







# Snowed in for Christmas

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**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** All I want for Christmas is anyone but him.

Benjamin

I warned my father this snowstorm was coming, but he insisted that I spend Christmas with him, his girlfriend and her insufferable son. Jett is everything I hate, a loud, brash, carefree partyboy who spends more time drinking at our college than studying.

Now I'm trapped with him.

The snowstorm I predicted blows in, and now it's just me, Jett and this big empty house in the mountains of Colorado. Our parents won't be able to reach us for days — if either of us are still alive by then. I swear Jett is doing everything possible to get on my last nerve.

Yet when push comes to shove and Jett needs my help, I race out into the snow to rescue him.

Jett

I might have screwed up.

I pissed off Ben by messing with him, then stormed off into a blizzard in sneakers and a hoodie. Getting frostbite is not my idea of a perfect Christmas.

But getting rescued by a hot guy could be.

It's got to be the hypothermia talking, but when Ben comes out into that snowstorm to save me, then all but carries me into a bathtub, my body reacts like he's not my worst enemy. If our parents get married some day, this could all get really messy really fast — too bad I've never been a person who operates on cold logic, like Ben. I follow my heart. And right now, my heart is telling me Ben is my Christmas miracle.

Snowed in for Christmas is an enemies-to-lovers Christmas MM romance with a disastrous Christmas vacation, total opposites keeping warm together in a blizzard, spicy open-door scenes and, of course, a HEA. Go to [linktr.ee/faraywrites](http://linktr.ee/faraywrites) for CWs.

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:01 pm*

## Chapter One

Benjamin

SLATE GRAY SKIES HANG low over the winding road through Loveland Pass. Snow dusts the mountainsides hugging the highway as I wind my way through the hills. I try not to focus on the watery light, the heavy clouds, the stillness weighing down the sky. I could be wrong. Colorado might not have a massive snowstorm barreling toward it.

But I'm almost certainly right.

I focus on the road ahead. Maybe less snow will fall than I suspect. Surely, the appropriate authorities can see this coming as clearly as I can. I'm just a college biology student. What the hell do I know? Smarter, more important people must know this storm is on the way and have plans in place to mitigate the impacts.

I've been telling myself that for the past week, but my anxiety spikes all the same as I snake through the mountain pass with the clouds pressing down on the roof of my car. Dad refused to hear my objections when I started raising the alarm about the snowstorm rolling into town.

"We aren't canceling our trip for a little snow, Benjamin," he'd said with a sigh.

That sigh carried all the weariness of the months we've spent fighting about this. He and his girlfriend first proposed a Christmas getaway back in summer, shortly after they got together.

That's when this whole "new family" thing got real.

Dad has been dating Charlotte for about six months, and I've mostly managed to block the whole thing out. Mom has been gone a long time. The man has the right to move on. I know that intellectually, but in practical terms, I hate every second of it. Charlotte is nice. She's fine. Her son, on the other hand...

The fighting started immediately. That's when our parents hatched this hare-brained scheme. A Christmas getaway in a cozy resort town a couple hours from Denver. Somewhere with spotty cell phone service, lots of trees and absolutely nothing to do. I might actually enjoy it. I could happily spend a week out in nature simply observing, but he will be there, and that alone shatters any hope of serenity.

I huff out a breath and try to focus on the curvy mountain road. It's only a week. And it's for my dad, who's been taking care of me on his own since I was a teenager. I can do this for him for one little week. I've brought more textbooks than clothing. If nothing else, I can hole myself up in a bedroom and dive into my coursework for next semester.

The pass deposits me into the gentle valleys that lie beyond it. Sparse signs of civilization speckle the roadside, signs for upcoming exits and attractions, promises of food, lodging, gas. Then the road dumps me into the resort town of Stone Valley.

Skiing trails streak down the hillsides like wavy chalk lines drawn by a child. Thick clusters of evergreens claim every space not cleared for skiing, while lifts criss cross like thread trying to knit the valley together. In the center of all of it, nestled between ski slopes, lies the town itself, a relatively modest cluster of buildings strung together by narrow roads with frustratingly slow speed limits.

I slow to a crawl as I head down the main drag through town. A quaint town center sits to either side, the buildings faced with brick and stone to mimic a genuine

mountain village. The McDonald's sign written in flowing script lessens the effect somewhat, but none of the pedestrians pacing the cobbled streets in their heavy winter jackets and beanies seem to mind.

I'm grateful to leave the fake cheer of the artificial village behind. Everything about it screams "tourist trap," from the McDonald's sign in faux Bavarian script to the false facings of every building. If there's one thing I should thank Dad for it, it's choosing a rental that lies a few miles outside of the town center. The speed limit rises to something more normal as I leave the resort's center behind and pass onto side streets for valley residents. I turn onto a residential street, then wind my way to a house at the end of the block.

The driveway lies empty. A kernel of relief wriggles into my chest. If all else fails, at least I'll have first pick of the bedrooms. There should be three. Obviously, I'll leave the primary for Dad and his girlfriend, but I'm definitely taking the better of the two remaining rooms. No way am I leaving it for him .

I park, but my slightly elevated mood evaporates the second I climb out of the car. The air is so brittle every breath escapes my lips in a puff. Silence and stillness thicken the atmosphere. I can taste the impending snow on every crisp breath.

The snow is definitely coming. And it's definitely going to be bad.

I dig out my phone and text Dad, asking him whether he's looked at the weather report yet. He won't be able to head over until after work tonight, so he'll be getting in later. I figured I would come early to stake out my space and spare myself whatever misery I can.

Yes, I've seen the weather report, Dad writes back, and I can almost hear the sigh in his message. They're still saying only a few inches. Relax, Benjamin. The trip is happening. Are you there yet?

Yes, just arrived.

Is Jett there?

I wrinkle my nose at the sight of his name. No, just me.

Go check out the house. Try to relax. We'll be there tonight. There should be some beautiful views from the second story.

I don't reply, just stuff my phone in my pocket and trudge to the back doors to retrieve my duffel bag, backpack and paper shopping bags. My textbooks weigh down the backpack until the straps dig into my shoulders, but I don't mind the momentary discomfort. These books are going to save my sanity while I'm stuck here.

Finally, I trudge to the door. The rental instructions include a code, and I punch it in and wait for the lock to click. That little noise shouldn't be so ominous, but this isn't some cute rental for the week. This is a hell rental where me, my father, his girlfriend and her asshole son will be stuck in close quarters for seven agonizing days.

I open the door and glimpse my demise.

It's actually pretty nice. The door opens to a space with huge glass doors along the back wall that afford a stunning view of the hillsides and trees nestled around us. A couch and easy chairs frame a coffee table that looks like it was carved directly out of one of those big trees on the slopes. A huge stone fireplace claims one wall, with brick that disappears upward. As I kick off my shoes and walk deeper into the house, I spot the kitchen on the other side, a huge space with a massive island that has stools tucked around it. There's also a proper dining table, complete with moose-themed salt and pepper shakers. The kitchen has enough appliances to supply a damn restaurant, and as I stock the refrigerator with the food I brought from home, I discover more

space than I could possibly ever use. Plus, the cupboards offer a few amenities of their own: Some tea, some coffee, some condiments. If I wasn't staying here in such wretched circumstances, I might really like this place.

The kitchen and living room occupy the back of the house. I have to climb a flight of stairs to reach a landing that overlooks those spaces and leads to the bedrooms. The primary bedroom lies at one end of the landing, and I don't bother messing with that. At the other end sits two smaller bedrooms. I check them out. One has bunk beds, like for little kids. The other has a queen bed, a desk and a reading chair beside a window overlooking the driveway and neighborhood. Yup, that's the one. Jett can contend with the bunk beds. I'm sure he'll complain, but that is hardly my problem. I arrived first, so I get to choose a bedroom first.

I dump my bags on the bed and close the door behind me when I leave to mark the room occupied. I'm sure it won't stop Jett, but it's the best I can do. I seriously don't like that snow smell in the air, and I run out to the nearest convenience store to pick up more food supplies just in case. Dad said not to worry about stuff like groceries, but I'm literally studying science at my university. I can't squash my instinct to get ahead of the storm looming on the horizon. The snowstorm, at least.

The driveway is still empty when I return. I breathe a sigh of relief and hurry inside to store my new groceries. At least I'm still alone. I have a little more time to enjoy the peace before everything goes sideways.

No, I need to do this for Dad. He's happy with Charlotte. They go on little trips all the time. They have similar interests. They were friends for a long time before any of this happened. I understand why they want to get all of us together before the relationship escalates even more. I just need to get through this one Christmas and then things will get better. Next year, I'll graduate with my biology degree, and then I can go off and do the things I really care about and leave all this behind.

I finish with the groceries and head back up to the bedroom I claimed, eager to get to my textbooks. The thought of my final semester of being an undergraduate sends a tingle of excitement through my body. I've known since I was a kid that I loved nature, loved animals, loved all things natural. I might not look it with my glasses and overall nerdy appearance, but I've always yearned for nothing more than a day out alone in the forest. As I aged and learned more about the state of the world, I burned with the desire to protect all those natural spaces I love so much. I don't want to merely understand the migration patterns of different birds; I want to protect those birds, protect their nesting sites, protect their food sources along their migration paths. As those things come under more and more severe threats, it's going to take ever more innovative solutions to preserve them.

I mean to be the person inventing those solutions.

In minutes, textbooks lie scattered across the desk in my bedroom. I open my laptop and start typing up notes on the first chapter of a textbook about deforestation in the Amazon. Sure, I don't have class for several more weeks, but there's no time to waste if we're going to save these things. It can't hurt to get ahead on this stuff.

I'm so distracted that I don't notice the car pulling up into the driveway until the beep of the alarm startles me upright. I blink, rubbing at my eyes beneath my glasses, then jump to my feet as the pieces fall into place. Someone is here, and it can't be Dad and Charlotte. It has to be him.

Jett Dunn.

I reach the window in time to see him climbing out of his beat up car. How that thing clambered over the pass, I can only guess.

Jett scowls the moment he exits the car, looking around like the trees themselves offended him. We would look alike, perhaps like actual, biological brothers, if we

didn't carry ourselves completely differently. My amber eyes sit behind glasses; his narrow at the world around him. My brown hair is neat and clipped; his is shaggy and brushes his shoulders. I keep my face smooth, but I've never seen him without a shadow of dark stubble hugging his cheeks.

We could not be more simultaneously alike and utterly different.

As he starts toward the front door with a bag slung across his chest, my heart drops into my feet.

So begins the worst Christmas ever.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:01 pm*

### Chapter Two

Jett

CLEAN MOUNTAIN AIR. Birds tittering in the trees. The gurgling of a distant stream.

God, this place sucks.

I scowl as I take in the quaint nature crowding in around me. I yank my bag out of the backseat of my car and throw it over my chest before the scent of all that green can nauseate me. What do people do around here? There's nothing but trees for miles around. I bet they hike or something horrifically mountain-y like that. How they don't all go insane is beyond me. Maybe they do. Maybe no one but hill people dare live in a place this dedicated to being boring.

I shake my head and start for the door before I can think too hard about it. There's another car in the driveway, which means he is already here. I'm sure he rushed in to claim the best bedroom in the house. I'm tempted to beat down the scrawny nerd and simply claim it for myself, but if Mom shows up and finds Benjamin with a black eye I'll be in endless shit. I promised her I'd be on my best behavior for this one week.

Of course, my "best behavior" is another man's bender. Everything is relative, after all. Even dear, old science nerd future bro would have to agree with that.

I enter the house and wrinkle my nose all over again. It smells like pine needles and wood. Jesus, is there nowhere I can escape this shit?

I rummage around in the kitchen and find it stocked. I grab an apple from the fridge and munch on it as I head upstairs to check out the bedroom situation.

One door stands closed. Of course. I scoff at it, then head to the other bedroom.

“Bunk beds?” I shout, not caring if the dickhead in the other bedroom hears me or not. “You have got to be kidding.”

I dump my bag on the floor and storm to the other bedroom, nearly crushing the apple in my hand into pulp. I throw open the door without knocking to find Benny bent over a desk with a bunch of textbooks scattered around him.

“Hey, asshole, what the hell?” I say.

He regards me mildly, his amber eyes flat behind his glasses. “Excuse you.”

“No, excuse you, dickhead. Why the hell am I stuck with bunk beds while you get all this?”

I wave at the bedroom, which includes a freaking reading chair by the window, not to mention a full-sized bed.

“I arrived first,” Benjamin says. “I chose a bedroom first.”

He shrugs as though that settles the matter, but that’s where he’s very, very wrong. I clutch the apple harder, my painted black nails digging into the soft flesh.

“You’re smaller,” I say. “Why should you get the bigger bed?”

“We are nearly the same size. I’m not going to take a smaller bed because of an inch or two of height.”

“Um, first of all, it’s at least three inches, and second, you weigh, what, a hundred pounds soaking wet? You don’t need all that bed.”

He rises from the desk, but it only serves to prove my point. In his mild sweater and jeans, the guy looks like he could blow over in a breeze. He crosses his arms over his chest.

“I’m sure I spend more time outside engaged in physical activity than you,” he says. “You shouldn’t get a better bed just because you can’t curb your Cheetos addiction.”

I slap my chest. “This is pure muscle, I’ll have you know.”

Okay, that might not be entirely true, but I’m definitely more built than Benjamin. I mean, come on. The guy was studying when I barged in here. We don’t even have classes and he was studying . Not that that’s any different from how he’s always been. We first crossed paths because we go to the same college back in Denver. We instantly disliked each other, but fate conspired to place us in the same block of freshmen dorms. Every time I tried to be a normal college kid having a normal fun time with my youth, Benjamin called God damn campus security on me. The number of violations I racked up because of his meddling nearly got me expelled. Now, Mom is saying if I can’t get along with the guy for the next week, she’ll stop helping me pay for school.

And here he is not even giving me a freaking decent bedroom.

“I am not sleeping on a bunk bed for a week,” I snarl.

Benjamin shrugs his perfect little straight-A shoulders. “There may be a pull-out bed in the couch.”

I clench my teeth, threatening to grind them into powder as rage boils up inside me.

Suddenly, I'm storming toward him without even meaning to. For the first time, Benjamin's cool facade cracks, a flicker of fear widening his eyes as he backs away from me. He hits the window beside the cozy reading chair and the glass halts his retreat.

I raise my hand on instinct, and Benjamin's fear tightens into something different. He isn't looking at my enraged face anymore. His eyes flicker to my hand and the apple I'm attempting to either crush into paste or use as a blunt instrument.

"Where did you get that?" he asks, suspicion thick in his voice.

"The fridge. What the hell do you care?"

"Idiot," he says, shoving me. I'm surprised enough to stumble back a step. "I just bought those groceries and you're wasting them."

"I'm not wasting anything. I'm eating it."

"Eating it, or bludgeoning me over the head with it?"

"Either way, not a waste."

Ben scrunches up his face in anger, which is kinda cute in a way. I mean, what is this little nerd going to do to me? Recite tree facts until I'm so bored I beg for death?

But then he lunges for the apple in my hand. Startled, I step back, but I'm off-balance. Benjamin stomps toward me, grabbing my wrist and twisting. I yank in response, trying to break free, but he holds fast, surprisingly strong. I hit a wall, and Benjamin pulls my arm up and pins it above my head. He's closer than he was before, his face bright with anger. His eyes are liquid with rage, warm as honey as he glares furiously at me.

I should not find that hot. I don't find that hot. My body is just confused because I'm trapped in the middle of nowhere with my Mom's boyfriend's uptight jerk of a kid. There is nothing hot about how close he is to me. There's nothing hot about him pinning me against a wall. This guy is the antithesis of hot and sexy. When he enters a room, fun runs screaming in the opposite direction. He's the ultimate narc, the consummate buzzkill. This abrupt show of strength and aggression is definitely not going right to my dick.

"Give it back," Benjamin snarls.

"One, I already ate part of it," I say, "and two, it's just an apple. Chill."

"If we get trapped here—"

"We aren't getting trapped here," I say. "And even if we do, do you really think our lives will hang on a single apple?"

"We could find ourselves with limited food supplies."

I roll my eyes. "You are so freaking paranoid. It's not like we can't go into town if we need to."

"You aren't listening. No one is listening."

His frustration boils over. With a growl, he shoves me against the wall before releasing me. Ben paces his spacious bedroom, hands on his hips as he stomps to the bed and then back to me.

"Look," he says, "we're stuck together for the next week. It's going to be miserable, but it'll be a lot less miserable if we call a truce."

“A truce?”

“That’s right. A truce. Right here and now. Don’t mess with my stuff. I won’t mess with yours. Stay out of my way, I stay out of yours. Simple.”

“I notice you get to keep the good bedroom in this truce,” I remark.

He huffs a sigh. “I’m barely going to leave it. I’m sure you’ll find ways to entertain yourself elsewhere.” At my scowl, he continues. “But I’ll owe you a meal or something.”

“A meal?”

“A drink. Whatever you want. We’ll even the score. Okay?”

I shouldn’t take the deal. I shouldn’t capitulate to this joy killer. Maybe my brain is still scrambled from that moment against the wall, but all I really want right now is to get out of here.

“Fine,” I say, but I take a huge bite of the apple to piss him off as I do.

I catch a satisfying glimpse of his perpetual scowl as I saunter out of the room.

I return to my depressing bunk bed room. It’s not that bad, I guess. Besides the beds, there’s an empty bureau in one corner. I put my duffel on top of it. A window lets in the weak sunlight, but I throw the heavy blinds closed and flop onto the bottom bunk with my phone and my half-eaten apple. Now that Benjamin is out of view, the fruit isn’t as exciting anymore, so I let it drop to the carpeted floor and resolve to worry about it later. Then I begin searching.

There must be something in this stupid resort town. Anything. Sure, people come

here for skiing, but they must like to drink and party afterward. But as I search, I come up frustratingly empty. There are bars, but they look like the type of places middle-aged couples go to have a “night out” during their fancy, expensive vacations. Maybe Mom and Paul will have fun there, but I sure as shit won’t.

I groan. This place can’t be as dull as I fear. No place can be this dull. It’s simply not possible.

I text Ryan, my friend and roommate back on campus.

Hey, man, have you ever been to Stone Valley?

The ski resort? he responds.

Yeah, I’m stuck here for a whole week. Is there anything to do around here?

lol probably not. It’s a place where old people go skiing.

There’s gotta be a club or something. I’ve been sneaking into clubs since I was eighteen (thank you, fake IDs). I can’t remember the last time I went an entire week without some kind of outing.

Bro, you’re in the boonies fr. There’s no clubs. You better put on your hiking boots.

My heart sinks. It’s one thing to know intellectually that I’ll be stuck in the woods for a week. It’s another thing to face the hard, cold, boring reality. I’m really trapped here with nothing to do. No bars. No clubs. No parties. My friends are back in Denver. The only people I’m likely to encounter for the next week are my mom, her boyfriend and the worst potential future step-brother on the freaking planet. I’ll be not only bored and sober, but celibate.

“Oh my God, I’m actually going to die,” I say to the wooden frame of the bunk bed over my head.

This can’t be real. It must be a nightmare. My mom and her dumb boyfriend are stranding me in hell so we can pretend at being a family. I don’t care if they go through with getting married some day. This will never be my family. Ben will never be my family.

The second I can get out of here and forget all about him, I’m speeding way and not looking back.

I search some more, determined to wriggle my way out of this. There must be a way back across that pass sooner rather than later. I simply have to find it.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:01 pm*

### Chapter Three

Benjamin

THE STORM BLOWS IN THAT evening. I stand at the large glass doors at the back of the house, watching as sheets of flurries obscure the hills outside the window. When I arrived this afternoon, I could see to the ski slopes. Now, I can hardly make out the end of the yard through the swirl of flakes the sky dumps on us.

“This looks really bad,” I say.

“Relax, Benjamin,” my father says on the other end of the phone. “It’s going to be fine.”

“Is it snowing in Denver? How heavy is it? Is the pass still open?”

“Slow down,” Dad says. “We’re keeping an eye on it. It’s not bad over here.”

“Well, it’s bad here and you were supposed to have left home by now.”

“We got a little delayed.”

A little delayed. It’s two hours past when Dad and Charlotte should have been on the road. Now, they can’t leave. Neither of them own a vehicle that can plow through the blizzard inundating the pass.

Which is exactly what I warned them would happen.

“Benjamin, calm down,” Dad says. “We’re playing it safe because it’s dark out, but we’ll check things out in the morning and head over as soon as we can. It’ll be fine in the morning. You said you got groceries, right?”

“Yeah, but...”

But Jett definitely didn’t. The only food we have is what I supplied. I’m sure Jett didn’t prepare at all for this trip, simply waltzed in and counted on things working out for him. That’s how he lives his entire life. He skates by counting on the universe clicking into place for him, not a care in the world, not a thought for anyone around him. I’ve watched his reckless actions interfere with other students’ attempts to study. A party on a Tuesday night is no issue if you don’t give a damn about waking up the rest of the dorm.

Thoughtless, inconsiderate idiot.

And now I’m stuck with him for the night.

I don’t realize I sigh into the phone until Dad speaks again.

“Listen, turn up the heat, put on a movie and we’ll see you tomorrow,” Dad says. “We’ll head over first thing in the morning, I promise.”

“I don’t even want to be here,” I say. “What if we’re stuck? What if the pass closes?”

“There will be a way around. If we have to go through a different pass, we’ll do it, even if it takes hours longer. It’s going to be okay.”

I hear an agitated voice behind my father, perhaps Charlotte. She sounds even less happy than I do.

“I know,” Dad says, voice tight. He must be speaking to Charlotte but ... it doesn’t sound very happy. Whatever. Not my problem. I have a blizzard to survive.

“Fine,” I sigh into the phone.

I don’t actually believe things are fine, but I let myself buy it for moment. I wish my dad goodnight and get off the phone.

Outside, white blankets the yard. It lines the evergreens, weighing down their branches. Even if the storm is worse here, if it’s hitting Loveland Pass at all, I seriously doubt Dad is getting through. And I’m not counting on the other passes faring much better. They’ll shut down the roads if the snow makes them unsafe, and with nearly a foot of the shit dropping already, those winding mountain passes are certainly going to be unsafe.

I stuff my phone in my pocket and turn away from the glass doors and windows. Putting the snow to my back does little to ease my worries, however. I drag myself to the kitchen and flick on the light, but even as I pull ingredients out of the refrigerator, my mind is calculating how much snow is likely to fall and how long it could block up the passes. A day? A week? Longer? I shudder to imagine myself stuck here with Jett for days or weeks. Surely it won’t come to that.

Please, God, don’t let it come to that.

The convenience store I pilfered this afternoon didn’t have a great selection, so I end up laying out a packet of instant noodles and whatever vegetables seem remotely edible. There is a bell pepper without too many blemishes and an onion that seems safe. They aren’t much, but they’ll add something to the pre-packaged noodles and flavor packet, at least.

I’m boiling water when footsteps creak down the stairs. My shoulders go stiff, but I

don't turn away from the stove, staring into the bubbling pot instead of turning to regard Jett. A stool scrapes the linoleum as he pulls it out and apparently seats himself at the kitchen island.

"Making dinner? How sweet," he says.

"It isn't for you," I drawl.

"Oh, come on, don't be a dick. What else am I going to eat?"

"Whatever you brought with you to eat."

Jett scoffs. "As much as I'd love for whiskey to be a viable meal, sadly it is not."

I whip around at last. "You brought booze but not food?"

Jett shrugs. "Yeah? So?"

"So what possible use is booze if you have nothing to eat?"

"Um, okay, first of all, I didn't think I'd be stuck here with you . Second, I figured Mom would bring food or we'd go out or something."

I groan and rub my forehead. Did not a single person but me even glance at the weather reports before driving into the fucking mountains ?

"So long story short, I have nothing to eat," Jett says. "Unless my dear future step-brother cuts me in on ... whatever that is."

He waves vaguely at the stove. I turn back toward it, but the water is still heating up, so all I can do is stare down at the bubbles forming in the bottom of the pot.

“We are not step-brothers and may never be,” I grumble. “Our parents are just dating. There’s no relation. At all.” Even I know it’s a pedantic complaint, but I’ll take whatever distance I can get from this man.

“Details,” Jett says. “We both know it’s a done deal.”

I can’t disagree, and that is what hurts the most. Despite everything, Dad is probably going to marry Charlotte eventually and bind my life to Jett’s. The only silver lining is that I probably have time to graduate before he proposes, and that means I can move to a different state, a different country perhaps, and start my own life far, far away from Jett, whatever our familial relation eventually becomes.

Distracted by my thoughts, I must have missed Jett standing up. Suddenly, his arm is around my shoulders. I flinch from the touch, then flinch even harder from how close his voice is to my ear when he speaks.

“Come on, Benny,” he whines. “Share your noodles or whatever this is. I’ll pay you back. Probably.”

I should have a retort, but my brain is whirling from his proximity. He’s never touched me before, not for any reason, and suddenly he’s so close his chest is pressing against my arm. And it’s solid ... far more solid than I might have guessed. Was he telling the truth about his bulk coming from more than Cheetos? Wait, no, who cares? That doesn’t matter. All that matters is that this annoying mooch is going to steal my dinner, a dinner I both paid for and prepared.

I go to shove him off, but he holds fast. Again, I meet with the surprising revelation of his solidity, and my brain jumps to the obvious conclusion without my bidding. The kitchen turns stifling, and I dare not look at anything but the pot before me.

“Fine,” I grit out.

“Wait, really?” he says.

“Yes. Fine. Whatever. Just get off me.”

This time, I manage to move him when I set my hands on his (ridiculously firm) chest and push. He stumbles away a couple steps, giving me space to breathe, a function I am performing with far too much vigor. I turn away, stomping to the cupboard and retrieving a second packet of instant noodles. At least they’re plentiful, so cooking two instead of one won’t deplete our stores in any significant way if we’re stuck here.

A shiver runs up my spine at the thought that this could be the first night of many that play out this way. I try to push the thought aside as I return to the stove.

“Instant noodles?” Jett says, leaning over my shoulder to view the packet. He gets far too close to me to read the packaging.

“Do you have a problem with that?” I say through gritted teeth.

“Only that it sort of sucks. This is really all you’ve got?”

At last, a comforting swell of rage washes away whatever suffused my brain when I touched his chest.

“You’re really going to complain about food that I bought and that I’m preparing? Food you aren’t entitled to, by the way?” I snap.

Jett rolls his eyes and strolls away. “Whatever. I’m ordering a pizza.”

I let out a breath. Great. One more package of instant noodles added back to the emergency supplies. Except mere minutes later, Jett issues a wail of despair and comes running back into the kitchen.

“They’re all closed,” he says.

“What are you on about now?”

“Every single restaurant in town,” Jett says. “They’re all closed. What the hell?”

I wave at the large doors and windows in the living room. “Yes, well, that should not come as a surprise.”

“Can’t they plow the streets or something?”

“Not the moment the snow starts falling. I imagine everyone here saw the storm coming and closed up early so they could get home before the roads turned bad.”

The fact that the locals shut things down well before the snow even accumulated twists my stomach into knots. It’s a bad portent that the people living and working here didn’t bother waiting until morning to close the town. This is definitely going to get worse.

“So ... about those instant noodles,” Jett says.

I sigh, resigned. “Yes, fine, just stop bothering me while I cook.”

Jett skips up to me, swiftly pecking me on the cheek before I have time to react. I’m still blinking and recovering from my shock as he bounds off into the living room. “You’re the best, future step-bro,” he calls over his shoulder as he goes.

I remain motionless at the stove, watching the water boil, feeling the heat lingering on my cheek from where his lips touched me. This night produced way more physical contact with Jett than I’ve ever experienced before, and it’s sending me into a tailspin. Maybe if I was more ... practiced it wouldn’t be so confusing. Yeah, that

must be it. Between being a virgin and stressing out over the snowstorm, I'm in no fit state to deal with a sudden deluge of physicality. In the end, though, it's just Jett being Jett. He doesn't mean any of it. His proclivities are no secret on campus. Girls, guys, everyone ends up in that dorm room of his, sometimes multiple at a time, and the sounds that echo down the halls leave little doubt about what's happening.

My face heats at the memory. The water begins to boil, and I dump in the noodles, trying to concern myself with stirring and not with whatever Jett gets up to in his dorm room. It shouldn't be my problem if people agree to sleep with the most annoying person I've ever met. He's probably just as selfish in bed as he is in every other aspect of his life.

In fact, he is, at this very moment, blasting something loud and annoying on the television, something that grates on my nerves as I spend my time and my money making sure we don't starve during this damn snowstorm. If only any of them had listened to me, maybe I wouldn't be stuck in a cabin with Jett. Maybe my Christmas holiday wouldn't be such a disastrous nightmare.

I glance out the back windows as the noodles cook and watch the snow fall like a thick, white blanket. It already sits piled up against the glass, but perhaps it'll stop soon. Perhaps by morning things won't look so bleak. Perhaps I'm not trapped here like I fear...

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:01 pm*

### Chapter Four

Jett

A SHRIEK JERKS ME out of a pleasant dream about those two sorority girls who live at the other end of the dorm.

“No,” Benjamin moans. “No, no, no, no, no.”

I groan and roll over, holding a pillow over my head to try to block out his complaining. I must doze because the next time I wake up, sunlight turns the navy curtains covering the windows a pale shade of sea blue. Silence hangs in the air, a heavy, complete silence. This isn’t just the quiet of an empty house. It’s a bigger silence, a silence that drapes itself over the whole world like a hand muffling it.

Some instinct drags me out of the lower bunk and to the window. I peel the curtains back with a single finger, squinting at the light that reflects into my eyes.

“Shit.”

Everything is white. Perfectly, brilliantly, eye-scorchingly white. It isn’t that the sun is shining all that brightly. It’s more that every drop of light is bouncing off a blanket of white so thick and complete it covers every single surface. I can barely discern my car from Ben’s in the driveway. Snow sits heavy on every roof and covers the street from end to end. There was a bigger road at the end of the block, if I remember right, but I can’t even see it through the snow. Everything is one uniform sheet. It’s gotta be multiple feet deep. And there isn’t a plow in sight.

“Shit. Shit. Shit.”

Benny the nerd was right. I remember him complaining about a storm or something in the week before we were all supposed to drive out here. Mom and Paul said it was nothing to worry about, but Ben kept insisting.

I really wish he was less smart.

No footsteps break up the flat, uniform landscape. No cars attempt the roads, not even a truck. The town of Stone Valley has completely shut down.

“Well, that explains why they wouldn’t deliver last night,” I say.

I close the curtains and pull on my warmest sweatpants, the ones with the fuzzy lining. I pile on a T-shirt and sweater as well before sitting on the edge of the bed and wondering what the hell I’m going to do. If the sun’s out, the snow will melt, right? So maybe I just have to survive a boring morning stuck in this house with Ben before I can get out of here. Surely, Mom couldn’t be mad at me for driving home when conditions are this bad. It’s the smart thing to do. What if more snow arrived? We wouldn’t want to be here if it got worse. Then we might really get stuck, and I think I’d go insane being trapped here with Ben for more than an afternoon. He’s fun to mess with and all, but I have my real life to get back to, a life that includes the girls down the hall, a bottle of whiskey and kicking Ryan out of the room for the night.

In fact, I should get started on that right away.

I scroll through social media, liking photos and videos, sending the right DMs to the right people, planting the seeds of my future adventures. I’ve heard that freshman on the tennis team is a total closet case, and those types are always fun to mess with. They’re always so desperate and needy, so eager to please. I can picture the freshman dropping to his knees in my dorm room, begging me to let him suck my cock,

plucking off his glasses so he can—

Wait. No. He doesn't have glasses. Where the hell did I get glasses from?

A pair of amber eyes flashes in my memory, amber eyes obscured by glasses.

Oh, hell no. Look, I might be in dire straits with this whole boring-resort-town thing, but I will never be so desperate that I start fantasizing about Ben of all people. I don't even know if he's a closet case or just ... asexual or something. I've never known him to show interest in anyone or anything but his textbooks. Is he gay? Straight? Ace? He's never shown even a flicker of desire for another human being. Maybe he's one of those people who's only attracted to inanimate objects. Maybe he jerks off into his textbooks, and that's why he always keeps them with him.

I want to laugh, but before I can, an image barrels into my brain of Ben touching himself, tilting his head back in pleasure, moaning as he spills over his hand. Blood rushes toward my cock before I can stop it. I groan, flopping back in the bed and reaching for myself, but I refuse to think about Ben. Absolutely no way. I focus on the girls from my dream. The closeted freshman. Yeah, that's the stuff. I stroke myself to the sight of their eager, pretty faces, and push glasses and amber eyes liquid with rage as far out of my brain as I can.

It's an uninspiring wank, in all honesty, but it gets the job done. I slink to the bathroom, clean myself up, brush my teeth. By the time I scurry back to the bedroom, I feel more like myself. No more weird thoughts about my insufferable not-step-brother.

I try to go back to scrolling my phone, but eventually the boredom of seeing the same sponsored posts over and over leaves me restless. I drag myself to my feet and slouch out of my stupid, small bedroom. I can hear Benjamin talking to someone as I descend the stairs, but don't bother eavesdropping. It's not like that guy could be

talking to someone fun or interesting. He probably called the National Weather Service to talk about snowfall numbers or some nerd shit like that. Is that a thing you can do? It doesn't matter. Ben would do it either way.

The smell of fresh coffee lures me into the kitchen. A pot sits in a coffee maker, steam hissing as the hot water drips through the coffee filter. I breathe deeply, letting the warm, fresh scent dispel the haze of sleep and fantasy clinging to my brain like cobwebs. When the coffee finishes, I pour it into the cup sitting beside the machine, not pausing to question why someone who hates me would brew coffee for me and leave a mug out for my use. Maybe he's feeling brotherly today. How sweet.

I search the fridge for coffee creamer but find only milk. Of course. It'll have to be good enough. I dump in a healthy pour, then stir in some sugar as well. When I sit at the kitchen island with my mug, Benjamin is still at the sliding glass doors in the living room, tugging at his short hair as he talks on the phone. I sit with my back to the kitchen, watching him as his frustration mounts.

"But Dad—" he says before his father apparently cuts him off. After a few moments of silence, he heaves a sigh. "Yeah, I know. I know. I'm just saying—"

As far as entertainment goes, this is pretty weak stuff, but it's the best I've got given the circumstances. I'd turn on the TV and find something to watch, but Benjamin stands so stiffly I think he'd actually chuck his phone at me for that. Instead, I sip on the coffee and watch him pace back and forth in front of the door.

"I said this could happen," Benjamin says. "I warned you. I wish you'd just listened. Now we're—"

Benjamin clamps his mouth shut as his father retorts loudly enough that I can hear a faint murmur from where I sit. Benjamin is facing me, but his eyes look right through me. He's staring into an abyss, his mouth so tight and taut it's little more than a thin

white slash.

“Fine,” he says, teeth gritted.

“Yes,” he adds after a moment. “Yes, it’s fine. I went to the store yesterday.” Another pause. “I’m not sure, but there must be something around. I’ll search the house today.” Pause. “Okay, fine. Yes. Fine. I understand. I love you too. Bye.”

He lets out a long, aggrieved sigh as he hangs up. For a moment, Ben stands there at the glass door, gazing out at the snow piled up against it and sweeping out as far as he can see. The rebounding sunlight limns him in ethereal white, casting him in an almost heavenly glow. He’s like an angel descended to Earth, glowing white as he surveys all of humanity — and apparently finds us lacking.

When he tears his eyes away from the snow, he’s scowling. The ethereal effect fades when his eyes settle on me, hard and cold. I try not to think about his glasses and the way they popped onto that freshman’s imagined face before, but my throat feels tight when Ben stalks over to the kitchen island and sits across from me on a stool. Without a word, he takes the coffee cup from me and downs a swig, then places the mug between us.

My stomach drops into my feet. He isn’t talking. He isn’t yelling at me for stealing his coffee. He isn’t telling me to fuck off. He’s just ... just sitting there, staring down at the faux granite countertop, his arms folded and head hanging. Normally, I’d revel in his pain, but this is downright creepy.

“Hey, man,” I say softly, “you okay?”

He drags his eyes up, glowering at me like he forgot I was here. “No, are you?”

Cool. That’s not ominous at all. I try to lighten the mood.

“It’s not so bad,” I lie. “I’ve got my cozy sweatpants, a fresh cup of coffee and my favorite future step-brother all right here.”

He winces, his scowl settling deeper into his face. “We aren’t...”

But he doesn’t even make it all the way through his usual complaint. Instead, he cuts himself off with a sigh and reaches for the coffee, taking a deeper drink this time.

“You put too much sugar in it,” he grouses.

Weirdly, I don’t have the heart to fight with him about it. The quips die on my tongue before I can voice them. This seriously does not feel right.

“Are you ... okay?” I say.

Ben is still for a moment before he looks up at me, glaring from under dark eyebrows. “No,” he says. “I am not.” He waves an irritated hand at the back windows. “I told them this would happen, but no one listened to me, and now we’re stuck here for the next week, and I don’t know where the flashlights are or if this house even has flashlights, to say nothing of our food supplies.”

“Wait, back up. We’re stuck here ?”

“Yes,” Benjamin says flatly.

“But ... what about our parents? What about Christmas?”

Ben shakes his head. “The pass is completely shut down. There’s no way through. No one is entering or leaving Stone Valley until the snow melts, and at this time of year, with this kind of accumulation, that isn’t happening for several days at best.”

I blink and blink as his words settle in. Stuck here. For days. No way in, no way out. Just me and Ben in this God damn cabin in the middle of nowhere.

“Dad says he’ll head over as soon as he can, but we should act like we have to survive the next week with nothing but what’s in this house already,” Ben says.

He starts droning about logistics, but all I hear is static. It’s a few feet of snow. How can we be trapped here? How can this be happening? I was supposed to be here for a couple days before escaping back to my friends, my life.

The screaming that woke me this morning suddenly makes perfect sense.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:01 pm*

### Chapter Five

#### Benjamin

I SHUT THE REFRIGERATOR and turn to my laptop sitting on the kitchen island. I place a “four” in the column beside “apples” and a “one, already open” in the column beside milk. Then I sigh.

The snow hasn’t let up all day. The pass is getting worse instead of better, every hour dumping even more snow on it and shutting it down for longer. I’m trying not to run the numbers in my head, but it’s hard when even my social media timelines are full of people wondering how much of this shit is going to fall. They’re calling it a “White Christmas,” and Christmas isn’t for several more days. Which means everyone expects this snow to hang around for a while.

Exactly like I said it would.

I try to push that from my mind, but I can only ignore so much before one of the dire thoughts buzzing around my head like an insect lands in my ear. All of this was so eminently predictable, and yet here I am trapped in Stone Valley.

With Jett.

I would not say he’s taking the news well. After stealing my coffee, he drifted back upstairs like a sleep walker trudging through a nightmare. I’ve heard him on his phone a couple times, but otherwise, he’s vanished behind his closed door. I’ve never known him to be so quiet and peaceful. I suppose if there’s been any positive

outcome to this, it's been taming Jett. At least for now.

I scan my spreadsheet. I've cataloged the refrigerator, so I turn to the pantry next. Jett and I are going to have to survive off my groceries for at least a few days, if not the entire week. That could mean rationing them. I didn't make my purchases with this scenario in mind, though perhaps I should have. What else could have resulted from my correct prediction about the snowstorm? And obviously Jett wasn't going to prepare whatsoever. I should have known we'd be living off my instant noodles and chips for the next week.

I set to work, cataloging the unopened bag of Doritos and stack of instant noodles. Thank God they come in such huge packages. I didn't intend to buy so many, but now I'm grateful the convenience store only sold them in bundles of twelve. We've used two, so we've got ten left, but that's pretty good if we each only have one per day. Whenever the snow stops falling, Stone Valley may begin plowing. A ski town like this should be used to snowfall, so we might only need to last a couple days before we can walk into town or something. It won't be an easy walk. Likely, we'll be trudging through feet of snow for several miles, and I have no idea if Jett brought any true cold-weather gear. Even I'm a little underprepared in that arena, though I do have snow boots and a heavy winter jacket. Hopefully, that's good enough to get me to a store. Eventually.

I return to my spreadsheet and note the chips and instant noodles. Then I go back to the pantry, rooting around for anything I might have missed. Jett must have brought something with him, perhaps a favorite snack he couldn't bear to be without. Any calories count right now.

...Except maybe those calories.

My heart races when I find a reusable shopping bag nestled under the shelves in the back corner of the pantry, but it clinks when I drag it closer. Instead of food, I find

several bottles of liquor: Whiskey, vodka, even a fancy bottle of tequila with a lime resting beside it.

My thousandth sigh of the day blows past my lips. Of course this is all he brought. He did say as much just yesterday. I didn't really believe he'd try to get through this by keeping himself in a drunken stupor the whole time, though. We can't even cook with this stuff. It's completely worthless.

I trudge back to the kitchen island and jot it all down anyway. My supply list will be worthless if I don't record everything, even things that won't help us.

Before I can return to my task, the crinkle of a bag opening jerks me away from my spreadsheet. I whirl to find Jett standing in the pantry, our singular bag of Doritos open so his pilfering hand can root around inside. As I watch in horror, he shoves a handful of chips into his mouth.

"Whatcha doing, bro?" he asks around the mouthful.

"What are you doing?" I shoot back.

He glances down at the chip bag. "Uh, eating?"

"Why?"

"Because I'm hungry? You alright, man? These questions are weird, even for you."

I stomp toward him and snatch the bag out of his hands. Orange cheese powder dusts his fingers and rings his mouth. He blinks at me in confusion before turning the look into a seething glare.

"Hey, I was eating that," he says.

“Yes, you were, and it’s going to ruin the spreadsheet.”

His eyebrows shoot up. “Spreadsheet? You have a damn spreadsheet for your groceries? No, wait, of course you do. I should have predicted this. It’s actually the least surprising news of my life.”

I bristle. “I have a spreadsheet of our supplies , which happen to all be my supplies because you arrived with nothing but a liquor store worth of booze!”

“Supplies? Bro, chill. We’re not lost in the woods. We have this whole house.”

He gestures at the home around us with his cheese-smeared fingers before popping those fingers one by one into his mouth to suck them clean.

“This house is empty,” I say. “And we are trapped in it for several days at a minimum. We have nothing to eat but what I brought, and when we run out, that’s it.”

Jett rolls his eyes. “You’re acting like it’s the end of the world. It’s just some snow. It’ll melt tomorrow and then we can get the fuck out of here. Thank God.”

“Yeah, that’s not happening,” I say.

Was he not listening to me this morning when I told him we’ll be here for a while? He clearly heard me. His face went ashen. This must be willful self-deception, a refusal to believe the reality staring him in the face.

I return to my laptop and slam it shut. I need to adjust for the chips, but I’ll worry about that after I get away from Jett and his incessant need to be as irresponsible as possible at all times. But I don’t manage to escape the kitchen island before he grabs me by the arm.

My eyes go first to his hand on my bicep. He's squeezing hard, and I've gone tense with surprise, so there's a lot of ... flexing happening. His grip shouldn't be that strong, but judging by the look on his face, he also didn't expect my bicep to bulge under his touch. I catch a flutter of eyelashes before he collects himself and remembers to glare. He releases me with a jerk.

"What do you mean 'that's not happening?'" he asks.

It takes me a moment to remember what he's referring to. When I do, I wave at the snow piled up at the glass doors and the flakes still fluttering from the sky to add to the heap.

"It hasn't even stopped falling yet," I say. "As I told you this morning, this isn't clearing out anytime soon. That much snow takes more than a sunny afternoon to melt off."

"But..." He flounders, seeming genuinely taken aback by this news, even as he receives it for the second time. "What are we going to do?"

I scoff. "I have been cataloging our food supplies so we don't starve." I hold up the bag of Doritos like it's a guilty verdict passed down by a judge. "A catalog you have just gone and ruined."

"It's one bag of chips. It can't possibly matter that much," he says, but his voice is weaker than before.

"Everything matters when we don't know how long we'll be stuck in here like this," I snap. "What if it's three days? Four days? The entire week?"

His face drains of blood. "It won't be the whole week."

“It could be!” I wave angrily at the doors again. “If this is how things look here, I assure you, the pass is far, far worse. No one is getting in or out of Stone Valley for a long time, and that includes us.”

His eyes drop to the floor. He blinks at nothing, and I can almost hear the gears in his head churning as he tries and fails to find a hole in my logic. Unfortunately, I’m every bit the “nerd” he takes me for, and when it comes to stuff like this, I’m almost always right.

I ignore him, rolling up the opened bag of Doritos and sealing it with a clip. He only got a handful or two before I stopped him, so I can leave these on the checklist of supplies. At least he didn’t pick something more important to ruin, but I’m not sure how I’m going to manage him throughout this. Jett has clearly never struggled, never gone without. He’s a stupid, spoiled playboy who’s always gotten everything he wanted. I have to wonder if he’s ever heard the word “no” before.

I skirt around him to put the chips back in the pantry, and for some reason this jolts him back to life.

“Hey, I was eating those,” he says.

“Well, I’d suggest holding off,” I say. “They are our only bag of chips, and a good source of calories, if not nutrition. We might need them.”

“No way. I’m not going to make staying here with you extra miserable by denying myself basic necessities.”

“Doritos are hardly a necessity.”

“For you.”

He reaches past me, grabbing the chips right back off the shelf. But I've had enough of him today. These childish antics will see us starving by the end of the week, and I need to lay down the law now if I'm going to have any hope of containing him.

I grab the bag, refusing to allow him to escape with it. He pauses in surprise, then yanks hard, but I'm not about to let go that easily. I pull back just as hard, and soon we're waging a tug-of-war over the Doritos. The yanking turns furious, both of us pulling as hard as we can but never gaining a true advantage. He drags me a step toward him, then I pull him right back, only for him to wait until I'm off-balance and yank with all his strength. But I'm not letting go no matter what. He can see me as a flimsy nerd all he likes, but this flimsy nerd is going to beat him at this game. I pull with everything I have, throwing my weight backward toward the shelves behind me in the pantry.

And that's when the bag rips.

Chips fly everywhere, scattering on the shelves, the floor, in our hair. We each hold half a ruined bag, but that isn't what has us frozen in place. I did indeed manage to pull Jett toward me — so hard that he now stands with his arms braced on the shelves behind me, caging me in with his body.

For a moment, we stand there breathless, our faces too close. I know my mouth is hanging open, but so is his. My eyes must be as wide as his as we face each other with our noses all but touching. With his hands braced on either side of me, I'm trapped, nowhere to go but closer to him.

My heart is pounding way too hard. My blood is too hot in my veins. I'm sweating, the pantry suddenly claustrophobic around me.

And I think he feels the same.

From this close, I swear I spy warmth in his cheeks, but that's such a ridiculous notion that it snaps me out of my stupor. I shove my way past him, throwing the ruined chip bag on the floor, my feet crunching over the snacks.

"Now I'll have to remove it from the spreadsheet," I grumble as I storm away with my laptop.

"Now I'll have to remove it," he mocks me, but he's still in the pantry, and his reply is far softer than it should be.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:01 pm*

### Chapter Six

Jett

I DON'T SEE BEN for the rest of the day. At some point, I wander downstairs and find a plate with a peanut butter (no jelly) sandwich on it and a note that says "lunch." I accept it, the same way I accept the instant noodles left outside my room later that day. I guess this is our rations now. Peanut butter sandwiches and ramen noodles with artificial flavoring packets. I could really go for a bag of chips, anything less bland, but I guess I ruined that today.

The snow stops at some point in the night, which is the only positive thing I can say about waking up the next morning and discovering a sheet of white as far as the eye can see. The sun is glaring down on the snow, but nothing is melting. Annoyingly, it looks like Ben was right. This sunny afternoon isn't even making a dent. We really are stuck.

I pace my stupid bunk bed room. This situation would be so much better if I wasn't stuck with the most obnoxious person I've ever met. Ben is acting like a dictator, controlling what we eat and when, marking down all our supplies, deciding what we can and can't do. Well, screw that. I'm not some peasant forced to bend to his will. And I want my damn chips.

I start throwing on clothes before I have any firm plan in mind. Jeans should be better than my sweat pants, which will only get wet out there. I don't have a super heavy jacket, but I figure layering some shirts and hoodies might achieve the same effect. I have a beanie, but no gloves and no boots. Last, I grab my wallet, phone and pocket

knife. You never know what you might find out there. Besides, I never leave home without my knife if I can help it.

I clip the little blade to my waistband and throw up one of my hoods. All right, snow. You might be big and bad enough to shut down the pass, but you've never had to contend with Jett Dunn. You'll be begging for mercy by the time I'm through with you.

Resolved, I slip out of the bedroom and down the stairs. Benjamin is nowhere to be found. I imagine he's holed up in his superior bedroom doing something boring like studying. He won't even notice I'm gone, not until I return with a bunch of new supplies. Then he'll have to shut his big mouth and actually be grateful for once.

I head out the door and immediately find myself in snow up to my knees. Okay, I'm definitely not driving. Good thing I bundled up.

I tromp down the driveway and onto what I assume is, or was, the street. The only footsteps breaking up the white hellscape are mine. There aren't even any signs of animals going by. Everyone around here probably knew the storm was coming and holed up in their houses, though, so that's no surprise.

But damn, it's cold out here. I stuff my hands under my armpits for warmth as I trudge up the street. My jeans are soaked through to the knees. So much for that idea. And my feet aren't doing much better. Turns out sneakers aren't much protection when you're forcing your way through this much snow.

Man, this is miserable. If stupid Benjamin hadn't broken that stupid bag of chips I wouldn't have to be out here. I'm owed one good punch in the face the second I get back to the house. Why did he have to go and snatch away the chips like I was a little kid stealing from the candy bowl? Can he stop being patronizing for, like, two damn seconds? He acts like I'm incapable of taking care of myself, but who's the one

who's out here foraging for food, huh? Looks like I'm the big savior this time, nerd.

Besides, all his complaining only ended up ripping open that bag and wasting the whole thing. If he'd just let me have it, it would have worked out fine. Instead he pulled until it popped and I almost crushed him in that pantry.

The memory of the moment when I nearly fell into him flashes through my mind, and suddenly the snow is a little less cold. If I hadn't caught myself on the shelves, I would have ran straight into him. It almost looked like we were about to kiss or something, as ridiculous as that is. If there's one person I'd never, ever kiss, it's Ben Payne. Even without the potential future step-brother thing.

Though ... his face was kinda cute up close, all startled and warm. He blinked way too often, which had the strange knock-on effect of making me realize just how long his eyelashes are, and how dark they look compared to the brightness of his eyes. His lips parted softly around a gasp, and for a moment I could have forgotten they belonged to him rather than a stranger I'd actually want to kiss.

I shake myself. Being cooped up is making me go insane already. There's no way I should be thinking about Ben that way. He's got a stick lodged so far up his ass that it's no wonder he's a virgin — how would anything else fit?

Ew. Wait. I'm not thinking about Ben's ass and anything being up it. Even if it does look kinda nice in his jeans. When the hell did that guy go and get toned? When I grabbed his bicep in the kitchen, it was far more firm than it should have been. A nerd like him has no business going to the gym and getting fit.

I halt, panting for breath and shaking my head to dislodge the worst fantasies my degenerate brain has ever entertained. If anything proves how badly I need to get the hell out of this place, it's fantasizing about Benjamin .

I look behind me and discover with dismay that I haven't even made it out of the block. I feel like I've walked miles, and I haven't reached the main road yet. I spot a tree off to the side and wade through the snow so I can grab a loose branch. Having a walking stick helps a little when I continue. I can pierce the snow and drag myself along, though my pace doesn't pick up much even with this help in hand.

When I finally get to the end of the block, I look both ways along the road. More white in every direction. I can sort of tell that another neighborhood lies straight ahead, but aside from that, the landscape doesn't give me many clues. The ski slopes clump on every side of me, so I can't follow those toward town either. And Stone Valley is so small that none of the buildings poke up any higher than the homes. It's snow in all directions, without a single hint to guide me.

Well, shit.

Determined not to be deterred, I pick a direction and start walking. Something should clue me in sooner or later about whether I chose correctly. Town wasn't that far from the house, right? What could it be? A mile? Two?

My heart sinks as I contemplate the potential distance. It took all this time to get to the end of the block. Now I'm wandering in a random direction with no idea how far I have to go to reach anything worthwhile. What if it's five miles to town? What if it's ten? Even a single mile is going to take forever this way.

No, I'm not giving up so easily. I want my chips. I'm young. I go to the gym. I can walk through a little (okay, a lot of) snow for a few miles. Come on, Jett, this is nothing. I run six miles on my cardio days. A two- or three-mile walk can't possibly be that bad.

Except that the chill is seeping up my legs. I'm starting to shiver, even as I sweat from working so hard for every step. I want to take off my layers of hoodies, but the

wind kicks up, scratching at my cheeks like icy claws. It would be suicidal to take off anything I'm wearing, but the sweat is making this so much worse. On top of all of that, my feet are soaked straight through. Shoes and socks both have provided zero barrier against the snow seeping through them. I can't feel my toes anymore. It's like walking on blocks of ice.

Okay, keep moving. Just keep moving. The best way to survive this is to keep the blood flowing.

I head slightly uphill toward a small bridge that crosses a river. Did I drive over a bridge on the way to the house? I rack my brain, but can't dredge up an accurate memory. I sort of remember a bridge, but was it this one? A place like this has a dozen of these stupid little bridges interrupting the road. I could have driven over this one, or I could have driven over a completely different one miles away.

Fuck, I'm cold. I'm so damn cold. The lack of other footprints is beginning to make more sense. Dread settles over me, as cold as the icy wind that kicks up every few seconds. No one else is out here because this is a suicide mission. I'm never going to make it to town. My toes are going to freeze and snap off. But turning around and returning to the house shivering and soaking wet sounds so humiliating that I can't stomach the thought. I'd rather freeze to death than let Benjamin say "I told you so" about this one.

I cling to my stick and try to trudge on, but my legs are burning from the effort of each step. I might not be able to get back to the house even if I could swallow the shame of doing so. I lean against the railing along the bridge, breathing hard and sweating under my hoodies. Below, the river churns by, cold and uncaring. The whole valley is similarly icy and aloof, crystallized in glinting white. Nothing moves. The silence is complete. I'm the only dumbass who went outside in this shit.

Which means any store I manage to reach probably won't even be open.

I sink down into the snow, not caring about my butt getting wet from sitting in the stuff. This was stupid. This was so, so stupid. Benjamin is right about me. I'm an idiot. And now I'm going to freeze to death on a stupid bridge in this stupid resort town.

I pull out my knife, shakily opening the blade. I start dragging it along my stick, aimlessly sharpening the tree branch I stole earlier. It's not going to improve my situation whatsoever, but whittling has always calmed me down. People might think I carry around my knife just for aesthetic, but I learned how to whittle from my mom when I was a little kid with too much energy. She saw an opportunity to turn that frenetic impulsiveness toward something creative and useful, and pretty soon I was carving up every stick in the backyard. I still do it sometimes when school and life are getting to me.

Already, I'm a little calmer, but it doesn't really improve my situation. I'm wet. I'm freezing. And I'm so exhausted that I don't know how I'm going to make the walk back.

I'm trapped out here. And no one in this cold, empty valley gives a damn.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:01 pm*

### Chapter Seven

Benjamin

“EVERYTHING IS FINE,” I lie.

“Are you sure?” Dad asks. “I’ve been looking at the weather. It looks bad, Benjamin.”

Yes, just like I told you . I bite that back. Arguing will not melt several feet of snow, and I don’t want Dad freaking out about this. He’s worried enough as it is that Jett and I are trapped here, which is why I received this frantic phone call.

“I’m sure,” I say. “I brought groceries with me. I cataloged everything so that I know exactly how quickly we can use them. Besides, the snow should melt soon, right?”

Dad doesn’t respond. We both know this much snow isn’t going to melt quickly, but neither of us want to say it out loud. It’ll only make the situation more real. Maybe if we keep pretending this is a small storm and the sun will take care of it in a day or two, it’ll save Jett and I from the worst.

Speaking of Jett, he hasn’t made a sound in far too long. It’s taken me until now to realize that the house is quiet and peaceful for once. Maybe he’s sleeping, but sometimes he’ll even do that with music on, so the silence creeps me out more than it reassures me.

“We might be able to get some supplies in tomorrow,” Dad is saying.

I tune back into the conversation. “No, don’t do that.” My voice is harsh. I’m too accustomed to having to yell at Jett for wasting our supplies already. I soften it as I continue. “Please don’t try to get over that pass, Dad. It’s crazy dangerous right now. Even if they open it back up, you probably need chains or snow tires to get through. It isn’t worth it for you to get hurt trying to help us. We’ll be okay here, I swear.”

Dad sighs, but gives in. “If you’re sure...”

“I’m sure. You don’t have a truck, and neither does Charlotte. It would be incredibly unsafe for you to try to reach us.”

“You’re right,” Dad says, “but sometimes I really wish you weren’t. I’m supposed to be the parent here.”

“You are the parent,” I say. “I’m just the biologist.”

Dad chuckles. “My genius boy, saving the world before he’s even graduated. I’ll trust you, but please call me if you need anything. We’ll figure something out.”

“I will, Dad. Love you.”

“Love you, Benny. Stay warm.”

We hang up, and I breathe a sigh of relief at having forestalled his rescue efforts. We’ll be fine here as long as Jett doesn’t demolish our supplies. I need to keep him under control and everything will work out.

The silence hits me again. Where the hell is Jett? Something in the back of my mind prickles. I suddenly understand why parents are so suspicious of silence. A rambunctious child can’t be up to anything good if they suddenly go quiet.

I rush downstairs, throwing open the pantry door. I half expect to find Jett sitting there in the dark like a goblin, his hand buried in our singular box of cereal so he can scoop it directly from the bag to his maw. But there's nothing in the pantry except the tidy groceries I left there. From the looks of it, nothing has disturbed the supplies in hours.

I creep back upstairs, tip toeing up to Jett's bedroom and pressing my ear against the door. Silence. Utter, eerie silence. I hold my breath, but nothing stirs on the other side of the door.

Taking a chance, I creak the door open as silently as possible. I open it only enough that I can peer inside, but a narrow glance at the room reveals nothing. Clothes on the floor. Dirty dishware that once held instant noodles.

I open the door wider as cold dread seeps into my chest. The sheets on the bed lie rumpled but empty. Clothes and shoes are strewn about on the floor. But I don't find his cell phone. And I don't find Jett.

I rush to the window, throwing open the blinds. Footsteps mar the perfect sheet of snow coating the town. The steps lead away from this house and down the block, then disappear around a corner.

I curse under my breath and throw the blinds closed. Rushing back to my room, I gather up my heavy coat, a beanie, gloves and boots. It isn't true snow gear, but it's probably worlds better than whatever Jett is out there in. What the hell is he thinking? Did he get so bored that he decided to leave? Is he just stupid?

I shake my head. It doesn't matter what his reasons are. He's out there in insufficient gear, stumbling around with no idea where he's going. I could be wrong about that, but I doubt I am. Neither of us have ever been here before, and Jett did not seem like he was studying the map. Even if he had, the snow has obscured everything. He

might have a map app on his phone, if his fingers aren't too frozen for him to use it, but if he does, it should be telling him that he's miles away from town, much too far to walk in this awful weather. There's simply no version of events in which Jett isn't wandering around in the snow while lacking the right gear to stay warm.

Which means I have no choice but to go find him.

Bundled up, I put my phone and keys in my pockets. I want to travel light. I have no idea what state I might find him in. Either he'll curse me out and tell me to screw off, or he'll be in real trouble. I don't have hand warmers or anything else I can bring with me to help him. My best option is simply to get him back inside the house as quickly as I can.

I push the front door open and start off into the snow.

I can follow Jett's trudging footsteps down the driveway and onto the street. Neither of our cars are getting out of here any time soon. Nor is anyone else's car. Nothing passes on the street ahead, not even an emergency vehicle or snow plow. There is no one out here to find Jett before I do.

I wish I knew how old these footsteps are, but that's beyond me. The air is still. No snow falls to fill in the footsteps and give me a hint to how long ago Jett passed through here. I have no choice but to hurry and hope I'm not too late.

My heart is pounding too hard against my chest. Perhaps it's the exertion of walking through the thick snow, but my heart's fluttery pace puts the lie to that. It's more like ... panic. Fear. Why the hell should I worry about Jett, though? He did this to himself. If he gets frostbite, it's his own fault. I shouldn't even be out here looking for him. I could get myself into just as much trouble as he's likely in. I'd be better off calling 9-1-1 and leaving this to professionals. Yet I can't bring myself to head home and wait for someone else to handle this. The moment I saw those footsteps in the

snow and realized what he must have done, the urge to rush out here and rescue him gripped me.

I reach the end of the residential street. I can tell Jett paused, unsure where to go. Did he seriously not even check a map? The footsteps wander around for a bit before veering off in one direction. He chose correctly, for whatever it's worth. He is or was heading toward the town, but that town is still miles off, so it barely matters.

I keep going, moving faster, sure now that he can't be far. A bridge lies ahead, and a figure sits huddled near one end.

It takes an effort not to break out into a jog. Jett doesn't even notice me coming. He's wrapped up in hoodies, but lacks a real jacket. I can't see his feet, but his jeans are soaked from trudging through the snow. He wraps his arms around himself, shivering even as I watch.

"Damn idiot," I snarl, but if I'm being honest, it isn't anger spurring me on.

I walk right up to him before he finally notices me. He blinks as though he doesn't recognize me, then understanding opens his face. His eyes are wide as he gapes up at me.

I pluck off my glasses and breathe on them to clear the fog that built up during my walk. It offers me an opportunity to catch my breath and slow down my racing heart.

"What are you doing here?" Jett says.

"You're welcome," I drawl.

The confusion hardens into anger. Jett jerks to his feet, pushing himself up with a stick. One end has been whittled into a vague, blocky shape, and I almost shout at

him. Did he sit here whittling when he gave up trying to get through the snow? How did he think that was going to help him?

“Seriously, what are you doing out here?” Jett says. He tries to sound stern, but it’s hard when his teeth are chattering so hard I can see it.

“Come on,” I say. “You need to get back to the house.”

I grab his arm, but he yanks himself free of my grasp.

“I didn’t ask for your help,” he says.

“You didn’t have to,” I say.

His face bunches up with anger. “I’m not a child. I don’t need you to come save me.”

“Clearly you do.”

I wave at the thick drifts of snow, at the biting wind, at his soaked pants and likely soaked feet, at his paltry hoodies that can’t possibly insulate him against the weather.

I grab his arm again, but he shakes me right back off.

“Fuck off,” he says.

The tip of his nose is red. His eyes are watery from the wind and cold. He visibly shivers even as he resists me.

I blow out a sigh. “Jett, please. You could get frostbite out here. I know you’re cold and you hate me, but let me get you home. I don’t want you to freeze.”

Something shifts in his face, some of the anger dropping away. “You don’t?”

“Of course I don’t, idiot. We may not get along, but that doesn’t mean I want to see you get hurt or lose a toe.”

“Wait, lose a toe?”

“That’s what happens when you have frostbite, yes. I presume you’re wearing sneakers under there?”

I peer down, finally getting a look at his terrible shoes. They even have mesh on the top. His feet must be soaked through to the bone.

“Seriously, Jett, this is really dangerous. Come on, I’ll help you.”

This time, he lets me take his arm and start leading him away. He doesn’t complain, doesn’t snarl, doesn’t call me a nerd or a dork or an asshole. He’s strangely quiet as he shambles along at my insistence. It seems like he needs both his walking stick and my arm to help him along, which deepens my fears that his feet are in nasty shape. We’ll need to get him warm as soon as we can, but the fact that he’s up and moving is a good sign. It’s far better to have the blood circulating rather than letting him sit there in the snow.

We walk in silence back toward the house. I almost don’t realize how quiet Jett has gotten, my mind already whirling through all the things we should do to get him warmed up before there’s a real risk to his extremities. Then I hear a quiet voice beside me, a mumble hardly louder than the wind.

“Thank you,” Jett mutters.

I don’t dare respond and break the spell.

### Chapter Eight

Jett

I CAN'T STOP SHIVERING.

Ben gets me back to the house. I barely remember the walk. It's a blur of cold and pain. Every step hurts. My body doesn't want to move. But something about his firm hand on my arm keeps me going. He doesn't speak, just tows me along, letting me walk as slowly as I need to as long as we keep moving forward. His presence beside me is like a warm blanket. As long as he stays close, as long as he keeps encouraging me, I can keep moving no matter how much it hurts.

It's a weird feeling, but I'm too cold and miserable to question it. My clothes are soaked. Sitting in the snow made everything worse. Once I was down there, I couldn't get back up, not until Ben appeared and forced me up. I was prepared to sit there and whittle until the snow covered me up and buried me alive. It nearly became peaceful. The cold seemed to retreat. It was still there, but it bothered me less and less. I stopped whittling as sleepiness stole into my body, luring me into a nap.

I very nearly gave in and surrendered to that nap when Ben appeared. I wanted to be angry, but honestly, the second I saw him marching toward me my whole body jolted awake. He was like a superhero walking straight out of a comic book movie, an impossible savior strolling in exactly when I needed him the most.

"What were you whittling?" Ben asks after we've been walking for a while. It feels like a while, anyway. With my head hanging, I can't tell how far we've gone.

I also can't tell if he actually cares. Maybe he simply wants me to prove I'm alive. Either way, I answer.

"Not sure," I say. "Just wanted to whittle."

"Have you whittled before?"

"Yeah," I say. "Used to whittle all the time. I was a bad kid, always needed to be doing something. My mom figured if I was whittling I couldn't be doing something worse."

Ben chuckles beside me, and it's strangely heartening. That low, quiet laugh nestles itself in my chest like a flicker of flame, warming me from the inside out. It feels a little easier to keep walking when I take my next shambling step.

He doesn't force me to talk more, apparently satisfied that I'm coherent enough to keep going. It feels like we trudge through the snow forever. Did I really wander this far? Did I walk several miles before I quit? Distance and time are fuzzy concepts out here in the snow.

"Did I get close?" I say.

"Hm?"

"To town," I say. "Did I get close to town?"

He laughs again, a short chuckle, but I'm quickly becoming addicted to the sound. When he responds, it's blunt, but not actually unkind. I didn't realize there was a difference until now.

"No," he says. "You didn't get close. Town is several miles off. You were headed in

the correct direction, but I don't think a walk like that is possible without skis or snowshoes today."

"I wanted chips."

I can feel him looking at me, even if I don't lift my head to meet his eyes.

"The chips," I say. "The bag I ruined. I wanted a new bag. I thought I could walk into town and..."

"Even if you had made it to town, I doubt any of the shops are open right now. There haven't been any plows. I haven't even seen an emergency vehicle. Everyone is waiting out the snow."

"Everyone except us."

"Yes, so it seems."

I glance up when the road beneath my feet starts to slant gently upward. He's leading me up the driveway, the house suddenly waiting just ahead. I blink and find myself shuffling past my car buried in the driveway. Ben lets go of my arm for a second so he can punch in the code on the door, and I shiver and hug myself.

He glances back at me, his glasses clouded with fog. "It's okay. We're home. You're going to be alright, Jett."

For some reason, when he says it, I actually believe it. Still, I waver like a reed in the wind while I wait for him to punch in the code and open the door. He pauses on the threshold, looking at me for a moment like he's debating something. Then he takes my arm again and guides me inside.

I sigh the moment the warmth hits me. I stand on the welcome mat shivering and holding myself. I don't bother trying to get out of my wet clothing or kicking the snow off my shoes. I simply stand there, closing my eyes in bliss as the heat hits me.

I hear Ben moving around, but I don't realize what he's doing until I feel him untying my shoes. I almost jerk backward when I open my eyes and find him kneeling on the welcome mat in front of me.

"Wh-what are you doing?" I say.

He pauses to look up at me, and there's something about the angle, about this view of him below me, his eyes peering straight up at me, that warms me more than the house's central heating ever could.

"You have to get these shoes off," Ben says. "They're even more soaked than I thought. Go ahead. You can lean on my head if you need to."

It takes my brain several moments to put all the pieces together and understand the implications. Gingerly, I set my hand on his head. His hair is surprisingly soft given how short he keeps it. Some insane instinct encourages me to curl my fingers and cling to it, but I hold back, resting my palm against the top of his head so I can use him for balance as I step out of my shoe.

My heart is pounding. I have to repeat the whole operation on the other side — and it does not get easier even though I know it's coming this time. There are too many factors working against me: our positions, the touching, my hazy, freezing, unguarded brain. It all combines into a flush of confusion that washes through my body and tumbles around my stomach.

I breathe a little easier when he stands up and we're eye to eye again. If Ben noticed my floundering, he doesn't comment on it. He looks me up and down coolly,

grimacing at what he finds.

“Well, the shoes were the worst bit,” he says, “and you’re still standing, so that’s good, but everything else is soaked too.” He sighs. “Come on, we can’t leave you like this.”

He takes my arm again, and when did that gesture become so casual? He tows me around like this is how we’ve always walked, like I never move on my own. The stairs prove a challenge. I have to leave my stick behind and cling to the railing to hobble up them. I don’t realize where Ben is taking me until we reach the bathroom and he sits me down on the toilet. He reaches past me, fiddling with the faucets of the tub, and I can’t help but notice the way he’s almost draped over my lap.

I look away, but it feels like it takes ages before Ben finally stands up straight again.

“Okay, stay right there,” he says. “Jett, are you listening? Don’t move. Stay there.”

I should be offended or annoyed that he’s ordering me around like this, but all I can do is nod. He bustles out of the bathroom, and my shoulders sink away from my ears. I must be really out of it from the snow and the cold because my brain is stuck on that image of him bent over me or kneeling under me. My fingers tingle from the softness of his hair. My brain produces an extremely unhelpful image of running my hands through that hair while Ben is kneeling before me, but definitely not to take off my shoes. Down there in the entry hall, he was basically at the perfect height to...

These thoughts are really not helping, even if they are warming me up. Between that and the central heating, my body is thawing out. I shiver in my wet clothing, but it’s not nearly as bad as it was when I was sitting on that bridge. Even my brain is thawing out, shame creeping in as I recall the humiliating ordeal of Ben all but carrying me back to the house.

I startle when he returns to the bathroom. I realize I've been doing nothing but thinking about him the entire time he was gone, which makes being face to face with the guy oddly embarrassing.

But Ben is all business, as usual. He sets a pile of clothes on the sink beside me, my clothes. Then he kneels down and starts peeling my socks off my wet feet.

I don't catch up with what's happening until he stands and starts taking my hoodies off.

"Hey, wait, what the hell are you doing?" I snap.

He doesn't even pause, pulling off one hoodie and unzipping the next one, but Ben doesn't meet my eyes as he speaks.

"You have to get out of these wet clothes," he says. "I'm running a bath. You should soak in there and warm up. We also need to see if there's any frostbite, though with how you're walking and moving, I think you're okay."

I'm down to my T-shirt. Ben pulls it off before I can complain, and suddenly I'm sitting on the toilet shirtless. Ben looks away, dipping his hand in the water filling the tub. He looks at the water instead of at me when he speaks.

"The, uh, the jeans as well," he says. "They're wet."

I've hooked up with men, women, enbies. It's never mattered to me. But the idea of taking my pants off in front of Ben leaves me frozen where I sit.

Ben huffs out a sigh.

"Listen," he says, "I don't like this either, okay? We'll just do it quickly and get you

in the tub. I won't look. But you can't stay here like this. You're nearly hypothermic."

"Quick," I say, numb.

"Yes. Quick. Very quick."

He doesn't look at me as he approaches. His eyes are down and to the side. He glances at me just long enough to find the clasp of my jeans and pull the zipper down. He grabs the jeans and the boxers beneath, but pauses there.

"I'm going to need you to lift your hips," he says. "We'll go fast. Ready?"

Hell no, I'm not ready. I sit there swallowing, contemplating the fact that I'm going to be naked in front of him very, very soon and there's nothing I can do about it. My fingers are too frozen for a delicate operation.

But eventually I nod.

"Okay," Ben says. "Three, two..."

He goes on two. I lift my hips on instinct, and my pants and boxers come down in a rush.

True to his word, Ben turns his back to me instantly, but it doesn't really improve this moment. I stand up, hoping to end the torture as quickly as I can, but the second I rise I wobble on my frozen feet and grab his shoulder to catch myself.

"Damn it," Ben hisses under his breath. A moment later, he adds, more loudly this time, "I'm going to have to help you into the tub."

All I wanted was a freaking bag of chips. Now my mom's boyfriend's kid who's unexpectedly hot is stripping me down and putting me in the bathtub.

I'm starting to think I screwed up.

### Chapter Nine

#### Benjamin

I CAREFULLY AVERT MY eyes as I sling Jett's arm over my shoulders and maneuver him toward the tub. I can look away all I like, but it's impossible to ignore the feeling of bare skin against my neck. Jett leans heavily on me, his breath scratchy in my ears, like he's ... like he's breathing way too hard or something.

I refuse to let myself think about that as I get Jett up and move him to the edge of the tub. Thankfully, he lifts his own leg over the lip, but he hisses the moment his toes touch the hot water, and I have to pause with him draped against me. At first, I cast my eyes to the water, searching for escape, but the surface is too reflective for safety. I end up focusing on the wall to my side as my glasses blessedly fog up from the steam of the bath.

Slowly, painfully, Jett lowers himself into the tub. One toe at a time, he sinks into the warm water. I get him over the lip and make sure he doesn't slip, which involves a lot of him clinging to me until he finally sits in the tub, the water covering him to the chest. He sighs as the warmth hits him, and I rush to turn off the faucet.

I relax. He should be fine now. He clearly doesn't have frostbite or hypothermia, though I think it was a close call on that latter point. A little while in the tub and he'll be back to his obnoxious self.

But as I attempt to slip away, a wet hand darts out of the tub and snags me by the wrist. I blink down at the connection, then look up to find Jett seemingly as surprised

as I am by his own actions. He hastily releases me.

“Sorry, uh...” he says. “Would you mind?”

This time, I’m the one who’s frozen. My brain glitches over his shy request. Is Jett asking me to stay with him? Is he that shaken? He isn’t even looking at me anymore, his eyes downcast and his hands back under the water.

I sit down on the toilet seat beside the tub. Maybe I feel bad for him. Maybe I’m simply so shocked that I can’t get myself out of that bathroom. This is a completely different Jett than the one I’ve known here and back at our college. He’s quiet, almost bashful, like getting stuck out there in the snow shattered his usual confidence. All the cocky swagger and lewd joking falls away, leaving behind a guy who’s scared and alone and just suffered a pretty decent shock.

He starts washing himself without a word. I don’t watch, but there isn’t much else to look at in this tiny bathroom. Clouds of steam billow up from the tub, warming the whole room and fogging both the mirror and my glasses. I take off the latter and clean them on my shirt, and when I put them back on, Jett is looking at me. He looks away just as quickly, but that beat of connection trembles between us.

I clear my throat, searching for something to say, something to break the awkwardness. We were never supposed to be in each other’s lives at all, but if our parents are going to date, we should have remained distant enemies. I’m sure he hates that I’ve seen him vulnerable, hates that he needed my help, but I actually prefer this side of him to all that posturing he does at school. The performance seems so flimsy and transparent now that I’ve glimpsed a different side of him. I have to wonder if anyone else realizes how phony it is. Perhaps he doesn’t let them.

He’s probably going to murder me for discovering his soft side, but for now the silence is oddly comfortable. Jett finds the soap, working it into a lather before he

rubs it on himself. It's awkward sitting on the toilet within arm's reach as he rubs his hands over his broad chest and down his surprisingly well toned arms. I knew he was a gym guy — he brags about it so much, how could I not? — but it's one thing to know that intellectually and quite another to see it for myself. The definition in his chest and the muscle corded across his shoulders and down his arms speaks to a shocking amount of discipline. I would almost respect it if those leanly muscled arms belonged to anyone but him.

He turns a little, and I glimpse something even more surprising. Perched on one all-too-toned trapezius is a little bird in black ink. The simple, stark design shows the silhouette of some sort of bird in flight, its wings spread as it soars across Jett's back. It's tiny, tucked away in a spot most people would never see, even if he wore a tank top.

“You like birds?” I say.

Jett stops scrubbing to peer at me, then twists like he's trying to get a look at his own tattoo. “Oh, that,” he says. He reaches a hand over his shoulder and rubs at the tattoo like he can pet the bird depicted there. “Yeah, I do. I had a bird like this growing up. That's why I chose this design. Her name was Pepper because she was kind of a gray, peppery color. She, uh, she was kind of my best friend at times.”

A soft smile graces his lips as he rubs idly at the tattoo.

I have to swallow around something lodged in my throat. Where the hell did this Jett come from? I'm starting to believe I dug a different guy out of that snow drift by the bridge because this cannot be the same partyboy asshole I've known throughout college.

“I always liked animals,” Jett continues. “But birds are my favorite.”

“You know, there’s a lot of wildlife around here,” I say. “I mean, when everything isn’t covered in snow. A lot of birds, as well. The mountains around here provide ideal habits for certain species.”

I wait for him to call me an annoying nerd, but he doesn’t. When Jett regards me, there’s genuine interest in his eyes.

“I’d like to see that,” he says.

“We can’t right now, but when the snow melts...”

I trail off as I realize I was about to propose an outing — with him . The cold must have gotten to both of us. I would never want to be alone on some backwoods trail with Jett, and I’m sure he’d sooner eat his own hand than go hiking at all. Yet Jett looks me dead in the eyes when he responds.

“That’d be kinda cool,” he says.

I must blink or startle. He looks away swiftly, pulling his knees up toward his chest.

“I mean, if the snow melts,” he adds. “Doesn’t seem like that’s happening any time soon. Which I guess I learned today. Thanks for, you know, coming to get me and all.”

Another thank you? Okay, this is way beyond weird at this point. I’m going to die of shock if things keep on this way.

“I noticed the footsteps,” I say with a shrug. That’s all the explanation I want to give. In truth, I want to run from this bathroom as soon as I can, as soon as he seems back to himself. Things are taking a stranger and stranger turn, and I’m way out of my depth.

“I should have looked at a map,” Jett says. “It was dumb. Sorry you had to go out into the cold and all.”

“It’s fine,” I say, then add, “I’m glad you’re okay.”

Jett smiles down at the steaming bathwater. “Still have all my appendages, it seems.” His hand darts under the water and between his legs. “Yup, still there. Didn’t freeze and fall off.”

Heat flushes into my cheeks. I thought we were doing pretty well pretending he wasn’t sitting there naked, but I suppose Jett wasn’t content with that. Of course he had to go and make things inappropriate. He’s my dad’s girlfriend’s son, and even if he wasn’t, we’ve never gotten along. Our relationship could get complicated in the future, and the absolute last thing we need is to make that situation worse.

Not that we would. Or could. I mean, it’s Jett. He jokes this way with everyone. It’s just how he talks. It has nothing to do with me in particular.

Suddenly, he chuckles. “You’re kinda cute when you get all flustered.”

I blink so hard I see stars. “Excuse me?”

Jett flashes a toothy grin. “God, what a nerd. One dick joke and you’re red to your ears. Relax, man.”

“How can I possibly relax when you’re—”

I clamp down, cutting myself off, but the damage is done. Whether I meant to end that with “naked” or “Charlotte’s son,” neither answer is good. One or both sends Jett into a fit of laughter that sloshes the water in the tub, nearly spilling it out onto the bathroom floor.

“Calm down,” Jett says. “Our parents are only dating. It was just a joke.”

“I know it was a joke.”

“Man, you’re such a prude. How have you survived so long being that uptight?”

“I’ve survived just fine, in fact,” I snap.

“Have you?” Jett says, and something mischievous curls his grin. “You strike me as the kind of guy who desperately needs to let loose. The sort who goes to his first party and drinks until he blacks out because he’s been holding back for his entire life. It’s not good for you, you know. You miss out on all the good stuff. Plus, it makes you kinda lame.”

“I don’t care about being lame.”

“No?” Jett says. “Then what do you care about?”

I could brush him off. It would be so easy. Maybe it’s something about how vulnerable he is sitting naked in the tub after almost giving himself hypothermia, but my answer comes out more sincere than I intend.

“I want to fix things,” I say. “I want to save places like this. I want to save birds like the one on your shoulder, like the ones living in these mountains. I want to preserve the things we’re destroying so casually.”

He stops, all the jovial teasing dropping off his face. We stare at each other, nothing but the steam filling the bathroom between us, and I see something in his eyes I never expected to find: respect.

“That’s really cool, man,” he says a bit too softly.

My stomach bunches up. The bathroom is suddenly sweltering hot. Sitting here in my cold weather gear was bearable before, but it abruptly becomes intolerable. I jerk to my feet, the urge to escape ticking in my chest like a bomb about to explode.

“Warm up,” I say.

Then I start backing away.

“Ben, hey, wait,” Jett says.

But this time I don’t heed him. I keep edging myself out of the bathroom, running from that awkward moment of eye contact.

“You should have everything you need in here,” I say. “Call me if you need something, though. I’ll be down the hall.”

It’s not a real offer, and we both know it, but it gives me enough cover to slip out of the bathroom. Jett watches me the entire way. He looks like he wants to call out to me again, but he remains silent as I free myself and shut the door behind me.

The moment I escape, I rush to my bedroom and close myself inside. I start stripping off jackets and socks until I’m standing in the room shivering in nothing but a T-shirt and jeans. I wrap my arms around myself, but it does nothing to banish the chill racing up and down my spine.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:01 pm*

### Chapter Ten

Jett

MY HEART DROPS AS I watch Ben go, but other parts of my body have a very different reaction. I managed to hold it back while he was still in the room, but now that I'm alone, heat rushes through my body — and toward my dick.

“You’ve gotta be kidding, bro,” I say to my hard cock.

It’s fully submerged, and Ben was fully dressed, but neither of those factors seem to matter to the renegade appendage. The reaction startles me, however. It makes no sense. I’ve been with hotter people, naked people, people who weren’t grumpy, boring nerds who hate me. If I’m getting hard from talking about birds with Ben, I must have come really close to dying out there in the snow.

Yeah, that’s gotta be it. This is just relief at being saved. It’s a damsel-in-distress reaction. He came out there and rescued me. I needed his help walking back because my feet were so cold and miserable. Hell, I even needed his help getting into the tub.

My mind flashes back to him undressing me, his hands accidentally brushing bare skin, a charming flush lighting his cheeks as he pretends not to look.

My cock twitches.

“God damn it,” I grumble, sinking back and grabbing it.

If this is what my body wants right now, fine, but we are having a serious talk later about boundaries. It can't be Ben. Anyone but Ben. This must be a temporary condition because of today's unfortunate adventure. That's all. I'll wank it out and never think about Ben again.

This time, though, this time I will apparently think about him a lot.

The second I close my eyes to search my brain for an appropriate fantasy, my mind goes right back to him. I try to think about twins instead, or maybe that cute, shy freshman on the tennis team, but nothing sticks. No matter how hard I try, my thoughts stray back to Ben, his eyes, his hands, his soft voice as he drones on about birds. Holy shit, I'm jerking it to a guy talking about birds. This is a new low, but despite all my protests, it works. I let my brain fixate on him as I stroke myself, and soon I'm ruining the nice warm bath Ben drew for me.

I rub a hand over my face, then get myself up as quickly as I can. I don't want to sit here and stew in this — either my thoughts or the water I just dirtied. I drain the tub while toweling myself off a little too roughly, all the while doing my utmost not to relive the fantasy that got me to the edge. If I don't think about it, maybe I can pretend it didn't happen. A temporary blip, one I'll soon forget all about.

Yet when I trudge back to my bedroom, I find Ben's bedroom door tightly shut against me. The house is quiet, like we've drawn battle lines in order to maintain a truce. If I stay in my room and he stays in his, we'll get through this fine. Except we've already ruined that, haven't we? We've already crossed those lines. It's only a matter of time before the truce fails.

I return to my room, warm and dry for the first time in way too many hours. I replay the whole day, wondering where it went so weird, cringing at some of the things I said. I really didn't need to tell him about Pepper. She was a bird Mom got me growing up. That's not a memory I should have shared with Ben of all people.

Too late now. The nerd knows I have a thing for birds. He's seen the evidence etched into my body.

Was he serious about seeing more of this place once the snow melts? For a moment, it almost sounded like he was inviting me out with him. He'd probably be a great guide on a hike. I bet he can name every species of tree. It sounds kind of fun, but it would be suicidal to ever admit that. Just another blip.

They're starting to add up.

I run my hands through my hair, pacing my tiny bedroom. This trip started annoying, but now it's downright disastrous. I have to get out of here before I start seriously crushing on the last person in the entire universe I should be thinking about.

I flop down on my bed, and I must fall asleep without realizing it, despite my churning thoughts. My misadventure in the snow must have exhausted me more than I thought. I startle awake some time later, bleary and disoriented. The light filtering into the room is wane and watery. My stomach growls. My mouth is tacky and dry. It seems my body cannot survive on baths and jerking off alone.

I drag myself out of bed, rubbing at my eyes. Everything is stiff and achy, like I ran a 10K. My legs and shoulders creak with soreness as I stretch. What the heck did I do to myself today?

I leave the bedroom, hoping to at least fix the hole in my stomach. Ben will get pissed, but come on, we can't starve ourselves. I must be entitled to another package of instant ramen by now.

His bedroom door remains shut. Maybe he locked himself away and freaked out for the rest of the day. It wouldn't shock me. If my head feels like a mess because of what happened this afternoon, he must be ten times worse. Part of me hopes he is.

Misery loves company, after all, and it's always gratifying to know the person you jerked it to might be thinking of you as well. He got an eyeful of me in that tub, and part of me can't help but hope he liked what he saw.

I pad down the stairs. If I can't get my hands on the ramen (maybe he's locked it up by now), I should at least have access to my booze, and boy, could I use a drink after all this. In fact, by the time I reach the kitchen I'm resolved to pour myself a stiff drink either way. This has been a day, and I could use something to take the edge off it.

But when I reach the pantry, I startle back, almost bumping into the kitchen island in my haste to get away. Ben jerks to his feet in the pantry, his laptop in his hands as he updates his infuriating spreadsheet.

"You're awake," he says.

"Yeah. Um..." I run a hand through my hair, but sleeping on it the way I did almost certainly left it wild. Not that it matters. It's Ben. Who cares if he sees my hair looking messy?

"How do you feel?" he asks.

"Hungry," I say.

"Well, there's more ramen. I could, um — here."

He thrusts a packet at me. I grab it and back away before remembering I came here for more than that. When I enter the cramped pantry, however, Ben's eyes go wide.

"Wh-what are you doing? You should have everything you need," he says.

“I need a drink,” I say as I squeeze past him, trying not to think about the way our bodies brush against each other. “And so do you, probably.”

I snatch a bottle of vodka from my bag, gripping it by the neck as I shuffle past Ben, our bodies far too close once again. I hear him suck in a breath that he doesn’t release until I’m out of the pantry and setting my booze and food on the island.

He follows me out. To my shock, he sets his laptop on the island, then closes it and sits on one of the stools.

“You’re right,” he says.

I raise my eyebrows. “I am?”

“Yes, it seems like we could both use a drink,” he says. “Though I’ll have to add it to the spreadsheet.”

A beat of silence falls. Then Ben looks up with the thinnest hint of a smile on his lips.

“A joke,” I say. “That was a joke. Benny, I’m so proud of you.”

That charming flush creeps into his cheeks. I bustle around the kitchen, searching for glasses and the ginger beer I stored in the refrigerator. I set it all out, then start popping off lids and mixing ingredients.

“It’s missing lemon,” I say, “but I figure this isn’t half bad for an improvised recipe I have to make from whatever I happened to bring.”

I push a cup toward Ben, who takes it gingerly, and keep a second for myself.

“What is it?” he says, peering skeptically at the drink.

I lift my glass and tilt it toward him. “A very half-assed Moscow mule. Drink up.”

He raises his glass reluctantly, but tips it against mine. Then we both knock back a gulp. The burn of the ginger beer tingles in my throat and warms my empty belly. I don’t realize that I closed my eyes in pleasure until I hear Ben coughing across from me. He sets down his glass and pounds at his chest as his face goes red.

“Why is it so spicy?” he manages.

I can’t help but laugh. “It’s the ginger. It’s supposed to be spicy. You going to survive?”

He catches his breath, rubbing at his chest. “Yes, I think so. It was just ... surprising.”

“You really don’t get out, do you? How are you a college student yet you know nothing about booze?”

“I have more important things to focus on.”

“Ah, that’s right, saving the world and all that?”

I meant it half-jokingly, but Ben just looks at me and says “yes” without a trace of mirth.

My body tingles, and it has nothing to do with the mule. I take another sip to cover up the reaction, but the stirring in my stomach isn’t a yearning for food. Ben really intends to save the world, as much of it as he can save. Even if it’s a single bird, a single tree, a single rock, I know he’ll give it his all, and there’s something shocking and beautiful about that kind of single-minded dedication to an ideal. Have I ever cared that much about anything?

“We should make that ramen,” Ben says.

He slides off his stool and starts gathering supplies, filling a pot with water and setting it on the stove to boil. He takes out two packets of instant noodles and puts a colander in the sink.

“I can help,” I say, hopping off my stool.

“That’s really not necessary,” Ben says.

But I’m already in motion, joining him at the stove. I grab one of the packets, meaning to read the instructions on the back, but he reaches for it at the same time, and his hand ends up on top of mine. The warmth of his skin washes through me in a burst, and I nearly jerk away.

“It’s just noodles,” Ben says, but his voice is low and scratchy. “I don’t need your help.”

I edge a little closer, drawn in like a moth heading toward the only light in the room. I spread my fingers so his fall between mine, so we’re standing there intertwined.

“I want to help,” I say.

Ben turns his head, and he’s so, so close now. The kitchen lights glare off his glasses, but it isn’t enough to hide the way his eyes flicker all over my face. Heat dusts the tops of his cheeks, and his lips form a tight, tense line that I yearn to pry open with my tongue.

I give in to the urge, leaning toward him, tongue gliding along my lips as I imagine the sounds I’ll drag out of his throat—

And that's when the power goes out.

### Chapter Eleven

Benjamin

“SHIT,” I HISS AS the whole house goes dark.

I jerk away from Jett and flick off the stove. It’s electric, so we’re completely screwed there, but I don’t want it coming back on unexpectedly.

“So much for dinner,” Jett says.

It’s so dark I can barely see him. He’s just another block of darkness, like the stove or the refrigerator. A moment ago, he was so real, so solid, his fingers laced through mine, his lips tilting toward me as though...

“We should find candles,” I say.

I pull out my phone and turn on the flashlight. The harsh light slashes through the darkened kitchen. I take the excuse to bustle away, diving into the deeper darkness of the pantry in search of anything that might help us. Out in the kitchen, I hear Jett doing likewise.

I breathe a little easier as he rustles around through cabinets and cupboards. I crouch in the pantry, but it’s not because I believe I’ll find anything useful among the cleaning supplies on the floor. My heart beats too hard. My breath comes too quickly. I’m somehow both shivering and sweating. Worst of all, I know it’s because of Jett. He wasn’t really going to kiss me, was he? No, there’s no way. He was probably

messing with me. He was likely leaning in to see how I'd react. Whether I'd frozen or leaned in, he would have turned it into a joke at my expense.

But he sure looked and sounded serious.

He wasn't laughing when he leaned in. He wasn't joking when he told me he wanted to help. I know shithead partyboy Jett, and that wasn't him. The guy standing with me at the stove, the guy who made me that strange spicy drink, he was a more mature, more serious, more earnest man than the Jett I know.

"Found something," he calls from the kitchen.

I almost slam my head on a shelf in my rush to get back on my feet. When I enter the kitchen, Jett has spread several items out on the island. He found some tea candles, as well as matches and a lighter.

"They aren't great," Jett says, "but there's a ton of them. We can put them in cups and carry them around."

"That should work," I say.

I didn't really hear his suggestion. I should be worrying about the fact that we have no power and no way to know when it'll return, but all I can think about is his hand resting atop mine.

We start lighting candles and setting them in cups. It allows us to turn off our phones and conserve our batteries a little bit longer. Eventually, all our little candles sit in cups on the kitchen island like fireflies waiting to take flight.

"When do you think it'll come back?" Jett says.

“Hard to say. Could be a couple hours. Could be a couple days.”

I expect a blowup or a tantrum of some sort, but Jett simply nods at this news. Seriously, what happened out there in the snow? Did I bring some sort of doppelganger home instead of the real Jett?

“What happens if it takes days instead of hours?” Jett asks.

I sigh at the prospect. “Well, we couldn’t use the stove. Shower and toilet probably will only last a few more hours. I guess we’ll have to eat whatever doesn’t require cooking and try to keep warm until it comes back. I wouldn’t use your phone much, if you can help it. We can’t get out and we have no way of knowing how long this will last, so we should keep our batteries alive as long as we can.”

Again, I brace for an explosion, and again Jett surprises me by staying calm.

“Good thing I already took that long bath, huh?” he says.

He laughs, but the amber brown of his eyes is liquid and warm in the candlelight, like tree sap caught in sunlight. Those eyes challenge me to remember those moments in the tub, the way I had to undress him, the way I had to help him into the water.

I jerk away from the counter, hoping the dark hides my stumble. I grab two of our makeshift candle holders and start backing away.

“I should shower while the water still works,” I say.

I don’t wait for a response. I head out of the kitchen and pound my way up the stairs as quickly as I can. I set both candles in the bathroom and strip, but the water is lukewarm when I turn it on, and it probably won’t last long. If it even turns on tomorrow, it’ll be colder, so I scrub as thoroughly as I can while I still have the

chance. Hopefully this outage will only last the night, but if it goes on much longer than that, things could get pretty uncomfortable.

I can't linger, but the shower still helps calm down whatever is swirling around my head. I towel off, and immediately regret not bringing my clothes with me into the bathroom. It's a chilly walk from the bathroom to my bedroom, and even worse than that, candlelight glows in Jett's open room, so I know he's up here as well. Disaster looms around every corner as I skitter toward my bedroom. If he were to pop out and catch me in nothing but a towel, I'm not sure how I'd react.

Thankfully, I make it to my room unobserved. I hastily nudge the door shut behind me, but my hands are full with the candles, so I don't manage to shut it all the way. Still, I breathe a little easier when I make it into the dark bedroom by myself. I rush around, digging for any clean clothing I can find. It's difficult navigating in the dark, and the chill seeping into the house doesn't improve matters. By morning, we'll be able to see our breath in here. The cold could quickly pose a serious threat. I didn't see any logs stacked by the fireplace, but with any luck we'll find some in the backyard. Otherwise, we might need to burn newspapers or something just for warmth.

Things will be better in the morning, I tell myself. Hell, the power could be on by then. We'll have to bundle up and tough out this one night, though even with sheets and blankets we might wake up shivering with how cold it is out there. With that dire thought in mind, I throw on an extra pair of socks.

A soft tap at my door interrupts my worrying. I startle upright to find Jett poking his head in.

"Hey," he says.

"Everything alright?"

“Yeah, totally, I just...” He casts his gaze down, and my stomach flips over. I’ve never seen him less than brazen, and this is downright bashful. “I was thinking,” he eventually continues, “it’s going to get really cold tonight, right?”

“Yes, it could. I’d recommend sleeping in any extra clothes you have.”

“That’s a good idea. But, um, maybe it would make more sense for us to share body heat, you know?”

It takes several seconds longer than it should for the implications to sink into my dense skull. When they do, all I say is, “Oh.”

“We don’t have to,” Jett says in a rush, “but it seems logical. I mean, this place is already getting chilly. It’ll be freezing by morning. My bed is smaller, so I thought...”

He lets me fill in the blanks. The two of us sharing the bottom bunk would certainly make for a tight squeeze. We couldn’t help touching each other if we slept that way. It would be warm, but at what cost? I’ve never shared a bed with anyone in my life, and some part of me can’t help wondering if Jett is talking about more than simply keeping warm. Is that possible? A day ago he couldn’t stand me. Now he might have just propositioned me.

My head is spinning. Jett pushes the door open a little wider and creeps inside. He holds a candle in a cup in one hand, but he uses his free hand to take me by the wrist.

“Come on, Ben,” he says. “It’s been a long day. Let’s go get warm.”

He isn’t pulling. He isn’t demanding. There’s no mirth in his gaze or his tone. This is, undeniably, the real Jett, and he’s surprisingly soft, surprisingly gentle as he waits nervously for my response.

“Well, if it’s to keep warm,” I say.

A smile twitches on his lips. I can tell he’s holding it back, but that implies my response left him giddy and that is simply too strange to consider.

I leave my candles behind as Jett tows me to his room. He sets his candle among the others flickering on the dresser. They cast a sedate, warm glow through the room. Jett tugs me to the bed, and we settle on the edge, both of us hunching to fit under the top bunk.

Jett shuffles back, the sheets unnaturally loud as he scoots all the way to the wall the bunk bed sits against. He gives me as much space as possible, but when I slip under the sheets and lie on my side, I’m so close our noses nearly touch.

“Warm?” he says.

We’ve only just gotten under the covers, but I find that I am, indeed, warm. Far too warm. I don’t think it has anything to do with the sheets.

I hear his hand moving, then it settles on my hip. Jett doesn’t grab or pull, just rubs his thumb over my sweatpants. Even separated by the thick fabric, my body tingles from his touch.

I swallow so hard he can probably hear it. Then he’s leaning in again, like he did in the kitchen.

This time, however, there’s nothing to stop us.

My eyes flutter shut when his lips meet mine. I’ve never done this, and I have no idea what I was expecting, but what I get is warmth, a warmth that seeps right down into my bones. For someone who’s always been so hard, so loud, so brash, Jett’s lips are

incredibly soft. They leech the tension and confusion out of me. I could be falling, even as I lie here in bed.

Jett tries to get closer, but my glasses interfere. He pulls away to pluck them off. He folds them up with surprising care, then leans over me to set them on the floor. The motion drapes his entire body over mine. He overwhelms the shuddering breath I draw. My mind flashes back to the bath and the muscle corded along his shoulders, and I nearly reach up for him. Then he settles back down on his side, facing me with a smile.

He cups my face this time, his thumb stroking over my cheek as he draws me back to his mouth. And I go. I go so, so easily, melting against him as he pulls me in. I don't know what happened to him today, and this could be a cruel act just to get some action while he has no other choice, but the longer he kisses me, the further my suspicions retreat, until they fade entirely beneath the pounding of my heart in my ears.

Jett breaks the kiss. He's breathing harder. His hand starts sliding down my body, over my chest, along my ribs, down my side, onto my hip.

"Wait," I gasp before he can go lower.

He stops immediately, confusion crossing his face. I should explain, but the words get stuck in my mouth. Shame burns inside me before I can utter a word. I take a shaky breath and prepare to admit my secret to a person I hated when I woke up this morning.

"I, um, I've actually never done this before."

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:01 pm*

### Chapter Twelve

Jett

MY HEART MIGHT JUST pop before it settles down. I assumed Ben was inexperienced, but nothing? Nothing at all? How does a guy live on campus for almost four years and experience nothing in all that time? Was that his first kiss too? Did I just claim his first kiss ?

“That’s okay,” I say, trying my hardest to sound calm.

It’s not easy. My blood pounds in my ears, a thrill warbling in my chest. I like being his first, not because of some weird macho possessive thing, but because it means Ben trusts me in a way he’s never trusted anyone else. Somehow, I’m the first person he’s let in this way.

“Can I keep touching you?” I ask.

The moment in which Ben stares at me while he deliberates seems to stretch on forever. I barely breathe.

“Yeah,” he says quietly. “I think that’d be okay.”

I’ve never heard him so unsure of himself. He’s always the guy with a solution, the guy who knows everything, the smartest person in the room. When it comes to matters purely physical, however, I’m the expert.

I won't let him down.

I draw him back to my mouth, kissing him gently, letting him settle against my lips. I don't do anything else at first, waiting for the moment Ben relaxes. I can taste the tension leeching out of him as our lips press together, and only then do I use the hand on his hip to tug him closer.

He gasps when our hips meet. My cock presses against him, hard and aching, but he's just as bad as me. I groan when his hard cock nudges at my hip, the surest proof I'll ever get that he's every bit as into this as I am.

Our ragged breathing turns our kisses into sloppy, groping things. It leaves our mouths open wider, which allows me to do the thing I frantically fantasized about what seems like a lifetime ago. My tongue slides into his mouth, tentatively poking around and waiting for a reaction. Ben stiffens a bit, drawing in a sharp breath at a sensation that must be strange and new to him. He doesn't push me away, however. Even more shocking, after the beat of surprise apparently passes, he sucks on my tongue, one hard pull that startles the breath out of me.

I groan, diving at him, too riled up to resist any longer. Ben makes some tiny, surprised noise as I go in deeper, my tongue delving into his mouth, my hand on his hip tugging at him so there's absolutely no space left between our bodies. Our clothes provide an outrageous barrier, but it doesn't stop our hips from moving as a frenzy of lust takes over.

Even Ben is doing it. One hand grasps my shirt like he wants to claw his way through it. He rolls his hips at me, his hard cock grinding against my body as he searches for something I suspect he never realized he needed. Not until now.

I break away breathless and burning with my desire for him. I've been with a lot of people, but Ben is the first to make me feel like I could lose control, like I could

physically tear my way through clothing just to get closer to him. I need to direct this energy somewhere before it explodes out of me.

Ben is flushed. The candlelight turns rosy as it flickers across the side of his face. His eyes are as warm as that wan light, like wood resin beading on the bark.

“I don’t know what I’m supposed to do next,” Ben says. It comes out quietly, like a confession, and I suppose for him it is. It’s an admission that there’s one thing he doesn’t know everything about from his books.

“You aren’t supposed to do anything,” I say.

“But...”

“Shh,” I cut in. “You’re going to lie there and look incredible, and I’m going to take care of everything else.”

Anticipation and anxiety flash across his face. I scramble into action, determined not to leave him to whirl around in his head for too long. Knowing Ben, the longer he has to think about this, the more he’ll manage to work himself up.

I throw the covers back. It’s plenty warm now, and it’s about to get a lot warmer. Ben lies there on his side as I hastily strip myself down. I would love to take my time, but with the way the wheels are churning in his brain, I doubt I have that luxury.

He seems startled by my nudity. His eyes dart all over, never resting in one spot: my abs, my shoulders, my chest, my hard cock curving up at my belly. I want to linger, to soak in the gratification of his awe, but time is of the essence, so instead I get him up and start peeling his sweater and shirt off. It’s tough with the bunk bed above us, but we manage it, then I go for his pants.

“Wait,” he says, urgent. “What are you...”

My hands pause on his zipper. His eyes dart to my cock, and I can see him doing the math in his head.

“I need to get my mouth on you,” I say. “Just my mouth.”

He blinks, swallows, but eventually nods. “O-oh. Oh. Okay.”

“Okay?”

“Y-yeah. I guess so. If that’s what you want.”

“Ben, you have no fucking idea how bad I want that.”

His eyes dart downward again. “I believe I have some idea.”

I chuckle, and some of the tension eases. He lets me unzip his pants, and even helps me get them off him. Then we’re sitting awkwardly on the bed, both of us naked and hard. I could drink nothing but this sight and never need water for the rest of my life. Ben is way more fit than I suspected, but I suppose it makes sense if he’s out in nature all the time. While not as big as me, he’s not tiny, either. His uninspiring clothing has been hiding lean muscle and the most delectable happy trail, one I’d be delighted to follow if my heart wasn’t set on other pursuits tonight.

“Should I, um...”

I don’t realize I’ve been staring until Ben stutters. I don’t bother responding, flying into motion again. I’d love to get behind him and go to town, but the bunk bed is too small for that. Instead, I lie flat on my back under him, then turn him around so his head is at my feet. He begins to stammer through a question, but I loop my arms

under him and grab him by the ass, turning his words into a yelp of surprise. I have all the leverage now, and I use it to yank him toward me.

His ass is plump yet firm, and with his legs spread around my shoulders, my yanking brings the feast right to my mouth. Ben shouts when I dive straight in, licking along him. Perhaps that was aggressive considering the guy just kissed another human being for the first time in his life, but I'm ravenous, and his startled little noises only fuel my hunger.

I swirl my tongue around his hole, and Ben's body bows at last, back bending in a curling arch. His next noise arrives muffled, suggesting his face is down in the mattress. I grip his ass tighter, squeezing hard as my tongue laps at him.

"That," Ben gasps, "that... I never knew ... it was meant to feel like th-AHt."

I chuckle against him. Of course he's trying to rationalize this even as it happens, but by the time I'm done with him, I mean to leave him speechless.

I push with my tongue, testing, and Ben makes the most lovely, startled, high-pitched noise. I store that away as I lick a ring around him. I mean to keep on teasing him, but Ben pushes his hips at me, already begging for more. I don't manage to hold back a moan as his body reveals his need. As composed and cool as he likes to seem, he's as human as the rest of us with the right prodding.

"Touch yourself," I rasp against him.

I don't wait for him to reply, just dive back in. This time I prod harder, pressing at that tight ring of muscle, a place no one has ever explored before. It's all mine. He's all mine. Every press of my tongue only solidifies that.

Ben shuffles around. His body shifts a little. I smile to myself as I realize he's

heeding my directive and grabbing for himself. He must know this much, at least. What guy hasn't jerked himself off? This time, however, it's going to feel so much better than he ever imagined it could.

I wriggle my tongue inside him as he strokes himself, and Ben whimpers into the mattress. He keeps emitting little blips of words, "oh" and "God" and "yes." There are other sounds too, ones far less coherent, ground up syllables squeezing between his teeth. "Nnn" and "mmmph" and "ffffrrr."

I close my lips around him, hold him tight, dig my tongue in as deep as I can. He jerks in my grasp, hips wild and uncontrollable now.

"Jett," he cries. "Jett, I think I'm gonna... Oh shit, I think I'm gonna... It'll get all over you. Jett."

Fuck, my name is so sweet, so right when he moans it into the mattress. I ignore his worrying, licking him harder, reaching everything I can reach, gripping him so he can't escape my mouth. He jerks like he wants to, but he's still stroking himself, still moaning into the mattress, so I know it's just the barrage of sensation battering him around. I hold fast, waiting, tensing nearly as much as him, digging my tongue in until he practically screams into the bunk bed beneath him.

I feel his orgasm all around me. His ass clenches. His body goes rigid. Hot, sticky cum hits my body in bursts. I dig my tongue out in time for him to go limp atop me, panting and twitching as the aftershocks of something he's never felt before rock him.

I could watch him lie there languid and fucked out forever, but sooner than I expect, he scrambles up and turns around to face me.

"Shit," he says, "Jett, I didn't... Are you... Do you need..."

I do, more desperately than I have in my entire life, but I would have waited forever if he needed me to. He crouches before me, and I simply smile and move one of his hands to my cock. I stroke myself through him, keeping my hand on his and staring directly into his eyes as I move his hand along me. He's tentative at first, too light, too delicate, but as I move him faster and harder he grips me more tightly. Soon, he's doing it on his own, my hand simply riding along with his.

Ben gazes into my eyes, braced above me on one hand, pumping my hard cock. His breath comes fast, blowing hot against my face. I lie there and let him touch me, my brain overheating as it hits me over and over again that the person perched over me is Ben. That Ben. The same one I despised when I woke up today; the same one who trudged out into the snow to rescue my dumb ass. Our panting intermingles in the space between our lips as tension tightens my gut. Ben studies my every reaction like he's going to dissect them in a science class, and part of me already hopes that's because he's storing the knowledge away for later, for another night like this one.

I come while imagining that improbable, impossible future.

### Chapter Thirteen

Benjamin

I WAKE WARM. INCREDIBLY warm. I snuggle more deeply into the sheets, and a grumble rumbles beneath my ear.

I startle, suddenly wide awake. I push myself up to find Jett beneath me, naked under the covers. His chest is warm where my head rested against it. My movement jolted his arm from where it laid around me. He screws up his face as frigid air sweeps into the gap in the sheets I've opened by pushing myself up on my hands.

Jett rubs at his eyes. He smiles when they creak open and he sees me perched over him. My chest flutters at that soft, warm, unguarded expression. The first thing he saw today is me, and that sight produced that smile sitting so naturally and easily on his lips.

“Hey,” he says.

“Hello.”

“Come back down here. It's cold.”

It is. It's freezing. I settle gingerly on his chest, and his arm wraps around me. I hold myself tense, the languid sprawl of sleep lost now that the previous night catches up with me. I joined him in his bed when he asked. I kissed him. I let him undress me. I let him ... do all those things with his tongue.

The memory flushes through me, leaving heat in its wake. I didn't know that could feel that way. I'd heard of it, sure, but it seemed a distant, unimportant concept. Now I tingle as my body relives every sweep of his tongue, the nerves lighting up from the distant echo of Jett's attention.

Jett rubs his thumb against my shoulder. "You're thinking too much," he says, voice deep and rough with sleep.

"There's a lot to think about," I say.

He chuckles. The sound tickles my cheek where it's pressed against his chest. When Jett rolls over, he deposits me gently on the bed beside him so we're lying face to face. He brushes my hair off my forehead.

"Not really," he says. "You can let it be, you know. You don't have to analyze every single thing."

"But..."

"Was it fun?"

I pause, weighing the question. Jett lets me muse, simply watching as I churn his words over in my mind. It was surprising. It was confusing. But it also felt good ... really good. Better than I thought it would. I always believed that kind of thing required ... something going in a hole, but he only used his tongue and that was more than enough for an orgasm more powerful than anything I've ever felt.

"Yeah," I say eventually.

"Okay then," Jett says with a smile. "If we both had a good time, what is there to worry about?"

“But I didn’t even do anything for you.”

He cups my face to draw me to his lips. “You did more for me than you realize.” His voice dips lower, dark with heat, and my body stirs the way it did last night, that confusing mix of tingling anticipation and warm desire.

Jett brings me back in, kissing me again and again. The musky warmth of our mouths mingles until it’s indistinguishable. My hand goes to his waist, eager for the skin-to-skin contact. Already, his body is something familiar, something safe. Touching him calms the worries that woke alongside me, the anxieties about whether last night should have happened. Whether it should have or not, it did, and now, with his mouth and hands on me, it feels so incredibly right.

“Mmm, Benny, you’re going to drive me crazy,” Jett says. “I can’t stop kissing you.”

I never let anyone call me things like “Ben” or “Benny,” but for some reason I let it slide when it’s Jett. He draws back while chewing on his bottom lip, as though he’s barely holding himself back from diving in again. How an inexperienced dork like me can inspire that response in someone like him, I have no idea, but Jett’s breathing has gone deeper and his eyes are clear and sharp with desire. My body stirs, something it seems to do incredibly quickly now, and I’d bet anything Jett is in just as delicate a state.

I slide my hand off him, fingers shaky as I reach for him. Just as I expect, I find him hard. I try to grip him the way I did last night, remembering how he set my hand on him. He moved me at first, but eventually that was mostly me. I want to impress him by doing it again, by giving him what he needs without his guidance or instruction. I can learn how to do this. Even if he’s far more experienced, I can make him feel good the way he made me feel good.

Jett sucks in a sharp breath when I grip him.

“Ben,” he says, perhaps a warning, perhaps a question.

“I want to touch you more,” I say. “Can I?”

“Fuck,” he rasps. “You beautiful creature.”

He shifts his whole body toward me, cupping my face to kiss me as his cock pushes into my hand. I groan against him as his mouth sears mine with sudden heat. He kisses like he’s trying to suck the breath out of my lungs, and my eyes fall shut on instinct, pushing away everything but the physical sensation of his body. My thoughts and questions and confusion tumble away, crowded out by an onslaught of physicality. I curl my fingers around Jett’s hard cock, marveling all over again at how nice it feels to hold him. I never thought a cock would feel nice. I thought it might be something that was useful. I knew I was attracted to men, but I didn’t anticipate the thrill that would race through me simply from grabbing another man’s cock and feeling it hard and hot in my grasp.

I pump along him, feeling his whole length from the base all the way to the tip. He’s wet at the top, and I swipe my thumb over it, brushing my finger against the softest part of him.

“God, Ben, that’s so good. That’s perfect,” Jett groans.

He lowers his head, burying it against my shoulder. Then he grabs me in return, his hand large and sure and strong on my cock. I yelp, but my body arches toward him instantly, more prepared this time to respond to his machinations.

I end up arching back as he bows inward, the two of us curling around each other like commas as we stroke each other and build up a cloud of heat under the covers. Jett’s free hand snakes under me and he grabs a fistful of my hair. Short as it is, he manages to grasp tightly and pull back, forcing me to arch even more. Then his lips find my

chest, my collar, my throat long and vulnerable before him. He sucks and licks. His teeth scrape against my skin. His ragged breaths scratch along me.

With my head tilted so far back, my breathing is no better. Every exhale blows out peppered with little cries, pathetic grunts and groans I never would have imagined myself capable of before last night. Jett strokes me harder and it only makes the noises worse. I try to match his pace, but my brain is flooding with lust all over again, and it's drowning out everything but the animalistic need bubbling up inside me.

"Say my name, Ben," Jett growls against my skin. "I want to hear it."

I all but screamed it last night, but apparently that wasn't enough. Apparently he wants more. I struggle to find the breath to obey as his hand burns along my cock. I moan incoherently, a sound that's not even close to being his name. He keeps stroking anyway, and tension builds inside me like blocks stacking up before they collapse calamitously.

I put every ounce of mental fortitude I have left into pumping his cock, getting him to the same place I am. I don't want to leave him behind this time. I don't want to be the one doing all the receiving without giving anything in return. I want to show him I can do this, even if it's new and I'm simply following his lead.

But Jett sucks hard on my neck, and I cry out, all thoughts obliterated. Maybe it'll leave a mark. That thought only has a second to reach me before it too flees before the stampede thundering through me. Jett licks over the same spot he just sucked, and my whole body tingles from the clash of sensation. Hard and soft, pain and pleasure. The lines blur as our hands move so fast and hard the friction begins to burn.

"Ben," Jett sighs. "Oh, Ben. I can't get enough of you."

I don't understand how that's true, but I'm too far away to care. My own body is both

distant and my only immediate concern. Jett twists as he strokes, and I moan so loud the sound rings in my ears. He sinks his teeth gently into the skin around my collar bone, like he's holding onto me as we shatter each other. His hips start thrusting toward my hand, and I realize I'm doing the same to his hand, the urge irresistible as the desire inside me grows so big I can't contain it with moans alone. I both never want this to end and need desperately to reach the peak. My body teeters on the verge of disaster, every stroke threatening to break me as my hand works frantically on him as well.

"Say it," Jett rasps, more desperate now. "Please, Ben. Say it. Let me hear you."

"Jett," I gasp, but even I know it's not enough. What's boiling inside me is too big for one tiny, breathy gasp. "Jett," I say louder. He strokes me so hard that stars of color pop behind my closed eyes. "Oh shit, oh shit, Jett. Fuck, Jett. Jett! "

The last one comes out so loud it scratches my throat raw along its way. I'm bent so far back I'm almost hanging off the bed, my body breaking itself on the pleasure bursting out of me as I explode over Jett's hand. He's doing the same to me, cum spilling over my fist as I pump him through a matching orgasm. The mess hits my abs, my chest, but I don't care. Nothing in the entire world matters except this feeling, this explosion of sensation that rips my very soul out as it gushes from my body.

He bundles me up against him when it passes. The cum is sticky between our bodies. It's all over our hands, but neither of us seem to care. What matters most is being nestled against his chest, listening to his breathing smooth, feeling the tap of his heart beating against my ear.

Jett kisses the top of my head, holding me tightly, holding me in a way I never thought I'd want to be held. His arms are strong around me. His warmth washes over me in waves. His breath tickles the top of my head as we lie there in our mess reeling

from a second round of the most unlikely sex of our lives.

I don't know how I went from despising him to losing my virginity to him in a single day, but as I lie here in his arms, it feels like the most natural thing in the world. I fit against him like his chest was designed for me. The circle of his arms seems crafted precisely for my body to fit within it.

"Ben," he says softly, nuzzling into my hair.

He sighs with contentment. Neither of us are thinking about the mess or the cold or the lack of power or how long we might be stuck here. Everything outside this bedroom fades away, as insubstantial as the snow that will eventually melt and disappear.

But the real world lurks just outside that bedroom door, and no amount of kisses will keep it at bay forever.

### Chapter Fourteen

Jett

WE DRAG OURSELVES OUT of bed eventually and clean up with towels and freezing cold water. It's miserable, but laughing my way through it with Ben makes it a little better. We splash the water pooled in the sink at each other, shouting in outrage at the icy chill. Then we pile on every bit of warm clothing we have and shuffle downstairs.

Ben believes we can start a fire without burning down the whole house. All I know is that I can see my breath every time I breathe, so I go along with his plan. He puts his winter gear back on and trudges into the backyard in search of dry wood.

"I can come with you to help," I say.

"Absolutely not," he snaps.

His gaze is unexpectedly hard, his jaw set and firm. The steel in that look roots me to the spot and sends a trickle of warmth into my belly.

"You don't have the proper gear for it," he says. "And we don't know when we'll have hot water. If you get soaked through by the snow again, we might not have a good way to warm you up."

"I can think of a way," I say, raising one eyebrow and shamelessly looking Ben up and down. He might be bundled up in jackets and boots, but now I know what that

body he's hiding looks and feels and tastes like. There's no more concealing the truth from me.

Ben straightens, knocked off-balance, but he recovers quickly and jabs his finger at my chest. "No."

He leaves through the back door, tromping through the snow toward a shed in the far corner of the yard. I stand at the door shivering and watching him. We let our candles burn down last night. I should probably do something useful like finding more of them for tonight, but instead I keep watching him. I never noticed before how efficient he is. He doesn't waste time, his own or anyone else's. He doesn't pity himself for having to go out in the snow. He simply stomps through the yard and gets the job done. Because it needs to get done and that's all there is to it for him. I might try to weasel my way out of a chore like this, might try to put it off or convince someone else to do it for me, but not Ben. If he deems something is worthy of his time, he goes at it head first, no fear, no hesitation, no whining.

I never realized before how much persistence and determination that must take. I wrote him off as a boring nerd, but as he struggles through the snow with a bundle of firewood in his arms, he starts to look a whole lot more like strength itself.

I open the sliding door for him when he returns. He stomps his boots on a mat by the door, but he can't help tracking some of the cold in with him. Together, we find the driest logs and set them in the fireplace. It doesn't look like anyone has used the thing in quite a while, but at least it's clean. It takes several matches and help from both the lighter and bits of newspaper, but eventually we get a few logs crackling. With the sun streaming in through the back doors and both of us warm in our sweatpants and beanies and sweaters, the living room quickly goes from bitterly cold to downright cozy.

Ben makes peanut butter (no jelly) sandwiches. Not luxurious, but we don't have

much choice when we can't use a stove or microwave or any other appliance. He cuts up an apple as well, and we dip the slices into the jar of peanut butter as we sit on the living room floor as close to the fireplace as we dare and play Scrabble.

"I can't believe we're actually playing this," I say.

"They didn't have much else here," Ben says as he rearranges his letters.

He's destroying me, of course, though it certainly doesn't help that I'm barely paying attention to the game. Mostly, I'm watching Ben's lips part so he can take another bite of apple. I'm watching his careful, elegant fingers moving tiles around. I'm watching his eyes behind his glasses, so focused and thoughtful as he contemplates his next word.

"Ha! Got it," he says.

He lays out seven devastating letters, attaching them to a "c" I didn't think anything of leaving hanging out at the end of a word.

"Quixotic," he says. "That's ... 52 points."

"What?" I shout.

"The word itself is worth 26, but I'm on a double word score."

"That's... You're cheating. Is that even a real word?"

"Of course it's a real word."

"Define it."

I should have known better. Ben snorts, not thrown off in the slightest.

“It means unrealistic, impractical, overly idealistic,” he rattles off.

He smirks at me, the implication clear. My heart judders as I realize he’s messing with me. Ben is joking with me. On purpose. He’s even smiling about it.

I flip the board abruptly, sending Scrabble tiles flying across the cream-colored carpet. Before he can complain, I pounce, shoving him to the carpet and perching on all fours over him. Ben lies under me blinking, a slice of apple caught between his fingers. I bend down with deliberate slowness, closing my lips over his fingers to steal the apple.

“Hey, that was mine,” he protests weakly.

I chew quickly and swallow. “If you hurry, I bet you can still taste it.”

I bend down to kiss him, and, incredibly, Ben rises to meet me. He licks into my mouth like he means to find any stray bits of apple I didn’t manage to swallow, and I open up to let him. In moments, the Scrabble game lies forgotten as I sink down atop him, chasing his lips until I’m pressing him into the carpet. His arms hook under mine to cling to the back of my sweater, one knee rising to cage me in.

I know we stopped doing this at some point between last night and now, but it’s starting to feel like if circumstances don’t intervene, our lips will never part for long. They must have so we could build the fire crackling beside us, but I struggle to recall any moment in the past twelve hours that didn’t taste like him.

I prepare to go in deeper, to claw all this heavy clothing off him, when a vibration in his pocket stops us dead in our tracks.

When I push up on my hands to look down at him, Ben's eyes are as wide as mine feel. We scramble off of each other and he digs for his phone, but pauses to catch his breath before answering (and yes, I do find that a little gratifying, even in a moment like this).

"Dad?" he says, and for some reason my stomach plummets into my feet.

For a breathless moment, I sit there watching him. He's pale, throat bobbing as he swallows.

"Yeah, he's here," he says. "We were ... playing Scrabble."

Jesus Christ. This is really happening. The world outside this snowed in chateau bears down on us like an avalanche. Ben shoots me one quick, panicked look. That's all the warning I get before I have to pull myself together as he scoots close and holds up his phone.

Both of our parents smile back at me.

"Hey, Jett," my mom says.

She's crowded in beside Paul, Ben's dad. They peer at Ben and I through the phone like they expect us to have frozen to death already. Red rims Mom's eyes; Paul is gray and haggard, like he hasn't slept the whole night.

"How are you?" Mom says. "Are you okay? Do you have power? We didn't realize until this morning that it went out. Why didn't you call?"

"There was nothing you could have done," Ben says. "I'm sure it'll come back soon."

"It could be out for days, Benjamin," Paul says. "What will you do?"

“It’s okay, Dad. We found candles. We built a fire. We might be a little smelly, but we’re not going to perish, I promise. We have everything we need.”

“It must have been freezing overnight,” Paul says. “How did you keep warm?”

Ben shoots me a frantic look. For all his cool competency in other arenas, he’s not a liar, almost to a fault. He’s been feeding our parents a version of the truth, and I know it’s because he’s incapable of doing otherwise. At the same time, there is absolutely no version of the truth we can tell our parents in this moment. We stayed warm by fucking. In my bed. In the house our parents rented because they’re dating and wanted to spend Christmas together with their kids.

“There’s actually, like, a ton of blankets in this place,” I say, stepping in to save Ben. “We pulled out everything we could find. I was sweating by morning.”

Ben shoots me a glare at the “sweating” comment, but he can’t exactly lay into me about it with our parents literally watching us, so I suffer nothing worse for the moment.

“I knew this was a terrible idea,” Mom mutters.

“Not now,” Paul says, low, under his breath, in a tone that suggests this is far from the first time they’ve had this fight.

“Do you have food?” Mom says louder.

“Yes,” Ben says. “I told my dad about the inventory. I’m still keeping track of everything. We’re fine. I went out to get firewood today—”

“In that snow?” Paul cuts in.

Ben ignores him and pushes on. “—And it looked like it was starting to melt. There was some dripping off the trees. I think the worst is past us. If this sunshine holds, we’ll be able to dig our cars out in a few days. Worst case, we can always sit in one while it runs and blast the heat, but I don’t think we’ll need to resort to that. Does the weather report say anything promising? I didn’t want to waste my phone battery.”

“It does,” Paul says. “Exactly what you said, basically. The snow should start melting today. The pass should open soon. We’ll be able to reach you in a couple days.”

“Help is on the way,” Mom agrees. “We’ll bring all the hot chocolate and pizza we can carry. With any luck, we’ll make it before Christmas.”

“But we shouldn’t waste any more of your battery,” Paul says. “Stay warm, okay? This nightmare is almost over. Before you know it, everything will be back to normal.”

A day ago, this news would have been everything to me. Today, my heart crumbles like the snow melting off the trees outside.

The second our parents are here, whatever started between Ben and I last night ends. We can’t keep on like that with our very, extremely dating parents in the house.

Ben hangs up, but I’m already looking past him at the snow melting outside the glass doors. I couldn’t wait for that shit to disappear a day ago. Now, it feels like it’s taking something with it. The sun is banishing not just the snow, but this small, scared hope that burrowed itself into my chest somewhere along the way.

I start to rise. Ben grabs my wrist. When he looks up at me, I see all my own despair dancing in his eyes.

“Jett,” he says.

I don't want to talk about it. It'll make it too final, too real, and I'm not ready to face that yet.

I tug myself free. "Need a minute," I say.

He doesn't follow as I head toward the front door and that stick I left beside it after he towed me in out of the snow. I head outside and sit on the front step, ignoring the biting wind. Then I pull out my knife and continue scraping it against the stick, working out my frustration with every bit of wood I peel away.

### Chapter Fifteen

#### Benjamin

JETT DOESN'T RETURN TO the living room for some time. I clean up the Scrabble game and the bits of apple, preserving as much of the fruit as I can. I don't bother marking any of it on my spreadsheet, though. We'll easily make it through this, and for once I just ... don't care.

I'm not stupid. I know why Jett got up like that. He's sitting outside, which I want to tell him is a desperately stupid idea, but I fear my presence will make things worse before it makes anything better, so I leave him to his grumbling. We have plenty of wood. If he stays on the front step, he can warm up beside the fireplace when he comes back in.

I tidy up the kitchen, then head back into the living room myself. I plop onto one of the easy chairs clustered around the fireplace. We pushed them back to make space for our game, but they rest close enough for the warmth to reach me as I hunch there listening to the silence of the house around me.

How long is Jett going to stay out there? I understand his worry. The past twelve or so hours have been like some strange, whirlwind dream. Reality crashed back in hard and fast, a merciless slap to the face, but we both knew it was coming sooner or later. We couldn't go on like that forever. Would we even want to? It's just attraction, just stupid, animal attraction. Maybe it would have faded in a couple days anyway. There's no reason to mourn the inevitable.

The front door jangles. I jerk to my feet, darting for the stairs and pounding my way up them like the coward I am. The moment Jett started to head back inside, I panicked. I'm not ready to face him or talk about this, so I scramble into my bedroom before he makes it through the door.

I stand there panting for a moment, listening to him shuffling into the house. He doesn't return to the living room, instead padding up the stairs and into his own room. He shuts the door softly behind him.

I let out a breath, unsure if it's relief or something else, but I don't want to let myself dwell on this, so I pull a blanket off my bed and head to my desk. I wrap myself up, then sit down with my textbooks, cracking one open at random. It's what I've always done. Ever since I was a teenager and we lost Mom, I've retreated to my books, and it's always worked. It's always managed to turn my mind away from the things I don't want to see. People think I'm smart, determined, single-minded, but in truth, this is simply my preferred form of running away. Not booze. Not boys. Not video games or drugs. Books. Setting myself impossible goals and throwing myself into them with absolute dedication. Yes, I care about repairing the world, protecting natural spaces, all of that stuff, but I might have left the work to someone else if I hadn't needed to run from real life for the past decade.

Today, it isn't working as well as usual. I try to focus, but the words slide off my brain. I keep looping back to Jett. No matter what I'm reading about, eventually the words turn to static, and all I can hear is him smoothly lying to our parents as his heart broke in front of my eyes.

I put my head down, trying to block it out, trying not to see the hurt so plain on his face, and suddenly I'm startling up hours later, my back sore from hunching and a glossy textbook page sticking to my cheek.

I blink. It's grown dark. The house lays quiet and cold. Is the fire still alive? Probably

not, if neither of us have tended it. My breath puffs out in a plume as I sigh in frustration at my own dereliction of duty.

Shedding my blanket is like stepping into a cold pool, but I leave it behind and shiver my way through the dark house, navigating the stairs by familiarity and feel. I don't find Jett downstairs, and the fire has burned itself down to embers. I carefully feed in more newspaper scraps, waiting until they catch before I gingerly add logs. We don't have much fuel left of either kind. If we need to spend another day or two this way, we'll have to make the logs last.

A creak on the stairs alerts me while I'm still building up the fire. The stairs run alongside the living room, but they let Jett down in the kitchen, which lies to my back. I listen as he shuffles around, searching beneath the crackle of the flames for some sign of whether he's grabbing a snack and fleeing or he actually intends to stay.

Soft footsteps crunch on the carpet. I tense as they head toward me. Then Jett is kneeling beside me, watching the flames lick their way up the side of the fresh logs I added to the fireplace.

"Did it go out?" he asks.

Even I can hear how hard he's trying to sound casual. Tension thrums between us, pushing us apart like a force field in a superhero movie.

"Almost," I say. "I think it'll be okay now. Are you hungry?"

He touches his stomach like he never considered the question until now. "Yeah, I think so."

"We should see what we can make," I say. "We can eat it in here. It'll be warmer."

I almost expect him to say no, to retreat back to his room, but he nods. We rise, leaving the warmth and glow of the fire behind. In the kitchen, we set out several more candles in cups, leaving them on the counters and island to help us navigate the rapidly darkening kitchen.

I find lettuce and veggies in the fridge. Fortunately, we haven't actually opened the refrigerator this whole time, and the house is freezing, so the things in there have remained fresh.

"I know a salad isn't exciting," I say, "but it's either that or more peanut butter sandwiches."

Jett shrugs. "I'm down for salad."

We set out the ingredients, find a couple cutting boards, and start chopping. Without a word, we end up shoulder to shoulder at the island, huddled close as the cold steals into our fingers and toes. Maybe that's why I lean toward him, for warmth. I can't say, but when our shoulders brush as we chop up lettuce and tomatoes and carrots, neither of us pull away. Whatever tension pushed us apart this afternoon, those light touches melt it as surely as the fire in the living room. It ebbs like the tide going out, and soon things feel almost normal again. Well, "normal" insofar as any of the past day has been normal.

We end up with massive salads, the lettuce speckled with tomatoes, carrots, avocado, onion, bell pepper, even the dried cranberries from my trail mix. There's an old bottle of ranch dressing in the fridge. We give it a careful sniff, declare it probably not deadly, and dump it on top. Then we carry our bowls into the living room, sitting on the floor as close to the fire as we can get.

Just like that, we're back where we were this afternoon, back in the spot where we played Scrabble and flirted and kissed — at least until that phone call came in. That

call changed everything, dunking us in an ice bath of reality before either of us were ready for it.

I poke at my salad. I'm starving, yet it's hard to eat after all that's happened. I look up and find Jett similarly dour. The firelight splashes against him, casting a warm glow against what little skin he's left exposed. It's mostly his cheeks, rough with stubble from the lack of shaving. My own facial hair hasn't grown in nearly so much in such a short time.

He catches me watching him, but his eyes quickly dart away.

"I'm sorry I walked away like that this afternoon," he says. "I needed to think."

"I understand," I say. "I don't think either of us were quite ready for that call."

"Yeah, maybe not."

He pushes around the remains of his salad, which he devoured nearly in a single breath. He sets his bowl aside, picking at the carpet beneath him instead.

"It happened so fast," he says. "I wasn't ready to hear it might be over already."

My chest goes tight. Who is this small, hunching, scared man before me? He's so unlike the Jett who swaggered in here, the popular guy always going to parties back at school, the playboy who has a different person in his dorm room every night. His shaggy brown hair hangs over his face, hiding his eyes from me, and suddenly I can't stand it anymore. I set my half-eaten salad aside and shuffle closer to him, taking one restless hand in mine. He looks up instantly, the firelight dancing in his eyes, turning them into dripping amber trying to encase me in this moment.

"We knew this would happen eventually," I say softly.

“Yeah, but did it have to be so soon?”

I almost flinch away from his sincerity.

“If it didn’t happen now,” I say, “it would have happened tomorrow. Or the next day. The snow can’t last forever.”

“Is it crazy that I suddenly wish it would?” he asks.

My heart lurches, jolting from this sudden shock. I need a moment before I can respond, “No, it’s not crazy.”

“Is it quixotic?” he asks with a smirk.

Some of the tension melts. I smile back at him. “Perhaps, but there’s nothing wrong with being a little quixotic at times. The world could use more dreamers.”

His thumb bumps along my knuckles. He stares at me, throat working, his smile falling off his lips.

“God, Ben, I just want to fucking kiss you every time I see you,” he says.

My gut tightens. I don’t disagree, but wouldn’t that only serve to make this worse? If we keep climbing higher, the inevitable fall will hurt more when it comes. And it is coming. Perhaps it’ll be a day. Perhaps a couple days. But the timer is ticking down, and there’s only one way this ends once our parents are here.

“We should stop doing this,” I say, but the words are weak, flimsy. They’re like a single snowflake thrown at that fire crackling and spitting beside us, and they have no chance of surviving of the heat in Jett’s gaze.

“Yeah,” he says. “We should. Eventually. But for now, we still have time.”

He rises up on his knees, cupping my face to draw me to his lips. I put up no resistance, leaning in without any insistence on his part. Because by now his mouth is so warm, so familiar, so safe that I don't know how to resist it.

Oh God, this is going to be a problem.

But a problem for later. For right now, I let Jett kiss me all the way down to the carpet. He gently sets me on my back beside the fire, his lips never leaving mine until I'm flat on the floor beneath him. Then he pushes himself up on his hands, gazing down at me, his eyes so warm they could drip on me like wax.

“I'm not letting this end before I suck your dick,” Jett says.

And those might not be the most romantic words in the world, but coming from Jett, they mean everything.

### Chapter Sixteen

Jett

BEN GAPES UP AT me, his lips softly parted. He blinks behind his glasses, and I pluck the damn things off, setting them aside so they won't get in my way.

Not that I plan to spend much time on his mouth.

This might be crashing toward oblivion, but I'm not letting it go before I've gotten a taste of him, a real taste of him. If he's never even kissed before, he's definitely never had someone suck him off before. The moment I realized that, I knew I was going to give him a blowjob the likes of which he'll never forget. If we only get one brief chance at this, you better believe I'm going to make it count.

"A-Are you sure that's something you want to do?" Ben says.

"God, yes," I say. "Are you joking?"

"I ... I never knew if the one doing the, uh, sucking actually enjoyed it or performed it out of obligation."

"Ben, I swear to you, I have never done anything in bed I didn't want to do," I say. "And I really, really want to do this."

My eyes flicker down, even though he's all bundled up in sweatpants and sweaters like me. When I look back up, the most gorgeous flush has stolen into Ben's cheeks.

He presses his lips together, but it's not enough to push down the heat crawling up his neck.

I cup his face, stroking my thumb along his cheek. As I bend down, I say, nearly against his lips, "You're never going to be able to forget this, baby."

Then I kiss him, soaking up his little murmur of surprise. At first, he simply lies there and accepts it, then his hands wrap around my back, fingers clinging to my sweater in a sudden surge of desire. I marvel all over again at how open and expressive he can be in the right circumstances. It's like a whole other side of Ben that no one in the entire world has seen except for me. I store it away in a corner of my heart, knowing I might need to rely on pure memory soon. I sear his little noises, his clinging fingers, his soft, open lips into my body, swearing to myself I'll never forget them no matter what happens in the coming days.

I try to shove thoughts of the future aside, but they've chased me all day like a mountain lion stalking me through the forest. It's a matter of time before they pounce and devour me. The snow is melting. The pass will open. Our parents will arrive. And we will be two random guys whose parents are dating. Sure, we aren't related. We aren't even step-brothers. But it would still be too weird for us to go near each other outside of these stolen moments trapped in this house in the snow.

I'm going to make the most of this. I'm going to live in this moment for as long as I can. Ben might like to worry about the future, but I don't. All I care about is now.

I pull away from his mouth, sweet as it is, and start trailing down his neck. Ben sighs as I suck on his neck. I pull his collar aside, searching for the mark I left there yesterday, and tug at it with my teeth. Ben shudders, hands clinging more tightly until I let go and lick over the mark.

"Is it wrong that I wish that mark would never fade?" I say.

“Yes,” Ben says, breathy, struggling, yet still analytical, logical Ben underneath. “But I wish it wouldn’t either.”

I lower my lips back to the tiny splotch of redness where his neck and collar meet, kissing it like it’s some talisman for good luck. It probably won’t even last until morning, and for an insane moment, I want to make it worse, want to suck until the skin bruises.

Ben must sense my intention. A hand grips my shoulder, and he pushes a little to get my attention.

“Don’t,” he says. “You can’t. We couldn’t cover it up.”

Of course. Of course we couldn’t. It’s on his neck near his collar, just high enough that a T-shirt might reveal it. We can’t let our parents see a thing like that. There would be no plausible explanation outside of the obvious.

But that is not the only place where I can mark him.

I comply, leaving his neck alone and working my way downward instead. I can feel Ben watching me, his anxiety about yet another new experience refusing to allow him to relax. That simply sounds like a challenge to me. I got him out of his head the other times, and I’m going to manage it tonight as well.

When I reach his sweatpants, I gaze up at him, meeting his eyes as I tease the elastic waistband. Ben props himself up on his elbows, watching my every move, but he lifts his hips as I tug on his sweatpants, letting me lower the garment to his knees.

I won’t expose him more than that. Now that it’s night, tendrils of cold seep in from every side, even here beside the fire. The flames can only protect us for so long.

I lower my head, kissing one thin, creamy thigh. Hair tickles my chin, and my scruffy beard produces a laugh as it scrapes along delicate skin. Ben jerks, ticklish, but I sink my teeth gently into his skin as the laughter softens to a sigh. Then I suck — hard. As hard as I wish I could have sucked on his neck. I tug at the skin while Ben groans and squirms. I pull away with a long pop, admiring the bright red mark on his inner thigh.

“Christ, Jett, that’s going to be there for days,” Ben says. He’s panting, every word ragged, and his cock is so hard I could probably blow on it and get him to come.

“I know,” I say. “That’s the point.”

His eyes widen a bit.

“I can’t do it to your neck, but no one but you will see this one,” I say. “And you’ll know you’re mine, regardless of how we have to pretend in front of everyone else. You’ll never be able to forget this night. You can’t tell yourself it wasn’t real when the evidence is right there on your body.”

He watches me, lips parted, eyebrows drawing toward each other. “Jett, I would never forget. Never. I promise you that. Nothing could make me forget this.”

I want to kiss him again, kiss him so hard he can’t even breathe, kiss him until his lips and mine are molded around each other. He always speaks as though he’s saying something obvious, but none of that was obvious to me — and I suspect he has no idea how much it means.

I dive to my task before emotion can overwhelm me. If there’s one thing I’ve always been a genius at, it’s turning emotions into physical actions, and that’s what I mean to do as I sink between his legs and angle his cock at my mouth.

He sucks in a breath when I grab him. I lick a stripe along the underside of his shaft,

tongue bumping over the engorged veins. At the top, I swirl my tongue around him, lazy, indulgent laps before I finally close my lips around his head.

He groans, the sound shifting as he apparently drops his head back. He's still on his elbows, but that will end if I do this right.

And I always do this right.

I sink down him slowly, taking my time, drawing the whole thing out, letting him feel my lips around every inch of him. Letting myself feel every inch of him, too. If this is the only time I ever get him in my mouth, I'm going to make damn sure I savor it. He lies thick and heavy on my tongue, his cock filling up my mouth just right. People might not suspect a nerdy guy like him has such a perfect dick. Hell, even I was surprised that first time I got a good look at his body. He's been hiding something tasty from the whole world, and I'd be lying if I said it wasn't a thrill being the only one who knows this secret.

I slide all the way down to my hand, swallowing him whole. I don't let him adjust, riding right back up him, sucking as I go. Ben groans and groans above me, labored breaths breaking free in between the noises.

I sink down a little harder, a little faster, teasing him, and the carpet crunches as he seizes at it with his fingers. I squeeze him at the base, taking him even harder and faster the next time, using my tongue to lick at him as I go.

Finally, Ben cracks.

A thump sounds as he drops from his elbows flat onto his back, incapable of holding himself up any longer. A hand dives for my hair, tangling in the shaggy strands. I moan as his clutching fingers send a tingle down my spine. He spreads his legs as wide as he can with his sweatpants around his knees, giving me space to work,

opening up his whole body to me.

I don't need to be told twice to get to work when I get an invitation like that.

I plunge down him, taking him deeper, breathing through the tickle of gag reflex. It's something I've worked through before, and for people who deserved it way less, so it's not hard to push past it. Besides, Ben's hand tightens the moment I take him that way, his moan loud enough to echo around the high ceilings. I want to fill this whole house with his noises, clutter and warm the space with his sweet voice until we don't even need the fire anymore.

"Jett," he gasps. "Oh God, Jett, why does that feel so good?"

Because I'm God damn good at it, for one thing. Because I'm taking him as deep as I can. Because I'm not doing this as a chore or an obligation, but because there's nothing I want more in this world than his cock filling my mouth.

I moan around him instead of responding. Then I play my final trump card. I remove my hand from where it was steadying him, allowing myself to sink even deeper.

Clearly, Ben wasn't expecting it. Clearly, he believed I'd gone as deep as I could go. The moment I go a full inch deeper, he shouts at the ceiling, his hips jerking up at me, his entire body twisting and writhing around a burst of pleasure. It almost does manage to gag me, but I breathe through it, insisting on holding deep, insisting on drawing this bliss out of him. It's so God damn sweet, so delicious, so precious. I come up, but only for a moment, only long enough that he might forget the feeling a little. Then I plunge down him until my nose is in his hair, and I breathe deeply, and I swallow.

Ben shatters.

He cries out wordlessly, nearly tearing out a chunk of my hair out as his whole body pushes toward me. He explodes into my mouth without warning, but I simply keep swallowing, taking it all down, pinning him in this moment of pleasure until every agonizing beat pulses through him and down my waiting throat.

When I finally come up for air, Ben lies panting on the carpet, eyes glassy, mouth open, limbs so limp he could be a doll tossed carelessly to the floor. I wipe at my mouth and smile, gently tugging his sweatpants back up before he can get cold. Then I lie on the floor with him, snuggling in close as he shivers not from cold, but from reverberations of pleasure. I soak up every tremble, every physical reminder that it was me who made him feel this good.

For several minutes, nothing but the crackle of the fire and his ragged breathing disturbs the house. I nearly believe he's fallen asleep, then he gasps and grabs for the arm I set across his chest.

"Jett, my God, I-I'm so sorry," he says. "I haven't even... Should I..."

"Shhh," I say. "You're in no state to do anything like that."

"But that's not exactly fair."

"When did I say I cared about fair?" I push up so I can gaze down at him, stroking his hair off his forehead. "And how is this unfair when I loved every second of it, huh? You're too limp to do anything but lie here and let me hold you, and that's all I want."

He watches me as though he doubts my words, as though he's searching for a lie. He won't find it. Sure, my dick is hard, but I'll live. What matters now is him, is this.

I settle back down, lying on my side on the floor so I can pull him in against my

chest. We cuddle in front of the fire, watching the flames flicker, holding each other while there's still time.

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*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:01 pm*

### Chapter Seventeen

Benjamin

AT SOME POINT, WE wake, stiff from dozing off in front of the fire. We clean up our salads and check that the fire won't burn down the whole house overnight. Then we stand awkwardly at the foot of the stairs, the inevitable question looming over us.

Jett cups my hands in his, his thumbs bumping along my knuckles.

“Will you sleep in my bed again tonight?” he asks.

My heart crumbles. I want to, and he clearly wants me to. My body is still reeling from what he did to me in front of the fire, and all I want to do is soak up the comfort of having his arms around me.

But the longer we do this, the more it's going to hurt. Every moment in front of the fire, every night spent cuddling in a bed together, digs the barbs in deeper. Soon, very soon, our parents will arrive, tearing them out. How bloody and broken we find ourselves in the aftermath hinges on moments like this, moments when we could either give in to indulgence ... or make the smarter choice, no matter how much it hurts.

“I don't know if that's the best idea,” I say.

Jett's face falls, but he tries to hide it. “It isn't going to make a difference,” he says.

“It could. If we keep doing this, it’s going to hurt more, Jett. We’re making it worse.”

“How can we possibly make this worse?” he says, voice rising a little. “We’ve already shared a bed. We’ve already slept together. We’ve already done so much. Is sleeping in the same bed going to make a difference at this point?”

I shake my head, but a kernel of doubt wriggles into my chest. Maybe it doesn’t matter. Maybe I should give in to the temptation while I can. But logic tells me it’s wrong, that it’s only hurting both of us more.

“I think we should sleep apart,” I say. “We’re going to make this worse.”

He frees one hand to cup my face. “I’m not going to stop wanting you just because I’m in a different bed. If you believe that, you’re stupid, and you’re damn near the smartest person I’ve ever met, Ben.”

I have to swallow down the lump of emotion that clogs my throat.

“I know,” I say, “but I’m trying to make the right choices. I’m trying to keep us from getting hurt.”

“We’re already getting hurt.”

I can’t respond. The emotion wins, stoppering my throat as surely as a cork plugging up a wine bottle. Nothing is getting past those feelings jumbled up inside me, so instead I simply lean forward and kiss him.

Jett understands without me having to speak. He holds my hand the entire way up the stairs, but he lets me go at the top, seeing me off to my own room without protest.

The bed feels cold that night. No matter how I pile up blankets and cocoon myself

within them, I never seem to warm up. I toss and turn, trying to find a comfortable position, but the cold creeps in from every side, icy hands grabbing at my toes, my ankles, my hand, my heart. I think I hear Jett shuffling around as well, but it must be my imagination.

I DON'T KNOW WHEN I finally fall asleep, but a rich, fatty scent wakes me sometime the next morning. Sunlight streams into my bedroom, burning my eyes. I curse when I remember that my glasses are still downstairs, sitting on the floor beside the fire where Jett...

I sit up with a sigh, the sheets falling to my waist. I'm naked from the hips up, my sweater and shirts gone. Sitting here in bed like this, the cold barely grazes my skin, but that should be impossible.

I jump out of bed and race to the other side of the room. When I flick at the light switch, beautiful, artificial light flashes on, struggling to outdo the sunlight pouring in through the window.

I fly around the room, throwing my sweater and sweats back on. I all but run to the bathroom, and the tap actually works when I attempt to brush my teeth. I'm tempted to take advantage of a shower immediately, but the smells rising from downstairs are far too tempting, so I settle for brushing my teeth before hurrying down the stairs.

I find Jett in the kitchen, flitting between the stove and the counter. Cutlery and plates sit ready on the kitchen island. Even as I watch, the toaster pings, two slices of bread popping up. Jett darts over to them and sets them on a plate.

He whirls when he notices me, a spatula held in one hand.

"Perfect timing," he says with a grin. "It looks like the power came back on some time last night."

I blink, trying to clear my eyes, but the miraculous sight does not disappear. Jett turns back to something on the counter. The smell that woke me originates from the stove, where butter sizzles and spits inside a pan.

Jett marches up to me with a mug of coffee in his hand. It's so fresh, so warm, so fragrant I could weep. When he offers it to me, I accept without a word of complaint.

"I hope that's how you like it," he says. "I'm not sure if I remembered it right."

I take a sip, and blessed caffeine seeps down my throat, warm and faintly sweet with milk and sugar.

"It's fucking perfect," I sigh.

Jett beams. "I'm glad. How do you like your eggs?"

My brain has to replay the question a couple times before I actually parse through what should be simple words.

"Any way you'll make them," I say. "I don't care. However you like them. I ... I'm still processing this."

He chuckles. "Clearly. Your glasses are over in the living room. I put them on the coffee table. The fire is dead, but that's kind of what we wanted, right? Plus, we don't need it anymore."

"Yeah, sure."

I shuffle away with my coffee, using the excuse of needing to find my glasses to try to get my head to stop spinning. I know Jett went to bed hurt, so is this an act? He has to feel as relieved as I do about the power coming back on. We could both use a

shower, and I won't cry about being able to brush my teeth, turn on a faucet and sit around the house without shivering all day.

I set down my coffee on the table when I retrieve my glasses, cleaning them on my shirt before perching them on my nose. I glance out of the sliding glass doors and find snow dripping off the trees. I can't spot any clear patches of grass yet, but the heap has shrunk significantly, and children play in the yard over. Everyone is crawling back out of isolation. The world is thawing around us, returning to normal.

To normal. The normal where Jett and I have to pretend there's nothing between us. The normal where our parents are dating, and could some day be more. The normal where the past two days don't exist.

I retrieve my coffee, desperate for the caffeine as too many implications click into place. Maybe Jett's chipper mood is a coping mechanism. Maybe he's living only in the moment instead of thinking about what all this means for us.

I should probably follow his lead, but even as I slouch onto a stool at the kitchen island, I can't stop my brain from whirling. If the snow is melting here, it's likely melting in the pass as well. The state will want to clear that pass as quickly as they can. If they can get it open sooner, they will. It's not solely up to nature anymore. Our time is coming to a rapid end, and short of another blizzard, there's nothing we can do about that.

Jett turns off the stove. When he faces me, he's carrying two plates, both bearing a slice of toast drenched in a slab of melting butter and a heap of scrambled eggs speckled with onion and bell pepper.

"We had some stuff left over from the salads," he says, "so I thought a scramble was best."

“We might be able to get to the store tonight or tomorrow to get more supplies,” I say.

I immediately realize my mistake. The comment was supposed to be helpful, but it only paints our predicament in stark relief. Jett swallows, sitting across from me at the island and sipping at his own coffee.

“Yeah, that’d probably be good,” he says, but all his enthusiasm is gone.

I want to say something comforting, but it would be a lie. There is nothing we can do. The future is inevitable, and it is barreling toward us at breakneck speed now that the snow is melting. Whatever charmed moment we’ve been living in, it is over.

“Thank you,” I say. “For breakfast,” I add, but it’s a feckless attempt. We both know I meant more than the toast and eggs.

Jett munches on his toast. “You cooked for me,” he says. “All that ramen.”

I snort a laugh. “All that ramen you stole.”

“Is it stealing if you gave it to me? Besides, you weren’t going to let me starve. You like to act all cold and badass, but you’re a softie.”

He smiles at me, a secretive little smile, a smile that says “I’ve seen inside you, and you aren’t hiding from me.” And he’s right. Whatever else happens in the future, he knows me. He knows sides of me no one else knows, and I’ll never be able to hide them from him.

But I’ll have to.

We’ll both have to. We can’t go on as we have. When our parents arrive, when the

world crashes back in, we can't act like we've seen each other's pleasure, tasted each other's lips, learned each other's most intimate, unguarded noises.

As though reading my thoughts, Jett reaches across the island, taking my hand. He doesn't stop eating his breakfast, and neither do I, but I don't let go of him either, clinging to him as I enjoy my toast and eggs and coffee. They're delicious, but they're a sign of the end, and we both know it. And maybe it's stupid, maybe it's exactly what I tried to avoid last night by sleeping in my own bed, yet when his thumb rubs against my fingers, I can't help the sense of comfort that washes over me.

If only it wasn't about to end.

### Chapter Eighteen

Jett

BEN RETREATS THE MOMENT he finishes his breakfast. He asks if he can help with dishes, but I wave him away, a choice I instantly regret. Free of obligation, he heads upstairs. The shower hisses on, and that's it. He's lost to me.

He would tell me he needs to study, I'm sure, but a lie that flimsy won't fool me. He held my hand throughout breakfast, but his shoulders stayed bunched up around his ears. He looked down at his plate more than he ever looked at me. His fear seasoned the meal more than anything I put in those eggs.

The end is coming, and he's bracing for it.

He isn't the type to enjoy the moment. He isn't the type to live in the now while he still can. He's worrying, I know he's worrying, and that anxiety is going to drive him away from me before our circumstances get a chance to wedge themselves between us and drive us apart.

I almost break the cup I'm attempting to wash. I set it aside and turn off the water, giving up on doing anything productive today. Overhead, the water from Ben's shower patters into the basin, tapping like rain. I slump into an armchair in the living room and listen to it, my mind conjuring images of Ben naked under the hot water when I close my eyes.

I let myself nap with those images playing in my mind. I woke myself up early to fix

him that breakfast after getting up to pee in the middle of the night and realizing the running water was back and the bathroom light worked. When I wake for the second time today, my neck aches from sleeping in a chair. The drumming of the shower has ceased. The light slashes in through the back door and windows, a harsh glare that glints off the snow. That glinting sunlight once looked like my salvation. Now, I root for the softening snow to hold on a little longer. Just one more day, one more hour, one more minute. I'll take anything it'll give me, but already the grass pokes through the snow in pockets of portentous green.

I haul myself out of the chair and throw on my hoodies and shoes. Fuck it, I'm bound to get soaked again going out there, but the shower works now. I'll be fine. Besides, I'm not going far this time. I'm not trying to escape. There's simply something I have to do while I have time.

Snow crumbles away from the back door when I slide it open, dissolving into a pile of slush. When I step outside, my foot goes straight through the paltry pile of snow, sinking down to the squishy, soaked grass. The mud clings to me more than the snow as I trudge across the yard. I scan the trees hanging over the huge space. I need one that's the right size and shape, but I end up making a circuit of the entire yard before I find it. It's not great, but I think it'll do the job.

When I return, I leave my shoes on the mat in the back so they can dry in the sun, but my socks are soaked through. I peel them off and drop them aside. No risk of hypothermia this time. The snow that Ben saved me from is barely more than a puddle. I never anticipated that when it melted away, it would dissolve my memories along with it. Once our parents are here, I can't reminisce. I can't think back on Scrabble beside the fire or that night in my bed. I know I'll get lost in the reverie and it'll show all over my face. Our parents will realize something happened if I'm anything but the loser partyboy they see me as. I probably can't even be kind to Ben once our parents arrive. They expect us to be enemies. In their minds, it's a miracle we didn't kill each other during our captivity.

Ironically, it might actually kill me convincing them of the opposite.

I know I'll have to do it, and I'm already dreading it. My mom knows all about my proclivities. She'd catch on the second I wasn't at Ben's throat. But I'm not ready to be that guy again. Trapped here in the snow, I let the persona fall. Ben saw sides of me no one has ever seen, not even my mother. I'm not ready to throw the walls back up and pretend I'm that other guy.

I pad barefoot into the kitchen, the bottom half of my jeans wet with snow. There, I dig around until I find the largest container in the entire house. It might be a pitcher for juice, I'm not sure, but it's the right size and shape. When I fill it with water and put the little branch I stole from the backyard inside, it does the job. I find a hand towel with Christmas trees on it and tuck it around the base of the vase like a tree blanket. Sitting there on the kitchen island, it doesn't look half bad. The vibes are distinctly "Charlie Brown," but for something I cobbled together out of whatever I could find in the backyard, it could be way worse.

There's one final piece. I go searching for the walking stick I left by the doorway, the one I've been picking at ever since I got stuck in the snow. I pull out my knife before I even reach it. There's a few final touches and it'll be perfect...

BEN DOESN'T COME DOWNSTAIRS for the rest of the day. I clean up my wet socks. I shave. I take my first shower in days, lingering under the hot water until I prune. I even clean up the bedroom I've been using, uselessly making the bed. Then I sit in the living room poking at a fire we don't need anymore, my heart bouncing around my chest like a ping pong ball.

Finally, a footstep creaks on the top stair.

My head pops up immediately, but Ben doesn't look at me as he descends. He goes straight for the kitchen, probably starving after skipping lunch in order to hide from

me. I jump up from where I sit on the living room floor, trailing after him into the kitchen.

“Hungry?” I say.

He keeps his back to me as he roots around in the refrigerator.

“Yes,” he says. “Are you?”

“Not really.”

I should be, but my stomach is so knotted up with anxiety that nothing else will fit. Ben hasn’t even glanced at the kitchen island and the haphazard display I built there. I should have known. It’s total shit. A guy this smart and competent isn’t going to be impressed by a stick in a tea pitcher. I guess I kinda hoped the thought behind it might count for something, but he still hasn’t noticed. In fact, he hasn’t looked away from the refrigerator.

I dare to creep up behind him. He’s wearing fresh jeans and a light hoodie over a T-shirt. Even with all that fabric, he flinches when I set a hand softly on the small of his back.

“Ben, will you talk to me?”

His shoulders stiffen, but he shuts the refrigerator and finally looks at me. What I find in his face nearly sends me reeling away from him. His gaze wavers. His brows draw close together. His mouth pulls into something between a grimace and a scream.

“What, Jett?” he says, his voice a rasp.

“Hey,” I say, taking his hands. “Hey, relax. Relax, okay? It’s not over yet.”

“What are we doing?” Ben says. “It’s only a matter of time. I talked to my dad and he said they’d be here tomorrow. It’s over. We’re idiots.”

“We aren’t idiots. You’re the smartest person I’ve ever met.”

“Not when it comes to this.”

His words punch me in the chest, nearly knocking the wind out of me. I could crumble to the floor, but I lock my knees and stay upright, mostly because it seems like he needs me to. Ben is fragile as a spiderweb caught between my fingers. One strong breath and he’ll drift away. All that time he spent locking himself away pretending he could save himself with his books, and he’s even worse off than me.

“Can I show you something?” I say.

He nods, and I tow him toward the kitchen island. His eyebrows raise when he finally notices the display on the table.

“What is that?” he says.

I wave at the branch I stuck in a pitcher, the kitchen towel wrapped around it, the small package bundled up in newspaper sitting at the base.

“A Christmas tree,” I say.

A startled laugh bursts out of him.

“Christmas isn’t until tomorrow,” he says.

“I know, but you said our parents will be here tomorrow, and I won’t have an opportunity to give you your present when that happens.”

He doesn't ask why. It's as obvious to him as it is to me. We don't need to speak to know we'll have to slip into our old roles. We'll have to be rivals, not lovers, polar opposites constantly at each other's throats. That Jett can't give Ben a Christmas present. It would be way too obvious. So I have to do it now, before the snow dissolves, before this moment preserved in ice melts away.

"At least open it," I say.

Ben is shaking his head. "How did you manage to get me a gift? We've been stuck here the whole time. It's impossible."

I wink at him. "You're forgetting about my secret talent."

Ben only looks more confused, but he takes the package under the "tree," weighing it in his hand. It won't feel like much, but hopefully that won't matter when he sees what it is.

Gingerly, he unwraps the newspaper. I couldn't find tape, so it truly is just a bundle of newspaper wadded around the object. Thank God whoever owns this place still gets physical newspapers. Not only did they help us build the fire that kept us warm, but I got to use it for this, too.

Ben's eyebrows shoot higher when he frees the object from the newspaper. He sets the paper aside and holds up a tiny wooden carving of a bird.

"It's like your tattoo," he says.

I can't help but beam. "Yeah. I couldn't see it, of course, but I used to doodle that bird all over everything. I had to do it from memory, though. I hope it's not too shit."

Ben strokes his thumb along the rough carving of the bird. It isn't finished, and I

would have tried way harder if I knew from the start that I was whittling it for him, yet he stares at it in fascination, hardly seeming to breathe.

“I, um, I started making it that day you found me outside in the snow,” I say to fill the silence. “I had that walking stick with me, and when I realized I was in a tough spot, I started whittling. It’s something I’ve always done, especially when I’m anxious or something. But I decided to finish it yesterday and it only seemed right that you should have it. Maybe it’ll help you remember...”

Me.

Maybe it’ll help him remember this me, the real me, even when I have to go back to being that other guy so the world doesn’t realize what we’ve done.

Ben finally looks up at me, still cradling the bird so gently in his hand, as though it’s a real bird and he’s scared to hurt it.

“I didn’t get you anything,” he says.

It’s my turn to laugh in surprise. “I know, dummy. I didn’t think you got me anything.”

“Then why?”

“Because I want you to have it. I want you to ... to remember this.”

He stares at me for a long, long moment, barely seeming to blink. Then he sets the bird on the island and steps into my space.

### Chapter Nineteen

#### Benjamin

JETT CATCHES ME THE moment before I fall against his lips. It's so easy to collapse against him, to cling to his shirt while soaking up the softness of his mouth. I thought I could start separating myself from this today, locking myself away from it so that when the inevitable end arrives, I'll be ready for it. But as I sink against Jett's mouth, I know nothing will ever prepare me to walk away from him. From us.

When we part, Jett cups my face, thumb rubbing against my cheek. I lean into the touch. It's become so familiar so quickly. I can't fathom how I'm going to live without it by tomorrow.

"We still have one more night together," Jett says.

The words sting. Even Jett's soothing touch can't quench the burn buried in my chest.

"There's one more thing I want to share with you, while we still have time," he says.

"Are you okay with that?"

I can't imagine saying no to anything he might propose. Every new adventure has been a wonder. He's made my body feel things I never thought it could.

"Of course," I say.

He smiles and takes my hand, leading me toward the stairs. So much for dinner, but

neither of us seem to care. When time is so fleeting and so precious, pausing even for a meal feels like a waste.

Jett brings me into his room. He nudges the door shut, which strikes me as strange at first. But no, it's not. Our parents will be here tomorrow. If we fall asleep in each other's arms again, that closed door might be all that saves us. He doesn't trust us to part as we should tonight, and frankly, neither do I.

Moonlight casts a cool glow against Jett's skin when he peels off his shirt. The light bounces off the remaining drips of snow, flooding through the window cool and cold. Jett's hands are warm as he eases me out of my shirt. He plucks my glasses carefully off my nose and folds them up before setting them on the dresser. His fingers tickle on my waist as he nudges me closer. He draws his finger along my neck, shivers rising in his wake. His mouth follows his touch, petals of warmth brushing my skin as he sinks lower and lower.

He drops all the way to his knees, holding me by the hips, and for a moment I think he's going to do what he did in front of the fire. My mouth waters. I never got to turn that around on him and try it for myself.

"No," I say, and he pauses, gazing up at me. "I never got to do it."

"I don't care about that," he says.

"Well, I do. What if this is my only chance?"

He doesn't respond. The reminder of that clock rapidly ticking down sobers his enthusiasm. I use the hesitation to get him onto the bed. He sits on the edge so that when I spread his knees open, I fit perfectly between them. Then I slide his jeans down, and there he is, hard and waiting for me.

I take him in my hand, unsure of what to do. All I have to go off is what he did yesterday, but I let instinct and desire guide me as I seal my lips tentatively over his head. He sucks in a sharp breath. Encouraged, I push deeper, getting more of him into my mouth, sliding all the way down to my hand. I thought it might be too much, but the fullness not only doesn't bother me, it feels ... kind of good? Something about him pressing against my tongue, filling up my mouth, scenting every breath lures me deeper instead of convincing me to back off.

I close my eyes and start to bob as Jett's moans patter down on my head like raindrops. He leans back on the bed, which creaks as he likely braces on his elbows behind him. His exhales are sighs; he's hot and salty in my mouth. I quickly find I can go all the way down to my hand, and that Jett will moan every time I do it.

He tangles a hand in my hair.

"Where the hell did you learn that?" Jett groans. "I thought you've never done that before."

I pop free of his cock to look up at him. "I learned from you."

He huffs a laugh and cups my face to draw me up to his mouth. He falls back as we kiss, so I'm perched over him on my hands. The darkness is deeper here under the bunk bed, but it doesn't hide the heat in his eyes.

"I want you to fuck me," he says.

I pause, heat flushing through me as my eyes go wide.

"I-I-I've never..." I stammer. This isn't a blowjob or some touching. This is a whole different level, one I have absolutely zero experience with. What if I screw it up? The consequences could be way worse than bad head.

“I know,” Jett says. “I’ll show you how to do it right.”

“Have you ever...”

“Yeah. Not that much, but enough, and I want to do it with you. If I don’t, if I never get the chance, I think the regret will kill me.”

“What if I hurt you?” I say.

“You won’t,” he says. “I know what I’m doing. I know what I like. You trust me, right?”

I nod.

“Then let me feel you inside me, Ben.”

Words and breath lodge in my throat. All I can do is nod again.

Jett shifts us around so I’m the one on my back on the bed. He leaves me there and goes to his duffel bag. My heart thuds as I contemplate what he must be looking for. Why did he even bring that stuff? Did he think he’d go into a town like Stone Valley and find some stranger who wanted to do this? Just how recklessly has he been living?

A protective urge wells inside me, but it’s one better stuffed down. By tomorrow, what he does and who he does it with won’t be my concern.

Jett returns, the sight of his naked body limned in cool moonlight distracting me from whatever he tosses on the bed. He starts kissing my neck, my chest, my abs.

“Left you too long,” he says, voice muffled against my skin. “You’re thinking again.”

I would laugh if he wasn't absolutely right. Any time he isn't touching me, the thoughts rush back in like water released from a dam. Soon, however, he's tugging my pants down, and I forget everything except the fact that we're both naked.

"Want you so bad," he groans. "Will you lick me? It gets me ready better than anything."

I nod, thinking he means his cock, but then he turns around and my eyes widen. His ass. His whole ass. Plump and firm and ... waiting. Waiting for me. I flash back to our first night. Lick him. That's what he means.

Nerves and desire clash within me, but I grab his ass. The moment my hands are full, the nerves quiet down. I crane forward, licking over him. I wasn't sure if I was aiming for the right place, but Jett's moan dispels my worries as my tongue leaves a trail of noisy destruction.

"Exactly like that," he says, far breathier than a moment ago.

I heed the instruction like this is my final exam. I guess it sort of is. Fortunately for him, I've always been a straight-A student.

I sink against him, tasting his warmth. Squeezing my hands gives me more of his toned ass. I can't believe anyone can actually build this much muscle in an ass, but Jett sure has, and it's a thrilling discovery, even as my tongue explores elsewhere. I lick over a tight yet soft ring of muscle, and Jett shudders in my grasp. Oh, that's nice. That's really nice. I love when those shivers race through him and into my hands, so I lick him again, exactly the same way I did before, and get not just a quiver, but a moan as well.

"Fuck," Jett rasps, and abruptly pulls away.

The suddenness startles me. “Did I do it wrong?”

He’s turning around, fiddling with a bottle of lube. “No,” he says as he tosses the bottle aside and reaches behind himself. “You were doing it too good. I wasn’t going to last if you kept going like that.”

I blink. But all I did was lick. I wasn’t even sure if I was in the right spot.

Jett doesn’t seem to care. His hand works behind him, and even I can guess what he’s doing. The thought of him reaching into himself, stretching himself open for me, makes my dick twitch as I gape at him through the dark.

A smile curls his mouth. “Like that, huh?”

He pulls his fingers free. Then he’s touching me, getting me ready. It feels wrong to just lie here and let him do everything, but as Jett speeds on, I begin to doubt I could stop him even if I wanted to. He’s the expert, and he deals with the practical parts of this with ease. Then he climbs over me, hunching in the cramped space of the bunk beds, bracing one hand beside my head as he reaches behind himself.

“Ready?”

I nod, and it turns out to be the greatest lie of my life.

The moment Jett sinks down, he knocks the breath from my lungs. Something hot and tight squeezes around the head of my cock. At the same time, Jett closes his eyes and groans between his teeth. All I can do is watch in rapt fascination as he pants with my head inside him, then sinks even lower. The pressure increases, his body wrapping around me like a hot, squeezing hand. It’s so tight it borders on unbearable, and I marvel that he’s still going, still sinking down.

By the time he fits all of me inside him, we're both panting. My body flushes with heat. I grabbed his thighs at some point, nails digging in like if I let go I might drift away. My head is swirling from the feeling of him clutching me inside him. Jett plants his other hand on the other side of my head, hunching over me, his shaggy hair falling into his face as he gasps down at me.

I reach up, cradling his face. The moonlight kisses his nose and forehead, dancing along his lips where they remain parted around ragged breaths. His eyes are cooler than usual, hardened amber preserving this moment inside them forever.

"Ben," he says.

Then he throws himself down at my mouth, and all I can do is catch him.

He kisses me furiously as he works himself on my cock. We moan into each other's mouths as he rocks. My hands slide around his back, nails digging into his heated skin.

Our mouths can't stay that way for long, not with how Jett is rocking us both with his thrusting. He can't move far like this, but it doesn't matter. Every single shift of his body makes the pressure within him change enough to snatch away my breath all over again.

Apparently, that isn't enough for him.

He breaks the kiss to push up on his hands, his head nearly hitting the bed above us. My hands fall to his thighs, which flex as he pushes himself up higher and falls back down on me harder. I cry out the first time he does it. The second time, my body arches into him, and he shouts almost as loudly as I do.

"Fuck, Ben, do that again," he groans.

Somehow, I understand through the haze. Even with my eyes snapped shut against the pleasure and my body reeling, I manage to gather myself enough to shove my hips at him the next time he sinks down. He cries out again, a sound I never would have suspected he could make, but one that is oh-so sweet.

I plant my feet under me, giving myself a bit of extra leverage. It isn't intentional. It's raw, stupid, thoughtless instinct, some animal urge I can't deny.

And it works.

When I use that leverage to shove my cock at him, Jett emits a long, low "fuuuuuuuck" before collapsing atop me. I take charge without thinking, wrapping my arms around him and continuing to thrust up at him. His moans are close to my ear now. His cock is trapped between us. Jett moans and moans every time I jerk up at him.

It becomes frantic, pathetic. We're whining and clawing at each other. I don't even know if I'd call what I'm doing thrusting. It's wild and ridiculous, yet it has both of us groaning so loudly the neighbors can probably hear. For right now at least, I can let that thought pass harmlessly by. Nothing matters but him. No one matters but him. Everyone else can wait until the morning.

The higher up he pushes himself, the deeper I can reach inside him. He starts to do just that, until he's basically sitting on me. I grab his cock without thinking, stroking him as I continue pistoning my hips.

For a moment, the rest of the world vanishes. There's nothing but him, hot in my hand, gripping my cock so tightly with his body, back arched in pleasure as the moonlight splashes against his bare skin. I marvel at him, at every straining muscle, at every wince as pleasure nearly overcomes him, at every moan as he works himself on me.

At the last moment, his eyes open a sliver, but it's enough for our gazes to lock together. Neither of us speak, but for a second, we both know. We know what this is, what it was, what it can never be. We know it's so much more than an accident or a mistake.

"Ben," he says, infusing the word with everything we've experienced these past several days.

Then his eyes slam shut as he breaks, and my world shatters into thunder.

He spurts over my hand, but I barely notice. His ass clenches around me, and my eyes slam shut as the bliss stops my heart. Everything in me goes rigid, my whole body tensing around a moment of exquisite pleasure. And then I'm falling, letting go, dissolving as release pounds out of me and into him. It feels like it goes on forever, like it's stripping something vital out of me, but I don't care. I welcome the crash when it comes, depositing me in a heap on that tiny bunk bed I share with Jett.

I'm still holding his softening cock. He's still perched over me on his arms. For a moment, we stare at each other, sweaty and filthy and boneless with pleasure. And then a smile cracks open his face, and we lie there giddy.

We don't say the words, but they ring out in every laugh.

### Chapter Twenty

Jett

THE DOOR WAKES US. Ben and I startle up in bed, groaning as we smack our heads against the frame above us. We slept tangled around each other, even though we knew the danger of indulging in that.

It seems that danger has arrived.

“Ben? Jett?”

My mom’s voice rings through the house.

“Shit,” I hiss. “Shit. Fuck.”

Ben evidently agrees. Both of us scramble out of bed, tripping over the sheets wound around our legs. His warmth sticks to my skin. His scent flavors my every breath, even as I claw through the clothes on the floor. I toss everything that’s not mine at him. Ben does likewise with my stuff, and we get dressed as quickly as we can. My shirt ends up on backward, but when shoes thud in the entrance hall, I don’t pause to fix it. There’s no time.

Ben grabs his clothes. He snatches his glasses, but doesn’t put them on. He crouches with me on the floor, staring at me for one long, breathless beat. This would be when he kisses me goodbye. This would be when we say our farewells. But those feet downstairs are moving, and we don’t have time for either.

We jump to our feet. I open the bedroom door so Ben can scurry out. I shut it the moment he's gone, then fly to the window and open it. Cold or no, I've got to air the room out as much as I can before our parents come up here. Fuck it, I might have to do more than air it out.

Thinking quickly, I go into my duffel bag and grab a pre-roll I bought before heading over here. I light it up right in the middle of the room, take a single huge puff and exhale. I set it aside to fix my backward shirt, then take a second hasty puff and blow it at the rumpled bed. With any luck, our parents will smell weed and not sex.

I curse when Mom taps at my door. I snuff out the pre-roll on the dresser, waving my arms around like I'm trying to dispel the scent.

She sighs as she opens the door.

"Jett, come on, this is a rental," she says. "It reeks in here."

I glance at the open window. "I was, um, airing it out?"

She rolls her eyes, but the ruse clearly worked. She might think I'm a fuck up, but at least she doesn't think I'm a fuck up who's sleeping with her boyfriend's son.

Paul pokes his head into the room beside her. He scrunches up his nose immediately.

"Jesus, Jett, we're renting this place," he says.

"I know, I know. I'm airing it out."

He sighs heavily.

"I'll take care of it later," Mom says, patting Paul's arm.

“Seems like they survived just fine out here,” Paul says wryly. “Maybe we should have left them to it.”

“Only if you want the cleaning fee doubled,” Mom says. “Anyway, Jett, do you know if Benjamin is up? We need to talk to both of you.”

“Probably,” I say with a shrug I hope looks casual. “He’s usually up before me.”

“Come to think of it, what are you doing up already?” Mom says. “It’s not even noon.”

“I was ... bored,” I say. “Not much else to do but sleep while the power was out. I guess I got a little too much rest.”

“Right. Did you have trouble staying warm?”

My mind flashes to that first night Ben and I spent in my bed, snuggling around each other. It was possibly the warmest, most comfortable night of my life.

“No,” I say. I do not elaborate.

“Well, good,” Mom says. “I’m going to make some hot chocolate. I brought the fancy kind that you like. Then we’ll chat when you’re both ready.”

“Sure,” I say, “I’ll go grab Ben and we’ll be right down.”

I realize my mistake a second too late. My mother and Paul both furrow their brows at me. Not only did I call him “Ben,” but I casually suggested fetching him. A week ago, I would have ignored his existence entirely. I probably would have started this conversation with all my grievances against him, but it’s too late for that now.

“My God, did you boys actually learn to cooperate while you were stuck here?” Paul says.

My stomach flips. Cooperate. Yeah. We cooperated a whole lot. I could go for way more cooperating, but even as a tingle tickles my gut at the thought, I know it’s impossible.

“We had to survive,” I say. “Plus, he had all the food.”

Paul chuckles. Placated, they leave me alone. I let out a held breath as they close my door and footsteps creak down the stairs. I may have bungled that a bit, but it was my first brush with my new reality. I’m not prepared to go back to calling him Benjamin and pretending I don’t know what he tastes like. I’m not prepared to go back to pretending I don’t care.

I tidy up the room a little, searching for any other incriminating evidence. We did a good job cleaning up. I’ll just have to make sure I leave with the trash from this room.

I leave the window open after my inspection. Even with the weed, this room could use a dousing of fresh air just in case. Don’t need my mom coming in here later and smelling something that’s not marijuana. The thought would be mortifying enough on its own, but the fact that it’s Ben makes it infinitely worse.

I realize I’m stalling when I catch myself remaking the bed. I don’t usually make it one time, let alone multiple.

I take a deep breath. Delaying won’t deny the inevitable. Our parents are already here. It’s over. I have to man up and make it official.

The march from my room to Ben’s right next door is how I imagine convicted

criminals feel marching to the gallows. No, I'm not being dramatic, thank you. I tap softly at his door, and he calls for me to come in. From the way his eyes widen behind his glasses, he must have assumed it was our parents.

"Hey," I say.

"Hey."

Ben stands stiff and awkward in the middle of his perfectly tidy room. His textbooks sit stacked on his desk. His bed lies unrumped. His clothes lay folded within his bag. It's perfect, but when I step closer, the immaculate facade cracks, strain showing around Ben's eyes and in the tightness of his mouth. I want to kiss away his anxiety, but dare not, stopping before I'm close enough to touch him.

"Our parents want to talk to us," I say.

"I expect they do."

"What do we do?"

He's always been the smart one, the one with all the answers, but he frowns at this question.

"We do nothing," Ben says. "We do whatever they ask. We have our 'family' Christmas like they want."

"Can you actually live with that?"

His throat works, the only sign he offers that it's just as tight as mine.

"We have to, Jett," he says. "We have no choice."

I give up, stepping into his space. “We aren’t related. They aren’t married. They aren’t even engaged. We’re just random people to each other.”

“They’re dating,” he says.

“So we have to be strangers?”

“Something like that.”

It comes out softened by emotion. I cup his face. He leans into the touch as he has so many times these past days as my thumb strokes his smooth cheek. When he meets my eyes, his waver with uncertainty. Looking into them is like watching his heart crumble right before me. Mine is just as cracked and fragile.

He leans in, kisses me softly, slowly. Ben lingers as long as he dares, setting his forehead against mine when our lips part.

“I’m sorry,” he says.

“I am too.”

He slips from my grasp, and the walls slam down immediately. His gaze is cold and distant, his face placid, empty. That kiss fades from his lips, leaving them dry.

I step back. It’s over. Really, truly over. There’s nothing we can do but march downstairs and face reality. We knew this moment was coming, but it doesn’t make it any easier to put my back to him and walk away. Somehow, it feels like crossing that room puts miles of distance between us, and not mere feet.

### Chapter Twenty-One

Benjamin

JETT'S KISS LINGERS ON my lips long after he leaves my room. I touch my own mouth, scared to wipe that kiss away, but desperate to cling to it in whatever way I can. I won't forget the feel of his mouth, I promise myself. No matter what diverging paths our lives set us on, I'll remember him. I'll remember this.

I glance at my bag. The bird he whittled for me lies tucked under my clothing. I hid it during the scramble this morning, terrified of my dad seeing it, but it's like I can see it through my T-shirts and sweatpants.

I want you to have it. I want you to ... to remember this.

"I will," I say softly. He can't hear me, and I can never tell him to his face, but I'll keep our promise regardless. Even when we leave this place, even when we're students living in our separate dorm rooms, even when we're polar opposites who are supposed to hate each other, I'll always remember the time we shared here. And when I graduate and move on with life, I'll take that little bird with me. No matter where I end up or who I end up with, I'll keep that piece of my life with me forever. It's hard to imagine anyone but him beside me, but it'll probably happen some day. We'll graduate. We'll move on. We might even move to different states. Who knows where my research could take me? As the ache fades, new people will fill those holes in our hearts. That's the way life goes. But he'll always be my first, and I'll always remember him.

I turn away, fighting down a rush of emotion as my imagination conjures up someone else taking his spot in my bed. It's hard to fathom sleeping on someone else's chest, having a different man's arm around my waist, tasting a stranger's kiss. The men in my imagination are faceless, shadowy figures, more figment than tangible human.

I shake my head, staring down at my feet as I take several deep breaths. Jett's feet pad down the stairs. If I delay too long, everyone will wonder where I am. I have no choice but to put myself together and join the rest of the family.

Is that what we'll be some day? If our parents continue dating, will this indiscretion go from a gray area to something far worse? What if my feelings don't fade like they're supposed to? What if my dad marries Charlotte and I still feel this way about Jett the whole time?

I shudder, but at least the fear gets me moving. I leave my room, which I've only slept in about half the time I've been here, and head downstairs. Everyone is in the living room, but I detour to the kitchen, getting myself a glass of water and ignoring the hot chocolate sitting out for me. My stomach can't handle the richness right now. Behind me, Jett is talking, but I tune out the words, at least until I hear him come up beside me at the sink.

He's standing way too close. When he reaches over me, his smell hits me, and my head goes light. He's holding a glass, but he doesn't actually fill it. It takes me another second to realize I'm the problem. I'm standing in front of the sink, mute and motionless as I stare empty-eyed at the stainless steel.

I scoot over too quickly. Jett starts the tap, but under the rush of the running water, he mutters, "You alright?"

"No," I say simply. What's the point in lying when it's so painfully obvious?

He turns off the water and sets his hand on the edge of the sink, right beside mine. As he tilts his head back to gulp down water, he reaches out with his pinky, brushing it against the side of my hand. Even that fleeting contact sends a wave of warmth rolling through me, and for an instant I feel a little less like crumbling to the floor in a pitiful heap.

“Me neither,” he says.

He turns away, striding back into the living room. For all the world, he looks and sounds like he’s completely fine. Is he that good at acting? I’ve never been one to pretend at feelings I don’t actually possess. Often, it’s gotten me in trouble. People call me blunt or mean, but I’m not trying to hurt anyone. I simply never learned how to be anything other than myself. How others go around wearing pleasant masks all day, I don’t know, but it never worked for me.

Which is going to make this chat in the living room really, really hard.

I top off my glass and head to the living room clinging to it. If I can’t falsify my emotions, perhaps I can hide them behind the glass as needed. It’s the only chance I have at concealing what happened these past several days.

Dad and Charlotte stand in front of the fireplace. The easy chairs sit off to the side. The piece of furniture most directly facing them is the couch. The couch where Jett already sits.

I have no choice, so I force my numb legs to take me to the couch so I can sink down on the far opposite end of it. At least this part will look believable to our parents. The Jett and Benjamin of a week ago would definitely place themselves as far apart on this couch as we could. For very different reasons, perhaps, but hopefully the effect is the same.

Our parents make no indication that they notice anything amiss. Once I sit, they shoot each other a nervous look. Charlotte is wringing her hands and standing a full step away from my father, who stuffs his hands in his pockets. Like me, he wears glasses, but his hair is darker than mine, and he's never without his five o'clock shadow, even first thing in the morning. Charlotte, meanwhile, clearly had a big influence on Jett. Her curly brown hair spills past her shoulders. Her eyes match his, bright, rich amber like tree sap.

"Okay, so, what in the world happened?" she says. "Are you both alright? When we found out you were trapped it was bad enough, but I almost called emergency services when I heard about the power outage. How did you stay warm?"

Drink number one. I raise my glass and down a gulp of water before I can flush from that question. Because the way we stayed warm that first night is definitely not something I can disclose.

Fortunately, Jett is steadier than me. "Relax, Mom. We're obviously fine. You saw that we had that fire going."

"But you couldn't shower," Charlotte says. "You couldn't cook. You couldn't do anything. What did you do all that time?"

"I mostly slept," Jett says. "Ben-jamin," he clearly reminds himself to say the whole thing instead of just "Ben," "I guess he studied or something."

He doesn't look at me when he waves dismissively. It's very nearly the old Jett, the one from before all this.

"How was your food supply?" Dad says.

"I took care of it," I say. "I had a spreadsheet. We had more than enough, even

without the ability to cook.”

Dad sighs. “I’m so sorry, Benjamin. It shouldn’t have been on you to survive a situation like that. Thank God you came here prepared.”

“Definitely came in clutch,” Jett says. When our parents both look at him, startled, he hastily adds, “I mean, in a nerdy way. Spreadsheets and all of that.”

I push my glasses up my nose to hide a smile. “It worked, in any case.”

“Right, yes,” Dad says. “And we brought a ton of groceries with us. We’ll be making a huge dinner tonight to make up for you boys surviving on peanut butter sandwiches.”

The conversation dies. Dad and Charlotte share a look. I want to do the same with Jett, especially as unspoken words clutter up the air. There’s something more they aren’t telling us, but I can’t even guess what it is. Unless they know somehow. The thought sends a cold trickle down my spine, like an ice cube slipped into the back of my shirt. Dad swallows, then he clears his throat.

“So, um, there was one other thing we wanted to discuss.”

Charlotte sighs. “We know we brought you out here to try out a family Christmas, but ... it seems that won’t be possible.”

This time I do look at Jett, unable to control the urge. The same question lies scrawled across his face. Do they know? Have we ruined Christmas with our indulgences?

Charlotte steps closer to my father, taking his hand in hers. “So, listen, boys, back when we booked this, six months ago or so, Paul and I really, really wanted to make

this work. We believed we could make it work. We were thinking of next steps, but we decided we needed to have everyone together for a holiday before we did anything drastic. This is your lives too. It wouldn't effect only us if we decided to ... move things forward."

"But," Dad says, "things ... didn't go as planned in the past few months. It was too late to cancel the trip, but it was starting to become clear to both of us that..." Dad looks into Charlotte's eyes, smiling sadly, smiling the way I must have smiled at Jett up in my room. "We're not right for each other."

The words hit like a bomb dropped in the middle of the room. I gape, making no attempt to keep my eyebrows from climbing toward my hair. Jett's mouth hangs open, and he blinks far too much.

"Wait, are you saying..." he starts. "Are you saying ... you broke up?"

Dad and Charlotte nod at each other, eyes still locked, hands still clasped.

"It wasn't going to work," Charlotte says softly. "We want different things out of life." She finally looks back at Jett and I. "But we're still friends. There's no bad blood between us at all."

Dad nods. "I still care about Charlotte, and I still care about you, Jett. That hasn't changed. That's why we went through with the trip, so you boys can know that everything is fine. You did nothing wrong. This is between Charlotte and I, but we can still have a great Christmas here together. None of that will change. Of course, we were hoping this trip might be a little more peaceful and a little less ... trapped in a blizzard with no power, but we couldn't control the weather."

My mind is whirling. I barely hear him. Dad's words turn into static when they hit my brain. I set my water glass aside, afraid it will slip from my limp fingers if I don't.

They're not together. It's over. They aren't dating. There's no possibility of them getting married or anything like that. They're just friends. That fighting I overheard every time I called my dad this week, it wasn't merely tension because of the storm. Things must have been that way for a while. I was only witnessing a brief glimpse.

Which means Jett and I...

I sneak a glance at him. He meets my eyes for a single beat before I hurriedly look away.

No, it would still be too weird. It would still be such a drastic shift. If we got together right away, our parents would have to be fools not to realize something happened during the blizzard, and I can't live with that. I don't know exactly what this means for our situation, but it's not as simple as our parents breaking up and us miraculously beginning to date.

I jerk to my feet.

"Benjamin?" Dad says.

I can feel Jett staring at me from where he sits on the couch, but I ignore him and my father both as I stride away.

"I think I need a minute," I say.

No one calls out after me as I charge up the stairs and into the room I claimed when I arrived here. I throw the door shut, my heart thudding in my ears. Is this the end? Or has Jett and I's story just begun? I don't know, and my head is too screwed up for me to figure it out. Regardless of our parents, our situation will never be quite that simple.

### Chapter Twenty-Two

Jett

PAUL AND MOM MAKE dinner that night, a truly enormous meal that includes steak, potatoes, asparagus soaked in butter, the works. They even pull out cheesecake for dessert. After all those days of peanut butter sandwiches and instant ramen, it's a true feast.

Part of me misses the peanut butter and ramen, though.

Ben and I speak as little as possible that day. We don't fight, which I suppose we should if we truly want to convince our parents nothing happened, but neither of us seem to have the heart for it. We stay quiet instead, and our parents seem to interpret that as exhaustion due to our "harrowing adventure."

The news echoes in my head all day. I sneak glances at Ben, wondering if he heard what I heard, wondering if his head is spinning the way mine is. Our parents are through. They aren't dating anymore. They've called it off for whatever reason. When they cook us dinner, they do it as friends, joking, jabbing each other playfully with their elbows. Their relationship didn't work out, but they hold no bitterness.

And Ben and I are free to do whatever we want.

He has to be thinking it too. The moment our parents finished talking with us, he ran up to his room to hide, only returning when his dad called him down for dinner. He ate sullenly, staring at his plate. That was the moment I probably should have given

him shit to convince our parents that nothing had changed, but I couldn't bring myself to do it when he couldn't even lift his eyes from his asparagus.

After dinner, we all eat cheesecake in the living room while watching a cheesy Christmas special on television. Ben chooses one of the arm chairs, curling his legs up to make himself small. His eyes never leave the screen.

I sit beside my mother, equally quiet. Though I stare at the screen, I don't see a single thing happening on it.

The next day, I come downstairs to find my makeshift Christmas tree still sitting in its pitcher on the kitchen island. I should have gotten rid of the damn thing. The sight of it stings my chest like a jab from an enormous bee. But it's far too late now, especially because wrapped gifts rest all around it. My mom or Paul apparently also found some simple string lights to carefully drape over it.

"I'm told this was your idea," Mom says as I trudge sleepily into the kitchen.

"The tree? I guess so. It's just a branch from the backyard. I was bored."

I certainly can't tell her I made that "Christmas tree" for the sake of giving Ben a gift, a gift I hope he'll always remember me by.

"It's nice," Mom says. "Very 'Charlie Brown.'"

I chuckle. "That's what I thought too."

"Do you want coffee?"

"God, yes."

The day is a little more bearable with caffeine. I add a couple gifts around the tree, stuff I got for Paul and Mom. I didn't bring anything for Ben, and he didn't bring anything for me. At the time, that sort of gesture would have been unthinkable. Besides, I gave him his gift in private.

We gather on the stools around the kitchen island and open gifts one by one, even though we technically missed Christmas by a day. Yesterday was already a lot without adding a major holiday to it, however. Mom got me a new scarf, as well as a video game I've been eyeing for a while. Paul got Ben a new pair of binoculars that look powerful enough to pick out individual rocks on the moon. I whittled something for my mom. She's always liked handmade stuff. It's just her cat, but she squeals over it and hugs me tight enough to crush my bones. I also got her an e-reader for all those books she devours.

The gifts go on until the tidy presents sitting under the tree turn into a pile of paper and cardboard. Paul gets up to make everyone breakfast while the rest of us clean up. Ben still doesn't speak to me, but maybe it's because we're in front of our parents. It has to be. I need it to be. Because if there's some other reason for his silence, it's nothing good.

He vanishes again after breakfast, back up to his room, back up to his books. I struggle not to watch him go, my chest all tight and achy when his bedroom door shuts.

I struggle to find something to do with myself that day. All I want is to talk to Ben, figure out where his head is at. We have a chance now, a real chance. Maybe we would need to play it cool for a little while, but in a week, a month, two months we could be doing whatever we want. We could be together if we wanted.

His silence crawls through me like tree roots pushing up and cracking pavement. Every moment we don't speak, a new fissure appears. Maybe he doesn't want to be

together. Maybe he never wanted to be together. Was this nothing more than an experiment for him, a momentary lapse in judgment? I struggle to reconcile that image with what happened over the past several days. Overlaying that Ben atop the Ben gasping and groaning in my bed is like crossing my eyes to try to make sense out of one of those Magic Eye pictures. I give myself a headache before I manage to reconcile the images.

I head outside at some point, shoveling the slushy snow out of the driveway to make it easier when we leave here tomorrow. When I parked in this driveway, I never imagined I'd be so reluctant to get out of here, but even with the cold biting my bare hands and the tip of my nose, I'd give just about anything for a second blizzard. Even with our parents here, something of the magic of this past week remains. The moment we drive away, it'll be gone for good, no more substantial than the melted snow.

TOMORROW ARRIVES ALL TOO swiftly. I wake to the sound of quiet discussions. When I pad downstairs, bags sit in the hall. The kitchen is sparkling clean. Every pillow and coaster has returned to its proper place.

Mom bustles up to me. "I made you coffee," she says, "but can you go get your sheets off your bed? We have to start a load of laundry before we leave. Benjamin already threw his in before leaving."

"He left?" I can't keep the hurt out of my voice as my heart plummets into my feet.

Thankfully, Mom doesn't seem to notice. "Yeah, he was up early. Said he wanted to get back before noon if he could."

The news strikes like a punch to the chest. I'm winded from standing still in front of my mother. I drag myself numbly back up the stairs and yank the sheets off the bed, the sheets we slept in, the sheets that still smell like the two of us, no matter how I tried to cover the scent with weed. I hold them bundled in my arms and, in a moment

of weakness, shove my nose into them and breathe deeply. I close my eyes as memories flood through me, memories Ben is apparently more than happy to sprint away from as quickly as he can.

Is it really that easy for him? I'm here sniffing sheets and he's speeding back to his normal life, locking himself up with his books to forget all about me. Did these past several days truly mean nothing to him? It seemed like they did. It seemed like they mattered. But I'm beginning to question everything I thought I learned about him.

I haul the sheets downstairs and throw them into the washing machine before I can linger any longer. I start up the wash. Water gushes into the machine, stripping away the final traces of the time Ben and I shared together.

I don't hang around long after that. I accept coffee, but not food, packing up my stuff and getting out of the house as soon as I can. I help Paul and Mom with some of the clean up, but Ben apparently took care of a lot of it before he made his escape this morning. By noon, I'm alone in my car, winding through the sleepy resort town of Stone Valley.

Snow still dusts the sides of the mountains when I reach the pass, but the road itself lies clear. I drive through nothing worse than a bit of slush that dampens the roadway.

I go straight back to Denver, to my mom's house. There are a few days left in the break, but I have no idea what to do with any of them.

At first, I simply get high and play that new game Mom got me. The time slips by, and I don't hear from Ben even once. I think about texting him myself, but the thought of getting confirmation of his rejection scares me worse than the silence, so instead I say nothing.

Then it's time to head back to school. My stomach twists up at the thought. We both

only have one semester left, but we'll spend it in the same block of dorm rooms. There will be no avoiding each other, no forgetting that the other lives down the hall. We will have to see each other, and I have no idea whether Ben will even meet my eyes when we do.

My roommate Ryan notices my foul mood immediately.

"Damn, someone needs to get laid," he declares during our first night back in our room.

"Shut up," I grumble.

"Ha! So it's true."

"It's not true."

"No?" he says with a raised eyebrow. "Got some action during the break? Who was it? Don't tell me it was that weird freshman."

I roll my eyes. "It was none of your business, that's who."

Ryan flops onto my bed next me. "Of course it's my business. C'mon, man, why so secretive?"

I sigh. Usually I'd tell him all about my escapades. I don't know how to explain that this is the one time I can't kiss and tell.

"Holy shit, was it serious?" Ryan says. "No way. Did you fall for someone?"

"Will you shut up?" I snarl. "Don't be stupid." Even though he's completely right, I'll never admit it to him.

Ryan slaps me on the shoulder and hops back up. “Well, whatever, man. Listen, I’m going to a little thing tonight. A couple of those sorority girls down the hall are having a get together. Just a handful of us. You should come. Might get your mind off of...” He waves a hand vaguely. “Whoever did this to you.”

“Whoever did this to me” happens to be a guy who lives just down the hall, a guy I professed to hate mere weeks ago. Ryan would never believe me if I told him the truth. At this point, with Ben’s icy silence, I barely believe it.

“Fine,” I say. “You’re right. I do need to get this out of my system.”

Ryan grins. “Atta boy! I’m heading over now, but text when you’re on your way. Room 403.”

“Sure, got it.”

I hunch forward onto my knees after Ryan leaves, sorely tempted to bury my head in my hands and never come out, but he’s right. I need to go out tonight. I need to flirt, to drink, to meet other people. It’s the only way I’ll have any hope of shaking off this thing with Ben. It’s the only way I’ll stop missing him.

### Chapter Twenty-Three

#### Benjamin

I PACE MY DORM room. I fought hard to get a single, so thankfully there's no one to see me anxiously repeating the ten steps between the door and the window over and over. I got here early, settling back in before anyone else returned to the college, but now voices echo in the halls as friends reunite and students settle back in for their spring semester.

I can't escape this any longer.

I thought I could. Back in Stone Valley, in the house, I thought if I drove away it might clear my head, but the whole way from the door of the house through the pass and back to Dad's house, my mind churned. I replayed every moment of those days Jett and I spent snowed in, searching for cracks, desperate for a reason to walk away.

I never managed to find one.

Our parents broke up, but reality crashed in regardless, an avalanche crushing me under its weight. I can't do this. I've never done this. What happened in that house during the blizzard was an aberration, one I can't possibly bring into the real world. I mean, how would it even work? What would people think if they saw Jett and I together after we spent the past three and a half years at each other's throats? They wouldn't understand. They'd judge. They'd assume. And I ... I'm completely inexperienced in this arena. I don't know what I'm doing. Back in Stone Valley, it was pure instinct. There was no one around to see, no one around to look at us funny

or ask probing questions. Here, we'll enjoy no such luxury.

Yet despite all of that, I haven't stopped thinking about him. When I lay down in bed at night, I shiver without his body beside me. When I dream, his eyes stare back at me, probing into my heart, asking why I ran, demanding answers. I wake shaken and shivering, hardly able to keep down a cup of coffee, let alone a meal.

After days of this, I'm finally putting an end to it. I owe him answers, if nothing else. I owe him an ending, if that's where this is going. I owe him better than silence.

I finger a small wooden bird, whittled with care from a stick found on the side of the road. It sits on my dresser, greeting me each morning, watching over me at night. I haven't been able to tuck it away and try to forget about it. I stow it in my pocket, clutching it for strength as I force myself out of my room.

My footsteps sound loud in my own ears as I pace down the hall, counting the numbers on the doors. 427, 428, 429. I stop in front of 431 and suck down a deep breath. No one bothered to greet me in the hall, though a girl a couple doors away eyes me suspiciously as I pause in front of Jett's door with my fist raised as though I mean to knock. I want to hunch and flinch away. She finds my being here weird, I know she does. Everyone does. This is all unfathomable and weird and wrong to them and I—

The door opens. I startle, my fist still raised, as Jett blinks at me in surprise.

"Um, hi?" he says.

He wears jeans and shirt that shows off his strong arms and broad chest. His hair lies a bit more neatly around him, and a cool, minty scent of aftershave wafts off him.

"You were going out somewhere," I say. "I'm sorry. I should..."

I finally lower my hand, spinning on my heel so I can run away. Of course he was going out. He's back in his domain. He probably has eight different people trying to hook up with him tonight, and here I am acting like he'd actually want to talk to me instead.

He grabs my wrist before I make it even a step away from his door.

"Ben, don't," he says.

I pause, my back to him, my wrist caught in his steady grip. I glance down at the connection, skin tingling.

"Why did you come here?" Jett says.

I turn toward him. That girl down the hall is still watching us, even more suspicious than before. My throat closes up.

"Can I come in?" I say.

Jett's gaze flickers down the hall toward our nosy onlooker. "Yeah, come on."

He tugs me into his room before releasing me and shutting the door. More than just Jett's clothes lie scattered on the floor. The rest must belong to his roommate Ryan, but it's tough to tell one heap of dirty laundry from the next. Empty liquor bottles litter the dresser, and the desks hold video game consoles and televisions rather than books.

Jett rushes around, gathering dirty clothes and throwing them into a pile off to the side. He gathers a couple of the liquor bottles, tossing them noisily into the trash.

"Sorry," he says, "I would have cleaned up but..."

But I've barely spoken to him since our parents arrived at that cabin. But we've hardly seen each other in all that time. But he never expected me to come back. I understand, but it stings all the same.

"It's okay," I say.

A single struggling lamp lights the room. I suppose that was all Jett was going to leave on after heading out on the night's adventure. That wane light casts his face into shadow, rendering him unreadable.

"So?" he says. "What are you doing here, Ben?"

Ben. It's so good to hear him call me "Ben" again and not "Benjamin" like he had to in front of our parents. That tiny slip gives me the confidence to speak.

"I felt like things were ... unresolved," I say.

He snorts. "That's putting it mildly."

My gaze falls to my feet. Hurt tightens his voice, leaves it brittle. Hurt that I caused by running.

"I'm sorry," I say. Because those are the most important words to get out today. "I'm really sorry, Jett. I just ... didn't know what to do. When our parents arrived, I freaked out. Then they said they broke up, but I still didn't know... I don't know how to do this. I've never done any of it. I don't know how to ... be with someone. And our circumstances make that even more complicated. So I ran. I'm a coward, I know, but I—"

His hand cupping my face cuts me off. My eyes jerk back up to find him standing close, his thumb stroking my cheek as it did so many times back in Stone Valley. I

lean into the touch without thinking.

“Do you trust me?” he says.

“What? Yes, of course I do.”

“Do you trust that I could take care of you if we were together? Do you trust that I’d take care of you regardless of what anyone else said or thought or did?”

“Yes, but...”

“But what, Ben? What else is there? What else matters?”

I hesitate, flailing for words. This all seemed so huge and scary and overwhelming only a few minutes ago, but when he holds me, when he gazes deeply into my eyes, when he promises to take care of me, all of my concerns wither, small and insignificant.

“No one will understand,” I say. “We hated each other the last time they saw us. Our parents were dating the last time they saw us. That girl in the hall—”

“Fuck that girl in the hall,” Jett says. “Fuck all of them. Who cares if they understand? We’re only here for one more semester, Ben. Then we get to leave and start our lives. And I ... I’m not sure I can do that without you anymore.”

I struggle to breathe. I stare wide-eyed at him, his words echoing in my head. He can’t move on without me? He can’t live his life without me? That’s ... that’s insane. It’s ridiculous. It’s...

“I feel the same,” I say, quiet, shocked, unsteady on my feet. “I think I might love you, Jett, but I’ve never felt that way about anyone. What if I’m wrong?”

He smiles, his free hand sliding around my waist to pull me closer. “You’re never wrong, Ben. You’re the smartest person I’ve ever met. I think you ought to trust yourself once in a while.”

He leans forward, kissing me. The moment his lips reach mine, everything melts away. The world and all its prying eyes seem trivial. That girl in the hall, the other students, our parents — they fade into background noise. Let them think whatever they like. There’s nowhere I should be but in his arms.

“And, Ben,” he says when we part, “I love you too. For the record.”

I don’t get a chance to do more than gasp at his boldness. Then he’s kissing me again, walking me backward until I hit the edge of the bed. We fall to the mattress while barely breaking the contact, his larger body pinning mine down, his weight so solid and real atop me. I throw my arms around his back, clinging to his shirt. I can’t believe I ran from this. I can’t believe I held myself away from him for even a few days. Right now, enveloped in his embrace, it seems ludicrous that I’d want to be anywhere else.

He pauses, pushing himself up on his arms. His eyes dart downward, but before he can move that direction, I halt him with a hand on his arm.

“Didn’t you want to go out and have fun tonight?” I say. “You shaved and stuff.”

Jett chuckles, grinning broadly. “You’re here. Where the hell else could I possibly want to be?”

He kisses me swiftly, then follows the path of his hungry gaze, pushing my shirt up as he shuffles downward on the bed. It’s still a twin, but it feels spacious after all that time we spent on a bunk bed. He pulls my shirt off, then kisses all over my chest, licking as he trails lower. Yet right at my waist, he pauses, muttering a curse before

he jumps out of bed.

I push up onto my elbows, watching him anxiously, but he simply grabs a sock off the floor and rushes to the door, tying it around the handle before closing and locking the door again. He winks when he turns back to me.

“Just in case Ryan comes back early,” he says.

Even lying here shirtless, I flush anew. A sock on the door. I’ve seen it, but I never thought I’d be the cause of it.

Jett peels off his shirt as he stalks back to the bed, and all stray thought flees my mind at the sight of his hard chest. He positions himself over me, indulging in another long, deep kiss before trailing down my neck and going right back to where he was before he interrupted himself.

This time, when he reaches my waist, he doesn’t pause. The jeans come off, as well as my briefs beneath them. Jett pushes one of my knees back, turning me slightly onto my side as he settles himself between my legs.

I suck in a breath as he sets his sights lower.

“Problem?” he says.

“N-no,” I say. “No problem.”

Thank God I showered recently, I suppose. I wasn’t counting on anything like this, but Jett doesn’t seem to care either way. He takes my words as assent, sinking down to lick along my hole, then higher, all the way up to my sac. He takes the delicate skin gently into his mouth, sucking lightly until I groan. Then he lets go, licking around and between, exploring lazily with tongue and lips.

I lie back and pant, closing my eyes against yet another new experience. I didn't really think about licking there, too, but it seems there's no part of me Jett will hesitate to taste.

He sucks and pulls, presses harder with his tongue, and I squirm until he holds me tighter to keep me where he wants me. I grip the bed under me, my head spinning from how quickly this went from a nervous, anxious confession to heat and touch and physicality. It seems we rarely escape this rapid escalation, like our bodies can't help snapping together like magnets any time we're near enough. How we held off during those final days in Stone Valley, I'm not sure, but as Jett renders me speechless with his devious tongue, it starts to seem like a miracle we didn't break sooner than this.

He stops, but the reprieve doesn't last long. I barely manage to open my eyes and catch my breath before he's going lower again, his ravenous mouth seeking out yet more of me. No matter how I writhe, I can't escape. He always seems to lick at the most sensitive parts of me, the parts aching and trembling from stimulation.

Here at school, I try to quiet myself, but the moans bubble up in my throat all the same. I can't keep them all back, so I suppose that girl out in the hall will have to reconcile with what she's likely hearing. If the secret wasn't out before, it certainly is now.

Jett presses harder with his tongue, and my body relents. It's still a wonder to me how easily that happens, how eager I am to relax under his touch. I wouldn't have thought it possible if he hadn't done it to me so many times. Somehow, if it's him, it always works.

His tongue probes into me, my tension giving way when he pushes. It leaves me gasping and groaning, my body burning hot. I reach for myself, aching for relief, but the moment I do he stops, snatching my wrist to keep my hand away from myself.

Jett still holds one of my legs up. He sits up a bit to look down at me as he speaks.

“I want to do something else this time,” he says.

“Anything,” I say. Because what wouldn’t be incredible if it involved him?

Yet he hesitates, uncertain. “Are you sure? I was thinking we could...” He takes a breath. “I want to be inside you. I want to show you how good that can feel.”

Nerves clutch my chest. I didn’t consider that possibility tonight. It seemed like something distant, something I might try some day in the faraway future. Yet I discover that that tightness in my chest isn’t nerves alone. There’s more, a tingling anticipation that warms my whole body.

“If you don’t want to—”

“No,” I cut in. “I do. I mean, I think I do. I’ve considered it. Especially after that other night.” The night I did it to him, the night I was inside him. It was incredible, and a piece of me couldn’t help wondering what the other way would feel like. All that moaning and writhing and clawing certainly made it seem like he was enjoying it.

“I’ll go slow,” he says. “And if it isn’t working, it isn’t working. There’s nothing wrong with that.”

“I know,” I say, but even as I speak, I desperately want it to work. I want to share everything I can with him, including this.

“Okay,” he says, smiling before he kisses me on the thigh. “Give me a second.”

He leaps off the bed, scrambling around under it, where he apparently keeps his

supplies. I try not to look too closely, try to remain relaxed and loose, but anticipation tightens my gut. What if I'm bad at this somehow? What if I don't know what I'm doing and screw it up? What if I hate it and have to ask him to stop?

I yelp when Jett kisses along my inner thigh. He's between my legs again, holding one up, turning me slightly back onto my side.

"Hey," he says, "no overthinking. Just feel, okay? I'm gonna take care of you."

"Okay," I say, but he must hear the nerves in my voice because he lowers his head back down.

At first, I barely react to his tongue swirling around me once more. Soon, however, the sensation of his mouth overwhelms my anxious thoughts like water boiling over the edges of a pot. He moans against me, his voice rumbling into me, and soon my cares melt away as quickly as they arose.

Jetts pulls away. He shifts, moving closer. He holds one leg and straddles the other. I gasp when the head of his cock kisses my slick, loose rim. He's even more slick, and when he rubs his hand over me, it adds yet more lube to the equation.

He aims his cock at me, but at first just pushes the head at me, letting me feel the resistance, the size. I gulp at his thickness, even as I will myself to relax. Because, I realize with a start, I do want this. I really want this. Every time his cock pushes at me, a tiny bit more gets inside, and it only ignites my curiosity more.

Then he stops merely playing, steadying his cock in his hand and pushing with intent. I tense at first, then will myself to relax, to endure the strangeness, the stretch, the sensation of pinching. Part of my brain howls at the weirdness of this moment, screaming that things do not go that way, that simply cannot be right, but I gaze up at Jett's eyes, focusing on him, letting the thoughts fade away into the background. And

before I realize it, the head of his cock is inside me. It's actually inside me.

He pauses. For a moment, we simply breathe at each other. Jett seems as stunned as me, and while I wouldn't describe it as entirely comfortable, it's not horrible, either. It's ... new. It's different. My brain doesn't know what to make of this sensation quite yet, but my body is burning around him, and my cock juts at my belly.

"My glasses," I say lamely.

Jett blinks, then barks a startled laugh. I can feel that laugh inside me as it shifts his cock. We both gasp, and Jett steadies himself so he doesn't go deeper before I'm ready.

"Leave them on," he says. "They're cute."

Cute. Warmth washes through me at that description. I never thought of them as anything but necessary, but if Jett likes them, I suppose there's no harm in leaving them on in this position.

The momentary pause helped without me even realizing it. My body isn't trying to clutch around him so hard. It's adjusted to that sensation of intrusion, some of the instinctual wrongness quieting.

Then Jett gives me more.

He goes slow, but that only means I feel each and every inch. He watches my face the entire time, his eyes never leaving mine, and somehow that gives me the confidence to continue. I know the slightest flinch would stop him, but the more he goes, the less I want him to pause for my sake. Already, my body burns with promise. Sure, this is new, strange, even uncomfortable at points, but it's also so much more than that. The inklings of pleasure stir inside me, a deep pleasure that's so different from anything

I've experienced with him so far.

He stops again when he's all the way inside me, his cock filling me up. He braces one arm beside me, searching my face for pain or distress.

"Okay?" he says, but he's not as steady. The word arrives a bit ragged, blown hotly against my face.

"Okay," I say, but mostly because I want so badly to see where this leads, to give him what he wants, to experience the high he promised me. If he says it can happen this way, I believe him.

"God, you're tight," he groans. "We should ... should wait."

It's getting harder for him to do that. I can see it, hear it. The strain twists all through his face. Yet he holds back for my sake, to ensure this is good for me. I don't know if that's possible. Isn't this the kind of thing that takes a bit more trial and error, a bit more figuring out? It's okay if it's not perfect the first time. I know we'll get it eventually, and now we have plenty of time to do so.

I reach up, cupping his face, rubbing my thumb against his smooth cheek, freshly shaven for a party he never went to tonight, a party he skipped for me.

"You don't have to wait," I say. "I'm okay."

"I know it's weird the first time, but I promise I'll make you feel so good."

"I know."

He smiles, but it's tight, like he's barely holding himself back.

“Ben,” he breathes, and leans down to kiss me.

The motion bends my leg back even farther, but I hardly notice because of the way it also shifts his cock in me. Before he ever reaches my lips, I’m gasping at the tightness as my body bends and his cock moves, the pressure pressing deep inside me. In the end, he has to let that leg down, turning me entirely on my side, but he doesn’t seem to care as long as he can seal his mouth against mine.

He groans as he starts rocking his hips.

The motions are small with him leaning over me, but it doesn’t matter. Every shift shivers through me, my body blazing from the new sensation. The slight back and forth of his hips is strange and confusing at first, but as my body heats up, the feeling grows into so much more than befuddlement. Friction sparks within me, like that tentative fire we built back in the house in Stone Valley. The way Jett moves nurtures the fragile flame, helps it catch on the tinder within me and grow and grow.

And soon it’s ... good. Soon my brain has forgotten all about the strangeness, all about the lack of familiarity. Soon the rolling of Jett’s hips comes to mean bursts of white hot pleasure.

Jett pushes up on his hands. It gives him more leverage, allowing him to pull back farther and thrust in deeper. I cry out the very first time, racked by a jolt of pleasure that nothing in my life has prepared me for. I know he’s holding back. I can see it in the strain bulging in his arms as he props himself up.

“More,” I say, hoping to free him from his reticence.

He grabs my leg again, holding it up from under the knee. He sits all the way up, and I grab at the sheets as he looms over me. He teeters on the edge, trembling from his efforts at restraint, but his hesitance is bordering on edging the longer he goes without

giving us both what we need.

“Jett,” I say. “Please, Jett. Just fuck me already.”

His next thrust knocks a shout from my throat and jolts me on his bed. The furniture creaks, but my voice rings out far louder. Anyone out in the hall surely knows what’s happening in this room, but I couldn’t care any less. His cock fills me to bursting, stretching me wide as he dives back into me, and something inside me screams for more. I squeeze my eyes shut, arching into his thrusts, writhing on his cock as he finally drives into me with abandon.

My brain goes blank. The scratch of ragged breaths fills my ears. Moans cloud the room, my own, Jett’s, I can’t tell the difference anymore. I have no control over the sounds gusting out of me. Every stroke of his cock pummels some new noise from my throat, even as it torments my body with a swell of stimulation. Every nerve ending feels more alive, more sensitive, more reactive than ever before. A single breath could annihilate me, which makes the plunging of Jett’s cock a sweet sort of obliteration. I’m breaking. I’m shattering. I’m losing myself among this storm howling inside my body. But I’m not actually afraid of who I’ll be on the other side of this. No matter what, Jett will be here with me.

I force my eyes open and find him watching my face, his attention rapt. His hips keep rolling, never letting up that steady, punishing beat that’s knocking every thought out of my brain. But, I realize with a start, I’m not actually fully hard.

“Touch yourself,” Jett rasps. “I want to see you come ... come like this.”

I fumble for myself. My limbs hardly feel like they belong to me. My body has been entirely in Jett’s care throughout this. I’m speared on his cock, rocking as he thrusts into me with desperate purpose.

When I grab myself, my hand is almost like a stranger's. I'm so out of my body, out of my head, that another point of contact blinds me like the sun suddenly glaring into my eyes. I stroke anyway because it feels right and good and like it might actually get me what I need so, so badly. Jett watches every motion, encouraging me along, and soon we're moving in sync without a coherent word passing between us. His thrusting and my stroking jumble into the same sweet song that's blasting through my body at full volume.

The cries rise in pitch, bubbling out on every breath, a quick "hah, hah, hah" that builds toward a crescendo.

"Yeah," Jett encourages me. "Yeah, come on, baby. Yeah, that's so good. Fuck, that's so good."

I want him to have everything. I want to share this bliss gathering up inside me like a balloon filling with too much air. I hold his gaze as long as I can, willing him to join me at the peak, but soon it becomes too much. I slam my eyes shut, knock my head back, stroke myself frantically as his cock drives into me hard and fast and deep. Then there's nothing but my long, long cry of pleasure and the heat bursting over my hand and Jett groaning and groaning above me, his cock searing my insides as my body clenches around him to hold him deep. I twist and turn, squirming like I'm trying to break my own back.

Then it's gone. Every bit of tension, every bit of stress. It drains out of me completely, and I'm nothing but a heap of limbs on the bed.

I don't know when during all that Jett came, but he must have because he collapses atop me almost instantly, his weight crushing me now that my body can't put up the tiniest resistance. His cock softens inside me, but eventually even that starts to get uncomfortable, so he pulls himself out before lying right back down on top of me.

“Was it okay?” he says after a little while.

I chuckle at the absurdity of the question. “Yes, but I don’t think I can move for the rest of the night.”

He pushes himself up a little to look down at me. “Then don’t.”

He leaps out of bed before I can stop him, not simply getting a damp cloth and cleaning us up, but also taking the sock off the door, retrieving our briefs and tucking us up under his sheets.

“I have to let Ryan come home eventually, but will you stay here tonight?” he says.

“You want me to stay with you?”

Even after all this, I struggle to believe it. Even lying here in his bed limp from being fucked with Jett tracing a finger down my chest and along my arms like every piece of me fascinates him. I ignored him for days after our parents showed up. I hid. I lied. I couldn’t face him when real life barreled back in to separate us. I would understand if that hurt him enough that he didn’t want to keep me around.

Jett just smiles. “Of course I want you here. Jesus, did you really think I’d kick you out after that?”

I shrug as best I can while lying on my side facing him. “I don’t know. I’ve never done any of this.”

“Then it’s lucky you have me for a teacher. Yes, Ben, I want you to stay. I want you to stay every night. I want you to stay forever.”

He draws me into a kiss, a warm, long, indulgent kiss. Even should someone walk

through his door right now, I know neither of us would break it. People can draw whatever conclusions they need to draw. We've done nothing wrong, and this is too important to walk away from for the sake of a stranger's comfort.

"I'll stay," I say when we part. "But ... it might be less awkward to use my room in the future."

"You wouldn't be the first guest Ryan's walked in on," Jett says. "He'll be cool. But noted. We'll do whatever makes you comfortable. You live down the hall, after all. What about, like, when we're on campus? Can I walk you to class? Can I kiss you?"

My heart very nearly explodes. A week ago such sweet, earnest questions would have been unfathomable. Now, they're simply Jett, the Jett I've come to know. The Jett I've come to love.

"Yeah," I say. "I'd like that."

The smile that lights up his face is worth every bit of hardship it took for us to get here. It may have been a bumpy and unconventional path, but many of the best things in life don't come easy. You have to fight for them. You have to struggle. And sometimes, on the other side, you discover something more precious than you ever could have imagined.

### Chapter Twenty-Four

Jett

I WAKE WITH BEN in my arms. Ryan stumbled back at some point, grunted at the sight of a lump beside me in my bed, and promptly passed out in his own bed. But as the harsh light of morning spears into our dorm room, I brace for my roommate to receive the shock of a lifetime.

At first, Ryan apparently doesn't notice. He shuffles out of bed and into the bathroom connected to our room. The water runs, and he drags himself back into our room rubbing at his eyes and yawning. By then, Ben is tense atop me, his head on my chest and arm around me. I leave my arms around him as well, even as I steel myself for Ryan's reaction.

"Jett, does your mystery guest like co—"

Ryan very nearly makes it through a full sentence before he cuts himself off, eyes flying wide. Shock swipes any trace of sleepiness off his face. His mouth falls open as he gapes, eyes flickering back and forth like he believes maybe next time he looks, it'll be anyone other than Ben nestled in my arms.

"Hold up," Ryan says.

I finally release Ben so I can sit up. My body could block his entirely from view, but Ben sits up beside me anyway, lacking both his shirt and his glasses.

“Yes, he likes coffee,” I say as though this is a totally normal conversation, “but we’ll go get it ourselves.”

Ryan is shaking his head. “Uh-uh. Hell no. You’re not playing this off like that’s not Benjamin Payne in bed with you. You do remember that he’s written us up like three times this year, right?”

I put up my hands in a placating gesture. “Yes, I remember. Be cool, man.”

Ryan backs away, waving his finger. “You’re messing with me right now. What month is it? January. Is there a January Fool’s Day? No, wait, maybe I’m dreaming. I drank way too much last night.” He slaps at his own cheeks.

I jump out of bed and grab his wrists to stop him, forcing my roommate and best friend to look me in the eyes.

“Ryan, it’s me,” I say. “Chill the fuck out.”

“But ... but that’s Benjamin Payne , bro.”

“Trust me, I’m well aware.”

I turn, Ryan’s wrists still in my hands, when the sheets on my bed rustle. Ben is shyly pulling his shirt back on and combing his fingers through his hair. He’s already regained his glasses and pants somehow.

“Wait,” I say. “Just hold on.”

I release one of Ryan’s wrists, stretching myself between Ryan and Ben like a support beam trying to both hold them apart and bring them together.

“Everyone fucking chill for a second,” I say. “Ben, this is my roommate, Ryan. He’s a doofus but I live with him anyway because he’s actually a nice guy underneath that. Ryan, this is Ben. My ... my boyfriend.”

Silence greets me on both sides. I don’t know if we’ve established a truce or if my life is about to explode before my eyes. I didn’t actually talk to Ben about the “boyfriend” word, but we’ve said we love each other and want to be together, so that shouldn’t be a stretch. Even so, my stomach turns in on itself.

“Everyone cool?” I say.

After a beat, Ryan sighs and shakes his head. He gently pulls his wrist free of my grasp.

“Man, you have one hell of a story to tell me later,” Ryan says.

“You don’t know even the half of it.”

“But,” Ryan goes on, and suddenly he looks up, smiling at me, “it’s gonna be pretty funny seeing you actually tied down with one person. You better not skip out on all the good parties. It’s our last semester, bro.”

“I can bring my boyfriend to a party,” I say.

“Does said boyfriend get a say in that?”

I turn to Ben, who stands fully dressed, his arms crossed over his chest. He’s the stern, unflinching nerd from down the hall again, but this time I detect a smile at the corners of his mouth.

I saunter up to him, tugging him toward me by the waist so I can kiss him. “That

depends. Are you agreeing that you're my boyfriend?"

He drapes his arms over my shoulders. "I suppose I am. It seems a rather small leap, considering everything else that's happened."

"True, but I still like hearing it."

We kiss again, and I nearly linger until Ryan clears his throat behind us.

"That is definitely going to take some getting used to," Ryan mutters. "You want that coffee or not? Rebecca down the hall got a fancy espresso maker for Christmas, and she said I could come back in the morning for a cup."

I look to Ben, who shrugs in my arms.

"Sure, we're in," I say, and damn, does it ever feel nice to use that royal, couple "we."

I get dressed and wash up. Ben borrows my toothbrush instead of going back to his own room, and that too is its own little thrill. Last night was incredible, but it's these tiny, ordinary, casual things that really have me buzzing this morning. Waking up together, calling ourselves a "we," sharing a toothbrush, walking out of my room together, seeing Ben and Ryan interact like friends. He's already integrating into my life, and sure, it's awkward at times, like with Ryan this morning, but the payoff is the bright, boundless, exciting future stretching out before us. The awkwardness will fade, and Ben and I will continue this journey side-by-side.

Rebecca and her roommate Emily startle when I walk in holding Ben's hand, but they take it way better than Ryan. With little more than a blink, they recover and ask Ben how he likes his coffee.

“This machine is sweet,” I say, settling on the edge of Rebecca’s bed with Ben and Ryan on either side of me. The girls take the other bed.

“I know, right?” Rebecca says. “So much better than that crap they serve in the cafeteria.”

“The school lets you have one of these in your dorm?” Ryan says.

A second later, he blanches, his eyes darting toward Ben. He isn’t the only one. The girls nervously glance Ben’s direction as well.

At first, Ben doesn’t notice. When he does, he sits up a little straighter, awkward under the scrutiny.

“I’m not your RA,” he says. “Besides,” and he lifts the coffee cup he’s cradling.

The tension drains back out of the room. Other people from the floor arrive, many bringing their own mugs and even their own coffee and accessories so Rebecca can show off her machine. More than one gives Ben a skeptical glance. He must notice the raised eyebrows and murmurs of surprise like I do, but I simply scoot closer to him, wrapping an arm around his waist and looking every curious student straight in the eyes. My gaze dares them to say something, but none of them accept the challenge. The rumors will spread through our floor, and then through the school, like that time Steven got a cold the night after a party and pretty soon we were all huddled in our beds coughing.

Well, everyone except Ben.

It’s startling to see how few people here know him, despite living with him. Then again, how much did I know him before that blizzard trapped us in a house together? He lives alone, always buried in his books, always apart, but I’m hoping that will

change now that he has me by his side.

We head onto campus after our coffee, wandering the blustery pathways hand-in-hand. It seems that now that the news is out on our floor, Ben doesn't care too much about letting it spread even farther. We get breakfast, or maybe it's more like lunch, in the cafeteria, ignoring the stares when we sit together with our shoulders touching. Then we head back to the dorms, Ben's this time. Our need for showers turns into a joint venture, which I don't mind one bit. Squeezed into the tiny stall together, we can't help but touch and kiss. I get to lick him while the water threatens to drown me, then he sucks me off until my legs nearly buckle under me.

Classes haven't begun, so we get to spend the rest of the day lazing around. I play on my phone. He reads. I drag him back to my room so I can play my new video game with Ryan. He tucks himself onto my bed and works on something on his laptop. By the time evening sets in, Ryan is including Ben in our plans to order a pizza for dinner. It took less than a day for Ben's quiet presence to feel natural, which bodes well for the rest of the semester.

That night, we go to Ben's room so we can have some privacy. We lie there in nothing but our briefs, kissing and touching idly. Ben traces patterns on my chest with his finger. He already set his glasses aside, so his gaze is a little less piercing when he addresses me.

"So, when classes start in a couple days I'll be pretty busy," he says. "It's my last semester, and it's probably going to be really demanding. I might not be able to keep up with your social schedule all the time."

His eyes fall as he speaks, but I tilt his chin up to make him look at me.

"I know," I say. "Do you think I'm not aware that you're going to go into full nerd-mode the second classes start?"

He chuckles softly. “I simply wanted to be clear. I don’t want it to seem like I’m avoiding you or downplaying your interests. I’m not sure how this works. I’ve never dated anyone. If I’m busy do I just ... tell you?”

I smile before leaning forward to kiss him. “This works however we want it to work. There are no rules except the ones we choose. But yes, if you’re busy and need some time alone, I’d like it if you told me instead of simply disappearing. Deal?”

“Deal,” he says. “But you should know that even after graduation things might not get much better for a while. This is all I ever thought I wanted, and I don’t know where it’ll take me. I could end up at grad school. I could end up in a totally different state. I—”

“Ben,” I cut in. “I know. That’s what I love about you. You’re passionate. You’re driven. You care so much. I know that nothing is going to stop you from saving the world, just like you said. But you aren’t getting rid of me that easily. You need to do grad school? Fine. I can find a barista job wherever you go to school. We can split the rent on a studio apartment. We’ll figure it out, Ben. I might not be a genius like you, but I can bust my ass doing service jobs if that’s what we need. Now that you have me, I’m here to stay.

“And some day, we’ll even tell our parents about this.”

Ben laughs. “I thought I was excited about my future before. I never realized it was missing something so important.”

He draws me to his mouth. I let my eyes fall shut as I kiss him, sinking against his warmth, that same warmth that saw us through that blizzard. I never thought I’d be grateful to get trapped in a boring, nothing place like Stone Valley, but as I lie in bed with Ben, tasting his lips, hand grazing his warm skin, my head full of all the possibilities awaiting us, I say a little thank you to God or Santa or whoever delivered

that snowstorm to our doorstep.

Little did I know when I crossed that pass for an ill-fated Christmas vacation that the best gift lived down the hall from me the whole time.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:01 pm*

Benjamin

Four and a half years later...

I STEP INTO MY father's house, and confetti bursts in my face.

"Congratulations!" a dozen voices shout all at once.

I'm assaulted by confetti and hugs before I even close the door. Dad squeezes me hardest of all, nearly strangling the breath out of my lungs.

"Benjamin, I'm so proud," he says. "You really did it."

"Dad, you didn't have to do all this," I say. "What's going on?"

"I did have to do all this," he says. "How many times is my son going to graduate from grad school, huh?"

Even so, the party is extravagant. Jett and I got in last night on a flight from California, where I studied. I expected a small gathering with my father and a few friends and family members, but Dad's house is buzzing. A banner hangs over the living room that says "CONGRATS, GRAD" in huge letters. The entire kitchen table and most of the counters are laden with food: cake, soda, pre-made sandwiches, bowls of chips, even a tray of grandma's special deviled eggs. Every aunt and uncle and cousin I have crowds the living room, spilling out into the backyard, where distant music plays.

Jett's mom is here too, and she smiles before hugging me.

"Congratulations, Benjamin," she says. "Jett's been telling me all about how hard you've worked. You really earned this."

I smile back at her. Jett and I waited until we graduated from college to tell our parents about us getting together. We had little choice at that point. By then, I knew I was going to grad school in California — and that Jett was coming with me. Our parents were a bit shocked by this abrupt-seeming decision, but I think they've since chalked it up to things happening at school without them knowing. None of us have talked about that doomed Christmas vacation ever again, and it's likely better that way. For everyone. I'm sure Jett agrees with me that our parents don't need to know what happened during that blizzard, even four and a half years later.

Speaking of Jett, where the hell did he go?

We arrived together at my dad's house in our rented car, but he vanished somewhere between me opening the door and me getting pummeled by hugs and well-wishes. I move through the party, stopped every couple steps by another person who wants to congratulate me and talk to me about school and life and my future. I struggle to make it from the door through the living room and into the kitchen, but even when I do, there's still no sign of Jett.

"Have a deviled egg," my grandmother says before I can escape to search for my boyfriend.

I accept, happily eating two before begging her to stop offering me more.

"You're too skinny," she declares. "You should eat more of them."

"I'll eat until I explode," I say, "but there's also cake and stuff."

“Cake isn’t as good for a growing boy. You need eggs. They’re healthy.”

With the amount of mayo she puts in them, she’s probably canceled out any nutritional benefits, but I don’t point that out. In any case, she heeds my pleas for mercy and allows me to stop shoveling egg into my mouth and move on.

I escape into the backyard, but that, too, proves a gauntlet of eager relatives and neighbors and friends. I spot Jett’s old college roommate, Ryan, amid the throng. They stayed in touch after graduation and remain close friends to this day. At this point, I consider him a friend as well. He graduated and became a teacher of all things, but his energy is a great match for his students, who apparently adore him.

“Nah, haven’t seen him,” Ryan says when I ask about Jett.

“What the hell?” I say, running a hand through my hair.

“Relax, I’m sure he’s around. He just had to get something.”

“Get something?”

My gaze sharpens, and Ryan stands up a little straighter.

“I mean, uh, I’m guessing he needs to get something,” he says. “I don’t know. Just assuming. Anyway ... oh, hey, Becca!”

He waves and hurries toward his wife. Yup, his wife. He ended up marrying the girl with the espresso machine. Never did I imagine a guy like Ryan would get a respectable job and settle down after graduation, but here he is, and according to Jett, him and Becca are even talking about when they might start a family.

It’s dizzying, and also a completely different life from anything I’ve known. I’ve been so busy with school that I’ve sometimes neglected my relationship with Jett,

despite my best attempts to the contrary. He's been patient and understanding the entire time, but that doesn't stop the guilt from creeping in when I have a moment to breathe. I've promised him things will get better. I have a job lined up with the Colorado Department of Parks and Wildlife. Things should become more stable, more predictable. Maybe we'll even get a chance to be like Ryan and Becca some day...

If I could find my damn boyfriend, that is.

Seriously, where could he even go? This is my father's house. It's not like he's visiting his childhood bedroom. Oh God, is he visiting my childhood bedroom?

I nearly sprint back inside to check on that, but Ryan suddenly takes me by the arm.

"Hey, why don't you, um, hang out here with me for a minute?" he says.

"What?"

Okay, something is not right. My suspicion hardens, and Ryan flounders.

"I, uh, it's been so long. We should catch up, man!"

"We have caught up," I say. "I need to find Jett."

I try to pull away, but he clings harder to my arm.

"Hang on!" Ryan says. "I ... um ... have you met Dane? He's another teacher at my school."

He introduces me to a guy who could not care less about meeting me, nor I him, yet Ryan will not let me go until I've shaken the guy's hand and shared some idle chit chat.

I nearly escape.

Then the party goes strangely quiet.

Chatter hushes. Someone turns off the music that was playing outside. Everyone's attention moves the same direction. I follow their eyes to find the people inside the house shifting, letting someone pass.

Jett steps into the backyard.

Ryan, Becca and Dane slink away behind me. As Jett steps forward, it feels like the entire party disappears, leaving no one but us. He's holding a box, a small wooden box that I know without asking he whittled himself. As he steps up to me holding it, he lowers onto one knee.

My eyes fly wide. I gape down at him before he says a single word, leaning back like I might wobble right off my feet.

"Ben," he says.

"Holy shit."

He smiles. "Yeah. Holy shit, huh? But we've come this far, and I know for a fact I'm not going anywhere. Not if you'll let me stay beside you."

He opens the box, and sure enough a ring sits inside, a simple amber band, the same color as our eyes.

"So what do you say?" Jett says. "You cool being stuck with me for good?"

A hush settles over my father's house. If everyone was quiet before, they're actively holding their breaths now. Jett's chest rises and falls as he awaits my answer, his

hands quivering on the box.

I drop hard to my knees and clasp his face in my hands to kiss him over and over, not stopping until we're both gasping.

"That is the worst way anyone has ever phrased that question," I say. "But yes. Yes, I'll be stuck with you for good."

Family and friends clap around us as we kiss again, then Jett helps me onto my feet so he can slide that ring onto my trembling finger. He already has an identical one ready for himself, and he lets me put it on him so we can show them off for everyone around us.

It's hard to believe this all started with a freak snowstorm that trapped two enemies in a house together, yet here we are, surrounded by love and linking our lives permanently.

I never believed in the magic of Christmas. I never wrote notes to Santa Claus, even as a child. But if Jett has taught me anything, it's that sometimes the season will find you anyway, whether you believe or not.