



Chance Encounter

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Category: Romance, M-m Romance, New Adult

Description: Ever since kindergarten, I've hated Chance. Everything about him rubbed me the wrong way and still does.

In high school, he was always trying to one-up me either in class or out on the ice. Much to his disappointment, I was always the winner. The competition between us was fierce, and even though we'd been out of school for over a decade, Chance Reed was still always trying to one-up me. Today he finally got his wish. The man I hate with a passion saved me, and now I owe him and he'll never let me forget it. What was once hatred has turned into an attraction I'm not sure I can deny, not now that he's got me right where he's always wanted me. Do I give into what my body wants, or do I fight him like I've been doing from the moment we met?

Polar Bear, Alaska's days are short and chilly. And the nights, well, they're long and frigid. The small, isolated town known for its yearly icy swim is overflowing with hunky, lonely men. These Mountain Men are waiting for their special soulmate to come along and heat things up.

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PROLOGUE

MADDOX

Junior Year High School

I'm high on life, and I can still hear the crowd cheering from the stands as I head inside the locker room. We are the two thousand and nine Division II, ASAA First National Cup Hockey State Championship winners.

My teammates yell and jump up, hitting the top of the door frame as they pass through into the locker room. When it's my turn, I slap it as hard as I can and smile at the sting on my palm. Adrenaline pumps through my system, making me feel like I'm going to explode with happiness at any second. Today is the best day of my life.

It takes longer than usual for me to strip down and shower as excitement courses through my veins. Grabbing the towel from beside me, I do a quick dry off and wrap it around my hips.

When I walk out, the locker room is empty, or at least I think it is until I spy Chance Reed pulling up his sweatpants over his tight ass. Sans underwear. It's not the first time I've seen his ass, but tonight is the first time I've wanted to act on the feel seeing it gives me.

Chance spots me as I make my way over to my locker. He flashes me a blinding smile. "Can you believe we fucking won, Blackburn?"

“Fuck, yeah. We’re the best, and you were on fire out there.” I clap him on the shoulder as I start to pass by.

Chance’s eyes flare, and I swear I see his pupils dilate as he takes me in. Am I imagining this newfound attention? I must be. Chance has hated me for what feels like ever when I’ve never done anything to him. I’ve never been able to figure out why, though.

I walk away before things start to turn for the worse. I don’t want anything to ruin this day for me.

“Are you going to the party?” He asks to my retreating back.

“Yeah, I think so. I’ll see you there.” I wave and open my locker to get dressed.

* * *

One of the guys on the team, Chris Steinbeck, is the one having the party in his barn. I’m just happy it’s heated. As I pass by the guys to grab a beer, I get the usual pats on the back and cheers. As captain of our team, it feels great to know that I helped lead them to victory.

“Hey, you made it,” Chris shouts over all the noise.

“Yeah, great party.” I take the cup of beer from him. “I still can’t believe we’re state champs. The only thing better is if we do it again next year.”

“Fuck, yeah. We’ll be unstoppable, especially with you leading our team.” He clinks his cup to mine.

We both take a long drink of our beer. When I lower my cup, the entire team is

surrounding us. For the next hour, we all tell the best moments of the night and refill our beers until I can't count how many I've had.

"I'll be back. I gotta take a piss," I tell the guys and head outside.

I'm walking back to the barn, where the music is drifting out the doors, when I spot Chance leaning against the wall.

"Hey," I greet him as I start to walk by him, but stop when I notice he's got a frown on his face. "What's wrong? Have you been inside yet?" Is the beer all gone?

Even in the dark, I can see Chance roll his eyes at me. "Why? So, I can listen to them all congratulate you on how awesome you are?"

My brows furrow in confusion. I don't understand his animosity. "They'd be congratulating you if you were in there. Hell, if you had been inside, you would have heard us talking about your awesome slap shot at the end of the first half."

I move away from the door and stand in front of Chance. Even from a couple of feet away, I can feel the heat rolling off of him, and it does something funny to my head. Or maybe it was all the beer I had earlier. It could be the combination of the two that makes me lose my head.

Leaning in, I press Chance against the side of the barn and slam my lips to his. He's stiff for only a second, and then his mouth opens underneath mine. I take the opportunity to slip my tongue inside his mouth. He tastes like wintergreen, and I moan. This has to be the perfect first kiss, hands down.

I tilt my head to get a better angle when Chance rips his mouth away. "What the fuck are you doing? Get your gay ass away from me," he yells.

What? I'm confused. It wasn't my imagination Chance was into that kiss or the way his tongue moved against mine.

"You liked it," I shoot back.

"Are you out of your mind? No, I didn't. I was shocked you'd have the audacity even to try to kiss me; otherwise, I would have pushed you away the second you leaned in."

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“I... I...” I don’t know what to say. I thought about the way he looked at me in the locker room earlier and then the way he got into the kiss. He wanted it. How could I have been so wrong?

“Got nothing to say? Yeah,” he sneers. “Because you know you shouldn’t have kissed me or even attempted it. I’m not a fag.”

“But I thought—”

“Whatever you thought was wrong. Now, why don’t you get the hell out of here?”

I stumble back, my head spinning. What the fuck just happened?

Turning on my heel, I see the door to the barn is wide open, and everyone is standing there witnessing what is now the worst day of my life. They stand there with disgust on their faces, and their phones pointed straight at me.

It’s amazing how in the course of a matter of minutes, your world can be turned upside down.

All I know is I will never forgive Chance for calling me out and embarrassing me in front of our entire team. It isn’t until Monday morning at school that I realize that multiple people have uploaded the video of Chance and me. Everywhere I look, I’m no longer the guy who won the championship but the guy they find revolting. Their mouths in a sneer, or the whispers they didn’t try to hide.

When I thought my day couldn’t get any worse, I stepped inside my house after a day

of ridicule by my peers to find my parents sitting in the worn-out kitchen waiting for me.

“Is it true?” My mother asks, her voice breaking on the last word.

I don’t bother asking if what’s true. It can only be one thing. “Yes, I kissed Chance Reed, and yes, I’m gay.”

“Son,” my dad’s voice is gruff, making my back stiffen. “You know a real man only has sexual desires for women.”

This is why I’ve kept my secret for as long as I have.

“I can’t help who I like, and that happens to be men.” Tears well up in my eyes. “You don’t think I’ve tried to like girls? That my life wouldn’t be easier?”

“Then you need to try harder,” my dad spits out.

“It’s not that simple,” I croak out. I look at him, hoping he’ll understand, but I find nothing but revulsion.

“No son of mine is a homosexual,” he barks.

I look at my mom, hoping to see something different in her eyes, but her eyes won’t meet mine. Her fingers tangle in a loose string from her shirt.

My dad stands, and the chair he was sitting in falls to the floor. “You’ve put shame on our family, and because it’s my responsibility to take care of you until you’re eighteen, I will do so, but the day you graduate from high school, I want you out of this house.”

Looking at my mother again, I hope she'll say something. Maybe even stand up for me, but she doesn't. Instead, she looks at the floor.

I can't believe this is my life.

Not only does the town think I'm disgusting, but my own parents now want nothing to do with me.

Last night was my biggest regret.

1

MADDOX

I curse my brother, Garrison, for what feels like the thousandth time since my snow machine ran out of gas a couple of miles back. Is it that difficult to stick the damn nozzle in the tank for two minutes to fill it up?

Obviously, if you're Garrison Blackburn, it is. He believes he's God's gift to womankind. He loves to pick up drunk women from the only bar in town, The Ice Box. They all think he's so chivalrous that they repay him by letting him stay in their beds, which works for me since if he isn't in their beds, he's on my couch being a complete and total slob and asshole.

The sound of a twig snapping in the distance has me stopping to check my surroundings instead of staying in my head. I can't believe I got myself caught out this close to dark. The temperature is going to drop drastically, and I'm going to be in a world of hurt if I don't find someone to give me a lift either into town or back to my place. And fast.

One thing everyone knows here is that Alaska is no joke. If the elements don't get

you, then the wildlife will.

Another snap has me turning around and tripping over a log buried beneath a foot of snow. I don't have to look at my ankle to know I've messed it up. Back in high school, during my senior year, I broke my ankle in the championship game, that has left it susceptible to injury. Like today. Now I'm truly fucked. What was I thinking, not checking to make sure my snow machine had enough gas during this particular cold snap? While the high is normally in the twenties here this time of the year in Polar Bear, Alaska, it's been hovering in the single digits as the high this week.

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At least I'm dressed appropriately, or at least I am until the sun goes down and I'm stuck outside for hours.

A loud roar has me on my feet and hobbling as fast as I can in the opposite direction of where the sound came from. That roar isn't from any old nuisance. No, it's from a bear. I guess today is just not my day. I swear if I die out here, I'm going to come back to haunt my brother until the end of time.

It sounds like a freight train is coming through the wooded area to my right, and I know I won't be able to outrun it.

The biggest ball of brown fur that I've ever seen comes speeding out from the trees. The brown bear heading straight in my direction roars. She opens her mouth, and the sounds that come out have all the hairs on the back of my neck and my arms standing straight up. The vibration of her anger seeps into my bones, terrifying me.

I don't need to pat my pockets to know I don't have any bear spray on me to ward off the attack. Before I can drop to the ground and curl up on the cold surface, the bear is only a few feet away. She's up on her hind legs, and she's pissed. I'm not sure why she's after me. There were no tracks of any kind. Did I somehow walk through her territory and not know it?

The grizzly bellows as she barrels closer. If I wanted to, I could count each and every one of her teeth. Instead, I close my eyes and pray to a God I'm not sure exists that if he lets me live, I'll be a better person. I won't give my brother a hard time about his manwhore ways, and I'll stay away from temptation. I'll do anything if I live.

The change in the air happens in an instant. There's a shift that has me wanting to turn around to see what's happening, but I stop myself. I need to keep my attention on the bear that wants to rip me into shreds.

The sound of a shotgun blast has both me and the bear turning. Sally, I've decided to name her because why not. The bear who wants me dead should have a name. Sally takes off with one last roar as I stand stupefied, looking for the shooter. My savior. Whoever it is that saved me, I'm going to kiss their feet when I see them.

"Stay where you are," a deep and gritty voice shouts—one that sounds eerily familiar. One that I'd know anywhere even if I haven't heard it for years. One that I hate almost as much as being attacked by a bear.

Maybe I should have let the bear take me down, so I wouldn't have to hear about Chance Reed saving me for the rest of my life. He is going to lord it over my head with evil delight.

It doesn't matter, though. I'm not going anywhere right now on my fucked-up ankle. Unfortunately, I need his help.

"I cannot fucking believe it. Maddox fucking Blackburn," Chance grumbles under his breath. Although he's not very successful if he didn't mean for me to hear him. "If I knew it was you, I probably would have let you fend for yourself."

"And here I was thinking of how I wanted to repay the person who saved me. That was until I heard your voice," I say loud enough for him to hear me as he eliminates the distance between us.

"I can leave, and you can see how far away you get before she comes back. You got too close to her cubs, and she's crazy protective. I've never seen anything like it in all my years." Chance says as he stops a few feet away from me. He turns to look back

over his shoulder. “What are you doing out here, anyway?”

I don’t want to tell him because I know I’ll sound like an idiot, but I don’t have much of a choice.

“I was out checking on the horses when I ran out of gas. One went missing, and when I saw hoof prints, I followed them further than I realized. If I knew I was so close to your land, I would have gone the other way.”

“Yes, because you’re so much better than I am,” he sneers. “Heaven forbid you are tainted by stepping foot on my land.”

“I never said that, Chance. That’s all you,” I snap back.

“Oh please, you’ve thought you were better than me since the moment we met in elementary school.”

Never once in all my years have I thought I’m better than him. While I succeeded in more aspects of my life than Chance, the thought of me being better never crossed my mind. Not even once.

“I can’t help it that I was better than you in school or at hockey. Was I supposed to let you win or do better on tests than me just to appease your bruised ego?”

“No, but you-” His words are cut off when Sally rages once again. “Shit, she’s coming back, and I only have one more shell, so we need to get the hell out of here.” He looks down at my foot that I’m barely putting any weight on, and his lips thin into a straight line. “Can you walk?”

“I don’t have much of a choice in the matter, now do I?” I take a step and hiss as pain shoots up my leg.

“Let me help you. There’s no sense in us both dying out here all because you’re a stubborn son-of-a-bitch.”

“You could leave me and save yourself,” I step away from him.

“I’m not like you, Maddox,” He shakes his head, wrapping an arm around my waist.

“I wouldn’t leave a man, even my worst enemy out here, to die by a bear.”

Does he seriously think I would leave him out here to die?

“I guess I should be thankful it’s a bear after me then,” I half-joke as I slip one arm over his broad shoulders.

“Indeed. Now let’s get out of here. I have a nice stew that’s waiting for me back at home that I want to eat.”

We didn’t say anything for a few minutes, as I used Chance as a crutch and tried to get away from the area as quickly as possible.

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“How far is it to your house?” I ask as another jolt of pain flashes through my leg and sweat coats my body.

“We’ve still got a way to go. If I would have known I’d be saving someone’s life, I wouldn’t have walked. You’re lucky I heard you.” His dark eyes flashed in the setting sun.

“What were you doing out in this weather?” I ask lamely.

“Letting my dog out. He started barking, so I went to investigate what had him so up in arms. He’s usually pretty chill.”

I had no idea Chance has a dog. He doesn’t seem the type.

“I’ll have to buy him a big juicy steak for alerting you.”

“And what are you going to give me for saving you? It was me and not Harry who fired the shot.”

Not even twenty minutes have passed by, and he already wants his payment.

I turn to look at him for the first time since he walked up to me. I’d been trying to avoid how he always made me feel when I looked at him. Chance was always good-looking, but he grew even more into his good looks as he got older. Gone is the youthful baby fat that once lingered on his face. Now he’s all man with his angular face, sharp nose, a goatee that set off his kissable lips. The dark slashes above his equally dark eyes are angled down in concentration, giving Chance a mysterious

quality.

“As much as it pains me to say this, thank you for saving me.” I grit out in pain from saying the words I never wanted to utter to my nemesis.

“Now you owe me a life debt.” The jovial tone in his voice makes me want to rage against the moment, but I hold it in. He could still leave me out here.

Sally bellows from a distance, making me look over my shoulder. I don’t see her, but it doesn’t matter. We need to get the hell out of here. She can smell us, track us, and that’s what matters.

“Can you walk any faster?” Chance asks as he speeds up. “How bad is your leg?”

“It’s not broke, but I think I sprained it pretty good,” I admit, hating to show any sign of weakness in front of him.

“Put as much weight on me as you need. We need to get out of here.” The urgency in his voice has me on edge and picking up my pace even as my ankle screams out in pain.

I grit my teeth to keep from making any noise that would indicate my level of agony. It’s bad, but death is so much worse and final. Just when I think we must be walking in circles, I see a light in the distance.

I squint my eyes, trying to see it better. “Is that your place?”

“It is. Can you make it that far?”

“Do I have a choice?” I ask, nearly stumbling.

“Of course, you do. You can give up and become bear food.” His deep voice rumbles.

“I don’t give up. Ever. You should know that.”

“Oh, I do. You’ve made that painfully obvious over the years how you’ll do whatever it takes to beat me,” Chance says with annoyance.

I’m not sure what he’s talking about. Chance has hated me since the day he met me, even before I did better than him on tests, in P.E. class, or sports. It’s never made sense to me, but it doesn’t matter now. He’s been an asshole to me for the last twenty-odd years of my life, and I doubt that’s ever going to change.

I hate him just as much as he hates me, if not more. He’s ruined my life by outing me to our town—a town that doesn’t do well with change or homosexuals, it seems.

Stepping up onto his wrap-around porch, a sense of urgency grips me by the balls. “Do you feel that?”

“Yeah, I do,” he pushes me toward the door. “I think she followed us, but why, I’m not sure. She’s too far from her den.”

“I guess I make everyone around me hate me. Is it the way I smell?” I ask jokingly. I did nothing to either of them and yet they both wanted me dead.

“Maybe she can sense how big of an asshole you are.” He opens the door and lets me walk inside first.

The second I walk inside his cabin, I’m overpowered by the cologne Chance wears. His smell is everywhere, and I’m close to walking back outside and seeing how well I’ll do on my own. If I stay here with everything that is Chance assaulting my sense, I don’t think I’ll last.

I swear this day has turned into some kind of bad horror movie.

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CHANCE

Maddox stands stockstill just inside the doorway, looking like he wants to bolt at any second.

I push past him and grumble. “Is the bear a better option than me?”

“Maybe. At least I’d know where I stand with Sally.”

Wait. What?

“Who the fuck is Sally?”

He looks at me like I’m the stupidest person on the planet as he rolls his eyes. “The bear. Who else?”

“I have no fucking clue. Who the fuck names a bear to begin with?”

Maddox huffs. He’s so damn dramatic. “I do. That’s who. For a moment there, I thought I was going to die, and it seemed better to be killed by something that had a name.”

Wow. He really doesn’t get out much.

“She probably would have killed you if I hadn’t come along.” I look him up and

down. I can't see much of him since he's bundled up in a pair of snow pants and a thick coat, but I know what's underneath. Well, I don't. Not now, anyway. I'm sure he's in even better shape than he was back in high school. "Did you piss yourself?"

"Close, but no cigar. I guess you're lucky I didn't shit myself and stinking up your place." His blue eyes sparkle from across the room, pissing me off. Maddox steps toward me, but after one step, he winces in pain. "Fuck," he hisses out.

I rush over and put my arm around his waist to help him over to the couch. "Sit down, and let's take a look."

"Why are you being nice to me?" He asks as I guide him down to sit.

"Because I'm not as big of an asshole as you think I am." I step back and watch as Maddox tries to pull up his pant leg. "Where did you get hurt?"

"My fucking ankle," he shakes his head as he continues trying to pull the pants up, but they barely move.

I eye the layers he has on. "I think you should take off your pants. Yoursnowpants," I amend. I certainly don't want him to think I want him to take off all of his clothes.

"I don't plan to be here for long," he looks up and stops what he's doing as our gazes lock. For one brief second, I see something other than disdain staring back at me, but just as quickly as it appeared, the look is gone. "In fact, if you could just give me a ride home or to the gas station, I'll get out of your hair."

"Why do you have to be so difficult?" I kneel in front of him and start to unlace his boots. "Let's look at your ankle, and then I'll happily take you wherever you want to go."

Maddox pulls his leg away, and I see the way he bites the inside of his cheek from the pain. “Stop being a little bitch. I’m not going to cut your leg off or anything like that. The longer you wait to put ice on it, the worse it’s going to get.”

“Oh really? I didn’t know you became a doctor.”

“Fucking hell, Mad, it’s simple logic. If I take you to get gas, you’re going to have to walk to your vehicle. Get some fucking ibuprofen in you along with some ice, so I don’t have to help you hobble all the way to your snow machine.”

“Don’t put yourself out. I’ll be fine,” Maddox huffs.

“Like you were fine when I had to save your ass.”

Maddox tries to push up, probably ready to storm out, but I’m not having any of it. Putting my hands on his shoulders, I push him back down. “Stop being a pussy.”

“Stop being an asshole,” he grits out.

“Not going to happen. It’s in my DNA. Why do you think I live out here far away from everyone else? Alone.”

Unzipping his coat, his eyes flick around the room. “Because no one wants to be around you.”

What was I thinking having Maddox here? I should have thrown him in my truck and dumped him on the side of the road.

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I have a feeling if I stay here in front of him, Maddox will only keep snapping at me. The sooner we figure out how bad his ankle is, I can get him out of here and back to my nightly binge-watch of Schitt's Creek. "Get out of your gear while I put together an ice pack."

He doesn't argue for once, which is a miracle in and of itself. I grab a couple of bags of peas from the freezer and a roll of duct tape from the drawer.

Maddox eyes the tape as I walk back and sit on the table in front of him. "What are you going to do with that?"

Setting my supplies down, I take in Maddox in his jeans and flannel shirt—both of which look like they're close to bursting. It seems as if he's been working out a hell of a lot since the last time I saw him, and it looks good on him. What I wouldn't give to see and feel all those muscles up close and personal.

Needing to stop thinking of Maddox like a piece of meat, I reach down, pick up his foot, and start pulling off his boot, wanting to get this over with. "I thought I'd see if we could stick it to your leg and pull out your hair."

He hums, his body stiffening as I start to remove the boot. "Is that how you wax?"

"Yeah, I'm fancy like that," I chuckle as I slip the boot off. The laugh dies on my lips the second I see how swollen Maddox's ankle really is through his thick sock. It's not just a little bit swollen. It's so swollen he shouldn't walk on it for at least two days, and then it's still going to be bad.

I start to peel off his sock, and the further I pull it down, the color changes to light blue to dark, and then a dark purple to almost black. His ankle is the size of a grapefruit—a mutant one.

My head snaps up to meet his. “How the hell did you walk on this?”

“Is it that bad?” He leans over to get a look, but I cover the black and blue area with the frozen bags of pea. Quickly, I wrap the tape around them to keep them in place. I guess it was a good thing I only have duct tape in the house. Otherwise, he would have seen just how bad it is.

“Bad enough that you’re going to stay the night here, so you don’t have to do any walking. Tomorrow I’ll take you to your house, and if you give me the general whereabouts of your machine, I’ll fill it up and bring it back to your place.”

Maddox’s eyes grow wide. “Is it broken? Did gangrene already set in?”

A heavy exhale leaves me as I push back and sit back on the table. “I’m no doctor, which we’ve already established, but I’m almost a hundred percent positive that you can’t get gangrene from a sprain. If that’s possible, we’d all be fucked.”

He gave me a look of disbelief. “The look on your face said otherwise.”

“And how did I look?” I shoot back, setting the tape on the table.

“Like I was never going to walk again. Seriously, you got me worried.” He sits forward, his hands going to the bags of frozen vegetables, and tries to peel the tape off.

I grip his wrists to keep him from looking. “You’re going to walk, but for the best and fastest recovery, you really should stay off it.”

“If I didn’t know any better, I’d think you’re offering for me to stay here because I’m dying.” He sits back, giving up. At least for the time being.

Again with the dramatics.

“You’re not going to die. Not today, at least.” I stand, grabbing a pillow and placing it on the table. “Why don’t you put your foot up, and I’ll grab us each a bowl of stew?”

Maddox’s blue eyes look around the living area and then come back to me. “You’re very domestic.”

“And you’re a pain in the ass,” I say, turning away and head to the kitchen.

I’m filling our bowls when I ask, “Are you saying you never cook or clean your own place?”

“Of course, I do, but...”

“But you thought I didn’t? I’m not one to live in a pigsty if I have an option.” There’s no way in hell I’ll live in anything resembling the dump I grew up in.

I hand over one of the bowls to Maddox and sit down in the recliner facing the TV. “I hope you like Schitt’s Creek because I was planning on watching it until I fall asleep.”

His spoon clinks against the bowl before he clears his throat. “I’ve never heard of it, but it doesn’t matter; it’s your house. You can watch whatever you want. I’m going to eat and then hopefully pass out, so when I wake up, you can take me home.”

There’s the asshole I know and hate.

“I know it’s my place, but I’m trying to be fucking hospitable,” I snap and take a bit of stew. Stew that I usually crave, but tonight Maddox Blackburn has ruined it. It tastes like sawdust on my tongue.

I don’t ever have people over to my place, and when I do and try to be nice, he gives me shit. Well, fuck him. Maybe luck will be on my side, and Maddox will develop gangrene while he’s sleeping, and he’ll die in his sleep.

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Pointing the remote at the TV, I hit play to watch my favorite show. “Try not to choke on your stew and ruin my night.”

I swear I hear him murmur a fuck you before Moira locks herself in the closet.

3

MADDOX

In the light of a new day, my ankle is killing me. If I could sneak out of Chance’s house, I would, but when I tried to stand up earlier this morning, I nearly screamed out in pain when I tried to put any weight on my foot.

“You’re up,” Chance barks out as he strides through the room and into the kitchen.

Unfortunately. I’ve been stuck on the couch all morning because I knew I’d end up waking him up trying to get around.

“Are you hungry?” He moves around the kitchen, clanging cups and pans. “I can fry up some eggs and bacon before we head out.”

Turning to look over my shoulder, I find Chance with his hands on his narrow hips. I get caught on his abs and the deep V that leads down into his plaid pajama pants. When I finally make my way up the rest of his body, Chance’s dark brown eyes are narrowed as he looks at me.

“Do you want something to eat or not?” He clips out.

“Sounds great.” As long as there’s no arsenic in it. I wouldn’t put it past him. “I’m going to use the bathroom if you don’t mind.”

He huffs and moves around the counter. “I didn’t have you stay here to torture you, as fun as that sounds. Did you really think I wouldn’t let you use the bathroom?”

The fuck if I know. A second ago, I thought Chance might poison me. Preventing me from using the restroom seems like his brand of torture.

He looks down at the now soggy ice packs hanging from my leg. I probably should have taken them off, but I didn’t want to see the damage just yet. “How’s the ankle this morning?”

I could lie. Hell, I want to, but I know the second I try to walk, Chance will see the truth.

“It’s fucking killing me,” I grumble.

“I should have given you some more ibuprofen before I headed off to bed, or at least left you some to take this morning.” His full lips form a thin line. “I’m not very good at taking care of people.”

“That’s okay. I’m usually pretty good at taking care of myself. And my younger brother, even when I don’t want to,” I admit. I’m not sure why I’m telling Chance my grievances about my brother. He’ll probably go and tell the whole town how Garrison is a burden on me and have them hating me even more.

“Your brother seems like the kind of tool who wouldn’t be able to take care of himself. Maybe if you stop, he’ll have to start or at least try. Let him fail.”

He’s probably right, but there’s no way in hell I’m going to tell him that.

“Okay,” he draws the word out. Sticking his hand out to me, I look at it, wondering what he expects of me. “Let’s get you to the bathroom.”

Oh, of course, except half the time when I’m around Chance, my brain isn’t working since my hormones take over. It’s like being transported back to high school when I realized Chance Reed made me harder than anyone on the planet. He still has the power to make me hard and lose myself in his heady cologne and good looks. But then all I have to do is remember when Chance publicly humiliating me after winning one of our hockey games.

I push away, not wanting to rely on him. “I can get there on my own.”

“Stop being a stubborn son-of-a-bitch, and let me help you. You’re only going to hurt yourself further if you try to get there on your own.” He lets out a long exhale, and his body tenses. “And I don’t want you here any longer than you have to be.”

“Fine,” I snap, tightening my grip on his shoulder. “I want to get out of here as soon as possible.”

“Good,” he shoots back like a child.

I take one step, and I know I’m in trouble. Any weight I put on my foot is excruciating. If Chance weren’t here, I would have dropped to the floor.

“Fuck,” I grit out. “This isn’t normal. Are you sure it didn’t look broken?”

“I’m no doctor, Mad. It’s possible with how swollen it is.” He hums to himself. “You know, I might have a pair of crutches out in the garage. Why don’t you sit down, and I’ll go get them? That way, you don’t have to rely on me to get around.”

“That would be great.” I give in. Seriously, why couldn’t it have been anyone else

who saved me? “I don’t think I can get around on one foot.”

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I lean against the back of the couch, not wanting to have to get up again once Chance is back. Now that he's not in the room with me, I take in his place since I passed out last night before I had a chance. It is clean without a speck of dust on any surface. The decor is sparse, but all the furniture is dark brown leather and dark wood that complement each other. As much as I hate to admit it to myself, his house is nice and strangely inviting.

The front door swings open, and Chance comes running inside. He throws the crutches in his hands on the floor and then locks the front door quickly like a serial killer is on his tail. He turns around with his back to the door and slumps to the floor. His breath is heavy, and all the color is drained from his face as he looks up at me.

"What the hell happened?" I hop over to the crutches and try to lean over to grab them, but I'm unsteady. I'm more likely to fall on my face than pick one or both of them up. I stand with my arms spread out to my sides, trying to get my balance before I look back to Chance, who still seems freaked out. "Seriously, are you okay? You look like you've just seen a ghost."

"Not a ghost, but Sally," he rushes out.

Sally?

"My Sally? The bear?" I question, confused.

"Oh yeah, your Sally. She's out there. It was like she was waiting for me by my truck when I came out of the garage. She reared up on her back legs the second I stepped outside, so I hauled ass back to the house."

That's not normal.

"No, it isn't," he answers my thought. I guess I said it out loud.

"I'm sure she'll be gone by the time we leave. Does she normally come this close to the house?"

Chance stands up and braces his hands on the door as he looks out the window. "Not usually, but as I was running back to the house, I saw her prints all over out there. She's circled the place multiple times by the looks of it."

Not wanting to ask, but in serious need of taking a piss, I clear my throat. "Could you hand me those crutches?"

"Fuck, yeah, sorry." He quickly picks them up and hands them over to me. "I told you I wasn't much of a host."

Slipping the crutches under my armpits, I give them my weight and start down the hallway. "For taking in someone you hate, you're doing a good job. You could've left me on the couch to piss myself."

"But I'd be the one who has to smell my piss-soaked couch, so no thank you."

I can't help the chuckle that slips out. Of course, he didn't do it to be nice.

It doesn't take me long to relieve myself and head back to Chance. I'm ready to go home where I don't have to deal with him, but I find Chance frying up a couple of eggs when I walk into the kitchen. He's trying, and I am hungry, so I guess I can stay a few extra minutes. Knowing my luck, his truck will break down, and I'll be stuck on the side of the road since there's no way I'd be able to walk with crutches through the snow.

He doesn't look at me as he asks. "Can you put a couple of slices of bread in the toaster? Breakfast will be ready soon."

"Sure," I mutter as I move around him. His kitchen is a decent size, but we're both big guys, and with both of us moving about and me with these crutches, it makes the space feel small. With each movement he makes, the unique smell that belongs only to him wafts my way. Being in Chance's space is driving me crazy. Why does his cologne speak to me on some type of primal level? If he weren't such an asshole, I'd throw him down and fuck his brains out. Instead, I should just hold my breath and hope I don't pass out from lack of oxygen until I can get away from him.

The sound of grease popping has me clearing my head and me putting the bread in the toaster.

"Since that's your right foot, how are you going to drive?" Chance is still not looking at me, which is fine. It's better that way. When I can't see his face, my stomach isn't flipping upside down, and memories I'd rather not remember don't surface. I can pretend he's someone else entirely when I can't see or hear him.

"What's taking so long on that damn toast? This shit is going to burn if it's not ready soon," he grumbles, and my sour mood returns.

"How am I supposed to know how long your toaster usually takes? You can take it off the burner and start plating if you're so damn worried about it."

Chance turns around, his milk chocolate brown eyes flaring with irritation. "Have you always been this entitled?"

"Entitled? Where would you get that idea?" I scoff. Growing up, I was the poor kid. I had no money and wore my clothes and shoes until they fell apart. All the kids made fun of me, and the first chance I could, I got a job and started to make my own

money. There was no way in hell my parents could have afforded to pay for any of my hockey stuff, and once they found out I was gay, they wouldn't have helped me even if they could.

Chance didn't say a word. Instead, he continues to stare at me. It feels like his eyes are trying to bore into my brain.

"You must have me confused with someone else. There hasn't been a day in my life where I thought I was better than anyone else." It's kind of hard to feel that way when your peers are always putting you down for the way you dress and being the kid who gets free lunches.

"Oh yes, that must be it." He slaps an egg on a plate and a few slices of bacon. "I'm not sure how I mistook you for the asshole who always taunted me about every victory you had over me."

"What the fuck are you talking about? You know what, it doesn't matter. Take me home, and I'll do my best to stay out of your way for the next decade or so." I turn and storm off, slow as fuck because I'm using these damn crutches, and fling open the front door only to slam it shut again.

"Change your mind?" Chance taunts.

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Every muscle in my body goes rigid. Why is he such an asshole? I swear it's like he lived on a different timeline than I did because nothing he said in the kitchen actually happened, and yet with the furious looks and the hateful words over the years, I almost believe him—except I was there, and I know what went down.

“No, I didn't change my mind. Sally did. She's at the bottom of the stairs, sitting there and staring at the door. Do you think she's waiting outside to kill me?”

Seriously, what did I do in this life or a past life to warrant a bear wanting to eat me?

4

CHANCE

My eyes roll so hard it hurts. “Doubtful. You didn't hurt one of her cubs by any chance, did you?”

“No,” he rushes out. “Until Sally came out of the trees and went all Attila the Hun on me, I hadn't seen her. I swear she hates the way I smell or something. I did nothing to her.”

My back teeth slam together in annoyance, and I feel the enamel grind from the force. “You did something. I don't know what, but definitely something. If I didn't know any better, I'd think you were some tourist. It's like you live in your own world, and I have no clue what's going on around you.”

“Maybe I do, but that's only because you made the entire town hate me.”

What the hell is he talking about?

“And how did I do that?”

“Are you telling me you don’t remember when you outed me to the entire town after our Championship game?” Maddox snaps, his blue eyes flaring with hate.

“Our junior year? That was forever ago. Why are you still holding onto that?”

“Maybe because after that night, the entire town hated me. No one wanted to be my friend because they were afraid I’d try to make a pass at them. I have no friends to this day.” The fire in his eyes extinguishes as his mouth turns down.

Did Maddox seriously not have any friends? Although I don’t know why I’m so surprised; I don’t have any either.

“It’s not my fault you don’t have any friends. Maybe they don’t want to be your friend because you’re an asshole to them.”

“This is pointless. You’re just going to argue with me just for the sake of arguing. What we need to do is figure out how to get that damn bear away from the house so you can take me home.”

“So, you’re willing to risk death in order to get away from me?”

“That sounds about right. If the bear doesn’t kill me, I’m sure you will.”

“As annoying as I find you, I’m not going to kill you. I’m too pretty to go to prison.”

Maddox’s eyes zero in on my mouth, and I swear I hear his breath quicken.

He lets out an unamused chuckle. “It’s good to know the reason you won’t kill me is that you don’t want to be gang-raped in prison.”

Taking a step back, I leaned back against the kitchen counter. “Whoa, who said anything about getting gang-raped?”

“Oh,” his eyes light up. “Does that idea excite you?”

“What kind of sexual deviant do you think I am? Not now nor will I ever want to be ganged-raped.”

He gives me a disbelieving look. “So, you say.”

“Maybe I’ll just push you out the front door and let Sally eat you. If anyone finds any of your body parts, I’ll say I have no idea how you got onto my property.”

It’s so damn fun to rile him up.

“I’m just going to call Garrison to come pick me up.” He pats his pockets and then scowls. “Shit, I forgot I was the dumbass who decided to leave home without his phone.” He tilts his head back and groans. “Fuck my life.”

“If you want, you can use my phone,” I offer.

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“I wish,” he retorts vaguely.

Letting out an annoyed breath, I take my phone out of my pocket and offer it out to him. “I don’t have fucking cooties. You can use my phone. There’re no consequences.”

Maddox makes his way over to the couch and plops down. “I can’t because I don’t remember my brother’s phone number. The only phone numbers I know are mine and my parents, and they won’t come. They’d probably encourage the damn bear to eat me so they can be rid of their gay son.”

“I doubt that’s true.”

“Oh, it is. They’re proud of their loser, manwhore of a son who mooches off everyone he comes into contact with but want nothing to do with their son who is one of the top horse breeders in the country.”

Damn, I kind of feel bad for him—kind of being the key word.

“And let me guess, it’s my fault. Everything that goes wrong with your life is my fault.”

“Pretty much. If you’d never outed me, my parents wouldn’t be ashamed of me, and everyone wouldn’t look at me like the town pariah.”

“Okay, hold up now, you’re not the Hester Prynne of the gay community of Polar Bear, Alaska. The town doesn’t look at you any differently than they look at anyone

else. Yes, maybe back in high school people did, but not now. You're imagining it."

"You don't know my life. You're like the town hermit and never leave your house."

I shrug because he's right. I do try to limit my time with the vast majority of the population of our little town. If I want to interact and hook up with someone, I tend to go to the next town over. Not that Maddox needs to know that.

"I leave. You just never see me when I'm out."

"Whatever," he rolls his eyes at me. "None of this helps the fact that I'm stuck here until Sally finds someone better to eat. Do you have Netflix or something we can watch until the coast is clear?"

"Did you blackout and forget last night? We were watching Netflix when I had on Schitt's Creek."

"Oh, I'm sorry if I didn't notice what it was on while I was in incredible pain and in a hostile environment."

"Oh, come on, Mad. It's not that bad. I've fed you, and my couch is incredibly comfortable. Hell, I even made you breakfast this morning. It's not my fault you didn't eat it. You're not going to die." I tilt my head and then nod. "Okay, you might if you go outside because Sally does seem to have a hard-on for you, but if you stay inside, you'll live if you stop making me out to be the bad guy."

Maddox tilts his head to the side as he sits on my couch like he owns the damn thing. His legs are spread wide, and I swear I can see a damn bulge in his pants.

"Are you turned on?" The words are out of my mouth before I have a chance to stop them.

One side of his mouth turns up in a sneer. “What the hell are you talking about?” He looks down at his crotch and then back up at me. “That’s my dick, plain and simple. I’m sorry if yours is so small that you think this is me hard.”

It takes everything in me not to walk over there and punch the asshole in the face, but when I’m only a few steps away, I stop myself. If I do what I want to him, it will only make matters worse.

“As much fun as fighting with you is, can we just be civil for the day?” I look out the window, but from here, I can’t tell if the bear is out there or not. “Once your friend Sally leaves, I’ll get you home, but until then, we can watch some TV. I’ll even get you some new ice packs to put on your ankle. It probably needs it.”

“Ice would be good,” he grimaces as he starts to undo the tape from around the now defrosted peas. “I grabbed a few ibuprofen when I was in the bathroom. I feel like a pussy admitting this, but damn, it hurts more than when I fucked it up back in high school.”

It must be bad if he’s admitting to me that it hurts.

“Well, I won’t make you clean the house or anything. Put your foot up, and I’ll get the ice.”

While in the kitchen, I pile some of the bacon on a piece of toast, fold it up, and shove half of it in my mouth. Why did he have to try and storm off right when breakfast was ready? Cramming the rest of the bacon sandwich into my mouth, I try to find some frozen veggies for Maddox to put on his ankle. I should’ve taken the peas and put them back in the freezer earlier. I don’t have much frozen food that works as an ice pack.

Since I don’t have any that will work, I fill a sandwich baggie with ice and crush it.

Taking a pan, I hit the ice to crush it. After one hit, Maddox yells from the other room.

“What the hell is going on?”

“I’m crushing your ice,” I yell back.

“Don’t worry about it crushing it. I’ll live with having big chunks of ice. I’m not that big of a baby.”

I’m not so sure about that, but I’ll do what he wants to appease him.

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Walking into the living room, Maddox is lying on the couch with his foot propped up on the arm. I lay the ice over his sock, happy I can't see the bruising because I know it probably is all kinds of black and blue. It's still swollen all to hell. In fact, I think it's bigger than it was yesterday. I don't dare tell him, though.

"Fuck, that's cold," Mad shivers.

"I thought you weren't a pussy," I chuckle, moving over to sit in my recliner.

"Do you want to watch a movie?" I ask, since he passed out last night watching my favorite show.

"Sure, it really doesn't matter to me. I don't watch much TV at home. Hell, I can't even remember the last time I turned on my TV."

"What do you do if you don't watch TV?" I ask in shock. The nights can get pretty long around here, especially when you're alone.

He lets out a sigh. "Usually, I have to deal with my little brother, but when I'm not doing that, I read."

"Read?"

He rolls his head to look over at me, his brows drawn down as he looks me over.

"Yes, read. Are you illiterate or something? Why are you so offended?"

I scoff. "I'm not offended. I just didn't take you for a reader. If you want something to

read, I've got some books in my bedroom."

"That's okay. I'm not going to be here long enough to get through a book." My eyes narrow at him. Yet again, he finds the need to remind me how much he wants to get the hell out of here. "It's just that I hate not finishing a book I've started," he adds hastily.

Wanting to fix the situation, I decided to try and make things better. Sitting forward, I put my elbows on my knees and clasp my hands together.

"You know, I didn't mean to make you feel like the town hated you back when I outed you. Which was unintentional, by the way." I don't think anyone hated him, but Maddox feels that way, and that's what matters. "I freaked out when you kissed me at the party after the game. I was confused and didn't want anyone to get the wrong idea about me."

His blue eyes darken like a turbulent storm as he stares at me. "But it's okay that they act like they'll get a disease if they look, or, hell, even touch me?"

"No, it's not okay. I was young and dumb, and I can admit now that what I did was wrong. I shouldn't have yelled and alerted everyone, but I freaked out." I hang my head, unable to look at him as I say the next part. "I did to you what I didn't want to be done to me. But I don't think anyone feels that way about you. Not then and definitely not now."

"I guess we'll have to agree to disagree," he mumbles.

"Listen, Mad. This is a small town, and they're not used to change, but I think they see you as any other resident."

He sits up and starts to turn to me until his injured leg starts to move. Maddox grits

his teeth and puts his clenched fists at his sides. “Is that why you stay away because they see gay men just like everyone else?”

I huff, unsure if I want to tell him why I keep my distance. “I stay away because no one in town interests me. If I want company, I go to Fairbanks, not that I make a habit of doing that.”

Maddox shakes his head. “You’re not the only one. There’s no one in Polar Bear that I’m attracted to.” His cobalt eyes cut to me, and he bites the inside part of his bottom lip. “Why is everyone even remotely our age here so...”

“Unattractive?”

He laughs. “Pretty much.”

Turning to the TV, I turn it on and admit. “I mean, if you weren’t such an asshole, I’d do you.”

“I have heard hate sex is good.”

Say what?

Maddox throws his head back and lets out a booming laugh. “Oh, my God, your face was priceless. If you think I haven’t thought of pushing you up against a wall and fucking you, you’d be wrong.”

Well, that changes things.

5

MADDOX

Why did I say that?I just can't keep my big mouth shut.

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Chance's eyes heat from across the room. I watch as he slowly gets up and moves to stand by the edge of the couch.

"I think you might be at a disadvantage with your ankle." He runs one hand up my calf to the slowly growing bulge in my pants. "But that gives me the chance to take advantage of you fully," he smirks, unzipping my jeans. "I've always wanted to see what you have to work with under here."

Leaning back, I put my hands behind my head. "By all means, please indulge your curiosity."

"Well, well, well, we might end up being friends after all." Chance slides my zipper down. His once chocolatey brown eyes are now almost black as he watches his hand's movement. Mine close as his rough fingers skate along the exposed skin and pull my pants and underwear down to my knees in one go.

"Fuck," he groans. "Of course, you've got the most perfect dick on the planet."

I swear I get harder at his emboldened words. The way he's looking at me has goosebumps erupting all across my skin while simultaneously making my body heat.

"I'm going to suck you so good; you won't remember your own name." Chance licks his full lips, and I can't wait to feel them around my cock. He winks at me, and for a brief moment, I think this has all been a sick joke, and he's going to start laughing or do any number of horrible things to me, but instead, he leans down and wraps his lips around my head and gives it a little swirl with his tongue.

The moan that leaves me is nothing compared to the noise I make when he takes the rest of my cock inside his warm, wet mouth at the same time one hand starts to massage my balls.

My hands grip his hair to make sure he doesn't go anywhere. "Holy fucking shit. Don't stop."

Chance looks up at me and smirks around my shaft. His eyes stay locked with mine as he bobs up and down and swirls his tongue like its magic. Fuck, he knows how to give the best damn blow job.

Sliding up, he lets go with a pop. I open my mouth to tell him to get back to work but stop when Chance moves down and takes one of my balls into his mouth. I nearly combust at the feel of him around the most sensitive area on my body. He moves to the other, using one of his hands and his saliva as lube to jack me off.

My hips lift off the couch, and I suck in a breath as I come all over his hand and onto my stomach. Damn, he was right. Maybe we will become friends after this.

I'm panting and in a state of bliss when I feel Chance shift. When my eyes pop open, he pats my thigh before standing up. "Good boy. Now take a nap so I can watch my show."

I sit up quickly, having forgotten my ankle. The second my foot hits the floor, pain floods my body. "Fuck," I yell. My eyes narrow at Chance. "Did you seriously just blow me hoping that I would fall asleep so that you can watch some stupid show?"

His eyes go wide. "It's not a stupid show. If you gave it a chance, you'd probably like it. No, I know you'd love it. No one in their right mind wouldn't love it."

"I'm sure," I say without any conviction. "That's not what matters right now. What I

want to know is if you did it because you wanted me out of your hair, or you wanted my cock?”

The tips of Chance’s lips curl up in a wicked smirk. “I guess you’ll have to wait and find out.”

I lie back down on the couch, carefully putting my foot up, and close my eyes. I’m not sure how to take in the last ten minutes. My mind is blown in more ways than one.

I hear him let out a deep sigh before he speaks. “I can hear you thinking all the way over here. Stop thinking and enjoy your state of euphoria.”

I can’t help but scoff. “Euphoria? You think mighty highly of yourself.”

“Not at all. I heard every noise, felt every twitch and shake of your body, and you came spectacularly all over my hand. You were definitely in a state of bliss there for a moment.”

“Yeah, maybe until you slapped my leg and told me to take a fucking nap.” I roll my eyes at him and move onto my side, facing the back of the couch. I don’t want to talk to him anymore.

The last thing I think of before I fall asleep is we are most definitely not going to be friends.

* * *

“Oh fucking hell, you’ve got to be kidding me,” Chance groans, waking me up.

“What?” I groan back, rolling over to look at him, only to find him standing at the

window.

“There was a noise outside. I guess it was your girlfriend, Sally. She broke one of the windows out of my truck.”

“Why would she do that?”

“I don’t know. Probably for the same reason she’s stalking you,” Chance shrugs and runs his hands through his dark strands.

There’s no reason to respond to him, but I do for some dumb ass reason. “Is she gone?”

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“I don’t see her.” Chance looks over his shoulder at me. He licks his lips, making me remember how he blew me right before I took a nap. “We could make a run for it, or I guess I should say I can make a run for it, and you can hobble out. I’m positive I can get into my truck before she gets me.”

My eyes narrow. “And fuck me, if I don’t make it?”

“I didn’t say that. I could always hit her with my truck.”

“What?” I laugh. “You’re not going to hit her with your truck. That will probably only piss her off.” Plus, I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if Sally got hurt or killed because of me.

“Probably not, but did it make you feel better that I wouldn’t leave you out there to die?”

“Strangely no. I hate to be a broken record, but can you take me home?”

He lightly chuckles. “Let’s get you home before you file kidnapping charges. Although, if I keep you long enough, maybe you’ll get Stockholm Syndrome and start to like me.”

“How about I promise to like you more once I’m home and in my own bed?”

Chance’s eyes flare. “Is that an invitation to join you in your bed?”

Sitting up, I grab the crutches off the floor. I’m so ready to be out of here. Not that I

haven't been trying to leave the entire time I've been here.

"Wow, I didn't think it was that bad. I mean, I can't even stand your company, and I don't want to kick you out as badly as you want to leave." He shakes his head. "Alright, let's do this. I'll go out, get my truck started, and pull it up front." He rolls his lips while turning to look outside. "If Sally comes barreling this way, I'll honk the horn, and you stay inside."

"Oh, are you worried I might be eaten?"

"I don't need your death on my conscience. That's why I'm taking you home. If the bear doesn't do the job, I'm sure I will."

And there's the asshole. I thought maybe he was gone for a second, but I was wrong. The asshole part of him reared his ugly head once again.

"Perfect, I'll grab my clothes, and I'll be ready to go."

He lets out a sigh and walks over to the chair by the door where my coat and snow pants are. "I've got them. They'll just slow you down."

"Thanks," I say, shocked.

"Don't let it go to your head. I'll push you out of the truck when we reach your house. I won't even stop. You'll have to tuck and roll if you want to live." He smirks.

I stand and face him. "Damn, with a comment like that, maybe you should just leave me to my fate with Sally. I don't have much practice in jumping from moving cars."

He watches me intently as I put my boot on my left foot. I look at my right foot and groan. The thought of putting my boot on it seems insurmountable.

Chance strides over and snatches my boot out of my hand. “I wouldn’t put that on. I’ll take your boot too.” He turns and starts to the front door. “I’ll see you out there.”

I won’t deny watching him leave isn’t a pleasure. His tight ass in jeans is a sight. Or maybe it’s because even though Polar Bear is mostly men, none of them are to my liking except the asshole in front of me. It doesn’t help that I haven’t visited a neighboring town and had any relief in months.

I’ve barely stood up when I hear Chance’s truck start in the distance. I’m happy that I don’t have my clothes to carry with these damn crutches.

Before closing the front door, I glance back at Chance’s house. It’s the first time I’ve been here and most probably the last. I hustle as fast as I can down the stairs, which isn’t fast at all, looking right and left for a giant furball coming at me. Only Sally never comes. Chance pulls up in front of his house, and I hop in.

As we’re pulling away, I swear I hear a roar, but when I look back, I see nothing. “Did you hear something?”

“I think your imagination is getting away from you.” He glances at me and just as quickly looks back to the road. “It’s either that or you didn’t really want to leave.”

Peering over at him, I chuckle. It’s strange to have this weird push and pull with Chance. He was my first crush and the guy I’ve been the most attracted to in all my years, but he’s infuriating. He’s also the one who ruined my life ten years ago. “Oh, I want to leave.”

“I think you’ll miss me and Sally. It might not be today or tomorrow, but someday,” he says playfully. It’s new, and I kind of like this side of him, but I know it won’t last.

“Maybe, but you’re right; it won’t be anytime soon.” I look at the sky as it starts to snow. I’m used to the snow, so it’s not a big deal—I mean, if you can’t hack it, you shouldn’t live in Alaska—but it’s the color of the sky and how the snow comes heavier and faster with each minute that passes that has me worried.

Chance has the heater going full blast to combat the broken window. It’s the only sound in the otherwise silent truck.

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It only takes Chance twenty minutes to pull up in front of my house. It would have been sooner if it wasn't snowing so damn badly.

I turn and smile over at him. His dark hair has flopped over one eye as he looks down his slightly crooked nose at me. Is it strange that I find that flaw on his otherwise perfect face hot? "I know I didn't show it, but thank you for saving me and taking me in. You didn't have to, and it means a lot to me." It's easier to say now that I'm moments from walking inside my place and knowing I won't see him for God knows how long.

He rolls his eyes at me. "I would never let you die, Mad." His brows pull tight as his lips tip down. "Are you saying you wouldn't help me if I were in the same position?"

"I never said that. I'm not a bad person."

"And neither am I," he shoots back with the snap of his jaw. "You should get inside. I need to get home before the weather gets worse."

"Yeah, of course." I grip the handle and then look back at Chance. "Safe travels."

He tips his chin at me and watches as I maneuver myself out of his truck and stand on one foot. This isn't going to be easy, and of course, my brother doesn't notice I'm home. He probably didn't even realize I was gone. Asshole.

"Mad," he calls my name the second I start to swing the door shut. I bend down to look at him. His jaw is tight and ticks before he grabs the crutches and offers them to me. "Take these. You need them." No matter how much I hate taking anything from

him, I do need them, so in the end, I take them from him.

His hands move to the steering wheel, and his gaze goes to stare out the windshield as he speaks. “And if it’s not better in a couple of days, go to the doctor.”

“Will do.” I salute him before I place the crutches under my armpits. Once I make it to my front door, I turn, only to see the red from his taillights in the distance as he pulls onto the road.

I open my front door to the smell of something burning, and my brother passed out on the couch.

Now that I’m home, I can’t say that I missed the shit show that is my normal life. One thing I do know is I’m done living like this. I’m not going to let my brother take advantage of me by letting him stay here any longer, and I’m done hiding from my town. Maybe Chance is right, and if I open my eyes, I’ll see that I’m not the town pariah in their eyes. It doesn’t matter if I am, though. I’m not going to let them stop me from living a full life. Not any longer.

It’s strange to think how much my mindset has changed in less than twenty-four hours. Maybe it was a good thing my snow machine ran out of gas, and Chance saved me from a killer bear.

Is it possible I might miss our banter now that I’m home?

6

CHANCE

What are the odds that not even a mile down the road from Maddox’s house, an elk would run out in front of me, causing me to swerve and get stuck in the ditch? I’d say

they're about a trillion to one, but I manage to do it nonetheless. The worst part is I'm not prepared to be walking in a snowstorm wearing only regular clothes and a coat.

I swear Maddox is a curse.

I jog in the direction of Maddox's house, hoping that he wasn't lying earlier when he said he wouldn't leave me to die. I mean, I don't think he's a stone-cold killer or anything, but he has hated me for over twenty years.

When I spy his driveway, I pick up my speed. It's cold as hell out here, and I can feel it slowly seeping into my bones every second I'm out here.

The closer I get to his house, the louder the voices inside become. Maddox and his brother are fighting, but I can't make out what they're yelling about. Not that I care. At least his brother is here and should be able to help me change my tire or take me home. At this point, I don't care. When I knock on the door, they instantly go quiet.

"I swear to God, if that's one of your whores I'm kicking you out," Maddox yells.

"You're just jealous because no one ever comes knocking on the door for you. Maybe you suck at being gay," Garrison shouts back.

Wow. Who needs enemies when you've got family like him?

"And maybe you suck at being a human," Maddox grounds out before he swings open the door. The second he sees me, he slumps against the door and frowns. "Did I forget something in your truck?"

I shake my head and step closer to the door. "Well, hello to you too, but to answer your question, no, I have a problem."

He looks off into the house and then back at me. It's then I notice how his body is slumping and the defeated look on his face. "Can't it wait until the next time I see you in town?"

"If you don't let me in, there won't be a next time." I look out at his yard and the rapidly falling snow, not wanting to admit the next part. "I ran my truck into a ditch, and I can't get it out."

Maddox stands and leans forward, looking out in the same direction I was looking. "Did you walk here?"

"Yeah, and I'm freezing my nuts off, so if you could let me in and get warmed up, I would appreciate it. Maybe your brother can give me a hand."

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He steps back out of my way and scoffs. “Doubtful. His blood alcohol is probably at least three times the legal limit.” We switch places, and he steps out onto the porch before coming back inside and closing the door. “And by the looks of how fast that snow is falling, I’d say we’re going to get a foot in under an hour. Why don’t you get warmed up, and we’ll figure something out? It may be my turn to host a sleepover.”

I swear I hear him mutter something like, ‘it’s like the world is trying to keep us together,’ but I can’t be sure.

Maddox motions for me to follow him into the smoke-filled living room, where I cough and wave the smoke out of my face. “Sorry, my brother was trying to burn down the house while I was gone.”

Garrison, standing in the kitchen, flips his brother off and storms out, leaving us alone.

“He’s an asshole on his best days, and today isn’t one of them. Once the smoke cleared, I was going to make myself a sandwich. Do you want one?”

Hell, if I’m going to be here for a while, I guess I better eat something while it’s being offered.

“Sounds good.” I follow Maddox into the kitchen, where the window above the sink is open. He grabs a baking sheet and tries to use it to get the smoke out quicker. Or at least that’s what I assume he’s doing. He looks like an injured bird trying to take flight. “Give me that.” I snag it out of his hands.

“I’m fully capable,” he grumbles.

I look over my shoulder as I try to get the smoke out of the room. It’s so smokey that I’m surprised the smoke detector didn’t go off. “Maybe, but I can’t stand here and watch you flap around and fall over.”

“Yeah, yeah, make fun of me. We’ve been apart for all of five minutes without you giving me shit. I’ll be back. I’m going to make sure G isn’t drinking himself into a coma.”

“Take your time,” I tell him, coughing as I swipe at the smoke-filled air.

The room is almost cleared by the time Maddox comes back into the kitchen. His face is red, and his brows are pulled low as he steps up to the counter and pulls out a loaf of bread.

Maddox turns and looks at me with wide eyes. “What about your poor dog?”

Yeah, poor Harry. “He has plenty of food and water. The only problem is he can’t let himself out, so whenever I do get home, there’s going to be a big mess for me to clean up.”

Mad wrinkles his nose at me. “I don’t envy you.”

“If I had known, I would have brought him with me.” The poor guy is going to think I abandoned him. I’ll have to cook him a nice steak when I get home tomorrow.

“I hope you like turkey,” he murmurs.

“Turkey’s fine. I’m not picky.” I pause and then decide to ask what I want to know. I’m not going to stop being me just because I’m in his house. “How’s your brother?”

Mad's eyes flick up to mine before he ducks inside the refrigerator and pulls out a package of cheese and turkey. "He's pissed that he can't go to the bar due to the weather."

When he mentioned his brother being a drunk, I didn't put much stock in it, but now I'm thinking he might be right. I don't often go to The Ice Box, but every time I'm there, so is Garrison.

"He's going to be unbearable to be around. It's too bad he wasn't at one of his women's houses and got stuck there." Maddox slams a knife into a jar of mayonnaise and slaps it on a piece of bread. He holds up a piece of bread, and I shake my head. "Maybe he'll be better with you here." He shakes his head, and a dry laugh leaves him. "I bet you wish you were anywhere else but here."

He's not wrong. I do wish I was at home with my Netflix on binging my favorite show. "Do you have Netflix here?" I ask instead of answering him.

Mad lets out a sigh while shaking his head. "G might have it. I don't know. Like I told you, I don't watch much TV. By the time I have any downtime, I'm ready for bed."

"You don't have any help here?"

"It's just me and my horses." The smile he directs my way lights up his entire face. It's obvious, Maddox loves his horses.

I look toward where I saw Garrison storm off earlier. "Your brother doesn't help at all?"

"Not if he can help it. Usually, he's passed out, or he's not home." He shrugs it off like it's no big deal.

Why does he let his brother take advantage of him when he seems like he needs help? What I took for pain yesterday may be exhaustion. I'm not sure why I care, but I do. A little bit. Only a tiny smidge. Life in Alaska isn't easy, and doing it alone, even harder.

Mad sets a sandwich in front of me. "Is Colby Jack cheese, okay? I forgot to ask you."

"Wow, you're fancy. All I eat is plain ol' American cheese." I take the sandwich from him and take a bite. It might be the best damn turkey sandwich I've ever had. Or maybe it's because I'm starving, and anything would taste good. I don't tell him that, though. "It's..." I shrug, playing it off. "It's edible."

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“Good,” he opens a cabinet and points inside. “If you want some chips, they’re in there.”

I expect for him to walk away—or hobble away, I guess—but instead, Maddox rests his ass on the edge of the counter and shoves his lunch in his mouth.

Unwilling to leave, I lean on the counter a few feet away. There’s nothing but silence as we stand and watch each other. It’s awkward as fuck, but I have a feeling this is the norm for him.

Maddox finishes off his food like he hasn’t eaten in a week and clears his throat. “I can feel how bored you are already from here. I’ll try not to be a shitty host.” His eyes flick up to mine. “Even though I didn’t expect a guest.”

“Neither did I, but I made do.”

“That you did, and that’s why I’m trying. I’ll warn you now that my couch isn’t nearly as comfortable as yours.”

“Duly noted.” Wanting to get him out of this strange funk he’s in, I blurt out the first thing that comes to mind. “How about we talk about the guys we’ve slept with in this town?”

“Easy,” he says, jaw tight. “None.”

“What?” I sputter. “How is that possible?”

“Because it’s a small town, and I don’t know anyone else who’s gay. There’s no way in hell I’d hit on someone, and then the whole town finds out about it. How many have you slept with?”

“Two,” I shrug. “I wouldn’t say they’re gay per se, but more like curious, or they don’t have many options.”

He nods like what I said makes sense, but he doesn’t speak for a long moment. “What you said before about them not thinking I’m a freak.”

“I never said you weren’t a freak because you are,” I laugh, but when I see he isn’t joking, I sober. “You’re not a freak, and they don’t look at you any differently than they do anyone else. The town of Polar Bear doesn’t care that you’re gay.” He cocks his head with one eyebrow up. “Okay, the vast majority of the community could care less. There are always assholes, but you should pay them no mind.”

“Easier said than done.” Mad looks over his shoulder and then back to me. His fingers twitch at his sides. “Are you telling me you don’t find it difficult to live in Polar Bear as a gay man?”

I’m not expecting that question from his mouth. If he wants to talk about our love for men, here is not the place. I want it to be in a relaxed environment even though I normally can’t stand the man. “Can we sit down to have this conversation? This isn’t something for the kitchen.”

Mad doesn’t answer me. Instead, he shuffles off to sit on the couch in the living room with his legs outstretched on the cushions. “How about here?”

“Works for me,” I answer as I lower myself into a broken recliner across from him. When I look up, he’s staring at me. I’m not sure if it’s because I’ve yet to answer his question or if it’s because I’m in his space.

“I don’t find it difficult for the same reason you do. Well, I’m sure you find it frustrating that it seems like we are the only gay men in town, but your problem stems from somewhere else.” He nods but doesn’t say anything. “I can’t say how many know I’m gay, but I don’t hide it. For those that don’t like it, tough shit. I don’t have space in my life for negativity or for people who are narrow-minded in their beliefs.”

“How did you get that mindset?” He asks quietly.

“My parents, I guess,” I shrug. “They have an open mind about everyone and everything.”

Looking away, his shoulders slump forward. “I don’t know what that’s like.”

How is the man sitting before me, who used to be so good at everything, so out of tune with reality? I thought he had everything.

“This is my opinion, and it might be wrong, but I think a great deal of your reservations stem from your family not accepting who you are. If you give everyone else a chance, they’ll show you they accept you for who you are.”

His gaze snaps to mine. “Why are you being nice to me?”

This is a complete one-eighty from the way I normally am with him—or was. I can’t remember the last time we had any type of conversation. “Because I’d hate to be in your shoes. I’m not ashamed of my sexuality, and you shouldn’t be either.”

“Easier said than done. You’re the first person I’ve known longer than a night who makes me feel like I’m normal.” He blows out a breath and looks to the ceiling. “When I kissed you, and you pushed me away, that was my first time kissing a boy. I can’t describe the way it made me feel. I thought everything I felt was wrong, and then when you outed me at the party, I wasn’t prepared for the whole town to see the

video of it. It was a very dark time in my life. Because I was a teenage boy, I felt like everything in the world was taken away from me. I was the outcast after everyone loving me. It wasn't something I was used to."

Damn, now I feel bad for outing him, but there's nothing I can do about it now.

"Fuck, I can't do this right now," he stands with his crutches. He's moving down the hall as he speaks. "I'm going to see if G has Netflix and can hook you up."

It's not like this is easy for me either. It's hard to get over a hate spanning over twenty years, but for the sake of the lost gay boy inside of Maddox, I'm trying to push past all the emotions I've felt for two decades and consider how he felt after learning all this new information.

MADDOX

Chance clears his throat and moves around the recliner he's been in all night. "I appreciate you taking me in and not leaving me outside to the elements."

I can't help but chuckle. The way we talk, we sound like stone-cold killers. "I wouldn't leave you out there in a snowstorm. Maybe if it was the middle of summer, though."

"Yeah," he smiles, shaking his head like he doesn't believe me. "This chair is not sleep-worthy. Do you think I could sleep in his room?" He nods toward where Garrison is passed out on the couch beside me.

"This is his bedroom." I grimace. "He sleeps on the couch. It may be why he tries to sleep at the places of the women he picks up."

He looks down the hall with drawn brows. "I thought you had a second bedroom."

I want to laugh in his face, but I'm tired and just want to go to bed, so I keep my mouth shut for the sake of hopefully getting to bed soon.

"Does this tiny shack look like it would hold multiple bedrooms?"

He shrugs, looking down the hall. "It's not like I've been snooping through your place. I have no idea. I saw multiple doors down the hall when I went to the bathroom, and I assumed."

“Ah, you know what they say—” Plus, I know I mentioned my brother sleeping on the couch.

“Don’t finish that,” he stops me. “I’m fully aware of what an ass I am. But seriously, as much as I hate to say it, your place is nice. It’s in no way a shack.”

Chance complimenting my house shocks me. “Thanks,” I say awkwardly. Even to my own ears, it sounds strange. “You have a nice place as well. Isn’t it surprising how well we did for ourselves? Coming from nothing, every success is a celebration.”

“Damn, Mad. That’s profound, and you’re right. We have done well.”

I nod, agreeing. “I don’t have another bed, though. I do have another bedroom, but there’s nothing in there but boxes.” I look down at my brother and speak quietly, hoping he doesn’t wake up and hear me. “I purposely haven’t set it up because I don’t want my brother to get too comfortable. You can sleep on the floor,” his eyes narrow on me. “But the house isn’t insulated that well. It could get cold. The only other option is to sleep in my bed. It’s a king, and I can sleep on my side. I usually stay on the edge if that amounts for anything.”

His mouth flattens into a straight line. “What game are you playing at?”

“None. Feel free to sleep in the recliner or on the floor. Enjoy listening to G snore.” I turn off the TV that’s kept Chance and Garrison entertained for the night.

“Why can’t I sleep on the floor in your room?”

I stand and shrug because I hadn’t thought of that. “Sleep wherever you want, but I’m going to bed. I need to be up at sunrise to feed the animals.”

“I’m sure as hell not sleeping in here.” He looks over to my brother and curls his

upper lip. I listen as he follows me down the hall and into my bedroom. “I can’t sleep with all that noise.”

“Me either, and neither can most of his women since they rarely give him a second night,” I chuckle, closing my bedroom door. “When he doesn’t drink, he doesn’t snore.” But that rarely happens.

I grab a blanket from the end of my bed and one of my pillows and hand them to Chance. His eyes go to the floor space by the bed and then to the bed before he starts to strip off his clothes.

I flick off the light when his fingers go to the button on his jeans, not willing to fall into temptation if I see what he looks like in only his underwear.

What if he sleeps in the nude?

Nope. Not going there.

I can’t forget. On my floor is the boy who ruined high school for me.

Slipping under the blankets, I sigh, finally able to relax after a day full of being in close proximity to Chance. I’m almost asleep when I feel the bed dip.

“What are you doing?” I groan sleepily.

The bed bounces some more before he finally settles. “The floor is cold and uncomfortable, and you offered to let me sleep in your bed, so I’m taking you up on it.”

I flip my pillow over and punch it for good measure. I just want to sleep. “Fine, whatever. Just stop moving.”

“You’re cranky when you’re tired.” His tone is full of amusement.

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I'm also cranky when I'm sexually frustrated. Add the two together, and I'm like a moody teenage girl. Having Chance in my bed is not something I ever thought would happen, and I'm not prepared for how it feels to have him in my space.

"Alright, alright, I can take the hint. Go to sleep, Sleeping Beauty. I'll keep my trap shut."

"Thanks," I yawn and pull the comforter up to my chin.

My body starts to relax, and my eyes become heavy. "Your bed is comfortable," Chance says in awe.

I turn over to look at him in the dark room. I can't see him, so I know he can't see the daggers I'm trying to shoot out of my eyes at him to shut. The. Fuck. Up.

I try to center myself by taking a breath so I don't breathe fire on him like a pissed-off dragon and kill him as he lies next to me. "Did you think I sleep on a bed of hay?"

"No, of course not, but this is damn comfortable. I might ask you in the morning where you got it so that I can get one. I haven't even fallen asleep, and I know I'm going to get the best sleep of my life here in this bed."

"You can ask whatever you want tomorrow. The keyword to that sentence is tomorrow." I lean forward and spit out the rest of my words, not hiding how pissed off I am. "If you open your mouth one more time, I'm going to slit your throat and ruin my nice comfy bed."

I feel the bed shake before I hear him. That asshole is laughing at me, and there's no way in hell I'm going to let him get away with it. Slamming my hand on the base of my lamp, it turns on to reveal a very shocked Chance. I roll over and hover over him. His face transforms from wide eyes and mouth in an 'O' to flushed cheeks and eyes that smolder.

He breathes my name into the air, and his lips brush against mine. I'm shocked by the daring move, although I shouldn't be since he blew me while I was at his house.

Leaning down, I take his bottom lip between my teeth and tug. Pulling back, I lean on my arm and grasp his chin with my other hand. "Did you do that so I wouldn't kill you?"

"Me? You bit my lip," he accuses as one hand cups the side of my hip.

"You brushed your mouth to mine first; therefore, you started it. What I want to know is if you only did it so I won't kick you out of my bed."

He licks his lips, his eyes never once leaving my mouth. "I did it because you're hot, and I'm very drawn to your mouth even when you're spitting vitriol at me."

Internally, I roll my eyes.

"What big words you speak," I taunt him.

"I can show you something else that's big." He may not be showing me, but I definitely feel something growing against my thigh, and it's only getting bigger. "I've heard hate sex is hot, and it doesn't have to mean anything. In fact, we might hate each other more afterward."

Rubbing my leg against his rock-hard erection, my lips angle up. "I wouldn't mind

loathing you a little more and owning your ass for one night.”

He juts his hips up. “Is that a dare?”

Moving back on my knees, I bring the covers with me and yank his underwear down. His cock springs free and slaps against his stomach. It’s thick with a vein running up the side that I want to lick but won’t. No, I’m going to dominate Chance.

I move to rid myself of my underwear until I have them at my knees, and my ankle gives a little twinge. Okay, more like a lot, but I try not to let it show.

His gaze goes to my leg. “Fuck, your ankle. You don’t have to be all growly.” His eyes are laughing at me, letting me know my plan is turning to shit.

Kicking my leg out, I roll onto my back and quickly remove my boxer briefs. “Get on your hands and knees,” I demand, gripping his hips and forcing him to turn over. Chance’s ass wiggles in the air, almost like it’s goading me. It’s round and firm and damn fine. I can’t wait to get my hands on it.

I grab the lube and a condom and slip it on before getting up on my knees. I slather my aching cock, run my fingers around his hole, and slip one finger in easily and pull it out. Greedy, I line myself up while I hold him by the nape of his neck. My head pushes through his tight ring, and then I slam in the rest of the way. Chance lets out a loud moan as our skin slaps as I pound into him.

Gripping onto his hip, my fingers dig into his flesh, knowing I’ll more than likely leave bruises, and it gives me a high like no other knowing I’ll leave my mark on him for longer than the moment we’re having.

I take out every ounce of aggression I have on him. This feels good. He feels good, and that knowledge pisses me off. Where is the asshole I thought he was?

I pound into him. In and out. In and out until my balls start to tingle. My hand presses into the area between his shoulder blades and forces his face into the mattress.

Chance moans and his body starts to shake underneath mine, spurring me on. He's close. "Fuck yourself with your hand," I demand, slapping his ass.

He clenches around me, letting me know he likes it when I slap him. I love the sight of my handprint on his ass. I smack him again, and this time I let go.

My cock jerks, and Chance's walls start to squeeze around me. Hot spurts of cum stream and fill the condom as Chance's body tenses and then turns to putty beneath me.

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Pulling out, I wish my cum was leaking from his ass, but I'll take slapping him on the ass again.

Splaying out on my bed, I remove the condom and throw it in the trash beside my bed. Closing my eyes, I embrace the moment.

I feel Chance shift beside me, and his arm goes around my waist. "Was I right, or was I right?"

"About?" I lift his arm and drop it onto the bed, letting him know exactly what this was. It was nothing. Just two guys letting go of their frustrations for the night and having a good time.

"That hate sex is good. Let me rephrase that. Hate sex is downright fucking fantastic."

I have to agree.

Maybe, just maybe, I hate Chance Reed a little less now.

8

CHANCE

I wake to the smell of coffee and bacon filling the air. Two of my favorite smells, and the best part is I didn't have to make it myself.

Rolling out of bed, I wince and then smile at the pain from last night. Maddox took me by surprise, and I wouldn't mind him doing it again.

After a pit stop to the bathroom, I wander into the kitchen, where Maddox is leaning his ass against the counter while staring down at his phone and chewing on a piece of bacon.

I go straight for the coffeepot. I pour myself a cup and take a long sip.

Mad lifts his eyes, and they follow me as I take another swallow. "Not a morning person?" He chuckles.

"How are you one?" My voice cracks, and I clear it. "You rolled out of bed when?"

"Five." He smirks and raises one eyebrow. "When's the last time you saw five in the morning?"

I blow out a breath and look up at the ceiling. "Um... high school? I'm not sure."

Looking down at his phone and back up to me, his blue eye bore into mine. "Is this going to be awkward now?"

"It doesn't have to be. We can pretend like it never happened," I tell him, even though I want it to happen again and again and again.

His gaze goes to my lips and then meets mine.

"Are you going to kiss me again?" I ask, wanting it more than I should.

"I was thinking about it until you said that like a cocky asshole. Now... I'll pass. Why don't I go wake up G and see if he can help you with your truck?"

“You don’t have to do that now. We can wait for him to wake up.” I don’t want to leave. Not yet, at least. I thought I’d have a couple more hours before we got to this point.

Leaning forward on the crutches, he throws bacon on his plate. “Don’t you want to get back to Harry?”

“Of course, I do.”

“Okay, then I’ll get Garrison to help you.” He starts to move past me and then stops, looking straight ahead. “I guess I’ll see you...”

“Soon,” I finish for him. “Let’s get through the next couple of days and then meet up.”

“Meet up?” His brows knit. “I know I rocked your world last night, but I don’t think it’s a good idea for a repeat performance.”

“You know what? I’m not going to argue with you. Your bullshit is giving me a headache. Tell your brother I’ll meet him outside.” I move to push past him and almost pause when he doesn’t stop me. Storming over to the front door, I rush to put my shoes on, nearly falling on my face. I’m zipping up my coat when Garrison pushes his feet into his boots and looks at me blearily.

“Did he already piss you off this morning?” He grumbles.

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“Yeah, but I shouldn’t be surprised. He’s been doing it from the day I meet him.” I shake my head in frustration. “I thought things would be different since I hadn’t talked to him in ten years, but he’s the same...”

“Infuriating asshole?” He finishes for me.

“Something like that. I’m sorry Maddox woke you, but I need to get out of here and back to my place.” I shove my hands in the pockets of my coat and look down the hall to Mad’s bedroom. “If you can pull me out of the ditch, that would be great.”

“Sure. Anything to get me out of the house. I don’t know what put Mad in such a piss poor mood, but I think I’ll be staying away for a few days.”

Interesting.

I wonder what Maddox’s face would look like if I turned up on his doorstep when his brother isn’t here.

“Whenever you’re ready,” Garrison opens the front door.

His eyes narrow as he looks behind me over my shoulder. A slow smirk slips over his face, and he lifts his middle finger in the air. When I look back, the place is empty.

“Forget him. He’s an asshole most days,” he says as I follow him out into the bright morning sun. “I swear he tries to bang around the house as much as possible to wake me up every damn morning.” He slaps the side of the truck. “Get in. We should get out of here before Mad thinks I’m trying to steal you from him.”

“Oh, there’s nothing to steal unless it’s hate and loathing.”

He frowns at me. “Aren’t they the same thing?”

“Not where we’re concerned. There are all kinds of degrees for us going from dislike to the before-mentioned loathing. It’s been a lifelong thing between us.”

Garrison taps his fingers on the steering wheel. “I know it’s not my place to say, and Mad would kill me if he knew I said this to you, but he could use a friend. While we have our problems, I do see how lonely he’s been over the years. Why do you think I hang around so much?”

I’m not sure if I should answer that or not. If I respond honestly, he’ll probably kick me out of the truck and not help me. But then I think maybe there’s some truth in what he’s saying. Maybe Garrison is trying to help out his brother in the best way he knows how, even if he’s doing a shit job.

“I’m not sure we could ever be friends,” I tell him truthfully. While Mad might be good for an occasional release, I’m not sure there’s a possibility for more.

We pull up past my truck and then backing up, so we’re only a couple of feet in front of it. Garrison puts his truck into park and turns to look at me. “Have you ever heard of the saying there’s a thin line between love and hate?”

“I have, but I can promise you there’s no love between us.” I start to get out of the truck until he speaks.

“Maybe just try to remember how lost you were in high school and then try to think about how it would feel if you thought everyone in town hated you and thought you were a freak.”

I have thought about it after Maddox mentioned it, and I can't imagine how he felt. I understand why he hates me, and it makes me reflect on my own feelings and why Mad had to be the best back then. He didn't have anything else. At least I had the support of my parents, even when I was number two. Mad only had the support of his peers and community, and he felt like he lost all of that when they found out he was gay.

"I'll think about it, and before we step out into the cold, I want to say thank you for helping me."

"It's fine," he smiles, looking so much like his brother. "I would have helped yesterday if the weather didn't intervene on my behalf."

I don't mention how he was drunk and couldn't since he is helping me. I hop out of the truck and follow Garrison to the back as he hooks a chain around my bumper.

"Why'd you run off the road?"

"An elk ran in front of me, and I didn't want to ruin my front end, so I swerved, not expecting the road to be as bad as it already was, and here I am," I pause and then laugh. "I sound like a tourist. I blame my mental state on your brother."

"Fair," he chuckles. "Okay, get in your truck, and let's get you out of here."

I do as he says, surprised he's not being an asshole. Maybe it's just a sibling rivalry thing.

His truck's taillights light up, and then my truck jerks. With my foot on the gas, I steer as Garrison pulls me out of the ditch in only a matter of minutes. Once I'm back on the road, I hop out and walk over to his window.

“Thanks. The next time I see you at The Ice Box, I’ll buy you a drink.”

A grin breaks out over his face. He looks so much like his brother it’s uncanny, except Garrison doesn’t look at me like he wants to kill me. I wonder if Mad will ever look at me like that. “I’ll take you up on it. See you around,” he says before he shifts out of park and drives off.

I guess it’s time to go home, clean up Harry’s mess, and binge more of Schitt’s Creek.

9

MADDOX

1 Week Later

Pulling the lasagna out of the oven, I startle and almost burn myself when there's a knock at my front door. No one comes to my house ever. Placing the dish on top of the stove, I walk to the front door with barely a limp. My ankle is almost one hundred percent and with it wrapped up, I can get around almost like normal.

There's another knock on the door. Whoever's outside is impatient for some damn reason. "I'm coming," I shout.

I swing open the door to find Chance standing there with a lazy smirk on his face. "What are you doing here?"

"Well," he draws the word out. "I figured you were home alone since I was in town earlier, and I saw your brother at the bar. I thought we could hang out. What do you say?"

Crossing my arms over my chest, I watch as Chance eyes me up and down. "I'd say I don't know my brother's code to Netflix."

He steps forward and runs his cold hands up my chest. Only they don't feel cold. They light my blood on fire. "I didn't come to watch TV, Mad."

“Oh,” I draw the word out this time. “I see what this is. You came for a booty call. Did you not have enough gas to make it to Fairbanks or any other neighboring town?”

“I have plenty of gas, asshole, but I liked what we did when I was here a week ago. I haven’t been able to stop thinking about it.”

I don’t buy what he’s saying for a second. “Is that right? Then why has it taken you a week to come by?”

“Because I’ve been waiting to know for certain your brother would be gone.” He pushes his way inside and closes the front door behind him. “Like I said earlier, I saw him at the bar and took my opportunity.”

I round on him and push him up against the door. “And what if I don’t want to give you an opportunity to get off?”

“Then I’ll leave. I’d never make you do anything you don’t want to do. If you say go, I’ll go. But I really hope you don’t.”

I look him up and down. He looks good. Damn good. He’s in tight jeans with black leather boots and a black Henley that showcases the trim and muscular body underneath.

“Not to be cocky, but I don’t think you want me to leave either.”

My eyes narrow as he licks his lips as if he knows exactly what he’s doing to me. I want to lick those lips and to feel them on other parts of my body, but I don’t give in easily. “I’m not so sure about that.”

Putting his hands on my shoulders, Chance pushes me to the side. “Smells like

dinner. What are we having?"

"I'm having lasagna. By myself," I add on since Chance can't seem to take the hint that I don't want him here. I am not a booty call, and I won't start a precedent for it either.

"Do you like eating alone because I know I sure don't," he says over his shoulder before he turns around to look at me. "Come on, Mad. One dinner. We can eat and talk, and if by the end of the meal you don't want me here, then I'll leave. Promise."

What is he playing at?

"Fine," I groan, giving in, and head to the kitchen. I cut a large piece of lasagna for myself and throw on a piece of garlic bread on my plate before taking it to the living room.

I've barely taken a bite when Chance sits next to me on the couch. If he's going to barge in on me, the least he can do is give me some space.

"You're walking better," he mumbles around a bite of food. "What did the doctor say?"

I set my fork on my plate in my lap. "Just that it was a bad sprain. Although he did say that he thought it looked broken, but the X-Rays said differently." I fork up another bite but pause. "I was going to bring back your crutches once I was sure I don't need them."

He swats my idea away like it's no big deal. "I don't need them at the moment."

"I'm sure I would have made it a whole hell of a lot worse if I'd tried walking around on it until I could get to the doctor, so thanks."

“This is good,” he holds up his fork before shoving it in his mouth. “Did you make it?”

“It sure as hell isn’t a store-bought,” I laugh. Those things are absolutely trash. They don’t even taste like lasagna. This is weird, and I want to get to the bottom of why he’s acting like we’re friends when we’ve never been friends a day in our lives. “What are you really doing here, Chance?”

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“Exactly what I said. I thought we could hang out. There’s nothing wrong with that, is there?”

“Yeah, kind of. Just because I fucked you doesn’t mean I want to have meals with you or, hell, even talk to you.”

Chance leans back, and for a brief second, there’s a look of pain on his face. Then he completely shuts down. He doesn’t speak, and neither do I as we eat our dinner in complete and utter silence.

Once he’s done, Chance gets up and takes his plate into the kitchen. I watch him. Tracking every move he makes, and I’m surprised he doesn’t go straight for the front door after putting his plate in the sink. Instead, he turns on the water and washes his plate before putting it in the drying rack.

When he’s finished, he comes back and sits down on the couch again. “Look, Mad, I can’t take back what happened to you in high school, and I understand why you were mad back then, but isn’t it time to give up on the grudge after over a decade?”

Looking him dead in the eye, I want him to know I’m telling him the truth. “I feel it’s safe to say I can hold it until the day that I die.”

“Okay, sure, but do you want to do that? It’s not good to hold on to hate for that long. It will fester and rot your insides.”

“And what about your hate for me?”

“I’ve thought long and hard since I found you that day, and I realized there’s no reason for me to hate you now. You’ve done nothing to me personally. I could have studied harder in school to get better grades, and I could have trained more to have a better slap shot, but all of that doesn’t matter now. That was over a decade ago, and I’m ready to let go of all of it because I know it’s not healthy. When we spent that time together, I got to know you, and as much as I didn’t want to admit it then, you’re not a bad person.”

Damn him. He’s making all kinds of sense tonight, and I don’t like it.

He lets out a deflated breath and angles himself toward me. “Look, Mad, I’m sorry, okay? I truly am. It was a shitty thing to out you, and if I could take it back, I would, but we both know it’s not possible. Forgive the me I was back in high school and look at the man I am now. The one who’s sitting in front of you saying sorry and wants to be your friend.”

“Is that all you want? To be my friend?”

“No,” he shakes his head. “If we can get over our past emotions, I think we could be more if you’re willing. I know I’m crazy attracted to you, and our chemistry is off the charts. Why fight it?”

I’m not sure. What’s the worst that could happen? We might end up hating each other and avoiding the other for the next ten years or more?

I shake my head and try to fight the grin that’s about to take over my face. “I knew you were going to get addicted to my dick and come running back.”

He gets on his knees and leans into me until I’m flat on my back. “I’m not going to lie. It was some of the best sex I’ve ever had, and if it was because it was indeed hate sex and not because we’re good together in bed, I could always find or do something

to piss you off and make you mad at me.”

Now I can’t fight it and burst out laughing. He’s absurd.

“See, I knew you secretly liked me,” he leans down and nips my bottom lip. “Stop fighting and let this happen.”

In that moment, I give up the fight. At least for one more night. What’s it going to hurt? I’ll get off, and I can kick him out of my bed if he pisses me off.

I lean forward and crush my mouth to his. Our teeth gnash together as we fight for dominance. I keep pushing until my knees are digging into the couch on each side of his hips.

Chance breaks away and kisses along my jaw and down my neck. “I never would have guessed you’re the dominant type. I always imagined it would be me owning your ass.”

I grin against his cheek. “Not a chance in hell.”

Chance pulls his mouth away from my rapidly heating skin. “Why are you always a cocky asshole?”

“I don’t know, but if you don’t like it, you can leave,” I throw back, grinding my cock against the zipper of his jeans. I’m still not convinced this isn’t a bad idea.

His brows furrow, and then a wicked grin spreads across his lips. “Is this because it’s almost your bedtime?”

I move to get off him, but Chance holds me to him by wrapping his arms and legs around my body.

“Hey, I’m just kidding. I like the back and forth between us.” His mouth brushes along the shell of my ear, and his rough words make me harder. “In fact, it turns me on. Don’t tell me you don’t get a little rush from sparring with me.”

I do, but now isn’t the time for talking, and I tell him so as I sit up to pull off my shirt and throw it to the floor. Next, I go for the button and zipper on his jeans. No fun can ever be had with clothes on. In no time, I’ve got all of our clothes off, and I’m lowering myself back on top of Chance.

“Back in high school, I hoped you had a pencil dick,” he says while wrapping his large, calloused hand around my shaft. “But now,” his eyes flick up to meet mine. His pupils nearly dominate the chocolatey brown. “I’m grateful I was wrong.”

Running my hands along the sides of his torso, I move my hips along with the steady strokes his hand makes, wanting more friction.

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My hand grips his cock and squeezes the tip. “Did you by any chance bring a condom and some lube with you?” I’m ready to be inside him and don’t want to take this to my bedroom.

“Yeah, in the back pocket of my jeans,” he answers while still stroking me. Chance stretches to reach his jeans on the floor by the side of the couch and grabs the essentials. I want to say something about him being overly confident about me letting him in, but right now, I only want to be balls deep inside of him and don’t want to fight about it. I can do that later.

I can’t take my eyes off him as he rips the foil of the condom and sheathes my dick in the latex. I’m transfixed as I watch him squeeze out the single-serve application of lube onto the condom and then smear what’s leftover around his tight bud.

It’s been a week since I’ve been inside of him, but I don’t bother to prep him. I’m too impatient. Pushing his legs up and then out, I circle my tip along the outer rim and watch as his body relaxes while his eyes darken further.

I push inside, and once my head has breached his opening, I thrust in to the hilt and groan.

“Fucking hell,” Chance growls. His hands trace along my torso, arms, back, and anywhere else he can get his hands on me as I piston my hips and sink deeper inside of him.

His ass clenches around me with each intrusion, and I know when I hit his prostate. Chance’s back bows off the couch as he lets out a long and low hum.

“More,” he urges me. I do what he asks and quicken my pace until all reality starts to slip away, and it’s just me and Chance and our bodies joining. I watch as his hand snakes down his lean torso and across his abs that are begging to be licked and furiously starts jacking himself off. Leaning down, I take his mouth in a brutal kiss. I’m lost to the sensation of our tongues sliding against the other and his hand brushing against me as he chases his pleasure. Rearing back, I grip his leg, pushing him to an angle that I know will drive him wild. I don’t stop my measured strokes until I feel his entire body start to shake, and the noises he’s making have me nearly coming.

Chance’s eyes fly open as his body arches, and white streams of cum shoot out on his stomach and hand, and on my stomach. I can’t hold back any longer. I pump twice more before I still and unload inside of him and the condom.

My entire body feels alive and yet fully sated at the same time, something I’ve only felt with him. I want to stay inside him until the end of time, but I know I can’t. Instead, I slowly slide out and pull off the condom. Tying a knot in the end, I throw it away in the kitchen trash. When I come back into the living room, Chance is gone, but his clothes are still on the floor, making me go in search of him.

I find Chance in my bedroom, in my bed, reading one of my books. “Why don’t you make yourself comfortable?”

He doesn’t look up from the book he’s reading as he says, “I thought you’d want to cuddle after the ass pounding you gave me.”

I move around to the other side of the bed.

“Or I might want you gone.”

“No, you may think you want that, but you don’t. Now come get into bed and tell me

about this book.”

I look to the cover and see it's *Winter's Orbit* by Everina Maxwell as I slip under the covers. “I haven't read that one yet, but it came highly recommended. You can read it if you want.”

Chance puts the book down and reaches over to drag me across the bed until every inch of my body is touching his. “I guess I'll have to until I can convince you to put a TV in your bedroom and that *Schitt's Creek* is hands down the best show on television.

“I never would have guessed you were a snuggler,” I murmur, putting my arm around his waist.

“Yeah, well,” he sounds unsure, making me look up to his face that's clear of the usual scowl I'm used to seeing. “I'm not like this with most guys. Maybe it's because I'm used to being the man on top, and I'm feeling a little bit vulnerable.”

I rear back to look at Chance, and he starts laughing, throwing his head back, his entire body shaking. “Oh my God, you should have seen the look on your face. No, I'm not feeling vulnerable, but that I can be myself with you.” He's quiet for a moment as his dark eyes scan my face. His hand comes up to cup my jaw, and his thumb rubs along the stubble of my chin. “While I do like to bottom, I also like to be on top sometimes. Is that something you'd be interested in?”

“I can say with one hundred percent certainty that I'm not ready for that yet. But maybe someday.” I can barely believe we've called a truce to a lifelong grudge, but something inside of me shifted when Chance apologized. I believe him, and I can't say I would have done much differently back in high school. Okay, I wouldn't have outed him, but I would have pushed him away if I was confused about my sexuality. I probably would have done something horrible to him since he's had this vendetta for

me since elementary, even if it was wrong. We don't always make the best decisions when we're young, and we shouldn't be punished for them for the rest of our lives.

"Okay." He shifts and runs a hand down my back. "I can work with that. I'm in no hurry. Plus, I like the way you fuck me." He leans forward and brushes the lightest kiss to my lips I've ever received. It's somehow nice coming from him. "I'm just thankful you opened the door and let me in."

Yes, strangely enough, so am I.

Who would have ever thought I'd be tangled in bed with my enemy instead of in a heated fight?

Certainly not me.

10

CHANCE

One Month Later

Arriving at Maddox's house, I wonder what he's going to do when I tell him my plans, or maybe I should say our plans. So far, I'm the one who's initiated everything between us. Maddox hasn't dropped by my place unexpectedly, no matter how many times I wish he would.

Before I can get out of my truck, the front door opens to a smiling Maddox. Maybe this won't be as difficult as I thought. At least he's happy to see me.

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“What are you doing here? I thought I’d see you tomorrow?” He greets me.

Stepping out, I shake my head at him. “You can see me today and tomorrow. But I thought we’d go out and do something today, and maybe if I’m lucky, you’ll let me stay the night.” I move up the stairs and kiss the corner of his upturned mouth.

He steps away and holds the front door open for me. “Why do I have a feeling I might not like whatever you have planned?”

His defense is already up, which is natural for him. “Because you like to fight with me. Now, why don’t you listen to what I have to say and give it a chance.”

“Fine,” he rolls his eyes at me. “Hit me with whatever you got, but who’s saying I don’t already have plans today?” He smirks, walking through his house to his bedroom.

This asshole is fucking with me, and I don’t appreciate it. “Because you don’t have plans with me,” I say, slamming the door behind me.

“It still doesn’t mean I don’t have plans. Who said I’m done with my horses?” He looks over his shoulder and finally takes in what I’m wearing. His face scrunched up in confusion. “Don’t tell me we’re going to look for Sally.”

“I don’t have a death wish,” I laugh, grabbing his snow pants that are hanging over the arm of a chair by the front door. “Dress warm.”

He starts to do as I say, which is surprising, but stops. “You’re not going to tell me

where we're going?"

A smile tugs at my lips, but I fight it. "I'll tell you if you really want to know."

He sits down on his bed, pulling on his pants. "Of course, I want to know. The last time I wasn't prepared—"

"And look what happened," I interrupted, unwilling to hear what was about to come out of his mouth.

"Right, but I'd rather not go through that again to..." he clams up and rushes to finish getting dressed.

"Why don't you finish that sentence?" I urge him.

Mad shuffles around his bedroom, glancing over at me standing in the doorway every few seconds. "If I say what I was about to say, it will sound too... serious."

I step inside. "It's okay. As long as you mean it, I won't read too much into it."

He lets out a humorless laugh. "You say that now."

I move to him and place my hands on his shoulders. "I promise I won't."

"Fine," he huffs. "It brought me, you. Okay? Are you happy now?"

Yes, I am indeed happy and already reading into his words just as he said I would. I can't help it. Maddox Blackburn just admitted there's something between us.

"I—"

“Nope,” he puts his hand up. “I see you over there, and you need to stop,” he demands.

“I didn’t say a word,” I laugh.

“No, but you want to.” He looks down at himself and then back to me. “What else do I need?”

“Everything to be outside for a good while.”

“Why are we going to be outside?” He whines. “What if I’m tired?”

“Too bad because we’re going out, and we’re going to have fun.” I grab his hand and start to drag him out of the house.

“I think we can have more fun here. Don’t you agree?” The seductive tone in his voice almost,almost has me stopping, but I continue forward until we’re out the front door.

Rounding my truck, I open the driver’s side door and hop inside. “Don’t try to distract me with sex.” His blue eyes widen for a fraction of a second before they go back to their normal state of distrust. “You can do that later.”

“Thanks for the permission, but I may not feel like it later, especially since you don’t seem willing to tell me what the hell we’re doing.”

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“We’re going to town. That’s all I’m going to say.” Because I know he’ll more than likely make me turn around, which I’m unwilling to do. Maddox needs to see with his own two eyes that no one in this town cares that he’s gay. Okay, maybe there are a few, but I want him to get over the notion that the whole town is out to get him because he’s gay when that couldn’t be further from the truth.

“You know you’re infuriating sometimes, right?” He huffs, looking out his window.

I turn to look at him and feel the corners of my mouth tip up. “I pride myself on it.”

Maddox opens his mouth every few minutes, probably wanting to ask me what we’re doing but knowing I won’t tell him.

Maddox leans forward when I pull up to the top of the hill, where a dozen cars are already parked, inspecting each one. “What are we doing here?”

“What’s it look like?” I ask as I get out of the truck. “What does everyone do here?”

“I haven’t been here since high school, so maybe it changed,” he shrugs from the passenger side.

“Well, it’s still the best place to go sledding, and I heard that they’ve got it so damn slick that you fly down the hill at lightning speed. I thought it would be something fun for us to do that’s not inside.”

“Okay,” he nods, looking down at himself and then past the cars where there’s a group of people standing around. “I don’t have a sled or anything.”

“I’ve got us covered. I brought a sled and a couple of inner tubes. You can use whichever one you want. Let’s just have fun.” I round the back of the truck with my compressor in hand and grab an inner tube.

“I’m all down for having fun, but are you sure you want to be seen with me?”

“I wouldn’t have brought you here if I had a problem in being seen with you. Stop overthinking it.” I hand him the now blown-up tube and start on the second one. “I’m using one of these.”

Maddox stands on the other side of the truck and watches each move I make, and once I’m finally airing up our fun, I round the back. “Let’s go.”

I swear he must be in shock. Maddox doesn’t say a word as he follows me to the area where everyone lines up single file to go down the hill. It’s been a long while since I’ve been sledding, but I know there’s no way in hell our first outing could resemble anything like a date.

We’re lucky there aren’t a lot of people here; otherwise, we’d have to wait forever for our turn. It takes less than five minutes for us to be in the front of the line.

With my inner tube held close to my chest, I turn to Mad. “I’ll bet you a hundred dollars that I’ll be the first one down.”

A small crack of his lips is all I get before he picks up the sled and nods. “You’re on.”

“On the count of three.” I hold up my hand with three fingers in the air. “Three, two...”

A loud chorus of “One” is yelled from behind us.

Maddox and I both throw ourselves down the hill. I go down headfirst, and when I look over, Mad is sitting on the sled directing it with the handles. We're nearly neck and neck, and it seems he realizes it the same time I do. Maddox gets on his knees and then lays down on his stomach. He's lucky this is one big ass hill; otherwise, he wouldn't have had the chance to change positions. It works to his advantage, and Mad starts to take the lead. There's nothing I can do but dip my head and try to beat him down the mountain.

Only I don't beat him.

Seriously, how does he always beat me in literally everything?

I watch as he comes to a stop and jumps off the sled, and lets out a loud whoop.

"That was awesome," he yells. "Let's do it again." He grabs his sled and starts to walk up the hill at a fast clip until he must realize I'm not following him. "What's up?"

I don't admit it hurts to once again lose to him. "I have to pay you a hundred dollars."

"Pfft, I don't want your money. I just want to do that again. Don't you?"

"A bet is a bet," I tell him, sitting on my inner tube.

"Well, let's go again," he says, walking toward me. He holds his hand out for me to take. "This time, you ride the sled. If I win again, you can pay me, but if you win, we're even. Deal?"

I take his hand and let him help me up. "You had fun?"

"Yeah, I forgot how fun this is." His brows furrow as he cocks his head to the side.

“Did you not have fun?”

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“I did. Up until I lost.” I look down and kick at the snow.

“Oh,” he pauses, and then I see his boots in front of mine. “Was I supposed to let you win?”

I grind my molars together. “No, but you have no idea what it feels like to always lose. It’s not a great feeling.”

“Hey,” he reaches forward, taking my gloved hand in his. “You won in the parent department.”

I look up into his blue eyes that hold the pain of losing his parents’ love. It’s then I realize he’s right. I am lucky. Who cares that I was second best in sports or our classes? I can’t imagine what I would have done if my parents rejected me.

“I did, and I’m sorry.” I pull him into a hug, and for a moment, he accepts it before he goes ramrod stiff and tries to pull away. “Don’t. No one cares. Look around.”

He lifts his head, and I don’t bother to look at those around us. I watch Maddox’s face as he takes in the few that are around us. His jaw relaxes, and he takes a step back.

“They...” Mad reaches down and takes my hand.

“They don’t care,” I finish for him. If I didn’t think he’d freak out, I’d kiss him because Maddox looks like the weight of the world has been lifted off of his shoulders.

Never in all the years of wanting to outdo Maddox and having him as my enemy did I ever think we'd be here. The fact that I seek him out to spend time with him now would have blown my mind before that fateful day with the bear.

I feel like I should thank her for bringing us together. If that's what we even are. I'm not sure how Mad would categorize us.

Mad pulls on my hand. "Let's see if you can beat me."

"You're on." I snatch the sled from him and run to the empty lane. Maddox is laughing behind me, clomping through the snow with the inner tube I used clutched in his hands. "Do you really think you're going to beat me on that sled?"

"I'm going to do my best." I can't help my competitive nature, especially with Mad, but after talking to him, I know I've already won.

His back leg stretches out into a lunge, and I know he's serious. It's impossible for us not to want to win against each other.

"Alright, let's do this."

We count down much the same way as last time, except this time, everyone around us joins in, and as we speed down the hill, I can hear them cheering us on. This time I win the race, but it's Mad who really wins. He finally sees that he's accepted for who he is.

"You won, so it must be the slide."

"It must be." I give him. It's strange to win and not care.

"Thanks for this." He turns to glance up the hill. "If you would have told me, I would

have fought you, but I can see now that I don't need to stay cooped up in my house having G, you, and my horses as my only interactions."

"Yeah, that's pretty sad. I mean, I'm awesome. We both know it, but it would probably be good for you to get out more."

"Well, I don't know how easily that will be for me, but I give you permission to force me out of the house." He starts to move back to the top, ready to go again.

"Does that mean this is a date?" I ask once I fall into step beside him.

He halts for a moment before he continues moving. With each second, his brows fall until I'm afraid they'll freeze that way. "Do you want to date me?"

I stare at him for a full minute before I can talk. "While the sex is amazing, I think we should step outside the bedroom, every once in a while."

"Alright," he lifts one shoulder. "We can call this a date." He says it like it's no big deal, so I try not to show a big reaction to him giving in.

For the next hour, we take turns sledding down the mountain. Not every time are we racing. It's all fun.

"Let's go grab some hot chocolate, and then we can head back to my place."

"Oh," his brows raise. "You're letting me back in your house?"

"Yeah, I think it's time. I haven't seen Sally around, so I think you're safe."

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I swear I see a shudder run through him at the mention of the bear who wanted to kill him.

He wraps his arm around my shoulder. "I guess I can come back to your place as long as she won't be there."

"Well, I can't promise you since I have no control of her, but if she's stalking the house because she smells you, we can go to your place." Fucking with him about that bear is the best part of my day most times. If you didn't know him, you'd think Maddox is a tourist with how clueless he is to wildlife. The only animals he seems to understand are his horses.

11

MADDOX

I scan the coffee shop as we walk inside. To say I'm still in shock Chance was right about no one caring is an understatement. It makes me realize I should have ventured out more through the years. There are so many things I wish I could do differently, but I'm done looking back. From now on, I'm only looking to the future. Old grudges have been eliminated, and I want to see what can become of Chance and me with this newfound freedom I feel.

"I've never been in here," I tell Chance as we walk up to the counter.

"What?" He stops dead in his tracks and looks at me with wide eyes. "How is that possible?"

“Um... I can make coffee at my house.” Isn’t that obvious?

“Yeah, but don’t you ever want a pick me up while you’re out?”

“Look, I grew up poor and got used to not wasting money. Spending at least four dollars on a cup of coffee isn’t really my thing.”

Chance glances toward the door and then back to me. “We don’t have to stay. I just thought...”

“How were you to know?” I shrug. “It’s not your fault that I’m a cheapskate.”

“I won’t make you do anything you don’t want to do, okay? If you want to leave, just say so. Plus, I asked you out today, so I’m paying.” He pauses for a moment before continuing, shuffling as the line moves forward. “You really should try their hot chocolate. It’s the best I’ve ever had.”

I nod as the couple in front of us steps to the side, and we’re up next.

“Since you’re buying, I’ll have whatever you’re having,” I tell Chance as I watch the couple take a booth on the side of the shop. It takes me a minute with the beard, but I recognize Dash Knight. He’s changed since I last saw him. He’s definitely added some muscle onto his frame. I don’t recognize the woman he’s with, but she’s beautiful. They look good together.

I feel hot breath against my ear before Chance speaks. “Are you checking out Dash?”

Twisting, I smirk as I catch his tight jaw tick. “If I was, is that you being jealous?”

“Me? Jealous?” He looks over my shoulder, staring at Dash.

“It’s okay if you are, but I can assure you I wasn’t checking him out. I was admiring how good they look together. Hell, at first, I didn’t even recognize him as Dash with the facial hair. I haven’t seen him in... years. Not since I was in high school.”

Dash used to come to all our hockey games. I’m not sure why, but maybe it’s because there’s nothing to do in this godforsaken town.

I follow Chance to sit in front of the window and take the seat across from him.

“See what you’ve been missing out on? The best hot chocolate in all of Alaska, and hot guys,” he laughs, nodding toward Dash.

“Oh, no,” I shake my head. “While the male to female population is on my side in this town, I’m not interested in the men of Polar Bear.”

His face pales, and his mouth opens and closes. “I...”

It’s then I realize what I said. It’s actually cute that Chance is upset, thinking that I’m not interested in him. I think about letting him sweat for a second, but I decide against torturing him, just this once.

Taking a deep breath, I reach forward and link my index finger with his. “I’m not interested in the other men of Polar Bear because I’ve already got the one I want.”

“You’re such an asshole making me think...” he laughs, his finger pulling on mine.

“Did you really think I would go out into public one day, and then bam, ditch you and find someone else? Someone like Dash, but who’s into guys?”

“Logically, no, but I don’t know. I put myself out there and somehow let myself be vulnerable, which is something I’m not used to.”

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“Hey,” I release his finger and then grab onto his hand. “I’ve never let myself be open to a relationship either, but I think it’s time. While I might not be one for public displays of affection, I don’t mind if eventually, people know we’re together.”

He flashes me a wide grin. “I have to say you’re surprising me.”

“What can I say? You’ve grown on me.” Even I’m shocked, but I’m not going to fight what I feel. I’m tired of being alone, with my only interaction being my drunk brother. Chance is surprisingly good company. He’s even got me watching Schitt’s Creek with him, and he’s started reading at night when he stays over.

A tall form moves to stand beside our table and speaks with a deep, gravelly voice. “Hey, guys.”

We both turn to look and find Dash standing there. “Hey,” we say in unison.

“Chance, Maddox, this is Sloane.” We both wave as he continues. “I was just telling her how crazy it is to see you two here together when you were like archenemies in high school.”

“Yeah, it’s amazing what can happen given the circumstances and time,” I laugh. “In fact,” I look at Chance and smile. “He’s my boyfriend.”

“Cool,” Sloane says with a sweet smile on her face. Her blonde hair shimmers in the sunlight. “Maybe we can all go on a double date sometime.”

“Yeah,” Chance coughs out. “Sounds like a plan.”

“Good. We were just headed out, but we’ll see you soon. You’ve got my number, right, Chance?”

“Yeah, I’ll text you, and we can set something up.”

We wave, and once Dash and Sloane are out of sight, Chance leans forward. “You’re just full of surprises today.”

“You haven’t seen anything yet.”

EPILOGUE

CHANCE

Christmas the Next Year

I feel the bed shift as Maddox turns over. He lets out a long yawn before he wraps an arm around my waist. “This bed is heaven. I’m going to have to thank Dash and Sloane for giving us a room at their lodge for Christmas.”

“Hmm. It is nice. We should find out where they got it and get one.” My words have their desired effect. Maddox leans up on his elbow and looks down at me with his brows knitted together.

“What? Why?” He opens and closes his mouth and then snaps it shut.

“You know, we’ve been shuffling back and forth between your place and mine for the last year, and I thought maybe it was time for us to take our relationship to the next level and move in together.”

When he doesn’t say anything and continues to stare down at me, I lean up and press

my mouth to his until he slowly becomes putty above me. His lush lips start to move against mine, and when I know I've brought Mad back to life, I pull away.

"Will you move in with me?"

"That's a big step," he mumbles against my mouth.

Maybe I didn't pull him out as far as I thought I did. "Yes, it is, but it's something I think we're ready for, don't you?"

"I just... I've been wanting to say or do what I thought was the next step, and you blew it out of the water."

A next step that isn't moving in. What the hell is he talking about? "What did you want to say or do?"

Mad blows out a puff of air. "I don't know why I've been waiting. Well, actually, I do. I hesitated because I didn't want to be the only one feeling this way."

Running my hand down his side, I grip his hip. "Feeling what way? Whatever it is, you can tell me."

"This isn't just fucking to you, is it?" He blurts out and then quickly clamps his mouth shut.

I almost laugh until I realize that he's serious, then just as quickly, rage blooms inside of me. How could Maddox think that? I know we had a rocky start, and while we disagree still about quite a few things, I thought I showed him that he's more than a fuck buddy. Taking a deep breath, I don't let it out until I rein in my emotions, which takes so long, I'm probably blue in the face. "If it were only that, I would have moved on eleven months ago. So, no," I shake my head, my grip on his hip tightening. "This

is so much more than fucking. It's... everything.”

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Damn, it feels good to tell him how I feel. It's not until then I realize I've been holding back probably for the exact same reason, so really, I have nothing to be mad about. What we need to do is communicate better.

His eyes soften as he pulls me closer to him. "Well, I love you, so I hope everything to you means you love me too."

"It does," I kiss along his jaw until I reach the corner of his mouth where I nip his bottom lip. "I should have told you before today how I feel."

"I should have done the same, but I didn't want to ruin what we have by opening my big mouth. Are you sure you want to live with me? I will have to get up even earlier to tend to the horses if we live at your place. We could live at my place," he suggests.

Yeah, no, thank you. While Garrison isn't as bad as he was, I like my privacy. At first, keeping quiet when he was around was fun, but now it's a drag. I like hearing Mad yell out my name, and I know he feels the same.

"Maybe we can move the horses out to my place," I offer. "I've got a barn I don't use, and we can make a nice place for them."

"Wow," he smiles, and it brightens up the room. "When you go all in, you really go all in. Your place is nicer, and I could give mine to my brother." His body sags against mine.

"If you don't want to leave your brother, I understand." He's been taking care of him since he got out of high school.

“Oh, I’m so ready to not live with my brother. The thing is, it’s going to be a lot of work to get your place ready for the horses, you know?”

“I’m not afraid of a little hard work.” I roll on top of him and settle between his legs. “You know, the day after I got stuck and Garrison helped me out of the ditch?”

“Yeah?” He looks up at me. The corners of his mouth turned down.

“Not that I needed his encouragement, but he told me I should come around more. Garrison may not show up in the way you want, but he does care about you. I’m not saying you shouldn’t give him the house. That’s up to you, but don’t move in with me only because you want to get away from him.”

His eyes light up with amusement. “That’s not what I expected you to bring up when I felt your dick growing against my leg. But let’s get this straight right here and now. There’s no way in hell I’d move my life to your place just to get away from my brother.” He grabs my face between his rough hands and shakes my head back and forth. “For fuck’s sake, I just told you I love you.”

“I know. I guess it just hasn’t sunk in yet. This is all new to me” I dip my head down and rest it against his forehead. “Now, I think we have about an hour before we need to meet Dash and Sloane for breakfast, so why don’t you let me show you how much I love you?”

His nostrils flare as he smirks up at me. “I like the sound of that.”

Reaching over, he grabs a condom and the lube. I start to take it from him, but Mad pushes my hands away. I watch as he rolls the condom over my straining cock, and then slathers it with the lube.

I circle my tongue over the flat disc of his nipple as I run my hand up the smooth skin

of his side. Cupping the side of his neck, I can barely get the words out as I speak.
“Are you sure about this?”

This is the first time Mad has let me inside him, and his trust means a lot to me. Sure, he’s let me finger him, but nothing like this.

“Yeah, I’m sure. I want you to know I trust you with both my heart and my body.”

I don’t hold back showing Mad how much he and his words mean to me. I crash my mouth to his, dipping my tongue inside, and taste every bit that is him. Mad doesn’t disappoint. His hands go to my shoulders, pulling me closer as if he can’t get enough of me. Our tongues swirl and caress in a dance of desire. I know I’ll never get tired of him. The way he makes my body sing is something I’ll never be able to let go of, and I only hope I can do the same for him. This past year hasn’t begun to satiate my need for him. We’re only getting started.

Pressing my tip to his tight hole, I slowly push inside, letting him get accustomed to my size. It’s not until I’m fully surrounded by his heat that I release a breath I didn’t know I was holding.

Slowly, I start to move. This feels so damn good, and I need to focus on Maddox’s pleasure the way he’s always focused on mine. I want to make this good for him.

Mad bows up and husks in my ear. “You’re my first.”

“What?” I stop all movement, unsure if I heard him correctly.

“You’re the first person I’ve let penetrate me with anything other than their fingers. You’re the first person I’ve loved other than my family.”

His words have me moving quicker than before, but not too fast. I want to relish in

the moment and store it in my memory.

“Fucking hell, Mad. If I had known, I would have prepped you better.”

“It’s okay. I’m fine.” He nods, his blond hair falling over his forehead.

Brushing his hair out of his face, I pull all the way out and slowly push in until I bottom out. “I can’t tell you how much this means to me. You won’t regret it.”

“I know I won’t.” A sexy smirk teases his lips. “Now fuck me like you mean it because this may be the last time I let you do this.”

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“Oh, Mad, I’m going to fuck you so good.” I lean down and nip his bottom lip. “You’re going to beg for me to be in your ass every night.”

“There’s the cocky asshole I know and love,” he laughs and then moans when I hit his prostate.

“Yeah, that’s right. You love my cock.” I push his legs higher, wanting to hear him moan with each stroke.

“I can’t believe I waited so long,” he groans. I’m not sure if he’s talking about the sex or finally telling each other how we feel. I can’t help but feel the same way.

He runs one hand down my chest as he moves the other hand down his chest until he’s gripping his cock that’s shining with pre-cum. His hand on me reaches around, gripping my ass, and with each flex, I can feel his fingers digging into my flesh.

I trail my hand down his slick chest and rest my hand over his six-pack that really should be called an eight pack, he’s so damn defined. Unable to hold back, I pump faster. My balls slap against his ass with each thrust, and the sound is sexy as hell. Utter bliss covers Mad’s face, and I have to say it’s one of my favorite looks on him. The way he’s giving over to his pleasure with his head thrown back and seeing his Adam’s apple bob as he sucks in air has my balls tingling.

“Fuck, Mad, I’m not going to last much longer,” I groan, my pace becoming erratic.

Leaning back, I brace myself with his shins and watch as he unravels underneath me. The way his body shakes and arches as white ropes of cum shoot across his chest and

all over his hand undoes me.

Slowing down, I draw out every ounce of ecstasy until we're both wrung dry.

I collapse on top of him, panting against the side of his neck. Each time my lips brush against his skin, he shivers. Mad's long arms circle me, and he nuzzles his nose into my hair.

I hold his head against mine and let out a contented sigh. Today is the happiest day of my life, and I know it's only just the beginning. "So, are you going to let me do that again?"

Mad skates his fingers down my ribs and only stops once he gets to the dip of my waist. "You can do that to me anytime you want."

Lifting my head, I trace my thumb over his bottom lip. "I know trusting me wasn't easy, but thank you for letting me in."

He cocks his head to the side. "Why do I have a feeling you're talking about more than my ass?"

"Because I am. You didn't have to forgive me. Hell, you could have turned me away when I showed up on your doorstep, but you didn't. I only wish that we would have had this talk back in high school."

"Then we wouldn't have had all the great hate sex we've had." He grins, and I can feel his silent chuckle shaking my body. "I'm not going to lie; there may be times where I pick a fight just to relive those times."

"Hate sex is great sex, but what we just shared is even better. Either way, I know we're going to have amazing sex. What do you say we take a quick shower before we meet up with everyone else?"

Mad sits up with me on top of him. “I’d say there’s nothing ever quick about us taking a shower together, but I think they’ll understand if we’re late.”

“I think you’re right.” I jump out of bed and watch as Maddox gets up and walks to the bathroom. His ass flexes with each step he makes, and I know we’re going to be more than a little late. I can’t get enough of him. Luckily, he feels the same way.

My chest feels light now that I know Maddox and I are on the same page. The fact that we’ll be living together almost seems like a dream. We’ve come so far in this last year, putting aside past hurt and traumas. I realize I never needed to be number one at everything, and maybe if I had known what Maddox’s home life was back then, I wouldn’t have cared so much about winning. Who can say, though? All I know is I found the person I want to spend the rest of my life with back in elementary school. It just took a couple of decades for us to figure out we were perfect for each other.

“What are you waiting for?” Mad yells from the bathroom.

Nothing, because I’ve got everything I need right where I am.