear off. “That’s impressive.”

“What’s impressive is how much Bev likes her.” Sami nods her head in their direction.

“Yeah, Matt, your cousin is the scariest girl I’ve met in my life, and Jenny has her wanting to have sleepovers and braid each other’s hair. She must be cool,” Nat admits.

“The coolest.” Brady sighs and we all laugh, even Nat who shakes her head.

“Brady, between you and Bev, Jenny will have to get a restraining order.” Sami scoffs.

“You didn’t see it,” Brady shouts, his eyes wide and impassioned. “She was like a ginger Lara Croft at paintball—” He freezes.

Matt closes his eyes and sighs.

Sami rolls her eyes as we all pause. “Like I didn’t know you were going there. The moment Lori came and did his team pep talk, I realized something was up.”

Nat laughs. “Busted.”

“Anyway”—Carson points at Brady—“he’s not exaggerating. It was insane. And even weirder, she and Bev are like simpatico.”

“It was intense,” Rich agrees and hands me a big mug of stout.

“It was fucking unbelievable,” Matt chimes in. “I’ve never seen such a show of teamwork and instinct. She’s a savage.”

“You should see how savage she is when she doesn’t like you,” I add, earning a nudge from Carson.

“That was just some foreplay, my dude. She likes you now. I can tell by the way she keeps touching her hair and smiling at you.”

“Do we know if she’s single?” Nat taps my foot with her high heel, brushing her tanned calf against my pants.

“Surely not.” Sami waves that off and a hint of spicy vanilla escapes her and rides the subtle breeze to me.

“Doesn’t matter, Lori’s scared of her,” Brady says casually. “He knows she needs a real man.”

“Which takes you off the list of possible suitors,” I hit back.

“How dare you, Lawrence! How dare you suggest I would stray from my beautiful fiancée.” Brady feigns disgust and wraps an arm over Nat who laughs and shoves him off her.

“Jenny has two gold medals and the silkiest hair I’ve ever seen. If she plays video games with half the ability she plays paintball, I’m leaving you for her. I guarantee my chances are better than either of you two knuckle draggers,” Nat drops a bomb comeback and we all, “*Oooh.*”

Brady nods, grinning and blushing. He has nothing for that.

“Well, we won’t be finding out this week, will we?” Sami lifts an expressive eyebrow at Nat, and it’s her turn to blush and press her lips together, visibly sorry for bringing the

PlayStation. Sami lowers her voice and leans into Matt and me to whisper, “Changing the subject though, what is up with Cap and the other PR girl?”

“Sukii,” Nat whispers.

“Right, are they blatantly screwing as if he isn’t married and there isn’t a major conflict of interest with her working for the NHL’s PR company?” Sami’s knowing stare fixes on them as they walk over sporting a post-sex glow, choosing to sit where the team is sitting.

My eyes dart to Jenny as we all turn that way, finding disappointment on her face. It’s a flash, there one second and gone the next. She fakes a smile the way all agents and representatives do, but I see through it.

“What’s up with his wife not coming?” Nat asks.

“Maybe things haven’t been going well for them and he didn’t want to talk about it.” Carson shrugs.

Matt mutters, “Not all relationships can withstand the hockey season.” He leans in and kisses Sami’s cheek. There’s something weirdly pure about seeing him be touchy-feely in front of people. His love for her is painfully obvious.

And while it stings, I wouldn’t want it any other way for her.

**F**riday, June 16  
Jenny

“He says they’re getting a divorce. Cap hasn’t told the team yet, but I swear, they’re not even living together,” Sukii defends herself as I pace my small living room. “I wouldn’t do that but neither would he. He’s a good guy, Jenny. His wife, Sandy, left him last summer. He’s crushed. Played the whole season with a broken heart.”

“Okay, fine.” I throw my hands in the air. “If you believe he’s telling the truth, whatever. But if this leaks, Stan is gonna \_\_\_”

“It won’t. I swear. He’s already invited me to stay at his place in Cape Cod. He’s talking dating, not just having sex.”

I part my lips to shout *DUHHH*, but the hopeful expression in her watery eyes forces me to snap my mouth shut. You can’t take twenty-eight years of knowledge and force it down someone’s throat. Sukii will have to learn the hard way that hockey players are hockey players. They’re gross and skeezy, and they will say whatever it takes to get into your pants and hand your number off to their friend when they’re done with you. Regardless of how cute they are or how well they fill out their tee shirt or how nice their smile is.

I need to get a handle on my attraction to a certain player. There’s no chance Lawrence is different from the others. And neither is Cap.

I've seen it a million times.

"Where is he now?" I ask.

"The rehearsal dinner. The wedding party and close friends are all there. I'm glad us peasants are on our own for the night. I need some down time." She walks to my Louis Vuitton bag and pulls the top open to peek. "Did you see Friday's bag already?"

"Yeah, I open them in the morning with my coffee." I have to admit, Sami has won me over with this wedding. Her gift bags alone speak volumes about the thought she puts into other people, something I never would have imagined her capable of.

"Have you taken a bath with the salts from Wednesday yet? They're amazing. My skin is so soft." Sukii opens the French hand cream that came in today's bag and takes a sniff.

"No, maybe that's what I'll do this evening. Since we're free."

She glances up. "Promise you're not mad at me."

"I swear, not mad. Just hoping you're being smart and careful. Athletes are known for womanizing." It's more than I should say.

"I know. It's not like I'll end up with him, but maybe we'll have some fun and hot sex . . ." Her voice trails off and it's obvious she wants this to become something.

"But keep your eyes open and expect the worst." I raise my glass of sparkling water at her. "That is my new motto." I drink it back, loving the feel of the bubbles on my throat.

"And on that positive note, I'll leave you to enjoy your solitary evening." She chuckles. "Let's ride over together tomorrow for the wedding." She blows a kiss and saunters out my front door and across the path to her own cottage.

The sun is setting, lighting the sky with oranges and pinks. I take my water out to the porch and sit with a blanket curled around me.

In the silence everything slows down, and my head starts to take in the last couple of days.

My mind does a slow dance through certain aspects of the wedding, making me embarrassed and wishing it had gone differently, particularly with Lawrence, but I find I'm also quite happy with other events. Meeting Beverly and the family I can't believe Matt Brimley belongs to, filled with normal people who have nothing but funny stories and sassy accents. The few times I've seen him with them makes me like him more.

Slowly but surely, my mind tiptoes to Ben.

Has he noticed I'm gone?

Did he stop by my apartment to find I'm not there?

Are the movers there and he's panicking?

Has he been trying to call me or called someone to check on me?

As delightful as I thought this would feel, there's some icky guilt. I'm not sure if I should be proud of ghosting him or ashamed or a bit of both.

"You look deep in thought," a voice interrupts from the shadows.

I lift my head to find Lawrence walking by the front of my place to his.

He stops, grinning under the dim streetlight, and I realize the sun has gone down while I've been out here.

"I'd say a penny for your thoughts, but I'm scared I might have to pull out my checkbook."

"It's just so quiet here," I reply before thinking and I'm sure it sounds crazy.

But he walks to me, nodding. "I know, it's as if the stillness requires extra contemplations as payment for the peace." It's the smartest thing I've heard from a guy like him.

"Ex-exactly," I stammer and have to agree.



“I keep finding myself startled back from the oblivion of daydreaming.” He doesn’t continue walking. “I don’t recall the last time I felt so peaceful in a place.”

“Right.” I change the subject to avoid getting deep with him, “Shouldn’t you be at the rehearsal dinner?”

“I rehearsed all I could and escaped out the back when no one was looking.” He points at the lake. “Actually, I escaped because that old guy, Sam, says there’s going to be a meteor shower, and if we lie on the dock or float in the middle of the lake, we’ll be able to see it clearly. I guess the moon rose early and now it’s gone so the sky should be dark enough.” He shrugs.

“Oh really? I’ve never seen one of those—” I pause, realizing it sounds like I’m inviting myself.

“Yeah, me either. I was gonna grab a blanket to lie on. I don’t think my back can handle the dock for hours.” He hesitates as if realizing how awkward this is between us here alone in the dim light, him being so cute and me being so single. “I think other people are coming. Bev said maybe. You should come.”

“Sure.” How can I say no after sounding so into it? “Let me grab something to lie on too.” I hurry inside and grab the thick fleecy throw from the sofa and a bottle of sparkling water and rush back out.

He meets me at my stairs holding a blanket and a few beers. His eyes are wide and earnest now. That schoolboy spark is there, and I remind myself that instead of putting on lip gloss, I need to fight finding him attractive because it’s not possible. Not someone like him, so much younger and a hockey player.

“Ready?” he asks though it’s obvious I am.

“Yeah.” I grin like an idiot.

Oh God, I want to kiss him. His lips are so perfect. And the way his stare finds mine makes me believe he wants to kiss me too. I wrinkle my nose and tell myself I’m reading too much into everything and forgetting my hockey player rule.

“Okay,” he says and it takes a minute for us to stop staring at each other.

It’s awkward as hell but we start walking to the lake. On the downhill part of the path, I notice he has a slight limp and cling to that as a topic to discuss. “Did you hurt your leg in that last game?” I ask, pretending I didn’t watch it or know the exact moment he was injured. I nearly threw my beer watching it with my dad.

“Yeah, it’s a charley horse.”

“Did you roll it out?”

“I did but then I ran a little too hard yesterday morning and again during the paintball game,” his voice cracks with a laugh. “That’s still such a surprise.”

“What?”

“That you’re so cool,” his voice wavers and certainly he regrets saying it, but it’s done and out there. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that. Not like that. You just seemed so tense and rigid when we met—”

“I was having an off day that afternoon.” I wince, the humiliation lingering.

“Yes, you were.” He laughs louder. “What luck, eh? That second time in the bathroom—it had to be so uncomfortable for you.” He’s full belly laughing but I can’t. I’m dying.

“It was the ladies’,” I defend myself but it’s weak.

“Oh I agree.” He holds a hand up. “It was totally my fault. I never locked the doors.” He shakes his head, chuckling. “At least it was just you. Imagine if it was Matt’s mom or worse, his sister-in-law?” He jokes and I relax a bit and convince myself his joking around means he sees me as one of the guys. A safe spot my whole life when it came to other hockey players.

“What’s the deal with Matt’s mom and sister-in-law?” I keep the conversation flowing in that direction. “Are the sticks permanently lodged or do they have new ones put up there every morning?”

“New ones every morning, I imagine. They probably have different kinds of sticks for different moods.”

“Why bother having moods if the Botox prevents you from expressing them?” I say cruelly and we grin at each other. “That was mean, wasn’t it?”

“It was.” And our eyes stay locked for a second too long. “So you’re funny, a great dancer, an all-star hockey player, and an assassin.” He beams back. “You should have led with that the first day.”

Was that flirting?

“Oh my God, I want to pretend it didn’t happen.” Am I flirting?

“Me too.” He sneers. “Shouting at you on the docks like you were some paparazzi who snuck in to sneak photos. What a dick.”

“No, you were protecting your friend, an admirable quality,” I defend him which visibly surprises us both when we stare at each other again.

Somehow conversing and being nice to one another isn’t making the awkwardness go away. It’s intensifying, securing my expectation we’re totally going to kiss.

Our hollow footsteps fill the uncomfortable silence until we reach the end of the dock, and as luck would have it, no one else is here yet. He flings out his blanket and I do the same. I fold mine in half to make it extra comfy.

“Good call.” He does the same then offers me a beer.

“I’m good, thanks. Taking a bank holiday from drinking for liver health.” I place my water next to me and lie back, adjusting to the firmness of the dock despite my blanket.

There are no lights out here and the restaurants and houses are far enough away that they don’t interfere with the sky.

The lake laps with the gentle breeze, and we lie next to each other like embarrassed summer camp kids who are far enough apart we feel the extra distance we added so as not to make it weird, but now it is.

“The last time I saw the sky this clear I was in Tofino,” I offer, filling the silence.

“I love it there.”

“When I was there, it was my first time doing mushrooms.” I laugh. “I was sixteen and we had a game in Port Alberni. Our coach took us to Tofino to stay at his friend’s resort. One of the guys on my team had a friend who lived there, and he got us some drugs to do on the beach. We snuck out and got high and listened to the waves. It was trippy.”

“If you don’t do mushrooms in Tofino as a teenager, are you even Canadian?”

“No.” I sigh. “Do you miss the West Coast now that you’re in New York?”

“I don’t miss life there. You know? Like New York is such a center and it feels like the world revolves around it. I do miss the ocean back home and how it seems colder and fresher. And how the rain clears the air there, whereas on the East Coast, it makes it heavier and you’re never free of it.” He turns to face me. I don’t look, but I hear the wrinkle of the blanket and see movement in my peripheral. “Apparently, I only miss the weather. How about you?”

“I don’t miss the weather, but I miss the island. I never go back.”

“Why not?”

“It’s a long story.” I don’t want to talk about it, but when I turn my head, he’s staring as if waiting patiently for his entertainment. “Fine.” I laugh. “I grew up in Port McNeill and my brother left when I was starting grade twelve. He and his band began touring once they found a permanent drummer.” I pause wishing I hadn’t said that.

“Was that a problem?”

“Good drummers are tough to find.” I glance back at the stars. “Anyway, my dad was retiring from the RCMP that year. So right before my graduation, he went home to Nova Scotia for a high school reunion and met up with Judith, his old

classmate. I guess he and Judith were high school sweethearts and had wondered about each other over the years. As soon as I left for college, he sold the house on the island and moved to Halifax to be with her. They got married a few months later. Their wedding was precisely two years after my mom died, to the day.” I wish I’d left the last part out. It’s too real to share.

“Two years after she died?” He’s outraged for me.

“Yup.”

“Wow.” He whistles and maybe wants to add his thoughts but doesn’t. “How’d she die? Your mom?”

“Cancer. It was a long fight, five years. In the end, she made us promise we would do all the things we wanted. We would live to the fullest.” Tears threaten my eyes so I focus on the sky, not daring to look at him.

“I’m sorry.”

“Thanks.”

“Is Judith cool?”

“Yeah—no, she’s the worst. Which means I don’t see my dad much. Judith is the boss level of stepmoms, a real—cow.” I usually use a different c-word, but I don’t know him well enough to pull that bad boy out. “Josh never sees them either. It’s shitty actually.”

“Does she have kids of her own?”

“Oh yes.” I pause. “I have a stepsister who is the apple of her mother’s eye and can do no wrong. And Josh and I can do no right.” It’s too far and I’m ashamed I said it aloud.

“You’d think being a stepmom you would try to be the best, ya know? Not to encourage the stereotype Disney has promoted.” He says it nonchalantly and I burst out laughing, losing one accidental tear down the side of my cheek he can’t see. For the second time, he has surprised me with his wit, and I’m grateful for the save.

“Exactly.” I finish laughing and focus back on the starry night.

“And your brother is in LA?”

“Yeah, the famous Josh Snowdon.”

“The lead singer of Twin Peaks?” He turns his head again and stares at me.

“That’s him.”

“Jesus, any Nobel Prize winners to go with the famous Canadian-musician son and gold-medal-winning daughter?”

“Well, there’s one—” I laugh and he groans. “What about your family?” I ask, wanting desperately to change the subject since no one else is coming and I’ve laid myself out naked emotionally.

“You mean beyond what’s all over the internet and news?” He runs his hand through his hair. “My mom is a spoiled princess, daughter of a billionaire—”

“So like Sami?” I say before I remember Bev said he’s in love with Sami.

He flinches and nods painfully as if making that comparison in his head for the first time. “Yeah.” He swallows a lump in his throat and I couldn’t be a bigger ass.

“And your dad?”

“He’s not so bad. He was a regular guy when he met Mom. I want to think they loved each other when they met, but seeing them together now I’m curious if her family money motivated his affections.” He cringes. “That sounds terrible, doesn’t it? So, about that Nobel Prize winner in your family —?”

“That bad, huh?”

“I shouldn’t say that.” He wrinkles his nose. “They’re not all bad. My grandpa is a cantankerous old bastard, but I love him. Him and my cat, Simon.”

“Simon?” I try not to say it meanly. “That’s a weird name.”

“Yup.” He stares back at the stars but doesn’t explain so I turn to watch the twinkling night.

“Any brothers or sisters?”

“I do.” Again, he doesn’t include details so I don’t pry. “But my family doesn’t believe in divorce, regardless, so they’ve spared me the wicked stepfamily.”

I chuckle halfheartedly and leave it there.

Fortunately, we’re saved by the first shooting star flashing across the sky, bringing a gasp from my lips, as if I haven’t seen hundreds of them on North Vancouver Island. The second comes right after it, and before long we’re sitting under a streaming sky, a sight I’ve never experienced. “Oh my God, there are so many.”

“This is amazing.”

I turn my head and see the smile pasted on his face. Even his side profile shows he is lit up. And for half a minute, I forget he’s a gross hockey player who is six years younger than I am, at least, and enjoy the view as much as I’ve enjoyed his company.

He turns and I swear for a second the reflections of the shooting lights linger in his eyes.

He swallows hard.

My stomach knots.

His lips toy with a grin but it doesn’t win.

His eyes lower to my mouth and as much as I realize what’s about to happen, I can’t believe I’m in this moment.

Noise interrupts us and we’re saved by the company he promised.

“Jenny!” Bev rushes out onto the dock, her footsteps sounding like a herd of elephants. She lies on her back next to me on my small blanket, excited by the lights flying across the dark sky. “This is so crazy. I haven’t seen a shower this good since the night Mo Darling’s old nag got caught in the wire fence. You remember that, Eddie?” she asks him as he steps onto the dock, staring upward.

“Yup, never seen a man cry so hard over the death of a tired old horse.” His words are almost whispers that become lost in the noise of more people.

The long dock fills up quickly.

The sky is lit, the crowd is gasping, and the sight is something you see once in your whole life.

But I can't stop seeing Lawrence Eckelston's perfect, beautiful face staring back at mine. I wish we had kissed.

And I don't know what to make of that.

But another night of him being cool and sweet and kind won't be great for my self-control. Not since I've let my guard down, accidentally.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



**S**aturday, June 17  
Lori

The wedding day is exactly as it should be.

Sami's decorating crew has used enough decorations to make it appear as though we're in a forest. But not just any forest, this one is filled with trees with high-reaching branches of white flowers and blossoms stretching and arching at the top, creating a path underneath. She had them brought in this morning on a jet. It reminds me of a movie set. I wouldn't be surprised if it was a movie set.

Even the bronze glowing chandeliers match the earthy, natural setting that combines with the long carpet of white petals to create the aisle. It must be from there that the scent of jasmine floats lightly to us.

Brady reaches over and squeezes my ass cheek, making a grin cross my lips but I don't move. I know how many cameras there are and what's expected of me. It's been explained seven thousand times.

The music starts and the bridesmaids begin coming.

First, a cousin of Sami's I didn't like.

Then one of Sami's aunts who squeezed my arm seductively and told me I reminded her of her favorite nephew. I still don't understand why she's a bridesmaid. She must have forced her way in.

Thirdly, it's Liz, Mike's wife.

Then Bev who smirks at me.

And finally, Nat strolls carefully down the petal path, offering us guys a smile. I wink at her.

Matt doesn't see her, or any of us. His eyes are fixed on the large doors at the very back of the petal carpet. Doors that stand in the middle of the field as an entrance to the magical forest placed here for the wedding.

The music changes. The camera crew sneaks around the sides, staying out of view.

The crowd stands and turns.

They're gasping and whispering.

My heart sinks.

We have the best view in the house.

Brady lifts his hand to Matt's shoulder, squeezing once.

Sami and her father come through the doors and everything moves in slow motion.

She's perfect.

A soft breeze flutters her veil as Sami and her father cross through the arched doorway.

Her veil is sheer so it catches the light, adding a sheen to her face and hair.

She's glowing in her gown, something I've unfortunately seen already. She stripped naked and dragged it on for me and Carson, forgetting that I'm not gay and quite attracted to her.

And as she walks down the aisle, flawlessly, she beams when her eyes meet Matt's, glistening with excitement and bliss.

Matt clenches his jaw and Brady appears to be crying. Nat is. Sami's mom is sobbing, probably because she thought this day would never come for these two.

Her dad lifts her veil and kisses her cheek. She closes her eyes and leans in. I take a mental shot of that face. That

expression. I have never seen her this happy.

Mr. Ford shakes Matt's hand and hands Sami to him in that weirdly barbaric way dads do with daughters. Sami stares at Matt as he leads her to the priest. His back is to me, and so my entire view of the blessed event is of her. She smiles and blinks and loses herself in him. She doesn't see us or anyone beyond him.

Matt's voice shakes as he says his vows and Sami snuffles through hers. I ignore it all, taking in her glowing skin or the sparkle in her eyes. It's intense to witness.

"You may kiss your bride," the priest says happily and everyone erupts.

They kiss and it's intimate and weirdly delicate.

"May I introduce Mr. and Mrs. Brimley!" the priest shouts and the crowd claps louder.

Mike slaps me on the arm as he wipes his cheek.

I nod at him as Matt leads her away, leaving me to stare at the back of the beautiful dress.

Brady takes Nat's arm, she's a complete wreck now, and escorts her out. We each take our turn until I end up with Bev as my partner. She grins and pats my arm as we walk down the aisle together. "How ya holding up?"

"My feet were getting sore," I lie.

"Yeah, I was talking about your heart, dipshit." She nudges me. "You might have everyone else fooled, but I can smell a lovesick idiot downwind from five miles."

"What?" Is she high?

"You know that scene in *Love Actually* where the guy is making the video of the wedding and all he does is film the bride obsessively?" Bev asks with a whisper.

"No." I'm lost. "What's *Love Actually*?"

"Dear sweet baby Jesus, save me from this moment. How you gonna be the guy who wants his best friends' girl and not know *Love Actually*?" She groans and waves at some old lady

I don't know on Matt's side of the aisle. She takes charge, gripping my arm, and walks us right to Carson who's standing next to Rich.

"That was everything," Rich gushes, his eyes darting to where the camera crew films and photographs Sami and Matt, something Matt seems to be tolerating but his patience is on a countdown to the end.

"This fool has never seen *Love Actually*," Bev brings them into our conversation.

"What?" Carson wrinkles his nose, obviously lost on it as well.

"Oh my God, Colin Firth is so hot in that movie. When he's struggling to talk to his love interest, and he's fumbling it because he's so awkward—" Rich exhales sharply. "I think about that scene sometimes randomly. It's perfection." His eyes dart to Carson. "Anyway, you have to watch it."

"Yeah, whatever," I mumble absently as my gaze is fixed on Sami for a second, watching her pose and smile, making a kissy face for the camera. She's back to being herself.

"Lori!" Nat shouts at me as she waves us over. "Picture time!"

"Kill me," I whisper, making Carson and Rich laugh as Carson kisses Rich goodbye and joins the rest of the wedding party.

"Deep breaths, Lawrence, deep breaths." Bev grips me tighter and forces my feet to move toward the massive wedding party.

"I think you're about a decade late on my infatuation with Sami. I offered to be her baby daddy because she would have been ruined to the society crowd."

"Okay, sure," she patronizes me.

When we get to them, Brady nudges me. "Dude, your resting bitch face is showing. Nat swears it'll be thirty minutes, then we're free to go to the reception. It won't be that bad."

“Thirty minutes at the first spot, dumbass.” Bev scoffs, sounding as excited as I am. “Clearly, you didn’t read the itinerary. After this we have two other stops. The dock and then the gardens and after that she wants us to pose in front of the barn before we’re allowed in the reception.”

“What?” Brady growls, “But the sun’s setting.”

“They have that movie-scene lighting so it will look like natural light.” Bev laughs. “Sami’s set up a whole photo studio.”

“Are you joking with me?” Brady’s eyes narrow on Nat. “I was definitely not told about this shit.”

“Well, buckle up, princesses, this is about to get excessive. Matt figures at least two hours of photos.” Bev laughs and drags us to the spot where the photographer is pointing.

“Kill me now,” Brady grumbles and I can’t help but laugh bitterly.

At least I’m not alone in my misery.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

**J**enny

The wedding is stunning. I'm in awe of the transformation the grounds have taken while we all slept and readied ourselves. By the time we arrived at the designated spot on Saturday's itinerary, it had been transformed into a magical forest instead of a field. The lack of light from the setting sun allows the glowing decorations to create a secretive ambience under the canopy of imported trees, elegant and bursting with light flowery opulence.

A white petal aisle for the bridal party to walk down is framed with arched bows from trees and flowering branches. Dangling flowers, which appear fake but are indeed long open wreaths of white and creamy petals, hang with lights from the fabricated forest ceiling.

The seats are massive logs turned into pews and glazed so as not to snag clothing.

I've never seen anything like it.

The groomsmen who wait next to the minister are the handsomest I've ever seen.

Matt and Brady are smokeshows. Carson is pretty, a proper square-jawed beauty.

Mike is rugged but handsome, nevertheless. And Lawrence is something else altogether.

Seeing him in the tailored suit isn't unusual; he's always wearing suits for games. But this one clings to him in a way I

envy. He's beautiful and my brain replays that moment under the shooting stars when he turned and stared at me. I felt seen for the first time in a long time.

As the music changes, so does he.

The bridesmaids start walking down the glittery enchanted forest. I don't recognize the first couple until Bev and they all look amazing, except Natalie Banks who is more. She's a goddess in her lavender gown.

Sami Ford brings to mind something from a magazine. She shines like a light, effervescent and bright.

My eyes drift back to Lori's, finding wonder on his face. It's palpable and for some sick reason I can't tear my gaze from it, trying to figure out if Bev's right and his attraction to her is obvious. I'm curious if he's hurt or if Bev's superpower hasn't actually figured Lawrence out.

If he is wounded by this, I have a strange desire to take it away, soothe it for him. I understand that feeling, though mine wound up with me standing in the rain, smelling of mud, watching the person I love betray me.

I barely notice the ceremony, I stare at him so hard.

I realize it's over when Sami's kissing Matt and everyone cheers. As if coming out of a daze, I lick my lips and take a deep breath as they walk down the aisle. Bev grips Lori, but it doesn't change the misery on his face. If anything, she seems to make him more uncomfortable.

The wedding party is whisked off for photos as we're directed to drive our golf carts to the big red barn where the reception will be.

Still seated and a bit overwhelmed if I'm being honest, I take my first real breath as Sukii slips her fingers into mine. "That was intense." She wipes her eyes with a silk handkerchief.

"It was the most beautiful wedding I've seen. I can't comprehend everything I watched and heard," I admit. "Even the music was entrancing." It was raw and reminded me of my mom playing piano while I sat under it coloring.

“I agree. The acoustic music, weird fairy forest, the smell of jasmine flowers, and the perfect decor with combinations of delicate and rough were mesmerizing. Adding the beautiful guests, ridiculous clothing, and two people who seem more in love than any two I’ve ever seen, and I am confident this wedding will never be topped.” Sukii wipes her flawless makeup again as she sighs. “I mean, why would any of us bother getting married now? It’ll never be like this.”

“Nope.” She’s right. This is the sort of wedding girls don’t even know they dream of having. We stand and walk out of the fairy forest.

“Shall we go get a drink?” Sukii asks and nods at our golf cart.

“Let’s go.” I offer her my arm. She takes it and we cling to each other, walking in a weirdly dread-filled silence. There’s a tremble in our fingers that matches.

We follow a steady stream of carts up to the big red barn, driving to where the golf-cart valet points.

Sukii parks and turns to me, speaking softly, “Let’s have fun—real fun—okay?”

“You mean like no holds barred?”

“We are never going to a billionaire’s wedding again. I wanna rock this.” She lifts her pinky finger. “Swear, whatever happens tonight, stays here.”

“Okay, that sounds aggressive. But I’m in. Responsibly. Don’t do anything Stan would fire you for.” I wrap my pinky around hers and we shake.

“Let’s break some hearts and make this party a night no one will forget.”

“Deal.” I smile and force myself to keep any judgements I’ve had about her and Cap in the back of my mind.

The reception is as stunning as the wedding. The red barn has been transformed into a similarly enchanted forest. We pause in the doorway and stare, taking it all in.

Rich Fairfield sees us and walks over with a big smile.



“You both look beautiful,” he offers and holds out his arms for us so he might escort us in.

“Thanks,” Sukii says softly. “That wedding was everything.”

“It most certainly was.” Rich grins as he strolls to the table where we’ve been assigned seating. “Save me a dance.” He pulls out our chairs for us.

“Thanks,” I mutter and sit.

Sukii lifts the flute of ice-cold champagne and sips. “Oh my God, this is amazing.”

“To Stan, for forcing us into the weirdest and most fabulous weekend two average office girls could ever experience!” I lift my drink and we clink the delicate glasses.

Sukii’s right, it’s delicious.

“Stan is missing out,” Sukii says, scanning about as the tables fill with beautiful people who somehow seem like accents and accessories to the room. As if they knew how to dress for the occasion.

My quiet reverie is interrupted by a voice, “You’re Jennifer Snowdon?” A woman walks up. She’s older but ageless in the way rich people are.

“I am.” My stomach tightens as I prepare for the Olympics fanfare which I hate.

“I’m a huge fan of your brother’s band, Twin Peeks. I interviewed them for *Rolling Stone* a few years ago when they were coming up. Marla Lopez.” She doesn’t offer her hand to shake but instead, sits at the table and gets comfortable. It takes a second for me to realize not only has she slept with my brother, but she’s sharing our table tonight.

“Oh wow,” I say with a pleasant smile back.

The gleam in her eyes is scary. Skin-suit scary. This woman, who is easily ten or more years older than my brother, has a cougar vibe even I’m afraid of. “How’s he doing?” She toys with her glass.

“Good, busy. They’re in LA now full time. Record deals and all that.” I omit that he’s hired bodyguards and it would likely be hard for her to hunt him down.

“Yes, I did hear that. They’ve come a long way.” She beams at Sukii and me.

“So are you friends with Matt or Sami?” Sukii asks, changing the uncomfortable subject.

“Matt’s mother and I are dear friends. I’ve known Matt since he was a baby.”

Dear God, she’s older than I thought.

Jesus, Josh . . .

We muddle through appetizers and more people joining our weird table of odds and ends. Stan would have fit in perfectly with these people, but Sukii and I are sore thumbs.

Finally, the bridal party shows up. We cheer and smile as they take their places at the head table.

Matt stands, offering his glass. “On behalf of Sami and I, and of course our son, Eli, and our families, we want to thank you all for canceling whatever plans you had for the weekend and instead, joining us so suddenly.” He smirks at Sami who laughs loudly. “On this magical weekend. You have made it the exact event Sami and I wanted it to be. We will always remember and celebrate the memories we’ve made and joy you brought to this week. So thank you and cheers!”

It’s far more eloquent than I expected and when Sami stands to raise her glass to us, she is illuminated. “Cheers!”

They drink and we drink and the night can begin.

A stout beer and a feast are immediately brought out. Mugs of beer and plates are rushed to every table but laid before us so smoothly I doubt the precision effort is a fluke. Sami has hired the best of the best for everything.

The plate is unexpected but welcomed: two sizeable stuffed Yorkshire puddings with juicy roasted meat and hot au jus next to caramelized carrots and crispy beets.

“Oh thank God. I thought for sure it would be some bullshit froufrou meal,” Sukii whispers and I laugh, joined by Marla and a man I’ve already forgotten the name of.

We cut into the food and quietly moan into the first bite. Combined with the beer, it’s perfection. We eat and drink as more speeches take place.

Carson, Sami’s father, Nat, and Brady all make funny and touching speeches. Sami smiles brightly and Matt nods as if offering approval.

Finally, Lori gets up. He’s taken off his jacket and his tie is noticeably missing. He doesn’t have the refined appearance he had during the ceremony, but this is more real.

He stands at the discreetly adorned podium. “Good evening, everyone. This will conclude the speeches, since Sami hates them and we had to force her to allow these few.” He winks at her, making her blush and wrinkle her nose. “But as the final speaker of the evening, I want you all to raise your mugs one last time before we get this party started. To my friends, the family that chose me, Matt and Sami”—he turns to them, speaking directly—“your love inspires great hope that happily ever after exists. Your faith in each other is the currency all hearts wish to spend. Your strength in overcoming the tests that have burdened your relationship is the foundation needed to make a love that will outlast your mortality. And being here to witness it was a privilege I’m sure none of us knows how we earned the right to. Congratulations on your wedding and thank you for inspiring us all.”

Sami blinks and tears stream her cheeks for the first time since she said her vows.

Matt presses his lips into a thin line.

It’s as if Lori has seen them in a way no one else managed.

Not even Brady and Nat.

He’s good at that, and I don’t know if it means he’s far deeper a person than I’ve given him credit for or he’s a better actor than I imagined.

They nod and lift their glasses.

“To Matt and Sami!” Lori calls and we shout with him, clinking our beers.

“That was insanely good,” Sukii whispers. “Who knew young Lawrence was more than a pretty face?”

“He seems to have his moments,” I comment and swallow the lump his speech brought to my throat.

Matt stands up, silencing the room with his massive presence. He offers Sami his hand. She beams, taking it and letting him lead her to the dance floor outside on the veranda.

A different band takes the stage and begins to play a song I recognize.

“Oh my God, is that the Lumineers?” Sukii gasps.

“What?” I stare at the musicians for a moment before smiling. “Oh my God. It is.”

“Oh, this is ‘Stubborn Love.’ I love this song.” Sukii leans into me, making me sway with her as we watch them dance.

Sami is staring at Matt, making that face that screams “blissfully in love.” His stare back at her is intense, so hot it has to burn his eyes.

“Damn,” Sukii says.

I nod, feeling like a voyeur who shouldn’t be witnessing this.

“Never thought I would see that look on his face,” Bev whispers as she slides in next to me to watch.

“You and me both.” Her grandma from Kentucky snorts, shaking her head like she might live in an eternal state of disappointment in Matt. Something I like her for.

She and the family from his father’s side are unexpected in all the best ways. They make Matt human, unlike his cyborg mother and sister-in-law who seem frozen and untouched by everything.

As with Lawrence, Matt is more than I expected. And his stiffness is complemented by the lightness and energy of Sami. She animates him and draws out his emotions. He reminds me

of my dad, and I imagine the struggle is painful for him, but the fruit his efforts bear are worthwhile. He is incandescently in love, lit up by the flame Sami carries and adds to even the smallest of things.

Not a single person in our office believed in this romance, but being here with them for the last four days, I cannot imagine a more perfect balance.

My gaze drifts to Brady and Nat and I realize I'm wrong.

Somehow these four people were not only given beauty, wealth, and success but also true love and a great friendship.

The catacomb in my chest where my heart once sat fills with envy. I don't wish to have what they do; but as Lawrence said, I want to find a love like theirs, on my terms. I want someone to stare at me the way Matt is watching Sami.

The Lumineers finish the song and bow, offering Sami a wave. "Congratulations!"

"Thank you, I can't believe you came. Thank you!" She waves back as they leave the stage and a different band comes on. I didn't know Sami could fangirl, but she visibly adores the Lumineers and it's sort of adorable and unexpected.

The new group onstage is the cover band Bev was talking about and the instant they start to play, it's obvious she hasn't exaggerated their greatness. They choose one of my favorite songs as their opening; it's from *Tangled*. Grace Potter, "Something That I Want." I love that movie.

The crowd moves in on Sami and Matt, swallowing them.

Hands grab mine. Bev and Sukii drag me onto the floor. The lights above us in the lattice of the pergola pulse with the beat.

My hands fly into the air and my body starts moving.

The melancholy of the envious moment I was having is gone and the beats drive me.

Sukii was right. This is going to be a top night!

No holds barred.

Nothing but fun.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

**L**ori  
I slam back another shot at the bar and nod my head to the song playing.

“This is the best wedding I’ve ever been to,” Cap says loudly, shouting over the group who turned out to be the best cover band I’ve ever heard. They’re crushing “Brown Sugar” by the Stones to the point even Mick would be impressed.

“Me too,” I agree and turn, following Cap’s eyes to the dance floor where the little brunette he’s not so discreetly banging is dancing up a storm with Jenny and Beverly.

They’ve been at it for hours, drinking and dancing, and now everyone is lit.

The outdoor room is crowded and rocking. The lights make it feel like a proper club.

“Sami killed this.”

“She’ll easily be able to make this a package and sell it,” I say with a laugh. “So weird. You’d never met such a spoiled lazy girl in your whole life.” My voice cracks as my gaze follows Sami across the dance floor. “And then she meets that schmuck and all she wants is to earn his respect. Now she’s a workaholic.”

“How long have you known her?”

“I’ve known her for a while, but we’ve only become friends in this last bit. I don’t think she paid any attention to

me though our families have known each other forever. Same with Matt. I guess our dads were friends. Probably shared mistresses.” I chuckle and give him a side-glance. “Speaking of which,” I face the bar again, lowering my voice and leaning in, “you’ve never struck me as someone who would—”

“I’m not. I know what you’re about to say but it’s not like that. Sandy left me last summer, right before the start of the season. Sukii’s the first person I’ve hooked up with in almost a year.” He pauses. “I didn’t want the media attention and bullshit so I didn’t say anything. Sandy’s filing and we’re hoping it can be swept under the rug.”

“I’m sorry, man.”

“Thanks, Lori. I should have said something before but—”

“Like I said, Cap, you don’t come across as someone who’d do that sort of thing. You owe no one an explanation. I know who you are.” I slap him on the arm and hold my fingers up for the bartender.

She winks and stalks over, lifting the bottle and pouring.

“I don’t think I can do another.” Cap waves it off but I lift it, insisting.

“Drink up.”

We clank the glasses and shoot the sipping tequila like assholes. He shudders, making me laugh.

Sami appears out of nowhere, grabbing my hand. “Why aren’t you dancing, Lori? You’ve barely danced with me.” She pulls me away from Cap as “Another One Bites the Dust” starts up.

In her massive dress, Sami spins me, sending me shooting into the crowd with a giggle.

She and Nat attack, dancing seductively.

Matt lifts a drink in my direction from his hiding spot. I flip him off but dance along as they sandwich me, sliding hands and bodies up and down me. The booze is hitting, and I catch a glimpse of the face in front of me. Sami beams, flawlessly.



Someone grabs my hands, spinning and depositing me in the middle of the dance floor, and I turn to find a mess of red curls being pulled from a pinned bun. The scent of cherries wafts in and saves me. Her locks tumble down right in front of me, mesmerizing me in the flashing lights and the beat of the music.

Jenny turns and stares briefly before her eyes light up. I want to kiss her glossy lips. The shot hits and I stumble forward and somehow the movement starts us dancing.

Jenny can dance and I'm feeling everything all at once: booze, attraction, the need to fuck. I get lost in it, in her.

The song ends and the two of us are standing across from each other, awkwardly.

"You're a good dancer," she offers and wipes her face.

"You too but I guess I already knew that." I lay down the grin.

She rolls her eyes, somehow managing to resist the charm I'm putting out.

"Uhh, sorry to pause the music but we have a request," the lead singer says into the mic. "Our friend Bev told us there's a certain someone in this crowd who plays the drums, and we have been told her favorite song is 'I Need Never Get Old' by Nathaniel Rateliff and the Night Sweats. It's also one of our favorites. And we want her to come play with us, since she's already been in a famous band and all."

Bev spins around and beams at Jenny who takes a step back.

"No," she whispers.

"So uh, Jenny Snowdon, obviously we are huge fans of your brother, Josh, and would be so honored to play with you." He scans the crowd and Jenny backs up into me, bringing with her that damn cherry smell.

I have two options, lean in and smell her while everyone stares at us, or push her away from me. I take the second

option, preferring not to get hard in front of everyone since I'm halfway there with her against me.

Pushing her forward makes her turn back, gasping at my betrayal as the singer's eyes land on her. Bev grabs her hand and pulls her up onto the stage.

Bev grabs the mic and shouts in, "Jenny is a shit-hot musician because of course she is." Bev laughs and rolls her eyes, making everyone else laugh. "Not sure how many of you know this, but she was the drummer in her brother Josh's band for a summer when she was seventeen and the band was just coming up." Bev pushes Jenny to the drums where the drummer hands her his sticks. He grins at her in a way that makes me wanna punch off his face, but I'm too stunned to move.

She smells like heaven, plays hockey better than I do, dances like she's paid to do it, kills at paintball the same way, and she plays the drums?

Fuck me.

Everyone is cheering and clapping. Brady places a hand on his chest and gives me the look. The one that says I better nail that fucking redhead or else. But I'm way ahead of him.

Jenny's mouth parts to protest, but the drummer picks up the tambourine and moves to the other side of the stage.

The guitar and bass players begin.

They play a couple of rounds of the intro, staring back at Jenny who is in shock. Her hands start to move with the other instruments, drumming softly.

The musicians grin and nod to her beat then turn around to us. The whole song starts over again, making the intro crazy long.

This time Jenny beats those drums.

She starts dancing exactly as she did in the living room except now she's actually got drums.

She isn't trying to be sexy; she's an intense drummer and this song is somehow in her blood.

The singers are bringing the music.

The drums are building.

“You working at catching flies?” Beverly asks as she slides up next to me.

“How did you know she played in the band?”

“Just because jerking off with a bunch of guys is your job, don’t mean it’s mine.” She scoffs.

“No, really,” I press but my stare is stuck on the girl flinging the drumsticks.

“I had one job in this wedding, Lori. Make sure the guest list was perfect. When Stan Levisohn replaced himself and his wife, I vetted Sukii and Jenny through Stan. He didn’t bring up the gold medals or the fact she’s an assassin, but he did joke that if the band canceled, Jenny could entertain us. I looked up old Twin Peaks videos from when Stan said she toured with them, found a video of her playing the drums on YouTube. Sukii said this was her favorite song.” Bev shrugs like this is no big deal.

“That’s creepy.”

“No, what’s creepy is you’re pining for Sami ten years later, and at her wedding no less, when this goddess is right in front of you.” She motions her head at Jenny.

“Okay, we need to talk about this. Firstly, I’m not pining for Sami. Maybe I find her attractive and sometimes imagine dirty things when I stare at her, but I’m admitting nothing and guilty of less than that. Secondly, I have a rule about hooking up with girls at weddings,” my voice cracks because neither of us believes the line right now. Particularly, since I’d already convinced myself that fucking Jenny needed to be the next thing I did.

“Oh my God, you and your rules. Trust me, she isn’t up for a serious relationship, Lori,” Bev spits the words out with a laugh as the song ends. “I was thinking something less permanent. One night in your shared cabin. That’s more her speed, anyway. Just get fucked, Lori, you’ll feel better!” Bev

slaps me in the arm and walks away as Jenny hurries off the stage while everyone cheers.

The drummer takes back his seat and Bev's insane words float through my mind.

*Get fucked.*

Jenny blushes and makes her way to the bar, clearly embarrassed by the attention. Despite Bev's weird meddling almost killing my vibe, my feet are walking that way before I have something to say so I lean against the bar next to her, staring like a psychopath, still shocked.

She orders a shot and drinks it back, wiping her mouth with her hand. Her fingers are trembling a little when she puts the glass down on the wet counter.

"So you're an assassin, a drummer, and a lead scorer for Team Canada?" I ask loudly. "Anything else?"

"You never listen, Lori." Her eyes lift from the counter as she turns to face me, staring up through her lashes. "I told you I'm retired. Besides, I heard it's you who's the lead scorer right now." Her lush red lips toy with a grin and I realize she's flirting.

My cock twitches. "Well, I mean—maybe. Where'd you learn to play the drums like that?"

"My mom was a music teacher. We all played instruments. I haven't done that since I was seventeen, not on a stage. And forgot how amped up it makes me." She blinks and catches her breath, wiping her flushed cheeks. "Do you want to fuck me, Lawrence?" she asks flatly and for some reason her saying my full name is hotter than it's ever been.

"Yes, pleas—I mean, yeah. If I'm being honest I've wanted to from the moment you first yelled at me," I say, wishing I might have skipped the weird "please" part.

"Then let's go." She walks away from the bar, leaving me leaning against it, completely confused.

Brady's watching the entire thing from about fifteen feet away, but he's obviously gotten the gist, as he's pointing after

her and shouting, “Run!” His eyes are so wide, I see the strobe lights in the whites.

The realization of what just happened hits me.

I turn and sprint, finding her driving her golf cart away, swerving the damned thing all over the road. But my feet don't stop. The dress shoes are killing me and my leg hurts from no real warmup, but the band is playing something loud and fun, motivating me to sprint harder. I cut across the field as she drives the stupid cart all over hell's half acre to try to get home through the woods.

We arrive at the same moment. I'm huffing my breaths, standing at the stairs of my cabin, trying to look cool but all the cool is gone. She's leaning on the golf cart and no longer wearing her dress. The swerving was her undressing. She steps away in red high heels, a white push-up bra, and those same white shorts-style underwear.

She staggers a tiny bit on the gravel in her heels, moving me forward to catch her.

Before thinking, I scoop her into my arms and turn, storming for my cabin. She's laughing. It's a little nervous and crazy sounding as I fumble for the stupid key. The moment we're in my cabin, I set her down and we pause. It lasts a tense second before she shoves me against the wall and attacks.

It's how I expected it would be when she yelled at me by the lake. She runs her hands roughly through my hair and trails them down my body, almost raking. I suck my inhale as she rips open my shirt and shoves it down my arms.

The violence ignites me.

I scoop my arm around her waist and pull her into me, crushing her breasts into my chest. She lifts her gaze, offering a fiery stare.

We're kissing and now it's her back slamming against the wall as I struggle out of my pants, hopping and flinging shoes. I have one sock, my underwear, and the cuff of one of my sleeves still around my wrist as the shirt drags behind me.

We bump into the coffee table and she shoves me again, forcing me back onto the sofa. I've barely landed when she climbs into my lap, straddling me and cupping my cheeks as she devours me.

My body is desperate to slow the whole thing down, savor it, but she's flinging her bra off and her perfect breasts are in my face.

I cup them, noting the subtle pink to her nipples as I take one in my mouth, making her moan as I roll the other gently with my finger and thumb. Her skin is softer than I expected. But she isn't soft. She's ferocious, grinding against me, whispering, "Fuck me, Lawrence," in my ear.

My whole body shudders from the intensity. But I refuse to Forrest Gump this. I stand, carrying her to the bed, and lay her down, gaining back the control.

She writhes but I gently thumb her underwear, feeling the soft lips beneath the delicate fabric.

"You want me to fuck you?" I ask, lightly brushing her clit. She's squirming, but I'm not anywhere near done. I drop to my knees in front of her, spreading her legs roughly and placing a soft kiss on her inner thigh, breathing in the cherries and sex.

It's her sucking her inhales now. She clings to the sheets as I tug the underwear to the side and lean in, brushing only my breath against wet lips.

She tries to move but I pin her there, hovering, teasing.

Finally, I bury my face in her, licking and sucking until she's grinding against my face. Her hands find their way to my head, and she slides her fingers into my hair, gripping and moving me in a way she wants. Her breathing gets louder, her pussy gets wetter, and her grip on my face and hair gets tighter. She comes with violent jerks and gyrations.

The heady scent of orgasm, cherry, and excitement mixes, overwhelming my senses, but I don't stop until she forces me to. She is struggling with her breath, her body still twitching when I reach into the nightstand and grab a condom, sliding it

on as fast as I can. My dick throbs with the need to bury myself inside her.

I grab her thighs and drag her down to the edge of the bed again, spreading her thighs roughly. She gasps as I'm tugging her underwear to the side and rubbing my cockhead against the wetness of her pussy.

I pause, taking her in. In the bit of light coming in the window from the small moon across the water, her skin glows. Her body is long and lean but the curves and softness have filled out nicely.

She opens her eyes, meeting my gaze and I thrust in a bit. Her glistening lips part and her head falls back again. She's not entirely ready for me so I give her half, pumping a few times before inching more in.

"Fuck." She adjusts as I push in more. She backs off, pulling away and removing me from her. She sits up and pushes me back, her mouth dropping open again. "What the fuck is that?"

"What?" I look down at my desperate cock. "A condom?"

"No, you're on the bottom with that." She gets up and pushes me onto the bed on my back. I climb up onto the pillows as she kicks off her shoes and pulls her underwear off. She climbs up onto the bed with me, letting me pull her into my arms. But she doesn't let me get on top of her again. She climbs into my lap and slowly eases herself onto my cock. She takes the head, doing mini pumps before she takes a little more.

I'm vibrating with the need to fuck her but she needs a minute. She lifts and lowers, adjusting until I'm buried to my balls in her. She's sitting on my lap, tense and ready to move, but she doesn't. Her eyes meet mine and I have to stare.

"God, you're beautiful," I whisper. She flinches and I see it was the wrong thing to say so I recover with something less personal, "Can I fuck you now?"

The playful grin comes back and she bites her lip.

Scooping her into my lap, I get up and lay her on her back. The smell of cherries and her is everywhere when I bury my face in her neck and slowly start to thrust again. Her breaths are gasps but she's taking me, all of me. I let it go for a few minutes of playful fucking before I pound her once. She moans and rotates her hips like she did when it was my face there.

I lean back, dragging her to me and putting her calves on my shoulders as I lift her butt and grasp her hips. She's lying there, spread out and beautiful as I pump into her, making her breasts bounce with the rhythm of our fucking.

My grip tightens as my thrusts become faster. I'm fucking her hard now and she's crying out, chanting, "Fuck me, fuck me, fuck me!" She contorts a bit, clinging to my body as her orgasm hits and she forces me to fuck her at a particular angle. As she comes, her body clutches mine, squeezing my cock.

The ecstasy builds with that movement and I let it unleash. I couldn't hold it back if I wanted to. I come so hard my entire body tenses and cramps as I pound into her until there's nothing left but small twitches.

She wraps her legs around me, pinning me to her so we are frozen with my hard, yet slightly dying cock inside her.

We're both gasping for breath, but she doesn't want me to move as her body clings to mine.

When she's done shuddering, she releases me. I roll to the side and try to gather my thoughts but my mind reels with the insane outcome.

She turns and sighs. "I needed that. Thanks." She closes her eyes, not showering or peeing or anything. She passes out. It's weird and sudden and I feel used.

I don't know what to do.

She's sleeping.

I guess she's staying. I pull the covers up over her before I clean myself up and come back to bed to stare at her.



I fall asleep with the image of her face burned into my mind and the smell of cherries in my nose.

It's the last way I imagined the night would end, but it's the best possible outcome.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

**S**unday, June 18  
Jenny

My thirst and cotton mouth are the first things I notice.

The obvious insane amount of sex my body has had is the next.

Memories flash in my mind. I wish we were drunk enough that I might be able to forget at least some of the humiliating details.

But no, the night is crystal clear, including me asking Lawrence Eckelston for a fuck. I said “fuck.” Drunk drummer Jenny asked for a fuck.

God kill me now.

This is why I wasn’t allowed to stay in the band or why I don’t talk about it. Banging Josh’s best friend all summer because the drums got me hot was apparently not cool.

And here I am again. Asking for a fuck.

My cheeks burn with humiliation, but I’m still too stunned to completely understand how I thought it was okay to say that to him.

The warmth from his side of the bed and the sound of him breathing sends stabbing pains into my stomach. With trembling fingers and the worst sensation of anxiety I’ve had in a long time, I lift the covers to what I expect to find. Nothing. I’m naked.

Without moving too much, I scan the dimly lit room, seeing our clothes in a disarray of scattered fabric. Each piece invokes a clear memory of the moment it left his body or mine. The remains of his shirt is extra embarrassing. I ripped it from him like an animal, spewing buttons across the room. My breath is shaky as I tense and slide from the bed, leaving the sheets and blankets behind and risking being naked in front of him. I'm not bashful about nudity, but I'm unsure what my body looks like after the insanity of what happened. Searching for my dress, it takes me a second to recall stripping as I drove the golf cart.

"Oh my God," I whisper and hurry to the bathroom to steal one of his thick towels, avoiding my reflection. As I pass the door to my room, the door that I should've been smart enough to unlock last night, I cringe. But that isn't the case. Tiptoeing to my shoes and bra, I abandon my underwear and creep to his door.

His breath remains even when I turn the handle and pull so slowly it adds suspense. It's hardly open enough for me to slip through but I do, closing the door the second I'm out. Pressing my back against it, I take a deep breath before scurrying like a college kid from his porch to my own.

Fortunately, it's early and no one else is up.

When I reach the door, I realize the key card is in my dress. A memory of flashing the pockets at Bev when she complimented my outfit sparks in my mind.

"Shit!"

My heart is racing, my hands are clinging to the towel, and my eyes are aching from scanning the area as I rush to my badly parked golf cart. The dress isn't here.

I lift my gaze, flinching when I spot my poor battered dress lying on the gravel path fifty feet from where I'm crouching.

My options are drive my cart in a towel to the dress or struggle with bare feet and the gravel. Desperate for this

moment to be over, I choose the cart and hop in, starting it and backing up quickly.

It's not as easy to drive whilst holding the towel, but I manage. My dress has tire tracks from multiple carts being driven over it, and when I grab it a bug falls out and scurries away. Holding the garment out as far as I can without losing the towel, I fish the key from it and put my dress on the seat.

Once inside my place, I drop the keys and dress on the floor and walk to the bathroom to take the longest shower possible.

But the steamy water and soap don't wash me clean because every time I close my eyes, I imagine him. And not merely the feel of his body pinning mine or the way he uses his magically long tongue, but also the light in his eyes and the smile he offers when he's not trying.

Being almost five foot nine, I've never been with a guy who picked me up like I weighed nothing, until Lawrence. It's the first time my hundred-and-fifty-five-pound body was swept up and carried so easily.

My hands lather the soap over my body, bringing memories of the way his touch dug in as he clung to me. Need. He had a need of me and I mimic it with the soap, reliving the experience until I'm in the mood for another round.

Turning off the shower, I contemplate sneaking back into his room and ravaging him a second time.

But the realization of where I am, who I am, and even better, who he is, hits hard.

He's a twenty-year-old hockey player.

And a vow I made to myself when I was twelve years old is broken. Sixteen years I managed not to date, kiss, or hook up with a single hockey player. Even when I was the one horny teenaged girl on the team of cute boys.

Annoyance and shame build as I get dressed and pack my bags, preparing to go back to the real world. A world where I have way too much shit to do to add fucking Lawrence Eckelston to. I have to unpack a brand new apartment I don't

want, face the feelings about Ben and I being over, and get back to being in charge of the entire NHL contract while Victor is in Europe.

The idea of sleeping with one of our clients makes me sick, but the disgust and loathing motivate me to clean and finish so I can leave faster. Before I have to see Lawrence again.

A knock at the door startles me mid silent lecture.

I turn to the front door but there's no one there.

My stomach drops and I realize it's the other door.

"Oh God," I whisper.

"Come on, Red, I can hear you in there. I got you a coffee," Lawrence says through the doorframe.

I take several deep breaths before I force myself to walk to the door. As I lift my hand to the knob, I decide to tuck angry, professional Jenny back in and paste a smile on my face. "Hey," I answer as I open. "Did I wake you with the noise of my packing?"

"You did but that's cool. Motivated me to get up and make some coffee."

Oh God, he looks good wearing only shorts. His spiky hair looks like he just got out of the shower, adding a glistening sheen to his muscled body which already appeared photoshopped. It's too good to be true. Thick muscles over a tall, lean frame. He cracks that grin, the one I normally want to punch him in the face for, but instead of being annoyed by it, I smile wider.

"Here." He hands me a mug. "It's just cream, right?"

"What? Yes, how—"

"I guessed." He laughs. "Actually, I saw you order a coffee and thought the 'just cream' was weird. Canadians always have a double-double." He raises his thick eyebrows and leans against the doorframe. "You gonna invite me in or what? I haven't seen your side yet."

“You saw it through the window,” I joke but remind myself to cool the flirting. I don’t need a repeat.

“Ah yeah.” He bites his lip but the smile doesn’t fade. It changes and I want to be the one biting his lip. God, I want a repeat. The feel of beating those drums and dancing and him fucking me is overwhelming, mixing with the aftershave he wears that makes me want to devour him.

I want a repeat. In fact, I can think of nothing beyond having his hands all over—“Can we fuck again?”

His eyes lift and I realize I’ve said it aloud.

*Oh God. Oh God, why?*

I can’t breathe.

My whole body has pins and needles.

“Yes,” he says flatly and takes my coffee before I’ve even had a sip, putting both our mugs on the table next to me. He grabs my hand and pulls me into his arms, wrapping around me and it happens again. Something—his smell and feel and thick muscles—makes me crazy. I’m climbing his body and he’s cupping my ass, slamming me into the wall so I’m sitting on the table in his side of the cabin.

We’re kissing and feverishly ripping clothes. It’s my blouse this time shooting buttons everywhere and my skirt being ripped to shreds as he spreads my thighs open.

“Oh fuck, you’re so wet already,” he whispers into my mouth as his thick fingers slide into me and he thumbs my clit and rubs my G-spot. I’ve gotten myself so hot and bothered in the shower that I come almost instantly. It’s so violent, my body tenses down to my toes and my left calf muscle cramps. My fingers dig into his skin, clinging to his arms as his body pins me against the wall.

“Fuck me,” I manage to whisper hoarsely as I struggle to recover from the most intense orgasm I’ve ever had.

He drags my underwear off viciously, spreading my legs to make way for his thick body. When I have my strength back, I

grab his face and pull it down to me, kissing him passionately as he rubs his cock against me.

I brace for it, recalling how much it shocked me last night.

He takes it slow as if he's accustomed to girls struggling with the size of him. When he's in all the way, he pauses and lets me adjust before moving. It's a weird place I've never been with another human being. A tense and straining moment, a true understanding of the calm before the storm.

He lifts his hand to my chin and tilts my face so we're looking at each other. One fiery gaze locking on the other. He thrusts and we both moan, staring. I see myself in his eyes. His pupils are dilated like a shark's, and suddenly I see it—I'm his prey. All along, I thought I had the upper hand, but he was letting me think that.

His lips twist into that grin, suggesting he's also aware of my revelation, as he begins pumping into me, slamming me. The angle is weird with my legs hanging so I try to lean back but the table's too small.

“Wrap your legs around me,” he says as he lifts me up.

I do as he says and he spins and carries me to the bed, laying me down carefully. He hovers over me, his ragged breath meeting mine. We're staring again when he thrusts back inside me. The angle is perfect and my back arches as I dig into the bed, grabbing at sheets as he fucks me until we both orgasm loudly with our eyes locked on each other's.

“Goddamn,” he whispers as he rolls over to face me. “Where the hell did you come from?”

“I already told you, Port McNeill. Typical Mainlander,” I reply, trying to catch my breath. “You guys always ignore everything us Islanders say.”

He laughs which is nice. No one else in our world would get the joke.

I'm nowhere near recovered when a knock at his door jerks both our heads in that direction. “Lori, you in there?”

“It's Brady,” Lori whispers. “He won't go—”

“It’s okay.” I lean in breathlessly and kiss him once. “It was nice meeting you, Lawrence. And I’m sure I’ll see ya around.” I climb out of the bed and hurry to my door, scooping up my clothes on the way.

When I close the door, I lock it and tell myself, *Enough*.

Just as Sukii says, “What happens at the wedding, stays at the wedding.” And I need this to stay here, where Stan and Victor never find out about it.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



**L**ori  
Fucking Brady.

He had to come get me for brunch and interrupt.

I can't believe how upset I was waking with her gone.

I made her coffee and thought the second round would satisfy me, but all it's done is make me want her more.

What is this sorcery?

"And I just want to thank you guys for being here and being so awesome." Sami lifts her mimosa and speaks to us all, "This has legit been the best week of my life, besides having Eli." She eyes the sleeping baby in her mom's arms. "Cheers, everyone!"

We all toast and sip our orange juice and champagne.

"So I guess this is it. We have to go back to the real world," Nat says as she dumps maple syrup on her bacon, hash browns, and eggs, the Canadian way; something I introduced her to.

"You better spill." Brady leans in. "We all saw you guys leave together. You chased her fucking golf cart. What did she say to you at the bar?"

"Dude, stop," Carson winks at me. "When Lori's recovered, I'm sure we'll all get some details."

“She didn’t come for breakfast. Does she have a sore bottom, young Lawrence? Is that why you ran after the golf cart? She said you could play the back nine?” Brady laughs at his own joke.

“When has Lori ever given any of you honest details about his sex life?” Rich comes to my aid which I appreciate. “He’s always joking about fucking, but can you remember a genuine kiss and tell? No, he’s a gentleman.”

“When has Lori banged a girl worthy of my notice?” Brady asks, earning a hit in the arm from Nat.

But I say nothing.

“Cap’s noticeably missing too.” Brady’s eyes widen. “Did you have an orgy with Cap and the brunette?”

Offering nothing but a smug grin, I slowly sip my coffee, staring Brady down. My silence is killing him.

Nat knows it and winks at me.

“Come on, man!” Brady says loud enough to earn a scowl from Matt. “You sprinted after her golf cart. Sprinted, in those bullshit shoes Sami made us wear. And doesn’t your thigh hurt when you run right now? You almost died from sprints with Cap the other morning.” He points his fork at me but I offer nothing.

Carson laughs and nods. “Well played, Lori.” He nudges me.

Nat bursts into laughter.

“You assholes.” Brady throws in the towel and starts eating again. “Did she sleep over? Is that why you’re all tense and weird? You accidentally let her sleep over?”

“Breakfast is your favorite. Why aren’t you eating, Lori?” Sami interrupts.

“I’m not hungry,” I say loudly back and then lower my voice, “I ate a lot last night.” I offer a wink to Brady and get up from the table as everyone loses it.

“Come back here and tell me more!” Brady demands, but I wave over my head and walk to the rich side of the room to pay my respects before leaving.

The shaking hands and telling cheesy jokes portion of the morning drags on with my mind stuck on one thing, one person. I have to see her again. That can't be the last time we hook up. We didn't even get a proper goodbye and it's not out of my system. Maybe I just need a couple more times.

But how do I see her again?

She was exactly as Bev said she would be, into the one-night stand only. She even left, doing the crawl of shame and leaving me to wake up alone. I don't know if I've woken that disappointed before.

And what kind of girl asks for a fuck?

And then thanks you and sneaks out in the morning after she sleeps over and makes your whole bed smell like her?

Goddamn.

I thought I'd seen it all but that was new.

Finally, the breakfast is ending. I wave and offer my grandfather's best to them all, though he hates most of them, and follow Carson and Rich out.

“Bro, honest to God, when you ran after her golf cart, I almost spit my drink.”

“Yeah, me too,” Carson agrees with his boyfriend, laughing.

“Hey, wait up!” Bev calls after us. We stop so she can catch up, something I regret the moment I see her smug grin. “How ya feeling this morning, Lori?”

“Fine,” I'm scared of the question. It feels like a trap.

“Was that your first time with a real woman?” Bev links her arm in mine and they all laugh at me, but I join them, shaking my head.

“You guys are the worst. Why is no one bugging Cap about the brunette?”

“Because she’s nice and sweet, and they probably did it missionary and then made sandwiches afterward while he told her about the highlights from his last game,” Rich says, making Carson burst out laughing.

“That’s how I pictured it too,” Carson agrees.

“Absolutely.” Bev giggles.

“Anyway.” I give Bev a side-glance. “You leaving soon?”

“Yeah, gotta get Gran and Gramps home. You guys?”

“I want to leave before Sami and those guys. They’ll need to take care of things here and I want to get home.”

“Ride with us. We’re leaving now. I have a family thing tomorrow, so we’re going to my parents’ place,” Rich offers.

“Yeah, all right. Thanks. I’ll meet you guys at the front desk in like thirty?” I glance at my watch, hating that it’s already one.

“You hoping to catch Jenny at the airport?” Bev nudges, not giving up on it.

“No,” I say casually. “This whole thing is insane. I don’t have my phone to call my pilot to meet me at the airport and I left my plane in New York. And Simon’s probably missing me.”

“You’re such a weirdo,” Carson mocks me as they turn right to go to their cabin. Bev walks me to my door, noticing when I glimpse at Jenny’s side to check if she’s there. But her golf cart’s gone.

“I know I said it was a one-night-stand situation but if you want her number, I might be able to help you out.”

“What?” I pull out my key and offer Bev a look. “You have it?”

“Maybe.” She is too smug for this not to be something, her and the Jenny thing. Something’s up.

“What did you do? Did you set us up? Is this some bullshit matchmaker thing?” I don’t know why but that bothers me.

“Nope.” Bev taps her nose. “I knew you two would be the perfect weekend buddies. I made the concierge put her next to you on purpose. I figured some cute redhead might help you with your little problem.”

“But you said you didn’t know she was some awesome—”

“Ha! You think she’s awesome.” She points. “All I want to hear from you is thank you, Cousin Bev.” She taps her nose again and leaves the cabin.

“You’re so weird,” I shout after her as she closes the door.

I have no idea what the hell just happened or what the hell she means. And now, I have no idea how to solve the new problem I have. Because as much as Bev played matchmaker for a one-night stand, I doubt she understands how hard she hit this one on the head. Which makes me uncomfortable. I’m becoming the girl at the wedding all hopped up on the marriage steroids and wanting to cling to this.

No way.

I need to back off.

But the problem is only one small part of me is saying I shouldn’t see Jenny again. And I should avoid her and the feelings she has invoked in no time at all.

But the rest of me screams that I have an hour to get to the airport and hope I can catch her. I race to the door, ripping it open and shouting, “I wanna know everything.”

Bev stops in her tracks and spins back to me. “Then you better hurry up, lover boy.”

I race like a madman around the cottage, grabbing my shit and stuffing bags.

There’s no time to wait for Carson and Rich.

I’m a man on a mission.

**J**enny  
“I have a hundred and forty-seven texts, six hundred and eleven emails, and fifteen voicemails.” Sukii glances over her phone at me as we get back onto the main road and our data is working again.

My phone is no better. “Oh God.” I wince seeing them all adding up.

The phone rings immediately with Stan’s number.

“Hello?” I put him on speaker so Sukii can hear too, in case we’re busted for misbehaving.

“Jenny, how are you? Not too hungover I hope.” He laughs and I grimace.

“No, sir. Sukii and I are on our way home now, you’re on speaker.”

“Hi, Stan,” Sukii shouts.

“Hello, my dear. Did you girls have fun?” He sounds like a grandpa asking his grandkids if they had fun at summer camp.

“We did. The wedding was stunning. You missed out. The food was the best ever. Thank you so much for asking us to go,” Sukii gushes.

“Oh good, that makes me happy. And, Jenny, I wanted to tell you the driver who is picking you up at the airport will have your new keys and take you to the building. The move

was easy and the guys have you all ready to go. They put furniture where they thought it should go.”

“Oh—th-thank you.” I feel so weird and actually a little sick about this. “I don’t know how to thank you.”

“No, it was my pleasure. The least I could do after springing this on you. Anyway, we’ve had a heck of a week here and are excited for you two to get back. Jenny, I know I said take tomorrow off, but could you come in? I need you.”

“Of-of course. If you want me to get started on some things now, send them to me. I have the flight and I’m sure we’ll have some delays. Plus my laptop is fully charged from being powered down all week.” I laugh but the reality of the apartment and owing him a blood debt and now all the catch-up I have is giving me heartburn.

“No, no. I’ve sent the company jet to get you. They’re waiting for you. Go home and unpack your boxes. Get settled. I’ll see you girls in the morning.” His jovial tone is forced for our benefit. Something’s wrong. Is he regretting giving me the apartment? Does he know about Cap and Lawrence? I can’t handle this.

“Okay,” Sukii says as if this is all just fine.

“Rest up.” He hangs up the phone with a ruffling sound like he’s brushing a microphone against his jacket.

“Oh, Stan.” Sukii lies back in the limo and sighs when the phone call ends. But he doesn’t stay the topic of discussion for long. “So Cap gave me his digits and asked me out for dinner tomorrow night.” She lifts her eyebrows and offers a sly grin.

Deciding not to stress out right now, and frankly I’m too tired for it, I go along. “He means business. Who asks someone out for a date on a Monday?”

“I know,” she squeals. “I really like him. We went fishing and hung out and spent as much time by ourselves as we could. It was nice.” She blushes and lowers her gaze to the floor.

Fortunately, she was so preoccupied with Cap all weekend, she doesn’t know about Lawrence and me.

“How are you feeling about Ben now that we’re going home?” she changes the subject again. Sometimes with her it’s like facing a tommy-gun firing squad, and I’m not in a great place for it right now.

“I didn’t think about him much.” It’s not a lie. “And I guess now that I am, I feel a bit weird about my decision to ghost him,” I choke back the words, hating that I did it.

“You shouldn’t. The guy’s a twat.”

I snort.

“And don’t think you’re getting off easy, I’m coming home with you. I wanna see the new digs and help.”

“Dude, we’re both exhausted.”

“All the more reason for me to come and help.” She squeezes my hand before letting go and getting comfortable.

Deciding to use the time to distract myself, I comb through my messages and open my emails to tackle the list of them.

It takes the whole drive from the farm to the airport for me to junk out and answer with quick responses of calling back tomorrow.

We climb out as the driver gets the door. The air is warmer here out of the mountains. A valet comes for us, directing us to the private jet. I’ve never been on one before but it’s everything I expect and hope for.

Comfy leather seats, snacks and beverages, and the ability to lie back flat. After the night I had, closing my eyes on the jet is a nice surprise.

Landing at the airport is discombobulating.

For half a second, I have the strangest sensation I have nowhere to go. Or rather I don’t know the way home. It’s odd and keeps me moving quickly after the valet who has our bags on a trolley. But the familiar smell and feel of New York is calming.

“I can’t believe it’s over. I could swear we were at that wedding for a year. It’s like the lotus-eaters,” Sukii says as we



climb into the limo.

“I know.” I laugh, still in disbelief of the turn of events. Only I would go from screaming at and mocking a guy to having the most insane sex with him.

“But you had fun, right? Even with all the shouting at Lawrence and them forcing you to play the drums.” She cackles.

“I still can’t believe Stan told Bev that I helped my brother with the band when I was seventeen.” I cover my face, sensing the steam starting to rise.

“Oh man, it was so amazing seeing your face.” Sukii holds her stomach and laughs harder. “It was like when Phil from Accounting found that old video on YouTube of you playing with the band and sent it to the office.”

“And all you assholes changed your ringtones to the song so I had to listen to it for weeks.” I fold my arms over my chest. “I hate you all.”

“You make it so easy to target you.” She slaps my thigh and wipes her eyes. “Who plays the drums and guitar and shoots like an assassin and speaks multiple languages and was on Team Canada for two gold medals? Like overachieve less.”

“Shut up,” I mutter. “Canada is bilingual. And my mom was the music and French teacher at my school. And I don’t know if you’ve been to North Vancouver Island, but it rains ten months of the year. It was a lot of time to perfect random shit like the drums.”

“You and I both know you’re a rock star, maybe not the same way Josh is, but you’re amazing.” She cocks an eyebrow. “So no one feels sorry for you. You’re like one of those homeschooled kids, but you also have a killer personality to go with it.”

“Lots of homeschooled kids have great personalities.”

“Yeah, they need multiple to get through the boredom. Trust me, I did a semester of it. I was a week away from making myself a Wilson handprint volleyball like Tom

Hanks.” She sits up and looks out the window. “Dude, he’s turning onto Sixth Ave. Oh my God!”

My stomach drops because the rent in this part of town has another zero at the end of my measly twelve hundred dollars we agreed to. “Oh no,” I whisper and press my face against the car window, seeing the expensive buildings as we pass them.

My breath becomes harder to inhale, and when he turns right onto West Fifty-eighth, all the blood drains from my face.

“Oh snap,” Sukii says, her eyes meeting mine. “How much did he say he was gonna let you pay?”

“Oh God, oh God, I can’t breathe.” I loosen the buttons on my blouse and heave my breaths.

“Get it together,” Sukii retorts, patting my back.

“Is something wrong?” the driver asks as he opens the door.

“No.” Sukii scoffs and shoves me out of the car. “She’s just so excited.” She pushes me up to the door where the doorman rushes over and opens it.

“You must be Ms. Snowdon. I’m Eric, if you need anything at all, let me know.” He holds out a gloved hand.

With a professional, albeit sweaty, smile, I take his hand. “Yes, I am. Nice to meet you.”

“You as well. Mr. Levisohn said you would be arriving around now. That man is uncanny.” He chuckles and helps the driver with the bags.

“Oh, he’s something.” I walk into the stunning foyer. It brings to mind the reception of a beautiful hotel with sitting areas on either side of the check-in desk with double elevators, one for each sitting area.

“Building 58 is a wonderful community of people. We have twenty-four-hour concierge and doorman. The super lives in the building, which is nice. His name’s Xavier Timmons and he’s wonderful.” He hands me a card with Xavier’s name on it. “We’re one block from Bergdorf’s and the park. Carnegie Hall is right there. It’s a prime location.”

My head is spinning.

I accept this.

The driver hands Sukii a small envelope as she tips him.

“Enjoy.” He waves and leaves us.

I’m still homeless in my mind.

My fingers are trembling and I’m grateful Sukii decided to stay.

“Your apartment is on the fifteenth floor, great view. It’s 15C.” He presses the elevator button for us. “I’ll come up after with the bags. Let you go in and see for yourself first.” His eyes sparkle with excitement. He knows I’ve won the lottery. The apartment lottery. But he’s the only one excited. I feel sick.

My knees are weak when Sukii shoves me into the elevator.

“How can I accept this?” I ask us both.

“Because Stan owns the building. You’re a tax write-off. You work your ass off and this week is the first time you’ve booked any days off in five years. You always help with the worst clients. You never complain.” Sukii stares at me in the mirrored walls. “And if Stan plays the long game, you’ll end up being one of the partners, and he will have your undying loyalty because of this. He’s old. He’s outdated. And honestly, between us, he’s out of his league. Having you on his side means he can keep control of some aspects of the company when he retires.”

“You’re smarter than you look.” I won’t lie, the black-and-white explanation makes this a little dirtier. I’m being bought and I didn’t even know I was for sale.

“I know.” She winks. “Being underestimated is my jam.”

The elevator lands on the fifteenth floor and the doors open, making my frazzled nerves twitch a bit more.

The hallway is like a hotel. Sukii takes the key out of the envelope and hurries to the door. She’s so excited to see the

place, but I'm at odds with accepting such a grand gift.

The door to 15C is dark wood with a fancy door knob, matching the other doors. She turns the key.

My stomach twists more until the door opens.

Then I'm frozen.

It's not at all what I expect. There's a long hallway with a door leading to a powder room on the left. Next to it are three closets, making up an entryway. On the right are tall windows, nearly as high as the ceilings which seem double the height of my old apartment.

The floors are a wide plank beachy wood, reminding me of driftwood on the island. The trim is wide and white, making the hallway modern and stylish against the silvery pale-blue walls.

We round the corner to discover my house is sort of set up.

"How can I possibly accept this?" I whisper and stare, blown away. "This is like selling my soul."

My gray sofas and white coffee table match the walls perfectly. The view from all the windows is insane, the city and park.

"Holy shit!" Sukii rushes to the French doors and opens them, bringing the city in with her. The balcony is huge.

My HGTV obsession whispers at me to be excited but my rational brain is in the way.

The kitchen is open, overlooking the living room, with a dining room off to the right, opposite the hallway where the entrance is. Sukii is running around like a crazy person, shouting out obvious things like where the bathrooms are and which of the two bedrooms is bigger.

I run my hands over the white granite counters and stop at the white full-sized fridge.

It has double doors on top and a large freezer drawer below, like my father and Judith's. It's an adult fridge. I open

the doors slowly, scowling when I see a bottle of champagne and a large blue box. It's Tiffany's.

"Oh my God, I'm moving in!" Sukii shouts as she comes into the kitchen and grabs the bottle and box that I'm stuck staring at. "Jesus, this is like a four-hundred-dollar bottle of champagne. Are you and Stan fucking?"

Her comment draws my eyes and I realize how bad this looks. "Oh my God, everyone is going to think that, aren't they?"

She laughs. "No. Dude, it was a joke. Besides I don't think this is from him." She opens the Tiffany's box and tilts her head at the two flutes with a small card lying on top of them. She hands me the card and my already tense stomach does a flip.

"Congrats on the new apartment, neighbor. Dinner?" I read it aloud and lift my gaze to hers, but her eyes are stuck on the other side of the card.

"Lawrence?" She gasps and I flip it over to see his name with his cell phone number. "Oh my God, you fucked him!" Her eyes flash surprise and then anger. "Wait. You got so shitty with me over Cap—"

"Because he's married—"

"He's getting divorced!"

"I didn't know that and I didn't want you to be his side dish. I know how these guys are." It's weak and all I have.

She lifts the champagne flute. "Yes, clearly they're all womanizing assholes who just want to have sex and never call again. Or do you think you're the only one who could possibly land a good one?"

"No, what? I didn't want to land anyone! I don't want to —" I grab the glass from her and hug her. "I was wrong. I shouldn't have judged. You were right. Cap is a nice guy. I shouldn't have generalized them all that way. It was mean." My fingers bite in and I start to cry. I'm not sure why.

I think it's all too much.

I've sold my soul, broken my promise never to sleep with pucks, ghosted my boyfriend.

The entire week has me at my max capacity for crazy.

And for some reason the flutes and champagne from Lawrence are the straw that break the camel's back.

But thankfully I'm not alone.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

**L**ori  
Needing to distract myself from the fact she hasn't called or texted or even told me to go fuck myself in the four hours since she got home, I take a run on the treadmill and stare out at the city. I spend half the run convincing myself that seeing her is a bad idea. But the other half, my dick makes all the decisions, and I'm confident that nothing bad can come from more time spent devouring Jenny. We're clearly compatible and attracted to each other. And she's cool. And not clingy. If anything, she's the opposite which is killing me.

Simon licks himself peacefully on the windowsill in the gym, ignoring me but staying in the same room so I know he isn't happy that I vanished for the wedding right after being away for hockey.

"Lori?" Brady shouts from the hallway.

"Yeah?" I stop the treadmill and grab my towel, walking out of the double-room gym on the far side of my apartment. We meet in the hallway by the elevator. "Hey," I huff and wipe my face.

"Tell me that is some sex sweat and not you running off your needs," he says with a laugh.

"I would look a lot happier if I was having sex, even if you interrupted," I mutter and walk to the terrace off the bar to cool off. The view of the park is perfect from here on the southern side of the building. "Why aren't you at home?"

“Nat just wants to game. She ordered a pizza and is eating it alone, vegging out.” He rolls his eyes. “I think she might actually need to decompress from so much Sami time.” He laughs.

“She was getting a bit heavy-handed there,” I say as Bev strolls out of the house onto the balcony, interrupting us.

“Well, do we have a game plan?” she asks.

“How are you here?” *Why are they both here?*

“I sent Gran and Gramps home with Eddie and everyone else and decided to come help you. I feel bad that you accidentally fell for the one-night stand. But in my defense, I was telling the truth when I said I didn’t know Jenny was so awesome. Stan gushed about her, but I assumed he was being polite. I mean, how many PR reps have you met like her? None.”

“Okay, while she is awesome and I won’t lie, I can’t stop thinking about her, I didn’t fall for her.” I scoff. “I don’t feel done yet.”

“I don’t know who you think you’re talking to, Lori, but I was there. I saw you. And at the time, I thought you’d chase after her golf cart and have some drunken sex.” She rolls her eyes. “Anyway, what is your plan? A girl like her comes along once in a lifetime, you need a solid idea.”

“I googled what to send girls for a housewarming gift. It said to send her champagne and glasses. So I did, with a little note saying welcome to her new place and asked her for dinner.” I give Bev an annoyed look.

“What’s happening right now?” Brady sounds lost.

Bev ignores his question. “You sent champagne and asked her out for dinner the week—no the day—she moved? Why wouldn’t you go for bringing pizza to her house, rich boy? She’s probably got no food and a house filled with boxes, ya dumbass. What did Stan say?” Bev mocking me should feel like old hat but it still stings.

“Just what you said, that she moved into her new apartment today. I thought dinner might be nice and would



lead to more sex.”

“Really?” Bev tilts her head. “Who’s gonna unpack her house while she wines and dines with your dumb ass at one of those annoyingly trendy restaurants you rich people take poor people to so you can pretend to be relatable? You think Stan’s over there unpacking her boxes? He sounded a hundred years old over the phone.”

“Who the fuck is Stan and why didn’t I know you two were working on a plan to win Jenny over for real?” Brady folds his arms. “And what am I, chopped liver? You go to this thing for advice over me?” He points his thumb at Bev.

“Well, he wasn’t looking for advice on how to ruin her dress in an alley and never call her again,” Bev shoots back.

“I kinda was,” I defend myself.

“Stan’s Jenny’s boss. He’s friends with Lori’s grandpa—”

“Who isn’t friends with your grandpa?” It’s Brady’s turn to roll his eyes.

“I’m pretty sure he doesn’t like you,” I say with a weak laugh, earning my own scowl from Brady.

“He loves me, so fuck you. And secondly, I scored Natalie-fucking-Banks. So my advice is better than Bev’s. Who has she scored? Geoff the camera guy who I’m not supposed to know she’s banging?” He nods at Bev.

“Fuck you, Brady, that was a good one.” She lifts up a middle finger and walks inside to pour herself a scotch at my bar.

“But she’s right.” Brady gives Bev a glare. “If Jenny just moved, that girl probably has no food. No booze. Her apartment is a mess. She’s not going to want to have sex. As the person who actually unpacked our place while Nat messed around in the gaming room, I will say having someone show up with pizza and beers was dope.”

“Okay.” I fold my arms and stare out at the park. “You’re right, asking her out for dinner the night she moves was stupid. But isn’t going there and helping her unpack sort of intense?”

“Depends on the situation. One day of knowing Nat, and I would have walked through fire for her, regardless of how I fought my feelings. Do you like her? Like want to have dinner with her while unpacking and flirt and not have sex?”

“No, yes, I don’t know,” I answer them all too quickly. It takes me a second before I can accurately answer and expose myself to Brady’s torment. “I think I like her. I think I would have dinner and not have sex.” The night on the dock, waiting for the meteor shower, flashes through my mind. Staring at her beautiful face as she told me her sad story is still a highlight. It was intimate and quiet, and if I’m honest with myself there’s a chance, a huge chance, I want more of that.

“What’s not to like? She’s the coolest girl any of us has ever met. Plus, if your sleazy ass is sniffing around her boss and dropping the old grandpa card to get her number, I think we can both agree, the sex was something out of this world. Which I knew it would be. Her dance moves and fitness level —” He stops himself.

“Anyway. What do I do now? Did I mess up with the dinner and champagne?”

“Yeah, but that’s ‘cause you’re rich—you have no idea what the real world looks like.” Brady laughs. “You should have seen Matt and Sami’s faces when I explained we were moving ourselves. I don’t think Sami understands what moving is, like she shows up at the house and the gods just poof her shit there in exactly the place she would want it.”

“I’m down-to-earth,” I defend myself.

Brady bursts out laughing, doubling over.

“What?” I’m insulted. “I am.”

“What’d I miss?” Bev hands me a drink but holds on to Brady’s while he’s dying.

“Nothing. I said I’m down-to-earth,” I reply flatly, not understanding the laughing.

But Bev joins him, “Oh, honey.” She snickers. “You’re living in an apartment in the Plaza Hotel that is one whole floor. A whole hotel floor. You have a service elevator and a

regular elevator. You live on Billionaires' Row and by the way you talk, people think you're living in a fifth-floor walk-up in Brooklyn."

"Yeah, but I don't have drivers or staff—"

"Millie counts, even if you say she's here for the cat, and you have a maid service and valet and driver with the apartment. You have room service. You live in a fucking hotel," Bev says, pointing at the park. "On Central Park, where you have his and hers bathrooms to go with your matching his and hers closets."

"I don't use those services very often and Millie *is* for Simon!" I point at Simon who watches us from his perch in the window. The expression on his face suggests he doesn't entirely buy the line either. "And she makes killer sandwiches. And what snobby rich person loves sandwiches as much as me?"

"Okay. Come on, man. This is getting embarrassing. Let's get you a pizza so you can win over this girl." Brady slings an arm around me and wipes his eyes, barely recovered.

"I can order pizza on my own." My tone remains a little snappy.

"Sure ya can." Bev links her arm with my other one and hands Brady his drink. "Have you ever ordered your own food without asking someone to do it for you?"

"You two are gonna make me nuts." I pull away and walk through the library to the master bedroom. In the shower, I decide they're right; as much as I hate them both right now, asking her for dinner was stupid. She probably has a lot going on.

The idea of showing up at her place is conflicting but seeing her again, even if it is so soon and uncool, has me hurrying to get dressed and finish off with some of that aftershave she seemed to like.

I take one last glance in the mirror before I rush out to the living room.

“Okay, I spoke to Cap. He says Sukii is there, helping out. They’re about halfway done with the boxes but the place is a shitshow. She says Jenny is a bit of a mess, which is to be expected. Nat finds moving crazy emotional.” Brady walks to me, talking and texting. “Cap’s gonna tell the doorman you’re coming over and then get Sukii to leave and clear the path for you to go there and help her with the unpacking. Unpacking only.”

“Exactly, because Sukii also said Jenny’s fragile right now. She’s cried a couple of times already. So if you genuinely like this girl, be her friend not a fuckboy,” Bev points out. “Your pizza will be in the foyer downstairs in two minutes.” She walks with me to the elevator. “Try not to be a douche-bag hockey player and you’ll be fine.”

“He’s already banged her, he knows how to act,” Brady defends me.

“Yes, because fucking a girl at a wedding is a solid start to a relationship.” Bev finishes her drink and saunters over to the bar again.

“Calm down, Bev. Lori just wants to date her casually until he’s ready and then nail her down.” Brady scoffs and waves her off and his words hit me. “There’s no rush.”

He’s right.

I do want something casual right now, we barely know each other.

What the hell am I doing?

“Bro, pizza, girl! Let’s go!” Brady claps his hands and jolts me out of my trance.

I nod as if this is fine and not insane and walk into the elevator. “Feed Simon,” I say as the door closes.

This is the worst idea.

Why did I think talking to her the day after seeing her was a good idea?

It makes me look desperate.

I have a rule about that.

My mind whispers that I haven't stopped contemplating the moment I would see her again since she left the farm, and I *am* desperate. I've been stuck in pursuit mode from the moment she got away. Calling Stan, finding out about her move to a building a block from mine, happened before I gave any thought to how insane it looked. Getting someone to run over a housewarming gift with a note might have been too much.

In the moment, it made sense that we would have dinner and have sex again maybe. I never got further than that. And now the reality lingers in the back of my mind, trying to hit me with something resembling common sense about it all.

The elevator door opens and the concierge is waiting with my pizza in a proper delivery bag to keep it hot, and he also has a six pack of Canadian beer, obviously Brady's idea of a joke. "Mr. Eckelston, the food you requested."

"Thanks, Seb." I take it and offer my usual smile, faking all the confidence in the world. "Have a good night, man."

"I'm off in fifteen minutes. It's about to be an amazing night." He winks.

I hurry through the front door, certain this is the biggest mistake of my life, but my feet don't stop, even when I get to her building. I'm on autopilot.

The doorman nods. "Mr. Eckelston, I was informed you would be joining us. They're expecting you, 15C." He presses the button in the elevator for me.

"Thank you," I say and step in, noticing the nerves in my stomach. I haven't felt this way in a long time. It's another sign I should go home, eat the pizza with Bev, and listen to Brady call me a pussy.

Fuck it, I'm going home. This is crazy.

But the door opens on the fifteenth floor and as I press the lobby button she's there, standing at the elevator, waiting.

There's no glamor or glitz. No fancy clothes or makeup. In fact, whatever eye makeup she was wearing is staining her cheeks a little bit and her eyes are puffy like she's tired but also crazy emotional. Her hair's in a huge bun and for some reason, she no longer has eyebrows. She's holding a bunch of flattened boxes.

Her eyes meet mine and widen. "Oh shit." She drops the boxes and steps back, horrified.

Panicking, I say the first thing I think of, "I came to see if you needed help." It's a lie but now that I see her, I don't want to leave.

"Lawrence," she whispers.

"Here, you take the pizza and beers and I'll bring these down." I pass her dinner and pick up the boxes, keeping my foot in the door so it doesn't close on me.

"No, it's fine, honestly—"

"Just go, I'm sure you're starving. I was an idiot to think you'd be done unpacking in time to eat." I step back into the elevator and smile, but she doesn't offer one back which makes me second guess all my decisions.

When the elevator doors open to the lobby, the concierge is hurrying over. "Here, thanks." I hand him the boxes and a hundred dollars and step back into the elevator.

The guy smiles wide, his eyes darting between me and the money. I offer back a polite nod.

When I get upstairs the door to 15C is ajar for me.

Inside, the apartment is a disaster. I see why she's been crying all afternoon.

"Sorry, it's such a mess." She tries to tidy up some of the counter space where she has placed the pizza, but she wobbles and staggers.

"Hey, no worries, Red. I've seen much worse," I lie and offer her the grin to get her fired up. But it doesn't work at all. "It's okay." I walk to her with my arms open and pull her in,

hugging her. “I’ll help you clean it all up. It won’t take any time at all.”

God she smells good.

She starts crying and I regret everything, particularly the champagne which I suspect, by how trashed she is, might be the one thing she’s eaten all day. She blubbers an apology, breaking my heart. It takes a lot for a girl like her to fall to pieces.

“It’s okay. You’re just tired.” I lift her up in my arms, trying not to smell her like some kind of serial killer, but the lingering scent of cherries is killing me. Fortunately, the smell of champagne is also there and she’s blubbering into my dress shirt incoherently. Something about Ben or bending and cheating and being at work in the morning.

I’m lost.

I nod and continue through boxes, pacing and trying to choose which room is hers. There’s an unmade bed with clothes on one side and a huge quilt on the other. I place her on the armchair to sit while I spread out the quilt. She’s shaking her head, trying to argue that she’s not tired but I refuse it. I pull her to the bed and force her to lie down.

“I have to work in the morning,” she says the first truly coherent thing since I came into the apartment.

“Okay,” I add, unsure what this has to do with anything. “But you’re exhausted so just lie down for a minute. You look like you might pass out.” I drag her into the comforter and wrap it over her, tucking in like my nanny did when I was little. “Just a few minutes and then we’ll go out there and have some pizza and clean it up.”

“Okay,” she snuffles and covers her eyes. “I’m so sorry. I can’t stop crying. I don’t know what’s wrong with me.”

“Well, you’re hungover and maybe drunk again. And we didn’t really sleep last night. Then you moved and you’re tired and probably hungry. I’m an asshole when I’m hungry. My grandpa got me a shirt that says, ‘I’m sorry for what I said when I was hungry’ for my tenth birthday.” I chuckle at the

memory, making her laugh but it's weak. I stroke her head and kiss her forehead. "I promise, I'll make it all better."

"Mmmkay." She nods and makes a funny sound.

I hold her until her breath is even and I'm pretty sure she's sleeping.

Like a complete stalker, I watch her and realize, as weird as this is, I don't want to be anywhere else. In fact, I want to fix this problem.

The cold reality of Bev and Brady's mocking reminds me I don't know what to do.

This is the sort of problem I throw money at, which gives me an idea.

Gently, I pull my phone from my pocket without making a sound, sending a text to Millie and cringing when I see it's eight at night. She will not appreciate the text, but I need her help and I honestly don't know who else to ask.

*911! I need like ten women just like you to unpack an apartment, ASAP! Can you think of someone? I'll pay whatever they want to come here now and do this job in the next fifteen minutes.*

The message delivers and within seconds she's texting back. Like all old people, she texts for a whole minute but all she sends is a single word.

*Address?*

I send her the address and slip from the bed carefully, ensuring Jenny is tucked in. I close the blinds in her room and close the door, leaving her in the fairly dark room.

Turning around, I take it all in. It's a shitshow. I should have asked for twenty people. I grab the phone on the wall and call the concierge.

"Good evening, Ms. Snowdon. Eric here. How can I help?"

"Hi, Eric, this is Lori—Lawrence Eckelston. There's a group of people coming to help with the unpacking. They're



going to arrive in about fifteen. Can you ensure they make their way up here and tell them they need to be silent?"

"Sure thing, Mr. Eckelston."

"Thanks." I hang up and take a snoop around the apartment. It's the size of my gym but for some reason it suits her. The view of the park is pretty good considering it's a street back. As I suspected, the champagne bottle is empty and one glass is dirty.

Wishing I'd simply come here hours ago instead of sending the stupid neighbor note, I feel responsible for her state. I grab a slice of pizza and eat it over a paper plate.

I have no idea how they'll have this all done before she goes to work. It looks endless.

Eventually, a knock at the door interrupts my scattered thoughts.

I hurry over and answer, smiling at Millie with nine other people who remind me of her. Efficient and stern.

"I owe you something incredible at Christmas, remind me of that," I whisper.

"Why are we whispering?" She doesn't enter and the people behind her don't move.

"The girl whose place it is fell asleep. She's exhausted and stressed. I think the move was sprung on her. I want this to be done so she can wake up and go to work and not worry."

Millie's eyes narrow. "Really?"

"Okay, she's hot and I sent her a bottle of champagne and she drank it, and now she's passed out and her apartment isn't unpacked at all and it's possibly my fault," I say with a grin and Millie nods.

"What kind of person is she?" a guy in the back asks. "Besides hot."

"Canadian. Hardworking, she's a PR rep. She was Team Canada for hockey and has two gold medals. She plays drums and seems like a tense shouter until you get to know her. I

think she's a bit of a control freak, like an assassin who has fun but on their terms."

"Really?" Millie's eyebrows lift.

"Anyway, the place is a shitshow. And I don't know what to do."

"That's okay," Millie says and walks in. "Enrique and his team are the very best at what they do." She leads them inside. "They were in the neighborhood with a job that doesn't have such a time limit. I told them you'd pay double time."

"Yeah, whatever it takes."

"This is cute," one of the ladies notes as she takes in the mess.

"That's her bedroom. We should do that last and let her sleep. She doesn't seem like one of those people who wants help." I motion my head at the door.

"You go stand outside." The guy points at the balcony. "And take the pizza and beer with you."

"Okay." I give Millie a look before grabbing the food and carrying it to the balcony. She follows me outside.

"So who is she?"

"Girl from the wedding," I admit easily. Millie has seen worse, by far.

"A girl from a wedding who you have known for a couple of days? Who you're already paying professional unpackers to take care of?"

"It sounds crazy and I'm pretty sure it is, but I like her. And I have a weird feeling something bad is going on behind the scenes; she's not a crier, I don't think. Which also makes me think I've walked in right in the middle of the storm. But she's good, ya know?"

"I do." Millie's stare suggests she might be hinting that I'm good, which makes me uncomfortable.

"Pizza?"

“Yes, since you interrupted my dinner.” She takes a slice and we eat and watch the team of people assess everything before they start.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

**M** onday, June 19  
Jenny

I wake with a start, scared I've been abducted or something. I don't recognize the room but the bed is mine. Glancing around, I'm confused until I see a note on the pillow next to mine.

*RAINCHECK?*

*L.*

MEMORIES FLOOD my mind of Sukii and I unpacking. I was crying and drinking the champagne and she had to leave. Lawrence showed up. The rest is hazy.

I'm pretty sure he carried me to bed, we were going to nap.

But the bedroom is bare, or rather clean.

No boxes or clothes.

My phone is charging on my nightstand next to me. I grab it and check the time, six in the morning.

How long have I been sleeping?

What day is it?

Climbing out of bed, I realize I'm still wearing my underwear and tee shirt, but my pants are neatly folded on the

armchair in the corner of the room. I have no memory of getting undressed or making the bed.

It's all a blur.

I pull on my robe which is creepily resting on the hook on the back of the door, and stagger out into the living room, almost collapsing when I see it.

The whole apartment is put away.

There's not a single box.

It's like a science fiction movie.

My house looks how it should with only a few things out of place. A smell hits my nose and I turn, seeing a coffeemaker I don't recognize but I smell the coffee.

"What the hell?" I whisper and walk to it. My stomach growls and I wonder if the magical apartment fairy left me any of that pizza I recall Lawrence bringing. There's another note on the coffeemaker.

*SORRY, this should have been your housewarming gift.*

*Bev has informed me that the Tiffany's was weird.*

LAUGHING, I open the fridge and step back, gasping. It's full. It's weirdly, accurately full.

With trembling fingers, I open the other door and gasp again. Even my organic coffee cream is there with my favorite yogurt, bread, milk, and butter. My jam, *how the fuck?*

Taking the cream out, I close the fridge and walk to the coffeemaker, opening a cupboard above it to find the mugs where I would've put them. My French press coffeemaker is there too, tucked away up top.

"Did I put this all away?" I ask no one as I pour a cup of coffee and walk to the living room, setting the mug down and opening the curtains I don't recall installing.

The scenery hits me. It's New York in the morning with the sun rising.

I walk out onto the balcony, confused by the furniture here. It's not mine. I never had a deck before. The scene suggests I'm still dreaming. This is a dream.

But it's perfect.

I sit and sip and listen to the sound of the city.

It's more than perfect.

And I don't know how he did it, but I'm pretty sure Lawrence is somehow responsible for this dream.

As much as I hate to admit it or accept his help, this is the best wakeup I've had in a while. Ever maybe. It reminds me of Christmas mornings before my mom died. She was one of those people who put so much effort into other people's happiness. Overdoing to the point that Josh would complain we were getting too old to pretend so much magic existed. But somehow Lawrence Eckelston has made me believe again. Lawrence, a person I have clearly misjudged, has managed to evoke that same feeling my mother gave me.

Leaving the balcony and the view is hard, but I go inside and take a quick look around. Everything is here. My second bedroom is an office and den and someone has ensured the soap and towels are in the bathroom.

My closets are filled with linens and things that should be in storage. I'm a little worried Lawrence knows me this well after a few days.

I'm either incredibly predictable or he's some kind of serial killer.

The thought sticks with me all the way through eating and getting ready for work. But by the time I'm walking across the foyer of the building, I'm wondering if Sukii helped him.

I wave at the new doorman and hurry out into the street.

It's discombobulating being here but once I have my bearings, I hurry to the subway at Lexington and ride it to

Grand Central. My work is right next door to the Chrysler Building.

I smile at Mark, our doorman, as I enter. “Morning, Mark.”

“Good morning, Miss Snowdon.”

“Jenny, call me Jenny,” I say for the hundredth time and click across the massive marble foyer, waving at the receptionists. “Good afternoon, ladies!”

“Good afternoon, Jenny!”

When I step into the elevator, I lean against the stone wall and try to figure out what the hell I’m doing with Lawrence. It’s a minute of contemplation before I put on my game face. Office Jenny is a whole other beast, and I’ll have to figure out Lawrence later.

When the elevator doors open, Stan is standing in front of me, disheveled and not wearing his usual three-piece suit. His face is the shade of crimson I worry about fairly consistently. He’s too old to be that red.

“I’m so glad you’re here.” He gasps. “I had hoped you would come in early, but I know, all the unpacking.” He sighs, taking a deep breath. “We have a crisis. A real one.” His eyes widen and the vein in the middle of his forehead has popped out, flexing with his heartbeat.

“It’s okay, Mr. Levisohn.” I place a soft hand on his arm. “Whatever it is, I’ll fix it.” I use soothing tones.

“I know you will. You’re my girl. This is why—anyway, I need your brand of genius right now.” He wheezes another breath and turns, pulling me with him. “There was an incident last week while you were at the wedding and it’s come to a head as of last night. A complete crisis.”

“An incident?” My stomach tightens. He doesn’t normally get this worked up.

“One of our clients went Twitter crazy. He was Twittering all over the internet.”

“Twittering all over the internet,” I repeat his statement, trying not to laugh as I realize this is no emergency, but rather

an average day at work.

“Indeed. Spent the whole evening bad-mouthing one of the directors of the movie he just finished, making some very damning claims.” Stan stops walking and shakes his head. “Very damning.” His eyes meet mine with genuine concern. “If it’s true, I don’t know how we’ll carry on a relationship with the director.”

“Chances are, it isn’t. It’s probably sour grapes or angry words,” I lie. “I’ll get to the bottom of it.”

“You have to fix this, Jenny. The movie releases soon and the press junket is in a few weeks. The director is saying he’s going to cut scenes, breach his contract with the studio. The actor says he won’t attend the junket, despite being under contract. The studio has been phoning me since three am. I haven’t had any sleep. I didn’t want to bug you this morning but—”

“Okay, sir.” I have nowhere to start. My brain is still sort of on Lawrence and the wedding, moving, and Ben. My mind is frozen but I nod. It’ll take some more coffee and a second to get my ideas rolling. “I’ll get Sukii to send me all the information, then I’ll grab another coffee and tackle this. Is Laura here yet?”

“No one’s been able to reach her. We’re pretty sure she’s mid flight from Japan.”

“It’s okay, Mr. Levisohn. Go home and get some sleep.” I smile wide, pretending to have all the confidence in the world. “I’ve got this. I’ll call if I need you.”

Which I won’t.

The world could be on fire and I wouldn’t call him. He’s an old man in a young man’s public relations world. He doesn’t understand the modern technologies at all. He can hardly text. He barely understands email.

When he started the company, it was a world of print and radio shows. He’s seventy years old and out of his league. But he’s a good boss, he cares about us, and he has a team of experts who understand the Twittersphere. And he just got me



an apartment with next to no rent on the park, so extra work will be my pleasure, indefinitely.

“Sukii.” He glances behind me. “Can you get Jenny everything we have?”

“I’ve already emailed it to you. How was the first sleep in the new place?” Sukii beams mischievously, confirming my suspicion she helped Lawrence with the apartment.

“Magical.” Which is the truth. I lift a hand to Stan’s arm. “Sir, I’ll phone as soon as I know anything or have any ideas.”

“Thanks, Jenny. You’re a lifesaver. I’m sorry I haven’t asked about the apartment. Was it all satisfactory?”

“It’s too much, sir. I don’t know how to accept something so grand. I am grateful,” I say, not yet totally comfortable with the notion the apartment is mine. “And don’t worry, I’ve got this.”

“I never worry when you’re here.” He smiles and turns and walks away, shouting at Sukii as he heads to the elevator, “I’m going home to sleep. Unless there’s blood or fire or death, don’t call me until tomorrow.”

She waves him off as I hurry for my office to prepare. Not that it will be a huge ordeal for me to fix this. Our firm has handled this sort of thing weekly since I started working here as an intern almost six years ago.

“Good morning.” Sukii enters my office with a coffee. “Okay, he’s gone, like actually in the chopper. Let’s dish.”

“Thanks.” I take the coffee and hold it to my nose, inhaling the soothing medium roast she specially imports for the office from the UK. It’s from a boutique coffee-roasting company called Monsoon and a favorite amongst us all. “And thank you for helping Lawrence with the unpacking. I don’t know how to repay you guys.”

“What?” Sukii makes a doubt-filled face.

“You didn’t help Lawrence unpack me?” my voice cracks and my stomach tightens again.

“How could I? I left. I went to see Cap. He told me Lori was coming to see you. Why didn’t you unpack yourself?”

“Oh shit,” I whisper and tap my finger against my cup. “Okay, let’s worry about who unpacked me later.” I shake my head, trying not to think about how big of a skin-suit situation Lawrence clearly is. “How bad is this, the work thing?”

“It’s bad, but nothing more than the usual.” Her dark eyebrows lift with surprise. “New cast of characters this time, Liam Farringdon. You know him?”

“Yeah, of course. He’s in trouble? We’ve never dealt with him before, have we?”

“No, but it was only a matter of time. He’s become such a diva since he started his divorce proceedings from Margo. He’s got his panties in a knot with the director from his last movie. I guess the guy was drunk and started spouting shit last week, said the studio hired Liam for the job because he’s hot. And that Liam couldn’t act his way out of a wet paper bag.”

“Oh no.” None of our A-list celebrities would take that lightly.

“Right. So then Liam’s method of dealing with it was to go full diva on Twitter, calling the director a tyrant who allegedly jerks off to pictures of young—”

“I get it.” I smile, sipping the coffee but the taste is lost in the acid brewing in my stomach. “You said this was routine. Pervert accusations are not routine.”

“Oh yeah, I meant it was a ‘bunch of celebrities being dicks’ normal. So the shitstorm is that not only are the director and Liam our clients, but so is the studio. And they all want blood. Liam says he has proof of the director being a pervert. He’s threatening to expose him.”

“Oh good.” I cover my eyes. “Why do they have to open their mouths, or go on the internet when they’re pissed off? Why can’t they go for a jog?”

“Honestly.” She shrugs. “I used to think actors were hot before I took this job. It’s amazing how few of them are

actually cool. Which is why I'm glad I recently made the switch to hockey players." She winks.

"No wonder Stan was sweating." I grimace as she laughs her way out of my office, leaving me and the coffee to figure this mess out.

Forcing myself to focus my mind on work and not Lawrence, I open the email, cringing my way through the snaps of tweets and exchanges. It's a complete shitshow with other celebs coming to the defense of the director, calling Liam a liar. On the flip side, several younger female actors are agreeing with Liam, claiming the director was flirty with them when they were in their early twenties.

It's a hot mess but there doesn't seem to be any actual inappropriate behavior on the director's part, beyond flapping his gums.

Fortunately, now the director is saying nothing publicly, but his email to Stan is aggressive at best. At worst it's threatening.

The studio is flipping out. The project in question has cost a hundred million dollars to complete, and if Liam has proof the director is a pervert, they will eat that. Something they aren't prepared to do.

And as a result, everyone's agent is blowing up Stan's email, offering excuses and threats almost simultaneously.

I stretch, drink the last of my coffee, and start thinking about work but my brain is jumping back to my own personal problems. That leads to pacing and biting my lip until it throbs.

I've worn a path in the floor of my office when a miracle of an idea hits.

I grab my phone and press the contact's call button.

"Mia, it's Jenny Snowdon at Levisohn and Shuster."

"Oh thank God, Jenny." She's Liam's agent, someone we do a lot of business with. "I talked to Stan earlier and he sounded flustered. Is Laura in?"

“No, but I have an idea.”

“Give it to me. At this point I’m desperate.” She truly sounds desperate.

“I have to ask one question first, is the director shady? I’m not defending a pervert.”

She is quiet for a second before she speaks slowly, “No. He has flirted and schmoozed, but I’ve been doing this a long time. He’s not one of those ones. No casting couch and everyone he’s gone after was over twenty, barely but they’re legal. This is Liam being a dick, but I never said this and I will lie if ever questioned about it.”

“Fair enough and gross, almost equally. But I think I have a solution. Our best approach is to create some background noise. Let’s build on Liam’s lies and spread some more untruths. What if the director had an affair with Liam’s latest girlfriend? Which means Liam’s heartbroken and lashing out, not acting like a giant d-bag. People relate to a broken heart, so we make this entire Twitter incident a crime of passion as opposed to a narcissistic egomaniacal outburst.”

“Who’s his girlfriend?” Mia asks, not questioning the fact that Liam isn’t dating anyone, and we are about to start some serious bullshit. It’s what we do best. And the media is always there to grab it up and spread our lies. They do more than half our work for us.

“Was there anyone coming to the set much? A girl he saw more than once? It’s better to use someone that witnesses on set would have seen. They’ll verify. The crew loves giving statements when it’s against someone like Liam or the director. They love that fifteen seconds of fame.”

“Let me think.” She pauses. “Yeah. Natasha Wentworth. She came to the set four or five times to see Liam. She was filming somewhere close by. I think they’re just friends—”

“Perfect. She’s exactly what we need. She’s only twenty-three. Liam is heartbroken and the director is a bit of a rogue, going after a woman thirty years his junior. Natasha’s not one of my clients, so I don’t care if we slip a bit of scandal her

way. Let's also circulate that Natasha wants a role in the director's next big movie, and maybe she's sleeping her way into it."

"You're vile." Mia laughs.

"I know." I sigh. "Anyway, let's use the drama to promote the movie. Every time someone clicks the link to an article about this, we'll pay to have an ad for the movie come up. Sell it to *People Magazine* and *In Touch*, with a tiny article that will end up as a second- or third-page read. It won't make the cover and we won't offer a full interview. And wherever the placement is, so will be the promo for his next movie."

"We should also mention he is fragile from the divorce and now Natasha is sleeping with the director." Mia is fully invested in this lie.

"Wait, didn't one of Liam's relatives die recently? Did I see that somewhere?"

"His aunt who immigrated to live in Florida," she answers quickly.

"Perfect. Find some photos of him at the funeral. Some pictures of Natasha in Florida. And add some images of her and him together recently. Link it all up, spin a relationship. Then we add that Liam's friends from Hollywood have been there for him with a picture of her and him together. Let the reader make the connection from the pictures and assume. Do you have access to his Twitter feed?"

"Yeah. I deleted it already, but the screenshots from the keyboard warriors with nothing else to do with their lives say it all."

"Okay. So long as it's deleted, I don't care what they do. They're going to help us promote this movie. Every article that comes out about this blowup needs to have reference to the movie. How his separation from his ex-wife made him take a more challenging part to help him find himself and how this movie pushed Liam to be a better actor. How he and the director fought on set, but according to sources, this will be

Liam's best movie, the one that wins him awards for more than being hot."

"He's never going to go for this," she groans.

"No, he won't. But it doesn't matter because he won't be giving any public statements, and he won't be interviewed until the junket. In fact, I want him on full lockdown, no internet or leaving his estate for at least two weeks. This will already be leaked by the time he's seen in public. And at the junket, he will be heavily guarded."

"Or medicated." Mia snickers.

I should laugh at that but instead, I start writing down that we will be using the idea and emailing the doctor we keep on staff for something to slip to Liam. I don't know him at all, but I'm sure his handler in our office, Laura, will have no problem making certain he's extra chill at the junket. "I have to call the studio now and beg for favors. I'll get back to you after all this is in the works."

"Thanks, love. You're the best. And I want to say that even though you're junior there, we all know you're the miracle worker."

"Thanks. The word is 'workaholic who is indebted to her boss,'" I joke, sort of, hanging up and calling the studio rep. "Angelo, how are you?" I ask as he answers gruffly.

"Fucking terrible, Laura, how do you think I am?"

"It's Jenny."

"Jenny, how are you?" Angelo's voice lightens. He's a little on the flirty side of things with me. I use it to my advantage.

"I've been better. I need something from you. Well, two things."

"Okay." He sounds leery. He should be, I am about to ask for the moon and stars.

"We can take this entire thing and swing it into something profitable for everyone, but I need your help."

“Go on.”

“I need you to give Liam the best role you have coming up—whatever you haven’t filled yet that’s going to be a blockbuster. I mean something sweet that your big names are being recommended for. And I need that offer to come to him in two weeks, right before the junket. I want him to hear whisperings of the role but no confirmation until the offer hits him.”

“Are you kidding me?” He scoffs. “Jenny. This is a huge favor.”

“I know that. But right now he’s about to be in the papers a ton. He’s got the attention of the press. He’s a good actor and a solid investment, adding that he’s in the spotlight and on everyone’s lips can’t hurt.” I try to smile while I say it.

“He’s a mediocre actor and he’s a diva.”

“What if I guaranteed he wouldn’t be a diva?” Not that I have any idea on how to make that happen. Not that it matters; it will be Mia and Laura’s problem, not mine.

“He will be a good boy and make the movie and work hard. He will not be a diva or a pain in my ass in any way. And you will agree to go to dinner with me.”

“Done.” I promise, hating that part of it. “The other favor is for Natasha Wentworth. I need her offered the same thing. She needs a substantial role to smooth over the fact I just made her a bit of a whore in the news to cover this up.” And to make it appear she slept with someone for the role, but I keep that to myself.

“Wow, you gingers truly don’t have a soul.” He says it with a smile I can hear. “She’s no problem. She’s a hot seller right now.”

“Can you make it all happen?” I want to feel bad about it, but my mind whirls with details.

“I can. Dinner next time you’re in LA,” he adds.

“You name the place and I will be there.”

We hang up and I open my email, sending the solution to Stan.

The fix is in.

Sukii comes back into my office with a Bavarian cream donut on a plate. “Hey, how’s it going?”

“Good. Problem solved.” I take the donut from her and smell it as a text comes in from Victor reminding me that tomorrow we’re having that meeting with the New York team for the hockey game we’re hosting. “Fuck.” I shouldn’t eat the donut but my anxiety levels are through the roof. How could I forget about the meeting and the game?

“What?”

“I’m helping Victor organize a hockey game against the Rangers. They have to play a fundraiser game against our office team here and do a barbecue afterward.” I laugh nervously, realizing I’ll have to play hockey against Lawrence. “The meeting is tomorrow and I completely forgot about it.”

“Our beer league team is going to play an NHL team?” She can’t hold back her grin.

“Yeah.” I blink and stare at the screen.

“Aren’t you the one decent player on the team?” Sukii lifts an eyebrow.

“No, there’s a couple of us.” I take a bite and close my eyes. The food should taste like heaven but stress eating never does.

“So the Rangers are coming here tomorrow for a meeting?” Her eyes dazzle with delight. I’m pretty sure it’s the opposite expression to what I’m making.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



**T**uesday, June 20  
Lori

The elevator is a whole new level of no. The air is polluted with too many dudes, and someone has been an ass and farted. I hold my breath and lean into Brady who always smells like an aftershave commercial, in case I can't hold it long enough.

Brady's face is getting redder and I realize he's holding his breath too. Our eyes meet and he smiles, making me laugh and blast my breath all over Matt's cheek. He grimaces but doesn't glance back.

The doors open and we escape into the fresh air as the guys laugh and joke like ten-year-olds. Matt gives us both one of his uppity asshole glares. "I don't want to know which one of you did it," he says before he turns and strolls down the hall.

"So this is her building?" Brady asks too loudly as we pass what appears to be a bullpen of office cubicles. Eyes lift but these people are accustomed to athletes and celebrities. They barely bat eyelashes. "And she didn't text or call?"

"Nope," I feel like an idiot but Millie and Bev have both said Jenny was likely exhausted and back to work, and she probably needed a night to piece it all together. They called it laundry night. I don't know if it's a metaphor or what. "I came on too hard."

“What I want to know is how amazing was that sex?” Brady leans in like he might lower his voice, but he doesn’t. “Because thus far this girl has you looking like a bitch. Chasing after her golf cart the same way my grandpa used to run his old dog. Then you spend thousands of dollars having her apartment unpacked and cleaned by a team of professional housekeepers while she sleeps?”

“Shut up, Brady,” Matt offers as we follow Cap and our coach into a large room.

The seats are nice, sort of a laid out like a classroom so we can all sit and watch the presenter. I’m hoping Jenny is the person doing the presentation so we can talk afterward and I can try to recover from the unusually forward gesture of unpacking her house. I panicked. It seemed like the right thing to do, now I feel weird. And obsessed. I’m obsessed.

*Holy fuck, get it together Eckelston.*

Taking a deep breath, I get my seat next to Brady and wait for the talking to begin.

The guys are shooting the shit, talking about the last game and Matt’s wedding.

“How come you’re not on your honeymoon, buds?” Mike, one of our defensemen, asks Matt.

“We’re going later in the summer. After this guy here gets married.” Matt nods his head at Brady who beams.

“That’s right, fellas. I’m gonna be off the market as of the end of July, so if you’re interested in any of this, you better hit me up soon.” Brady holds his arms out.

We laugh but Coach barks, “Coldwell!” forcing us to straighten up as Jenny walks in the doorway with a group of geeky-looking people. She laughs at Brady and casually comes further into the room but the flush on her cheeks makes my breath hitch.

A tall man dressed in a sweet navy-blue Kiton suit, I have one that’s similar, starts to speak to us with a thick Russian accent. “Good morning, I’m Victor Stanovich. This is Jenny Snowdon. We’re part of your PR team here at the firm.”

Jenny waves and smiles but there is a difference. Work Jenny and home Jenny and maybe even wedding Jenny are all different. She's one of those weird people who can wear the hats and turn off aspects of their personality.

"I'm going to cut to the chase here, I have a flight in a few hours, and I'm sure you would rather be spending your day somewhere warm. As you all know, signing with a team means you agree to certain types of PR. The endorsements are great, but actual PR is important. The New Yorkers have to love you. They need to care about the team." Victor points to Jenny. "Jenny will explain further on our plan to boost that." He steps back and watches us as though he's her henchman.

"Thanks, Mr. Stanovich." Jenny smiles. "Good to see you all again so soon." We laugh with her. "What Mr. Stanovich is saying is we are changing the way things are done here. We have decided that season ticket holders will now be entitled to VIP events where players will come and take part. There will be charities and galas that will include mingling with those pass holders. There will be events that are mandatory for players, timed particularly during playoffs to build cup craziness. All home games will have a theme. Pride. Kids. All abilities. With prizes related to the cause and donations made to charities involved in the theme. Sticks will be wrapped with rainbow tape and so on."

"You want to add to the workload during the hardest part of the season?" Coach asks in a not so polite way.

"Yes, because cup hype is everything. And we can rotate the roster of who has to participate, so as not to stress any one player." Jenny smiles but her tone is also one not to be reckoned with. "We have already put this plan into effect with teams in smaller cities. We did several test runs to see if the juice was worth the squeeze. It was. Season passes have sold out in all the major cities and stadiums are full year round, even in the early part of the season."

"That's easy for you lot to say here in your offices. But you don't understand the strain and stress on a player at the end of the season. What time they have to spare, they like to spend with their families." Coach isn't about to drop it and

since he missed the wedding, he's unaware he's talking to someone who balanced school, work, and the Olympics.

“And all of that is taken into consideration, I promise.” Jenny offers a bright, sincere smile. “When we've run the tests in other cities, we ensured the schedule for PR was available to players well in advance and never took more than a couple of hours a week from anyone. The investment of their time was tenfold in financial return. And additionally, the players found that having a stadium filled with excited fans added a lot of reward. It boosted morale and led to more wins.”

Coach can't argue with that. He nods and we move on.

“As such, we have decided that as your last act of community spirit and service before you all break for the summer, you will be playing a game here against a fun team. It's a family event and an email has been sent with the details.”

“Like the Harlem Globetrotters?” Cap laughs.

“Indeed. Maybe it will motivate you against the Senators next year. Because the loser will play the fun team again next year as this is going to be annual.” She winks at him and he laughs as the rest of us clench our jaws at the mentioning of their name.

Victor watches Jenny as she moves through the meeting. His eyes land on her ass in her pencil skirt enough times that my mood sours.

“Bro, your resting bitch face is showing,” Brady whispers.

I relax but my stare remains on the older man. He licks his lips, staring right at her body and I sit up.

“Yeah, I saw that. He needs to die. Old fuck.” His instant dislike of Victor the Twat makes me love him even more.

We are both glaring the pervert to death when Jenny wraps it up. “And that is everything, so thank you for coming in. And we promise the stands will be filled with screaming fans next season.”

Coach stands and walks directly to her. I know him, he wants to see the proof and numbers she was speaking of. He is

a predictably grumpy old man. Instead, I hear him apologize, “I didn’t recognize you, kid. I’m sorry for sounding so—”

“No, please don’t apologize. I understand. And normally the people in the office wouldn’t be able to comprehend how hard a hockey season is.” She is desperate for him not to bring it up.

“Then we are lucky to have you on our side,” he says as his cheeks blush.

His words surprise her and she offers her real smile, making my heart swell with pride like an idiot. She isn’t mine to be proud of. Not yet.

Coach says goodbye and I take my chance, nodding my head at the door to the office. She walks over and follows me through the door, slipping her hand in my arm and pulling me to the left instead of the right where everyone is walking for the elevator.

Brady and Matt follow me with their stare. I wave them off and let her corner me in a small alcove.

“I just want to say sorry—”

“No.” She loses the office mask. Her eyes are wide with emotion. “I’m so embarrassed. I drank all the champagne and didn’t eat and I was already so upset—”

“Jenny.” I take her hand in mine but she doesn’t squeeze back.

“Lawrence,” the way she says my name is different. It’s cold like it was when we first met. “I should have said something before but I just got out of a relationship.” She closes her eyes and pauses. “I’m an idiot. I—we broke up—I—” She searches the ceiling for the words and can’t seem to get her breath. “It’s been a week. It was last Tuesday. It’s why I was such a mess when I met you. So emotional and crazy and it took me a couple of days to settle into the wedding.”

Her words are a knife to the heart.

“I’m so sorry I didn’t say something. I honestly thought it was a one-night stan—”

“It’s cool,” my fucking voice betrays me and cracks as I step back, letting go of her hand. “I get it. It was nice meeting you too.” I manage to keep it together but my whole body is at odds with me.

“Lawrence,” she says my name again.

“Goodbye, Jenny.” I nod and turn, walking to the elevator. When I get inside, she remains there, staring at me as the doors close. My chest throbs, matching my pride. “You’re such an idiot,” I whisper to myself.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

Jenny

The day already feels like the worst I've had in a while, and it's only eleven in the morning. Pacing my office, reliving the entirety of the conversation I had with Lawrence, I'm plagued with regret. The words were coming out and I wasn't in control of them. He makes me so crazy. And now that he's said goodbye like that, like I'd killed his dog, how do I fix it?

"You promised that?" Laura, the agent who handles the A-list Hollywood celebs comes stomping into my small office, shouting, "How the hell do you expect me to make Liam-fucking-Farrington behave? Have you ever met him? He's an opinionated narcissist. He thinks he's god's gift to the world. Women and the world. He thinks he's an artist. What he is, is a playboy."

My brain takes a second to snap back into the right crisis. "He owes you, Laura. You got him the biggest role coming out of that studio next year. It'll make him a household name." I can't believe she's bitching. I handed her a sculpture made from a pile of sludge.

"*You* got him that, not me. He won't listen to me!" Her high-pitched shrieking draws the eyes from the already busy hallway.

"I think Liam will do whatever you say when he hears this has fixed his grievous error. He'll behave or he'll lose his career. No one likes a diva."

“He doesn’t give a rat’s ass,” Laura groans. “And in turn, when he loses his job, I’ll lose mine.” She isn’t nearly as grateful or motivated to fix it as I’d imagined she’d be.

“If your client goes rogue, you have to clean up the mess.” I’m dumfounded. This is the bread and butter of our floor of our global communications marketing and PR firm. We handle the hard stuff—people. The other floors handle easy shit like brand names and corporations.

“I can’t agree to this commitment.” She turns to leave my office. “You made it, you take him on.” She walks out, visibly angry.

Defeated, I slump into my chair as Sukii comes in, cocking a dark eyebrow. “Is she for real? Did I hear that right or are my eavesdropping skills slipping?”

“Fuck me. She’s for real. But I can’t take him on, Victor will kill me. We don’t handle Hollywood douche bags. I’m already working six days a week. I just moved. Lawrence hates me. But I’m pretty sure he’s a skin-suit situation so maybe that’s for the best.”

“What?” She closes the door and leans against it. “What are you talking about?”

“He unpacked my apartment exactly how I would have done it. And bought me a coffeemaker and balcony furniture. The exact kind I pinned on my Pinterest page. I woke up in bed like some doll in a house. It was crazy and creepy.”

Her jaw drops but her words don’t match my assumptions. “The guy shows up to you being a slobbering mess and when you pass out, he pays for your apartment to be unpacked by a team of rich-people elite movers who Marie Kondo’d the place for you, and you call him a skin suit? Jesus, Jenny. Harsh.”

“What?” I’m lost.

“Yeah, Cap just told me. I was on my way in here to tell you when Laura came in and lost her shit. Lawrence didn’t unpack you. He got professionals to do it so when you woke up in the morning, everything was perfect. He was trying to be nice because you were such a wreck. Cap says he showed up



and put you to bed and took care of everything. He was super upset you were such a mess, perhaps thinking it was his fault, like he shouldn't have sent over champagne."

"Oh fuck me," I repeat and fall into my chair. My heart's back from the puddle and racing a mile a minute. I cover my face with my hands and contemplate screaming into them, but the reminder I need to be worth the practically free apartment silences me.

It takes a whole minute of deep breathing before I sigh and put my hands on my lap, tapping my overdue manicure on my thighs. "Fuck. I didn't even thank him." I laugh but it's one of those crazy irrational laughs.

"Okay, look, you have a huge pile of shit here." Sukii waves her hands in front of herself as if my whole life is a storm of bad things. "Stan just moved you into the apartment, you can't fall apart like this." She hurries toward me. "We are going to write a list of things you need to do. Start with work, don't touch anything unless it's in chronological order, and we will tackle it all."

"Okay." I snap back, taking gulps of air again and nodding my head. "I'm sweating."

"Yeah, I'm starting to think you might actually have that anxiety sweating thing." She hands me a tissue and takes out my planner, flipping to the back where the notebook pages are. She's aware of the list of shit I need to get done better than I am so she writes while I fan myself with my desk calendar.

It takes a minute to get my brain back to work mode, but I manage to tuck Ben, the apartment, Lawrence, and the hockey game into a file in my head. "Did we ever hear from Natasha Wentworth's agent?" I ask.

"Yes. She just emailed back. Says she'll call you. She doesn't want a paper trail either."

"Perfect."

"Okay. Check that list, start at the top, don't stray. You can't mix business and pleasure right now." Sukii pats me on the back once before she leaves, hopefully to find me more

coffee as I send another email and phone Stan who isn't in yet. "You emailed that you wanted to chat with me, Mr. Levisohn?"

"Yeah, I just got a call from Laura. She sounds upset. She asked to have Liam traded to you."

"I can't take on anyone else, Victor will kill me."

"Victor won't be involved in this." Stan sounds annoyed but I sense it's not with me. "Liam will be your first solo act and to even things out, I'm giving Laura a few of Victor's needier people who are transitioning into Hollywood, trading clients. I don't think she has the spine for Liam. And you're on this already anyway. Which means you need to clear the week of the press junket. It's in Beverly Hills. Make sure you have flights booked and a hotel. Get Sukii to help, she's a star."

My heart is racing so hard I feel my pulse in my temples.

"Great," I squeak out. "Thank you, sir," I try to sound as though I mean it with something resembling enthusiasm. My first solo client should be exciting.

"I told Laura she would be picking up your slack this week while you handle this and your move and everything else. She'll also be doing your work the week of the junket when you're away, as it happens the same week as the hockey game benefit." He sounds as though he's making that her punishment, which isn't even close to fair. I'm technically the one being punished.

"Of course." I want to say something else but I don't.

"You're a lifesaver, Jenny. A real star on this team. I want you to know I see that, and more than that, you have earned every bit of that apartment."

My stomach tightens as I speak, "Thank you, sir. I won't let you down."

"I have no doubt in your abilities. See you later." He hangs up and I try to take deep breaths.

This has to be some sort of alternate world or a hoax from God.

I almost want to lay my head on my desk and cry.

Instead, I get another latte and begin making phone calls while searching for antacids to soothe the irritation from too much coffee and stress.

“You busy?” Victor comes to the door of my office and leans against the frame. The older European gentleman is not who I expected to run the American hockey PR. But he’s an avid fan and a genius at advertising.

“No—yes, but obviously never too busy for you.” I laugh nervously. What the hell am I saying?

“No problem, I spoke to Stan. He explained.” His eyes flicker and roam my body. “You okay with taking your first solo client?” His wandering stare has always creeped me out.

“No?” I laugh softly.

“I’ll be there if you need me. But try not to need me.” He winks and walks out.

“Yes, sir.” I laugh again, hoping to the gods of all that is holy I don’t.

I take a deep breath and prepare for the onslaught of my new to-do list.

It’s an intense day of catching up and smoothing but I believe I have it covered.

By the time I’m leaving the office, the lights are off and I’m alone. I’ve rescheduled sushi with Claire for the weekend and have missed dinner so I’m starving.

I don’t click down the hall, confident in my heels as I normally do. Instead, I carry my shoes and walk in my purse-Tieks to the elevator. I push the button and sigh, leaning against the wall.

The walk home is nice, diverting and chaotic. The streets are full though it’s dark and past nine.

“Good evening, Ms. Snowdon,” Eric says as he gets the door.

“Jenny,” I say with a smile and head for the elevator.

When I fish out my keys from my purse, I see my to-do list with two things not yet completed.

Ben and Lawrence.

And I have no idea how to fix either one.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

**W**ednesday, July 5  
Lori

The locker room is quieter than normal, with only a few voices speaking in muffled tones, almost whispers, suggesting this room has become something tragic instead of a place where we normally amp each other up. We gear up as the disappointment of losing to the Senators in the playoffs lingers as if hanging out in the shower steam that rarely leaves. The New York Rangers do not take a loss well during regular season; the playoffs are hitting us that much harder.

The sound of a slap on bare cheeks echoes through the quiet room, but it takes a second to realize they were my cheeks. The hit is hard enough that the sting is delayed, but when it lands, I wince, nodding my head. It was a good one.

“Why you so quiet lately, Lori?” Brady’s voice booms over the awkward stillness of the room as he leans in rubbing his sore hand from smacking me that hard. “Red keeping you up at night?”

“No, your mom tired me out last night,” I retort, taking the cheap shot which matches my mood and my desire to avoid all conversations involving Jenny. Deep down, I like that he’s sensitive about his mom.

“Not my mom, bro!” He shoves me into the wooden shelves in front of me.

“Don’t fight it.” I spin, naked and smirking at him. “You gonna be okay calling me daddy from now on, bud?” I wink. “Because I think she likes me.”

His eyes widen and ferocity flashes in them. His fist balls and before he can contain himself the knuckles are flying. I leap to the right, leaving him to punch the wall where my head was. “Shit!” he shouts, cradling the injured appendage. “You fucker!”

“Eckelston!” Coach barks. “Coldwell! Quit grabassing. Get your gear on and stop dicking around.” He’s in no mood either. This fun-game nonsense is no fun at all.

Pretending to be fine and not dying from the rejection I haven’t told anyone about yet, I stagger away from Brady as he turns on me.

His lips are locked in a sneer and his eyes are slits. “I’m gonna beat your ass!” he says like it’s a deadly threat, but his tone is low because he too fears the coach.

My lips part to make another mom joke but a hand slides across them from behind and a voice whispers in my ear, “Quit while you’re ahead.” Matt cuddles me from behind. The fact I’m naked and he’s sort of spooning me in some of his hockey gear as Cap walks around the corner makes me laugh, despite Matt’s hand on my mouth and my heart broken.

“I don’t want to know.” Cap waves his hand at me and Matt. “Just get dressed, both of you!”

“Yeah, yeah.” I struggle free and saunter back to my gear, making a kissy face at Brady who nurses his hand. It’s reddening and swelling. “You bruised those knuckles, ya hammer.”

“I know!” he snaps and walks to the changing area where we always leave our regular clothes and starts stripping. “It’s fucking swollen already, Lori.”

“You did it to yourself, bud.” I begin dragging on my gear. It still smells like the loss of our spot in the playoffs. Blood, sweat, and tears. Matching how everything smells in my life currently.

“It’s the day after Independence Day. I should have my head in the toilet like everyone else. Why do we have to do this? It’s barbaric,” one of the guys asks from the far side of the locker room. I don’t turn to see who it is.

“Because we lost. You were at the same meeting I was, Mike. Maybe we’ll all play harder next year for the win so we don’t have to spend our summer like this.” Cap is not excited to be here or holding back. “The rink’s packed and I expect you all to show up. Play hard, be fun, smile, and get the crowd going.”

“Anyone know who the fun team is? That was missing from the email,” Mike shoots back.

“Coach just said it. Clean the shit outta your ears,” Cap barks. “They’re a rec league team made up of the guys who work for the PR firm. The office we were all at last week.”

“And apparently, they’re all right. So if they score, we’re all gonna wish we were dead,” Matt torments us.

I continue dressing as the grumbling and groaning become the background noise. It’s better than the miserable quiet, but it doesn’t take away the sting of knowing I’ll see Jenny at the barbecue after the game, something I’m dreading.

When I’m done dressing, I turn to see Brady glaring at me. I continue to bug him. “I’m telling Nat you hit me and that’s why your knuckles are bruised,” I torment him.

He rolls his eyes. “She’ll believe it too, ya shit.”

I shrug and sit, waiting for the coach to come in and read us the riot act. He’s barely speaking to any of us. He took the loss harder than we did and wouldn’t even come to Matt’s wedding.

“All right, boys,” Coach bellows as he reenters the room. “This is a rec league team, but I’ve been told they’re good. You guys play at fifty percent until we gauge where they’re at. I don’t wanna see a slaughter out there, no showboating. Although, after how you played in the playoffs, maybe these guys can teach you something.” The remark hurts more than any of us wants to admit. He waves and walks out again.

We all look to Cap. He nods. “What he said. Game faces on, boys!” He follows Coach out. The hallway, like the dressing room, is a place where we normally amp each other up and get excited to play, but this isn’t that kind of game. Or week. Or year.

Dragging sticks and hearts, we make our way to the door and wait for our names to be called by the announcer. He’s blathering on about nothing, something to do with the fundraiser. I grip my sticks and helmet while trying not to stare off into space too hard.

“For reals, what’s up your ass?” Brady asks again, nudging me.

“Nothing, man. Just tired.” I try to shrug it off.

“Red destroyed you last night, didn’t she? You don’t have to be shy, you can tell us. We knew she was too much for you to handle anyway.” He leers and I fight wincing. It’s been two weeks since I saw her last and any mention of her makes my entire body ache. And the worst of it is that I cannot stop thinking about her.

Serves me right to fall for a girl who was only looking for a one-night stand.

The only person who knows Jenny and I are done is Bev, and she called it instant karma and laughed at me.

I don’t imagine telling anyone else is going to go better.

“If you’re not sleeping, you should try this shit I’m taking to help with my energy levels,” Matt mutters. “Sami is making me take it as a trial. Some powder I add to my morning shake that she was asked to test out.”

“Holy shit, ladies, this isn’t brunch. Game faces,” Cap snarls.

I have to laugh at that. “I kinda want some brunch now that you mention it, Cap.”

“Brady, hit him again,” Cap says.

Brady nudges me into the wall, making me grunt.



“Send me the link for the powder,” I mention to Matt as the door opens and Cap is called out and the crowd goes wild. One by one, we make our way to the glistening ice that’s fresh and sparkling from the Zamboni.

Matt gets called. Then me. Then Brady. We wave and smile as we skate out. The cold air, the sound of the fans, and the smell of fresh ice perk me up. I skate to the team we’re playing, running my glove over theirs as I say, “Good luck,” on repeat.

I offer the refs a glove touch and head for my spot in the lineup.

The crowd is going nuts as more of us are called out.

Staring at the back of the other team, I notice a few of the guys aren’t very big. Not just short but slight, even in skates and gear. A flash of red hair sticks out the back of one of the smaller guys. I squint and notice the texture and gloss of the hair. It’s her.

Fuck.

“Is that a girl?” Brady asks Matt. “Is that Red? Lori, why didn’t you tell us she was playing?”

Fuck.

“Where?” Matt asks.

“Right there in front of us,” Brady points a gloved hand in the direction of the silky red hair.

Fuck.

“No way. They don’t let girls play in rec leagues.” Matt’s eyes narrow in on what I’m seeing. “He’s probably one of those metrosexual guys.”

“You’re metrosexual, that’s a girl. That’s Red.”

Fuck.

My heart is racing but sitting in my throat. I haven’t seen her since she told me about her breakup and we said goodbye. I’ve moped like a little teenaged girl for two weeks, barely seeing my friends because of this girl and here she is. In gear.

In front of me. I was prepping myself for the possibility I'd see her at the fundraiser, but I don't know how to act on the ice. It's mine. My domain. My safe place.

I take a deep breath and tell myself everything will be fine.

It's just a game of hockey.

She's just a girl I banged.

None of this is anything to get worked up over.

"Girl player on the team," one of the other guys in our line mutters.

"Oh shit, that's Jenny," another whispers.

"There's another girl." Brady points at a blonde with streaks of lighter blonde in a messy bun tucked up inside her helmet.

"The last time I played hockey with girls I was in high school," the Russian says.

Matt glances at Brady who's instinctively inspecting them for fuckability. He can't fight the urge. He wouldn't cheat on Nat, but the manwhore phase isn't far enough behind him not to have some of the habits linger. "Keep it in your pants, bro."

"I haven't played with girls since I was twelve," Brady whispers, saving me from overthinking and making me laugh. "You know what I mean, dicks." He brushes off the laughter.

"Guess that means we're really not allowed to hit," Matt adds.

"Oh, I'm gonna hit," Brady says with a dirty grin. "I'm hitting Red fucking hard. I've been thinking about it since the moment I saw her yelling at you at the lake. And she shot me in the face. This is war!" He tries to sound fierce but nods at another player. "And I'd bang the goalie. Look at that ass," he mumbles toward the goalie I hadn't noticed to Jenny's left.

"Uhhh, buddy, that's not a girl," Matt adds quietly making me laugh for real and Brady squint harder.

The noise of us draws the goalie's head. As the announcer is introducing the guy who's about to sing the anthem, the

goalie turns back to us flashing a full beard. Brady's face makes Matt and I laugh louder.

"Damned man buns," he grumbles as Coach offers us a deadly glare.

We press our lips into a tight line and put our heads down while some old man sings the national anthem.

The whole warmup is spent whispering and pointing at the other end of the ice.

The words "girl" and "Jenny" are uttered over and over, our eyes drawing there like we'd never seen one before.

This is my own personal hell.

"Any of them hot?" Mike Number One asks. He's one of the few guys who wasn't at the wedding.

"Yeah, shotty that ginger," Mike Number Two adds, who also was not at the wedding.

I want them both dead.

"Then what? We get to shotty your wife?" Matt laughs at him, throwing me a bone though I suspect he knows Jenny and I are not a thing. Matt always knows.

"Yah, if I can shotty yours, Brimstone." Mike laughs.

"Good luck with that, man. If you can make her happy, you can keep her." Matt scoffs and we all laugh. Sami is a special kind of girl.

"Okay, boys, focus in," Cap says, his voice thick with disparagement. "They have three girls on the team." His eyes dart to Brady. "Not the goalie."

We all laugh, even Brady.

"Try to keep it in your pants. There's no contact. No hitting." It's my turn to earn his cold gaze. "No sexual harassment."

Matt nudges me.

"We're running shifts. Everyone gets a chance to play. Don't play too hard but don't let those girls beat you; Jenny is

good.” Cap knocks one of the Mikes in the head and skates for our bench.

“Fifty bucks to anyone who gets Red’s number,” Mike Number Two says quickly.

“Watching you all get shot down is going to be amusing,” Matt mocks them, his stare darting to me.

Dreading everything, I pull on my helmet and skate to my starting position, trying to catch her eye before the puck drops, but she has her hockey hat on, and I’m pretty sure all she sees is the game.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

Jenny

My gear is a little tight from not training as much lately, but it's good to be on the ice. The smell and feel of the cold air around me is soothing. I've missed it. It's therapeutic, even with Lawrence so close by.

Like an asshole, I haven't crossed him off my to-do list. I don't know how and the last two weeks flew by with work and adjusting to the new apartment and seeing my girlfriends for the obligatory "fuck Ben" party.

Lawrence and Ben linger there, waiting to be crossed off, akin to baggage I don't want to unpack.

"You ready to get our asses kicked?" Allan, one of the managers who is suited up, asks as the puck is held and the ref shouts demands for a fun game with no hitting.

"Yup." It's a lie. I'm not ready. I hate losing. But what would amount to a beer league team against the Rangers is essentially my own version of hell. And we have hipster Steve in goal. He's one of those miserable "plays for the love of the sport" people.

I play to win. I snug my glove a little tighter and grip my stick, staring down the Rangers who are coming to the realization of who I am. Lawrence, Brady, and Matt have been watching me nonstop.

The puck drops and immediately New York has it. Matt skates with grace and elegance, sliding the puck along as he

looks for a pass. He hands it off to Cap, hitting dead center of his blade with a loud thwack.

Allan is already wheezing but Suz, another girl on the team, is on him. Cap doesn't expect her there. He's cocky and confident and she steals it, passing it off to Roger who manages not to lose it and passes it to me. His pass doesn't hit the blade of my stick, but with a quickening of pace and reach, I catch it and move.

"On her!" someone shouts. But they're slower than me.

Suz makes her way to the goal. I smack the puck at her but Coldwell intercepts, flashing me a grin as he passes it down the line.

I stop and turn, skating away as some beefcake tries to accidentally run into me, but I dodge him with a spin and skate past.

"That wasn't very nice," a huge guy grumbles as he skates up next to me, pretending to check me. "He put his best effort into that meet-cute." He winks and blows by me, moving like he's a tiny ballerina on ice, not a two-hundred-and-forty-pound beast.

Lawrence peers over at the guy flirting with me, and I hate life and boys and the look on his face.

The Rangers score their first goal and the crowd goes wild with the horn.

Cap's name, Belamy, is called out by the announcer and Coach calls for the line change.

They trade and so do we, clearing the bench with the second line.

I sit and suck in a little water.

"Jenny, that was a good pass," Suz says as she knocks my padded arm with her glove.

"We need to fuck them up," I mutter back, keeping my eyes on the puck, but it's hard to stay focused. Lian, the girl who plays the second line, is getting mauled by the guys with everything from nudges and holding, to grabbing her jersey. At

one point, one of the beefier guys picks her up and skates around, holding her hostage. The crowd is laughing but I know Lian is seething inside.

Suz and I aren't laughing with the bench. We're both glaring.

"We're scoring a goal on those fuckers. You ready?" I ask her as I stand and get ready to jump back over the boards onto the ice.

"Let's fuck them up," she growls and the bench clears again as we swap.

The puck's in play. Brimley and Coldwell and one the massive Russians skate hard, passing back and forth like this is a joke to them. I slide in behind the Russian and sneak the puck as he's about to grab it.

I turn and skate, sprinting and watching for someone to pass to. Two large guys move toward me. One of them is getting ready to take me into the boards and steal the puck. I fake a pass and skate faster, circling behind the net and flicking like I'm shooting up into the corner. The goalie lifts his hands, but I pass to Suz who is right in front of net. She catches and smacks it into net.

The horn goes and the crowd cheers louder for us.

I nudge Coldwell whose jaw is hanging open on my way back to set up.

"Fuck, Red, nice handling." He chuckles and says something more, probably dirty, but it's lost in the crowd and the music and chaos.

Everyone is giving Suz a light shove or a slap, but she is staring at me. I wink and she beams.

"Hey, Red, if you don't score another goal, you have dinner with me tonight," one of the guys lifts his helmet and shouts at me.

"She's already having dinner with you, moron," Suz says with a laugh, making his smirk fall. "We all are. It's a fundraiser and we're being paid to hang out with you,

something I'm sure you're accustomed to." She whacks the ice with her stick and the puck drops.

Cap has it and moves it forward to Brimley. He skates beautifully for such a large man. It's something to see so close. They pass back and forth moving around my teammates with ease, scoring with even more ease. At the sound of the horn, I smack the ice and turn to go back, this time running into a wall. He catches me. Every inch of my body wants to shove him but the crowd is watching. My bosses are watching.

"Careful there, Red," Lawrence says with a grin but it's hollow. "Unless you're trying out that meet-cute Mike just tried on you." His joke is cold. "But as you know, I don't require that kind of effort. Just show up in my room naked and I'm in."

Pressing my lips into a tight line, I pull free and skate away, kicking myself. How could I hurt his feelings like that and not mend this before the game? I told myself I was working too much to handle it but now I have to admit it was avoidance and I regret everything.

The puck drops and we move fast. My mind is stuck in the game, and I don't bother passing to anyone. Instead, I drive toward the goalie, skating through the guys on the other team. I fake out the Russian and pass to Suz who fakes a slap shot but passes to me again, and I flick the puck into the corner of the net.

The Russian cusses me out. I laugh, understanding a lot more than he realizes.

Lori is suddenly there between us, speaking Russian, telling the guy to watch himself.

I'm taken aback, not only because he defended me to his teammate but that he speaks Russian.

We change lines but I'm stuck staring at Lori.

"Nice goal, kid!" Our coach gives me a whack of approval.

I sit down next to Suz and drink some water. As the game starts again, I glance over at their bench next to us. He's still staring. "Did you know Eckelston spoke Russian?" I ask Suz.



“Yeah, Russian, Japanese, German, French. He’s a typical trust fund kid like Brimley. Proper boarding school, Ivy League, and all that.” She huffs for air. “I didn’t know you Canadians had those too.”

“We do.” I sigh, hating how sexy that is. “How mandatory is this dinner?”

“You organized it and Stan would be personally offended if we didn’t go.” She flashes me a sorrowful stare. “Guess we better be nicer to the cute pucks.”

“Yay us,” I groan and drink more water.

Our next shift is no better. I’m trying to mind my own business, skate, steal, and pass, but they have made it their mission to bump, nudge, trip, and grab at Suz and me. We barely touch the puck for the whole four minutes.

The buzzer rings for end of period and I struggle my way back to the bench. Someone smacks me on the butt, which in hockey isn’t weird but it isn’t one of my teammates. It’s one of the big Mike guys I don’t know on the Rangers team. He wasn’t at the wedding. He flashes a grin but I glare, imagining peeling his skin from his body.

The guys laugh as they leave the ice.

Annoyed but counting down the minutes until this humiliation is over, I follow my team to the locker room.

“It smells like balls in here,” Lian gripes when I sit down next to her.

“It’s pretty bad,” I agree.

“I know you thought of it and it’s a fundraiser and just for fun, and we’re making bank for a good cause, but I’m getting annoyed at how much of a joke we are to them,” Lian whispers as she leans back on the bench, stretching out her legs. “Don’t get me wrong, it was brilliant. And the upper crust of this company loves you for it. But I wish we could turn the tables a little.”

“I know.” I have to agree. “This is painful. I hate losing, even when it’s for a good cause.”

“We should swap jerseys, put all our strongest players on one line and surprise them,” Suz interrupts. “My team did that once, it was awesome.”

“It’s genius.” I glance at Allan and Steve. “Suz, didn’t you play goal on your team?” I ask quietly.

“Yeah,” she says back softly. “League record for shutouts. Steve refused to let me. But I brought my gear in case he accidentally got injured.” She stares past me to the hipster with the man bun and beard. I’m shocked he hasn’t got a toque under his helmet.

“He asked me out a few weeks ago,” Lian confesses quietly, dread thick in her voice. “To mess with those Rangers, I could tell him I’ll go out with him if he lets you have goal.”

“And I could switch jerseys with Marshall. He’s got to be close to my size.” I eye up the smaller forward from the second line.

Suz’s lips curl into an evil grin as Lian and I nod, though I have to admit I am getting the best end of this deal. Marshall always smells nice. Wearing his jersey won’t be as bad as Lian having to go out with Steve.

**L**ori  
I'm a ball of nerves between watching the guys who didn't come to the wedding hit on her and everyone else touch her. I wanna break skulls.

Mike Roscoe and I already had words about him touching her ass.

What is wrong with me?

Why is this girl killing me?

Even worse, why can't I get over it? It was a couple of quick fucks.

Maybe I should fuck someone else.

That's what I'll do. Instead of pouting in my apartment over Jenny and the playoffs, I'll spend the weekend getting lit with Carson and fuck shit up.

We line up for the second period and I relax a bit, seeing the older guy as their center. This is their second line, who couldn't beat a team of ten-year-olds, and Jenny isn't on it. The puck drops and before any of us is ready, the center slides the puck to the forward who jumps to life, skating past Matt and Cap. He weaves in and out of our defense, blowing past Brady.

"Get on him!" Cap shouts but there's no chance. Before we catch up, the horn is blowing and the goal is counted. The

forward skates past me, and for a second I swear the face doesn't match the lineup or the jersey.

I do a double take, turning around and watching him skate away.

Fixing my stare on the forward, I skate up to the line to watch the puck drop.

Something's off.

I scan the bench for Red but I can't tell if she's there.

The puck drops and again the center passes to the forward but this time Cap's ready. He steals it from their team and spins, tapping it through the legs of the center who is slow. He smacks the puck and sends it down the line to me. I carve left, flicking it up into the right corner of the goal, but the goalie snatches it out of the air. It's the first move from him we've seen all game.

He hands the puck to the ref and Cap offers me a look, one suggesting he also has no idea what is happening. The goalie seems different and their line is quiet. No joking or teasing.

The face-off is fast again and this time we win the puck. Matt hands it off to Brady who takes a shot. Goalie snaps it out of the air with almost no effort.

The crowd is going nuts. Music is booming. I'm lost.

We skate down—our four minutes is up—switching lines but they don't change.

“That goalie got some lessons in the dressing room.” Brady nudges me and steals my water bottle.

“Something's off. I swear one of them who was a chubby guy is a girl now. But I didn't see any hair so I couldn't tell if it was Red or the little blonde who scored.”

“Yeah, that goalie was holding back,” Cap agrees. “Maybe it's a pro, and they don't have the real name on the jersey. They're messing with us.”

“Permission to engage?” Brady asks smugly.

“No contact, no slap shots.” Cap glances out at the ice. “If they wanna mess around, we can bring the game to them.”

The line changes. The boys come in puffing but successful. Their line scored once.

We jump out and skate into the play. Matt and Cap go for the action. I stay in line with the puck, waiting for the pass.

Matt doesn't pass. He gets a breakaway and skates hard, taking a shot so close to being a slap we all wince, but the goalie snags it like it's nothing. He tosses it into the air and nods at Matt, cocky.

The moment the puck's in play again I get it at the boards, bringing it center, weaving and faking, looking for the pass. Cap's open. I fake and slide it to him. He flicks and the goalie blocks it with his pads. Cap tries for the second shot, but it's deflected again, this time in the direction of one of the other team's players. The little fast guy. He snags it, passing down to another guy who skates hard, crossing center and passing back to the little guy. They play well, faster and sharper than anyone else on the team. They have to be pros. We're being punked.

That chaps my ass. I push myself, flying down the ice as the little guy takes his shot. He fakes and hits it to his teammate who shoots and scores. They jump into each other's arms, hugging and—*they're fucking girls!*

Fuck!

It's Red and Blondie and they've faked us out with a new jersey and line change.

Jenny has her hair pulled so tight against her head you can't see it in the helmet. So does Blondie. She skates past me, flashing a smile and the slightest hint of that red hair.

“That's the girls, isn't it?” Brady growls.

I nod, mouth once again hanging open and total confusion plaguing me.

“Son of a bitch! They stacked their line,” he snarls and turns to line up for the drop.

But this time we're ready for them.

Cap gets the puck at center, passing it hard to Matt, landing it dead middle on the blade of his stick. Matt passes directly to me. I skate hard, handing off to Mike Number One. He passes to Brady who takes the shot. It's a slap. He doesn't hold back at all. The puck flies at net but the goalie is some kind of ninja. He reaches out and blocks, deflecting it off a pad. The puck goes soaring into the boards and is grabbed by their team.

Ref blows the whistle.

"No slap shots! Penalty for the visitors. Who's taking the shot?"

Jenny skates over. "I will."

Brady looks like he might eat her but Cap skates over to give him a talking to. I want to watch Brady have his ass handed to him as he skates to the bench, but my eyes are on Red. If she lands this goal, we're only beating them by one.

She swaps her stick out with the blondie who's goofy handed. Red takes the puck, skates hard, heads directly for the left-hand side of goal. It's a risky move, but she fakes high and shoots low, his weak spot as he catches left. Her goal slides right past his stick and pads, sending the buzzers and horn into the air with "We Will Rock You" by Queen.

Red lifts off her helmet as she skates to the box to take a seat. Her eyes find mine and she flashes that sexy, smug grin. It's the same one she gets after she drums.

The game flies by. Second period is over before we can get a good lead. And in third, we can't score on their goalie, so our defense has to button up and keep the puck in play on their end. Not that it helps us.

The goalie is something from legends. I'm assuming any second the helmet is gonna come off and Carey Price will be there, grinning at us. I swear I saw the butterfly effect a couple of times.

The third period ends and we've beaten them by one goal. The girls fly at the goalie who rips off her helmet and grins.

It's the other blonde. The one who was on Red's line in the beginning.

"Holy fuck, it's a girl," Brady and Mike Number Two say at the same time.

"She might be the second best goalie I've seen in my life," Cap adds with a nod of respect.

The stands are going nuts, cheering louder when they see it's a girl.

"It's time to shake hands. Line up," Cap shouts and skates to start the line.

We file in behind him, all of us stuck staring at the goalie. She and Jenny and the blonde forward made the team.

As we're offering a sincere handshake and greeting to each player, my gaze doesn't leave Jenny. She's sweating up a storm and the pale skin of her face is flushed with color. I remember the last time I saw her skin look like this and fight a groan.

"Keep it in your pants." Matt taps my jaw closed which I hadn't noticed was open.

When she gets to me, she's smirking and I can't fight the grin on my face.

I offer her a, "Good game," but the animalistic stare on both our faces is familiar. We are going to fuck tonight and she might break my dick off. But it'll be worth it.

"You too, Lawrence." She winks and cruises past me, offering Brady what amounts to a slug in the arm. "Coldwell, I felt that ass grab, fucker."

I spin to slug him too but he's busy staring at the goalie, offering a near reverence, "You played well."

"You're an asshole for the slap," she retorts and keeps going like he's nothing.

Brady and I both laugh, and I know for a fact if he wasn't engaged to Nat, he would be offering the goalie the tour of the White House. Particularly the oval office.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



Jenny

“That was some game, girls!” Stan says excitedly from the door as we walk up to his mansion on the Upper East Side in the fading light of sunset and streetlights. He hugs Lian, Suz, and then me, whispering in my ear, “You kicked their asses.”

“Yes, sir,” I say with a laugh. “We had some motivation that first period.”

“Indeed. They were messing around with you. I saw it.” He turns us to face the insane entrance. “Go on inside and get something to eat, you must be starved. And well done on all the arrangements. The food and entertainment are perfect. You are definitely superstars.”

“Thanks, sir,” we say in unison and walk into the house.

“Oh my God, that was amazing.” Sukii hurries to us and takes my hands. “Cap says you switched up your jerseys and changed lines to throw them off.”

“Yeah, it was a dirty trick,” Suz says with too much delight in her voice. “But it might not have been necessary had they not molested us the first period.”

“They made their beds,” Lian adds, still fired up with adrenaline. “I’m gonna go pick the lucky winner who gets to have sex with me later. I think I might fuck that huge Russian asshole.” She winks and walks to the bar, leaving us all giggling.

“Yeah, I think I might be into that too,” Suz glances at one of the servers, a tall girl with a wide smile and eyes that haven’t stopped flickering in Suz’s direction.

“Have fun!” Sukii sings and pulls me to the far side of the great room which is filling up with people. “Cap also mentioned that he didn’t think you and Lori had patched things up.” She inspects me with her dark eyes. “You said you dealt with it.”

“Okay, well, I—lied,” I admit quietly. “I don’t know what to say. I feel awful. He was trying to be nice, and I treated him so coldly and I called him a skin-suit—” I glimpse to the left to see him, Nat, Sami, Brady, and Matt all walk in together. “I panicked and decided to let it sit until the junket and game were off my plate.” I exhale slowly, trying not to stare at the tight tee shirts and fitted jeans. “And now the piper has to be paid.”

“Damn, look at those thighs,” Sukii whispers, joining me in staring until the whole group of them gazes over at us like they’re the Cullen family and this is the Forks High School cafeteria.

I force a smile and a wave as Nat does the same. Sami’s halfhearted smile suggests she knows how poorly I’ve treated Lawrence, making me feel worse. Especially since all I can think about since the game is fucking his brains out. It’s all I’ve thought about for two weeks while I threw myself into my work.

Lawrence nods and walks into the house, not coming in my direction.

“Oh shit, he is pissed at you.”

I press my lips together and try not to sweat, but the more I try to stop it, the worse it gets.

“You’re weirdly sweaty again,” Sukii mutters.

“Yup, take over for me and don’t let anyone notice I’m gone,” I squeak and excuse myself, hurrying to the servants’ bathroom on the main floor, thanking the gods I know about it. When I get in there, I strip to my underwear and bra, waving

my blouse out and airing my skirt. The action of moving around is making it worse so I sit on the toilet in my undergarments and heels and think.

But that doesn't help either so I play on my phone.

I end up on Facebook typing Ben's name in but not finding him. It takes a second for me to remember I blocked him. I almost want to unblock him so I can snoop, but I don't.

Thinking about him again makes me realize the sweating didn't start until Ben. The stress he caused was the beginning of the end for me. Everything was great before that. And now I'm in my boss's bathroom, hiding because of it. I need to stop being a little baby and close this chapter. I need closure so I can stop soaking everything.

My fingers are shaking and my chest is aching, but I decide to take this thing off my to-do list, the easier one weirdly enough. I enter his phone number and wait.

"Hello? Ben here." He sounds professional.

His voice rips at me but I force myself to speak, "Hi."

"Jesus—fuck—Jenny!" he shouts. "Where are you? Are you okay? What happened? No one's returning my calls. Your brother sent me some shitty email, threatening to kill me. None of your friends are returning my calls. What is going on?"

"I saw you," I whisper, ignoring his questions and saying the one thing I need to check him off the list.

"What?" He calms down but doesn't understand what I'm talking about. "Where are you? I'll come meet you. Are you at your place? I can be there in twenty."

The question brings a smile to my lips. He doesn't know I moved. He hasn't gone to my apartment in the three weeks since this ended.

It's a tough lump to swallow but I realize this is over. The closure tastes bitter but it's better than the guilt from saying nothing to him.

“Say hi to Aslin.” I hang up and block his number. Exhaling, I notice the sweating has stopped and I shiver from being cold, but it’s a clearing and freeing feeling to be done with that.

I dress slowly, realizing I didn’t need Ben to know I saw him or that I knew about Aslin. I needed to know if he cared that I was gone without a trace.

And the answer, as much as it hurts my feelings, is the final nail in the coffin. For the first time in weeks, I am genuinely over it.

I take a look in the mirror before opening the bathroom door, meeting my own gaze for the first time in a long time. My lips curl into a grin and I turn the handle, walking out and into a wall. I thump and fall back but he catches me again.

“Easy, Red!” Lawrence laughs and lifts me to my feet.

“What are you doing?” I grunt as I shove him away and straighten my clothes.

“Actually, I was—God, you were right.” He runs his hand through his hair and peers down the hallway as if he might run away. “This is awkward. But I can’t stop thinking about you. You’re killing me. And right now I wish I’d ducked into another room instead of waiting. I mean, you were in there for like ever. And I already feel like a stalker over the whole apartment thing—”

I attack, grabbing his face and kissing to stop him from talking. He’s shocked but kisses back after he mumbles a few words. His hand slides up my back, inside the shirt, massaging roughly as he whispers, “Fuck, I missed you.”

I have a fistful of his hair and my leg up his body and around his butt when I realize where we are. I shove him back and wipe my mouth, huffing my breaths. “We can’t do this.”

“Yes, we fucking can!” he says exasperatedly.

“No, I mean we’re doing this, just not here. I’ll lose my job and, unfortunately, my apartment. The two are tied together.”

“What?” He frowns and parts his lips, about to say something, but he pauses, nodding. “Okay. Let’s go.” He grabs my hand and pulls me around the side to go back to the front room but I pull him back.

“This way.” I drag him through the servants’ entrance to the street and he hurries to a limo, knocking on the window.

“Hey, Charles, can I ask a huge favor?”

“Your place, I presume?” the old driver asks like this is something that happens a lot. I don’t care right now. Not really. Okay, I care a little but I’m way too high to come down yet.

He gets the door for me and I hurry inside before someone sees me leaving early, sitting down as he sits across from me.

The door is barely closed when the car starts moving.

Lawrence stares, trying to catch his breath.

I’m desperate for the moment we’re out of this vehicle.

He keeps swallowing like he might start talking but he doesn’t. And his eyes have that funny innocent and cute look to them.

It’s a tense pause.

His fingers dig into his jeans as if he’s holding himself back.

The car stops and I swear it’s been a lifetime of crazy silence.

He jumps out before the valet can get it and we’re at the Plaza.

This must be where he brings girls.

He grabs my hand and drags me from the car. My legs are seizing from the savage game but I keep up, even in heels.

We race past people who are saying good evening to him but Lawrence ignores them or offers a weird little wave. They all seem to recognize him as he pulls me through the hotel to the elevators. There are other people with us so his fingers

entwine in mine as his thumb massages my palm. My knees almost buckle as memories of that thumb massaging other parts of me find their way to the surface.

We get into a different elevator and as the doors close, he scans a card.

“You keep a room here?” I ask, confused and starting to doubt my decision of coming to his dirty-room sex lair. The limo was weird and kinda gross. This is something else. I’m not sure I’m in for this call-girl-feel type of sex. Not when the hotel staff know who he is. Meaning he’s who I thought he was.

“No.” He scowls. “I live here. My apartment.” He points at the doors as they open to a stunning foyer.

“This is your apartment?” I’ve lost a lot of my sexual desires and am starting to question things. The enormous gallery-style hallway off the elevator makes me laugh. It’s a portrait gallery like in a museum, which suits the decor.

A fluffy black-and-white cat comes running to us, meowing and rubbing against Lawrence’s legs. “Simon, this is Jenny.” He picks up the cat and turns.

“You have a cat?” I ask but recall him mentioning this at some point. The name Simon brings it back. “Right, Simon.”

My legs are moving and my eyes can’t stop scanning what I now think is the entire floor of the hotel. Of the Plaza, of all hotels. “What are you, Chuck Bass?” I spin and take it all in.

“Who?”

“Nothing,” I mumble and walk away, fully snooping. There’s a huge living room that leads to a bar, an actual bar. It flows into a theater or library or both. The entire outer wall of these three rooms is windows overlooking a terrace that has a full view of Central Park. I hurry to the left to find a formal dining room. Which is weird. My grandma is the one person I know with a formal dining room.

That leads to a breakfast room with again, a huge terrace overlooking the city.

The kitchen is the size of my apartment, and I suspect Lawrence has never cooked a meal in his life.

The pantry is weirdly huge and well equipped for a guy who lives alone with his cat. Or is he here alone?

“Where are you going?” He laughs and follows after me.

“What the hell, Lawrence?” I gasp when I enter the gym, a two-room gym. It’s insane. People could pay memberships for it.

The hallway from there leads back to the elevator. “You have wings. An east wing and a north wing and a west wing?” I walk past him and the cat, to the library which brings me to a set of double doors. They lead into a bedroom like I’ve never seen in real life. It’s the size of the living room. It has a full office to one side and a hallway with weird closet doors, reminding me of something from a horror movie but, they’re plush fabric-covered and in a taupe.

“I haven’t redecorated yet. The former owner was a fan of Versailles.” He’s defending himself for the furnishings, but honestly, it’s something out of a castle and I’m kind of digging it. It’s the sort of place you have themed sex wearing a wench costume.

There are his and hers dressing rooms, closets, and bathrooms. “The entire east wing is a master suite?” I laugh and stare at it all, shaking my head in tiny twitches. “Do you live here alone? This is bigger than my elementary school.”

“It was a steal. Some shady European investment banker”—he makes finger quotes—“died and his family was under suspicion for his crimes so they wanted to get rid of it quickly. And it was a cash deal so I got it for a steal.” He puts Simon down and points randomly at the room. “It’s a smart investment and while I’m playing here, it works as a home.” He totally tries to shrug off the billionaire’s apartment.

“A home? How dare you bring me here after seeing my apartment.” I laugh. “I’m glad you didn’t see the last one.”

“I’m not at all interested in your apartment, Ms. Snowden.” He steps forward. “Or mine. I was all for fucking

in Stan's bathroom. You're the one who wanted to leave."

"And the limo? You don't do limo sex?"

"Well, I do but it's Matt's limo and I really like Charles, so I doubt I could have performed in there," he admits casually.

"Matt's limo?" I bite my upper lip to prevent anything else from popping out.

"Yeah, I-I don't have a driver. I prefer to drive myself. In a car. Or truck." He narrows his eyes. "Were you thinking I was going to cheaply bang you in the car and then drop you off? 'Cause that's not what I was thinking. At all."

"Okay," I say with a smile. He moves forward but I put a hand up, realizing this closure thing has to happen because I don't want to have sex and avoid him again afterward. I like him. Even if he lives in a weird apartment castle alone with his cat. "Wait. I need to say something first."

"Noooooo." He moves closer but I move back.

"Seriously. I have to apologize. It was a weird couple of weeks and it's a long story." I laugh nervously. "And I need you to hear it." I don't know if I'm starting in the right spot. "Do you have ice cream?"

"Fuck me, we're really going to talk? My bed is right there."

"I'm going to bet there's ice cream." I ignore him. "You have one of those nice old-lady housekeepers, don't you?" I hurry past him for the kitchen. It takes two tries because I get turned around by the gym.

"Her name's Millie." He follows behind me, grumbling, "There's a Ben and Jerry's collection."

When I find it, I gasp, "Cherry Garcia!" I take it from the freezer and grab a spoon, pulling the lid off and smelling it. "Custard ice cream. God love, Millie." I take a bite and moan. I'm starved after the game. "Anyway, I should start at the beginning. So you know what you're getting yourself into. Not that you want to get into anything—" I stop myself and take a



deep breath. “I just mean I’m not crazy, there’s been some things going on.”

“Well, if we’re going to be lady friends, get me the Tonight Dough and a spoon.” He sighs and sits on a barstool at the marble counter. I grab him the ice cream and a spoon and sit next to him.

“The week before we met, I took my first vacation in five years and went to my dad’s in Halifax. But like I said before, my stepmom is kinda mean, so I came back to New York early and was going to surprise my boyfriend, Ben.”

“Oh shit, I see where this is going.” He takes a big bite.

“I was bringing him a coffee from his favorite café and it started pissing rain. I dropped my house key in the mud and spilled coffee and mud all over me. I was in the middle of fishing the key out of the mud when his work friend, who he swore up and down he didn’t have a thing with, Aslin—”

“That’s a mean-girl name, for sure. Continue.”

“Right, so she comes out of the house and is talking to him about hearing something, and he tells her to come back to bed. They couldn’t see me because of the barbecue, and I was ducked down by the stairs trying to find the key in the puddle.”

“Damn. Did you bust in and beat some asses?”

“No.” I laugh but it’s a bit of a snort, unfortunately. “I actually left and changed everything. Cell number, Facebook, Insta, everything. WI-FI password, iTunes password, Netflix password. Everything.”

“You ghosted him?” He stops eating and stares. I use the stunned pause to hand him the Cherry Garcia and I take the Tonight Dough.

“Yeah. And then Stan called a few hours later wanting me to take his place at the wedding. I said I couldn’t; I had to apartment shop so I would never see Ben again.”

“That’s aggressive,” he says with a chuckle.

“I was raging, Lawrence. And betrayed and irrational. I agree it’s aggressive but it’s where I was, okay?”

“Yes, please continue.” He motions with his hand and the spoon for me to go on.

“Anyway, Stan was so desperate for me to take the wedding invite—and he’s so rich, he doesn’t think like a normal person—he gave me the apartment.” I glance at him. “No offense.”

“Yeah, I’m actually offended.”

“We barely knew each other when you hired movers to unpack me while I slept off the bottle of champagne you sent, so I don’t care.” I take another bite. “Anyway, crazy-rich person Stan tells me he can take care of the apartment and move me while I’m at the wedding, if I agree to take his place. I tried to fight him on it, but he wouldn’t take no for an answer. He was adamant and I was upset. So when I got to Sami’s wedding, I was having a mini meltdown the day we met. In a bad spot, let’s say.”

“And of course, you didn’t tell me this because it’s insane, and we barely knew each other, and you didn’t want to look like a headcase who ghosts dudes and takes bribes to go to celebrity weddings?”

“Asshole!” I hit him lightly with my spoon, leaving a wet bit of ice cream on his cheek.

His eyes flash revenge, but I’m up running and screaming before he can catch me. Except his house is a maze. He vanishes, no longer chasing me.

My heart is racing as I stop in the foyer and spin, trying to gauge where he’ll come from. A creak makes me turn to the left but he isn’t there. I duck into a closet and wait, breathing heavily.

Minutes pass and I don’t know what to do. I can’t hear him moving in the hallway.

After a long silence, I take a deep breath and push the door open, smiling when I see flower petals on the floor from the closet leading down the hall to the right.

My nerves are still on edge, certain it's a trap but the littering of white petals, from what appears to be a rose, leading me toward the bedroom, is worth a trap.

And as much as I want to fight this and be rational, I think he might be worth the insanity of letting go and giving in to my feelings. Feelings I can't recall ever having before.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

**T**hursday, July 6  
Lori

Sitting in the sunny part of the games room at Matt and Sami's place in the city, my mind is stuck replaying the night spent with Jenny. Her laugh and the way she played a sexy version of hide and seek still makes me smile.

For the second time, I fell asleep with her in my bed and woke to her gone. She left a note this time, but it didn't change the casual sex, friends-with-benefits stage we're stuck at. And for the first time in my life that bothers me.

At least she told me about Ben. The guy must be the biggest loser on earth to let her slip through his fingers.

Mike Smolensky comes and sits next to me, interrupting my thoughts with his presence though he sits quietly for a minute, watching me set up the poker game. We've barely seen Mike since his and Liz's wedding and their move to Florida, but he's one of those people who you slip comfortably back into your friendship with.

"Did you hear Laramie's getting traded again? Colorado is sending him to the Oilers."

"No. Damn," I mutter. We don't mention his name loudly in here. Him being the traitor who tried to break things off between Sami and Matt and screwed up their relationship for like a year.

“He’s only a few years in and he’s gone from New York to Colorado and now to Edmonton. That’s a lot of trading in a short career. It suggests he’s problematic.” Mike lifts his brows.

“Can’t imagine the boys in Edmonton are gonna be stoked about that,” I mutter. “I have a couple of friends from BC on the team, and they know the story of him trying to break things off between Sami and Matt.” I lean back and watch for Brady and Matt who are in the other room talking to Sami and Nat. “And while Canadians are nice, they don’t forget something that shitty.”

“Yeah, what happens in the locker room stays in the locker room,” Mike grumbles. “You do not film and leak videos of your teammates getting blow jobs in the shower.”

I change the subject, nervous about bringing up Tandy in this house, “Now that your balls are dangling from Liz’s bracelet, you don’t have to worry about any of that,” I tease.

“Speaking of balls in a knot, you having any luck with that redhead from the wedding?” Mike winks.

“How’s the baby coming along?” I continue, not bothering to answer. I don’t want to jinx anything that’s going on between Jenny and me. Two weeks of nothing terrified me there would never be more. Until last night after the game and her weird story explaining everything, we had fun and the sex blew my mind.

Mike doesn’t take the bait and stays with Jenny as a topic, “That girl can play hockey, huh? All the girls on that beer league team were outstanding. I can’t get over the goalie.”

“No one can. It was pretty crazy. How’s Liz doing?” I try once more, desperate to change the subject before the guys come. Jenny has a way of becoming a hot topic quick, and there’s a solid chance I will never get beyond the friend zone with her.

“I try not to ask her too many questions.” Mike loses the shit-eating grin. “You remember how Sami was?” He lowers his voice, “This is worse, I think. Liz’s been accusing me of

cheating on her because I took too long at the grocery store a couple of times. She tracked me on the iPhone app. It's hell."

"Are you cheating?" I ask flatly.

"No, dick." He scoffs. "Her fucking list of demands from the store is insane. I tried mentioning that my mom writes her grocery list according to the route she takes through the store, instead of how Liz has me running all over hell's half acre. She didn't talk to me for three days. She's mental."

"Okay, so not that I have a lot of experience with pregnant women," I admit comfortably, "but maybe don't recommend anything to her for the next little bit. Just do as you're told. How hard is that?"

He cracks a grin again. "Okay, lover boy. One day when your balls drop and you manage to get someone knocked up, I'll remind you of this advice."

"What advice?" Matt asks as he sits with Brady following behind him.

"Skipper here just told me to do as I'm told and not question or suggest anything to Liz while she's pregnant." Mike nods at me.

"Yeah," Matt agrees, seeming lost on how this is funny. "Question nothing. Offer no advice. Never argue. There's no point. Pregnant women are crazy. They can't help themselves. Totally hormonal."

"Come on, it's not that bad. Sami seemed all right once you guys were patched up." Brady takes the deck and shuffles while we wait for Carson and Cap to arrive for the game. "Though I bet Nat becomes a train wreck when we have kids one day. She has that potential hiding below the surface."

As if on cue, Nat and Sami walk into the games room. "Hey, guys." Sami beams, looking like a breath of summery air. "What are you talking about?"

"Hockey."

"Poker."

"Chips."

“Pregnancy.”

We all answer at the same time and I’m the only idiot who tells the truth.

Sami’s eyes fix on me, narrowing. “Pregnancy, huh?” She ignores the other answers. “What about it?” She sits on Matt’s lap as he shoots me a dirty look.

“How majestic it is.” My answer is shaky and stupid.

“You’re the worst liar, Lori.” Sami steals a chip and eyes Matt. “Were you bitching about me?”

“No,” Matt says with a laugh. “Not a chance. We all know Lori would rat on me in a heartbeat.”

“His bros before hos is broken,” Brady adds.

Under the bus I go.

“I wish.” Sami scoffs. “He’s barely got time to speak to me since he and Jenny started hooking up. I hardly saw him at the wedding.”

“Oh my God, speaking of weddings, can she be your date to mine? She’s so pretty and perfect for the pictures and atmosphere. She’s fun, ya know?” Nat asks excitedly and my insides take a tumble. “She’s so cool.”

“Ours?” Brady offers. “Our wedding? I’m going to be there too.”

“No!” Sami says, scowling, completely ignoring Brady. “We don’t want Lori to actually date Jenny. She’s way cooler than us. I can’t live with that.”

“Yeah, she is,” Brady agrees, going for the low blow.

“We could always call off *our* wedding.” Nat lifts an eyebrow at him.

“Whaaaat?” Brady sings with a high-pitched tone and pulls her into his lap.

Mike rolls his eyes at Matt and Brady.

Fortunately, Carson and Cap come in at the same time, saving us from the awkward public displays of affection from

Brady and Nat.

“I thought we were playing poker.” Carson wrinkles his nose at Sami and Nat.

“We came to show you these.” Sami pulls an iPad from her oversized handbag and taps on it until she’s at a website for some critic I’ve heard her talk about before. She leans across me, wafting her perfume in the air. “Look!” She swipes to a review of the wedding.

“Someone reviewed our wedding?” Matt asks flatly.

“Of course.” she scoffs. “Like twenty someones. People who actually mean something to the bridal and influencer world.”

I lift the iPad and read, “Ms. Ford’s wedding style reminds us all why we got married and has us wishing we could do it all over again with her as our planner. Not only is Sami Ford’s style something to emulate, it will go down in the records as the little black dress of weddings.”

Sami’s smile is so wide her gleaming white teeth are blinding.

“Congratulations, Ms. Ford.”

“Mrs. Brimley,” Matt corrects, folding his arms. “I thought we agreed you were taking my name.”

“I did legally, but I’m not using it for public consumption. My brand is Sami Ford, it’s who I am. I’m not starting over and Brimley doesn’t sound as sharp as Ford. Sami Brimley is lame.”

“Then why take it at all?” Matt’s voice lowers, which for most people would indicate less aggression. But with Matt, it means he’s ready to boil over.

“Oh man, is that the time?” I say awkwardly as I stand and follow Nat out of the room with Carson on my heels.

“Because you made me take it!” Sami snaps back and it’s on.

“Made you?” Matt growls.



“All right, we’ll leave you two to the foreplay. We can play poker another day,” Brady jokes and walks out of the games room with Mike next to him, closing the double doors as Sami shouts something inaudible.

“That was uncomfortable.” Carson sighs. “Why are they still fighting? They’re married now.”

“I honestly think the fighting is worse since they got married,” Nat murmurs. “Maybe after our wedding she’ll chill out.”

“You guys wanna get something to eat?” Brady asks, his eyes darting back to the fight.

“Yeah, I’m starving.” Nat nods.

“Is Millie home?” Mike asks, lifting an eyebrow at me.

“I could be in for one of Millie’s sandwiches,” Brady agrees.

“Yup.” I chuckle. “My house it is then. You coming too, Nat?”

“Yeah, and I’ll text Liz and tell her to meet us there. She was doing a little shopping.” She winks at Mike who laughs.

“Her and the baby clothes. I told her to wait, she’s been pregnant for a minute.” Mike shakes his head as we walk to the elevator.

“She’s excited. Girls get this way about babies,” Nat says it like she isn’t a girl but might be an expert on them. Half the time I’m convinced she might not be, she acts like such a dude.

When we get to the street, Cap pauses. “I’m gonna jet, see you guys later,” he says as he stares at his phone. “I’ll see you guys later,” he repeats himself and smiles like a complete idiot as he strides away before any of us say anything to him. He’s oblivious to us all.

“Damn, the girls who work at that PR company, man.” Brady glances my way. “Magic vag.”

“No.” I refuse to speak to him about it.

We walk through the park, Mike and Brady acting like idiots as if trying to impress Carson who's laughing so hard it drowns out the other New Yorkers.

Nat links her arm in mine. "What is the deal with you and Jenny? Spill."

"I don't know." I glance down at her, noting the wide-eyed stare she's giving me. It's captivating and forces me to continue speaking, "Honestly, I don't. She came over last night —"

"That's why you fled Stan Levisohn's house before the party even started?"

"Yeah." I pause, fighting dread. "First, she called her ex from the bathroom—"

"Ex?" Nat interrupts again.

"It's a whole thing." I take a deep breath and start at the beginning, "She came home early from vacation to surprise her boyfriend, Ben. Some dick she's been seeing for like three years. Caught him—"

"Oh shit, poor Jenny." Nat's genuinely upset, possibly because she's lived this version of hell already with that douche bag William Fairfield.

"Yeah. I guess she went off the deep end. Ghosted him. Cut him off from her in every way she could. Friends. Family. Social media. Netflix. Her lease was up so she was moving apartments and Stan helped her out. He had a spot in his building. Moved her if she agreed to go to the wedding in his place."

"This was the week of the wedding?" Nat stops walking and gives me that soulful stare. The big-sister one she offers me and Rich almost exclusively.

"Yup." I hate where this is headed. I've had this thought already, and getting the speech from someone so common sense as Nat makes it much worse.

"Lori, she's fresh out of a three-year relationship—" She stops as though she's caught herself. "As someone who has

experienced this very thing, my advice is take it crazy slow with her. Unless you want to be the rebound boyfriend who's only there for the short term while she works on forgetting Ben the Asshole." She starts us walking again, not at all giving the advice I'd hoped for.

"I don't know if I'm up for a relationship," I lie, and the worst part is I know it's a lie. I can't stop thinking about her.

"Anyway." She laughs, obviously aware it's a lie. "When are you going to see your grandpa?"

"I'm leaving tomorrow. I want to be sure I'm back in time for the wedding." I nudge her. "I figure ten days before the wedding should be a safe number of days to be home."

"You don't want Sami coming to your grandpa's and dragging you back." Nat laughs. She's surprisingly calm about her wedding, though it's at the end of this month. "For real though, you inviting Jenny to the wedding?"

"That's a big step," I admit carefully.

But the truth is I've been trying to work up the courage to ask her. My best-case scenario is Stan makes her and Sukii come. In fact, I might mention it to him.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

---

CELEBRITIES ARE LIKE FISH, THEY START TO STINK THE  
MINUTE YOU GET THEM HOME

**J**enny  
It's taken me several days but I am back on top of my workload.

All that's left is meeting Liam Farrington at the junket tomorrow and ensuring he plays ball with our plan to save his career. His internet isolation has hopefully worked, and he hasn't seen all the rumors we've been spreading about him. And if he has seen them, I hope he thinks it's tabloid media until I can explain why I did it.

"Hi," Sukii says as she walks into my office with an iced coffee. "I made you something."

"I love you." I take it and stand up from my desk, noting the creak in my hips and knees from sitting far too long.

"You got here at five again this morning? You're back to fourteen-hour days. Things not going well with Lori?" She sips her iced coffee and leans against my small desk.

I don't know how to answer the question so I change the subject back to something safe, "I've used these fourteen hours productively. I messaged Liam's agent, Mia, and organized a meeting for the press junket. She agrees we need a full game plan, so I'll arrive a few hours early at the location where the junket is taking place. I've organized my flights to LA tomorrow and taken care of a driver. And I've figured out which clients Laura will have to take over for me."

"Is she still pissed at you?"

“Kinda. I hoped she would come around to it all. Especially since I saved her ass, but whatever.”

“You saved her and Liam. He isn’t typecast as a bad boy, so the public persona needs to match the roles he plays.”

“Yup.” I take a long sip and sigh.

“You nervous about being his rep or are you cool with it?”

“Nervous.” I don’t bother lying. “As hell.”

“I would be too. I’d be freaking out.” She sips and nods. “And speaking of celebrities, it’s cool you’re avoiding asking me about him. I’ll just skip the bullshit and tell you how things are with Cap. I think I love him. We haven’t been apart once since the wedding. Not one night.” She beams and I want to be happy but the news of his divorce just broke. God knows where his head is or if he’s using her to avoid dealing.

“Hello, Jenny.” Stan pops his head in my office with Liam-friggin’-Farringdon right behind him.

I almost spit my drink but manage to stay cool. “Hello.” I stand tall and put the coffee down.

“You guys want an iced coffee?” Sukii asks as she saunters to the door as if this isn’t a big deal that our boss has caught us sitting around talking about guys like college girls.

“I’d love one, Sukii. Vanilla, thanks,” Stan orders for only himself and Liam doesn’t say anything.

“Mr. Levisohn, what a surprise.” I act as though I don’t recognize Liam, giving Stan a chance to introduce us properly.

“This is Liam Farringdon. Liam, this is my secret weapon, Jenny Snowdon. She’s a wizard.”

When I don’t say anything because my mind is a whirling dervish, Liam does, “Nice to meet you, Miss Snowdon.” He cracks something resembling a half grin and bats his long, inky thick lashes.

Whew, he’s hot in person.

Why do guys always have the good lashes?

Why am I still not talking?

I force myself to speak, “Likewise, Mr. Farrington. Are you in New York on your way to LA for the junket?”

“I am.” His Irish accent is delightful. “I came to meet ya, and thank ya for helping me out of that sticky situation. I just got a call about a new role, and I heard it was you who made sure my name was at the top of their list.” He’s all smiles and manners, and I’m pretty sure this is going awesome.

“Oh, no problem. My pleasure.” That’s a lie.

“Jenny, I asked Liam to sit down and have a chat before the junket tomorrow. But it’s not a great day for me. Do you mind taking Mr. Farrington to dinner for me? I have a reservation already and the car’s waiting downstairs.” Stan’s new life purpose is to abruptly put me in intense spots.

“Of course not.” I force a smile across my lips, though I’d made plans with Lori to have dinner. “I’m starving anyway.”

“You guys have a great meal.” Stan touches my arm. “I’ll get Sukii to email you the details of what I wanted discussed so you have the notes for reference.” He winks and walks away, leaving me alone with a complete stranger.

“So.” I clear my throat and shoulder my purse. “Dinner?”

“Do you mind if we just drive and talk? I’m in a bit of a rush to get to LA and ready myself for the junket.” Liam places a hand on my arm.

“Of course, no problem.” God, I love the accent. “In fact, we don’t have to drive at all. We can ride the elevator to the top floor and sit in a window, have a chat and no one will see us. It’s the private work area.” I point to the ceiling as though he can see what I’m talking about.

His lips lift, flashing those perfect white teeth. “A quiet place no one will see us?” His bright-blue eyes narrow. “No one will take pictures of us? I’ve had enough publicity.”

“I promise.” I almost roll my eyes but fight it. “It takes a lot to impress the people who work here. We’ve met the Dalai Lama.” And now I’m bragging and name dropping. This is

amazing. “He was humble,” the word slips out before I think, and I realize it’s like a shot at him. Am I saying Liam isn’t humble? Why is this happening? Why can’t I be cool?

“Humble?” He laughs. “Are ya mocking me by suggesting I’m not humble?”

“No.” Oh my God.

“You are. That’s cheeky.” He chuckles as we stroll into the elevator.

“Genuinely, I wasn’t. I was just saying he is.”

“Mmmhmm.”

Well, now that that’s cleared up.

I need to staple my lips shut.

I press the button for the floor below the penthouse, our own quiet private work area. It’s the sort of place someone like Liam would want to sit. Rarely is anyone there. And if there are people, they’ll be wearing headphones and be too geeky to recognize the celebrities we work for.

“So,” Liam says, leaning and smiling, and I have a bad feeling he’s hitting on me. In a closed-in space. Does God hate me?

“Yeah, that was some Twitter feed,” I offer casually.

“I don’t want to discuss it.” His eyes meet mine, expressing a seriousness I don’t expect. “I’ve had my hands slapped, my Twitter and internet rights revoked, and have been put on warning with the studio.”

“Right.” I press my lips together.

“Go ahead, laugh.” He waves a hand at me. “I’m a grown man being scolded as if I’m a child.”

“Okay.” Why is this elevator so slow?

“It’s ridiculous.” He folds his arms. “I got drunk and acted like an asshole and said all my inside thoughts outside. I’m not the first person to do it.”

“Let’s go sit and I’ll quickly go over whatever Stan wants me to.” I hurry to a spot in the light, not sunlight but at least the last of the daylight.

He waits for me to sit before he does. The sight of him and the leather chair belongs on the cover of *Vogue*.

I open my phone, peering at the email and cringing inside.

It’s one paragraph and not a good one. “We never told him about the spin, we forced him to take a social media break. Mia wants you to tell him what’s really going on. Everyone likes you. You’re Canadian. Thanks!”

Sighing, I almost close my eyes as dread fills me. I press my lips together, struggling with how to tell him anything.

My insides are raging but I manage to start, “So the whole Twitter thing, we’ve obviously been spinning it.”

“I assumed you would.” He’s flippant now. He changes his moods faster than I do. Extra awesome.

“Right. So in the past few weeks we’ve taken advantage of your aunt’s passing away to offer you a reason for your outburst but also to drive sympathy. Redirect the feelings people have for you, so to speak.”

“What?” A distasteful sneer crosses his lips. “What the hell does that mean?”

I continue, talking faster, “We’ve been saying that the recent divorce and your aunt’s death have made you quite emotional—”

“Ya mean unstable?” He’s seething.

“Emotional,” I repeat. “And we’ve been selling it that you were spending a lot of time with Natasha Wentworth, leaning on her and believing there was something there. But then she slept with the director to win a part in a movie next year. And that’s why you attacked him.”

“You have to be fucking joking?” No one says “fucking” the way the Irish do.



I can't defend this to him. When I created it he wasn't my client. He was a faceless being. I continue quickly, "And you were emotional and feeling stressed and betrayed during this hard time. That's why the outburst on Twitter. The idea is that we've been using any traffic driven to gossip about you to plug the movie, along with any articles about your meltdown. The studio gave you this role to comply, and we will sell it as your big break and hope everyone sees this entire series of events as an emotional betrayal and not a childish outburst."

The scowl on his face suggests I am not nearly as gifted as Stan believes me to be.

"That is disgusting."

"I didn't say it was pretty. Just a spin to save your career."

"How do you people sleep at night?" His accent thickens with the rage. "How can you drag Natasha into this? Holy shit! You're a soulless psychopath. All of you are! This is fucking disgraceful." He stands abruptly and stalks to the elevator, not saying another thing.

"Wait!" I run after him, hating everything about this. "Listen, if you don't go to the junket and play along and behave yourself, you don't get the part. The studio will blackball you, I need you to take this seriously."

"You're disgusting—"

"I'm disgusting?" I step into his personal space and glare up at him. "You publicly accused a man of being a pedo with no proof. That's the worst thing you can accuse someone of, and for what? Because he hurt your feelings?" I point a finger up at him as he looms over me, not backing down to the aggression pouring off me. "He doesn't think you're a good actor so you tried to ruin his whole life?"

His eyes narrow and it's his turn to step closer. He's so close I feel his breath on my face. "I never said pedo. I said he's a pervert and I stand by my accusations."

"Really? You have proof of underage girls?" I'm not backing down.

“You really are sexy when you’re angry.” He changes the subject and moves closer, lowering his face to mine. He kisses me once on the cheek and whispers, “See you tomorrow.” He steps into the elevator and smirks.

I want him dead but I force a smile, certain the combination is terrifying, though he shows no signs of intimidation.

“Fuck!” I shout when the elevator’s gone and he can’t hear me.

No wonder Laura wanted to get rid of him.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

**F**riday July 7  
Lori

The fresh British Columbia air hits hard in the lungs, making me cough a little as I finish the ten-kilometer run through Vancouver's British Properties. The guard at the gates gives me a nod as I walk past him, hands on my hips.

My thigh's better, thankfully, but my head remains clouded with the scent of cherries and the feel of Jenny. I can't shake her and I don't seem to want to. It's new and unsettling. Particularly, since she stood me up last night for work. The girl's a workaholic.

Wiping the sweat from my brow, I walk up the estate to the front door.

"How was your run, Mr. Eckelston?" our butler, Bert, asks as he gets the door for me.

"Mr. Eckelston is my dad, Bert, but the run was good." I slap him on the arm affectionately and cross the vast main floor to the breakfast room and out onto the deck where Grace, our German chef, meets me with a massive glass of water. "Thanks." I take it and drink, loving the sparkling feel of the water. It's so clean and fresh and crisp.

"How was the run, my dear?" Grace asks, not bothering with formalities. She's known me since I was a baby and doesn't bother with titles. Honestly, she doesn't really speak to

the rest of the family, apart from the odd nod. Not that I blame her.

“Good.” I cough again and force a deep sigh. “My lungs are polluted from the city I think.”

“This is a city.” She laughs and takes the glass as I finish, handing me a post-run protein smoothie she has waiting.

“It’s different. Canada has so few people. The city here is like a nature preserve in comparison.” I chuckle and sip the smoothie from the rubber straw Grace insists on buying. She’s got that West Coast recycling program down pat.

“Are you all right?” She rests against the railing and folds her arms. I’ve been home for three hours and she already sees it. “Is it the season ending badly with the team playing so poorly that has you distracted?”

“No.” I scowl, not sure how to explain the Jenny thing.

“Interesting.” Her hawk eyes remain on me, waiting for the answer.

“It’s this girl—woman—Jenny. Actually, you’ve heard me talk about her before.” I laugh and shake my head. “Jennifer Snowden from the women’s hockey team. Won the gold for Canada at the last two Olympics.”

“I don’t recall her,” Grace says slowly, unimpressed by gold medals since she has two herself for winning the Culinary Olympics.

“We met at Sami’s wedding and we didn’t get along at all in the beginning.” I smile recalling her shouting at me. “But then something changed. And now I can’t stop thinking about her. But it’s bad timing for her so she’s not as invested as I seem to be, and I don’t know what to do about it.”

“She’s using you for a physical relationship as you have done to countless other girls?” She lifts an eyebrow. “God is punishing you, Lori, for being such a bad boy.” She laughs wickedly and goes back into the house.

“No, legit there’s a connection. I know she feels it too.” I follow her inside instead of stretching which I’ll regret later.

“We have something, but we haven’t talked much really.”

“You’re a beautiful boy, very handsome and sweet and fit.” It sounds nice but with her accent and the coldness of her demeanor, there’s definitely something bad at the end of this. A “but.” “All girls have an attraction to that, my dear dumb boy. But that doesn’t mean there are feelings attached to it. Does this girl—woman—Jenny, know your heart? I don’t think so. You don’t even know your own heart.”

She starts working as I sit at the counter, my usual hangout when I was a kid to be her recipe tester and listen to her lecture me.

“I remember when you were a boy. You told me you would never marry because a wife was the last thing a man should check off his list of things to do. It was your grandfather speaking, but you were adamant you’d be single your whole life.”

Her words slice into me, as always, as I wait for the point. It will be a doozy, I can already tell.

Her sharp stare flickers to the far side of the room where the dining room overlooks the city and harbor. “No doubt growing up amongst such people, you have no faith in love. You have no belief that relationships work and are worth your time and effort.”

“That’s fair,” I admit hesitantly before taking another long drink, contemplating her words.

“And now ten years later, you have been a coward when it comes to love. Which has always baffled me, as I’ve never seen you be a coward in any single area of your life, apart from that. You see girls for one night and never again. You have your foolish rules.” She stops mixing the bowl in front of her. “Which leads me to believe you don’t understand your own heart. You are still just a boy spouting his bitter grandfather’s words.”

“Ouch.”

“Tough love is good for you. Time to—how does your grandfather say that?” She pauses. “Pop your testicles out and

stop fooling around. You're not a kid anymore, you're a man now. And it's time to start acting like one. When I was twenty-two, I was married, apprenticing under the best chef in all of France, and sending all my money home to take care of my dying mother and help my father and my husband support our families."

"I know, I know, you walked uphill both ways to school," I tease her, hoping we can stop the soul-shredding serious talk.

She picks up and points her glistening chef's knife at me. "You little shit, I did walk uphill both ways."

"Grace, I'm serious. I've broken all my rules for her. And you met Frederick when you were nineteen. You said you knew he was the one the moment you met. So don't talk to me about crazy kids making weird love choices." I point back but with a finger. She's the only one allowed on the business side of the counter where the weapons are.

"Yes, but I didn't have your privilege and ridiculousness." She goes for the low blows again. "I knew a gentle heart and kind eyes were more important than breeding and pocketbooks. Your head is so full of yourself and all the nonsense of this world, there is no room for loving another person. If this Jenny has a good heart and kind eyes, then stop trying to close those eyes with your kisses and distractions. You get to know her and lower your guard. You win her over with everything but the physical, then you come and darken my doorway with your stories of connections and breaking rules." She rolls her eyes and I hate that she has a point.

She always has a lot of points.

"And stop chasing this girl if you have no intention of giving the relationship a chance. She isn't a box to be checked. I suspect your boxes are just a way to want something you can't have, so you will never end up with something you don't want."

"Damn, that was mean. It might have been your meanest yet."

“Good. Now, go and shower before your mother sees you all sweaty. Dinner will be ready in a couple of hours.” She waves me off, dismissing me.

“Love you, Grace.” I smile.

“Love you too.” She nods and I take my smoothie and walk to the stairs to my room in the west wing of the house.

My bedroom hasn’t changed, not that anything in this house changes. It’s a museum to the Piggott dynasty.

I climb into the shower and let the jets beat the hell out of my body, massaging me as my mind whirls with the truths Grace spoke.

I’m not sure she’s right, but there’s a real chance she’s not wrong.

It’s a weird and disturbing realization.

Why am I so fucking nuts about commitment?

The thoughts and insights into my batshit crazy brain stick with me as I walk into the dining room to have dinner with my father and mother.

Dad’s already seated, drinking in silence and staring at the wall. He comes to life as I enter the room. “Lori!” He gets up and hugs me, kissing my cheek affectionately. My dad without my mom is my favorite. We ski and board and drink and he’s a regular guy.

“Hey, Dad.” I hug back and sit.

“Tough luck about the end of the year. You guys played hard,” he says the things dads are supposed to say.

“No, we fell apart. But we’ll get it next year.”

“Well, you played hard, lead scorer in the league. But one man can’t carry the team, and they fell apart. I watched, I saw. Brady and Matt seemed distracted by the drama in their lives and not really into it.” He isn’t completely wrong, but I don’t shit talk my teammates.

“Everyone has good years and bad ones.” I lift the drink that’s waiting for me at my spot. “Where’s Callie and Martin

and the kids?”

“Coming tomorrow. How long are you staying?”

“A couple of days. I’ll go see Grandpa tomorrow for the day. I have Brady and Nat’s wedding coming up, on Martha’s Vineyard.”

“Right of course. That’s a lot of work for you.” He smiles, teasing me about my aversion to staff.

“You know I keep Witchwood fully staffed.”

“How could you not? You’re never there,” he jokes. “Your grandfather uses it more than you do. How was Sami’s wedding?”

“Actually, it was cool. We had fun. You guys missed out. And I met someone. A girl from the island. She played on Team Canada for a couple goes at the gold.”

“A female hockey player?” He lifts an eyebrow. “And her family?”

“Not a clue. We haven’t got there yet.” I don’t want to discuss family.

Dad winks as if this is some gross thing we have in common, banging girls before we know them.

My mother, or rather Mother, enters the room, which buttons my dad right up. He knows his role when she’s around. “Lawrence.” She walks to me, offering a kiss that doesn’t touch my cheek. “How was the flight?” Mother asks on her way to her seat.

“Good. How are things here?”

“Fine.” Her tone is heavy. “Now that the season is over and you’ve had a humiliating loss, are you reconsidering your grandfather’s proposition with the company?”

“No.” I scoff. “Not a chance. Grandpa offers that to me every year to be a dick. He’s not serious. Besides, who quits their career in a low? If I leave the NHL, it will be after a high, the Stanley Cup and the Olympics. And I’m never working for Grandpa.”



Mother presses her lips into something resembling a smile, but there's fury in her eyes. "How are your knees, darling?" Her glare narrows slightly.

"Good. I've been doing some extra physio to keep them going strong."

"It seemed as if they went out in that last game," Dad adds, letting me know he's been watching the games. Something she won't admit to.

"No, just a charley horse. Anyway, you guys were missed at Sami and Matt's wedding." I lift my eyebrows at her, fully aware of who makes decisions such as that.

"Who does Sami Ford think she is?" Mother scoffs. "I understand marrying Matthew Brimley is an ideal arrangement for her family now that he's the controlling heir to the fortune and company, but it was tacky to assume everyone would drop everything and fly to Tennessee of all the places." Mother laughs cruelly. "Just for her wedding? Particularly, after they've had a child out of wedlock."

"Okay, well that's a bit archaic." I hope I don't have to spend the evening arguing with her.

"But speaking of well-connected families, there's a particular young lady we'd like you to meet. She'll be here for dinner tomorrow evening with her family. They're connected to—"

"I was going to visit Grandpa tomorrow."

"Oh, darling, he's coming here. He'll be here for dinner as well. It's nothing extravagant, just a trifling of a dinner party. Callie's coming home with Martin and the kids. Should be lovely." Mother speaks and so it shall be. "You haven't seen your sister or your nieces in ages."

"Quite negligent on your part, Lawrence," Dad teases.

"Right." I lean back as the first course is brought out.

"I've laid out some clothing for you to wear tomorrow." Mother slices into the beets in her salad and points with the

knife and all I see now is Sami. “And I expect you to be on your best behavior.”

“She means you aren’t allowed to seduce the girl and diminish her to another notch on your belt, Son.” Dad winks when Mother isn’t looking at him.

“I most certainly shouldn’t have to say that—to either of you!” Mother snaps and everything Grace said to me in the kitchen makes sense.

“Have you had any word on Sean?” I ask about the one person we never discuss.

Mother flinches at the name and Dad raises his eyebrows as if to warn me with a stare. But it’s her that speaks, “Your brother is gone, Lawrence. I’m sorry but you have to come to terms with it, as we have.”

My blood boils but I maintain my composure, just as I was taught to.

We make it through dinner civilly and I excuse myself, using jet lag as my reason for needing to go to bed right after dessert.

Upstairs in my room, I check my phone but she hasn’t texted.

I lie on the bed and Google her name, thinking Jenny Snowdon will bring up old hockey photos but instead, it brings up something else.

Something that makes my stomach twist.

Sitting up, I click the link of the new headline: Who is Jenny Snowdon, and is She Liam Farrington’s Latest Conquest?

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## **THE END**

The end (of Part One) so stay tuned!

As the cast and crew of the Puck Buddies series is extensive,  
I've had to cut the final story for these guys into two parts.  
Part Two, Baby Daddies, is up next!

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

**ALSO BY**

**ROMANCE**

**by Tara Brown**

**The Serendipity Series**

*Fling Club*

*He Loves You Not*

**The Royals Series**

*A Royal Pain*

*A Royal Affair*

*A Royal Wedding*

**The Puck Buddies Series**

*Puck Buddies*

*Roommates*

*Bed Buddies*

*Girl Next Door*

*Baby Daddies*

***Standalone novels***

*My Side*

*The Long Way Home*

*For Love or Money*

*Lost in La La Land*

**THRILLER/SUSPENSE**

**by Tara Brown**

**Blood and Bone**

*Blood and Bone*

*Sin and Swoon*

*Soul and Blade*

**The Single Lady Spy Series**

*The End of Me*

*The End of Games*

*The End of Tomorrow*

*The End of Lies*

**The Lonely Duet**

*The Lonely*

*LOST BOY*

***Standalone novels***

Ophelia

Castaways

**EROTICA**

**by Sophie Starr**

Sinderella

Beauty's Beast

The Club

**MYSTERY**

**by Meg Browne**

**Crimson Cove Mysteries**

Pretty Girls Die First

The Little Crimson Lies

Third Time's a Charm

Four Crimson Corners

When The Lights Fade

**YA SCIENCE FICTION BOOKS**

**by AE Watson**

**The Born Series**

Born

Born to Fight

Reborn

**The Seventh Day Series**

The Seventh Day

The Last Hour

The Earth's End

**The Last City of Men Series**

Imaginations

Duplicities

Reparations

**Standalone YA Science Fiction**

The Reverse of Everything

**YA FANTASY BOOKS**

**by AE Watson**

**The Roses Series**

Cursed

Bane

Hyde

Witch

Death

Blackwater

Midnight Coven

Redeemers and Betrayers

**The Stones of Amaria**

Sword of Mist

Sword of Stone

**The Light Series**

The Light of the World

The Four Horsemen

The End of Days

**The Blood Trail Chronicles**

Vengeance

Vanquished

Valiant

**Standalone YA Fantasy**

First Kiss

Sunder

In the Fading Light

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

Tara Brown is the international bestselling author of over sixty books. She is represented by Natalie Lakosil from the Bradford Literary Agency and is published traditionally with Montlake Romance and Skyscape Publishing.

<https://www.tarabrownauthor.com>

<http://TaraBrown22.blogspot.com>



[\*OceanofPDF.com\*](http://OceanofPDF.com)