

One
Frosty
Puckering
Meet Cute

A ROMANTIC COMEDY



PENELOPE
BLOOM

**ONE FROSTY PUCKING MEET
CUTE**

PENELOPE BLOOM

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ANDI

My wedding veil is on the passenger seat, my poofy ass dress is trying to suffocate me in the tiny little car, and I'm officially on the lam.

That's me. *Bride on the lam. Nuptial Nomad. Hitched Houdini.* Or for thriller fans, I could go with *Gown Gone Girl.*

I smile, aware I must look like a complete lunatic. I've cried through my makeup, my bare feet are filthy from my unplanned escape, and I'm pretty sure I got some forest debris in my hair.

It's fine, though. Totally fine. Between the twigs in my hair and the ruined wedding dress, I probably look like a forest nymph. A beautiful, crazy, confused forest nymph.

Right now, I imagine my family is calling everyone I know to track me down. The police might even be involved. *Am I in a high speed police chase?*

I check my rearview mirror and sigh with relief. It's just me and the open mountain road winding up toward the sleepy little town of Frosty Harbor. I've got the chilly winter air, the towering Vermont mountains, and the only slightly smelly interior of my old car to myself.

It's moments like this when a girl realizes she could have made a few

practical decisions during her bridal bailout. Putting on underwear, for example. Swinging by the apartment for toiletries and a few changes of clothes? *Yep*. Those would've been good ideas, but today is apparently not a day for forward thinking and good ideas.

I'm driving to Frosty Harbor because it's where my brother was planning to spend the holidays. One of their star players is injured and lives in a cabin there, so all the starters were going to set up a home base in the small town to keep him company and cheer him up.

Is my overprotective big brother going to be happy that I'm about to show up and finally meet all his hockey friends for the first time? *Nope*. But where else am I supposed to go? Running away from your life sounds all fine and dandy until you realize you have to run *to* somewhere.

I know I should call my brother and let him know I'm not dead. He's probably combing the forests of New York at this very moment, searching for my cold, lifeless corpse.

But I can't bring myself to confront anyone. Not yet. Not even my brother.

I just need some more time and some more space because I'm afraid I'll do the easy thing and agree to go back-back to a life I can now see was never meant for me.

Mortification and shame hit me as I replay my grand escape in my head. I ran away from my own wedding. I can't even begin to run the math on how many people I upset, screwed over, and at the very least, inconvenienced. It's a nuclear level mistake—the kind that leaves radioactive fallout no amount of cleanup efforts can actually erase.

Usually, singing loud to silly songs and dancing always cheers me up.

I'm currently mouthing the words to “WAP” as it blares over my radio while

mascara-laden tears roll down my face.

“Macaroni in a pot,” I whimper, stirring at the air with my free hand as I let out a confused sob.

I do a quick internal double check and make sure I’m not crying because I think I made a mistake. *Nope*. I’m not crying because I’m sorry I won’t be marrying Landon Collins, heir to his father’s pharmaceutical fortune, rider of horses, and owner of a fleet of expensive collector cars. Landon wasn’t a bad guy, and there were good times between us. But reality snuck up on me right before the ceremony and smacked me across the face.

I saw all the little signs I’d been trying to drown with optimism and positivity for months. The missed dates, the cold touches, the way there wasn’t a spark anymore. I’ve always been a romantic, and I knew I would never forgive myself if I settled on anything less than true, toe-curling love. I just can’t believe I was trying to fool myself into thinking I was feeling it all this time.

So, yeah, I’m crying, blubbering, and then rapping a little when the song gets to the good parts.

The road narrows and the shoulder starts to look a little icy, but my trusty little beat-up car chugs along as to-go cups roll around the foot space of my passenger seat.

I sniffle and use my wedding veil to give my nose a very lady-like dab. I glance in the rearview and sigh. Look at me. Thirty-two years old—a practical dinosaur—a known veil vanisher, dirt poor, and thinking about starting over from scratch.

But I can already feel my trademark optimism doing its thing. Dinosaurs deserve love, too, right? And what’s crazier, dashing through the forest in a wedding dress to escape your own wedding, or marrying somebody you know you shouldn’t marry?

I mean, nice guy or not, I can see it so clearly now. Within six months, my married reality would've been watching my husband pulling out his phone, wincing, and telling me he just checked his calendar and noticed we haven't copulated in several weeks. Then he'd ask if I wanted him to pencil me in. *Would I be needing oral, or would penetration do for our appointment? He could schedule both, but he wasn't sure if that would work this week.*

First of all, *always oral*. Second of all, *no*. I want my husband to break down doors with his broad shoulders, carry me to bed, ruin my favorite clothes and underwear in the process of getting them off (and of course, offer to buy me new ones in a cutesy little couple's shopping trip later) and ravage me.

No calendars. That's right. I want to be married to a man who doesn't need to remind himself on a calendar to sleep with me.

I just want some excitement. Spontaneity. True freaking love.

But what now? What the hell am I going to do when I get to Frosty Harbor? I have nothing but my badly torn wedding dress, a tube of chapstick, one slightly used floss pick, two quarters and a dime, and a hairpin. I don't even have shoes. For all I know, now that I'm a missing person, Jake isn't even going to leave New York and come to Frosty Harbor like he planned. I'll become the weird homeless lady in a wedding dress. Kids will make up scary stories about me.

Nope. No mopies. It's fresh start time. The mopies can come in a few weeks when I face all the problems I caused by running away and figure out how to make it up to everyone.

For now, I'll hide out in Frosty Harbor for a while until tensions back home cool off. Jake will show up eventually. *Probably*. I'll hang out with my brother and the teammates he's always refusing to let me meet. It will be just *perfect*. *I hope*.

My car sputters, gives a concerning shake, and then starts smoking. I try to steer off the side of the road and the steering wheel feels like it weighs a million pounds.

I'm no mechanic, but my gut tells me that's not a good sign.

I pull hard on the wheel and something beneath the car makes a loud noise. Now the wheel weighs nothing, which is great, but it's spinning like a kid's toy and apparently useless.

"Not good!" I shout, still shaking the wheel side to side because I have no idea what else to do with my hands. I feel like a toddler pretending to drive her mom's car.

I slam on the brakes because I see a bend in the road coming up and the car is drifting toward the steep shoulder. The brakes only manage to make the car spin, throwing me back against the seat.

The last thing I see is the road, but my car is going backwards and then there's a split second of weightlessness followed by a deafening crash.

I blink a few times and feel like I just woke up from a great nap—only the reason I woke up from my great nap is somebody hit me in the forehead with a bowling ball. I put a hand up to my forehead and find a drop of blood there.
Blood?

Did I just crash my car? Awareness cuts through the groggy fog and I look around, recognizing what happened bit by bit.

I look at the dashboard, still confused. The airbags came out and already deflated. The windshield is cracked. The whole car smells kind of like gunpowder for some reason.

For a few long seconds, I just sit there in the driver seat of my suddenly unfamiliar car. I conduct a comprehensive "limb thereness" test. Four limbs.

That's the right number, isn't it?

Once I've confirmed two arms and two legs is all I had before the crash, I decide I'm the luckiest woman alive for surviving that crash practically unscathed.

I notice the check engine light politely flashing on the dash.

"Oh, that's helpful," I say. My voice sounds distant and muffled after the bang of the crash and the airbags.

I scoop up my veil from the passenger seat, and then I have to throw my shoulder into the door a few times before it creaks open.

"This is great," I say, breathless from the effort. "I'm talking to myself now, and not just in my head. We've gone full crazy because we're talking out loud. And look. I just crashed my car. Is this like some kinda on-the-nose visual representation of the state of my life right now, universe?" As usual, the universe declines to answer my questions.

I walk in front of the car and consider checking under the hood, then I realize the state of the engine probably doesn't matter since my car is wedged into a ditch. Then again, even if the car wasn't stuck in a ditch, the only thing I know about engines is *metal thing makes car go vroom vroom*. Unless words of encouragement can fix mechanical problems, I have no hope of getting this thing running again.

I cross my arms, suddenly noticing the cold bite in the air. At least it's not snowing, but my bare feet are absolutely not going to cut it out here. Somewhere in the distance, a twig breaks and echoes dramatically. A little creature chitters. *Wait*. How do I know it's little? Do bears chitter?

Of course not. That's ridiculous. Bears don't chitter.

But aliens might.

I slowly sink into a defensive stance, lifting my veil in both hands like I'm about to go Jack Reacher on whatever comes at me from the woods.

For the first time since my tied knot trot, the reality of my situation sinks in. Yes, I've been thinking about nothing but what I just did for the last few hours. But there's a difference between thinking about something and *feeling* something.

Right now in this moment, I feel it like a punch in the gut.

I slowly lower the veil and decide the cold air and my lack of proper clothing or heat is the only real threat I'm facing. Well, unless being subject to my obviously poor decision making for the rest of my life qualifies as a threat. It probably should.

I let out a long sigh. *What the hell am I doing?*

The answer seems to come straight out of the ether. *You're acting like an idiot. Call your brother. Ask for help.*

I glare at nobody in particular. That was supposed to be a hypothetical question, but I pull my phone out anyway and make a call to my brother in tears. I explain where I am, what happened to my car, and brace for impact. I might even ask for confirmation that aliens aren't chittering at me as we speak.

His deep voice comes very slowly and very controlled. "Andi. Tell me you're not hurt. That's all I care about right now."

"I'm... I bled my own blood a little." I tap my forehead and find the cut has already started to dry over. "It's not bad, though."

"Fuck. I'm going to call an ambulance."

"No!" I shout. "No. Please, I can't afford a freaking ambulance. I'm so broke

I was actually relieved to crash – now I don't have to figure out how I was going to pay to fill up the gas tank.”

“I'll pay for it. For fuck's sake, Andi. You crashed your car. We're all worried as shit here. I've been looking through the forest for six hours trying to find you. I thought maybe you had a seizure, wandered off, and fell down to freeze or something.”

“Sorry,” I say, fidgeting with the torn edge of my wedding dress. “No. I just... realized Landon was never the right guy. I didn't want to believe the magic was fading, and I kept thinking I could fix it later. But this morning I realized I was acting crazy. I should know it in my bones when a guy is right. I shouldn't have to talk myself into it or make excuses. And... well, then I became the altar aviator.”

There's a long pause. “Where are you right now?”

“Like half an hour outside Frosty Harbor on some random ass forest road and suddenly thinking maybe going commando in my wedding dress wasn't the most climate appropriate decision.”

“You wh–” He pauses again. “I'm going to call the guys and have them come pick you up. They should just be finishing up practice now.”

“You mean I finally get to meet your teammates? All it took was a betrothal bypass, a car crash, and a lack of proper winter gear?”

“Could you please stop coming up with weird phrases to describe what you just did, Andi? This is serious. There are like a hundred people here right now trying to figure out where the hell you are. When I tell them–”

“You can't tell them. They'll all just try to make me come back, and I can't do that. I need this. I need to hide out for a while and get my head on straight. Please, Jake. You can call your teammates, but don't tell anyone else I talked

to you.”

He sighs. “They’re going to find out eventually.”

“Then I’ll deal with it eventually. But not right now. Please.”

“Dammit, Andi.”

I bounce on my feet a little, already feeling the bitter cold from the dirt trying to sink straight into me. Maybe I need to just wait in the car and hope it isn’t about to explode or something.

“How is Landon handling it?” I ask, wincing even as I say the words. It feels like that time I asked my doctor if the three headaches I had last month meant I had a brain tumor. I really didn’t want to know the answer, but I hoped I was just being paranoid, and I knew if I didn’t ask I wouldn’t be able to sleep at night.

Turns out, three headaches in a month is perfectly normal. Who knew?

“Fine, weirdly enough. Was there something going on I didn’t know about? He looks like he’s worried for you, but not upset about the wedding being called off. His parents seem pretty pissed, though.”

“Good,” I sigh. “Not about his parents, but I’m glad Landon took it well.”

I hear a door slam.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“I just got to mom and dad’s place. I’m not going to be able to get there till tomorrow morning, but I already texted Jesse while we’ve been talking. They’re leaving the rink now and coming your way.”

“Okay. So if a car full of beefy hockey guys pulls up, I just get in, right?”

Jake sighs again. “Don’t call them beefy. Actually, don’t even talk to them.

Don't make eye contact. They're all convinced they're God's gift to women, and it doesn't take much encouragement to get them excited."

"I just pulled the old matrimonial mirage, Jake. Do you really think I'm already planning on getting in another relationship?"

"How many stupid phrases have you come up with for being a runaway bride, Andi?"

I grin, even though I'm shivering and my teeth are clattering hard now. "It was a long drive, but I'm almost out of phrases, so we need to wrap this conversation up. But, um, Jake?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks for not yelling at me or being mad or anything like that. I'm sorry, I—" I can feel the tears coming.

Jake must sense it, too. "You're my little sister, so shut up. Of course I have your back. I always will. Now get in your car if it's not on fire. Try to stay warm. And *do not* tell any of the guys you 'went commando'."

I eyeball the car, give it a cautious little kick, then nod. "Car's not on fire," I confirm. "Going to get in and try to warm up now. I'll just cuddle up with my itchy wedding gown and veil."

"I'm glad you ditched that guy. He wasn't good enough for you. But did you have to crash your fucking car and get yourself stranded?"

"Sorry. Thanks for sending in the calvary to save me."

"Any time. I love you, Wedding Vanisher."

I laugh. "That one was kind of weak. But I love you too."

JESSE

I'm driving slow, hands tight on the wheel and eyes alert as I scan the road for signs of tire tracks. The guys are sweaty from practice and my injured ass is perfectly clean in a heavy wool shirt. Carter and Liam were the only ones who managed to get themselves moving fast enough to join me in the search for Jake's little sister. Nolan and Maddox had just gotten in the showers, so we told them we'd catch up later.

"Think we'll find her?" Carter asks. He has a mop of brown hair that's permanently disheveled, mischievous blue eyes, and a knack for turning even the most dire situations into a joke. On the ice, it can be an asset. His over-the-top celebrations and trick shots have a way of calming all our nerves, even in the biggest games.

"There's only one road into town from that direction," I say. "We just need to keep looking."

"A runaway bride, huh?" Liam muses. He's in the back of the car, cold air blowing through his hair so he looks even more like a movie star than usual. He has chiseled features with green eyes that seem to win over girls the moment he meets them. On the ice, he's all grace and smooth skating, with a knack for scoring in ways that look effortless. But that's Liam in a nutshell. Everything seems to come too easily for him, which is probably why he

always seems on the verge of boredom. “Why do you think she bailed on the groom?”

“Don’t know,” I say. “Jake wasn’t exactly bursting with details. He texted that she crashed on the side of the road coming in from the east side of town. She’s cold and needs us to get her ASAP. That’s all I know.”

“Think she’s cute?” Carter asks. “Or do you think she’s like a female version of Jake? All big muscles and big eyebrows with a jawline to slice garlic in prison for mobsters?”

“What?” Liam asks.

“Haven’t you seen that movie?” Carter says, circling his hand as he searches for the title. “Ah, shit. I can’t remember what it’s called. The one where the mobsters are in jail and they cook this pasta meal, but they have to cut the garlic so thin they use razor blades?”

“Uh, no,” Liam says. “And it’s concerning that you’ve paid so much attention to Jake’s features. I should tell him you have a crush. Maybe he can cut you out of your clothes with that jaw of his you admire so much.”

“I was only trying to imagine what his little sister looks like,” Carter complains. “You know me, man. Tell me I can’t have something and I just want it more. How many times has he told us his little sister is off limits since we met him? A thousand? I’ve never even seen a picture of her. It’s shameful.”

“Would you both focus on helping me look?” I ask. I keep picturing her shivering somewhere, breath coming out of her mouth in frosty puffs. A wedding is the day most girls spend their whole lives dreaming of. I can’t even imagine how she must be feeling to have run away from her own wedding only to crash her car on the side of a freezing mountain.

“I can look and bullshit at the same time,” Carter complains. “I’m an elite athlete. I could even chew gum while I do this if I wanted.”

“Then maybe quit chatting so I don’t have to listen to you,” I suggest.

“Somebody’s cranky,” Carter says.

“Jesse’s always cranky. It’s part of his charm.”

“Not always,” Carter says. “He has been extra cranky since he hurt his shoulder. Well, I guess he also got more cranky after that thing with Sarah.”

I tense up at Carter’s words. Both topics feel like fucking barbs in my side. I try not to let my irritation show, though.

“Do you know what tact is?” Liam asks. “Sorry, Jesse. I’m apologizing for Carter and his big mouth.”

“It’s fine. Just tell me if you see something.”

“Do you think the car is on fire?” Carter asks. “That would be pretty easy to spot.”

“If Jake’s sister dies before we get to her,” I say. “Jake is going to personally murder all three of us, starting with you.”

Carter folds his arms. “Point taken. We’re hoping the car isn’t on fire, then.”

We drive a few more minutes before I finally see a set of skid marks. I follow them and spot the little red car. The shoulder slopes down from the road and thankfully curves up long enough that she didn’t roll all the way down the mountain. The car is bent in the center so it’s slightly in the shape of a “V”.

I pull the truck to the side and flip on my hazards. I look down at the car and think I’m seeing the airbags at first, except they should’ve deflated by now.

I realize what I’m looking at, though. It’s a big, poofy wedding dress

practically taking up the whole cabin of the car. I don't know how the girl even drove safely with that thing on. Actually, it kind of explains the fact that her car is crashed in a ditch.

"You two wait here," I say, getting out.

Liam holds up his hands in a "what the hell?" kind of gesture. Carter opens his mouth to say something, but I just jab my finger at him. "You can meet her when she gets in the car. But she might be freaked out. I don't want to overwhelm her."

"Yeah, yeah," Carter grumbles. "You just want first crack at her. At least be honest about it."

I ignore him and slam the door, picking my steps carefully down the steep shoulder toward her car. "You okay?" I ask.

I approach the driver side window and can't even see her through all the white lace. I hear her voice come muffled from inside the dress.

"How do I know you're not a roadside serial killer?"

"Uh," I say. I was kind of expecting her to rush out of the car and offer me thanks. "I know your brother, Jake."

"Prove it."

I can't help grinning a little. I feel like I'm speaking with a talking floof of lace and white silk right now. A sassy floof of lace and white silk, that is.

"Your brother is going to kill me if you freeze to death out here. So I'd really prefer it if you got out of the car and followed me up to the road. I've got the heat blasting in my truck right now."

There's a long pause. "I *am* a bit nippy," she admits.

“Can I get you out of there, then?”

“Alright, beefy hockey guy. Let’s do this.”

I pull on the door, but have to give it a few yanks before it comes loose. The girl practically falls out of the car and lands straight on me. She grips my hips on both sides, trying to keep herself from falling, but my feet catch on a patch of something that leaked from her car and froze. We both go toppling backwards. My back hits cold dirt and her face lands in my lap. She screams into my crotch, bare feet kicking uselessly as she’s tangled in her dress and her feet can’t get traction on the frozen ground.

All she’s managing to do is grind her face harder between my legs. I try to get up, but my feet slip, too.

The sound of laughter from above makes me look up just as she realizes her only chance of escape is to roll sideways.

“Jesus,” Carter says, skidding his way down the hillside. “And I thought Liam worked his magic fast. Four seconds and you already got her going down on you? I find it usually works best if you take your pants off first, though. Feels a lot better that way.”

“I’m so sorry,” she says, teeth clattering.

“Shit,” I say, managing to get up and extend a hand toward her. She takes it, and her skin is freezing.

When she gets up, her dress finally pulls away from her face enough for me to see her. Her skin is pale and her hair is dark. She has big, bright brown eyes and an upturned nose. She looks like a fucking princess, and she makes my breath catch. Her wedding dress has bits of leaves stuck all in the clingy lace fabric and the hem is torn up to mid-thigh on one side, like it got caught on something. I realize I’m admiring the shape of her leg and blink, forcing

my eyes somewhere else. “Come on,” I say, hand still holding hers.

“Should Liam and I wait outside the truck and give you two some privacy?” Carter asks. “I mean, if you guys want us to watch, that’s cool, too.”

“We slipped,” I say. “Can you shut up and help? She’s fucking freezing.”

“Oh, it’s not so bad,” she says through clattering teeth.

“Where are your shoes?” I ask, looking down at her feet, which are covered in dirt.

“I tried to pull a Cinderella. But I lost both shoes instead of just the one. So much for my fairy tale exit, huh?”

Something about her carefree attitude despite a moment in her life that has got to be near rock-bottom strikes me. Her eye makeup is smeared and there’s a twig stuck in her hair. Her car looks like it’s posing as a letter of the alphabet and her wedding dress is covered in dirt. All this, and she’s making lighthearted jokes?

“Did you hit your head?” I ask.

“You know,” she says. “I’m starting to get offended by how often people ask me that.”

“No,” I say. I reach up, gently touching a small cut on her otherwise perfect forehead. “You’ve got a cut. We should take you into town and have the doctor take a look. You could have a concussion.”

“Hear that?” Carter says as we reach the truck.

Liam is giving us a mildly interested look from the back seat.

“Jesse is already trying to convince her to let him play doctor. Don’t listen to him. The only one here who’s qualified to be your doctor is me. I got

certified in CPR a few years ago. If you need mouth-to-mouth, I'll take one for the team and administer it, Jake's sister."

She narrows her eyes at him. "My name is Andi. Has Jake really not told you guys my name?"

I open the passenger door for her in the front, jerking my thumb for Carter to get his ass in the back with Liam. "Your brother treats you like a national secret."

"Same goes for you guys," she says, lifting her huge dress and trying to get up into the truck. She struggles, so I kneel and thread my hands together, giving her a makeshift step.

She smirks at my gesture, curtseys, then plants her filthy foot in my hand and pauses. "Um, don't look up while I do this. Jake told me not to mention it, but I kind of went commando under this dress."

And just like that, my cock, which has been in a state of hibernation since my break up with Sarah, stirs to life. I stare hard at the ground, watching her dirt-stained toes flex as she pushes herself up and crawls into the passenger seat. She shuffles, tucking the dress in around her and then gives me a thumbs up once she's settled. I close the door for her, shaking my head.

No wonder Jake didn't tell us about his sister. She's fucking infectious. If I introduce her to the team, they're all going to be punching each other out for a chance to make a move on her. The assholes probably won't even care that she clearly needs some time and space, given the whole runaway bride thing.

I get back behind the wheel and look at Liam and Carter. The expressions on their faces immediately tell me this girl is going to be trouble. I have about thirty minutes to figure out how the hell I'm going to keep them away from her.

“So,” Carter says. “We’ve got a spare bedroom in the cabin, right? If not, she could have my bed. I’ll just sleep on the floor until she’s ready to invite me in. Or if you’re still cold, we could cuddle up for warmth.”

Andi is rubbing her hands together in front of the heaters. She pulls them to her face, pursing her full lips and blowing on them. “Sorry. I know I look like quite the catch, but I’m completely broke. I couldn’t pay for a room at your cabin. I think I’m just going to hide out at a fast food place and wait for my brother to come pick me up.”

“No,” I say. “We’re not taking your money. But I don’t think it would be a good idea for you to sleep in the cabin with us.”

She tilts her head at me, mischief glinting in her eyes. “Why is that?”

I clench my teeth together. Carter leans forward, punching my good shoulder from the back seat. “Yeah, Jesse. Why is that? Worried you’ll pop a stiffy in the middle of the night and puncture your water bed?”

She laughs, clapping her hands. “Wait. You really sleep on a water bed?”

“The guys make fun of me for it, but it is a nice way to sleep.”

“Wow,” she says, still smiling. “I’ve always kind of wanted to sleep on a water bed.”

“Hey, Jesse,” Carter says. “Remember when you asked me to trade beds with you? I’ve thought harder about it and decided to allow you to trade with me. I’ll take your water bed. For the team.”

“I never asked to trade beds or rooms with you, Carter. It’s my cabin. Why would I want to give you my room?”

“Come on,” he says, grinning. “Help me out, dude.”

“He calms down eventually,” Liam says. “Carter just gets excited when he

meets new people. He's obnoxious when he's excited."

"I've been called endearing," Carter says. "By nicer people," he adds under his breath.

"I don't mind it," Andi says. "I've always wanted to meet Jake's teammates. He's just... protective. He's worried I'm going to fall in love with them or something. *You*," she says, correcting herself as if she's just now realizing we are "them".

Carter runs a hand through his hair, only managing to make it messier. "Well, you've already got the dress. What do you say we leave these losers behind? You and me can go get hitched somewhere."

She laughs, even though I'm not sure Carter was joking. "You know he said you guys weren't even fun. Obviously he was just trying to keep me away. This is already great."

"Right," Carter says, sinking back into his seat. "We're a blast."

"I think she should stay in the guest house," I say suddenly. "Nolan can take the spare bedroom and we'll give the guest house to Andi."

"Does *she* plan to stay in Frosty Harbor long enough to need a bed?" Liam asks.

Andi tilts her head as if she's thinking over the idea for the first time. "Maybe I will. My family used to visit here when I was a kid for the holidays. Jake will be here, too. I was kind of bummed to be away from him for Christmas during the honeymoon. But now I wouldn't have to be. And besides, what better place for a fresh start?"

"Jesse grew up here," Liam says. "He could show you the local's tour."

"Is that how you guys have a cabin to stay in?" Andi asks.

“Yeah,” I say. “My parents left it to me.” I tap my shoulder. “I screwed up my shoulder in the first game of the season. I’m resting and training on my own here in town until I recover. The team came to spend the holidays with me in my hometown.”

“That’s so sweet. I can’t wait to meet everyone. Is the whole team at the cabin?” Andi asks.

“Just the starters,” I say. “There’s the three of us, then Nolan, Maddox, and your brother.”

“So tell me about everybody. Do you guys have cool nicknames? Wait,” she says, turning in her seat to face all of us. “Let me guess them.” She starts with Liam, who is lounging in the back and grinning. “I bet they call you *Hollywood*.”

“More like shitstain,” Carter laughs.

“And you,” she says... “*Joker*.”

“Oh, come on. That’s way too edgy for me. You can call me *Heartstopper*.”

“No,” Liam laughs. “Nobody is allowed to call you that.”

“And you...” she says, looking me over. She takes a long time, tapping her lips in thought. “You’re harder to figure out. I’m going to have to think about your nickname.”

“Oooh,” Carter says. “How come he gets to be hard to figure out? I can be mysterious. You know I don’t even like chocolate. I bet that raises all kinds of questions about my troubled past, doesn’t it?”

“Sorry,” she says. “You’re very mysterious, too.”

I keep my focus on the road, but my thoughts are spinning. Part of me thought maybe my heart had permanently frozen over after Sarah. I decided

to put all my passion into hockey this season. I wanted to leave it all on the ice. Play my ass off, clear my head, and move on with my life.

And then I had to fuck up my shoulder. My stick ended up hitting an opposing player's skate during a slapshot and tore something deep in my rotator cuff. I can still live a mostly normal life, but it's going to be several months before I can swing a hockey stick again. For the first time in years, I've had to look in the mirror and see just plain Jesse—not Jesse the hockey player, or Jesse the teammate. Now all I see is Jesse, the guy who couldn't keep his girlfriend from running off. I see the guy who doesn't know who the hell he is without hockey.

Now this?

I'm gripping the wheel so hard my knuckles have gone white. I'll be fine. The runaway bride sitting beside me is probably going to get bored with Frosty Harbor after a day or two. She'll go back to her pretty little life and I'll be left to brood alone, just the way I'd planned.

My teammates haven't said it, but I know they're aware I'm not in the best place right now. It's why they are making sure to spend as much time in town as they can while I'm here rehabbing. Contractually, I'm not obligated to go to games injured, even though I know I should be dragging my ass to them to support the guys. None of them have said a word about it, so far, and I wonder if they ever will.

Either way, I'll spend Christmas with my teammates here in Frosty harbor. Then they'll go back to finish out the season and leave me to wallow. What more could I want?

But instead of the silence I've come to expect when I ask that question, I find my eyes sliding to the girl in the passenger seat of my truck. I jerk them back to the road, grip the wheel harder, and wonder if I'm really that stupid.

ANDI

“So they said you took a bump to the head?” The woman asking is in her thirties, with mousy blonde hair and a doctor’s coat on. I’m in a room that looks about a hundred years old and sitting on a chair covered in crinkly, disposable paper. Her name tag reads “Dr. Knight.”

“I think so,” I say. “I might have crashed my car a little bit.”

She clicks her tongue. “Take a deep breath for me.”

I breathe in while she listens. “I noticed Jesse Prince brought you in. Are you two a couple? The word around town was that he had taken himself off the market after things with Sarah went south.”

Well, then. Apparently small town doctors also deal in gossip. “Um, no,” I say. “He’s my brother’s teammate. They came to rescue me because I’m too poor for ambulances.”

“Oh, you wouldn’t want a ride in our ambulance anyway,” the doctor laughs. “Those two meatheads refuse to use GPS and they’re always getting lost. And if they’re not getting lost, they’re trying to seduce female patients.”

“And they still have jobs?” I ask.

She leans in my face, shining a light in my pupils and breathing her coffee

breath in my nose. “Well, Frosty Harbor isn’t exactly a booming labor market. Sometimes you just have to take what you can get.”

“I see,” I say, hoping that isn’t the mentality that landed Dr. Knight her position. “Does it seem like I have a concussion?”

“Oh, no. You’re fine. So, what’s the story with the wedding dress? At first I thought maybe it was some sort of costume. But that thing is legit, isn’t it? Or it was, at least.” She gives me a sad look as she lifts the torn hem.

“Well,” I say, suddenly certain this doctor will wind up telling the whole town anything I share with her. “It’s kind of a long story. But I pulled the old betrothal backout.”

“You’re a runaway bride?” she asks, eyebrows shooting up. “How exciting. Did you run away for Jesse Prince? Can’t say I blame you. I think every girl in Frosty Harbor has a special place in their heart for Jesse. Of course, he’s about as available as a statue. Well,” she pauses, tapping her chin. “I guess nobody would stop you from romancing a statue. He’s as available as a statue in a high security prison.”

“Why would they keep a statue in prison?” I ask slowly.

She narrows her eyes.

I realize I’m not sure I actually want the answer to that, so I cut her off. “But no. I just met him like half an hour ago. He’s my big brother’s teammate.”

“Mhm, mhm,” she says, looking in my ears. “Well, I’d say you’re all healthy, Miss Summers. That’s a pretty name. Miss Summers in Frosty Harbor. Makes you wonder what will win, your sunshine or our cold winter, doesn’t it? Your warm lady parts or Jesse’s cold manhood.”

I smile awkwardly. “Right. Makes you wonder!” I put a little false cheer into my voice, suddenly eager to be out of the room with this “doctor”.

“I’m sure you’re practically chomping at the bit to get out there and rejoin those rugged boys, huh?”

“Yep,” I say. “That’s me.”

She smiles and gestures to the door. “You’re good to go. No charge. Consider it a welcome to Frosty Harbor treat, on me.”

“Thank you.”

I don’t bother telling her if it wasn’t free, I’d have to ask if doctor’s offices have dishes I could wash to pay off my debt. I’ve never been really good at holding steady jobs, accumulating savings, or planning for my future. I like to think of myself as a “happy in the moment” kind of girl. If that means living in a crummy apartment or bunking with a friend for a little, so what? It’s all just part of life’s adventures. But life’s adventures don’t really do a great job of paying for healthcare.

Jesse, Carter, and Liam are all waiting in the lobby for me. They look ridiculous in the chairs sized for normal people. All three guys are well over six feet tall, broad, and muscular.

Jesse bolts to his feet when I come out. “Well?” he asks. “Are you alright?”

I flash two thumbs up. “Healthy!”

It’s cute how relieved they all look, especially Jesse. They just met me, but it looks like they were all out here biting their nails while they waited to find out my condition.

“So,” I say. “Jake is going to be here tomorrow. I can handle hiding between some bookshelves for a night or something. I really don’t want to be any trouble for you guys.”

“No,” Jesse says. “We’re not going to have you sleeping on the floor in a

library. No way. It's not safe, for starters, and—"

I grin, glancing out the window at the picturesque little snowy mountain town. It looks straight out of a Hallmark movie. I bet if I walked outside right now and tilted my nose to the sky, a perfect little snowflake would land on my tongue and a cheery old man would ring a bell, because that's exactly the kind of stuff that happens in places like this. "Dangerous town, huh?"

Liam grins and elbows Carter, who is watching Jesse with amusement. I think they're both interested to see how he's going to justify this.

"Well," Jesse looks uncomfortable. "A few years back, there was a violent crime here."

"Wasn't it man on statue violence, though? That old guy was pissed they got his face wrong so he drove his car into the statue they put up for him?"

"What is it with this place and statues?" I ask no one in particular.

"Oh, statues are a big deal here," Carter says. "It was one of the first things Jesse told us about when he showed us around. Anybody who's anybody eventually gets a statue. Honestly, if you don't get a statue around here, you're kind of a failure at life."

I narrow my eyes. "Really?"

"Really," Jesse says, sounding impatient. "But I'm not going to leave you on your own when I have a perfectly good cabin you can rest at. You just had a car accident. Even if you have a clean bill of health, you should be somewhere comfortable."

"Where?" Carter asks, grinning wide. "Like your water bed?"

"If she wants," he says, shrugging.

"Uh, I—" I start to stammer as my mind fills with an image of me snuggling

up to Jesse tonight. *Nope, nope, nope. Bad mind.*

“Shit,” Jesse says as Liam and Carter laugh to themselves. “I just meant you could sleep on my bed if you wanted to rest. Not that I’d be...” he trails off and sighs. “Would you just come to the cabin and hang out till your brother gets back? I don’t like the idea of leaving you all on your own at the library.”

“What if I asked you guys to stand guard outside the library for me? You could do a bird call if any angry old statue-ramming men are driving towards me.”

“I volunteer,” Carter says, slapping a fist over his heart.

Jesse looks reluctant. “If... that’s what you really want, sure.”

“I’m kidding. “The cabin sounds great.”

“Oh,” Jesse nods with relief. “Good. You can take a nap in the guest house if you want. No one will bother you. Nolan can even cook you something if you’re hungry. Are you hungry?”

I smile. “A little. Sure.” My stomach does a very unladylike groan at the thought of food. I hope none of them hear it.

“Then it’s settled,” Carter says, clapping his hands. “To the cabin!”

“This should be interesting,” Liam mutters as he stands.

Jesse puts a hand on the small of my back like I might fall at any moment, guiding me outside to the truck. I could complain and protest. I could tell him I’m not some damsel in distress who is about to fall over without support.

But he’s possibly the most jaw-droppingly gorgeous man I’ve ever laid eyes on.

It’s hard not to gawk at his powerful frame, which is undoubtedly the result

of years and years of grueling training. He practically radiates agility and command, all lean muscle and potential energy, like some big cat made to prowl dark forests and pounce.

His dark hair is tousled and frames a chiseled face with brown eyes and a mouth I find strangely captivating. It's something about the way it moves when he talks that's almost mesmerizing.

So, yeah, I let him put his hand on my back even though I'm not in danger of slipping and falling. *Sue me.*



WE LOAD INTO THE TRUCK AND RIDE A SHORT WAY BACK OUT OF TOWN, UP A section of mountain, and pull up to a huge log style cabin. It looks old, but well-maintained.

“This is it,” Jesse says. “I can take you straight to the guest house if you’re not up for meeting the guys yet.”

“I’d like to meet them,” I say.

Jesse runs his tongue over his lips, then nods. “Alright, then. Let’s go.”

He does the thing with his hand on my back again, and this time I wonder if he’s trying to claim me for himself or simply keeping the others from thinking I’m free game. Jesse punches in a code for the front door lock, then opens two big double doors.

The interior of the cabin is all cozy yellows and browns, with warm lamp-light and a fire burning in the hearth. There are animal furs and blankets all over comfortable looking furniture, with a mini-library behind the living room that I want to go curl up and die in.

A tall guy with shoulder-length, straw blonde hair, looks our way. He has blue eyes and a scar running from his cheek to his chin. I've been around hockey enough to suspect it's a puck to the face injury. The sight of it makes my skin crawl with sympathy. It must have hurt.

The guy opens his mouth to say something, but freezes when he sees me. "Oh," is all he says.

"Nolan," Jesse says. "This is Jake's sister, Andi. She's off-limits."

I slide my eyes toward him. That's a bit of a strange way to introduce somebody, but I decide maybe Jesse is more like my brother. Protective to a fault. For some reason, I don't think his protectiveness has something to do with his intentions towards me. He seems to just want to keep the other guys from taking advantage of me.

"Obviously," Nolan says. "Even if she wasn't Jake's sister, she's wearing a wedding dress."

Jesse seems to have forgotten that detail. He looks down at me, then pulls something from my hair. I look at his hand and notice he's holding a twig. *Thanks, Dr. Knight*, I think. You did a full physical on me and didn't think to pull the freaking twig from my hair before sending me out to the waiting room full of hot, beefy hockey guys?

"Did that come from my hair?" I ask.

He grins, chucking it to the side. "You're good now."

"Are they back?" Another voice calls from somewhere upstairs. I hear footsteps coming down toward us and then see a big, heavily muscled man with shaggy dark hair. He stops short when he spots me. "Oh, wow. A runaway bride? That's super good luck."

I scrunch up my face. "What?"

“Sorry,” he says. “I just mean it’s a good omen. Runaway brides mean fresh starts. Maybe that’s a good sign for our next game.”

“That’s Maddox,” Carter explains. “He’s got like three brain cells, and he uses all of them to hold every wild, silly superstition you can imagine.”

“You shouldn’t talk like that about superstitions, man. It’s bad luck.”

Carter gives me a “see?” kind of look.

I smile. “Hi, Maddox. And hi, Nolan. I’m Andi Summers.” I’m distracted when my phone buzzes from my bag, which I now notice is smeared with dirt. I glance at the screen and see a text from Jake.

Jake: Be there as soon as I can tomorrow. Don’t do anything crazy. I hope the guys are taking good care of you, but not too good. I calmed mom and dad down. They are good. Everything is good here, so don’t freak out too much.

I look up from my phone and see all five hockey players are just watching me. It’s a little overwhelming, and I’m also aware that I probably look several shades of crazy. I’m wearing my big wedding dress, my hair is wild, I’ve got a cut on my forehead, and I’m wearing a pair of old, way-too-big snow boots Jesse let me borrow from his truck. *Yeah*. I can’t imagine they’re forming the highest opinions of me right now.

“Well,” Nolan says, looking around the kitchen. “Are you hungry? I was just making bread.”

“You’re *making* bread? Like slicing it, or actually making it?” I ask.

“I’m making it. I brought my mother from home for this.”

I narrow my eyes, then lean a little to see deeper into the kitchen. “Your mom is here?”

Everybody laughs, and I smile, even though I don't get the joke.

"It's a cooking thing," Nolan explains. I like the way he's smiling. He's not laughing at my expense. He just wants me to understand. "In cooking terms, a 'mother' is flour, water, yeast, and beneficial bacteria. Bakers use it for making breads like sourdough, but call it a mother. With regular feedings, you can keep it alive forever. My grandma started this one over forty years ago, and we've been feeding it and cooking with it ever since."

"I know," Jesse says. "It sounds super creepy. It's just a jar that looks like a bubbly milkshake."

"Well," I say. "I, um, can't wait to taste your mother?"

JESSE

Andi is at the kitchen table with Carter and Nolan. The three of them are going on and on about some TV show they all like, which is based on a book they read as kids.

Most women I've met would've rushed off to find a bathroom so they could clean up as soon as they walked in and saw all of us. I like that Andi has been sitting there looking like she just rolled down a hill in the forest and doesn't seem to care. She's just absorbed in the conversation, oblivious to anything else.

At the same time, I *don't* like that I like several things about the small woman. She's one of my best friend's little sisters, for starters. I also had a very clear plan to mope and feel sorry for myself for at least a few more months.

I watch them for a little while, ignoring the annoying temptation to step in and get her away from the guys. I remind myself she's not mine and she's never going to be. Even if she wasn't Jake's little sister, I know I'm too much of a mess right now for relationships. Letting myself get tempted by her would be pointless. Hell, it would be worse than pointless. It would be painful.

I head out to the back patio and lean on the railing, taking in the swaying trees of the Vermont mountains. Liam joins me a few minutes later.

“Is this a solo brooding session, or is company allowed?” he asks.

“Company’s allowed.”

He takes a spot in one of the adirondack chairs on the deck and kicks his legs up, looking out to his side to take in the trees with me. “I’ve been there, you know. If you want to open up and talk about it, I’m all ears.”

“I don’t,” I say.

“What Sarah did was fucked up, she shouldn’t—”

“I said I don’t want to talk about it.” I pause, take a deep breath, and glance at my friend. “And it doesn’t have anything to do with Jake’s sister, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

He smiles his movie star smile. *Hollywood*. Andi’s silly little nickname rings in my brain when I look at Liam.

“Your words,” he says easily. “Not mine.”

I shake my head and look back at the trees. “She’s not going to want to stick around here, anyway.”

“You sure? Frosty Harbor can be pretty charming around the holidays. Girl just bailed on her wedding. I doubt she’s excited about the idea of going back to her life and dealing with the fallout. A little while hiding out here probably sounds like exactly what the doctor ordered.”

“Maybe,” I say.

Liam gets up and gives my shoulder a squeeze. “Look, man. Telling you shit you don’t want to hear is my job as your teammate and your friend. So here it

comes. Sarah broke your heart. But broken hearts are the price we pay on the road to finding love. And if you ask me, I think that's what we're all here to do."

I give him a sidelong look. "I can think of a few other choices. Passion. Hobbies. Travel." I gesture vaguely around us. "Just enjoying nature, or some shit."

He chuckles and shakes his head. "All great stuff, yeah. But all better with somebody to share it with. Soulmates, Jesse. We're all just feeling around in the dark while we wait for the right one to come along and click with us. Sometimes we're not ready to admit it. Sometimes we never succeed. But shit, man. Life is short. I don't want to see you waste a chance to find the right girl for you."

"That's your worldview. I'm pretty sure I can live a happy and full life by myself. I've got you guys. I've got the game. What else do I need?"

"Carter won't rub your feet when they're sore or give you bathtime rubdowns after a long week."

"Actually," I say. "I'm pretty sure he would if I asked nicely."

Liam laughs. "Okay. Bad example. I'm just saying to keep an open mind. And an open heart." Liam thuds my chest with his fist. "I want to see you happy again."

"I'll get there."

He leaves me on the patio and I find myself looking back inside. I don't see Andi at the table anymore. I'm about to go in and check on her when she bursts out the doors to the deck, smiling with her hands behind her back. She tilts her chin, looking up at me with her big princess eyes.

"You're going to freeze out here," I say, pulling off my jacket and extending

it toward her. “At least put this on.”

She hesitates. “Won’t you be cold?”

“I’m fine.”

She takes the jacket, slips it on, and then gives herself a hug and closes her eyes. “Smells good.”

“What?” I ask.

“Nothing.” She smiles quickly. “I was actually hoping to ask you a huge favor, though.”

“Anything,” I breathe before I realize how fucking pathetic I am.

“Jake’s going to be here tomorrow, and I feel like I’d rather not still be in my wedding dress by then. I’m also not sure I can sleep in this, and I don’t know if you want me getting naked in your bed. Do you think you could take me into town for a little shopping?”

I raise an eyebrow. Something else thinks about rising, too, because the image of Andi Summers naked and slipping beneath her sheets is waking parts of me that I’d rather keep slumbering. “I wouldn’t mind. But places close early here. By the time we got you to town, nothing would be open. You can borrow some of my clothes for tonight. I’m sure they’ll be big, but it should do.”

“Okay,” she says slowly. “I can do that. And you really don’t mind taking me in the morning to get clothes?” She clutches her hands together, smiling. “I may just need to borrow a little money. And then I can have Jake pay you back tomorrow. *And then I’ll figure out how to pay him back,*” she says forehead scrunching more and more as she speaks, as if it’s some complicated puzzle.

“Alright, then. That settles that.”

“Thank you!” She rushes forward and hugs me. “For everything,” she says, voice muffled by my chest. “For saving me, not looking up my dress, taking me to the doctor, letting me stay in your cabin, introducing me to your teammates and letting me taste Nolan’s mother, giving me your jacket, and now this.”

I smile, noticing that she still manages to smell like all things feminine, even in her current state. I also thought I was letting her borrow my jacket, but it sounds like she’s keeping it. Maybe that should annoy me, but I just find it endearing. “Sure. You’d do the same for me.”

“Oh, no,” she laughs. “I would’ve definitely looked up your dress. Not that I’ve been picturing you in a dress. I just mean if I was you and you were me—” She blushes bright red and then smiles as Carter steps out to the deck.

“Are we talking about Jesse in a dress? Because I’ve always thought he has the legs for it.”

ANDI

I lift the dress on a hanger and hold it up to myself in the body-length mirror. “What do you think?” I ask Jesse.

He’s looming in the back of the store as if he’s trying not to stand too close to me. He looks up like he’s surprised I’m asking his opinion. I slept in his clothes—which smelled amazing, by the way—and had the curious decision on whether to put my torn, dirty wedding dress back on or go out into town in clothes that were obviously Jesse’s.

On the one hand, I could look like a crazy runaway bride, which I am. On the other hand, I could look like the kind of girl who hooks up with a guy she just met on her first day in town, which I am not—no judgment, either, that’s just not how I roll.

So it was back into the dress for me.

“It’s good,” he says.

“You’re sure? You barely looked.”

“I would really prefer to wait outside,” he says.

“I need a second opinion, though. I never shop alone. I hate returning things. So I want to make sure I’m sure before I pick something out.”

“It’s good. Yeah,” he says again, eyeing the dress.

“I’ll just go try it on, then. Oh,” I say, laughing and blushing all over again. “I might need some undies before I do that. I’ll just buy those first, I guess?” I shuffle over to another part of the store and pick up a pack of panties and the cheapest bra I can find. I glance over my shoulder and see Jesse is trying very, very hard not to look at me now. He’s actually just staring at the ceiling like he’s afraid it might suddenly spring a leak.

I smile to myself, then go to the register. “Um, Jesse?” I call out. “Can I borrow a little money? I promise I’ll have Jake pay you back.”

“Oh, yeah. Sorry.” He comes over and fishes out his card. He pushes it across the counter to the young girl ringing me up. She eyes the underwear, Jesse, me, my wedding dress, and then Jesse again.”

“So,” she says slowly.

“Don’t,” Jesse warns.

I’m surprised for a second by the way he’s talking to her like they know each other. Then I remember he grew up here. He probably knows everybody. He probably could tell me a handful of stories about this random, lovely young girl working the register at a random clothing store in town. The thought makes me smile, because it’s such a novel concept after spending most of my life in busy cities. I’m used to the relative anonymity of city life—of only having a few regular pillars of my life and being surrounded by otherwise anonymous masses.

“Okay,” the girl says. She’s in her early twenties with strawberry blonde hair and a not-so-polite way of chewing her bright pink gum. “I won’t ask why you’re buying a runaway bride new underwear.” She pops her gum, scans the underwear, and taps Jesse’s card to the reader. When she speaks again, her

eyes are down and her voice is low. “I’ll just *assume* you ruined some poor guy’s wedding night by stealing his wife-to-be and ruining her panties in the process.”

Jesse sighs. “I don’t...” he pauses. “I don’t know how to explain this situation, exactly. But, no. It’s nothing like that.”

She eyes him, amusement sparkling in her eyes. “Oh, sure. When I asked you to go to that Halloween party with me, you were still too heartbroken to say ‘yes’. I guess I just missed your recovery window by a couple months, huh?”

I bulge my eyes a little, feeling suddenly uncomfortable. On the one hand, I feel bad for her. On the other hand, the curious part of me—which is admittedly maybe one of the biggest parts of me, aside from my ass the morning after I eat ice cream, that is—wants to know more about this “heartbreak”. I try to imagine a woman who has a guy like Jesse Prince in her life. Gorgeous, hockey star, apparently quite the gentleman. Why would someone break his heart?

“Come on,” Jesse says to me. He leads me toward the fitting rooms.

I smirk at him when he stops in front of the door. “Were you planning to come in with me and make sure these fit?” I ask, holding up the pack of panties with my fingertip.

Jesse’s eyes blaze. “No. I just didn’t know if you knew where the fitting rooms were.”

“Okay. Mind bringing me that dress and waiting here in case I need a different size?”

He looks like he wants to refuse, but he just nods his head and goes to get the dress. I’m impressed when he brings me the exact one I asked him about and in the size I was holding. Apparently, he *was* paying attention.

It takes me a lot of effort and grunting before I realize I'm not getting out of my dress entirely without help. I can't manage the zipper in the back, and I feel like a walking cliché at this point, but I slowly crack open the door to the dressing room. "Jesse?" I ask.

"What?" he breathes. It's kind of adorable how uncomfortable this is all making him.

"I'm sorry to ask, but could you please help me with my zipper?" I turn around and gesture toward the zipper running down my back with both thumbs.

He wordlessly takes the zipper and pulls it down. I can't decide if there's any way he could've done it without it feeling erotic. But the way he slowly pulls it down makes me imagine his eyes drifting down my bare back as the zipper trails in its path. Some little part of me feels guilty about all this. But when I think back on the last few months, it feels like I was already single, as crazy as that sounds.

Landon and I were always the type to avoid rocking the boat. Rocking boats is a good way to sink them, after all. Before Landon, some outside disaster always seemed to end my relationships so I didn't have to. Once, I had a boyfriend realize he was asexual and wanted to go explore Buddhism. I'll admit, it was hard not to see that one as some kind of personal attack. I had another boyfriend who was running a secret Pokemon card crime syndicate and bailed on me when the law was getting too close. Then again, that could have just been the most believable story he could think of to explain why he was with a different woman a week later in another state. I once even dated a guy who watched a documentary on hunting for gold in Alaska and he decided it was his life's mission to strike gold himself. Last I heard, he was not having much luck.

"Are you... okay?" Jesse asks.

“Huh?” I say.

“You’re crying.”

“Oh,” I laugh. For some reason, he’s right. I wipe at my eye and shake my head. “I’m fine. I’m not crying because of the guy, if that’s what you’re wondering.”

“If you need to talk…” he says the words softly, and there’s enough empathy in them to practically break my heart.

Where did this guy come from?

He stops the zipper a few inches above the small of my back. *A gentleman, again.*

I give a quick smile and pull the door of the dressing room closed. “I just keep looking back and trying to pinpoint the moment it went wrong, I guess.”

“Would it fix anything if you knew?” he asks. For some reason, he’s asking like there’s more than just idle curiosity behind his words.

“I mean, it’s not like I never cared about Landon. Things were really good for a while. And it was like the magic died piece by piece. It all happened so slow it never seemed obvious in the moment, you know?”

“Sure,” he says.

“I guess I’m crying because I feel bad for letting it get so far along. Like I had my wedding dress on and I think it hit me all at once. I didn’t love him anymore. Maybe I did at some point. And it all just made me wonder how the hell you’re supposed to get it right. Before him, it was all apocalyptic, obvious reasons to break up. With Landon, it was something new but just as deadly. Slow, creeping death. Apocalyptic death.” I laugh and there’s no humor in the sound. “Makes you wonder if it’s even possible to still love

someone by the time you make it to the altar.”

There’s no sound from the other side of the door, so I suddenly feel like an idiot.

“Sorry. Verbal diarrhea. I guess I just feel all kinds of weird after running away from my own wedding. Go figure. Like *God*. His parents paid for the wedding and I just bailed on it. I know they’re mega multi-millionaires or whatever, but I’m going to have to figure out some way to pay them back. And all the people who made plans to come be there?”

“It’ll be fine, Andi,” Jesse says. “I don’t think anyone would have wanted you to go through with the wedding just because they bought plane tickets. People who care about you will want you to be happy.”

I sigh. “Right. *Right*. You’re definitely right. Thanks,” I say. I decide I can dwell on how big a mess I made at some other point. I force some cheer and lightness into my voice. “I got the zipper. We’re good! Definitely out of the dress now.”

“Good. Not that you’re naked, just that the—” Jesse makes a noise of disgust with himself. “I’m going to shut up now.”

I grin as I slip on the new underwear, which I never thought I’d appreciate so much, and then try the dress on. I twirl, checking myself out, and then give my hair a little bit of fingertip treatment. It doesn’t help much, but licking my thumb and wiping off my smeared makeup at least makes me look a touch less tragic.

Because I’m *not* tragic. I’m a bright, vibrant, young woman who is turning over a new leaf. I’m somebody who is taking the first steps of her new adventure and ready to see where life takes her. If that’s tragedy, then sign me up.

I open the door and spread my arms wide. “Well? How is it?”

Jesse’s eyes fall from mine to my body, drifting slowly down and then back up again. He licks his lips, nodding. “Yeah,” he says.

“Yeah?” I ask. “Like, ‘yeah, you should burn that dress and file a restraining order against it’ or ‘yeah, that dress looks amazing and you’re beautiful.’”

“The second one.”

“You think I’m beautiful?” I ask.

“That’s not what I meant, I just—”

“You *don’t* think I’m beautiful?” I’m trying not to smile. I just can’t help pushing his buttons. He’s so tightly wound. It feels like somebody needs to take him by those big, muscly shoulders and shake him.

Jesse opens his mouth and then settles for hanging his head. “Are you getting the dress, Andi?”

“Yes. Actually, you are, if you’re still willing to lend me the money.”

“Come on.”

“One sec.” I duck back in the fitting room and scoop up my huge wedding dress, tucking it under one arm. I can’t say I feel a particular emotional attachment to the thing, but it might be weird to leave it lying on the floor of a dressing room.

Jesse reluctantly brings me back to the cash register, where the girl is watching us with an interested expression. “So he liked the dress on you, I take it?”

“He did,” I say happily, spreading my arms and twirling. “What do you think? Do you like it?”

She tilts her head. “Sure. It’s nice. It shows off your figure. Probably why Jesse likes it.”

“Is this true, Jesse Prince?” I ask, nudging him.

“Just ring her up, please,” he says, pushing his card toward her.

I turn my back toward the counter and pull the tag out. The scanner gives a little beep. “Do you want a bag for the rest of the panties Jesse bought you?” she asks.

“Um, yeah. Unless Jesse wanted to shove them in his pocket or something.”

“A bag,” he says quickly.

I bite back a smile. Katie meets my eyes and smiles a little, too. Maybe I’m not the only one who enjoys pushing Jesse’s buttons, then.

“Thank you,” I say, going up on my tiptoes to kiss his cheek. He flinches back like I tried to bite him.

“You’re welcome. Jake doesn’t need to pay me back, either.”

“Oh, no. I don’t ever let people buy me stuff without paying them back. You’re going to get all...” I check the receipt. “Eighty-seven dollars and forty-three cents back. Wow. That dress was expensive, huh?”

“Really. It’s fine. If I have to tell Jake I paid for your underwear, I think he’ll try to murder me, anyway.”

“Oh,” I say, laughing a little. “I guess you have a point. Then *I’ll* pay you back. You may just have to give me a couple days.”

We walk toward his car.

“Know any good places around town where a girl can make some quick money?”

“You want a job? Are you seriously planning to stay that long?”

“This place gives me good feelings,” I say, looking around and taking in the scenery. It really is picturesque, with cutesy little shops and homes dotting the hills that eventually back up to a towering range of snow-capped mountains. “Maybe I’ll stay a little while.”

“I don’t know if that’s a good idea.” Jesse pulls open my door and waits for me to get in, but I stop, leaning on the car to look up at him.

“Why wouldn’t it be a good idea?”

“Don’t you have a life to get back to?”

“I have friends, sure. But only one I’m really close with. She’s the kind of friend where distance isn’t going to keep us from being close, if you know what I mean.”

“What about your parents?”

I shrug. “They can visit. They’ll be happy if they know I’m happy.” I look around again, smiling as the thought starts to really take hold in my chest. “Right now, this place makes me happy.” My eyes linger a beat too long on Jesse, so I drag them back to the mountains.

“After the holidays, it might be best if you had plans to get your own place. The guys are here until Christmas, then they’ll be traveling more for games.”

“Won’t you be with them?” I ask. “Jake got injured once and I remembered he still went to the games and all that.”

“I have a good agent. My contract says I’m free to rehab with my personal trainer and stay home if I choose in the event of an injury.” He hesitates.

“What?” I prompt.

He shakes his head. "I should still be acting like part of the team. I know I should. It's hard for me right now. Being around the game makes it feel farther away, somehow. It's easier when I—" he laughs, almost like he said something stupid. "Anyway. Until this rotator cuff heals, I won't be swinging any hockey sticks. Lucky for me, I can still do pretty much everything else."

I want to pry for more detail, but I bite back my questions. He didn't seem to want to go into more detail than he already did. "I'm sorry. That has to be hard. I know how Jake got when he hurt his ankle that one season. He was super cranky and emotional."

That gets a grin from Jesse. "Is that how I'm coming off? Sorry."

"No, no!" I take his arm without thinking, then let go. "I just meant I understand how hard it can be on an athlete like you. Hockey is where you put so much of yourself. An injury for you is like if a writer had to put their brain on pause for six months, or something. It would be torture. Anyway," I say quickly because it suddenly feels awkward. "I'll be out of your hair by Christmas. *Or shortly after.* I promise."

Jesse hesitates, like I said something wrong, but then he closes his mouth and nods. "Alright, then."

I look down at my feet, which are swimming in his massive snow boots. "You know," I say. "I wonder if we should go shoe shopping before we head back."

Jesse looks like I just asked if he wants to swing by the dentist for a root canal. He slowly nods his head. "Yeah. Sure. Let's get you some shoes, too."

JESSE

After three hours of being around town with Andi, buying her panties, a bra, a dress, shoes, then going back because she forgot she'd need socks, and then her realizing it was December and she should maybe pick up a winter jacket, I'm fucking exhausted.

Exhausted, but fighting the odd impulse to smile as we head back inside the cabin. I'm surprised to see the place is empty. Nolan and Liam's cars are gone from out front and nobody's home when we come inside.

"Where are they?" Andi asks. She's clad in the green dress and gray wool leggings we bought, new boots, and a puffy fur-collared jacket. I'm also unfortunately aware that she's wearing hot pink panties beneath it all and a white, cotton bra. I know this because the pack of underwear came with three colors. Pink, black, and white. When she came out of the dressing room, the pink ones were missing, because of course they were.

I check the time and set my things down on the stop and drop by the door. It's a carved wood bear holding a shelf. My dad loved shit like that, and the cabin is full of similar items. "Team meeting, I think. They have a game in two days. Coach was okay with them staying in Frosty Harbor if the guys were willing to travel into the city for meetings with the rest of the team."

“Oh. I guess that explains why Jake couldn’t make it until later today. He probably had to go to the meeting first.”

“He probably is. He requested this meeting off and the coach already granted it for your...” I trail off, thinking about the crumpled wedding dress Andi didn’t seem to care about fetching from the back seat of my truck when we arrived.

Andi smiles. “It’s okay.” She flops down on one of the big leather armchairs and crosses her thighs. “You can go to the meeting, if you’re supposed to be there.”

“I don’t need to go,” I say, pointing to my shoulder. “I’m out for the season. My job is rehab and staying in shape. No point for me to go gameplan.” I don’t mention the guilt eating at me for missing them. Sure, I don’t *have* to go to avoid being cut or fined. But I should be going. Andi’s right, after all. The guys treat me like a captain, and what kind of captain stays home and watches his brothers go to war from his TV on the couch? I make a quiet promise to do better from here on out.

“That has to be hard,” Andi says.

I feel a temptation to open up about it and admit that yes, next to things ending with Sarah, the injury has been one of the hardest things I’ve had to go through. I’m aware that makes me one lucky bastard, but it is what it is. “It’s fine,” I say instead.

She works her lips to the side, considering me. Her eyes always seem to dance with playful energy. “Wanna help me figure out how I’m going to pay you back?”

For a split second, I’m not sure if she’s implying something completely different with her question. My eyes fall to her thighs—endless lengths of wool-clad, well-shaped leg. I drag my gaze up to her face and the shape of

her full, upturned lips and the seductive tilt of her eyes. And then reality slaps some sense into me.

She's talking about making money, dumbass. “Well,” I say, drumming my fingers on the counter as I think about it. “I could ask around.”

“Can I come?”

“What?”

“With you. To ask around. What else am I going to do? Sit here in your cool cabin? Snoop through your room for ideas about what awesome hockey nickname I can give you?”

“You’re still trying to think of a nickname for me?”

“Of course. I already got one for Nolan and Maddox.”

I grin. “What did you come up with?”

“Nolan is the goalie, right?”

I nod.

“Okay, good. Because he’s ‘Goalie Gourmet.’ Do you like it?”

I chuckle. “Yeah. He’d like that one, too.”

“And Maddox can be ‘Mojo Maddox’. Because he’s into all that superstitious stuff, right?”

I nod. “You figured them out pretty quickly. I’m surprised it’s taking you so long to give me a name.”

“I just want to get yours right.” She narrows her eyes at me, and for a moment, I think she’s about to blurt something out. But she just shakes her head, looking disappointed. “Nope. Still not coming to me.”

“What is it you’re going to do with these nicknames, exactly?”

“It’s just for fun. Maybe I’ll write them on your Christmas gifts. Or, I’ll use them if you guys are being naughty. *Goalie Gourmet, put down that expensive cheese!*”

I grin. “Nolan can afford the expensive cheese. Trust me. It tastes terrible.”

She laughs. Then she tilts her head as she seems to see me in a different light.

“What?”

“Captain Jesse.”

I shake my head. “That’s not even a nickname. It’s a title, and it’s a title I don’t deserve.”

“Well that’s not how this works. You don’t get to change it. If I let people change their nicknames, we’d have to call Carter Throbbing Heartbulge or whatever it was he suggested.”

“Heartstopper,” I say.

Andi shivers and we both laugh.

“You get to be Captain, because I can see how the guys all respect you and look up to you. I mean, just look at the fact they’re all here in Frosty Harbor with you for the holidays even if it means extra travel to keep up with practices and meetings.”

I open my mouth to argue, but I can see she’s completely right. Something in my chest catches, so I just nod my head. “They’re good guys.”

“Yeah. I think all of you are,” she says. Our eyes meet, and I feel a sudden jolt of something that feels a hell of a lot like danger. Warning bells go off in my brain. “Why don’t we save the job hunting for when Jake gets here? He

can join us.”

“Do we have to?”

“What? Are you worried about when he comes back?”

“I mean...” Andi shifts in her chair, then tucks her legs under her butt and folds her arms like she’s suddenly trying to contain her huge personality in as small a space as possible. “I did just kind of drag my whole family along for months of wedding planning, a rehearsal, and Jake probably had to rent a tux to go to the ceremony. He had to ask for time off from the team. All that and I got out of there so fast I couldn’t even keep my shoes on? *Yeah,*” she says, lowering her eyes. “I’m not exactly thrilled to have to face him when he gets here.”

I sit down across from her on the couch. “You’re sure you don’t regret it?”

“Pulling the old, ‘actually, I don’t’ maneuver?”

“Yeah.”

Andi bites her lip, forehead scrunching up as she stares at something on the floor. “No,” she says after a few quiet moments. “I mean, I feel bad that I *don’t* feel bad. But I keep thinking about it and waiting for the real guilt or regret to hit me. Instead, all I’ve been feeling is this sense of freedom and relief, like a huge weight rolled off my shoulders.”

“How did you guys meet, anyway?”

“At a fundraiser event Jake invited me to. We went on a couple dates and they were... also fine. He was pretty easy to talk to, even if it was always a little boring and impersonal. He had this huge family fortune and a lot of job responsibilities. Everybody I knew was over the moon for me, like I’d won some kind of lottery. Before him, my last few relationships were kind of disasters of epic proportions, so I think a normal, stable guy seemed like such

an obvious 'right' answer I even had myself convinced it all made sense."

I try to imagine myself in her shoes and nod. "That had to be hard."

She tilts her head. "I can't tell if you're being sarcastic. I mean, yeah. Who is going to feel bad for the girl who starts dating some mega millionaire rich guy that doesn't treat her badly, right?"

"I mean feeling trapped. That's how you felt, right?"

She lets out a sudden breath like my words hit her in the chest.

"Sorry," I say quickly. "I didn't mean to assume. I just—"

"No," she says, smiling now. "It's just that nobody ever got it. In all the time I was with Landon, I'd try to bring up how I was really feeling and they'd get it wrong. They'd think I meant something else or refuse to really hear me. Everybody just gushed about how lucky I was and how excited I must be. At some point, I think I started to believe them. After all, all these people were telling me how I should feel. What did my own feelings matter at that point, right?"

"What happened at the wedding?" I ask.

"I realized it wasn't fair to either me or Landon. I left him a note explaining everything because I was worried I'd lose my nerve if I said it to his face. I was planning to tell a few more people, but then I heard my mom and my aunt coming to get me. So I just jumped out of the closest window and lost my shoes in the process. I kept thinking they'd catch me, but I cut through some trees instead of sticking to the road. I ran like a mile to my car, got in, and *boom*." She makes a zipping away gesture with her hand and smiles. "I still can't believe I did that. In a way, it feels like I lit a stick of TNT and threw it, but I'm still waiting for the explosion."

"I can imagine. Well, from what I know of Jake, he'll understand. If he's too

hard on you, I'll bail you out. Okay?"

Her smile is crooked. "Why are you so nice to a girl you just met, Jesse? Usually, I'd accuse a guy acting like you of wanting to sleep with me. But I don't think that's what you're trying to do. So what is it?" Her tone is playful, but there's a glimmer of real curiosity behind her eyes.

"I'm just doing what anyone would do." I try not to gulp down a hard swallow. *Wanting to sleep with me.* Just hearing the words slip between her full lips makes them alive, real, and dangerous. I can almost feel their silky thread tightening around me, threatening to pull me closer to her and toward all the bad decisions I'd make if my hands were on her body.

"What anyone would do, hm? I'm not so sure about that."

I clear my throat because the moment suddenly feels a little too heavy. "Well, I'm hungry. I can go pick up some takeout if you want to shower and clean up."

"Are you trying to tell me I *should* clean up, Jesse? Do I stink?" She raises an eyebrow.

"No. Somehow you still smell like flowers and sunshine."

There's that crooked smile again. "Have you been sniffing me?"

"What kind of food do you want?" I ask, because I'm not a good liar.

Her smile goes wider. "Surprise me. Which shower should I use?"

"Take your pick." I hesitate. "Actually. Use the one in my room. If the guys get back early, I don't want them barging in on you."

"Right," she says. "That's smart. If I use your shower, you'll be the only one at risk of barging in on me and seeing me naked."

I can't think of a solid argument for that, but I'm also still not willing to tell her to go use another shower and risk the guys walking in on her. I pretend not to hear her and point behind her. "It's the one at the end of the hall."

"With the waterbed, right?"

I grin. "Yeah. That one. Feel free to take a nap on it if I'm not back when you're done. I'll come get you once I'm back with the food. Any requests?"

"Surprise me!" She pops up from the chair, stretches with her arms behind her head in a way that makes her dress ride up until I'd almost be able to see her panties if she hadn't been wearing those damn wool leggings. Actually, I should be thanking God for those leggings, because I'm not sure I could keep my impulse to push my luck with Andi if I was any more tempted than I already am. With any other girl, I'd think she was doing all this on purpose—taunting me with her body and her sexuality.

With Andi, though, I don't think that's what it is. She has the energy of a golden retriever on steroids—like a rogue beam of sunshine that's almost too blinding to look at but too captivating to take my eyes away from.

"This way?" she asks, pointing in the completely wrong direction.

"That way," I say. I pause. "Actually, you could just use the guest house shower. I don't know what I was thinking."

"That's okay. I'll use yours. I want to give that water bed a test drive." She winks and walks off down the hallway toward my room.

I try not to, but I definitely watch the full shape of her ass as the fabric of her dress shifts up and down. She doesn't look, but it's almost as if she can sense me staring. She starts swaying her hips in an exaggerated, playful impression of a catwalk. It pushes past sexy and goes straight to comical, especially when she plants a hand on the door frame, drags it down, and then shoots me

a smoky glare.

She backs into my room, then pokes her head out and twinkles her fingers before pulling the door shut.

I'm left standing at the end of the hallway with an extremely confused erection and a pounding heart. Suddenly, the idea of Jake showing up and threatening to murder me in cold blood if I so much as look at his sister doesn't sound so bad. It honestly sounds like one of the few things that might just save me from my stupid heart trying to act like it's not still torn in half.

ANDI

Whoever decided water beds needed to go extinct after the 80's should be brought in for questioning.

I'm lying on my back, eyes closed, and it feels like I'm riding a cool wave. The bed ripples beneath me every time I shift or wiggle, and it might as well be rocking me to sleep like a freaking baby.

I still need to get up and get dressed—I'm just in my towel from the shower because I was too excited to try this bed out. I can't seem to motivate myself to get up, though.

I lay there, thinking about how wild my last two days have been. Yesterday morning, I was trying to convince myself this was the beginning of the most important day of my life. Oddly enough, I'm not even sure I was wrong. After all, it was the day I decided to stop being satisfied with "good enough". Yesterday, I decided I want my life to be great. I want it to be so awesome I'm afraid to blink because I might miss something.

And so far? I'm about twenty-four hours into this new life philosophy and I'm already floating on an NHL player's waterbed like Jasmine on a magic carpet ride. Although, I guess if Jasmine had been wearing nothing but a towel, that movie would've gone in an entirely different direction.

I smile, even though my face is squished into the pillow. *Jesse's pillow*. The thought creeps up on me, and then I start noticing how the entire bed smells like him. Like faint, *very nice* man smell. It's the sort of scent I want to bottle and take whiffs of—hypothetically speaking, of course, because that would be super weird if I really wanted to do that. *Okay, I definitely wish I could do that, even if it would be weird.*

I'm freestyling a dirty version of *A Whole New World* when Jesse walks in. "I could show you my beaver," I'm singing, voice badly muffled by the pillow my face is buried in.

"Uh," Jesse's deep voice startles me, so I roll my face to the side and see him in the doorway, crinkled paper take-out bags in hand. "I don't think that would be a good idea."

"I was, well," I try to think of how to explain that I was just modifying a beloved children's song because I have the maturity level of an unripened banana and thought it was hilarious. "This bed is great," I say instead.

He smiles. He's already smiling more than he was yesterday, and I like that. Yes, he's wound tighter than a cat's tail in a room full of rocking chairs, but I feel like I'm gradually helping him ease up, just a little. "You know it vibrates?" he asks.

"You've got to be kidding." I sit upright, looking around for the magic button.

"I wish I was." He chuckles, but comes toward me, setting our food on the side table. "The switch is kind of hard to reach. Here, if you just—" He puts a knee on the bed and leans like he's trying to get to something behind the headboard.

I scoot back to give him room and forget how my movement will make the whole bed ripple.

One minute, he's leaning with his arm fully extended and one leg on the bed. The next, he's flailing in a highly athletic, coordinated, and ultimately doomed attempt to keep himself from falling on top of me. One of his hands grips the headboard but slips. His other hand swings out, catching my towel and yanking it down so my boobs pop out like two spring chickens.

I reach up to try to get him off me, but the force of his big body coming on the bed sends a rebound ripple that makes him fall harder, planting both hands on either side of my head as he's sort of straddling me. I'm reaching up to hold his shoulders and help him slow his fall right when a tall figure appears in the doorway.

"Oh, hi, Jake," I say, tugging my towel up to cover my boobs.

JESSE

I'm holding a bag of frozen peas over my eye and trying to purge the image of Andi's bare breasts from my head. *Okay*, that's kind of a lie. I'm not trying that hard to get rid of the image. It's more that I'm trying to stop picturing them because my best friend and the big brother of the girl those breasts were attached to is currently pacing in the kitchen.

He hasn't formed a coherent sentence since he walked in on us a couple minutes ago.

One moment, I heard Andi say Jake's name. The next, I was being thrown to the ground and Jake was on top of me. His fist found my face before I even had time to register what had happened. I didn't bother fighting back, because it was pretty easy to see what he thought he just walked in on. Honestly, I also kind of deserved to get punched, even if it was only for what was going on in the privacy of my mind.

Andi is sitting beside me on the couch, head hanging like a kid who got caught making out with her boyfriend when her parents came home. She went into my bathroom and got dressed before joining us out here.

"I'm not mad that you hit me," I say slowly. I'm not sure if it's the right place to start, but I figure I've got to start somewhere.

“Good,” Jake says between his teeth. “Because I’m not sure I’ve finished hitting you.”

“He was just trying to show me how the bed vibrates,” Andi says. “He slipped and fell and then my boobs came out. It’s not that crazy. My boobs were still wet and slick from the shower, so they were honestly really hard to contain in that moment. It’s really—”

“Andi,” Jake says again, somehow still without unclenching his teeth. “I’m going to need you to stop talking about your boobs before Jesse gets any other stupid ideas.”

She lowers her eyes and nods her head.

“You—” he says, pointing at her and then closing his eyes like he’s trying very hard to control himself.

Now that I’ve met Andi, I can see how similar she is to Jake. They’re both dark haired with pale skin. They both have prominent eyebrows and similar noses, even if Jake’s is a little longer and more angular. When he’s not punching me, Jake is also usually pretty easy-going and fun, just in a more subdued way than someone like Carter.

“I’ve barely slept in twenty-four hours because I’ve been making sure nobody comes hunting you down here. I’ve tried very hard to convince several people you are fine and not dead. I even had to convince a cop that *I* didn’t kill you. Then I drove six hours to get here, which, by the way, took me past where your car is still on the side of the road and covered in caution tape.”

His words are all coming in very controlled and very low tones. It’s honestly a little scary. I can almost picture him suddenly pulling out a hockey stick and trying to beat me to death with it. He pauses, though, and he seems to be finding a way to shove down the buckets of anger he must be feeling. I

admire him for that, because if he was too hard on Andi, I might wind up being the one throwing punches. “Do you really think there’s a good explanation for what I just walked in on?”

She sinks a little lower into the couch cushions.

“I’m not remotely interested in your sister, Jake,” I say. “I know it looked insane, but it wasn’t what it looked like. Yeah, I should’ve told her to get dressed before I tried to show her how the bed vibrates, but I didn’t think—”

“You didn’t think. You’re right,” he snaps. Jake starts pacing again and runs both hands over his short, buzzed hair. “Because if you were thinking, you wouldn’t have been alone with my sister in your fucking cabin, would you? I asked you to rescue her, not fondle her on your weird ass water bed.”

“He didn’t really touch me,” Andi says. “It was honestly really impressive hand-eye-coordination to *not* touch my boobs with the way they were flapping and flopping everywhere. If anything, you should be patting him on the back for dodging them so well. And water beds aren’t weird. Have you ever tried laying on one? Also, Jesse’s vibrates. But I didn’t get to experience that yet. I’m sure it’s amazing, though.”

“And you’re not going to experience his vibrations,” Jake says. He looks like he’s short-circuiting, and I can’t say I blame him.. “His... bed’s vibrations. *Jesus*. Do either of you realize how insane this is?”

“It was a misunderstanding,” I say as calmly as I can. “But think about it, Jake. You know me. I’m the last person on the team you need to worry about going after your sister. She’s not even my type.”

Andi tilts her head, and I kind of regret those last words. They’re complete bullshit, for starters. I also may have pushed too far in convincing my friend and crossed into hurting Andi’s feelings.

He puts his hands on his hips, giving me a long, discerning look. Finally, some of the tension seems to roll off him as he nods. “Fuck, man.” He says, laughing a little. “These have been two days from hell.”

“I’m sorry,” Andi says.

The normal Jake is finally starting to come back. “Hey, it’s alright. Come here.” He gestures for Andi, who gets up and hugs her big brother tight. “I know this has been a shittier couple days for you than any of us. I’m sorry everything got so screwed up.”

They’re clearly having a sibling moment, so I get up from the couch and lower the frozen veggies from my eye.

Jake eyes me over the top of Andi’s head. He gives me the slightest nod. I think the nod means, “We’re good, but you’re on thin ice from now on. So don’t push your luck.”

I head back to my room, suddenly tired as hell and craving a nap. With Jake back, I know I don’t need to worry so much about keeping an eye on Andi. He’ll do that for the both of us. Honestly, I’m probably the one he needs to protect her from at this point. Job hunting can wait for a little after that whole episode.

I flop down on the water bed and visions of her bare chest drift into my brain. Just like that, I’m back in dangerous territory. When I realize my bed smells like her now, I’m in even deeper.

I bring both hands to my face and run them down it, breathing out hard.

ANDI

I'm in the back seat of Jesse's truck about an hour after what I will forever think of as the boobtastrophe. I still blush when I replay everything that happened. Maybe the worst part is I sort of set events in motion to get Jesse punched in the face by my brother. I can see the spot on his cheek where it has already swollen and gone from a bright red to a deep purple. Guilt is gnawing at me.

I've never been the sort of girl guys punch each other over. Then again, that's probably because I've lived my life in total awareness of my big brother who thinks the best way to protect my heart is to lock it away and scare off every man who comes near me.

The two of them are talking about hockey stuff like I'm not even in the back of the truck, though. I had to practically beg Jake to let Jesse bring me around town to look for a job like he promised.

Outside the window, the snow-covered hills and distant mountains of Vermont creep by. Jesse is taking it slow, but then again, everything about this place seems to move at a little slower pace than usual.

There's finally a lull in their conversation, so I lean forward. "I'm sorry I kinda got you punched, Jesse," I say.

“Can we not talk about it?” Jake asks.

“Agreed,” Jesse says.

He’s been a little colder toward me since Jake showed up. He *did* say he wasn’t remotely interested in me and that I wasn’t his type. Maybe I’m too weird for him. Or maybe he just doesn’t like getting punched over girls...

As a girl who was wearing a wedding dress just yesterday morning, I keep telling myself I shouldn’t let those comments get to me. After all, it’s not like I *should* want to be his type. I just... I guess I don’t really know what I want.

“So, who are we going to ask for work?” I say. “My skills include singing badly, cooking decently, and I’m amazing with certain kids some of the time. Oh, and I know how to make movie-theater popcorn. I can also wait tables.”

“Maybe lead with that last one next time?” Jake laughs. “Unless you think we’re going to find someone in town who wants their ears to bleed from listening to you sing.”

“You never know,” I say.

“I have to stop by and have a word with my sister, Caroline, before we get started,” Jesse says. “I figured I can ask her where we should go. If anybody in town needs help, Caroline will know it.”

“Is she the mayor?” I whisper.

“Why are you whispering?” Jake asks.

I shrug, and Jesse glances at me in the mirror. “Not the mayor, no. Frosty Harbor doesn’t have a mayor. Just a town council. Caroline’s on it. She’s also the first person to know if something goes wrong and the first person to chew you out if you do anything that isn’t in the best interest of the town.”

“She sounds like a badass,” I say.

“Kind of,” Jesse agrees with a little grin. “As long as you don’t mind sarcasm and somebody who doesn’t know how to keep out of other people’s business.”

For some reason, Jesse gives Jake a long look at that.

I frown, leaning forward with my hands on the back of their seats. “What was that? What’s that look you just gave Jake?”

Jake shakes his head. “It’s nothing. Jesse just... it’s nothing,” he says again. “We’re almost there, anyway.”

“This looks like a bed and breakfast. It’s so cute,” I say.

“That’s exactly what it is. Our grandparents lived here, then our parents built the cabin when dad got into architecture. They turned this place into a bed and breakfast as a passion project to benefit the town. Caroline fell in love with it when she was little and always wanted to be here. She and our mom spent so much time here, so it didn’t surprise anybody when Caroline kind of turned this into her full time job. That, and acting as the event coordinator for the town.

“You know,” I say, feeling a sudden annoyance with Jake. “You never even told me Jesse had a sister.”

Jake glances over his shoulder. “I never told you anything about my teammates. Apparently, my instincts to keep you away from them were spot on, too.”

I sink back in my seat. “Low blow.”

“Fair blow,” he counters.

“Caroline just turned thirty last month,” Jesse says, as if trying to make up for my brother’s tight lips.

“Is that younger than you?” I ask, because I’m nosy.

“Stop asking him questions,” Jake says.

“I’m thirty-three,” Jesse says.

“I’m thirty-two!” I say. “Right between you two. How funny is that?”

“It’s not funny at all,” Jake says.

“You know I ask people questions all the time, Jake. It’s possible to be curious about somebody without wanting to jump their jimmies.”

“Considering what I walked in on?” Jake says. “You two have a much shorter leash with me than usual. So I don’t particularly care what you usually do.”

I roll my eyes. “Well, I’m excited to meet your sister.”



THE BED AND BREAKFAST IS CHARMING, COZY, AND WE’RE ALL SITUATED ON various sofas and loveseats by a crackling fire in the living room. Caroline has turned the kitchen nook into a little office, which was where we found her when we came in. She was just finishing up checking in two guests, who shuffled off to their room upstairs after giving us a wave and a smile.

Caroline told us to sit while she made hot chocolate for everyone.

She sets down the cups beside us, making no secret of the curious looks she’s throwing my way.

Jesse eyes me over his cup, but jerks his gaze away when he sees me looking.

Caroline takes the open seat between Jesse and Jake. She has dark hair like Jesse, but the similarities kind of stop there. She’s short, bubbly, and from my brief interactions so far, highly sarcastic. She’s wearing somewhat eccentric

skinny glasses with half-moon lenses that make her look like the kind of librarian who has a special stack of extra saucy romance books for her favorite customers. She's also beautiful in a girl-next-door kind of way, almost like she's trying to downplay her looks for some reason.

Subtle or not, Jake must notice. He's sitting extra stiff in his chair and apparently making a point not to look at her. Aw. Does my big cranky brother have a crush?

"Careful with those hot chocolates," Caroline says. "I brew them hot enough to invite lawsuits. Now that I've told you they're boiling hot, you can't sue me."

"Have you considered lowering the temperature to something farther from the surface of the sun?" Jesse asks.

"No. I like it this way." Caroline wiggles her eyebrows at him and sips her drink, somehow not even flinching from the heat.

She shifts her focus to Jake. "It has been a while, hasn't it? Last time we met, you were so busy pretending I didn't exist I think you might not remember me."

Jake's jaw clenches. "I wasn't—I"

Now Jesse tilts his head. "What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing's wrong with me. She's your sister," he says, gesturing as if that explains absolutely everything.

Both men share a very confusing look, then Caroline rolls her eyes.

"Speaking of sisters," she says. "Jesse told me he wasn't allowed to so much as think about your sister. Now it sounds like she's practicing the extreme sport of water bed diving with him at his cabin. What changed there?"

Jake shoots Jesse a look.

“Those were not the words I used in my text,” Jesse says. “I just wanted her to know what she was about to get dragged into.”

“What is she getting dragged into, exactly?” Jake asks. There’s a warning note in his voice.

“A cranky big brother who thinks I’m trying to take advantage of his little sister? A ball of sunshine who wants work? Am I missing anything?”

“Just the teammate who thought it was a good idea to let my half naked sister climb into his stupid waterbed.”

“Anyway,” Caroline says. She’s younger than all of us, but I’m impressed with the air of command in her voice. She’s used to getting order and control when she wants it. I can see how this small woman could practically run things in Frosty Harbor now. “So it seems like you’re hoping to stay in town for a little while, Andi. Is that right?”

I suddenly feel like I’m being interviewed. “If that’s okay?” I ask.

“Oh, of course. So long as you pass my tests. Now listen very carefully.” Caroline’s eyes bulge and she leans closer. Jesse puts his palm to his forehead and sighs. “What is the airspeed velocity of an unladen swallow?”

The corner of my mouth twitches. “African or European?”

Caroline pops out of her seat and claps excitedly. “You pass!”

Jake and Jesse both lift their palms, absolutely baffled. “What the hell was that?” Jesse asks.

“You obviously don’t get it,” Caroline says. “But Andi is a woman of culture. She gets it, so she’s in. So says I and so it be!”

I give Jake a double thumbs up, but he's too busy watching Caroline with a strange expression. *My oh my, he certainly does have a crush.*

"Well, newest Frosty Harboran," Caroline says, sitting back down. "Jesse told me you were looking for work. How long do you think you'll be staying in town?"

"Weeks? Months?" I say. "I mean, permanently is possible too. Who knows?"

"You're not seriously considering staying here permanently," Jake says. "You don't even know how to ski."

I narrow my eyes. "So? It would be fun to learn. Jesse could teach me."

"I'm sure I could find you a good coach," Jesse says quickly. "If you do decide to stay," he adds.

Jake looks like he's torn between saying something or not, and eventually decides to take an aggressive sip of his drink. "If she stays, it can't be at your cabin," Jake adds.

"I know," I say. "I don't want to put Jesse out like that. I want to find a job so I can pay him back and then maybe put down a deposit for a place of my own."

"Pay him back?" Jake asks. "For what?"

"It's nothing—" Jesse starts.

"Well," I say. "I just needed some... stuff. Jesse lent me money and I want to make sure I pay him back."

"Stuff?" Jake asks.

Jesse shakes his head firmly. "Nothing you wouldn't have wanted me to get

for her. She was just wearing that wedding dress when I found her.”

“*Just* wearing it?” Jake asks. “Why are you phrasing it like that?”

“Soo,” I say, before Jake has time to dig any deeper into that line of questioning. “Know anybody who’s hiring?”

Caroline beams. “I do. *Me*. I’m always extra busy with the bed and breakfast with Christmas coming up. But I also coordinate the Frostival every year. It’s an assortment of holiday-themed events leading up to Christmas we put on every year. It’s a ton of fun, but a lot of work. I could hire you to come here every day and just put you to task on whatever I’ve got going on. What do you think?”

“That sounds like a bad idea,” Jesse says.

“What?” Caroline asks. “You’re usually so gung-ho about helping me. And you’re always complaining about how we don’t have more help. Why are you suddenly trying to turn down an extra pair of hands?”

“He’s right,” Jake says. “I don’t think Andi would want to do that.”

I stare at him. “Pardon?” I ask in a bad, fake French accent. “The girl who lives and breathes all things Christmas holidays? The girl who would listen to *Rockin’ Around the Christmas Tree* all year if somebody didn’t complain that it was July when they rode in my car with me? I would absolutely *die* if you let me help you. That sounds amazing.”

“Then it’s decided!” Caroline says happily. “You can start tomorrow, if you want. If you are actually planning to die of excitement, just do it off the clock, please. I don’t have health insurance.”

“Got it. Die off the clock,” I say.

“The town council allocates an event planning budget every year. I’m kind of

a frugal badass and always manage to slide in way under expected costs for everything, so there's plenty left to take care of paying you. Besides, Jesse won't ever let me pay him, so I've always got extra money lying around after Christmas every year."

Jake is gripping his cup like it might get up and run off. Jesse looks like he just swallowed a frog.

"What?" Caroline asks. "I thought you guys would be relieved. That was the whole point of bringing her here, wasn't it?"

"No," Jesse says in a strained voice. He's smiling, but it looks more like a wince of pain. "This is great. Just what we needed."

Jake's jaw twitches. "Thanks, Caroline."

Caroline bulges her eyes at me in a kind of *Okay, then* way. I bite back a smile. "I can't wait!"

And just like that, I've got my foot in the door of my new life. I can't stop smiling the entire drive home.

I have a vague, uncomfortable awareness of the way it feels like I'm a bit of a human rubber band, though. I'm yanking myself as far as I can, stretching until I'm about to snap in half and split off from who I was back home. The question is whether the old life is going to slip free before I break things off and come rushing back to pop me in the ass, or if I'm the one who is going to go flying back home because I'm too scared to keep pressing forward.

But those are worries for another day. For now, I'll just keep ignoring my phone and pretending I don't still need to give my friends and family more than half-assed "I'll tell you everything soon" kinds of texts. I'll forget about my crashed car on the side of the mountain, and I'll enjoy whatever my time here shapes out to be.

Who knows? Maybe I'll even stay here in Frosty Harbor for a few months.
Would that really be so bad?

JESSE

The cabin is filled with the aroma of simmering spices and fresh bread. I towel some sweat from my forehead and then chuck the towel and my shoes in the laundry room, kicking the door shut on my way in from the garage.

I find Nolan behind the counter and a familiar girl sitting on the other side.

“Mia?” I ask.

“Oh, hey, fancy running into you here.” She smiles at me and her tone is casual, but her eyes slip away from mine as if she’s embarrassed to be caught here with Nolan. Mia has her bright red hair pulled into a ponytail and looks like she just finished ice skating. She has on a black short skirt over matching leggings and a sleeveless top. Her jacket and bag with skates is at her feet.

“Right. Weird that you’d run into someone when you show up at their house uninvited.” I walk past her, glancing at whatever Nolan has simmering in a big pot. Mia has been best friends with my sister since they were little, and I have no interest in being cruel. If she’s embarrassed to be here for some reason, I’ll spare her the inquisition act. She can explain what the hell is going on in her own time if she wants to.

“That smells insane,” I say, setting the lid back on the pot. “What is it?”

“I’m just reducing some leftovers for stocks. So many people waste bones and fat trimmings and vegetable scraps. Throw that in with some water, boil it all off, and you’ve got liquid magic for weeks. Anyway, the real prize is in the oven. Wanna see?”

I follow him to the oven and look over his shoulder. It’s some kind of buttery bread in a complex pattern starting to rise out of its circular pan. Greasy yellow spots of butter are bubbling and sinking into the pillowy crust. He has sprinkled a few types of cheese and tomato quarters over the top with an herb blend. It smells like rosemary, parmesan, and butter.

Nolan catches me admiring it, wiggles his eyebrows, and shuts the oven. “Nice, right?”

“Yeah,” I say.

I’m standing somewhat awkwardly in my own kitchen now, not sure what I’m supposed to do or say in this situation. I’ve hardly ever seen Nolan and Mia interact, and now I find them alone in my cabin together. Am I supposed to ask? *Fuck if I know.*

“Well,” Mia says, stretching. “Maybe I should head out. I think I got the gist of those recipes.”

I squint at Nolan. “Cooking lessons? Is that what this is?”

He shrugs. “I posted on the town board that I’d be up for hosting a cooking club for the next few weeks. Mia was the only one who signed up. I told her she might as well swing by today for some tips since this recipe is perfect for someone just getting started.”

“Yep,” Mia says. She’s slipping her jacket on and shouldering her bag. “He was just... giving me the tips.” She winks and I shake my head.

I shake my head. “You don’t have to wrap up for my sake. I’m about to head

to Caroline's, anyway."

"Nah," Mia says. "I should go if I'm going to get a shower before work. Besides, *always wrap it up*. That's what I say, at least."

I don't miss the way Nolan is watching her. There's a glimmer of something very much like admiration or affection in that look.

"You know," I say. "I think you were actually *more* mature in middle school."

"Caroline asked me to tell her how you were acting when I said I was going to be at the cabin. I'll just put cranky, grouchy, and mean in my report, then?"

I sigh. "I'm fine. You don't need to tell her any of that."

Mia takes a step toward me, looking up at me from beneath long eyelashes. She purses her lips and taps them once, twice, three times. "I don't know, Princey. You look kind of stopped up. Frustrated? Sexually, or are you just having a little bout of constipation?"

"Would you please just go?" I ask.

She walks toward the door writing a fake note on the pad of her hand with an invisible pen. "Cranky, grouchy, mean, and constipated." She mimes closing the notepad, then blows a kiss to Nolan over her shoulder. "Thanks for the lessons, Nolan."

"Sure," he says.

I turn to face him once she's gone, palms facing up. "What was that?"

"It's what I said it was. You alright, man? You look off. More off than usual, I mean."

"I'm fine." I plop down where Mia was sitting, folding my arms and resting

them on the countertop. I drum my fingers, then unfold my arms and cross them over my chest. “Everything is fine.”

Nolan grins, pulling his scar up with the expression. “Alright.”

“What?” I demand.

“I didn’t say anything, man. You’re the one who looks like you want me to beg you to tell me what’s wrong. Is that what you’re waiting for?”

I stare out the window. “Imagine I told you I never wanted you to date my sister,” I say slowly.

“Okay. Pretty easy since I think you’ve said those exact words to me a few times. Now what?”

“Now imagine you just recently had an epiphany about the fruitlessness of love and dating.”

“Alright. I’m imagining it.”

“What would you do if you had a really good time hanging out with my sister?”

“Easy,” he says. “I’d invite her over for a really nice dinner. Tablecloth, candles, suit and tie, maybe. I’d tell her to wear that black dress she wore to the fundraiser. The one with the cleavage, and—”

“Nolan,” I say, raising my hand. “What would you really do?”

He chews his lip, thinking for a few seconds. “I’d ask if you were cool with it?”

I sigh. “Okay, now what if we were talking about Jake’s sister, instead?”

He grins. “I would strike the idea from my mind and never let Jake get a sniff of what I was thinking.”

I laugh, tapping the table a few times as I nod. “Yeah. That’s probably what I’d do, too.”



CAROLINE’S BED AND BREAKFAST IS PICKING UP IN ACTIVITY BY THE DAY. SHE has three families checked in and two more set to arrive today. When I show up, it’s a couple hours before noon, the snow hasn’t quite melted yet, but it probably will, and Andi is out front in a red sweater and jeans.

She spots me pulling up in my truck and waves with a big smile. It’s an arm-over-the-head, jumping wave and a huge smile, actually. I dip my chin beneath the sun visor, wave, and shut off the truck. Then I catch myself smiling and wipe that shit from my face.

I need to be cool. Be under control.

Yeah, Andi is infectious and fun to be around. Yeah, I’m pretty sure there’s more than a little mutual attraction. But *yeah*, she’s also Jake’s sister. That’s supposed to matter. Bro code, and shit like that.

“New sweater?” I ask as I climb up the porch. I was planning on not talking to her unless I had to, and I’m already failing at that directive.

“You like it?” she spreads her arms and dips one knee, posing for me.

“Yeah, sure,” I say, staring at the board that has needed replacing on the steps for a few months now. Maybe I’ll finally take care of that today.

“Jake took me out early this morning. Got some more variety. She lifts a hand to the side of her mouth and lowers her voice. “I’m gonna pay you back before him.” She winks and smiles.

“I wish you wouldn’t try to pay me back,” I say. “I really don’t mind.

Actually, I'd rather you save the money to get a place of your own. Or you could let me find you someplace to stay."

Her expression falls a notch, and I hate how quickly I'm wanting to take back my words just to make her look happy again. "If I'm causing that much trouble for you, I could ask Jake to help me figure something out..."

I hesitate. *Don't say it, Jesse. Don't fucking say it.* "No. You're not trouble. I just thought you'd want to be someplace with more privacy. I doubt you want to be sharing a cabin with a bunch of smelly hockey thugs."

"You guys all smell great! I've loved being at the cabin. It's like a vacation with a bunch of big brothers I never had."

I sigh. "Yeah. Well, take your time."

I head inside to see if Caroline has what I'll need to repair the porch step. She's serving brunch to a couple of older folks hanging out in her kitchen. It looks like some kind of tiny sandwich.

I move past her to the storage closet and find the drill and nails.

She eyes me. "Finally going to fix that porch step?" Caroline has on a white sweater with a giant red fuzzy ball in the center of her chest. There's a cartoony eye on each of her boobs, and a huge curved smile across her belly.

The old man nods, chewing and swallowing his bite of the tiny sandwich. "I was going to mention it. That step will give out sooner or later. Someone could get hurt."

"Yeah," I say. "I'm on it."

"Weird," Caroline says. "You've been making excuses when I ask you. I guess if you get to watch Andi decorate the porch while you work on it, things are different, huh?"

“It’s not that,” I say.

“The cute one who played checkers with me?” The older woman asks. “She’s just a doll. She’ll make a fine wife for somebody.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” I say. “I think she might have more of a future in track and field.”

The older folks give me a confused look and Caroline folds her arms, scowling at me.

“What?” I say. “I thought it was funny.”

“The wood is in the storage shed. I think you’re going to have to cut it to size, though. Think you can handle that, Mr. Not-so-handy-man?”

I ignore her and head out back.

About half an hour later, I’m on my knees in front of the porch with the mostly cut-to-size board and the original ripped off. My spot on the steps has given me an unfortunate eye-level view of Andi’s ass in those jeans all morning. She’s constantly going on tiptoes to reach up for things, just daring me to stare.

“What do you think?” Andi asks.

I glance up, trying to figure out what she’s asking about. I see a little string of candy cane lights framing the front door and two windows on either side.

She puts a fist on her hip, tilting her head as she studies her work. “Is it too much?”

My eyes fall to her ass again, and I force them back to the decorations. “It’s great. They’re great,” I say, clearing my throat.

She glances over her shoulder, smirking. “How long is that going to take you,

anyway? No wonder you don't charge your sister. You're super slow. You also realize you cut that step kind of crooked, right?"

"Are you an expert on replacing steps?" I ask. "Maybe I'm doing this fast. How would you know? And I'd like to see you do better with a thirty-year-old hand saw that's rusted to hell."

"Somebody's grumpy today. Is that why you've been giving me the silent treatment?"

"I haven't," I say. "I asked about your sweater."

She laughs. "And then you've proceeded to stare at the ground and pretend I don't exist ever since."

Definitely not true. "I'm trying to respect your brother," I say. "He's right, anyway. I was way over the line with you yesterday."

She scrunches her face up. "What?" she laughs. "You weren't at all. You've been a total gentleman since you rescued me off the side of the mountain. You didn't even look up my dress when you boosted me into the truck! And that was when we'd just met. I think five out of ten guys would've looked. *Easy.* And not because I'm some hot commodity, just because who *isn't* going to be curious if I was actually commando under my wedding dress. Right?"

"I could have sent you into those clothing stores with my card and waited in the truck. And I should've asked you to get dressed before trying to show you how the bed vibrates."

Andi folds her arms. She's so damn pretty it hurts. It hurts, because I know I'm not even remotely ready to date again or enter into anything resembling a relationship. Even if I was, she's my best friend and teammate's little sister. I need to get that fact tattooed on the inside of my damn eyelids at this point. It

feels like I need constant reminding.

“I wanted your advice on the dress,” she says. “And the bed thing was funny. It’s not like my boobs flopping wildly out of a towel in that kind of chaos is going to be *sexy* to anyone. Jake was overreacting. He always does.”

“Yeah,” I say, wondering how she thinks seeing her bare chest could’ve *not* been sexy in any context. “But, it’s about respect. Jake is my best friend. It’s disrespectful to give him any reason to worry about my intentions with his little sister.”

Andi rolls her eyes. “And what about the little sister? Does anyone worry about what is respectful or disrespectful to her? Like talking about her as if she’s some symbolic object instead of a living, breathing person who may have preferences of her own?”

Shit. I can see she’s right, but I’m also stuck between two impossible options. Dropping the cold and silent act with Andi is going to be a betrayal to my best friend. But it’s like she says. Acting as if Jake has the right to decide what’s best for Andi isn’t fair to her.

I hang my head and shake it. “I’m sorry, Andi. I don’t really know how to win here.”

She makes a frustrated noise and turns her back, pulling down the candy cane lights and tapping her chin, like she’s trying to figure out where to put them.

“What?” I ask.

She keeps her back to me for a few seconds. “I guess I thought maybe you’d be different than the other guys I’ve known. They run scared of me the moment Jake enters the picture. The only relationships I’ve ever had last more than a few weeks were the ones that started when he was too busy with hockey to screw them up in time. But I thought you were nice enough that

you would at least still treat me like a person, even when he showed up. I'm just disappointed, but it's alright. You don't owe me anything."

I open my mouth to say something but can't seem to find the right words. I want to tell her that *yeah*, sure, if things were different I'd be interested in her. I haven't enjoyed spending time with a woman like this in a long ass time. But I also don't want to lead her on. I know I'm not ready to open up any time soon, and Andi would deserve that from me. All I'd be able to offer her is sex and something casual. She deserves way more than that, and she definitely doesn't need to hear me explain it that way.

It feels like the only correct response is to stay silent.

Andi apparently disagrees, because she drops the candy canes a few seconds later and goes inside, closing the front door a little too hard.

I consider going after her, but know it wouldn't do any good. Instead, I finish up the job and head back to the cabin for the day. I told Caroline I'd stick around until afternoon when the guys got back from practice, but I figure she has Andi now. And Andi will probably be relieved to find me gone when she goes back out, anyway.

ANDI

I only realize I'm throwing a quiet tantrum a few minutes too late. I've just set a cardboard box of decorative lights down on the counter inside Caroline's bed and breakfast with a thud when it hits me.

Suddenly self-conscious, I glance toward Caroline, who is curled up in a chair by the fire with a cup of something in one hand and a crumpled old paperback in the other. It looks like a book she has read a few dozen times. She's not paying attention to the book or the drink, though. She's watching me with a glint of knowing amusement flickering in her eyes.

Caroline's last guest headed out into the town for the day and she suggested we both take a break. She's doing exactly that while I've been trying to keep busy, but not actually accomplishing anything.

I sigh, spreading my hands. "Go ahead. Say it."

"You've got that *frustrated by Jesse Prince* look on your face. I've seen it before."

"I just don't think I understand him."

Caroline gestures to the open chair across from her on the other side of the fire, eyes still dancing.

I sit down and fold my arms like I'm arriving for a therapy session. It's ridiculous. On top of the burning ruins of whatever I left behind at the altar two days ago, I've now apparently decided to be dramatic about some guy I just met not acting like "himself" around me? I try to snap out of it, but it's not working.

"What did he do?" Caroline asks.

I shrug. "He didn't do anything. I just met him two days ago and for some reason I'm letting myself get frustrated that he's not acting normal. I don't even know what normal is for him."

"Jesse is much more simple than he probably wants people to think. When we were kids, he was the one who always made sure nobody got left out of our games. He was always taking in outcasts and picking up strays, sacrificing his time to help the people everybody else forgot. That's just who he is. He takes care of people, and I love him for it."

"Why do I feel like all that nice stuff is coming with a 'but'?"

She chuckles. "Because he just got out of a pretty serious relationship and he won't tell anybody what happened between them to end things. I don't even know who broke things off with who. What I *do* know is he hasn't been the same since. There are flashes of the old Jesse, but then he'll pull back into his shell. It's like he's trying to be someone else, and that someone else can be cold and push people away. He tried it on me a time or two, even."

I realize I'm chewing my nails—the nails I spent too much of my own money to have done up nicely for the wedding and promised myself I would not chew for at least a few weeks. *Whoops*. I'm chewing my nails because a very dangerous phrase just fired off inside my stupid brain.

Maybe I could fix him.

Maybe I should focus on fixing myself, first. Maybe I shouldn't even be thinking about romantic relationships when I just fled my own freaking wedding barely twenty-four hours ago?

"He really hasn't told anyone?" I ask.

"Nope. I've tried interrogating his teammates and they all swear up and down he hasn't told them. I even bribed Carter with homemade cookies to get the truth out of him and got nothing. The little asshole admitted he only tricked me into thinking he knew so I'd bake for him."

"What about this ex of his? Has anyone asked her?"

"They can't. She left town, and she wasn't exactly a socialite when she was here. He met her out of town and she moved into that cabin with him, but she mostly stayed to herself unless he dragged her out. I guess she was another one of those strays he picked up. Typical Jesse."

I glance toward the front door and imagine Jesse still sitting out there. I already feel bad for getting frustrated with him, but then I decide I'm allowed to be frustrated with a guy, even if I sympathize with him.

"Maybe I'll go talk to him."

"Best to give him time," Caroline says. "If he was being pissy with you, he's probably in his feelings about something. Talking to him more is just going to get you mad all over again. I'd give him a few hours."

I drum my fingers on my knees, still glancing toward the front door. Giving people time and space isn't exactly in my D.N.A. I'm more of a "charge toward unhappiness and use a freaking fire hose of happiness to drench it until everybody is smiling" kind of person. "What does he like? Maybe I could cheer him up."

Caroline looks hesitant. "I don't know if that's a good idea."

“What? Everybody likes something. Give me some clues or I’ll just guess wildly and go down swinging on my own.”

She laughs. “Okay, okay. Well, he loves hockey more than anything. But that’s off the table for now because of his shoulder. He’ll never admit it to anybody, and he’ll kill me if he knows I told you, but he loves to dance, too. And hmm...” She taps her chin in thought. “He likes scary movies, but he talks through the whole thing usually. I think he actually gets scared and talking is what helps him act like he’s not.”

I’m smiling now, because my head is brimming with ideas. “Okay. This is great. I’m sure I can come up with something. You’re the best!” I get up like I’m about to power hug Caroline, then realize I’d end up spilling her drink all over both of us. So I stick out my fist for an awkward bump. She grins at it and punches it with her book hand.

“You’re welcome,” she says.

JESSE

I'm out in front of my cabin awkwardly holding a hockey stick in my left hand. I can't even try to use my right hand to help swing without risk of setting my injury back, so I'm just half-heartedly slapping a street puck into a net in the driveway. Usually, hockey clears my head, but lately it just pisses me off. It reminds me that I'm out for the whole season. It makes me feel like some part of me has been chopped off. Probably worst of all, it makes me feel like I have to figure myself out.

With hockey, I've always been able to shut my brain off and focus on the game. I can tell myself I'm working on what's most important to me and neglect the rest. Ever since my injury, I've had nothing to hide behind, and all the cracks in the life I've built seem plain as day.

The guys are gone for practice and I know they won't be back for at least another hour, and that's assuming they don't stop for lunch afterwards. Another guilty pang goes off inside me at that. I should be watching practices. I could at least give pointers or advice. I could be doing skating drills. Maybe that's why I'm out here in the driveway right now. *Guilt.*

Part of me wonders if Andi is even going to come back to the cabin when she's done helping Caroline for the day.

I know I was a bit of a dick to her, so it wouldn't shock me if she decided to simply keep her distance. I guess that was kind of the idea, even if I hadn't consciously formed the plan in my head. Push Andi away to protect her and to protect myself. It's that simple, even if I don't like it.

I'm aimlessly whacking the puck when I see Caroline's car pull up. Andi gets out, says something to Caroline, then comes practically bounding down the driveway. "Oh!" she says. "Can I watch?"

I can't help grinning a little. I have to admit it's endearing to see she has clearly moved on from the little attitude I gave her a couple hours ago. Sarah liked to hold grudges for days when I pissed her off, and she only ever forgave me when I performed some sort of self-flagellation for an apology. Apparently, Andi's ability to hold a grudge is about as developed as a golden retriever's.

Caroline backs out of the driveway, giving me a wave. I can't see her that well through the windshield, but I feel like I don't love the look on her face. It seems mischievous.

"There's not much to watch," I say. "I can't use my right arm for this."

"Then teach me," she says.

She extends her arm toward me as if she's waiting for my stick. Her cheeks and the tip of her upturned nose are pink from the cold. She's breathless, and even her lips have gone a brighter shade of red. She's both wholesome and adorable in her big, oversized sweater. If I hadn't had quite the glimpse of what she was hiding beneath the big, conservative clothing, it probably wouldn't seem so sexy to me.

"Alright," I say, handing her the stick. Jake can't possibly be mad at me for this if he happens to come back from practice early. And nobody could take this the wrong way. I'll keep my distance and just coach her up some. It's

harmless.

“Show me what we’re working with,” I say. I lean against the cabin, arms folded while I watch her set up.

It’s immediately clear that she grew up with an NHL player for her brother and has almost never hit a hockey puck in her life. She’s holding the stick way too low with her hands practically on top of each other. She winds up comically far, swings, and hits the driveway with a resounding *click*. She glances nervously toward me, smiling. “One sec. Just gotta warm up.”

“Maybe don’t try to send this one through the stratosphere. Just take it easy and put it in the net.”

She nods, focusing on the puck as she winds up again. She swings a little more slowly and the puck rolls on its little bearings. It’s *way* wide of the net and rolls into the grass.

I go get it for her. “Okay,” I say, considering where to start. “So I guess Jake never gave you lessons?”

She folds her arms over the stick, smiling. “Is it that obvious?”

“You’ve got some natural talent. *Probably*,” I add. I try not to laugh as I say what seems to be a complete lie.

She meets my words with immediate laughter and I can’t help joining her.

“Okay. Maybe there doesn’t appear to be talent,” I admit. “But I know you can do this.”

She’s watching me with such bright intensity that I can’t help feeling my heart start to beat faster. I glance down, focusing on her hands.

“Try moving these apart,” I say, pointing.

“Like this?” she asks, scooting them barely an inch apart.

“A little more.”

“Like this?” she spreads them so far out that I’m sure she has to be messing with me.

“Here,” I say, taking both hands and gently pushing them back together until they’re in the proper place on the stick. “Feel that? Now you can use your whole body in the swing. It should feel like the stick is part of you.”

She closes her eyes. “Nope. Feels like I’m holding your stick. *The* stick,” she corrects, which makes it way worse than if she’d just left her words alone.

I clear my throat. “Well, try swinging slowly. Like this.” I do the gesture as well as I can without moving my shoulder in the way I know will irritate my injury.

She mimics the motion. *Sort of.*

I’ve already backed away from her after helping her adjust her hands, but she’s hopeless when it comes to verbal directions. I knew players like this at various points in my career. Some people just have to be guided through the motion and, *of course*, Jake’s sister is one of those people.

“Here,” I say, putting my hands on her shoulders and moving her through the swing path. “Do this with your shoulders.” I’m standing behind her with my hands on her shoulders and the smell of her hair filling my nose. It’s that strawberry shampoo again, and it’s quickly becoming my new favorite smell. Her sweater is fuzzy and cold under my fingers, but I can feel the warmth coming up from her skin beneath. It’s practically intoxicating, and I know I should just back off. There’s nothing at stake here. I don’t need to teach her to do this *well*. I could simply stand by the cabin where it’s *safe*, give her some decent direction, and let her do what she does.

And yet I'm still holding her shoulders and guiding her through the motion until I feel like she has the path down.

"How was that?" she asks.

"Good. Now spread your feet wider so you're in an athletic stance."

She squats and her ass nearly bumps into me. I have to step back suddenly to avoid it. "Alright," I say. "Now when you swing, your weight should start here." I motion to her right hip, which brings my eyes to the swell of her ass against the jeans she has on. "It'll travel here." I point in front of her. "That weight transfer is a big part of your power." I'm talking on pure instinct, because it feels like the entirety of my focus is on the places where our bodies are touching and the thin gaps of air between us—on how easy it would be to slide my arms around her and pull her close in the way my body feels like it's aching for.

"Okay." She sounds breathless, even though everything we've been doing has been at fractions of normal speed.

"Like this?" She rocks back and forward, following the swing path I showed her almost perfectly. The swing looks so good I'm almost suspicious she *has* done this before.

"Wow, yeah," I say, smiling. "That's really good."

I take a few steps back and it feels like I can finally breathe normally again. "Now lock your eyes on the puck, follow through with your whole body, and aim for the net."

She takes a deep breath and swings. The puck glides smoothly across the pavement and lands in the center of the net. She pumps both fists in the air, jumping with a triumphant smile and celebrating like she just won the Stanley Cup.

I'm smiling as I give her a respectful little round of applause. I hate to admit it, but the impromptu training session has very quickly washed away the irritation and nerves I'd been letting get to me all morning. My smile's genuine and it feels good. "That was great," I say.

She blushes, and I can't help but find it utterly endearing. "Thanks to my fantastic coach. You know, I think you might have a career after your playing days in coaching. You just may want to stick to male students."

I frown. "Why?"

"Because you're going to have way too many fond admirers to handle if you coach girls." She bites her lip and I can't tell if it's because she regrets what she just said or if she's just waiting to see how I react.

Is she flirting with me?

She walks toward me and holds the stick out. She doesn't hold it out with straight arms, though. She keeps it close to her body, eyes on mine. "You can have your stick back, Coach."

I put my hands on it, and for some reason, the moment feels far more sexual and electric than it has any right to. I force my eyes down from hers to the stick and gently take it from her.

"Uh, yeah. Anytime, Andi."

She smiles suddenly, dispelling the tension in the air as she resumes her usual, endlessly energetic, bouncy stride. She takes a few steps toward the house and turns to face me. "Shouldn't make promises to me! I hold people to them!"

I wonder in what world "anytime" qualifies as a promise as I watch her head inside. *Okay*, I mostly watch her ass.

I knew Jake's sister was dangerous the moment I laid eyes on her. I don't think I understood just *how* dangerous she'd be for me until now.

I run my hands through my hair and glance down the driveway, half expecting to see Jake lying prone with a sniper rifle ready to take me out once and for all after that little display. The driveway is empty except for my truck, of course. I shake it off and briefly consider getting in my truck and driving into town. After all, Andi is in there. I might as well be jumping into the dark ocean after seeing a giant fin circling my pathetic little life raft.

But I can't run from her. She's made that much clear. Andi Summers will track me down, pursue me, and catch me with a blushing smile that threatens to undo every carefully laid plan I have.

If you can't run from something, you face it.

So I take a deep breath and head inside the cabin.

JESSE

I don't know why—probably my brief but memorable past experience—but I almost expected to find Andi in some compromising, accidentally sexy position when I opened the front door of the cabin. I thought maybe she'd be bent over—stuck in the washing machine with her ass out—asking if I could help her get out, or in the middle of changing in the living room. Honestly, neither possibility would be completely out of character given what the woman has already put me through.

Instead, I see her curled up on the couch with her hands under her cheek and her eyes closed. She's trying to take a nap?

“Oh,” I say when she looks up at me as I come in. “You might want to do that in the guest house. The guys are due back from practice any time now. I mean, if they got lunch you may have an hour or two.”

“It's okay,” she says. “It's cozy here.”

I hesitate, then take a look at her laying there on the couch. I remember how it felt to have my hands on her shoulders and how cold her sweater was. For some reason, Andi Summers brings out every protective instinct I have. Is she a grown ass woman who could probably track down a blanket if she's cold? Yes. Do I still feel like I need to personally monitor her body

temperature and comfort levels to be safe? Also yes.

“Here,” I say. I go to the blanket box under the TV and fish out the biggest, warmest one we have. Then I think about it and grab the whole pile. I walk over to her and when she makes no move to grab the blankets from me, I drop them and lay the first over her body. “Want more?” I ask.

“More blankets, or more of you pampering me?” she asks. “Because both are really nice.”

I have to turn my back to her because the way I feel when our eyes meet right now is entirely not something I can deal with. I pretend I was about to start a fire, partly because it lets me keep my eyes off her and put my back to her. “If you’re still cold, this might help.”

“Okay,” she says, stifling a yawn. “You really are good to me, Jesse Prince. Keep this up and I’m not going to want to move out of your guest house. I’ll just find a way to convince you to let me stay forever. We can be platonic roommates since I’m not your type. Jake won’t even be able to complain about that.”

I open my mouth and try to think of some clever but not completely asshole response to that—something to make her understand that would *definitely* be a bad idea. It’s almost a minute before I finally get the fire going and I still haven’t thought of anything to say. I stand up, still focused on the fire. “I’m sorry about what I said earlier, Andi.” I can’t bring myself to look at her, so I keep talking to the fire in a low voice. “I didn’t mean to be harsh when I said you weren’t my type. I just wanted Jake to relax and stop worrying. What I mean is I was talking out of my ass—just saying what I thought he wanted to hear. Honestly, if I was looking to date, which I’m not, you’re exactly my type. I’m just not—” I turn and realize her eyes are closed and she’s breathing heavily.

The blanket is pulled up to her chin and her legs are tucked in tight so she's barely taking up any space at all on the couch. She looks so small I know I could scoop her up in my arms without any effort and carry her to the bed in the guest house if I wanted. Part of me does, if for no other reason than I want the sight of her like this to be for me and me alone. I don't want to share it with the other guys when they come back.

I unclench my fists and let out a long breath, though. She's asleep and didn't hear a word of what I said. It's probably better that way.

I pull one more blanket from the pile in front of her, drape it over her sleeping form, and flop down on the opposite couch. I know it's not as if she's in danger here, but it feels wrong to just leave her by herself while she's in such a vulnerable position.

I kick my feet up and pull out my phone. There's no reason I can't hang out and keep an eye on her until she wakes up, just to be safe.

I see a string of texts from Caroline when I pull out my phone.

Caroline: How did it go?

Caroline: I think she really likes you, by the way.

Caroline: You two would be cute together. You realize that, right?

Caroline: Hope you're both using protection.

I roll my eyes and fire off a response.

Jesse: Nothing happened. Nothing is going to happen. Stop trying to play matchmaker.

Caroline's response comes almost right away.

Caroline: I wish you would just tell me what happened with Sarah. You used

to tell me everything. Maybe I could help.

I start typing a message, delete it, start again, delete it, and then set my phone down in frustration. I glance over at Andi again and some of her hair has fallen across her eyes. I have to fight the urge to go gently push it back from her forehead and tuck it behind her ear.

I send my message quickly.

Jesse: I just need time. It's nothing. Stop worrying so much.

I set the phone down and ignore the next string of vibrations signaling Caroline's replies. I feel a little pang of guilt for ignoring my sister. Our mom died shortly after Caroline finished high school and I was just breaking into the league. Then dad died a few years later. Now all we really have is each other. I have my teammates, but I know she just has the people around town and Mia, and that bond isn't anything like what forms between the guys on the squad.

I need to do better for her. I need to do better for the guys on the team, too. I've let myself draw back inside myself ever since the breakup, and the time for self-pity is long gone by now. Somehow, Andi's arrival has been the wake-up call I didn't know I needed.

I run a hand down my face and look over at Andi again. I try to decide if she's still cold. Actually, I think maybe she's too hot now. I go and peel off the top blanket, hesitate, then decide to leave the single blanket on her. I poke at the fire a bit until I've moved a few logs out of the fire to help calm it down some.

I take my spot back on the couch and thread my fingers over my stomach.

I can't allow myself to start thinking about chasing after Andi. Obviously, I'm attracted to her. Obviously, I find her fun and enchanting. I'd be

surprised if anybody *didn't*. She's infectious, and before long, she'll probably have all of Frosty Harbor under her spell, along with my teammates.

Maybe keeping a protective eye over her can be enough for me. Maybe I can settle for taking care of Andi while she's here. I can help her. I can be like another big brother to her when Jake isn't around and when he heads back out of Frosty Harbor after the holidays.

I just need to find a way to suppress how my body seems to practically light up with an electric current of excitement every time I'm near her.

Easier said than done.

JESSE

I'm not avoiding Andi. Not exactly, anyway. I'm simply resisting the near overwhelming urge to put myself in positions to be around her. I've been jumping at the chance when Caroline needs something done away from the bed and breakfast. Errand to run? I'm on it. Go ask so and so about this and that? No problem. As long as it's not me and Andi together doing something, I'm all for it.

Around the cabin, I've managed to keep my distance, too. I started going to practices to cheer the guys on and give them pointers. I even went to a meeting the other day. On the one hand, it's helping tamp down the growing guilt I've felt over failing to be a leader for my teammates. On the other hand, it's keeping me away from Andi and from having to confront whatever confusing shit is attempting to form itself between us.

When I do need to be near Andi, I try to make sure my teammates are also around. Despite my efforts, we've still found ourselves alone a few times. The chemistry is impossible to ignore when it's just us. We rode out to her crashed car together the other day and I helped the town mechanic, Mikey, chain it up and tug it free. He said it was most likely totaled, but he'd take a look. I helped Andi get things filed away with her insurance and we got lunch together before heading back.

All told, she has been in Frosty Harbor for about a week now. One week and I can already see how her presence is reaching to every corner of town like rapidly spreading vines. I've seen her laughing with Teri and Keri, the couple who runs the farmer's market every weekend. I've spotted her chatting with random old folks on the sidewalk, running errands all over town for Caroline, and staying up late to play board games and watch movies with the guys at my cabin.

One week, and Andi already feels like she's integrating with the town more than Sarah ever did after all our time together.

It's a scary thought, considering Sarah's inability to make a home here was always a point of contention between us.

I've also apparently managed to put out the signal that Andi is mine to pursue. The guys have been careful to stay platonic, and I know at least a few of them would have taken their shot by now otherwise—Jake's murderous intent or not. The only explanation is they think I've laid some kind of claim over Andi.

I've thought about correcting their assumption. I *should* correct it. If I wasn't full of shit, I'd sit them down and tell them in plain terms: I'm not interested in Andi that way. The fact that days keep ticking by and I haven't had that conversation with anyone tells me everything I need to know. Of course, I'm still pretending I don't see the writing on the wall.

Why?

Because I'm a coward and an asshole, apparently. I know I have nothing to offer Andi besides a chance at one day earning the fragments of my screwed up heart and heaps of casual, meaningless sex along the way.

I'm in a foul mood as I keep circling those same thoughts. I push open the door to Caroline's place and find her behind the counter finishing up a check-

in.

I spot Mia on what must be her lunch break. She's still wearing her serving apron and a t-shirt that reads "Paulie's Perogies and Such". After a freak injury, Mia gave up figure skating and settled down into the kind of small town life most people around here cherish. She waits tables at Paulie's and still slips her skates on when she gets the chance. She has her red hair pulled into a ponytail and smiles when she sees me.

"Jesse! Hey! You conveniently didn't tell me about your new love interest the other day. I thought there were no secrets between us."

I shoot a glare towards Caroline, who suddenly and mysteriously gets very busy behind her desk.

"She's not a love interest," I say. "She's Jake's little sister."

"Mhm," she says, and it's now clear to me that Caroline has talked with Mia already. *A lot*. "The little sister Jake Summers didn't tell anybody about until she showed up in a torn wedding dress after running away from her own wedding." Mia is counting cash—her tips from the morning shift, I assume. She finishes and stuffs the few bills in the front pocket of her apron.

"He didn't want the guys chasing after her. And he's not exactly thrilled to have her staying in the cabin with us. We're all trying to be respectful to him and not... well, you know."

One of her dark red eyebrows lifts. "Not what?"

I sigh. "Nobody wants to tell Jake they have the hots for his sister."

"But they all do, right?"

I'm not a good liar, so I decide to change the subject instead of trying. "It was nice to run into you, Mia. I need to see if Caroline needs—" I groan when

Caroline practically sprints into the back room before I've finished my sentence.

"Looks like she's fine," Mia says, smiling wide. "Guess you're stuck answering my questions."

"I don't think Andi is even going to stay in Frosty Harbor. So whether anybody has the 'hots' for her or not is kind of a moot point. She's going to be history sooner or later. The girl ran away on the morning of her wedding. I don't know if that's exactly a recipe for stability."

"I see." Mia lifts a to-go cup and sips something pink through the clear straw. "So this girl is definitely girlfriend material, but she's so great that you can't bring yourself to admit it because you're scared she'll leave?"

"That's not at all what I said."

"Okay."

I sigh, frustrated, and look toward the back door. "Caroline?" I call out.

Mia's grinning again. "I saw Andi in here earlier. She's really cute. Kind of got that rogue, Disney princess vibe to her. I was half expecting songbirds to come fluttering through the window and land on her shoulder, or flowers to sprout in her wake or something. Honestly, I sort of wanted to hate her for a second. But she's not really easy to hate. Sweet girl. Don't you agree?" Mia takes another sip, eyes locked on me.

"What's your goal, here, exactly?"

Mia's lips curve up around her straw. "You know everybody hated to see you get hurt when things ended with Sarah. I know you don't talk about it or whatever, but everybody just wants to see you happy again. Maybe I'm inclined to think the best medicine for a broken heart is to start trying to use it again."

“You shouldn’t use things that are broken.” My voice is more flat and harsh than I intend, but Mia knows by now that Sarah is a touchy subject with me.

“Hearts don’t literally break, though. I mean, what are they having you do for physical therapy on that shoulder of yours?”

I clench my teeth. I can already see the point she’s planning to make. “You know the answer to that.”

“Mhm,” Mia says. “So something on you got hurt and the cure is to...” She fake gasps, lifting manicured nails to her rounded lips. “Carefully use it again?”

“It’s apples to oranges.”

“Unless it isn’t,” she says, shrugging. “Just saying, Jesse. I think hearts don’t get better if you lock them up. They just wither away, shrivel, and get weird. You keep staying in your grumpy little cave and in a few years, girls like Andi aren’t even going to *want* you to notice them.”

“You’re my sister’s best friend, so I’ve let you talk about this more than I want. But I have my limits. I’m done.”

Mia just smiles and twinkles her fingers in a little wave. “See ya around, Jesse.”

At this particular moment, I can’t help thinking I don’t want to see Mia around. The crueller parts of me want to ask her what was going on at my cabin the other day. I want to see how she likes being put on the spot and questioned about personal things, like whatever was unspoken and thick in the air between her and Nolan. Unlike her, I’m not cruel, so I keep my mouth shut. Instead, I grunt and head into the back, where Caroline falls away from the door she was clearly just pressing her ear against.

She blushes and folds her arms. “Oh, hi. The door was... making a weird

sound.”

“Yeah,” I say flatly. “A sound like a conversation you forced your brother into with your best friend, I imagine.”

“Anyway,” Caroline says. “I actually need a favor, now that you’re done farting around out there. We’ve had a lot of early check-ins because of that snow storm they’re predicting. I’m going to need more hot chocolate and milk. Could you run to Liana’s and grab me some?”

She holds out two twenty-dollar bills for me, which I ignore.

“On it,” I say. I pause, though, looking around the back room, where I kind of assumed Andi was. She isn’t in the lobby, out front, or back here. So where is she?

Caroline, who’s annoyingly perceptive, laughs at my moment of hesitation. “Looking for Andi?” she asks, her smile entirely too sly for my liking.

I shrug.

“She’s running an errand for me.”

“Alright,” I say. But what I’m really thinking is “good”. Andi on an errand is an Andi I can avoid. If she was back here, I wouldn’t have put it past her to ask if she could tag along.

As much as part of me would enjoy her company, another part of me feels so damn conflicted around her that I can barely stand it. Maybe if I’m lucky I can make it the whole day without running into her. After that shit with Mia in the lobby, I feel like I need the day off from anything complicated.

ANDI

I'm exhausted, but in a good way. I had a snowball fight with some local kids, got in a touch of gossip with their moms, and even managed to ambush Jesse with a snowball attack on the sidewalk when he was heading toward Caroline's with groceries. He didn't seem to appreciate the humor in it all, but I had a great time today.

Honestly, I've had a great time all week. I know I'm kind of running from what I left behind in New York and still refusing to face it, but for now, that's alright with me. I can face it eventually, and that's enough.

Caroline drops me off at the cabin, thanks me for my help, and hands me an envelope with cash in it for my day's work.

I spot Nolan, Maddox, Liam, and Carter all waiting in Jake's car in the driveway. Carter rolls down the window and flashes a peace sign toward me. "Sup, Summers. Might want to roll with us tonight. Jake's just in there grabbing his wallet. That means you're gonna be stuck with Jesse if you stay in. He's grumpier than usual. Just a warning."

Maddox nods. "Full moon," he says, pointing up to the sky. "Jesse is always off on full moons."

"Right," Liam says. "Because the amount of sunlight hitting the moon

definitely impacts human psychology.”

“I know,” Maddox says, completely missing Liam’s sarcasm. “It’s wild, isn’t it?”

“I’m pretty beat.” I jerk my thumb toward the cabin. “I was kind of looking forward to just vegging out on the couch for a few hours tonight. Thanks, though.”

“Sure. Oh, hey,” Carter says. “If Jesse asks why his toothbrush is wet, just tell him I lost mine and used it. Don’t tell him it fell in the toilet.”

I narrow my eyes. “What?”

“Forget it,” Carter smiles. “Jake!” he shouts as he slaps his palm on the side of the car. “Let’s go, Princess! The liquor in town isn’t going to drink itself, dude.”

Jake comes jogging out from the garage, but slows when he sees me. “You coming with us?”

“No, thanks.”

He hesitates. “Going to the guest house?”

“Maybe.”

“Andi…” his voice is serious.

“Jake?” I ask sweetly.

He clenches his jaw, then shakes his head and goes to get behind the wheel. “Call me if you need something.”

“Maybe I should get one of those necklaces they give to older people who are a fall risk. We could put a little button around my neck to push. That way my brother can come rescue me whenever I need.”

“I think she’s being sarcastic,” Carter says.

“No shit.” Jake rolls the window up, shoots me the middle finger, and drives off, kicking up gravel.

I grin and head inside. Jesse is making some kind of protein shake in the blender. “Oh,” he says.

“Hi,” I say. “I saw this trailer for a new scary movie. Wanna watch it with me?”

He closes the lid on the blender and hits the power button. For a solid minute, I wait as the machine grinds up ice and yogurt and his protein powder. He finally shuts it off with a look of defeat. “Yeah, sure,” he sighs. “Honestly, I really love scary movies.”

“Oh, really?” I’m not sure my acting job is super convincing, but he doesn’t look suspicious. After all, I was fed information by Caroline a few days ago, and I’ve had the scary movie idea up my sleeve ever since.

It’s not like I’m being sneaky. Not exactly, anyway. All I want to do is cheer him up.

I lay on the couch, pick up the remote, and start blindly navigating the streaming services on his TV, hoping I find something that looks good. The truth is, I haven’t seen any trailers. I just heard Jesse is grumpy and I want to do something to make him happier.

He sits on the opposite end of the couch with his shake.

I look over at him and laugh. “Afraid of my cooties?”

He sighs, then scoots a few inches closer to me. I decide not to push it. After all, it’s not like I’m trying to seduce him. I’m not even trying to get back into a relationship. I just wish he didn’t treat me like I was radioactive.

I eventually settle on a movie about some women on a girl's trip to a remote cave where they supposedly find mutated human-like creatures that are out for blood. It sounds absolutely charming.

Jesse watches silently for about twenty minutes, and then, just like Caroline predicted, he gets a little chatty once the tension in the movie picks up.

"I don't get people who go into caves like that," he says.

I look over toward him, nodding. "Me either. Confined spaces? No cell phone signal? Trusting your life to a few ropes? No thanks."

"Right. If you have a death wish, there are easier ways to—*ah fuck. Jesus.*" He shrinks back, face contorted in disgust and horror at what he just saw on the screen.

I'm biting back a smile. "Scared?" I ask.

"I'm fine."

My amusement at his discomfort doesn't last long. Within thirty minutes, I've scooted over to Jesse to hide against his shoulder with my blankets and he is rambling about everything from hockey to his favorite meal Nolan has made. Between me hiding my eyes and him talking nonstop, I think neither of us is actually watching the movie, which has turned out to be downright terrifying.

I hit pause eventually. "Sorry," I say. "I'm actually really not good at scary movies. I just wanted to cheer you up. Caroline said you like scary movies and talk a bunch when you get scared. I kinda wanted to see if she was making that up, too."

"I don't," he says, then he pauses and laughs. "Maybe she's right."

"It's okay. I think you have a lot of empathy for people. Maybe these movies

freak you out because you can really put yourself in their shoes. I think it's cool."

"That's a nice way to spin it."

I cross my legs on the couch, turning to face him and resting my chin on my hands, which are threaded over his shoulder. "Maybe I think you're a nice guy."

"Andi..."

"What?" I ask.

He swallows hard. "You being here hasn't been easy for me."

"Is it because you have to remember to put the toilet seat down? Because you guys are all shockingly good at that. Either that or you all go number two *a lot*."

He grins. "It's not that."

"What is it, then?" For some reason, I'm whispering now. The low tone of my voice and the sudden realization of how close our faces are makes the moment feel more intimate. I watch his long lashes as he looks down, trying not to make eye contact with me.

"It's you," he says.

"I'm a bad house guest?"

He chuckles softly, then he looks at me. The moment our eyes meet, neither of us has to say another word. It all clicks into place so clearly I can almost hear the metallic sound of locks sliding into place.

I want this. It's almost like the words are physical things in the air between us.

He touches my cheek and leans in close.

I lean in, too, pressing my lips to his. We kiss softly at first, then more intensely. His hand moves from my cheek to thread into my hair. His other hand falls to my knee. I touch his side and run my hand up his neck, gripping a handful of his silky hair.

I start to fall back as he kisses me deeper, arms planted on either side of me. I unfold my legs so his body positions between them and I can feel the hard shape of him between my legs, making my core throb with desire.

And then a car door slams outside.

We both sit up suddenly and I hit unpause on the movie. I scoot several feet away from Jesse and he straightens. I jerk my head to the side to see Jake coming in the house. “I forgot my—” he trails off, eyebrows wrinkling at the sight of us. He looks up at the screen, where one of the girls is covered in blood and screaming. “What the hell are you guys doing?”

“Watching a scary movie,” I say.

“Nothing,” Jesse says at the same moment.

Jake doesn't move for several beats, then he finally goes to the kitchen. “Forgot to charge my phone. Do you have a charger in here somewhere?”

“The drawer by the knives,” Jesse says.

Jake opens it, roots around for a suspiciously long time, then stands in the kitchen and just stares openly at us. “Why are you both sitting so weird?”

“We're not,” I say.

“Fuckin' weird,” Jake finally mutters, almost to himself, and then he leaves through the front door.

We both let out a breath once we hear his car start up and drive off. It's a testament to how distracted we were that we only realized he was outside when he slammed the door shut.

I pause the movie again.

"That was close."

"It's good he came. We can't... That wasn't a good idea."

"Why?"

"You know why."

"I don't know if I do. I'm single. You're single. Yeah, my brother is overprotective and thinks he gets to say who I do or do not date, but so what? We're all adults."

"It's not that simple."

"Because of her?"

He makes a non-committal grunting noise.

"Oh, interesting," I say. "So you really think—" I mimic his grunting sound. "I was actually thinking—" I do a different variation of the grunt. "But if you think—" I grunt again.

He smiles. "Very funny. But not entirely because of her, no. Just kind of."

"Do you still have feelings for her?" I ask.

"No," he says quickly. "No," he says again, shaking his head. "Some of the... scars are still too fresh. I'm not ready to say what I want, or to make promises about what I can offer."

"Maybe I'm not, either."

He looks up. “So you agree with me? We can’t let this happen again?”

“No,” I say. “I mean... who says we have to promise things? Can’t we just see where it goes? Stop acting like we don’t feel it.”

“That sounds dangerous.”

“It’s not like we’re nuclear bombs, Jesse. We’re just people. Worst case is we hurt each other’s feelings, right? People survive that.”

He looks like he wants to argue with me, but he nods very slowly. “If I agreed with you, it would be under one condition.”

“I’m listening.”

“Nobody can know.”

I chew my lip. “I hate to break it to you, but I think we might be the last people to realize this was going to happen.”

He chuckles, but then frowns. “I still don’t want to talk to Jake about it. About—whatever ‘it’ would be.”

“Something casual,” I suggest.

“Casual,” he says slowly, as if he’s testing the concept aloud. “I think I could offer casual. Yeah.”

“And I can keep a secret. Even if everybody and their grandma already suspects we’re doing the dirty behind closed doors.

Jesse lets out a long sigh. “Okay. Yeah. *Okay.*”

“Does this mean I can cuddle you now?”

He bites back a smile. “Yeah. Come here.” I rest my head on his shoulder and close my eyes. Confusion wrestles with contentment in my chest. I’m

thinking about the kiss. I'm thinking about the fact that I ended a year-long relationship with a note last week and ran away from my wedding. And even if I don't want to care, I'm also thinking about how mad Jake would be if he found out what we're doing.

But right now, I decide that it can all happily find its way to the back of my mind for later. Right now, Jesse's shoulder is the comfiest place in the world, and I plan to enjoy it.

JESSE

Andi is walking beside me down the main strip of Frosty Harbor. Ahead of us, the frozen over harbor is full of families ice skating while distant holiday music plays, echoing off into the mountains beyond the ice. Tourism is picking up, and I'm recognizing fewer and fewer people sharing the sidewalks with us.

"You know," Andi says. "I don't think I've ever done *casual*."

"Should I be worried, then?" I'm trying to sound nonchalant, but my pulse quickened the moment she brought up the odd arrangement we started last night on that couch. I wanted to kiss her more, but she asked to finish the movie and fell asleep before it finished. I wound up carrying her to the guest cabin bedroom, tucking her in, and sleeping alone.

Alright. I went into the bathroom and fucked my hand. *Then* I slept. Same difference.

"Nope. I'm sure I can figure it out. Let me guess. The difference between a casual relationship and a real one is you gotta act cool all the time, right? Roll with the punches. Oh, you're ending things? Cool, cool. Yeah. No biggie."

I grin. "Something like that."

“See? I’m going to be fine.”

“One question, though.”

“Alright.”

“Does this make me your girlfriend? Or do I have to qualify it? Like, I’m your ‘casual’ girlfriend?”

“As long as you only use that kind of label with me, sure. But nobody else is supposed to know, remember?”

“So we’re casual secret boyfriend and girlfriend? Yeah,” she says, pursing her lips. “Cool, cool. No biggie.”

I shake my head, laughing. “Alright, then.”

“So where are we going, anyway?”

“I need new string lights for the tree at my cabin. Old ones are going out.”

She is barely containing her excitement. “Are we going to decorate your tree together?” She has her hands clutched up against the point of her chin, teeth clenched and eyes wide.

“If you want.”

“I do!” She punches me three times, because apparently that’s what Andi Summers does when she gets too excited. She’s like a fucking cat, or something.

I have to take her by the shoulders and steer her away before she lands any more punches. “Easy, killer.”

“Sorry,” she says, blowing a loose clump of hair out of her face. “Holiday stuff just gets me super pumped.”

“Clearly.”

“Can I decorate the rest of the cabin, too? You have boxes of stuff somewhere, right? You said it was your mom and dad’s cabin. I bet they have a treasure trove of cutesy little weird decorations.”

“There might be some stuff in the basement. I haven’t looked in years.”

“I’m on it!”

I smile, but there’s a thread of worry running through me as I hold the door to the department store open for her.

Casual.

Last night, the word felt like armor. It felt like a cure-all for any of the many problems I could list off about this arrangement. Today, it feels flimsy and weak. In the face of Andi Summers and her thousand megawatt smile, the word “casual” might as well be a wet piece of paper for all the good it’s going to do me.

I should tell her we’re not decorating together, because that’s the kind of cutesy bullshit boyfriends and girlfriends do, and we’re not supposed to be boyfriend and girlfriend.

I should, but the way she lit up at the idea means I’m absolutely not going to let her down. One step down the slippery slope of my impending demise, here I come.

ANDI

Jesse is quietly untangling string lights on his knees while I'm humming and looking for places to hang up things. So far, I've made it through one of three huge boxes his mom and dad kept in the basement with all kinds of cute decorations. Jesse has mostly been messing with the same strings of tangled lights.

"Where are those guys?" he asks.

"Expecting them?" I glance over my shoulder at him. He looks irresistible in a cable-knit gray sweater and jeans, with his dark hair all tousled and messy. It's taking everything I have not to tiptoe over to him, wrap my arms around him from behind, and kiss him on the cheek. But we're casual.

Casual, Andi. Yep. I totally know what that means. I'm definitely not just kind of rolling with this and acting like I'm not super lost. I mean, is a casual super secret girlfriend allowed to ask her casual super secret boyfriend for a kiss? Can I hold his hand? Do I still have to pretend I never burp?

So many questions.

I stand up straight, tilt my head, and then adjust the dangly santa head again where I have it hanging from a cabinet knob. "Your parents had some really good stuff."

Jesse grunts.

We're grunting now, it seems. That's how I know he's uncomfortable. He thinks if he talks another language, I will leave him alone. *He still doesn't know who he's dealing with.*

I grunt back at him. I try to put as much emotion into the grunt as I can. I hope it's a grunt with a slight note of curiosity and a bit of reprimand that lingers on the palette.

He glances up and the corner of his mouth twitches.

I give another grunt. This one is more overtly questioning. It's a *talk to me, bitch*, kind of grunt. Strong on the tongue and tasting faintly of aged oak barrels. Or at least that's what I'm going for.

He finally caves, chuckling and shaking his head. "Honestly, I was hoping the guys would come back because this kind of thing doesn't feel casual. That's the truth."

"Oh," I say. "Well... If quietly decorating is too intimate, maybe we need some dance music in here?"

"What? I'm not seeing how that would help."

"Because silly dancing would make this way less intimate. It'd just be fun. The kind of things super casual chill girls do with their not-boyfriends."

He grins. "I don't see how—"

I cut him off by starting a song on my phone. I crank the volume up. The song is *Santa Claus Is Coming To Town*.

Jesse sighs, but he's smiling as he watches me stand there while I give him a silly stink eye and start dancing with just one shoulder and hand. I'm

snapping and tapping my toe, daring him to get into it.

“Do you want me to put it on the house speakers?”

I blink. “You have house speakers and I’m just learning about it?”

“Here.” He holds his hand out for my phone.

I do a little dance to close the distance between us, hand him the phone, and start doing a little boogie in place while I wait.

He taps a few times, waits, and then the crummy sound from my phone flickers and is replaced by booming, full sound coming from everywhere all at once.

“Oh shit,” I laugh, having to raise my voice. “This is awesome!”

He’s barely holding back a smile as he stands. “It’s not bad.”

“Do you dance, Mr. Prince?” *Yes, he does.* I know because I have secret intel from his sister.

He looks hesitant.

“Oh, come on.” I turn around, put my hands on my knees, and start booty popping my way back toward him until my ass collides with him. He laughs, putting his hands on my hips to stop himself from falling over.

Before long, we’re both having a blast. Jesse is smiling wider than I think I’ve ever seen as he dances with surprising grace around the living room in his socks. I’m operating on pure enthusiasm and absolutely zero talent, but having a great time.

The playlist clicks over to a slower song. I wiggle my eyebrows at him. “May I have this dance, Mr. Prince?”

He looks like he wants to say no, but he nods, stepping closer to me.

We're both breathing hard as we come together, his fingers threading with mine. He puts his other hand on the small of my back and it drifts down, touching the top of my ass. I step inside his space, resting my chest against his stomach and my cheek on him.

We sway like that as my mind wanders. The moment feels so painfully perfect, except for the underlying unknown. I thought that was what I wanted. Leaping into the unknown and letting my life be an adventure again. I thought I wanted to have no idea what comes next.

Right now, though, I just want to know that this doesn't have to end in flames. I want to know what I'm supposed to do to keep from screwing this up. "I really like you," I say into his chest.

He doesn't answer right away. "You're not so bad yourself."

"I think Jake wouldn't be that mad," I try.

"Andi... we can't. I need you to promise we can still keep this a secret."

"For now."

He pulls back, eyes on the floor. "Maybe we should finish decorating. The guys could be back any time."

"Cool, cool," I say, pretending I don't feel like I'm about to cry like a baby from the tiniest hint of rejection I just felt. *God*. If this is how I am going to act, he's going to call the whole thing off before it even starts. *Be cool, Andi*. "I get it."

He opens his mouth to say more, then bites his lip and reaches for my phone. "Here, let me turn that down some."

"Okay."

He turns the music down until it's just quiet background noise, then gives me

my phone and heads back to the box of lights.

I blow out a breath once his back is turned, wipe at my eyes, and kneel in front of the box of decorations.

One step forward, two steps back. Some might call it a set back. Not me. I'd say if you take one step forward and two steps back enough times, it'll just look like dancing.

ANDI

Caroline has her back to us as she fiddles with the coffee machine in her kitchen. It's sputtering and spraying bits of coffee everywhere. One of her elderly guests is bending over and trying to offer suggestions, but neither of them seem to know what they're doing.

I'm on the couch in the lobby with her laptop, firing off email after email to confirm various orders and people's availability for upcoming Frostival events Caroline has planned. Jesse is out front with Jake helping one of Caroline's guests with their car.

It makes me like Jesse even more when I see how much time he spends helping his sister out. Yes, he has gone off at various points to do things with his team, especially the last two days. Yesterday, they were all gone for a hockey match a few hours away. Mostly, though, the guys are in and out of the cabin. When Jesse isn't involved in some kind of team activity, he's in town asking Caroline if she needs help. It's sweet of him, especially the way he never complains or acts annoyed to be helping.

Jake comes inside. His hands are oily. He glances at me, then pauses. "What are you doing?"

"Work," I say, raising my eyebrows. "Does Jesse need help out there?"

“Not from you.” He goes into the kitchen and stands beside Caroline to wash his hands in the sink. Caroline looks at him once, then twice, and then clears her throat. “Do you think you could help us figure this thing out, Jake?”

Jake swallows visibly, then nods. “I can try.”

I shake my head at the two of them. Adorable.

After a lot of cursing, loud banging, and the eventual tossing of an entire coffee machine into the trash, Jake loudly announces he’s going to a hardware store to buy Caroline a new coffee machine.

The older guy heads up to his room and Jesse finally comes in from outside. He pulls off his jacket and rubs his hands together. They’re pink from the cold.

“Get it fixed?” I ask.

“For now. He’s going to need to go see Mikey, though. I basically put bubble gum and tape on it to get him up the hill a ways.”

“Mikey still has my car, right? Have you heard anything from him?”

Jesse frowns. “No. Maybe we should go pay him a visit.”

“Road trip!” I announce loudly.

Caroline sticks her head out from the kitchen. “Are you stealing Andi from me already?”

“Just for a little. We’re going to go see if Mikey is done with her car yet.”

Caroline’s eyes flick between the two of us. “So, when are you two going to tell people, exactly?”

“Tell them what?” Jesse asks.

Caroline puts her hands on her hips and rolls her eyes. “Whatever. Just bring Andi back when you’re done, please. The Frostival is going to start kicking off soon and we need to get our butts in gear if it’s going to be the best holiday season Frosty Harbor has ever seen. *Which it is.*”

“We’ll try to be quick. Come on.”

I set down Caroline’s laptop and trot after Jesse outside.

“Hey, Jesse?” I ask.

“Yeah?” He pulls open the passenger door of his truck for me, gesturing.

“Do you think it’d be easier if we just admit to people that we’re kind of casually dating?”

He visibly winces, then leans over a little like he has to use the truck’s door to keep upright. “I think this is all a hell of a lot simpler if we keep it in house.”

I press my lips into a smile. “Like we’re playing house together?”

“It’s just an expression.”

“Okay,” I say, still smiling.

He sighs and shakes his head. “Bad things happen when you tell people about your feelings. That’s all I know.”

I tilt my head at him. “I’m not sure that’s objectively true.”

“Well, I am.” There’s a note of finality in his voice, so I take the hint and act cool. Super cool. That’s me. I’m cool as a freaking cucumber. *Sort of.*

I twiddle my thumbs. “You could make an argument that keeping things bottled up is actually what makes bad things happen.”

“Or you could argue the opposite,” he snaps.

One step forward, two steps back, and now we’re dancing again.

I’m grinning as I stare out the window and watch the main street of Frosty Harbor pass by. I spot Mia heading into a cooking supply store with Nolan and frown. *That’s odd.* I know she’s Caroline’s friend, but I didn’t realize she knew Nolan. Maybe they’re running an errand for Caroline. She seems to always have everyone in town running her errands, so it wouldn’t be that big of a surprise.

As we drive, I feel just the slightest sinking in my stomach. Yes, I’m trying to tackle this whole thing with enough optimism to knock out an elephant, but beneath the face-blasting of good, happy thoughts, part of me wonders if I’m setting myself up for epic disappointment.

As crazy as it sounds, running away from my wedding wasn’t really heartbreaking. It was more like realizing my heart was just dozing off in a corner somewhere when it was supposed to be playing the lead role. When I understood what was happening, walking away made sense. It was almost easy.

With Jesse, I’m telling myself a bold-faced lie if I pretend my heart isn’t singing and dancing in the rain right now.

Oh well. You can’t bungee jump without trusting your rope.

Actually, you could just... not bungee jump, I guess. But we’re not going to dwell on that.

We pull up to a mechanic’s shop that backs up to a large hill. The patchy grass is littered with rusted cars on flat tires and partially assembled tractors and other large machinery.

There’s a muscular guy covered in grease, half-buried under the hood of a big

truck in the bay of the garage. A little boy I'd guess is seven or eight and a girl who looks maybe five are taking turns spinning each other in a torn up old office chair.

"Hey, Mikey," Jesse says as he pulls open the door for me.

I have to admit I like how Jesse always opens doors for me. He's my own personal grumpy gentleman. My secret boyfriend grumpy gentleman. My grouchy... *okay, no*. I get the impression he's avoiding labels. I'm all about rolling with things right now.

Mikey straightens. He's a big, handsome man with short, dark hair and a series of scars on his tanned face. One runs up into his scalp, drawing a bright white line up through his hairline. Another crosses his upper lip to his chin. The last one I notice is on his neck, disappearing beneath the fabric of his white tank.

"Hey, Jesse. Caroline called and said you'd be coming. She mentioned you two wouldn't mind babysitting the kids tonight. You guys are sure?"

Jesse shoots me a *don't you dare agree to this* kind of look.

"Meet your emergency babysitters!" I announce

Mikey hesitates, then gives his kids another look. The little girl just yanked on the back of the office chair and sent her brother spilling to the ground. They're both rolling around yelling at each other and throwing punches. At least the boy looks like he's mostly just slapping and not actually trying to hurt his sister. *I think*.

"You think you guys can handle them?" he asks.

"I have lots of babysitting experience," I say. "And I brought some muscle along." I elbow Jesse's ribs.

“We’ll manage,” Jesse says. “How long are you going to be gone?”

Mikey picks up a greasy rag and wipes his hands. I’m not sure how he expects to get clean by wiping his hands on an already filthy rag, but he’s definitely trying. He lets out a tired sigh. “Hard to say. I got called down to the city for some legal shit. Angie is on another one of her kicks and she’s trying to get the kids back. I’m meeting with a lawyer in town.”

“We got you,” Jesse says. “By the way. Any good news on Andi’s car?”

Mikey sucks at his teeth. “That depends what kinda news you consider good. Would the idea of selling it for scrap be good? Because that’s pretty much all you’ve got on your hands. Frame is completely cracked and trashed. It’s as totaled as totaled gets. I thought maybe I had something lying around that I could repurpose, but it’s past that.”

“That’s a bummer,” I say. “I guess Jesse is going to remain my personal driver for the foreseeable future. Sorry.” I give his arm a squeeze.

He grimaces. I can’t say if it’s because of the news about the car or the fact that he’ll have to keep acting as my driver.

“Thanks for taking a look, anyway. What do I owe you?” Jesse asks.

Mikey waves his hand. “We’re good. Besides, you’re going to be more than paying me back by watching the rugrats.

”Thanks,” Jesse says. “Go take care of your thing. Need to borrow my truck?”

Mikey shakes his head. “Nah. I got the old girl running again last week. Thanks, though.”

Mikey crouches in front of his kids, who are still rolling and fighting on the dirty floor of his garage. He grabs each by the back of their shirts and pulls

them apart like an animal taking its young by the scruff. He lifts them easily, setting them a few feet apart, then raises a warning finger. “These nice folks are going to watch you while I’m gone. Understand? You be nice to them. No trouble.”

The kids give him big, innocent eyes and nod their heads.

“Alright, come here you little gremlins.” He pulls both kids in for a hug, then stands up and wipes his hands on his jeans, which are also covered in some dark greasy oil.

I decide I’m getting this man a Christmas present, and it’s going to be a giant bag of clean towels.

“Good luck with the lawyer!” I call after him.

“Thanks. Oh, feel free to take the kids to your cabin, Jesse. They love it there and might be easier to handle.”

“Alright. Maybe,” Jesse says.

A moment later, Mikey is pulling out of view in his truck and we’re left with the little kids.

I kneel down in front of them. The little girl has bangs that were obviously cut by Mikey. They’re a little crooked and choppy. She has angel eyes with a tiny little mouth full of tiny little teeth. For some reason, she reminds me of those old Furby dolls. Adorable, but honestly a bit scary, too. “What’s your name?” I ask.

“Meemee,” she says.

“Amy,” the boy corrects in an annoyed voice. “Her name is Amy. She always gets it wrong.”

“Meemee!” she shouts. In the blink of an eye, her placid face has scrunched

into pure rage and she looks ready to kill. She shoves the boy with both hands.

“Alright, you two,” Jesse says, sounding bored. He gets between them on his knees, using his long arms to keep them apart. “Play nice.”

I’m feeling the first hint of being in over my head, but I try to cover it with a smile as I look at the boy. He’s definitely the kind of kid who climbs trees, breaks bones, and probably will be breaking hearts in a few more years, too. “What’s your name?”

He has blue eyes and jet black hair. He folds his arms. “I’ll trade you. My name for your number.”

All I can do is raise my eyebrows and laugh. Maybe he’s a little older than eight. Nine or ten?

“Hey,” Jesse says. “Be respectful, Cade.”

“I am,” the boy sounds outraged. “Daddy says if you respect a girl, you get her number, take her on a nice date, and always use protection.”

I share a silent look with Jesse, then clap my hands. “Okay,” I say, smiling. “I think we’re getting side tracked here. Does anybody want to go to Jesse’s cabin? That sounds like fun, doesn’t it?”

“Whooo!” Cade shouts, fist pumping as he runs toward Jesse’s truck. He climbs on the rear wheel and tosses himself into the bed with a heavy thud, then his head pops up into view a moment later. “Wanna ride back here with me, Miss?”

“No, she doesn’t,” Jesse says, voice cold. “Up front or in the back, Meemee?”

Meemee looks up at me, clutching her hands together and twisting from side

to side. She smiles, showing all of her tiny, straight teeth. “Are you a princess?”

I laugh. “Being a princess is a state of mind, Meemee. So, *sure*.”

“Wow,” Meemee breathes. “Then I’m a princess too. And I have sparkle power.”

“Princess of the sparkle turds, maybe,” Cade calls from the truck.

“Knock it off,” Jesse says. “And stay put back there. I’m not stopping if you fall out.”

Cade purses his lips in a *yeah yeah* kind of way that seems beyond his years, but then again, the words coming out of his mouth also don’t seem to belong with such a small kid. I can’t help wondering what sort of life these kids are living.

“Let’s blow this hot stand,” Meemee shouts as Jesse helps her up into the truck.

“It’s pop stand, Amy,” Cade calls.

“Meemee!” she shrieks.

The little girl positions herself between Jesse and me and then grabs my hand in hers, squeezing hard and smiling up at me once I’m inside. I grin over at Jesse. “They aren’t so bad, right?”

He shakes his head and starts the truck. “They’re just warming up. I hope the guys are back at the cabin. We’re probably going to need the help.”

JESSE

Nolan is in the kitchen when I walk through the front door with Andi beside me and Meemee fighting with Cade to get inside first. Mia is sitting in the kitchen again. She gives me a casual wave, but her cheeks go pink. “More cooking club?” I ask.

“Yeah, so?” Mia counters.

“Do you have a four wheeler?” Cade asks as he weaves inside past my legs.

“No,” I say. “And if I did, I wouldn’t let you drive it.”

“Uh,” Nolan says, leaning out into view with a cooking apron wrapped around himself. “Should I whip up something for the kids to have for dinner, too?”

“I’ll take a hamburger on the rocks,” Cade says. He snaps and shoots two finger guns at Nolan, who tilts his head.

“I like potatoes,” Meemee says. “But only squishy ones. I like lots of salt and lots of butter. When can we have a treat?” She tugs on my jeans, then realizes she probably has a better chance of getting something out of Andi.

Andi gets down on her level and takes Meemee’s little hands in hers. “Let’s eat your squishy potatoes first, then we can think about treats. Okay?”

I'm unable to help admiring how good she is with Meemee. She's patient and kind *and... it's very admirable, but also completely not working*. Meemee has taken her hands back, bunched them into fists, and big crocodile tears are forming under her eyes.

Cade is watching with folded arms and a smug smile. "Shouldn'ta told her 'no'. *Bad idea.*"

"Squishy potatoes?" Nolan asks, oblivious to the meltdown about to happen. "I can manage that. What's a hamburger on the rocks, though?"

"I was messing with you, dude," Cade says, rolling his eyes.

"I want a treat," Meemee says. Her voice is low and dangerously quiet.

Andi shows the first sign of panic. She looks up at me, then back at Meemee. She gives the little girl an uncertain smile. "Well, lots of butter and salt is kind of a treat, isn't it? Think how yummy that will be."

"I want chocolate." Meemee takes a small step toward Andi.

"You know what?" I ask. "I was hoping you two would play hockey with the guys in the driveway while we wait for dinner. Would you like that? I could find Jake, Carter, Liam, and Maddox. You guys can pick whoever you want for your team, even Miss Andi, if you want. I'll have to play cheerleader because I tore my rotator cuff."

Meemee tilts her head at me, clearly confused.

"I uh, got a boo boo."

Her mouth forms a small "O" of understanding.

"You mean we can play with NHL guys? Really?" Cade asks.

"Aren't you excited to play with me?" Andi asks.

Cade eyes her. “If we win, will you give me your number?”

“Who are we playing?” Jake asks. He’s just coming in from the garage with Carter and Maddox. All three are sweaty like they were in there doing a workout.

Carter grins at the little kids. “Look, it’s like that Rugrats show. Except... not as cute.”

Maddox elbows him and bulges his eyes. “Dude, Carter. You can’t talk like that to kids. It’s super bad karma.” He steps forward and gets down on one knee in front of both kids. Meemie looks like she’s still not sure she wants to give up her tantrum-to-be over waiting on sweets. He clears his throat and speaks loud and slow like he’s talking to someone who barely speaks English. “You are both, really, really cute. And I mean that in a platonic, non creepy, socially acceptable adult way. Totally great kids.” He holds up a thumb and winks, then gets up.

“Uh, anyway,” Jake says. “What’s with the kids?”

“A favor for Mikey. I’ve known him for years,” I say. “And it’s one I was going to turn down until somebody jumped at the opportunity and invited them to the cabin.”

Andi does a little curtsy and smiles. “That was me. I’m the one who did that.”

Jake rolls his eyes. “So, what? We’re all babysitting now?”

“Yes,” I say. “And you’re all drafted to play hockey in the driveway. Anybody who refuses is welcome to stay here with little Meemie and try to explain why she can’t have a treat before Nolan finishes her dinner, which is probably going to be like half an hour.”

I wait, eyebrows raised. All the guys take a moment to eye Meemie and seem

to come to the same conclusion I've come to.

Hockey it is. In a shock to nobody at all, Mia stays back and hangs with Nolan while he's cooking. If I wasn't so wrapped up in my own shit, I know I'd be trying to figure out what was going on with those two. Problems for another day, I guess.

I dig a lawn chair out of the garage and sit with Carter, who the kids don't want to play either with or against because they've decided they don't like him. So far, the game in my driveway looks like Cade taking slap shots at every opportunity and everyone else trying their best to make sure Meemie is having a good time. Every time something doesn't go her way, she starts making that "I'm about to explode" face again.

"Kids, huh?" Carter says. "What makes people want to pop those things out? Like, 'yeah, I'd love to have a little tyrant rule my life for the next eighteen plus years! Sign me up!'" He shakes his head. "Honestly, they should start doing mental screenings before allowing people to procreate. Anybody who actually *wants* that must be mentally deficient."

"They aren't that bad," I say.

Carter eyes me. "Poop on the walls, screaming matches, gross boyfriends trying to bonk your daughter? Sounds *that bad* to me."

"I'm not saying I want kids. I don't even want..." I trail off and shake my head. My eyes keep finding their way to Andi, who really is good with Meemie, even if the little terror is making it as hard as she can on Andi.

Seeing her be so good with the kids is doing weird things to me. *Stupid things.* Things I don't remotely understand, so I'm going to just keep pretending I neither feel nor understand them. That strategy has been working pretty damn well with all kinds of shit lately, so why change it now?

“Okay,” Carter says slowly. “I know you go all Guantanamo Bay the moment we bring up you-know-who, but I’m just putting this out there because I want you to know it. When the time comes that you want to talk, you can talk about it. As much or as little as you want. I may be a jack-ass, but I’ll control myself if you need an ear. Or something like that,” he adds, clearly feeling awkward.

I stare forward, eyes following Andi. She’s laughing because Cade looks deadly serious and he’s trying to score a goal on her. I’m also noticing that Andi is handling the stick suspiciously well after our one brief lesson. I’ll have to ask Jake if she has played before and was only pretending to be bad to cheer me up. I can’t even be mad if she was.

“I don’t know,” I say after a while. “I think the easy thing is to keep my head down. The easy thing is to not go looking for... anyone. But this shoulder shit happened and now I’ve been stuck here, hardly able to do more than jog and lift weights. And I can try to avoid women as much as I want, but what happens when they fall into my lap?”

“Literally, in this case,” he says.

“Huh?”

“I mean I found you two like ten seconds after you met and her face was between your legs. Props, man. That’s impressive speed, but it’s also not a race, you know.”

“Shut up,” I laugh, shoving him.

Carter grins slowly, and I hate that I just said all that crap out loud to him. I’ve done such a good job of bottling it all up before now. Suddenly, Andi shows up and everything seems to want to leak out the moment I let my guard down. “It’s alright,” he says, dropping the humor from his tone. “Feeling the way you feel. It’s normal.”

I let a little tension out of my shoulders. I know the guys must be more worried about me than they've let on if even Carter isn't giving me shit. "It's frustrating," I say, aware that I'm being vague.

Carter nods. "You know how I see it? The most important thing is to move forward. The past can hurt. The shit we leave behind looks pretty damn big in the rearview at first. But every day you move forward, the smaller it gets. Then one day you look back and the big pile of shit is nothing but a little turd on the horizon. And then it's nothing. Just—" he raises his hand and spreads his fingertips out suddenly, making a *poof* sound. "Just gone."

I grin. "So just keep moving forward until your past becomes a smaller and smaller turd in your rearview? That's exactly the kind of life advice I would expect from you."

He pats my back. "I'm glad I could live up to the hype."

"That's one way to put it."

I feel a little lighter, though. Somewhat stupid or not, Carter has a point. Then again, he doesn't know the insanity I just agreed to with Andi. Hell, I'm not entirely sure what we agreed to. In the moment, I'll admit I was pretty much talking about sex. I thought we'd end that night after the scary movie in my bed. I wanted something uncomplicated. No strings. No feelings. I just needed an outlet for all the pent up attraction I feel.

Apparently, I wasn't clear enough. Andi seems to be treating "casual" like a code word for dating but more slowly. It makes no damn sense, and I have no clue how to un-fuck the situation I've found myself in. Worse, I'm not entirely sure I *want* to get out of this.

Everybody cheers when Meemie scores a goal. She smiles big, then her eyes light up as she looks around. "Treat time?"

Andi deflates a little, then shrugs. “Okay. Okay. You get a treat.”

“And I get your number,” Cade says, leaning on his stick and doing what he probably thinks is a bad boy smile at Andi.

“And you do not,” Andi says. “Maybe I’m already spoken for.”

Jake goes completely stiff at that and Cade waves off her rejection in a carefree way that says he’ll try again later.

“What do you mean?” Jake says.

Andi looks up at him like she just remembered he’s there. “I just mean I ran away from my wedding. I haven’t actually talked to Landon, so that means I’m kind of technically still in a relationship, right?”

Jake’s gaze slides to me. The natural thing to do would be to look back at him and act normal. Instead, I raise my palms like he just pointed a gun at me.

Dammit. Way to look guilty, dumbass.

Jake’s eyes narrow and he looks at Andi again. “What do you mean? What’s going on?”

“I mean what I said,” Andi snaps.

Carter chuckles and does an impersonation of a cowboy striding into a raging gunfight, fingers holstered in his jean pockets. “Now, now, gentlemen. Let’s not turn a kids’ hockey game into a soap opera. We’re all friends here. Some of us are... friendlier than others. Some of us may have very ungentlemanly ideas about others who happen to be present here. But this isn’t 1984. You can’t police our thoughts, Jake.”

“Wow,” Maddox says, staring at Carter and then at me. “I didn’t know he read books.”

“Eighth grade,” Carter says, winking. “My English teacher was so hot. I read the book just so I could impress her when I answered all the questions. Didn’t work, but you know what they say. You miss eighty percent of the shots you don’t take.”

“Uh, a hundred percent,” Maddox says.

Carter tips his imaginary hat to Maddox. “Thanks for the support, bro.”

Maddox looks like he’s about to explain he was just correcting Carter, then gives up with a sigh.

“I’m done here,” Jake says, storming inside.

Andi looks after him and sighs. For a moment, she seems upset. But she straightens and smiles with a shrug. “Let him go. It’s fine.”

“You okay?” I ask.

“I’m great. Wonderful,” Andi bounces on her tiptoes. “You guys want to see if Uncle Nolan is done with those squishy potatoes?”

“Can we please not start calling him Uncle Nolan?” I ask as we all head inside.

“Can I be an uncle?” Carter asks. His eyes go distant and starry as he spreads his hands in front of his face, picturing it. “Uncle Joker. That’s cool, right?”

“No. Definitely not,” I laugh.

“Shit. I forgot my nickname,” Maddox says.

“I never gave you one,” Andi says. “But I can. Hmm.” Everyone stops inside by the counter. Cade goes off to the bathroom and Meemie flops down on the couch and yawns a huge, “I’m about to pass out” kind of yawn.

“Voodoo. Do you like that?”

“Ohh hell yeah,” Maddox says. He wiggles his fingers at Carter. “Voodoo. You like that, bitch?”

“Watch your language, man,” Carter says. “Impressionable kids and all that.”

“Yeah,” I agree.

“Sorry, sorry. What’s your nickname, Jesse?” Maddox asks. “Twisted panties?”

Carter spurts with laughter and Andi smiles.

“Captain,” Andi says.

“*Lammee*,” Carter complains.

We eat dinner, which involves a sleepy Meemee having a pre-dinner treat that she can barely stay awake for and a post dinner treat—a homemade cookie prepared by Nolan and Mia. The guys are all light spirited and laughing. Mia does a good job of fitting in with the group as well, and I can tell I’m not the only one trying to puzzle out whether she’s really just here for the cooking club or if it’s all about Nolan. Andi seems carefree as she jokes with the guys, eats her food, and teases the kids. Jake joins us a little later and apparently has managed to pry his head out of his ass, because he’s pleasant with everybody and hardly even glares at me. Nobody seems to know where Liam is, which means he’s likely found some love interest around town and is out with her tonight.

After dinner, everybody splits off and goes their own way. Carter and Maddox head into town. Jake goes to his room. Nolan claims he’s giving Mia a ride back to her place. Other than the threat of Jake emerging from his room, it leaves me mostly alone with Andi and the kids in the cabin.

Meemee is falling asleep for little two to three minute power naps, waking up and burning off whatever energy she generated in short bursts, and then

falling asleep again. Right now, she's curled into a ball beneath the kitchen table, snoring. Cade is practicing his shot inside on a little blow-up goal with a squishy puck and plastic stick the guys had for goofing around. Ever since our match, he has been too busy working on his shot to cause trouble.

"That wasn't so bad," Andi says. She moves beside me where I'm cleaning dishes in the kitchen. She gets close enough that I smell that shampoo of hers again and feel my body go rigid all over.

"Yeah," I agree.

"You know, you're not so bad with kids. I was kind of expecting you to suck at it."

I'm about to say something when my phone rings. It's Mikey, and he's apparently hung up in the city and wondering if we'll stay the night at his place and put the kids to bed for him. He won't be back until morning.

"Shit," I say, then I explain what I just heard to Andi.

"So?" she asks. "What is it, Jesse? Afraid to spend the night with me?"

I don't even see the point in lying, so I nod my head. "Maybe I am."

She goes on her tiptoes and presses a fingertip between my pecs. "Well, I promise I won't bite. I mean, unless you ask nicely."

And just like that, I've returned to what seems to be my natural resting state when Andi Summers is involved. *Erect and confused.*

ANDI

We get the kids to sleep without much fuss since Meemee is already on the verge of passing out and Cade is exhausted from all the hockey he played.

I'm on the couch with my feet kicked up in Mikey's living room. Jesse pulls open the door of the fridge and rummages. Glasses clink for a moment and then he emerges with two beer bottles. He holds a bottle toward me, eyebrows up.

"Sure," I say, taking one. He jerks his head toward the porch door and we head outside. It's cold, so we both bring our jackets before we take the rocking chairs on the front porch.

Outside, our breath mists in front of our faces and the wood of the chairs is freezing against my ass and back when I sit. I shiver, sip the beer, and set it on the table between us. "If I didn't know better..." I say. "I'd think you were trying to get me cold so I'd ask you to snuggle later."

"Actually, I'm trying to get enough alcohol in my system so I stop asking myself what the hell I'm doing here."

"Babysitting?" I ask, even though I'm pretty sure I know that isn't what he means.

“Sure, that. But you, too. Jake has to suspect something by now. He’s like a brother to me, and I’m going behind his back with his sister.”

“Come on,” I say. “We barely kissed.”

He eyes me. “Trust me. That’s only because I’ve demonstrated a metric fuck-ton of self-restraint.”

“Well,” I say, not quite sure how to respond to that. “Jake would be mad even if nothing was going on. He always does this. I had a few really bad relationships when I was younger. Jake was busy because he was always traveling for hockey camps and training and tournaments back then. He didn’t really know how bad it was for me until he got back for the holidays one year and kind of saw the aftermath. I think he never forgave himself for not being there. And ever since, he has been like this.”

“I’m sorry,” he says. “I can understand that. Caroline’s driven as hell. If she was less busy taking over the town and doing what she does, I can’t say I’d be doing much better than Jake in the overprotective department. I can’t even imagine what it would be like to see some asshole mistreat her. That’s why I don’t hold it against Jake. I know how hard it must be.”

“Yeah,” she says. “But even if I understand his intentions, it doesn’t mean I have to be ruled by them. Neither do you.”

He eyes me, then looks at his beer. It’s already empty. He points to my barely touched beer. “Want another?”

“Stay,” I say, touching his arm before he can get up to grab another. “I don’t want you to feel like you have to numb yourself to be with me. If the whole... officially unofficial thing we talked about is too much for you, then we don’t have to act on it. You can just talk to me. That’s fine.”

His eyes fall to my lips and he slowly shakes his head. “I don’t think you

understand, Andi. I can't just talk to you. The moment I saw you in that torn up wedding dress, I knew I wouldn't be able to get you out of my mind. I..." he trails off, his big hands clenching on the glass until his knuckles go white. "I know I can't keep you. But I need to have you. *Tonight*. Tomorrow night. As many nights as I can manage. I think that's the only way this is going to work, though."

I'm not sure if I'm breathing anymore. His words are rattling around in my brain, not quite sinking in. "What do you mean?"

"At night, you're mine. During the day, it's business as usual. That's how this needs to work. That's what I meant the first night on the couch. I want to fuck you, Andi. Not date you. I'm not ready to date anybody. So, that's it. It's all on the table now, and you can take it or leave it. No hard feelings either way."

Apparently, he has been thinking a lot about this. All I can do is nod my head.

At night, you're mine.

I replay those words again and again. Each time they repeat in my mind, I feel a rush of warmth that makes the cold bite in the air feel like it can't touch me. Yes, there's bone-numbing disappointment in his words. He doesn't want to date me. He doesn't want me like that. Of course he doesn't. He just wants my body.

I want that stuff, too, though. So maybe I can take what he's offering, even if it isn't everything I want. Because who knows, maybe the rest will come along the way?

I bite my lip and shift my eyes to the dark horizon and the faint outline of forested mountains in the distance. "No hard feelings either way?" I ask after I've had time to think over what he said. "You mean you won't be... feeling

hard if I say I want you to fuck me, too?”

Jesse’s sharp intake of breath would make me laugh if I wasn’t having a bit of a moment myself. Instead, I just bite my lip and shrug. “It looks a lot like night out there. And if I’m supposedly yours at night, we better get—”

The next thing I know, I’m being carried cave-man style through the screened porch door and toward Mikey’s bedroom. Normally, I’d have all sorts of hygienic, moral, and practical concerns about what we’re going to do in another man’s bed. But my pounding heart and absolutely humming libido are blasting away all of it. I just want whatever he’s planning. I want him. His hands on me. His breath against my skin. His lips on mine.

I want Jesse Prince to devour and consume me. I want his touch to take over until I forget what I’m still running away from—until I don’t feel the temptation to glance over my shoulder and see if my old life has caught up with me yet.

Tonight, I’m someone else.

Tonight... I’m his.

JESSE

I kick the bedroom door shut behind us and the thud echoes like a starting gun. I carefully set Andi down on Mikey's bed and wonder what that starting gun sound signifies. Is this a race toward stupidity? Simple satisfaction? Or maybe it's just a race to the finish line, because I just laid it out for her. Sex. No more acting like we're dating but keeping it quiet. No more confusing shit.

In the dim light, I can see the wild look in Andi's eyes. It's a look that tells me she may not know where this leads either, but she's ready to be claimed.

My hands are still on her arms—my grip just firm enough to let her know my intentions. I can instantly feel the silent understanding between us in this room. Tonight, I'm the one who makes the rules. I'm the one who decides the tempo. There's power thrumming between us with every rapid beat of my heart. It's as fiery and addictive as it is terrifying.

“Andi,” my voice is low and steady, a counterpoint to the rapid rise and fall of her chest. “We still can't tell Jake about this.” Normally, I know Andi would bite back. She'd tell me Jake isn't here and this is none of his business. Maybe she'd complain that he doesn't rule her.

Tonight, her reply is a whisper, a surrender that sends a surge of possessive

satisfaction through me. “Okay.”

I lean in, my thumb tracing the line of her soft jaw and smooth skin. My eyes fall to her lips, full and pouty. She parts them, big eyes turned up to watch me and wait. The look on her face says, “I’m yours. I trust you. But please, take care of me.”

That look does something dangerous to me. It settles in my chest like a weight of responsibility, because I want that, too. I want to claim every inch of her perfect body for myself and I want to greedily keep her stashed away—mine and only mine. I don’t want to share her with my teammates or the town. I want them to all go home for the holidays while I keep this perfect woman stashed away in my cabin, ready to laugh and smile in her infectious way every time I see her.

And at the same time, I want none of that. Those are the selfish, impulsive desires she brings up in me, and those are all the reasons I’m no good for her—the exact reasons I had to draw the line at physicality.

“I want you to myself,” I breathe into the crook of her neck. I want to kiss her. I want my lips on hers to seal this unspoken pact between us. I want that dirty promise I know I shouldn’t be making. But I’m using everything I have to restrain myself—to voice my worries in whatever way I can before we take that step.

“I’m yours,” she says, fingertips sliding up the nape of my neck and into my hair. “I’m all yours, Jesse.”

Holy. Shit. I move my palm down her stomach, slipping it beneath the waistband of her jeans. It glides over the silky fabric of her panties—panties, I realize, I probably bought for her that first day she was in Frosty Harbor.

“This is all I have to offer,” I say, still pleading with her, even if I don’t want her to really hear me and back out.

“I want this, Jesse,” she whispers, eyes intent on mine. “Stop trying to talk me out of it.”

Dammit.

Her voice is a fucking siren song. It’s irresistible. It’s the pull toward a darkness I know might just swallow me up—a place I’m not ready to go. At best, this will end with my own messed up heart permanently screwed. At worst, it’ll end with me breaking her heart. There’s no happily ever after here, but what if we can just be happy for now?

I lift my face, eyes locking on hers. “I’ve been sharing you since you arrived here. In the car with Carter and Liam. At the cabin with Nolan and Maddox. Around town with the kids and the people you meet. Tonight, with Meemie and Cade. But I’ve wanted you to myself from the moment I saw you. And I have a confession…”

Her eyes catch a touch of starlight from the window, glinting in the low light of Mikey’s room. “What is it?”

“I did try to look up your wedding dress when I helped you into the truck. I didn’t have any luck, but I tried.”

She whacks my shoulder, laughing. “Jesse Prince! And I complimented you for being a gentleman.”

“Secret’s out,” I say, voice growing heavy as I lean closer to her. “I’m an asshole who doesn’t like to share. I don’t even want to share you with the night. Every breath. Every whisper. Every moan that’s about to spill out of you? They’re all mine.”

I finally kiss her and the entire room seems to contract around me the moment our lips touch. Our mouths move softly and carefully for a few seconds—each of us simply exploring the new sensations.

Her tongue slips into my mouth and the heat triggers something in me.

My kiss grows hard and wild. She meets my intensity, her small hands digging into my skin and my hair, tugging at my clothes as if they're a sudden nuisance she wants gone.

I'm straddling her and pulling off my shirt. She's beneath me, blouse and jeans unbuttoned, eyes heavy and lips parted.

That's when the door groans and creaks open.

I hear a little yawn and look to see Meemie, who is covering her mouth with one hand and lugging a giant, floppy pink teddy bear with the other. "Y'all quit wrastlin' an' make room," she says in her tiny voice, as if it's the most normal thing in the world.

All I can do is stare as the small girl climbs up on the bed, crawls right next to us, and lays on her side, cuddling the bear.

Andi bulges her eyes at me and looks like she's on the verge of laughing or crying.

I hang my head. *Fuck.*

"Uh," I say. "Meemie, you can't sleep in here."

Meemie ignores me.

"Hold on," I say to Andi.

I start to scoop up the little girl to carry her back to her bed, but the moment I touch her, she screams and starts whacking me with the teddy bear. "I'm not going back! There's a monster in my room!"

"There's not—ow," I say, laughing despite my irritation at being interrupted. "There's no such thing as monsters."

“Go tell that to him,” Meemee complains.

“Come on,” I say. I get off the bed—and *Andi, regrettably*. I pull my shirt back down and adjust myself in my jeans a little. I was so ready to be inside Andi that my cock physically hurts right now. Every pulse of my heartbeat is just pain.

Meemee eyes me over her shoulder. “You go,” she says.

“Nope. Come on. We’re getting rid of this monster together.”

She hesitates, but slides out of bed and rubs her eyes. She snatches the bear from the bed and follows after me.

I quickly yank open her closet, lay down and look under her bed, check the window, and gesture. “See? Nothing here.”

“You ain’t checked the drawers.”

“What? Monsters would be big. Why would one be in your drawers.”

“I ain’t scared of big ones. I’m scared of little ones. This big,” she says, holding up her thumb and forefinger.

I sigh and start opening drawers. “Nothing,” I say after a few minutes. I’m picturing Andi on the bed waiting for me. It’s all I can do to not just sprint back there, lock the door, and let this kid figure it all out on her own. But Caroline was scared of the dark when she was little, and I still vividly remember how much she needed me to help her grow past her fear.

Meemee chews her lip. “Can you stay ‘til I fall asleep?”

I open my mouth to say “hell no,” but catch myself and clench my fists. I sigh and unclench them. “Uh, yeah, sure, kid. Just hurry up about it.”

Meemee scurries to her bed, climbs in and lays there, watching me

expectantly.

“What?” I ask, barely keeping exasperation from my voice.

“You gotta take off my shoes.”

I see she has on big bunny slippers with floppy ears. I go to her and peel them off as she stifles another big yawn.

“Alright?” I ask, holding the small slippers together in one hand.

“Now tuck me in.”

I set the slippers down and pull up her blanket, tucking it under her tightly so she’s wrapped like a little cock-blocking burrito. Maybe that will make her think twice about getting up again and interrupting us.

She watches me. “A story?”

“Another one? Didn’t Miss Andi tell you a story?”

“Mhm. Now you.”

“Um,” I sigh, walking and looking around the room. “Where are your books?”

“Make one up.”

I search the ceiling for strength, but decide it’s easier to just go along with her terroristic demands. “Okay. Once upon a time there was a little hobbit. You know what a hobbit is?”

She shakes her head.

“They’re small and annoying with hairy feet.” I nod to her slippers, which I’ve set on her dresser.

She giggles, and I have to admit my annoyance fades just a touch at the

sound.

“So, this hobbit left the safety of her village one day. She made a long journey, and for some reason, she went knocking on the door of a big scary dragon’s cave.”

“Why did the cave have a door?”

I pause. “It was a special cave. The kind of cave that has doors.”

“Oh,” she whispers.

“And the dragon really wanted to breathe his fire all over her. He wanted to turn her into a kebab. But the dragon was feeling nice, so he decided to give her a ride on his wings back to the safety of her home village. He helped her back in through her front door, wished her a good night, and then... then he left her with a warning. ‘Never come back,’ he said. He told her that dragons do very mysterious dragony things in their caves, and it’s no place for little hobbits with furry feet. So he told her if she ever came back, he would turn her into a kebab and gobble her up. The end.”

Meemee smiles. “I like the dragon.”

“Well, you’re not supposed to,” I say.

“I do.” She closes her eyes, still smiling. “If I was that hobbit, I’d go back to his cave and knock again. I don’t think he’s really gonna burn her up.”

I sigh. “He definitely will. You can believe that.”

“Nope,” she says, eyes still closed. “You can go, Mr. Jesse. I’m sleeping now.”

I grin a little. “Night, Kid.”

I turn and see Andi standing in the doorway. She has mostly buttoned up her

shirt, but not completely. I see the slightest sliver of her breast and her bra. In an instant, I'm completely ready to go again.

"That was really cute," she whispers once we've left Meemie's room.

"I need to get inside you or I'm going to fucking explode," I say.

Andi laughs, but her eyes linger on me in a way that says there's arousal beneath her amusement. "I don't know, Jesse. What if the *dragon* turns me into a kebab? You had to make yourself something cool, huh? You didn't want to be a beaver?"

"The story about a beaver isn't PG."

She frowns, looking confused, then blushes and laughs. "I don't know if that's gross or funny."

WE MAKE IT BACK TO MIKEY'S ROOM AND I'M VERY TEMPTED TO LOCK THE door, but I know I shouldn't. I close it quietly this time, then point at the bed. "Get on the bed. Take off your clothes."

Andi salutes me sarcastically, then starts walking backwards seductively as she reaches for the next button on her blouse. Every ounce of my attention is on her fingers.

And then the door opens again, bumping me in the back.

I look down in disbelief as Meemie shuffles past me, dragging her teddy bear behind her. "Hi, Mr. Dragon. Gonna burn me up?"

All I can do is stare as she waves to Andi, then crawls into the center of the bed, yawns, and goes to sleep.

I throw my hands up. "What do we do?" I ask.

Andi bites her lip. “I guess you’re going to explode,” she says, barely holding back laughter.

“Not funny,” I warn.

“I mean, it kind of is.”

“Tomorrow,” I say, pointing at her. “We’re picking up where we left off.”

“It’s a date,” Andi says.

We both get ready for bed without much conversation.

I want to tell myself we’ll go straight to my cabin in the morning and finish what we started, but I know the guys are going to be there. It’s a Saturday, and Nolan always makes team breakfast for us when it’s a weekend and we’re in the same place. And Caroline needs Andi and me to be there for the first Frostival event in the afternoon. We have to help set up all afternoon and participate at night.

I’m going to have to survive the entire fucking day while keeping my hands to myself. It might literally kill me.

Andi pauses before I go to my side of the bed. She has changed into a big t-shirt she must’ve stolen from my closet at the cabin without me realizing. She eyes me, then looks at Meemee, who is still sleeping. “Um,” she tiptoes toward me, lifting her face so her mouth is close to my ear. “You might not be the only one who explodes if you don’t get some kind of release. I feel too weird to... you know. But maybe we could...”

I perk up. “We could what?”

“Come here.”

She beckons me toward the bathroom and pulls the door shut quietly once I’m inside. She takes me by the wrist and carefully guides my palm between

her legs.

I go completely stiff. *In more ways than one.*

My fingers glide down the silky fabric of her panties, running over the rounded skin between her legs.

She shudders, then reaches in the waistband of my pants and grips me. “Is this okay?” she whispers.

“Fuck, yes,” I say.

I kiss her, circling her and letting her pump her fist against me. “Only this,” she breathes. “Just our hands, okay?”

I nod. A greedy part of me wants to complain that it’s not enough—that I want more. But if this is all she’s comfortable doing while Meemee is sleeping in the bed right outside the door, then I’ll take it. At least I won’t have a near fatal case of blue balls in the morning.

She gives my pants a tug and pulls them down so my cock is free. I move my hand inside her panties and sigh with relief when I move my middle fingertip down her center and feel how wet she is for me.

It’s no time at all before her breath comes ragged in my ear. With one hand, she’s pumping up and down my length and the other is roaming my back, my hair, squeezing my ass, and running up my abs. She kisses my neck and lifts my shirt up to kiss my bare chest and stomach.

I’m just as greedy with my spare hand, cupping her full ass and breasts, kissing her neck and mouth. I know it won’t take me long.

Either she’s doing an exceptional job with that hand of hers, or I just wanted this so badly that it doesn’t matter. It’s not long before my release is close. From the way she’s breathing and moving, I don’t think she’s far away,

either.

She's grinding into my hand. She brings her other hand to my palm, pressing me deeper and urging me inside her. Using two fingers, I press in her entrance and let out a gasp of pleasure. She's tight, even around my fingers, and I curl them toward myself, making her knees bend like she's about to fall over.

The pace of her hand on me increases. I can feel I'm close, and I want her to climax with me, so I pull every trick out of the book.

I hook my thumb around, circling her while I curl my fingers inside her. The moment my thumb touches her clit, she bites down hard on my shoulder and her fingers squeeze me, still pumping up and down with hard tugs.

My whole body clenches and I'm surprised at how dirty she is. She pulls down on me, aiming my release at herself so my own release slicks my circling thumb. She goes rigid against me, breathing heavy and hard on my neck. A moment later, she convulses and I feel her walls clench around my fingers. I imagine those walls gripping my cock and it's all I can do not to flip her around, bend her over, and plunge myself inside her.

Instead, I let her keep gripping my now over-sensitive length while she cums for me.

She rests her forehead on me a few moments later, breathing hard. "Wow," she says. "Um, thank you."

"Likewise," I say, chuckling.

I lift her chin with my fingertip and kiss her softly and passionately. "Tomorrow night," is all I say.

She nods, eyes wide with something that might be fear, or maybe it's just anticipation.

We head back into the bedroom and crawl under the blankets. I close my eyes, but when I open them, I see Andi staring back at me from the other side of Meemie. She looks wide awake. She smiles and twinkles her fingers at me, blushing.

I grin and close my eyes again.

And fuck. Between practically having to parent two kids together all day and that little stunt she just pulled in the bathroom? I'm not sure how I'm supposed to let this girl walk out of my life when she realizes I'm still too broken to be somebody's other half.

Problems for another day.

Right now, all I can think about is rushing toward tomorrow night like my life depends on it. Tomorrow night, she'll be all mine. No kids to interrupt us. I'll lock the fucking door.

ANDI

I'm still stuffed from the breakfast Nolan made everyone this morning. He did some wonderful thing to the shortbread where he shaved frozen strawberries over chilled, spongy bread topped with whipped cream. He drizzled condensed, sweetened milk over that, topped it with another chunk of bread, more strawberry shaving, a whole chocolate dipped strawberry, and more drizzled sweetened milk.

I think I almost died when I tasted it. And that was *after* the crunchy, cinnamon crusted french toast sticks made from homemade bread with his "modified" whiskey-infused syrup.

I think my moans of enjoyment must have been louder than I realized, because Jesse had to clear his throat at me to get me to stop, which made all the guys except Jake laugh.

Little by little, I've felt like the guys have accepted me as part of the team.

Sure, I know I need to get my ass out of Jesse's cabin before long. After last night, I'm only *more* confused about our status. On the porch, he said we needed to stop doing all the "in between shit" or some other elegantly Jesse way of putting it. Basically, he just wants to be friends with benefits, minus the friends part, I guess? So why do I still feel like we're friends? *More than*

friends.

Either way, I can't bet on things working out and him wanting me to stay in his cabin permanently. I'll pinch the pennies I get and figure something out by the time Christmas comes around. With what Caroline is paying me, that shouldn't be too hard, even after I pay back Jake, Jesse, and get my growing list of friends here Christmas gifts. *And something for my parents and friends back home. And find a way to pay back Landon's parents for ruining the wedding they paid for.*

Alright. Maybe it's going to be hard. But challenges are all part of the adventure, or something. I'll just have to start buying scratch-off tickets. I'm pretty sure if I read stuff about financial responsibility, I'd find that suggested all over.

Jesse left without me this morning to head into town. It's not like him, but I figure this is him making some kind of symbolic statement about our relationship. *People who aren't dating don't always ride into town together.* Kinda makes sense.

I end up asking Jake if he minds giving me a ride once he and the guys finish their morning workout. I'm not sure how they manage to exert themselves after eating all that food Nolan cooked. The only activity I feel up for right now with the food baby in my stomach is lounging on couches and groaning dramatically.

Jake eyes me in the kitchen. "Don't you normally ride with Jesse?"

The question feels like a test. *Don't panic. Act normal.* "Sometimes," I squeak. My voice goes so high it hurts my own ears. I clear my throat. "Sometimes," I say way too deeply.

Jake sighs. He scoops his keys from the counter and yells toward the garage. "I'm gonna give Andi a ride. Are you assholes good on your own?"

“Drive all by myself?” Carter calls back in a mock-feminine voice. “I never!”

Liam sticks his head inside. The man really is almost too pretty. He smiles at me. “Oh, hey Andi.”

“Hey,” I say.

“I’ll drive them,” he says. “Are you going to that gingerbread thing in town?”

“Later,” Jake says.

“I’m going to go help Caroline get it set up.”

Liam nods. “See you guys there.”

Jake jerks his head toward the driveway. “Come on.”

When we get in the car, I realize either I’ve been avoiding Jake or he has been avoiding me. One way or another, we have barely spent any time alone together since I got here. In the brief silence as he starts the car, I feel the overwhelming need to say *something*.

“I’m sorry,” I say, voice confusingly thick with emotion. “I know I’m probably ruining your holiday.”

He scowls. “What? No, stop that.”

“I’m trying,” I blubber. “I just feel so bad. I—the wedding, and—” I suck in a noisy noseful of boogers.

Jake fumbles around in the center console for tissues and finds an old Dunkin Donuts napkin that is dusted with brown sugar. “Uh, here.”

I blow my nose. “I just—”

“Andi,” he says firmly. “I’m not upset. You’re my little sister. I’m happy you’re here. Okay? Stop crying. *Jesus*.”

“You’re happy?” I sniff. “You’ve seemed so mad.”

“I’m just...” he relaxes his grip on the wheel and shakes his head. “I’m trying to stop worrying so much. I know my teammates. None of them are exactly long term prospects. When I picture what would happen if you dated one of them, I have a hard time seeing it going different than it always does with those guys. They’d get what they wanted, and then they’d move on. And my little sister would have a broken heart.”

I nod, thoughts going straight to the cracks already forming in my already fragile heart. Jesse just wants sex. He doesn’t even want to be friends. Another wave of emotion threatens to take me over, but I push it back. “I can take care of myself. You don’t always have to protect me.”

“Yes, I do. You’re my little sister and I’m your big brother. I’m always going to look out for you. Sometimes a little too much,” he adds, almost reluctantly.

I smile. “I do appreciate it. Even if it *is* too much sometimes.”

He gives my hand a quick squeeze, then grimaces. “It’s all wet,” he says.

“Sorry,” I sniff again. “Got any more of these?”



MY FIRST FROSTIVAL EVENT IN FROSTY HARBOR IS A BLAST. SURE, JESSE avoids me like I have the plague for most of the morning and afternoon, but otherwise, it’s great.

Tourists and locals are all welcome to participate, and I spend most of the day in front of Caroline’s bed and breakfast at the station we set up for people to build their gingerbread houses. I have to run and pick up more supplies a few times, but otherwise I’m mostly helping cute little kids build and decorate their houses or making small talk with adults who stop by for some fun.

When Meemie shows up with Mikey and Cade, she rushes up and gives me a big hug. She tries to build a ginger-dragon in honor of Jesse, but she eats too much of her portion of decorations and winds up with more of a crumb pile.

All the guys on the team stop by eventually and I give them the appropriate amount of shit for their poor attempts at gingerbread houses. Carter's looks like it's about to collapse. Maddox pulls Meemie's move and just stands there eating everything while he talks with me about astrology. Liam's is decent, but he seems distracted by a pretty girl at another table the whole time. Jake is overly competitive in everything, so he barely speaks while he builds his admittedly pretty good house. Nolan comes by last, and he's with Mia.

Those two have gone from suspicious to obvious, by my estimation. I guess the same sort of bro code that has stopped the guys from calling Jesse out on his interest in me has protected them. To my knowledge, everybody is pretending they haven't noticed Nolan and Mia's little cooking club for two.

The two of them are adorable as they work to build what is easily the prettiest gingerbread house yet.

Jake sticks around to help us pack up all the supplies when it's done. The houses are crammed inside Caroline's bed and breakfast like decorations for now, and she's going to go back through to pick a winner from each age group soon.

I wind up carrying a table with Jesse and Jake inside. I'm surprised when Jesse speaks to me for the first time all day. "Are you really planning to stay in Frosty Harbor after Christmas?"

"I don't know," I say. It's mostly a lie. The truth is I'm almost sure I want to stay. I don't know for how long, but leaving after Christmas sounds way too soon. "I finally called my best friend from New York and we talked. I was

expecting her to be mad or try to convince me to come back, but she thought it was awesome.”

“Bree?” Jake asks.

“Yeah,” I say. “She’s really busy with her business right now, anyway. She’s going to try to come see me here soon, though.”

“Did you talk to the guy?” Jesse asks. He puts his back to me as he lifts the table and sets it in a row with the others. “Your almost husband guy?”

I chew my lip. “He texted once. Basically, he said he wished I had talked to him in person, but he also wished me well and hoped I was happy here.”

Jesse shakes his head. “Fucking crazy. How can he let you go that easily?”

I pretend not to notice the way Jake goes still beside me. I’m grinning from Jesse’s words. “What do you think he should’ve done?”

Jesse hesitates, lifting a hand to scratch the back of his neck. “I’m just saying, theoretically, if your bride runs off on your wedding day... it’s weird to be okay with it.”

I relax a little, and Jake seems to as well. “Yeah, well, there’s nothing like a big ceremony to force you to take a good hard look at what you’re about to do, right?”

“I guess so,” Jesse says.

Looking at him makes my thoughts go straight to the way he felt in my hand last night, and the feeling of his fingers inside me—his mouth on mine and his hot breath all over my body. Suddenly, I don’t feel so cold anymore, even if the world is covered in white.

Jake is giving us that look again. I know he suspects something, but he is at least controlling what must be a nearly overwhelming urge to stick his nose

in my business and demand to know what's going on. *Again.*

Jake clears his throat. "Come on," he says to Jesse. "Going to help me get the rest of the tables or are you going to paint your nails and talk more about weddings? Carter said they're going to watch the Christmas movie back at the cabin. If we hurry, we'll be there for that popcorn Nolan makes."

"Shit," Jesse says.

"What is 'the Christmas movie'?" I ask.

"*Jingle All the Way*," Jesse says. "They love Arnold Swartzeneger movies. We watch *Predator* on Valentine's day, *Terminator 1* and *Terminator 2* for Thanksgiving, and *Commando* for April Fool's. Traditions," he says, shrugging as if none of that is really that weird.

It is.

I just nod as the guys jog back outside together to get more tables. I find Caroline walking slowly between the gingerbread houses with a clipboard, making notes and checking the tags to see who built each one. She heads outside to look at the houses we haven't brought inside yet.

Most of the crowd from the event has moved across the street to a little bar with outdoor seating. There's a game of Bingo going on that is at war with karaoke being held a few houses down. Both are incredibly loud, but the sounds are happy, and I don't mind.

"So?" Caroline asks.

"I think it went well," I say. "Everybody seemed to have a really good time."

She smirks. "I was asking about Jesse."

I pause with a handful of graham cracker, then drop it in my trash bag. "Oh. It's fine. He's a really nice guy."

“Mhm.”

I can tell she’s using the old “stay quiet and they’ll spill their guts” trick on me, and I try really hard to not let it work.

A minute of the most uncomfortable silence passes. *Then two.*

“I mean, I do like him. Obviously,” I blurt. “I’m guessing there probably aren’t many girls who meet Jesse and *don’t* like him.”

“He doesn’t usually like them back, though.”

I hesitate. She’s probably just guessing, but her suggestion makes my heart pound. Stupidly, of course. After what we did last night it shouldn’t come as some kind of revelation that he might “like” me. He certainly liked touching me, at least. I guess I just want more than that. *Shocker.* “What happened with Sarah? He has hardly said anything to me about it.”

“You only got here what, like a week or two ago? The fact that he has said anything at all is impressive.”

Now it’s my turn to try the silent treatment.

“I don’t really know anything about why it ended,” she says as she scribbles something on her clipboard. “I do know they dated off and on since he was in college. Sometimes, they had fights about him traveling for hockey. More than once, they took breaks apart and I know she fooled around with other guys, but I’m pretty sure Jesse didn’t get with other girls during the breaks. He always took her pretty seriously.”

I listen quietly and try not to let this information sting. It’s stupid to let any of this bother me. Jesse had a life before me. He has been very careful to make sure I know he’s also going to have a life *after* me, too. We’re not even supposed to officially like each other, anyway. The idea that he took this girl so seriously shouldn’t bother me, especially considering I was about to get

freaking married right before I met him.

It shouldn't bother me, but it does. It makes me wonder if the reason he's keeping me at an emotional arm's length is because he's waiting for this girl to come back—that he's fighting his urge to be with me because he knows he'd drop me in a heartbeat if Sarah was back in the picture.

“And one day they just broke up for good?” I ask.

“Not just that. One day they were living together at that cabin. The next, she had already flown back to Connecticut to live with her parents before anybody knew they had split up.”

“And nobody knows what happened?”

“Jesse won't talk about it and Sarah has ghosted everybody from town, not that she was much of an open book before that, anyway.”

I lean on my palms, thoughts racing. I'm about to ask more when Caroline's friend, Mia, appears. She has ice skates slung over her shoulder and her red hair pulled up in a ponytail. “Hey,” she says. “I was going to go down to the harbor and skate some. Do either of you want to join me?”

I think about the movie Jake said the guys are watching back at the cabin. Something about curling up on the couch in Jesse's cabin while a fire roars and snow drifts down outside sounds amazing. That, and the feeling I've already come to love of being part of the team with the banter of the guys in the background and the feeling of camaraderie when they're all together. I've had Nolan's popcorn, too, and it's almost enough to make me want to ask Caroline for a ride up to the cabin. But, then I think about the awkwardness between me and Jesse. Where would I sit for the movie? What would I say to him?

I make up my mind.

“Sure,” I say. “Do you happen to have any skates I can borrow, though?”

“They have a rental place down by the harbor. My feet are huge, so I doubt you’d want to use a pair of mine.”

“I’ll pass. I want to finish cleaning up here,” Caroline says.

“Oh,” I say, feeling suddenly like an asshole. Caroline is paying me after all. “I’ll finish helping you first. I just meant—”

“Go,” she says, smiling. “Have fun. It’s okay.”

I pump a fist in the air. “Whoo! I haven’t skated in so long.”

I follow after Mia, who leads the way down the hill. “Caroline told me you’re a really good skater,” I say.

She scrunches her nose and shakes her head. “I’m a has-been. But, I still love something about it. Just being on the ice is my place of peace, I guess.”

I nod. *Don’t be nosy. Don’t be nosy.* “So, what’s up with you and Nolan?” I ask.

Mia swallows suddenly. Then smiles. “He’s a really cool guy. Isn’t he?”

“Yep,” I say, my smile a little too big.

Mia looks at me and laughs. “I don’t know,” she finally says. There’s something reserved in her tone that tells me it would be rude to push more.

“Guys are confusing,” I say, offering her a chance to drop the topic.

“Did you skate?” she asks after a few moments.

“When I was younger. My brother was always at the ice rink and my parents were always driving us around. If I didn’t learn to skate, I would’ve been bored out of my mind. Eventually, my parents decided to get me lessons.”

“That’s really cool. I can’t wait to see your moves.”

“You can’t wait to see me shake off the cobwebs, you mean?”

We both laugh, and I’m struck once again at how bizarre it is to be here in this place.

My mind drifts back to New York. To my parents who are probably more than a little pissed with me. To Landon, who is probably wondering why I had the nerve to abandon him on our wedding day with nothing but a note. To my friends, who I’ve only just now made the smallest contact with. I think about it all and I wait for the tug of nostalgia or homesickness to come, but it never does.

I look around where I am. I turn to the left and take in the towering mountains partially obscured by falling snow. I savor the feeling of cold, wet points of snow touching my skin. I breathe in the crisp air and enjoy the crunch of our feet on the thin layer of snow covering the sidewalk.

Maybe I could stay here. *Really* stay here. Not just for a few months after Christmas. Maybe this could be my place. Before, I’d always just kind of been where I was. Frosty Harbor could be *my* place.

I know I’ll need to face my past sooner or later, but that doesn’t mean I couldn’t still stay.

I go up to the rental desk and get a pair of skates, strap them on, and join Mia, who is already twirling gracefully on the ice along with half a dozen other people—mostly just a few moms and their kids.

I feel shaky on my skates at first. I didn’t realize just how long it had been.

But after a few minutes, I’m enjoying the feeling of simply moving fast with the blades of my skates biting into the ice and the way the cold wind whips at my cheeks and hair. I even pull off a few tricks, which earns happy applause

from Mia, who is keeping pace with me and talking occasionally as we skate.

I close my eyes and sink into the moment—to the whole experience. I'm also completely oblivious to the fact that Jesse has come down to skate, too, and he's currently watching me from the bank of the frozen harbor.

JESSE

OF COURSE.

I came down to the harbor to skate so I could clear my head. I was going to go with Jake to watch a movie with the guys, but I figured Andi would be there. I'm trying as hard as hell to keep an emotional distance between us today. I want to send the right message. I want to prove we can fool around at night without going all gooey eyed for each other by day. Easier said than done, apparently. So I'm cheating a bit today. I'll just avoid the shit out of her and make it easier on myself.

But even when I'm keeping my distance, I can't get her off my mind. All fucking day, I've had Andi on my mind. Her scent. Her presence. She's like a drug I'm desperately trying not to get hooked on. So, I figured I'd get in a workout on my skates to clear my head.

But there she is.

She's on the ice with Mia Calloway. Mia is skating backwards and beckoning for Andi to follow.

Andi does a little spin and a jump, surprising me with her grace. She's good. I can tell immediately from the way she carries herself on the skates. Her balance is almost perfect and she lands as if gravity can barely touch her.

She does a twirl, hands circling out with wrists bent, then curtseys and both

girls break into laughter.

Something in my chest hurts.

I realize I'm smiling as I watch her. I realize it because she looks up suddenly, locking eyes with me. She was mid turn and her skates bump into each other. She spills on the ice, her ankle rolling to the side as she lets out a yelp of pain.

"Shit," I say, dropping my gear and rushing to the ice. I make my way toward her as fast as I can in tennis shoes, almost falling on my ass several times and not caring.

I slide to my knees beside her, where Mia is crouched and Andi's breathing hard.

"I'm fine," Andi says, clearly forcing a smile. "I just rolled my ankle a little. I'll be fine."

"Not if you lay here on the ice," I say.

"Wanna drag me to safety?" she asks, smiling that crooked smile of hers.

"I'll..." I hesitate. I was going to offer to carry her. Bum shoulder or not, I should be able to manage that much. But I glance behind me at the distance of slippery ice and realize as much as I may want to whisk her to safety in my arms, I'd be doing more harm than good. One slip and I'd slam her to the ice and cause more damage. "Can you stand with help?" I ask.

"I think so."

She gets up, pulling on me and Mia to get to her skates. She tries a little weight on her right foot and winces. "Just sore," she says.

"Come on." I glare at Mia. "Why did you let this happen?"

Mia's face screws up with outrage, then she laughs. "What? How is this my fault? You're the one who was being all creepy off on the bank smiling like a weirdo at her. I think I could see your boner from here."

I clench my jaw. She's kind of right—not about the boner—but I want to blame her. "I was just surprised to see Andi here. I didn't know she could skate like that."

"Impressed?" Andi asks.

"I was," I admit. "Until you busted your ass, at least."

"Hey," she says, laughing. "Be nice to me. I'm mortally wounded."

"We'll get ice on that ankle back at the cabin. Actually... I think I should take you to see Dr. Knight, just to be safe."

"No, really," Andi says. "It's just a rolled ankle. I'll be walking like normal by morning. I promise."

I give her a long look, but nod my head in agreement as we move off the ice and to the snow.

"Here," I point to a bench. "Take a seat."

Andi eases herself down and I kneel, undoing the laces on her left skate first. I think I see Andi making a face at Mia, who is standing behind me. I try not to imagine what unspoken, womanly bullshit is passing between them. I pull the skate off and Andi wiggles her pink sock-clad toe in my face. "Are they stinky?"

I grin, swatting her foot out of my face. "Terribly."

I take my time with the right skate, but Andi doesn't argue or ask me to let her do it. She just waits quietly while I get the laces as loose as I can and grip the skate with two hands.

“Ready?” I ask.

“Should you be doing all this with your shoulder thing?” she asks.

“It’s my rotator cuff. Overhead motions are bad. The follow through on swinging a stick is bad. Most other stuff is fine. Now shush and let me do this.”

She takes a big breath, nodding.

I give it the first bit of a tug and she cries out in pain. “Not ready, not ready!”

I pause. “We need to get this off.”

She shakes her head. “Nope. I think it looks great on me. Let’s just leave that bad boy on. I’ll get married in it someday. Honestly, it would probably make my getaway even faster if I have this skate on. The skate-away bride.”

“Alright. That’s it,” I say, standing. “We’re going to see Dr. Knight.”

“No! Just take me back home. To your cabin, I mean,” she says, correcting herself.

“Sorry, Andi,” Mia says. “I shouldn’t have asked you to come. Didn’t mean to get you killed.”

“It’s okay.” Andi smiles up at me. “It was Jesse’s fault, anyway.”

I throw my hands up in helpless surrender. “Can we get moving? I don’t want you out here in this cold right now.”

She tilts her head at me, showing the faintest smile. She wraps her arms around herself and plays up her shiver, blowing out a breath through suddenly chattering teeth. “You know, I am cold now that you mention it.” She tips over, laying sideways on the bench and curls in on herself, one skate still on her leg, which is sticking straight out. “*So cold.*”

I roll my eyes, but smile a little as I scoop her up, ignoring her laughter and the way she's swatting at me. My amusement fades when I see the look on Mia's face. She's watching us both with a knowing smile.

"When did you two start dating?" she asks.

"What?" I stammer. It's not exactly a world class defense, but her question catches me completely off guard.

"We're just friends," Andi says. The sentiment rings a little hollow considering she's pink cheeked from laughter and currently cradled in my arms like she was built for them.

Mia purses her lips. "So how long have you friends been fucking, then?"

"Mia!" Andi laughs. "I'll have you know, I just ran away from my wedding not so long ago. Do you really think I'd be letting some rogue put his hands on me at night so soon?"

"If you ran away from the wedding, then, uh, *yeah?* People don't usually run away from weddings they want to be part of. Who says you can't be a runaway bride gettin' busy?"

"I need to get her inside," I say, hoping to change the subject.

"I didn't know you had dyslexia, Jesse," Mia says. "You just said 'I need to get her inside' by mistake. Judging by the look in your eyes, I think you meant, 'I need to get inside her.'"

Andi and Mia both cackle with laughter. I feel less amused.

"She's going to freeze out here," I say, ignoring her jokes.

"Right," Mia says. "Because rolled ankles cause sudden hypothermia? You just want to get her back to your place so you can dote on her. Admit it, big boy."

“We’re leaving,” I say, mostly because I know Mia well enough to see she’s just gathering momentum with this. A few more minutes, and she’ll be even worse.

“Caroline is going to love hearing about this,” she says, almost as if she’s just thinking aloud.

I ignore her and Andi waves, offering a shaky “cya later”.

I climb the hill towards my truck, carefully set Andi down in the passenger seat, and rush around to turn the engine on and get the heat rolling.

I glance at her wordlessly. All she does is laugh at me, eyes lit with delight.

My lips curve in a smile. “Shut up,” I say.

ANDI

I'm set up on the couch. My leg is propped up on the coffee table, I'm wrapped in fur blankets and armed with hot chocolate and a big bowl of homemade chocolate and caramel drizzled popcorn. *Jingle All The Way* is playing on the TV. I made the mistake of joking that I was sorry to miss the beginning, so the guys happily restarted the movie from the beginning for me. Nolan also rushed straight into the kitchen to make me a fresh batch of popcorn.

Jesse hasn't sat down since we got back over half an hour ago. He keeps wandering off and returning with things that he thinks might help me. It's honestly adorable. So far, he has brought me enough blankets to smother a wooly mammoth, my phone, hot chocolate, one of his beanies "in case my head was cold", and a heating pad. He's acting like I fell through the ice and nearly drowned. Maybe it should be annoying, but I'm just finding it sweet.

It's hard not to compare the way he's acting to Landon. When I got sick, Landon used to awkwardly ask me from the doorway of the bedroom if I needed anything. Then he'd call Uber Eats to have it delivered. He'd set it by my bedside, ask if I was good, and proceed to check on me every six or eight hours. It wasn't that he didn't care or worry about me. He just wasn't built to be a caretaker. He waited for me to ask when I needed things.

Don't get me wrong. I'm a grown ass woman and I can take care of myself when I'm sick. But, I have to admit it's nice to be pampered like this.

Jake is in the single seater with a view of me. His arms are crossed and there's an angry look on his face.

I slide my eyes to him and shrug.

He makes an annoyed sound, then looks back to the TV.

Carter is sitting on the floor with his back against the coffee table like he's a kid who has to sit a few feet from the TV to properly see it. Liam has dozed off and his head is leaning on Maddox's shoulder. *Adorable.*

There's a fire crackling in the hearth and snow is drifting down outside the big windows, piling up on the railing of the balcony overlooking the trees. It's just like I was picturing, minus the rolled ankle, but every bit as perfect.

I smile, wrapping my hands around the coco mug. The movie is actually pretty funny, and I'm quickly getting invested in it. *Is Arnold going to get that Turbo Man toy for his kid or not?*

Jesse returns with a big pair of scissors. "Hear me out," he says, ignoring Carter, who shushes him. "I'm thinking we cut the skate off."

I raise an eyebrow. "You don't think the rental people will be mad?"

"I'll work it out. I'm not worried about that. But can you stay still enough for me to do this safely?"

"I think so."

Jake is eyeing us, irritation clear on his features. He's not saying anything, though, which is a step in the right direction.

Jesse kneels. He puts one hand on top of my shin, and the innocent contact

makes my heart start pounding. I watch his face as he moves his head, surveying the situation and forming his plan of attack.

He might actually be the most gorgeous man I've ever laid eyes on. That dark hair of his has fallen into disarray after the chaos on the ice. It's dangling in front of his eyebrows, just barely reaching his eyes. I watch the muscles in his neck as he moves, oddly fascinated by them and the way his long fingers look delicate and capable at the same time. I imagine those same fingers guiding his hockey stick in front of thousands of fans.

He lifts the scissors. "Okay, ready?" he asks, whispering so he doesn't interrupt the movie.

Nolan plops down on the couch beside me with fresh bowls of popcorn. These guys never stop eating, but somehow they're all completely shredded. *Men.*

I lose all interest in the movie as I watch Jesse fumble with the scissors. He grips my calf with his free hand, then lifts the fabric of the skate to make as much room between the scissors and my skin as possible.

I wince a little. Just having him move the skate around hurts, but I try to keep my noises to myself. It's kind of nice being messed with by him.

Five minutes have passed and he's managed to make a little slit in the softest part of the skate near the top. There's a plastic buckle he can't seem to get through. Nolan has taken an interest in the project now, and he's kneeling on the other side of me, providing commentary and feedback.

Ten minutes later and Maddox has joined, too. They have a small serrated knife and they're all arguing over the best way to get the plastic straps off. Liam is saying they should just drive me to the doctors, but I think the rest of the guys are too invested in solving the problem to give up now.

After another fifteen minutes, Jake and Carter have joined, too. Jake has one of those long barreled lighters and he's heating the plastic strap so it's easier to cut. Nolan has driven into town to try to find a better tool, and Jesse is the man in control while everybody else leans over the skate, trying to guide his efforts.

It's hilarious, sweet, and endearing.

I can't say I've ever felt more taken care of in my life, and I find myself wishing I could bottle up this moment and hold onto it forever.

Jesse looks up after a while, notices the look on my face, and does a double take. "What?" he asks.

"Nothing," I say, smiling and covering my yawn.

He smiles, and that smile pretty much threatens to undo me. It's a lot like the smile we shared in the truck before he drove me here. It's a conspiratorial smile. A smile that says we're in on the secret together, but it's *our* secret. Nobody else's.

And wow. I apparently like being Jesse's secret partner way, *way* more than I should.

I cover another yawn, watching them work through eyes that are getting heavy.

JESSE

For the second time in one day, I find myself carrying Andi. I could tell Jake was wondering the obvious as I scooped her up: “Why are you the one taking charge of all this shit?” Honestly, I’m guessing he heavily suspects something approximating the truth, by now. I wouldn’t be surprised if he confronts me soon. *Problems for later.*

By the time we got her ice skate off, she was fast asleep. Apparently, she’s a heavy ass sleeper, too. Carter fell, spilled the remains of his popcorn, swore loudly, and nearly knocked over the coffee table. She only snorted a little in her sleep and stirred.

I carry her outside, through the snowy path of cobble stones I can just barely make out, and shoulder the door to the guest cabin open.

Andi isn’t exactly the tidiest houseguest. There is a small pile of shopping bags with clothes in them, tags still attached. There’s a CVS bag full of toiletries, most of which are scattered around the sink. The bed is unmade and there’s a pair of panties dangling from the headboard.

Nice, I think. For some reason, I picture Andi living a little more of a neat and tidy life. But then again, seeing that she’s a bit of a slob doesn’t surprise me, either.

I smile as I carefully set her down on the bed. I take a look at her ankle. Seeing the way it is dark blue on one side makes my heart twinge and my stomach clench. I feel like such an asshole for not just approaching like a normal person when she was out there. If I had, I probably wouldn't have scared her so suddenly to make her fall and get hurt.

I'm also pissed for a completely selfish reason. I've barely managed to make it through today with my sanity. Waiting to get my hands on Andi again has been pure, sweet torture. But I knew the payoff would come once the sun set. I knew she'd be mine. All night, if I wanted.

Then again, I'm not sure how she'll feel toward me after a day of trying to ignore her. Sure, the ignoring Andi thing kind of went up in smoke when she hurt her ankle, but I doubt that kind of attention counts. Anybody would've taken care of her if they were in my position tonight.

My grand plans of letting myself into her guest house tonight to claim her are apparently going to stay in the realm of fantasy for now. She's out cold, and my hard-on is going to be about as useful as a nail gun on a rubber life raft.

I sigh and pull the covers up to her chin, then flick off the light. "Night, Andi," I mutter. I check to make sure the heat is on to keep it nice and warm for her. Then I double check the whole guest house, just in the event that some intruder happened to sneak in here, waiting to surprise her. *They didn't.*

I make a few more excuses to hang around. I check the windows. *All locked.* I even look at the air filter and make sure the heater is running properly. Everything is just as good as it was a few weeks ago when I came out here to look it over.

I finally give her one last look, then pull the door shut as quietly as I can.

I make the trek back to the house and find Jake in the kitchen, waiting for me.

“Hey,” I say, trying to sound casual. “Where is everyone?”

“Karaoke. Liam invited everyone.”

“You weren’t interested?” I ask.

He folds his arms, muscles straining against his black t-shirt. “I’m keeping an eye on you.”

Frankly, I want to blurt the truth to Jake right now. I want to get this protective older brother bullshit out of the way and tell him I do like his sister. I like her, but I’m currently involved in some weird ass, confusing secret relationship that isn’t actually a relationship—a relationship that is *supposed* to be all about sex, even though getting a chance to sleep with his little sister is proving to be more of a logistical challenge than I pictured.

Coming clean to Andi’s brother isn’t something I’m going to do without making sure Andi is on board first, though. Even if the secrecy was my idea in the first place.

“Alright,” I say.

“Alright?” he asks. “Mind telling me your intentions? Can we at least be open about that?”

I run my tongue over my teeth. I don’t particularly like his tone, but Jake is also like a brother to me. He’s a teammate, a friend, and that also means something to me. It means he gets a little leeway when he’s acting like a prick and deserves to get shoved or punched. “I have no romantic intentions with your sister.” *There*. That is sort of true, at least. My intentions are sexual. Not romantic.

He locks eyes with me. “Why does she look at you like that, then?”

“Like what?” I ask, genuinely interested. *How does she look at me?* I wonder.

“Like...” he lets out a frustrated sigh and runs a hand through his dark hair. “She looks at you like you’re the answer to all her fucking problems. I don’t know.”

“Maybe because I’ve been nice to her and helped her out. Maybe she likes Frosty Harbor and knows I live here, so she’s hoping I’ll keep helping to integrate her to town. I don’t know, Jake. Take a fucking guess.”

He glares. “My guess is because she wants to sleep with you. To date you. Hell if I know.”

I shrug. “What if she does? Are you going to be a creepy asshole and tell your sister who she can and can’t sleep with?”

“I’m—” he hesitates, snapping his mouth shut. His jaw ticks several times before he speaks again, barely controlling his tone. “I’m just worried about her state of mind. You do remember she came here in the first place because she was running away from her wedding, right? So yeah, call me an overprotective asshole for wanting to make sure she’s not jumping into something too soon.”

I sigh. “You have a point. But shit, man. Making mistakes isn’t always... a mistake. Sometimes bad things happen and it seems like the end of the world. Then you look back on it later and realize it was just an opportunity.”

“Are you quoting fucking fortune cookies at me right now, Jesse?”

I can’t help laughing, and Jake smiles too. “I’m only saying I get it. I’m a big brother to a little sister, too. You don’t want to see them get hurt. To make mistakes. To feel regret. Any of that. But you also have to let them be who they are. Be there to guide them when they ask for it, but if you stick your nose in their life so hard and so often, they won’t go to you when they actually need help. I don’t know,” I say shrugging. “Just my experience so far.”

“Yeah. You’re not wrong.” He lets out a heavy breath and looks toward the guest house out the window. “I’ll try to be less of an asshole. And I’ll try to stop glaring at you. No promises, though.”

“Glare away, man. I can handle it.”

He smirks. “If my little sister did want to make a mistake and move on too quickly with some guy, I guess she could do worse than you.”

“Alright, alright,” I say, giving him a shove. “Quit being sweet with me or I’m going to think you’re about to grab my ass and kiss me.”

He laughs. “Fuck you, man.”

“Hey. If you’re not going to the karaoke thing, why don’t you go hit the weights with me in the garage?”

He cracks his knuckles and looks that way, clearly tempted. “Fuck it. Let’s go.”

I clap him on the shoulder and head into the garage. If I can’t sleep with Andi, I need some way to get the tension out of my system. Lifting heavy shit is probably the best outlet I can think of. Plus, I’m glad to feel like Jake is finally loosening up. He’s normally my closest friend on the team. Having him pissed at me all week has been annoying me.

“So,” I say once we get in the garage. “You basically said I can date your sister. Did I get that correct?”

He tosses a towel at me. “No. I definitely didn’t say that.”

ANDI

I wake up and slap blindly around, trying to find my phone. It's not under my pillow where I usually leave it. Instead, I find it placed neatly on the nightstand, right beside one of my bras. I blink through the sleepiness and tap the screen. Midnight.

Dim awareness starts to return to me. I remember sitting on the couch while all the guys took turns trying to figure out how to get my skate off. I remember Jesse bringing me everything I could possibly need. I remember the crackling fire and the Christmas movie playing in the background and snow drifting down outside the windows. I'm smiling at the memory when I roll back over and then suddenly yelp with pain.

I forgot about my ankle, and the way I rolled over made the blanket tug against my toes, turning the ankle.

I sit up, pushing the covers down and reaching to rub my ankle. I see the skate is off. I don't remember that happening. I'm also still fully dressed in the clothes I wore today.

I rub my head and it starts to make sense. I fell asleep and Jake or Jesse must've carried me here.

Jesse.

The thought hits me with a jolt. He must have been so disappointed. After last night with Meemee interrupting us, he was probably expecting tonight to... *well*.

I'd been excited all day, too. Sure, part of me was freaking out about it, but I was excited.

And then I notice the big shape on the couch beside my bed. In a split second, my heart is in my throat.

“Holy fucking shit! AHH!” I scream, reach for a pillow, and sling it toward the intruder with all the power of a sleepy toddler. It misses by several feet and the figure on the couch rises up like a vampire in a coffin.

I try to scream again, but only a whispery, pitiful squeak leaves my throat. I'm pointing, scooting back on the bed, painfully aware that I can't run because I'm crippled. This is how I die. Dead in somebody else's guesthouse. Dead before I ever got a chance to get laid by a dreamy NHL player. It would almost be funny if it wasn't so tragic.

“Andi,” the voice says. It's deep and familiar. “Calm down. You're going to wake everyone up.”

I frown, leaning forward in the darkness. “Jesse?”

He rubs the back of his head. “Yeah. Sorry. I didn't mean to scare you. I was sleeping in my bed and then I started imagining you waking up in the middle of the night to pee or something. I wasn't sure if you'd be able to make it to the bathroom on your own. And I didn't want to wake you... so I was just waiting here. But shit—” he chuckles a little. “I can't seem to stop scaring you to death today.”

“It's past midnight,” I say. “So now you scared me yesterday *and* today.”

“Right. Well, um, did you need help getting to the bathroom or something?”

“Are you going to help me get my pants down if I do, Jesse? Was that your plan?”

“Uh,” he says. He’s kind of adorable when he’s uncomfortable. I probably shouldn’t put him through it so often, but I can’t help enjoying the sight of him sweating. “I hadn’t really thought through the logistics. I just didn’t want you to be alone out here.”

“Okay,” I say. “I don’t need to pee, though.”

“Alright.”

There’s a long pause.

“But I am pretty cold.” *I’m also a liar.* Jesse must’ve cranked up the heat because I’m definitely not cold. “And that couch is too small for you.”

Another long pause.

“You want me to come in your bed?”

I shrug, then realize he can’t see me in the dark. “If you want to.”

I laugh at the sound of sudden movement. In less than two seconds, Jesse has moved from the couch to the bed beside me. I can see the faint shape of his smile in the darkness.

“Okay, then,” I say.

“Andi?” he asks.

“Yeah?”

“I need to at least touch you. We don’t need to... but at least let me help you.”

“Help me?” I tilt my head, not sure what he means. “You have been helping me all night.”

“No,” he says, voice darker and deadly serious. I feel his fingertips on my stomach. They inch downward, stopping at the waistband of my jeans. “Let me help you.”

My lips curve up in a smile. “Who says I need help down there?”

I see his tongue slide across his lips, smooth as velvet. “Because I think you’re already soaking wet for me. Want to make a bet?”

I bite my lip. *God, he is dirty, and I kind of love it.* “Um. I was told I don’t have the impulse control or foresight to bet.”

His breath is hot on my neck. “Tell me you’re not already wet. Tell me you haven’t wanted to cum for me all day. Say the words, and I’ll go to sleep. I’ll leave you alone.”

“I was also told I shouldn’t tell lies,” I whisper.

Jesse’s breath hitches and his fingertips slip beneath my waistband. He finds me, fingertips sliding down until he confirms what he already seemed to know.

He starts doing that magic thing with his fingers again and I arch my back, forgetting all about the dull throb in my ankle or my doubts about our little arrangement. When his hands are on me, it feels like the perfect plan. The perfect situation. Why wouldn’t we do this whenever we can? What could possibly go wrong when it feels this good?

I’m breathing harder and I keep catching myself looking at him. I’m watching his downcast eyes and his long lashes. I’m watching his parted lips and the way his chest is rising and falling, his breath heavy from nothing but his enjoyment of doing this to me.

He isn't asking me to return the favor. He doesn't even seem to think I would be able to sleep with him, maybe because of my ankle. I have to admit I'm impressed he's not just rolling me on my side and taking what he can get.

My thoughts start to lose their clarity. The edges blur until my brain is just full of happy mush. His fingers feel so good and I can sense the wave of release rising up.

I reach down, gripping his wrist hard with one hand and the back of his neck with my other hand. I pull his face into my chest. My whole body goes tight and I cry out. He pushes a hand to my mouth and shushes me as I cum for him. My body pulses with release.

When it passes, I feel emptied out and blissfully at peace. I smile. "Thank you."

"The pleasure was all mine."

I laugh. "Actually, I think that's the opposite of how it went. I could... if you want." I touch his belly, meeting his eyes.

He shakes his head. "You should be resting."

I laugh again. "Says the guy who just used his magic fingers on me in the middle of the night? You think I'm going to be able to sleep after that."

He looks down. "Sorry. It's selfish of me, but I want you all the way when I have you. There's... a certain way I want things to go. You'll need your ankle for it."

I frown, then giggle. "That sounds oddly specific."

He looks embarrassed. "I don't mind taking things a little slow."

"Really?" I ask.

He doesn't respond, and I try to puzzle out why he would say something like that. My brother has told me all about NHL guys. They treat sex as casually as going out for drinks. Why would Jesse have any interest at all in taking things slowly with me?

"Are you... not ready to do it?" I ask.

He waits a long time to answer. "Trust me. I don't know if I've wanted anything as badly as I want to feel you—*all of you*." He chuckles softly. "But, you've got some kind of hold over me, Andi. I keep trying to tell myself it's only sex. Just bodies seeking satisfaction. I keep trying, but my brain wants it to be more. So... I guess maybe I'm hoping I can sort my shit out before we do anything."

"Because you're worried it'll mean too much if we do it now?"

He doesn't respond, but he doesn't have to.

I smile in the darkness, scooting closer to him and resting my head on his bicep. I lift my eyes, looking up at him from below. "You must really like me, Jesse Prince."

"Don't do that." He can't even meet my eyes.

I plant a kiss on his arm, wrapping both hands around it. "You *like* me."

One corner of his mouth twitches. "You're attractive."

"You think I'm pretty. *And* you like me."

"You should get some sleep."

"Oh, sure. Except, this hot NHL guy just snuck into my room, woke me up to finger bang me, then told me I'm so enchanting he's afraid to sleep with me because he's worried he'll catch feelings. So, excuse me if I'm feeling a little wide ass awake right now."

Jesse opens his mouth, closes it, and then closes his eyes. “When you put it that way, I... I’m sorry.”

My eyebrows scrunch together. “Stop apologizing to me. You’re allowed to like me. You know that, right? And if it’s this whole arrangement thing you’re worried about, don’t be. I can’t say I’ve ever been friends with benefits or officially unofficial or a secret booty call... but I’d be shocked if people in those situations don’t wind up realizing they like each other all the time.”

“If that happened,” he says suddenly. “Hypothetically speaking. I would need us to both know that we’re not going to act on those feelings.”

“Right. Like... realizing we enjoy each other so much we take things to the next level and sleep together? Got it. We’ll avoid that.”

“I didn’t mean that.”

“No?” I ask, voice completely sweet and innocent. “Then what is this mysterious next step we’re trying so hard to avoid, Mr. Prince?”

“Commitment,” he says. “We’ll have our fun. But nobody needs to go and start making plans for the future. That’s when things get too complicated. This thing between us has an expiration date. I just need us both to remember that.”

“Okay,” I say, even though a little voice in my brain is saying *we’ll see about that*. I yawn. His arm and his smell are so comforting and warm. Maybe I *am* a little sleepy. I scoot closer to him and something hard presses into my stomach. I look up suddenly, laughing. “Is that—”

“Don’t,” he warns.

I laugh harder. “Jesse, nobody is going to hand out purple hearts in the morning for those who died of blue balls in the night. Let me help you.”

“You don’t have to.”

I press my fingertip to his chin, gently forcing his face down so he has to look at me. “I know I don’t. I want to. Now shut up.”

I smile, awkwardly scoot down until my head is beneath the covers, and then I tug down his pajamas.

JESSE

I feel like some kind of middle school kid sneaking my way around rules my parents have set. Andi and I are both completely game to sleep together, but somehow, everything *except* fucking her feels safe. Last night, she sucked me off and *holy shit*. It's morning and I'm not sure I slept more than an hour or two. I kept replaying the way her soft lips felt on me—the warmth of her mouth sliding up and down my length and the sensations of her quiet moans vibrating through my skin.

The best part was before it even started—the moment she locked eyes with me and told me it was what she wanted to do. She's so damn sexy without even trying.

Her small hands are resting on my chest and stomach. I drink in the moment, studying the way the morning light streaming in the high windows makes her black hair look almost blue. I run my fingertip down the pale skin of her cheek, tracing the fullness of her lips and studying the gentle, upward curve of her nose.

Friends with benefits. The words drum in my head like some kind of tribal warning signal.

I remove my hands from her and thread them behind my head. I try to stare at

the ceiling, but my gaze keeps drifting back to her. I'm not sure I ever want her to wake up, but I also feel the impending danger of the guys realizing we're in here together.

Together.

That's a dangerous word. We *are* together, in a way. But I'm skirting around the meanings of that word, just like I'm trying to dance on the thin line between sex and foreplay.

But that's what this whole thing is, isn't it? It's like the foreplay that comes before a relationship, but we're trying to promise ourselves it will stop there—that neither of us will succumb to the temptation to finish the act. To dive into the treacherous abyss that is commitment. Endless foreplay without emotional release. If that doesn't sound like a blueprint for disaster, I don't know what does.

I manage to slide out from under her and get out of bed before she groans and blinks her eyes open. "Hey," she says, voice sleepy and sexy.

"We should try not to make it obvious."

"Mhm." She stretches her arms overhead, her shirt lifting to reveal the vertical line of her belly button and smooth skin. It takes all of my self control not to crawl back into bed and rip those jeans off of her so I can plunge my face between her legs. She has a body that deserves to be worshipped. Moans that are sweeter than any fucking music on Earth.

She's utterly addicting, and I've got to find a way to leave this guest house without taking so much as one more kiss. That's the only way I'll survive this.

Moderation.

Control.

Resistance.

I'll need all of it if I'm going to stick to the plan. "Do you need to pee?"

She grins. "A little. Are you going to help me?"

I nod. "Come on." I help her stand. She tests out her ankle and says it's a little better, but still tender. I help her into the bathroom and sit her down on the toilet with her pants still on. "I'll let you take it from here."

She smiles. "Okay. I'll summon you when I'm done."

"Alright."

I hear the toilet flush a few moments later. "Mr. Prince. I require your aid!"

I grin and go in. She's sitting on the toilet in a princess-like pose with her pants pulled up, her legs crossed at the thigh, and her fingers laced over one knee. "Remove me from this toilet at once!"

I help her up, then hesitate. "Are you going to be able to get yourself ready for the day by yourself?"

"Well," she says. "I usually shower."

Fuck.

She meets my eyes, and I can see the mischief there. It makes me wonder if her ankle still hurts too bad for her to walk, or if this is like when she supposedly didn't know how to hit a hockey puck and needed lessons.

"You know we agreed to sleep together," she says. "Basically. I think you seeing me naked wouldn't be the end of the world."

God damn. I'm not sure there's a man on the Earth who could say no in this moment. I'm staring at the most beautiful creature I've ever laid eyes on. Big eyes, innocent but deadly smile, a body built to destroy me, and she's *asking*

me to help her shower?

“I’ll just... help you get clean. Nothing more than that.”

“Okay.” She sits back on the toilet and pulls her shirt over her head, cheeks going red.

I look away by instinct.

“You can watch,” she says. She pauses, voice more quiet and husky now. “I want you to watch.”

Jesus Christ. I’m not sure if a dick can explode from excessive blood flow, but I think I’m about to find out if she keeps this up. I drag my eyes to her and suck in an involuntary breath. She has already unbuttoned the top of her jeans and I can see the hint of her panties behind the zipper.

“Do you mind helping?” she asks. “I’m crippled.

She sticks out a leg and waits. She’s still wearing her bra but her shirt is on the floor beside her.

I reach in the shower and start the water for her, then I reluctantly take the leg of her jeans and give it a tug. I’m more careful with her injured ankle, and I manage to get them off of her but have to have her stand up. She leans against me and we both laugh as the project of undressing her proves to be quite the challenge when she’s on one leg.

I get her bra off, even though I’m fairly sure she could do this part by herself. The fabric falls away and her breasts fall free, bouncing once in a way that I’m pretty sure is going to be etched into my memory for all of eternity. My eyes fall to the hardened points of her nipples and the soft, supple flesh.

I lift a hand and then stop myself.

She’s grinning at me. “He wants to touch, does he?” she asks.

I shake my head. “You’re ridiculous.”

“So are you. Just touch them. They’re only boobs.” She wiggles them in my face, making a face that is supposed to be silly instead of sultry, but it has the intended effect either way.

I cup both of her breasts and sigh with relief. I’ve wanted to do this ever since they slipped out of her towel that first day. Maybe it wasn’t that long ago. How long *was* it, anyway? Two weeks? Either way, it feels like a fucking eternity.

“Holy shit,” I breathe.

“Usually,” she whispers up to my ear. I’ve just been enjoying the feeling of her breasts in my hands for several long moments. “I take off my panties before I shower. Do you mind?”

I already feel my intentions completely failing. Instead of simply reaching down and mechanically taking her panties off, my hands slide down her body, tracing her curves. I hook my thumbs in the elastic and guide the fabric down her body. I watch goosebumps rise up all over her skin.

“You’re doing this on purpose,” I growl.

“Maybe,” she admits.

And then all I can do is watch with amazement as she walks on her injured ankle into the shower, showing me her perfect ass at the same moment she shows me she has been capable of walking on her own all morning.

I laugh in astonishment as she looks over her shoulder, running her hands through her hair as the steamy water soaks it. “Wow. It’s not as sore as I thought this morning. Whoops.”

I try like hell to do the smart thing—to turn, walk out of the bathroom, and

leave before this woman crawls any deeper into my brain.

But I find my hands reaching for the hem of my shirt and lifting it over my head.

“What are you doing?” Andi asks. She actually looks surprised as I continue to undress. Did she really think she could tease me like this and I’d just walk away? She must have severely over-estimated my self control.

“I’m coming in there. I need a shower, too,” I say.

“Oh,” she says. Suddenly, all of her confident flirtation washes away and she looks vulnerable and nervous.

I step inside the shower with her. It feels small and she feels even smaller, her body wet and bare for me. I reach for the shampoo bottle. “Let me,” I say.

“Okay.”

I take my time shampooing her hair and soaping her body, enjoying the slick sensation of wet skin and the frictionless way the soap makes my hands glide across it.

Before long, we’re kissing. My hands greedily explore her body. My mouth claims hers like it has always been mine and always will be, even as my brain is setting off warning alarms like nuclear warheads have just been launched.

I want to savor this, but I’m also afraid to. The more I enjoy what we’re doing, the harder it’s going to be to let her walk away. The harder it’s going to be to do the smart thing.

Even though I want to dry her off, carry her to the bed, and take my time, I fist her hair.

I tilt her head back, tugging down so she has to look up into my eyes. I kiss her parted lips, then I turn her around, pushing her toward the shower glass.

Andi plants both palms on the glass, fingers sliding down and leaving trails in the condensation. Her ass presses against me, her body absolutely incredible.

I don't let go of her hair. I like having her on a short leash.

I grip myself and then pause. "Birth control?" I ask.

She nods. *Thank God she nods.* "I'm clean. Are you?"

"Clean," I say.

She runs her tongue over her lips and watches me while her bare ass is pressing against me, daring me to take her.

I guide myself inside her and groan with relief. She gasps.

The water runs over her arched back, running down her body in rivulets as I grip her hip with one hand and her hair with the other. I tug on her hair, forcing her to exaggerate the arch because I know the angle will feel better for her.

"Oh my God. It's so big," she says.

It's not long before I'm pounding into her hard enough that her hands are pressing the glass hard enough to make it creak with each thrust. I can't take my eyes off her. She turns her head, letting me admire her profile. I'm already impatient to kiss her again, I turn her around, lifting her by the thighs with her back against the glass.

I slip back into her and kiss her deeply, relishing the feeling of her wet body against mine, slick and warm. Her legs wrap around me and her core clenches tighter than a fist.

It's pure fucking ecstasy, and I don't hold back. I don't slow down so I last longer. I don't drag things out.

I drive myself into her. Harder. Faster. I kiss her more deeply. I grip her breast hard enough that it must hurt, but she only moans into my mouth.

And then the tension in every fiber of my body releases. I close my eyes tight. I feel myself pulsing, releasing deep inside her.

Her mouth falls away from mine and she kisses down my neck. I can feel the smile on her mouth, even if I can't see it.

I help clean her off with the bar of soap. Even though I just finished, I can already feel myself ready for another round by the time I'm done running my soapy hands across her body.

"We need to get back out there. Maybe we can just sneak straight into town," I say. "It would be less suspicious than going out there at the same time together."

"Okay," Andi says. Her eyes are flicking between mine like there's something she wants to say but she's holding back—or she's waiting for me to ask her to say it.

I don't ask. Whatever is on her mind after that, it can't be good. I know my own mind is betraying all my intentions right now, and I don't dare find out what she's thinking. If it's the same thing as me...

I shake my head and grab two towels for her and hand them over.

"What about you?" she asks, realizing there are none left.

"Don't you need one for your hair?"

Andi laughs. "Not if it means you don't get one. Here." Her smile is so damn infectious. "You are kind of ridiculous. You know that, right? It's like you'd lay down in a puddle to keep me from getting my feet wet."

"Maybe I would," I say.

“That’s not very friends with benefits of you,” she notes as she towels her body off.

I have to force my focus to stay on her face, because the way she’s standing there completely naked and making no effort to cover herself is doing things to me. It’s making me want to take her again, but I know we can’t just stay in this guest house all day fucking. At least, we can’t if we don’t want all the guys to figure out what we’re doing.

We both get dressed. In retrospect, I probably should’ve seen this coming. Maybe I did and just lied to myself about what I expected to happen. Whatever it was I wanted to happen, I can’t exactly complain about how things turned out.

“Well,” Andi says while she brushes her wet hair in front of the bathroom mirror. “Thank you.”

“How’s the ankle?” I ask.

She gives me a shy smile. “Um. Just a tiny bit sore. Sorry for kind of tricking you. It’s just so nice to be pampered like that. I’ve never been with a guy like you. It’s like I’m a princess.” She laughs, and then the look on her face goes suddenly serious. “I mean. I’m sorry, I know I’m not ‘with you’ like that. I just don’t know if they make phrases to describe whatever it is we’re doing.”

“Yeah,” I say. I’m overcome by two emotions. Both are so strong and so overwhelming that I feel the sudden need to escape the room, which now feels suffocating. On one side, I want to lose myself in this thing between us. I want to forget about what Sarah did and what I promised myself. I want to forget that Andi recently ran away from a wedding and a life that still hasn’t caught up with her here. I just want to go up to her, kiss her, and tell her she’s not leaving this guest house, because I could write a list a mile long of all the things I want to do to her.

But I also want to run as far as I can as fast as I can. The echo of pain is still loud and palpable inside my chest. It's still there, and it's still fucking terrifying. I know that path of temptation leads me straight through that same place where the pain can come. Where the pain *will* come.

"I'm going to sneak to my room and grab some clothes. Then maybe we can meet at the truck?"

"How are you going to sneak to your room? Won't Nolan and the guys be in there having breakfast?"

"I leave my window unlocked."

She tilts her head. "What about robbers?"

"Do you remember how long you have to drive before you see another house out here, Andi? I'm not exactly worried about home invaders."

She folds her arms. "No more unlocked windows. I don't want you getting murdered in your sleep. I happen to be a little attached to you, Jesse Prince. I'd be very upset with you if you got killed."

Despite the warning bells, I grin. "Alright. I'll start locking the window. Princess' orders," I add, chuckling.

ANDI

Caroline looks like she's about ready to rush out the door when I arrive with Jesse at the bed and breakfast. She eyes us, disappointment forming a crease between her eyes.

"Well?" she asks. "Where are your skates?"

"What?" I ask. And then I slap my hand to my forehead. "Oh, crap. I'm sorry, Caroline. I totally forgot about the skating thing."

She clicks her tongue, grabs her bag, and gestures impatiently for us to follow her. "It's fine. I heard you rolled your ankle out there yesterday. Mia said it was very pathetic. Jesse had to carry you like a baby to his truck. She said he looked about ready to cry with worry over you."

"That's..." Jesse says. "Entirely exaggerated."

"I don't know," I say, punching him softly. "I thought I saw a little water in your eyes. I think if I'd given one more groan of pain, I might've earned a tear."

He shakes his head. "Are we going, or not?"

And there is the coldness. I know I'm being foolish, but I keep thinking the connection I feel when our bodies are close is going to somehow change his

mind—that we’ll wake up the next day and he’ll want to hold my hand and call me sweet names.

“Going,” Caroline says. “And why are you two so late? You told me you’d be here by seven. According to my clock, it’s eight.”

I share a look with Jesse, and neither of us seem to come up with what should be an easy to fabricate excuse. All I can do is picture his strong hands on my body and his insanely big manhood stretching me like I’ve never been stretched. The memory makes my cheeks go red, and Caroline notices.

She stops at the door, fist on her hip. She looks between the two of us. “Are you two... you know?”

“No,” I say quickly.

“Not exactly,” Jesse says.

I jerk my head toward him, completely surprised by his answer.

“Not *exactly*?” Caroline sounds thrilled, not mad. “Not exactly!” She pumps a fist and hugs me, waddling me from side to side while she grips me tight like we’re a pair of penguins. “I knew it. Mia told me there was so much chemistry between you two she thought she was going to barf. Like a couple of lovesick puppies, she said. I thought she was just exaggerating. Oh my gosh, can you imagine how much everybody in town is going to love hearing about this? Maybe it’s not too late to do some kind of date night event for the Frostival, something to really showcase you two—”

“Easy,” Jesse says. He shoots me an apologetic look. “Sorry, Andi. It’s better to just admit it to her. She can keep a secret. If we kept hiding it, she wouldn’t know it was a secret, though. She might have started asking the guys about her suspicions and made it even worse.”

“Oh, yeah, totally,” I say. I’m trying to sound neutral about the whole thing,

but I secretly love being out in the open about it. Even if it's just with one person. It makes what's happening feel like less of a crazy fever dream. It makes it easier to hold on to my foolish hope that Jesse will change his mind about keeping things strictly physical. If he ever does, then I can properly freak out and try to decide if that's what I even want. *Baby steps.*

But for now? Somebody actually knows. There's someone I can actually talk to about this. I could scream with relief.

"You know I have to tell Mia, though," Caroline says. "I tell Mia everything."

Jesse sighs. "I know."

"Should we just tell Jake and the guys, too?" I ask.

"No," Jesse says. "No," he says again more softly. Then he looks to Caroline. "It's just casual fun, though. It's not like we're talking about white picket fences and commitments, okay? Andi doesn't know how long she'll be here and neither do I. We both know this thing has a short fuse, and we're both ready for the end to come sooner than later."

Sheesh, I think. I don't know if I would phrase it exactly like he just did. "Super casual," I say, winking. Except I can't help thinking about the way my heart was trying to melt all over him last night and this morning... and like a dozen other times since I arrived in Frosty Harbor.

Caroline looks a bit skeptical, but she just nods. "Alright, well, why don't you two lovebirds walk together to the harbor, then?"

"What are we doing down there, exactly?" Jesse asks.

She sighs. "Do you listen to anything I tell you? I swear, normally you're the one reminding me. Ever since your new boo showed up, it's like you're an airhead." She knocks on his head and he looks every shade of uncomfortable

imaginable.

“I don’t remember,” is all he says.

“Kids skating lessons. Your whole team is going to be there. Mia is going to be there. And it’s a drop-em-and-go arrangement. If parents want the morning off, they can leave the critters with us.” She looks at me now. “Every year, we try to plan something like this where parents can sneak off and get some last minute holiday shopping done. Or just take a nap.”

“That’s cool,” I say. “I may just be moral support. I think my ankle is too sore to strap on skates again.”

“Yeah, you’re not going on the ice,” Jesse says. He seems to realize he spoke a little too firmly because Caroline and I are both looking at him.

He shrugs at us. “She rolled her ankle less than twelve hours ago. I don’t want her making it worse.”

“I don’t know,” I say. “It was pretty nice having you pamper me all night. Maybe I’ll trip on my way out the door and enjoy another day of being treated like a princess?”

Jesse scoops me into his arms like I weigh nothing. I laugh, then thread my hands behind his neck and smile up at him. “Going to protect me from myself *all day?*”

“If I have to,” he says.

“Oh my God,” Caroline coos. “It’s so cool seeing Jesse in love again.”

“Don’t use that word,” Jesse warns. “I told you it’s casual.”

“You know,” I say. “I’m curious how you plan to keep me safe without everybody in town realizing you’re sweet for me.”

“Sweet for you?” he asks. His voice is hard, but his eyes are sparkling. “Is that what you think?”

I shrug, fingers still laced behind his neck. “Kinda looks that way from... where I’m being held.”

He carefully sets me down, then points a finger at me. “No accidents. Unless you want me carrying you off to the cabin in front of the entire town.”

My mouth moves before I can stop it. “What if I do?” I ask.

Jesse’s expression hardens. His jaw ticks.

Once.

Twice.

Three times.

“We’ve told Caroline already,” he finally says. “She’s going to tell Mia. That’s more than enough damage for one day. Quiet is better. Come on. We should get going.” He heads out the door and waves his hand for me to follow.

I give Caroline a look. She winces and shrugs.

I head outside and let Jesse get the door of his truck for me. I can tell from his body language that I said something wrong.

I keep trying to be careful with my heart, but I can’t help constantly wanting to leap into his arms. I want to close my eyes, trust him to take care of me, and smile. I just want to let go and enjoy this, but I keep having to remind myself what happens when I jump into things without thinking it through.

This time, I’m dealing with a man who very clearly told me he’s not ready for a commitment or a relationship. And what did I do? I convinced myself

and him that I'm not either. It sounded reasonable at the time, even to my own ears. I mean, what kind of insane woman wants to jump straight into a relationship right after bailing on her own wedding?

But, what is the point of setting an arbitrary time limit on how long I have to wait to open my heart up again? Sure, everything happening so fast is confusing and a little concerning, but people feel what they feel, right?

I texted my parents this morning and gave them the most detailed explanation I've managed yet since the wedding. I knew the text was long overdue, even if I have had a few short, clipped calls with them since getting to Frosty Harbor. They seemed to know better than to pry and I wasn't ready to open up about it all yet.

After a few back and forth texts with them, I think they actually understand, even if my dad probably wishes I would've just gone through with it and kept things simple. He's a "simple is better" kind of guy.

I sigh and lay my head against the window, watching Frosty Harbor creep by. Jesse's having to drive slowly because the snow on the roads melted yesterday and iced over last night. The whole town is a frozen wonderland. Everywhere I look, there's a healthy mixture of tourists in big winter clothes waddling around from store to store. There are the locals, usually obvious because they aren't dressed like it's Antarctica. Some of them are just wearing light jackets and jeans.

"Sorry," I say, still keeping my focus on the window. "I didn't mean to freak you out back there."

"What? You didn't freak me out."

I roll my head to the other side, studying his profile. It's quite the profile. Everything about him is this perfect meeting place between sharp and graceful. The nose, the chin, the full lips. The long lashes. I watch the

muscles in his forearms rolling and tightening as he grips the wheel. “You seemed a little freaked out.”

He lets out a breath. “I don’t want you to have the wrong idea. That’s all.”

“The wrong idea?” I ask. I pause. I know what the “cool girl” thing to say would be. I’d shrug and tell him it was fine, that I was super chill. *Super casual, dude*. But I know that’s not me, and I can’t keep the words in. “Would thinking you like me for more than casual sex be the wrong idea? Because that’s the only one I can think of getting. And if it’s true, then what’s the harm?” My heart is pounding after I speak and I feel breathless.

He clenches his jaw again, eyes on the road. “This is the kind of thing I wanted to avoid. It’s the whole point of casual. Casual isn’t messy, Andi. It’s simple. It’s real fucking simple.” His tone is tight and I have to admit it stings a little. I feel like he’s scolding me, and I also know I probably deserve it. He made the conditions of this situation perfectly clear. I’m the one trying to get around the rules.

“I’m sorry,” I say.

He lets out a heavy breath, then reaches over and squeezes my hand. “Don’t be sorry. I’m not... *mad*. I’m just trying not to fuck this up.”

I narrow my eyes. I feel like I’ve already pushed my luck a little too much being needy for one car ride. I decide to keep my mouth shut and let him talk if he has more to say.

He licks his lips, shaking his head. “I’ve enjoyed all of this. *Us*. And I haven’t just enjoyed the physical stuff. You’re kind of awesome, Andi.”

I grin. “Thank you.”

“And that’s the problem.”

“Right,” I agree, frowning because I’m confused now.

“Look, I’m not saying never. Okay? Just... not right now.”

“Not right now,” I say, nodding as if I understand. *I totally don’t understand what we’re talking about anymore.* All I can tell is Jesse doesn’t entirely mean the stuff he said that stung my heart. He’s confused. Confused might be good?

“We’ll just see how things go,” he says, still not making much more sense.

I nod. “I’m sorry I brought it all up. We’re good.” I inject as much carefree, cheerful vibes into my words as I can manage.

He glances at me, clearly wanting to say something else. But he closes his mouth and that jaw of his starts ticking again.

I roll my head back to rest on the chilly glass and wait till we arrive.

ANDI

WELL, SHIT.

I'm approaching the frozen harbor without a care in the world when I notice several very familiar faces. There's mom, dad, my best friend since pre-k, Bree, and even Uncle Paul. Maybe that explains why my mom and dad were so willing to be understanding in their texts this morning. They never asked me where I was, but I'm guessing Jake has been getting grilled since the day I showed up here. Either they took an educated guess and figured I'd be with Jake, or he blabbed to my family and friends. I guess it doesn't matter, now.

They must have already been here this morning when we were texting, which may explain why they seemed so ready to move on and forgive me. At least that means this is more likely a friendly ambush than a hostile one. *I hope.*

They're all bundled up and waiting with the crowd. They stand out like sore thumbs, even among the tourists who are mulling around to see what's going on.

Moms and dads are dropping off kids on the ice and my brother and his teammates are taking some while Mia and her figure skating friends are taking others. I notice Mia and her group are not-so-sneakily looking Nolan's way more often than not as they talk.

"Um," I say, turning to Jesse. He's staring ahead with a kind of cold

determination.

“I think we should leave it where we left it,” he says.

“No.” I’m feeling a little flustered by the surprise of my parents showing up out of nowhere, and I let some of the panic creep into my voice. I step in front of Jesse’s big body, stopping him before we get any closer and most likely noticed. “My parents are here. My best friend, Bree, is here. My Uncle Paul is even here.”

Jesse leans past me, then tilts his chin up when he thinks he has them spotted. “There?” he asks. “You told them where you were?”

“No,” I say. “But it also probably doesn’t take Sherlock Holmes to figure it out. That, or Jake blabbed. So, what do we do?”

“What do you want to do?” he asks.

His calm is infectious. I take a slow breath, close my eyes, and actually think about his question. What *do* I want to do?

Ever since running from my wedding, I’ve been dreading the moment I’d have to face people from my life in person. I’ve texted and even hopped on short phone calls, but this feels different. Everybody has been giving me space when we talk, almost like they wanted me to have a chance to explain on my own time. But showing up in Frosty Harbor? That feels like a confrontation.

Jesse must see the panic in my face, because he reaches out and pulls me into a tight hug. I fight it for a split second, mostly because I’m imagining Jake or someone else noticing us. But then I think about how reluctant Jesse has been for people to see what’s going on between us. The fact that he’s willing to risk so much to calm my nerves right now means the whole world. For a few perfect moments, I forget everything and melt into the hug, pressing my face

against the cool cotton of his black team hoodie.

“I don’t know what to say to them,” I admit.

“I’ve usually found the truth is simplest. It’s also the easiest to keep straight. Once you start telling lies, things get complicated and twisted pretty fast.”

I almost say something to that—something about how he’s the one insisting we keep our relationship a secret. Isn’t that kind of a lie? Then again, he *has* always been honest with me, even if he hasn’t always been *open*.

“I want to get it over with. I’m tired of things looming over me. A marriage I wasn’t sure about. Expectations. Now the disappointment I haven’t faced. I just want to get it all off my shoulders and live in the moment again.”

“Want me with you?” he asks.

I consider that. “No. Thank you, but no. This feels like one of those things I kind of need to face on my own.”

Jesse kisses the top of my head and it makes me feel warm all over. “Thank you,” I say.

He gives me a tight smile and lets me loose from the hug. “I’ll be on the ice when you’re done. Just, uh, make some kind of noise if you need help.”

I laugh. “Like a bird call or something?”

“Something,” he says. “I’ll keep an ear out.”

I leave Jesse, take the deepest breath of my life, and then head toward my family.

Mom spots me first. She’s a big woman and she gives the best hugs on the planet. The moment she sees me, she rushes towards me with her arms out wide and the only thing I want is to hug her, too.

I squeeze her tight and she squeezes me tighter. “It’s okay, Baby,” she says, rubbing her hand down my hair.

Unexpected tears fill my eyes. I wipe at them, nodding and laughing as she rocks me from side to side.

Dad walks up. He’s a string bean with bowed legs and a permanent frown. He’s also prone to the occasional sarcastic line and his trademarked dry humor. He’s less of a hugger and more of the “here’s an approving nod or wink” kind of guy. But those nods and winks can feel almost as good as a hug from him.

I eye him over mom’s head. She’s almost comically short, which makes my tall dad seem even taller.

For a few seconds, he says nothing. Then he finally comes toward me and joins mom in hugging me. I’m surprised and touched by the gesture and find even more tears spilling out of my eyes.

When I finally step back from the hug, I’m wiping my eyes and laughing. “I’m sorry I ran off like that. I just—”

“It’s okay,” Mom says. “Landon helped us understand.”

I raise an eyebrow, looking at Dad, who nods. “He read your note to us and said it made sense. He said we should give you a little space, but thought it’d be okay for us to come now that we knew where you were.”

“I was worried we were being too pushy until your texts this morning,” my mom says.

I squint. “Did you just get here today?”

“Two days ago,” she admits with a sheepish smile. “We were trying to wait until the time felt right. Your Uncle and Bree just got in last night, though.”

“Wow,” I say. Something heavy I didn’t know was pressing down on me feels like it slides away.

We spend a few minutes catching up before Bree finally spots me. She rushes over, hugs me, and then punches me.

Bree is thirty years old, a recovering goth, and she has always been the counterpoint to my blinding optimism. When people meet us, they usually say we’re like yin and yang. “That is for ghosting me, dick.”

I grin. “I deserve it. But now we’re even because you seriously came all the way out here without warning me? What if I went on a trip or something?”

“A vacation from your vacation, you mean? I was banking on that not happening. But yes, you do deserve the punch.” Bree keeps her hair cut short and wears her blonde bangs in a severe, straight line. She only stopped dying her hair black a few years ago. Sometimes, I think it’s funny that I’m the one with naturally black hair and my habitually cynical friend is the one with sunshine blonde hair.

“So?” she says. “Where’s the guy?”

“What guy?”

She folds her arms. “The guy. I’ve known you long enough to know there’s a guy. Point to him now or I’m going to walk out there and demand to know who has been plowing my friend’s fertile fields for the last week.”

“Nobody has been—” I stammer, glancing toward my parents, who are thankfully distracted because Uncle Paul is showing them something on his phone. “Okay, okay. That’s him,” I point toward Jesse. Less than a minute alone with my best friend and I’m already proving I’m not nearly the great secret keeper I thought I was. *Nice.*

Jesse is already on his skates and leading a group of three boys around. He

points to one of their skates while we watch, says something, and all four of them break into laughter.

“My, my, my,” Bree says, clicking her tongue. “No wonder you ran so fast and so hard.”

“I didn’t know he was going to be here. I ran because... well, I told you why. Jesse just happened to come rescue me when I crashed my car.”

Bree turns slowly, blinking in dramatic fashion. “You crashed your car? This wasn’t a detail you thought I should know when I asked if you were okay and you said ‘totally fine’?”

“It was a minor crash,” I say. “And I had rescuers there in minutes. It really wasn’t a big deal.”

“Is your car totaled?”

“Um. Well, yeah. But it’s fine. I could barely afford to put gas in it, anyway. Destroying my car has actually been a good financial decision for me.”

She shakes her head. “Is insurance going to cover it?”

“Well, that’s the thing. I kind of missed a few payments. I was going to catch up, but they are claiming I was delinquent on my payments or some jargon that means, no. Basically I’m on my own.”

“Seriously, Andi? Your brother is in the NHL. I’ve got my own business. Anybody would’ve happily helped you get caught up if you just asked. I’m sure Landon would’ve paid your insurance—”

“I know, I know,” I say, holding up my palms. “I’m stubborn and poor and I should really work on it. But I’m fine. It’s all fine. Stop worrying so much.”

Once Bree is done scolding me for my irresponsibility, she asks all about Frosty Harbor, the Frostival events leading up to Christmas, Jesse’s

teammates, and eats up every ounce of gossipy speculation I offer about my suspicions about Mia and Nolan as well as the little spark I've seen between Caroline and Jake.

Caroline eventually comes up and jerks her head toward the ice. "I'm not paying you to chit chat, Andi. Get out here and help!" She's smiling, but I can also gather she's telling me to get to work, not asking.

I say a quick goodbye to Bree and my parents, then make myself useful in the area where parents are dropping kids off. I may be able to walk, but I'm not quite ready to throw on skates yet.

From where I'm helping, I have a perfect vantage point to admire Jesse from a distance.

Mikey's kids, Meemie and Cade, show up shortly after I start helping. Mikey thanks me profusely for the other night, and then heads off. Cade rushes onto the ice and goes to Jesse's group and is clearly talking his ear off. Meemie is hanging around me, arms folded like she's my pint-sized bodyguard.

"Don't you want to skate?" I ask.

"I'm help you!" she insists.

As the evening goes on, I realize Meemie's definition of "help" is following me around while her mouth never stops moving. She asks about aliens, boys, and hockey players. I tell her there's really not much difference between the three, which leads to a whole string of questions about dragons and tornados. I try to tell her that she probably doesn't need to worry about either in Vermont, especially during winter, but she's convinced both are going to be very big problems in her near future, along with quicksand, which she has seen in too many cartoons to ignore as a real threat.

Between managing Meemie, occasionally helping show parents where they

can leave their kid's stuff, helping track down kids when parents return to pick them up, and sneaking glances at Jesse, the evening flies by.

I spend some more time having less tense conversations with my parents and Uncle Paul. Bree fills me in on how her business has been faring since we last really talked. Then I go for lunch with Meemee, Bree, and my family while Jesse goes with his teammates to eat somewhere in town.

Before I know it, the sun is setting and Mikey is thanking me again as he has to practically peel Meemee off my leg. Cade thanks Jesse and heads off, sweaty and pink-cheeked from a day of exertion on the ice.

I stretch, yawning and admiring the stars overhead. Jesse comes up beside me. "Ready to go?"

"Oh, you're talking to me now?"

He glances to his side. Jake and the guys are in a group, laughing about something as they head for the parking lot. "I wanted to keep a low profile. Like we talked about."

"I know," I say. I force a smile. The last thing I want is to be the prickly, annoying girl who can't take a hint. I want to be cool—to play along with the rules he's laying out. "I was just giving you a hard time."

He nods and we start heading for the parking lot together. "Is your ankle okay? I tried to keep an eye on you and it looked like you were getting around fine. I just wasn't sure if it was bothering you, though."

"Were you worried about me?"

"Of course I was. I know you were stressed about your family and all that. Did it go okay?"

I smile. "Yes, thank you. Are you this protective of all your not-girlfriends?"

He chuckles. “I wasn’t with Sarah. Maybe that’s why you bring it out of me so strongly. She would’ve bitten my head off if I tried to pamper her the way I pamper you. It’s nice that you don’t mind. It feels good to take care of you, I guess.”

I have about a million questions. He just offered up information about his ex without me even asking. My instinct is to rattle off the million questions I’ve been holding back about her, but I think that would just get him to clam up. I decide the best tactic is to simply nod and not pry for more. “Well, feminism is great and all that, but I think it’s kind of nice to be with a guy who still knows how to treat a girl like a princess. Er, *not* with a guy,” I add.

Jake and the guys drive up to us in Jake’s rental SUV. They roll to a stop, windows down.

“We’re going to that pub with the good pretzels,” Jake says, one hand on the wheel and one resting outside the window. “You guys wanna come?”

I shift my eyes to Jesse and he shakes his head. “Nah. I think Andi has been on that ankle too much already. She should get back and get some rest.”

I can tell Jake almost warns Jesse out of habit. For some reason, he just clenches his mouth shut and gives a confusing nod to Jesse, like they’ve got some kind of understanding.

What the hell?

Carter pops out the back window. “Oh, hey. If you guys need any romantic tunes to get things going right, I kinda fucked up your speaker thing, Jesse. Sorry. I spilled my chocolate milk all over it. I’ve got it resting in some rice right now.” He holds up his thumb and forefinger in a circle, winking. “Give it a few days and I’m sure it’ll work just fine. You’ll have to use your phone or something.”

I hear Maddox from inside the car. “Doubt it when you just jinxed it, dumbass.”

“Jinx this,” Carter says, disappearing back in the car. I hear thumping and grunts as the two grown men wrestle like boys.

Jake glances behind him. “Catch you guys later, then. Oh, Andi. Are mom and dad good? I didn’t get a chance to ask them.”

“I meant to ask you how they knew where to find me,” I say, hands on my hips.

“You didn’t think I was going to buy time forever, did you?”

“No,” I sigh. “It was actually fine. I got to talk to them a lot today. I think it really helped them to see me here kind of in my element. They’re already talking about coming to visit again in a few months. And Bree is doing great. She doesn’t even seem mad at me.”

Jake hesitates. “Coming to see you in a few months? You really think you’ll still be here?”

“Maybe,” I say, trying to sound casual.

“Huh,” he says, but to my surprise, he looks at Jesse as he answers and doesn’t try to tell me I’m crazy. “They staying at Caroline’s?”

“Yep. She didn’t even know they were my parents. They got here two days ago and hid out.”

“Maybe I’ll go to Caroline’s later and visit them.”

“Sure,” I say. “You can say hi to Caroline while you’re there.”

He scowls. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“Yeah,” Jesse says. “What does that mean?”

“We gonna get pretzels or chit chat all night?” Carter complains from the back seat. I see Jake’s seat jerk forward like someone kicked it from behind.

Jake suddenly seems ready to drive away. *Shocker*. “Night. Be careful on that ankle,” he says, pulling off and rolling up the windows before I have a chance to explain.

I give Jesse a questioning look. “What was that about?”

“Huh?”

“That moment when Jake gave you some kind of bro nod. Like you guys have an agreement about something?”

Jesse runs his tongue over his lips. “It was nothing.”

I put my fists on my hips, stepping in front of him before he can reach for the handle of the passenger door to his truck. “What happened to honesty and no lies? You know omission is a form of lying, right?”

His eyes fall to my feet, then back up again. “Jake said you could do worse than me. That was it. He didn’t give me permission to date you or whatever. He just... made it sound like I might get off with a black eye instead of a knife in my chest. Alright?”

“What? He never gives guys permission to date me. If he said he wouldn’t kill you, he practically gave you permission. When was this?”

“I don’t know. Not that long ago.”

“Were you going to tell me this? Wasn’t Jake like the main reason we’ve been keeping things secret?”

Jesse moves around me and pulls the door open.

I watch him for a few beats, waiting for him to answer. He impatiently

gestures to the seat and I slam myself down, folding my arms as he closes the door for me.

He gets behind the wheel, still annoyingly quiet.

“Is this why you don’t do relationships?” I ask. “Your communication skills deteriorate with time?”

He blinks slowly, then reaches to turn the key. He shifts the truck into reverse, backs out, and starts driving without another word.

I unfold my arms just so I can fold them again with annoyance. “This is great. Good talk, Jesse.”

“You’re acting like I didn’t warn you about all of this,” he says quietly after we’ve been driving a while.

“What?”

“I tried to tell you. I’m not... ready. It’s why I didn’t want you to think this was going to be something real. It’s just sex. Can’t it just be that? Sex between friends because we’re both attracted to each other. I don’t want complicated.”

I chew the inside of my mouth. Several things pop into my head. I want to say all of them, but I run them through my mental crazy checker and decide all I can do is keep my mouth shut. I can’t complain because he’s completely right. He warned me. He tried so many different ways to tell me there are no strings. And here I am, proving I am totally and utterly unable to do “no strings”.

So much time has passed that the moment is gone, but I speak anyway. “Yeah. Complicated is overrated.”

He side-eyes me, but says nothing.

JESSE

A ndi is curled up on the couch in the living room with a paperback. It's something by Terry Pratchet, but I can't read the title from where I am in the kitchen.

"Beer?" I ask.

She lifts her eyes from the book. "Is this kind of like your code for when you want to get feisty? You offer me alcohol?"

I hang my head, shake it, and then close the fridge. I walk over and set two beers down in front of her and two in front of me. "This isn't easy for me." I take a spot on the couch adjacent to the big one where she's laying. Her head is facing me and she has changed into a white shirt with no bra and pajama bottoms. It's... highly distracting.

"It's hard because of her? Because of Sarah?" She sets the book down and rolls to her side and props a few pillows under her head so she can look my way.

I recognize the cover now. It's *The Carpet People*, by Terry Pratchet. *Good choice*. When I'm not injured, I make my way through a metric shit-ton of books. Playing in the NHL is short bursts of high intensity fun punctuated by a lot of traveling and boring periods of waiting. Reading books has always

been my preferred method of passing the time. About two seasons ago, I think I made my way through the entire Terry Pratchett collection.

“Jesse?” Andi asks. “You’re doing that thing you do when she comes up. It’s like you go somewhere behind your eyes. Jesse’s body is there, but *you* go somewhere else.”

“Yeah.” I don’t bother arguing. “I made a few promises to myself after Sarah. When I promise myself something, I take it very seriously.”

She sits up, folding her legs beneath her. “Are those promises also secrets?”

I open my mouth to say *yes*. But there’s really no reason I can’t tell her, is there? Maybe it’s uncomfortable, but maybe it would help her understand, too.

I take a steadying breath and sink a little deeper into the chair, folding my arms over myself. “I swore I wouldn’t open up again like I did with her. Letting people in... it just gives them access to all your vulnerable parts. It lets them hurt you.”

Andi’s mouth turns down at the corners. I can see her sympathy is almost overwhelming, even though I feel like I barely said anything worth saying. “I get that,” she says.

“You get it?” I laugh with disbelief. “For some reason, I thought you were going to launch into a debate about why I have the wrong idea. Or you’d tell me to open up with you because you’ll be different.”

“Well that wouldn’t really make sense. I think you open up with someone when you feel ready. If you don’t feel ready to open up, then it’s not time. Right?”

I study her. Does she know what she’s doing? Does she know how hard it is for me not to spill everything on my mind every time I’m around her? *She*

can't possibly.

I nod carefully. "Right."

"And I'm sorry somebody made you feel that way." She says the words with so much care that I know she isn't just bullshitting me. She really feels that sorrow for me. I have to admit it's touching—*if I was the kind of guy who got touched by shit like that, I mean.*

"Come here," Andi says, smiling suddenly. "Come to Mama. Cuddle me up."

I breathe out a laugh. "What?"

She beckons me, reaching out both arms. "Come on. Get in here. You don't have to talk about it, but you do have to cuddle me."

"I don-t—"

"You can get in here and cuddle, or I'm coming over there. I'll sit on your lap and hug the shit out of you, Jesse Prince. So one way or another, it's happening."

"I don't cuddle," I say.

"Alright. I warned you." Andi chucks a pillow at my face—maybe as a distraction technique. I catch it, and by the time I'm moving it to the side, she's slipping inside my guard.

I laugh, lifting my arms because she's already wrapped around my neck with her arms and working her legs around me like a baby monkey clinging to its mother. "What the hell are you doing?" I ask.

"Cuddling you. Shh. Let it happen."

I shake my head, but I'm grinning. She's fucking ridiculous. I slowly lower my hands to rest on her back and give her an awkward pat.

“There you go. Just follow your instincts. Pat me if that’s how you like it.”

I laugh. “You’re the one making this weird.”

“Weird can be good.”

I put my arms all the way around her, pulling her in tight. I have to admit the weight and pressure of her body against me is nice. It’s relaxing. I feel myself letting out a breath I didn’t know I was holding. Some of that old, long-forgotten tension I carry at all times leaks out of my shoulders.

“You know…” she says after several minutes of silence. “Cuddling on beds is fun, too. I would imagine it’s even more fun on water beds.”

I raise an eyebrow. I can’t say if she’s hoping this goes where I’m thinking or if she really does just want to keep this up in bed. Then again, I wouldn’t really complain about either outcome. “Come on, then,” I say, carefully untangling myself from her and standing. “Let’s do it.”

Her eyes light up. “I’m not sure I’ve ever been this excited.”

She rushes up to me and takes my hand in both of hers, squeezing tight and making an excited noise through her teeth.

I lead her to my bedroom and no small part of me wonders where this is going to lead, but I push that curiosity to the back and pull open the door. I gesture toward the bed.

“Can we make it vibrate, please?”

I laugh. “Okay. Sure.”

I get on the bed and reach behind the headboard, flicking on the switch. A gentle, constant vibration starts to ripple through the bed.

Andi jumps on the bed, laying flat on her back like a starfish. She closes her

eyes and moans, then rolls to the side, looking at me from where I'm still on my knees. "Get down here."

I lay back on top of the covers and she scooches toward me, resting her head on my chest and throwing a leg over me. Her small hand lays on my chest and her fingertips idly circle. "This is nice," she whispers.

I know she's not pressing me for more information, but something about the moment makes me feel odd. The innocent contact on the couch. The feeling of her head on my chest and her apparent comfort with the silence... It makes me feel like all the shit I've been bottling up since the breakup is right there. It's at the tip of my thoughts and it all feels slimy and stale from being held in so long. In this moment, it almost feels like I might be sick if I don't just get it out.

"Sarah isn't anything like you," I say. I have no idea where I'm going with this, but I can feel I'm definitely going.

"That's a shame. I think I'm pretty great."

I smile at the ceiling. "You're alright."

She whacks me with the hand on my chest. "You know you like me. You just don't like to admit it."

I don't speak for a while. When I do, my smile is completely gone. "We met when we were younger. I was traveling for hockey stuff pretty regularly. I had this summer camp I went to every year in her hometown out in Connecticut. We met there and kind of started a long distance thing. I think the long distance worked for both of us, but we talked a lot about how perfect it would be if we could finally just live in the same place.

"For me, it was probably easier to have a long distance girlfriend for that period of my life. It took way less time and I didn't need to deal with drama

because I was constantly traveling for hockey. We saw each other a few weeks over the summer and occasionally made a trip out to visit. Other than that, it was easy. Phone calls, promises of finding a way to live in the same place eventually, that kind of shit.”

“Long distance is hard,” Andi says. “My high school boyfriend moved away for college. He was super normal before. Then all of a sudden he wanted to be on the phone constantly. He wanted me to keep it on speaker at night ‘to hear me breathe’. Really, I think he just was insecure and wanted some kind of proof I wasn’t cheating on him.”

“Yeah,” I say. “It was tough. Eventually, the excuses dried up. I got drafted and we started talking about the future more. There weren’t any more good reasons for us to live apart, and she finally agreed to move here to Frosty Harbor with me. But we both had our own lives at that point. She had music, which was hours of playing and recording stuff at home or traveling for days at a time to go to far-off festivals. I usually couldn’t go with her, and once we were living together, it felt like a bigger deal.”

“Festivals are way too smelly for me. Have you ever been to one? They sell water, beer, and t-shirts. What they really need to sell is deodorant.”

I grin. Something about the way she’s taking everything I’m saying so lightly keeps me going. If she’d just been laying there silent, I think I would stop talking. I’d question why I was sharing any of this. But Andi makes it so damn easy to talk. “I think we both probably knew it wasn’t working. I decided the problem was how neither of us were committing. We just needed to take that final leap, I thought. So I did. I told her we needed to get hitched and maybe think about having a family. I was pretty convinced that’s what I wanted, too. I told her I wanted to earn enough to set us up for life from the league, retire, and settle down here in Frosty Harbor to enjoy a simple life together. Celebrate the holidays, grow old... that kind of shit.”

“Wow,” Andi says. “What did she say?”

“Not much. She just kind of listened that night, and then the next morning she’d packed her essentials and was gone. Didn’t even say ‘bye’. She just left and all I had was a text. ‘Need some time to think’. That’s what she sent.”

“I’m so sorry,” Andi says. She curls in a little closer to me, hugging me tight.

I run my hand through her hair. I haven’t told this shit to anybody. But why? Maybe it’s the deep stabs of embarrassment and stupidity the story stirs up in me. How was I so fucking stupid? How did I not see it all coming from miles away?

Neither of us talk for a while. “I guess I’m like a walking red flag to you, huh?” Andi asks. “With the way things ended between you and Sarah. Then you meet a girl who ditched her wedding last-minute. I can see why you’ve been keeping me at arm’s length.”

Shit. “Andi. It’s not like that. I wasn’t judging what you did. Honestly, I didn’t even connect those dots.”

“Well, I wouldn’t blame you. I’ve kind of worried about my own state of mind. I mean, what kind of person does what I did? Maybe the relationship was doomed. But what kind of person agrees to get married when they aren’t dead certain they want to? Who waits until the morning of the wedding to take a real look inside and ask themselves, ‘is this actually what I want?’” She laughs sadly. “What’s wrong with me?”

Now it’s my turn to give her a little squeeze. “I don’t think anything is wrong with you. Except that you’re related to Jake. He’s an asshole.”

We both laugh at that.

“Why do you think you’ve been bottling this all up?” Andi asks. “I don’t want to dismiss what you went through. But, I was expecting something like

a murdered baby or a weird kink, like you needed to be fed cake while you had sex to get off and she finally had enough. *By the way,*” she whispers as she wiggles her eyebrows. “I’d totally cake bang you, if that’s what you were into.”

I grin. “That’s a good question. I think... After she left, I told myself the mistake I made was admitting what I wanted. She left because I opened up, you know? So I swore I’d learn to keep my mouth shut. No more vulnerability and openness. Honesty, sure. But there’s no reason to just offer up the deep shit.”

“Well,” she says. “It means a lot to me that you’re telling me how you feel. I know you only want this thing between us to be physical, but I want you to know I’m happy you can confide in me, too. I’ve never really felt this comfortable with a guy. *Ever,*” she adds with a surprised laugh. “It’s too bad we’ve agreed not to like each other. Because I have to admit, I kind of like you, Jesse Prince.”

“I like you a little, too,” I say, lying out of my ass. *A little?* My feelings for Andi make me feel like some hastily constructed pressure vessel—like something inside me is pushing harder and harder with every word she says, threatening to burst out of me.

And then we’re kissing. Her mouth is soft, warm, and perfect. Her moans are whispers in the dark.

She giggles when I roll on top of her and the bed ripples beneath us, making our bodies undulate with the motion.

“Why is it so hard to resist you?” I ask.

“Why are you trying so hard?” she counters.

“Because you’re dangerous for me.”

“Why?” She gasps, arching her neck as I kiss down her chest and then peel off her plain white shirt. I bury the hard point of her nipple in my mouth, circling it with my tongue.

I lift my face, kissing her chin before I speak. “Because I could get addicted to this. To you. Your body. The way you move beneath me and the way your moans sound in the dark. I could convince myself nothing else matters but this—here with you.”

“You’re not so bad yourself,” she breathes.

I grin. “Not so bad?” I ask with an edge of playfulness in my voice. “So this is just alright for you?” I press my palm between her legs. The thin fabric of her pajama bottoms and panties don’t stop me from feeling the shape of her or the damp warmth. I slide my fingers up and circle her through her clothes. “If it’s not that great, I guess I could stop.”

She grips my wrist like a vice. “Don’t you dare.”

I laugh. “Oh, so it’s maybe better than alright? Tell me how good it is, Andi.”

“Fine. It’s pretty good.”

“Hmm,” I say, keeping my hand on her but not moving it. “Pretty good?”

She groans and grinds her hips up, pressing herself against my hand and cupping my neck with the back of her hand. She tries to pull me down to her and I refuse, tightening my muscles so I’m as immovable as a rock as I hold myself above her. One hand is planted on the waterbed and one is between her legs, motionless.

She makes a frustrated noise, hooking her legs around my hips and her hands around my neck. She lifts herself up against me, holding tight.

We both laugh at the ridiculousness of it and then I let her flip me. She

climbs on top of me, bare breasts absolutely perfect as she reaches to pull her hair out of her face. “Maybe I’m a gentlelady. Maybe I don’t want to talk too dirty about how much I may or may not like doing this with you.”

“Then I’m going to humbly dedicate myself to the art of fucking the gentle out of you.”

She bites her lip. “Isn’t it more like a pushing in kind of act? Maybe it would make more sense to say you’re going to fuck the bad into me.”

I roll my hips, easing her down on her back again and hooking my fingers around the waistband of her pajamas and panties. I give them a tug, pulling them down to her thighs. “Or maybe you shouldn’t worry about semantics at a time like this.”

She lifts her lips to my ear, voice seductive and sultry. “There’s always time for semantics.”

If there’s one thing I’ve learned about Andi, it’s that she could talk her way through a car crash. Sometimes, the only way to shut her up is to stop engaging. In this case, taking my shirt off does a pretty good job, too.

Her eyes drift down from my face to my chest and stomach. She reaches for my jeans, fumbling with the button.

We both rush to get the pants and underwear off each other and have a hilariously hard time on the water bed. I end up falling to my side and Andi, who has her ass out and her pants down to her knees, shimmies down the bed as she tries to tug my jeans off.

“They always make this look so easy in the movies,” she says.

“What kind of movies are you watching?” I ask.

She presses her lips into a thin smile. “Don’t judge me, Jesse.”

“I would never.” I position myself above her and use my hips to ease her legs open wide. I guide myself inside her and we both sigh with relief.

“Talking semantics must get you wet. You’re fucking soaked,” I say.

“Oh, you have no idea. Talk semantics to me and I’ll be yours forever.”

I drive my hips forward, filling her. I lower my mouth to her ear. “Is a hot dog a sandwich?”

Andi gives an exaggerated moan, laughing even as her body quivers for me. “Oh, God. No, a hot dog is not a sandwich.”

I press into her again. “Two pieces of bread. One piece of meat. *Sandwich*,” I hiss, exaggerating the rasp in my voice.

Andi shakes her head, breathing hard and chest heaving. “One bun. The bun is split, but connected. It’s not a sandwich.”

I hook my hands behind her knees, dragging her toward me. I also can’t believe I’m actually having this conversation while fucking the girl I haven’t been able to get out of my head since we first met. “What is a hotdog bun if it breaks down the middle?” *Pump*. “Two pieces of bread. *Sandwich*.” *Pump*.

Andi laughs, moaning again. “Okay. You win. For now. To be continued.”

“Thank God,” I say, flipping her to her back and lifting her to her knees. I grip her from behind and rail her. There’s no restraint. No limits.

We’re both sinking into the center of the water bed and it’s not exactly easy to stay upright. I’m nearly about to climax when I get too enthusiastic and we both tip over to the side. She laughs, then turns her head to her left, kissing me and touching my face as I lay behind her. I slip into her, running my hands along her body and easing myself into her again and again.

When we’re finished, she rolls to face me in the dark. Our bodies are slick

with sweat and we're both still breathing hard. "So," Andi says. "I wasn't actually done with the hot dog thing. I just couldn't think straight anymore."

"Why is that? Because of my 'just okay' sexual performance?"

She grins. "Exactly. It was so aggressively average my brain was going into a kind of coma. *Anyway*, it's not a sandwich. If I put a piece of ham in a hotdog bun, would it become a sandwich? No. It would be ham in a hot dog bun. A ham dog, if you will."

I laugh. "No. It would be a ham sandwich. Is a philly cheesesteak a steakdog? No. It's a steak sandwich."

"It's about intention," she says. "A hot dog is a statement of intention. I... intend to call this a hot dog?" Andi sighs. "That made more sense in my head. And this isn't fair because you're over there looking like *that* while I'm trying to think straight."

"You don't even know what your point is anymore."

She grins. "Sometimes, two people start out at one place with one thing in mind. And then... eventually they wind up somewhere totally different. Like, hear me out..." she trails off, eyes big and searching.

My chest gets tight. I can tell we just suddenly shifted from playful to serious.

"Two people do all the things people in a relationship do. They get along. They are *aggressively* attracted to each other." She holds up a finger because she can tell I'm about to say something. "Even though the guy in the relationship is only just okay in bed."

I close my mouth, smiling a little. "You forgot how patient he is."

"Anyway," she says, pressing on. "These two people, for all intents and

purposes, are acting like they're in a relationship. Hypothetically speaking, you could even imagine they're internally having all the kinds of feelings people in a relationship have. But these two people have a problem. Wanna know what it is?"

"Am I allowed to say 'no'?"

"You're not. That was a hypothetical question. Now shut up and keep looking pretty while I talk." She presses her fingertip to my lips, smiling, even though she looks nervous. "So what do you call this thing happening between the two people? Because they started off calling it temporary and casual. But if it changed into something else, is it still temporary and casual just because they called it that? Or is it more?"

I stare at the shape of her in the darkness—the glint of fire in her eyes and the curve of her full, pouty lips. I follow the line of her slender neck and the swell of her bare hip. "It depends," I say slowly, thoughts racing. "If he wants to do the right thing, he keeps calling it casual. He calls it that because he knows anything more isn't fair to her. That she's going to expect things from him he knows he can't give her. And if he cares about her—hypothetically—he won't want her to get hurt."

"Hypothetically, let's say she's a big girl who wears big girl panties. Shouldn't that be her choice? Her risk to take?"

I narrow my eyes. "Are we still talking about hotdogs?"

"Answer the question, Jesse."

I sigh. "I guess it should be her choice. And he does know she wears big girl panties, since he bought her some the first day they met."

She kisses me softly. We've kissed quite a few times over the past two days, but this one feels different. A spark of something runs through me as soon as

our lips touch. Her fingertips on my cheek feel tender, almost loving.

Dangerous thought. An even more dangerous word to toss around, even in my own head.

I pull her head into my chest and hold her tight. I know the morning is going to come, and none of this is going to feel as simple and clear as it does when we're alone and stripped bare for each other. I know the dawn is coming, but I want to relish the darkness for just a little longer. In the dark, nothing we're doing has consequences. I wish it could stay that way, but I know it can't.

I pull her to me tight and don't let go, even after I drift to sleep.

ANDI

My morning began with an escape out Jesse's window. I gracefully fell into a snow-covered bush, landed on my ass, got melted, cold snow all over myself, then scampered around his cabin to the guest house. After our conversation last night, I hoped he'd reach out and tell me to stay where I was. I may or may not have even had a dream or two about us proudly walking out together and announcing to everybody that we were officially a couple now.

Baby steps, though. I can do baby steps, right?

I'm at the table now with Nolan and Maddox while Jake, Liam, Carter, and Jesse are somewhere in the cabin, probably getting ready for the day.

Nolan slides some little french toast rectangles onto my plate. He has crisped them and coated them with brown sugar and cinnamon, then dusted them with powdered sugar, creating an angelic blend somewhere between a churro and French toast.

"Thank you, Goalie Gourmet" I say.

He smiles. "Give it a try," he urges.

I crunch into it and sit back in the chair, sighing around my mouthful. "So

good,” I manage.

Nolan’s smile goes even wider. “I baked the bread this morning. I tried to mess with the egg mixture a little. Doubled the vanilla and added some more nutmeg. Can you tell?”

I shrug. “It just tastes like magic to me. I don’t have a very complicated palette.”

“Magic,” he says, almost as if to himself. “I can handle that.”

He goes back into the kitchen, probably making a batch for the other guys. It’s kind of adorable. I know the team is supposed to be this big macho beefy man machine. They’re supposed to chest bump each other through walls, grunt, lift heavy objects, and radiate masculinity. But the more time I spend around them, the more I see how sweet they actually are with each other.

Nolan loves to cook for the guys and eats up any feedback he can get on his food. Jake is almost as overprotective as the guys as he is of me. The other day, I saw him having a long heart-to-heart with Liam after things went south with the girl Liam was seeing from town. There was a lot of shoulder touching, arm squeezes, and genuine gestures of concern.

Then there’s Carter, who tries to act like he doesn’t really care about anything except making jokes. But I’ve seen glimpses of there being more to him beneath what he lets on. Just the other night, he was the star adult with the kids at the skating event. We had to keep splitting groups off to spend time with the other players and the girls trying to teach figure skating. Every time we took our eyes off them, they’d sneak back to Carter’s group, where everybody was laughing and having the time of their lives.

Liam is still a little bit of a mystery to me. For most of the time I’ve been here in Frosty Harbor, he has been busy with the girl from town named Avery. I took him for the typical heartthrob who shrugs off break ups without

a care, but I've been surprised to see how hard he's taking the end of their little fling. Mostly, he's just been sulking around the house and withdrawn since it happened.

I eye Maddox, who is happily chomping on his french toast across from me. I can't say I've fully explored the depths of Maddox, if there are any. He seems like the kind of guy who doesn't ever try to dig too deeply into his own thoughts. Maybe he's exactly what he lets on.

He notices me looking, lifts one of his french toast sticks, and extends it toward me for a kind of toast. *A french toast toast.*

I grin and tap my stick to his. Cinnamon and brown sugar drift down to the table and we both take a bite.

"So, Mojo" I say, curious to make conversation with him. "Who is the best player on the team?"

"Jesse," he says simply. "I mean, right now he's all gimped up so not technically. But normally, he's the best. Without him, it's looking like we may miss the playoffs this year."

"Really?" I ask.

"Jesse has that killer instinct on the ice. He just always knows when to take the shot and where to put it. It's like magic." Maddox considers, frowning at his french toast stick, then looks back up at me with surprise in his eyes. "Probably *is* magic."

"Have you always been... um," I search for a delicate way to put my question. "Interested in superstitions and things like that?"

"Oh, definitely. My mom was a palm reader. She taught me all about it. And have you ever seen those Conjuring movies? My dad was kind of like Ed Warren. He'd go to people's houses and help them with hauntings and stuff

like that. They both passed,” he adds, looking uncharacteristically sad for a moment. “Keeping my finger on the pulse of this kind of thing makes me feel like I’m still with them, I guess.”

“Wow,” I say. I definitely wasn’t expecting that out of him. “That’s really sweet.”

He nods, chomping down on his food and leaning closer, face suddenly growing serious. “Look. I know how crazy it all sounds, but think about this, okay?”

“Ready to think,” I say.

“Alright, here’s the way I see it. Nature isn’t perfect. Every natural process has imperfections. A whole forest can burn and you’ll still find intact trees. A rainstorm can pass over a city and miss a whole block.”

“Can it though?” I ask, eyes narrowed.

“Hold your questions, please,” he says seriously.

I grin. “Okay.”

“So, we’ve agreed that nature’s grasp on reality is imperfect. In fact,” he says, raising a finger. “You could argue imperfection is actually the natural state of things.”

I feel a slight sense of concern that his little speech is actually making a touch of sense to me, but I don’t see how he’s going to tie this into superstition.

“Therefore,” Maddox says. He looks triumphant already, even though he hasn’t made his final point. “This whole idea that we’re stuck in our own head with no access to forces outside ourselves?” He leans across the table toward me. “It’s there, but it’s not perfect, either. Stuff slips in. Intuition. Psychic insights. Spiritual experiences.” He lifts his palms. “It’s all crazy to

most people. To me, it's just part of the natural order of things."

Nolan returns with warm syrup that smells like cranberries and faintly of liquor. He pauses. "Oh, no. Is he giving you the nature speech?"

"I thought it was very interesting," I say.

"See?" Maddox says, slapping the table with his palm. "Somebody finally gets it."

"She's just being nice, dude. We all know you're crazy."

"And yet you have been wearing your socks inside out ever since I pointed out you block more shots when you do."

Nolan opens his mouth to argue, closes it, and sets down the syrup. "Cranberry, whiskey, and maple syrup reduction. Enjoy."

Jesse comes out wearing a gray t-shirt and sweatpants, with his hair wet and shaggy. He runs his hand through it, pushing it out of his face.

My whole body goes rigid at the sight of him.

"Hey," Jesse says. "Did I miss anything?"

Nolan raises his voice from the kitchen. "Maddox gave Andi the speech."

Jesse groans. "Sorry, Andi. We try to keep him away from new people as long as we can, but he eventually manages to slip through our defenses and give the speech."

"I really didn't mind it."

"Thank you!" Maddox says, slapping the table again with his palm.

I hang out at the table as the guys emerge from their rooms one by one. Eventually, we're all at the table and the guys are talking about hockey stuff

that's happening after the holidays. It hits me that the cabin is going to clear out before I know it, and I probably need to form an exit plan.

Even if I'm starting to wonder whether me and Jesse are actually casual and not serious, I feel like I need to get my own place. I don't want to just assume he has no problem letting me stay with him.

"So," Jake says. "What are your plans for today? Going to see Mom and Dad? Or were you going to hang with Bree?"

"Bree already had to go back to New York. She's interviewing advertising firms this week to take her business to the next level."

Jake nods. "Good for her."

"We're doing a secret Santa event tomorrow," I say. "I was going to get a head start and get my gifts today for the event. And then I was going to pick up my Christmas gifts for all you guys, too. I thought I could invite Mom and Dad."

"Get gifts?" Jake asks. "With what? Aren't you broke?"

I blush. "Caroline has been paying me. Once I pay back Jesse... and you, I'll be less broke."

"You really don't need to pay me back," Jesse says.

"I do. But holiday gifts are also important. I can't just not get you guys something."

"It's a lost cause," Jake says. "She really will pay you back. Andi is stubborn as hell. She's always broke, always in debt, but always paying people back. It's kind of a mystery to behold."

Carter lights up. "You're going to get me something?"

“Of course I am, Joker. I’m getting something for everybody.”

“Hold on,” Carter says, narrowing his eyes. “You haven’t used our nicknames since that first day. Did you forget about them and now you’re trying to make up for it all at once?”

“*Whaat?*” I ask in a terrible attempt at acting. “Definitely not.”

Carter laughs and shakes his head. “Knew it.”

Maddox rubs his hands together. “I’m excited. Andi seems like she’d be a really good gift giver.”

“Notoriously good,” Jake confirms. “She’ll give you a gift so good you’ll feel bad about whatever she gets you. It’s honestly annoying.”

I smile and shrug. “He’s right. You’ll all be annoyed and thrilled at the same time. It’s my speciality.”

“Why don’t you let me tag along, then,” Jesse says. “I can spot you the money and I’ll just add it to the tab or whatever.”

Everybody at the table shares a silent look.

“What?” Jesse demands.

“Nothing,” Carter says. “Just that you two sure do spend a lot of time together.”

Jake nods. “I also noticed some small, feminine footprints in the snow leading from your window to Andi’s guest house. Looked fresh this morning.”

I’m blushing again. “Uh, I–”

“Andi got trapped in my room. She…” Jesse trails off.

We're both completely stumped and have no good excuses, apparently.

Liam shakes his head. His hair moves luxuriously from the simple motion like some slow-mo shot out of a shampoo commercial. "I've known you two were sneaking around since day one. Neither of you are anywhere near as subtle as you think."

"What?" Jesse says. "We're not sneaking around."

"Even I saw it," Maddox says. "Why do you think I wasn't laying my charm on Andi. You don't think I could've wooed her by now if I didn't know you'd already spoken for her?"

"Actually, I would've wooed her," Carter argues. "It would've been no contest. Your charm versus mine? Might as well be a lion trying to arm wrestle a mouse."

"You're the mouse?" Maddox asks.

"Lions and mice don't even have the joints and body composition to arm wrestle, dumbass," Jake says. "And the lion would just eat the mouse."

"Point is!" Carter interrupts. "I would've absolutely wooed the socks off your little sister if Jesse hadn't beat me to it."

"Do you all mind?" Jesse asks.

Carter grins and points. "See? We're making him jealous. Why would you be jealous if you weren't already embroiled in a secret affair with Jake's little sister."

Jake glares. "And why do you think I had to grit my teeth and give you permission to continue your secret affair if I didn't already know it was going on?"

I share a look with Jesse. *Is this really happening right now?* He gives me a

subtle nod.

“We weren’t sure if we should tell you guys,” I say.

“It was supposed to only be casual,” Jesse adds.

His few words mean the world to me. *It was supposed to only be casual.* As in, it’s not anymore. As in, it’s officially more than casual. If I wasn’t trying so hard to play it cool, I’d be squealing and dancing around right now.

“Does this mean I don’t get to watch Andi try to scamper through the snow outside my window in the morning anymore?” Carter asks. “Because that was pretty hilarious.”

Jesse shakes his head. “Come on, Andi. Let’s go pick up your parents. I don’t know how much more of these guys I can take right now.”

“More like you want to get in the truck and play grab ass,” Carter says, laughing.

Jesse shoots him the middle finger. And me? I take a big handful of Jesse’s ass in front of everyone, drawing a chorus of laughter and a groan of disgust I assume is from my brother.

JESSE

I'm in a room at the bed and breakfast while Andi and her mom sit on the bed, wrapping the Secret Santa gifts we spent the first part of the day buying. To my surprise, her parents haven't been too hostile toward me. Sure, her dad had a bit of the stand-offishness I'd expect from a man who is watching his runaway bride daughter launch herself straight into a new relationship. I'd be worried if he *wasn't* suspicious of me.

He's lounging beside me in one of the two arm chairs in the room. He's a tall, incredibly thin man with a big head and a large, prominent Adam's apple.

It occurs to me that I haven't been up in the rooms at the bed and breakfast in years—since back when my parents were running the place. These days, I just come in the front or back door, hang around the kitchen and lobby, and go. It's oddly nostalgic up here.

Andi and her mom are chatting at high speeds about anything and everything that's happened since her arrival in Frosty Harbor.

"I used to sneak into these rooms and jump on the beds," I admit to Andi's dad.

He glances up from his paperback, grinning. "Andi said your folks used to run this place, right?"

I nod. “Yeah.”

Both our eyes drift to Andi. She’s in a fluffy white sweater, black leggings, and she has kicked off her boots so her bright green reindeer socks are on proud display. There’s a fluffy red ball on each big toe that must make her shoes wildly uncomfortable, but Andi apparently decided it was worth the pain.

“So you two are pretty serious, then?” Her dad’s question sounds somehow more like a threat, and I’m not exactly sure what response he wants.

“I don’t know what we are, exactly,” I say. It’s the truth, if nothing else.

“Promise you’ll treat her right if it does get serious?”

I raise my eyebrows. “Yeah, of course I will.”

He nods to himself, apparently satisfied, and lifts his book again.

I’m turning the brief conversation over in my head when my phone buzzes from my pocket.

My chest goes cold when I look at the text and see who it’s from. *Sarah?* What the hell? She hasn’t texted me since the day she left.

Sarah: Hi, Jesse. I’m in Frosty Harbor. It was a last-minute thing. Do you think we could meet somewhere just to talk?

I grimace. The last thing I want right now is to open up old wounds. I don’t want to talk to Sarah. Andi happens to look my way and the expression on my face must be something, because she trails off mid-sentence with her mom.

“Is everything okay?” she asks.

“Yeah,” I say, shoving my phone in my pocket. “I just need to go handle

something. Here,” I set my truck’s keys on the end table with Andi’s dad. “If Andi needs to head back to the cabin before I get back, maybe you guys could drive her. It may be better if Andi doesn’t drive. Last time I saw her drive, she crashed her car.”

“You crashed your car?” her mom asks suddenly.

Andi gives me a *thanks a lot* kind of look, but grins and waves as I get up to leave.

I text Sarah back once I’m outside.

Jesse: Where?

Sarah: The old park we used to go to?

Jesse: Yeah. I’ll be there in five.

I spend the walk worrying about what she’s going to want to talk about. It has been a year. A fucking year and she wants to show up unannounced like this and try to mess with my mind? I try to decide how I feel about this from her, and eventually decide it pisses me off. The time to talk to me was the day she left. She didn’t even show me the decency to explain her side of things. And yes, there was a time I desperately wanted to know—not so desperately I was going to lower myself to reaching out and begging for her to explain, but still.

I realize now that time has passed. I don’t think I care anymore why she left or what she thought. Maybe I really have moved on, once and for all. Before Andi, I kept thinking back on my relationship with Sarah as such a big part of my life—like something I wouldn’t be able to replicate with another woman.

Then Andi showed up in a crashed car and a torn wedding dress. She showed me the goal was never to replicate what I had with Sarah, because that wasn’t right for me. The goal all along was to wait for Andi Summers to come crashing into my life.

Only Andi comes with her own set of completely new, completely terrifying questions I need to dig deep inside myself to answer—questions I’m not sure I’m ready to tackle yet.

I see Sarah sitting with her back to me on a bench. She has dyed her hair blonde and she has new tattoos on her neck and the backs of her hands. She hears me coming and turns to look.

She stands. “Hey,” she says. She was always pretty, but it’s strange to see her now after so much time. It’s as if the magic has worn away in the year we spent apart. The things about her I convinced myself were perfect seem just ordinary. She just looks like a person. A person I used to know who holds no power over me anymore.

“What’s going on?” I ask. I try to keep it from my voice, but my annoyance is obvious.

She looks down. “I’m sorry. I just... I wanted to see you. My parents fell in love with this place when they came to see me last year. They talked me into coming with them for the holidays, and I kind of agreed because I knew you would be here.”

“Sarah...”

“Just—” she holds up a hand. “Can I finish what I came here to say?”

I fold my arms, waiting.

“I ran off on you and I’ve felt terrible about it ever since. I needed some more time to explore and find myself, though. I felt this kind of suffocating feeling when you started talking about settling down and marriage and kids. Like I had so much I still wanted to do, and you obviously wanted to rush into the boring stuff.”

“This is what you wanted to say?” I ask.

“I wanted to say I’m ready now. I realized all that stuff only matters if you have someone to share it with. And maybe we could compromise, you know? Settle down, but not stay put. We could still have adventures and see the world, but together. We could call it whatever you want, and maybe even do the whole kids thing down the line.”

“Sarah, I don’t have those feelings anymore,” I say.

She laughs and takes a step toward me, like what I said was completely ridiculous. She reaches for me, but I shake my head and take another step back. “Don’t,” I warn. “You call it rushing into the boring stuff, but that’s the thing. If you’re with the right person, none of that is boring. It’s the most exciting fucking thing you can ever imagine. More exciting than a thousand fans screaming your name or signing a multi-million dollar contract. Some part of me wanted to believe it could be like that with us, but it wasn’t. I can see that now.”

Her expression falls, but then she smiles again. She’s assuming this is all just a prologue to the part where I take her back. “What’s wrong with you? Is there some other girl or something?” Sarah was always the confident type. She didn’t mingle well with other people at times because she could be too opinionated or too bold for some. Seeing her turn that boldness on me like a weapon stirs up old memories of the bad times between us—of moments when she strained my relationship with the team because she pushed buttons or when she got jealous and tried to accuse me of things that weren’t true.

“Yeah,” I say. “There’s another girl.” I frown, because I can feel the truth in my words even before I say them. “And she’s the type of girl who makes the boring stuff seem like it wouldn’t be so boring. The kind of girl you change your life for.” True or not, my own words scare the shit out of me. *Is that really how I feel? What the hell am I supposed to do with that, if it is? Tell Andi the truth and spook her all the way back to Manhattan?*

Sarah sticks out her jaw, folding her arms like she's disgusted that I've moved on. "So none of what we went through matters? You already replaced me?"

I realize she really thought this was going to work. She believed it would be like other times we'd taken breaks from each other. All those other times, I'd spent our time apart convincing myself I screwed up and would be lucky if she gave me another chance. I'd let her jump back into my arms and apologized for whatever I'd done wrong while she let me shoulder all the blame.

She must have come here completely convinced this would work out the way it always had.

"It's good to see you," I say. "But I am actually in the middle of something, so I need to get headed back."

"That's all? I came all this way to see you and you're just going to toss me away like I'm nothing?"

There are several things I really want to say, but I know I'll feel better if I don't lower myself to her level here. "I think we can both admit our relationship lasted longer than it should've. Getting back together wouldn't be good for either of us. And like I said, I'm with somebody else, now."

She lowers her eyes and laughs a little. "Okay," she says quietly. "Okay. Yeah. Good for you, Jesse." She looks up and I'm surprised to see she has already regained her composure. "I'm happy for you."

"Thanks," I say. "Are you still planning to stay for the holidays?"

She hesitates. "I don't know yet. We'll see."

"Sorry it turned out this way."

She laughs softly. "I don't think you are. She must be something special. You look good, Jesse. Really good."

I nod. There's a heavy sense of finality in the moment. Instead of sadness, the realization makes me feel light and relieved, like the sudden end of oppressive background noise. I press my lips together in a smile, wave, and leave her there in the park.

In the quiet minutes I spend walking back toward the bed and breakfast, I'm surprised when sadness or regret doesn't come bubbling from the depths in my mind.

I spot my truck after a few minutes parked on the side of Main Street. I follow the sound of a small crowd and holiday music to the plaza, where the big Christmas tree is set up. Kids are helping Caroline put up decorations and Andi is watching with her parents. They're talking about something and Andi notices me first, her smile faltering as she reads the stormy expression on my face.

I approach them, nodding to Andi with my hands in my jacket pockets. "Hey," I say, trying to mask the mix of emotions churning inside me. "Sorry about that."

Andi's parents greet me politely, but there's an unspoken question in Andi's eyes. She senses something's off. "Everything okay?" she asks, her voice tinged with concern. "You didn't say where you were going..."

I hesitate, not wanting to lie but also reluctant to unload everything right here. "Yeah. Just something from my past I had to deal with."

Andi looks at me, her expression a mix of confusion and worry. "You mean Sarah?"

I nod, noting the flicker of something like disappointment in her eyes. "Yeah.

She texted me out of the blue. Wanted to talk. I told her it's over, for good."

There's a pause, heavy with things unsaid. Andi's parents, sensing the tension, make an excuse to give us some space. We watch them go and then the silence stretches between us for a minute or two.

"She's here? In Frosty Harbor?" Andi's voice is calm, but there's an edge to it I can't quite read.

"She came with her family for the holidays. I didn't know she'd be here. But I told her it was over."

"I thought that was already clear?" Andi is speaking calmly, but there's a note of hurt in her eyes that is breaking my fucking heart.

"It was," I say. "I thought it was, at least. She... I guess she came here hoping to start things back up. But I told her there was no chance."

"Right," Andi says, her smile not touching her eyes. "No chance because you're not ready for commitment, right?"

I hesitate. I know what I should say here. I should tell her the reason I told Sarah it was over wasn't just because I felt none of the old emotions when I saw her. The biggest reason is because I've already started giving my heart to someone else. *To Andi*. But I can't bring myself to admit that. It brings me back to when I opened up to Sarah and she vanished on me the very next morning. Andi already knows I've taken the step of admitting we're together to people. Can't that be enough for now? There are certain truths too dangerous to utter. "Something like that," I say. I try to reach for Andi's hand as a gesture of peace—a gesture to see if we're still okay.

She subtly pulls away, looking toward the children playing in the snow. "I taught him that technique," she points with the hand I was just reaching for. "See how he's laying his arm back and using his hips?"

“Yeah,” I say, my gaze lingering on her hand instead of the kid as I think about how I’m already fucking this up, too. “I see it.” I want to say more, to explain, to reassure her, but the words don’t come. Instead, there’s this growing sense of a gap widening between us, filled with doubts and unspoken fears.

“Maybe I should head back,” Andi suggests after a moment. “Caroline said there were more boxes at the bed and breakfast for the tree.”

I nod, feeling helpless. I know what I should be doing. I know how to fix this. The part I don’t know is whether trying to fix it is smart. Maybe the smart thing is letting the fracture forming between us continue to widen—to let us break apart before either of us get any more invested. “Sure, I can walk you back.”

We walk in silence, the festive sounds of Frosty Harbor echoing around us. I glance at her, wanting to bridge the gap, to return to the easy connection we had just this morning. But the shadow of my past hangs over us. I’m struck by a feeling of awe with how fast and how easily something so strong can start to come apart. Maybe Andi’s patience for my reluctance evaporated when we came clean this morning. Without realizing it, I was supposed to be all-in and no more doubts. *Maybe*. I guess I don’t know exactly where I went wrong, but I do know the right thing to do would be to ask—to make some attempt to fix things.

And yet I keep walking and not doing that. I keep letting it get worse.

“Is it okay if I just call you when I need a ride back to the cabin?” Andi asks. There’s a new coldness to her voice I don’t like at all. She’s trying to sound normal, but I can sense the lack of warmth like a knife to my chest. “Unless Caroline can drive me, that is.”

“I don’t mind giving you a ride,” I say. I smile and take a step back. I want to

kiss her, but I can feel it's not the right gesture. She wants space from me right now. It's why she's politely dismissing me and basically telling me to go back home. To leave her alone today.

Why the hell am I letting this unravel before my eyes? Why am I just watching it all break apart?

The questions ring loud in my brain, but no answers come.

"Bye," she says. She turns and heads off before waiting for my response.

I watch her go, kicking myself. *What the hell are you doing, Jesse?*

ANDI

It has been getting colder in Frosty Harbor, and the chill seems to be seeping between Jesse and me. We've still been civil with each other, but I haven't visited his bedroom since he came back from talking to Sarah.

We've crossed paths in the cabin, acted cordial, shared smiles and rides into town. We've helped Caroline set up various events for the Frostival weeks leading up to Christmas. We set up a big train to run around the Christmas tree in the town square with the kids. We hosted a toy drive for needy kids, organized a charity date night where some of the players auctioned themselves off for a date with lucky girls from town. Mostly, they went to dinners with sweet old women. We had a throwback disco skate night at the harbor, karaoke, bingo, and enough events that every day has been busy and full of things to keep my mind occupied. Now that Christmas is close, we're mostly just prepping for the big Frostival finale on the ice.

I've even managed to spend more time with my parents than I was expecting. They've been downright pleasant. It's almost like Jake wasn't the only one secretly crossing his fingers and hoping I'd change my mind about Landon.

Other than the growing, confusing rift between me and Jesse, everything has been perfect.

But that kind of feels like saying “other than losing a leg, things have been great!”

I just wish I knew what was going through his head.

Tonight is the ugly sweater party, which actually isn't an official part of the Frostival festivities.

It's late evening, and, as usual, a light snow is drifting down outside the guest cabin. I walk to the bathroom and pull on the gaudiest, ugliest sweater I could find. It's a bright red monstrosity with a reindeer whose nose actually blinks, along with the words “Ho, Ho, Ho” in big, flashing letters across my belly. I mess with my hair but can't quite seem to feel right. I normally love ugly sweater parties, but tonight I just feel nervous.

Maybe it's because everybody *just* had basically admitted they know me and Jesse were fooling around. No less than a few hours after the team confronted us, we somehow managed to screw it up? And now we're turning one small awkward mishap into several days of near silence and cold shoulders?

I decide this whole thing is silly.

I'm going to find a way to talk to him during the party. I'll just confront him and ask him what in tarnation has gotten up his butt. And yes, I may use those exact words because I can picture them making him smile. I'm not sure even the boundless, beautiful nature in Frosty Harbor can compete with Jesse Prince when he smiles.

With my plan firmly in mind, I head out into the night, tennis shoes crunching and slippery in the snowy path from the guest house to the main cabin. As soon as I'm outside, I hear the dull thump of music and laughter coming from the party. The team, along with some locals, are already in full party mode, it seems.

Taking a deep breath, I push the door open and step inside.

The warmth of the cabin hits me, along with the sound of holiday music and the scent of hot chocolate, cookies, and something else I can't put my finger on.

I spot some of the usuals I've come to recognize and know from town events, but it's not everyone. This is more of a Jesse thing than a Frosty Harbor thing, I guess.

I scan the room and my eyes land on Jesse. He's wearing an ugly sweater, too. It features a cartoonish Santa falling as he comes out of a chimney. His red pants are down around his ankles and his shiny butt cheeks are on full display. Our eyes meet, and for a moment, there's a flicker of the usual butterflies and chemistry. He ruins it with a polite smile and wave. "Hey, Andi." His voice is neutral. "Nice sweater."

"Thanks," I reply, trying to match his tone. "Yours is... something else. I can't tell. Am I supposed to be aroused by those shiny cheeks?"

He looks down, lips curving down in amusement. "Um. That's up to you, I guess. But I thought semantics was what got you going, not old man cheeks."

I smile, cheeks going red at the memory of what had to have been the world's weirdest dirty talk. That was also the last time we were intimate.

This feels like the normal Jesse. Maybe it's the atmosphere in here easing his mood. Maybe it's the alcoholic beverages he could've already started working on. Or maybe he just needed some time after running into Sarah like that. Whatever it is, I'll take it.

"Um, yeah, well. You could say I'm never going to think about a hot dog the same."

He chuckles. "Yeah. Me neither."

A couple of the guys from the team holler at me. “Andi!” Carter says, voice rising above the rest. “Come judge our sweaters. Maddox actually thinks that his is better than mine. We need an impartial judge.”

One perk, if you could call it that, of this slump with Jesse is I’ve had more time to get to know the guys from the team. Carter is a big movie and literature buff, surprisingly, and has spent a few nights hanging out with me watching old movies. Maddox is crazy about board games, and frustratingly good at chess, but he has been trying to teach me to get good enough that I’ll be able to surprise Jesse and kick his ass some day. Liam likes to write, and he even agreed to let me read and give some feedback on some of his work. Nolan is happy to have anyone to talk to when he’s in the kitchen and he is always looking for taste testers. I’ve even had fun playing casual games of hockey against Jake, although he destroys me when he tries.

All of it has been so nice, along with my budding friendship growing between Caroline and even Mia and the dozens of other little connections I’ve formed with various people in town.

If only this stupid thing with Jesse wasn’t hanging over it all like a black cloud.

Jesse snaps me back to the moment, nodding toward the guys and smiling a little. “Go have fun,” he says.

“See you later, though?” I ask.

He studies me, eyes twinkling in the warm light of the cabin. “Later. Yeah.”

I subtly brush my hand against his as I head off toward the guys. Caroline is with Jake, Carter, and Maddox. All three of them are laughing about their sweaters, and I’m asked to serve as judge. Caroline, as usual, is looking at Jake every time she laughs.

Somebody brings me a drink–spiced wine, which isn’t really my thing but I drink it anyway–and the party slowly washes away all my apprehension. I spend hours laughing, drinking, snacking on finger foods, talking with the guys, going over plans for the Frostival finale coming up with Caroline, and stealing glances of Jesse.

“I don’t know, man,” Maddox says. He looks genuinely torn up about this as he sucks his teeth and puts his hands on his hips. Behind him, the big Christmas tree in Jesse’s cabin twinkles with light and there’s holly and tinsel strung up everywhere. It even *smells* like Christmas in here.

“Come on,” Carter pushes. “Tell him, Andi.”

I raise my eyebrows, cup in one hand and no clue what they’re talking about. “Huh?”

Carter sighs. “He is afraid to let me borrow the golden thong for our first game back after the holidays.”

“The... golden thong? Is that like a figure of speech?”

“It’s this gold thong I got as a gag gift a few years back,” Maddox says. “I fell behind on laundry one season and it was all I had one night, so I rolled with it for game time.” He grins slowly, leaning close like he’s about to share a secret. “Best. Game. Of. My. Life. The thong is obviously good mojo. So now I wear it whenever we really need a win.”

“But it hasn’t been working as often,” Carter says. “It needs to be circulated.”

Now my eyebrows might be inside my hairline. “Circulated?” I ask, almost afraid to learn more.

“He needs to let me try it,” Carter insists. “Maybe he used up all the luck for himself, but there could be some left for me.”

“Or maybe you’ll ruin it,” Maddox counters.

“Or maybe men shouldn’t share golden thongs?” I suggest.

They both give me an offended look.

“I’m just saying it’s not the most sanitary thing I’ve ever heard of.”

“I would *wash* it, Andi,” Carter says. “I’m not a monster.”

“Yeah, he would wash it,” Maddox agrees, even though he doesn’t seem to want to give it up.

The guys devolve back into a circular argument as I notice Jesse heading out to the patio. We lock eyes for a moment, and then the door shuts.

“Maybe,” I say, eyes still on the door. “Just ask yourself what Oprah would do. She’d give everyone a turn. You get the golden thong. You get the golden thong. Spread it all around, like... a golden shower.”

Maddox and Carter both burst out laughing.

Carter puts a hand on my shoulder and shakes his head. “I’m not sure that means what you think it means, Andi.”

I’m still distracted, so I mutter some excuse, set my drink down, and head out after Jesse. I hear Maddox and Carter laughing as I leave.

The air outside is bitter cold. I regret not grabbing my coat, but I see Jesse leaning on the balcony. He has brushed off enough snow to lean without getting his arms wet. He glances over his shoulder, then runs his forearm across the balcony to clear a spot for me to lean.

“Hey,” I say, teeth already clattering.

“Where is your coat?” He doesn’t wait for an answer. He strips off his big, bulky jacket and puts it around me, then drapes his arm around my shoulder

and pulls me into his warmth. The simple gesture feels like everything after days of distance between us.

“Sorry,” I say, even if I’m not particularly sorry at the moment since it led to this.

“I’m the one who should be sorry,” he says. “I kind of panicked. It’s like I didn’t realize I hadn’t fully closed the door on the Sarah thing until she showed up, but then I couldn’t slam it shut fast enough. Then it felt like you wanted me to double down on us. I…” he trails off, shaking his head. “I want to make it up to you. Maybe a dinner date tomorrow night. Somewhere nice?”

“Really?” I ask. My heart is pounding, even though the prospect of a dinner date shouldn’t feel so groundbreakingly exciting. *It does, though.* It’s like a symbol—as if we’re taking a step closer to the thing we’ve been skirting around and pretending not to feel. I also feel a touch of guilt, because maybe he’s right. Maybe I was being needy and I really did want him to double down on us after he talked to Sarah.

“Really,” he says. “Me and you.”

“Jesse?” I ask.

“Yeah?”

“You’re not having doubts about ending things with Sarah, are you? Is that why you’ve been distant? You’re thinking about whether you want to go back to her and don’t want to hurt my feelings?” *So much for not being needy.* But I also don’t want to have doubts. I want it all in the open. I want honesty between us, even if it means asking uncomfortably blunt questions.

“No,” he says quickly. He cups my face in both of his hands, which are somehow warm despite the cold in the night air. “No,” he says again, more

softly this time. “I think... Sarah was the easy out, maybe. She was the door that I hadn’t figured out how to completely close. It wasn’t that I wanted to go back to her. It was that I kept thinking of what happened as a mistake I’d made—like something good I’d screwed up and lost. But none of that is why I’ve been distant.”

I wait, because I feel like whatever he’s about to say is going to shatter me into a million, happy little pieces.

“The time we’ve spent together made me see her differently. You’ve been showing me what it’s like when it’s good. *Really* good.” He shakes his head, chuckling to himself as he looks off into the trees and moonlit, snowy hills below the balcony. “It’s like if you only ever ate chocolate that tasted bitter and stale. Everybody else says it’s amazing, so you kind of convince yourself that it’s not so bad. Maybe you have to force it, but you can kind of see what they’re talking about if you squint real hard. And then you came along.”

I put my hands over my heart, melting on the inside. “Jesse Prince. Are you about to tell me I’m your first bite of sweet chocolate? Because that is so romantic.”

He laughs. “Something like that.”

I hug him tight. “I’m the high calorie treat you are trying not to over-indulge in. That is so tragic.”

“You may be taking the metaphor a bit too far,” he says, humor lacing his words. “I just... I’ve seen what all the fuss is about since I met you. And closing that door on Sarah made me finally come face to face with some important questions. Questions about where I want to go from here. I needed time to think, maybe.”

“What did you decide?” I ask, pulling back enough to look up at him.

“To take you on a nice dinner date. Not tomorrow, because the guys have a game and I want to be there. But we’ll go the night after.”

I grin. “That is an evasive answer.”

“Yes, it is,” he agrees.

I go back to hugging him. Partly, it’s because he’s warm and I’m cold, even with the big jacket. But mostly, it’s because his words have filled me with something that feels an awful lot like hope. Hope for us. Hope for my future. Hope for everything.

It’s an amazing feeling, so I close my eyes and listen to the muffled sound of laughter and music from inside the cabin behind us. I think about the sparkling lights all over and the soft snow making the night so supernaturally quiet. I think about maybe, just maybe not going back to New York when all this is over.

I squeeze him a little tighter and smile.

JESSE

I find Andi in her guest house that night when everyone else has left or gone to sleep. I let myself in. “You should really lock this door,” I say once I step inside the darkened room. Only the bathroom light is on and I can see her shadow being cast through the doorway from inside.

“Are you worried a squirrel or a bear is going to turn the knob and come get me? I feel pretty safe with all these big tough hockey guys right next door. Besides, someone once told me they don’t even lock their window because this cabin is so far out and there’s no reason to fear an intruder.”

“I’d feel better if I knew you had it locked. And that someone locks his windows now. Princess’s orders, remember?”

“But then how would you sneak in to seduce me at night if I lock up?” She peeks out from around the door frame, eyes twinkling with mischief. “That *is* why you’re here, isn’t it?”

“That depends.” I move closer to the bathroom. My heart is pounding because I wasn’t sure how this would go. It has been far, *far* too long since I had my hands on her. I wasn’t sure if our conversation brought us right back to where we were, or if I had some making up to do before she’d flirt so openly with me again. “Do you require seduction? Or can I just walk in here

and demand that you get in the bed, undress, and let me fuck you.”

My words were supposed to be a little bit of a joke, but my passion seeps into them and I’m already getting hard by the time I’ve finished.

She bites her lip, turning to face me. She’s just wearing a long t-shirt with bare legs beneath and her hair is let down, still wet from the shower she must’ve taken. “Well, both sound nice. When I order fajitas at a restaurant, I can never decide between chicken or steak. I like both.”

“You want the combo package?” I ask.

“Yes.” She folds her arms, which draws my eyes to her chest.

“Alright. Is water wet?” I ask.

Her forehead scrunches up. “What?”

“Answer the question. Is water wet?”

“Um, yes. When water touches things, they become wet. So water is wet.”

I take a step closer. “I think water makes things wet. But the water itself isn’t wet. *Semantics*,” I add with a wiggle of my eyebrows.

“Oh, I see what this is,” she bites a smile. “You’re trying to get me all... semantically seduced, are you?”

“Is it working?”

She takes a step toward me and runs her fingers down my shirt, gripping it and smiling. “Well, I can think of one way to find out. We could test your theory.”

“How?” I whisper.

“Well, am I wet? Or will it just be your fingers that will be wet after you

check for yourself?”

Damn. I slide my hand down the small of her back and grip her ass through the fabric of her t-shirt. I can feel the line of her panties beneath. I squeeze tight, pushing her against me. She makes a small sound, then tilts her head up toward me, lips parted.

I kiss her once, then lift her shirt and slide my hands down her panties. “You are very wet,” I say. “And so are my fingers.”

“Water is wet,” Andi declares triumphantly. “And so am I.”

We both chuckle and start kissing. I spin her around and lay her down on the bed. She lifts her arms, letting me pull the shirt over her head. As much as I just want to plunge myself into her, I’m always torn with her on whether I want to take my time or take her as hard and fast as I can. My body wants both. It wants to unleash every pent up sexual urge in a blaze of kisses, friction, and power. But I also want to savor every sensation—to drink her in like fine liquor.

I kiss down her neck and trace my path with the tip of my fingers. My touch raises goosebumps on her smooth skin. I cup her breast through the t-shirt, enjoying the hard point of her nipple as I tease it with my fingers and draw more moans from her.

Savor it. An unconscious part of me decides tonight is for taking things slow and enjoying her. Tonight is for making a deep memory of what this is like, because some part of me is worried I’m still going to screw it up. *Again.* I need to enjoy Andi in every way I can because any night could be our last together. I already saw how fragile it can be and how easily it could all come breaking apart.

So I start with my head between her legs. I toss her panties to some corner of the room and don’t stop until she’s pulling my hair so hard it hurts and

gasping my name.

Then I take her with my fingers while I kiss her deeply, only stopping when I can tell she's inches from another climax. She's panting and sucking in hard breaths when I stop and position myself above her. "Tell me what you want, Andi," I command.

"You," she says simply.

"Is it my cock you want?" I ask.

She bites her lip and shrugs. Even when she's on the edge of sexual desperation, she still can't help being a brat. "I don't know. I was thinking more about your big toe."

I kiss her neck, then nip her with my teeth just enough to tease. She laughs and swats at me. "Okay, okay. It's not your big toe I want. It's... I'm really into armpits. Can I see your armpit?"

"You are so weird," I say, smiling.

"Bad weird or good weird?"

"Both."

"That's fair." She pauses, staring up at me as her eyes twinkle in the low light of the guest house. "Are you really going to just stay there unless I say it?"

"Maybe." My throbbing cock says otherwise, but she doesn't have to know that.

"What if I want to hear you tell me what *you* want? Hm? What about that?"

"That can be arranged." I lower my lips to her ear, my voice barely a whisper. "I want to feel your pussy around my cock. I want to feel your warmth gripping me. I want to feel your walls shudder when you cum for me, and I

want to hear my name on your lips. Only my name—like it’s the last name you’ll ever be allowed to moan. I want you totally and completely. I want you all to myself.”

“*Okay,*” she says shakily. “That’s very specific and very hot.”

I kiss up her neck and find her lips. She squirms beneath me, kissing me hard and fast. She wraps her legs around me, urging me inside her. I don’t drag this out. I know she’s just as near the edge of losing her mind as I am, and both of us need this.

I plunge into her and she’s everything I want and more. I close my eyes tight, squeezing hard fistfulls of the sheets as I drive into her again and again, the sounds of her moans mixing with my hard breaths and moans of my own. I’ve never been the vocal type, but apparently Andi’s body draws it out of me.

“Oh, God,” she gasps. She pulls me to her tight, arms wrapping around my back and fingers digging into my skin. “So good,” she breathes.

“Fuck,” I hiss between my teeth.

My body goes rigid with my release and in one final, prolonged moment, I feel the intensity of everything we’ve been building like it’s right in front of me—like I can reach out and grab it. It’s more than just physical. I’ve known that since the start, even if I don’t like admitting it.

I collapse beside her, both of us panting and covered in a sheen of sweat. The silence that follows seems to be thick with the unspoken. I turn toward her and see her eyes are closed and her chest is rising and falling with each breath.

“You alright?” I ask.

Her eyes open slowly—almost sleepily. Her smile spreads slowly, showing me

her straight teeth. “I think...” she says. “I think maybe we need to do some more experiments.”

I chuckle, confused. “Experiments?”

“Yeah. I’m still not sure if I’m the one who was wet, or if now it’s your... *thing*. I think maybe we need to keep messing around until we’re sure.”

I pull her toward me, cupping her face and kissing her pink lips. As much as I’m enjoying this, I can’t shake the feeling that we’re using our bodies to ignore some deeper conversation we still need to have—some step we’re trying to skip over. It feels like we’re just rolling around a bundle of cords and tangling them more and more every time we do this. We’re ignoring the complex webbed mess behind us and charging forward—blindly.

But when her hands drift below my waist and she grips me, none of that seems important anymore.

ANDI

Jesse and the guys all left early in the morning for a team meeting and then a match in a nearby city. Jesse said he didn't have to go and offered to stay to spend the day with me, but I didn't want him to feel like he had to miss it for me. It was nice, though, because it made me feel like maybe we already patched over whatever that weird little cold spell was between us. That's progress, right? We already had our first fight and got over it. *Go us!*

I told Caroline I'd help her prep the harbor for the Frostival Finale that's in just a couple days. On Christmas Eve, we're going to have the frozen over harbor skating rink lit up like some kind of winter wonderland. There will be decorations, lights, food, drinks, music, and even a few fun games and contests. Once night rolls around, we'll have the couples skate and dance on the ice. And the best part? She agreed to my idea to use some of the leftover budget to hire a fireworks crew. We're going to have the fireworks go off during the couples dance, which is going to be amazingly romantic.

Caroline is humming *Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree* while she supervises a pole being screwed into the ice.

"I love that song," I say.

"Really?"

“It reminds me of *Home Alone*. We always watched that movie every Christmas because Jake is obsessed with it. I’m pretty sure he still watches it.”

“That’s cute. Speaking of cute...” she does a silly little smile and tilts her head toward the handyman from town who has been helping us out this morning. He brought a small collection of power tools to help us drill the holes into the ice and secure the poles we’ll be stringing lights and other decorations from. He’s also putting together a small stage for the DJ booth.

I cover my mouth and my smile. The older man’s butt crack has been aggressively on display all morning. I lower my voice. “Can you imagine being an unsuspecting snowflake? Just drifting down in your beautiful little life until you realize where you’re about to land...”

“Adam’s butt crack,” Caroline finishes, stifling her laughs.

“Welp,” Adam says a few minutes later. He dusts off his hands and looks at his work. “I’m gonna run by the shop and grab some two by fours and I’ll be back in a split.”

When he says “two by fours”, it sounds more like “tewbafurs”.

“Okay, drive safe.”

“And y’all walk safe. No slipping on this ice while I’m gone. Jesse told me to keep an eye on y’all today.”

“More like keep an eye on Andi,” Caroline mutters.

“Got it,” I say. “Wait until you get back to slip.”

He gives me a rueful laugh and points his power drill at me. “You’re a firecracker, aren’t you? Maybe they ought to shoot you off instead of all them fireworks you ordered.”

He drives off and I'm left to dig strings of lights out of boxes on the ice and carefully loop them around hooks on poles. It's easy enough, but walking on the ice in our sneakers is perilous work. I nearly bust my ass every few minutes. At least Caroline is struggling, too. We're both constantly slipping, swearing, laughing, and powering on with the task.

"This is going to be so perfect," I say.

Caroline smiles over her shoulder. "I know. It's probably going to be the best Frostival Finale we've had in years. Believe it or not, you are a *much* better helper than Jesse."

I laugh. "For some reason, I can believe that."

"So," she says carefully. "Do you think you'll be around next year to help? Or are you going to head back home when your parents leave?"

"Oh," I say, caught off guard by the question. "I don't actually know yet. I guess it's hard to really picture what it's going to be like living here once Jake gets back in the flow of the season and isn't around. With him and my parents all gone, I just can't say for sure. And I do have friends back home." I can't tell if I'm hedging my response for Caroline's benefit or for my own. I know one thing: I've been operating under the assumption that difficult choices are only scary if I think about them. Therefore, I've been shoving everything scary into a mental closet, barricading the door, and pretending I don't hear it thumping and thrashing as it tries to get out.

Totally normal, healthy behavior.

Caroline doesn't look thrilled with my response, but she nods and smiles. "I get that. It's a big deal to leave so much behind. I think that's why so many people never really leave home. And if they do, they always end up getting pulled back to it. It's honestly why I'm still here."

“Did you always want to run a bed and breakfast?”

“Not exactly,” Caroline says. “I just... My mom was always so involved in town stuff. When I was a little girl, almost all my memories with her are doing stuff like this around Frosty Harbor. Decorating for the Frostival. Setting up for Valentines, Thanksgiving, Easter, Halloween. Holidays were kind of like her Superbowl, and the whole town loved her for it. When she passed a couple years ago, I guess I felt the void she left. I didn’t really have to think too hard about it. I just knew I was supposed to step in and take over. Not just for me, but for her and the town, you know?”

I wipe at my eye, sniffing as I nod.

Caroline laughs and slips on her way to come hug me. The hug nearly knocks us both down. “You are hilarious,” she says. “It’s okay, really. I’m happy to be doing this stuff. It’s not sad.”

“I cry easily,” I say.

“I’m glad Jesse found you. I know you guys can’t, like, promise it’s going to work out. And I know it’s complicated. But, even if you end up going back to New York after the holidays, you’ve been really good for him. And maybe he has been good for you, too.”

“He has,” I admit. “I was feeling lost before I came here. I mean... obviously,” I say, laughing. “I ran away from my freaking wedding on the morning of. I even sat through makeup and got my dress on before it really hit me. But being here has felt good. And little by little, I think it’s showing me that everybody in my life was trying to support me while also being worried as hell about what I was doing. None of them really seem upset that I ran off from my wedding.”

As if I’ve summoned his attention by talking about the wedding, my phone buzzes. I glance down and do a double take when I see the name on the text.

Landon?

“What is it?” Caroline asks. “You look like you just saw a ghost.”

I smile, shaking my head and shoving the phone back in my pocket. “Not exactly. I just, um—” I shake my head again and decide that moment is going right into the closet with all the other scary, confusing stuff. *Pretending I didn't see that. Definitely not reading the text.*

“Where should we put this?” I hold up a huge Santa head with a sparkly, pointy white beard.

ANDI

I've seen Jesse in casual clothes, workout clothes, and holiday sweaters. I haven't seen him in a button down shirt, tie, and suit before. I have to say I'm a fan of the look.

He's sitting across from me beneath a string of Edison bulbs in the outdoor area of the Mexican restaurant he brought me to. A heat lamp sits beside us, humming softly and putting out a nice warm envelope of comfort.

"You look nice all cleaned up," I say.

"You too."

"How was the meeting thing?" I ask. "And the team had a game, right? I thought I saw it was a win."

"The meeting was fine. Coach asked me a million questions about my rehab. I think he's hoping I'll somehow wind up recovering from an eight-month injury in three months if he asks nicely enough. It was good, though. Before you got here, I was pretty much ignoring every team activity. Getting back to things here and there has felt like the right move. It was good to be at the rink and see a game again in person. It feels like I'll actually be out on the ice again next season."

I nod, smiling when our waitress drops off a big bag of salty, oily looking tortilla chips and three different dips. Dark red salsa, chunky guacamole, and queso. I snag a chip and dip it in all three, biting and making a satisfied noise. “That’s so good.”

He smiles. “I hoped you’d like it here. You mentioned fajitas the other night, so I thought—”

“Wow,” I say, already scarfing down another chip. “You’re a good listener.”

He shrugs.

“Why do you think you were mentally pulling away from the team?” I ask.

He frowns in thought. “I think I was pulling away from everything. Like a turtle pulling into its shell, or whatever.”

“And what brought little Jesse turtle out of his shell?”

“You,” he says, locking eyes with me and making me blush.

I awkwardly bite my chip, which is loaded with salsa, queso, and guac. All of it falls right down my cleavage, along with the tip of a chip.

We both laugh and Jesse reaches over to help. His fingers are between my boobs when the waitress comes back. She pauses, looks at his hand, and then does an about-face and walks back toward the kitchen.

I’m blushing even harder now. “Thanks,” I say, laughing.

We’re both smiling until I see the man walking in the front of the restaurant and the smile completely falls from my face.

A thousand-pound-weight drops cold and heavy in my stomach.

Landon Collins, the guy I was supposed to marry, is standing right there. He’s in Frosty Harbor. *Why is he in Frosty Harbor?*

I realize he's gesturing for me to come outside and talk to him. I try to give a little shake of my head. He gestures more forcefully, and I can't say why, but I make something up for Jesse. Maybe I'm just remembering how threatened I felt when I heard he was talking to Sarah and I don't want to put him through that. Or maybe I'm just a coward. "Hey, um, I'll just be a second, okay?"

He nods. His back is to Landon, and he seems unbothered when I get up and head toward the door.

Landon steps outside and I follow him. He's standing in front of the building on the sidewalk, pacing with his hands in his pockets.

"Hey," he says. Landon is tall with dark hair and the kind of skin I've come to learn only very rich people get. It must be the solid diet of expensive food, or maybe it comes from not growing up on bags of neon orange dust compressed into turd-like shapes masquerading as food. *Don't get me wrong, either. I love those neon turds.*

He steps closer and takes my hands in his and I awkwardly pull back from him. For a few heartbeats, all I can do is look at him and take in the sight. It's surreal.

For weeks now, I've pictured him just fuming and angry with me. I've imagined how many questions he has had to field from his parents and friends. *Obvious questions*, like how the hell did he not see this coming? How could he be so stupid? All he must have gone through because of me and he's just standing there looking calm and completely normal.

"How do you look so normal?" I ask. "I ran away from our wedding and there must be like a million things you've been waiting to yell at me for. That's why you're here, isn't it?"

"Uh," he says, rubbing the back of his neck. "Did my text not come

through?”

I’m rapidly working to calm myself way down. I came out here ready for some kind of fight or flight moment (okay, let’s be honest, my track record shows I’m more of the flight type, but still). Instead, Landon just seems... *normal*. It’s like he’s here to ask if I saw that new show everybody’s talking about, as if he didn’t have to drive hours to get here.

“Oh,” I say. “The text. Well, um, I kind of didn’t read that.”

He looks confused and maybe a little hurt. “I texted you this morning and told you I was coming. I had to ask your parents where I could find you. And they had to ask some woman named Caroline.” He looks around, taking in the sight of Frosty Harbor after dark. “It’s really pretty here.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t read your text. I’ve kind of been avoiding a lot of stuff, and you are part of that stuff. I’m sorry. I know that’s not fair to you, and you were never—”

“Andi,” he says, smiling in a way that suddenly makes all the tension in my shoulders release. “Please, relax. I’ve come here to tell you I agree with your decision. Marriage wasn’t right for either of us. You did the right thing. *Even if I wish your senses had come a day earlier and saved me the embarrassment.* Because, I did have to deal with some awkward conversations after you bailed on the wedding. *A lot of them.* And I was mad for a little, but I get it. I do.”

I wince, but even as I freshly imagine him waiting for a bride who never came on his wedding day and I feel like the world’s biggest jerk all over again, I recognize what he’s saying. Even Landon agrees we weren’t supposed to get married.

“Why is nobody mad at me for this?” I ask. I realize I sound a little hysterical. “What I did was honestly terrible. Everybody should be telling me

so, because I know it's true. You should be the most mad of all of them."

His well-sculpted eyebrows twitch downward. "You... wanted people to be mad?"

"No. I just went through a great deal of stress and conflict avoidance when I imagined how it was all going to play out. I pictured being disowned by my family. I thought maybe you would hire Keanu Reeves to come sexily assassinate me or something. I thought my friends were going to tell me I was an idiot."

"You realize Keanu Reeves isn't a real assassin, right?"

I wave off his point impatiently. "Thank you," I say, smiling and feeling tears come to my eyes. "Thank you for understanding."

I reach up and hug him, feeling the relief wash out of me like it's draining from my pores.

"There's one more thing," Landon says.

"Yeah?" I step back from the hug and wipe my eyes.

"I thought about how I talked you out of applying for that job a few months back. You wanted to help with Bree's bridal planning. I told you to wait until after the wedding and see how you felt." He shakes his head, as if seeing that moment now through a different lens. "Well, I talked to my father. He has a contact with Javier Bridal. It's an international firm out of Manhattan. He said he can get you an interview if you're still interested. You'd have to suffer through some training, but—"

"Wow," I whisper. "I didn't think your dad even liked me." I also don't know if he realizes I didn't offer to help Bree because I had dreams of being a bridal planner. I just thought it would be cool to work with my friend. But still...

Landon chuckles. “He likes you. But I asked him as a favor. Anyway, you don’t need to decide right this second, but they are planning to fill the position in early January. So, if it’s something you want to do, try to let me know by Christmas. Okay?”

“Okay,” I say, head spinning. “Um, not to be rude or anything, but is there a reason you came all the way here to tell me this in person?”

He grins. “Can I be honest?”

“Okay...”

“We might not have been marriage material, but I think I know you pretty well. I kind of had a feeling you’d ignore my text. And I kind of figured you’d be freaking out and need a little help calming down. So I came here as a favor.”

“Wow,” I laugh. “Well, that was super sweet of you. Thank you, Landon. I’m sorry again. For everything.”

“Don’t be. I’ll be around town through the holidays, I think. Unless that would be too awkward.”

“No, no. It’s fine. That’s great. Um, Landon? I should let you know I’m seeing someone here in town. It started after the wedding. I didn’t even meet him until I got here, but—”

His face twists, but he quickly clears his expression. “Alright. Thanks for telling me, Andi.” He smiles politely, gives me a tilt of the chin, then walks off with his hands in his pockets.

When I sit back down, Jesse gives me a concerned look. “Everything okay? You were gone a while.”

“Um, yeah.” I force a smile. “The weirdest thing just happened...” I take a

moment and explain the ignored text and then Landon appearing and what he said, finishing with the job offer. “I didn’t want to tell you it was him in case you were going to turn barbarian and start punching or something. But he was harmless. I told him I’m seeing someone, now. So he knows.”

Jesse’s jaw is ticking, but he nods. “I wouldn’t have hurt him. But I get it.” There’s something he’s not saying. A feeling my words released in him that he doesn’t want to give words to.

“Yeah,” I say, pretending I don’t feel it, too. “It’s kind of crazy. I really never had a dream job—just this vague idea that I wanted to do some kind of work that made people happy and let me work face-to-face with other people. You know? Just not sitting at home with a computer and Zoom calls, or whatever. And he mentioned this huge job opportunity. It’s the kind of thing I should be over the moon about, right? Like how many people would say that’s their dream job?”

Jesse nods. I can’t read the look on his face, but I know what I want to see there. It’s not fair and it’s not logical, but I know what I want to see.

“I mean,” I say, rambling because I can’t stand the silence. “I guess I can’t go my whole life just working little side jobs and hoping I’ll figure out my future later. Right? Maybe I really should consider taking a real job like this. It’s just so far away...”

I want him to reach across the table, take my hand, and beg me not to do it. I want him to say I belong here in Frosty Harbor with him—that he doesn’t care if we haven’t even known each other a full month, because he knows he doesn’t want to let me go. I want him to say all that because I’m too scared to make the decision for myself. I want him to convince me I won’t be giving up on this job for a guy who still isn’t sure he wants to be with me.

I want the kind of act of commitment people make after months or years of

being together. I want all of that from a guy I've known for like twenty-five days or something? It's ridiculous, but it doesn't stop my chest from aching when I see the way his expression has gone flat.

Our server sets the food down and Jesse picks up his silverware, eating without a word.

My stomach clenches as I build myself a chicken, steak and shrimp fajita. *I couldn't make up my mind, so I went with all three meats.*

"What do you think I should do?" I ask. It's about as direct as I can bring myself to be. The question feels so obviously designed to get him to say what I want. *Do you want to beg me not to go? Or even just gently suggest I could think it over through the holidays?*

"About the job?" he asks. His casual tone slips into me like a knife, which he twists when he shrugs. "It sounds like a real opportunity for you."

"Yeah," I agree. I flash a smile that only lasts a heartbeat. "It does."

I can't handle the awkward tension between us after that, so I launch into a funny story from my childhood about when Jake accidentally hit a street hockey puck so hard it embedded itself in some guy's Mercedes. After that, we talk and finish dinner, but the silences between our conversations don't feel comfortable like they always do. They feel oppressive.

When we're back at the cabin, I set my coat down by the door and rub at my temple. It's more show than reality. "Ugh," I say. "I'm getting a pretty nasty headache."

He looks concerned. "Get comfy on the couch. I'll grab you some medicine."

As much as I want the routine where he pampers me to play out like it has a few times already, I shake my head. "It's okay. I was actually thinking about just crawling into bed. *In the guest house,*" I add, because I don't want him to

think I'm talking about going to his room together. Every time we sleep together, I get more confused and I get more attached.

After tonight, I feel like I might need to start preparing myself for the end. Because, if I don't, it's only going to hurt more when I go.

And how can I not go? He's going to think I'm some kind of psycho stalker if I turn down an opportunity like Landon is offering to stay here with him. No matter what we're feeling, it would be crazy to make a decision like that after so little time. People need time, right? It takes time to figure out if you're right for someone, especially when more than half of the short time we've had was spent aggressively pretending we were only fooling around.

My headache suddenly feels very real.

Jesse comes back with a bottle and taps two pills into his palm. I notice he not-so-subtly points the label at me so I can see what he's offering me. *Thoughtful*. I smile and take the pills, then he goes and fills up a small glass with water and brings it to me.

"Andi?" he says as I drain the water.

"Yeah?" I ask.

He opens his mouth, then closes it, swallowing and wincing like he's in pain. "I'm sorry about your head. I hope it's better in the morning."

"Oh, yeah. Thanks."

I climb into my bed alone, pull the covers up to my chin, and let out a shuddering breath. I lay there, replaying the night and wondering if there was any magical combination of words I could've uttered to keep things from going the way they went. What if I had just been more honest? What if I sat down and told him the job sounded great, but I've never been the kind of girl who dreams about a career? I could've told him my real dream has always

been finding the right person and figuring the rest out once I had that in my pocket.

But I didn't. I didn't say it because I was too scared of how he might look at me.

I squeeze my eyes shut and let sleep come, hoping everything will feel more clear in the morning.

JESSE

I've got to find a way to end things. The Frostival Finale is in two days. Christmas is in three. When we're in the cabin and around the guys, Andi and I have both formed some kind of unspoken agreement to pretend everything is normal. We smile, we laugh, and we even do the small gestures that normal couples do when they're freshly in love. A touch on the arm, a hand on the small of my back, and a lingering glance when we think nobody's looking.

In those moments, I can almost pretend it doesn't feel like a seismic crack has formed between us. I haven't slept with her since before our dinner date. We've hardly talked in private, except for the few conversations we've shared on our drives into town in the mornings to go help my sister.

Mostly, Caroline sets Andi to work and sends me off to run this errand or that.

Today, I'm waiting in a chair by the fire while Caroline explains what Andi needs to tell the fireworks guys. She's supposed to make some call and confirm details with the pyrotechnic who is driving out for the fireworks show at the finale. A staffing issue turned it into a headache and Caroline is passing the problem on to Andi.

Caroline already served up breakfast for her guests, who mostly make their

way into town by this point in the morning.

I pass the time by watching Andi when she hopefully doesn't catch me looking. Caroline wanted me to do something today, but I can't remember what it was, so I'm just hanging around until she realizes I'm idle and starts scolding me.

Andi has on a big green and white sweater with little ringing bells dangling from her ears. Her hair is loose around her shoulders, so dark it's almost black. She tucks it behind her ear as she talks on the phone, giving me a view of her perfect profile. I stare at her and think about how it felt just days ago to pull her close to me and wonder if I was really going to try to make her mine.

Now, those memories are nothing but salt in a fresh wound. When I look back on the last couple weeks, I can't put my finger on the exact moment things went wrong. I wonder if she can—if there was some deciding moment where I proved I wasn't long-term material. Or maybe it was me who decided I wasn't ready to commit and pushed her away.

Whatever the case, there's a new distance between us that wasn't there before. I still feel the same pull towards her, but for the first time, it's like we've taken large steps away from each other. One more step, and I can imagine the pull of that gravity snapping under tension, spinning us both out of orbit.

Caroline walks up to my chair and kicks my shoe, which is resting on the coffee table. "Hey," she says. "Where are your lazy teammates? They told me they were going to come help today."

I squint. "They did?"

She plants her hands on her hips. "Final set up for the Frostival Finale? Decorations all over the harbor? Putting together a stage for the DJ? Is any of this ringing a bell in that big head of yours?" She flicks my forehead for

emphasis.

I rub the spot, glaring at her. “Okay. Yeah, it sounds vaguely familiar. I don’t remember you saying you asked the guys to help.”

“Well, I did. And I told them to show up first thing in the morning. It’s...” She glances at her phone and shakes her head. “Almost ten. Don’t you guys wake up early to train? How are they this unreliable?”

“Maybe they went straight to the harbor and got started without you.”

My suggestion makes Caroline’s eyes widen in horror. “But they—they wouldn’t know where I wanted things to go. And there was a certain vision I had for...” She gives me one last horrified look, then gestures for me to follow her. “I need you to drive me to the harbor. You coming, Andi?” Caroline calls over her shoulder. “You can finish the call in the truck.”

“Um, okay.” Andi glances at me, and I don’t miss the meaning there, even if I don’t understand it.

She trails behind us, one finger in her ear while she occasionally mutters an acknowledgment into the phone. She gets in the back and we make the short drive to the harbor.

“Shit,” Caroline hisses as we pull up on the hill overlooking the ice.

Sure enough, Jake, Liam, Maddox, Carter, and Nolan are all out there decorating. Jake and Liam are literally scratching their heads in front of the partially assembled stage. Jake is holding a drill. He points without as much confidence as you’d like to see from a man holding power tools, then kneels and starts screwing two pieces of wood together.

Carter has a string of lights in his hands, which he’s holding while slowly turning in a circle, as if the correct place to put them is going to jump out and smack him in the face.

Nolan and Maddox are wrestling for some reason while their sneakers slip on the ice. Right as we're getting out of the car, Maddox whoops in victory and both men spin, smashing down on the ice with Maddox on top. Nolan yells something obscene.

Caroline sticks her fingers in her mouth and whistles loudly. "Boys!" She shouts.

The guys look up at her.

"What the hell is going on?" she asks.

Carter smiles. "We thought we'd surprise you and just get it done."

"Get it done?" she asks as we carefully pick our way down the snow-covered slope leading to the ice.

I fall behind and see Andi has ended her phone call. The guys are pleading their case as Caroline lays into them in the background.

"Hey," I say.

"Hi." Andi tucks her hair behind her ear, only holding my gaze for a split second before she stares at her feet.

"Sorry," I say, not really sure where I'm going with this. "About things," I add stupidly.

"Yeah," she agrees.

"It has been kind of crazy." I hear myself talking and I wonder if Andi realizes my words carry almost no meaning. I'm just spinning my wheels while I hope something magically gets traction—only I can't say if I'm planning to use that traction to pull apart once and for all or to say *fuck it* and try to get back to her.

“I talked to Landon last night about the job,” she says, finally raising her eyes to meet mine.

I nod and hope she can’t see the way the thought of her talking to him twists my stomach. I can feel her drifting out of my reach and I don’t know what the fuck I’m supposed to do if I want to stop it from happening. It’s maddening. It’s all happening in slow motion, but it feels like my brain isn’t working properly, either. It’s like I’m in a dream, or a nightmare. “That’s good,” I mutter.

Something passes over her face. A twitch, almost, like something jabbed her. “Yeah,” she says, looking at her feet again. “I’m thinking maybe I’ll leave the day after Christmas. His dad says he has a lot of pull with the bridal company, but it’s not unlimited. If I make them wait too long to do the interview, he can’t promise they’ll hold the job.”

“Right,” I say.

“Hey, fucker,” Carter calls. “You two going to play grab-ass all day up there, or are you going to help us?”

“Yeah,” Maddox says. “Your scary sister just yelled at us. We need Jesse down here to be the sacrificial lamb next time we screw up.”

Caroline whacks him with a strand of holly. “Try not screwing up in the first place.”

Maddox flinches away from her. “See?”

I sigh. I’m about to say something else to Andi—maybe apologize for the way I’ve been acting and admit I don’t know what I’m supposed to say about this job. If we wanted to stay together, though, there’s no real reason she couldn’t take the job and we could make things work. When the season started again, I could see her when time allowed between traveling for games. I could spend

all offseason in New York. It wouldn't be that difficult.

I could explain all of that, but I'm worried she'd feel suffocated. Maybe she'd disappear in the morning the way Sarah did because my words would smother her. *I don't know what the hell to do.*

I open my mouth, then realize Andi is already walking away down the hill.

I run my hand through my hair in frustration and follow after her.

ANDI

I t's the night before the Frostival Finale and I am fully ready to admit I'm moping. I should be excited, because I've always loved this kind of thing. Holiday events. Social gatherings. The sense of community and knowing my new friends will all be there to enjoy it with me. Even my parents are still in town and nobody is upset with me over running away from my wedding.

It should all feel perfect, but the growing void between me and Jesse is spoiling everything.

Jesse has been avoiding me ever since our dinner date, and I can't blame him. I know I've been distant. But I'm doing the right thing, aren't I? Wouldn't I be crazy to choose some guy who doesn't even want commitment over a once-in-a-lifetime job opportunity?

I hear Jesse, Carter, and Maddox's voices coming from the garage, where the occasional clank of heavy objects tells me they're working out. Liam has found some new girl he's interested in, and is once again missing more often than he's around. Nolan is on the couch, watching some kind of cooking show with his feet kicked up and a pack of ice on his shoulder. He apparently suffered a slight injury in his wrestling match with Maddox at the harbor yesterday. Mia is sitting beside him and checking on his shoulder when nobody's looking.

We've all had dinner already and I don't really know what to do with myself. I briefly consider sitting with Nolan and Mia to watch the show, but I feel off. I don't really want to wipe my gloomy mood all over everybody else. I grab a bottle of water and head for the door to the guest house. It's odd to think my temporary home away from home will just be a memory in a few days. This cabin and the guest house have already started to feel so familiar, along with the bustle of the guys constantly being up to something around the house.

"Hey," Jake says, stopping me by the back door. "Where are you headed?" He's drying his hair with a towel and wearing a white shirt with black sweats.

I consider making something up, but decide on the sad truth. "Turning in early. I don't really know what to do with myself, I guess."

Jake gives me that older brother look I've come to know so well. His eyes turn into narrowed slits and his gaze darts across my face. It takes him about two seconds before his forehead creases with concern. "What's going on? What did Jesse do?"

I laugh humorlessly through my nose. "Everything isn't somebody's fault, Jake. Sometimes... sometimes stuff just sucks. It's fine."

"If Jesse is what sucks, he's going to hear about it from me. After I'm done hitting him."

I shake my head. "Jesse didn't do anything wrong. He told me exactly what to expect when we... started this. And he has fully delivered on his promise."

"Andi," Jake says carefully. "You're speaking in female. You've got to dumb it down for me here."

I grin. "I know this isn't likely what you want to hear from your sister, but we agreed it would just be casual. You know... physical, mostly."

Jake grimaces. “Gross, Andi.”

I laugh, feeling the first tinge of lightness in a while. It doesn’t last long, though. “You asked.”

“Okay, okay. So you agreed to be, what, friends with benefits or whatever? And now you’re all bummy. So what does that mean, you decided you wanted more and he doesn’t?”

I try to think of a reason to say his explanation doesn’t really do the situation justice, but I realize that’s sort of exactly it. I drop my shoulders and lift my palms. “I guess? Except there was a little moment there where I thought we agreed it was more than that. And then things went south so fast I don’t know if I just imagined that part. And now I’m realizing I can’t just do casual with him. I need everything or nothing, and I don’t think he’s ready to give me everything.”

“I’ll kill him.” Jake takes one step toward the garage and I reach out, grabbing his arm. “Easy, Cujo. Look, the thing is Landon showed up out of nowhere the other night. He said his dad has this dream job he can help me get with this place called Javier Bridal. I looked it up and they are huge. It would be such a big opportunity.”

Jake gives me a look. “Wait. So is this what happened? You told him about the job and now you think you need to go chase after it. So he’s mad at you for leaving?”

“No,” I say. “Would you stop trying to guess and just let me finish?”

Jake folds his arms, glaring.

“I told him and he encouraged me to go after it. He said it was a great opportunity.”

Jake gestures. “And?”

“And that’s it!” I snap. “I can’t be mad because he said the only reasonable thing he could say. But the problem is I want him to be unreasonable. I want him to ask me to stay or something. I want him to tell me we made a mistake by calling this thing casual, because we both have real feelings that aren’t casual at all. I want all of it, and I know I can’t ask him because it’s insane.”

“The insane thing is you pretending you care enough about some job to leave this place and go back to New York.”

“What?”

“You’ve never been the type to dream about a career, Andi. You’re all about the moment. You’d be perfectly happy to keep doing odds and ends for Caroline around Frosty Harbor. Or babysitting. Or delivering pizzas. You have never given a shit about careers or money or all that materialistic stuff. You just scrape by enough to pay the bills and enjoy your life. I’ve always admired that about you.”

“Well,” I say, frowning as I turn his words over and ask myself if they’re true. “Even if that’s right, I can’t spend my whole life that way. I mean, at some point I’ve got to grow up and do grown up shit, right?”

“I’m a fucking NHL player, Andi. I’m never going to let you be destitute and on the street. I’ll always have your back, financially and otherwise. It’s why I never correct you when you think you’ve paid me back but still owe me shitloads of money.”

“I do?” I ask. “I’ve always tried to—”

He waves me away and grins. “I want you to be happy. To live your life. To chase after the things that excite you. It’s one of the perks of making this kind of money. I can extend my own good fortune to the people I care about. So if you don’t actually think you want to work this job, then fuck it. Stay here, even if Jesse won’t pull his head out of his ass, which he will.”

“Wait,” I say. “What do you mean, ‘which he will’?”

“I’m going to talk some sense into him.”

“No. Jake, please. You can’t tell him any of what I just said.”

“I won’t. I’m going to strategically and subtly lead him to the proper conclusion. He’ll never know you talked to me.”

I lick my lips. “I don’t know. You’ve never really been the subtle type.”

“I can be so subtle it’ll make your head spin.”

“If my head is spinning, wouldn’t that kind of imply it *wasn’t* subtle?”

“It implies—” he stops, then looks like his brain hurts, and shakes his head.

“Just trust me. I’ll set him straight. It’s what best friends do.”

I know there’s no point in arguing, so I do all I can do and sigh.

“Now go cheer Nolan up. He’s still moping because I gave him a hard time about being a dumbass and getting banged up when we’re off for the holidays. And maybe tell him we all know he’s got the hots for Mia so they can stop pretending they aren’t dating or banging or whatever it is they’re doing.”

I lean to see around the wall to where Nolan is slumped on the couch sadly eating popcorn. He *does* look pathetic, even with Mia at his side. “Okay,” I say with a half smile.

Jake gives me a little squeeze on the shoulder. “Seriously, Andi. I’ve got you. Okay? Don’t go work some bullshit job you don’t care about because you think you need the money. I’ll never forgive you if you do.” With that, he heads straight to the garage, pulling the door open so I can briefly see Jesse all sweaty in a black t-shirt and shorts. Our eyes meet for a split second before the door closes.

Heart racing, I go to plop down beside Nolan and Mia. “Will you share?” I ask, nodding toward his popcorn.

He brightens. “I tried something a little out-there. It’s like a cinnamon, caramel, and strawberry reduction. Then I thinned it out until it was kind of a glaze and tossed the popcorn.”

“It’s really good,” Mia says.

I take a bite and smile. “Wow,” I say. “Yeah, this is amazing.”

And just like that, Nolan looks perfectly happy.

If only everybody else was so easy to cheer up.

JESSE

The cold feels good against my sweaty skin as I step out of the garage into the driveway, which is patchy with ice.

I put my hands on my hips, breathing hard and watching Jake. He just interrupted my workout and said we needed to talk about something.

“I told you I was okay with you dating my little sister if you didn’t break her heart.”

I squint. “I’m pretty sure those were not your exact words. I think you said she could do worse than me. I wasn’t even sure if—”

“Shut up and let me do this, man.” Jake turns, running a hand over his buzzed hair. He takes a deep breath. “Against her better judgment, Andi likes you a lot.”

“Did she say that?”

“No. But I’m her big brother. I know this shit. And I can tell you two are in the middle of screwing things up. You’re about to let her go back home for some job she doesn’t give a shit about and she’s about to actually do it.”

“Wait,” I say. “She called it a dream job.”

“She’s confused. She thinks it’s supposed to be a dream job, but Andi has never been the type to dive into some real career. She works odd jobs to get by and enjoys life. And I want her to be able to keep doing that because it makes her happy. When she’s happy, I’m happy.” Jake gives me a solid punch in the chest, eyebrows drawn together. “You make her happy. Not some ‘dream’ job. Get it?”

“I’m not sure I do…”

“Jesus,” Jake throws his hands up. “No wonder you two can’t get this to work. She doesn’t want to leave. Get it? She wants you to want her to stay.”

“That’s not what she said.”

Jake looks like he might want to strangle me. “She’s a woman. Part of the game is reading their minds. But I’m her brother, so I’m pretty sure I know what I’m talking about here.”

“I wanted to give her the space to do what mattered to her. I didn’t want to pressure her into staying. I mean, *shit*. I haven’t even known her for a whole month. You’re telling me she actually *wants* me to talk her out of going back home where her family and friends are and getting some cool job with a bridal company? And for what? To stay here in Frosty Harbor and hang with my gimp ass until I’m back in season and traveling the country, barely ever home for her?”

“She’d follow you for games. She already knows the ropes. She grew up with me as her brother, remember? Andi is a great fan.”

I’ve been holding up a mental block for this whole conversation, but I finally let my guard slip just a touch. Is Jake actually right? “How much of this did she tell you and how much are you guessing?”

Jake grins. “I’m not here to give you the cheat codes. I’m just nudging your

dumb ass back on the path, which you have firmly and thoroughly fallen off. So think about it, realize that you are very close to watching my sister walk out of your life for good, and decide what you want to do about that.” He grips my shoulder. “And tomorrow is the Frostival finale, by the way. Her favorite holiday song is *Rockin’ Around the Christmas Tree*, she loves big romantic gestures, and her favorite slow dance song is *Better Together*, by Jack Johnson. You’re welcome.”

I stare at him as he walks back inside, as if I’m supposed to know what the hell to do with all that information.

I finish my workout in a cloud of confusion, drive into town still confused, and I wander into Caroline’s bed and breakfast. It’s almost lunch time, and she’s snacking on a sandwich at the front desk. A Swedish couple I’ve seen around since last week is sitting and talking by the fire while two little kids play with the chess set. *All I Want For Christmas is You* is playing from the crummy little stereo at her desk.

Caroline spots me, gives a sisterly frown, then jerks her head for me to come sit with her.

I pull up a chair from one of the tables and sit behind the desk with her, kicking my feet up and threading my fingers on top of my head.

“So what did you do?” she asks around a mouthful of her sandwich. “Something with Andi, right?”

“I don’t know. Jake just had a confusing ass conversation with me. Apparently, I’m an idiot and I was supposed to know to talk Andi out of going back to New York to pursue her dream job.”

Caroline nods. “Interesting.”

“That’s all you got?”

“To be honest, I would trust Jake on this one. To me, it’s a toss up. Sure, it’s romantic and all to make some big push to get the girl you’re dating to choose you over a job. But in real life? People need jobs. They need money and they need a purpose outside being in a relationship. So I’d kind of say you did the reasonable thing by not pressuring her.”

“Thank you.”

“But,” she says. “When you really care about somebody, it can be stupid to be reasonable.”

I sigh. “Care to explain?”

“Feelings aren’t reasonable. That’s kind of the whole point. It’s why you try not to make business decisions with your heart. But you make heart decisions with your heart.”

“I led with my feelings when it came to Sarah. Look where that got me.”

Caroline sets her sandwich down. “Hmm. Yeah, let’s take a look. You ended a relationship with a girl who never quite seemed right for you, spent a few months moping. Then you seemed like you were trying to learn from your failed relationship like a mature adult. Now you meet somebody new and you like her more than I’ve ever seen you like somebody. Doesn’t seem so bad to me.”

“I mean, what if leading with my feelings makes me lose Andi.”

“It sounds like leading with your brain is already losing her, isn’t it? What happens if you do the reasonable thing? She goes back to New York, right? So what do you have to lose?”

I open my mouth to argue, then hang my head and shake it. “Damn it.” I mutter.

As if on cue, Andi comes in the front of the bed and breakfast looking like she's in a rush.

"Hey, hi," she says to Caroline. Her eyes slide to me, but they don't linger. "I know this is last minute and I'm really sorry, but I'm actually going to head back to New York this evening. I'm sorry I'll miss the Frostival."

My stomach feels like it is about to drop out of my body.

"What?" Caroline asks, mirroring the exact word that's firing off in my brain.

"I'm sorry," Andi says. "I just realized I've been running from my responsibilities here. I, um, I guess I just need to go back to reality, you know? Staying for the Frostival would make it all harder, so I'm going to make sure it's all ready to go for you and then I'm going to head out. Since my car is completely toast, my parents agreed to drive me back. I'm sorry to leave you on short notice like this, Caroline. You've been amazing. I'm just going to double check the concession stand one last time because I think I may have forgotten the drink lids. And then... I think we're going to go."

Caroline looks at me, bulges her eyes like she's expecting me to say something, then gestures.

Andi doesn't notice. She grabs something from behind the desk—a set of keys I'm pretty sure goes to the concession stand down by the harbor.

"There they are," Andi says to herself. She walks out of the bed and breakfast in a rush, never once looking my way.

I watch her go like the dumbass I am.

Once the door closes, Caroline whacks me on the back of my head. "Seriously? You couldn't think of a single word to stop her?"

ANDI

Okay, it's possible I am not feeling anywhere near as brave or confident as I'm letting on. The fact that I'm curled up in the concession stand by the harbor while I cry my eyes out may be some indication of the fact. I wipe at my face, take a shuddering breath, and blow out. "It's going to be fine."

I keep repeating that to myself because I think if I say it enough, maybe I'll make it true.

"It's going to be fine."

I can still see the look on Jesse's face back in the bed and breakfast. He looked like he wanted to say something to me, but what?

I try to push that question from my mind. I need to just move on like I said. This life here in Frosty harbor has been a nice little dream, but that's all it is. This thing here is so fragile there's no way it wouldn't come apart sooner or later. Leaving before it shatters is the best way I can think of to protect myself. Jesse obviously doesn't want to ask me to stay, and I have to remind myself for the thousandth time that he shouldn't. He'd be crazy to care if I leave or go. He barely knows me.

I hear footsteps outside and pop up behind the desk of the small concession stand. I'm surprised to see Mikey standing there with Meemie and Cade at

his side. “Oh, good. I thought I might find you here. Sorry, I heard—uh,” he trails off. It’s probably very obvious I was just crying. “Are you alright, Andi?”

I smile. “Allergies.” I make a dismissive gesture with my hand. “It’s all moldy back here. Caroline asked if I could try to replace the, um, moldy board.”

“She asked you to replace a board? Jesse couldn’t do it?”

I shrug. “Busy? Anyway, what’s up?”

Mikey looks like he wants to say more, but seems to pick up that I’m being evasive on purpose and doesn’t want to pry. He rubs the back of his neck. “Look, I hate to ask. But I kind of need a favor. The kids want me to bring them to the Frostival tonight but I’m going to be slammed all night. I’ve got to get Denny’s truck running by tomorrow or he’s going to miss Christmas with his folks out of town. It could be an all-nighter. I was wondering if I could drop the rugrats with you and maybe you could pass them off to Caroline or Jesse when they get here? Sorry to ask, I know—”

Meemie mouths “please” and squeezes her small hands together like she’s praying.

“You needed a last minute babysitter and you came down to the harbor to find me? Did Caroline tell you where I was?”

Mikey hesitates. *He’s hiding something.* I can’t say what, or why, though. “We were in town and saw you headed this way. Figured you were coming to do some set up, or something.”

I nod. “Um, well, yeah. I can’t really say ‘no’ to watching the little guys.” I was hoping to leave town soon, but I’d be sad to leave without spending a little more time with these kids, anyway.

Meemee cheers. “Yay!”

Cade looks happy, but he’s too cool to do anything overt like cheering, so he just stands there, fighting his smile.

“You’re a lifesaver, Andi. Thanks.”

A few minutes later, Meemee is licking a strawberry flavored icee I whipped her up from the concession stand and Cade is showing me the progress he’s made on his hockey moves. He’s skating around with his stick and puck, showing off his puck-handling skills.

“Wow,” I say, clapping. “That is amazing, Cade. Have you shown Jesse yet? He’d be really impressed.” As soon as I say the words, I feel the now-familiar pang of pain his name brings.

Jesse is the elephant in the room. I have to try my hardest not to really think about what I’m doing if I’m going to go through with it. I know I want to leave Frosty Harbor if Jesse doesn’t want what I want. I know it, because the alternative is too sad and pathetic.

I’ve imagined myself lingering here through the holidays. I would continue working for Caroline until I could afford my own place. I’d move out to some small, broken down but charming place outside town. Little by little, I’d carve my place into Frosty Harbor as a local. And little by little, Jesse would get bored. He’d eventually tell me it’s time for the part we agreed on before this ever started. Things had gone on too long and we need to split.

And then what?

I’d be the local who wasn’t really a local. The girl who lived outside town with no family, no steady job, no purpose. I’d live on the outskirts of town and Jesse’s life, like some poor homeless kid on Christmas looking in through a frosted window at the life I wished I had—the one I got to taste for a

few heartbeats.

Nope. Way too pathetic.

So I'm leaving. It's the reasonable thing to do. In order to be reasonable, I've just got to make it a little longer without thinking too hard about Jesse. I know it was cruel of me to say all that to Caroline without looking Jesse in the eyes back at the bed and breakfast, but I was afraid I'd break down and lose my nerve if I did. I can call him once I'm safely outside of town and try to properly explain everything.

Once I'm done running away again.

The thought rings in my brain with a sour, depressing note. When did I become the girl who runs away from everything?

"I'm gonna skate with Ellis," Meemee says. Her mouth and tongue are stained red from the ice. "Daddy says I have to use the twelve inch rule if we dance." She smiles mischievously. "I don't know how big twelve inches is."

I laugh. "Easy, tiger. You have your whole life to chase boys. I'm sure this Ellis guy is great, but—"

"Yup," Meemee says. "He's the fastest kid on the playground. He chases me every day. He says he loves me. He can burp half the alphabet and he can do an arm fart in his knee pit."

"Wouldn't that be a knee fart?" I ask.

"Nope," Meemee says matter-of-factly.

I shrug and bite back a smile. "He sounds absolutely amazing."

She nods like I just said "water is wet".

“Well, this is twelve inches,” I say, holding my hands roughly a foot apart. “You should stick to your dad’s rule or this Ellis guy is going to get the wrong idea.”

“Ellis always has the wrong idea. Miss Janice asked us what our good news was for the day and he said he had no clean underwear so his mommy told him to figure it out.” She laughs adorably, crinkling her nose. “That’s not good news. That’s just dirty pants!”

I grin. “No. It’s definitely not good news.”

“Do you like Mr. Jesse? Daddy says he makes googly eyes at you. Googly eyes are where your eyes roll all around your head like this.” She lets her mouth go slack and wobbles her head around, eyes crossing, uncrossing, and rolling back.

“Oh, yeah. That’s exactly how I look at him.”

She wiggles her eyebrows. “Knew it. You gonna marry him?”

“I don’t think so. Grown ups are complicated. Sometimes it takes more than just liking someone.”

“Like what?”

“Well, people have responsibilities. Duty.”

“Duty?” she giggles. “Daddy says if Mr. Johnson doesn’t stop lettin’ Duke do his duty all over our side yard, he’s fixin’ to start a ruckus.”

“Duke is a dog, right?”

“Yup.”

I grin. “That’s not the kind of duty I was talking about.”

Meemee shrugs, her little mind already moved on from the topic.

I glance around, wondering where the heck everybody is. I'm waiting for Caroline or Jesse to show so I can hand the kids off and leave before I lose my nerve.

I sigh and go to pour myself an icee. If I'm going to be here a while longer, I might as well enjoy my last hoorah in Frosty Harbor. An icee with a view and some pint-sized company doesn't sound so bad.

JESSE

As far as last-minute, half-baked plans go, I rate mine a solid seven out of ten.

Mikey shoots me a text a few minutes after we talk and lets me know the diversion tactic has been initiated. Unfortunately, those are his exact words. For a rural mechanic type, the guy has weird taste in movies and occasionally gets dorky on me.

I text him back a quick thanks, then knock on the door to Andi's parents' room.

Her dad answers. His eyes narrow when he sees it's me at the door. "Jesse?"

"Yeah, mind if I come in for a minute?"

Jesse's mom is deeper in the room with her suitcase laid out on the bed. It looks like she's almost done packing.

"I was hoping to ask you two for a favor."

Her dad tilts his head, letting me know I can come in.

"What kind of favor?" he asks.

Andi's mom has stopped what she's doing with a blouse in her hands, mid-

fold. "Is Andi okay?"

"Everything is fine," I say. "I was just hoping I could beg you two not to drive Andi back to New York tonight. Make some kind of excuse. Tell her you're having car trouble. Whatever it is, just get her to stay through tonight."

"Why would we do that?" her dad asks.

Andi's mom slaps him with the blouse. "Don't you see it? He's in love with her."

I grin. "Let's not go crazy, now. I just—"

"Huh?" her dad says.

"He wants her here for the Frostival. She wants to leave because she's trying not to get too sucked into this adorable little town and the life she can see for herself here. She knows it's going to hurt too much to lose if she goes any deeper. That's why she asked us to drive her back home tonight."

"I thought she wanted that job," her dad says.

Andi's mom gives me a *sorry, he's hopeless* kind of look. "I'll agree to this," she says, "But you have to spill the beans. Tell me everything. I want to know the whole plan."

"Right now, I'm mostly just trying to make sure she's in town tonight. If she's leaving, I'm still going to tell her how I feel. But I figure it would mean more if I could make the message a little more memorable. Something tells me Andi would appreciate that."

Her mom's eyes light up. She gives her husband a squeeze, even though he looks completely lost by what's going on. "See how well he knows her?"

"Are we leaving tonight or not?" Andi's dad asks. "I am so damn confused."

“Not leaving,” she says, whacking him on the head.

“Okay. This is the plan. *So far...*” I say.

ANDI

I check the time again. I've watched Cade perform every hockey move he has in his arsenal about ten times, listened to Meemee describe every single classmate and every single boy in her school who likes her—apparently, they all do. My brain hurts from the three icees I've downed and my hands are cold.

All this, and I'm still waiting at the harbor with no sign of Jesse or Caroline to relieve me of my babysitting duties. It's not just odd. It's suspicious.

I look around the harbor and see the growing number of people gathering. Families are making their way down the snowbank from the street and parking lot. People are bringing their skates and the teenager manning the skate rental building has shown up with her friends.

The pyrotechnics guy is already out on the ice making last minute preparation for the show tonight and the townspeople Caroline enlisted to help are all here. It's drawing closer and closer to night time and I can't imagine why Caroline wouldn't be here yet.

I sigh with annoyance and finally pull out my phone to call Caroline.

Thankfully, she picks up. "Hey, um," she says, sounding a little odd. "Are you on the road with your parents already?"

“No... that’s the thing. I kind of agreed to watch Mikey’s kids for a little because I thought you or Jesse would be here soon to take over. But it has been hours. I was wondering if everything is okay. I thought you would’ve come down to the harbor by now.”

“Oh, yeah. Everything’s fine. I had to run some last minute errands with Jesse. He’s going to be a little late, but I should be there in like thirty minutes. Can you make sure all the lights are on? Just turn them on manually and bypass the timers. I don’t want to risk them not turning on when they’re supposed to.”

“Yeah,” I say. “Sure.” My stomach is sinking, though, because it’s getting close enough to the Frostival finale that it’s going to be hard to imagine simply walking away instead of staying another hour or two to see it all play out. I’m also wondering why Caroline seems so unapologetic about leaving me to handle everything on my own.

“You’ll have to wait for Jesse to take over the babysitting though,” Caroline says. “I’m not sure when he’ll be there, exactly. Sorry. I promised Mia I would walk her through the whole DJ setup. Our normal guy couldn’t come and she’s nervous as hell about running the booth for the event.”

I look down at Meemie, who looks back up with a blue-stained smile—she moved on from her strawberry icee to raspberry and now blueberry.

“Okay,” I sigh.

Eventually, Jesse should show up. I can still leave like I planned, it’s just going to be even harder to walk away from this amazing night now that I can see it all coming together before my eyes. Of course, seeing Jesse again is going to be the real test. Can I really walk away from him twice? I barely made it out of the bed and breakfast earlier, and I only pulled that off by aggressively pretending I couldn’t see him.

I gesture for Meemie to follow me to where the switches are for the lights. They're strung all over the ice from the poles we had set up with Adam's help and along the bank leading down to the harbor. The rental shop, concession stand, and makeshift DJ stage are also lit and decorated as much as we could. There's a twelve foot Christmas tree with presents for all the kids in town beneath it, all donated by Jake and the guys, a photo op set up where kids can get a picture with Santa, a table showing off the houses that won the gingerbread contest, and a few fold-out tables we covered with red and green construction paper holding finger foods, drinks, and party bags for kids.

In an hour or so, some of the guys are going to bring out grills and make hamburgers, hotdogs, and barbecue, too.

I call my parents while I manually flick on all the lights, feeling a pang of sadness when I see how beautiful they all are. I imagine the whole town under these lights tonight as people skate on the ice and eventually dance and watch the fireworks show. I don't know how a dance on skates works, but it's apparently something they've done here for years, so it must be possible.

"Hey," my dad says into the phone. "We're fine. Everything is okay."

I frown. "Okay? I was just calling to say I might need you guys to wait a little longer to drive me back. I got kind of hung up with something here and I'm not sure when I will be able to leave."

"That's great," Dad says. He makes a noise like someone just hit him. I hear him talking quietly off the phone and then my mom's voice and maybe a man's voice. "I mean, sorry, Kiddo. Just keep us posted. We, ah, had some car trouble. I'm trying to take a look at it now. Not sure if I'll have it ready to go tonight."

"You don't know anything about cars," I say slowly. "What good is looking

at it going to do you?”

There’s a long pause. “I think it’s the hydraulic fluid.”

I grin. “Hydraulic fluid? Is that even a thing in cars?”

“I’ve, ah, got Mickie here. *Mickey?*” *he asks someone.* “Mikey, sorry. Mikey the mechanic.”

“Mikey told me he was going to be stuck at the shop all night to get a truck ready by tomorrow. What’s he doing there?”

Another long pause. “Look, Andi. I didn’t know how to say this but your mom is, well, she’s feeling really feisty tonight. I’m going to have to do some things that I’d rather not talk to my daughter about. Sorry for lying about the car.”

I stare into the distance, not sure I’ll ever be able to see the world the same again after hearing that. “Um,” is all I can think to say.

“Well, I’d better get to it. *Her.* Get to her.”

Dad hangs up the phone.

I stare at my phone and think if I had a time machine right now, all I’d want to do is go back ten seconds and hang up on that call before I heard what I just heard.

I shudder. *What the hell is going on tonight?*

I’ve always been the type to believe things happen for a reason, and if I didn’t know better, I’d say the universe was trying to tell me to stay for the Frostival Finale. First Mikey needs an emergency babysitter, then Caroline can’t show up, and now my parents are doing whatever it is they’re doing?

Alright, then. One way or another, it looks like I’m at least going to see the

finale through. After that, I can decide if I have enough resolve to follow through with my plan to head to New York and take Landon's dad up on that job.

ANDI

I'm bundled in my jacket, scarf, and mittens while I watch close to a hundred residents of Frosty Harbor and a few tourists taking to the ice skating area. Another hundred or so are mulling around the periphery, all on skates. Men are grilling in skates. Mia is behind the DJ booth in skates. All of it is taking place beneath the most magical arrangement of Christmas lights and decorations I've ever seen.

All of this, and my stupid mind is tangled up inside like it's caught in a web of brambles.

I feel myself fighting against something. I feel the borderline panic inside as I try everything I can to run before any of this can catch up with me. The harder I try to fight, the more it seems like I'm pulled right back to where I started, though.

Meemee is skating with Cade now and giving my ear a temporary break from her near-constant chatter.

I'm watching with a smile when Caroline finally arrives. She sees me, veers off in another direction with a strange smile, and disappears into the concession stand.

I shake my head. Something is really off with her today. Honestly, it feels

like everybody is off today. Mikey was acting weird. My dad was absolutely acting weird. Caroline mysteriously has been everywhere *except* here, even though she has spent the last few weeks talking about the Frostival Finale every chance she gets. Even Jake and the guys from the team are mostly ignoring me, except for a brief greeting before they went off to goof around on the ice and skate with the locals.

Caroline also made it sound like Jesse *was* planning to come, but I still haven't seen any sign of him.

I notice Liam out there with his latest love interest. She's a little older than him by my guess with pretty, wavy brown hair and a big smile. They're holding hands and laughing as they skate—him going backwards and her following after him.

Part of me wants to go out there and skate with them, but the honest truth is it wouldn't feel right without Jesse. I don't *want* it to feel right, I guess. So I'm a little glad he isn't here, even if I'm dying of curiosity to know where he is. The most likely answer is he's avoiding me. Caroline probably told him I was stuck here and he'd already made plans to be as far away from me and the Frostival Finale as he could.

I hate the idea of him missing this just because he's worried about being near me, though, which brings on a fresh rush of guilt.

I watch Carter and Maddox make the rounds on the ice. The crowd has grown and the skating area, which seemed too big when it was empty, now almost seems small. The two guys are apparently scouting out options for the couples skate, because they keep stopping to talk to every pretty girl they come across. Eventually, one of them skates off with Maddox, leaving Carter to go it on his own.

Jake is hanging out with Nolan. Neither guy seems like they're particularly

worried about hooking up tonight. They're just hanging out and enjoying the moment. It's typical of Jake, at least. I know he has always tried to cut ties with any girl he's with during the hockey season. In a few days, all the guys but Jesse will be back in the full flow of the season, and Jake won't want any distractions. Maybe Nolan shares his view.

Mia, who is manning the DJ booth, stops the music. That's when I realize Jesse has arrived and he's standing up on the stage we built on the ice with her. He's holding a microphone she just handed him and shielding his eyes against the bright lights cutting through the night. The sound of skates scraping on ice and coming to a stop is loud now that the music has been turned off. The general murmur of voices dies out and gets quiet.

Jesse taps the mic twice and it's loud, reverberating through the chilly night. "Hi," he says.

Uh. The single word, or maybe it's just a sound, is the only thought I seem to be able to manage. Deep in my brain, I think part of me is already starting to piece together why he would be up there and how it connects to everybody acting so weird. But all I know right now is my heart is pounding and I'm straining my ears, waiting to hear what he says next.

"I'm Jesse Prince. Most of you know me, some of you don't. Sorry to interrupt your night, but I need to send a really special message to someone. I'm just, uh, not sure she's here. Can anyone help me find Andi Summers?"

My stomach clenches in fear. Caroline is suddenly behind me. She lifts my arm high and shouts. "Got her right here!"

Most of the town is in front of me on the ice, so they all turn toward me, the sudden attention making my cheeks burn. There's a confused round of clapping, laughs, and murmurs.

Jesse turns to face me and I feel myself freeze in a way that has nothing to do

with the cold. *What the hell is he doing?* If he's about to engage in the world's most public, embarrassing break up, I'm going to kill him. Then I'm going to cut a hole in the ice, step into the water, and drift away into oblivion.

"Andi, I know this is crazy. I'm not sure it was even a month ago when we met. I know it's supposed to take longer than that to develop feelings or decide how you feel about someone. But I'm done caring about that. I know how I feel. I thought I was being smart by keeping all that bottled up. It's easier to lie to yourself and say it doesn't hurt if nobody knows the truth but you, or something like that. So, I guess this is me making sure everybody knows the truth. This is me making sure it will hurt if you go, because it should."

He takes a step closer to the edge of the stage, raising his muscular arm again to shield his eyes so he can try to see me better. "Andi Summers, I care about you so much I've been questioning my sanity. I want to be with you. I want to follow you to New York if you go after that job and I want to make you part of my life here if you don't. I just want to be with you, no matter how it happens."

He pauses and the echo of his voice through the microphone seems to go on for several seconds. Nobody makes a sound, then Carter lets loose a loud "Whoo!"

"Go kiss her!" Carter yells.

There's scattered laughter and it feels like a thousand faces turned toward me.

I'm not sure I've breathed for a full minute. When I finally do, it comes in a shaky gasp. Did I really just hear all that? Or did I try to skate, hit my head on the ice, and now I'm hallucinating?

Caroline leans close to me, whispering over the growing noise. "What are you gonna do, Andi?"

My body moves. I'm not wearing skates, so I'm awkwardly slipping my way in tennis shoes onto the ice, excusing myself as I bump into people and push past them on my way toward the stage.

Jesse drops the microphone and gets down on the ice. He only has time to take one step on his skates before I crash into him, arms tight around his body. There's a rush of clapping and excited conversation as soon as we meet in our hug.

"You really mean all that?" I ask. For some reason, I'm crying.

"All of it."

"All right, all right," Caroline says. She has recovered the microphone. "For all you tourists out there, sorry for the sideshow. Mia, hit the song!"

Maggie flashes a thumbs up and "*Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree*" starts to play.

I laugh. "Oh my God. I love this song."

Caroline is still holding the microphone. She points behind the stage to where I know the pyrotechnics are set up. I also know they aren't supposed to go off until the end of the night, but I have a hunch that plan has changed.

"Who's ready for some fireworks?" she shouts. "We were going to save them for later tonight, but fireworks are fireworks, right? Who cares if they are early!"

There's a loud cheer and kids are hopping up and down on their skates all around us. A few of them wipe out, nearly taking parents with them as they crash to their butts, laughing.

"Hit it!" Caroline calls into the mic. She sets it back on the stand and Mia cranks up the song louder.

Jesse has me by the hand with his other hand on my waist. His eyes are all for me, even when the boom of the first firework goes off and whistles upwards. I look back at him, waiting for the pop of its detonation.

I hear the sound and see the red sparks reflecting in his eyes. Everyone around us “oohs” and “aahs”.

Even though I know he must have had to beg Caroline to move up the firework show for me, I can’t seem to take my eyes off him.

“Aren’t you going to watch?” he asks as we sway, hardly even matching the upbeat rhythm of the song. It’s like we’re dancing to a song only we can hear, perfectly in tune. I’m mostly just letting his momentum pull me from side to side on the flat bottoms of my sneakers, and it feels like I’m floating.

“Did you really do all this for me?” I ask.

“Maybe it was for both of us.” His perfect eyebrows draw together. “I’ve been afraid to admit to myself that I want this. Afraid admitting it would mean scaring you off the way I scared off Sarah. But then I realized holding all that in was going to mean losing you, too.”

“Somebody hurt you,” I say. “You were afraid it was going to happen again.”

He chuckles. “Yeah. But some people are worth the risk.”

I bite my lip. “You put your trust in me up there. Saying all of that in front of everyone... it made you vulnerable, and I want you to know you never have to be afraid to be vulnerable with me. You gave me a little piece of your heart, and I’m going to cherish it. Okay?”

“If you think that was only a little piece, I think I may have to go ask Caroline for that mic back. I was trying to give you the whole damn thing, Andi.”

I smile, laughing. “Really?”

He looks suddenly serious. “Really. I mean what I said. I don’t care if it’s crazy or too fast or if none of it makes sense. I’m tired of pretending the way I feel should follow any kind of rules. It is what it is, and I know how I feel. That’s why I’ll do whatever it takes to make this work. Following you to New York, traveling as much as I can to see you during the season. *Anything.*”

I grip the front of his sweater in my hand, squeezing until I feel the hard warmth of his body beneath. “You want to hear something really crazy?”

“Yeah.”

“I just want to be where you are—with you. That’s my dream right now. That’s the thing I care about. These past few weeks have been some of the most incredible weeks of my entire life, and I don’t want it to end. I don’t want *us* to end.”

“Then we won’t,” he says with a certainty and finality that makes me feel gooey and warm inside.

“Promise?” I ask.

“I promise to care about you way more than sanity should allow—to keep falling for you faster than should be humanly possible, and to enjoy the shit out of pampering you next time you roll your ankle, get a headache, have a bad period, or wake up too cold in the morning.”

I rest my cheek on his chest, smiling. “That sounds amazing.”

The song ends and the next track is *All I Want For Christmas is You*.

We just shift around a little while longer—him doing the work on his skates and me letting my sneakers glide as I drift across the ice, following the

rhythm of his movement. I'm enjoying the sensation of his body against mine and knowing the invisible detonation timer I've felt hanging over our heads for weeks now just stopped counting down to doomsday.

"Andi?" he says.

"Yeah?"

"You really don't want to go to New York for that job? You can tell me if you do. I'll find a way to make it work."

"I really don't. Some people would call it a dream job, but the only dream I care about right now is the one I've been living in the last few weeks, and if this is dreaming, I don't want to wake up."

We kiss and the fireworks continue to splash and pop overhead, bathing the night in bright colors. The music keeps playing and this place that might be my new home feels alive all around me. I slip my arms around Jesse, pulling my body into his warmth and closing my eyes. I'm smiling, because I don't know what is ahead of us. All I know is we're both taking the plunge together.

Being with Jesse feels like the start of a new chapter to the adventure. A new, exciting chapter that I desperately hope will end with a happily ever after.

He looks down at me and I can tell he wants to say something.

"What is it?" I ask.

He hesitates, then shakes his head. "It's crazy. I'm not going to say it or I'll scare you off."

"You couldn't scare me off, Jesse Prince. Say it."

The grand finale of the fireworks show is in full swing. Booms sound from farther off in the harbor and the crack and sparkle of pyrotechnics is almost

constant. Multi-colored lights flicker across his perfect face as he stares back at me.

“I love you.” He says the words, then lowers his eyes and shakes his head, as if he’s expecting me to laugh at him.

I grip his sweater with both hands, waiting for him to meet my eyes. When he does, I’m smiling. “Say it again,” I demand.

His smile comes slowly. “I love you?”

I kiss him so fiercely it hurts, but I don’t care.

“There’s something I need to do,” he says, face flushed red after our kiss.

“What?” I ask.

“Wait here.”

He goes up to the stage, thumps over to the mic in his bulky skates, and grabs the microphone again. “Andi Summers is my girlfriend and I love her. That’s all.” He gives me a look that’s almost giddy, drops the microphone, and climbs down as there’s confused clapping and a few whoops from his teammates, who are scattered around the harbor.

I watch him skate back toward me. If I didn’t already know I love him, too, I’d know it in my bones now. That smile of his and the way he runs his hand through his hair as he reaches me, grinning like a kid who just pulled the fire alarm at school in all his charming glory. “Sorry,” he said. “I wanted you to know I’m not holding back with you. I’m all in, Andi.”

“Good,” I say. “Because I don’t care if it’s crazy, either. I love you too. And tonight has been perfect. I wouldn’t trade this for anything.”

“It’s one of many to come,” he says, pulling me close and kissing me again.

EPILOGUE - JESSE



I t's Christmas morning and I've got Andi Summers lying in bed beside me. Fuck whatever's under the tree. This is all I need.

I smile sleepily as I lift a lock of her dark hair and watch it practically sparkle in the morning light streaming through my window. She groans, squeezing her eyes until her nose wrinkles, and then yawns.

"Hey," she croaks. As soon as she spots me, she scoots closer and curls into me.

I put my arms around her, pulling her even closer. "Merry Christmas," I say.

"Oh!" She pops upright, almost headbutting me in the chin. She looks down, realizes she's not wearing a top, then covers her breasts and laughs. "What did you do to me?"

I chuckle. "Come on. Let's get dressed. Carter is always the first one awake on Christmas. If we don't get out there, he'll probably open all his presents without us."

Andi, clad in nothing but a pair of panties, scrambles out of bed and starts

gathering her clothes from my floor and tossing them on as she finds them. I get dressed, brush my teeth, and head out to the living room with her.

Nolan is up and making coffee. The whole cabin smells like syrup, biscuits, and cinnamon.

Carter is sitting very close to the tree looking suspicious.

“Morning, *Captain*,” Carter says, giving me a cheesy salute.

“*Joker*,” I say, grinning. “You aren’t trying to peek at your presents, are you?”

“I just shook ‘em a bit.”

“Bad luck,” Maddox says. He’s shuffling into the living room, clad in PJs with his hair a mess. “Every time you peek at a present, a cute kid dies somewhere.”

“Dude,” Carter says, shaking his head. “You just made that one up.”

Maddox shrugs. “Did I, though? You won’t ever know for sure. You’ll just be blasting kids all over the globe because you’re too impatient to wait and see what you got. Is it worth it?”

I laugh, because Carter looks seriously concerned.

“Biscuits?” Nolan asks.

“Me!” Andi says, rushing toward the kitchen. “Where’s Mia, by the way?” she asks around a mouthful of hot biscuit.

“She... couldn’t come,” Nolan says.

Evasive. Something’s going on there. The two of them haven’t admitted they’re into each other, but it has been pretty obvious for weeks now. If she’s not here for Christmas, he must’ve screwed something up.

Jake slaps me on the back and gives a squeeze. “Morning, asshole.”

“Morning,” I say. “Merry Christmas.”

He points at me, still gripping my uninjured shoulder. “You did a good job last night, by the way. That was... yeah. Andi deserved something like that. I’m glad you gave it to her.”

I nod. “She did deserve it.”

“And you were a dick for not realizing it sooner.” He reaches up to mess up my hair and then turns to grab two biscuits. He shoves one in his mouth, chewing and then flicking Andi on the head. “Morning, Goober.”

“Merry Christmas!” she says, hugging him.

Maddox turns some cheesy Christmas music on his phone and yanks Carter to his feet, forcing him into a kind of weird waltz. Nolan is humming as he pulls out some cookies from the oven, and Jake is talking with Andi about their plans for later to meet up with their parents at Caroline’s bed and breakfast.

The big windows of my cabin have piles of snow gathering at the ledges and the trees outside are all frosted white.

I don’t know if anything is truly perfect, but I’m not sure I could think of a better morning or a better moment. I’ve had thousands of fans screaming my name—people telling me how good I am at the thing I’ve spent my life perfecting. I’ve had highs and lows. But this? I’m not sure how I’ll ever top it.

Once everyone has taken their coffee and Liam has finally emerged fully showered, groomed, and dressed for the day, we go around opening presents. I already know what Andi got everyone since she was using my card to buy the gifts when we went Secret Santa shopping.

She has labeled everybody's gift with the silly nicknames she gave us that first day. Carter gets a scooter—like the kind kids ride around. For some reason, he seems absolutely thrilled with the gift and gives Andi a huge hug in thanks.

For Maddox, she got a fancy set of tarot cards, which he loves. He promises to do a “reading” for her later. If Andi is pretending to be excited about that, she's a great actress.

She got Liam a nice jacket that he puts on over his sweater and admittedly looks pretty damn good in. Then again, the man is like a fucking male model, so she probably could've bought him a paper bag and he'd make it look good.

Nolan gets a pair of oven mitts that look just like goalie gloves. He puts them on immediately and doesn't take them off.

Jake gets a giant lump of real coal, which is exactly what he got for Andi. Apparently, it's a long-standing Summers tradition to get each other coal. Weird, if you ask me, but they both seem to get a huge kick out of it.

I'm surprised when she pulls out a big box for me last and lifts it up. “This one is for the Captain.”

“When did you get this?” I ask. “I was with you when you bought gifts.”

“Jake snuck me out. I owe him money for this one.” She winks at her brother, who smiles back. “I hope this isn't too, um...” Andi looks down and suddenly appears adorably nervous. “I don't know if this is too cheesy or sappy and if you don't like it, it's—”

“Andi,” I say calmly. “It's from you. That's all I care about.”

She licks her lips, nods, and then waits with her hands clasped. She's on her knees in front of me like she can't stand to be any further away while I open the present.

I pull back the paper and see it's an ornament in gold plated metal. It's a circular shape with an embossed image in the center. There's a man on a stage with a microphone and a girl on the ice in sneakers. Fireworks are going off in the background and a crowd of less detailed people are all surrounding them." I smile and feel an unexpected tug of emotion.

"This happened last night. How did you—"

"Mikey knows a guy with one of those CNC machines. And the CNC guy knows an artist. Jake made him a very generous offer to work all night on the image and the CNC guy owed Mikey a favor. And the gold plating lady owed the CNC guy a favor. So really, it was easy. Jake went out and picked it up this morning so you wouldn't suspect anything."

I laugh. "Wow. This is..." I hug her tight, pulling her up from her knees to my chest. "It's incredible. This will be front and center on my tree for the rest of my life."

Andi sniffs and I pull back to see she's crying.

I laugh again, wiping at her eyes. "Why the hell are you crying?"

"I'm just so happy," she blubbers.

"Jeez," Maddox says. "You guys are just sickening, aren't you?"

"Fuckin' disgusting," Liam agrees.

"Would it be rude if I take this bad boy for a ride while they're having a moment?" Carter asks. I can see he has finished getting the scooter out of the box and assembled. He tries to do a little jump kick in the middle of the living room and busts his ass. Maddox howls with laughter and Liam helps him up.

I kiss the top of Andi's head. "Thank you. This is perfect. And now I feel like

my gift doesn't live up to it."

"Then maybe I shouldn't tell you I got all of you one more gift."

"Damn it," I say, laughing. "I'm definitely going to have to make it up to you."

"I told you," Jake says. "Andi always outdoes everyone with gifts."

"Well," I say, going to the tree and plucking an envelope with Andi's name from the branches. "This is what I got you."

She looks at it and shakes it. "Did you get me cash, Jesse? I always love cash."

I laugh. "No. Sorry. Next year, I'll make sure to give you cash, though."

"Next year, huh?" Jake asks. "Already making long term plans for yourselves?"

Andi bites her lip, eyes big as she looks at me.

I shrug. "I'd be crazy not to."

She pulls open the envelope and lifts up two plane tickets. "Plane tickets?" she asks.

"I thought we could go to New York for a little while. You could introduce me to your friends there, tie up loose ends, and show me around. If you want, that is."

She's crying again as she rushes in and hugs me. "This is so thoughtful, Jesse. Thank you."

Carter is back up on his scooter trying to do tricks. For some reason, he's making futuristic sound effects every time he does a lame little hop. He nearly knocks over the tree, but Nolan manages to play goalie and catch it

before it tips.

“Okay, okay,” Andi says, wiping at her eyes. “You all wait here. Nobody move.”

She runs out to the guest cabin and comes back with six thin, flexible presents wrapped in gold paper. She goes around, handing one to each of us with a huge, shit-eating grin on her face. “I didn’t really know about sizes, so hopefully this works.”

Carter already has his opened. He’s holding up a glittery gold thong in front of his face with a gigantic smile. “Fuck, yes! Lucky gold thongs!”

Maddox lifts an identical thong, grinning. “This is awesome, Andi. Mine was running low on juice.”

Liam sets his down on the armrest of his chair and gives Maddox a disgusted look. “Maybe not the best word choice, Maddox. Mojo? Luck? There are dozens of words and you went with thong juice?”

“Fair,” Maddox admits, nodding his head.

I tilt my head at Andi. “How did you know about the lucky gold thong? Actually, don’t answer that.” I laugh. “And none of you are going to model these for her.”

I press my palm to my face when I see Carter has already slid his up over his sweatpants. He’s aiming his ass at Maddox and asking him how it fits.

We all burst out in laughter.

EPILOGUE - ANDI



I hold Jesse's hand for the entire flight back to New York. I wondered if it would feel like going home, but so far, it doesn't. In two months, Frosty Harbor has started to feel like more of a home to me than Manhattan ever did. I'm excited to go back and see old friends and old places, but I'm just as excited to get back to my new life in Frosty Harbor when we're done here.

"I keep worrying I'm going to wake up," I say to him suddenly. I'm leaning my head on his shoulder and watching the clouds pass by out our window. He got us tickets for First Class, which is new for me.

"You can sleep. I'll wake you if anything important happens."

I smile. "Not like that. I mean, like, this all just feels like the most perfect dream. It's like those mornings when you wake up in the middle of a dream and you squeeze your eyes shut, just praying you wind up back in the same story. This feels like that, and I keep worrying it's not real."

"I know what you mean," he says. He's so unbelievably gorgeous. The sunlight is casting a glowing outline around his profile and his full lips. He has a few day's scruff on his jaw, just the way I like. He's got on a turtleneck

I bought for him, with his money, and jeans that hug his muscular legs. “But if I wake up and find out this was all a dream, I’m just going to go and find you again.”

I laugh. “What do you mean?”

“If I’m only with you in a dream, then I’ll wake up and find you again. Over and over. As many times as I have to.”

I wrap my hands around his arm and hug him, smiling into his shirt. “Then it’s a deal. If this isn’t real, we’ll just keep finding each other again.”

He lifts my hand and kisses the back of it. “That’s right. Because you’re mine. In your dreams. In my dreams. In reality. It doesn’t matter where.”

“Jesse?” I say after a minute or two of silence.

“Yeah?”

“Can I travel with you and the team when your shoulder is better next season? I thought about it a lot. I want to be there with you for all of it. Every game. All the boring hotels. But I don’t want you to feel smothered, so if it’s too much—”

“I’d fucking love that,” he says, lifting his hand to my cheek. “You couldn’t smother me if you tried.”

“No?” I ask, forcing a psychotic little glint to go in my eyes. I lift the tiny pillow the flight attendant gave me earlier and raise it toward his mouth. “What about in your sleep?”

He laughs and swats the pillow out of my hand and kisses me softly on the lips. “I want you with me as much as I can get. If you want to come to my games, I’d love that. You can stay at the team hotel with me and travel with me any time you want. As much as you want.”

I hug him again and close my eyes. Happiness pulses through every fiber of my body and makes me feel suddenly and overwhelmingly sleepy. I just want to curl up in this moment and never let it go.

And if it turns out this is all just the world's most perfect dream, I'm going to hold Jesse to his promise. I'm going to track his ass down, make him love me again, and do this all over.

For ever and ever.

THE END.



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