



The Puckin' Girl Next Door (Power Play Off The Ice: Snowed in for the Hoildays)

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Category: Sport

Description: Smith Cabot is known as the ultimate player, in hockey and in life.

Lately though, the high life doesn't feel the same and it's starting to affect his game. When his best friend suggests

retreating to the mountains for the holidays to figure out what he wants in life, he jumps at the

chance. Coming up with a plan for his life seems to be easy until he sees Annabelle, his best friends little sister, and shes all grown up.

Annabelle Rogers has always dreamed of a fairytale life. The perfect job. The perfect life. She

had it all planned out, but when her dream job turns out to be a nightmare, everything changes.

Now shes stuck in a small town named Embers Bend for Christmas, alone.

Things couldn't possibly get any worse, right? Wrong. She didn't expect to come face to face with her brother's best friend, Smith. Not only is she missing time with her family, but she has to figure out how to survive being in the same house

as the boy shes always had a crush on. Only now hes a man, all man.

What happens when Smith and Annabelle are snowed in and forced to be together. Will they be able to make it

happily ever after?

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Chapter 1

Smith

"Son, thanks for coming home for Thanksgiving. It really means a lot to Kimberly and I." My father's voice comes through the speaker of my phone as I listen to the voicemail he left earlier today. Letting out a long breath, when he mentions Kimberly... We were friends in college and then casually dating. I would take her with me to have dinner with my dad, not because we were serious. No, it was to have her as a buffer between us. It felt needed, especially after my mom died. When she was more into my dad than me, I cut her loose. I didn't need her to cause any more problems between my dad and me, nor did I need her as a distraction, either.

Didn't think I would ever see her again, especially not as my dad's new girlfriend. I have nothing against her. She's a nice person and seems to be really into my dad. After seeing them as a couple on Thanksgiving, I can see that they actually love each other. She's not trying to get anything out of him, but it's hard to be around them.

A shiver runs down my spine, my lip curls in disgust at the idea of them being together intimately. Not only is he my dad, but fuck, he's like twenty years older than her, too. Now she's pregnant and I'm going to have a sibling who my dad might not even see into adult hood. The whole thing is bizarre to me. Finally, tuning back into the voicemail..."Well anyway I love you and hope to see you at Christmas."

Yeah, that's not happening.

Hitting the end button on my phone, I throw it into my locker. There is no way I'm

going to put myself through that again so quickly. I'll just need to find something else to do so I can give him an excuse.

"Hey man, you okay? You've been off lately. And I don't just mean hockey." A deep voice interrupts my thoughts from behind me, a voice I know really well. I look up to see my teammate and best friend Steve Rogers staring at me with a look of concern.

Shrugging him off and not really wanting to explain myself, I reply, "I'm good."

He mostly knows about what's been going on but I still wince as I close the door to my locker. I adjust the towel around my waist as I stand up to go shower when his words stop me in my tracks.

"Smith, it's obvious you're not. Not only have you been more of a grumpy asshole, but your game is taking a beating. People are noticing."

He's not wrong. I've been missing shots left and right lately. Coach was on my ass just yesterday, telling me I needed to get my head out of my ass. Every time I go up to take a shot, my heart kicks up and my vision swims, I don't even want to take the shot. So I pass to the rookie on the team, and he gets it in like fifty percent of the time. Still, that doesn't mean I want Steve to point it out.

"Steve. I said I'm fine," I reply in a sharp tone.

He narrows his eyes at me, puffing out his chest as his voice raises a bit. He doesn't hold back. "Man, you're not fine. Anyone with eyes can see it. If you don't get your shit together, then who knows what might happen."

My shoulders sag a bit because he's right. I need to figure out how I can get my shit together. Obviously, just shoving every emotion down deep and throwing myself into hockey isn't working anymore. I'm just stuck.

"Sorry, man. It's always rough this time of year with my mom, and you know, with my dad and Kimberly. I guess it's affecting me more than I thought." Taking a deep breath, I blow it all out, then finish, "Life is just not what I thought it would be. I thought it would be different."

Steve stands up, his hand going to the towel around his waist, holding it in place. "I hear you, brother. Let's go get a beer and food from the Rowdy Saloon?"

"Won't Kayla be expecting you?"

"Nah. She's out of town for work."

"Alright. Let me finish getting ready."

"Sounds good. I'll meet you out here."

Nodding, I head toward the shower, knowing that once we go to dinner, he's going to be having me spill everything. Steve has been my best friend since we were kids. His family have always been there for me. I first met him at our local recreation hockey team back in Rose Valley. Later, I found out he was in my fifth-grade class, and we became inseparable ever since.

After high school, his family moved away, but it didn't affect our friendship since we were already signed to the same college team. Life would not be the same if it weren't for him, especially after my mom died. We would stay behind after practice, getting drills in, making sure that we both became the best hockey players we could be.

I know if my mom was alive today, she would be proud of both of us, "the terrible duo" she used to call us. It all paid off because now I'm a winger for the Dallas Blades and he's the goalie, both of us living our dreams.

Beyond hockey, though, he seems to have gotten it right. Two years into college, he met the love of his life and after a few difficulties they're now living out their life plans together. A year into the pros, they got married, and I stood as his best man at their wedding. Now he's about to be a dad, and it blows my mind that the guy who used to walk around with his shirt off and a beer cap strapped to his head, burping the alphabet, is about to have a whole person he will be responsible for. Better him than me.

I don't want to be a dad soon, or maybe never. Having the responsibility of a parent just seems soul crushing.

It only takes me fifteen minutes to shower up and get dressed. Grabbing my hockey bag from my locker, I head to the parking lot. Opening the door, I jump into my F-150, taking in a deep breath before I start it up.

Time to get this therapy session over. I just hope it helps me get out of this rut I seem to be in.

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Chapter 2

Smith

Pulling into the parking lot of the Rowdy Saloon, I grab my wallet out of the cup holder and head into the restaurant. When I get in there, a wave of relief comes over me when I see that it's not too busy. Bobby always makes sure that people don't bother us too much, but sometimes it gets so busy that he can't stop some fans. But I'm not interested in any of that tonight. I just want to have a burger, a beer, and face the firing squad from Steve.

He's already at a table and thankfully has ordered two beers. Pulling out a chair, I slump down. "Hey, man."

"Hey," he answers while taking a sip of his beer, his attention goes back to the TV where a football game plays. We both just stare at the TV, neither of us saying a word.

"What can I get you?" A soft feminine voice breaks through the haze I was in as I focused on the game. I can't help myself as I look at the cute blonde standing at our table. She must notice me checking her out, because she gives me a sly smile. But my cock doesn't even stir, nothing, nada. Even with the image of her long legs wrapped around my neck, not even a twitch.

Pissed off that my body doesn't seem to be interested in anybody anymore, I turn away and order, "Can I get a burger with fries? I'll take another beer too." Turning back to the game, I cross my arms over my chest, annoyed at myself once again.

"She was cute?" I hear Steve say.

"Yeah."

"Maybe you just need to get laid. She seemed interested."

"I'm not interested."

"What do you mean, you're not interested? You're always interested."

Turning my body toward him, I rest my forearms on the table and lean into him and whisper, "Promise not to laugh."

With his brows furrowed, he looks at me. "I promise not to laugh."

"I haven't been able to get interested in anybody in the last six months."

Steve's lips twitch, but I have to admit even though it seems hard, he's at least holding it in, while he asks, "What do you mean, not interested?"

"I mean, every time I try to get with a girl, a part of me doesn't want to. And now it's messing with me, man. Even affecting my hockey. Like, will I ever make the shot?"

I see it before it even happens, Steve finally letting it out with a big, deep chuckle. "Hey, you said you wouldn't laugh."

"Sorry. Sorry." He puts his hands up as if he's surrendering and tries to gather himself.

"Shit. I know it's bad. I'm just not sure what to do."

Steve straightens himself, taking a sip of his beer as he places it down on the table.
"What happens when you try to take a shot? And I don't mean sex."

"My hands shake and sometimes my vision goes wonky."

"I don't know, man. Maybe you're putting too much pressure on yourself, in all aspects. You should talk with someone."

Grabbing my beer, I turn my attention back to the TV. As I sip on my beer, I think about what Steve just said. Maybe I have been putting too much pressure on myself in all aspects of my life. I'm getting up there in age, well, at least in hockey years, and I still haven't won the Stanley Cup. Lately, I've been feeling like a clock is just ticking away from somewhere behind me, and if that's not enough, my personal life isn't what I thought it would be either.

I thought I would be at least engaged by now, planning a future. Since I have met no one worth being with, all I have is this feeling that something is missing. Damn, I need to get myself out of this pity party and just focus on hockey. That's what is important.

"You know what you need?" Steve's question draws my attention from the TV back to him.

Taking another sip of my beer, I ask, "What's that?"

"Smith, you need a vacation, away from everyone. Get some time to yourself."

"I just got back from vacation."

"No, I don't mean like to see your family. I mean go somewhere, where you can be by yourself. A break from it all."

I scoff at his suggestion before replying, "Maybe. But I wouldn't even know where to go."

But then I think about all the things I need to do to help with my game. If I don't improve, the coaches might bench me or worse they might not renew my contract in two years time. Thinking about all the things I need to do, I turn toward Steve. "What I need is to focus on hockey."

Shaking his head. "No, you are focused on hockey. That's the problem. You put so much energy into hockey that you can't think of anything else. And now everything is getting to you."

"Maybe." I'm not really convinced that what he's saying is true though.

"Listen. We have a few days around Christmas. My family is going to the Bahamas for the holidays. Go chill out at my parents' house for those few days. Maybe hit the slopes, sit in the hot tub. No one will be there to bother you. What do you have to lose?"

"Thanks. I'll think about it.", Right at that moment, the server brings us our food and we both turn silent as we eat. Looking over at my best friend, I think more about what he said. Maybe a vacation would do me some good and he's right, nothing bad could happen if I take a break for a few days. It would be nice to get sometime by myself where I have nothing else to worry about.

I really don't want to spend Christmas with my dad and Kimberly. Watching them dote on each other, talking about the baby. On top of that, my dad would probably try to get me to do something else for it, like he did at Thanksgiving.

Taking a deep breath, maybe being in the wilderness will be good, surrounded by trees and fresh air. It's not like I'll be roughing it, but it will give me time to get out of

my normal routine. It has to be the way to help my game and maybe I'll even find someone I can close my other type of game with, too.

I know what I'm going to do for my break, deciding I'm going to take Steve up on that offer. With that decision made, I feel lighter already. Yep, that's what I'm going to do. Take some time and hang out at his family's house, hike in the snow, maybe even go snowboarding, and take a moment to just breathe.

I turn to my friend. "I'll take you up on staying at your family's house. You're right, I need a break."

He laughs as he grabs his phone. "It's the right call. I'll text my parents to let them know."

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Chapter 3

Annabelle

Two weeks later

"Annabelle, I need you to finish up this report before you leave for your Christmas vacation." Frannie, my boss, sneers at me as she places a pile of papers on my desk.

Clearing my throat, I sit taller as I pull all of my courage from deep within to speak up. "Frannie. I was actually on my way out. I have to leave if I'm going to make my flight to the Bahamas."

Frannie's face doesn't even move, no emotion whatsoever. Sometimes I wonder if she can even make expressions.

"You know, the one with my family," I say trying to encourage her to remember the conversation we had just a few months ago.

After a few tense moments, she finally responds, but not in the way I wanted her to. "You will not leave until this report is completed."

"But I put in for—" I start to say but Frannie interrupts me. "I don't care when you put in your vacation. You can't leave until this is done. If you don't finish this before you leave, you might as well not come back," she demands. Before I can even say anything else, she turns and leaves my tiny office.

Dropping my head on to my desk, I groan. That was not how I wanted this to go. I can't help but wonder how this has become my life, stuck at this job, a job I hate. The only reason I've even stayed this long and put up with the abuse is because I make more money here than I would've anywhere else. Not that I have time to spend it on anything, since all I do is work and sleep in my parents guest house. The same guest house I've been living in since I graduated from college. I haven't even had time to find a place to stay.

The whole reason I moved back here to Ember Bend is because I always imagined a future where I would raise a family here, next to mine. Where my kids get to run around in the snow with cousins, laughing while us adults watch and talk about how we used to do the same as kids. But that dream seems like a lifetime away.

Taking another deep breath, I try to release all of my pent-up stress out. Something I have to do. Alot! Sitting up, I glance over at the clock. It's three thirty in the afternoon. My eyes go to the pile of papers Frannie just left, and if the amount is any sign, then this is going to take longer than the thirty minutes I have before I leave.

Damn! I'm supposed to be on a plane in a few hours to join my family in the Bahamas. I can't help but feel anger bubbling up underneath my skin. She probably did this on purpose, knowing that I'm supposed to leave for vacation. One that I put in months ago. Even after reminding her, she didn't care because all she cares about is that someone gets the work done. And it definitely won't be her. I could just leave her high and dry, hoping to get a chance to plead my case by justifying that I had a plane to catch to HR or the higher ups, but something in my gut tells me that won't make a difference.

Letting out a breath, I resign myself to the fact that I'm going to have to push back my flight. Grabbing my phone, I rebook my flight for tomorrow, ignoring the little notification that says there's a possibility that my flight could be postponed because of the impending storm. I just have to pray that I can get on that flight tomorrow and

now on top of that I have to hope that I don't lose my job either.

Once it's done, I send my mom a text to let her know.

Mom: Annabelle, have you seen the weather report? You need to get down here tonight.

I take another deep breath as I read her text. My mom can lay the guilt on real thick, and I don't want to deal with that right now. Instead of responding to her, I put my phone back in my purse and grab the papers that my boss left for me. Flipping through them and seeing all that I need to do, I can feel the pressure building behind my eyes. I blink my lashes repeatedly, hoping to keep the tears away, because I will not do that here. I will not cry.

I pull up the program on my computer and start working on the report. Hopefully, I can get this done quickly and run home to grab my suitcase. Even though I pushed my flight back, I hope that I can get on a standby flight. I won't tell my mom this but I'm a little worried about the weather too.

But for now, I've got to concentrate on this. No need to worry about something I can't control.

When I finally finish the report, I feel upbeat, hoping that everything will fall into place, and I'll make my flight. I glance down at the clock and all those feelings flee from me immediately. Damn! That report took longer than I thought. Hitting the print button, I grab it and staple it together.

Once I have it all together, I walk down the hallway to Frannie's office and all the lights have been turned off. Of course she's already left. My shoulders slump over as I curse her out in my head. If I had the guts, I would tell that she-devil exactly what I think about her. But since this is not a perfect world, I can't.

Pushing back my shoulders, I go to open the door to her office instead of dwelling on the fact that I'm here and not on vacation. I slap the papers down on her desk, probably a little more forcefully than needed, and try to resist the urge to break all her things.

As much as that sounds like fun and I would probably feel better, that's something I'm sure I would come to regret. Leaving her office before I did anything that I couldn't reverse, I grab my things and head to my car. Once settled, I grab my phone and call my mom.

"Hey honey, are you at the airport?" Her voice rings out over the Bluetooth in my car as I reverse out of my parking spot.

"Ugh, not quite."

"Annabelle Joy Rogers, what do you mean?" My mother squeals through the phone so loud I wince and have the urge to plug my ears.

"Mom. I had to finish up a report at work and it took longer than I thought. But don't worry, I've already got a ticket for the flight tomorrow morning." I say trying to appease her before she goes off on one.

"You need a new job. They work you to death."

Not wanting to discuss my job any further, I ask, "Is everyone there?"

"Yes. Everyone but you. And we miss you."

"I miss you too. But I'll be there tomorrow."

"Only for a few days. You'll find no one if you keep working yourself to death."

"I know, Mom. I'm almost home. Do you mind if I take some food from the main house? I haven't had time to grocery shop."

"See, that's what I mean. But yes, honey, help yourself."

"Thanks Mom. Love you. I'll see you tomorrow," I say hurrying her off the phone, not wanting to dive into why I work so much and never try to find a partner. I know she means well, but sometimes it's just too much.

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Chapter 4

Annabelle

After hanging up the phone with my mom, I pull into the long driveway, looking up at the large house that imitates a rustic log cabin with a huge wrap-around porch. It's one of the biggest houses in the area. When our parents were questioned by my siblings or I, they would always say they wanted a home that all of their grandchildren could stay in with them.

Which at the time seemed ridiculous because I was only fourteen, and even though I was the youngest of five, we were all in a place that seemed as if kids were far away. Now though, it doesn't seem that way.

After coming here to visit for an anniversary trip, they fell in love with the small mountain town and moved from Rose Valley to Ember Bend. When I pointed out that we already lived in a small town, their response was, "Yes, but this is in the mountains."

It seemed dumb at the time, but after being here a few years, I knew they were right. It's magical. That magical feeling is the whole reason I moved back after college. Plus, I want kids. When I was younger, there was always someone around, something going on, and I loved it. I never felt left out, and I want to make sure my family has those feelings. I hope to eventually be surrounded by family as they grow up.

Looking out at the immaculately kept yard surrounding the log cabin, covered in snow with patches of grass peeking out, I smile as I imagine my fictional children

running around with my two older sisters who also live here with their kids, grabbing handfuls of snow to create snowballs to peg each other with. During the season, my brother comes home from whatever team he's playing on with his beautiful wife Kayla and kids in tow, so we can celebrate Christmas together.

Shaking my head of the imaginary dream, because honestly, I'm not sure that's how my life will turn out no matter how much my mother wills it. I don't even have a partner and finding one seems impossible with how much I work. Maybe she's right, and I need to find another job. As much as I love to work and have goals I want to achieve within my career, I also want to have a family. I shouldn't have to choose between my career and a family. Women can have both.

Parking my car at the garage of the main house, I turn off the engine. I would've walked from my house, but the ground is a little slippery from the snow we got last week. With the heat turned off, I tighten my wool coat around me because it's freezing with the new storm that is supposed to blow in on the horizon.

My stomach growls, reminding me that right now is not the time to contemplate how my life isn't going exactly where I want it to, but time to eat. Getting out of my car carefully, I trudge over to the panel sitting on the wall and enter the code to open up the garage.

When the door opens, I somewhat expect to hear my mom's voice chastising me, "Annabelle, what do we owe the pleasure of seeing you?"

"Do I need a reason? I just wanted to come see you," I always say as sweetly as possible, even though she always knows the deal.

She always rolls her eyes and comes back at me with, "Oh, don't lie to me, young lady, you came to eat."

"Well, if you have anything to spare?" I would always answer giving her a coy smirk, and then we'd both laugh.

But nope, not today. The memory reminds me that everyone is together in the Bahamas, and I'm here. Trying not to dwell on it and hoping that I'll be there tomorrow before the storm hits, I make my way toward the kitchen that's just down the hall.

This house is ridiculous, but the kitchen is on another level. With a vast island that sits in the middle and outside walls that are all counter space, it always feels cozy when we're all here, but empty, it always seems sad. There is something about being in a large house all alone. A shiver runs down my spine, I've always been a scaredy cat. It's something my siblings have always teased me about when I was younger, and I must admit sometimes even now as an adult. It normally doesn't matter or even creep into my mind until I'm in some freaking situation like this alone in a large house, noises coming out from nowhere. Not wanting to be here longer than necessary, I open the stainless-steel refrigerator that sits on the farthest wall and begin pulling out containers of leftovers.

Bang.

"What the hell?" I mutter as I jump right out of my skin. Placing my hand on my chest, I try to remind myself something probably just fell. I pause for a moment to see if I hear anything else, because I'm definitely not going up there to check it out. When I hear nothing else, I continue to look through the leftovers, but a little quicker, you know, just in case.

Bang.

When another loud sound comes from upstairs, I grab whatever leftovers I've pulled out and get the hell out of there. I'll figure something out when I get home. Sprinting

quickly out of the kitchen and through the garage, I just hope I closed the fridge as I slide into the car, closing the door quickly.

Once I'm in the car, I make sure to lock the doors because you never know if the sound was a murderer. My heart racing, I try to take a deep breath, praying that whatever sound I heard wasn't anything too bad, or it at least stays where it needs to stay at my parents' house.

Putting my car in drive, I drive farther down the driveway toward my little abode the one that is a very much smaller version of the large house but makes me feel safe and sound hoping that tomorrow will be better. It has to be, right?

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Chapter 5

Smith

"Thanks man," I say absentmindedly as I put my phone back into my pocket while the driver pulls in front of my buddy's parents' house. They are so gracious in letting me stay while they're on vacation. My eyes go wide when I see it because I don't remember Steve's house being this big. Admittedly I've only been here once, and that was during college, right after my mom died. I'm not a stranger to big houses. Actually the house I grew up in could be considered a mansion, but I expected something different when he described this place as a "cabin in the woods."

Grabbing my stuff, I enter the code he gave me into the panel on the garage and get settled. The inside looks like a normal open concept house, but with a few rustic touches like wood beams running throughout the entire house. I decide to place my bag down on the couch and give myself a quick tour. The kitchen is large, with an island in the middle, and commercial grade appliances, which will make cooking easier. I open the large fridge and smile when I see that Steve's mom left me groceries, even though I told her it wasn't necessary.

Closing the fridge, I move toward the back of the house, walking through a game room that has a pool table in it, and a door that leads to the back porch. Stepping out on the porch, I take a deep breath and love the way it smells, like fresh crisp air with a slight dampness, meaning we will probably get snow while I'm here. In the distance, I can see a small guest house. Steve mentioned his sister lives in there but she won't be there because she'll be in the Bahamas with them.

After a few minutes of taking in the beautiful scenery, I decide to go back into the house and unpack my stuff. Rolling out my shoulders and feeling how stiff my body feels after being on the plane for a few hours, I decide to go into the hot tub later. Steve gave me explicit directions on exactly which room I'll be staying in and how to access everything, like the hot tub.

When I get back to the large living room, I pick up my lucky duffel bag and take the steps two at a time toward the guest room. Opening the door to the room I'm staying in, I see that it's more of a suite. The walls are a light gray, and a huge king size bed sits in the middle with a small set of chairs off to the side. On the bed there is a pile of pillows, sheets and towels, that makes me smile because not only did Steve's mom leave me everything I could need while I stay here, but there's also a note sitting right in the middle of the pillows.

Smith,

We hope you enjoy your stay and find the answers that you need. Next time we vacation you'll have to come with us.

See you soon,

Vickie

While I read the note, I can't help but feel an ache in the center of my chest. Not only did she make sure I have everything I need, but she also wanted me to know that she was thinking of me. Even after all these years, Steve's mom still reminds me of my own, making it hard to be around her sometimes I've been working through it, but it doesn't stop grief from hitting you in the weirdest way, or at the wrong time. I shake out my shoulders, literally shaking the sadness off of me. This is not the time to dwell on my problems, I'm here to enjoy myself.

I open my bag on the bed and unpack, placing my pants and t-shirts in the dresser, along with hanging up my sweaters in the large walk-in closet. When I come to finish unpacking, I hear a whirling sound coming from the floor below me.

What was that?

In my mind, I retrace my steps, trying to remember if I closed the garage or not, which I'm pretty sure I did. Stopping in my tracks, I try to listen to see if I hear anything else. When I don't, I take a deep breath and continue to unpack.

I've got to be hearing things. You are the only one in the house.

I grab my toiletries from my suitcase, juggling the shampoo and conditioner bottle with my bag so I don't have to make two trips. A loud bang rings through the room when I drop one of the shampoo bottles on the floor.

"Shit. I guess I'll have to come back and grab it," I mutter to myself as I head to the attached bathroom, forgetting all about the bottle, I should go get when I see it. The rustic feel even follows through here, with navy blue tiles that line the walls of a huge shower encased in floor to ceiling glass doors. Next to the vanity that has white marble countertops sits a clawfoot tub that looks out at the mountain landscape. It's freaking gorgeous. When I retire, this is what I want, hopefully with a partner.

Returning to the room, I'm reminded of the bottle I dropped when I see it lying in the middle of the floor. Not wanting it to spill, I bend down to pick it up when I hear a door close downstairs. I thought Steve said no one was supposed to be here, I shrug my shoulder's thinking it's probably the housekeeper. My father has one who comes in and cleans the house every few days maybe Steve's parents are the same. I mean, this is an enormous house and would be a lot for one person to clean. I ponder about the noise downstairs while I put the rest of my toiletries in the large sized bathroom.

Wanting to finish up so I can head downstairs to get something to eat, I lift my bag from the bed to put it away. Entering the large walk-in closet, I accidentally drop it harder than I meant to creating another loud noise. I wince and the need to scold myself is high. "Fuck Smith, this isn't your house. You need to be more careful," I mumble under my breath.

That's when I hear another door slam, and what I swear is the garage door opening again. Maybe I should go down and introduce myself, so I don't scare whoever is here. Making my way back downstairs, I walk through the house searching for whoever could be here but come up empty.

So strange.

Taking my phone out of my pocket, I decide to text Steve to let him know and see if they have a housekeeper. As I wait for his response, I decide to grab something to eat and do what I came here for, relax.

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Chapter 6

Annabelle

Ring! Ring! The sound of my phone ringing next to me has me rolling over to grab it from my nightstand. Without even checking the caller ID, I answer, "Hello?"

"Oh Annabelle. Thank God. Are you okay?" my mother says in a high pitch voice through the phone. I can feel her relief, which has me furrowing my brows with confusion.

"Ugh yeah why?" I ask groggily.

"Have you looked outside? The news here is saying the snowstorm hit you last night earlier than expected, and it's the biggest one they've seen in years."

"No," I answer sitting straight up in bed when I whisper gasp into the phone. "Do you know if my flight has been canceled?"

My mom continues, "Sorry Annabelle. Your flight has been canceled and I've been looking all morning but it doesn't look like they have any more flights leaving Ember Bend any time soon."

My chest tightens at the thought of not being with my family for Christmas. I need to get up and see what is happening. I throw the covers off of me as climb out of the bed, still holding the phone next to my ear. As soon as the covers come off, the cold air hits me, causing me to shiver. "Shit. I think the power is out. It's freezing in here,"

I say to myself as much as to my mother.

Not wanting to freeze any more than I have to, I grab the blanket off the bed and wrap it around myself to get warm as my mom tells me, "If the power is out, you need to go to the main house. Even if the generator isn't working because of the storm, it will be better because you can use the fireplace for heat."

"That's not a bad idea," I breathe out. My mind races about all the things I need to do in order to get through this storm, while simultaneously worrying about whether I'll be able to see my family. Tears threaten to fall when my brain wanders toward the idea of not seeing them and being all by myself on Christmas day. Shaking my head as soon as the thought enters, because nope, I'm not going there.

Taking a deep breath, I blow it out through my nose, because I need to get on with the day. "I'll let you go, I don't want to wear my battery down. I'll head up to check the house and call the airport to see if I'll be able to get out of here in the next few days."

"Okay, honey. Stay safe and make sure to check in."

"I will Mom."

I hang up the phone and run over to my closet to get dressed, making sure to layer up because I need to stay warm, while walking outside. I put a tank top on over my bra, I'll definitely need the layers if the heat is on in the main house.

Pulling the thickest sweater I have off the hanger in my closet, I put it on over my t-shirt and can't help but snuggle into it. Not only is it the thickest sweater I have but also the softest one too. I trade out my pajama pants for some leggings and thick wool socks.

Moving to the bathroom to brush my teeth, the scenery outside grabs my attention

and I'm drawn to the picture window in the living room. When I see that, the yard is blanketed in white powder, it causes my whole jaw to drop. You can't see any green anywhere except for the very tops of the trees and even that is few and far between. It's beautiful though, like a winter wonderland.

This right here is the reason my parents moved here, and why I don't want to move anywhere else. You can't beat how beautiful the snow is and the way it looks when it covers everything in sight.

"I guess I need to put my snow pants and boots on, because I won't be driving up there today, but it shouldn't be too bad," I muse to myself after admiring the snow for a few minutes.

Once I'm done brushing my teeth, I pull on my snow pants and boots. From the small hall closet next to the front door, I grab my big winter coat, zipping it up as far as it would go.

Ready to head out into the snow and get up to the big house, I take a tentative step out onto my porch. The wind blows through my body, forcing a huge shiver to wrack my body.

Needing to get warmer, I grab the hat and gloves out of the pockets of my jacket. I put them on, hoping to keep the cold air away from my skin as much as possible.

Taking that first step into the snow, my foot instantly sinks down. "Shit. I guess we got more snow than I thought. It's now or never," I mumble to myself as I continue to step through the snow toward the house, thoughts of the heater on my mind.

What should've taken me five minutes ended up being about fifteen the huge hill in the backyard being the worst part as I kept slipping trying to climb it. I'm not saying I fell on my butt a few times, but there's a chance I fell on my butt a few times. When I

reach the back deck, I can't help but do a tiny victory dance. Pulling my keys out, I unlock the door and bask in the heat of the house as soon as I enter.

Yes. The power is on so I won't have to do anything special.

Needing to get my layers off because it's warm in here, I pull my gloves and hat off, pocketing them in my jacket. I unzip my jacket, hanging it on the back of one of the kitchen chairs. I begin walking through the house to make sure that everything is still in working order. As soon as my foot hits the floor in the living room, I hear a deep voice from my side. "Can I help you?"

"Ahh!" I scream, throwing my hands in the air, trying to balance myself as I spin toward the voice.

My heart races as black spots blur my vision. Leaning over, I place my hands on my knees as I try to gasp for air. Closing my eyes, I just hope to dear god that I'm able to regain my composure in a timely manner before the stranger in the house murders me.

A rough hand rubs against my back. The contact brings a shiver to me, forcing me back into the present. I try to shake him off, not really wanting to be comforted by a man who could possibly murder me, but he doesn't allow me to.

When I'm finally able to settle my heart and breathe at a normal rate, I look up into the deepest brown eyes. Not being able to tear myself away, my heart skips a beat once again, but for a different reason. While I drown in the beauty of his chocolate colored eyes, my panties dampen.

Oh shit. This can't be happening right now. I cannot be attracted to the man who might murder me.

"You're not going to murder me, are you?" I blurt out.

"What?" he asks me and I can't help but notice the sexy smirk his lips make.

Shaking my head, I mumble, "Never mind."

Standing up to my full height, I take a step back, trying to put space between us. It's like magic. The more space I'm able to put between us, the better I'm able to think. I really should ask this stranger a few more questions, but I can't seem to get the words out of my mouth. Thankfully, he doesn't seem to have the same issue. "What are you doing here? Do you work for the Roger's?"

I can't help it as a huge laugh bursts from me. Who is this guy?

"Work for them?" I blurt out, trying to compose myself, but I can't seem to stop laughing. And by the way he's glaring at me, I can tell that he doesn't seem to think it's as funny as I do.

After a few minutes, I clear my throat and try to keep my laughter down enough to answer his question. "Ugh no. I don't work for them. I'm their daughter, Annabelle Rogers. And you are?"

This time, his jaw drops in disbelief. "Yo-you're Annabelle? Little belly?"

I bristle at the childhood nickname, and it takes me a minute to realize that he shouldn't know that's what my brother called me when I was younger. "Uh, and who are you?" I ask again.

He places a hand over his chest dramatically. "I'm offended that you don't recognize me, even after all these years. I'm Steven's friend, Smith Cabot."

As soon as he says his name I tilt my head as my eyes gaze down his body getting a better look. And boy, am I not disappointed. Straight, dark brown hair that is short on the sides but long on top, making it hang down in front of his eyes, and a muscular build that's not too bulky. When my gaze goes back up to his face, he has a cocky smile that tells me he saw me checking him out.

I can't believe it. It's Smith Cabot, the boy from next door, my childhood crush and my brother's best friend.

Then the next thought hits me.

Holy crap, he is FREAKING HOT!!

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Chapter 7

Smith

I 'm dumbfounded. This can't be the same girl that I grew up with. My cock fucking hardens in my pants as I stare at the woman I've been missing from my life.

Annabelle fucking Rogers.

The girl who would tag along with me and her brother everywhere we went as we were growing up. Damn. I clench my hands together trying to keep them to myself, because this girl is not a girl anymore. She is all woman.

I drink her in. She is just my type a tiny little thing only coming up to my chest with long blonde hair that falls down her back dark blue eyes and curves to die for. And all I can seem to think about is how I want to explore every freaking one of them.

With my hands.

My tongue.

My cock.

I drop my gaze to the ground because shit, I should not be thinking about my best friend's little sister like that. No, I should not be thinking about her in any sexual way.

That's not what you're here for. You're here to make a plan and figure out how to get

your game better.

Steve might've suggested finding someone to help release the tension, but I'm not sure he would appreciate it if that person was her.

I shake my head, trying to actively remove the lust filled thoughts from my head. But to no avail because with every glance of her they're back.

Needing to move on and think of anything else, I try to change the subject by bringing up her family. "I thought your whole family was in the Bahamas?"

"They are. Why are you here?" she replies immediately but doesn't answer the underlining question I was asking.

Why isn't she with her family?

I allow her to focus back on me for at least the moment. "Steve said I could use the house to help me relax."

The little pixie across from me narrows her eyes while crossing her arms across her breast. She seems to be saying something, but I can't hear what it is because all I can focus on is how her arms are pushing up her boobs. It's hard to tell how big they are because she's wearing a huge sweater, but the attention to them has me wondering what they would look like underneath. Are they so big they would overflow my hands? Or would they fit in my palms perfectly? Would she let me lick them? My cock hardens further as each question enters my mind.

"Smith!" she yells my name, pulling me from the fantasy of her perfect tits.

"Yes?" I ask as I look back up at her face, and I can see the pinkness in her cheeks. Is that from me checking her out, or is she mad at me? Either way, it's cute.

"Did you hear me?"

I clear my throat as the heat creeps up my neck. Now it's my turn to be embarrassed.

"Ugh, no?"

"Is that a question?" she asks with an amused smile.

"Fine. I said that the power is out at my cottage, so I'll have to stay here until I can get a flight out to the Bahamas. Sorry, but I'll have to invade your alone time."

My smile drops. I don't like that. If she stays here with me, then it will be harder for me to keep my hands to myself, because all I can think about is how much I want to touch her. Nope, I can't do that. I'll have to make sure I keep my distance from her, because I can't do that to my best friend. And even though he's never came out and said I need to stay away from his sister, it's bro code. You don't mess with family. For now, I'll just have to hope that she'll be able to get a flight out to see her family soon.

"Sorry. I promise I'll stay out of your way. You won't even know I'm here."

Yeah right. I'll definitely know she's here. I'll always know she's here. But I say nothing, staying silent.

After a beat, she says, "I'm going to walk around the property to see if the snowstorm from last night ruined anything."

Not trusting myself to say anything else, I just nod as I watch her walk down the hall, away from me.

For the last few hours I've done a pretty good job at keeping my distance from the

little pixie, but it seems that time has ended when I enter the kitchen and she's standing at the stove in leggings and a tank top. Where the hell did her sweater go? Her toned arms flex as she stirs the contents on the stove, and I can feel myself thicken under my sweats. Damn, when did I start getting turned on by arms?

Usually, I'm an ass or boobs guy. I don't ever think I've been attracted to anyone's arms. Speaking of ass, my eyes drop to hers and man, it's perfect. Everything about her is perfect. It's going to be hard to not act. Suddenly, she spins around and gives a little squeal when she sees me. I can't help but give a little smile at her response.

"Shit," she yelps as her hand comes up to her heart. "Smith why do you keep sneaking up on me?"

"Sorry, I didn't mean too. I was just coming in here to make myself something to eat," I say as I begin to move toward the refrigerator.

She puts her hands up freezing me in place. "I already made dinner I was just about to come find you."

My brow furrows in confusion. "What do you mean, you made dinner?"

"Exactly what I said," she says as she scoops something in a bowl, once it's full she pushes toward me.

I look down at the bowl, then back at the woman in front of me. "You made chili?"

She shrugs her shoulders. "Yeah. I remember your mom used to make it and besides, it's perfect for a night like tonight."

I close my eyes at her response taking a deep breath to help keep my emotions in check. She's right my mom did make chili for me when I was a kid, and though it

brings back wonderful memories, sometimes those memories hit me with a wave of sadness.

Her soft fingers grip my forearm, pulling my attention to her. I look back up at her face and I can see that her eyes are glistening. "I'm sorry. I wasn't trying to make you sad. If you want, I can make you something else." she says as she goes to grab the bowl.

My hand comes out and grips her wrist. "No. I don't want to eat anything else."

"Okay," she whispers, then realizing that she's still holding me she lets go and continues, "Theres toppings right on the table," she explains.

"Thank you," I say as I head to the kitchen table.

Once I'm done adding the toppings she sits down in a chair across from me, fixing her own bowl. We continue this way for most of dinner, allowing me time to think about when my mom used to make chili for me and my dad. My mom never knew how to make a small amount, so it was always inevitable that she would make too much, but we never wasted it. She would pack it up and take it next door to the Roger's house.

I still can't believe that Annabelle remembered but I really shouldn't be that surprised because even as kids, Annabelle always thought of others. Making sure that everyone was happy.

Taking a chance, I look up at her over my bowl and can't help but smile when I see her eating. It's nice to know life hasn't taken that kindness away from her.

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Chapter 8

Annabelle

"Hey, after the dishes, would you like to watch a movie?" Smith asks me as he drops off another dish from dinner into the sink.

"Sure. That sounds great," I say trying to sound as non-chalant as possible, even though I'm freaking out on the inside. Not sure if I pull it off because my inner teen is screaming. Ever since I saw him this morning, the crush that I thought was no longer seems to have come back in full force. Feeling like that young girl is not something I wanted to feel again. The idea of him rejecting me makes my heart drop, I'm not sure I'd be able to recover. I try and focus on the dishes in front of me, but it's hard because my inner teenager is screaming at me.

I can't believe we're about to watch a movie with Smith Cabot.

"Awesome. What movies are you into now a days?" he shouts back to me as he walks toward the living room.

"I like anything but scary," I yell back, being mindful not to look over at him.

"Oh yeah, now I remember how much of a chicken you were growing up," he chuckles as he looks back over his shoulder at me, and then gives me a wink.

"Hey, it's yours and Steven's fault I'm a scaredy cat, really. You guys would gang up on me and try to scare me on purpose."

"Of course we did. We were young boys. What else would we have done?" he says grinning at me and it's freaking sexy as all get out.

Not wanting him to know how much he affects me, I continue to wash the dishes answering him, while keeping my voice as flat as possible. "Oh, I don't know...maybe torment someone else?" I see him open his mouth as if he was about to say something else, but my phone prevents us from talking further when it rings.

"Do you mind checking to see who that is?" I ask as I lean my head toward where my phone is sitting on the counter.

"Sure," he says as he walks over to my phone. His brows scrunch when he looks down at the caller ID. "It's someone named Frannie."

I let out an exasperated breath as I turn the water off and dry my hands. Once they're dry, I go to answer my phone, turning my back on Smith to get some privacy, because I can't imagine that this is going to be good.

"Hello?"

"Annabelle. You were supposed to finish that report I sent you last night before you left."

No hello, or are you on vacation? Nothing. I pinch the bridge of my nose, trying to keep my cool, because this woman drives me nuts. Taking a deep breath, I calmly state, "I did. It's on your desk and in your inbox."

"Well, I'm looking at my inbox, and it's not there."

"Give me a minute, I'll resend it."

"You're not on vacation?" And it sounds like she's a little hopeful at that idea, leaving me feeling uncertain. "Not yet. I wasn't able to leave before the storm, but I'm go—."

"Good, I'll see you on Monday. And Annabelle, don't forget to send me that report," she interrupts me and then hangs up before I can tell her I am still trying to go on vacation. I guess I'm not going to the Bahamas.

I squeeze my phone in my hand as I grit my teeth together trying to release the anger that I feel every time I talk to that infuriating woman. How did she even get to the level that she's at?

Plastering on a smile, I spin back toward the kitchen sink, hoping that Smith didn't pay attention to any of that conversation, but my heart melts when I see him washing dishes, and not just his own dinner dish but the ones I cooked in too. And even though I shouldn't be easily swayed by dishes, it's more about the gesture of helping me.

Not wanting him to find me getting choked up over dishes, I decide to announce my presence.

"If you don't mind, I'm going to run upstairs to the office and email my boss a report."

"No problem. I'll just finish up the dishes and then we can watch a movie when you're done."

"Awesome." I say as I scurry away from the man who seems to be set on setting me on fire.

The whole time I'm walking toward the office, I try to keep my thoughts on work and not on the man downstairs. The one who I've fallen back into the same old crush with, though he doesn't seem to be affected by me. I quickly turn on the computer and

while I wait for it to boot up, my mind drifts to the possibility of what it could be like if Smith was attracted to me. Would he hold my hand while we watched a movie? Or would he just go in for the kill and hold me the entire night as he caressed my skin?

He seems like the kind of guy that would just dive in and take what he wants, the perfect alpha man, like the ones that I read about in my fictional books. He would definitely take care of whoever he chooses to be his partner in crime. And it's clear that I'm not that person. I mean I know it's been years since we've seen each other, but he would've at least flirted with me, right?

Sitting down at my parent's computer, I start shaking my body from the excess energy I'm feeling. Time to focus on the reality of my life, working for this company, hoping it's a steppingstone to something better, and keeping this witch off my back. I go back to my sent folder and can't help but roll my eyes when I see that I did in fact, send it to her. Resending the document, I take screenshots of both emails, that way, if she tries to throw me under the bus at work, I can prove that I did my job, because she's fucking useless.

Before going downstairs, I check the airline websites again to see if there are any flights in the near future, but to my dismay, the airport hasn't even re-opened yet. Feeling out of control, I try to ground myself by leaning my head against the desk. The coolness of the desk helps me, but I still can't help but feel like my life has just turned into a giant mess. A tear escapes my eye, opening the gates, for more to fall. I just let them slide down my face as every frustration and emotion I've felt over the last few years bubble up to the surface.

While I'm sitting in the office battling with my emotions, a deep voice comes from behind me. "Did you still want to watch that movie?"

Not wanting him to know that I was crying, I keep looking down and furiously try to wipe the tears from my face. "Uh, yeah. I'll be down in a minute," I lock my eyes on

the ground as I try to keep my voice as neutral as possible, hoping that he doesn't notice the emotion.

"Are you crying?" he asks, and I can hear him moving closer to me.

"I'm fine," I mumble, hoping he doesn't ask too many more questions, because I don't want him to know how sad my life has become. He's here to relax and figure out his own life, not listen to me babble about my problems.

"You're not okay. What's wrong?" he asks as he swings the chair back toward him but I don't look at him, I continue keeping my eyes on the ground, not giving him what he wants.

I need to make sure I keep my guard up, letting it down around him will just lead to me getting my heartbroken. If I get too close to him, my crush will get worse, and I'll just end up hurting.

But Smith seems to oblivious to the war that is going on in my head because he doesn't give me any space. Gripping my chin, he forces me to look at him and snaps, "Annabelle. Don't lie to me."

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Chapter 9

Smith

Her eyes light up with a fire in them when she hears me accuse her of lying to me. Fuck, yes. There she is. I love that fire in her, and fuck even though her brother is probably going to kill me she's going to be mine, and I'm going to make sure that the only tears that come from her will be because of happiness, or from the fierceness of her orgasms.

"I'm not lying. Everything is fine, Smith."

But first, I've got to make sure she knows she can't hide from me. I'll get every single fucking secret she has, including why she's up here crying all alone. "Bullshit," I call. "Why are you up here crying, then?"

Her cheeks flush with redness. This time it's not all from her crying. Some of it is from the anger that's rolling off her in waves. Though I'm not trying to piss her off, I love the fact that I'm affecting her in this way. It turns me on, especially when she shows her fire.

A good and fiery argument is great foreplay, and I have a feeling with her it's going to be amazing.

She narrows her eyes at me when she finally spits out, "Just feeling a bit sorry for myself since I'm here and my family isn't. Is that okay with you?"

I don't answer her right away. Keeping my eyes on her I lean over placing my hands on the office chair arms. We're so close it wouldn't take much for our lips to brush against each other. I don't doubt that she's missing her family. The Rogers have always been close, spending as much time together as possible. I know there's more to the story and she might not want to tell me right now, but she will eventually.

We continue to stare, neither of us willing to look away as we challenge one another. The longer we stare, I carefully take in more of her expression, trying to read her. We might've just reconnected, and it's harder for me to read her right now, but eventually I'll know every movement and what it means. Her eyes are glassy from crying and my chest tightens uncomfortably, knowing that she's probably been up here crying by herself for too long.

Moments later, I decide I've had enough of this staring contest. It's doing nothing to solve whatever the problem is, just causing more pain. Time to pivot and use a different tactic to get her to talk. My eyes soften as I place my hand on her thigh, looking deep into her beautiful ocean eyes, I softly remind her, "I'm here. And we can try to make the best of it."

Her face relaxes when she pats my hand and stands up, forcing me to stand up along with her. "You're right. We're friends and we can make the best of this situation."

I bristle at her declaration of us being friends.

"No. We're not friends," I declare as I stand up to my full height.

"What do you mean we're not friends?" she asks, her voice shaking a bit, which makes me feel like a fucking asshole when I hear it.

"I mean, we're more than friends."

She shakes her head as she goes to leave the office, and I blindly follow her. When we were kids, I always felt drawn to her, but didn't know why. I always thought it was because she was my best friend's little sister. My skin itched every time another boy got too close to her, the anger that would rip through me if I saw her even smile at someone else who wasn't me. I just wanted to always be around her, I didn't care as much as Steve did when she would tag along. Most of the time, I liked it.

When her family moved away, the protective feeling vanished. I never felt like that for anyone else after figuring it was just a stage from when I was a kid. When Steve and I went to college, he would talk about what his sister was up to, but he kept us separate from his family life.

But when she walked in through the door, and I saw her again for the first time in years, all of those feelings came back with a vengeance. Now, as a man, I know what those feelings were; feelings of love.

She's mine, and even though she thinks she can tell me that we won't be together, she's wrong.

Steve might be upset when I tell him about my feelings, but he'll just have to understand. He might have a few issues, but that won't matter because Annabelle Rogers will be mine.

"What movie did you pick out?" she asks me bringing my thoughts back to the gorgeous woman in front of me.

Of course, I realize that she's changed the subject and is completely ignoring our conversation from upstairs. I try to make eye contact, to tell if I can see what she's thinking, but she refuses to look at me. I know it's because I've come on strong, so for now, I let it go.

"I thought we could watch Men in Black," I reply, grabbing the remote from the table and pressing play.

"That sounds great. I used to love that movie as a kid."

Wanting her to know that I still remember everything about her, I sit back on the couch and reply, "I remember."

She says nothing, just looks at me for a beat with her jaw hanging open, but quickly recovers when she grabs a blanket and looks away from me. I'm sure she thought I just forgot about her when she moved away, and even though I tried, I never forgot about the only girl I was ever drawn to.

Stretching my arms out, I watch her sit down on the other side of the large sectional, forcing a chuckle from me. She glares up at me as she fixes her blanket, and I can't help but keep grinning because this woman is something else. She pulls her feet up under herself in a tiny ball, keeping clear of any place that could accidentally touch me.

Once she's situated and comfortable, I turn my head back toward the television, trying to focus on the movie but I can't stop myself from stealing glances at her. We continue to watch the movie in silence, except for a laugh here and there. When the credits roll, I glance over at Annabelle and she's sound asleep. A smile graces my face when I hear her little snores.

Getting up off the couch, I go over to where she's sleeping. I put my hands under her body and pull her into mine, cradling her just right so I don't wake her up. With her warm body pressed up against me, I've never been more grateful for my hockey workout routine. Slowly, I walk up the stairs toward the guest room I'm staying in, making sure that I don't jostle her too much.

When I get to the doorway, she makes a cute mowl, and even though I know I shouldn't do it, I lay her down on the bed I've been sleeping in. Knowing that I should walk away and sleep on the couch, especially after the way she refused to talk about being in a relationship, I can't seem to force myself to walk away.

I pull my shirt and pants off, leaving me in just my boxers. Grabbing the comforter, I pull it back, making sure I tuck her body underneath them before I crawl into bed with her. I'm sure she'll yell at me for being in the bed with her, but I can't seem to find it in me to care about it.

Watching her sleep, I vow to myself that even though she might be sad that her family isn't here, this Christmas, I'm going to show her how good the holidays can be with me.

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Chapter 10

Annabelle

Waking up this morning, I felt really warm. I can feel every drop of sweat that is rolling down my back. Maybe I left the heat on too high last night. I need to get up and check to see what the thermostat is set to. Rolling over, I feel a hard lump next to me, causing my eyes to shoot open.

Then a rush of memories play out in my mind from yesterday the snowstorm, checking out my parents' house, finding Smith at their house, Frannie calling me last night and realizing that I'll be spending my first Christmas away from my family. Sadness tries to creep into my bones once again, but an enormous arm comes across my torso, distracting me.

Glancing over my shoulder, I see Smith lying next to me, snuggling into my pillow. What the hell is he doing sleeping next to me? I glance around the room and realize that we're in one of the guests rooms. Rolling away, I try to extract myself from him. Once I'm successful, I place both feet on the floor.

I don't even remember falling asleep, the last thing I remember is watching a movie. Stretching my arms above my head, I let out a small groan as my body tries to loosen up. Before I even stand up to use the restroom, I can already feel him looking at me I guess he's awake too.

Not ready to face anything, especially any feelings that were brought up last night, I keep my eyes cast down not looking at Smith. I just push off the bed and head toward

the attached bathroom, closing and locking the door.

Plopping down on the toilet, I relieve myself, but I also drop my head into my hands as I sit there wallowing in my feelings. What the hell am I going to do about all of this? It's just too much. Maybe if I don't bring anything up he'll take a hint and give me space, because I need it to keep my head on straight.

Ever since I was a young girl, I wanted nothing more than for Smith to notice me, but he never did. The only time he seemed to notice anything about me is when he would join Steve in keeping other kids away from me. Even after we moved away, I would secretly imagine what it would be like for Smith to show up here and declare his feelings for me.

By the time I graduated from high school, I had already learned about the many dalliances that Smith had through my brother. I just knew deep down in my gut that he would never be mine. Smith just isn't that type of guy.

But last night when he said we were more than friends, the feminist and rational adult in me knew I needed to shut it all down. But the teenage girl in me shouted with glee.

A knock on the door reminds me I need to get up and stop worrying about Smith and me. Because there is not an us, we don't even know each other anymore. How does he even know he likes me? We haven't seen each other in years.

"Annabelle. Are you okay? " His deep masculine voice breaks through my thoughts and the door.

"I'm fine, be out in a minute," I shout while washing my hands, the whole time contemplating the situation, I seem to have found myself in. I mean, we grew up together and he is my brother's best friend, so we know each other on one level, but we also have so much to learn.

I rip open the door and come face to face with a shirtless Smith. My mouth waters as I take in his muscular pecs. Yesterday I saw he had a tattoo quickly but didn't get a good look at it. Today I can see it's some type of tribal image that wraps around his shoulder. When I come eye to eye with him, he is staring at me with his sexy smirk and I know he caught me checking him out.

Not wanting to deal with what he might say, I push past him before he can open his stupid, gorgeous mouth. But because he is him, he doesn't let me get away without saying something. "I'll make breakfast for us in a few minutes."

I don't even acknowledge what he said, I head straight toward my parents' room, not just to borrow clothes from my mom, but to put some space between us. I need to make sure I keep my head on straight.

I was so distracted by the appearance of Smith yesterday I didn't think about going back to my cottage and grabbing a load of clothes to bring back up here to the main house. That'll be the first thing I do after I grab clothes from my mom. She won't mind.

Thankfully, Smith gives me the space I need as I quickly change. Once I'm done, I head back downstairs, hoping that he hasn't made it to the kitchen. Ideally, I would love to escape and spend some time in my cottage, possibly reading or doing some yoga. But the snow is keeping me from that idea.

As soon as my foot hits the floor, I can tell that my original plan of keeping distance between Smith and I will not work out. I freeze when I look into the kitchen. Smith is already there, shirtless, in a pair of gray sweatpants, cooking breakfast from what I could tell. Stirring something on the stove, I notice him dancing at the same time while singing along to the song he's playing on his phone.

I can't stop myself and let out a giggle at the show, pulling his attention from

whatever he's cooking to me.

"Are you spying on me?" he playfully asks.

"Me." I say as I dramatically throw my hand over my heart. "I would never."

Smith makes a beeline for me, abandoning the stove. My brows furrow, wondering what the hell he is up to, but I can tell by the way he's looking at me it's definitely something. "You're going to burn whatever you have cooking if you come over here," I try to say assertively, but it ends up coming out breathier than I meant, and it doesn't stop Smith one bit either.

When he reaches me, I watch his every move as he cradles my face in his hands, and his eyes soften right before he crashes his mouth to mine. A warning quickly flashes in the back of my mind, but I can't seem to stop the kiss. I gasp as I instantly melt into his soft lips. Smith uses that moment to slide his tongue into mine, and I can't do anything but accept it.

And it all feels right.

It feels like this is meant to be and he's really mine. Suddenly, a picture of my brother flashes in my mind and I think about the friendship between Steve and Smith. I would hate myself if I were the person who came between them. Knowing he can't ever belong to me, I place my hands on his chest, pushing him away.

"I can't." Tears burning my eyes, I turn away from him, grabbing my coat off one of the kitchen chairs. Saying nothing else, I just run.

Running away from him and every fucking feeling I'm having, back toward my refuge. My little cottage.

Chapter 11

Smith

I stand still as I watch Annabelle run away from me. As much as I want to, I fight the feeling to run after her, instead I return to the kitchen to continue making breakfast. How can she not realize how good we could be together? I mean, especially after that kiss?

That kiss was amazing.

Fireworks.

And men don't talk about kisses like that. If she would've let me, I would've kissed her forever. Rationally, I know she needs time to wrap her brain around the fact that she is mine. I'll finish breakfast, get dressed, and then I'll track her down. That'll give her enough time to wrap her brain around everything, but not enough to run too much further away from me.

A buzzing feeling comes from my pants. Pulling my phone out of my pocket, I look down at my caller ID, causing me to grin. Perfect timing.

"Hey, man," I answer my phone.

"Hey, Smith. How's it going at the house? Have you run into Annabelle yet? My mom said she isn't able to come to the Bahamas because of the storm."

I let out a breath. This will be even easier to tell him now that he's brought his sister up. Needing to plate up the breakfast for two I'd been making, I place my phone on speaker. "I have actually. Man, she's grown up. It's been a while since I've seen her, it's been great getting to know her again."

He chuckles through the line. "It has been a while since you two have seen each other. The reason I'm calling is that my mom said she's having a hard time being away from the family for the holidays. Can you help make it somewhat tolerable for her?"

"I got you, man. Speaking of your sister, I just wanted to let you know I plan on taking my shot with her."

I expect Steve to yell at me or tell me to fuck off after my revelation, but he doesn't do either. In fact, he doesn't speak at all. We both just sit in silence. Tapping the screen of my phone, I make sure he's still there. When I see he is, I let us sit in silence for another minute, giving him time to come around to the idea of me being with his sister.

"Hey, man. I'm not try—" I begin, but Steve cuts me off.

"Is this just so you can fuck her?" he asks me with such a fury that I've never seen coming from him. His accusation pisses me off and I can feel anger swelling in my chest, but I take a deep breath to calm myself.

"Fuck you Steve. No, I wouldn't have informed you if I was just trying to fuck her. She's going to be my forever."

"Forever?"

"Yeah, man. She's endgame for me."

Steve lets out a rushed breath and I can just imagine him pacing around as he runs his hands through his hair. He finally answers, "Sorry, man. I just needed to make sure that your for real. It's just in the past you've been more man whore than husband material and she's my sister."

His assessment of me hits right in the solar plexus. I rub at it, trying to relieve the pain that my best friend just unknowingly set on me, by sharing how he has seen me. But even I have to admit he's not wrong. I have been with anyone in the past just to help fill the lonely hole within me.

Being around Annabelle doesn't give me that feeling, though. When I'm around her, I feel free. Everything that weighs me down daily is lifted and I feel like I can breathe again. If I want to be with her with a blessing from her brother, I'll need to tell him, no matter how uncomfortable it makes me feel.

"I know, but that was just to fill the void. I told you when I came here something was missing from my life, and now I know what it is. It's her. She's everything to me."

A gasp comes from behind me, and I spin around, finding Annabelle standing there with tears in her eyes. At first neither of us say anything, the only sound in the room is Steve yelling through the phone line. "Smith, are you there? What's going on?"

The sound of his voice breaks me from my trance, but my eyes never leave hers. "Hey, man. I've gotta let you go, its time I talk to your sister."

"Good luck, man." With that, you can hear the phone hang up, but all I can hear is the sound of my heart beating. Annabelle finally breaks the silence at that moment. "You want me?"

Not being able to hold myself back, I drop the fork onto the plate of food I had made and eat up the distance between us, my eyes never leaving hers. "Yes. How do you

want me to show you? You're my everything, my heart."

With those words, she wraps her arms around my neck and kisses me. Every emotion is in this kiss and it's incredible. Lifting her up, I grip her ass while she wraps her legs around my waist. I can't help it and rub my hard cock against her, forcing another gasp out of her mouth. I love that fucking sound.

"Prove to me you want me."

I move her up and down against me. "This doesn't prove to you I want you." I grit out as she arches her

back with a moan and it is the sexiest sight I've ever seen.

She rests her forehead against mine and breathes out, "I know I make you hard. I want to know that you want me, for me, not just my body."

I carry her up the stairs, not wanting to waste another moment because I'm going to show this woman of mine what it means to belong to me.

When she realizes that we're moving, she asks, "Where are we going?"

"I'm going to take you upstairs and worship your body. Mark every fucking inch of your skin so you'll always know who you belong to."

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Chapter 12

Smith

As soon as I enter the bedroom, I make a mad dash to the bed, dropping her right at the end. She giggles as she bounces against the mattress, splayed out all for me. Fuck, she is so gorgeous, a gift from above. Staring down at her as her blonde hair lays across the bed in contrast with the comforter, I vow I'll do whatever I can to convince her we're good together.

First, by worshipping her. I drop to my knees, reaching for the waistband of her leggings. With a bit of force, I pull them down, revealing a pair of nude panties; I lick my lips. Propping herself up on her elbows, she looks down at me, cheeks bright pink. She tries to shift her legs closed, muttering, "You don't have to."

My hands grip her thighs, forcing them back open, giving me the most beautiful view of her pussy. Gliding my fingers under the hem of her panties, I can feel how wet she is and the thought of all that wetness on my tongue makes me hard as a rock.

"I know I don't have to, but I want, no, I need, to taste you, baby," I mumble as I knot up her panties in my hand and tug them down her legs. She helps me by lifting her ass off the bed, showing me more of her glistening pussy.

My gaze has been transfixed on her the whole time. Not being able to look away, I adjust myself. I'm not sure my cock has ever been this hard before.

Finally, when I'm able to look away, I find her eyes and keep contact with her, licking

right up her slit, gathering as much of her wetness on my tongue. Not willing to stop at that, I explore the way her pussy feels on my tongue, stopping to circle around her clit every few swipes.

With every lick of my tongue, the more restless she becomes. She doesn't seem to have control of herself. Every sound, every movement goes straight to my dick. And all I want to do is thrust right into her so I can know what it's like to have her squeeze her pussy around me. But I need to take my time. This is the time to show Annabelle that I'll worship every single piece of her.

My teeth graze against her clit, pushing her closer to her orgasm, wanting her to come soon, but not before I know what she feels like on my fingers too. I slide a finger inside her while kissing down her inner thighs. Annabelle closes her eyes, but I need to see her when she comes. "Eyes on me, baby." With my words, her eyelids pop back open but stay hooded as she is engulfed with pleasure. "I want to see you when you come for me."

Gliding another finger inside her, I press them upward as I move them in and out of her, searching for the spot that will set her off. I know I've found it when Annabelle chants, "Yes. Yes," as she rocks her hips against me.

"That's right, baby. I want you to come on my fingers and my tongue. Let me taste you."

Leaning down, I suck on her clit as I play with her pussy with my fingers. With the friction, she tightens around me. Her pussy pulls them in more when she has a rush of wetness that comes, dripping into my mouth.

I pull out my fingers and lap up every drop that she has on her pussy. Once I feel I've gotten as much of her cum on my tongue as possible, I stand up. If I had it in me, I would be embarrassed by the way my sweatpants are tented but when her gaze goes

straight toward my dick, I can feel it getting even harder. I would've never thought I could get any harder at this moment.

When she finally looks back up at me, I don't look away as I lick every inch of my fingers while she watches.

"Oh shit, Smith. That is freaking hot."

"You think that's hot? Wait until I have you coming on my cock," I say as I pull down my sweatpants and boxers at the same time. My cock hits my stomach as it springs out of my pants.

Annabelle stares at me, and my whole body flushes with her attention. I mean, I know I look good, it's part of my job. I have to work out to help me play hockey better, but I've never been more aware of my body than I am right now.

"Holy shit. I could tell it was big, but that's huge," she whispers.

Grabbing my cock, I slide my hand up and down, jacking it a few times. It's so sexy watching her as she watches my hand on my cock. "You like that, baby?"

She looks up at me with narrowed eyes. "You know I do, big boy."

"Big boy?"

"Yeah. You're fucking big." Her gaze moves all over me and I can't help but preen when she whispers into the room, "Everywhere."

Taking a few steps, I place myself between her legs, as my hands go under her shirt, gliding up her torso, revealing every bit of porcelain skin. Pulling it over her head, I go to unhook her bra, but she gets to it before me. The perfect amount of tits bounces

right out in front of me, and my hands itch to touch them. Giving into that feeling, I palm each one, loving the way each one feels.

"Damn. You have the best tits."

Her chest flushes at the comment, and I love how I can see every emotion on her skin. Leaning down, I kiss every part of her chest, leaving her nipples for last. Sucking each one of them into my mouth, I give them the attention they deserve, swirling my tongue around each point.

Her hands tangle up in my hair when she whispers, "Smith, I need your cock inside me." I pull away from her and she lets out a grunt. "Move up." I demand.

"What?"

"Move up, baby. I want to be inside you, but not on the edge of the bed. You should be comfortable."

Wordlessly, she scoots her body toward the headboard, and I crawl after her. My cock trails along her legs, leaving a pre cum trail. The animalistic part of me loves that I've marked her, even if the mark is just a small amount of my cum on her body.

Once she settles, I crawl even further over her, pressing my lips against her soft ones. We melt into each other as our tongues glide against each other's. Her body rocks harder against mine. I waste no more time, pressing my cock into her entrance.

We both groan as my cock stretches her. I keep pressing until I bottom out and my balls are resting against her ass. She brings her hand up and cradles my cheek, giving me a soft smile. "You feel incredible, but I need you to move."

The electricity sizzles between us. The tension thickens as I thrust slowly in and out

of her. Sex has never felt like this, it's always been about the release for me. At first, that worked, but even that slowly turned into a chore. But right now, as I watch Annabelle as she takes my cock, I know this is more. It's about the buildup, not just the release. The moment that you're not sure you can take anymore right before you fall over the cliff. Though I imagine when I finally release will be just as great.

Both of us thrust our hips into each other as we climb up toward our orgasm. My cock throbs and I can feel that I'm close but I want her to come with me. I find her clit and rub it with my fingers as I pickup my thrusting. "Fuck Smith. That feels so good."

Feeling her pussy flutter around me, I can't help but agree with her. "I know, baby. You're so fucking incredible."

I graze my fingers over her clit, pushing her to tighten her legs around me. It's just a matter of time and I'm right there on the precipice with her, "Come for me, baby. Now," I demand.

Thankfully, her body listens to my command. She comes right at that moment, pulling me deeper into her while her pussy contracts around my cock. Wanting to make sure that her body takes every ounce of cum I can give her, I push my dick until it's pressing against her cervix, then I come with a roar.

Not wanting to crush her, I wrap my arms around her, making sure that my cock doesn't slide out of her wonderful pussy. I roll us over so she's lying on my chest, both of us out of breath, as we come down from the best sex I've ever had.

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Chapter 13

Annabelle

After a few minutes of us both laying in each other arms, enjoying skin to skin touch, I look up at him. Smith is smiling down at me as if I'm his world, giving me a warm and fuzzy feeling. The awkwardness of what happens after sex thankfully doesn't seem to taint the moment, like it has done for me in past relationships.

"That was incredible," I breathe out, returning his smile.

"No, you're incredible," he says as he bops my nose, which feels out of character for him but is super cute.

Laying my head back down on his chest, I trail my fingers across his skin, exploring him. We both sit in silence focusing on the way I'm touching him, when as predicted, my brain wonders and starts asking the hard questions. Is this what life would be like if we were in a relationship?

Just the thought of the word relationship grips me, and my pulse quickens. I glance up at Smith, his eyes are closed and the way his chest is steadily rising, I assume he's asleep.

He looks peaceful.

My brain goes back to us and if he would he even want to be in an official relationship? I mean I heard him say to my brother that he cared for me beyond just

sex. Which is the whole reason I even fell into bed so quickly with him in the first place I swooned so hard when I heard him. Now, in the aftermath, instead of basking in my afterglow, I can't help but allow my insecurities to take over. Could he just have said those things about me to get in my pants? Even though logic tells me that's not true, my brain can't seem to convince my heart of anything else.

Closing my eyes, I try to rid myself of these feelings, focusing on how I need to get rest, but I can't seem to stop questions from racing through my mind. Like if we were going to be together, how is that even possible? He lives in Texas where he plays hockey; I live here. My job is here, my family is here. Smith travels most of the year for hockey. If I moved there with him and things didn't work out, I could end up stuck there.

Alone.

Every single insecurity runs through my mind, especially the one wondering if he's going to be content with only being with me for the foreseeable future. I know in order to quell some thoughts, I need to put some distance between us. To process everything and really figure out what I want before I jump any further into whatever we're doing here.

But he said he wants you for you.

My brain tries to defend Smith. I mean saying those words out loud to his best friend took guts, but I'm not sure he actually thought about how this would even work. It's all just too much.

Needing space from Smith but also needing to get up and do something and get rid of this restless energy, I quietly remove myself from Smith's chest and gingerly get out of the bed, making sure not to wake him up. Grabbing my clothes off the floor, I head to the bathroom to clean myself up before heading downstairs. When I get a glance at

myself in the mirror, I can't help but cringe a bit. My hair is a giant mess sticking up all over the place, hickeys litter my chest and an uneasy feeling washes over me.

Turning away from the mirror, I bend down and pull my shirt back over my head, covering up all the marks that Smith left. Next, I wash my face before pulling my leggings and underwear back on. My stomach growls, reminding me I haven't eaten since I ran away when Smith was cooking breakfast.

Peeking out the bathroom door, I check to see if Smith is still sleeping. Once I'm satisfied that he hasn't woken up, I tiptoe down to the kitchen. Glancing at the clock, I see that it's a little after lunch, which means Smith will need to eat soon, too. Even though my mind is spiraling about being with him, I'm not a heathen and am still willing to help take care of him.

Surveying the fridge, a meal comes together in my mind. A quick spaghetti sauce with pasta will be comforting on this snowy night, I think to myself as I pull out all the ingredients I'll need from the fridge and pantry.

Even though I'm not the best cook, the act of cooking has always centered me. Allowing me time to think.

While I'm cutting up all the vegetables for the sauce, I think about how I could make something work with Smith. While he's in Texas, traveling with the hockey team and I'm here working for the devil herself. We could always do long distance. It wouldn't be an ideal situation but it would allow sometime for us to figure out if we're compatible outside of the bedroom. Because if earlier today was anything to go by, we are very well matched in that area.

My cheeks blush thinking about how the sex with Smith was. Picking up the cutting board that has the vegetables on it, I scrape them into the hot pan on the stove. Stirring them, I think back to how a long distance relationship would work. I could

always fly out for his games, and he could come here anytime he has off. As much as I don't care for my job, I'll need to keep it. I get paid pretty well and if I'm going to be traveling to see Smith often, I'll need the money to pay for it.

Grabbing the hand blender from under the cabinet, I place it down on the counter before grabbing the large pot to boil water for the pasta. Once I'm done setting that all up, I stir all the vegetables for the sauce one last time as I turn the heat down to simmer.

Maybe I could call Kayla, Steve's wife, and stay with her when I travel to watch Smith play hockey. My hands shake when I think about all the logistics. Is Smith the type of guy who would get angry if I couldn't leave because of work? What if Frannie is a bitch again, and I get stuck here when I should be with Smith?

With these complications, would he even want to deal with being in a relationship together? Ready to finish up the sauce and pasta, I blend up the vegetables and add the pasta to the boiling water.

Once I'm done blending, I hear footsteps behind me right before big arms wrap around my waist. As he snuggles down into my neck, kissing the soft spot between my neck and shoulders, he hums. "Something smells good."

"Mmm...It's spaghetti," I say as I check the pasta. Seeing that it's ready, I step out of his arms and strain the water.

Grabbing bowls out of the cabinets, I ignore Smith's overwhelming presence as I plate up our food. Placing it down on the counter, I pull out forks and stick them in the bowls.

"It's ready if you're hungry," I mutter as I grab my food and go to sit at the breakfast table. I try not to look at Smith as he grabs his own bowl. He sits down in front of me,

ensuring I that if I look anywhere else but my own bowl, I'll have to look at him. After a few minutes of eating in silence, I hear him place his fork down before asking, "Is everything okay?"

My hands begin to tremble when I place my fork down and look up at Smith. His face is so filled with concern that I can't seem to stop myself. "Are we in a relationship now? What is this?"

Chapter 14

Smith

"Have you been worrying about that this whole time?" I ask her.

"Ugh. Maybe?" she says as she picks her fork back up and starts shoving her food into her mouth as quickly as possible.

"Why are you worrying about this right now?"

"Listen, I'm not a casual girl. I'm clingy and insecure. I need to know that we're moving toward something."

"I know you are not a casual girl. I wasn't expecting to just have sex with you and be done. All of you belongs to me, not just your body."

Her body visibly relaxes with my words. Now I'm kicking myself in the ass I should've made sure I had said that to her right after we had sex. Annabelle needs to be reassured about things. I remember that from when we were kids. I should've known better, and honestly, I'm surprised she's not spiraling even more.

"Will we have a long distance relationship?"

Placing my silverware into my bowl, I get up and go over to where she's sitting at the table. I kneel on one knee and cradle her face. "Baby, I don't have everything figured out. I have to go back to Texas for hockey the day after Christmas. But I don't want to

spend what time we have left worrying. We'll figure out all the details soon, but what I know is that I want us to be together, whatever that might look like. Let's spend Christmas day together and we can go from there."

Annabelle nods at my words, but I can still see that mind of hers working overtime. I brush my lips softly across her billowy ones. We both start off slowly, just feeling each other out but quickly catch fire. When her stomach growls between kisses, I quickly pull away.

"You need to finish eating before we do anything further." I tell her as I step away and go back to my food.

"Seriously, though, Annabelle. We will figure it all out. I promise."

"Okay. I trust you Smith," she says as she dives back into her food.

Something inside me warms with her words, but also my stomach drops because I've never really had someone trust me completely before. Not like this. Is having someone depend on me for everything, something I can commit to? My eyes peer up from my bowl, glancing over at the sexy woman across from me, and something within me settles. Because I was right, she is the only one for me.

The next morning, I wake up to Annabelle in my arms, and nothing gets better than this. I keep my eyes on her as she continues to sleep. Yesterday was the perfect day, starting with waking up with her in my arms, making love to each other, cooking, playing games and just getting reacquainted with each other. After her freakout, neither of us talked about the future. Our conversations brought me back in some ways, talking about childhood memories that I didn't mind reminiscing about.

Annabelle stirs a bit and rolls over on to her other side, allowing me to sneak away. Today is Christmas. Even though she's tried to hide it, I know she's sad about not being with her family. I want to make today a day for her to remember, starting with breakfast.

I try to rack my brain on what would be a good breakfast meal for her, then I remembered she mentioned in one of our many conversations how much she loves French toast. Grabbing my sweatpants, I pull them on and sneak downstairs, leaving Annabelle asleep in the bed we shared. I see the fireplace as soon as I reach the living room and head toward it to start a fire. I turn on the switch and smile as I imagine us sitting in front of it while we eat breakfast. Hopefully, she'll find this romantic.

Heading to the kitchen, I start to make breakfast as I plan more ways to make today memorable. Since I have to leave tomorrow, I want her to never forget this moment, the Christmas that I made her mine.

When she finally comes downstairs, breakfast is done and I just have to plate it up. She says nothing to me as she heads straight to the coffeepot and begins pouring herself a cup. Yearning to touch her, I stop what I'm doing and wrap her in my arms carefully, so as not to spill her coffee. "Merry Christmas, baby," I whisper in her ear.

I can feel the goosebumps that pebble her skin as she spins in my arms. Stepping up on her tippy toes, she gives me a quick kiss. "Merry Christmas, big boy." Looking around the kitchen, she looks at me puzzled, asking "Did you make breakfast?"

"I did. Why don't you go get yourself settled in front of the fireplace and I'll bring out the plates."

Grinning like a little kid on Christmas, she gives me another kiss and runs off toward the living room. I don't waste any time and grab our breakfast plates walking toward my future.

When I enter, I'm surprised because Annabelle moves quickly. She's pulled out a blanket and laid it down for us to sit on in front of the couch with a view of the fireplace. Right now, she's grabbing the pillows off the couch and is lining them on the floor for us to have something comfortable to lean against.

"It looks good," I say as I head to the blanket she set up, placing our food down on the ground. "I'm going to go get a coffee for me. Do you need anything else?"

Annabelle shakes her head. "Nope. I'm good," she says as she settles down on the ground, grabbing her plate. I can't help myself and watch her begin to eat, filling me with pride that she seems to like the meal I made for her. She must feel me watching her because she looks up at me arching an eyebrow. "I thought you were going to go get a coffee?" she asks giving me a wink.

"I am. I love the way you're flirting with me by the way," I say as I walk away knowing that her skin is now flushed with my compliment.

When I return, I sit down and eat. Annabelle grins at me between bites, when she points to her food. "This is good, Smith. Thanks for making my favorite food."

"My mom used to make this recipe for me, and I wanted to share it with you."

Her face softens at my revelation. "I'm glad that you shared it with me."

Not wanting this moment to get too sad I decide to change the subject. "How do you like your job?"

"Ugh, it's okay."

"You don't like it?"

"Not really. I'm super busy and my boss is kind of a bitch."

"Why don't you quit?"

"I can't just quit. I have bills to pay."

I shrug my shoulders. "You don't need to work. I can take care of you." I let the words slip out of my mouth without even thinking. Even though I'm ready for us to dive right in I should've known that was the wrong thing to say. The air in the room changes instantly. I need to fix this because I did not want to get in a fight on Christmas day.

"You could come live with me that way I can fuck you every moment I can," I joke with her as I place my dishes to the side of the blanket.

Her brow furrows at my words. "What the fuck, Smith?"

Before she can get any angrier, I lunge at her and tickle her. She laughs every moment my fingers are on her, and not one to give up on an opportunity, I mumble while grinning, "I was just kidding, but let me show you what it's like if I were to fuck you every day."

Chapter 15

Annabelle

"Y ou are ridiculous," I breathe out laughing as Smith continues to tickle to me on my inner thigh.

"Tell me you'll let me fuck you," he says chuckling while he grabs my legs right above my knee.

"Never!" I yell as I twist my body, trying to buck him off of me. I placed my hands on the ground, putting myself on all fours. Using my feet, I try to push myself up so I can run away, but Smith doesn't allow me to get very far before he wraps his arms around me, pulling me into his chest.

He leans down and licks the outer part of my ear, and my whole body shivers with the contact. I have never thought that anywhere around my ear could be erotic, but Smith has changed my mind over the last day.

Continuing his perusal of my neck, he licks down the side of it leaving kisses in between licks. The further down he goes the more my legs tremble.

"Are you ready to give in?" he whispers against my skin.

My nipples pebble as my pussy flutters at the idea of his cock inside me. Not being able to stop myself, I give in because I can't imagine anything better than him inside me. Before I answer him I drop to my knees and he lets go of me, his brows rising, as

if he's questioning what I'm up too.

I turn toward him, hooking my fingers in his waistband and pulling down his sweatpants. His cock springs out and it's the best cock I've ever seen. Its long and thick, the head is flushed with purple as the blood rushes to it. I can't tear my eyes away from it. The longer I look at it the harder it becomes. Smith's deep voice washes over me when he asks me, "Are you just going to stare at it? Or did you have something else in mind?"

I silently look up at him through my lashes as I lick my lips. My mouth waters, dying to know what it feels like to have his cock in my mouth. My hand wraps around his thick shaft and I slide it up and down a few times, using his precum as lube. When his cock leaks once again the need to know what it tastes like takes over and I lean over licking the head of his cock.

"Mmmm...salty," I mumble under my breath. Smith gives me a shit eating grin, so I know he heard me.

Not one to play with my food, I brace myself on his thighs, as I drag my tongue down his shaft. Smith lets out a small gasp when I circle my tongue around the head of his cock. The noises he makes emboldens me and I engulf his cock into my mouth, taking him deep until I gag.

Pulling back slightly to reset my gag reflex I grab Smith's hands that are clenched so tight by his side, his knuckles are white. Placing them on my head, I show Smith that I want him to guide me as I suck his cock. He takes the hint and tangles his hands into my hair, rubbing his fingers down my neck.

I take him into my mouth once more and Smith encourages me to go farther with a bit of pressure on the back of my head. Bobbing on his cock, I lay my tongue out flat making sure that he feels it with every pass of his hard dick in my mouth. After a few

minutes Smith pulls me off, drool trailing from my mouth to his cock, he takes his thumb and wipes it as he mutters, "You are perfect."

"I'd be more perfect if you give me your cum in my mouth."

"Who is this sexy vixen and what has she done with my Annabelle?" he asks me a glint of amusement in his eyes.

I remove my hands from his thigh and run them up my body, pulling my shirt along with it, exposing my tits to him. "This is who I've always been. You just finally realized it, big boy."

Smith hums in approval. He takes one of his hands out of my hair and lightly grazes his fingers across my hard nipples. "I know you want me to come in your mouth, but I think I want to come on your tits instead. I like the idea that you would smell like me for the rest of the night."

"I don't care where. I just want your cum, big boy," I say as I lean over and take him in my mouth once again.

When I pull back some, I swirl my tongue around the head. Gliding him in and out of my mouth a few times, Smith pulls me off once again. This time though he jerks his cock a few times over me, before I can say anything Smith's body tenses and he comes all over my chest, and my chin.

Grinning he watches as I stick my tongue out and lick up all the come that is dripping down my chin. He doesn't miss a beat either, he takes his fingers and wipes up the bit I can't reach with my tongue and places it in my mouth. I take down every drop. Smith then moves down to my chest as he rubs the rest of his come into my chest.

"Don't wash this off until tomorrow. I want to smell myself on you for the rest of the

day. Give me this gift."

"You got it. Merry Christmas, big boy. I hope you enjoyed your gift," I say as I pick my shirt back up.

"Don't put it back—"

But before he can finish his sentence, we hear car doors closing. Shit, that could mean only one thing. I pull my shirt back on over my head as quickly as I can, then I yell at Smith, "Get your pants on now! That's my family."

Thankfully, Smith moves quickly and is able to pull his pants up right as the front door opens.

"Merry Christmas," my dad bellows from across the room.

"Mom. Dad. What are you guys doing here?" I ask as both of my sisters, their husbands, and kids follow them into the house. Before they can answer my questions my brother and his wife also enter the house.

Oh shit. This is not good.

"Mom and Dad felt bad that you were here all on your own, so we came home as soon as the airport was open. Merry Christmas, little sister," she says as she walks over to me and brings me into her for a hug.

When she pulls back, her face screws up and she gives an obnoxious sniff. "You stink. You need to go take a shower," she says as she gives me a slight shove.

"That's a great idea. I'm going to shower while everyone settles in," I say as Smith scowls at me, but I don't care because I will not sit here and do Christmas dinner

smelling like him and sex.

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Chapter 16

Smith

After the intrusion of her family coming home, Annabelle retreated to go take a shower, which rubbed me the wrong way a bit. I want everyone to know that she belongs to me, but the more rational man in me says she doesn't need to smell like sex around her family.

I watch her go up the stairs, when I hear a deep chuckle from next to me. "Oh, man, you've got it bad."

When I look over my shoulder, I see that everyone else has also retreated to other parts of the house leaving me in the living room alone with Steve who's grinning at me, like a lunatic. But I can't really say anything to him about it because I was the same way with him when he had met Kayla. I was probably worse because I kept trying to get him to party and meet other girls, at least until Kayla and him set me straight.

Instead of denying it I just nod my head. "Yes. I have it bad."

His face softens when he asks, "Have you guys talked about how you're going to make it work?"

I glance back over my shoulder toward the stairs where Annabelle disappeared at, then back at him. "Not yet. I just told her she's it for me, but we haven't figured out the details yet. I was hoping to do that today, since I have to head back tomorrow."

He nods his head. "That would be good. I'll help you get her alone."

"Thanks, man."

"No problem. Want to go in the kitchen and see if the hot chocolate is ready? My mom said she was going to make it as soon as we landed for the grandkids. I bet we could steal some," he says giving me a wink.

"Just like when we were kids?" I laugh out.

"Exactly."

We both walk into the kitchen and to our surprise we didn't have to steal anything, a cup of hot chocolate was shoved into our hands as soon as we entered. "Thanks Mrs. Rogers."

"You don't have to thank me. I remember how much you boys liked hot chocolate."

"Well, you did always make the best hot chocolate."

Sipping my mug, I listen to the Rogers family as they reminisce of past Christmases. When Annabelle joins us a few minutes later, freshly showered and looking beautiful as always. Her sister Eve passes her a mug of hot chocolate as she settles on a stool. I couldn't help but watch. I'm hypnotized by her.

Seeing how everyone in their family interacted once again filled my chest with warmth but also a hint of sadness. This is what my family was like before my mom passed away. If Annabelle and I stayed together, I could have this again. Watching her laugh and seeing how much she appreciates her family makes me excited for the future. I need to figure out how to get her alone so we can talk some.

The day goes by too quickly with all the Christmas traditions that the family has. The ladies and kids made cookies while we watched the Christmas basketball game. Quickly after that, we went outside to see who could make the biggest snowman, which was actually really fun. The kids were hilarious.

In between all of those things, Mrs. Rogers was able to make dinner for everyone, somehow. Which honestly is super impressive. All of these things helped me to look to the future, one with Annabelle.

Finally, we all settle down to watch a holiday movie. I just hope that afterwards I'll be able to corner her.

Halfway through the movie, I glance around and see that Annabelle and I are the only ones who are still awake.

Now is my time. "Hey Annabelle, want to go have one last hot chocolate before bed?"

Before answering, she looks around the room, as if she's searching for something, but I'm not sure why she wouldn't want to talk to me. After a few seconds, her shoulders sag a bit. "Sure," she answers while getting up from the couch.

We both head into the kitchen and I pull out the left-over jug of hot chocolate her mom had made while Annabelle grabs two mugs, neither of us saying anything. We just work seamlessly heating the drinks. Once we're done we sit down at the table and I take it as my moment to let her know how I feel and what I want. I go to open my mouth when she says, "I know we both like each other, but I'm not sure how we can make this work? I mean my job is here. I think we should just let it go."

"Are you sure? We can do long distance, or I can even help you find a job in Dallas."

Annabelle shakes her head. "I don't want that. Hooking up was fun, but I don't see a future."

She might as well have stabbed me in the chest with a knife. I'd assumed this whole time that we were on the same page, but I guess it was just me. Swallowing down the pain, I don't even try to say anything. I just push back my chair and stand. If I respond, I'm not sure what I'll say, and I at least need to keep my friendship with Steve.

When I reach the threshold of the kitchen, Annabelles whispers, "I'm sorry."

I just keep moving, if I stop, the pain would consume me. When I reach the guest room, I don't get ready for bed. It's time to get out of here. Maybe if I'm surrounded by my emotionless house, I'll be able to deal, because she's right. This was nothing but a hookup. I'll get over it.

Grabbing my phone out of my pocket, I order a car to take me to the airport. I would rather sleep in the airport than spend another moment here. Once the site confirms my car is on the way, I violently shove my clothes and toiletries into my duffel bag. Next, I pull my hoodie over my head, and walk downstairs to put my shoes on.

Just as I'm lacing up my shoes, my phone dings to let me know the car has arrived. At that moment Steve comes down the stairs. He looks me over then asks, "Hey, your flight is tomorrow."

It wasn't a question, it was a statement. But I answer anyway, "Your sister decided she didn't want to take things forward, so I need to get out of here. I hope you understand."

Steve's body softens when he looks at me. "Of course, man. I'll see you at home."

"Yeah," I say trying to keep my emotions down, but I still hear a bit of shakiness. I just hope Steve didn't hear though something tells me he did.

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Chapter 17

Annabelle

A knock on my bedroom door wakes me up. Instead of answering, I grab my pillow and put it over my head. Last night after talking with Smith, I'd escaped to one of the guest rooms and claimed it as mine, since before I was sleeping in the same one as him. Even though I was utterly exhausted, I couldn't seem to fall asleep. I just kept seeing his face drop, how sad he was when I told him I couldn't see a future with him.

It will haunt me.

Of course, I didn't feel that way. I just couldn't see how we could make it work, living so far away and the fact that we are both workaholics. Another knock comes, even louder this time, but whoever is on the other side doesn't wait for me to answer. The door swings open, and Steve and Kayla walk in.

"Sure. Come on in, I wasn't sleeping or anything," I say sarcastically to both of them as I roll my eyes.

My brother Steve looks over at me and doesn't even bother to hide his feelings. He twists his mouth in disgust before he spews, "You look like shit."

Before I can respond by telling my brother off, my sister-in-law Kayla takes care of it first. "You can't talk to her like that," she says smacking him against his chest.

"Fine. I don't have time for this, we have a flight to catch," he huffs out.

"You promised," Kayla says to him, but it leaves me feeling very confused.

"What's going on?"

"We know you broke things off with Smith," Kayla says softly.

"Which was fucking stupid," my brother blurts out.

I sit up with that comment and narrow my eyes at him. "Well, good thing it's not your life," I yell at him.

"When you ruin the best thing in your life, it's my duty to tell you, you pain in the ass," he yells back and with that, he stomps out of the room.

I turn to look at his wife, her face softens as she pads over to the bed I'm lying in, ignoring the fact that her husband just walked out of the room. She sits down on the edge of the bed, placing her hand on my leg. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"No. I don't," I huff out as I lay back down.

"Let me tell you what I know and then you can decide what you want to do."

I roll my eyes at her but still listen. I've known Kayla most of my young adult life. She got together with my brother in college, so she's been around for a while, and I respect what she has to say.

She begins, "I'm not sure why you don't want to go forward with Smith, and I won't presume to know how you're feeling. But yesterday when we were all together, Smith never took his eyes off of you. He smiled every time you did something, and he even risked his friendship with Steve by calling him. When they were on the phone, I heard him say that he wanted to be with you. You don't do things like that if you're

not serious."

I roll over on to my side, propping myself up on my elbow, tears stinging my eyes.

"What if I change everything to be with him and we don't work out?"

"That's always a possibility. You'll just have to decide if it's worth the risk."

"I'm scared."

"Love is scary. I was scared out of my mind when I decided to be with your brother. The idea that I would follow him to play hockey, and he would leave me behind...but he has shown me time and time again that he loves me and will never leave. Just think about it, I would hate for you to lose something great just because you're scared." She pats my leg and gets up to leave.

Taking in her words, I stop her before she exits. "How did you know?"

"Know what?"

"That Steve was worth it."

"It was the way he looked at me. Like I was his world." She doesn't explain anymore but leaves me with so much to think about it.

I reflect on our few days together. The whole time we were snowed in, he always made sure that I had everything I needed. He would cook for me, talked with me, even watched movies I know he didn't really like. Plus the orgasms. My whole body shivers at the memory of how he would touch me. A picture of him sitting at the kitchen counter comes to my mind. He looked at me like I was his universe. If that's what love is, then I need to tell him we should try to be together, even if its long distance.

I jump out of bed and get dressed. If I'm going to tell him, I'll need to hurry before he leaves for the airport. When I run down the stairs, I pause and scan the living room but don't see anyone but Steve and my oldest sister Heather. "Do you guys know where Smith is?"

"He left last night," my brother says without even looking up from his phone.

"What do you mean, he left?"

"After your conversation last night, he went back to Dallas early."

"Oh crap! I need to talk to him. Do you think he'll answer my phone call?"

My brother just shrugs his shoulders. Right then, my phone buzzes in my hand and hope fills my chest. Maybe it's Smith calling me, but that bubble quickly bursts when I see Frannie's name on my phone.

Why would she even be calling me right now? The office is closed. Because she's a crazy person that's why. Not wanting to lose my job has me hitting the accept button because Frannie would fire me for not answering on the day after Christmas.

"Hello."

"Annabelle. I need you to go into work today and write up a data summary. Josh needs it tomorrow."

"Frannie, it's Christmas."

"Actually, it's the day after and if you still want a job then you'll do as I say."

Letting out a huge breath I answer quickly before I hang up. "Fine."

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Chapter 18

Smith

Lacing up my skates for tonight's game, I still can't believe it's been two weeks since I've heard from Annabelle. I've tried calling her a few times hoping that I could convince her that we could make it work between us, that I would be willing to go as fast or as slow as she would like, but I guess she meant what she said.

A large hand slaps down on my shoulder, and I look up to see Steve. "Perk up man. It's the first game of the new year."

"I'm ready, man," I say standing up from the locker room bench. I don't comment on anything else because at this moment, I can't really muster up anymore energy.

We all start to shuffle out the locker room to hit the ice. "Everything will work out. Believe me." Steve says to me right before he takes off on the ice, warming up for the game. I follow him as I skate around.

Our warmup goes by fast while I keep my head down and work on my shots with our goalie John. When the buzzer goes off, I head to the team bench and have a seat as all the beginning game stuff happens, but I don't pay attention. Any time my mind isn't on hockey it automatically drifts to the life I could've had with Annabelle, torturing myself with visions of what it'd be like.

Just as quickly as warmups go by, the first period flies by too. Thankfully, when I'm on the ice, I'm able to focus on the game. It's nice that my heartbreak hasn't seemed

to take my other love away from me. The hype of the crowd is getting louder and louder, mostly because we seem to be winning.

It's the third period when I return to the ice. The tension between us, the Dallas Blades and the opposing team, the Seattle Revenges, is at an ultimate high. We're trying to keep our lead, with them struggling to make a few more goals. The adrenaline in my body is thrumming when Steve sends me the puck and I start to take it down the ice, getting ready to line up my shot when suddenly a brick wall hits me.

"Fuck!" I shout as I lose my balance from the hit and land on the ice. I'm on my back looking up, the defenseman who barreled into me is grinning as he looks down at me. My teammate Devin comes over and pushes the defenseman out of the way before putting his hand out to help me. When I get up off the ice, black dots start to pepper my vision, and I feel dizzy. Oh shit that's not good. I must've hit my head harder than I thought.

"Hey coach, we need a trainer over here," Devin calls out as he helps me over to the players bench. Before I can plop down on the bench, one of the trainers comes over to me. "How are you feeling? You took a big hit out there."

"I'm a little dizzy," I tell the trainer.

"Okay, lets get you back to the locker room and check you out."

I just nod. As the trainer helps me get back to the locker room, my body sways a little and I seem to need more help than usual. After a few minutes I'm sitting in the team medical room while the doctor comes in to check me. Using a flashlight to check my pupils and a few other tests he looks at me with a slight frown, "Do you want the good news or the bad news?"

"Give it to me straight, doc."

"Well, the bad news is that you have a concussion. The good news is that it's a mild one, so you'll only be out of practice for a few days and won't miss a game."

"That's great," I say showing no emotion. Even though I love hockey, when I'm not on the ice, I just feel empty. The only time I felt complete was those two nights I spent with her .

The medical team leaves the room allowing me to rest. Before turning the lights out the doctor turns back to me. "I'll be back in a few to check on you again. You'll need someone to drive you home."

Once everyone is totally gone, I lay back down on the bed. I begin to close my eyes when there's a knock on the door. Wow! That was quick, maybe I did close my eyes.

Another soft knock comes when I yell out, "Yeah."

No one answers but I hear the door open and soft feet padding closer to me. A soft hand grazes against my cheek and I pop my eyes open to come face to face with the aquamarine eyes I've missed seeing.

"Hey," she says softly smiling at me.

"Hey. What are you doing here?" I ask her, coming out a bit harsher than I meant it to.

"I've been here the whole time. I came down to let you know that I want to try being us," she says as she pushes the hair on my forehead out of the way.

Arching an eyebrow I ask her, "Are you sure? Because I can't go through the heartache I've been feeling the last few weeks again."

She leans over me and kisses me on the lips. When she pulls back slightly, she whispers against them, "I'm sure. You're my end game Smith."

I wrap my arms around her neck and pull her soft pink lips back to mine, she opens immediately for me and my tongue finds hers. We stay like this for a few minutes before there's another knock on the door. Annabelle pulls away from me when the doctor walks in but doesn't go far when I grab her hand keeping her close.

"How are you feeling, Smith?"

"A little better," I say turning toward Annabelle and giving her my signature smirk, the one I know the ladies can't resist. She giggles as if she knows what I'm thinking.

"Do you have someone who can drive you home?"

"I can," Annabelle chirps.

"Excellent. Call me if any other symptoms show up or if the dizziness persists," the doctor says and then heads out the door.

When we're alone I turn back to her. "What about your job?"

"I quit."

"I thought that was important to you."

"It was until I found something better."

"What's that?"

"You."

I wrap my arms around Annabelle once more and pull her into my chest. "Move to Dallas."

"I already did," she says.

Smith

One year later

Pulling up to my dad's house has butterflies filling up my stomach. It's been over a year since I've been back here, only talking with him through phone and video chat. Sometimes it makes me feel like an ass because I now have a new brother and haven't met him but between hockey and my relationship with Annabelle, I haven't had time.

Well, actually that's not completely true. I could've probably figured out a way to come out here and visit but I didn't want to. Coming back to this house, to Rose Valley, brings back old memories of my mom. Some were good, some were bad. But mostly all I can see when I come here is images of my mom fighting for her life. A lot of those images include my dad. Disheveled while he sits with my mom, looking worried. Memories of him fighting with the doctors as he makes sure that she gets the help she needs, but in the long run none of that mattered. Once my mom died I became so angry with him. Why wasn't he the one who got sick? After a lot of fighting, I just drowned myself in hockey and avoided my dad as much as possible. Then when he got together with Kimberly it triggered even more heartache, forcing me to keep my distance more.

Now that I'm with Annabelle she has showed me that this is not a way to live. And somehow convinced me to start therapy. Which is how we got here, me driving down the long driveway that leads to my childhood home.

I glance over at the beautiful woman who has been by my side this past year, and she's grinning while she looks out the window, taking in the views. I turn back toward

the road when she mumbles, "I've missed this place."

I can't help myself when I ask, "Really?"

"Yeah. Mostly I miss the memories that come with Rose Valley." She turns toward me and swats my chest, "You know an older boy telling me to scram. Torturing me and telling the other kids not to play with me."

I don't say anything, I just give her a huge shit eating grin.

When we reach the end of the driveway, I put the car in park and stare up at the house for a moment. Reaching for the key's I ask Annabelle, "Are you ready for this? We can always go find a hotel and disappear for the holidays."

She looks back at me smiling, leaning over and squeezing my hand, before answering, "As much as I would love for us to just disappear you need to do this. Everything is going to be fine. You have me here now, big boy. I've got your back."

Letting go of my hand she turns toward the car door and begins to open it when I murmur, "Yeah, I do."

Taking a deep breath, I get out of the car and meet Annabelle at the front. She gets up on her tip toes, giving me a chaste kiss. She always seems to know exactly what I need. The need to drown myself in her is overwhelming, but before I can take it any further, I hear the front door open.

"There you are!" I hear my dad's deep voice from behind, and it has Annabelle and I pulling away from each other. He comes over to where we are standing and wraps his arm around my shoulder giving me a sideways hug. "I'm so glad you guys could make it."

"Thanks for having us, Dad. You've met her on video chat but officially meet my girlfriend, Annabelle."

He lets go of me and turns his attention to Annabelle, giving her the same sideways hug. "I told you I remember Annabelle. Come on let's go in," my dad says as he heads back into the house. Placing our bags down in the hallway, we follow my dad down the hall and into the kitchen.

When we enter the large kitchen, it looks similar to Annabelle's parents' house, except darker in color. I see that Kimberly has out done herself. She has a huge arrangement of snacks spread out along the main island, including my favorite sweet snack "muddy buddies".

I know it's a kid's snack but I love it. The combination of salty and sweet is the best, especially if you use crunchy peanut butter to make it. Kimberly must've noticed me staring at the delicious snacks because she hands me a plate. "Feel free to grab anything. Then we can settle down and you guys can tell us about how things are going."

Neither Annabelle nor I complain we just grab the plates and start packing them full of snacks. We had a long day of traveling and neither of us seem to eat good on these kinds of days, so I'm thankful that Kimberly and my dad thought ahead.

"Should we eat on the patio? I've really enjoyed the views of the forests since we've gotten here," Annabelle suggests.

"That sounds great," Kimberly adds as she makes her way out the patio doors leaving them open for us all to follow.

"Would any of you like a glass of wine?" my dad asks before sitting down. Why are they both serving us like this? Don't get me wrong I'm glad they thought to have

snacks but usually my dad would just tell me to tell the chef what I want to eat. This is weird. I then really look at my dad. He looks as if he's sweating and can't stop fidgeting with his hands. It dawns on me, he's nervous. Just like me.

"No. We're good, Dad. Just sit," I say to him. Even though we've been a little estranged due to the memories of my mom, I don't want things to get worse. I learned in therapy that I really want to have a better relationship with my dad, which means as Nina would say, "you have to have the hard conversations and do the hard steps."

"Thanks for the snacks, guys. They're great," I say hoping it will cut through the awkwardness. It doesn't. All four of us just sit in silence for a few moments until Kimberly breaks it first.

"How are things in Texas? Did you find a job, Annabelle?"

"Things are great. We just moved into a new house on the outskirts of Dallas," Annabelle explains as I sit and listen to the conversation.

"Is that the fixer upper?" Kimberly replies.

"Yes. We begin construction next week, after Christmas."

"And the job?"

"I actually got a job working with Smith's hockey team the Dallas Blades. I'll be working as a data analyst."

"That's so exciting."

I've never been more thankful for Annabelle and Kimberly. If it was just my dad and I sitting here we would've just talked a bit about hockey and then been silent. With

these two we don't have to carry the conversation, and it helps to avoid the awkward silences, that neither of us knew how to fill.

Annabelle then grabs my hands and gives me a sexy smirk and I already know what she's going to say. "We have one more announcement. We're getting married," she says as she holds up her hand, she's wearing the same ring my dad used to propose to my mom. A princess cut a sapphire ring with a halo of small diamonds around it. It looks perfect on my woman's hand.

Tears fill my dad's eyes. I mean he knew I was going to do it because I asked him to mail the ring to me, but to see him this emotional, I know that I did the right thing in asking for my mom's ring.

Both Kimberly and my dad get up from their seats. "Congratulations," they say in unison. "We're so happy for you."

Kimberly and Annabelle break off to talk about wedding plans when my dad wraps his arms around me, pulling me in for an unexpected hug. "I'm proud of you son. Your mom would've loved her."

"Thanks, Dad," I reply, returning his hug. One year after Annabelle crashed back into my life, it feels like everything is exactly how it's supposed to be.

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Kimberly

"God. I fucking hate dating." I huff, crossing my arms over my chest as I throw myself down on the break room couch at Rose Valley Hospital. A chuckle comes from behind me and whirl to see who it could be. Colleen's grin gets bigger and bigger as I continue to glare at her. Her black messy bun distracts me slightly as it shakes as she tilts her head to ask, "Bad date?"

Rolling my eyes, I turn my back on her. "The worst."

"What happened?" she says sarcastically. "I thought Todd was different." She wiggles her fingers, adding air quotes.

I whip around to give another glare, but then her chuckles get to me too, and a laugh suddenly bursts out. Now, I can't seem to stop giggling. A stabbing feeling to my side reminds me of how much of a joke my love life is. Man, they should just make a reality TV show about me. I'm sure it would be a hit with all the losers I've dated. Every time I think maybe this will be it, maybe this one won't be so bad. But I'm never right. They're all bad.

We both suddenly stop laughing and just stare at each other. Colleen's eyes soften a bit. "What happened this time?"

Shaking my head, I clench my hands. "I saw him kissing another woman before the date even started."

"Whaat?" she shrieks. I hurry to plug my ears. Man, she's loud.

"I was running late and I didn't know his number because we've only been messaging on the app, so I tried to contact him through there. Well, I guess he didn't get my message because when I walked in ten minutes late, he was sitting at the bar with some woman on his lap and they were making out."

"Did you say anything to him?"

"No, I just left. But he responded this morning." Shrugging my shoulders, I try to be as nonchalant as possible. Though really if I'm honest, my heart aches. I thought by the time I was twenty-seven I would have met my perfect someone. That I would be married, possibly have a kid on the way. But nope, the universe doesn't work like that. Well, at least not for me.

Out of the sea of frogs I've dated, there was only one who had snagged my attention, the only man I was truly drawn to and he wasn't even someone I was dating. No, he was my, at the time boyfriend's dad. A man who was sexy as fuck and had eyes that you could drown yourself in.

A man twenty years older than me.

Whose wife had died the year before.

When my boyfriend Smith had caught me ogling his dad for the hundredth time at a family dinner, he'd practically dragged me too. Smith confronted me. His mom had just died and how could I even think I would have a chance with his dad when she was the love of his life. When I tried to lie and deny it, he saw right through me. I felt so disgusted with myself. The worst part? He was right, I would always be second with Silas Cabot. It was a pretty nasty breakup. That fight gave me the strength to walk away, or at least as far as they knew. They didn't need me to come between them. They needed each other.

I've felt nothing like the way I did when I was around Silas. Over the years, I've been

trying to recreate those feelings. Trying to forget. Hoping that one of these guys on these sites will be my true love... but nothing, nada.

Colleen interrupts my walk down memory lane when she asks, "Well, what did he say?" Oh yeah, we're talking about my date from last night.

"He asked me why I stood him up. I told him I didn't stand him up, but he probably didn't see me since he had his tongue down another woman's throat."

Her brows shoot up at that, placing her elbows on her knees as she listens to my story. "What did he say to that?"

"He told me if I wasn't so selfish and showed up on time, he wouldn't have moved on. I didn't respond."

Colleen sits up and leans back in her chair. "Sorry Kimmie. Maybe the next guy will be better."

"That's just it. I don't want there to be a next time. I'm tired of these dates."

"Yeah, it's definitely difficult to find someone worth your time out there," she murmurs, leaving me with questions. But I know I have to be careful how I ask things, not pushing her too hard. She keeps things locked down tighter than Fort Knox.

"Enough about me. What about you? Are you dating anyone?" I ask, trying to keep my tone light so she doesn't think I'm prying.

Colleen lets out a huff. "No. I'm just out having fun."

Her eyes light up as she gets up from her chair, and I know I'm in trouble. When she jumps over the back of the couch, landing next to me, she wraps her arms around my

shoulders. She has this glint in her dark brown eyes, causing me to take in a deep breath and brace for whatever comes out of her mouth next. "I know what will make you feel better. We should have a girls' night." she blurts out.

Letting out my breath slowly as my shoulders relax, I pull my phone out of my pocket. "That sounds good to me. Let's text the girls and see who is down."

Thank god that was it. Sometimes Colleen comes up with some crazy stuff, and because she's my ride or die, I'm always down for whatever, but sometimes her ideas are a little much, even for me. "Do you want me to text everyone or do you?"

Before Colleen responds, the alarm on my phone buzzes. Reminding me that my lunch break is over. Time to get back at it. Standing up, I tuck my phone back into my pocket. "I've got to get back, before the cardiac wing goes crazy without my presence."

"I'll text in our group chat to see who wants to get together. Are we doing this tonight?" Colleen asks as she pulls out her own phone.

"Yeah, we can do it tonight. I'm off tomorrow. Thankfully."

"Awesome. Now get back to work," she says as she smacks my ass as hard as she can.

My hands instinctively go to my ass. "Ouch. Did you have to do that?"

She smiles. "You know I did."

"Now my ass is going to hurt all day."

She winks at me. "You know you like it."

"No, you hag. I don't like it. But it's time to get back to work."

Colleen cackles behind me as I leave the break room, rubbing my sore ass. Heading back to the cardiac wing, I roll out my neck, reminding myself I only have four more hours on this shift. Usually, I work twelve hour shifts five days a week. Except for surgery days. On those days, you never know how long you'll be working. Sometimes it's longer, other times it's shorter. I love my job. It seems like I'm complaining, but I'm not.

What other job could you have where you get to meet great people? Work with one of the most complicated organisms in the body, the heart? And help heal people, not just physically but emotionally, too. I was meant for this, but that doesn't mean I don't get tired.

Pushing the doors open after scanning my I.D. the sight I see has me freezing right in my spot. All thoughts about my disastrous love life and my sore ass leave my head. What the hell is he doing here? I will my legs to move so I can get out of here and hide in one of my patient's rooms. Thankfully, I'm able to turn quietly, attempting to tiptoe down the hall. Before I can creep past the two men standing at the nurse's desk, Randall, my boss, spots me.

"Aww, there you are, Kimberly." My whole body stiffens. Shit, I wanted neither of these men to see me, time to be a big girl I force myself to relax my shoulders. Plastering on the fakest smile, I turn back toward Randall and his guest. Making sure I keep my eyes on my boss and only him, I ask, "What can I do for you?" My words are dripping in sweetness so he can't see how uncomfortable I am right now.

"This here is Mr. Cabot; he just bought the hospital and is making rounds over the next few weeks to check in on the departments."

My jaw drops in shock. My gaze goes to the man standing next to him. And shit, my heart skips a beat when they connect with Silas Cabot's very green eyes the same man

who has had my heart since the moment his son introduced us seven years ago.

"Hello, Kimberly," he greets me with a small smirk. His deep voice rolls over me, the same one that had my stomach flipping every time he spoke back then, and it seems things have not changed, no matter how much I've tried to put him out of my mind. I say nothing. I can't. All my words are stuck somewhere between my brain and throat. And maybe even a few have dropped to my pussy, because suddenly my clit is tingling, and my panties are damp.

This is not good. I can feel my boss's gaze bouncing between us. When he finally gets the guts he clears his throat and asks, "You two know each other?"

I'm nodding, because my brain doesn't seem to want to work, but Silas answers for us both. "We've met. She dated my son a few years back. Isn't that right?"

As if a bucket of ice has been thrown on me, I wake up to reality instead of being stuck in the one I've created. Why would Silas have any interest in me other than as his son's ex-girlfriend?

"Yes." I casually answer, pulling my nurse phone out of my pocket, pretending that a patient is calling me. "Sorry, I've got to go." Not caring if the two men staring at me know it's all a ruse, I immediately start down the hall. Because right now I need to get myself together.

When I reach one of my patient's doors, I take a deep breath and let all the tension in my body go. He just owns the hospital, nothing more, nothing less. He has more important things to do than care about you except for the extent of your job. And nothing to worry about there because you're a kick ass nurse.

Maybe if I chant that a few times, I'll even convince myself. A buzzing sound interrupts my thoughts. When I pull out my personal phone, I see a slew of texts confirming girls' night.

Taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly as if I was at yoga. This is what I need, a night with my girls to keep my mind off of Silas Cabot or that he now owns the freaking hospital.