



Wrong Pucking Move (Humbled Superstars #1)

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Category: Sport

Description: I couldnt believe what I was seeing on my phone screen. . .

Josie thinks shes getting surprised with an engagement at her favorite restaurant, but instead her hockey superstar boyfriend Jesse dumps her for someone he thinks will fit better into his new celebrity lifestyle. One painful year later hes desperate to fix his mistake, but Josies moved on. . .

Authors Note: This book has no physical cheating. It does have a very high level of pitiful desperate groveling. HUMBLLED SUPERSTARS is my new standalone grovel series. Each novella will feature a different celebrity man. This series is about big men crying on the floor, begging for mercy, and throwing their money around to win back their women and get a HEA.

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Chapter One

If I'm getting engaged today, I'm not getting caught in sweatpants and Crocs, I told myself happily as I smoothed the pretty yellow fabric of the flowy dress over my generous hips.

If this was going to be the first day of the rest of my life, I wanted the pictures to be good, so that my kids wouldn't look back and say, "Mom, what are those things on your feet?"

And Jesse would probably give me that teasing grin and say something like, "I guess your mother just didn't give a shit about getting engaged."

But I did . I wanted it so badly.

My boyfriend was always sunny and cocksure, always trying to get a rise out of me so he could pull me in his arms and nibble teasingly on my ear. An engagement in the middle of the week like this without warning would be such classic Jesse. We had been together since junior year of college. When I spotted him across the room at a party, I couldn't believe someone that gorgeous was ten feet away from me with a beer in one hand and a hockey stick in the other, asking who else wanted to play street hockey in 32 degree temps.

And of course they all wanted to. People just did what Jesse Wi?niewski wanted them to. He was the kind of popular guy it was impossible to hate even though he had everything—looks, charm, dripping with sex appeal, athletic talent.

Along with the rest of the party, I trooped outside to watch Jesse and the other guys play. But everyone's eyes were on Jesse, especially after he peeled his shirt off to reveal broad shoulders and a thick chest with well-defined bands of muscles. I heard the whispers that he was the new captain of the hockey team, that he was a star, that the bulge in his gray sweatpants was all him. . .

I didn't think I had a chance with a guy like that, but somehow I didn't go back inside, my eyes reluctantly glued to the way he moved, the big cocky grin, the easy way he blew past all the defenders.

A blush flooded my cheeks as I watched the muscles contract in his back, an embarrassing amount of heat pounding between my legs.

A guy like that would probably only go for the most beautiful and stunning models, but oh god, I wished he was mine. . .

And when he dislocated a finger slapping a long shot into the goal, I was the only one who didn't run screaming away.

I was in school to be an elementary teacher and that shit was something we had to take in our stride.

Jesse laughed as I popped his finger back in place.

"This doesn't gross you out?"

"I just supervised a 5th grade project about different types of beaver dung, so no, this doesn't gross me out."

His hand in mine was so massive, and I dropped it quickly, afraid he'd notice how my skin had broken out in goosebumps.

As I stood up, I met Jesse's eyes and I felt something turn over deep inside me, a hunger that heated my bones. He grinned at me again, that perfect golden boy smile. Up close his eyes were so blue, an unusual shard-bright ice color.

Then he asked me out, and ever since then we'd been inseparable. Five years together.

Five years of not missing a single game. College play, minor league games, and now, finally, a signing with our local NHL team the Philadelphia Heat.

It was something he'd wanted so badly, something he'd worked so hard for.

And now this was Jesse's big chance to finally show the world what he could do, and after supporting him and cheering him on for five years, I couldn't wait to see what came next.

And what would be more romantic for my cocky boyfriend than to give me no details whatsoever, get me to my favorite restaurant, and then ask me to marry him?

I walked up to the restaurant with anticipation building in my gut. Maybe we could go out for ice cream after.

I smoothed my dress over my curves. Heavy, big tits, curvy stomach, round ass and thighs. Jesse had always loved my body. He was the first man who ever made me feel completely confident in my own skin.

Fluffing my long dark hair out, my hands clutched my purse tighter as I saw Jesse through the window. He was sitting at a table in a baby blue polo shirt and long dark slacks. The most gorgeous, most beautiful man I had ever seen. Golden blonde hair, ice-blue eyes, tanned skin with the most exquisite cheekbones. Sensual lips that knew just how to lick their way down my skin, make my body sing for him.

He was massive , enormous wingspan with broad shoulders, a muscular chest and narrow waist. One of his thick thighs was bouncing up and down as I grinned to myself.

My sweet boyfriend must be nervous.

Oh, god, how I loved him.

I had never met a man like Jesse. His brutality on the ice contrasted with his playful cockiness off it. He had never missed an important date or an anniversary. He was sunny and friendly and magnetic, and up for anything, any date idea I had, and we loved to do everything together from kayaking, hiking, rock climbing, to sip & painting.

I couldn't imagine my life with anyone else.

Just as I put a hand on the front door, someone walked up to him and for a moment I thought it was a fan. People had started to approach him more after getting signed with the Heat, and only a few weeks into the season Jesse was already on fire .

I was so proud of him.

But it wasn't a fan. It was Taylor, one of the PR specialists for the Heat.

It seemed like she and Jesse had gotten close over the last few months. But I was used to that. Jesse was an incredibly gorgeous man. Women always wanted him. But he was experienced at deflecting their attention away, and I had never had any cause to doubt him.

Once he wore a ring, maybe this attention would calm down.

Taylor was tall with bouncy yellow curls and a tiny waist, perfectly dressed and made-up like an Instagram model.

It was good that Jesse had someone to help him transition to NHL stardom. It was a lot different, and a lot more pressure now.

She bent down to his ear, and I hesitated outside. There was nothing really inappropriate about the way he kept his big hands folded on the table. And there was nothing technically wrong about the way she stood beside him, whispering into his ear.

But I knew Jesse Wi?niewski. Knew him like back of my damn hand.

He was nervous . And she was comforting him. Encouraging him.

What would he need comfort for?

Suddenly, I felt a flicker of unease in my stomach.

Surely I was overreacting.

But there was something worse than flirting between them.

There was something. . .comfortable.

Like he went to her for advice.

Like there was something between them that he was keeping from me.

My stomach in knots, I opened the door and went in.

As soon as I saw his eyes, I knew .

I didn't even need the reassuring pat Taylor gave him, or the quick flick of her eyes up and down my outfit before she left.

Numbly, I sat down across from the man I'd been madly in love with for five years.

He cleared his throat. "Josie, we need to talk."

Stubbornly, I waited, clenching my hands into fists underneath the table, digging them into the fabric of my skirt to stop my legs from trembling.

When I didn't say anything, he cleared his throat again.

"I think—we need to take some time apart. I've been really busy lately, and—things are different. I'm going to be gone a lot with the team."

I couldn't help remembering a trip I'd gone on with him when he was in the minor leagues. I hadn't even been allowed to stay with him and of course there was no budget, so I'd spent all my own money to accompany the team all the way from Philadelphia to Seattle.

But I had been happy to go and cheer him on because he was so depressed that the NHL deadline had come and gone with no signing.

The way he had looked the day he hadn't been signed had almost broken my heart.

I need you he had told me.

I know I won't be able to concentrate on the games unless you're there.

And by the time I got to Seattle, all I'd been able to afford was a few nights' stay in the most godawful fleabag hotel. But it had all been worth it, I'd thought, because he'd started to break out that trip, ease into his post-college play.

But now that he could travel in style, could put me up in a hotel where I wouldn't get bedbugs, suddenly I simply couldn't handle it.

What else was he planning to upgrade?

"Are you cheating on me?" I asked directly.

Jesse's eyes bugged out, and I saw a muscle twitch in his jaw. His hands gripped the restaurant table tightly.

"No. No ."

I didn't want to know, but I had to know.

"Is there someone else then?"

His eyes flicked away from me then, and I knew.

Jesse never could lie to me.

"I never cheated on you," he said, like that was supposed to make me feel better, I guess. "But there is someone else. She just—I think she fits with my lifestyle better."

I felt anger grow under my skin, flood my face with bright painful heat.

"Your lifestyle ?" I shot at him. "And I don't? Even though I went to every single one of your games in college, traveled to all those games in the minor leagues, watched

you practice for hours?”

It was a stupid thing to say, because it was over, and it had been over even before I arrived.

Jesse shifted in his chair, but he looked a little surer, cocky again.

“The NHL is different,” he said. “It’s more high-profile. More demanding. I don’t think you’d enjoy it or fit in. I’m doing you a favor.”

I said nothing.

What a fool I had been to think this meant an engagement.

It meant an upgrade for him. A rite of passage for pro athletes. Time to shed the girl he’d gone to college with for the beautiful model who was more attractive, exciting, probably way better in bed, and loaded to boot.

I was a teacher with loans and she was a hot model with 4 million Instagram followers.

“I care about you, Josie,” Jesse said, but there was nothing in his eyes as he looked at me. “Take all the time you need to move out of the apartment. If you want, I can give you some money for a down payment for a new one. And you don’t have to pay it back or anything. Just a gift.”

He waited, those big tanned hands folded in front of him. The hands that had held mine, comforted and caressed me for so long it seemed like a sick joke that they wouldn’t anymore.

I didn’t see anything in his ice-blue eyes but pity. Just pure neutral pity for me.

Forcing my shaking legs to move, I slid out of the bench and stood up, my stomach plummeting to the floor realizing that this would be the last time I'd get to be so close to him. From now on, he'd have security at the games, go to entirely different restaurants and bars. Our paths wouldn't cross.

"Keep your goddamn money," I said. "I don't want it."

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Chapter Two

The weeks moved one after the other, each more painful than the last.

The very first day I knew Jesse was at an away game, I moved out of the apartment and back home with my parents in old Philly.

I felt like I was dying without him at first, my bed so empty without his reassuringly warm body, the way he had always pulled me tight against him.

I had to stop myself so many times from texting him or contacting him that I finally blocked his number. I had held onto it way too long, in the hope that maybe he'd message me.

It was time to let that hope go.

And then each month was a little less painful than the last.

I was nothing if not stubborn.

Jesse was not going to win. And winning meant getting over him.

I threw myself into my work teaching 5th grade. At first it seemed impossible to be able to ignore Philadelphia Heat's superstar center Jesse Wiñiewski. Philadelphia was mad for its professional hockey team, and Jesse had almost immediately made the most of his opportunity. He had led the league in goals in his first season, and even made the All-Star team.

I had to face the fact. My unwavering support for him had been completely unnecessary.

He hadn't really needed me after all.

The way I had encouraged him not to quit, told him his big break would come, spent hours filming and analyzing his form so he could improve? All unnecessary.

He now had the girlfriend fitting an NHL superstar.

With Taylor on his arm, he made celebrity gossip headlines with every trip to a sushi restaurant. At first I had to allow myself one thirty-minute period a week where I feverishly searched the two of them on every social media platform, gorging myself on her beautiful stylish outfits, his gleaming white smile.

The worst was the way his big hand spanned her lower back as he guided her past the paparazzi and into those fancy restaurants or movie theaters, because I remembered how it felt. Like I was the luckiest woman in the world to be loved by him.

Did he say all the same things to her at night?

Did he wash her hair in the shower, singing funny little songs about Rapunzel?

Did he kiss her after every game, smelling like heat and power and exhilaration?

I guessed he did.

They had been together a year and the headlines were all speculating about an upcoming engagement.

Well, why wouldn't he wait?

He had exactly what he had clearly wanted.

5 years with me and no ring.

Only 1 year with her and he probably already had a ring picked out.

For a while I wallowed in this pointless misery, in every single picture of them together and every cute fit check and video Taylor posted on her Tiktok.

But slowly I began to realize that a man who flashed a \$60K watch at the camera probably had nothing in common with me.

He was still a dog, but we hadn't been compatible after all.

Then I began needing less than thirty minutes a session to gorge myself with internet stalking, and then one week I didn't need to do it at all.

I began to start going out on dates again.

Bryan, one of my old friends from college, had messaged me to say if I ever needed a distraction, to give him a call.

I did need a distraction, and he was pretty damn good at it.

We became friends with benefits, and I stayed far away from dating any athletes at all.

And then one cold day in January, with the entire city bundled up as tightly as I was, my phone buzzed gently in the pocket of my slacks as I walked home from school.

I pulled out my phone with thick woolen mittens.

Oh damn, if this was the school calling to say I had to come back for a staff meeting. .
.

But it wasn't. It was a message from an unfamiliar number.

Can we talk? - Jesse

I stared at the words with undiluted horror, my stomach churning with nausea and revulsion.

That he would dare . Dare send me a message like that.

After a year not talking to me. A year with her.

What could this even be about?

Maybe he was about to ask her to marry him, and he wanted to warn me. Prepare me.
Spare my feelings as much as he could.

What should I say?

I didn't need or want his pity. What could I say to convince him of that?

Ugh.

Then my phone vibrated again.

I miss you

Can I call?

My jaw dropped.

What the fuck , Jesse?

Was he fucking drunk or something? At 3:30 in the afternoon?

My hands felt frozen as I ripped my mittens off to try to figure out what to reply, my steps slowing as I reached my street.

My fingers hovered over the letters, my breath catching in my throat.

But before I could decide what to say, I saw the three little dots lighting up to show he was typing something else.

I wrote back Stop drunk-texting me

Then I blocked him.

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Chapter Three

The next day I got to school, determined to shake off my unease, even though the few words he had texted seemed engraved into my mind.

What would he have to talk to me about? I couldn't think of any good reason unless it was from some stupid misguided belief in saving my feelings.

Well, he would see from me blocking him that I had no desire or need to talk to him.

Everyone was settling down after recess when my co-principals Mr. Montgomery and Mr. Macduff hopped into the room.

Mr. Montgomery was tall and Black and Mr. Macduff was short and white, and they both loved teaching and hated being the Principal, so they had compromised on sharing the job, as both men were the best of friends.

"You're a hockey fan, aren't you, Josephine?" Mr. Macduff asked eagerly.

For a moment, I couldn't speak. Then I composed myself.

"Yes, I enjoy hockey."

"Well, today is your lucky day!" Mr. Montgomery put in, his eyes gleaming behind his glasses. "There's never been a better day to be a Heat fan!"

"Why?"

My hands moved restlessly to straighten a stack of math work on my desk.

“The team just contacted Elmsweep Elementary, and we are all getting FREE VIP tickets to one of the upcoming afternoon games!” Mr. Macduff chirped. “Mr. Montgomery and I will of course go along to chaperone.”

Shock vibrated through my body.

What could I say to get out of this? Standardized testing? Rampant lice? Stomach flu?

But the kids were already surrounding me.

“Can we go, Ms. Josephine? Can we go?”

I mean, there really was no other option. I couldn’t have denied a bunch of hockey-mad 5 th graders the chance for VIP tickets.

But I didn’t like this. Didn’t like it at all.

I didn’t want to see Jesse and pretend like he was just another player when he was literally a world champion asshole.

On the day of the game, I had talked myself into thinking this was all a big coincidence.

After all, EVERY class at Elmsweep was going to get to go. It was just that the Heat Office Manager had been very. . . insistent that my class had to be the first.

We arrived early as the teams were warming up, and the familiar sounds of sharp blades on ice made my stomach twist inside.

For five years that had been the background noise to every homework assignment I completed, every book I read, every word game on my phone.

Hoping against hope that Jesse was out sick, I refused to look at the ice where the hockey players were warming up, instead looking at the tickets we'd been given at the entrance. I shuffled through them, turning automatically to lead the kids all back to the nosebleed section.

"Ma'am, please," the usher said, waving to the front row. "These are your seats."

"There must be some mistake!" I insisted. "Those are some of the best seats on the rink."

The man shook his head. "Only the best for you are my orders! If you would follow me, Ms. DeRosa."

Then he led me and twenty-five 5th graders to seats directly behind the glass on center ice.

Shit

I was hoping to make myself as inconspicuous as possible, to go to the game and leave without attracting any attention.

But it felt like all eyes were on me as I settled the kids, separating the ones who wanted to punch each other and directing Mr. Montgomery and Mr. Macduff to seats in between the biggest troublemakers.

We were in such sickeningly expensive seats that I even recognized a few celebrities in our section. Suddenly I had a wild fear I'd end up next to Taylor.

Good lord, this game couldn't be over soon enough, which sucked because all my kids were so excited, here in Heat colors, waving homemade banners and signs. And the game hadn't even started yet.

I needed to get a hold of myself.

Jesse was in my past. There was no reason to believe I'd have to do anything but see him across the ice.

I could handle that.

Just then I heard a sharp slice, and I felt a big body bump against the boards directly behind me, so hard I felt the reverberations in my chest.

My skin prickled but I didn't turn around. The gasps from the kids made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up and my skin felt tight, my long dark ponytail heavy down my back.

When I heard his voice it was like a chill down my spine.

"Hi, Josie."

I couldn't understand the note in his voice. If I didn't know any better, I would say it sounded like the time two years before when he had missed the cut and been sent down to the minors again. Raw and low, and with a note of pain he couldn't hide.

But that made no sense. He was leading the league in goals, he was the star forward on his dream team. He had everything he wanted.

"Jesse," I said coolly, but I still refused to turn around. "You didn't need to come over here."

There was silence for a moment and I heard his breathing, heavy against the glass, the sound ragged even in the noisy arena.

“Why did you block my number?” he asked, his voice a low growl.

“Didn’t want to talk to you,” I replied evenly. “Now go away.”

“Josie,” he said. “Josie, look at me.”

“Have a good game,” I answered dismissively, fiddling with my backpack like it was absolutely urgent to check the number of Band-aids.

“Please,” he said again, and I felt anger began to grow under my skin and tears prickle the corners of my eyes.

How fucking dare he have that note in his voice. How fucking dare he ask me to look at him!

I made to move past to my seat, but the glass rattled as I took one step away.

“Let me explain,” he insisted hoarsely.

Dimly, I began to hear people chant his name.

“Jesse! Jesse! #87! Gooooo Heat!”

I turned sideways and my heart twisted inside me to see him with his gloved hands on the glass, like he was trying to press through it.

The helmet obscured his face, but I could see his blue eyes, fixed fiercely on me.

Well, this was fucking aggravating.

“Apparently this isn’t getting through to you, but I don’t want to hear anything you have to say to me,” I hissed angrily.

Then I turned my back and went to my seat, wanting to scream at how he slowly skated away, as I deliberately pulled out my knitting.

I wished the game was a blur, but no, it seemed to pass painfully slowly, my face frozen and my lips moving with my automatic responses to the kids.

Yes, number 87 talked to me

No, it wasn’t that exciting

Yes, I hoped they would win

No, he hadn’t promised to get in a fight

No, I wasn’t going to call him back over and ask if he’d punch someone

No, I didn’t know if there was going to be a fight

Yes, we were going to get nachos

My heart still hammered every time Jesse skated right past us, the ice slicing up in a spray of white.

All the years of watching came back to me, but this time I didn’t give a fuck.

So I was shocked when his head twisted in my direction after his second goal of the

game.

The stadium was going wild, screams echoing in my ears, the crowd so wild for #87 that all I saw were brightly colored blurs all around the ice.

But when Jesse looked over at me all he'd see was the one singular person sitting and knitting a very nice hat. Because fuck him, that's why.

"The man is a hockey demigod!" Mr. Macduff howled in my ear.

"He's a magician on the ice!" Mr. Montgomery agreed, vibrating with such excitement that the popcorn was hopping out of his bag.

The kids were incredibly excited, even though the game ended without a fight, and for everybody but me it was the perfect day.

After the buzzer rang, I got up in relief.

Finally, we could collect our complimentary T-shirts and leave, but suddenly the usher was back.

"Please come this way," he said. "The team has arranged for a tour of the facility."

The team ?

At least it couldn't possibly be Jesse, since the game had just ended. . .

But as we were escorted into the tunnel, the star center met us at the entrance, in sweatpants and a T-shirt.

He still looked slick with sweat, like he hadn't even stopped to shower. And, as

always, he was too damn big and magnetic, making everyone laugh as he led the kids on a tour.

I hung back.

When we were dating, I had been used to this. Jesse was like the sun: golden, compelling, popular. I was the quiet, studious girl and I had been perfectly content to let him be the center and bask in the reflection.

But I didn't care anymore.

His sun wasn't for me anymore. Wasn't for my benefit. Therefore it did not pertain to me.

After we had toured the locker room and facilities, he handed off the group to one of his teammates—a tall, dark-haired Czech named Karel, who had them all practicing shots on a goal in one of the training rooms.

I stood back by the door, checking my phone, and my stomach tensed as Jesse headed over to me.

Shit

He stopped right in front of me, and I could feel the heat radiating off him, see the tight grip my ex had on his thick biceps.

“Josie, I just want to talk,” he said in a low voice. “Please. Can you give me that?”

I had planned to be cool and disinterested, but at this ridiculous request I had to struggle to keep my temper in check.

“Can I give you that ? You don’t get to ask me anything. You don’t get anything from me.”

“I just—I just want to explain,” he said. “I really need to talk to you.”

“Well, we have nothing to talk about,” I shot at him.

He looked down at me, and I saw the muscles in his forearms flex and release, flex and release again. There was a muscle that moved in his jaw, and I didn’t like how close he was standing to me, how intently he was looking at me.

“I—miss you.”

“Bullshit,” I said, glaring at him.

“It’s not bullshit,” he gritted out. “I miss you so much.”

His jaw flexed and I saw him swallow convulsively.

“I can’t stop thinking about you.”

“How’s your girlfriend?” I interrupted.

“We—” he began, but I turned away.

“Never mind, I don’t want to hear it. Just go away. I don’t want to be your friend or anything. Don’t fucking bother.”

“Jo-bug, please,” Jesse pleaded, and I felt his big hand on my wrist, burning even though he held me gently. Like I’d disappear or something.

I shook him off in a fury.

“Don’t ever call me by that nickname again,” I spat at him, so angry that I wrenched my hand from his hold.

Jesse looked startled.

“Just let me explain—” he was saying, but I was already headed to the door. Then it opened and Taylor was there.

Of all the rotten awful luck.

But instead of saying anything, she just stood there, darting her eyes between us.

Jesse inexplicably ignored her completely, following me to the exit.

“Can we go somewhere and talk?” he asked me.

He was so close that I could smell his skin, the familiar scents of ice and heat.

“Absolutely not,” I retorted. “Get yourself in check, buddy.”

“Is there a problem?” I heard a deep voice behind me and I whirled around to see Karel, folding his arms and looking at Jesse and I. Taylor had taken a few steps back into the hallway and was watching with a frown on her pretty face.

“There’s no problem,” Jesse said, and I saw the way he turned almost protectively in front of me.

I wanted to fucking rip his face off.

“I wasn’t talking to you,” Karel said.

Up close, his face was even more attractive, a straight strong nose with dark brows and thick head of dark waves.

“She’s no concern of yours,” Jesse said sharply.

I could barely see Karel past my ex’s broad shoulders.

“Beautiful women are always my concern,” Karel said. “Especially teachers. I love teachers.”

Oh, he was slick and he was trouble, but I couldn’t help smiling at his flirting.

“I give you an A for looks and a C for original lines,” I said.

Karel laughed at this, but Jesse didn’t.

“OK, class, let’s go!” I said, and I moved away as hastily as I could, trying to brush past Jesse, but I wasn’t quite fast enough.

He reached out for me, his hand brushing by my lower back, a jolt as I felt the contact of his thigh against my hip.

“This isn’t over, Josie.”

“Yes, it is,” I said through my teeth, and I smiled extra big at Karel.

“Thank you !” I said. “You’ve made this day a huge hit for the kids. And my principals,” I added.

“It was no problem,” he said smoothly as I heard Jesse grunt unhappily behind me.

As I herded the kids out the door, Karel touched my elbow briefly.

“Can I have your number?” he asked. “You’re stunning.”

I didn’t even hesitate.

I gave it to him loud and proud and then I left before waiting to see what my ex had to say about that.

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Chapter Four

A year ago, I had moved out of the apartment Jesse and I shared and back home with my parents, who lived in an old, historic (by which I meant tumbledown) neighborhood in a crooked little brick house.

They had helped me move out on a day I knew Jesse was going to be gone, and now most of my shit was stuffed in the backyard shed until I found another place.

My dad was a big, rumped plumber in his 50s named Roger. He was absolutely great at plumbing and absolutely awful at managing his plumbing business. Despite being a grumpy bastard, the tiniest sob story would move him almost to tears, and he'd be giving away \$5000 worth of plumbing for free.

My mom Diane had silvery blonde hair and twinkling hazel eyes, and was a phenomenal lunch lady. She adored Dad, almost as much as she loved our huge, disreputable St. Bernard named Watson, who had way more hair than brains.

I loved my family and tried not to think of living at home as a step backwards.

This was just until I could pay off some loans and save for the first and last month's rent at a new place.

My little brother Mike was a husky 22-year-old part-time sandwich maker at Subway and part-time jail overnight visitor when he'd do something like get drunk and pee on the mayor's car. He was a full-time dumbass.

I was shaken by what had happened at the Heat stadium, but after getting home, I changed into comfy leggings and a T-shirt and tried to distract myself.

He was still blocked . And good riddance to him.

My mom and I were in the kitchen making lasagna when we heard the doorbell ring. Mike had just been in the kitchen making himself an enormous pre-dinner sandwich with two solid inches worth of roast beef, so Mom yelled out to him to get the door.

He groaned dramatically but went.

Our house was small enough so that I could see the front entrance from the kitchen, and I guessed it was probably some door-to-door salesman. But I knew something was fucking up when my brother's sandwich was thrown down on the side table so violently that the whole thing shook.

“Bro, I fucking said it was on sight ! Let's gooooo!”

There was another violent rattle as Mike charged out the front door.

“What is that boy up to now?” Mom said.

Dad twitched the curtains aside, but he suddenly hoisted himself up from his easy chair with an,

“I'll be god-dammed!”

I whirled around as I saw him adjust his suspenders and charge out the door too, his wild gray hair sticking up all over his head and his bushy beard bristling with anger.

Fuck

I could only think of one person who would inspire my dad to get up out of his chair in the middle of one of his WWII documentaries.

And it was the person I never hoped to see again.

But I couldn't very well ignore this, for god's sake.

I dropped the bag of spinach and raced after them.

And out on the sidewalk I saw Jesse Wi?niewski fending off both Mike and Dad. My brother was fully six feet tall, but Jesse still towered over him. He was wearing a white cable-knit sweater and jeans and was dodging Mike's blows at the same time as he had a grip on Dad's suspenders.

"Just give me a chance to explain—" he was saying.

"No fucking way, asshole!" Mike shouted. "Not after you dumped my sister!"

Jesse was forced to let Dad go and put an arm up to block Mike's punch.

I was gratified by this evidence of brotherly affection, I guessed, but for a moment the breath was driven so hard from my lungs that I couldn't speak.

Dad picked up a statue of Santa that was still on the front porch, because we were one of those families that didn't get decorations down until Valentine's Day at the latest, and jabbed Jesse firmly in the back with it.

"Scram, punk!"

If I didn't want to scream with rage, I would have smiled to see my dad taking on Jesse as if this professional hockey player wasn't a foot taller and fifty pounds of hard

muscle heavier.

Mike was coming with both fists at Jesse, his arms windmilling in the air.

But suddenly my ex saw me and Jesse froze, his eyes widening. I realized I was in a long-sleeved T-shirt with no bra on but I refused to cover up. He could choke looking at my tits for all I cared.

Mike pulled his arm back like an old-timey cartoon and pasted Jesse right in the mouth. My ex barely reeled back, his eyes still locked on mine, that ice-blue burning hot and deep.

“What are you doing here, Jesse?” I asked.

There was a little smear of blood on his lip from where Mike had hit him, but Jesse wasn’t even paying attention as it dripped down his face.

“I need to talk to you. Please .”

“Talk to my sister?” Mike roared, incensed. “I don’t think so, asshole.”

“You dare to show your face here?” Dad raged. “And what is this?”

He pointed to a Tupperware that had been set down on the sidewalk.

“ Szarlotka ,” Jesse said, still staring at me. “I made some for you.”

“Fuck your apple pie!” Mike roared, kicking the Tupperware so it skittered across the sidewalk.

“All right, calm down,” I said, walking down the steps and grabbing the back of

Mike's shirt. "Just leave, Jesse."

"No!" he insisted. "I'm not leaving until you hear what I have to say. Can we go somewhere? Maybe get a bite to eat."

"You can talk to me here," I said tightly, jerking my head at Dad and Mike so they'd leave.

They went back up the stairs and inside, glaring at Jesse the whole way. I saw Dad scoop up the Tupperware first as Mike pointed his finger in Jesse's face.

"If you so much as lay a finger on her, asshole. . ."

Jesse's face was flushed, two pink spots of color high on his cheeks.

"Who the fuck do you think you're talking to?" he growled.

"Someone who knows you're looking desperate, bro," Mike retorted tauntingly. "What's the matter? Sick of Instagram models? Fucking pussy."

"Just go!" I snapped at my brother, tearing my gaze away from Jesse's burning eyes and shoving my brother up the stairs.

Then I put my hands on my hips and glared at my ex, who was still breathing hard.

"What do you want? Spit it out. I don't know how long Mike will stay in there. He's like a mad dog."

Jesse took a deep breath and ran his hands through that thick golden-blond hair.

I was startled to see that his hands were shaking.

“I miss you.”

I rolled my eyes.

“You said that already. I still don’t believe you, and I don’t care about your little trip through nostalgia town.”

“It’s true,” he insisted. “I miss you. A lot. I can’t stop thinking about you.”

There were dark circles under his eyes that I hadn’t noticed earlier, his hands still shaking as he shoved them down into his pockets.

“Please, Josie. I made the dumbest mistake of my life in breaking up with you. I want another chance. I want you back .”

I wanted to punch him in his stupid cocky face, except he didn’t look cocky now, just tense, the tendons straining in his arms as his hands were stuffed in his pockets.

“No fucking way, Jesse. Aren’t you engaged to another woman?”

He wouldn’t look away from me. He should look away, after what he had done to me. But he wouldn’t. His eyes were so bright and blue.

“It’s over with her. I was fucking deluding myself the whole time. I made a mistake, Josie.”

“A mistake ?” I shot at him. “You dumped me for another woman. You haven’t talked to me in a year. You are not forgiven.”

Jesse stepped toward me, his hands out in supplication.

“I know it was one huge goddamn mistake . I know I’ll have to make it up to you. I was an ass. A complete fucking moron to think I could live without you. I can’t .”

I stared uncomprehendingly at him, like this shit surely couldn’t be happening to me now.

When I didn’t say anything, Jesse’s lips started to twitch.

“I love you, Josie. I never stopped. Please tell me what I can do to make this right.”

“No,” I said furiously, knocking his hand away as he reached for me. “You don’t get to bring your trifling ass around here selling me bullshit.”

He took a ragged, deep breath.

“Maybe this was too fast. OK, I didn’t mean to freak you out. But I meant every word, Josie. Losing you has been the single stupidest thing I’ve ever done.”

“I don’t believe you,” I said flatly, clutching my arms to my chest, like the action would hold me tight, keep me from falling into pieces.

“All you care about is your image.”

“I thought I did, but I don’t. I swear I don’t.”

There was a sharp rapping on the window and I looked around to see Mike and Dad in the frame.

“Wrap it up,” Dad called, twirling his finger around. “I need that sidewalk.”

“You’ve got five fucking minutes or I’m going to start lighting off firecrackers,” my

brother warned.

Without looking at us, my mom came and took ahold of the curtains.

“Close them, please. I don’t want to see him.”

I glanced up at Jesse and I saw he was breathing heavily. The dark circles under his eyes were like midnight shadows, and his jaw looked like it could crack walnuts.

Most of Jesse’s family still lived in Poland, and his parents were dead.

My parents had taken him in, loved him like a son.

Until the day he had broken up with me.

“I deserve it,” he said quickly. “I deserve what they think of me. What I did was shitty.”

“OK,” I shrugged. “Thanks, I guess. Thanks for this belated little sorry. You can go now.”

“But I want to win you back,” Jesse said. “The five years with you were the best years of my life.”

I looked at him, really looked at him. Even with the dark circles, and the way his tight skull pressed against his skin, he was still breathtakingly gorgeous.

“What was so great about those years?” I asked.

“Oh, Josie, they were the best!” he cried, his deep voice cracking in his eagerness. “How everything with you was so fun! How we laughed over dumb shit every day.

How we did everything together—studying, practices, trips. How fucking amazing it felt to kiss you. How you were the best person to go over games with and analyze what happened and how I could improve. How everything was fucking right with you, baby.”

He was looking down anxiously at me, his big hands clenching and unclenching feverishly now.

“You know what I think?” I said.

“What, baby? What? I’ll never take you for granted again, I swear.”

“I think those five years were a goddamn waste of time, because I spent them with a jackass who dumped me as soon as he got to the big leagues. Because he wanted to level up with other women.”

“No!” Jesse moaned, staggering so he had to grip the fence for balance.

“ You wanted to live your life without me. Well, you got your wish . Enjoy it, baby . There’s tons of girls out there who would fit your lifestyle better. Go find them and leave me alone.”

“No, please!” Jesse begged, clutching at the back of my shirt as I tried to go inside. I had never heard that note in my cocky ex’s voice before. “Please. I don’t want anyone else. I know that now. I was so arrogant. I can’t live without you. I tried. It fucking sucks .”

“I will never believe you care more about me than your image. This conversation is a complete waste of time. Now get your grubby paws off me.”

“How can I prove to you I mean what I say?” he asked anxiously as I tugged my shirt

from his grip.

“You can’t,” I said. “Goodbye, Jesse.”

I turned on my heel and went inside just as Mike stuck an air horn out the window and let it go.

My phone pinged as I slammed the door, and I glanced down at the message.

Well, I knew one thing for damn sure. I was going to go on that date with Karel.

If Jesse thought he could get forgiveness with some Polish apple pie, he was goddamn mistaken.

I wasn’t falling for his shit.

Chapter Five

Karel was handsome. He seemed nice.

And that was all the qualification I needed to have sex with him.

The date had been going pretty well, out at a nice sushi restaurant with a bar downtown.

Frankly, the most appealing thing about Karel was that he wasn't Jesse Wiśniewski. That made him practically irresistible.

I was waiting for Karel to come back with our drinks when someone in a tight pink miniskirt stopped by our table.

To my shock, it was Taylor.

"What do you want?" I asked.

I had seen her plenty over the last year. She had been everywhere with Jesse. They had looked like the perfect golden couple. Both stunningly tall and attractive, stylish and compelling. You couldn't take your eyes off them.

And I had watched her TikToks with a burner account. The cute little dances, the fit checks, the Valentine's Day gifts.

Jesse had bought her diamond earrings and a ski trip to Aspen.

From the outside, it had looked like the perfect relationship.

Taylor slid into a seat across from me and looked me up and down like she had that day Jesse broke up with me. But today was different. This time she didn't have that superior look on her face, that curl in her lip.

Today she looked like she was sizing up a rival.

"You are beautiful," she said. "I didn't see it before because you weren't dressed great. But now, yeah, ok, I see it."

It looked like she was barely repressing a you bitch to the end of that.

I glanced down at my tight red dress that clung to my curves and the way my breasts were lush and overflowing in the tight bodice.

"I do look good," I said. "What do you need, Taylor?"

"Can I ask you a question?" she bit out from behind a smile that didn't reach her eyes.

Her face looked brittle, like she might shatter into a million pieces.

"Sure," I replied, forcing my hands to calm, not fret around the stem of my glass.

"Was Jesse cheating on me with you?"

I'm sure I was unable to hide my total astonishment.

"No, he wasn't," I said evenly. "Why do you think that?"

“Oh, you know,” she said, sliding her eyes down, and when she fidgeted with her purse I realized she was nervous. Around me.

“I just—I just knew when he broke up with me that he was going to try to get back together with you.”

“Why did you think that?” I asked carefully. “He broke up with me to get with you.”

Her perfect plump lips twisted up in a grimace. “I guess. And he didn’t ever cheat on you, if that’s what you were wondering.”

“It was emotional cheating, though, wasn’t it?” I said softly. “I know it was because he felt guilty about it. About wanting you when he was with me.”

Taylor made another bitter face. “I guess. We were casual for months and I had to work like a fucking dog to get him to commit to even officially dating me.”

I didn’t know what to make of this so I ignored it.

“And what do you mean you guess he broke up with me?”

Her lovely eyes were smudged, like she’d been crying.

“I mean he never really got over you.”

For a moment, my breath caught in my chest.

“I find that hard to believe,” I retorted, forcing myself to keep meeting her eyes. “He didn’t contact me at all.”

“Shouldn’t I know since I was the one dating him?” she asked angrily. “I knew. It

was things he said and didn't say. And he's not as fucking subtle as he thinks he is. The stories that stopped abruptly when he realized you were in them. The fucking endless college nostalgia. The damn memories from when I used to be in the minors . It wasn't the minor leagues. It was you . It was you he was remembering and you he wanted."

Taylor looked angry, shredding napkins all over the table like tiny brown confetti, fidgeting with the tiny crop top over her perfect flat belly.

I said nothing.

"You hung over our entire relationship," she said furiously. "From the very beginning . I hope Josie is OK or I hope I didn't hurt Josie too much . He expected you to contact him," she added viciously. "And he was fucking pissed when he found out you'd blocked him instead. I had to hear about that for goddamn months."

I said nothing again and this seemed to piss her off even further.

"Plus, I know he was still obsessed with you because he had a secret little folder in his phone and it was literally full of pics of you. I guess he just couldn't bear to give up any single picture of when you went to St. Petersburg. There were like 40 pictures alone of you, like, petting a dolphin."

"That's sad," I said.

She was clearly expecting a bigger reaction, and her face twitched in annoyance.

"I bet you just can't wait to get back with him," Taylor hissed, and I could tell she very badly wanted to.

Jesse was loaded, hot, a superstar celebrity. She'd assume everyone wanted him.

“No,” I said, then I looked over at Karel, who was coming back to our table with the drinks. “I have other options.”

The naked jealousy on Taylor’s face startled me.

She was jealous of me.

“Lucky bitch,” she said. “I’ll see you around, I guess.”

She turned to leave, but just as she did, the front door to the restaurant snapped open, and Jesse walked in.

Taylor sucked in her breath sharply, but I didn’t have to wonder long why he was here.

“Josie!”

He always commanded attention, even in only a sweatshirt and sweatpants, and Jesse strode toward us, bending down to put a hand possessively on the back of my chair.

“Karel, this is my girl.”

My skin began to heat with the contact, and I shook off the sensation as the tips of his fingers brushed by my back. My dress had a deep v and the feel of those fingers on me was infuriating.

I used to be fucking weak for this man, my body so finely-tuned to his that my skin would already be thrumming with desire before he even touched me.

But if he thought he could get around me on sex appeal now, he was very mistaken.

“I’m not your girl,” I said hotly.

“What are you doing here?” Karel asked warily.

“She’s my girl,” Jesse said. “She’s always been my girl. I’m not going to just sit here and watch you take her out on a date.”

“I’m afraid you’ll have to,” Karel said, cocking his head.

“Fine,” Jesse shrugged, sliding into the table directly beside us. “I’ll just wait here until you’re done.”

Taylor huffed. “Can I talk to you?”

Without taking his eyes off me, Jesse shook his head no.

“I made a mistake breaking up with Josie. She’s the woman I want. She’s the one I want to spend my life with.”

Taylor made a little scream of rage.

“I hope you’ll be soooo happy together! Did you know his cock hasn’t even been working for the last few months?” she demanded to Karel and I.

Karel suppressed a shocked snort and I glanced over at Jesse. He had two spots of color on his cheeks but he still looked steadily at me.

“That’s right. It doesn’t work. For you, Taylor.”

She gave a scream of rage.

“Oh, that’s right. Go fucking jerk off to your ex’s pics, you sad fuck.”

Huffing, Taylor stomped off angrily.

For a moment there was a frozen silence, then Jesse spoke.

“It is sad. Sad and fucking desperate.”

Something uncurled inside me at the smoldering look on his face.

Who was this man who admitted out loud he was desperate to get back with me?”

“ Go away,” I said. “I don’t want you here, Jesse.”

“I want you to see,” he said. “See that I mean what I say. I’m willing to do anything.”

He leaned forward until he was only inches away from me.

“You had your chance, man,” Karel warned, and I heard a grating noise as Jesse gripped the back of his chair so hard the metal protested under his fingers.

“I can still love her better,” he said fiercely. “Better than anyone else.”

Well, I wasn’t going to sit here and try to answer Karel’s questions about what I did for fun with Jesse looming right behind me.

So I excused myself to go to the bathroom and when I got there I crawled out the window and hightailed it the fuck out of there.

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Chapter Six

I was so pissed-off that I took an Uber over to Bryan's apartment. We'd been friends since high school, and I'd never been tempted to date him, but he was very good in bed.

We usually met up once, maybe twice a month, and this time I had a lot of anger I wanted to burn off, but as I lay in bed afterwards with my damp hair stuck to my back, I still felt unsatisfied.

"What's going on?" Bryan asked, rubbing my shoulder gently.

"Oh, Jesse's back around," I said, attempting a casual tone.

Bryan's hand stilled and I saw a frown cross his face.

He was a physical trainer at a local gym, with shaggy light brown hair and a hipster goatee. He was a nice guy and we were very compatible in bed, but frankly I didn't think about him otherwise.

I guess I would have to keep looking until I found a man I actually liked enough to think about during the week.

"And what does he want?" Bryan asked.

"Oh, he says he wants to get back together. He's just pissing me off."

“And do you?” Bryan asked.

I rolled to my feet and reached for my panties.

“No.”

“Good,” Bryan said, a little too quickly. “Fuck that guy. He’s just a dumb meathead.”

Bryan had never liked Jesse, but I felt a little prickle of irritation.

“You and I are casual,” I reminded him coldly. “No strings attached.”

“I know,” Bryan said, “I just would hate for you to get hurt again.”

When I only stared at him, he added with a rueful grin, “OK, and maybe I have a selfish motivation, too. Because you’re the best lay I’ve ever had, fucking hands down. You’re so sexy.”

“Hm,” I said.

But I didn’t return the compliment.

As he drove me home, I had to admit why I was feeling so restless still.

At first, I had thought Jesse contacting me was just drunk texting or something impulsive.

He always had been cocky and impulsive. But today it almost seemed like he meant it.

What did that mean?

Nothing, right?

It changed nothing.

Maybe Jesse would finally give up and let me go back to my life.

But when Bryan dropped me off back at home, there was a tent at the bottom of our stairs and as I moved closer the front unzipped and Jesse emerged, a sleeping bag under one arm.

“What are you doing now ?” I yelped at him.

“Just doing anything I can to show you I’ve changed,” he said. “That I’m committed to this relationship.”

“We don’t have a relationship,” I reminded him as he sprinkled de-icer on our front steps.

“I want to be here for you,” Jesse insisted, turning around so my heart twisted inside me. “There’s severe weather projected for the next few weeks.”

Just then he caught sight of Bryan walking behind me.

“What’s he doing here?” Jesse asked darkly.

Bryan stepped next to me, putting an arm casually around my shoulders.

“What does it matter to you?”

“I want to get back with her,” Jesse retorted.

“My relationship with Bryan is none of your business,” I put in firmly.

“Your relationship?” Jesse asked, taking a step closer.

God, even off the ice, he was just massive, huge broad shoulders stretching that black hoodie wide.

“Mind your business, man,” Bryan said, but I noticed he didn’t try to step in between Jesse and I, and watched the much bigger pro warily.

“It’s sex,” I said. “We meet up to fuck.”

For a moment, tensions crackled in the air, then I heard a window open behind me, and there was a loud slurping sound.

“Mm, what delicious hot chocolate,” Dad said. “It’s lovely and nice and warm inside. Come here, Watson, and look at this damn fool camping on our front sidewalk.”

Jesse was looking like he’d been punched in the gut, and Mike stuck a leaf blower out the window and sent a huge spray of wet, slushy snow all over my ex.

“Boo to you,” Dad said. “Boo to you, Mr. Wi?niewski.”

Then he shut the window with such satisfaction that little paint flakes flew out in a cloud.

“Did you think I was going to take a vow of celibacy?” I demanded.

“No, no,” Jesse said, but I could tell he absolutely hadn’t expected this. “I just want things to go back to how they used to be. I want you to be mine again.”

“Not going to happen,” I warned him.

“Give me another chance,” he said, looking at me with those damn fucking baby blue eyes.

“What’s the matter?” Bryan put in. “Got tired of fucking Instagram models and now you want Josie back?”

“Just go, Bryan,” I warned him, stepping in front of Jesse.

“Fine,” Bryan said, backing away. “Text me whenever you want to cum, Josie. Let’s try to beat our previous record.”

Jesse’s breathing was so ragged and angry I didn’t know if I was going to turn around and he’d be fucking chasing Bryan’s car down the street.

“He’s right, though,” I said. “I don’t buy it. You didn’t contact me for a year. You’re just bored or nostalgic or something. You thought you could do better than me, so go find it.”

Jesse looked like I’d slapped him in the face.

“I can’t—I can’t believe I was so stupid,” he groaned, tearing at his blonde hair. “I thought I would be a fucking Big Man and sow my wild oats or something. Well, it fucking sucked. It was nothing like being with you.”

His eyes scanned my face, like he was looking for any evidence of me softening. “I tried to deny how I felt for months. Then I finally couldn’t deny any more that I’m miserable without you. I want to fix everything I broke.”

“Some things can’t be fixed,” I said, “and this is one of them.”

I turned to go but he gripped my hand, sending a wave of sensation through me.

“What are you doing?” I snapped, but he was getting down on one knee and digging in his pocket.

To my astonishment, he pulled out a little black box and held it out to me.

“I’m doing something I should have done a long time ago. Asking you to marry me. Will you, Josie?”

“Absolutely not,” I said indignantly.

“Open it, please,” he begged.

“Absolutely not,” I repeated. “You just don’t fit into my lifestyle anymore, Jesse.”

After I had gone inside, Mom looked at me with round eyes from where she and Watson were sitting in front of a cozy roaring fire.

“How long is he going to be out there?”

“I don’t know, Mom,” I said. “I don’t know.”

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Chapter Seven

When I opened our front door the next day, it was to a frigid morning and Jesse sitting calmly on a camp stool with a mug of coffee.

He jumped up when he saw me and reached for a big to-go cup of steaming Starbucks coffee beside him.

“I already got you your favorite so you don’t have to stop. A London Fog for you, m’lady.”

He handed it to me pinky-up, like he always had, with a smile twitching at his face.

I had heard the same teasing joke so many times and it always made me laugh, so I wasn’t able to stop my lips from curving up.

So he didn’t get the wrong idea, I bent and took a sip of my drink. It had been made with lavender syrup, just like I always asked for.

When I looked up he was down on one knee again, and this time the little box was popped open so I could see the ring.

Choking on my drink, I could barely believe my eyes.

It was absolutely massive, just an enormous damn rock in there, a pear-shaped monstrosity sparkling up at me like the opening of some pirate’s loot.

“I love you,” my ex said. “And I want to marry you.”

I dragged my eyes away from the ring to look at his face—craggy with stubble now.

“If you love me so much, why did you break up with me? Why would I trust you won’t do the same damn thing if I took you back?”

He flushed.

“It’s so shitty and stupid that it’s embarrassing. After I got signed, all the guys were talking about what I’d get now. Like I could buy a mansion, tons of sports cars, designer everything. And of course, I could get any pussy I wanted.”

His voice trailed off.

“And I was so fucking fat-headed after getting signed that I broke up with you and I got any pussy I wanted and started dating Taylor too. And then. . .it wasn’t what I thought.”

“What a heart-rending cautionary tale,” I said caustically. “I wonder how much pussy it took for you to finally decide you were bored and would rather go back to the girl who penned your dentist appointments in the calendar because you always forgot.”

“No, Josie!” he cried in a panic. “It’s not like that! It’s you I miss. And it’s all because of you that I made it to the NHL. I never could have without your support.”

But I was already moving down the steps.

“Go to practice, Jesse,” I said.

“I’m going to keep asking you,” he called after me. “Again and again.”

“I hope you saved the receipt,” I yelled back at him, then walked to work wishing I had just kicked the coffee cup from his hand and gotten it myself.

When I arrived at school, I was hoping for at least eight or nine hours of not thinking about my ex.

But alas, it was not to be.

I headed for our crappy copier in the Teacher’s Lounge to get some math sheets ready, when Mr. Montgomery and Mr. Macduff both ambushed me, their faces split in ear-to-ear grins.

“Josephine, you will never guess what happened!” Mr. Macduff caroled.

“Josephine, you have never seen such a beauty!” Mr. Montgomery cried at the same time.

Then they both moved aside and gestured like old-timey circus ringmasters.

And my eyes beheld the astonishing sight of a brand-new copier, shining in the fluorescent lighting like the Holy Grail.

“What—how?” I almost shrieked with glee, running over to touch the machine to make sure it was real. The district was so tight-fisted they never let us have luxuries like working equipment.

“Finally, copies that come out right!”

“And that’s not all,” Mr. Macduff chortled. “Look! All new school laptops for the kids! Every teacher’s wish list filled. A new playground!”

“And,” Mr. Montgomery added, “enough funding for another 5th grade teacher next year so our class sizes can be smaller!”

I gasped with the decadent, rich pleasure of potentially having 20 instead of 25 or 30 in a classroom.

This was a funding bonanza so huge I’d never seen anything like it in my life.

We weren’t one of the big fancy schools, we were powered by heart and dedication, and how had we managed to get on any big donor’s radar. . .

My co-principals were high-fiving on getting funding for an art and dance teacher when I realized the obvious.

It should have been my first thought.

“Who donated this?”

Mr. Macduff looked down at his fax, which was crumpled in his hand.

“It looks like. . . why, who is this? Jesse Wi?niewski ? Why, the man is a saint! I don’t know how we got on his radar, but praise be to every goddess in the sky that we did!”

“A stone-cold saint!” Mr. Montgomery agreed, rubbing his hands together.

They bounced off happily to spread the good news to the other teachers and I remained looking at the copier, running my hands absently over its shiny perfect surface.

I wanted to cry over its perfect whirling gears.

This would mean so much to the kids and the teachers. A potentially life-changing amount of resources and support for at-risk kids.

My stomach was churning when I headed home.

I had to say thank you. Not that it meant I would get back with him, but I was so grateful.

As I got closer, I saw Dad on the front stoop with his karaoke microphone and Jesse on his hands and knees scrubbing the brick walkway with a toothbrush.

Dad's off-key falsetto rendition of 'Man, I Feel Like A Woman,' accompanied by the howlings of Watson, must be some kind of advanced torture technique.

"If he's going to be hanging around like a bum, he might as well make himself useful," Dad said as Watson rushed down the steps to greet me, rubbing his shaggy head all over my silk trousers.

The window opened and Mike looked out, his mouth full.

"If you think you can get around my sister with Polish desserts, you're fucking mistaken," he said, spraying pastry crumbs everywhere.

"I made Karpatka," Jesse said, referencing the pastry filled with rich creamy custard that was my favorite. "You better save some for her."

When Dad brought his old bugle out from behind his back, I waved them all inside.

"Enough, you jokers, I want to talk to Jesse."

"Make him suffer!" Mike advised sternly before shutting the window.

“See,” Jesse said, stretching to his full height. “I’m hoping if I suffer enough, they’ll forgive me.”

“I’m not here to talk about you and me,” I said.

“Whatever you want to talk about, I’m here for it,” he said, leaning back against the railing near me.

My skin began to feel itchy and overheated. He always barely dressed for the winter, and the way his sweatshirt was rolled up over his big forearms made me tighten my hands firmly in my pockets.

“Thank you,” I said stiffly. “For your generous gift to Elmsweep.”

He turned to look at me.

“You supported my career for a long time, Josie. Now I want to support you. What else can I do to help?”

I should have said nothing, should have emphasized that we would never get back together.

“We aren’t the only school in town,” I replied.

“Whatever you want, baby,” he said, grinning that killer smile at me. “It’ll be done tomorrow. All the schools. I don’t give a shit about my money without you. I thought I did, but without you it’s all meaningless. All this fucking money and a condo in the fancy fucking rich shithead part of town doesn’t matter if you aren’t there with me. And goals on the ice aren’t the same if I can’t look over and see you cheering for me.”

“Watson, attack!” I said, because I didn’t know what else to do.

I couldn’t process what he was offering to do for me.

Our disgraceful St Bernard only howled again and then licked Jesse’s face, a big wet slobbery tongue bath.

“Watson, come away from that man!” I said sternly. “I changed my mind. I don’t want you associating with him. He’s a bad influence.”

“Josie, please—” Jesse said, his voice cracking, but I turned my back on him and we went inside.

I wondered what would discourage him, but Jesse camped outside the whole rest of the week, except for when he went to practices and games and to bake a new Polish dessert as an apology.

I tried my best to ignore him, but goddamn, it was hard not to question whether he fucking meant it or not when I’d walk up the steps to flakes swirling around me and he was scraping off the steps, wiping down the garbage cans, or eating a sad little can of soup.

And my family didn’t make it easy on him.

Mike built the fire to inferno heat in the living room and taunted Jesse with it.

My mother refused to eat his desserts.

Dad came out with increasingly outlandish chores for him to do.

Then one night I had gone to bed early and woken at midnight to glance at the

temperature.

It must be 20 degrees below freezing.

Oh, fuck.

This fool was going to get himself killed.

I remembered one time when we had gone camping in college and of course hadn't prepared properly. It had been so cold that night that Jesse had peeled off every stitch of clothing and forced me to wear it, wrapping his huge body around me to keep me warm.

"You're going to freeze your dick off!" I protested through chattering teeth.

"I don't care," he said, my face so tightly pressed against his chest that I felt the strong thump of his heartbeat on my ear. "As long as you're warm."

Now I slid out of bed, and grabbed a pair of old sweatpants, shoving my feet into slippers.

Apparently the rest of my family was perfectly happy to let him freeze, but I just couldn't do it.

I went downstairs, listening to Dad and Watson's dueling snores. Since of course Watson always slept in their bed Mom basically had surround sound.

Then I carefully opened the front door. It was cold as fuck outside, and I watched a few snowflakes drift down. Apparently we were supposed to get several inches sometime next weekend.

“Jesse?” I hissed, then louder. “Jesse! If you keep me waiting any longer I swear I’m going to go back inside.”

I gripped my arms tighter, feeling my belly clench as his tent zipper rolled down, and then Jesse was there, a big knit cap on his head and wearing a huge parka.

“Just come inside,” I said. “And stop wearing that hat. I knitted it for you when we were together.”

“I know you did,” he said. “I kept it. I kept everything.”

I closed the door behind us.

“You can sleep on the couch,” I said. “Let me just go upstairs and grab some extra blankets.”

He followed me, of course.

I stumbled over my big fluffy slippers on the way up the stairs, and his hand was immediately on my elbow to steady me, his other on my waist to make sure I didn’t pitch forward onto my face.

“Are you all right? Wouldn’t want you to dislocate your finger.”

It was such a teasing tone, and his hands felt so familiar that for a moment desire for him almost drowned me.

The way my big T-shirt had ridden up, the way the tips of two of his big fingers were tightened on my overheated skin.

“Those aren’t our jokes anymore,” I said breathlessly. “We don’t have inside jokes

anymore because you broke up with me.”

He groaned, pulling me closer so that I felt the huge broad width of his chest against my back.

“Please. I was so stupid. I’m so sorry. I would do anything to get you back.”

One big hand stretched across my stomach, and I could have screamed with the familiarity of his big hand on my soft belly.

“Maybe you can go back in time and make a different fucking move, then,” I said.
“Those are my terms.”

He moaned again as I crossed my arms across my chest, tightening my fingers so I didn’t do anything stupid. Like lean back into him.

“Please. You don’t know how I crave you, baby. I can’t stop thinking about getting you back. About everything I stupidly gave up. You’re so hot, and your body is incredible. It’s driving me fucking crazy being so close but not able to touch you.”

His arm was under my breasts and he sucked in his breath as I shifted so the full weight of them was on his skin.

“I’m begging, Josie. Begging.”

I felt his breath on my neck, rustling my long hair, and when I didn’t say anything, he bent to kiss my back, gasping as his lips hit my flesh.

“Please, oh my god you taste so good.”

Each touch of his lips felt like a brand on my skin, burning, spreading a wave of heat

and lust through my body.

“But I was told you can get any pussy you want,” I said, and I marveled at how steady my voice was.

“Who gives a fuck? I only want you,” he rumbled, and I felt his voice all down my spine, his thick cock burning my thigh.

“Let me go,” I said.

He did with a low note of pain, and I scampered quickly up the rest of the steps and into my bedroom.

“Just sit on the bed,” I said sharply. “We aren’t having sex. Just sit there and I’ll bring you a blanket.”

But when I got back, he was sitting on my bed holding a stuffed otter. An otter I thought I had hidden very well.

“Why are you going through my closet, you asshole?” I said hotly, snatching it away from him.

Jesse looked up and I saw tears glistening in his eyes. His massive hands looked strangely empty suddenly without the stuffed animal there.

“I remember that day we went to the aquarium. Watching your face when you got to feed the otters was the best thing ever.”

“I remember that day too,” I said. “Back when I thought you were the only man in the world I could trust with my heart.”

Jesse looked up and I saw he was shaking.

“I fucked up, didn’t I, Josie?”

I didn’t know what else to say.

“Yeah. Yes, you did, Jesse.”

He put his head in his hands and began to cry.

And real fucking tears, leaking down his cheeks and between his fingers.

The room was quiet except for low sound of him sobbing.

“Shit,” he said, and his voice sounded shaky. “I’m a fucking mess.”

“Go home,” I said, for what felt like the hundredth time.

“No,” he said. “I’m going to stay here until you believe me that I’m committed to you. I want to marry you. I know I don’t want any other woman as long as I live.”

“You had your chance,” I said.

Then Jesse was on his knees, gripping me around the waist in a hug so tight it took my breath away.

“No! Please, baby!”

He pressed his head against my stomach, his gold hair standing out against the gray of my shirt.

“This is ridiculous,” I said sternly. “This is not going to work.”

“Nothing was right without you,” he said, his voice sounding muffled from how hard he was pressed against my belly. “Everything was shit. It sucked. I can’t live without you.”

“You should have thought of that before you broke up with me.”

I crossed my arms across my chest, very unwilling to think about how warm and strong his arms felt around me, how they’d always felt around me.

“I was an idiot,” Jesse said, his voice cracking. “I thought I needed to be some kind of fucking big man, but it was the stupidest, most arrogant mistake of my life.”

“So your little plan to upgrade didn’t work, and now you’re crawling back?” I asked caustically, trying to pry his arms off me.

It was no use. Jesse was built like a fucking brick wall, massive shoulders and thick arms holding me tight, his broad chest clutching me so tightly I could feel his ragged breathing all through my legs.

“Yes,” he groaned. “I’ll crawl on a bed of nails, I’ll beg on the fucking floor. Just please. Say you’ll give me another chance.”

I let the silence stretch between us.

“No . And I don’t need you anymore. I have Bryan to fulfill any sexual needs I have, unless of course I decide to keep going out with Karel.”

“Please no,” he said brokenly, and I felt wet on my T-shirt, his tears soaking through the fabric and plastering it to my body.

“I know I look like a pitiful desperate mess, but for you I am. I am desperate for you and I don’t care who knows it. It can’t be over. It can’t be over, Josie. Please say there’s a little hope.”

My heart twisted inside me.

Was it true I had no feelings for Jesse?

No, the way my heart still fluttered in my chest was proof there was some part of me that still felt pulled toward him.

But

“I don’t think I can ever get over this,” I said. “There’s too much bad history. I’d rather start out a relationship with a fresh start and no bitterness. Now take these blankets and go downstairs. And be sure to leave before Mike wakes up, or he might dump the fireplace coals on you.”

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Chapter Eight

When I got a text from Karel asking if I wanted to come to the next Heat game, as his guest, I said yes.

Maybe this would encourage Jesse to move on.

But I was vacillating as game time approached, pulling a pair of jeans over my ass.

Karel was hot, but was I even into him?

Should I even be dating anybody else with these lustful thoughts I had about my ex? I had barely been able to sleep after feeling Jesse's hands on me last night.

It wasn't worth it to get back with him, I reminded myself. How could I ever get over what had happened?

I needed to keep on with my plan of finding someone else. Someone new.

Then I got a text on my phone.

Hey, you aren't planning on coming to the game are you? Wouldn't want to distract our boys – Taylor

Our boys?

Keep them both away from me if you can, then, I texted back.

Oh, I couldn't miss the game now.

I was a bit late and walking toward my seat when the players began heading down the hallway to the ice.

For a moment, I felt that old thrill I always did to see Jesse emerge from the locker room.

Impossibly big and strong, looming in the doorway, his jaw set and ready for the game.

The thrill had been knowing he was mine to cheer for, the person I loved best in all the world.

Then I saw Taylor too, standing backstage. Her eyes narrowed when she saw me.

I met her eyes, though.

"Don't fucking text me again," I warned, and I saw by the way her lips tightened that she had heard me.

I felt a gloved hand on my arm and looked down to see Karel right before me.

He looked up at me with such a cocky grin on his face that I couldn't help smiling at him.

"Hey, sexy," he said. "Glad you came."

Then he pulled me down and kissed me.

I could vaguely hear Jesse yelling in the background, but Karel's lips were firm, his

tongue gently teasing at me.

I opened my lips and let him in. The big player grunted in pleasure and his grip on my hand tightened as he plunged his tongue deeper.

He was a good kisser and I stepped closer to the edge and put my hand on his neck, tangling my fingers in his hair.

With a grunt, Karel released me as Jesse knocked into him. Jesse's eyes were narrowed with fury and my ears were ringing as I saw him get in Karel's face and shove the other man into the side of the tunnel.

But other players broke them apart and jostled them onto the ice.

Holy shit

My legs shaking, I settled into my seat (next to the ice again , damn it, and I did not want to be this conspicuous).

This was an important game, with division rivals, and the pace was frenetic.

But I was reluctantly at the edge of my seat. Jesse was electric to watch, and I knew exactly how talented he was.

But then I had always known that. Always believed in him. Even when he was a 20-year-old meathead playing street hockey.

I knew he was talented. Knew he had what it took to go pro.

It had fucking stung that he'd thrown everything we had away for someone else.

I didn't think I could ever get over it. I didn't think anything he could do would be enough to make up for his mistake.

I was so glued to the game I didn't miss it. But it would have been impossible to miss.

Karel cross-checking Jesse into the glass right in front of me, shaking the boards so violently that the entire stadium sucked in their breath.

Then it all exploded in a rush of sound as the two pros tore off their gloves.

"That's your teammate!" several people shouted in my ear as if either man was confused.

My heart was pounding.

I had only seen Jesse in one other altercation in my entire life. He was not a fighter. He didn't have to be. Usually his size was kind of a deterrent to everyone.

But one time we had been jogging together in the park and he had stopped to fill our water bottles as I ran slightly forward.

Two half-drunk frat boys had called out to me, commenting on my 'big tits' and body and as I passed by, one of them swatted my ass.

I had barely turned around in anger when Jesse was there, decking both of them easily. They stumbled into each other as Jesse knocked out with his powerful reach. I heard one guy's rib crack, then the other guy's nose crack, and Jesse hit them again, and then again, until I gripped him around the waist and dragged him away.

"What was that?" I asked when I had finally pulled him down the sidewalk.

His blue eyes glinted savagely as he looked at me.

“Nobody fucks with you,” he said.

But I’d never seen him like this before. Karel got a punch in, and then Jesse’s fists were crashing into his face again and again as Karel was driven back so hard he was thrown against the glass right in front of me.

Blood was pounding in my ears as I watched Jesse fight. The entire stadium was so loud the sound was reverberating in my chest cavity.

The other teammates managed to pull them apart, but the look on Jesse’s face made me press my thighs together to stop the shudder that rolled through my body.

He was not going to let Karel date me

I felt restless and horny after the game, so I drove over to go fuck off some energy with Bryan, only to remember halfway to his apartment that I was on my period so he wouldn’t want to have sex.

Fuck

I drove the rest of the way anyways, and watched him play video games while I twitched restlessly.

It was slick out, so he offered to drive me home, and I agreed, wondering why I’d even come. Fucking Bryan wouldn’t even have solved the main problem—that I couldn’t stop thinking about my ex.

I zoned out as he drove me back, barely listening to his work stories as I replayed Jesse’s fight over and over again.

Gritting my teeth, I got out of the car, moving carefully on the slick sidewalk.

It was late, so I expected everyone to be asleep.

I felt Bryan's hand on my lower back as he guided me up the steps.

"Be careful, it's slippery."

But he had barely spoken when the door of the tent was ripped open and Jesse stuck his head out.

My heart pounded as Jesse came storming down the steps. It wasn't as cold as the night before, but his breath still made puffs in the air.

"I told you to stay away from her!" he roared.

I had never seen a damn ex so jealous and upset.

"Jesse, stop! What is wrong with you? It's like you've gone fucking feral!"

I stepped quickly between the two men, putting a hand out and gripping Jesse's shirt to keep him from lunging at Bryan.

"We are casual," I seethed to Jesse. "Get a hold of yourself."

"Casual for now," Bryan put in.

He was wearing on my nerves.

I could feel every ridge of Jesse's ab muscles under my fingers, his chest heaving in and out.

“Casual forever,” I said.

Bryan’s handsome face twisted with disgust as he looked at me.

“Don’t tell me you’re considering getting back with him,” he said condescendingly. “You’re so much better than that.”

“Fucking stuff it,” I retorted. “I’m better than you, too. Get out of here.”

When Bryan hesitated, because of course he didn’t want me going off mad and losing access, Jesse picked him up by the collar and carried him over to the driver’s side of the car and threw him in.

“You’re making a—spectacle of yourself,” I said as he turned back to me.

I felt light-headed.

He strode back, moving quickly for such a big man, shadows from the streetlights streaking across his massive shoulders.

Then Jesse stopped in front of me.

“Don’t be mad. Please, don’t send me away,” he begged. “Anything but that. I just saw you with him and I—couldn’t stand it.”

He knelt with bowed head in front of me.

The huge broad width of his shoulders looked so strange slumped in dejection.

“The paparazzi might drive by and see,” I pointed out.

“I don’t care,” he said. “I don’t care about my image. All I care about is you.”

There was a purple line beneath his eye, a growing bruise from his fight with Karel, and I couldn’t help the way my heart pounded faster, the tingling warmth that spread through my limbs.

“I’m going crazy thinking about you with Bryan,” he groaned.

“Not that it’s any of your business, but I didn’t fuck him. This time. I was on my period.”

Jesse’s jaw dropped as his big hands clutched at my arms.

“He doesn’t want to have sex with you on your period? Fucking pussy.”

I opened my mouth to object but Jesse rushed on, gripping my waist.

“Let me. You know I love doing it on your period.”

I said nothing.

“Please,” he said again. “I can fuck you better than him. I can love you harder than him. Harder than anyone else.”

“All right,” I said. “Just this one time.”

“Yes!” Jesse crowed, swinging me up and into his arms.

“This doesn’t mean we’re getting back together,” I said firmly.

“Yes, we are,” he said, as he carried me up the stairs so I could open the front door.

“We belong together.”

But with each step I took up the stairs I got even madder.

“This means nothing,” I warned him as I shut the door to my room. “I’m still fucking pissed at you. I’m just using you for your body.”

“I accept that you’re pissed at me,” Jesse said, stepping closer and pulling me flush against him. “Use my body, baby.”

“You looked like a real dumbass fighting your own teammate today,” I said.

His hands plunged into my long waves of hair and held them tightly.

“Yeah, I did. And I’d do it again to scare any other man away from you. Can I kiss you?”

“Maybe,” I said, to piss him off, but he sat down on the bed and pulled me into his lap.

“Nothing was like this,” he said fiercely, his hand tight on my chin as he captured my mouth with his.

For a second I felt pure panic, then only a rush of heady sensation as his hands bit down on my chin and waist, pulling me closer to him.

Jesse was kissing me with bruising force, making me gasp as his tongue plunged into my mouth.

He kissed me with deep, urgent need, his big hand crushing my hair in his fist as he pressed me deeper into him.

“Fuck, you’re so hot, Josie. I missed every fucking thing about you.”

My thighs were trembling and my nipples felt so tight as they brushed against his chest, but I only said, “I had some guys who knew what they were doing.”

Jesse groaned, low and painful, breaking off from my mouth to kiss my throat.

“I deserved that. I deserve everything you’ve thrown at me. But it still makes me so pissed I’m seeing red to think about any other men. I’m going to fuck you so good, baby, you’ll forget all about them.”

“Hm, we’ll see,” I said noncommittally as he pulled my T-shirt impatiently off, hissing as he saw my heavy, full breasts.

“Fucking hell, you look so amazing.”

He dragged his tongue between the full swell of my breasts, then nipped gently all along the curves, his teeth biting down just exactly the right amount, just exactly the right tiny prick of pain mixed with pleasure.

I ground my pussy into him and he stopped to kiss me again, my lips still throbbing.

“Want to go in the shower?”

“You’re not going to fit in this shower here,” I retorted.

“OK, let’s spread a towel out.”

He set me gently down on the ground and I walked over to the closet with rubbery legs to get one and put it on the bed.

“Got a condom?” I asked.

He swallowed.

Before, I had been on birth control and we didn’t use condoms. But I sure as fuck wasn’t doing that now.

“Yes, I do. I-I got tested a few weeks ago, and I’m STD-free. But I know you don’t really trust me right now.”

“Put it on,” I said.

He nodded, and reached for the string of his sweatpants.

“You’re so fucking hot, Josie. The most beautiful woman in the world.”

He pulled off his T-shirt and I swallowed to see all those defined muscles, the way his abs flexed with each movement.

But I waited as he pulled his dick out and rolled the condom down the length of it.

Heavy and thick, his hands shaking as he rolled the condom down the whole length of it.

“Please let me be the only one,” he said hoarsely, his blue eyes wild. “I’ll do anything. Please let me work my way back to you trusting me.”

“Why should I?” I said, languidly stretching back on the towel. “I can find other men.”

“But no one,” he growled. “No one who could love you like I do, Josie.”

He put a hand on both of my thighs and I stifled a moan as he drew my period panties down.

Unlike other guys, he never commented negatively while I was on my period, because he had never cared about any of that shit.

Jesse spread my legs gently.

“Wait here,” he said, reaching down to grab my hot pad and roll it up into a round cylinder.

Then he put it behind my lower back, raising me up gently so my hips were tipped up.

“I know your back hurts sometimes,” he said, and I felt his cock drag up my thigh, burning my overheated skin.

One hand gently cupped my breasts, swollen and heavy with my period.

I felt so slick and wet and he gulped loudly as the head of his cock parted my lips.

“Oh my god, you feel amazing. I don’t know how long I can last.”

His hands were braced on either side of me, and I felt them shaking too with his concentration.

He began to slide in again, inch by inch, so big that my sensitive skin began to pulsate with how he filled me.

Sounds began to spill from my lips, little cries of need.

Fuck, I had to admit to myself I had missed him, disgusting betrayer that he was. Missed his teasing, missed his warmth, missed the way his cock was so thick my inner walls throbbed as he pressed all the way in until he was fully sheathed.

Then he began to roll his hips, in that low, sensual way I remembered, building heat in a slow rolling boil until sweat was dripping down my throat and back. Then he put a finger on my slippery clit and began to rub, dragging me to the precipice and back again until my legs were weak and trembling from the delicious, wicked edging.

“I could do this all night,” Jesse growled as he nipped at my throat, my breasts, the rosy pink tips of my breasts.

My stomach tightened and I gripped his broad shoulders as I came, hurtling over the edge with a cry, and Jesse said I love you over and over again, rumbling into my belly so I felt him in my chest cavity.

I didn't say it back, but when he bent down to kiss me again I opened my sore and throbbing lips for his and the pleasure of his tongue.

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Chapter Nine

The next day the long-anticipated storm came.

It was so cold there was no question of letting Jesse stay outside, and when he came back from practice I immediately opened the door to him.

“Where’s the dessert?” Mike asked. “You are not going to be forgiven without apology kolaczki.”

“Those are for Josie,” Jesse said. “She’s the first one who has to forgive me.”

He disappeared into the bathroom to change as Mom charged around the corner.

“The side door is open!” she cried, wringing her hands in distress. “And I can’t find Watson anywhere! I know he’s gone out in the storm!”

Oh, goddamn Watson! I thought in despair.

Mom yanked at the front door and called as loud as she could:

“Watson! Watson !”

It was a wall of howling white blizzard out there, and the angry wind tore at the door, flinging it open so hard it smashed against the entryway wall.

“Close it!” I cried as the tiny ice pellets pelted my cheeks with hard, sharp slashes.

Dad, Mike, and I struggled with the door as Mom called again for Watson, her voice fading and cracking in the howl of the blizzard.

Then Jesse was there, gently moving her aside and putting his big body against the door, forcing it shut.

I gasped, my cheeks still stinging with the wind.

“I’ve never seen it this bad,” I panted.

Mom began to cry, and Dad looked like he’d been punched in the gut.

Even Mike wiped his eyes with the back of his hand.

“Dumb dog,” my brother said. “Why’d he have to go do a thing like that?”

Jesse flipped his hood up and reached for his sneakers.

“He can’t have gone far. I’ll be back in a bit.”

“Stop!” I yelped. “It’s way too dangerous to go out there, Jesse. It’s a whiteout blizzard! You won’t be able to see a foot in front of your face.”

Jesse grinned down at me. “Ach ! I’ve seen worse.”

He took my chin in his hand and bent down to kiss me, his lips heated, his fingers spreading possessively across my skin.

And then before I could protest, he was gone into the swirling white.

We rushed to the living room to look out the window but of course there was nothing

to see but angry snow and ice, the bare branches of the trees outside scraping at the window.

We stayed like that as the minutes ticked out loudly with the grandfather clock.

“Fucking dumbass,” Mike said. “What the fuck was Jesse thinking going out in this?”

“He’s cocky,” I said, “Thinks he’s the shit and he can do anything.”

“That idiot is certifiable!” Dad agreed. “He’s going to break his damn fool neck.”

I said nothing again.

I knew exactly what that meant. He’d won them back.

Mom just kept her nose glued to the window.

As the minutes ticked on, my breath seemed to grow more ragged. Did I always breath like this? Is this what normal breathing felt like? Blood rushed in my ears, and I noticed that my knuckles were white as I gripped the windowsill.

What if he was lying in a ditch somewhere with a broken neck?

What if he had couldn’t find his way back?

What if I never saw him again?

Then the door opened and there was my ex, frost in his eyelashes, his blonde hair covered in tiny icicles, and under his arm he was clutching the misbehaving reprobate Watson.

I couldn't even hear Mom screaming in joy as the blood drained from my body, my limbs going limp in relief.

"Jesse," I croaked, and he laughed and gathered me in his arms.

"Come near the fire, you're freezing!"

"I don't care," he said, putting me gently back on my feet and getting down on one knee.

"Marry me, Josephine. You make me the happiest man on earth and I swear to all the fucking saints that I will do my best to make you happy."

My breath caught in my throat and I glanced up and my entire family was there, all cuddling Watson.

"Some privacy, please!" I begged as they all directed loving puppy dog eyes at Jesse.

"We can never thank you enough," Mom said as they bore Watson into the living room and the fire.

"He's not so bad after all," Mike advised.

"Man makes a hell of an apple pie," Dad said, closing the door after them.

I could see Jesse's lips twitching, but he still held my hand tightly as he stared anxiously at me.

"You don't get to marry me just because you charged out into a blizzard," I said sternly.

“Can I marry you because I’m fucking crazy about you, Josephine DeRosa? Because thinking I could live without you was the worst mistake of my life I’ll never repeat again.”

I looked down at him and that huge-ass diamond ring winking up at me.

And I could have started fresh. I could have found a good man and good sex elsewhere.

But I chose Jesse anyway.

Because despite his fuck-up he still had my whole heart.

“Please,” he said again, and I saw him swallow convulsively, over and over, tears gathering in the corners of his eyes. “I love you so much.”

“I love you, too,” I said. “I love you, Jesse.”

And he roared with triumph and whirled me around, pressing me up against the wall to kiss me thoroughly as Watson howled in solidarity from the other room.

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“My wife,” Jesse said proudly.

We were at the annual ESPY Awards, a star-studded event that recognized the best athletic performances of the year.

Cameras clicked rapidly as we posed for the photographers.

I was wearing a flowing petal-pink gown that clung bewitchingly to my curves and frankly made my tits look phenomenal.

Jesse was in a matching pale petal-pink jacket with black pants and he was cracking jokes with all the other athletes we met after proudly introducing me as Mrs. Jesse Wi?niewski.

There were several other Philadelphia Heat players there, too.

Not Taylor, though. It turned out she was a little too dumb not to brag that she had tried to stop the fight between Karel and Jesse by telling me not to come. And since Heat management knew Jesse had been a perfect angel after we got back together, she was out on her ass.

“You look amazing,” a voice rumbled beside me, and I looked up to see Karel looking admiringly at me.

“Thanks,” I said, and Jesse’s hand tightened possessively around my waist.

“My wife does look stunning,” he said. “She’s the light of my goddamn life.”

Karel put his hand up in mock submission and stepped back with his own date.

“I’d feel the same, if I was lucky enough to have her,” he agreed.

My lips quirked, because Karel was a fucking audacious flirt and Jesse had never forgotten that kiss.

“That asshole would love for me to screw up,” my husband said darkly, his hand tightening on my lower back. “He’d be over here in a fucking second to try to scoop you up.”

“That’s right,” I said composedly, and Jesse grinned ruefully at me.

“I’ll never make that screw-up again. That’s for goddamn sure.”

I felt his breath against my throat as we headed to our seats.

“I know now that you’re the most precious thing in the world to me and I’ll do anything to keep you mine.”

I smiled at the feel of his tongue, his teeth under the heavy fall of my hair as the cameras flashed.

I didn’t know if it was the weeks spent living in a tent and polishing my front steps with a toothbrush or trying to get himself killed to save my dog, but somewhere down the line I started to trust him again.

And when Jesse was announced as Best Male Athlete, he made it very clear where I stood.

“First and foremost, I want to thank my wife, Josie. Without her years of unfailing love and support, I wouldn’t be where I am today. Everything I am, I owe to her. I

love you, baby.”

“I love you too,” I mouthed, and I watched as the whole world recognized the talent in him that I’d been so sure of so long ago.

THE END

HUMBLER SUPERSTARS is my new standalone grovel series. Each novella will feature a different celebrity man. This series is about big men crying on the floor, begging for mercy, and throwing their money around to win back their women and get a HEA.

What if your superstar ex-boyfriend who dumped you when he got signed with a pro team came crawling back?