



Far From Home

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Category: Romance, Lesbian Romance

Description: Taylor's spent the better part of a semester doing whatever she can to distract herself from Sam, the amazingly shy Brit who happens to be her college roommate. However, when Sam tells her she has no place to go for the holidays, Taylor decides to invite her home instead.

Without Sam's studies and Taylor's more recent flings to keep a wall between them, the winter holiday pushes them closer together than ever before.

Sam's more than willing to give them a chance, but Taylor's distaste for long-distance relationships holds them back.

Can Sam find a way to break through Taylor's defenses, or could the future distance between them put an end to something that's only just begun?

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Chapter One

Sam

“Do you have anywhere to go?”

Halfway through a game of Halo, I looked away from my monitor and met Taylor’s gaze. She’d walked in from the hallway and was in the process of toweling off her long brown hair.

“Not really. It is Saturday, after all,” I replied, pulling my attention away from her to continue my game.

It took more effort than I would’ve liked. Even with her hair frizzing out, it was hard not to admire her. Heck, sharing a dorm with her was almost too much for someone like me. That isn’t to say I only care about looks, of course, but I couldn’t help smiling whenever she wore her hair like that. She’d likely straighten it once we were through, but for now, I got to see it in its most natural and wavy form.

Sadly, whenever I looked at her, she was too busy looking at someone else to notice. Maybe it was because I wasn’t from the area. Or maybe it was because I didn’t live in the US. To her, we were college roommates and nothing more. However, if I were ever given the opportunity, you’d better believe I’d take it.

“I meant for the holidays,” Taylor said with a laugh. “Do you have any relatives around here?” She made her way over to her closet to grab a clean shirt before ducking behind the door so she could put it on.

I shook my head and hoped the heat on my cheeks wasn't terribly noticeable. "They all live across the pond."

"Then where do you plan to go during winter break?" she asked from her place behind the door. "You can't stay here."

"Why not?" I'd done it before. "Just because the campus is closed, that doesn't mean I have to leave."

With her clothing in order and her hair still the way I liked, she walked over to her bed and sat down. "True, but it's gonna

be boring as hell around here. At least during Thanksgiving, the break was short. But staying here for an entire month all on your own? Who will you talk to?"

"I suppose I could grab a late flight." My folks would be thrilled. My wallet, not so much.

"You could always come home with me."

I immediately paused my game and studied her expression for the hint of laughter. She was dead serious. "For an entire month?" Why not?

Oh, I don't know, maybe because I can't stop looking at her? At least during Thanksgiving break, she went home for a week while I stayed here. But to spend time off-campus with her?

"You make it sound like it's a bad thing," Taylor said when I didn't say yes. "And before you starting coming up with excuses, I've already run it by my mom and she's all for it."

I swallowed hard and placed the controller in my lap. “But she doesn’t even know me.”

“So?” She offered me a partial shrug. “She’s heard me talk about you before. In fact, when I went home last month, I got the look because I didn’t bring you along. To be fair, I probably shouldn’t have told her you were here on your own. I should also warn you before you accept the invitation. You might or might not have to help me wrangle up some kids.”

“Kids?” I laughed. “With what? A lasso?”

Now it was her turn to laugh. “I’m afraid we’re all out of those. My sister has two kids, one boy and one girl, and they’re at that fun age where they like to go and hide in whatever nook they can find. Other than that, it should be pretty normal as far as family gatherings go.”

“Your sister?” I’d heard her mention having a sibling before, though we never talked about her more than that.

“How old is she?”

“Five, almost six years older than I am.”

I winced. “I bet she wasn’t too thrilled once you were around.”

“Hardly, but by the time we reached our teens, things started to smooth out. Now I’m her babysitter, her sister, and her best friend.” She shrugged and left it at that. “So will you come? For my sake and so I can avoid the daggers in my mother’s eyes, could you please, please come home with me?”

Unless you have somewhere to go, that is.” She already knew the answer. Her wide

grin gave her away.

Taking a breath, I shook my head. “Like I said, I could go and see my folks, but I bet those tickets are expensive.”

Especially with it being so last-minute. “Are you sure your mom’s okay with this?” My stomach churned at the thought of meeting someone’s folks. I’d never actually done it before, not unless you count the playdates I had back in grade school.

Taylor got up from her bed so she could finish packing her things. “Okay with it? She pretty much suggested it.”

“Well, if it means I can keep you out of trouble, I suppose it couldn’t hurt.” You mean aside from the fact you can’t stop staring at her? I’d find a way to make it work. A month alone with Taylor instead of staying here was way too tempting to ignore.

“Then it’s settled. You, me, and Chelsey.” She snapped her suitcase shut and plopped it on the floor.

Chelsey being her car. “I never could understand that.”

“Hey, she’s my first, and I’ve taken very good care of her.

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Besides, you Brits have your own odd quirks.”

“Yeah, but naming cars isn’t one of them. Not in my family, anyway.” Naming cars. How ridiculous. The last thing I’d named was one of my stuffed animals and possibly a fish.

Not a car.

Taylor simply shook her head and dug through her closet for whatever else she’d need to take with her once we left.

We. We were leaving campus together . She could’ve invited Jen, or was is Jordan? She’d had so many flings recently, I couldn’t keep up. That was a problem as well. At

school, she was unavailable, which made it a lot easier for me to keep my thoughts to myself. But seeing as she’d invited me home...

This is going to be a very long month.

With any luck, I’d come out of it alive.

Chapter Two

Taylor

Sam hadn’t said more than three words since we pulled onto the interstate. Instead, she focused on whatever was moving outside the passenger side window, allowing

me the opportunity to study her reflection. Even with the faded look, her brown eyes were as intense as ever.

I hadn't told her, but the reason I'd invited her along wasn't just because of my mom. The last time I went home, all I could think about was Sam. Her absence was terribly obvious as soon as I walked in the door, and while things may have been cheerful and merry, the person's laughter I wanted to hear and missed the most was back at school.

You never should've invited her.

This was a bad idea. Looking at her now with her brown hair pulled back in a ponytail, I could

see she felt the same way. The upbeat, cheerful woman I was so used to seeing day after day had been replaced by a shy, quiet replica. She looked the same, and when she spoke she certainly sounded like Sam, but this wasn't the Sam I knew. This one was nervous. Timid.

"What do you usually do for the holidays?" I asked, cringing at how loud my voice sounded in the quiet car.

Sam jumped, then fidgeted in her lap, keeping her attention on whatever was or wasn't outside her window. "You mean for meals?"

"Or activities," I said with a partial shrug. "Is there anything we can do while we're on break to make you feel more at home?"

I couldn't imagine spending the holidays away from my folks. They might get a little overwhelming from time to time, but Sam had to have been homesick by now. If there was anything I could do to help with that, I'd do it.

“Ice skating,” Sam said after giving my question some thought. I didn’t have to look across the console to know she

was smiling. It made it all the way into her voice.

“It’s like normal skating, right?”

Now she did look at me. “You’ve never been?”

I shook my head and glanced back at the road. “I may have tried skates once or twice when I was a kid, but I never liked using those, either. I’d rather walk on my own two feet, thank you very much.”

There was that smile again, and this time, she was looking right at me. “Huh. Imagine that.”

“What?”

“You’re into all kinds of sports, but you’re too afraid to go skating.”

“I didn’t say I was afraid, just that I prefer to have my own two feet under me. Besides, the ponds never froze long enough to try.” I’d learned that lesson the hard way.

“I’m sure there’s somewhere we could go,” Sam mused aloud, wiggling in the passenger seat as she did. “You’d love it. It’s a lot like dancing.”

“I’m going to regret this, aren’t I?” The dread had already started to pool inside my stomach.

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She released a soft chuckle that formed small wrinkles along the corners of her eyes. “It won’t be that bad, I promise.

I could even hold your hand.”

I like the sound of that. “Anything else?”

“You’re hoping I’ll give you something easier to do, aren’t you?” She cocked an eyebrow at me, completely calling me out.

“Again, I’m not scared, and I realize it isn’t hard, but...

yes.” I released a long breath. There was no sense in denying it. We still had another forty minutes until we reached my folks’ place, and I knew she’d bring it up again if I tried to change the subject now.

Sam paused a moment, almost as if to consider it, then said, “Even if it doesn’t happen until the day we head back to

campus, I’m going to get you out on the ice.”

I shivered. “And knowing me, I’ll make you wait that long.”

She shrugged, then went back to watching out the window.

“Considering the amount of snow you said we’re supposed to get this winter, I’m sure it won’t take too long.”

She sounded so sure of herself. As for me, I was too busy white-knuckling the steering wheel to do anything else. It wasn't so much a fear of skating or even falling on my ass, but more a fear of the ice breaking and me not being able to get back to the surface. It almost happened once before.

I swallowed hard but didn't say anything else. Sam didn't need to know that. No one did.

But if you go to an ice rink, it won't be as bad.

It wouldn't be a pond. We'd be in a place where they actually made the ice themselves, possibly several feet thick.

There was no way I'd be able to fall through the ice then.

However, if that were true, why was my stomach in knots?

I flinched when Sam cleared her throat.

"Light's green," she said with an apologetic smile.

Nodding, I took a breath to ease the tightness in my chest.

"It won't be long now. I hope you're a hugger."

"Is your family big on affection?" She sounded surprised.

"Oh yeah. Not the kissing on the cheek kind, but we're pretty big when it comes to hugs. And it doesn't matter if you're family or not. As soon as you step into that house, you're fair game. Oh, during meals, grab what you can. We tend to have a bit of a feeding frenzy, so if you don't grab what you want while it's there, it will

probably be gone once you go back for seconds.”

“Sounds like my family.” There was an edge to her voice.

“Are you okay?” I asked, casting her a sideways glance so I could still watch the road.

“Yeah, just thinking about home. I bet Uncle Charlie’s already at the house. He’s always the first to arrive and the last to leave.”

“I’ll make you a deal. If you survive this holiday with my folks, I can go back to England with you during spring or summer break.”

Unless she’s dating someone by then. I winced. I’d never seen her with anyone, but the first thing she’d told me after we met was that she was gay. It was why I kept bunking with anyone I could.

As soon as school started, we clicked. I realized I could talk to Sam about anything. Or almost anything, that is. She didn’t judge me or tease me for my shortcomings. She simply smiled, offered her support, then would change the subject if she thought something made me uncomfortable.

No one else had ever done that for me, and while it might sound like a small thing, it made me enjoy her company even more.

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Sadly, as much as I loved the idea of giving us a chance, sleeping with my roommate didn't sound right at all. What if we had a falling out and still had to share a dorm with one another? If I thought things were awkward between us now, they'd be ten times worse by then.

Not that I wouldn't love to run my hands through her hair.

Cup her face. Kiss her. I never should've invited her.

It was too late for that now.

"Really?" Sam's soft voice drew me from my thoughts.

It took a moment to remember what I'd said, which only complicated things more as heat rushed into my cheeks. "Sure.

Why not? I've always wanted to travel but never really had the time. I'll have to scrimp and save a bit, but I'm sure I could swing it no problem."

"Then you've got yourself a deal," Sam said with a huge grin on her face. No longer staring out the window, she sat back and looked at the road ahead. "So what do you like to do for the holidays?"

By the time we pulled into the drive, it was dark. We'd stopped for a quick bite to eat along the way, but I was already starving. No doubt Mom had a load of food prepped in the fridge, some of which I hoped to break into as soon as we got through the door.

“Aww, it’s cute,” Sam said as she rummaged around the backseat for her things, pausing once she was through to admire the small cottage my folks owned. “You never told me about this. I always thought you lived in the city.”

“Sometimes, I do. Mom and Brad have two homes. There’s one right on the edge of the city, but they also have this one which we tend to use for our family get-togethers. It actually has a yard in the back.”

“It looks way better than the flat we have back home,”

Sam said. “You get a nice view but not much of a yard to speak of.”

I nodded then. “Which is how the other house is. This one is my favorite, though it isn’t close to anything at all. We’ll have to drive about twenty minutes if there’s anywhere you want to go, so while it may look good, the travel can be a bit of a pain.”

“Which is why it’s a holiday home,” Sam chirped.

“Exactly. In any case, are you ready to step inside or would you like to admire the exterior some more?”

Sam tilted her head to the side, gave the house one last look, then bumped shoulders with me and joined me on the front step. I was about to reach for the door when it opened fr

om the other side. My mom’s bright smile greeted us as soon as she pulled back the door.

“You brought her.” She threw her arms around me, hugged me tight, then look at Sam. “You must be Sam. I’ve heard so much about you.” When she held open her

arms, Sam gave me a questioning glance. Once I inclined my head, she fell into her arms, completely enveloped by my mother's welcoming

embrace. "Come on in. Have you eaten? Are you hungry?" she asked, releasing Sam back into the wild.

We walked close behind her, leaving our things inside the door before joining her in the kitchen. She'd already put out a spread along with chips, various dips, and veggie sticks.

"Coffee?" She was already in the process of starting a new pot when I pulled her into my arms. "Mom, we've got this. Go sit down."

"Oh hush," she said with a wave of her hands. "You shut your yap and let your mother do her job."

Sam smiled at me, then lifted her brows as she silently asked for guidance.

"Grab what you can," I reminded her. "Consider this your rehearsal dinner for tomorrow."

Smiling, she picked up a plate and took a handful of cheese and meat rolls. "You guys celebrate on Christmas Eve?"

"Usually," I said with a shrug. "That way most folks have time to travel and unwind back home before returning to work."

It makes things less hectic, you know?"

"Yeah, but think of the travel time." She shook her head, then rolled up some meat and cheese together before taking a bite.

I had to agree with her there. We had two days until Christmas and the roads were already packed when we left campus. I couldn't imagine what the drive would've been like if we'd waited until tomorrow.

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“At least you girls won’t have to leave that soon,” Mom said, busying herself with dishes that had already been washed.

“Is Brad around?” I hadn’t seen my stepdad when we walked in, but he had a habit of working on cars and other projects late into the evenings.

“You know how he is,” Mom said. “He’s currently in the garage tinkering on that old bike of yours.”

“Bike?” Sam looked at me with surprise, shifting her weight from one foot to the other as she finished her food.

“This was delicious, Mrs. Martin.”

“Sue, please. Mrs. Martin sounds far too formal, so unless Taylor is flunking and you’re her professor, call me Sue.”

“Not a professor, no,” Sam said with a laugh.

“Not yet,” I said, pointing a stick of celery at her before scooping up some spinach dip. “As for the bike, it isn’t what you think. I’m not that adventurous.” Though it probably wouldn’t have surprised her if I was.

“Aww, so I don’t get to join a motorcycle gang?”

“I’m afraid not.” What would it even be called? I shook my head and pushed the thought away.

“Brad’s trying to clean up the frame so we can gift it to Sally,” Mom said without missing a beat. “I’ll leave you to it.

I’m going to check and see how the tinkering is going, then I’ll be upstairs if you need anything. Sam, there are clean linens in the guest bathroom if you need them.”

“Thank you.” Sam watched her go, keeping her voice low once my mom was out of earshot. “She’s bubbly, ain’t she?”

“My entire family is like that. It’s exhausting, really.”

“And she put out all this food for us?”

I shrugged and took a handful of veggie sticks. “Us. Her.

Brad. Maybe my sister and her two rugrats if they get here tonight. Mom tends to overspend. Most of the time when you leave here, you leave with a lot more than a doggy bag.”

“A family that likes to eat, nice. Looks like I’ll fit right in.”

“I knew you would.” Brushing my hands off on my jeans, I headed back into the living room. “Come on. The guest room’s this way.”

Chapter Three

Sam

The guest room must’ve belonged to Taylor’s sister. Either that or Taylor had gone through quite the pink phase when she was a kid.

The blush walls with their stenciled bears along the top were enough to make me smile. Taylor wouldn't be caught dead in a room like this now.

It was cute but seriously in need of a paint job. Then again, Taylor had mentioned being an aunt, so maybe her niece and nephew stayed in here. Aside from the walls, there was a toy chest, a dresser, and a handful of knick-knacks. At least I wasn't stuck sleeping in a child's bed. I could see it now; small pillows, sagging mattress, with my feet hanging off the end. I smiled at that, rolling over on the mattress as I tried to get comfortable.

I'd never been good when it came to sleeping in an unfamiliar place. As close to the holidays as it was, sleeping in a bed that wasn't mine made me even more homesick. At least with college, I had some of my own things around me. I hadn't thought about it at the time, but I probably should've considered bringing a touch of home along with me instead of leaving it at the dorm.

At least Taylor's here. Which was another reason why I couldn't get to sleep. A very big reason. I couldn't get her out of my head. Sure, we might've shared a dorm on campus, but here was different somehow. I couldn't quite put my finger on it, but it was almost as though the temptation to see her sleep, to watch her, and be with her was stronger than before.

Creepy.

I'd never admit it and I hated the fact that I did it, but there were nights when I couldn't sleep. Taylor was a light sleeper, so I never got up or turned anything on. Instead, I'd lay there and listen to her even breaths until I finally dozed off again.

Laying in a bed that wasn't mine and surrounded by walls that were more girly than I'd ever been, I had to wonder if Taylor ever did the same thing. Were there times when she couldn't sleep and listened to me instead? Did she find comfort in just

knowing someone else was there in case she needed them?

Unlikely.

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She'd never looked at me the way I looked at her. I did whatever I could to keep my thoughts to myself, but every time she went out with someone else, I couldn't help feeling a little jealous. A little? Okay, probably more than that, but it had become painfully clear over the last several months that whatever interest I had in her, she didn't have it in me.

But she was a friend, a good friend, and I'd do whatever I could not to change that. Which means no mucking things up.

No complicating things, no matter how tempting it may have been earlier this evening to take her hand in mine or to hug her the way Sue had hugged me.

The only time Taylor and I had any physical contact at all was right before Thanksgiving break. She'd hugged me then, briefly and not as strong as I preferred, but that was it. She may have bumped shoulders with me or elbowed me in the arm whenever she joined me in a game of Halo, but that was as far as things ever went.

Which would've been fine if I could keep her out of my head.

Closing my eyes, I took a deep breath and thought of home. My folks would be up soon with tea brewing and biscuits piled high. There'd be a roaring fire and the smell of pine in the air. It wouldn't snow, though. It rarely did. Instead, it would rain.

God, I missed England. Sure, it was gloomy at times, but my entire family was back there. If not for the offerings in the states, I never would've left.

Being with Taylor makes it better. We weren't together.

She's one room away. Close enough to invade my thoughts and not much else.

Coming here was a bad idea.

Staying back at the dorm wouldn't have been any better.

The last time Taylor went home, I couldn't help noticing her absence. Her warm laughter didn't fill the dorm and our room fell into silence as soon as she walked out the door. It didn't take long for the smell of her perfume to fade as well, leaving me with an empty room that smelled more like floorboards and bitter cold than anything else.

I'd tried to take my mind off of it by going out with a couple of the other girls on campus, but it wasn't the same thing. As soon as I got back to the dorm to tell her about my day, her absence hit me all over again.

It made my chest hurt and forced a tight ball into my stomach.

I'd missed her. I'd almost told her as much once she got back. But to risk ruining what we have? I shook my head if only to myself. It was better if I didn't say anything at all.

Only I wasn't back at campus, and even with Taylor sleeping one room away, I could still smell her perfume. It wasn't much but still enough to ease the nerves that had gathered in my stomach.

With my thoughts a world away, I slowly fell into dreaming.

Morning couldn't come soon enough.

When I woke, sunlight streamed in through the windows. I threw the covers over my head and rolled onto my stomach, shoving my head under the pillow seconds later. It wasn't enough. It was too damned bright, and I was wide awake.

Growling under my breath, I tossed the covers aside, then crawled out of bed so I could make myself somewhat presentable before breakfast.

I was almost done making the bed when someone knocked on the door.

"Sam, are you up?"

My heart leaped into the back of my throat at the sound of Taylor's voice. After a breath, and once my heart rate returned to this side of normal, I opened the door to greet her.

"Hey," I said, wincing when my voice refused to work. "I was just getting ready to head down."

Taylor gave me an incredulous look as she leaned against the doorframe. "I'm really sorry we had to set you up like this." She gestured at the room.

I couldn't tell if the twinge in her voice was for her benefit or my own. I appreciated it either way.

"It's okay," I assured her. "As long as it has a bed and a place to put my things, I can't complain. Besides, this is way better than staying at one of those old bed and breakfasts with the flowery wallpaper and furniture that should've been tossed decades ago."

She laughed at that, then said, "You slept in. I don't think you've ever done that before. You?"

“You’re always up before me.”

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“Usually,” I agreed. Unless, of course, I couldn’t sleep. To be honest, I didn’t nod off until almost four in the morning.

“Guess I was restless. Unfamiliar territory and all.” I shrugged and left it at that, stifling a yawn a second later.

Taylor wasn’t convinced, cocking an eyebrow at me as she canted her head to one side. “Sounds like my one time at summer camp. I don’t think I slept the first three nights I was there. Too many strange noises.”

I followed her down the stairwell and into the kitchen where Sue had placed out large platters and was in the middle of cooking up a fresh batch of eggs and bacon. A man I could only assume was Brad sat at the head of the table, paper in hand.

“You must be Sam.” He held out his hand which I shook once I was within range. “We’ve heard so much about you.”

So I’ve been told. I released a nervous laugh.

“All good things, I assure you,” Taylor cut in as she took her place at the table.

Noting the empty chair to her left, I joined them, and after a handful of niceties, we dug into our food. Watching Brad and Taylor go on about which team they wanted to win on game day made me think of my dad and uncle Charlie back home.

I’d never caught the sports-fan bug, but it was easy to see Taylor had.

“What about you, Sam?” Brad asked, pulling me from my thoughts. “Do you think the Redskins will pull ahead?”

“Oh, I’m not sure,” I said as I dropped my gaze. “I don’t really watch the games. They bore me to tears, really.”

“Finally, someone who can sit with me and bake while those two whoop and holler at the television screen,” Sue said as she placed a plate of toast between us.

“I’ll gladly take up baking over that,” I said, silently thanking her before taking a piece of toast from the center of the table. “My folks back home love to watch the games, but I never saw the point of them chasing a ball around. Back and forth. Back and forth.” I rolled my eyes, and Sue grinned.

“If I’m going skating, you have to watch one game with me,” Taylor said as she pointed her fork in my direction.

“You think I won’t?”

“Nope.”

“Rather, you’re hoping I won’t agree so you can get out of it.” Not a chance. If there was one thing I planned to do during break, it was to get Taylor out on the ice.

“Pretty much.”

Then, knowing a challenge when I saw one, I said. “As lovely as baking sounds, I think I may have to take a rain check this time.”

“It’s no problem at all,” Sue assured me, turning her attention to Brad as the conversation stalled.

Awkward silences were the worst, and if that wasn't enough, Taylor's eyes on me only seemed to complicate things even more. I'd seen that look before, but it'd never been directed at me. Her eyes had a shine to them, and when she looked at me then, she blushed.

You're seeing things.

Wishful thinking, that's all it was.

Then again, how come she hadn't looked away? She'd stopped shoveling food into her mouth and everything, and she was always a quick eater.

"What?" I asked after a long moment, struggling to get the air moving from my lungs. "Do I have something on my face?"

Taylor shook herself out of her trance and glanced down at her food. "Just that smug grin of yours." And damn her, she almost said it with a straight face, but even as the last word tumbled from her lips, she started to laugh.

"Look who's talking," I said, joining her in her laughter.

"Sue, breakfast is delicious."

"A quiet guest and someone who likes my cooking?" Sue put a hand to her chest. "Taylor should bring you around more often."

"So are you two a thing now? I knew Taylor was—"

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“No,” Taylor almost blurted out. “We’re just good friends.”

Her cheeks were bright red now, her eyes downcast. If I didn’t know any better, I would’ve thought she had a thing for me, though she’d never mentioned it before.

And it’s probably for the same reason you never did.

No, the reason I never told her how I felt was because she was always dating someone else. That’s what I kept telling myself, anyway. In fact, I’d repeat it until my brain got the point. Taylor was off-limits.

“My mistake,” Brad said, his voice muffled as I tried to figure out what he hadn’t had the chance to say.

Taylor glared at her stepdad, then looked at me with a big smile on her face. “So what would you like to do today?”

I wiped my mouth with a napkin, then transported my plate to the sink. “No idea. I’m not familiar with the area, so it’s entirely up to you.”

“You should take her to the clubhouse,” Sue said, shooing me away when I tried to rinse off my plate. “Go on and sit, I can do this.”

I went to argue, but when Taylor dumped her things in the sink and asked me to join her, I didn’t object.

Once we were out of earshot, Taylor pulled me aside.

“Sorry about that.”

“About what?” Things seemed to have gone pretty well if you ask me.

“My folks are really pushing me for a long-term relationship,” Taylor said, oblivious to my thoughts. “I guess they thought—”

“It’s no problem, really,” I said as I did my best to alleviate some of her embarrassment. “Mine are the same way. ‘Sam, when are you ever going to settle? Sam, what about that nice girl down the street. Sam...’ It can get rather exhausting at times.”

“They mean well,” Taylor said to me as well as herself,

“but I wish they’d let me come to terms with it on my own.

The last relationship they pushed me into was a disaster, and we have a good thing, you know?”

“Sure do.” But that doesn’t mean I wouldn’t like more. I kept the last bit to myself, cursing my brain for ever thinking up such a thing. What we had was enough.

“Mom did make a good point, though,” Taylor said.

“Would you like to see the clubhouse?” She was already in the process of putting her coat on.

Following her example, I pulled on my jacket, then zipped it up until it almost reached my chin. “Sounds good to me, but a clubhouse? Really?”

“It isn’t what you’d expect.”

“No tea party, then?”

“I didn’t say that.” With a laugh, and after announcing we were going out to her folks, we stepped outside.

A light dusting of snow covered the ground, and at first, I couldn’t tell if it had all been from last night or if more had fallen this morning. Looking at Taylor’s car which was covered in a thin layer of ice, it seemed as though it was six of one and half a dozen of the other.

“Does it always snow for you on the holidays?” I asked, shoving my hands in my pockets as I stepped into place beside her.

“Usually, but the amount varies. Last year, I think we got eight inches. The year before we had over a foot. This year looks like it’ll mostly be ice, which really sucks.” Snow crunched under her shoes.

“Because of the roads?”

“That and the power lines. One year, the ice was so heavy, it weighed down the power lines until they snapped. We lost power for five days.”

“Oh god.” I could only imagine.

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“If it wasn’t for the fireplace and blocking off every other room in the house by hanging blankets in each of the doorways, we would’ve froze. We were packed like sardines in a can, but at least we stayed warm. We had to make breakfast in the fireplace and everything. Brad ended up pulling the good camping stuff out.”

“I can’t say we’ve ever had anything like that. We’ve lost power, but it never lasted more than a few hours.”

“Unfortunately, it’s a pretty common occurrence around here, probably because of how high in the mountains we are.

Anyway, the clubhouse is a bit of a walk. Do you think you can manage?”

/> I shook my head at her. “You’re the one all out of breath.”

“Because I’m doing most of the talking,” she said with a laugh.

“And that’s unusual because?”

“Oh, shut up!” She bumped shoulders with me, then grabbed my arm when she started to lean too far to my side.

“Sorry,” she said, righting herself a second later. “The clubhouse is this way.”

Chapter Four

Taylor

It was strange how close I felt to Sam just then. Sure, we'd been roomies for over a semester, but having her here with me was different. It was almost as though we were childhood friends shooting the breeze as a light snow fell around us. Tiny flakes tinked against the thin blanket of snow now covering the ground, making the most peaceful sound as they landed on the tree branches above.

I always liked this kind of snow. The world got quiet, and if Sam hadn't joined me, I would've been completely lost in my own thoughts.

But because she was here, my thoughts focused on her instead. Things like how her shoulders bunched from the cold or the thin cloud of vapor as it left her pink lips. Her hands were still deep inside her pockets, and her eyes were fixed on the ground as we slowly navigated the trail between the cottage and the clubhouse.

She seemed so out of place with a rain jacket on, and yet, I couldn't imagine spending the holiday with anyone else.

"So where's this clubhouse of yours?" Her teeth chattered a bit. "I thought it would've been in your backyard."

I lifted my arms and spun in a circle. "These woods are the backyard. No one else comes out here."

"Aren't you worried about bears?"

I caught myself before I could fall and kept walking. "The last one we had was ages ago, and it wasn't over here. It was next to the house. That was a quick lesson in covering up the trash nice and tight so he couldn't rummage through it. As for what's in the woods, the most I've seen are chipmunks and maybe a deer."

She hesitated and looked back the way we came. "But there is a bear in the area."

“There was a bear,” I said as I gently placed a hand on her arm. The contact was brief. As soon as I realized what I’d done, I shoved my hands in my pockets. “He’s probably long gone by now. The house isn’t far from here. This was actually a project my sister and I did with Brad’s help. It was our way of gaining a bit of independence in our mid-teens since going out to a party was kind of a no-go. Too far to travel, you know?”

“What about friends?” Sam asked as she stepped in line beside me.

I stopped halfway down the path. “What about them?”

“I don’t think I saw other houses on our way here. How far is the nearest one?”

“Four, maybe five miles? As for friends, it was mostly Katie and me. We had some back near the city, but no one ever wanted to drive out here. Their loss, really.”

Sam nodded then, her mouth agape as soon as we rounded the corner. “That isn’t a clubhouse.”

“You were thinking it was going to be a kid’s house, weren’t you? I told you it was different.”

Sam nodded as she gawked at the architecture. I did the same. Even though Brad was Mom’s second husband, he was the only father I knew. He was the one who raised us kids and even built this house. It was his own design, and even now, after spending my teens in it, it was still a sight to see.

“And you weren’t kidding,” Sam said, completely out of breath. “So instead of staying at your house, you decided to make a second one?”

“It isn’t that big.”

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“It’s pretty close.” Sam glanced over her shoulder at me before walking around the outside of the cabin. “I could live here.”

The house itself was rather small. Without the wooden logs and stone chimney, it could’ve passed as a large playhouse. On the inside, however, it had a living room with a foldout couch,

a small kitchenette, a backroom for storing wood, and a fireplace for warmth. It wasn’t quite livable as there was no running water, but it was a great step for me and my sister.

“What’s the shack over there for?” Sam gestured at a smaller building not too far from the house.

“That would be the outhouse. There aren’t any bathrooms inside, and if we want to wash our hands, we’ll have to run the pump from one of the nearby streams.”

Her eyes went wide as a bit of color drained from her face.

“Oh.”

“Would you like to take a look?”

“At the toilet?”

I laughed. “No silly, at the inside of the house.”

Relief washed over her face. “Definitely.”

She paused as I rolled back the front mat to retrieve the key from underneath.

“You do realize anyone could’ve found that out here,” she said as I got to my feet.

“Yeah?” I shoved the key in the lock and turned the knob, opening the door before gesturing for her to go inside. “And with so many houses around too.”

“Okay, so maybe no one would find it in the woods, but still, under the mat?”

“Better than under a rock somewhere with all of the snow.”

At least the mat was safe and dry under the roof.

“Oh wow.” Sam’s voice was barely audible as she stopped inside the door. Her posture stiffened as she looked from one corner of the cabin to the other, her smile brightening as she did. “There’s almost an entire house in here.”

“Forgot about the outhouse already, huh?”

“No biggie.” She shrugged it off, but it obviously worried her. Probably because of the bear.

“Even with the bear?” I asked.

She whipped around. “Oh god. Do you think he was out there one night when you were camping out?”

“If he was, he didn’t seem to mind.”

She nodded and forced a smile.

“Relax,” I said in a soothing voice. “We didn’t see a single animal on our way in. If all else fails and we ever do get trapped in here, there’s always the phone.”

“So it’s a cabin without any running water but it still has electricity?”

“It’s a little backwards,” I admitted, “but it works. Of course, the gas has been turned off, which means we’ll have to use the fireplace for heat.”

“Sounds like a great place to bring a first date. Romantic, you know?”

“I tried that once, actually.” I stepped into the backroom to gather some of the wood before dumping it in front of the fireplace.

“Oh? And how did that work out for you?”

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“Terribly. They weren’t the least bit impressed. Sure, it’s technically on Brad’s property, but my folks never come back here. Not even for their wedding anniversary. They’d rather go to a hotel with room service.” The fire came to life, filling the room with an orange glow. “Much better.” When I turned to Sam, she was still standing in the doorway. “Dude, take off your coat and stay awhile.”

“How often do you come back here?” She slung her jacket over the back of the sofa, then sat down.

“Thanksgiving.” Sitting beside her, I said, “I love my family to bits, but at feeding time, things tend to get a little nuts. I come back here to decompress.”

“All on your own?”

“Sometimes my sister comes with me while our folks watch the kids, but yeah.”

Removing my coat, I let my head fall back and closed my eyes. The crackling fire was music to my ears as the tension that had been building ever since we arrived last night started to fade. Granted, the reprieve only lasted so long. As soon as Sam shifted her weight beside me, my thoughts went right back to her. To her even breaths and the sound she made whenever she rubbed her palms on her pants. It was a nervous tick she had and one I’d noticed shortly after we’d started school together.

It was especially bad before a test, but she always passed.

All that fretting for nothing.

“Man, it really does heat up the place, doesn’t it?” she asked as the fire flickered and cast long shadows across the room.

I cracked open an eye. “It’s very effective. In any case, if you can’t find me at the house tomorrow, chances are I’m back here.”

“You don’t want me to come with you?” I couldn’t mistake the disappointment in her voice.

“I was planning to,” I said as I turned to face her, “but what about the bear?”

“Okay, okay. I get your point.” She rolled her eyes at me, then sunk into the couch cushions. “If you happen to bail on your holiday gathering, I’d love to join you.”

“Great.” Because I was hoping you would.

Chapter Five

Sam

The crackling of the fire was loud enough to drown everything else out. It was also a lot warmer than when we’d first walked in. Granted, I couldn’t honestly say if the warmth was because of the firelight or the little bit of room we’d left between us.

Either way, I did my best to relax as Taylor lay her head back against the couch cushions. She looked so peaceful then, and it wasn’t until she cracked open an eye when I realized I was staring.

I hadn’t meant to, but seeing her at ease helped. With her eyes closed, I got to admire the woman I’d gotten the pleasure to know over the last few months as the soft glow of firelight danced across her face. I knew what she looked like, and I’d spent more

than enough time staring at her when she wasn't looking, but the absence of light and the long shadows the fire cast across her face made it different somehow. Mysterious but exciting.

Even as the fire died down and Taylor's breaths deepened, I could still make out her lips and one eye looking back at me.

"What?" Her voice was heavy with sleep.

"Am I not entertaining enough for you?" I teased, ducking just in time to avoid a pillow to the face.

Taylor glared at the pillow still in her hand, then set it in her lap. "It's a conditioned response," she said with a shrug.

"I'm so used to coming here to relax that I tend to crash as soon as I walk in the door."

"That sounds kind of nice, actually." Being able to turn off the stress? Yes, please.

She leaned back and glanced at the ceiling. "I was dying to come here during exams."

"The dorms are only a few hours away, so why didn't you?"

"I didn't want to ruin it, you know? I refuse to bring bad things into this space."

"Exams weren't that bad," I said gently

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She looked at me then and frowned. “Unlike you with your photographic memory, some of us actually have to study in order to pass.”

“And you did that when?” The only thing I remembered her doing was playing video games late into the night, late enough for me to go to sleep.

“Ha ha, very funny. Man, you have no idea what I’d do to have an ability like that.”

“You make it sound like it’s a super power.”

“It kind of is, isn’t it? I mean, anything you want to remember, you can do so almost instantly.”

“Maybe,” I said, not looking at her, “but there is a limit.”

There were some things I simply couldn’t remember. Things I’d wanted to work through on my own but had to depend on my folks to do it for me.

She got quiet then, leaning forward until I met her eyes. “I didn’t mean to cross a line if I did.”

I let out a long breath and forced a smile. “You didn’t. It just isn’t this great thing everyone talks about. I might get an easy pass on tests and such like that, but it’s almost like I have a time limit on what my mind chooses to remember. I remember stupid stuff forever and forget a lot of the more important things. It isn’t like that for everyone, but it is for me.”

“So you’re like everyone else. Information goes in one ear and eventually falls out the other.”

“Pretty much. It might be an overflow of information that pushes everything else out,” I said as I gave it some thought.

“That’s how I look at it, anyway. In any case, I don’t depend on it as much as I probably could. Instead, I over-analyze things all the time and struggle whenever I have to make an important decision. I realize the two probably aren’t related,

but...” I let out a long breath and let the subject drop. “You get what I mean.”

Taylor nodded, then sat back on her side of the sofa. “I do.” Then, likely sensing my discomfort, she moved on to something else. “So your folks... what do they do for the holidays?”

“It’s more like what don’t they do. Mum is a serious baker and makes batch after batch of cookies along with nut rolls and muffins for Christmas morning. My dad gets stuck with putting up the decorations, mostly because he won’t let my grandfather go up on the roof. My grandfather has the easiest job of all. He gets to sit back and watch the house transform without lifting a finger.”

“Sounds like my kind of job.”

“He gets to rest until Christmas day. That’s when the real work begins. Back when I was a kid, he’d get up, put on some nice holiday music, make breakfast, then join everyone in the family room for presents. Once that was over, he’d go back into the kitchen to finish prepping everything for the rest of the day. He’ll be up around four in the morning just so he can have everything ready before noon.”

“I take it back,” Taylor began, “I’ll stick with putting up the decorations instead.”

“Tinsel and all?”

“Oh god, no. We’ve banned that stuff from the house. It’s almost as bad as glitter.” She scrunched her nose, and I couldn’t help smiling then. “A lot of the decorations we have are old and delicate. Anymore, Mom uses some of the generic balls on the tree. That way, if my niece or nephew knock one off, it isn’t that big of a deal.”

“So you never take out the ones you’ve collected?” That’s a waste.

“Mom will bring them out to show them off, but they’re more of a display item than anything else. We used to get a new ornament every year. I remember almost every single one

of them because I got at least one in my stocking ever since I was a kid.”

“And she’s continued with the tradition?”

“Sadly, no. Now she gets these plastic ones for Dillon and Sally.”

“Your niece and nephew,” I said with a nod.

“It’s a simple touch, and while we might be adults, I still kind of miss it.”

Smiling then, I said, “How about this? Once we get to the house, I’m going to see if your folks have any paper and glue.”

Taylor looked at me and laughed. “What’s that for? Are you going all arts and crafts on me now?”

“We both are. We’re going to make ornaments out of paper mache.” My smile grew. “Oh, and if they have paint, we can decorate them as well. It’s something we can do

once everyone else is gone. We can start a new tradition.” One I hoped would last for more than just one year.

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You could always mail an ornament to her.

I could, though I really liked the idea of giving it to her in person.

“Later... oh crap, we have to get going,” she shot up from her spot on the sofa as panic slowly made its way into her voice. “We still need to make the walk back. If we’re late, we won’t get to eat.”

Following her example, I got up from the couch and gathered our things while she put out the bit of fire that was left. “You sure love your food.”

“You don’t get it. If we aren’t there as soon as Mom puts everything on the table, we won’t eat. Trust me on this. Unless you want a meal of cookies, cider, and cheese, we need to get out of here.”

“But earlier you told me there’d be leftovers.”

“There are, but it isn’t always meat and gravy. And the rolls. We can’t miss the rolls!”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “Sounds like my kind of dinner.”

“Remember what I said before. Get what you want as soon as you can because it’ll all be gone when you go back for seconds.”

After zipping my jacket, I opened the door and followed her outside. Once everything was locked, and after replacing the key, Taylor and I walked side by side as we made

our way back to the house.

The next few weeks were going to be amazing.

Chapter Six

Taylor

The chaos of my family didn't seem nearly as overwhelming with Sam at my side. Instead of getting lost in the mix like so many of my friends had done, she blended right in. As soon as the food was on the table, she took what she needed, then joined me in one of the more quiet rooms.

Granted, it was also where my sister's rugrats had decided to camp out, but it wasn't as loud.

"How are you holding up?" Sam asked between bites of turkey and mashed potatoes.

I shrugged as I dug into the cranberry sauce. "Okay, I suppose. Though I didn't expect you to hold your ground the way you did. The way you blocked my uncle when you reached for the biscuits was amazing." Sam was usually so polite that seeing her go for the food like I'd suggested wasn't like her at all. It wasn't a bad thing, either. We both had to eat.

"Hey, I love my biscuits," she said, tearing off a piece before popping it in her mouth. "It's even better if they're warm."

I glanced at the three piled on her plate. "I'm surprised you didn't take every last one."

"It was tempting," she admitted, looking back toward the dining area, "but I'd much

rather stay on good terms with your folks. So what usually happens after the feeding frenzy?”

“The game, though it doesn’t come on for another hour.

My uncle will probably claim the lazy chair, zonk out for a bit, then get animated once the game’s on. Katie and her kids have to go to her ex’s place, so they’ll stuff themselves here, then eat again before dinner. As for Mom and Brad, they tend to clean up a bit, make doggy-bags, then settle on the couch.

That’s when I either join them or retreat to the cabin.”

“So we should finish up then.”

“Why’s that?” I stifled a laugh when she wiped potatoes from the tip of her nose.

Frowning, she said, “Because the sooner we finish here and get that goodie bag, the sooner we get to work on those ornaments.”

I shook my head but couldn’t hide the smile in my voice.

“You really are a weird one. I’ll give you that.”

“I’m weird in a good way,” Sam said with pride. “I already checked with your folks and they have a box of

supplies ready to go. We’re going to do this whether you like it or not. You said you missed getting an ornament, so I’m going to make one for you. It might not be shiny, as you guys don’t have any glitter, but it will be beautiful either way.”

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“Coming from you, I can believe it.” No doubt she already had a few ideas running through her head.

I’d never thought of her as the arts and crafts type, but it also didn’t surprise me. She always came up with these great ideas, though most of them involved our dinner and whatever supplies we had left at the time.

With Sam still smiling and our food getting cold, I nodded, then finished the rest of my meal. For the remainder of lunch, we ate in silence. Sam’s mind was likely on the ornament she’d planned to make while I concentrated on the conversations happening behind us at the adult table.

My sister was trying to get back with her ex, Uncle Joe was planning a trip to Alaska, and Brad still had to put the colorful streamers on my old bike for Sally. Nothing terribly important when compared to the woman sitting at my side.

It was great having her there, but why did I feel so rotten? I had butterflies, of course, but something churned under the surface. Just thinking about the coming month made me half-sick to the stomach. It wasn’t that I didn’t want to spend time with her, because I did, but what about when we went back to school? Would everything change?

She was so easy to talk to that I’d started to depend on her company after one of my bad days. If things between us went

south, I’d lose my friend.

Sam was fully focused on her studies, whereas I did just enough to get by. We were on two different sides of the spectrum. I'd never seen her throw a ball, but she loved to read. She went through books the way most kids in college go through chips. I'd seen her read several of them in a single day, and they weren't short, either.

I bet if they ever allowed it, she'd camp out in the library and never go back to the dorm.

As for me, I only ever cracked the spine of a book for school and couldn't stand reading for pleasure.

The fictional worlds Sam loved so much weren't enough for me. I'd tried to secretly share her interest in them before, reading the first few pages while she was at class, but it was very slow going. They took a page and a half to describe the grass. Who the hell does that?

Still, if slogging through the first two or three chapters meant joining Sam in her worlds of fiction, I'd gladly do it.

"Hello? Earth to Taylor."

Sam's voice drew me from my thoughts.

"Huh?"

She placed a hand under my plate, righting it before the contents could fall to the floor. "You almost lost your dinner to the carpeting. Is everything okay?"

"Yeah," I managed, swallowing around the lump in my throat before speaking again. "Everything's good."

She wasn't convinced but didn't say anything else. Instead, she removed her hand from under my plate and got to her feet.

"I'm going to see if there's anything left."

"Good luck. There might be some more biscuits warmed in the oven so long as Uncle Joe hasn't gotten to them yet."

Sam smiled, then retreated into the kitchen, hidden from sight as she went in search of seconds. Or was it thirds? I'd zoned out, so anything was possible.

Sitting with my plate on my knees, I stared at my food only to find I was no longer hungry. I thought again about Sam's books along with her invitation to take me ice skating during winter break. Both didn't sound too exciting to me, but I wanted to get to know her better, or at least more than I already did.

She talked about her family a lot, but we'd never really talked about ourselves. Anything I knew about her I'd learned through observation. Aside from my dating spree, there probably wasn't much she knew about me, either. She probably thinks I'm an ass.

I wouldn't have blamed her if she did. I hadn't really treated her that well. Not like how I should've done from the beginning.

So start over.

A fresh beginning was exactly what we needed. We also had an entire month to do it.

When a hand landed on my shoulder, I half-expected to find Sam standing next to me. Instead, my sister looked at me with a concerned expression on her face.

“What?” I asked, now wondering where Sam had gone.

Getting another helping shouldn’t take this long.

“I was right,” Katie called over her shoulder to the rest of my family, smiling when she met my gaze. “You’re so lovesick, you can’t help yourself, can you?”

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“I didn’t say—”

“Didn’t have to,” she cut in. “I haven’t seen you this tense since what’s-her-face from elementary school.”

Cameron. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Uh-huh, just like you don’t see what’s right in front of you. You couldn’t stop talking about Sam on Thanksgiving when Mom and Brad weren’t around, but you haven’t even introduced her to us yet.”

Sighing, I said, “Can we please not make a big deal out of this? I really like her.” And I’d rather not scare her away with

our formal initiation. The last thing Sam needed was a thousand questions thrown her way.

“Duh.” There was that smug grin again. “You wouldn’t have brought her home if you didn’t like her, even with Mom’s look. Sit with us. Let her soak in some of our culture.”

“More like leave her to the sharks with twenty-thousand questions and a side of innuendos. Thanks, but I’ll pass.”

“She’ll have to go through it eventually,” Katie said matter-of-factly.

“Only if you guys don’t scare her away.” The questions my family came up with

were insane.

“On New Years, then. You have one week to deliver your sacrifice.” Katie waited a moment for me to smile, then continued. “It won’t be that bad, I promise.”

“Maybe not from you, but Uncle Joe?” He was notoriously bad at these things.

“Wait until he falls asleep,” she simply said, giving my shoulder a squeeze before getting up to gather her kids.

I managed a small smile and watched her go. It wasn’t long until Sam joined me again, sitting down as she spoke.

“What was that all about?” she asked, looking back the way my sister had gone.

“She was making an observation.”

“A good one I hope.”

A very good one. “It was. What about you? You bailed on me.”

“Your uncle cornered me in the kitchen. Nice guy.”

Oh no. I hated to ask. “Did he happen to bombard you with a bunch of questions?”

“He did,” she said with a nod, “but it was easy to stop.”

Okay, I had to hear this. “What did you say?”

She spoke in a voice so low, I almost didn’t hear her. “That we’re swingers, you like getting tied to the bed, and we may

have a meth lab back at school.”

Oh. My. God. I was amused and mortified. “And?”

“And what? He turned all sorts of colors, mumbled something under his breath, then made a hasty retreat into the living room. Last I saw him, he turned on the television and put the volume up as high as it could go.”

I laughed at that. “That’s genius.”

“I’m used to the twenty questions bit,” she said as she broke into one final biscuit. “My ex’s dad was in the armed forces, so when we finally met, he sat me down in a room with just the two of us and interrogated me. Your uncle is a pussy-cat compared to him.”

“I can’t imagine. I’ve never had to face a family like mine.

The first girl I lusted after was in the sixth grade, so it was more of a crush. Once we entered high school, it was pretty easy to avoid most family dinners. She went to one local school and I went to the other. As for my more recent conquests, they’re too short-lived to actually come home with me.”

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“Because you want to avoid this?” There was no judgment in her voice. If anything, she was concerned.

“Mostly, yeah.”

“But it’s the normal progression of a relationship.” She counted off a list, pointing at her fingers as she did. “The first date is usually so you can get to know one another, the second is to make sure things feel right, the third is so you can share a few personal secrets, and the others are part family introduction and part interrogation. It’s completely natural.”

“But you met my family first,” I told her. “We’ve skipped at least three of your steps.” Ones I would’ve loved to experience for myself.

She shrugged. “So what?” ‘Besides, we aren’t dating,’ I could almost hear her say. “I haven’t run away,” she said with a shy smile, “so the worst part of today is over. Well, aside from the bear that might still be lurking around. That could be a problem.”

“So none of this freaks you out?” Not me, my family, or our strange initiations?

The way she smiled at me then forced even more butterflies into my stomach. “My family is even worse.”

“You’re just saying that to be nice.” Sam was way too polite.

“I guess you’ll just have to wait and see once we go back to England.”

“I suppose I will.”

Chapter Seven

Sam

After getting sent back to the cabin with enough food to feed an army, Taylor and I hobbled through the snow that had fallen while we were away. Unable to feel my toes and shivering along the way, none of it mattered so long as I was with her. A cloud of vapors slipped past her lips into the chilly air as she shoved her hands in her pockets. Considering her bunched shoulders, I had a feeling she was just as cold as I was but pushed forward anyway.

No doubt her folks would've let us stay overnight, but I also remembered what Taylor had said we when first arrived at the cabin. It's a way to detox. Funny thing is, it seemed as though she needed it more than I did.

Meet

ing her family, especially her uncle, wasn't as bad as she made it sound, though I bet she spent most of the afternoon worrying about what someone might say if they happened to get me alone.

With a box of art supplies in my arms, I made sure to take my time navigating through the snow. Taylor wasn't doing any better, growling under her breath when a bag of store-bought rolls fell to the ground.

“You could've said no,” I said with a laugh as she picked them up.

“You never say no to my mom. She'll just pile on even more food if you do,” Taylor said, righting herself before continuing down the footpath.

“You know what we need? A wagon. One of those red ones.”

“And pull it through the snow?” Taylor was already shaking her head before she could finish. “I’ll stick with carrying the box, thanks.”

“It is nice out here,” I admitted. The snow was falling in large clumps now, adding on to the snow that already covered

the branches around us.

“This is only the beginning,” Taylor warned. “It’ll get a lot worse later on tonight, which was why we left when we did. I need to make sure we have everything we need before the next storm rolls in.”

“You know, we could’ve just stayed with your folks. I’m sure they wouldn’t mind.”

“And risk getting asked even more questions?”

“I suppose you’re right, though it would’ve saved us this walk and I’d still be able to feel my toes.”

It didn’t matter if the snow was only a few inches deep.

The snow had already soaked through my shoes. Granted, I really didn’t bring the right footwear for this. If I’d known about Taylor’s cabin... nope. I still would’ve brought the same things.

“Once we get inside and have the fire going, it’ll be worth it.”

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I believed it, and with the shine of Taylor's flashlight to guide us, we continued on our way.

The last time we came back here, I hadn't actually taken the time to admire our surroundings. Not even when we were on our way back to the house. However, now that I knew what to expect, I couldn't help staring at the branches above us, laden with snow. Every now and then, I'd catch the glimpse of something out of the corner of my eye, my heart rate skyrocketing until I recognized the colors or the wings of a bird. It may have been peaceful back here, but it was still a densely wooded area, and while I was more relaxed about it than I'd been before, that didn't keep me from watching our backs.

"Still trying to find your bear?" Taylor teased, pausing halfway down the path until I caught up with her again.

"You're never going to let that go, are you?" I asked, glancing at once of the trees closest to us. One seemed to have been struck by lightning, its trunk splintered down the middle.

"You get any bad storms up here?"

"Blizzards mostly. Thundering snow as well."

"It thunders when it snows?" I'd heard of it happening but had never experienced it for myself. "That sounds like a terrible combination." No wonder they lost power all the time.

“It has happened,” Taylor said with a slight nod, “but it’s rare.”

“Could it happen now?”

“Doubt it. It isn’t the right temperature. This is just your usual blizzard.”

“And none of this bothers you? This is quite a ways to walk for some privacy.” I wouldn’t usually mind, but considering our current circumstances...

“I love this stuff, actually. As for getting back to the house, Brad will come dig us out if it gets too bad. We have everything we need thanks to Mom’s leftovers. My sister and I actually had to camp out at the cabin for a few days back when we were teens.”

“And you weren’t scared?”

“It was the best thing ever. After a stupid fight over something I can’t even remember, she came to the cabin. Mom sent me after her, and once I got her to calm down, it started to get dark. So we stayed in, got the fire going, did some jigsaws, and waited it out. The storm wasn’t supposed to be as bad as it had been, but we managed. We kept in contact with my folks through the phone. Other than that, it was kind of a mini-vacation for us away from them.”

“So camping without actually camping.” I guess I could appreciate that.

“Pretty much. Granted, I could do without the snow in my socks, but we’ll warm up once we get inside. We have an indoor clothesline we can hang our stuff on in front of the fire if you want.”

“I might have to take you up on that. This jacket is soaked through.”

“We should probably go shopping after the holidays to get you a coat.”

“I’m gonna have to agree with you there. Especially if we aren’t going to stay at the house.”

By the time we reached the cabin, it was pitch black. It had taken us over half an hour no thanks to the snow, but at least we survived. Aside from my numb toes, fingers, and not having any feeling at all in my ears, it hadn’t been too bad.

The woods back here were completely empty aside from the occasional bird or squirrel. Taylor did say something about deer before, though I had yet to see one. As for the bear...

I laughed, which resulted in a curious look from Taylor once she walked back into the main room.

“Are you making fun of me?” She’d changed her clothes and had even more layers added on, including ear muffs and a fur cap.

“Of myself, actually.” I studied her puffed-up attire.

“What’s with all the layers? I thought we were staying in.”

“We are,” she said as she made her way toward the front door, “but I need to shovel a path to the outhouse so we don’t break our ankles. There’s a lot of raised tree roots over that way that are hard to see under the snow.” With that, she zipped up the front of her spare coat, then flashed me a wicked grin.

“Get the place all nice and warm. I shouldn’t be too long.”

Before I could reply, she was gone, leaving me in the cabin with nothing but my thoughts to keep me company. I shivered at the thought of going back outside to use the outhouse. You’ll have to use it eventually. Yeah, but hopefully by then, there’d be

a lot less snow on the ground.

Glancing around the room, I noticed a set of photographs sitting on the mantelpiece. Dust covered their frames, which I quickly wiped away with my sleeve. Most of the photos featured Taylor or her sister, but there were a few where Taylor was posing with another girl.

An old friend perhaps?

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Even if she'd been a previous girlfriend, it was clearly from several years ago as Taylor's hair was a lot longer now.

After setting the photograph down and getting the fire started, I took the little opportunity I had to get a proper look at the place. The kitchenette was small enough to fit one person at a time with a slim island positioned between it and the rest of the cabin. The room that had the fireplace in it was the largest. According to Taylor, it was also where we'd spend the night as there were no bedrooms.

Not that I minded. Hell, we'd been sharing a room for months, so this would be no different. Except you have a huge fire to keep you warm. Not to mention the fact our beds weren't on separate sides of the room anymore.

Maybe we should've stayed back with her folks after all. I could hide my feelings for her back at the dorm with a bit of effort, but here? Now?

I probably wouldn't be able to sleep at all.

I was jolted from my thoughts the moment Taylor opened the door, her boots and pants caked with snow as she stomped off as much as she could. A fair dusting covered her things, but even as she set her boots inside the door, the snow had already started to melt.

"Lovely outside, isn't it?" I asked, cocking an eyebrow at her from my place in front of the fire.

"It is, actually. The snow's tapering off, so it should stop in a few hours." She

fumbled with the zipper to her coat, grimacing when it didn't budge. "Damn zipper always gets stuck." Before I could offer to help, she pulled the thick downy coat up and off, leaving it in a heap on the floor.

"You haven't changed yet," she said, gesturing to my still-damp clothes.

I shrugged. "I got sidetracked looking at old photographs. I also might've left my stuff back at the house." I'd realized we'd left them behind as soon as we reached the cabin. I'd

hoped my things would've dried off in front of the fire, but instead, my clothing felt heavier than before.

"That's easy to fix."

At first, I thought she was talking about getting my clothes from the house, which would've meant another long walk in the snow. Instead, she gathered up her wet things, retreated into the back room, then came back out with a drying rack.

Her discarded clothing was draped over it, and under her arm was yet another spare change of clothes.

Handing them to me, she said, "They may be a little big on you, but at least they're dry. You can change in the back, then hang your things on here. They should dry pretty fast in front of the fire."

I smiled my thanks, then retreated to the adjoining room.

Hugging the clothes to my chest, I caught the faint smell of Taylor. These are her clothes. My heart skipped. I was wearing her clothes—clothing that smelled like her.

As my hands shook with nerves, I managed to get the clothes on without too much trouble. Well, aside from the zipper on the jeans. It kept getting stuck and took some time for me to dig out.

With that out of the way and feeling more comfortable now that my wet clothes were off, I made my way back to the main room.

Taylor smiled as I rounded the corner, sitting up from her place on the sofa where she'd placed a large blanket on top of her. "Oh good, they fit."

I laughed at that. "Once I got the zipper to work."

"I'd let you wear my sweats, but they're kind of my favorite." She kicked a leg out from under her blanket to show off the gray material before covering herself back up again.

"Come on and sit down for a bit. We can work on your ornaments later."

You don't have to ask me twice. Taking my place beside her, I practically sunk into the sofa, releasing a contented sigh

as the fire crackled in front of us. "I gotta tell ya, I'm not a fan of that walk."

"But?" she urged.

I turned my gaze, losing myself in her eyes. "I love this fire. These cushions." And the company. I kept the last bit to myself, dropping my gaze as I tried to think of something else to say.

Practically reading my thoughts, Taylor said, "And what about me? Do you like being here?"

“With you?” I asked, slowly meeting her gaze. “I think that’s the best part.”

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Before she could say anything else and before I could think things through, I leaned in close to her, cupped her face with my hands, then gently kissed her on the lips. Her quick inhale of breath made me pause, her body stiffening under my touch until she finally melted in my embrace.

At first, I was sure I'd done something wrong. I'd stepped over the line between friends and something more. Something unnatural.

But then she settled back down, took me in her arms, and kissed me back.

And god if it didn't make my heart race.

It was soft, light, and not at all what I'd come to expect after seeing her at the end of one of her make-out sessions.

Strangely enough, that didn't bother me. In fact, her lack of aggression made it better. Not only because she was kissing me but because of how she held me. She didn't hesitate, but she didn't push me, either.

She simply fell into my embrace, melding her body against my own as she deepened our kiss.

If I thought the room felt warm before, it was boiling now.

Heat rush into my cheeks, my chest tightened, and after what felt like the longest kiss known to mankind, we separated.

Slightly out of breath and sounding just as giddy as I felt, Taylor pressed her forehead to mine and absently ran her

fingers through my hair. “I’ve wanted to do that for the longest time.”

I leaned into her, closing my eyes until the room stopped spinning around us. “Same.”

She drew back so she could meet my gaze. “What took you so long?” There was no mistaking the hurt in her voice.

“You were always with someone else,” I said, sitting up before placing my hands in my lap. “I figured I wasn’t your type.”

She frowned, then ran the backs of her fingertips against my cheek. “They were a distraction. Terrible ones too.”

“You seemed to enjoy yourself.” Hell, the last woman she’d been with, while short-lived, had her laughing all of the time. I thought she was happy.

“It was an act,” she assured me. “I wanted you to think I was happy.” She shook her head at that. “I don’t know why, and it sounds really stupid now.”

I turned so I was facing her and folded my legs underneath of me. “What about you? Why didn’t you ever say anything?”

There were countless times when she’d had the chance, times when I thought—when I wished she’d say it but never did.

“Because eventually, you’ll have to go home.” She didn’t look at me then, staring at the few embers left inside the fireplace instead.

My heart sank. “So you didn’t want to give us a chance because I might go back home at the end of the year? I have to come back here, you know.” I still had a few years before I could finish my degree. I could transfer, of course, but considering the person I was with...

“Yeah, but what about after college? I just... I’ve been hurt before. I started my longest relationship toward the beginning of high school. Things were going great, but then she moved after our senior prom. She didn’t move far, and while we gave it a go, things ended worse than if we’d broken up before she left.”

“You don’t mean that.” Surely the long-distance thing didn’t bother her that much. “If you don’t mind my asking, why break it off?”

“She started seeing someone before we even broke things off. She actually told me she met someone else and that we had to stop seeing one another over the phone. She ended up mailing back my things in an old shoebox.”

“Ouch, that’s harsh.”

“In any case, I could see we’d be a good thing, maybe even great, but I just... I can’t do the long-distance thing again.”

I nodded, and as badly as I wanted to kiss her again and take her in my arms, I kept to myself. “But you kissed me back.”

“I did,” she said with a shy smile.

“So what does that mean? If I’m going to be here with you for an entire month, I’d like to know where we stand. You could’ve pushed me away or told me I overstepped. I would’ve understood.”

“But I didn’t want to do any of those things,” she said without looking at me. “It’s selfish, all right?”

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I wet my lips and weighed my next words carefully. “Do you want me to leave?” Just saying the words made my chest ache.

She snapped to attention, her eyes going wide as her face drained of color. “What? No! God no. If anything, I don’t ever want you to go.” She snapped her mouth shut but it was too late. The words were already out there, hovering between us.

Taking her hand in mine, I smiled when she squeezed it tight. “If I might be so bold, I think holding off on something good to avoid pain later on isn’t fair to either one of us. Yes, I may end up going home, and yes, I may find a job way down the line that isn’t close to you, but you know what? Those are far-off possibilities. None of which will happen for another three years.

So why not give us a try? You already offered to join me across the pond during spring or summer break, so you’d be with me the next time I go home. If I’d known you were interested in me, I wouldn’t have waited so long. Hell, after a week, I was dying to kiss you.”

Taylor took a deep breath, releasing it slowly as she rested her head on my shoulder. “So much time we could’ve spent together.”

“Hey, no regrets, okay? We’re both here now, and if you’re willing to give us a go, then so am I.” I squeezed her hand, then laced our fingers together when she looked at me again.

She hesitated but only for a moment. “I’d like that.”

With the room slowly falling into silence, I pulled her close and caressed her cheek as I spoke. “What do we tell your folks?”

“Are you kidding?” She drew back enough to meet my gaze. “The way those two are, they already know.”

“So your folks are cool if we—”

“Man, they expected it.” She ran a hand through her hair, removing her hair tie in the process. “Mom sort of got me to slip up the last time I was home.”

“Slip up how?”

“Oh, you know, normal Mom powers. She asked how I was doing, which is her way of asking about my dating life. I said I was fine, but instead of saying my date’s name at the time I kinda used yours.”

“Oh no.”

“Oh yes. Of course, being my mom, she just looked at me and smiled. Then as I was getting ready to leave, she insisted I bring you along next time if you had no place to go.”

“Moms are great.”

“They can be,” she admitted, her voice tight. “They can also be a huge pain if they don’t like who you’re with.”

“I’ve had my fair share of those. However, seeing as your mom suggested this trip, does that mean I have her stamp of approval?”

“Seems like it. Brad’s as well. You might not have seen much of him but he’s a quiet guy. His short grunts mean he’s pleased.”

“I’ll try to remember that,” I said as I closed my eyes. Lost in my own thoughts, I hadn’t realized Taylor was speaking until she gently lifted my chin.

“I lost you there for a second,” she said with a knowing smile.

“I think it’s that conditioned response you were talking about. The cabin’s starting to work its magic on me.”

“And what about that new tradition you mentioned earlier?” she asked, glancing back at the box of supplies we’d left inside the door.

I leaned in and cupped her face with my hands. “I like this one a lot more.”

Chapter Eight

Taylor

Blinding light streamed in through the windows, and at first, I’d forgotten where I was. Shivering, I reached behind me for the blanket only to discover Sam sleeping beside me.

She stirred, then clutched the blanket as I tried to get my half back.

“A little help,” I said, glancing back over my shoulder at her. She pretended to sleep, but the way she gripped the cover, I knew that wasn’t the case. “Come on, man, it’s freezing in here.”

“So start a fire,” she said without opening her eyes.

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“It’s a good thing I like you,” I said, relinquishing my hold on the bit of blanket I had left so I could relight the fire.

I’m not sure when we nodded off, but considering the amount of light coming in through the windows, it must’ve been rather late. Even after we reclined on the sofa and went over all of the what-ifs circling in my head—things like what if it didn’t work out or what if she decided to stay overseas—

we’d talked for hours.

Apparently, I wasn’t the only one who’d broken a few bones in her lifetime. Sam had actually broken her arm ice skating when she went to do one of those twists and landed on it wrong. I still couldn’t believe she was a skater. Out of all the times she’d teased me for playing pool, soccer, or working out in the gym we had back on campus, I honestly didn’t think she was the type.

Sure, ice skating might sound fancy, but it isn’t any easier to accomplish. Same with ballet. My sister actually took lessons for years, and the amount of stress it put on her body was insane.

I couldn’t imagine how that compared to skating, but I had a feeling the latter was a lot worse.

With Sam buried under the covers so I could only see the top of her head, I got to my feet, then rummaged around for the box of matches.

“Looks like we’re almost out of wood,” I said to her as well as myself.

“Do we have some more?” she asked as her head popped out of the blanket.

“Outside. If you want, you could go out and dig under the tarp to get some from the pile.” No doubt it was covered in half a foot of snow.

I’d actually meant to wake up during the night to keep the path clear outside, but then I got distracted and—

“I’ll get breakfast started,” she said, oblivious to my thoughts. “We should have enough supplies and leftovers for me to come up with something.” She was already pushing the blankets aside, yawning as she did. “What time is it?” she asked as she looked out the window.

“We don’t have a clock in here, but if I had to guess, I’d say it’s close to ten. We slept in.”

“On Christmas morning,” she said with a huge grin on her face. “There’s no better day to do it.”

I had to agree with her there. Aside from attending the gift exchange later on at the house, there wasn’t much we needed to do. It was a lazy morning, and I planned to make the most of it.

After placing the screen in front of the fire to keep any stray embers from jumping out, I gathered yesterday’s clothes from the drying rack and ducked into the back room. In my rush to get back here, I’d completely forgotten to grab a brush.

The one we had sitting in the supply room must’ve been twelve years old, but thankfully, it did the trick.

I could worry about the frizz later as it honestly didn’t matter once I put my hat and

earmuffs on.

Sam was smiling as soon as I walked back into the main room, her lips hidden behind one of her hands. “That’s a good

look for you,” she teased from her place on the sofa.

“You know, if you really want, we could trade. I’ll reheat the leftovers and you can go outside and shovel a path so we can use the bathroom.”

Her expression was a mix of amusement and disgust. “I’m fine in here, thanks. Besides, you already have all of your stuff on. It’d be a shame to waste it.”

Given the fact we didn’t have the proper clothing for her to go out there and do it herself, I smiled and left it at that.

“So what’s the plan for the day?” she asked as she walked me to the door, pausing just inside to kiss me on the lips. The kiss was feather-light and barely there, but it was still enough for me to take her in my arms and do it again.

Much like last night, she stiffened in my embrace, her reaction mimicking my own when she’d kissed me then. It was so sudden and so out of character for her that it took me some time to realize what had happened. Once I did, I met her in another kiss, followed by another and another.

But now, with the sun shining outside and the snowfall finally over, I had to pull myself away from her so I could tend to the fire.

“Once I get the fire sorted,” I said as I pulled out of her embrace, “we can lounge a bit, then maybe head back to the house after lunch. We can’t really go anywhere seeing as it’s Christmas.”

“Some places are still open,” she said, taking my hand in hers as I reached for the door with the other one.

“Yeah,” I said with a laugh, “but I’m not a nut-job. I’ll wait until after the holidays are over, thank you very much.”

She gave my hand a squeeze, then let it drop to my side.

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“So basically, you’re saying we have this cabin all to ourselves for the next two or three days.”

“Even longer if you’d like, though we really should go back to the house to get some more supplies. I could use a shower, and you seriously need some other clothes.”

“I don’t know,” she said as she canted her head to the side.

“I like your hair the way it is. It’s more natural.”

“When it’s frizzy?”

“Wavy,” she corrected me. “I’ve always liked it that way, but then you straighten it and... man, I would’ve killed to have hair like yours when I was a kid. It isn’t exactly brown but not honey-colored, either. It’s somewhere in between, and when you have the waves, it’s extra shiny. I don’t know. I’ve just always liked the look of it.”

“I’ve honestly never noticed that before,” I said as I scrutinized my reflection in the front door. “I just know the waves got in the way of my eyes most of the time, especially when I haven’t had a chance to straighten it yet.”

“Like right now?” she asked with a touch of laughter in her voice.

“Pretty much. Anyway, I’m gonna go out there, clear the snow, and hopefully be back with some more wood in twenty minutes. I’ll clear a path to the outhouse first in case you need to use it, but I shouldn’t be long.”

With that, I stepped outside and closed the front door behind me. Even with the door placed between us, I could still feel her eyes on me. Usually, it was a distraction, only now, it made me smile. She was watching after me, likely fretting the entire time as I slowly started to shovel a path.

Knowing this, I continued on my way, thinking about Sam as I did.

We spent the rest of the morning cuddling in front of the fire. By the time we reached the house, it was almost three in the afternoon. The walk had taken longer than usual, but it wasn't because of the snow. Under all of her complaints about the cold and damp air, Sam still found the time to start a snowball fight. I won, of course, but it was loads of fun.

As soon as we walked into the house, we received a stern talking to from my mom, but even she smiled through the tirade, probably because of the snow caked on our clothes and in our hair.

“Get out of those clothes and throw them in the dryer,”

Mom said as she headed back toward the kitchen. “Food’s ready.”

Sam and I thanked her, then did as she asked, retreating to our separate rooms to change. Peeling off my wet pants, I couldn't help thinking about the time we'd spent together last night. I wondered then if things would've turned out differently if we'd stayed here instead. If anything, we would've met in the hall, maybe share a kiss, then end up in the same place we already were.

If not last night, then maybe tonight. Tomorrow. The next day. Definitely bef

ore our vacation was up, and I was thankful it happened a lot sooner than I'd anticipated because I needed it—to kiss her, to fall into her embrace, and to hold her

against me.

It hadn't exactly been a goal during this entire trip, though it had crossed my mind. What I hadn't expected, however, was for Sam to beat me to the punch. As hard as she tried to plan everything out, that kiss was completely random. Random and perfect in its own way.

Knowing we had a little time, I wet down my hair and tamed it the best I could. However, when I went to pull it back, Sam's voice popped into my head.

'I like your hair the way it is.'

I frowned at the waves I worked so hard to hide, then let them be, smiling when I practically walked into Sam in the hallway.

The huge grin on her face was all I needed to get over my frizzy, wild hair.

No doubt my mom would say something about it at the table, though that probably wasn't the only thing she'd notice.

Considering how much Sam smiled at me then, our kiss and our night at the cabin wouldn't be a secret for very long.

By the time we reached the kitchen table, Mom had several plates full of warm food waiting for us. Looking around, it seemed as though my sister had already come and gone.

Much to my relief, my parents left us alone. I blamed it on their respective food comas and Brad's need to keep an eye on the game more than anything else.

Using the loud television as cover, I took Sam's hand in mine and smiled. "Was it

anything like you expected?”

“Pretty low-key, actually,” she said from her place at the table. “Don’t give me that look. You hyped it up to be this terrible thing, but it honestly hasn’t been that bad.” Lowering her voice, she added, “Especially at the cabin.”

My cheeks warmed at the sound of her voice. “You’re going to be the end of me.”

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“Sounds like my kind of ending.” She took my hand in hers and managed a shy smile. “Though I have to admit, I’m going to get sick of ham once this week is through.”

“Then it’s a good thing New Years is right around the corner.”

“Oh god. More ham?”

“Lasagna, actually.”

Her eyes brightened. “Much better.”

I had to agree. It was odd how families held onto traditions, especially when it came to food. Every holiday, turkey was always made available along with ham, potato salad, pickled beets, mashed potatoes, the works. Though just this once I’d love to have pizza or a nice juicy burger on Christmas. It might not have been traditional, but it sure beat the usual.

“Next year,” Sam began, pulling me from my thoughts,

“we should make our own dish and bring it with us.”

Next year? Would we still be together by then? Would she still be around? My stomach churned as I did whatever I could to hide the worried expression on my face.

“What did you have in mind?” I asked, thankful when my voice actually worked.

“Sushi? Lobster? Biscuits?” She shrugged.

“You have some of the strangest tastes I know.”

“Variety,” she said, pointing her fork at me, “is the spice of life.”

“I’ve had variety and it isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. I prefer the ordinary, quiet Brit I’m sitting next to.” I gave her a pointed look and smiled when she averted her gaze. God, you’re beautiful when you blush.

When she looked at me again, my breath caught. I know that look. Those eyes. She’d given me that same look back at the cabin, and again as we were making our way back to the house.

Oblivious to my thoughts, she cupped my face and crushed my lips with her own, deepening our kiss when I melted in her arms.

“No displays of affection at the dinner table.”

My mother’s voice caused us both to jump and pull apart, but when I looked at her across the room, there was a wide grin on my face.

“I’m glad to see you happy, baby, but rules are rules,” she said, shuffling over to the sink to rinse off one of Brad’s dishes.

I kissed Sam again, which resulted in a concerned look from her and a pitiful one from my mom. She tried her best to look serious, but the wrinkles at the corners of her eyes gave it away.

Sighing, she said, “Don’t let Brad find out. You know how he gets.” With that, she excused herself from the room as a very pale Sam looked back at me.

“Relax,” I said, unable to keep from laughing. “She’s kidding.”

“What about Brad?” she asked as she watched my mother go.

“He’s even better.”

“But your mom—”

“It’s all for show. Believe it or not, it means she likes you.

Think of it as an odd quirk. The only thing we absolutely must not do is sleep in the same bed together.”

“But at the cabin, we—”

“Didn’t sleep together,” I finished for her.

She swallowed hard. “And you’re sure everything’s okay?”

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“How do your folks act when you bring someone else home?” When she grimaced, I said, “See? Same thing here.

It’s the whole parental test you go through with everyone you meet. You’re just new to them, and because I’ve been burned before, she’s looking out for me.”

“I’m glad you have someone to do that for you. It’s nice.”

Her voice changed then, somber and full of regret.

I wanted to ask her about it but thought better of it once I saw the glaze over her eyes. She’d spoken fondly of her folks before, so I knew it didn’t have to do with them.

Whatever it is, it isn’t any of your business.

Maybe not, but considering how quiet she got then, I really wished I could’ve fixed whatever it was I’d inadvertently walked into.

“I’m sorry.” It was all I could say before leaning my head on her shoulder.

“It’s all right. It’s mostly this day, really. Being this far from my family is hard.”

“Why not start a video chat with them?” I offered, taking out my phone before turning it on. “You can even do it now

since we have service here.” The connection back at the cabin was shitty as hell.

“I will pretty soon. I want to get all washed up before I do.”

I nodded but said nothing else. I loved my folks to bits and couldn't stand going a few hours away for school. I couldn't begin to imagine how homesick Sam must've been. She'd kept it quiet until now. The holidays affect us all differently. While I enjoyed meeting up with my family, then retreating from too much stimulation, it was easy to see Sam was the complete opposite. No doubt she joined in the festivities for as long as possible.

She'll see them in the spring.

Which was still a long ways away. Even so, if we were still together when the time came, I knew I'd go with her.

Chapter Nine

Sam

After a chat with my family that was bittersweet, Taylor and I packed up and made our way back to the cabin. Much like the night before, we arrived after dark, but once we got the fire going, I felt right at home.

“Here,” she said, handing me a box wrapped in paper once I took off my coat.

“What's this?” I didn't get you anything.

Her smile brightened. “Open it and find out.”

Feeling terrible for not having anything to give her in return, I lowered myself onto the sofa and slowly removed the paper. When I did, my heart skipped.

“An e-reader?” I asked her with surprise.

“I know how much you love your books, so I thought—”

“Thank you,” I said, cradling the device in my hands. “I don’t know what else to say.”

“That pretty much covers it,” she said as she placed her hand on mine. She smiled when I met her gaze. “I wanted to do this for you. Now you don’t have to run to the library every night. The campus library actually has an electronic system you can access on the e-reader and take your books out that way. I know it won’t feel the same and it doesn’t have that broken-spine smell you keep going on about, but it should save you some time.”

I’d been late to class a few times already because of a book I needed to return. More like losing yourself in another book when you don’t have time to browse. “It’s perfect,” I said as I powered it on.

Curled up on the sofa beside her, I was able to access a few online retailers, even with our crappy wireless Internet inside the cabin. But even as I downloaded books I’d been coveting for weeks, I couldn’t be bothered to open them. Not when

Taylor was sitting right next to me, and certainly not when she kissed me on the cheek.

“The things you do to me,” I said, shivering from the brief contact.

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Taking the e-reader from me, she set it out of the way before gently pressing her lips against mine. It was a familiar sensation, and yet, it was still enough to send a jolt of electricity all throughout my body. This was where I belonged.

Taylor was the one I was supposed to be with, and if given the chance, someone I'd love to introduce to my family.

I'd never intended on dating in the states for the same reasons Taylor had avoided me. It would be temporary unless we both gave it a go. Only now, I wished I would've given in to temptation a lot sooner.

We'd lost so much time because of our what-ifs and not knowing if I was good enough for her.

But now? Curled up on the sofa beside her with Taylor's head resting on my shoulder?

"You're enough for me," I said, placing a hand on her arm when she draped it across my stomach.

"How do you mean?"

"If this is as far as we ever get, it's enough. As long as I'm with you, nothing else matters."

She smiled then, her soft exhale of breath tickling the side of my neck. "I couldn't agree more."

We spent the following week between our time at the cabin, staying up late, going to the house, as well as returning a few of Taylor's gifts that were too big. The longer I stayed with her and her folks, the less homesick I became. I still would've liked to have spent the h

olidays with my family, but at least with Taylor around, I got to spend it with someone I truly cared about instead of hiding away inside our dorm on my own.

And you thought staying on campus would've been fine.

No, I thought it would've been easier, but I sure would've missed her.

Around her family, I actually felt like I belonged. I wasn't just someone who dropped by for a visit. Whenever her folks spoke to her, they addressed the two of us. I'd never met a family like that outside of my own. It was refreshing and made me feel right at home.

"What about this one?" Taylor asked, holding up a plush winter coat. "You need something more than that sheet you've been wearing."

"I'm adjusting." It was still cold as hell, but at least the snow had stopped. We even had a path between the cabin and the main house from all the walking we'd done.

She wasn't convinced. "You need something warm." Then, placing her hands on her hips and doing the best impression of Sue that she could, she said, "If you get cold later on, don't come crying to me."

A smile crossed her lips as she put the coat back, taking my hand a moment later as we made our way out of the store.

It was the third one we'd visited this morning and the last one in the strip mall that

had clothes my size, so we kept walking.

The cool breeze bit my cheeks which were probably bright red by now, but it barely registered when compared to Taylor's fingers which were laced with my own.

It was amazing to think every interaction we had started with our hands. Her cupping my face. Holding hands. Placing one at the nape of my neck. They were small and seemingly meaningless gestures, but they all had the same effect. I couldn't get enough of her. Not her voice, her smile, or the faint perfume she usually wore. I enjoyed her company, I loved it when she laughed, and there was something familiar about her that made me feel like myself.

It was something I hadn't felt in a very long time.

Especially not since my trip to the states.

"Are you hungry?" Taylor's brows rose above her eyes, which was her way of silently suggesting we stop and get something to eat.

"I could munch on something."

Giving it some thought, and after eying the few eateries around us, we headed for a small Mexican restaurant. "After all of those leftovers, I'm dying for a taco."

I couldn't help but laugh. You sure love your food. "I do like the sound of the spicy chicken wrap."

"Then it's settled. Let's eat."

Practically dragging me into the establishment, we both placed our orders, got our food, then sat in a booth near one of the windows. As usual, Taylor scarfed down her

food without giving it a second glance, which meant she was also staring at me as I continued to work on mine.

“Sorry,” I said as I wrapped up the rest of my food.

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“You don’t have to stop eating,” she said, placing her hand on mine when I went to put the rest of my lunch away. “I’m not in any rush.”

“I said I could eat, not that I was starved. Besides, now I have something to snack on later.” I paused and gave her a serious glance. “Where does your food go?” For as long as I’d known her, she’d loved to eat. Thankfully, she had a metabolism that more or less kept up with her, but I rarely went for a second helping, whereas she did.

She shrugged, then glared at her now-empty soda bottle.

“Seeing as the rest of our day is free, I was thinking we could go check out that skating rink we found online the other night.”

That got my attention! “And here I thought you were going to make me wait until the very last minute.” Even now, I could see the idea bothered her. Not enough for her to say something, but the tightness in her voice whenever we brought it up assured me I was right.

“As tempting as that is,” she began, “I’d rather get it out of the way. That way, if it’s as great as you say it is, we can do even more of it before we have to go back to school.” She was expecting the worst and hoping for the best.

I smiled. “You’ll like it. Hell, as a kid, I spent most of my time out on the ice once I learned how to skate. My folks got tired of me asking to get carted around everywhere, so I either biked or took the bus.”

“How often did you go?”

“A few times a week? At first, it was just something to do, but once I learned a few things, I never wanted to leave.”

“And yet you didn’t go into sports.”

I offered her a partial shrug. “Nothing else interested me.

Dancing is kind of similar, but it isn’t close enough for me to forget my time out on the ice.”

“You’re a figure skater, then?” She smiled and was clearly joking around.

“A bit.”

When I met her gaze, her eyes were as wide as they could go. “You’re kidding.”

“I suppose you’ll just have to wait and find out once we get to the rink.”

Taking our trays, she quickly dropped them off at the counter, then returned to get her coat. “I can’t wait to see this.”

Chapter Ten

Taylor

There was something different about Sam once we stepped through the doors. The shy woman I was used to hanging out with had suddenly been replaced by a kid in a candy store. Her eyes lit up under the bright lights, and her smile grew as we approached the counter. A man greeted us, went over the usual niceties, then asked for shoe size. Before I could get a word in, Sam blurted hers out, practically shaking beside me as the clerk handed Sam her skates.

Smiling, she said, “I’m gonna go lace these up. Come to the bench when you’re ready.”

I nodded, completely numb as I took my skates from the man behind the counter, feeling their weight in my hands as a heavy ball of lead sunk into my stomach.

“Never skated before, huh?” the clerk asked, sensing my hesitation.

“Once.” Sort of. I shivered at the memory.

“Don’t let the intimidation stop you. It looks like you’ll have one hell of a teacher.”

Glancing back over my shoulder, I had a feeling he was right. Sam had her back to me and was in the process of lacing her skates, bobbing her head the entire time. No doubt she had a song stuck in her head and was doing whatever she could not to hum with other folks around. It was one of her small quirks I’d gotten used to at school, which we then made into a game of Guess that show tune.

Lowering beside her, I swallowed hard and let the skates hang between my knees.

“It won’t be that bad,” she promised, offering me a small smile when I met her gaze. “I can see this bothers you, but I’ll be there the entire time. If it makes you feel any better, you can keep the skates off while I’m out on the ice.”

“You aren’t going to join me?” You can’t leave me alone out there. Even with a few people out on the ice, I was bound to crash into something. Another skater. One of the gates. The wall. Definitely the walls.

“Oh, I will,” Taylor said, oblivious to my thoughts. “I’ve just been away from it for so long, I need to get out there real fast and get this out of my system before I can chill and talk over basics with you without shaking.”

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I laughed at that, taking her hand in mine before she could run off. “Don’t make me wait too long.”

“I won’t.”

With that, I let her go and wondered if the sweat on my palm was mine or hers. It was probably mine, though there was no mistaking the excitement in her voice. Her words were full of energy and went up an octave as she spoke.

I’d never seen her so excited before. She was thrilled when she got a new book and even more excited when I asked her what it was about. She was very passionate about the worlds she lived in and could talk about the lore and adventures for hours.

But now that she was making her way over to the ice, she was on an entirely different level.

Smiling, I almost forgot why we were here and what I’d promised to do before we headed back to the dorms.

I’m still supposed to skate.

She was simply going out there by herself to get it out of her system and then she’d be back.

My heart skipped and my stomach churned a little more.

You have to do this. If she enjoyed skating this much, I wanted to share it with her.

Besides, it had to be easier than reading those epic novels, right?

Reading her doorstops made me feel dumb, and I was pretty sure as soon as I got out on the ice, I'd make a fool of myself. But we were already here, and there was no rule on how long I had to skate. I just had to try.

Leaving my skates where they were, I approached the wall, smiling at Sam when she waved in my direction. "Well, show me what you've got."

She released a soft chuckle. "I'm a tad rusty," she warned,

"but I'll see what I can do."

She skated off, doing laps around the rink as she slowly built up her momentum. I wasn't expecting much, so when she leaped into the air, did a twist, then came down on one skate, my jaw nearly hit the floor. The hell? We'd joked—or at least I did—about her being a figure skater, and she had mentioned breaking an arm by doing something like that, but seeing her fly through the air, I couldn't help wondering how deep her love of skating actually went.

I stood there for what felt like hours, the cool air from the ice barely noticeable compared to the heat on my skin. I wanted to join her, to skate with Sam and hold her hand in mine, but my feet were firmly planted on the ground.

When she finally came over to me again, I was leaning against the wall as I couldn't trust my own two legs to hold me up.

"Dude, that was freaking amazing," I said, unable to keep the excitement out of my voice.

"I effed up the double, but it is what it is," she said with a shrug.

“The double?” I’d been watching her for so long, I wasn’t sure what each of her twists were called.

“Two rotations, basically. Like I said, I’m a bit rusty.”

“Didn’t look like it to me.”

She skated along the wall, then stepped out of the nearby gate before joining me again. “Then you don’t watch much figure skating.” When she finally sat down, she said, “It’s how I got started. I learned through observation. We couldn’t afford a teacher, so I learned what I could from what I saw on tv.

Most of the time, I keep to the usual jumps such as Loop, Axel, Flip, and Waltz, but I do like to shake it up sometimes.

So how do you feel now? Do you think you’re ready for your first time on the ice?”

I didn’t know what any of those terms meant, but as long as I didn’t have to do any of them, I’d be fine. “No tricks?”

“Oh god, no. That would take forever to learn in the little time we have before we go back to class. That said, I can teach you to skate. However, before I do, have you ever skated at all?”

“Roller skates, yes. I tried roller blades as well, but I couldn’t keep the skates straight.” Along with going out on the ice once. And that still wasn’t something I wanted to share with anyone. Not only was it scary as hell, but what happened after the fact was my own damned fault. Who the hell goes out on the ice when they’re drunk? Aside from me, anyway.

“You were probably wearing the wrong size,” Sam said, referring to my roller blades.

“If they’re the right size and you’ve laced them up tight, you shouldn’t have a problem.

Some folks say they’re easier to learn on, actually.”

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“Yeah, well after falling on my butt one too many times and forgetting how to use the break, they went back in a box inside my closet.”

Sam offered me a reassuring smile and squeezed my hand.

“Let’s get you laced up, then we can worry about the ice.”

With her guidance, I got my skates laced and managed to walk back to the break in the wall which served as an entrance to the rink. Then, holding my hand, she stepped out onto the ice, steadying me when I did the same. Out of habit, I immediately held out my other arm, not at all surprised when I skidded back into a wall.

Ever patient, Sam waited for me to right myself. “Hold on to the wall a sec so I can show you a few basics.”

Gladly.

In front of me, Sam stood with her legs shoulder-width apart and her knees slightly bent. “This is the position you’ll start in. The blades on your skates have two edges; one inside, and one outside. You’ll be learning to skate on the inside edge

as it’s easier. The biggest thing you need to keep in mind is to keep your weight centered over your skates, otherwise, that’ll happen.” She gestured at a skater across the way who, in the process of trying to catch himself, fell back on his ass.

“To start, you’ll put most of your weight on your left skate,” she explained, “then push off with your right like this.”

She demonstrated it, much like the starting position, holding the pose a moment longer before stopping and skating back to me again. “It looks super complicated, but it really isn’t. Your skates fit, which is the most important part. The rest shouldn’t be nearly as bad as you remember from your inline skating days.”

“Day,” I corrected her. “I didn’t even last an hour.”

“That’s a shame. It can be a lot of fun. So are you ready to give it another go?”

I craned my neck to see where the other skater had gone, catching sight of him as he clung to the opposite wall.

“Don’t worry about him,” she said as she placed a hand on my arm. “I’m right here with you, and I promise not to let you fall. Just trust in yourself, okay?”

I trust my own two feet. The skates, on the other hand, were something else entirely. They didn’t feel like an extension of myself the way my shoes did. They were foreign, strange, and would take some getting used to.

“I’m going to let go of you now,” Sam said as she slowly backed away to give me some space.

I nodded even though I’d rather keep her hand in mine.

Not only for balance but also to have contact with her. “Okay, so shoulder-width apart?”

“Bend your knees a bit. Like that. You want to lean on the inside edge of your skate. Good. Good.” She approached me again and fixed my posture, straightening my torso as she did.

“Much better. Now,”—she spoke as she turned her back to me

—“what I need you to do is put your weight on your left skate, turn the right foot to the side a tiny bit, flick your ankle, then slowly push off with your toe.”

I exhaled, then followed her example, pushing myself forward the tiniest bit. “I did it!” Best of all, I didn’t fall over.

Sam glanced back at me. “I want you to do it again, but this time hold the position for three seconds before standing with your skates shoulders apart. It sounds silly, but it’ll make you feel more confident.”

Again, I followed her example, pushing off with my right skate and keeping it off the ground for a while longer before stepping back down. Once I did, Sam repeated the process. We spent a few minutes practicing, and once she thought I was ready, she showed me how to transition to the other foot. The biggest problem I had was shifting my weight, but after a while, I got the hang of it.

“Do you think you’re ready to go out into the rink now?”

she asked once I’d finished gliding.

“I thought we already were.” There was a long wall surrounding us and plenty of ice under my feet.

“Away from the wall,” she said with a smile. “I’ll still be right beside you, but playing over here is a bit limiting.”

I took her hand when she offered it to me, and with a bit of effort, actually kept up with her as we pulled away from the wall. The rink was starting to fill up with other skaters, which meant even more bodies to avoid. Deep down, I was terrified of

running into someone, falling, or getting cut up by someone else's skates, but I fought my panic back as Sam grinned from ear to ear.

“How long did it take you to learn to do those fancy spins?” I asked as we finished another lap around the rink.

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“Two, maybe three winters? But we’re talking hours upon hours of practice. I spent a lot of time with my ass on the ice or in the surrounding snow. I almost broke my tailbone once. It was bruised for weeks, but I still went out to skate a few days later.”

“Damn, you were committed.”

“Addicted is more like it. I couldn’t get enough of it. When I wasn’t skating, I was reading up on it or watching figure

skaters with my mom. I did whatever I could to improve my technique.”

“And you didn’t want to do this professionally?”

After seeing what she could do, it was easy to see she had the passion for it.

She shrugged. “I thought about it, but to be honest, I didn’t want to ruin it, you know? I didn’t want it to become a job instead of something I did to unwind, kind of like you in your cabin. When I’m out here on the ice, everything else lifts away.”

I nodded at that. “Why did you stop?” It didn’t take a genius to see just how much she loved being on the ice, but she also said she was rusty. “How long have you been away from it?”

“A few years maybe? I meant to get back to it, but real life got in the way. School became a huge deal.”

“It usually does.”

“I think that’s enough for today,” Sam said, stopping at one of the gates. “Unless you want to keep going, that is.”

“While I wouldn’t mind, I need to get something to eat and stop for a bit. It’s a lot harder than it looks. Not the stuff you do, of course, but just skating in general.”

“It can be,” she said as she helped me through the gate.

“Thank you for agreeing to this. I could’ve come on my own, but I like it a lot more when I get to do it with you.”

“You were right, by the way. I didn’t hate it nearly as much as I thought I would.” In fact, it was way better than when I tried to skate on a half-frozen pond. Yeah, never doing that again. But here? Now? “I could definitely get used to this.”

“Does that mean you’d be up for doing this again sometime?” She sounded hopeful. Excited.

“Once I get something in my stomach, I’d be more than happy to go again.”

Because if being on the ice meant holding her hand and seeing her like this, falling on my butt would be worth it if

only to see her smile.

Chapter Eleven

Sam

Watching Taylor take small steps onto the ice reminded me of when I first learned to skate. My dad had introduced me to the idea, but he was also hoping I’d enjoy hockey

more than plain old skating. Once I'd grasped the basics, I was on my own. Not Taylor.

After numerous sessions on the ice, her confidence almost matched my own. She'd fallen twice, once into me and then again into a nearby wall. After learning to skate backwards, forwards, and in between, she started to share the same enthusiasm about the ice as I did. But the part I loved most was when her eyes brightened and her smile reached all the way to her ears.

I'd seen her like this before, but to truly see someone else enjoying something I had an interest in outside of a handful of video games made me love her that much more.

Until you go back home.

My heart sank. My going home would crush her. The smile I'd seen so often would disappear.

For the briefest of moments, Taylor had let go of that fear, but eventually, I'd have to go home. To stay or visit, I wasn't sure, but it would happen. Soon too. Spring break was right around the corner. Even summer was too soon for us to be apart for any amount of time. I was a part of her family now.

She'd let me in, and I couldn't stand the thought of betraying her trust.

With only one week left until we went back to school, I planned to make the most of it before our studies or anything else could get in the way. Starting with tonight. Tonight I'd let her know how much she meant to me, and nothing—not even an ocean—would change that.

“You want to go out on the ice again?” Taylor asked, passing me a knowing smile as she took me in her arms.

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I sighed and melted in her embrace, breathing in her very faint perfume. God, I could stand here all day. In her arms, kissing her, or snuggling on the sofa, I didn't care which so long as we did it together.

"As much as I'd love to," I began, gently breaking her hold on me, "I've made plans."

"Oh." She sounded hurt, and when I met her gaze, something I didn't quite recognize flashed behind her eyes.

"Maybe later, then?"

I wanted to tell her what I'd planned but thought better of it. Instead, I pulled her close and released a sigh of relief when I felt some of the tension lift from her shoulders.

"I'm not seeing anyone else, just so you know," I said without letting go of her.

"I know that." There was the smile I loved. "Besides, as slow as you move, it isn't like you've had enough time to meet someone else out here."

"That chipmunk the other day was pretty cute," I told her.

"Just wait until it bites. Those things hurt like hell."

I looked at her with surprise. "You've been bitten by one?"

She'd never mentioned it before.

"Not by one of them, but by a pet gerbil. Rodent bites are nasty, so I figure a chipmunk would feel just as bad."

"I'll be sure to remember that. For now, I need to get back to the house. I promised to help your mom with something."

It wasn't completely true, but she was my ride into town.

Given the fact I'd helped her on a few occasions before, it was a solid excuse. Even so, the white lie didn't help the swirl of nerves in my stomach.

It'll be worth it, I assured myself.

In eight hours, all the secrecy would be over. Not that my nerves would calm down anytime soon, but it if meant putting Taylor's mind at ease, any amount of nerves made tonight worth doing.

"Are you heading to the house?" I asked, pulling on the coat she'd finally convinced me to buy.

"In a little bit. I need to get some of the logs cut up before I do."

"I could help you with that." I'd done so before, and while my cuts weren't as clean as hers, I was getting the hang of it.

There was also the woods to consider. They still bothered me enough not to stray too far on my own. There was a path in the snow, so I wouldn't get lost, but it was terribly quiet whenever she wasn't around.

“It’s okay,” Taylor said with a wave of her hand, “I’ll catch up.”

I’d rather you go with me. “Are you sure?”

“It’s no problem at all. Just tell Mom not to keep you too long. Maybe if you get back soon enough, we can get some lunch or go ice skating again.”

“I’ve turned you into a monster, haven’t I?”

She closed the distance between us and hugged me close.

“You’re a terrible influence. You know that, right?”

“So I’ve been told. I promise I’ll be on my best behavior and will come right back once I’m through.”

“You’d better,” she called after me once I’d stepped outside, “otherwise I might have to ask that chipmunk out myself.”

“What about the rodent bites?”

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She shrugged, then waved at me as I turned back toward the path we'd cut through the snow. As much as I hated to go

—as badly as I wanted to take her in my arms and call off my plans for the rest of the day—I took a calming breath, then slowly made my way toward the house. Just a few more hours.

A few hours was nothing.

I've got this.

“Can I open my eyes now?”

Taylor's voice shook the slightest bit as I carefully guided her through the snow. It probably wasn't the best of ideas doing this in the middle of winter, but the cabin was right around the corner. It hadn't taken long for me to gather what I needed from town, but keeping Taylor occupied with something else while I did my own things took some work along with a little bit of help from her mom.

She easily conjured up a reason to keep Taylor at the house for a bit while I walked back to the cabin on my own. Once Taylor left the house and was on her way, Sue called to give me enough warning so I could meet Taylor halfway.

“Did my mom put you up to this?” Taylor released a nervous laugh, then hesitated when we rounded a corner.

“No,” I said as I helped her navigate around a snowbank,

“but she did help.” I held her steady when she stumbled over a raised tree root. “Eyes closed,” I reminded her when she went to open her eyes.

She frowned but did as I asked. “I feel like we should’ve been there by now.”

Oh, we are. I was actually walking her down a new path, slightly off-course, to a frozen pond I’d come across a few days ago.

“Okay, open them.”

When she did, her jaw went slack and her hand fell to her side. In front of us was a small fishing hole Brad had told me about during one of his stories about Taylor’s childhood.

Apparently, they used to ice fish on the pond, but Taylor always watched from the snowy banks.

That’s not why we’re here.

Along the water’s edge was a pair of skates, and behind them, etched into the snow after hours of thought and practice

—

“I love you?” Taylor looked at me then as all of the color drained from her face. “Did you do this?”

“I don’t think the chipmunk knows how to write,” I said with a laugh. “Once Brad mentioned how much this pond froze in the winter, I decided to have a look knowing you’d never actually come this way on your own.” Facing Taylor, and after taking her hands in mine, I continued. “You don’t have to skate. You don’t even have to step on

the ice if you don't want to."

"Then why do this? Why here?"

"Because I can see how much you enjoy it."

"At the rink," she reminded me. There was a slight edge to her voice, one I hadn't heard before.

"I was completely safe on the ice earlier," I told her, "but if you're uncomfortable, I won't pressure you." With that, I took her in my arms. When I spoke again, my voice was so low, I wondered if she even heard me. "But I do love you. It doesn't matter if you go out on the ice or not."

r /> She was quiet for a long moment, her arms locked around me. At first, I thought she was shaking because she was cold.

Maybe she was laughing. But when I drew back to meet her gaze, her eyes were full of tears.

Afraid I'd done something wrong, I walked her over to a fallen tree and sat her down, crouching in the snow in front of her once I did. "What's wrong?" I asked, my heart skipping when she looked at me again. "Was it something I said?"

Those weren't happy tears.

She swallowed hard, her eyes focused on the ice behind me. "No. It's lovely. Really."

"But?" I urged, unable to ignore the tightness in her voice.

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“I’ve never told anyone this but...” She released a long breath and tried again, this time with a little more success than before. “I fell through the ice a few years ago. Fortunately, I was still close to the bank but...” she trailed off and shrugged.

Oh god. My heart jumped into my throat as I took her in my arms. “This entire time, the whole time I’ve asked you to skate, this was in the back of your mind?” I shook my head.

“Why didn’t you say anything? If I’d known, if I’d realized your hesitation was more than that, I never would’ve pushed you as hard as I did.”

She was already shaking her head before I could finish, leaning into me once I was through. “But I wanted to,” she said, her voice heavy with tears. “I was stupid. I was young, had too much hard cider, then went onto the ice once it started to thaw. It was a stupid mistake and something I haven’t done since.”

But it could’ve been worse. A lot worse.

She didn’t have to say anything else. I could see it in her eyes and in the way she held herself then. This place haunted her, and no amount of reassurance would change that so I didn’t even try.

Instead, I stood in front of her and held out my hand.

“Come on.”

“And go where?” She hesitated a moment, then took my hand in hers, getting to her

feet with my help.

“Back to the cabin,” I said, breathing a little easier when she squeezed my hand.
“This isn’t your only surprise.”

Relief washed over her as we walked away from the pond, leaving her new pair of skates behind. We can get them later.

But if I didn’t get her inside, under the covers, and in my arms soon, I’d lose my mind.

“Do we really have to do this again?” Her eyes were closed much like they’d been before, her grip on me tightening when we walked around another corner.

“I promise this surprise will be even better.” I did my best to ignore the fact she hadn’t told me she loved me back. It isn’t something you say unless you mean it.

But I did mean it, and deep down, I hoped Taylor would as well.

“Can’t be any worse,” she said with a nervous laugh.

“I deserved that.” Even if she’d never told anyone, I knew how she felt about the ice. How she used to feel.

Still, just because she was okay with skating at a rink, that didn’t mean she’d be okay when it came to doing the same thing on a pond, even if it was man-made. With a ball of lead sitting in my stomach and my nerves probably just as bad as Taylor’s, I walked her in front of the cabin, stopped, then let go of her hands.

While getting everything set at the pond had taken some time, this had taken the most planning.

So when Taylor opened her eyes again, she stepped back, walking right into me as she admired the warm lights hanging just above the front door. “Christmas lights?”

I shrugged. “You didn’t decorate it for the holidays, and it looked kind of lonely out here without them. There’s more inside.” I couldn’t hide the smile in my voice as she unlocked the door, leaving me to open it a moment later so I could go in before she did.

All around the room, on the mantelpiece and counters, were a series of candles I hadn’t had the chance to light. Then, hanging over the back of the sofa, was a brand new, extra-wide blanket which I hoped would alleviate our endless tug-of-war in the mornings with the one we already had.

“I thought you said it was better than the ice,” Taylor teased from her place in the doorway.

I glanced back over my shoulder at her as I grabbed a fresh box of matches from the kitchen. After lighting each of the candles, I removed a cake from the fridge along with some sparkling cider and two narrow glasses I’d borrow from Sue.

When Taylor finally joined me, her expression changed.

Her eyes still looked tired from the tears she shed back at the pond, but her bright smile slowly pushed the weariness away.

“What are we celebrating?” she asked once I handed her a glass of cider.

“Who says we need to celebrate in order to have a bit of fun?” I headed back into the main room with my drink, leaving the cake behind. “We have one week left before we go back to school, so I figured we should do something nice.

Something we normally wouldn't get the chance to do.”

She followed after me, pausing once she closed the door to look at the cake. “And the dessert?”

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I shrugged. “It was there, so I grabbed it.” Once she joined me on the sofa, I set my glass to the side, then dug into my back pocket. “Before you say anything, this isn’t what you think it is.” From my pocket, I took out a small box, and inside of it was a single silver band.

Taylor’s eyes widened, but she didn’t take it from me.

“How is that not what I think it is?”

“It’s a promise ring,” I told her. “Or my version of one, anyway. It’s simple and not too fancy.” Removing it from the box, I held out my hand, smiling when she took it. “I had to get some help from your mom, so I hope this fits. I understand your hesitation when it comes to long-distance relationships. I also know you’re going to come with me during one of my next breaks overseas. But if you ever find yourself worrying or wondering if we can make this work, look at this ring.

I promise to never lead you on. I’ll always be honest with you. If we ever are apart, I will call you every day and miss you just as much. I realize it may be too soon to promise the rest of our lives together, but I promise to give it my all as long as you’re willing to do the same.

I love you. I’ve loved you ever since our first week together. First as a good friend, and now? I can’t imagine not having you in my life. I want to hear you laugh, I want to see you smile, and I want to be there for you when you break down. Even if you decide we’re better as friends, I always want to be a part of your life.”

Her hand shook as she took the ring from me. She slipped the band onto her ring

finger with ease. “I love you too, and I promise to do whatever I can to make this work, even if I have to move overseas to be with you.”

Releasing a breath I hadn’t realized I’d been holding, I melted in her arms, kissing her gently once I did.

“Now we have a reason to celebrate,” she said, breaking our kiss before pulling away from the sofa. “And if it’s okay with you, I’m going to break into that cake.”

“I’m right behind you.”

Chapter Twelve

Taylor

With the candles mostly burned out and their light replaced with the glow of the fire, I curled up against Sam, full of cake and cider. Listening to her even breaths as she ran her hand through my hair, I played with the band on my finger. The butterflies in my stomach were still there, and I knew I’d have to explain this to my folks once we got back to the house, but I was happy. Really happy.

Even if it wasn’t an engagement ring, that somehow made this one better. It was too soon to think long-term, but for Sam to acknowledge my fears—no matter how silly—she made the possibility of a long-distance relationship seem a little less unnerving.

“Where have you gone?” Sam asked, craning her neck so she could meet my gaze. “You zoned out,” she told me when I didn’t say anything.

“Nowhere, really. Just here, in this house with you.” I sunk in her arms, releasing a slow breath when she held me close.

It was strange looking back on how things were a few weeks ago. Back when we weren't a thing. Back when we didn't exist.

But now? After spending the entire holiday break together?

I couldn't imagine being with anyone else, and that scared the shit out of me. To be so dependent on someone. To fall so deeply in lust. You know what'll happen.

I'd been burned before, but Sam would never do anything to hurt me. I was sure of it.

Swallowing around my nerves, I said, "How far do you see this going?"

"As far as we allow." There was an edge to her voice, and when I met her gaze, I realized I'd caused her pain without meaning to. "What do you need me to do to convince you

things will be okay? What do you need me to say?" The tears in her voice matched the ones in her eyes.

I shook my head. I don't know. "We don't know if things will be okay a month or even two months from now."

"Which is true about everything else. Another relationship, school, a job... However, in answer to your question, as long as it's within our control, I can see things going on for a while."

"But what if you decide to go home and stay there? I can't ask you to pack up and leave."

"No," she agreed, her voice sounding just as tight as it had before, "and I can't ask you to do the same. If you're that concerned, maybe we should call things off while

we're ahead.

We can enjoy the rest of this week, then go back to just being friends once we go back to school.”

My heart dipped. I didn't like the sound of that, either.

“That isn't fair to either one of us.”

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“I didn’t say it was, but if you’re this concerned about what may or may not happen, perhaps it’s best if we stop before we reach those choppy waters.”

She was taking the logical approach, same as always.

Problem was, I valued her as a friend as much as anything else, and I knew if we gave up on what we’d become, it would hurt her even more.

The thought of breaking things off left an uneasy feeling in my stomach.

“You see?” she said with a tight smile. “Nothing sounds right. As for me personally, I’d love to see where this goes.

Sure, we don’t know where we’ll be in a few months or even a year from now, but I do know where I am at this very moment, and I’m not ready to leave.”

“The cabin?” I offered her a sheepish grin, but it was forced.

“And this.” She held me tight, then gently lay her head on my shoulder. “Especially this.”

“So what do we do now? Ignore the possibility?” I asked as I sunk in her embrace.

She released a heavy sigh and pinched the bridge of her nose between her thumb and forefinger. “Yes. And if you really think about it, the possibility of things falling apart is there for any relationship. You have to work at it to hold things together even if it isn’t long-distance.”

“Yeah, but long-distance makes it that much harder,” I said when she pulled away from me again.

“And more rewarding once you’re together again.” Lifting my chin, she gently kissed me on the lips. “Don’t give up on us yet. I know the fears you have and how deep they go, but you have to trust me. Us. Give us a chance before you call things off, okay?”

“But you just said we should stop while we’re ahead,” I reminded her.

“No, I was offering you an out, which you didn’t take. If it makes you that uncomfortable, pull the plug while we’re on good terms. However, if you’re willing to give it a chance, I’m all for it.”

“And which one did you have in mind?” I asked, already knowing the answer.

“I’m all in. I have been since the start, and that’s not going to change anytime soon.”

“Then so am I.” Because I’m not ready to walk away from this. Not even close.

Smiling, she leaned in and kissed me again, harder than before. With her arms wrapped around me, I let my fears go.

Much like her bear, my fear of Sam walking away was outside, somewhere in the woods. It wasn’t inside the cabin with us. It probably wasn’t even close. But knowing it was out there waiting? I shuddered, then closed my eyes as I listened to Sam’s even breaths.

She didn’t pressure me. She didn’t even speak. Instead, she simply held me close and stroked my hair, pushing my fears to the back of my mind. They were still there, of course, only

now, they were buried under Sam's embrace, her warmth, and her warm smile when I looked at her again.

"I love you," she said, her voice so low I barely heard her.

This time I didn't hesitate. I didn't even think. "I love you too."

Four words. Four words I'd never said to anyone else outside my family.

And the best part was that I'd meant every single one of them.

"I love you with every part of myself," I said once my voice decided to work again.

"Thank you."

"What for?" I asked.

"For trusting me. For bringing me here. For giving it a chance. Not only now, but earlier."

Again, I looked at the band around my finger, remembering all she'd promised me. "I promise to try my best," I said as I rubbed the band with my thumb. "I'll hold on to this for as long as I can." Because I'm not done with you yet.

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In fact, I was just getting started.

Epilogue

Taylor

That summer...

“You’ll be fine.”

Sam squeezed my hand as she placed her arm on the armrest between us. Deep down, I knew going to another country wasn’t a big deal, but finally meeting her folks? The same ones I’d Skyped with over the last few months? To say I was nervous would’ve been a huge understatement.

Cars shrunk in the distance and roadways fell away as we took off, leaving only clear blue skies and a very long, several-hour flight in front of us. The flight itself wasn’t what bothered me, but having that much time to think and reflect on the last few months did. Sam and I had a bit of a rocky start once spring break rolled around. Her visit to England may have been short, but I missed her terribly while she was gone.

I would’ve joined her if not for my studies, which I was taking more seriously now that I had other things on my mind besides video games and dating the first person I met.

“I hate these first meetings,” I said as I watched out the window. “The introductions are always so awkward.”

“But you’ve already met them,” Sam said with a laugh, waving a flight attendant away when she offered us overpriced drinks.

“On the computer maybe, but in person? What if I say something stupid? What if they ask me to leave? It isn’t like I can hop in my car and drive away. Not to mention you drive on the wrong side of the road.”

“Relax, and we don’t drive on the wrong side. You do.”

She flashed me a sheepish grin, then took my hand in hers.

It was an on-going joke between us that had overstayed its welcome but still brought me a bit of comfort as I glanced out

the window. I’d offered her the window seat when we first got on our flight, but she told me I’d want the view once we were ready to land. Something about first impressions. She also suggested I bring a raincoat just in case.

It’s funny how different we were in the beginning, but the more time I spent with her, the more similar our interests became. We’d learned to try new things, some of which were far outside my comfort zone. As promised, I fell in love with my time on the ice and was actually pretty good at it as well.

At first, I swore it was because of who I was with, but during spring break, I spent more time at the rink than usual. It helped me clear my mind and somehow made me feel closer to her when she wasn’t around.

I never did skate on the pond, and Sam was cool with it.

Still, I felt as though I should’ve trusted her a little more in the beginning.

None of that matters now. Especially not when she was sitting right next to me.

Completely oblivious to my thoughts, she ran her thumb over the back of my hand, smiling as she put one earbud in.

“It’s gonna be a long flight. Are you sure you don’t want the tablet? I think I still have a disc in there if you want to watch something.”

I shook my head, leaning against her as I closed my eyes.

“I’m okay. I’m kind of tired, actually.”

“After the night you had?” She smiled, then snuggled up next to me. “And you say I’m the one who frets.”

For whatever reason, this visit stressed me out. I’d tried to sleep, I really did, but when my mind kept going in circles, I ended up pacing the hallway outside our dorm instead.

So much had changed since our first week together, from the way we shared our meals and spent our weekends to simply cuddling on her bed which was closest to the tv. In fact, I rarely slept in my own bed anymore, getting as close to her as I could just so I could feel her beside me.

“Here,” Sam said in a low voice as she handed me the pillow she’d brought along with her.

“It’s yours.”

“And it’s big enough to share.” She gestured for me to lift my head, and once I did, she placed the pillow between us.

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“We’ve got a long flight ahead of us, so feel free to doze off.

I’m probably going to do the same. I usually do by the time we cross over the east coast.”

I nodded, kissed her on the lips, then settled down beside her. With any luck, I’d sleep the whole way there.

It’s really hard to sleep on an airplane while sitting up. It’s especially difficult when the kid sitting behind you decides to kick the seat nonstop. Sam slept through most of it. As for me, I’d probably need a hot shower once we arrived.

When she woke, I forced a smile, hoping she wouldn’t see the weariness in my eyes or hear it in my voice.

“Hey,” she said, her voice groggy.

“Hi yourself.”

“You sleep?” she asked, sitting up before placing the pillow on her lap.

“A lit

tle.”

She didn’t miss a beat. “I’m sorry about that. The worst flight I ever took, I had one guy next to me invading my space by hogging the armrest, then someone behind me

insisting I pull my seat forward until I was sandwiched between it and the one in front of me. I was jabbed, squished, and yelled at by entitled jerks the entire time. I swore off flying for a bit, but it didn't last long once school started."

I sympathized. "When you put it like that, my short doze doesn't sound so bad."

"We'll be able to sleep once we land. The jet lag will have you behind for a few days, but then things should equalize a

tiny bit."

"Yeah, until we need to fly back." I wasn't sure if two weeks would be enough time. "I'm still amazed you can fly here, then back in one week and not suffer."

"Oh, I do, I've just gotten very good at slogging through it.

But seeing as this is your first time, I expect you'll be face-first in a pillow once we reach the car."

"Burrowing under a pile of blankets sounds really good right about now."

Sam nodded in agreement, then turned her attention to the front of the cabin when the seatbelt light came on. The butterflies in my stomach returned, and when Sam took my hand, I flinched.

"It's okay," she soothed. "Just think about how wonderful it will be to get off this thing."

I smiled again, and this time there was no holding back a long yawn. "Looking forward to that nap."

“You’ll have plenty of time to sleep after you meet my folks.”

Oh god.

I swallowed hard and did my best to focus on the landscape outside my window. The landing was what I’d come to expect, and once we got our bags, we went in search of Sam’s dad. He was waiting for us outside with the car still running and the wipers on.

“You girls have a good flight?” he asked, slipping back into the car when we did the same.

“Same as always,” Sam replied, smiling as she handed me her pillow.

“How about you, Taylor?” His eyes met mine in the rearview mirror.

“Exhausting, but not terrible. At least we didn’t crash.”

“That is good news.” He released a soft chuckle, one that came straight from his belly, then pulled out of the parking lot.

“You’ll have to forgive your mother, Sam. She insisted on tidying the house one last time. Taylor’s created quite the stir at home.”

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“I bet,” Sam said, not sounding too thrilled.

“You don’t bring many girlfriends home?” I asked, slightly amused when her cheeks blossomed with color.

“Not serious ones, no.”

“So only me, then.”

“Pretty much. To stay over, anyway.” She didn’t look at me then, quietly placing her hands in her lap as she played with a piece of lint that had fallen onto the edge of her blouse.

Simple conversation followed. The list of topics we covered was short and ranged from the weather to our studies, which was worlds better than what I’d thought was going to happen. No one asked about past relationships, and Sam’s dad didn’t judge me when he learned how much I’d slept around to avoid being with Sam. It was just easy conversation, which didn’t change once we got back to the house.

Inside, the light of a fire flickered across the walls and ceiling as a tray of tea and cookies sat out for us.

“Here, let me take that,” Sam’s mom said as she helped me with my things. “You must be famished. There are tea and biscuits on the table. I’ll have some real food ready in a moment. I’m just waiting on the roast.” She offered me a quick hug, then said, “Welcome to the family, hun. Oh, I have so much I want to know, but later. For now, you girls relax.”

Dad and I will handle everything.”

Before I could thank her, she retreated into the kitchen, calling after Sam’s dad when he didn’t follow her.

“So?” Sam asked as we both sat down on the sofa. “It isn’t too bad, right?”

“No, though I am expecting to get questioned later.”

She laughed at that, handing me a mug of tea as she sat back with her own. “That’s never gonna happen. For as long as we’ve been together, they know you’re important to me. I’d

never done anything like this before, and while they did voice their concerns when I visited during spring break, they were only looking out for me.”

“And now?” I watched her as she dipped a cookie in her tea. I never did understand it, but it was one of her small quirks I’d grown to love.

“You’re part of the family,” her mother chimed in behind us, carrying a tray of food over to the dining room table.

I smiled my thanks, then closed my eyes, savoring the warm tea as I took my first sip. “Tea’s lovely.”

“Much better than what you have over there,” Sam’s dad said when he joined us moments later. “That there is real tea.

Stronger. It’ll pep you right up.”

God, I hope so.

“In the meantime, let’s eat.”

It was then my stomach decided to growl loud enough for everyone to hear. Sam’s mom passed me a shy smile while her dad kept to himself. As we sat down to eat, I didn’t feel as though I was a visitor or that I didn’t belong. There were no awkward silences. Instead, they spoke as though I’d always been around. Instead of asking what my major was, they asked me how it was going. Small things that made a huge difference, and soon, the butterflies I’d had on the flight over here simply faded away.

And you get to stay with them for two whole weeks.

I smiled then because even as I dug into a delicious meal, it was made worlds better by the woman sitting next to me.

No matter the distance between us, I could never walk away from this. From us.

And so, in the midst of a conversation, and before I could think it through, I turned to Sam, took her hands in mine, and blurted out what I’d been thinking the entire way here.

“Marry me.”

Silence followed.

Sam’s mom dropped her fork on her plate, her dad stared in my direction, and all the color drained from Sam’s face.

“What?” she managed to say, her hands shaking between us.

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“Marry me,” I said with a little more confidence than before. “I’ve thought about this a lot, and I realize it may be way too soon for something this big, but... the last few months have been great. Amazing. Better than anything I could’ve ever imagined. I don’t care if we have to be apart sometimes, or if I have to move here once school is over. But the thought of not having this, the thought of not having you? I can’t stand it. If it’s too soon, tell me. If you need more time, just—”

“No.”

My heart dropped. “No?” Was that her answer? Had I spoken too soon?

“No,” she said, squeezing my hands as she’d likely sensed my hesitation. “I don’t need more time.”

Oh, thank god. My heart skipped, then started up again.

“Man, you almost gave me a heart attack.”

“Well, don’t just sit there,” Sam’s dad said with a wide grin on his face. “Answer her.”

“Yes.” Sam spoke so low I’d barely heard her, but I’d read her lips, and as soon as she said that single word, all four of us rose from the table.

Pulling her in my arms, my exhaustion from earlier took over. Her folks joined us with bright smiles on their faces and tears in their eyes. However, all I could think about was the woman in my arms with tears streaming down her face as she held on

to me for support.

“Now I can understand why you were pacing last night,”

she managed as I met her gaze. “You’ve planned this the entire time.”

“I did,” I admitted, clearing my throat when my voice refused to work. “Though in my defense, I was hoping for a nice day when we were on a walk and closer to the end of our

break. The jet lag’s getting the better of me. My brain to mouth filter is off.”

She laughed at that, and after hugging her folks, the four of us sat back down to finish our meal.

“Quite a day, huh?” I asked, lifting her chin so I could kiss her on the lips.

“This entire year.”

“But we’re only halfway through.”

“Yeah,” she agreed, “but being with you, I know it’ll be great.”

I had to agree. Just being with her made all the studies in the world more bearable.

“I love you,” she said in a thin whisper, her cheeks turning a vibrant red as she did.

“I love you too.”

With all of my heart.