



HOME ICE

A
DENVER
STAMPEDE
NOVELLA

FOR THE HOLIDAYS

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

STEPHANIE KAY

Home Ice for the Holidays

Stephanie Kay

Home Ice for the Holidays

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Home Ice for the Holidays

What if falling for my best friend is the best Christmas present ever?

Harper Cameron's life is a mess. Her temp job just ended and now her boyfriend's dumped her a week and a half before Christmas. In desperate need of cheering up, she heads to a hockey game. The Denver Stampede is the visiting team and her childhood best friend is one of their top defensemen. Their relationship has been strained recently, but when he spots her in the stands and flashes his signature boyish (but does that sound too childish?) grin, her mood instantly lifts.

Connor Horton has everything he's ever wanted---great teammates, awesome condo, and the best friend a guy could ask for. So great that even though he's carried a torch for her since high school, he's never been willing to risk their friendship. When they catch up after the game, he knows he's not ready to let her go, and invites her to come back to Denver with him until the holiday break.

Ten days away from her life in Edmonton is exactly what Harper needs. But ten days in close quarters with Connor stirs up more than she bargained for

and it hits her that she has feelings for her bestie that have nothing to do with friendship. He's always been her rock. Now she's wondering if he could be a whole lot more.

Will this destroy their lifelong friendship or will they finally find their way home to love?

~*~

Please sign up for my newsletter for upcoming releases and exclusive excerpts. You can also email me at stephanie@stephkaybooks.com or find me on Instagram or Facebook. For more information, please visit my website, www.stephkaybooks.com. You can also join my reader group on Facebook, [Stephanie Kay's Sassy Readers](#). We discuss books, romance, dessert, and hockey butts.

Dedication



To finding love with your best friend under the mistletoe!

Acknowledgments



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To my amazing in-laws, thank you for letting me watch your hysterical Italian family for the last 15+ years. I still think about that first Christmas

Eve. After everyone gorged themselves on seafood for dinner, my mother-in-law asked if anyone was hungry, and the family sat down to a lasagna she just had in the fridge and dove in...at eleven p.m.

To my family, for always encouraging me to go after my dreams and for your unwavering support, even if most of you don't read romance novels... I'll forgive you for that last indiscretion.

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And to my readers, thank you for continuing to read my books and fall in love with my characters as much as I have. I hope I make you laugh out loud and follow your heart.

Please sign up for my for upcoming releases and exclusive excerpts. You can also email me at stephanie@stephkaybooks.com or find me on [or](#) [. For more information, please visit my website, . You can also join my reader group on Facebook, . We discuss books, romance, dessert, and hockey butts.](#)

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Chapter 1



HARPER

My life was falling apart, so I decided to go to a hockey game. It was a distraction I desperately needed, but as the music blasted through the arena in Edmonton, nerves filled my belly. I considered getting up and leaving, but then the hockey players flooded the ice for warmups, and I was rooted to my seat. I'd been an Edmonton fan my entire life, but I was also a new Denver Stampede fan thanks to Connor Horton, my childhood best friend, who was currently a top defenseman for the new expansion team.

He shouldn't be the cause of my nerves, but we hadn't spoken to each other too much in the last year, which was weird since we'd been friends for almost twenty years after I'd knocked him on his ass during a game of pond hockey when we were six.

I chuckled. He always said he'd tripped when I reminded him of that.

Ugh. I'd missed him over the last year.

I shook aside those thoughts and focused on the other players firing shots on the goalie to warm up. My family had been season ticket holders at this

arena for as long as I could remember, and we always sat in the lower bowl on the attacking side. My dad swore it was so he could shout “shoot the puck” more often than if we were sitting on the other side.

It also meant that I was currently sitting on the side where the Stampede was warming up, and I’d spotted number twenty-five immediately. I should’ve texted him to say I’d be at the game tonight, but with everything else going on, it’d slipped my mind until right now. I hated that our communication had lagged, and I knew it was my fault.

I was a few rows up, and the fans were filling in, so maybe he wouldn’t see me. Probably should’ve grabbed some food on the concourse, but I’d been conditioned by my father to always watch warmups.

Why did I feel like a total coward right now?

Forty-five minutes later, I’d relaxed in my seat.

Well, as much as anyone could be relaxed at a hockey game—a game where I couldn’t decide who I wanted to win.

That was a lie.

I wanted Connor to win. I would always want Connor’s team to win. But when they’d scored the only goal so far, a few minutes ago, I kept my cheer quiet. Connor had looked so happy on the bench when the goal buzzer had sounded, grinning as he tapped his glove with the guys. It couldn’t have been easy going to a brand-new team this summer after winning the Cup with the Strikers in June.

And I hated that we’d barely talked about it—or anything, really. I’d been so wrapped up with Brian.

Nope. Not tonight. I wasn’t going to think about him, no matter how fresh it all was.

Then the glass rattled in front of my section, and I locked eyes with

Connor. I was seven rows up, and it was only for a second, but his eyes widened, and his lips parted.

And I wiggled my fingers in a small wave.

His mouth quirked up in a grin before he pushed off the Edmonton winger he'd just checked into the boards and got back into play.

And then I started breathing again.

"Timmy's really stepped up with the new team," I heard someone say.

"Edmonton has to win, but love seeing a local kid killing it, you know?" another guy said.

Timmy.

He'd earned that nickname when we were kids. With a last name like Horton and a crazy love for Timbits, it was a given.

I tuned out the guys in front of me and focused on watching Connor and the rest of his teammates.

Walking the concourse during the first intermission, I was trying to decide what comfort food I wanted the most when my phone buzzed in my pocket. Pulling it out, I smiled at the sight of his name on my screen.

Connor: Why didn't you tell me you were coming to the game?

Connor: Is Brian here?

Connor: We're staying over for the night, so let's grab a beer after the game. Your choice.

Connor: Missed you, Harps.

Connor: Gotta get back. Best surprise seeing you in the stands.

I laughed at the influx of messages. He'd always been like that.

Harper: Had to come to watch you play, obviously. And yes, I'm up for a beer after the game. Our usual?

Connor: Perfect. Off to kick the home team's ass. You better cheer for me.

Harper: Always.

I held my phone in my hand for a few minutes and waited for another response, but nothing came through.

Nerves hit my belly again. Beer with my best friend. Totally normal.

Now, I definitely needed a snack.

With five minutes left in the third period, the Stampede were up three to two. It'd been a tight game all night, and butterflies had taken up residence in my stomach for most of it. Every time Connor had ended up at my end of the ice, he'd flash me a smile. He grinned over at me when he'd gotten an assist on the third goal at the end of the second. He seemed so happy to see me, and it made me feel like an awful friend for not keeping in touch like we always had before.

But Brian hadn't liked my friendship with Connor. Said it was weird that my closest friend was a guy. I should've seen that red flag waving from a mile away, but love was stupid like that.

But now that was over, and I was determined to fix my friendship with Connor. Not having him in my life, even if most of the time it was only by phone, was no longer an option.

I hoped Connor felt the same way and that I hadn't pushed him off too much. His texts tonight suggested I hadn't, but I was still on edge. Connor had meant so much to me for most of my life, and I'd stupidly let that slip away for an asshole.

Ugh. That ice cream cookie sandwich I'd inhaled during the second intermission after the poutine I'd polished off during the second period wasn't sitting well.

Dammit. Nerves and comfort food never mixed well for me.

CONNOR

“We going out tonight? Timmy, got any recommendations?” Micah Smith, my defensive partner, asked as we got dressed after the game.

We’d won three to two, and it’d been tight as hell. More importantly, I was still in shock that Harper had been in the stands.

And annoyed that she hadn’t texted to say she was coming. It’d been strange between us since she’d gotten back together with that piece of shit, Brian. I’d thought he was permanently in the past after their last breakup three years ago. Until she brought him around again last year. The asshole was like a rash that never fully went away.

But I’d looked her way more than I should’ve during the game, and no one had taken the seat next to her. Hopefully, that meant no one would get in the way of us hanging out tonight.

“Earth to Timmy,” Micah said, drawing my attention back to him.

Harry Sinclair dropped his arm over Micah’s shoulders. “I’m in for a drink.” Then he waved a finger at me and added, “You’ve got a squirrely little smile going on.”

“Just happy about the win. And I have plans with a friend, so I’ll see you guys tomorrow,” I replied, grabbing my stuff.

“Hey, no recommendations?” Sin called out. “And what kind of friend? A lady friend? You’re moving fast.”

“Ignore him,” Tally, our team captain, shouted as I slipped from the visitor’s locker room.

I could feel the heat on my ears and was grateful that none of my teammates had noticed my blush at Sin’s taunts. Especially Sin himself. The man was a ballbuster by nature, and I would’ve caved like a house of cards in a soft breeze.

Slipping my phone out of my suit pocket, I tapped on Harper's name.

Connor: On my way.

My Uber was ten minutes out, and I could've walked to the bar in less than that, but I liked all my body parts, and Edmonton in December was fucking cold as hell.

Harper: Grabbed you a light beer. It's hockey season.

I chuckled.

Connor: Keep your water and get me a real beer.

Harper: See you soon.

Finding a corner near the arena entrance, I leaned against the wall and kept my head down while I waited for the Uber. I didn't play for the hometown team, but I was an Edmonton boy, so people recognized me. Hopefully, I was tucked away enough that I wouldn't be spotted by fans because I wasn't in the mood to chat with anyone except Harper.

Twenty minutes later, I walked into Smitty's and scanned the crowd. We'd been coming here since we'd turned eighteen. Okay, maybe before we turned eighteen. The food was decent, and the beer was flowing. That was all that mattered.

And there she was. Long, brown hair falling over her shoulders under her Edmonton toque. I'd have to get her a Stampede one. She had on her dad's old Gretzky jersey, but at least it wasn't a current Edmonton player.

She'd need my jersey, too.

Fuck, I was getting ahead of myself. This last year had been off-kilter for us, and I was over it. Not that I'd reached out to her about being in town tonight, but I should've. We'd been friends for too long, and I refused to let Brian win.

And as luck would have it, I didn't spot the dick anywhere. There was,

however, an empty stool next to her, so I slid onto it and turned to face her.

She looked nervous as she met my gaze. Probably biting the inside of her cheek, like she always did when she was reading the room or situation.

Which drew my attention to her lips. Those lips that I had no business thinking about. Lips that I'd spent way too much time fixated on since we'd hit our teens.

I shoved those unwanted thoughts aside and playfully knocked her shoulder.

“How's it going, stranger? Can't believe you didn't tell me you were coming to the game tonight. I'd have gotten you better seats.”

She scoffed, and I chuckled, knowing full well that she had great seats thanks to her family.

“Did you see me kick Edmonton's ass?” I took a long pull from the beer in front of me. She'd grabbed my favorite lager, not the light beer she'd threatened me with.

She grinned and took a sip of her beer. “Pretty sure it was a team effort. But you guys did okay. A few lucky bounces.”

I glared. “Whatever. Remind me to send you some Stampede gear. It'll look much nicer than these Edmonton colors.”

“You bite your tongue, mister. I bleed blue and orange and don't you forget it. But I guess I could get a Horton shirt. You know, since you're from here and everything,” she deadpanned. “Ooh, or maybe I can just grab a Tim Horton shirt.”

“Very funny.”

That twinkle in her soft brown eyes almost did me in, but I wouldn't go there. There was something else in her expression, almost like she was putting on a brave front for some reason.

“So, you good, Harps? It’s been a while.” Fuck it. I hated that we’d been off for the last year, so I was just diving in. My life had been all over the place in the last five months, what with the expansion draft and heading to a new team, but we’d been weird for longer than that.

She ran her hand along the rim of her pint glass, no longer looking at me. “Yeah. Everything’s fine.”

Tapping her hand, I muttered, “Bullshit.”

She sighed. “Never was good at keeping shit from you.”

“That why you’ve avoided me?”

“Not really.” She paused, her eyes meeting mine. “Just having a shit week is all.”

“Brian?” I tried not to bristle at his name.

“I’m not in the mood for I-told-you-so.”

I took a sip of my beer to keep from doing that very thing. I was just happy that the prick appeared to be gone. Hopefully, he’d stay that way.

“Fine. It’s over. And for good this time. I can’t believe I actually moved in with him.” Her voice broke with a sardonic laugh. “Unemployed and homeless. Yea, me.” She lifted her glass to take another gulp of her beer.

“What? Back up. What happened with your job? And why the hell are you homeless?” What the hell was going on?

She bounced her leg, and I almost put my hand down to still it, hating how uncomfortable she looked.

“I mean, I’m not really homeless. My bedroom at my parents’ is always available. Ugh. I’m just annoyed with myself. And I know you don’t want to hear about Brian, but he’s a dick and I’m done with him. But I’d also been living with him after the gallery I worked at closed six months ago. Took a temp job while I was looking for something else, and that just ended. It’s not

all dire, I'm just frustrated that it all came to a head this week." She let out an audible sigh and took another drink. "So, that's it for me. How are you?"

"Nope. We're not done with you," I said, putting my hand over hers on the bartop. "Want me to kick Brian's ass?"

Her laugh was watery as she looked at me, heat staining her cheeks. If there was one thing Harper hated, it was looking like she didn't have complete control over her life. But she knew I was never going to pity her. She'd deck me if she thought I was.

"He's not worth it," she said, keeping her hand under mine.

Something I liked too fucking much. I'd had the hots for Harper since we were teens, but I knew she just wanted to be friends, so I'd kept a tight rope on those feelings. We were better this way.

"Glad you see that. You deserve so much more," I said, ignoring the husky tone in my voice. Clearing my throat, I took a pull from my beer.

She smiled softly, and I ignored the spark in my gut.

"I'm just annoyed that I'm in this situation. Sorry. I just wanted to catch up, to have fun like old times, and I'm turning into such a downer."

"No, you're not. So what's your plan?"

"No idea. Look for a job, obviously, but it's ten days before Christmas and I'm sure no one needs holiday help or anything. Probably move back in with my parents, which sucks. You know I love them, but I don't want to go back there. I'm twenty-three years old, dammit."

"Practically ancient," I said with a grin.

"You're all of three months older than me, old man."

"Move in with me."

The words were out of my mouth before I could think them through.

Chapter 2



HARPER

“What?” Was he serious?
There was a flash of surprise in his eyes, but then he squeezed my hand.

“Come on. It’ll be fun. You need a break from everything.”

“You live in Denver and it’s the middle of hockey season,” I said, trying to wrap my brain around his offer.

“And you have a passport. We have a game in Calgary in two days, then we’re back in Denver until the break. It’s perfect. We can hang out and then we’ll head home for Christmas.”

I eyed him. “This is crazy.”

“No, it’s not. It’ll be fun. My condo has two bedrooms, so you won’t inflict any injuries on me.” He smirked.

I shoved his shoulder. “That was one time, you ass. And we were eight.” I didn’t remember the dream I’d had all these years later, but something had

caused me to kick out—and I’d caught him right in the nuts. The way he’d howled had woken everyone up. “It’s not like I did that on purpose.”

I didn’t miss his slight flinch. Guess that was a core memory, never to be forgotten.

“Come on. You can come to the games and cheer for me. We’re not playing Edmonton again until after the holidays, so your loyalties won’t be challenged.”

“Are you sure?” I asked. It would be nice to get away from everything. A ten-day break from the sad looks that my mom kept giving me about my imploding love life and lack of a job. Definitely wouldn’t mind a break from that.

“Absolutely. You can cook for me.”

I glared. “I’m not cleaning up after you.”

“Hey, I’m not a slob anymore. I’m a grown-up. So, you’re coming, right?” He looked puppy-happy. And he was my best friend.

Almost two weeks of no responsibilities, just hanging out with my bestie and going to hockey games.

“Okay. I’ll come.”

He grinned and tugged me off my bar stool and into a hug.

“You’re going to love Denver,” he said, squeezing me tight.

Dammit, I’d missed him so much.

Fucking Brian.

Three days later, I walked out of the Denver airport and looked for Connor. The team had flown back to Denver from Calgary last night, but the earliest flight I’d been able to get from Calgary had been this morning. He was probably dead-tired since last night’s game had gone to OT before they’d lost in the shootout.

I hated shootouts. With a fiery passion.

A shiny dark green SUV pulled up in front of me, and Connor jumped out, a huge smile on his face.

My heart did a funny little bounce when he hugged me, and I couldn't help but laugh.

"Aren't you tired from that late game and even later flight last night?" I asked when he finally put me down.

My heart was racing. So weird.

"What? Quick flight back, crashed as soon as I got home. I have to get to practice in an hour, so I've been up for a while."

"I could've taken a cab."

He narrowed his eyes at me. "Absolutely not. I had time to pick you up and now I get to show you my place."

"You're like a little kid right now."

"I'm just happy to have you here. It's been ages since we really got to hang out, only us. I missed it."

My entire body warmed. "Me too," I said softly, handing him my bag and climbing into the truck.

Forty-five minutes later, he led me into his condo. The drive had been so easy. We talked about nothing and everything. Well, not about Brian. Just fun stuff, like we hadn't skipped a beat in the last year. I'd been shocked by his offer, but I was already grateful that I'd agreed. The next week would be exactly what I needed.

"Home sweet home," he said, parking my rolling suitcase just inside the door. The building was impressive. Modern and charming mixed together with every amenity imaginable.

"It's pretty sweet," I said, taking in the oversized couch in the living room

and granite-topped island in the nicely sized kitchen. “And the entire team lives in the building?”

“Most of them. Some of the guys are looking for houses, especially if they have families, and we can keep renting or buy the units if we want. It was just nice of the owners to get us all set up here for the season, so we all weren’t looking for places to live when we first arrived. It’s close to everything, so I’ll probably just buy the unit since I signed with the team for three years.”

I hugged him. “I’m so proud of you, Con.”

He squeezed back. “Thanks. You know I loved being with the Strikers, but I’m already loving Denver and the guys. It’s a fun team and the fact that we all started together is special.”

“How’s everyone adjusting to the new team?” I asked.

“Some of the guys still have big chips on their shoulders for not being protected in the draft, but I signed with the Stampede in the offseason, so I’m just happy to be playing.”

“Always looking at the bright side,” I replied, keeping my tone steady. Connor had always been like this, so I wasn’t surprised. I wasn’t bitter or jealous of his outlook on life—okay, maybe a little jealous at this moment. But I was blaming the current shit show waiting for me back home.

“I’m sorry, Harps,” he said almost sheepishly as he stepped back.

“Nah, I’m just tired of the funk I’ve been in. Now, show me my new bedroom and then I can make us lunch before you have to go.”

“Sounds like a plan.” He grinned again. “I’m so happy you’re here.”

“Me too.” I smiled back and followed him down the hall to my new room.

“Smells awesome,” Connor said the next morning as I plated the veggie omelets I’d just finished to go along with the stack of French toast. It was all about balance.

“Bout time you woke up,” I said, lifting my head toward the kitchen island—and swallowing my tongue.

Good grief, warn a girl. It wasn't like I didn't know that my best friend was hot, but in low-slung sweatpants, as he rubbed a towel through his damp reddish-brown hair, with his perfect abs on display? I'd been caught off guard.

“What are you talking about? I've been up for ages. Got in a quick run and showered all while you were snoring,” he teased.

“I don't snore,” I sputtered, reaching for my coffee. I needed caffeine, pronto.

He stepped next to me, reaching around to grab the cup I'd poured for him. His arm brushed my upper back, and a shiver rocked through me.

What the hell.

I quickly shifted away. Why was his nearness so overpowering right now? It was because my head was a jumbled mess—obviously.

“What are you wearing?” he asked, his eyes locked on me, his fork hovering over the plate he'd just loaded up.

“What?” Looking down, I plucked at the oversized shirt I'd snagged from his room back when we were in high school. It was an old hockey shirt with his name on it from when he played in juniors.

Then I met his gaze again. There was something intense in his eyes, and it stole my breath.

“I love this shirt, and you can't have it back. It's so soft.” Thankfully, I'd slipped on a bra before leaving my room this morning because right now, my traitorous nipples were pointing right at him.

Fucking hell.

CONNOR

She was trying to kill me. I wasn't going to survive her walking around, my name on her shoulders, in a shirt so threadbare that if she hadn't had a bra on, I'd be able to see exactly what color her nipples were.

Fuck. My. Life.

Get control of yourself, man.

This was Harper. My best friend. I needed to get my shit together, and ogling her was not helping anyone. The last thing I wanted was to make this awkward, so I quickly skirted around the island and took a seat, willing my annoying cock to calm down.

“So, what're your plans today?” *Sound normal. And don't think about wanting to strip that shirt off her over breakfast.*

She peered at me over her coffee cup as she leaned against the counter next to the stove. Her hair was up in a messy bun, with a few strands brushing her cheeks.

My stupid fingers itched, and I'd never wanted to be a piece of hair that much in my life.

Fuuuuuuck. What the hell was my problem, and how was I not going to give myself away over the next week?

“No clue. Read. Take a walk. Figure out what the hell I'm going to do with my life,” she said, her frustration spilling out at the last part.

I shoved aside my unwelcome thoughts and focused on being the friend I should be.

“Harps. You're taking a break. A vacation. We'll figure everything out but give yourself some grace. I mean, at least for a few days.”

A smile teased her lips as she set her coffee cup down on the island. “I know, and I can't thank you enough for letting me crash here until

Christmas.”

“Stop it. You’re my best friend and we haven’t spent enough time together in I can’t even remember how long. I’m beyond happy that you’re here. Now, load up your plate and come sit down.”

“You’ll tell me if I’m cramping your style, right? Or if you have a style to cramp right now?”

I glared at her. “Very funny.”

She grinned. “So, are you dating anyone or anything?” she said as she slid her plate across the island and took the seat next to me.

“Nope. No dates. Well, except for one tomorrow, but it’s not like a real date. Just from the auction.” One that I wasn’t looking forward to, but it was for the team.

She swiveled toward me. “Auction? What auction?”

“This team thing. They did a player auction about a week ago for winter dates and activities. The money raised went to the team foundation.”

She giggled. “Please tell me you had to walk down a runway.”

I groaned at the memory. “Yeah, let’s not even go there. I was so awkward, but it’s for a good cause. At least that’s what I keep telling myself.”

“And who won you?” she asked, her chin propped up on her hand as she smirked.

“A woman, maybe a decade older than me. Seemed nice. We’re going to see the winter lights at the zoo. You know I’m a sucker for those,” I said.

“Ooh. Maybe she’ll get handsy in the dark,” she teased.

“Not funny. And maybe I’ll just tell her I have a girlfriend at home. Or better yet, I’ll just bring you with me too.”

She laughed. “And I’m your girlfriend in this scenario?”

I shrugged, trying not to think about what it would be like to date Harper. It

was something I'd thought about many times already.

"Well, you are a girl and my friend."

"Well, if you need backup, just give me a call," she said, patting my chest.

My bare chest.

Heat barreled through me at her touch, and I tamped down a shudder, refusing to imagine her hands all over the rest of my body.

She pulled her hand back, and I instantly missed it.

Best. Friend.

Best. Friend.

Dammit.

"Yep. Will do," I said, giving her a salute.

She quirked her brow. I hated being awkward around her, so I turned my attention back to my plate and focused on eating the rest of my breakfast.

And not the little sounds she made as she ate her French toast. Or how her tongue poked out to get the last bit of syrup on the corner of her mouth.

I gulped down my coffee and stood up, scooting around the island and away from her so she wouldn't see just how much she affected me.

Damn sweatpants.

"You okay?" she asked.

Clearly, my escape attempt hadn't been subtle, and I hoped like hell that I wasn't blushing.

"What? Yeah. Totally fine. Just getting another piece of this awesome French toast," I said, grabbing a slice from the stack.

She quirked a brow. "Okay."

"You're coming to the game tonight, right?" I asked.

"Of course. I hope my seat's decent."

I glared at her, loving when she laughed back at me. Tension averted.

She stood up and walked over to me before nudging her shoulder into my arm. “I seriously can’t wait. The new arena looks sweet and I have a brand-new jersey to wear. I hope you kick Pittsburgh’s ass tonight.”

“We’ll do our best.”

I couldn’t wait to see her in my jersey.

I truly was a glutton for punishment.

“That gorgeous woman wearing your jersey is back, Timmy. She was in Calgary, too. She following you?” Sin asked with a smirk as we slid on the bench for the start of the second period against Pittsburgh.

“That’s Timmy’s new roommate,” Micah announced from the other side of me.

Sin tilted his head at me. “Roomie, huh? Details, man. I need details.”

“How about we focus on the game,” Tally said. “And Timmy can fill us in after we win tonight.”

I gave Tally a small nod. “Thanks, Cap.”

“Nope. I can multitask like a champ. See, I’m watching a sloppy pass from Pittsburgh that Dom just missed. Come on, Dom,” Sin called out. “Now spill, Timmy.”

“It’s just Harper. She’s been my best friend since we were kids. We caught up after the Edmonton game and she wanted a break from home, so I told her to come stay with me until Christmas. That’s all,” I rushed out, my eyes locked on the ice.

Okay, maybe they drifted to the corner where I knew Harper was sitting.

Fuck. She looked good in her Stampede toque and my jersey. And then I was remembering her flashing me her blinding smile earlier during warmups. Damn, I loved having her at my games.

“Interesting. Very interesting,” Sin said. I imagined him stroking his chin

like he had a fake villain beard or something. But again, I wasn't looking at him, because I was solely focused on hockey.

Tally chuckled. "Shut up, Sin." Then he tapped his glove against his stick. "All right, boys, let's get out there and win. Sin can pump Timmy for info at Tippy."

I bit back my groan as I got ready to hit the ice for my shift.

Couldn't wait.

Maybe she'd want to skip the bar tonight.

Three hours later, we were walking into the Tippy Steer. We'd lost to Pittsburgh, four to two, and part of me had wanted to go home, but the team always met up after the game at Tippy, and Harper had wanted to see our local hangout.

I didn't miss the glee in Sin's eyes as we walked over to the guys. Fuck. I knew what was going to happen. He was going to try to get embarrassing stories out of Harper, and she was only a vault when she wanted to be. Hell, we'd spent our entire lives teasing each other, when it came down to it.

"What would you like to drink and what extra awful stories do you have about our dear sweet Timmy?" Sin asked before I could even make it to the bartender.

"I don't know what you're talking about, and I'll take a lager on tap," she said with a twinkle in her eyes that made me groan.

Damn, I'd missed her.

Chapter 3



HARPER

I took the pint glass Sin handed me and had a sip. Connor knew I wouldn't spill all his secrets, but making him squirm had been on my to-do list since we were kids.

"Let's see," I started after I set the glass down.

"Harps," Connor muttered.

It was almost a growl, and I was not okay with what that sound did to my body.

I flashed him a grin. *Friend. Best Friend.*

"Well, there was the time that. Wait. No, maybe when he..." I paused and tapped my finger on my chin. "Or that time with the cow..." I trailed off, biting back the urge to laugh at how Connor's teammates all waited with bated breath for juicy details.

Micah barked out a laugh. "A cow?"

"There was no cow." Connor pouted, folding his arms over his chest. When had it gotten so impressive?

I burst out laughing. “I’m just teasing. Connor was always a good guy. Follows the rules. Nothing crazy. I promise.”

“Damn, you really had me for a minute,” Sin said, knocking his beer bottle against my glass.

“I try.” I flashed Connor a smirk. Thankfully, they didn’t pry for more information. Connor might just out me about that stupid cow to get back at me.

“So, how long have you been friends?” Tally asked.

“Since I kicked his ass at pond hockey when we were six. Knocked him right down,” I said as Connor narrowed his eyes at me. I shrugged and took another sip of my beer.

“I still say you tripped me,” he grumbled.

I gasped. “I would never.” I knocked my shoulder into his chest, and heat fired through my body.

What was my problem lately?

For the next hour, we hung out at the bar. Tally and his girlfriend, Cora, bailed after one drink, which was apparently their norm lately, and Connor never left my side. He probably didn’t want me to share any other embarrassing stories if he stepped away.

But his presence at my back and his heat against my side were doing a number on my brain—and the rest of me. I knew I was in a sad place right now, and spending time with Connor was exactly what I needed, but he could never be my rebound.

I refused to wreck our friendship like that.

And it would wreck it. Connor had always been a constant in my life, and even with our lack of communication in the last year, I knew he would be there if I ever needed him.

Case in point—right now. He'd welcomed me into his home without a second thought and without judgment. He hadn't given me grief for going back to Brian a second time. He was the best friend I needed, and I was not going to mess that up just because he looked stupidly hot on the ice. Or in sweatpants. And don't even get me started on his game-day suit.

Fucking hell.

I squeezed my thighs and took in a steady breath.

"Ready to get out of here?"

I jumped a little in my seat and he chuckled.

"You forget I was standing here?" he asked, his breath washing over my cheek as he leaned closer.

"Nope. Didn't forget." Fuck. That sounded raspy. I grabbed my glass to take a sip and recenter myself, but the damn thing was empty.

"Yeah, I'm pretty tired and ready for bed."

"Oh. Okay. Yeah."

Did he sound a little off?

No. I was off.

"We're heading out," Connor said to Micah and Dom, who'd been chatting with us. Other guys had trickled out already.

"See you at practice tomorrow," Micah said. He raised his nearly empty glass in my direction. "And we'll see you at the next game."

"Yep, I'll be there," I said with a smile.

The car ride to the condo was short and quiet. I'd Ubered to the game, so Connor was driving us home.

"Well, good night, Con," I said after we walked into his condo. "I had a great time tonight. I mean, aside from the loss, of course."

His lips tilted up in a half-smile. "Good night, Harps. I'm glad you were in

the stands. And yeah, tonight was fun. Thanks for not sharing any truly embarrassing stories about me with the guys.”

It should not be adorable how his cheeks flushed.

I leaned against the kitchen island. “Please. What would I have told them? You’ve always been a good guy. Nothing wild and crazy or stupid. Hell, I was the crazy one between us.”

He chuckled. “Yeah, pretty sure you’re the one who tried to tip the cow and ended up on your ass in a cow patty.”

I grimaced. That smell never left my memories. I’d even gotten it in my hair. I bit back my shudder. “And you snuck me back to your house, cleaned me up, and got me back home before anyone knew I was gone. That’s probably how I ended up with one of your shirts.”

He smiled. “Always stealing my stuff, apparently.”

“Your clothes are soft and comfy. I fully plan to leave here with a new wardrobe.”

He walked a little too close to me as he moved toward the fridge, and my nerves sputtered.

Dammit.

These feelings were welcome and unwelcome at the same time, and I needed to escape to my room.

“Anyway, I’m going to bed. G’night, Con,” I said, grabbing the bottle of water he held out to me.

“Night, Harps,” he said as I walked into my room, shutting the door behind me.

I just needed a good night’s sleep, and I’d be fine in the morning. Hockey always riled me up.

“Shit.” I gasped as I collided with Connor’s chest—*his bare fucking chest*

again—the next morning. His hands gripped my biceps, and my entire body lit up like a damn Christmas tree. I was wearing my favorite threadbare shirt of his, and it offered no protection against the heat of his skin. Yeah, I definitely should've slipped on a bra again before I walked out of my room, but I was still overtired after last night.

“You need a Christmas tree,” I blurted out, trying to not think about him touching me. Then my gaze drifted lower.

Ah, fuck.

“What?” he asked, but it sounded garbled in my brain because all I could see was that he was only wearing a towel.

A towel that looked a little loose.

“Fuck,” he barked, releasing me to grab the towel and hold it in place.

I dragged my gaze up his body. Droplets of water slowly moved down his abs—all eight of them—and his forearm flexed while holding that towel tightly against his hips. His nipples were tight, his shoulders were endless, and I tried to find words, but whatever sound emerged from me just made his eyes widen and my cheeks heat.

I internally shook my head, trying to gain control over whatever the fuck was going on in my brain.

“Um. Sorry. Yeah. I,” I started.

“Still getting used to having a roommate,” he interjected, giving me a half-smile that was not helping my nerves.

At. All.

“Didn't think you'd be up this early. I'll get out of your way. Maybe we can go for breakfast or something,” he rambled.

“Yeah. Sure.”

I couldn't get into the bathroom and shut the door between us fast enough.

Slumping against the door, I took a deep breath, hating how tense and antsy I was around him. The frustrating need and these new feelings building up in my body were driving me crazy, and I had to find a way to relieve the pressure.

Connor could never be my rebound. I loved him too much for that.

I repeated that new mantra over and over again.

CONNOR

I smiled and listened to Harper talk about how much fun she had last night and how happy she was to see me with my new team while we ate our omelets two hours later. We'd decided to eat in since her omelets were the fluffiest I'd ever had. And not once did I think about how her nipples felt pebbled against my chest or how her indrawn breath felt against my throat.

Not once.

Okay, maybe a hundred times nonstop since I'd gripped my towel with every ounce of strength I had and ducked into my bedroom. Where I'd dropped my towel and glared at my hard cock in the mirror while I could hear the shower running. I'd even fucking muttered at my wayward appendage.

Fucking hell. The thoughts went through my head, knowing she was steps away in the shower, naked. Wet.

FUCK.

"Con? You all right?" she asked, pulling me from my spiral. My wet, naked Harper spiral.

Get a damn grip, idiot.

"What? Yeah, I'm fine." I shoveled some omelet into my mouth.

She quirked her brow at me. Damn. She had me on edge.

“So, should we go look at trees today? I don’t have practice, and I have plenty of time before my auction date thing tonight,” I said, trying to get out of my head.

“Trees?”

“You mentioned I needed a Christmas tree this morning. When you bumped into me,” I said, cursing myself for putting my brain right back into the gutter.

But her cheeks turned pink, and I stupidly wondered if her thoughts were in the same place.

No. Stop thinking about her that way.

I’d been firmly in the friend zone since day one and it worked for us. Not that I hadn’t wanted more for longer than I could remember, but I wasn’t going to wreck this. Especially when she was finally back in my life.

I truly hadn’t realized how much I’d missed talking to her regularly until I spotted her at the Edmonton game.

“Oh, right. Yeah, you need a Christmas tree. Maybe just a small one or something,” she said.

I shrugged. “Sure, we can get one. I hadn’t planned on doing anything because it’s just me and I won’t be here on Christmas Day.”

She smiled. “We’ll get a small one and all the trimmings. It’ll be fun.”

“We should get a fake one. Then I can use it again next year.” I waited as her mouth parted.

“Fake? Absolutely not. You can only get a real tree.” She visibly shuddered. “Fake. Humph. We do not do fake trees, mister.”

I chuckled. If she’d been standing, her hands would have been on her hips as she glared at me. Harper was a Christmas fanatic. One year, I’d suggested

she get a fake tree and just hang a pine-scented car air freshener from the branches. She'd been outraged.

"You are a Christmas disgrace. Just for that, we're getting a big tree. Huge," she boasted, holding her arms out as wide as she could.

"Excessive, maybe?"

"Never. Now, finish up so we can go buy all the things." She grinned as she scooted her chair back to stand.

Happiness bloomed in my chest at her excitement. Making Harper smile was one of my favorite things to do. I hated seeing her sad or upset. I'd buy all the decorations just to help her get her mind off everything back in Edmonton. It was a small price to pay.

I set the last bag down on top of our stash later that afternoon. "I think that's everything."

She chuckled. "Maybe we went a little overboard."

"Just a little," I deadpanned, looking at my overflowing living room. I'd already set up the supersized tree in the corner; its branches brushed against my recliner that Harper had shoved against the couch to make room for the "perfect" tree.

I bit back a chuckle. Tree shopping with her had been more fun than I wanted to admit. I mean, it's not that I didn't like the holidays or anything, but I was on the road so much and, with going home for Christmas, it hadn't crossed my mind to decorate at all.

"I hope we have enough lights," she said, her arms full of boxes of multicolored lights. Plain white lights weren't allowed. It was something we'd both agreed on.

"I think we cleaned out the store, Harps," I teased, pulling out containers of ornaments from our shopping bags. We'd found a few hockey- and skating-

themed ones that Harper demanded we buy.

“Whatever. The tree needed this many,” she said, dumping all but one of the boxes onto my recliner.

I grinned and bopped her on the nose with one of the boxes. “Whatever you say, boss.”

She shook her head. “Don’t be annoying and get to work sorting what we have. It’s a good thing you’re tall. This tree looked smaller in the lot.”

“They always do. I tried to tell you.”

“It’s perfect. I just wish we could decorate it now, but the branches need to settle a bit and you have your date to get ready for.”

“I’d forgotten about that. We can sort and then I’ll get ready. Maybe we can decorate tonight when I get back,” I said, not missing the quick flash of disappointment in her eyes at the reminder of my date.

Or maybe I’d just imagined it.

“You’re good on your own tonight, Harps?”

“What? Yes, of course. Ordering takeout and making a popcorn and cranberry garland while I watch *White Christmas*. Perfect night.”

“Dammit. That does sound perfect. Save me some popcorn and maybe we can watch *Rudolph* while we decorate.”

She chuckled. “Of course you want to watch *Rudolph*. How many times have you watched it this month?”

“Maybe one or two. And shut up, it’s a classic,” I said, lightly shoving her arm.

And trying not to acknowledge the sparks that shot through me every time I touched her.

I needed a night out of this condo to clear my head, even if it was only for a few hours.

But I also wished I didn't have to go tonight. I just wanted to hang out and decorate with Harper.

Inviting her to stay with me was both amazing and torturous.

I took a step back. "I'm just going to go jump in the shower and get ready. I think I got sap on me from that damn tree."

"Oh, yeah, sure," she said before she turned her attention toward the ornaments on the floor.

I headed down the hall to my room, frustrated with where my brain was always going the last few days. I'd had feelings for Harper for a long time, but I'd come to terms with the fact that they would always be one-sided.

Why was I having such trouble dealing with them now?

Chapter 4



HARPER

“S hit,” I muttered, sticking my finger into my mouth. I’d pricked it yet again with the needle I was using to thread my popcorn and cranberry garland. I should be in full holiday mode. Bing Crosby was crooning on the screen, and I had ornaments and lights scattered all around me, but my mind kept wandering.

To Connor.

To where it had no business going.

I mean, hell, he’d walked out of his bedroom a few hours ago looking way too hot for my brain to deal with. Dark wash jeans were molded to his ridiculous thighs, and a slightly fitted, deep green Henley that made his eyes pop stretched across his shoulders. He’d lifted his hand to run his fingers through his ginger hair, and I’d been fucking jealous of his damn fingers.

“Dammit,” I grumbled.

And now he was on a date. And maybe she was nice and stunning, and they had a lot in common, and his charity date was turning into a real date. While I

was sitting here feeling sorry for myself and stabbing my fingers to death.

Of course, it hadn't helped that my mom had texted to see how everything was going and to make sure I was okay because she'd seen Brian out with some other girl yesterday when she'd grabbed takeout.

I was in a funk and needed to get out of it. I pulled my finger out of my mouth and assessed the damage. That had been my third stabbing of the night.

Grabbing a beer from the fridge, I popped the top and took a healthy gulp, then made a tiny charcuterie plate. Grapes, cheese, crackers. Couldn't go wrong with that combo. Heading back into the living room, I sat my ass down and focused on my beer, my snacks, and Bing.

I'd finished my snack and *White Christmas* when the front door opened and Connor walked in.

"Hey, you're back early," I said.

He shrugged. "Saw the lights. Had some hot chocolate. And now I'm home."

"Thought maybe you'd go out after. Grab a drink if it was going well," I said, hating the edge in my voice.

I was not jealous. Nope. Not at all.

He sighed. "It wasn't a real date, Harps. Plus, she had to get Brandon home for bedtime."

"Brandon?"

"Yeah. I forgot that she was bringing her son with her. He's a huge hockey fan. Hanging out with me was his Christmas gift. Pretty cool, right? I mean, I had to win him over to the Stampede since he's a Colorado Springs fan, but I think I got him. The lights were awesome. We should go before we head home next week."

“Oh. So it really wasn’t a date?” I asked.

Why did I sound breathy?

“You knew it wasn’t. It was for the foundation,” he said, walking toward me.

I swallowed hard. Dammit. He looked stupidly handsome.

“If I didn’t know better, I’d think you were jealous,” he said, quirking a brow.

I could feel my breath catch in my throat, but I waved my hand, playing off his comment. “Jealous? I’m not jealous.”

He laughed softly. “Of course you aren’t.”

He turned to look at the TV. The credits were rolling.

“I see I missed *White Christmas*. You still up to decorate and watch *Rudolph*?”

“Uh, sure.”

He faced me again, and I swore he could see right through me.

“You okay?” he asked.

“Yeah. Just a bit tired. And had some blood loss.” I held up my finger.

He took hold of my hand, and I barely managed to not choke on air.

Control yourself right now, dammit.

“You are terrible with garlands. I should’ve done it. I have excellent hand-eye coordination,” he said, a small smirk on his lips.

I pulled my hand from his. “Shut up. My hand-eye skills are superb. I bet I could still score on you if we were out on the ice.”

He grinned. “Probably. I bet you’re still fast as hell on skates.”

“Damn right,” I said, poking him in the chest.

Touching him again.

“Okay, let’s decorate,” I said, changing the subject.

“I’ll take that,” he said, grabbing the garland and bowl of popcorn before I could.

“Hey, I was going to finish that.”

He tilted his head. “Nope. What kind of friend would I be if I let you continue to stab yourself?”

I rolled my eyes. “Very funny.” But I was grateful for the friend reminder.

I clearly needed that.

“Don’t knock me on my ass, okay?” Connor said a few days later as we took the ice for the Stampede family skate.

Tomorrow night, they were playing Carolina, and then the next day, we were heading back to Edmonton. It’d been just over a week since I’d showed up at Connor’s game in Edmonton, and I hated that it was almost over.

I’d easily set reality aside to just enjoy myself, and I was not looking forward to moving back into my parents’ house while I job-hunted again.

“You okay?” Connor asked, interrupting my pity party.

He looked adorable in his reindeer sweater, his Stampede toque covering his always-mussed hair. I’d dared him to wear the sweater, but he only agreed once I put on my matching one. His mom had given them to us a few years ago, and I couldn’t begin to explain why I’d put it in my suitcase before leaving Edmonton.

“Yeah, yeah. Shall we race?” I asked.

Micah skated up next to us. “Did I hear you mention a race? A little friendly competition? I like it.” Then he smirked at Connor. “And, uh, nice sweater, Timmy.”

“It’s not a competition when she always beats me,” Connor said, plucking his sweater away from his chest. “And she forced me to wear this. I’m humoring her.”

Micah smirked. “You’re going to be humoring a lot of the guys, too.”

“Whatever. It’s the holidays. And I’m very secure in my festive sweater,” he boasted.

I loved how he never changed. He was living his dream, playing in the NHL, and his ego was as nonexistent as it was when we were kids. It was endearing and sexy at the same time.

Nope. I was not going there again.

The last few days had flown by but had also been more torturous than I’d imagined they would be since I was constantly biting my tongue, trying to ignore my attraction to my best friend.

Hell, I’d almost kissed him when we’d gotten tangled up in the lights and garland while we dressed the tree the other night.

He’d laughed and ducked away, but I’d sworn there was a moment where I thought he was leaning in.

Everything in me had wanted him to lean in.

CONNOR

“Come on,” Micah yelled next to me on the bench the following night as our guys on the ice tried to clear the puck from our zone.

“Fuck. Fucking sloppy, Fishy,” Tally muttered. Josh Fisher, one of our defensemen, missed the pass, and a Carolina forward grabbed it, keeping it in our zone.

We were losing four to two against Carolina in the middle of the third period and morale was down. We’d barely squeaked out a win against New Jersey in overtime the other night, and after the loss last week against Pittsburgh, losing tonight was not how any of us wanted to go into the holiday break.

“Fuck,” Coach Millsy barked when the goal buzzer blared.

I bounced my leg in frustration. Now, we needed three goals in the next six minutes to tie this up. Not an impossible task, but with the way we were going, it was definitely improbable.

But I refused to give up. I slid down the bench a short time later, getting ready for my next shift with Micah. At least I could do my best to make sure Carolina didn't score again when I was out there.

“No more goals for them,” Micah said, tapping his stick against mine as we took the ice.

“No shit,” I called back, skating into the fray. I made myself a nuisance to the Carolina forward in front of me, shifting when he shifted, and keeping him from being open for a pass from his teammate.

Tally grabbed the puck from the bad Carolina pass and worked up the ice with Sin and Santa. They were gelling as our top line, and I hoped it continued that way. Micah and I hovered near the center line, and our forwards inched closer to Carolina's goalie. And as the puck dinged off the pipes from Sin's missed shot, I was ready to go when one of the Carolina forwards snagged the rebound.

Dammit.

Then, it was back in our zone. I focused on their left winger, who currently had the puck. He was fast as hell. Even faster than Harper.

Nope. Focus.

He tried to get around me, but I crowded him into the corner. Sin came to join me, trying to steal the puck. He chirped at the Carolina player, attempting to ruffle his feathers, and I was able to get my stick on the puck. Spotting Tally open, I knocked it over to him.

“Fuck yeah, Timmy,” Sin said, grinning before he headed back up the ice

with Tally.

“Nice, man,” Micah yelled as we moved back up to the center line, ready to join in when we needed to.

But a few seconds later, the goal buzzer sounded. Tally had scored, and I was pretty sure I had an assist. We rushed toward our forwards, slamming into them for a big celebratory group hug.

“Yeah, Timmy. Fucking dug that shit out,” Tally yelled, slapping my helmet.

As we skated back toward our bench, I turned toward where I knew Harper was sitting and flashed her a smile.

She was on her feet screaming while wearing my jersey. With a Stampede toque on her head. I felt invincible.

And I never wanted her to leave Denver.

“I’m sorry you lost tonight, but nice assist, Con,” Harper said later that night as we lounged on the couch and watched another Christmas movie. It was *Elf* this time. Another classic. We’d changed into comfy clothes, and it almost felt like old times, except for the tension we could cut with a knife.

Or maybe I was just imagining it was mutual since I’d been tense since she’d moved in.

“Thanks. Fucking sucks that we lost, but it happens. A lot, since we’re a new team,” I muttered.

“Don’t be so mopey. You guys are doing great and it’s your first season. And this team picked you, remember.” She nudged her shoulder into mine.

“Yeah. I guess,” I said, nudging her right back. I didn’t want to be a downer on her last night in Denver. “We probably should’ve gone out with the team. Had some fun on your last night.”

She turned to face me, her eyes sparkling in the dimmed light of the room.

We only had the Christmas tree lights and the TV on.

“Nope. This is exactly where I want to be, hanging out with you. And we have an early flight home tomorrow,” she said, running her hand down her beer bottle.

“Are you excited to go home?” We hadn’t talked much about what would happen after the holidays. She wanted to relax and enjoy herself, and I was just happy to have her around.

She picked at the label, staring at her fingers, before looking back up at me, a sardonic smile on her face.

“I mean, it is Christmas. Presents. Family. All that festive stuff.” She sighed. “But I haven’t wanted to think too hard about everything else. I know I have to find a job. Maybe a roommate, so I don’t have to live with my parents for too long. Need to figure out a way to get all my stuff from Brian’s place without maiming him when I see him.”

I shrugged. “I’d be happy to maim him. Wouldn’t be the first time.”

“I still can’t believe you did that, almost knocking him out in high school. You missed your last hockey game because of that,” she said.

“And I’d do it again without question. I know I shouldn’t say I told you so or any of that, so I won’t. But his cheating on you back then—fuck, Harps, he broke your heart, so I broke his face. I will always protect you. Always be there for you. Don’t you know that? And you deserved better. You’ve always deserved better.”

I couldn’t stop myself from reaching out to run my hand along hers, trying not to read anything into the slight tremor I felt beneath my fingers. I knew I sounded intense, but it was the truth. Harper deserved the absolute best, and I wished I could show her that.

“Con,” she whispered.

My heart ramped up. My little speech had kick-started my adrenaline, and my name falling softly from her lips as she leaned in was my undoing.

I took the beer from her hand and set it on the coffee table in front of us.

Then I turned to her, sent up a silent prayer that I wasn't fucking up our friendship, and gently cupped her jaw, my thumb tracing along her soft skin.

"You deserve everything, Harps," I said just as I lowered my mouth to hers.

The first meeting of our lips rocked me to the pit of my stomach, and I waited for her to pull away with a laugh. But she sank in closer, her hands reaching up to curl into my shirt.

And I pressed my lips harder to hers, pouring everything into our first kiss, stupidly hoping it wouldn't be our last.

Chapter 5



HARPER

Connor was kissing me.
Holy shit.

Connor was kissing me, and it was exquisite. At my first gasp, he'd deepened the kiss, his tongue teasing my lips. It'd taken everything in me not to climb into his lap.

This was madness.

Insanity.

And there was nothing else I wanted more in this world than to kiss him right back. My tongue swept against his, and his groan vibrated through my body. My nipples tightened, and I clenched my thighs as his tongue tangled with mine. I slanted my head, getting as close to him as possible.

His hands sank into my hair, gripping my head and holding me close.

I moaned. I wasn't going anywhere, but feeling his strength as he held my face to his turned me all the way on. Fucking hell. My best friend could kiss.

Oh God, could he kiss.

I lifted up, needing to get closer to him, and straddled his waist, our lips still joined. He froze as I settled over his lap, but I curled both of my hands into his shirt and poured myself into the kiss.

His hard cock pressed against my ass, and I couldn't help but softly grind against him. Heat pooled between my thighs and I desperately wanted him. And I didn't want it to be weird.

Well, hell. We'd probably sailed right past that already.

With one of his hands still locked into my hair as he ravaged my mouth, his other hand gripped my hip, holding me in place, keeping me from rocking against him. I loved how powerful he felt beneath me. How his kiss—his touch—felt perfect.

“Harps.” He groaned, finally breaking the kiss.

“Yes,” I whispered, meeting his gaze. Desire that I knew matched mine stared back at me, and my breath caught in my throat.

“Is this real?” It almost sounded like he was in awe, and my heart raced.

“Very. Is it weird to you? I don't want to stop. All I can think about is kissing you. Think about how amazing you feel right now,” I said, baring myself and hoping it didn't come back to bite me.

His chuckle was husky, and he released my hair to cup my jaw. “Oh, Harps. It's all I've thought about since we were teens.”

I took a startled breath.

“What?”

“You, Harps. I've thought about kissing you. More than I ever should've because you're my best friend.”

Little memories flitted through my desire-filled brain. Random touches. How he looked at me when we'd had our one dance at senior prom. Glances I caught when he thought I wasn't looking but didn't quite understand.

“Wait? You like me? Like, *like* like me?” I laughed at how ridiculous I sounded.

He tugged on one of my loose curls.

“Yeah. Harps. Like, I *like* like you a lot.” The blush staining his cheeks warmed me up to the tips of my toes.

“But you never said anything.” I couldn’t believe we were having this conversation while I was still sitting on his very hard cock.

I rolled my hips, relishing his growl.

“Dammit, Harps,” he said, gripping my hips to still my movements. “I have enough trouble thinking around you as it is.”

I giggled. *This is crazy.*

“Yeah, it is,” he replied.

Apparently, I’d said that out loud.

“So we should stop?” I asked, not wanting to move a muscle.

He tipped his head back and looked toward the ceiling. I watched his throat move as he swallowed.

“I don’t want to stop, but I also don’t want to ruin us,” I whispered.

He met my gaze again. “Okay, I’m laying it all out. Yes, I’ve had feelings for you, Harper, for as long as I can remember. But you had me in the friend zone and I respected that because you have always been important to me and having you in my life as my friend was better than not having you at all. I hated every time you went back to that cheater. I hated every guy who didn’t treat you like the loveable badass you are. But deep down, I’ve never stopped wanting you. Never stopped wondering what if.”

“Oh, Con. This year without you has sucked, and I wanted to reach out so many times. And now I’m scared to do something that we might not be able to come back from. But I also don’t want to walk away from what this could

be,” I said. If he wanted to see where this would go, I would gladly take the leap.

“I don’t want to be a rebound,” he murmured.

“You would never—could never—be a rebound. My feelings for you are too deep for that.” As I said it, I realized just how true my words were. I reached up, running my fingers through the hair falling over his brow.

He took in a shuddering breath, and his eyes drifted shut for a brief moment.

Then he was watching me again. “Can I kiss you again?” he asked.

I smiled. “Yes.”

“But before that, I—we have to agree. If things get strange, we talk about it. We communicate because losing you is not an option. And if this goes nowhere, I can deal with my feelings,” he said.

I bit my lower lip. This was a huge risk. But I wanted to see where we could go too. There was so much history with Connor and me. And this spark between us wasn’t something I’d ever felt before. I wanted more of that. More of him. And I didn’t want to sit back years from now and wonder what if.

“Seal it with a kiss?” I teased.

He grinned and tugged me closer. “Give me those lips, Harper.”

I snuggled into his chest and locked my lips with his, loving his soft groan. His hands tightened in my hair and on my hip, and I sank into his lap and swiped my tongue across his mouth.

Then, he was kissing me within an inch of my life, and I couldn’t get enough of him.

My hips rocked against him, his hard cock insistent against me. We hadn’t skipped a beat during our little conversation, and I was grateful for both that

and for our talk. We needed it.

I needed it.

I tunneled my fingers through his hair, scraping my nails along his scalp, and my body hummed with need as he shuddered underneath my touch. I couldn't get over how right all of this felt. How long had I ignored this between us? Been blind to his feelings? To my own, as well?

“Get out of your head, Harps,” he murmured against my lips.

I pulled back, seeing only heat and affection in his eyes. He seemed so confident in what we were doing, and at that moment, I gave myself over to him. I wanted this more than my next breath, and I was so ready to go for it with him.

So I kissed him back, giving as good as I got.

Why had I waited so long?

I rocked against his body, dragging myself along his hard cock. And all the weirdness fell away.

He growled against my mouth when I pressed down again, and suddenly, there were too many clothes between us.

I broke the kiss, holding his gaze as I pulled my shirt over my head. Was this too fast? Probably.

But I wanted it.

Him.

“Fuck, Harps.” He sucked in a shuddering breath. “Do you know how long I've ached to see you like this?”

“You've seen me in a bathing suit, Con. A million times.”

He traced his fingers along the strap of my bra, over my shoulder, and down toward the cups.

I sucked in a breath, wanting him to take what he wanted, wanting him to

pop the clasp and hold my fevered skin in his hands. My nipples were hard, and I knew he noticed.

“It’s not the same. This is another level, and I’ve honestly dreamed about it so many times. I want to kiss every inch of you. Worship every spot. Watch you gasp and moan and come apart in my arms.”

“Oh, Con,” I whispered, my heart in my throat. To hear those words from his lips wrecked me.

He dipped his finger just under the top edge of my bra and skimmed it along the tender skin.

“Tell me you want that. You want *me*.” I heard a slight hitch in his voice.

Reaching behind my back, I released the hooks on my bra, letting the material pool between us.

“I want everything with you, Connor Horton. Take me to bed.”

I couldn’t stop my gasp when he stood up with me in his arms and strode down the hallway to his bedroom.

All the uncertainty fell away as he carried me, peppering kisses on every spot he could reach while he walked.

CONNOR

I wasn’t going to ask her again if this was a good idea. I didn’t care how crazy we were acting right now. This was something I’d wanted for years, and I was not going to push it away.

Harper was in my arms, and she felt like she belonged there. She was fucking exquisite.

Kissing her was beyond any of my dreams, but I should’ve known to expect the unexpected with her.

With every brush of her body against my cock, I bit back more than a few curses. She felt so fucking good in my lap, and I couldn't wait to strip us both and finally indulge in her.

We walked through my bedroom door, and she flipped on the light. I didn't pause until I reached the bed. She unlocked her legs from my waist and stood in front of me, our bodies still pressed against each other.

Her soft breath caressed my throat, and I clenched my jaw to get control of myself. I didn't want to rush this, and I could feel myself getting overwhelmed. I'd wanted this for so long, and I was ready to explode.

I took a step back and pulled my shirt up over the back of my head. Her fingers were on my chest as I tossed my shirt away.

"Damn, you're hot," she said, trailing her nails over my abs. My answering chuckle was strained.

"And you're a smoke show, Harps. Always have been," I said, banding my arm around her waist and pressing her naked breasts against my chest. "Fuck, you feel good." I groaned.

She leaned in and nipped my collarbone with her teeth before licking the spot.

"Are you marking me?" I asked.

She chuckled. "Maybe. Now get naked."

She wiggled free from our embrace and pulled off the rest of her clothes until she was standing naked in front of me, and fucking hell, I almost swallowed my tongue.

She reached for the waistband of my sweats and quickly shoved them and my boxer briefs down. "You were taking too long," she said.

And then her hand was wrapped around my cock, her thumb grazing the tip, and I almost blacked out.

“Fuck, Harps,” I bit out, unable to stop myself from shallowly pumping into her hand.

She turned us so my back was to the bed and put her hands on my chest, giving me a light shove. I wrapped my arm around her waist and pulled her right along with me as I fell to the bed. Her laugh rang through my ears.

I loved every second of what we were doing.

“Condom,” she said.

“Stay here,” I said, rolling away from her and reaching into my nightstand drawer, praying I had a box of protection in there. I snagged a foil-covered square and turned back to face her, but she didn’t meet my gaze. Her eyes stuck quite a bit lower.

She grinned up at me. “What? You have a stellar ass with or without clothes.”

I chuckled and climbed back into bed, settling her on top of me again. It was a view I greatly appreciated. Her full breasts were at mouth level, and I couldn’t resist lifting my hands to cup them. To feel her shiver as my thumbnails scraped over her hard nipples. I drew one distended tip into my mouth and teased her with my tongue, loving every soft sound from her lips.

Her fingers tightened in my hair, holding me in place as I feasted on her.

“Delicious,” I murmured against her skin.

“Connor, please,” she said, rocking her heat against my cock.

Fucking hell. She felt amazing in my arms. I wanted nothing more than to sink inside of her body, feel her muscles clench around my cock with nothing between us. But hopefully, that would come in time.

I bent my knees, urging her to lean back, and handed her the condom. She tore the wrapper and rolled the protection on painstakingly slowly, her hand squeezing my cock as she went.

“Keep that up and I’ll come in your hand, Harps,” I gritted out, my hips lifting us up, chasing her touch.

“We can’t have that, can we?” she said.

Then she was slipping the tip of my cock inside of her. Her muscles fluttered against the head, and as she sank on top of me, I tried to remember to breathe.

“Fuck, Harps. Oh, fuck.”

She pitched forward, her hands landing on my chest. Her nails scraped against my nipples, and I gripped her hips, holding her in place.

“Damn. You’re so wet, Harps. You feel so fucking good.”

Her eyes met mine. The desire coursing through me was echoed in her gaze, and I started to move. She lifted and lowered herself on my cock, and I met her every move. My brain short-circuited, and all I could do was move with her and give her everything she gave me. My thumb trailed down the center of her body, over her belly, and found her clit. I started with faint touches, slowly applying more pressure in tighter circles, trying to read exactly what she wanted from me.

“Oh, yes. Don’t stop.” She gasped, almost faltering in her rhythm when I pressed harder on her clit. Her fingers curled into my chest, and I continued to tease her as she moved up and down my cock. My body was a live wire ready to spark, but I needed to make her come first.

“Come on, Harps. Fuck, you’re incredible. Come for me, Harps,” I rasped.

Her hands left my chest, and she sat back, resting against my thighs as she ground against my thumb. She held my gaze and sank one hand into her hair, her lips parted on a gasp.

And then she came, crying out my name.

There was nothing hotter than watching her fall apart.

Nothing.

“Oh God, Connor. Fuck. That was good.”

“We’re not done yet,” I said, licking the taste of her off my thumb.

Fuck, I needed to get my mouth on her.

She leaned over me, the aftershocks of her orgasm clenching my cock.

“No. We definitely are not,” she said.

I rolled her under me and picked up the pace, plunging in and out of her heat, my cock painfully hard and ready to explode.

She wrapped her legs around my waist, her hands reaching into my hair to hold on as I moved in and out of her body.

I lowered my head, watching where we were joined. Fuck. I could not have imagined how perfect this was. How perfect we were together.

“Connor.” She gasped, followed by a few inaudible words. I loved making her lose her mind.

“Fuck. I’m close, Harper. Fuck,” I rasped as I fucked her, my body tight.

I wanted another orgasm from her. I wanted to feel her clench around my cock again.

“Me, too. Oh God, how,” she murmured, and my ego swelled right along with my cock.

Then she was gasping my name again and squeezing my cock as she came.

And I groaned, falling over the edge right along with her.

My heart beat frantically in my chest. There was a little niggle of fear that I’d fucked up everything, but I ignored it and sank into Harper’s arms.

A place I never wanted to leave.

Chapter 6



HARPER

“Don’t make it awkward,” a voice mumbled, and I couldn’t help but grin.

Last night had been amazing, and I was in too much of a state of bliss to be apprehensive about what happened next.

After Connor had gotten me off twice in spectacular fashion, we cleaned up and passed out. Wrapped up in his arms felt so natural, so perfect. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d slept so well.

“I can feel you laughing, Harps,” he muttered into my ear. His breath caressed my skin, sending a shiver down my spine.

I turned to face him, reaching up to run my fingers through his sleep-mussed hair.

He pressed a kiss to my palm.

“If I’m laughing, it’s because I’m happy,” I said, wanting to be honest with him. This was new territory for us, and if I wanted us to pursue this and keep our friendship strong too, communication was key.

His arms tightened around me, holding me close.

“Me too, Harps. So damn happy.” The blush staining his cheeks warmed my heart. “After all this time, I finally got my Christmas wish. And my birthday wish—okay, all the wishes.”

“What?”

“Yeah. That’s a lot of pressure, isn’t it? I don’t want to overwhelm you, Harper,” he said.

“I can’t believe I was so blind to your feelings. And that you never said anything.” I refused to think of it as lost time because we’d been together all these years, just as friends.

He pulled back slightly. “Harper, I’ve loved you since we were kids, and I fell for you when we were teens, but I didn’t want to risk our friendship, and being your friend has meant more to me than anything else in this world. Whatever this is, I want to see where it can go, but we can’t predict the future. Just know that, whatever happens, I will do everything in my power to make sure our friendship remains. I value it too much to let it slip away.” He paused and then gave me a lopsided grin. “I’m going to stop freaking you out now.”

I tugged him tight against me and held his gaze.

“I’ve always loved you, Connor, and I do think my feelings are changing into something more than friendship. I’m afraid to wreck what we have, but I’m more scared to ignore what we could be. We just have to be honest with each other—I mean, not that we’ve ever really had that issue before.” I couldn’t help but grin.

He groaned and pinched my side. “Yes, you’ve never had an issue being honest with me.”

I chuckled. “If this is about that green Members Only jacket you loved so

much, I was doing you a favor. It was horrible.”

“I loved that jacket,” he muttered.

“It was awful, just admit it. That was definitely an article of your clothing that I was never going to steal.”

He tweaked my side again. “Speaking of clothes. Or lack of them.” He wiggled his brow, and I couldn’t stop my shudder. This new aspect of our relationship was already beyond anything I’d imagined.

“Are you saying we should get dressed?”

He tugged me closer. “Absolutely not.” He lowered his head, and I closed the distance, pressing my lips against his.

We had so much to figure out, but for now, I sank into the kiss, relishing the feel of him enveloping me.

Then my alarm blared.

“Dammit,” I said, breaking the kiss and blindly reaching for my phone.

“As much as I want to continue this, we can’t miss our flight,” Connor said, pulling me from the bed after I’d shut off the alarm.

“Are you sure?” I asked, a small smile on my lips as he tugged me toward the bathroom.

“How about we conserve water and shower together?”

“You’re so smart, Con,” I teased, letting my gaze drift down his naked body. Fucking hell, the man was a work of art, and now I had every excuse to stare as he pivoted to turn on the water.

His ass was what dreams were made of.

When my eyes finally worked their way back up to his face, he smirked.

“I think I’m going to like this new aspect of our friendship. So many benefits,” I said, licking my lips.

He chuckled. “We are going to be so much more than friends with benefits,

Harps.”

“I can’t wait,” I said, following him into the warm shower.

“You better get all your kisses out now, because our moms are going to notice if you’re getting frisky with me over Christmas dessert,” I said as we walked off the plane in Edmonton later that afternoon.

He linked his fingers with mine—a gesture he’d done more than once since we’d left his condo this morning. I loved every little touch. Every kiss. It was going to be rough trying to keep my hands to myself for the next three days, but we’d agreed that not telling our families right now was a good idea. The last thing we wanted was expectations set on us by our families just because we’d known each other all our lives.

“If you recall the cow patty incident, I’m really good at getting you back into your house without anyone noticing. I bet I could slip into your bedroom with none the wiser.”

Heat filled my cheeks at that thought.

“You would just have to keep from screaming my name,” he teased.

I tweaked his side. He was extra ticklish there. “Not the only loud one, Horton.”

He chuckled. “I can’t wait to test our limits. Making out with you in your bed has been a dream of mine.”

I laughed. “You’re such a cliché, Con.”

“And you love it,” he said.

I reached out, tugging his face down to mine. “I absolutely do,” I said, sealing my lips to his.

His arms banded around my waist, holding me close, and everyone and everything around us disappeared. We had a lot to figure out, but I’d agreed to stay in Denver with him for the rest of the season, and then we would go

back to Edmonton for the offseason. Yes, I was putting off making decisions about my life, but I just wanted this time with Connor to see where we could go.

But this wasn't like Brian. Living together while I looked for a job. It seemed like I was just getting back into the same situation, but this was Connor. I loved and trusted him.

"Don't overthink it, Harps," he murmured against my lips.

I smiled. He'd always read me so well. He knew when to push and when to encourage me to do what I needed to do.

And then his lips were on mine again, wiping away my doubts.

When we finally ended the kiss, I was breathless.

"Okay, best behavior. But if any mistletoe comes out, I make no promises," he said, giving me a wink.

I giggled and pulled him back down for another kiss.

Two weeks ago, I'd thought this holiday season was going to be the worst, but falling in love with my best friend was the best Christmas present I ever could've imagined.

And I was definitely going to hunt up some mistletoe while we were home. I'd told him to be on his best behavior, but he probably should've asked the same of me.

When we broke the kiss, I kept my eyes locked on his.

He groaned. "How am I supposed to resist you for three days?"

I lifted up on my toes and nipped his lower lip.

"Maybe we'll just have to find a few dark corners." Heat rushed through me at the thought.

His pupils grew. "All the dark corners."

I sucked in a breath. "Okay, but now we need to be good."

Then my phone beeped, and I pulled it out of my pocket.

Mom: Are you home yet, honey? Can't wait to see you two and hear all about Denver.

"We could tell them," Connor said.

I sighed. "Not yet. I know. Don't hate me. I just want it to be us for a bit and you know they'll be all over us."

He gave me an understanding smile. "It sucks, but I get it. But when you're ready, I'm shouting it from the rooftops."

I grinned at his excitement. How had I gotten so lucky to fall for my best friend?

"Now. Let's get out of here before I pull you into a bathroom or something," he said, his voice low.

"We can make out in the Uber," I said.

There was a twinkle in his eyes. "Absolutely."

CONNOR

She'd walked in with her family fifteen minutes ago, and I was already itching to kiss her. We'd done our hellos and hugs, acting like everything was normal, but I was a ball of energy or nerves. Maybe both. She looked beautiful in her red sweater covered in snowflakes and black leggings. Her knee-high boots made her legs look even longer, and I couldn't stop thinking about them wrapped around my waist.

She'd eyed me over the rim of her water glass not five minutes ago, poking her tongue out slightly before she took a sip.

Dammit. I will not get a hard-on surrounded by my family.

She was taunting me on purpose. Fuck, it was so not fair. She's the one who wanted to keep everything a damn secret. She should be sitting in her

chair, listening to my uncle tell stories about playing shinny hockey when he was a kid, not making me want to find the closest piece of mistletoe and a dark corner.

“How’s it going, honey?”

I almost jumped at my mom’s voice behind me. I was a damn live wire, and it was all a certain sassy brunette beauty’s fault.

“Hi, Mom.” I turned to face her and just hoped my face wasn’t bright red. The red hair had never helped.

“You okay?” she asked, quirking a brow.

I took a sip of my beer. “Yep. I’m home with you guys. Of course I’m okay.”

She pulled me in for a quick hug, giving me a squeeze. I’d never get enough of those.

“We miss you during the season. Denver is a big change, but at least it’s a little closer than San Francisco was. And I’m so happy you had Harper with you the last two weeks. Must’ve been fun, like old times,” she said, sending a smile in Harper’s direction.

“Uh, yep. Just like old times.”

“She needed the break. I’m so glad she’s done with that Brian kid finally. She deserves so much better.”

I focused on Harper; her eyes widened slightly as I stared.

“Yeah, she does,” I said.

“Well, I’m glad you’re both home for the holidays. I just wish it was longer,” she said, patting my shoulder.

“You’re coming out to visit in two months, Mom.” I was excited to show her my new teammates and the arena. She’d loved hockey her entire life and

had taken me to every single practice. My dad came along to support, but my mom was the true hockey fan.

“And we can’t wait. Thank you for the new jerseys. And shirts, and hats, and that gorgeous scarf.”

“Anything for you, Mom.” I may have gone overboard decking them out in Stampede gear, but I knew she loved it and would wear it proudly—well, as long as it wasn’t an Edmonton game day.

Priorities.

“Can I help with anything?” I asked.

“Nope. It’s all done. Just enjoy the snacks I put out and grab a beer. I’ve got this,” she said.

“Taking the brie out now,” my dad called out from the kitchen.

My mom glanced down at her watch. “Oh goodness. Be right back.”

Then she headed into the kitchen, most likely to banter back and forth with my father about the appropriate cooking time for puff pastry-wrapped cheese. They were both excellent in the kitchen but tended to butt heads over food timing. Tomorrow was going to be entertaining when there was a turkey on the line.

“Hey, Connor, glad you’re home. How’s Denver treating you?” my aunt Carrie asked.

“It’s been fun. I’m liking my new team and the city’s great,” I replied, glancing subtly over her shoulder to see if Harper was still nearby. I’d just spent ten days with her, but I always wanted to be around her. Not like that was a change. We’d been in each other’s back pocket since we were kids.

I spotted her talking to my dad near the kitchen door, probably distracting him while my mom grabbed the rest of the food. She glanced over at me and gave me a wink.

Fuck. I ached to kiss her right now.

“Think the team will get to the playoffs? You’ve done decent against Edmonton,” my uncle Fred said as he stood next to his wife.

“Uh, yeah. We’re hoping. You never know with expansion teams during the first year,” I said.

“Look at Vegas though. But yeah, they had some heavy hitters right from the get-go, that’s for sure,” my uncle said.

“I’ll let you two chat. Good to see you, Connor,” my aunt said before walking away.

A few of my cousins wandered over with my other uncle and Harper’s dad, and the conversation turned to hockey, as it always did.

We all lived and breathed the game. My oldest cousin had played a few seasons in the NHL, and all my uncles had played at university. I settled in for my favorite part of family dinner and hoped the stories would be enough to distract me from dragging Harper into my bedroom.

“You’re so popular,” Harper teased a short while later. She handed me another beer. “In case you’re parched from all that talking.”

I glared at her. “They only want to talk about hockey, you know that.” And normally, I wouldn’t have a problem with that, but all I could think about was getting Harper alone.

She laughed, pressing her hand to my upper arm. Heat rocked through me, straight to my hardening cock.

“We all love hockey and you know it. Maybe we can play a little pond hockey before we head back to Denver. It’s not completely balls-cold out this year,” she said.

“Just because we’re dating doesn’t mean I’m going to let you beat me,” I teased.

She grinned. “Nah, I’ll beat you because I’m faster than you.”

“She’s not wrong,” my mom said, coming up to us. “You know I love you, dear, but Harper is freaky fast on skates.”

I froze.

Had she heard the dating comment, too? No. She would’ve said something.

Fuck. I wanted to tell her—to tell everyone—but I would wait. I understood Harper’s reticence in sharing our news. Our moms were best friends who still lived on the same damn street where we grew up together ever since Harper and her parents had moved here when we were kids. It made sense to be totally sure that we were both ready to be a couple in front of our families.

Not that I had any doubts. But I’d wait.

“Yeah, she is,” I said with pride. I loved that she loved my favorite sport, and it was even better that she enjoyed playing it. I couldn’t wait to get her back on the ice with me again. “Even if she likes to trip me.” I would never tire of getting a rise out of Harper.

She glared at me, but my mom swatted my chest and spoke up before Harper could.

“Oh, stop. She would never trip you. Not our Harper.”

Harper stuck her tongue out at me when my mom wasn’t looking. Then her cheeks started to pink.

Was she thinking about where she wanted to put her tongue on my body? Because I sure as fuck was.

“You’d think after all these years, he’d get over that, right?” Harper said, giving me a wink. I needed to kiss her sooner rather than later if I was going to make it through the night. Maybe I could convince her to sneak out of here soon.

“You would think. So, did you enjoy your time in Denver, hon? He didn’t

drive you crazy, did he? He's kind of messy. I've tried to get him to pick up after himself, but now that he's out of the house, there's only so much I can do."

Harper laughed. "He's gotten better with age, I promise. And we had a great time. He showed me all the sights and I got to go to all the games. Overall, a decent host."

"That's wonderful. And are you home for good now?"

"Uh..." She drew the word out for a moment. "I'm not sure. I might spend more time in Denver. I really liked the city and it was nice to have a friend there," she said.

"And I'll have you know, I'm very friendly," I said, hoping it hadn't sounded as pervy out loud as it suddenly did in my head.

Harper snorted. "Yeah, very friendly."

I could feel myself blushing again. Dammit. How could she make me feel so awkward in my childhood home? Oh, right, because I was on edge. It'd been hours since I'd kissed her, had my hands on her. And apparently, I was fritzing out as a result.

"It's good for Connor to have his best friend out there with him, too. But you let me know if he's driving you crazy. I'll sort him out," my mom said.

"I'll definitely let you know," Harper said, humor lacing her tone.

My mom patted me on the arm. "You better take good care of our Harper."

"Always have and always will," I replied.

My mom gave my arm a squeeze and then walked toward my dad.

"What if I like it when you drive me crazy?" Harper whispered into my ear.

Fuck.

She was close enough that I could just lean in and taste her, but I held firm—well, one part of me was currently *extra* firm.

“We need an escape plan,” I muttered.

“In due time. Now, go eat a few of those butter tarts you love so much, or something. Hopefully, you’ll need the sustenance for later,” she teased.

I groaned. “You’re killing me, Harps.”

“Right back at ya, Con.”

Then she turned and headed toward my cousins.

I couldn’t help but stare at her ass as she walked away, which was not helping my body calm down at all.

Dammit, Harps.

Chapter 7



HARPER

“I’m so ready to get out of here,” Connor said an hour later.
“Absolutely, but we have to be subtle.” I’d hoped that we had been, but let’s face it—I’d been unable to keep my hands to myself for most of the night. It’d mainly been quick grazes or pats on one body part or another, but I needed more.

He chuckled, leaning in close. “We’ve been subtle all night and I’m about to explode.”

Fuck. My entire body tightened at his words.

“We could get a hotel,” he suggested.

“For a night of sex? Like it’s prom night or something?”

He let out a soft groan. “I definitely imagined taking you to a hotel room on prom night.”

I sucked in a breath. Brian had been my date, but I’d danced one slow song with Connor. I wondered again what it would’ve been like if I’d clued into Connor’s feelings years ago. Would we be here right now?

He ran his thumb over my palm, pulling me from my thoughts.

“Stop. Don’t think about what-ifs,” he said, sincerity in his gaze.

“Can you read my mind or something?” I asked.

He smiled. “I’ve just known you forever and I know what you’re thinking.”

“So, what am I thinking right now?” I taunted.

“About how loud you moan when I eat you,” he said matter-of-factly.

I fake-gasped. “Connor Horton! Who knew you were so dirty.”

He grinned. “Are you complaining?”

“Absolutely not.” Heat rocketed through my body. We so needed to get out of here.

“We could go to your house since everyone is here. Just sneak right out and no one will notice. They’re having too much fun,” he said.

“You just want to hook up in my bed, don’t you?” I asked.

He shrugged, pink staining his cheeks. I loved that he blushed even when he whispered dirty words in my ear. It was beyond hot.

“If you recall, I’m excellent at sneaking both of us in and out of your room.”

“Could you not bring up the cow patty incident when we are discussing sexy times?”

He chuckled. “Couldn’t resist.”

“What am I going to do with you?” I asked, laughing.

“You’re going to sneak into the backyard with me and then we’ll slip into your house two doors down. Go grab your purse and keys,” he said. “And be subtle.” There was an urgency in his tone that matched the beating of my heart.

I giggled and glanced around the room. Everyone was scattered around in small groups and not paying any attention to us. Now was the time to escape.

I didn't spare Connor another look, for fear of giving ourselves away, as I headed toward the back of the house, but remembered to grab a cookie along the way. Then a tiny brownie. Had to keep up appearances, pretend I wasn't about to get it on with my boyfriend in my childhood bed while our families celebrated the holiday two doors down from us.

I felt giddy.

As I slipped out the back door and into the garden, the freezing temperature knocked the giddiness right out of me, and I practically ran to the back gate, only to have a comfortable warmth envelop me as Connor dropped his coat on my shoulders.

"Fucking hell, it's cold." I gasped.

"Don't worry. My tongue will warm you right up," he said, without breaking stride as we hustled toward my house.

I froze for a second. "Oh my God, Connor," I said.

"You'll be saying that soon enough. Hurry up, Harps."

I snorted. "You're ridiculous."

Then he flashed me a wicked grin, and my body flamed back to life.

My fingers fumbled with the keys when we got to my back door.

"I'm so much better at sneaking us in and out of houses," he said.

"Very funny," I muttered, finally getting the key in the lock before quickly turning it, and then we were inside. His coat fell to the floor as he scooped me up and then bolted for the stairs.

"In a rush or something?" I teased.

"Don't want to get caught."

"They'll be hours," I said, peppering his jaw with kisses.

"So will we," he growled.

My body shivered.

He smirked. “Cold?”

“Like you’re not turned the fuck on by this. Dammit, I feel like I’m going to combust when you growl at me.”

“That’s only fair, since I constantly feel like combusting whenever you’re near me. Or when I’m thinking about you. Or when someone mentions you...” His voice trailed off, and I couldn’t stop my smile from widening.

This man.

This freaking man.

He’d already been everything to me, and now we’d managed to bump that up another level. I still couldn’t believe we were here right now. My life had been self-destructing, and now I was here. With him.

“I love you so damn much, Con,” I said, enjoying the fact that I could so easily say that to him.

“I love you, too, Harps,” he said, striding into my room and kicking the door shut behind him.

He slowly lowered me to the bed, and I had never been more grateful that my parents had upgraded me to a full in high school, because there was no fucking way Connor and me on a twin would have worked. One of us would’ve ended up on the floor, and not in a sexy way.

I snorted.

“What’s funny?” he asked.

“Oh, nothing, just glad I don’t have a twin bed in here. You’re way too big for that.”

He grinned. “We would’ve made it work,” he said, leaning down to press his lips to mine.

I gasped when he licked against the seam, and I parted my mouth, my tongue sweeping against his.

He groaned as he deepened the kiss, and I curled my fingers into his shirt. Lifting my legs, I wrapped them around his waist and rocked my body into his.

He broke away to trail kisses along my jaw and down my throat. My hands sank into his hair, holding him to my body.

“Fuck, Harps. Fuck, I need you,” he rasped.

I arched into his touch when his hands cupped my breasts, his fingers tweaking my pebbled nipples.

“Oh yes, Connor. Don’t stop,” I moaned.

But he pulled back and tugged me upright.

“What?” I whined.

“We need to be naked now, and please tell me you have a condom because I stupidly left mine in my bag at my parents,” he said.

“If I did, they’ve probably expired. But I’m on the pill and I did a health check after Brian. It’s all clear. We could go without, if you wanted to,” I said. I needed to feel him inside me. I wanted nothing between us.

“Fuck, Harps. Yeah, I’m clean. Tested at my last physical and it’s been a while for me. God, I want to sink into you bare,” he said, staring down at me, his eyes flaring with heat.

“Strip now,” I commanded.

He chuckled. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Shut up,” I grumbled as I got naked as fast as possible.

He turned on the bedside lamp, and we stood in front of each other in my bedroom, with not a stitch on between us. He traced his finger down my chest, over my breasts, almost reverently. The look in his eyes gripped me as he held my gaze.

“You’re so damn gorgeous, Harps. I still can’t believe you’re mine,” he

whispered.

I put my hand over his and pressed in closer so we were touching from chest to thigh. “I’ve always been yours, but now it’s even more than I ever imagined. I fell in love with my best friend. What’s better than that?”

“Nothing. Absolutely fucking nothing,” he said, and then he turned and laid back on the bed, pulling me on top of him.

My thighs straddled his hips, his hard cock pressed against my heat, and we both groaned at the same time. I leaned over him, my hair creating a curtain around us, closing out the world, as my lips met his.

I poured everything I had into that kiss, and he met me with every sweep of our tongues, with every soft whisper of need.

Then I lifted my hips, notched his cock at my entrance, and sank down in one slow motion until we were flush against each other.

“Fuck, you feel good,” he said, holding still as I adjusted to him inside of me.

I lifted my head, grinning down at him. “I can’t get enough of you.”

“That’s the plan,” he said, his eyes twinkling.

Then I started to move. Up and down his length, rocking my hips, chasing the friction I needed. My stomach coiled tight as I sat up and arched my back.

“Glorious,” he whispered; his hands cupped my breasts.

I looked down my body at him and watched him hold my gaze as he bit his lip.

When his thumb found my clit, I moaned and almost lost my rhythm.

With one hand on my clit and the other on my hip, he held me steady as I moved on top of him.

Heat curled inside of me, and I was going to lose it soon. I wanted to come, but I also wanted this moment to never end. Under the dim light from my

bedside lamp and the fairy lights I'd hung up ages ago, with soft Christmas music coming from various houses on our street, this moment couldn't have been more perfect if it tried.

"Come for me, Harper." His raspy voice made my heart race faster, and I couldn't stop myself from crying out his name and toppling into bliss.

As I rode out my orgasm, Connor pumped his hips a few more times.

"Fuck, Harps." He groaned, following me right over the edge.

I would never get enough of this. Of him.

CONNOR

I woke up in my bed alone after sneaking out of Harper's bed a few hours ago. It'd taken everything in me to leave her. Waking up with her in my arms had definitely been one of my Christmas wishes, but technically, it'd been Christmas morning when I left her snuggled up with one of her pillows. We just had to get through today and tomorrow morning, and then we would be back in Denver without our parents' prying eyes.

She gave me the best present when she agreed to stay with me until the end of the season. I knew she wasn't trying to mooch off me since she didn't have a job. That was the last thing this was. Having her with me—my best friend, my *girlfriend*—was all I cared about.

I didn't care how sappy that made me sound. I was in love and finally able to express that to the person who had been my person for most of my life, even if we hadn't realized it when we were younger. Well, I'd hoped for it, but I'd never thought it would actually happen.

My phone dinged on my nightstand.

Harps: Morning, hot stuff. I hope Santa brought you everything you wanted.

I grinned.

Connor: He brought me you. That's all I've ever wanted.

Harps: You are so over the top.

Connor: Too much?

Harps: Surprisingly not. Are you turning me into a romantic?

I chuckled. Out of the two of us, I was definitely the softie. And I didn't care one bit.

Connor: I don't care what you are as long as you're mine.

Harper: That should be gross, but I love it.

Harper: Wish you were still in bed with me.

Connor: You have no idea how much I wanted to stay.

Harper: Maybe we can sneak away tonight. Late-night movie at my house?

Connor: Can I feel you up under a blanket?

Harper: It's a date. Mom's calling me downstairs. Merry Christmas, Connor. Love you.

Connor: Merry Christmas, Harps. Love you too.

I set my phone down and climbed out of bed, ready to start the day. Had to get through family stuff today, but then Harper was all mine tonight.

I couldn't fucking wait.

"So, what are we watching?" I asked as we settled on the couch later that night. Harper's parents had a fully finished basement with a sweet TV setup, and we were down here alone.

I'd spent a lot of time on this couch growing up. Movie nights. Hockey game nights. It was both familiar and foreign since I'd never tried to cop a feel while we watched TV in here before, but I sure as hell was going to tonight.

"You pick," she said. "Action? Sports? Rom-com?"

I laughed. "You're not really the rom-com fan."

"Hey, what can I say? I'm feeling romantic lately," she said with a wink.

I tugged her on top of me, threading my fingers through her hair. "Are you?" I whispered before I sealed her lips to mine.

"Con," she murmured against my mouth.

"You have to be quiet. Your parents are right upstairs," I teased.

"Going for another cliché, are we?"

I chuckled. "Just always want to be kissing you."

"You guys need anything down there?" her mom called out.

"Shit," Harper snickered, shifting away from me like she'd just been caught.

I tugged her back into my body. It's not like her mom was actually down here.

"Nope. We're good, Mom," she said.

"Are you getting sick, Harper?" her mother asked.

I smirked, and she playfully punched me in the shoulder. I grabbed her fist in my hand and brought it to my lips, licking across her knuckles with my tongue.

"Stop it," she said.

"I can't wait to lick all of you," I rasped. She was constantly teasing me, so getting her back was always a treat.

Her eyes widened, and I ran my teeth over her knuckles, chuckling darkly when she tried to pull away.

"No, I'm fine, Mom. We're good," she said, trying to sound calm. I could feel her racing heartbeat when I pressed a kiss to the hollow of her throat.

"I'm going to wreck you, Con," she whispered harshly as she squeezed her thighs.

I grinned. "Can't wait."

"Enjoy your movie," her mom called down, and then the door at the top of the stairs closed.

"Oh my God. What is up with you?" she asked, twisting to stare at me.

I looked down at my lap. "Thought that was obvious."

She swatted me again. "Who knew you were such a horndog."

"Only when it comes to you. Is that a problem?"

She trailed her hand down my chest, not stopping at my waistband, then she palmed my hard cock over my Christmas pajama pants and squeezed.

"Fuck, Harps," I rasped.

"If you're a good boy, maybe we'll get to that later." Then she moved her hand back up my body and patted my chest.

I groaned. "You are going to kill me."

"Right back at you," she said with a smirk. "Now, let's watch this movie and then we can play."

"Sounds perfect," I said, tucking her against me and reaching for the remote.

We made it thirty minutes in before the movie was forgotten and we gave in to our need. Making love to Harper under the blankets, with only the light from the TV and the Christmas tree in the corner to see by, was my new favorite Christmas memory.

My mom squeezed my arm the following morning. "I wish you could stay longer."

I'd slipped out of Harper's house in the early morning hours for the second day in a row, and I couldn't wait to return to Denver this afternoon and stop sneaking around.

"We're going to see him in two months, Debbie," my father said, handing

my mom her cup of coffee.

“I know. But I just want the holidays to last longer,” she said.

“You’ve had the decorations up since early November,” my dad muttered.

“They bring me joy. I wish they were up all year around,” she said.

I laughed. It was an argument they had every year. One year, she’d tried to convince him that since people in the States put up their decorations the day after Thanksgiving, they should do the same, even though Canadian Thanksgiving is in October. He’d put his foot down about that.

I mean, October? I loved Christmas, but that was just madness.

“So, how’s it really going with Harper staying with you?” my mom asked.

I coughed, my coffee going down the wrong pipe.

My father quirked a brow at me as he patted me on the back.

“I’m good, I’m good,” I said, shifting away.

“Everything okay with you two?” she continued.

“Yeah. Why?” Her smile made me nervous.

“Debbie,” my father interjected.

My mom ignored him. “So?”

“Don’t badger him,” my dad said.

Shit. She knew.

My mom had the gall to look affronted. “Oh please. I would never.”

“Your mother wants to know what’s going on with you and Harper. I told her to leave it alone. Because you would tell us if something was going on, wouldn’t you? Your mom said both of you were acting suspicious on Christmas Eve,” my dad said.

I bit back a groan. Harper wanted to wait to say anything, and I wanted to appease her wishes.

“I know you’ve loved her a long time,” my mom said. “I just want you to

be happy.”

I attempted to deflect. “Of course I love her. She’s my best friend.”

Her smile grew wider. “You know that’s not what I mean. But I think I have my answer, and I’m glad you both finally came to your senses.”

“Mom, you cannot say anything. I mean, there’s nothing to say. We’re just friends.”

Dammit.

“Oh, you’ve confessed now, son,” my dad said with a chuckle.

I pointed at both of them. “You will say nothing to her parents. This is important to her.”

“She doesn’t want everyone to know you’re together?” my mom asked, offended on my behalf.

“No, it’s just new and there’s a lot at stake, so we’re going slow.”

My mom nodded. “Okay. Well, I’m happy for both of you. And I’m sure it will all work out.”

“Thanks, Mom. Now, I have to go meet her for breakfast before we head back to Denver,” I said, kissing my mom on the cheek and hugging my dad.

“Feel free to bring her by before you leave. We’ll both be on our best behavior,” my mom called out as I headed toward the front door.

“Reel it in, Debs. Reel it in,” my dad said, chuckling.

Harper was going to kill me, but I couldn’t say I minded that my parents knew. I’d been itching to shout it from the rooftops for ages.

Chapter 8



HARPER

I couldn't wait to share my possible news with Connor as he stood just inside the front door the morning after Christmas. We were grabbing breakfast at our favorite bakery and basically killing time before our flight home to Denver in a few hours.

Home.

Not that Denver was really my home. But being there with Connor felt just like it. Then again, anywhere with Connor felt like home. And I was stupidly giddy about going back to his condo and finally being alone with him. It felt like ages, not two days since we'd arrived back in Edmonton.

"You ready to go?" he asked, his cheeks bright red from the cold. His hands were stuffed into his jeans pockets, and he rocked back on his heels. He looked amped up. Maybe he was just as excited to go back to Denver as I was.

"Yeah, yeah. Let me just grab my coat," I said, pocketing my phone and grabbing my coat and a small bag.

We hustled out to his rental car. This had been a relatively mild Christmas for Edmonton, but it still wasn't warm.

As soon as we slid into the car and shut the doors, he was on me.

"I cannot wait to get you back in my bed in Denver. No interruptions. No parents. And no one making me leave your bed in the middle of the night," he said.

Then his lips met mine, and I sighed, giving in to the kiss. I sank my fingers into his hair, holding his face to mine as I gave back as good as I got. Kissing Connor would never get old, and I could gladly do it twenty-four seven.

After an endless moment, I remembered that we were parked out in front of my parents' house and broke the kiss. Shit. Hopefully, my parents weren't watching.

But maybe I was okay with that. I knew it was too soon to tell people, especially our families, since there was the added pressure to make this work.

Not that I had any doubts. At least, I hope I didn't have any doubts.

Ugh.

I loved Connor. Connor loved me.

We'd known each other forever, but I also had terrible taste in men. Not that Connor was anything like Brian.

"What's going on in there?" Connor tapped my forehead with his finger.

I startled. "What?"

"You look like you're overthinking. Don't, Harps, just don't," he said.

"But what if—"

"We'll figure it out," he interrupted. "Come on, Harps. We've been best friends for seventeen—no, eighteen years. We can work through anything because we have a solid base that not everyone has. I'm trusting in you that

this is going to work, that we can be so much more than friends, and I hope you have that same trust in me.”

I just plain melted.

He always knew exactly what I needed to hear, when I needed a push, and when I needed to just breathe in the moment.

“You’re amazing, Connor. Have I told you that?” I asked, smiling up at him.

He leaned in, brushing his nose against mine. “You’re incredible.”

Then his stomach rumbled. and I couldn’t stop my giggle.

“Let’s hit up that bakery and then go home,” I said.

“Sounds perfect,” he said.

A short drive later, we arrived at the bakery. We’d spent endless hours at Baked over the years, and I couldn’t wait to dive into one of their oversized cinnamon rolls.

“Getting a cinnamon roll?” he asked.

“Of course,” I said with a laugh as we headed toward the front door. The place was crowded, so we gave them our names and stood in the corner.

Connor was pressed up against me, and I definitely didn’t mind. Yes, people knew us, but it didn’t stop me from slipping my hands into his coat and around his waist.

I was just trying to give people more room, and I was cold.

I bit back a snort at my weak excuses to touch him.

“Getting handsy, are we?” Connor teased.

“Just staying warm.”

He leaned down and kissed my lips softly. It was a quick peck, and I ached for more.

“I knew it,” a familiar voice said, and I turned to see my ex standing there,

looking smug.

“Brian,” I said.

“That’s all you have to say? You gave me shit about breaking up with you, and here you are with your best friend, looking very cozy. I knew something was going on with you two. How long have you been hooking up with him?”

“Are you for real right now?” I spluttered. *How dare he?*

How. Fucking. Dare. He.

He scoffed when Connor tightened his arm around my waist. “Did you or did you not cheat on me?” he asked.

“You must be joking. Until recently, Connor and I were strictly just friends. Not that I need to justify myself to you after all the crap you put me through,” I said, unable to contain my irritation.

“Sure, sure. You two have been abnormally close since you were kids. I never believed for a second that it was always platonic,” Brian said.

I stepped up, jabbing him in the chest. “I’m not going to listen to this. You ended our relationship, not me, but I’m not coming back to you.”

“Like I’d want a cheater.”

I snorted. “Please. I know you banged your assistant.”

“All right. Enough,” Connor said, shifting around so he was between Brian and me. I didn’t miss his glare at my ex.

“Don’t you dare spin your bullshit at her. She never tried anything with me while you two were together, so show her some fucking respect. Not that you did when you were together. But she’s mine now. You had your chance and now you’re done.”

My heart sped up when Connor got growly. It was ridiculously hot and I couldn’t wait to kiss him again, but right now, I needed to get away from Brian. He was ruining an otherwise perfect holiday.

“Such big talk for someone who spent years in the friend zone.” Brian sneered.

I pushed my way between them. “That’s enough. I’m happy with Connor. There was nothing going on with him while you and I were together, and the two of us have been done for a while now. Just leave us alone.”

“You always did defend him. Quite pathetic for a hockey defenseman to need protection from a woman.”

“I cannot believe you went back to this guy,” Connor muttered.

“Don’t be surprised if she does again,” Brian said.

“Enough. Getting back together with you the second time was a huge mistake, but we’re done, Brian. I don’t know why you even care to continue this conversation.” I was so done. How had I dated this man not once but twice? Condescending douchebag. “We have a flight to catch. So lovely seeing you, Brian,” I said with a glare.

“She moving in with you, Horton? Without a job? Sounds familiar.”

“Seriously, what the fuck is your problem?” I hated that he’d voiced my fear. Connor and I had talked about it, but he’d assured me that he wanted me with him in Denver for the season, and we could figure out everything else later.

“Here’s the thing, asshole. Harper is an amazing woman, and I’ve known that for almost my entire life. I get to call her mine now, and I want her in Denver. Maybe she gets a job there, maybe not. But I’m not going to hold it over her head while she figures it out and none of it is your business anyway. So, kindly fuck right off so I can enjoy breakfast with my girlfriend before we fly home,” Connor said.

His hand had found the small of my back when he started his speech, and he ran his thumb over that spot, comforting me. He read me in a way Brian

never had, and I hated that it'd taken so long for me to know I deserved better than that asshole had shown me.

“Oh look, there's an open table,” Connor said, steering me away from Brian.

I had nothing left to say to my ex anyway.

“Are you okay?” he asked, sliding into one side of the booth. He tugged me down with him.

“Uh, yeah. I'm okay,” I said, trying to wrap my brain around what had just happened.

“I swear that man is lucky I don't knock him out again,” Connor muttered.

“He's not worth it.”

“And he's also not worth the pain and frustration he's causing you. I don't care if you don't have a job in Denver. I want two things, Harper. I want you happy and I want you with me.”

I threaded my fingers through his. “You are seriously the sweetest man ever. I love you so much. And I might not be unemployed for long.”

“What?”

CONNOR

“I might have a job,” she said.

My heart sank a bit because there was no way that job was in Denver.

“Oh. So when does it start? You can stay with me as long as you want,” I said, trying not to show my sadness.

She smiled. “It's not official yet and it's in Denver.”

I sat up straighter. “What?”

“I never had plans to look for a job outside of Edmonton, because initially I was just visiting you for a break, but now I want to stay there. I mean, if

that's okay with you?" she asked.

"Are you serious? Of course it's okay with me. I'll do whatever I can to keep you in my condo," I said.

She grinned. "That doesn't sound creepy at all."

I rolled my eyes. "You know what I mean, Harps. So tell me about this job."

"So, it's nothing official yet, but my dad has a friend in Denver who runs an art gallery. I guess he mentioned to his friend that I was spending time in Denver and had previous gallery experience. And the guy said he was actually looking for more help. I mean, it would be so perfect. And because of my dual citizenship, I can work in Denver without going through a ton of hoops."

"That would be awesome and perfect for you," I said, unable to hide my excitement.

She laughed. "I don't have the job yet, Con. I have to give him a call this week. But hopefully it'll work out. I mean, how sweet would that be? A job I love, living in a city with the man I love?"

"Now, who's the cheesy one?" I teased, loving every bit of it.

"Guess you're rubbing off on me," she said, running her fingers over the back of my hand.

My body tightened with need. We seriously could not get back to Denver fast enough.

"You're fun to rub against," I said.

She barked out a laugh. "It's a good thing I'm a sure thing because that line was awful. Please tell me you've never used that one before?"

I chuckled. "Of course not. But I mean it. I couldn't be happier with you moving to Denver. And even if this job doesn't work out, you'll find

something else when you're ready. And if it's not in Denver, we are going to rock long distance because I've never wanted anything else in this world as much as I want you."

"Con," she whispered. "How did I get so lucky?"

"I'm the lucky one," I said, leaning across the table and sealing my lips to hers.

Yes, we were in a popular bakery in town, and yes, more than a handful of people in here knew us, but I didn't care.

Hopefully, Harper didn't either.

It took everything in me not to drag her across the table, but there would be plenty of time for that later.

I finally broke the kiss before we went too far.

"I cannot wait to get home," Harper said breathlessly. Her cheeks were pink and I knew that blush had already started to travel down her body and beneath her clothes. I couldn't wait to strip her naked this afternoon.

Home. I loved that she already thought of my place in Denver as home.

"It's about time, you two," Gladys said, dropping off our regular order. We hadn't even placed an order, but Gladys had worked here longer than Harper and I had been alive. She knew every regular's order.

"Uh." Harper's cheeks were blazing now.

"Thanks, Gladys. Great to see you," I replied.

She gave me a wink and then walked away.

Harper put her head in her hands. "Oh my God. How many people saw us? I can't believe I just kissed you in front of everyone. Our families are going to freak because we didn't tell them first. My mom will totally give me grief if she hears it from some town busybody and not her own daughter."

I laughed softly. "Breathe, Harps. Breathe."

“How can you breathe at a time like this?” she asked, her voice a bit panicky.

“Don’t hate me, but I might’ve let it slip already to my parents,” I said. Might as well just get it all out.

“What?” she whisper-screamed.

“I know you wanted to wait, but they freaking cornered me this morning. I caved. By the way, they’re thrilled for us,” I said.

“Oh shit. Your mom knowing before my mom? That’s even worse.” She dropped her hands from her face and began fidgeting with her napkin.

I covered her hands with mine, stilling the motion. I felt bad for adding to her stress this morning with my news.

“Look, I know it seems like I’m being irrational, but it’s a lot of pressure. You’re not just some random guy I’m dating. You’re Connor, my best friend since forever. I don’t want to screw this up. I mean, what if this doesn’t work out.”

I tried not to bristle at how easily she imagined this not working out for us, but I understood where she was coming from, especially after Brian. I sucked down my frustration and squeezed her hand. “Harper, this is going to work. We’ll figure everything out no matter what happens, but I need you to be all in on this with me. Don’t think about it failing when we’re just getting started. Please.” I didn’t want her to think about how we could go wrong when we were just starting out.

She gave me a small smile and nodded.

“Con, I want us to work out more than anything. But you know my track record with guys sucks. It’s my nature to second guess.”

“I get that, but remember, Harps, I’m not other guys. We know everything about each other. We’ve had our ups and downs over the years, but we

always find our way back to each other, and I firmly believe we can do that as more than friends. I've never been truly in love with another woman except for you." I was laying it all out. At that moment, I had to. I had to show her that I was in it forever.

"Oh, Con. I love you so much it scares me," she said.

"And I've wanted this for so long that I'm scared, too. But we'll work on it together like we have with everything else that has come up in our lives in the last eighteen years."

"How do you know exactly what to say?" she asked, her gaze locked on mine. It felt like everyone else had disappeared.

"Because I mean every single word. This is it for me. You're it for me." I smiled sheepishly as her eyes widened. "I mean, no pressure or anything."

She laughed softly. "You're it for me, too, Connor."

I tugged her closer to me from across the table so that we met in the middle. "We should get this to go and find a hotel."

She laughed when I followed my words up with a quick kiss.

"I like the way you think, but we have a flight to catch, so you have to be patient."

I groaned, sitting back down on the booth seat. Dammit, I loved her, but I still hated when she was right sometimes.

"And after we finish this, we need to go tell my parents before your mom gets to mine and they start planning our wedding," she added.

An image of Harper in a wedding dress flashed in my brain. I wanted that. Not that I was going to tell her that right now. No need to freak her out further.

Chapter 9



HARPER

“I told you, Ellen. I knew something was going on,” my dad said a short time later when Connor and I stopped by my house to grab my stuff and tell them about us.

Connor just rocked on his heels and grinned. It was reassuring that he had no issue with our families knowing the truth and that the pressure of what could happen didn’t get to him. I mean, I wanted our relationship to work out more than anything I’d ever wanted in my life, but part of me was always waiting for the other shoe to drop.

“I know, I know. It’s just that, when you think something is never going to happen, you push it out of your mind, so this is a surprise,” my mom said. Then she turned to me. “But the best surprise ever. I mean, aside from giving us a grandbaby to spoil at some point.” Then she winked at me. *Freaking winked.*

“Mom,” I admonished, shaking my head.

She shrugged. “Whenever you’re ready, of course.”

I glanced at Connor. This direction in the conversation should have been freaking him out, but he just kept smiling at me.

Would our babies have his red hair or my boring brown?

Nope. Not going there right now.

“Okay, honey, we’ll stop. But we’re happy that you guys finally figured your shit out. Hell, this boy has been in love with you for ages, and let’s not even talk about Brian,” my dad said.

I gaped at him.

“What? We all saw it,” he said.

“Uh.” Connor rubbed the back of his neck, looking sheepish. “I guess I wasn’t totally subtle.”

“You were to me,” I grumbled.

Then he tugged me into his arms, and I rested my head on his chest.

My mom grinned. “I’m so happy for both of you. But this means you’re staying in Denver, doesn’t it?”

“Well, we’ll see. I need to find a job still, after all. I’m calling Dad’s friend tomorrow.”

“I’m sure you’ll get the job, honey. I’ll just miss you,” my mom said.

“Denver is a short flight away,” I said.

“Definitely. You can visit anytime. My parents are flying out when we play Edmonton at home in two months. You should come, too.”

“That could be fun, El,” my dad said.

“Yes, I’m just so excited.”

Dammit. This had been my fear if it didn’t work out. The stakes were already getting higher. This wasn’t just some random guy I was dating. This was Connor Horton. I didn’t know a time in my life when he wasn’t a part of it. Okay, not totally true since I’d spent the last year sort of trying to avoid

him because I was back with Brian. But for the most part, Connor had always been a fixture in my life. Was I causing myself stress for no reason? I didn't typically overanalyze like this, but I wanted this to work out. I needed it to.

Because it was Connor.

I bit back a groan at my internal dialogue.

His hand squeezed my hip, and I looked up at him.

"It's going to be fine," he whispered.

A sense of calm rolled over me.

It was.

It was going to be perfect.

Well, not always perfect because nothing was.

But perfect for us.

"Home sweet home," Connor said hours later when we finally arrived back at his condo that night.

"Sucks that you can't stay longer," I said.

The Stampede had a road trip starting the next day in Vegas. Because everyone was getting back from the Christmas holiday break and Vegas was a quick flight, they were flying out tomorrow morning. But it was a short trip. Only four days since the final away game of the trip was against the other Colorado team, so he'd be back at home for that.

"I wish you could come with me."

"Me too." I wanted to get started on my job search, starting with connecting with my dad's friend. "But you get your own hotel room, so at least we can definitely have some fun video chats."

He wrapped his arms around my waist, drawing me into his chest. "You have the best ideas."

"Yours are pretty decent, too," I said, trailing my fingers down his spine.

“I have a great one right now,” he said with a wink. We’d riled each other up the entire plane ride, and I’d practically climbed into his lap during the cab ride from the airport.

We were finally blissfully alone. No one could walk in on us. And as much as I loved being home, I was beyond excited to be here with Connor and give our new relationship a real go. Before Christmas, everything was all up in the air, and we were just figuring out how to go from friends to more, but now I was here with plans to stay as long as possible. It was different.

Better.

“What are you grinning about?” Connor asked, placing his thumb under my chin to tilt my face up to look at him. “What dirty thoughts are going through your head right now? Because I’m one hundred percent on board with them.”

I laughed. “I actually wasn’t thinking anything dirty. Just that I’m so happy to be here. And that I’m crazy in love with you, Con.”

“Are you getting sappy on me while I’m trying to get in your pants?” he teased, but his warm smile told me everything I needed to know.

“I know, I know. It’s usually the reverse.” I reached down and squeezed his ass for good measure.

He rocked his hips against me, and I bit my lip. Dammit, I wanted him so freaking much.

Lifting me in his arms, he pressed me against the closest wall. “I love you too, Harps. Now can we discuss this while horizontal? Or maybe we don’t need any words at all?”

I wrapped my legs around his waist and sunk my hands into his hair, holding on. “I love the way you think.”

“Want to do it under the Christmas tree?” he asked, walking us deeper into the living room.

“Seriously?” I asked. “There’s a couch right there and a bed just down the hall.”

“You’re supposed to be the adventurous one,” he said, pivoting and heading toward his bedroom. He snagged a piece of mistletoe on the way.

“You don’t need mistletoe, Con. You can kiss me anywhere you want.”

“Fuck, and I cannot wait to do that. But let’s keep it festive.”

I giggled as he carried me into the bedroom. He stood at the end of the bed, and I let my legs fall from around his waist, so I ended up standing in front of him.

He tapped the mistletoe against his chin. “Where to kiss first?”

I loved that our teasing and banter-filled relationship had so easily transitioned into something more. I never would’ve expected that, and I could not get enough of it.

Then he dropped to his knees, his fingers slipping into my waistband to tug down my pants.

“Ah, I know the perfect place to start my exploration.”

“Exploration? Like you’re an adventurer or something?”

“Being with you will always be an adventure, and I’m going all in every chance I get,” he answered. And then his lips were on my body, and my hands were in his hair, holding on for dear life.

He’d said I was his Christmas wish, but he was the dream I’d wanted my entire life, and he’d been right in front of me the entire time.

And I wasn’t going to waste another minute thinking about another shoe dropping. I was going to jump in with both feet and relish in the fact that my boyfriend was also my best friend.

And what was better than that?

Epilogue



HARPER

“**H**ow was your day, dear?” Connor called out when I walked in the front door.

I laughed. “It was great, sweetheart.”

We’d been trying out cheesy nicknames but always went back to Harps and Con.

It’d been a month since we’d returned to Denver after the holidays, and we had settled into a routine. Not that it’d been hard since we already were aware of each other’s little quirks.

I had yet to punch him in my sleep, so that was a plus. And he had yet to drive me crazy with his inability to change the toilet paper roll. And the banter and sex were both still epic.

I’d started at the gallery three weeks ago, and working there was a dream. I loved everything about it, aside from a few snooty customers. But that was just par for the course when working at art galleries. Edwin was the easiest boss I’d ever had, and I was excited to go to work every morning.

And happy to come home to Connor every night. Well, except when he was away. But we'd had more than a few hot-as-hell video chats. He was becoming quite the pro. I bit back a shudder remembering last night. They'd won their game against Arizona, and Connor had gotten a goal. He'd been amped up, and it'd been glorious. I couldn't wait for a live repeat, hopefully, sooner rather than later.

"I don't mind sweetheart, I think," Connor said, walking up to me and tugging me in for a kiss.

I laughed softly. "I'll pass on dear."

Then I swept my tongue against his lips and dove into the kiss. I would never get enough of this man. He knew how to push all my buttons, good and bad, and I was loving every minute of it.

"I missed you," he said when we ended the kiss, his arms still locked around me.

"I was only gone during normal working hours," I said.

"I know. But I was away for days and you were gone when I got home this morning."

"You're cute when you pout. And you were only gone four days." Then I rocked my hips against him, feeling his hard cock under his sweatpants.

He growled, "Harps."

"What? Don't we have some time before we need to leave?" I asked, fluttering my lashes at him.

His chuckle was pained. "Probably, but then everyone is going to comment on my sex hair."

We were meeting some of his teammates and their partners for a group date at some fancy bowling alley. I'd had a lot of fun getting to know the other WAGs.

It still felt weird to include myself in that group, but I enjoyed watching the games with them. A few of us had even grabbed dinner and just hung out when the guys were away. It was nice to be welcomed in so quickly and easily.

“No one is going to comment on your hair. And I’ll try not to tug it in every direction, but when you do that thing with your tongue on my clit, I cannot be held responsible for my actions.”

“Harps,” he rasped, his cheeks tinging pink.

I loved it when he blushed.

“Please, like the rest of them aren’t getting it on every chance they get? Cora and Nate are always slipping away.”

“They teased me endlessly after the New Year’s Eve party at Flower’s house,” he grumbled.

I mean, maybe I shouldn’t have pulled him into the laundry room to have my way with him, but he’d looked so cute in his snowman tie, and he’d been playfully kissing me all night. And the way he filled out his perfectly tailored suit—come on. It was his own damn fault.

“Sin made one joke about your hair and you caved and told them everything.” I ran my hands along the waistband of his sweats.

“Harps,” he growled.

I sighed. “Do that again. Makes me all tingly.”

“Fuck,” he growled.

“My clothes are going to burst into flames at this point.”

Then I was in his arms, and he was sprinting toward the bedroom before setting me back on the ground.

“Strip and then get on your hands and knees. Wouldn’t want to mess up anyone’s hair before we have to leave.”

Fucking hell.

“For such a sweet-looking guy, you can be so dirty and demanding,” I said, shucking my clothes quickly until we were standing in front of each other naked.

“Is it too much? I swear, you make me feral, Harps.”

I ran my hand down his bare chest.

“I love making you feral, Con.” Then I gave him a wink and climbed onto the bed, wiggling my ass for good measure.

“Dammit, Harps.” He groaned.

The bed shifted, and then he was pressed against me. His hands caressed my back, and I could feel the brush of his hard cock every time our bodies moved. I needed him inside of me. I pushed my hips back, trying to find any friction I could, and his strained chuckle made my heart race.

I glanced over my shoulder, meeting his gaze. The heat in his eyes overwhelmed me, and I whimpered.

“Please Con. I need you.”

He leaned over my body, pressing a kiss to the center of my back, and his fingers moved to my stomach, drifting down to my heat.

I cried out as his thumb grazed my clit, and my entire body clenched. He started to torment me, moving his thumb in tight circles before he sank a finger inside of me. My inner muscles fluttered, and I wanted so much more than just his finger.

“Fuck. Harps. You feel so damn good gripping me,” he said, sinking a second finger inside of me.

“I need your cock, Con,” I rasped, curling my fingers into the comforter, my forehead dropping to the pillow.

Then his fingers left me, and his cock thrust inside me. I clenched down

with a moan, fisting the covers as I adjusted my angle to take him as deep as possible.

Inaudible sounds fell from his lips, and I relished in every noise we made together.

His arm banded around my waist and he lifted me up, pressing my back to his chest, keeping himself fully seated inside me.

I turned my head to look at him.

“Wouldn’t want to mess up your hair and makeup,” he said, his grin strained as he continued thrusting into me.

“Let them tease us. It’s so fucking worth it,” I panted.

He kept one hand on my waist and used his other to turn my face to kiss him. His tongue swept against mine and our rhythm faltered. We were messy and chaotic. And it felt amazing. He broke the kiss, nibbling on my lip, and I reached back, wrapping my arm around his nape, holding him to me as we chased our orgasms.

His fingers spread out from my waist, and his thumb pressed against my clit again.

“Come for me, Harps. I’m so fucking close, and I wanted you to squeeze my cock. Fucking hell, you are incredible,” he rasped.

“Oh my God, Con.” His mouth was lethal, whether it was his words or what he could do with that mouth, I would never get enough of that. Of him.

I arched my back, my desire threatening to overtake me. I was nonsensical as he continued to tease my clit and plunge in and out of my body.

“I’m not going to last,” he gritted out, his hand cupping my breast and squeezing.

My body froze, and then I cried out as I tumbled over the edge into bliss. My orgasm hit me hard, and my body turned to jelly. Connor held me

upright, thrusting into me one last time, and then plummeted over the edge right along with me.

I lowered my hands back to the bed as we caught our breath, and then he slipped free of me. He twisted, falling flat on his back on the bed, and pulled me on top of him.

“Can we just stay here?” he asked, running his fingers up and down my spine.

I smiled, dancing my fingers up his chest. I propped myself up, staring at him.

“We just have to show up for a little while,” I said, running my thumb over his lips.

He nipped me, then bathed the spot with his tongue.

“Fine,” he grumbled.

“But then we get to come back home and do this all over again,” I said.

His eyes started to darken all over again.

“There’s nothing in this world I’d rather do than come home with you.”

“Oh my God, you’re so cheesy,” I teased.

He grinned and pressed a kiss to my nose. “And you love it.”

“More than I ever imagined,” I said, smiling up at him.

Being with Connor was amazing and unexpected. Falling in love with him had been as easy as breathing. I still couldn’t believe we were here like this. In each other’s arms and exploring every new and delicious aspect of our relationship.

I couldn’t wait to see what would happen next.

Thank you for reading Home Ice for the Holidays!



Anna is up next.

Can a certain grumpy hockey player heal Anna's broken heart?

About the Author

Stephanie Kay has always loved a good romance, and she got hooked on the dirty ones at the tender age of 14, when she told her mother that if the cover wasn't a bodice ripper, then there was no sex in the book. As an avid mystery reader, her mother never checked to see if Stephanie was lying. Twenty-plus years later, Stephanie's most prized possession is her Kindle, and she may have a Hallmark movie obsession.

She lives in New England with her musician husband, energizer bunny daughter, and perfect writing companion pup. It's a constant adventure with very little sleep.

Stephanie loves to hear from her readers. Please sign up for her for upcoming releases and exclusive excerpts. You can also email her at stephanie@stephkaybooks.com or find her on [and](#) [. For more information, please visit her website, . You can also join her reader group on Facebook, , and discuss books, romance, dessert, and hockey butts.](#)

She hopes you enjoyed *Home Ice for the Holidays* and reviews are always welcome!

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