



Ski You Later (Alpine Glow #1)

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Category: Sport

Description: The life of a student-athlete is as busy as it gets. Rhodes Langley is stuck in a balancing act between passing her classes, constant alpine ski training, and maintaining the “social life” she likes to imagine having. Long story short, Rhodes is one girl who doesn’t need any more added stress in her life.

When she receives a startling call from her mom, Rhodes’ world is turned upside down. Her anxiety spirals when she learns her cousin is attending the family wedding with Rhodes’ ex-boyfriend! She can see it now: the pity hugs, the side-long glances, the whispers, and enough backhanded comments to make her blood boil.

In a last-ditch effort to save face, Rhodes quickly decides she’ll need that plus one after all. With only serious partners being allowed, Rhodes finally reveals to her family the secret boyfriend that she has totally been dating this whole time

She can only imagine one man pulling this off, and Roman Huxley is as secretive as they come. Grumpy, quiet, and allergic to friendship, the captain of the alpine ski team is the perfect candidate. But in order for this to work, everyone needs to know just how perfect they are together.

Will Roman and Rhodes be able to endure this event with their heads held high, or will the situation become too messy for all parties involved?

Total Pages (Source): 49

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Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 2:12 am

Not this again.

New York is nothing but an overpriced pit, and I'll never understand the appeal. Relaxing against the couch, I shovel another handful of popcorn into my mouth and continue to hate-watch the movie I picked for tonight.

My roommate, who doubles as my best friend, sits across from me.

Since she's an avid action movie fanatic, I had to put on the cheesiest romantic comedy I could find to make her mad.

This particular film revolves around a woman with an avid shopping addiction, which is something I know will drive Aurora nuts.

I can't help but roll my eyes as the main character in the movie marvels at a city full of greed.

In my opinion, if someone wants the New York experience, I think a stroll through the sewer would do the trick.

Maybe I'm being too harsh, but you don't grow up in the Rocky Mountains and then yearn to travel to the concrete jungle.

I grimace when the main character does something embarrassing, but quickly school my features so Aurora doesn't know I hate this just as much as her.

"She doesn't need to buy another scarf," Aurora screams at the movie as pieces of

popcorn fly from her mouth. She doesn't seem too bothered by the mess as she mindlessly reaches into the bowl for another handful.

Her indignation is palpable at this point as she flails her arms at the television, causing more popcorn to fly all over the floor.

When the movie gets especially cringy, she tries to use the long strands of her curly black hair to cover her eyes.

But eventually just gives up and eats more of her snack.

My sigh reaches her ears, and she shoots me her most vicious glare. "You don't have to make such a mess," I complain and look pointedly at her.

"Maybe if we watched a movie that didn't suck, I wouldn't be forced to ruin our beautiful couch!

" Her words immediately bring me joy, and we both can't help but smile at each other.

While the giant U-shaped couch is our best thrift find to date, it's still lumpy and old.

It's another one of our many fixer uppers, but now a crucial member of our Friday movie night.

Knowing how to rile up Aurora more, I can't help but complain about one of the many flaws in this film in an attempt to ignite her rage.

"She doesn't need a single thing we've watched her buy; this is insane!

" Casting a side long glance as I say it, I see the vein in Auroras temple start to pulse

as she tries to keep her feelings to herself.

“I hate this movie! I hate it! Imagine having all this stuff in your home! I can’t keep watching Rho… it hurts me,” she screams into the room.

“Don’t call me Rho,” I deadpan back.

“Rho, I’m dying here!” Aurora throws her hands over her eyes and slouches into the couch cushions. An evil smile graces my face as I look at her hunched over form.

Last Friday when I had begged her to turn off that intense robot fighting movie, she had a fit about how I don’t care about her interests.

Since I patiently waited a week for this revenge, I savour in her distress and go back to watching this stupid movie.

“Get ready Rora, we’re just getting started! ”

Aurora’s groan fills the living room as I turn the volume up and enjoy every minute of sweet justice. As I’m about to pester her further by asking who her favourite character is, our attention goes to our phones as they simultaneously buzz on the table .

Locking eyes across the sectional, I lunge for my phone as I pray it didn’t happen again. Aurora’s at my side in a second and a stream of curses flows out as she reads the message over my shoulder.

New Teamchat update: Training tomorrow at 8:00 am has been scheduled.

“Roman, you suck!” Rora screams at my screen as she jumps off the couch and storms towards the kitchen.

I tip my head back and close my eyes in dismay when I see that it's already ten at night.

We now have eight hours until we need to be awake and in the team van.

"Maybe he had no choice but to schedule it this late. The coaches are the ones who book the training time, you know," I say defensively.

I can't imagine Roman would choose to inform the team so last minute if he had a choice in the matter.

It's common knowledge how lazy our coaches are, but somehow the hate always goes to Roman.

Standing to follow Aurora, it only takes me a couple seconds to join her in our cramped kitchen.

The tiny rental is an open concept, with the living space, dining area, and kitchen all being squished together in one big, cozy room.

No one's living in this house for the aesthetic appeal; the house's age shows in every banister and windowpane.

However, filled with plants and thrifted art pieces, Aurora and I proudly call this home.

We were also lucky enough to get the garage, which is basically the equipment room.

Standing on the opposite side of the counter, her brow raises in my direction as she pulls out the sandwich ingredients. "Rhodes, I love you. I really do, but you need to stop defending Roman at every turn."

Blushing and avoiding her gaze, I drop the subject due to her hostility over the situation. It's not that I'm Roman's biggest fan or anything, but I hate bullies, and I have a sick feeling he's just doing the best he can.

But, since over half the team's currently out at the bar with the assumption there's no training tomorrow, it's going to be hard to defend him. It's not that the training is mandatory or anything, but our race season is approaching fast, and everyone wants as much practice on snow as possible.

With a quick check on the attendance for tomorrow, relief fills me when I see Jasmine has marked herself as not going. Releasing my held breath, I relish in the fact I won't have to deal with my horrible cousin at training.

I pull out both the lunch bags, and mentally run through a checklist of everything I have to do before bed: pack my ski bag, prepare my skis, make a lunch, lay out my clothes, and set all my alarms. "I'm going to go scrape the wax off my skis," Aurora grumbles as she saunters to the garage.

It's required that we cover the bottom of our skis with a layer of wax when we know they'll go more than a couple of days without use. This helps preserve the base of the ski, and the temperature-based wax will react with different snow temperatures. Effectively, this helps us go faster.

My phone starts to ping in my pocket as I frantically fill our lunches with snacks and sandwiches, and I rush to pull it out.

Our group chat is flooding my phone with messages and I soon learn how everyone's feeling about the situation.

Aurora changing the chat name to Roman is a fuck face isn't filling me with hope that everyone's understanding his side of things.

Charles: Is this a joke?

Liam: There's no way he was ballsy enough for this one.

Aurora: I WANT TO BURN DOWN HIS HOUSE!!!

Charles: Hmm, I don't think that is the best idea, Ror. I'm not a lawyer yet, so no burning down anyone's house until I pass the BAR .

Liam: Nah, let's set her free. Burn it down Ror!!

Rhodes: How about we just give him the benefit of the doubt. There's no way he took pleasure in booking a training session this late. He must know the team will hate him for that!

Charles: Oh precious, little Rhodes. I know you believe the best in everyone, but I thought we learned our lesson in that.

I can't stop the hurt that suddenly shoots through me. The shock of Daniel being mentioned so casually causes my whole body to freeze until I force myself to relax. Only a select few know how bad he hurt me, but mentioning him in passing seems like a low blow, nonetheless.

Aurora: You better count your days Charles if you are going to mention that dick head in this chat.

My smile helps ease my shock as I see the chat name change to Charles better count his days .

This's just another reason Aurora will forever be my best friend, as she drops her previous conversation to defend me at a second's notice.

As the texts start to ping in again, my eyebrows rise as Isla jumps into the chat.

Isla: Y'all I am sloooshered rigft noe lk .

Liam: Ahh, you can always count on Isla to diffuse the situation.

Charles: Girl, did you get the update we have training tomorrow morning?

Isla: *video of her screaming and dancing in the middle of the club*

Liam: UGH, I'll handle this one, guys. Isla! I'll be there in 10 minutes! ISLA, DO NOT CHANGE BARS.

A laugh escapes me at Liam's text, but I somber up quickly when I remember that their dynamic is somewhat of a trouble spot in our group.

Isla's the newest member of the ski team, and Liam has shown obvious interest in her.

But the whole situation is only awkward for the ones who know how long Aurora has liked Liam.

The entire dynamic is balancing on a fraying thread, and I fear it'll snap sooner rather than later.

I hear a forced laugh coming from the garage and marvel at the bravery of my best friend.

Even though I know she's hurt from their obvious flirting over the group chat, she tries to play it off as if it's no big deal.

Completely ignoring her feelings and putting on a brave face s another classic Aurora move.

Even though she infuriates me with her obvious disregard for her own emotions, she's one of the most important people in my life.

Becoming friends the instant we clipped into our skis at three years old, our parents both love to remind us how it was an instant bond.

Who would've thought we'd reach the point where we attend the same university, compete on the same ski racing team, and occasionally have the same thoughts at the same time.

The latter sometimes scares us to the point that we mutually decide to spend the next few days apart.

Aurora meanders back into the room with a facade of impassivity plastered on her face.

"I made you a sandwich and also added the last of your mom's homemade dim sum to your lunch," I tell her and hope the mention of her favourite food will help calm her.

Since Aurora's parents live a couple of hours away, they always ensure to leave us with a fridge full of traditional Chinese dishes whenever they visit.

"You're a queen, Rho. I scraped the wax off your skis for you," she replies instantly.

I hear her move, and before I can recognize what's about to happen, my best friend swallows me in a hug from the side.

Aurora's not the best female ski racer in the country because she's petite and delicate.

As a result, I fall hard against the counter as she wraps me in a bear hug.

Knowing this is more for her benefit than mine, I return her embrace and hold her for as long as she needs.

After a couple minutes, I get a goodnight kiss on the top of my head, and Aurora dashes to her room as I swat her away.

Since she's almost a head taller with fifty pounds of muscles on me, there's not much I could do to stop her anyway.

Although, that doesn't mean I am small by any means, my lower body is stacked with muscles that only seem to grow by the day.

I just happen to live with one of the only girls that could physically destroy me if she chose to.

Her lip balm now leaves an oily residue in my freshly blow-dried hair, and I groan in frustration as I finger comb the top of my head. The blonde bangs that currently fall into my eyes make this even more frustrating, and after a while, I just give up on the entire endeavor.

Finally retiring to my room, I light up the lamps scattered across the space and welcome the organized chaos that greets me.

Ski goggles litter my desk, candles and lip gloss are scattered around the space, and numerous sketch pads stack up on the bedside tables.

The colour scheme of pink and white are exactly to my taste as the glow of the

yellow lights casts a peaceful ambiance to the space .

Getting ready for bed as fast as possible, I check the mirror as I apply my night creams. The green of my eyes seems electric against my ghostly pale skin, with the winter sky definitely not helping any colour to develop on my face.

I check that everything's set for this last-minute training session, and then I plop into bed and prepare for a small amount of sleep.

The group chat's still popping off with anger.

Aurora's now choosing to only type in capital letters to show the extent of her rage on the situation, while Liam and Isla are having their own conversation.

Liam's begging her to drop a pin, but she just keeps responding about how she wore her hair down tonight.

Shaking my head at the whole lot, I silence my phone, and set numerous alarms for five hours from now. Crying internally at this, I toss my phone onto the duvet and snuggle deeper into the feather soft warmth that surrounds me.

Against my wishes, sleep seems to elude me as my thoughts continue to circle back to Roman.

The ease at which everyone's spreading negative rumours about our team captain are plaguing my mind more than I thought they would.

He's by no means a perfect person, but having known him for almost seventeen years now, I know he's a good guy.

Roman might be the only person that can crack through my calm demeanor, but that

doesn't change the fact that I know he has a kind heart.

It's just buried deep underneath his grumpy exterior.

Feeling sleep start to pull at my edges, I make a mental note to start defending him more. I can't control what the team says about him, but I can try to stop all this negativity from being spread around.

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She'd get herself killed if not for me.

The January wind howls through my helmet as I finish the last gates of the course. The finish area approaches quickly, so I punch the empty air in front of me, and effectively stop the timing sensor early.

Letting my burning muscles finally have their reprieve, I turn my skis to the side and come to a stop below our course.

It was announced early this morning that we had lane space to train slalom, so everyone geared up for that discipline.

In slalom racing, we have guards that wrap around the bottom of our helmets, guards placed on our shins and guards that wrap around the handles of our poles.

For this discipline, the fastest way down the course is to come in direct contact with every gate, so proper protection is a must .

I reach up and adjust the pink guard that protects my chin as I make my way to the timing box clipped to the fence.

It's just a small black cube with a screen, but it displays the time it took each athlete to complete the course.

The team radio is clipped beside the timing box, and I ask the coaches what I need to improve on for the next run.

They just repeat the same thing they always say about how I need to work on my body's separation at the apex of the turn.

It would be lovely if they explained to me what that really meant, but apparently, they don't care enough to help me anymore than providing me with open-ended advice.

Checking to see if my time was faster than last run, I mentally high five myself when I see that I shaved off a quarter of a second.

Even a hundredth of a second can mean the difference between first and second, so a whole quarter's more than enough to have me walking on air.

Clipping the timing box back onto the fence, I make my way towards the chairlift.

Aurora and I were lapping the course with each other earlier in the day, but she's always hyper focused during training and ditched me on the first run. Hell, if I was on a fast track to Team Canada, I would be doing the same .

The team managed to grab early lane space this weekend, meaning we get a couple hours of undisturbed training before the hill opens to the public. The flood lights help illuminate the dark mountain as I fly towards the chairlift and perform some practice turns.

Slalom involves turning fast and tight, so I continue to push myself as I make my way towards the lift. There's a thin layer of ice on top of the groomed snow, and I marvel at the ease at which my skis slice through it on each turn.

Finally allowing my burning legs a rest, I crest the pitch and straight line towards the chairlift.

The sun's starting to rise behind the mountains as I fly downwards, and I breathe in

the peaceful atmosphere.

The beauty in front of me reminds me of my mom, which quickly sparks my memory and I scramble to pull out my phone.

Mom made it very clear she was going to call today, and I made it very clear I wasn't training so she could call whenever. When my phone refuses to turn on because of the cold, I can't help but groan into the wind.

The second her call goes to voicemail, she'll know I'm at training, and then I'll be in a world of trouble. Rhodes, you can't keep jumping through hoops like this! They either book training or they don't. This is just ridiculous! I mimic her voice to myself as I put my phone away.

Mindlessly adjusting my equipment to try and release some of my stress, I approach the chair lift and begin to ski into one of the entrance slots.

As I finish fixing my gloves, a strong grip clasps over my bicep, and yanks me away as a chair lift flies in front of my face.

Throwing myself backwards instinctively, the grip on my arm helps keep me steady and pulls me to the side.

"Rhodes, what the hell, you almost skied right into that thing!" Shock is still fresh in my brain as I look down at my arm. Following that grip to its source, I see Roman's glaring down at me, and his face is a mask of anger as he keeps his hand wrapped around me.

"Where did you come from?" I can't help but blurt out as I look around at the emptiness that surrounds us.

It's not that I was ignoring his question, I just can't believe I didn't notice such a massive figure looming there.

He leans back against the chairlift slots and I take this time to I admire how his white and blue race suit hugs his impressive form.

The black helmet and chin guard match the curly hair I know is underneath.

But, since his goggles sit on the rim of his helmet, his glare hits me in full force .

That anger quickly fades to his classic impassive expression, and his face looks bored as he answers my question.

“I was waiting here for the coaches to come down, but then I saw you fixing your glove as you went to load the chair. I haven't seen a university level athlete get taken out by a chairlift before, and I didn't want that changing today.

” His voice betrays the anger he seems to have over the situation, with his tone sounding clipped as if he's holding himself back.

I stare inquisitively at him; his obvious care for me causes confusion to roll around in my brain.

This immediately reminds me of what I thought last night, and I switch gears with this conversation. “Why'd you book training so last minute?” Crossing my arms and leaning my hip against the slot opposite of him, I force myself to look up and meet his gaze.

Whether it was my abrupt conversation change or the fact that I hit a nerve with my question, his eyes widen a fraction before he swiftly calms his features.

“I just booked it in the second the coaches told me about it,” he deadpans.

The way he avoids eye contact and shrugs his shoulder tells me everything I need to know.

“I knew it!” I yell happily as I stab my gloved finger into his chest, and his mild surprise turns to shock .

“What are you talking about,” his response sounding more confused than defensive.

“I just knew you wouldn’t do that if you didn’t have to, that’s all.” I put my hand up in the air and wait for him to give me a high five.

His face is set in an expression of bafflement as he looks at my hand and then back at me.

“Did that chairlift hit your head or something?” His tone isn’t kind but any means, but I know that my train of thought can be a lot for people sometimes and I chuckle.

The only ones that seem to keep up with me are my older brothers and Rora.

“Just, watch where you’re going from now on,” he mumbles. With one last confused look in my direction, he pushes himself forward to load the chairlift.

The day flies by, my rapid laps of the course cause me to cross paths with Liam, Charles, and Aurora, all at random times in the day. After a couple hours, the hill opened to the public and our once quick laps of the course turned into waiting ten minutes to load the chair.

I was hoping to cross paths with Liane or Rachel since either of the coaches could help me dissect my skiing more.

Then I could have a better idea on how to fix my issue in the course and apply it, but they always conveniently evade me.

The annoying reality of university coaches are that they tend to focus on the top athletes instead of the entire team.

It's not as if we all had to pass a certain skill range to even make it on the team in the first place.

Little do they know that I've been pushing myself extra hard in the off season.

Building my body in the weight room and on the track, so I can try to make the top ten this season.

Our first race is less than a month away, and every bone in my body wants the coaches to regret not focusing on my skiing more.

The snow today has been holding surprisingly well, so I run into the lodge quickly and decide it's another day of eating on the chairlift.

With a majority of the general public all eating inside at this time, I get an entire chair to myself as I pull out my food and fight the frostbite nipping at my fingers.

Of course, a buzzing starts to sound in my speed suit the second I take an abnormally large bite of my sandwich.

Happiness that my phone isn't broken is immediately diminished by the person that is calling me.

Momma Bear staring back at me freezes my chewing jaw as I grapple with whether to answer the phone. I shouldn't have told her training was cancelled, now she'll be

furious when she finds out I changed my plans last minute to come.

She's the definition of a no-nonsense woman who doesn't jump through hoops for anyone, let alone for coaches that don't even give me proper feedback. I can taste the lecture as I click answer and put the phone to my ear.

"Hoi Moabma," I say into the microphone. My sandwich-filled mouth doing my best to speak clearly.

"Rhodes, what's wrong with you? Why would you answer the phone with your mouth full of food? That's not lady-like at all!" I roll my eyes as she continues her tirade.

Leaning my head over the bar, I consider spitting my sandwich out onto the people below. If I saw Charles or Liam skiing below me, I might have, but instead I furiously chew my food.

With the highest pitch voice I can muster, I cut her off from her speech. "Hello darling mother, how are you doing on this fine day?"

Without acknowledging my sarcasm, she proceeds as if we just started the call. "I'm good sweetheart; I've just been spending a quiet day with dad. I was actually thinking that – wait, is that wind I hear? Are you training Rhodes Jayne Langley!"

"Umm, no? I'm free skiing today. Obviously." Forcing a chuckle between each sentence, and inwardly cringing at how fast she's going to see through that.

"Rhodes," she deadpans. "Do you think I'm stupid?"

"No," I mutter back immediately.

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“Those useless coaches of yours have no right to be booking practice at the very last minute like this! You have an education to study for, and a life to live! What if you were at a club last night, talking with a guy!”

The way that she confidently says those words as though it were an actual possibility makes me raise my eyebrows. “When has that ever been the case?”

“I just think you should get back out there, sweetheart,” she easily responds, as her tone goes from angry to suggestive in a second.

My saving grace comes into view as I see the unloading platform right before me. “Okay, I’m getting off the chair now. I’ll call you back soon.”

Instead of receiving the classic reluctant goodbye, she hesitates for a second. “Oh honey, did Carlos talk to you today?” Her tone fills me with immediate worry as I get off the chairlift and ski so I’m out of the way .

“No, why? Is he alright?” The fear that something happened to my brother quickly flooding my system.

“Oh, for Pete’s sake, he was supposed to tell you so that I didn’t have to,” mom mumbles in the phone.

“Mom, I don’t have much time, is he alright?”

“Fine, I’ll tell you. But I want you to keep in mind that Carlos lost the draw and was supposed to do it.

” She takes a big breath as I wait with anticipation, and all the information spills out in one go.

“I recently talked with your aunt, and she informed me that Jasmine will be taking her boyfriend to Julian’s wedding.

Then, when I fought with her about it, she said it wasn’t her wedding and wasn’t her decision. ”

The silence from my side of the phone is deafening because I must’ve misheard this information. “She’s bringing Daniel? To Julian’s wedding?”

“I’m so sorry dear,” mom says gently.

“Just so I’m clear.” I shake my head to try and process this horrible news. “Julian’s wedding that’s in less than three months. That wedding?”

“Yes. That wedding,” she says hesitantly.

As if someone dumped ice water on me and then threw me in the snow, my body freezes everywhere all at once.

The fact that Julian allowed him to come to this family event completely baffles me.

My living nightmare is quickly becoming my reality, so denial is the only emotion that I can process at the minute.

“Didn’t you tell her that she can’t bring him!” My voice starts to sound hysterical as I quickly lose my composure over this news.

My cousin, the most self-absorbed person I’ve ever met, has decided to bring my ex

to her brother's wedding. The same ex-boyfriend I caught cheating on me with her.

It took me months of therapy to even imagine myself trusting another man again, let alone actually dating one. So, when the Langley's received our wedding invitations last week, we all collectively laughed when it asked if I was going to bring my partner.

While the last year has been brutal in every aspect, I've had a support system that kept me together the whole time.

Since Jasmine and I both joined the Polar ski in the same year, it was essential I had Aurora at my side.

When my therapy sessions overlapped with my dryland schedule, Charles and Liam covered for me with the coaches.

Finally, when the life of a full-time athlete and student was too much to handle, my family was always one call away .

The sound of my mom's voice quickly brings my back to my unfortunate reality.

"Honey, in no world do I think it's appropriate that she's bringing him to this event.

The whole thing is going to be weird for everyone, but apparently Jasmine threw a huge fit.

At the end of the day, it's her brother's wedding and he's going to pick her feelings over yours.

" The defeat in her voice causes my own hopes to deflate.

“If you don’t want to go, just say the word and I’ll mark you as not going.

No one will judge you Rhodes, this is all on Jasmine. ”

That idea honestly sounds like the best option, just avoiding the whole event and eating ice cream on my couch that night. But Julian has always been so kind to me, even when Jasmine tried her best to have him hate me too.

At the end of the day, Julian is just as much of my cousin as she is, and he deserves to have family on his special day.

A new resolve fills me, in no world am I going to let some loser who cheated on me prevent me from attending this wedding.

I can do this. All that time I spent putting myself back together won’t fall apart in one night.

Hopefully .

Mom has been staying silent over the phone, as she waits for me to make my own decision on the matter.

I know without a doubt she wouldn’t blame me for not going, but I know she’d be even more proud if I went anyway.

With all these thoughts running through my mind, I double down on my decision and let my mom in on my idea.

“It’s actually so convenient that you brought this up mom,” fake cheer laces my tone. “It turns out that I’ll need a plus one for this wedding after all. My boyfriend’s going to be coming with me.”

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She's wearing the wrong type of socks.

The rest of training went along seamlessly, ripping hot laps in the course until it was time to tear it all down. The slang hot lap originating from the fact that you never stop skiing, and thus being on fire .

At this level of our careers, almost everyone prefers to go at their own pace, and lap the racecourse as many times as possible instead of waiting around for friends to finish.

A consequence of this is having to interact with new people on every chairlift, and they're always filled with comments. The spandex-polyester speed suit we have to wear in minus twenty-degree temperatures causes people to look at us with surprise.

Oh, I'm cold just looking at you!

Young lady, where are your clothes!

Does wearing a jacket really slow you down that much? I don't think it's that big of a deal .

I always hit them with a forced chuckle, and just jokingly agree since I never want my answer to come across as rude.

What they don't know is that wearing a jacket compared to a race suit could be the difference between first and twentieth place.

The wind resistance and restriction of movement caused by the jacket can slow racers down by multiple seconds, but that reasoning seems ridiculous to the average person.

At a certain point it just becomes too much work to defend the sport, so I just nod and move on.

Stomping my boots onto the worn rug of the lodge, I shake the snow off my gear and make my way to our usual spot.

Spotting Rora taking off her gear with our friends, I bee line right for our little group.

Squeezing past Calvin and his friends, I toss my gloves on the table and plop my butt on one of the cold metal stools.

This whole lodge was built to resemble a log cabin in the woods; the logs making up the walls, tables, and even the ceiling of the building.

The entire space never fails to comfort me, and this is probably due to the fact that I was basically raised under these wooden beams. I just always assume they cheaped out at the final stages and put metal stools in for the seating, since the seats are as ugly as they're uncomfortable .

Unbuckling my helmet, I glance up to see the rest of our group trickling in from outside. Charles sits across from me, immediately putting his head on the table and pretending to fall asleep. His sandy brown hair falls everywhere in the process, and I promptly brush it off my gear.

This causes him to jokingly glare up at me, and his piercing blue eyes catch my attention. Charles has a fairly ordinary face with very pale skin, but the beauty of his eyes immediately distracts everyone that meets him.

I look past him to see that Liam and Isla both made it to training today, with the latter being a little worse for wear. Liam starts to wrap his arm around Isla's groggy form, and they both head to our table.

Liam removes his helmet to reveal hair so blonde, that rivals my own. Although, this is paired with his dull blue eyes that don't hold a candle to Charles'.

Liam couldn't be more different from the girl at his side as she also starts removing her gear.

Isla's easily one of the prettiest girls I've ever met, which is another reason Aurora seems to hate her so much.

Her dark brown skin mixed with equally dark eyes draws people in like a magnet.

Even as a high-performance athlete, she somehow manages to look amazing at the end of a training day, and I'll never learn her secret. I couldn't relate less to this if I tried, as I look in my goggles and see my hair sticking up in every direction.

Even though my best friend isn't a big fan of her, Isla transferred to the Polar group this season, and has quickly become one of my favourite teammates.

Isla and Liam start to flirt before my eyes, and I cast a sidelong glance at Aurora. The hurt flashing on her face is sudden and sharp, but she just returns to taking off her boots as if nothing happened.

In classic Aurora fashion, she'll simply ignore these emotions and focus all her feelings into her ski racing.

I've tried to get her to talk to me about these feelings for longer than I can remember, but she's as stubborn as they come.

What's important is that she knows I'm always here for her, and that is the best I can offer.

Her somber mood reminds me of my phone call, and how stressed I am about a certain situation I've put myself in. I'll have to fill her in on my stupidity tonight, and maybe the joke that is my life will bring a smile to her face.

The different factions of our ski team all start to make their way to our corner of the lodge, as everyone undresses and waits for the end of the day debrief.

My friends are already spread out around our table, but my cousin and her band of morons push past us to sit at theirs.

Turns out my nightmare of a cousin actually showed up today, as her and her two minions make a scene as they sit in their seats.

Jasmine, Taylor, and Sofia all carelessly toss their gear onto their table, howling with laughter at something Jasmine said. The noise is as fake as it comes because I know she's the least funny person in the world.

She removes her helmet, her long, dark hair spilling out from the inside, and it proceeds to fall down her back in waves.

Shaking her head lightly, her bronze skin somehow glimmers after practice, with the chocolate brown of her eyes complimenting all aspects about her.

While our moms are both from central Alberta, her dad was born in Colombia, and blessed both his children with their beautiful bronze skin.

I watch as she makes another lame joke, and her resulting smile seems to shine. I don't know how she does it, but her makeup looks the same as this morning, with her

gloss still shimmering. Against my better judgement, I can't help but compare myself to her.

My hair sticks up in every direction, while chunks of it are glued to my scalp with sweat.

The green of my eyes only brings to attention the paleness of my features, which makes everyone think I'm sick all the time.

Aurora says my freckles give me a little bit of colour, but I think she's just being nice.

Looking away from Jasmine, I'm determined to be kind to myself and focus on something else.

Luckily, the male equivalent of Jasmine's little group strides in, and their obnoxious energy floods the lodge in waves of testosterone.

I look up and meet Aurora's eyes, her dismay transforming into a fit of suppressed laughter.

Calvin, Nico, Grayson, and Kai are just yelling at this point as they start to remove their gear and talk about how good they are at ski racing.

They all look the exact same if you ask me: tall, muscular athletes who are criminally obsessed with themselves.

While their complexions all vary, they share the same buzzed haircuts and the desire to feed into each other's egos.

They're fairly harmless in my opinion, with all of them having manners and good

social skills. But, that doesn't change the fact that they're always yelling, fighting, and causing a scene wherever they go.

Aurora and I both roll our eyes at the group, returning to removing our equipment in peace. That is, until the cold wind signals more people entering from outside .

Always finding a way to command the room, the final friend group are the last to enter the lodge.

Rhys strolls in and holds his ski bag with one hand, as if it didn't weigh a million pounds.

The guy is an absolute force, taking up over six feet of space as he saunters to the corner table and starts to gear down.

Unclipping his helmet reveals the short black hair cropped close to his scalp, and his tan skin that contrasts his white face mask.

Landon and Xander quickly make their presence known as they both clamor into the room.

The Huxley brothers are goofy and loud, pushing one another as they walk to their table.

Landon's pale blond curls oppose Xander's dark brown hair in the starkest of contrasts and show how even on a physical level the two are Yin and Yang.

The story of Landon being brought into the Huxley family isn't too well known, with rumors running amuck at the time. Whether Landon's parents passed away, abandoned him, or were abducted by aliens, the only thing known for sure is that the Huxley family took him in immediately.

The Huxley's are a big family name in this sport, having a yearly donation for the university team to decrease our fees, as well as volunteering at all the races.

They run a ton of businesses within the city, from ski stores to athletic wear companies.

There was even a rumor that their parents owned this super exclusive bar, but no one can get anything out these boys.

Either way, the Huxley family has been a friendly face on the hill ever since I was a little girl.

As the last gust of wind hits my face, the black cat of the family saunters his way through the door. Roman's usual scowl is plastered to his face, as he brushes the snow off himself. I can't help but notice how his muscles move with the motion since his race suit hugs him like a second skin.

The white suit is covered in blue swirls that wrap around his body, with his many sponsorships running up both calves. Similar sponsorships cover the side of my leg, but given his height, he has more room when it comes to displaying them.

I watch discreetly as he strolls towards the group, but I really start to stare when he removes his helmet.

Curly brown hair so dark it looks black spills into his eyes, and he promptly runs both hands through it.

Against my better judgement, I take in every inch of his form and the way every piece of him is packed with muscles.

I know that everyone on this team is insanely strong, but seeing the way Roman uses

them to do simple tasks is almost hypnotic .

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Letting my eyes wander back up to his face, I freeze at his intense stare looking back at me.

Like a deer in the headlights, I don't move a muscle as we keep our gazes locked together.

My face starts to flame immediately at being caught, and the embarrassment causes heat to flood my cheeks.

As if seeing this, his gaze snaps free of mine and he returns his attention to Rhys and his brothers.

Even though he dipped his head down with impressive speed, I still catch the upward tilt of his lips when he looked away.

As Landon and Xander see his attention on them, they immediately try to include him in whatever joke they're currently laughing about. It doesn't surprise me when Roman promptly ignores them and proceeds to remove the rest of his gear.

With his table across from ours, it's easy to see the smattering of freckles that explode across his wind flushed face. Before I can get a better look, he turns his back to me, and barks out a laugh at whatever Rhys just told him.

"You're staring. Like a lot." I jolt at Aurora's voice in my ear, and the fact that her entire body's pressing up to the side of mine .

I quickly lean away from her, indignation, and denial at the tip of my tongue. "No,

I'm not!"

"You were a second away from drooling," she responds immediately.

My jaw drops at her words, and I push her out of my personal bubble. "Don't be silly," I deadpan.

Aurora promptly puts herself back into my space, pushing into me even more than before. "Are we crushing on him now? If we are, I'll consider being nicer to him."

Promptly ignoring her, I shove Aurora off me again and start to remove my ski boots. Although, her words do get the gears in my brain turning.

Even though she isn't aware of my ridiculous problem yet, her words sparks something in my brain. This idea sits promptly at the front of my mind as I smash my frozen boot shell into the floor.

Unfortunately, I'll need an actual plan when it comes to this whole issue, and step one is to get this frozen piece of evil off my foot.

I furrow my brow in concentration, and I can hear the rock-hard plastic on my feet laughing at my desire to remove it.

Without any hesitation, I pull the plastic boot lip open as far as possible, and smash my foot into the ground again .

An alpine ski racer boot is different from the comfy ones that most people get to wear. Normal ski boots allow you to slip your foot in with ease, and I heard some are even fuzzy on the inside.

In contrast, our boots are specially fitted to the exact size and form of our feet.

The inner fabric liner is vacuum sealed to our foot, and then a hard-plastic shell goes over that liner.

Similar to putting on a figure skate, the fabric liner needs to be tied up all the way.

The only difference is that our laced boot liner needs to be inserted in the plastic shell, and those two pieces combined make up our race boots.

These things make high heels feel like slippers, and after a couple minutes of smacking my frozen shell into the ground, my liner finally slips free.

Lifting my foot gently, I groan at all the ice covering the laces and the sole.

It takes me another couple of minutes to get the other foot free, and then I'm carefully untying both my liners and holding back tears.

Cold, frozen, broken little toes stare back at me as I remove my ski socks.

I'm cringing even thinking about moving them right now, since the defrosting of my toes is the worst part of every training session.

Pulling my fuzzy socks and my warm boots out of my ski bag, I brace myself as I carefully attend to my feet .

An embarrassing whimper leaves me as the shooting pain goes up my leg, wincing as the pins and needles mix with the frost bite. Closing my eyes, I try to breathe past the feeling that a million tiny monsters are all biting my feet at the same time.

Looking to my side, Aurora's giving me the most unimpressed look I have ever seen on her face. "You are being ridiculous," she states. Her eyebrow raising as an actual tear falls from my eye.

“Unlike you, I haven’t lost all the feeling in my feet,” I shoot back.

She grabs the metal stool under her for balance and raises both her feet. Wiggling her frozen monstrosities she calls toes in my direction, I swat her away and try not to vomit. “Aren’t they so pretty, I was made to wear open toed shoes,” she beams.

I can’t help but notice that she’s currently missing three toenails, and the cold has caused black skin to replace where they used to be.

“Rora, that’s vile,” I say with a grimace. Scooching two stools away from her, I go back to looking at my own feet.

As I lightly place them both on the ground, shooting pain goes up my leg, and I can’t stop the piercing noise that comes from my mouth .

Was this embarrassing? Of course. But the pain overpowers my pride and I shut my eyes to avoid the judging glances. Just because everyone else on this team has crazy nerve damage in their feet, doesn’t mean I do too.

Immediately looking up to see if Aurora’s giving me an exasperated look, I catch the gaze of someone else.

Roman’s looking right at me, with something akin to concern splayed out on his face.

In a weird moment where he isn’t wearing his signature scowl, it’s plain as day that his focus is on the way I’m cradling my feet.

His gaze goes up to meet my eyes, and I watch as he drops any expression from his face.

That mask of indifference is fully on display as he promptly turns his back to me.

More confused than anything, I tap Aurora to tell her what I just saw, but the coaches come into view at the same moment.

“Alright, settle down,” Liane shouts. Standing in front of the group, she clips off her radio, and gestures for Rachel to come close to her side.

They’re both already out of their gear, and have their short brown hair pushed back with matching headbands.

If my memory serves, they got those on their one-year anniversary, which we all celebrated as a team last season.

They’ve been coaching the Polar team for a couple years now, but their coaching quality really decreased this season.

I guess they realized that they get paid the same amount if just half the team gets in the top ten.

Thus, the winning athletes from last year are getting the most attention, and Roman’s getting blamed for all the other stuff.

“I’m going to inform everyone on the schedule for tomorrow. Roman should’ve told you everything already, but I’ll repeat it.”

Everyone immediately turns to Roman; expressions of confusion and anger being splayed across the faces of our teammates.

He’s now standing up, leaning against the table with his arms crossed over his body. Seeing the way his eyebrow slowly lifts as he absorbs what they said, I can tell this news came as a surprise to him as well.

Looking past him, Xander and Landon appear even angrier than the team, with Landon starting to stand before Roman clasps a hand on his shoulder. Giving him a firm but gentle shove, Landon plops back in his seat and Roman ignores all the eyes on him .

The boys start to furiously whisper with each other, and I watch as Xander and Landon argue with their brother. Roman eventually just turns his back on them, shutting down the conversation and listening to the coaches.

Liane doesn't pay them any mind. She starts to talk about which run we have booked for tomorrow, what time the van will leave and other aspects of what everyone should have planned for their Sunday.

The only part of her speech that varies every training day is what run we're training on, so I can't help but tune out everything after that.

She keeps yammering while I attempt to wiggle my pinkie toe; white hot pain shooting up my leg as I move it.

Aurora nudges me a couple of times because I can only assume Rachel's glaring at me, but I couldn't care less.

I'll start paying attention to the coaches when they start returning that courtesy to me.

Liane ends her talk with some lame joke and tells everyone to be at the van in five minutes so we can head back to the city.

The group starts throwing their gear in their bag, and the noise level in the lodge rapidly increases as they pack.

The only group that hasn't moved a muscle yet sits across from me .

Rhys, Roman, Landon, and Xander all huddle over the lodge table. Passing furious whispers back and forth, the latter two boys are becoming more upset by the minute. Landon eventually gives up, grabs his gear, and storms out of the lodge. Xander marches out right after, hot on his brothers' heels.

Dipping my head down so I don't get caught staring again, I process this information in my head. This does nothing but enforce my suspicion that our team captain's getting blamed for something that isn't his fault.

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Liam better count his days.

“Only that slime ball could possibly stand to be in her presence for more than twenty seconds,” Carlos yells.

Carrying all my equipment into the house, I chuckle at his rage and press the phone between my shoulder and ear.

Due to today’s events, I fell asleep the second I entered the team van and woke up to seven missed calls from Car.

My brothers’ feelings help justify the rage simmering in my chest at this whole situation, but the exhaustion is quickly taking over.

Chuckling into the receiver, I dump my gear in the entry way and bee line straight for my room.

All my gear will be slightly damp tomorrow morning, but that’s a price I’m willing to pay.

The swishing sound of my speed suit rubbing together reminds me that I was too tired to even remove it.

This whole day was too cold, long, tiring, and just too much .

I turn on my multiple lamps, the warm light welcoming me like a hug, and nicely contrasting the blizzard raging outside my window.

The small space is filled to the brim: my desk, clothing rack, and bed taking up the entire room.

Not to mention all the art supplies, books, trinkets, and rings that are placed around.

Seeing my room in all its organized chaos causes a weight to lift off my shoulder.

Car's chattering carries on as I fight to remove the damp spandex suit that's currently glued to my skin.

"I hate to speak ill of others, but she's a raging bitch." A laugh bursts out of me at his statement, and the lengths he's going to just to comfort me isn't going unnoticed.

Jasmine has been nothing but a bully since we were all kids, but I was lucky to have Carlos at my side during every family gathering.

While Carlos and I were two peas in a pod, our oldest brother Henry was always more of a lone wolf. The one thing connecting us all being the fact that we are basically mirror images of each other. We were blonde hair, pasty white skin, and piercing green eyes times three .

"Did you see her stupid ass at training today?" Carlos' question jolts me back to the present as I find the energy to keep discussing this.

"Yeah, I just avoided her. I'm pretty sure she was hungover today, so she didn't have the energy to talk with me. I should've just made loud noises all day, to give her a killer headache." Chuckling at my own deviousness, I wait for Carlos to laugh with me.

"My dream is for her to crash in the course and break her leg," he says immediately after.

“Carlos! You can’t say that!” The shock of his words mixed with the intention behind them almost cause me to drop my phone.

Even if she has single-handedly caused every problem I’ve ever had, it goes against everything I believe in to wish harm to her.

Wishing ill will towards someone else will do nothing but cause someone bad karma and even worse skin.

“Hmm, alright, that was a little harsh. It’s just annoying how there’s never any repercussions for her actions! It’s infuriating, sister!”

“I know brother! But that is life sometimes. Just focus on yourself, and everything will be okay.” My words help center me and remind me of my beliefs, which successfully calms my anxiety filled body .

I can hear his grumbling on the other end, since he hates when I shut down his trash talking of others. His statement isn’t wrong though; Jasmine does whatever she wants without a care in the world. She always has and always will.

Come to think of it, the only person I’ve ever seen get mad at her was Roman, and the coaches later punished him for that. That’s just another point for Roman in my books.

“Ugh, I can’t stand even thinking about her right now. Okay, I have to go. Bye.” The line goes dead as I receive the classic Carlos goodbye.

My brothers’ goodbyes are always sudden and direct, but I’m just happy they call at all. The next time we’ll all be together again will be at the wedding.

The wedding where I’ll be bringing my boyfriend and introducing him to my entire family...

The boyfriend that I don't have.

"UGH, I'm a disaster," I yell into the empty room.

Rolling myself into a blanket burrito and trying not to cry at the ridiculous situation I'm in.

A knock sounds at my door and with my luck, Jasmine might be on the other side.

She probably heard that I'm bringing someone, and she thought it would be appropriate to laugh in my face rather than over the phone .

"Come in," I say weakly.

The logical side of my brain knew it was Aurora, but seeing her walk through the door was a relief nonetheless. She sulks in with a furrow between her brow, and flops onto my bed while wrapping her blanket tighter around herself.

"She beat me today," she blurts out.

A confused expression crosses my face at this. Someone on our team was able to beat Aurora?

"Who beat you?" I ask quickly. Sitting up fully to look at her, I pray that it isn't who I think it is. "If you say Jasmine then I'll throw up on you." I point my finger sternly in her face, so she knows I mean business.

"Isla! She beats me at everything. I just hate her and her stupidly beautiful face!" Aurora's voice rises as she starts to strangle the air in front of her.

Everything being the fact that she stole the heart of the guy Aurora's been crushing

on for the past couple years now. She has never explicitly told me she likes Liam, but it's the most obvious thing in the world.

I don't want to push her on this because I firmly believe her hatred is misplaced, but tonight is not the time to discuss that.

"Do you want to watch the movie with the robots that fight those aliens?" Knowing that it's one of her favourite movies, and I hope it will be enough to make her feel better.

A frown takes over her cute face as her watery eyes look up at me. "How do you not know the name at this point. I watch every week." I can't help but fully laugh at that, since I hate every part of that movie and refuse to remember the title.

We both start laughing at this point, and I decide that telling her my garbage news will take her mind off of her problems. There's really no better way of doing it then just blurting everything out.

"Jasmine announced to the family that she's bringing her boyfriend to Julian's wedding. So, I told my mom that I'm bringing my new boyfriend."

I can feel Aurora bolt upright beside me, the shock basically pouring off of her in waves. "NO," Rora screams in my face.

Covering my ears from that attack of volume, I look her dead in the eyes as I purse my lips and nod.

"Rhodes, you don't have a boyfriend." She acts as if I didn't know that fact, so I give her the most unimpressed glare I can conjure.

"Oh, really? I was under the impression I had one!" My voice rises with mirth as

Aurora howls with laughter. Clutching her stomach, she flops back onto the bed and absolutely cackles at the situation.

“There’s no way you actually told your mom you’re bringing your boyfriend, and she believed you!” Rora can’t contain her laughter at my expense, but at least the tears in her eyes are ones of joy.

“Okay, chuckles, I’m dealing with a serious problem here.” There’s no harshness to my voice though, as happiness at Aurora’s uplifted mood overtakes me.

“You’re going to have to come clean girl. There’s no way you can get away with this one. The wedding is in what, like five months?”

“Three,” I say dismally.

Another fit of laughter bursts from her as I sink deeper into my comforter. I have about three months to figure out what to do about this whole mess, and I can only think of two things.

Either find a boyfriend in three months or admit to everyone that I lied, and just show up alone. There’s always the option to call mom before she submits the invitations, but something holds me back.

The thought of seeing my ex attend Julian’s wedding with the girl he cheated on me with shoots a familiar pang of betrayal in my chest .

As I sit with this feeling, I realize there’s something else there too. A burning that simmers low in my gut and is more intense than my hurt.

I realize that I’m not mad. I’m furious.

I let out a huge yawn on the chairlift, as I mindlessly adjust my forearms guards and relax.

Today we're training giant slalom, meaning the gates are farther apart and we're able to go much faster than in normal slalom. It also requires less protection, the only guards we need for this discipline are strapped to our forearms.

Yesterday has been running through my mind all day, and I channel all those emotions into my training. The only upside to this whole disaster is that I can use these feelings to push myself like never before.

My strategy seems to be working flawlessly since both Liane and Rachel radioed me at the end of my run. Telling me how impressed they are and giving me feedback I actually found useful.

I now dangle my feet high above the ground and reach to pull out my phone, just as the chair lift jolts violently.

The entire thing swings forward as my body swings back, and I quickly grab the bar with both hands.

I hold steady when the chair gives a stomach-churning swing in the other direction and wait for it to settle down.

Muttering breaks out from the chairlifts surrounding me, since most people aren't accustomed to the frequent stopping of this crappy lift. Luckily, I was the third chair out of the station, so I'm positioned right above the flat cat track that leads back to the main lodge.

"This is going to be a little while, folks." The liftie's voice reaches me from the station, and I can't help but groan into the wind. Not only am I stuck on one of the

most unreliable chairs ever, but I'm also only wearing my race suit.

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The wind howls through my helmet as the flurry of snow continues to pour down, and I try to move my fingers for warmth. The only thing keeping me distracted at the point are the people skiing underneath me. From other ski racers to beginners, none of them are safe as I pretend to squash them all.

I hit a record of pretending to squash thirteen people in a row when a cluster of neon red skis in my direction at the same time.

I first notice the distinct helmets of Charles and Aurora, with the pair spotting me at the same time.

Our course today is just above this chair lift, and I've been waiting for them to come by .

"No! You got stuck! Girl, that sucks!" Aurora yells up as she sees me. "Coaches said we could head inside until the chair started again," Aurora screams up.

"Sister, you must be freezing up there!" Charles then unhelpfully adds, "I would give you my jacket, but I'm also freezing."

I give him a thumbs down, both his statements being completely useless to me. Aurora turns to her side, pushing Charles into the pile of snow behind him without a second thought. Sending my best friend two thumbs up, she chuckles as she starts to unzip her ski jacket.

"Alright, girl, you ready?" Rora yells as she bunches up her jacket and crouches down, preparing to throw.

I fail repeatedly to catch this silly jacket.

Each time the whole thing unravels, and blows away before it reaches me.

Eventually, Charles attempts to throw it a couple of times, which is even sadder than watching Aurora do it.

The jacket doesn't even make it to the height where I could catch it with my skis.

The wind really starts to pick up suddenly, and with everyone already inside, I beg them just to head in and leave me. With some arguing and a sad wave, they both ski toward the lodge .

I accept my fate and decide to use this time for resting my body and focusing on my training. I'm unsure if it counts as rest if your limbs are numb from the cold, so I swing my legs to keep the blood flowing.

The constant sound of the wind, mixed with my overtired brain, slowly starts to lull me to sleep.

These past couple of days seem to hit me all at once, and my eyelids become heavy as my head rests in my hand.

I can hear someone yelling my name in the back of my head, but the haze of sleep impairs my other senses.

That is, until a ball of snow smacks me in the mouth, and my exhaustion evaporates in the blink of an eye.

I whip my head below me to see Liam looking up at me, with his hands covering his mouth in utter shock. Isla stands beside him, her hands covering her mouth in the

same expression.

“Liam, what the heck man,” I yell down at him. I’m cold, tired, and now have a raw face from the snowball. There’s only so much a girl can take in one day, so I don’t even try to hold back the tears welling in my eyes.

“Well, it’s kind of your fault, Rhodes. I called your name, and you didn’t answer.” He phrases his sentence as if I had this whole thing coming, and I just glare down at him.

I like to present myself to the team as calm and collected, and I work very hard to maintain that reputation. Currently, I’m using every ounce of peace I possess to maintain that facade. Liam’s my friend; there’s no benefit from screaming at him for his actions.

Closing my eyes and taking some deep breaths, I quickly open them again when I hear a pair of skis coming to an abrupt stop below me.

Roman’s standing beside a snow-covered Liam, leaning in close and stabbing him in the chest with his finger. Even leaning over the bar, I can’t hear a word they’re saying, but I can see Isla’s wide eyes.

It isn’t until Liam turns and skis off in a huff that I realize they didn’t have a friendly conversation.

“Are you okay?” Roman calls up to me, a touch of concern worming its way into his neutral tone. I don’t think I’ve ever heard him talk in any manner that isn’t similar to a bored robot’s way of speaking.

“I’m alright,” I yell back.

“Rhodes, you’re bleeding.” His hand gestures to his mouth as he says this.

I rip off my glove and gently touch my hand to my lip, red saliva sticking to my fingers as I pull it back .

Well, dang it to heck. I've had so much dental work in my life that if one single tooth is even slightly loose, I'll be killing Liam. My decision is final.

"Rhodes, are you hurt?" That concern I'm not used to laces his voice again. I'm slightly taken aback as I reassure the team grump that I'm completely fine.

As team captain, he must feel obligated to check up on me. This being another aspect of him that makes me believe everyone's harsh words less and less.

"Hey, Langley. Catch!" Did he just call me by my last name? I don't have time to dwell on it as I look down and see a huge, neon-red bundle flying towards my face. The scream I release is purely out of self-defense as I close my skis together, safely securing his jacket.

Praying that I didn't rip this extremely expensive team coat with my sharp skis, I reach down and wrap it around myself. It's the perfect kind of oversized where my arms can stay together in the middle, securing all the warmth.

I lean over the bar to look at this beautiful man below me. "Roman, I'm buying your butt a coffee. I owe you my life!" I yell this down to him, looking ridiculous with the empty arms of his jacket flapping in the wind .

There is a whisper of a deep chuckle that reaches my ears, the sound being dulled by the wind surrounding me.

The red dots that slowly form on Roman's skis confuse me, but I quickly realize they're all due to me leaning over the bar.

I had completely forgotten about the snowball that shook my entire skull until now.

Red creeps up my neck as I think about how embarrassing that was. I almost bled onto his helmet—ugh!

A loud clank echoes in the air, and the whirling of machinery thrums through the chairlift. With a jolt, the lift hums to life and starts to make its steady way to the top.

Moving past Roman, I turn back to see his hands cupped around his mouth, but I can't make out a single word he's saying. With my arms wrapped around my body, I have no chance of moving, so I just shake my head vigorously, and hope that conveys the message to him.

As the chairlift whirls away, the last thing I see is an exasperated Roman putting his head in his hands.

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I'd never let her do this alone.

My energy this morning was sitting at a comfortable thirty-five percent, but a snowball to the face quickly took it down to ten.

I can't help the storm cloud of grump that settles over my head as I straight-line down to the top of the course.

The hill is as good as dead since the chairlift is having issues, and I want to get inside the lodge as soon as possible.

Stopping at the top of the training course, I pop off my skis and make my way to the team radio that's clipped to the start gate.

"Hey, Liane and Rachel, I was stuck on the chairlift, but I'm at the top now. Should I come down to the lodge?"

"Oh, Rhodes, this is perfect! Can you tear down the course and leave every ten-gates bundled on the side of the hill?" Liane's staticky voice asks this as if it were no big deal, as if she's asking for a cup of coffee.

As if it's acceptable to ask me to tear down a thirty-gate course alone, after I've been freezing my butt off on the chair for twenty minutes.

"Um, sorry. Just to clarify, you want me to dismantle the entire course by myself?" I repeat into the radio, with the disbelief apparent in my tone.

“Look, Rhodes. Apparently, the lift needs a whole new piece ordered, and they won't be able to get it until Monday. If you can tear the course, then we don't need to get the ski patrol involved.” Rachel jumps into the fray with this information.

My silence must convey my reluctance because Liane pipes in with another informative message.

“Rhodes, we're not asking. You are part of a team, and you're the only member up there right now. If any other athlete were in your shoes, they would do it for you. So, the longer you stall, the longer you are left outside in the cold.”

This day sucks. It really does. I know that Jasmine would never be asked to do this, and that thought does nothing but cause anger to flood through me. I'm crushed under the double standards held by this team, and I try to tamper down the boiling of my blood.

Ripping the radio off the post, I shut it off before I tell the coaches where I think they can shove it .

A bloody face, a frozen butt, and a sour mood are the key points of my day. The fact that I have to go home and finish my lab report is just icing on this cake of crap.

There are four gates in view from here, the pitch below housing the other twenty-six.

Accepting my fate, I push the sleeves of Roman's jacket up to my elbow, bend at the knees, and begin to yank the frozen plastic poles from the ground.

Since we had a decent amount of training before this, the snow surrounding the gates is a sheet of ice, and I ensure my feet are secure before I pull.

I only manage to remove three gates out of the ground with ease, since the fourth

refuses to budge even an inch.

With a frustrated scream that rattles the trees, I use all my might to kick the base of the gate.

It's frozen itself into the ground, so I repeatedly smack my boot into this plastic gate.

I channel my emotions from the entire weekend into my leg, putting all my force behind it and waiting for the ice around it to crack.

"I heard it's easier to just pull them out of the snow," a deep voice chuckles behind me.

I whip around at the sound, shock mixing with my anger as I take him in .

Roman uses his skis as poles as he crests the pitch, gently placing them both on the snow before he makes his way to me.

"What? How? What?" My words unintentionally turn into questions as I look at him quizzically. How is he even here? Didn't he go into the lodge with the rest of the team?

"I heard. Pulling them out of the snow. Is easier." He mimics the motions of pulling a gate out of the snow as he over-annunciates each word.

My confused expression quickly turns into a glare that could rival his as I lift my goggles to the rim of my helmet. "Oh, thank you for that explanation, Huxley," I quip, using his last name like he did mine.

His eyes widen a fraction, the slight lift of his lip visible before his expression is schooled back into neutrality. "Sorry, Langley, I'll just let you get back to it then."

Crossing his arms over his chest, he looks at me expectantly, and I can't describe the flutter like feeling in my stomach.

I turn away from him before I get too distracted, mumbling as I go back to my task.

Grabbing the very bottom of the gate, I use my legs to pull straight up.

The piece in the ground is covered in bristles that stick to the snow but should slide right out at this angle.

The current issue is that the bristles are frozen to the ground and need a big tug to get them free.

I feel a slight shift in the gate under my hands, my mood brightening significantly right before my boot slips on the ice, and I go flying backwards.

Easy to say my emotions are all over the place at this point as I remain flat on the ground.

If I weren't wearing a helmet and a protector strapped to my back, this probably would have hurt a lot more.

While my butt gives a light throb as I sit up, it's actually the howling laughter that grabs my full attention.

Roman's arms are now wrapped around his stomach, his form bent over at the waist as he lets out another bout of laughter. My jaw drops all on its own, never in all my years of knowing him, has he ever laughed like this.

While I usually love to hear others laugh, the fact that it's at my expense does nothing but get on my nerves. Crossing my arms over my chest now, each laugh causes my

eye to twitch.

“I can’t believe you’re just standing there, laughing at me,” I say outraged.

He has the nerve to let out a joyful sigh as he puts his goggles up, wiping a tear from the corner of his eye. “That was hilarious, Langley. ”

The use of my last name two times in a row makes me grit my teeth and I try to stay calm. Putting my arm behind me, I smack my boot into the ice, so I don’t slip again and carefully push myself up. Before I’m even halfway off the ground, he appears right in front and grabs me.

His hand closes around mine, with the other one lightly gripping me under my bicep. He easily pulls me to my feet, and keeps me steady as I find my footing.

“Thanks,” I mutter. Walking past him and going towards the panelled gate in the snow. The sound of his boots is right behind me as I approach this gate, and I’m more determined than ever to get it out.

Roman’s presence behind me is doing nothing but motivate me more as I grip the bottom post. With every ounce of strength left in me, I pull up and feel the shift of the bristles in the ice. As the gate gives out, my upper body shoots upward with the gate in my hand.

It doesn’t take two seconds before I drop the gate, whip around, and shove my finger into Roman’s chest. “Ha! I did it! I told you!”

He grabs onto my out-stretch wrist without a second thought, his hold gentle but firm. Leaning down closer to me, his glare stays locked in place as one of his eyebrows quirks up. “I never said you couldn’t do it,” he snips.

“You implied it,” I respond immediately. Pulling my shoulders back so I can look him in the eye better.

“I did nothing of the sort,” he says confused.

“You laughed at me!” My temper starts to slip as he continues to play coy.

“You did something funny,” he drawls back. I try to ignore the way it snakes over my skin, causing my thoughts to scatter before me.

He’s close to me now, much closer than I remember him being. “Well, I’m still upset with you,” I declare. Turning around and confidently stomping towards my skis.

Unfortunately, he’s back in my path before I can make it another two steps. His brow is still raised, but now it’s mixed with a confused expression.

“What? What have I done?” His question seems to be the straw that broke the camel’s back for me as every terrible part of this weekend bubbles to the surface. My suppressed emotions mix with my current thoughts, and I take a giant step into his space.

“Who. In their right mind. Books a training day. Seven hours. Before it even starts!” I can’t help but get louder as each set of words comes out of my mouth. My finger goes back to stabbing him in the chest, with each poke freeing some of my pent-up emotions.

His gaze turns critical as he starts to look over me again. The playfulness that had danced in his eyes disappears, and I can’t describe the regret that suddenly floods me at this. His signature scowl is locked back in place and he just glares down at me.

He seems to have a fight with himself as I watch conflict enter his gaze.

When I think he's just going to turn around and leave, he surprises me further by stepping directly into my space.

"Oh, I don't know, Langley? Did you ever think that I don't book the training space," he says defensively as his glove lightly taps my collarbone periodically.

"I did, actually! That is why I always defend you when everyone's pissed at you!" I retaliate by stabbing my finger into his stomach multiple times as I say this. My angry tone mixed with my kind words, cause Roman's face to look more confused than ever.

His quizzical stare meets my angry one and he throws his hands in the air. "Then why are we yelling at each other!"

"I don't know," I yell even louder. Throwing my hands in the air with him, and his oversized jacket causes the extra room in the arm sleeves to flop all around the place.

My eyes widen immediately, and I realize that I've been warm in his jacket this whole time as he stands in front of me in his speed suit.

With speed that impresses even me, I reach down and start to fumble with the jacket's zipper. My gloves inhibiting my ability to grip the small clasp, and I let out a frustrated sound.

Roman's hand lands atop mine as I continue to struggle, stopping my motions as I look up at him. "What are you doing?" He asks exasperatedly.

"I'm giving you back your jacket," I respond instantly.

"Why?" His guarded expression falters before he schools it back.

“You’re in a race suit. You must be freezing.”

His gaze narrows, probably at my rapid switching of emotions. “I thought we were fighting?” His question has an air of lightness to it, and I grip onto that like a lifeline.

“I can multitask,” I say casually.

Lifting my shoulder in a shrug, I push his jacket to my elbows as I start to remove my gloves. There’s no way I can grab that tiny zipper with my chunky mitts .

“If you think I’m letting your hands out of those gloves, you have to be insane.” He quickly grabs both my wrists, stopping my movements.

“Fine. I’ll give it back to you in the lodge then.” I have to tilt my head drastically to look at him when he’s this close, but he nods at my words and releases my hands.

He doesn’t step back though, and I surprise myself by staying rooted to the spot as well. This close to him, it’s easy to see the stubble that clings to his jaw, the harshness of his features similar to a statue.

Arguably, the most noticeable feature displayed on his face is the bend at the top of his nose, the result of a childhood injury.

“Why are you smiling, Langley?” His voice is quiet as he asks this, his body drifting closer to me, almost as if he’s unaware he’s doing it.

“I just remembered the day you broke your nose. You had that terrible crash, and then when they tried to send you home, you started freaking out. Even at thirteen, you were determined to finish every race.” I can’t help the laugh that escapes me as I remember us all those years ago.

He must feel the same way, his eyes widen as I recount the memory, shock, and something else sparkling in his gaze. “How the hell do you remember that. That was about ten years ago.” The awe is evident in his voice, as if people remember these things about him is not a common event.

“How could I forget, that day was hilarious. I think Xander started crying because he thought you were dying.” That gets another smile from him, possibly the most genuine one I’ve ever seen.

Before I decide if I’ll randomly freak out at him again, I decide it’s time for us to get moving. “Okay, let’s just tear this course down and get in the lodge.”

Finally stepping away from him, I go to clip on my skis and ignore the cold that quickly fills the space he previously took up. As I grab the four gates, my jaw drops as the view from over the pitch greets me.

The entire course is gone, bundles of gates leaning on the side of the hill. All the work I had been dreading is completely done, and neatly piled where the coaches wanted it. Roman skis up to my side, taking the gates from my hands with ease.

“Yeah, I hiked up here while you were on the chair and tore down the entire course. A snowball to the face seemed like enough of a punishment for you today, Langley. ”

Feelings rapidly fly through me at this: guilt, embarrassment, gratefulness, and shame. How he must have felt after doing all that work just to have one of his athletes scream in his face.

My cheeks flames at the thought, and I quickly turn towards him to apologize. His strong back is all I see as clips in his skis and goes down the pitch.

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Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 2:12 am

Banana loaf?

After triple-checking that this was the right address, I ring the bell before I let my nerves take over.

Standing on the stoop of their cute little house, I marvel at the fact that I've never been here before.

It wasn't even a ten-minute walk from my house, and I can even see the university at the very end of the road.

Double checking my watch, I still have an hour before I need to be in my bone structure and development class.

There's no movement in the house as I look through the window, so I decide to take in the surrounding area.

The whole neighbourhood has a peaceful and quiet energy, with a light dusting of snow making it look even more cute.

The trees caked in fluffy snow makes me smile and I watch as the birds jump from branch to branch .

We had a huge dumping of snow over the weekend, and I'm surprised to see the shovelled walkway of the Huxley house. I quickly text Aurora that we need to shovel our drive, as well as deal with the wicked patch of black ice at the bottom of our stairs.

Just as I add melting salt to our grocery list, the sound of steps approaching the door catches my attention.

A rustling of locks turning causes my back to straighten, and I grip my banana loaf against my chest. The door cracks open a sliver, and all I can see is an eye peeking out.

“Who are you,” a deep voice questions from the other side of the door.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I think I have the wrong house.” Giving them a smile and a wave as I turn to leave their property.

“Wait, what kind of loaf is that?” The voice asks, curiosity lacing his tone as he keeps the door open a crack.

“Banana,” I say warily. The strange person quickly closes the door to take off the deadbolt.

A very dishevelled Landon opens the door, his blonde hair sticking up in all directions as he focuses on the loaf in my hands .

“Landon, why didn’t you open the door for me?” I wouldn’t say that Landon and I are the best of friends, but I thought he knew who I was.

“Come in,” he says as he completely ignores my question, and walks into his house.

I quickly shuffle in behind, removing my platform boots and giant white jacket at the door. Strolling down their long hallway, I enter into a house that closely resembles mine. But, where my home is filled with soft light and decorations, theirs is starkly plain.

Sports gear is lying on every surface, from skis to race suits, all of it's laid out against their walls and chairs.

Their kitchen is significantly bigger than ours, with protein powder bottles and snacks littering the entire space.

Lastly, their living room houses multiple leather couches that are dispersed around the television set.

As I survey the space, I almost miss the fact that Xander's lying on the floor. Then before I can blink, Landon slides down to lie next to him.

"Hi Rhodes! Give us a minute, would yeah?" Xander waves at me from the floor and then stares intently at the ceiling .

The guys are wearing matching outfits, both fitted in fuzzy blue hoodies that reaches to their calves.

"Ready!" Landon yells.

"3."

"2."

"1."

"GO!" They shout in unison as they both throw a handful of gummies into the air. Candy flies in every direction as each boy keeps their mouth wide open.

Xander looks exactly like Roman as he lies on the floor, but as I look closer, it's easier to see the differences to his brother.

Where Roman's features are on the harsher side, Xander's are very soft, and all mesh well with each other.

He also shares the same deep brown eyes as Roman, but then lacks the natural curls of his hair.

Saying that, as they lie on the floor next to each other, the contrast between these two is as stark as ever. Landon's skin is several shades darker than his brothers but lacks any of that in his hair. That almost black quality to Roman and Xander's hair makes Landon's look even more blonde.

"How many did you catch?" Landon asks Xander with his mouth full, so I can only assume he caught some .

"Your aim sucks, so I couldn't catch any!" Xander yells at him, punching Landon's arm.

"You didn't catch any because you suck at this game," Landon retorts.

I can tell they're going to start fighting, so I quickly remind them that I'm still here. "Hey, sorry to interrupt."

Their gazes both whip towards me, surprise flaring in their eyes. "I was just wondering if Roman's home?" I ask and smile sweetly. I hope they give me an answer quick because they're being really weird, and I have better things to do today.

"Oh shit, sorry Rhodes." Xander jumps up and then extends a hand for Landon. "I have some terrible news for you; Roman's not here."

I can't help but frown at this; I really wanted to get this over with fast. I planned to bring him this apology loaf, tell him I'm sorry, and promptly leaving.

Xander wasn't done talking yet because he starts waving his hands in the air as he speaks. "Don't worry one hair on that pretty little head of yours; you can hang out with us until he shows up!" He says this with such enthusiasm that a genuine smile pulls at my lips.

We may not be friends, but the invite is kind, nonetheless. Landon crosses his arms over his chest as he stands beside Xander. The guy looking as imposing as one can look in a giant fluffy hoodie. I can tell that he doesn't want me to join, sending Xander a warning with his eyes.

But he promptly ignores Landon as he puts his arm around me and steers us towards the couch. It's not another minute before a grumbling Landon trails one step behind us both.

"Ignore him, we were going to play a kart racing game, but he can wait until Roman gets here."

I stop dead in my tracks, Xander and Landon almost walking into me as I quickly turn around. "Hold up, a racing game?"

I can't help the fit of giggles that takes over me as I win the cup for the second time today. After winning the first four races, a furious Xander had to excuse himself from the room. Angry grumbling sounded from the bathroom down the hall, and Landon and I couldn't hold back our laughter.

I decided that I would skip my class today in favour of making more friends on the team. And who knows, if this goes well, I bet either of them wouldn't mind being my fake boyfriend for this wedding .

As we finish the second round, I'm right in front of Xander's cart on that last lap. Being the sneaky girl that I am, I screen peak at the exact time he throws his green

shell. With only a second left, I dodge left and cross the line in first place.

“DAMN IT,” Xander roars from beside me. Standing up fully, he points his finger in my face and puts all his rage into his words. “Who trained you, woman!”

This pulls a gut clenching laugh from my stomach as his anger brings me immense joy. Xander immediately laughs along with me, throwing himself on the couch as he puts his hands on his face. Turning to the side, I see Landon wearing an easy smile as he looks in my direction.

“The king has been dethroned,” Landon announces. He turns to face me, holding two remotes as he pretends to bow down.

I sink back into the couch, dusting off my shoulders in a show of supremacy. Xander snatches the remotes out of Landon’s hand, and starts another round of races without asking either of us.

It’s nice to find myself eager to keep going, not having to stress if I’m overstaying my welcome. These guys might be childish and odd, but they have been so nice while I wait for Roman.

Halfway through this round, Xander’s beating me by a couple of points, and I find myself furrowing my brow in concentration. There aren’t any barriers in this circuit, and I can’t risk losing my pretend title.

I catch Xander’s foot reaching across Landon, the intention to kick the remote out of my hand being evident. The second I enter the straightaway, I smack Xander’s foot away and laugh at the pained sound he lets out.

“What the hell is all the noise?” Roman’s voice carries from the kitchen, and the sound of his footsteps gets louder as he approaches.

I can see him come to a grinding halt in my peripheral vision, but my main focus is on the race in front of me. Xander's racing with one hand, the other reaching across poor Landon to try and snatch my remote.

"Rhodes, what are you doing here?" His voice sounds curious and confused, but I can't afford to look at his face with only two corners of the race remaining.

"Oh, I just came here to talk to you, actually." Xander's right in my face now, and I shove him away as my car crosses the line before his. Landon cheers, happy that Xander's getting a taste of his own medicine, as Xander dramatically flops across us both.

"Rhodes, how could you! I let you into my home, and this is how you repay me!" Xander yells and then pretends to cry. Making sure every one of his sobs is loud and drawn out.

A hand appears in front of my face, and I look up to see Roman extending it towards me. He must be used to Xander's dramatics by now because he completely ignores him.

His calloused palm scrapes against my skin as he helps me to my feet, and Xander decides to dramatically fall on the floor.

"Roman, get this she-demon out of the house." He throws his arm over his eyes, the other pointing towards the front door.

"Want to talk in my room, or we can go outside if you're more comfortable with that?" I let him know that his room is perfect, and he doesn't let go of my hand as he leads me away.

Before we leave the living room, I turn and pretend to tip my hat to Xander and

Landon. “It has been an absolute honour, boys.”

They both stand up, bowing at the waist as Roman tugs me away from them. As he leads me towards the stairs, I can’t help but think how I just now became friends with two guys I’ve known my whole life.

The thought makes me smile as I stop and grab my loaf I left on the kitchen table. He leads me up the carpeted stairs and turns into the first bedroom.

Walking into the cleanest room I’ve ever seen comes to me as no surprise. I take in the small space and wonder how he calls this place his room. He leaves the door open as he walks towards the desk, and I take in the whole space.

While the bedspread and chair are both dark blue, everything else is shades of cream or tan.

The desk, dresser, and bedside tables are all neutral colours, with a few items scattered about.

Based on the vibe of the space, I know their placement is intentional, and he would be annoyed if anything were to be moved.

Roman pulls the chair out from his desk and motions for me to sit; he then rests at the end of his bed and faces me. He doesn’t say anything, just reclines his arms back on the bed as he waits for me to start.

Without thinking about it, I find myself studying him as he watches me.

His dark hair is just long enough to frame his face, and the strands compliment his paler complexion.

The freckles on his nose are stark and make his glare look less menacing.

None of us have seen the sun in months, so everyone on the team shares the same sickly pallor.

Roman decided to battle the cold weather today in a dark green cable knit sweater, and black corduroy pants. I'm slightly astonished at how well he dresses; the outfits being simple and flattering.

Focusing back on the situation, I clear my throat as I realize how obvious it was that I've been staring. I start to panic and just grab for the loaf at my side.

"I made this for you." I push it toward him, praying that this will take his attention off me.

"Um, thank you," he says quizzically. Slowly taking it from my hands and inspecting it all around. "Why do I have a loaf of bread?"

"It's a banana loaf and it's an apology for my behaviour yesterday," I state.

"Well, then, I can't accept this." He extends this stupid loaf back to me, waiting for me to take it.

"What? Why not? It took me an hour to make that." I promptly push it back in his direction, not letting him have an opportunity to give it back.

"Rhodes," he says on an exhale. Placing the loaf beside him, he puts his arms on his knees as he looks at me. "I won't accept this because there's no reason for you to be apologizing. I'm the team captain; it's my responsibility to tear the course down."

I narrow my eyes in suspicion, he's being weirdly nice, and I don't trust it. "Why are

you being nice to me?”

“I’m always nice,” he responds with indignation.

Raising my eyebrow at him, I smile as if we are sharing an inside joke. “Now, that is just not true.”

He lets out a frustrated breath, sitting up to his full height as his expression turns serious. “Alright, well, I hope that I’ve always been nice to you. I like to think I’m nice to my friends.”

My eyes widen a fraction, his casual use of the word friend surprising me. Sure, we’ve never been unfriendly towards each other, but I wouldn’t have gone so far as to call us friends.

Although, Roman has always been someone who kept to himself. In his brain, I bet our pleasant interactions must have been friendship to him all these years.

A twinge of sadness goes through my chest, and how I was unaware of the friendship he thought we had all this time .

“Well, no matter. I should’ve never yelled at you; that was extremely rude of me, and I’m sorry,” I say meaningfully. Giving him a small smile, I stand to leave, and hope he can accept my apology.

In no world did I plan on being here for so long, and Aurora’s going to die when she hears about this afternoon. “I’ll see you later,” I say and wave at him as I make my way towards his door.

“Did you just apologize because I’m your team captain?” His voice is small, and he keeps his head down as he stares into the banana loaf.

Something about this doesn't sit right in my brain, obviously being more to this question than he's letting on. Either way, I answer him honestly. "No. I apologized because you're my friend."

He looks up at that, with his eyes expressing more emotion than his face ever will. "Thanks, Langley. I'll see you later."

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Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 2:12 am

I need to put ice melt on my grocery list.

My body presses deeper into the kitchen table as my eyes try to understand the jumble of equations in front of me. Notes are splayed everywhere, and I furiously scribble down another equation.

When I applied for a science-focused kinesiology degree, I had conveniently forgotten about all the science I would have to do.

My workload has done nothing but increase since my first year of university. The hours seeming to pile on top of each other, sometimes to the point that I have to study on the drive to the ski hill.

Reaching over a pile of paper to grab my formula sheet, I remember why I'm doing this in the first place.

It took years of sprains, muscle tears, and cracked bones, but a physiotherapist was always my calling.

The idea that I can assist future athletes and help them on the road to recovery, now that sits right with me .

Ski racing isn't my life, and I just don't have the passion that's required to succeed in the sport. Someone like Aurora will go the distance. She has a craving to hop on skis the second she wakes up, the desire to train flowing through her blood.

Being able to watch her fall deeper in love with the sport as we grew up has only

made me realize how I don't have that desire. But I'm thrilled to have the opportunity to compete while I pursue this degree, so that's exactly what I'll do.

Although, that'll only be possible if I'm able to solve this ridiculous equation. Grumbling to myself, I pull out a fresh piece of paper and scribble down a new answer.

"There's steam coming out of your ears right now, girl." Aurora's voice startles me. She rests her body against the door frame as I whip my gaze towards her. I frown at my best friend, she's watching me with a bored expression and munching on some black licorice.

"How long have you been standing there?" I ask, narrowing my eyes in her direction. She casually shrugs and makes her way into the kitchen, flopping into the chair beside me.

Turning to face her, I finally take in what she's wearing.

Aurora's long black hair is down, with her natural curls on full display.

The makeup she wears is subtle, but perfectly highlights her features.

She then completes the whole look with a maroon two-piece set.

The short skirt perfectly hugs her figure, and the crop top compliments the look with one strap.

Realization dawns on me, and I dive across the table to snatch my phone. Messages have flooded my home screen, everyone talking about their excitement for tonight and asking where Aurora and I are.

Looking up, I see Aurora's expecting gaze locked onto me, and her left eyebrow slightly raised.

"Rora, don't be mad," I say gently. The tone of my voice conveying the message I don't have the nerve to say.

"No! You promised you would come this week!" She yells as she shoots out of her chair and rounds the table towards me.

There's a decent number of bars on campus, but The Cave is the main spot for all the student-athletes.

They offer a huge discount for winter athletes on Thursday nights, so naturally, everyone will be there.

The bar found out that a majority of the training is scheduled on the weekends, so offering the discount on Thursdays always brings in a huge crowd .

This includes the Polar Ski Team, who all go almost every week. The team decided a while ago that dancing and drinking was the best way for us all to bond, and the tradition just stuck over the years.

The whole night is a nice break from competing against each other, and we're all able to act like a real team.

Unfortunately, this week has been crazy with school, and the whole thing slipped my mind.

"This stupid assignment is due at midnight, and I still don't even have half of it done," I say apologetically.

Her face falls as she hears my argument since she knows more than anyone how I have to put my academics first.

That doesn't mean I don't feel terrible, especially with Isla and Liam becoming even closer lately, I know she was relying on hanging out with me tonight.

"No worries, I totally get it," she says. The hurt is evident in her voice as she heads towards the front door. I can't help but see her as a puppy walking away with her tail between her legs.

Tipping my head back, I let out a silent scream that expresses my exact feelings. "I'll be at the bar no later than nine." My voice is full of defeat as I put my head in my hands .

A scream from the other room forces me to smile, and Aurora's excited form quickly rounding the corner. "You're the best, most amazing, beautiful friend a girl could ever have!" I can't help but smile bigger as she skips around the table, giving me a quick hug before she's out the door.

After an hour of intense focus, I finished the last question of my assignment. Through grit, dedication, and random people online, the entire thing came together easier than I thought. I owe my life to the anonymous man who decides to teach organic chemistry on his channel.

Closing and organizing all my papers, I rush to my room to get ready. Cringing as I see the time, I plug in my curling iron and scramble around my room.

Aurora's contact pops up on my phone repeatedly, her texts letting me know that my absence has been noticed.

With a natural makeup look and a quick curl to my hair, I quickly settled on an outfit.

My cream-coloured tank top has lace trim that wraps around the edges, and I pair it with my dark red skirt.

I then quickly rush towards the front door, but make a necessary kitchen detour for a tequila shot.

I've never arrived to The Cave sober, and I won't start that today.

Pouring the cheap alcohol into my princess mug, I can't help but wince as I shoot it.

Putting down the bottle as I contemplate another one, I brace myself for the late night before me.

Ignoring the constant buzzing in my pocket, I put on my oversized leather jacket and matching dark brown boots.

It feels like a miracle I managed to get everything done. Finishing my assignment, getting ready, and having a drink with barely any time to spare. I can't help but smile smugly to myself as I finish another day of managing my insane workload.

Grabbing my purse off the hook, I barely pay attention as I whip open the front door and walk straight into Roman's chest.

His hand darts out to steady me, and his grip is essential as my balance becomes precarious. Whipping my head towards him in surprise, I notice the same emotion reflected in his gaze. "What are you doing here?" I sputter out.

My words jolt him out of his shock, and his hand quickly releases me. "Sorry, I just came to drop off your tin." He raises the loaf tin in his other hand as he steps away from me .

His gaze travels down my body as he steps away, the outfit I'm wearing seeming to catch his attention. Whether it be because he likes the style or because he only ever sees me in athletic wear, he continues to take me in with a look of admiration on his face.

It's been a little over a year since I broke up with Daniel, and that means it's been just over a year since I've felt appreciated like this.

Nerves quickly take over me. That nervous feeling I always get whenever a man is near, except this time it's not with fear, but rather excitement.

I start bouncing from foot to foot, Roman's silence doing nothing but stress me out. "Everything okay?" I gently ask. His eyes finally meet mine again, and they freeze me to the spot. The last thing I expected to see was such raw want written all over his face.

As if realizing what he's doing, he blinks, and his expression returns to his bored mask.

"Here," he says quickly. Pushing the loaf tin towards me as if it burns him.

I suppress a smile at his bluntness and take the dish from his outstretched hand. Carefully putting it on the shoe rack beside me, I turn back to see his eyebrows furrowed in my direction .

"You're dressed very nicely. Why?" He states plainly.

"What do you mean why?" I immediately respond. My stance becoming defensive from his stupid question.

He crosses his arms over his chest and manages to look down at me, even though I'm

a step higher. “I mean, why are you all dressed up on a Thursday night?”

Tilting my head down but keeping my eyes up, I lift a brow at him. “Come on, you know. The team always goes out on Thursday nights.” I realize my mistake immediately as his eyebrows lift in surprise, but he quickly masks his face again.

“Oh right, I forgot,” he says as his voice betraying nothing. “Where’s the team going tonight?” His question immediately plays his hand since the team goes to the same bar every week.

“The Cave on campus! You should come tonight,” I respond enthusiastically.

Turning around so I can lock my door, I can hear his footsteps retreating behind me.

“Wait, where are you going? I yell at his back.

Rushing down my stairs to catch him, I awkwardly jog as I see he’s already made it to his car. Lightly jumping down the last stair, I take one more step and feel the ice under my boot too late. I don’t manage another one before I feel that full impact of my butt hitting the hard ground.

It would be a flat-out lie to say that this hasn’t happened before; I always forget about the black ice patch at the wrong time. Closing my eyes, I tilt my head back and try to process the pain throbbing through me.

“Rhodes, holy shit! How did you even manage that? I didn’t even know that was there. I am so, so sorry. Shit, shit.” I can hear Roman’s rambling, his tone becoming more frantic as he keeps talking.

“Ouch, ouchie,” I close my eyes and whine. I’m not proud of the whimper that follows my statement, but my tailbone is shooting pain throughout my whole body.

Opening my eyes after a couple of composing breaths, I see Roman's kneeling right in front of me. His hands lean on his knees as he looks at me with the most concern I've ever seen on his face.

"Rhodes. Are you alright? You haven't talked in a whole minute, so I'm getting concerned here." My pain morphs into anger as I shoot him my most withering of glares.

"You. Aren't. Funny." My statement comes in segments as I try to breathe through the sharp discomfort in my tailbone .

"I'm pretty funny," he retorts. Worry is evident in his voice, but his joke makes me feel a fraction better.

The embarrassment of slipping quickly overtakes that good feeling. It's the first time Roman has ever been to my house, and I fully cartoon slip in front of him.

"I'm alright; I just need a second," I inform him. After a couple more calming breaths, I aim to push myself up, but Roman's already there. Both arms lightly grasp my elbows, and he uses his strength to pull me up.

He remains right in front of me as I stand, clasping both my arms and looking me over with worry. "You're a disaster, Langley," he whispers. The words hanging in the air as neither of us attempts to pull away from each other.

I can't help but smile at him and allow the tiniest bit of confidence to enter into my tone. "You look like you could use a little disaster in your life, Huxley."

His small smirk causes a full one to bloom across my face, and I can't help but admit how much I love this look on him. His facial features are relaxed for once and he's displaying the most genuine smile I've ever seen. I make a mental note to do more

things that make him smile .

I attempt to step away so he doesn't get uncomfortable, but my lower body immediately protests. Pain shoots up my back at the movement, causing my knees to buckle without my permission, and Roman's grip to tighten on me.

I let out a forced chuckle as I gather my bearings, the pain being more manageable as I make small movements with my legs.

"Sorry, that was weird," I chuckle and try to brush off this situation.

"Did you want to join us tonight?" Standing on my own, I take a step away from him, and his arms fall back to his sides.

"Join you where?" He questions as he moves his arms, not seeming to know what to do with them anymore. After settling on crossing them over his chest, he focuses all his attention on me.

"The bar?" I question back, adding fake confusion into my voice.

"You can't go out like this!" He practically yells into the dead silent street, throwing his arms up in the air with frustration.

His outburst makes me pause, putting my hands on my hips as I square up to him. I pretend the motion doesn't hurt terribly as I glare upward.

If there's one thing that no one can do, it's dictating what I do with my time .

"Well, watch me, buddy!" Patting his shoulder, I confidently stride away from him, not letting my limp deter my confidence.

I can feel the anger radiating from the man behind me, but I don't stop as I reach the road and keep walking.

A loud groan echoes through the air behind me, but I don't give him the satisfaction of turning around.

Usually, this walk would be an easy ten minutes, so I figure the limp should only add another seven to my time.

It doesn't take another thirty steps before a black truck pulls up beside me.

The window rolls down, and the closest thing to an apology comes out of Roman's mouth. "If you're going to be insane and go out, then the least I can do is give you a ride."

"Are you going to come?" I question as I stop walking and cross my arms. Raising my brow at him, I can't help but mentally chuckle as I act like I have the upper hand in this situation.

"No, not tonight. But I'll be driving you there," he immediately responds.

"Why won't you come?" I ask, with more than a little frustration in my voice.

"Rhodes, I –."

"Roman, just come out for a little while!"

"Rhodes, I wasn't invited. The team doesn't want me there, and I have no intention of forcing them."

His admission startles me a fraction, only because I didn't expect such honesty from

him. It's been obvious to me that the team has a problem with him, but the fact that he knows as well fills me with sadness.

I start to question whether Landon or Xander invited their own brother, but they must have just given up by now.

Roman probably sees their invitation as pity, and both brothers just stopped trying.

"Well, that's insane." I reach for the door, plop into the seat beside him, and look him dead in the eyes. "I'm inviting you, and your attendance is mandatory."

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I can't believe I'm actually here... I want to leave.

When we finally arrive, the bar is packed. Convincing Roman to come along took longer than I expected. Nothing had worked, not asking repeatedly, pretending to cry, or attempting to drag him out of the car.

The winning ticket was when I added more of a limp to my walk and told him that I would be fine on my own. He stared at me with a withering glare, only to sigh in defeat and lock his truck. I had to suppress my smile as we walked into The Cave together.

I try and fail to part the crowd, attempting to make my way to the basement where the Polar team always sets up camp. Unfortunately, we got here pretty late into the evening, and the drinking is well underway for the winter sports athletes.

Peering around the space, I notice the ski cross team is present, as the lot of them chant with each other and take shots.

I spy the top two figure skaters in the country near the back, both ladies not shy as they make their bodies well known to the other.

At the pool tables, half the men's hockey team is playing a game against half the women's hockey team, and everyone is screaming at each other.

As I try to squeeze past another group of athletes, they don't budge when I attempt to push through. Huffing out a breath, I prepare my nicest excuse me, when an arm parts the crowd directly in front of me. Roman's at my side now, one hand making a path

as the other hovers over my lower back.

People turn in annoyance but quickly go back to what they were doing when they notice Roman.

While being over six feet tall helps his case, it's his build that makes people leave him alone.

Due to our insane training schedules, there isn't a single part of us that isn't rock-hard muscle.

But in Roman's case, it makes him look like a Greek god and people have no problem with giving him a wide berth.

I manage to limp my way to the banister all on my own as the glaring man behind me helps keep my path clear.

I look down into the basement and find the dance floor is electric tonight.

The lights under the dance floor highlight everyone's movements as the music pounds in my ears.

Leaning farther over the railing, I spot the team scattered about in groups.

I see Aurora in the middle of the floor, dancing her heart out with Charles, Isla, and Liam at her side. Calvin's group is right beside them, all four guys bobbing their heads as they search the floor for a partner.

Looking further over, long, caramel-coloured waves of hair swaying to the music and catch my attention.

Jasmine Flores dances as if she was born for it, moving to the music in the perfect rhythm.

She's three inches taller than me which is the perfect height to distribute her curves.

I can't help but watch her in envy, as her darker skin sparkles under the dance floor lights.

A guy with sandy brown hair starts to make his way towards her, grabbing her from behind as she emits a shriek of joy. My stomach drops as her arms wrap around the man's neck, his wrapping around her in return. The pair immediately pulls each other close and they start to dance.

I white-knuckle the banister in front of me, horror and fear worming its way into my body. The captain of the Polar hockey team, six feet of pure muscle and the only man who's ever cheated on me, has decided to come tonight .

He hasn't shown his face here since we broke up, and I hate all the feelings that suddenly come flooding back.

It was just another Thursday night going out with the team, and he told me how sorry he was that he couldn't make it.

His text went on about his stress over this random assignment, and he had to work late.

Since it was about school, I understood completely and went out with my friends while he worked.

Later that night, when I let myself into his place with my arms full of study snacks, the last thing I expected to see was my cousin. Daniel and Jasmine were entangled in

each other on the couch, the pair making their mouths well acquainted.

It was crystal clear what kind of people they were as I dropped everything in his front entryway, turned around and never looked back.

I hadn't seen Daniel since that horrid day, deciding it was better to let him keep my extra t-shirts rather than having to face him again. After unfollowing him, Jasmine, and all their mutual friends, it has been a Daniel-free life until now.

A twinge of hurt ricochets through me at the fact that Aurora let me come tonight, but then I realize she must not know. There's no world where she would insist I come out if she knew he was here.

Knowing Aurora, she would kick him in the balls if she saw him. Since he's standing perfectly fine, I know she's just as unaware as I was.

My pinkie finger starts to tap the banister in stress as I think through my options. A quick text to my best friend would clear everything up. I could head home, and no one would be any the wiser.

The issue is the situation itself. Am I going to be that girl who turns tail because her ex-boyfriend is here?

No. The money I invested into therapy this past year was not so I could run at the first sight of him. This is as much of my school as it is his.

"Why do you look like an angry elf," Roman questions from beside me.

The ridiculous comment snapping me out of my intense glaring, and I whip my gaze up to the giant standing beside me. "Did you just call me an elf?" I resist the urge to stamp my foot, my pride and my tailbone not allowing the motion.

“I just thought of something short and cute,” he states. “Why are you glaring at Jasmine and that guy?”

He must have tracked my line of sight, and the way I was openly glaring at her made that an easy task for him. “I was not glaring; I was just looking upon her with distaste,” I say loudly into his ear. The music is blaring and requires me to lean closer so he can hear me.

“Okay,” he says confused. “Wait, why are you glaring at your cousin?” His confusion over the subject makes me remember that I shouldn’t be spouting familial discourse.

My whole extended family just decided to brush our situation under the rug and make sure Jasmine stays happy.

Overall, the details of my ex cheating on me are known by very few people.

That’s what happens when one cousin is well-behaved, and the other is known for throwing fits. It’s in everyone’s best interest to placate Jasmine, and they just assume I’ll remain quiet.

The whole thing causes my eye to twitch, and I change the topic before I do something I’ll regret. “No reason. Let’s go find everyone,” I say with a smile.

I don’t think twice before grabbing Roman’s hand and directing him towards the back staircase.

His hand tightens on mine, and he thankfully pulls me back when I almost get trampled by the ringette team.

The motion causes sharp pain in my tailbone, but I decide that getting drunk should fix that issue.

Making a quick stop at the bar to grab Roman and I a drink, I lead us towards the back booth areas. The very corner one is filled to the brim with jackets and purses, as well as half of the team talking casually.

Charles, Aurora, Nico, Kai, and Taylor all sit together, a game of cards splayed out in front of them. I didn't exactly tell Aurora that I'm bringing Roman, but she should probably be fine with it. Then the team will see how nice he is, and it will all work out great.

Unzipping my jacket and plopping it on the huge pile, I turn and stare at Roman until he does the same. Watching him roll his eyes and reluctantly take off his coat fills me with a spark of joy, but I don't exactly know why.

Brushing off the feeling, I plop onto the seat and move over so Roman can sit. He decides to lean against the end of the booth, crossing his arms across his chest as he looks around the space with disinterest.

With his jacket off, I take him in as he continues to scan the crowd.

He's wearing a black, tight-fitted shirt, straight-legged jeans, and his signature boots.

His hair is in waves today, the dark strands framing his face on both sides.

All this is paired with his clean-shaven face and that makes it harder than I thought to look away from him.

Everyone must be plastered at this point because no one in the group even looked our way when we sat down. I reach forward and rap my knuckle on the table, following it with a quick wave when they look up.

"Hey, y'all!" I shout at them, moving in closer as I point to Roman. "I got Roman to

join tonight!” It’s critical I keep my big smile glued in place as I deliver this news. Uneasiness snakes through me as I think about all the ways that this could go wrong.

“What’s he doing here?” Charles screams rudely, ignoring what I just said and pointing his drink in Roman’s direction. I put my head in my hands, expelling a breath of frustration.

“Hey! How about you be kind and talk to him, and not at him.” I prove my point by tipping my drink in his direction as I talk.

Everyone stares at me wide-eyed, especially Charles, who’s used to my laid-back demeanour. I can’t exactly pinpoint where the defensive outburst came from, but I know, without a doubt, that I don’t regret it.

The group continues to look at me wearily, and I decide that backpedalling is probably the only way for them to accept Roman’s presence tonight. “I just mean that we should all be kind to each other. Who deserves to be here more than our team captain.”

The group continues to look at me oddly, but the surprise slowly leaves their faces. With weary glances in each other’s direction, I signal Charles that he need to be the bridge at the moment.

He nods my way conspiratorially, always being there for me when I need him. He promptly turns past me to face Roman, lifting his drink in friendship instead of accusation. “Hey, Roman. Do you want to sit and play cards with us?”

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“No.” The voice behind sounds bored as he responds instantly.

I whip around in my chair, my blonde curls slapping me in the face as I look at him.

“Roman!” I whisper-yell in his face.

“What?”

Turning back to the group, I hold up a finger in the universal gesture of give me a second . Turning my knees to face the outside of the booth, Roman puts his arm on the wall above me and leans down.

I furrow my brow as I glare up at him, poking my pointer finger into his chest.

“They’re reaching out. This is time for you to make a friend,” I plead.

“I have a friend,” he counters.

“Who?”

“You. ”

My blank stare speaks for me because I get the added bonus of watching his lip quirk up. “You need more than that,” I say exasperatedly.

“No, Langley. I really don’t.” His gaze is teasing, the smile countering the storm cloud he had when he walked in here.

The shuffling of the group beside us catches my attention, and I see them all exiting

from the other side of the table.

Charles must see my expression, yelling at me as he shuffles himself from the seat.

“We’re going to dance, you should come!” He smiles at me, lessening his expression as he looks over my shoulder.

Then, I lose sight of them all as the group joins the masses.

Turning to the giant grump beside me, I can’t resist another chance to mess with him. “I hope you’re happy, bud.” Poking his chest harshly with every word.

His face fights the urge to increase his smile as his hand whips out to wrap over mine. “Oh, I am.”

With one more glare, I finish off my drink and pluck his from his hand. He gives a protest that I promptly ignore and drown the contents of his rum and coke.

“I’m going to dance; you can come if you like,” I tell him. He doesn’t move out of the way, and I revel in the blush that colours his cheeks as I squeeze past him .

With the drinks flowing through me and a sudden burst of confidence, I happily smile as I make my way onto the dance floor. I don’t even make it ten steps before it feels like I’ve been hit by a truck.

Aurora’s arms wrap tightly around me, and she screams in delight when I laugh and hug her back. “Girl, you scared me half to death! Why do you always do this!” I try to use my stern voice, but I can’t seem to be angry when it comes to her.

“Where have you been! It has been an Isla and Liam sandwich all night!” Aurora puts her finger in her mouth and makes a fake vomit motion.

“I stopped at the table to drop my stuff. Also, I brought Roman, so maybe you guys —.”

“Why the fuck did you bring Roman!” Aurora’s voice somehow yells louder than the music, and I can’t help but cringe. Before I can explain, she decides to continue. “Did he force you to invite him? I bet he wants to see us all having fun before he books another last-minute training session.”

Aurora laughs at her own joke, but I frown up at her.

“He did everything in his power not to come, but I forced him. Maybe if his athletes gave him a chance, they would realize he’s actually very nice.

” I end my speech with a knowing look and feel satisfied at the skepticism in Aurora’s gaze. “Will you give him a chance,” I plead.

“Nope,” she declares. “I don’t buy it. He’s a raging ass, and I’m going to prove it!” The way Aurora seems to be swaying makes a laugh escape my throat. Wait, is she swaying, or am I?

A fit of giggling quickly takes over me, and I quickly realize I’m too drunk to be having this conversation. Aurora’s laughter quickly joins mine, and she grabs my hand.

The giggles fully take over my body as we both sway on the spot. Aurora’s laughter reaches my ear and I decide the only reasonable thing to do at this point is get a drink and dance. She must have been thinking the same thing, grabbing me at the wrist and yanking me onto the floor.

We join the rest of the team late enough into the night that all the friend groups have merged together. My cousin is nowhere to be seen as I scan our group and I can let

myself relax with everyone.

I spot Charles and a guy from the bobsled team becoming well acquainted behind me. Liam and Isla are exactly how Aurora had described, the pair grabbing for each other as if it's the end of the world. I spot my best friend looking in their direction, but I quickly bring her attention back to me.

Songs go by in a blur, some requiring me to sing at the top of my lungs while others I keep strictly to dancing. Charles has ditched his guy, also having noticed Aurora's situation, and spends his time with her.

Landon and Xander show up at some point, both boys giving me a hug and making my friend's eyebrows raise. I told Aurora about our afternoon together, but it slipped my mind to tell anyone else.

As Xander spins me around for the millionth time, a parting of the crowd gives me a clear view to the back of the bar.

Roman reclines against the wall, the signature scowl well in place as his eyes stay glued on me. The intensity of his gaze causes me to stumble and Xander immediately pulls me closer to him.

Whether it be the lights or all the drinks flowing through me, I thought I saw genuine anger quickly flash across Roman's face. Before I can look closer, I'm spun in the other direction and brought back into the circle of my friends.

I try to go back to dancing, but the feeling of Roman's eyes on me is similar to an itch that I can't reach. At this point, the only thing that will calm me is another drink.

I get Aurora's attention, pointing to myself and then the bar behind me, and she gives two thumbs up in return. Making my way off the dance floor, the feeling of lightness

returns to me as I wiggle through a crowd of friendly faces.

The various sports teams smile as I walk by, even some athletes I've talked with before giving me a wave. Frustration fills me as another group of people passes me, and I realize that I've been looking for Roman this whole time.

The wall he was previously at stands vacant, and a sour feeling fills my stomach when I think he could be on the dance floor. Maybe another girl asked him to dance, and he obliged her. I start to gnaw at my nail but force myself to brush off the feeling.

Roman and I aren't even anything. We're barely even friends, and I have no justification to feel this way.

A spot at the bar frees up, and I quickly fill the open position.

Two shots of tequila later, my brain is murky, and I'm ready to get back to the dancing.

Pushing myself away, I do another once over of the space, hoping I had just missed Roman the first time.

The entire floor seems Roman-free as I focus on my path and walk straight into this guy's back.

As an apology immediately bubbles from my throat, but the odor of the man causes my blood to go cold. The smell of cheap cologne drowns me as Daniel turns around.

The anger on his face quickly disappears as he sees me, and a slimy smile takes over his features.

"Whoa, Rhodes. How much have you had to drink tonight, babe?" I feel hands on my

back, and before I understand what's happening, he's pulling me in for a hug.

This is torture. Having his touch on me while I have to continue to inhale him. Mixing this interaction with my two tequila shots causes my brain to swim.

Panic and claustrophobia overtake me as I plant my hands on his chest and push. I can't seem to get even an inch away as he peers down at me and laughs. "Hey, hey. Calm down. We're basically family, Rhodes."

His words only cause more emotions to flood me, indignations, denial, and fury all cloud my judgement as I fumble for what to do.

All the time I spent trying to prepare myself for when this moment would come, seems to crumble at my feet.

My mind does nothing but spin as his disgusting form tries to get closer to me.

My breathing quickly turns into rapid pants before I can control it, and I find myself falling into a full-blown panic attack.

"What the hell is wrong with you –." Daniel's words are cut off abruptly. The sticky heat of his body finally leaving me and being replaced by cool air kissing my skin.

There's some yelling that's undecipherable over the music, but I just put my head in my hands and attempt to orient myself. I need to get a grip right now, the drinks in my system are turning against me as I feel myself start to sway.

Gentle hands grip me under my elbows, steadying me and slowly guiding me away from the busy crowd. I immediately know it's Roman, his strong hands showing a reverence I would've never associated with the team captain.

He tucks his arm around me and seems to relax as I push myself closer to him. Filling my nose with the clean laundry smell that always sticks to his person.

He starts to walk, and I blindly follow. The fear that Daniel will follow us prevents me from even registering our movements .

The noise decreases as the crowds become easier to maneuver through, and I realize he's walking toward the washrooms.

The distinct noise of girls shrieking fills my ears, but Roman pays them no heed as he leads me into a stall. Putting the lid on the toilet, I have no shame as I sit down and put my head in my hands.

He shuts the bathroom door behind him, and I notice he doesn't lock it as he crouches down so we're at eye level. His finger is crooked as it lightly rests under my chin, applying light pressure as he tilts my head up to look at him.

There's a quiet moment that passes between us, the silence stretching as we both continue to watch the other.

"What happened, Langley," he whispers. The night's events flooding back to me as I let his words register.

The alcohol in my body does nothing to suppress the wobble that forms in my lip, the water in my eyes coming quickly after.

The tears start to fall at the same time I watch Roman's face crumple. His usual disdain is nowhere to be seen as his expression turns to one of sorrow .

"No. Don't cry, beautiful," he says softly. Placing his hand on the side of my face as the tears silently stream down. Roman's thumb swipes away the moisture and helps

soothe me.

After a couple minutes of holding me, I start to feel better. I fully blame the drinks for my little episode, and I quickly sniff as I sit up straighter. Guilt fills me to the brim, he didn't want to come out, let alone spend his night with a crying girl.

"Roman. I'm so sorry," I half laugh and half sob. My dehydration becoming apparent as my head starts to spin.

"It's okay," his voice soft as he rubs my face.

"If it makes you feel better, I had a great time. Team bonding went better than I could have hoped." His tone is light, but the sarcasm is laced in every word.

"I think I'm ready to call these guys my new brothers," he states with a serious expression.

I peer up at him, my spinning head making all of this worse. "You are kind of an ass," I deadpan. The time for niceties is far behind me, and I put my splitting head against the cool bathroom stall.

"Don't I know it, Langley," his tone chipper.

He starts to say more, the sound of his voice coming from high above me. But I think the drinks have run their course, and I get no warning as I promptly blackout.

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Daniel is a dead man walking.

The sun's blinding as I groan and pull the covers over my head. The concept of waking up crosses my mind, but I ignore it completely and snuggle deeper into the comforter. I don't have my first class until two, so that's plenty of time to sleep in and get ready for the day.

My bed is so much softer than normal. My thrifted mattress has never given me this good of a sleep before, and there's no way I'm going to ruin this moment by waking up.

Even the smell is different today, the scent of cleaning detergent filling my nose, but in a subtle and calming way. I relish in this comfort, as I fully extend my limbs and stretch them out.

Pain shoots down my legs with a vengeance, my tailbone throbbing at the discomfort I put it through. The night comes back to me then, slipping on the ice, forcing Roman to come along, dancing, and then running into Daniel.

I can't help but put my hands over my head in embarrassment since the entire exchange went horribly.

Roman must think so little of me; he doesn't know our history, and probably thought I was just being a weirdo who freaked out.

The memory of crying in the washroom flickers in my brain, but I'm just going to pretend that didn't happen.

With a steadying breath, I pull back the covers and prepare to get a good start to the day. Carefully moving my tailbone, I throw my legs over the bed and come to a complete stop.

A very large Roman is curled up on the floor, wearing a blanket that barely covers him, and his head rests on what looks to be a throw pillow. His dark brown hair is messily strewn across his pillow, and the expression on his face lacks all the tension I'm so accustomed to seeing.

This is the most defenceless I've ever seen him. The lack of a scowl or furrowed brow revealing the soft features of his mouth and eyes. His state of utter peace shocks me so much, that I'm just now realizing he's asleep on my floor .

Wait, no. That's not right. This isn't my pink duvet, but rather a dark blue one. Quickly looking around the room, I'm greeted by the sight of minimal decorations and ornate furniture. Roman's actually sleeping on his floor, and I'm in his bed.

Looking under the covers, I see I'm still wearing my outfit from last night, and I let out the breath I was holding. I never expected Roman to do anything without clear consent, but my trust in men is officially at an all-time low.

A sensible part of my brain is telling me to bolt, and if this were some random guy, I would've already been down the street.

But something has been going on between us lately, and I can't imagine I'm here for no reason.

No, I don't want to bolt. I want answers.

Leaning over the side of the bed, my hair falls over my shoulder and hangs right over Roman's face. Surprisingly, it's not as knotted as I had feared, and I quickly tuck it

behind my ear.

Using my pointer finger, I don't think twice as I poke Roman in the forehead.

He lets out a frustrated grumble, the scowl instantly forming on his face as he turns onto his side. I move to lay on my stomach, and I lean farther over the bed so I can poke him even harder.

Seriously, what's with this guy? If I felt someone randomly poking me in the face as I slept, I would wake up right away.

I now lean precariously off the bed as I simultaneously poke him and say his name. "Roman. Roman. Roman," I whisper yell. Increasing the pressure of my pokes each time.

This finally causes him to stir, whipping his face in my direction and glaring at me with menace. If he thinks he has the right to be upset, he has another thing coming.

"Roman Huxley, you better have a damn good explanation for why I woke up in your bed!" The volume of my voice rises as I just start randomly smacking him on the shoulder. This man is something else, only starting to wake up as I actively hit him.

"Shhhhh," he groans. His hand lightly grasping my wrist and pulling it towards his chest. With one of my hands clasped in his, he closes his eyes, and the peaceful expression takes over his features again.

He turns to the other side, putting my hand in his and fully succeeding in pulling me off the bed. The upside is that I finally got Roman to wake up as my weight lands roughly on top of him.

His upper body shoots up off the ground, confusion written all over his tired face.

“Rhodes, are you okay? What’s happening? What’s going on?” His face is scrunched up with sleep, and his brown hair defies gravity with how it’s sticking up in every direction.

His gaze focuses on me as he seems to wake up more, and his hand steadys me as I sit up myself.

I look at him with an accusing glare, not letting him think for a second that I’m happy.

“Well, I tried to wake you up multiple times, but you were basically dead. Seriously, I was smacking you, and you didn’t even move! ”

His palm moves to rub his eye and then moves to run through his unruly hair. “Uh yeah,” he mumbles. “That makes sense. I haven’t stayed up past ten in such a long time. I think my body just shut down.” He reclines back onto the floor, keeping his eyes on me as I watch them slowly close.

“Are you trying to go back to sleep!” I try not to shriek at this man, but is he serious right now. “A strange girl just woke up in your bed, and you don’t even care. Is this a common thing for you? Do girls just come and go through that door?” I add some fake sass to my voice as I stare him down.

Roman stares at me as if I said something ridiculous and gives me a knowing look as he sits up fully. He’s wearing a Polar ski team shirt, I can’t help but focus on the flex of his arm as he stretches them both over his head.

“Rhodes. Of course, I’m trying to go back to sleep; we were up until three in the morning. Second, you are the farthest thing from some strange girl.”

I decide to brush off his second statement, not wanting to read too much into it and

have to acknowledge the flutter in my stomach. The first part of his statement makes me pause. Three in the morning?

That can't be right. We couldn't have left later than midnight. But now that I think about it, I can't remember leaving at all.

He must see my confusion, the last remnants of sleep leaving his face as he looks at me. "What do you remember from last night?" His question is soft, as if he knows I can't remember.

I see no point in sugar coating my memory since he was there the whole time anyway. "I can remember everything until I started crying in the washroom. So, yeah." I purse my lips and look away, refusing to let the embarrassment overtake me at this moment.

I take a couple of scootches back to the end of the makeshift floor-bed so there's a decent gap between us, and he doesn't feel uncomfortable.

It's easy to tell that he's fully awake now, as his classic scowl takes up residence on his face once again.

He tilts his head up, looking at the ceiling as he thinks. His expression suddenly turns more excited as an idea forms in his mind. I'm nervous as he turns to face me with a small smile.

Wariness quickly fills me as I return his gaze with a skeptical expression. "Alright, I'll tell you something from last night in exchange for a question answered by you." He states this as if it's an acceptable trade and places his hands under his chin.

"Is this a form of blackmail?" I ask immediately.

“No,” he states. The side of his mouth quirks up, and I can’t help but frown.

Frankly, I don’t have many secrets, and I like being in his presence, so I don’t mind going further with this. “Fine, but I get to go first,” I say as I extend my hand.

He seems smug as his large hand wraps around mine, giving it one downward tug. “Deal. ”

I decide to bite the bullet right away. “What happened last night?”

“Too vague,” he responds immediately.

“You never said it had to be a specific question!” I counter, triumph lighting up my face.

He narrows his eyes at me, the gears turning behind those pretty brown eyes of his. “Fine, Langley. Last night we went to the bar and came back here.” He stretches his hands in the air, an arrogant smile building on his face.

When he looks back at me, my frown mirrors his from earlier. It seems that if I want detailed answers, I will need to ask detailed questions.

“Why am I in your bed?” I ask quickly.

“Nope, it’s my turn now. You wasted your question. Who’s Daniel?”

My morning brain didn’t expect having to explain this so early, and he can see it in the way my eyes slowly widen.

There’s a piece of me that just wants to get up and leave, ignore this game, and go right home. But I know he didn’t ask it to be rude.

There's an undertone of worry in his gaze, and I find myself being just as curious as he is .

“Daniel is my ex-boyfriend,” I say the words slowly. Trying them out and smiling when I feel nothing towards the sentence.

Seeing him last night was overwhelming for sure, but I've put a lot of work into moving on from anything we had. The lack of feeling regarding him calms me down, and I look at Roman with a little more confidence.

He watches my face through this all, and he's obviously struggling to keep his own expression neutral. Even though his face is set in a frown, he doesn't broach the topic again and signals that it's my turn.

“Why am I in your bed?” That has been one of my biggest questions so far. Why didn't I just go home with Aurora?

“Because that's where you fell asleep,” he says with a straight face that crumbles instantly at my glare.

“I'm sorry, I'm sorry. That was a joke!” He puts his hands up and blocks the smack I send his way.

“I don't know how much you remember, but you didn't want to leave the bar at all.

You left the bathroom, then ran onto the dance floor and hung out with the rest of the team.

Everyone was completely hammered, and I only left when you stumbled over to me, asking me to take you home.

” He states this all as if it’s just a fact and not horribly embarrassing for me.

“Then I had this whole moment of panic if I should go through your purse and find your house keys or just take you back to my house. In the end, I was exhausted and overwhelmed, so I just brought you here.” He rubs the back of his neck, and his body language conveys how unsure he was of his decision.

Without a doubt in my mind, I get up on my knees and wrap my arms around his neck. Words don’t seem like enough as I express my gratitude. “Thank you so much, Roman.”

He hasn’t moved under me, but I feel his hand lightly pat my back after his shock wears off. I chuckle at his awkwardness and pull back to my side of the floor bed, with my tailbone only giving an uncomfortable twinge now.

His face is beet red, and the blush only intensifies when he looks in my direction. I suppress my smile at his adorable behaviour and decide to put him out of his misery. “Your turn,” I say casually.

Collecting himself, he answers right away, as if he’s already planned out these questions. “Why do you not like your cousin? ”

His innocent question doesn’t fool me. I have a feeling I was blabbering last night, and Roman’s now trying to put together a puzzle.

“We don’t get along,” I reply quickly.

“Too vague,” he counters immediately.

“I don’t want to tell you,” I say defensively.

“I didn’t want to go out drinking last night, but sometimes we don’t get what we want.”

I glare at him, and the fact that he just made a really good point.

“Jasmine and I have never gotten along, but things got much worse when I caught her sleeping with my boyfriend.” I keep my tone neutral, since I don’t let the situation cause me discomfort anymore.

But I can’t help my laugh as I look at Roman’s face.

He’s able to school his features better than anyone I know, so seeing his jaw drop completely is very amusing. I can tell I’ve thrown him off greatly with this information, as his face looks as though I’ve slapped him.

At first, I kept the situation quiet because I was so embarrassed. I couldn’t even imagine leaving my house for the first week after I found them. But, as time passed, I just stopped caring .

Revealing the details to everyone would only bring more attention to me, and that’s the last thing I want.

The best revenge I can think of at this point is bringing a loving partner to this family wedding, but that’s out of the question for me.

The next best thing is faking a loving partner, and that’s much more doable.

“It’s your question now,” he says. It’s obvious he wants to ask more, but the fact that he’s not prying is a relief to me.

“Why were you sleeping on the floor?” Thinking about him sleeping on the hard floor

all night made me cringe, and I had to know why.

He looks up at me immediately, his facial expression seems like he knows a funny joke that I don't.

"Oh, I tried my very best to give you the bed and go sleep downstairs. You weren't having it.

" He tries to keep his voice level, but a chuckle works its way in as he keeps talking.

"I had my work cut out for me on that one. You barely let me sleep with my shirt on, let alone downstairs."

If I could choose a moment to disappear, it would be right now. "Shut up. That didn't happen," I say defensively .

"Oh, it really did. And I hate to break it to you, Langley, but it was hilarious."

I fall on my side, covering my face with my hands as I process his words.

"I'm so, so, sorry, Roman," I whine.

As I highly debate moving out of the country, his hands lightly grip my wrists and pull my hands away.

"Hey, no, no. It's okay, you weren't yourself." I see him give me a reassuring smile as he looks down at me on the floor. "If anything, it made me feel very handsome. So, thank you."

It's strange; his behaviour towards me has been so kind lately, and I have no idea why. No matter, he has made me feel nothing but safe this past week, and for that,

I'm thankful.

I nod in his direction, feeling better as I sit up and indicate that it's his turn.

He hesitates before he asks, eyeing me up curiously before he speaks. I brace myself for this one, sensing there's one more thing he hasn't figured out yet.

“My question is, what's the deal with your cousin's wedding?”

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I like everything in this deal, except the word fake.

“What?” Is the only word that properly forms in my head as I look at him. How did he know about the wedding? Did Jasmine come talk to him while I was dancing? Did my mom call him?

No, not the last one.

“Was that a serious question? Should I repeat myself?” His tone is bored, as if he’s not asking me to admit one of my greatest problems to him.

As any rational adult, I handle the situation calmly and with dignity.

“Who told you!” I point an accusing finger at him as I yell in his face.

He easily bats my hand away, leaning in close to me as he smiles. “You did.” He puts both hands behind his head as he relaxes against his bedroom wall. “You sort of told me everything. That’s why we were up so late. You wanted to vent, so I just stayed awake and listened.

“So, if I’m correct. Your cousin’s taking Daniel, who’s your ex-boyfriend, to Jasmine’s brother’s wedding. This huge family celebration, and you need to bring a date.”

It’s irritating that he’s acting like this whole situation is some sort of game he can just try and solve. The usual anger I direct towards him isn’t there when I look inside myself. All I can find is a genuine hurt that he’s treating my problem so lightly.

Roman senses my change in atmosphere, taking one look at my face before jumping over to my side. The pride he was just displaying is gone as he peers down at me. Worry clearly splayed across his face.

“I’m sorry, that was rude of me. You just seemed so sad last night, and I want to make you feel better, and –.” He grumbles at a loss for the right words.

As I start to dismiss him, he looks me dead in the eyes as he decides something.

“Rhodes, I want to help you! I just want to understand what about this wedding was upsetting you. And most of all, I want to do everything in my power to make sure you never cry like that again!” The look of hurt is clear on his face as his brain takes him back to last night .

Clearing his throat, he returns to scratching the back of his head as he stands up.

Roman has always been very reserved, ever since we were kids. He was clean, grumpy, angry, and quiet. These traits seem to have only grown with him as he got older, and everyone from our old team is well aware of his tendencies.

But I’ve never seen him lose his temper, not in all those years. Whether it was a garbage race day, the team was fighting him, or he was just unhappy. Not once did he ever outwardly express his anger.

He must realize what I’m thinking, since the shock at his outburst is clearly written on my face. In response, his face turns beet red, and he just begins to pace in front of me.

“Sorry for yelling. I don’t even know what came over me,” he admits, seemingly stunned by his own actions.

I smile up at him, brushing off his worries as I stand to my feet as well.

I could never keep a level head like his does.

Roman has a superpower when it comes to keeping his emotions in check and analyzing a situation.

Always choosing to remain calm and composed, even at the worst of times.

It's healthy for him to express his feelings instead of bottling them up .

As I'm about to tell him all this, an idea starts to form in my head.

It's crazy, and I immediately ignore it as soon as it fully forms.

Although.

As I think about it more. He would be the only one that could pull it off.

I change directions with my earlier smile, replacing it with the sweetest one I can muster.

"What just happened in your brain?" He asks as fear and confusion lace his tone.

My smile mirrors his smug one from earlier, and a brilliant idea blossoms in my mind. "Nothing," I say casually. If this has any chance of working, he needs to feel like he pried the answer from me.

"Tell me, Langley," he demands in his clipped tone.

"No, seriously. It's nothing," I brush him off and walk towards my purse on his desk.

He stays silent, watching me and I make sure my wallet and keys are accounted for. As I continue to ignore him, I watch from the corner of my eye as he rubs his hands over his face.

I know I've won when this is followed by an audible groan .

"Just tell me," he says annoyed and motions with his hands.

"I don't think you'll like it, so I'll just keep it to myself," I say casually. Silently cheering in my head as his face shows open curiosity.

"Langley. You have to tell me now. I don't care what it is."

Bingo.

Taking a big breath, as if to convey my reluctance, I let him in on my brilliant idea. "I was just thinking over my recent issue and how you could help me."

His curious expression vanishes. Quickly being replaced by the bored and closed-off face he usually wears.

Ensuring my voice doesn't waver because of his change in mood, I keep explaining my idea. "Here it is, you be my boyfriend! I told my mom last week that I had a boyfriend, and everyone knows we have been interacting more as of late. It's perfect!"

Throwing up my hands in joy, Roman's face doesn't move a fraction. His brow is furrowed and his mouth stays glued downward.

Realizing my wording might have scared him a little, I quickly backpedal. "Well, fake boyfriend, of course. It would just be until the wedding, and nothing would

change at all.”

He looks at me with an upset expression on his face, and I realize I might have overstepped big time. I guess I don’t really know too much about Roman at all; maybe he’s already dating someone. The thought that I just asked a taken man to be my boyfriend terrifies me and I talk before he can.

“Oh my gosh. You’re dating someone, aren’t you,” I speak quickly. Putting my hands over my mouth to show him my genuine shock.

As he’s about to respond, I can’t help but cut him off yet again.

“I’m so sorry. Truly, I had no idea. I should probably just get out of here.” I beeline for his door, but he promptly steps in front of me, and grabs both my biceps as I almost walk into him.

“Stop. Just stop,” his words sound as exasperated as he looks. Taking another big breath, he looks down at me with a serious expression.

“I’m stopping,” I say quickly. Earning a glare from the man in front of me.

“Hush,” he grabs my lips with his fingers, lightly pinching them closed. I can’t help but frown, but he continues as if nothing’s happening .

“I don’t have a girlfriend. I haven’t dated anyone in years because I’ve decided to wait for the right person.” His words are sweet but have a bitter aftertaste when I think about him with this right person .

“Why does it have to be boyfriend? Can’t I just go with you as a date when the time comes?” His question is more like a plea, and I cringe as I answer him.

“It’s just really complicated, that’s all. I can’t just take a date to the wedding. Since we have so many family members, it was agreed upon that only serious partners would attend.” If I could’ve just brought anyone, I wouldn’t be in this situation.

He lets go of my arms, turning so he can pace around his room. I would be lying if I said I didn’t miss his touch, as the place he was holding goes cold in an instant. His hands then spear through his already dishevelled hair, and he lets out a sigh as he turns back to me.

All my hopes plummet as I make eye contact with him, and his face of guilt mirrors mine from earlier. Regret rips through me, the thought that this would even work makes me feel so foolish. I can’t stop the flush that creeps up my neck as embarrassment takes over.

“Listen, Rhodes I –.”

“Nope. No need. You don’t have to do any of that.” I chuckle awkwardly, inching my way towards the door.

Roman starts to protest, some unreadable emotion taking over his features. “Wait. Don’t leave. I want to explain.”

I can’t help but cut him off once again, shame and embarrassment making my vision blur. “It’s fine, man . Don’t even worry about it, dude . No explanation is needed, homie . I’m just going to leave now,” I mumble the last words as I fly out his door.

“Rhodes! Please just wait!” His words chase after me as I sprint down his hallway and run out the house.

Sitting on my couch with a pint of rice milk ice cream, I stew in my sorrows. “Stupid athlete diet, stupid rice milk, stupid Roman,” I mumble into the tub.

The rest of my complaints turn into grumbles as I shovel this garbage into my mouth and scroll on my phone.

I had made the prudent decision to skip class today, favouring the idea of burrowing into the couch cushions.

The only thing that had calmed my stormy brain at first was sketching.

The feeling of the pencil in my hand allowed me to breathe peacefully for a minute.

But, when different angles of Roman were the only drawings that appeared on my page, I tossed my paper aside.

Since then, my only companion has been social media. My feed is always filled with these fitness influencers as they show me a new way to burn that stubborn fat .

As a high-performance athlete who works out almost every day, I find these more comedic than anything else. Some gym influencers are legit and can really help people, but most are just looking for views. Those creators are the subjects of my ridicule.

Watching a lady push the Smith machine bar up with her feet causes me to form the first smile I've had since the incident. The issue is, every time I remember this morning, my chest starts to throb with how embarrassing the entire interaction was.

As I really think about it, there's some good that came out of it. I put enough trust in a guy to ask for help. Which hasn't happened since Daniel hurt me.

On the other hand, he did reject me, and I was too much of a coward to even hear him out.

So, pros and cons to the situation for sure .

Just the fact that I felt so comfortable asking Roman for such a big favour makes me cringe.

Why on earth would he ever want to be my fake boyfriend?

What would he even get out of that? The fact that I'm going to see him at training tomorrow makes me groan out loud and I fall sideways onto the couch.

The sound of the front door slamming shut causes me to brace myself as I hear my name ring through the house. "RHODES LANGLEY!"

During my intense mental spiral, I had totally forgotten about one person who always feels the need to know about my business. Aurora.

She storms into the living room, planting her feet in front of the couch as she crosses her arms over her chest. "Explain. Everything. Right now!"

Her yell causes me to pull away as I slowly sit up.

I'm debating on what I can even say about last night, but I never get the chance. "Where did you even go? Someone told me that you went home with ROMAN! Roman, Rhodes? Are you serious? I mean, he's the worst guy you could have possibly gone home with! He's such an ass! "

Aurora continues her tirade, but I can't listen to this for one more second. Even after everything, I said I would start defending him more, and there is no time like the present.

"Aurora," I stand as I say this. My interruption and movement shocking her into

silence. I never cut off my best friend, instead choosing to always let her rant and yell.

But I'm not in the mood for this today. I could not be less in the mood even if I tried, and I'm going to defend him.

"You have to stop. I know you don't like him at all, but you need to give Roman a chance. If not for him, then for me."

This time I'm not going to back down. Aurora's personality causes lots of people to cower from her. Which is usually just easier, and I tend to just agree with whatever she's saying. But, if this is going to work, I have to look her dead in the eyes and show her I'm serious.

Her eyes narrow in my direction; a hesitancy overcomes her as she looks at me. "Is something going on between you two?" She asks with curiosity filling her voice.

I suppress the laugh that bubbles up in my throat, his rejection still so fresh in my mind. More than anything, I want to unload my thoughts and let Aurora in on my humiliating morning. Unfortunately, that's just not the best idea right now.

Not telling Aurora about my ridiculous proposition is the right move in my mind. She would only pity me and try to murder Roman. Neither of those being constructive things that could help my issue.

"No. I promise I would've told you immediately if that were the case." Grabbing her hand and giving it a squeeze, I make sure she knows I'm telling the truth.

The fight leaves her body as she visibly relaxes before me, and she smiles as she squeezes my hand back. Expressing a breath, she flops onto the couch and looks up at me with curiosity.

“Alright, I’ll take it easy on Roman, but you have to tell me this.” I return her quizzical gaze and take a seat opposite of her. “Where did you sleep last night,” she asks with a knowing smile on her face.

My face flushes red as I lean back into the cushions, Aurora’s smile only growing the longer I stay silent. While I’m not going to tell her about my stupid proposition, I see no reason to hide the rest.

“Roman’s bed,” I say quickly, covering my face with my hands.

Aurora’s resulting scream fills the house.

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This is going to be more dramatic than I would've liked.

Using every ounce of energy I have left, I push myself harder and cross the finish line.

Even though it's well below freezing, sweat drips from my hair and into my eyes, to the point that it blurs my vision.

My training bib migrated up my torso during my run, so I absently pull it down so I can properly display my number. Every team member has a training number to keep track of their time, and I'm happy to be lucky number fourteen.

I ski a little way down from the end of the course to ensure there's enough room for the racer behind me to stop without hitting me. We're training giant slalom today, which means everyone's reaching speeds upwards of eighty kilometres per hour.

The last thing I need in my life right now is to be hit by my teammate finishing their run .

Stopping in front of the timing box, I pop off my skis and approach the device clipped to the side of the fence.

My first run was my slowest, which doesn't surprise me. As the team's skis continue to compact the snow, my times will gradually speed up.

Although, it's essential I work on perfecting that first run since that's all we get on race day. With our first race just around the corner, I make a mental note to work

harder on those initial training runs.

Smiling at my results nonetheless, I lift my goggles to swipe at the sweat that's now pooling on my face.

Even though it's only training runs, I've been putting everything I have into each lap. Using my feelings from last week as fuel as I push myself even harder.

"Rhodes, can you pass the timing box?"

I whip around in surprise as the voice catches me off guard. Calvin's standing behind me with Nico and Kai at his flank. I must've been so absorbed in comparing my times I didn't even hear them behind me.

"Yeah, sorry about that," I say kindly. Smiling as I pass them the handheld device .

Walking to my skis, I turn back when one of them calls my name. "Are you number fourteen?" Calvin asks, trying to peer at my bib, but it has bunched up again.

"Yeah, why?" I ask back, blowing out an annoyed breath as I pull it back down.

"You're the fastest girl so far," he says casually. Not even bothering to take his eyes off the device.

"What!" I run back over, squeezing past Kai to look at the box.

He turns the box to the side, showing me the top standings, with number fourteen being the highest for the girls.

I hear the guys talking to more team members who stopped near us, but I can't take my focus off the timing box. The fastest female time of the day was from me, two-

hundredths of a second faster than Aurora's best.

Passing the box back to Calvin, I walk to my skis in a daze. Happiness and pride are at war with each other, both emotions flooding me when I think about how hard I've been working and how it's paying off.

Blue ski boots suddenly come into my vision, and I look up to meet the eyes of their owner .

"Hey, Cous. How was your run?" Jasmine stands in front of me, her bright red racing suit drawing in the light and making her even more of a focus on the hill.

"Fine. How was yours?" I ask hesitantly. Jasmine never talks to me, and I never talk to her; that way, everyone stays happy.

So, my guard immediately rises as she smiles at me like a fox in a hen house. "It was horrible. I'm skiing terribly today, and my times are garbage."

It's obvious that she's seen the times for today. I know as soon as she saw that I was much faster than her, there's no way she could admit that her runs were good.

"Dang, that sucks," I say awkwardly. Lifting my shoulders and pointing behind me. "I was actually just leaving." I manage to get the words out before I'm tackled from the side, and lifted into the air.

"SHE'S THE FASTEST WOMAN ALIVE!" Xander roars in my ear.

When did he even get here?

Taking a look around, I notice over half the team is now congregating at the timing box, as they wait for their turn to look at the times. Unfortunately, because everyone

on the team loves Xander, we've caught all their attention.

Murmurs of my fastest time start to spread around the group, but as Xander puts me back on my feet, all I see is Jasmine. Taylor and Sofia have joined her, but she pays them no mind as she stares daggers at me.

"Dang, this is an amazing time! Holy shit, Rhodes, you were flying," Xander exclaims even louder than before.

Landon walks over and gives me a high five, leaning past me to see the time for himself.

I can't help but blush slightly. Xander and Landon don't owe me anything, so this encouragement from them is hard to disregard.

"In what world do we believe she actually got this time?" Jasmine's outburst startles everyone around us. People are looking back and forth to try and figure out if she's serious or just making a weird joke.

After no one responds, Calvin decides that inserting himself in the conversation is a great idea. "I mean, she beat me on that last run. There's a chance the timing wand is just busted. "

His immediate dismissal doesn't come as a shock to me; the bigger surprise being the fact that I might've beaten one of the fastest guys on the team.

"I don't know, man. Maybe you're just slow," Xander says with a smug smile. The surrounding team members lightly chuckling at his words.

I smile with the rest of them, ignoring how his comment doubles as a jab at me. Just because my time was faster than Calvin's doesn't mean he's slow. It could also mean

that I'm quick.

I work up the courage to say as much when another member of the group makes themselves known. "I'm going to disagree with you on that, Xander. My thoughts are that Rhodes is just fast," Roman says in his usual bored tone.

His white race suit stretches with his body as he walks into our makeshift circle. Extending his hand outward, Xander wordlessly hands him the timing box. The joking atmosphere dies in an instant, everyone tensing as Roman presses buttons and examines the screen.

"Based on the times before and after Rhodes, the timing works fine. Looks like you're going to have to speed up if you want to beat her, Calvin." Roman's wearing a devious grin, the comment hitting home as I watch Calvin's pale face redden.

As I brace for Calvin to spit venom back at Roman, it's Jasmine that pipes up. "What are you playing at, Roman? Isn't the team captain supposed to be impartial about his athletes' times?" She says with conviction, crossing her arms as if she's preparing to win a battle.

"What are you yammering about now?" He asks dismissively. The way I know he's rolling his eyes under his goggles has me stifling a laugh.

Jasmine's hands ball into fists at her side, and I swear I can hear her tooth crack from how hard she's clenching her jaw. "I'm talking about the fact that you're blatantly taking Rhodes' side, even though you are supposed to remain neutral to everyone as our team captain."

Her entire speech is garbage; the team hasn't respected Roman's position all season. It's only when Jasmine needs a basis for her argument that she pretends he's this role model figure.

“Let’s just say I have an invested interest in Rhodes,” he says plainly.

“And what interest would that be?” Jasmine immediately shoots back .

“Well, Jasmine,” he says with mock sweetness. Taking his eyes off the timing box, he finally looks up and he wraps his arm around me. Pulling me close to his side, he lets his arm hang off my shoulder as he locks eyes with Jasmine.

“What kind of boyfriend would I be if I didn’t intervene?”

I can feel the team’s movements freeze at his words. Even I can’t help but whip my head towards him, thankful for my reflective goggles, otherwise, everyone could see how wide my eyes have become. Did he just? In front of everyone?

My bafflement is completely ignored by Roman as he keeps his gaze in front of him.

His form leaning in closer to my cousin, and his voice lowering as if he’s sharing a secret with her.

“I know of some pretty pathetic boyfriends. Boyfriends that lie, some that steal, and one that cheats.” He emphasizes the last word, standing back up to his full height as he keeps me glued to his side.

“I’m not going to be anything like those men,” he says, his harsh features softening as he looks down at me.

Even though this whole thing is fake, and both of us know it, his words soothe me. I don’t think I even knew how much I needed to hear them, and him saying them all on his own makes them so much more meaningful.

I can feel the anger pouring off Jasmine in waves now, the double meaning in his

words evident to only us three.

Roman promptly pulls us away before we can feel her wrath; his touch gentle but firm as he walks me to our skis.

I chance a glance back to the group and find all eyes on us. Shock and confusion splayed across the team's faces, apart from devious smiles coming from both Xander and Landon.

Roman doesn't seem too bothered, though, not even looking up as he clips in his boots and skis away. Without thinking this through, I clip in my skis and chase after my new boyfriend .

We both fly down the hill, Roman periodically turning his head back as he does practice turns ahead of me.

Usually, I would savour the groomed snow under my skis and the freedom of my turns.

But Roman's words succeed in cycling through my mind and take away any appreciation I have for my current skiing.

Let's just say I have invested interest in Rhodes .

It's like a broken record in my mind, the way he leaned in close as the words flowed effortlessly from his lips. From my angle, all I saw was the sharp cut of his jaw as he spoke the words that doomed us both.

I'm overwhelmed with feelings as I file in lift line beside Roman. My brains in such disarray that I just stare blankly at the liftie who tries to scan my pass. With a light chuckle from Roman, I promptly unzip my suit and remove my pass from the secret

inside pocket.

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With a glare at my new boyfriend, I just skate towards the entry slots and file onto the loading platform without looking back. A deep laugh comes from behind me, and Roman quickly places himself beside me. We both put our poles between our legs, as the chairlift scoops us up.

Without acknowledging the man beside me, I quickly pull out my phone and text Aurora about the situation. This would be the fastest fake relationship in the world if Jasmine caught up to Rora and she unknowingly blew up this whole plan.

She must be on the chairlift ahead of me because her response comes immediately and in the form of a thumbs-up icon. I don't have any delusions that she won't want all the details, but I'm grateful she's not hounding me right now.

Putting my phone away and taking a big breath, I prepare for the conversation we're about to have.

"What. The hell." My words are clipped, giving him the benefit of the doubt before I completely explode.

"You're welcome," he says automatically. His tone pleasant as he acts like he just did me a great favour.

"Are you joking?" I ask plainly.

My words cause him to turn, caution entering his tone as he responds. "Yes?" The question lacing that word only causes my frown to deepen.

“Do you know what you just did?” My voice rises on its own accord, and I quickly tamper it back down.

With his eyes covered by his goggles, all I can see is his mouth hanging slightly ajar. “What I just did? You mean save your ass?” He questions indignantly.

I can’t help but scoff, my body involuntarily brushing against his as I look back up to him. “Save me? If by that you mean, make my life a hundred times harder , then yes. You totally saved me, Roman.”

He stares at me in disbelief, my words sinking in as his face grows more outraged. His stare of silence turns into an unbelieving chuckle, that quickly followed by a strangled sound.

“I. You. I just,” his words are clipped as he flounders for another minute. He takes a breath and tilts his head down to stare right at me.

“I thought I did what you wanted me to,” he says defensively. A touch of worry laces his words, but that only frustrates me further.

Putting both my hands on the bar, I drop my head into them and exhale an exasperated breath. “What are we going to do now?” I groan.

A hand lands on my shoulder, Roman’s gloved fingers giving it a slight squeeze as I look back up at him. His face looks pained, the humour from a moment ago vanishing as he looks down at his skis. “Look, I’m sorry, Rhodes.”

I sit up fully now. The way sincerity coats his every word has me more curious than anything else.

“I had no idea what to do when you asked me for help last week. People don’t exactly

come to me for help, and it took me by surprise, that's all.

I never wanted to disappoint you, and I thought we would talk it through some more.

Then, before I could figure out what I wanted to say, you just ran out the door.

I've felt like shit since then, and I didn't know what to do .

"Today I planned to pull you aside and discuss this further. But, when I finished my run, and I saw your cousin being mean to you." He looks away from me now, focusing on the ground below us. "After everything she's done to you, there was no hesitation in my mind that I had to step in."

The emotion lacing every one of his words shocks me beyond belief. This rare vulnerability from him invading each of his sentences, and my anger slowly disappears.

He's totally right. I shouldn't have just run off and been so caught up in my own emotions that I didn't even think about him. It was clear that the night prior to our talk had rattled him, and then I just followed that up by asking for a massive favour.

Roman keeps talking, completely oblivious to my internal debate. "So, what I'm trying to say is, I'm sorry. I really thought I was helping." His voice is dejected as he finishes speaking, and his tone conveys just how much frustration he has with himself.

I don't know if it's because I'm delusional or just crave rejection from him, but I reach over and grab Roman's hand. He tenses underneath my touch but doesn't pull away.

"I should be the one apologizing, not you. I'm so thankful you're constantly trying to

help me, and you continue to have my back. Frankly, I don't even know why you're being so nice, but you should know that I'm really grateful." Giving his hand one more squeeze, I promptly release him.

He continues to stare down at the place my hand vacated. While he hasn't spoken yet, there's a relaxed quality to his face when he looks back up at me. Something close to a smile graces his stoic features.

"So, what should we do about this situation I got us in?" he asks matter-of-factly.

A humourless chuckle leaves my lips, and I lean my elbows on the safety bar in front of me.

"Well, I don't know if there's anything we can do at this point.

" My words are resigned, and I try to keep my tone neutral as I tell him my plan.

"I'll come clean about everything. It'll be easy for everyone to believe that you were just trying to help me.

Then I can take the blame and deal with the consequences.

"I see him quickly turn towards me, but I keep my gaze trained forward.

This whole situation is embarrassing enough to make my chest hurt, but I know without a doubt that I can't let Roman sacrifice anymore for me .

Will I be teased by my friends and family for the foreseeable future? Probably. But that's nothing a will of steel can't handle.

Swinging my skis back and forth keeps my mind off the impending damage to my

pride. I resign myself to this fate and brainstorm ways to handle it with grace.

Maybe if I moved to Mexico, people would forget about me completely.

It isn't the perfect plan, but it's also not the worst.

"Rhodes, in what world would I let you do that?" Roman says, somehow sounding angry and exasperated at the same time.

"Let me do what?" I say with genuine confusion.

"I think it's very clear what I mean."

"It's not clear at all," I respond immediately.

He groans loudly and rubs both hands over his helmet, frustration written all over his face. "Langley, you're killing me," he says as his gaze lands on me.

I continue to stare at him with curiosity because his actions are always so cryptic. "Can you just tell me what you mean for once?" I argue back.

He sits straight up and faces me fully, a new look of determination on his face. "I accept. I'm going to help and attend the wedding with you. "

My brain freezes as his words refuse to register. "What?"

"I want to go with you. If that's what you still want."

"Why?" It sputters out of me before I have time to think. While this would technically solve all my problems, I need to know what he gets from all this.

“What do you mean why? Because I want to,” he states, the indignation practically dripping from his words.

“Roman, I’m not letting you do this just because you pity me.

This whole situation might get uglier than I ever anticipated, and the last thing I want is for you to get in the middle.

” His help would be greatly appreciated, but I can’t drag him into this mess just because he feels bad.

His friendship has been a welcome surprise, and I don’t want to risk it.

Based on Jasmine’s behaviour today, I have a feeling this entire ruse will go south quickly. The last thing I want to do is hurt his reputation even more.

“That’s not the reason at all.” His voice takes on a serious tone as he looks straight at me. “I don’t pity you, Rhodes. I just want to help. ”

Leaning away from him, I narrow my eyes in his direction. “Alright, say I believe you. What do you get out of this?”

“I don’t want anything out of this.”

I lift my goggles and raise my brow, making it clear I don’t believe him for a second.

“Why does there have to be something in it for me? I’m just helping a friend,” he states defensively.

Crossing my arms in an over-dramatic fashion, I attempt to raise my brow higher. “Really?”

He assesses my stare and droops his shoulders slightly. “Fine,” he grumbles. “If I help you with this whole wedding thing, then I think the team might hate me a little less.”

Out of anything he could have said, that was the last thing I presumed it was going to be.

He always seemed like he really couldn’t care less what everyone thought about him.

Obviously, his roommates are close to him, but other than that, he never showed any interest in being friends with the rest of the team.

“Roman. You don’t need to get involved in my family drama just so you can get closer to your own team.

I’ll figure out my issue alone, and we can work together to get the team to warm up to you,” I say as I smile sweetly at him and hope he can see that I’m being genuine.

If all he wants is friendship, that’s something I’ll help with any day.

The platform at the top approaches, and Roman lifts the bar as the chair slows down. I feel his shoulder press against mine a second before his upper body leans close to me.

“Where’s the fun in that, Langley?” His smile is full of humour as he hops off the lift. “Dinner at my place tonight. I’ll text you.”

With that, he pushes off his poles and skis to the top of the course.

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Xander and Landon are too much to handle.

“What do we do? Knock? Holler? Just stroll right in?” Aurora continues to ramble as we walk up the driveway to Roman’s house.

“I don’t know; I’ve only been here once.”

“But you guys are fake-dating now. What if Jasmine’s doing laps around this house right now? Then she sees you knocking from the window of her car.” Aurora starts to increase her talking speed as the ridiculousness of her story grows.

“From that, she can deduce that you aren’t comfortable entering his home on your own. Finally, she finds out you’re both lying your pants off.” She spread her arms wide as if this was some insane revelation.

Per usual, Aurora makes my overthinking look like child’s play. “That’s insane,” I tell her as I raise my fist and knock .

“Your cousin’s the insane one, not me,” Aurora mumbles under her breath. She then slouches against the door frame as she examines the neighbourhood.

Roman texted me after training that I should come over for dinner to discuss our game plan. Naturally, I told Aurora the full story the second we got home, and she insisted on coming along. I sent him a text saying that I’m bringing an unwanted plus one, but I haven’t heard anything back yet.

The temperature’s dropped significantly since this morning, and even though we have

a ton of layers on, standing outside isn't ideal. Aurora's teeth start to chatter as I pound on the door a couple more times.

I start to jump in place to preserve body heat and contemplate just calling his phone.

A strong gust of icy wind blows in our faces as I reach into my pocket, and I couldn't be more grateful for my best friend.

She starts to curse under her breath as she tries the door, then lets herself into the house.

I laugh as I quickly shuffle in behind her. We're met with a gust of warm air as well as multiple voices carrying into the entryway. It sounds as if multiple people are shouting, Roman's voice being the one I notice first .

"They're going to be here any second! Get rid of that thing right now!" Roman's yell carries to our ears from the other room.

"You heartless monster! You can't make us get rid of them; they're our babies!" That scream was definitely Xander, and his voice sounds more dramatic than usual.

"You've had them for ten minutes!" Roman's rebuttal has a pleading note to it.

A loud crash echoes through the house, and multiple screams erupt from what I believe to be the kitchen. "Run Xander! Take our kids and run," Landon yells.

I turn to Aurora with humour and confusion scrawled all over my face. She's already sporting a huge smile as she points her finger towards the source of the noise with a disbelieving laugh.

"What the hell is going on?" She's unable to hold back the giggle as she asks the

question. A similar-sounding chuckle leaves me at her words.

Before I realize what she's doing, Aurora confidently strides down the hallway and towards the boys. With a split-second of panic, I quickly jog to catch up. The yelling gets much louder as we interrupt the strangest situation ever .

The wooden hallways turns to cream-coloured floors as we move to the upper landing, which houses the kitchen area. It's also where all the roommates are currently causing a ruckus.

Landon's holding Roman back as Xander stands on the table and cradles a box in his hands.

I notice immediately that Landon's once beautiful blonde curls are now buzzed off.

One of the kindest guys I know looking much more menacing with the new hair.

Although, his matching tracksuit just negates the tough guy look he was going for.

But really, it's Roman they should fear as he looks at his brother with murder in his eyes. But Xander doesn't look afraid as he starts cheering on Landon. "Get him, Landon! Show him what happens when you mess with our children!"

I take in the scene again and notice Rhys standing at the back of the kitchen.

His jet-black hair drips water as he pushes it out of his face.

The sides are cropped close to his scalp, while the top is longer and falls to his temples.

The dark hair only accentuates his darker skin, strong brow bone, and almond eyes.

That's all added to the fact that he's easily the tallest person I've ever seen, dwarfing even Roman by being five inches over six feet .

While all those features are physically appealing, there's always been something unnerving about him. A certain coldness to his presence.

It could just be his sheer intensity in the sport, but he's proven time and time again, he's only here to ski. He never trains with the group, never goes to the team dinners, and even drives himself to the ski hill.

Gas prices are no laughing matter, so we're all aware that he really doesn't want to bond with us. I'm pretty certain he only lives in this house because Roman shows an equal distaste for the team.

Everyone knows his goal is to be drafted by the Canadian team and make the next Winter Olympics. But he'll need to improve his social skills if he's serious about this goal.

Aurora's loud clap breaks me out of my thoughts, and I quickly turn to see her standing right in front of the guys. "Is this how you treat two beautiful women that you invited over for dinner?"

Her presence freezes them all in their places. Even Rhys shows his surprise with a slight lift of his brow. I subtly place my hand over my mouth to cover my smile. It's obvious the boys aren't used to such a commanding female presence as they stare questioningly at Aurora .

"Well?" She drawls, placing a hand on her hip as she stares at them.

This seems to snap them out of their shock, and everyone changes tactics. Rhys remains relaxed, his hands resting on the granite counters as he watches the event

unfold. Roman is finally able to throw off Landon as he approaches me, but it's Xander that I keep my gaze fixed on.

He lightly places the box down as he hops off the table, and quickly strides up to Aurora. Xander's dark wavy hair seems to bounce with him as he makes his way over. He's wearing a white hoodie and sweats, both a little rumpled after closer inspection.

"I forgot how well you cleaned up, Princess," he murmurs as he stands before her. An attractive smile slowly grows on his face; his eyes betray the emotion swimming there.

"Ugh, you need to drop that. We were nine," Aurora states dismissively as she shoulders past him and sits at the table. Xander quickly turns tail to follow her just as Roman approaches me.

"Hey," he says softly, catching his breath as he takes me in. "Wow, you look lovely." His voice's slight note of awe doesn't go unnoticed, and I politely thank him .

Aurora and I wear matching maroon sweater dresses. Both of us decided to complete the look with hair bows of the same colour, and a darker lipstick. The whole ensemble is very season-appropriate but provides us both with drastically different results.

Aurora's curly black hair falls to her mid-back, and the darker makeup choices aid in sharpening her already accented features.

Whereas my naturally blonde hair is in stark contrast to the colour and is on the verge of washing me out completely.

I had my doubts about wearing the outfit, but Aurora's insistence was the only reason

it made it out of the house.

Taking in the man before me, I realize that Roman's sporting a dashing outfit yet again.

His cream-coloured cable knit sits over a dark navy collared shirt.

Navy-corduroy pants connect the ensemble, and I can't help but feel he deserves a compliment in turn.

"Well, you look quite smart yourself, Huxley."

His smile is gentle, the usual tension lacking from his face as he thanks me in return.

Maybe it's being within the walls of his own home, but he seems so peaceful as he looks down at me.

Just being able to see this side of him causes a warm feeling to grow in my chest, and I can't help but smile back at him .

He starts to open his mouth, but a loud gasp catches both of our attention. Xander has that box in his hand again, holding it out as Aurora and Landon look inside. "Aw, that's so cute," Aurora coos as her eyes move rapidly around the box.

I take a step towards the group as curiosity gets the better of me, but Roman's hand latches onto my upper arm and he holds me in place. All that tension I'm used to has flooded back into him, and his eyes stay glued on his brothers.

"I told you both this already. Get that out of the house right now," Roman grits out. His tone's lethal as he carefully pulls me closer to him. Both boys promptly ignore him, and Roman lets me go as he runs his hands through his hair.

As much as I feel for him, the suspense of what's in the box is killing me, and I quickly rush over while Roman's distracted.

His yell of protest reaches my ears at the same moment an inhuman scream rips from my throat. The noise causes everyone to startle, their hands all moving to their ears at the sheer volume of my yell.

Unfortunately, Xander conducts the same motion as the group and lets the small box fall to the floor. I watch in mute horror as the corner lands on the ground and pops the lid from the base.

The only thing that goes through my mind as the box opens is that feeling when I watch a scary movie. The frustration when the main character's just standing there as their murderer slowly approaches them. Then all I can do is yell at the moron for not moving a muscle as this is happening.

Well, I'm that horror movie moron as two giant wolf spiders spill out of the box and start to run around. Shrieks pierce the air. I recognize Aurora's, but the other feminine sound is all Xander's doing.

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“KILL THEM, MAKE THEM DIE,” Aurora’s voice pierces the air as she screams. Her agile body leaping onto the kitchen counter as Xander follows suit. The pair start to fight over the limited amount of counter space as they continue to yell in a panicked voice.

Neither Landon nor Rhys shows an outward reaction. Instead, they both watch the spiders with a calm curiosity.

I couldn’t be more different than them, as a paralyzing fear courses through my whole body. While I may be an animal lover, I draw the line with one of Canada’s native spiders. They might be smaller than the size of my palm, but they’re still much bigger than I’m comfortable with.

Someone calls my name, but my gaze stays trained on the fattest of the two, its beady eyes landing on me as it shoots in my direction. Fear courses through me and seems to glue my feet to the floor. Its quick scuttling suddenly puts it a foot away from me, and all I can do is brace myself.

As if appearing out of nowhere, Roman releases a string of curses as he lightly knocks the spider off its path.

His arm wraps around my waist in the same motion, and then I’m pressing against his chest as my feet go out from under me.

Both of Roman’s arms are banded around me as he steps onto one of the chairs.

I’m fairly certain spiders can climb chairs, but Roman hasn’t set me down yet, so I

should be safe for the moment.

“You know wolf spiders can climb chairs,” I mumble into his chest. Peeking up at him, I see a smile break free from the death glare he is sending his brothers.

Finally breaking his gaze away from the boys, he peers down at me and raises one of his eyebrows. “How is that supposed to help?” He questions me with a hint of laughter in his voice .

“I just thought you would want to stay well informed,” I quip back.

“Maybe I should just drop you then. Survival of the fittest and all that.”

I let out a fake gasp, looking at him indignantly. “You wouldn’t dare, Huxley.”

He leans even closer to me, that clean smell filling my senses and putting me at ease. He opens his mouth and shuts it just as quickly when another scream pierces the air. We both whip our gazes towards the kitchen, where a multitude of events are occurring.

One of the spiders must have started climbing up the kitchen counter due to the fact that Aurora decided to shove Xander off.

Xander screams inhumanly as he scrambles on the ground, and Rhys has a huge smile on his face.

Then there’s Landon, holding one of the spiders in his hands as he watches the scene in disbelief.

I tap Roman on the bicep, waiting until he notices me, and then I point towards the kitchen. The other spider didn’t fall for Xander as the bait as I watch its long legs

cresting the kitchen counter.

Roman's mouth drops open in surprise, and I can't help but stifle my own laugh. Aurora follows the direction I'm pointing, ripping her vocal cords as she shrieks, and volleys herself off the counter .

She promptly tackles a freshly standing Xander back to the ground, and both of them scream as they lose sight of the spider yet again.

We all sit at the table. Roman on one side, with Xander and Landon on the other. Aurora and I both share the head of the table as we wait eagerly for the events to unfold.

Landon had cleaned up the mess, capturing and placing both spiders in the backyard. Aurora and Xander were breathing heavily but became relieved as soon as the wolf spiders vacated the premises.

I would be lying if I said that I didn't like the way Roman kept his arms around me as he stepped off the chair. He scanned the ground before finally placing my feet back on the floor with his.

I couldn't resist myself as I placed my hand on his forearm, giving it a small squeeze before I walked over to Aurora. The second the chaos was over; Rhys didn't say a word to anyone as he left the room.

Now, we all have a plate of spaghetti in front of us and are ready to hear the story behind the box.

"Why did you have a box full of spiders if you are afraid of them?" Roman sounds exhausted as he questions his brothers .

“I didn’t know I was afraid of them,” Xander says simply. “But let me tell you, when that box fell open, I was petrified.” He laughs as if he said something funny, but Roman only stares at them both with venom. Landon quickly takes over, attempting to placate his older brother.

“Well, you see, we were on a walk and spotted them both on the side of a tree. Which was weird because it’s winter and they aren’t usually around,” Landon explains.

He motions with his hands as he talks, as if it helps us understand his logic.

“They were breathtaking as they started to make a web on the side of that tree. Xander and I were both mesmerized by the pair of them and we took them so they didn’t die in the cold. ”

Roman’s face has never looked so annoyed, the vein in his temple popping out slightly. “But why were they in a box,” he grits out.

“To keep as pets,” Xander answers immediately as if it were obvious.

I giggle at their interaction, both younger brothers showing no fear as Roman looks as if he’s about to strangle them. “Why would you do it today?” He asks, running his hands through his already messy hair .

“Well, what were we supposed to do? Leave the box in our room?” Xander asks this as if it’s an insane idea.

“Yes!” Roman’s hand flies in front of him as he yells at his brothers.

“No, Roman. They could’ve escaped,” Xander states seriously. Turning his head to both of us and shooting a wink our way.

“Xander. I’m sitting right in front of you,” Roman deadpans.

“Ah shit, I used my wrong eye,” Xander whines. Turning to face Landon, who’s doing his best to hold back his laughter.

Roman seems to dismiss both his brothers, turning fully to face Aurora and I. “I’m so sorry. There’s no way I would’ve invited you over if I knew this would happen.” While he speaks to us both, his gaze stays trained on me.

I’m about to dismiss his apology, but Aurora gets there first. “Roman, you need to chill. This was the funniest thing that’s happened in so long. It was awesome,” she states. Reclining back in her chair, as she crosses her arms .

He looks at her in surprise, as if she’s grown a second head. “Aren’t you upset?” The sheer surprise in his voice almost makes me cackle.

“No,” Aurora says with just as much confusion in her tone. “It’s not a big deal,” she states as she turns her attention back to her food.

I face Roman with a knowing smile, showing him that I’m not remotely upset. His mood seems to lighten after that, with everyone eating their food and making casual small talk.

It takes twenty minutes for the plates to empty and the flow of conversation to reach its natural end. We all stare at one another, waiting for the main purpose of this dinner to commence.

Thankfully Xander has the shortest attention span and cuts through the growing silence. “So, like, what’s even going on with you two?” He uses his spoon to gesture between Roman and I, and Landon nods along in the back.

I give Roman a quizzical look but go back to facing his brothers. “Has Roman not told you anything?” My lips purse a little as I think about the fact that Roman hasn’t uttered a word of this, not even to the people closest to him .

Xander lifts his brows as he looks confused. “No? Told us what?”

“They don’t need to know anything. Don’t feel pressured to tell them, Langley.” Roman glares at his brothers as he talks, but his words still make my heart melt. If Roman’s going to help me, there’s no need for him to hide the whole thing from his family.

With a glance at Aurora, we have a quick mental conversation as she nods in agreement. While I could’ve never imagined sharing my life with Landon and Xander of all people, it just seems like the right thing to do.

I tell them the key points of everything. Family drama, ex-boyfriend drama and then the two combined. Their facial expressions make the whole story worth it, shock and outrage only growing as I keep talking.

When I finish with everything, I tell them how Roman agreed to fake date me in exchange for help warming up to the rest of the team.

Landon side eyes his brother at the last part, but Xander’s eyes are wide as he covers his mouth with both hands.

“NO,” Xander yells in my face as soon as I’m done .

This causes a full laugh to break from Aurora’s chest as Landon punches him. “Sorry, I’m just shocked,” Xander amends as he rubs his arm.

“How does no one know about this? Surely, if we tell the board, we can get her

kicked off the team?” Landon looks confused and then faces Roman for confirmation, the latter sending a small nod to his brother.

My anxiety spikes as he nods, and I almost fall out of my chair as I turn towards Roman.

“No. No, that can’t happen. That’s exactly what I didn’t want to happen.

” Turning to everyone at the table, I look them in the eyes as I continue.

“You will tell no one, I don’t want anyone knowing about the relationship I have with Jasmine. Alright?”

I get three reluctant nods from the guys and settle back into my chair. “Now, if we can all just pretend that Roman and I have been dating for the past month, everything will be fine,” I say as I try to believe the words myself.

“So, when is this wedding?” Landon asks with a puzzled expression.

“It’s April eighteenth, so in about three months,” Aurora pipes in .

“After that, are you guys just going to have a fake breakup? Won’t that look suspicious?” Landon seems to be suppressing a smile for some reason. But he actually raises a good point, and I realize that I haven’t thought that through.

“She doesn’t need to worry about that. I’ll sort it out.” Roman’s first words in this conversation are definitive as he pushes his chair back and gets up from the table.

His brothers sense his shift in mood, and Landon quickly changes our conversation. Landon starts to ask about our ski season, but not before I catch the glance Xander sends to Roman.

He watches Roman with a keen eye, a devilish smile playing on his lips. Xander raises his eyebrows toward Roman, and I turn to face my fake boyfriend. Roman's sending Xander a death glare, his face full of malice as he points a threatening finger at his brother.

Roman senses my gaze then, as he drops the look entirely and faces me with a small smile.

Aurora's talking with Landon in the background, but when I face Xander, all I see is an excited smile taking over his face.

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It's impossible for me to focus on anything when she's in pain.

I smack my feet against the lodge's worn carpeted floors as the day comes to a blissful end. My four little toes have all frozen together, forming what I call the mega-toe . They've also reached the point where they're so cold that it burns.

Plopping onto my usual stool, I do whatever is necessary to get these frozen plastic shells off my feet as fast as possible. A few minutes of whining and watery eyes later, my ski boots lay discarded at my side.

After wiggling my toes fails miserably, I attempt to stand to help with the blood flow. This also fails spectacularly, and I find myself clutching the stool for dear life.

Today's training was more intense than usual, with the first race looming over everyone's heads.

Even though I lost the feeling in my feet within that first hour, I kept skiing as many laps of the course as possible.

The result of my commitment today left me with ten frozen stubs and socks iced onto my skin.

I take a couple of minutes to let my feet breathe and start to remove the rest of my gear. The blonde strands are plastered to my head with sweat and stick in every direction when I remove my helmet.

This gets a cackle from Charles sitting across from me, and I quickly braid my hair

before he can take a photo. After putting everything on the table, I brace myself for the main event.

Wrapping my hands around my feet to try and thaw my socks, I have the sobering realization that I don't have any feeling in those either. I start breathing warm air into my fingers and watch as the team trickles in from the cold.

Snow sticks to everyone's jackets as the icy wind whips through the open doors. The entire team showed up for training today and slowly starts filling up our corner of the lodge.

The sound of ski boots hitting the floor fills my ears as we all undress and wait for the coaches to give us a debrief .

Next week is the first race of the season, so Liane will go over the proper conduct expected of a Polar Team athlete.

It'll just be the usual rules that they'll make no attempt to enforce.

Wear your team jacket at all times.

Do not leave your rooms after ten at night.

You are representing the University when you wear that jacket, so you all must be on your best behaviour.

I roll my eyes just thinking about all the time this speech will waste as I go back to trying to move my feet.

The spike of pain that shoots up my calf makes me grit my teeth and grip the end of the table for support. Looking across from me, I see Aurora's going through similar

pain as tears streak down her face.

As I'm about to say something to her, a hand lands lightly on my shoulder.

Turning to the side, I find Roman looking down at me, furrowing his brow with concern. It looks as if he just walked inside, since his helmet and jacket are both sporting miniature snow piles.

"What's wrong? Why are you crying?" His question sounds more like a panicked demand as he examines me. His eyes are wide as he takes me in, only looking back once as he sits on the stool across from me.

"Did someone make you cry?" He begins to whip his head back and forth around the lodge as if he'll find what he's looking for.

I give a pained chuckle as I place my hand on his arm. "You're being ridiculous; no one made me cry. I'm totally fine." I give him a tight-lipped smile and then look away as I scrunch my face up in pain.

"What's your face doing then?" He starts unclipping his gear as he looks at me quizzically.

"It's nothing. My feet are frozen, and I'm currently in the burning phase of frostbite," I try to say casually, but my toe accidentally knocks against the ground. My entire body tenses on the impact and I turn my wince into a smile in order to convince Roman that I'm fine.

There is an upward tilt to his lips as he leaves to retrieve his ski bag. He removes the rest of the equipment in front of me, but frequently glances my way.

After looking at me three more times, I turn towards him fully. "Why are you sitting

over here?" I ask curiously. He always sits a couple of tables over with his roommates, but they don't seem too upset he's sitting here now.

Roman's shoulders shrug. "I wanted to sit here today," he says simply.

"Why?"

"Because I wanted to," he responds immediately.

"But why?"

A small laugh bursts out of him then, his head hanging low as his body starts to convulse. Confusion fills me for a second before I realize that he's laughing.

He looks up at me, a sheen of water in his eyes as he sends me a smile. His eyes scan the surrounding area before he leans into my space and puts his lips to my ear.

"You are absolutely terrible at this dating thing, Langley," he drawls. His smile's so prominent that I can practically hear it in his voice. I blush at that, having forgotten we're even fake dating in the first place.

He's still smiling as he leans away from me and against the lodge table. I send him a teasing scowl as I begin packing my equipment. My brain mulls over a witty retort to send Roman's way, but Liane and Rachel appear before I have any hopes of delivering it .

"Alright, listen up team. Rachel and I are going to go over all the rules for our first official race of the season." She pulls out her notebook and goes over the general itinerary for the trip.

"The van will leave the school lot at six am, Thursday morning. We'll drive non-stop

until we reach Thistle Mountain. This is a seven-hour drive, so pack lunch, water, and lots of snacks.”

They start to describe the packing list for the race, and at the same moment, I feel my feet being lifted from the ground.

The burning feeling returns in an instant, as the contact of warm hands causing prickling to break out over my toes. The pain immediately lessens with the pressure from those hands, and warmth starts to slowly bleed into my feet.

I turn my head to see Roman holding both my feet in his lap, his warm hands gripping them together as he tries his best to melt the ice from my socks. His brow is furrowed in concentration as he alternates lightly squeezing both my feet between his insanely warm hands.

The tears return to my eyes for a completely different reason as I watch our team captain treat my frozen toes so gently. He’s applying the perfect amount of pressure to slowly warm my feet without crushing them.

Roman glances up periodically so the coaches can see he’s listening, but the majority of his attention remains on the task in front of him.

My eyes are glued to the boy before me, but as I look around the group, I see that his little stunt hasn’t gone unnoticed. Most of the team ignores the coaches and now watches Roman take his time warming up my toes. It hasn’t slipped past my attention that half of them have their jaw hanging open.

I guess hearing that Roman’s my boyfriend versus actually seeing it are two completely different matters at hand.

I don’t miss the look of shock that’s on Jasmine’s face, as well as the enormous grin

that Xander and Landon are both wearing.

It suddenly clicks what he's doing. Roman chose to do this in front of the whole team, ensuring that everyone would be watching and help sell our relationship. It was a great tactical move on his part, and the effort he's putting in should make me so happy.

Yet, against my better judgement, his intentions cause all the fluttering in my chest to wither up and die. For one split second, I felt giddy at the thought that he was doing this just because he wanted to. Not because he saw a great opportunity for others to see us acting like a couple.

I don't let any of my feelings show on my face. This would all go to waste if I looked sad, so I ensure to keep the facade of a loving girlfriend locked in.

Rachel must have noticed the shift in the team's attention because she suddenly claps loudly to regain the room. "I don't know why Langley's feet are more important than your schedule, but we're not going to be repeating this information."

I flush crimson for what feels like the millionth time this week and try to pull my feet from Roman's grasp. His hands quickly shoot to my ankles, holding firm as he keeps them in his lap. The fight goes out of me instantly as I realize he wasn't willing to grip my frozen feet any tighter.

He looks up for the first time since starting this task. His face is set in a teasing glare as he lets go of my ankles and going back to lightly holding the beds of my feet.

Turning back to the coaches, I mutter a quiet apology and hope Aurora was listening to everything I missed.

"You'll be racing Giant Slalom on Friday and Saturday and then Slalom on Sunday.

You'll get your bibs Friday morning, and you'll keep them for the whole weekend.

The inspection will start at eight in the morning.

The girls race will then start at nine and the boys will follow with the start at ten thirty.

The course will be reset at lunch and then this schedule will be repeated in the afternoon. If any of you have any questions, contact Roman and he'll talk to us."

All the heads turn towards Roman who puts his hand up in a quick wave but doesn't bother to lift his head. His hand goes back to grasping my feet immediately, with his grip having succeeded in melting the sock off my foot.

"Coach? What if Roman's too busy to pass on our messages?" Jasmine's hand is raised so high that one would think she's trying to help a plane land. A mask of mock innocence is displayed across her face as she acts as if her question is legitimate, and not a dig towards Roman.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Liane's voice sounds intrigued as she turns and faces Jasmine.

"Well, just because he's apparently dating Rhodes now, so he probably doesn't have time to maintain his team captain responsibilities. I mean, he's not even paying attention to our first race meeting. "

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If everyone wasn't already looking at us, they sure are now. The coaches have even turned their full attention to the spot where Roman and I are sitting.

I freeze under the weight of everyone's gazes and try another desperate attempt to pull my feet back. Roman's hold is as firm as ever now, and he just shoots an annoyed look my way.

He takes a big breath in front of me, and lets it out in an annoyed fashion as he sits to his full height. I watch as he lifts an eyebrow towards the coaches and casually crosses his arms over his chest.

"What do you have to say for yourself Huxley?" Liane asks, her tone clipped as she grows bored with the conversation.

"Not much honestly," Xander answers immediately, crossing his ankles as he puts his hands behind his head.

"Shut it Xander!" Rachel yells, stepping around Liane to point his way.

I cover my smile as Xander gives Rachel a bewildered expression. Placing both hands over his heart as he looks to the team in shock.

Everyone's lips quirked up at Xander's antics but quickly focus on Roman again as he responds.

"Not much honestly. I'm quite happy with the responsibilities I have on my plate at the minute.

” This is probably the happiest the coaches have ever heard Roman sound, and Liane’s wide eyes confirm my suspicion.

She quickly narrows them at the pair of us and seems to think about her next words.

“If it starts to affect your team captain responsibilities than we’re going to have an issue, understand?” Liane’s voice leaves no room for argument, and she turns to leave when Roman gives her a curt nod.

“Everyone in the van in five minutes,” Rachel yells to the group as she follows her girlfriend.

Roman just reaches past me and grabs my puffy boots from the floor as if nothing happened. Carefully slipping each shoe onto my sore foot, and even ensuring that the laces at the back are tied.

I’m stunned to silence as I watch him gently place my feet back to the floor. “Is that better?” He asks, the slight hint of nervousness in his voice making that flutter feeling return with a vengeance.

Fake or not, my feet are feeling a million times better, and he deserves to know how much that means to me. Looking him dead in the eyes, I don’t hesitate as I wrap my fingers around his hand that rests on his thigh .

“Roman, that was the sweetest thing that anyone has ever done for me. Thank you so much.”

A furious blush rockets up his neck, and he quickly breaks eye contact and looks at the wall of the lodge. He brushes me off as he puts on his own boots, but I smile at his sudden shyness.

“Sorry about all that, by the way. I didn’t even think about the coaches finding out and how that will probably make your life harder.” A wave of nerves overwhelms me at my words. If anything happened to his position as team captain because he was helping me, I would never forgive myself.

“Oh yeah, I would be devastated if I had to stop posting last minute training on Teamchat because the coaches are lazy as hell.” He says this under his breath, but still loud enough that it’s easy for me to hear.

I swat his shoulder, my mouth open in shock as he sits up and looks at me with confusion. “Roman Huxley, did you just make a joke!” I accidentally yell the last part, but I don’t regret it as an embarrassed half smile forms on Roman’s face.

“Maybe,” he muses, sending me a questioning glance as he picks up his bag.

Wanting to continue to tease Roman, I quickly shovel my gear into my own bag and sling it on my back .

I try not to fumble as I strap the booster strap of my ski boots together and put them over my head. This common ski racer trend would be the same as tying shoelaces together and letting them rest on the shoulder straps of a backpack.

When my boots sit snug on either side of me, I face Roman with a smile, and only then does he start to walk away. He holds the lodge door open for me as we head towards the spot where the team leaves all our skis and poles.

“Are you nervous for the first race?” I ask casually as I watch Roman slow his gait to match mine.

“No, not really. It’s my third year of first races , and it feels more chill now.” He looks down at me as we walk to our skis and a little smirk forms on his face.

“Are you nervous, Langley?” The subtle hint of humour in his voice makes me glare his way, but I still hesitate before I answer.

Against my wishes, my stomach roils just thinking of the race. Where an athlete places in the first race will affect them for the rest of the season.

Remembering my inability to even land in the top thirty last race season immediately sours my mood.

I know that I’m a better racer than I was last year, but I’m still so scared. “I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t a little nervous. What if I do bad like last year?” I unintentionally pull at the end of my braid as I look to Roman to see what he thinks.

His brow is furrowed in confusion, as if my words are having a hard time registering.

“What do I see here? Is Rhodes Langley thinking negatively?” He takes the end of my braid from my hand, giving it a light tug as he looks at me.

“Don’t think like that ever. It’s a horrible mentality, and I can’t support it.

“You are going to kick ass, Langley. That’s the only mentality you can go in with. Understand?” His face is dead serious as he looks down at me, and he only relaxes once I nod in agreement.

He’s right anyway, it’s no way to be going into the new race season. The mental game is just as hard as the physical one, and I need to stay positive if I want to see results.

“Say it,” Roman says as he looks at me expectantly.

“Say what?” I respond baffled.

“I want you to say, I will kick ass, Roman.” I send him a disbelieving stare, but he only stands taller and crosses his arms.

“Fine. I will kick butt, Roman,” I even punch my hand in the air for emphasis .

His whole face cringes as he puts his hands over his face.

“Langley, no,” he groans the words as he tilts his head back, but I hear laughter in his tone.

“That was so horrible. I can’t even look at you.

Just say ass.” His tone is full of humour but holds a serious quality as he keeps his hands on his face.

“No,” I respond indignantly.

“Why not?” He laughs as he looks down at me.

“Because I don’t want to,” I respond with a shrug. A smile pulls at my lips, but I fight to keep it down. Just because he is a lovely boy who is great at warming up feet, doesn’t mean he can tell me what to do.

“When your friends bully you for saying kick butt, I’m not going to help you.” He makes his voice high pitch as he says kick butt, as well as adding in a leg kick and a weak arm raise.

I glare at the ease with which he teases me, but I have a hard time holding it as he shoots me a smile. This isn’t just a closed-mouth smile, or even a quick flash of teeth. Roman’s smiling widely, and his laughter lingers in the air between us.

Before I get the chance to comment on this smile, he asks another question. “Are you free tomorrow? ”

I narrow my eyes slightly, but keep the easy smile on my face as I tell him that I am.

“I saw a flyer reminding me that the winter festival is coming up, and I was wondering if you wanted to go.” His tone is casual, and he leans against the ski rack as he asks this.

The winter festival is the most significant event for the ski community, yet I’m still surprised he even knows about it.

Ski racers of every age and from every club are welcome to the winter carnival, and it’s always loads of fun.

There are ski swaps, ice sculptures, twinkle lights, mulled wine, and lots of games.

I hesitate for a second, trying to figure out why he would want to go to this. Roman doesn’t exactly strike me as a guy that get excited for the maple taffy making booth.

It clicks just as quickly; this is another attempt for him to put our relationship out there. Picking an event that’s public and making sure everyone’s there to see us.

I forcibly push away that feeling in my stomach that dips every time I remember this whole thing is fake. No matter how muddled my feelings are getting, I owe it to Roman to stick to my half of the bargain. “Pick me up at seven?”

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I'm so nervous. I might throw up.

This is a piece of hot, flaming garbage.

I stare at myself in the mirror and continue to critique it from every angle.

The cardigan seems to stretch in the chest more than I would like, and I can't remember my skirt being this short.

Twisting my body in every angle, I can't help but hate the outfit entirely and move on to the next one.

Then the next one, and the next one.

Outfit seven seems to be the most promising of the bunch. A white turtleneck with an oversized sweater on top. Then, my dark blue denim jeans help add causality to the look. With one last glance in the mirror, I smile and nod to myself.

This isn't a big deal. Just a fake couple going on a fake date.

I keep repeating in my head that it's all fake. Not one part of it is real, and there is no need to stress. My hands don't seem to get the message though, as I repeatedly wipe the sweat from off my palms.

Roman isn't supposed to arrive for another fifteen minutes, but the nerves are starting to get the best of me.

I really need to relax. I can't get hurt by something that isn't real.

My breathing immediately steadies, letting that information settle, and I lean against the entrance wall. He can't hurt me, so there is no reason to be scared.

Roman is not Daniel; he has done nothing but support me, and he's earned my trust. If I let Daniel's actions continue to affect me like this, then that's when he truly wins.

The knock at the door causes my entire body to freeze, but I run from the room before he rings the bell and gets Aurora involved.

She's going to the fair with the rest of the team and started sulking when I told her I wasn't going too.

Her mood completely flipped around when I told her why, and then it took me forever to get her to go into her own room.

Pulling open the front door, Roman stands with his hat pulled down low on his head since it's absolutely freezing outside .

Actually, it's well below freezing, but when has that ever stopped a Canadian from doing anything? He was looking around outside, but quickly turns his full attention to me as I stand there.

"Hi," is all my distracted brain can think to say as I admire him. We're wearing the same stain of jeans, his are a straight leg cut and sit nicely on the outside of his boots. He's wearing his red Polar Athlete jacket as well, since all ski-related events demand we wear it.

"Hi," he says in an equally breathy tone. His gaze catches on my face, and he seems slightly taken aback before he schools his features.

I can't help but smile inwardly; the makeup I decided to go with is serving me right at this minute.

It's just a light brown shadow on my eyes, a subtle winged liner, some blush across my cheeks, and a layer of gloss.

It isn't like I went full glam, but I couldn't help but appreciate my work when I was done.

The fact that Roman also seems to be appreciating it adds a little bounce to my step as I put on my jacket. "Are you ready to go?" I ask casually. Then frown at the way he hesitates and moves from foot to foot.

"Yeah. Yep, I uh –" He starts to trail off, and I notice one of his hands tucked fully behind his back .

"What are you holding?" I ask immediately. The embarrassment that flushes across his face only making me more intrigued.

I can't help but laugh and repeat my question, being so bold as to grip his bicep as I attempt to look behind him. Unfortunately, he's built similar to a giant, and I can't catch a view of anything.

Planting both my hands on his shoulders, I hop and attempt to gain an aerial advantage. This is quickly thwarted when his arm wraps easily around my waist and plants me back on the front landing.

"I'm stupid. I wasn't even thinking, and it was so dumb of me," he starts to ramble.

Then without making eye contact, he pulls out a giant bouquet of colourful flowers. The big pink peonies blend in with the baby's breath and have a complementary array

of various orange ones. The whole set would be absolutely stunning, if they weren't all completely dead.

He moves to scratch the back of his neck, obviously upset about the fact that flowers don't survive in sub-zero temperatures. "It's obviously freezing outside, and they died before I even made it to your door. I'm so sorry. "

Fear is written all over his face, but I can't take my eyes off the bundle in his arms. Alarm flashes on his face, probably due to the tears that furiously well up in my eyes.

Flowers. He bought me flowers for a date that isn't even real.

He starts to apologize again, but I cut him off as I reach out and gently take them out of his hands. My watery eyes meet his, and I can't help but smile ruefully.

"I've never had a guy buy me flowers. Thank you so much, Roman." His flustered rambling comes to an abrupt stop, and he looks at me as though I've slapped him.

"You've never been given flowers? From another guy?" His questions come out more as statements as if he is trying to process this fact in his own head.

"Nope," I respond, focusing on my new flowers.

"I thought you had an ex-boyfriend?"

I look up and furrow my brow at him. "You know that I do."

That blank stare is back on his face as if he doesn't even understand what I'm saying. "Wait. Are you telling me that he had never bought you flowers? He has never bought you flowers? "

He repeats his question with sheer disbelief lacing every word. Again, I agree with his question-like statement.

“Damn, Langley. You have terrible taste in men,” he says eventually.

“That’s a self-burn, isn’t it?” The words are out of my mouth before I can think twice, and I tense my muscles in realization.

His eyes light up, and a small smile starts to form on his face. “Is it now?” His voice is full of humour and I can’t help but laugh at him.

I shove lightly at his shoulder and relax a fraction when a chuckle escapes his lips. “Alright, alright. Let me just go put these in water, and I’ll meet you at the car.”

He grabs my elbow as I turn to go back inside and spins me so I face him. “Put them in water? They’re dead, Langley.”

A blush spreads across my cheeks, but I don’t shy away from him. “Yeah, but that doesn’t change the fact that they are special to me.”

He lets go of me slowly as if he’s thinking through something.

That contemplative expression remains on his face for a minute but slowly changes to one that looks like appreciation.

“I’ll go keep the car warm then. Do not slip on that icy patch again!

” With a quick squeeze of my elbow, he turns and walks off.

We’re quickly on the road after that. My frozen flowers are currently sitting in warm water with the unrealistic hope that the warmth will rejuvenate them.

Roman and I have been sitting in companionable silence, the howl of the wind mixing with the sounds of traffic keeping us company.

“You should’ve put them in hot water. That way, maybe one of the flowers might’ve survived,” Roman says into the quiet car.

“I did that actually,” I say easily.

His hand holds the wheel lazily as he brings the car to a stop and looks over at me.

“Whoa. It’s like we have one brain,” he says with an air of fake surprise.

“Whoa. You are so right,” I respond with an air of equally false shock. We both share a quick smile as the light turns green and he turns back to the road.

It’s not twenty minutes later when he pulls into the dark parking lot of the winter festival. The traffic sounds are quickly replaced by the shrieking of children and the steady beat of music.

Roman quickly puts the car into park and jumps out of his door. While I’m registering the speedy exit of my fake date, my door is opened for me and Roman stands with his hand extended.

I can’t tamp down the smile that forms on my face as I place my glove in his. Hopping down from his truck is a lot easier when his other hand instinctively goes to my waist. To my surprise, he keeps his hand in mine and pulls us towards the crowd.

Kids run amok as they weave between groups of people, and the events and games are everywhere, causing the air to become electric.

The field has been transformed into a winter wonderland with lights hanging off every tree, booths littering the space, and people skating on the frozen river.

One side occupies most of the carnival games, while the other stretches out to local vendors.

I'm absolutely mesmerized by the space. Snow falls lightly around and people all crowd around the fire pits that are placed methodically. My gaze jumps from place to place, and I'm absorbed in watching the events happening.

"What do you want to do first?" The sudden sound of Roman's deep voice startles me, and I focus back on our date.

I don't really know what to do here. Aurora and I usually beeline it to the mulled wine booth and go from there. We always have a blast, considering I don't have a single memory of ever returning home from this event.

"I don't know. What do you think?" I respond with uncertainty in my voice.

He stares over the space and thinks for a minute. "Okay, we could play a game, make maple taffy, or even deck those kids over there with snowballs. It's up to you."

I turn around quickly to see a group of ten-year-olds screaming. All of them engaging in a giant snowball fight. The stall closest to the bunch houses a very unhappy man who glares at them, and I can predict how this will end.

"You want to have a snowball fight with the angry mustache man right beside them!" I point to the booth worker and the bulging vein on his head.

"Hmm, you're right. There's no need to anger Randy if we don't need to." He says in all seriousness, the slight tilt to his mouth giving him away.

"Oh yeah, because you and Randy are so close." I lift my eyebrow up at him, his gaze lowering to meet mine.

“We go way back; he might as well be my second father.”

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“Okay, Huxley.” I tug him away from Randy and the kids, making our way towards all the booths and lights. Luckily the wind has died, so there’s nothing more than the crispy air nipping at our noses as we peruse.

It’s nice being with Roman; his posture remains relaxed as I pull him from stall to stall, and we check out the various trinkets and wares. There’s wooden carvings, metal makers, hot chocolate stations, and many more random vendors as we make our way.

After some wandering, I spot Charles, Aurora, Isla, and Liam sitting by the fire pits on a couple of benches. Everyone’s squished together with hot chocolate in their hands and huge smiles on all their faces.

“Look, there’s the team. This is the perfect time to mingle with them all. They’ll warm right up to you!” I start to pull him towards the group, but my momentum immediately dies as his body remains stock still.

“I’m actually alright, let’s just keep walking around.” He starts to look past me, his head looking everywhere but at the group.

I can’t help but frown at his words. This was the whole point of our deal; he wanted to get closer to our team. “Isn’t this what you wanted, to try and get everyone to see that you are a super fun and loving person.”

He looks down at me confused, and then his face changes as if something registers in his mind. “I wanted the team to hate me a little less, not make friends. Luckily, my wish was granted the second word got out about us.” He smiles as if this answer

satisfies me, and I just scrunch my eyes at him.

“You wanted Aurora to come to dinner the other night,” I counter.

His gaze narrows slightly, a small smile playing on his lips. “I don’t think it was me who wanted Aurora over the other night actually.”

Pointing his finger right in my face, he lightly taps my nose. Finally letting go of his hand, I use both of mine to bat him away. “Fine, I invited her over. But you didn’t hate having her there,” I counter quickly and menacingly point my finger in his direction.

After he pretends to contemplate, he relents. “Fine, she was more tolerable than usual.”

“You are a grump,” I say without hesitation.

“I will wear that as a badge of honour, Langley,” He teases and makes quick work of grabbing my hand.

As he starts to pull me away, I do a double-take and look back at our friends. I know the only reason he asked me to come on this date at all was to make sure people saw us out and about. I don’t want him to think I’m just wasting his time by doing this.

I start to chew on my thumbnail as Roman looks back at me. The easy smile he was wearing starts to falter as he looks over me.

“What’s wrong?” The worry in his voice does nothing but make me stress over the situation more.

“I just didn’t want to waste your time, and I feel bad.” When all he does is stare back

at me in confusion, I can't help but sigh. "You know, you only took me here because you wanted people to see us. I don't want you to think I'm wasting your time or anything."

His face falls in disappointment, before changing into a contemplative expression. Before I can fill the silence with more apologies, he places both hands on my shoulders.

I have no choice but to strain my neck as I look upward, and his face manages to look both annoyed and contemptuous. "Rhodes. I didn't bring you here for any other reason than I thought you would like it and have fun. I don't care about anyone else."

He's straight to the point, not even giving me a chance to argue with him as he takes my hand and starts walking .

"No overthinking, just have fun," he says in my ear. Pulling me away from the group and towards a new path.

My jaw starts to throb, and I realize that I've been smiling for so long that it's actually aching. I look away from Roman, if only to rest my facial muscles.

It has been another hour of doing completely nothing. After drinking free hot chocolate and talking about the different ski hills we've been to, we decided to just tour the grounds.

The booths have all had free samples of various sweets and soups, as well as the close call we had with Randy and the kids.

So far, this year's event has been my favourite one yet. I'm about to tell Roman that before a familiar voice calls out to me.

“Rhodes! Why aren’t you answering my texts!”

The shrill voice of my best friend shatters the peaceful moment Roman and I were sharing as we both look towards her. While I take a second to focus on Aurora, I don’t miss the irritated huff that comes from the man in front of me. “I take back what I said,” he mutters under his breath .

My mouth turns upward against my wishes, and I step between him and my roommate.

“I didn’t know when you were coming! I was texting you and calling you! Here we’re all sitting over here.” Aurora confidently grabs my hand, turning her back to me and walking towards the rest of the group.

I look up at Roman with disappointment written all over his face when he thinks I’m not looking. Aurora knows our deal, and I bet she thinks she thinks she’s helping us sell our fake relationship to everyone.

I know I shouldn’t be doing this, but I pull my hand from Aurora’s before she can take another step. Roman and I are definitely not dating, but interrupting the night he planned for us feels wrong, nonetheless.

Rora’s gaze whips back to me, a general sense of confusion playing on her face. She looks between both of us quizzically as she waits for an answer.

When neither of us says anything, she conspiratorially looks around and awkwardly shuffles close to me. “Don’t you want to show the team how lovey-dovey you both are?” She whisper-shouts in my ear.

I can’t help but think critically on this one because we should be with the team right now. We should be sitting close to each other while we pretend it is casual. We

should be using every opportunity we have to flaunt our relationship. For both of our benefits really.

Roman hasn't moved a muscle this entire time. He didn't reach for me when Aurora pulled me away, but he hasn't left me either. I know he would follow if I chose to join my friends.

He would pretend to be my happy partner when his real wish would be to get as far away from everyone. As fast as possible.

Just thinking causes a smile on my face, and I'm confident about my next move. I turn my face so I can whisper to Aurora. "I actually think we're just going to spend some time together for a bit."

Aurora pulls away from me, unbridled joy shining on her face. "I'll catch up with you guys later then!" She whispers back at me. Winking at me as she turns and walks back to the group.

I move so I can face Roman again and immediately see his bored expression back in place. He seems to be dissociating as he starts to follow Aurora's fleeting form.

Before I can doubt myself, I take a big step in front of him and successfully block his path. He blinks in surprise, his hands immediately shooting to my shoulders, and he looks down at me in confusion. "What are you doing?"

Fidgeting in his grasp, I nervously look back up at him and do everything in my power to keep the uncertainty out of my voice. "I was just wondering if you wanted to hang out one-on-one for a little bit longer?"

His entire face changes, the bored expression morphing to shock and quickly settling into the most content face I've seen on him yet. Reaching down to interlace our

gloved fingers, he starts to direct us in the other direction without breaking eye contact. “Langley, I would love nothing more.”

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The cousin's somehow more annoying than the friend.

There's a whole other side of this fair that I've never even seen. It turns out I missed a lot when I spent the whole night drinking mulled wine, which Aurora spiked even more. While that was one of my best memories of all my buddies together, today might just top it.

I've never seen Roman so alive, jumping from booth to booth and actively engaging with the sellers. The old lady selling wind chimes was so charmed by him she gave him a free hand-woven coaster. He then proceeded to buy a wind chime because he was so thankful for the coaster.

"Well, well, well. It looks like I have competition," I chuckle as we walk away from her booth.

He moves his hand from being interlaced with mine and puts it over my shoulders. "You'll just have to keep impressing me, I guess." He shrugs and pulls me even closer as his shoulders fall back down. "Also, I bought you a wind chime," he adds matter-of-factly.

The serious tone of his voice as he says it makes an easy laugh fall from my lips. Without thinking about it too much, I grab the hand that falls over my shoulder as I look up at him.

"I don't want a wind chime from my competitor," I pretend to be upset over this, but the smile stays glued to my face.

He starts to wave the shabby woven coaster in my direction, and I can't help but fully laugh at this. "You're just jealous you didn't get one," he muses.

With a doubtful look, I raise my brow at him. "I'm so jealous, Roman. I wish I had a thread baren coaster, too."

"I know." With a smile from him, he puts the coaster in his little bag and keeps us walking.

"It's honestly really impressive," I say with awe. Hoping I can keep a straight face long enough.

"What is?" He asks, confused.

"How do you manage to juggle being the team captain and looking after your eighty-year-old girlfriend."

A rough laugh bursts out of him, and I smile for making it happen.

"It's hard, to say the least, she goes to bed so early.

"I can't help but giggle at his ridiculousness as he laughs along with me.

"But why would I ever make something easy for myself?" He says the words with a smile, but the truth of them hits home for me.

I look forward again and absorb his words. There was no need for him to agree to this whole ordeal, and it's just making his entire life harder. I start to slow my pace as I think, and Roman follows suit until he looks at me with concern.

"Why did you do it? Get yourself involved; I mean. Jasmine's going to make your

life hell from this point on. You've been putting her in her place so far, don't get me wrong, I've been loving. But it doesn't seem like you even care about being closer to the team. So, why are you doing this?"

He looks at me plainly, not one emotion on his face could possibly reveal what he's thinking. I mirror him by looking curious but not demanding. From what I've learned of the gentle giant, if you give him time, he'll open up.

I mentally smile as he starts scratching the back of his head, his indecision starting to show through the cracks in his expression.

It takes a couple more seconds before guilt starts to trickle in.

This question is obviously something he isn't comfortable answering right now, and why should I be questioning his help in the first place?

Grabbing his hand before I can think better of it, I start to drag him towards the giant sign that has just caught my eye.

Tire d'érable is lit up across the space, a giant block of snow taking up the whole middle of the area and people milling about around it.

"Have you done this before?" I ask Roman. My change of topic doesn't go unnoticed, and he sends me a thankful smile.

As he looks up at what I am dragging him towards, he looks back at me with an eyebrow raised. "I grew up here, Langley. Of course, I have done this. I will say it has been years, though."

"I haven't done it in ages either. When I was a kid, I would always try and eat it before it was set, and I would end up getting sugar burns on my tongue."

My mood brightens as a laugh slips free from his lips, and something akin to pride fills my body. “You’re definitely that kid who would eat scalding hot maple taffy and then just start screaming.”

I lightly smack his arm, a playful laugh lacing my tone. “I didn’t scream! I was a dignified child.”

He pulls me closer once again, his arm falling easily over my shoulder as if it were the most natural thing in the world. “Now that I believe. I’ve never seen a twenty-one-year-old so against swearing.”

“I abhor crudeness! Is that so terrible of me?” I counter.

“You would use ‘abhor’ casually in a sentence.”

I playfully glare at him as the kind woman working the stand cuts us off from our bickering. Roman pulls out his wallet faster than me, and he buys us two popsicle sticks.

She then ushers us down the line to the older gentleman, and his hot pot of maple syrup being held in his gloved hands.

“Two for you kids?” His cute old man voice croaks.

“Yes, please,” we say in sync, both quickly locking eyes with each other.

“One mind,” Roman mouths over the old man’s head, and I just roll my eyes at him.

The sweet old man pours two lines of hot maple syrup on the snow and leaves us to finish the job. The objective is that we need to roll the syrup once it’s cool enough to be taffy-like and easily attach to the stick. But not wait so long that the syrup

solidifies and becomes crunchy .

Roman's hunching over across from me, his brows narrowing in focus, and all his attention fixed on the freezing taffy.

"Now, Rhodes, you actually have to wait for the taffy to cool before you eat it. There are horror stories of adorable little girls burning their tongues, and they start screaming like crazy." He flicks his eyes up to me as he says this and is rewarded with a glare from me.

He starts lightly chuckling at his own joke, and I lean down and grab a handful of snow.

I pretend to focus on my taffy as I slowly lean towards his.

As I prepare to throw a giant lump of snow on his taffy, a giant hand grips my wrist as I prepare to toss it, and my snow falls helplessly to the floor.

He's standing up straight now, his body leaning over the snow block as his glare's narrowed on me. "Don't. Even. Think about it, Langley." I can't tell if he is trying to be serious, but the humour shining in his eyes does nothing but egg me on.

"Oh, I was thinking about it, buddy. It would make my perfect maple taffy stick look even better if it was beside yours."

He opens his mouth to retort, but I don't let him get a word out as I lean in closer to him. "Either way, we both let it sit for too long now, and we both will have a frozen lump of maple syrup."

My smug expression falters as an absolutely feline smile plays on his lips. "Is that so? Maybe you ought to look down. Bud?" He heavily emphasizes that last word, and I

whip my head down in horror.

My heart drops when I see that his other hand has been expertly rolling the syrup this whole time. A gooey glob of perfectly rolled taffy hanging off his stick. Picking up my own taffy, the line of syrup is frozen solid, and is standing perpendicular to the stick.

I look up at Roman with a slight pout on my lip and can't even savour the full laugh that erupts from him. Against my wishes, my competitive streak comes out in full force.

"Whatever, you cheated!" It's not my best come back, but I don't care. He's a sneaky little deviant that needs to be reprimanded.

"It wasn't a competition, love." His laughter comes easier now as he leans against the snow and smiles at me.

His words have the confusing effect of both infuriating me and causing my heart to explode in my chest. Before I can sort through those feelings, the old lady from the front shoots towards us with a small Polaroid camera in her hands.

"Okay, sweeties, let's see those sticks!

" She yells in our direction as her head ducks behind her camera.

I feel a swift movement in my hands but ignore it as Roman leans farther over the snow block. Resting his head on top of mine, a blinding flash goes off, and I instinctively react. Quickly holding up my horrendous stick, I flash the biggest smile I can muster.

The smile on the older lady's face is radiant as she looks up at us both and places the

photo face down. I brace myself for this sweet old lady to be disappointed in my work, but my brow furrows as she faces Roman with disappointment.

Her face falls instantly since taffy-making is something she obviously takes very seriously. “Oh, well, maybe get your girlfriend to help you next time, sweetie.”

She pats Roman on the arm as she makes her way to the people beside us.

I turn back to Roman, that adorable smile gracing his face yet again as he holds my taffy as a badge of honour.

I look at my own hand to find I’m holding his perfectly rolled maple syrup stick, and the taffy starting to ooze down my hand.

“How did you do that!” I demand in shock .

“Quickly,” he says cheekily, as I lick the perfectly sweet treat. Roman does the same beside me, but I hear a distinct crunch coming from his.

“I feel terrible, she was so disappointed in you.” I feel bad, but I can’t help but laugh at the absurdity of the whole sentence. A sense of lightness taking over me when Roman laughs with me.

“Do you think I’m banned for life?” He says curiously.

“I fear the photo will go on the wall of shame and you will never move on.” I add sadness into my voice, starting to lick up my delicious taffy just as his eyes light up across from me.

Roman reaches past me and plucks the polaroid off the nearby table. Leaning in close, he flips it around so we can both see, and then it takes me a second to process.

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He switched the sticks right before it was taken, my huge smile on display as I hold out a perfectly rolled sweet treat.

But it's Roman's face that catches my attention.

His head is pressed into the top of mine and the happiest smile I've seen on him is plastered to his face.

Looking up at him now, he stares down at the photo with immense fondness and promptly tucks it into his wallet .

I take another lick of syrup-taffy without thinking and then feel guilty as he crunches his.

"You can have yours back if you want. It's really good, and I didn't eat all of it." He looks down at the two specks of sugar left on the stick, and then back at me with his eyebrow raised.

"No, I insist you keep it. After all, I did cheat." We stand beside each other again, eating our respective treats and walking with no direction in mind.

"I'm glad we can see eye to eye on something. We should do that more often" I glance up and side long at him just to see he has already been watching me.

"We don't see eye to eye on anything. I have to bend my entire back to get to your height, Langley."

I turn to him, a quip already on my tongue, when Jasmine steps directly into my path.

“Hi, cous,” Jasmine says, shooting a sickly-sweet smile my way as she turns her focus to Roman. “Hey there, Roman.” She draws her words out, leaning closer to him as her friends stand behind her.

Taylor is grinning like a villain at Jasmine’s display, but Sofia has the decency to look mildly uncomfortable. That uncertainty I always have when Jasmine’s near starts to worm its way into my chest .

Against my wishes, I start to tap my feet and wring out my hands as she completely ignores me and focuses on Roman. Jasmine erupts in a fit of fake laughter at her own joke, with Taylor and Sofia promptly joining in.

Standing awkwardly at Roman’s side, I can’t help but tense as she takes a step closer, officially getting into our personal space. She can’t be trying to make a move on my fake boyfriend. Can she?

As panic and indecision fill my body, I feel the weight of Roman’s arm drape around my waist, and he pulls me close to his side.

Before I can even understand what’s happening, he artfully places me between him and Jasmine.

My cousin’s gaze turns into a glare as it lands on me, but she looks over me and continues talking.

The panic that had previously flooded me slowly dissipates as Roman's chest presses snugly into my back. The feel of his arm banded around my stomach calming me in a way I didn’t expect.

With his help, I'm able to take a couple of deep breaths and listen to the garbage coming from my cousin's mouth. "Don't you agree with me, Rhodes? It just makes more sense. "

She looks at me expectantly, her friends stifling their laughs by putting their hands over their mouths. Roman's hold on me shifts, his chin resting on my head as he brings his other arm around me.

"Jasmine, what's your goal here? How about you go run back to that scum bag boyfriend of yours and leave us alone."

All niceties vanish from her face at Roman's words as she registers that the game she's playing has no effect on him.

It's like a flip switches in her head, and that cruel look she had when we were kids shines in her eyes.

She points a menacing finger at Roman, something akin to a snarl in her tone.

"I don't know who you think you are, but you have no place in this.

I know this whole thing is a sham and I'm going to prove it.

" She moves her finger between us, real anger erasing the sweet angel act she always puts on.

"If you think for one second he's going to want you back now, you have another thing coming. So back the hell off." I furrow my brow at her words, literally having no idea what she's even talking about. Then we both watch as she turns tail and storms away.

Roman releases his hold on me when she's out of sight and quickly grabs my hand to start walking the other way. The air between us seems to have shifted, the silence becoming charged the longer we walk without speaking.

He pulls me to a quiet corner behind one of the booths, turning to face me as he crosses his arms.

"Has that been your plan this whole time?" He refuses to meet my eyes as his hand starts to rub the back of his neck anxiously. "Are you using me to get back with your ex?"

I can't help but look at him with absolute bafflement, confusion and a pinch of anger suddenly overtaking me.

After everything I told him about my past, does he think so little of me as to want him back?

Pure anger floods me at the fact that one comment from my cousin would make him even think that.

"After everything I shared with you, my feelings and healing over this past year, do you think that's what I want? Does one comment from my cousin make you think so little of me?"

His pensive face falls away and the guilt that takes its place is visible. He starts to fidget, taking off his hat to run his hands through his hair. I cross my arms over my chest, waiting for his response and seeing if this will be our first and last fake date .

Lifting my eyebrow at him as he just stares at me, he takes a breath and slowly extends his hand in my direction. With no choice considering the crowd all around us, I gently place mine in his.

With a quick tug, I'm pressed into his jacket as his arms wrap around me.

"I'm sorry, Rhodes. It wasn't fair of me to ask that."

"Hmmm," I narrow my gaze up at him.

"You know I don't appreciate telling you my feelings and you responding with, hmmm." Frustration enters his voice at this, and I crack a small smile.

"Well, I don't appreciate someone who knows my history, believe I want anything to do with that loser ever again!" I rear back, surprising even myself on that one.

Usually, I would apologize right away, but instead, I own it as I stare back at him.

He lifts his head from mine as a small smile graces his face. "Fair enough, Langley."

After walking me to the door, Roman gently squeezes my hand before he walks away. I can't help but stare at him as he leaves, the fond memories of our first fake-date replaying in my mind .

A peaceful smile tugs at my lips, and I let it take over my face as I head to the kitchen. I barely manage to walk through the door before I stop dead in my tracks.

Standing in the middle of the vase, surrounded by withered up flowers, is one living pink rose.

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I think arguing with Rhodes is the only thing that could make me feel better at this point.

“Where’s my race suit?” Aurora yells from the garage, our connecting door currently being propped up with a pile of gear. She does a drive-by past the front entranceway as she tosses another bag of equipment onto the ever-growing pile.

The season's first race means that most athletes are scrambling the night before to ensure everything is ready to go. Our group chat is blowing up my phone, with everyone double checking they have the essentials packed since the race is a seven-hour drive away.

I decided to be productive and pack up everything early this morning, so now I can just relax on the couch while Aurora runs around in a panic.

Roman and the guys were nice enough to offer us a ride to the van tomorrow, meaning we don’t need to leave our car in the university parking lot for a week. I chance a look back at our mountain of bags and inwardly cringe.

It'll be a tight fit for sure, but I feel better when I remember that Roman has a truck. Usually, we would’ve driven with Charles, Liam, and Isla, but Aurora needs a break from some of them, and Roman was offering.

Against my better judgment, I check my messages from him and see the same confirmation text from a couple of hours ago staring back at me.

Roman: Do you and Aurora want a ride to the van tomorrow?

Rhodes: Really? Do you mind?

Roman: I was the one who offered, Langley.

Rhodes: Oh, ha-ha, yeah. Fair point!

Roman: ... Is that a, yes?

Rhodes: Yes, please!

Roman: Alright. Be there at five thirty.

I grimace at my phone, dreading that our texts have the same energy as the ones I share with my aunt. Not that I expect everything to change after one very fake date, but I was hoping things between us would become more casual.

I can't stop the mixed emotions I have after that whole night, the way his defenses were completely lowered, and he seemed genuinely happy.

Surely, he didn't fake that; he doesn't strike me as the type of guy to fake any emotions.

Then, with Jasmine throwing herself into the whole mix, I can't help but start tapping my foot in a fit of nerves.

Did Jasmine manage to scare Roman off? Will he stop wanting to help me now that he knows how mean she can be?

Biting my thumbnail, I re-live the entire night and try to pinpoint every moment that could have scared him off.

Aurora runs past me down the hall, holding a bundle of clothes in her arms, but abruptly drops them to the floor. Turning fast as a viper, she jumps over the couch, smacking my leg down, and ripping my hand from my mouth.

“No! Stop stressing about nothing! I’m too busy to help right now,” she yells in my face. Pointing her finger at me with menace, and then rushing to finish what she was doing.

I let out the breath I was holding and watch as my crazy best friend runs into her room. She’s right, though; this whole deal won’t work if I go home and stress out about everything. Tossing my phone onto the couch beside me, I use a rare pocket of free time to work on my latest drawings.

In no time, pencils are scattered in the folds of the couch as my sketch pad sits snugly on my lap. Candles are lit periodically throughout the space, and calming jazz music plays, as I snuggle into my blanket.

I decided to use pencils today, revelling in getting my fingers covered in the lead as I press the side of the tip onto the page.

A fake fireplace sits on my TV, and the crackling of the wood sets a calming atmosphere.

A frustrated scream from Aurora’s room ruins my mood for a minute, but peace returns shortly after.

In my periphery, I notice she’s frantically running in and out of the house, but I can’t hear if she is talking to me.

The paper in front of me has a rough sketch of Roman’s face plastered across it. I squint as I focus on capturing the strong set of his jaw, accenting it with a dusting of

stubble.

I think about the few times I've seen him un-shaven and decide I prefer it the other way. When his face proudly displays his smattering of freckles, it always manages to make my stomach flip.

The face that stares back at me has a small smirk playing on the corner of his mouth, and I did my best to capture the twinkle of mischief in his eyes. I start to shade the column of his neck just as I feel a presence behind me.

"Who's that?" Aurora questions bluntly.

"Roman," I respond without looking up.

There's a stretch of silence behind me as if she's confused by my words. "That's Roman?" Aurora questions again.

"Yes. Why?" I look at her now, confused at the face she's making.

"It just looks wrong."

"What? I thought I nailed his proportions in this one!" I say defensively.

"No, you did. It's just that he looks happy." It comes out as more of a question, and I can't help but frown at her.

"Stop being mean,"

"I'm not! The guy literally never smiles. So, it looks wrong."

Now that she says it, I can't remember a single time lately that we've hung out, and

he hasn't been smiling. Whether because he was teasing me or just because we were hanging out. Lately, Roman has always had a smile on his face .

"Oh, well, he's been smiling a lot lately," I counter defensively and turn back to my drawing.

I can practically hear the wicked smile forming on my best friend's face, and I promptly ignore her as she continues to get ready.

I scoff at Aurora's insinuation and toss my sketch pad beside me.

Crossing my legs and tucking them further under the blanket, my mind wanders to our last couple of interactions.

The way he teases me but never in a degrading way, and always makes me feel more confident after our verbal sparring.

If it were anyone else on our team, I would never even dream of yelling at their face, let alone being pleased with myself after.

As I reach for my drawing again, a weight sinks on the couch beside me, and Aurora throws her arms over her face.

"I can't do it. I'm not ready. I'm not going," she says definitively.

"You aren't done packing yet? What have you been doing for the past couple hours?" I close my sketch pad and face her, so that she knows she has my full attention.

"I can't race this weekend. I'm not ready, Rho.

" Grabbing my sweater sleeve, she sends her pleading puppy eyes directly at me

before she puts her head on my sleeve.

My delicate little heart swells and I reach to pull my best friend into a well needed hug.

But, before I can even get one arm around her, she shoots up and starts to pace in front of the couch.

“We haven’t had enough training, you know! It has been such a warm winter, with only five weeks of gate training this season! That isn’t nearly enough!” My eyes move back and forth as if I’m watching a tennis match, her steps erratic and her voice rising as each new point pops into her head.

I try to counter some of her arguments, since they are ridiculous, but it seems that she has just hit her stride.

“I should’ve lifted heavier this summer. Lifted heavier weights, bulked, and then brought that strength into my skiing. I wasted so much time!” She stops her pacing and hangs her head in shame.

“Rora, that’s ridiculous.”

“Also! The chairlift has been faulty this year, so do you know how much time was wasted because I was stuck on it. I bet Roman didn’t factor that in when he decided to book us in for the earliest race of the season!

” My mood instantly shifts at the casual insult towards Roman, the sympathy I had quickly turning into defense .

“Alright, let’s not go blaming Roman for this. You know that isn’t fair.” I send her my most pointed glance and I see the fight leave her body.

“Yeah, I know. I’m just not ready yet Rho. All the scouts are going to be there, and if they aren’t then they will definitely watch the results online.” She slumps on the couch beside me, stealing half my blanket and finally resting her head on my shoulder.

Her admission dissipates my anger, and I give her the hug she is in desperate need of.

“How about we just try and get a good night sleep before we leave tomorrow? There’s no need to stay up all night and stress.

” She sighs heavily from beside me, and I wrap my arms around her in a comforting hug.

“Don’t worry. It’s all going to work itself out. ”

“GET UP! GET UP AND RUN!” Light floods into my room and I’m visually disoriented as I try and fail to comprehend what’s happening.

After rapidly blinking for a couple seconds, I squint my eyes greatly and see Aurora’s panicked face looking back at me.

After my eyes adjust to the light, I can’t help but notice that she has on two pairs of pants, which is obvious because the second pair is only pulled up to her knees.

Then there’s her sports bra that’s on top of her shirt, as well as the one sleeve of her hoodie that made it onto her body.

This is all accented by her hair that rests in a horrid-looking ponytail.

She begins to hurl my once neat-folded clothes at my face, as I still struggle to understand what’s happening. As my rolled-up leggings hit me in the nose, I gain

enough consciousness to question Aurora's actions.

"What on earth is happening?" I ask groggily, my eyes falling closed again on their own accord. I hear Aurora rambling, but the warm sheets lull me back into a daze, and I slowly slip back into my bedding cocoon.

Getting smacked in the face with the last piece of my clothing finally wakes me up enough to say goodbye to the idea of getting anymore sleep.

Slipping out of bed before Rora starts throwing more things at me, I register voices coming from the other room.

but my brain is too tired to think anything of it.

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Aurora's saying things too, in quite a frantic matter, but I won't be able to register anything she says until I have some caffeine in me.

As I hop off the side of my bed, I make a beeline to the kitchen, with the primary goal of drinking as much coffee as fast as possible.

I hear a strangled sound come from Aurora behind me, but I leave my room without listening .

My mood only grows more unpleasant when I find that all the lights have been turned on, and I have to squint my eyes yet again. Making my way to the kitchen, I can't help but grumble at the fact that Aurora turned our house into the inside of a light bulb.

Using muscle memory to put the coffee pod in the machine, I put my arms on the counter and try to catch a couple more minutes of sleep.

Usually, I'm awake and ready to go at this time, but my sketch of Roman took longer than I anticipated.

His jaw has this unique structure that I couldn't quite figure out how to shade from the angle I drew him.

After crafting up some sketches and configuring the correct angle, I was able to be proud of my last sketch.

This angle of the drawing was from underneath, as if the artist was looking up at him.

I tried my best to capture the slight feathering that's always in his jaw.

Then I had to ensure the proportions were all correct.

It wasn't until much later in the night, when I pulled the sketch away to get a different angle, that I realized that I drew him from the exact angle I see him.

I quickly put everything away at that point, not needing to read into that fact any further, but my brain wouldn't shut down. Have we been together enough for it to be normal that I can draw him in that way ?

It's hard to ignore the fact that I drew him with my favourite smile gracing his face. The one that comes to him naturally, but he usually does his best to tamper down. I even had the thought to add the faint smile lines that rest on his cheeks.

Not to mention that damn hair; hair that is screaming for someone's hands to run through it.

As I stared at the ceiling waiting for sleep, all I could think about was how badly I wanted that somebody to be me.

My mind reels with these thoughts as I hear the coffee machine start to brew my salvation.

It isn't a minute later when I feel a comforting hand land on the small of my back and starts rubbing gentle circles with the palm of their hand. It starts to dawn on me that I feel asleep on the counter, but the warmth seeping through my satin pajamas overrides any thoughts I might have had.

"Rhodes, we have to go love," a deep voice whispers close to my ear.

I lean farther into the warmth and try to bury myself in that lovely sounding voice. “No, five more minutes,” I mumble this into the air, that warm hand still rubbing up and down my back .

“I would love nothing more than to stay in this moment. But we are already cutting it really close, we should get going.”

The words slowly register, and my body slowly tenses as I understand.

Aurora’s distress, noises in the hallway, a warm hand on my back and a voice that I would recognize anywhere.

Shock eradicates all the tiredness right out of my body, and he must feel this because he removes his beautifully warm hand.

Roman stands in front of me, a dark grey athletic shirt stretching across his shoulders. He has black sweatpants that hug his hips and fall smartly down his legs. After slowly drinking in this beautiful boy in front of me, my eyes quickly dart back to his face.

The smuggest smile I’ve ever seen is plastered there as he crosses his arms over his chest and looks down at me. This does nothing but cause my addled brain to fixate on the veins bulging his forearms and the fact that I have to draw them the next time I get the chance.

“What are you doing here?” I shout in surprise, as I try my best to cover up my embarrassing sleepwear. Of course, I had to wear my satin set with the little snowmen all over it .

“Well, Langley.” He leans in closer to me, so much so that I can feel the warmth practically radiating off him.

“I said I would be here at five thirty, and it’s now five forty.

” With his body practically pressed up against mine, he just has to slightly raise his wrist between us to display the time.

Horror, fear, and panic rocket through my system as I sprint toward my room. “We have to leave in five minutes!” His familiar chuckle sounds from the kitchen as I fly into my room and slam the door. Aurora’s gone, probably in the garage, loading everything into their car.

Fast as a rabbit on skis, I rush into the bathroom and do my best to make myself presentable.

Looking at the slight frizz to my hair, I cringe as I brush it out, but thank the heavens that I didn’t do heatless curls last night.

Roman seeing me with two giant sticks in my hair isn’t what I needed today.

Quickly doing my skincare while simultaneously brushing my teeth results in globs of lotion on my face.

But, I don’t have time to fix it as I throw everything into my toiletry bag.

My clothes, which were once folded nicely, lay strewn across my unmade bed.

Letting a loud groan out and a mental promise to get Aurora back, I pick everything up and dress quickly.

With everything loaded in my hands, I whip open my door with my foot and see the grump leaning against my door frame.

“You finally ready?” He looks down at me with a smug smile and I can’t help but glare back. Usually, I love making him smile, but this morning has frazzled me beyond belief.

“What time is it?” I shoulder past him as I ask in a panic, knowing full well the van will leave without us if we’re late.

“Don’t know?” He responds casually and I hear his footsteps right behind me.

“Are we super late?” I question in a panic and double-check that everything’s ready to go.

We still have to load all our bags into their car and actually get to the van lot.

As if sensing that I’m really panicking over here and not joking, I feel a weight leave my shoulder.

He starts taking bags off my person without even answering my question.

“Come on, let’s go.” With that, he turns on his heel and walks to the door.

I don’t think I could look crazier if I tried. He is, without a doubt, the most infuriating man I’ve ever met. Why can’t anything be easy with him! “Roman!” I yell as I storm after him in a huff .

As I fully prepare to throw a shoe at his head, I’m met with a completely empty space as we approach the front door. Taking in the house for the first time, I notice the lights are all off, and it’s completely silent.

“Aurora!” I yell just to have my voice echo through the empty space.

“She’s gone; she went with Landon and Xander. It’s just you and me, Langley.”

Turning back around to face him, he’s casually leaning on my entryway wall. I can’t stop the scowl that forms on my face, and I mirror his stance on the wall across. I’m pretty sure my stance holds more power since he has three pink overnight bags hanging off his body.

As neither of us moves, I can’t help but notice that he’s acting like he was a couple of weeks ago. Unhelpful and blunt.

“What is with you today?” The question blurts out before I can really think it through, but I don’t take it back as I watch him.

He’s obviously taken aback by this, his face changing from surprised to suspicious. “What’re you talking about? Everything is fine.”

“It obviously isn’t. You are acting all weird. ”

“I’m not acting weird. I’m just trying to get to the van on time!” His voice is monotone, but I can hear the tinge of anxiety behind it.

“Something’s wrong; tell me what it is.” I take a step forward as he leans farther against the wall. Even with almost a foot on me, he seems to fear my question as I continue to push.

“We really need to get going, Rhodes.”

“AH HA! You called me Rhodes! Tell me what’s wrong right now.” I whip my pointer finger in his direction and then promptly poke him a couple of times in the chest.

“I always call you Rhodes!”

“You never call me Rhodes!” I counter immediately.

Taking a step back, I square my shoulders and put on the deepest voice I can muster.

“Hey, Langley, I’m going to act really weird today and just expect you not to notice.

Let me just cross my arms now and pretend I am too cool for everyone.

” Lifting my arms in the air, I cross them in the air and push farther into Roman.

His blank face looks back at me, not impressed in the slightest. “I don’t do that,” he deadpans .

I can’t help but laugh at him as I keep my crossed arms in the air. “You literally do this all the time! Cross your arms and glower.”

Sending a mix between a glower and a smoulder his way, I finally see how much he is fighting down a smile. He’s trying quite hard, so I make sure to purse my lips a lot and waggle my eyebrows in his direction.

Before I can even process this action, a full-bellied laugh bursts out of him, and he sends me the most wonderful smile I have ever seen. It takes over his whole face as he laughs at my ridiculousness, and tears seem to build in his eyes.

I drop my arms and step away from him now, a small giggle coming out of me as I watch him. His sleep-deprived brain probably finds this way funnier than it is, but I’ll take what I can get.

“Will you tell me what is going on with you now?” I add in a pleading voice as he

recovers from his fit of laughter.

“I don’t really want to go into it. I’m just having a bad day, that’s all.” His words are gentle, as if he feels bad that he can’t give me more.

But I’m never going to push if someone’s not ready to talk about something. A case in point is the entirety of Aurora’s love life .

I start to slip on my booties and face Roman as he opens the front door for me. “You can always talk to me, you know. I’m your fake girlfriend, after all.” His face seems to fall even more after that statement, and he ushers me out the door.

As I make my way down the front steps, I catch the words he tries to hide under his breath. “That’s the whole problem, now isn’t it.”

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 2:12 am

Project Sandwich was made for moments like this.

We're going to be ten minutes late to the van and I'd be a giant liar if I said I wasn't fully freaking out. Not only was I terrified about the race tomorrow, but now I'm even more scared by the fact that I might miss it!

Ski racing is built on schedules; inspection times, forerunner times and race starts are all set in stone. So, being late for anything means you are getting left behind.

The level of leniency for something such as van departure really depends on the coach's mood. At six in the morning, I can't believe they're going to feel too generous.

Last season, when their relationship was going through a rough patch, everyone knew about it. One time when I was ten minutes early to the van, I had found it already pulling away from the lot .

I'm thankful the highway is dead as we make our way, and I can't stop the rapid bouncing of my knee.

It's impossible to lean more forward than I already am, but I give it my best shot as I anxiously wait for us to arrive.

Roman's hand abruptly lands on my knee as I'm about to bounce it for the thousandth time, and I feel the light pressure he applies in an attempt to stop my rapid tapping. "Sorry, I'm just a little nervous," I admit abashedly as I look out the window stressfully.

A small smile lifts at the corner of his mouth as I turn back, and he lets his hand linger on my knee even after I stop tapping. “Don’t worry, the guys are covering for us.”

Turning fully to face him now, I send him my most skeptical look. “What do you mean by covering for us?”

Stopping at the red light, he dips his shoulder to look at me and sends me his most mischievous smile. “I don’t think you would believe me if I told you.”

My jaw drops as we pull into the parking lot minutes later.

Rachel stands outside the window of Landon’s car, yelling at him through the glass.

In the distance I see that Liane is doing a similar thing but with Calvin in the driver’s seat of his car.

Both their cars have the hazard lights blinking as they sit parked in front of and behind the team van.

The boys have parked so close to the van that there’s no chance it can maneuver its way out. Another laugh barks out of me at this display and I cover both hands over my face.

The team is standing outside, watching the entire thing as they point and laugh at both Landon and Calvin. Turning to Roman, he’s trying his hardest to suppress his laughter, but fails the second Rachel starts throwing snow at Landon’s window.

Of course, the window was cracked open, so now Landon’s cursing as he tries to roll it up.

“How did you get Calvin to help in this?” I ask Roman bewildered.

He starts to unbuckle himself as he leans over and does the same for me. “Apparently, he owed Xander a favour, but I have no idea why. Now, let’s hurry before the coaches catch onto why they’re doing this in the first place.”

I nod in agreement as we hop out, and Roman grabs my overnight bags. Apparently, Aurora and the guys took my skis and other equipment, so I just need to blend in and pretend I’ve been here the whole time .

“I’ll sneak your bags into the van. You need to go give Landon these and say you found them on the ground.” I stare at him in disbelief as he starts to pull something from his pocket.

Somehow, they had this whole thing already planned out, and I cannot get over the fact that they did it all for me. There’s no question in my mind that they’re all getting a banana loaf to themselves when we’re home from this race.

Roman reaches into his pocket and produces two sets of car keys, placing one set in my hand. Glancing down at mine, I recognize the pink pom-pom and bedazzled R key chain anywhere. “Hey! These are mine and Aurora’s car keys!”

His smile turns devious and seems to light up his whole face. “I had to think on my feet, Langley. We couldn’t intact Project Sandwich without extra sets of keys,” he says, making it sound like I’m the crazy one.

“Wait, what are the keys for?”

“You’ll see, Langley. Landon has his keys on him; you just need to make sure Rachel physically sees you giving him a set of keys. I’ll do the same for Calvin. He flashes me a wicked grin as he runs to the van.

As he passes by the rest of the team, I can't help but revel over how they had this whole plan ready to go. I've always been curious how he was able to share a house with his brothers since he's so different from them both. But, from what I've seen lately, they're all cut from the same cloth.

Roman loves to be just as ridiculous, but only with the people he lets in.

Whereas Landon and Xander give themselves to the world and wait for acceptance, Roman can't function like that. He treads carefully with his actions, bracing for the next misstep, even when he's on solid ground.

I let out a sad breath as I watch him carefully put my bags with the rest of the team's stuff. He's filled with so much kindness and fun, yet his first instinct toward the world is to scowl.

A resolve washes over me as I watch him finish at the van and run toward Calvin.

Squaring my shoulders back in determination, I know in my gut what I need to do.

This goofy, scheming, lovable man has been nothing but kind, and I'm going to make sure the whole team knows this side of him.

It is completely unfair how he's treated, and it's time I actually do something about it.

At this point, it's the least I could do for him.

Smiling to myself about my idea, I focus on the present and follow the plan .

Running over to Landon, who's parked his truck so that it blocks the front of both vans, I hear their yelling before I see them.

“I don’t know where they went! They were in the ignition, and next thing I know, poof. They’re gone!” Landon sounds baffled as he says this, but I can detect the slightest hint of humour in his tone.

“That doesn’t make any sense, Huxley! You can’t park a truck and then have the keys disappear! Move this car right now!” Rachel screams in his face, and I don’t know how he hasn’t broken character yet.

“I told you, I can’t. No keys,” he says with a straight face as he shrugs his shoulders.

Rachel looks like a kettle that’s about to boil over, and I make sure to intercept before she explodes.

“Hey, Landon. These were on the floor by the van door. Are they yours?” Rachel turns to me with fury lighting up her eyes, and I try my best not to wince away.

His eyes widen in surprise as he dons the most convincing face of relief. “Rhodes. You are an absolute gem. Those are exactly what I lost. Rach, I’ll move this car right now.”

I pass them to him, but Rachel plucks them from my fingers before I can stop her. She inspects the pom-pom and then raises her brow at the R key-chain. Looking back up at Landon, she gives him the most unimpressed look I’ve ever seen on her face. “These are your truck keys, Huxley?”

A wince takes over my expression as Landon stares at her with confusion. “Yes? Can I have them back now?”

“There is a giant pink thing on these keys,” she states.

“I love pink. It’s my favourite colour,” Landon responds immediately.

“What about the sparkly R keychain?” Rachel questions with annoyance in her tone as she holds it up for all of us to see.

“Yeah?” He questions as if it’s Rachel who’s not making any sense. “R for Landon,” he says immediately as he snatches the keys from her hand. As she processes the sudden loss of keys, Landon lets out a triumphant cackle and starts the truck.

Ripping away to park in one of the athlete spots, Rachel yells and runs after him. If the coaches didn’t have a special love for Xander and Landon’s antics, I would feel really guilty about what they did for me.

Instead, I let out a full-bellied laugh as I watch our coach start smacking Landon as he exits his truck. I hear tires on gravel and see a similar situation unfold at the back of the van, with Calvin driving away and an angry Liane on his tail.

The entire team is laughing at this point, big smiles on their face as they slowly start loading into the van. An exasperated Rachel storms past me as she beelines it for the driver’s seat, and a firm weight lands on my shoulders.

“That was hilarious. If I weren’t an actor, I wouldn’t have been able to keep it together,” Landon says plainly and pulls me close to him. My eyes widen at the actor comment, but he said it so casually that I’m just going to pretend I knew about it this whole time.

“The coaches are going to be furious with you,” I say with worry since this whole event was to make sure I wasn’t late for departure. “Thank you so much, Landon.” Wrapping my arm around his waist, I give him a quick squeeze as we both release each other.

His expression is sheepish as he brushes me off. “I would take angry coaches over an angry Roman any day,” he states easily.

Turning back to face him, I make sure the curiosity is visible. “Why would Roman be angry?”

Landon looks at me as though I’m being ridiculous. “If the coaches left you behind, he would probably do something much more drastic than just blocking in the vans.”

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 2:12 am

It's just my luck that out of two vans, I picked the wrong one.

Landon runs off to find Xander as I walk towards the van in a daze. This entire spectacle was all to help me, and I could not be more grateful for these guys I've been growing closer to. Rachel's fuming in the front seat, rolling her window down and barking at everyone to load up.

Doing my best to go unnoticed from the grumbling coach, I quietly enter the van and quickly occupy one of the empty rows.

Plopping down and resting against the headrest, I look out the window to my right. Roman, Landon, and Xander are laughing hysterically and patting Landon on the back. Putting my hand over my mouth, I stifle my own giggle and wait for them to join me.

I watch with dread as the three of them head for the van that Liane's driving. Ignoring the disappointment that floods me at the thought of not sitting next to Roman, I look up to try and get Aurora's attention.

Leaning forward, I spot Calvin and all his friends already occupying the rows directly in front of me, and Jasmine's sitting right at the front. As I survey the occupants of this car, I silently scream into the void.

Sometimes, I am a grade A moron, and this is one of those situations. I was so scared about the coaches yelling at me, I didn't even look to see who I'd be on the road with for the next seven hours.

As I carefully pick up my jacket to slip into the other van, the tell-tale sound of tires spinning confirms my nightmare. Rachel starts to pull out of the parking spot, and our journey has officially begun.

Flopping back into the seat in a huff, I'm thankful that everyone looks like they're preparing to head back to sleep.

That doesn't stop the panic from forming a weight on my chest. Even though I have known Calvin and the others for years, they're not my friends.

If Jasmine decides today is the day to really interrogate me about my 'relationship', I'm going to completely freeze.

The van comes to an abrupt halt, the door ripping open, and ricocheting back with a bang. Everyone shoots bolt upright in surprise, with any lingering sleep disappearing.

Roman stands outside the door with a hand braced on either side. His breath is heaving as he scans the people in car and stops as we lock eyes.

The frustration vanishes as he looks at me and is instantly replaced with a smile. Slinging a pink backpack over his shoulder, he hops in and slams the door closed behind him.

"Huxley! What do you think you are doing!" Rachel's shrill voice ensures that everyone has no choice but to be awake at this point.

"Sorry, got in the wrong van." That's all he says as he ducks down and makes his way to the back row. He looks gigantic in the confined space as he puts my bag on the end and takes the seat beside me.

Rachel's at her wits end with athletes today because she just turns up the radio as she

peels out of the lot. As Calvin and his friends realize Roman's not going to get in any trouble, they all promptly return to closing their eyes.

I watch as Taylor and Sofia have the same idea, but Jasmine's glare remains fixed on me. Her eyes are narrowed on me, and I can feel fear trickle in even as she sits three rows ahead. With a last scrunch of her eyes, she flips her hair and faces the front.

I keep my eyes forward, too scared to look away incase she decides that she's not done with me. Roman's cough pulls my attention away and try to shake the nerves as I face him.

Before he can even say a word, I look up at him with dread in my eyes.

"You really shouldn't have done that! The people in this van aren't too fond of us on a good day, let alone causing another interruption to our departure.

" I send him a pointed glance and try to ignore how fluttering forms in my stomach the longer we lock eyes.

He shrugs, brushing his hand through his mop of dark, wavy hair.

The silky strands part slightly to the left, and the rest of the hair falls back in place.

As he stretches his arm in the air, he looks behind me and places his arm against the back of my seat.

"Honestly, I couldn't care less, Langley.

Anyone who isn't fond of you isn't worth my time. "

Again, the ease at which he says this causes a slight delay when it comes to my

understanding. I quickly turn back to the front to make sure he doesn't notice my fierce blush .

The road whizzes past us as we hit the highway, and the athletes in front of us all lean on one another in sleep.

Roman and I stay silent for a while, but I can't help periodically catching glances of him from the corner of my eye.

He keeps his arm on the back of my seat and reclines as if it's the most comfortable thing in the world.

The start of the sun rise casts a pink hue on his features as I turn to him fully. It cascades down from orange to pink and highlights his attributes.

A small scar below his chin, a freckle that rests near his temple and the faint smile lines that are proof of his happy nature.

He casts a quick look at me, but then does a double-take as his gaze stays fixed on me. As if in a trance, his hand slowly comes up until it's gently cupping my jaw. The feel of his callused hands contrasting my squishy face, but I revel in it none the less.

I can only imagine a similar pink and orange hue is all over my face, and I smile at the thought of it. A soft grin transforms his face at this, and I feel the motion of his thumb landing lightly on my lips.

"Rhodes. You are absolutely beautiful," he says slowly, as if he can't believe his own eyes. I can't stop the furious flush that forms in my cheeks, and I try to dip my head away. No one has ever said something like that to me, and I have no response for something so kind.

“No, no. Don’t do that, Langley. You’ll break my heart.” He leans in closer and uses his hand on my jaw to tip my head back toward him. “Don’t shy away, especially not from me.”

This is how people feel when they reach the top of the roller coaster, and teeter on the precipice.

“Roman. I just wanted to thank you for switching vans for me.” I hate the breathless quality worming its way into my voice, but I can’t think straight as his damn thumb starts moving in a gentle tracing motion.

“I was really hoping we would get to sit together anyway,” I somehow manage to string together those words before all sense leaves my brain.

The pink hue is stunning on his features as he leans in closer. I don’t dare breathe as his thumb brushes my lower lip, pulling it slightly down until his thumb starts to carefully trail down my chin. “Anything for you, Rhodes.”

My heart solidifies and then proceeds to remelt in my chest. No one in my life has ever said those words to me, let alone, saying them with eyes that are filled with sincerity .

His lips are millimeters away from me at this point, and I can’t help but tip my head the slightest bit up in response. I don’t know if this is for show or what his game plan is at the moment, but every organ in my body is screaming for oxygen as he moves fully into my space.

His lips are soft as they press into the side of my temple. The kiss lingers as he uses the hand that’s cupping my jaw, to pull me closer. Cold floods the space he occupied as he pulls away, turning to face the front of the van once again.

Before I can question his absence, the arm on the back of the seat moves forward and he promptly wraps it around me. Leaving a small gap between us still, my heart swells as he gives me the option to pull away.

There's not a single doubt in my head as I close the distance. Resting my head on his shoulder and smiling to myself as he pulls me in close.

After four hours on the road, everyone in our van starts to stir and mingle.

Jasmine's been whispering with her friends, periodically glancing back at me, and laughing.

I try to ignore the forced giggling from her friends, but I can't help the way my jaw clench gets more severe the longer I'm in this car.

I fear all my teeth will be cracked and broken before the first race.

Roman's presence is the only reason she's not making more obvious barbs in my direction, and I couldn't be more thankful.

When we reach the halfway point, an hour later, everyone gets out to use the washroom and stretch their legs. Roman and I are so disappointed when we accidentally load into the other van with our friends.

Aurora gives me a big hug, expressing how sorry she is that she didn't see me go into the other one. Her defense being that she sat down and proceeded to fall asleep immediately.

The company for the rest of the ride is far superior. My friend group and Roman's seeming to mesh easily. Landon talks with Isla, Liam, and Charles about who knows what. Then one row in front Xander does his best to ensure Aurora's attention

remains all to himself.

Roman and I sit comfortably in the back again, his arm resting casually around my shoulders. I can't help but notice Aurora's gaze constantly flickering back here, and a small uplift to her smile.

I would be embarrassed about being this casual with everyone, but only three people know it's fake anyway. Roman's really smart for keeping up the rouse in front of everyone, and I can't help but leave it at that.

We aren't a thing. He's just a friend that's helping me out.

A friend who's smell floods my brain when he's close and I can't help but be drawn to it.

A friend that looks out for me. A friend that seems to care about every aspect of my wellbeing, when it's the last thing he needs on his plate at the minute.

A friend who's thumb on her lips sparked the strongest spark of attraction she's ever felt in her life.

The sudden jostle of the van driving on loose gravel causes my eyes to open groggily, and I realize I must have fallen asleep. Voices echoing throughout the van are louder than their usual volume, and the excitement of getting to the hill is at an all-time high.

I'm nervous to sit up fully, past experiences reminding me about the neck pain that is sure to come. It's only the feeling of the warm chest beneath me and the heavy weight encompassing my body that causes my senses to sharpen.

Jolting my head upward, I find Roman leaning against the side of the van's wall as his chest rises and falls steadily in sleep. His arms are wrapped around my stomach,

holding me to him as my face presses into his chest.

With a peak out the window behind him, I see that we're still an hour away from the hill at this point. Before I can think too hard on it, I rest my head back against his chest and close my eyes as I get comfortable.

It's impossible to stop the sheepish smile that grows on my face as his hand comes up and cups the back of my head.

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She really never listens.

Everyone was sore after sitting for so long, but the next few hours will be spent unloading our gear, and that's a sure-fire way to get everyone moving.

Jasmine and her friends mysteriously disappear the second it's time to do actual work, and the rest of us start to huddle around our giant trailer.

The team is renting a four-bedroom, hillside house that's absolutely filled to the brim with bunk beds. At this point, we're all accustomed to the fact that we'll have no personal space as we enter into the race weekend.

We're also all aware of the system that we need to form in order to unpack this trailer efficiently.

Someone will stand in the gigantic trailer and throw bags down to the people waiting below.

Those bags are then passed to the 'runners,' who stand at the door of the house and bring the bag to its respective place .

There's about fifteen people who each have four pairs of skis, ski equipment bags, ski tuning tables, overnight bags, premade food, and enough booze to kill a cow. Long story short, without organization, unpacking this would be a nightmare.

Liane and Rachel have their own condo down the road, so they pass the van, trailer, and house keys off to Roman. He returns to our group and leans casually against the

side door or the trailer.

Conversation naturally pauses as everyone creates a half moon around him, and Roman's eyes scan the crowd. His mouth moves without sounds as I see him counting everyone, and I don't miss the small wink he sends me when we lock eyes.

"Alright, listen up," Roman says, speaking normally, yet the team hushes instantly.

Even though not everyone wants to be his friend, he's still our team captain. More importantly, he's an imposing figure who's our only hope of unpacking this mess.

"Aurora, go round back and get the rest of the girls; they're not getting out of unloading duty." He points towards the house, and Aurora looks to me with a smile and runs away .

"Okay. We'll be having a team meeting at six in the living room, so that gives you all a couple of hours to unpack and have some food.

I'm meeting with the coaches at five to get all the details for the race.

Now let's get organized and unpack this thing.

" Calvin and Roman unlatch the doors to our enormous trailer, and a mountain of luggage stares back at everyone.

Shrieks sound from around the corner momentarily pull away everyone's attention as Jasmine and her friends rush back to the group. "You're psychotic!" Jasmine screams at Aurora as she makes a stupid face in their direction.

Rora comes right up to my side, chuckling under her breath and wiping a tear from under her eye. "What did you do?" I whisper to her, not wanting to interrupt Roman

while he's assigning tasks. Aurora just laughs harder and says she'll tell me later.

The team starts separating into groups as Roman finishes, and I immediately realize I wasn't listening at all. The sun was hitting the side of his face at just the right angle, making it impossible for me to hear anything coming out of his mouth.

I can see Nico and Grayson going into the garage as they make room for sixty pairs of skis to fit in it. When I look back at the trailer, only Xander and Kai are catching luggage that the other guys are throwing down.

Roman doesn't even seem to be paying attention as he mechanically picks up equipment bags and tosses them to Xander. Without overthinking it, I walk up to the base of the trailer and wait for the next bag.

Roman robotically turns around, cocking his arm back as he preparing to toss someone's bag down.

As his momentum swings the bag back and then forward, his eyes lock with mine.

His bored expression transforming into shock as his eyes widen dramatically.

In one of the most ridiculous moves I have ever seen, he tilts his body to the side and uses the momentum to whip the bag into the trailer wall.

We silently stare at someone's poor bag as it slowly rolls off the trailer platform and has a loud thud as it hits the ground. The wince is practically glued to my face, and I'm surprised to see a slight smile on his.

"I think that was Jasmine's bag," he says with humour in his tone.

I completely ignore him as I cross my arms. "What was that?" I look between the bag

and Roman as I fix the latter with an unimpressed expression.

The man resembles a statue as he blankly stares down at me. “I didn’t know it was you until the last second. It was a close one,” he says nonchalantly. Picking up a new bag and tossing it to a figure on my left.

The way he continues to toss bags and ignore the fact that I’m trying to help makes me want to smack him. As he throws yet another bag to a figure beside me, I decide to put my hands out to show I’m in line.

“Can you get to work?” Roman looks at me expectantly. He keeps his emotionless facade on, but I can see the teasing gleam that lights up his eyes. As if he’s waiting for me to reciprocate.

“Um, yeah. Can you pass me a bag, please?” I don’t tamp down the sass in my tone as I keep my arms extended.

“If you insist on doing this, then there’s a bag right there, Langley.” He gestures to the one at my feet and lifts his eyebrow my way.

Landon conveniently appears beside me and I kindly ask him to take Jasmine’s smushed bag. Roman glares at his brother retreating from as I stare up triumphantly.

“Now I have no bag, so can you please toss one down to me?” I tilt my head innocently and keep my hand extended .

His gaze seems assessing as he crouches down on his haunches, gripping the side of the trailer for balance. “What if I don’t want to toss one down?”

My defenses rise immediately, and I point an accusing finger at him. “Why? Because I’m a girl?” I know Roman isn’t doing this because I’m a girl; I just saw him toss one

to Aurora. But logic has no place in my arguments with this infuriating boy.

His face somehow looks even more bored than before. “Don’t be ridiculous. That’s the last reason I would treat you any differently.”

“Aha! You are treating me differently!” I say triumphantly as I jump up and point at him with more gusto.

“I never claimed I was going to treat you the same,” he drawls. He reaches down slightly and brushes away the bangs that had fallen into my eyes. The glare that he sees right after pulls a small laugh from him, and I’ll be damned if that sound wasn’t honey in my tea.

At this point, we have drawn the team’s attention, especially since Calvin is now the only one passing the bags down. Roman realizes this and fully stands up again, sending me a warning look before tossing more bags down .

Aurora appears at my side as she extends her hand for something. “Why are you making a scene?” She whispers to me casually as Roman places a cooler in her hands.

“I’m trying to prove a point,” I say without looking away from Roman.

“She’s getting in the way,” he says, eyes locked on mine.

“Okay, then,” Aurora draws out the words as she promptly turns to leave.

Roman turns his back on me to get more bags, and before I get the chance to regret it, I grab the side of the trailer and hoist myself onto the platform. I teeter once on the ledge, but Roman’s at my side in a second. Gripping under my elbows, as he promptly pulls me into his chest.

“You really never listen. Do you, Langley?” He asks with a hint of bemusement in his voice. His hand moves to grip the top of my hip and steady me in the wobbly trailer. I put my hands on his forearms, relishing the hard surface under my palms.

But I refuse to let his toned, beautifully-muscled arms distract me at this moment. “I want to help, and if you don’t pass me a bag, I’ll just have to get it myself. I’m not just going to stand here and do nothing, Roman,” I state. Crossing my arms so he knows I’m serious.

“I never expected you to do nothing, Langley. I literally assigned you to the tuning room,” he deadpans.

I stare at him for a second without processing his words. Is that why he wouldn’t pass me a bag? “Oh, well. I wasn’t listening then,” I say quickly, dropping my strong-woman stance and stepping back.

He doesn’t waste a second to close that gap again while simultaneously pulling me back into him. “You never do,” he says with a smile and a quick squeeze of my hip.

My body is burning at this point, the anger from earlier turning into something else as we stay this close. “Is that why you didn’t give me a bag?”

“Correct.”

“Why didn’t you just tell me that then?” I can’t help but ask curiously.

His face contorts in front of me as almost a sheepish quality takes over his face. “Now, why would I want you anywhere but right beside me?”

Heart, meet the floor. My brain is an empty jar of butterflies as my body presses against every smooth ridge of his .

“I’m just going to go unpack the tuning room then,” I say breathlessly, but I’m doing everything in my power to stay calm. Being this close, his clean smell is invading everyone of my senses, and I want nothing more than to wrap it around myself.

“Good girl,” he whispers. His rich voice penetrates my last barrier of brain cells, and try not to let those words melt away all my common sense. A slow nod is all I’m capable of giving him and he smiles like a cat at my flustered face.

He then gives a couple of open-handed pats to my hip, slides past me and hops onto the pavement. Turning around as he lands, his hand extends out to me as the other prepares to grab my waist.

With a sigh, I take his hand because this trailer needs to be unpacked, and I’m only slowing down the process at this point. His other hand grabs my waist immediately, and I’m weightless for a moment as I’m lowered to the ground.

“You seem to be touching me an awful lot, Huxley,” I say as my feet touch the ground. Thinking about what he said in the van, I tip my head up and look directly at him after telling him my thoughts.

“Then tell me to stop, Langley,” he counters as the smile on his face only grows .

There is not a single part of me that wants him to stop this recent shift in behaviour.

The small touches, the tantalizing words, and the acts of kindness have all inched their way into my heart.

Burrowing there and creating a space where I feel comfortable putting my trust in him.

I would be thrilled if not for the fact that this whole thing is just an arrangement.

I know in my head he's acting like this because I asked him to, and he's doing his best to help me out. Even though every single thing he says to me makes my heart melt into goo, I need to remember it's all for show in front of the team.

He must see my face change from these thoughts, as that light-hearted look sputters out from behind his eyes. "What's wrong?"

'Oh, nothing,' I deflect as I put a normal smile back on my face. "Just tired, you know. I'm going to go unpack the tuning room." Pointing back to the house, I turn and make my way over to the garage.

A hand quickly encases my wrist, and I turn back to see Roman looking at me with concern. "I'll see you inside, Langley," he says with a reassuring smile and then lets go of my wrist, albeit reluctantly.

As if in a daze, I walk towards the garage and see Landon helping set up the ski tuning tables all around the space. He chuckles as he sees my face, puts down his socket wrench, and walks up to me.

"You good, Rhodes?" He asks half-heartedly, as his attention stays focused on everyone moving things around.

Ignoring my inner turmoil, I put on a forced smile and try and joke around with him. "Oh yeah, I'm fine. Your brother is a confusing grump, but what else is new," I say jokingly.

"Oh, I can only imagine it's just beginning," he says distractedly. His eyes stayed fixed on everyone's movements around the room.

His words pull me out of my own head, and I turn to him in confusion. "What does that mean?"

Landon does a double-take as he seems to tune into the conversation, and his eyes widen comedically as the past minute registers. “What? What does what mean?”

“The thing you just said,” I say as I narrow my eyes at him.

He looks at me with a blank stare, and with a move that’s more startling than anything else, he turns and walks away.

“Landon! You can’t just leave!” I yell and chase him into the house .

People and luggage are moving everywhere, and I mentally high-five myself when he gets stuck behind a line of athletes at the bottom of the basement stairs. Grabbing his bicep, I drag him into one of the storage rooms nearby.

“Help me! A crazy woman’s grabbing me,” he yells to the team as he successfully catches everyone’s attention.

I slam the door before he can draw more of a crowd and pin him with my deadliest stare. “What’s going on, Landon?”

“Nothing. I swear!” He surrenders one of his hands as he puts it in the air, but I can plainly see the other one tucked away. The fact that he feels the need to cross his fingers behind his back only solidifies my suspicion.

“Landon! Tell me right now,” I yell, pointing an accusing finger at him.

His fake distress that he’s been milking this entire time turns to mischief right in front of my eyes.

A feline smile takes over his face, and even though he’s adopted, he looks exactly like Xander in this moment.

“I just think certain aspects will change when it comes to your little arrangement, Rhodes.” Before I can inquire further, we hear Grayson calling his name from the hallway.

I can only imagine that it has to do with the organization of the tuning room and Landon comes to the same conclusion.

With a few patronizing pats on the head, Landon darts out the door and leaves me alone in this storage room. Leaning back against the wall, put my hand over my mouth in thought.

The Huxley boys are up to something, and I’m going to find out what.

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Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 2:12 am

The coaches are about as organized as Xander.

The team meeting is going as well as I assumed it was going to go. Which is not well at all.

As the team squishes into the space of the rental house, we all wait for Roman to return and give us the information for the race tomorrow.

The fear of the impending race, mixed with my anxiety for Roman, causes my knee to bounce vigorously on the carpeted floor. The team is getting restless the longer we all wait, and I hate the negative energy that's building in the room.

The living space has a cozy cottage feel, with exposed wooden beamed ceilings and leather couches.

The kitchen, dining room, and living area are all one open concept space, where we all squish together and wait.

Three couches in the living area make a giant U shape so we will all be able to face Roman when he gets here .

Rhys is the only one who avoids being with the team and chooses instead to lean against the wall.

He just arrived over an hour ago, since his personal preference is not to travel with the team.

It's quite convenient for him since he puts all his gear in the van and lets the rest of the team unload it.

If I had enough money to just fly to the races, I would probably do the same.

Kai and Grayson are using their time wisely as they finish up some last-minute assignments. I have half a mind to work with them, but my bigger concern is keeping everyone's attitudes positive regarding our team captain.

It's just hit twenty minutes past six, and Roman is still nowhere to be seen. The team is becoming restless, and the more vocal athletes ensure everyone knows their thoughts on the matter.

"So, who thinks he's even going to bother showing up within the hour?" Jasmine loudly asks the group as she examines her nails. The small chatter comes to an immediate stop as all heads turn in her direction.

She and her little minions are all wearing matching sweat tracksuits as they squish together on the larger couch.

Calvin and his friends reside in this same seat, and he's all too happy to continue this conversation.

"Let's be real. He's probably late on purpose as a power play.

Proving that we will all just sit here happily and wait for him. The guy is power hungry."

I can feel the vein in my forehead start to pulse as they talk about him, as if anything they're saying is true.

Frankly, no one on this team knows Roman at all besides his roommates, and over half of that group is his brothers.

I would've liked to put myself in that category, but I come to a harsh realization that I don't.

While Roman's tendencies and mannerisms are quite familiar to me at this point, I don't know that much about him as a person. If there's one thing that's true, is that he keeps things tight to the vest and doesn't like to talk about himself.

A loud laugh from Jasmine and Calvin brings me back to the moment. The pair are both laughing a fraction too loud at something, and I know that I'll hate it.

Looking towards the Huxley brothers for confirmation, my suspicions are confirmed as they both sit there, clenching their jaws.

At one point I see Landon open his mouth to say something, but Xander holds him back with a small shake of his head.

I move so I can look at Rhys leaning against the wall, and while he doesn't look pleased about the topic of conversation, it doesn't look as though he is going to intervene .

Glancing across the group, I find relief in the fact that Aurora, Liam, Isla, and Charles are not taking part. A couple of weeks ago, they probably would have been leading the slanderous session, and now they sit as quiet as a mouse.

They still haven't gotten the chance to really get to know him, but just the fact that they're giving him a chance makes me grateful for the group.

"It's a team meeting, is it that hard to just show up on time?" Calvin asks loudly and

looks around to relish in the laughter.

“Dude, look at this shoe box of a rental house. I don’t know why we let him stay in charge.” Laughs fill that space as Grayson joins the mix, and they all start feeding off each other.

“The dude is about as useful as a teacup; he can barely schedule the practice,” Kai pitches in.

“It astounds me how he became team captain again; I want a recount!” Grayson yells and even gets out of his chair a little.

I notice that the fear that just gripped me has quickly morphed into anger.

As I glance one more time at his brothers and see that they aren’t going to intervene.

I decide it’s time for me to get my elbows out .

“What’s so funny about that? What is hilarious is that you feel confident enough to say this all behind his back, but never to his face.

” My voice shatters the mood instantly, and everyone looks in my direction now, as the remnants of laughter hang in the air.

Grayson seems to become flustered, obviously someone who can dish it but not take it.

As I lift my eyebrow in his direction, waiting for him to sputter out some nonsense, my vulture of a cousin sees her moment to attack.

“What’s wrong, Rhodes? Feel the need to protect your man? How well did that work

out for you the last time?” Jasmine’s comment shocks me into silence, with only my self-preservation keeping my jaw from dropping. I’m not upset as much as I’m just shocked. She’s getting daring with these responses.

I can see that everyone is dead silent now, with various people casting sidelong glances at each other. While almost no one knows about the cheating, it’s still common knowledge that Daniel and I broke up a year ago, and Jasmine started dating him right after.

“I know that you didn’t say that, you slimy little worm,” Aurora yells at my cousin’s face.

I grab Aurora’s sleeve and pull her back to the couch as she starts to rise.

Frankly, I have no idea what she has in mind, but if my best friend got banned from our first race because she was defending me, I would never forgive myself.

Jasmine just shrugs and smirks at Aurora’s growing rage, and I have to keep an iron grip on her now. “Jasmine, how about you do everyone a favour and just shut it, alright?” I say with my teeth gritted and doing my best to hold back Aurora.

Her eyes light up for a millisecond as her scheming face shines through, but it disappears just as quickly.

Jasmine’s face absolutely crumples in front of my eyes as she puts her hands over her face and sinks back into the couch.

Her minions are at her side in a second, rubbing her back and soothing her as she pretends to cry at my insult.

I roll my eyes at this display, but what surprises me is the anger I see radiating from

Calvin's face.

I've always suspected that he has a thing for her, but my suspicions are confirmed as he looks to her and then whirls on me.

I notice in my periphery that both Xander and Landon got up in that second, but I don't take my eyes off of Calvin.

Standing up, he points a finger in my direction as he takes a step closer. "You need to apologize to her right now," he yells in my direction .

I'm so over men thinking they can just yell in my face, so I stand in turn, and make sure some muscled up moron isn't telling me what to do. As the memory of them making fun of Roman comes into my mind, I make sure I put on my sweetest smile. "I would rather die," I say kindly.

His building rage only makes my smile bigger, as he advances towards me. "You little bitc—."

His words are abruptly cut off as Rhys steps right in front of him, shoving him back and into the couch. Everyone stares in shock since no one had even seen him move from leaning against the wall.

He's by far the biggest guy on the team, but more importantly, he never gets involved in anything. This behaviour from him is unprecedented, and no one moves a muscle.

"Sit down, and shut up," he says with boredom as he turns his back to Calvin and walks away. To my biggest surprise, Rhys walks towards me and leans on the wall located right behind my couch.

Before anyone can process that, the front door bangs open and a furious Roman

storms in. This entire night has been a tennis match of emotions, but seeing Roman finally makes me breathe at ease. I can't determine why but having him in the room makes everything better.

He wears another of his chunky-knit sweaters, this time paired with a pair of medium-washed jeans.

It's easy to see the movement of his powerful legs through the denim as he eats up the space from the door to us.

With frustration plain on his face, he stands at the front of the room and glares at everyone.

He does a quick scan of the room and stops when his gaze finds mine. He gives me a small smile, but then flicks his gaze towards Rhys, who stands behind me. Confusion splays across his face for a second, but quickly reverts to his usual bored expression.

"Alright, I'm going to say this once and post the notes on our Teamchat afterward.

We have a three-day race coming up. Tomorrow and Saturday will consist of giant slalom, one run on each day.

It is a co-ed course for these races; the girls will start in the morning, and the boys will follow in the afternoon.

Sunday is our last day; it will be regular slalom, and you will have a run in the morning and one in the afternoon.

There will be two different courses, boys are set on the right; girls left.

"Inspection will begin exactly one hour before the race start time. Do not be late.

There're four forerunners for each race, and your racing bib will be given to you tomorrow morning. Any questions?"

So much important information has just been word-vomited on everyone, so I'm not surprised when Roman is met with silence. I mentally rewind to see if he missed any key points for the weekend, but I'm pretty sure everything was covered.

We're responsible for everything when it comes to racing.

We have to know the times for event starts like the back of our hands.

Inspection start is when we're allowed on the course an hour early so we can preview our terrain.

Race start is an obvious one and the overall schedule for the whole weekend.

After everyone seems to process Roman's words, Xander's hand shoots into the air, and Roman quickly points to him. "Is this race a team inspection, or is solo allowed?"

Everyone nods at this question and faces back to Roman.

Inspection is the time we are allotted to view the set-up of the course before the race starts.

We can notice tempo changes in the course, as well as terrain changes, and we can overall try to memorize the entire course during this time.

Certain ski hills demand team inspection as to keep all the athletes grouped together, but some allow solo inspection.

This allows athletes to go at their own pace and look at everything.

“Sunray Mountain club said they don’t mind solo inspection as long as it starts twenty minutes before inspection closes.” Xander nods and goes back to absorbing everything Roman has said.

No one says anything for a couple of seconds, and Roman nods at the group. “Alright, if that’s everything, then we are done. Have all your skis tuned, bags packed, and be on skis at seven tomorrow.”

This is as good a dismissal as any, and chatter breaks out again.

I notice Jasmine and her girls leave immediately, followed closely by Calvin.

Kai, Grayson, and Nico make no move in following their buddy as they relax in their seats and turn back to their work.

No one brings up the past thirty minutes, but tensions within the group hang heavy in the air.

I turn to chat with Aurora, but her eyes widen slightly, and she abruptly turns to face Liam on her other side.

My brow furrows in confusion until I turn to see Roman heading right for my couch. He nods towards Rhys behind me, and extends his hand to help me up.

I tentatively take his hand as he lifts me to my feet, and I watch as he plops into the seat I just vacated. Before I can express my outrage, his hand snakes around my waist, and he pulls me on top of his lap.

“I missed you this afternoon, Langley,” he whispers into my hair.

Since we’ve never displayed PDA like this in front of the team before, my face

flames at his actions and kind words.

As I try to get up, my attempt fails immediately, and Roman wastes no time as he pulls back to him.

The rest of the team casts quick glances at us, but mostly leaves us alone as I'm pressed to Roman's chest.

I do my best to relax, but straight adrenaline is coursing through me. Every inch of him is so warm and comfortable as I feel the pull to relax, but remain tense.

"You need to relax if you want to sell this, Langley," Roman whispers in my ear.

I do another glance of the room, finding everyone preoccupied as I turn to him. As everyone seems distracted by Xander, I rest my head on Roman's shoulder and whisper back.

"You don't have to do this if you don't want to. I won't be offended or anything," I admit to him. I give him my kindest smile, but I know in my heart that I am falling hard for a man who thinks this whole thing is fake.

"I don't mind," he says back to me .

I pull away to see him smiling sweetly at me, and my heart officially breaks. I'm no actress, and I need to let Roman know my feelings before this gets to be ridiculous.

"Roman, I don't want you to make all these gestures anymore if they're just going to be for the show." I bite my lip as I say the words, but I don't regret sharing my thoughts with him.

To my surprise, I'm pulled even closer, and he faces us both to the rest of the group.

His lips press into my neck, and I try to suppress the shiver that wants to go through me. “I think we’re starting to get on the same page now, Langley.”

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Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 2:12 am

I couldn't be more proud of my girl.

With a smoothie in my belly and protein bars filling all my pockets, I try and get rid of the stress that fills my body.

Our small rental was alive at five am and athletes filled the room as they ate their oatmeal.

All of yesterday's struggles were forgotten as everyone readied themselves for the tough race ahead.

I smile at the texts I received when I woke up. Mom, Dad, Henry, and Carlos, all wishing me luck this weekend. That was followed by a link of the dress I have to wear to the wedding as well as a million questions about Roman.

Putting a pin in those questions, I keep my focus on the race ahead instead of my pretend love life.

Rachel and Liane are both needed on course today, so we asked a neighbouring teams coach to help us all clip into our skis at the start. Since our race skis want to touch the snow as little as possible, it's always helpful to ask a coach to clip us in.

There are many rules when it comes to race day at the professional level. Long hair must be tied back or braided. Face masks aren't worn for fear that they could cause a millisecond of drag. Tons of athletes have certain socks, gloves, or an article of clothing that's only worn on race day.

It can get out of hand sometimes, with some athletes believing they will crash if they don't do their pre-race ritual. Luckily, I don't have that level of superstition when it comes to the sport, and I can perform no matter what socks I have on.

Aurora and I inspected together this morning and her eyes caught onto terrain changes that I stupidly looked past. We then quickly went back up the chair and discussed the various problem spots we would encounter of this race.

It wasn't too long after that when I found myself standing beside the start gate and screaming like a mad woman as my best friend started her run. As the countdown finished, Aurora's powerful body threw herself off the starting ramp and she flew onto the course .

It only takes a few powerful pushes until she puts her arms forward and forms a perfect tuck. From beside the starting hut, we're only privy to the first three gates of the course, and then lose her after the steep drop of the pitch.

Right after losing view of Aurora, I do the same thing for Isla and then go back to the team's spot.

We have reserved a corner of the start area by throwing all our jackets and skis into a giant pile. The other girls are currently all chilling here, wrapping themselves up in their jackets as they complain about the cold.

I roll my eyes at the bunch since they didn't cheer for Aurora or Isla, and walk a ways away. Picking up the team radio, I ask one of the coaches to give me a course report on how the course is looking so far. An answer doesn't come right away, so I give it a minute before I ask again.

With still no response, I decide to take off my jacket and zip off my snow pants. My light pink speed suit seems to glow in these cloudy conditions. The white lines going

up my arms and legs, hugging my body like a glove and doing nothing but accentuate my figure.

Grabbing my curved poles, I moved away from the group and start to swing my legs as high as they can go.

I can't hyper fixate on all my fears when I need my attention on trying not to kick anyone.

As my breath freezes right before my eyes, I am encouraged to keep moving even more.

Inactive muscles will be the end of me if I cramp up during my run.

At this point Isla should be done her run, but the radio remains silent as I prepare for myself. I mentally go over the course again as I highlight all the points my best friend highlighted for me. Try my best, don't give up, and stay strong.

Those words go through my head as the course coordinator yells out the bib numbers needed at the start area.

The girls slowly dwindle from our group as their bibs are called, and I don't bother cheering for any of them as I focus on myself.

Calvin and his friends make a quick appearance to grab everyone's gear, but I barely pay attention as I calm my mind.

When I'm done centering myself, I'm not surprised to see that my jacket and pants are left in the snow.

Calvin's obviously still upset about yesterday, and I don't have the time to even care

at this point.

I've trained so hard over the summer and on snow, so this is the time to show everyone my progress.

As I see the athlete's bib numbers enter the seventies, I pick up my race skis and head to the lineup.

There are ten girls ahead of me, and I look for another team's coach that can help me clip into my skis.

As I enter the lineup, the volunteers pull the girl out of the start gate and inform everyone that it's currently a stop-start. This meaning that the racer ahead has crashed, or there's an issue with the course, so they have to stop the running.

I don't stress about this as I pump out some squats and focus on what's to come. There are nine girls in front of me now, and even though it's a stop-start, I need to put on my skis at this point.

I'm shaking like a leaf as I drop them both down and watch as they slap onto the snow. Nerves worm their way into my system, and I try to push them aside as I begin to clip myself into my race skis.

A figure quickly approaches me in my periphery, sliding onto their knees and quickly grabbing my raised ankle. I whip my gaze to my left, seeing Roman kneeling to the ground below me with a screwdriver in his hand and my unzipped jacket on his shoulders.

He's breathing heavily, as if he raced to get here, and he looks up at me with a guilty expression. "Rhodes. I. Am. So. Sorry." Every word out of his mouth comes with a gasp of air, and he starts to work right away .

He takes the screwdriver and clears any ice built up off of my ski boots, and then proceeds to clean the snow out of my binding.

The way he hunches his body to the ground just to make sure my skis are clean makes my heart swell.

This feeling only increases as he clips in my next foot with the same level of intensity and care.

The race is back in full swing now, the girls in front of me dropped down to three and I didn't even notice. My body starts to shake with nerves, since the first race is one of the most important.

Roman stands to his full height in front of me, with my helmet, boots and skis, I am just able to reach his shoulder.

My goggles are still on the rim of my helmet as I look up at him and I try for a reassuring smile.

It comes out as more of a grimace as the fear fully grips me, and I can't do anything as I look ahead with paralyzing fear.

Fear of falling. The fear of letting everyone down. The fear that I this is just another aspect in my life that can be easily ripped out of my grasp.

Concern forms behind Roman's eyes, obviously thinking my intense trembling is from the cold. Without me uttering a word, he reassures me and starts to rub up and down my arms .

"Hey, it's alright. You are going to kick ass, Langley. Now start moving, you will freeze if you are standing still."

I do as he says, thankful he can't read my thoughts as I stomp my feet up and down, Roman continuing to warm me up. The volunteer ushers me into the starting hut, informing me that I am on deck.

As I stand here, I can see the giant clock, counting down the time for the racer to go.

Volunteers surround the racer in gate, writing down their number and asking questions.

The starting hut volunteer tried to usher Roman out, but every athlete gets a coach in the start, and he has taken up that role.

Before I can think twice, I turn to him.

"I'm not ready." Fear is crawling up my throat and I'm shaking like a leaf as I watch the racer in front of me prepare.

What if I fail and I get my sponsorships pulled?

What if I lose my place on the team? We don't have many races a season, meaning every one is essential.

Roman blocks my path swiftly, his gloved hand lightly grasping my chin and tipping it up.

"Listen to me." His harsh words are at a contrast with his other hand that lands on my hip.

"You're ready. You train every weekend, and you're one hell of a racer.

I know it without a doubt. I know that you know it as well.

Now, go out there and show everyone what we already know. ”

He looks at me with such confidence as he grabs my goggles and places them on my eyes. The cheering from in front of me bring my attention to the now empty starting gate.

Roman’s hand is at my lower back, pushing me towards the gate. The giant red and black clock faces me, counting down two minutes. I can feel Roman lean in, his hands giving my waist a quick squeeze. “This is your race, Love.”

The cold immediately replaces his warm body as he removes his hand, and now all I can lean on is his confidence. I can do this; it’s my race and now I need to show everyone else that.

The volunteer to my left leans in close. “Rhodes Langley. Bib number seventy-five. Are you ready?”

I put my poles on the slope of the start ramp, bending my back so that it’s completely flat and breathing in steadily. I nod at the volunteer’s question and face forward to the course.

The clock has entered its last ten seconds as a loud beep sounds from my right.

“Racer ready.”

“3.” BEE P

“2.” BEEP

“1.” BEEP

I put all my strength into my arms as my body hovers in the air for a fraction of a second before tripping the timing wand at my shins.

A roar of cheering sounds at my back, and I can only assume it's coming from a certain fake boyfriend.

But I put that information to the side for now as I focus on what's to come.

With everything I have, I push myself and use the guards strapped to my arms to hit away the first gate. Using the momentum from the contact, I use my last burst of explosive energy and form my tuck.

The second and third gates come at me fast, but I stay strong as I try to build my speed.

Breaking my tuck, I absorb the turn of the pitch and prepare for it to become more turny.

I keep my body actively moving forward in order to stay on top of things.

As soon as a racer falls below the gates, they lose their whole line, which means they lose the race.

The wind is howling through my helmet as I fly through this course. The sound of the choppy ice below me meeting the sharpest skis I own and creating a grating noise that fills the space.

That noise is music to my ears at this point in my career, and I brace myself for the main pitch to come. It approaches fast and I know that the gate below is a cranker. If I have any chance of making it, I need to prepare for it.

With leg strength I didn't think I had, I flip my gigantic skis in the direction of the next gate and dive in fast. The contact my arm makes with the gate ricochets through my body, and the resulting sound of the gate hitting the ice causing a loud boom to sound.

I smile as the adrenaline course through me and try to let my instincts take over. The main pitch is always the hardest, and since I started so far back, choppy ice ruts litter every turn.

If I want to place in this race, I need to ski higher above the gates than the racers before me. While this could cost me time wise, it will be a hell of a lot faster than being stuck in those ruts.

The terrain flattens out as I near the bottom, and I can see the finish line only three gates ahead. The sounds of cheering start to fill my helmet and I suppress a smile as I reform my tuck.

My quads are on fire as the lactic acid tightens my muscles to a point of pain, and I hold my shaky position as much as possible.

Keeping my skis flat to the snow, I allow the wax to do its job and help fly me to the end of this course.

With the very last amount of my energy I have, I punch my hand out of my tight tuck and trip the timing monitor.

Muscle memory helps me bring my skis to a stop and I look at the stadium sized television stationed at the end of the finish corral.

There are stands scattered in a U shape around the finish area, as well as people swarming up to the fence.

The announcer's voice then booms over everyone and informs the crowd of my placement.

“Rhodes Langley of the Polar Bear Ski Team. Bib number seventy-five had a time of one minute and thirty-seven seconds. This puts this athlete one second off of our race leader and into seventh place.”

I almost don't believe my eyes as the screen displays my name moving up the ranks and settling in seventh place.

Seventh.

Seventh place out of over a hundred female athletes. Everything was worth it in the end because I managed to be top ten in my first race. An embarrassing squeal leaves my lips before I can stop it, but I'm too happy to even care.

Pride fills me when I see Aurora's avatar standing in first and Isla's down in third. My best friend deserved the win for this race, and I can't wait to see her on the podium .

Volunteers are yelling in my direction, and I skate to the exit fence with a giant smile taking over my features.

They congratulate me as they usher me out the exit fence.

Letting my pole straps dangle to my elbows, I put my goggles on the rim of my helmet and search for the team.

I spy Charles, Liam, Isla, and Aurora all huddling together to the left, smiles plastered on everyone's faces as they try to look for me in the crowd.

Clipping my skis off beside the rest of the groups, I run as fast as my ski boots will let me and tackle Aurora from behind. My joy was not only for my own score. Seeing Aurora Roberts in first place made my excitement explode.

“YOU WON! YOU WON OUR FIRST RACE!” I’m jumping and crying as I hold my best friend in joy.

“I FUCKING WON BITCH!” She screams in my ear as we jump in each other’s arms. I can feel another strong set of arms wrap around us as Charles gets involved, followed by both Isla and Liam.

My friend group might have some internal turmoil happening at the minute, but I couldn’t be more grateful as we feel happy for everyone.

I notice the genuine joy radiating from Isla, and it make my heart sink the tiniest bit.

It reminds me that she’s not aware of Aurora’s feelings towards Liam, and thus herself.

With a big sigh, I leave the issue for another day.

I give all my friends an individual hug, as everyone radiates joy for the women’s race. The guys ask us to cycle back up quickly since they want us to take their jacket and pants down.

I then realize that my stuff is still at the top of the course, so I have to go back up anyway to get my gear.

As I walk towards my skis and poles, the force of a battering ram slams into me from the side.

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I wonder if it's too late to get a new team.

Arms wrap around my waist, hugging me close as I feel my feet lift off the ground. I'm in the most insane bear hug ever as I'm swung in a couple of circles and then placed back down.

"Rhodes got top ten! Rhodes got top ten!" A sing-song voice says in my ear as I'm shaken around by a guy with very familiar voice.

"Dude, you are going to break her," Landon says from beside me.

"Nah, it takes more than a hug to break a woman like her," Xander says with joy.

As soon as Xander lets me out of his crushing embrace, he grabs my shoulders and puts me at an arms distance. "You crushed that run, Rhodes! Now pop me out so I can congratulate your best friend."

I can't stop the quick laugh that comes out of me, and I'm released from his hold only so I can pop him out of his skis. Turning around, I see Aurora heading our way as she raises her eyebrow at us.

"Hello Princess, I can't help but notice you won the whole damn race!" A smile I haven't seen for quite some time now explodes on Auroras face at Xander's words.

Then, before I can comprehend what's happening, she throws herself into Xander's arms. The pair of them share a giddy laugh as Xander begins to swing her around like he did me.

I'm still staring at them with confusion as I feel a light hand on my shoulder, and then suddenly all I see is Landon's chest as he pulls me into a hug. His gentle presence is a welcome feeling after the surge of energy, and he rubs my back as he congratulates me.

He pulls away, looking to Aurora as if to congratulate her, but decides against it.

As I smile at Landon and turn away, I look for the only Huxley brother who hasn't congratulated me. The space is packed as I start to walk back towards my skis. Slipping past the last barrier of people milling about, Roman stands waiting as he holds my jacket and snow pants in his hands.

My face crumples as all the emotions hit me at once. I try to avoid making eye contact as I feel my eyes welling with tears, but Roman only opens his arms for me.

When I'm only a couple of steps away, I speed up my pace and fall into him. His strong arms band around me as I fall, and I feel my feet leave the snow yet again.

The hugs from his brothers were great, but nothing compares to the feeling of being held in his embrace. As soon as I feel his gloved hand pushing on the back of my neck, I fully relax into him and put my head on his shoulder.

I can only imagine he's holding me a good foot in the air at this point, and we must look absolutely ridiculous, but I'm only thinking about Roman.

How he's always there for me when I need him, how he speaks in his actions over his words, and how I know that these feelings I have for him are becoming anything but fake.

That thought will have to wait until after this hectic weekend though as I feel myself slide down Roman's body yet again. He pulls me away so we can look at one another,

but quickly takes both his hands in mine.

“I’m so proud of you,” he beams. Genuine joy is splayed across his face as he watches me with those intensely beautiful eyes. A girl could get lost in chocolate brown eyes such as those, and I can’t help but feel like I’m becoming one of those lucky people.

I blush and put my head down instinctively, such raw emotion still being something I’m not used to. “I didn’t even get top five.” I counter immediately.

His gloves gently grasp my chin as he directs my gaze back to him. “Stop that. You did just as I asked. You kicked some serious ski racer ass today.” I wait for him to say more, but Xander starts to yell, and I hear the sounds of bindings clipping in from behind me.

Roman’s hand slides down to my hand and gives it a quick squeeze. “I need to go and try to do just as well as you now, Langley.” I lift my brow at him since I know he’s aiming for first, but I can’t help but smile.

As everyone waves and starts to ski away, I watch as Roman grabs his poles and clips into his skis. With the joy coursing through me, I have no regrets as I grab his arm and pull him down to me.

“Kick ass, Huxley,” I whisper in his ear and relish as his eyes widen.

He turns to me quickly with a smiling spreading over his face. “Anything for you, Langley.”

The rest of the day flies by, from using all the air in my lungs to cheer for the guys, to heading home and making sure everything is ready for tomorrow’s race. The house was bustling as everyone prepares their lunches for the next day and gets their race

skis ready.

It's always right after the race when the six-bedroom house feels the smallest. All the showers being occupied, athletes running up and down the staircases, and the kitchen being stuffed with guys trying to figure out the mechanics of a sandwich.

As I squish between Aurora and Charles on the couch, I pat him on the knee and congratulate him on his top ten finish today. He gives me a big side hug and we then both face Roman at the front of the room.

It looks like instead of eating, he was one of the ones to use the shower before the rest of the team.

His hair looks black when wet, some pieces dripping water while others dry with a slight curl.

The darkness of his hair does nothing but accentuate his pale skin and the freckles dusting across his face.

They're clumped on the bridge of his nose, and then stretch out across his cheeks in the most adorable manner.

He starts to address the group, probably going over results for today and the plan for tomorrow, but I can't seem to stop analyzing him.

The distinct bump of his nose is looked at as a flaw to most, but I love the way it shapes his face.

As well as his broad shoulders, wide neck, and ears that are on the smaller size.

I realize I've been tuning everything out as he makes eye contact with me, and I

notice the rest of the group doing the same.

His gaze turns from expectant to slightly confused and finally a smile graces his face as he realizes I have no idea what he said.

“Um, what sorry?” I ask the group as I look every which way.

I’ve never seen such a quiet man seem so damn smug as he stands in front of us all, crossing his strong arms over his chest with a huge smile on display.

Looking to my left for some support, I see Aurora doing her best to suppress a laugh building up.

Charles looks similar to her, and I look around the rest of the group to find no support.

“Alright, I wasn’t paying attention. What’s going on?”

” I confess and try my best to keep the defeat out of my tone.

Xander starts fully laughing now as he leans back in his chair and Landon decides to finally puts me out of my misery.

“Roman got mad at us for not paying attention, then he was talking about how you looked like the only person that seemed invested in what he had to say. Then, when he gestured to you, you were just drooling in his direction.”

I see Aurora’s arm cock back at that, followed by the pillow that smacks Landon directly in the face. “I was not drooling!” I immediately throw my own pillow at his face.

“Alright, settle down.” Roman puts his hands out, trying to stop the projectile pillows from breaking something.

“As I was saying, there’s a snow delay for tomorrow. They’re planning on starting the race at one, meaning we have the entire morning off.”

The energy in the rental switches like a light, everyone leaning forward as we all share the same idea.

Roman tenses as he feels the energy shift as well, and once again throws his hands up to continue talking.

“There will be no parties in this rental! We can’t lose our deposit and we can’t get a noise complaint. ”

These are all terrible points to stop us from having a party. Considering we’ll clean the rental after and we’re surrounded by houses that are occupied by the other teams, who will be invited anyway.

“I want you to all look at me right now. You will not have a party,” he states this with authority and points to everyone in turn. I can’t help but feel bad for the guy when fourteen smiling athletes look back at him.

“Rhys?” His gaze travels to the lone figure leaning against the wall and his voice sounds pleading. Every head turns around to look at the relaxed man that starts to smile and shrug his shoulders.

With Rhys’ agreement, we all cheer and pull out our phones. It looks like the Polar team is throwing a party.

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I don't like parties.

The party is in full swing at this point.

I felt bad for Roman as everyone completely ignored his protests and invited people to the party.

I would've had his back in this, but the Polar Bear's didn't host a single party last season, and no one forgot about that little detail.

Also, because I packed the cutest party outfit and needed an excuse for Roman to see me in it.

As the living room is packed with racers from across the country, I find our team spread out among the masses. Some playing beer pong, multiple people heading outside, and others relaxing on the couches and mingling with the teams.

I grab another drink from one of the coolers and squeeze my way out of the packed kitchen. I spot our friend group all hanging outside, laughing hysterically with each other and I excitedly make my way towards them .

I don't shy away as the one drink I've had courses through me, and I confidently walk to the sliding doors.

Feeling bold from the colour I'm wearing, I relish in my deep red, long-sleeve body suit, with a tight fitted grey skirt and lighter grey stockings.

Letting my hair down tonight, my bangs fall slightly into my eyes, but are offset by my dark red lipstick.

My mood is giddy as I struggle to open the sliding glass door, and then eventually give up and knock. Aurora sees me on the other side, laughing as she comes to open it for me. “Girl, how much have you had?” She questions as makes sure I don’t trip while exiting the building.

I can’t stop the giggle that erupts from my mouth and just shrug at my best friend. She rolls her eyes at me but drags me towards where everyone is hanging out. It warms my heart to see that Roman’s brothers have decided to hang out with my friends all on their own.

The group is all mingling with each other as smoke pours from everyone’s mouths. A couple athletes from the neighboring hill are mixed in with our giant group, and I don’t miss how Landon leans in close to the most gorgeous girl I’ve ever seen.

Her dark brown hair falls down to just under her breast, accentuating her heart shaped face and cupid’s bow lips.

But her skin’s absolutely breath taking as the moon light reflects the dark colour.

She stands a couple inches taller than the guys around the circle, but that only gives her more power as she mingles with our group.

Landon doesn’t stand a chance with her, but that doesn’t stop him from whispering something in her ear and making her chuckle.

Someone nearby passes her a joint, and she shakes her head before passing it to Landon. He must really be into her because he also passes on it and decides instead to lean back into her orbit.

I see that Xander notices her as well, catching glances to the side so he can keep looking at her. This doesn't go unnoticed by Aurora who glares daggers at the youngest Huxley brother. Frankly, I have no idea what's going on with those two, but I make a mental note to inquire about it later.

I make another mental note to ensure that Roman goes nowhere near this goddess looking woman. One cheating boyfriend is all I need in my lifetime.

Not that I think Roman would ever cheat on me, he has to be actually dating me in order to even cheat. That puts even more fear into my system, and I start to look around for the tall piece of muscle that I call my boyfriend .

The whole train of thought jars me a little, since the easy-going nature Roman's been displaying around me lately, made me forget we aren't actually dating. I guess that's what I asked of him though, to make sure there is no doubt my cousin or family could ever question us.

But a bigger part of me knows him, and I know that he doesn't do things unless he wants it. So, either he really wants to help me out with my problem, or he's just as interested in me as I am in him.

Leaning forward, I tap on Xander's arm and gesture for him to come toward me.

His drunken state easily forgets about his previous conversation, as he staggers into my side, and I have to use all my strength to support him.

"Where's Roman?" I yell in his ear as he sputters spittle in my face and asks me to repeat myself.

After hearing me a second time, he throws his head backwards in a scoff as he responds. "That little bitch is in his room because he's convinced that people are

going to try and steal his stuff.”

A small smile pulls at the corner of my mouth, because that’s a very Roman like thing to think when a party is happening. “I’m going to try to get him to come down.” I yell back to him over the music and Xander just laughs, wishing me luck with my mission .

As I squish my way inside and to the back staircase, I pass by all the athletes milling about on the stairs.

More people are lounging against the walls on the second floor when I get up there, and I spot Rhys with a girl at the end of the hall.

We make eye contact as I head his way, and he immediately walks towards me.

“Can you go and get him out of our room. I can only do so much in a hallway, and he’s just sitting in there reading.

” It takes me a second to process this since he quickly whisper-yells it all in my face, but I nod at him and suppress a giggle.

I pat Rhys reassuringly on the arm as I promise another one of my boyfriend’ s roommates that I’ll get him to come out.

Knocking and asking if I can come in, I hear the sound of footsteps approaching from the other side of the door. “For the last time, we share a room. You can’t just kick me out of our room because you want alone time with her.”

Putting my hand over my mouth to suppress a laugh, I knock lightly against the door once again. “Oh, believe me, I wish that was the case.” I wouldn’t say I’m drunk, but I’m definitely tipsy as the words flow freely out of my mouth, and I don’t regret

them.

The door cracks open slightly at my words and Roman peers down at me with suspicion. Once he does a glance of the rest of the hallway, he opens the door fully and ushers me in quickly.

“What’s the rush?” I can’t help but chuckle as I enter his room, and turn around to see him locking the door behind me.

“I don’t want anyone just waltzing in and making a mess of the room I just cleaned”.

Looking around the space, two sets of bunk beds are pushed up against each wall, leaving the floor and beds covered in the gear from the guys.

Race suits are laid flat, helmets are placed along the windowsill, and everything sits organized on everyone’s beds.

It looks as if a mess of boy exploded here and was then promptly organized.

“Did you clean this all up?” The idea that he has been spending his time picking up after his roommates sobers me up instantly, a guilty feeling creeping into my chest.

“No, no. I cleaned this up hours ago. I’ve just been reading and trying to ignore what’s going on downstairs.” He plops onto his bottom bunk, and a sense of loneliness weighs his shoulders down as he leans against the wall.

I plop down beside him, putting my back against the same wall as I lightly tap his knee with mine. “You know, you can always come downstairs and join us,” I say and try my best to keep my tone light.

He looks side long at me, hope flaring in his gaze before it immediately sputters out.

“No, they don’t want their team captain down there,” he says with finality.

“That’s not true at all. A bunch of people want you down there!”

His gaze is as disbelieving as his words as he looks down at me. “Yeah, like who?”

“Rhys, Xander and Landon, all missed you,” I counter immediately.

He smiles easily at this, breaking eye contact as he looks away. “I can guarantee the only reason they want me downstairs is so they can have this room to themselves.”

I frown at the likely truth to his words and decide that it’s time to be honest with him. “I wanted you down there,” I whisper and feel fear spear through me as his gaze whips my way.

Neither of us move for a second, as if he didn’t believe his ears and wants to make sure he didn’t imagine it. “You did?”

I nod back at him, not breaking eye contact with him as I sense his body move toward me .

The couple drinks I’ve had evaporate in my stomach as I feel a tension build between us. It seems like everything we’ve been through has been breadcrumbs leading us to this moment and it feels so right in my gut.

We’re a hairs breath apart now and I close my eyes as I feel his hand snake into my hair. The slightest brush of his lips touches mine just as the bedroom door slams open.

Both of us jolt apart, shock and confusion splay out on both our faces as we whip our gaze to the door. Xander stumbles in with a key in hand and points his finger directly

at his brother.

Roman startles, something I've never seen him do, and I'm yanked behind him before I can blink. I think it took him a minute to understand the lunatic at the door was actually his brother as Xander confidently stumbles his way towards us.

"Dude, Rhoses is going to come and see you. Don't worry at all, I told her nothing about your feelings for her or about the plan," he slurs all his words as Roman shoots off the bed toward him.

Roman immediately supports him as he seems to fall over, as Xander wraps his arms around him in turn "Alright buddy, that's enough of that.

How much have you had to drink?" His earlier confusion is gone as he looks worriedly towards his baby brother.

"Just because the race is in the evening tomorrow, doesn't mean it isn't happening at all.

This is exactly why I didn't want a party in our rental.

" He all but growls that last part and tries to usher Xander into bed.

Worry for him has me standing and moving over to them, which was the wrong decision on my part.

Xander's eyes widen comedically as he sees me, and then lunges away from Roman and into my path. His arms wrap around my neck in a second as his dead weight falls on me, and my body immediately strains under the impact.

"Qucik, less make him jealoss." Xander slurs, his head looking like he's going to kiss

me before dropping to my shoulder as he falls asleep.

His weight is quickly removed from me, and I don't hesitate as I breathe in an unrestrained breath of air. While these guys might be loveable idiots, they're freaking heavy.

Roman grumbles something angrily under his breath as he hauls his limp brother into the bed across from his and flips him on his side. I can see the war waging within Roman's eyes since Xander obviously ruined the moment that we built between us .

I can't help but think back to Xander's words as Roman puts a blanket over him. Roman's feelings towards me?

Turning to face me, Roman runs his hands through his hair in dismay, and his shirt slowly rides up to expose the flat pane of his lower stomach. My brain understands that he's talking to me, but my eyes stay glued to that piece of skin.

A couple more words sound in the background, but I return to feeling the same way I did before Xander interrupted us.

Suddenly, his curled pointer finger comes to rest under my chin, and he tilts my head up to meet the smug grin on his face.

"Here I thought he ruined our moment," he breathes.

"Were we having a moment?" I ask in a breathy tone, tilting my chin up ever so slightly as I challenge him. His eyes narrow at my words and his hands move to rest on my hips.

"I know we were having a moment, Langley. My heart doesn't beat that fast if I'm just standing still," he admits in a whisper .

I look up to him with a devious smile that puts a note of uncertainty into his gaze. “So,” I say curiously. “You told Xander you had feelings for me, huh?”

Roman’s face reddens immediately, the flush causing those damned freckles to stand out on his pale face even more. I curse at myself internally, the last thing I wanted was to frazzle him, but I don’t know how else to go about this.

Daniel’s time in my life has left it’s mark, and I’ve been dancing around Roman for months now. Even if he rejects my bold question right now, I’m so proud that I had the courage to ask it in the first place. I brace for him to pull away from me and retreat back into himself.

The flush remains on Roman’s face, but his eyes never change as he looks at me. To my surprise, he doesn’t retreat from me, instead using his grip on my hips to pull me closer. There seems to be conflict behind his eyes, but it vanishes instantly as a new resolve takes over his face.

“I have feelings for you, Rhodes. I’ve had feelings for a long time, and I’m devastated it took a fake relationship to get us where we are. What I’m not upset about is the fact that we’re here now, and no one will bat an eye when it comes to you being mine. ”

His words are like a tsunami in my brain, and I try not to crumple under the pressure. He’s had feelings for me? For a long time?

Before I can ask more, he leans in close and cups my jaw with both of his hands. “I’m also not going to kiss you.”

The softness of his voice causes a delay for his words to register. He isn’t going to kiss me? Does he know that I want it just as bad as him? As the protest is about to leave my lips, his thumb shifts so it covers my mouth, and stops what I was about to

say.

“I’m not going to kiss you in this shitty rental, full of smelly ski suits and a raging party happening below.

” He steps even closer to me now, our bodies fully pressed together as he walks me backwards, and I feel the wooden beam of the bunk bed lightly hit my back.

His stare is intense as I watch him settle himself against me, his hips pinning me to the post.

“I’m not going to kiss you for the benefit of putting on a show, and I’m sure as hell not going to kiss you when my brothers snoring in the corner.”

He’s closer to me now, leaning in as my breath goes ragged, and his words start registering in my overwhelmed brain. “When I kiss you, Langley. Because there will be a when. It’ll be the farthest thing from fake.

“Now, I’ll walk you to your room so we can both go to bed. We have a race to win tomorrow.”

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I'd give anything in the world to never see her like that again.

I didn't win today's race. I didn't even finish.

Sleep was the last thing on my mind last night. After Roman walked me to my room and said goodnight, the only logical thing to do was join my friend's downstairs and continue drinking.

It was later on, when I saw that Xander had wandered back downstairs, that I knew it was time to call it a night.

Surprisingly, I was one of the few athletes that retired early, and the blaring music did nothing to help aid in my sleep. From there my mind wandered, and all I could think about was Roman.

What will remain ingrained in my brain for the rest of my life is the feeling of him pressed up against me.

The warmth radiating from him as every inch of our bodies touched and I just felt encompassed in a blanket of safety.

I've never had that feeling before, not even for one second in my past relationship.

The feeling of falling and knowing without a doubt he'll be there to catch me.

The revelation of this caused even more turmoil to course through me, and then three hours of sleep later, I wasn't the happiest of campers.

The entire team was plastered last night, so I fit right in with the crowds as we all groggily got ready for the race.

The only exceptions to the hungover roster on our team were Roman, Aurora, Rhys, and Calvin. They're all on strict diets in the race season and won't touch a drop of alcohol until the last race.

Turns out, I should've adopted their philosophy because then I might've been able to ski more than five gates. My race run ended before it even started really, the tip of my suddenly ski hooking inside the fifth gate, and brutally throwing me onto the ice.

Due to the length of giant slalom skis, they truly have a mind of their own and need to be controlled at all times. I lacked this control severely as my ski yanked me backwards, my whole body rotating to the side, and then everything came in contact with the hard ground.

As I lay upside down on the hard snow, my mind spins as I register the past couple seconds. I narrow my eyes in confusion as the world seems upside down, and then it all clicks into place.

I crashed. I crashed in the second race of the season and there's no way for me to save it.

Pushing up from the hard ground, I look around in a daze and watch some course volunteers rushing towards me. Their volunteer tags blow in the wind as they surround my fallen form.

The left side of my face seemed to take the brunt of the fall, the ice being so cold it burns.

Realizing I am still face first on the ground, I flip myself towards the downhill of the

slope and carefully place my race skis on the sheet of ice.

It's surprising to see that I only have one ski on, and thank the volunteer that hands me my other one.

Getting up is easy enough, and I push myself up as I brush off all the concerned parents asking to take me to ski patrol.

I can feel the bruise on my knees forming as I tuck my metaphorical tail between my legs and ski to the side of the course.

Taking stock of myself quickly, I feel that my knees are slightly sore, and my head is throbbing but everywhere else feels fine.

I shake off the physical pain and try not to dwell on the hit my pride is about to take. It's the second race of the season and I couldn't even make it five gates. I can't help but repeat my failure as I kick myself on such a stupid mistake.

Roman cheered for me at the start, and probably raced to the bottom to watch the end of my run. Him and the rest of the team will all be there as they announce my DNF.

It's not that I actually thought I would win, but Roman's words just instill so much confidence in me.

Even though it's stupid, a tiny part of myself thought I could do it.

Although, spending the night before drinking my brains out wasn't the best choice if that was my goal.

Roman's words just stuck to me like loose glitter, the only way I could think to get rid of it was to drown myself.

Messing up on a run is one thing, but making a silly mistake that takes you out of the race entirely.

I am going to get a talking too about this one.

I slowly slip down the side of the course, sticking close to the netting that encompasses the whole race.

The volunteer waves me down once I get over one of the small pitches and pulls the netting aside for me.

I see concern light up his face for a second, but I just wave and ski past him.

Skiing one run over from the racecourse is the ski racer equivalent of the walk of shame. Wearing your full race suit and bib outside the course is as good as wearing a cape that read, I FAILED.

It isn't until I reach the rest of the team at the bottom of the course that I really have to fight back the tears.

Aurora turns around at my approach, striding to my side and wrapping me in a bear hug.

My best friend is exactly what I need with her comforting presence threatening to unleash those tears I am keeping at bay.

Race day is always operating at such high intensity, and the emotions swirling in my system demand to be released. Her embrace seems to intensify the pounding in my head, but I brush it aside in favour of comfort from my favourite person.

The few tears I allow myself to shed freeze to my skin before they become visible, so

I'm just not going to count those ones. Anyway, having frostbite on my eyes is more preferable than having the others see me cry. Aurora's hold on me tightens when a snuffle escapes, and she rubs my back lovingly.

After another minute of comfort, I pull away from my best friend, and try my best to put a smile on my face. "Alright, enough of this. It isn't a big deal," I say dismissively. Keeping my head down more due to embarrassment than anything else .

I turn to look at the trees while I compose myself and ask how her run went. "I pushed really hard that run and I won again." Her words bring the first feeling of joy to my face and I turn to her and give a congratulations.

I watch an array of emotions filter over her face from joy, to shock and finally landing on concern. "Rhodes, oh my gosh. Are you okay? I didn't know you were injured!" She yells and I don't miss the multiple heads that turn our way.

Confusion wrinkles my brow as I look at her and the fear on her face starts to spread to me. Grabbing her goggles on the rim of her helmet, I gently direct them down and my eyes widen as I look at the mess that is my face.

The adrenaline must have been blocking out this pain, but as I glimpse the blood that covers the left side of my face in a sticky mess. Thinking back to it, I hit the ground hard with my elbows and knees, but the left side of my face took the rest of the crash.

Lightly tapping that side, I wince slightly at the throb I feel there, but I'm pretty sure that it is a surface wound.

The wave of dizziness I feel immediately after is more concerning, but I can't help and fixate on the fact that I'll have scabs all over my face.

I guess it's just the risks of being an athlete, but I'm just thankful the wedding is still

over a month away.

As I release Aurora's helmet, I'm about to tell her it's fine and I'm in basically no pain, when someone shouts my name from close behind me.

Rushing over, his ski boots eat up the distance between us, and Roman's face is alive with worry. His rushed walk turns into a flat out run as he notices the red that takes up the entirety of my cheek and chin.

"Rhodes! Holy shit, I saw you didn't finish on the board, and I was so worried." His words come out in a ramble as he completely ignores Aurora and steps directly into my space.

His widened eyes scan every inch of my exposed skin, and his mouth purses as he tips my chin up to look at my neck. I flinch when his finger lightly prods my cheek, and his worry only intensifies.

"Aurora," Roman's authoritative tone immediately snaps her attention towards him. "Can you keep track of the rest of the women's team? Make sure everyone's times and places are documented, then help organize the start of the men's team."

He doesn't even check that she heard him, just turns back to me with a tender expression on his face. "Let's get you cleaned up, Langley."

The concern in his voice threatens to bring the tears back, but I can't let him ignore his captain duties because of me. "Roman, don't worry about me. I'll just ski to the rental and sort myself out. "

He proceeds to ignore me while he pops his boots into his bindings beside me.

Lifting his eyes to meet mine, a dazed look is on his face, and he starts to wave his

hands in front of me.

“I’m not listening to you say ridiculous things as long as that blood stays on your face. I can’t even think clearly right now.”

Putting his poles and mine to the side of the course, he grabs my hand and slowly skis us down the hill. Nothing about my body hurts more than a throb, but he refuses to listen as he holds us both in a snowplow down to the rental.

It takes five minutes longer than it should by the time we ski to the house. Roman grabs my skis before I can as he puts them both on the rack for us. It doesn’t take another five minutes after that until I’m flopping on the couch and resting my body.

Once I’m settled on the couch, Roman leaves me to take off my gear, and I cringe at the blood on my helmet and gloves. I can’t help my groan at seeing all the red splotches that litter my pink and white suit. It’s hard enough to clean them, let alone getting blood out .

Roman comes back to the room, and I avoid looking him in the eyes.

Not only did I hurt myself doing something stupid, but I also bet the coaches told him and he needs to lecture me on it now.

Please inform Rhodes that her fall was completely avoidable and maybe she shouldn’t drink the night before a big race.

A warm towel touches my face, startling me out of my spiral and I jerk away from the contact. “Sorry, I said I was going to start cleaning off the blood.” Roman’s voice brings me back to this moment, and I try and fail to keep my head downward.

His crooked finger rests under my chin, but he doesn’t put any pressure on it. I guess

it's time for me to start lifting my own head when I fail.

After another quick breath, I look into his face and cherish the small smile I get from him. He sits on the coffee table right in front of me, hunching his body so that it is level with mine.

“Oh, I can do this,” I mumble and try to take the towel from his outstretched hands.

His other hand quickly catches both of mine, moving them to my lap as he returns his focus to my cheek. “Let me do this for you. ”

I give him a small nod and look around the room as he takes his time. I only wince a couple times and feel so cherished when Roman immediately pulls away.

All the poking and prodding causes a small pain to start in my temple, the feeling only spreading as time goes on. I notice Roman lightly shaking my shoulder, but it's too hard to focus on him as the room spins.

“Rhodes. Are you alright?” His voice seems far away as I look at his fuzzy form.

“Yeah, I just think that I'm going to lie down for a bit.” My words suddenly feel heavy on my tongue, and I push myself off the couch.

“No, hold on.” I hear, but it's from an even farther distance now.

“Roman?” I say with a hint of fear as I stop feeling my body and start to lose my balance. There's nothing stopping me as I fall sideways, and I fear for the moment I'll hit the ground again.

A jolt goes through my body as my descent is rapidly stopped and I feel arms around me now.

“Hey, hey. No, no.” Light taps on my uninjured cheek wake me up slightly, and I realized I closed my eyes .

“There she is, let’s keep those eyes open.” There is pressure at my back and under my knees, as I find myself cradled tight to Roman’s chest.

“Rhodes, please stay awake. Stay up for me, love.”

I have nothing left in me as I nod. Hoping the motion distracts him for the minute as I close my eyes and drift off.

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This is what people mean when they say that suddenly all the songs are about her.

The sun streaming through the window blinds me as I blearily open my eyes. The wooden beams of the bed above me come into view, and I try to remember when I decided to take a nap. I'm tucked tightly into one of the bottom bunks in my room, two heavy blankets covering me up all the way to my neck.

My head has stopped it's aching as I sit up and try to remember how I got here. Movement in the corner catches my eye, and I see Roman quickly come to sit at the end of the bed.

"How are you feeling? Do you need some water?" His massive hand gently supports the back of my head, as if he is scared I might fall backward.

"I think I'm alright." I say the words slowly, as if testing out if they're true .

I close my eyes for a second, the recent memories coming to me in short bursts. The race. The fall. The humiliation.

It floods back to my me as if a dam has broken, and I pull my head out of Roman's grasp. The fact that I had the world's most pathetic crash, and then I ended up hurting myself in the process. I know Roman' going to yell at me for failing, so I apologize as fast as I can.

"Roman, I'm so sorry." I put my face in my hands, shame flooding every bone in my body.

“Rhodes.”

“I failed you. I failed our team.” I continue as I hear him say my name again, but this time dragging out the last syllable.

“Plus, I think I dazed myself with that crash,” I sputter.

“Rhodes,” he says quickly as he tries, and fails to interrupt me.

“Which, I’m also so sorry about!” I point to him and talk over his repetition of my name.

As if it’s a reflex, he grasps my wrist and forces me to look at him. I try to pull away from him so I don’t see his disappointment, but he only pulls me closer.

As I’m about to apologize again, Roman’s eyes widen dramatically, and he shushes me in my face. “No! I’m going to talk. You’re going to listen.” He gives me a hard look and doesn’t move until I nod back at him.

“I have no idea what you are rambling about. You crashed; it happens, dust yourself off and get ready for the next race,” he says it like it’s that easy.

Sensing that I’m preparing to cut him off again, he plows on with his speech. “You might have a concussion, and I’m going to get a ski patrol to come look at you. You could’ve passed out from being overwhelmed and in shock, but either way I want it looked at.

“Injuries are not to be messed around with. I’m assuming you didn’t even know about your state and that is the only reason I’m not mad with you.” He says this all in a very serious tone, and I realize I can’t be too hurt if I’m able to follow what he’s saying.

“Now, how are you feeling, and don’t even think about lying to me.” He sends a serious expression my way and I smile at how much he cares.

“I’m feeling fine now. I promise,” I add at the end when he sends me a skeptical look.

“Alright, then I’ll fill you in on what’s gone on since you’ve been asleep, and you tell me what happened at your crash. ”

He tells me how he contacted the coaches right away and informed them of an athlete injury. Ski patrols are on standby for whenever I’m up, and I need to be cleared by them if I want to race tomorrow.

He goes on to inform me how he traded places with Aurora for an hour to ski his race run but then came right back to my side.

I can’t help sending him a disbelieving look at that as I grab onto his hand. “You didn’t have to come back. Aurora can watch me if you have team captain duties,” I say as guilt flows through me.

His brow furrows and he move in closer. My bangs fall into my eyes as I inch towards him, and he wastes no time brushing them out of my face.

“I don’t care who it is, Langley. I won’t know peace unless I see that you’re okay with my own two eyes. It’s pretty selfish of me if you think about it.”

I release a slight chuckle at his words, and wince slightly at my cheek. Brushing my hand over it, I don’t feel much pain until I get near my eye.

“From what I gathered; your goggles gave you a small cut, but it just bled like crazy. It could’ve been due to altitude honestly,” he says gently.

His hand grabs mine and he raises them so my fingers can brush over the cut. It seems shallow which makes me release a breath, but I can't stop the insecurity from taking over me.

"Does it look bad?" I ask him with uncertainty lacing my voice.

"Langley," he drawls. "You are so beautiful. Now you just have an awesome battle scar. Guys dig that you know."

I flush but decide to not to shy away from his flirting. "Oh, yeah? Well, I have my eyes on a specific man at the minute, so I hope he likes it." I pretend to look around the room as I say this, knowing it will make him mad.

When I feel a light grip on my chin, I smile as he brings my face to meet his. "If that man isn't me, we're going to be having words miss."

A full laugh takes over me and I relish in the smile I get in return. I quickly tell him my side of the story now. Telling him every part of my race run and where it went wrong.

Embarrassment creeps its way into my voice when I get to my fall, but I plow through and describe everything from there.

Roman nods the whole time, analyzing what I'm saying and stares at me intently. I tell him that I'm still feeling completely fine, and how I think it was the nerves mixed with the lack of sleep and food.

He nods up until my very last word, then leans past me to put another pillow behind me. I lie back after he fluffs them up and I feel like a pampered princess as I recline.

He dusts off his hands as he leans against the wall. "Alright, that was my team

captain duties over.” He puts one of his hands over the covers and rests it lightly on my leg. “Now as your boyfriend.”

“Fake boyfriend you mean,” I add in quickly just in case this was some sort of test. Albeit this is one test that I would love nothing more than to fail.

He doesn’t even acknowledge me as he continues.

“I was scared shitless there.” He runs his hands through his hair, causing the usual styled back brown strands to stick up in every direction.

“You had blood all over your face. Then I couldn’t even feel relieved when I saw it was just a couple of scrapes because you passed out. ”

Putting his hands back in his lap, he faces away from me to look at the wall ahead.

“I’ve delt with this kind of injury before, when Xander had a bad concussion a couple years ago.

He crashed into a tree and was vomiting everywhere.

When that happened, I worked fast and efficiently, doing everything I could to ensure he got proper treatment.

“But, when you passed out on me, I was terrified. All the training I’ve been through just left me in an instant. I was fully panicking, and my lack of professionalism could have hurt you. I’m so sorry, Rhodes.”

He faces me now; his smile lines couldn’t be farther away from me as his devastated eyes meet mine.

Without even thinking, I reach forward and wrap my arms around his neck.

Pulling him close to me and holding him tight.

I can feel a piece of my heart wrapping around this boy as I hold him, but I feel it solidify when his arms encircle me, and he grips me back.

He's exactly the type of guy to do everything in his power but then blame himself for not doing enough. I lock my arms into tight bands around him, and put all my reassurance behind this hold.

It's moments like this, when I'm surrounded by his embrace, that I hate the word fake.

But, the hug itself is too enjoyable to even dwell on that problem right now. His warm body fits perfectly under mine, and I find myself pressing further into his perfect chest .

It's only when he relaxes under me, that I think I have proved my point and slowly pull away from him.

Looking at me thoughtfully, the hug seemed to have cleared some guilt on that conscious of his.

He starts to rub the back of his neck nervously, and I can't help but find the actions adorable now.

“Well, Langley. I'll get the ski patrol to come check you out, but you're going to stay here for the night, no exceptions. Your ass is grass.”

While his words make sense, I also don't love the idea of him telling me what I can

and cannot do. “You can’t just tell me what to do you know? You can advise me, but you can’t order me to stay here tonight,” I say with challenge thick in my tone.

His head tilts, not anger splaying across his face, but it’s an intense emotion as he assesses me from his spot on the bed. I can’t explain the thrill that fills me on having all his attention focused on me like this, but I don’t back down.

The Roman I usually see stays hidden underneath his grumpy exterior. He’s kind, gentle, caring, and very easily rattled.

Whereas the Roman sitting in front of me currently, is the team captain. He’s used to getting his way and doesn’t back down an inch at my words .

“You. Aren’t. Leaving. This. Bed.” He leans in closer after emphasizes each word, and this does nothing but succeed in making me push back more.

“What if I do?”

“You shouldn’t even try.”

“Now I want to try even more.” The lightness of my tone counters his menacing glare and I smile wickedly at him.

A piece of me recognizes that I’m fully flirting now. If I actually had any interest in going out, I would just sit here until he left and then sneak out later.

But, I don’t want to sneak out. I want to spend more time with the man in front of me.

Staring at him now, I realize that I don’t want Roman as my fake-boyfriend, my friend, or my team captain. I just want him to be mine.

His actions have shown me time and time again that he wants to be more than a fake relationship. And as I sit here, safely on my bed after dutifully being taken care of, I can't help but want the same thing.

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He must see this resolution in my thoughts, as his grumpy attitude vanishes before me. His eyes sparkle and he seems to dare me to defy him further. This is something I couldn't be more excited to listen to .

Fear and excitement course through me and I fill my gaze with challenge. Reaching for the blankets keeping me prisoner, I pull them away, and swing my legs out of the bed.

Roman doesn't move from the other end, surprising me by doing the opposite of what I thought and reclining on his hands behind him.

He remains motionless as his gaze tracks my every movement. I try not to read too much into the exhilaration thrumming through me and jump out of the bed. I chance quick glances in his direction, noticing the tautness of his posture as I make my way to the door.

Yet, I never manage to make it as two warm hands grip my waist, pull me into a very hard chest and lift me off my feet.

I can't help as an honest to god squeal comes out of my mouth as Roman proceeds to pick me up, and press my back into the solid door.

“What the hell do you think you're doing?” I ask as a smile breaks out over my face.

“Oh, that wasn't a very nice word, Langley.” His gaze remains narrowed as he suppresses his own grin.

“Someone I know wants me to use that kind of language.” I lean into him as I crane my neck up .

“He seems like a terrible influence.” His head lowers towards mine.

“Oh, he’s the worst. Trying to tell me what to do all the time.”

“You shouldn’t stand for that,” he says immediately.

“I won’t,” I state matter-of-factly.

His face doesn’t even sit an inch away from mine now, the mint on his breath flooding my senses. He makes another comment, something that I need to formulate a witty response too, but I don’t have it in me.

“Langley?” He asks hesitantly as he draws out my name. That raspy voice doing nothing but lulling me in further.

I squint my eyes slightly, trying and failing to hear anything he’s saying. “Um, sorry.” My voice is nothing but a whisper of a breath as I lean into him just a fraction of an inch.

We both stay frozen in the spot, our heads straining towards each other as neither of us dare make the first move.

Everything can be labelled as fake before now if one of us had second thoughts. But, the moment we move behind closed doors, become mine for real .

With as much courage as a girl can have at a time like this, I tilt my chin up ever so slightly and feel the smallest brush of his lip against mine.

“Ah, fuck it,” he breaths into me, and his mouth crashes into mine.

His hand quickly comes up, holding the back of my head just as I stumble fully into the door. He uses that hand to tilt my head even higher as his other holds tightly on my hip.

He deepens our kiss then, pressing me deeper into the door, and leaning down lower to meet me better. I move my hands up his chest to fasten around his neck, desperately doing what I can to pull him closer.

This isn't like any kiss I've ever experienced in the past, and its intensity drowns out all other thoughts in my head.

That hand at my hip slides up and across my back, pulling me in tight as he kisses me with urgency. The passion behind every motion threatens to take me off my feet, and I can't help but meet him at every move.

As I embolden myself in his arms, I start to push back and kiss him with an intensity that surpasses his own. He brings us closer once again, and I don't think twice before biting his bottom lip .

That little act alone seems to startle him, making his eyes widen as he slightly pulls away from me. Uncertainty suddenly courses through and I can't help but question if I went too far.

But the hunger that's written all over his face changes my mind in an instant. I'm pressed up against him in no time, his arms wrapping around my waist and bringing me up to his height. As I lean in close to continue what we started, he huffs a conflicted breath in my face.

“We have to stop now. If we keep going, I'm going to do something that we could

regret.”

I chuckle as I wrap my arms around his neck and drop my lips to his ear. “I don’t think we’re going to regret anything that follows this path. Well, at least I know that I won’t.”

I have no idea who that confident woman is that just spoke for me, but if it means more kissing Roman, than I support her and all her actions. I know I’ve won when a strangled groan comes from him, and his mouth is back on mine in a second.

It’s not a minute later when he pulls away, letting me slide down his body as he releases me. It’s clear to see a war playing out on his face, the need for me being shut down just as quickly. “We can’t Rhodes. ”

I mentally laugh as he goes ahead and tells me what to do again. At least this is different because consent between the both of us is essential in moving forward. But that doesn’t mean I’m not curious about his reasoning.

“Why? You need to start telling me the reason to things instead of dictating everything,” I counter and cross my arms as I wait.

“Well, for starters. The fact that you slept the day away with a head injury.” He motions to the window, which I now notice has the setting sun staring back at me. “As well as other reasons,” he adds quickly.

Brushing off the realization that I slept the entire day away, I turn to face him again. Latching onto the other part of his comment, I focus all my energy on that. “What other reasons?”

“They aren’t important,” he deflects.

“I would argue the opposite actually.”

Locking my gaze to his, I make him understand that I’m not going anywhere without an explanation.

There is a myriad of emotions that cross his face, but a look of pure determination is the one he finally settles on. His two strides eat up the distance that was slowly growing between us and I move in an inch as I look right back at him.

“Because Langley.” His hands lightly cup my face, bringing our noses just inches apart. “When we kiss again, there’s not going to be one bone in your body that thinks this relationship is fake.”

Silence infests my brain, not on neuron firing that would help me find words to respond with

Whether it’s from the lack of sleep, food or just because of this startling information, I slightly sway in place and Roman steadies me. With concern flashing in his gaze, his arms grip me under the elbows, he walks us back to his bed and lightly guides me to take a seat.

He grabs a cup of water on the side table, putting it right into my hand and watches me drink the whole thing.

“Listen, we need to talk about this more, but I have to be at the team meeting soon and you need rest. I’ll come back for you in a bit and get the ski patrols to look you over.

But rest will go a long way for helping you in the meantime. ”

He pulls back the covers and my overwhelmed brain has no objection about getting

into a cozy bed and getting more sleep.

His hands are gentle as he tucks me in, and I chuckle at his overbearing nature. There is a hope that shines bright in his eyes, and he looks down at me with such unbridled joy in his face. I can't help but smile back just as big, feeling like the luckiest girl in the world.

"I'll be right back, Langley," he says as he gives my brow a quick kiss. Standing to his full height, he looks back at me once before he's out the door.

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This was all part of the plan.

The rest of the race weekend went by without a hitch. On Sunday morning, after I decided to race, the coaches both coldly greeted me. They might as well have held up a sign saying, One more stupid mistake will be your last.

I was able to lock in for my race run, and land myself in fourth place for the slalom event. Being two hundredths of a second off third place usually would have stung, but finishing the race was all I wanted from today.

Aurora won the slalom race on Sunday, making her the female champion for the entire weekend. Whereas Roman just lost the top male to Calvin after taking a time penalty in the Sunday race.

Everyone else placed within their usual standings, and no one on our team placed any lower than the top twenty. The Polar team prides itself on having some of the best Canadian ski racers, and it's important that every race reflects that.

Now, after a quick awards ceremony and a couple hours of packing, we all huddle around the trailer and get ready to depart. Half the team walks towards the van after cleaning up the rental unit, while the other half is responsible for playing Tetris with everyone's luggage.

Since the race ended a couple hours ago, it's essential that all the skis were put away with no snow lingering on the binding. Letting our precious race skis soak in water for the long drive home is a huge no for everyone.

Roman's deep into the trailer, switching out bags with Landon and Rhys, as the three of them make sure everything will fit. Aurora stands at my side, as the jingle of the medals in her pocket causes a smile to form on her face whenever she moves.

I think my voice is still raw from the sheer amount of cheering I did for my best friend. People looked at me like I was nuts, but that is the price you pay for being supportive.

As our teammates mill around, everyone prepares themselves for the drive home, but I keep my eyes glued to the man in the trailer. Roman barks out orders, pointing so everything's done in a certain way and ensuring this process gets wrapped up quickly.

While everyone is seeing him as the team grump, I can't help but see him the way he was last night. The way he kissed me as if it would fix all his problems. The way his touch lingered on me at all times, and the way he wanted it to end as little as I did.

When we kiss again, there's not going to be one bone in your body that thinks this relationship is fake. Damn him. Getting the last word while simultaneously making me weak in the knees. It's not fair.

Half of me wants to walk right up to him, give him a good shake, and demand to know what is going on between us. But a bigger part of me relishes in the fact that this isn't real yet. I can't get hurt by a relationship that isn't actually real.

Crossing my arms over my chest, I'm only half listening to Aurora talk, but mostly focusing on Roman work. Kai and Grayson join in and help in passing the bags to Roman and Landon, then the lot of them start arguing over where everything needs to go.

He's in the middle of yelling at them all and then stops suddenly.

As if sensing my gaze, he looks up and meets my eyes directly.

I lift my brows in his direction and nod towards the bags, as if I had half a mind to go over there and help.

Knowing full well what happened last time I tried to do that, I'm met with an exasperated expression and a quick shake of his head.

Rolling my eyes, I turn back to Aurora, hoping her problems will distract me from mine. "Look at her being completely useless. Go help the team or something, you know?"

I follow her gaze, watching Isla lean against the wall of the house and scroll on her phone.

"I mean, we're also just kind of standing here," I counter without thinking. Her sharp glare shoots through me and I throw my hands up in a surrender motion right away. "I mean, she's so lazy. I can't even look at her and all that laziness."

Aurora softens her gaze only a fraction and then promptly returns to glaring in Isla's direction. As I'm about to open my mouth, hoping Aurora might be open to hearing my thoughts on this matter, the clanging of the trailer doors catches everyone's attention.

"Polar Athletes, load the vans in the next five minutes. We're heading right back to Calgary," Liane yells at the crowd.

Everyone starts to shuffle around, grabbing their personal bags and making their way to the van.

Before I can decide if I want to sit with Roman on this long drive, he takes the

decision out of my hands as he walks up to Aurora and I.

With a nod in Rora's direction, he focuses his attention on me and picks up the backpack I had sitting by my feet. "I'm going to sit in the back of this van, I'm saving you a seat beside me."

He points to the van on the far side and sends me a kind smile as he walks away.

The mix of butterflies and throat clenching fear mix in my stomach as I watch him walk away. Whatever is going on between us needs to be sorted out now, and I think this van ride will have to be the time to do it.

"Are you guys actually dating now?" The hurt that laces her voice makes me turn her way, and I can't help but feel guilt mix with all my other emotions.

"No. I mean, not exactly. It has just gotten really complicated lately." I use my hands to talk as I scramble to find the right words to describe my situation. Never in my life would I want Aurora to think I'm not telling her something, but I don't even understand what's going on between us.

She cuts off my scrambling with her hand on my forearm, and I see true understanding shiny in her eyes. "I won't force you to talk about something you don't understand. If anything, I am ten times more guilty about that than you."

Her gaze looks behind me, I can only assume that Liam's standing there.

"The only advice I can give you is to not waste your time. Either this is something you want, or you don't.

You can't be afraid of getting hurt because that is no way to live Rho.

You need to untangle these strings and figure out what will make you happy. ”

She promptly grabs both my shoulders and pulls me into a crushing Aurora hug. A hug I desperately needed to ground myself as I wrap my arms right back around her. “But, if you aren’t ready for this, I’m going to save you a seat beside me.” My best friend gives me a smile and walks towards the van.

Taking a deep breath, I steady myself and prepare to do the scariest thing I can imagine. Put myself out there again. For real.

I start walking toward the van with a newfound determination in my step when the laugh that sounds behind me makes me startle. Xander has been standing behind me the whole time, talking to Landon about who knows what. But more importantly, I can’t see Liam anywhere near here .

Was Aurora looking at Xander when she was talking about tangled strings? I contemplate if I should dig deeper into this revelation, but I just let it drop. Shaking my head, I need to sort out my own love life before I meddle into the business of others.

Grabbing the handles of the van, I pull myself up and look at the options before me. Aurora’s in the second row with Charles, Isla, and Liam surrounding her. Making eye contact, she motions towards the empty seat between her and the window.

Looking at the back rows, Landon and Xander occupy the third one.

Leaving Roman in the very back row, his long legs stretching across the walkway.

Looking up those legs, I see his toned arms smartly crossed over his chest, as the tight, athletic shirt strains on his biceps.

Then using all my internal strength, I lift my eyes to his face and meet the darkest brown eyes I've ever seen.

He raises his eyebrow at me, the challenge there making mine narrow slightly. I smile back at him, and against my better judgement, grab the handles on the ceiling and walk towards the back of the van.

My heart feels as though each beat is pumping out of my chest as I pass Aurora, who gives me two thumbs up.

I give her a shaky smile as I make my way to the back and sit in the seat Roman was just occupying.

I watch him move to the corner of the van, one leg bending onto the seat while the other stretches out horizontally.

While the back is the best place to have a quiet conversation, due to the trailer hitch rattling the whole drive, it's the worst for the guys and their long legs.

"We can switch seats if you want," I say and promptly cringe as his knees bends awkwardly to give me some room.

"No, don't worry. I don't care about space, I just really wanted to talk to you for a minute." My body tenses as I look at him and then send a pointed glance at all of our friends taking up the rest of the van.

Without taking his eyes off me, he puts his fist in front of his mouth and coughs pointedly. A few groans sound in front of us, but slowly everyone puts their ear buds into their ears.

Xander has the audacity to turn to Roman with pleading eyes, only to receive a

withering glare in return.

Finally, he also turns around and reluctantly putting his headphones in. Roman doesn't give him a second before leaning over the seat, grabbing the phone out of Xander's hand, and pressing the play button. He then passes the phone to Landon and turns back to face me again .

He must see the full smile on my face because he seems surprised for a split second before he smiles back. It's moments like this when giving Roman a chance seems like the most natural thing in the world.

In the past, I kept relating the guys I liked to Daniel, and then lose interest in them. But the way Roman treats me, the way he speaks with his actions and the way he always put me first. That couldn't be more unlike my ex-boyfriend.

“Look, Rhodes, I know the last night I was out of line. You had just had a long, difficult day and that thing between us was probably overwhelming.”

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He takes his hand and starts to rub the back of his neck, his nervousness coming alive before my eyes.

“It’s just, learning about your past put everything into perspective for me.

I never wanted to make you uncomfortable and remind you of your ex.

” He seems to hesitate the longer he talks, almost as if he’s losing hope in himself.

His dejected gaze starts to look down, but swings to me as I rest my palm against his jaw. “Don’t do that, Huxley. Keep going,” I say and smile knowingly at him .

He looks back at me with disbelief, but the tension that slowly releases from his frame doesn’t go unnoticed.

Frankly, I’m just as nervous as him about this whole thing. Preparing myself to let his words infiltrate a piece of me I’ve been keeping closed this whole time is a scary thought.

Locking his eyes with mine, his face solidifies as if finally settling the debate within himself.

His free hand reaches across and gently grabs mine. The gentle manner in which he holds me does nothing but further weaken my resolve, and I prepare myself to enter this exchange with my walls down.

Taking a big breath, Roman makes the first move to end our fake relationship.

“Let me take you out on a real date. This Friday.” His eyes are the closest to pleading that I’ve ever seen them, but I say nothing as I wait for him to continue.

“I tried my best to respect your space and keep this whole thing fake because of your past. But I want more. I want there to be an us in private, just you and me, Rhodes and Roman.”

His warm fingers engulf my hands as he genuinely looks at me, and the hope in his gaze is palpable. He must see the hesitation on my face, and he keeps going before I can voice my thoughts. “Give me one chance. Then if it is a total disaster, we’ll keep this fake-dating going until the wedding.”

With the guarantee he’s going to the wedding with me, my reasons for saying no are dwindling by the minute. “Promise you will come to the wedding, no matter what?” I ask with skepticism heavily laced in my voice.

“I promise you, Rhodes.” His tone is as serious as I’ve ever heard it, and I can feel the last foundation of my defence crumble.

I extend my hand toward him in a very dramatic display as I smile shyly at him. “Then it’s a deal,” I say.

His hand lightly clasps my own, turning it upward and bringing it close to his face. Keeping his eyes locked with mine, his lips brush my knuckles delicately. “Then it’s a date.”

The smoke from the curling iron brings me back to reality, and I drop the strand of hair before I go on my first date as a bald woman. The blonde lock falls down my front, and I’m just relieved that the curl looks to be the right shape.

I have one more section of hair clipped up, which I make quick work of. The

trembling in my fingers brings a smidge of concern to the forefront of my brain, but I choose to ignore it as I move to my closet.

First date. First real date with Roman. Roman is taking me on a date. That is real.

I breathe in a deep breath and try to center myself.

We got back to the city late Sunday night and haven't talked too much since then.

Everyone's always majorly behind in school after a race weekend, so I'm not surprised by the little contact.

We texted a little back and forth, but I guess we both agreed to save on conversations for Friday.

Snapping myself back to the present, I decide I'd better keep it casual and dress for any occasion.

Roman's text just said to be ready at seven and not to eat beforehand.

That didn't help me at all when it came to picking out an outfit, but any further inquiries I made just resulted in a question mark being sent back to me.

I try to let my excitement overpower my fear as I rifle through all the options before me. Not once did my ex ever plan a date, let alone have the desire to keep it a secret.

It's that thought that pulls me back into the present, and I stare at my floor in thought.

If I'm truly going to give this a real chance, it's officially the end of ever thinking about my ex.

I have to create new experiences, and not compare every aspect of this night to my past date nights.

I look at myself in the mirror and let the resolve settle in my bones.

My safest choice is something I feel comfortable in, so I go with a short plaid skirt, my dark brown turtleneck, and chunky gold jewelry. My thick tights are a life saver for the colder climate, and I decide to finish the look with my boots that sit right under my knee.

Walking out of my room, I find Aurora lying horizontal on the couch, watching whatever new action movie released on our streaming service. She's wearing comfy sweats that I envy as I plop down beside her.

"Oh, you look so cute! Let me see the whole look. Do a twirl!" She pushes the popcorn out of her lap and sits up fully to look at me.

Aurora successfully makes me smile and I bounce off the couch to give her a spin. The short skirt gives a cute little lift as I turn, and my best friend proceeds to put both fingers in her mouth and whistles.

"Stop," I admonish. "I'm already so nervous; I don't need your whistling."

"My whistling is the exact thing you need right now to get you hyped up!" She shoots up off the couch as she says this and proceeds to throw her hands in the air. I try to let her excitement infect me, but the nerves coursing through my body win as they start to give me a stomach ache.

Aurora must see my queasy expression because she seems to sober up and come close to me.

“Rho, I’m going to be really honest with you right now.

” Pulling me in by my elbows, we both sit to face each other on the couch.

“There’s nothing to be afraid of, because you’ve basically been dating this whole time.”

She says this in such a matter-of-fact way that it takes a minute for me to process her words. “What? What are you even talking about?”

Aurora gives me an unimpressed stare, as if I’m the ridiculous one. “Honey, all the guy does is find random excuses to be around you.”

“Yeah, so everyone would be convinced that we were dating,” I counter.

“Well then, I think he might have done too good of a job. That boy has a bad case of the Rhodes fever.” Aurora laughs hysterically at her own joke as I throw my couch pillow at her.

“Just admit it, this is a safe space!” She screams as she moves, putting the coffee table between us.

“There is nothing to admit!” I yell back as I stand in defence .

“Um, admit that you have one of the hottest guys on the team wrapped around your finger!” She laughs as she moves her pointer finger in slow circles, and I throw another pillow at her.

My face is beet red at this point, and the smile on Aurora’s makes me want to hit her. As I open my mouth to deny her claims further, the ring of the doorbell silences us both.

“Oh my god, that must be him. I’m so nervous for you,” Aurora yells in a giddy tone.

I just roll my eyes at her and make my way toward the door.

I hear Aurora squeal behind me as she runs to her room and gives us some privacy.

Approaching the door, I see the movement of his shoulder by the side window.

I can’t help the smile that immediately forms on my face, and I want nothing more than to get this date started.

Doing a quick check over myself, I brush any lint off my skirt and straighten my bangs. I let the full force of my smile free now and open the door with all the excitement and nerves I feel.

Nothing in the world could’ve prepared me for the sight of Daniel standing on my front step.

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This is an unexpected snag to say the least.

The sight of him standing on my doorstep causes my limbs to freeze to the spot. My hand remains on the doorknob, and I can feel the way my eyes have widened comedically.

His hair is styled to look as if it naturally flows that way, but I know the time he spends sculpting it. He's wearing skinny jeans, which is honestly more of a red flag than the cheating, and he's making a face as though he wants to come across as innocent.

This whole display makes me want to vomit a little, but a bigger part of me sees him for who he is. An insecure loser that caused self-doubt to wiggle its way into my brain. I have no idea what he's doing on my front porch, but I couldn't be happier at the turn of events.

"What do you want?" I ask and don't even pretend to have any patience for him .

He starts to squirm on my doorstep, as if he's upset by my words. Then, as he starts to shrug his shoulders inward, I can't hide the disgusted look that takes over my face.

Panic starts to shine through the cracks of his calm expression, and I can't help but soak it in. I quickly glance behind him and hope that Roman is late for the first time in his life. The last thing I want is to have this moron ruin anything else in my life.

"You should go. There's nothing we have to talk about." I start to close the door in his face, but his boot slips in the house before it can fully shut.

“Rhodes, give me five minutes to talk,” he insists.

“No, I’m okay, thanks.” I start to put my shoulder into the door, but of course, he’s wearing steel-toed boots. Damn Canada’s terrible climate, forcing everyone to wear fortified footwear.

“Rhodes, seriously, open the door and let me talk to you. Things aren’t going well with your cousin, and I have been thinking about us.

” The absurdity of what he’s saying stops me in my tracks and lets his counterweight open the door wider.

“I feel terrible about how we left things. Can we just talk for a bit? ”

He gives me a smile that only an oaf would find charming, and completely misreads my expression. What he thinks is happy-shock on my face, is really a look so dumbfounded that I can’t even describe it. The absolute nerve of this disgusting little pig.

The smile falls from his face as I hold the door frame and let out an honest to god cackle. This guy must think I have no self-respect, and the nerve of him just makes me laugh harder. The fact that he thinks I still want anything to do with him is killing me the most.

Finally, I look back at him as I wipe the tears from my eyes. The pretend charm has morphed into anger as he crosses his arms in front of him. While I hear the rumbling of a truck in the distance, I don’t dare take my eyes off of the moron in front of me.

“What is wrong with you? I’m asking you for a civil conversation, and you’re acting like a crazy person. I don’t remember you being this nuts.” He throws his arms wide now, hurling the insult to my face.

“What’s wrong with me? Daniel. You. Cheated. On. Me.” I clap my hands in his face after every word, in order to get my point across and also to annoy the hell out of him. “There’s no talking. There’s no reason for you to drop by. I have a date, and you need to leave. ”

Even with my fastest attempt to close the door, I see that damn foot sticking it’s way further into my home. I’ve been looking forward to this night all week now and I’m not about to let this loser take any more from me.

Throwing the door open wide to face him, he puts his hands up in surrender and opens his mouth.

I don’t give him a second to even get a word out as I point behind him.

“Can you just leave already! This is ridiculous!” My voice conveys every inch of disbelief and exasperation I feel, and then my heart plummets as he tries to approach me again.

Luckily, he doesn’t even make it a step before he is yanked backwards and out of my face.

Roman has an easy couple of inches on him, as he grabs him by the collar of his jacket and yanks him away from me. Daniel tries to shove him off, but Roman doesn’t budge, as he grabs his front lapels and proceeds to shake the man before him.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing at my girlfriend’s house.” Roman hasn’t even glanced my way as he uses all his focus to stare daggers at Daniel.

“Dude, you need to calm the hell down, I just wanted to talk –. ”

Roman gives Daniel a good shake, hauling him up to his eye level, and causing

Daniel to go on his tip toes. “You’re going to listen, and you’re going to listen good. Never bother her again, and we won’t have a problem. Are we clear?”

Daniel scoffs as he tries to get out of Roman’s grip, but his knuckles are white on Daniel’s jacket. With another rough shake, Roman looks Daniel dead in the eyes. “I said. Are. We. Clear.” The menace dripping from Roman’s words causes me to step back.

I’ve never seen this side of him. Not when the team is attacking him, and not even when the coaches are mistreating him. This is an entirely new version of Roman, and I can’t help but marvel at the fact that it’s all because of me.

Daniel starts to mutter something under his breath, and Roman drops him like he’s a hot potato.

He seems to have oriented his position in a way so Daniel lands right at the top of the stairs and falls back the second Roman lets him go.

My mouth drops open as I watch Daniel fall, but Roman just lets himself in and closes the door.

I try to look back and see if there’s a seriously injured moron on my front porch, but Roman’s hand tilts my chin towards him. “Don’t worry about him. He’s fine.”

The dismissive tone almost makes me smile, but this new side of Roman does cause some uncertainty to seep into my head. Roman casually turns the lock on the door and closes the window coverings so the man outside can’t give us any more problems.

Then, doing a complete one-eighty, Roman’s hands wrap around my waist, and he hauls me into his chest. The act is so sudden that it takes me a moment to process.

His head falls easily into the crook of my neck, my feet are clear off the ground as he holds me flush against him, and he breathes me in deeply.

I slowly wrap my arms around his neck and lightly brush back the curly strands of his hair to help him relax. It all clicks in my brain as I hold him back just as tightly. While I know he'll protect me no matter what, I also know he doesn't care for violence and threats.

After a few more minutes of Roman holding onto me for dear life, he starts to slowly slide me down his body, and releases me once my feet hit the floor. His eyes lift from the ground to meet mine, and he gently brings his hands up to cup my face.

"Are you alright?" He asks, and the tenderness in his voice causes my entire chest to constrict. I nod up at him, placing my hands on the outside of his larger ones.

"I'm okay," I say with a smile, and I can't help but mean every word. It was good to face Daniel and not have a feeling of fear or panic. I'm so proud of myself and how far I've come. Now I just need to make sure Roman knows that and not ruin our date before it starts.

"You don't have to lie; it's okay to not be okay," he says lightly, moving his hands to rest on my hips. I smile ruefully at him, but he responds before I can reassure him further. "How about we have our date another day. I understand if you would rather not do it tonight."

I can feel my eyes becoming watery as I look up at him. Just the fact that he keeps thinking about me and what I need makes me weak in the knees. But the pit that forms in my stomach when I think about him heading home solidifies how much I'm against his plan.

"No, I don't want that. Not even one bit," I tell him without hesitation.

The side of his mouth tips up at my words, and the hands on my hips seem to tighten. “I mean, it would be a shame to let this pretty outfit go to waste.”

He puts some distance between us and takes in every inch of me. The blush that spreads up my neck is furious, and I look away before I turn into a tomato. I use this time to look at him in turn, and I can’t help but marvel at his outfit tonight.

His neon red team jacket is nowhere to be seen as he sports a knee-length navy coat.

His classic cable knit sweater hugs his upper body and is accented with straight-legged black dress pants.

The flow of his dark curls hasn’t changed, but instead looks more styled than usual.

To put it simply, he looks absolutely gorgeous.

I noticed he’s still admiring me, and I decide to spin in a circle before him. “What? Do you think I look cute?” Throwing my gaze behind my shoulder, I watch as he gravitates towards me.

Leaning against the wall behind me, I look up at him innocently and gently flutter my lashes. His hands land lightly on either side of my head as he doesn’t hesitate to lean into my space. “I think you know damn well that you look cute.”

His voice is low, his gravelly timber grating against my brain in the best way. I can’t help but lean in a smidge closer to his strong chest. “Cute enough to take on a mystery date?”

“Oh, definitely cute enough for that.” He plants his hands on each side of my neck, leaning down and planting a quick kiss on my temple. “Close your eyes and stay here.”

He's gone in a flash, and by the time I process his words, he's opening the door again. Slamming my eyes closed, I rock on my heels as I stay pressed against the wall.

"Hold out your hands," he says with excitement in his voice.

I wordlessly put them out and can't hold back the furrow in my brow as an enormous lump is placed in my arms. My eyes fly open immediately, and I look at the brown paper wrapped around my gift.

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“I learned my lesson this time. I can’t have dead roses sitting in my girl’s house,” he says quietly. He removes the top piece of paper and pulls out the most roses I’ve ever seen together. Not just any roses, but the same type of pink rose that survived his first bouquet.

I stare speechless at the bundle and feel the waterworks coming all over again. “This is so sweet of you,” I blubber as emotion fills my throat.

“Ah, come here, Langley.” He wraps me in his arms, and I don’t even feel self-conscious about the stray tears that fall.

I’m held softly until I pull away and look up to meet Roman’s gaze. Those chocolate brown eyes are already on me as I’m overtaken by a feeling of complete ease.

“Whenever you’re ready. We have a date planned.”

“I don’t know why you chose to wear those,” he complains again. Reaching over the snowbank, he opens the passenger’s side door for me, and I turn to dangle my legs outside.

“I wear them because they’re pretty, and I don’t need any other reason,” I state smugly. Looking over at Roman as he crosses his arms and lifts his brow.

“Is the prettiness of those boots going to help you over the snowbank?”

He doesn’t move a muscle as he watches me take one step down onto the foot bar of his truck. “Oh, they definitely will. Want to know how?”

“Strangely, I do,” he responds.

I extend my leg to step on top of the bank, and as I attempt to leave the truck, Roman shoots towards me. He steps clear over the two-foot-tall bank, his boot landing in the snow as he suddenly stands before me.

We’re the same height now, and I can’t help but lean in close so I can whisper in his ear. “The guy I’m dating would never let me slip in shoes this pretty. ”

The menace of his narrowed gaze is diminished by the obvious smile he’s fighting before my eyes. “The guy you're dating would never let you slip. Period,” he retorts.

“You flirt,” I tease. He shakes his head at me, and I take the hand he has extended. “I don’t want you to slip when I lean on you, so maybe hold onto the door,” I say absent-mindedly.

He chuckles as I step out of the truck and onto the very edge of the giant bank. “I’m not going to slip.” His tone is self-assured, as if the very idea of him falling is ridiculous.

“I’m just saying, my weight might tip you over. I’m heavier than I look, Huxley,” I say simply.

His brow furrows. “What are you even talking about?” He asks with genuine confusion.

“Well, if I slip, I could accidentally take you down.”

He’s looking at me as if I’m speaking another language. “You wouldn’t,” he says dismissively.

“I would!” I say as my voice rises in protest. I can’t tell if his resulting smile is infuriating or amazing, but the butterflies in my stomach lead me to believe the latter .

“You’re what? Two feet tall? I’m not too worried, Langley.”

“I am five three! I’m tall for a woman!”

That causes a full-bellied laugh to come from him, and I do my best to maintain my unimpressed expression. “Maybe tall for a gnome, but not a woman.”

My jaw drops. “A gnome! You’re comparing me to a gnome before our first date has even started?” This boy's nerve is astounding, even more so as a feline smile graces his face.

“Love, we’ve been dating for quite some time now. This is just the first time you’ve accepted it.”

His words shock me almost as much as his actions as he grasps my waist and asks if I’m ready. “Ready? Ready for what?” I ask in confusion.

“I’m going to lift you over the bank, so your shoes don’t get ruined.” He says this so casually, as if I’m not a professional athlete who weighs over a hundred and seventy pounds.

“You can’t lift me. I’m a professional athlete Roman, I’m pretty heavy.”

“Just zip it, Langley,” he sighs. The hand around my waist pulls me flush with his chest, while the other wraps around the backs of my knees .

I can feel the movement of his long leg stepping over the snowbank, and then his

weight shifts as he swings the other one around. My feet are gently placed on the sidewalk as I stare wide-eyed at him.

He leans over to shut my door, locking the truck and extending his hand to me in one fluid motion. “Holy cow, that was hot,” I say under my breath. I earn a chuckle and an eye roll from my man as he starts to pull me away.

“Where are we going anyway?” I ask and look around the semi-populated street. The people range from wearing full winter coats to short skirts and tank tops. I smile at those girls, impressed they got out of the house in those outfits.

“We are going, right here,” he says casually. He pulls open a heavy glass door, one of those fancy ones where the handles run along the entire thing. “After you.” Swooping his hand out dramatically, I add an exaggerated jaunt to my step as I walk inside.

It takes me a second to realize we’re currently in New Moon, which is one of the most expensive restaurants in the city. I only know because my parents went here for their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, and even then, they booked a year in advance .

“Roman,” I whisper his name and attempt to pull him aside. “You don’t need to do something like this for our first date. I just want to spend time with you, I don’t care what we do.” Have I always wanted to eat here? Obviously, but I can’t let him do this as a first date.

His eyes visibly soften at my words, and I flush as he quietly approaches me. His palm rests on my hip and then slowly moves to circle my waist. I’m pulled flush against his chest as he leans down to whisper in my ear. “When you say things like that, all I want to do is treat you like this.”

The main entryway is empty as he pulls back and leaves a languid kiss on my cheek.

The contact mixed with his new cedar cologne causes a million butterflies to erupt in my stomach.

“You are just obsessed with me, Langley,” he laughs into my hair. I lightly smack his shoulder, but the grin on my face negates any hostility behind the action.

There’s a small coat room further down the hall, and Roman passes both our jackets to the attendant. His hand falls to my lower back as he guides me down a very dark hallway, and I survey the framed photos lining the space.

As we reach the end, a woman in a skin tight black dress stands at the ready with menus in her hand. “ Good evening, Mr. Huxley. Please follow me.” My brow furrows in confusion at the fact that we didn’t even check in, but Roman doesn’t seem bothered as I follow behind him.

The restaurant is very gothic, with tall ceilings and chandeliers emitting a low light. Giant framed art uniformly lines the walls, and everything is organized mathematically. The space looks very uniform, but the chatter from the full tables provides a cozy environment.

We follow the lady further to the back of the restaurant, and I notice the people in the surrounding tables all look to be couples in the midst of intimate conversations. The sound of hushed arguing stands out in the atmosphere, and I look to the booth on the opposite side of the room.

Long, curly dark hair springs out from behind a menu, and two guys sit on either side of the figure. Both men are pulling baseball hats down over their heads, and I watch as the woman and man whisper angrily to each other.

I have no idea how Aurora got ready and beat me here, or how those idiots managed to get a table, but I smile to myself as Roman pulls out my chair for me. As he pushes

my seat back in, I see his head whip towards the booth, and an angry frown takes over his face.

He angrily steps towards them, but I quickly snake my hand out and catch his wrist. Looking down, he stares at the place I'm gripping him, and slowly looks up at me.

"It's fine. They're harmless and dumb, let's get our date started," I say calmly, and do my best to put him at ease.

I know Roman just wants this to go well, and I think it's funny that they're here.

I'll also not forget this moment for when Aurora starts dating.

With one more glance towards Landon, Xander, and Aurora, he sighs and moves to the seat across from me.

He seems to push them from his mind as he extends his hand across the small table and lays his palm up.

I can't explain why this moment is so intimate, but I feel special as I gently place my hand in his.

The waitress appears before us then, introducing herself as she flips our glasses upward and pours us each some red wine. We thank her, and she promises to return soon.

Instinctively, I swish the wine in the glass, and I lean in closer to Roman. "Isn't it kind of weird that she just poured us wine? Aren't we supposed to order it?" Roman starts to squirm in his seat, and my suspicions immediately rise. "What did you do?" I say with accusation heavy in my tone.

With a face that depicts both his nerves and excitement, he releases my hand to put both of his in front of him. “Alright, I want you to know I’m fully invested in this Rhodes. I’m fully invested in us, and I thought bringing you here is a great start.”

I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t confused, but I don’t interrupt as he continues.

Picking up his wine glass, he raises it towards me in a toasting motion, and I slowly mirror his movement.

“Now, I know you don’t know much about me, so I thought we could spend this time getting to know each other.

And even though you know a lot less about me than I do about you, the last thing I want to do on our first date is just hear myself talk.

“I would love it if we could take turns, each of us saying something about ourselves and the other can listen? Yours don’t even have to be major secrets or anything. Truthfully, I just want to hear your voice.”

I can’t help but smile ruefully at him. The fact that he doesn’t want to spend the whole night talking about himself makes me more excited for this night already.

But I’m dying to know about the service here first and foremost. “I agree,” I say hesitantly.

“As long as you go first, and you start with the reason people seem to know you at this restaurant.” His gaze looks almost impressed with me as I stare back with a challenge in my eyes.

Tipping my wine in his direction, I wait to see if he accepts my terms.

The clink of his glass solidifies our arrangement, and I take a slow sip of the wine. I'm pleasantly surprised when I taste one of my favourite brands, and my gaze shoots to his in bafflement.

"I'll start us off strong, Langley," he says with confidence.

"The wine the waitress poured is your favourite red. The one we drank at the team banquet last year, and you said, 'you loved it so much you wish you could marry it'." My eyes widen dramatically, and he keeps his gaze locked with mine.

"I never knew I would be jealous of a glass of wine, but it happens," he says easily.

"I also had a set menu for tonight that I planned, and it consists of all your favourite foods. I'll have you look through it, but if you want something else, feel free to get whatever you like." I know I'm staring at him with a dumbfounded expression, but I can barely comprehend what I'm hearing.

"Anyway, this is a good time to tell you, this is my family's restaurant."

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This is everything I've ever wanted.

My glass stops midway to my mouth, as his words sit at the front of my brain but refuse to process.

"Your family restaurant?" He nods in my direction, apprehension bracing his features as he waits for my response.

"So, like, your family owns this place? One of the most popular and exclusive restaurants in the city?" I ask in disbelief.

"Yes," he states.

"Why have you been keeping this a secret?" I ask with astonishment, looking around the room in a new light. It's not that I care he's kept it a secret, but the team would probably be a lot nicer to him if they knew he could get them into one of the nicest restaurants in the city.

"We keep it a secret because it's stupid.

" The harshness of his words surprises me, and he seems to deflate before my eyes.

"This place got crazy popular a couple years ago, and everyone on the team at the time would harass me to get them a table, and to give them free drinks. This was before Landon and Xander joined, so I was the only one everyone pestered about it. As athletes started to pick up on the fact that I wasn't going to help them, I was immediately met with the cold shoulder. "

I watch as Roman talks about his experience, this being something that obviously upsets him and I don't think twice as I extend my hand over the table. His eyes track the movement, and I'm happy to see a small smile form on his face as he takes it.

"It was just really frustrating, you know. I had just started at the university and people only knew me as that guy whose parents owned a cool restaurant ." He huffs out a breath, taking another sip of his wine as he looks around in frustration.

Frankly, I've never heard him speak so much all at once and I'll not be the one to stop him as the flood pour opening.

"The next year we had a major athlete rotation, and it was just normal for everyone to keep giving me the cold shoulder, even without knowing why. Honestly, I wasn't too pressed about it because no one pestered me anymore, but then I noticed who some of the new athletes were.

"I already knew about Xander and Landon joining, as well as Rhys coming back which I was happy about. It meant I didn't need to make friends or play nice because I had my brothers with me.

" He looks at me then, his face morphing from mild frustration to a radiating genuine joy.

"But the thing that I was most happy to see that season was when I saw your name on the roster."

I look back at him with shock, the last bit causing my heart to stop. "My name?" I ask in confusion.

He just nods back to me, slowly sipping his wine as a mischievous look dances across his face. "Why my name?" I ask again, leaning forward across the table as if that'll

help me hear his response faster.

Biting his lip, he seems to consider something before looking back at me.

“We’ve known each other for a very long time, Rhodes.

I’ve watched you be a kind soul in a sport that pushes competition and cruelty.

I always thought as we grew older, you would adapt the traits of all the mean girls surrounding you, but you never did.

“I was happy to see you on the roster because I wanted you on my team again. I wanted to be around you and I wanted to watch a girl that refuses to crumple under the weight of her problems. But I learned that you had a fresh break up when you joined the team, and I’ve been patiently waiting for the moment you felt ready to date again.

“It wasn’t until this season when Xander and Landon sat me down and made me buck up.

They told me how I wasn’t going to get you by standing around and staring at you all the time, so we made a plan to get you to date me,” he says this with embarrassment, but all I can feel is my heart growing three sizes.

“Eventually, you and I just ended up making our own deal, and everything needed to be altered. Long story short, while you agreed to a fake relationship, I did nothing of the sort. I’ve wanted you from day one, and I’m going to do anything to hold onto you now. ”

This man never fails to make my eyes water, and this is no exception. I blink and the tears streak down my face. “That was the nicest thing anyone’s ever said to me,” I

blubber out, my voice sounding embarrassingly loud in the middle of the restaurant.

He chuckles as he squeezes my hand and brings it to his mouth. “It’s all true, Langley. I’m honoured to be here across from you, and I’m going to protect you from now on.” He holds me tight, placing a chaste kiss to my palm before putting our hands back in the middle of the table.

I can’t help the small noise that comes from my throat, and the only reason I’m not jumping across this table to hold him is purely because of proprietary reasons.

“Was my turn good enough?” He jokes sweetly, his eyes now having a reflective sheen as he looks at me.

I brush the wetness from my cheeks and look at him dubiously. “It’ll do, Huxley.”

His chuckle brings me immediate joy, and he seems to visibly relax in front of me. It’s as if this information has been sitting on his chest and he’s finally able to breathe freely. “Okay, Langley. Your turn.”

“Let me think, something about me,” I say with a distracted tone. “I love to draw,” I admit, shrugging one of my shoulders and avoiding eye contact.

“That’s cool. What kind of art style?”

I’m shocked that he would ask that, but I don’t waste time answering.

“Mostly pencils, but if I have the time, I like to experiment with acrylics. I don’t know, it’s always been kind of personal for me.

The only one who’s ever seen my drawings is Aurora, and she says they are really good.

But she's my best friend and has to say that, you know.

"I gesture towards him with my glass, and he looks back at me knowingly.

"I have a feeling they're wonderful, Langley. I've never seen you do something half assed. If you put your heart into it, then it's probably the most genuine drawing I'll ever see." He lightly taps my glass with his, as if he's not just spouting out kindness to me today.

We start to ask each other lighter questions, and we go back and forth as time flies.

It's no surprise that his set menu looked divine, and conversation flows as the dishes come and go.

He tells me more about himself and his character traits, describing how he can be grumpy and a control freak.

To help him out, I pretended to be shocked by this news.

It's not like he keeps getting elected as the team captain because he's disorganized.

Eventually, the waitress clears away our plates that had the most delicious chocolate cake I've ever eaten, and Roman asks if I want to stay longer. With an enthusiastic nod from me, he orders another round of drinks and places his elbows on the table.

"You're in a fancy place, Huxley. You could get kicked out for behaviour like that." The drinks make my words pour out of me without a second thought and I relish in the wicked smirk he sends my way .

He shrugs in response, and the way he sways slightly in his seat indicates that he's feeling the same as me. "I think the owners like me, so I can get away with it," he

says dismissively.

“Do you get along well with them?” I ask curiously.

“My parents?” He asks confused, and then relaxes as I nod.

“Yeah, you can say that. We aren’t terribly close to be honest. But they have a lot of responsibilities and various projects that keeps them busy.

I would be lying if I said I didn’t miss them, but they are always at the races, so at least I can see them there. ”

I sense the atmosphere turns somber, and I extend my hand towards him.

If there’s one thing I’ve learned about Roman, it’s that he’s very loyal.

His parents not being around is probably harder for him than he’s letting on, but he’s not going to disrespect all their hard work by complaining about it.

He takes it without thinking twice, and mindlessly spins the ring on my middle finger. “We didn’t have too much growing up, but my parents had an unparalleled love for ski racing. They put us in as soon as we turned three, and basically worked all the time to make sure we stayed in the sport .

“Thankfully, we all grew to adore it as much as they did, and the rest is history. As we got older, their side projects started really taking off, and there was so much conflict with our schedules. But, after all of this, they’ve never missed a race, and I’m so grateful for them.

” He finishes his speech with a smile on his face, and it’s almost like talking about these feelings helped him figure them out.

Squeezing his hand, we sit comfortably in the silence, and I know it's my turn to share something important. This boy has done nothing but open himself up to me all night, and I think I'm finally ready to do the same.

With a big sip of my drink, for confidence, I place the glass down and talk before I can second-guess myself.

"I have a complicated relationship with my family. If we are talking direct family members, then that's a lie.

I love my parents and brothers more than they could ever know.

My parents do nothing but show me constant support, and my two older brothers are my best friends.

But, if we are talking about my mom's side of the family, it gets a lot messier. "

I take another drink of wine, and my hands start to clam up as I recall all these feelings.

Roman remains leaning back in his chair, as his face remains open and understanding.

But it's his hand locked around mine that I use as a lifeline.

I breathe deeply, remembering that this is all in the past, and no one is making me share this.

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“Jasmine has always been a real piece of work. My mom and aunt had us within the same year, so we’ve been together our whole lives.

That also meant I’ve had to deal with her personality my whole life.

Even though I couldn’t care less about fighting her, she always ensured that I would lose, no matter what.

“She had to have everything I did, whether it was a new doll or a new outfit, it would be the end of the world if she didn’t get it.

Later in life, I learned the hard way that this also included men.

” My voice is resigned at this point, but Roman’s gentle squeeze of my hand makes me keep going.

“After I caught the two of them together, I just fled. I blocked his number, social medias, and all of his friends. It wasn’t until a couple of months later when Jasmine announced that she had a new boyfriend, and by that point, I was so over it.

The only thing that really got to me was this whole wedding situation, the idea that he’s going to be reintroduced to my entire family as her boyfriend, and I just couldn’t do it. ”

I hang my head in shame and say the rest in a small voice. “It was pathetic and petty of me to make this deal with you, but I’ve just had enough, and I wanted to push back.”

Within a minute, the sound of a chair scraping fills my ears and Roman's on a knee in front of me. His finger guides my head up, and I look into his understanding eyes.

"You're so strong, Langley. Hold this head up high," he whispers to me.

"It was petty and wrong of me, though," I counter, feeling embarrassed as my voice cracks slightly.

Looking me over, his hand slides to hold the nape of my neck. "Frankly, I don't know how you do it," he states plainly.

Roman's question pulls me from my thoughts, and I look at him curiously. "Do what?"

"Stop yourself from absolutely clocking that bitch."

I can't stop as the most embarrassing cackle that barks out of my mouth. The noise of the restaurant quiets suddenly, and I slap my hands over my face. That was by far the funniest thing he could have ever said to me, and I keep my head down to avoid attention.

The steady flow of conversation resumes, and I look up to see Roman's mouth pursed together. His laughter is barely being contained. "Alright, new rule. You can only have your head down if you laugh too hard," he says with a shaky voice.

As I wipe a tear from my eye, the dam he's been building finally breaks and he roars a laugh louder than mine. We both ignore the rest of the place as we fully laugh together, and he goes to sit back in his seat.

The problem is, it gets funnier the harder we try and hold it back. He's barely composed as he looks across at me, but laughter slips whenever we make eye contact.

After much too much time, we start to calm down, letting ourselves bask in the smiles of the other. “Rhodes, this was the best first date I have ever been on.”

That relaxed smile stays glued onto his face, and I can’t help but send a big one back to him. “This was the best date I have ever been on, period,” I respond.

“Agreed.” Roman extends his hand out, and I give him the crisp high five he was holding out for me.

It’s obvious the people around are very sick of us. The night they’ve been planning for ages being quickly ruined by a couple of twenty-something year old’s. We both silently agree it’s time to go, and Roman walks around to help me out of my seat .

Looking over, I see the booth across the room is empty, and my mind wonders what those guys could possibly be up to.

Roman walks us past the hostess stand, we both collect our coats and head outside. “I can get the taxi for us; you’ve done more than enough tonight.” I say as I pull up the app and try to orient myself.

Plucking my phone out of my hand, he orders the car on his phone and then proceeds to pull me in close. The slight sway to his stance tells me he’s probably as drunk as I am, but I don’t mind as he holds me on the sidewalk.

The car arrives a couple of minutes later, and we are promptly brought to the front of my house. Roman and I lean on each other as we stumble up the steps, the icy sidewalk not helping the situation at all.

“Where’s your ice melt?” He grumbles under his breath after we get on the porch.

“It’s right under the million dollars I leave lying around. Not all of us have

restaurants, hun.” I send a wicked smirk over my shoulder and proceed to put the key in the lock.

A pair of strong hands pulls me back into a firm chest and I immediately hold my breath. “Oh, so we’re being sassy now, are we love? ”

I can’t control the quickening of my pulse as I lean back into him, ensuring our bodies are as close as possible. “Oh, I just thought you could handle me, Huxley.”

Without turning around to see his face, I get my door open and step inside. Turning on my heel, I see Roman’s feet planted on the step, as obvious war rages in his eyes.

“I probably shouldn’t,” he says with uncertainty in his tone.

“It would be the end of the world if you came in.” I deadpan back to him, starting to unzip my jacket.

“This is a first date, Langley, and I want to be a gentleman.”

“That’s what a lady loves to hear,” I drawl back. I can help but smirk at the glare he sends my way as I plop my coat onto the rack.

He still hasn’t moved from the step, but I can see the tremble in his hands as he watches me. I open the front door wider, turning on my heel and strutting into the house. I can’t help but add an extra swish to my step, allowing my skirt to move behind me.

My gait falters as I hear sounds coming from inside, but the slam of the front door steals my full attention. A pit opens up in my stomach, and I don’t even want to turn around. Did he really just leave? Without saying goodbye?

I slowly turn around to look at the front entrance way, but I'm blocked by the massive team captain who's suddenly before me. His hand snakes under my hair to cup the back of my head. His other hand wastes no time before grabbing my hip roughly, pulling me flush and crashing his mouth into mine.

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Operation 'Date Rhodes' couldn't have gone better.

This is nothing like the first kiss we shared; all the restraint he previously showed has vanished. As if this whole time he's been suppressing his feelings, he's finally allowing himself to take what he wants. It doesn't hurt that I now know without a doubt that things between us are real.

His grip on me is like iron, holding me in the perfect places that support my suddenly weak body. The second his mouth touched mine, all coherent thoughts went right out the window. His lips urgently press against mine, as his mouth slowly opens for me.

The hand at my hip slithers up, wrapping around my waist and hauling me off my feet. The kitchen wall meets my back a second later, and I waste no time in wrapping my arms around his neck. His body fully presses into me as I tighten my hold on him, and his head slants downward to deepen our kiss.

He kisses like a man starved, never giving me respite as he pushes us further together.

The feeling of his tongue against mine makes my stomach dip, and I can't help but push myself back against him.

Using confidence, I didn't know I possessed, I pull my knee up the side of his body so I can cling to him tighter.

The hand that has been cupping my head slowly slides downward, caressing my body until he grips me under my knee. With a gentle but firm yank, my leg wraps around his waist, and we press ourselves closer than I ever thought possible.

As I contemplate wrapping my other leg around him, a loud cough snaps me out of this frenzy. I pull away from Roman, opening my eyes to see a look of confusion and joy on his face.

“Are you alright?” The sudden concern in his voice does nothing but warm my heart.

I place one of my hands on the side of his face, and relish when he leans into my touch.

Just as I’m about to respond, another loud cough snaps us out of our moment, and both of us whip our heads toward the living room.

My heart drops as I see all our friends sitting there, a movie paused on the TV and everyone’s eyes on us.

Ever the coward, I quickly grab Roman’s sweater sleeve and press my face into his arm.

In a move that makes me fall for him all over again, he puts my back to the group and faces everyone down himself.

“Hi,” he says in a bored tone. The emotionless voice is back, and I can only imagine everyone’s seeing the displeased mask he always wears. Peering up and around him, I’m ready to chastise him for his lack of emotion.

My eyes widen as I see him facing the group with a huge smile on his face, the way it lights up his eyes makes me swoon for the boy all over again.

Turning in his arms, I face the group and see their faces all displaying the same shock I had moments ago.

My embarrassment turns to annoyance as I step right in front of Roman. “What are you all doing here?”

I see Charles, Kai, Nico, Isla, and Liam all relaxing on our couch, as if they’re meant to be here.

They go silent at my accusation, and I cross my arms over my chest as I wait.

“Aurora texted us all to meet her here for team drinks. She said we could let ourselves in, and that everyone is welcome,” Charles says as they finish off their drink.

I groan when I hear that, knowing this will be an open invitation for my cousin to waltz into my house with whoever she wants. If Aurora wasn’t my favourite person on this planet, I might have killed her for this.

Speak of the devil, the front door bangs open as Aurora stumbles into the house, with Landon and Xander hot on her heels. Landon’s carrying a half-empty bottle of whiskey, and I can only imagine how drunk they already are.

I should’ve seen this coming. Since training was cancelled this weekend, that just means everyone’s down to get absolutely obliterated tonight. Doesn’t anyone have homework? If I didn’t have the most important date of my life tonight, then I would be finishing my research paper.

The noise draws everyone from the living room, and the bottle starts being passed immediately. Aurora gets the music going, and a mini party forms right before my eyes. Turning around, I see Xander pulling out pong cups while Kai and Nico clear the table.

The very last thing I saw happening tonight was half the team being at my house as

soon as I returned from my date, and I can't help but feel guilty. It's not as though I expected Roman to hang out the rest of the night, but I know he's not going to want to stick around for this .

Keeping a smile plastered on my face as my friends mill about, the feeling of absolute dread takes over me. The last thing I want to do is watch Roman leave, but I also don't have the heart to kick everyone out.

The guys get a honeycomb game started on the kitchen table and yell for everyone to join in. But it's as Kai and Charles usher Roman over, insisting he plays with them, that I raise a brow. Are they including him?

I glance over and catch the raw emotion that flashes over his face before he can think to hide it. "You should go," I say and lightly place my hand on his arm, slightly pushing him towards the guys.

He looks over with poorly masked desire, but then brings his gaze right back to mine. "No. This is our date and I want to spend my time with you. What do you want to do, love?" He grabs onto my hand, and loosely intertwining our fingers as he looks at me.

Filling a smile with as much swagger as I can muster, I start to pull him towards the guys. "I want to watch as you get your butt whooped in honeycomb."

His returning smile solidifies my decision, and I prepare myself to ingest some truly horrid drinks .

After an hour of drunken morons screaming and drinking, the leash I had on my mood has all but snapped.

While the atmosphere around me has skyrocketed, I might as well have my own personal storm cloud.

Everyone has moved on to new ventures after the drinking game era, and I make my way to the couch.

Roman has been bonding so well with the team, smiling in photos, and even getting his name chanted when he did a beer funnel. Really, it all went uphill after he played a prank on the entire team during one of the honeycomb games.

As the cups were being passed around and the tension was at an all-time high, everyone's phone simultaneously dinged.

The game stopped abruptly, and people slowly pulled out their phones to see the message.

The Training at 7AM appeared on everyone's lock screen and they slowly looked at Roman's direction.

I am certain everything would have backfired had Roman not burst into a fit of laughter immediately. The way the energy in the room flipped as his laughs were echoed by everyone around the table.

Seeing Roman fit in with everyone makes my chest melt, and it's the only reason I haven't retired to my room yet. Although I also just can't bring myself to socialize tonight. It took a lot out of me to talk about my past feelings, and now there's nothing I want to do more than go to bed.

A group of guys walk past the couch and head for the sliding door, but Roman does a double take as he sees me slumped in the seat. Sensing the change in my mood, he says something to the others and then promptly plops down beside me.

Before I say a word, he wraps an arm around my shoulder and pulls me close.

“What’s wrong, Langley?” The concern behind his voice starts to unravel me, and I can’t stop as my eyes start to water.

That concern morphs to fear instantly, and I feel a warm hand at my back as I’m ushered towards my room.

Closing the door behind us, he turns on the lamps and sits on the bed with me.

“Hey, hey. None of that, why’s my girl crying?” His gentle hands cup my face, swiping away the tears as they continue to fall.

“It’s nothing, it’s really so dumb,” I blabber and force myself to laugh it off, as if I am not bothered at all.

“Rhodes. Talk to me.” His strong hands feel so good on my face, and I can’t stop myself from gripping his wrist and falling into his palm.

I look at my bedroom wall, not wanting to meet his gaze in case he thinks I’m crazy. “I was just excited to have a night with you, that’s all. I didn’t even realize how badly I wanted you all to myself until it was ripped away.”

His hand lightly grips my chin, promptly moving my head towards him and causing our gazes to clash. That look is back in his eyes, as if I’m everything on a silver platter and he is a man starved.

Moving into my space, I can’t stop my body’s reaction to the low drawl of his voice. “If you wanted it just to be us tonight, why didn’t you tell me?”

“I didn’t want to ruin anything for you. The team was finally warming to you, this is what you always wanted, and I wasn’t going to ruin it,” I state flatly, but his eyes seem to heat as he leans into me.

“Wrong,” he states simply.

“What do you mean wrong?” I furrow my brow at him as he keeps his gaze on me.

“What you just said. It’s wrong.” He leans on the arm behind me, and our faces are inches apart.

“What was wrong with it?” I can’t help the breathy quality of my voice, as his presence is distracting me more than I care to admit.

He lowers his head, our lips brushing in a shadow of a kiss. “All I’ve ever wanted is you, love.” Leaning in slightly, our mouths meeting in a gentle kiss that seems to last an eternity. I savour every second of contact as I put my hand on his neck and hold him close.

“Would you want to stay over?” I blurt out between us before I can think twice about it.

Hope and joy fill his gaze as he quickly grabs my hands and holds them between us. “There’s nothing in this world I want more than that.” His words hit me in the heart, and I blush furiously.

He gives me another soul-shattering kiss before we both get ready for bed.

Pulling out the makeup wipes from my desk, I plop down on my chair and start getting ready to sleep. “Well, the good news is that no one could possibly think we were faking our relationship,” I say jokingly.

I find him leaning down towards me, wrapping both his arms around my middle, and tucking his face into the crook of my neck. “Langley, I was never faking it.”

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I don't know how I got so lucky.

Now this practice would only be applicable if the recipient has received blunt force trauma to the...

Oh shoot, I wasn't reading any of that. Groaning loudly into the living space, I go back to the top of the page and try my best to focus. While the professors are very willing to give us extensions on our assignments, those due dates approach faster and faster every time.

Aurora must feel the same as I watch her furiously erase the work in front of her. Cursing at her textbook as she reads the back and realizes everything, she did was wrong. I stifle my chuckle, but her gaze whips towards me before I can get away with it.

"What's so funny? Last time I checked, your paper is due in five hours."

I chance a look at the clock and hang my head in defeat. Even though I've been working on this thing all week, it won't meet the usual standard by which I hold myself.

Aurora must see the defeat on my face, our roles quickly reversing as I watch her start to laugh. "Shut it," I grumble in her direction, and put my head in my hands.

"Oh, Roman. Please come over! Want to sit on the couch and watch my doodle for a couple of hours." She puts on this high-pitched, sarcastic voice and drags out each of the words.

“You’re a bully. I hope you know that.” I lean back in my seat, glaring at my best friend on the other side of the couch. “And he wasn’t just watching me draw, we were watching a movie,” I grumble under my breath.

She pins me with an incredulous look. “Honey. I don’t know exactly what was going on, but neither of you were looking at the screen.”

I can’t help the slight lift of my lips, knowing that he spent over an hour just sitting with me, watching me draw. My sketch flowed easier, and I had no issue thinking of his face shape since I could always turn around to correct it.

We haven’t hung out since that night, as my pile of homework is getting dangerously high right before the race this weekend. As I was organizing my schedule, I couldn’t help but stop short when I saw that Julian’s wedding was the week after.

The panic that usually filled my chest whenever I thought about the event is nowhere to be seen. I even reread the calendar just to double-check and found that I wasn’t afraid.

Taking a break from my homework, I pull out my phone to check my messages.

Roman: What are you up to, gorgeous?

Just the message that pops up makes me smile before I even get the chance to blush at his words. I’ve essentially banned him from my house for a couple of days, my academic workload taking precedence.

Rhodes: I am finishing up my paper now, and then I have another assignment about all the different knee joints. I follow up that message with an upside-down smiley face and pretend that I’m not eagerly waiting for him to respond.

Roman: The guys and I are prepping our skis for travel. Have you travel-waxed your skis yet?

If he means, have I found time to take all six pairs of skis, sharpen them, properly clean the base of them, and then drip hot wax on the bottom to protect it during travel. Then, no. No, I have not .

I put as much flirty sarcasm as I can into my responding text, asking him when I would've had time to do all that and go back to my work. After focusing for another twenty minutes, Aurora slams her book and stomps to the garage.

"I'm sick of this shit. I'm going to go prep my skis," she grumbles as she storms off. I wish her luck as I return to my paper and struggle to absorb the most boring sentences.

After a couple more minutes, I shut off my music in order to focus better and hear the distinct sound of voices coming from the garage.

"No, those aren't the ones she's going to race with."

"I think I would know what skis my best friend is using," Aurora counters.

"Don't you remember she's trying this brand!"

"No. I think you're wrong." I hear her state.

"Frankly, I don't care what you think. I know you're wrong." Either they think I'm stupid or listening to music because they progress from hushed voices to straight up yelling at the end.

I knew that eventually they were going to have their moments. The both of them

simply have too conflicting of personalities to get along at all times .

Opening the garage door fully, I see Aurora squaring up to Roman. Not one trace of fear is on her face as she stands her ground. It's honestly hilarious watching Roman argue with her, since she's the most stubborn human being I know, and he really doesn't know what he's in for.

As I watch Aurora prepare for her next rebuttal, I think it's time to stop this before he gets hurt.

"You're actually both wrong." My voice rings out, and they both freeze like deer in the headlights.

I can't help but laugh as Roman tries to hide behind Aurora, causing her to step away from him without a second thought.

"Rora, could you give us a second?" I ask and make my way towards them both. She pats Roman's shoulder twice with probably the most comfort she will ever give him and then heads back in the house.

Roman still hasn't said anything as he rests his body against the tuning table set up in our garage. "What are you doing?" I stalk closer to him as I try to keep the smile off my face.

"I just came to say hi. See how you were doing, you know." The end of his statement comes off as more of a question, and I can't help laughing at how frazzled he looks.

"Huh. So why do you need my skis? "

"No reason." He responds instantly.

“Roman Huxley. Are you going to tune my skis for me?” I’m right in front of him now, arms crossed with my hip jutting out.

I love the flush that spreads across his face, as if he should be embarrassed about his kindness. Before he can make himself any more flustered, I lunge forward and wrap my arms around his torso. Pushing my face into his strong chest, I don’t feel ashamed of the big breath I take while in his arms.

His huge arms quickly hug me back, encasing me in his smell and making me safe. “I just wanted to help,” he says softly into my hair.

It has just been such a long journey for me, and I never thought I would be able to trust a man again. But I know without a doubt, as Roman holds me in his arms, he would never do anything to hurt me. “That’s all you’ve ever done for me, Roman.”

Aurora, Charles, Isla, Liam, and I take over the living room as the team goes about their afternoon.

Everyone raced their best today, but only a select few from our team even managed to make it into the top ten.

There are double the racers at this race, and we all need to give it everything we have.

Our last race of the weekend is the slalom discipline tomorrow, and a select few are itching for the win.

I managed to submit a subpar paper last night, as well as whipping up a decent assignment alongside that. Aurora has math problems spread across the whole space, her tempers at an all-time high, and I can’t afford to anger her when I need her to look over my work.

Charles, Liam, and Isla are all in the same intro class, looking at each other's work and finishing up their last report.

We're staying in an identical condo as last time but located on a completely different hill. The second race is always more relaxed since everyone's too busy to be stressed at this point in the year.

The students lucky enough to have no homework spend their time downstairs, having some drinks as they prep their skis. I know Roman's down there with his roommates, and I'm not ashamed of the way I replay that moment in my head.

Stopping by my friend group, he let me in on his plans for the next couple of hours, and kissed me sweetly before he left. For someone so quiet, I couldn't be more pleased with the amount of communication he has with me .

A pencil harshly tapping me in the forehead breaks me out of my trance, and I can't help but glare daggers at Aurora. "School now, Roman daydreams later," she says without looking up from her work and immediately returns to chewing on the back of her pencil.

Wiping the slobber off my forehead with a groan, I try my best to focus on what's in front of me.

While everyone assumes I'm also working on homework, I smile mischievously to myself as I put the finishing touches on my project.

After editing the last piece, the door to the living area burst open again, and noise erupts in the space.

Landon and Xander are howling at something random, shoving each other as they make their way to the kitchen. It must have been funny because Rhys saunters in

afterward, a small smile on his face, which for him is hysterical laughter.

I can't stop the way I keep watching, waiting for the fourth in their little group to make his appearance.

They must've been doing something separately because it has been over five minutes of me looking up every time I hear the slightest noise.

I must be craning my neck very obviously because I can't help but hear Aurora mutter hopeless under her breath .

Ignoring her completely, I smile as Roman's form enters the room. Rubbing his hands through his hair with a scowl, he storms past our area, and keeps his head down as he goes upstairs.

We all watch him go, and I turn back to see everyone looking at me. Various levels of confusion and alarm are on their faces, and I can't help but feel the same emotions in my chest.

"Rhodes, this is your problem now!" Xander's shouts from the kitchen and I turn to see him pointing his spoon towards the stairs.

"Yeah, that's what I get for falling for the moody one," I tell the team. Smiling as my friend's snicker, I quickly grab my project off the table and rush up the stairs. All the doors are open except the one at the end, leading me to believe that is where I need to go.

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There's no sound coming from the room as I lightly knock, saying his name as a question into the quiet space. After no response, I let myself in. His back is to me as he looks out the window, and I would be lying if I wasn't looking at every muscle stretching his shirt.

"I just need a minute, Rhodes," he says with restrained anger in his tone.

His words dump cold water on my current train of thought, and I can't help but ask what's wrong. "Is everything alright? I can leave you alone if you want, but I'm a little worried now."

He takes a deep breath, turning around to show me how frazzled he looks. Red is creeping into his eyes, as if he has been rubbing them, and his hands are clenched into fists at his side. After looking at him for a couple of minutes, I realize he isn't stressed. He's furious.

"Rhodes, I just need a second to breathe." I start to back out of the room, knowing well that if someone wants their space, it's best to respect their wishes.

That's until Roman makes a sound of angry frustration and starts rambling.

"I have never wanted to hit a girl. Never in my life. My mother would disown me in a heartbeat if she knew that I even had thoughts about it." He starts to pace in front of the window with his hands behind his back, until he whips his finger towards me.

"Until I dealt with your cousin. I would gladly hit your cousin."

Two things happen in my brain at the same time. First and foremost, I agree with him, and then I'm terrified of what she could have done to make this sweetheart of a boy feel like this. But secondly, a gut-wrenching laugh that comes out of me .

Clutching my stomach, I double over as I cackle at his sentence. His reaction is how I feel every time I have to deal with her, and it's nice to know I'm not the only one. If anything, now him and Aurora have something to bond over.

"Did you do it?" I ask in a voice that shakes with laughter.

"Did I do what?" He asks in confusion.

"Did you hit her?" Imagining Roman randomly decking Jasmine is now going to be my go-to image when I'm sad.

Amusement turns to horror as he looks at me.

"What? Of course, I didn't! I would never!

" The fight seems to drain out of him as I approach, and a rueful smile plays on my face as I come within arm's length.

Sadness wiggles its way into my chest as I see how dejected he is, and I wrap my arms around his middle.

Leaning up on my tip toes, I brush my lips against his neck as I whisper in his ear.
"Want to know a secret?"

His arms wrap around my back as he leans down. "Obviously."

"I wouldn't blame you if you did. She's probably targeting you now. I'm so sorry, it's

all my fault.” I pull back to look into his eyes and ensure he can see the guilt I have for the whole situation.

His hands slide up from my back, landing on my shoulders as he looks down at me. “I don’t know how you dealt with this your whole life. She seems to be up to something, Rhodes. I don’t like the sound of it.”

“Well, what did she say?” I know how cruel she can be, and the last thing I want is for Roman to be involved in this. Honestly, if we weren’t giving this a real shot, I would’ve let him go at this point. The wedding is a week away, and I fear the lengths she’ll go to ruin this for me.

A distant expression crosses his face, and he pulls away from me slightly. “I don’t really want to talk about it, if that’s alright.”

I can’t stop the fear I feel at that kind of reaction, but maybe he just needs time to think. “That’s fine.” I lie to his face and plaster on a kind smile. I don’t want to push him on this anymore, so I think it’s the perfect time to give him my gift.

“Alright, well, I have something for you.” His interest peaks at my words, and I immediately retrieve it from the hallway where I left it.

As I run back towards him, I can’t stop smiling like an idiot as I hold this book behind my back and jump up and down.

He seems taken aback by my enthusiasm, but the confused smile now on his face makes me feel like a winner.

“Close your eyes, hands out in front,” I say excitedly.

“Rhodes,” he deadpans and raises an eyebrow at me. I don’t waste a second as I glare

right back up at him and wait for him to do what I said.

As he grumbles and closes his eyes, I place the green book in his hands when he cups them in front of him. Impatient as ever, he opens them the second the book's in his hand and wordlessly flips through it.

He continues to rifle through the pages, emotion slowly trickling into his expression as he reads. It's impossible not to be embarrassed about this since we haven't actually been dating for that long. But all his kindness was getting too much to go unreturned.

He still hasn't said a word, and I finally hit my capacity for letting the silence sit. "Yeah, so it's just a normal planner, but I changed a bunch of stuff around. Like here, you can put all your notes from the team captain meeting, and maybe jot down things to remember here."

I tip the top of the book down so I can see it and point to all the modifications I made just for him. "Oh, and here's where you can put in your meal preps for the races," I say excitedly. "I just know you like things organized, and I thought this would really help."

Looking back up at him, I'm almost taken aback by the look of pure adoration splayed across his face.

Before I can even think of something to say, Roman steps right into my space. His hand cups my face as he presses a quick but firm kiss to my lips. It wasn't our most passionate kiss by any means, but there was something behind it I can't quite place.

"How can I ever show you how much this means to me." His words are almost a whisper as he goes back to flipping through it. Probably reading the random notes I left throughout the whole thing.

“It’s nothing, seriously. I just wanted to help you out. You know, like how you’re always helping me.” Reaching up to place both my palms on his face, I brush my thumbs over his clean-shaven cheeks. “I’m really happy to be with you, Roman.”

I can’t help the moisture that forms in my eyes as my words thrum a cord in my chest that sits just right. His hands come to rest atop mine, and the most emotional gaze I’ve ever seen from him reflects back at me.

“Langley, I’ve had a real shitty couple years. It has been a constant struggle, just with friends and skiing, and always something happening to make me feel like crap.” Closing his eyes, he pulls me flush against him and tucks me in close. “I’m so thankful for you,” he says into my hair.

“I’m just treating you the same way you treat me,” I say into his chest and hold him tight.

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It's only really a win if she's at the finish line.

I wince and cover my ears as Aurora's scream fills the air, her hands waving wildly as she jumps up and down.

The ladies' race went swimmingly in the morning, with Aurora snagging first place, and me fitting into eighth.

The entire place is now packed as we watch the men's race; the netting surrounding the finish area is full of people screaming and ringing cowbells.

"Alexander Huxley, bib thirty-five, has landed himself in to third position." Another round of cheers goes up, and Aurora's voice knocks them out of the park.

Xander comes to a stop before us, snow spraying everywhere as he looks up and sees his position.

I watch as his arms shoot in the air and his poles dangling down his arms as he starts to punch the sky.

As Aurora gives one last blood-curdling scream, his whole-body tenses as he quickly turns towards us .

My best friend suddenly goes quiet as his eyes stay on her, but I can't help smiling as he blows her a kiss. "Is there still nothing happening between you two?" I lean close and yell to Aurora, hoping she's able to hear me over all the noise.

Not surprisingly, she doesn't respond. Scoffing in my direction, then promptly ignoring me to cheer for the next racer. I have a strong desire to pry, but Roman is in a couple of racers, and I can't risk missing him.

That blue and white ski suit catches my eye as he crests the pitch above us. His movements are precise as he pushes himself to the brink, and the finish line's only ten gates away now.

The guards on his pole are neon yellow and stand out stark against the snow.

As he approaches the next gate, he positions his body perfectly so that he'll make contact at the exact point he wants.

This all happens in a matter of seconds, and before I can blink, he's already flying towards the following gate.

It isn't long before he pushes himself all the way to the finish line, and his hand shoots out before him and stops the timing.

"Roman Huxley, bib thirty-nine, has just slotted himself into first place, everyone!" The announcer roars, and the crowd starts to lose their mind .

I can hear the obvious sound of Xander and Landon making a scene on the other side of the fence. But it's the sound that rips itself out of my own throat that manages to make the loudest noise.

An immense swelling of pride fills my whole body as I sprint towards the racer exit. Once I'm around the bend, I see him handing his racer bib to the attendant and thanking her for volunteering. His goggles are on the rim of his helmet now, and an immense look of happiness is plastered on his face.

His eyes are alight as he seems to be scanning his surroundings, and I can't help but think he's looking for someone in particular. That feeling in my chest only intensifies when he makes eye contact with me, and his smile becomes bigger than I've ever seen it.

I can't help but scream with joy, opening my arms and jumping right into his outstretched ones. "You did it! You freaking won!" I scream as I hold him tighter and pour all my pride into him.

He rocks me back and forth, joy basically radiating from his body as he holds me. "I couldn't have done it without you, Langley. Truly." His head falls into the crook of my shoulder, and we breathe each other in as we stand at the exit .

The moments quickly ruined by the tell-tale sound of Xander's screaming getting closer.

Roman quickly places me down on the snow, his hands landing on my shoulders as he pushes me back a couple of steps. I give him a confused glance but then quickly understand as Xander comes in contact with Roman, as both men take to the ground roughly.

"YOU BASTARD! YOU DID IT!" Xander's scream permeated the air, and a course volunteer quickly warns him about appropriate language.

Landon is quickly behind his brothers, a giant smile plastered on his face he hugs Roman. The sheer amount of pride emanating from both his siblings causes tears to form in my own eyes.

Roman fully laughs, shoving off both his little siblings roughly, but smiling widely at them the whole time. I didn't think this moment could get any better, but my eyes widen as all my friends rush up to Roman.

To my biggest shock, Aurora bear hugs my boyfriend from the side, congratulating him loudly as she holds him. He seems to be just as surprised, but lightly taps her back in gratitude.

Charles, Liam, and Isla all give him positive words, hugs, and pats on the back. This was the best way we could have ended the race weekend, everyone seeming to come together at the perfect time.

“Alright, we’re going to have to host a party now, right?” Xander’s voice cuts into the various conversations happening all around.

Sly smiles emit from the Polars, knowing damn well we leave tomorrow morning and everyone’s game to let loose tonight. This time, though, all heads turn to Roman, as the team finally seeking advice from the leader.

He takes his time looking at each and every one of us, his gaze landing on me last. “Fuck yeah we are having a party!” He roars into the group, throwing up his hands as everyone cheers.

I throw mine up with the group, truly letting myself loose for the first time in forever, and gladly returning the crushing kiss from my boyfriend.

I’m absolutely gone. Not one thing is left running in this brain of mine, and the thoughts turn into puddles of goo as soon as they form.

No one was surprised when the team was ready for another Polar party, with red solo cups promptly being removed from various athletes’ luggage. It was a quick pregame filled with ski shots and shot gunning, which gradually progressed to hours of drinking games as all the teams filtered in.

It’s well known that the Sunray Mountain team is also having a party, so we’re all

aware a midnight party merger could be in the cards.

As I shoot another pong ball into the last cup on the other side of the table, I scream and jump into the arms of a very drunk Charles. Almost taking us both down as I hugged the life out of them.

“You brilliant girl!! Suck it Oceanside!” Charles yells as he points across the pong table and waves an accusing finger at two guys from the Oceanside team.

With a condescending comment from Charles, they shake our hands and wish us both a good night. I can’t help but notice how the second guy’s handshake lingers with Charles’, both leaning towards each other and keeping the conversation flowing.

I take my cue to leave, smiling as Charles laughs and the two of them continue with their flirtatious arguing.

Keeping a stupid smile on my face, I let the noise and people wash over me as I make my way throughout.

I have nowhere to be as I stumble along but stop mid-stride as I hear the tell-tale sound of Aurora laughing close by .

A bunch of guys are chatting in the hallway, blocking my path to my bestest of friends. “Excuse me, I just need to get past,” I say, but can’t help the slur of the last words. My head starts to spin the longer I look around, and I suddenly have the urge to find Roman.

“She is sloshed man.” The voice closest to me says.

“Dude, go put her ass to bed.” Another hallway man states.

The figure in the middle chuckles, confidently standing up straight and approaching me. “Hey Buddy! I have a boyfriend! No, thank you!” I lean back and point at his face.

A low chuckle escapes from the figure, the sound quickly melts away any of my hostility. I start to evade the figure, but strong arms wrap around me before I can make my drunken escape. Arms that hold me so well, my body immediately relaxes into him against my will.

“Langley, I think it’s bedtime.” Roman all but coos into my ear, and a smile breaks out on my face.

“Roman! You’re socializing!” I screech as I wrap my arms around his neck, and rock him back and forth. I can only imagine how much he is leaning down to accommodate me as my feet stay planted on the floor .

“I’m going to bed, guys,” Roman says beside me, but it sounds far away. A chorus of boos come from around us, and it warms my heart that they want him here.

“Dude, just put her to bed and come back down.” I hear someone yell, and then the sound of everyone agreeing. Even though I’m not proud of it, I tighten my hold on Roman almost immediately.

Roman’s resounding chuckle thrums through my chest, and I feel his arms loosen around me. Getting the message, I start to release my hold on Roman’s neck, only to feel his arms under my back and knees.

Suddenly, the ground rushes away, and I have to close my eyes to keep from throwing up all over him. “Ugh, no, no,” I moan as I put my face into his chest and try to stop the room spinning.

“Oh, I’m so sorry. We’ll be in bed soon,” Roman says softly as he places a kiss on my spinning forehead.

The sound of the party quiets significantly as I feel Roman walk away, and then a soft surface is underneath me before I know it. I can’t help the groan that leaves me as my spinning head meets a fluffy pillow .

Another chuckle from my love makes me open my eyes, and my eyebrows turn down towards him. “How dare you laugh at my pain,” I mumble

His smiles come easier than ever lately, and he kneels beside the bed. “You did this one to yourself. You actually volunteered to drink the king cup. Who does that?”

“I had to protect Aurora from it. You wouldn’t get it; girl friendships go beyond your comprehension.” I burrow deeper into the pillow as a smug smile takes over my face.

“You brat,” I hear him mumble.

I feel his presence leave from beside me and I shoot up without thinking. Reaching for his hand, I fall short only once the dizziness returns with a vengeance. Two strong hands quickly land on my shoulders to steady me and help me lean back onto the bed.

“Don’t leave me,” I whine as I grab onto him. “A better girlfriend would tell you to go downstairs and have fun, but I’m not that girl. If you leave. I will cry.” I spew this out immediately, hoping he understands my jumbled words.

His hands gently brush my upper cheeks, moving to cup my face in his palms. “I’m not going anywhere. You had your chance to get rid of me, but you blew it, Langley.”

My face scrunches in a smile as he kisses the tip of my nose. “Now, let’s move on to the logistics. How do you remove this stuff from your face?”

The laugh that rips from my throat is loud and obnoxious, but it's the perfect sound to describe how happy this man makes me.

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Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 2:12 am

Yellow's her most appropriate colour. She's my personal sunshine after all.

This was, without a doubt, the longest week of my life.

The sheer number of messages I received regarding the wedding would have stressed me out on their own.

But the combination of them all with my training and homework resulted in a few grey hairs popping up.

If it weren't for Roman, I probably would've booked a trip to Mexico by now and just blown the entire thing off.

Luckily, he has been there every step of the way, from helping me with my meal prep when I had to find a twenty-four-hour seamstress.

To massaging my aching muscles after training when I had to sit on the phone with seven family members.

Apparently, the dresses for the flower girl got destroyed, and they needed all hands-on deck to solve the problem .

Overall, it has been an absolute mess and Roman's been there, standing in the eye of the storm with me, through the entire thing.

Flattening the satin fabric against my skin, I cringe at how the stupid dress is already wrinkling. Julian was very adamant on spring colours being the theme, even though

the wedding is in the middle of April.

Twirling around to look at every place the light-yellow dress hugs my curves, I can't help but admire how my entire back is on display. As I make sure I'm alone, I flex my back into the mirror, and can't help but smile at the muscles I see.

My hair is all pinned up in a bun with a few strategic pieces escaping the messy updo. Since my bangs have grown to almost a curtain length, I part them down the middle to frame my face nicely. All it takes is a few more makeup touches, and I'm completely ready for the event.

My hands are sweaty as I open and close them, so I wipe them on the bed to avoid ruining my dress. The satin's going to be a real issue if I can't get it wet, because the stress sweat is coming in hot.

Jasmine's been quiet lately, always finding a way to ignore the family calls, and laying low at training. Auntie said she wasn't feeling well this week, which just meant I got stuck doing all her tasks. My new dream is for her to be sick as a dog, and I'm able to attend this event in peace.

"Langley?" A voice calls from the hallway, the familiar timber of it already putting me at ease.

"In here," I call back, doing one more once-over to ensure everything is in place.

"Sorry, I knocked a couple times, so I just assumed –." I turn around at the abrupt stop in his sentence, but every thought flies out the window as I stare at Roman.

His frame fills the tux as if it were made for him, with the tie being a perfect match to my sunshine yellow dress.

His hair is gelled back with only a slight wave present now, his shoes shine against the indoor lights, his face is clean-shaven and every freckle he has is proudly on display.

As I flounder for words to express his beauty, it dawns on me that he's having the same problem.

He looks at me in complete awe, his eyes alight as his gaze travels up my form. I almost want to shy away from the sheer intensity of it, but that's the last thing he would want me to do. "Do you like it?" I ask teasingly .

"Rhodes, you're absolutely stunning," he says with emotion filling his voice.

"It's a beautiful dress," I say in agreement.

He slowly approaches me, grabbing both my hands in his. "No, it's the woman in the dress who's steals the room."

Looking up to meet his eyes, the softness I find there threatens to crush me. "Roman, thank you. For everything," I say and try to keep the emotion from clogging my throat.

"Any time, gorgeous," He smiles widely, and then wastes no time leaning down for a kiss. Before I get the chance to feel the press of his mouth on mine, a loud bang sounds from the front entry way.

"Rhodes Langley! We have called you fifteen times! We have to go. Now!" My mother's voice echoes through the house, and it couldn't have ruined the mood more.

"Mom! That key was for emergencies only!" I scream back at her, giving Roman an apologetic smile as I walk to the door.

As we make our way into the hall, the feel of his hand on my back does nothing but help steady me for the event to come. I smile up at him and promptly jolt as I hear the loudest gasp that has ever left a woman's mouth .

We both break eye contact, shooting our gazes to my mother standing five feet away, with her hands over her mouth in shock.

Her long pink gown stops just shy of her sparkly heels, her bag and earrings complementing both of them nicely.

She basically looks exactly like I will in thirty years, but with the difference of being ten times louder than me.

“Rhodes Jayne Langley! He's absolutely gorgeous!” She quickly strides over to us, not warning Roman before wrapping her arms around him.

“Mom! Get off him! This is not how normal people introduce themselves,” I say with a healthy dose of embarrassment. Luckily, he just laughs as he lightly pats my mother's back, a chuckle escaping him before he can stifle it.

“Oh, hush. I carried you around for nine beautiful months, I can introduce myself however I want,” she says happily. “Where's our dear Aurora?”

I intercept her before she can barge into Aurora's room, and I quickly lead the group back to the front door. “She's in class still, how about we all just head over to the church, huh?”

“Well, I'm so thankful you both were able to skip class today. Thank you both,” she says kindly .

I don't mention that we're both probably going to have to skip training tomorrow as

well, but there's no chance I would say that in front of her. Roman doesn't need to know my mom's opinion on how we have too many training days and never a rest.

As my mother makes her way to the car, I reach for my jacket, only to have it already extended towards me. Roman holds it up as I slip my arms through, and I put both my palms on Roman's chest.

"This will be your last moment of peace for a minimum of ten hours. I hope you're ready." I give him an intense gaze and frown when he has the gall to laugh.

"I think it'll be alright. Remember, you're getting my best behavior." That hand runs through his dark hair stops short when he remembers it's all been gelled down.

With one last tap on his chest, I interlace our hands as we walk out the door. "Oh, Huxley. They're going to eat you alive."

It took around fifteen minutes for me to notice the first sign that Roman was sweating.

That was after both my parents and brothers grilled him in the car on why he was worthy enough to date me.

Honestly, surviving more than ten minutes of that torture before the first sweat broke is an achievement.

The church is a beautiful structure, stained glass in every window that casts a beautiful glow onto the space below.

Entering the main doors, my little nieces stand with their moms and hold bundles of flower pedals for everyone to take.

We thank them kindly, but then shuffle into the room so we don't hold up the traffic.

Entering the church's main area, we find the entire place packed with family, and soon to be family. My relatives are sprinkled around everywhere, half mingling with the bride's guests and the others reuniting with the long-distance family members.

I don't manage to make it five steps before the nosiest of my aunt's barrels into me, grabbing both my arms as she looks at me with the most fake pity she can muster.

"Oh Rhodes, look at you trying to wear such a happy colour. This day must be so hard for you. But don't worry, us gals can stick together all night.

" She leans in close as she says the last part, as if everyone's eyes aren't currently on us.

My mom starts to make her way to us, but I decide to intervene before they start a fight in the middle of the area. "No Aunty, I'm not sad at all. Julian's getting married today, and I have the privilege of attending with my boyfriend."

It's almost humorous how half the conversations in the room sputter out and their attention moves from me to the six foot man at my back. He leans around me and extends his hand out to my aunt, who's almost too busy ogling him to return it.

"Nice to meet you, I'm Roman Huxley." He gives her one of his sweetest smiles and I promptly excuse us both before she tries to steal my date.

Everyone comes in waves after that, family members from all over the place coming and having quick words with the Langley clan. It ranges from cousins I've missed over the years, to snippy comments from relatives that think I've embarrassed Jasmine by bringing someone.

I couldn't wrap my head around that logic, but luckily Roman stood by my side through it all. A comforting hand on my waist and polite dismissals when he saw fit.

After half an hour of mingling, we finally manage to take our seats and I can't help but expel the breath I've been holding in .

"That was, a lot," he says with exhaustion in his tone. "Are you alright?" He asks with concern as he interlaces our fingers.

Turning to look up to him, I lean into his neck and whisper so that no one can overhear. "The only reason I'm okay is because you've been by my side. For real." I quickly pull back and smile, so he knows just how grateful I am.

"I wouldn't want to be anywhere else, Langley," he whispers into my hair and then places a firm kiss there. Warmth floods me at his actions, but even more so when he reaches across and slides me closer towards him.

"We have to keep up pretenses. You get it," he says with pretend seriousness. I can't help but pull away slightly and raise my brow at him. His response being to plop a quick kiss to the tip of my nose before I can bat him away.

Carlos abruptly ends our little moment, as he flops down beside me with Henry in tow.

They both make a ruckus as they take their seats.

They look like twins in their matching tuxes, both boys sporting cute little noses and long blonde lashes.

The only way to differentiate the two is due to Carlos's shaggy blonde curls that are a direct contrast to Henry's new buzz cut .

“Y’all want a drink?” Carlos slips us a flask, and I don’t think twice before taking a big swig.

I temper down a cough as some of the cheapest tequila I have ever had burns its way down my throat. Roman is much more of a champ as he swallows his sip the same as if it were water.

“Mate. That’s dreadful,” Roman says right after. Leaning over me to meet Carlos’s eyes, and the smile on Car’s face telling me everything I need to know.

“Ah, it’s going to be that kind of night,” I mutter. Taking another discreet swig of the flask as Henry joins the conversation.

“Rho, you wouldn’t believe how many people asked us if you paid Roman to be here. Can you imagine?” Henry whisper shouts to us, and my heart drops into my stomach.

“What! Who told you that,” I whisper-shout as I whip towards Henry.

“Uh, like a bunch of people, but Car Car and I are shutting them down. Don’t worry.

” The thumbs up Henry sends back does nothing to ease my nerves and I quickly face the front, so they don’t see my panic.

Obviously, I didn’t pay him to be here, but it’s not like he was my boyfriend when I invited him .

The muttering quickly quiets down, as everyone follows my lead in facing forward.

Julian starts to walk down the aisle and I try my best to produce a smile for him.

He looks great in a forest green suit and my aunt radiates with pride as she walks him

down.

The bridesmaids following close after them, everyone wearing a darker colour of pink as they walk down.

Jasmine is the last to walk down, her dress a dark pink that accentuates her glowing-bronze skin. I try not to look, but as I scan the small area, I don't see any sign of Daniel sitting in the crowd.

Julian's fiancé takes to the aisle not long after, and we all stand. Her cream dress is accented with hundreds of mini flowers, the design continuing to the train of the veil. The wedding's entire design fits so well together, and I love the uniqueness of the whole thing.

The ceremony proceeds as usual after that, both parties smiling big as they face each other and get ready for the next stages of their life. I try my best to keep my gaze on the happy couple, but I can't ignore the number of relatives looking back at me.

My cousins, aunts, and people I don't even know make covert glances back, when their sole focus should be what's happening up front. "Are you seeing this?" I whisper up to Roman, thankful as he lowers his head to be more discreet.

"Yeah. Your family seems to be very inquisitive. Just ignore them, Langley. This day is about your cousin, so let's just focus on him." The swift kiss he places on my temple does nothing but strengthen my resolve, helping me face forward with more confidence.

Not long after that, cheering breaks out and everyone's filled with joy as Julian becomes a husband. The pair of them are radiating love as they face the crowd and wave.

They do a couple more dramatic kisses that are met with a wall of cheers, and I'm glad everyone's focused is fully on them.

Looking up at Romans smiling face, I send him a reassuring nod and lean into his side. We've gotten through half the event already; this should be completely fine.

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 2:12 am

Violence is never the answer.

If I could go back in time and unthink that thought, I would. I really jinxed myself on this one.

Roman and I stand shoulder to shoulder, staring at the seating chart with twin looks of shock on our faces. My mom started to power walk away the second she saw it, but luckily dad caught her before she could do any damage.

Henry and Carlos join our group and then promptly stop when they see the chart for themselves. The circular table consists of Carlos, Mom, Dad, Roman, Henry, Daniel, and then me.

In that order.

“No fucking way,” Henry says into the space between us, as Roman attempts to peel off the names.

Our heads all turn in his direction and he just shrugs his shoulders. “It was worth a shot,” he muses, returning his hand to the side of my hip .

“Should we just, go home?” Carlos suggests, his question sounding like the best idea in my opinion.

“We can’t go home; we need to be here for Julian,” I counter immediately, but not putting much conviction into my voice.

Henry looks at me, raising his eyebrow in a skeptical way. “Ten bucks you don’t even know his wife’s name.”

“I know you don’t either,” I say without a second thought.

“Violet.” Henry smirks as he looks at us all.

“It’s Charlotte.” Carlos confidently states as he tries to scratch out Daniel’s name on the board.

“She just looks like a Chloe to me.” I muse as I watch Car erase the D with his nails.

Roman looks between us all, a mix of amusement and bewilderment on his face. It’s not like his brothers are much better. At least we aren’t brawling on the floor.

“Just in case any of you try to actually congratulate them, her name is Paige,” Roman states calmly. Moving his hand to hold mine and directing us to the reception area.

The giant event space is outlined with a large window and has flowers everywhere.

The decoration is placed in such perfect segments, making the room look busy and elegant at the same time.

Since it is April and freezing outside, everyone mills about as they admire the décor and talk with one another.

As we make our way to the table, I can feel the eyes tracking us from all around the room.

I catch conversations halting, and gazes being whipped our way as we pass through.

Thankfully there's also Paige's side of the family here and they couldn't care less about my dating history.

I find shelter within their ranks, and I'm tempted to squeeze myself into one of their tables.

"Should we be like, talking to people?" Car asks as we get to our table, taking off his jacket and tossing it on the back of his chair.

I'm unfortunately thinking the same thing, but someone takes the stage before I can voice that opinion. "Hello everyone! Thank you so much for coming to celebrate Paige and Julian! If everyone could find their table, we will be getting started here shortly."

As Henry and Carlos high five each other loudly, I shake my head at them and turn take my seat. Roman doesn't miss a single beat, pulling out my chair and promptly pushing it back in.

"Why thank you, sir. You're such a gentleman," I say in my most high society voice .

"Anything for such a beautiful lady," he muses back to me in an equally stupid tone. "I'll go grab us a drink. Red wine?" I nod up to him, lightly squeezing his hand and watch as he walks away. I see Henry and Car follow excitedly, probably going to try and get themselves two drinks each.

Since sitting still isn't really in my mental dictionary, I fiddle with the fun decorations littering the table. "Well, hello gorgeous, here's your drink." That was fast, but my distracted brain just says thank you, as I put the little flowers away.

When I look up to see a glass of white wine, I turn to Roman with a furrow in my brow. "Oh, I don't drink white –." My sentence dies in my throat as Daniel takes the

seat beside me.

He looks exactly the same as he always does, hair styled into a boyish mess. His signature pretty boy smile on his face, as he sets those striking blue eyes on me. Although he's a similar height and build to Roman, there's not a bone in my body that feels anything for him.

His hand lands on the back of my chair and seems to have no issue with leaning into my space. "Listen, Rhodes. We need to stop playing these games and talk tonight. "

My brain isn't even processing what's currently happening. His body language and actions are so casual and it's confusing the hell out of me. "Where is Jasmine?" Is the only question my brain can conjure up at the minute.

"Who knows," he responds immediately, and placing both hands on the table in front of me. "But what I do know, is that your cousin is a lot more work than you ever were." He whispers this as if it's flattering for me to hear, but I don't try and hide the disgusted look on my face.

"Don't give me that look babe. I get why you were so upset now, and I'm ready to give us another chance."

A blank stare is all I can give to this ignorant boy. "Are you joking? Is this, like, a joke?" I stare at his serious face and can't comprehend where he keeps all this nerve he seems to have.

"Rhodes, I've been calling you for months. I wouldn't have been declined every time if you weren't playing hard to get," he says with such confidence.

Blinking is all I can do to try and process this. As I do a quick glance around the room, I'm thankful no one is looking our way as I lean in toward him. "It's because I

blocked you, Daniel. I don't want anything to do with you."

He sends me a face as if I'm acting ridiculous and starts to reach for my hand.

"Babe. You need to calm down and –." He doesn't get the chance to utter another word, as his wrist is captured by a much stronger hand.

"What do you think you're doing." The menace that drips from Roman's hushed words would've caused a much smarter man to turn tail and run.

Whether Daniel is delusional or just an idiot, he doesn't seem to react as he calmly turns to Roman. "Hey man. I don't know if you saw, but the seating chart put our seats next to each other." He points between himself and I, as if this is some sort of checkmate. "I don't know what to tell you."

Daniel seems relaxed, but the slip of his smug smile tells me everything I need to know about his real feelings. I would be just as stressed if Roman was towering over me, with anger pouring off him in waves.

Roman puts down my glass of red wine, and promptly puts that hand on the back of my chair.

"It wouldn't matter to me if the seating chart was tattooed to your face. You're going to get up, sit across the table, and shut the hell up," Roman says all this with a lethal sort of calm .

"And if I don't," Daniel says as a slight wobble enters his voice.

Roman leans down, talking too low for me to hear, but his words cause Daniel's face to go a shade paler. I can't help but think that it's about time he's the uncomfortable one between the two of us.

The announcer steals everyone's attention suddenly, asking that people take their seats so the dinner can begin. I spy Jasmine near the front, surrounded by our relatives that fawn all over her. But as I look at her face, I get goosebumps at the death glare she is sending my way.

Turning back to the table, I see Roman pull out the recently vacated seat, and Daniel storm off somewhere behind us. "That was fun," Roman says with the most emotionless voice I've heard yet. I grin fully at him and love the way his features soften as he looks back at me.

The sound of applause and cheering bring us back to the present, and we quickly stand and welcome the bride and groom. The happy couple waves to everyone as they walk in, making their way to the head table.

The bridal parties' eyes are filled with love as they watch the newlyweds enter, with the exception of one. Jasmine's stare is still pinned on me as she slowly claps her hands together.

I don't know if it's the few sips of wine I've had, or if Roman has just emboldened me lately, but I smile smugly back as I send a wink her way.

Speeches, dinner, games, and the first dance go by in a blur. Julian holds his new bride, who's name I totally remember, close to him as they sway to the music. The slow tune is filled with love and passion, ensuring everyone in the room watches in awe at the two love birds.

We're at the back of the crowd, placing ourselves near the corner so we have a semblance of privacy.

Roman's hands wrapped around my middle as soon as it started, his chest fitting snugly against my back as we sway back and forth.

I feel as his chin rests lightly on top of my head, and I feel nothing but peace in this moment.

“This wedding is beautiful,” Roman whispers. His lips ghosting over the shell of my ear, as I lean farther into him.

“It really is. I would love a wedding like this one day,” I say into the space before us .

I’m pulled closer into Roman as his cheek rests lightly against the top of my head. “I want that one day too, Langley.”

His words register slowly but sit so right with me as I turn in his embrace. I slip my palms up his chest until my hands lock around his neck. The steadying weight of his arms wrapping around my waist brings a smile to my face, and I naturally tilt my mouth up.

I’m met halfway without a second thought, and Roman’s lip are gentle as we melt into each other. Our relationship is so fresh and has so much growth ahead of it, but just the fact that we seem to have to same end goal makes this kiss so much sweeter.

His reluctance is obvious as he slowly pulls away, but we both know this isn’t about us right now.

I’m just happy no one has taken their attention off the happy couple, and I return to leaning back into Roman’s hard chest. His hands move up to my shoulders, wrapping around them and holding my close.

Clapping and cheers erupt once again as the atmosphere changes from romantic to electric. The warm lighting switches to a disco ball in minutes, and everyone floods the floor as the real party starts.

I extend my hand to Roman, knowing it's a long-shot, and that he probably just wants to sit down. But I can't keep the megawatt smile off my face as he enthusiastically takes my hand, switching positions with me as he drags me on the floor.

Dancing fills the time and Carlos and Henry find us after a while.

Car quickly leaves when one of the groomsmen steals him for a dance, but Henry stays by our side and parties his heart out.

A couple dances quickly turns into twenty as the drinks keep flowing, and the alcohol numbing my feet gives me no reason to stop.

Roman's the biggest surprise so far. The man hasn't left my side for a second, as he uses his two left feet and dances in a manner that has me laughing hysterically.

The bride and groom left for their honey-moon over an hour ago, but it's obvious the rest of the room plans to stay until we're kicked out.

I grab Roman's hand as the music crescendos, pulling me into his frame and randomly beginning to salsa right in front of him.

"Langley, what is this," he says filled with laughter.

That joyous expression taking over his face as he tries and fails to match my steps.

The energy between us is natural and it just makes my smile continue to grow.

As I try and think of a new ridiculous dance I can make him do, feedback suddenly erupts from the microphone. Everyone on the floor cringes at the noise and the music comes to a stuttering halt. The drunken group whips their attention to the front, and my eyes immediately widen at what I see.

The drunkest version of Daniel I've ever seen takes the stage, his dress shirt unbuttoned, his hair a tousled mess, and a very distressed Jasmine holding him back.

The room waits silently in shock as Daniel taps the microphone harshly a couple more times and stares out at everyone. "Many of you all know me, already. I'm practically as family as the married lady," he slurs into the mic and stumbles back into Jasmine.

She promptly tries to wrestle the microphone from his hands, but he just holds her to him in a one-armed hug. Successfully pinning her arms to her side as he has trouble focusing on the crowd in front of him.

I turn in shock and I see both my brothers reflecting my emotions.

Carlos' jaw might as well be on the floor, and Henry's wide eyed as he puts both his hands over his mouth.

I'm too scared to look at Roman, fearful he's going to judge me forever dating this train wreck.

But as I turn to my other side, I see the undeniable smirk that he's trying desperately to suppress .

"You cannot be laughing right now," I whisper furiously to him.

He looks down at me, placing his hand on my hip as he steps closer to me. "I'm not laughing, Langley. I'm just thinking of something funny, that's all."

I don't believe him for one second, but echoed words from the stage snap my attention back to the front. "Anyway, I need to say something important. Marriage is all about commitment, about finding that person that makes you happy and holding

onto them tight.

“I’ve met the woman I want to spend the rest of my life with, and I couldn’t love her more if I tried.

I want to take this next step with her, and she wants the same from me.

” Jasmynes stopped struggling now, and lightly steps away from Daniel.

Her face shines with anticipation and the room waits eagerly for what he’s about to say.

As his gaze turns to Jasmine, he quickly looks past her until he finds me in the crowd.
“Rhodes Langley, will you marry me?”

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And here I thought she couldn't get any more beautiful.

Silence envelops the space as everyone seems to process this turn of events. Slowly but surely, every head starts to turn my way and stare at me with confusion. I'm no exception to this as I look around the room like a deer in the headlights.

After a couple more seconds, Jasmine seems to understand that she's not getting engaged and promptly storms off the stage.

Daniel doesn't pay her any mind as he keeps his eyes on me, jumps off the front of the platform, and beelines it to where I am.

The crowd parts before him, and I know it's because this entire family lives for the drama, but I couldn't dread it more.

"Rhodes, I know we've had our differences, baby, but you need to get over this if we're —."

Daniel doesn't manage to get in another word before everything happens at once.

Roman's hand on my hips pushes me behind him, so the only thing I can see is his back.

I watch as the muscles under his dress shirt bunch up as his fist cocks back, and the resulting sound of Roman punching Daniel rings out through the room.

All I can see from my angle is Roman's back, so I quickly lean to the side.

Daniel's sprawled out on the dance floor, blood pouring from both of his nostrils as he groans and rolls around on the ground.

Roman shakes his hand out, paying it no mind as he fully turns around to face me.

Making eye contact with me, he throws up his hands in a gesture of innocence.

"In my defence, I warned him," he says with traces of fear in his words.

I'm still shocked by absolutely everything that's transpired and turn to Roman with absolute bafflement. "How on earth did you warn him even a little bit?" I ask, my voice louder than I meant to have it.

"Well, I said if he bothered you again, I would break his nose. So, I only interfered when you looked bothered," he states this as though he is recalling the weather, and not seeming to see a problem with his words.

"Hell yeah! I've been wanting to do that all year!" Echoes through the room as Carlos stands at the edge of the dance floor, both hands raised in the air with joy .

A piercing whistle quickly follows Carlos' words as Henry stands on the other side of the dance floor. He mirrors Carlos' starfish stance as he points to the rolling figure on the ground. "Get that loser out of here!"

That snaps the crowd out of their trance as murmurs and cheers of agreement break out all over the place.

Two of my uncles start to wrestle a crying Daniel into standing, while some other relatives pat Roman on the shoulder.

It's not long until the music is reconnected, and the entire space is more than happy to get back to the party.

I grab Roman's uninjured hand and motion us towards the other room. The first thing I need to do is apologize to him, and then get some ice on that hand as fast as possible. We make it to the adjacent room, only to find a distressed Jasmine crying on the couch.

Roman lets out a very audible sigh beside me, but I swat at his arm. "Please don't do what I think you're going to do," he groans.

I promptly ignore him as turn to face him. "I'm going to go talk with her, how about you go get some ice for your hand," I say this as more of a statement, and I hope he can see how I need to do this on my own .

There's a wariness in his gaze, but he eventually nods. "You don't owe her anything, Langley. If the conversation isn't constructive, then just leave," he says with all seriousness. Giving my forehead a quick peck before he turns to go inside.

Using the strength Roman's words give me, I walk towards her and sit on the opposite side of the couch. Her snuffle stops immediately, and she sends a wary glance in my direction.

The way the innocent expression on her face drops the second she sees me tells me everything I need to know about how this will go. "What do you want?" She seethes at me, turning away and looking around the room.

"I don't have much to say to you Jasmine, there's no rhyme to your reason after all these years and I'm sick of your shit. But I am curious about one thing," I say this as I face the wall, but my question brings our gazes together. "Was it worth dating that moron just to get back at me?"

A huff of a laugh comes out of her, and she seems to just relax back into the couch. "No," she says under her breath. The comment making both of us chuckle as we look at one another .

I see Roman enter the room again, and I'm grateful he gave us any time alone together.

Turning to my cousin, I don't feel any of the fear or anxiety that I used to, only pity.

"I'm really happy, and I'm not going to let you get between what I have any longer.

You can't take what I have this time, because I'm going to fight for him.

"Jasmine, I wish you the best. I can't say that I'm ever going to be your friend, not with what you've done to me.

But I'm not your enemy. I hope one day you find what you're looking for.

"I don't give her another glance as Roman walks up to my seat, helping me stand as we both make our way out the door.

"I'm very impressed with you, Langley. I mean, I'm always impressed with you, but especially now," he whispers down to me. I can't help but look up at him; his strong features seem to glow under the mood lighting, and I feel so much towards him.

Bringing us to a stop, I find a small alcove to the side and have no hesitation in dragging him in with me. He easily wraps me in his arms, bringing me in close so that we can both fit and look up at each other.

His face immediately turns pensive, and he starts to ramble before I can say a word. "I shouldn't have hit him, I know that. I know you are strong enough to fight your own battles, it's just I held back for so many things he said and –."

My mouth is on his before he even finishes his pointless apology. I'm so incredibly thankful to have someone that sticks up for me, and I plan to tell him exactly how I feel.

“I couldn’t have done it without you, Roman.

I would’ve never had the strength or the courage to say what I mean and stand behind my words.

You’ve helped me in every way, and I’m so thankful for every moment I have with you.

” I meant every word I said, and the sheen that built over his eyes as I spoke only made me fall for him more.

“I’m so lucky, Rhodes,” he whispers between us. His hands lightly brush my bangs out of my face, as he tucks both sides behind my ears. I smile fondly up at him as his hands drop down to my jaw, cradling my face as he looks down at me.

“I’m so lucky to have you in my life. I feel so special that you asked for my help, and I’m absolutely honoured that I could stand by your side through all of this.” His words seem to wrap around my heart and squeeze it tight, the tears welling in my eyes as my feelings for him overwhelm me .

He dips his head in close, those chocolate brown eyes looking at me with the most care in the world. “I love you, Rhodes Langley. I love you more than you’ll ever know.”

I don’t waste a second before cupping his jaw in return, as I put all the emotion I can into my next words. “I love you so much, Roman Huxley, and I’m going to love you for as long as you’ll let me.”

Our mouths meet in the middle as we pour every feeling we have into the kiss. Our promise to protect one another, stand beside each other and love without restraint. I feel it all as I kiss Roman with everything I have, and I just think about how excited I am for our own wedding one day.

- THE END -