"Absolutely irresistible!"

- Chip Pons, USA Today bestselling author of *Dearly Departed*



FINAL CUT

A Novel

AMY JAMES


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ALSO BY AMY JAMES

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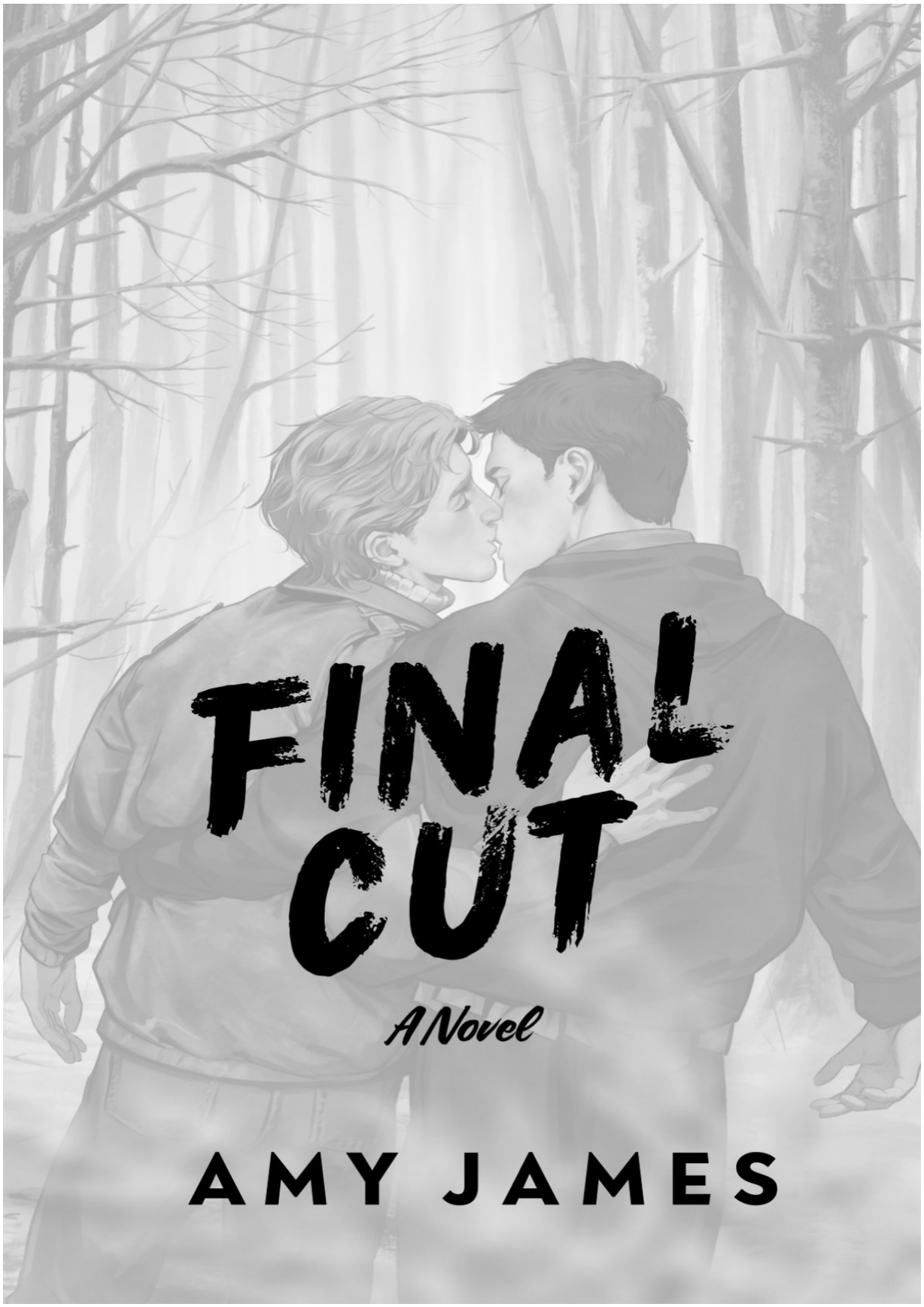
PRAISE FOR FINAL CUT

Amy James delivers a pulse-pounding romance that proves first impressions can be dead wrong. Equal parts heart-racing suspense and swoon-worthy chemistry, Final Cut had me racing to see what would happen next! Quin and Cole are the perfect opposites…one beloved by millions, one misunderstood by nearly everyone…and watching them fall for each other amidst danger, secrets, and snow-covered isolation was absolutely irresistible! - **Chip Pons, USA Today bestselling author of *Dearly Departed***

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For Penny—the world's best dog.

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About the Author

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1
QUIN

You could probably fill several oceans with what I don’t know about Formula 1.

It’s a hot September night in Singapore, and I’m at the Grand Prix, pretending to follow all of the racing terms flying around the Harper Racing team garage. Understeers and overcuts, late braking and drive-through penalties. I nod and smile like it all makes sense, then I look it up on my phone when no one’s looking.

I’m not really sure how or why I was invited. Someone at Harper must’ve looked at their guest list and decided they were short a celebrity. I’ve been a little lost all weekend, a little clueless, but even so, my heart is pounding through the last laps of the race. One of Harper’s drivers, Travis Keeping, is trying to pass—sorry, “overtake”—one of Crosswire’s drivers, Jacob Nichols. He almost manages it a few times—I hold my breath along with everyone else—but the laps tick down and he can’t quite get by. The whole garage groans as Jacob Nichols flies over the finish line in first place. A loud cheer echoes from the Crosswire garage next door.

“That was awesome,” I say fervently, to no one in particular.

A woman standing near me tosses her hair.

“I met him yesterday,” she says. “Jacob Nichols.”

Her smile is a little bit smug. I bite into my lip, hiding a smile of my own. I met Jacob Nichols this weekend, too. He showed up in the Harper garage on Friday when I was chatting with Travis Keeping. He was bleary-eyed and sweaty, and there was a huge stain on his t-shirt, and Travis looked at him like he'd hung the moon. And if the way Jacob smiled back at him was any indication, I don't think this woman has any more of a shot with him than I do.

"That's cool," I say.

The woman's eyes flick up and down my frame, and I know what she's going to say before she says it. "You're Quin McCarthy, aren't you?"

"Yep," I say briefly, then I turn away from her and take out my phone.

I know it's rude, but I just don't have it in me today. All weekend long, fans and photographers have followed me around. And I know that's the job, I know I shouldn't be complaining, but ever since I broke up with my boyfriend a few months ago, I've been in a dark sort of mood. I'm so tired of meeting people and waiting for them to reveal what they want from me. I'm so sick of living in LA and waking up to the same damn blue sky.

I shake my head at myself with sudden impatience. This is not who I want to become, some rich actor whining about excited fans and sunny weather.

I turn back to the woman beside me and put on a friendly smile. "Where are you from?"

We chat for a few minutes and take a picture together on her phone, then she wanders off with her boyfriend, a famous soccer player whose name I can't remember.

I should head out, too, before the race crowd spills out into the streets, but instead I linger, watching the podium ceremony on the garage TV. The camera zooms in on Travis Keeping. His hair is wet with champagne and his race suit is covered in golden confetti. He smiles, wide and bright, and I

know even before the camera pans out that he's looking at Jacob. If you looked up "love" in the dictionary, you'd get a picture of their faces.

My stomach twists unhappily. For the tenth or twentieth time this weekend, I remember my ex-boyfriend, Lashawn, and the look on his face when he told me he loved me. So open and warm, so sure I was going to say it back. Instead, I stammered at him like an idiot, and watched his face fall as he realized I wasn't going to.

I couldn't, though. Not when it wasn't true. I *liked* him a lot. He was kind and caring, he was good in bed, he was everything a great boyfriend should be. For six months, I kept waiting for my feelings for him to change, for affection to tip over into that mysterious certainty people claim they feel when they're in love. But it never happened, just like it never did with the guy I dated before him, or the one before that. It's like there's something wrong with me, like there's a flat, hollow space inside of me where the ability to love should be.

"Excuse me, Quin?"

A polite voice breaks into my thoughts. One of the Harper workers is smiling at me, a pretty woman with dark hair and freckles. Heather, I think her name is, and she's looking at me like she's already said my name once or twice.

"Sorry, what?"

"Your headset," she says. "Do you mind if I take it?"

"Yeah, of course. Sorry." I hand over the headset she gave me at the start of the race.

"There's an afterparty going on at the Ritz-Carlton, if you'd like to come," she says. "Top floor, in the Club Lounge."

"Oh, right. Yeah, maybe."

She gives me an amused sort of smile, like she can tell I have no plans to be there, then heads off to collect headsets from the other guests. I cast

one more glance at Travis and Jacob celebrating on the TV screen, then I heave a little sigh and head out.

An hour later, alone in my hotel room at the Ritz-Carlton, I sit cross-legged on my bed with my laptop in front of me. I'm reading a script my agent sent me for some new TV series called *Coldwood*. It's about a policeman who's assigned to a remote northern town where people keep wandering into the woods and coming out a little bit evil. It's dark and cerebral and creepy, completely different from the rom-coms and fantasies I'm usually in. My agent said they plan to film it in some tiny town in Canada, and added the ominous note, "Producer/director's a bit weird."

I push my laptop aside and cross the room to stand at the window. There are fireworks going off on the other side of the city, tiny starbursts of pink and green and gold. I love fireworks. I think I could watch them every night and not get sick of it. I used to think, if I ever got married, I'd end the night with an hour-long fireworks show. Even if my guests got bored, I wouldn't care. It would be the perfect end to the night, the perfect start to a lifetime.

Nowadays, I don't think about it as much anymore.

Fuck me. I can't just stay here all night feeling depressed. With a burst of restless energy, I change out of my sweats into jeans and a t-shirt and head out of the room.

I ride the elevator to the top floor of the hotel, where loud music is thumping from the doors of the Club Lounge. The bouncers let me in without asking for my name, and I ignore the annoyed scowls of the other people still waiting in line.

Inside, it's dark and loud and crowded, and I regret coming almost as soon as I walk in. This is exactly what I don't want, this impersonal, feverish chaos. I want to sit down and have a conversation with someone. I want to talk to someone who gives a shit about something.

I maneuver across the dance floor and make my way to the bar. I'll just get one drink, then I'll head back to my room. I'm already ticking through a

list of names in my head, friends I might call up and talk to. The depressing truth is, there's not really anyone. I have plenty of people I'd call friends in LA, but we don't ever talk about anything real. If I phoned any of them right now and told them I was feeling down, they'd make soothing noises and tell me they were sorry, then they'd try to cheer me up with a funny story or mindless gossip. Or, they'd say, "Look at how much you have!" and make me feel guilty for being unhappy.

I know that I do have a lot. Growing up, all I wanted was to be a famous actor. When my career finally took off, it happened almost overnight, a break-out hit that catapulted me to fame. It was everything I'd ever dreamed it would be—for about six months. Then the dark side of the industry reared its ugly head, and I realized how many of the new friends I'd made weren't really friends at all, and what it meant to be looked at as a commodity rather than a human being.

I learned to set boundaries and focus on the work, but somewhere in those messy years, I realized that what I wanted out of life wasn't just to be a famous actor. What I really wanted—what I really *needed*—was to have real friends I could count on, and to find someone to share my life with. I always assumed it would happen eventually, but so far, I'm 0 for two.

I order an old fashioned at the bar and slide onto a barstool to wait for it. My elbow bumps into the guy standing next to me.

"Sorry," I say, without looking at him.

"No worries," he says. Then, like clockwork—"Hey! Aren't you Quin McCarthy?"

Great.

I plaster on a weary smile and turn toward him, then I blink in surprise. The guy standing next to me is really handsome—like, pick-your-jaw-off-the-floor stunning. He's tall and fit, with tanned skin, dirty blond hair, and the kind of wide, white-toothed smile casting agents dream of. And he's got

a natural warmth about him, like you just know right away he's a good person.

"Yeah, I am," I say, smiling a bit brighter. "Hi."

He gives me a firm, friendly handshake. "Trevor Kelevra. My boyfriend's obsessed with you."

The corners of my smile drop. Of course he's got a boyfriend.

"That's nice," I say politely.

"He's here with me now, do you mind meeting him?"

"Of course not," I lie.

Trevor grins and raises his voice to shout at someone across the room. "Yo! Jonathan!"

A moment later, a dark-haired guy appears. He's not as blindingly handsome as Trevor, but he's striking in his own way, with amber eyes and shiny dark hair.

His name is Jonathan Harmon. He looks absolutely mortified when Trevor introduces me—"This is that guy you're so obsessed with!"—and apologizes profusely when Trevor insists on taking a picture of us.

"It's fine," I say, amused despite myself. "What do you guys do?"

"I host a history podcast," Trevor says brightly.

Jonathan shoots him a wry, fond smile. "You're a professional volleyball player," he corrects. "We both are. We play for a team in the Italian league, in Tuscany."

"Yeah, but the podcast is more interesting," Trevor says. "Did you know that tug-of-war used to be an Olympic sport?"

"Um—no?"

"Summer Olympics, 1900 to 1920. I've got a photograph of one the events on the wall in my office."

"He does," Jonathan says. "It's weird."

Trevor flashes him a grin, then asks me earnestly, "If you could live in any decade, in any country, which would you choose and why?"

“You can’t ask strangers weird stuff like that, Trevor,” Jonathan says. “Leave him alone.”

Trevor rolls his eyes. “What do you want to talk about, then? Weather’s nice out today, eh? Did you hear that Team A beat Team B at Random Sporting Event?”

I laugh. “I did hear that. I love Team B.”

“Please don’t encourage him,” Jonathan says, while Trevor cackles.

“I like you, Quin McCarthy,” he says. “Come dance with us.”

“Trevor,” Jonathan protests.

“No, it’s okay,” I say. “Let’s do it.”

The bartender returns with my old fashioned. Buoyed by a wave of optimism, I drain it in one and let Trevor drag me off of the barstool and into the crowd.

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QUIN

For about an hour, life is good. I dance and laugh with Trevor and Jonathan, and I forget about Lashawn and the fact that I'm probably going to die alone. But when the thumping pop music gives way to a slower love song and Trevor pulls Jonathan in for a brief, affectionate kiss, all of the happiness abruptly drains out of me.

When I look around, all I see are more couples. Trevor and Jonathan's friend Ben is dancing with his redheaded girlfriend, Anne. The woman I met in the Harper garage is making out with her soccer star boyfriend. And in a booth in the corner, Travis Keeping and Jacob Nichols are sitting beside each other, not touching at all but somehow still radiating more love and affection than any of the rest of them.

I swallow hard and look away.

"I'll be right back!" I tell Trevor, raising my voice over the music.

He gives me a smile and a thumbs-up. "Bring back shots!"

I head for the bathroom, for lack of anywhere better to go, but there's a long line, and a group of women standing nearby start eyeing me eagerly. I turn away and walk through an unmarked door near the bar, which leads to a staircase, which leads to the roof.

The sound of the music falls away as the door swings shut behind me. I don't think I'm supposed to be up here. It isn't part of the club, just an ugly

concrete roof with a bunch of whirring air conditioning units and a layer of cigarette butts underfoot. The city stretches out in front of me, the three towers of the Marina Bay Sands standing out against the rest.

I go to the rail and take a deep breath of the hot, humid night air, then I nearly jump out of my skin when I notice someone standing beside me.

“Holy shit,” I say, laughing. “Sorry, I didn’t see you there.”

The guy doesn’t answer me, he just gives me a look like I’m bothering him and blows out some smoke from his gross cigarette. He looks really familiar, and after a moment, I realize who he is. He’s one of the Formula 1 drivers, the one that no one likes. Cole Milton, I think his name is.

I could turn right around and leave, but something in his face makes me want to dig my heels in. I can’t help myself sometimes, like last week when a rich executive told me he thought it was really smart how I’d “cashed in on the gay thing,” and I told him I thought it was really smart how he’d cashed in on being a dickhead.

“You really shouldn’t smoke,” I tell Cole.

He glares at me. I smile back sweetly.

I look out at the city for a few minutes, then a door creaks open somewhere below us. The roof has two levels, and I feel a jolt of surprise as Travis Keeping and Jacob Nichols step out on the level below us. They walk to the railing together and lean on it, side by side.

Crap.

They clearly don’t know that anyone else is here. Neither level of the roof is lit, and Cole and I are cloaked in shadows. I glance sideways at him. He seems like exactly the kind of guy that Travis and Jacob wouldn’t want to find out about them. They’re just talking now, bantering a bit about the race, but their forearms are touching, and there’s an energy between them that would be hard to mistake.

Fuck.

Alright, here's what I'm going to do. I'm going to cough really loudly, before they can do anything that's too damning—

Travis wraps his arms around Jacob.

I've missed my chance to warn them.

I glance at Cole again uneasily. He's watching them with an expression I can't quite read, blowing smoke from his cigarette like he doesn't care if they look up and see us.

Fireworks start exploding from the roof of a nearby hotel, but for once, I can't enjoy them. I'm too anxious on Travis and Jacob's behalf, and too irritated with this jackass Cole for making me feel that way.

The fireworks come to an end, and the air conditioning unit chooses the same moment to stop whirring. As Jacob turns in Travis's arms, it gets quiet enough to hear the soft sound of their kiss, and every word of what they say afterward.

"Take me home?" Jacob says.

"Always," Travis answers.

Fuck, that's romantic. I'm so jealous of them I could cry.

They head inside, hand in hand, and the door closes softly behind them.

Cole Milton snorts loudly beside me. "Lame."

My blood pressure triples. "Excuse me?"

"*Lame*," he repeats. He turns toward me, and I notice, with a spike of irritation, that he's sort of good-looking, in a cold, unapproachable kind of way. He has a sharp, fine-boned face, with dark hair and darker eyes. If he were cast in a movie, he'd be the evil villain who keeps getting away with things.

I curl my hands into fists. "You'd better not tell anyone about them."

He looks me up and down and scoffs. "Or what?"

I flush. I'm not a small guy, but I'm also not someone you'd call intimidating. There's a reason I'm always cast as the nice guy in things.

Cole smirks. “I thought so. And I already knew about them, anyway, so you can untwist your panties.”

I grind my molars together. “So you’re not going to tell anyone?”

“Tell them what? That F1’s precious golden boy is a fucking loser? Like I care.”

“Travis isn’t a loser,” I snap. “And you’re a fucking homophobe.”

“I don’t think he’s a loser because he’s *gay*.” He adopts a high, mocking tone, and says, “‘Take me home?’ ‘Always.’” He rolls his eyes. “Travis Keeping could be fucking a different guy every day of the week, instead he’s trailing after one boring loser, probably dreaming about the day he can pop the question so the two of them can lock themselves into legally binding misery.”

“A guy who doesn’t believe in marriage, how unique and interesting.”

“I don’t care about being unique or interesting.” He doesn’t add, “unlike you,” but he says it anyway with a dismissive flick of his eyes.

My flush darkens. “I’m starting to understand why everyone hates you so much.”

“People hate me, I hate people.” He smiles coolly. “There’s a pleasing symmetry.”

I let out a scornful breath. “Look, I’m sure you think it’s really cool and edgy being a total douche all the time, but it’s actually just super boring. And you might want to try working out whatever childhood trauma makes you act this way—daddy issues, if I had to take a wild guess—before you’re eighty years old and you realize no one in the world will give a shit when you die.”

“Oh, wow,” he says acerbically. “You’ve seen right through me. No, seriously. You’ve totally changed me with that little speech. I’m going to go home tonight and re-evaluate my entire life, thanks to you.”

“You’re a dick,” I snap.

“And you’re a boring little do-gooder who plays make-believe for a living. So I guess we all have our problems.” He flicks his cigarette butt into the darkness and gives me a cold, sharp-edged smile. “I’m off. Enjoy thinking about this interaction every night for months, while I forget your entire existence the second you’re out of my line of sight.”

The door slams shut behind him before I can think of a comeback, leaving me alone on the roof. The scent of his cologne lingers in the night air. It smells really good, like rich douchebags often do.

I stand there for five whole minutes with my pulse pounding furiously, hating him with every fiber of my being. Then I realize, with a renewed spike of fury, that this is exactly what he would want me to do.

Well, I’m not going to. I’m going to go back inside and dance with Trevor and Jonathan and their friends. I’m going to have a fun, exciting night, and in the morning, I’m going to call my agent and tell her I’ll do that creepy TV series in Canada. It’s exactly what I need, two months away from LA in a remote winter town where no one knows or cares who I am. And who knows? Maybe I’ll meet some guy on set who’ll turn out to be the love of my life. The Jacob to my Travis. The person who lights up the hollow parts inside of me.

What I’m not going to do is waste a single thought on Cole Milton. And even if I do—if I accidentally relive the conversation a few times, thinking of all the things I should have said and all of the insults I should have used—it’s not like he’ll ever know.

I’m never going to see that jerk again, if I can help it.

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3

QUIN

I watch the last Formula 1 race of the season on the flight from LA to New York City. I've gotten kind of addicted to F1 ever since I went to the race in Singapore, mostly because of Travis Keeping. There's something deeply satisfying about seeing a gay man succeed in a big sport, even if he isn't out yet.

He already won the Drivers' Championship a couple of races ago, but it's still thrilling to see him win the final race in Abu Dhabi. I grin foolishly at my laptop screen when he crosses the finish line, ignoring the odd look the woman sitting next to me shoots me.

"Travis Keeping takes the win for Harper!" the announcer says in my earbuds. "And Eric Clayton comes home in second, a fantastic result for his very last race in Formula 1."

Fireworks explode over the track as Eric's car flies over the line. Eric drives for Crosswire Racing, Harper's biggest rivals. He's retiring after this season, and his seat will be taken by Jacob Nichols—Travis's boyfriend.

I smile to myself. Two secret boyfriends on rival teams, fighting for the F1 championship. Honestly, the story writes itself.

"And for the third weekend in a row," the announcer continues, "it's Cole Milton rounding out the podium! What a turnaround for Dark Force. And what an impressive run of performance for Cole."

My smile drops like a stone.

Fucking Cole Milton.

That's the one major downside of my new F1 addiction, having to see so much of his stupid face. The TV directors are spending more time on him lately, since his team made such a comeback in the last part of the season. Dark Force Racing, they're called. Their engineers and mechanics are on the screen now, clapping and hollering for Cole, which begs the question—do they not know what a dick he is? Or do they just not care?

Cole's father owns the team's title sponsor, Cypher, so it's probably the latter. I looked Cypher up, once, to see how Cole's family made all their money, but there was freakishly little information about it online. Its website called it "a global leader in performance synergy and digital optimization", which is meaningless nonsense, but when I searched "how much is Cole Milton's family worth", it said two and a half billion, so I assume Cypher is your typical corrupt corporation, and Cole's family the usual rich monsters. There's no such thing as an ethical billionaire, and if there was, they sure as hell wouldn't be related to Cole Milton.

I know I shouldn't be thinking about him, three whole months after our single interaction. I specifically told myself that I was going to forget about him. He's nothing but a douchebag, not worth a second of my mental time.

But I can't help it. Every time I watch F1, I'm reminded of his stupid smirk. Every time I go for a run, I catch myself fantasizing about running into him somewhere and telling him off. Every sleepless night, my exhausted brain drags me back to our meeting on the rooftop.

I glower at my laptop as his face pops up on screen. He and Travis and Eric Clayton are in the cooldown room, which is this little televised area where the drivers sit before the podium ceremony. Travis and Eric are smiling and chatting while Cole sits on the opposite side of the room, watching the race replay. Eric Clayton smiles at him once or twice, like he's trying to draw him into the conversation, but Cole ignores him.

He gets a modest amount of applause when he walks onto the podium, probably because people feel it would be rude not to clap. It's common knowledge that no one in F1 really likes him, aside from a small pocket of fans who only like him because he's hot. If his face matched his personality, they'd be singing another tune.

Unfortunately, it doesn't. He's even better-looking now than he was when I met him in Singapore. He's lost some weight, which apparently isn't unusual for drivers at the end of the season, and it draws attention to his dark eyes and his cheekbones, giving him a sort of gaunt, sexy look, like a *Twilight*-era vampire.

Actually, "sexy" is entirely the wrong word. It implies he's a person I'd like to have sex with, and I'd rather swim naked in a frozen lake than sleep with someone like him. I've never understood the appeal of hate sex, and Cole Milton's existence has confirmed that it's not for me. Hate punching, maybe. Hate booing-during-F1-races, definitely.

I take out my phone and open WhatsApp to message Trevor and Jonathan.

[8:17]: Watch the race yet?

I've gotten really close with the two of them since we met in Singapore. I talk to them three, sometimes four times a week. Trevor is an unstoppable force of nature, constantly exuding joy and energy, while Jonathan is quiet and funny and sweet.

[8:18] Trevor: Just finished!! Travis Keeping, fuck yeah!

[8:18]: 😁😁😁

[8:19] Jonathan: Are you on your way to Newfoundland?

I take a picture of the airplane window and send it to them.

[8:20]: On my way!

Trevor sends back a string of snowflake emojis, and a shiver of nervous excitement runs through me. I've never lived anywhere cold before. I grew up in Louisiana, then I moved to Austin to study acting, then to LA after my career took off. But for the next two months, I'll be living in Newfoundland, which is a province on the east coast of Canada.

The only things—and I do mean the *only* things—I know about Newfoundland are that it's very cold, sparsely populated, and that Travis and Jacob went there once on vacation. Or at least, I think they did. Last summer, Jacob posted a picture on his Instagram of two coffee cups sitting by a window that looked out over a harbor filled with huge red ships. He tagged it as St. John's, Newfoundland, with a little heart emoji in the caption, and if the second coffee cup didn't belong to Travis, I'll eat my hat.

Coldwood, the show I read the script for back in Singapore, is filming in Marble Brook, which is a ski town several hours northwest of St. John's. The show's producer and director, Corbin Wells, said that filming in Canada is good for tax reasons, but I think the truth is, he wants the shoot to be *atmospheric*. We're filming about a remote northern town, he wants us all to live in a remote northern town. The characters shiver in the script, he wants us all to shiver in real life.

"This is going to be an immersive experience," he kept saying on the pre-production call. "We're all going to live it. We're all going to *feel* it."

He's kind of a weird guy, to be honest. But if his biggest problem is that he cares too much, and wants things to feel too real, I can live with that. I've dealt with weirder producers over the years. And while he might be going for creepy, frozen vibes on set, I intend to live in cozy, Christmas vibes the rest of the time.

I've rented a log cabin in a place called Moose Lake, about twenty minutes outside of Marble Brook. I've told my agent to completely block off my calendar, no appearances or phone calls or meetings, and I plan to

spend my evenings reading books by the fire and my weekends learning how to snowboard at the ski hill. Another picture on Jacob Nichols' Instagram account was of him on a snowboard somewhere in the Alps—another vacation with Travis, I bet—and he made it look extremely cool.

As if on cue, Jacob's face pops up on my laptop screen. He's watching the podium celebrations with a group of Crosswire workers. I scroll back in the video and hit "pause" when his face appears. He's smiling up at the podium, ostensibly cheering for Crosswire's driver, Eric Clayton, but the warmth in his eyes makes me sure he's looking at Travis.

I wonder what it feels like to look at someone like that, to love someone so much that it literally radiates off of your face. I wonder if Jacob knows how lucky he is to feel that way, and how lucky he is to have someone like Travis love him back just as much.

Looking at his smile, I'm pretty sure he does.

"Another mimosa, sir?" a pleasant voice asks. The business class steward is smiling at me from the aisle.

I glance at my empty champagne glass. I've already had two drinks, and I've got a long day of travel ahead of me. After I land in New York, I've got a two-hour flight to Halifax, Nova Scotia, then an hour and a half flight to Deer Lake, Newfoundland, then an hour's drive to Moose Lake.

"No, thanks," I say. "Just some coffee, if you don't mind."

She smiles and takes away my empty glass, and I turn my gaze back to Jacob's frozen face on my laptop screen. It feels impossible that I could ever feel that way, like wishing I could fly or turn myself invisible.

A tight, panicky feeling swells up inside of my chest. Maybe I'm just not made to fall in love. Maybe there's some crucial synapse missing in my heart, and I'll be hollow and alone forever.

No, stop that.

I give a rough shake of my head and restart the race footage. I'm only twenty-six years old, for god's sake. It's not too late for me. And I'm

shaking things up, going on an adventure, getting out of the glossy, sharp-edged world of LA. For two months, I'm going to wander snowy forests and read books by a crackling fire and meet people who don't give a shit how famous I am. And maybe I'll meet someone wonderful on set, or maybe I won't. But someday, *someday*, I will feel the way that Jacob feels about Travis.

I will love someone so much it radiates off of my god damn face.

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4
COLE

There are few people on this earth that I hate more than Travis Keeping.

There are more obnoxious drivers on the grid—Josh Fry comes to mind, and that annoying shithead Matty Wright—but none of them irritate me as much as Travis Keeping does. He's so fucking *wholesome*. I think he believes—like, really, truly believes—that the world is a good and decent place.

And why shouldn't he? Everything always goes his way. He's stiff and awkward in every interview, and the media brand him a silent sweetheart. His boyfriend gets into a massive crash that should have killed him, and instead walks off scot-free. His father got rich enough to put him into racing without turning into an evil dickhead who'd burn the world down for a dollar. Everything Travis Keeping touches turns to gold, and it makes me want to throttle him.

He's sitting beside me right now, making small talk with Eric Clayton while we wait for the post-race press conference to start.

"Any plans for the holidays?" Eric asks him.

"Probably just hanging around home," Travis says.

He smiles after he says it, a small, unconscious curve of his lips that makes it ridiculously obvious he's thinking about Jacob. I wonder if he realizes how dumb he looks, or how stupid it is to wrap all of your

happiness up in one person. Every time I see him smile like that, I think, *you're going to regret it*. Travis has built his entire life around Jacob Nichols, and when Jacob is gone, he'll fall apart without that scaffolding. He should have learned his lesson when Jacob almost died, but obviously he didn't. Maybe he thinks karma will be on his side now, like one horrific experience is enough for a lifetime.

In my experience, it's definitely not.

"Alright, let's get started, shall we?" James Riley says, settling into the interviewer's chair at the front of the room. The reporters fall silent, holding their recorders toward us. "Let's start with you, Cole."

Goody.

"Three third-place finishes in a row—what a way to end the season."

I raise an eyebrow. "Is that a question?"

He chuckles. "How do you feel about landing your third podium in a row?"

I shrug one shoulder. "Good."

"It's quite the turnaround for Dark Force," he says. "Do you think you'll be able to keep up this momentum going into next season?"

I shrug again. "Hope so."

Irritation flickers over James's face, but he covers it with a professional smile. "Is there anything in particular you can point to that's led to your team's improvements?"

I shrug one more time for good measure. "Not really."

A brief, stilted silence follows my words, then James wisely moves on to Eric.

I space out while Eric waxes sentimental about the end of his career and stifle an eye-roll while Travis charms the press with his stupid two-word answers. When it's over, I head back to the Dark Force garage. The other drivers have more interviews to do, but my father's shelled out a bunch of money under the table to keep me from having to do much press. He

doesn’t like the way I come off in interviews. He says it reflects poorly on the family name.

I certainly hope it does. It’d be a shame if I was doing it for nothing.

He’s waiting for me in the Dark Force garage, dressed in a dark blue suit that probably costs more than most people’s cars.

“There he is!” he says loudly, pulling me into a back-breaking hug. “The man of the hour.”

I stand stiffly in his grip until he lets me go. He turns his blinding smile on Dark Force’s team boss, Dan Starling, who’s standing nearby.

“I knew we could do it!” he says.

“You knew it,” Dan agrees. “Cole’s done an incredible job.”

My father thumps my shoulder hard enough to bruise. “He has. But he couldn’t have done it alone. You’ve done a fantastic job this season. The whole team has. In fact—” He glances around the garage. “Can everyone gather around for a moment?”

He waits for the team to form a half-circle around us, smiling at each person as they step close. “I won’t take long, I promise—I know you’ve all got work to do. And, more importantly, I’ve got a flight to catch!” Everyone laughs at his stupid little joke. “Seriously, though,” he continues, in the warm, paternal tone he uses when he wants to seem like one of the people, “I just wanted to take a moment to thank you all for the amazing work you’ve done this season. We started this year celebrating ninths and tenths, and we’ve finished it celebrating podiums. I may have put in the money, but you’ve put in the work, and we all know which one of those is more important. If I had something to toast you all with—ah, thank you,” he says, as his assistant magically produces a glass of scotch for him to hold up. “To Dark Force!”

“To Dark Force,” everyone echoes.

“I’d ask Cole to say a few words,” he goes on, over a smattering of applause, “but we all know that’s not his style.” Everyone laughs again. “So

I'll say it for both of us—thank you all, enjoy your time off, and we'll see you again next season!"

There's another round of applause, then some of the engineers and mechanics rush forward to talk to him. I never know if they're just kissing his ass or if they genuinely think he's a good person. It's probably the latter. People who don't know him well often say that he's charming. He's free with his smiles and his praise, and he has a way of arranging his face when people talk to him so it actually looks like he cares.

I try to make my escape while he's distracted, but he catches up with me halfway down the hall to my dressing room, trailed closely by his assistant.

"Slow down, there, sport," he says. "Give your old man a minute."

"I've got a flight to catch," I say.

He ignores this. "What are your plans for the holidays? Hitting the islands, maybe? Superyachts and supermodels?"

"I'm going back home," I say tersely.

He sighs. "Again? C'mon, kid. You know it's not good to linger in the past. It's been what, three, four years now? Time to stop moping and move on from all of that. Onward and upward, eh?"

He thumps my shoulder again, a bit gentler this time, and for a split second, I feel the same pull that the Dark Force engineers probably do. The sense that he really cares about my feelings, or anything I have to say. Honestly, if he'd gone into acting, he'd probably have a crateful of Oscars by now.

"Onward and upward," I repeat, since I know it's the only way I'll ever get rid of him.

His expression clears instantly, all smiles now that he's gotten his way. "Atta boy. I'll see you at the usual shindig in Marble Brook in a few weeks. And try to enjoy your time off, alright? Go a little crazy, do some things I wouldn't approve of."

He chuckles at his own joke and heads off. His assistant lingers a moment longer, looking at me. Her name is Candi, if you can fucking believe it, and she's easily the most beautiful woman I've ever seen in my life. She's twenty-four years old, two years younger than me, and she's worked for my father for a little over a year. My father has had a string of assistants over the years—all of them young, female, and beautiful—but Candi is easily the worst. She presents herself as this chic, sharp businesswoman, pairing tight skirt suits with six-inch heels, but whenever my father talks to her, she puts on a vapid, admiring smile, and she laughs at every stupid joke he makes.

"Will you be staying at The Chalet?" she asks. That's what my father calls his place in Marble Brook, because god forbid anyone just call it a cottage. It has to be The Chalet, with stupid capital letters and everything.

"No," I say flatly.

"Ah. Well, if you want me to open it up for you, you just let me know. You've got my number?"

My jaw twitches irritably. This is, like, the fourth time Candi has tried to give me her phone number. I think my father probably ordered her to, so she can check up on me when I don't answer him.

I'm sick of hearing about it, so I hold out my phone and let her put her number in it.

"Text me anytime," she says with a bright smile.

I turn away without answering and go into my dressing room, where I'm greeted by a loud, thumping tail. My shoulders relax a little, and a bit of air slips out of my lungs.

"Hey, monster," I say, crouching down onto the floor. My dog, Bandit, bounds toward me, tail wagging like it's been weeks since he's seen me instead of a couple of hours. "We got another podium, buddy," I tell him, while he aggressively licks my face. "What'd you think about that?"

He jumps on top of me, and I hug him tightly for a minute, burying my face in his soft black fur. He wags his tail even harder and tries to climb into my lap, tipping me backward onto the floor.

“Rascal,” I chide him halfheartedly. I plant a quick kiss on the top of his head and then nudge him off me. “Let’s get you for a walk before we go to the airport, yeah? Does that sound fun?”

He sits down comically quickly, his ears pricking up at the word “walk.” Bandit would go for a hundred walks a day if he could. The shelter he came from thought he was a mix between a German Shepherd and a Doberman, but when I did his genetic testing a few years ago, there was a lot of Belgian Malinois in him, too. He’s like a seventy-pound Energizer Bunny, an unstoppable source of energy and strength. He’s also the only thing left on this earth that I love, and if anyone ever hurt him, I would go full-on *John Wick* and burn the whole fucking world to the ground.

He waits reasonably patiently while I change into street clothes and pack up my things. It doesn’t take long. I live my life out of a single duffel bag, which contains all of my possessions. My laptop, my passport, five sets of near-identical clothes. A pack of nicotine gum I haven’t needed in a couple of weeks. A bag of toiletries, a battered Nintendo Switch, fifty thousand dollars in American cash.

At a moment’s notice, Bandit and I could disappear, never to be seen or heard from again. I seriously consider it every couple of days. Then I get in my race car again, and I decide to put it off a little bit longer.

I zip the bag up, swing it over one shoulder and lean down to give Bandit another tight hug. His tail whips back and forth against the floor, his whole body practically vibrating as he waits for his promised walk. But he rests his soft chin on my shoulder and lets me hold him for a minute or two, like he knows it’s the only thing holding me together.

The thought of returning to Newfoundland makes me sick to my stomach. It’s been creeping up on me for weeks now, like a series of heavy

weights being set onto my shoulders. Two and a half months without racing; two and a half months without the chaos of F1 to distract me from myself. If I could spend the winter break anywhere else in the world, I would.

But I can’t, so I kiss the side of Bandit’s head and pull away.

“C’mon, monster,” I say. “It’s time to go home.”

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5
QUIN

I always knew I was taking a risk with this rental place. There were only five reviews for it on Airbnb, and they were all from middle-aged men who'd rented it for hunting trips. But the long-term options around Marble Brook were limited, and I kept coming back to this place because of its description. *Secluded log cabin with wood-burning fireplace.* It sounded so idyllic, so romantic. I had visions of myself curling up by the fireplace, reading books and drinking peppermint hot chocolate.

Now that I'm here, I think a more accurate description would have been "Worryingly isolated shack with no other heating source BUT a wood-burning fireplace."

Okay, "shack" might be a bit harsh. It's a small, loft-style cabin with a bedroom on the second floor and a living room, kitchen and bathroom on the first floor. It's a bit dusty and a bit run-down, with scratched-up wooden floors and faded furniture, but I could deal with all of that if there was any damn *heat*.

It's so cold in the living room that I can see my own breath, and even though there are radiators lining the room, there's no actual heat coming out of them. There's a thermostat on the wall, an old-fashioned one with a little lever you can push up and down, but it's already set to twenty degrees Celsius, which I think is around seventy Fahrenheit.

There’s no *way* it’s seventy degrees in here.

I push the lever up as high as it goes and wait for a few minutes, but nothing happens. The radiators are still ice-cold. I search the place for another thermostat, but there isn’t one. There is a big pile of wood in a bin by the living room fireplace, but that can’t be the only heating source, can it? I can’t spend two months in a place with no heat.

I pace the floor, fighting a rising wave of panic. Nothing in this journey has gone smoothly so far, not since I landed in New York. My flight to Halifax was so turbulent it made me nauseous, and my flight to Deer Lake was delayed by two hours, which meant I arrived well after dark. When I stepped out of the airport, it was so cold it actually hurt to breathe, and for the entirety of the hour-long drive, I was the only car on the pitch-black road.

And now, I’m going to die of hypothermia.

A laugh bubbles out of me. I’m being way too dramatic. I’m sure this is an easy fix. There’s almost no cell service in the cabin, which is vaguely concerning, but the internet is good, so I open the Airbnb app and send a message to the owners. There’s probably some master switch I need to turn on, or something like that.

While I wait for them to answer, I head back out to my rental car to get my luggage.

Fucking hell, it’s dark out here.

The cabin is at the end of a long dirt road that cuts deep into the middle of a forest. When I booked this place, the owner told me there was one other cottage at the end of the road, but that otherwise, the nearest property was miles away. At the time, I thought it sounded peaceful and secluded. Now, it feels more like the setting of a horror movie. I peer into the woods for a minute, convinced I saw a flicker of movement between the trees.

I bite my lip and look away. I’m sure it’ll be less creepy when the sun is up.

Nevertheless, I walk a bit quickly to get to my car. There's no snow on the ground, but everything is covered in a slick layer of ice. Halfway to the car, my feet slip out from under me.

Fuck. That really hurt.

My right elbow is throbbing where it hit the ground. I try to climb back to my feet, but my stupid sneakers slide on the ice again and I thump down for a second time.

Fuck, fuck, *fuck*.

"Stupid god damn ice," I snap.

I manage to get back on my feet, but now my left hip is aching along with my elbow.

I walk more carefully the rest of the way and ignore the nervous prickle that spreads over the back of my neck as I wait for the trunk to open. I'm not going to let myself be scared of the woods for the next two months. That's just not how this is going to go.

All the same, I feel better once I'm back inside, with the door closed and deadbolted behind me.

My phone dings with a message on Airbnb. It's from Mary, the owner of the cabin.

Oh no, I'm so sorry about that! The furnace has been acting up lately. I'll call someone to take a look at it first thing tomorrow. In the meantime, there should be plenty of wood in the bin. Fire starter and matches are in the drawer by the microwave. The fireplace can heat the whole place once you get it going. Enjoy!

Enjoy?

I think I might cry.

I have no idea how to build a fire, and it's so cold in here that my fingers are going numb. I search on my phone for nearby hotels, but the closest one is twenty minutes away, in Marble Brook. Struggling against a

renewed swell of panic, I track down the matches and fire starter from the kitchen and sit down in front of the fireplace.

I'm sure I can figure this out. Probably.

Fifteen matches and five failed fires later, I take out my phone and run through the list of people I could call for help. I'm pretty sure none of my LA friends know how to light a fire. My dad probably does, but I'm not super keen to call him. My relationship with my parents is kind of tricky. I know they love me, but my decisions have always baffled them. Like when I came out back in high school. It wasn't like they didn't support me—they did pretty damn well, for middle-aged Christians born and raised in the South—but they made a few comments about how it might have been easier if I'd kept my private life to myself.

It was the same thing with my acting career. They supported my decision, but they didn't understand why I wanted to do it. Wouldn't it be better to go into banking like my father? And did I really want to move all the way out to LA when I could just stay in Austin, or better yet, move back home?

My parents are all about doing what's easiest, about moving through life without making any waves. I remember the anxiety in my mother's voice when I told her I was going to be living in Canada for two months. *Oh, Quin—do you really think that's a good idea?*

Right now, I definitely don't. But I don't want to call them and hear them say "I told you so."

Instead, I scroll through my contacts until I reach Jonathan's name. The phone rings six times before he picks up.

"'lo?" His voice is low and gravelly, and I realize it's, like, four a.m. in Italy.

"Hey," I say. "I'm so sorry, did I wake you?"

"S'okay." I hear a rustling, like he's sitting up in bed, then Trevor's voice says, "Who is it?"

“Quin,” Jonathan says.

“Yay!” There’s another rustle, then Trevor’s voice comes through more clearly. “Hi, Quin. Did you forget the time difference again?”

He doesn’t sound annoyed. I’m not sure “annoyed” is something Trevor’s capable of.

“Yeah,” I say. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize. Are you okay? You sound stressed.”

“Not stressed,” I lie. “Just freezing to death. Do either of you know how to build a fire?”

Trevor inhales sharply, his most excited noise. “I’m the *best* at making fires. Aren’t I, Jonathan?”

“You are,” Jonathan agrees.

“Here, hang on,” Trevor says, then he hangs up on me.

A moment later, my phone rings with a video call. The two of them are in bed in their house in Tuscany. Jonathan has his head resting on Trevor’s shoulder, bleary-eyed and half-asleep, while Trevor looks wide awake and cheerful.

“Sorry,” I say again. “What time is it there?”

“Four thirty,” Trevor says. “And I told you not to apologize. We can stay up and watch the sunrise now, it’ll be great.” He pokes Jonathan, who grunts sleepily in assent. “Did you make it to Newfoundland? What time is it there?”

“Yeah, I’m here. It’s midnight.”

“Is the cabin nice?” Jonathan asks, blinking himself awake with obvious effort.

I turn the video around to show them the room. “It’s a nice place to get murdered.”

Trevor pulls a face. “Jesus. My mom would not approve.”

“I don’t, either,” Jonathan says.

Trevor’s mother is a famous interior designer, and Jonathan is taking a design course online in the evenings. He helped me redecorate my place in LA last month when he and Trevor flew out for a visit.

“We’ll sort that out later,” Trevor says. “For now, let’s work on the fire. I am the best at starting fires, for real.”

“I’ve never done it before,” I admit.

“Fifteen minutes from now, you won’t be able to say that.”

He grins at me, and I smile back. I feel warmer just talking to them. And it turns out, Trevor’s right. Fifteen minutes later, following his simple, patient directions, I’ve built my first fire. A real, proper fire, crackling merrily in the fireplace. There isn’t much heat coming off of it yet, but Trevor assures me there will be soon, and explains how to bank it so it’s easier to get going again in the morning.

“Thank you,” I say gratefully. “You’re a lifesaver, for real.”

“Any time, handsome.”

Jonathan yawns on his shoulder, and a sudden wave of loneliness rushes over me. I wish they could stay on the phone with me a bit longer. I just know that the second we hang up, this place is going to feel empty and creepy again. I wanted to get away from the chaos of LA, but I’m starting to worry I might have swung too far the other way.

“I’ll let you guys go back to sleep.”

Trevor clicks his tongue. “Don’t be ridiculous. You’ll stay on the phone until the fire is going properly. Ooh, and you can watch the sunrise with us.”

My heart clenches. “Are you sure?”

He smiles. “Duh. I want to tell you about my new podcast idea, anyway. Jonathan claims he’s tired of hearing about it.”

I smile back and shift closer to the fireplace, letting its fragile heat sink into my skin.

“I’m listening.”

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6
QUIN

I wake the next morning sprawled out on the couch in front of the fireplace. I was too nervous to sleep in the bed upstairs, in case the fire went out in the middle of the night, but Trevor's fire-banking technique has lived up to the hype. The fire has burned down to its embers, but there's still a bit of heat coming off of it, and when I put in some fresh wood, it lights up again easily.

I'm not going to lie, I feel pretty impressive heating this place all by myself. By the time I leave Newfoundland, I'm going to be a proper outdoorsman, able to survive in the middle of nowhere with only my wits and a roll of duct tape.

I do wish I'd stopped to get groceries last night, though. I'm absolutely starving, and the only things in the kitchen cupboards are salt, pepper and a bottle of olive oil.

The crunch of tires on gravel alerts me to someone's arrival in the driveway. I go outside and find a middle-aged woman climbing out of an SUV. She has wiry gray hair and a narrow, pleasant face, and she beams at me like we're long-lost friends.

"Hello, there!" she says, in a thick, warm accent that sounds almost Irish. "You must be Quin."

I smile. "Yes, ma'am."

“Ma’am!” She cackles. “I’m not that old, yet, am I?”

“Oh—no, not at all,” I say hastily. “It’s a Southern thing. Sorry.”

“I’m just teasing. Some cold out today, innit? How ya gettin’ on?” She takes two steps toward me and almost loses her balance on the icy walkway. “Oh, for heaven’s sake—” She clicks her tongue. “You’ll kill yourself walking up and down this mess. Hang on a sec, I’ve got some sand in my car.”

I watch as she hauls a huge yellow bag out of her trunk and tucks it under her arm like it weighs almost nothing. She walks up and down the walkway a few times, scattering sand over the stones.

“That’ll sort you out for now. I’ll bring a few more bags later today, make sure you’ve got enough to last the winter.” She climbs the porch steps and gives me a bone-creaking handshake. “I’m Mary, by the way. Mary Murphy. My husband and I have owned this place for—gosh, must be comin’ on twenty years. It’s got a bit run down over the past few years, though. Billy used to take care of it, but he’s got that rheumatoid arthritis. Ever heard of it? Nasty stuff. Now then, let me give you a quick tour, this old place has some quirks. It’s some cold in here! Don’t worry, though, I’m after calling the handyman and he’ll be down to fix it soon.”

She chatters cheerfully as she leads me through the cabin, telling me about her husband Billy in between instructions on how to use the washing machine and how to twist the showerhead so it doesn’t leak. In the kitchen, she exclaims over the layer of dust on the counter.

“It’s really okay,” I say.

“It is not! Fancy young man like you, can’t live in filth for two months.”

“I don’t know that I’m *fancy*—”

“I’ll pop home and get my supplies, give this place a proper clean. My niece was supposed to do it last week, but I’ll bet ya she spent the whole time on her phone scrolling TikTok. Will I be in your way if I come back later this morning?”

“No, not at all. I’ve got to head out soon, actually. First day of work.”

“You’re some kind of actor, eh? Shooting out over in Marble Brook?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m surprised you’re not staying in town. Too busy for my liking, but it’s got all the restaurants and things you hip young people like.”

I grin. “I’m not that hip. And I wanted to be out of town. Somewhere quiet and cozy, you know?”

She laughs. “I don’t know about cozy, but you’ll get all the quiet you need out here. There’s only one other place nearby, the big cottage at the end of the road. Otherwise, you’ve got about five hundred acres of woods all to yourself. There’s a walking trail that goes out to the lake, it starts right off the driveway. It’s about five kilometers there and back, if you like that sort of thing.”

“I do, thanks.”

She beams at me, and I smile back. Sure, the cabin isn’t quite what I imagined, but this conversation with Mary is exactly what I wanted. It’s clear she doesn’t know who I am, and I doubt she would care at all if she did.

She walks me out to my car, pointing out the trailhead and giving my rental car a careful once-over.

“You’ll need good tires to get out of this place when it snows. We’ve got a fellow who plows the road, but the drifts can still get ya. Alright, well, I’ll let you get on the go. Call if you need anything.”

I smile and thank her, then I double back inside to grab my keys and head out.

It’s a twenty-minute drive on the highway to get to Marble Brook. Once I’m there, I drive around for a little while, getting the lay of the land. There’s not much to it. It’s a small town bordered by a harbor on one side and the ski hill on the other. Beyond the sprawl of homes tucked in the shadow of the mountain, the town basically boils down to two streets. The

first, Main Street, features the town's grocery store, post office, RCMP station and library. The second, Water Street, has a coffee shop, a couple of restaurants, and a bookshop that looks cute. It's a bit sleepy and a bit old-fashioned, and every single person I see on the street looks at least sixty years old. I smile at them all like an idiot. This is going to be absolutely perfect.

Coldwood's headquarters is set up in a small, industrial-looking building off of Water Street. The show will be filming in locations all across town, but this is where we'll go every day for hair and makeup. As I pull into a parking spot, I see the show's producer and director, Corbin Wells, greeting people at the door. He's a tall, thin guy in his early thirties with curly brown hair and intense gray eyes. If he were cast in a movie, he'd be "Mildly Exasperating Hipster #3" or "Man Who Quotes Too Much Poetry."

I climb out of my car, put on my most professional smile, and head into the fray.

I spend most of the morning trying to memorize faces and names. It's a smaller cast and crew than I've worked with in a while, and everyone seems pretty nice, although I can already tell I'm going to have to control my facial expressions carefully whenever I'm around Corbin. He talks about the show like it's going to cure cancer, and whenever he says the word "art"—which is *way* too often—it sounds like he's saying it with a capital letter. We're here to create Art, everyone. Our Art must be taken very, very seriously.

He believes it so much, he's likely to make a hit of this thing after all.

Ah, well. It's a good enough morning, and it gets better when my costar, Keladry Winters, shows up. She bursts through the door at the tail-end of Corbin's endless welcome monologue, dressed in a long plaid coat and army boots.

"Sorry, sorry! Flight was late. What'd I miss?"

"I was just welcoming everyone," Corbin says.

Keladry's face drops. "I missed your speech? Damn."

Her tone is entirely genuine, but as she drops into the empty seat beside me, she shoots me a tiny wink.

I stifle a grin. I'd never heard of Keladry Winters before signing on to this show. Her IMDb page was pretty sparse, but I found a YouTube clip of some indie film she did, and just from a single scene, I could tell she was talented. She's twenty-six years old, like me, and none of her features are traditionally beautiful—her nose is too big, her lips are too thin, and her eyebrows too straight and heavy—and yet they all add up to something infinitely more appealing than the skeletal, Botoxed faces currently saturating the industry.

When Corbin is done talking, she does a quick round of the room, introducing herself to everyone and leaving smiles and laughter in her wake. She saves me for last, wandering back as Corbin herds the crew off for lunch.

"Kel Winters," she says, holding her hand out to me.

"Quin McCarthy," I reply. Her grip is warm and strong. "It's Kel? Not Keladry?"

She pulls a face. "Kel, unless my mom is in the room. She read a bunch of Tamora Pierce novels when she was pregnant and named me after a fictional female knight."

"I've read those books. You would be a kick-ass Kel, if they ever made a movie out of them."

She blinks at me. "You know, that might be one of the best compliments anyone's ever given me." She studies me for another moment, then drops into the seat beside me and says, very seriously, "Do you want to be friends?"

"Um—sure?"

"No, really," she says, fixing me with an earnest gaze. "Adults are shit at making new friends, so whenever I find someone I like, I ask them

straight up if they want to be friends. So you shouldn't say yes unless you're prepared to be friends. Real friends, no Hollywood bullshit."

She holds her pinky finger out to me, like a challenge.

"You're very intense," I say.

"Yes."

"And a little weird."

"That, too."

After a beat of amused silence, I link my pinky in hers.

"Real friends," I confirm.

She smiles widely, revealing very large, white teeth. "Good. Let's go do something."

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7
QUIN

Kel and I grab lunch from the town's coffee shop, Jitters, then we wander around for a little while, popping in and out of stores. Most of what's for sale is a bit kitsch, which delights Kel to no end, and the bookstore I spotted earlier is a cozy, cinnamon-scented space stuffed to the rafters with a mix of new and used books.

"Are you staying here in town?" Kel asks, as we head back to set.

"No, I've got a place in Moose Lake. It's about twenty minutes out of town."

She pulls a face. "Aren't you worried about driving here in winter?"

"No." I hesitate. "Should I be?"

"I don't know, I hear they get a lot of snow."

I bite my lip. I never thought about that. "I'm sure it'll be fine. It can't be that hard."

She laughs and threads her arm in mine. "Okay, LA boy. When you change your mind about that, you can crash at the hotel here with me. But don't get any ideas—"

"You know I'm gay."

"—because I'm saving my on-set romance for Corbin."

A laugh splutters out of me. "Oh my god, you did not just say that. He's the *worst*, Kel."

“He makes *Art*, Quin. He’s so ridiculous it’s sexy.”

“That’s not a thing. And you’re not sleeping with him, I won’t let you.”

She gives me a sharp-toothed grin. “Try and stop me.”

“Pick someone else,” I say. “Literally anyone. Look, what about that guy there?”

She follows my gaze to the entrance of headquarters, where a policeman is talking with our assistant director, Jennie. The policeman—or RCMP officer, I think they’re called here—is tall and sandy-haired and handsome, in a clean-cut, boy-next-door sort of way. He’s handing Jennie a stack of folded uniforms. Corbin mentioned the local RCMP station was loaning us some clothes for the shoot.

“He’s hot,” Kel agrees. “I’ll put him on the list right after Corbin.”

I snort. “Nice.”

“What? I’m not looking to get married. My last relationship was so serious, I just want a break from being in love, you know?”

My smile feels more like a grimace. “Not really. I’ve been kind of unlucky with relationships.”

“Dating assholes, or being an asshole yourself?”

I chuckle. “Neither? I’ve dated really great guys, I’ve just never been in love with any of them. I’m, like, ninety percent sure ‘being in love’ isn’t even a real thing. We’ve all just been brainwashed by romance novels and Disney movies.”

Kel smacks her forehead with her palm. “Good lord, the drama. You’re, what, twenty-six? And you’ve had how many serious relationships?”

“Four.”

“Babe, that’s a bit like walking into a library, reading four books, then declaring you hate all literature. You need to read more books.”

“I’ve *been* doing that. I feel nothing. I’m dead inside.”

Her laugh is bright and loud. “Oh, for the love of—you’re not dead inside, idiot. You just haven’t found the right person yet.”

“Have you?”

“Found the right person? No. But I’ve been in love twice.”

“And you’re sure you were in love with them,” I say doubtfully.

She smacks my arm. “Yes, I’m sure.”

“You can’t give me any specifics of this so-called feeling?”

“What do you want, a checklist?”

“Yes.”

She laughs again. “That’s not how it works. You just know it when you feel it.”

“I really want to kick you right now.”

“Too late,” she says, grinning as we step around the handsome RCMP officer to get inside. “The cameras are waiting.”

The next few hours pass by quickly. I’m not a method actor—spare me from that self-indulgent nonsense—but I’ve always liked sinking into a new role. My character, Thomas Cartwell, is a cynical police officer who takes life too seriously, and Kel plays Monica Katz, the office secretary whose ex-husband was one of the townspeople who turned evil after wandering into the woods.

The show has six episodes, and in the first few, Thomas is coming to grips with the idea that there’s something supernatural going on, and opening himself up to Monica. Then, in the third episode, he goes into the woods and gets turned evil himself. At the end of the fourth episode, he takes Monica out on their first date—she doesn’t know yet that he’s gone bad—and makes plans to kill her. Over the last two episodes, she figures it out and outwits him. The series ends with her stabbing him to death in the woods.

A bit morbid, I know. Corbin says it’s a cautionary tale about closing yourself off to life and love. If you wait too long, you’ll lose out. Or, in this case, get some spooky forest curse and get murdered by the woman you could’ve loved.

I usually play more charismatic characters, and at first, it's sort of fun to portray someone darker. But by the time the day wraps up, I'm tired and gloomy. What if this show is some dark sign from the universe? What if I'm destined to be closed off to love forever?

"Really good work today, Quin," Corbin says. "Really *dismal*. I feel depressed just watching you."

"Thanks," I say dryly. "See you tomorrow."

I spend most of the drive home trying not to think of what the road will be like covered in snow. Kel said some parts of Newfoundland get ten feet of snow over the winter, but I'm pretty sure she was exaggerating to tease me.

Back at the cabin, ten massive yellow bags of sand are lined up on the porch, and every surface inside has been scrubbed within an inch of its life. The radiators are pumping out heat—thank god—and Mary's left a Tupperware container of scones on the kitchen counter, along with a bottle of rum called Screech. I nibble on a scone as I wander around my newly-cleaned home. I'm not going to lie, it's still a bit dingy. The furniture is old and scuffed and the hardwood floors are stripped almost bare. But warm beams of late afternoon sunlight are streaming in through the windows, and the air smells like pine and fire smoke, and Mary's homemade scones taste like butter and cheese.

My mouth tugs up into a smile. "This will work," I say out loud.

On impulse, I pull on my boots and coat again and walk down the driveway to the start of the trail. It's in great shape, a bit narrow but smooth enough that I don't have to stare at my feet all the time. I usually run every day on my treadmill back home, but this will be so much better.

I stretch my arms out and run my fingertips over the tree trunks, admiring the way their ash-gray bark gleams in the fading light. There are little tufts of pale green moss dangling from some of the branches, and curls of paper-white bark peeling away from the birch trees.

Just past a cluster of firs, I reach a fork in the trail. To the right, it cuts deeper into the forest, toward the lake Mary told me about. To the left, there's a large, two-story cabin.

It puts me in mind of a hunting lodge, with sturdy walls built from thick dark logs and a wide, screened-in front porch. There's a black Land Rover in the driveway, so someone must be home, but the whole place feels eerie and abandoned. There are piles of rusted car parts near the shed, and one of the windows on the second floor is boarded up.

I should probably introduce myself to the owner at some point—I'm picturing a burly middle-aged man who decorates his walls with sawed-off deer heads—but for now, I turn away and head a little further up the trail. I'd like to make it to the lake, but the sunlight is fading fast.

I'm contemplating turning back when I round a corner and meet a dog.

I go perfectly still when I see him, and he does the same. He's some sort of Shepherd or Malinois, I think, sixty or seventy pounds of lean muscle and short fur. His face and paws are almost pure black, while his body is a peppery mix of black and dark brown. His ears are pricked up, and he's holding his head slightly low to the ground, like he's trying to decide whether or not I'm a threat.

To someone who didn't know dogs, he would probably be terrifying. But I grew up with dogs, and I know a good boy when I see one.

"Hello, handsome!" I say warmly, and just like that, his whole posture changes.

He slaps his front paws down in a happy play bow, then he lunges at me in excitement, his whole body shaking with the force of his wagging tail. I crouch down to pet him, laughing as he licks my face.

"You are so gorgeous!" I say, rubbing his soft ears. "What are you doing all the way out here?"

He doesn't have a collar on, but he's way too healthy to be a stray. As he tries to jump onto my shoulders, a voice further up the trail shouts,

“Bandit?”

“He’s here!” I call back. The dog—Bandit—barks loudly, as if in agreement, and I laugh and bury my face in his fur again. “You’re a good boy, aren’t you?” I say, using the light, goofy voice I can’t help but adopt around dogs. “I can’t remember the last time I saw such a handsome puppy.”

Footsteps crunch on the ground nearby and Bandit looks around in excitement. “Sorry,” I say, rising to my feet, “Your dog and I had a little love thing going on—”

I stop dead as the owner of the footsteps comes around the corner. For the span of five heartbeats, I feel nothing but shock.

Then, a wave of fury crashes over me.

“You’ve got to be *kidding me*.”

Cole Milton—*fucking* Cole Milton—is standing across from me on the trail. He looks just as gorgeous and mean as he did back in Singapore, dressed in heavy boots and dark jeans and a black winter jacket. For a moment, he looks as shocked as I feel, then his whole face darkens with contempt.

“Do I know you?”

That little fucker. “You know who I am,” I snap. “We met in September, in Singapore.”

His eyes flick over me dismissively, just like they did on the Ritz-Carlton rooftop. “Right,” he says coolly. “Hollywood’s little sweetheart.”

My hands clench into fists. “Oh, fuck you. What the hell are you doing here?”

“I own this land,” he says. “And that dog.”

I look down at Bandit, who I’ve been unconsciously holding against my legs. “What do you mean, you own this land?” My stomach drops as I make the connection. “You own the cottage at the end of the road.”

“And all of the land around it,” he says. “Including this trail.”

He beckons to Bandit, who rushes instantly to his side, sitting down beside him and staring up at him with blind canine affection. My pulse spikes furiously at the sight. How can someone so horrible own such a good dog?

“Well, I’m staying at Mary Murphy’s cottage,” I retort. “And she said I was allowed to use the trail.”

“I said her stupid hunting guests could use it. That doesn’t extend to you.”

“And you’ll tell her that, will you?” I have a feeling Mary is a match for anyone, including douchebag billionaires.

Sure enough, Cole’s mouth tugs down unhappily, and I know I’ve scored the point.

“I’m staying here for two months,” I say. “And I’ll use this trail as much as I want. And if you don’t like it, you can fuck off to whatever private island your rich-ass family owns.”

“You can’t stay here for two months. *I’m* staying here for two months.”

I gape at him. “You’ve got to be *kidding* me,” I say again.

Cole looks just as angry and incredulous as I feel. “I stay here every winter. It’s my land, and this is my trail. You can find somewhere else to stay.”

“No, I can’t!”

He scoffs. “Seriously? There are a thousand rental places in Marble Brook. Pick one.”

My pulse is pounding. “I chose this one! And I’m not leaving just because of you. I’m sure you’re used to everyone jumping to do what you say, but you can’t make me leave, no matter how rich your daddy is.”

He lets out a harsh, disbelieving breath. “This is unbelievable.”

“Couldn’t agree more,” I snap.

An angry silence falls, both of us breathing hard. Bandit looks between us, then barks meaningfully at Cole.

Like a reflex, Cole's hand drops onto his dog's head.

"We're going, buddy," he says, in an entirely different tone. Then he glares at me. "You're in our way."

I glare back just as fiercely and step back to let them pass. Cole strides by first, with Bandit following close behind. Bandit stops to look up at me with his deep brown eyes, and as much as I hate Cole, I can't resist a look like that from a dog.

"Bye, handsome," I say, reaching out to sneak a quick pat before he leaves. Cole's head whips around when I say it, his eyes wide with indignation.

Ignoring him, I lean down and plant a defiant kiss on Bandit's soft head. "I'll see you out here again, won't I, buddy?"

Bandit wags his tail enthusiastically and rises on his back legs to lick my nose. "Good boy," I say, smirking at Cole.

He gives me a look that would shatter ice, then turns on his heel and strides away from me.

"I'll see you around, neighbor!" I call after him.

Then I turn to the nearest tree trunk and ram my forehead against it.

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QUIN

“Cut!” Corbin shouts, throwing his hands up in frustration. “Come on, you two. That wasn’t good.”

Kel holds her palms up. “Don’t look at me.”

I scowl at her. “Thanks, co-star.”

“Just telling it like it is,” she says with a grin. “I’m killing it today.”

“She has a point,” Corbin says, crossing the room to frown at me. We’re shooting the last scene of the day, in an old office building that’s been done up like a police station. “Where’s your head at, Quin?”

I scrub my hands over my face. My head is back on the trail, thinking of all the things I should have said to Cole Milton. I can’t *believe* that prick owns the only other cottage on the road. I can’t believe he’s going to be living there all winter long.

“Sorry. I can do it better.”

“I know you can. That’s why I hired you. Now, c’mon, let’s run it again from the top. And really lean into it this time, Quin. Really *sell it*.”

Kel’s lips twitch, fighting a smile. “Sell it” is Corbin’s personal catchphrase. He’s said it at least a hundred times today.

With enormous effort, I shove Cole from my mind and focus on the scene. My next attempt is a little better, but Corbin clicks his tongue and makes us do it again, finally nodding his approval on the ninth or tenth take.

“What’s up with you?” Kel asks, as we drive back to headquarters. “No offense, but if I’m going to have to keep carrying you like this, I’m going to need a cut of your salary.” She cackles as I glower at her. “I’m kidding. Tell me what’s wrong.”

“It’s nothing, really. There’s just this jackass staying at the cottage up the road from me. He’s this horrible Formula 1 driver—Cole Milton, if you know who that is.”

Kel’s mouth drops open. “Of course I do! I’m obsessed with F1.”

“Me too. I’ve been watching it ever since Harper invited me to the race in Singapore.”

“Fuck off. That’s amazing.”

“It was,” I agree. “But I met Cole while I was there, and he was such an asshole. He called me a ‘boring little do-gooder who plays make-believe for a living.’”

She makes an indignant noise. “What a douche!”

“*Such* a douche. And now he’s living literally five minutes up the road from me. He said he’s going to be there all winter. For F1’s winter break, I guess.”

Kel grimaces. “Jesus. That sucks.”

“It completely sucks.”

“He’s always so rude in interviews. It’s like, no one’s making you race in F1, asshole. If you don’t want to be there, feel free to give your seat up to someone whose family isn’t rich.”

“Right?” I drop my head back. “I don’t know what I’m going to do.”

“You could find another place.”

“Yeah, I know.” I’ve been thinking about it all day. “But why should I have to leave? I’ve just started settling in there. And I’ve already paid for two months.”

Kel flicks me a dry look, like she knows the money isn’t really a problem for me. I flush. “Okay, that part’s not a big deal. But I still don’t

think I should have to leave." I glare out the window. "Why the hell would he even come to a place like this? He belongs somewhere obnoxious and douchey, where everyone he talks to is paid to kiss his ass."

"Maybe you won't have to see him much. He doesn't seem like he's very sociable."

"Yeah, maybe." I sink down in my seat. "It's such bullshit. Out of all the Formula 1 drivers, why does it have to be Cole fucking Milton?"

Kel laughs. "Right? I wish it was Matty Wright. Or Travis Keeping, he's my favorite."

"Mine, too. I actually got to meet him in Singapore."

"What was he like?"

"Super nice. Stupid gorgeous."

"*Stupid* gorgeous," she agrees. "Did you see that new documentary about him on YouTube?"

"Probably. I've watched basically everything."

"This one just came out a few days ago. It was on some motorsport channel that does videos about classic car restorations. Travis bought an old Porsche that he's restoring himself, and they did this hour-long documentary with him. He actually talks a ton in it, it's crazy."

"Send me the link?" I say, as we pull into the parking lot at headquarters.

"Of course. And look, don't stress about Cole. You probably won't see him much."

"Yeah," I say uncertainly. "You're probably right."

"Of course I'm right. And if he bothers you too much, you can get a room at the hotel with me. We can watch movies and play video games and have a threesome with Corbin."

I burst out laughing. "Oh my god, Kel. No."

"C'mon," she says, wheedling. "Make Art with us, Quin."

I unbuckle my seatbelt. "I'm getting out of the car now."

“Spoilsport,” she calls after me.

AFTER WORK, she sends me the link to the YouTube video, and I spend the evening curled up on my couch, eating dinner while it plays on my laptop.

Travis talks way more in it than he usually does, and the low, easy sound of his voice is inexplicably soothing. If I ever meet him again in person, I’ll probably combust from embarrassment. I suddenly have a lot more sympathy for fans who have stammered and blushed when they met me.

Onscreen, the camera cuts to a clip from Travis’s early racing days. He’s younger, maybe eighteen or nineteen, and he’s being interviewed about a Formula 2 race he won.

My gaze catches on a driver in the background, a handsome young guy with dark hair. He must’ve done well in the race, because he sprints across the pavement to a girl with curly hair and spins her around in celebration. She laughs, they kiss, then the camera cuts back to Travis’s present-day interview.

I put my plate aside and scroll back in the video. I replay the clip, then I pause and zoom in, staring at my screen in disbelief.

The driver in the background is Cole Milton—only he looks absolutely nothing like himself.

He’s younger, like Travis, but that’s not why he looks so different. He’s smiling—no, *beaming*—and the change it makes in him is startling. A voice in the back of my mind whispers *gorgeous*, and as much as I hate to admit it, it’s true. With a smile on his face, Cole is drop-dead gorgeous, and it makes me think about things that I don’t remember noticing, like the curve of his lips when he sneered at me or the way his jeans clung to his thighs.

I shift on the couch, little pulses of heat stirring in my groin. Then I remember who I'm thinking about, and all of my desire drops away. I *refuse* to be turned on by Cole Milton. That is just not something I am willing to let happen.

I scowl at my laptop, hating him even more than before. It seems impossible that the person on screen could have grown up into the man I talked to yesterday. It's not just his smile, it's the way he runs to the girl in the video like she's the best part of his day. It's Travis-and-Jacob-grade affection. He looks at that girl like she hung the damn moon.

And the weirdest part is, she's not even that pretty. Or at least, she's not the kind of pretty I associate with Formula 1 drivers. I've seen F1 drivers' girlfriends on TV during races, and they all look a little bit alike. The same shiny hair, the same perfect skin and straight white teeth. The girl Cole's spinning on screen isn't anything like that. She has frizzy dark hair and a slightly beaky nose, and she skews more toward gangly than slender. If she was an actress, she'd be cast as "Average Girl," or maybe "Laughing Friend #3."

And yet, Cole looks at her like she's everything, and she smiles back at him in just the same way. In one single five-second clip, they look happier than I've ever felt with any of my boyfriends.

How is it possible that Cole's loved someone like that, and I haven't? And what the hell happened to him between this old video and now?

Tires rumble outside of the cabin. I look around just in time to see Cole's Land Rover roar by. Even the way he drives feels angry. And the way he dresses, black on black on black.

And yet—

Unbidden, my mind draws up a memory from yesterday. In between the snarky comments and cold looks, there was that moment when Cole put his hand on Bandit's head.

We're going, buddy.

The way he sounded when he said it…it didn't fit with Cole Milton the raging asshole. It fit with Cole Milton the smiling nineteen-year-old, laughing and spinning his girlfriend around.

I stare at the frozen image on my laptop for longer than I'm proud of, chewing restlessly on my bottom lip. Then, when I realize how long I've been sitting there, I slam my laptop shut. I don't care what Cole used to be like or why he changed. It doesn't interest me in the least.

I don't think about him while I clean up the kitchen, or during my nightly call with Trevor and Jonathan. I set my alarm, turn off the lights, and crawl into bed, still not thinking about him.

I lie in the dark with my eyes closed for about sixty seconds. Then I roll over, grab my laptop, and type his name into YouTube.

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QUIN

Two hours later, I’m still watching videos. Most of them are from F1’s official YouTube page, pre- or post-race interviews that Cole has given in the media pen. In every last one of them, he’s unsmiling and rude, never saying a single word more than he needs to. He never looks happy, not even in the interview after he got his first podium. His teammate, a Korean-Australian guy named Aaron Choi, is featured in a bunch of silly promotional shorts for Dark Force, but Cole is barely in any of them. When he is, he looks like he's being filmed with a gun to his head.

I watch a twenty-minute video essay titled “Cole Milton: Nobody’s Favorite F1 Driver.” The comment section is brutal, a nonstop stream of “WORST DRIVER EVER!!!” and “fuck this fucking asshole!!!” but the guy who actually made the video has a more measured take.

“I’m not here to defend Cole’s personality,” he says, “but I do want to talk about his driving, which I think is a lot better than anyone gives him credit for. During this year’s race in Brazil, thousands of people were up in arms about his pass on Josh Fry, but if you actually look at the move, it’s almost identical to Travis Keeping’s overtake on Eric Clayton, which everyone thought was brilliant.”

He plays the two overtakes side by side, then goes on to dissect one of Cole’s most infamous race crashes, arguing that it wasn’t actually Cole’s

fault.

“For the first two seasons of his career, the Dark Force car was basically a trash can, and yet he still finished every season in the points. And now that the car is decent, he’s landed five podiums. So, if you want to hate Cole Milton because of his driving, you might want to remember that he’s beaten every one of his teammates in Formula 1, and that when he competed in Formula 2, he finished second, ahead of Josh Fry. If you want to hate Cole because his family’s rich, you might want to look up the net income of the other F1 drivers’ families. And if you want to hate Cole because he’s a raging douchebag…” He laughs. “Well, okay, I’ll give you that one. Sound off in the comments if you think Cole deserves the hate, and make sure to subscribe for more F1 content all year long.”

I hit ‘Subscribe’, then I click on the search bar and type in “Cole Milton Formula 2 interview.” Almost nothing comes up, but after ten minutes of searching, I discover that for a hundred dollars, I can watch all of the old F2 seasons through F1TV.

I find the first race that Cole got a podium in and scroll to the end of the video. After a young Matty Wright jokes with the interviewer about his third-place finish, Cole steps up to the camera, smiling so widely it briefly takes my breath away.

His grin is aimed over his shoulder, like he’s just stepped away from someone he was talking to. It dims a little when he turns to face the camera, and he’s not exactly effusive in the interview, but it’s nothing like his interviews in F1. His humor is a bit dry, but he’s not cold or rude, and he looks genuinely pleased with his race result. When the interviewer moves on to the race winner, Josh Fry, Cole turns back to whoever he was talking to before, his smile brightening again like a reflex.

The camera doesn’t show who he’s looking at, but I’d bet all the money in my bank account it was the girl from the other video. I google “Cole Milton girlfriend”, but all I find are trashy articles speculating about models

he’s slept with, and a Reddit thread where someone asked if he had a girlfriend. The top reply says, “I don’t think his daddy’s bought him one yet.”

From there, I go down the rabbit hole on Cole’s family. There’s almost no information about his mother, except that she died in a car accident during his childhood, and that her father was from Thailand, which I find out from a Reddit thread thoughtfully titled “is it just me or does cole milton look a little bit asian.”

There’s a bit more information on Cole’s father, Blaine. He was born in Michigan, but his family moved to Marble Brook when his father got a job at the local paper mill. He was married to Cole’s mother for fifteen years, then divorced her right around the time his business blew up.

There are a few videos of him on YouTube, mostly interviews at F1 races. He speaks in a warm, self-deprecating tone, and the general consensus in the comments is that he’s not that bad for a billionaire. One comment says, “Met him once, he was pretty chill. Not his fault his son’s an asshole.”

It pisses me off, though I’m not quite sure why. Cole *is* an asshole, I’ve seen that firsthand. But Blaine Milton doesn’t seem any better to me. He comes off better on camera, but he reminds me of the worst kind of people in Hollywood, the ones who smile to your face and talk shit behind your back.

Sometime past two a.m., I push my laptop aside and rub my tired eyes. I don’t know why I’m wasting my time like this. I need to be on set at eight.

I lie down on my side and hug a pillow against my chest, but it’s a long time before sleep finally finds me. My last coherent thought is of Cole’s bright smile, and his voice saying, “We’re going, buddy.”

AT SIX A.M. THE next morning, my alarm goes off with a vengeance. I spend a few minutes dreaming wistfully of another half hour's sleep, then I drag my tired ass out of bed and get dressed in my thermal running gear.

I know there's a chance that I'll run into Cole on the trail, but I'm determined not to let his presence change my behavior. And, I'll admit, there's a part of me that kind of hopes I run into him again, if only so I can see Bandit. I'm always so busy with work that it's never felt right to get a dog, but I've missed having one so much. I wouldn't mind playing with Bandit again, even if means putting up with Cole.

Plus, I think it pissed Cole off that Bandit liked me, and that's a reward in itself.

I set off at a brisk jog and make it to his place in five minutes flat. The porch light is on and a stream of smoke is rising from the chimney, but otherwise, it looks just as creepy and abandoned as it did the other day.

It's kind of weird that a guy like Cole would stay in a place like this. It's not like he can't afford to fix it up. He's a billionaire, for fuck's sake. He could raze the whole place to the ground and build something fancy and new in its place.

I stare up at the windows for a little while, but there's no sign of movement, so I turn up my music and keep running. I want to see the lake Mary told me about, the one this part of Newfoundland is named for. She said I might see actual moose there. Apparently, there are thousands of them in the province. She also warned me not to try to pet them, which makes me wonder if she thinks I'm a bit of an idiot.

The lake appears almost out of nowhere. One minute, I'm running through the woods, the next, I emerge onto a narrow, rocky shore. A vast pool of water stretches out in front of me, shimmery gray under the clouds and as perfectly still as a mirror.

I gape at it stupidly. It's so beautiful it almost doesn't look real. It certainly doesn't feel like I should be here alone. There should be crowds of

tourists all around me, fighting to get the perfect picture for their Instagram.

I take a few pictures myself, then I put my phone away and sit down on a rock. With the lake in front of me and the dark, quiet woods all around, it feels like I'm the only living person in the world.

The peaceful silence lasts for all of five minutes, then it's broken by a loud, happy bark. I twist around and see Bandit at the end of the trail, staring at me like I've made his whole day.

I throw my arms out. "Bandit!"

He bounds across the rocks and launches himself on top of me, nearly tumbling us both into the water.

"Hi, handsome!" I laugh. "Oh my goodness, you're such a good boy!"

I sit down again to rub his sides and scratch his ears, putting off the moment I'll have to look up at Cole. I already know that he's there. I can feel the cold weight of his gaze.

I kiss the top of Bandit's head, then I put on a cool smile and stand to face him. "Have we met?"

Cole sneers. "Unfortunately. You're that guy who's trespassing on my land and interrupting my dog's training."

"What are you training him for? Ripping out the throats of poor people?"

He scoffs. "How much do they usually pay you for your little movies? Is it more or less than a nurse's salary, or a teacher's?"

The question hits closer to home than I'd like to admit. "I'm not a billionaire."

"Neither am I."

"Daddy's only given you a few hundred million, has he? You poor baby. Your life is so hard."

He lets out an angry breath. "Get away from my dog."

I crouch down again and hug Bandit defiantly. "You don't deserve such a good dog."

It’s not a particularly clever insult, but Cole reacts to it like a blow, his eyes widening and his chin jerking back. His jaw works for a few seconds, like he’s trying to get a hold of himself, then his hands tighten to fists at his sides.

“Bandit, come,” he snaps.

Bandit leaps out of my arms and rushes to his side. Cole’s hand drops to his head, just like it did yesterday, but all of his muscles are tensed up, and his mouth is twisted like it’s never known a smile.

I rise to my feet. “What the hell happened to you?”

“Excuse me?”

“You used to be *normal*. What the hell happened?”

He looks at me scornfully. “You don’t know anything about me.”

“I know that you used to be happy,” I retort. “I saw an old video of you in a documentary about Travis Keeping. You were in the background, smiling and laughing and spinning around with some girl.”

Cole’s face changes, like a switch has been flipped.

“*Shut your fucking mouth*.”

His words rip through the silence. He doesn’t look irritated or angry anymore. He looks *furious*. He looks like he wants to put his hands around my throat and squeeze until I’m dead. Bandit is totally still at his side, staring at me like he’s just realized I might be a threat.

I’m not going to lie, I was kind of having fun sniping at Cole, but it doesn’t feel fun at all anymore. It feels like I’m standing in the middle of nowhere with a billionaire who hates me, who could easily claim he knows nothing if I don’t make it out of the woods.

My feet carry me half a step backward, that’s how close and real the thought is. But the second I move, Cole’s face changes again, something like guilt flitting over his features. It only lasts a second, but it’s there, and I let out an unconscious breath as the tension gives way. Bandit feels it, too, his muscles relaxing, his tail wagging happily again.

“I’m not going to *hit* you,” Cole says. Irritably, like I’m being an idiot.

“How should I know what you’ll do?” I demand. My voice comes out a bit shaky, and I feel even angrier for it. “You’re a rich douchebag, you think you’re better than the world.”

His jaw clenches. “Just stay the fuck off of my land, and stay the fuck away from my dog,” he says, turning his back on me. “C’mon, Bandit.”

Bandit hesitates for a moment, watching me hopefully, but as Cole disappears down the trail, he turns away and trots after him.

I stay where I am, with my pulse drumming fast in my veins, and a lingering chill on my spine.

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10

COLE

All the way back to the cottage, Bandit clings to my side, staring up at me anxiously and whining softly in distress.

“It’s okay, buddy,” I tell him. “I’m alright.”

I’m lying. It’s not okay, and I’m definitely not alright.

I’m so angry I feel sick with it. My hands are shaking and my heart is throwing itself at my ribs. It’s anger, but it’s something else, too. I keep seeing the look on Quin’s face when he stepped back from me. Like he was scared of me, scared of what I might do.

I’m not going to feel sorry for him. He’s a fucking prick. Throwing that shit in my face like he knows me. *Smiling and laughing and spinning around with some girl.*

I throw open the door and lash out at the first thing I see, a cluster of empty picture frames on a table in the hall. They fly across the room and shatter into pieces. Bandit yelps in alarm and then leaps into action, throwing himself at the threat.

“Bandit, no!”

He stops dead in his tracks and looks back at me, his expression alarmed and confused. All of the anger floods out of me in an instant, leaving nothing behind but the guilt.

“That’s glass, buddy,” I say, crouching beside him. “Sit here while I get rid of it.”

His tail wags unhappily as he watches me clean up. When I’m sure all the broken glass is gone, I hold my arms out to him. He bounds across the room and licks my face like all is forgiven.

I rest my head on his fur. Quin was right. I don’t deserve my dog.

“Sorry, Bandit,” I murmur.

I stroke his head until he gets bored of me and prances off to the kitchen to get a toy from his toy bin. I sit back on my heels and look around the living room. It looks the same as it always does, run-down and ugly and full of dusty, unpacked boxes.

I gather up the wooden bits of the broken picture frames and put them back on the table in the hall.

“Sorry, Clara.”

I SPEND the rest of the day deep in the woods, letting Bandit lead me wherever he wants to go. We don’t go near the trail or the lake, and I don’t think about Quin McCarthy or any of the things that he said to me. If I do, I stop thinking about them right away, and distract myself by throwing a stick for Bandit or by driving my knuckles into the nearest tree.

By the time we make it back to the cottage, my hand is bloody and my feet are numb. Bandit, at least, is very happy with the day. The minute we get home he hops onto the couch and falls asleep on his back with his tongue hanging out, the picture of canine bliss.

I spend a few hours on my racing sim, the only object of any value in the house, then I take a shower in the bathroom upstairs, grimacing as the water heater spits out alternating gushes of boiling-hot and freezing-cold water. I really need to get it fixed. It’s been like this for three years.

I stumble downstairs in my boxers, cursing as I stub my toe on a pile of boxes. I wake Bandit from his nap and give him his dinner so he doesn't wake up at three a.m. looking for it, then I choke down a stale protein bar in lieu of cooking anything for myself.

I curl up in bed with Bandit at my feet and my computer on my lap, watching footage of last month's World Rally Championship event in Japan. The great thing about WRC is, if you watch all the stages from start to finish, you can burn through fifteen or twenty hours of your life without having to think about anything but racing.

Tonight, though, it's harder than usual to turn off my mind. Quin's words are stuck in it like sharp, painful burrs. I can't stop wondering what video he was talking about. Twice, I open up YouTube and type "Travis Keeping documentary" before I come back to my senses and close out the tab.

But the universe must have it out for me, because when the WRC video starts back up, a banner ad pops up beneath it. *Quin McCarthy*, it says, in big capital letters, above the title of some stupid movie he was in, *Desert Born*. I know a little about it, somehow. It's a romantasy—because the world really needs more of those—and I'm pretty sure it's the only thing Quin's been in where he actually plays a gay guy.

It would be ridiculous to watch it. The last thing I need is to spend two hours staring at his fucking face.

And yet, somehow, my fingers are moving across my keyboard, shelling out twenty dollars to watch a movie I know I'm going to hate.

I spend the first half hour rolling my eyes at every scene. I don't know how people can watch shit like this without cringing. It's literally adults playing make-believe, and somehow we're supposed to take it seriously.

Then Quin's character shows up, and I hate it even more.

At first.

I would rather crawl naked through a pit of broken glass than admit it, but Quin is kind of good at his job. I actually almost forget that it's him, and it's not just because his hair's a different color or because he's wearing a stupid costume. It's like he's disappeared inside a different person, like someone else has taken over his body.

That must be nice. Maybe I should look into acting myself.

The music shifts on screen. Quin and his co-star are making out, stripping off their clothes as they stumble toward a bed. Dimly, I remember that this is why I've heard of this movie. There was a big commotion about the sex scene, a bunch of boring losers protesting "gay smut" in such a popular movie, followed by a larger uproar from more interesting people celebrating the scene's inclusion and authenticity.

As someone who's fucked their fair share of men, I'm less impressed by its so-called authenticity. I've never slept with anyone in such perfect lighting, and Quin's co-star is really hamming it up with the sex sounds.

Quin does it much better. I almost believe his little hitches of breath, and when he moans into his pillow, I feel it like a hot pulse of blood.

Fuck. I really need to stop watching this.

It's not fair that he looks like that. No one should look that good with their clothes off. All that smooth, perfect skin, all those lean, strong muscles. It shouldn't be allowed. I'm starting to understand all the protests.

I rewind the scene and watch it twice, then I slam my laptop shut and throw it aside. I'm annoyed and turned on, and there's a pit of guilt like a rock in my stomach that's stopping me from doing anything about it.

I hate it. I hate everything about it.

"We're leaving here tomorrow," I tell Bandit.

He opens his eyes to give me a flat, reproachful look, like he knows I'm full of shit. Or maybe he's just mad at me for waking him, I don't know.

I roll onto my stomach, studiously ignoring the tug of heat in my groin. I close my eyes and wait for sleep to find me, but it's a long, long time

before it does.

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11

QUIN

I have not done a great job acting this week.

We're on the nineteenth or twentieth take of our last scene on Friday, and I've lost track of the number of times Corbin's told me to "Sell it." Even Kel is looking weary, yawning into her hand as the shoot stretches on. It's not even a difficult scene that we're filming. Our characters are in the police station, talking about a girl who's disappeared into the woods. It's maybe five minutes of cut-and-dry footage, and I cannot stop fucking it up.

"Quin—a moment, please." Corbin pulls me aside, out of earshot of the crew. "Is everything okay? You don't seem like yourself."

I look away from him. As obnoxious and pretentious as he is, Corbin is also surprisingly kind. I've seen it in the way he interacts with the crew, always checking in on them, always making sure they're not hungry or tired or thirsty. He's not a bad guy, at the heart of it.

That doesn't mean I want to tell him all my problems. I don't even really want to admit them to myself.

"I'm fine," I say. "Just distracted."

Corbin frowns. It's obvious he doesn't believe me, but he doesn't push the issue.

"Let's wrap up," he says, raising his voice to carry through the room. "We'll try this again on Monday."

My shoulders sag. “Thanks, Corbin.”

He crosses the room to draw Kel into conversation as the rest of the crew start to pack up. Kel shoots me a concerned look over her shoulder, but I summon up a reassuring smile and slip out the door before she can follow me.

Dark clouds hang low in the sky on the drive home, spitting a mix of rain and ice that has me gripping the steering wheel tightly. I hate how nervous I’ve become about driving. And I hate how relieved I am to have an excuse not to go running.

I haven’t been out on the trail since my last encounter with Cole. Every time I remember it, my face gets hot with anger and shame.

I’ll admit it—the night I stayed up watching those videos of Cole, I got ideas. Stupid, ridiculous ideas. I started replaying our conversations on the trail and in Singapore, and a dangerous word cropped up in my mind.

Banter.

It’s what comes of watching too many rom-coms or reading too many romance novels. I saw Cole smiling in that video and I started thinking…I don’t know. That he was the protagonist of a nineties movie, the handsome jerk with a heart of gold.

Delusional, I know.

Cole doesn’t have a heart of gold, and I’m not the manic pixie dream girl who inspires him to change. He’s just an asshole, and I don’t want to spend my whole winter living next to him. I’ve been looking more seriously into rentals in Marble Brook, even though the idea of running away still leaves a bitter taste in my mouth. All of my cozy winter plans, torn apart by Cole fucking Milton.

As I slow down to turn off the highway, the car shifts beneath me, sliding erratically on the icy road. For a handful of heartbeats, I’m frozen with fear, then I slam on the brakes and skid to a stop.

“Fuck,” I say, shakily. Then, louder and angrier, “*Fuck!*”

That’s it. Tomorrow, I’m finding a new place to stay.

I drive about two miles an hour down the driveway, white-knuckling the wheel the whole way. When I finally get to the cabin, I slam my car door shut behind me, venting my frustrations like a child.

As I stomp to the front door, bright car lights illuminate the walkway, paired with the telltale rumble of Cole’s Land Rover.

Just what this awful day needs.

I wait for him to blow past the driveway, but instead he slows down and turns in. All of my muscles tense up as the driver’s door opens. Cole walks around the front of the car, his back as stiff as an angry cat’s.

“What the hell do you want?” I demand.

He glares at me. “Bandit wanted to see you.”

He opens the back door and Bandit leaps out and bounds toward me. I crouch down automatically to greet him, but I don’t look away from Cole, who’s standing with his arms crossed and a look on his face I can’t quite read. There’s anger there, but there’s something else, too.

“I thought I was supposed to stay the fuck away from him,” I say.

He scowls at the air to the left of my shoulder. “Don’t be so dramatic. You can use the stupid trail.”

I stare at him. “Excuse me?”

“You heard what I said.”

My heart starts beating faster. I know it shouldn’t, but it does.

“Yeah, I did,” I say. “But I want you to repeat it. I think you might have left a few words out.”

He meets my eyes then, pure venom in his gaze. “I’m not *apologizing* to you.”

My lips curve up slowly. “Yes, you are. That’s why you stopped. You feel bad—which you should, by the way—and you wanted to make it up to me.”

He scoffs. “Bullshit.”

My smile stretches wider. “I want to take Bandit for walks.”

“What?”

“I want to take Bandit for walks,” I repeat. “Once in the morning and once after work.”

He stares at me like I’ve lost my mind. I lift my chin defiantly, a heady feeling coursing through my veins. It’s starting to rain again, heavy drops falling onto Bandit’s fur.

Cole raises his eyes to the heavens and shakes his head back and forth, like he can’t believe this turn of events. I wait, patiently, my pulse thrumming fast in my veins.

He hisses out a breath. “*Fine*.”

My heart beats harder. “Fine. And don’t be rude to me again.”

“Don’t push your luck,” he snaps. “Back in the car, Bandit.”

Bandit looks up at me hopefully. “I’ll see you tomorrow morning,” I promise him.

“Don’t feed him any processed shit,” Cole says. “And don’t let him run around aimlessly or tear off after squirrels.”

“Night, Cole,” I say sweetly.

“Fuck you,” he replies.

I wave goodbye to Bandit and head inside, grinning harder than I’m proud of. As I watch Cole’s car pull away, a shiver runs through me, one that has nothing to do with the rain.

I know that he’s a walking red flag, just like I know that if you tracked down all those nineties rom-com couples five years after their movies ended, you’d find a veritable stewpot of domestic misery.

I know all of that, intellectually. But try telling it to my heart.

THE RAIN CLOUDS LIFT OVERNIGHT, and the next day dawns cold and bright and clear. I sleep in a little, because it's the weekend, then I put on my running things and head to Cole's. His place looks just as dismal and creepy as ever, but as my feet crunch over the gravel, I hear Bandit barking excitedly inside.

Cole opens the door before I've even reached the porch.

"Don't keep him too long," he snaps, before slamming the door shut again.

It's less banter than I'd hoped for, I'll admit, but Bandit is happy to see me, and it's a lot more fun running the trail with a dog by my side. Once or twice, Bandit's ears perk up at something in the woods, but when I tell him to heel, he stays put. Having grown up with dogs, I do understand Cole's little temper tantrum about Bandit's training. A dog as clever and energetic as Bandit needs discipline to thrive.

That doesn't mean I won't let him have a little fun. At the lake, he bounds over the rocks and stands at the edge of the water, ears pricked and tail high. It couldn't be clearer what he's hoping for, and after a few moments of searching, I find a suitable stick for the purpose.

I do feel a tiny pinch of guilt as I hurl it into the water, but it vanishes as Bandit splashes after it. He's a bit goofy at first, slapping the water awkwardly with his front paws, but by the third or fourth throw, he's focused like a laser, darting in and out of the water like he was born for it.

We play like that for twenty minutes, then it takes another twenty minutes for me to convince him to get out of the water. He shakes his fur off right beside me, showering me with ice-cold droplets, then he runs zoomies up and down the trail.

"All that swimming was supposed to tire you out," I say with a laugh. "Where's all this energy from?"

My hands and face are aching with cold by the time we make it back to Cole's place, and I'm breathing heavily from the effort of keeping up with

Bandit, but my shoulders feel looser than they have in months. Maybe it's not actually a boyfriend that I'm missing. Maybe I just need to get a dog.

Then Cole answers the door with his shirt off, and I walk back that idea real fast.

"Fucking hell," he says, when he sees Bandit.

It takes a moment for my brain to start working again. I was not prepared for those *abs*.

"He had a little fun at the lake," I say finally, dragging my eyes back up to his face. "He's a really good swimmer."

"Of course he is," Cole says indignantly. He turns away to grab a towel for Bandit, and I peer curiously into the house. If I thought my cabin was run-down, it's got nothing on this place. Everything is dingy and dusty and faded, and there are a bunch of unpacked boxes stacked up in the hall.

"Nice place you've got here."

He glares at me. "Goodbye, Quin."

"I'll be back for Bandit later," I say, as he swings the door shut.

I linger on the porch for a moment, eyeing the holes in the porch screen and the uneven board on the stairs. As I'm standing there, I hear Cole talking to Bandit inside.

"That's a good boy," he says, in that voice that doesn't sound like him. "Did you have lots of fun at the lake?"

Swallowing a laugh, I head back to my cabin, grinning like an idiot the whole way.

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12
QUIN

Twice a day for the next week, I go to Cole's and take Bandit for a walk. Cole barely says two words to me, throwing open the door to let Bandit out the moment my feet hit the porch steps, but I don't really mind. We both know I won the battle between us, and I'm just happy to be able to use the trail again.

And if I spend some of the walks musing out loud about Cole, no one has to know that but Bandit and me.

"What happened with him and that girl?" I ask Bandit on Thursday, as we watch the sun rise by the lake. "Did she break your dad's cold little heart?"

Bandit huffs and looks away from me. He's mad that I won't let him swim.

"It's too cold out, buddy. It's not safe."

I don't know if that's actually true, but I don't want to take any chances. The temperature plummeted overnight and the air is so cold that it's painful to breathe. When I looked at the forecast yesterday, it warned of heavy snow this weekend, which I'm trying really hard not to think about.

I sit for a few more minutes, watching the sky turn a pale, even gray, then I get to my feet and shove my frozen hands deep into my pockets. "Come on, rascal. Let's get you home."

Cole isn’t quick enough with the door this time, and I get another glimpse of the inside of the house. All the way to work, I think about those dusty, unpacked boxes. Are they full of his own stuff, or his girlfriend’s? Did they buy the cottage together and then break up before they moved in?

Last night, I spent about thirty minutes googling every iteration of “Cole Milton girlfriend break up” that I could think of, but I didn’t find anything useful. I even tried a more disturbing option, “Cole Milton girlfriend death”, but that didn’t yield anything, either.

Honestly, I thought the whole point of the internet was that none of us could hide any of our secrets. I know for a fact if you google “Quin McCarthy first boyfriend” you’ll get a deeply embarrassing picture of me as a gangly fourteen-year-old holding hands with my middle school boyfriend.

Maybe it’s a billionaire thing. Maybe Cole’s family have an army of underpaid minions scouring the internet for unflattering stories about them and bribing and bullying people into deleting them. Or maybe I’ve invented this whole idea of Cole loving that girl, and she was just some random hook-up he celebrated with once at a race.

“Or maybe,” I tell myself, as I park my car in the lot at work, “you need to stop spending so much time thinking about Cole fucking Milton.”

I jump as Kel raps on the window. “Talking to yourself, Quin?”

“Fucking hell, you scared the shit out of me.”

She grins. “Sorry.”

I push the door open. “No, you’re not.”

“No, I’m not.” She loops her arm in mine as we head across the lot. “Jesus, it’s cold out today. Did you see there’s a snowstorm coming this weekend?”

“Don’t remind me. I’m going to stock up on groceries and stay home reading books by the fire.”

“No, you’re not. We’ve got a party tomorrow.”

“What party?”

“The much-anticipated, highly exclusive Marble Brook Ski Hill Gala,” she says, adopting a dramatic voice. “It’s some big party they have every year at the ski hill. And guess who’s throwing it?”

“Who?”

“Blaine Milton.”

“Cole’s dad?”

“The very same. Apparently he throws a fundraiser here every year. Giving back to his old hometown, or whatever.” Her nose wrinkles. “He’s always seemed like a creep to me. But the party’s supposed to be fun. Corbin got us all invited. I’m thinking it’s the perfect time for me to make my move on him.”

“Kel, no. We talked about this.”

“You talked, I didn’t listen. And you have to come to the party, it’s going to be awesome.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

“No maybes,” she says, as we head into the building. “Don’t you want to see Cole all dressed up in a suit?”

“What? No. Why would I?”

Kel gives me a sly smile. “Oh, right, I forgot. You hate him.” She frames the word “hate” with her fingertips.

“I do hate him,” I retort. “And he’s probably not going to the party.”

“Which is it, you hate him or you don’t think he’s going?”

“Quiet, now,” I say, pushing her through the door to our dressing room. “It’s acting time.”

THE SHOOT STRETCHES OUT until well after dark. We finish the day with a scene from the third episode, where Kel’s character and mine share their first kiss. Corbin keeps complaining that we’re not being convincing

—“Come on, you two! Sell it!”—and for once, I have to agree with him. Every time Kel and I pull apart, one of us threatens to break into laughter. It’s childish and a bit unprofessional, but no one except Corbin really minds. The crew are in the same silly mood as we are, all of them looking forward to the party tomorrow, with its promise of free food and booze.

By the time I get home, it's too dark to walk Bandit. I tell myself I’m not disappointed and curl up on the couch with tomorrow’s scripts. I fall asleep by the fire and wake up before dawn, with a twisty, excited feeling in my stomach that I blame on the upcoming storm.

It’s dark enough outside that I need to bring a flashlight, an old, ugly yellow thing that I found in the pantry. I turn it off as I get closer to Cole’s place, and walk extra quietly over the gravel so I can get to the door before he opens it.

He looks half-asleep when he pulls open the door to let Bandit out, his dark hair tousled like he’s just rolled out of bed. He’s wearing a thin, oversized t-shirt that hangs low over one collarbone, and obscenely threadbare briefs that leave almost nothing to the imagination.

“Why’re you here so fucking early?” he says, in a low, slightly throaty voice.

I drag my eyes up from his bare legs. “I have to work early today.”

“Work.” He scoffs. “You mean play dress-up.”

“Remind me, what is it you do again? Drive cars around in a circle? Not exactly neurosurgery.”

He drags a hand through his hair, and I try not to wonder what it would feel like to do it myself. “Just take Bandit and go. It’s too early to listen to you.”

“Fine.” I hover on the step for a moment, rocking on my heels. “I can’t take him tonight, so I want three walks tomorrow.”

“Whatever.”

“I’m going to a party tonight,” I add. “The one your father’s throwing in Marble Brook.”

That seems to wake him up a bit. “Fuck, is that tonight? Why the hell are you invited?”

“Because I’m Hollywood’s little sweetheart. Your words, not mine.”

He glowers at me. Bandit pushes his head against my thigh, impatient to get going.

“Everyone from the show was invited,” I say. “I suppose your father will expect you there, too?”

He grunts instead of answering properly and swings the door shut in my face.

“Asshole,” I say loudly.

Bandit barks to agree with me.

I take him for a quick run to the lake, making sure he heels, like Cole is always telling me to. Cole is waiting by his car when we get back, dressed in his usual dark jeans and jacket and scowling like I’m holding him up.

“C’mon, Bandit,” he says, holding the car door open for Bandit to jump inside. He heads for the driver’s side without so much as a backward glance at me.

“I’ll see you at the party tonight, then, will I?” I call after him. Then, when he rolls his eyes instead of answering, I add sarcastically, “Save a dance for me.”

He gives me the finger over his shoulder. For some reason, it feels like a win.

On the way into work, the snow starts to fall. It’s light enough that it melts as soon as it touches the pavement, but my stomach tightens anxiously and I sit forward at the wheel. The road doesn’t feel any different, but I slow my speed anyway, until I’m passed by a woman in her eighties and I start to feel a little bit foolish.

As I creep back up to fifty miles an hour, I ask Siri to call Trevor. The phone rings several times before he picks up.

“Hey, Quin.” He sounds slightly breathless, and I hear the thump of volleyballs in the background.

“Hey, are you busy?”

“Not at all, we’re just wrapping up practice. Are you driving somewhere? You sound echoey.”

“I’m on my way to work, in the snow.”

“Uh-oh.” He sounds amused. I may have rambled to him and Jonathan once or twice about my driving fears.

“It’s not much right now,” I admit. “But I don’t know what it’s going to be like by the time I’m done work.”

“Well, if it’s bad, just get a hotel room in town. Or stay with that girl you told us about, Kel.”

“Maybe. Though I think she’s planning on seducing our producer at the party we’re going to tonight.”

“Ha! Good for her.” He chugs water loudly. “What about you? Are you planning a seduction?”

“Yeah, right. Who would I be seducing?”

“I don’t know, maybe the Formula 1 driver you’ve been coparenting a dog with all week?”

“I told you, it’s not like that.”

“You did, and I didn’t believe you. A bit of advice, though, from someone who’s had their fair share of one-night stands—make sure you have a solid exit plan to get out when the sex is done. I hooked up with a girl one time in the first hour of an eighteen-hour ferry ride, and let me tell you, if swimming home had been an option, I would’ve done it.”

I shift my fingers on the steering wheel, easing up slightly on my death grip. “I’m not planning a one-night stand.”

There’s a beat of silence. “You’re not trying to date him, are you? Jonathan and I watched some of his interviews on YouTube. He doesn’t seem like a very nice person.”

“No, I know.” Heat rises to my face. “I’m not trying to date him.”

“Quin…”

“I’m not! I’m not planning anything with him. He’s kind of hot, that’s all. I’m not an idiot.”

“You’re definitely not an idiot,” Trevor agrees. “But sometimes very smart people make very bad romantic decisions. The last girl Jonathan dated before we got together was a certified mean girl. Right, Jonathan?” He raises his voice. “Tell Quin about the mean girl you dated.”

Jonathan’s voice comes through the phone. “She wasn’t mean, she just had—troubles.”

“Yeah, she had trouble being a good person,” Trevor says. There’s a thump, like Jonathan’s punched his shoulder. “Hey! You don’t think Quin should date Cole Milton, either.”

“Not if he’s anything like he acts on TV,” Jonathan says. “Is he different in real life, Quin?”

I think of Cole flipping me off this morning and slamming the door in my face. “Um…no. Not really. But I’m not trying to go out with him, Trevor just made that up by himself. I was just thinking about sleeping with him, maybe. If he even wanted to, which he probably doesn’t.”

“Oh,” Jonathan says. That’s all—“oh”—but it somehow hits harder than Trevor’s lecture.

“You think it’s a bad idea.”

I can picture him biting into his lower lip, a habit we both share. “I mean, if that’s what you really want, go for it. I just never got the appeal of hate sex, myself.”

“Oh.” I shift my hands on the wheel again. “Well, yeah. Me neither.”

“It’s fine if you do,” Jonathan says hastily. “I just don’t want you to get hurt. I’ve had exactly one one-night stand in my life—”

“You have?” Trevor says in the background. “With who?”

“It was way before you, hush,” Jonathan says. Then, to me, “It was fun in the moment, but it just felt sort of shitty afterward. And that was with a girl I actually liked, not a billionaire whose biggest claim to fame is being a dick.”

My shoulders sag. “Right.”

“Just…think about what you really want. That’s all I’m saying.”

“I know. Thanks, Jonathan.” I put my turn signal on for the Marble Brook exit. “I’m about to turn off of the highway. I’ll call you guys later?”

“Call us later,” Trevor says, taking the phone back. “And don’t stress too much about the snow. I’ve been tracking the forecast, it looks like you’re only going to get a few centimeters.”

“Text me what that means in inches and I’m sure I’ll feel better,” I say. “Talk later.”

“Talk later. Love you.”

I smile. “Love you both, too.”

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13

QUIN

For all of Trevor's reassurances, I spend most of the day watching the windows, monitoring the snowfall like a hypervigilant weatherman. By the time my workday wraps up, three or four inches have fallen, but I give myself a firm pep talk in the parking lot and drive ten miles under the speed limit, and I make it home in only forty-five nervy minutes.

When I get out of the shower, though, there's a text waiting from Trevor —*Forecast's changing, be careful!*—and the snow is falling more heavily outside the windows. In the time it takes to make dinner and get dressed, another foot of snow magically appears.

At seven p.m., I stand in the doorway of the cabin dressed in dark jeans and a gray sweater. I zip up my winter jacket with slightly unsteady hands. The snow outside is falling in relentless, glittery curtains, undisturbed by so much as a breath of wind. If I could stay in all night and watch it through the windows, I'd think it was enchanting, but the thought of driving in it has my palms prickling with sweat. If Uber existed in Marble Brook, I'd have ordered one an hour ago. But it doesn't. If I want to go to this party, the only person who can drive me is me.

"This is not a big deal," I tell myself as I lock the door behind me. "Plenty of people drive their cars in the snow all the time."

I continue my pep talk all the way to the car. Earlier today, the snow was light and fluffy, but now it's heavy and damp, clinging to my hair and clothes. I brush the snow off of the car with the sleeve of my jacket, making a mental note to buy one of those snow scraper things. By the time I've buckled my seatbelt and turned the car on, the windshield is covered in snow again. I turn the car on and clear it off with the wipers, then I grip the steering wheel tightly and put my foot down on the gas.

The car moves a bit slowly, like the wheels want to stick to the ground, but I get it turned around without any problems and pull out carefully onto the road.

"I can do this," I say out loud.

The car feels weird on the gravel, like something's trying to tug it to one side, but as long as I drive slowly, I feel mostly in control. There aren't any streetlights along the road, and the snow swirling in the headlights makes it a bit tricky to see, but I'm sure once I get out onto the highway, it'll be easier. And I'm almost there now, there's just one last little hill to get over. I'm going too slowly to climb it, so I add some more gas, then a little bit more—

"Shit," I yelp, as the car slides beneath me. It fishtails for one terrifying moment before I come to my senses and lift off of the gas. The car skids to a stop turned slightly askew on the side of the road.

Fuck. I hated that.

My heart is beating rapidly, but I swallow hard and sit up straight. I'm not a coward. I'm not just going to give up after one tiny setback. I take a few shaky breaths, then I press gently—very gently—on the gas. The wheels spin uselessly for a moment, then abruptly they catch, and the car swerves and lurches on the spot. I keep pressing on the gas—I'm not a coward, *not* a coward—but there's an awful crunching sound as the wheels keep spinning uselessly, digging me deeper into the gravel and snow.

I curse aloud and drop my forehead onto the steering wheel.

It looks like this party isn’t going to happen.

A hot, painful lump suddenly swells in my throat. I don’t really care about missing the party. I just feel a bit useless, incapable of driving a single mile down a snowy road.

I swallow hard until the lump goes away, then I take out my phone to call Trevor and Jonathan, but I can’t get a signal. Even if I could talk to them, I’m pretty sure they wouldn’t be able to help me. I just need to, like, push the car out.

I put it in park and struggle through the rising snow to reach the back of the car. Both back wheels are thoroughly dug in.

I put my palms on the bumper and give a tentative push, which does absolutely nothing. I think I need to put the car in neutral, but I’m too scared it’ll roll backward and crush me against a tree.

I kick one of the wheels to vent my frustrations, then I turn to look back at the driveway. It’s going to be a long, dark walk to get home.

I’m contemplating walking to the road for cell phone service to call a tow truck when headlights flare in the distance. Cole’s black Land Rover is coming up the road.

My heart catches in my chest. For one awful moment, I think he’s going to blow by me. Instead, he comes to a stop and rolls his passenger window down.

“What the hell are you doing?” he demands.

“Oh, I just stopped at the side of the road here to build a snowman,” I say. “What does it look like I’m doing? My car’s stuck.”

He rolls his eyes to the heavens, but in the same motion, he opens his car door.

“I don’t need your help,” I say.

He ignores this fairly transparent lie and walks around to look at the back wheels of my car. “Have you ever driven in snow before?” he says tetchily. “And I assume you don’t have any traction mats or a shovel.”

I don’t even know what a traction mat is. “Just leave if you can’t help,” I say irritably. Cold clumps of snow are gathering on my hair and jacket, and I just want to go home and forget this whole night.

Cole looks from my car to me and back again, then he heaves a loud sigh. “Get in.”

“What?”

“Get in,” he repeats, walking back to his car. “You’re going to this stupid party, aren’t you?”

“Well—yeah.”

“So, get *in*. Or stay here and freeze to death, either one is fine with me.”

I hesitate, but only for a moment. The snow is coming down even heavier now, and I’m a tiny bit terrified of getting lost on the walk back up the road.

The inside of Cole’s car is warm and pine-scented, but it doesn’t have the expensive spotlessness I would’ve expected. The leather seats are worn down and scratched, and the back seat is littered with chewed-up tennis balls and stuffies. One of them is a bright pink lobster with half of its legs chewed off. I have a sudden, vivid image of Cole buying it at a pet store.

He follows my gaze and scowls like he knows what I’m thinking. “Put your seatbelt on.”

“Concerned about my safety?”

He flicks me a dark look. “The car will beep if it’s not on.”

“Right.” I draw the word out disbelievingly.

Cole ignores me and puts the car in gear.

“Easy,” I say, as we shoot forward. “You’ll get us stuck.”

He snorts. “No, I won’t.”

He pulls out of the driveway easily—“You’ve got better tires, or something,” I mutter—and turns onto the highway. The snow is swirling so fast in the headlights that it makes me slightly dizzy. Cole doesn’t look nervous at all driving in the storm, and he’s made no effort to dress up for

the party. He's wearing the same dark jacket and jeans he always does, and they look just as good as ever.

"I'm surprised you're going tonight," I say.

He makes a brief, dismissive noise.

"That's not actually a response," I point out. Then, when he glares at me, "That isn't, either."

It earns me another glare, followed by an irritable sigh. "If I do this one thing, my father will piss off until F1 starts up again."

"Not a happy family?"

"Not your business."

"So, what? We're just going to drive in silence?"

"That was the plan."

"Lame." I sink down a little in my seat and trace my finger over a tear in the fabric. Cole's hand is resting absently on the stick shift, and I try not to notice how strong and slender his fingers are.

"Is Bandit at home?" I ask.

"Where else would he be?"

I reach into the back seat and grab the pink lobster toy. "This is cute."

Without taking his eyes off the road, he grabs it from my hand and throws it back onto the seat. I stifle a grin. "You're too easy."

"You want to walk the rest of the way?"

"I don't think you would do that."

He gives me a dark look. "Try me."

I open my mouth to retort, but before I can get a word out, Cole jerks the car abruptly to the right, swerving out of the way of an oncoming car that's driving halfway over the median. In the same motion, he throws his arm out, pinning me back against my seat.

For a split second, the Land Rover slides erratically over the tarmac, then Cole does some one-handed magic with the steering wheel and guides it effortlessly back onto the center of the road.

“Moron,” he says, glancing back at the car that nearly hit us. His hand drops off of my chest and settles back onto the stick shift.

I press a hand to my heart, which is thumping hard against my ribcage.

Cole glances at me. “You good?”

The words sound like they’ve been dragged out of his throat against his will. I let out a slightly unsteady breath. “Yeah.”

He’s quiet for a moment, then he mutters, “Nobody knows how to drive in the snow.”

“Right,” I say weakly. I think that’s the closest I’ve ever come to being in a car accident, and I can’t help thinking what might’ve happened if I’d been driving my own car.

We don’t speak again for the rest of the drive. I don’t want to take Cole’s attention from the road.

By the time we pull into town, the snow has eased up a bit, and my heart rate has almost settled back to normal. The ski lodge looks like a postcard, with its high, paneled windows glowing warmly from within and a thick layer of snow draped over its peaked roof. The lights of the ski lift illuminate the mountain like a long string of Christmas lights, and bright, energetic music echoes from inside of the lodge. The parking lot is packed full of cars, and people are heading into the buildings in twos and threes, winter jackets and hats pulled over their dress clothes.

I’m acutely aware I should thank Cole for the ride, but the silence between us has turned stiff and uncomfortable, and the moment we’re out of the car, he strides away from me without a backward glance. I watch him go, feeling distinctly off-balance.

Kel’s voice catches me halfway across the parking lot. “Wait up, handsome!”

I turn and see her walking up from the sidewalk, dressed in a long wine-red coat and high-heeled boots. I hold my arm out to steady her.

“Hey, gorgeous,” I reply. “Did you walk all the way from the hotel?”

“Nah, I caught a ride in with Corbin. He dropped me off to park around back.”

“Fun,” I say dryly.

She chuckles. “Oh, yeah. He recited a Lucy Larcom poem on the way here.”

“You’re joking.”

“‘Tiny little snowflakes in the air so high; are you little angels floating in the sky?’”

“Oh my god.” I grimace. “And you still want to sleep with him?”

Kel grins. “Yep. I’m dying to know what obnoxious poem it’ll inspire. But first, are you ready to get turnt with me tonight?”

I laugh. “Is that what we’re doing?”

“One hundred percent.” We climb the steps to the lodge together and someone ahead of us pulls open the front doors, spilling laughter and music into the air. A smiling young girl is waiting inside to check our coats. She blushes bright red when I thank her.

“Do you want a picture with him?” Kel offers. The girl blushes even harder and stammers out a yes, fumbling to get her phone out of her pocket. Kel steps back to take our picture, then looks absolutely pole-axed when the girl asks to take a picture with her, too.

“Is that the first time that’s happened to you?” I ask, after I’ve taken a picture of the two of them and returned the phone to the beaming girl.

“Yeah,” Kel says breathlessly. “That was fucking cool.”

I grin. It’s been a while since I’ve seen fan photos as anything but a slightly uncomfortable part of the job. It’s nice to see Kel so excited.

“Don’t forget me when your famous,” I say. She elbows me hard in the ribs.

Beyond the lobby, another set of double doors open into the main part of the lodge. I imagine during the daytime, this space is lined with tables where skiers and snowboarders can eat fries and drink hot chocolate from

the canteen, but it's been cleared out for the party, which is already going in full swing.

"Oh, hell yes," Kel says, and pulls me by the hand into the fray.

It's one of the strangest, most enjoyable parties I've ever been to. Someone clearly went out of their way to make the event fancy, with smartly dressed waiters bearing trays of champagne and hors d'oeuvres, but Marble Brook's locals have taken charge, pumping folksy music out of the speakers and dragging everyone into the middle of the room to dance. The *Coldwood* crew are some of the most energetic participants, and Kel and I are quickly coerced into dancing with them and downing several eye-watering shots of Screech.

It quickly becomes apparent that I'm the lightweight of the group, and I wave away the fourth round of shots and step away to catch my breath. I see a few locals glancing at me with interest, but no one asks for pictures or does anything weird.

As I wait in line to get a bottle of water at the canteen, a handsome woman in a glittery sweater touches my arm. It takes me a moment to recognize her.

"Mary!" I say brightly, too tipsy to moderate my tone. "I didn't know you were coming."

"Oh, we come every year," she says, smiling. She gestures to the man standing next to her, a pleasant-looking fellow with gray hair and glasses. "Billy, this is Quin—he's the one staying out at the cabin."

"Nice to meet you," I say, shaking his hand.

"How ya getting on out there?" Billy asks, in a Newfoundland accent even thicker than his wife's.

"Good," I say politely. "I've been running the trail every day."

"The lake's something, eh?"

"Definitely. Though I'm not sure Cole Milton's very happy to share it with me."

“He’s there again this winter, is he?” Mary says. “Poor fella.”

Her words take a second to penetrate my drunken brain. “What do you mean?”

Before she can answer me, the music cuts out, replaced by the sound of someone tapping on a microphone.

“Testing, testing,” says a deep voice.

Cole’s father, Blaine, is at the front of the room, dressed in an expensive gray suit that looks out of place in the venue. Cole is standing beside him, his mouth drawn in an unhappy line.

“Can everyone hear me okay?” Blaine says into the microphone. The crowd murmurs in acknowledgement, and he gives them a wide, white-toothed smile. “Perfect. I promise I won’t hold up the party for long, I just wanted to say a few words. For those of you who don’t already know, the town of Marble Brook holds a very special place in my heart. This is the place where my father worked, and the place where my son, Cole, was born.” He thumps Cole hard on the shoulder. “He went to school just around the corner—I see a few of his old friends here tonight—and rode his first go-kart out on old Millhouse Road.” He gives Cole an indulgent smile. Cole’s flat expression doesn’t change.

“And,” Blaine continues, “as many of you know, one of my first business ventures was the Marble Brook paper mill. Although it shut down, gosh, over a decade ago, the impact it had on this town can still be felt today.”

He pauses while the crowd claps politely. I notice a lot of people only bring their hands together once or twice.

“This town means so much to me,” Blaine says, “and every year, I like to say thank you with a little donation. This year, I’m donating fifty thousand dollars to the Marble Brook Ski Hill, a pillar of the community.”

A gorgeous blonde woman in a black skirt suit materializes at his side with an oversized cheque for fifty grand.

“Martin, would you do the honors?” Blaine asks.

An older man who I assume works for the ski hill steps forward to accept the cheque. As a photographer comes forward to take some photos, Cole steps back and vanishes into the crowd.

“Alright, that’s enough fanfare,” Blaine says after a few minutes, waving the photographer away. “Let’s get back to the party!”

There’s some more polite clapping, then the music starts up again. I keep watching Cole’s father. He spends a few minutes chatting with people, smiling wide and shaking hands, but when he turns away to speak with the blonde woman who gave him the cheque, his expression changes, becoming businesslike.

I look away and find Mary watching me.

“Sleazy sort of fella, eh?”

“Definitely,” I agree. “He used to own a paper mill here?”

Mary nods. “His father worked there. Started on the floor and worked his way up to own it, then he handed it off to his son. Blaine there sold it off to some big US company a couple years later, and it was shut down not long after that.” She makes a face. “Lot of folks ‘round here were laid off, and a fair few of ‘em blamed Blaine Milton. Not sure it’s his fault the economy took a turn, but with him going on to make millions and folks here left out of a job, I’m not surprised he only comes back once a year.”

“Well, at least he donates some money,” Billy says. The canteen line moves forward and he and Mary step up to the counter. “You want something to drink?”

“Ah—no,” I say distractedly, my attention snagged by a dark head moving through the crowd. “I’m fine, thanks. You two have a good night.”

“You, too,” Mary says. As I walk away, I hear her tell Billy, “Handsome fella, isn’t he?”

I stifle a smile. Kel tries to wave me back onto the dance floor, where she, Corbin and the crew are learning a dance from a group of locals, but I

shake my head and mouth the word “bathroom.”

Then, when she looks away again, I turn on my heel and follow Cole through a door at the back of the room.

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COLE

The rooms in the back of the ski lodge are dark and empty, and they reek of old French fries and sweaty ski boots. The smell drags me back to junior high school. Weekend mornings spent in skiing lessons, afternoons spent snowboarding with my friends.

I see a few of his old friends here tonight, my father said in his stupid little speech. As if he actually remembers who my friends were. The only person I saw at this party who went to school with me is Nathan Hart, and he sure as shit wasn't my friend.

I wander to the very back of the lodge, to the smaller cafeteria that looks out over the back deck. The lights of the ski lift illuminate the main trail, a wide, winding path called Donny's Lane. The harder trails are further off to the right—not that Marble Brook Ski Hill has anything more to offer than a couple of black diamonds—while the bunny hill is tucked on the left.

I stand at the window, watching the snow fall and trying to tune out the annoying music from the party. My father never stays at any function longer than twenty minutes, and I'm hoping I can hide away until he leaves.

Instead, I get five minutes of peace before he finds me. His loud footsteps are followed by the clicking of Candi's heels.

"Ah, there you are," he says. "I thought I saw you sneaking back here." He comes to join me at the window. "Reminiscing about the old days, eh?

We had lots of good times here."

I can't bring myself to answer him. We actually did have some good times here, before he turned into the world's biggest douche.

"Good turn-out this year," he says. "Twice as many as last year, I'd say, even with this rotten weather. Having a good break so far? Got everything you need at The Chalet?"

"You know I'm not staying there."

He sighs like I'm being silly. "You really should. Candi can get it opened up for you. She gave you her number, didn't she?"

"Yes, sir," Candi says.

"See? There you go," he says, like the reason I don't stay there is because fucking *Candi* hasn't opened it for me.

"I don't want to stay there," I snap.

He holds his hands up peaceably. "Well, suit yourself. I hope you're having some fun while you're here, though. It's not healthy to hole yourself up all winter. We need you in a good mindset going into next season. Championship year, this year. Yours for the taking."

"Right."

"I put in the money, you put in the work. Right?"

"Mm."

"Alright, well, I've got a plane waiting on me, but you look after yourself the rest of the break. And let Candi know if you change your mind about The Chalet."

Candi nods her agreement. "Text or call anytime."

My father thumps me hard on the back a couple of times, then the two of them head off, leaving me alone in the darkness. It takes a few minutes to notice I'm clenching my fists so hard my hands hurt.

My fucking father. The *fucking* Chalet. Like I'd ever set foot inside it again. I wish someone would burn it to the ground.

Anger swells up hot and fast in my chest, paired with another, stronger emotion I don't want to name. I want to run out of here and go home to Bandit, but I can't, because I'm Quin fucking McCarthy's ride home.

I should've left him to freeze to death on the side of the road. Then I wouldn't have to see him every day at my cottage, in my woods, the one place I'm supposed to have all to my own.

High-pitched giggles split the silence as a woman and her boyfriend stumble into the room.

"Oops," the woman says. "Sorry."

Her boyfriend tilts his head. "Hey, aren't you Cole Milton?"

"Nope," I say flatly, striding past them into the hall. I veer into the men's room to stop them from trailing after me, then I duck into a stall in case the guy tries to follow me in for a chat at the urinal.

The stall door is covered in the exact same graffiti it was ten years ago, which pisses me off to an unreasonable degree. When I hear someone else walk into the bathroom, I step out of the stall, itching for a fight.

But instead of the giggling woman's boyfriend, it's Quin McCarthy standing at the sink, splashing cold water on his flushed, handsome face.

Even better.

"You know I'm not driving you home, right?" I snap.

He stares at me in the mirror. "Excuse me?"

"I'm not driving you home," I repeat, stepping up beside him to wash my hands. "So if your stupid little actor friends are too drunk to take you, you're just going to have to sort out some other way to get back."

He frowns at me. "Cole—"

"It's not my problem you don't know how to drive in snow. You're not my fucking responsibility."

His eyes are a strange shade of brown in the dim light, dark honey flecked with gold. "I know I'm not. But we're going to the same place, and if you were a decent person, you'd drive me."

“I’m not a decent person.”

“No,” he agrees. “You’re a prick.”

I snort. “Fine. I’m a prick. Want to fuck?”

He stares at me. I suppose that was sort of abrupt. But I want to do something destructive, and this feels like as bad a choice as anything.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” he says.

I dry off my hands, ball up the paper towel and chuck it two feet left of the garbage bin, just to piss him off. Sure enough, he hisses out a breath and retrieves it, putting it into the bin.

“Good boy,” I say.

Oh, but if looks could kill. I think he’d like to storm out, but now that he’s picked up my dirty paper towel, he’s got to wash his hands again. I lean close while he does it, raking my gaze up and down his frame, more to annoy him than anything else. He does look good tonight, though. The fabric of his sweater is so fine he may as well not be wearing anything, and he’s pushed his sleeves up to his elbows, revealing the flush on his strong, slender forearms.

“So?” I prompt.

“So, what,” he says flatly, scrubbing his hands under the water.

I exhale impatiently. “Don’t be boring. I know you’ve got those little panties of yours in a twist over me. It’s obvious.”

He scoffs. “Obvious, is it?”

“Yeah.” I lean my hip on the sink next to his. “You’re not that good an actor.”

He rinses the soap from his hands and reaches around me to grab a piece of paper towel.

“Oh, c’mon,” I say irritably. “In or out, actor boy.”

He crumples the paper towel up and tosses it into the bin. Then he turns to face me with his arms crossed over his chest.

“You really think I’d hook up with you in some dirty bathroom?”

His tone is sharp and disdainful, but he looks me up and down before he says it, an unconscious flick of his eyes.

I smirk. *Gotcha*.

I step closer, into his space. “If you didn’t want to, you’d have already left. The door is right there, and yet, here you are. Staring me down like an angry cartoon squirrel.” I flick the bottom of his chin. He flinches back, irritation flickering across his face, but he still doesn’t leave. It’s so fucking easy, it’s almost dull.

“Let me tell you how this is going to go,” I say. “You’re going to give me the usual lines. I’m a prick, you’re not interested, you’re offended to your very core that I’d suggest you suck me off in this dingy bathroom. You’ll say all that, but you still won’t leave, and when I ask you one more time, you’ll get down on your knees like a good little boy and try not to come in your pants while I fuck the back of your throat.”

His expression changes at that, a flicker of arousal darkening his brown eyes. His gaze moves over me again, a slow, deliberate look that almost feels like a touch. I can almost hear his brain whirring as he talks himself into this. After a long, drawn-out moment, his lips curve up wryly, like he can’t believe what he’s about to do.

Too fucking easy, I think as he steps closer.

He rises up on his toes and brings his lips close to my ear, his warm breath ghosting over my skin. I can smell his cologne, or maybe his shampoo, something stupidly sweet, like pineapple and coconut.

“That,” he says softly, “doesn’t interest me in the *least*.”

I jerk back in surprise. He falls back on his heels with a crooked smile.

“You’re right, Cole,” he says. “I’m attracted to you. And if we had sex, I would blow your tiny little mind. But this? This is not what I’m looking for.”

Both of my feet are flat on the ground, but I feel like he’s pushed me off balance. I cover it up with a sneer. “Oh, right. I forgot. You want your own

fucking Travis Keeping, some sad loser mooning at you on a rooftop and telling you he'll always love you."

"Yeah," Quin says, smiling. "I do. And you know what the crazy thing is? Beneath all your bullshit, beneath all of *this*—" he sweeps his hand up and down my frame "—I think it's what you want, too."

I let out a harsh, dismissive breath, but he just keeps on smiling, like he actually thinks that he knows me.

He rises on his toes again and brings his lips back to my ear. I don't lean back, because it would be stupid to be scared of him, and I don't flinch away when he rests his palms gently on my chest.

"I think you want to *hold* me."

My spine stiffens. "Excuse me?"

His fingers curl into my t-shirt, drawing me closer. "I think you want to hold me," he repeats. His voice takes on a low, rhythmic quality, like he's mocking me or casting a spell. "I think you want to take me on a date, and kiss me on my doorstep, and spend hours in my bed taking me apart. I think you want to wake up with my head on your chest. I think you want to card your fingers through my hair and tell me all the dark secrets in your cold little heart."

"Fuck you," I say harshly. My voice shakes a little; from fury, I think. "I don't want any of that."

The edges of his smile are sharp. "Tell that to your dick."

Before I can tell him off, he leans into me, pressing his thigh between my legs. I hiss in a sharp breath, then swallow a groan when he presses harder.

"When you're in bed later," he says, "alone and thinking of me, I want you to know that you could have all of those things. Just walk down the road, knock on my door, and tell me these four simple words. *You were right, Quin*." He counts the words off on his fingers.

"In your fucking dreams," I retort.

He just smiles at me, sweetly, and rises on his toes one last time to brush his lips over my cheek. It's the barest, briefest contact. It shouldn't feel so fucking good.

For one horrible, brilliant moment, he presses his whole body against mine, then he lets out a soft, regretful sigh that I already know is going to haunt me. My traitorous brain runs through a list of things I could say to keep him with me, but before I can pick one, he steps backward, out of my reach.

"Have a good night, Cole. And don't worry—I'll find my own ride home."

I open my mouth to tell him I could give a flying *fuck* how he gets home, but it's too late. He's already gone.

I stare at the place where he disappeared, my skin throbbing furiously everywhere he touched me.

I'm not sure I've ever hated anyone as much as I hate him.

I'm not sure I've ever wanted anyone as badly, either.

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15

QUIN

“You seem very pleased with yourself today,” Kel says, grinning at me from her side of our dressing room. “Did you do something slutty over the weekend?”

I smirk over my coffee mug. “Little bit.”

“Details?”

“Not a chance.”

“C’mon,” she wheedles.

“Nope.” I close my eyes so the makeup artist can dab purple eyeshadow over my eyelid. “Remind me why I have a black eye in this scene?”

“You got in a fight with my brother at a bar,” Kel says. “Read the script, superstar.”

I laugh. “Right. Sorry.”

“It’s okay. I’d be distracted, too, if I was up all weekend having sex. Oh, wait a minute—I was.”

I groan. “You didn’t.”

“I did,” she says, grinning. “We made Art, Quin. Pornographic Art.”

“Good lord. I’m ignoring you now.”

She chuckles and puts her earbuds in, tilting her head back so her hairdresser can comb her hair. I take another sip of coffee and close my eyes again for the makeup artist.

Immediately, my thoughts drift to Cole, and that low, deep noise he made when I pressed my thigh between his legs. I should get a damn medal for turning him down. I spent most of my weekend in bed, imagining all the things we might've done if I hadn't said no. I didn't even go to his place to get Bandit. I blamed it on the heavy snow and the fact that I had to wait around all weekend for the tow truck guy I found to pull my car down the road, but really, I just didn't trust myself around Cole. If he opened the door in those threadbare boxers again, with his hair mussed and his voice low, I don't think I would have had the strength to turn away.

Intellectually, I know I made the right decision. I don't want hate sex in a bathroom. I want real, proper love.

That doesn't mean I can stop thinking about the warmth of his chest under my palms, or the look in his eyes when I told him he wanted to hold me. He was furious, but beneath that, I think he was scared. And I think that I'm right about what Cole really wants. I think that he's lost and lonely beneath all the anger and sarcasm.

But that's his problem to sort out, not mine.

Although if he does sort it out, and he shows up at my door willing to admit it…

I bite down hard on my lip. I'm not going to fantasize about things that are never going to happen. At least, not while I'm still at work.

"Earth to Quin," Kel says, waving a hand in front of my face. "Are you coming with me, or are you going to sit there grinning all day?"

I bat her hand away. "Hush, you."

We walk to set together and spend the morning shooting a series of short, tense scenes set at the show's makeshift police station. If Kel hadn't told me she and Corbin had slept together, I would never have guessed. He paces back and forth behind the cameras and gives his usual inscrutable directions, "Leave more space for the silences, Kel," and "Quin, stop holding your anger so close." Kel and I make eye contact twenty or thirty

times, but we only burst out laughing once, which I think shows impressive restraint.

Kel's scenes are done after lunch, and the rest of the day is significantly less fun without her. We spend a good hour shooting a single shot of me walking down a sidewalk. Corbin complains that I'm walking too fast, then too slow, then that I look too cold.

"I *am* cold," I say, bouncing on my heels to try to coax some blood back into my feet. I've given up my hands as a lost cause. They're nothing but ice blocks shoved deep inside my pockets.

"Your character is too angry right now to pay attention to the cold," Corbin says, and I contemplate smacking him with one of my ice-block hands.

We eventually get it the way he wants, then I spend half an hour in a blissfully warm van as we drive to the next location for our last scene of the day. Corbin is manic with excitement about this one. It's the scene where my character walks into the forest and gets corrupted. It doesn't sound like much, but when we pull up to set, I kind of get why he's so excited. The cameras are set up at the edge of a vast, snowy meadow bordered by a dark pine forest about a quarter mile in the distance. It's so quiet you can hear a pin drop, and the snow is glittery-white and completely untouched. They're going to film me walking across the meadow and into the forest, with one standing camera that will film me getting further and further away, and one drone flying high overhead.

"We only get one shot at this," Corbin tells me for the sixth time. "If we mess it up, we'll have to wait until it snows again to cover your footsteps. Walk as straight as you can, and once you get five or ten feet into the forest, hold there, and just be in the moment, alright? Just *react* to what you see, however feels natural. Got it?"

I stifle a smile. "Got it."

“We’ll tell you when to cut,” he says, gesturing to the tiny earbud in my right ear. “If you need something, we can hear you, but for god’s sake, don’t talk unless it’s an absolute emergency. I don’t want anything to ruin this beautiful silence.”

“I wouldn’t dare,” I say solemnly.

I make a mental note to tell Kel about the beautiful silence, then I find my mark and wait obediently for everyone to get set up behind me. One of the crew gave me these brilliant little heat warmer things to put in my shoes and gloves, and I’ve got a thicker coat and hat on for this scene, so I’m barely cold at all. And as much as I hate to admit it, Corbin is right: the complete silence that stretches across the meadow is pretty cool.

The snow crunches softly underfoot as I start to walk. The standing camera is behind me, and the drone is too far up to film my face, but I stay in character anyway, taking slow, cautious steps, like I’m wary of what I’m about to face.

It’s hard to be scared of the forest up ahead, though. It’s too damn pretty. Every tree is draped in shimmery snow, and the gray clouds overhead give the whole place a gorgeous, colorless look. The drone shots are going to look incredible. I’ve got to hand it to Corbin on that.

I hesitate on the threshold of the forest, partly because I think my character would do it, and partly because I need to catch my breath. The whir of the drone grows a bit louder as it drops down behind me. I wait until it settles again to take my first steps into the trees.

I walk about ten feet, looking around, then I do a double-take.

There’s a man walking deep in the forest to my right, tall and broad-shouldered and dressed in a black winter jacket and knit cap. He’s a hundred feet or so away, walking with his back to me so I can’t see his face, but he doesn’t look like anyone I recognize from the crew.

Shit. Corbin is going to lose his mind if some random hiker ruins this take.

I can hear the drone whirring above me, so I wander to the left, leading the camera away from him. I walk for a minute or two until a quiet voice in my ear says, “Cut. You can come on back.”

“Thanks,” I reply.

I’m about to turn back when a splash of color catches my eye, the pale pink of a glove someone’s dropped by a tree. I crunch across the snow to pick it up.

I’m leaning down with my hand stretched out when I realize it isn’t just a glove.

Everything goes strange for a moment, like someone’s turned down the volume on the world. My pulse speeds up before my brain fully processes what I’m seeing.

It isn’t just a glove; it’s a glove on the hand of a body, a young woman lying dead in the snow.

Time slows to a crawl. I take slow, halting steps and drop to my knees beside her. Her skin is waxy and her eyes are flat, and even though she can’t be much older than me, her mouth is shriveled and sunken in like an old woman’s. Long, stringy hair pokes out from under her hat, and there’s a scarf wrapped around her neck, the same pale pink color as her gloves.

“Hello?” I say hoarsely.

She doesn’t answer me. Of course she doesn’t, she’s fucking *dead*.

Bile rises in my throat. I reach out and shake her shoulder, and her scarf slips down, revealing a dark, mottled bruise around her neck. A ringing noise starts up in my ears, high pitched and nauseating.

Slowly, I look away from her, to the snow. There’s a line of footsteps leading toward her, and another leading away; a slow, steady march toward the man I saw before. He’s almost out of view now, a tiny black dot disappearing between trees.

“Quin?” Corbin’s voice is in my ear. “Did you say something?”

My mouth is paper dry with fear; my voice comes out high and thin.

“Corbin?” I say shakily.

“Yeah?” he replies.

I look back at the dead woman’s body. “Call the police.”

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QUIN

“Explain to me again,” Officer Wilson says, “why you didn’t call for help the moment you saw the suspect.”

My cheeks burn. “I thought it just some guy.”

“You thought it was just some guy,” he repeats.

I wait for the next question, but he lets his words hang in the air between us, like he thinks I need some time to hear how stupid they sound.

I don’t need any time. I already know they’re fucking stupid.

I look down at my hands and shift my weight in my chair, the same uncomfortable plastic one I’ve been sitting in for two hours. All of the crew had to come down to the RCMP station to give statements, but I’m the only one the police are really interested in. I’m the one who found the woman’s body. I’m the one who saw her killer, and watched like an idiot as he made his slow escape. The drone camera caught the whole thing, my utter uselessness captured in high definition.

I lick my dry lips. “I thought he was just out hiking in the woods. By the time I saw the body, he was really far away.”

“Really far away,” Officer Wilson says, repeating my words for the second time.

My flush darkens. I may have been an idiot, but Officer Wilson is being an absolute dick. He’s a heavy-set man in his fifties, and he was the first

one to arrive on the scene after Corbin called the police. The first thing he did was holler at me and the crew for crowding around the body and mucking up the crime scene.

Afterward, he called for back-up to look for the man in the woods—the man who dumped the body, the man who killed that girl—but by the time they arrived, it was too late. A heavy snow had started to fall, covering up most of his footprints, and now all the police have to go on is my shitty description and a blurry zoomed-in image from the camera drone.

“Do you think I should have gone after him?” I ask.

For the first time, Officer Wilson hesitates, then a kinder, younger voice chimes in.

“Do we think you should have gone after a potential murderer all by yourself?” Officer Hart says, appearing at Officer Wilson’s shoulder. “Absolutely not.”

I give him a small, grateful smile. Officer Nathan Hart is the handsome, sandy-haired man that Kel noticed on our first day of shooting, the one who brought the police uniforms to set. He’s about the same age as me, and about a thousand times more sympathetic than Officer Wilson. He even brought me a cup of coffee earlier, when we first got to the station.

“Phone call for you up front,” he tells Officer Wilson. “I can finish up here.”

I sit back with relief as Officer Wilson leaves the room. He shoots me a suspicious frown over his shoulder as he leaves, like he thinks I’m hiding something.

“Sorry about him,” Officer Hart says, taking his seat. “He takes his job very seriously.”

“It’s okay. I guess it’s good to take it seriously. I mean, it’s a murder, right? That’s what happened?” I bite my cheek to stop my nervous rambling.

“We’re treating it as a murder, yes,” Officer Hart says.

“And you’re still searching the woods for that guy?”

Officer Hart gives a vague tilt of his head, like he’s considering how much he can tell me. “We’ve searched the woods. There’s an old hunting road a little ways past where you saw him. It looks like he drove away from there.”

My throat catches. “If I’d followed him, I could’ve got the license plate.” I look down at my hands, rubbing my palms back and forth over the rough material of my jeans. “Are there CCTV cameras you can get it from?”

Officer Hart looks amused. “This is a small town, Quin. We’ve got five officers, four police cars, and one red-light camera in town.”

“Right. Sorry.”

“It’s alright. You haven’t done anything wrong.”

My hands curl in my lap. “I know.”

He gives me a pitying look and leans forward in his chair. “Look—this is classified, for now, but just between us, we know who that girl was. Her name was Ava Parsons. She’s one of the local druggies. We’ve had her in the drunk tank a hundred times before. More than likely, this was all a drug deal gone wrong. And we know some of the people she used to run with, that’ll give us some leads to sort it out.”

I can tell he’s trying to make me feel better, but all I can think about is that dark purple bruising around her neck, and how small she was compared to the man I saw in the woods. It must have been nothing for him to squeeze the life out of her. She must have been so scared before she died.

“Right,” I say thinly. “That’s…good, I guess.”

He smiles at me sympathetically. “Marble Brook’s really not a bad place. It fell apart a bit after the paper mill closed, but as long as you don’t run with the wrong crowd, it’s perfectly safe. Are you staying here in town?”

“Um—no. I’m renting an Airbnb in Moose Lake. Mary Murphy’s place?”

“Oh, sure, I know the one. Mary’s a bit of a character, isn’t she?”

“Mm.”

He leans back. “Mary Murphy’s place. That’s out by Cole Milton’s house, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

Officer Hart’s mouth twitches, like he wants to grimace but is too polite to do it. “I went to junior high school with him.”

I stare at him blankly before I remember that junior high is what Canadians call middle school. “Lucky you,” I say, a thin attempt at a joke.

Officer Hart laughs, but it’s a hollow sound. “I don’t think many people who knew Cole Milton could call themselves lucky.”

He clears his throat afterward, like he’s realized he shouldn’t have said it, then he sits up a bit straighter. “I think we’ve got all we need for now. Why don’t you head out? Do you have a way back home?”

I look to the windows, where the snow is still falling steadily. The thought of driving home in it and spending the night alone—

“I’m staying in town tonight,” I say. “With a friend.”

“Good idea.” Officer Hart rises to his feet. “I’ll give you my cell phone number, and you text or call if you think of anything you might have forgotten, alright?”

“Yeah. Thanks.”

I put his number in my phone and slip out of the station, keeping my eyes low as I pass the reception area, where Officer Wilson is talking loudly on the phone. On the sidewalk outside, I stand motionless for several minutes, trying not to think of the dead girl’s pale, waxy face.

I swallow hard against the lump in my throat and dial a number in my phone.

“Hey, Kel,” I say thickly, as soon as she picks up. “Can I come over?”

“GOD, THIS IS MESSED UP,” Kel says, tightening her arm around me protectively.

It’s ten p.m. the next day, and we’re sitting on the bed in her hotel room, surrounded by half-empty pizza boxes. Corbin canceled filming for the day, because of what he’s calling “our shared trauma”, and Kel dragged me out for several long, snowy walks around town. We didn’t talk much, besides wondering out loud if they caught the murderer yet. Later on, Corbin showed up and took us to dinner, where he put his hand on my arm and told me not to be afraid to share my deepest feelings, which was funny enough that it did make me feel better for a little while.

Now that he’s gone, I feel shitty again, and a bit guilty for spending another night in Kel’s bed.

“Don’t be stupid,” she chides me. “You can move in here for good if you want.”

“Corbin might object to that. I think he’s kind of obsessed with you.”

She snorts. “He is, isn’t he? Men like him love ugly, clever girls.”

“You’re not ugly,” I say loyally.

“Unconventionally pretty, then,” she says. “And I mean it, Quin. You can stay here as long as you want. I don’t like the thought of you going back to that cabin all alone.”

I don’t like it, either, but I say, “No, I have to. I don’t want to spend the rest of the winter being freaked out. And it’s not like it’s dangerous. It’s like Officer Hart said, it was a drug deal gone wrong. I’m sure they’ll find the guy who did it soon.”

“You’re sure he didn’t see you?”

I nod. “He never looked back. And he was really far away.”

“Hm.” She frowns for a moment, then her lips quirk up and she elbows my ribcage. “Officer Hart, eh?”

I bat her arm away. “It’s not like that. He’s straight.”

“You sure about that?”

“Definitely. He’s nice, though. He said I could text him if I need anything. I could try to hook you up with him, if you want me to.”

She turns away from me to grab a slice of pizza. “Eh, don’t bother.”

I hide a smile. “You’re totally falling for Corbin.”

“I am not! Take that back, Quin McCarthy.”

“I’ll take it back when you stop staring at him the way you were at dinner.” I prop my hands under my chin and adopt a dreamy look. “Tell us more poetry, Corbin, that’ll make us feel better.”

She punches me hard in the shoulder. “Asshole. I get to pick our movie, because of that.”

“Make sure it’s something pretentious that your new boyfriend would approve of.”

She laughs and punches me again, and the knot in my gut eases as we settle down to watch a movie. But when it’s over, and Kel is fast asleep beside me, the knot tightens again. I stare up at the ceiling, flushed and restless with guilt.

I know, intellectually, that I didn’t do anything wrong. It’s not my fault that girl was killed. It’s not my fault I was too far away to get a good look at her killer’s face. Officer Hart said it was lucky that I saw him at all, and that if I hadn’t found the body, the snow would’ve covered it up, and no one might’ve found it for weeks.

I could’ve gone after that guy, though. If I’d been smarter, if I’d reacted quicker, I could’ve tracked him to his car. Kel said that would have been crazy, that I could have gotten myself killed, but she wasn’t there. She didn’t see that girl’s pale pink gloves or her sunken-in mouth.

I scrub a hand over my face. Maybe it’s self-indulgent to be so upset about a girl I didn’t know. I don’t want to be one of those awful people who clings to a tragedy for the attention. It’s a tragedy, but it’s not *my* tragedy. I

found her body, but that doesn’t make her story mine. Officer Hart didn’t tell me if she had any family, but if she did, they’re the ones who should mourn her. I don’t have any right to that pain.

I roll onto my side and hug a pillow into my chest. What I need to do now is find a way to move past it, but the thought of going back to the cabin alone makes my palms sweat with fear. It’s already kind of creepy there at night. I’ve just been dealing with it by calling Trevor and Jonathan before bed, and exhausting myself on my runs with Bandit to make sure I fall asleep right away.

Maybe I can ask Cole if Bandit can sleep at my place some nights. Cole told me—or rather, snapped at me—that Bandit did a few training courses meant for police dogs. I’d feel better sleeping alone in the cabin if Bandit was there to guard me.

I doubt Cole would go for that, though. After our encounter at the party, I don’t even know if he’ll want me walking Bandit again.

My thoughts linger on Cole for a while, remembering the look on Officer Hart’s face when he talked about him. I wonder if he knows anything about Cole and the girl from the video. Even if he does, he probably wouldn’t tell me. He seems like he’s too professional for gossip.

What does it say about Cole, though, that someone who grew up with him dislikes him that much? I don’t know why I keep clinging to the idea that there’s more to him, when all of the evidence keeps pointing the other way.

Actually, that’s not true. I do know why. It’s my rom-com delusions, the nagging idea that I’ll find love in the most unlikely of places.

It’s naïve and it’s pointless, and I’m not going to entertain it anymore. I shift in bed to find a cooler spot and punch my pillow into shape. I’m not going to lose any more sleep thinking about Cole Milton. Life is too short to waste any of it on bad guys.

The dead girl in the woods should have taught me that.

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QUIN

Being at work the next day is tiring, and not just because our day off yesterday means squeezing two days of filming into one. All anyone wants to talk about is the dead girl in the woods. Who she might have been, why she might have been killed. One of the cameramen says he heard she was a tourist, and makes a joke that one of us might be next.

"She wasn't a tourist," I say irritably.

He looks at me with interest. "Did the police tell you that?"

I shrug and turn away from him. I hate the way some of them are acting, like the whole thing is some cool story they can't wait to tell their friends. The people who actually saw her body aren't acting like that. I've noticed Corbin checking in on them throughout the day, taking them to the side to speak with them quietly. He's probably telling them to let their deepest emotions fly free, or something like that, but at least he isn't acting like it's all a fun anecdote to share at parties.

My scenes wrap up around three, and I head back to Moose Lake before I can change my mind about staying with Kel. I need coffee and laundry detergent, but I drive by the store without stopping. The roads have been plowed since the snowstorm, but I still don't like the way the slush tugs at the car, and I don't want to get home after dark.

I could call Trevor and Jonathan on the way home, but instead I drive in silence, trying to draw the quiet inside of me. Not for the first time today, I wonder if taking this job was a huge mistake. I wanted to relax and reset my life, but right now I feel more stressed and untethered than ever.

When I pull into my driveway, there's a tall, dark figure standing at my front door. For a single sharp heartbeat, I think of the man in the woods, then I spot Bandit at his side.

Cole turns at the sound of the car. Bandit barks excitedly and leaps off the porch steps, running circles around my car until I park.

"Hi, handsome," I say, letting him clamber up into my lap. "I missed you."

I hug him tightly, pressing my cheek against his fur. When I look up again, Cole is watching us with an expression I can't quite read. He isn't here for a hook up, that's for sure.

I climb out of my car reluctantly, a deep weariness settling over my frame. "What do you want, Cole?"

He crosses his arms and looks away from me. "Nothing. Bandit was throwing a fit because you hadn't come by."

"I've been busy," I say. "And the trail is full of snow."

"It's clear now."

I glance at the newly shoveled-out trailhead. "Did you do that?"

"I do it every year," he says in a clipped tone. "It's good exercise."

"Right. Well, I can take Bandit now, I just need to get changed."

"Fine."

I wait for him to leave, but he just keeps standing there with his arms crossed and an irritated look on his face.

My temper flickers. "What, Cole? I've had a really long couple of days, so say what you want to say or just leave Bandit and go."

There's a beat of silence, then he points his eyes somewhere over my shoulder and says, "I heard something in town about a body on your film

set.”

He looks even more annoyed after he says it, and I suddenly realize what the strange look on his face was.

“Oh my god, were you *worried* about me?”

His spine stiffens. “No.”

For the first time in days, I feel myself smiling. “Yes, you were. You heard that something happened on set, and you were worried about me. You came to my house to make sure I’m okay.”

“I don’t think you can call this place a house.”

My smile widens. “I was right about you.”

“Excuse me?”

“You’re *nice*.”

He lets out a loud, impatient breath and turns away from me. “Bring Bandit back when you’re done with him.”

A laugh bubbles out of me, bright and irrepressible. “Thanks for checking on me,” I call after him. I wait for him to give me the finger over his shoulder. When he does, it just makes me laugh harder.

I open the front door to let Bandit into the cabin.

“I feel a little better now,” I tell him.

THE GOOD FEELING lasts until the sun goes down and long shadows start to stretch across the cabin. The trees outside the windows are creaking softly in the wind, and every few minutes, I hear a rattle or thump in the cabin that I’m sure I’ve never heard before. Twice, I walk upstairs and look in the closet, just in case.

I should have asked Cole if I could keep Bandit overnight, but he never gave me the opportunity. He was on the phone when I dropped Bandit off,

scowling like he didn’t like whoever he was talking to, and he waved Bandit inside and shut the door in my face.

I try to cheer myself up with the knowledge that I’ve rattled him, but it’s not much of a comfort in my dark, empty cabin. It’s too late to call Trevor and Jonathan in Italy, and when I texted Kel earlier, she was headed out to dinner with Corbin.

I’m scrolling through the contacts on my phone when a message from Mary pops up on the Airbnb app.

Hi, Quin! The Northern Lights are supposed to be good tonight. There’s usually a great view at the lake, if you don’t mind a late-night walk.

The Northern Lights! I cross to the window, but the sky doesn’t look any different than normal. After a moment’s hesitation, I turn off all the cabin lights. I go back to the window, and this time I see it, a faint, greenish discoloration hanging low over the woods. It doesn’t look that impressive at first, but the longer I stand there staring, the deeper it becomes. It feels like it’s gathering strength, building up to something beautiful.

I’ve never seen the Northern Lights before. I’ve always wanted to.

My pulse ticks up as I contemplate Mary’s suggestion. If I walk really quickly, I could be at the lake in thirty minutes. And it’s not like I haven’t walked the trail in the dark before. I’ve done it a couple of times before dawn.

There’s nothing stopping me from going. Nothing but my own fear. The idea of walking through the dark forest, alone, with the memory of the dead girl’s body hanging over me…

I swallow hard. I’ve run up against enough challenges in my life to recognize a turning point when I meet one. I can sit inside and watch the lights through the window and go to bed disappointed and afraid, or I can go out there and see something special.

I turn away from the window and start pulling on my winter things. I move quickly, defiantly, telling myself over and over that I’m not afraid.

I turn on my flashlight and step outside, taking deep, slow breaths of the night air. It tastes like the forest, cold snow on pine branches, and when I breathe out, my breath curls like smoke.

For all my bravado, the first few minutes in the trail are mostly terrifying. My flashlight throws long, twitchy shadows between the trees, and my footsteps echo strangely in the silence, giving the unnerving impression that someone is walking behind me.

But I keep my eyes on the faint green glow in the sky, and I hum a Christmas song to cover any eerie sounds, and by the time I reach the first fork in the trail, I'm feeling almost confident.

Then there's a quick patter of steps, and a dark shape leaps toward me. I lurch backward, my flashlight clattering to the ground.

"Jesus—*Bandit*!"

I laugh in relief as I recognize him. I think my reaction scared him as much as he scared me, and it takes several minutes of ear rubs and compliments before he's back to his usual bouncy self.

"What are you doing out here so late, buddy? Where's your cranky owner?"

As if I've summoned him from the darkness, Cole's voice rings out through the night. "Bandit!"

Bandit's ears perk up at the sound of Cole's voice, but he doesn't leave my side.

"He's over here," I call back.

The silence turns dour, as if the force of Cole's annoyance is penetrating through the night. I retrieve my flashlight, which flickers unsteadily until I give it a smack, then I lead Bandit down the short path to Cole's house. Cole is standing on the porch steps dressed in a t-shirt and sweats, his arms crossed tightly against the cold.

"What the hell are you doing?" he demands.

"Kidnapping Bandit," I say.

“What?”

“Going to the lake,” I say, louder.

“It’s the middle of the night.”

“It’s barely nine,” I retort. “And I’m going to see the Northern Lights.” I gesture up the sky, where the greenish glow is growing stronger. It’s still not that impressive, but it’s gaining momentum, I can feel it.

Cole casts a brief, dismissive glance at the sky. “You can’t be serious.”

“Of course I am.”

“Are you an idiot? Do I actually have to explain to you why it’s a terrible idea to wander the woods alone, at night, in minus-ten-degree weather?”

“What’s that in Fahrenheit?”

He ignores me. “Did you even bother to tell anyone you were going?”

“Yes,” I lie.

He ignores that, too. “What do you think is going to happen if you trip and smack your stupid little head on a rock? You’ll be a fucking popsicle by the morning.”

I’ll admit, I never thought of that. I want to argue that I wasn’t planning on tripping and knocking myself unconscious, but I’m sure no one ever plans on doing that. Suddenly, this nighttime adventure of mine doesn’t seem like that good of an idea, but I’ll be damned if I tell Cole that.

“I won’t go alone, then,” I say, putting my gloved hand on Bandit’s head. “I’ll take Bandit.”

“Like hell you will!”

“He wants to go. Don’t you, boy?”

Bandit barks excitedly in agreement, like the very good boy that he is.

“See?” I say. “I’ll bring him back in a bit.”

“No, you won’t. *Quin*—”

He keeps arguing, but I ignore him, turning on my heel and heading back onto the trail. Bandit follows me eagerly, his ears perked forward and

his head slightly low, like he knows we're going on an important quest. The trail seems a lot less frightening with him by my side.

We walk for two or three minutes before I hear footsteps behind us. Cole's face is a thundercloud under his black knit cap, and he's zipping up his winter jacket as he walks. My heart starts beating quicker at the sight of him.

"Decided to join us, did you?" I say.

"You're a fucking asshole."

"And you didn't have to come."

"You think I'd just let you run off with my dog? You'll get him lost in the fucking woods."

"You do know there are words in the English dictionary besides 'fuck', don't you? You need to expand your vocabulary. And how exactly am I supposed to get lost in here? There's one trail. It goes to the lake and back again."

"There are hundreds of old hunting trails back here. It's nothing to get lost at night. You'd know that, if you had a single functioning brain cell."

I heave an exaggerated sigh. "Look, if you're going to be a third wheel on our walk, do me a favor and keep your mouth shut. You're ruining the magic."

He lengthens his stride to walk ahead of me. "Like I want to talk to you."

I follow him, not bothering to hide my grin. The green in the sky is intensifying faster, and there's a bit of pink now at the edges. I don't know if it's the colors in the sky or Cole's presence ahead of me, but I feel slightly giddy, like a teenager heading out on their first date.

As we go further along, I realize Cole wasn't wrong about getting lost. In some places, where the canopy of trees is thicker, there isn't much snow on the ground, making it look like it's part of the trail. Twice, he turns to the left when I would've veered off to the right. I have a sudden vision of

myself wandering the forest alone, constantly taking wrong turns without meaning to until I'm miles into the forest and freezing cold. Not only would that be a horrifying way to die, I'd have to die knowing Cole was right. He'd probably carve "I told you so" on my tombstone, just to be a dick.

We walk in silence for ten or fifteen minutes, the sky steadily growing more colorful above us, then, all at once, the forest breaks, and the world opens up above the lake.

Holy shit.

Holy *shit*.

I think my heart actually stops for a moment. It feels like I've been punched in the chest, or like I've stepped out of this world into another one.

I've seen pictures of the Northern Lights before, but they don't come close to doing it justice. The sky is alight with waves of green and pink and white, shifting and shimmering like curtains rippling in the wind. And I can *hear* them, somehow. I can hear the colors moving. It sounds like—fuck, I don't know what it sounds like, because it's like nothing I've ever heard before. Like there's an electric current running through the air, maybe, or like a billion people are whispering "shh" just out of sight.

Without taking my eyes off the sky, I walk to the edge of the lake and sit down on a wide, flat rock. I never want to stop looking at this. It's like a fireworks show, if fireworks lit up the darkest parts of your soul and went on forever and ever.

Bandit sits beside me, indifferent to the Northern Lights but happy enough to let me pet him while I watch them. I don't want to look away, not for a second. I'm completely, utterly mesmerized. I almost feel like I could cry.

Rocks shift and thump as Cole moves behind me.

"Are you seeing this?" I murmur. It would feel wrong to talk louder, like we're in a church or a museum.

"I've seen it before," he says flatly.

“So? I could see this a million times and still be awestruck. This is magic.”

“That’s not even remotely true.”

“Yes, it is. It’s actual, real-life magic, and you’d have to be dead inside not to appreciate it.”

I drag my gaze away long enough to see him roll his eyes. “You have five minutes, then I’m taking Bandit home.”

I exhale in frustration. “I don’t get why you do that.”

“Do what.”

“Act like this, like you’re too cool for anything. This is fucking spectacular, Cole. And I know that you know that.”

He shakes his head again dismissively. With a pang of real disappointment, I turn away from him. “You can go back if you want to. I’m staying here as long as I want.”

After a minute or two, the ground crunches under his feet. He sits down on a rock to the left of me. His hands are shoved deep in his pockets, and his expression is closed-off, but he isn’t leaving. He doesn’t look up at the sky, though, and it makes me deeply, inexplicably sad.

“I don’t get you,” I say quietly. “Is it so hard to act like a normal person, just this once?”

Something shifts in the depths of his eyes. “You don’t know anything about me.”

“I would if you told me.”

He holds my gaze for a moment, long enough that I feel a flicker of hope. But then the shutters come down again and he looks away, retreating into whatever dark spaces lurk in his mind. The disappointment cuts a bit deeper this time.

Bandit’s cold nose pushes into my cheek. I’ve neglected my petting duties staring at Cole.

“Sorry, buddy,” I murmur, turning away.

I tilt my face back up to the aurora. I don’t know how much time passes, but eventually, the curtains of light start moving slower, and the colors grow softer, like whatever cosmic magic is controlling them is running out of steam. My hands and face and feet are completely numb, but I don’t look away, not until the last traces of color have melted from the sky.

When it’s over, a deep silence settles over the woods, like the whole world has let out a breath. I glance at Cole. If he’s felt anything this past hour, his face doesn’t show it. He just rises to his feet and says, “Coming?” without looking at me.

Maybe it’s stupid, but it makes me want to cry. I don’t know how someone could feel nothing, seeing what we just saw. If he really didn’t feel anything, it means those little glimpses of him that I’ve seen—his bright smile when he spun the girl in the video around, the way he threw his arm out to hold me against my car seat when we swerved in the storm—don’t mean what I thought they did. But if he’s *choosing* to feel nothing, if the darkness inside of him is so strong he’s afraid to let in even a little bit of light…

I don’t know if there’s anything anyone can do to fix that. I don’t know if I have enough light inside of me to try.

“Coming,” I say quietly, and follow him onto the trail without a word.

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QUIN

On set the next day, all anyone can talk about is the Northern Lights. The excitement over the dead body has come and gone, replaced with a feverish exchange of near-identical photos, the colors of the aurora more intense on screen but less magical than they were in real life.

"I took better ones with Corbin's camera," Kel says, scrolling through the pictures on her phone between takes. "It's one of those fancy professional ones."

"And what were you doing with Corbin in the middle of the night?"

She grins. "Having weirdly good sex."

"How is that possible?" I ask. "I mean, no judgement, but *how*?"

She laughs. "I have no idea. He's so completely ridiculous that it comes full circle and ends up being sexy."

I glance at Corbin, who's gesticulating energetically as he talks to one of the camera crew. "If you say so," I say doubtfully. "Just promise me you won't end up marrying him, okay? I have enough hipsters friends in LA, I can't drag myself to one more wedding in a barn, with the bride wearing a burlap sack gown and the groom reciting his own poetry for his vows."

"Oh my god." Kel looks at me, wide-eyed. "Please tell me that's a real example."

"One hundred percent. The bride's name was Bluebell—"

“Stop.”

“—and her maid of honor led all the guests in a guided meditation at the end of the ceremony.”

Kel dissolves into laughter. “That is the greatest thing I’ve ever heard. *Bluebell*. Fuck me. What was the groom’s name?”

“Ed.”

It makes her laugh even harder. She still has tears in her eyes as we start the next scene, which ends up working quite well, because her character is supposed to be upset. We’re filming a scene for one of the early episodes, where an old woman is found dead in her home and everyone but Kel’s character thinks she died of old age. Kel’s character is convinced it’s a murder, and that someone in the town has been corrupted by the forest. Spoiler alert—she’s right. But at this point in the show, my character doesn’t believe her.

“Give us more *passion*, please, Kel,” Corbin says after our first take. “An innocent woman’s been murdered.”

There’s a beat of silence as we all hear his words for a second time, the silence thickening as everyone remembers the dead girl in the woods. We keep filming, but Corbin’s words linger in my stomach like a cold chunk of ice. An innocent woman *was* murdered. I found her body, I touched her skin. What does it say about me, that I could go out last night and fawn over the Northern Lights mere days after she died?

“It says that you’re human,” Kel says. We’re at the local grocery store, grabbing groceries neither of us will have time to get after work. “What happened to her was horrible, but you didn’t actually know her.”

“Yeah, but she still existed,” I say, as we step up to the line at the counter. “She had friends and family and things she wanted to do with her life. And now that’s just nothing. Her whole future, gone.”

“That’s not your fault.”

“I could’ve done more, though. I texted Officer Hart earlier, and he said they still haven’t found the guy that did it.”

“Not yet,” Kel says. “But if you hadn’t been there, they wouldn’t have any idea what he looked like. They’ve got a starting point, thanks to you.”

“A tall guy with a dark jacket. That could literally be a million different people.”

“There aren’t a million people in Newfoundland,” she says.

“You know what I mean.” I bite my lip. “If I’d just gone after him—”

“Then you might be dead alongside her. That guy was an actual murderer, Quin.”

The woman waiting in line ahead of us turns around, her face bright with interest. “Are you two talking about the girl that died? You’re Quin McCarthy, aren’t you? The one who found her?”

I hesitate. “I don’t know if I can talk about it.”

She waves a dismissive hand. “Everyone’s already talking about it all over town. News travels fast around here.”

The cashier, a young blond guy, chimes in as he starts swiping the woman’s items. “It was Ava Parsons, wasn’t it? One of my buddies went to school with her in St. John’s.”

“My neighbor’s son worked with her at the gas station,” the woman says. “Apparently she was all sorts of trouble.”

The two of them keep talking for a while, eagerly exchanging stories they heard about her.

“Pretty wild you found her body,” the cashier says, as the woman swipes her credit card.

“Yep,” I say curtly, unpacking my cart without looking up.

He doesn’t take the hint, and watches me intently as the woman heads off. “Aren’t you worried the guy who did it will, like, come after you? They should put you in Witness Protection, or something.”

“He didn’t see me,” I say flatly.

“What’s the Witness Protection Program like in Canada?” Kel asks. “There’s so much forest everywhere, do they just, like, stick you on a moose and send you out into the wilderness?”

It makes the cashier laugh, and Kel keeps him distracted while he rings up the rest of my things.

“I’ll wait for you outside,” I tell her.

I find a bench outside the store and sit down with my grocery bags beside me. An uncomfortable sensation is spreading through me. The longer I sit there, the stronger it grows, coalescing into a deep, nagging dread.

I point my eyes at the cars passing by, but I don’t really see them. In my mind, I’m watching the guy in the woods walk away from me, his footsteps slow and steady, like he wasn’t in a rush.

He didn’t see me in the woods. I’m sure of that.

But apparently everyone in town knows what happened. They all know I’m the one who found the body, and they all know I saw the guy who killed her. Officer Hart said the police knew the people Ava Parsons ran with. Does that mean the man who killed her was a local? And if he is…if he’s heard people talking, if he knows what they all know…how hard will it be for him to find out where I’m staying? And what’s to stop him coming for me in the middle of the night?

“Quin?” I jump at the sound of Kel’s voice. She’s standing behind me, two overstuffed grocery bags hanging off of her elbow. “You good to go?”

“Yeah,” I say. “Sorry.”

“No worries.” She eyes me as we head to my car. “Are you alright?”

I step out of the way of a group of guys walking past us. One of them is tall and broad-shouldered. Another is wearing a bulky gray jacket that could look black from far away. Beyond them, further up the sidewalk, a tall, middle-aged man in a dark coat is climbing into his truck.

Everywhere I look, there are more nondescript, tall men. Any one of them could be the guy from the woods.

Kel touches my arm, her face creased with worry. “You want to stay at my place tonight? We can watch a movie and have Oreos and peanut butter for dinner. I promise I won’t even make you have a threesome with Corbin.”

Aside from the threesome, the offer is tempting. But if I give in to fear and paranoia now, where does it stop? Am I going to stay at Kel’s place all winter? Move out of Mary’s cabin and flee to a hotel?

It feels like another turning point, an opportunity to dig my heels in or flee. I climb into the car and squeeze the steering wheel, trying to think rationally and look past my fears. Ava’s death was a drug deal gone wrong, that’s what Officer Hart said. It doesn’t make it okay, it doesn’t mean she deserved it, but it’s not the same as a random serial killer strangling women for sport.

It was a drug deal gone wrong, and the guy who killed her was trying to hide her body in the woods to avoid getting caught. He’ll be laying low now, hiding out from the cops. He’s not going to be worrying about some random actor who saw him, one who already told the police everything he knows. And he’s not going to do anything that would draw more attention to himself, like coming after me. If he has any sense at all, he’ll have already left town, or maybe even fled the province.

I let out a slow breath, my fingers loosening on the wheel. When I think about it like that, it seems a lot simpler. All of the tall men out on the street start looking like normal, pleasant strangers again.

“No, thanks,” I tell Kel firmly. “I’ll be fine.”

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QUIN

I've never watched a rom-com defiantly before, but tonight, that's exactly what I'm doing. I've got a homemade pizza in the oven and a glass of red wine in my hand, and I'm halfway through *Runaway Bride*. When it's over, I'm going to watch *My Best Friend's Wedding*, and if I'm still not tired after that, I'll tack on *Pretty Woman* and make it a Julia Roberts trifecta. I've got a fire going in the fireplace and the front door is locked, and I'm not thinking about the guy in the woods or letting my irrational fears get the best of me.

I miss a Facetime call from Trevor and Jonathan while I'm taking the pizza out of the oven, but I text them back that I'll call them tomorrow. If I talk to them now, I know I'll end up spilling out all my worries, and saying them out loud might make them feel more real. Jonathan's imagination will jump to the same scary conclusions that mine did, and then Trevor will have to talk both of us down. Or, worse, they'll spend a bunch of money to fly out here and be with me, like Trevor offered to do when I told them about finding the body. They've got two games left in their volleyball season before the holiday break, and I don't want them to skip out on them because of me. Better to wait and talk to them tomorrow, when my nerves have settled down a bit.

That would happen a lot faster if this damn cabin would stop making so many noises. It's windy again tonight, and every few minutes, something creaks or groans. I know that it's nothing, I know that I heard all the same sounds last night, but I can't stop myself from noticing them. I keep pausing the movie to listen, then calling myself an idiot and restarting it again.

Cameron Diaz and Julia Roberts are having their face-off in the women's restroom when there's a particularly loud thump from outside. I sit bolt upright and pause the movie again. I don't think I've heard that sound before.

I look to the window, but all I can see is my own frightened reflection. The firelight creates strange, flickering shadows behind me, and for a moment I swear I see something move in the kitchen.

I whip around, but there's nothing there. Of course there isn't. How many people have heard strange thumps in their houses, or seen weird shadows, and how many of them have actually been murdered? I don't know the answer, but it must be a fraction of a fraction of a percent. We all just think it'll happen to us because we grew up watching too many scary movies.

If this were a movie, the shadow in the kitchen would be a red herring. I'd turn back to the window and the killer would be there, instead, standing with his face pressed against the glass.

A chill creeps up my neck.

This is stupid. I'm being *stupid*.

I turn back to the window slowly, with my heart somewhere up in my throat.

There isn't anyone there, obviously. But now I can't get that image out of my head.

I know what I have to do. I have to get up, and go outside, and prove to myself that there's nothing out there. If I don't, I'm never going to be able to go to sleep tonight.

I know I have to do it, but it takes several minutes to work up the nerve to move.

I turn the movie back on—if I'm about to be murdered, at least I'll have Julia and Cameron to witness the crime—and walk to the door, wincing every time the floor creaks. As I hover for a moment with my hand on the doorknob, there's another loud thump from outside. My breath catches from fear. My heart starts pounding rabbit-fast.

In one quick motion, I yank open the door.

The porch is empty, just like I knew, deep down, it would be. I let out a breath and take a cautious step outside. It's freezing out, even colder than last night, but I pad out to the top of the steps in my socked feet and peer out at the driveway. There's nothing out of the ordinary there, and the forest is dark and quiet and still.

Thump.

Something white flashes in the trees. For a split second, I'm scared again, then there's another flash of white, and another soft, deep thump.

My legs go weak with relief. There's a stumpy pine tree near the house that's been bent sideways ever since the first snowstorm. The weight of the snow on its branches must've finally reached a tipping point, and the thumps I heard were clumps of snow falling to the ground. As I stand there watching, another huge chunk slides off, and the tree springs up a little bit straighter, happy to be free of the weight.

"You scared the shit out of me," I tell it sternly, then I laugh a little, slightly shaky with leftover fear.

I'm about to go back inside when my gaze catches on the tree line. The sky is overcast tonight, but in the space between the clouds and the trees, there's a faint tinge of green.

My heart leaps. It's the Northern Lights again. Someone at work said they might be back tonight, but I forgot all about it until now. If I hadn't

come outside, I would've missed it, and if that's not a sign from the universe, I don't know what is.

With a surge of sudden energy, I go back inside and start pulling on my winter things. I'm going to walk to the lake again, and I'll stop at Cole's place and ask him if I can take Bandit with me. He'll probably insist on coming with us, and maybe *that's* what the universe is pointing me toward. Another chance to spend time with Cole.

He's been at the back of my mind all day, a constant, nagging presence I can't shake. He was right last night, when he said that I don't know him at all. But I want to. For better or worse, I want to know him more.

I grab the old yellow flashlight and smack it hard to make it turn on. I pause my movie and leave the living room lights on, so the house won't seem so cold and empty when I get back, then I close the door behind me and head for the trail.

I walk for about five minutes before I realize something's wrong. There isn't any one thing that triggers it, just a slow, creeping awareness that this doesn't feel right. It's nothing like it was last night. The forest is too dark, the wind is too cold, and the pale green light in the sky is fading instead of growing stronger. And this idea of going to Cole's, it doesn't feel right anymore. It feels forced.

The magic just isn't here tonight. This doesn't feel like an adventure. It feels like I'm alone in a cold, dark forest when I'd rather be curled up on the couch watching a movie.

Also, I've just realized I left my phone at the cabin, and Cole's dire warning about getting lost in the woods is ringing in my ears.

I stop walking. Time to recalibrate.

As soon as I turn around, I feel better, like my breath is coming easier again. I might feel stupid about this later, but sometimes, you just have to trust your gut. Tonight is not the night for the Northern Lights. They're basically gone now, anyway, barely a flicker of green left under the clouds.

I’m almost back to the trailhead when my flashlight flickers and dies. I turn it off and on and give it a few hard smacks, but it still doesn’t work. It doesn’t matter, now—the cabin light is spilling through the trees—but if I hadn’t turned around when I did, I would be standing in the middle of the forest in the dark.

You see? This is why you have to trust your gut.

I shake my head ruefully and shove the useless flashlight into my pocket. As I make my way to the end of the trail, I’m thinking about the fire waiting for me, and the pizza I haven’t finished, and which movie I want to watch next. All of my fears from earlier tonight have quieted down, like this little failed adventure was just what I needed to set my head right.

Then I step out onto the driveway and see a tall, broad-shouldered man standing on my front porch.

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QUIN

There isn’t any moment of uncertainty, no second where I think, *hey, maybe it’s Cole*. I know right away it’s the guy from the forest, the one who strangled Ava Parsons and dumped her body in the snow. He’s standing on my porch, looking in through the window, one gloved hand already reaching for the door.

My feet move before my brain catches up, carrying me back into the shadow of the trail. A bit of snow crunches under my boot, and the guy glances over his shoulder, and for one breathless, hopeless moment, I think, *fuck, this is how it ends*.

But he doesn’t see me. He turns back to the door and peers through the window again, then he turns the unlocked doorknob and slips inside.

I realize in that moment that I’ve never known fear before; not real fear, not like this. My brain is screaming run, *run*, but my body isn’t answering. I just stand there, watching through the windows of my cabin as he walks around, looking for me. Some small, disconnected part of my brain catalogues his movements, the turn of his head when he notices my laptop, the careful pause when a floorboard creaks under his foot.

He looks around the kitchen, then he turns back to the living room, and I forget, as his gaze sweeps the window, that he can’t see outside. As I lurch

backward in terror, the flashlight falls out of my pocket. It hits the ground and comes to life, a sudden spotlight shining out of the dark.

I'm looking at him when it happens. I see him see it, I watch his face change. He takes a single step forward, and all of my muscles come alive.

Run.

I take off through the trail, sprinting flat-out in the dark. I can hardly see where I'm going; I lose my footing twice and scrape my hands bloody scrambling back to my feet.

I don't look back to see if he's following me, I don't think about what I'll do if Cole isn't home. I am nothing but my fear, and the voice in my head screaming *go*. If I fall again, if he catches me—I can almost feel it, like it's already happening.

By the time I reach Cole's house, my lungs are on fire. I trip on the porch steps and come down hard on my shin, but I struggle back to my feet and hammer frantically on the door. Bandit starts barking somewhere inside.

It takes maybe five seconds for the door to open, but they're the longest five seconds of my life. My pulse is so loud in my ears I wouldn't hear footsteps if they came up behind me, but I don't look behind me, I can't.

Bandit squeezes out of the door first, leaping at me in excitement, then the door opens wider and Cole is there. He stares at me. "What—?"

"Someone broke into my house," I say, my voice ragged and high.

"Get inside," Cole says. "Bandit, come."

He shuts the door behind us and turns the deadbolt. "Tell me what happened."

I suck in a breath that sounds like a sob and the words tumble out of me frantically. "I was out on the trail and when I got back, there was someone standing on the porch, and it was that guy, the one I saw in the woods, the one who killed that girl. He was on my porch, and he went inside, he was looking for me—" A wave of hysteria swells up inside of me, and for one

awful second, I think I might actually burst into tears. Bandit whines and dances on his paws, catching my distress.

Cole's face hardens. "Did he follow you here?"

"I don't know. I dropped my flashlight and he saw the light—"

"Wait here," he says. Then he grabs a shotgun from the closet by the door and walks out into the night.

My heart clenches. "Cole, *no*—"

I follow him outside—what other choice do I have?—and Bandit comes with me, taking the porch steps in a single leap and streaking off into the dark. "Fuck," I cry. "Bandit!"

"Let him go," Cole says. Then, to the darkness, "Bandit, find."

He walks onto the trail, holding the shotgun loosely in one hand. My heart stops beating as he nears the trees. The forest is a wall of black, and there's a rustling sound that must be Bandit—I hope it's Bandit—

"Go back inside, Quin," Cole says. "Call the police."

"I don't have my phone."

Cole glances back just long enough to toss his phone to me. "Wait in the house."

I stumble after him instead, tugging off my glove to tap clumsily at his phone.

"911, what's your emergency?"

"There's a break-in happening," I choke out. "It's at—fuck, what's the address?"

Cole takes the phone from my hand. "14 Herringbone Road, in Moose Lake. It's off the highway, first cabin on the right." He moves the phone away from his mouth to frown at me. "You're bleeding."

I follow his gaze to my palms. They're both scraped up and oozing blood. "I fell in the woods."

Cole's gaze narrows. "Yes, right now," he says into the phone, then he hangs up. "They're sending someone. Are you going back inside?"

I hesitate. “No.”

“Then stay behind me.”

Every nerve in my body stretches thin as I follow him onto the trail. My eyes are better adjusted to the dark this time, but that only makes it worse. Every tree swaying in the wind, every twitching shadow, they’re all a potential danger, a threat.

A loud rustle close by heralds Bandit’s reappearance. Cole clicks his tongue softly and makes a gesture with his hand, and Bandit lopes ahead of us on the trail, nose low to the ground. Cole walks steadily onward, his eyes hard as he scans the trees.

After a minute or two, Bandit trots back to us with his tail wagging. Cole stops walking and pats his head with a frown.

“Let’s go back,” he says. “We’ll take the car.”

He walks behind me this time, a human wall between me and the forest. I glance back every few steps, waiting for a figure to materialize from the dark, but Cole shakes his head and says, “There’s nothing there. Bandit would have found it.”

Bandit wags his tail happily in agreement and jumps eagerly into the back seat of Cole’s car. I get in the passenger seat, breathing a bit easier when the door is shut. The car starts with a growl that I’m sure can be heard all the way to Marble Brook. Cole backs the car around and heads onto the road with the shotgun in his lap.

“I’m going to stop at the cabin,” he says, in a low, calm voice that reminds me of the one he uses with Bandit. “You need to stay in the car while I do.”

“The police,” I say hoarsely.

“It could be a while till they get here.” He looks over, holding me for a moment in his dark, steady gaze. “It’s going to be okay, Quin. Breathe.”

I lick my lips and force a breath out.

“There you go,” Cole says.

It only takes a minute to get to the cabin. The lights are still on and the front door is closed. I can't see anyone moving inside.

"Stay here," Cole says. "Lock the doors."

He gets out of the car and lets Bandit out of the back seat, then he waits for me to click the locks. I watch, heart in my mouth, as he and Bandit walk toward the cabin. Cole's shotgun casts a long shadow down the driveway.

They go inside. The door swings shut behind them. Every nerve in my body is on edge, waiting for a bark or a shout or a gunshot.

Fuck. I can't let him do this alone.

I fumble with the car door and fall out onto the driveway. The darkness around me is a living, breathing thing, pressing itself against my skin. There are footsteps stamped in the snow up and down the walkway, but I can't read anything from them. My pulse throbs in my fingertips as I climb the porch steps and walk through the door.

Cole is in the kitchen, looking into the pantry with Bandit at his heels. He frowns when he sees me and gestures for me to stay where I am. He and Bandit check the laundry room while I stare up at the loft.

"Nothing," Cole says quietly.

He heads for the stairs, putting a hand out to stop Bandit from following him. Each step creaks loudly, a steady crescendo as he climbs to the top. He lifts his shotgun for the first time, pointing it into the darkness above.

One final creak and he crests the top step. I hold my breath—the silence swells up—

"Nothing," Cole says.

"There's a closet," I whisper.

"On it."

Bandit presses his head against my leg. I clutch his fur tightly as Cole moves deeper upstairs. After a moment, he reappears.

"Nothing," he says again.

A shaky breath ripples out of me, then my fear surges up as bright headlights swing across the living room windows. I spin around—Bandit starts barking like mad—

“It’s okay,” I tell him, as a wave of relief crashes over me. “It’s the police.”

I step out onto the porch as Officer Hart climbs out of his police car. His eyebrows lift as he takes in the sight; my pale face and bloody hands, Bandit at my side with his hackles raised. Then Cole steps out beside us, and Officer Hart’s expression darkens, his gaze coming to rest on the shotgun in Cole’s hand.

“You’d better have a permit for that.”

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QUIN

The tension between Cole and Officer Hart is thick; I'm not sure which one of them hates the other more. With obvious effort, Officer Hart speaks to him calmly and professionally.

Cole takes a different approach.

"We've already looked in there," he snaps, as Officer Hart searches the cabin. "Are you an idiot, or are you just this bad at your job?"

"This is protocol," Officer Hart says evenly, but he frowns at me after he says it, like he's thinking of what he'd have liked to say if I weren't here.

"Your protocol is to let a killer get away?" Cole says.

"If you don't like it, wait in the car. And take that damn dog with you."

Bandit growls at my side. He can tell that Cole hates Officer Hart, and he's been growling at him almost constantly, his head low and his hackles raised.

"I can take him," I say.

Officer Hart nods stiffly. "Thank you, Quin."

The next stretch of time is cold and uncomfortable. I sit in the back of Cole's car with Bandit, who's deeply unhappy about being parted from Cole. Officer Hart calls in back-up, and he and another officer spend half an hour sweeping the woods. Cole searches the woods, too, though he doesn't

stray as far. I track the light of his phone as he walks around, searching the area near the cabin in methodical, widening circles.

By the time they're done, Bandit's unhappy whines have given way to sleepy grumbles, and I'm shivering from exhaustion and cold. Officer Hart and Cole argue in low voices near the cabin while the other officer, an older man with a mustache and a reassuring manner, takes my statement.

"I don't suppose this place has a security system?" he says.

"I can ask Mary," I say. "But I don't think so."

"Hm. Well, there's a highway camera not far from here. We might be able to get something from there."

"You think he parked at the end of the road?" I don't know why, but the thought of him walking all the way to the cabin makes my skin crawl. That's a long time to think about how you're going to kill someone.

"It looks like he came about halfway down. You can track his footprints down the drive and see the place where he turned around and drove away." He gives me a sympathetic look. "Do you have somewhere else you can stay tonight?"

"He can stay with me," Cole says, walking to my side. Officer Hart follows him, scowling at the back of his head.

"I can call Kel," I say halfheartedly, but Cole shakes his head.

The mustached officer nods. "We should get on the road, then, see if we can track him down. If you have any more issues, you give us a call."

"Thank you," I say. He smiles and gets in his car, and Cole walks to his Land Rover, but Officer Hart lingers a moment, his eyes moving between me and Cole.

"I don't mind taking you into town," he says, "if you wanted to get a hotel."

I hesitate. "That's okay. Cole's place is right here. I just want to crash."

He looks between us again, a worried crease between his brows. "Alright, then. If you're sure. You've got my cell phone number if you need

me.”

“We won’t,” Cole says. “Coming, Quin?”

I offer Officer Hart a thin smile and get into Cole’s car. Officer Hart watches us back out all the way onto the road, his jaw set in a tense line.

A DAY AGO, I would have been bursting with curiosity walking into Cole’s house, but I’m so tired right now my eyes are blurry, and I follow him and Bandit upstairs without even attempting to look around. I do notice the unopened boxes in the second-floor hallway, but only because I nearly trip over them. A cloud of dust rises off of them, like they haven’t been touched in years. It would all be sort of creepy, if it wasn’t for Bandit, who bounces around my feet brimming with pure, unadulterated joy.

“Out of the way, monster,” Cole says, nudging him aside to open a door at the end of the hall. It leads to a bedroom with a four-poster bed and a reading nook tucked under a window. I might have called it cozy, if it didn’t have the same stale, abandoned feel as the rest of the house.

“You can sleep here. There’s a bathroom next door.” He glances at my clothes. “I’ll get you something to wear.”

He leaves me alone with Bandit, who leaps onto the bed. I sit down beside him to pull off my shoes, wincing as a sharp pain shoots up my leg. I roll my jeans up and find a dark bruise on my shin, and all of a sudden, I feel like I might cry.

I don’t know why. The stupid bruise doesn’t even hurt that much. It’s just all of the tension and fear of the night, and the knowledge that someone wanted to hurt me, and that he’s still out there somewhere.

Bandit bats me with his paw, his head tilted with concern. I wrap my arms around him and bury my face in his fur.

“Do you want a toothbrush, too?” Cole asks as he walks back into the room.

I pull away from Bandit. “If you’ve got one,” I say, scrubbing my face with my sleeve.

There’s a beat of silence. “Are you alright?”

“I’m fine.” The wobble in my voice somewhat undermines the words. I pet Bandit’s head, just to have an excuse not to look at Cole.

I hear him exhale. “Quin.”

“It’s fine,” I repeat, squeezing the words past the lump in my throat. “I’m just going to go to sleep.”

Soft footsteps pad over the carpet. He waits for me to look up at him. His expression is so sympathetic, he looks like a stranger.

“I’m being stupid,” I say thickly.

“No,” he says. “You’re not.”

I open my mouth to tell him I’m fine again. Instead, I burst into tears.

I *hate* crying in front of people. I always have, even when I was a little kid. I’ve never taken a job where I had to cry on camera. Not real crying, anyway, the kind I’ve only ever done in private.

Right now, though, I can’t stop myself. My nerves are wrung out and I’m tired and scared, and when Cole sits down beside me and puts his arm around me, I turn my face into his shoulder and have a stupid, embarrassing cry.

I’m not sure how long it takes for me to cry myself out. Too long to be clinging to a guy who mostly hates me, that’s for sure. But Cole doesn’t make any attempt to pull away. He keeps his arm wrapped around me and rubs his hand up and down my back. Bandit whines and tries to lick my face until Cole shoos him away, then he lays down on the bed with his chin on my leg.

“Sorry,” I mumble, when I finally pull away.

“It’s okay.” Cole uses his thumbs to wipe the tears from my cheeks, then pulls away abruptly, like he’s just realized what he was doing. He clears his throat. “I’ll go get you a toothbrush.”

While he’s gone, I scrub my face with the hem of my shirt, red-faced from tears and embarrassment. Cole returns with a toothbrush and a small pile of clothes, dark sweatpants, a t-shirt, and a pair of boxer briefs.

“There’s Polysporin and bandages in the bathroom,” he says. “If you need anything for your hands.”

I look at my palms. The scrapes are shallow, barely worthy of a Band-Aid, but the sight of them makes my throat ache again.

“Thanks,” I mumble.

“No problem.” A beat of awkward silence passes. “I’ll let you get some sleep. Bandit will stay with you.” He hesitates at the door. “If you need anything, my room’s down the hall.”

I nod instead of answering. I don’t want to do something awful, like burst into tears again. He nods back and leaves me alone, closing the door softly behind him.

I cry into Bandit’s fur this time, and I try not to wish Cole was still here.

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22

COLE

It feels wrong going to sleep without Bandit sprawled out beside me. It feels even stranger knowing Quin McCarthy is just down the hall.

It's close to two a.m., but I'm not tired. I feel jittery and slightly sick, like I've drunk too much caffeine too fast. I'd like to blame it on all the events of the night, the long, tense hours spent searching the woods and the time wasted arguing with that shithead Nathan Hart, but the truth is, I didn't really feel much of anything until Quin broke down in my arms.

I'd forgotten what it felt like to hold someone like that.

I'd forgotten what it felt like to be needed.

When he showed up at my door tonight, pale and breathless and so damn scared, it was like a switch flipped inside of me, turning me back into a person I didn't think existed anymore. And the way it felt when he turned his head into my shoulder, the way he clung to me as he cried…

It's making me think about things I don't want to remember, so I strip down to my underwear, climb into bed and grab my laptop to find a distraction.

I start with the footage from the cottage's security cameras. I installed them last winter after someone scratched up my Land Rover, some bored townie or drunk renter at Mary's. I scroll slowly through the videos from tonight, but the only person who comes near the house is Quin. Seeing his

fear gives me an awful sensation of weakness in my chest, and I spend a few moments fantasizing about beating the fucker who scared him to death.

I scroll through the videos twice without finding anything useful, then I close my laptop and throw it aside. I lie back in bed and stare up at the ceiling, trying to think of anything but the warm weight of Quin in my arms.

Fuck. I have not missed this feeling.

I toss restlessly for a few minutes, then I reach for my laptop again to find some WRC or IndyCar to watch until I can sleep.

Instead, my traitorous fingers take me to Quin's Instagram account.

He hasn't posted anything new since I last looked a few days ago, but I spend a while scrolling anyway. I linger on a selfie he posted last week on the trail. His cheeks are flushed from running and his hair is sweaty under his knit cap, and he's giving the camera a wide, dimpled smile.

Those god damn dimples. They're really not fair.

I stare at the picture a little while longer, then something clicks like a switch in my mind.

The trail cameras.

I completely forgot about them. I set them up a couple of years ago when I was worried there might be a bear hanging around the trail. Bandit thinks all four-legged creatures should be his friends, even if they weigh three hundred pounds.

I don't even know if the cameras still work, but it's worth a try. I slip out of bed, pull on a t-shirt, and head to the closet at the end of the hall. I dig through it until I find the trail camera box. I scan its QR code to re-download the app and click to reset my account password. I'm waiting for the reset e-mail to come through when I hear the telltale thump of Bandit jumping off the bed. A moment later, Quin's bedroom door creaks open.

I lean back on my heels and see Quin and Bandit peering into the hall.

"It's just me," I say. "Sorry."

Bandit bounds toward me as Quin steps out into the hall, looking vulnerable and small in my clothes.

“Sorry,” I say again.

“It’s okay. I wasn’t really sleeping.”

I should let him go back into his room, but the lateness of the hour and the sleepy tangle of his hair must be hot-wiring my brain, because instead I hear myself say, “Bandit wasn’t doing a good job protecting you?”

His lips curve. “No, he was. He was sitting on the end of the bed with his head between his paws, like a really cute bodyguard.”

I rub Bandit’s ears. “He’s a good boy.”

Quin’s smile curves up a little more, and suddenly I’m thinking of the last time I said “Good boy” to him, and the way his body felt pressed against mine afterward. I clear my throat and turn back to my phone.

“What are you doing?” Quin asks, crossing the floor in his bare feet. They look cold. I should have given him a pair of socks.

It takes me a second to remember his question. “I just remembered I have some old trail cameras set up in the woods. I thought I’d see if they caught any photos of that guy.”

His smile fades away. “Did they?”

“I don’t know. I’m just getting into the app.”

He twists his hands in the hem of his—my—t-shirt. “Can I look with you?”

No, I think. *Absolutely not.*

“Um—yeah, I guess. Hang on.”

I push Bandit’s nose away from my face and sign into the app, then I rise to join Quin in the hallway, standing a careful few feet away. But Bandit shoves past me and runs back into Quin’s room, where he leaps onto the bed and starts whining loudly.

“Bandit, stop,” I say sharply, but it’s too late. Quin goes back into his room and sits on the edge of the bed to pet him. They both look up at me,

expectantly.

I give Bandit a dark look and reluctantly sit down on the bed beside Quin. I leave a foot of space between us, but I can still smell his shampoo, that beachy, pineapple-coconut scent. It shouldn't be so intoxicating. I don't even like going to the beach.

"I don't know if the cameras are still working," I say, as I try to figure out how to work the app. "It's supposed to be triggered by motion, but I haven't changed the batteries since I set them up."

I figure out how to get to the photo gallery, and about a thousand photos pop up, most of them of me and Bandit. I kind of forgot this thing would photograph us, too.

"How many times a day do you walk him?" Quin asks, leaning toward me. Closer up, I can see the individual strands of gold and bronze in his hair.

"I don't know. Five or six times."

He smiles. "That's cute."

"It's not cute," I say, bristling. "He's part Malinois, he needs a lot of exercise."

"You spoil him," Quin says.

He makes it sound like a compliment. A flush of heat spreads through my face.

"These are all from last year," I say, scrolling determinedly on my phone. "I think the newer ones are at the bottom."

Quin leans closer. "Is that me?"

I stop scrolling. It is him. There are tons of photos of him recently, blurry pictures of him and Bandit on their runs.

"That feels like an invasion of privacy," he says, with a wry smile that I feel in my bones.

"Fuck off," I mutter. "It's my land."

He doesn’t say anything else, just smiles a little more. It’s hard to look away from his lips. I remember how they felt when he kissed my cheek, warm and full and slightly rough.

I’m still watching his mouth when his smile drops away. Bandit sits up abruptly, catching Quin’s sudden terror.

I look at my phone screen.

“Fuck.”

There are only three photos from tonight, all of them timestamped less than ten minutes apart. First, there’s a blurry image of Quin running from his cabin. A minute later, there’s a photo of a tall white man heading after him. Two minutes after that, there’s a blurry photo of the back of the guy’s head as he jogs back toward Quin’s house.

“That’s him,” Quin says thinly.

I wrap my arm around him without thinking, holding him steady while I use my other hand to zoom closer on the second photo. The image quality isn’t great, and it’s night-vision, so the guy’s eyes are lit up eerily, but it’s not nothing. It’s enough that someone might be able to recognize him.

“Fuck,” Quin says. “*Fuck*.”

He sounds like he’s a heartbeat away from a panic attack. I don’t blame him. The guy in this photo looks like a murderer.

“He was a minute behind me,” he says. “If I’d been any slower—if you hadn’t been home—”

Bandit growls deep in his throat, looking around the room like he wants to find the source of Quin’s fear and rip it apart.

I know the feeling.

“It’s okay,” I say, pulling Quin closer. “You’re alright.”

“It’s not okay,” he chokes out. “Look at this guy, Cole. *Fuck*.”

I put my hand on his cheek and turn his face toward me. “Hey,” I say firmly. “Look at me, alright?”

His wide, scared eyes meet mine, and something deep inside of me wobbles unsteadily. I swallow hard and push the feeling away.

“This is a pretty fucked-up situation,” I say. “And I don’t blame you for being freaked out. But everything is going to be okay.”

“You don’t know that.”

He’s right. I don’t actually know anything, and I’ve got the track record to prove it.

“Yeah,” I say. “I guess I don’t. But I know what we’re going to do next.”

“What?”

“Well, first of all, you’re going to pet Bandit, so he stops throwing a fit.”

Quin blinks at Bandit, who’s literally quivering with anxious energy. Quin’s face softens, some of the panic and fear slipping away. “Sorry, Bandit. Come here.”

Bandit is seventy pounds too heavy to be a lap dog, but that’s never stopped him before. He crawls onto Quin’s legs and shoves his head into the crook of his neck. Quin wraps his arms around him, and my chest tightens painfully at the sight.

“Right,” I manage. “Next, I’m going to text this picture to Nathan Hart, and he’ll do whatever cops do with shit like this, and I’m sure they’ll track this weirdo down in no time. There are, like, a thousand people in Marble Brook. Someone’s bound to recognize him.”

Quin nods a little, but his fingers tighten on Bandit’s fur. “I don’t want to stay here anymore.”

“Well,” I say after a beat. “You don’t really have to, do you?”

“I can’t just quit halfway through a shoot.”

“I mean, you could.”

“Yeah, but I won’t.” He swipes at his face with his sleeve. “People are counting on me. I’ll just—I’ll get a hotel in Marble Brook. That’s what I

should've done in the first place. It's fucking awful out here."

I'm silent for a moment. "Right."

He blinks at me, then his shoulders sag. "Sorry. I didn't mean that."

"You don't have to apologize. It is awful out here."

"No, it's not. I mean, my place could use some new furniture, and yours needs a lot of cleaning, but the lake is gorgeous, and the woods. Not that I ever plan on taking that trail again," he adds, glancing at the picture on my phone. He takes a steadying sort of breath. "It's not awful. But I can't stay here anymore. I'll look for a place in town tomorrow. Or later today, I guess."

"Right," I say haltingly. "Sure."

A little silence falls between us. It's a sensible solution. I don't know why it feels so wrong.

I take my arm off of his back. "I should send this picture to Hart. You said he gave you his number?"

"Yeah."

He digs out his phone and gives me the number. I shoot the photo off to Hart, along with a curt, two-line explanation. I'm tempted to add a snarky comment about doing his job for him, but I restrain myself for Quin's sake.

When I turn back to him, he's stifling a yawn.

"You should try to get some sleep," I say. "What time do you work tomorrow?"

"Not till ten."

"I'll drive you in. We can stop at your place on the way so you can get your stuff."

He blinks at me in surprise, then he says, very softly, "Thanks, Cole."

Fuck.

"It's no big deal," I say sharply. "Do you need anything else?"

He hesitates. "Stay here with me?"

My shoulders stiffen. "What?"

“Stay here with me,” he repeats. “I’m never going to be able to sleep by myself.”

I tear my eyes away from his hopeful gaze. “Bandit can stay with you.”

“Oh. Yeah, alright.”

He waits for me to get up and leave. I want to, but my muscles won’t listen.

I hear my own voice say, “Fine.”

He brightens. “Really?”

“Don’t ask again,” I snap. He smiles, like he knows there’s no real heat in the words.

I cross the room to lock the door, then I sit down on the chair in the corner. Its cushions are stiff and uncomfortable, and I’m pretty sure a mouse has been chewing on the armrests.

Quin frowns. “You can sleep in the bed.”

“I’m fine here,” I say curtly. Then, when he takes a breath to argue —“You wanted me to stay, I’m staying. Don’t push your luck.”

His mouth twists like he’s fighting a tiny smile. “Fine. But if you change your mind—”

“I won’t.”

He climbs under the covers and Bandit stretches out happily beside him. “Night, Cole.”

“Night.”

He turns the bedside lamp off, plunging the room into darkness, but I’m pretty sure I can still hear him smiling.

I shift a bit deeper into the uncomfortable chair and close my eyes stubbornly, but several minutes pass and sleep won’t come for me. I wait for Quin’s breathing to even out, then I take out my phone to see if Hart’s texted back. He hasn’t. I stare at the trail cam photo for a while, a cold chill spreading up my spine. This guy looks like the sort of person who would

strangle a girl to death. I wonder if that's how he was planning on killing Quin.

I turn my phone off. My eyes slowly adjust to the darkness, enough that I can make out Quin's sleeping form. Bandit is stretched out beside him, his paws twitching as he dreams.

Quin thinks he'll be safer at a hotel, but I'm not so sure. I swipe my phone open again and type "Quin McCarthy TV show Marble Brook hotel." Within two minutes of idle browsing, I've found a photo of his costar, Kel Winters, outside of the Marble Brook Inn.

Two minutes of browsing, and she's not even a huge celebrity.

Quin won't be any safer in a hotel. He'll just be easier to find.

The obvious solution is hovering at the edges of my mind, I just don't want to acknowledge it. I feel ill just thinking about it, literally sick to my stomach.

I look at Quin again, watching his chest rise and fall. I think of the blood on his palms and the fear in his eyes when he showed up on my door. Then I take out my phone and send a text to Candi.

[3:23]: I need you to open the chalet for me.

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23

QUIN

I wake to an incessant thumping sound and steady puffs of warm breath on my face. I open my eyes and Bandit's black nose is two inches from mine, his dark eyes locked in on my face. His tail thumps harder when he sees I'm awake.

"Hey, buddy," I say sleepily. "Have you been watching me all night?"

He licks my nose, which I'm going to take as a yes. I rub his muzzle for a while, and his soft, silky ears, then I push myself up onto my hands. My stomach plummets as all of my memories from last night hit me at once.

I rise and go to the window, which looks out over the front of Cole's house. It's a bright, sunny day, the snowy forest glittering cheerfully. The snow is tamped down where the trail starts off the driveway. I wonder if Ava Parsons' killer stood there last night. I think he must have. He was only a minute behind me. He must've turned around when he saw me go inside with Cole.

I wonder what time Cole got up, and if he slept at all last night in his chair.

A distant clatter from downstairs makes me jump. Bandit shoves his head into my palm and looks up at me impatiently.

"Alright, we'll go," I murmur. Bandit sprints to the door and bounces on his paws while he waits for me to change out of Cole's clothes. I leave them

on the bed reluctantly. My own clothes are wrinkled and smell of last night's fear.

Bandit leaves me behind in the hallway, which gives me a second to try to collect myself. There are so many emotions coursing through me right now, and at least half of them are centered around Cole. I'm still not sure I understand him at all, but when it counted—when I showed up on his doorstep last night, cold and afraid—he was there for me, no questions asked.

I take a deep breath and head downstairs.

I can hear Cole moving around in the back of the house, where the kitchen must be, but I linger for a moment in the living room. If you look past the dust and the faded furniture, it's actually a pretty cool space. It has a high ceiling and dark hardwood floors, and there's a huge stone fireplace with little nooks on either side of it that would be perfect for matching bookshelves. I know that because someone's already mapped them out, using green painter's tape to mark where the shelves would be. The tape must have been here a while, though, because it's hanging loose in several places. Someone planned to build shelves, and never followed through.

The whole place has the same eerie vibe, a renovation abruptly abandoned. There are dusty paint cans stacked near the wall, and the lamps on the end tables are still wrapped in plastic.

I follow the sound of Bandit's excited yips to the kitchen, where Cole is making coffee. He's fully dressed in dark pants and boots and a sweater, which makes me acutely aware of my bare feet and tangled hair.

"Morning," I say.

He sort of grunts in response, flicking his eyes toward me briefly. "Did Bandit wake you?"

"Not really. I was waking up anyway. Didn't really sleep well after—you know. Everything."

He grunts again. “Coffee’ll be ready soon. There’s not much food around, but you can eat whatever you want.”

“Right. Thanks.”

I wait a moment, but he still doesn’t look at me. The lines of his back are tense.

He crouches to scoop dog food into Bandit’s bowl while I move tentatively around the room. He wasn’t exaggerating about the food situation. The fridge has a carton of milk and a loaf of bread. The shelves have some protein bars and a jar of peanut butter.

I take a protein bar and lean on the edge of the counter to eat it. There’s a small kitchen table by the fridge, but it doesn’t have any chairs.

“Have you owned this place long?” I ask.

His shoulders stiffen. “Not really.”

“It’ll be nice once you finish it.”

“I’m not keeping it.”

I raise an eyebrow. His answer raises more questions—everything in this place raises more questions—but the set of his mouth warns against asking them. I shift on my feet. “Thanks for letting me stay here last night. And for everything else. I really appreciate it.”

He looks at me—finally—but his eyes are hard. It’s like we’ve time-traveled back a few weeks, and he’s only barely tolerating my presence. “It’s nothing.”

“It’s *not* nothing. I don’t know what I would have done if you weren’t here.”

He jerks his chin a little, so I know he’s heard me, but he doesn’t say anything in response. The silence stretches out, thick and awkward. The coffee isn’t quite done, but I turn toward the cabinet and start looking for a mug, just to have something to do. I find a cluster of mugs in the second cabinet I open and grab the nearest one.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Cole react, a tiny flinch he can't quite suppress. The mug in my hand is pale blue, with the letter 'C' painted on in white.

"Sorry," I say. "I'm guessing this is yours."

I hold it out to him, but he doesn't take it. I let out a heavy breath and put the mug down. I'm more disappointed than I'd like to admit. After everything that happened last night, I sort of thought—

Well. I got some ideas in my head, that's all.

I clear my throat. "You and Bandit will have the trail back to yourselves for the winter. I'm going to find a hotel in Marble Brook to stay at."

Cole stares at me for a moment, his jaw twitching like he's trying to stop himself from speaking. Then he looks away from me again and says sharply, "You can't go to a hotel."

"Well, I'm not staying at the cabin anymore. I'd rather not sit around every night waiting to get murdered." I say it like it's a joke, but an icy wave of fear swells up at the thought. That guy is still out there somewhere. He found me once—how long until he does it again?

Cole glares at me. "You think you'll be safer at a hotel? This is Marble Brook, not Monaco. None of those places have security. And everyone in town will know where you're staying about five minutes after you check in."

"It's still better than staying out here."

He raises his eyes to the ceiling, his jaw shifting again. "I've got a place you can stay."

"What?"

"I've got a place you can stay," he repeats. "My family has a house by the ski hill. It's in a gated community, and it has a security system."

I stare at him. "I can't stay at your family's place."

"Why not? There's no one else using it. And there are houses around it, neighbors or whatever. It's safer than a hotel."

I hesitate for so long that Bandit looks up from his bowl, staring at me like he can hear the gears turning in my head.

“I don’t want to put your family out,” I say finally.

“You aren’t. And my father’s annoying PA is already getting it ready for you, so you might as well use it.”

His tone is rude. The words are not. How early did he wake up, to arrange all of this for me?

I know I should probably say no, but there isn’t any part of me that wants to. I would feel better staying somewhere with security. And—might as well admit it—I want a place that will keep me connected to Cole.

“Well—okay,” I say. “Yeah. Thank you.”

He nods rigidly. “What time are you done work? I can meet you after and show you where it is.”

“Probably around four. I should get going, actually. I need to be there soon.”

“I’ll drive you to Mary’s,” Cole says, then scowls like he can’t believe he’s said it.

A tiny smile tugs at my lips. This version of Cole, the one covering up kind favors with irritation…it’s giving me ideas again. “I don’t want to put you out,” I say, just to see if I can make him repeat the offer.

His scowl deepens like he knows what I’m doing. “Don’t do that.”

“Do what?” I say innocently.

He heaves a long-suffering sigh and turns away from me. “Come on, Bandit,” he says. “Time to go.”

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24

COLE

The entirety of the Marble Brook RCMP station could fit in the foyer of my father's smallest house. Its five parking spaces are all taken, so I'm forced to park next door at the library. I lock the car doors, just in case anyone gets any ideas about stealing Quin's suitcases from the back seat, and make the short walk to the station, squinting in the winter sun.

There are three people ahead of me in line, two angry elderly women who want to complain about the subpar service of the local snowplow and a teen who needs to be fingerprinted for his after-school job. This is the kind of shit this place is equipped to deal with, not actual dangerous crimes.

I'm still waiting for the teen to stop talking when Hart emerges from the back rooms. His expression curdles when he sees me. I'm sure my face looks exactly the same.

"Did you get the picture I sent you?" I demand, before he can turn away.

He flicks a sharp look at the teen and the receptionist, who are staring at us, then lets out a tetchy breath. "Come on back."

I follow him to a small office with a desk and a bunch of filing cabinets. He sits down at the desk and makes a show of closing the open files on his computer, as if I could possibly care about whatever minor "crimes" he's working on. There's a chair opposite his, but he doesn't invite me to sit.

“It would be helpful,” he says tersely, “if you could refrain from shouting about open cases in public.”

“Have you found the guy from the picture yet or not?”

“Have I tracked down an average-looking man based on a single blurry trail cam photo you sent me six hours ago? No, Cole. I have not.”

“It’s not that blurry. You can see his face clear as fucking day.”

I usually get the sense that Hart wants to punch me. Right now, I think he might want to strangle me instead.

I know the feeling.

“It’s a photo,” he says. “It’s not magic. It’s going to take time to find him.”

“If you’re even trying.”

His eyes flash. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Just that your people don’t have the best track record for looking into crimes.”

“Real crimes, you mean?” he retorts. “Or ones you’ve invented in your head?”

My hands lock into fists. What I wouldn’t give, to break open his fucking face—

“This is a real crime,” I snap. “It’s a bunch of real crimes. That guy strangled a woman and broke into Quin’s house and tracked him through the woods. And you’re sitting here doing nothing about it.”

“Why do you care so much?” Hart demands. “Is Quin McCarthy a friend of yours?”

I remember the smell of Quin’s hair and the way his shoulders shook when he cried into my shoulder.

“No,” I say. “But that creepy fuck trespassed on my land, and you need to do something about it.”

“Well, if you’re here to file a trespassing complaint, consider it done. Otherwise, all I can tell you is that the investigation is ongoing and that

we'll be following process as we see fit."

"So doing shit all, then."

I'm looking into his eyes when I say it, and I see the moment his temper snaps. Without meaning to, I take a step backward. Not because I'm scared of Hart, but because he suddenly reminds me so much of my father. When something pisses my father off, he doesn't rage or shout, he just goes very still, with this eerie, remote sort of look in his eyes. Hart loses his temper the exact same way.

"This is not appropriate," he says, very quietly. "I know you're used to getting your way, shelling out daddy's money whenever you don't get what you want, and I let you get away with it three years ago. But this is a real crime, Cole, with real victims and a real suspect. And I will *not* let you interfere with it. If you find any further evidence—actual evidence, not crackpot theories or unhinged gut feelings—you will bring it to me. You will not harass my colleagues, or shout about sensitive information in the middle of our station. You will let this investigation proceed unhindered, or I will bring you in for obstruction of justice. Do I make myself clear?"

My jaw spasms so hard it makes my teeth creak. There are a lot of things I'd like to say to him right now, and several knuckles I'd like to break his face with, but I know he's serious about arresting me, and that the only way I'll get out of it if he does is by calling my father's lawyers.

With monstrous effort, I keep my mouth shut.

"That's what I thought," Harts says coolly, then he turns pointedly to his computer. "You can go now."

I swallow down fifty or sixty more insults and turn away.

"Oh, and Cole?" I pause in the doorway, and look back in time to see his cold smile. "Feel free to send me a thank you card when I wrap this case up properly, using actual police work."

BACK IN MY car in the library parking lot, I spend several minutes contemplating Hart's death. I'm not sure my father's lawyers could get me out of a murder charge, but I despise Hart enough to wonder about it for a while.

Fucking Hart. There's no way he won't screw up this investigation.

I take out my phone and pull up the trail cam photo from last night. It is a little blurry, but the guy's facial features are still clear. Thick, straight eyebrows, a narrow jaw, a nose that's been broken more than once. He even has a gross little soul patch. It's the kind of face they use in police procedurals when they want to make sure that the audience will recognize the bad guy. And in a place as small as Marble Brook? Slap this photo on a few dozen telephone poles and you'd get his name and address in half an hour.

Actually, that's not a bad idea.

I get out of my car and head into the library, a boxy brick building that probably hasn't been renovated since the seventies. It's disconcertingly busy for ten in the morning, but there's a free computer with a printer in the corner. It takes me five minutes to make up a poster, and another five to convince the librarian to give me a roll of packing tape.

As I turn to leave, a warm voice says, "Cole?"

My body reacts before my brain does, muscles clenching and blood running cold. I turn around and see Magda, the owner of the Marble Brook bookstore. She has more wrinkles around her eyes than she did the last time I saw her, but the gray hair and horn-rimmed glasses are exactly the same.

"It is you!" she says brightly. "How are you? It's been too long."

"I'm fine," I say curtly.

She gives me a warm, aren't-you-brave smile that makes me want to scream. "Are you here for the holidays?"

"Uh—yeah."

“Are you staying with Clara’s parents? I haven’t seen them in, gosh, a few years now.”

Something sharp twists beneath my sternum. “They don’t live here anymore.”

I also haven’t heard a single word from them in three years, but I’m not going to tell Magda that.

She starts to speak again, but I talk over her. “I’ve got to run.”

She puts her hand on my arm. “Have a good holiday, dear. Stop by the store if you get the chance. It might be nice, you know. Relive all those good memories.”

I stare at her incredulously. I think she really means it.

I turn away from her before I can say anything I’ll regret, bitterness and anger burning like acid in my throat. *All those good memories*. I walk away quickly, like I can outrun her words.

Back in my car, though, all those good memories come for me. The quiet jingle of the doorbell as customers came and went. The cracked leather of the armchair where I’d sit in the back. The solemn look in Clara’s eyes when she told me this time, *this* time, she was really only buying one. The massive god damn stack of books she left with the last time we went there together.

My chest starts to tighten; my skin is too hot. I press my forehead into the steering wheel and take several deep breaths before panic can take hold. I think of nothing, and of no one, and after a few long, painful minutes, I can almost breathe again.

All I want to do is go home to Bandit and run the trail with him until I throw up. Instead, I grab the stack of posters I made and head back out onto the street to plaster them on every surface I can find.

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QUIN

“That is the scariest, most romantic story I’ve ever heard in my fucking life,” Kel says.

We’re sitting together at the kitchen table of her character’s house, where we’ve been filming for most of the day. I told her the story between takes, keeping my voice low so no one else could hear.

“I’ll give you scariest,” I say. “Not so sure about romantic.”

“Are you kidding me? Cole went full-on superhero mode to protect you. Don’t tell me you don’t think that’s hot.”

I attempt a smile, but it doesn’t come out right.

Kel’s eyes soften. She reaches across the table to grip my arm. “Hey,” she says, gentler. “It’s going to be okay. The police have got a photo of him now. They’ll track him down in no time.”

“Yeah.” I nod. “Probably.”

“And in the meantime, you can crash with me. We can watch movies and eat pizza and film a sex tape with Corbin.”

I crack a real smile. “God, no.”

“Okay, fine, no sex tape. But you should stay with me, or at least get a room at the same hotel. You can’t go back to that creepy cabin alone.”

“No, I know. Cole said I could stay at his family’s place in town.”

Her eyes light up. “Of *course* he did.”

“It’s not a big deal. It’s some chalet they own by the ski hill. He said there’s no one using it.”

“Oh, right. Because that’s a totally normal, non-romantic thing to do for someone.”

I flush. “It’s not like that.”

Kel frowns. “Didn’t he proposition you in the bathroom at that party?”

“Yeah, but that was just, like, a hate sex thing. I think—”

“What?”

“I don’t know.” I remember the way Cole flinched when I took the wrong coffee mug. “I think he’s kind of…damaged. I think he went through some terrible break-up.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah. Or—”

“What?”

I hesitate. “I think he may have been with someone who died.”

I’ve been thinking about it all day, ever since I looked around Cole’s living room. It’s the only thing that makes sense to me. If the smiling girl in the video had dumped him or cheated on him or broken his heart, it might’ve turned him off of relationships. It might’ve made him want to sleep around and disparage love and commitment.

I’m not sure it would explain the half-finished house.

“I can’t find anything about it online,” I say, “but his place in the woods, it’s like he bought it with someone, started to renovate it, and then just *stopped*. There was this dried-up can of paint in the bathroom with a paintbrush still stuck in it, like someone walked away from it one day and never touched it again. It feels like everything’s been left exactly where it was after some huge tragedy.”

“Fuck,” Kel says. “That’s awful.”

“Yeah. I don’t know if I’m right. Maybe he’s just too rich to clean stuff up, I don’t know. But it’s weird.”

Kel wrinkles her nose. “You think that’s why he always acts like such an asshole? If he lost someone important…that kind of grief can seriously mess you up. When my dad died in middle school, I became a cheerleader.”

“Seriously?”

“Yep. For two years, I went around acting like this boppy *High School Musical* star, because I thought that’s what my dad would have wanted. Like, if I acted like the type of girl I always thought he wanted me to be, it would bring him back somehow. Which obviously doesn’t make any sense, but it made sense to my messed-up grieving brain. You know?”

I nod a bit uncertainly. I’ve never lost anyone before.

“Maybe acting like a dick is Cole’s version of cheerleading,” she says.

“Or maybe I’m wrong and he’s just sort of a dick.”

“I don’t think you’d be into him if you really believed he was a bad person,” Kel says. “And if you are into him, you should just go for it. What’s the worst that could happen?”

“Right now? He gets pissed and throws me out of his house, and Ava Parsons’ killer murders me in the street.”

“If he throws you out, you come stay with me,” Kel corrects. “And we get a bottle of champagne to celebrate when the police catch that guy. And then we have—”

“Don’t say a threesome with Corbin.”

“I wasn’t going to!” She laughs, loud and bright, and it eases some of the fear in my chest.

“Thanks, Kel.”

“Of course.” She glances behind me. “Hey, look. Maybe we’ll be popping that champagne sooner than we think.”

I turn around. Officer Hart is standing in the doorway, looking handsome in his RCMP uniform.

“Quin?” he says politely. “Can I have a quick word?”

“Um—yeah, sure.”

I rise to my feet and follow him from the room, shooting an apologetic look at Corbin, who frowns and says, “We’re about to lose the light.”

“I’ll be quick,” I promise him.

I follow Officer Hart to the front of the house, wincing slightly as we step into the cold.

“I just wanted to check in and see how you were doing,” he says.

“I’m alright. Just—you know. Sort of freaked out.”

He nods. “Understandable. Don’t worry, though. We’ll track him down. You haven’t seen anything unusual today, have you?”

“No.”

“And there were no issues last night? At Cole’s?” He grimaces a little when he says Cole’s name, like it tastes bad on his tongue.

“No, nothing. Do you think the picture he found will help? The one from the trail cam?”

His face darkens. “The picture, yes. The barrage of phone calls we’ve gotten from his little stunt with it, no.”

“What’d you mean?”

He breathes out hard through his nose. “Cole took it upon himself to plaster that photo all over town. I’m sure I don’t have to tell you how unhelpful it is having our work interrupted every five minutes by demented elderly women who are adamant they saw the same man two years ago at a gas station.”

“Oh. Yeah, I guess.” I rub my bare arms, trying not to shiver. “Couldn’t it be useful, though? I mean, if someone actually recognizes him?”

Officer Hart makes a noncommittal sound. “These days, everyone who’s watched a true crime series on Netflix thinks they’re a detective. It can muddy the waters, people calling in with hunches and theories and wrong information.”

“Right. I get that.”

“We did get a lead off the highway cameras,” he adds. “A red Camry heading to and from your place around the right time frame. The plate is registered to a woman in St. John’s who reported it stolen a few months ago. It’s a good lead.”

He smiles at me encouragingly, and I try to smile back. A better lead, I think, would be the guy’s name and address.

“Quin!” Corbin scowls at us through the door. “We need you back here.”

“Coming,” I say. “I should go,” I tell Hart. “Unless there’s anything else you needed from me?”

“No, I just wanted to check in. You found another place to stay?”

“Um—yeah.” I don’t dare tell him that it’s Cole’s place.

“Good. I’ll be in touch if there are any updates.”

“Thanks.” He smiles and turns to leave, but before he can, I hear myself say, “Officer Hart?”

“You can just call me Hart.”

“Right. Can I ask you something?”

“Sure thing,” he says, smiling.

“You mentioned you went to school with Cole.”

His smile drops away. “Yes.”

“I just wondered—” I hesitate, unsure how to phrase it. “I wondered if you knew anything about a girl he used to date. Sort of tall, with curly dark hair—”

“Why? What did he say?”

I blink at his sharp tone. “He didn’t say anything. I just saw a video of them together, but I couldn’t find anything online about her. I wondered if she was someone he knew from here.”

“Oh.” He relaxes. “Yeah, she was.”

“Do you know what happened with her? I mean, with them?”

He frowns at me, his expression cautious. “Why do you want to know?”

It’s a good question. “I don’t know. It just seems like—I mean, Cole didn’t say anything, but I get the feeling something weird went down.”

He studies me. “You and Cole…you’re friends?”

Another good question. “No,” I say, after a beat. “I barely know him. Other than what I’ve seen on TV.”

I make a little face after I say it, like I don’t like what I’ve seen. I know it’s a bit manipulative, but I have a feeling Hart is too polite to share his true feelings with someone he thinks is Cole’s friend.

His shoulders relax a bit more. “What you see on TV is a pretty good representation. He’s not a good person. You know anything about his father?”

“A little,” I say, with a real grimace this time.

“Yeah, well, the saying is true—the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.”

Corbin raps hard on the door, glowering at me. I hold up a finger to tell him I’m coming.

“What about the girl?” I say quickly. “Was she from here?”

“Yeah,” Hart says. “She was.” He pauses again. “Her name was Clara.”

Clara. That pale blue coffee mug marked with a ‘C’.

“She grew up in St. John’s, but her family moved here when she was fourteen. She and I were together for a couple of years.” Hart’s mouth curves up for a moment, like he’s remembering her, then it curls down again. “Then she dated Cole.”

That certainly explains some of their enmity. “Were they together long? He’s never talked about her.”

“Well, he wouldn’t,” Hart says. “Not when it’s his fault she died.”

My stomach drops. “What?”

The front door swings open and Corbin storms outside. “Quin! We’ve got, like, two minutes of light left, come on.”

“I’ll let you go,” Hart says. “Call if you need anything.”

What I need is to know exactly what happened with Cole and Clara, but it's too late—Hart is already walking to his car.

"Come *on*," Corbin says.

I spare one despairing look at Hart's retreating form, then I swallow down all of my questions and head back inside.

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QUIN

Corbin is right—we lose the light. We end up re-shooting two scenes from the beginning, doing everything from scratch so the lighting will be consistent.

With enormous effort, I put Hart and Cole and Clara from my mind, because I think Corbin might kill me if I drag the shoot out any longer. By six o'clock, he's pleased with me again, gripping me warmly by the shoulder and praising my "quiet intensity."

"And you," he says, turning to Kel with an effusive smile. "Your emotion, your honesty—positively effervescent."

Kel shoots me an amused smile, which I try to return. Really, though, I'm just thinking about Cole, and the girl Hart thinks died because of him. My mind is racing with possibilities. A car accident where Cole was driving. A skiing accident where she was going too fast to try to keep up with him. Or maybe Hart is exaggerating and it wasn't really Cole's fault at all. He did say he dated her before Cole, maybe his viewpoint is a bit skewed. Maybe Clara was driving to meet Cole somewhere and got in an accident on the way. Or maybe she died on a trip they went on together, and Hart thinks that if they hadn't gone, Clara would still be alive.

I don't know, and it's making me crazy thinking about it. It also makes me deeply, profoundly sad, thinking about Cole and his half-finished house.

He must have bought it with her. All of those unpacked boxes must be full of her stuff.

As we turn into the parking lot back at headquarters, an excited gasp from our AD, Jennie, pulls me out of my thoughts.

“Oh my god, is that Cole Milton?” she says, slowing the car down to peer out the window.

It is. Cole is in our parking lot, leaning cross-armed against his Land Rover with Bandit at his side.

“I am *such* a big F1 fan,” Jennie says, driving past them to find a parking spot. “I wonder what he’s doing here.”

“He’s here for me,” I admit. “I know him a little.”

“Oh, man. That’s so cool. Do you think he’d sign something for me?”

I glance toward him and see the stony look on his face. “Um—maybe some other time. Have a good night, yeah?”

“Yeah,” she says, disappointed. “You, too.”

My nerves thrum as I head toward Cole. He doesn’t look particularly pleased to see me. Bandit, on the other hand, loses his mind with excitement and greets me by leaping into my arms.

“Hey, handsome,” I say, stumbling under his weight. “Have you been waiting for me long?”

The question is partly for Cole, who I can’t bring myself to look at directly. I’m acutely aware that I know something about him that he didn’t tell me, and probably doesn’t want me to know, and I can’t help thinking he’ll see it on my face.

“You said you’d be done at four, and it’s six,” he says. “So, yeah. We’ve been waiting long.”

I wince. “Sorry. We ran late. I would’ve texted, but I don’t have your number.”

He grunts in acknowledgment, then beckons for Bandit to get back in the car.

“A normal person would offer me their number now,” I point out.

“Follow one of them home, then,” Cole replies. He closes the door behind Bandit. “I’ll wait for you out on the road.”

My nerves resurface as I follow his car across town. I keep thinking of what Kel said, that I wouldn’t be into someone if I really thought they were a bad person. This morning, waking up in the clothes Cole gave me, in the bedroom he let me sleep in, I would have said with reasonable confidence that he was a good person, deep down. But Officer Hart is a good person, too, and he thinks Cole is responsible for a woman’s death.

And what if he didn’t mean it in an abstract way, like an accident Cole could have prevented? What if he meant it in an evil billionaire way, like a girl vanishing in the woods and Cole’s expensive lawyers claiming he had nothing to do with it?

I chew anxiously on my bottom lip and almost run into the back of Cole’s car when he puts his blinker on. He turns onto a street near the ski hill and drives a little way up the mountain to a gate with a security hut.

A young guy in uniform steps out and talks to him, then the gates open to let us both through. Beyond the gates, there’s a wide, winding street lined with houses. They’re very nice, but not obnoxiously so, and the whole street has a friendly, lived-in feel. A woman and her son are building a snowman on one lawn while a group of older kids have a snowball fight on another.

Cole pulls into the driveway of a home near the end of the street. I was expecting something huge and pretentious, but it’s not that much bigger than the others around it. It looks a bit more expensive, with its high, peaked roof and gleaming windows, but as I step out of my car, the first word that springs to my mind is *cozy*.

The front door, which is decorated with an elaborate Christmas wreath, swings open. A stunning blonde woman I recognize from the ski hill gala steps out, followed by an equally stunning blond man in a dark sweatshirt and jeans.

“Mr. McCarthy,” the woman says brightly. “Welcome to The Chalet!”

She says it with capital letters, just like Cole warned me she would. “The stupidest name in the world,” he called it, but now that I’m standing in front of the place, I have to admit that it fits.

“Thanks,” I say awkwardly. I glance back at Cole, but he’s taking his sweet time getting out of his car.

“I’m Candi,” the woman says. “Mr. Milton’s PA. And this is Porter Collins, one of our security liaisons.”

She says it with a smile, like it’s totally normal for a family to have multiple security liaisons.

“Nice to meet you. I’m sorry to put you out.”

“Oh, not at all! This place is amazing, it was such fun to open it up again for you.” She leans down to greet Bandit, who Cole has finally let out of the car. He seems happy enough to see them, licking Candi’s face and rubbing his head on Porter’s legs. Cole looks significantly less pleased, and greets them both with a stiff nod.

“The security system is up and running,” Candi says. “And Porter will be staying next door.”

“Oh.” I glance uncertainly at the house next door.

“He’s very discreet,” Candi says. “You’ll forget he’s even here.”

Porter inclines his head in agreement. Not a chatty man, I don’t think.

“Please, go inside,” Candi says. “I’ll give you a tour.”

She waves us into the warm, well-lit entranceway and chats quietly with Porter on the doorstep while we take off our shoes and coats. I sneak another look at them as I pull off my boots. I’ve met a lot of good-looking people in my life, but Candi and Porter might outshine the lot of them. If they were actors, Porter would be cast as the rugged bodyguard who defuses a bomb without spilling his old-fashioned, and Candi would be his supermodel girlfriend with a heart of gold.

I glance at Cole to see if he's checking them out, too, but he's staring at the inside of the house with all the color drained out of his face.

I touch his arm. "Are you okay?"

He flinches away from me. "I'm fine."

I'm not sure why he bothers lying. Anyone in their right mind could see that he's upset. Bandit is sticking close to him, like he knows it, too.

Candi comes back inside alone and leads us deeper into the house with a wave of her perfectly manicured hand. The inside of the house is like the set of a Hallmark Christmas movie, but decked out with a few hundred thousand dollars' worth of furniture and abstract art. The main floor is made up of a gleaming kitchen designed for entertaining, a huge guest bedroom with an ensuite bathroom, and a large living room with massive couches arranged around a wood-burning fireplace. There's a flawlessly-decorated, twelve-foot-tall Christmas tree by the windows, and a garland on the mantle.

"I wasn't sure which holiday you prefer to celebrate, if any," Candi says to me. "I can alter anything that you don't like."

"No, it's great," I say politely, while Cole stares at the tree like it might be poisonous.

Candi takes us up a glossy stairwell to a large, open-concept space with more couches, another fireplace, and glass doors that open onto a wide balcony at the back of the house.

"The ski hill's just there," Candi says, pointing. "If you'd like to spend some time there while you're here, I can arrange equipment for you. Did Cole give you my cell phone number? Here, let me put it in your phone. I'll give you Porter's number, too."

I glance back at Cole as she puts the numbers into my phone. He's standing in the center of the room, looking strangely small in the space. Bandit is sitting beside him with his head pressed against Cole's leg.

“The master bedroom is on the left there, and the master bath,” Candi says. “And your room is over here on the right. Did you need me to bring your things over from Moose Lake, Cole?”

He stiffens. “I’m not staying.”

It surprises me, though I’m not sure why. He never told me he was going to stay here with me. I probably shouldn’t feel as disappointed as I do.

Candi shows me the guest bedroom, a large, beautiful space where my suitcases have been laid out, then offers me the use of a private chef, a personal trainer, and a stylist, all of which I turn down. She heads out shortly afterward with a cheerful, “Text or call if you need anything!”

The door closes behind her, leaving Cole, Bandit and me alone in the entranceway. Cole’s jaw is clenched so tightly it must hurt, and the muscles of his shoulders are bunched under his shirt.

I take a nervous breath. “Cole—”

“You have everything you need?” he interrupts, looking somewhere to the left of my face.

My shoulders fall. “Yeah.”

He nods. “Text Candi if you need anything.”

I watch silently as he pulls on his jacket and shoes, struggling with the maelstrom of emotions in my chest. I wonder if Cole hates this place so much because he used to stay here with Clara. I wonder if he blames himself for her death, like Hart does.

I can’t stand not knowing what happened to her. And I can’t stand seeing the pain in Cole’s eyes, or thinking of him going back to that half-finished cottage all by himself.

“I want to walk Bandit,” I say abruptly.

He stares at me. “What?”

I lift my chin stubbornly. “I didn’t get to walk him this morning. I want to walk him before you go.”

“It’s already dark out.”

“There are streetlights. Plus, he wants to go. Right, buddy? Want to go for a walk?”

Bandit’s ears have been perked up since I said the word the first time. Asking the question directly kicks him into overdrive. He rushes to the door and looks expectantly at Cole.

Cole heaves a sigh. “Fine. One quick walk.”

I smile. “One quick walk.”

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COLE

I've never gotten mad at Bandit before. Even when I have to discipline him, like when he tries to chase after deer or eat treats out of the bins at the pet store, I'm never actually angry. Right now, though, I'm seriously contemplating a trip to the pound.

Actually, no. That's not true. I don't even like thinking that inside of my head. I would never get rid of Bandit.

He is a traitor, though.

He's practically fused to Quin's side as we walk around the neighborhood, shoving his head against Quin's hand to get rubs and sitting beside him obediently whenever we reach a crosswalk. You could take a picture of him and label it "Dog Entranced", and people would swoon over how cute it was.

It *is* really fucking cute, which makes it even more infuriating.

"So, what's the deal with Candi and Porter?" Quin asks.

"What'd you mean?"

"I mean, do they live here in Marble Brook all the time?"

I snort. "God, no. Candi only unplasters herself from my father's side when she absolutely has to. She was in New York with him yesterday. She and Porter flew in this morning on my father's jet."

“Shit, really?” Quin winces. “That must’ve cost a lot of money. And if Porter’s staying here all winter, just to live next to me—”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“I will, though.” He switches Bandit’s leash from one hand to the other. He isn’t wearing gloves, and his hands must be freezing. “I have money, I can pay him.”

“Porter charges a hundred thousand dollars a week.”

Quin actually stops walking to stare at me. “Are you serious?”

“Mm.”

“That’s more than five million dollars a year.”

“Good math.” I pull off my gloves and hand them to him, tired of watching him shiver. He stares at them for a moment before taking them. “Former Russian assassins don’t come cheap.”

His eyes widen. “You’re messing with me.”

“Nope. I’m pretty sure ‘Porter Collins’ didn’t actually exist until a few years ago.”

Quin whistles. “That’s wild. Is it bad that I think he’s really hot?”

“Probably. But if you’re worried about anything while you’re here, call him first. He’s a lot more competent than the Marble Brook police.”

We walk for another moment in silence, then Quin says, in a strange, offhand tone, “Officer Hart actually came by the set today.”

I grimace. “What did he want?”

“Just checking in, I guess. He was kind of mad about the posters you put up.”

“I hoped he might be.”

He glances sideways at me. “You two have a lot of history.”

“Is that a question?”

He gives me a dry look. “Yes.”

I exhale slowly, watching my breath disappear into the night. “We went to school together for a few years. He’s a dick.”

“You think everyone’s a dick.”

“No, I don’t.”

He arches an eyebrow. “Name one person that you like, besides me.”

“If you think I like you, you’re delusional.”

He laughs, like he knows I’m lying. “You do like me. I don’t know why you’re bothering to pretend that you don’t.” I roll my eyes like I think he’s crazy, but it only makes him laugh again. “But seriously,” he says, in a different tone, “what’s the deal with you and Hart? He seems to really hate you.”

My stomach tightens. The deal with Hart is that he dated Clara before I did. They were together for a couple of years in junior high—a very serious relationship, at that age—before she realized what a jerk he was. It took her a while to notice because he did it in such a sneaky way. He’s the kind of guy who showers his girlfriend with praise and attention when things are going his way, then turns on her in a heartbeat. Clara used to call him The Nice Guy, and she didn’t mean it as a compliment. Hart always saw himself as the hero of the story, and anyone who went against him had to be the villain.

But I’m not going to tell Quin any of that, so I settle for a different truth, instead. “Hart’s father worked at the paper mill here. He lost his job after my father sold it off.”

“Oh.” A little crease appears on Quin’s forehead and my heart rate ticks up anxiously. I wonder if Hart already told him about Clara. I realize, in the same moment, how badly I don’t want Quin to know. I want him to keep looking at me like he did last night, like I was the hero in his story.

Maybe I’m more like Nathan Hart than I think.

“Cole—” Quin starts.

“We should get back,” I interrupt. “I’m starving.”

He looks at me again with that little wrinkle in his brow, then he looks down at his hands, warm and snug in my gloves. When he meets my eye

again, his gaze is hopeful. “Are you staying for dinner?”

Bandit looks up at me, too, like he’d also like to know.

It’s really not fair, the two of them ganging up on me like this.

I open my mouth to say “no,” but instead, I hear myself say, “If you want me to.”

THE KITCHEN IS STOCKED with what Candi called “the basics”, which apparently includes Kobe Wagyu steak, Beluga caviar and Egoleum olive oil. I make grilled cheese sandwiches with smoked cheddar and truffle oil, for lack of any better ideas, and try to ignore the way Quin smiles as he watches me cook.

I eat standing up by the counter while he sits at the kitchen table with one leg drawn up into his chest, feeding Bandit bits of his crust when he thinks I’m not looking. Bandit’s tail wags hard on the floor and Quin smiles at him like the two of them are sharing a secret.

I seriously need to get out of here.

“You can keep Bandit here with you,” I say, as I pull my boots on at the front door. I’m trying not to notice the way Quin’s hands are twisted in the hem of his shirt, or the nervous glances he keeps darting at the windows.

“You’re not scared of sleeping out there alone?”

I honestly hadn’t thought about it. To be scared of something like that, you probably have to give a shit whether you live or die. “I’ll be fine.”

“Okay,” he says quietly.

The corners of his mouth are tugged down, resigned but unhappy. I know how safe he is here, with Porter next door and a security system that rivals most casino vaults, but to Quin, this is just a big, unfamiliar empty house.

I can’t stay with him, though. I can’t spend another second in this house where I used to be happy. It’s like being inside my own personal house of horrors, endless memories chasing me from room to room. I can’t stay here. Quin will be fine on his own.

“Do you want me to stay?”

If I didn’t feel my mouth move, I wouldn’t believe it was me that said it. Quin’s eyes light up, and I’m fucked, I’m really, truly fucked.

“Will you?” he says.

No. Absolutely not. I’d rather die.

“Yeah,” my mouth answers. “Fine.”

I SHOWER in the guest bathroom downstairs, which is the safest place in the house, since we never really used it. I’ll spend the night down here, too, not in the master bedroom, where we used to sleep.

I get dressed in the same t-shirt and boxers I’ve worn all day, for lack of anything else to wear, then I drag my feet upstairs to make sure Quin doesn’t need anything. The second floor living room taunts me as I pass through it, needling me with memories of bright laughter and Christmas music.

Bandit has made himself at home in Quin’s bedroom, stretched out happily on the bed beside him. I’m not entirely prepared for the sight of Quin in his own pajamas, a thin gray t-shirt that clings to his chest and red flannel pants.

“You good?” I say curtly.

He nods uncertainly. He’s biting into his lower lip, a nervous habit of his. Quin’s not actually a small guy—he’s only an inch or two shorter than me, and he has the lean, defined musculature of a runner—but he looks small right now in the room’s king-sized bed.

“I’m downstairs if you need anything,” I say.

He doesn’t answer me. He doesn’t have to. I know what he wants. I can see it in those wide brown eyes.

He can want it all he likes. I’m not staying up here with him. I won’t.

“Move over,” I say.

His whole face brightens. “Really?”

“Are you moving, or not?”

He flashes those god damn dimples at me and nudges Bandit out of the way. Bandit barely moves, leaving less than a foot of space between me and Quin. It’s not enough. A whole house wouldn’t be enough.

“You can get the lights,” I say rudely, turning my back on him. I can practically hear him smiling as he climbs out of bed to lock the door and turn the lights off. When he gets back in bed again, the space between us shrinks to a few inches. I can feel him looking at me, but I don’t turn around.

“Good night,” he says after a moment.

I manage a grunt in response. Calling this a good night would be a ridiculous lie. I can’t believe how quickly I’m spiraling. I’m making bad decision after bad decision, and for what? To ease the fear in some annoying actor’s eyes? It’s ridiculous, and horrible, and I need to get a hold of myself, fast.

Instead, I listen to Quin’s breathing, and feel ridiculously pleased with myself when it settles into sleep. After everything that happened yesterday, he needs a good night’s rest, and I care about that, apparently, because I’m the world’s biggest moron.

I didn’t sleep at all last night, myself. I sat up in that uncomfortable chair at the cottage, watching the bedroom door instead of Quin, half-hoping the murderous asshole who scared him would break in so I could beat his face in.

I’ve been exhausted all day, but I know I won’t be able to sleep. Not with Quin’s warm body beside me and the familiar smells of The Chalet in

the air, fire smoke and cedar and overpriced cotton sheets.

I must doze off at some point, though, because I'm stirred from a restless sleep by a series of soft, low noises. It takes me a moment to realize they're coming from Quin, and another to connect them to the heat low in my groin. I roll over and see Quin on his side, facing me, his sleeping brow furrowed and his breathing slightly shallow.

Fuck me. I cannot lie here while Quin has a sex dream. I literally don't think I'll survive it.

Then he jolts awake, his eyes huge in the darkness, and I realize it wasn't a sex dream at all.

For a moment, he's still trapped in his nightmare, and he flinches with fear when he sees me beside him.

"It's okay," I say. "You're safe, come here."

The words just slip out, like a reflex. And then it's too late to take them back, because he's reaching for me blearily and shifting into my arms.

I'm not prepared for his warm weight, or the way that his body molds against mine. I'm not prepared for my own response, my arms wrapping around him without my permission, my fingers curling protectively in his hair.

"Nightmare?" says a voice that sounds like mine.

"Yeah," he mumbles.

His eyes flutter closed; I feel his eyelashes brush my skin. My free hand moves of its own accord, stroking up and down his back. The muscles at the base of his neck are tense and knotted. I know what that feels like. I carry tension there myself. My trainer, Clarissa—one of the only people at Dark Force I don't actively despise—is always complaining about it, and digging her knuckles into my neck before races.

I find the worst knots of tension beneath Quin's skin and press down on them, holding pressure until they shift and release. He makes a low noise I can't blame on a nightmare, and shifts closer to me, tucking his head right

under my chin. His breathing settles into sleep again almost immediately, slow, deep breaths that reverberate in my own chest. His leg is tucked over mine, his thigh pressing into my groin.

I stare up at the ceiling and try to remember how to breathe.

It's ridiculous, because it hasn't even been that long since I've been with anyone. I slept with a woman, a model, the night after qualifying in Abu Dhabi. Although "slept with" is probably the wrong phrase. We had sex on a sofa in the private room of a club, and I left as soon as it was over. Which sounds cold, but believe me, she was more than happy to see the back of me. I would never sleep with anyone who actually liked me, or who wanted me to stick around after the sex was done. I'm something of an expert at finding awful people to sleep with, narcissists who thinks it's their due to fuck a rich F1 driver or bored socialites looking for an hour's distraction. People I want out of my sight the moment the sex is over.

I wouldn't want Quin out of my sight, if we ever slept together. I wouldn't want him out of my arms. I'd want to stay with him for hours, exploring every inch of his soft, warm skin.

He shifts a little in his sleep, making a soft, happy sound that makes me wonder what other noises I could wring out of him. It's the worst possible train of thought to follow right now, but I've clearly lost control of my damn mind.

I take a deep, slow breath through my nose, letting the familiar smells remind me of all the things I've lost, and all the things I don't deserve to have. It helps, a little, but no matter how many times I tell myself to shift away from Quin, my muscles won't listen.

So I just lie there, holding him and wanting him and hating it, until sleep finally comes for me.

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QUIN

The first dream I had last night was absolutely awful.

I was in the woods again, running from Ava Parsons' killer, but the air was sticky and thick, like it was made of molasses. I kept trying to fight through it, thrashing and staggering, but the harder I fought, the thicker it grew, and I could hear footsteps behind me growing louder and louder.

And then I woke up, and Cole was there, and he was pulling me into his arms.

My second dream of the night was a whole lot better.

I don't remember all of it. It was one of those dreams filled with random stuff that makes perfect sense to your sleeping mind. I was late for a wedding, and I was standing at my apartment door, trying to leave, but I couldn't, because Cole's mouth was on my neck and his hand was on my dick. Not moving, just holding me firmly through my clothes while he dragged his lips and teeth and tongue over my throat. I kept saying, "I have to go"—not really meaning it—and he kept laughing and saying, "Then go, I'm not stopping you."

Needless to say, I woke up with my pulse throbbing and my breath coming fast. I was relieved and disappointed when I realized I was in bed alone. Cole and Bandit were gone, and the sheets around me were cold.

I slipped out of bed and went straight to the shower, and now I'm standing in the kitchen, fully dressed, watching Cole make a pot of coffee and pretending I didn't come with his name on my lips about ten minutes ago.

"What time do you have to be at work?" he asks, crouching to take the tennis ball from Bandit's mouth. He's been playing with Bandit all morning, using him to avoid looking at me.

"Nine," I say. "I should be done earlier today, though. Things are wrapping up. Tomorrow's the last day of filming before the holidays."

Cole nods stiffly. "Are you going home for Christmas?"

I hesitate. When I decided to come here for the winter, I was planning on having a perfect solo Christmas, curling up with my favorite movies and using the time off to reflect on the coming year. Now, though, flying home to my parents' place in Louisiana doesn't seem like the worst idea.

"I don't know yet." I pause. "Are you staying here?"

Bandit shoves the tennis ball into my hand. I throw it for him obediently.

Cole nods again. "I always stay in Moose Lake."

It makes my chest hurt, thinking of him spending Christmas in that awful half-finished house. Even if there hadn't been a violent killer there two days ago, I wouldn't think it was a good idea.

I chew on my lip and glance around the kitchen. Candi's put up holiday decorations in here, too, subtle, sparkly ones. "This place is kind of perfect for Christmas," I say. "But I don't really want to stay here alone."

I watch Cole closely after I say it. I'm testing a theory that's been rolling around my brain since yesterday. Namely, that Cole is no longer capable of saying no to me. He rolls his eyes and huffs about things, but he never actually says no.

Right on cue, he heaves a loud breath. "Are you seriously asking me to stay here with you for Christmas?"

I widen my eyes just a little. “Yes.”

He huffs again and fusses with Bandit’s tennis ball some more. When he finally speaks, there’s something different in his face. “I don’t like staying here.”

My stomach twists a bit guiltily. This place is obviously triggering for him, but I’m not going to back down.

I don’t know what happened with Clara, but over the past twenty-four hours, I’ve realized one thing for sure. Cole is not a bad person. Even if Hart is right, and Cole was responsible in some way for Clara’s death, I don’t believe it’s something he did on purpose. I don’t believe that a guy who buys his dog pink lobster toys and walks him five times a day is a monster. I don’t believe that a guy who gives you his gloves when it’s cold out and tells you you’re safe when you’ve had a nightmare is someone who would purposefully hurt someone he loved.

I think Cole has been lonely and sad for a long time, and I’m honestly just sick to death of seeing it. I won’t let him run back to Moose Lake to spend Christmas alone.

“Stay,” I say, softly. “It might be fun.”

He doesn’t answer me, but he doesn’t say “no”, either.

I’ll take it for now. We throw the ball for Bandit a couple more times, then I say, “I should get to work.”

He goes to the cupboard to get me a thermos for my coffee. “Do you need me to drive you?” He looks annoyed with himself after he says it, which is too cute for words.

I don’t need him to drive me. Headquarters is barely ten minutes away. But there’s no way in hell that I’m going to say no. I put on my most hopeful face. “Can you pick me up again afterward?”

He heaves one of his most impressive sighs yet. “Let’s go.”

I'M NOT GOING to lie, I spend most of the workday smiling foolishly. I actually forget there's a murderer after me, for a little while, daydreaming instead about spending Christmas with Cole. I'm already planning all the movies I'm going to make him watch, and the music I'll play, and the gentle questions I'm going to ask to try to get him to open up about Clara. I'm already wondering if he'll sleep in bed with me again tonight, and what we might do if he does.

I'm not the only one who's distracted. Most of the crew are flying home for the holidays after we wrap up tomorrow, and Kel in particular is giddy with excitement. She's told me five times about the gifts she's bought for her mom.

"Come on, everyone," Corbin says, as we set up for the last shoot of the day. "I know we're in the home stretch here, but let's focus up."

Kel winks at me, then we both smooth down our expressions and take our positions in front of the camera. We're filming a simple scene. I'm sitting at my makeshift police desk, with Kel's character perched beside me. I'm flipping through a stack of old paperwork, and I find a report from the eighteen hundreds about a woman who was exiled from town and then killed herself in the forest. Her suicide is what kicked off the forest curse, though our characters don't know that part yet.

"When you read the report," Corbin says, "make sure you react to it. This is a pivotal moment in the show, I want you to really—"

"Sell it," Kel and I finish in unison.

Corbin's mouth curves up indulgently, and for a second, I kind of see what Kel sees in him. He'll never be my type, but he is a good person beneath all the pretension.

Kel and I knock the scene out in three quick takes, and the day wraps up just after dark. We go back to headquarters, and I try not to smile too hard while I text Cole to tell him I'm done. I put my number in his phone on the drive in this morning. He rolled his eyes, but he let me do it, and when I

text him now, he responds almost instantly, sending back a single thumbs-up.

I open my text chain with Trevor and Jonathan while I wait. I texted them this morning, but they haven't answered. It sometimes takes them an hour or two to get back to me, if they're in practice or a game, but I know for a fact their last game was yesterday, and yet still neither of them have answered.

I'm typing another text to them when Cole pulls up, with the back seat window rolled down so Bandit can greet me.

"Hey, handsome," I say, smiling widely. He's so excited he's whining a little bit, and trying to climb out the window to get to me. "Who's a good boy? Yes, you are."

Cole rolls his eyes. "You know he was much better behaved before he met you."

"Please. You spoil him as much as I do."

"I reward him for good behavior," Cole corrects, as I climb into the passenger seat. "There's a difference."

"You let him sleep in your bed. Isn't that supposed to be bad for dog discipline?"

"He doesn't like dog beds," he says, affronted.

I grin. "Yeah, exactly."

He exhales in that loud, heavy way he does when he's not really mad. "What are we having for dinner tonight?" I ask, just to nettle him.

Before he can answer, my phone buzzes in my hand. Trevor is calling me.

"Hold that thought," I tell Cole, as I tap to answer it. "Trevor, hey," I say cheerfully.

"Turn around," he says abruptly.

"What?"

"Turn around!" he repeats, laughing. "You just passed us."

“I—what?” I twist reflexively in my car seat. “What are you talking about?”

“Jonathan and I are here,” he says. “We’re at your place.”

“My place,” I repeat. “In *Newfoundland*?”

“Yes!” He laughs again. “We’re literally pulling into your driveway.”

“You’re at the cabin?” I ask. Cole glances at me, eyebrows lifted. “Friends of mine are out at Mary’s,” I tell him.

“Who’s that?” Trevor asks. “He sounds sexy.”

“He didn’t say anything!”

“Yeah, but I can tell by the tone of your voice when you talk to him. Are you with a new boy you haven’t told us about?”

“Er—no,” I say, flushing as Cole looks toward me. “Why were you yelling at me to turn around?”

“Because you just blew past us on your driveway! Not very responsible driving, I might add. We’d be highly offended if we weren’t so excited to see you.”

A chill runs down my spine. “That wasn’t me. I’m in town. Are you sure you’re at the right place?”

“Yeah, I think so. Kind of small and shabby, with a bunch of bags of road sand on the porch?”

“That’s it,” I say. “And someone just drove past you on the driveway?”

Cole’s head snaps toward me.

“Yeah,” Trevor says. “Like a minute ago. Maybe it was Cole.”

“No,” I say thinly. “Cole’s with me.”

“Wait, what? He’s the sexy guy?”

“Someone’s at the cabin?” Cole asks.

“Yeah,” I say. “No, I’m not talking to you, Trevor, sorry. Did you—what kind of car was it, did you see?”

“I don’t know, a red one.”

“A Camry,” Jonathan says in the background.

My mouth goes dry. “Look, just—just turn around and leave again, okay? I’m at a different address, I’ll text it to you.”

“Are you okay?” Trevor asks. “You sound freaked.”

“No, I’m fine,” I lie. “Don’t get out of the car, though, okay? Just turn around. I’ll text you my new address.”

“Okay,” he says slowly. “Are you sure you’re alright?”

“Yeah, no,” I say. “I’m fine. See you soon.”

I hang up, my heart pounding unsteadily. Cole is watching me closely.

“Two of my friends came to visit,” I tell him. “They said someone just blew past them on the road to Mary’s.”

“Just now?”

“Literally a minute ago. A red Camry. That’s the car Officer Hart saw on the highway cameras.” I lick my dry lips. “Do you think it could be—?”

Cole’s eyes narrow, and my pulse kicks into overdrive.

“Yeah,” he says. “I do.”

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QUIN

I lurch in my seat as Cole pulls a U-turn, veering back into the parking lot and slamming on the brakes in front of headquarters.

“What are you doing?” I demand.

“Dropping you off. Stay here where there’s people, and call Porter to come get you.”

“What are you talking about? What about you?”

“I’m going to the cabin.”

“What?” My voice is high with alarm. “You can’t do that. And there’s no point, they said he’s already gone.”

“I might be able to catch him on the highway.” He reaches over me to push my car door open.

“Absolutely not!” I yank the door shut again. “If you’re going, I’m going with you.”

“Quin—”

“No, shut up,” I snap. “If you’re going, I’m coming with you. We don’t have time to argue about it,” I say, as he tries to protest. “Drive us home or drive us there, either way I am not getting out of this car.”

He glares at me for a moment, then he lets out a harsh breath. “Fine. Is your seatbelt on?”

“Yes.” I’ve barely finished the word when he slams on the gas, launching us back onto the road.

“Speed limits!” I protest.

“Hold Bandit,” he says, driving faster.

I wrap my arms around Bandit, who has his front paws on the console between us. My knuckles are white on his fur as we fly out of town and onto the on-ramp. The highway is covered in a harrowing layer of slush, but Cole doesn’t seem to notice or care. I glance at the speedometer and see the needle pass 150km/h. I don’t know what that is in miles per hour, but I know that it’s too fucking fast.

I fumble with my phone and press it to my ear.

“Who are you calling?” Cole says.

“Officer Hart. Careful!” I cry, as he whips the car around a turn.

“How is Hart going to help?”

“He’s a police officer, Cole, we need him. Hi, Officer Hart? It’s Quin McCarthy.”

I explain the situation as quickly as I can.

“I’m patrolling nearby,” Hart says brusquely. “Are you at Mary’s place?”

“No, I’m with Cole. We’re headed there on the highway—”

“You’re *what*? No, absolutely not. Tell Cole to pull over, right fucking now. If you see the suspect, *do not engage*. Do you hear me?”

“Yes, sir,” I say.

“Good. Sit tight and wait for my update.”

He hangs up in my ear. “He wants us to pull over,” I tell Cole.

“Yeah, I’m not doing that.”

“But—fuck, slow down.” I hold onto Bandit as we round another curve.

“Lights,” Cole says.

I follow his gaze. A car is approaching from the other direction. Cole slows down a little. The car is getting closer, but it’s too dark to see its color

—it zips past us, and I think it might be red—

“Cole!” I yelp, clutching Bandit as we pull another U-turn.

“There’s a passing lane up ahead,” he says. “I’ll get us alongside, you see if it’s him. Okay?”

I want to say no, but the car ahead of us is driving way faster than the speed limit, and there’s a chilling certainty in my bones. “Okay,” I say tightly.

The highway opens up to a passing lane. My stomach leaps as Cole presses on the gas. In the blink of an eye, we’re alongside the other car, and it’s a red Camry, I’m sure of it. It speeds up like it’s trying to stay ahead of us, but Cole keeps up easily, and as we pass under one of the highway’s rare streetlights, I get a clear view of the man inside.

“That’s him! Cole, it’s him!”

His eyes are hard. “Hold Bandit,” he orders, “and stay in the car.”

He waits for me to wrap my arms around Bandit, then he yanks the steering wheel to the right, slamming the Land Rover into the side of the Camry and forcing it onto the shoulder of the road. Gravel flies, spraying the windows like gunfire. We’ve barely come to a stop before Cole throws open his door.

“Stay here!” he shouts, then he’s gone.

The next stretch of time passes in strange, jerky flashes, each of them punctuated by one of Bandit’s furious barks. One second, I’m fumbling with my seatbelt, yelling for Cole to stop; the next, Ava Parsons’ killer is out of his car and tackling Cole to the ground. They scrabble and roll—Cole punches down, his fist coming away bloody—

I get my door open just in time to hear Cole curse in pain. The glare of the headlights bounces off of a blade, a fucking knife in the guy’s pale white hand, and Cole is clutching his left arm, and there’s blood on his fingers.

I stumble across the gravel to get to his side. His mouth moves like he's shouting for me to stay back, but I can't hear him over the sirens—over the *police sirens*, the police are here, their blue and red lights are streaming over the pavement.

I reach Cole's side in the same moment Hart jumps out of his car. He shouts, "Put your weapon down!", and Ava Parsons' killer throws his knife to one side, like he knows that he's lost, like he's going to surrender.

Instead, he pulls a gun out of his waistband.

I see Cole move, then I hear a single shot.

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COLE

There’s a second sound beneath the gunshot, the soft, wet crunch of a bullet punching through bone. The noise hits me like an electric shock, skittering from the center of my chest to my fingertips. It’s such a horrible, visceral sensation that for a moment, I think I’ve been shot.

Then I see the body on the ground at my feet, and the pool of dark blood spreading around it.

My immediate reaction is strange, a lurch in my chest, my mind screaming *no*. Every single part of me is rebelling at the sight of another human being lying dead at my feet. For a split second, I don’t care who he is or what he’s done. I just think, *this can’t be what’s happened, I can’t have caused this.*

Then Quin makes a wordless noise of distress, and I stop being sorry at all.

He’s got my shoulders in a vice grip, holding me tightly from behind. I turn my back on the dead body and gently peel Quin’s hands from my jacket.

“It’s okay,” I say, my voice eerily calm. “Everything’s alright.”

I can hear Bandit barking furiously in the car, and a part of my brain notes I’ll have to go to him next. For now, though, I only have eyes for

Quin. He's staring at the body on the ground, his lips bloodless, his eyes wide. "Are you okay?" I ask.

"Am *I* okay?" His eyes are incredulous. "Fuck—*Cole*—" He looks from the body to my face and back again, and I realize, belatedly, that when that guy pulled a gun, I pushed Quin behind me.

"Cole," he says again, in a different voice. A rush of warmth floods my face. I suddenly feel like I'm standing naked in front of him, all of my vulnerabilities laid bare on my skin. I'm almost grateful when Hart's voice splits the silence.

"Get back!" he hollers, approaching the body with his gun in his hands. He points it at the guy's skull and nudges his shoulder with his boot. When he's satisfied the guy is dead—of course he's dead, he shot him in the fucking skull—he rounds on me.

"What the *fuck* were you thinking?"

"Officer Hart—" Quin says shakily.

"Be quiet," Hart snaps. "I told you to do nothing. I *specifically* told you not to engage."

"It's not Quin's fault," I bite back. "I was driving. I did this, not him."

Hart looks between us, and I see the moment he clocks Quin's frightened expression and realizes he's not coming off like he wants to.

He breathes out hard and turns on me, instead. "You did this," he repeats. "You went against my explicit order, and put an innocent person in danger."

"He didn't want to," Quin says. "He told me not to come."

"He shouldn't have done it in the first place!" Hart snaps. "You reckless, *stupid*—"

He breaks off at the sound of a siren, two short blasts as another police car pulls onto the scene. With visible effort, Hart swallows his temper, but his jaw is clenched as another police officer steps out of the car. It's a thin,

older guy with glasses and dark hair. One of Hart's superior officers, I think, based on the way Hart's shoulders stiffen.

He introduces himself as Officer Andrews and steps close to look at the body. "What've we got here? Hell, is that Paul Johnson?"

"Who?" Quin asks.

"Paul Johnson," Hart says tersely. "We ID'd him earlier today when he filled up his car at a gas station."

He sneers at me after he says it, as if to say, *See? That's proper police work.*

"He works for Hammond Gordon, one of the biggest coke dealers on the East Coast," Officer Andrews says. "He's got a rap sheet as long as my arm. Did some jail time a few years back for assault and possession."

"He's the same guy I saw in the woods," Quin says. "The one who strangled Ava Parsons."

Officer Andrews sucks a breath through his teeth. "That checks out. He's one of Hammond's dogs, a real nasty sort of fellow." He gives Hart a sightly pointed look. "Would've been nice to bring him in."

Hart's jaw twitches. "He pulled a gun on these two," he says, jerking his chin at Quin and me. "After Cole here decided to play Batman."

Officer Andrews frowns, more at Hart than at me, I think. "Walk me through it," he orders Hart.

"I have to check on my dog," I say. I don't feel any need to hear Hart's twisted version of the story.

Quin follows me to the car. I don't let Bandit out—I don't want him going anywhere near that dead body—but I roll the back seat window down so Quin and I can console him. When I took Bandit to a police dog training camp a couple years ago, the instructor called him a natural born protector, and right now Bandit is shaking with distress at not being allowed to do any protecting.

Quin kisses the top of his head a few times and strokes his fur with bone-white fingers. I take his hands in mine to warm them.

“You’re okay,” I say. “It’s over.”

He makes a choked, angry sound. “I know *I’m* okay. What were you thinking? He could’ve killed you.” His gaze moves to my arm. “Fuck, you’re bleeding—”

“It’s fine.” I don’t think it’s a deep cut—I flinched backward when that asshole swiped his knife at me—but it’s stinging a bit, and leaking a steady trickle of blood under my sleeve.

“It’s not fine,” Quin says fiercely. He turns away from me. “Officer Hart?”

I’m sure Hart doesn’t give a shit that I’m bleeding, but Officer Andrews does. He even frowns at Hart for not realizing I was injured earlier. Within ten minutes, he has an ambulance on the scene, and I’m sitting in the back of it, letting a paramedic stitch up my arm. Quin hovers by my shoulder and asks three times if I should be taken to a hospital.

The paramedic, a plump middle-aged woman, gives him a patient smile. “The nearest open ER is an hour and a half away. This cut isn’t deep, we’ll have him patched up in no time.”

Quin still looks uncertain, but his attention is drawn away by a black car pulling onto the side of the road. A tall, handsome blond guy gets out of the driver’s side, and an equally handsome dark-haired guy from the passenger’s side.

“Trevor, Jonathan!” Quin says, his voice thick with sudden emotion.

The blond guy’s smile fades as he takes in the scene—the ambulance, the smashed-up cars, the police officers gathered around the body.

“Fucking hell,” he says, then he crosses the gravel in three long strides and pulls Quin into a bone-crushing hug. The dark-haired guy puts his hand on Quin’s shoulder, and for several minutes, the three of them exist in a

bubble. Quin's hands move as he tells them what happened. At one point, he turns and gestures to me. I drop my gaze like I wasn't watching.

"All done," the paramedic says.

I look down at the neat row of black stitches curving around my bicep. "Thanks."

"No problem. My official advice is that you go to a doctor to have those stitches taken out in about ten days. Unofficially, if it's healing well, you can take them out yourself with a clean pair of scissors."

She goes over signs of infection to watch for then leaves me alone in the back of the ambulance. Quin glances toward me again, like he wants to introduce me to his friends. I almost can't stand the way he's looking at me, like I'm someone worth looking at.

I hop off the ambulance and walk back to the body. More police officers have arrived, and one of them is taking photos of it with a professional-looking camera. Every time the flash goes off, it lights up the guy's dark, lifeless eyes.

"Hey, keep back," Hart snaps at me.

I ignore him and approach Officer Andrews. "Do you still need us here?"

"Ah—no," he says. "You should be good to go."

"You can't move your car yet," Hart says. "It's part of a crime scene."

"Which crime?" I ask. "That guy trying to stab me, or you blowing his head off?"

Hart's eyes flash. "If you hadn't recklessly endangered your own life, I wouldn't have had to step in to save it."

"And if we hadn't tracked him down," I say, "you might never have found him."

Officer Andrews clears his throat pointedly. "Do you and your friend need a ride back to town?"

Quin steps up beside me and puts a hand on my arm.

“We’ve got one,” he says. “Thanks.”

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QUIN

I call in sick to work the next day, for the first time in my entire career. Or I try to, anyway, but halfway through my unconvincing food poisoning story, Corbin asks, “Quin, what’s wrong?” and I spill out the whole story without really meaning to.

He’s silent for a long moment, then he says, in an uncharacteristically businesslike tone, “What do you want me to tell people?”

The question is steadying, for some reason. I take a deep breath, then another one. “Just tell them the guy who killed Ava Parsons was shot by the police.”

I don’t want the crew taking the full story home like a fun souvenir.

“Very good,” Corbin says. “You’ll tell Kel, though?”

“I’ll call her later,” I promise.

He manages one more second of solemn silence, then he launches into a lengthy diatribe about the “restorative magic of the Yuletide.” I get him off the phone after five or six minutes, then I slump back onto my bed in The Chalet’s guest bedroom.

“Off the hook?” Trevor asks, blinking at me blearily.

“Yeah. Sorry to wake you.”

“It’s alright.” He stretches out on the bed, pressing his palms against the headboard. “Did you sleep okay?”

“Yeah.” I didn’t think I would, but I was so exhausted when we got home, I barely remember my head hitting the pillow. “Thanks for staying with me.”

He grins. “Thank Jonathan for lending me to you.” Then he sobers and adds more seriously, “We weren’t going to let you sleep alone after all of that.”

I smile at him gratefully, and I try not to think about who might have stayed with me if Trevor hadn’t had his fit of chivalry. “I still can’t believe you guys are here.”

“I can’t believe you almost died.”

“I know.” I rake my hands through my hair, trying not to remember the sound of the gunshot, or the dark pool of blood spreading around Paul Johnson’s head. “Fuck. I need coffee.”

“Then coffee you shall receive.” Trevor stretches again and then leaps out of bed with enviable energy. He takes my wrists and pulls me out after him, laughing when I groan in protest. “Come on. I’ll make pancakes and bacon. Everything seems better after breakfast food.”

The smell of coffee is already wafting up from the kitchen, and Jonathan is standing at the fridge dressed in a hoodie and sweatpants. He turns at the sound of our footsteps, his amber eyes filling with worry at the sight of me.

“Hey, Quin. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” I say.

He doesn’t look like he believes me. I don’t blame him.

“He’ll be fine,” Trevor assures him, squeezing my shoulders. “You want me to cook?”

“Please,” Jonathan says. “There’s barely anything in here that I recognize.”

Trevor laughs and rummages through the fridge while Jonathan and I pour ourselves some coffee.

“Has Cole come down yet?”

“He was up earlier,” Jonathan says. “He said he was taking Bandit for a walk.”

There’s a beat of silence, in which he and Trevor exchange the world’s least subtle look.

“He’s very handsome,” Trevor says, stacking eggs, bell peppers and packages of steak onto the kitchen island.

I snort. “Is that a question?”

“No, but this is: have you fucked him yet?”

I choke out a laugh. “God, Trevor.”

“That’s a no, then. Do you want to?”

“Yeah,” I say. “But it’s complicated.”

“He doesn’t seem like as much of an asshole as he does on TV,” Trevor says. “He’s just kind of broody, but in a sexy way. Right, Jonathan?”

Jonathan makes a noncommittal noise. “He seems pretty closed off. And I don’t love that he dragged you into all of that last night. He could’ve gotten you killed.”

Trevor frowns. “My boy makes a good point.”

“Don’t call me your boy,” Jonathan says dryly. “We’ve talked about this.”

“Sorry, babe.”

“We’ve talked about ‘babe,’ too.”

“Cole didn’t want me to go with him,” I say. “I made him take me. And it’s a good thing I did. He wouldn’t have called the police and that guy might’ve killed him.”

“Still,” Jonathan says. “The sensible thing would have been to call the police and stay far away.”

I run my thumb over the rim of my coffee cup. “I know. But if we’d done that, he might’ve gotten away. And then it would’ve only been a

matter of time before he came after me again. I'm sure that's why he was at the cabin yesterday. What Cole did was—"

"Crazy," Jonathan supplies.

"Reckless," I correct, "but it was brave. And I'm glad he didn't make me stay behind." I fiddle with my coffee cup again. "I'm not completely helpless."

"Of course you're not," Trevor says.

"I didn't mean it like that," Jonathan adds.

"No, I know." I give him a thin smile. "I'm just glad it's all over."

Trevor reaches across the kitchen island to squeeze my hand. "We'll stay here as long as you want us to. And we'll leave as soon as you want us to, too. Let you have some sexy time with Cole." He winks.

"I really like him," I admit.

"No," Trevor says, feigning shock.

"I don't know if it's a good idea, though."

Trevor shrugs. "You won't know for sure until you try."

"Or if he's even interested in me," I add.

He scoffs. "How could he not be?"

"He hasn't made a move yet. Not since that thing at the ski hill party, I mean."

"Well, then, it looks like it's up to you." Trevor cracks an egg into a bowl and gives me a wide, slightly disconcerting grin. "Or rather, you and me. I'm the best wingman. I'll have you making out with him by midnight or your money back."

"Oh, god," I say, while Jonathan snickers. "Please don't."

"Too late," Trevor says.

"It's not too late. You haven't done anything yet." I sit up straighter as I hear the familiar rumble of Cole's Land Rover pulling into the driveway. "I mean it, Trevor. It's not going to help if you're weird and pushy—"

"When am I ever pushy?"

“The waking hours,” Jonathan says.

We all fall silent as the front door opens. Bandit bounds into the kitchen, covered in snow and panting hard from his run.

“Bandit!” Trevor cries, crouching to greet him. Bandit throws himself happily into his arms. I don’t want to believe Bandit likes Trevor more than me, but the worrying signs are starting to add up.

Several seconds pass before Cole appears, which makes me wonder if he was standing out in the hall, putting it off. His back is stiff and his face is expressionless, but I know him well enough now to know it’s from awkwardness, not anger.

“Our hero!” Trevor says, throwing his arms wide.

I’m going to *kill* him.

“Ignore him,” I say quickly. “How’s your arm?”

Cole clears his throat. “It’s fine.” He eyes the food Trevor’s piled onto the island. “Are you cooking?”

Trevor’s eyes flick from Cole to me and back again, and a slow, dangerous smile spreads over his face. “We all are. Grab a knife, handsome. You can chop the bell peppers.”

I SPEND the morning watching Trevor, waiting for him to say something inappropriate or to shove me and Cole into a closet. Instead, he just sets us all cooking, putting Cole and me on vegetable-chopping duty while he and Jonathan cook bacon and steak. Trevor asks polite, harmless questions about Bandit and muses aloud once or twice about last night’s events, keeping the conversation going effortlessly without demanding much input from the rest of us.

It’s strange to see how Cole acts around him and Jonathan. If it were anyone else, I might use the word *shy*. He’s turned down his usual snark

and cynicism in favor of stilted politeness, and I can't help but think it's because they're my friends. There's something different in the way Cole is looking at me, too. Or rather, the way he isn't looking at me, his gaze darting away like the sun is in his eyes.

By eleven a.m., the four of us are sitting around the kitchen table staring at an obscene amount of food.

"I think we've overdone it," Jonathan says.

Trevor winks at him. "No such thing."

We eat for a while in silence, then Trevor asks Cole, "Do you have to do anything for F1 over the winter?"

Cole grimaces. "Not until February, thank god."

Trevor watches him over the rim of his coffee cup. "Why do you do it, if you hate it so much?"

"I don't hate it," Cole says. Then, when Trevor raises a doubtful eyebrow, "I don't hate *all* of it. The politics are ridiculous and the press questions are insipid, and I'd rather gouge my eyes out than talk to Matty Wright or Travis Keeping—"

"Hey!" I protest.

He shoots me a dry look. "You don't even know them."

"I met Travis once," I retort.

He snorts. "Lucky you."

"So, you hate the press and the politics and the people around you," Trevor says. "And you don't need the money or want the fame. So, why not quit? Is it because of your father?"

"I hate my father."

"Then why do you race for his team?"

"It's not *his* team. He just gives them a lot of money."

"Dance around the question a little longer, please," Trevor says.

Cole glares at him, a bit of his old self slipping through, but then he drops his gaze to his plate and says, in a different voice, "I like to race."

Something twists in my chest. It feels like he just told us a painful secret, or admitted a shameful guilty pleasure.

Trevor sits back in his chair with a satisfied smile. “Well, you should,” he says. “You’re very good at it.”

Cole shoots him a doubtful look. “What do you know about racing?”

“Almost nothing,” Trevor says. “But my friend Ben knows a lot, and he says you’re excellent.” He drums his fingers on the table. “Speaking of Ben…” He glances at Jonathan and then hesitates.

“What?” I ask.

“Oh, it’s nothing,” Trevor says. “We bought Ben a Christmas present at the airport in St. John’s, and we were going to mail it out today so it gets to him in time. And Jonathan and I may have also had some Christmas scheming we wanted to do for you today.”

“So?”

“So, I don’t want to leave you here alone,” he says, with a worried little crease between his brows.

As an actor myself, I have to give him credit. If it wasn’t for the slight gleam in his eyes, I might have believed him.

“I’ll be fine,” I say, giving him a warning look.

“Yes, you will, because we’re going to stay here with you. It’s okay if Ben’s present arrives late. And we can do everything else some other time.” He sighs theatrically.

“I’ll be here,” Cole says. “I can stay until you two get back.”

Trevor makes absolutely no effort to hide his smug smile.

“You really don’t have to,” I protest weakly.

Cole shrugs. “I don’t mind.”

I know I should protest. I know that it’s morally questionable letting Trevor manipulate him like this.

“Well—okay,” I say instead. “If you really don’t mind.”

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QUIN

An hour after Trevor and Jonathan leave, my phone buzzes with a text.

[1:07] Trevor: I told you I was good.

Arrogant bastard. I put my phone away without answering. I don't want to tell him that he's right.

Cole and I are sitting in the second floor living room with a fire crackling in the fireplace and snow falling outside of the windows. Bandit is on the couch between us, sleeping with his chin on my leg. Every time I move an inch, he huffs and whines, which leaves Cole to fetch everything he thinks I need—a blanket, a glass of water, an old-fashioned.

"Isn't it a little early for that?" I ask.

He sits down across from me and drains half of his own drink in one. "I think I'll need to be drunk to put up with your friends."

"You don't mean that."

He rolls his eyes and looks away from me. His way of saying "no."

I smile into my glass. For the last hour, Cole and I have been talking. Not about anything earth-shattering—I bragged about my fire-building skills as I lit the fire, and we discussed the likelihood that Bandit is, objectively, the world's best dog—but it's been peaceful, which is not a

word I ever thought I'd associate with Cole. It's hard not to feel safe with someone you know would take a bullet for you.

"Do you mind if they stay here a few days?" I ask. "There's not much space if we go back to Mary's."

"Why the hell would you ever go back there?"

"I mean, I can't stay here all winter. And that guy is…you know. Dead. There's no reason I can't go back there now."

Cole scowls. "There are hundreds of reasons. It's dingy and gross. You don't know how to drive in the snow. And it's not safe. I don't think you're going to have another murderer on your doorstep, but what about run-of-the-mill stalkers or creepy fans? Tons of people in town know you're staying at Mary's place."

I shift uncertainly on the couch. Bandit opens his eyes just long enough to glare at me. "I'll find somewhere else, then. The hotel Kel's staying at, maybe."

"Why bother? This place is empty. And it suits you."

His brow furrows after he says it, the way it does when he didn't mean to say something. I exert a modest effort to stop myself from smiling.

"Suits me," I repeat. "Because it's classy and beautiful?"

"Overpriced and obnoxious," he corrects.

My smile grows. "I know you don't mean that. You're too nice."

He looks affronted. "No, I'm not."

"Well—okay, yeah." I laugh. "Maybe not nice. But you're a good person."

He grimaces. "That's even worse."

"Maybe, but it's true." I take another sip of my drink. "Can I ask you something?"

"It doesn't seem like I can stop you."

I turn to face him—Bandit huffs unhappily but allows it—and draw my knees up into my chest. The words are on the tip of my tongue. *What*

happened to your girlfriend? Why does Hart think it was your fault?

But I can't bring myself to ask. Things are too perfect right now, with the snow falling and the fire crackling and the smells of pine and cedar.

And maybe there's a small part of me that's afraid to hear what Cole might say.

"What's up with you and your father?" I ask instead.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, do you actually hate him? I know he's kind of—"

"Evil?"

"Cole," I say reproachfully.

He drains the rest of his drink and puts his glass on the table. "The best I can say about my father is that I don't know for sure that he's ever killed or raped anyone."

"You're exaggerating."

"He's a billionaire, Quin. Having that much money fucks up your brain. It rots away the parts that control empathy and humility."

"That might be a more convincing speech if you weren't also a billionaire."

Cole looks away from me, his expression irritated. I study him closely.

"You're not," I realize out loud. "You don't take money from your father."

His laugh is humorless. "I *didn't*. But I can't really say that anymore."

My stomach drops. "Fuck. Sorry."

"For what?"

"You took his money so I could stay here. And for the security system, and for Porter—"

"Oh." He frowns. "Yeah, I did, but I don't care about that. I don't mind letting him spend money on *you*."

"What were you talking about, then?"

He looks away from me. For a minute, I think he isn't going to answer, but then he shrugs and says, "I stopped taking his money when I was eighteen. But he found a way around that when I signed on with Dark Force."

"I thought—" I hesitate, realizing how rude the question will sound.

"You thought he bought my seat there."

"Well…yeah."

"Everyone thinks that." He picks at a loose thread on the couch cushion. "Dark Force were in talks with another title sponsor when they signed me. My father found out about it somehow and swooped in and outbid them. He called it a 'surprise.'" He frames the bitter word with his fingertips. "The team technically pays me—"

"But his company pays them."

"Mm." He turns his gaze to the fire, the flames flickering in his eyes. There's so much darkness inside of them, so much thinly-veiled pain.

I have to ask him about Clara. I can't stand this anymore.

I lean forward, but just as I take a breath to speak, the front door opens downstairs and Trevor's cheerful voice calls, "We're back!"

Bandit launches like a rocket off the back of the couch, and the moment is lost.

I rise reluctantly to my feet and follow Cole and Bandit downstairs.

THE REST of the afternoon passes by quickly. Cole tries to escape back to Moose Lake more than once, but Trevor circumvents him every time. First, he needs help bringing in the groceries he and Jonathan bought in town. Then he needs Cole's help making more drinks—even though, the last time I checked, Trevor was better at making drinks than most professional bartenders. After that, he suggests we all walk Bandit around the

neighborhood in the snow, then he needs help making dinner, on and on until it's nine p.m., and the four of us are on the upstairs balcony, sitting on a sectional around the outdoor fire and looking up at the stars. Cole looks slightly bemused, like he's not quite sure how he ended up here.

"Have you gone to the ski hill yet?" Trevor asks me. In the distance, late-night skiers are curving their way down the trails, illuminated by the bright lights of the ski lift.

"Not yet," I say. "They don't have lessons until January, I was going to start then."

"Lessons!" Trevor scoffs. "You don't need lessons."

"Pretty sure I do."

"I mean you don't need to wait for them. I'll teach you while we're here. We can go tomorrow! Jonathan wants to learn how to snowboard, too. He tried skiing, but it wasn't his thing."

"That's his polite way of saying I was terrible at it," Jonathan says.

"What about you, Cole?" Trevor asks. "Skiing, snowboarding?"

Cole clears his throat before he answers. I could probably count the number of words he's said all evening on two hands, but he's never ignored a direct question. "A little of both."

Trevor beams. "Perfect! The four of us will go tomorrow. Speaking of which—" He rises to his feet. "—it's already tomorrow in Italy, and I'm exhausted." He holds a hand out to Jonathan. "Bed?"

"Bed," Jonathan agrees, letting Trevor pull him up.

"Bandit, do you want to sleep with us tonight?" Trevor asks. "Hm? Want to go to bed?"

Bandit launches off the sectional in a heartbeat. "Bed" is his second favorite word, after "walk."

"Traitor," Cole mutters.

Trevor grins. "Night, you two. Sleep well."

He shoots me a wink that I hope Cole doesn't see and disappears back into the house with Jonathan. The silence changes as the glass doors shut behind them.

Cole is sitting right beside me on the sectional, thanks to Trevor's clever maneuvering. My pulse ticks up as I turn to face him. I wonder if he sees how fast it's beating at my throat.

I think he does. His gaze moves from my lips to my neck and back again, and my heart races a bit faster.

He looks away from me. "I should get to bed."

I let out a long, deep breath. "Cole."

I say his name quietly, a gentle reproach. I'm just so tired of dancing around this. Everything that's happened since I landed in Newfoundland feels like a step I took to get here, to this exact moment in time. Sitting in the cold, under the stars, with Cole looking at me with those dark, boundless eyes.

I take his scotch glass out of his hand and put it on the table beside us. The clink of the glass is loud in the silence.

Cole exhales slowly. "Quin…"

"What?" I say quietly.

He meets my eyes with his brow furrowed, every inch of him telegraphing flight. I can see how badly he wants to run. I can hear it in the way he breathes.

Instead, his gaze drops to my lips.

My breathing changes. It feels like there's an electric current running through the air between us. I startle a bit when he touches me, two strong fingers rising up to my jaw. A moment later, the warm pad of his thumb drags over my lower lip. I sit perfectly still with my heart beating in my throat, pulsing faster as the space shrinks between us.

The first kiss is nothing more than a brush of cool, soft lips, but it lights up everything inside of me. His lips drag over mine again, slower and

rougher, and one of his hands slides into my hair. His fingers card softly for several long, torturous moments, then abruptly, they curl hard, pulling me closer, deepening the kiss.

I throw my leg over his hips and settle into his lap; he makes a low noise as I sink down into the warmth of him. He tastes like cheap cherries and expensive scotch, and his skin smells like sandalwood and pine. I kiss him like I've always wanted to, hard and deep and urgent. My hands slide up his chest, warm, strong muscles shifting under soft cloth. When we pull away to breathe, I grip his waist and move my hips against him, chasing the flashes of heat in his eyes.

One corner of his mouth is turned up, dangerously close to a smile. He wants this as much as I do. I can see it. I can feel it. I lick my lips just to watch him watch me do it, then I lean close and murmur in his ear, "Take me to bed."

In an instant, everything changes. His whole body hardens, every muscle rigid with sudden tension. A moment later, I'm unceremoniously shoved away.

"This was a mistake." His voice is brittle and cold. "We shouldn't have done this."

It takes a second for me to process the words. My brain is still hazy with lust. "What are you talking about?"

"Just go to bed," he snaps. "I mean it, Quin. Just—fuck off."

I open my mouth to protest, but it's too late. He's on his feet, slamming the glass door shut behind him.

I touch two fingers to my warm, swollen lips and stare at the place where he disappeared.

What the fuck was that?

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33

COLE

Take me to bed.

Quin’s words are running circles in my mind. Sprinting, shouting, beating themselves against my heart. *Take me to bed. Take me to bed. Take me to bed.*

The first ten times, I hear them in his voice, deep and warm and painfully sexy. The next ten times, I hear them in Clara’s.

Clara was never big on dirty talk. She was always a little bit shy about sex, even after we’d been together for years. Once we were in bed, the walls came down a little, but talking about sex was never something she felt comfortable with. She would never say “Wanna fuck?” The word “horny” would never cross her lips. But when her eyes would get dark, and her pulse would tick up, she would kiss me and smile at me and say, “Take me to bed.”

It was her thing, our thing, the way she felt comfortable telling me what she wanted. I’ve had a hundred meaningless hook-ups since her, and none of them, not one, has used that exact phrase.

And now, to hear those words from Quin, of all fucking people—

I flee to the master bedroom, since there’s nowhere else in this horrible place I can go. I sit down on the edge of the bed and drag my fingers through my hair, raking my nails against my scalp, hard enough to hurt.

Fuck him. *Fuck* him. And fuck her for doing this to me. For ruining the only brief moment of happiness I've had in three years, for making me push Quin away. He'll be furious right now, fuming on the balcony or back in his room. Or, more likely, downstairs in Trevor and Jonathan's room, complaining about what a dick I am.

Someone knocks loudly on the door.

"Go away," I say hoarsely. I can hardly hear my own voice over the thundering in my ears.

The door opens, and Quin steps inside.

"Fuck off, Quin," I choke out. "I mean it."

He doesn't fuck off. He just looks at me, carefully. His lips are swollen where I kissed him. I know what he tastes like now. I know how soft and warm his mouth is.

"Are you alright?" he asks.

"I'm fine," I say through my teeth. "Just leave me alone."

The silence stretches out while he watches me. "What happened?"

I hate the tone of his voice. So soft. So gentle. Like I'm someone who deserves his empathy.

"Just *fuck off*, Quin! I don't want you here, what part of that is so fucking hard to understand?"

There's another long silence. Then, again—

"What happened?"

My hands clench into fists. "None of your fucking business."

He makes an impassive noise. "You had your tongue down my throat, like, two minutes ago, so I'd say it is my business, actually."

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Tough," he says. "This isn't a TV show. You don't get to push me away and not tell me the reason for four or five episodes. Put your big boy pants on and talk to me like an adult."

“You don’t—you have *no idea*—” I’m almost choking on my anger. That, and the sound of Clara’s voice saying *take me to bed.*

I can’t look at Quin’s face, but I see his feet shift. “I know a little,” he admits. The bed dips as he sits down beside me. “Hart told me about your girlfriend. Clara.”

For a moment, I struggle to breathe. When I finally get the words out, my voice doesn’t sound like mine. “What did he say?”

“Just…that she died.”

I let out a harsh breath. “And?”

“And that he thought it was your fault.”

Something is clawing at my sternum, trying to escape my chest. I have to swallow hard before I can speak again. “Well, he’s right.”

“I don’t believe that.”

“That shows how much you know,” I snap. My hands are shaking. From anger, probably. I knot them in my lap before Quin gets any ideas about taking them in his.

There’s a long, painful silence. “Will you tell me what happened?”

“Do I have a choice?”

“Of course you do.” He takes one of my hands, just like I was afraid he would. His skin is so warm, and he holds on so tight. “If you don’t want to tell me, you don’t have to.”

“And then what?” I say scornfully. “You’ll just live not knowing?”

“Yes.”

He sounds so certain, I can’t help looking up at him incredulously. It’s a mistake. I’d almost forgotten, in the last minute, how handsome he is.

I pull my hand out of his. “Clara killed herself, Quin.”

An awful silence ticks by. I can hear every beat of my heart in my veins.

“*Fuck*,” he breathes.

“Yeah,” I say harshly. “Fuck.”

“When?” he stammers. “I mean, how long ago—?”

“Three years ago. Two weeks before Christmas.”

December tenth, if you want to be specific. I spent the whole day in bed this year, only getting up to let Bandit out to pee.

Quin’s face hurts to look at. “Fuck. *Cole*.”

“Don’t,” I snap. “Don’t feel sorry for me.”

“I wasn’t,” he says. Then he shakes his head. “Actually, you know what? I was. I do feel sorry for you. That’s the worst fucking thing I’ve ever heard in my life.”

“Stop.”

“No! I’m so, so sorry.”

“I don’t want your pity.”

“Why not?” he demands. “Why do people act like this, like it’s the worst thing in the world for someone to feel bad for you?”

“Because I don’t deserve it!” I burst out. “For fuck’s sake, Quin, can’t you understand this? She didn’t get murdered or die of cancer. She killed herself. She felt so bad inside, so fucking hopeless, that that was the only way out she could find. And I didn’t even notice.”

“Cole—”

“I didn’t have a single fucking clue, I didn’t see a single god damn sign. I thought we were happy. I actually thought we were fucking happy. And then she took a whole bottle of Ativan and walked out in the snow and died.”

His chin jerks back. “That could have—it could’ve been an accident—”

“I didn’t notice,” I say again, because I need him to understand this. “She was scared and sad and hopeless, and I didn’t notice, not even once. And now I just have to live with that, forever. But I can’t—I *won’t*—” I gesture toward him, a sweep of my hand that encompasses a million fucking things. “I won’t do it again.”

He falls silent for a long, long moment. I can’t bring myself to look at him. I’m shaking all over with grief and rage, my fingers white-knuckled on

the edge of the bed. I'm sure he's trying to come up with something comforting to say, some meaningless placation he can offer to make it all okay. But it isn't okay. And when he realizes that, he'll start to ask the right questions. Like how selfish a person has to be not to notice the love of their life is depressed, or why anyone would ever want to be with someone like that again.

"Can you tell me about her?" he says instead.

The question sparks an image in my mind, a brief flash of Clara as I thought I knew her. Brightness and warmth. Laughter and happiness. The spray of freckles on her nose, the crooked tooth in her smile.

Fuck. *Fuck*.

"No," I croak.

He nods. "Okay."

"I mean it," I say. "I really can't do this."

"Okay," he says again. Then, after a beat, "Can I make a counterargument, though?"

"A counterargument," I repeat, through numb lips.

"Yes." When he speaks again, I feel like he's choosing each word with exquisite care. "I've never been through anything as awful as you have. I can't even begin to imagine how you must feel. But you aren't doing well, Cole. You aren't happy." He pauses again, biting into his lower lip. "I know you say you can't do this, and I'm sure it feels that way, but…I think you need to do it."

"You think I need to make out with you."

"You need to let yourself be happy," he corrects. "You need to stop punishing yourself for something that wasn't your fault."

"Wasn't my fault?" I repeat. "Did you hear a single word that I said? Clara and I were together for *seven years*. She wasn't—we weren't—" My voice wavers. My chest hurts so badly, I'm surprised any words are getting out at all.

“What?” Quin says, softly.

I shake my head. I don’t want to keep talking.

But for some reason, the words keep coming out.

“When I was in F2, I used to look around at all the other drivers with their model-slash-actress girlfriends they didn’t give a fuck about, and I used to think I was so much better than them.” I shake my head again roughly. “I was so fucking smug. I thought, I know what it’s like to be happy, while all these dumb fucks are still chasing rainbows. I thought Clara was my best friend. I thought she told me everything. And then she booked an appointment with a doctor and got a bottle of Ativan without telling me. And then she took all of them and walked out alone into the middle of a frozen lake to die. So don’t you dare say it wasn’t my fault, and don’t you dare tell me I need to let myself be happy. I don’t *deserve* to be happy. I had my chance. I fucked it up.”

He’s quiet for a moment, breathing shallowly. Then—

“Yes, you do.”

My temper splits open, or maybe just my heart. “Quin—”

“No,” he says. “Just stop.” He takes my hand again, that same warm, tight grip. “You are so, so wrong about this. I know you can’t see it, but you are. Some things that happen are just completely out of your control.”

“This isn’t one of them. I should have *seen it*.”

“If you didn’t see it, maybe it’s because she didn’t want you to.”

“Why not?” I demand. “Why would she hide something like that from me? I thought she told me everything. I’ve reread every text she ever sent me, seven years of messages, and I didn’t find one single fucking sign that this was coming. What am I supposed to do with that? What the fuck am I supposed to do?”

Quin’s grip tightens, almost to the point of pain. “You let yourself be happy again.”

“I don’t want to be happy.”

“Yes,” he says. “You do.”

I hiss out a shaky breath. “How do you know?”

“Because,” he says. “If you wanted to be unhappy, you would’ve gotten rid of Bandit.”

A strangled noise tries to rise in my throat. A laugh, probably. The kind that makes it hard to breathe.

Quin watches me for a moment—I feel his gaze boring into my face—then he lets out a breath and moves closer to me, wrapping his arms around my chest. I go completely still, like I’m in a chokehold instead of a hug.

“Let go.”

He drops his forehead against my temple and squeezes me tighter. “No.”

“I mean it, Quin,” I say unsteadily. “Let go.”

“*No*.” He holds on even tighter. I didn’t think he was this strong. “I’m so sorry, Cole. I’m so sorry that that happened.”

He holds me like that until the pain in my chest becomes unbearable. “I really need you to leave,” I choke out.

“Cole…”

“I need you to leave now,” I repeat. “Please.”

He must hear in my voice how much I mean it. He squeezes me once more and then lets me go. The room is cold without his arms around me. He hesitates for another moment before he rises to his feet. Two warm fingers touch my chin.

“You’re a good person, Cole Milton,” Quin says. He brushes his lips over my cheek, a gentle kiss I don’t deserve.

He doesn’t wait for me to answer him. Maybe he can see I’ve got nothing left to offer. He disappears for a few minutes and reappears with Bandit, who looks like he’s been woken from a deep sleep in Trevor and Jonathan’s bed. He leaps onto the bed beside me, then stares expectantly at Quin.

“Not tonight, buddy,” Quin says. “You stay with him.”

Bandit lets out an unhappy huff and thumps down hard onto my lap. My hands twist into his fur, holding on for dear life.

“Night,” Quin says quietly. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

My throat hurts too badly to answer him. When I finally look up again, he’s gone.

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QUIN

Doing normal things feels unnatural today. I watch my own hands wash out the coffee pot with a weird sense of disconnect, like I'm looking down at myself from the ceiling or watching myself act on screen.

Trevor is in the kitchen with me, making pancakes on the stove. When I first came downstairs, he gave me a swift, appraising look, like he was trying to figure out what had happened last night after he and Jonathan went to bed. He frowned when he saw the look on my face.

He hasn't asked what happened yet. I think the rigid set of my shoulders is deterring him. I don't know if I could put it into words even if I wanted to. I woke up this morning with an awful weight on my chest, a strange counterpart to the memory of Cole's lips. Thinking about what happened to his girlfriend—what happened to *him*—makes me sick to my stomach. I don't know how he can manage it. It feels like something too horrible for a person to survive.

I guess he didn't survive it, really. The smiling version of Cole, the one I saw in that old video, I don't think he exists anymore. I think he died with Clara.

"Quin?" Trevor says.

He's looking at me with concern, probably because I've been standing by the sink holding an empty coffee pot for several minutes. Gently, he

removes it from my hands and turns on the tap to fill it.

“Want to talk about it?”

“No,” I say quietly.

His eyes search my face. “Alright. But if you need me to beat the shit out of someone—a scowling F1 driver, for example—”

“No,” I say quickly. “It’s not like that.”

“We still like him?”

I nod. “We do.”

Jonathan steps into the kitchen, distracting Trevor, and I take over flipping pancakes just to have something to do with my hands. I wonder what the two of them would think if I told them what happened to Clara. I wonder if they’d think I was crazy for still liking Cole. I can imagine what some of my more casual acquaintances in LA would say—“How could he not notice she was that depressed?” or “He must’ve been a pretty shitty boyfriend.”

And I know that there are a lot of shitty boyfriends out there. I can easily picture a girl crumbling and cracking while her selfish boyfriend doesn’t notice anything’s wrong, because she still fucks him and does his laundry and doesn’t burden him with any of her negative thoughts or feelings.

But that’s not Cole. Cole acts like a dick, but that’s not who he is. He loved Clara, I know he did. I remember the way his voice shook when he talked about her. *I thought she was my best friend*. That’s not how a shitty boyfriend talks about his girlfriend. When he says he didn’t see it coming… I believe him.

“Ready to eat?” Trevor asks me.

I sit down at the table opposite Jonathan, who offers me a gentle smile. Jonathan’s struggled with anxiety and depression before, and for an awful moment, I imagine getting a call from Trevor telling me that he’s gone. That he’d felt so hopeless and alone he hadn’t been able to see another way out.

That he hadn’t talked to either of us about it, hadn’t wanted either of us to stop him.

Trevor puts a plate of pancakes down in front of me. They smell like butter and syrup and the chocolate chips are arranged in smiley faces. I don’t have any appetite at all.

When I look up again, I catch Trevor and Jonathan exchanging a worried look.

I clear my throat and pick up my fork. “Are we still hitting the ski hill today?”

“Only if you’re up for it,” Trevor says.

“I’m fine,” I say.

He snorts. “Very convincing.”

I manage a small smile, and he sits down beside me, scooting his chair close to loop an arm around my waist. We eat in silence for a few minutes before we hear the telltale thumping of Bandit rushing down the stairs.

“Bandit!” Trevor abandons his plate to greet him, sitting down on the floor to play. Cole steps into the kitchen a moment later. My insides do strange things at the sight of him, rearranging themselves so my heart is beating in my throat.

“Morning,” I say softly.

His posture is tense, and he doesn’t answer with anything more than a nod, but I can see his flat expression for what it is now, a mask laid over his fear.

“Trevor made pancakes.”

“No, thanks,” he mutters.

“There’s toast and bacon, too, if you’re too cool for pancakes,” Trevor says, rising from the floor. “Is Bandit allowed to eat bacon?”

“Yes,” Cole says. He doesn’t sit down, but he does pick at a piece of toast, which is more than I’ve seen him eat most mornings.

“We’re heading to the ski hill soon, if you want to come with us,” Trevor says.

“No, thanks.”

Yesterday, I might not have pushed him on it, but the thought of him spending the day alone, retreating back inside himself again—

“You should come,” I say firmly. “It’ll be fun.” I can already see the refusal forming on his lips, so I bring out the big guns, dropping my voice and widening my eyes just a bit. “Please?”

From the corner of my eye, I see Trevor stifle a smile. I ignore him, holding Cole’s gaze, maintaining the sweet, hopeful look that I know isn’t fooling him one bit. I can tell I’ve thrown him off balance, though. After last night, I bet he thought I’d treat him with pity, but pity is not what Cole needs. He needs someone to drag him out of the darkness, kicking and screaming if that’s what it takes.

After a long moment, he lets out an aggrieved breath, and I know that I’ve won.

THE SKI HILL is surprisingly busy for a weekday, full of families with young kids and groups of teenagers on their winter break. The weather is perfect, bright and sunny and cold. Jonathan and Trevor go inside to buy lift passes for us—“We don’t need everyone swarming to get your autograph,” Trevor teases me—leaving Cole and me alone by the car. Cole is doing his best to maintain a prickly silence, which I’ve decided to ignore.

“Did you come here a lot growing up?” I ask.

“Mm.”

“Did you come here with Clara?”

His head twists toward me, his eyes angry and startled, like he didn’t think I’d dare say her name.

“You can’t pretend she didn’t exist,” I point out.

“I’m *not*. But I don’t want to talk about her.”

“I think you do.”

A muscle twitches in his jaw, but he doesn’t tell me that I’m wrong.

“You can’t scare me away by acting like a dick,” I say. “I already know it isn’t true.”

He lets out a heavy breath. “Quin…”

I lean close and brush my lips over his cheek. He startles at the contact.

“Thanks for coming with us,” I say.

Trevor and Jonathan return before he can reply. Trevor makes no attempt to hide his smirk at the sight of us close together. He hands us our ski passes, which are just stickers paired with triangles of wire. I stare at mine uselessly before Cole takes it out of my hands, unpeeling the sticker and folding it neatly over the wire. He hands it back to me, ignoring Trevor’s wide grin. Jonathan elbows Trevor in the side, which saves me having to do it myself.

Trevor hands out our rental gear—snowboards for Cole, Jonathan and me, skis for himself—and we head for the hill. I tuck my snowboard under one arm and my helmet under the other, which is far more awkward than the seasoned snowboarders all around us make it look. And by “seasoned snowboarders”, I mean the group of pre-teens walking just ahead of us.

“Where are you guys going?” I ask, when Trevor and Cole turn left, away from the ski lift. “Aren’t we going up there?”

“You have to walk before you can run, little one,” Trevor says. “We’re starting off on the bunny hill.”

“The *bunny hill*,” I repeat with disgust.

Trevor cackles at the look on my face. Even Cole looks grudgingly amused.

“Yes, the bunny hill,” Trevor says. “Come along now. If you get lost, just follow the five- and six-year-olds.”

I scowl at the back of his head and follow him and Cole to an area at the far left of the bottom of the mountain. Calling it a hill is generous—it's a wide, gentle slope serviced by a mini lift that Trevor calls a T-bar. I can tell he really wants to make us use it, like all the tiny children are, but Jonathan shoots him a warning look, and we walk to the top of the hill instead.

I will admit, once I'm at the top with my board strapped on, the tiny hill looks a hell of a lot bigger. It takes me three tries just to stand up without falling, and when the board starts sliding to the right for no reason, I sit down again with a thump. Jonathan is on the ground beside me, fiddling uncertainly with the straps of his boots.

"I think we've got our work cut out for us," Trevor tells Cole. The two of them have tucked their skis and snowboard off to the side of the trail. I contemplate throwing something very heavy at Trevor's head, but before I can find anything suitable, he claps his hands together and says, "Alright, time for lesson one: standing without falling on your ass. Cole, you're in charge of that one."

It takes Cole a moment to realize "that one" is me. Trevor takes Jonathan's hands and pulls him to his feet, then gives Cole an expectant look. After a brief, stilted pause, Cole steps forward and offers me his palms.

I immediately rescind my decision to throw something at Trevor's head. Cole holds my gloved hands tightly, keeping me steady when my balance wobbles.

"Take a minute to find your center," Trevor says. "Lean back and forth and see how it feels."

I do as he says, and almost immediately fall on my ass again. I don't, though, because Cole is holding onto me. He doesn't meet my eye, but every time I lose my balance, his grip tightens, keeping me on my feet.

"You can lean forward more than that," he says after a moment. The words sound like they've been dragged out of his throat, his inner teacher

rising up against his will.

“I’ll start sliding,” I protest.

“Dig the edge of your board in with your heels.” He tugs me further upright. I slip down a few inches before the board catches in the snow. “Just like that.”

I try it again, letting the board slide down a little before bringing myself to a stop. “I did it!” I say brightly. The set of his lips shifts slightly, almost like the start of a smile. “I’m basically an Olympian,” I say, sliding forward again. Then I lose my balance and sit down hard on the snow.

“Basically,” he says dryly, pulling me back to my feet.

“Careful,” I warn him. “You almost look like you’re having fun.”

“Do you want me to let go?”

“You wouldn’t.”

He lets go of my hands, but the instant I start to wobble, he catches me again.

“Ha!” I say. “Told you.”

His fragile smile lasts for all of two seconds, then something dark passes over his face.

“Don’t do that.”

“Do what?”

“Flirt with me. I meant what I said last night. I can’t do this.”

“You’re already doing it.” I lower my voice below the noise of the ski hill. “Come on,” I say softly. “You don’t have to make it so hard.”

I mean it seriously, but the moment the words leave my lips, I realize they’re also the perfect opening for a “That’s what she said” joke. One corner of Cole’s mouth twitches, like he heard it, too. I grin and give his hands an encouraging shake. “Atta boy. Now, come on—show me what to do next.”

He tries to keep me at arm’s length a little while longer, but it’s just not that easy to do when you’re teaching someone how to snowboard. For one

thing, I’m absolutely awful at it, and for another, Cole is a natural teacher. He can’t seem to stop himself from helping me.

About thirty minutes into our lesson—during which I’ve successfully turned exactly once—Trevor’s phone goes off in his pocket.

“Shoot, that’s Coach,” he says. “I should take this.” He answers it, wandering off to the side of the trail for privacy.

Jonathan sits down on the trail with his board in front of him. He’s a little better at this than I am, but not much.

I stifle a smile as Cole glances toward him.

“Go on,” I say. “I know you want to.”

He gives me a dirty look, but then he lets go of me and crosses the trail to hold his hands out to Jonathan. My chest aches warmly as he pulls Jonathan back to his feet.

For the next half hour, Cole moves back and forth between us, holding our hands as we execute clumsy turns. At the bottom of the hill, he shows us how to use the T-bar, and then walks alongside us, ready to steady us if we lose our balance.

On our second trip down, Jonathan manages a full turn without holding onto Cole’s hands.

“That’s it,” Cole says. “Now shift back onto your toe edge—exactly. Good job.”

Jonathan smiles at him, a shy curve of full lips. I actually see Cole react to it, a quick double-take imperfectly stifled.

He clears his throat. “Try to do that again.”

He returns to me after Jonathan’s next turn. “Stop it,” he says, as he takes my hands in his.

“Stop what?” I say innocently.

“Grinning at me like that.”

I smile even wider. “You’re a fucking softie.”

Color rises to his cheeks. “Fuck off. I am not.”

“No, right. You’re an asshole. Heart of stone.”

He glares at me, but there’s no real heat in it. He guides me through a set of turns, all of which go exceptionally well, if I do say so myself.

“I’m waiting for my compliment,” I say. “Jonathan got one, I want one, too.”

“You didn’t fall on your ass that time. Bravo.”

I smile. “I’ll take it.”

When Trevor returns a few minutes later, Cole is back with Jonathan, correcting his stance. Trevor grins at me, his eyes glinting mischievously.

“I’ll take my boyfriend back now,” he tells Cole. “Unless you want to keep him instead of Quin.”

“Fine by me,” Jonathan says. Then, when Trevor feigns a gasp, he says, “What? You and Quin are probably better suited. You’re both very—”

“Handsome?” Trevor says. “Charming?”

“Loud,” Jonathan says.

A tiny laugh escapes Cole’s lips—if I wasn’t looking straight at him, I wouldn’t have believed it came from him. “I can stay with you,” he tells Jonathan.

“You’re going to abandon me?” I protest.

“Happily,” Cole says.

“Too bad I won’t have it.” Trevor plants his hands on Cole’s back and shoves him toward me. “This one is mine. You’re stuck with Quin.”

“He’s right,” I say, holding my hands out to Cole. “You’re stuck with me. There’s no getting out of it.”

“Is that a threat or a promise?” Cole asks. He says it in an off-hand tone, but I hear something else beneath the words. Uncertainty, or maybe even the tiniest bit of hope. It’s not much, but it feels like everything.

I squeeze his hands hard. “It’s a promise.”

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COLE

When I was growing up, my father liked to complain about weak men. He'd say it all the time—"This is what you get for doing business with weak men"—and for a few years, when I was young and stupid enough to care what he thought, I used to worry he'd decide I was weak. Then I grew up and realized that "weak man" was just the umbrella term he used for anyone who disagreed with him, and I stopped caring about it.

Today, though, I am being a weak man.

I shouldn't be at the ski hill with Quin and his friends. I shouldn't be letting Quin smile at me the way that he is, or letting him believe that there's something between us. I meant what I said last night. I won't do this again. Loving someone is nothing but misery, and I've caused enough misery in my lifetime.

But it turns out I'm a weak man, and every one of Quin's smiles is making me weaker.

I thought he would learn his lesson after last night. I thought he would start treating me with wide-eyed, cloying pity, the kind that would make it easy for me to push him away. If he'd put his hand on my shoulder and said, "Poor you, poor Cole," I would have told him to go screw himself and happily fucked off back to the woods by myself. It would have been so, so easy, an ironclad reason to despise him.

Instead, he's grinning at me, not with pity but *affection*, and cursing enthusiastically every time he wipes out on his snowboard.

"Motherfucker," he says for the fourth or fifth time. "This board is defective."

I pull him back to his feet. "Your brain is defective."

"I don't respond to negative feedback, Cole. I'm an actor, I need constant praise."

"Then get someone else to teach you."

"I don't want anyone else. I want you."

He winks after he says it, and I try not to find it charming. I really do.

"Shut up and try that turn again."

We spend a few more hours on the bunny hill, until our hands and feet are numb and Quin and Jonathan's legs are shaking from unfamiliar use. I did little more than stand around and guide them through turns, but all of my muscles are heavy with exhaustion. A phrase has been hovering on the edges of my mind all day, and as I crouch to help Quin get his board off—his hands are too tired, he claims—I remember what it is.

An unstoppable force meets an immovable object. That is Quin and me.

I know I can't be with anyone again. I *know* it, in my bones. There is nothing but darkness inside of me, and I won't drag anyone into it again. The walls around my heart are made of Kevlar. I've built them so no one can get inside.

But then Quin looks at me, and I feel the cracks forming, tiny fracture lines that whisper dangerous things, like *maybe it wasn't your fault* and *maybe this time will be different*. I try not to listen, I try to keep him away, but he keeps pushing his way back in, and smiling at me like I'm someone worth smiling at.

I'm trying to resist it. Every time he smiles at me, I make myself remember the pictures of Clara's body, the ones Nathan Hart showed me after I spent an hour shouting in the police station, refusing to believe she

was dead. Every time I catch myself remembering the way Quin looked staring up at the Northern Lights, I force myself to think of the last text Clara sent me, *Safe flight! xoxo*. I make myself wonder, did she already know what she was going to do when she wrote those x's and o's? Was she crying when she sent it, wondering why, *why*, I couldn't see she was in pain?

If she'd only *told* me—

I break off that angry thought before I can finish it. It's so tempting to be mad at her. Sometimes I nearly choke on swallowed anger. But I won't blame her. It was my job to take care of her, and I didn't do it well enough. I'm not so weak that I won't face that.

But every time Quin smiles at me, more of those tiny cracks appear, and I catch myself wondering, *maybe*.

His friends aren't helping. Jonathan is alright—he's sort of sweet and mercifully quiet—but Trevor is a whole other story. He reminds me of Matty Wright, Travis Keeping's annoying teammate at Harper Racing. He carries himself with the same absurd, offensive confidence, like life is easy and happiness is guaranteed.

Unlike Matty, Trevor is irritatingly handsome, which sometimes makes me forget how annoying he is. He also has a supernatural talent for preventing me from leaving Quin.

I don't know if he's doing it on purpose. When we get back to The Chalet, I immediately tell them I'm heading out, and Trevor smiles and says, "Sure thing! We'll unload all of this crap and let you go."

I help them unload the car, because I'm not a monster, but then Bandit is uncontrollably excited to see us, and Trevor asks politely if it would be okay if he and Jonathan took Bandit for a walk before I go.

"Our volleyball schedule is too busy for us to get a dog," he says, "so we both have canine withdrawal syndrome. We'll just take him to the end of the road and back."

I don’t really have the option of saying no. Bandit heard Trevor say the word “walk” and is already vibrating in place at the door.

“Make it quick,” I say, even though I know Bandit has never allowed a walk to end sooner than half an hour. I’m left alone with Quin, again, and he’s looking tired and sweaty and cold.

“You should go and shower,” I say, turning away from him. “I’ll make some food.”

He’s gone long enough for me to make some pasta. I don’t claim to be very good at cooking, but some of Clara’s recipes have stuck in my head. I used to hear her voice in my head when I cooked—*add more salt, for fuck’s sake, you aren’t serving this in a hospital!*—but that hasn’t happened in years. When I try to remember her voice these days, it sounds tinny and far-away and wrong.

“Oh my god, that smells good,” Quin says, reappearing with wet hair and flushed skin. He peers over my shoulder to look at the sauce, accosting me with the pineapple-coconut smell of his hair.

I turn the burner off and lean away from him. “I’m going to head out as soon as Trevor and Jonathan are back.”

He leans on the counter and fixes me with an even stare. “Why?”

“You know why,” I say shortly. “There’s nothing between us. And I don’t want to talk about it again.”

“I hear what you’re saying,” he says, in peaceable tones. “But has it occurred to you that you’re being a massive fucking coward?”

My head jerks back. “Excuse me?”

“Something horrible happened to you,” he says, in a quieter voice. “And I am so, so sorry for it. But what you’re doing—blaming yourself, living alone in the woods, acting like a dick to keep anyone from ever getting close to you—it’s not helping.”

“I don’t want it to help,” I snap.

“I know. And it’s cowardly.”

I make an incoherent noise of fury. “It’s none of your business what I do. I’m not hurting anyone—”

“You’re hurting *me*.”

It brings me up short. My mouth moves soundlessly, trying to find an argument, but he just looks at me with those damn honey-brown eyes, and more splintery cracks form inside of me.

“You’re hurting yourself, too,” he adds, “but I know you don’t care about that.”

I snatch an unsteady breath. “Look,” I say stiffly. “I’m sorry if you thought something was happening between us—”

“There is something happening between us,” he says. “You just don’t want to let it happen. And I know you’ve been telling yourself it’s because you’d be bad for me—”

“I *would* be bad for you. I know my own track record.”

“Cole.” He hooks his fingers under my chin, forcing me to look at him. “Do you really believe that? Do you really think it’s your fault that Clara took her own life?”

I open my mouth on an automatic “yes”, but Quin narrows his eyes and the word dies on my tongue.

“You said you looked through seven years of text messages,” he says. “And I’m assuming you’ve spent the last three years reliving seven years’ worth of memories. So, tell me honestly—do you really think it was your fault?”

My temper surges up like a fountain.

“It wasn’t *her* fault,” I snap, knocking his hand away from my face. “Don’t you fucking dare say that.”

“I wasn’t going to.”

“You were thinking it.”

“No,” he says. “I wasn’t. It wasn’t her fault, and it wasn’t yours.”

“It was my fault. I was supposed to make her happy.”

He lets out a heavy breath. “Would you be blaming yourself like this if Clara had died of cancer?”

“Yes,” I say.

His mouth curves humorlessly. “I believe that. But you’d probably know, intellectually, that you shouldn’t.”

“It’s not the same thing.”

He raises an eyebrow. “Is that really the hill you want to let yourself die on? That mental illnesses aren’t as real as physical ones?”

“I didn’t say that,” I snap. “I know that they are. You have no idea—you don’t know how many fucking psychiatrists I’ve talked to. I’m practically single-handedly funding the Canadian suicide hotline—”

“You are?”

“—I’ve talked to people who’ve tried to kill themselves, and people who want to kill themselves, and families who’ve lost people to suicide, and it’s not—it isn’t—it doesn’t *fit*,” I burst out. “Nothing they say makes it make sense. And don’t tell me mental illness doesn’t have to make sense, I’ve heard that bullshit before.”

“It’s not bullshit.”

“It is! It is. You can’t—you don’t *understand*. She wouldn’t have done that to me.”

I don’t mean to say the last part out loud. It sounds so pathetic, so selfish, like I’m only sad for myself instead of her. But it’s not a lie. After all these years, I still don’t believe she would do that to me. Clara and I, we looked after each other. That was our whole fucking thing. She was an introvert, and most people annoyed me, but it didn’t matter. I was her person, and she was mine. Our whole life was the two of us.

Quin drags his lower lip through his teeth. “Then maybe it wasn’t what it looked like.”

Hearing him say it actually hurts, like he’s punched me in the sternum. “You don’t think I’ve thought of that? I spent months, *years*, trying to prove

that someone killed her."

Every dollar I ever earned in my life, I spent on private investigators. Then, when all of that was gone, I spent hundreds of thousands of my father's money on more. It didn't matter. They all came to the same awful conclusion.

"Maybe they didn't have all the evidence," Quin says tentatively.

I shake my head jerkily. "They did."

As loathe as I am to give Nathan Hart any kind of credit, he did cooperate with the people I hired—the first four or five of them, anyway. He gave them the police reports, the crime scene photos, the witness statements. When he got fed up of dealing with them, he gave it all to me. And as much as I'd like to believe he did it to hurt me, I think the truth is even worse. He was the first one on scene at Clara's death, the one who found her, and I think he was tired of reliving it. I think, in his own stupid little mind, he thought Clara would go back to him someday. I don't think he's ever forgiven me for taking that chance away.

"Maybe they missed something," Quin says.

"One set of footprints," I say, with a weariness that threatens to suffocate me. "I saw the photos myself. Clara drove herself to Lake Packett—an old lady saw her car go by—and she walked out onto the lake by herself, and she died by herself. That's what happened. I can't change it."

Quin watches me for a long, exquisitely painful moment, then he steps close and puts his palms onto my chest. "Then you have to let it go."

A strange, thin noise slips out of me. "Or what?"

"Or nothing. It's not an ultimatum. It's just…what you have to do. Aren't you tired of being alone, and sad?"

Yes.

The word springs to my mind before I can stop it, and once it's there, I can't look away from it.

I am tired of being alone. I'm tired of being unhappy. I'm tired of rationing my feelings and making bargains with myself. Letting myself keep racing, but only if I'm miserable the rest of the time. Letting myself sleep with people, but only if I don't give a shit about them.

I'm never going to be like Trevor, smiling and skipping blithely through the world. I wasn't like that even when Clara was alive. But I want to be a person again. I want to *have* a person again.

I want to have Quin.

His hair is still wet from his shower, and a rivulet of water is slipping down his neck. I catch it with my thumb before it can slip beneath his t-shirt. I don't mean to do it, it just happens. My default setting is giving a fuck about him.

He smiles a little, like he knows what I'm thinking, and rises on his toes to brush his mouth over mine.

I hate how good it feels. I hate it and I love it, too.

I put my palms on his chest and push him back, gentle but firm. "I'm still in love with Clara."

I say it because it's true, and because I think it might be the only thing that can scare him off for good. But he just tilts his head and gives me a sad sort of smile. "I know you are. But you don't have to let go of Clara to hold onto me."

The pain in my chest is sudden and blinding; for one awful moment, I really can't breathe. But Quin keeps looking up at me with those damn honey-brown eyes, and it shatters something inside of me that I didn't think could ever break.

As quickly as it came, the pain disappears. My heart feels strange and weightless without it, like there's more space inside of my chest. I know that the feeling can't last, but it feels so fucking wonderful that for now, I don't try to fight it.

And when Quin leans up and kisses me again, I let myself kiss him back.

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COLE

There’s a feeling I used to get when I got out of my race car, back when I first started racing in Formula 2. It was such a step up in power compared to Formula 3, and when the races were over, it always took me a few minutes to find my footing again, that same wobbly sense of lost momentum you get when you step off of a really fast roller coaster or abruptly jump off of a treadmill.

I feel the same way tonight, sitting at the dinner table with Quin and Trevor and Jonathan. Trevor is telling us what Bandit did on his walk. They let him tear off after a squirrel, and he leapt up a six-foot tree to chase after it, as he’s wont to do when no one tells him not to.

“He did a police dog training course,” Quin says, then he looks at me to tell them the whole story.

And I do. At least, I think I do. I feel my mouth moving, and the three of them smile and nod like the words coming out all make sense. Inside of my head, there’s a steady roar like a snowstorm, and every few minutes my heart flutters frantically, like it’s trying to figure out what the fuck I think I’m doing. At some point, Quin takes my hand under the table, and Bandit puts his head on my leg, like the two of them think I’m close to a meltdown.

The scariest thing is, I'm not. It isn't fear or panic coursing through my veins. It's *relief*. I feel like I've been carrying a weight around for three years and someone's just given me permission to put it down.

And I really, really want to be alone with Quin, for as long as this madness lasts.

But of course, now that I actually want to be alone with him, Trevor doesn't help me out at all.

"We should play a board game or something," he says, as we do the dishes.

Jonathan stifles a yawn. "I'm kind of wiped. I might just crash."

"I'll come with you," Trevor says immediately.

Jonathan smiles at him, and Trevor smiles back, and something pangs in my chest, like, *that. I want that*.

"We're going to be MIA tomorrow morning, by the way," Trevor says. "It's Jonathan's mom's boyfriend's seventieth birthday, and we've got this big Facetime thing planned with his kids."

"Is he doing okay?" Quin asks.

"Yeah, he's good," Jonathan says. "He was feeling pretty rough on the anniversary of her death, but he's doing better now."

"Jonathan's mom died of cancer last year," Trevor tells me.

"Shit," I say. "I'm sorry."

Jonathan rubs the back of his neck. "Thanks. We were really close."

"That's rough," I say, ineptly. Dealing with my own grief for three years hasn't made me any better at dealing with others'.

"What about your parents?" Trevor asks me. "Quin said your dad is an evil billionaire?"

I snort. "Pretty much."

"And your mom?"

I hesitate. I don't usually talk about my mom to anyone, but after Jonathan talked about his, it feels like it would be wrong not to.

“She died in a car accident when I was twelve.”

Trevor sucks a breath through his teeth. “Shit. That’s awful.”

“Mm,” I say vaguely. I can feel Quin’s eyes on my face, but I just keep washing dishes.

“That must’ve been hard on you and your dad,” Trevor says.

“Not hard on him, no,” I say in a clipped voice. “He’d already divorced her by that point. He was dating a Bulgarian supermodel when she died, if memory serves.”

Trevor winces. “Still. The two of them were married, they raised you together…I’m sure it was rough on him.”

My temper flickers. That’s just like him, to think everyone in the world is a good person deep down. I should let it go, but I’m acutely aware that Quin is still watching me. I don’t want him to think I’m an asshole who hates his father for no reason.

“He didn’t even come to her funeral,” I say. “And when he picked me up from the hospital after the crash, he called her a ‘dumb bitch who never knew how to drive.’ Not to my face, I mean. He said it on the phone when he didn’t know I was listening.”

Trevor stares at me. “Jesus Christ.”

“What an asshole,” Quin says.

They all look so horrified, I decide not to tell them what he said afterward, that he was pissed about the money he’d spent on the car my mother wrecked.

I was in the passenger seat of the car when it crashed, but I didn’t have any real injuries. Probably because when the drunk driver swerved into our lane, my mom turned our car so her side took the blow. I still remember the tooth-jarring impact of it, and the halo of blood on the windshield where her head shattered it.

They didn’t tell me right away what had happened to her, so I climbed out of my hospital bed when the nurse wasn’t looking and went looking for

my dad. At that point in time, I still loved him. He had charmed me the way he charms everyone, showering me with attention and gifts throughout my childhood, saying all the right things to my face when he divorced my mom. But standing there in the hospital, listening to him talk to one of his colleagues on the phone when he didn't know I was listening, I realized he was human fucking garbage.

A Mercedes S-Class, completely totaled, he said. Then he chuckled and added, *Don't ever sign a pre-nup, man, not even when you're poor.*

It's strange how clearly I remember it, considering how fuzzy my childhood memories are before then. Ages zero to twelve are a blur of birthday parties and karting and skiing lessons, but that day is crystal fucking clear. I remember the look of feigned sorrow on my father's face when the doctor told us mom was dead, and I remember how cold my anger was when he squeezed my shoulder and told me he was sorry.

I feel just as angry now, remembering it, but I clear my throat and push the memories away.

"He's a dick," I say shortly. "He's just really good at acting like he's not."

There's another beat of silence, then Trevor says, "If I ever meet him, I'm going to kick him in the balls."

My lips curve up grudgingly. "You'll have my blessing."

"Are you guys going to stay up for a while?" Trevor asks, looking between Quin and me.

Quin hesitates and glances at me, a flicker of heat briefly crossing his gaze.

Trevor grins so wide I'm surprised his cheeks don't split open. "Ah," he says delicately. Then he crouches down in front of Bandit. "How would you like to spend the night with Jonathan and me, hm? You want to sleep in our bed tonight, boy?"

I glare at him, but I don’t tell him not to take Bandit. The things I have planned for the night will be a lot easier if Bandit isn’t scratching impatiently at the bedroom door.

“You sleep well, now,” Trevor says, kissing Quin on the cheek.

We can hear him cackling all the way down the hall as he and Jonathan and Bandit head to their bedroom.

I turn to Quin to make a comment about his choice of friends, but the words die on my lips. His eyes are all pupil and his cheeks are flushed, and his pulse is a twitching shadow in the slender column of his throat. I want to put my mouth on it. I want to run my tongue over every damn inch of his perfect skin.

For one long, drawn-out moment, we stand there staring at each other. The last dinner plate is in my hands, dripping soapy water onto the floor.

“I’ll just…finish up,” I say hoarsely.

He drags his eyes up from my mouth. “I’ll meet you upstairs.”

WHEN I GET to his room, he’s waiting for me on the bed. My brain short circuits for a moment, and I find myself on top of him without quite realizing how I got there. I kiss him hard and deep, like I’m starving for air and his lips and tongue and throat are my oxygen. His hands slide down my back, his fingers digging into my hips, pulling me closer.

“What do you want?” he asks breathlessly, when we break apart to breathe.

I don’t know how to answer him. I want a million different things. I want to take him apart slowly with my tongue; I want to fuck him hard and fast into the mattress. I can’t come up with a single answer, so I just kiss him again, twisting my hands tight in his hair. His mouth is perfect, warm

and soft and sweet, and when his tongue slides against mine, it lights my nerves on fire.

I only stop kissing him long enough to get his clothes off. I've seen him shirtless in his movies, but that's done nothing to prepare me for the reality of having him naked underneath me. I sit back on my heels just to look at him, cataloguing every dip and shadow on his skin, tracing out the path my mouth will take.

He tugs impatiently on my belt buckle and I realize I'm still fully dressed. I hop off the bed to strip my clothes off, and Quin rises up on his hands to watch me, showing off the strong curve of his biceps and the slim lines of his waist. There's a faint trail of bronze below his navel; my skin pulses as my gaze follows it down. When I look back up again, his eyes are heavy-lidded and his breathing is quick.

His thighs shift apart as he murmurs, "Get over here," an order I'm all too happy to obey.

I run my palms up his warm, strong thighs and swallow him down to the root, stifling a grin when he gasps, "Fuck, *Cole*."

I take slow, deep pulls off of him until he gets incoherent, then I release him and nip the inside of his thigh. I shift upward and spend several intoxicating minutes on his chest, sucking and nipping until he starts to wriggle and whimper beneath me. The second the rhythm of his breathing starts to change, I pull back and pinch his hip hard.

"Bastard," he laughs, dropping his head back as I run my tongue up his throat. He shifts and writhes underneath me as I nibble his earlobe, gently grinding my hips against him and running my tongue over warm, sensitive flesh.

"Cole—fuck, *Cole*—"

The sound of my name on his tongue nearly ends me; a low groan drags itself from my throat. I want to keep him like this forever, hovering on the edge of pleasure, until his voice is broken from crying my name and he

forgets every single thing except my tongue. But I want him too badly to drag things on any longer. I sink down between his legs again and grip myself roughly as he falls apart, helplessly thrusting into my mouth as he comes with a hoarse, broken cry. I jerk myself hard and follow him over the edge, moaning around him until he starts to whimper and twitch from oversensitivity.

"Fuck," he breathes, throwing an arm over his face. "*Fuck*."

I rest my temple on the inside of his thigh, nuzzling shamelessly against his hot skin. My breathing hasn't even settled and I'm already craving more. I want him in my lap, bent over the side of the bed, naked and wet in the shower. I want to make him scream for me. I want to make him beg. I want to wrap him up in soft blankets and stroke his hair while he sleeps. I want to bring him coffee when he wakes up, and hold his hand while he drinks it.

I've gone fucking crazy, in other words, in a way that's only happened once before. I need to stop this, now, before I tumble headfirst over the edge.

He drops his arm down from his face and tangles his fingers in my hair. "What're you thinking down there?"

His eyes are dark and vulnerable, and I brace myself to say what I know I have to say. *This was a mistake. We shouldn't have done this. I'd rather saw my dick off than open my heart up to someone again.*

"You're perfect," is what comes out instead.

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QUIN

The TV series that kicked off my acting career was a six-episode historical romance about a farmhand who falls for a rich society girl. If I'm being totally honest, I don't remember that much about it. We filmed it in only two months, and it was so many years ago now. But it got rave reviews from early viewers, and Netflix pulled a quote from one of them and used it in the teaser: *Omg, the YEARNING.*

Looking back, I wonder how I pulled that off, considering I had no idea what yearning meant.

Now that I've spent the night with Cole, I really fucking do.

It feels like a sickness, or an addiction. At any given moment, at least fifty percent of my brain is thinking about him. The heat of his tongue dragging over my skin, the bite of his fingers on my thighs. The way he stared at me afterward, like I was a pool of water in the middle of a desert.

I had a feeling he would be good in bed, but "good" doesn't even begin to describe it. He touches me like I'm an extension of himself, like he's feeling my pleasure as his own. And he likes to draw things out, dragging me to the knife-edge of pleasure and then pulling me back with strategic nips of pain. I thought I'd had great sex before, but no one's ever brought me to the point of hoarse, shameless begging.

Trevor laughs out loud at the look on my face when we finally leave the bedroom at noon the next day, and he and Jonathan conveniently remove themselves from the house for the afternoon, claiming they want to explore the town on their own.

They take Bandit with them, and thank god they do, because I'm not sure Cole and I have the wherewithal to look after him. We scarf down a late breakfast and retreat back upstairs, half-naked before we even reach the bedroom.

"You need a shower," Cole says, in a low, throaty voice that briefly steals my breath away.

If having a kink for washing people is a thing, I'm pretty sure it's one that Cole has. He spends—god, I don't know how long running his soapy hands over my skin, and digging his strong fingers into my scalp until I'm putty in his arms. The shower door is too steamed-up to see much of our reflections in the mirror, but I watch our shadows move while he wrings me apart with curled fingers and blunt, rhythmic pressure.

During our brief relocation from the shower to the bed, as I'm watching him pull the sheets back, I think, how can this be the same man I met back in Singapore? He was so cold back then, so closed off.

He's nothing like that now, watching me ease down into his lap. He's desperately, intimately present, holding my hips tight enough to bruise and looking at me like I'm a dream come to life. I don't think anyone's ever looked at me like that, not even guys I've been with for months. The effect it has on me is—startling. I drive myself against him, chasing his pleasure more than my own, until my legs are trembling with effort and he's crying out with every thrust. He says my name as he falls apart, and my whole world narrows down to the burn of him, stars bursting at the edges of my vision as a savage wave of ecstasy spreads from the center of my body all the way down to my toes.

"Oh my fucking god, *Quin*."

His head is tipped back, his brows drawn together like he's in pain, and I realize I'm still moving against him, little shifts and bounces that must be tortuous. It's an effort to make myself stop. I want to keep going, I want to see how quickly I can drag us back to the edge again. I wait a minute—or thirty seconds, at least—and tentatively move my hips again. It draws a low, deep noise from his chest.

"You're going to have to give me longer than that," he says, gripping my thighs to hold me still.

I pout a little, which makes him smile like I hoped it would. "How much longer?"

"Thirty minutes and some breakfast, at least."

"Twenty minutes and a power bar," I counter.

He laughs. "This isn't a negotiation. It's a physical necessity." He slaps my hip lightly and I move off of him carefully, slightly stunned by the bright, easy sound of his laugh. He gets off the bed and holds a hand out to me. I stare at it for a moment before I take it. He pulls me to my feet, laughing again when I wobble on shaky legs.

"I think I'm going to need a break from our snowboarding lessons," I say.

"What happened to 'twenty minutes and a power bar'?"

I elbow him. "Asshole."

We go downstairs and make peanut butter and banana sandwiches, which Cole calls a lazy man's dinner. It's only four thirty, but by the time I get a fire going in the living room, it's dark outside.

We sit across from each other on the couch with our plates on our laps and our feet tangled up under a blanket. He runs his toes up and down the arches of my feet, purely to torture me, I'm sure.

"I am so fucking into you," I say, since apparently, I left my brain-to-mouth filter up in the bedroom.

I don’t regret saying it, though, not with the way it makes Cole look at me. But his fond expression only lasts a moment before something darker crosses over it. I don’t need him to tell me what he’s thinking. Clara’s name is written all over his face.

“Will you tell me about her?”

“Like what,” he says, warily.

I shrug. “Anything. Tell me a story about her. A good memory.”

He looks away from me. His foot isn’t moving against mine anymore. “I don’t like talking about it,” he says. It feels like there’s more he wants to say, so I wait, patiently, while he works himself up to it. “I can’t trust any of it,” he mutters finally, looking at his hands.

“You wonder what she wasn’t telling you.”

He gives a fraction of a nod. “Every time I remember something good, I wonder if it was fake. If she was only pretending to be happy.”

God, that’s heartbreaking. I know he won’t want my pity, though, so I chew my lip and think of something better to offer. “Did you two get Bandit together?”

He frowns. “Yes.”

“Then tell me a story about her and Bandit. No one can pretend to be happy around Bandit, unless they’re a psychopath.”

It makes him laugh. “That’s true.”

“So, tell me a story about the two of them.”

I don’t think he likes the idea, but after a few moments of me looking at him hopefully, he huffs out a breath and relents.

“She took him to the pet store on Sundays.”

I wait for him to elaborate. “And?”

He shrugs. “And nothing. She used to take him to the pet store every Sunday. She called it Sunday morning snacks.” He tears a piece of crust from his sandwich. “Don’t say that phrase around Bandit, though. He’ll break the door down to get to the car.”

The strangest ache spreads through my chest. “That’s nice,” I say softly.

“Mm.”

“Did you get him as a puppy?”

“Yeah.”

He doesn’t elaborate, but his eyes grow distant, then he gives a tiny shake of his head, like he’s trying not to remember the day. I can’t bear the way his face closes off afterward. I wonder how much time he spends running from memories.

I want to wrap him up in my arms, but I know from the set of his shoulders that it’s not what he needs.

“Tell me something else,” I say instead, nudging his leg with my foot. “Tell me something about *me*.”

He draws himself out of the darkness to shoot me a dry look. “Seriously?”

I grin. “Yes. When did you first know you liked me?”

He sighs theatrically, but then he’s quiet for a minute, like he’s really thinking about it.

“Watching you watch the aurora,” he says.

I make a triumphant noise. “I knew you thought it was beautiful.”

“I thought you were beautiful.”

I blink at him. “Fucking hell.” I toss my empty plate onto the table and lean across the couch to kiss him hard. “Who are you and what have you done with Cole?”

“I can be nice,” he says, with a note of childish stubbornness that makes me smile.

“Nice,” I agree. “Brave. Sexy.”

I punctuate each word with a kiss, first on his lips, then his cheek, then his jaw. His hands slide up my sides, warming my skin through the thin fabric of my t-shirt.

“I think it’s been about thirty minutes,” I say, shifting closer.

He runs his palms up my thighs, watching his hands move like he can’t quite believe that they’re his. “How much longer do you think Trevor and Jonathan will be gone?”

“Long enough that we don’t have to move off this couch,” I say, then I lean down and capture his mouth.

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COLE

I wake up with Quin’s head tucked into the curve of my neck, and his arm slung low over my waist. Snow is falling outside of the windows, and Christmas music is wafting up from downstairs along with the smells of coffee and bacon.

I lie there for a long time, trying to remember the right word for what I’m feeling.

Peace. I think that’s what it is.

When I think of Clara, the pain is still there, but it’s duller, like a bruise that’s starting to heal. I reach for the guilt instead—I can’t just let myself lie here feeling *peaceful*—but that feels different now, too. It darts away from me like a fish, chased off by new, nagging thoughts like *don’t be a coward* and *it wasn’t your fault*.

I don’t really believe that last one. I understand the point Quin was trying to make the other day, comparing mental illnesses to physical ones, but what he doesn’t understand, what he hasn’t seen yet, is that it’s not just that Clara was depressed. It’s that she never felt safe enough to tell me about it. I didn’t make her feel safe enough to tell me. Start to finish, that is my fault.

But maybe I could do better this time.

The thought brings all of my fears rushing back. I shouldn't be allowed to be with anyone again, just like I shouldn't get to lie here feeling happy. But Quin is snoring softly on my chest, and his fingers are twitching gently as he dreams, and I have a deep, unshakeable feeling that, like it or not, I'm in this too deep to get out.

I wrap my arms around Quin and hold him tight. I'm going to do better this time.

The movement pulls him out of his dreams. He makes quiet, sleepy noises as he wakes, and tilts his chin up to smile at me. "Good morning."

"Morning."

"Sleep well?"

"Yeah."

We look at each other for a moment, then Quin bursts out laughing and buries his face in my chest.

"What?" I say.

"I was just thinking about how weird this is. After I met you in Singapore, I literally thought to myself, 'I'd rather swim naked in a frozen lake than ever sleep with him.'"

"Thanks," I say dryly.

"And now I'm naked in your bed."

"You're not naked," I correct, plucking at the fabric of his boxer briefs.

He grins. "You know what I mean."

"Yeah." I clear my throat. "I'm glad you're here, though."

His smile softens. "So am I."

I pluck absently at his underwear again, then I slide my fingers under the waistband. "You could be naked, if you wanted."

He groans as my hand slips deeper. "I would really, really love that…"

"But?"

"But Trevor and Jonathan wanted to go into town for coffee this morning. Do you want to come with us?"

He looks up at me with wide, hopeful eyes, and I know that I'm well and truly fucked. I've tumbled off the edge of the cliff, and there's no way back up, just like it was with Clara.

No, that's not true. It's worse now. I know just how fragile it is, just how quickly a life can be snuffed out. One minute, warm and alive in my arms, the next, a cold corpse in a box.

Remembering it should make me want to run. I *do* want to run. But I can't. Quin has stitched himself into my heart, long rows of sutures crisscrossing with Clara's.

I pull him close and brush my lips over his temple.

"Yeah," I say. "Let's go."

I'VE BEEN to town a hundred times since Clara died, always with my hood up and my baseball cap pulled low so no one could recognize me. I would have avoided it altogether if I had a choice, but the nearest grocery store outside of Marble Brook is an hour and a half away, and they don't sell the brand of dog food Bandit likes.

There are certain places I've never let myself go, though, and Trevor and Jonathan take us to all of them. I grit my teeth through Clara's favorite gift shop and chew my lip bloody waiting in line at her favorite coffee shop. I'm thinking we've gone through the worst of it when Quin points at a sign up ahead and says, "That's a really cute bookstore."

Trevor groans dramatically while I try to remember how to breathe.

"*Quin*," he says. "You can't tell Jonathan about a bookstore. You know this. Our house is literally overflowing with books. You know how they say Venice is sinking? It's not because of overtourism. It's the weight of all the books in our house slowly pushing the whole country into the ground."

"Half of them are yours," Jonathan says.

“I didn’t say I wasn’t part of the problem. I’m just saying, there’s a fifty-pound weight limit on luggage, and I’m going to say ‘I told you so’ if you exceed it by two hundred pounds.”

Jonathan laughs. “No, you won’t.”

“No, I won’t,” Trevor agrees. “But I’ll be thinking it.”

We’ve reached the storefront. Trevor pulls the door open for Jonathan and Quin, but my feet come to a hard stop on the threshold.

Quin looks at me. “You coming in?”

The smell of the bookstore is wafting onto the street, old books and cinnamon and coffee. I can’t do this, not even for Quin.

I shake my head rigidly. “You guys go ahead.”

His eyes search mine, but he doesn’t press the issue. “We’ll just be a few minutes.”

“That’s a lie if I ever heard one,” Trevor says. “Cole and I will be out here.”

I stiffen. “You don’t have to wait with me.”

“I know I don’t.” He gestures to a bench nearby. “Let’s sit. Those two will be a while.”

I can’t think of a reason not to sit with him, other than “I don’t really want to”, so I follow him to the bench and sit down beside him. He turns toward me with one knee drawn up against his chest, like we’re schoolgirls getting ready to gossip.

“So,” he says. “You’re kind of a train wreck, eh?”

“Excuse me?”

“A train wreck,” he repeats. “A mess. An emotional work-in-progress.”

I scowl. “We can just sit in silence.”

“We *can*, but we won’t.” He wraps an arm around his bent leg and rests his chin on his knee. “I’m really sorry about your girlfriend.”

I jerk back like he’s thrown a punch at me. “Did Quin tell you?”

“Would you be mad at him if he did?”

“Yes,” I snap. Then, when he raises a disbelieving eyebrow, I grudgingly amend it to the truth. “No.”

“Good boy. And no, Quin didn’t tell me. Porter did.”

“Who?”

“Porter Collins. Your dad’s creepy, sexy bodyguard.”

“For fuck’s sake. How do you even *know* him?”

“We ran into him walking Bandit the other day. You know, he may be the most good-looking man I’ve ever seen in real life. And I met Travis Keeping at the Singapore Grand Prix.”

“Travis Keeping is *not* good-looking.”

Trevor gives me a pitying look. “It’s hard to take you seriously when you say such ridiculous things. But anyway, it was Porter who told me what happened with your girlfriend. I’m really sorry.”

He says it simply and honestly, nothing like the syrupy, self-indulgent condolences people have forced on me in the past.

“It clearly fucked you up,” Trevor goes on. “You think it’s your fault, even though that’s nonsense, and you’ve clearly been punishing yourself for it. And if I’m being totally honest, you’re so damn prickly I wouldn’t try to help you if you weren’t dating one of my best friends.”

“I don’t need your *help*,” I say, bristling.

He snorts. “Yeah, handsome. You do. Something horrible happened to you, and it fucked you up in a major way. And Quin is pulling you out of it, I can see that, but you need to let other people in besides him.”

“Why?” I demand.

“Because you can’t put all that weight on him. It’s not fair.”

I hate the way he says it, like a cocky fucking asshole.

I hate it even more that he’s *right*.

“If you love Quin—”

“I don’t *love* him,” I say, my pulse spiking with alarm.

“—then you can’t make him responsible for your fucked-up mental health. Let other people in. See a therapist. Put your guilt and grief behind you.”

“Like it’s that easy.”

“It’s not,” Trevor says. “But it’s what you have to do if you want to make things work with Quin. And you do want to make things work with him, because if you hurt him, I’ll fucking kill you.”

“So, just to recap,” I say tersely, “the woman I loved for seven years committed suicide, and you think I should fix it by making friends?”

“*Yes*, you dumb fuck. That’s how people fix things. With the help of other people.”

I glare at him, speechless with rage, but he just stares back at me and holds his palms open, as if to say, *well? Am I wrong?*

I wish to god that he was.

“Fine,” I say finally. “I’ll let other people in. Not you.”

“Too late,” he says blithely. “We’re friends now, and you just have to deal with it. And now that that’s settled,” he adds, leaning forward with a gleam in his eyes, “you have to tell me all about you and Quin.”

“Absolutely not.”

“He hated you for a while there.”

“He didn’t *hate* me.”

“Yes, he did. But you won him over. I can relate to that.”

I snort. “Really.”

“Mm.” He leans back again and takes a sip of coffee. “I know it’s hard to believe, because I’m so handsome and charming, but I did *not* make a good first impression when Jonathan and I first met. He hated my guts for the first year or so, actually. Someday I’ll bore you with the whole story.”

“Goody.”

“But with time,” Trevor says, ignoring me, “my naturally wonderful personality emerged and Jonathan fell for me. You can’t hide who you are

forever, you know. If you're a shitty person, it'll come out eventually. And you, Cole Milton, are an emotional train wreck, but you're not a shitty person."

I run a thumb over the lid of my coffee cup. "How do you know?"

"Because I have eyes and a functioning brain."

"You've known me for, like, three days. You really think you know me?"

"Babe, I don't think *you* know you. You've been angry and sad and alone for too long. But you'll sort yourself out."

I attempt a derisive noise, but it doesn't come out quite right. I run my thumb over my coffee cup again. "You think?"

"Yes," he says simply. "I do."

I will never admit it to him—like, literally never—but his words have a frightening effect on me. It feels like he's plucked something painful and sharp out of my heart.

He lifts his coffee cup and points at me. "I'll tell you what—Jonathan and Quin want to do a movie night tonight, but tomorrow night, you and I are going out, just the two of us."

"Not a fucking chance."

"No arguments. We need to lock down our friendship."

I groan. "Why?"

"So I can be the best man at your wedding, obviously. I'm not going to let some stupid F1 driver swoop in and steal it."

"Jesus." Heat rises to my face. "I'm not thinking about marrying Quin. We've been together for, like, a day."

"Mmk." He gives me a dubious look over his coffee cup. "I'm going to pretend I believe you, because we're such good friends."

"You're annoying."

He grins. "Love you, too."

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QUIN

Cole’s phone goes off five times in a row during our evening walk with Bandit.

“Who’s texting you?” I ask, as he glares at the screen.

“Your psychotic friend.”

He hands me his phone so I can swipe through the texts.

[7:51] BFF: Do we want wine tonight?

[7:51] BFF: I think we want wine.

[7:52] BFF: Jonathan and I are raiding your liquor cabinet.

[7:53] BFF: What movie do you want to watch?

[7:54] BFF: Actually, disregard that, I’m going to let Jonathan choose. I don’t trust your taste in movies in the least.

I make a valiant attempt to control my laughter. “I didn’t know you and Trevor were BFFs.”

He snatches his phone back. “He put his number in my phone like that.”

“You two bonded while Jonathan and I were book shopping?”

“Absolutely not.”

I thread my arm in his. “You *bonded*.”

He rolls his eyes, but he doesn’t pull away from me. “No. He got it into his shrunken brain that I need more friends. I wasn’t given a choice in the matter.”

I chuckle. “That sounds about right. Although, *more* friends? What friends do you have besides me?”

“Is that what you and I are?” he asks.

“Friends,” I confirm. “Friends and—”

“Don’t say it.”

“—*lovers*,” I finish, exaggerating the word.

Cole groans. “That *word*.”

I laugh. “I hate it, too. If it’s not between the words ‘meat’ and ‘pizza’, it has no place in the modern world.”

“Agreed.”

“Plus, you and I have only slept together, like, twice.”

“It was considerably more than twice.”

My pulse stirs. “You know what I mean. We don’t need to ‘be’ anything.”

“Yeah,” he says. “Right.”

He crouches to untangle Bandit’s leash, which is stuck under one of his front legs. I watch him carefully, biting into my lower lip.

“Okay, fine,” I say abruptly.

He looks up at me. “What?”

“I’ll be your boyfriend, if that’s what you want.”

He goes completely still for a second, and my stomach swoops in joy and triumph. I hide it under an impartial face.

“I didn’t say that,” he says.

I hold my palms up. “Cole, seriously. You don’t need to twist my arm anymore. I already said yes.”

He straightens. “You’re obnoxious.”

“I’m perfect?” I wind an arm around his waist. “Thanks, babe. I’m so lucky you’re my boyfriend.”

“Alright.” Cole puts his hand over my mouth. “You can stop talking now.”

“Quin and Cole, sitting in a tree—” I sing, my voice muffled by his hand.

“Stop singing or we’re breaking up,” he says.

I fall silent obediently and he releases me. I rise on my toes to kiss him. His lips are soft and cool, and when I start to pull away, he catches my waist and pulls me back again. The warm slide of his tongue shifts the flow of blood in my veins. Movie night with Trevor and Jonathan suddenly feels like the worst way to spend the rest of the evening.

Bandit’s impatient bark eventually reminds us that we’re in public. There’s no one around to see us, but still. We break apart reluctantly, but I thread my arm in his as we continue our walk.

“Boyfriends,” I say firmly.

He doesn’t say anything, but he ducks his chin in a tiny nod, a faint smudge of color on his cheeks. I smile so hard it makes my face hurt.

Bandit’s ears perk up at the sight of another dog in a fenced yard on the opposite side of the street.

“Is he okay with other dogs?” I ask.

“He’s the Trevor of dogs,” Cole says. “He thinks every other dog should be his best friend.”

I laugh. “You should take him to a dog park.”

“Trevor?”

“Bandit.”

Cole grimaces. “I don’t do dog parks.”

“Of course not. That’s where the people are.”

“Exactly.”

We drag Bandit past the golden retriever he's trying to befriend and walk for a few minutes in easy silence. A gentle wind sweeps over the street, blowing glittery snow off of the rooftops. The neighborhood has really gone all out for the holidays. Every house is lit with strings of colored lights, and half the lawns are decorated with inflatable snowmen and reindeer.

"Can I ask you something?" I say, as we turn onto the next street.

"Mm."

"The bookstore."

"Is that a question?"

"Yes."

He exhales slowly, his breath frosting the air. "Clara went to that bookstore a lot."

I nod. That's what I thought. I tighten my arm around his, pulling him a little closer to me. "Tell me about it."

"About what?"

"Going to the bookstore with her."

He hesitates. "Do I have to?"

"No."

He breathes in and out again, even slower. Then he licks his lips and starts to talk.

COLE'S HAND is sliding fast between my legs when someone hammers on the bedroom door.

"Breakfast time!" Trevor hollers from the hallway. "Time to get your lazy asses downstairs!"

I swallow a moan and chuck a pillow at the door. I hear Trevor cackling as he heads back downstairs.

“Fucking asshole,” I mumble.

“I told you,” Cole says. “We need to get him on a flight back to Italy.”

“I’ll book it myself,” I say. “*God*—”

My voice falters as Cole’s grip tightens. His teeth drag over my ear lobe, his breath hot and close on my skin. Pleasure is building hot and fast with his touch, which is absurd, because he already brought me off an hour ago.

At least, I think it was an hour ago. My memories of last night are a bit of a blur. I can’t explain the way Cole affects me. Every time he touches me, it’s like a match dragging over a strip of phosphorous, lighting a fire under my skin. I don’t think there’s any part of me that his mouth hasn’t moved over. I fell asleep last night in his arms, dreamt of his tongue, and woke with his dick pressed against my hip.

The memory pulses through me like a flame. I arch into his hand. “*Cole*.”

He releases me abruptly, but before I can protest the loss, he slides beneath the covers, and the next thing I feel is the hot curl of his tongue. It’s all over from there, a burst of fireworks on the back of my eyelids, my fingers twisted in Cole’s hair.

Eventually, we make it downstairs for breakfast.

“Can you really call it breakfast if you’re having it at noon?” Trevor asks as he hands me a plate of pancakes made with red and green M&Ms. Cole has taken Bandit out for a walk, and Jonathan is in the living room reading.

“It’s not noon,” I protest. “It’s eleven forty-five.”

Trevor grins. “Good night?”

“Yeah.”

His eyes gleam. “You’re in serious trouble.”

“I’m in serious trouble,” I agree.

“I love that for you.”

I cut a bite of pancake and move it aimlessly on my plate. “You don’t think it’s a mistake?”

He meets my gaze. “Not even at all.”

My shoulders relax. “Good.”

“And you know I’d tell you if I did,” he adds. “I have basically no filter.”

“I’m well aware,” I say dryly. “Did you make coffee?”

“I made coffee at seven, which is when some of us woke up to let your boyfriend’s dog out.”

“Well can you make more?”

Trevor leans over the kitchen island and presses a kiss to the top of my head. “For you, my love,” he says, “anything.”

WE MIGRATE to the living room and Jonathan and I connect his Nintendo Switch to the living room TV to play Silksong while Trevor and Cole go for a run. “Bonding time,” Trevor called it, while Cole sighed and raised his eyes to the ceiling.

When they re-appear a few hours later, their hair damp from showering, Trevor hooks his phone to the living room speakers and turns some Christmas music on.

“We need to decorate this Christmas tree,” he says, sitting cross-legged on the carpet so Bandit can climb into his lap.

“It’s already decorated,” I say.

“Yeah, but it’s too perfect. The ornaments we brought from home will feel bad about themselves if we put them next to these.” He flicks a golden ornament on the bottom of the tree.

“You brought ornaments from home?” I ask, at the same time Cole says, “You’re staying through Christmas?”

“Yes and yes,” Trevor says. “Do you have any childhood ornaments, Cole, or were you a sour Grinch even as a toddler?”

“Always a Grinch,” Cole says.

“You and Clara didn’t have any ornaments?” I ask.

The silence turns fragile. Cole licks his lips. “We had a few things.”

“Are they still around?” Trevor asks.

Cole hesitates again, but then he nods and says, “They’re in the closet by the garage.”

“Let’s get them!” Trevor says, rising to his feet. “Jonathan, will you grab ours?”

“Mm.”

I catch Cole’s hand and give it a quick, reassuring squeeze as we follow Trevor to the hallway by the garage. He hangs back as Trevor opens the closet doors.

“Are they in here?” Trevor asks, lifting the lid of a large red box. “Oh, amazing, these are perfect.” He lugs the box out of the closet. “Do you have any mistletoe?”

“I don’t know,” Cole says haltingly. “Clara always—that was her thing. She never let me help.”

“Smart girl,” Trevor says. “You obviously have no Christmas taste.”

“Right,” Cole says.

His voice is faint. I tighten my grip on his hand. I know Trevor is right to push him. Cole has to do this, he has to stop burying his memories of Clara. But I can see the effort it costs him, and my heart is aching like it’s inside of his chest.

We carry the box of ornaments back to the living room, then Trevor goes to the kitchen to make peppermint hot chocolate.

“You doing okay?” I ask Cole quietly, sitting down beside him on the couch. The box of ornaments is open on the floor in front of him, and he’s staring at it with his jaw tightly clenched.

“Yeah,” he says. “No. I don’t know.”

“Those are all the possible options,” I agree.

He manages a soft, amused breath. “A bit of all three.”

I shift closer to him. “I’m really proud of you, if that helps.”

I’m expecting a sarcastic response, but instead, he exhales unsteadily and rests his temple against mine.

My heart clenches. “Want to go back to being a dick?”

He attempts a laugh. “It’d be easier.”

“But not as good.”

He sighs and drags a hand through his hair. “You know you don’t have to do this, right?”

“Do what?”

“Date someone who’s a train wreck.”

“Duh. I’m an extremely handsome movie star.”

It makes him laugh again, like I hoped it would. I brush my lips over his cheek. “I don’t want to date anyone else. You’re stuck with me.”

He squeezes my hand and I kiss his cheek again. I can’t help myself. I’m addicted to the smell of his skin.

“Christmas drinks!” Trevor announces, reappearing with four mugs balanced precariously in his hands. Jonathan returns with his own small box of ornaments, and the rest of the afternoon slips by in a haze of hot chocolate and laughter. Trevor sings Christmas songs way too loudly and makes dumb jokes to lighten the quiet moments when Jonathan or Cole go still over certain ornaments. After a gentle nudge from Trevor, Jonathan tells a story about his mother, who made most of the ornaments he’s hanging. After a gentle nudge from me, Cole tells a story about Clara, and I’m so happy and sad for him I could cry.

Afterward, his hand finds mine under the blanket spread over my legs. He holds onto me like a lifeline as Jonathan puts the final decorations onto the tree, and Trevor pours us all some more hot chocolate.

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COLE

I don’t recognize the feeling in my chest when I wake up these days. It’s brightness instead of darkness. Lightness where there used to be weight.

It’s Quin, obviously. Every morning, I wake up with his head on my shoulder and his bronze-gold hair soft on my skin. We talk and we fuck and we fall asleep together, and it stitches up wounds inside me that I never thought could be closed. He keeps up his gentle, relentless campaign to keep me talking about Clara, and even though it still hurts every time I say her name out loud, it’s getting easier to do it, stories rising more freely from the dark confines of my mind.

It’s Quin, but it’s also—god help me—Trevor. When he isn’t being a pain in the ass on purpose just to irritate me, he’s actually sort of interesting to be around. He’s a really good skier, so when Jonathan and Quin get tired of our lessons on the bunny hill and head back to The Chalet to play video games or read, Trevor and I hit the harder trails for a few hours. He’s as competitive as I am, and more than once Jonathan and Quin are forced to return to the hill to drag us home before the ski lift shuts down for the night.

Jonathan helps, too, in a less overbearing way. He has a dry sense of humor that I appreciate, and, unlike Trevor, he’s perfectly capable of being quiet for more than sixty seconds at a time. When Trevor and Quin get worked up about something—they like to listen to history podcasts and then

argue about them, for some reason—Jonathan and I retreat to the living room and sit in companionable silence.

In the evenings, we watch stupid movies or play Mario Kart or have drinks by the fire. It's just stuff normal people do over the holidays, but I'm sometimes gripped with strange moments of panic, like I'm holding something precious and if I loosen my grip even a little, it might slip away.

"Well that's fucking stupid," Trevor says, when I make the idiotic mistake of telling him about it. We're sitting on the bench outside the bookstore again, waiting for Quin and Jonathan to come out of the shop.

"Thanks, friend. I'm so glad I shared that with you."

He grins. "You can't live your life scared of what might happen."

"Oh, wow. I feel so much better now."

"Shall I put it into a racing metaphor for you?"

"God, no."

"If you crash your F1 car," he says, adopting a patronizing tone, "you can't be afraid of racing again. You need to get back in the driver's seat, turn the car on—"

"We don't actually do that part."

"—put your seatbelt on—"

"It's called a harness."

"—and race again."

"How has Jonathan not left you yet?"

"Hey!" He punches my shoulder. "Too far."

"Jesus." I grip my bicep. "You're a professional volleyball player, you can't go around punching people."

"That's not a rule."

"Can I run you over with a car, then?"

"You'd miss me too much." He takes a sip of his coffee and then glances over his shoulder at the bookshop. "What are you getting Quin for Christmas, by the way?"

My stomach drops. “I haven’t thought of anything yet.”

Trevor doesn’t even attempt to stifle his laugh. “Cole!”

“I *know*.” I dig my knuckles into my forehead. “I just can’t think of anything good enough.”

“Good lord.”

“Quin’s not materialistic,” I say defensively.

Trevor laughs again. “Yeah, I know! That makes it worse. All that will matter to him is the sentiment.”

“Which makes it a million times harder.”

“Exactly.”

“What are you getting Jonathan?”

I immediately regret asking the question. Trevor looks way too smug about it.

“I’ve booked a trip to New Zealand for us and two of his old friends,” he says. “Jonathan’s always wanted to travel, but he’s never been able to afford it.”

“And you can?”

He shrugs. “I’ve been saving up.”

“And your dad is rich. Quin told me.”

“My dad is rich,” he concedes. “Not as rich as yours, mind you, but he’s got money. And he did make me bump our tickets up to business class when he heard about our trip, but that’s only because he’s got a soft spot for Jonathan.”

“You expect me to believe your dad’s a totally nice guy, but with money?”

“He’s the exception that proves the rule. I’ll bring him to an F1 race sometime, you’ll love him. But stop trying to change the topic—we were talking about your Christmas present for Quin, remember?”

“I don’t have any good ideas. Are you getting him something?”

He looks offended by the question. “He’s my best friend, of course I am. You’re my second best friend,” he adds.

“I didn’t ask.”

“Quin’s been talking a lot about how he has no real friends in LA, so I reached out to the people he’s closest with there and had them all write letters in a notebook, telling him how much he means to them.”

“God damn it. That’s really good.”

He smirks. “I know it is. Look, just think about what you know about Quin and try to think of something he’ll love.”

I open my mouth to tell him I’ve already been doing that—then I go still.

“You thought of something,” he says.

I turn the idea over slowly in my mind. “I thought of something,” I agree. “But I might need your help.”

He grins. “Of course you do.”

I DON’T LIKE to throw around the word “perfect”, but that’s what Christmas day is.

It starts even before I wake up, with Quin’s mouth dragging me out of a deeply enjoyable dream. I wake on a hot pulse of pleasure, but he pinches my thigh to stop me from coming and drags me into the shower with a bottle of body wash. He’s poked fun at this particular preference of mine, but I know he likes it as much as I do.

We make it downstairs sometime after ten. There’s a pot of coffee ready in the kitchen, and a note from Trevor and Jonathan telling us they’ve taken Bandit for a walk. I’d feel guilty about letting them look after Bandit so much if he wasn’t so completely obsessed with them.

He bursts through the front door an hour later, soaking wet from playing in the snow. He licks my face while I dry his fur off with a towel, bounding off before he's dry to greet Quin the same way.

We eat a late breakfast of pancakes and bacon, then we laze around in the living room, toasting marshmallows over the fire and exchanging gifts. Quin tears up over Trevor's gift to him and buries his face in my shoulder to hide it. I don't tear up over the gift Trevor gives me—a framed picture of me and Clara that he swiped from my phone without my permission—but it's hard to talk for a long while after I unwrap it.

Trevor laughs himself to tears when I give him my gift—a piece of paper on which I've scribbled "You are my friend"—and shoots me an infuriatingly approving smile when I give Jonathan a Nintendo Switch 2 and a copy of *Breath of the Wild*. "Can be used to escape Trevor for a few hundred hours", I wrote on the box.

I can feel the two of them watching me as I unwrap my present from Quin. I don't like it; it's like I'm standing on a stage lit by spotlights. It's a small box, impeccably wrapped. I swear if he's given me some sort of jewelry, I'm going to rethink everything I've ever felt for him.

Instead, the box contains a single piece of paper. It's folded up a bunch of times, and when I unfold it, it takes me a second to realize what it is. A print-out of a flight booking from LA to Barcelona, for the first weekend of F1 testing.

He's watching me a bit nervously. "I don't have to come, if you don't want me to."

I shake my head and say, "I want you to," because I don't think I should say what I'm really thinking, which is *fuck, I'm in love with you.*

He leans over the couch to kiss me, holding up his middle finger when Trevor wolf whistles.

I brush my thumb over his cheek. "I'll give you your present later, after dark. It's not sexual," I add, after hearing my words aloud.

“No?” He smirks. “That’s disappointing.”

We retreat to the kitchen to attempt to make a turkey dinner. None of us have ever cooked one before, but Trevor insists it can’t be that hard. I duck out for an hour to “take Bandit for a walk” and pretend I don’t noticed the absurd wink Trevor gives me when I leave.

My hands are icy with nerves and cold by the time everything is ready. I go back to The Chalet and eat a surprisingly decent dinner that I mostly credit Jonathan for, then I scrub my palms on my thighs and tell Quin that we’re going for a drive.

He looks uncertain as we pull into the driveway at Mary’s place. I know it doesn’t exactly hold good memories for him. But I take his hand and squeeze it hard, and Trevor makes a series of ridiculous jokes, and Jonathan keeps a hand on Bandit’s head to keep him from sprinting off to the place that he knows we’re going.

It takes thirty minutes in the dark to get to the lake. The sky is mercifully clear, every star reflected in the deep, still water.

“Sit,” I say, guiding Quin to a large, flat rock by the water. Jonathan and Bandit sit near him, while Trevor stands off to the side, bouncing on his heels.

I take out my phone and open the app I downloaded earlier. I really hope this works. I’m going to feel pretty fucking stupid if it doesn’t.

I swallow hard and click “Start.”

For a few awkward seconds, nothing happens. Then, the first firework shoots into the sky.

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QUIN

I’m not sure I breathe at all during the fireworks. It feels like they’re going off inside of my chest, bursts of color glittering all over my skin. The lake is a perfect mirror of the sky, red and gold and green above and below us, and it feels just like the Northern Lights did, like magic come to life.

At some point, Cole sits down beside me, and I reach for his hand without looking away from the sky.

There are tears on my face when it’s over. I don’t bother wiping them away before turning to Cole. I can’t even think of anything to say, I just stare at him with my heart bleeding out of my chest. It’s not just that he did this for me, or that he knows me well enough to know how much I’d love it. It’s everything he’s done since he kissed me in the kitchen. The way he’s let me in, the way he’s let Trevor and Jonathan in. I told him not to be a coward, and he’s floored me with his bravery.

He kisses me once, a soft brush of cold lips. I’m not sure if he looks more embarrassed or pleased. I know I should say something—“thank you” would be a good start—but my throat is too tight with tears.

“It was all my idea,” Trevor says, breaking the tension.

Cole splutters out a laugh. “No, it wasn’t! You wouldn’t even help me set it up.”

“I had to keep Quin distracted. Plus, it’s freezing out here.”

Cole shakes his head. “Fucking asshole.”

The two of them keep bickering, and Bandit starts barking to protest his boredom at sitting still for so long. As we head back onto the trail, Jonathan falls into step beside me and gives me a soft smile.

“Good Christmas?” he says.

I look at Cole walking ahead of us, his head tilted back with laughter. He catches my eye over his shoulder and grins at me, and I’m struck by a sense of déjà vu. I’ve seen that smile before, in the old YouTube video with Clara.

“Good Christmas,” I say.

THE STRETCH of time between Christmas and New Year’s Eve passes by in a haze of happiness. Mornings spent with coffee and video games, afternoons at the ski hill, nights in Cole’s arms. Trevor and Jonathan co-opt Bandit’s morning walk, since they’re usually out of bed before us, but after our Christmas Day visit to Moose Lake, Cole and I start taking Bandit out there once a day for a run. I don’t think about moving back to Mary’s place again, but the sight of it stops feeling scary. The trail is ours again, ours and Bandit’s.

We do go to Cole’s place, once, when Bandit decides to roll in something foul-smelling and needs to be cleaned off. It’s even bleaker than I remember it, with a new layer of dust over the stacks of unopened boxes. Cole stares at them with a closed-off expression I haven’t seen on him in days.

“You and Clara bought this place together?” I say.

He nudges one of the boxes with his boot. “We were going to fix it up. I know it looks like shit now.”

“No, I can see it. It’s got good bones.”

“Mm.” He crosses to sit on the arm of the couch, petting Bandit’s head while his gaze travels the room. “I should probably just sell it.”

“I think it depends on why you’re keeping it.”

“I don’t even know anymore.”

I cross the floor and sit beside him. “If you like it here, keep it. But if you’re just using it to punish yourself, or because you think selling it would be an insult to Clara’s memory…”

“She wouldn’t care about that.” His mouth tugs down. “Or maybe she would. I don’t know.”

“Yes, you do.”

He rubs his thumb back and forth over Bandit’s head. There’s a long silence before he speaks again, like there usually is when he’s bringing up memories of Clara. “I used to be able to hear her voice in my head when we weren’t together,” he says finally. “She was studying full-time and she had a crazy phobia about flying, so she couldn’t come to a lot of my races.” His brow furrows. “Or maybe she just didn’t want to go.”

“Cole,” I say reproachfully.

“Yeah, I know,” he mutters. “But that’s what it’s like now. I don’t know what was real and what wasn’t.”

I rest my chin on his shoulder. “Assume it’s all real, then.”

He sighs again, but then he kisses the top of my head. “I’ll try.”

We head back into town to get ready for the New Year’s Eve party Trevor is dragging us to. It’s a yearly event at the ski lodge. Magda, the bookstore owner, told us about it.

I’ve never been a fan of New Year’s Eve—too much hype, never enough substance—but when we get to the lodge, folksy music is pumping out of the speakers and everyone is dancing with the same bright, raucous energy they had at Cole’s father’s gala.

Cole and Jonathan refuse to dance—I can’t entirely blame them, given how sweaty and chaotic the center of the dance floor is—but they hold our

drinks while Trevor and I dance for a while, and when we run into Mary and her husband later on, Cole is politer than I've ever seen him before.

Mary knows everything that happened at the cabin—it only felt right to tell her—and she assures me that she's installing a security camera in case I decide to move back in.

"And are you sure about the refund?" she adds. She offered me a refund the day I moved my stuff out, but I said no.

"Yeah," I say. "I still might move back in."

Cole looks at me after she's gone. "You really think you're going to move back in?"

"I don't know. It's good to have a back-up option, right?"

"You mean, in case we break up."

"What? No." I'm startled by the force of the word. "But I know you're not crazy about staying at The Chalet. If you want to go back out to Moose Lake, I could go back with you."

"If I go back to Moose Lake, you can stay with me."

"Really?"

He frowns at me like I'm being dense. "Of course."

"Oh." I bite into my smile. "Okay. I still don't want to give Mary's place up, though," I add after a moment. "What if she rents it out to some annoying hunter who wants to use our trail?"

He smiles. "Our trail, is it?"

"Duh." I nudge him with my shoulder. "Now, c'mon, let's go find Trevor and Jonathan. It's almost midnight."

It takes a few minutes to extricate Trevor from the dance floor, where he's managed to make about fifty friends in the span of an hour, then we slip out to the back of the hall to wait for Jonathan, who ducked into the bathroom to wash a splatter of red wine—spilled by one of Trevor's enthusiastic new friends—from his shirt.

The hallway outside of the bathroom is dimly lit and quiet. I yawn and rest my head on Cole's shoulder.

"Wake up, grandpa," he teases.

I laugh and kiss him as the bathroom door swings open. Officer Hart steps out ahead of Jonathan; his face goes through a comical series of contortions at the sight of Cole and me.

"Hey, Hart," I say, smiling awkwardly.

He frowns at me for a moment, then he lets out a breath through his nose and finds his composure. "Hey," he replies. "How are you doing?"

"I'm good, thanks. Sorry, these are friends of mine—Trevor and Jonathan."

Hart shakes their hands politely and manages a sort of grunt in Cole's general direction, then he wishes us a happy new year and heads off.

"Jesus." Trevor laughs. "He does not like you."

"The feeling is mutual," Cole says. He glances at his phone. "Ten minutes till midnight. Are we going back in?"

I shake my head. "Too crowded. Follow me."

We make our way out of the lodge and walk to the bunny hill. The lights drop away quickly, but the moon is almost full, and the stars are bright and close. We climb to the top of the hill and lay down in the snow. Cole puts his arm under my head, and Trevor plays *Auld Lang Syne* on his phone, and for the last few minutes of the year, we just lie there together, looking up at the sky.

At midnight, I tilt my head up to kiss Cole.

"This is going to be a good year," I tell him.

He smiles. "Is that a threat or a promise?"

I kiss him again. "It's a promise."

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QUIN

On January second, Trevor and Jonathan fly back home to Italy. Bandit throws an absolute fit when he sees them dragging their suitcases out of The Chalet, so I go to the airport with them alone while Cole stays behind to soothe Bandit's sorrows with a walk.

I wait with them in the airport lobby until their flight is called and walk them all the way to security.

"I wish you could stay longer," I say, hugging Trevor tight.

He kisses my cheek. "No, you don't. You can have sex in every room of The Chalet now, unimpeded."

I hug him tighter. "We already have."

He cackles and pushes me away. "Fucking pervert."

I hug Jonathan next, and kiss his cheek to make him blush. "You'll read the rest of the book on the plane?" I ask. We've been buddy-reading *The Thorn Birds* together.

He nods into my shoulder. "I'm keeping my fingers crossed the creepy priest dies."

I kiss his cheek again and release him, fighting a sudden swell of tears. "I'll see you both soon?"

"Really soon," Trevor promises, then they both hug me again and head off.

I let myself cry a little on the drive home, happy tears because I love them so much.

When I get back to The Chalet, Cole's car is gone from the driveway. I call Bandit's name when I go inside, but he doesn't immediately fling himself down the stairs, which means he isn't here, either.

I kick off my boots and head upstairs to grab a sweater. When that's done, I stand aimlessly in the upstairs living room for a minute, frowning at nothing.

I feel like I'm forgetting something. Like it's someone's birthday and I haven't called them, or like there's a meeting I'm supposed to be in. I run through all my friends' birthdays in my mind and open my e-mail to check my schedule, but there's nothing there.

And yet, the feeling lingers.

I go down to the kitchen to make a pot of coffee and find a note on the table, written in Cole's messy scrawl.

Taking Bandit to the dog park. Yes, where the people are. Try not to be too smug about it.

A smile spreads over my face. I love him so fucking much.

The thought pops into my head so naturally that I don't even notice it at first. I actually put the note down and turn to the coffee machine, then I do a double-take.

Holy fucking shit.

I'm in love with Cole.

I know now why everyone has such a hard time describing the feeling. I can't describe it myself. It's—fuck, I don't even know. It's a million feelings mixed up in one. Total safety and paralyzing terror. A giddy weightlessness and a warm, aching weight. I sit down at the kitchen table and put my head in my hands, reveling in the pure, simple joy of it. All of my fears of dying alone and being incapable of love suddenly seem so

ridiculous. Obviously, I was made for love. I was made to be in love with *Cole*.

I sit there for a while, kicking my heels like a school kid, then I get up and pace the house in a feeble attempt to dispel the bubbly energy inside of me. I walk by the mirror hanging in the upstairs hall and catch a glimpse of my face, flushed and smiling like an idiot.

An idiot in *love*.

I start collecting Christmas decorations as I move through the house. Might as well be useful as I pace, and I firmly believe holiday decorations shouldn't stay up after New Year's. I'm carrying an armful of garland downstairs when it hits me that I'm going to have to *tell* Cole that I love him.

Fuck.

I understand now why all the characters in romance novels and rom-coms make such a big deal about saying it. It's a bit scary.

Maybe more than a bit.

I think he'll want to know—and if anyone deserves to know they're loved, it's Cole—but I don't know if he loves me back. I know he likes me, but he's still so tangled up in grief, I'm not sure he has space yet for love. And I don't want him to feel like I'm pressuring him, like I'm expecting him to say it just because I do.

I debate the timing back and forth in my mind as I continue my holiday purge of the house. I go to the closet where Clara kept the holiday decorations and find the huge red box she kept the ornaments in. I drag it to the living room and slowly strip the Christmas tree of its decorations, twisting around every time I hear a car approaching the house. It won't be long before Cole and Bandit are home from the dog park, and I need to decide what to do. He knows me too well for me to hide my nerves from him. The second he sees my face, he'll know something's up.

I lug the ornament box back to the closet. It's heavy and awkward, and in the process of shoving it back into the closet, I manage to knock over a box of ribbons and wrapping paper.

"Smooth," I mutter.

I have to crawl on my hands and knees to pick everything up. As I put the last ribbon back in the box, I notice an envelope tucked at the bottom.

It's dark green, with Cole's name written on it in silver pen. The handwriting is neat and small, with a little heart drawn inside of the 'o'.

My heart thuds hard. It's Clara's handwriting. I'd bet that on my life.

I sit back on my heels and turn the envelope over. It's sealed with a golden sticker in the shape of a Christmas tree.

A snippet of conversation rises to my memory. *Do you have any mistletoe?* Trevor asked. And Cole's stiff answer: *I don't know. Clara always—that was her thing. She never let me help.*

If Clara wanted to hide Cole's Christmas presents, she would do it here, in the closet of decorations he wasn't supposed to touch. I have a brief vision of him walking toward the closet, offering to help, and Clara rushing to block him, laughing with her arms spread wide.

A shiver runs through me. If this card is here, unopened…it must be the Christmas card she made for Cole the year that she died. Her hand moved over this envelope, writing his name in pretty silver pen days or weeks before she took her own life.

Alarm bells start going off in my head. Scary, urgent ones.

I open the envelope. Maybe I shouldn't do it, but the alarm bells are too loud. The gold sticker lifts easily after three years in a dusty box. The card inside is one of those fancy Papyrus ones, with a Christmas tree on the front made of multi-colored crystals. Inside, there's a folded piece of paper. Clara's writing covers both sides of the card.

I read that first.

Merry Christmas handsome! she's written, in thin black Sharpie. *I didn't get you a gift, because the world already has too much shit in it and your rich ass certainly doesn't need any more. Instead, I've got you something priceless—MY COMPANY!* She's drawn a laughing face emoji after that, with little tears of amusement in its eyes. *Dr. Walden gave me a prescription for Ativan to take for flights (he gave me a HUGE lecture about how addictive benzos are and how VERY CAREFUL I must be, it literally went on for like thirty minutes) and as you can see from the paper I'm including in this card, I've booked flights to ALL of your F1 races!! (Or at least, all the ones before the summer break. I'm not made of money, for fuck's sake). I'm sweating bullets right now just THINKING of all those flights, but for you, I'm willing to do it. You are going to do SO WELL this year, and if you don't, Bandit and I will still love you, because we're normal people who don't live or die on the results of Formula 1.*

Love you so much, handsome. Here's to another perfect year.

PS – before you ask, yes, I've already asked my parents about looking after Bandit. They said they're happy to dog-sit anytime.

The ringing in my ears is deafening. With numb fingers, I open the folded paper that fell out of the card. Exactly like my own gift for Cole this year, Clara has taken screenshots of all her flight confirmations and shrunk them to fit on a single page. St. John's to Melbourne. St. John's to China. St. John's to Japan. Layover after layover, hours and hours of flying.

A clammy sweat breaks over my skin. There is something really wrong going on here.

My phone dings in my pocket. I dig it out distractedly and glance at the text.

> [4:35] Officer Hart: Hi, Quin, sorry to bother you over the holidays. We're missing your signature on one of the pages of your statement about Paul Johnson. Any chance you can come by the station to sign it?

Another shiver runs through me. The universe couldn't be screaming at me any louder. I need to get to the police station and show Clara's Christmas card to Hart.

Cole told me he didn't see any signs of what Clara was going to do. Seven years of memories, and not a single one to suggest she was struggling. I questioned the story myself, for a few seconds, but when he told me the private investigators didn't find any signs of foul play, I accepted it as truth. But I can't believe—I *don't* believe—that the girl who wrote this card was planning to take her own life. It doesn't make any sense.

Which means it's not what happened.

[4:36]: I'll be there in ten.

I put the card and flight confirmations back in the envelope, then I get to my feet and walk out of the house. My body is moving on autopilot. I back my car out of the driveway and wave mechanically at the kids who hurry to move their hockey net out of my way. All the while, my mind is racing.

Could Clara's death have been some sort of accident? Did she take an Ativan to try it out, to see what it would feel like if she took it on a flight? But, no. Cole said she took the whole bottle. She knew how dangerous the pills were. The doctor warned her. She wouldn't have taken more than one.

So, what, then? If it wasn't an accident, that only leaves one other alternative. But no one found any evidence that it was a murder. Not the police, not the coroner, not the private investigators. Clara was found alone. One set of footprints leading out onto the lake and a bloodstream full of Ativan that for all appearances made its way there intentionally.

I press my forehead to the steering wheel as I come to a stop at a red light.

Think. *Think*.

I park in the only open spot in the tiny lot on the side of the RCMP station. Inside the station, a line of cranky-looking people are waiting to speak with the receptionist. Everyone turns to look at me when I walk in, and one younger guy frowns like he knows he recognizes me but can't remember why.

I'm about to text Hart to let him know I've arrived when he appears from a door next to the receptionist. He's talking on his cell phone, but he moves it away from his face when he spots me.

"Quin, thanks for coming in," he says. "I'm running out for the night, but I left the paper on the desk in my office." He props the door open with his foot. "Hey, Roseanna?" he says to the receptionist. "Quin's going back to my office for a second."

She waves a hand in acknowledgment.

"You can go on back," Hart tells me. "No, sorry, not talking to you, man," he says into his phone. "My office is the second door on the left."

"Thanks," I say. He's clearly in a hurry to leave, but I add quickly, "Um —Hart?"

"Yeah?"

"Could I make an appointment with you tomorrow? I need to talk to you about something."

"Sorry?" The guy on the other end of the phone is distracting him. "Yeah, sure, we can definitely set a meeting. I'd do it now, but I've got a thing—" He gestures apologetically to his phone.

"Yeah, of course," I say. "Sorry."

He gives me an absent smile and a quick thump on the shoulder, then he hollers a goodbye to Roseanne and heads outside. I swallow down my disappointment. I guess I could wait in line and see if another officer is available, but I don't want to talk to someone else. I want to talk to Hart. He knew Clara, he cared about her. I know he'll listen to me.

I walk down the hall to his office, which is small and tidy. The only thing left out is a single piece of paper on the desk, with a helpful yellow Post-it showing me where to sign. The only thing missing is a pen. I cautiously open a couple of desk drawers, uncomfortably aware that this might be construed as snooping, but I can't find anything but a highlighter. I pop back out to see the receptionist Roseanne, who gives me a pen and a smile.

I sign the paper, return the pen to Roseanne and head back out to my car. I sit for a minute in the driver's seat with Clara's letter burning like a coal in my jacket pocket.

I back out of the spot and pull out onto the road. Talking to the cops can wait until tomorrow, but I need to call Cole right now. I don't care that I'll be home in ten minutes. This is too important to wait.

At the first stop light, I take out my phone. In the same moment, something cold touches my neck.

"Put the phone down," Hart says.

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QUIN

When I was fifteen years old, I went through a bit of a thriller phase. I watched all the classic movies, I read all of the popular books. My obsession only lasted for four or five months before it fizzled out. I got tired of the tropes and the patterns. I started guessing the murderers too quickly.

If I was in a movie theater right now, watching myself, I'd be rolling my eyes at my own stupidity. I'd sigh and whisper to whatever friend I'd dragged there with me, "Did he seriously not see this shit coming?"

The answer is no. I didn't see this shit coming.

Hart was nice to me. He was *nice* to me, and it didn't seem fake or forced. It didn't seem like an act. He was nice to me, and now he has a gun to the back of my head.

"Put the phone down," he says again.

I put it down on the console. He takes it with his free hand. The one that's not holding a fucking gun.

"Hart—"

"Green light," he says calmly.

A car honks behind us. I press on the gas. Hart's gun shifts on my neck, cold metal pressing into my skin.

"What are you doing?" I wish I sounded brave, but I don't. My voice is small and shaky.

“Just do what I tell you and no one will get hurt. Turn left at the next lights.”

My mind lurches and spins. If I stopped the car right now, what would he do? It would take a second to undo my seatbelt and another to open the door. That’s more than enough time to pull a trigger, but is he really going to shoot me in the middle of the street?

I flick a glance to the left. There’s a restaurant up ahead. There will be people in there.

“I’ve got a taser,” Hart says, “if you’re thinking about running.”

Fuck.

“You’re going to tase me while I’m driving?” I try to sound unimpressed, but my voice is high and thin.

“Yes,” he says. “If you try to move, or run, or make any sudden movements with the car, I’ll tase you. We’ll roll to a stop, and I’ll pull you into the backseat and take over driving. Or, you can do exactly what I tell you to do, and everything will be okay.”

“If everything was going to be okay, you wouldn’t have a fucking gun to the back of my head. Why—” My voice cracks. I swallow as hard as I can without moving my neck against the gun. “Why are you doing this?”

“Turn left,” he says, ignoring me.

We’ve reached the lights. The left-turn arrow is flashing. I turn off the main road onto a street I don’t recognize, then turn right again at Hart’s direction, and just like that, we leave the town behind. There’s nothing around us but trees. I’ve lost my chance to run for help.

“Left up ahead,” Hart says.

I swallow again, trying to summon up some courage. I’m not just going to sit here and do what he tells me. He clearly has some sort of plan, and shooting me in the car isn’t part of it. It’ll take him longer to get a taser out than it will for me to run.

We're almost at the next turn. If I'm going to do this, I need to do it now, before we get any further away from town. I'm not going to slam on the brake, or do anything that might startle him. I'm just going to lift off the gas and jump out of this fucking car.

I gather every scrap of courage I have and lift my foot off the pedal.

As I reach for my seatbelt buckle, I'm stung by a million bees.

That's what it feels like, anyway. A million bee stings, or maybe a million baseball bats hitting me a hundred times in the span of a second. I can't move, I can't *think* about anything but the pain, and it probably only lasts five or ten seconds, but it feels like a fucking lifetime.

It stops almost as abruptly as it started. I struggle to breathe again, a raw noise like a sob at the end of each breath.

Hart sighs impatiently. "What did I tell you? Do you want me to do that again, or do you want to keep driving where I tell you to? It's up to you. Either way is just as easy for me."

A fictional version of me tells him to go fuck himself. In reality, I choke out another scared noise and press down on the gas pedal again.

"I thought so," Hart says. "Left up ahead."

The next road takes us deeper into the forest, but it's lit with occasional streetlights, and there are a couple of mailboxes marking the ends of driveways. Only one house is right on the road, and all of its lights are turned off.

We take another turn, then one more, finally turning onto a gravel road marked with a trail sign. I don't need to read it to know where we are. I already knew this is where we were going.

Welcome to Lake Packett Trail! the cheerful park sign says. *Please don't litter.*

A disconnected part of my brain wonders if the park would consider leaving a dead body behind "littering." The larger part of me wants to break down in tears.

Hart makes me get out of the car first, with my hands held up. He keeps the gun trained on me as he climbs out of the back seat. He's still dressed in his uniform, which surprises me, even though it shouldn't. I saw him leave the police station dressed in it five minutes before he put the gun to my head.

He takes my phone out of his pocket and holds it up to my face to unlock it.

"Walk," he orders.

The moon is bright enough to see the trail, but it's rough and unkempt, the ground uneven and scattered with snow. Hart walks behind me and slightly to my left, his gun in one hand, my cell phone in the other. He taps on it a few times like he's typing something out.

I glance at the gun. He has his finger on the trigger, that's how ready he is to shoot me. But maybe, if he's distracted—

The quiet whoosh of a text being sent breaks the silence. Hart puts my phone in his pocket without taking his eyes off of me. I've missed another chance.

"What'd you just do?" I ask. My voice is shaking, and not just from fear. It's freezing out, and I didn't leave the house with gloves or a hat.

"Not your business," he says. "Keep walking."

"Not my business? You're holding me at gunpoint. Walking me out to the lake where you killed Clara."

He doesn't even bother denying it, he just gives me an impatient look and gestures forward with his gun. When I hesitate, he huffs out an irritated breath and hefts the gun in both hands, pointing it straight at my forehead.

"Hart, *don't,*" I cry, because the look in his eyes is fucking terrifying. He wouldn't have shot me in the car. He will absolutely shoot me right here.

"Then walk," he snaps.

I do.

The trail winds deeper into the forest. My hands get colder. Hot tears blur my vision.

I should keep my mouth shut, but like any character I've ever played who's had a face-off with the bad guy, I can't stop myself from talking.

"I thought you loved her," I say.

"Things change."

"But *why*—"

"No," he interrupts. "We're not doing this." The tone of his voice is as scary as the look in his eyes. It isn't cruel or angry, just clipped and irritated, like I'm an annoying coworker chatting too much in the break room. "This isn't one of your stupid little movies. You don't get an explanation. You can die not knowing."

My heart rate ratchets up. I already knew that's where this was going, but hearing him say it with such utter indifference makes me want to vomit.

And yet—

Another emotion is bubbling up under my terror, hot and viscous and impossible to ignore.

Fuck him for what he's doing to me. And for what he did to Clara, and to Cole.

"You're *pathetic*," I choke out. "Clara chose Cole over you in fucking middle school. Get over it."

"Cole Milton and his father are everything that's wrong with the world. Billionaires take whatever they want and destroy what little is left for the rest of us."

"Yeah," I snap. "They do. And if you were advocating for sweeping tax reform that funneled wealth from the one percent to the rest of humanity, I'd be right there with you. But what you've done," I say, my voice shaking with anger, "is murder an innocent woman because of a middle school grudge."

“My father lost his job because of Blaine Milton,” Hart says. “We lost our house while his daddy bought private jets and superyachts.”

“Blaine Milton may be a shitty fucking person, but as far as I know, he never *murdered an innocent woman* and made her friends and family think that she killed herself.”

I almost lose my footing, my boots slipping in a slick patch of snow. I make a harsh noise as I put a piece of the puzzle together. Cole told me there was only one set of footprints leading out to Clara’s body. But there weren’t, really. There were two. Clara’s footsteps, and Hart’s. The first police officer on the scene.

Hart shoves me forward with the muzzle of his gun. “Clara knew what Cole’s father did to this town. Then she went and fucked Cole anyway, just because he was rich.”

“She *loved him*, you stupid piece of shit. And Cole is a better person than you’ll ever be.”

“Stop talking.”

“No.” The trail is getting wider up ahead. I think we’re getting close to the lake. “You’re a terrible fucking person. And there’s no way in hell Cole is going to believe this is a suicide.”

“Maybe not,” Hart says. “But the rest of the world will. His father buried the story about Clara, but he won’t be able to do that with you. You’re Hollywood’s little sweetheart, and when everyone finds out you’re the second person Cole Milton’s driven to suicide, they’re going to tear him apart.”

My chest tightens so painfully I almost stumble again. What the world thinks won’t matter to Cole. But whether he believes it’s a suicide or not… losing me will break him.

Trevor and Jonathan will try to keep him together, but it won’t be enough. He doesn’t trust them enough yet. He’ll pull back from the world again. He’ll fall apart.

And I’ll never get to tell him that I love him.

My fear is almost completely gone now. All that’s left is sorrow and rage. But I don’t know what I can do with it. If I fight him, I’ll lose. If I run, he’ll shoot me.

The trail ends abruptly. The frozen lake stretches out all around us, snow-covered and still under the moon. My heart throws itself against my ribcage. This is where Clara died.

A high-pitched ringing noise swells up in my ears. I can feel myself disconnecting from reality, pulling away from the steady crunch of Hart’s footsteps behind me and the steady ticking down of my life.

I dig my fingernails into my palms, trying to anchor myself in the pain. It doesn’t help. My mind is racing and my mouth is paper dry.

“Turn around,” Hart says. “Kneel down.”

Running isn’t an option anymore. There’s nothing to hide behind, we’ve walked too far out onto the lake. I’ll have to fight him, but I already know how that’s going to end. He’s taller than me, stronger than me, and the only fights I’ve ever been in were scripted ones on set. The only thing I’m good at is acting. That isn’t any use against a fucking gun.

But maybe it could give me an advantage—even if it’s only for a split second.

My heart hammers as I drop to my knees. I’m only going to get one shot at this.

Hart’s impassive eyes move over my face, assessing my position, setting his feet in the snow. He crouches down and aims his gun.

“Tilt your chin up,” he orders.

Fuck. This is it.

Sell it, Corbin’s voice whispers in my ear.

I lift my chin the tiniest fraction, then—subtle, *subtle*—I flick my gaze behind Hart and go perfectly still. I don’t normally do method acting, but in

that moment, I let myself believe with all my heart that I've seen someone coming to rescue me.

When Hart glances backward, I move.

I grab the gun with both hands and pull, wrenching Hart off balance. He squeezes the trigger reflexively, burying a bullet in the snow an inch from my foot. The recoil of the gun almost pulls it from my hands, but I hold on tight, using every ounce of strength I have to keep the muzzle pointed away from me. Hart makes a furious noise and tries to wrestle it back. We stagger back and forth on the snow, and he's stronger than I am, but I'm more desperate, and I don't want to die here, I *can't*—

I manage to hook my foot around his ankle—he stumbles, his grip briefly slips—

The gun flies from his hand and skitters away on the icy snow. For a single, euphoric moment, I think that I've done it, then the world tilts sideways as he drives his fist into my temple. I hit the ground, and his hands close around my throat.

My first, absurd thought is that being strangled is nothing like they make it look on TV. He's not just cutting off my air, he's cutting off the blood flow to my brain, and in the span of three agonizing heartbeats, I realize I'm about to die.

Faces burst like fireworks in my brain—my parents, Trevor and Jonathan—but Cole's is louder and brighter than all of them.

I don't want to leave him. I can't bear to leave him alone. But Hart's grip is too tight and the world is going dark, and I'm scrabbling at his wrists and scratching at his eyes but it isn't doing anything, I'm going to die here—

Bandit.

I don't know why I think of him. I want to die thinking of Cole, but my dying, blood-starved brain is remembering Bandit's soft fur instead, and the deep, vicious sound of his bark—

No, that’s not right. Bandit’s bark isn’t vicious.

And that sound isn’t coming from inside of my head.

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QUIN

Since the first day I met him, I've thought of Bandit as a goofball. I know that he's part Malinois, the breed of dog they use in the military, and I know he's done police dog training, but in my mind, he's only ever been seventy pounds of boundless energy and goofy affection.

Now, all of that weight and energy hits Hart with the force of a missile. I glimpse a vicious mouthful of sharp white teeth, then Hart is wrenched off of me onto the ground. I try to roll over, but my muscles won't move, and bright lights are exploding on the backs of my eyes. I suck in thin, painful breaths until the world focuses again. When it does, there are splatters of blood all over the snow.

Bandit's teeth have ripped through Hart's uniform and torn open the flesh of his arm. He hasn't let go of him, and he's yanking Hart backward, away from me. Hart is kicking him viciously, his free hand fumbling with the taser at his waist.

I scramble to my feet and lurch for his gun, a blurry black smudge on the snow somewhere to my left. I'm so lightheaded I can barely walk, and I fall to the ground by the gun at the same time I hear the crack of the taser.

No—

I spin frantically on my knees, my frozen hands clumsy on the gun. Bandit is lying motionless on the ground—Hart is turning back toward

me—

A tall, dark figure cuts between us. With one single, vicious punch, Hart is laid flat on the ground. A brutal kick to his head stops him moving altogether.

The figure turns toward me, pale blue eyes under a dark knit cap. In the second before I recognize him, I think, *fuck.*

You'll forget he's even here, Candi told me.

She's right. I did.

"Porter," I croak.

He doesn't answer me—fuck, those eyes are cold—but it doesn't matter. A rapid crunch of footsteps heralds Cole's arrival, and he falls to his knees beside me on the snow.

"*Quin*."

"I'm alright," I try to say, but the words don't come out right. My throat is throbbing; trying to speak feels like swallowing glass.

"It's okay," Cole says, prying the gun from my hands. "It's okay, you're okay."

I can tell he doesn't really mean it. His voice is shaking too much. Nothing about this is okay, but he's *here*, he's with me. I reach for him clumsily, gripping his jacket with ice-cold fingers.

Cole pulls my hands into his and blows on them to warm them. Behind him, Porter is cuffing Hart's hands behind his back with Hart's own handcuffs, and Bandit—thank fucking god, Bandit is climbing back to his feet. He gives a rough shake of his fur and then bounds toward Cole and me, all wide eyes and wagging tail now that Hart is immobilized.

"Good boy," Cole says, pulling him under one arm.

"Is he hurt?" I rasp, tears of pain and fear pricking my eyes.

Cole briefly releases me to run his hands up and down Bandit's frame. Bandit licks his face a few times and then bounds off to demand the same attention from Porter.

“I think he’s fine,” Cole says. It’s a valiant attempt at a joke, but his face is pale and his fingers are skimming the tender flesh on my neck. “Can you breathe okay?”

“Yeah.” I clutch his wrists to keep his hands on my skin. “Cole, it was Hart.”

“I know, love. Porter’s got him.”

“No, not tonight. It was *Hart*. He killed Clara.”

Cole goes perfectly still. A series of emotions flick through his dark eyes. Disbelief and confusion. Incredulity and rage.

He turns on his knees and stares at Hart for a long moment, then his gaze moves back to the snow. I realize, belatedly, that the gun is lying beside me.

“Cole,” I whisper.

I don’t think he hears me. His eyes are on the gun. My heart starts thundering in my ears as Porter walks toward us, his manner cool and businesslike as he follows Cole’s gaze.

“Maybe he got shot in the fight,” he says, with the barest hint of a Russian accent.

Cole is silent for the longest minute of my life. Then he looks at me and his breath shudders out of him.

“No.”

I fumble for his hands and clutch them tightly, shaky and lightheaded with relief.

Porter shrugs indifferently and takes the gun from the snow, tucking it into his jacket pocket.

“Can you walk?” Cole asks me.

“Yes,” I say. “Cole—”

“Later,” he says. “Please.”

He’s holding on by a thread, I can tell, and my own fear and pain fade to nothing in the face of it. I put my hand on his cheek. “Get me out of here?”

He turns his face to kiss my palm, and I think, *fuck, I love you so much.*

He helps me to my feet—Bandit also tries to help, by jumping on top of me several times—and blows on my cold hands again while Porter throws Hart's unconscious form over one shoulder with unsettling ease.

The walk back to the trailhead goes by unnaturally quickly. It felt like hours when Hart had the gun to my back. In reality, it was less than five minutes.

Cole's Land Rover is parked behind my car. Porter puts Hart in the back and gets into the driver's seat.

"We'll meet you at the station," Cole tells him, pulling the back door of my car open so Bandit can leap inside. I don't bother asking if Porter will be okay if Hart regains consciousness on the way. I don't think Porter is a man who needs to be worried about.

Cole and I don't speak much on the drive to the police station. He holds my hand painfully tightly and asks me twice if I'm sure I'm alright, but he doesn't press me for details of what happened, and I don't volunteer them. I'll have to tell the whole story once we get to the station, and I can feel how close Cole is to breaking down. I bring our joined hands to my chest instead, letting him feel the steady beating of my heart.

At the station, two on-call officers let us in, and everything begins to fall apart.

One of them is Officer Wilson, the unpleasant man who interviewed me after I found Ava Parsons' body. The other is a blonde woman named Officer Kinsley who's obviously friends with Hart. Their first priorities are calling an ambulance to tend to him, and threatening to charge Porter with assault. Porter sits down on a chair in the waiting room and surveys them with utter indifference, while Cole's temper stretches and snaps.

"Hart tried to *kill Quin*," he shouts. "Don't take his handcuffs off, what the hell are you doing?"

Officer Kinsley looks up from her position at Hart's side. Porter dropped him face-first on the floor, and not gently, if the blood streaming from his nose is any indication.

"Calm yourself," Officer Kinsley orders, "or I'll put you in a cell until you calm down."

"Hart's the one who belongs in a cell," I say, each word like a barb in my throat. "He tried to strangle me. He held me at gunpoint."

Officer Kinsley frowns, her narrowed gaze dropping down to my throat. It must look as bad as it feels, because a sliver of doubt crosses her eyes.

"What a load of nonsense," Officer Wilson says, glaring at me. "What're you playing at, boy?"

But Officer Kinsley is still frowning. "That's the paramedics," she says, as headlights swing across the windows. "Gary, unlock the door for them, will you? I'll take their statements."

"Statements." Officer Wilson scoffs. "What a load of—"

"Now, please," Officer Kinsley says.

Officer Wilson gives her a dark look, but lumbers outside to get the paramedics. After another concerned glance at Hart's prone form, Officer Kinsley rises to her feet, placing herself firmly between him and us.

"Sit," she says. "Talk."

Cole bristles, but I do what she says. My legs are shaking, anyway. I don't know how much longer I could've stayed on my feet.

I start from the beginning, with Hart's text asking me to come down to the station. I'm almost immediately interrupted by the paramedics, who lift Hart onto a stretcher and hook up a machine to take his vitals. They're the same ones who stitched Cole up by the roadside all those days ago, and one of them, the younger guy, greets Cole with a crooked smile. "You two are a magnet for trouble, eh?"

Officer Wilson glares at them, but I feel a bit more confident as I continue my story. The paramedics are obviously listening. They take Hart's

vitals at least four times, which seems like overkill, and I catch them exchanging wide-eyed looks when I explain how Hart hid in my car and held me at gunpoint.

"He killed Cole's girlfriend," I say. Cole's hand spasms in mine. "Clara Harkin. She lived here, in Marble Brook. Hart killed her three years ago at Lake Packett."

Officer Kinsley frowns. "Clara Harkin?"

"Suicide case," Officer Wilson says. "Girl took a bunch of pills and walked out in the cold to die. Unstable sort. History of mental illness."

"Fucking shut *up*," I snap. It makes my throat throb, but I don't care. I turn back to Officer Kinsley. "Clara didn't have any history of mental illness. Hart killed her, and he made it look like a suicide. Clara dumped him for Cole in middle school, and his father lost his job when Cole's dad sold the paper mill, and he's hated Cole ever since."

Cole's hand twitches again. I hold onto him tighter.

Officer Kinsley frowns at Officer Wilson. "Is that true?"

Officer Wilson scoffs. "There wasn't any evidence of foul play."

"Because Hart was the one who investigated the fucking case!" My hand is the one that spasms this time. I want to drive my fist through this asshole's face. "I don't know how he did it, he wouldn't tell me all the details when he had a fucking gun to my back, but he *did it*, I know that he did."

Officer Kinsley holds my gaze for a long moment. Her gaze drops to my neck again, and when she looks back up, something's changed.

She believes me. Or at least, she believes me enough.

"Call Anderson in," she tells Officer Wilson.

He scoffs again. "Allison—"

"Just do it," she snaps. It occurs to me that a prick like Officer Wilson probably isn't very respectful of the station's female officers. He gives her a

scathing look before he retreats into the back to call whoever Anderson is. Someone with authority over him, I hope.

“Clara didn’t have any history of mental illness,” I tell Officer Kinsley again. I briefly release Cole’s hand to dig in my jacket pocket. Clara’s Christmas card is a bit crumpled but otherwise unharmed. “She wrote this Christmas card for him before she died. I just found it today.”

I cast an apologetic look at Cole—I wish I could’ve prepared him for this—but he doesn’t notice. He’s staring at his name written in Clara’s cheerful handwriting.

Officer Kinsley opens the card and reads it quickly. Her frown deepens.

“Does Officer Hart need to be transferred to the hospital?” she asks the paramedics.

The younger one, the guy who grinned at Cole, sucks his teeth. “His nose is broken, and he’s knocked out cold, but he should be waking up here soon. If there’s any sign of trouble when he does, we’ll have to take him to get checked out, but otherwise—”

Officer Kinsley nods. “Keep him here until he wakes up.”

“Should they take a look at Quin, too?” Porter asks, his first contribution to the conversation. “Or are we reserving medical attention for the criminal?”

Officer Kinsley flushes. “Yes, of course. Please, go ahead.” She beckons the paramedics toward me, but I wave them away impatiently.

“I’m fine. You need to take Cole and Porter’s statements, too.”

The obvious question pops into my mind—how did they know where to find me?—but before either of them can speak, Hart shifts and grumbles on the stretcher.

Cole rises to his feet, every muscle in his body tensing.

“Easy,” Officer Kinsley says. Officer Wilson returns, and her eyes move between all of us. “Wilson, take Hart and the paramedics into the break

room. Is Anderson on his way? Good. You three—” She gestures to me, Cole and Porter. “Come with me.”

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QUIN

The minute Hart wakes up, he starts lying.

We don’t hear him do it. Officer Kinsley keeps me, Cole and Porter in her office while Officer Anderson, the District Commander, talks to Hart. When he’s done, he comes to Officer Kinsley’s office to talk to us.

He’s a short, bald man in his late fifties whose face remains mostly impartial as I tell him my story again. The only time he reacts is when I talk about Hart killing Clara. He doesn’t say anything, but something shifts in his eyes, like he’s putting two puzzle pieces together in his mind.

When I’m done talking, he tells us Hart’s side of the story, which is a pile of fucking horseshit. Hart claims that after he saw me in the office, he had a “sense” that something was wrong, so he waited for me at my car, where the station security cameras were conveniently turned off. When he asked me what was wrong, I revealed that I’d stolen his gun from his office, forced him into my car at gunpoint and drove to the lake planning to kill him and then myself.

Cole shakes with fury as he listens to Hart’s lies. My own anger has bled away in the face of pain and exhaustion, and now I mostly just feel afraid. I almost died tonight, and now that I’m on the other side of it, I can see exactly how Hart would have played it out. Multiple witnesses—and the functioning security camera in the station lobby—saw me walk in and talk

to Hart, who smiled at me and thumped my shoulder pleasantly before leaving for the day. They heard Hart tell the receptionist I was going to his office, and saw me leave a few minutes later. Hart was on the phone with a friend when he left the station, and had mentioned to the receptionist that he was going to visit the same friend later that night—a friend who lives near Lake Packett. I can practically hear Hart making his statement to the press. *I was heading out to a friend's house, saw an abandoned car by the lake and thought I should check it out. If I'd only gotten there sooner, I could've stopped the poor kid from killing himself.*

He might've gotten away with it. I really think he might have.

But I survived, and Cole and Porter both witnessed him strangling me. And when Officer Anderson asks them the obvious question—"How did you know what was happening?"—Porter takes out his cell phone and slides it across the desk.

"Security camera footage from the trailhead," he says, in his dry, uninterested voice.

"There aren't any security cameras at Lake Packett," Officer Anderson says.

"There weren't, three years ago," Porter says. "There are now."

Officer Kinsley leans over Officer Anderson's shoulder, all the color draining from her face as she watches whatever's on screen. Footage of Hart holding me at gunpoint, I suppose. My heart is drumming fast. Security cameras, fucking *security cameras*.

I turn to Porter. "How—?"

"Candi donated a few hundred security cameras to the provincial park system last year, when Cole's father told her about Clara Harkin's murder," Porter says. "Sorry—'suicide.'" He frames the words sarcastically with his fingertips.

"Under whose authority?" Officer Anderson asks.

Porter raises an eyebrow. “What are you talking about, authority? Parks need security cameras. Kids vandalize signs, bears get too interested in garbage bins. The province doesn’t have the money for expensive cameras and security personnel. Candi donated it. I own the security firm the park contracted to monitor the footage. I’ve been keeping a close eye on Lake Packett, since it’s, you know, the site of an unsolved murder.”

Officer Anderson’s mouth tightens. He’s not like Wilson, objecting to the facts. I think he just dislikes Porter.

I don’t really blame him. Porter’s tone is dry and patronizing, and this whole time, he’s been slouched casually in his chair, drumming his fingers on the armrest like this entire affair is boring him.

“This footage is—”

“Damning?” Porter suggests.

“—*concerning*,” Officer Anderson says with a glare. Officer Kinsley runs her hand over her mouth beside him, white as a sheet. “Hart will have to be held until its authenticity can be verified—”

“What about Clara?” Cole interrupts. He’s whiter than Officer Kinsley, his hands fisted in his lap. “Hart *killed her*. You need to charge him—he needs to go to *jail*—”

Officer Anderson clears his throat. “We’ll open an investigation. If what you say is true—”

“It *is*,” Cole says, leaning forward in his chair.

I touch his arm. “He’s not going to get away with it.”

“He already did!” Cole makes a strangled noise like a sob or a laugh. “He’s been walking around for three fucking years, living his life while Clara is dead! He killed her. He did that.” He stands up abruptly. “I want to talk to him.”

“Absolutely not,” Officer Anderson says.

“Why the fuck not?” Cole makes that awful sound again. “He *killed my girlfriend*!”

The pain in his voice rips a hole in my heart, one I'm not sure will ever be fixed. "Cole," I say softly, rising to my feet and putting a hand on his back.

"He killed her, Quin." Fury and grief bleed out in each word. "He killed Clara."

He breaks down, then, like the scaffolding holding him upright has collapsed. I wrap my arms around him and hold on tight as his shoulders shake against me. He's almost completely silent as he cries, which makes it even more painful to witness. Officer Kinsley's eyes are very bright, and Officer Anderson's mouth is a thin white line. Only Porter is unaffected, watching us impassively, like we're a boring TV show playing in a waiting room.

"Can you give us a minute?" I say tightly. "Porter, go check on Bandit?"

"Of course," Officer Kinsley says, rising to her feet.

I ease Cole back into his chair after the three of them are gone, stroking the back of his neck while he cries. When he finally pulls away, his eyes are red and swollen.

"Fuck." He swipes ineffectually at his face. "Sorry."

I move his hands away and use the hem of my sleeve to wipe his cheeks. "Don't apologize."

"He could have killed you," he chokes out, the words interrupted by unsteady hitches of breath. "If Porter hadn't put those cameras out—if he wasn't watching them—" It isn't cold in the room, but he's shivering violently. "*Fuck.* I'm so sorry, Quin."

"Hey." I take his hands in mine, warming them just like he did for me at the lake. "You didn't do this."

"It's my fault!" He tries to pull his hands back from me, but I don't let him. "He almost killed you because of me. He killed Clara because of *me*. I always knew it was my fault. I knew it."

"Cole," I say sharply. "Look at me."

He shakes his head, his restless, bloodshot eyes pointing anywhere but me. I take his face in my hands and turn it back to me, digging my fingers in ruthlessly until he finally meets my gaze.

“Stop that,” I order. “Right now. This isn’t your fault. It isn’t Clara’s fault. It’s not even your father’s fault, although he’s a fucking dick. This is Hart’s fault, start to finish. And I know that you’re hurting right now, but I can’t have you walk out of this room believing this was your fault. Okay? I can’t do it. You need to cut that shit out of your brain, right now. For me, Cole. Please.”

I can see how badly he wants to argue. He shakes his head a few times and takes an unsteady breath, like he’s going to speak. But when he meets my gaze again, he falters.

He wants to blame himself for this. I know he does. He wants to sink back into guilt and self-destruction, because that’s easier than facing Clara’s death all over again. But he jumped in front of a gun for me, and he let me into his heart. I’m not sure there’s anything he won’t do for me, and now, I’m asking him for this.

He wavers for one more minute, then his face crumples, and he drops his head onto my shoulder.

“*Fuck*,” he says, through renewed tears.

I take a painful, shaky breath and thread my fingers in his hair.

“I know,” I say. “I know.”

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COLE

It hasn’t been a great year so far.

For the last three years, I’ve been grieving Clara’s suicide. Now, I’m grieving her murder, and it feels like she’s died a second time. All those awful wounds Quin stitched up have ripped open all over again.

I don’t know what the date is today. January sixth? Seventh? Hart is still in custody, but a date for his trial hasn’t been set. He’s been charged for what he did to Quin, but every time I ask Officer Kinsley about Clara, she says the same thing. *We’re still looking into it*.

He’s going to get away with it. I can feel it in my bones. He’ll go to jail for trying to murder Quin, but he’ll never pay for what he did to Clara. He’s denied he had anything to do with it, and other than Quin’s word, they don’t have any new evidence to tie him to it. I’ve asked, multiple times, to be allowed to speak with him, but Officer Kinsley keeps refusing me.

I don’t really blame her. I can’t see any scenario that doesn’t end with my hands around his throat.

But I’m trying not to spend too much time thinking about that.

When Clara died, I spent months hiding away in the woods. I didn’t sleep. I barely ate. If it weren’t for Bandit, I would’ve drank myself to death.

I’m not tempted to do that this time. Clara is gone. Quin is still here.

I don’t fall apart, because I don’t want to scare him. I choke down three meals a day and take Bandit for walks. I don’t drink. I don’t spend all day in bed. When he asks me how I’m feeling, I tell him.

And I don’t blame myself for what happened.

That’s a lot harder than the rest.

“Are you sure you’re going to be okay tomorrow?” Quin asks. He’s lying next to me in bed, turned on his side with one of his hands tucked under his cheek.

“I wasn’t sure the first seven times you asked me,” I say. “But now that you’ve asked me an eighth—”

“Ha, ha.” He kicks my shin under the covers.

“I’ll be fine.”

His brow furrows. “Are you sure? Because I can ask Corbin to change my schedule.”

“I’m sure.”

“Really?”

“Oh my fucking god, *yes*.” I drag him on top of me and push his face into my chest—gently, so I don’t hurt his throat. He says the bruises barely hurt at all anymore, but I don’t believe him. “No more talking for you.”

“I was just checking,” he protests.

I kiss the top of his head. “I know.”

His fingers trace absent patterns on my chest. For a moment, he seems nervous, like there’s something he wants to say. But the silence stretches out, and he doesn’t speak.

“Did Kel’s flight make it in?” I ask.

I haven’t met Kel, yet, but she’s called Quin every day since the lake. When he was holding Quin at gunpoint, Hart sent her a text from Quin’s phone. *I can’t do this anymore, Cole is making this too hard*. It was obviously supposed to make him look unstable and make me look like the villain.

She called Quin's phone ten times after he sent it, then she called the police station while we were still there. She cursed Officer Wilson out until he let her talk to Quin, and then yelled at him even louder when Quin handed the phone back. I heard the words "incompetent fuck" and "incurable douchebag," which describe Officer Wilson pretty damn well.

"Mm," Quin says. "She and Corbin landed an hour ago."

"They didn't break up over the holidays?"

His laughter vibrates through my chest. "Nope. She swears it's just a fling, but I don't believe her. He told her—" He breaks off abruptly.

"What?"

He clears his throat. "He told her he loves her."

Ah.

"Did she say it back?"

"No. She called him a fucking lunatic."

I laugh. "Nice."

"Yeah. She's probably right. I mean, it's way too soon for him to say it." A beat of silence. "Right?"

I've been so lost in darkness these past few days that it takes a moment to recognize the bubbly feeling in my chest. I slide down on my pillow and shift Quin off of me, so we're lying side to side, face to face.

A smile tugs at my lips. "Say it."

He looks away from me, like he doesn't already know exactly what I'm talking about. "What?"

My smile widens. "Say it, Quin. Don't be a coward."

He groans and presses close to me again, tucking his head into the crook of my neck. "Why do I have to say it first?"

I card my fingers through his hair. "Because I'm asking you to."

His heart thuds hard against my skin. He rises on his elbows and swallows hard, his honey-brown eyes dark and vulnerable.

"I love you."

Fuck, but that feels good. I want to say it back so badly I can taste it.

Instead, I pat him on the head. “Good boy.”

He splutters indignantly. “I beg your fucking pardon?”

“You did that very well,” I say, in the same tone I use to compliment Bandit on catching a tennis ball.

“Oh my god, you fucking *asshole*.” He smacks me hard in the chest, then wriggles out of my grip as I try to pat his hair again, dissolving into laughter as Bandit leaps onto the bed, barking and trying to shove himself between us.

“It’s okay, buddy,” I tell him, laughing. “It’s okay, we’re just playing.”

Bandit is not appeased by my excuses. He thumps himself down half on top of Quin and stares at me reproachfully. He’s gotten extremely protective of Quin ever since the lake. He also has a concerning new obsession with Porter, who’s stopped by a few times to give us updates on the case. I don’t know how he gets his information, and I’m sure I don’t want to ask. Every time I see him, I’m more convinced he’s an actual sociopath, and I’m not thrilled by how eagerly Bandit’s taken to him.

“Well?” Quin demands, dragging my attention from Bandit’s reproving gaze.

I brush my thumb over his lower lip. “I love you, too.”

I think I’ll remember the look on his face forever. No, I know I will. I still remember the way Clara looked when I told her I loved her for the first time, and that was almost a decade ago. Some things stay with you forever, and the look in Quin’s eyes right now…it’s with me for good.

I kiss him, ignoring Bandit’s whine of protest. My blood stirs at the feel of Quin’s lips and the smell of his skin, but I pull back before the kiss deepens. We haven’t had sex since the lake. I’ve been too tangled up in grief to even think of it—and then there’s Bandit, who’s been throwing toddler-level temper tantrums every time Quin is out of his sight.

And maybe there's a small part of me that's still trying to punish myself for what happened, or that feels like it would dishonor Clara's memory to want Quin again. I don't know. But the way he's looking at me right now, dark-eyed and perfect, makes all those reasons seem desperately insignificant.

Maybe tomorrow, when Quin gets home from work, I'll see if Porter can take Bandit for a very long walk.

"What's your schedule look like tomorrow?" I ask.

"I have to be on set at eight," Quin says. "Speaking of which, I should probably get some sleep."

"I'll get the lights."

"Thanks. I'd do it myself, but I have a seventy-pound weight on top of me."

Bandit gives a little huff, like he knows Quin's talking about him.

I turn the lights off and climb back into bed. I shift Bandit to the bottom of the bed—he whines a few times but relents—and tuck Quin's head under my chin.

"Say it again," he says, after a few moments of darkness.

I run my fingers through his hair. "I love you."

He smiles against my chest. "I love you, too."

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COLE

After all of my bravado about being fine without Quin, I'm sort of embarrassed at how quickly I fall apart when he goes to work. We haven't been apart since the lake, and the second I see his car turn out of the driveway, all of the demons I've been holding at bay close in on me.

Clara is dead. Hart killed her. And I can't stop picturing her final moments.

She would have been cold, like Quin was cold. She might not have been scared with all the Ativan in her system—fuck, I hope she wasn't scared—but she must have known what was happening.

I wonder how Hart got her to take the drugs. Did he threaten to hurt her if she didn't? Threaten to hurt me or her parents? Or did he somehow slip them into something she ate or drank? She always took the same water bottle to the gym. Maybe he knew that, maybe he followed her there. Maybe he slipped the drugs into her water bottle, then offered to drive her home when she started feeling woozy. She didn't like him much, but she would have accepted a ride if she needed one.

But when he drove them to the lake, what did she think was happening? Was she conscious enough to wonder, or was she so out of it that she just stumbled along in Hart's wake?

In her last moments on earth, was she thinking of me?

Bandit whines at my side. I haven't moved from my place at the front door, and my breath is coming sharp and fast. I need Clara's Christmas card. I need to read it again, I need to touch something her hand touched. I need to remember the way she wrote my name.

In my growing panic, I can't find it. I stumble upstairs and tear apart all the drawers in the bedroom, I pull out the pockets of every single sweater and pair of pants. Nothing. It's nowhere. It's gone, like it never even existed.

I almost trip over Bandit on my way back downstairs. I tear open the closet by the front door and rifle through every jacket, ripping out crumpled tissues and wrinkled receipts.

I'm halfway to a full-scale panic attack when the doorbell rings. I ignore it, but it rings again and again, and Bandit starts barking, protesting the noise.

I wrench open the door, and Trevor is there.

"Hey, friend," he says.

I open my mouth to tell him to fuck off. Instead, I burst into tears.

"YOU REALLY SUCK at this game. Are you sure you're a Formula 1 driver?"

I glare at Trevor from the opposite side of the living room couch. "Bandit distracted me."

"I'll pretend I believe you, because we're best friends."

I grab a slice of pizza from the box on the table and pull off pieces of pepperoni to feed to Bandit.

"Eat some yourself, while you're at it," Trevor says.

"Thanks, mom."

He grins. "Drink some water, too."

“Shut up and start the next race.”

Bandit jumps on the couch to sit beside me as Trevor picks the next Mario Kart track. We’ve been playing it for a few hours. It’s only in the last thirty minutes that I’ve been able to look him in the eye, after my meltdown by the door. I can’t believe I cried in front of him. No, not cried. Sobbed. Panicked. Babbled incoherently about Clara’s Christmas card until he ran upstairs and found it for me.

I can’t believe I did that.

I can’t believe it made me feel *better*.

I beat Trevor easily on the next three races. He tosses his controller aside after his third loss. “Time for Bandit’s walk.”

“Bored of losing?”

“Shut up and get his leash.”

It’s a beautiful day outside, bright and glittery and cold. It doesn’t feel right that it can be this nice out when Hart is alive and Clara is dead.

“Does your dad know what happened?” Trevor asks, as we walk toward the dog park.

“I assume Candi told him.”

“He hasn’t been in touch?”

I snort. “No.”

“The fuck,” Trevor says. “What a dick.”

“Yep.” I shove my hands in my jacket pockets. “If he’s given it a moment’s thought—which I doubt he has—he’ll only be worried it’ll affect my performance this season.”

Trevor makes a face. “Gross.”

“Yeah.” I exhale slowly, watching my breath disappear into the air. “He doesn’t even like racing. He just likes controlling me, and getting things. If something exists in the world, he thinks he deserves it. I wish he’d just fuck off out my life.”

“Have you ever told him that?”

“Many times. He just ignores it. Or he threatens to stop sponsoring Dark Force.”

“So?”

“His company is the team’s title sponsor.”

Trevor shrugs. “I’m sure they could find someone else.”

“Yeah, but—” I cut myself off.

“But you don’t think they would keep you on the team,” he finishes.

I flush. “Yeah.”

“Why not? You’re a great driver, even if you do cheat at Mario Kart. You’ve outperformed your teammates every year you’ve been there.”

I clear my throat. “They don’t exactly like me.”

“You? No.”

“Shut up.”

“No thanks.” He grins. “I have two things to say. First, that I don’t think that’s really an issue. Formula 1 isn’t a popularity contest. Teams need drivers who can bring in results, and you’ve already shown you can do that. They’re not likely to toss out the only driver who’s ever gotten them a podium—”

“Five podiums.”

“—*five* podiums just because your daddy stomps his foot and takes his money away.” He pulls open the gate to the dog park and bends to unclip Bandit’s leash. “Second, they probably would like you if they got to know you, and I’m guessing you haven’t given any one of them the chance.”

“I’m not very likeable.”

Trevor raises his eyes to the heavens. “Lord, the drama. Poor handsome rich boy, nobody in the world can understand me.”

I smile despite myself. “Ass.”

“Dick,” he rejoins. “Look, I’m not saying you’re going to be everyone’s favorite color of crayon—”

“Is that a real expression?”

“—You’re too competitive, and you cheat at video games, and you don’t appreciate how brilliant and charming your friends are. But despite your many flaws, I think there are some people on your team who could learn to tolerate your presence. Probably. I give it fifty-fifty odds.”

He’s grinning widely by the end of this obnoxious monologue. For some reason, so am I.

“You’re the worst person I’ve ever met.”

“I love you, too.” He throws an arm around my shoulders and herds me toward Bandit, who’s waiting for us at the center of the dog park with his favorite tennis ball at his feet. “In all seriousness—”

“Are you capable of that?”

“—if you don’t want your dad on the team, just get rid of him.”

“How?”

“You know how. If all he cares about is his reputation, destroy it. Book an exclusive interview with some sports TV people and tell them what a dick he is, how he didn’t give a shit when your mom and your girlfriend died and how he’s just like every other greedy billionaire who doesn’t give a fuck about anything but money.”

“Fuck, I wish. That would be amazing.”

“What’s stopping you?”

I hesitate. “I don’t know. He’d probably sue me for slander.”

“It isn’t slander if it’s true. And that wouldn’t make him look very good, suing his only son.”

“Yeah.” I grab Bandit’s tennis ball and toss it to the far end of the park. “I don’t know. It’s not like I haven’t thought about doing it before.”

“But?”

“But if he pulled all his money from Dark Force, they’d have to scramble to find another title sponsor. And if they can’t, wouldn’t that be my fault? If the team lost a bunch of money, they might have to lay people off. Wouldn’t that make me just as bad as my father?”

Trevor sucks on his teeth. “I see your point.”

“Yeah.” I crouch to retrieve Bandit’s ball again. He looks deeply unimpressed with my unenthusiastic throw. I throw it twice as hard this time, and he bounds off eagerly. “Sorry to whine at you about all of this.”

“You’re not whining. It’s a pickle, I’ll give you that.”

“I’ll just keep doing what I’ve been doing. It’s not like I see him that much, he just shows up on race weekends to act like a douche.”

“Mm. I’ll think on it.”

“Think on what?”

“How to solve your problem.”

“I didn’t ask you to solve it. Seriously, it’s fine. I’ve put up with him for twenty-six years, a few more won’t kill me.”

“Stop talking now, please,” Trevor says. “I’m thinking.”

“You keep thinking,” I say. “I’m going to text Jonathan and see if he can fly out and replace you.”

An unnerving glint lights up his eyes. “You don’t need to text him. He’s already here.”

“What?”

Trevor scoffs. “Did you really think I brought two massive suitcases just for myself?”

“Yes.”

He laughs. “Jonathan thought it might be overwhelming if we both showed up at the same time.”

“Ah.” He’s probably right. “So where is he, then? On set with Quin?”

Trevor smiles. “Not exactly.”

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COLE

It’s only been a couple of weeks since I went to the cottage, but it looks a lot shittier than I remember. There are tears in the porch screen and shingles missing from the roof and a huge pile of rusted car parts that the previous owners left by the shed. I guess I’ve noticed it all before, but it never bothered me. It felt like the kind of place I deserved.

Looking at it now, I’m struck by a new sort of guilt. Clara loved this cottage, and I let it fall apart.

There’s a rental car parked in the driveway, so I know Jonathan is inside, but it’s still somehow startling to see him there, sitting on the ugly living room rug with a sketchbook in his lap.

“Bandit!” he says brightly, as Bandit lunges across the room to greet him. “Hey, boy.” He rubs Bandit’s head and then looks up at me with a small, slightly awkward smile. “Hey, Cole. How’re you doing?”

“I’m alright,” I reply. Trevor makes a loud, disbelieving sound, which I choose to ignore. “What’s all this?”

Now that I’m further inside, I can see all the papers scattered on the floor around Jonathan. There are pages torn from home decorating magazines and swatches of fabric and paint.

“Oh—well.” He rubs the back of his neck. “Quin said you and Clara were planning to remodel this place. Trevor thought—”

"*You* thought," Trevor corrects.

Jonathan glares at him. "Fine, *I* thought that I might be able to help. I'm taking a course in interior design. I'm not an expert or anything, but I've been working with Trevor's mother on some projects."

"And by that," Trevor chimes in, "he means he's worked on several multi-million-dollar renovations, including a complete remodel of the Pagani museum in Modena."

"Your mother did that," Jonathan says. "I just helped her a bit."

Trevor gives him a fond, exasperated look. "Whatever you say, babe."

"We don't have to do anything if you don't want to," Jonathan tells me. "But if you wanted to fix this place up a bit…" I follow his gaze as it moves around the living room. The threadbare rug, the faded paint, the stacks of boxes covered in three years' worth of dust. He clears his throat. "I thought we could help."

I look around the room again. For three years, those unpacked boxes have haunted me. The thought of opening them, of touching Clara's things, has always made me physically sick.

But they look different now, just like the house. They're not as scary anymore. And as I stand there staring at them, I hear Clara's voice inside my head for the first time in three years.

C'mon, babe. It's time to move past this.

Fuck.

If I cry in front of Trevor again, I'm going to scream.

Instead, I clear my throat a few times and take another step toward Jonathan. "Show me what you're thinking."

TREVOR AND JONATHAN stay with us for five days before I check their team's schedule online and realize they're missing the early part of

their volleyball season.

“Go,” I insist, when Trevor starts waffling the day before their flight. “I’m fine. Really.”

It doesn’t feel like as much of a lie this time. It’s not that I don’t have any dark moments anymore. But in the last few days, I’ve felt something changing.

I’m tired of grieving. I want to be happy again. And every time I try to feel guilty about that, I hear Clara’s voice in my head. *For fuck’s sake, Cole. Are you going to be sad about this forever?*

A part of me still wants to be. It feels like that’s the only proper way to honor her, to prove I still love her.

That’s stupid, her voice says. Then, softer, *Let it go, babe*.

Quin thumps down on the couch beside me. “What d’you guys want to do for your last night here?” he asks Jonathan and Trevor.

They exchange a glance. “Funny you should ask,” Trevor says, with a smile that concerns me. “We got you an early birthday present.”

“It’s your birthday soon?” I ask.

“Not for a few weeks,” Quin says. “It’s not a big deal.”

“It is a big deal,” Trevor corrects. “And for your present—drumroll, please—Jonathan and I are going to stay out in Moose Lake tonight. With Bandit. He likes us way better, anyway.”

“He does not,” Quin says indignantly, putting a hand on Bandit’s head. Bandit is sprawled across his lap, his favorite position as of late.

“Do you want your present or not?” Trevor asks.

Quin glances at me, and a warm shiver spreads over my skin. “We want it,” Quin says.

“Alright, then.” Trevor rises to his feet and drops a kiss on the top of Quin’s head. He tries to do the same thing with me—I duck away just in time—then crouches in front of Bandit. “Bandit, want to go in the car?”

“Traitor,” Quin says, as Bandit launches off the couch.

“You’re sure you don’t mind staying out there?” I ask, as we walk them to the door.

Jonathan nods. “I need to take some more measurements anyway.”

In the past five days, he, Trevor and I have cleared the cabin out. The old furniture, rugs, dishes and appliances went to Goodwill, while the rusty car parts went to a guy Trevor met in town. He loaded them up himself, swearing he could find a use for all of them while his wife rolled her eyes in their truck.

Jonathan stripped the faded wallpaper while Trevor and I scrubbed down the empty rooms. It was mindless work that nevertheless felt purposeful, and Trevor insisted on playing episodes of his history podcast for me, which I will never, ever admit were interesting.

The full remodel will take months, but Jonathan thinks it could be done by the fall. Mary Murphy and her husband are going to oversee the work while I’m away, though I’m not quite sure how that happened. Trevor ran into her coming out of the driveway, chatted with her for fifteen or twenty minutes, and apparently that was enough to convince her to help me out. *The magic of being nice to people*, he called it, before I threw a wet sponge at his head.

“See you lovebirds tomorrow,” he says now, following Jonathan and Bandit out the door. “Try to wait until we’re out of the driveway before you get naked.”

“Asshole,” I say.

“Dick,” he calls back.

The door swings shut, and Quin and I turn to look at each other. A beat of charged silence passes between us.

We both move at the same time, mouths colliding greedily. I pull his hips against mine while his strong fingers dig into my back. His shirt comes off at the bottom of the stairs; his pants are kicked off at the top. I lift him

by the ass and carry him the rest of the way, a move that's easier in theory than in practice and which ends in both of us falling onto the bed.

"So graceful," he says, grinning up at me from his elbows.

I toss my shirt aside. "I thought so."

I crawl on top of him and kiss him hard, relishing in the warmth of his body under mine and grinding against him in a steady rhythm that rapidly unravels my self-control. I had planned to take my time, to drag him to that perfect, dark-eyed place where he can hardly speak for wanting me, but it's been over a week since I touched him, and pleasure is building almost painfully quickly, desire turning to desperation.

If the frantic way he's undoing my jeans is any indication, he's right there with me. We release each other just long enough to get the rest of our clothes off, then I push him back onto the bed and settle back on top of him, wrapping one hand between us.

His weight is on his elbows, his head tilted back, his eyes closed. I drink in the sight of him, my hand moving faster, heat and friction building. There's lube in the bedside drawer, but I don't want it. The edge of pain is an anchor, holding me in this moment where I've got the most beautiful man in the world in my grasp. Words are slipping out of my mouth unchecked, *you're perfect* and *you're gorgeous* and *fuck, Quin, I love you so much*.

His eyes fly open on that last one. In the same moment, his hips convulse, and strips of heat coat my hand. It takes my brain a staggered second to register that I've tipped over the edge with him, and the second pulse of pleasure hits so hard the world goes black at the edges.

The aftershocks nearly break me, shadow bursts of pleasure almost as strong as the real thing. I tip my head back and ride through it. When I open my eyes again, Quin is smiling at me, deep dimples on each cheek.

Sometime later, as we lie together, Quin's arm around my waist and one of his strong, warm thighs between mine, a memory comes to me, one I

haven’t thought about in years.

It was the day that Clara and I went to the animal shelter to look at Bandit. She saw his picture on the St. John’s SPCA website and we made the four-hour drive the same day. It was the middle of a snowstorm, and the roads were awful, but for once, Clara didn’t chide me for speeding.

“I don’t think anyone’s going to adopt him today,” I told her, when she urged me to pass a snowplow on the highway.

“Are you kidding? He’s perfect.” She showed me her phone screen again, zoomed in on Bandit’s face.

He was the world’s cutest puppy, but I didn’t think there was much risk he’d be snatched up. He was seven months old, a bit older than most people liked to adopt, and on the SPCA website, he was described as “An intelligent, feisty dog who will thrive with an experienced dog owner. Not suitable for homes with children or other pets.” The words “not suitable” were underlined and bolded, which I suspected would be enough to scare off most adopters.

When we got to the shelter, the woman at the desk warned us that Bandit was “a bit of a special case.” He’d been found wandering the streets of a nearby town, without a collar, and had been adopted and returned three times, usually within one or two days.

“He’s very energetic,” she said. “And a bit of a chewer. And it’s not that he doesn’t *like* other dogs, he just plays a bit…rough.”

She went back to where the dogs were kenneled, and we heard the sound of a cage door swinging open, followed by an exasperated, “Bandit, no!”

Five seconds later, Bandit slid through the doorway, leapt up into the worker’s empty chair, scrabbled up onto the counter and started helping himself to the open jar of treats. Clara burst out laughing, and I knew right there and then we weren’t leaving that place without him.

“Very energetic” was an understatement. Bandit did ten rounds of zoomies around our car before Clara could persuade him to jump in, and he spent the first half of the drive with his front paws planted on the front console, barking whenever we passed another car and smacking Clara’s face with his ratty tail.

About two hours in, he crashed, like a toddler coming down from a sugar high. He thumped down in Clara’s lap and fell asleep with his head on her shoulder, and she hugged him so tightly I thought for sure she’d wake him up again.

“Now I have two things I love so much it hurts,” she said.

“Oh yeah?” I grinned. “Who’s number one?”

She rolled her eyes. “This isn’t racing, dumbass. There aren’t firsts and seconds in love. I love Bandit because he’s the world’s best puppy, and I love you, for some inexplicable reason.”

“Because I’m handsome and charming?” I said.

Maybe I was more like Trevor back then than I thought.

She smiled. “Something like that.”

We drove in silence for a while, holding hands over the center console until Bandit woke up with a vengeance and decided to try to climb into my lap, instead. The details of the memory are blurry after that. I don’t remember exactly what Bandit did when we got home, or what we made for dinner that night. But I remember that moment in the car as clear as day. Clara hugging Bandit and smiling and telling me there were no firsts and seconds in love.

I tighten my grip on Quin impulsively, squeezing him tighter and tighter until he laughs and tells me to stop.

“You don’t mind, do you?” I ask when he stops laughing. “That I still love Clara?”

He presses a kiss to my collarbone. “You wouldn’t be you if you stopped.”

A wave of affection crashes over me, and I know, deep in my heart, that he’s right. I wasn’t made to stop loving people.

Once someone is in my heart, they’re in my heart forever—and I will go to my grave loving Clara and Quin.

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QUIN

The last day on set falls on my birthday, February second, and it's a surprisingly emotional affair. I actually tear up a bit during Corbin's final speech, which I wouldn't have thought was possible considering he kicks it off by reciting his own poetry. He really turns it around after that part, though, thanking everyone for their work, telling a few funny stories of things that happened on set, and finishing off with a brief tribute to Ava Parsons.

"I don't believe that death is final," he says. "The ripples in the water linger long after the stone sinks to the bottom of the lake. Ava's life touched others; her death touched us. It shocked us, it scared us—it brought us all closer together."

Kel sniffs beside me.

"Are you actually crying?" I whisper.

She glares at me. "No. You are."

I sort of am. I take her hand under the table and squeeze it hard.

"Even if the show does well," Corbin continues, "there won't be another season. We're not corporate sell-outs—this story has been told. But I hope to work with all of you again on another project someday. Thank you all, and get home safe."

I clap along with the others, then I spend an hour or two saying goodbyes. Usually, at the end of filming, I get out quickly. I've never been a fan of goodbyes—they're so often awkward and forced—but I've recently developed a keen sense of appreciation for them. When you think you won't get the chance to say them, you realize how important they are.

My parting with Kel is the briefest, a quick hug and a kiss on the cheek. It won't be long till I see her again. We've already made plans to meet up when we're back in LA, and she's promised to call me "incessantly" in the meantime.

"Any plans for your last night here?" I ask her, as we walk to our cars.

"Corbin wants to go *stargazing*," she says, rolling her eyes in disgust. "He says we need to appreciate the beauty of nature before returning to the claustrophobic trappings of the city."

"I thought you were breaking up with him after the shoot," I say, with feigned surprise.

She ignores me. "What about you? Any plans for the night?"

I shake my head. "Nothing crazy. I've got to finish packing."

She kisses my cheek again. "Safe flight home."

I let her go without telling her it's my birthday. I didn't tell anyone on set. I knew that if I did, they'd insist on dragging me out for dinner or drinks. As kind as their offers would be, I want to spend this birthday with the man I love.

As though I've summoned him with my thoughts, my phone buzzes in my pocket.

[4:53] Cole: Day wrapping up yet?

[4:54]: Just getting into my car

[4:54] Cole: Don't.

I’m typing back “That’s ominous” when his car turns into the lot. He pulls up beside me and rolls the window down so Bandit can stick his head out of it.

“Hi, handsome,” I say.

“Are you talking to me or Bandit?” Cole asks.

“Bandit, obviously. What are you two doing here?”

“Birthday surprise,” he says. “Get in.”

I grin. “So bossy.”

We make the short drive downtown and find a parking spot just off of Water Street. I’m not crazy about any of the restaurants in town, but the coffee shop has good sandwiches, and there are tables outside so we can sit with Bandit. It’s cold out, but I’m used to it by now.

I tell Cole about my last day, and he tells me about a call he had with his team boss at Dark Force. The F1 season is kicking off soon with testing in Barcelona.

“Were you nice?” I ask.

“Of course,” he says. Then he tilts his head. “Well, mostly.”

“Cole.”

“I may have had some choice words about the new regulations. There’s way too much reliance on battery power, I don’t like it.”

I feed Bandit the last bite of my sandwich under the table. “Maybe it’ll turn out okay.”

“Maybe. I asked him to stop cc’ing my father on e-mails.”

“Good,” I say vehemently.

“Mm. And Trevor sent me the name of his agent, I’m going to chat with her next week. She mostly works with volleyball players, but Trevor says that she’s good. And then I can fire my manager. I think I’ll just write, ‘Thanks for telling my father about the Dark Force deal, prick.’”

“Nice. I’m proud of you.”

Cole makes a face, but I can tell that he's pleased. Then he ducks his head and says, "Incoming."

A pair of teenage girls are drifting toward us, clutching each other nervously. I kick Cole under the table and put on a smile, but they look straight past me, to him.

"Are you Cole Milton?" one of them asks.

I stifle a snort. "He is."

Their eyes go wide. "Oh my god. Can we get a picture? We're obsessed with Formula 1."

"You sure can," I say, grinning. "Want me to take it?"

"Yes, please."

I take a few photos on one of their phones—Cole doesn't smile, but they don't seem to mind—then they pet Bandit for a few minutes, which I can tell wins Cole over a bit.

"Good luck this season," they tell him, then they scurry away, whispering eagerly.

"He is just so dreamy," I say, adopting a high-pitched tone. Cole gives me a dark look, which I choose to ignore.

"Want to head home?" I ask, as he drains the last of his drink.

He hesitates. "Yeah, we can."

I study him. "Or?"

"Or…" He licks his lips. "I thought we could go by the bookstore. I'm not really—I mean, I know you told me not to get you anything for your birthday, but I thought you might want a book or something."

My heart trips over itself. "Are you sure?"

He swallows and nods. "Yeah, I am. C'mon."

It's a short walk to the bookstore. Halfway there, Bandit starts tugging on his leash, and when we get to the door, he spins around a few times, unable to contain his excitement.

"Is he allowed in?" I ask.

“Yeah.” Cole’s throat moves convulsively, then he reaches out and pulls open the door.

A delicious smell wafts out onto the street, the smell of old books and cinnamon. Bandit yanks Cole over the threshold, and as I follow them in, a bright voice says, “Cole!”

I’ve never heard anyone sound that excited to see him. It’s the bookstore’s owner, Magda, and she’s beaming at Cole like he’s an old friend.

Cole looks a bit unsettled by her greeting. “Hey,” he says awkwardly.

“And Quin, hello,” Magda greets me. “And Bandit!” she adds, as Bandit jumps up to put his front paws on the counter.

“Down, Bandit,” Cole says.

Magda clicks her tongue at him. “Nonsense. He knows where the treats are, don’t you, buddy?”

She takes the lid off of a glass jar near the register and gives Bandit a massive bone. Upon receiving it, he immediately heads toward the back of the store, turning back when his leash catches to give Cole an impatient look.

“He likes the couches back there,” Cole tells me, color rising to the tips of his ears. “We used to sit back there when Clara was looking around.”

A warm fist squeezes my heart. “I could look around for a bit.”

He glances at the back of the store, then at me. “Or—you could sit with us?”

The fist around my heart squeezes harder. “Yeah, of course.”

“Drink menu’s on the table,” Magda says. “Holler if you want something.”

We make our way through the shelves to the back corner, where a few squashy couches are arranged around a fish tank. Bandit leaps up on one of the couches and settles in to enjoy his bone. I tuck my arm in Cole’s.

“Where did you usually sit?”

“Just on the couch there.” He pauses. “Clara would stack all the books she was going to buy on the table.”

I take his hand and lead him to the couch, sitting sideways on the end of it so he can sit next to Bandit.

“Tell me about it,” I say.

We stay in the shop until it closes, and I don’t look at a single book. Magda brings us cinnamon-dusted cappuccinos and sits with us for a while, listening to Cole talk about Clara and contributing stories of her own. Some of them, I can tell, are new to Cole. They’re nothing monumental, just little moments of Clara’s life that he hadn’t heard before, but they feel like everything.

As we drive back to The Chalet, with Bandit snoozing happily in the backseat, I take Cole’s hand and thread our fingers together tightly.

“Perfect birthday,” I say.

He attempts a smile. “Listening to stories about my dead girlfriend?”

“Yeah,” I say firmly. “I think I would have liked her.”

One corner of his mouth turns up. “She definitely would have liked you. You could’ve nerded out together about books.”

“And talked about how dreamy you are.”

He snorts. “That, too.”

I stroke my thumb over the back of his hand. “You’re doing better?”

He nods. “Yeah. I just hope—”

“Yeah?”

His smile falls. “I hope the truth comes out in Hart’s trial. It isn’t right, people not knowing.”

“Porter hasn’t tracked down Clara’s parents yet?” I ask.

He shakes his head. Cole told me that Clara’s parents moved out of town after she died, and that he hasn’t heard a word from them since, but he hasn’t said much else about them. I get the sense he might have been close

with them, though, and the thought of them abandoning him makes my chest hurt.

I squeeze his hand. “I’ll tell everyone what happened when I’m on the stand.” I haven’t gotten a summons for Hart’s hearing yet, but Officer Kinsley told me it’ll be coming. “They’ll have to look into it then.”

Cole nods once, then again, like he’s trying to reassure himself. “I know.”

He parks the car in the driveway, and I lean over the console to kiss him. “I’m looking forward to the rest of my birthday.”

His lips curve up. “Me too. I’m not above bribing Bandit with another bone to get him to stay downstairs for an hour or two.”

Bright, easy anticipation is coursing through me as I step out of the car.

I walk around to the front door, and the good feeling vanishes. Porter is sitting on the front step of The Chalet, dressed in all black with his legs stretched out in front of him. His expression is bored, like it always is, but his presence sets my pulse racing.

“What’s happened?” I demand.

He gets to his feet. “Hart is dead.”

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COLE

As soon as Porter says it, I realize I should have seen it coming.

Of course Nathan Hart is dead. Of course he took his own life in his cell.

I'm not stupid enough to think he did it out of guilt. This is just his parting shot at me. His final, petty revenge.

He would've known he had no chance at his trial, not with video footage of him holding Quin at gunpoint and two witnesses who saw him strangling him. But I don't think he killed himself because he was scared of being convicted for that. He did it to stop the truth about Clara getting out.

I don't react well to the news. I try to be calm, for Quin's sake, but the more I think about it, the angrier I get. It builds up inside of me until something snaps, and I flee to the backyard of The Chalet and scream until my throat is raw.

When I come back to myself, Quin is kneeling next to me in the snow. One of his hands is on my back, the other is clutching Bandit's collar, holding him back from launching himself at me in distress.

All of my plans for Quin's birthday night go out the window. Instead, I spend the night oscillating between choking rage and overwhelming grief. In the morning, I feel drained and empty and awful.

I slip out of bed before Quin wakes up and bring him a mug of coffee and a plate of peanut butter toast.

“What’s this for?” he asks, blinking blearily.

“Apology breakfast.”

His eyes sharpen. “Cole.”

“I ruined your birthday.”

“I’m not three.”

“And I keep putting so much on you,” I say, ignoring him. “You shouldn’t have to deal with all of this.”

“It is really inconsiderate,” he says, “that you haven’t gotten over the murder of the woman you loved more quickly.”

“You know what I mean. I thought I was doing better—”

“You *are* doing better.” He scoots closer to me, pressing his knee against mine. “This is just a setback. A really awful setback.”

“Really fucking awful.” I look down at my coffee cup. Swirls of steam rise from the dark liquid. There’s something tugging at my heart, but it takes me a few minutes to put it into words. “It isn’t just that he won’t go to trial for it, or that people won’t know what he did. It’s that I’ll never know what happened.”

“You mean, how he did it?”

“How he did it. What her last moments were like.” I swallow. “If she said anything about me.”

Quin’s arm wraps around me, warm and strong. “You’ll never know the details,” he says. “But you knew Clara better than anyone. What do you think she would’ve said?”

I fall silent, considering the question. Clara’s crooked smile flashes in my mind, along with an echo of her bright, overloud laugh.

“She would have been angry,” I say. “She would’ve called him an asshole, or a coward. She probably would’ve threatened him. Told him he wouldn’t get away with it. That Bandit would rip his throat out.”

“He almost did.”

“I think—” I clear my throat. “I think she would’ve thought of me when she realized she was going to die. When I was away at races, she always used to tell me to think about her before I fell asleep.” I hear her voice in my head. *Night, babe. Think about me before you go to sleep.* “I think she would’ve thought about me. And Bandit,” I add, reaching a hand out to touch him.

Quin rests his head on my shoulder. “I think so, too.”

“Yeah?” I want to believe it so badly.

“You’re what I thought about,” he says.

It hurts so much it takes my breath away. I kiss the top of his head instead of answering. I don’t think I could get any words out if I tried.

“It’s going to get better,” he says. “I promise. But you’re going to have good days and bad days, and it’s going to take a really long time.”

I attempt a laugh. “That sounds awful.”

“Yeah, well.” He shifts closer to me again, and I breathe in the smell of his skin. “We all have our problems.”

ON QUIN’S last day in Marble Brook, we get a visit from Candi. She sweeps in dressed in a Burberry winter coat and Prada earmuffs, bearing a box of macarons from Ladurée and a black file folder that she sets on the kitchen table in front of us.

Her presence doesn’t bother me at all anymore. If anything, I’m slightly in awe of her. I still can’t believe she donated all those security cameras to the parks, or paid Porter’s security company to monitor them. Porter said it was all with her own money, too, nothing to do with my father. When I asked her why she did it, she shrugged one perfect shoulder and said, “Public parks should be safe.”

“Here’s the thing,” she says now, while Quin pours her a cup of coffee. “Technically speaking, I should not have access to anything inside of this file.”

“Okay,” I say slowly, exchanging a glance with Quin.

“And if you were to ask me how I got it, I wouldn’t answer you,” she says. “And if you were to tell anyone about it—if you were to mention it to a friend, for example, or post about it on social media—I would be very disappointed.”

“That almost sounds like a threat,” I say.

She chuckles. “It did sound like that, didn’t it? I channeled my inner Porter there for a second. Who, by the way, would also be very disappointed if you divulged anything in this file.”

Quin grimaces. “That’s a much more effective threat.”

Candi smiles again. She’s got a bit of Porter energy herself, I realize, a scary edge underneath the blonde hair and fancy clothes. I’d never noticed it before. Or maybe she’s just good at hiding it.

“So,” she says, “do I have your word you’ll keep this quiet?”

“We don’t even know what ‘this’ is,” I point out.

“True.” She shrugs a shoulder. “You’ll just have to trust me.”

I exchange another look with Quin.

“You work for Cole’s dad,” he says, his voice slightly accusatory. “He’s not exactly our favorite person.”

“Really?” Candi says. “I find him fascinating. Especially his stock trading patterns. I find those downright compelling.”

I stare at her. She takes a bland sip of her coffee.

“Are you…investigating my father?” I ask.

She blinks her long lashes. “If I were, I wouldn’t tell you, would I?”

An incredulous laugh escapes my lips. While I try to wrap my mind around the fact that Candi—fucking *Candi*—might be trying to take down

my father, she takes a delicate bite of a macaron. “Now then, do you want to see what Porter and I have found, or not?”

Quin sits down beside me. “Go for it,” he says.

She opens the file. There are several pieces of paper inside. The first is a printed schedule.

“Dr. Francis Walden’s clinic schedule from November ninth, three years ago,” Candi says. She takes out another page and places it beside the schedule. “And his office notes from his visit with Clara.”

My heart starts pounding hard. I lean forward and squint at the office note, which is formatted strangely, like a printed-out screenshot. I don’t know what I’m hoping for, but Dr. Walden’s note is a three-line disappointment. *23 yo F c/o phobia of flying. Small rx Ativan prescribed. Counselled on medication risks 1:16-1:32pm.*

“We already knew that,” I say, trying to hide my disappointment.

Candi taps the schedule. “Look who was scheduled fifteen minutes after her.”

I squint again at the tiny text. *Nathan Hart – f/u knee pain.*

“Fuck,” Quin breathes.

It takes a moment for my wrung-out brain to follow. When it does, my pulse kicks off again.

“We can only speculate, at this point,” Candi says. “But I spoke with Dr. Walden’s secretary, and she says he’s notorious for running late. It’s reasonable to assume that Clara and Hart were in the waiting room at the same time, and that he might have asked her why she was there.”

Quin takes my hand. “So he knew about the Ativan.”

“One could assume,” Candi agrees. “Now, we’re going to jump a week later.”

She lays out another page, this one a printout of a police report. It’s dated November sixteenth, but the officer’s handwriting is so messy I can’t garner much more than that.

“Seven days after Hart saw Clara at Dr. Walden’s, Officer Wilson arrested a local drug dealer for possession.”

“For fuck’s sake,” Quin says, “How many drug dealers does Marble Brook have?”

Candi snorts. “Every small town in the world has drug dealers, and almost all of them deal in opioids and benzos. This fellow was brought in after a bar fight, and then charged with assault and possession of hydromorphone and Ativan. And look at who was working with Officer Wilson that day.”

She taps her nail on the scribbled name. *N. Hart.*

“You can hardly read the numbers in Wilson’s report,” she adds. “This could easily be a one or a seven. That’s a big difference, eighteen pills versus seventy-eight. And if a fistful of Ativan went missing, how could it be tracked? I think, when they made this arrest, Hart remembered Clara’s prescription and realized he had an opportunity. And if you think that’s a stretch,” she adds, “take a closer look at the name of the man they arrested.”

Quin and I lean forward together, then he sucks in a sharp breath.

“Paul Johnson,” he says. “The same guy who—?”

Candi nods. “The very same.”

I sit back in my chair, remembering the crunch of bullet through bone, and the dark pool of blood that spread out over the roadside.

Quin has gone pale. “Do you think that’s why Hart shot him?”

Candi makes an impassive noise. “I think he saw an opportunity to get rid of a loose end, and he took it. I don’t think it’s typical RCMP protocol to take down a criminal by shooting them in the head.”

“*Fuck*,” Quin says.

“Indeed,” Candi agrees.

“So Hart knew Clara had a prescription for Ativan,” I say, with a calmness I don’t feel at all, “and he had access to a bunch of it himself. Then, what?”

Candi takes out two final pieces of paper.

“Bank statements from Clara and Hart. The day she died, Clara paid nine dollars at Jitters at four forty-six in the afternoon.”

I nod jerkily. I already knew that. All of the private investigators I hired went through Clara’s bank statements, and the barista working at the coffee shop that day confirmed she’d come in, ordered a cappuccino, drank it at one of the tables outside and then left. The coffee was three dollars. She gave the barista a six-dollar tip.

“Here,” Candi says, pushing the final piece of paper toward me. “Hart’s bank statement from the same day.”

She’s highlighted a single item. JITTERS CO, *Marble Brook NL (Apple Pay)*. Three dollars and fifty-two cents paid at four forty-eight.

“The coffee shop doesn’t have cameras,” Candi says. “And the town doesn’t have CCTV. No one remembers seeing Hart and Clara together while she was drinking her coffee. But I pulled Hart’s internet records. He visited Clara’s Instagram page twenty-six times the year she died. He googled your name sixty-eight times. He posted nasty comments about you online using different names. This was an obsession, Cole. A calculated plan.”

My pulse is roaring in my ears. Quin’s hand tightens in mine.

“This is as much as Porter and I could find,” Candi says. “We’ll never know all the details for sure, but this is our best guess. Clara went to the coffee shop after work all the time. Anyone following her movements would know that. Hart knew she had a prescription for Ativan. He had access to Ativan that no one would notice had gone missing. He kept it with him, and he waited for an opportunity. The coffee shop was busier than usual that day.”

She keeps talking, but I don’t hear the words anymore. I see them instead, like a horror movie playing out in my mind.

Clara is sitting at one of the wrought iron tables outside of the coffee shop. It's December, and it's cold out, but she doesn't notice at all. She's reading a book on her Kobo, taking sips from her cappuccino without tearing her eyes from the page. Hart goes into the shop and buys his own coffee. He stops to talk to Clara on his way out. He takes a packet of sugar from her table to put into his coffee. His hand lingers for a bit too long over her drink.

He walks off again, saying hi to people he knows on the street, so he'll have witnesses who saw him leave if he ever needs them. He strolls up and down the street, drinking his coffee, never straying far enough to lose sight of Clara.

It's only one or two pills, just enough to make her feel woozy. He circles back to her table. He asks her if she feels alright, offers to drive her home when she says no.

Clara doesn't like him, but she's not going to get behind the wheel when she feels so weird. She doesn't feel drugged, yet, just a bit off. She thinks she's getting sick, maybe. Hart gets in her car. Clara gets in the passenger seat. Later, no one will think it's strange that Hart's fingerprints are on the steering wheel. He's the one who drove her car from the lake to the police station after she was dead.

On the drive, Hart offers her a bottle of water, one he's been carrying around for days. Drink some water, he tells her. You look like you're about to pass out.

It's a good idea. She feels a bit dizzy. She drinks all of the water, but the dizziness only gets worse. No one will find the water bottle afterward, because it's been tossed out in the police station recycling bin, where no one would ever think to look.

And then Hart drives her to the lake, and the gun comes out.

Her footsteps are steady, at least for the first half of the walk. She realizes what's happening, but she's too weak from the drugs to run. When

Hart points a gun at her head and tells her to walk, she does. She curses him, insults him. She doesn't plead with him. She sees in his eyes that it won't work.

Nearer the lake, she starts to stumble. The rest of the drugs are kicking in, and it's getting harder to hold on to her anger and fear. She kneels on the ground where Hart tells her to. It's freezing out, well below zero, but she's not really aware of it. The drugs are slowing her breathing. She's so tired, she just wants to sleep.

She lies down on the ground. The snow is cold on her cheek. Her eyelids are too heavy to lift. She's floating away, but her iron will holds her there a moment longer. She thinks of Bandit, and of me. She loves us. She's sorry to leave us.

She falls asleep, and the cold does the rest.

Candi keeps talking, but I stop listening. I don't care what Hart did afterward. I don't care how he made everything look the way he wanted it to look. I am lying in the snow with Clara, holding her in my arms, feeling her last breath slip away.

Candi leaves, and Quin takes me upstairs and puts me in bed.

"This is one of the bad days," he says.

I wrap my arms around him and hold on tight.

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COLE

Quin cancels his flight out of Marble Brook. He has things to do in LA, meetings he's missing and appearances that have to be cancelled, but he tells me firmly that he doesn't give a shit. I don't argue with him. I don't even try.

He stays with me, and we spend the good days and bad days together.

On the good days, we go to the ski hill. Quin is snowboarding well enough now to come with me on the ski lift and try out the harder trails. We laugh together when he wipes out, and scald our tongues drinking crappy canteen hot chocolate, and when we get tired or the hill gets too busy, we take Bandit and head out to Moose Lake to run the trail together. Back at The Chalet, Porter comes by every evening at seven to take Bandit for a run, and Quin and I spend the time together in bed, or in the shower, or—on one particularly memorable occasion—on the balcony.

On the bad days, we don't do much of anything. It's strange, how exhausting grief can be. F1 testing starts in less than two weeks, and I should be working out more and using my racing sim to get ready for the season, but sometimes, my limbs feel like they're weighted down with lead.

The feeling always passes, though. Quin will put a movie on and stretch out on the couch with his legs draped over mine, or he'll drag me to the dog

park with Bandit, and suddenly, life doesn't seem as bad. I'm sad, but I can see my way past it.

One morning, Porter shows up with a phone number written on a scrap of paper.

"Clara's parents' landline," he says. "It took a while to find it. They really did go off the grid."

I sit on the couch for a long time, staring at the scrap of paper. I asked Porter to try to track them down after Hart was arrested, but I'd given up hope he'd actually find them. Clara's parents live in Costa Rica now, but I've never known exactly where. I'm not sure I want to know how Porter finally tracked them down.

Quin takes Bandit out for a walk while I work up the nerve to call them. He knows this is something I have to do alone.

The phone rings at least ten times before Clara's mother picks up, her voice bright and breathless, like she's run down the stairs to get the phone. I'm struck with a sudden wave of guilt. She sounds so happy, and I'm about to ruin her day.

The weird thing is, I don't think I do. After I stumble through the story, she and Mr. Harkin, who she called in as soon as she recognized my voice, are silent for a long time. Then one of them—Clara's mother, I think—lets out a long, slow breath.

"I knew it," she says.

A bit of weight slips from my shoulders.

"Yeah," I say. "Me, too."

We stay on the phone for over an hour. We talk about Clara and cry a little together. I ask them about their lives, and they ask me about mine. Clara's mother apologizes for not keeping in touch.

"It's okay," I say.

"No, it isn't," she says.

And I know that she's right. It really isn't okay. For seven years, Clara's parents were my parents, too. I didn't see them all that often, because I was so busy with racing, but I spent seven Christmases with them, and they never failed to call me on my birthday or to text me congratulations when I did well at races. They cut off contact completely after Clara died, and I never pushed them on it, because I thought I deserved it. But it hurt more than I realized, and when Clara's mother apologizes again, and her father chokes out, "We're so sorry, son," it stitches up two deep wounds I didn't even know were there.

"Can I call you again next week?" her mother asks, before we hang up.

A bit more weight falls from my shoulders.

"Yeah," I say. "I'd like that."

THE FOLLOWING DAY, while Quin is on a phone call with his agent, I drive into town and buy two cappuccinos from the coffee shop. I don't linger there any longer than I have to. I'm not quite sure I'll ever be able to go back there again. Today, though, it's what I need.

I take a slow, circuitous route to the graveyard. I drive by my old junior high school, where Clara and I first met. I stop at the closed-down movie theater where she and I had our first date. We were sixteen, and when the movie was done, I held her hand for five whole minutes. I can still remember exactly what it felt like, just like I remember the taste of her lip gloss the first time I kissed her, two dates later.

I stand outside the movie theater for a while, remembering. Then I get back in my car and drive to the graveyard.

It's not that far from The Chalet, but I haven't been here since her funeral. The thought of her body buried underground…it was too much.

It's *still* too much.

But today, I'm going to do it anyway.

The gravestone looks different than I remember. It's smaller than any of the other stones around it, and simpler, but it feels right. Clara wouldn't have wanted some ostentatious monstrosity with a flowery quote on it. And it's in a quiet part of the graveyard, tucked under an apple tree that must be beautiful in spring.

I sit down on the ground and take sips of my cappuccino. I rest the other one against her gravestone, like she and I are having coffee together one last time.

I'm not a spiritual person, or a religious one. I don't believe in ghosts or angels. But sitting here, remembering Clara almost feels like being with her again. My hand is warm where she held it outside of the movie theater. Her laughter echoes in the wind.

That's nonsense, babe.

Her voice is louder, too.

I sit there for a long time, remembering. When my coffee cup is empty, I pick up hers. I turn it in my hands, working up the nerve to speak.

"I think—" My voice cracks. I swallow hard and try again. "I think I'm going to move on now. If you're okay with that."

I'm dead, Cole. You don't have to clear things with me anymore.

"I know." I swallow again. My next words rise up from deep inside of me, a hard pit of guilt I'm not sure will ever go away. "I'm so sorry I didn't stop him."

Who, Hart? Don't worry about that little shit. He's on my side now. I'll take care of him.

I choke out a laugh. If anyone walked by, they'd think I was a lunatic, but I'm so sure it's what Clara would say. I know her better than anyone, and I know what she'll want to hear next.

"I'm going to be okay now," I tell her. "I promise."

Her wide, crooked smile flashes in my mind. *I know you are, handsome.*

I press my forehead to her gravestone. The lump in my throat is a painful, vicious thing. “I love you.”

I love you, too.

I know that I should leave now. Her coffee has gone cold and my hands are mostly numb. But I sit there a little while longer, holding on for one last time. It’s not like my memories will vanish when I leave here. It’s not like I won’t think of her and feel sad. But for the last three years, it’s like I’ve been stumbling through life with my back turned against it. I’m ready to turn around and move forward again.

I empty her coffee cup over her grave. Some people would lay flowers, but I know she’d like this better. I rise to my feet and put my hand on top of her gravestone. When I lean down and press my lips to it, hot tears splash onto the stone.

“I’ll look after Bandit,” I whisper.

The wind shifts over the graveyard, wrapping me in a cloud of cold, glittering snow. I put Clara’s empty coffee cup inside of mine, then I turn around and walk to my car.

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QUIN

The first F1 race of the season takes place in Melbourne, Australia on the second Sunday in March.

I watch it from the back of the Dark Force garage. Kel is here with me, but she dragged Corbin off a few minutes ago to track down some cold drinks. The garage has air conditioning, but it can't keep up with the sweltering heat.

I'm kind of glad to have a break from them. Kel is her usual wonderful self, but Corbin has approached his first F1 race with the same intensity he approaches everything, and I'm tired of explaining all the minutiae of the rules.

There are a few other celebrities standing with us, including an actress I vaguely remember meeting at an awards show last year. She tries to make polite small talk while we wait for the race to start, but quickly realizes that I'm not paying attention. I'm too busy watching the pre-race grid interviews on the garage TV screen, waiting to see if Cole will appear.

As if on cue, his face pops up on screen. He's on the grid talking with one of his mechanics, pointing at something on his car. The pre-race interviewer, a blonde British woman, approaches him.

"Excuse me, Cole? Do you have a minute to talk?"

She looks surprised when he says yes. It was the same way at pre-season testing in Barcelona, every interviewer politely flabbergasted by Cole's sudden willingness to chat. He used to avoid the media like the plague, but this year, he's doing things differently.

"We're minutes away from the start of the first race of the season," she says, putting the microphone in his face, "and you're kicking off the year in P3. Tell me, after your success in qualifying yesterday, have your feelings on these new regulations changed?"

"Nope," Cole says, smiling. "I still think they're pretty fucking stupid."

The interviewer glances at the camera. "Apologies to our viewers," she says hastily, "for the colorful language. Er—can you elaborate a little for us, explain why you think they're stupid?"

"Fucking stupid," Cole corrects, still smiling pleasantly. "It's like I said in Barcelona, fans don't show up to see us slowing down in the fastest corners."

"But they say that the cars will be faster on the straights, and with super-clipping and active aero—"

"I don't think watching an F1 car drive in a straight line is particularly interesting," Cole says dryly. "And if you want my thoughts on super-clipping, you'll have to explain it to me again, 'cause I think I've forgotten what it means."

The poor interviewer looks torn between resignation and amusement. I know exactly how she feels. As she moves on to less foul-mouthed drivers, I take out my phone and send a text to Cole.

[3:26]: I'm getting you a swear jar. Five hundred bucks every time you curse on live TV.

His response comes in seconds.

[3:26] Cole: You love it.

I grin foolishly wide. I do love it.

[3:27] Cole: It’s your fault, anyway. You’re the one who told me to be myself.

I laugh out loud. What an ass. Before pre-season testing, I did tell him he should be himself. I think my exact words were, “Just be yourself, tell them what you really think.”

I probably should have added “within reason”, but you know what they say about hindsight.

There’s a particularly memorable interview running wild on the internet right now where a reporter asked Cole if he’d spent Christmas with his father, and Cole said he hadn’t, because he didn’t enjoy spending the holidays with emotionally stunted man-children who would happily fuck over the world for an extra dollar.

Yeah. He said that on TV.

Needless to say, his father isn’t speaking to him. There are rumors he’s going to pull his company’s sponsorship from Dark Force, but he hasn’t pulled the trigger yet. I think he’s trying to preserve his reputation, which started falling to shit a few weeks ago after an article popped up on the news hinting that he’s being investigated for serious financial crimes. Candi’s work, I’m sure.

Blaine Milton doesn’t know it yet, but even if he manages to weasel out of whatever charges get laid against him, Dark Force isn’t going to keep Cypher on as a title sponsor after this year. Last week, a company called Redlark made them an eye-watering offer for title sponsorship starting next year. It’s some big tech company based in London, and the only thing I know about them is that the CEO is friends with Trevor’s father. He did some consulting work for them in the past, and he somehow convinced them that investing in an F1 team would be a fabulous idea.

Cole is thrilled he's going to be out from under his father's thumb. He's less thrilled that he now owes Trevor—according to Trevor himself—"eighty-five million favors, not including tax."

Regardless of their title sponsor, Cole has a two-year contract left with Dark Force, and he's determined to give them a reason to keep him around. A championship title, if he can manage it. The Dark Force car looks like it might be the third best on the grid, after Harper and Crosswire, and I've promised Cole I'll root for him instead of Travis Keeping or Jacob Nichols.

He's never going to be one of the most popular drivers—he's been acting like an asshole for far too long—but public opinion on him is shifting a bit. Everyone's so fed up with greedy billionaires that the video of him calling out his dad earned him a lot of new fans. And someone—I suspect Candi—leaked a story online about how Cole never took his dad's money in the lower Formula series, and how Blaine only sponsored Dark Force *after* Cole signed with them, against Cole's wishes.

I don't know how it's all going to play out, but I know Cole won't give a shit even if people end up hating him again. Inside the Dark Force garage, though, he's making a concerted effort to be nice. I've seen him laughing with some of the mechanics, and after qualifying yesterday, his team boss kept thumping him on the shoulder with a look on his face like a proud dad.

My phone dings again in my hand.

[3:28] Cole: Have you checked on Bandit?

[3:28]: A few minutes ago. He's napping on the physio table in your room.

[3:29] Cole: Lucky puppy.

I bite into a smile as I send my reply.

[3:29]: Oh no, are you tired for some reason?

I don’t remember what time Cole and I fell asleep last night, but it was definitely late. Very late. Lost-track-of-time-in-the-shower late.

[3:30] Cole: Not at all.

[3:30] Cole: My arms are sore though. Almost like I was holding some guy against a wall for forty-five minutes.

[3:31]: Not my fault that you’re a weakling. Also, forty-five minutes? Your memory is flattering you. It was more like five.

[3:31] Cole: !!!!!

[3:31] Cole: Little prick.

[3:31] Cole: I’m timing it tonight.

I’m sending back a string of devil emojis when a new text pops up on my phone.

[3:32] Trevor: If you’re texting Cole right now, Jonathan owes me a hundred bucks.

I frown at the text.

[3:32]: Huh?

[3:32] Trevor: Check the screen, handsome.

I glance up just in time to see my own face on the garage TV, before the camera turns back to the starting grid.

[3:33] Trevor: Well? Does Jonathan owe me money?

A smile stretches over my face.

[3:33]: Yeah. He does.

Back in December, on the plane from LA to New York, I watched Jacob Nichols watching Travis Keeping on the podium, and I wondered what it would feel like to love someone so much it spilled out onto your face. What it would feel like to love someone, full-stop.

I swipe to my texts with Cole again.

[3:34]: I love you so fucking much.

I can picture him rolling his eyes when he reads it, embarrassed and pleased in equal measure.

[3:34] Cole: Then come make out with me on the grid, this pre-race shit is boring as hell.

I laugh.

[3:35]: I think that would go against our “keeping things on the DL” plan.

We’ve talked a lot about whether to go public or not. Cole said we just should do it, and fuck anyone who gave a shit, but I weighed the pros and cons for a while and decided to keep things quiet. I feel weirdly protective of our relationship, like it’s a shiny toy I don’t want to share with anyone else. For now, I just want to enjoy it, without any added pressure or attention.

The offer to go make out with him is still pretty tempting, though.

[3:35] Cole: Come onnnnn

[3:35] Cole: Dimwits one and two are making love eyes at each other out here, it’s sickening

[3:36]: You had better not mean Travis and Jacob.

[3:36] Cole: You know I do.

[3:36] Cole: They've got this creepy intense energy going on right now, staring at each other like one of them is dying of cancer

[3:37]: If you ever want to have sex with me again, you'll stop talking right about now.

[3:37] Cole: Fiiine

[3:37] Cole: But I swear they're going to go public any day now.

[3:38]: So?

[3:38] Cole: So we have to go public before them!! I don't want to look like I'm copying Travis fucking Keeping.

[3:38] Cole: You and I are a way better couple than them.

[3:38]: I'll agree with you there

[3:39]: Though I might be the only one

[3:39]: Now stop texting so I can listen to the anthem.

[3:39] Cole: Such a little do-gooder.

[3:40]: You love me.

I look up at the garage TV as the Australian national anthem starts, and find the camera trained on Cole. He's typing on his phone—I'm seriously going to smack him—but he puts it away reasonably quickly. A moment later, my phone dings with a text.

Warmth spreads through my chest as I read it, and I know, deep in my bones, that I will never stop feeling this way.

[3:41] Cole: Always.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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