



Home for the Hockey-Days (Cedar Rapids Raccoons)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: In the frozen heart of Cedar Rapids, hockey hotshot August Kade collides with more than just his on-ice rivals when a fender bender sparks unexpected fire with Rowan Armistead the whip-smart ex of his fiercest competitor.

As Christmas lights twinkle and tensions rise, the polar opposites find themselves skating on thinning ice.

Can the jock and the introspective beauty conquer their societal divides and the ghosts of relationships past? Or will their smoldering romance shatter under the weight of old wounds before the last hockey-day puck drops?

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Page 1

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Sweat streams down my neck as I step out of the gym. When my hot, sticky face hits the cold, December air, a shiver skates down my spine. The weather report said we have snow on the way, and from the bite in the breeze, I'd say it's not too far from falling.

Mom would lose her mind if we got a white Christmas.

Me on the other hand? I could do without the reminder of the festive season, but everywhere I go, there it is. The gym had at least three fully decked out Christmas trees. Snow is on the way. And if I was playing that stupid Whamageddon game where you try to last from the first day of December until Christmas without hearing 'Last Christmas' by Wham! I'd have lost on the first day of the month.

This time of year is just another reminder of everything I don't have, including the empty seat at the dinner table where my brother should be. We've never been well off, never had a lot, but when my big brother, Todd, decided to try to take stuff that didn't belong to him, he got himself fifteen years in prison for a string of armed robberies.

Don't get me wrong, he deserves to do the time for his crimes, but the impact it's had on my family, my own life... Woof. Some days the pressure feels like it's crushing my ribcage.

I sigh as I sling my duffel bag into the trunk of Rusty, my faithful motor. My twenty-year-old, falling apart vehicle should probably be in the car heaven by now, but she's as stubborn as I am, and refuses to quit.

Thank fuck, since I couldn't afford to replace her any time soon.

When I slam the trunk closed, movement in my periphery draws my attention from the flecks of rust that fall onto the ground of the gym parking lot.

A short, curvy woman with long, auburn waves, stands poised like she's walking toward the gym. She turns on her heel, and heads back to a car a few rows behind Rusty.

I've forgotten shit for the gym in my car damn near every time I come, so it's nice to know I'm not alone. When I start the engine, I realize that funky smell permeating the confined space is me, so I open the driver's side window.

In my wing mirror, the beautiful woman stands a few feet behind Rusty, frozen in place, eyes wide. She quickly disappears out of sight, and from the slam of a car door close by, I'd say she got back into her vehicle.

Weird.

I'm almost out of the parking lot when I catch her running into the gym in my rear-view.

Wait.

Was she... afraid of me?

Shit .

I'm a big dude. Fine, I'm fucking huge. Close to six-and-a-half feet, built like a fucking tank, broad chest, wide shoulders, thick thighs, but I'm not scary. At least, I didn't think I was all that scary off the ice. On the ice I'm happy to make my

opposition shit their pants.

The honk of a horn behind me stops me from thinking about the fear in her wide eyes and how she avoided my gaze. I didn't do anything, other than open my window—fuck, she probably thought I opened it to talk to her. Talk about inconvenient timing.

Shit.

This is why women would choose getting stuck with a bear in the woods over a guy, right?

I rake my hand through my hair, shaking my head when the fucker behind me honks again. Asshole. I flip him off and tear out of there like someone's giving chase.

Or, at least that's what I would have done if Rusty could do zero to sixty in less than ten minutes. Exaggeration? Perhaps, but some days it feels like it.

Fifteen minutes later, I'm at my dorm. It takes less than fifteen to shower off the gym filth, get changed, and pick up some stray dirty laundry that might have been stinking up my floor for longer than I care to admit.

Before you can say "Cedar Rapids Raccoons," I'm sitting at my favorite table in Bitches Brew with a dark chocolate and raspberry mocha cradled between my palms waiting for some of my teammates to come and kick my ass. I don't have a lot of money, but I love Bitches Brew, and once a week I do everything in my power to afford a little luxury. Ramen noodles are my best friend.

It wouldn't be a stretch to say that it's what keeps me out of a cell next to my brother. Okay, fine, another exaggeration, but orange really isn't my color.

The cafe looks like Christmas threw up in it. Instead of the usual Christmas cheer, everything's pink. Pink trees, pink lights, pink Santa hats... just... pink.

Am I early? If so, I'm taking up a huge table just for me, when the place is starting to fill up. I scroll back through group chat to make sure I've got the time right.

"There he is." Justin Ashe makes a beeline for me as soon as he steps into the cafe, but the twins, Apollo and Artemis de la Pe?a, go to the counter. Raffi says something to the brothers as he passes before joining me at the table.

"You good?" Raffi cocks a finger at me.

I shrug, because not really.

Fuck, I should have brought a hip flask to this intervention—that's absolutely what this is—because no matter what comes out of the guys' mouths, I'm not going to be happy with their solution to my problem.

Apollo grabs my shoulder, squeezing as he sits down. "Are you good for a drink? Want a refill?"

I'm tempted to ask for a second mug of mocha to survive the next few minutes—please God let it only be a few minutes—but I shake my head with a grunt. "I'm good. Thanks."

After a few minutes of waiting for their drinks and getting situated, it's Justin who opens the discussion. "We have a plan."

That should loosen the knot in my chest, but it doesn't. There's no guarantee I'm gonna like their fucking plan. In fact, ten—very precious—dollars say I'm not going to like it.

Without breaking eye contact, Apollo slides a piece of paper across the table. “It’s not charity.”

Fuck. Any sentence that starts with those words is bound to raise my hackles. My grip on my mug tightens as Justin and Raffi get extraordinarily interested in their drinks.

“Don’t scowl at me, August. I mean it, it’s not charity.”

“But?” I jerk my head at him to continue because his sentence was most definitely punctuated with a pause, not a period.

“We found a tutor to help you out.” He lets the words hang between us while he takes a long, slow sip from his steaming mug.

A tutor. Crap. I mean, it makes sense. I’m flunking two classes, and Coach says I can’t play if I fail. Not to mention my scholarship is tied to good grades. Getting someone to help me get my shit together in the classroom makes sense but I can’t affo—ah. That’s where the charity comes in. The de la Peñas are going to pay for me to be tutored.

Fuck.

“You must be desperate, eh?” I stare into my mug, not wanting to make eye contact with my friends, my teammates, my brothers, as my voice thickens with shame and embarrassment.

“You’re the best defenseman on the ice.” Raffi cringes. “Sorry, man.” He shrugs at Artemis who shakes his head.

“He’s right,” Artemis pokes my arm like he’s trying to get me to look at him.

“We aren’t desperate .” Apollo takes up the conversation baton. “But we need our captain, the heart of our team. If we throw some money at the problem, we get to keep you.”

Justin touches my forearm. “Please just go with it, August. Please?” His voice is soft, like he’s afraid I’m going to blow my stack.

I weighed up my options the day Coach called me into his office and told me I was flunking. Like I didn’t know my grades were in the fucking toilet. If I don’t get into the NHL for a regular hockey gig, or even for coaching, my prospects are limited. And without a college degree or a trade of some kind to fall back on, they’d be limited even further.

I can’t afford not to get a good job.

Now that Todd’s serving out the next decade and a half in Fort Dodge Correctional Facility, and my parents are approaching retirement age, I need to step up. I need to bring in a good wage to make sure my folks are looked after in their senior years. They gave up so much for me to be able to play hockey, I have to pay them back somehow, even a little.

Guilt swirls in my gut as I gulp down some of my drink. I’ll pay my teammates back when I’m a rich and famous defenseman in the National Hockey League. It won’t be forever, it’s not charity, it’s just a loan, and it means we all win. The team will do better with me on the blue line, and I won’t flunk out of the team, and school because I lose my scholarship.

“Okay.”

Raffi opens his mouth, presumably geared up to argue because he snaps it shut just as fast.

“Okay?” Justin tips his head to the side. “Just... okay?”

I shrug. “It’s better for everyone if I’m on the ice, and to do that I need to do better in class.”

Apollo nods slowly, like he’s expecting me to have something else to say. “It’s better for everyone,” he repeats.

Artemis simply stares at me like he’s not sure whether I’m being serious, or telling them what they want to hear. Justin and Raffi start talking about a hockey game they watched on TV last night while I gaze out the window. I shift in my seat drawing Artemis’s attention to me, and, if possible, he stares at me even harder.

It’s temporary. It’s a loan. I’ll pay them back. It’s for the good of the team.

My knuckles are white again around the almost-empty mug in my hands. They all stay until their drinks are empty, and I get by with the occasional grunt as my addition to the conversation. I think they probably know I need to sit with things for a bit .

“You’re in for the holiday parties, right?” Raffi asks, slurping at the dregs of his drink. “Christmas and New Year?”

I know he’s talking to me without lifting my head. The twins are hosting, apparently they love any excuse to throw a shindig. The holiday itself doesn’t even matter. Justin wouldn’t miss it for the world, my dude fucking loves Christmas, so that leaves me. “Maybe.”

In my periphery, Apollo shakes his head at Raffi like he’s telling him not to force it.

“It’d be good if you could.” Apollo adds his own sentiment and mercifully redirects

the conversation to something that isn't about Christmas, the Christmas party, or the snow that's starting to fall outside the window.

When everyone's on their way to the door, Artemis hands me a gift card for Bitches Brew.

I arch a brow, because while I'm a grumpy fucker, I'm not a Sagittarius or a Capricorn. December is not my birthday month, we don't do secret Santa on the team or any kind of gift exchange, and these guys know how much I hate being considered a charity case. Especially considering I just accepted their help for tutoring fees.

It doesn't slip my notice that it's Artemis, the badassiest of the group, who hands me the small, plastic card, and no one else. That said, it's kind of cute they probably assume I wouldn't start something with him.

I could still take him. "What's this for?" I wave the card back at him.

Artemis shrugs back at me. "Coffee?" Just like that, no big deal, casual, smooth.

A growl rattles in the back of my throat. "I don't do charity, Artemis. You know that."

He pats my shoulder. "Merry Christmas? Just take the gift card, Gus. Use it on your tutor if you want to, give it back to Taryn behind the counter, I don't care. But don't let your stubbornness and pride stop you from drinking good coffee."

I fucking hate when they get logical. And the idea of having a few weeks of free coffee is hugely enticing. Christmas is expensive as fuck, especially when you start off broke. I don't get a lot of gifts, but Mom loves the holiday so much and with Todd gone... I guess I try to overcompensate for his absence by going big with a gift.

I have zero regrets, even if my wallet is crying and filled with nothing but dust mites.

“And write to Rowan.” Artemis gestures at the piece of paper with her name and number on the table. “Today.”

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CHAPTER 2

Rowan

Unknown Number: Hey Rowan, my name's August, I'm a senior at UCR. I hear you have open spaces for tutoring next semester? I'm struggling with, well, everything to be honest. I'm enrolled in both accounting ethics and law and advanced statistics, and could really do with a miracle to help me get through.

I stare at the message and heave out a sigh, reminding myself that I decided not to take on any tutoring clients this semester. After Christmas, I'm taking some me time. I'm focusing more on my own degree, I'm putting myself first, and I'm not going to let my inner need to help people bulldoze through that boundary.

'No' is a complete sentence. Or so I'm told. It's something I still struggle with almost daily, but it's okay being a work in progress, right?

The message on the screen pricks at my chest. I don't have time right now to hit reply, just as well because I'm sure my traitorous thumbs would type out the word yes instead of no.

I swipe the message off my screen and tuck my phone in my purse. I'm late, and one thing my friend Athena loathes is tardiness. I'd rather make August wait a little bit for my not-a-knee-jerk reply than suffer the wrath of the bestie.

Fuck, it's really starting to come down out there, and I stupidly left home without a jacket this morning. It's one of those four-seasons-in-one-day kind of days, it was

perfectly pleasant when I stepped outside at 8AM. But now? Flurries of snow drift down onto my car, and I'm starting to hope against hope it'll stick around long enough for us to have a white Christmas.

I love Christmas, I love snow, and usually, when I have the appropriate clothing with me, I love the cold.

As I pull out of the Target parking lot on Edgewood, my phone rings through the in-car Bluetooth system. It's Athena. Shocker.

"I'm on my way." I don't even say hello, Hen isn't often one for pleasantries.

"You're late."

"I'm not late yet." I glance at the dash to fact check. I'm right, I'm not late, I have at least two minutes before I'm officially considered tardy.

The light changes at the last second, and the piece of shit car in front of me stops when he really should have gone. It was yellow, he could have made it.

I slam on the brakes, but the car in front gets bigger and bigger as my car careens toward it.

Fuck.

I'm not stopping.

"Fuck. Fuck. FUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUCK." I try to turn the car so it doesn't hit the vehicle stopped at the light but it's too late.

There's a crunch of metal and an explosion of glass, and the airbag deploys. My body

swings forward then slams back against the driver's seat, knocking the wind out of my body .

“Row? Rowan? Are you okay?”

I groan. I'm fine, nothing hurts, at least I don't think it hurts. The same can't be said for my car, unfortunately.

A quick check out the window tells me both cars have seen better days. Motherfucker.

“I'm fine, but I gotta go deal with this. Just a fender bender, no drama.” I hang up before pinching the bridge of my nose, because this is all drama. The car in front of me is a piece of shit, the paint is splotchy, there's patches of rust, and I'm not even sure how it's still considered road-worthy. Hopefully the person driving it isn't a dick, and the insurance company will figure it out.

The man who gets out of the car isn't what I expected. I dunno, I guess I thought he'd be older. Instead, he's young, kinda hot, and a freakin' giant. And from the scowl creasing up his face, he's very, very pissed.

He stops at the back of his car and observes the damage, shaking his head. He's muttering something to himself. I think I'm glad I can't hear whatever it is.

I unbuckle my seatbelt, get out of the car, and smooth down the front of my shirt. “Are you hurt?”

His brown eyes bore into me as I search his face, his broad chest, then his face again. His jaw is strong and covered with a dusting of dark hair, his nose has a bend in the middle, and his eyebrow has a scar through it.

I can't stop staring, and it's not because I'm searching for injury.

"I'm fine." He grunts at me. "You?"

Why isn't he yelling at me? I just crashed into his car. One look at his vehicle and even I can tell it's not good.

We're both standing in the middle of the road, people are trying to drive around us but from the frequency of the honks we're getting, we need to move our cars pretty damn quick.

I nod. "I think I'm okay." I gesture at the back of his car. I'm not a professional, but I think it's a goner. "I'm so sorry about your car. I tried to stop but... the ice."

His face doesn't soften, he's still staring at the bumper hanging off the back of his vehicle and the pile of glass fragments on the ground.

"I... I'm not sure what to do after an accident, do you know?" I'm not making the assumption he's been in a long line of fender benders, but this is my first ever accident. I'm clueless.

He nods at me. "We should move out of the way, and exchange information." He snaps a picture of my license plate. It's smart, on the off chance I flee the scene he's got a picture of my vehicle. Then he snaps a picture of my face.

"Hey!"

He shrugs. "Just in case you run." He points across the road to Casey's gas station. "Over there."

He gets in his jalopy and drives, so I follow. When we're parked up safely, he gets

back out of the car, pulling a coat from the back seat and shivering as he slips it over his huge frame.

He grabs a notebook out of a backpack on the floor of the back seat and hands it to me with a pen. “Name, address, vehicle registration number. And I’ll call the cops.”

My stomach tightens as my core temp drops another few degrees. “Th-the cops?” I absently scrawl down my details and hand him back the notebook.

His face is stern as he taps his screen. “And we need to file a written report within seventy two hours of the accident if there’s any injury, or damage of over fifteen hundred bucks. You should report it to your insurance company.”

He jerks his chin at the phone in my hand before he stares at the damage, and the blood drains from my body. Fifteen hundred dollars? It can’t be that much. “You think there’s that much damage? ”

He’s already listening to a ringing sound on his phone. Wanting to get ahead of whatever is cooking on the other end of his call, I dial my insurance company to report the accident.

I stare at his mouth as he talks to whoever is on the call as I answer the insurance operator’s questions on my line, telling them everything that happened.

“Yes, that’s right.” My blood runs cold as the operator’s words sink into my brain. “Wait, what did you just say?”

“I’m sorry, ma’am, but you don’t have insurance coverage with our company.”

“Th-that’s not possible. My parents... I’m on their insurance....” Panic grips my chest, tightening around my lungs. Fuck. Breathe. It’s just an admin error, she’s going to

check her system and find the correct information.

I just need to keep breathing.

“Yes, Ms. Armistead. I just double checked, your insurance ran out.”

Something clicks in my head. “No, it didn’t run out. My parents were paying and changed it over to my account. It was on autopay.”

“I’m sorry, Ms. Armistead, but there was no autopay set up on this account, your insurance premium hasn’t been paid for a number of weeks now.”

No. No, no, no, no, it can’t be. Sh-she has to be wrong. I have to have insurance. The guy whose car I hit makes eye contact with me, his brows furrowing at whatever he sees on my face.

“We can set you up with new insurance. I’ll need your payment details...” The insurance operator’s voice fades into the background as my head spins. My chest is so tight I’m afraid it might implode as I suck shallow gasps of air into my lungs.

How am I going to pay for the repairs to my car? To his car? And restarting my insurance all at once? Shit. Could I go to jail for driving without insurance? What are the laws in Iowa?

My hands tremble, my legs shake, and somewhere in the distance a woman’s voice sounds like a faint echo at the end of a long corridor. “Your insurance premium will increase substantially after this accident.”

I don’t know how long passes before cold hands pry the phone from my quivering fingers. A muffled voice says something, and I think he hangs up.

The stranger clicks his fingers in front of my face but my body is consumed with panic. When he cradles my face with both hands, he raises his voice, and breaks through the fog.

“Are you okay?”

I shake my head. “My insurance lapsed. My parents were transferring the insurance to me, and I thought I set up autopay, but I didn’t, and the lady on the phone, she said...” I heave out a sob. “She said I’m not insured.”

His face remains impassive. “My car’s a write-off. I have a buddy coming over to take it to the junkyard.”

“Y-you know that from looking at it?”

If I’m not mistaken, he’s smiling, and that sound he’s making is a chuckle. “I think everyone knows by looking at her that Rusty’s a write-off.”

“Rusty?” That makes me smile. “You called your car Rusty?”

He shrugs. “I give all my cars names.”

My fingers are numb, I’m not sure if it’s shock, panic, the cold, or the fact I owe this guy a shit ton of money out of my own pocket. Money that I don’t have.

I’m so lost in my own fear and dread I’m honestly not sure what happens in the minutes that follow. A guy comes to pick up the stranger I rear-ended, he says something to me but I’m only half listening, and he hands me a crumpled piece of paper which I shove in my pocket .

As he drives away, Athena appears. “You okay?” How does she make sub-zero

temperatures look so damn glamorous?

“I-I’m not really sure. I trashed his car.” I point at Rusty hooked up to the back of a tow-truck making her way to car heaven. “And I had no insurance. I-I...” My hands shake, and Athena curls my hands inside hers.

“We’ll figure it out.”

A glimmer of hope flickers in my chest. I hate the idea of borrowing money from Athena, but maybe this is my way of getting myself out of the frying pan and avoiding vaulting into the fire.

“My parents stopped paying the insurance. I thought I’d set up autopay, but I guess I haven’t. I need to pay for his car repair...” I rake my hand through my hair. “Replacement, I guess. Shit. Fuck. I need to fix my car. And I need to pay for insurance.” Tears stream down my face.

“Why did your parents stop paying your insurance?” She’s still holding both my hands.

“They want me to learn financial responsibility, how to adult by my big girl self.” I shrug on a sigh, a shiver slithering through my body, reminding me of how cold I am.

Athena nods. “A worthy endeavor.” She stares at me for a long moment, chewing the inside of her cheek. “Here’s the deal. I’ll loan you the money to cover the damages on your car, but we’ll need to arrange a payment plan, and make sure you’re still learning to be a boss bitch.”

She rubs her palms down my arms. “Tranquilo, amigo. We’ll figure it out.”

Air flows into my lungs a little easier on the next breath. “You’ll help me?”

“Of course I’ll help you.” She scrunches her face up like she’s offended I implied otherwise. “We’re family.”

Something unknots in my chest, just enough for a breath to snake past and into my lungs. “I swear, Hen. I’ll pay you back. I promise.”

She nods. “I know you will. It’s all going to be okay.”

I have no idea how things will be okay, but my bestie is going to bail me out long enough to figure out a path forward.

So much for a Merry fucking Christmas.

Guess I’m not giving up that tutoring gig after all.

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CHAPTER 3

August

I hate having nothing to do.

Too much time with my own thoughts is never a good thing. Especially when I'm thinking about the beautiful, shell-shocked woman who rear-ended my car yesterday. I want to be furious, she took away my freedom, my vehicle, and I have no idea who she is.

She didn't write down a name in my notebook, only her address and cell number, and I didn't notice until I got back to the hockey house. I was too busy trying to keep her upright. She shook so hard I have no idea how her legs didn't buckle underneath her.

So, when the Eastern Iowa Airport broadcasts yet another round of delays due to the snow storm which seems to be taking a dump over Cedar Rapids right now, I can't help but groan.

Waste of fucking time.

At the announcement over the intercom, those on the team who aren't catching flies with their Zs groan with me. We've been here for hours, as evidenced by the two teams of snoring hockey players stinking up the departures area. Our team, the Cedar Rapids Raccoons and the Wisconsin Wolves. They were in town for a game last night, and now we're all fucking stuck.

Our collective optimism has long since been buried under the inches of snow falling outside. We're grumpy, we're tired, and we're fucking grounded. Not only that, but the Christmas playlist that's been on repeat since we got here is making me want to stab myself in the ears.

I wish someone would just call it, make the executive decision and say, "Hey, just fucking go home. We aren't sending planes up in this white, fluffy shit today." But that would be too close to common sense, so instead, we wait. And we wait.

And we fucking wait.

Raffi and Tate both dig out their guitars from their cases. I guess excess baggage isn't an issue for people with deep pockets. They start strumming some tune I've never heard before, but even my tone deaf self can admit they sound pretty good together.

I close my eyes and try to let myself sink into the music, let it weave its restorative powers into my soul. My muscles are tense, wound so tight I'm afraid something simple like a sneeze will break me into pieces. I haven't slept for four days, not since I got pulled into Coach's office and told I need to pull my socks up, or I'm off the team.

My chest knots tighter.

It's my final year in college, and all I've ever wanted to do was play hockey in the NHL like my uncle Bob. I've never been book smart, in fact, most days I feel dumb as a bag of rocks. I never planned to go to college, but the scholarship brought with it a crack in the door to fulfill my dream, so I crammed my toes in there and urged it open, one hard-earned test paper at a time.

The thought that I could lose it all, that the NHL is within my grasp, and I could fuck it all up just because I can't math... Well, that makes my stomach churn. I found a

tutor. Or rather, my hockey team found me a tutor, Rowan Armistead.

Her name sounds kinda stuffy. And she hasn't even bothered to write me back yet. Kinda rude.

I hope she has a magic, wicked smart wand she can wave at me, because Coach said the team can't afford to lose its captain.

And we both know I can't afford to lose the team.

My older brother is in prison for stealing cars. I have three cousins in foster care because their parents are addicts or crooks, and I'm the first in my family to go to college. To go... anywhere, really.

The pressure is immense. Not even from my family, but from myself.

I don't want to fail. I can't fail, I won't accept it. So if I need some nerdy know-it-all to teach me how to count, I don't have the luxury of being affronted. I need to suck it up and find a way to scrape a pass.

I grunt, unable to still my mind enough to drift into the abyss of sleep. And I swear to all that's holy if I hear Jingle Bells one more fucking time...

Why don't all airports have gyms? Somewhere for us to pump some iron while we wait for them to announce the inevitable cancellation of our flight across the country. I'm half tempted to drop to the floor and do some push-ups in a bid to distract myself from the self-loathing spiral my brain is caught in.

So I can't math, so what?

I can shoot a puck at ninety three miles per hour and score a goal from damn near

anywhere on the ice. I know plenty of people who can math who can't hockey. I don't see them getting dragged into the dean's office .

What gives?

The urge to expel energy burns under my skin, heating my blood and making me twitch. Maybe a mindless scroll of social media will keep my attention for a while. The first story on my feed is a post from the team we are traveling to play against. They have already announced that our game is canceled and will take place at another time.

If they know we aren't boarding a fucking plane, and I know we aren't boarding a fucking plane, why the fucking fuck hasn't the airport announced it?

Caged like animals lingering around the departure gate, everything pisses me off. From the de la Pe?a twins grinning and singing with Raffi, the cheap-ass Christmas decorations hung poorly on the walls around us, to Justin Ashe's snoring providing an off-tempo baseline to the music.

I need to hit something. I'm sure the freshman, Artemis, could go toe to toe with me in a ring. I've seen him workout. Dude's a machine. If anyone on the roster could dance with me, I think it'd be him. I really fucking hate charity, at least when it's directed at me.

I know they're on my team, and we all skate for the same logo on the front of our shirts. We all want the same wins, and to succeed on the ice, but we aren't the same, them and me. We're far fucking from it.

Their offer to pay for my tutor still sits uncomfortably on my chest, and I'm sorely tempted to give the Bitches Brew gift card from Artemis to Mom as part of her Christmas present.

I hate taking loans, or help from people. I hate owing anything to anyone. And I sure as shit hate being bailed out of a situation I created myself. If only I'd done a little more studying, or read the questions through a second time on my test papers.

Fuck.

Justin Ashe is awake and the first to drop to the floor for a push up challenge, but he's not alone. One of the Wolves, a sophomore, Xavier Martinez, is next to him.

"First to one hundred?" Xavier grins at Justin who nods. Joke's on Justin if he thinks he can out-do a Martinez. Xavier is hockey royalty, his older brother Roman, who plays for the New Orleans Phantoms, is the best goaltender in the national league.

"Works for me." Justin looks up, not one to back down from a challenge. "Someone set a timer?"

One of the twins pulls out their phone. "On it."

It's not long before both men are grunting, and Xavier's grin has been replaced by a tight-lipped grimace.

A few more Raccoons and Wolves join in and soon there are close to a dozen hockey players face down on the airport floor trying to do one hundred push-ups.

Xavier beats Justin to the finish line and face plants on the floor. "What's next?" His chest heaves, and sweat trickles down his face.

Lachlan Fergusson, one of my oldest friends in the game—even though he now lives and plays in Wisconsin—collects a few empty water bottles from around the feet of the players. "What about bowling?" He holds up a massage ball.

Lachlan lines up ten bottles in a triangle shape and takes some long strides away from them. He throws a shot, knocking over one pin from the back corner of the group of bottles.

“Fuck.” Lachlan stamps his foot, but two other Wolves stand behind him like they’re keen to take a turn.

One of my teammates collects another round of empty plastic bottles and lines them up a few feet away from Lachlan’s ‘bowling lane’ making two lanes for us to play. A half hour later we have four plastic bottle bowling lanes with two massage balls, a tennis ball, and a golf ball from a traveler who didn’t put all his balls in his checked baggage. Players on both teams are taking turns, and we’re keeping score on a notepad.

Turns out our competitive natures lend themselves to wanting to win. Who’d have thought?

It comes down to the last two throws, me on one side, and Lachlan on the other. Both teams and some random travelers surround us in a horseshoe shaped crowd. Lachlan offers me his hand to shake before we both throw.

“May the best team win.”

That one sentence feels like the weight of the world is suddenly dropped onto my shoulders. Fuck. No pressure. It’s just a friendly game between rival teams, right? A massage ball against empty bottles.

No. Big. Deal.

Then why is sweat prickling across my brow? Why is my stomach tight and muscles tense like I’m stepping up to an Olympic race? Why is there so much anticipation in

the air that it's heavy and crackling?

Shit.

Apollo rubs my shoulders like I'm about to step into a boxing ring. "You've got this, amigo."

Nice, nothing like a little extra, external pressure from your team to raise the stakes even higher.

I gesture at Lachlan to go first, he does, knocking over eight bottles.

I need a strike to win. Fuck. Couldn't he have gotten only one or two down?

I line up the ball, resisting the urge to kiss the damn thing before I throw. Everyone collectively holds their breath when I release the ball at the collection of empty bottles.

The crowd goes wild when the ball knocks over all ten bottles, and we win the battle of the —not at all important but feels like a Stanley Cup victory—airport empty-bottle bowling .

After a quick handshake line, the crowd disperses, and both teams go back to lounging around at the departure gates.

"What's next?" Raffi Shaw asks. "Two truths and a lie? Rock, paper, scissors tournament? Trivia showdown?"

"What about a paper airplane making contest?" One of the Wolves offers.

"I have Uno cards."

“Charades.”

“Twenty questions?”

“What about airport bingo?” It’s one of the Wolves rookies who suggests it, and we all stare at him like he’s grown a second head.

“How do you play bingo in the airport?” Artemis might be the one to ask it, but it’s the same question that’s on everyone’s mind.

“We’d each create bingo cards with typical airport shit, like a crying baby, a person running to catch a flight, a flight attendant, someone sleeping on the floor... And the first team to get a bingo wins.”

Kinda sounds like fun, and if we find a person running to catch a flight we’ll be gearing up to board a plane ourselves. No take offs, no running.

It’s not much longer before I’m put out of my misery of being stuck in the airport.

An announcement comes over the intercom, the flight is canceled, game canceled, go enjoy Christmas vacation, and we’ll try again in the New Year, Coach says. I wait in my seat for a couple of minutes now the announcement is official, my thumb hovering over Rowan Armistead’s contact when something about the number tickles my gray matter.

What is it about this number that’s pinged something in the depths of my brain?

I need to set up a date for us to get started. With only a few days left of term before Christmas break it’ll probably be January before we get together. And if I play my cards right, I could push it back even further.

Traveling with the team, busy with the holidays, I could give her every excuse I can come up with so I don't have to see her Judgy McJudgerson face staring at me with pity when she realizes I'm a dumb jock. The dumbest of dumb jocks.

Clicking on her name, I suck in a breath. I could tell her I'm sticking around, get a jump on playing catch up. The longer I leave it, the worse it'll be. Or so Coach says. Would she even want to get together this close to Christmas? Is she traveling somewhere for the holiday?

Guess I won't know if I don't ask.

Something about the number still prickles in my mind. I dig out the crumpled up piece of paper with the details of my fender bender from the day before, and compare it to the number on my screen.

The answer to my earlier question is staring right back at me.

Rowan Armistead is the one who crashed into my car yesterday. The woman who hasn't replied to my message about tutoring, is the woman who destroyed my beloved Rusty.

What are the fucking odds?

August: Let me know when you're free for tutoring. Turns out you owe me one. Or twenty.

The dots on the screen stop, start, and stop again, like she's trying to figure out what to write.

Rowan: What does that mean? How do I owe you anything?

August: Check the piece of paper you got yesterday at the traffic lights on Edgewood.

It takes a few minutes but eventually, the dots move again.

Rowan: OMG! I'm so sorry!

Rowan: You're right, though, I definitely owe you. I wasn't going to take any new tutoring clients after the holidays, but now... Well, we both know I need the money. Tell me where you'd like to meet, and we can start right away.

August: Later today? Our flight just got canceled so we don't have a game later.

I don't want to meet at my place. She's going to pity me enough without needing to witness the sad state of my tiny room in the hockey house. I don't want to go to the library either, that place scares the shit out of me, and I'm not easily scared.

August: Bitches Brew at four?

I want to go early so I'm done before whoever is left on campus gets up and needs their caffeine fix from Taryn and the gang.

Rowan: Sounds like a plan. See you there.

Rowan: Sorry again. Really. I'll make it right.

I'd rather eat dirt than have some know-it-all geek tell me everything I suck at in great detail. Never mind some know-it-all geek who destroyed my cherished vehicle.

Ugh. I already know how much I suck, fuck you very much. I know I've next to no chance of passing my final year, I should have undertaken an easier degree. Guess hindsight is twenty-twenty.

But I really have no choice. Coach says it's this way or the highway, and having seen where the highway leads for people like me, it's got to be this way.

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CHAPTER 4

August

When the boys first said they'd found me a tutor, for some reason I expected an eighty four year old grandmother with a lifetime of math under her belt.

Not... this... this... stunner.

I also expected to wait until next semester to get stuck in. But considering my failings from the tests we just sat are on my permanent record, I need to get the jump on making sure those scores aren't repeated in the new year. That means meeting her to have a chat about where I'm at, where I'm going, and let her see just how bad it is.

I'm not sure I'll be able to do much more than drool at her, because she really is striking to look at.

I didn't pay much attention to her the day we first met, I was too busy trying to pull her from the brink of passing out in the middle of Casey's gas station's parking lot. But Rowan is all of five feet and a splash, with shiny auburn waves that course down the front of her chest, resting on her ample cleavage. She's more than curvy, her body nips in just a little at her waist, and my mind-of-its-own dick already wants to bury itself between her lush booty cheeks.

If she wanted to crush my skull with her thick thighs, I wouldn't be mad about it. In fact, I can't think of a better way to die.

I'm a big dude, and more often than not when it comes to women, I'm afraid I'm going to break them. But this... Rowan... Wow. Despite being a short ass, she's a formidable fucking woman, and it's taking everything I have not to sweep our laptops onto the floor of the cafe and fuck her right here on the table for all to see.

Woah. Down boy.

It helps to remind myself that I'm still pissed at her. It hasn't even been a couple days. And it wasn't completely her fault that she hit a patch of ice and bowled into the back of me, but she still ruined my ride.

Something about this pint-sized vixen has me smothering a growl. If she didn't think I was a meathead when she first sat down, she probably does now.

We're in Bitches Brew, there's a hot pink Christmas tree at least eight feet tall decked out with simple white lights. I have to give it to her, Taryn, the owner of the cafe, sure does like the color pink.

The weight of Rowan's hazel eyes on my face demands I make eye contact. "August?" She shifts her weight like she's not sure.

I nod. "I guess I look different when you're not crashing into me." I didn't mean that to come out as clipped and barbed as it did, and she flinches.

She puts up her hand. "I really am sorry about that." She approaches the table I'm sitting at and gestures to the chair facing me.

I nod again, and she sits. She reaches out to the mini pink Christmas tree in the middle of the table. "These are so cute." She points at the decor. "Someone really likes Christmas. And pink."

There are pink tinsel garlands hung on the fireplace, twinkly lights strung all over the coffee shop, and the pink couch photo-op-spot has two smaller Christmas trees book-ending it... it's a lot.

“Do you want something to drink?”

I tip my head to the side like an overexcited dog waiting for an ear scratch. All that's missing is a comedic Scooby Doo noise. I blink, once, twice, but I still can't get my ears to work. What did she say?

She giggles, and the warm, melodic sound hits like a shot of caffeine straight to my system. It's now my life's mission to make this woman laugh every time I see her. “I asked if you wanted anything.” She waves her wallet at me.

Normally, I can't afford anything on the menu. Between school and hockey, I don't really have time for a part time job, so I make do with what I have from my scholarship, and I try to only splurge on fancy, overpriced coffees once a week, at most, even if Taryn puts something addictive in them, and they taste fucking delicious.

I do have that super generous gift card from Artemis money-bags de la Pe?a, but I still don't know that I want to spend it. Just call me Scrooge McDuck. “I'm good, thanks.”

“Are you sure? I feel like I at least owe you a coffee after...” She waves her hand. “You know...”

“You crashed into me and destroyed my vehicle.”

We both recoil.

“Sorry.” I shake my head. “Too soon.”

She pauses like she wants to say something else before shaking her head and going to the counter. Her jeans hug her ass like they were spray painted on her, and all I can think about is leaving teeth marks on her rounded cheeks. That’s not where my brain should go. I should be focused on math, on boring, complicated, keeps-my-spot-on-the-team math. But with the auburn beauty striding to the counter I think logic and sense have left the building.

I tug at my collar, even though it’s not restrictive, or hot. It’s Iowa in December for fuck’s sake. The snow that got dumped on us from the storm last week, was joined by even more snow yesterday.

I feel like a fucking caveman. I’m not an ape, I know that women aren’t pieces of meat, or trophies to look pretty and bring joy to men folk. But, holy shit, I’ve never seen a woman like this before. I just need my body to catch up with my brain, then I can focus on learning to count and spell like a good little dumb shit.

When she returns to the table, she has a hot pink paper cup in each hand. “Left or right?”

I stare at her like this is some kind of trick. I told her I didn’t want anything.

“C’mon, August. I didn’t want to drink alone, and I didn’t know which drink I wanted. So I got two, and whichever one you don’t pick is the one I was destined to have.”

I don’t believe in fate, or whatever kismet shit she’s talking about, but I do love the fancy coffees here, and I love surprises. So picking a cup sends a little buzz of excitement through my veins.

As a leftie, I gravitate that direction in all things, so I pick the hand to my left. When she hands over the cup in her right hand, she takes a sip from the one in her left before smacking her lips. “Ahhh.” Her eyes roll back in her head. “The coffee here is so fucking good.”

Something we both agree on. I love a girl who can shamelessly cuss like society doesn’t expect women to be “good.” When I left my old neighborhood and came to college, I was amazed at the number of girls who raised eyebrows at my shameless use of profanity .

I mean, find me a better word in the dictionary than fuck. I’ll wait.

I know words have power, but the number of people who are held hostage to language astounds me. The fact that Rowan isn’t afraid to throw down a well placed F-bomb makes me inordinately happy.

Maybe this tutor-student partnership will work after all.

She takes her seat, then curls both palms around the warm paper cup, and draws in another mouthful of her drink. I’m bewitched, I can’t look away. From the freckles dotted across the bridge of her nose and cheeks, to the gray flecks in her eyes, I’m enthralled. If this woman decided to read the phonebook to me right now, I’d listen to every damn name and number from start to finish.

What the fuck is wrong with me?

I rub my head, maybe the accident knocked something out of place in my brain like one of those crappy romance movies. Someone has a car crash, wakes up, and falls for the first person they see.

I pick up my cup, pausing when she holds hers out to ‘clink’ against mine.

Scrunching up my face, I purse my lips.

“To acing your next round of exams and kicking math in the balls.”

I’ll drink to that. Math can suck my balls. I can’t help the smile tugging on my lips when I answer, “Cheers,” and take my first sip. “Salted caramel mocha?”

She nods with a grin. “It’s not on the menu, but Taryn says it’s going on the board for Valentine’s Day.”

We still have a way to go before we get to Valentine’s day, but with Christmas only a couple of days away, commercialism has already moved on to the next thing.

I can see why this mocha is going on a specialty menu, however, it’s the best thing I’ve had in my mouth. At least for a while .

We sit for a long, but not uncomfortable moment, quietly sipping our drinks. A few people have started to trickle in off the street, but so far, no one who knows me. As captain of the local college hockey team, I’m a recognizable figure around campus. Add to that my six feet seven inch stature, and I’m hard to miss.

“You’re a senior this year, right?” Her gaze lingers on my face as she waits for an answer.

It almost sounds like she’s asking how I made it this far without a tutor, but I’m determined to give her the benefit of the doubt. That’s probably not what she means. Maybe she’s simply making polite small talk. Wouldn’t be the first time my insecurities heard the wrong thing and ran with it.

“Yeah.”

Graduation is about six months away, and as I stare down the last few months of my degree, fear grabs me in an unrelenting chokehold. I've scraped through college so far. Clinging to passing grades by the skin of my teeth. My professors have largely been understanding of the fact I'm not the sharpest tool in the shed, and I've been given a little grace on assignment deadlines here and there, well, because, hockey I guess.

Or they've taken pity on the kid who's clambering to stay on the straight and narrow. Maybe a little bit of both.

I don't know what's wrong with me this year, the work feels harder, heavier, and my hockey schedule isn't any more relentless than it has been. I just can't get my shit together.

"Are you a senior too?"

She nods, with a soft smile.

"Do you have plans for after college?" It feels like I should be polite and ask her about herself since she bought me this delicious coffee.

Another nod. "I'd love to be an investment banking analyst."

I understand what those words all mean individually, but I have no idea what someone with that job title does every day. Except math. That sounds like lots and lots of fucking math.

"What is an investment banking analyst?" I admit to having a vague curiosity, but I'm mostly delaying the inevitable. Getting to the math.

"It's someone who helps someone reach their investment goals, assess client needs,

and project the outcome of potential investments.”

That all goes straight over my head, but I nod along like I know exactly what a financial portfolio is and how someone would analyze it.

We fall quiet again, and after a long moment of silence, she takes another sip. “I really am sorry about your car. I spoke to Apollo, they’re going to pay me to tutor you.”

Interesting that she has an ‘in’ with the de la Pe?a’s. It was Artemis who gave me her number, not Apollo. “How do you know Apollo?”

“Their older sister and I are friends.”

Athena isn’t a senior yet, so that just makes things even more interesting. “How did you two become friends?”

She smiles like she knows I’m stalling for more time. “We can talk about that some other time. Her brother says you can have as many sessions a week as you want, or we can fit in. It’s up to you.” She shrugs. “Is there a way you feel you learn better? Reading? Writing out notes over and over until it sticks? Listening to lectures? Watching tutorials?”

I stare at her pale face. Her question, her tone, her everything feels genuine, like she’s truly interested in finding what works for me to try to help. But where I come from, nothing comes for free. Everything has a price tag, even kindness. She owes me for destroying my car, but the reminder that I’m too poor to pay, that the de la Pe?a’s need to bail me and my thick skull out, makes me feel queasy .

I don’t even know that I have an answer to her question. She’s the first person to ever ask me how I learn best. Most days it feels like I can’t learn at all, so how am I

supposed to have an answer to that?

Something uncomfortable settles under my skin. It's not her, it's me. I know it's my shortcomings, but that doesn't take the sting out of it. I fucking hate feeling like a dumbass. You'd think it's something I'd be used to by now. Guess not.

"It's okay if you don't know, we can work on finding out how you process and retain information. I don't need to know right this second. We have time." Her smile is warm, and I feel it down to my bones. I'm drawn to her in ways I don't understand, and for once in my life I'm not completely intimidated by someone else's intelligence. She doesn't make me feel like a dumb jock. She talks to me like I'm on her level, even though I'm very obviously not.

By the time my hour with her is up, my head hurts, there's a dull throb behind my eyeballs, and I feel like I've played back to back hockey games, on the same fucking day. My bones are weary.

"We'll get you to where you need to be, August." Rowan's assurance sounds so concrete, so secured in a firm belief that I can't fail, that she won't let me fail, that it's hard not to believe her.

So despite the blinding pain in my brain, despite the fact I'm getting tutoring I can't afford, from a woman who totaled my only mode of transportation, for just a beat, I let myself believe. Believe that I can be more, believe that I won't fail, and believe that I'll graduate, play in the NHL, and live out all my hopes and dreams.

And that the redhead in front of me will help me get there.

CHAPTER 5

August

I fucking hate parties.

Especially fancy-as-fuck Christmas parties.

I survived the ugly sweater party Mom dragged me to at the neighbor's house, but this? Penguin suits?

I also fucking hate tuxedos.

Who the fuck are these rich kids who thought it was a good idea to have a party, invite the whole team, and make us dress up in glad rags I don't even own? Couldn't they do something more meaningful with their money? Something less... lavish?

I'm grateful to them for paying Rowan for my tutoring. But this... this level of opulence, of grandeur... of waste .

I bet as soon as I walk into the fanciest hotel in Cedar Rapids, everyone is going to know this tux is borrowed from my cousin. I'll stick out like a sore thumb, a giant sore fucking thumb at that.

These de la Pe?a kids have more money than sense. It grinds my fucking gears. Has no one in their lives taught them about the value of a dollar? About how some people barely make ends meet? Ugh. The entitlement .

I haven't known them all that long, since the college hockey season started in October. They seem like nice guys, from the little time I've spent with them, and I know life isn't fair, that just because someone was born into money doesn't make them raging assholes, but it all feels a bit... in-your-face flashy.

They're paying for my tutor, which is far from a dickish thing to do, so I need to give them some grace and tuck my own hang-ups about the wealthy aside. And as captain, I can't not show up to their holiday party for the team, even if I'd rather stay in my dorm room, eat ramen noodles, watch porn, and pass out in my underwear.

I do look hot as fuck though. I can carry off a tux with the best of them. I'm lucky that my one and only cousin who has made something of himself is an inch taller than I am and owns a penguin suit.

These hotshot sons of a billionaire have even comped hotel rooms for each member of the team for the night. Not shared rooms, either. We get a room of our own. I half expected matching jammies like we got at Halloween, or group activities in the morning. Or even matching smoothie makers for everyone on the team. But I guess that's a step too far for the Princes of Prosperity.

Fuck.

I heave out a sigh. I know I'm being a petty bitch, I know I'm being judgmental and ungrateful and normally, I can keep myself to a mild snark.

It's definitely worse than usual. I guess there's something about being forced into needing help that's rankling me.

I'm trying not to be bitter, to not resist participating in the group activity even if it stinks of Benjamins. It's not their fault they were born into money and I wasn't. And underneath all the dollar bills they're actually decent guys, they really are. I need to

focus on that more, it's just hard when it's almost brandished in my face at every turn.

If they weren't good guys, they would never have offered to help me out of a tough spot by paying for my tutoring with Rowan. I mean, they could just stand by, stay quiet, and keep their money in their very deep pockets. They could let me lose my place on the team, and in university, and one of them could even take my 'C,' if they were the cut-throat, competitive, jackasses I'm making them out to be.

It's just sometimes it's hard to see past everything they have that I don't.

Fine. All the damn time.

If they knew I was struggling as much as I have been, both financially and academically, they'd wave their money wands and make it go away. They didn't hesitate to find Rowan for me, before I'd even opened my mouth to ask for help.

But I guess I'm just too fucking proud to ask for real help, or let them even if they tried. Taking that gift card from Artemis in Bitches Brew physically hurt my insides.

Coach wants me to work harder at strengthening my bond with all the guys on the team and stop being so much of a lone wolf. Some days I think he regrets giving me my "C," because I don't like people. I'm not a good leader. He says I'm wrong but I don't see it. He says it's his job to see things in us that we can't.

And for some unknown reason, people tend to tell me personal shit like they think I can help them fix it. To be fair, sometimes I can. But that's beside the point.

I don't mind hanging out with my boys, but this... this is... extreme. It's such an unnecessary fucking waste.

The hotel in downtown Cedar Rapids looks pretty fly under thousands of soft twinkly Christmas lights. A huge, black Christmas tree, adorned with silver and gold decorations, stands in the lobby, an electric toy train chugging around the tracks surrounding giant piles of beautifully wrapped empty boxes at its base.

“Are you here for the hockey team party?” A guy behind the desk asks with a warm smile.

Isn't it obvious? Is there another penguin fancy dress party in the building? I'm glad he referred to it as the team party and not the de la Show Off's party. I might have snapped.

“Yeah.” I tug at my collar. As soon as it is socially acceptable, I'm yanking off this stupid dickie bow.

He points to his right. “Take a left at the end of the hallway.”

I nod and follow the arrows to the grand ballroom. Inside, it's much of the same, lots of sparkle, twinkling lights, glitz and glam, and I don't get two feet into the room before a server passes with a tray of bite-sized... somethings.

Who the hell came up with the idea of eating miniature versions of anything? That's not my jam. Give me the full sized option, and give me lots of it. Another server pauses with a tray of champagne flute glasses. She holds the tray out to me. “Apple cider?”

“No alcohol?”

She shakes her head. “It's a dry party.”

Nice. My shoulders relax a bit. I might think they're entitled, but I'm big enough to

admit that I like that the twins haven't tried to pay their way into getting alcohol served to underage kids here.

No one's going to be swinging from the pretty chandeliers overhead, streaking through the hotel, or skinny dipping in the pool.

At least not because of booze at the party.

What they do outside this room is their own problem. Inside these four walls, I'm in Captain Mode. These assholes are my responsibility, all of them. And there'll be no front-page drama on my watch .

I should have thought to give a hockey stick to the guy at the check in desk and have all the team sign it when they head to their hotel rooms like I do when we travel for away games. It was something the departing captain told me last year, a handy dandy trick to make sure everyone makes curfew.

You give a hockey stick to the receptionist and ask them to take the time when each of the players sign it. If they're a hockey fan, they get to keep the stick. It can be a costly process, and it's not always necessary. But when Coach enforces a curfew, or we have a big game coming up, it's a sneakily easy way to make sure everyone gets to where they're supposed to be without me standing guard over the whole team.

Win-win.

Sticking to the periphery of the room, I'm on my second glass of apple cider. I've had about a dozen hors d'oeuvres, and I'm still starving. These things aren't real fucking food. They're tasty, but they aren't actual nourishment. My stomach says so.

Scanning the room, mostly in search for something I can actually sink my teeth into, my eyes land on someone I wasn't expecting to see here, and I choke on the tiny puff

of cheese pastry I just swallowed. Fuck. Thumping at my chest, I flag down a passing server to give me another flute of cider. She waits for me to drain it and take another before she hurries off.

Should have asked for a tall glass of water. Fuck.

Blurry eyes, burning throat, and flakes of pastry still stuck in my esophagus, I've never been more relieved than when the server appears with a giant glass of water. "Thanks," I croak, but I can't take my eyes off the vision, the ethereal, the fucking goddess standing right there in my line of sight.

Rowan.

Sipping my water, I take her in. Her hair hangs loose over her shoulders. She's wearing a gold, sleeveless dress that flatters her tits and waist, falling to her mid-thigh in loose pleats. A wide black belt and strappy black sandals finish the look, and she holds a small black clutch against her side. I damn near swallow my tongue.

Holy fuck.

How am I going to be able to sit across a table from her to learn math?

Fair enough, if anyone's going to convince my brain to absorb complex equations and math it's going to be the most intelligent and beautiful woman in the room, right? Right. I just need to figure out how to stop staring and drooling over her because that shit's not cool.

The person she's talking to moves into view. It's Athena de la Pe?a, oldest of the four de la Pe?a siblings, resident boss bitch, and scariest motherfucker on campus. She's every bit as wealthy as her younger brothers, but much smarter. At least so the rumors go, I don't know her at all.

They're clearly good friends, from the relaxed posture, the warm smiles, and the fact it's commonly known that Athena keeps her circle small.

My stomach falls.

Standing here looking in on my new tutor hanging out with a billionaire heiress, it's hard to miss the subtle extravagance painted all over her body. How can I compete with that? What can I give her that she can't just buy for herself?

Fuck.

The perfectly manicured nails, the expensive looking dress, I bet those shoes cost at least a grand. The vision standing in front of me is a contradiction to the scared woman who broke down crying in the parking lot a few days ago when she realized she had no insurance.

Which is the real Rowan?

Is she poor like me, but doing what she can to keep up with the de la Pe?as? Or was it all an act, and she was playing me like a fucking fool to gain my sympathy because turning on the water works might get her out of trouble? If that was the case, why would she need the de la Pe?a's money for tutoring me?

It doesn't make sense.

My gaze lingers on her feet. Visions of those sparkly black heels carving tracks into my ass cheeks as I relentlessly fuck her assault my mind. It almost distracts me from the fact her dress probably cost as much as a year's worth of food. It almost distracts me from the fact I'm not good enough for her.

Almost.

I should have known better than to think she was just another struggling college kid like me.

“Flirting with the enemy?” Justin Ashe’s amused voice is too close. I didn’t see him approach, which is already unusual for me. When I damn near jump out of my skin, he chuckles. “That answers my question.”

My mouth is dry despite drinking my glass of water, so when I go to speak, nothing comes out. Clearing my throat, I breathe in and try again. “Enemy?”

“She’s Johnny White’s girl, man.”

The final nail is driven into Rowan Armistead’s coffin with gusto.

Privileged, above my station, and my mortal enemy’s girl. As if she can feel me staring at her, she skims the crowd before her eyes land on me, stopping my breath in its tracks. Her face breaks into a wide, beaming smile, but I school my features, barely tipping my head in acknowledgement of her existence.

Johnny White’s girl. Fuck my life. That’s drama I don’t need right now.

I honestly have no idea how our rivalry started back in high school. When it comes to JW, I don’t think there needs to be a reason, he was born an absolute asshole, he hates everyone, he thrives on making people miserable. He’s a jackass .

I’ve stood up to him since we were teenagers, and I think that added fuel to the fire. Most people back down and let him win. Not me.

At some point, the local fans started to hype our rivalry, often comparing our stats and performances. Then the local hockey blogs and sports reporter caught wind and jumped on the bandwagon, which led to JW throwing me shade on his socials,

chirping shit at me in comments after games. And when the two of us are on the ice together, our subtle, virtual jabs are transferred into actual face-punching jabs.

The crowds love it. They probably think it's staged, but when you peel back all the layers, Johnny White isn't a nice guy, and he's a dirty fucker on the ice.

If she's with him, that says it all about her. I'll use her for her math brain to help me keep my place on the team, but beyond that, I need to stay away from her. All I need is to give Johnny another reason to drop the mitts on the ice. I can't help my team to victory if I spend all my time in the penalty box.

I turn my attention back to Justin, who watches the non-verbal exchange with thinly veiled curiosity. He looks like he's about to say something, but seems to decide it's best not to open his goddamn mouth.

Right choice.

I'm not known for fighting my own teammates, but right now, I'd be happy to make an exception.

I'm inexplicably pissed at myself. And at her. I don't even know why. She doesn't owe me any information about her life, we aren't dating, she's not cheating. Guess my imagination got the better of me, and I expected...

I don't know what I expected.

It's not like she was going to sit down and go, "Hi, I'm Rowan, I'm rich and in a relationship with your childhood enemy." Of course she doesn't know who I am. I'm no one. It makes sense. But it still stings just a little.

I thought she was different, or at least different enough. Different enough that being

the poor kid wouldn't matter for once.

Maybe I even thought I could be different.

Echoes of high school come back to me, the sneering laughter of Johnny White and his friends as they mocked my hand-me-down sneakers, hockey pads, and the same paper bag lunch every single day because it was all Mom could afford.

My stomach lurches.

Money can't buy happiness, but it sure as hell makes life a shit-ton easier.

A sickening thought tickles the edges of my mind. What if Rowan does know who I am, and is fucking with me to sabotage any chance I have of getting to the NHL? I wouldn't put it past Johnny to sink that low to recruit other people to his fucked-up plans.

Is she lacking moral scruples just like him? She'd have to be to date him, right?

I shake my head. No. He's a master manipulator. There's every chance he's recruited her without her even realizing he's a complete piece of shit. A bully at best.

A bell chimes, and we're called to dinner.

"Sit with me, cap." Justin tugs my arm. I'm pretty sure these tables are all set out with a very specific seating plan, but he doesn't seem to give a shit. Basically the twins planned a wedding without a bride and groom. There are fresh poinsettias adorning the space, lights, coordinated linens, huge centerpieces blocking people who sit on one side of the table from talking to people sitting across from them unless they contort themselves around the vases.

It's everything you'd expect from a... well, a wedding. I bet this little soiree of theirs cost them a fucking bomb. Or rather, cost daddy dearest.

Since my eyes landed on Rowan, I know where she is with every step she takes. I feel her questioning eyes roaming over my face. Why did I blow her off? Why, indeed. I'm not going to make eyes at that asshole's girl. That's a line into act-of-war territory that even I won't cross.

I can't believe she's with Johnny fucking White. She seemed so damn nice... I suppose there's no accounting for taste.

There are more women in the room than I expected. Guess I hadn't thought about the guest list beyond the hockey team being invited.

The round tables each seat six. Scott takes a seat to my right, leaning toward me. "She's off limits, cap. White's girl."

How am I the only fucker in the building not to know that she's already with someone else? Not just anyone, but Johnny fucking White. My blood boils as his name tunnels further under my skin. And how the hell did Scott notice my attention on her? I need to stop staring. I'm clearly drawing attention, and it's kind of rude.

She's just so goddamn stunning, I can't help myself.

Justin sits on my left. To Scott's right, Athena takes a seat, and Rowan sits next to her.

Oh, for fuck's sake. They had to sit right here? At my table?

Worse still, Athena moves the fucking centerpiece off to the side so we can all see each other.

A chick I've never seen before sits next to Justin. She's wearing a dress so low cut I'm pretty sure Justin just jizzed his pants.

There's an awkward atmosphere at the table, but according to these little fancy embossed place cards, everyone is exactly where they are supposed to be. Athena chats to Rowan, but her eyes stay firmly focused on my face as the meals appear in front of us. I have no idea what I eat. I can't taste it. I do know that it's definitely more filling than the bite-sized teasers we were given on arrival.

I have no clue what the conversation around me is about either, I can't hear it.

When I'm not staring at my plate, I'm sneaking glances at the fiery redhead sitting across the table trying to murder me with her death-glare. She's clearly pissed that I ignored her and didn't return her smile and greeting. At least I think that's what she's pissed at.

Good.

I'm pissed too. What good person, in their right mind, dates Johnny White?

Pissed means I won't accidentally stick my tongue in her mouth and make her moan my name while her cum decorates my cock.

Easy, tiger.

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CHAPTER 6

Rowan

There are few people in the world that I've met and thought, "I want you to bend me over the nearest piece of furniture and fuck me senseless."

To date, August Kade might be the first and only.

Strike that 'might be.'

Fuck, he's handsome as hell.

I thought he felt the zing of attraction too. That jolt of electricity that strikes in your veins and drives you to act without forethought. The crackle of your body dictating a deep and feral need to be with someone, sometimes before you even know much about them.

When he walked into the party, I thought all my Christmases had come at the same time. This party is a bust. Not only am I surrounded by hockey players, but they're all staring at me like I'm the enemy.

I might be imagining that. Perhaps. Maybe. But that's what it feels like.

I can't hook up with any of them either. Not only because I don't want any of them, but my ex put a sour taste for athletes in my mouth. All he ever wanted me for was my brain, my intelligence, and to help him get good grades.

When he asked me to write a whole paper for him, I did, because I thought we were in love and that's what people in love do for each other, right?

Except he didn't love me. He loved that I could help him pass.

Bastard.

The shame of being taken for a fool drags its nails through my skin with ease.

I swore off hockey players, athletes of all kinds, until August.

When I crashed into him, literally, my heart stopped dead.

When he got out of the car, and I saw him, it felt more like he crashed into me .

I thought we had a moment. Granted, he was kinda pissed at me for destroying his beloved vehicle, but I thought the lightning strike of carnal attraction had hit both of us. I thought he wanted to rip my clothes off and give me a good pounding as much as I wanted him to.

He surveys the room, filling out his tux in a way that should be illegal. Broad shoulders, thick neck, bulging biceps... fuck. My panties are damp just from staring.

When his eyes graze over me from the doorway, I start to lift my hand to wave but stop when his rakish stare keeps moving.

What the fuck?

Maybe he doesn't recognize me in my fancy dress. I wouldn't blame him. My transformation from swamp witch to Christmas ball babe was impressive as fuck, even if I do say so myself.

But when his hard stare glides over me a second time, I know it's not an accident, because it fucking lingers on me.

He's ignoring me ?

What the hell?

I'm half tempted to walk right up to him, grab him by his shirt and kiss him senseless right here in front of everyone.

Does he not think I'm attractive?

I thought... I dunno, I thought I saw fire in his eyes when he looked at me.

Is he embarrassed by me?

He could at least have the decency to say hi, right?

As he stays on the edges of the room, a chill spreads through my bones as I realize the parallels between him and my ex.

Johnny only wanted me for one thing, my brain.

And the more I stare at the side of August's unfairly beautiful face, I can't help but wonder.

Is he just like my last boyfriend?

Does he only want me because I can help him get a passing grade?

I refuse to be used again. I refuse to be kept as someone's dirty little secret. And I

refuse to let August fucking Kade behave like he's never seen me before.

Game on, hot shot.

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CHAPTER 7

August

When dessert comes, a chair screeches somewhere across the table, but I don't dare risk another look. My dick hasn't gotten the memo that she's mad at us, or that she's off limits. Maybe it even likes that she's mad at us because it's pointing at her like a fucking street sign. Scott and Justin are bickering back and forth across me about something inane like I'm not even sitting there, but they stop when a throat clears to my left.

I turn to face a scowling Rowan with a plate in her hand which she quickly thrusts into my space. It takes me a minute to realize that she's just cream pied me, and not the fun kind of cream pie.

Whipped cream sticks to my entire face. Justin snorts. Scott is howling, and I can feel Athena now trying to murder me from across the table with nothing but her eyes as well.

What the actual fuck?

I dig the cream out of my now stinging eyes. Even blurry, Rowan is fucking gorgeous. She drags her cream-covered index finger across her tongue before sucking off a blob of cream. Fucking hell I'm going to blow my load right here. This woman is magnificent.

Out of my league.

Off limits.

Forbidden.

Too smart. Too rich. Too in-a-relationship with your enemy.

And even if she doesn't know all the thoughts that have been rattling around my brain, even I can admit, I kind of deserved it.

When she leans forward to place her mouth near my ear, her huge tits are right there at my face level. She grabs my thigh, just high enough to let my balls know she's in the area. They immediately tighten while my dick twitches towards her long, gold-painted fingernails.

"I don't know what gave you the impression that I'm the kind of girl who likes to be ignored, August. But I'm not." Her hand tightens around my thigh, her nails nipping at my skin. "You don't get to talk to me in private and ignore me in front of all of your friends. That's not how friendship works. I thought you were above thinking you were better than people."

I grunt. Is she for real? Oh, the assumptions she's making right now.

She thinks I'm the uppity fucker who thinks he's too good for her ? If only she knew the truth. She wouldn't look at me with sparkly doe eyes, she'd see me for the trailer trash, shit-on-her-shoe that I really am.

I don't know who's in control of my body and mind right now, but rational, logical, sane and sensible have all left the building. Maybe I'm simply blinded by her boobs. Can boobs have hypnotic properties?

She wants me to show my friends that I know her? Fine. I'll do just that .

Reaching out, semi blind from the sticky dessert topping clinging to my entire face, I grip both her hips, bury my cream covered face between her tits, and motorboat the shit out of her making her giggle, probably against her will.

It's a beautiful sound, but if she doesn't slap me for this, I'll be surprised, and kind of disappointed. My hands itch to trace the lines of her body, but I hold them in place, even as she rears back.

"Asshole." Her palm collides with my cheek and a delightful burn seeps through my skin.

I deserved that. And so much more.

"Says the pot to the kettle." I grin at her, but my stomach churns. I've never in my life touched a woman before asking permission, and I won't ever again, it grates across my skin like nails on a blackboard. Fuck. That was out of line. A cheap laugh, sure, but at what cost?

Fuck. She could press charges for that, couldn't she? I'm a stupid fucker.

She flips me off, the corner of her lips twitching like she's fighting a smile. She doesn't seem offended, but I know from Mom smacking me around the head when I'm an idiot that women often pretend they're fine when they're really not.

I cautiously blow a kiss at her.

Her fist clenches by her side.

Our chests heave as we just stare at each other, both hyper aware that we have a curious audience, and unsure what to do next. I don't know what the fuck just happened, and I know I was so fucking out of line. But I'm still somehow about thirty

seconds away from pressing her face onto the table, and fucking that pretty ass from behind right here for all to see.

Fuck Johnny White.

This is the best foreplay of my entire life, and the more she narrows her eyes like she wants to end my life, the harder my cock gets in my pants .

“Wish I’d brought marshmallows for toasting.” Athena’s deadpan makes me chuckle.

I’m almost face to face with Rowan as she stands next to me, still seemingly startled and indignant at my reaction. Maybe she’s calculating her next move. She better think fast before I haul her over my shoulder and finger her while I carry her up to my room. A strong hand appears on the back of my head, pulling me forward, and before I know what’s happening, my face is moving toward Rowan’s.

“Kiss and get it over with.” Athena doesn’t do small talk.

Rowan face-palms me, or she would if her hand was bigger, or my face was smaller. Either way, she blocks my lips from meeting hers, and I’m kind of disappointed about that.

She’d probably taste like a perfect summer’s day.

Before I can blink, or think, she spins on her heels and heads toward the bathrooms. Justin hands me a napkin and a glass of water, but I don’t think it’ll be enough. After having smashed my face between her boobs and blown a lengthy raspberry, well, the damn cream is everywhere.

I thought I’d have zero regrets from smashing my sticky face between her boobs and blowing a raspberry, but I do. If she’s as smart a woman as she seems, that’ll make

her stay the fuck away from me, because I'm not sure I'm strong enough to resist her pull.

That girl is fire, and I am the moth, ready to burn.

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CHAPTER 8

Rowan

No amount of scrubbing my titties in the bathroom made them feel less sticky. That asshole August got me good. I'm back in my hotel room. My very expensive and brand new party dress is draped over the seat in the corner, with what looks like jizz all over the bust.

So much for returning it tomorrow to get some quick cash as a payment for Athena. Ugh.

Fucking August. I'm so pissed at him I think I might send him the bill for the fucking dry cleaning.

And I'll collect, too. How dare he think he can put his hands on me without asking first?

Jerk.

What the hell was I thinking? Shoving a pie in his face?

I grunt. It was a waste of perfectly good pie, sure, yes, this is true, but I also wanted to lick his entire face clean.

My face heats as shame sticks to my skin like the meringue topping still stubbornly clinging to my body.

I need to put him out of my mind. There are too many things in the ‘don’t you fucking dare’ column.

He’s a student, I’m his tutor .

He clearly hates me because I crashed into his car.

And from what Athena told me as she raced out of the ballroom behind me, August Kade is my ex boyfriend’s life-long fucking rival.

Could I have chosen someone more complicated to crush on? I don’t think so.

Shit.

Noooooooo.

I can’t crush on him. I can’t. I can’t have a crush on the burly, surly, gorgeous-in-a-tuxedo hockey player with dreamy, bottomless golden-brown eyes who just motorboated my boobies in front of all of our friends.

Shit.

To distract myself from that unpleasant realization I have a quick rinse in a scalding hot shower, hotel shower cap pinned firmly in place. It’s after midnight, and I washed my hair yesterday. There’s no way in hell I’m washing my curls on back to back days. Nope. Ain’t gonna happen. Not even for sticky boobs.

I pat myself dry with the hotel towel. I always think these places will start doing luxury towels, and every single time it feels like I’m drying my nips with sandpaper. Without fail.

Ouch.

I apply some lotion, pausing to give special attention to my knees and elbows—winter in the Midwest isn't fun when it comes to dry skin—and rub a little extra on my towel-sanded, standing to attention nipples.

By the time I starfish between the sheets in my king size bed, I'm silky smooth all over and smell of limes and coconuts.

I still can't figure out what the hell August's problem really is. The look of damn near disgust on his face when he saw me at the party hurt more than it made me angry. And for what? A busted, piece of crap car ?

I thought we connected at Bitches Brew. I thought we were making progress. I thought we could be friends.

I guess he had other issues. That or he's a fat-phobic, judgmental asshole who took issue with a chubby girl wearing a revealing dress. Or maybe his relationship with my ex means I'm guilty by association? Either way, we most definitely are not friends.

That's not fair. I saw the lust in his eyes, everyone did. I don't think he even tried to hide it. Then what? What stopped him from being a decent human being when he spied me at the party?

I heave out a sigh, tossing and turning on the smooth, cool hotel sheets.

Maybe he really liked his car.

Shit. My tummy aches. Maybe it's more than that, maybe he really needed his piece of crap car, and I took that from him. Damnit. Okay, fine, he has plenty of reason to be pissy at me if it's about the car. But if it's about my ex and the fact he and Johnny

loathe each other...

What are we? Super villains?

We're grown fucking adults, busting our asses to graduate college, we don't have time for petty squabbles and arch nemeses.

Or at least we shouldn't. I sure as shit don't. This isn't a goddamn Marvel movie.

Who the hell has time to keep up grudges with someone they went to high school with? Not me, that's for sure. Isn't August trying to be some big shot hockey player? Do all hockey players play dumbass games with people from high school?

Damnit, I'm a nice fucking person. People generally like me... most of the time at least. But I clearly somehow flipped August's shit list switch. And it's bothering me more than I'd like.

Ugh. Why am I so perturbed? Does he think I'm still with Johnny? Is that why he's so pissed at me? He's afraid I'm using him in some master plan Johnny has to get back at him for something? To trap him into cheating with me so Johnny could mess his pretty face up at their next game?

Johnny can barely tie his own shoe laces without adult supervision, never mind mastering a revenge prank on someone. That would mean he'd have to think about someone other than his goddamn self for a hot minute.

Oof. Clearly I'm not all the way past my Johnny White experience just yet.

I'm wired.

I'm mad.

I'm tangled up in some teenage crush that I'd really like a one-way ticket out of, but instead, I'm hot as hell.

I can say a lot of things about August Kade, he's a grumpy shit, rude, abrasive, hard to read, and totally overstepped the fucking line by laying hands on me without asking my permission.

But he sure does rock the ever-loving hell out of a tuxedo.

And, lack of consent aside, that was by far, the best motor boating experience of my entire life to date. I'm pretty sure he bared his teeth on my skin as he rubbed his mouth over my tits. A shiver snakes up my spine at the memory.

Hot damn.

August Kade is a dirty boy. Feral. And I liked it. Or I would have, if I wasn't pissed at him for pretending not only that he didn't know me, but that I was completely invisible all night, and touching me like he fucking owned me.

My fingers drift between my thighs, I can't help myself. It's a tried and true method of getting me to calm the hell down and go to sleep. Especially when my spank bank is overflowing from the day.

Yes, I'm a strong and independent woman. I'm one hundred percent down for consensual sex between people. But there was something about that man just... grabbing me... that blew my fucking mind as well as my titties.

I should be ashamed of myself, of being turned on by him possessing me like that, but instead, there's a throbbing in my crotch I'm truly not proud of.

I just need to rub one out and get over it.

Get off, then pass out.

I'm fucking soaking. Jesus Christ, what is it about me liking the wrong guys? August Kade is all the way wrong for me, and yet... My squelching pussy tells an entirely different story.

Fuck.

I will not moan his name. I will not moan his name. I will not moan... his... his... oh god... my fingers glide over my clit, drawing a gasp from me.

The firm set of his jaw, the broad stretch of chest between his strong shoulders, the molten gold flecks flickering in his brown eyes, those hot as fuck forearms that somehow look even hotter with turned up dress sleeves. What even is that?

A scream bellows from me as I pant, hurtling toward my release. "August." God damnit his name just slipped out.

"Yeah?" A man's voice breaks the silence.

My hotel door swings but doesn't shut.

My heart—and hand—stop dead.

I scream, jumping out of bed, smacking the light switch and reaching to the bedside cabinet to find something, anything to use as a weapon against the intruder in my room.

The lamp. The lamp will do. I played softball in high school. I'm ready to face whoever the fuck burst into my room in the middle of the night.

The stupid thing is plugged in, so it takes a couple of tugs to yank it free.

It takes a beat for my eyes to adjust, but I line up my swing, arms raised, hip popped, ready to throw down, once I figure out what the hell I'm dealing with.

Fuck.

It really is August Kade.

I thought that was some weird-ass, pre-orgasm abject terror haze.

Standing with his jacket over his arm, both hands in the air in surrender. The top two buttons of his shirt are open, and his bow tie is draped around his neck.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” I might swing this fucking lamp at his face anyway, I'm sure I'd feel better for it.

His jaw hangs wide open, eyes bugging out of his head and fixed on what I now realize is my very, very naked body. “I... I... Fuck. Shit. I don't know. My card opened the door, Rowan. I swear. I didn't pick the lock or anything.” He's talking at my tits, if I wasn't hopped up on adrenaline, I might laugh.

He shuffles back toward the door, his heel catches my suitcase lying on the ground, and in what seems like slow motion, he falls on his ass with a grunt.

Dropping the lamp on the bed, I lurch toward him.

He's already scrambling to his feet. “You're naked!”

He's right. I am. But I'm also not ashamed of my goodies.

Planting my fists on my hips, I go full Superman pose. Doctor Amelia Shepherd in Grey's Anatomy says that not only does standing like this make you perform immeasurably better, but it also makes you feel more confident.

The more his eyes rake over every inch of my bare skin, the more my confidence wavers, but my anger rises.

He clears his throat. "You're still naked."

"And you're still standing in my fucking hotel room, August. Only one of these things is weird right now."

Side-stepping my suitcase, he backs up until the door clicks closed behind him, not once taking his eyes off mine.

He takes a step toward me, then licks his lips .

I'm frozen in place, torn between finishing the job I started in my pulsing lady garden, making the asshole who ruined my orgasm finish it for me, or smacking him upside the head with the fucking lamp.

CHAPTER 9

Rowan

A ugust has left the building.

Not literally. He's still standing a few feet from me ogling my naked body, and I don't hate it. In fact, from the heat flickering in those eyes and the way his dick is punching a hole in his pants, I'm totally here for it.

No one has ever looked at me this way. I'm frozen in place because it feels like if I make even the smallest of moves, he'll pounce. His chest heaves, a weird anticipation hums in the air between us, and I'm doing my level best not to stare at his pants.

It's hard—both his cock, and the trying not to stare. Sweet baby Jesus in the manger, he's hung.

And he's looking at me like he wants to eat me.

It's tempting.

I'm sure if I risked stepping closer to him I'd find a pool of drool at his feet.

A long, strained silence stretches out between us.

“You're Johnny's girl.” His low voice is a raw growl, like he's physically fighting his dude-urges to bend me over and fuck me .

I puff out my chest. “The fuck I am. For one, I’m no one’s girl , and for two, that egomaniacal asshole and I parted ways a while back.”

Something registers on his face, but I can’t figure out what it is. He takes a full step toward me, and it’s as though the closer he comes, the thinner the air gets. His gaze flickers to my chest, and I swear my nipples tighten in response. This guy is practically controlling my body with just a stare.

He takes another step. Part of me wants to see how far he’s prepared to go, and the other wants to taunt him, push him, make him snap. I can’t help myself. “I know you hate him.”

He grunts like it’s an understatement.

I smirk. “What? You don’t want his sloppy seconds?” I know I shouldn’t provoke the giant caveman currently being ruled by his meat compass, but I’m angry, and horny, and I’d much rather August finish getting me off, than leave me to my own devices.

The space between us is eaten up by his long strides, and before I can even blink, my back slams into the wall. He towers over me, his hand holding my jaw so I meet his intense stare. “You’re no one’s sloppy anything, Rowan. Do you hear me?” He’s grinding the words out between gritted teeth.

I’m throbbing, everywhere, desperate for him to touch me. My brain has short circuited. I know he wants me to answer, but my senses are overwhelmed. His dick presses against me, his eyes burn into mine, and he smells of... man. That’s the only word I can think of to describe his musky scent.

“I asked you a question, Rowan.”

I’m not proud of how visceral my body’s reactions are. I’m scared to look down,

because the pool of drool that I joked about forming at his feet? That ain't got nothing on the thick coat of arousal making the tops of my thighs sticky. I offer a jerky nod, but instead of relenting, his entire being presses me more firmly into the wall.

"I need to hear you say it, Rowan. Out loud."

Fuck. Guys like this don't exist outside of dirty books and movies, but I'm a puddle of need, painfully aroused, and shamefully eager. "I'm no one's sloppy seconds."

"I need to touch you."

I've never known someone to be so transparent before. If his body wasn't telegraphing that he wanted me, the words fall from his lips like he doesn't care who hears them.

Deciding I haven't poked the bear enough, I lean forward and drag my tongue from his jawbone, all the way up to his cheekbone, before placing my mouth close to his ear. "Then fucking touch me."

He shakes his head. "I need to apologize first."

I don't know whether to laugh or cry. He picks now? This moment right here? After I've just told him to fucking touch me, to say he's sorry?

This guy sure has a great sense of comedic timing.

"You do? Now?" My voice is pained.

"Yeah. Now." His words are gruff. "I shouldn't have laid hands on you without your permission." He straightens, putting some space between us, too much fucking space for my liking, but I like how he's trying to roll back his animalistic tendencies to be a

gentleman, or... something.

He pulls back, his eyes flickering to my lips, his chest rising and falling with slow, heavy breaths as though he's trying not to jump, as though he's fighting every urge to take me, to own me, to ravage me.

"I'm sorry." He shakes his head, indecision and pain in his eyes, his jaw tense. "I wanted to shock you the way you shocked me with a pie in my face, but... I was out of line."

I roll my lips so I don't laugh, because he's right. He should be sorry. Just because I liked it doesn't make his actions right.

"You were out of line." I nod.

He stares at the hair that falls across my face, picks up his hand, his fingers hovering so close to my skin, I shiver. His eyes search mine for permission, and when I nod again, he tucks the hair behind my ear.

"Consent is sexy." I somehow manage not to shout over my pounding heartbeat. "And important."

He nods, his face serious. "I know. I really am sorry." His voice breaks, but he doesn't move. He's so near, so painfully close to my body that my skin dances with energy. My nipples are hard, goosebumps cover my body, and another shiver slithers up my spine, but I'm not cold.

"I don't normally just... act like a fucking caveman, Rowan. I swear."

Something about his tone makes me believe him more than I already did. "I know. Or you wouldn't still be standing here."

He drops his forehead to mine with a groan. “I should have behaved better.”

Yup, he should have. His actions were shitty, and toxic, and hot as all fucking hell, and if this man doesn’t touch me soon I’m going to combust.

“August?”

He jerks his head up to look at me. “Yeah?”

“You’re forgiven. Can you kiss me now? Ple?—”

His mouth meets mine in a frantic, aggressive battle. Hard, hungry, our lips meet in a fierce collision as his hands possess me, just like when he gripped my body earlier. Like he already owns me. Maybe he does.

When his fingers slide through my soaking wet folds, I whimper. My head lulls back onto the concrete wall and soft, quick pants burst from me as his fingers find my clit, and he drags his teeth down the column of my neck.

Something tells me August is about to ruin me for any man who comes after him, but I don’t want to stop. I’m caught in the undertow, and I welcome the rapture.

“So fucking wet.” His words kiss my skin on ripples of warm air. “Eyes on me.”

My eyes snap open, finding his heavy gaze waiting for me. His hand stops, then he starts over, grazing my clit with his fingertips like he’s teasing me, dragging out my pleasure, sending waves of desire racing through my blood. Except I’m good, I’m ready to go, the oven was already pre-heated before he’d even laid a finger on me.

Now I just want to fucking come. I curl my fingers around his neck and sink my nails into his skin before dragging them down the length of his throat, enjoying the growl

that rumbles in his chest. “Stop toying with me and make me come already.”

His deep chuckle makes my chest vibrate. “Or what?” The challenge in his voice lights something up inside me, adding another log to the already scorching fire.

“Or I’ll finish myself off.” It’s my turn to chuckle. “I was doing just fine before you burst in here, you big oaf.”

“You mean when I found you moaning my name while you were getting off?” When he pulls his hand away from my pussy, I fight the whine that catches in my throat. “You definitely seemed fine.”

“I was.”

He jerks his chin at me. “Show me.”

Show him? He wants to watch me finger myself?

Fine. I slide my hand into my soaked pussy with a sigh, and as my fingers swirl over my clit, he shucks off his pants and boxers, never moving his gaze from my body. The faster my fingers move in my sopping wet pussy, the faster his hands pump his cock.

Hands. Plural. Dude needs two hands to wrap around that baton he’s packing.

Girthy as fuck.

My tongue snakes out and licks my lips as a bead of precum seeps out the tip of his dick. Will he let me lick that droplet off his cock?

“I-I’m going to come, August.” I don’t know if I’m telling him because I want

permission, or for him to finish the job, but his lips and brow quirk.

“Stop talking about it, and do it, Toots. Come for me.”

My obnoxious guffaw gives my clit a moment of reprieve. “Toots?”

He narrows his stare, still sliding his hands up and down his length. I can’t look away from him. His intensity burns through my skin. My teeth sink into my lip as my fingers strumming my clit match his pace.

“Come for me,” he damn near snarls. “So I can fuck you till you scream.”

CHAPTER 10

August

Watching Rowan's body flinch and convulse as she comes is the hottest thing I've ever seen in my whole life. Her legs tremble as her orgasm crashes, wave after wave. Her eyes flicker closed, and she whimpers through the aftershocks. I close the distance between us, cupping her throat with my palm. "Eyes. On. Me. "

An adorable little giggle is all the answer she gives me before raking her eyes over my now bare chest. She pushes herself up onto tiptoes, dotting a tiny kiss on the tip of my nose. "Are you going to keep staring at me? Or are you going to fuck me, August?" Her eyes sparkle, and her cheeks are a charming shade of pink.

"Is that consent?"

She nods.

"Out loud."

She pulls her bottom lip between her teeth. "Fuck me, August."

"Oh." I lick my lips. "I'm definitely going to fuck you. I'm going to make you forget Johnny White ever existed. "

She covers my mouth with her hand. "How about we don't talk about my ex when your dick's hard as fuck, and I'm standing here naked, mmmkay?"

I nod. “Deal. How do you want to be fucked, pretty girl?”

“I prefer Toots.” I inch toward the desk.

This fucking girl. “Fine, Toots . How do you want me to fuck you?”

“Like you hate me.”

A growl rattles around my chest.

She turns away from me, planting her splayed palms on the desk before tossing me a cheeky grin over her shoulder. “And from behind.”

She jiggles her ass at me, grazing my cock with her plump cheeks. “Pleeeeeeease, August.” Her head falls onto her hands on the table, and I can’t ignore her plea. Making my lovers beg has never been my jam, but hearing just how sweet Rowan’s voice sounds as she implores me... How she says my name... Well, I could definitely get used to that.

I’m sheathed and balls deep in seconds, her hair wrapped around my fist as I drive into her tight pussy relentlessly, pounding over and over. The table moves with each thrust, and I lose my grip on her enough to frustrate the fuck out of me. I’m done with the damn table. I need to fuck this woman just how she asked me to. Wild, unhinged, and hard.

Picking her up by her hips I drop her onto the bed, face down, ass in the air. She squeals, but lets me lead. She looks so fucking beautiful, ready and waiting for me to take her again. When I sink into her this time, I take my time. Enjoying her tight heat as each inch of my dick slides inside her. Her muscles constrict around me, clenching, milking, dare I even say, possessing. She’s murmuring my name, pleading with me to go harder, and meeting me thrust for thrust, driving her hips back to meet

mine. I'm going to blow my load.

Curling my fingers into her soft hips, I pick up more speed, my balls smacking against her. She arches her spine, tipping her head back, and I take it as an invitation to pull her hair again. The whimpers and pleas continue as I tug on the strands.

It's on the tip of my tongue to ask her if she's ever been fucked dirty by a guy from across the tracks, but I don't want to think of her with anyone else other than me. If she answers, I might spear her so hard with my cock to fuck away the memory of any other man she's ever had, especially Johnny fucking White, that she splits in two.

And if she says a dude's name out loud that isn't mine while my cock is nine inches inside her, I'll lose it.

This woman is mine. At least for the time being.

Every cell in my body feels it, and every emotion, rational and otherwise, demands it.

I'm not good enough for her to be mine forever. I don't have enough money, or social standing, or whatever else girls like her look for in a man. But what I do have, is right now, tonight. And I'm not going to waste a single fucking second of it.

I pull out of her in one stroke, making her gasp and groan. And I chuckle. I'm glad my absence, the emptiness I left by taking my cock out of her, hits her as hard as it does me.

I'm already stripping myself bare. "Rowan. Are you on birth control?"

She meets my gaze over her shoulder, scrunching up her face in confusion. Her eyes trail down my body, landing on the discarded condom in one hand, and my weeping cock in the other. "Oh, God." Her breathy moan is almost drowned out by the

bedding as she buries her face and raises her ass higher in the air. “August, please. Please just take me.”

I know it’s irresponsible. She didn’t ask if my last physical was clear. She didn’t answer whether she’s on birth control or not. And an accidental pregnancy is not on my to-do list for my senior year of college. But when she rocks her hips back toward me, and her hand drops between her thighs to play with her clit, my final thread of self-control snaps.

If she gets pregnant, she gets pregnant. Hell, I’d be lying if I said the thought alone didn’t make my dick even harder. It’s careless, and reckless but the idea of her belly growing with my child inside it makes my chest swell.

Fuck. She’s even tighter and wetter as I slam into her again, and again. “You like when I fuck you raw, Toots? You like feeling every twitch and flicker of my cock deep inside you?”

“Y-yes,” she whimpers.

“You want my cum inside you?”

“Y-y-yes.” Her answer is more urgent this time.

Her wails and moans are going to get us kicked out of this hotel room, but I don’t fucking care. Let them try. I’m not going anywhere until she coats my dick with her cum.

“Finger my ass, August.” Her demand almost makes me come apart. My muscles tense, thighs trembling with the effort of holding back while that familiar tingle in my balls tells me I’m close.

There's nothing sexier than a woman who knows what she wants and comes right out and asks for it. I've barely stuck my finger in her ass when a shudder passes through her. She tosses her head back and screams my name through her orgasm.

It's the most glorious sight I've ever beheld. Her pussy twitches around me, spasming and squeezing. My release slams into me like a check against the boards, powerful and sudden, sucking my breath out of my lungs as I brand her from the inside, painting her walls with my cum. It won't matter what pretty little rich boy comes after me, I'm going to fuck her until the only dick her pussy will ever want is mine.

CHAPTER 11

Rowan

I shouldn't be surprised when I wake up alone. But I am. Surprised, pissed as hell, and... My stomach sinks. Disappointed. Crushed, even. And ashamed, embarrassed, and a cacophony of other emotions I don't want to give a name to.

While our first time was most definitely some kind of exorcism of our demons as he pounded into me like a pneumatic drill, by the fourth time he fucked me, August had softened somehow.

And I don't mean his dick. I don't think that thing ever softens.

I mean the fact that he wasn't hammering at me like I was his enemy's girl anymore. And I dared to hope... What? What did I hope? I heave out a sigh, admitting the ugly truth to myself on the exhale.

I hoped that maybe we could be something more. That maybe my crush wasn't one-sided.

I choke through a groan. When will I ever learn? All guys are raging assholes, and they only want one thing: to wet their dicks .

That said, if August only ever wanted to use me for sex, well... I might have considered letting him. But this hot-and-cold shit won't fly. Who the fuck up and disappears before the other person wakes up? Fucking cowards, that's who.

My pussy aches in all the best ways, and every muscle in my body hurts from the vigorous, and lengthy , workout.

That man can certainly work his dick like a master.

A shiver snakes up my spine at the memories. I'd never have guessed by looking at him that he was such a considerate lover, but holy shit, I think he drained me of all my cum with his mouth.

August Kade is a cum vampire.

After I get dressed, I make my way down to the restaurant. As Athena waves me over to her table, I feel the searing stare of someone to my right, but I don't gift them my attention. If August Kade wants my attention, he shouldn't have sneaked out of my room like he was doing a dirty walk of shame.

Jerk.

I plop onto the chair facing Athena before reaching across the table and lifting her mug of coffee.

"Late night?" She quirks a brow.

I know I'm taking my life into my hands by stealing her caffeine, but she looks more amused and curious than pissed at me right now, so I'm going to take full advantage of it. The weight of the stare to my right finally draws my attention, but it's not the beautiful eyes of August Kade staring back at me. It's Johnny's sister, Jade.

Well, shit.

She tries to smile and wave, but I ignore her. I don't have time for her, or her asshole

brother anymore.

She doesn't get to make nice with me just 'cause I'm not with Johnny anymore. What the fuck is she doing here? Is she dating one of the Raccoons? Surely the fuck not. The universe wouldn't be that cruel to me, would it? But what other explanation could there be?

I glance to my left, briefly catching August's eye before he turns his attention back to his breakfast. He spears at his scrambled eggs with his fork like they did him dirty.

"Ah ha." Athena waves her toast at me. "I get it now."

A server comes to take my breakfast order before she says anything else, but as soon as he turns his back, Athena's on me again. "You fucked him, didn't you?"

I don't bother denying it. I'm not ashamed of what I did with August Kade all night, even if he is. "Apparently his key opened my door."

She snickers. "Is that a euphemism?"

I crack a smile. "His actual key opened my hotel room door."

She nods like this isn't a hugely surprising thing. "That happens more than you might think." When I say nothing, she tips her head. "Was it shit?"

I recoil. "What?"

"You both look mad as hell."

I hate how astute she is. The restaurant is getting busier, dishes clink, and the din of conversation around the tables makes it easier to talk about it without being

overheard.

“Jade’s over there.”

“I’ll allow this momentary change of subject, Row. But I need an answer on how good August Kade is with his dick.” Athena doesn’t turn to look at Jade. “I spied her when I got here. She tried to talk to me, but I told her to get fucked. You think she’s here with one of the team? She better not be here with one of my brothers, I’ll sever their dicks off with a rusty knife.”

Jade White is as renowned for dating handsome, rich men as her brother is for being an asshole. And Athena just so happens to be related to three rich, delicious eligible bachelors who fit Jade’s profile.

“It was the hottest night of my life. I came so many times I lost count. I’m pretty sure he broke my vag.” I stare down at the nearly empty mug still cradled in my hands avoiding her probing stare. “Then I woke up alone.”

“No!”

I nod as she takes another bite of toast. “You wanna fuck with both of them?”

“You mean August and Jade?”

She nods.

A spark of a thrill ignites in my stomach. I love nothing more than fucking with people, especially when they both deserve it. “Tell me.”

Less than a minute later, I’m striding toward August. He won’t meet my eyes, and that bothers me more than I care to admit.

But I won't let him know how much I care that he's thrown me out with last night's used condom. Singular. Because it turns out I didn't just like having his cum dripping out of me, I fucking loved it. And I'm on birth control.

I don't care that he's at a table full of hockey players, I don't care that he left me in the early hours of the morning like what we did was icky and wrong. And I also don't care that Jade might be watching, in fact, I hope she is.

"I didn't see you hiding all the way over here, Snickerdoodle ," I give August a casual, saccharine smile as I approach.

His head snaps up, a slice of bacon frozen mid-way to his open mouth. He pushes his chair back like he's going to stand, but before he can rise, I straddle him, slide my fingers into his hair, and kiss his stunned face.

I'm not sure what I expect, but instead of shoving me off of him, his hands skim my hips, up my back, and pull me against his chest. Thank fuck for that. It could have been embarrassing if he hadn't run with it.

Maybe there's another reason why he got outta dodge this morning. Maybe he had somewhere to be, or... I dunno. I feel like if he needed to leave, the polite thing to do would have been to wake me up. Hell, I'd have happily given him a before-breakfast-blowie to send him on his way and everything.

He's still kissing me, his hands tightening on my hips. His teammates don't cheer and clap like I half expected them to, but there are whispers and murmurs all around us. Barely fighting the urge to dry hump his hardening dick, I eventually come up for air. His eyes search mine, swirling with lust and confusion.

I drag my tongue up the side of his face like I did last night, he seemed to like it. And I sure as shit love the rumbling growl it draws from his body. "Johnny's sister is

here.” I roll my hips against his, and his grip on me tightens like he’s fighting the urge to fuck me right here at breakfast. What the hell is this guy’s deal?

He wants me? He wants me not?

Either way, I wish he’d make up his fucking mind and let me know.

“You’re putting on a show so it gets back to him?” His voice is quiet, like it’s just for me. He holds me while he moves his pelvis, his rod-stiff cock pressing into the apex of my thighs.

“Is that a problem?” I don’t recognize the breathy voice that comes out of me, nor the urge to show Johnny that I’ve moved on, and to his mortal enemy no less.

He looks up at me, searching my eyes for something. “I don’t know. You look kinda pissy.”

“I didn’t appreciate waking up alone.”

His brows twitch, and I’m glad I caught him off guard. “You didn’t?”

“No, you big oaf. I fucking didn’t.” I sweep my nose against his. “I’m pissed you left.”

Something I can’t identify flickers in his eyes, and he flexes his jaw muscles. “This’ll never work between us, Rowan.”

“You don’t know that.”

“The fuck I don’t.” He scowls. “Girls like you belong with guys like Artemis and Apollo.”

It's my turn to scowl. "The fuck? Is that so? And who made you Grand Master Cupid? I'm aware of the current political climate, August Kade, but I'm also still the boss of my own fucking body. Pray tell why I belong with them and not you."

"I don't have money."

I can't help rolling my eyes. "And?"

His nostrils flare. "I don't even have a fucking car."

Ouch. Okay, that makes me wince. "My bad, but what does that have to do with whether something between us is worth exploring?"

He growls at me like the answer is obvious. "We're from opposite sides of the tracks, Rowan. It just won't work."

"Riiiiiiight. So you're clairvoyant. Cool, cool. And we won't go into the fact that you're making sweeping assumptions about my life based on the fact I'm friends with Athena." I brush my lips against his. "For the sake of argument, even if it doesn't work out. It just needs to seem to work. At least for the next few minutes."

"Why?" His breath catches as I nip at his jaw. "What do we get out of faking it?"

I shrug. I can't explain it. I feel something for this grumpy, brooding asshole, and I'd like a chance to pursue it, but if I say that again, it might spook him even more. "Sticking it to Johnny White and some great sex?"

He falls quiet, and while it seems that most of his teammates behind me have gone back to their breakfasts, I still feel eyes on me.

"Come on, Snickerdoodle." I flash him my most disarming grin. "You can't tell me

you don't want me." I rock my hips again, dragging a hiss from him. I lower my mouth to his ear. "Well, you could, but we'd both know you're lying. At least think about it? Just a date, or two..." I know I sound pathetic, but so are his reasons for writing us off before we even have a single date.

August doesn't say another word, he doesn't put me down either. Instead, he cups my ass, stands up, and walks away from his breakfast. His teammates apparently suck at whispering because they're gossiping out loud like little old ladies. One thing is resoundingly clear: August never dates. August never does PDAs. They're all stunned that August has me in his arms right now.

Okay, two things are clear. One, the team is convinced that August is basically a monk.

And two, from the look on Jade's face, she's already told her brother that I'm making a scene with his nemesis.

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CHAPTER 12

August

“G us!” Aunt Maggie’s screech can be heard across two zip codes. “What in the world are you doing here?” She comes out from behind the counter of The Blue Line diner and makes a beeline straight for Rowan and me.

She grabs my face with both her hands. “And why the fuck has it taken you so long to come visit me?” She glances over my shoulder, clocks Rowan, and steps back with a gasp. “Who is this?” she hisses in a shit-poor stage whisper.

“Aunt Maggie, this is Rowan. Rowan, this is my Aunt Maggie.”

Maggie gives me a sharp dig in the ribs with her elbow. “I need context, August. Friend? More than a friend?”

I’m already regretting my decision to bring Rowan to my aunt’s diner for lunch, but now, the only way out is through.

Not waiting for an introduction, Rowan steps forward, arm out-stretched. “Hi, I’m Rowan. And this is our very first official date.”

It’s only been a couple of hours since breakfast in the hotel, but Rowan was so very sure we’d work together as a couple, it’s time to show her just how wrong she is.

Maggie claps her hands. “First date!” Mirth dances in her eyes. “If I’d known you

were coming I'd have brought the baby pictures with me to work."

Rowan snorts. "Now that I'd have paid to see."

"Come on." Maggie leads the way to my favorite booth in the back, grabbing menus as she passes the till.

When Rowan and I are settled, menus in hand, Maggie pops her hip. "Been to see your brother lately?"

My stomach clenches. I knew she'd ask, it's even part of why I brought Rowan here, so she'd see all my skeletons up close and personal in one fell swoop. "No. Mom went a few weeks ago. She sees him weekly."

Maggie's face turns somber. "Poor woman. Having to go to a place like that over the holidays can't be easy. Are you ready for Christmas? Or as ready as you can be?" The sadness in her eyes drills at the seed of guilt in my chest. I don't miss having my brother or his shitty schemes around the house. Things at home feel less unhinged with him behind bars.

Rowan watches the exchange with silent curiosity. The look on her face tells me she's bursting to ask what my aunt is talking about.

"Rowan, my dear. I recommend the Blue Line BLT, or the Goaltender grilled cheese, obviously with a Slapshot shake. And if you feel like a shake and dessert, the Breakaway Brownies are delicious if I do say so myself."

She turns to me, taking the menu back out of my hands. "We both know you don't need that, Gus. The usual?"

My stomach growls in answer.

“Hat trick and penalty box fries it is.”

Rowan’s face lights up. “Wait.” She scans the menu. “What’s that?” After a quick beat, she reads the description out loud. “Hat trick burger, triple stacked beef patties with all the trimmings. Hmmm.” She taps a fingernail off the menu. “Penalty box fries... loaded fries with cheese, bacon, and jalapenos. Sounds good on all counts, make it two please, Maggie! Oh, and I’ll have a strawberry slapshot shake since they come so highly recommended.”

Rowan beams at Maggie, who returns her grin right back. “No problem honey. I’ve got you.” Maggie takes Rowan’s menu, but before she leaves, she thwaps me on the head with both of them. “Don’t fuck it up August Nathaniel Kade. I like her.”

She can’t possibly like Rowan. She’s said less than a dozen words to her. But the threat in her tone tells me she’ll smack me with more than a couple of laminated menus if I mess things up. Except that’s exactly what this is about, isn’t it? Letting Rowan see my dark underbelly and watching her run for the hills in terror.

“Do I ignore the way your face puckered like you chewed a lemon when she mentioned your brother and pretend I didn’t see it? Or do we talk about it?”

Fuck. She doesn’t cut corners or fuck around, does she?

I shrug. “My brother’s in prison for grand theft auto.” I study her face as the information sinks in, but it doesn’t give anything away until she breaks into a huge smile.

“Ooooooh. Is that what this is?” She gestures around the diner. “Bring me out to lunch at your family’s diner. Introduce me to your aunt whom you knew would bring up your criminal brother?” She snorts. “You’re going to have to try harder than that to scare me off August Nathaniel Kade. Not to mention burger joints are a guilty

pleasure of mine. Granted I've never been here, though as a hockey fan I have no idea why not. But that's beside the point. You can't scare me off with diner food, or meeting your charming aunt, or talking about a brother who's in prison." She sits back smug. "But points for trying I suppose."

I don't answer, so she leans toward me. "Were you expecting me to paint you as guilty by association? My uncle is on the sex offender list for date-raping his female secretary. He got away without a conviction because he was friends with the judge. As scandals go." She shrugs. "Yours is pretty tame."

I had expected her to be surprised, disgusted, judgmental, but it's me who's taken aback. "Th-that's awful."

She nods. "I know. Poor woman. Am I guilty of being a criminal because he is?"

"No."

"Well then. What were you trying to accomplish? You just wanted to eat me out for dessert this morning, feed me a burger, and send me on my way?"

She tasted sweeter than any milkshake Maggie could bring to the table. I lick my lips hoping there's a faint taste of her on my tongue. "You tasted fucking delicious."

Her cheeks turn pink. "Thank you. But I'm not letting you away with dismissing this. I don't know what preconceptions you've made about me, August, or rather about yourself, but I feel like it's unfair as fuck. You barely know me, I barely know you. Just because you have a felon for a brother doesn't mean I'm automatically going to think you're a felon too, or that you're going to get some kind of criminal ick on me. Or whatever fucked up thoughts you've been stewing over in that thick skull of yours."

Maggie appears with a milkshake in each hand. “Peanut butter for my favorite nephew, and strawberry for his beautiful future wife.”

Rowan doesn't miss a beat. “You better wear a big hat, Maggie.” She slurps her shake. “And if you're not careful, you'll be on the hook for catering, too. Shakes for all the guests would be a bitch for you to put together, but they're delicious as fuck.”

Maggie grins. “I like her. ”

I nod. “I know, you said.”

“And I'll say it again. I. Like. Her.” She winks at Rowan who takes another drink. “If he fucks this up, you come find me, I'll beat him with my shoe.” She fucking would and all.

When she eventually leaves us again, Rowan has drunk half her shake and is making all the right yummy noises. Maggie keeps grinning over at us.

“What kind of cake are we having?” Rowan looks at me with such sincerity in her eyes it's as though she truly believes we're going to get married. “And I'm going to need a ring.”

I open my mouth to reply, but nothing comes out.

She tips her head in expectation. “Well?”

I close my mouth but can't swallow. It's as dry as the desert. Is it hot in here?

After what feels like the longest pause in history, her lips twitch, and she bursts out laughing. “You're so fucking easy, Gus .” She uses the name Maggie called me, leaning into it when she says it. She's clutching her chest, her shoulders shaking so

hard the silverware dances on the table.

“Well, well, well. Of all the burger joints in Cedar Rapids.” Johnny White’s syrupy voice meets my ears from behind, and I don’t even swallow my groan.

Rowan’s stopped laughing. Her face tells me all I need to know about how she’s feeling at this moment. If looks could kill, JW would not only be dead, but he’d be shredded into a million teeny tiny pieces and scattered into the wind. Her nostrils flare, but it’s the hardness in her eyes that shares the depth of her dislike for her ex.

I shouldn’t enjoy her loathing of another person, but since it’s Johnny, and he deserves it ten times over, it fans the embers in my chest.

I haven’t asked her what went down between them, can’t say I really care. Unless of course he hurt her or did something that might need for me to rearrange his face on the ice some time, but the hard-set of her jaw tells me I was right not to pry for details.

“I didn’t bring bug spray.” She stabs at the bottom of her milkshake with her straw.

“Huh?” I cant my head, not following her train of thought.

“You can’t hear that buzzing noise? Sounds like a mosquito.”

Slowly, her meaning sinks into my brain. She’s talking about JW, and I can’t help chuckling. “More like an angry bee than a mosquito.”

She snorts. “If only he died after he stung people.”

Ouch. That’s harsh, even for Johnny Fucking White.

The sinister laugh gets closer. “That was a good one, Row-boat.” He comes to a stop beside the table and snickers. “I heard you were slumming it. Had to come to see for myself.”

The blood coursing through my veins heats, but I’m not going to react to this prick and give him the satisfaction. I don’t need to defend Rowan’s honor, she can handle herself. But if he goes too far, I’m not above throwing this asshole out on his ass.

His sister acted faster than I expected her to. And how did he find out where we were?

“Can’t say I thought you’d be down for my sloppy seconds, Gus Gus.”

What the fuck? I thought he was talking about her slumming it with me, not the other way around. When Rowan’s face hardens, my fist flexes. I want to knock this asshole out, but she gives me an almost imperceptible headshake.

“And you.” He points at her. “You know his brother’s in jail, right? Trailer trash piece of shit. Clearly he’s only with you for your money. You still have money, right? Daddy dearest didn’t gamble it all away at the track?”

A growl catches in the back of my throat. I’d never use another person for their money, not ever. And from the way Rowan’s cheeks turn pink, there’s an element of truth to what he’s saying about her Dad being a gambler.

She folds her arms, like she’s using them to protect her chest, but she lengthens her spine, straightening to square her body up to the man who’s taking cheap shots at both of us.

“Are you finished?” Her tone is so caustic I’m afraid she’s going to melt the table. Aunt Maggie will understand, though, she hates entitled assholes too.

“You know me, Row-Boat, I’m never finished.” He winks at her in a way that suggests he’s talking in a sexual way, and it makes my stomach churn. “Always have more in the tank.”

“How did you find me?”

He wiggles his phone at her. “Find my friend.”

Fucking stalker.

Rowan opens her mouth to reply but Maggie appears, next to us. “You need to leave.”

“The fuck I do.”

My cheeks flex from the pressure of grinding my teeth. I swear, if he starts on Aunt Maggie, I’ll?—

“Why don’t you scoot back into the kitchen and make my lunch like a good little server?” He dismisses Maggie with a flick of his wrist. “This isn’t your usual type of place to eat, Row-Boat.”

If he calls her that one more fucking time I’m going to break his nose. She flinches every time he does. It’s clearly not a nickname she remembers with affection.

“You could do with laying off the burgers though, no? Getting a bit squishy around the middle.” When he leans forward like he’s going to poke her stomach, I grab his finger, bending it back to the point where his breathing quickens, and he hisses through his teeth.

“Struck a nerve did I, Gus Gus? It’s okay.” He turns his attention back to Rowan. “He

likes the fat ones. ”

I’m on my feet, and before he takes his next breath, my fist connects with his face with a satisfying crunch. As blood drips onto the table, I cuff my hand around his bicep and squeeze until he winces. “You’re leaving. And you’re never going to come back here again. You hear me, JW?” He must notice the shaking in my muscles and how much self-restraint it’s taking not to drag his ass back into the kitchen and put his face on a hot plate.

“You broke my fucking nose.”

“And if I ever see or hear of you talking to my girl again, I’m going to do more than just break your nose.”

Johnny grabs a stack of napkins and presses them against his bleeding face. “I’ll get you back for this, asshole. He’s a worthless piece of shit, Row. He’s not good enough for you.”

As he strides out of the diner, I can’t help but replay the conversation in my head as I stare at his back. No matter what he said about Rowan, he’s right about me, I’m definitely not good enough for her.

CHAPTER 13

Rowan

“We didn’t talk about what happened yesterday at the diner.” My voice is a hushed whisper. It’s the day before Christmas Eve. Despite his protests, we’re in a quiet corner of the library for a tutoring session, surrounded by musty old books. Beams of soft light filter through the small window above us, showing specks of dust lingering in the air.

At least the official reason we’re here is for a tutoring session. I mostly just wanted to spend time with him and get to know him better.

August doesn’t react or answer, a muscle feathers in his cheek as he concentrates on the math problem he’s working on. His profile is stunning, striking, and sexy as all hell. Every time I think of the crunch Johnny’s nose made at the diner, I think of the bump in August’s nose.

He’s clearly had a broken nose or two of his own in his time. “Why were you even with that asshole, Rowan?”

It’s a question I’ve been expecting since we met, but I wasn’t expecting how tortured his voice sounds when he asks it .

He looks up from his math problem and meets my eyes. “He’s literally the worst human being I’ve ever met. And my own brother is a crook.”

He's not wrong, Johnny White is a real piece of work.

"He wasn't like that when I met him. Actually, that's not strictly true. It was more that he didn't let me see that part of him right away."

Someone shushes us from somewhere close by so I drop my voice and shift in my seat. The weight of August staring at my face is heavy.

"You thought you could fix him." There's no accusation in his voice, no judgment or mocking, but I fucking hate that I'm so transparent, and from the way my cheeks sizzle, I can't outwardly hide the fact he's right.

"Guys like him can't be fixed, Rowan, they can't be saved."

My head shakes before he finishes speaking. "Everyone can be saved." I jolt. "That's not why I want to be friends with you, August. I don't think you need to be saved."

"I know." His warm hand cups my chin, his thumb stroking my face. "People can be saved. But they have to want it. Johnny doesn't want to be saved. He's happy being a prick."

Something about what he's saying makes sense, but embarrassment scratches at my skin. I wasted too much of my life with Johnny White before I realized the bad far outweighed the good.

If someone can save him, it sure as hell isn't me. And when I tried, I lost myself in the process.

"You know he was bullied when he was younger for being fat? Then he found hockey, got fit, and turned into an absolute asshole."

When August stays quiet, I keep talking. “I guess hurt people hurt people.”

August grunts. “I suspect he’s always been an asshole. Losing weight just gave him the permission he needed to let it shine. Hurt people hurting people is no excuse. Go to therapy, get your shit together, work on yourself, do what you gotta do. And don’t bring others down with you just because you feel like shit.” He winces like he relates to his own words, then sighs.

“I made assumptions about you when we first met.” He rakes a hand over his jaw. “I do it with my teammates, too. Damn near every day.” He shakes his head. “Hate myself for it.”

It takes me a moment because I’m waiting for him to finish his thought, but I think that’s it. “Do you mean the de la Pe?as?”

He grunts again. Guess that means yes?

“Spoiled little rich kids.” His words drip with disdain as he said them. “But they’re good guys, you know?”

I nod. “Athena and I are friends.”

He nods. “I know.”

A huge sigh bursts out of my body. “I honestly don’t know how they aren’t assholes considering how their dad is.”

His head snaps up like this is a new piece of information for him. “Their dad?”

“He’s a horrible, awful man. You should look him up online sometime.” I wish I was exaggerating, but I’m not. “He’s a cut throat business man.” She shrugs. “Aren’t they

all? But he's really not a good guy. And Athena in particular..." I blow out a puff of air. "Her life is... restricted. Oldest child, only daughter... Some days I fear the weight of her father's expectations might crush her. She's the strongest person I know."

August nods like he might know what that feels like. "I thought you were a spoiled little rich girl too." He jerks his chin at me.

After a long pause I realize he's not going to fill the silence.

"You suck at apologies." I tap his foot under the table with mine.

His face twitches, so I point at his mouth. "Is that...? Oh my God. August Nathaniel Kade. Are you smiling?"

He shakes his head. "I don't do that."

Another shush makes us fall quiet for a few minutes, but instead of turning his attention back to his work, he just stares. At me.

I nudge his foot with mine again and mouth the word "What?" at him.

"I'm sorry," he whispers, caressing my face again, making my eyelids flutter shut for just a moment.

"For what?" I'm not letting him get away with it that easily, even if his touch is sending shivers through my whole body.

"For assuming you were a spoiled little rich girl." His breath tickles my face, like he's leaned in toward me. His hand touches my knee, and I instinctively part my thighs.

My breath catches as his nose skims along my jaw.

“What if I am a spoiled little rich girl?”

He walks his fingers up my inner thigh, and my body leans forward like a magnet being drawn to another. He nips the shell of my ear. “I’m still sorry for being judgmental.”

When his fingertips skim the panties under my heavy skirt, I gasp.

“Just because you’re rich doesn’t mean you’re spoiled, or that I should assume negative things about you because of your bank balance.” His fingers travel higher.

“In the library?” My voice is breathy, and my heart hammers so loudly I’m sure the shusher is going to tell us to pipe down again any second.

August nibbles at my ear, drawing a deep moan from somewhere inside me. “Depends.” His fingers graze the hem of my underwear .

“On what?” I’m trying very hard not to beg him to touch me, not to pick up his hand and shove it inside my panties. But it’s so fucking hard.

He’s so close, his warmth is consuming me. “Is it possible for you to stay quiet long enough for me to make you come?” He slides a finger under the damp fabric and glides it up my labia. I can’t take it, I need him to sink his fingers into my aching pussy.

I bite my lip, hard.

“Can you be quiet, Rowan?” While he drags his tongue up the column of my neck, he slides his finger between my soaking wet lips, barely grazing my clit.

“Fuck.” It’s a pained whisper. “Please, August.” I roll my hips. “Please.”

“Shhhhhhhh.” He nips the soft skin where my neck meets my shoulder, making me swallow a groan.

When he removes his hand, I whimper. “P-please, August. Please don’t stop.” I’ve gone from being in complete control of this tutoring session to being a whiny, needy, soaking wet mess. It’s not at all professional, but if I don’t come soon, I might explode.

In silence, he drops to his knees and pushes my legs apart.

Oh God. Is he going to... Fuck.

He slides my skirt further up my thighs before pulling my ass toward him, moving me to the edge of the seat. I can’t help but look behind him. What if someone walks past? What if I can’t stay quiet? What if...?

What if?—?

Fuck. He peels my lips apart and sinks his tongue into my pussy, and in a split second, I don’t care who walks past.

August eats my pussy in earnest, feeding off my ragged breaths. He slips two fingers inside me, curling them into my g-spot.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuckety fucking fuck.

I’m bucking my hips against his face, but it’s not enough. He’s lapping my clit with the flat of his tongue, and the more I writhe against him, the slower he goes.

He's trying to fucking kill me.

My body tenses as I inch closer and closer toward my release. All the while, he takes his time like he's in no rush to go anywhere, be anywhere, and like we're not in the middle of a fucking library with his head between my legs under the table we were just studying math at.

I can't take it.

I release the arms of the chair I had been white-knuckle gripping and spear my fingers into his hair, drawing him to me.

It's August who blinks first and makes a noise. Apparently this guy likes it when my nails are biting into his scalp, and my pussy is suffocating the life force out of him.

He groans against my clit, sending a deep shiver through my whole body as I crest the wave. I've never, in my entire life, stayed quiet through an orgasm. Not once. Until now.

I bite my lip so hard a metallic taste fills my mouth. Wave after wave of pleasure crashes into me with such force I see stars. My ass is off the edge of the chair, the only thing holding up my jerking, twitching body is August Kade's face.

My orgasm lasts forever, aftershocks rippling through every muscle in my body, and still, he stays on his knees slurping my arousal and cum like it's his fucking life force.

I'm not sure how long it takes my body to switch back on, or my brain to reboot after the haze of bliss that hit with my release. But when I blink back into real time, August has pulled my panties off my ankles, he's righted my skirt, and he's sitting back in his chair next to me working.

“August? Where are my panties?” I’m breathless, my chest is heaving with shallow breaths as I struggle to fill my lungs.

He pats his pocket but doesn’t say anything.

“I think I’ve got the right answer to this one.” He slides his papers across the table to me like he didn’t just suck my soul out of my body.

“You expect me to math? Like... right now?” I cover my erratic heart with my palm as he looks me straight in the eye with a look that could ignite kindling.

“Yes, Rowan. I do.” He points at his crotch. “Sooner I get this shit done, the sooner I can fuck you senseless.”

CHAPTER 14

August

“Y ou sure you’re okay being seen in public... with the enemy ?” Lachlan’s voice drops to a dramatic whisper at the end of his sentence. It’s Christmas Eve, and he’s in town from Wisconsin to visit with family.

We’re both missing the ice. While part of me is concerned that Johnny White’s going to crack me in the skull with his twig, another part is eager to get back to the game.

Lachlan picks up his burger and stares at it. “You know how hockey fans get.” He quirks a brow. “They might think we’re in cahoots.” He takes a way-too-big bite, demolishing about a quarter of the burger.

“If they think anything, it’ll be that we’re setting up for a fight after the holidays.” I pick up a few fries and drag them through the pot of ketchup before cramming them in my mouth.

“I’m game if you are.” Lachlan mumbles around the food in his mouth before grabbing a napkin on the table and dabbing it against his mouth. “In fact, why wait? We don’t even have gloves to drop. Get up, we can give everyone here a good Christmas show.” He grins .

I shake my head. “I’d rather not.”

He’s got at least two inches on me, and the only time I’ve ever fought him, I ended up

on my ass with a busted nose. We eat in silence for a few moments, and a kid comes up to the table to get Lachlan's autograph.

"I'm so sorry." The child's mom practically groans at me. "We did our best to make sure he was a Raccoon's fan, but he really loves wolves..." She waves her hand like that's all it took to convert the little boy who can't be older than six or seven.

He looks up at Lachlan with Stanley Cups dancing in his eyes, and gushes at him about how he's the best player in the whole wide world. It's adorable. Lachlan asks the boy's mom if she'd like tickets to the first game back after the holidays, and she says they're already going.

Lachlan nods. "I could get my teammates to sign a notebook for you, and give it back to you after the game."

The kid's smile widens even further, like all his Christmases have come at once. "Is that okay Mom?" He looks at her with such hope in her eyes there's no way this woman's saying no.

"Sure thing, kiddo."

While Lachlan chats with the mom about logistics, I pick at my fries. A flash of red hair captures my attention, and the person it's attached to is a similar build and height to Rowan. After staring at her for way too long, when she finally turns around, my heart sinks because it's not her. It's Christmas time, time for people to be with their family, but I'm sorely tempted to message her to schedule an emergency Christmas Eve tutoring session just so I can be near her for a while.

As I gulp down my root beer float, I feel eyes on my skin. "What?"

"Who is that?" Lachlan doesn't bother to gesture at who he's talking about. I hadn't

seen the woman and her son leave, but he's obviously spied my gaze lingering on the redhead across the restaurant.

I shrug, taking another drink. "Don't know her."

He takes another bite of his burger, swallowing it in record time. "Okay, who did you think she was?"

I shake my head. "No." I cram some food in my mouth, hoping it'll be enough to put him off pressing the topic, but he doesn't. Instead, he kicks my ankle.

"Oh, you're absolutely going to talk." Another quarter of his burger disappears down the hatch and he washes it down with a glug of his milkshake. "Who is she, my 'I'm staying single forever, soon-to-be a preacher friend?'"

With a snort, I kick him back. "It hasn't been that long." It hasn't, but only because I fucked Rowan senseless at the Christmas party a couple days ago. And again after I ate out her delectable pussy in the library yesterday instead of learning math.

"Spill," he presses.

I sigh. "Her name is Rowan Armistead. She's my math tutor."

His brows twitch. "White's ex?"

Sometimes the hockey world is exceptionally small. I pinch the bridge of my nose. "How do you know her?"

"One of the guys on my team wanted to ask her out on a date without knowing she was in a relationship already. Johnny knocked one of his teeth out." He grins. "My teammate broke his nose in response." He shrugs. "Wasn't a bad fight actually."

“Well, she’s single, or I think we’re dating? I’m not sure.”

“You’re not sure?” Lachlan drags some fries through mayo and crams them into his mouth. “How did you meet? Through tutoring?”

I shake my head. “She crashed into my car.”

He gasps before clutching his chest. “Not Rusty. How the hell are you getting around?”

With a nod, I turn somber. “Rusty is no more. Ubers, bumming rides from teammates, the twins keep offering me a loaner.”

“And you keep saying no.” He shakes his head. “Take the fucking help, Gus. She wrecked Rusty, and you still want to see this woman? She must be special.”

“She is, and I can’t get her out of my mind.” The urge to drop my head onto the table with a thunk is powerful, but I’m not normally dramatic.

“When are you seeing her again? After the holiday at school?”

I grunt before taking a drink.

“Why don’t you ask to see her over Christmas?”

“We barely know each other, Lachlan. It’s Christmas, she’s probably with her family...”

He studies me for a long moment while I polish off my fries. “What aren’t you saying, Gus?” He holds me with a hard stare that somehow pierces through my defenses. Maybe telling him what I’m afraid of will help me figure out how to move

forward.

“I’m not good enough for her, okay? She’s smart, like super fucking smart, and beautiful, and funny, and...”

“Wealthy.”

My jaw drops.

“Don’t deny it.” He holds up his palm to me. “You really need to knock that shit on the head, Gus. You get back what you put out there. If you believe you’re not worthy of love because you’re broke, you’re never going to get love, or fucking money. The universe listens to that shit.”

It’s a bit too much of a woo-woo answer for my liking.

“How you talk to yourself is important. If you constantly tell yourself and others you’re not worthy, or that the only worth anyone has is financial worth, you’re going to end up miserable and alone.”

“Ugh.” This time, I don’t hold back from smacking my head off the table.

“Did you fuck it up already? Did you push her away?” He studies my face. “Gus, please don’t tell me you fucked it up.”

Why he’s so invested in my love life is anyone’s guess, but I guess it’s nice that he cares. “I don’t think so. I mean...” I rub my palms on my thighs. “I tried to scare her away by taking her to see Maggie.” I jerk my thumb at the counter. “And I told her about Todd.”

He groans, giving me an eye roll that would rival a high schooler’s. “And how did

that go?”

“Maggie insisted she get an invite to our future wedding.”

Lachlan smacks his thigh with a laugh. “Well, if Maggie likes her, she can’t be bad. How long has it been since you’ve dated?”

“A while.” I’m not answering that with specifics. Heaving out a weighted breath doesn’t lighten the tension in my body. “I’m afraid of fucking it up.”

He slurps at the bottom of his shake with his straw. “You deserve all good things, my friend.” He pauses. “Except winning the Frozen Four, that’s got the Wolves all over it this year.” He grins. “But you deserve to be happy. Just be yourself, that’s more than enough for anyone. If you act like you don’t deserve her, then you won’t.”

He holds up his hand again. “Don’t. It’s Christmas. Allow me this one time a year to be a sappy fucker, and I’ll go back to head smacks in the New Year.”

We fall silent for a couple of minutes as his words sink into my subconscious. Could it be that simple? Believe I’m worthy of her affection, and I will be?

I guess there’s one way to find out. I pick up my phone, and type out a message.

August: I need your help.

CHAPTER 15

Rowan

A ugust's name sits on my screen, my thumb hovering over the 'send message' button as the sound of Mom and Dad arguing fills the air. Life would be a hell of a lot easier for all of us if they called it quits, filed for divorce, and went their separate ways.

It's Christmas Eve, for fuck's sake. Can't I even get a time out over the holidays? The painful pounding behind my eyes throbs harder as they get louder and louder.

Same thing, different day.

Dad wants to feed his gambling addiction with Mom's inheritance from Grampy, but it's in a protected trust that he can't get to. Turns out she put it in a trust for me that no one can access until the day I turn thirty years old.

She says he needs help. He says she needs to stop being a miser, it's not that bad, she's overreacting.

Until recently, I'd have agreed with him. But it turns out they've skillfully kept a lot of their issues out of my line of sight. They couldn't hide the two heavies who showed up at the door on Thanksgiving Day, demanding Dad pay them back the ten thousand dollars he'd racked up in debt to them .

No one knows, not even Athena, in part because she'd offer me the clothes off her

back and the other part is because she'd probably kill Dad plus the two debt collectors for daring to darken our door and threaten me.

Panic fills my chest cavity.

When I asked Mom about the insurance, she panicked and couldn't apologize enough. Every penny she could cobble together had to go to paying Dad's debt, so the assholes at the door didn't come back and take, well... me.

A shudder passes through my body as a chill sinks into my bones. We live in a nice house, in a nice neighborhood, we have three nice cars, and from the outside, everything seems... nice.

But if you peel back the layers, the cracks start to show.

My father is in deep, he's lost himself, who he is, and he's consumed by his addiction. He's lost his job, but Mom is a named partner at a local law firm. She's busted her ass to get to where she is, and she loves him too much to let go. But at this point, I think it's what she has to do to make him see he needs to get help.

And me? I stay in my room and wait for the storms to pass. If I'm caught in the crossfire, Dad tries to drag me into their fights, demanding I take his side against Mom's logic.

When the doorbell goes, the yelling stops, and for a blissful moment, I can't thank the mail-person enough for even a brief interlude in the fighting.

The house is decorated for Christmas, lights and tinsel strung on damn near every wall and piece of furniture. We have three Christmas trees, and yet, I couldn't feel further from being in the Christmas spirit.

“Rowan, it’s for you.” Mom’s weary voice makes its way up the stairs.

I’m in yoga pants and an oversized Christmas sweater, thankfully Athena doesn’t give a crap about my fashion sense. It has to be her, she’s the only one who knows where I live. Except when I skip downstairs, glad to have a reason to leave the battleground that is my childhood home, it’s August’s imposing figure that fills the front door frame.

My breath stutters to a halt as my ribs compress my lungs. What is he doing here?

He’s holding a Bitches Brew paper cup in each hand and flashes me a warm smile that melts the ice in my veins. “Pick a hand.” He picked left when I gave him the option, so I’m guessing that’s his favorite side.

“Right.” I return his smile as he offers me the cup in his right hand. “What are you doing here?”

Acutely aware of the curious eyes of both my parents on us right now, I keep my own eyes fixed forward on August.

He turns his attention to my folks over my shoulder. “I’m so sorry for intruding on Christmas Eve, I know you guys are probably super busy. But.” He turns his gaze back to me. “I was kind of hoping I could take you out for an hour or two.”

My stomach rumbles. My watch tells me my parents fought through dinner time, and despite the heaped pile of perfectly-wrapped gifts sitting under the tree, there is no cheer to be had within these walls.

Swallowing down the lump in my throat, I nod. “I’d love to.” I move toward him but grind to a halt. “Give me a sec to change?”

He shakes his head. “You don’t need to change. Throw some shoes on, and let’s go.” His sense of urgency unsettles my stomach. It’s like he heard my parents yelling and wants to get me out of here as quickly as I want to leave.

It would have been impossible for him not to hear the fighting. I’m sure by now the whole neighborhood has heard the arguments from within this house.

I nod, slide on the pair of sneakers behind the door, and grab a coat .

“Drive carefully.” It’s Mom who tosses out the warning.

It’s on the tip of my tongue to say he doesn’t have a car because I destroyed it, but I didn’t want Mom to feel any more pressure than she already does, so I kept that piece of information to myself.

August holds up a set of car keys. “Yes, ma’am. I’ll take good care of her, Mr. and Mrs. Armistead.”

Before my parents can answer, or contribute anything more, August slides his arm around my waist and guides me outside.

A car I don’t recognize sits at the end of our driveway. “You got new wheels.” Relief unfurls in my chest. “Does it have a name?”

He chuckles as he opens the passenger door with the hand that was wrapped around my waist. “Cars are like ships, they’re generally called ‘she’ not ‘it.’ And no, this isn’t mine. It’s a loaner from the twins.” He winces like it hurts to say the words, but I know it’s more because they did him a favor.

He closes the door and settles into the driver’s seat.

“Where are we going?” I finally take a sip of the drink he gave me. “Mmmm what is this?”

“White chocolate cinnamon chai latte.” He turns on the ignition and pulls away from the curb. “And anywhere that isn’t here.” The edge to his voice confirms he heard what was happening behind my front door when he arrived. “Have you eaten?”

I shake my head, and my stomach rumbles again. Twenty minutes later, we’ve had drive thru for dinner, we’ve refilled our hot drinks from Bitches Brew, and we’re back in the car driving around the neighborhoods of Cedar Rapids to see the Christmas lights.

And still, August hasn’t brought up my parents. Not even once. In fact, we haven’t talked much at all. It’s not an uncomfortable silence, it’s the kind of silence that doesn’t need to be filled by conversation. Christmas music plays faintly on the radio as we drive.

The twinkly Christmas lights and the bite in the air combined with the warmth of the hot cocoa in our paper cups finally makes it feel like Christmas.

“How did you know where I live?” I slurp at the tiny marshmallows on top of my hot chocolate. Taryn didn’t even bother to put the lid on, she knows I love extra marshmallows on top of my cocoa.

August doesn’t turn his head to me as he navigates the snowy streets. “I asked the twins if they could help me find you, and loan me a car to come see you.” He turns to me briefly. “I needed to see you.”

Something flutters in my chest. “You did?”

He nods. “I was having food with a friend.” He shrugs. “He told me to get over

myself and my hang-ups and not fuck up my shot at being with you if that's what I want to do."

"Is that what you want to do?" My voice is breathy and comes out on a puff of steam.

He grunts.

"Is that a yes?"

He rolls his eyes. "I'm here aren't I?"

"You suck at asking someone out."

The corner of his mouth twitches as we wait at a red light. "I suck at a lot of things. But I'm willing to try to be better." He reaches across and picks up my hand, sliding his into mine and resting it on my thigh. "What do you say?"

"To what?" I'm not letting him off the hook that easily.

He groans. "Date me? Be my girlfriend? I don't know what the cool kids call it these days. You and me, in a relationship." His exasperation makes me laugh.

"I'd like that."

His shoulders loosen like they were holding tension, and he breathes out a long, slow breath .

He pulls into a parking lot next to the city's Christmas tree, it's like he can tell I'm not ready to go home. The streets are bustling with people, arms laden with bags of last minute gift purchases, and a small choir sings Christmas songs next to a replica of the Christmas story. Someone has placed a minion in the manger and seemingly

stolen the baby Jesus.

“You want to talk about it?” His fingers skim over my cheek. “I’m here if you do.”

I stare out the window at the flurries of snowflakes still falling before shaking my head. “Not yet.” I squeeze his hand. “Thanks, but I’m not ready to share that. I will though. Just... let me have tonight.”

CHAPTER 16

August

I had no choice but to take Rowan back to Mom's. There was no fucking way I was taking her back to her parents. Rowan had asked for time, but on our way back to my Mom's place, she told me about her home life.

I had thought she was a spoiled little rich girl, when in fact, her family is every bit as fucked up as my own. Maybe even more.

My stomach cramps as I lead her down the street to my childhood home, mostly because I'd misjudged her. I guess we really don't know what someone's going through in their life unless we walk a mile in their shoes. I make a mental note to apologize to the de la Peñas for being a prick as well.

God only knows what they have to endure under the guise of being a well put together family under the public eye.

"It's not much." I squeeze her hand. "But I couldn't leave Mom alone on Christmas Eve and take you somewhere else."

She rolls her eyes. "I don't care. I just don't want to go home. Plus, I'd like to meet the woman who raised you to be such a pain in the ass." I shove him playfully, but his face remains stern.

She picks up the flowers on her lap. "Grab the wine and cupcakes from the trunk.

Hopefully she won't be too upset I crashed her family Christmas."

My stomach dips again. I've never brought anyone back here, I've never introduced a girl to my family. While we don't live in a trailer home anymore, our house is meager. Mom keeps it clean and tidy, but we don't have much.

I try to press down the embarrassment as I take the bag from the trunk with one hand, and my new girlfriend's hand with the other. By the time we walk up the steps, Mom has opened the door and steps back to let us both in. "Come in! Come in out of the cold."

Rowan holds the flowers out to her. "Mrs. Kade, I'm Rowan, August's new girlfriend. I'm so sorry to gatecrash your Christmas Eve. He rescued me from an uncomfortable family situation and..." She visibly shrinks. "I wasn't ready to go home yet. I hope it's okay to stay here for a little while." She cracks a small smile. "Maybe see some pictures of Gus when he was little?"

Mom's face lights up like all her Christmases have come at once. "Flowers and photos? I like you already."

Mom guides us both into the living room where Rowan kicks off her shoes and climbs onto the couch before pulling one of Mom's crocheted blankets off the back of the sofa and wrapping it around her body. She pats the cushion next to her. "Come look at baby Gus pictures with me."

I'd argue or protest, but it would just make them even more intent on embarrassing me. We sit eating cupcakes, drinking wine, and Mom asks Rowan more questions than I could have thought to ask, but it's helping me get to know her.

She hates fish, mushrooms, and pickles. She has an unhealthy obsession with Swedish fish, and can't whistle.

By the time midnight hits, it's as though Rowan has been part of my life for years. She and Mom chatted like old friends, and the way she lay curled into me on the couch felt like she was made just for me.

I don't connect with people easily, my gruff exterior and the many chips on my shoulder drive people away pretty damn quickly. But something about this woman makes me want to bare my soul for not only her to see, but everyone else.

Mom went to bed about twenty minutes ago, and Rowan shows no signs of movement. I don't want to take her home, but I don't want her to think she's forced to stay here.

"Is it too much too fast to ask to stay here?"

No, no it is not because the thought of waking up tomorrow morning with her under my roof makes me stupidly content.

"Not at all. I can sleep on the couch, you can have my bed, and I can take you home after breakfast tomorrow morning. We always have Christmas morning cinnamon rolls with bacon."

She grins at me. "I'm totally down for breakfast, but why can't we share your bed?" She bats her eyelids at me. "If you don't want to do, uh, anything while we're under your mom's roof that's one thing, we can snuggle." She puffs out her chest. "I'm a champion snuggler. But if you want to take the couch and leave me in your bed all by myself." She shrugs. "I guess that's okay too."

It's a matter of minutes before she's naked and between my sheets. The only light in the room is from the Christmas string lights Mom put around my window that casts a cool green glow on Rowan's bare skin.

“Best Christmas ever,” I whisper, fisting my cock as it leaks precum with every pump.

She’s fucking gorgeous. Her full, creamy tits have a mole underneath on the left side of her ribcage, her dusky nipples are hard and pointing straight up to my ceiling, and the landing strip of curly red pubic hair is a runway to the Promised Land.

“You’re so fucking beautiful, Rowan Armistead.” I skim my hands along the outside of her thighs.

She parts her legs. “I’m so fucking wet, August Kade.”

I drag my fingers through her lips collecting her arousal. Fuck. She’s definitely wet.

I shake my head. “I don’t know that you can stay quiet enough that you won’t wake my mom.”

“Try me, Snickerdoodle.” She grins, her fingers already working on her nipples. She flips herself onto her front. “I’ll even smother my face in your pillow.” She pops her hips up, somehow making me even harder. “But I need your cum inside me.”

I fold my body over the top of hers. “You need my cum inside you?” Something primal rears its head in my chest. “Do we have a little breeding kink, Ms. Armistead?”

She twerks her ass at me. “I don’t know.” Her voice is a frenzied whisper. “But I need your cock inside me. Cream pie me, Gus. Please?”

I love how filthy her mouth is, and as much as I’d love to make her beg all night for me, I need to be inside her every bit as much as she needs me to fill her.

Ramming my cock inside her pussy is easy, she's so slick I glide right in. Her velvet cunt is hot, pulsing around my dick, and the harder I get the more she's clawing at my sheets.

"Not... Gonna... Last... Row."

Her only response is to clench her walls around my cock like she doesn't want me to last. My body tightens, my balls explode, and I fill my gorgeous girlfriend's pussy while her arms and legs tremble from holding herself up.

When every single, solitary drop of my cum is inside of her, I pull out. "Stay there." I pat her ass reassuringly before dropping onto my back right under her .

As my cum leaks out of her onto my chin, slithering onto my chest, I eat her out. Her mewls and moans and pants are muffled by my bedding, but the way she grinds her crotch against my tongue tells me everything. It's not long before she detonates on my tongue, soaking me with her delicious juices.

I can't hold back the satisfied hum that rolls through my body as wave after wave of her orgasm makes her pleasure leak out in my mouth.

For a long moment after the last wave crashes into her, everything falls still. The only sound in the room is our ragged breaths as we try to re-center ourselves and come back down to earth from the atmosphere.

When she climbs off me, she shuffles down the bed and grins up at me. "I made a mess of your chest."

I nod, unable to engage the part of my brain that uses words.

She sticks her tongue out at me. "Let me clean that up for you."

CHAPTER 17

August

“I owe you an apology.” I hand the keys of his car back to Apollo. Artemis is beside him, they’re both dressed like penguins again. Rowan, dressed in the most tongue-swallowing red sparkly dress I’ve ever seen in my entire life, has already hurried into the heart of the de la Peña house to find Athena, but I need a moment alone with the twins before I join her in the belly of the New Year’s Eve party they’re hosting.

“Both of you.” My hands are shaking. I feel like such an asshole, hence the apology, but there’s something simmering inside my body that I hadn’t noticed underneath all those layers of judgment.

I don’t want to lose these guys.

In fact, I want to know them more, better, I want to let them into my life and to really build friendships with both of them.

“You owe both of us apologies?” Apollo quirks an eyebrow.

Artemis purses his lips. “Is it because you were a cabrón about accepting the gift card for Bitches Brew? That’s ancient history.”

I shake my head, tucking my hands into the pockets of my dress pants in a bid to stop them trembling.

“I judged both of you.” I shrug. “All four of you, I guess... unfairly. I’ve held onto bitterness from my own life and let unkindness and jealousy keep me back from being a good captain to you guys. I’m sorry.”

Saying the words releases a tightness I’ve been harboring in my chest.

“I’d like to start over. I’d like a chance to get to know both of you better. We only have a few months of the season left, and I’d like to be the captain—and friend—you both deserve for me to be.”

There’s a heavy silence after I finish speaking, and for a beat I wish their gorgeous marble floor would open up and swallow me whole.

“You wouldn’t be the first person in the world to make a snap judgment about us based on what the world sees of our family in magazines and on the internet, August.” Apollo pats my shoulder with an open hand.

“He’s right, we’re used to it,” Artemis adds, like that somehow justifies my behavior, my thoughts.

“That’s no excuse. I was an asshole. I held onto prejudices I had no business believing because...” I rake my hand through my hair. “Because I needed somewhere to direct my anger, about my brother, my home life...” A lump appears in my throat that I struggle to swallow down, and I can’t finish my thought out loud.

Apollo pulls me into a hug. “It’s okay. I appreciate the apology, but it’s unnecessary. Our father casts a pretty big shadow, and people assume because he’s the way he is, that we are too.”

Artemis shakes my hand when Apollo lets me go from his bone-crushing hug. “We try to do as much good in the world as we can.” He shrugs.

Apollo nods. “Because our father is so fucking stingy with his fortune. Speaking of which, we have a party to host.” He pats my shoulder again guiding me toward the room where the music is emanating from.

“Leave the past behind us, August. There has been no harm done. We’re a team, a family. Let’s see in the New Year together, so we can play harder, stronger, fight tougher and win the Frozen Four for your final year wearing Cedar Rapids green.”

Going out of my final year as a champion sounds pretty fucking great, especially when my girl is determined to help me graduate. Wouldn’t that be epic? “Sounds like a plan to me.”

CHAPTER 18

August

It's the first game back after the holidays. We're rested, feeling strong, and we're up by two at the start of the third. I've done everything in my power to stay the fuck off the ice every time Johnny is on it. I don't want drama, not here, not in my happy place, but I can't avoid it anymore.

Coach calls the line change just as Johnny jumps off the bench, tossing me a promise-filled stare as he passes. Great. I should have known better than to think we'd behave like grown-ass adults about the fact I'm officially with his ex-girlfriend.

For the entire shift, he chirps at me. He hooks me twice, but when the refs miss the slash across my shin, I see red. "Fuck off, dick."

He shoulders me as someone ices the puck and play stops. "Single syllables." He taps me with his twig. "You know she doesn't go for dudes with shit for brains, right? She's just using you for your tiny cock. She'll move on to someone more on her own level soon enough."

I ignore him, despite the spark his words ignite in my chest. I'm well hung, confident with the size of my cock, but the other things he said about my intelligence tug at my insecurities.

"She does enjoy charity work, though. Maybe she's taking pity on your poor ass. A community outreach project or something."

As though he smells blood in the water like a shark, he sneers as we lean forward, preparing for the face off. The spark has turned to a flame that's breathing fire into my veins despite the fact we're standing on a giant hunk of ice.

I try to find some Zen, whatever the fuck that might look like, but his smug presence lingers like a bad smell.

The fact he had his cock in her makes me insurmountably angry, and I try not to think about it often. But right now? I probably need to be incensed that he's seen her naked body because he's gearing up for a fight, and this time he means business.

Johnny keeps muttering under his breath to my right. I'm going to break this shithead's face, and more than that, I'm going to enjoy it when I do.

Now that she and I are together, I'm not letting her go. She's my woman, and I don't give a fuck who doesn't like it. She's chosen to be with me, and I hope to God I make her even a fraction of how happy she makes me.

It should be embarrassing just how much a single text from her can light up my whole day. The past few weeks have been some of the best of my whole life. I failed one of my winter exams, but I'm not going to quit. I've studied more over the winter break than I can remember, and all because my girl believes in me.

"Dirty little whore, right?" Johnny digs me with his elbow, breaking me out of my happy thoughts.

"Spoiled little rich girl on the streets, freak in the?—"

I don't even let him finish his sentence before I've dropped my gloves, yanked off his helmet, and sent my fist sailing into his grinning face. I guess I draw the line at kissing and telling, and I definitely take issue with slut shaming, especially in front of

both of our teams on the ice. They're the worst gossips in the world.

This asshole deserves all he gets.

I get a few solid digs in before the refs break up the fight. Johnny grins at me, teeth bloodied from a stream of blood trickling from his nose. "This is gonna be fun." He drives his shoulder into me again before heading to the penalty box.

CHAPTER 19

August

I've barely stepped foot out of the arena, and she's here, standing in front of me. The team trickles out around us as she stands staring me down from just a few feet away, her face a picture of concern. I stride toward her, closing the distance between us, and use the pad of my thumb to iron out the creases between her furrowed brows.

She grabs my hand, her breath whispering across my busted up knuckles as she inspects the damage, clucking her tongue. "What did he say?"

I debate not telling her, or lying and saying "nothing," but she's not stupid, and I don't want to start whatever this might be between us with dishonesty.

Sliding my hand over her cheek and cupping her jaw, I tilt her head so she's staring me straight in the eye. Her intensity disarms me, stealing my breath. "He called you a whore."

She flinches at the word, it's almost imperceptible because she's gotten really fucking good at hiding when she's hurting, but I see it. She doesn't shrink away from me though, instead, she straightens her spine even more. This woman has balls of steel and seems to be clueless to the fact .

"Did you say anything back?" Her voice is hushed, her breath tickling my face with each spoken word.

I grunt. “I like to think my fists did at least most of the talking. But I told him the only person who gets to call you a dirty little whore is me, when I’m balls deep in your tight cunt, my cock covered in your cum, and I’m making you scream my name.”

Her face colors in seconds, her breath snagging on a small hiccup as she absorbs the words. “You didn’t.”

Nodding, I flash her a smile. “No one insults my girl, Rowan. And now everyone on the ice knows it. Especially that asshole Johnny White.”

“Your girl? How prehistoric. Are you going to bash me over the head with a club?”

I flash her a grin. “I didn’t think it was big enough to be called a club, but if that’s your kink I’ll totally hit you over the head with it.”

She laughs, shaking her head. Her jaw drops open. Closes. Opens again before she breaks into a wide grin. “You’re such a fucking caveman.”

“Maybe so, but I’m your fucking caveman.”

“Damn straight you are.”

THREE YEARS LATER

Most people have butterflies in their stomach on their wedding day.

Me? I get a dozen jackrabbits that seem to have spent an hour chugging Mountain Dew and eating candy corn. Ew. I hate candy corn.

I press my palm against my stomach, willing the nausea to stop. I've smoothed out my dress no fewer than three thousand, two hundred and six times. Every time I try to sit, I bounce to my feet like my ass is on fire.

August should be here any minute. The more I wait, the more lightheaded I become. I don't know why I'm feeling so vulnerable, so insecure, when I know in my heart of hearts he's every bit as excited as I am for us to get down the aisle and start the rest of our lives together.

The photographer checks something for the millionth time before offering me a small smile. "He'll be here in a minute."

I know. I'm not afraid he won't show up. August always shows up.

I'm in a side room of the church. It's small, smells of musty old books and nostalgia transports me back to our days at UCR when we spent time studying in the library. My chest still aches with the pride I feel for how much work August put into those last few months of our final year.

He passed his finals, graduated college, and his mom sobbed her way through our

graduation ceremony.

I blink myself back into the present. My crap is strewn all around the small space despite the fact I just got here a little while ago. My parents are sitting out in the church having just renewed their own wedding vows only a few months ago before spending two weeks on vacation together in Thailand.

Mom always wanted to visit, and after surviving the worst parts of the past few years and Dad getting the help he needed, it was time for them to tick that trip off their bucket lists.

They tried to come in here with me, but despite their protests, I wanted to do this all by myself.

My heart pinches that my husband-to-be doesn't get to have his brother standing next to him today at the altar. Despite not having any intention of repairing his relationship with Todd, I think there's a piece of him who still wishes he was able to be here today. I rub at my chest, trying to scrub my nerves out of my body.

My bridesmaids aren't even here yet, I came early for our "first look," and I kind of regret not making my girls come with me.

Nothing would distract me more than Athena's sharp wit and inappropriate comments. I thought when she finally gave in to her desires and settled down, too, that it might sand away some of her sharp edges, but I am gleeful to have been proven wrong. She's still every bit the spitfire she was before. And then some. Some days I wonder how the hell Scott manages not only to handle her, but her brothers—his best friends—as well.

The handle of the door rattles, and I shriek. Glancing around the room I'm not sure where I can hide. For a strategic person, I didn't really think this one through all that

much.

The door springs open enough for an arm to pop through, hand open, waiting. The camera clicks in the photographer's hand, but I ignore her. I ignore everything but my guy.

I shuffle myself across the room, pin my back to the door, and reach for his left hand with my right. The camera keeps clicking. As soon as our hands meet, relief unfurls the tension knotting my muscles, allowing joy to seep into my body, warming me up.

I blink back tears, fighting the welling emotions in my chest.

"You still want to do a sneak peek or whatever it's called?" August's voice is gruff, low, and laced with unspoken emotion.

I drop my head back against the door, as though it'll fall against his. "Yeah."

"Freaking out?"

"Yeah."

His grip on my hand tightens for just a second. "Let me in, Row. I can't take it anymore."

I smile as I step back from the door, anticipation zinging through my body as I smooth the front of my dress for the three thousandth two hundred and seventh time. What if he doesn't like the dress?

A bubble of laughter makes its way out of me. Is that what other brides think the moment before their soulmate sees them on their wedding day? What if they don't like the dress?

The door swings open, and August steps into the room, blindfold firmly in place. The photographer positions him so he's facing me, takes a few snaps, and asks me if I'm ready.

The warring bunnies in my stomach and my trembling hands might suggest I'm not, but I am. I've been ready to spend my life with August Kade from damn near the minute I laid my eyes on him .

Despite my readiness, I shake my head, wanting to take in my giant, the love of my life for just a second before he makes this about me. His broad shoulders perfectly fill out his custom made white tuxedo, he smells of mint and musk, and I've never seen shoes so shiny in my entire life.

I wasn't sure we could pull off this black and white wedding, especially since I made him wear white, but as he stands there, patiently waiting in silence, I know I made the right choice. He looks like a beautiful fucking angel.

He's had a haircut, he's tidied his beard, and if I'm not mistaken, he's even gone and gotten himself a manicure. I bet he went with Ares. I grin at the thought of the entire team getting mani pedis just for our wedding. It's the kind of brotherhood shit they'd do together.

At my nod, the photographer instructs August to take off his blindfold. The action is slow, and it takes a second or two for his eyes to adjust to the light, but the moment he sees me, truly sees me, pure adoration registers on his face a beat before his tears fall.

The sight of my love, my heart, my gruff, angry, mean muggin' man standing in front of me with tears trickling down his face, snaps every emotional cord that's been keeping me together so far today.

I take a step toward him, but he holds out his hand to stop me. “Not yet. Let me just...” He sucks in a shaky breath. “Let me look at you, Rowan. Please? Just... just let me look. I need to soak this all in.”

My chest heaves with the weight of his stare as he takes me in from head to toe and back again. If he cares about the photographer seeing him cry, he doesn’t show it.

His eyes rake over the bodice of my black dress, pausing for a beat at my waist before traveling down to the floor again. “I’ve never seen anyone look so breathtaking in all my life, Rowan.” His voice is thick with emotion, and from the slow way he’s speaking, I can tell he’s choking back a meltdown.

I don’t know whether I want to hug him or fuck him right now. This man... this fucking man.

“You look stunning, baby.”

“You don’t look so bad yourself, Snickerdoodle.”

At that, his lips quirk, and he steps toward me. Cupping my chin with both his palms he breathes me in. “What did I do to deserve you?”

“You must have been a murderer in a past life, Gussy.” I brush my nose against his. “Your punishment is a lifetime with me.” I wink.

This man is my hero.

He’s busted his ass to make his dreams come true, and he has. He plays for our local NHL team, we live in a comfortable house, with savings in the bank, and he drives a perfectly restored 1975 Ferrari 308 GTB with a mid-mounted 2.9 liter V8 engine. I don’t know what any of that means but I watched him piece it back together with his

bare hands over the past year and a half so I know it's a big deal.

But I also know that none of that matters to him, not truly. If you asked, he'd tell you his dreams came true the moment he met me, the moment he opened himself up to loving not only himself, but others. And while I can't claim all the credit, I'm so relieved we weathered the storms and made it to this point.

I kiss him, an all-encompassing, deep and passionate kiss that I feel in every part of my body knowing that this man is my forever.

And I'm one lucky fucking woman .

WHAT TO READ NEXT?

If you're curious about some of the side characters in this short story—have no fear, I've got stories ready for you!

The Cedar Rapids Raccoons series starts with book one, Freezing the Puck and Justin and Savannah's story. Here's a little teaser for their book.

I can't decide.

Chris-bean-a Aguilera, or Queen Latte-fah?

I've been staring at the menu for longer than is considered socially acceptable, and I still can't decide. I'm going to order what I always do. I know it. The Barbie-pink haired barista giving me sympathetic eyes knows it. And my best friend, Athena, sitting at our usual table shooting daggers into my back while she waits for me to order her first caffeine hit of the day, knows it, too. Hell, even the hero and heroine in the romance novel I'm hugging against my chest know it.

Huh. Perhaps not. Bitches Brew—the best coffee shop in town—has added new things to their menu. The Cocoa Chanel looks drool-worthy. Buttery hot chocolate with hot pink whipped cream, mini marshmallows, and edible glitter.

Ooooh. Come to mama.

But what if it's not as good as it looks on the menu board?

Nothing is ever as good as it looks on the menu board. And it's quite the beautiful-looking menu board. Everything in the coffee shop is pretty: striking, hot pink, and sparkly. First appearances come with a pink punch at Bitches Brew. There's so much interesting stuff, like a pink guitar hanging from the ceiling and a pink bike mounted on the wall over a fireplace, that I almost get distracted by it all and forget I'm supposed to be ordering.

Almost. I need to focus. Turning my attention back to the menu board, I shift my

weight. I need to pick something to order. It shouldn't be this hard.

But I know my Ruth Bader-Brewsburg, their dark chocolate mocha, is delicious. I love the depth of the coffee flavor, the richness of the chocolate, and how Taryn—my favorite barista and owner of Bitches Brew—takes the time to draw a music staff and notes with cocoa powder on top of my drink.

I do this every time. Every fucking time.

I convince myself that I'm going to stray from my boring, same old, same old and try something new. It's on the tip of my tongue, venturing out from my safe space into the unknown. But the comforting familiarity of my old favorite sinks its claws into me, just a little deeper, and I can't stop myself from blurting out the same thing I always get.

I know one thing, though. If I don't hurry up and bring Athena her Ariana Grande with an extra shot of Espresso Patronum, they're never going to find my body.

"You ready to order?" Taryn flashes me her superstar grin. I've been coming to Bitches Brew for as long as I've been a student at the University of Cedar Rapids, Iowa, AKA: UCR. Three years. And for three years I've ordered the same thing, every single time.

Maybe today, first day of my third and senior year, is The Day.

I nod and suck in a breath. "I'll have an Ariana Grande with an extra shot." A quick glance over my shoulder tells me that Athena has hit DEFCON 2.

She's starting her junior year. We met right here at the coffee shop, on our first day of college three years ago when she tried to hit on me. I was flattered, but I'm straight. She took it in stride, we got to talking, and the rest is BFF history .

She's the Geena Davis to my Susan Sarandon, the Buffy to my Willow, the Christina Yang to my Meredith Grey.

A grunt, and a string of Spanish profanities indicates she's escalated to DEFCON 1. "Better make it two extra shots, please, Taryn."

Her perfectly curled pink hair bobs up and down as she nods. "And for you?" She arches a manicured brow like she's expecting me to say something different, something new. I can't blame her, I've spent more time than usual examining her new board.

I meet her eyes, warmth blooming in my cheeks. How in the name of all that's holy does she get her eyeliner flicks so even?

The gaggle of geese hanging out around the small lake outside are honkin' up a storm. Even they know what I'm gonna order.

I heave out a sigh. Today isn't the day. "Ruth, please."

Her smile softens as she nods again. "You got it. Anything else?"

She's right. DEFCON 1 requires sugar as well as caffeine. "Hen will take the lady lips, and I'll have a dick waffle dipped in white chocolate. Please and thank you."

There's no judgment in Taryn's eyes. It's one of the reasons Bitches Brew is so popular, it's a safe space for all. A hot pink, glitz-and-glam safe space. I should be in charge of their marketing with such original taglines.

You wanna eat a dozen twat waffles and wash it down with a gallon of coffee? No judgment.

You do you, boo.

We can also work for six hours straight and use the free Wi-Fi when we are behind on projects and are butting up against deadlines. That one might be oddly specific to me, though somehow I doubt it.

Here, people can be their most authentic selves, without apologies. A twinge catches in my chest making my breath stutter. I don't really know who my most authentic self is anymore.

I thought I knew my most authentic self. I thought—I don't know what I thought—but finding the piece of paper in my dad's study telling me that I wasn't born a Bowen, that I'd been adopted as an infant and my parents hadn't told me? That shook me to my core.

It still shakes my core. I've spent the months since trying to figure out who I really am. I'd love to say that piece of paper didn't define me, or that it didn't change a single thing, but it did.

It changed everything.

I no longer know who I am. I tap my card against the machine and smile through the pain shredding my insides. My parents—my adoptive parents—kept it from me for almost twenty years. I've only known for a couple of months. But... How can I not be changed now that I know the truth?

The almost unhappy beep of the machine suggests a problem, and I scowl, wrinkles creasing my forehead. "Can you run it again please?"

Taryn nods and hits a couple buttons before I flap my card against the end of the machine one more time. Heat creeps up my spine and into my extremities. I place my

book on the counter—cover up, because there’s no shame in my smut of choice game. I know Taryn loves my hot as hell man-chest-candy covers as much as I do—then my purse.

Shit. If the card is declined again I don’t think I have another way to pay.

I purged my bag last night so it was ready to collect receipts, tubes of Chapstick, and crumbs from food I don’t eat anywhere near my purse. I thought I tossed my coin purse back into my bag, but the sinking feeling in my chest has me wondering if I left it at home .

Checking again, I confirm it. My coin purse is on my nightstand, right next to my charging vibrator and my half-empty glass of water. I close my eyes and send up a prayer. The Big Guy won’t let me down. Right?

The same “transaction denied” sound scrapes my ears and my stomach drops.

I could ask Athena to front me the cash. It’s my turn to buy, but she won’t mind. Being the daughter of a billionaire, I know she has the dough. But I’ve taken pride in being that person—you know, the one who knows who she is but who doesn’t want her for her money, or her family connections, or to get close to her delicious, hockey-playing brothers.

I love her for her. Not her last name.

“It’s okay, I got it.” A deep, velvety voice behind me sends a ripple through my body, sparking my lady bits to life.

Huh. I’d thought after all the months of neglect, apart from the occasional buzz with a battery operated boyfriend, that she’d closed up shop. Yet here she is reacting to a tall, dark, and handsome stranger behind me in line at the coffee shop. He has to be

tall, dark, and handsome, right? With a voice like maple syrup, he must be.

A glance at my book cover confirms it—this is my very own meet-cute. Maybe he's even shirtless already.

Guy saves girl from embarrassment by offering to buy her coffee. A little clichéd, it's true, but I can totally work with clichéd. Especially if he has a romance-novel-hero sized dick.

I kinda wish I'd shaved my legs this morning. Because of course I'm going from meet-cute to mounting the hottie behind me in zero-point-three seconds.

I spin around, ready to say "I do" and cut right to my happily ever after, and my jaw drops. Sure, he's tall, blond—not dark—and he's handsome alright, but he's also?—

"You can insert or tap." Taryn's voice barely registers from behind me .

My hand darts out, blocking his card from touching the machine. "It's fine. I'll just... I'm sure I have cash in here somewhere." I jiggle my bag at him like that'll somehow make him disappear, an alternative method of payment appear, or my vision come into focus, and it won't be who I think it is, who I know it is, standing in front of me.

Instead, my actual not-a-douche-canoe knight in shining armor will be here to save me from caffeine withdrawal and a murderous best friend instead.

His brow arches high over his crystal blue eyes as he gives me that lopsided, jock smile that dazzles like a disco ball and makes women's underwear spontaneously combust. But the acid in my empty stomach bubbles, stomping out any desire I felt when I first heard his voice. Before I realized who it was.

I'd rather saw my arm off than let Justin Ass pay for my breakfast.

I blink. Try to restart my brain, but his blue eyes won't let go of me, and I don't move my hand from the card machine. The walls are closing in around us at a snail's pace, like a slow-motion 80's montage in a movie, and I'm pretty sure everyone is staring at me, staring at him, waiting for me to say or do something, or even just move.

Taryn clears her throat behind me. "Girl. Sometimes you gotta let the patriarchy pay for your coffee. Call it reparations." She moves the machine from my grasp and lets Justin tap the end. I'm still staring, mouth gaping, like another brainless idiot who loses the power of speech when a pretty hockey boy looks her way.

I look to the ceiling, to the Big Guy. This isn't funny. Justin Ashe isn't my romance novel hero. He's not my happy ever after.

He's heartburn after a bad burrito.

He's always been the pretty boy, ever since high school. But his shoulders have filled out, and his biceps are stretching the navy-blue sweater as though it could burst at the seams like a can of Pillsbury biscuits.

I mumble an apology and a thank you—or at least I hope that's what came out of my mouth—and move to the side, fixing my eyes on...something...anything that isn't the man who paid for our drinks. His stare is heavier on my back than caffeine-thirsty Athena's was, and my cheeks are scorching.

What the fuck is he even doing here anyway?

Here. In my coffee shop.

In my fucking space.

He belongs back home, in Minnesota. Not here in Iowa. He's out of place, like a

distant memory showing up out of context. Blindsided, bumfuzzled, betrayed. Ugh. I smooth down my shirt, even though it doesn't need to be smoothed. Every cell in my body wants me to haul ass out the door but I know he'd probably follow and make a scene.

Has he been going to UCR this whole time and I had no idea? I've been to a couple of hockey games over the years but I can't remember seeing him on the ice. Does he still play?

What the fuck is going on right now?

I get it, everyone is welcome in Bitches Brew, but as soon as I get the chance I'm going to add "except Justin-fucking-Ashe" in sharpie to the "Everyone Welcome" sign hanging on the front door. Yeah, it's also pink.

"You forgot your book."

My man-chest cover slides into view as Justin's outstretched arm offers me my novel. I want my fucking money back. J.R. Blake, my favorite romance author, has a lot to answer for. This isn't what was supposed to happen. Justin is not my fucking hero.

Except he kind of is since he just bought not only my caffeine, but Hen's too, and he's returning my current read.

He steps in front of me, still holding the book, giving it a wiggle as though to attract my attention. My face burns hotter as amusement and knowing dances in his gaze. Jerk. So I like some on-page spice with my love stories, it's no big deal.

I could be a murderer. Or worse, I could be someone who leaves her toenail clippings next to the bathroom sink. What's a little bit of sex between the covers? I'm a consenting adult. Or at least I would be if I could find my very own fucking hero.

Justin is still smirking at me. Judgmental asshole.

I snatch the book from his grasp and jam it into my purse. A frown pinches his flawless face, and he purses his lips.

Shit. My stomach tightens. Does he think we're going to talk now? To start a conversation at the counter while I wait for my drinks?

Hard pass.

Hundred percent not going to happen, buddy. Just because you saved me from certain death with Athena for further delayed caffeination doesn't mean we're in some way even-stein. Not even close.

I toss a look at Taryn, convinced she's stalling, taking longer than she normally would to make the drinks, to give me time to talk to the pretty-boy hockey player still scowling at me.

Doesn't he remember me?

Another twitch in my stomach. Fuck.

Wouldn't that be the kick-in-the-crotch cherry on top? We went to the same high school. Hell, we even ran in the same circles for years. I haven't changed all that much. Not enough for him not to recognize me. Unless I really was that unmemorable to him.

Fuck.

Does he really not know who I am?

I'm not sure what I want more—him to remember me, or to forget I ever existed. One thing's for certain, though, I am not getting into a conversation with this man. I don't care how pretty his eyes are, or how my nether regions react to the gravelly timbre of his voice.

Once bitten, twice shy—that's the old adage, right?

Justin Ashe took a chunk out of my best friend...out of me in high school. And while I'm not shy, exactly, bet your ass I'm not giving him the chance to do it again. I narrow my eyes. Maybe I can scare him away by trying to emulate Athena's resting bitch face. She is the master of saying everything she needs to with just an icy stare.

I'm pretty sure my face is as bright pink as the Bitches Brew décor, but my insides are as black as the accent walls. I need this guy out of my space.

He opens his mouth to speak, and Taryn announces my order is ready at the end of the coffee bar. Thank fuck for that.

If he'd said anything to me, I'm not sure what I'd have done. The only words I have for him are venom-coated and fuelled by the misdirected anger simmering in my veins. Maybe not so misdirected. Sure, I've been pissed at my parents—adoptive parents—for months, but my rage at Justin Ashe has spanned years and feels just as acute as it did back in high school.

He's deserving of my burning rage. Even if he looks...like that.

I gratefully accept the tray from Taryn and grunt my thanks once again at Douchebag Magee before I make my way to Athena like a T-rex is chasing me for my dick waffle. Silly T-rex. Everyone knows I never share my dick waffles.

"We're leaving." The long strap of my purse slips over the curve of my shoulder and

slides down my arm, making the bag land on the floor at my feet with a heavy thud like it's punctuating my sentence. With the tray balanced in both hands, I can't pick it up yet, so I shift my toes toward it like my foot can communicate my irritation that it fell. My bangs are in my eyes, and my skin is on fire .

I feel his gaze on my body, probing, curious, amused.

Athena sits back in her chair and tosses me a smirk. "You're holding plates. Are we stealing plates? I don't think Taryn would let us back if we steal her shit."

I groan. She's right. Taryn did me dirty. She always gives us paper cups so we can eat and run, but today? Today she's given us the oversized, not at all portable mugs. Dammit. The pink-haired cupid is way off the mark with her arrow this morning. I want to take the sharp-ended weapon and shove it up Justin's ass.

I place the tray onto the table with slightly too much force, and push my bangs out of my irritated eyeballs.

After a long sip of her coffee, Athena jerks her chin at what I assume is Justin still standing at the counter behind me. "Wanna talk about that?"

I'd rather sever my own carotid artery and watch myself bleed to death on the floor of the coffee shop. I pick up my chocolate-covered dick waffle and lick off the white chocolate jizz at the top before taking a huge bite and pointing to my mouth as if to say, "can't talk, eating."

"Found out anything about your birth parents yet?"

My girl is persistent, I'll give her that.

I point to my mouth again.

Chewing very studiously, I pull out my phone and open the local classifieds. I've searched every single day over the summer for a job. I want a job. I need a job. I need something to do outside of school, not only for the cash, but so I can avoid going back home to Minnesota as much as possible, to my parents—my adoptive parents. Something that gives me a legitimate reason to ignore my phone when their name flashes on the screen. Something to distract me from the hurricane of feelings tearing up my mind.

I shift in my seat and swear I can feel the pressure of his stare against my back. Something must show on my face because Hen raises an eyebrow.

"It's okay. We've all had crushes on hockey players before." She pats my hand, condescension and knowing hanging in the air between us. I wonder who she's talking about having had a crush on. She hates hockey. Having brothers living and breathing the sport turned her off it long ago—or so she says. Maybe there's another reason she won't step into the rink to watch a game. That's a thread that'll need to be pulled on in the future.

She picks up her lady lips pastry and drags her tongue across the seam before making moaning sexy sex noises at its deliciousness. She's tongue fucking the slit right there in front of me, in front of everyone.

"People are staring." I'm convinced the dude at Athena's three o'clock is going to come in his pants if she doesn't stop putting on a show.

She teases where the clit would be—if it were real lady lips—with the tip of her tongue, and the dude groans. Her smirk only grows.

"I don't have a crush on anyone." I take another bite of my dick before my high school self claws out of the box in my chest and spills the ancient history tea to my best friend.

Some things need to remain in the past, and Justin-fucking-Ass is one of them.

For Xavier's big brother, Roman's (Why Choose) story, you're going to want to read My Brother's Teammates.

Here's Charlotte's first chapter:

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:09 pm

“Wait. You’re breaking up with me?” I stare at my... boyfriend... ex-boyfriend? Roommate? I’m not really sure what he is right now, but surely he’s not saying what I think he’s saying. “You’ve been cheating on me with this...”

“Kai. ”

I glance at my ex-boyfriend’s new boyfriend and suck in a breath, trying to steady myself. My palms are sweaty, my stomach’s in knots, and my jaw is trembling as tears fill my eyes. The last thing I need is to cry in front of either of them. “You’ve been cheating on me with Kai, and now you’re breaking up with me? Am I hearing this right?”

Shane sighs, running a hand through his short blond hair and glancing at the floor with a grimace. “I’m sorry you had to find out this way, but... we’ve been seeing each other for a while.”

“You’re sorry I found out this way ?” My voice goes higher and higher with each repeated word, cracking on the last one.

“I meant to tell you. I really did.”

I let his words hang between us, suffocating me, squeezing my chest so hard it hurts. Two years—two years we’ve been together—and he didn’t even have the decency to tell me he’d found someone else.

Just like always, he failed to think about anything or anyone but himself.

I was the delusional yet dutiful girlfriend. The one who loved him, who put her life on hold so he could get his hockey podcast off the ground, even though I had a dream too.

No one really gives a shit about hockey in New Orleans, but I was right there by his side, helping him succeed, giving up the things I wanted to make him happy.

His life consumed mine, and I let it because I thought we were in this together.

I thought... Well, I guess it doesn't matter what I thought.

"That's not good enough, Shane. We've been together for two goddamned years, and you don't think I deserve to know you're done with me? That you found someone else?"

"I know, I'm sorry."

"You keep saying you're sorry, but I don't think you are."

"I'm so?— "

I narrow my eyes as soon as he opens his mouth, and he leans back on the couch, raising his hands in surrender. He casts a quick glance at Kai, who's sipping a soda in the kitchen, pretending like he's not listening despite being able to hear every word.

"Charlotte... Babe..."

"Don't you babe me, Shane." I cross my arms, biting down on my bottom lip to keep it from quivering. "You lost that right when you started having feelings for someone else. So... what now? Are you and...?"

"Kai."

“Are you and Kai moving out?”

He looks back to Kai and swallows, his Adam's apple working up and down, something I used to think was sexy, but now... I honestly don't know what to feel.

Shane turns to me, cracking his knuckles one by one, something he does when he's uncomfortable, and I know I'm not going to like what's coming next. “My name is on the lease, so I think it might be best if you moved out.”

My insides twist and my stomach drops as I take another deep breath, stopping the tears threatening to fall by sheer willpower.

I don't say another word. I don't need to. There's no use fighting him on this. It's his apartment, and if I really step back and think about it, I don't want to live here with the ghost of our relationship anyway. With the happy memories and the sad. With what could have been instead of what is.

I don't need that. I don't need him.

The next thirty minutes are spent packing up most of my things, and just to be petty, taking a few of Shane's when he turns his back. The TV remote has been liberated of its batteries, his shampoo has been squirted down the drain, and his toothbrush may have been rubbed around the toilet bowl .

It might be a little childish, but fuck, he was cheating on me and it makes me feel better, so sue me.

I've spent way too much of my life making sure Shane was taken care of, paying our bills so he could buy all his recording equipment, and look where that's gotten me. Nowhere. I have next to no money in my bank account, and definitely nowhere to live.

Fuck me. I'm not sure I can afford a couple of nights in a hotel, and come Monday, I'll be teaching all week with no time to look for a new apartment.

Shit.

I'm so screwed.

As I'm cramming my heels into my suitcases, I get an idea. It might not be a great idea, but it's the only one I've got.

My brother, Harrison, has technically moved out of his place to shack up with his current girlfriend, leaving an empty room in his teammates' apartment... A place I happen to have a key to—in case of emergencies—but I feel like if he was here, he'd agree that being cheated on and kicked out of your home by the person you thought was the love of your life qualifies.

He's a good big brother, he'll understand.

He'll have to.

Although, I guess it's his old roommates I'll have to convince. At least I've got a little luck. They're all out of town, playing a string of away games, and won't be back until Monday night. That gives me a little time to gather my thoughts and figure out a game plan that doesn't involve spending all the money in my bank account.

I might even be able to convince them to let me stay there short-term.

After taking a deep breath, I lean on my suitcases and zip them up. I've crammed so much of my stuff into these two bags, I'm afraid they might burst open and throw my pencil skirts everywhere. If there's anything left, I'll have to come back for it. There's no way I'm sticking around here for another second.

When I walk through the apartment, I'm half expecting more patronizing looks from the happy couple, but the living room is empty. It's not long before I know why. Muffled sounds come from the second bedroom—grunts, pants... I'm pretty sure someone just spanked someone else, as there's an unmistakable crack of skin against skin followed by a howl. An honest-to-God howl, like one of them is pretending to be a damn wolf.

My gut turns, and my chest tightens as a wave of emotion crashes over me. I try to swallow it down until I leave the apartment, I really do, but I can't stop the tears that stream down my cheeks.

Two years. I was with this man for two years. I was dedicated to him for two goddamn years, and he can't even wait until I'm gone to forget all about me. My heart shreds into tiny little jagged pieces.

I can't believe this is happening. Fucking jerks.

As I set down my suitcases to wipe the tears from my face, I see a note written in Shane's sloppy handwriting on the dining room table reminding me to return my key. Between heaving sobs, I let several expletives fall from my lips. It takes all my strength not to carve something profane into the hand-me-down wooden table.

He doesn't deserve my anger. He doesn't deserve any piece of me.

I slip the key off my keyring and toss it on the center of the table with a shaking hand. Fuck. My sewing machine. I look around at my belongings, shoved into every piece of luggage I own, and do the mental math. There's no way my two hands are carrying all of this out in one trip—and I'm absolutely not coming back in for any of it right now .

There's no way I'm sticking around here for another second.

I'll just have to come back when I'm feeling a little stronger, because today, I don't have it in me.

As much as I want to bring it, it's a luxury I can't afford to carry right now. I'll have to come back for it, or write it off and replace it. I wince. Mom gave me this sewing machine; it belonged to her mother, but no amount of staring at the pile of bags around my feet makes them shrink, or any lighter to carry.

I can't linger here any longer. I'll have to leave it, even if it makes my stomach hurt. I grab my suitcases and drag them down to my car. As I grip the steering wheel and shift the car into drive, I whisper a silent goodbye, wipe the tears from my face, and head to my brother's old apartment.

Gratitude washes over me as soon as I step through the threshold and into the luxury apartment he called home until about a week and a half ago.

I have two days to figure out what I'm doing. Two days to see if I can find a new place, or if I can come up with a compelling reason for them to let me stay. It'll have to be one hell of an argument, especially with his best friend, Jace.

He wouldn't piss on me if I were on fire.

But in the meantime, I need a glass of wine, a pint of ice cream, and a good chick flick I can cry through.

A wheel sticks on my giant suitcase, and I end up dragging it halfway into the living room where I drop it to the floor before falling face-first on their leather couch. I'm fully ready to wallow in my own self-pity when I catch a whiff of something awful.

What the hell is that smell? Did something die in here?

After pushing myself up, I head into the kitchen and stop short as I take in not just a

sink full of dirty dishes, but plates and bowls littered with food stacked up half the length of the counter. These boys are pigs, and clearly have no idea what a dishwasher is. I lived with Harrison growing up, so I'm used to messes. But this... Oof . This is gross.

How could they go on a several-day road trip and leave the kitchen looking like this? I don't know how much they make a year between their NHL contracts and their endorsements, but it's more than enough to hire a damn housekeeper.

Cleaning up after Shane and a rowdy class of kids all week was bad enough. Throw in getting cheated on and broken up with, hauling my meager possessions across town, and I'm wiped. I wasn't prepared to spend my weekend cleaning up after grown fucking men, but I can't live in this filth. Not even for a couple days. And maybe it'll help them see me as an asset and let me stay if they come back and their apartment doesn't smell like the inside of a dumpster.

A few curse words and many tears later, my eyes are puffy, my head hurts, and my throat is raw, but the apartment looks a little more livable. The stench isn't gone completely, but if I leave the windows open a bit longer, maybe the New Orleans swamp smell will drown out the stench of a rotting carcass.

Sweat streams down my back, and I briefly contemplate lying back on the sofa before deciding to take a shower. After digging my shower stuff out of my smaller suitcase, I pull open the music app on my phone and pick my Girl Power playlist. I know my girls Kesha, Bey, and T-Swift will have my back. If there's anyone that can help me get over a soul-crushing breakup, it's them.

I crank the shower to melt-your-skin-off hot and step under the spray. Hanging my head, I let myself feel the heartache, the betrayal, the pain of walking in on my boyfriend with someone else. I obsess over what I might have done wrong, what I could've done to prevent this. As my tears wash down the drain, I straighten my spine. Shane cheating on me was inevitable. He was selfish, arrogant, rude, and only

did something if it benefited him.

I'm better off without him. I don't deserve to be treated like that, to be suffocated in a one-way relationship where I will never be able to really be who I am. Where I'm not allowed to have opinions of my own and dreams that don't involve him.

This is going to be a new era of getting what I want, discovering myself, and most importantly, being the best damn elementary teacher in the district—despite my asshole boss.

With a little more determination, I turn off the shower and pat my skin dry to the beat of the music. After doctoring up my curls, I toss the towel on the floor and dance my way into the living room. I just need something comfortable to wear for the night, and I'll worry about unpacking in the morning. I make my way around the gigantic couch, cranking up the volume before digging through the rest of my belongings.

Bent over with my ass in the air, I'm shout-singing along to "DONE" by The Band Perry, and feeling so much better about my life.

Fuck Shane, and fuck every guy who thinks they can dip their sticks in other people when they're supposed to be in a committed relationship.

I spin, then scream bloody murder, the container of lotion in my hand falling to the floor with a thud .

Turns out, I'm no longer alone.

I don't know how long they've been standing there, but my brother's three roommates are six feet from where I'm standing. And by the looks of the tents they're all pitching in their dress pants, I just gave them a pretty good show .

Welp, this is awkward.