

GOOD BOY

WAGS SERIES

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RENNIE ROAD BOOKS

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ABOUT GOOD BOY

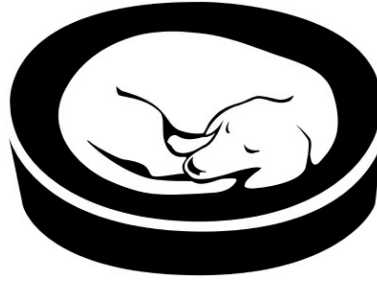
Hosting her brother's wedding for an MVP guest list is the challenge of Jess Canning's life. Already the family screw-up, she can't afford to fail. And nobody (nobody!) can learn of the colossal mistake she made with the best man during a weak moment last spring. It was wrong, and there will not be a repeat. Absolutely not. Even if he is the sexiest thing on two legs.

Blake Riley sees the wedding as fate's gift to him. Jess is the maid of honor and he's the best man? Let the games begin. So what if he's facing a little (fine, a lot) of resistance? He just needs to convince the stubborn blonde that he's really a good boy with a bad rap. Luckily, every professional hockey player knows that you've got to make an effort if you want to score.

But Jess has more pressing issues to deal with than sexy-times with a giant man-child. Such as: Will the ceremony start on time, even though someone got grandma drunk? Does glitter ever belong at a wedding? And is it wrong to murder the best man?

Caution: May cause accidental aspiration of tea or coffee. Do not read in a public place where loud laughter is inappropriate. Contains hot but hilarious hockey players, puppy cuddling and a snarky pair of underwear.

1 THE MAID OF HONOR GIG



Jess

Even though the restaurant staff has already done its magic, I'm fussing over the dining table one more time. Each centerpiece gets a last-minute adjustment to make sure the flowers are perfect. A glance out the window shows me that the cloudless sky is already deepening. I've timed my brother's rehearsal dinner so that the first streaks of color will appear over the Pacific just as the appetizer course is served.

The forecast for tomorrow is perfect, too—sunny with a high of seventy-five. Even the weather doesn't dare interfere with the greatest wedding ever thrown.

Beyond the arched entryway to this private dining room, I hear the pop of a champagne bottle right on schedule. The guests are arriving. I can hear my sister's laughter just around the corner in the bar area. Sure enough, my mother pokes her head through the doorway.

"Oh, sweetie, you did such a fabulous job!" she exclaims. "This is all so gorgeous! I predict a smashing success!"

"Thank you," I whisper, adjusting a butter knife that I adjusted two minutes ago.

"You are constantly surprising us, Miss Jessica." Mom beams at me as she raises her champagne flute to her lips.

Instead of beaming back and accepting Mom's compliments, I find myself bristling. Because I don't hear the compliments. I don't hear the words "fabulous" or "smashing success" or "Miss Jessica," the nickname my dad gave me when I was three years old.

I hear the word "*surprising*."

Translation: My family is surprised I managed to pull off this rehearsal dinner without screwing it up.

“Thanks, Mom.” I muster a smile, and she disappears again, probably to greet another of my five siblings.

I should be out there, too, having a glass of wine and resting on my laurels. But I can’t stop myself from grabbing my notebook out of my bag and eyeballing the page marked *Rehearsal Dinner* one more time. Name cards—check. White wine ordered and iced—check.

Everything is perfection. Except for me. I’m a freaking wreck. In the first place, planning the perfect wedding is stressful. And in the second place...

“Wesley! J-Bomb!” a loud voice bellows in the next room. “I have arrived!”

The deep timbre of his voice reverberates inside my chest. Blake Riley is on the premises, and my blood pressure doubles.

I fiddle with the silverware again, listening. “Gonna get you both pixilated tonight!” Blake says, and I hear the powerful slap of bro-hugs being dished out. “And who is this beauty?”

My mother begins to gush over Blake, and I feel a chill climb up my spine. As if the wedding weren’t stressful enough, I have to cope with the loudest, brashest, most annoying man I’ve ever met in my life. He’s got a big body, a big personality and...

Fine. He also has the biggest dick I’ve ever seen in my life. But I try not to think about that particular part of his anatomy if I can help it.

My family *cannot* know about the colossal mistake I made this spring. I can’t give them one more exhibit of my lack of judgment, not when I’m about to announce yet another career change. I’m already the flighty kid. The screw-up.

And I absolutely put the *screw* in *screw-up* when I let Blake get me out of my clothes. Trust me, that won’t be happening again. But his presence complicates things. Tomorrow I’m throwing a wedding for three hundred people, including two dozen famous hockey players. Meanwhile, Blake has spent the past month texting me inappropriate wedding ideas and jokes.

And, when I hadn’t replied, a photo of his hand around his junk.

OMG, stop, I’d replied. Anyone could have seen that.

Ha! I knew you were getting these texts!

The man is incorrigible. And now I’ve run out of things to fuss over and

straighten. I'm just hiding here in the private dining room, damn it.

I give my hair a quick toss and wet my lips. Then, with my chin held high, I take a deep breath and step into the bar area. I spot my sister Tammy holding a bottle of champagne, so I home in on her without looking at Blake. But I can sense his presence at the end of the bar. He's a big man with an even bigger personality. Just stepping into the room with him, an awareness of him settles over me, like an itch that needs scratching.

Like poison ivy.

"Here, Jessie!" Tammy says, handing me a glass of the good stuff. "I'm just so impressed with the way you've handled Jamie's big day!"

"Thanks," I mutter, slugging back a mouthful of bubbly. Tammy heaps more praise on me, and then Mom joins us to heap on more. They had obviously expected me to fail spectacularly, or to quit in the middle of the job. And it brings me no satisfaction to know that the wedding tomorrow is going to be lovely. Because shortly afterward I'll have to tell everyone that I'm giving up on party planning.

They'll be shaking their heads over me before Jamie and Wes are back from their honeymoon.

"What's the matter, Miss Jessica?" my mother asks.

Crap. Cindy Canning should've gone into law enforcement. I swear this woman can pick out any lie, read any expression to determine whether she's being played. But no matter how intuitive she is, I refuse to ruin my baby brother's wedding rehearsal dinner by revealing my insecurities.

"Nothing's wrong," I insist. "I mean, look at Jamester. How can anything be wrong when he looks this happy?"

The diversion is successful, and Mom's face softens as she glances over at her youngest child. Jamie stands beside his fiancé, his hand on the back of Wes's neck. They're showing photos of their recent fishing trip to Pat, who runs the hockey camp where they met. All three men are relaxed and smiling.

Jamie is more peaceful and content than I've ever seen him, and that's saying a lot, because his default mode is peaceful and content. Ryan Wesley, his super-successful semi-famous fiancé, on the other hand, is wound a little tighter. But Wes has his reasons.

That's the real reason this wedding-planning gig was a bit of a challenge. Anyone can hire a tent and a band. The bigger trick is planning a celebration for a man whose family doesn't speak to him anymore. The press follows him everywhere he goes, which means that I had to reserve

everything under pseudonyms. But the two people who should be here tonight balancing out the tidal wave of Canning love and support—Wes's parents—couldn't be bothered.

So I planned this dinner—along with the engagement party a few months ago and the ceremony and reception tomorrow—taking care not to expose that gap. There won't be any wedding favors with baby pictures of the grooms on them, because those photos may no longer exist.

Instead, I chose puck-shaped chocolates, because my brother met Wes at hockey camp.

Most of Wes's teammates will be at the ceremony tomorrow, but tonight's dinner is for family, close friends and members of the wedding party. I fill more than one of those roles, since I'm also Jamie's best woman.

I've done the maid-of-honor gig before. Usually I love all the responsibilities that come with it. And if the best man is cute, that's always a perk. For my friend Wendy's wedding last summer, the hottie best man and I bailed on the reception midway through and locked ourselves in his hotel room for two days straight.

Won't happen this time, though. Nopety nope. Because Wes's best man happens to be—

“What the hell, J-Babe? You didn't use any of my suggestions!”

Yep—him. Blake has threaded his muscular, bulky self through the crowd to speak to me.

“As usual, I have no idea what you're babbling about,” I say coolly. But then I make the mistake of lifting my chin to look him in the eye. Why does such an annoying human have to be so freaking attractive? Bright green eyes look back at me, framed by thick lashes. They're set into a ruggedly handsome face, which is riding atop a dreamboat body. For a split second, I can't think of a single reason why I don't like this man.

Blake's gorgeous eyes narrow at me. “You so know what I'm talking about.” He waves one arm around the candlelit room, and my traitorous gaze notes the delicious way his sculpted body fills his tailored black suit. “Where's the glitter, eh? And where's the banner I asked for? The one that's supposed to read ‘Wesmie 4ever!’”

Oh, right. Now I remember.

“Sorry, dude, but glitter plays no part in a wedding. ‘Wesmie’ is a ridiculous couple name. And banners are strictly reserved for high school proms and retirement parties.” I've spent months trying to make sure this

event is classy and flawless. And he'd turn it into TackyFest 2016 in a hot second.

Emphasis on hot.

A cocky grin tugs at the corners of his mouth. "Call me that again."

"Call you what again?"

"Dude. I'm totally digging it. Reminds me of my fraternity days."

Blake was a frat boy? Shocking.

"You know," he continues, "when all the babes would throw themselves at me nilly-willy."

"Willy-nilly," I correct.

"Huh?"

"It's willy-nilly. The willy comes first."

He winks at me. "I'll let you have this one, but only because you're right—the willy always does come first."

I clench my teeth. This man is impossible. I don't know what ever compelled me to get naked with him.

Loneliness, a firm voice reminds me.

Right. Loneliness. Plus, that whole girly, I-need-to-feel-desirable curse that comes after a breakup. I might've been the one who broke up with Raven, but that doesn't mean I wasn't feeling vulnerable. Blake and his big stupid dick were there at the right place, at the right time.

Sleeping with him was a mistake, but it's a mistake I won't be repeating. Doesn't matter that he gave me three orgasms in thirty minutes. I will not be tapping that ass again.

"Actually, life's not all that different from those college days," he muses. "The babes are still knocking on the old Riley door." He grins at me. "Sometimes they show up in nothing but a trench coat."

"Ooooh, sounds kinky." Sarcasm drips from my tone.

"It is," he says seriously. "Like as kinky as getting it on in a massage chair."

I glare at him. He just laughs, that deep, boisterous laugh that seems to come from the center of his soul, because Blake doesn't do anything half-assed. He laughs the way he lives his life—loud and fierce and without inhibition.

He fucks that way, too.

Argh. Damn it. I don't want to think about how Blake is in bed. I don't want to think about him, period.

"I need to speak to the caterer," I say stiffly. "Go bother someone else."

"Not until you tell me why you vetoed my idea about life-sized cutouts of the grooms."

"Because it was childish!" I blurt out, frazzled to the point of anger. "All your ideas were! I was trying to plan a wedding, and you were trying to plan a teenage girl's Sweet Sixteen!"

He smirks. "Excuuuuuuse me for trying to inject some silliness into your brother's wedding." He gestures around the room again, pointing at the gorgeous centerpieces at each table and the flickering candles set up on the ledges spanning the walls. "Maybe if you'd taken some of my suggestions, this shindig wouldn't be so stuffy."

"It's not stuffy. It's elegant. Now if you'll please excuse me..." I force myself not to stamp my foot, because that would make *me* the childish one. And Blake Riley wouldn't understand what it's like to be the only screw-up in a family of achievers. Besides, there's nothing stuffy about the labor of love I've done for this wedding. It's going to be perfect, or I'll die trying.

It's too late to convince my almost-brother-in-law to pick a new best man. So I solve the problem the only way I know how—with a gulp of champagne and by marching away from the big oaf.

Blake

I watch Jess Canning stride away, her long, tanned legs mocking me, her perfect ass sashaying. To look at us, you'd almost think that Jess didn't like me. But this is just how we are together. *Fiery*, baby. That little exchange just bought me at least an hour of sweet lovin'. Though at some point I'll have to stop baiting her so she'll remember how much she likes to get naked with me.

It's all about the timing, really. And I've always been good with timing. That's why I had twenty-one goals last season.

And, *hell*, it's fun to tease her. She gets a cute little furrow on that smooth, kissable forehead. Her big brown eyes get all flashy, as if Bambi were possessed by a demon. A really hot, fuckable demon with great tits.

At the rate I'm going, she and I won't be doing the naked salsa until the dessert course. But I can wait. I'm a patient man. And in the meantime, I'm

going to feast on seafood with my best buds.

A few minutes later, Jess herds everyone into a dining room overlooking the bay. There's candlelight and a killer view. The boats in the distance look like toys from here. It's beautiful.

"What a dump," I tell Jess as she rushes by to tweak another detail. "I wanted to have the rehearsal dinner at a clam shack on the beach."

She casts me a glare that burns with pure hatred.

Yessss. My dick gives a little twitch of impatience.

There are name cards on the tables so everyone knows where to sit. Mine is on the opposite end of the long table from Jess. I know she did that just so we could stare longingly at each other from a distance.

I take my seat beside her brother Scott. "Dude. Are you wearing your weapon right now?" I ask him. If I couldn't be a hockey player, I'd be a cop like Scott.

"Uh, no," Scott says. "No need to show up to my brother's wedding packing heat."

"Bummer. Can I play with the siren in your cruiser, then?" I've always wanted to do that.

"Since I made detective, I don't have a cruiser anymore. So no more siren."

"What a rip!" I thump him on the back. "What's the point of being a cop if you don't get all the gear?"

He picks up his menu card, so I pick up mine. There's a list of all the tasty things we're going to eat. On the cover there's a black-and-white map of Lake Placid, New York, even though we're in Marin County, California right now. Jamie and my teammate Wes met in Lake Placid, and that's why Jess put it on the card.

I can't help myself—I pull out my phone and text her. *Shoulda gone with my suggestion. The pic of two lobsters humping? Sets the mood for the bachelor party later.*

Her reply takes a minute to arrive. *Stop texting me or I'll block you.*

Yup. She wants me.

Waiters begin to bring out food, so I have to concentrate. I'm serious about my food. I mean, you don't get to be this size without knowing your chow. Luckily, the restaurant doesn't disappoint. We have a fabulous shrimp cocktail and a ceviche so tangy and delicious that it makes me want to cry. Then it's on to lobster tail and potato-crusting salmon and peppercorn tuna.

I'm in heaven.

When the plates are cleared, it's time for dessert. But I have to set aside my chocolate mousse temporarily for a very important reason. It's time to roast the groom and the groom, and I can't let J-Babe beat me to it. In fact, it looks like she's making a move, so I hurry to stand up first. I move so fast that I hear my chair thunk to the floor behind me, but it's all good because now I have everyone's attention.

"Ladies and gentlebeasts," I begin.

At the other end of the table Jess's beautiful brown eyes narrow.

"As Wes's best man, it's my obligation to embarrass him tonight."

There's a ripple of laughter, and Wes just shakes his head.

"But it's not gonna be easy," I admit. "'Cause Ryan Wesley is a helluva friend and a helluva teammate. I mean, the guy is full of shenanigans. But the man who witnessed all of those—the public nudity in Lake Placid and the drunkenness and the trespassing—is marrying him tomorrow. And he wouldn't give me the dirt I need."

That gets me another laugh.

"This year he played a season of hockey that was the opposite of embarrassing, so there's no material there. Honestly? The only thing that's embarrassing these days about Wes is how much he loves Jamie."

"Awww," the whole family says in unison.

Wes looks at his coffee cup.

"I mean, I could just stand up here and tell you some of the stupid shit that Wesley has said. Like that night in the bar after a game against Philly, he argued—*vehemently*, I might add—that penguins weren't mammals." I give a little chuckle just remembering that ridiculousness. "He wanted me to believe they're *birds*."

"They *are*," Jess mutters under her breath, because she loves to bait me.

"But I thought it would be more fun..." I wave to the waiter who's watching from the door, and he carries in the extra-big tablet I rented for this. I get up and stand where everyone can see me, and I fire the thing up. "...to let Wesley embarrass himself, you know? It turns out that he wasn't always such a great hockey player and such a studly guy. Thought you all should know." Then I press *play* on the video I made and hold it up.

The sound is working—that's good. The first strains of U2's "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For" emerge from the speakers on this thing. The intro text I made lights the screen, and it reads, *Ryan Wesley*,

Ladies and Gentlemen. Then it changes to say, *Super Stud*. The first picture dissolves into focus, and it's a two-year-old Wes gripping a hockey stick in his chubby little hand, looking quite deranged.

There's a gasp from the other end of the table. Jess's eyes are the size of my dessert plate.

"Awww!" Cindy Canning says, clutching her heart.

"Look at you!" Jamie crows, reaching over to rub his fiancé's back. Wes just leans forward, staring at the screen in confusion.

"It's a good thing the Toronto management didn't have access to these babies." I chuckle as the next photo fills the screen. It's Wesley in a snowsuit at age five, I think, those fierce eyes already recognizable. He's on a pond somewhere, skating hard after two kids about twice his size. He doesn't have a prayer of catching them. Funniest thing I've ever seen.

But nobody's laughing. Jamie has his arm around his boyfriend now, and his eyes look a little shiny. Cindy Canning is standing behind them both, an arm around each shoulder. And everyone else is smiling.

"Where on earth did you get these?" someone murmurs.

Then comes the really good stuff. A video clip plays of Wesley at eight, kitted out in a full uniform, a determined look in his eyes. He sends a slapshot toward the goal and...misses! And because I'm just that funny, the clip is followed by Wesley missing shots on goal three more times at various ages. There's one where he's kind of tiny and skating face-first into a snow bank.

Finally, I get a laugh. Tough crowd here tonight.

More pictures flash on the screen—Wesley at twelve, accepting a trophy. Wesley with a mouth full of braces and a serious case of bedhead. The music swells because my video is coming to an end.

"Brace yourselves," I tell my audience.

Next we get Wesley at fourteen, grinning, a big pimple right on his nose.

The final shot is my *pièce de résistance*. It's the only photo I had to steal. I took it out of Wesley's wallet one night in D.C. during the playoffs. We were all so exhausted after the overtime period of our game that a single glass of whiskey made us drunk and silly. I'd swiped the photo and had it scanned by the hotel concierge. (Tipped the guy twenty bucks.) It was safely back in Wesley's wallet a half-hour later.

There's a chorus of *awwwws* and sighs as the photo of sixteen-year-old Jamie and Wes together fills the screen. They're standing on top of a hiking trail somewhere near Lake Placid. Jamie is making a goofy face, but Wes is

looking at him with such love that it gives me a big ol' ache in my chest just to see it.

I check my teammate's face and find red spots on his cheekbones. Maybe he thinks I've embarrassed him with this picture, because it reveals so much. But I haven't. It's only embarrassing to declare your love for someone who then betrays you with it.

That kind of shit only happens to me, though. My two friends here are solid.

The show is over, so I click the tablet off and hand it back to the waiter who's keeping it for me. (Tipped him twenty bucks.) My chocolate mousse is still waiting for me, thank you, baby Jesus. As I tuck in, my phone buzzes with a text. Hoping it's from my date to the wedding tomorrow, I eagerly glance at the screen.

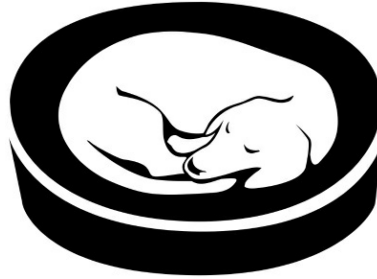
But it's from Jess. *Where on earth did you get the pictures and video?????*

Stop texting me, I reply. *Don't want to have to block you.*

From the other end of the table, she gives me an evil look.

Yeah, it's *on*.

2 WTF DOES EVERYONE HAVE AGAINST GLITTER?



Blake

I've been to a shit ton of bachelor parties. Most of them were rated triple-X. I'm talking strippers who get naked top *and* bottom. Lap dances. One ended in an orgy. Another involved lots of whipped cream.

Now, I wasn't expecting all three X's for this shindig, but would it have killed the grooms to let me plan something with at least *one* X? Or maybe an R-rating?

I don't do PG. Makes me antsy.

But Wesley and Jamie hamstrung me, threw a bunch of rules on me and demanded I fall in line. Which means no life-sized cake with a male stripper popping out of it. No tequila shots off each other's butts. And no glitter.

What the fuck does everyone have against glitter?

"This place is rad," my teammate Eriksson remarks.

"I'm diggin' it," Wes's college friend Cassell agrees as he brings his cigar to his lips and takes a quick puff. The smoke billows out and paints the air gray, making Jamie cough.

"Whose idea was it to do this at a cigar bar?" Jamie grumbles, but I don't know why he bothered asking, because those brown eyes are focused on yours truly.

I glare at Groom Number Two. I've designated Wesley as Groom Number One. 'Cause I met him first. "Mine, asshat. Because *someone* vetoed all my other venue suggestions."

Wesley leans over to smack a kiss on Groom Number Two's clean-shaven cheek. The nine of us have commandeered the back corner of the dark, paneled room, and the music is low enough that nobody's gotta shout to

be heard. Jamie's dad and Coach Pat both look as though they've died and gone to heaven, sitting side by side in overstuffed leather chairs, sipping on glasses of bourbon.

"This was the lesser of a million evils, babe," Wes tells his man. "Just be happy there's nobody waving around a limbo stick."

"The night's still young," I say, waggling my eyebrows. But truth is, I'm kinda starting to enjoy the low-key vibe in this room.

Only thing that'd make it better would be if my girl J-Babe was sitting on my lap right now, puffing on her own stogie. But the women all begged off, which was probably wise.

"Do *not* have hangovers tomorrow," Jess had threatened in the restaurant parking lot before she took off. "I don't want you two looking green in the photographs."

"Stop worrying so much," I told her. "They're responsible adults, just like me."

"That's exactly what I'm worried about," she grumbled.

She's always ribbing me, that sweet blonde angel of mine. I know she loves our verbal foreplay as much as I do. She's just too stubborn to admit it.

Plus, she's kind of holding a grudge against me because Jamie became seriously ill when she and I were supposed to be taking care of him. That was the day I met Jess. That was also the day I *met Jess*...in the biblical sense.

The thing is, Jamie's scary fever was a total fluke thing. And it turned out fine—I mean, the dude's getting married tomorrow, isn't he? But Jess will never let me live it down, even though her little brother is as healthy as a horse.

We all are. Healthy, that is. It's summertime, and we're drinking expensive Scotch and smoking first-rate cigars. Tomorrow we'll put on our Sunday best and watch Wes and Jamie tie the knot.

Man, life is damn good.

The whole thing puts me in a sentimental mood, so I rattle the ice cubes in my glass and take a seat next to Eriksson, because he's the only one looking a little low. "Chin up, buttercup. It's a wedding."

He casts his eyes down, looking guilty. "I know. I'll behave. Weddings make me think of mine, though. When I said 'I do,' I meant it."

Ouch. Eriksson's wife left him just before the playoffs. "I'm sorry, man. But this shit is totally survivable. It's like any kind of pain. Like a rough check to the gut. Feels awful for a while, but then it recedes."

“What would you know about it?” Eriksson grunts.

More than he thinks. “Did you ever hear about the time I almost got married?”

He lifts his chin and smiles at me. “Let me guess—it was in Vegas with a showgirl? I can totally see it.”

“Nope. You’re way off.” I puff on my cigar and think back. “This was almost five years ago, during my rookie season. My college girlfriend and I were together three years by that point. I loved her more than I thought possible.”

Eriksson raises a brow in surprise.

“Seriously, I would’ve laid down in the road for her. We had a wedding date set. Three hundred people were invited to our shindig at the Toronto Zoo...”

“Oh man.” He snorts. “That really is perfect for you. The gorilla cage, right?”

“By the lions’ exhibit, actually. But I called it off two months before.”

“What happened?” He looks stunned by this plot twist.

I take a sip of Scotch and wonder what I’m willing to admit to my teammate. “She did something unforgivable. A real betrayal, like *Young and the Restless* type of shit. So I knew it was over before it began, you know? Anyone who can lie to my face is not someone I need to marry.”

Beside us, Jamie’s brother Scott winces. If I’m not mistaken, he’s had a recent breakup, too. “Sorry, bro,” he offers. “But you’re better off knowing.”

“No kidding. And I don’t want to be a Donny Downer, ’cause these two —” I wave my glass at Grooms One and Two, “—have what it takes to go the distance.”

“Yeah!” Scotty’s twin, Brady, raises his glass.

Their older brother Joe puts his fingers in his mouth and whistles.

Heads turn, because we’re the loud crew in this establishment. But fuck ’em. We’re celebrating true love here.

“KISS!” I yell, banging my glass on the table. “Come on, let’s see a practice kiss.”

Wes rolls his eyes, but Jamie laughs. Then he gets up and sits right on Wes’s lap, grabs his face and plants one on him.

We all howl our approval, and it’s a miracle I hear my phone over the din. I fish it out of the pocket of the suit jacket I’d tossed over the back of my armchair. Kind of a dick move to answer your phone when you’re celebrating

the deep eternal love of two of your closest buds, but I've been waiting for this call all day.

"Scuse me," I tell the boys. "My date's checking in."

I duck into a nearby corner and swipe my index finger on the screen. It takes a few swipes because I've got big fingers and they never click what I want 'em to click. "Angie, honey!" I say after the phone blessedly unlocks. "You get in okay? All in one piece?"

Her hesitant voice tickles my ear. "I just got to the hotel." There's a pause. "Are you sure it's all right that I take your room?"

"S'all good. I made other arrangements." And I did, thanks to a saint named Cindy Canning. Jamie's mom is far beyond da bomb dot com. She's like...da bomb dot gov.

"I'm nervous," she admits. "I won't know anyone there."

I grin into the phone even though she can't see me. "You know the most important person there, Ang."

"How many times have I told you not to call me that?" She sounds exasperated.

"How many times did I tell you I don't listen?" I counter. "Anyway, check in and get some sleep. Have a nice, relaxing morning. I'll pick you up tomorrow after lunch."

I hang up before she can protest, because it already took some serious effort to twist her arm into being my date. I'm not sure Jess is gonna like it, but hey, Jess isn't the boss of me, now, is she?

Jess

I juggle my phone, day planner and steaming mug of decaffeinated tea as I leave my tiny kitchen and enter my tiny living room. My friend Dyson is babbling in my ear, giving a long-winded response about everything from the weather to the color of his tie, when all I asked was whether he plans to show up early to help me out.

I set my mug on the coffee table and cut him off midsentence. "Babe, I adore you. You know I adore you. But for the love of God, can you *ever* answer anything with a simple yes or no?"

“What was the question again?”

I almost hurl the phone against the wall, but stop myself at the last second. “Are you coming early to help with the setup, or are you showing up at three?” I ask through gritted teeth.

“Ah, I’ll come early,” he decides. “We can watch everyone arrive and dish about what they’re wearing. Ooooh! Do you think Cousin Brandy will have another wardrobe malfunction?”

Oh God, and repeat the Strapless Bra Mishap of 2014? I hope not. My sister Tammy still has nightmares about that. It happened at her and her husband’s ten-year anniversary party, and she’s never forgiven our cousin for it.

“I already made Brandy send me pictures of every item of clothing she plans to wear,” I assure him. “We should be good.”

“Way to crush my dreams.”

I snicker. “What do you need to see tits for? Wouldn’t you rather my cousin Andy’s tuxedo pants popped open and flashed some dick?” Andy is Brandy’s twin brother. No joke. My mom’s sister—Aunt Val—is terrible at naming children. Andy and Brandy’s little brother is named Chuck. Not even short for Charles. Just Chuck.

“Ooooh, Andy will be there? He’s almost as dreamy as Jamie.”

“Ew, Dyse. You are *not* allowed to drool over my little brother.”

“You’re right. I’m not allowed to *now*. I missed my chance. I cannot *believe* Jamie is marrying a man. It’s like the universe is having a laugh at me right now. If I thought there was even a two percent shot Jamie would turn to the dark side, I would’ve blown him in the high school locker room while I had the chance.”

“Omigod, no thank you for that image.”

“I’m seriously heartbroken, Jess. This is worse than opening up Brandr and seeing guys on there who used to stuff me into lockers. Jamie was one of the good ones. And he’s marrying a celebrity athlete. He should be marrying *me*.”

I take a sip of my tea, then a deep breath. “Are you going to be able to contain your disappointment tomorrow? Because I really need your help.”

“Sure.” He sniffs. “Maybe I’ll catch the bouquet.”

There won’t be a bouquet, but he doesn’t need to know that yet. I flip to the back page of my day planner, where I jot down last-minute notes about the wedding. “Oh, hey, I’m going to need you to sit on Wes’s side of the aisle

tomorrow. All his teammates will be there, but I'm not sure that'll be enough to balance out the Canning side."

"Baby, you had me at *teammates*. Please tell me there won't be enough chairs and I'll have to sit on one of their laps."

"You want to try to sit on a hockey player's lap? Do you care about your teeth? If not, go ahead."

Laughter fills my ear. "I'd get punched in the mouth any day of the week if it means hooking up with a hockey player. You know my life's goal has always been to be a puck bunny."

Trust me, it's overrated, I want to tell him.

Instead I say, "Please don't get punched in the mouth. Wes's teammates have been awesome. But it's not like I made all the guests fill out a questionnaire checking off 'Cool with the Gay Thing / Less Cool with the Gay Thing' boxes."

And Dyson is the biggest flirt I've ever met. I swear, he probably flirts with himself in the mirror when he's home alone.

"I'll be a perfect gentleman," Dyson promises.

"Thank you."

We hang up a few moments later, and I quickly go over the rest of my list. As long as the minister and the caterer show up, along with the tables and chairs I've rented, the show could go on. But I won't be satisfied by merely pulling this off. It has to be *perfect*. It needs to be such a gorgeous wedding that people are talking about it for weeks.

Once I'm satisfied I've covered every detail, I finish off my tea, drop my mug in the kitchen sink, and wander around the apartment turning off lights. I have a bad habit of leaving every single light on. When I was in high school, my dad used to take a percentage of the money I earned at my part-time job at the ice cream parlor to put toward our electricity bill. He claims I was to blame for how high the bills were. I call bullshit, but I can't deny I suck at remembering to turn off lights.

My bare feet slap the hardwood as I walk into my bedroom. I'm nervous about tomorrow, but excited, too. Jamie and Wes are going to have such an amazing life together. I've never met two people more perfect for each other. Even Tammy and her husband, John, who are disgustingly in love, don't seem to have that same deep, tightly woven bond that my brother has with Wes.

I wonder what that feels like. Loving another person so much that they

become a part of you. I thought I'd been in love before, but sometimes, when I watch my brother and Wes together...I question everything I've ever felt in the past.

Sighing, I crawl under the covers and push aside my Deep Thoughts. I need to get some sleep. Tomorrow is going to be a busy, busy day.

The moment I close my eyes, a loud bang bursts through the apartment.

It takes a second to realize that someone is knocking on the door. I shoot up in bed and flick on the lamp on the end table. It's almost one a.m. Who on earth would—

"J-Babe! Yo! Open up!"

Why the *hell* is Blake at my door?

I whip the covers off and hurry out to the front hall. I swear to God, if he's here to tell me that Jamie and Wes are in jail because of something that happened at the bachelor party, I am going to *murder* him.

There's another heavy thud on the door. "Come on, Jess! I'm tired. If I don't get the exact right amount of beauty sleep, I'll—"

He stops talking when I fling the door open. A happy grin stretches his mouth, but it turns into a smirk when he notices my pajamas. "Aw shit, that's so fucking adorable. I love bananas—did I ever tell you they're my favorite fruit? And apricots. I like apricots, too."

I am literally seconds away from strangling him. Yes, my neon-pink pajama pants and matching tank are covered with yellow cartoon bananas. But it's one in the morning, he's clearly drunk judging by the bright shine to his green eyes, and he's at my doorstep talking about fruit?

"What. Are. You. Doing. Here." Each word is punctuated by the slap of my hand on the doorframe.

Blake steps closer, a black duffel bag slung over his shoulder. "Your mom didn't tell you? I'm crashing here tonight."

My jaw falls open. "Oh no you're not."

"Oh yes I am." He drops the bag on the stoop with a loud thump. "My man Cindy said she ran it by you."

"My mother is not a man," I grind out.

He waves a big hand. "Figure of speech. My *pal* Cindy, how about that? She said she texted you."

I hesitate. Okay, that's actually possible. There were about two dozen texts on my phone after the rehearsal dinner, mostly from the caterer and some wedding guests asking me last-minute questions. I hadn't finished

going through them, so I suppose I could've missed a text from Mom.

But still.

"Wes said you were staying at the inn with your teammates," I say suspiciously.

Blake rakes a hand through his scruffy, dark hair. "I was. But I had to give up my room."

"To who?" I demand.

"I believe it's *to whom*."

Is he seriously correcting my grammar right now?

"And I gave the room to my date."

I can't explain why my chest tightens at that, but I know for a *fact* it's not jealousy I'm feeling. I already knew Blake was bringing a date to the wedding. His invitation had a plus-one. Besides, I'm bringing a date, too. I specifically made sure of it because I didn't want to deal with Blake's annoying comments if I showed up solo.

"She won't share a room with you? What, she's waiting for marriage?" I don't bother curbing the sarcasm.

Blake shrugs. "She's already married."

Excuse me?

I don't know whether to be outraged or...well, outraged. He's bringing a married woman to my little brother's wedding?

"Are you out of your goddamned mind?"

He considers the question. "I'm kinda drunk, but nowhere near out of my goddamned mind. That would require more Scotch. Got any?"

"No!" I shriek, my blood pressure notching up into the red zone. It's one in the morning, and I need to be asleep right now.

So I do what a girl with five siblings learns to do to keep the urge to commit murder at bay. I count quietly to myself until it passes. *One Mississippi, two Mississippi, three Mississippi...*

After quite a few deep, cleansing breaths, I do what's necessary. "Get in here already." I step aside, and Blake gallops in the door. "You're on the couch."

"Does it fold out?"

"Negative. But you'll survive."

He looks dubious, but I don't have time to care. I hustle to the cupboard that doubles as my linen closet and pull out a set of sheets. It's summertime in California; he won't need more than that.

I thrust the pile of linens into his hands. "Sleep well."

He looks at the sheets in his hands and then back at me. "Don't leave yet," he says as I edge toward my bedroom door. "Aren't you gonna tuck me in?"

"You're a big boy."

His grin turns wicked. "I sure am. You probably remember pretty well, because I'm unforgettable. But I could give you a refresher right now." He drops the sheets onto the sofa and reaches for his fly.

And that's my cue to get the hell out of there. I stomp into my bedroom and slam the door.

I HAVE THE ODD, stress-filled dreams of a party planner. In one of them, the wedding cake doesn't show up and my mother decides to bake one at the last minute. We get into an argument about whether seven-grain is the way to go on a wedding cake. (My mother is a famously healthy baker, with mixed results.) In another dream, it rains, and the tent we rented melts into white blobs, like sodden toilet paper.

Then things take a turn for the weird. I dream there's a grizzly bear in my bed, and I'm okay with it. And then the dream gets sexy. The bear's body is warm and hard, and his ambitious erection is poking me in the bum, and he fingers my nipples...

I wake up with a jolt, my eyes popping open. There *is* a grizzly bear in my bed. He's pressed to my back, his thick, muscular arm around my waist, his hand cupping my right boob.

Holy Mother of God. Blake Riley is spooning me, uninvited.

And I think I like it.

No!

No, I don't like it.

Right.

After letting out a perfectly silent sigh, I start to formulate a plan. He's sleeping soundly, which helps. The snoring in my ear is a big clue. So I inch one toe toward the edge of the bed, then slide all at once out of his grasp in a maneuver that would make my yoga teacher proud. We'll call it the Escapes-from-Grizzly pose.

When I land on my feet at the side of the bed, he's still snoring soundly, his unfairly handsome face smoothed out by sleep, unruly brown hair sticking

up against my pillow.

I tiptoe into my bathroom and close the door so carefully that there isn't even a click. Then I just stand there for a second and try to gather my wits. Today is my brother's wedding, which I planned from the invitations to the guest list to the cake to the coffee after dessert tonight. It must go off flawlessly. My family is just waiting for me to fail.

And I just had a quasi-bestiality dream about the ridiculously attractive man asleep in my bed.

A shower will help, right? I turn on the water, shed my banana PJs and hop in. I wash my hair and apply my best conditioner, because I don't want to frizz out in the photos. (I've planned those, too.) I'm already feeling better when I shut off the water and wrap my towel around my naked body.

Taking care to be absolutely silent, I slowly open my bathroom door...

And then shriek when I find Blake Riley standing on the other side. Stark naked.

"Arrrh!" he says, clapping those big paws over his ears. "My head."

I want to make a witty retort. Like maybe, *My eyes!* But it doesn't work, because my tongue is suddenly three sizes too big as I stare at the glory of Blake Riley in the buff. His shoulders are like well-muscled mountains, his pecs like perfect, sculpted dunes. I want to explore them with my tongue.

Actually, I'm pretty sure I did once.

"Gotta use your bathroom, honey. Pick that tongue up off the floor and let me pass?"

This remark snaps me back to consciousness. "Did you ever hear of clothes?"

"You've seen it all before." He places a hand on my upper arm and nudges me aside. "Really, honey, I know you're enjoying the view, but I've gotta make the bladder gladder."

I'm no longer in control of my eyes, though, because they follow his hand down to where he wraps it around his giant...

Gah!

Scurrying into my bedroom, I yank my bathrobe off its hook and hastily tie it on. With a double knot. Just in case.

"Why were you in my bed?" I grumble at the bathroom door.

"Couch was too small," he calls back.

"That doesn't give you permission to jump into bed with me!"

"You said it was cool when I came in and asked to bunk with you," he

protests. “And you’re awful cuddly, J-Babe. Like sleeping with an octopus.”

Ugh. Betrayed by my subconscious.

Grabbing my brush, I begin raking my hair into shape. I have to dry it, style it, put on makeup, get dressed, meet the caterers, see to the cake. And a hundred other things.

I pick up the hairdryer just as a warm, solid body sidles up behind me. “You know,” a low voice drawls as a warm hand squeezes my shoulder. “There’s time to feed the kitty before we get dressed for the big day.”

He’s so near that parts of me tingle even in my outrage. “Blake,” I say, my voice almost a whisper.

“Yes,” he breathes beside my ear.

“I don’t have a cat.”

He lets out a sexy rumble, his thumb trailing down my arm. And it’s then that I realize *feed the kitty* means...

“We aren’t feeding the kitty or hiding the salami or anything else you can think of to call it. We’re just not. There will be no repeats this weekend.”

He reaches beneath my wet hair and cups the back of my head, his long fingers trailing across my skull. Goosebumps break out all over my body. “Never say never, J-Babe.”

It’s a good thing my back is to him, because I can’t control my shudder of longing as his fingers leave my skin. “Don’t you have to go meet your *date*?” I remind the both of us.

“I’ll get her right before the wedding. I thought I’d help you with errands first.”

“Seriously?” This gets my attention. I spin around because I have to know if he’s joking. I need all the help I can get.

“Sure. I have a rental car, and I’m no longer too drunk to drive it. We’ll have to swing by the bar where I left it last night. You probably have errands that need running last minute, right?”

Only a million. My brain goes racing down the list. “Balloons,” I say quickly. “I’ve ordered four dozen of them for eleven o’clock so that they’ll stay fully inflated all evening.” All Blake has to do is shove them in his car and drive away. He couldn’t ruin it if he tried. “And Grandma Canning needs a lift from the airport.”

His face splits into a grin. “See? You do need me to help you.”

“You’re right, I do.” It hurts me to admit this. But I really do. “But... you’re just going to leave your date to herself for several hours? Won’t she

mind?”

“Not in the least,” he says grandly. “She might even be glad.”

I bite back the urge to make a pithy comment. “Why don’t you raid my fridge while I dry my hair, and then I’ll drive you to your car?”

“Now we’re talking!” He takes one huge stride toward my kitchen, and the muscles flex in his gorgeous...

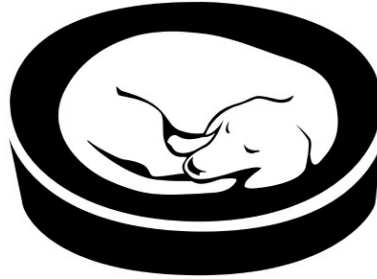
“Blake?”

“J-Babe?”

“Put on some clothes.”

He sighs. “If you insist.”

3 EVERYTHING LOOKS TERRIF



Jess

The ceremony and reception are being held on the gorgeous, sprawling grounds of the gorgeous, sprawling house that belongs to friends of my parents. Originally we were going to rent a banquet hall somewhere, but Mom was at lunch with the Todds a few months back and, when she mentioned that Jamie was getting married, the couple offered the use of their home.

And they refused to let us pay them. Apparently Mr. Todd is a hockey fanatic. He was actually trying to pay *us* for the privilege of hosting Ryan Wesley and more than half the Toronto roster.

The good thing about doing this at a private residence is that it makes it easier to fly under the radar. A public event would've no doubt found its way to the press, who've been hounding Wes and Jamie ever since their relationship became public. This way, the two of them can actually have some privacy while they declare their undying love for each other.

Me, I've pretty much been on the verge of a nervous breakdown all morning. I'd decided to become a party planner because I wanted to do something artistic. But it hasn't worked out that way. If anything, I'm more like a drill sergeant. It's not fun. It's fucking exhausting.

I tell as much to Dyson as the two of us sit under the enormous tent set up on the Todd property. We're folding ivory-colored napkins at one of the tables while various people shuffle in and out of the tent, hauling chairs and flowers and centerpieces.

"I don't know," he muses. "*I'm* having fun."

"You've been here for an hour folding napkins into swans. *I've* been

here since the crack of dawn, dealing with a million teeny details. Trust me, it's not fun."

Dyson shrugs. "Well, if it helps, you've done a fab job, baby-cakes. No joke." He waves an arm around the interior of the tent. "Everything looks terrific."

That *does* help. Relief flutters through me as I take in the scene. The centerpieces turned out really beautifully. So did the flower arrangements. I guess the thirty-two hours I spent consulting with the florist paid off.

"Thank you," I say gratefully, reaching for another napkin. "And thanks again for coming early. You don't know how much I appreciate it."

"No problemo." My date grins. "Even though you only invited me to make someone jealous."

My jaw drops. "I did not! I told you, I just need a buffer."

"Buffer, jealousy provoker, same diff. Can't wait to see who it is. Don't tell me, okay? I want to guess." He brushes some napkin lint off his tie. "Hey, what do you think of this color? It was between this and the salmon. Did I choose wisely?"

Dyson holds out the end of his purple-and-silver-striped tie, which perfectly matches the purple bellflower on his lapel. His suit is slate gray, which I was happy to see. I was genuinely worried he might show up in pastels or something.

"Definitely the wiser choice," I assure him.

"I know, right? As much as I love the salmon, it would have clashed horribly with your dress." He gestures to my mauve shift. Then he frowns. "But I still think we could've made a bigger splash if we color-coordinated so we both wore salmon."

"Would you please just call it pink? It's pink! And let's get real here, Dyse—you look terrible in pink. It washes out your complexion."

Before he can object, a frazzled voice calls out from the tent's entrance. "Jess! Mom's asking about Nana." My sister Tammy hurries over to our table. "Who's getting her from the airport?"

"The best man," I answer. "He texted ten minutes ago to say that her flight was slightly delayed. She'll be landing any minute, though."

Tammy looks relieved. "Okay, good. Mom was getting worried. Hey, Dyson—when'd you get here?"

"A bit ago." His tone is vague as he studies Tammy's face. "You doing okay, sweetie? You look tired."

“I had a baby fourteen weeks ago. Of course I’m tired.”

For some reason, that doesn’t appease Dyson. He sets down his napkin and hops to his feet. Tammy takes a wary step back.

“You’re pale.” He grasps both her hands in his without asking. “Hands are ice-cold. Nails a tad brittle. Baby, are you taking care of yourself? You might be a wee bit anemic. You getting enough iron in your diet?”

“What diet?” Tammy sighs. “With Ty just toddling everywhere, and Lilac shrieking like a banshee all night with colic, I barely have time to breathe, let alone eat.”

I shoot to my feet, too. I knew that Tammy was exhausted, but my sister always plays it off like she’s a superhero. *I’ve got it covered*, she always tells us.

“Why didn’t you tell anyone?” I demand in concern. “You know we’d be at your place in a heartbeat to help you out.”

Tammy slowly removes her hands from Dyson’s grip. “It’s fine,” she insists. “I’m a mom of two—of course life is going to be exhausting.” She glances at Dyson. “But I’ll make a doctor’s appointment and get a blood test done, if that makes you feel better.”

He rolls his eyes, but his tone is gentle as he says, “It’s not about making *me* feel better, sweetie. It’s about making sure you’re strong and healthy for yourself and your children.”

“I’ll make the appointment,” she mumbles, and there’s a flicker of guilt in her eyes as she dashes off, the hemline of her pale yellow dress swirling around her knees.

“I can’t believe you just got her to agree to see a doctor.” I gape at Dyson. “Tammy *never* admits that anything is wrong.”

“I’m a nurse. That gives me magical powers.” Wagglng his eyebrows, he flops back in his chair and goes back to swan construction.

I hesitate before sitting down again. I’ve been putting off this conversation for a while, but this feels like the ideal opening. It’s also one of the reasons I asked Dyson to attend the wedding with me, instead of asking one of my other male friends.

“I have a question,” I start slowly.

He laughs. “And I have answers. Lots of them. For example, the answer to the question ‘should we have worn salmon?’ is obviously ‘hell yes.’”

I force a smile. “A more important question,” I admit. “And you have to promise to be one hundred percent honest with me, okay?”

The humor in his eyes dissolves into sincerity. “All right. Hit me.”

“Do you think...” I take a breath. “...I’d make a good nurse?”

There’s a second of silence, and that’s all it takes for me to back-pedal. Frantically. Like I’m in a kayak that just got too close to a waterfall.

“Forget it,” I blurt out, ducking my head as I quickly start folding again. “Don’t answer that. That was a dumb question. I don’t know why I was even considering—”

A firm hand clamps over mine, stilling my nervous movements. “Oh hush, baby-cakes. You just caught me by surprise. I think you’d make a fabulous nurse.”

I bite my lip and meet his eyes. “Really?”

“Absolutely. Why? You thinking of applying to nursing school?”

After another beat of hesitation, I offer a jerky nod. “I started looking into it after Jamie was in the hospital this spring,” I confess. “I told you about the nurse that was taking care of him, right? Bertha? Well, I had coffee with her in the hospital cafeteria a couple of times when I was in Toronto, and she kind of gave me a whole rundown of the process.”

“Wow. So this isn’t just a random thing. You’re really considering it.” Dyson releases my hand and resumes his napkin folding. “Where were you thinking of applying? San Francisco?”

I shake my head. “I’m looking everywhere. You won’t believe how expensive nursing programs are now.”

He snorts. “Oh, I’d believe it. You think the student-loan fairy just floated down from the money tree and paid off my debts? Think again, sweetie pie. My bank account hates me. It’s hard to look *this* good when you’re *this* broke.”

I can’t help but laugh. He really is one of the best-dressed, most fashion-conscious guys I know. But I had no idea he was still buried under a mountain of loans.

I am, too, but at least all the money I owe isn’t to the government. My parents are the ones who fronted my college tuition. And who paid for the start-up costs of my failed jewelry business. And for the business cards for this new event-planning venture. There’s no deadline for me to pay them back, but every time I accept another handout from them, it chips away at another piece of my independence.

Not to mention my self-esteem.

Fuck. No wonder my family thinks I’m a screw-up. I *am* a screw-up. My

bachelor's degree in Art History was supposed to set me free, but it just ended up being an albatross around my neck. It didn't open a single door for me, didn't get me a single job offer. A position at a museum or in academia now requires more than a measly bachelor's degree. You need a master's or a PhD, and I can't exactly afford to go back to school for another hundred years.

Besides, lately I've been wondering if I even belong in a creative field. I've tried and failed at so much shit, but this nursing thing... It feels *right*. When I think about doing it, it's like my entire being just...centers. This is the first time I've ever felt that way.

"Did you consider any Canadian schools?" Dyson asks.

"No, why?"

"They're cheaper. I didn't know that when I was applying, but I work with some nurses who studied in Vancouver to save money."

I make a mental note to investigate.

"And listen," he says gruffly, "if you're really serious about nursing, then I'm more than happy to sit down with you and tell you all about it. The good, the bad and the disgusting bedpans."

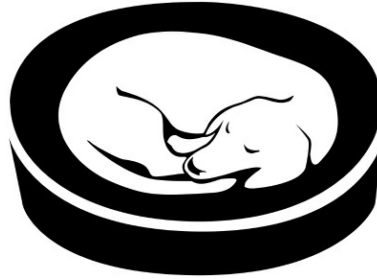
I giggle.

"Seriously, babe, this job can be gross sometimes. But it's super-duper rewarding, too. It's the best decision I ever—oh sweet Jesus of Nazareth, who is *that*? And what are *those*?"

My head swivels to the other side of the tent, and I immediately let out a strangled shriek.

Oh *hell* no.

4 WE'RE NUMBER ONE. OR TWO



Blake

Cheezus. This is going to be a nice party. As I carry two giant balloon bouquets down the sloping lawn, I like what I see. There's a long line of tables for the buffet, ensuring good access to the chow later. And some dudes in white shirts and black vests are setting up what could only be a generous bar.

"Check it out," I say to Granny Canning. "They're putting down a dance floor right on the lawn."

"I'll bet you like to boogie." She gives me a wobbly smile. "I'm saving a dance for *you*, hot stuff."

"Awesome. You stay cool, GrannCann." I lead her over to a nice wicker chair facing the lawn. "I gotta deliver these babies."

"What about my luggage?" she asks. "I think I left it in your car." She covers her mouth to smooth over a little belch.

"I'll take care of it. Don't you worry."

"Thank you, honeybuns!" she calls as I walk away.

The babes. They all dig me.

"BLAKE RILEY!"

A shriek cuts through the air, its pitch as high as a dog whistle. "Whassup, J-Babe! I got your balloons and your grandma. What's next on my list?"

She marches across the grass on those long legs, her soft hair bouncing on beautifully tanned shoulders. Jessica Canning is a vision of sexiness in her sleeveless dress and perfectly pink lips.

Her face is a little red, for some reason. But hey, nobody's perfect.

“What the hell are those?” She points up into the air.

I look, too. “You know, now that you mention it, that cloud *does* kinda resemble a camel.”

“No, those!” She points nearer to my head.

“Balloons, duh.” I admire them. “The white you ordered turned out really boring in person, though. You shoulda seen it. Just...whiteness on white ribbons. So I dressed ’em up a little. It’s sporty, you know? Aren’t they perfect?” I’d bought fifty Mylar balloons in the shape of those big foam fingers you see at hockey games. “This is a sporty wedding. I saw those puck-shaped chocolates you got, and the hockey-themed wedding website. So these fit right in.”

They’re bright blue and say WE’RE #1 down the finger.

“N-no you don’t,” she sputters. “No fucking way.”

“Language, Jessica!” Cindy Canning chides, gliding up to where Jess and I stand facing each other. “What’s the matter, honey?”

“Those are not the balloons I ordered.” Her pink, pouty lip sticks out, and I want to give it a nibble. But I’m sensing now isn’t a great time.

“Well, they sure are shiny,” Cindy says. “They’ll do, honey. Let’s not get all stressy.” Cindy waves at her mother-in-law. “Thank you for picking up Nana at the airport, Blake.”

“Don’t mention it. We had a little scare there when the airline couldn’t find her luggage, but I calmed her down. I’m good at that. Right, GrannCann?” I call over my shoulder.

“Everything is fine!” Granny yells. “Hi, Cindy! Let me see that dress. Lace, honey? That’s very mother-of-the-groom.” She cackles.

Cindy’s eyebrows lift. “Blake, is it possible that my mother-in-law has been drinking?”

“Well, she was pretty stressed out. I bought her a couple of beers while the airline guys ran around and found her luggage.”

“Oh dear,” Cindy says, marching off to check on Granny.

That leaves me and Jess alone, and she’s staring at me like she wants to rip off my clothes. Or just rip something. I’m not quite sure which.

“Those blue fingers have to *go*,” she hisses, low and threatening. “Where are the rest of the white ones?”

I shrug. “Didn’t need ’em, so I gave them to a kid who was having a birthday party. Man, that kid was stoked. Said he was going to try that thing where you hold ’em all and jump off the roof of the garage.”

“You *gave away* my balloons?” Jess’s face falls.

Oh hell. The thing is, the Jess I met in Toronto this spring had a wicked laugh and a naughty sparkle in her eye. I thought she’d think these balloons were funny. They *are* funny. But the poor girl just can’t appreciate a joke right now, and that’s my bad. I should have known not to mess with a chick’s color scheme. My sisters would probably castrate me for less.

“Don’t be mad, Jessie. I’ll go back to the store.”

“They require twenty-four hours notice,” she whispers, her face reddening further.

I’m starting to feel uneasy for her. Apparently I’m not the only one, because a slender guy with a wave of perfect hair scurries up and starts waving his hands near her face.

“Breathe, sweetie pie. Give me some deep yoga breaths. Fainting would wrinkle your dress, and we can’t have that.”

“There aren’t breaths deep enough,” Jess insists. “If I’m jailed for murder, will you visit me?”

“Yes, baby,” the guy coos, kissing her cheek. “Especially if the jumpsuits are salmon.” Then the guy extends a hand to me, but laughs when he realizes I can’t shake it because I’m holding something like a hundred balloons.

“I’m Blake Riley,” I offer.

“Dyson Hart.”

“Dyson, like the vacuum?”

“That’s right.” He gives me a sidelong glance. “Want a demonstration?”

“Dyson,” Jess snaps. “What did we talk about?”

The guy chuckles.

“Blake, this is Dyson. My boyfriend.”

Dyson chuckles again, and she elbows him. He holds out his hand. “Nice to meet you, hon.”

Jess sighs. “Okay, so we have half as many white balloons as we need. I’ll just make do.”

“What about these blue babies?” I look up at them glinting in the sunlight.

“They can go...by the port-a-potties,” she grumbles.

“All right.” If it’ll cheer her up, I’m all for it. “Then it’s a real shame that some of ’em don’t say, *We’re Number Two*.”

Dyson lets out a loud laugh-snort and holds up a hand, which I try to

high-five. But we get tangled up in the balloon ribbon, and Jess has to free us. She does this while rambling on and on about how difficult I am and that she's never planning another wedding again as long as she lives.

I'm obviously going to have to calm her down with some nookie later. This much stress isn't good for anyone.

Jess

"So tell me about *Blake*," Dyson orders, licking his lips. "Why are we trying to make him jealous?"

"We're not," I snap. "You're just the buffer."

"Uh-huh," he says with a wink. "I'd let Blake buff me."

I clamp my jaw shut because the urge to spill my guts is strong. But I'm saved from that disaster by the appearance of my brother, the groom.

"Wow, look at all this." Jamie looks so handsome in his suit and tie that I have to restrain myself from running over to ruffle his hair. There's a smile on his tanned face, and now I know why I've been working my ass off these past few weeks.

"You look so amazing," I tell him, my throat closing up a little. "Wes is a lucky man. I hope he knows."

Jamie grins. "He does. Hey there, Dyson. How are you?" My brother holds out a hand for Dyson to shake.

My friend hesitates for a second, a hurt look in his eyes. Then he pulls a startled Jamie into a full-body hug. "I'm so happy for you," he says shakily.

Jamie shoots me a confused look over Dyson's head. "Thanks, man. I appreciate it."

Dyson pulls back with a shuddering sigh. "I'll just...go powder my nose," he mumbles, walking off toward the main house.

"Is he okay?" Jamie asks, pointing over his shoulder at my crazy friend.

"I'll check on him in a minute. But in the meantime, is there anything you need? Guests will start arriving in an hour. Is Wes here? Is he dressed? I should really check on the musicians."

Jamie puts his hands on my shoulders and looks me right in the eye. "Calm down. You're making me tense."

“I am?”

He gives me another big, baby-brother smile. “You did a great job out here, Jessie. It’s going to be a terrific party. I *love* the menu.”

We’re having barbecue—brisket and ribs, corn salad, two different kinds of slaw on the side.

“And those balloons by the bathrooms are hysterical.”

Sigh. “I just want you to be happy.”

“I *am* happy. So stop freaking out and have a glass of wine or something, okay? You deserve it.” He squeezes my shoulder one more time, then walks away to greet our grandmother, who has been relocated to a shadier spot and handed a cup of strong coffee.

Right. I need to calm down. And I’ll do that, just as soon as I check on the musicians I’ve hired. Jamie is right—I’m so tense about the wedding that I hardly recognize myself. I know I need to relax, but I can’t seem to do it. It’s too important to me that my family thinks I’ve done as good a job as anyone could.

They think of me as their hot-mess kid. But now I finally know what I’m supposed to be doing with my life. And when I tell them after the wedding, they’ll still roll their eyes.

NINETY MINUTES later I’m still a wreck, but it isn’t my own fault.

A couple hundred guests, including some of the most celebrated athletes in the NHL, are seated in tidy rows of wooden chairs on the lawn. My older brothers have just finished seating Nana and the rest of my siblings in the front row.

In the back, under the tent, I stand with the grooms and my parents. A pair of musicians up front play the first descending chords of Pachelbel’s Canon in D on an electric cello and an electric guitar.

It’s go time. But there’s just one problem. Blake Riley—Wes’s best man—is *missing*.

This is both horrible and unsurprising. In between murderous thoughts, my palms sweat around the bouquet of daisies I’m clutching. If Blake actually shows up now, I’m going to hurl it at him. My mind is a continuous loop of, *Where is he? Where is he? Where is he?* and *Why me?*

Beside me, Jamie smooths down Wes’s lapels, then cups his fiancé’s chin in his hand. “You look awesome. You know that, right?”

Wes gives him a shy smile and then takes a deep breath. He looks nervous, the poor sweetie. Wes doesn't enjoy attention unless he has a hockey stick in his hand. "I'll be fine," he says, his voice gravelly. "Can't wait to be married to you."

"Tomorrow we'll be on our way to the beach," Jamie whispers.

"Can't wait for that either," Wes agrees.

"Our baby is getting married," my mother says with a sigh. "Does this mean we're officially old?"

"If we are, don't tell me," my father grumbles.

I turn my head for the hundredth time, looking for the jerk who's supposed to walk me down the aisle. And lo and behold, his enormous form is standing fifty yards away, talking to a middle-aged woman in a beige dress.

My blood pressure spikes. Does he not see that there are two hundred people waiting for him? I'm about to go stomping up the hill and drag him bodily down it when he finally starts moving in my direction.

Relief is like a cool breeze on my face. He puts his arm out, and the woman takes it. They make their way down to where I'm standing. When they're only a few paces away, I open my mouth, ready to chew Blake a new one. But Wes looks over his shoulder, does an enormous double take, and then says the last thing I'd ever expect him to say.

"Mom!"

We all stare at the newcomer for a second. She and Wes have the same coloring, I suppose. Brown hair and attractive features. But where Wes is a little dangerous looking, this woman seems to have been constructed at a country club by parts procured in a fancy department store. Her dress is prim, and there is a perfect strand of pearls around her neck.

"Hello, Ryan," she says quietly. "I hope you don't mind that I came." Her eyes look a little shiny as she blinks at him. "You look very dapper, dear."

His mouth opens and then shuts again. Then it opens once more. "Where'd you leave Dad?"

She lifts her chin, and it almost looks defiant. Almost. "He's on a golf weekend in West Palm."

"Ah." Wes's face shuts down. "You didn't tell him you came, did you?"

Slowly she shakes her head.

Wes inhales deeply. "All right. Well. This is Jamie—" He lays a hand on my brother's arm. "And Cindy and Richard and Jess."

“We’re so glad you made it,” my mother gushes. “Maybe we should change our processional a little bit? Would you like to walk your son down the aisle?”

Both Wesleys shake their heads at the same time. “Please carry on,” Mrs. Wesley stammers. “I’m just happy to be here.”

Wes clears his throat. “Mom, we’ll talk more later. We have to, uh, get this show on the road before Jess here bursts a vessel.”

“Let’s find you a seat, Ang,” Blake says, offering his arm.

She takes it, and they walk off slowly until Blake points at a vacant seat near the front and walks her to it.

We all stare after them.

“Wow,” Jamie whispers as she sits down.

That’s pretty much the only word on my mind, too. I’d just spent the last three months in anguish over the fact that Wes’s family wouldn’t show up for his wedding. I had my mother call the Wesley household in Boston. The calls were never returned. I wrote a personal letter, which was ignored.

And Blake Riley just waltzes up with Mrs. Wesley and plunks her into a rental chair. Unfuckingbelievable.

“All right!” Blake booms as he rejoins us. “Let’s get hitched! Give ’em the high sign, J-Babe!”

He’s right, of course. The musicians have been playing Pachelbel for longer than Pachelbel was alive. I wave to the minister, and she steps gracefully out from the sidelines to take the podium. The musicians segue smoothly into the Bach piece I chose for the processional, because my brother insisted that the wedding march is only for chicks.

Then my father puts an arm around Jamie’s shoulder. “Let’s line up, shall we?”

Jamie nods, and the two of them step out of the tent and wait for the rest of us.

Blake reaches out to grab Wes’s shoulder. “I’m proud to stand up for you, man. Let’s do this thing.”

Wes flashes him a grateful look. Then my mother takes Wes’s hand, kisses him on the cheek and says, “Ready, honey?”

He smiles back, and the two of them line up behind Jamie and my dad.

The music notes climb up my spine, breaking out as chills across my back. And suddenly *I’m* not ready. Jesus. My baby brother is getting married, and Wes’s mom made the right choice at the last minute. The music is really

pretty, my eyes are hot and my mouth is as dry as a desert.

I'm getting all gooey and the wedding hasn't even started yet.

"Deep breath, Jessie," Blake murmurs. "Everything is fine."

He's right. It is. But there's no time to agree.

With a gentle firmness, he takes my arm and leads me to the front of the group. There is nothing in front of me but the pretty green grass of the aisle. The guests turn and look toward us.

This is *it*. I've been planning this for three months. I hope I've pulled it off. Maybe I'm about to get my period, because I'm drowning in emotions right now. And so much could still go wrong...

"Ready, and..." Blake whispers.

I step forward with him. Once. Twice.

Just as people turn to watch us, he actually grabs my butt.

It must be divine intervention that I manage not to shriek. Instead, I do a sort of awkward shimmy that almost takes me down onto the grass, but I recover quickly. "Oh my God," I whisper out of the side of my mouth. "Why do you torture me?"

"You looked a little glassy-eyed. Needed to make sure you wouldn't faint on me. Better now?"

If I had a knife, he'd be dead right now.

We walk down the aisle together, and I hope the photographer doesn't capture my feral smile.

We reach the podium and, right on cue, we take our places on opposite sides of the minister. We turn to forty-five degrees just as we'd rehearsed, and I give Blake a death stare. He smiles kindly at me.

When I look at the crowd, they're all watching Jamie, Wes and my parents. The four of them look radiant. My parents take their seats, my brother arrives at my side a few moments later, and I give him a little unrehearsed hug because I can't help myself.

"Dearly beloved," the minister begins. "We are gathered here today to celebrate the union of two very special young men..."

My attention is drawn to a snuffle in the front row. Oh boy. It's Dyson. He pulls an embroidered handkerchief out of his breast pocket and blows his nose. Loudly.

The pastor makes some introductions and then invites my mother up to read Emily Dickinson's poem "Forever is Composed of Nows."

It's beautiful, but the poem takes me too deeply inside my own head. It

reminds me that I need to move forward with my own forever by getting the *now* part right.

My brother Joe reads a Walt Whitman poem, and then my sister Tammy stands up for her reading. She carries baby Lilac up to the podium, and everyone says “Awww.”

Smiling, Tammy reads a bit of the judge’s ruling that overturned Proposition 8 in California. “Marriage under law is a union of equals,” she finishes, and the audience claps.

I sneak a glance at Wes’s mother. She’s clapping politely. I can’t imagine what’s in her head right now as she watches my big, crazy family applauding the addition of her son to our clan.

The last thing that happens before the vows is that the cellist plays an Irish tune while my tiny nephew Ty wobbles down the aisle carrying the rings. He gets about halfway there when he sort of stumbles to a halt, then looks around himself, as if unsure what he’s supposed to do next.

Jamie steps out, positioning himself so that he’s centered on the aisle, then crouches down. “Over here, little man,” he says.

Ty’s round face lights up, and he starts again, walking toward his uncle Jamie in his little suit jacket and clip-on tie. Everyone melts, and not just because they’re sitting in the sun.

Jamie takes the rings from Ty and then picks him up, handing him to his daddy in the front row.

When Jamie is back in position, facing Wes, the pastor asks them to join hands. From where I’m standing, I can’t really see my brother’s face. But I can see Ryan Wesley perfectly. As a rule, he’s not a solemn or serious guy. But right now his expression is full of awe.

The minister introduces the vows portion of the ceremony and then begins with my brother. “I, James,” she says, “take you, Ryan, to be my friend and husband.”

“I, James,” my beautiful brother echoes, “take you, Ryan, to be my friend and husband.”

“To be yours in times of plenty and in times of want, in times of sickness and in times of perfect health.” My brother repeats the vow. “In times of joy and inevitable sorrow, in times of failure and in times of glory, I promise to cherish and respect you, to care for and protect you, to comfort and encourage you, and stay by your side, forever.”

Oh, man. My eyes sting like crazy as I listen to my baby brother repeat

those lovely words. Because I know he'll make good on them. And Wes is looking back at Jamie like he's hearing words of love for the first time in his life. Like he'd better not breathe because he might miss something.

And I want that, too. I want someone to look at me like they just won the lottery. And I want to feel sure that I have, too—that I can say “forever” and know I’m making the absolutely right decision. I’ve been in love before. A little. But never like that.

When it's Wes's turn, he lifts his chin in preparation.

The minister feeds him the first line: “I, Ryan, take you, James, to be my friend and husband.”

“I, Ryan,” his husky voice repeats, “take you, James, to be my friend and husband.”

“To be yours in times of plenty and in times of want.”

“To be yours in times of plenty...” He clears his throat, and his cheeks pink up. “And in times of want.”

“In times of sickness and in times of perfect health...”

Wes repeats each line slowly, though his voice becomes a little rougher each time. “I promise to cherish and respect you...”

His eyes are wet now, and I clutch my flowers a little more tightly. *Come on, sweetie*, I silently encourage him. *You're almost there.*

I feel Jamie lean forward a degree or two, squeezing Wes's hand.

“To care for and protect you,” he gets out. Then one fat tear launches itself from his eye and down his rugged cheek.

My heart breaks into little tiny splinters. Maybe I didn't enjoy planning this wedding, but I'm sure as hell happy to be part of it now.

“And stay by your side, *forever*,” Wes finishes eventually.

Noisy sobbing can be heard from the front row. It's Dyson, of course. I force a smile onto my face so I don't start crying, too. Though there are plenty of people dabbing their eyes in my peripheral vision.

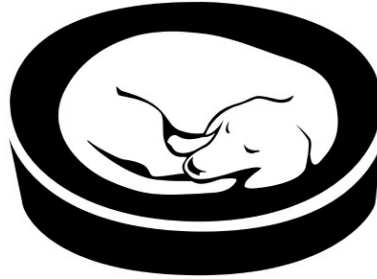
“By the power vested in me by the State of California,” the minister announces with a smile, “I hereby declare you legally married. You may kiss your husband now.”

Wes lunges forward and wraps Jamie in the tightest hug I've ever seen, like he's needed to do that for hours. My brother pats his back and turns his head to kiss him, and everybody cheers.

The musicians begin to play again. Dyson weeps loudly, and everyone gives our men a standing ovation.

Ladies and gentlemen, my party planning career has peaked. I've helped create magic, and I never need to do it again.

5 PURR-FECTION



Blake

Jess knocked this wedding out of the park. I don't know why she was stressing so hard, because everything is *purr*-fection. The ceremony, the dinner, this kick-ass reception. Everything.

I don't think a single guest is having a bad time. Folks are dancing and chatting and munching on the five-tiered wedding cake that I forced myself to have only one slice of. If not for my solid good judgment, I'd already have eaten four of the five tiers.

I eat tons.

Right now I'm focusing on drinking. Wesley and J-Bomb sprang for the good stuff—the serving staff is handing out bottomless flutes of Cristal and Dom, and there's an entire table of craft beer on the lawn. I chose champagne. I've always loved weddings. The cake. The bottles of Dommy P. And since I'm never having a wedding myself, I might as well enjoy this one.

"Hey! You're one of Ryan's teammates?" a female voice coos.

I shift around to see a hot redhead in a hot-pink dress. Tricky color combo, but she pulls it off.

"I'm a huge fan," she continues.

"Really? Hockey fan?" Jamie always tells me that hockey isn't big in Cali.

"You are so built!" She squeezes my biceps over my jacket like she's at the grocery store trying to pick out a ripe melon.

I tolerate this because it's my champagne-holding hand and I'll probably spill the Dommy P all over myself if I make an abrupt movement. But my Spidey senses are tingling. There's something about her that rubs me the

wrong way. Make no mistake—I love having a chick’s hands all over me. But at least buy me dinner first. And I’m not one hundred percent sure that my big fan even knows my name.

“What’s your favorite thing about hockey?” I ask.

“Just...all of it,” she says, sweeping hungry eyes over me.

“Me too,” I admit. “Did you see that game between Miami and Seattle? Crazy, right?”

“Great game.” She nods enthusiastically, her hands on my lapels.

Ah, hell. I knew it. Those cities don’t even have NHL teams. My interest in this conversation dies a fiery death. Don’t get me wrong, I have no issue with women looking for hockey players or women looking for sex. But what I can’t stand are *phonies*.

My head gives a stab, and I rub my temple.

“What’s wrong?” she asks.

“...back in to-ow-ow-ow-own!”

I’m spared from answering thanks to the dying cat on stage. Also known as Matt Eriksson trying to sing. Eriksson, one of our star forwards, is shit-faced and belting out his version of “The Boys Are Back in Town.” I immediately search the lawn for Jess, because I’m pretty sure drunken hockey player karaoke wasn’t something she arranged.

I spot her in the corner of the shiny dance floor, in deep conversation with my man Cindy. Jess doesn’t seem to notice that it’s Eriksson performing with the band instead of the wedding singer she probably picked after interviewing five thousand other candidates.

The crowd notices Eriksson, though. And they’re loving him. Loving him *hard*. Ten of my teammates are gathered at the bottom of the stage, their ties loosened, glasses and bottles raised in the air as they sing along, loud and off-key.

“You hockey boys sure are rowdy,” Red remarks with a giggle. “Do you...” She lowers her voice to a whisper. “...want to get out of here? Go somewhere a little more private?”

I gently pry her manicured talons off my arm. “Sorry. Got best-man duties to attend to.” Then I dart off before she can object.

I get it—weddings make people super horny. But I’m not feeling this chick. She made me feel like a piece of meat, and not in a good way. That ain’t cool.

“Fuck,” comes a dejected voice. “Gonna miss this.”

I slap my teammate Forsberg on the back as he sidles up to me. “Naah, nothing to miss. You know there’s this thing called a postal service? People can send each other letters and shit, and I could be wrong, but I think it’s possible to mail stuff between countries. I know, right? Freaky. But that means when you’re down in Florida, you can just open your mailbox and presto! You’ll see all the save-the-dates and bar mitzvah invites and the court summons I plan on sending you when I sue you for that hundred buckaroos you owe me—”

“Okay, okay, I gotcha.” Forsberg sputters out a laugh. “Do you ever shut up, bro?”

“Naah.”

He rakes a hand through his scruffy hair and then chugs half his beer. “I know this isn’t the last time I’ll see you guys, but...shit. Getting traded still sucks balls.”

“Yeah. I know, dude.” And I hope it never happens to me.

If I got traded, I wouldn’t worry about adjusting to a new team. I fit in everywhere. Throw me on a dude ranch and slap some assless chaps on me? I’ll be roping steers and riding broncs like a champ before the day is done. Adapting to a new franchise would be even easier. Hockey is hockey, right?

But I like my life in Toronto. My apartment, my teammates, my family. I’m not ready to say goodbye to any of that yet.

Forsberg doesn’t look ready either, poor fucker. He’s been walking around all sour-faced ever since the GM told him he was being booted to Florida. It’s goddamn sacrilege almost. Forsberg is one of those players who gets traded every few seasons, and he’s really fucking sick of it.

It’s going to be weird not to have him on my line this season. Toronto traded Will Forsberg, a solid veteran, for Will O’Connor, a hotshot with a chip on his shoulder. A Will giveth and a Will taketh away. Life always evens itself out, I guess.

Except, O’Connor’s played for three teams in two years. Grapevine says he can’t keep his mouth shut or his pants zipped. Apparently someone in the head office thought it’d be a good idea to welcome a media nightmare into our town.

“I got a life here,” Forsberg mutters.

Shitballs. He looks close to tears. I’m not good with tears. Especially man-tears.

Luckily, Eriksson stumbles over, saving me from having to bust out a

stand-up routine in order to cheer up Forsberg.

“What’d ya think?” Eriksson asks, nodding toward the stage. “I kicked ass up there, huh?”

I nod fervently. “You should quit your day job, dude. Like, right now.”

He nods, too. “And Kara always said I couldn’t sing! Told her she was crazy! The twins love my songs!”

Oh no. He’s bringing up Kara and his kids? Already? I wasn’t expecting ex-wife and twin-girl talk to start until Eriksson had downed at least five more beers.

“A good wife would’ve encouraged you to audition for *American Idol*,” I say solemnly.

“I know, right? Good fuckin’ riddance! She was holding me back.” But he rubs his eyes with the back of his hand, and now I’m sandwiched between two guys on the verge of man-tears.

Abort! a voice in my head shouts.

I’m all about being there for my buds, but this is a celebration, dammit. I’m having fun and I’m a wee bit buzzed. Too buzzed to think of any inspirational speeches right now. I already used up my epic speech quota last night and then again tonight at the reception dinner.

“‘Scuse me,” I say, taking a hasty step. “J-Bomb’s waving me over.”

And holy shit, I’m not lying. Jamie *is* waving me over. I spare a brief look up at the heavens—*Did you do this?* I ask the big man. He must’ve. The timing can’t be a coincidence.

I lumber over to Jamie, who immediately claps a hand on my arm and murmurs, “Look.”

I follow his gaze to the self-serve dessert station. Wesley is there with his mom. No, Wesley is there *hugging* his mom.

“How on earth did you make this happen?” Jamie sounds astonished.

“What do you mean?”

“How’d you get Angela Wesley to come to the wedding? My mom and sister have been calling her for months. Hell, *I* even called her.” His guilty expression darts toward his new husband, as if he’s scared Wes might overhear us all the way across the lawn. “I called her three times,” he admits. “Called his dad’s office, too. They hung up on me every time.”

“Samesies. I was starting to get a complex. I mean, not even my high school girlfriend Katty hung up on me that much, and bro, she did that a lot.”

“Katie?”

“No, Katty. Like cat but with a K. Katty. She had huge tits.”

Jamie snickers. “Of course she did.” He pauses, his voice thickening. “So you just kept calling?”

“Every day since you got engaged.” I wrinkle my forehead at his wide eyes. “I knew it’d make him happy to have at least one of his folks here. What? That’s not normal?”

“Um, no. It’s not.”

The next thing I know, I’m swallowed up in a bear hug.

“You’re a good friend, Blake. Like...the best.”

I reach around and smack him on the ass. “Right back atcha, J-Bomb.”

Jamie glances at Wes and Ang again. So do I, and I notice that Wesley’s eyes look a tad shiny. Awesome. More man-tears.

“I think my hubby needs rescuing,” Jamie says wryly. “If that photographer Jess hired gets a picture of him sobbing, he’ll kick the guy’s ass.”

Speaking of Jess...where’s my angel at?

Jamie walks off to join his hubby, and I search the crowd again until I find Jess. She’s hugging her mom, too. Lots of mom hugging going on tonight. And now she’s walking off, but not back to the party. She’s hurrying down the limestone steps that lead to the gardens.

This property is awesome. I walked down there earlier with Granny Canning, and there was a cool flagstone path that wound through the gardens. A really nice koi pond, too.

But it’s weird that Jess is disappearing mid-reception. People have barely started dancing, and we still need to do the toss-the-jockstrap-bouquet thing. (At least I’m hoping we do. Though *someone* probably vetoed that idea, too.)

I drop my empty flute on the tray of a passing waiter, then head toward the stone staircase, reaching the top in time to see a flash of purple near the path.

I take the steps two at a time and duck past a row of hedges toward the path. My legs are about twice the size of Jess’s, so my stride eats up a lot of ground. I reach the koi pond just as Jess is flopping down on the stone bench across from it.

Oh, and she’s crying her eyes out.

Cheezus. Is this a fucking party or a screening of *The Notebook*?

“Go away,” she croaks when she spots me.

Yeah, right. I march over and sit beside her.

"I said *go away*," she growls.

I hide a smile. Now *this* is what gets me going—a woman who doesn't give a shit that I'm Blake Riley the hockey player. A woman who'd rather shoo me away than impress me. It's...refreshing.

I'm surprised there aren't any lights out here lining the walkway or shining at the pond, but it's dark. We're in the shadows, so it's hard to see her expression. I don't really need to, though. If she's crying, I'm pretty sure that means her expression ain't sunshine and rainbows.

"Aw baby, why are you crying?" I ask gruffly. "Don't do that anymore."

A choked sob tickles my ear. "Why not?"

"Because I don't like it. Makes me want to beat up whoever did this to you."

"You can't beat up my mom." She laughs weakly.

"Cindy did this?" I'm surprised. Jess's mom is the sweetest lady on the planet. I don't think I've ever heard a bad word leave her mouth.

Jess lets out a long, unsteady breath. "She said she was proud of me."

I gasp. "The *nerve* of her!"

My angel doesn't even crack a smile. My jokes aren't doing it for her? Shit. This must be really bad.

"She told me I planned the best wedding she's ever been to," Jess whispers.

"Again, not seeing the problem."

"You don't get it." She shakes her head forcefully, and a chunk of hair falls out of her updo and into her eyes.

I tuck it behind her ear, and she lets me. Yup, shit's bad if she's letting me touch her like this. Lately she has an aneurysm if I so much as smile at her. Not sure why. I mean, I rocked her world this spring. We both know it.

"This doesn't happen often," she goes on. "I'm not someone who gets a lot of compliments from my family—I'm the one who screws everything up. I'm not like Tammy, who's super smart and turned down a million scholarships. Or Scott, who's wanted to be a cop since he was five. Or Jamie, who fell in love with coaching the moment he started his job. I can't even tell you how many jobs I've had and failed at."

"You didn't fail at this." I gesture to the party that's in full swing up on the lawn.

"No, I didn't." She bites her lip.

I want to be the one nibbling on that lip. I nibbled the fuck out of it back in March. She nibbled on my lip, too, among other things.

Man, once definitely wasn't enough with this chick. I haven't been a monk in the four months since we boned down—there may have been a hookup or two between then and now—but that doesn't mean I haven't been thinking of Jess.

If anything, I think of her *too* much. Usually when I've got my hand wrapped around my cock. She'd probably slap me if I admitted that.

"But I'm about to," she says.

I frown. "You're about to fail?"

"Sort of. I mean...Mom was standing there telling me how proud she was, and all I could think was, how the hell am I going to break it to them that I..." She stops.

"That you what?"

"I don't want to be a party planner," she blurts out.

My lips twitch. Shit, *that's* what she's crying about? "Honey. Is someone holding a gun to your head forcing you to plan parties?"

"No." Her eyes flash with exasperation. "See, I told you that you wouldn't get it. It's considered a failure, okay? I started down yet another career path, and I'm yet again bailing. Trust me, my family is going to have a lot to say about this."

I shrug. "It's just taking you a while to identify your superpower. That's all."

"My...what are you talking about?"

"What's your superpower?"

She snorts. "I make wine disappear. And money."

"Naw. Don't sell my Jess short." I squeeze her hand. "Everyone has something that makes them the best."

"Yours is hockey?" she asks with a sniff.

"Not exactly. There're more talented athletes than you can shake a hockey stick at. My advantage is my amazing tolerance for pain."

She's listening carefully now, those big brown eyes taking me in. "What if I never find my special thing?"

"You will. You just have to keep looking."

"It's so hard sometimes."

She moans, and yeah, it's in despair, but my cock isn't one to differentiate between moans. The big guy just remembers the throaty pitch of

the sound. He heard it a lot that night in Toronto.

Jess Canning makes a lot of noise in bed. Or, rather, in chair. I like that, because I make a lot of noise, too.

“Planning this wedding was a total nightmare,” she confesses. “I hated every second of it. I hated making lists and phone calls and chasing people around to RSVP. I worked my ass off, Blake. And you want to know the ironic part? The only reason this thing is a success is because of *you*!”

I blink. “Naah.”

“Yes,” she says firmly. Then she moans again. She really needs to stop doing that, because my dick is getting confused. “I arranged the flowers and the food and the guest list, but you—” She makes an irritated noise, “—*you* took care of the most important things. You found those pictures of Wes. You brought his mother to the ceremony. I wanted so badly to make this wedding about *both* of them, but I couldn’t, because Wes’s family is so fucking difficult. But it was easy for you.”

“I can’t figure out if you’re mad at me or happy I did all that.”

“Both!” She reaches up and starts pulling the pins out of her hair, letting the golden strands fall to her shoulders.

Aw man, there are tears sticking to her eyelashes again.

“Don’t start crying again,” I warn.

“Or what?” She sputters out a sound that’s a cross between a sob and a laugh.

“Or I’ll have to take drastic measures.”

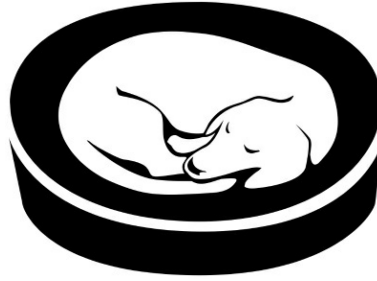
“Like what?” she challenges.

I stare at her mouth. She’s wearing pink lipstick. Usually I prefer red—looks hotter when it leaves a ring around the head of my cock. But the pink’s not bad either. Makes her look sweet, and sometimes sweet is just as hot as spicy.

Fuck it. As much as I love this fun skating-around-each-other thing we’ve got going on, I’m long overdue for a shot on goal.

So I kiss her.

6 A SERIOUS CASE OF ADD



Jess

Blake's mouth is on mine. How the hell did that happen? And why aren't I stopping this?

Okay, I know why. Because it's so, so good.

Considering his massive size and serious case of ADD, you might expect the man to be a sloppy kisser. But he's not. Blake kisses with surprising gentleness. His lips are warm and soft, and he always takes his time with his tongue—I remember that from our last hookup.

And it's just as potent as I remember.

His hand cups the back of my neck as he deepens the kiss. He licks a hot line across my bottom lip, and when I risk opening my eyes, I see that his are squeezed shut. His gorgeous face is creased with concentration, and that makes me smile. Of course, the moment I part my lips, his tongue slides past them. The tip of it meets the tip of mine, and it's like a cattle prod to the spine.

Heat spirals between my legs, so fast and unexpected that I jerk my mouth away.

"None of that," I mutter. "I told you, no repeats."

His green eyes open, and they're burning with lust. "But I want a repeat."

"Can't always get what you want, dude."

"You're so mean to me."

"Someone needs to be." I suck in an unsteady breath. My heart is beating way too fast, and damn it, why didn't I wear underwear? I was trying to avoid the embarrassment of visible panty lines, but on the humiliation

scale, I'm pretty sure a wet stain trumps panty lines.

"You weren't mean to me in Toronto..."

No, I wasn't. And look where that got me—bouncing on Blake's dick like it was a pogo stick while my brother almost *died* in the other room.

Blake is more perceptive than I thought. Or maybe he's just a mind-reader. "It wasn't your fault J-Bomb's fever came back that night. Wouldn't have mattered if we were sitting there watching TV. He had pneumonia. Us keeping our clothes on wouldn't have changed that."

The rational part of my brain knows that. Actually, I think *every* part of my brain knows that. But if I don't focus on the guilt, then I might start focusing on other things...like how good Blake's muscular body had felt beneath mine. How full I felt when he was inside me.

He's not my type. If anything, he's the opposite of my type. He's big and brash and...a *jock*. What do I need with a jock? I want someone who's deep and artsy and who I can have a serious conversation with, not someone who says things like "Cheezus" and "samesies" and all the other frat-boy nonsense that leaves Blake Riley's mouth.

A one-night stand, sure, I'll take it. I *had* it. But there's no point in going there again when I know there's no future with this guy.

Blake, however, is nothing if not persistent. "We had fun that night, J-Babe. Let's have fun again."

"No thanks."

"You always this stubborn?"

"You always this pushy?"

"Fucking duh." He grins. "How 'bout this? We don't have to bone tonight. I just want another kiss."

I roll my eyes. "How 'bout...no?"

He pouts. He's a grown man and he's *pouting* and it should look ridiculous, but my gaze is drawn to the sexy curve of his lips and...gah! No. I'm not kissing him again.

"One kiss," he presses.

One kiss, the devil inside me urges.

"And then what?" I ask suspiciously.

"And then we go back to the party and maybe you dance with me a couple times. Or not. I mean, you're missing out if you don't—I got moves, Jessie. But no presh."

Duh. No presh. This man is about as deep as a puddle, all right.

I stare at his mouth again.

So why am I considering this?

"Fine. One more kiss," I say in a grudging tone. "But only to get you off my back." Ha. Right. I'm being so generous. Because it has nothing to do with the fact that my lips are tingling with anticipation.

He breaks out in a huge smile. Rubs his hands together and then cracks his knuckles as if he's preparing for a throwdown rather than a kiss.

I narrow my eyes. "I don't have all night, bud. You want a kiss, come and get it. Otherwise—" The words die in my throat when he sinks to his knees in front of me. "What are you doing?" I squeak.

Big, warm hands slide under the hem of my dress, slowly dragging the satin material upward. "What do you mean?" he asks innocently.

Surprise makes my pulse race. "Where's my kiss?"

Ignoring me, he pushes my dress all the way up to my waist, then groans so loudly that I shoot a wary glance behind me. But everyone on the lawn is completely out of sight, which means Blake and I are out of sight to them. Which means nobody but Blake can see that I'm not wearing anything under my dress.

"No panties?" he croaks. "Seriously? We were walking down that aisle together and you weren't wearing panties? Are you trying to kill me?"

I'm still too stunned by his presence between my legs to respond.

Blake lets out a ragged breath. His face is so close to my core that I feel the warm puff of air on my clit. I shiver in desire, then curse myself for feeling it.

"Get up, you perv," I grumble, trying to shove my dress down.

He locks both my hands with one of his. "Not until I get my kiss." A naughty gleam lights his eyes.

"My lips are up here, asshole."

The curve of his mouth widens, his smile becoming filthier and filthier. "You said a kiss, honey. But you never specified *where*."

And then that wicked mouth lands on my aching core, and an even wickeder tongue sweeps out for a long, lazy lick.

Oh. My. God.

A shockwave of pleasure darts from my clit to my breasts to...well, to everywhere. I feel that one lick in every inch of my body, and it's so good I don't have the strength to push him away. I do the opposite, actually—I grab the back of his head and pull him closer while my traitorous legs part even

farther.

“Yeah, that’s what I want,” Blake mumbles against my sensitive flesh.
“Open up for me, honey.”

I hate him.

I hate his warm lips and his wet, talented tongue.

I hate the sting of his fingers on my inner thigh and the blunt tip of his finger as he drags it toward my opening.

I hate—

No, I don’t. I *love* it. I love every damn thing he’s doing to me. Every flick of the tongue against my clit. Every growled noise that leaves his throat as he wraps his lips around that swollen bud and sucks. But there’s no release. No cure for the knot of tension coiling low in my belly.

“I need to come,” I almost wail.

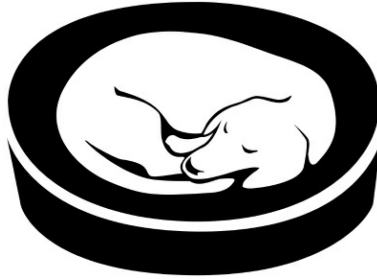
His laughter vibrates between my legs, male and husky and smug as fuck. Then he works his tongue over me again while his finger travels lower, dips into my embarrassingly obvious arousal and slips inside me.

That’s all it takes to detonate the pressure in my core. I gasp as the orgasm rips through me, pulsing in my blood and making my knees shake. My fist tightens in Blake’s hair as I rock my hips and ride out the wave of sensation.

When I finally grow limp, Blake raises his head and wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. “I love kissing you,” he says solemnly.

I’m too sated and mindless to reply, but somewhere in the haze of pleasure still fogging up my brain, I’m pretty sure I want to punch him.

7 LIKE A ROCK



Jess

No matter what crazy things happened between Blake and I a couple of hours ago, there's no rest for the wicked.

The party is winding down around me. Jamie and Wes have already turned in—at midnight a limo took them to our family home so they could get some sleep (or alone-time) before their honeymoon. Meanwhile, I'm starting the cleanup process. While the caterers and rental company will do most of the heavy lifting, there are centerpieces to save and borrowed items to collect and return. There are DJs to tip and taxis to call.

I'm way too busy to think about Blake or to scan the crowd for his big head. And I'm way too busy to wonder what's going to happen later tonight in my bed...

"Jess, can I see you for a moment?"

The chair I'd been folding clatters to the ground in my haste to face my mom. "Um, sure?" Do I look guilty? Mom is the most intuitive woman in the world. Can she tell I recently had my bush patrolled by the best man?

But she just smiles and offers me one of the bite-sized lemon cookies on the little plate she's been passing around. "I have a little favor to ask. Would you mind taking your brother and Wes to the airport at five in the morning? I thought I could manage it, but it will be two o'clock before we leave here, and your grandmother expects a hot breakfast when she gets up at six-thirty. I can't handle her in a zombie-like state."

"Sure," I say quickly, leaning down to yank the chair upright again. God, I hope there isn't a wet spot on the back of my dress. "I'll do it."

Mom puts a hand on my shoulder. "I *really* appreciate it. You've been

like a rock through all of this. Anyone who hires you to plan their big day is getting a bargain at any price.”

I actually flinch when she says that. Planning a stranger’s wedding would be easier, but I still have no urge to do it again.

“What’s the matter, sweetie?” my mother asks, missing nothing.

Maybe it’s the champagne, but the truth comes spilling out. “Planning weddings isn’t really my thing.”

Her response is swift, and it’s precisely what I expected: Her face drops.

“Listen,” I add in hurry, “it’s not because I can’t handle it, or I’m bored. But there’s something more important I’m supposed to be doing. Something that does more for the world than choosing color schemes.”

Mom sighs, and the sound of it grates on me, because I’m the child she saves her sighs for. “But it’s been just three months since you announced to us that *this* was your future.”

“Four,” I correct, even though it doesn’t help my case. “And I would have stuck with it. I’m not a bad party planner. This isn’t like the Egyptian jewelry designs, Mom! But when Jamie was sick, I finally got a clue. It’s taken me a couple of months to mull it over, but I’ve finally figured myself out.”

Mom shoves a cookie in her mouth. That’s how I know I’ve really stressed her out. Normally she avoids white flour and sugar. “So tell me.” She nods like I should get on with it.

“I need to go to nursing school. I know it will be hard, but I really want to do it.”

She chews. She swallows.

She shoves another cookie in her mouth.

Yikes.

Eventually she sets the tray down and takes my hand. “Nursing school is expensive, sweetie. And it’s hard. If you go, you have to finish.”

“I *will* finish,” I insist. “I’m already applying to four schools.”

Her eyes widen. “That’s a lot of schools.”

“They’re, uh, expensive like you said. And it’s competitive, too. But I can do this. I got a B in organic chemistry. They care about that. I’m smart enough to get in.”

“I’d never doubt that.” She strokes the back of my hand. “You can do anything you try to. It’s the effort that’s been your problem. You give up when things get hard.”

It takes all of my willpower not to argue that. It's not really true, but it's how my family sees me. "I want to be a nurse, Mom. Like Nurse Bertha." Bertha took care of Jamie when he was laid up with pneumonia in the Toronto hospital. My mother and I both worshipped her. "I always told you I needed to do something artsy, but I was wrong. There are a lot of ways to make beauty in the world. I want to help people who are scared and sick. It's the most important thing I could do with my life."

The expression on her face now tells me that I'm getting somewhere. She's looking at me the way she looks at my sister Tammy. Like I just might be worth the effort. "How much does nursing school cost?" she asks softly.

"Well..." I clear my throat. "UC San Francisco is the most expensive, unfortunately. It's fifty-five thousand the first year."

"Fifty..." Mom makes a choking noise. "*Sweetheart*. We don't have that kind of money."

I feel smaller when I hear it. I mean, it's a crazy amount of money. Nobody in my family drives a car that costs that much. But I have to wonder whether her reaction would have been less vehement if one of her other children had the same need.

"It's...I..." My dignity is taking hits all over the place tonight. "I'll find a way." It sounds petulant coming out of my mouth, but I mean it. Even if my parents won't help me, there has to be a way.

"There must be other programs," Mom says, recovering from the shock. "Cheaper ones. I'll help you look."

"Okay," I say slowly. But I *have* looked. Master's programs are pricey. And if I'm going to do this, I want to do it right. "There are loans."

She makes a face. It's the face of a mother who thinks her daughter won't follow through. "We'll think of something."

"No, I'll handle it," I tell her. "It has to be me." I can't keep running to Mommy to fund all my ventures. Not this time. With a little advice from Dyson, I know I can figure it out. And the only way to show my mother I'm serious is to *be* serious.

"Jess?"

I look up into the eyes of the least serious person on earth. Then I shiver because Blake Riley is *that* attractive in his suit. His roomy shoulders are like a ledge where a girl could rest her head in comfort. And a lock of his errant hair falls across his smooth forehead.

Blake is attractive, all right, but he's totally wrong for me. He's a big,

playful guy. And the next year of my life won't be about playing—it'll be all about goals and how to reach them.

"Are you ready to head back to your apartment?" He gives me a broad grin that is not at *all* innocent.

"Let me give you my key," I say, making a decision. "Here." I grab my clutch purse off the table and rummage around. My house key is on a removable ring of its own, so it only takes a few extra seconds to do the right thing. I hand it over. "Make yourself comfortable," I say firmly. "I'll be a while."

His puppy-like head cocks to one side. "You sure? Anything I can help you with here?"

"Thank you, but it's under control."

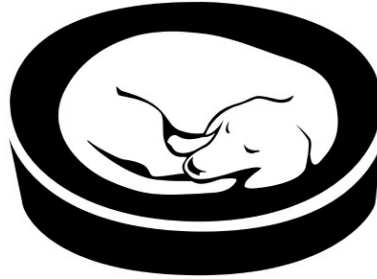
The key bounces once in his hand. "Okay. I'll leave a light on for you. Goodnight, Cindy. Lovely party."

My mother beams at him, then gives him a hug and wishes him a good night.

When he walks away, I don't look back. Later, I'll insist on crashing at my parents' house tonight, to make it that much easier to take Jamie and Wes to the airport tomorrow morning.

Blake will spend the night in my bed. But I won't be there.

8 VERBAL IMPULSES



September

Blake

I trudge into the locker room after practice, all jazzed up. We killed it out there today. Everyone was gelling. Skating like champs. Just...clicking. Even Coach was smiling by the end, and that dude never smiles.

We're winning the Cup this season. Mark my words. Hell, we could've done it last year if we hadn't been hampered by so many injuries during that first playoffs series. I've never won a Cup before, and I wonder if the trophy is as heavy as it looks. Forsberg won one with Chicago a few seasons back. Said it weighs a ton, but I think he was just fucking with me.

By the locker next to mine, Wesley strips out of his sweaty jersey and pads and flops down on the bench wearing nothing but his hockey pants. His chest has a sheen of sweat, and his hair is a mess as he drags one hand through it. It's his left hand, and I burst out laughing when I notice his ring finger.

"Dude, when'd you get that done?" I grab his hand and pinch just under the knuckle, where he now has a wedding ring *tattooed* on his skin.

"Ouch," he gripes, shoving my hand away. "It's still sore, motherfucker. Got it done last night."

"Too cool to wear an actual ring?"

"No, I was tired of having to take it off for practice, and I can't keep it on 'cause I don't like the way it feels when I'm wearing my gloves."

"*Bad* move, dude," Eriksson calls from the other side of me. I turn to see the horrified look on his face. "You got a permanent wedding ring? Jesus!

Have fun explaining that to whoever you date after the divorce.”

My jaw drops. “Bro,” I say in warning. I mean, that was really uncalled for. I get that Eriksson is going through a rough time, but Wesley and his man are still newlyweds. Did the fucker just *hex* their marriage?

But Wesley is unfazed. “That word doesn’t exist in my vocab,” he says cheerfully. “Canning and I are forever.” He strips out of his pants and disappears bare-assed into the shower area.

I scowl at Eriksson. “So not cool.”

“I know.” He has the decency to look repentant, rubbing one hand over his overgrown beard. Has he not shaved since the wedding? Sure looks like it. “Fuck. I’ll go apologize. It’s just...Kara filed for sole custody this morning.”

Shit.

“Shit,” I say aloud.

“I get it, all right? My schedule doesn’t really let me be a full-time dad, but *sole* custody? We could’ve had joint custody. The girls could’ve stayed with me when...” He stops to think, and I might be a wee bit slow, but I can see his thought process clear as day.

When would his twin girls stay with him? A couple nights a week when he doesn’t have games? Or when the team is playing at home? Maybe, but that’d mean leaving them with a sitter those evenings he’s at the arena. Off-season, then? A few weeks in the summer?

I hate to say it, but maybe his soon-to-be ex-wife has a point about the sole-custody thing.

“Whatever,” he says abruptly. “My lawyer will deal with it. I need to shower. I stink.”

He charges off before I can respond. Man, I feel bad for him. Can’t be easy dealing with a divorce at the start of the season. It’s still pre-season, though, so maybe he’ll get his head on straight before October.

“Really? Nobody has the balls to tag that? Well, I will,” a smug voice drawls from the other side of the room. “The girl is *smokin’*. Like, fuckable to a whole other level.”

“Quit it with that,” someone else mutters.

“Lemming hears you and you’ll have his fist in your jaw,” our captain Luko warns, referring to our other teammate who’s also going through a breakup right now. “Exes are off-limits, newbie.”

The newbie—Will O’Connor—just scoffs. “I’m not gonna keep my

mouth shut just because of some archaic bro code. I fucked two of my teammates' exes in Nashville and look—" He pats his chiseled jaw. "—still in one piece."

Yeah, then why aren't you still in Nashville? I want to call out. But I keep my trap shut, because I've already had several run-ins with the fucker, and they all almost ended with my clocking him a good one. Me, a pacifist! I don't hit peeps off the ice. I don't even *think* about hitting them.

But this guy... This guy. O'Connor is young, cocky and a total pain in the ass. He says shit without thinking, and that's gonna get him in big trouble one day. Hell, it already has. There's a reason he keeps getting traded, and it's not because his former teams are collecting draft picks.

"Back me up, Riley," O'Connor says when he catches my eye. "Lemming's ex. You'd tap that, right?"

"Nah, I like my nose where it is—on my pretty face."

The dark-haired newbie rolls his eyes. "Whatever. You guys are all pussies." He strides past and ducks into the showers.

Luko and I exchange a grim look. "Trouble," our captain murmurs. "Got a lot of growing up to do, that one. Keep an eye on him, will ya?"

Damn. I knew I shouldn't have accepted that assistant captain patch. Seems like O Captain My Captain is always giving me the shit tasks.

I make my way to the showers, smack Wesley's ass as I come up beside him and dunk my head under the hot spray. O'Connor is across the steam-filled space, soaping up his dick and ignoring everyone. I guess he's pissed that nobody wants to tag-team Lemming's ex with him. Christ, I hope he doesn't make a move. Claire and my teammate were together for two years before she left him. Lemming will shit a brick if our newest manwhore puts his grubby hands on her.

"What are we having for din-din tonight?" I ask Wes. One of the perks of being his upstairs neighbor is that I never have to eat alone. All I gotta do is ride the elevator down five floors and I've got two willing dinner companions waiting for me.

Well, maybe they're not *always* willing. Sometimes they're reluctant. Sometimes they try to kick me out, but it's all in good fun. Wes and Jamie would cry buckets if I stopped being their friend.

"You're on your own tonight," he tells me. "Canning and I have plans."

I brighten. "I love plans. Where we going?"

He rinses the shampoo out of his hair, then glances over. "You're going

home,” he says dryly. “And we’re going to play moving men.”

“Sounds kinky.”

He snickers. “I wish. If anything, it’ll be a total pain in the ass. Have you ever tried lugging boxes through one of those super-narrow dormitory hallways?”

“Dormitory?” I wrinkle my forehead as I drag the bar of soap over my body. “What, you friends with a college freshman or something?”

“Sort of. Jess is starting nursing school this week, so—”

“Jess?” I interrupt. “Which Jess is this?” I only know one. But she can’t be in *Toronto*. I would have sensed a disturbance in the force. A hot, sassy, blond disturbance.

“My favorite sister-in-law.” Wesley snorts. “She *just* got off the waiting list at Toronto Nursing College. Big stuff. She got the call four days ago. Had to sell her car and pack some things into a few cartons, quick-like. It’s a better school than the community college where she was supposed to start next week.”

“Oh. That’s cool,” I hear myself say. But it isn’t really. After the wedding, Jess went full-on Amish and shunned me.

We were *totally* going to bone down in June. She wanted it. Like, wanted it bad. I made her come so hard she couldn’t move, for fuck’s sake.

And then she bailed on me. Gave me the key to her apartment and never came home that night. I couldn’t stick around the next morning because I had a flight to catch, and my ma would’ve murdered me if I didn’t make it home on time. It was my sister’s birthday. Nobody misses a Riley birthday and lives to tell about it.

I’d texted Jess from the plane. She didn’t text back. I’d texted her throughout the summer. She didn’t text back, not even when I sent her the best dick pic ever taken. I experimented with lighting in order to emphasize both length and girth, and she couldn’t be bothered to comment on how great Snake Riley looked?

Wesley shuts off the faucet. “Anyway, we’re gonna grab dinner in Jess’s new neighborhood. I’d invite you, but I’m not sure how long the move will take and I don’t want you waiting around.”

I can help with the move, I almost say, but I bite my tongue. It’s rare, but sometimes I *am* able to control my verbal impulses.

Jess obviously doesn’t want me around, otherwise she would’ve told me herself that she was moving to Toronto for nursing school.

Whistling to himself, Wesley towels off. I shut off the water, too. But I'm moving slowly, trying to process this turn of events.

"You have a sister in Toronto, Wesley?" O'Connor says from underneath the towel he's using to dry his hair. "Is she hot? Can I have her number?"

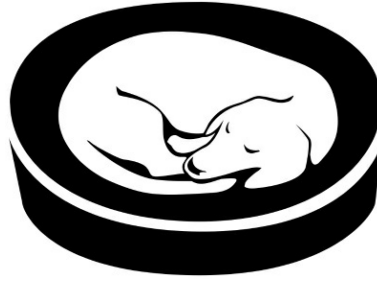
Wes growls. "Touch Jess and *die*. You hear me?"

O'Connor chuckles, and the sound climbs up my throat like bile. Somehow, fists are clenched at my sides. Jess and I aren't together, and we never will be, and yet I feel like grinding the newbie into dust just for joking about calling her.

Weird.

Must be time for dinner.

9 ONE BUTT CHEEK



Jess

I'm freaking out. But who wouldn't be, right?

Five days ago I was moving back into my parents' house to save money and enrolling in a community college nursing program. It wasn't ideal, but I was determined to do whatever it took.

Then I got the call.

The Toronto phone number didn't clue me in, because that's where Jamie and Wes live. I came *this close* to answering the phone with, "Whassup, Jamester?"

Some benevolent force in the universe caused me to answer "Hello" like a normal person. And a few seconds later I heard something that changed my life.

"There's a place for you here in Toronto."

Suddenly, I was no longer slumming it in the only local program that had a last-minute spot for me, but flying out to a top-notch nursing program in a new city. In a different *country*.

I thought that I'd be easing into this whole back-to-school thing. It's been five years since I took notes or studied for a quiz. Frankly, I was already terrified. And that was *before* I won a probationary scholarship that requires me to get good grades. If I do poorly, I'll lose the funding.

So here I am in this tiny room in a cinderblock dormitory, with its two twin beds and two tiny desks. At twenty-six, I'm starting over.

I tuck my pillow into its pillowcase and lay it on the bed as my brother carries the last bag through the door. "This is it?" Jamie asks, smiling. "I thought we'd be here for hours."

“Not so much.” All I’d brought to Toronto were two suitcases full of clothes, a box of reference books, my laptop, my teddy bear and an empty bank account. “I still appreciate the help,” I tell him. Moral support is just as important as arm strength today, and I’m not afraid to admit it.

“Your roommate sure is organized,” Jamie remarks, peeking at the books lined up on the other desk. There are at least twenty important-looking medical texts. “What’s radiopharmacology?”

“Uh...” I give a whole body shiver. “I’ll have to get back to you.”

He chuckles. “Let’s eat dinner. Wes is putting some more change in the meter. Want to scope out the falafel joint we saw two blocks down?”

“That place is disgusting,” someone sneers from the doorway.

Jamie and I both turn to see an angular, dark-haired girl stride into the room. She marches over to the desk and slaps four *more* textbooks onto its surface.

“Hi,” I squeak. “I’m Jess Canning, and this is my brother Jamie.”

The thin creature turns her face my way, the lenses of her narrow glasses glinting in the fluorescent light. “Violet Smith. Pleasure to meet you.”

Something about the way the girl said “pleasure” makes me wonder if she knows what that word means.

“I’m a first-year nursing student,” I tell her, all the while comparing our two desks. Mine has only two postcards propped up on the book ledge. One is a picture of JJ Watt, which my brothers insist is blasphemous because I’m not allowed to root for a non-Niner, but I don’t care because he’s *hot*. The other reads *Keep Calm and Pour the Wine*. Hers looks like a medical school bookstore.

“I’m a first-year, too,” she says with a shrug. “Let’s start with some ground rules, shall we? I need quiet time between six p.m. and six a.m. No music, no speaking. Those are the really valuable study hours, and we’re going to need to hit the books hard just to stay afloat the first trimester. Oh—and no food in the room, because this building has had trouble with ants.”

Did she just say *six* p.m.? And on my budget, granola bars at my desk are likely to be a main staple of my diet.

“Do you have anything to add?” she prompts.

“Um...” I look to my brother for help, but he’s staring at Violet in fascination. “I’ll let you know,” I finally say, the urge to flee overtaking me. “Jamie? We were on our way out?”

“Right.” He gives me a salute, but I’m already aiming at the door.

“Jessie? Don’t forget your keycard. Don’t want to climb through the window on your first night, like you did at State.”

“Jesus.” Violet’s lip curls.

I grab the card off the bed where I’d left it and eject from the room like a fighter pilot whose jet has taken fire.

AN HOUR later I’ve almost calmed down. The vodka in my bloodstream has helped.

Jamie, Wes and I just finished eating at Tonic, a slick new restaurant that’s recently opened in their neighborhood. I couldn’t afford the place, but Wes insisted on buying dinner to welcome me to Toronto. We’d meant to investigate the neighborhood around my new school, but I didn’t object to the change of plans when Wes said he was in the mood for something nicer.

The food had been awesome, too. Now, as I step outside and feel the breeze off Lake Ontario brushing my face, I can almost convince myself that I’m on a mini-vacation in a pretty city. Then I look up the street toward the streetcar stop and feel a new twinge of trepidation.

“Aw, Jessie.” Wes grabs my shoulders and hugs me. “It’s going to be okay. The scary roommate probably has first-day jitters, too.”

“You didn’t meet her,” I point out.

“She was a piece of work,” my brother agrees. “But so what? Even if she wins a Nobel Prize by the second week of school, it doesn’t mean you won’t do well.”

“Of course she’ll do well,” Wes scoffs, releasing me from the hug. “She’s a Canning, and Cannings are smart. They’re smart enough to drink a beer with me right now and watch the first *Monday Night Football* of the season. Your Niners are playing.”

I hesitate. I’d planned to re-read the schedule for the first week of school and memorize the campus map. But their apartment is just a few steps away, the semester hasn’t even started yet, and my team is playing.

“All right. I’m in.”

A few minutes later, I’m holding a beer and wondering where to sit. It shouldn’t be a tricky question. Wes and Jamie have claimed opposite ends of the sofa, sitting sideways with their legs casually intertwined. All their focus is on the screen.

The screen I can’t see from the counter stool where I’m perched right

now.

“Shit,” my brother groans, pointing his beer at the screen. “Jessie, do you believe this?”

I walk behind the couch to catch the replay of the interception our QB shouldn’t have thrown. Nobody was open, damn it. He should’ve just tossed the ball out of bounds. “Oh, man. That is just wrong.”

It’s a good game. My whole family loves football—it’s our thing. I ruffle Jamie’s hair to console him over that awful play.

“Sit down,” my brother says, pointing at the obvious piece of furniture. The one I’ve been avoiding since I crossed their threshold. “The massage chair is awesome,” he adds.

Right.

I approach the chair the way I might approach a bloody crime scene—with both curiosity and discomfort. It still looks brand new, with buttery leather upholstery and a deep seat.

“Something wrong?” Jamie asks. He’s watching me like I’ve lost my mind.

“Not a thing!” I turn and sit on the edge of the chair. Actually, *sit* isn’t the right word. I perch one butt cheek on the edge of the cushion.

But the memory comes back, anyway. I was sleep deprived on that March day, and really stressed out. I’d taken the red-eye from San Francisco to Toronto to take care of Jamie the first time he’d been released from the hospital. When I’d knocked on the apartment door, Blake Riley had answered.

He and I had clashed immediately, fighting over every little thing—who would get Jamie’s glass of water, what we’d feed him for lunch. And the whole time I was all too aware of how gorgeous he was and how much space his muscular body took up in the room. It was too distracting, and I didn’t like it. I asked him to leave, but he refused, that dickhead.

After I tucked Jamie into bed to sleep off his illness, things got a little weird.

I sat down on the couch feeling teary. I was worried for Jamie, and anxious about a bunch of things in my life. My sister Tammy had just had a new baby. I’d just broken up with my boyfriend. And only a few weeks into my new career, I was already having second thoughts about party planning.

Tired and vulnerable, I’d sat there trying to disguise my unhappiness, surreptitiously wiping my eyes on the sleeve of my T-shirt.

Blake was onto me, though. And that dude is a lot like a big, drooly dog. Doesn't matter if he just met you, he wants to lick your face and hump your leg. Three seconds after I started crying, he was clucking over me, bringing me a cup of water and dabbing my face with tissues.

When that didn't work, he picked me up like I weighed as much as a throw pillow and scooped me into his lap. "Shhh," he'd said. "J-Bomb is gonna be fine. He's tough."

I sniffled and pulled myself together. But the all-nighter I'd pulled to get to Toronto took its toll and made me unusually emotional. I told Blake all my problems. How I'd broken up with Raven because he'd been pushing for us to move in together and I couldn't see that ever happening. How my career choices were always wrong.

"You are a big ol' ball of stress, Jessie," he'd informed me. "I have just the cure."

"You do?"

"Scotch whiskey."

As it happened, accepting a single tumbler of single-malt was a major tactical error.

I drank and watched a movie with Blake. I got sleepier and even more sentimental. Blake went to check on Jamie, returning to tell me that my brother was sleeping like a baby.

"He was such a cute baby," I'd hiccupped into my glass. "I'll never have babies because I can't stick with a man for more than ten seconds." The tears began to leak from my eyes again.

"Shhh," Blake said again. "Time to call in the big guns."

"What?"

"Try this," he'd said, scooping me into the air. We landed a moment later on the massage chair. It was built for one, but Blake didn't care. He reclined in the usual fashion, positioning me on his lap. "Here we go," he said, his voice smokier than I wished it was. There was a click, and then the chair began to hum. "Now that's what I'm talking about," he'd drawled.

It was...different. A wave of harmony swept down my frame. Big hands landed on my shoulders and began to massage me.

"Aauuughhhg," I moaned.

"I know, right? I think I need one of these in every room of my apartment." He kissed the back of my head, and it didn't even seem weird. My tired, tipsy eyes flickered over to the TV, where the movie we'd put on

had advanced to a make-out session between the action hero and the starlet he was trying to protect from the mob. He pushed her down on the bed and climbed on her body.

“Ugh,” Blake grunted from behind me. He was watching the movie, too.

That’s when I realized his lap had firmed up. A lot.

Sitting here again six months later, my memory of that night seems a little questionable. Because the hard length that had been pressing against me in the chair had been so ridiculously sizable that it almost seemed impossible. From that moment on, I could think of nothing else. In fact, I’d arched my back a little just to see if it would still be there when I returned...

As I close my eyes to try to sink deeper into the memory, Jamie’s apartment door flies open, hitting the wall with a bang.

“Wesmie!” Blake calls out. “Whatcha watching?”

I leap to my feet as if the massage chair had just delivered an electric shock.

Blake stops, his body freezing into position in the doorway. “J-Babe. Welcome to Toronto.”

“Thanks,” I squeak. A glance at my brother and his husband calms me only a little. The game is back on, so they haven’t noticed my odd behavior. And Blake’s presence is so routine that they seem not to have registered him, either.

Blake stomps into the kitchen to toss the six-pack he’s brought onto the counter. He takes one of the beers, pops off the top and then crosses the room again.

I’m still standing in front of the chair like a dork.

He nudges me aside. Then he sits down in the chair, reaches down and slips the switch.

The hum of the chair makes goosebumps rise all over my body.

Blake looks up at me, an evil glint in his eye. Then he pats his massive thigh. “There’s room right here.”

Several parts of my body spasm at once, including my uncooperative mouth. “Graghhff,” I say as panic sets in. I lift my beer bottle to my lips and drain it.

When I check his face again, he’s watching me lick my lips, his lust-filled gaze aiming like a laser pointer at me.

“I gotta go,” I stammer.

“Aw, but I just got here.”

All the more reason to go.

I turn to my brother. "I have class at nine tomorrow. I should really get a good night's sleep, you know, so I'm bright and bushy-tailed for my first day of school." I give a half-hearted fist pump. "Yay school!"

Jamie stands up. "You're going to do great, Jessie." He slings an arm around my shoulder. "Come on, I'll walk you to the streetcar stop."

Blake is on his feet in a heartbeat. "No need. I can drive you."

No way. "No way." Shit, did I say that out loud? At Blake's hurt expression, and Jamie and Wes's confused ones, I hasten to add, "I'll be fine taking public transit. I don't want to put you out."

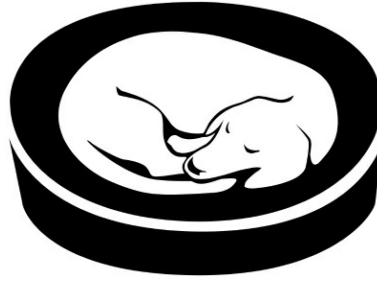
The seductive look he gives me says I can put him anywhere I want, any time, any place. Luckily, Jamie and Wes don't see it, because they're too busy looking at me. "I'd feel better if Blake drove you back to the dorm," Jamie admits. "You're not used to the transit system here yet, and it's late."

Blake walks over and claps Jamie's back. "No worries, J-Bomb. I'll make sure J-Babe gets home safe. I'll even walk her all the way to her door." He brightens. "We can do a buddy-system thing, holding hands and all that so we don't get separated."

I swallow a scream. "Don't even think about holding my hand," I grumble. "But fine, if you're serious, then let's go."

He makes a grand gesture toward the door. "After you, milady."

10 A FOX NOT A DOG



Blake

“Cheezus, it’s just a ride home, Old Yeller. I’m not taking you out back to shoot you.”

Jess glares at me from the passenger seat. “Did you just call me old?”

Grinning, I start the engine and reverse out of the underground parking spot. “So it’s okay to call you a dog, but it’s not cool if I say you’re old?”

“Because I know I’m not a dog,” she says haughtily. She winks at me. “I’m a fox.”

Hell yeah, she is. It was damn impossible to keep my tongue inside my mouth when I walked into Wesmie’s place and saw Jess Canning standing there in her tight jeans and low-cut tank. Her body is out of this fucking world.

“But you think you’re old?” I prompt.

“I *am* old.” Her expression darkens again, and I kind of wish I hadn’t revisited the age comment. “I’m a twenty-six-year-old freshman—I feel ancient.”

“Aw, honey, you’re not ancient.” I give her a very slow, very pointed onceover, making sure to stare extra long at the delectable tits that are practically pouring out of her top. “You’re the hottest freshman I know.”

Instead of thanking me, she shifts her gaze out the window. I can see the pout of her lips and the nervous set of her profile. “This car is such a gas guzzler,” she mutters. “Do you really need to drive this macho-mobile?”

Seriously? At six-five and two hundred and fifty pounds, I don’t fit comfortably in many vehicles. Even this Hummer is a wee bit cramped for my rockin’ physique. “Have you seen me? Oh wait—you have.” I give her a

wink and she blushes.

My macho mobile emerges from the underground, and I steer onto the main street. Admittedly, the Hummy is like ten feet taller than all the other vehicles on the road. I like that, though. Makes me feel like a badass.

The hot blonde next to me, however... She makes me feel all of two feet tall. Seriously. She's not good for my ego, this one. "You should've told me you were moving to the T-Dot."

"It was last-minute," she answers without looking over.

"So? Takes all of a second to shoot a text."

"Why would I do that?"

"Because we're friends?"

"Are we?"

I smirk at her. "Would you rather I said 'former lovers'? Or maybe soon-to-be-lovers-again?"

She smirks back. "In your dreams."

"Fuck, yes. *Absolutely* in my dreams. The wet kind." I reach over and cover her knee with my palm. "How about we make those dreams a reality?"

Jess flicks my hand away. "Do you ever give up?"

"I play hockey."

"I didn't ask what sport you play!"

"That's the answer, though. Do I give up? Of course not. I'm a hockey player."

She makes an unflattering noise under her breath, then jerks when the cup holder starts vibrating. Or rather, when my phone makes it vibrate.

"Check that for me, will ya?" I ask as I execute a miraculous lane change without smashing into any other cars. This Hummer wasn't designed for the narrow streets of downtown Toronto.

"It's a text. From...Brenna." Jess puts on a high-pitched voice. "*Blakey! I need that recipe for your famous Rippin' Riley sangria!*"

My sister doesn't sound like that at all, but Jess doesn't give me the chance to point that out. She just grumbles something else under her breath.

"What was that?" I ask.

"Nothing."

The light at the intersection turns amber, and I slam my foot on the brakes harder than necessary, mostly because I want to stretch my arm out and across Jess's chest to protect her from such an abrupt stop. An intentionally abrupt stop, but whatever.

“Oh my God! Did you just cop a feel?” she sputters.

“Of course.”

“Blake.”

I glance over. “What is it, baby?”

Aggravation flares in her brown eyes. “Don’t call me baby.”

“Okay, J-Babe.”

“Don’t call me that, either.” She thrusts both hands through her hair. “You know what? Pull over after this light.”

My dick does a happy dance against my zipper. “*That’s* what I’m talking about.”

“Not for that,” she screeches. “We...” She takes a deep breath. She seems to do that a lot when I’m around. I make her breathless. “We need to get a few things straight.”

Shit, I don’t like the sound of that. But I still do what she asks, pulling over the moment I see an empty stretch of curb. It’s a fire zone, so I leave the engine running in case we need to drive away quick-fast.

Jess starts saying ridiculous things the moment the car comes to a stop. “Here’s the situation, Blake. We’re not going out. We’re not having sex again. We’re not sexting or flirting or playing these weird games. We’re not *anything*, okay?”

“Are you playing hard to get?” I’m genuinely asking, because I’m genuinely not sure.

“No! I’m not! I—”

My phone buzzes again. “Hold that thought,” I cut in, because I see my sister’s name on the screen. Bethy, this time, reminding me that Brenna’s baby shower is coming up. Not that I’d forgotten—I’m about to become an uncle for the first time, and I’m totally pumped about it. My fingers are too big for this touch screen, so it takes longer than it should for me to text back a quick *Duh. I’ll be there with bells on.*

“Are you done?” Jess’s tone is lined with impatience.

“Sorry.” I drop the phone in the cup holder.

She takes another breath. “Look. I’m sorry I led you on at Jamie’s wedding. I shouldn’t have let you...uh...do stuff to me. It was good—”

“I do good work,” I say with a nod.

“—but it was a mistake.”

“Giving you orgasms is a mistake?”

“Yes, it is. *Was*. I won’t be falling into bed with you again, okay? I’m

not in the right headspace to sleep with anyone right now. I'm starting a new school program. I'm in a new city I don't know my way around yet. I need to buckle down and be serious for once in my life, and you, Blake, are not... um..."

"I'm not what? What's so bad about hooking up with me again?" I challenge, just as my phone buzzes for a third time.

"Oh my God. Who is it now?" Jess snatches it from the cup holder, her lips tightening as she reads the message. "*Britt* wants to know if she can get an extra ticket for the next home game so she can bring her sorority sister Cassandra." Growling, she slaps the phone in my hand. "*That's* why I won't hook up with you again. Three different chicks have texted you in the span of ten minutes! Three!"

I open my mouth to object, but she cuts me off again.

"You're a player, Blake. You're hands down the least serious person I've ever met in my life. You're fun, I'll give you that. But fun is the last thing I need at the moment. All I want to do is study my ass off and impress my instructors and keep my scholarship."

Her little speech makes me bristle. Yeah, I get it. I'm fun. I like to laugh. I like to fuck. And why the hell not? Life is too damn short, and I want to enjoy every second that I have on this awesome planet. I want good food and fast hockey and hot girls and even hotter orgasms.

I tried the serious thing once before. I almost got *married*, and look where that almost got me. Serious is overrated.

Without a word, I move the gearshift and pull away from the curb.

"What, you're mad at me now? Just because I was honest?"

"Honest?" I spare her a brief, smug look. "That wasn't honesty, honey. That was you making excuses because you're too freaked out by how much you want me. And PS? All those chicks who just texted? They're my sisters, so you can retract those Jealous Jessie claws."

Another glance reveals her expression to be a combo of frustration and sheepishness. "Your sisters?" she echoes dumbly.

"Yup. All three of them."

"Brenna, Beth, Britt...and Blake. Did your parents stop watching *Sesame Street* after the letter B and didn't realize there was more to the alphabet?"

I snicker. "That's a good one. Remind me to tell it to my ma next time I see her."

I turn left onto Jess's new street, and she directs me to a low-rise on our right. "Just park here," she says. "This is my dorm."

I give the building a quick appraisal. It's made of red brick and looks bland as hell, but this area is safe and clean, so I approve. "I'll walk you inside." I move to flick the ignition.

"No, it's okay." She reaches for the door handle, then hesitates. With a sigh, she offers me a rueful look. "I'm sorry. That stuff I said about us not being friends. We *are* friends. You're a good guy, Blake. Seriously. And now that I'm living in Toronto, I know we'll probably end up seeing a lot of each other because of Wes and my brother. But it's not going to lead to any sexy-times, okay? I meant it when I said I don't have time for that. I..." She blows out a tired breath. "I need to focus. I really, really need to focus."

Aw. I have a Stress Jess on my hands. That's what's really happening here. I've been accused of having a bulldozer approach, but even I know to not push a chick who's so clearly on the ledge. I'll have to de-stress her, obviously. Just not tonight.

"It's fine," I assure her. "You go ahead and focus on what you need to focus on."

She eyes me suspiciously. "Really?"

"Uh-huh. Focus away."

Her hand moves to the door handle again.

"Oh, one other thing," I say before she can go. "A minor thing, really, but we gotta be on the same page, right? I mean, I like hearing someone tell me when I'm wrong. Constructive criticism, you know?"

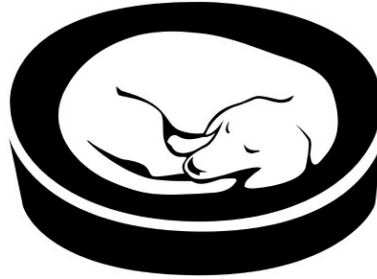
"What the heck are you talking about? Who's wrong about what?"

"You, about, well, everything." I grin at her. "We're way more than friends, Jessie."

"Blake—" She sounds exasperated.

"But no worries," I finish breezily. "I'll just sit tight until you figure that out."

11 CHEEZUS



Blake

She hasn't figured it out yet.

I was hoping it wouldn't take long for Jess to acknowledge to herself how hot she is for me. A day, maybe day and a half, seems to be the right amount of time for such an easy thing to figure out. But it's been four days since I dropped her off, and she hasn't called or texted.

I told her I'd sit tight, so that's what I'm doing. I'd way rather be naked with her at the moment, but you can't win every game in the third period, right? Sometimes it goes to overtime. Jess and I are in overtime right now, skating around each other until one of us scores. Except in this case, we both score, which...I guess ends in another tie and another OT period?

Fuck. My thoughts are getting away from me and I don't like it. I try not to think Deep Thoughts if I can help it.

The lake outside my apartment window looks a little purple in the sunset. The lights of Toronto shimmer above the waterline. It's a Tuesday evening, there's no game tonight, and I'm hanging around the ol' apartment, considering my options. My place is awesome, but it's a little too quiet at the moment.

There are probably a few of my teammates drinking down at Sticks & Stones, our favorite bar. I could head over there for a couple of beers. That's always a good time. In fact...

I dig out my phone to check for messages. The guys usually let me know where they're drinking on our nights off.

My shoulders tense when I see the screen. Someone has left me a message, all right. But it's not the name I was hoping to see. Not by a long

shot.

Fuck.

Carrying the phone over to my brand-new chair, I sit down and lever my feet into the air. Then I use the clicker to dial up a whole-body massage and press *start*. I lean back as the chair begins to do its thing, the rollers kneading my lower back and calves first.

Only when the relaxing powers of the world's best chair have kicked in do I dare press *play* on the voicemail message.

"Hi Blake," a soft, familiar voice says into my ear. "It's Molly."

Pity. There goes the possibility that she'd butt-dialed me by accident. I brace myself.

"I was hoping we could go out for coffee," she says timidly.

"No can do!" I announce to nobody in particular.

"We need to catch up, okay? I convinced my firm to relocate me to Toronto for good."

"Nooooo!" I yell.

"So we're going to see each other from time to time. I'll be at your sister's shower next weekend. Let's not be awkward, okay? I want to see you and hear what's new. It would be good for us to be friends again."

That's it. That's all I can take. I hit *delete* on the voicemail and drop my phone on the rug.

The chair does its level best, rolling its tireless mechanical hands over my back and then down past my ass. But no massage chair in the world could overpower the bad news I just received.

I'm good at staying upbeat. The team psychologist loves me, because I can always put the last game behind me and focus on the next challenge coming down the road. But when there are toxic people in your life, it's trickier.

I need some non-toxic people. Quick!

With a flick of my wrist I shut off the chair and then bounce to my feet. It only takes me a couple of minutes to ride the elevator down a few floors and pound on Wesmie's door.

There's a muted grumble, and a chuckle, too. Sounds like I interrupted a make-out session on the couch. Oops.

"I'll come back later," I tell the door.

"S'okay," Jamie's voice says, coming closer. "We were going to order some dinner anyway." The door opens, revealing a tousled-looking Jamie.

Wes is headed for the kitchen, where he pulls a third wine glass out of the cupboard and pours for me without even asking first.

Did I mention how much I love this man?

“What are you ordering?” I ask.

“How do you feel about Indian?” Jamie suggests.

“Indian food always makes Blake Riley smiley,” I answer. “I’ll buy.”

It’s usually my treat when we order in, because I eat Jamie’s cooking a few times a week. He told me he buys extra of everything because he knows I’ll probably turn up. “And when you don’t, I have leftovers for lunch,” he explained.

Wes hands me a glass of wine. “You want your usual?” he asks, pulling out his phone.

“Yeah, and let’s get the samosas, too. I’m starved.” Bad news makes me hungry.

I sit down in their massage chair, which is identical to my massage chair. This leaves the whole couch for Wesmie. They sit at opposite ends, but Wes puts his feet in Jamie’s lap.

Jamie’s eyes are on the TV screen, where some sports highlights are playing. But his hands unconsciously attach themselves to Wes’s left foot, and he begins to stroke the arch with his thumbs. Watching, I can almost feel how awesome that must be, the pressure just right against muscles tired from today’s brutal morning practice. I could use a massage. Maybe I’ll book one tomorrow with the team therapist.

Wes gives me a frown. “You okay?”

Fuck. I must have been staring. “Sure. ’Course I’m okay. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Well...” Jamie chews his lip thoughtfully. “Got any hot dates lined up? You just seem a little lonely lately.”

“*Lonely*? I don’t get lonely.” Maybe I’m at loose ends a little bit right now, but it’s only because our season hasn’t really started up again. That, and Jess Canning still refuses to accept the inevitable.

Wes and Jamie exchange a glance that irks me. Cheezus. Just because a guy spends a lot of time being the third wheel to the happiest couple alive doesn’t mean he’s *lonely*. That’s ridic.

“Want to watch some *Sense8*?” I suggest, changing the subject. “We’re almost up to the one with that orgy scene that everybody’s talking about.”

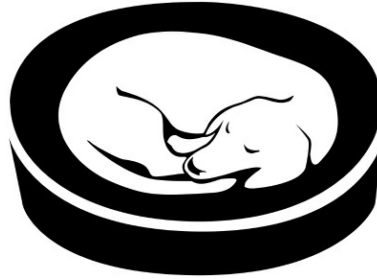
“Sure, buddy,” Wes says kindly. “Cue it up.” He tosses me the clicker

and then slides his other foot into Jamie's welcoming hands.

I dial up our latest show and sit back to watch. I put the massage chair on the quiet setting and relax into its comfy robotic embrace. And everything is just great.

Of course it is.

12 THE LEADER OF THE ALIEN RACE



One Month Later

Jess

I'm freaking out.

Again.

This isn't me, either. I'm not a worrier. Or I didn't used to be. I'm a California girl, damn it. We're chill. We take each day as it comes and make the best of it.

But a month into nursing school I'm not any more relaxed than I was on day one. It's still hard, and I still feel like an alien dropped onto a planet where everyone else has a photographic memory and speaks Latin with great fluency.

The leader of the alien race is Violet Smith. She's squinting at me right now, in fact, as I lean against a hallway wall in the pediatric oncology ward at the hospital. My evil roommate can tell that I'm not paying enough attention to Nurse Hailey, our instructor. But I need a moment to compose myself, because around the corner there's a playroom for patients on the pediatric oncology ward. I am about to come face to face with *kids fighting cancer*.

My classmates are all bent over their clipboards, taking notes as the instructor speaks.

"The play dough is non-toxic, but we still don't want anyone eating it." Nurse Hailey smiles at us. "So feel free to shut that down right away. And if you have any trouble with the rubber-band looms, I'm pretty much an expert now. And just have fun with this. Interacting with the kids comes first. And then, when you're feeling settled, that's when I want you to start to check off

all the observations we've been working on in the classroom with regard to patient assessment. Since this is a stealthy assessment, you don't need to ask the patient any questions. But even without verbal queries you should be able to learn things from the patient's movements, skin tone, audible breath sounds, et cetera."

I clutch my bag of play dough and follow the rest of the class into the big room. It looks like the set of a Nickelodeon show—bright furniture in interesting shapes, a wall painted to resemble the facade of a castle. There are tables and chairs and a TV playing an animated movie.

It's paradise until you look a little closer. A dozen heads turn in our direction as we enter. The kids are all shapes and sizes, but my worried gaze trips over a small bald head and then another. One little girl—she's wearing a glittery T-shirt that says *Girl Power* on the front—is so thin that it hurts to look at her. She smiles, though, and her front teeth are missing.

I want to bolt from the room.

My hesitation costs me. The other nursing students scatter like heat-seeking missiles. They each pick a child and sit right down to do their thing. Seconds later, they're bonding already.

I look frantically around, but all the kids have been taken. My evil roommate smirks at me over the top of the painfully thin little girl's head. For the last four weeks, she's enjoyed my discomfort. Whenever I have to ask her a question—when my notes aren't clear enough or when I just don't understand something—it makes her entire week.

Now I'm standing here in the center of the room, uncertain. My eyes sweep one more time, finding only unaccompanied adults around the edges of the space—nurses in their bunny-rabbit pediatric scrubs, and a parent or two.

And a teenager.

Oh.

She's sitting at a table alone, stabbing angrily at her knitting. Her fingers are white sticks against the dark yarn. She's wearing a scarf tied around her scalp, and there's a dark circle under each of her eyes and a scowl on her face.

I wander over, feeling tentative.

"Don't want any," she mutters as I approach.

"Well..." I sit across the table from her anyway. "I'm here to force you to make a play dough jack-o'-lantern with me. My entire semester's grade is

riding on this, so make it good.”

She looks up quickly, confusion and scorn mixed together on her face. “What the fuck?”

“*Joking*,” I sputter, the tension getting to me. I actually giggle. “Jeez.”

For a split second something like humor crosses her face. Then the scowl returns. “You’re a nursing student?”

“Yup.”

“Pay close attention when they teach you to draw blood. Because most of the nurses here suck at it. Big time. I look like a junkie with track marks because none of them can find a damn vein.” She shows me her forearm, where I see some nasty bruising.

“Ouch. I’m sorry.”

My sympathy doesn’t go very far with her. “Whatever. I’m having a spinal tap tomorrow. That’s ten times worse.” She squints at her knitting and then suddenly throws it down. “My mother says that knitting is relaxing. But this ribbing is all wrong and I just want to stab someone with the needles.”

Given the look on her face, I think she’s mere seconds away from following through with that threat. “I know ribbing,” I say quickly. “What’s the problem?”

“Really?” For the first time since I sat down, she looks hopeful. And the change of expression takes years off her gaunt face. “Why do I have all these extra loops?” She passes her knitting to me.

And it’s a total wreck.

“Hmm...” I say, taking care to find the right words. “The regular stockinette stitch looks great.” She’s made a bunch of stripes—burgundy and mustard-colored.

“Thank you.”

“But the ribbing has some issues.”

“It’s a disaster.”

“I think I know why. When you switch between knit and purl, you have to move the yarn before you take the stitch. Those extra loops happen when the yarn is in the wrong place. When you’re going to knit next, it needs to be in back, and when you’re going to purl, it has to be in front.”

“Oh,” she says slowly. “Can you show me?”

“Sure. But we’re fixing this, right?”

“Can it even be fixed?”

“Anything can be fixed.” I grab the stitches and slide the whole thing off

the needle.

With a gasp, she clutches her heart.

“Omigod, are you okay?” I squeak, sounding *nothing* like a nurse.

She points a shaking finger at the knitting. “You just...murdered it.”

“No I didn’t.” I grab the working yarn and tug, and her stitches start to fly apart.

“Holy...” With a sob she buries her eyes in her hands. “You’re going to drop all the stitches. That took me *weeks*.”

“No—look! If you want to be a good knitter, you have to be a good unknitter.”

One eye emerges from behind her hand. “Can’t look. That’s like...gory! Blood and guts everywhere.”

“Do you have a name?” I ask, working quickly. It takes me about sixty seconds to remove the bad stitches and then catch all the remaining ones on the needle again.

“Leila,” she says from behind her hands.

“Look now, Leila. See? You only lost a half inch of knitting.” I pass it back to her.

“Wow.” She turns it over in her hands. “Okay. That’s pretty cool.” She picks up the other needle and knits two stitches. “Now tell me what you mean about moving the yarn.”

I show her. “Now, with that yarn in front, purl.”

She hesitates.

“You’ve got this.” I mimic the right motion and give her the memory line I used to learn knitting. “Come out the front door, grab your scarf...”

She puts the needle through and wraps it.

“Now duck out the back before the cat barfs.”

“Oh my fucking God,” she says, squinting at the needle. “Worst rhyme ever.”

“It worked, though. Where is the gratitude? Now move the yarn to the back and get ready to knit.”

She does. And a few minutes later, she’s holding her knitting up to the light and crowing about how great it looks. “Like real ribbing!”

“That’s because it is.”

We talk knitting for a while longer, and then I’m surprised when Nurse Hailey taps me on the back and says our time is up. “Meet us out in the hallway, please,” she says.

“Thank you,” Leila tells me. “I didn’t get your name.”

“It’s Jess. Good luck with your...is it going to be a sweater?” I ask, although the knitted piece is really too small for that.

“A hat,” she replies, and then the shape makes more sense. “It’s for my little brother. He loves Harry Potter, and these are Gryffindor colors. It’s for Christmas.”

“Oh! That’s brilliant. He’s going to love it. And you’re almost there. This will be done way before Christmas.”

Tired eyes lift to mine. “Has to,” she says, and her gaze dares me to look away. “I’m stage four. Might not make it to Christmas.”

Just like that, I crumple inside.

My exterior keeps going. I take her hand and give it a gentle squeeze. I call her by name and make eye contact and tell her I’ll be thinking about her. I pick up my bag with the play dough inside, and my feet carry me out the door.

Half the nursing students are in the hallway already. They’re bent over their clipboards, their pens flying over the page, their observations spilling forth. When I come to stand beside Violet, she’s writing “contusions on the inner arm.”

She sees me looking over her shoulder, and her head snaps up, clipboard hugged to her chest. “What the hell? Are you copying me?”

Of course I’m not. But it wasn’t until I saw Violet’s handwriting that I remembered all the observations we were supposed to be making.

I failed. Again.

This realization is a second little bomb going off inside my chest. So even though Nurse Hailey hasn’t come out yet to speak to us, I turn and march down the hall, heading for the elevators.

“Where are you going?” Violet calls after me. “Class isn’t over.”

I don’t even turn to look. I can’t, because there are tears spilling over now, tracking down my face.

When I step into the elevator, it’s already impossible to remember why I wanted any of this in the first place. Not only is nursing school hard, but sad things wait for me when it’s over. Everyone I left behind on the ward is better prepared than I am. None of them are escaping the building like me.

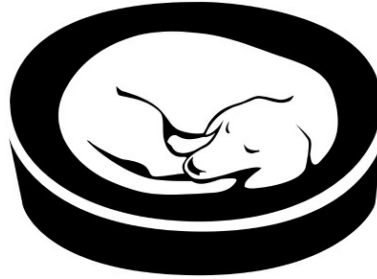
As I often do, I take the subway to my brother’s apartment. That’s my refuge. When Violet’s lip curls once too often, I hide in the waterfront condo at dinnertime.

On the train, I open my nursing textbook in my face and hide behind it until the tears stop.

That poor kid, knitting her brother a hat in October, in case she doesn't make it to December.

Why?

13 CRANKINESS MAKES SENSE



Jess

Jamie isn't home from work yet, but I let myself into the apartment with the spare key they gave me. He told me via text to get dinner started if I felt like it, and although I *don't* feel like it, I do it anyway. He and Wes are nice enough to let me come over and eat their food every other night, so I might as well contribute in any way I can.

Not having money sucks. My bank account is like a horror movie—I can't check the balance without screaming. The student loans I took out allow me a certain amount for living expenses, but I'm being extra stingy with those funds, buying only the bare necessities.

I had a friend in college who had a ton of cash left over from her loan (because she couldn't be bothered to buy any textbooks) and she blew it on manicures and hair appointments. We all kept telling her it wasn't free money and that loans need to be repaid. She didn't listen, and now she's paying the price in the form of insanely high interest rates. I, on the other hand, am going to be smart about this. There's no such thing as free money. Anything extra, I'm keeping in my savings account and using to pay the sharks back.

Though I suppose buying groceries for Jamie and Wes every now and then would probably make me less of a dick for eating all their food.

I'm chopping up a green pepper at the counter when the front door creaks open. "In here!" I call out. "How do you feel about fajitas?"

"I feel awesome about fajitas!"

I freeze mid-chop. That's not Jamie's voice. Or Wes's. Nope, it's—

"J-Babe!" Blake looks delighted to see me as he lumbers into the kitchen.

“Hi,” I say, hoping my reluctance doesn’t show on my face. I don’t know if I can handle this man’s ceaseless energy right now, not when I’m feeling so low.

I’ve encountered Blake too often for my comfort this month, which was inevitable given that I’ve taken to hiding out here because my roommate is unbearable. Blake practically lives in this condo (I honestly don’t know how Wes and my brother haven’t killed him yet), so the four of us have hung out a lot. Oddly enough, he hasn’t hit on me, not even once. I guess he was serious about the ball being in my court. Or maybe it’s because Jamie and Wes are always around.

“You look hot enough to fuck.”

Yup, obviously the latter. The big lug wouldn’t dream of saying something like that in front of his teammate and my brother.

“You need to work on your conversation skills,” I tell him.

“Naw. I make great conversation.”

He wanders over to the counter and props one hip against it. Even slouched over like that, he still towers over me, and I can’t help but eye the way his sweatpants ride low on his hips and admire every ripple on his chest under his faded gray T-shirt.

“And I mean it,” he adds. “You look gloriously fuckable. Shall we retire to our chair?”

Despite myself, a laugh pops out. That makes his green eyes light up.

“A laugh? Oh yeah, I’m totally getting some tonight.”

I resume my chopping. “I’m sorry to inform you that you’re not. I’m just here to eat.”

“Me too. I like eating. Food, but also other things. I’m a voracious eater, Jessie.”

I snicker.

“Holy cannoli! Another laugh? I’m *on fire* tonight.”

He’s so ridiculous, it’s impossible not to smile, but my good humor doesn’t last long. I’ve cut up enough peppers and now it’s time to dice an onion. But the fake tears it brings to my eyes confuse my already depressed mind, and suddenly I’m blinking back *real* tears.

“I skipped class,” I blurt out.

“Abrupt subject change,” Blake remarks.

I blink faster. “Well, I didn’t skip it entirely. I just left early.” Before Nurse Hailey could call me out for being a screw-up in front of my fellow

students.

“Okay... Should I call the cops and report you?”

Stifling a sigh, I set down the knife and meet his bewildered eyes. “I didn’t observe.”

“Cheezus. Do you always talk in riddles?”

I quickly explain myself. “We were in the cancer ward. The *kiddie* cancer ward.”

“Eek.”

“I know, right? And we were supposed to sit down with one of the patients and talk to them, but, you know, observe them at the same time. For visible symptoms.” The sigh slips out. “I got the talking part down pat, but I totally dropped the ball on the observing. I didn’t take any notes. Everyone else took notes, and then Nurse Hailey wanted us to report our findings and... I just bailed. I was too embarrassed. I felt like such an idiot.”

I keep my gaze on the cutting board, because I’m yet again feeling embarrassed. I can’t believe I’m spilling my guts to this man.

A warm hand lands on my cheek, making me jerk in surprise. I raise my head and see Blake’s somber gaze fixed on me.

“You’re not an idiot, Jess,” he says quietly. “You’re one of the smartest people I know.”

“Yeah, I’m so smart I spent twenty minutes teaching a kid about knitting instead of doing the job I was supposed to do.”

“What was she like?”

The question comes out of left field. “What do you mean?”

“The kid you were talking to. What was she like?”

“Frustrated,” I admit. “She was knitting a hat for her brother and couldn’t get the stitching right.”

“Why not? Does she just suck at knitting, or were her hands too weak?”

I think it over. “No, her hands were steady. I mean, she had bruising on her wrists and the insides of her elbows from all the needles, but her grip was strong.” I chew on my bottom lip. “But she had dark circles under her eyes, too, so maybe she was too tired to knit.” I smile. “And she was kinda cranky.”

“Stage three cancer? Four?” he asks.

“Four.”

Blake nods, his fingertips lazily tracing my jawline. I find myself leaning into the warmth of those big fingers.

“Crankiness makes sense,” he says. “You see a lot of anger and irritability at the terminal stage.”

My forehead wrinkles. “How do you know that?”

“My grandpa died of colon cancer a few years back. He was a cranky son of a bitch by the end. The pain got to him, screwed with his head.”

I think back to Leila, trying to remember if she’d shown any signs of pain. Her breathing hadn’t sounded too stable, and she’d been so pale. And thin. So damn thin. My heart clenches at the memory.

“Sounds to me like you observed plenty.” Blake’s thumb teases my lips, and then he lightly pinches them. “Maybe next time you should write that shit down. Or at the very least, stick around for the debriefing, or whatever you call it in nursing school, and tell your teacher everything you just told me.”

I bristle, but only for a second. He’s right. I *had* observed. I’d observed without even realizing it, and now I feel like an even bigger idiot.

“Argh!” I groan. “Why didn’t I stay?”

“Panic?” he offers.

Yes. Panic. And that crushing feeling of inferiority that my awful roommate seems to instill in me. “I saw Violet’s clipboard and...” Another groan slips out. “She wrote a fucking essay, Blake, and it killed my confidence.”

“Violet? The evil roommate?”

I nod. I’ve complained about her every time I’ve visited the condo, but I’m surprised Blake actually paid attention. He doesn’t come off as someone who retains information, unless it relates to sex or hockey.

“She makes me feel like such a loser,” I confess. “She’s just so...smart. Scary smart. She spends all her free time with her nose buried in a textbook. I swear, she studies twenty-four/seven. I asked her if she wanted to study together and she...” My cheeks heat up. “She *laughed* at me.”

Blake hops up on the countertop and rests his hands on his massive thighs. I’m surprised the counter doesn’t collapse under his hefty weight. “Well, that’s your mistake right there, honey. You don’t try to make friends through *studying*.”

“But that’s all she does! This nursing program is literally the only thing we have in common.”

“No, it’s not.”

I roll my eyes. “You know something about Violet that I don’t?”

“I know something about college,” he says with a shrug. “Thing about

college, Jessie, is that it's goddamn stressful."

I can't help but snort. "Uh-huh, I'm sure you were so stressed at whatever party school you went to. All those exhausting frat parties! God! How did you ever survive?"

He wags a finger at me. "Well, aren't we judgy. I needed a C-average to be eligible to play hockey—you think I kept that up without going to class? I went to class, dudette. I even wrote a few papers. Typed them up and everything."

Guilt pokes at me. I really do need to stop judging this guy. "Sorry," I mumble.

He waves off the apology. "Anyway, school means stress. And stress makes everyone a little bitchy."

"So you're saying I should be patient with Violet?"

"I'm saying you should get trashed with her. Fuck studying. Take Bitchy Betty to a bar and get lit. I guarantee you'll find some common ground if you both let down your guards."

I stare at him.

"What?"

"That's not bad advice."

"Course it's not. It's grade-A wisdom."

I bite my lip again. "What happens if we go to a bar—that's if she even agrees to it—and we've got nothing to talk about?"

"Naw, that won't happen. Text me the deets. I'll come along. People always have shit to say to me."

He's right about that. "You're inviting yourself to my roommate bonding date?" I say with a grin.

"Why not? I'll bring a couple of the guys. Maybe Bitchy Betty is just bitchy because she needs a good lay. Is she cute?"

"Violet?" I picture her stern face. She's so severe that it's hard to objectively assess her appearance. "I guess she's cute," I finally answer. "She's got great skin, and she's very petite. Like a china doll. Brown eyes, glasses—"

"Lemming," Blake interrupts. "Yeah, Lemming will be all over that. He's got a librarian fetish."

My eyes widen. "Really?"

"Oh yeah. Every away game, he asks the team manager to try to put us up in a hotel that's got some business conference going on. Then he sits in

the bar and waits for a glasses-and-pantsuit-wearing broad to walk in.” Blake grins. “My friends are the coolest.”

“Your friends are the weirdest.” My teeth dig into my lower lip. “I don’t know how Violet will feel about hanging out with a bunch of rowdy hockey players.”

“She’ll love it,” he assures me. “And would you quit biting your lip like that? It’s making my dick hard.”

Shaking my head, I pick up the knife again and get back to dicing. “I should’ve known you couldn’t go five minutes without bringing up your stupid dick.”

“My dick isn’t stupid. He’s the smartest fella I know.” Blake slides that enormous body off the counter and lazily approaches me.

I stiffen, but for some reason, I don’t move. I just stay put as he slowly eases in behind me, planting both hands on my hips as he nuzzles the nape of my neck.

My pulse quickens. Damn it. Why is he so frickin’ sexual? And why does he smell so good? I’ve got an *onion* right under my nose, yet all I can breathe in is Blake’s woodsy scent.

“Jess...”

I squeak when his groin tucks up against my butt. Oh my God, he is hard. Unbelievably, mouth-wateringly hard, and his erection is so impressive that I choke down a moan. The first and only time he’d slid that huge monster inside me, I almost came on the spot. I’d never felt more full in my entire life.

“Jess,” he murmurs again.

I find my voice. “Mmmm?”

He rotates his hips, and a jolt of desire shoots down to my core. “I haven’t had sex since June.”

The hoarsely voiced confession startles me. “Somehow I don’t believe that.”

“It’s the truth. Haven’t been with anyone since I went down on you at the wedding.”

I’m tempted to turn around so I can look into his eyes, gauge if he’s telling the truth. But I’m afraid that if I do, the lust I’ll find on his face will shatter my defenses.

“I jerk it every night thinking about you,” he rasps, his lips tickling the shell of my ear. “So for the love of God, babe, why don’t you put me out of my misery and throw me a bone? You know I’ll make it good for you.”

I have no doubt about that. My gaze unwittingly travels across the open-concept space and lands on the massage chair. Every square inch of my body begins to tingle as dirty, filthy images flood my mind. Blake unzipping his pants while I wiggled out of mine. Blake's teeth sinking into my neck as his hands toyed with my breasts. His low growl of need as he lowered me onto his cock and—

“Jess! You here?”

Blake and I break apart at Jamie's shout. I immediately pick up the knife, while Blake slides to the other side of the counter. My cheeks are hot enough to start a brush fire, and I pray that Jamie doesn't comment on it.

My brother enters the kitchen, shrugging out of his fall jacket as he says, “Oh good, you started dinner. I'm famished.” He glances over. “Hey, man, what're you doing here? Wes said there was some team PR meeting after practice.”

Blake nods. “It's only for the guys who are playing in the charity tourney.”

“Oh, you're not doing that? I thought you were.”

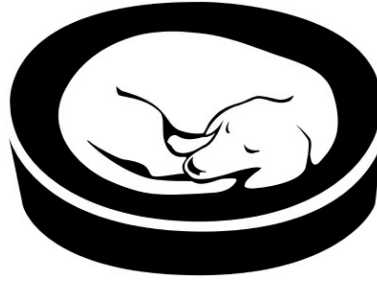
“Trainers didn't want me to take any chances. You know, 'cause of my bum knee. It'd be stupid to risk reinjuring it for a game that doesn't count for standings.”

“Truth.”

As the two of them continue to chat, I keep my gaze on the onion I'm dicing and force my heartbeat to regulate. Thank God Jamie came home when he did. Five seconds later and I would've been bent over this counter, presenting myself to Blake like a dog in heat.

Jesus. Imagine if my brother had walked in on that? I'd never hear the end of it.

14 BITCH, I'M CANADIAN



Jess

“Wow. You got a special favor from Nurse Hailey?” Violet peers at me over the lip of her pint glass, her nose scrunched up.

“Not so special,” I say, hating my defensive tone. “She said it wasn’t a big deal that I hadn’t turned in my observations that same minute. She was happy to have them before class today.”

I’d sweated it for forty-eight hours, though, thinking she was going to give me a lecture about turning assignments in on time. Instead she’d said, “I’m glad to see you feeling more upbeat today. That ward always gets to me, too.”

“Um...” Nurse Hailey’s sympathetic look had surprised me. “I’m sure I can get used to it.”

“You will,” she’d said. “But not because you’ll be hardened to it. But rather because your work in nursing will become a real balance between the good and the sad. Once you’re sure you’re making a contribution, the scary stuff gets easier to take.”

I don’t share this wisdom with Violet, because I am not in the mood to hear her sour opinion on it. Or on anything else. We’ve been at the bar for ten minutes, and I’m already certain it’s a mistake. Not only do Violet and I have nothing in common, she keeps blatantly showing off all the knowledge she’s socked away in her frontal, parietal, occipital and temporal lobes.

There’s an anatomy quiz tomorrow on the central nervous system. I think I’m finally ready. It’s the first time I’ve felt confident about classwork this year.

“Today Ashleigh and I read ahead in the anatomy textbook,” she

announces.

Of course they did. Ashleigh is one of Violet's nerd friends.

"The circulatory system is going to be a real bitch. All those veins and arteries? It's, like, ten times harder than the quiz we're taking tomorrow. And—God—Ashleigh actually confused veins and capillaries today. I mean, I'm sure she'll pull it together before the test, but can you believe it?" She gives a little shake of disgust at the idea, while I make a mental note to Google *capillaries* later.

My confidence dissipates like the foam on top of my beer. I'd ordered the least expensive draft they had. The one flaw in Blake's plan to go out drinking with Violet is the fact that the team's favorite bar—Sticks & Stones—*isn't* cheap.

Speaking of Blake, I crane my neck, wondering when he's going to show up.

"So who's your friend, anyway?"

"Blake Riley? Oh, he's my brother's neighbor. You wouldn't know him. Hockey player. Not exactly up on his anatomy." Wait—that wasn't strictly true. Blake is very well-versed in the reproductive organs, and, well, my nervous system. Whenever he touches me, all my synapses short out...

I catch a funny look on Violet's face. "What?" I ask. "Something wrong?"

She uses a low, hushed voice I've never heard before. "You can't be serious. Not *that* Blake Riley. Not the Toronto forward." Her eyes become saucer-like.

Uh-oh. Have I fucked up yet again? "What? You don't like hockey?"

She gulps. "Bitch, I'm *Canadian*. Of course I like hockey. I *love* hockey. You can't tell me you *know* Blake Riley."

I shrug. "Of course I do. *All* my Toronto friends are on the hockey team."

"All. Your. Friends," she repeats slowly.

"What, like that's weird?"

Slowly, Violet's wide eyes track upwards, over my head. "Oh God." She puts both hands to the sides of her face and gasps.

A deafening sound booms down from above. "Yo! J-Babe! What are we drinking?"

Blake has arrived. But I can't take my eyes off Violet, because something is very wrong with her. She's holding on to her face, and her

mouth has flopped open. She's doing Edvard Munch's *Scream*, basically. It's so unusual that I'm instantly uneasy.

"Hey, are you okay?" Why would she hold on to her face? Is there weakness there? "Are you...stroking out?"

Shit! What are the signs of stroke? Facial drooping, difficulty speaking! Check and check!

But then she thrusts a hand out. "Blake Riley! I'm a huge fan of your work. That overtime goal against Pittsburg in the playoffs was seminal to my existence."

I make a note to look up *seminal* later. That word must have two meanings. I only know one.

"Nice to meet you, too," Blake says, reaching around me to shake hands with typical Blake-like enthusiasm.

I turn to greet him, and he's so close behind me that we're suddenly face to face. Big, green eyes blink into mine. And, damn it, a sizzle shoots through my chest, tingling through all the various veins and arteries. And maybe even my capillaries, if I knew where those were.

"Hi," I say stupidly.

He winks. "How's it hangin', J-Babe?"

"Not bad. You?"

He makes a face and claps a hand on his thick neck. "Got a crick right here. It's nothing a beer won't fix." He turns away, waving a hand. "Lisa! *Une beer avec moi!*"

"That's not proper French," I point out.

"Baby, I'm very proper when I French." He grabs my ass on the bar stool, and I slap his hand away.

"Don't squeeze the Charmin, dude." I'm still watching Violet carefully, because she's not quite back to normal.

Her eyes are still twice their usual size, although she's talking now. "How on earth do you two know each other?"

"Well, Jess is fun people," Blake explains, patting me on the back. "And I like to have fun. Also, her brother is married to my teammate."

Violet grabs her chest, so now I'm thinking the trouble might be cardiac arrest. "Wait—do you mean Ryan Wesley? You're..." Her eyes practically roll back in her head. "That kind of Canning? Your *brother* is one half of Wesmie?"

"Wesmie is a stupid name," I insist, taking a slug of my beer.

And here I'd spent all this time thinking Violet was smart. But she's been rendered speechless by the appearance of Blake Riley, who is now explaining that he'd *coined* the Wesmie term.

"Always knew I'd go viral some day," he remarks, stroking his chin. "I thought it would probably be a sex tape, or for eating twenty saltines in way under thirty seconds. But you can't choose the way you change popular culture. It chooses *you*. *Je suis un elephant élégante*."

She gapes at him.

"Hey, Jessie!"

I turn and find Wes at my shoulder. With a smile, he leans in and kisses me on the cheek. "I can only stay for one beer. Told Jamie I'd skate with his team at practice tonight. But I have a half-hour to spare."

"Aw!" I hug Wes. "That's so nice. Those kids will be pumped up."

"Sure, 'til I make 'em do suicide sprints." He gives an evil laugh. "Who needs a beer?"

Violet's hand shoots into the air, stick straight, fingers tensed.

"Easy, Hermione," I mutter. "Classes ended an hour ago."

I regret the words as soon as they're out, because Violet actually looks sheepish, which I didn't think was possible on her know-it-all face. So I introduce her to Wes, who buys her a beer, and then to Lemming, who strolls up a few minutes later. Violet almost faints for the third time in ten minutes, but I'm over it now.

"We're heading for Montreal next week for a preseason series," Wes says, tossing cash onto the bar.

"Is that why Blake is pretending to speak French?"

"That would be my guess. Hey—check out evil roomie's face."

I steal a glance at Violet, who is rapt. Lemming is holding her hand in both of his, whispering to her. "Who knew?"

Blake enters the conversation with a snort. "It's a basic law of chemistry. Every chick wants a hockey player."

"Not hardly," I argue. "And I did well in chemistry."

"Kids," Wes warns. "Play nice."

I drink my beer. And then Blake offers me another one, which I accept because he's rich and I'm a poor student who is nice enough to cook his dinner some nights.

"What are you drinking?" he asks. When I tell him, he makes a face. "Let's upgrade you. Yo, Lisa!"

The bartender approaches, all five feet of her. The blue mohawk she's sporting gives her another inch, though. "Whadaya need, Blakey?"

"My girl Jess needs a beer. What would you recommend?"

Lisa tilts her head, appraising me. "I think a Velvet Fog. It's a wheat beer."

That's really not my thing. "How about..."

But Blake holds up a hand. "Lisa *knows*. Trust the process, Jessie."

He and the bartender exchange a glance, and then she moves off to tap me a beer I've never heard of.

"Was that just a little weird?" I whisper to Wes.

He grins over his glass. "Sometimes you just gotta roll with this place." Whatever.

Wes leaves for practice a little later, but two more players arrive—Eriksson and the new guy, Will O'Connor.

Eriksson says hello to me, but then parks himself on a stool, diving into conversation with Lisa. It sounds as if she's counseling him on some aspect of his divorce.

And anyway, I haven't met O'Connor yet, so I focus on him. "I've just had my first month in Toronto, too," I tell him. "It's a nice town, right?"

"It just got nicer," he says in a deep, smoky voice.

Dude, really? I suppress a weary grin. "How's that?" I wonder how cheesy he'll get if I let him.

"Because you're here."

My smile pops free. "Uh-huh. So what else do you like about Toronto?"

"My new place is killer. I rented a penthouse apartment with a hot tub on the terrace."

"Did you, now?" Inwardly my eyes are rolling. Hard.

O'Connor props an elbow on the bar and tips his chin onto his hand. He blinks at me, and his lashes are so long I'm pretty sure I felt a breeze. Will O'Connor is a pretty boy. He's got wavy hair and the aristocratic cheekbones of a Ralph Lauren model.

He's beautiful and he knows it. Even the way he's flashing a bicep at me right now feels rehearsed.

"Sounds like a party," I say. "How's your kitchen? That's the one thing I really hate about living in the graduate student dorm. I can't do any cooking."

"Oh, I'm not much of a cook. As long as the coffee machine works and the fridge is full of beer, I'm a happy boy."

"I see. So the kitchen isn't your favorite room. How about..."

He lifts his eyebrows and grins at me. "The bedroom, you mean? Most chicks want to know *all* about my bedroom."

"I bet they do," I say with a straight face.

He leans in, close enough that his breath tickles my ear. "I can give you a private tour later. Or now if you want. I'm happy to ditch these losers."

I jerk at the nip of his teeth against my earlobe.

Did he just *bite my ear*?

Before I can lecture him about proper bar etiquette, O'Connor is being pulled backward, courtesy of Blake.

"Hands off," Blake says in a low voice. "That's Wes's sister." But the possessive gleam in his eyes makes it clear that any *sisterly* feelings on his side play no part in this macho posturing.

"Chill, bro. Message received." O'Connor winks at me before drifting over to Eriksson.

"What the hell was that?" I hiss at Blake.

"Good question. You go first." He crosses his huge arms over his chest.

"I'm not allowed to talk to your teammates?"

"Talk all you want. But flirting ain't allowed, honey."

Seriously? "I'll flirt with whomever I want," I shoot back.

"Aw, you really think that?" He smiles. "That's so sweet."

I don't get a chance to respond, because he slides onto the stool next to mine and now he's the one whispering in my ear. The sound is so low and dirty that chills break out across my back.

"Baby? If I don't get to fuck you, nobody else gets to fuck you. Especially O'Connor—that dude lays one finger on you and I'll tie him to the net at the rink and practice my slapshot on him."

My eyebrows soar. "Well, aren't we bloodthirsty?"

"Thirsty, period. And hungry. So. Goddamn. Hungry."

As warm lips brush the side of my neck, my panicky gaze darts toward Violet and the others. They're not paying any attention to us, though. My roommate is engrossed in whatever Lemming is saying to her, and Eriksson and O'Connor are chatting up a pair of brunettes now.

"If you're that in need of nourishment, go order another beer. And some nachos." My tone is as indifferent as I can muster. "I'm sure that'll solve the problem."

"Only one thing's gonna solve this problem," Blake corrects. His gaze

lowers to his crotch, and God help me, but I look down, too.

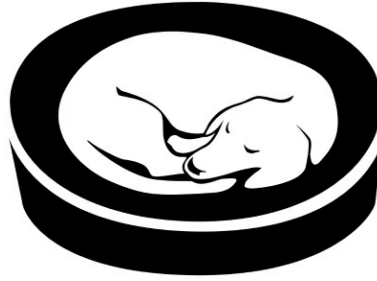
Yep. He's hard. It looks like he shoved a forty of beer down there and tried to smuggle it into the bar.

Why does his dumb dick have to be so stupidly big?

I take a deep swallow of beer and then hop off my stool. "Gotta use the ladies'," I lie. It's either that, or keep sitting here next to Blake and fight the urge to undo his pants.

I scurry away before he can answer. The corridor that leads to the restrooms has two long lines. I stand behind a tall blonde, under the pretense that I indeed have to pee. Which I don't. Though I probably will by the time this line reaches the bathroom.

15 BASIC MATH



Blake

I wait for Jess outside the jill.

When she emerges, I pounce. Even though I don't mean to startle her, she gives a little squeak of surprise when I clamp a hand around her arm and tow her toward the back door.

I push it open, making tracks toward my Hummer, while she sputters out a question. "What...Blake! I wasn't ready to leave!"

"So don't leave. But you and I need a minute alone."

"We really don't."

She could not be more wrong. It's blissfully quiet out here, so I angle her against the door of my oversized car. "We weren't done talking."

"You're never done talking," she mutters back. "All you do is talk, you big motormouth."

I grin down at her. "Did you just call me a motormouth?"

"Yes! Because you are."

"I use my mouth for more than just talking," I remind her. "But you already knew that. Remember back in March? All that begging you did about what I should do with my mouth?"

Her cheeks flame. "I told you, it was a one-time thing."

I slant my head. "And the wedding?"

"Also a one-time thing."

"One plus one equals two, babe."

"Gee, congrats! You can do basic math!" She presses her palms to my chest to try to move me, but I can see the precise moment she gets distracted by the knowledge that she's touching me. Her touch softens and she takes a

shaky breath.

I lean in until our bodies are touching everywhere. “Look, it’s cool. This can be another one-time thing.”

“This?” Her brown eyes lift toward mine.

“Yeah, *this*.” And then my mouth crushes hers. Not a second passes before she grabs on to my shoulders and tugs me closer.

Our tongues meet, and Jess shivers in my arms. I work it slowly, dragging my tongue against hers, devouring her bit by bit. Suddenly, her hips are rocking against me, her leg sliding up to hook around my hip.

I am ridiculously hard. The fly of these jeans is in danger of exploding like my aunt Judy’s pressure cooker last Easter.

Boom!

“Boom?” Jess mumbles against my lips.

I must have said that out loud.

“We need more *room*,” I improvise, expecting to be shot down. But her hand shoots out to the side and grabs the handle to the back door of my truck.

I help her open it, because I’m polite like that, and two seconds later we’re sliding onto the seat and I’m yanking the door shut behind me. I tug her onto my lap and dive right back into her sweet mouth. She moans so loudly it vibrates my tinted windows. Did I mention how sweet my ride is?

Jess’s hand sneaks under my untucked shirt and onto my abs. “This won’t become a usual thing,” she mutters between kisses.

“No,” I agree. The fact that we’re on the same page is awesome. I don’t do relationships.

We do another swan dive into a kiss deeper than a mineshaft. I grab her ass in both hands and give it a nice, filthy squeeze.

“It’s a...study break,” she pants.

“A little stress relief,” I assure her as I slide my hands underneath her shirt and unclip her bra in back.

I grab her top and yank it over her head, then toss it into the front seat. The bra follows. Then I’ve got two hands full of boobalicious goodness. Jess has the sweetest tits. I just want to press my face between them and make motorboat noises.

But I forget all about that idea when her hands drop to my fly. She unbuttons my jeans and then yanks on the zipper. It’s only partially successful because my jeans are as tight as fuck right now, and she’s sitting on me.

I help her out, because I'm fun like that. And a second later she's got one of her smooth little hands wrapped around my cock.

"Oh fuck, oh fuck," I start to mumble. Then I cup her head and pull her to me again.

She wiggles away. "I want a taste," she whispers, ducking lower.

Before I can even respond, there's a pair of soft lips dropping kisses on my cockhead. I stop breathing. Then she licks the sensitive place on the underside. "Fuck, baby. Get up here."

She shakes her stubborn head. "I want to give you a hummer in your Hummer."

I let out a laugh and wind her hair around my hand. I'll give her a couple of minutes, I guess. Fair's fair.

Her hot mouth takes the crown in, and I gasp. It's so, so good. She sucks hard and wraps her hand around my base, her fingertips teasing my balls. Tipping my head back against the headrest, I wait, pleasure coursing through my body.

It takes a few minutes, but eventually Jess looks up at me, panting. "I can't...get much of it."

"I know, baby. Nobody can. Good of you to try, though. Come here." I beckon.

She gives her silky hair a toss. "No. I hate failure." She leans over and kisses my tip again. "Mmm," she murmurs, tonguing me.

My hips pulse with longing. The sight of her pink tongue lapping at me is crazy hot. "You fucking kill me," I groan. "Come here already."

This time, I don't wait to be obeyed. I place my hands under her arms and haul her up until she's straddling me again.

It's tricky work, but I jam a hand into my back pocket and fish out my wallet. I open it on her knee and yank out the condom that I keep there.

Jess gives a little shiver. "Never meant to do this tonight."

"Don't overthink it." I tear the packet and roll the rubber onto my aching dick. "You just need a little recharge on my docking station."

Our eyes meet. Time stands still for one perfect second.

Then we both explode with laughter. Jess honks like a duck and then clutches her side, and I'm howling. She grabs my shoulders to steady herself, and we're both still cracking up. I wrap my arms around her and bury my face in her silky neck, trying to calm down. But the laughter ripples through us for another couple of minutes.

Eventually we're left with just the odd titter. She's smiling at me, and I'm grinning back at her.

"Never a—" She gulps back another laugh. "—dull moment with you, huh, Blake?" Her boobs jiggle when she laughs, and I suddenly remember how badly I want her.

"Nope." I cup one of her tits and stroke gently. "Not dull."

Her expression gets a little hazy and soft. She leans in and kisses me.

Man, this is some really sweet stuff right here. My arms are full of the prettiest girl in Toronto. She's a good friend and a great lay. How rare is that? I'm not worried that I'll see a picture of my bare ass on Twitter tonight or what the fuck ever. Maybe Jess and I don't always see things the same way, but she's honest with me even when I wish she wasn't.

And right now, what's honest about her is how she's rubbing herself like a cat in heat on my chest as we make out.

"Jessie," I whisper against her lips. "I want you so bad. Let me have you."

"Unnmf," she grunts.

I reach under the short skirt she's wearing and find a tiny pair of underwear that I quickly tug off. "Now, baby," I urge. "Do it."

She lifts herself onto her knees, and I line up at heaven's entrance. Then she's sliding down slowly. We lock eyes. Her mouth makes a perfect O as she lets out a moan.

"That's it," I encourage her. "Fuck yeah." She's hot and tight and perfect.

She leans in, and I have to kiss her. I'm in heaven and I'm desperate. So I guess I'm *heasperate*. I roll my hips and suck on her tongue and everything is awesome awesome awesome.

"Oh fuck," she mumbles, beginning to ride me. "You feel...oh fuck. Oh fuck."

"I know." I brace my feet and meet her stroke for stroke. "Fuck me just like that. So hot."

No, *hot* doesn't even begin to describe the visual I have right now. Her tits bounce as she moves, the ends of her silky hair brushing my pecs. I'll probably never bother with porn again after tonight. I can just relive this—a turned-on girl getting herself off on my cock, her brow creased with pleasure.

My balls tighten up just watching her.

She takes a deep breath and grips my shoulders. Hard. "Oh, Bl-Blake,"

she pants.

My name on her lips makes me feel like a superhero. I'm so close it hurts. Grasping her hips, I pump her body harder onto mine.

Jess gives a little shout of pleasure, followed by a whimper. The sounds she makes just knock me over. Every breathy little pant and throaty moan goes straight to my happy dick.

And then she's groaning and shuddering, clenching my cock like a vise. "Fuck, yeah." I lever my body off the seat and pound into her. Release breaks over me like a wave. With a growl I impale her once. Twice.

Boom!

Jess

It's quiet again, save for the sound of my pounding heart. I'm naked, except for my skirt that's bunched up around my waist. I'm in the back of Blake's car. And I'm still on his giant...

Yikes. When I give into temptation, I *really* give in.

There's obviously a masochist living somewhere inside me, because instead of pushing him away, I dove onto his dick. Damn this man. Even now he seeks out my lips with his. He's such a great kisser. Slow and seductive but utterly relentless.

Until five minutes ago, I hadn't had sex since the spring. Since Blake. My body obviously rebelled from the lengthy dry spell.

I'm so disgustingly weak.

And he's so disgustingly sexy.

I gather the last threads of my dignity and disengage all our various body parts. Moving onto the seat beside Blake, I spot my panties on the floor. Grabbing them gives me a good reason to avoid eye contact.

One big hand curls around my hair. "Hey. J-Babe?"

"Mmm?" I keep busy so I don't have to look at him.

But he waits me out. "Jess?" he says softly.

Giving in, I turn my chin.

"You're the coolest girl I know." His eyes light up when he smiles at me.

That smile brings a little flutter to my chest. It shouldn't, though. That's insane. "We're not making this a regular habit," I say for my own good.

His grin doesn't slip. "No kidding. But it sure was awesome. Does my truck rule, or what?"

I glance around. Thank God for the darkly tinted windows. "Your truck is bigger than my dorm room. I'm pretty sure."

"Aw." He fusses with my hair. "You want me to drive you home?"

I cringe, wondering if Violet thinks I've been kidnapped. "I have to find the evil roommate." Wandering off with Blake has wrecked all my plans to bond with Violet. *Nice going, Jess.*

He reaches into the front seat with his giant arm. "Here's your double-barreled slingshot. And your shirt."

I hurriedly put my bra on, and he does something with the condom. I hear the crinkle of a plastic bag, and I don't ask questions.

A few minutes later, he opens the door. "Coast is clear, I think."

I emerge, shaking myself off. "Do I look..." *Like a girl who just bounced on your dick in the parking lot?*

"You look fabulous, as always. I'll walk you inside. If Violet asks where you've been, I'll make up a story. I'll tell her that a giant squid attacked. Or pirates."

"Good thinking," I scoff.

We head inside, but Blake stops in the middle of the hallway before we can reach the main room. He fishes his phone out, studies it, then grumbles out a curse.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

"Nothing." He shoves the phone back in his pocket.

"Okey-dokey."

We take about five more steps, and then he halts again. "I need a favor," he blurts out.

I turn around with a sigh. "I already had sex with you. Doesn't that fulfill my favor quota for the night?"

He snorts. "If anyone was doing someone a favor out there, it was me. To your va-jay-jay."

I roll my eyes. "Uh-huh, sure. Now tell me what you want, or I'm walking away."

"I need a date."

Exasperation shoots through me. Did he not hear a word I said in the

Hummer? We're not making this a habit! And we're certainly not going on a date.

"Absolutely not," I announce.

His green eyes narrow. "Wipe that horrified look off your face, J-Babe. A date with me is like a trip to Disneyland. You'd fucking love it. Because everyone loves Disneyland. Anyway, that's not what I meant. It's a fake date, okay?"

Well, now I'm confused. "A fake date?"

He nods glumly. "My ma just texted to remind me that my sister's baby shower is this weekend. It's a lunch thing. My family'll be there, some friends..."

He pauses just long enough for my guard to rise. Friends, huh? I wonder which *friend* is responsible for the very uncharacteristic deer-in-the-headlights look on Blake's face.

"You want me to go to a family event with you?" *Hell no.* "I, ah, I'm not sure I feel comfortable with that. I won't know anyone there."

"You'll know me," he protests, looking offended. "Besides, you owe me. I'm the one doing all the favors. The smokin' sex—you're welcome—and telling you how to bond with your roomie. I've done you two solids." He shrugs. "It's your turn."

His logic is in no way sound, but I can't deny that his idea to bring Violet to the bar had been a good one. Granted, I've ignored her for the past, oh, thirty minutes, but we seemed to be connecting before that.

"Please?" he presses. "It'll really help me out if you came along. That way the fam might finally get off my case."

"What are they on your case about?" I ask curiously.

"They think I need a wife."

I squeak in alarm. "I am *not* going to pretend that we're engaged!"

"Didn't ask you to. I told you, it's just a date. I'll tell 'em you're my girlfriend, they'll be happy as clams and, in a few weeks, I'll say you dumped me or something." He mimics my earlier words. "It's a one-time thing."

Despite my reluctance, I find myself nodding. "Fine. I'll do it."

He brightens.

"But it's not a real date," I say hastily. "It's just a favor for a friend, okay?"

Blake leans in and smacks a kiss on my cheek. "You're the bestest friend ever, Jessie." Then he sucks my earlobe between his lips and murmurs,

“Plus, you’re fun to fuck.”

I shove him away. “You’re incorrigible.”

When we walk back into the bar, I find Violet swaying on a bar stool, her face enraptured as she listens to Will O’Connor boast about how many teams he’s played on.

“Violet?” I ask carefully. “Are you okay?”

“Yea-ah,” she hiccups. “I had a few beers.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I’ll take her home,” Lemming pipes up from Violet’s other side.

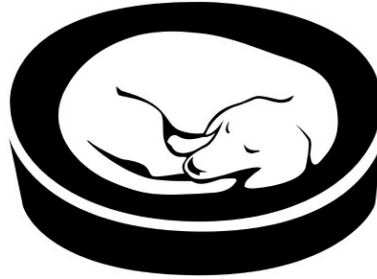
“Sorry, stud,” I say firmly. “I don’t think tonight’s your night.” I hold out a hand to Violet, who looks a little green. “Come on, roomie. Time to go.”

“I’ll drive you guys home,” Blake offers.

It sounds much better than dragging my drunk roommate onto the subway, so I take him up on it.

What’s one more ride from Blake Riley tonight?

16 MOUNTAIN OUT OF A MOLEHOLE



Jess

It's Sunday afternoon and we're zipping along a nice suburban road in Blake's Hummer. I could high-five myself for keeping my eyes straight ahead. I haven't snuck any looks into the backseat, not even one. But I swear I got all hot and bothered the second this vehicle pulled up in front of the dorm. My body has a thing for Blake's ride.

Or, let's be honest, Blake.

"So, who am I meeting today?" I'm not watching the muscles in his forearm flex as he drives. Not much, anyway.

"The shower is for Brenna. My other two sisters will also be there, Beth and Britt. Two of them are married, including the pregnant one." He chuckles. "Mom is over the moon. She's bought out the baby store already, so my sister is gonna end up with four of everything. I mean, what does a baby really need? A bed and a hockey stick. The end."

Hysterical. "So then what did you get the baby?"

"A hockey stick. Duh. And I paid for some fancy stroller. The Hummer of strollers, supposedly."

"Nice."

A few more miles roll by.

"Do you get along with your folks?" I ask curiously.

"Of course. They're awesome."

Hmmm. Something just doesn't add up. I can't figure out why Blake would need a fake date for a family party. Unless there's someone else giving him the willies. "Who else am I meeting? Anyone I should look out for? Any exes?"

And, aha! He flinches.

“That bad, huh?”

Blake scowls. “It’s no big deal.”

Riiiiight. “Is she the reason you suddenly needed a girlfriend? Just level with me, and this will be easier to pull off. What’s her name?”

He sighs. “Molly. She’s my sister Brenna’s best friend. I don’t see her that often, but sometimes she gets all clingy.”

Ah. “But if I’m there she’ll back off?”

“She’ll have to,” he grunts.

We turn down a tree-lined street in some area called Brampton. It’s lush and pretty in a way that’s completely different from California. I know nothing of Ontario, I realize, and this short break from my textbooks is a welcome reprieve, even if I was secretly brought here to defend Blake from the sharpened talons of an ex.

“You should have warned me,” I say quietly. Then I immediately feel guilty because I tried to pass off Dyson as my boyfriend at Jamie’s wedding.

Hypocritical much?

He parks the car at the curb of a sprawling house with pink and blue balloons tied to the mailbox. There are potted mums on the front porch and a hedgerow of sunflowers. I love it already.

Blake snaps the keys from the ignition and turns to me. “Look, I’m sorry I didn’t say anything. I really appreciate you coming with me today.” His green eyes look uncertain, and it’s an expression I so rarely see on his face that I can’t help but melt a little. Blake Riley’s confidence has slipped? Call 911 and administer CPR.

I reach up and pat his cheekbone. “Am I allowed to have a little fun with it? Can I make up a story about our first date?”

“Go nuts, girlfriend.” He grins, making his face instantly more familiar. “I told ’em we met when we were both looking after Jamie. But I skipped the part about taking off my pants and daring you to find out if Wesley’s massage chair would turn my dick into a real-life vibrator.”

All my nether regions give a big shimmy at the memory. *Gah*.

Blake points his finger at me like a gun. “Keep that expression.” He winks. “You’re very convincing with that sexed-up look in your eye.”

I frown on purpose. “I do not look sexed up. Nobody here is sexed up.”

The backseat laughs behind me.

Blake doesn’t bother arguing the point. He gets out of his monster truck

and comes around to my side, opening the door with a flourish. “Come and meet the Rileys, girlfriend.”

The house is chaos inside. Blake steers me into the kitchen, where at least a half-dozen women buzz around like bees. Though it’s no trouble identifying the Riley sisters. One of them is hugely pregnant, but the other two are just as easy to pick out. The female editions of Blake are basketball-player tall, with wide shoulders and even wider smiles. They wear floral-patterned dresses in different colors, and I can’t decide if the similarity is intentional.

In contrast, I look positively bashful in my little blue sleeveless dress.

They don’t notice our arrival, because they’re clucking over a giant bakery box that just arrived. “Omigod!” the pregnant sister shrieks. “These are the best thing ever.”

I stand on my tiptoes for a peek in the box. Row upon row of beautiful cupcakes wait, each frosted with a cloud of white icing and a single chocolate sperm swimming across the top.

“Damn, those are scary!” Blake crows.

Heads swivel, and then the clucking hits a deafening pitch as his three sisters charge him. “BLAKEY!” “He’s here!” “Have a beer!”

Instinctively I engage in defensive maneuvers, ducking behind Blake’s bulk to avoid being trampled. With a cheerful roar, he lifts each of his sisters off their feet in turn. “Let the fertility festivities begin! Where did you say the beer was?”

“I’ll get you one,” a sister volunteers. It’s easy to see that Blake is well-loved by his family.

“Bring two,” he says. “I brought someone to meet you all, and she’s probably thirsty.”

He turns his head left and right, wondering where he’s misplaced me, so I duck under his arm to show myself.

His fingers graze the bare skin of my shoulder. “Girls, this is Jess. My girlfriend.”

The room goes so quiet so fast that at first I think I’m suffering some kind of audiological anomaly. But then I see the surprise crisscrossing all the women’s faces. One of Blake’s not-pregnant sisters has her hand on the refrigerator door, but she’s forgotten to open it. Instead, she’s staring at me, jaw dropped like a hungry grouper.

The silence is as deep as the Pacific, and I use the time to study all the

shocked faces. Besides the sisters, there are two or three more women gaping at me. One in particular—she’s got springy curls that frame her pixie face—has slapped a hand over her mouth in dismay.

“Uh, girls? Hello?” Blake prompts. His palm strokes my shoulder absently. “Come over here and meet Jessie. Cheezus.”

“Sorry.” The sister at the fridge recovers first. She crosses the room on giraffe’s legs and grabs my hand, giving it a bruising shake. “I’m Britt, the youngest of us four. It’s so nice to meet you,” she says, pumping my hand. “Blake didn’t tell us he was seeing anyone.” She lifts big eyes—green like her brother’s—to Blake, and there’s a question in them.

“I’m doing that now,” he answers, sounding grumpy. “Let’s not make a mountain out of a molehole.”

“*Molehill*,” I correct.

“Nah, J-Babe. That can’t be right. Moles dig underground, they don’t *build* shit.”

Oh for God’s sake. “But the dirt they kick up out of the lawn gets...” I see at least a dozen eyes on me, and they’re burning with curiosity. “Never mind,” I mumble, and Blake chuckles.

“Beer?” he asks. “There’s probably some girly white wine around, too.”

“Beer would be awesome,” I say quickly. *And keep ’em coming.*

I meet both of his other sisters and then Blake’s dad. To say that Mr. Riley isn’t what I expected is an understatement. Blake is six inches taller than his father, and he outweighs him by at least a hundred pounds. Mr. Riley shakes my hand as politely as a school principal, and then he steals a sperm cupcake out of the box and slides quietly out of the room.

Just when I’m ready to declare the science of genetics a fraud, there’s a great pounding of feet and an enormous woman launches herself at us.

“BLAKIEEEEE!”

“Oof,” my faux boyfriend says, catching her. “Easy, Ma. Good to see you, too.”

“It’s been NINE DAYS since you came home for dinner!” she hollers.

“But who’s counting?” He grins.

“I MADE BRISKET! You need protein if you’re gonna POUND MONTREAL INTO TINY BITS OF DUST.”

“Awesome,” he says. “Hey, Mom? This is Jess. My girlfriend.”

I brace myself as Blake’s mother turns to inspect me. Unlike Blake’s sisters, she doesn’t gasp or express shock and dismay. She does, however,

look me over from head to toe, as if I'm a brisket she might purchase, depending on whether or not I'm worthy.

"Nice to meet you," I say in a shaky voice, extending a hand.

Her giant mitt closes over mine. She has a handshake like Mike Tyson's. "Welcome to our home, Jessica. How long have you known my boy?"

"Um, since March. He and my brother are friends."

"Six months. Hmmm..." Mrs. Riley muses, arching an eyebrow. "And what is your favorite thing about him?"

Just as my traitorous brain offers up a truly inappropriate image, Blake jumps in to rescue me. "Mom, Jessie hasn't gotten the tour yet. We'll catch up with you in a little while?"

His mother frowns, unhappy with this interruption. I get the feeling she'd rather pull me into a windowless interrogation room for a little truth serum and waterboarding.

Blake's hand closes around mine. He passes me one of the two beers he's collected, and I take a deep swig as we make our escape out a pretty set of French doors and into the backyard.

"Cheezus," Blake gasps when we make it outside. "J-Babe, I'm sorry. I didn't know they'd go all DEFCON 4 if I brought someone home with me."

"When's the last time you had a girlfriend?" I ask.

"Uh. Five years ago."

"Okay..." The puzzle pieces are sliding together in my head. "So you broke up with whatsername and then stopped dating entirely?"

"Pretty much," he says gruffly. "Check this out." He sweeps his hand across a gorgeous yard with a shimmering pool at the far end. "We dug this ourselves the year I was fourteen. It was a blast."

"Looks like fun, too." There's a basketball net at one end of the pool, and I can just picture all the larger Rileys battling over it together. On the surface, Blake's home and mine look nothing alike. But I feel a familiar big family vibe here, and it's comforting to me. That weirdness in the kitchen really wasn't so bad. "Nice place you got here, Blakey." I hook my arm in his. "Show me some more."

He takes me to the pool house, with its refrigerator full of Canadian beers. We return to find that the baby shower is just getting going in the huge sunroom off the kitchen. Guests are arriving in ones and twos, piling gifts on one table and sampling appetizers on another.

"Let's find you something to eat," Blake says, rubbing the small of my

back. “I know my mom is a little much, but she’s a damned good cook.”

“Sounds great.”

He hands me a plate, and I help myself to a mini quiche and a deviled egg. His sister Britt gallops over, smiling at me. “There’s a lot more food right in there,” she says, indicating the dining table through the French doors. “And we’re playing a party game.”

“Quarters?” Blake guesses. “Beer pong?”

His sister rolls her eyes. “No, Blakey.” She doesn’t even have to stand on her tiptoes to attach something to his shirt pocket. It’s a safety pin with a tiny blue ribbon on it. She hands me one with a pink ribbon. “For the whole party, you can’t say the word *baby*. If you do, you forfeit your pin to whoever heard you say it first. There’s a prize for the person who has the most pins at the end.”

“Beer pong is funner,” Blake argues.

She pats his chest. “Eat some brisket. Make Mom happy.”

We queue up for the buffet. The Riley dining table practically sags under the weight of all the food on it. As I load up my plate, Blake gets pulled into a discussion with his brother-in-law about the team’s chances for the season.

On the other side of the room, the curly-haired girl from the kitchen stands holding her plate. She’s listening to Brenna and shooting me dirty looks at the same time. That has to be Blake’s ex, and I find myself studying her. She’s cute, with big brown eyes and a heart-shaped face. The only ugly thing about her is the sour expression.

Blake gives my ass a squeeze, and I realize he’s prompting me to move forward. I take a chunk of the famous Riley brisket and a soft, buttered roll. Looking at the food, I’m suddenly starving. For a month I haven’t eaten all that well. Meals with Wes and Jamie are always terrific, but otherwise I scarf down a lot of takeout with the window open so Violet won’t sense how often I violate her no-food rule.

She’s softened up to me, though. I thought there was only one way to impress her—medical knowledge. But now I know there’re two. Since I introduced her to the team, she now looks at me like I’m someone worth knowing, which is just bonkers.

“Shoulda used two plates,” Blake comments. When I look, his is practically overflowing.

“You can stash something on mine,” I offer.

“Aw, thanks, J-Babe.”

“Whoa! I get your pin. Cough it up, big guy.”

“What?” He adds another roll to my plate and follows it up with a pat of butter the size of a hockey puck. “I didn’t say the b-word.”

“You did!”

“*Babe* isn’t the same.”

“A dozen Christmas tunes beg to differ.”

“Fine, *baby*. Take it.” With a smile, he kisses me on the forehead. “But if it wasn’t for your little technicality, I would’ve won big. The word *baby* isn’t even in my vocabulary.”

A gasp of dismay erupts from the other side of the room, and I don’t have to look to know who made it.

We carry our plates to the seating area, and Blake sets us up at a table with a couple of chairs left. “I’ll get silverware,” he says after I’m seated.

But before he’s taken more than a few steps toward the kitchen, his pregnant sister grabs his elbow. “What were you thinking?” Brenna hisses.

“I was thinking I’d get my girlfriend some silverware and a glass of water.” Blake removes his arm from her grasp, an indignant look on his face.

Her glare is deadly. “Your timing sucks, bro. A *baby shower* is when you decide to spring the girlfriend on us? With Molly watching? She’s very vulnerable right now.”

Blake’s jaw hardens. “It’s been five years, Bren. Do I look *vulnerable*? Cheezus.”

He stomps off, and I’m still staring at the doorway where he disappeared when I realize someone across the table has said my name. “Jessica.”

My gaze snaps over to find Mama Riley watching me. “Sorry, what?” Did she just bust me watching the Riley Family Drama?

“Don’t worry about that,” she says, waving a hand as if swatting away a fly. “My daughter is all hopped up on pregnancy hormones.”

“Oh, erm,” I stutter. “I have a big family, too. Five siblings. There’s always one drama or another.”

“Do you, now?” She sets her glass down, and I see her chill toward me thawing a little. “Tell me about yourself. What are your plans for the future?”

“Uh, I’m a nursing student. I study all the time. That’s pretty much it.”

Her eyes narrow. “And you’re dating my son, who’s friends with your brother.”

“Right,” I say quickly. “My brother is married to Ryan Wesley. They

live in the same building as Blake.”

“Ah.” Mama Riley looks happier. “Good arm on Wesley. Excellent reflexes.”

“Yeah...” Now we’re talking hockey? I have whiplash, I think.

Blake sits down again, and he’s his usual buoyant self. The food is, as Blake promised, terrific. I tell Mama Riley this, and she beams.

Playing the part of the good girlfriend, I gather our dishes when we’re through. “I’ll just pop these into the kitchen, honey,” I offer, laying it on a little thick. “Do you need another beer? Or coffee?” Does Blake drink coffee? *Fuck*. I should have done my homework.

“I would love a cup!” he says. “Black, of course.” He winks.

“Of course!” I jump up and take my leave.

In the kitchen, I rinse our plates and pop them into the biggest dishwasher I’ve ever seen. Then I pour two cups of coffee from the big urn on the counter. Just around the corner, a tearful conversation catches my ear.

“It’s hard,” someone sniffs.

“I know, I know,” another female voice soothes. “Your baby would have turned four just next month. They would have been cousins.”

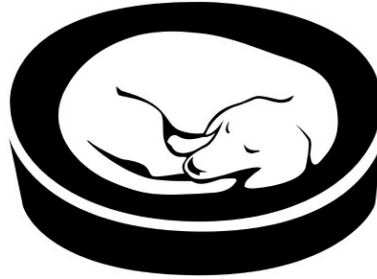
A chill climbs up my neck. Could she mean...?

Grasping the cups carefully, I walk off, keeping my back to the whispering women. But I can’t resist. When I’m a safe distance away, I turn my head.

Sure enough, it’s Molly and Brenna, their heads bent close together in conversation.

I have a million questions, at least. But for some reason the first one that pops into my mind is: Will Brenna now forfeit the collection of game pins on her dress?

17 THE GODZILLA ROAR



Blake

Sweet Cheezus, I've almost done it. If this baby shower were a baseball game, then I'd be stretching my legs toward home plate right now.

Sure, there were a couple hiccups getting to first, second and third. Like the fact that Molly was glaring at Jess all afternoon. And the suspicious looks my mom kept throwing my way. And I may have pissed off Brenna a wee bit. But I rounded those bases and now I'm sliding to home plate, about to be free of the tension that's been coiled up inside me since—

“Blake? Can we talk for a second?”

Shitballs.

I almost dive back into the bathroom when I find Molly waiting for me in the hall. Fuck. Why did I have to duck inside to take a piss? I should've just held it until I got home. Or used that empty Gatorade bottle on the floor of my Hummer. Jess would've probably thrown up, but the fast getaway would've been worth her repulsion.

But now I'm stuck, and Molly's staring at me with that sad, doe-eyed look she's perfected over the years.

“Ah...Jess and I need to take off,” I say awkwardly. “Can we do this some other time?”

“Why didn't you tell me you were seeing someone?”

I guess we're doing it now.

Swallowing my annoyance, I try to think of a suitable answer. Why didn't I tell her I was seeing someone...

Well, first and foremost, *because it's none of her fucking business.*

But that's too harsh. Right? Too harsh?

Maybe...*because we broke up five years ago?*

Damn it. Still harsh.

Because I'm not an angry guy, but every time I see you or hear your name I want to Hulk out and smash an entire metropolitan city.

Okay, even worse.

There's nothing I can say that'll appease her. The best I can come up with is, "It's new."

"Six months isn't new!" Her cheeks redden when she realizes she's yelling. She quickly lowers her voice. "A heads-up would have been nice, Blake. You *knew* I was going to be here today. I would have appreciated a warning that you were bringing someone," she says tightly.

My voice is equally terse. "No offense, Mol, but I don't owe you any warnings. It's been five years. Shouldn't be a shocker that I'm dating other people."

Her lips part in dismay. Then she blinks, rapidly, and I prepare myself for the inevitable tears.

"You don't have to be"—blink blink—"cruel about it," she whispers. Blink blink blink. "After everything we've been through"—blink blink—"I deserve more than that."

And cue the tears. They cling to her dark lashes for a second before slipping free and streaming down her cheeks. I pray that none of my sisters walk in right now, because they're all super protective of Molly. If they saw that I'd made her cry, they'd kick my ass to next Sunday.

"Molly." I shove both hands in my pockets. I'm not going to touch this woman. Not going to comfort her. "You need to move on."

Her tear-filled eyes widen. "I have moved on."

"No, you haven't. But it's time for it, honey." My hands slide out of my pockets and dangle at my sides. "I'm sorry, but I can't do this right now. Take care of yourself."

Then I lumber past her without a backward look. Am I an asshole? Maybe. Do I fucking care? Nope.

Molly is *lucky* to be here. One word from me and there'd be no more invites to these kind of events. If my family knew what she'd done, they wouldn't even let her approach the front door.

Jess is waiting for me in the parlor, toying with the end of her ponytail. She looks up at my approach, sees my face, and asks, "Everything okay?"

"S'all peaches and cream. Come on, we're outtie." We already said our

goodbyes to the fam, so there's nothing stopping me from taking her arm and dragging her toward the truck.

"Chill out," she grumbles, shrugging my hand off. "I know how to walk by myself."

I practically fling myself into the driver's seat and have the engine running and the gearshift in drive before Jess has even buckled up. Her seatbelt snaps into place as I leave my parents' house in my dust.

The sight of my childhood home in the rearview mirror pisses me off. I love that house. It's *mine*. Total bullshit right there, that Molly is driving me away from my own house.

"Blake, slow down. You're going too fast."

I ease up on the accelerator. Shit, I'm all riled up. Riley'd up, if you will. I chuckle at the new phrase I've coined. Or maybe it's not a chuckle so much as hysterical laughter.

"Okay, now you're just freaking me out," Jess announces. "Pull over. I mean it."

I do it. Maybe it's her tone of voice. It's sharp and commanding, like when my mom used to order me to clean my room or else she'd stop paying for my hockey gear.

I park at the curb and stare straight ahead. We're at the end of my parents' street, and I hope nobody from the party drives by and stops to ask what the hell we're doing.

"Get out," Jess orders. "I'm driving."

Again, I listen to the lady. And I don't even ask if she's capable of driving such a powerful machine, because I'm not so far gone that I don't realize she'd slap me silly for being sexist.

We switch seats, but Jess doesn't start the engine. She studies me silently before letting out a heavy breath. "I know what's going on here, so you don't have to pretend."

I furrow my brow. "What are you talking about?"

"I know why you're upset," she clarifies.

"Sorry, babe, but I doubt it."

Jess stubbornly juts her chin. "I do know. Or at least some of it." A sheepish look crosses her face. "I overheard Brenna and Molly talking in the kitchen."

Every inch of me goes rigid. Including my neck, which suddenly throbs with pain. Damn it, why won't that goddamn kink go away? I asked the team

trainer to work on it after last practice, but it's still sore as hell.

"What did you hear?"

"Not much," she admits. "But enough to put a few of the pieces together. She, um, got pregnant, huh? When you two were together?"

I clench my teeth.

"And then she lost the baby." Jess's tone softens with sympathy. She reaches for my hand and squeezes it gently. "I'm sorry. I can't even begin to imagine what you two went through."

Another choked laugh flies out, making her eyes widen in alarm. Then they turn to thunderclouds.

"You think it's funny?" She releases my hand and stares at me in disapproval. "What the hell is the matter with you?"

"Jess." I clear my throat a couple of times. "Look. I appreciate your concern. And the sympathy. I know it's coming from a good place, but trust me, it's misguided."

"Misguided?" she echoes. "Your ex-girlfriend lost your baby and my sympathy is *misguided*?"

"There was no baby!" I shout.

She freezes. Silence falls between us, a long, tense silence during which I want to smack myself for opening my big mouth. Fucking hell. Why'd I have to go and say that?

Maybe she didn't hear?

Yeah, dumbass, she didn't hear the Godzilla roar that just rocked the Hum-hum.

"What do you mean, there wasn't a baby?" Confusion etches her pretty features. "But...I heard your sister say that your baby would have been four next month. And how Brenna's kid and Molly's kid would have been cousins. I swear I didn't mishear that, Blake."

I exhale slowly. "You heard right, okay? But you heard wrong."

"Is that a riddle?" She sounds exasperated. "I don't understand. Why would—" Jess gasps so loudly that I actually jump in my seat. "Oh my God! She's *lying* to your family?"

"Can we please drop this?" I lean over and tap the steering wheel. "Just drive us home already."

Jess isn't listening to me. She looks aghast, biting her bottom lip as she studies my face. "Why does your family think you and your ex were going to have a baby?"

“You’re really not gonna let this go?”

“No.”

I clench my fists against my knees. “They think it because that’s what Molly told them. Because that’s what she told *me*. The start of my rookie year in the pros, she told me she was pregnant.” I fix my gaze out the windshield. “And she lied, okay? She wasn’t preggers, but she said she was three months along, and, you know, that’s when you’re allowed to start shouting it from the rooftops, so I told my family right after I found out. Mol and I were engaged at that point, so they were as thrilled as I was.”

“You were engaged?” Jess blurts out.

“Had a date set and everything.” I snort. “But I guess that wasn’t enough of a commitment. Not to her.”

“I...don’t get it.”

“Not much to get,” I mutter. “She didn’t like all the attention I was getting from other broads. You know how it is—hockey players are gods. It’s like a buffet of hot girls. Not that I ever sampled the buffet.” I swallow down a wave of bitterness. “I’m not a fucking cheater.”

Jess wrinkles her forehead. “Did Molly think you were cheating?”

“She was scared I would. Didn’t matter how many times I reassured her, she didn’t believe I’d keep my dick in my pants. We were getting married, for fuck’s sake, but nope, she still couldn’t trust that I’d stick around.” I fight my rising anger. “So she came up with a way that I’d *have* to stick around.”

I stop abruptly, pissed at myself for laying all this shit at Jess’s feet. It’s ancient history, and there’s no reason to dredge it all up. Molly and I aren’t together anymore. So what if I still see her around sometimes. So what if I’ve told my family a lie or two. As long as I don’t think about it too hard, it can’t make me angry.

“When did you find out she wasn’t pregnant?”

“She said she had a sonogram appointment. I was supposed to be on the road, but a snowstorm in Vancouver meant our flight couldn’t take off. So I surprised her at the doctor’s office.”

“And she wasn’t there?” Jess guesses.

“Oh, she was.” I can still picture the freaked-out look on her face when I walked into that waiting room. “But there was no sonogram, because there was no pregnancy. She’d made an appointment to ask her gynecologist for fertility meds.”

Jess gasps. “She’s infertile?”

“No idea?” I throw my arms up. “All I know is that she was trying to make her lie into a reality. As soon as she started sputtering excuses, I knew what had happened. I’d gotten a weird vibe off her when she said she wanted to stop wrapping the weasel.”

“Wrapping... *Oh*.” Jess rolls her eyes.

“She *pulled the goalie*.” Five years later, I still almost can’t believe it. Who does that?

“Who does that?” Jess asks.

“Someone who is willing to lie to me.”

“So what did you do? How could you not dump her on the spot?”

“Because she’s...was...family. Molly and I didn’t get together until freshman year of college, but I knew her before that. She’s Brenna’s best friend. They were inseparable in high school and she was always over at our place.” I blow out a breath. “My whole family loves her.”

“Would they still love her if they knew what she did?”

“I don’t know,” I admit. “But just because she hurt me didn’t mean I wanted to tar and feather her, or cost her a lifelong friendship with Bren. So yeah, I ended it, but she begged me not to tell my family about what she’d done. We told them she had a miscarriage, and then a couple of months later we ‘broke up’—” I use finger quotes “—and told everyone that our relationship couldn’t survive the emotional trauma. But we were dunzo the day I learned the truth.”

Jess is visibly horrified. “Blake! That’s *insane*! Why wouldn’t you set your family straight? Now they all view her as some innocent victim who got dumped by her fiancé after she miscarried their baby.”

“What else was I supposed to do?” I counter. “Embarrass her? Make Brenna—*her best friend*—hate her? I was trying to protect her.”

“She doesn’t deserve that!” Jess screeches. Then she takes a calming breath. “Cheezus, Blake, you’re either a saint or the biggest idiot on the planet.”

I finally crack a smile. “Babe.”

“What?”

“You just said cheezus.”

She looks flustered. “I did not.”

“Yeah, you did.”

“Agree to disagree.” She shakes her head at me. “I can’t believe that happened to you. Fake pregnancy? A web of lies? That’s soap opera shit right

there, dude.”

“Tell me about it.” I can’t believe I just unloaded all of that on her. Then again, Jess is studying to be a nurse. Maybe she doesn’t mind wading into other people’s shit storms.

We go quiet for a beat. Jess turns the key in my macho mobile.

“You totally said cheezus,” I mutter under my breath.

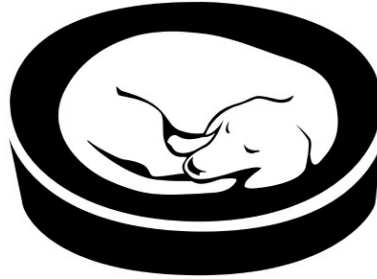
“Did not,” she scoffs.

“Did so.”

“Did not.” She looks over her shoulder to check for traffic and then pulls out and guns it.

I stop arguing because I’m too busy watching a pretty girl drive my truck. At least one thing went right today. In a pretty blue dress that shows off her curves, Jess Canning handled my nutty family like a champ.

If I was ever gonna trust a woman again, she’d be the top seed of the tournament.



Jess

The next two weeks of my life are crazy.

I pass all my anatomy quizzes by never leaving the library except for classes and to sleep. Clinical observation work continues, too, and lately we're visiting a geriatric home. They taught us to take vital signs, so now we even touch the patients sometimes. The cases there can be sad, but not kids-with-cancer sad.

My friend Dyson works with geriatric patients, and when we chatted on the phone, he gave me a tip. "Sing Ella Fitzgerald," he said.

"What?"

"Learn some Ella tunes, and sing one if the patient isn't cooperating. Trust me. And your voice doesn't even suck."

That wasn't exactly high praise, but just in case he was onto something, I memorized the lyrics to "They Can't Take That Away From Me."

A week later I called Dyson back to tell him he's a genius.

"Well, obvs," he said. "But what did I do this time?"

"When I sing Ella, the oldsters will let me do anything. Came in handy on my first blood draw."

"Oh, honey. I'm sure that went smoothly." He giggled.

"The poor man gritted his dentures," I confessed. "But when I sang about the way he wore his hat, he relaxed."

"Good girl. And this shit takes practice. You'll be findin' them veins in no time."

I hoped so. Even a couple of months in, I still wake up every morning with the feeling that I'm holding on by the skin of my teeth. My schedule is

so crazy that I've barely seen my brother or Wes. Their schedules are nutty, too, now that their hockey seasons have really begun.

But tonight, finally, I'm going to see Wes's game with Jamie, who has a pair of comped season tickets. I missed the first one he invited me to because Violet convinced me that it would be a sacrilege to miss an evening lecture about medical ethics.

I deserve a night out, damn it. So even though I have a paper to write this week, I meet Jamie at the stadium and follow him toward his seats. "We're only a few rows up from the penalty box," he says, pointing to two open seats in row E.

My feet freeze on the staircase, though, because I see Mama Riley sitting in the third seat in. At six-feet-and-change, even from the back she's easy to spot.

"What's the matter?" Jamie asks, waiting for me.

"Um..." Shit! I haven't spoken to Blake since the world's most stressful baby shower. He hasn't called or texted, and he didn't turn up either of the nights I visited my brother. He might even be avoiding me. "Let's get some food first," I say quickly. "There's something I have to tell you."

He gives me his version of an irritated look—a flicker of disapproval and then a relaxed shrug.

I drag him back into the crowds and into line at a mac-n-cheese stand that calls to me. "Okay, this is going to sound crazy."

"Yeah?" Jamie is reading the menu, unconcerned.

"A couple of weeks ago I was Blake Riley's date for a thing."

"A thing?"

"A family party." It's the kind of story I would have told Jamie for giggles, except that Blake's reason for needing a date was so awful I ended up keeping it to myself. "It's a long story, but he told his family we're dating."

Jamie snorts. "You and Blake Riley?"

"I know, right?" My laughter has a tinge of hysteria in it. "It was a favor. He was supposed to tell his mom that we broke up later. But I don't know if he did yet."

Jamie turns to me with laughing brown eyes. "So, the Rileys think you're either his girlfriend or his ex, but you don't know which."

"Right."

"Well, this will be entertaining."

It's our turn, so Jamie steps up to the counter and orders mac-n-cheese with pulled pork for both of us, along with two beers.

I pull out my wallet, but my little brother waves off my twenty. "My treat."

He and Wes are always treating me, damn it. This whole year is all about regressing. Back in the dorms again. Back to being broke. Fun times.

"You know..." Jamie hands me our beers. "If you're smart, you'll string this fake relationship out another week."

"God, why?"

"There's a benefit thing. It's black tie, which blows. But Hozier is playing."

The beer bottle stops halfway to my mouth. "Hozier is playing? Like, *live*?"

"Like, yeah!" He snickers. "For three hundred guests at a thousand bucks a pop. All the players get a plus-one."

"Can I go with Wes?"

"No fucking way," Jamie retorts, lifting the tray off the counter. "I'm going with Wes. It'll be the first big charity thing I attend with him. Didn't I choose well?"

"But...I like Hozier more than you do."

"Says who?"

"Maybe Blake would bring me as payback." Except he doesn't owe me any favors now. Damn. It. My life is short on fun right now, and it's definitely short on thousand-dollar concert tickets. I freaking love Hozier, though.

"You get the inside seat," Jamie says as we descend again toward row E.

"What? No."

He chuckles. "Just save my eardrums this one time."

Reluctantly, I take my seat next to Mama Riley. "Hi there," I say with false cheer.

Her dark eyebrows lift in surprise. "JESSICA!"

My God, she's loud. "How have you been? Lovely party you threw. I'm still thinking about that brisket."

She beams. "Thank you! How come you're sitting here?"

Uh-oh. Does that mean Blake and I broke up? "Well, um, sorry. These are Jamie's seats..."

She slaps me on the back with a hand that's shockingly large for a

woman's. "Thought you'd be in the WAGs box! Both of you!"

"These are great seats," Jamie says, helping me out. His smile is pure amusement. "The WAGs box is fun, too, though. But I'm always hung over the morning after hanging out in there. Right, Jess?"

"Um..." I don't even know what the WAGs box is.

Luckily, the game is starting. We all rise to sing "O Canada," which I really don't know. But that's okay because Mama Riley belts it loud enough for all of us. I'm approaching deafness by the last "WE STAND ON GUARD FOR THEEEEEEEEEEE!"

When I turn to my brother for a shared glance, something blue catches my eye. In his ear. Jamie is wearing one of those disposable earplugs.

"Omigod, where did you get that?"

"Hmmm?" he asks, passing me my dinner.

The starting lineup is announced, and when Blake's name booms from the loudspeaker, Mama Riley cheers so loudly that I almost spill my beer.

Then the game starts, and the action is right in front of us. I've never seen an NHL game before, since I'm more of a football fan. But our seats are great and the fast-moving game is addictive. Blake is pretty incredible, too. He's not as fast and slippery as Wes, but he's just so *forceful* out there. I can't even imagine what it would feel like to look up at two hundred and fifty pounds of Blake Riley charging you for the puck.

I have an inappropriate shimmy near my goal crease just thinking about it.

If I'm honest, Wes is on a team full of startlingly attractive players. Besides Blake, there's Eriksson, who I wouldn't kick out of bed. And of course there's the pretty boy Will O'Connor.

Naturally, Jamie and I cheer for Wes and Blake every time they get their sticks on the puck, but our enthusiasm is nothing compared to Mama Riley's. Whenever her son sets foot on the ice she lets fly a litany of violent encouragement.

"GET 'EM, BLAKEY! BEND HIS FENDERS! SINK HIS BATTLESHIP!"

I nudge Jamie. "What does that mean?"

He shakes his head, smiling. "I tune it out."

It looks like the first period will be scoreless. But when there's only fifty seconds on the clock, both Blake and Wes vault over the wall for one more press. Right before the buzzer, Blake makes a risky pass to Wes, who snaps it

right *back* to him. If I'd blinked, I'd have missed the whole exchange.

Someone on the other team must have blinked, because Blake fires that puppy into the net at top speed. The lamp lights and the hometown crowd is on its feet and we are all THRILLED IN ROW E!

I'm shrieking when Mama Riley picks me up clear off the floor, crushing me against her giant bosom and yelling, "GOOD BOY, BLAKEY! MAMA LOVES YOUUUUUU!"

The announcer calls the goal for Blake and the assist for Wes.

The intermission begins while I try to catch my breath. Seriously, I need to come to more of these. Cheering for my friends beats the snot out of cramming for another anatomy quiz.

"So, Jessica," Mama Riley starts.

"Mmh?" I'm sipping my beer and watching them set up for an intermission game down on the ice. It has something to do with T-shirt cannons and giant bullseyes.

"I hope you're on some sort of birth control."

The beer goes down the wrong pipe. I gag, my throat constricting. Then the hacking starts. I'm dying here, and Blake's mom is still talking.

"There are more options for a girl your age," she says. "Better pills and IUDs. No reason not to be careful."

"Um..." I sputter. "I'm, um..."

Beside me I can feel Jamie's laughter without even having to look.

"...a nursing student," I finally manage. "I have, uh, lots of information about all of that."

"Good," she says firmly. "Blake doesn't need any distractions. Women have toyed with him before."

Even in my haze of embarrassment, this statement hits me a little wrong. I lock eyes with Mama Riley, and her expression is fierce. Maybe she's the type to assume that every girl is a gold-digger. But I think not. Blake didn't tell his family what happened, but mothers are damned intuitive.

I think she knows.

Jess: MAYDAY! Hope you see this before you see your mom. I sat next to her, and let's just say a body cavity search would have been less probing.

Jess: Also, nice goal!

Blake: Shitballs. I'm sorry. Forgot J-Bomb's seats were next to Mom. Ugh. Ugh. Ugh.

Jess: Felt like a jerk lying to her :(

Blake: I hate liars. And now I made you into one. My ex has got me all tipsy topsy.

Jess: Topsy turvy.

Blake: Whatever.

Jess: So would now be a good time to ask you if you needed a +1 for Hozier? #Pleasesayyes #ILied2YourMom4U

Blake: Wait. Is this a shakedown?

Jess: No, because I'm being REALLY HONEST here about how deep in love I am with...Hozier.

Blake: Fine, lady. But wear something sexy.

Jess: REALLY? I can go?

Blake: Yeah, it's cool. Gotta go. I can hear Mom out in the hallway bellowing for me.

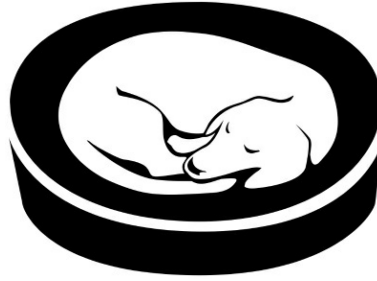
Jess: Bye! You're the best friend in the whole world! I owe you!

Blake: Uh-huh. We'll talk payment later. TTYTOTNDOW

Jess: ?

Blake: Talk to you tomorrow or the next day or whenever.

19 FRIENDS AT BENEFITS



Blake

Houston, we have uno problemo.

No, not just uno problemo. We have...whatever the Spanish word is for *disaster*.

And it's me. *I'm* the disaster. I've been a disaster for two weeks, and nobody has even noticed. Well, in their defense, they haven't noticed because I've kept my mouth shut about it. Because what man goes around telling everyone that he's a disaster?

This wasn't supposed to happen. Not to me. I'm a big, tough hockey player who always knows what to do. And I liked my life just the way it was, fuck you very much. Playing pro hockey comes with a ton of perks. Babes. Free shit. Babes. Adoring fans. Oh, and babes.

In fact, any chick would be fawning all over me right now, whipping her panties off and whispering in my ear all the filthy things she'll do to me later for bringing her to such a cool-ass event.

Any chick but Jess Canning, that is.

She's my problem. And I can hardly even form the words in my mind, they're so awful.

I'm falling for her.

But does she notice? No, no and no. My date is too busy fawning over the Irish chump on the stage.

"That *accent*," Jess gushes, her brown eyes glued to the singer. "Oh my God, I'd listen to him recite the phone book for three days straight if it meant hearing that accent broguing in my ear."

"Broguing isn't a real word," I grumble.

She snickers. “Hey, pot? I’m kettle. Half your vocabulary is made up, Blakey. Now shhh! I’m trying to listen!”

But she’s the one who started talking in the first place! I swallow a growl and force myself to tune in to Hozier’s set. He’s got this whole acoustic setup going on, nice and intimate, and I might actually be enjoying it if Jess wasn’t eye-fucking the guy.

How much does this dude weigh, anyway? A buck seventy? Eighty? Everyone knows you’re not a real man unless you weigh over two hundo.

I watch Jess as she watches the show. She took my suggestion and wore something sexy tonight—a tight black dress that hugs her perfect tits and stops about mid-thigh. When she stood on her tiptoes earlier to hug Eriksson, the silky fabric rode so high I could see the swell of her ass cheeks. And she did something seriously fuckable to her hair. It’s big and trashy-in-a-good-way. I want to shove my fingers through it, angle her head back and kiss her until she’s breathless. And then buy her some dinner.

Yup. Dinner.

I don’t just want to fuck this girl. I want to *feed* her. I want to take her out to some fancy French place, maybe order chocolate-covered strawberries and sensually rub them on her lips, all Don Juan-style.

Seriously, something’s wrong with me. It’s been wrong ever since I dropped her at home after the baby shower and almost blurted out, “Can I take you to a French place and feed you strawberries?” Thank fuck I reined in the crazy.

“ENCORE!” the crowd shouts.

I think Eriksson might be leading the chant. I turn toward him—yeah, he is. Never knew the Swedes had such a hard-on for the Irish. Were they allies during the war?

“What war?” Jess asks in confusion.

I said that aloud?

“Sweden and Ireland,” I answer. “Were they allies in Double-you Double-you One and/or Two?”

She stares at me. “You realize the W’s are just for writing purposes, right? To make it short-form? Saying them out loud makes the word longer.”

“You make the word longer,” I mutter.

Jess frowns. “What’s up with you tonight? You’ve been cranky since the moment we got here.”

Guilty as charged. I’m Mr. Cranky-Pants. I just spent two weeks going

out of my way to avoid this woman, and it did nothing to fix the problem. Isn't time supposed to be the answer to everything? Give it enough time, and whatever stupid feelings you're having will eventually fade. Anger? A good night's sleep always cures it. Sadness? A night at a bar with friends always does the trick. I-think-I-might-really-like-Jessica-Canning? It'll pass.

Except it hasn't passed. Seeing her tonight only opened up the floodgates again.

"I didn't have enough to eat," I lie.

"Um. You ate steak, lobster and about a million hors d'oeuvres, not to mention half *my* dinner."

"Then maybe I'm thirsty," I say flippantly. "I'm hitting the bar—want anything?"

"No, I'm good." Her gaze shifts back to the stage, where Hozier is getting ready to play his encore.

I leave Jess in the crowd and make my way to the bar, where I find Will O'Connor chatting up three skinny blondes with huge bazingas. One of them has her hand on his hip while another runs her palm up and down his arm. The newbie is loving the attention.

"Riley!" He greets me with a big grin. "Enjoying the party?"

I grunt, then ask the bartender for a whiskey neat.

"What's-a-matter?" O'Connor mocks. "Wesmie's sis won't put out?"

"We're just friends," I answer. "And don't say that shit around Wesley or he'll kick your ass."

O'Connor rolls his eyes and turns back to his companions.

I take my drink and wander off, but not back toward the stage area. Instead, I find a solitary corner and lean against the wall, sipping my drink. The ballroom is decorated in the same elegant style as every other charity fundraiser I've attended, only this one is for a dog rescue, so the pink wall hangings are covered with glittery silver paw prints, and the dessert I scarfed down and the name plates on the tables were also paw-shaped.

I study the crowd. Jess is standing with Wes and J-Bomb, laughing at something her brother whispered to her. Then they cheer their lungs out as Hozier starts singing. Jess moves seductively to the music, her hips swaying and blonde head bopping.

Man, she's pretty. And smart. And funny. And about a million other things I can't put into words.

My mom called the other day and asked how the relationship was going.

She even said to tell Jess hello for her, which, when it comes to Mom, is the equivalent of her giving the relationship her blessing.

Usually, the “R” word makes me break out in hives. I’ve been a bachelor for five years and have no intention of changing up the status. Don’t get me wrong—I don’t think all women are lying, untrustworthy assholes. But why take the chance, you know? Better to keep shit casual. Keep it about the fucking and forget about the trusting.

“There you are!” A breathless, flushed Jess flies up to me, her high heels clacking against the marble floor. “You missed the encore.”

“I’ll watch it on YouTube later.”

“You’re such a downer tonight.” She tugs the drink out of my hand, takes a sip, and then places the glass back in my hand. “Come on, party pooper, it’s time for the speech.”

I follow her back to our table. The event organizer seated us with Wes, Jamie, and a few of my other teammates and their WAGS. Eriksson is the only solo gent at the table, and he slides closer to Jess as she sits down.

“You ready to cry your eyes out, J-Babe?” he asks her.

I bristle. What the fuck is he calling her J-Babe for? That’s *our* thing. I glare at Eriksson over Jess’s head, but he doesn’t seem to notice.

“Why would I cry?” she asks, puzzled.

“You never been to a Broken Paws event before?”

She shakes her head.

“Oh man.” He reaches into his breast pocket and tugs out a handkerchief. “Canning, you’re about to experience something petrifying—a room full of grown men crying.”

Jess glances at me. “I thought this was a benefit to raise money for animal shelters.”

I nod. “It is.”

“Then why...?”

“Just wait,” Eriksson warns.

“Just wait,” our team captain Luko echoes from the other side of the table. He’s already got his own handkerchief out.

Mic feedback screeches through the room, and we all turn to see the founder of Broken Paws take the stage.

“Hello, everyone, I’m Paula Anderson—”

I shove my fingers in my mouth and let out a deafening whistle.

“Go Paula!” Eriksson shouts, while our d-man Hewitt thumps both

hands on the table.

The fifty-year-old redhead laughs into the mic. “Hockey players...can’t bring ’em anywhere.”

The crowd rocks with laughter.

“With a few exceptions, of course,” Paula says with a smile. “Because what many of you might not know is that every player on the current roster of this revered Toronto franchise volunteered at one of our animal shelters this past year.”

It’s true. We all have, though I know some of the guys didn’t do it willingly. Like me, Coach Hal is a hardcore dog lover. This is his pet charity—pun intended—and he made every player promise to work at least one shift at a Broken Paws shelter. Non-negotiable.

“But one player in particular has worked so hard and so relentlessly to raise money for our cause.” Paula’s voice thickens with approval. “So I ask all of you to give a big round of applause for Blake Riley, whose tireless fundraising efforts have allowed us to save the lives of a hundred more dogs this year than we did last year. He’s also made several sizable personal donations that have enabled us to provide veterinary care for the dogs of families with limited means.”

As applause fills the room, Jess turns to me in amazement. “You did all that?”

I shrug. “Dogs are awesome.”

Her eyes narrow, as if she’s trying to figure something out. Then she turns back to the speaker.

Another girl would probably give me at least a kiss for helping all the pooches. But not Jess. She only raises one lithe, elegant arm to take a sip from her wineglass. She swallows, and I watch her throat work, wishing I could put my lips right there and taste her.

Shit. Once upon a time we were briefly friends with benefits. Now we’re just friends *at* a benefit.

“And now I’d like you all to turn your attention to the screen,” Paula says, and behind her, a huge projection screen slides down. “All of you have donated tonight. All of you have donated in the past. I, along with everyone else at Broken Paws, thank you for it. We thank you, and we commend you, and we would like you to see where all your money has gone.”

“Oh God, here we go,” Eriksson moans.

The lights dim. The first strains of “Angel” float out of the speakers.

And then the slideshow begins.

The first shot is of a scrawny chocolate lab puppy who's missing his right eye. The caption reads: *Wally. Four Months. Abandoned in a dumpster in Joliette, Quebec.*

The second shot shows a slightly older Wally, still missing an eye, but now happily sitting in the lap of a smiling little girl with pigtails.

The caption: *Four surgeries later. Wally's new home with Katie.*

Luko's wife is the first one to sniffle.

Then we have a pic of a Great Dane with two broken legs. He's followed by a litter of starving terrier puppies in a cardboard box that was found on the side of the road in Northern Ontario. And a husky that was beaten within an inch of his life.

With a little gasp, Jess slips her hand into mine. She's trembling, and I look over to see tears sliding down her cheeks. When I check the table around me, I see Jamie give a teary smile to Wes, who discreetly flicks a drop away from the corner of his eye. Aw. They're as cute as the fucking dogs.

There isn't a dry eye in the room, mine included. This happens every year at this event. I don't know why I keep coming back, except that it's such a fucking amazing cause, and I guess even hockey players could use a good cry every now and then.

But Paula wouldn't leave us in this condition. It's bad for business to destroy your donors completely. So the music morphs from Sarah McLachlan to "Who Let the Dogs Out." There are pictures of the new grooming facilities in the Ontario shelter, thanks to last quarter's donations. A state-of-the-art operating room at the Quebec location. There are several shots of my teammates and various shelter dogs.

And then? The thing closes with a montage featuring yours truly. There's a video of me being swarmed by a litter of Rottweiler puppies. Paula had opened their cage when I wasn't looking and the six of them started jumping all over me, trying to get the sandwich I was eating. The audience cackles as they watch me hold up my sandwich so the puppies lick my face instead.

But I'm not done yet. The next four photos are of various dogs sticking their noses in my crotch. Beside me, Jess lets out a giggle. The music swells and one last shot fills the big screen. It's me holding a puppy in one hand, close to my face. I'd been letting the dog sniff me a little, but the photo was taken in a way that suggests we're sharing a kiss.

The sound of a hundred and fifty female sighs fills the room.

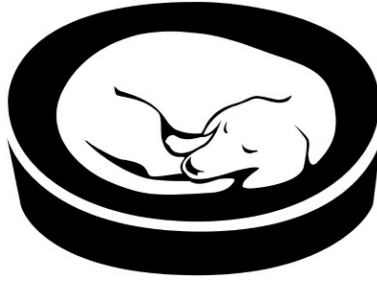
“Oh my God, Blake,” Jess whispers in my ear, and I jolt when her lips brush my cheek. “You are...you’re...”

“I’m what?” I ask thickly.

She squeezes my hand. “You’re the best.”

Her praise makes my heart soar. Damn it. I’ve got it bad.

I’m so fucking fucked.



Jess

Blake is acting weird. Weirder than usual, that is. I don't think I've ever seen him this subdued, but I'm done pestering him about it. If he wants to tell me why he's down, then he will. I can't force him to talk.

"You want to dance?" I ask him.

Now that the speeches are done, the music has started up again. Not Hozier, unfortunately—I'm assuming he's already on his private jet heading somewhere awesome—but the DJ's song selections aren't bad. Jamie is out on the dance floor with Ben Hewitt's wife, Katie, and either I'm wrong or they're doing the Uma and Travolta dance from *Pulp Fiction*. They're terrible at it, though, and Wes and Hewitt stand nearby, laughing at their respective spouses.

"Naw," Blake answers. "Not in the mood."

I put my arms up around his neck, though, hoping I can change his mind. "How did you get involved in this charity, anyway? Seems like you put in more time than if it was just a team thing."

This wins me a shadow of a Blake smile. "I love dogs. Used to have one, a big white boxer. After graduation, I, uh..." He clears his throat. "Lived with Molly for a while. She took care of him when I had away games, which was all the time, right? So after we broke up, I had to let her keep him. Otherwise he'd be in the kennel half the time."

Damn it. Blake looks even more blue than he did a couple of minutes ago. "Maybe you'll see him again now that she's back in Ontario," I suggest.

"Maybe," he halfheartedly agrees. "Listen, do you mind if we take off? I'm kinda wiped. Didn't get much sleep last night."

I drop my hands from his shoulders. “Hot date?” I say lightly.

He shakes his head. “Neck.”

“Huh?”

“Neck’s sore,” he admits. “It was hard to find a good position to sleep in.”

I have to bite my tongue to refrain from suggesting a whole bunch of naughty positions that he might find pleasing. I don’t know what’s wrong with me. My girl parts have been tingling ever since that photographic montage of Blake and all those cute puppies. I guess I’m turned on by philanthropy? Who knew.

Or maybe it’s just Blake who turns me on. Blake and his big body and easy grins. The man whose magical power is that he’s always able to make people laugh. And orgasms—he’s good at giving orgasms, too.

“Jess?”

I snap out of my *Ode to Blake* train of thought. “Hmmm?”

“So you’re cool if we go?”

“Yeah, it’s fine. I have finals to study for.” We’re on trimesters, so there’s only ten days until crunch time.

Blake and I say our goodbyes, hugging, kissing and fist-bumping his teammates, their dates, and the event organizers. As we leave the ballroom and walk toward the coat-check area, he keeps a couple of feet of distance between us, which is unsettling. Normally he doesn’t waste any opportunity to touch me, even if it’s just placing his hand on my arm.

I wish I knew what was up with him. Loud, brash Blake, I can handle. Melancholy Blake? I’m stumped.

We reach the coat-check counter, only to find a little plastic sign that says *Back at 10:15*. Seriously? I check the clock on the wall. It’s 10:03. Who just leaves their post mid-party? People need their coats, damn it!

I suppress a sigh. “Awesome.”

Blake rubs the side of his neck and rotates his head as if trying to stretch it out.

“Your neck hurting again?” I ask in concern.

“A bit.”

I move closer and brush my hand over his nape. The soft hairs there tickle my palm. “Want me to rub it out for you?”

I wait for the inevitable wisecrack, but...it doesn’t come. Oh boy. Is Blake broken? Maybe he needs his batteries replaced?

Leaning up on my tiptoes, I press my mouth to the side of his throat and kiss his warm flesh.

“Jessie... What are you doing?”

“Kissing your boo-boos,” I murmur, then trace the tendons of his neck with my lips. “Do you want me to stop?” My tongue glides over his skin, and his clean, spicy flavor infuses my taste buds. “Would you rather we talk about why you’ve been sulking all night?”

He groans when my lips encircle his earlobe. I’m not sure where this urge to maul him has come from. It’s not like I’ve been aching for him these past two weeks. My school schedule has been so hectic that it didn’t leave much time to think sexy thoughts about Blake Riley. But now that he’s here, standing so close to me, smelling fantastic and looking good enough to eat in his tailored black suit...sexy thoughts are *all* I’m thinking.

“Well?” I prompt, tilting my head back to meet his eyes, which are now burning with lust.

“No, I don’t wanna talk.” His voice has gone husky, sending a shiver up my spine.

I glance at the clock again. 10:05. Then I shift my gaze to the coat-room door. “We have ten minutes,” I say meaningfully. “You think that’s enough time?”

He winks. “Baby, I’ll make you go boom in three minutes, tops.”

I choke down my laughter as he yanks open the door and pulls me inside. Oh, thank God. I fixed him. Blake is back in Blake form. Smiling, naughty and impulsive, his green eyes blazing with heat as he lowers his mouth and kisses me. With our mouths locked in a battle for dominance, we stumble down a row of coat racks toward a private nook in the back of the room. Blake has me up against the wall before I can blink, his tongue slicking over mine, his hands all over me.

I gasp when he slips one hand underneath my dress and rubs me over my panties.

“So wet,” he croaks, before cupping me fully.

I squeeze his package through his trousers and groan, “So hard.”

His choked laughter heats the air. “Kay, so we’ve established that you’re wet and I’m hard. What are we gonna do about it?”

I latch my lips to his again and loop my arms around his neck. “What, you need me to show you an instructional video?”

“Mmmm, a sex video starring you?” One long finger dips underneath

the crotch of my underwear. “Let’s put a pin in that. Right now, I just want...” His finger pushes inside me, and we both moan. “*That*,” he grunts. “I want that.”

That’s as much foreplay as I get. Blake produces a condom from his wallet and has his pants down and his dick out before I can blink. Not that I was expecting sweet, lingering kisses and lots and lots of teasing. We’re in a coat closet and on a deadline. This is going to be a quickie, through and through.

Blake lifts me up and presses my back against the wall. I hook my legs around his waist, relishing the feel of his warm hands cupping my ass. He angles my body slightly, moves one hand to his erection, and then guides it inside me.

“*Oh*,” I gasp when he thrusts deep.

“Hold on, baby. This is gonna be a rough ride.”

Holy shit, he’s not kidding. His mouth captures mine in another blistering kiss, and then he’s fucking me in fast, shallow strokes. I cling to his shoulders and rock my hips, straining to get closer. The tension in my core gathers, tightens, as pleasure makes my toes curl. I can’t catch my breath, because Blake is still kissing me, and his frenzied pace doesn’t let up.

My piano teacher always said, “If you’re going to make a mistake, make it good and loud.”

I’m pretty sure she didn’t mean this kind of mistake, but I’m following her advice nonetheless as I moan into Blake’s mouth and writhe against his talented body.

Blake

It’s been a long time since anything felt so fucking good. I’m drowning in this girl and I don’t want to be saved. I keep giving it to her hard and fast, even if what I really crave is a long, slow night of it in my bed.

But she’s loving it, and I’m the kind of guy who knows not to ruin a good thing. Except it’s such a good thing that it’s ruining *me*. She’s wrapped so tightly around me, I never want it to end. The sweet sounds she’s making are almost as good as the clench of her pussy on my cock.

Then she sucks on my tongue, and my nuts tighten up faster than a slapshot.

“Oh *shit*,” I say between groans. “I’m gonna come, Jessie. Like...super fast. Like...oh fuck...like *now*.”

My eyes pop open to see her beautiful features taut with ecstasy, and it’s over like a rocket. I shoot so hard that my whole body shakes with the force. She moans, long and low, and we tremble together, our mouths locked as tightly as our bodies.

Afterward, we just stay there for a moment, panting. But eventually I have to set the poor girl down and disengage. She clings to me still, her arms around my neck. “That was...” The sentence gets no ending.

Indeed. I smooth her skirt down, because I don’t really want to stop touching her. But we can’t be seen like this. Gently, I lean Jess back against the wall and tuck myself hastily together.

She seems to wake up to our current situation, her hands straightening her hair. Her big eyes hold mine and it slays me. She wears the most beautiful sex flush on her cheeks, and all I can think about is dragging her back to my lair and starting over again.

And my neck feels looser all of a sudden. The pain is gone. I want to build an altar to Jess Canning and declare a miracle.

But first, we have to get out of here. I nudge her gently toward the exit, hoping nobody will notice us sneaking out of the—

Jess smacks into Will O’Connor’s chest the second she steps out the door.

Shit.

My least trustworthy teammate smirks at Jess, then arches a brow at me. “So,” he remarks. “Riley. I guess the ass-kicking for hooking up with Wesley’s sister doesn’t apply to you? He’s gonna be fascinated when I tell him about this.”

I open my mouth to argue, but Jess gets there first. She pokes his chest and scowls at him. “This isn’t high school, asshole. My brother *really* doesn’t need to hear about every time I do something a little stupid.”

My mouth slams shut. I wish I could unhear what she just said, but it’s already branded into my brain. And the pain it brings freaks me out a little, because it’s been a long, long time since my gut has clenched like this, since it felt like someone had stabbed me in the heart with a skate.

O’Connor’s face splits into a grin. “Hey, if you’re feeling stupid again

later, I'm available."

The strangled sound I've been holding back breaks free, emerging from my throat like a twisted gasp.

Sensing trouble, Jess eases backward until she's pressed against my chest. Her hands find mine, which are clenched into fists. "Move along, Will," she says quietly. "Nothing to see here."

He gives a final smirk, and I feel like punching it off his face. It takes all my willpower to let him walk away.

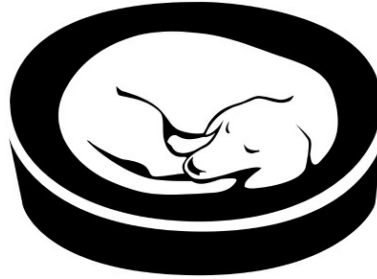
When he's gone, Jess lets out a breath. "Whew. What an asshole, right?" She turns to me with a smile.

I try to return it, but it's hard. Because Jess just said in no uncertain terms that fooling around with me was stupid. Whatever I'm feeling for her, it's obvious *she's* not feeling it back. My good mood has been punctured as quickly and completely as a balloon with a needle.

"The coat-check lady is back," Jess says. "Shall we?"

I take her hand. And then I take her home. But there's no joy in it.

21 ONCE MORE WITH FEELING



Blake

The puck comes whizzing toward me—it's a pass from Wesley. I put my stick in position, pluck it out of its trajectory and snap it into the goal.

Or that's what *should* have happened.

For the third time today I shoot wide, sending the puck into the waiting arms of my scrimmage opponent, Will O'Connor. And that asshole laughs. I don't pay attention to him, though, because I'm glancing at Coach instead.

His face goes slack, and he shakes his head.

I'm so fucking frustrated I could spit. My neck aches, too. The pain radiates down my shoulder, wreaking havoc with my concentration.

We position ourselves for another face-off. I catch Wesley watching me with nervous eyes. Then the puck drops and Eriksson passes to Wes. I put on a burst of speed as he lines up to send it over to me.

Once more with feeling! I get my stick on that puppy and...

Lemming steals it with a poke check that I never saw coming.

Coach Hal blows the whistle. "Let's change a few things up," he says.

Wes groans. He knows what's coming. Hal is going to make a line change before our game tomorrow night. Goddamn it.

And then it's worse than I thought, because Coach puts Wes with O'Connor, who's a glory hog. Wesley spends the rest of practice looking sour. And when the final whistle blows I leave the ice so fast there's probably a contrail behind me. I'm in the showers before anyone else has even unlaced his skates.

Under the spray, I knead my shoulder while the hot water pelts me. My teammates shuffle in. They leave me alone, but I can feel eyes on my back.

So I cut the shower shorter than the ideal length—eternity—and get dressed.

While I'm changing, the head trainer hovers, asking me what's the matter. "Is it something we should evaluate?"

"Just a stiff neck," I insist, because it is. There is nothing really wrong with me except a little pain and the horrible sense of doom that's descended like a dark cloud. I just can't shake the feeling that something is switched off inside me.

Last night I lay awake worrying about it. That's so unlike me it's not even funny. But it's as if my carefully calibrated sensory balance has gone haywire. Last year when I had that sprain, I bounced right back. But this time? My bounce has bounced elsewhere.

I hightail it out of there and drive to the one place that will never let me down.

The bar, of course.

It's only five o'clock, and at this hour Sticks & Stones is empty. The other players will all drift in here eventually, but for now I have the place to myself. Except for Lisa, of course. She hustles over and plunks a mug of beer in front of me.

"I didn't order yet," I mumble.

She shakes her head. The mohawk is green today. "I can always tell what my customers need. And what you needed was speed, man. You need a beer, like, yesterday."

"That obvious, huh?" Good ol' Lisa.

Her smile is patient. "What's her name?"

"Who?"

Lisa gives me an eye roll. "Whoever has you twisted up in knots. And she must be somebody special, because you're never the one who's sitting here with a mopey face."

"Her name is Jess." I take a big gulp of the beer she's brought me.

"Wait..." Lisa puts her elbows on the bar. "She drank the Velvet Fog, right?"

"Prolly."

She nods like a sage. "Nice girl. Not everyone jives with a wheat ale. I'd do her. But I thought you weren't ever dating again after whatsername."

"Molly."

"I didn't *forget*, Blake. I just don't like saying it out loud."

Right. Lisa is awfully protective of the players. I never told her what

Molly did to me, but during my rookie season Molly used to come into Sticks & Stones and guard me like a Doberman. She never liked this place, and she used to complain that her beer was served too warm.

Now that I think about it, Lisa might be responsible for that.

“She’s back in town, you know,” I hear myself say.

“Damn.” Lisa makes a face. “I’m sorry. She giving you a hard time?”

“Nothing I can’t handle.”

Her face softens. “You always say that, honey. And I’m sure it’s true. No man is an island, though. You’re the kind of guy who takes care of his family. Takes care of his friends. Takes care of his teammates. But who takes care of you?”

With another gulp, I consider this question. “So you’re saying that men are more like peninsulas? Then women are like the busy parts of downtown. All those one-way streets and all that traffic. It’s so fucking confusing.”

Her mouth opens, then closes again. Then she grabs my pint glass off the bar and yanks on a tap, topping it up. “Drink this, and tell me what you’re going to do about the Jess situation. Did she dump you?”

I shake my head. “She said fooling around with me was stupid. Or that I was stupid. One of those.”

Lisa flinches. “Oh, honey. Maybe she didn’t mean it like it came out.”

Actually, I’m pretty sure she didn’t. But then where is she? And how long would it take her to realize that we’re good together?

“Women *always* want me.”

The bartender’s lips twitch. “*Most* women.”

“Right,” I correct. “Women who like dick want me.”

“But not Jess?”

“She likes me a little,” I admit. “But not enough. Seriously, Lise—how could one woman try to trap me and another just considers me her OOPF?”

“Oopf?”

“Occasional Orgasm-Producing Friend.”

“And you want more.” She pauses. “You’re lonely.”

Ugh. That word again. Why do people assume I’m lonely?

“Okay. Stupid question,” Lisa warns. “Have you actually told this girl you want more?”

“Yeah. Well, I hinted.”

“You hinted. How?”

Hmmm. I pushed her up against the wall of a coatroom and pounded her.

“You may have a point.”

Lisa cackles. “Yeah? Go figure. So now you need to be straight with her. How’s she gonna give you what you want if she doesn’t know what that is? Oh, and if you’re the kind of guy who likes to make a grand gesture, now would be a good time to do that. You strike me as a grand-gesture kind of guy.”

“I do?” Granted, I make some very grand gestures with the Blake Snake. But I’m getting the feeling that Lisa might not be talking about sex right now.

“Yeah. You’re a go-big-or-go-home guy, right? Think of something she really needs, and then give it to her. A girl would have to sit up and notice something like that.”

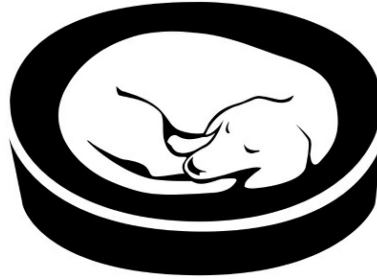
“She would, right?”

“Of course.”

I think this through a little more. “But if I make a grand gesture, she might still turn me down.”

“It could happen,” Lisa admits, wiping down the bar. “But then you’d know how it was.”

Fuck. My neck gives a big twinge, and I feel like I already know how it is.



Jess

“Rise and shine!”

The loud and cheery voice jolts me from not-so-peaceful slumber, and before I can blink, the whole world tips over and I’m slamming down onto the floor. What the hell...?

I groan and rub my arm where it smacked the hardwood, realizing I’d fallen out of my chair. Was I sleeping at my desk? I groggily scrub both hands over my face. Yep, I totally fell asleep mid-cramming last night. There’s a drool spot and a cheek impression on the pages of the textbook that had served as my pillow.

“Oh my gosh, are you okay?” Violet is tugging me to my feet, her eyes wide with concern behind her glasses. “I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“It’s fine. I’m fine.” I rub my tired eyes. “What time is it?”

“Eight thirty.”

I gasp. “Are you serious?” Crap. *Crap*. Our final exam for pathophysiology and pharmaco-therapeutics (two words I never knew existed before I started this nursing program) is in thirty minutes. I don’t even have time to shower, damn it.

“Why didn’t you wake me earlier?” I ask my roommate.

She wrinkles her forehead. “I did. You said *I’m up!* and then kept reading.”

I did? Great. Some people sleepwalk. I, apparently, sleep-study. Except...oh God, I can’t remember a word of that textbook. Same with all the notes I took at the lectures. Panic coats my throat as I struggle to recall even a shred of information from my study sessions. Oh fuck oh fuck oh fuck. I’m

going to fail this final.

Violet is oblivious to my internal anxiety attack. “You should get dressed,” she informs me.

No shit. I fly around the room snatching up pieces of clothing, then strip out of yesterday’s wrinkled jeans and sweater while Violet leans against the door, watching me.

“Are you leaving now or do you want to wait so we can walk to class together?”

“I can wait,” she says graciously.

I yank a pair of clean yoga pants up my legs. Ugh. I can’t believe I fell asleep in jeans. I have red lines all over my thighs from where the denim dug into my skin all night.

“You want me to quiz you while you get ready?” she asks.

If it had come from anyone else, the offer might have been construed as considerate. But there’s a hint of smugness in Violet’s tone. Sure, we’ve been getting along better since the icebreaker at Sticks & Stones, but that doesn’t change the fact that Violet is super competitive. She crows every time she does better than me on a quiz, gloats whenever our clinical instructors give her any praise, and constantly makes sure to remind me that she’s at the top of our class.

I’m nowhere near the top. I’m not on the bottom, either. More like middle of the pack, which is a frustrating place to be. I’m killing it in the practical stuff (I secretly do some gloating of my own every time our instructor tells me how wonderful I am with patients), but the academic part is more difficult than I’d expected. Of course, that’s the part that Violet excels in, and she never lets me forget it.

“Thanks, but I’m good,” I answer as I slip into a V-neck T-shirt. “I don’t like to go over the material right before a test. It clouds up my brain.”

She shrugs. “Cool. I don’t need any last-minute prep, either. I had that textbook memorized before school even started.”

Of course she did.

I duck into the common bathroom on our floor, Violet trailing behind me. After some hurried teeth- and hair-brushing, I shove a stick of deodorant underneath my shirt and swipe it over my underarms, then zip up my toiletry case.

Five minutes later, Violet and I have grabbed coffees from the stand in our lobby and are making our way across campus. My insides churn with

every step I take. I'm so fucking nervous, and chugging half a cup of coffee on an empty stomach isn't helping to ease those nerves.

The way this program is set up, most of our courses are on a pass/fail basis. This one is the exception—a score of seventy percent or higher is required in order to pass the course. This is the grade they'll be checking when they review the status of my scholarship.

The good thing is, I've already passed all my other classes, so this is my last final. But I can't afford to do poorly this morning. I *have* to kick this final's ass.

"So what's the deal with you and Blake Riley? Did you break up?"

Violet's curious question jerks me out of my panic spiral. "What? No. I mean, we weren't going out in the first place."

"But you went to that charity thing with him last week. There were pictures all over the internet of the two of you dancing."

Were there? In all honesty, I've been in a study bubble for the past ten days. Blake hasn't even crossed my mind. Nobody has. In fact, last night I got a text from Jamie that simply said: *You alive?* I messaged back, *Studying. Leave me alone.* And that's pretty much the only contact I've had with the outside world since the Broken Paws benefit.

"You of all people should know that I've been married to my desk this week," I remind Violet. "I haven't had time to see anyone."

"Yeah, but he hasn't texted you at all," she points out. "Before the charity party, he was texting you all the time."

I furrow my brow, because 1) she's been monitoring my text messages?? And 2) she's right. It's been a while since Blake sent me one of his randomly absurd texts. Or his deliciously filthy sexts.

Is he avoiding me? Maybe he's mad at me?

Why would he be, though? Our on-and-off friends-with-benefits arrangement has suited us both. Besides, Blake is incapable of being mad at someone. He's the man who lets his evil, lying ex consort with his poor unsuspecting family because he doesn't want to tarnish her reputation. I doubt he even knows the meaning of anger.

Still, I'm not thrilled with the idea that he might be ghosting me. I like this casual, have-sex-once-in-a-while thing we've got going on. It's the perfect stress release, a nice orgasmic break from my chaotic schedule and an effective temporary-amnesia inducer that makes me forget about my empty bank account.

"I guess he's been busy," I finally respond.

Violet gives me a look.

"What?"

"Um, he's a hockey player, Jess. If he hasn't called you, that doesn't mean he's busy. It means he's *busy*."

I raise my foam cup to my lips and take a sip. "Meaning?"

"Meaning he's screwing other people."

The coffee gets stuck in my throat, and it takes a few seconds of coughing to clear it. "He's not screwing other people," I sputter. "And even if he was..." I trail off. Even if he was, what? I'd be okay with it?

I mean, I guess I'd *have* to be okay with it. Blake and I never talked about us being exclusive. We agreed that our sexcapades weren't going to be a habit. So how could I be mad if he's seeing other women? And why did it take so long for the thought to even occur to me? Blake has the attention span of a fruit fly. He probably forgets I exist the moment he zips up his pants and walks away.

My chest clenches at the thought. Okay, that stings. And the idea of him having sex with someone else while also sleeping with me sends a hot streak of...something... up my spine. Oh no. I think it might be jealousy.

Violet speaks up again when I don't continue. "All I'm saying is, most of the Toronto roster is made up of manwhores, and Blake Riley has always been one of them. If you don't lock him down, he's going to move on to some other girl."

"I don't want to lock him down." Then I question my own statement, because...do I? No, of course not. If I asked Blake for exclusivity, that would be saying that I want a commitment from him. Which I don't.

She shrugs. "Then you can't get mad about him not texting you."

I wasn't mad about it! I want to shout. I hadn't even noticed Blake's radio silence until *she* brought it up.

I suddenly wonder if maybe she's trying to get into my head. I was already freaking out about this final, and now, thanks to Violet, my brain is even more of a jumbled mess. But nobody is that calculating, right? I'm sure she was just trying to make conversation.

As we walk into the lecture hall, I banish all thoughts of Blake from my head and force myself to concentrate on what's important. Passing this exam. Excelling in this program. Proving to everyone that Jessica Canning is not a screw-up.

I can do this.
I know I can.

I CAN'T DO THIS.

For the millionth time since I sat down, my gaze flies toward the clock over the door. We had three hours to write the final. We're down to ten minutes.

I have one question left to answer. It's the hardest one on the test, which I decided to save for last after wasting the first twenty minutes blankly staring at my exam booklet and struggling to write something.

I'm supposed to pick one of the diseases on the list and write a two-page "systematic examination of the disease process, physiological changes and nursing implications, grounding the assessment in a pathophysiological framework."

What the fuck does that even mean?

Heat stings my eyes, and I order myself—no, *command* myself—not to cry in the middle of the lecture hall. I have ten minutes to write a two-page response. Nope, make that nine minutes, because I just wasted a whole minute panicking about it.

Violet, of course, is long gone. She was beaming like a fireworks display when she delivered her booklet to the instructor thirty minutes early. She's probably at the campus coffeehouse right now, bragging to everyone about how she aced this final.

Stop thinking about Violet! Write something!

I take a breath, then utilize the mantra Wes taught me after he caught me freaking out over a flower-related disaster when I was planning his wedding this summer.

It's going to be okay.

It's going to be okay.

It's going to be okay.

I exhale slowly. Wow. All right. That kind of worked. Wes is really good at this calming-yourself-down stuff.

With my pen firmly in hand, I bend my head and start writing. I write as fast as I can, not bothering to proofread every sentence the way I usually do. There's no time. *Just write, Jess. You've got this.*

When the instructor clears her throat and announces that our time is up, I

drop my pen and release a breath of relief. My wrist is sore as hell, and my fingers are numb and locked in a claw position, but I don't care, because I did it. I answered the motherfuckin' question! I filled two pages and I feel like I've just finished a 10K marathon.

On shaky legs, I walk down the steps to hand in my paper. The instructor sets it on the pile with the other booklets and smiles as she bids me goodbye. I smile back, but it's a tight, strained smile. The panic is setting in again, because I notice that a lot of the other students are handing in not one but *two* booklets. They wrote so much that they had to ask for extra paper? I wonder how many booklets Violet filled up. Ten, I bet.

God, why couldn't I have been born an over-achiever?

I'm glummer than glum as I hitch my messenger bag over my shoulder and exit the building. Outside, the air is frigid and the wind is brisk. Winter's coming, and I'm looking forward to it about as much as the Starks in the north. And that's just another mistake the under-achieving Jess Canning could've avoided—spend more time studying and less time binge-watching *Game of fucking Thrones*. Maybe if I hadn't wasted so much time on pointless shit these past couple of years, I wouldn't be a twenty-six-year-old first-year nursing student who probably just bombed her final exam.

Wonderful. I'm feeling sorry for myself again.

What happened to me? I used to be so confident. But it's like something has slowly been chipping away at my self-esteem ever since I graduated from high school.

I watched all my siblings accomplish their goals. All my friends killed it in college and now have successful careers. The friends who didn't have a driving career passion still found passion in other ways, like Darcy, who married the best guy on the planet and just had her first kid. She emailed me a few weeks ago and admitted that being a wife and mom is the most rewarding thing she's ever done.

And me? I'm struggling with yet another career path, and I don't think I've ever been in a relationship that I would classify as "rewarding."

Okay, enough. Pity party's over, missy.

I draw a breath. Yeah, I need to stop wallowing. It's totally counterproductive.

I head back to the dorm, where I take the shower I was forced to skip earlier. Then I crawl into bed and pass out, catching up on all the sleep I missed during my ten-day cram session.

When I wake up, the room is bathed in darkness. A weary glance at the alarm clock reveals that it's a little past seven. I'd slept for seven straight hours. Awesome. Now I'll be up all night. Why didn't I set an alarm?

A peek at my phone shows a missed text from Jamie.

How did the final go? Tell us over an early dinner?

It was sent at five, so I'm not sure if he and Wes have eaten already yet. But I'm starving, so I sit up and dial his number.

"Hey," I say after he picks up. "Just got your message. I was napping."

"I figured." He chuckles. "God, I do *not* miss college. The thought of cracking open a textbook again makes me shiver in horror."

"It's not fun," I agree.

"So how do you think you did this morning? A-plus or A-plus-plus?"

"Neither. But I'd give up my firstborn for a C-plus. That's all I need to pass."

"Eh, you can pump out a C-plus in your sleep. You've always been one of the smart Cannings."

My eyebrows shoot up. Uh, right. *I'm* one of the smart Cannings? "That's very sweet of you to say, but we both know I'm at the bottom of our family smarts ladder."

"Bullshit," he argues. "Joe didn't even learn how to spell his name—all three letters of it!—until he was five. Mom told me."

I gasp. "Oh my God, really? I am so bringing that up at Christmas!"

"And Scottie almost flunked out of the police academy," Jamie reminds me.

"Yeah, but that's because he was getting drunk with all the other cadets every night instead of studying, not because he's a dumb-dumb."

"True." Jamie's voice softens. "But you're not a dumb-dumb, either, Jessie. You know that, right?"

"Right," I say lightly, before changing the subject. "Anyway, are you guys still up for dinner?"

"Aw, actually, no. We ended up going to this Indian place after we didn't hear from you. Wes was grumbling about how hungry he was and didn't want to wait."

"That's fine. Don't worry about it."

"I'd invite you over to raid our fridge, but it's probably better if Wes and I have some alone time tonight. He's all cranky because his practice was a complete disaster today."

I frown. “Why? What happened?”

“Not sure. The team wasn’t gelling, I guess? And Blake bombed in practice so bad that Hal changed up the lines. He didn’t even want to come to dinner with us because he was in such a shit mood.”

Surprise jolts through me. Blake Riley, in a shit mood? That’s unheard of. The man is a perpetual Susie Sunshine. And he turned down a chance to eat *food*? Very troubling, indeed.

“Weird,” I say absently. “Okay, I’m going to let you go now. I need to forage for food.”

My brother laughs. “Come over tomorrow?”

“Sure.” Now that my last exam is in the can, I have a whole week off before the new term begins.

We hang up, but I don’t get up from my bed. Instead, I pull up Blake’s number and stare at the last messages we’d exchanged. They’re from the home game where I sat with Mama Riley and listened to her lecture me about birth control.

After a beat of hesitation, I take a page out of Jamie’s book and text, *You alive?*

I’m startled when my phone buzzes right away.

No, I’m dead.

I snicker to myself. *Want to hang out tonight? Just wrote my final exam.*

This time it takes several moments for him to respond.

Not in the best mood, J-Babe. Maybe another time.

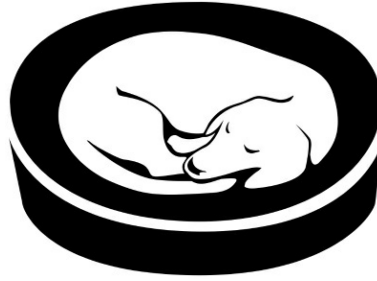
Undeterred, I type, *My mood’s not great, either. Let’s be miserable together. I’ll bring the ice cream if you provide the spoons.*

There’s an interminably long pause before he answers.

Yeah, sure.

Okay, so it’s not the most...*enthusiastic* reply. But hell, I’ll take it.

23 PICK YOUR POISON



Jess

When I arrive at a certain sleek condo tower by the waterfront, the doorman waves me in. But instead of getting off on Jamie's floor, I ride the elevator farther up, to Blake's. I've never been to his apartment before, and I'm not sure what to expect. There are only four doors on his hallway. I knock on the one that has a doormat depicting a St. Bernard with a hockey stick.

Behind the door, I hear the muted sounds of TV, then the thump of footsteps. Blake opens the door wearing a cuddly-looking flannel shirt—unbuttoned to reveal his fabulous chest—and a pair of well-worn jeans that hug his sculpted thighs. In other words, he looks scrumptious. But then I check his face, and I see that something is wrong. His expression is pinched in a way that's completely unfamiliar on him.

"Hey, Jess," he says softly. "How are you?" He shuffles backwards to let me in.

How am I? Totally weirded out. That's how.

"I've had better days," I admit. "But I brought ice cream and wine. I would have brought a chick flick, too, but you're not a chick."

I step past him and take a closer look at the apartment. I'd expected it to look about the same as my brother's, but it's not the same at all. Blake's pad is huge, and his kitchen must have been designed by a Swedish architect named Torvald. Everything is sleek wood or gleaming white. A thick wool rug pads the floor under my feet. Gentle light washes over all the surfaces from hidden fixtures near the ceiling. And there are sliding glass doors on the far wall leading to what must be a kickass terrace.

"Wow," I say stupidly. "Fancy."

He shrugs. "What kind of ice cream?"

"I have dark mocha and also coconut. Pick your poison." I carry my goods toward his kitchen, but Blake takes the bag from me and unpacks it himself.

"Did you eat dinner?" he asks, tucking the ice cream cartons into the freezer.

"Not exactly," I hedge. "But that's okay."

Blake clicks his tongue. "How about we order some Chinese? You probably haven't eaten all that well if you've been studying." His green eyes bore into mine.

"Okay, thanks," I say quietly. "I like chicken and broccoli. Actually, I like most anything."

One warm hand cups the back of my head for a second. Just as I register how nice it feels, it's gone again.

Blake orders our food while I locate a pair of wine glasses on a shelf over the countertop. But a corkscrew remains elusive. I can't figure out how to open his kitchen drawers because there aren't any handles. Out of frustration I give one a little push and it slides open with a hushed click that reminds me of a high-tech device. Blake's kitchen drawers are like something you'd find on a space shuttle.

I pour carefully because I don't know if red wine is capable of staining his immaculate marble countertops. Then I carry our glasses over to the generous leather sofa, where Blake is just finishing up his call.

"To shitty days that end with wine," I announce when he's ready to toast with me.

"I'll drink to that," he says as we touch glasses.

We hold each other's gaze as we sip, and it feels weirdly intimate. Although maybe I should stop finding it weird, right? How many times have I gotten naked with this guy?

Let's not count.

"This isn't bad," I say of the wine. I went above my usual price point, splurging on a twenty-dollar bottle. "Let's drink every drop. Otherwise I've squandered my last twenty bucks."

Blake cocks his head like a puppy. "Money troubles?"

"Always. I came to Toronto because nursing school cost *only* thirty-five grand a year, instead of fifty. My parents kicked in ten. I took out loans for ten. And the last fifteen are from a scholarship that I have to reapply for every

year. If I don't get at least a C-plus on today's exam, I probably won't be eligible next year." Ugh. The wine sours in my stomach. I shouldn't be worrying about this until my grades come back, but it's hard not to. "If I don't get the scholarship, I won't be able to continue."

And then where will I be? I'll owe back the money I borrowed from the bank. And my parents will be out ten grand for another one of my failures. I'll be back in Cali living in my old bedroom, in debt and looking for a job.

Shoot me.

Blake puts a hand on my knee. "I'll bet you aced your test."

I shake my head. Hard. "I didn't, though. Whatever my superpower is, pathophysiology isn't it."

"You're still awesome, Jessie. I refuse to believe that you won't make it in nursing school."

I give him a tired smile, because I appreciate how loyal that sounds. "Now let's talk about your thing. What's the matter, champ?"

He takes a gulp of wine, and then pats the place on the couch right next to him. I scoot over and he wraps an arm around me. And I lay my head on his chest, because it's irresistible. He smells good, too. Like clean flannel and sandalwood.

"I'm just off my game, 's'all," he rumbles. "My superpowers are a little wobbly right now, too."

"No, really? I'm sorry, sweetie." I pat his thick wrist with my free hand. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

He's quiet for so long that I wonder if he even heard me. Then he says, "I just like seeing your pretty face."

I get an odd lump in my throat hearing it. But it's nothing that a little more wine won't wash down.

A few minutes later, our food arrives. We eat sitting in comfortable dining chairs at Blake's small but sleek table in front of the windows. The lights of Toronto's waterfront twinkle on one side of the view, while the blackness of Lake Ontario coats the other. I ask Blake about the team's travel schedule, and then listen while he tells me which rinks and cities he enjoys visiting, and which ones are less fun.

The mood is a little subdued, but I tell myself it's just because we both had shitty days.

After we eat, I do our dishes and put away the leftovers in Blake's immaculate fridge. I pause in front of the freezer and ask which ice cream he

wants first. “I don’t know if these really go together,” I admit. “Which one do you want to taste first?”

“You pick.” He stands beside me at the counter.

I choose the mocha and pry the top off. My hands are a little sticky, and I don’t have a spoon. So I use my hip to open Blake’s magical cutlery drawer, and this makes him grin.

When he finally smiles, something relaxes inside me that I didn’t even know I’d been clenching.

I grab a spoon and dip it into the chocolaty surface. To keep his good humor, I fly the spoon toward his mouth until he opens for me.

At the last second, my in-flight spoon banks sharply and flies toward my own mouth instead.

But—learn from me—never try to deke a professional hockey player. His hand moves so fast I don’t see it until it grabs mine. With a playful shriek I fight back. The spoon is *almost* mine. In fact, I manage to smear chocolate on my lip before Blake gets control and sweeps the bite of ice cream into his own mouth.

His eyes gleam as he cleans the spoon. “That’s a nice look for you,” he says, lifting his chin to indicate the sticky smear on my lip. His eyes focus and then fill with heat.

Slowly, and with great deliberation, I sweep my tongue across the spot. “Did I get it?” I’m teasing him mercilessly right now, but at least he doesn’t look sad.

“No,” he says, his voice pure gravel. “It’s...let me.” He takes a step closer. Now he’s looking down at me, his lips mere inches from mine. I quiver with expectation as he lifts a hand to cup my chin. “Jess...” he whispers.

And then Blake swipes his thumb across my lip and takes a step backward, sighing.

A beat goes by while my body says, *Really?* I feel unconscionably bereft. I’m used to Blake trying to get into my pants. Now he’s not, and it’s so confusing.

I pick up the spoon and dig it into the ice cream. Blake watches me, his gaze on fire. I take a bite. Then I scoop up another spoonful and feed it to him.

It’s smooth and cold and wonderful. Heaven, really. Another bite for me. Another one for him. He’s still watching every move I make. His laser

concentration makes me feel completely alive. With those big green eyes tracking me, I'm not a broke student or a pharmacology failure. I'm just here, in this moment. And it's beautiful.

On the next bite, I let the spoon linger in my mouth. He looks pained. Then, instead of offering the next bite, I take that one, too, smiling at him.

Blake's eyelids get heavy. He mutters something like, "Oh, fuck it," and before I can blink, he tosses my spoon on the counter and grabs my head, tugging it toward him. With a groan, he claims my mouth, his tongue parting my lips immediately. Our kiss is cold and hot and pure chocolaty hunger.

I moan into his mouth as a big hand grabs my bottom, pulling me into him. And there is nothing sexier than the Great Wall of Blake Riley. The front of me is flush against his hard body. The feel of him is addictive. It's really no mystery why I keep shedding my clothes like a snakeskin every time we're alone. His greedy kisses have already dismantled much of my executive function. My awareness narrows down to the taste of his kisses and the throbbing of my heart.

And other places.

My hands are almost too small to grasp his shoulders, but I need more of him. "Bedroom," I murmur between kisses.

He doesn't reply. Instead, he picks me up in one hand. We don't even stop kissing as I fly through the air perched on his forearm. The light dims as we enter a back room. A second later he tosses me onto a giant cloud, which turns out to be a bed the size of my entire dorm room. He whips his shirt off. When he unzips his jeans, just the sound of the zipper makes me shiver. And then he shoves those down, along with his boxers. As always, my mouth goes dry at the dual sights of his massive erection and the look of determination on his handsome face.

This beautiful man wants me. *Me*. It's enough to make a girl dizzy.

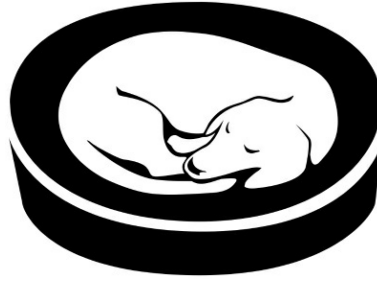
"You realize what this means, right?" he says, putting one muscular knee onto the bed.

"Mmmm?" *That I have zero self-control?*

He leans down to grasp the ankles of my yoga pants. And—*whoosh*—they disappear, along with my scruples. My shirt meets the same fate a second later. Blake props himself onto his elbows over my body. He puts his face between my breasts and sighs. Nudging my bra out of the way with his chin, he takes my nipple into his mouth suddenly and sucks on it with soft lips.

I gasp, my back arching unbidden.

“You know what this means,” he says again, unclasping my bra. “It means we’re going out for real.”



Jess

It takes a second for me to process the words, because Blake's hungry lips have attacked my other breast. "Wait. What?" I demand.

He releases me with a wet pop. "You. Me. We're a thing, if I do you in my bed."

"Says who?" My words are tough, but I've heated up faster than the top-of-the-line stove I spotted in his spiffy kitchen.

"Says me. My bed is a temple. It's reserved for solo spansks. And girlfriends."

Blake licks a hot stripe between my breasts, and I shiver uncontrollably. Damn him. He can't drop a girlfriend bomb while licking me all over. It's impossible to concentrate.

"Just close your eyes, Jessie. We'll talk deets later."

What deets could we possibly need to go over? I'm not his girlfriend, and I'm not—oh wow. His tongue is working my nipple now and it's pure heaven. Soft flicks and gentle kisses that make my toes curl into the mattress. And his warm palm is traveling down my stomach, tickling my mound, cupping my aching core.

I moan when the heel of his hand applies delicious pressure to my clit. Okay. He's right. We can save the talking for later. It's impossible to multitask when he's touching me. When he's sliding down my body and planting greedy kisses on my inner thighs.

"Better than ice cream," he rasps against my sensitive flesh, his tongue coming out to tickle my clit. "So much sweeter, baby." Then he captures the little bud between his lips and sucks hard enough to make me cry out.

“Oh my *God*,” I choke. My fingers tangle in his hair, keeping him trapped between my thighs. “Keep doing that.”

His laughter vibrates through my body. He continues to suckle me while one finger teases my folds, circling my opening until finally, slowly, slipping inside. I gasp in delight and rock against him. He’s rocking, too, I realize. He’s all but fucking the mattress as he licks and sucks and groans.

My eyelids flutter open, and I see the taut concentration in his features as he pleasures me. The flush on his cheeks. The restless shift of the hips he’s grinding into the mattress.

I bunch his hair between my fingers and tug his head up. “Get on your back.”

“Not done with you,” he mumbles.

“Trust me.”

His eyes gleam as he shifts onto his side. Then he grins and rolls over, propping his hands behind his head and awaiting my next move.

The ache between my legs is unbearable, making it difficult to move. I order my shaky limbs to cooperate, and climb onto his muscular body, twisting around so that my butt is wiggling in his face and his massive erection is at eye level with me.

“*Fuck*,” he gasps. “Yeah, babe, *that’s* what I like to see.”

Two big hands cup my ass and pull me down onto his face. When his tongue glides over me, I almost come on the spot.

Taking a breath, I grasp his cock in one hand and lower my mouth to his engorged head. I give a tiny lick, then breathe out, “Better?”

His response is a hungry growl punctuated by the brush of his tongue on my clit.

I wrap my lips around him and suck gently, the salty flavor of him tickling my tongue and heating my blood. He tastes delicious. He’s thick and hard and throbbing in my mouth, and it’s the hottest thing in the whole damn world.

I don’t know how long we lie in this position, torturing each other with greedy licks and deep sucks, but just as the first tingles of orgasm warm the base of my spine, Blake abruptly yanks me off of him and flips me over.

“Cheezus!” he spits out. “If I don’t fuck you right now, I’m gonna die, Jessie.”

I laugh hard enough to shake the mattress, but the poor man doesn’t even notice. He’s too busy grabbing a condom from the nightstand drawer.

Too busy stroking his cock as he sheathes himself. Too busy guiding that huge dick to my entrance and falling forward onto one elbow.

The penetration is swift. One second I'm achingly empty, the next I'm deliciously full. Blake moans against my neck and drives his hips forward. Then he retreats, a slow, torturous withdrawal until only his tip is inside me, an unbearable tease. My inner muscles clamp tight, trying to draw him in again, but he stays in that position for a moment, his gaze locking with mine.

"This is nice," he says solemnly.

I swallow. "Would be nicer if you moved."

"In a minute." He brings his hand to my face and strokes it gently. "I'm enjoying this. Your cheeks are bright red. So are your tits." He ducks his head and kisses one breast. "You're so hot when you're turned on."

I grasp his ass and dig my fingers into the taut flesh, trying to push him deeper inside, but his body is unyielding. The Great Wall of Blake ain't moving until he says so.

"Will you say my name when you come?" Warm, wet lips skate up my throat before hovering inches from my mouth. "Shout it, if you can. It'll make me crazy."

Another laugh pops out. "Dude. I can't control what I say during orgasm. It's mostly gibberish."

He kisses me, his tongue toying with mine until we're both breathless. "You'll say my name," he murmurs, and I don't know if that's another question or him just stating a fact, but either way, I don't have the mental capacity to decode it, because he's moving again.

God, he's moving. Slow, deep strokes. So fucking slow. Unbearably slow.

"Damn it, Blake, *fuck* me," I beg.

"Mmmm," is all he says, and the lazy tempo continues.

My body screams for relief. Every square inch of skin is tight and prickly, and the pressure between my legs is one hard thrust away from detonating. But Blake is determined to torture me. His hips move at a snail's pace, his expression not unlike the way he looks on the ice—sharp focus and a predatory gleam.

"You close?" His voice holds a taunting note, his lips curved in a slight smirk.

"You know I am," I say desperately. I buck my hips but that just makes him stop moving. Frustration streaks through me. "*Please.*"

“Please what?” He teases my nipple with rough fingertips.

“Please let me come.”

“Please let me come what?”

Confusion rises for a moment, until I realize what he wants. “Please, Blake. Please let me come, *Blake*.”

A huge grin stretches across his face. “Okey-dokey.”

And then he thrusts into me so fast and deep that my lungs seize up. The punishing stroke rips the orgasm out of me. I gasp for air as a burst of ecstasy rocks into me like a shockwave. I hear things. I think it’s my voice. I think... yup, I’m moaning Blake’s name, over and over again. And I think he might be chuckling as he fucks me into oblivion.

But any amusement he might have felt disappears the moment he starts trembling on top of me. I’m no longer embarrassed about chanting his name like a meditation mantra, because when *he* comes, it’s with a hoarse, passion-drenched “*Jess!*” that echoes in the bedroom and vibrates in my heart.

Blake

Holy shitballs.

That wasn’t sex.

That was...something else entirely.

My chest is heaving as if I’ve just finished a four-minute shift on the ice. During a power play.

I collapse on top of Jess, the aftershocks of release still surging through my blood, tingling in my balls. Then I realize I’m crushing her, and I roll us both over so her soft, curvy body is sprawled over me like an electric blanket.

“I can’t remember my name,” I mumble.

Her dry voice tickles my neck. “Really? Because I think I just shouted it, oh, about a hundred times?”

Hells yeah, she did. Why do you think I came so hard? Hearing my name on those sexy lips was like the aphrodisiac of all aphrodisiacs. Fuck oysters. From now on, whenever I need to feel horny, I’m just calling Jess Canning and asking her what my name is.

We lie there for several minutes, catching our breath. Finally—

regretfully—Jess disengages her lady bits from my man bits. She takes pity on me and removes the condom, then ducks into the bathroom. When she returns, she hesitates at the foot of the bed.

I pat the mattress. “Get back here, baby. We’re cuddling.”

She bites her lip.

“I mean it, J-Babe. If I don’t get my cuddling time in, I’ll be a mess at practice tomorrow.”

“I guess I could use a cuddle,” she admits.

She climbs back onto the bed and curls up beside me. I instantly sling one arm around her and tug her closer.

I wonder if she’s thinking about her money issues again. That bums me out. Someone as smart and awesome as Jess shouldn’t have to worry about anything. She deserves to have everything handed to her on a silver platter. Because she’s a queen. I guess that makes me her king? Yeah, I like the sound of that. King Blake.

“Can you buy a country?” I muse.

She sighs against my pecs. “Do I even want to ask you to explain that?”

“Like a small country. Can you buy one? And then turn it into a monarchy so you can be king and queen?” I absently run my hand up and down her spine. She’s so damn tiny in my arms. “I think you and I should be royalty.”

“Of course you do.” There’s a note of affection in her voice.

Silence washes over us. It’s nice. A relaxing, peaceful interlude as my lady and I lounge in bed after the best sex ever known to man.

“Jessie?”

“Hmmm?”

“I’m glad we’re dating now.” Cue her arguments in 3...2...1...

“We’re...not dating.”

I grin at the ceiling. “Sure we are. We did it on my bed.” I shrug. “That means we’re dating.”

“That’s not how it works!” she protests, raking a hand through her golden hair. “You don’t date people. Everyone says so. I mean, you’re just going there now because we had spectacular sex and you want more of it. It’s just the dopamine talking. I read up on this for my pharmacology exam.”

I snort. “You’re saying I’m driving under the influence of orgasms?”

“Exactly. You’re heading out on a road trip tomorrow...”

Moving quickly, I roll up on an elbow and look down at her. “You know

my game schedule? Why would you look if we weren't dating?"

She gives me a shove so I'll lie down again. Which I do. She puts her head on my shoulder and it feels so nice. "I know your schedule because it's Wes's schedule, and Jamie and I have a date to make lasagna and watch the game on TV."

Oh.

Duh.

"That's nice that you can hang out with your brother. You two get along pretty well."

"We do...except when we don't. And I miss my family a lot. I didn't go home for this vacation week because the airfare is expensive. But I'm used to seeing them every Sunday for a big meal. It's nice."

Aw, my girl misses her family. "Now that we're dating, come with me to dinner at my folks' house on the weekend."

She laughs. "Blake, seriously? You're heading out on a week-long road trip, where I'll bet you'd rather be single."

"Nope. I'm going to text you every night. You'll see."

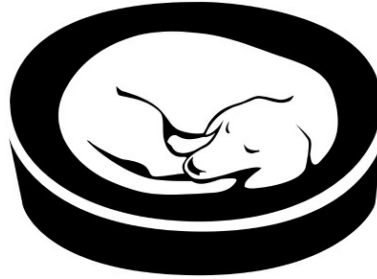
"We're not dating," she says. Except she's cuddling me with her entire naked body and stroking my chest lovingly with one hand.

"Want to eat ice cream in bed?" I ask.

"Yeah," she sighs, the arch of her foot stroking mine.

Silly Jessie. We are dating. She just doesn't know it yet.

25 I'LL BE IN MY BUNK



Jess

After all the stress I've been under, it's weird to have a week off. I'm so fried that I spend the first day watching videos on my laptop of cats riding Roombas. After a few hours in this vegetative state, I realize my dorm room is awfully lonely. I even miss Violet, who has gone back to wherever perfect nursing students come from.

That night I bask in the luxury of eating a falafel alone in my room. Violet isn't here to yell at me, so that's something.

At ten o'clock I receive a text from Blake. *Hi, girlfriend! I just wanted you to know I'm turning in for the evening. Alone. Because we're dating.*

I'm not a total jerk, so I reply, *Hey there! How's Chicago? I'm turning in, too. Alone. Because that's how I roll.*

I miss you, he writes.

And now I don't know whether or not to be honest. *I miss you, too,* I admit. *But that doesn't mean we're dating.*

We are, though.

Good night, Blake.

Good night, girlfriend.

THE NEXT DAY I take a yoga class first thing in the morning, and then undo all of my good work by spending the afternoon worrying about my exam grades.

I should have gone home to California, and I would've if my credit card didn't hate me. I'm not the type of girl who likes to be alone. I need people

around me. The nice word for this is “social.” But another view on it is “needy.”

In fact, the reason I hooked up with Blake in the first place was out of loneliness.

So I hang out the next evening with Jamie, who also seems at odds. “I got used to having Wes around,” he admits. “Now that the season has started up again, I guess I have to remember how to be alone. Here’s a tip for you—fall for someone who doesn’t travel seventy nights a year.”

My face heats. “I guess Hozier is out, then,” I joke.

“Mmh. Some guys are worth it,” my brother says. “Yum. That *voice*. He’s a little skinny, though. I like ’em meatier.”

So do I, apparently. “I don’t know if I can get used to you perving on men.”

“Hey, I’m married. I can’t steal your boyfriend.”

“I don’t have a boyfriend,” I say quickly.

Jamie gives me a quizzical look. “Joking.”

“Right.”

Together, we make a giant lasagna and then eat it in front of the big-screen TV.

“This is going to be a tough game,” he says when it’s hockey time. “Chicago is a great team, and their best player is all healed up from his injury last year.” He rubs his hands together as they set up for the first face-off. Wes is starting, but Blake is on the second line tonight.

I find myself looking for his face whenever the camera pans the bench. He’s easy to spot—those broad shoulders are unmistakable. And each time his long legs kick over the wall to take the ice, I sit up a little straighter.

The speed of the game is breathtaking. But I wish I was in the stadium so I could see him better. The cameraman keeps teasing me with glimpses and then taking Blake away again.

He grabs the puck on a breakaway, and the camera zooms in.

“Come on, dude!” Jamie yells.

I hear myself squeal as he charges the net. Chicago’s d-men get their acts together and try to block his path, but all that muscle on a fast course toward the goal cannot be stopped. The goalie butterflies himself in an attempt to block the shot. But Blake puts the puck right over the guy’s shoulder and into the corner of the net.

“Oh God!” I shriek. “BLAKEY!”

It's almost as if he can hear me. He does his signature celly: riding his stick like a pony. Except then he looks up at the camera and blows a kiss.

Jamie and I are jumping up and down on the couch. "A goal in the first five minutes! We've got all the momentum," my brother crows. "Seems like Blake is back!"

My phone is burning a hole in my pocket. I want to text him, to tell him how exciting that was. But he can't read it for hours, anyway.

I can hardly sit still for the rest of the game. Jamie and I drink a six-pack while waiting to find out if Chicago can answer our early lead.

They can't.

Blake gets an assist, and then Wes gets a goal. I make sure to shriek twice as loud for Wes.

By the time the final buzzer rings, it's 3-1. Toronto has won. I'm drenched with sweat, and tipsy, too.

And there's something I need to admit to myself: I'm now a hopeless hockey fan. But who wouldn't be? It's a really exciting game. My sudden interest has absolutely nothing to do with the extra-large-sized forward wearing jersey number 17.

When I emerge from the subway near my dorm a half-hour later, my phone chirps with a text.

I blew my girlfriend a kiss. I hope she was watching.

Oh, she was. *Great game!* I write, stepping right around the issue of the kiss. *I and I had a lot of fun watching you guys mow down Chicago.*

My phone is silent after that, and I assume the conversation is closed. But twenty minutes later, I'm shutting off my light when the phone chirps again. When I check the screen, the only message is a three-second video of Blake's hands unzipping his suit trousers. He's looped it, so those big hands unzip the pants, and then unzip them again...

Yikes. I've watched it seven times before I even blink.

What to do? My natural impulse is to tease him back. I like Blake, and he's so sexy I'm practically licking my phone right now. But who is he to insist we're a couple? Who does that? It's maddening. He drives me insane.

I wish he was here right now.

With a loud groan, I roll over, facedown on the bed. My ass is in the air, clad in nothing but little cotton panties that happen to say, *It's Not Going to Spank Itself*. They were a joke from Dyson last Christmas, and since I haven't done laundry since exams started, they made their way out of the back of the

drawer today.

I angle my camera around to my backside and stab at the phone's screen until I hear the camera shutter sound.

The resulting picture is a little off-center. So I crop it a little. And while I'm in the photo editor, I try a couple of filters until I find the one that best accentuates my boo-tay.

It's not that I'm trying to impress Blake. It's just that I'm artsy.

I hit send, and the reply is almost immediate. *OMFG. If you need me, I'll be in my bunk with my hand on my junk.*

This lights me up inside, and then almost as quickly fills me with guilt. Damn it. Do I want to date Blake? Sure I do. But it's a terrible idea. Because...

Picking up my phone one more time, I dial Dyson. It's only eight o'clock in California, so he answers right away. "Yo, Jess! How are you doing in the frozen north? Or should I say, *who* are you doing?"

"Cut to the chase much?"

"What is the count up to now?"

"The count?"

"We were at three last time we spoke—the chair, the wedding and the Hummer."

I sigh. "None of your business."

"Oh, I think it is. Besides, I'm on a fifteen-minute break before I start the other four hours of my shift. Give me a happy thought. Are we up to four? Dare I hope for five?"

"Well..." I clear my throat. "It depends how you count."

"Ungf."

Indeed. And he doesn't even know about the bed. We got a little sticky eating ice cream that night and ended up doing it again in the shower.

"Was it awesome?"

"Completely. But there's a problem."

"He doesn't want to do it again?" Dyson yelps. "Then he's an idiot."

"That's not it. Now he says we're dating. That's not cool, right? You can't just *inform* someone that they're half of a couple."

There's a silence on the line. "I'll be half a couple with Blake Riley if you won't. That man is smoking."

"He's as hot as they come," I agree. "But he's assuming too much! Who does that?"

“He must be really into you.”

I open my mouth to argue and then shut it again. Is he really? For all his loud-mouthed bluster and total lack of a filter, Blake is actually pretty hard to read. Everything is light and airy and surface-only with him. Other than his confession about his ex and the fake baby mama drama, I’m not sure I’ve ever had a deep conversation with the guy.

Maybe deep is overrated...

Maybe? Truth is, I’ve only ever dated intense, creative types. Guys like Raven, who could sit for hours talking about his feelings and pondering whatever existential crises he was going through at that moment.

But...another truth? Sometimes that got really old. And boring. I can’t remember laughing with Raven the way I laugh with Blake.

I always thought I’d end up with an artsy kook like myself. And sure, Blake’s as kooky as they come, but in a different way. He’s bold and loud and totally obnoxious at times. But he’s also hilarious, sweet, kind, loyal, great in bed...

A groan slips out. “I don’t know, Dyse. I...don’t trust it. He’s a famous hockey player. I’m a nursing student who underperformed on her final exam.”

“Oh, sweetie. I’m sorry. Did you get your grade back already?”

“No. I’m just bracing myself. The worst will be if I have to tell my parents this spring that my scholarship money isn’t going to be renewed. I’m going to tell them over the phone so I can’t see Mom’s face.”

Dyson clicks his tongue. “Panic much? You probably squeaked by. You studied hard.”

“Maybe.”

“We have to work on your self-confidence.”

“I’m confident!”

Dyson laughs. “Not so much, kitty cat. You dump your boyfriends so fast so they can never dump you first. And now you’re absolutely wiggling out about your whole future, when you don’t even know yet what grade you got on the test. That, my sweet love, is not confidence talking.”

Now I’m practically sputtering into the phone. “That is not an accurate diagnosis!” I don’t know who I’m more upset with right now—Dyson or Blake. “I’m confident. Ask anyone.”

“Uh-huh. This from the girl who didn’t like to cross the middle school cafeteria alone. You used to make me walk to the girls’ room with you and

wait outside.”

“Dyson, if it’s fair to criticize the things we did in the seventh grade, I’m going to have to call you out on that awful polyester blazer with the satin lapels.”

There’s a puff of outrage in my ear. “I was wearing it *ironically*.”

Great. Now I’ve made him mad, too. Everyone is mad at everyone else. “Look, I’m really tired. Sorry to whine in your ear.”

He sighs. “Get some sleep, Jessie. But my vote will be the same in the morning. I think he *likes* you. And I’m pretty sure we’ve been having this same chat since middle school.”

Well, ouch. “Goodnight, Dyson.”

“Night, kitty cat.”

TWO NIGHTS later I don’t really feel like going out, but I promised my brother I’d accompany him to an event thrown by the wives and girlfriends of the hockey team. Jamie is an honorary member of the WAGS club. As far as I can tell, they have two purposes. First, to drink together at every home game. Second, they do charity work. Tonight is some kind of planning session for their annual holiday Christmas party. It raises money for the same children’s hospital where I visited the cancer ward for my very first hospital assignment.

“What are we bringing?” I ask my brother, eyeing the shopping bag under his arm.

“I brought a couple of six-packs. The WAGS like fruity drinks. So BYOB if you want something else.”

“I love fruity drinks.”

We’ve arrived at a downtown apartment building with a lobby even grander than the one where my brother lives. “Whose apartment is this again?”

“Katie and Ben Hewitt live here. Wait ’til you see this place.”

Jamie isn’t kidding. Their pad is *swanky*. It has a formal entry foyer with a chandelier. A uniformed maid takes our coats. When we step into the giant room beyond, my eyes lift to find the double-height ceiling. There’s a walkway around the upper part, from which doors disappear to parts unknown.

“Cheezus,” I whisper.

Jamie cocks an eyebrow.

"I mean..." I clear my throat. "This is some place."

The women spot us and then tackle Jamie like a tidal wave. "You came!" "You didn't have to bring beer!" "Have a cookie!"

Good lord. I love Jamie, but he's not a celebrity.

They cluck on over to me. I'm hugged and patted, too. "You look so much like him!"

"Would you believe there're six of us?" I ask, shaking Katie Hewitt's hand.

"Shut the front door!" she shrieks. "Six? Are you all gorgeous? I don't know if the world can handle that much beauty."

Her words turn me into a stuttering goofball, because I've never been good at taking a compliment. Luckily, someone brings me a strawberry daiquiri. Jamie's wink says, *I told you so about the fruity drinks.*

But the thing is *delicious*, and I've decided that these women know how to have fun. Starving nursing students don't party like this, and it's a nice treat.

I'm introduced around as "Jamie's gorgeous sister." Which means nothing, because everyone here is either glamorous or beautiful or both. Katie Hewitt has thick, glossy hair and diamond earrings so large that I'm surprised she can hold her head up. She's a hoot, too. Her brand of glam isn't Rich-and-Stuffy. It's Let's-Party-Like-Wild-Women. She's wearing a custom Toronto jersey with the logo done in rhinestones, and I'd lay odds that her red lipstick was color-matched to the team's logo. Under one arm she holds a chubby white poodle with a red bow on its curly little head.

She's the hostess, so I take her for the leader of this organization. But when the meeting is called to order, it's by a dark-haired beauty named Estrella. She's wearing a "C" on her Toronto sweater, and I can't decide whether her husband is the team captain or if it refers to her own title.

Because she's clearly in charge.

"Listen up, ladies!" she declares, banging on a daiquiri glass with an elegant silver spoon. "First, I want to thank Katie for hosting us tonight."

"Oh, come on, I fucking *live* for this!" Katie says, beaming. A cheer rises up.

Estrella taps her spoon again, calling for order. "Now we have a very important decision to make. Which caterer do we want for the Christmas party?"

All the carefully made-up faces around the room turn thoughtful. A young woman raises her hand. “Which one made those pigs in blankets we had at our summer party?”

“That’s the guys at North End. But there’ll be children at this party, and hot dogs are a choking risk.”

There are murmurs of agreement, and several heads are scratched.

“But we can still have mini empanadas and mini quiche. So all is not lost.”

They discuss miniaturized foodstuffs for a few minutes while I wander over to the buffet table and nibble on fancy cheese. My brother sets himself up in front of the largest TV screen I’ve ever seen, on a beanbag chair the size of Mount McKinley. He pats the space beside him, and I sit down to the familiar crunch of shifting Styrofoam.

“God, I want this chair,” I whisper, petting the plush surface. It’s wooly and warm. “I could just live my whole life right here. It’s like a giant...”

“Sheep,” Jamie supplies. Then he grins. “Did Blake ever tell you about his fear of sheep?”

“His...what?” I’m thrown a little by Jamie’s mention of Blake. I don’t want my family to know about my recent frisky business with the guy. They already think I’m a screw-up and a lightweight. I don’t need to give them any more reasons to judge me.

“Yup. He hates sheep. Can’t stand ’em. Thinks they’re dangerous.”

I snort, and my head fills with pranks I could play on Blake. Do they make sheep underwear?

But that only makes me think of Blake removing my clothes... Rawr.

The WAGS have finished their caterer discussion and are ready to vote. “Jamie?” Estrella calls. “Do you want to weigh in? We’re having trouble deciding between the place with the sesame chicken on a stick and the place with the hotter waiters.”

“Tough call,” my brother says, tearing his gaze away from the pre-game commentary. “But I’d go with the sesame chicken. The hot waiters might’ve quit. And there will be plenty of hotness in that room already.”

More murmurs of agreement. The sesame chicken wins the vote, and then attention shifts toward the giant screen on the wall.

“Puck drops in five!” Katie says. “Who needs a fresh drink?”

I do. “Save my seat,” I order my brother.

My daiquiri is topped up just as Wes and Blake take the ice together on

the first line. It's a blast watching the game in this room full of hardcore cheerleaders. When Lukoczik gets the puck on a breakaway, Estrella starts screaming. He shoots, but the goalie scoops it into his glove.

"I love you anyway!" Estrella shouts, and everyone laughs.

I enjoy myself immensely. Since Katie's TV is the size of a double-decker bus, Blake seems nearly life-size every time he skates past me. My cheering for him is silent, but that doesn't mean it isn't heartfelt. Every time he charges down the ice I get a thrill.

The rum in my drink has made me a little breathless and woozy. I find myself hoping Blake texts me again tonight. Or calls. His voice in my ear would sound pretty good right about now.

When the first period ends, the camera follows the Toronto players as they exit the bench, down the chute. The lens zooms in on a pair of young women banging on the plexi, screaming like Beatles fans on the Ed Sullivan show. They're pressing signs to the glass, and I can read them all too well. *FUTURE HOCKEY WIVES!* and *MARRY ME, BLAKE RILEY.*

Under that? A phone number.

That cools me off a tad. For the first time since I heard Blake's awful story, I feel a pang of empathy for his ex. People are crazy. That marriage proposal on the poster is probably only seventy-five percent kidding.

My brother opens a new beer for himself. "You're good to stay, right?" he asks me. "This is more hockey than you usually sit through in a week."

"Oh, I'm having fun."

The second period is tense and fast. There's a fight between Lemming and one of the Dallas forwards. The pitch of the WAGS' shrieks is deafening until Lemming ends up on top.

"Aren't you glad Wes is not a fighter?" I whisper to my brother.

"Guess so. His face will stay pretty this way."

Drops of blood stain the ice when the refs separate the two players. Shit. Hockey is dangerous. I wonder how the WAGS sleep at night.

After the next face-off, Blake and Wes make a new attack. They cross the puck between them so many times I lose count. Both players get shots on goal, but it's Wes's that goes in. My brother leaps to his feet with a shout of victory.

Katie runs over to hug him. "Jamie has to do a shot! It's a rule!"

"Why?" I ask.

He grins at me. "Spouse of the scoring player drinks. That's why I'm

hung over the morning after a game with the WAGS.”

Katie swiftly appears with a bottle of tequila and a shot glass.

On the screen they call the point for Wes and the assist for Blake. Blake does his usual celly. Then he looks into the camera and winks, blowing a kiss. He clearly mouths the words, *Hi, baby!*

“Whoa!” Estrella hoots. “Did you see that?”

“What the fuck?” someone else adds.

“What did I miss?” Katie shrieks, handing a shot and a lime wedge to Jamie.

“Blake Riley throwing kisses! Does anyone know for who?”

“Really?” Katie looks at the tequila bottle in her hand. “I haven’t poured a shot for a Blake Riley goal in *years*. Anyone have the dirt?”

A strawberry-blond pipes up from the corner of a leather sectional sofa the size of Lake Ontario. “I heard Blake didn’t go to the strip club last night, and when they asked him why, he said his girlfriend wouldn’t appreciate it.”

Startled gasps reverberate through the room, and I feel heat creep up my neck. Suddenly, my fingernails become very interesting. It’s been a while since I had a manicure...

I can feel one gaze boring into me, and it’s coming from beside me on the beanbag chair. “You wouldn’t know anything about that, would you?” Jamie asks, his voice low.

“Me?” I squeak, picking at a cuticle. “That tequila has gone to your head, baby bro.”

The game resumes, thank God. My brother’s focus shifts elsewhere. And since Wes has a great night on the ice, Jamie is sloppy drunk by the time we get into separate cabs to go home.

I lie in my bed and wonder if Blake’s interest in dating me has survived another night.

It’s eleven thirty when my phone chirps. *How’s my girl?*

The words warm me all the way through.

Drunk and sleepy, I tell him. *Nice assist, hot stuff.*

The phone rings, and I answer it immediately. “You watched again?” he says, his voice making me smile.

“Yeah,” I answer, shy all of a sudden. “There was some rum involved.”

He laughs. “Did Jamie drag you over to Katie Hewitt’s?”

“He did.”

“Did you do a shot for my assist?”

Uh-oh. “I didn’t,” I admit.

There’s a brief silence, and I expect him to give me a hard time about it. “That’s okay,” he says cheerfully. “You can make it up to me by coming to lunch with my family this Sunday.”

“Blake,” I warn. “Didn’t you tell your mother we broke up?”

“Nope. Because we didn’t.”

“Is this another you-need-a-buffer-with-your-ex situation?” I ask warily.

“Naah. Molly shouldn’t be there. It’s just an ordinary Sunday with the fam.”

“Then why do you need me there?”

I can almost hear him roll his eyes. “Because we’re dating. That’s what dating people do. They hang out with each other’s families. The food will be epic. And you told me you always see your family on the weekend. You can see mine instead—it’ll be nice. And since we don’t get back into town until Saturday night, Sunday is your first chance to visit with the Blake Snake, anyway.”

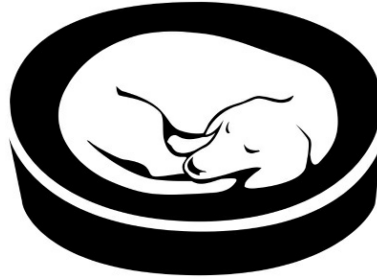
I give an unladylike snort. “The...did you just call your dick the Blake Snake?”

“Well, you haven’t named it yet. Unless we’re going with ‘Do me, Blake! Harder! Yes! Yes! Yes!’”

Even though I’m lying here alone, I have to put my hand over my eyes. His impression of me was frighteningly accurate.

And really, after all the orgasms he’s given me, the least I can do is go to lunch.

So when he says, “See you Sunday, baby,” I hear myself agree.



Blake

“Do I look like someone who just had sex in the parking lot behind a gas station?”

I give Jess a thorough onceover. Tousled hair—check. Sexed-up flush on her cheeks—check. Beard burn on her neck—check. Oh yeah, that’s what I like to see.

“Naw,” I answer. “You look like my girlfriend.”

Humor dances in her brown eyes. “And just out of curiosity, what does Blake Riley’s girlfriend look like?”

I reach over and tweak one still-hard nipple through her shirt. “Well-fucked.”

Jess groans in frustration. “Okay, pull over at the next gas station so I can use the bathroom to clean myself up.”

“Is that really a risk you’re willing to take, J-Babe? You know what happens when we go to gas stations.”

Hell, I don’t think I can ever pump gas again without thinking about pumping Jess. Seeing her fill up the tank of my Hummer was such a turn-on, I had to take her right there and then. Well, not right there. I had the decency to drive to the deserted lot behind the Petro-Canada before I ravished her.

Now we’re back on the road, making the twenty-minute drive to my folks’ place for lunch. I know she’s nervous about it, because she keeps fidgeting in the passenger seat. Me, I’m looking forward to seeing the fam and eating a home-cooked meal. This last week of road games was exhausting, and I’m sick of hotel room service.

“Just don’t make any inappropriate double entendres when we’re there,”

Jess warns as I speed off the highway exit ramp.

“How about triple entendres?”

“That’s not a thing.”

“Single entendres?”

“Also not a thing.”

“Everything’s a thing if you make it a thing,” I disagree.

She sighs. “I’m going to dump you one of these days.”

I cast her my most innocent smile. “No, you’re not.” And my inner Blake—who I like to imagine is holding a tiny hockey stick—does a happy flip because her remark implies that I’ve finally worn her down. We’re dating and she knows it. You can’t dump someone you aren’t dating.

“BLAKEY!” Mom shouts happily when Jess and I enter the house five minutes later. We’d caught her on her way to the dining room, judging by the two aluminum-foil-covered dishes in her hands.

“Hey, Ma.” I glide over to kiss her cheek, then rid her of both casserole dishes. “Lemme help.”

She clicks her tongue in approval. “What a good boy I raised, helping your mother like—JESSICA! I DIDN’T SEE YOU!”

Just like that, Mom abandons me for Jess, who looks a bit stunned as she’s enveloped in a bone-crushing hug. My mom gives killer bear hugs.

“Hi, Mrs. Riley,” Jess says shyly. “How’re you doing?”

“I’m great, honeybunch! Was cooking all morning, and everyone knows that cooking is good for the soul.” Mom fixes Jess with a stern look. “And I don’t EVER want to hear those words leaving your mouth!”

Jess blinks. “What words?”

“Mrs. Riley. Pshaw!” My mom slings an arm around Jess’s shoulders. “You call me Ma or Mama or Annette. ANYTHING ELSE IS UNACCEPTABLE!”

“Noted,” Jess says with a nervous laugh. “Thanks for having me over again, Mrs—Mama. Last time I was here I left in an honest-to-God food coma. I can’t wait for another one.”

My mother’s expression goes bright enough to light the Air Canada Centre. She likes people who like food. So do I.

“You’re going to love everything,” she informs Jess. “PAPA RILEY MADE RIBS!”

“Oooh, sounds awesome.”

Mom turns to me. “Blakey, shut the front door please. We didn’t raise

an animal—” Her forehead suddenly creases.

I turn around to see what’s got her all agitated. Through the door I’d left open, I spot a familiar silver Lexus pulling up the drive. The windows are tinted so I can’t see the driver, but... Fucking hell. The Lexus was here the day of Brenna’s baby shower, too.

I slowly turn back to my mother. “Kyle trade in his Beemer for a Lexus?” I ask hopefully.

She shakes her head. “He’s in the kitchen with Beth and Britt. They came together in Bethy’s car.”

Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck.

“Hello, everyone.” Molly’s timid voice sounds from behind me. Those two words prick into my spine like a sharp needle.

This is Brenna’s doing, obviously. My sister always invites Molly to every occasion known to man. But this shit is getting ridiculous. I can’t even enjoy a nice relaxing lunch with my folks without having Molly shoved down my throat?

“Turn around and say hello,” my mother murmurs, her voice audible only to me. “She’s here now. We can’t be rude.”

I’m not the rude one. What about *her*? Why the fuck does she have to keep showing up like this?

I draw a breath to calm myself, then turn toward my ex-fiancée. “Hi,” I say tightly.

The smile on her face looks forced. I don’t even bother trying to muster one up. Jess does, but it doesn’t quite reach her eyes.

“Hello again,” she says to Molly.

“Hi. Janet, was it?”

“Jess.”

“Oh, sorry. I’m so bad with names.”

She’s a lawyer. She can pull names out of her ass. I scowl at her before glancing at Jess. “Come on, babe, let me unload these dishes, and then we’ll get you a drink.” I need a drink, too. Or ten.

The dining room is empty, but the kitchen is bustling. Beth and her husband are at the counter flipping through what looks like a booklet of beach resorts, while my baby sister Britt leans against the fridge offering her two cents.

“No, don’t go to that one,” she advises. “The food is disgusto-central! If you’re dead-set on Mexico, go to the resort where the girls and I spent spring

break. It was gorgeous, and nobody got food poisoning.”

“I don’t know if I want to go to Mexico,” Beth muses. “What do you think, Kyle? Don’t you want to go somewhere more exotic? Oooh! Like Bora Bora!”

“Never trust a place with a double name,” I declare from the doorway. “They always have a high crime rate.”

“Blakey!” Britt gives me a big hug, then greets Jess with a warm smile. “Hey, Jess. Nice to see you again.”

“Samesies,” Jess answers, before slapping a hand over her mouth. She pins me down with a death glare. “Oh my God. I’m picking up your stupid lingo. You’ve corrupted me.” I grin, but she cuts me off before I can make a filthy remark about corruption. “And name *one* other place like Bora Bora,” she orders.

I pause. “New York, New York. Duh.”

Everyone laughs.

“You want a beer, man?” my brother-in-law asks, rising from his stool.

“Hit me. Jessie?”

“I’ll just grab a water, thanks.” She wanders over to the cupboards and opens the one that holds the drinking glasses. I guess she remembers where we keep them from the last time she was here.

I find myself tracking her every motion as she uses the built-in icemaker on the fridge and then presses a button to dispense water. A warm feeling creeps up my chest. She looks so comfortable in my parents’ kitchen. She looks like she belongs here.

Footsteps in the hall suck all the warmth from my body and replace it with a chill. Brenna and Molly walk in, and it’s easy to figure out why Bren is scowling at me—Molly’s eyes look watery.

Of course they do. I wouldn’t be surprised to hear that she turns on the waterworks when she’s in court just to win some sympathy from a jury. Twelve on a jury...yeah, at least half of them would probably be suckered in by those crocodile tears. Molly is very convincing.

Time for a change of subject. “Hey,” I say, nodding to both my sister and my evil ex. “How’s Harley doing?”

Molly hesitates. “Oh. Um.”

“He’s not in the car by any chance, is he?” I want to see that furry little beast so bad. He’ll remember me, even after five years. I’m *positive*.

Slowly, she shakes her head. “Blake, I’m sorry to tell you this, but...”

Oh, fuck. Don't tell me he died. My spine tingles with discomfort.

"I gave him to some friends in Vancouver. It was hard to get home from work often enough to walk him."

"You..." I'm not even sure I heard her right. "You *gave away* my dog? Without telling me?"

Her mouth opens and closes and then opens again. "You weren't exactly taking my calls." Bitterness splashes across her face. "But I guess I should have figured out you'd answer if the call was about the *dog*."

Yeah, I would have. *Because the dog actually loved me, you lying witch!*

My shirt collar is suddenly too small, and my siblings are looking at me the way you watch a volcano that's about to blow.

"FOOD!" comes my mother's ear-piercing shout. "COME AND GET IT!"

"Praise Jesus," I whisper. I need a change of scenery, even if it's only the dining room.

We all file in, and I steer Jess toward the opposite end of the table from Molly. When we're seated, we all join hands for grace. Jess gives my knuckles a squeeze, so of course I pull her hand onto my fly just to tease her.

She pinches me right above the pubes. Hard. I have to bite my lip to keep from smiling.

"Dear Lord," my mother starts, "thank you for these blessings we are about to receive. We are grateful for another Sunday together with family, and for Brenna's good cheer, even while she looks like a beached whale."

"Mom!" Brenna gasps.

My mom opens her eyes and gives Brenna a wink. "We pray for the safe delivery of our grandbaby as he makes his way into the world, and for a victory tomorrow night over the Canucks, who should NEVER HAVE WON THAT LAST ONE! AMEN!"

I hear Jess stifle a snort.

The second grace is over, dishes are passed. I offer Jess the platter of ham and then a healthy portion of my father's smoky ribs.

"This looks amazing," my girlfriend says.

As the platter moves down the table, I watch my sister Brenna put a tiny dot of potato salad on her plate and then pass it.

"You okay?" I ask. The Rileys are big eaters, and if Brenna is off her chow then I'm worried. My gaze lowers to the huge swollen basketball under her shirt. "And how long was I on that road trip? You look fifty pounds

heavier.”

Her jaw falls open. “Who says that to a pregnant woman?”

“Oh, shut it. You’re gorgeous and you know it. But you look bigger.”

After a long pause, she lets out a tired sigh. “I am bigger,” she admits. “I’ve gained about five pounds in the last couple of days.” She rubs the right side of her abdomen and leans back in her chair. “My hands and feet are swollen. I’ve had a tummy ache every day this week. And I think the morning sickness is back—I threw up twice this morning.”

Concern tugs at me. “Is that normal?”

Brenna rubs her belly again. “Charlie thinks it’s my stomach rebelling against all the greasy shit I’ve been putting into it.”

“He could be right. Maybe cut out the Mickey D’s and eat some veggies?” Britt suggests from her seat beside me. “See if it helps?”

Our sister nods. “Mom made a salad because I asked her to.”

“Oh!” Molly leaps out of her chair and carries the salad bowl over to Brenna. As if passing it the normal way wouldn’t do. “Is there anything else you need?”

Brenna shakes her head, giving my ex a sweet smile. “You’ve spoiled me rotten already this week.”

“Well,” Molly says, returning to her chair. “I remember how hard it was to be pregnant.”

The fork stops halfway to my mouth.

I have to play back her words for second just to be sure she actually said them. But it’s true. She sat at my family table and told a boldfaced lie. *Again*. My sisters are staring at her right now, pity on their faces.

When she moved away to Vancouver, I thought this shit was over. Several thousand miles of distance between us had allowed me to forget just how conniving she was. But now she’s back, still trying to hang on to a lie she’d told herself. It’s sick.

And it’s never going to end.

There’s a sudden zing of pain in my neck, and I drop my fork with a clatter. “Cheezus,” I swear.

“Blake,” Brenna warns as I get out of my chair. “Where are you going?”

“Advil,” I mumble, heading for the doorway. The truth is, I need a minute away from Molly to regroup. Things can’t go on like this.

I stumble into the kitchen and fill a glass with water, then guzzle it down. My brain tries in vain to come up with some solution—some way of

easing Molly out of all our lives. But I come up with nothing.

Someone approaches from behind, and I spin around to find Brenna.

“Blake,” she says in a low voice. “You can’t just storm off. Her feelings might make you uncomfortable, but they need to be acknowledged. And maybe you shouldn’t bring your new girlfriend over without warning us.”

My eyes practically bug out. “So, what, every time I visit Ma and Dad and want to bring Jess, I should send her a formal invitation and make sure she RSVPs so you know she’s coming? *Bullshit*. She’s my girlfriend, Bren. She’s welcome here anytime.”

Her frown deepens.

“You never had to check with anyone before you brought Charlie here,” I point out, the anger in my gut going from a simmer to a boil. “Same for Beth and Kyle. So what the hell makes this any different?”

“You know what makes it different,” Brenna hisses. “Mol’s my *best friend*. You were going to marry her! Do you realize how insensitive you’re being? It *kills* her to see you with someone else!”

“Then why is she here?” I shoot back. “Nobody’s holding a gun to her head and forcing her to have lunch with us.”

“She’s here because I want her here! Because she’s family!” Brenna’s cheeks turn bright red. “And she’s still in love with you, you stupid idiot.”

I take a breath. And another one. And one more for good measure. In fact, I’m two seconds away from busting out the mantra Wesley taught me after my knee gave out on me during the playoffs last season. I’m supposed to say *It’s going to be okay* three times.

Except...it’s not fucking okay. And it won’t be, not as long as my sister keeps throwing my lying ex into my path. That woman broke me. She fucking *crushed* me.

“I’m sorry that she still has feelings for me,” I say as calmly as I can muster. “But she needs to get over them. I’ve moved on, Bren. It took me five fucking years to do it, but I’m finally in a good place again.”

No, a *great* place. Jess Canning is...my goddamn world. We might’ve started off as fuck buddies, then took a trip into the friends-with-bennies zone, but she’s mine now. And she’s everything to me.

Brenna rubs the bridge of her nose as if she’s warding off a migraine. “I’m happy that you’re in a good place—”

“Are you sure?” I say bitterly.

“—but that doesn’t change the fact that Molly is still hurting. What

happened between you devastated her, Blakey. Do you even care that she's still grieving over the baby you lost?"

I press my lips together, and they're actually shaking.

"She talks about him all the time! I take her out for dinner every year on what was supposed to be her due date! What would've been his birthday!"

What. The. Fuck.

"How do you think she feels knowing that she was disposable to you? You two were planning a *future*—"

My mind is still reeling. She celebrates our baby's birthday?

"—you promised to always be there for her, and you just threw her away!"

Our *fake* baby's birthday? Who does that?

"I get that you were hurting just as bad, but you guys could have shared that burden together."

Something inside of me snaps. "Brenna," I warn.

"You could have grieved for your baby *together*—"

"THERE WAS NO BABY!"

A chorus of gasps comes from the dining room.

Brenna blinks. "What?"

I struggle to control my breathing, the ferocious trembling of my hands, the red-hot resentment coating my throat like acid.

My sister stares at me, waiting for me to explain.

"There wasn't. She said... She was trying to make me..." Oh, hell. I spent five years trying not to let it come to this.

Brenna pales visibly. I can see the moment she figures out what I'm trying not to say, because her chin snaps around toward the dining room, as if Molly's trustworthiness could be assessed through two walls and a lying, heart-shaped face.

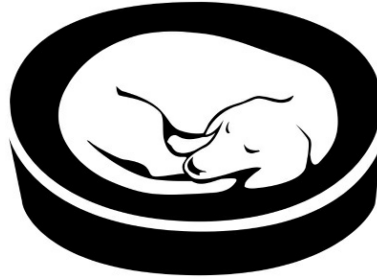
"Oh my God," she mouths.

In a heartbeat, my fury dissolves into defeat. Agonizing and weighty, pressing down on my shoulders until I can barely stay upright.

"What are you saying?" Brenna whispers.

I just shake my head. I can't talk. I can't even think right now. I need... air. Yeah, I need air.

Without a word, I stalk past my sister, bulldoze past the dining room, fly into the front hall and stumble out the door.



Jess

The silence is eerie. And not just because I'm in the Riley house, the place where silence goes to die. It's eerie because nobody is reacting to the atomic bomb that was dropped in the other room. Nobody is even blinking.

Well, except Molly. On the other side of the table from me, Blake's ex is trying to win the award for most blinks per second. Her eyelashes move at the speed of light, each rapid flutter bringing a new drop of moisture.

Like everyone around me, I'm unaffected by her tears. I'm worried about Blake, who just stormed out of the house. Either that, or the front door decided to slam itself.

"Mama," Molly starts.

Blake's mother holds up her hand.

The curly-haired woman instantly falls silent.

Soft footsteps approach the doorway as Brenna reappears. She's whiter than the tablecloth, her expression utterly wrecked as she stares at her best friend. Then she drops into her chair and drops her head in her hands. "I'm... having a migraine, I think."

"Oh no," Molly whispers. "Let me..." She rises, but as she approaches, Brenna's head snaps up, a challenge in her eyes.

Molly takes a step back. And then another.

We're all staring at her now. Everyone's probably wondering the same thing I am—what the *hell*? How do you make up such a monumental lie and then cling to it? I have to wonder if she repeated it enough times that she somehow convinced herself it was true.

Molly grabs her pocketbook off the back of her chair. She walks out of

the house, and nobody follows her. The door slams a second time.

I don't blame Blake for deserting me in the middle of this war zone, but I would like to find him before he does something stupid, like get into his Hummer and beat his head against the steering wheel.

I scrape back my chair. The noise it makes is like nails on a chalkboard, echoing in the dining room like a haunted house soundtrack. "I'm going to check on Blake," I say awkwardly.

I only take two steps before Brenna gasps loudly. "I think I'm gonna..." She lurches out of her chair in the direction of the doorway.

Since I'm already on my feet and mobile, it only makes sense that I'm the one who follows her hastily into the half bathroom, where she barely makes it over the toilet before vomiting forcefully. Two seconds later, I have her hair in one hand and a tissue in the other.

She takes the tissue with a shaking hand and wipes her mouth, turning to me with wide, frightened eyes. "I don't feel good."

Then, while I watch, she sort of melts down onto the bathroom floor and buries her face in her hands.

By the time I seat myself beside her, Mama Riley is already peeking into the doorway. "I'm going to get you your phone," she says. "You need to tell your doctor how you're feeling."

Brenna shakes her head. "It's just...I got upset. I'm so...*stressed*." She puts a hand to her chest.

Mama Riley disappears anyway.

I'm watching Brenna, and for some reason I'm terrified for her. Something is just *off*.

"Brenna," I say softly. "Where does it hurt?"

"My head. And I'm dizzy."

Anyone can get a migraine. But my Spidey sense is tingling like crazy. She's sitting with her feet straight out, giving me a view of her swollen ankles. I touch one gently, and when I pull my finger away the indent is still visible. "Brenna, do you know what preeclampsia is?"

"High blood pressure, right?"

"Yeah. When my sister was on bed rest in the spring, they were worried about it for her. That's what your symptoms remind me of. Maybe I'm just a Nervous Nelly, but..." I swallow hard. "Will you have your blood pressure checked just to make me feel better? Pretty please?"

She groans. "I'm not having this baby today. I'm only thirty-eight

weeks.”

That’s not even dangerous, and I’ll bet Brenna knows it. “Are you afraid?” I ask gently.

“Hell yes.”

I let out a shaky laugh just as her husband appears in the doorway. I know I’m just a first-year nursing student, and not even a very good one, but I tell Charlie my concerns anyway, because I can’t help myself.

“Let’s not waste time waiting for the doctor to call back on a Sunday,” I suggest. “She should go to the ER for a blood pressure check, just to be safe.”

“Let’s go,” Charlie says immediately, while Brenna starts to cry.

I SPEND the next hour worrying that I’ve sequestered the entire Riley family at a suburban hospital for no good reason.

At the ER, Brenna is whisked into an exam room while the rest of the Rileys pace. Blake looks distraught. I can’t stand the sight of his worried face, so I plant him in a chair and rub his shoulders until my hands give out.

When a young doctor comes out to tell us that Brenna will be transferred to the obstetrical ward for an emergency C-section, Blake hangs his head. “This is my fault,” he mumbles. “If I hadn’t lost my shit, this wouldn’t be happening.”

I dig my hands into his messy hair and tug until he’s forced to lift his head up to look at me. “That’s a lot of bullshit, Blake Riley. Brenna’s had this problem all week. The weight gain. The swollen hands and feet. This doesn’t have anything to do with you or Molly.”

“That’s right,” the doctor agrees. “Nobody knows what causes preeclampsia. There was nothing you could have done except drive here on the double.”

We all relocate to a different waiting room, where the Rileys commence pacing again. They are big people, and more than one hospital patron leaves the room to stay clear of their paths.

I make a vending machine run for sodas, just to have some way to help. And when I hand Mama Riley one, she grabs my elbow with a hand that’s almost the size of Blake’s. “I’m sorry about all that unpleasantness earlier,” she tells me, her voice eerily subdued.

“Oh! It’s fine,” I say, embarrassed. “Blake, uh, he already told me what happened between them.”

His mother nods like a sage. "I had my suspicions."

"Me too." I blush. "I mean, I had my suspicions that *you* had your suspicions." My tone grows awkward again. "Why didn't you say anything?"

"To him, or to everyone?"

"Both."

She sighs. "I kept my mouth shut because it was obvious my boy didn't want anyone to know. I thought maybe he was trying to spare his sister's feelings."

"He was," I confirm. "But he was trying to protect Molly, too." Not that she deserved it. I don't hate many people, but Blake's ex definitely tops the list.

"I figured that, too." She nods sadly. "That's Blakey's best trait, you know. His need to protect. To make everyone happy..."

Even if it means sacrificing his own happiness, is the unfinished sentiment. And my heart clenches painfully, because I know it's true. As over the top as Blake is, he lives his entire life for other people. Look at the way he took Wes under his wing last season, the way he dropped everything to help take care of Jamie when he was sick.

Blake Riley is a better man than anyone gives him credit for. And I'm ashamed of myself. I'm so fucking ashamed for ever believing that he was just a stupid jock who was incapable of being serious.

"Anyway, you're a trooper, Jess," Mama Riley says, while I continue to beat myself up for being such a jackass. "Just want you to know I appreciate it."

Then she gives me another oxygen-depriving hug, which I try to reciprocate. Maybe in time I'll learn to get a full breath of air before she does that.

It's only an hour later when Charlie reappears in the waiting room wearing a surgical smock and a smile. "It's a girl!" he announces. "Six pounds even. No name yet, but we're working on it. Brenna's all woozy, so I think my choice will prevail."

Mama Riley gallops over and places both hands on his shoulders. "Is Brenna okay?"

"Of course. She just yelled at me to take more pictures, so I'm thinking that's a good sign."

The other Rileys swarm Charlie to congratulate him. But not me. I need to sit down, like, yesterday. I slide into a chair, relief washing over me. The

room is too bright all of a sudden and there's not enough air. Brenna could've *died*. The blood pressure the doctor had rattled off in the waiting room downstairs was scarily high. And when I'd Googled preeclampsia during my sister's pregnancy, I'd been greeted by a lengthy list of horror stories involving seizures and both maternal and fetal death.

I put my elbows on my knees and curl up around myself, quietly freaking out while the Riley family rejoices.

"Jessie?" Blake sits beside me. When he takes my hand, his is cool where mine is clammy. "Hey..." He kisses my palm. "What's the matter? Everything is fine."

"I know." My voice shakes. "It's just..." My whole body shudders as I imagine other outcomes. "That was scary," I croak.

"Oh, baby." Blake pulls me onto his lap and kisses my neck. "You were amazing. You knew exactly what was wrong and lit a fire under everyone to get to the hospital."

"I was just guessing."

"Naw," he scoffs. "You saw some things. You had a gut feeling. You went with it. That's all everyone does. That's how I win hockey games. That's how your man Hozier writes those songs that make the girls throw their panties at the stage." He runs a comforting hand down my hair, and I lean back into his touch. "You know what? I have a gut feeling right now, too. It says, my girl hasn't eaten all day, and she's fried. We're gonna take a peek at the baby, and then we'll go fix that, okay?"

Someone brings us some pretzels and soda from the vending machines, and a bit later we're summoned to the nursery window. There, behind the glass, in a little bassinet, is the newest Riley. She's a teeny peanut-shaped person swaddled like a burrito in a blanket, wearing a pink and white striped hat. All that's visible is her round cheek and a shock of brown hair poking from beneath the edges of the hat. Her eyes are scrunched tightly shut, as if her slumber requires great determination.

"Awwwwwww!" the Riley clan choruses.

"That's...she..." Blake sputters. "I'm an uncle! She looks just like me."

I assume he's kidding, but when I look up at Blake's face, it's rapt, and his eyes are shiny. I press myself against his great bulk and push my face into his chest. One hand clamps around me, and I have a moment of complete happiness. What's more, I no longer feel as though this was the weirdest day ever. Standing here in the circle of Blake's arms, witness to this amazing

family moment? It feels absolutely right. Maybe I am suffering from low blood sugar. And there must be reproductive hormones off-gassing throughout the maternity ward.

“LOOK!” Mama Riley crows. “Here comes the name!”

A nurse in teddy bear-patterned scrubs walks over, flashing a smile to everyone on our side of the glass. She affixes a small sign to the bassinet. In black Sharpie, someone has written:

Annalise Jessica Daly, born November 2, 4:36 p.m.

“Oh man!” Blake chuckles. “The middle name was supposed to be Blake! You’ve stolen my honor, J-Babe.” He picks me right up off the floor and kisses my cheek, laughing.

“Omigod.” I’m staring at that card in astonishment. Maybe “Jessica” was already one of the names they’d been kicking around? “There’s no way your sister named that baby after me.”

“Yes, she fucking did!” He swings me around in a circle like a rag doll. “You’re stuck with us. Deal with it.”

After more baby-ogling and several rib-cracking hugs from Mama Riley, Blake and I find the hastily parked Hummer in the hospital lot and speed away. He drives with a hand on my knee, singing along with Mick Jagger on “Play with Fire.” And I’m so peaced-out that when he butchers the lyrics I don’t even have the urge to correct him. Much.

We pull through the drive-thru of a McDonald’s, and I feed him French fries as the lights of downtown Toronto approach.

The food shores me up. So when Blake parks his car beneath his apartment building and turns to me, saying, “Thank you for saving my sister and my niece,” the words nestle comfortably in my chest.

“I’m glad to have helped,” I say, instead of arguing with his logic.

For the first time since I got here, I feel certain that nursing is something I’m going to excel in. Maybe my grades won’t be as good as Violet’s. Maybe I’m going to panic once in a while. But I’ll just keep paying attention like I did today, and I’ll learn to get more things right than I get wrong.

That’s all any of us needs to do.

“Will you stay the night?” Blake asks.

“Yeah,” I say immediately. “And thank you for asking. Instead of, well,

just assuming.”

His face softens. “I’m sorry. I’m just used to...” He looks oddly embarrassed.

“Women throwing themselves at you,” I supply.

He clears his throat. “Well, yeah. Bossy works for me. On most girls.”

“I’m not most girls,” I argue instinctively.

Blake grins. “I know. That’s why I want to kiss you so bad. Can I?”

“Okay,” I whisper.

His smile comes closer. Then he takes my mouth gently, his lips soft. I draw a deep, slow breath and slant my head to improve our connection. Blake’s teeth graze my lower lip, and then he deepens our kiss. I open for him instinctively, welcoming him in. Whenever he touches me—from the very first day we met—I always melt like candy in the sun.

Before, I’d blamed this on my own lack of willpower. But tonight I don’t want to blame anyone. I just want to grab his shoulders and lean in. It isn’t long until we’re steaming up the Hummer.

Blake groans and breaks our kiss, his forehead against mine. “Let’s go upstairs, baby. I want you in my bed.”

In the way of two people who are in a hurry to pull each other’s clothes off, we hustle through the lobby to the elevator. It’s smooth sailing up to Blake’s floor.

The minute we enter his apartment, he kicks the door shut and pushes me up against the wall. Our kiss skips all the preliminary stages and goes right to a five-alarm fire. He wedges one muscular knee between my legs and then lets out a loud moan. “I want to do you on every surface of my apartment. Can’t decide which one should go first.”

I look up at his movie-star handsome, square-jawed face, my breath sawing in and out. This beautiful man wants me so badly he’s trembling. How did I get so lucky?

“I guess we’d just better start somewhere,” I say solemnly. “Sounds like it’s gonna be a long night.”

His answering smile is so bright and warm that I might need to remove some clothing just to survive it. So should he, I suppose. My fingers find their way onto his buttons and I undo them. His chin drops as he observes me.

“Am I doing it wrong?”

He shakes his head. “You’ve never undressed me before. I like watching it.”

When the halves of his shirt fall apart, I palm his chest and sweep a hand up and down his abs. Blake tips his head back and sighs with happiness. My fingertips tease lower, skimming the soft skin just above his waistline, trailing through the fine hairs leading down into his shorts. My mouth waters just knowing what's waiting for me.

"I'm still wearing pants, Jessica. Why am I still wearing pants?"

I snicker. "Sorry. Allow me to rid you of your trousers, milord."

His expression brightens. "Are we role-playing? I love role-playing."

Of course he does. "Maybe another time. I need to brush up on my Elizabethan English first."

He waves a hand. "Naah, they still use the same words for fucking. Like in *Romeo and Juliet*, when she's all, a blowjob by any other name will still make you come."

I burst out laughing. "God, Blake, you're priceless." Then I drag his zipper down before he can spew more made-up Shakespeare lines, because as entertaining as it is, my body is tingly with impatience.

Blake groans when I free his erection. It's thick and pulsing in my hand. The bead of moisture at the tip moistens the pad of my thumb. Taking a breath, I slowly sink to my knees. He watches me from above with heavy-lidded green eyes. He slides a hand through my hair and leans his head back against the front door, the muscles of his chest tight with anticipation.

When my tongue circles his swollen head, he makes a low, tortured noise, his fingers forming a fist in my hair. "Feels good," he mumbles.

"About to get better," I mumble back, and then suction my lips around him. He jerks, and I smile against his hot, velvety flesh.

I suck him down as deep as I can take him, which isn't as deep as I'd like. But it's his fault for having such a huge dick, the jackass. My fingers curl around his base to grip what my mouth can't, stroking him in time to the glide of my lips and tongue along his shaft. Every loving lick makes my heart pound harder. I want him to like this. No, to *love* this. I want to worship his cock and show him how much I—

How much you what?

The curious voice in my head messes up my lazy rhythm. I end up taking him too deep, and my throat rebels against the thick intrusion. As I gag, Blake quickly pulls out with a soft murmur of reassurance. "'S'okay, baby, I don't expect you to deep-throat me."

I choke out a laugh. If only deep-throating was the cause of my muddled

thoughts. But it's not. My emotions are all over the place right now, and I don't know if it's because of all the excitement today, or because...

Because what?

Awesome. My own brain is taunting me.

I push aside the unsettling thoughts. I don't want to think right now. I don't want to search for answers to questions I'm not ready to face. What I want is to lose myself in Blake Riley.

"C'mere." I tug on his hand and urge him to his knees. He does it without protest, and then his mouth is on mine and his hands are snaking their way under my shirt. He peels it over my head, undoes my bra in an impressive one-handed feat of dexterity and tosses both items away.

Neither of us cares that we're still in the front hall. I don't even blink when Blake nudges me onto my back. I barely feel the cold floor beneath my bare skin, because his body is producing enough heat to start a fire.

"Wanna be inside you." He latches his mouth onto my neck and sucks hard enough to make me shiver. Meanwhile, his hands are pushing up my skirt and coaxing my panties down my legs.

I loop my arms around his neck and pull his hair to bring up his head. Then I kiss the living daylights out of him and rock my hips upward in a desperate attempt to create some friction.

Blake grunts against my lips. His rock-hard erection is like a branding iron against my thigh. "Hold on, babe, lemme suit up."

I'm so mindless with need that I just keep rocking, until finally he grips both my hips and fixes me with a very un-Blake-like glare.

"Keep doing that and I'm gonna come all over your leg. Is that what you want, you evil woman?"

God, no. I want him *inside* me already. Why is he taking so long?

My impatient grumble summons a bark of laughter from him. He reaches for his discarded pants and fumbles around until he finds a condom. In no time at all, he's covered in latex and plunging into my needy core.

"Blake," I gasp.

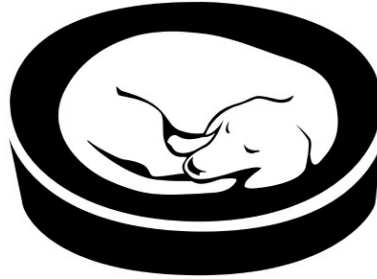
He doesn't answer. He's too busy setting a fast, relentless pace that steals my breath and my sanity. His thrusts are so deep, so deliciously violent, that our bodies slide forward on the hall floor. My head bumps into something—a duffel bag, I think. I don't care. Nope, don't care and hardly notice as his jack-knifing hips practically fuck us all the way into the living room.

I cling to his shoulders and squeeze my eyes shut, letting the pleasure take over. When the orgasm comes, it's not in lazy, pulsing waves, but an instant explosion of bliss. I shudder and curse and forget my name.

I vaguely register a growl from Blake. An agonized "fuck yeah," punctuated by one final thrust and then the ferocious trembling of his body.

It takes several minutes before we're able to move. I'm pretty sure I'm in cardiac arrest. Blake's chest heaves as if he's just skated his ass off to kill back-to-back penalties.

Eventually he speaks, his voice laced with humor. "Front hall—check. What room should we tackle next?"



Blake

I don't want to move. Actually, I might be physically incapable of moving. Sex marathons tend to do that to you.

But as much as I want to stay in bed all day with Jess Canning wrapped around me like a full-body scarf, the sunlight streaming in through the curtains tells me that it's morning. Or at least I hope it's morning, because I have practice at ten. Shit, I hope we didn't sleep through the alarm.

Trying not to wake Jess, I carefully lift my head and crane it toward the clock. Eight-fifty. Nice. I'm right on schedule. I stretch my arm out to turn off the alarm before—

“IF YOU START ME UP!”

“Fuck,” I curse when an explosion of music rocks the bedroom. I have the song programmed so that it skips the intro and gets right to the good stuff.

“—I'LL NEVER STOP!”

Except the good stuff is loud.

A tortured groan sounds from the mattress. “Why is Mick Jagger yelling at me?” Jess wails.

I finally manage to shut off the alarm and grin down at the grumpy blonde in my bed. “Sorry, babe. I like to wake up with the Stones.”

“Well, I like to wake up with my eardrums intact.” She sits up and rubs her eyes. “What time is it?”

“Almost nine.”

That gets her attention. “Crap!” She flies off the bed with a burst of speed that my coach would be proud of. “I have to go!”

“Me too.” I move a bit slower, staggering to my feet. “What do you have

going on today? I'm not sure I'll have time to drop you at the dorms this morning. Practice starts at ten."

"Don't worry. I'm fine taking the subway," she says as she ducks into the master bath. "I have a meeting with my program director at eleven." Her voice grows muffled as she turns on the faucet. "...come back."

"What was that?" I bulldoze my way into the bathroom, flip open the toilet lid, and grip Snake Riley in one hand.

"Blake!" she sputters in dismay. "Why are you peeing in front of me!"

"Why not?"

"Because it's...it's..." She gives up and turns back to the sink. "Do you have a spare toothbrush?"

"Second drawer." I finish my business and flush, then walk over to stand next to Jess. His and hers sinks, baby. I laughed at the real estate lady when she raved about that particular feature, but now I'm digging it.

Jess and I brush our teeth side by side. I make silly faces at her in the mirror, and she laughs so hard she spits out a mouthful of toothpaste and it drips down onto her bare tits.

"Gross," she says with a sigh, then bends over to wash her chest.

I admire the view of those perky puppies swaying over the sink. Then I admire her round ass. And her firm thighs. And her cute feet and bright red toenails. I could get used to this. Waking up next to Jess every morning, doing this whole domestic routine together.

I force myself to quit leering at her. My dick is already semi-hard and getting harder, and we don't have time for a quickie. "What were you saying before?" I prompt. "About your meeting?"

She rinses her mouth before shutting off the tap. "My final grades come back today," she confesses, and there's a deep furrow between her brows. "The director meets with all the first-year students one on one to discuss their first trimester's grades and performance."

"You still worried about the pharmacy exam?" I ask sympathetically.

"Pharmacology," she corrects. "And yes."

"Don't. I bet you aced it."

"I wish I could be as confident as you."

A smile touches my lips. "That's your problem, J-Babe. You're lacking in confidence." I shift closer and capture her delicate chin with one hand. "Look at that hottie in the mirror," I order.

Her head tilts toward me. "Blake."

“Nope, just look.” I force her chin to the side so she has no choice but to look straight on. “See that sexy mama peering back at you? What’s her name?”

“Jess Canning.” Her dry voice tells me she’s humoring me.

“Yup, it’s Jess Canning.” I sweep my thumb over her jaw. “And who’s Jess Canning?”

A groove appears in Mirror-Jess’s forehead. “What do you mean?”

“Who is she, baby?”

“I...” She sounds even more confused.

“You need a hint? Okey-dokey. Repeat after me, okay? *I’m Jess Canning.*”

“No,” she grumbles.

Mirror-Blake arches his brow.

“Oh, fine. I’m Jess Canning.” But she’s rolling her eyes as she says it.

“I’m going to be the best goddamn nurse on the goddamn planet.”

She hesitates, so I pinch her chin.

“I’m going to be the best goddamn nurse on the goddamn planet.”

“I am strong and confident. Nothing keeps me down. I can achieve whatever I set my mind to. I’m the brightest crayon in the box. The sharpest skate on the ice. I eat weaklings for breakfast and spit ’em out. I am woman, hear me roar—”

Jess doubles over in laughter. It’s the sweetest sound I’ve ever heard. “I’m not saying all that,” she says between giggles.

I fix her with a serious look. “Fine. Just the first part then.”

The amusement in her big brown eyes falters, but then it’s replaced with a gleam of determination. Pride wells up in my chest as Jess crosses her arms and glares at her own reflection.

“I am strong and confident. Nothing keeps me down. I can achieve whatever I set my mind to.”

“That’s my girl.” I smack her perfect ass. “Now get dressed before I bend you over this counter and fuck your brains out. We’ve both got somewhere to be.”

Her eyes meet mine in the mirror, twinkling playfully. “Bend me over and I promise I’ll go boom in two minutes, tops.”

A groan rises in my throat. My cock rises just as fast.

Then it’s on like beer pong, and another surface of the apartment is properly christened.

WE'RE in the elevator by nine thirty, which gives me plenty of time to speed over to the rink. Best thing about ten o'clock practices is that I get to bypass morning rush hour. Jess is checking her phone as I punch the lobby button, but when I put my arm around her shoulder, she leans in and brushes an absentminded kiss on the bottom of my chin. I love how touchy-feely she's becoming. It's such a turn-on.

Smiling, I run my fingers over the side of her throat, but the skin there is so soft that I can't not kiss it. So I start kissing it. Jess moans and lets her phone drop into her purse.

"You're such a horndog," she accuses.

Like that's a bad thing. "Mmm-hmmm." I lick a path up her neck to her jaw, then kiss my way to her lips. When our mouths meet, she makes an anguished sound and then practically attacks me with her tongue.

Cheezus. I cannot get enough of this girl. I want to do this forever. Kiss her. Fuck her. Love her—

Love her?

The thought barely takes root before the elevator doors ding open, and suddenly an astonished voice fills the small car.

"What the...? *Jess?*"

We break apart so fast that the back of my skull bounces off the wall. Oh shitballs. Wes is standing open-mouthed in front of the doors. He's got a hockey bag slung over one shoulder, a travel mug in his hand and a horrified expression on his face.

Behind him, Jamie stands looking every bit as surprised.

"Oh my fucking God," Wes bursts out, his gaze pinging between me and Jess. "I did *not* just see you two lip-locked. That is so not cool."

Jess recovers a lot quicker than I do. "Good morning to you, too, Wes. Can I have a sip of your coffee?"

His jaw stays unhinged. He stares at her, then at me again, then at the doors that are slowly sliding back together. In a flash, he thrusts out a hand to stop the doors from closing, then lunges into the elevator.

Still looking stunned, Jamie hops in after him.

The doors shut and then we're all just trapped there together with Wes's reddening face. He growls like a pissed off she-wolf, jams his finger in my chest and actually threatens me. "Paws off my sister. I mean it."

"Oh. My. God," Jess squeaks. "I'm a grown-up! And older than you! I

was having dirty, filthy sex when you were still trading hockey cards.”

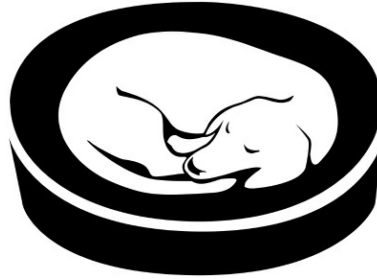
“Ahhh!” Wes tries to cover his ears, even while holding a mug in one hand, but I hear Jamie snort.

Honest to God, I’m offended right now. “What’s the big deal, anyway? You like me.” Shit. I *thought* they did.

“Your track record,” Wes says, dropping his hands. “It’s not good.”

“It is *now*. Cheezus. This isn’t just a hook-up, Wesley. We care about each other. A lot. Tell him, Jess.”

I look over my shoulder and see my girlfriend’s eyes pop wide. And my heart plummets.



Jess

My mouth is suddenly dry as I look back at three sets of eyes boring into me. My brother just looks confused. Wes looks like he's ready to rip Blake to tiny shreds with his bare hands. But now Blake suddenly looks unhappy, his handsome face falling.

And, shit. I don't want Blake to ever look the way he's looking now, like I'm about to reject him. This man has a heart the size of Ontario. He was far kinder to his crazy ex than I could *ever* be. And he's spent the last week showering me with affection. Maybe I feel a little overwhelmed by life right now, but I'll be damned if I'll let him think that I haven't noticed just how special he is.

It's more than a gut feeling I have about him. So I say what needs saying.

"Wes," I say softly. "You'd better just get used to it. Blake and I are together for real."

Blake's expression fills with surprise. Then he gives me a wide Riley smile. "Aw, Jessie. You make me so happy." He pushes me against the elevator wall and kisses me.

Wes makes a strangled sound, but luckily the elevator doors ding open. As Blake steps back, I see my brother steer Wes toward one of the stone columns dotting the fancy lobby and say a few quiet words to him.

Holding Blake's hand, I stop outside the elevator. "Sorry about that. I don't know why Wes is being such an ass."

"Eh, he'll come around." He squeezes my hand. "Are you okay? Wish I could drive you to school."

"I'll be fine." It's true, too. Even if I am about to learn I got a shitty grade on my exam, I know I can tell Blake later. He'll listen, and then he'll say something sweet. Then he'll strip off my clothes and make me forget.

We're good for each other. I've finally figured that out.

Across the lobby, Wes takes a deep breath and lets it out. His shoulders relax. Then he dips his chin and walks back over to us, his gaze on Blake. "You'll treat her right," he says. It's a statement, not a question.

My eyes are rolling so hard right now I could power that revolving restaurant at the top of the CN Tower. But I manage not to say anything snarky while Wes and Blake have their moment.

"Of course," Blake assures him. "You have nothing to worry about."

Wes strokes his chin and nods. "Okay. Sorry."

"Apology accepted." Blake's smile is blinding.

"So, uh." Wes clears his throat. "We're a little late for practice. I was gonna drive Jamie to work, but..."

"You need a ride in the Hummer." Blake laughs. "That's rich."

Wes puts on his best humble face. But he's not very humble, so it's a stretch for him. "Please? I'll stop being an ass."

"Is that even possible?" Blake tosses his keys in the air and catches them. "Fine, bud. Let's go. Just stay out of the backseat, because that spot is special to me and Jess now."

Both Wes and Jamie look horrified, but Blake just laughs. He gives me a kiss on the forehead and a promise to call me later. Then he and Wes depart.

"So." Jamie shoves his hands in his pockets. "You want a lift? I've got the car now."

"Sure."

I follow my brother to the building's parking garage downstairs, but he's awfully silent. We get into Wes's SUV before he says, "Why didn't you tell me? Why lie and say it was a joke?"

"It was a joke. But now it's not."

He sneaks a look at me. "Does that make sense?"

"Blake doesn't always make sense," I point out. "But he's pretty great anyway."

Jamie snorts. "You and Blake. That's some trouble right there."

"Why?" I'm ready to be offended. My family always assumes the worst of me.

"Well, he'll want glitter and zoo animals at your wedding," Jamie

replies with a snicker.

“What wedding? I said I was dating Blake, not marrying him.”

My brother is quiet for a moment. “I know you’re a commitmentphobe. But now that the shock is wearing off, I can sort of see you two together. And Blake is the kind of guy that when he falls, he falls hard. Before today I never heard him speak about any other girl the way he talks about you.”

Oh boy. There’s a lump in my throat when I think about how well he treated his horrible ex even after she crushed his spirit. God, I hope I don’t fuck this up. I can’t even argue with my brother calling me a commitmentphobe. My longest relationship lasted nine weeks, and there was a two-week spring break in the middle of it.

“I’ll be good to him,” I say quietly.

Jamie gives me a smile, and there’s no judgment in it. If I’m lucky it will stay that way.

MY BROTHER DROPS me off at the dorm, where I make a hasty clothing change. Violet is in our room, sitting on her bed.

“Hey! How was your week off?” I ask, stripping out of yesterday’s clothes. I reach for a button-down shirt and pull it on before I even notice how silent she’s been. “Violet?” I prompt, turning for a better look. “You okay?”

Her eyes are red. “I had my meeting.”

“Already?” I shove my feet into a clean pair of pants. “Didn’t it go well?” I can’t imagine that Violet failed her exam. Ms. Know-it-All was well prepared.

“I got a B-minus on the pharmacology exam,” she says with a sniff.

“God, I want a B-minus,” I say, hunting around for some socks.

“My mother is going to kill me.”

This gets my attention. “Why? That’s ridiculous.”

Violet sighs. “I’ll get a lecture about setting an example. The Smith family has been demonstrating excellence in medicine for a hundred years, blah blah blah.”

“Wait, what? How is that your problem?”

“It’s this school. This place. My parents have an inflated idea of our importance.”

I think this through while putting on my socks. The Smith School of

Medicine and Nursing has never been more to me than a name etched on a limestone facade.

But...my roommate's name is Violet Smith.

"Oh shit. You're that kind of Smith?"

She nods miserably.

"And a B-minus is the end of the world because your name is over the door?" I'm trying to listen, I really am, but in ten minutes I have my own meeting.

"There goes my spring-break trip to the Bahamas," Violet mumbles. "I was really looking forward to it."

"I'm sorry," I say kindly. I've felt family pressure, that's for sure. And I'm pretty sure mine was even deserved. "But you have to be proud of yourself for *you*. They won't be able to lord vacations over you forever. You have your own life."

She gives me some teary thanks, which I barely have time to accept. I grab my coat and my backpack and slip on some shoes, and then I'm out of there.

Halfway to the director's office, it hits me. If Violet got a B-minus, then how tough was the grading on this exam? Just like that, the confidence I'd felt earlier this morning drains right out of me, and when I open the director's door, my knees are shaking.

"Jessica, come in!" she says, waving me toward one of the heavy wooden chairs in front of her desk. Carol Taylor is in her sixties, with bright blue eyes and a quick smile.

Her friendly face does nothing for my nerves, though. It's her job to maintain the excellence of the program. And if I'm not excellent, I'm sure they'll show me the door.

"Let's get right to it," she says as my stomach rolls. She opens a file folder and pulls out my anatomy exam. I can see the skeleton outline on the first page. "An A-minus on your Anatomy and Physiology exam. Keep up the good work."

"Thank you."

"Nurse Hailey liked your observational work." She's skimming some notes on a page. "And then there's your pharmacology score..." She flips the page.

I brace myself.

"Hmmm." She leans closer to the exam booklet.

I'm dying.

"The professor has awarded you a B-minus," she finally reveals.

I let out a gasp of excitement.

"Oh, don't be *sad*," she says, misunderstanding my reaction. "The notes are good. Your essay was brief but succinct. Good grasp of the basics."

"I'm not sad," I say quickly. "That test was hard, and I was worried about my grade point average. I have the Harper scholarship to reapply for in the spring."

Carol looks up. "Oh, honey. Don't worry so much about that. We make everyone reapply because it gives us an out if someone isn't putting in the effort. But it's clear to me that you're going to become a fine nurse."

"It is?"

She smiles. "Of course. Nurse Hailey is very pleased with your work in the retirement home. She says you take a lot of care to put your patients at ease. You sing to them?"

Thank you, Dyson. "Sometimes."

"She also said—" Carol flips back a page in my file. "—that a pediatric cancer patient raved about your visit. Read this when you get a chance." She hands over the whole folder. "That patient is having surgery soon, and Nurse Hailey thought the young woman would enjoy a visit from you."

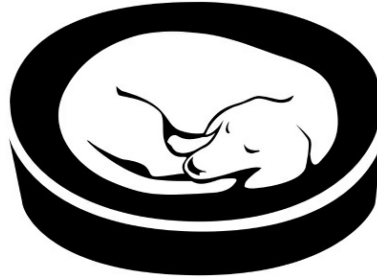
"Oh, wow." I take the file back, but I'm still hearing the echo of "B-minus" in my head. It's better than I expected. I can hardly believe it.

"You've done well, Jessica. In fact, I expect the second trimester to feel easier for you."

"Really?"

"Our returning students always have an adjustment period. They're usually intimidated to be back in the classroom setting. But with comments like these, your prognosis is excellent." She smiles. "Thank you for stopping by."

I shake her hand eagerly and then scamper out of there like an eager puppy.



Three weeks later

Blake

Right after Jess and I got together, I was a little worried that I wouldn't remember how to be somebody's boyfriend. I mean, it's been five years since I held that title, and there's really no proof that I was any good at this shit before. When your girlfriend lies to your face about your fake baby, a guy has to take a step back and ask himself where he went so wrong.

Yet I had nothing to fear. Turns out I'm a fabulous boyfriend. Every time I pass a flower shop, I buy my Jessie a bouquet. I've taken her out to dinner at all the hot spots, including the ones where I have to drop my own name to get in.

Since it's sort of embarrassing to drop your own name, I have a system. I call up pretending to be my own assistant. I don't have an assistant, but these maître d's don't know that.

"Hi," I say, kind of breathlessly, as if I'm about to kick my own ass if the reservation doesn't come through. "So sorry to call at the last minute, but Blake Riley is in town tonight, and he wants to take his girlfriend out to dinner somewhere awesome. He says you have the best sushi around."

Most of the time they just tell me to name the hour and they'll be ready. Once in a while I'll get someone on the line who doesn't know who Blake Riley is. I mean, who *I* am. It's fucking confusing to impersonate yourself. Anyway, last week I had to make someone look me up on Wikipedia. There's no way that chick was Canadian. I mean, *please*. But she got with the program, and Jess and I had a fabulous meal. What's the use of being a little

bit famous if you can't drop three hundred bucks on a sushi dinner for your best girl?

The funny thing is, I told Jess how I work my magic and she didn't even believe me.

"Seriously?" She'd slid me a sideways glance across the sofa. "They give you a table whenever they want? They have the hockey roster memorized?"

Oh, Jessie. She keeps my ego in check. Occasionally when we're out together, people stop me for my autograph, and she always looks a little puzzled. That's my girl.

At any rate, I've got this boyfriend thing down. Turns out it's like riding a bike. But the bike is a hot blonde with big brown eyes and perfect tits. And I'm a really good rider. Not only have we broken-in every room of my apartment, we've hit most of the available surfaces, too. Except for the vibrating chair, 'cause I'm saving that one up for a special occasion.

But now the regular-season schedule is kicking into high gear, and I'm really going to miss my girl when I'm on the road. Today we get a few hours together, though. They can't all be fancy sushi days—Jess has asked me for a ride to the bank where they process her student loans, because it's located at an inconvenient corner of Toronto. We're also stopping by the hospital where she's visiting that young patient who made her so sad a few weeks ago—Leila.

Jess flat out told me that I'm really there for moral support. The ride is just extra. Even though she's feeling much more confident about nursing school, I can tell she's still wigged out about dealing with the scary cases. I don't blame her. Some things just require a little extra whiz fizz. So I tell her that.

"A little...what did you say?" Jess asks on our way to the bank.

"Whiz fizz. Energy. Mojo. Call it what you want, but everyone can turn it on when they need to. Dig deep, Jessie. This girl likes you, right? You're her happy thought."

She looks unconvinced, so I tell her that I brought along two jerseys to sign. One is for the sick girl, and one is for her little brother.

"I don't know if he's into hockey, but it's still a nice gesture," Jess says as I pull into the bank's parking lot.

"Of course he's into hockey," I argue. "This is Canada."

"Right." Her perfect lips twitch. "I forgot."

I settle into a chair in the bank lobby with a copy of *Sports Illustrated*, but Jess reappears before I'm even finished with the first article. "That was quick."

"It only takes a moment to sign your life away," she replies.

I hate that she has to stress about money. It's just a freak thing that I don't. I mean, I'd play hockey even if they didn't pay me. But they do. A lot.

Jess doesn't like to talk about money, and I try to respect her wishes. But one of these days I'm going to figure out how to make things a little easier for her without getting yelled at. Last week I tried to ask her why she isn't going home to California for American Thanksgiving. I'm pretty sure she can't afford the ticket, but when I pressed her on it, she got all testy. So I had to back her up against the wall and lift up her skirt and *press* her in a completely different way just to calm her down.

Back in the Hummer, I head for the hospital. Jess looks out the window as I steer toward the other end of town. She looks nervous.

When I park in the hospital lot, she turns to me. "You don't have to come in if you don't want to. It's kind of grim up there."

"Whiz fizz, baby." I wink at her. "I'm in, as long as I get a kiss after."

But Jess feels like giving me my prize in advance. Her face softens, and she leans toward me. I meet her over the gearbox and receive one very soft kiss and a grateful smile.

After I grab the jerseys out of the back, we go inside, holding hands in the elevator. On the children's ward, Jess stops outside room 302. She takes a deep breath and then taps on the door.

"Come in," says a low voice.

We enter to find a skinny teenager in a bed, with a blanket pulled up to her chin. And right away I realize one important truth. *I'm such an idiot*. I thought I had enough jollies to get us both through this, but the girl's blanket looks like a scratchy hospital edition, and I realize I should've brought one of the plush Toronto blankets instead. My mom has 'em all over the house.

I brought this sick girl a *jersey*. It's so fucking impractical that I want to choke myself with it. And she's too skinny and her eyes are scared and there's a lump in my throat the size of a hockey puck.

How does any nurse get through the day? Fucking fuckity fuck.

But the girl's expression lights up as soon as she sees me. "Oh my God!"

"Hey, Leila," Jess says, her face about fifty times cheerier than mine.

“Do you remember me? We did some knitting together? I’m Jess, a nursing student.”

“Okay, Jess the nursing student.” One skinny finger emerges from under the blanket. She points it at me. “Is that *really* Blake Riley? Or did they fuck up my meds again? If I’m hallucinating right now, this is a good one.”

I guess that’s my cue. “Hey there, Leila. Nice to meet you.” I offer her my hand.

She takes it, still staring at me. “Are you in the wrong room? I didn’t make one of those wishes, from that foundation? They do some cool stuff. But I think it’s bad luck to take them up on it.” I see a tiny shudder go through her.

“So, you’re superstitious?” I ask. I can work with this. “Because I’m hella superstitious. On game day, I have to fill up my gas tank before driving to the rink. One time I drove there on empty and I had a shitty game. Oh, fuck! Am I not supposed to say *shitty* on the children’s ward?”

Leila cracks up, so I’m winning.

“Here, I brought you something.” I open the shopping bag and pull out both the jerseys. “One is for you, and I heard you had a brother.”

She squeals. “No way! Will you sign them?”

“Of course.”

I’m signing the shirts with my Sharpie when Leila finally turns her attention to Jess. “Did you do this?” she demands.

I have a dirty mind, so right away I’m thinking about it literally. Oh, she did *this*, all right. I give Jess an inappropriate grin, which she returns with a glare that suggests I should take it down a notch.

To the girl she says, “Blake is my boyfriend.”

Leila’s head thumps back against the pillow. “Holy crap. And, before, you wanted to talk about knitting? You were seriously holding out on me.”

“I love knitting almost as much as I love him,” Jess says with an eye roll. “And knitting is less egotistical.”

I don’t even argue with the egotistical part because Jess just said she *loved* me. Did that really just happen?

“Where is your knitting?” Jess asks. “I wanted to see how the hat turned out.”

With the practiced ease of someone who’s been here way too long, Leila reaches over to open the hospital bedside drawer. She pulls out a somewhat lumpy hat in a burgundy color with yellow stripes. “Do you think it needs a

pom-pom? What do you think of the bind-off?"

Jess takes the hat and admires it. "The ribbing turned out perfectly. And your bind-off is great. Not too tight."

"I was worried about that."

"It's perfect. He's going to love it. Do you have extra yarn so we could try a pom-pom?"

"Sure."

They get out the yarn and Jess shows Leila how to wrap it around spread-out fingers. Or something. My gaze wanders around the room to the collection of Get Well cards on the windowsill. There are a million of them.

Jess and Leila make a gold-colored pom-pom, one of them holding the tuft of wrapped threads, the other tying a knot around them tightly. Their two heads are bent together in concentration.

"Okay. Let's see what you think..." Jess holds the hat up, her hand securing the pom-pom on top.

"Hmm," Leila says, squinting critically. "Maybe it's more macho without?"

Jess pulls the ornament away again. "I kind of see what you mean. What do you think, Blake? Can a real man wear a pom-pom on his hat?"

"A real man can wear anything," I say. "Especially if it's handmade by someone who loves me. So where's my hat?" I seek out Jess's eyes, and when she smiles, her cheeks pink up.

She quickly turns her attention back to Leila's knitting. "It's perfect. He's going to love it."

The girl fingers the stitches on the brim, her throat visibly bobbing. "I'm having surgery tomorrow."

"I know," Jess says softly.

"Again."

"That sucks," my girlfriend empathizes.

"If something happens to me, would you make sure my brother gets the hat? I'm just worried that my parents would be too..." She clears her throat.

"Of course," Jess says firmly. "You're going to be fine, but I understand why you wouldn't want to take any chances with, like, fourteen hours of knitting."

"I know, right?" Leila laughs, but her eyes are shiny. "Just that ribbing took half my life."

My heart sinks when I do the math on how many years half her life

might turn out to be.

Jess, meanwhile, just smiles back at her. “The best stuff always takes a while, right?” She tucks the extra yarn into the bedside table. “I’ll come by the day after tomorrow with a box and some wrapping paper so you can hide it properly until Christmas.”

“Oh! Awesome.”

Now Leila is looking at Jess the same way she looked at me when we walked in. And I know without any doubt that all of her patients will wear that same expression when she enters their rooms. Jess is a rock star. She leans over Leila and gives the kid a hug.

“Me too,” I say, bending over the both of them. “Group hug!”

“I want a picture,” Leila begs as I squeeze the both of them. “My brother is going to freak out when I tell him I met you.”

“Awesome. I love freaking people out. Where’s your phone?”

The phone is fetched, and I sit one half of my ass on the bed so I can take a good photo with Leila. And I smile for the camera even though my heart is breaking.

My smile stays in place until we exit the hospital building, but once we step outside, I take a giant breath of non-sanitized air and let it out in a gust. “Fuck a duck. How do you do that?”

“Do what?” Jess squeezes my hand. She looks calm and happy now, and I’m a total wreck.

“*That*—help a kid with her knitting when she might die? *Cheezus*. I think I need some chocolate ice cream just to rebound from that.”

“Aw!” She jumps up to smack a kiss on my cheek. “You were great! I thought she was going to burst a vessel just from shaking your hand.”

“Eh. But that was just because I play hockey on TV, you know? It’s just a party trick. You’re the one who really soothed her. You’re amazing.” I sweep her up in my arms until her feet leave the ground, and hold on tight.

I don’t plan to ever let her go.

JESS and I go back to my place, which is where we usually hang out on the nights I’m home. Her dorm room is the size of my closet and offers zero privacy...and we need lots of privacy for the dirty activities we like to engage in. I don’t know how dirty we’ll get tonight, though. Jess has been quiet ever since we left the hospital. I guess she’s bummed about Leila’s surgery.

Good thing I'm a pro at cheering her up.

"Hey, you wanna go out for ice cream?" I call out from the kitchen.

Jess is on the living room couch, her blonde head bent over her laptop. "It's November," she calls back.

"Is that a yes?"

"Nope."

Her tone is absentminded, and I can tell she's not listening to me at all. I wander over to the sectional. "What are you looking at?"

Before my ass even hits the cushions, Jess has slammed the laptop shut.

I grin. "Porn, huh? All right." I start to unzip my pants. "Let's do this."

She lets out a strangled laugh. "We're not watching porn together."

"But we're a couple now," I protest. "That's what couples do." I reach for the computer. "So what are we watching? Girl on girl? Ménage?"

"I wasn't watching porn!" She sounds exasperated, and she's slapping my hand away from the laptop, which only heightens my curiosity.

"Then what were you doing?" I challenge.

Jess huffs out a breath. "If you must know, I was checking my credit card balance." She smacks my hand again, and I release the MacBook. "And there's no way I'm letting you see it. My bleak financial landscape is kind of a mood killer, okay?"

I frown. I noticed she's been charging a lot to her Visa lately, but I hadn't realized her cash sitch was that dire. "How bleak?" I ask slowly.

Her bottom lip drops out. "Very bleak," she admits. "My living expenses are higher than I thought they'd be, and I already burned through all the money I got from selling my car back in Cali."

I narrow my eyes. "Is this why you're not going home for Thanksgiving?"

I know Jamie already bought his plane ticket home and is leaving in a couple of days, but every time I've asked Jess why she's not going with him, she's insisted she's swamped with school work and can't afford to take the time off. Which makes sense, because Canadian Thanksgiving was a month ago and the school doesn't take a break for the American holiday.

The way she guiltily averts her eyes tells me I'm right. "It's not just the money," she mutters. "I really can't miss school."

"Jamie's only going for two days," I point out. "I'm sure you'll be able to catch up on two days' worth of work." I hesitate. "You could hit me up for a loan."

Her jaw hardens. “No. I am *not* borrowing money from you. I’m not borrowing money from anyone anymore, okay?”

Then she shoots off the couch and stalks to the kitchen, where she grabs a drinking glass from the cabinet. She continues to grumble as she fills it with water from the dispenser in the fridge.

“Jamie and Wes already offered to lend me some. My mom offered to buy me a ticket so I could come home.” She turns to glare at me. “And I said thank you, but no. You want to know why?”

I bite my lip to keep from laughing. “Because you’re a Stubborn Susie who apparently hates Thanksgiving?”

Jess slams the glass on the counter without even taking a sip. “I love Thanksgiving!” she bursts out, and there’s a slight crack to her voice. “I love turkey and stuffing and cranberries and I love California and I *love* my family and I hate relying on them for money! I hate not having five hundred measly dollars in the bank to pay for a plane ticket home! I. Hate. It.”

I’m at her side in a heartbeat, resting both hands on her shoulders. I try to pull her close. She resists at first. Then her entire body seems to sag, and she melts against me, her cheek resting on my left pec.

“I feel so guilty,” she mumbles. “My parents paid for my first college education, and now they’re paying for part of this second one. They keep helping me out even after I’ve screwed up. You know how humiliating that is sometimes?”

“Aw, Jessie.” I thread my fingers through her soft hair. “You shouldn’t feel humiliated. Your family helps you because they love you.”

“I know.” Her voice is muffled against my chest. “But I want to start helping myself. I want to start helping *them*. I want to pay them back every dime. I want to get a nursing job and be successful at it.”

“You will,” I say with conviction.

Her head tips up, brown eyes flickering with uncertainty. “You really believe that?”

“Of course. You’re going to be a kickass nurse, and soon you’ll be making dough hand over fist. You’ll be the first nurse to hit the Forbes list.”

Jess laughs. “Wow. You aim high, huh?”

“For the stars, babe. Always aim for the stars.” I sweep my thumb along her cheekbone. It’s slightly damp, as if a few tears slipped out when I wasn’t looking. “And here’s the thing—if my man Cindy offers to pay for your airfare, it’s not because she feels sorry for you or wants to rub it in your face

that you're broke. It's because she loves you and misses you and wants to see you."

A trace of guilt returns to her eyes. "I know. But...I can't accept any more money from them, Blake. I just can't."

I grasp her chin with my hand. "Then accept it from me."

Her mouth falls open. "No."

"Yes." I pin her with a stern look. "Let me buy you a plane ticket home, baby. I know you miss them." I've seen the longing in her expression the last few times we've visited my family. The Riley clan is as loud and boisterous as the Canning crew, but I know it's not the same as being with her own family.

"I do miss them..." She bites her lip. "But...no. I appreciate the offer, Blake, I really do, but—"

"But nothing. Let me do this for you."

"No—"

"Yes. And you know what? It's not even a loan. It's a gift."

"No—"

"Yes. I mean it, J-Babe. I want to give you this gift."

She sighs. "You're not going to let me say no, are you?"

I grin widely. "She's learning."

She starts doing the lip-biting thing again, which stirs the Blake Snake to life. I ease my hips back slightly so she doesn't feel my semi-snake pressing against her belly. I don't want her to think I want to bone her right now. Or worse—that she has to bone me in exchange for this plane ticket.

"Don't you get it by now?" I say gruffly. "I want you to be happy. I want to be the one *making* you happy. Cuz that's what—"

"Couples do?" she finishes, a wry smile playing on her lips.

"Yup. That's what couples do. They make each other happy." I reach down and smack her ass. "So open up that laptop of yours and find us a good flight deal."

"Us?"

Shit. I immediately regret the phrasing, because there's a happy glimmer in her eyes now. But there's no way I can go to Cali with her—we've got three days of East Coast road games this week. That's why Wes can't go.

"You," I correct ruefully. "I wish I could come with you, but it doesn't work with our schedule."

"Right." She nods. "The road games." There's a pause. "Maybe next

time?”

I can't hide the pleasure that swamps me. It shows itself in the form of a broad smile. “You'd really take me home with you?”

“Why not? My folks already know we're dating. Besides, it's not a real relationship until you've been interrogated, tortured and made fun of by my siblings.”

I snicker. “Let 'em try. I can out-torture anyone, babe. I just act extra annoying and they wave a white flag to get me to stop babbling.”

She snorts, then wanders back to the couch and picks up her laptop. I stand back for a moment, admiring the way her loose shirt slides off one smooth shoulder. And how long her legs look in those stretchy yoga pants. And how fucking hot she looks sitting on my couch.

My gaze shifts to the stack of textbooks on my coffee table. And the bright blue winter jacket draped over one of the counter stools. Her laptop case on the hardwood. And then there are the items I can't see—Jess's toothbrush and toiletries in my bathroom. The extra PJs—my favorite ones with the cartoon bananas—she keeps in my dresser.

These past few weeks, little signs of Jess have made their way into my apartment. And...I like it. I like coming home after a brutal game to find that she let herself in with the spare key I gave her and cooked dinner for me. I like snuggling up to her warm, soft body and falling asleep together.

“If you're serious about this ticket, there's a crazy deal happening on this travel site right now,” she says from the sofa.

“Jess...” I say slowly.

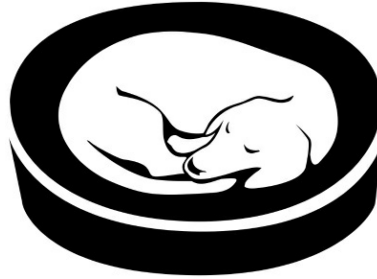
She peers up from the screen. “Yeah?”

I take a breath. Shit. Is this nuts? The last time I let a woman into my private domain, she turned my entire life upside down. She took my frickin' *dog* and then abandoned him in another province. She broke my heart.

But Jess isn't Molly. Jess isn't insecure or vindictive or scared of anything other than looking like a failure in the eyes of the people she loves.

I want her to move in. I do. But the doubts have already crept in, and as she sits there looking at me with those inquisitive brown eyes, I can't bring myself to make the offer.

So I say, “Make sure to check LastMinuteAir.com. They've, ah, got some good deals, too.”



Jess

When I return to Toronto after Thanksgiving, I feel completely and utterly rejuvenated. The trip to California was just what I needed, and I hadn't realized just how much I missed my family until I was back in their loud, crazy, chaotic clutches again. I swear my niece Lilac has doubled in size. Joe has a new girlfriend. Tammy's husband got a promotion. Brady grew what Jamie and I dubbed a "pimp mustache."

I was sad to say goodbye to them, but happy to say *hello* to Blake. I can't believe how much I missed that big oaf—and I was gone for only two days. My first order of business when I got back was taking a cab to his place straight from the airport and spending about, oh, ten hours in bed with him.

Blake called it our *reunited and it feels so sexy* sexy-times. I pointed out that the back-to-back use of the word *sexy* was kind of redundant, at which point he said *I* was redundant and proceeded to fuck me again. Which leads me to believe he doesn't know what redundant means.

Now it's two weeks since my trip and I'm over at Blake's apartment again. Hell, I'm over so often I almost feel like I live here, and Blake doesn't seem to mind that I'm all but squatting at his condo. It's just so...spacious. My dorm room is teeny and offers even less privacy than before, because Violet is...wait for it...dating someone. I couldn't believe it when I got back to discover that she's going out with Keith Chan, one of our fellow nursing students. I guess she's finally starting to chill out, letting go of that *must-study-always* mentality.

And also? Blake is here. I can tell myself that it's the floor plan that draws me to apartment 1504, but it's really the big guy at the other end of the

sofa.

I sneak a look at him, and he doesn't notice, because his attention is focused on the movie listings. I study his sturdy jaw and rugged cheekbones. He has laugh lines at the corners of his mouth, and I feel my own smile start to grow just from looking at him.

I always told myself I'd end up with someone deep and artsy, but it's a fun-loving, goliath-sized hockey player that makes me smile like an idiot whenever we're in the same room together.

Who knew?

"Baby-cakes," Blake grumbles from a few feet away. "I'm horny."

I snicker at him. "I know you are, big boy, but tough cookies. Stay over there on your side until the surprise arrives."

He pats his crotch. "I'll give you a surprise, how 'bout that?"

"Nope." I point to the screen. "Be quiet and watch the game."

At his exaggerated huff, I hide a smile. He's been trying to tear my clothes off ever since I arrived, but I'm expecting a delivery and don't want us getting interrupted by the doorbell. Of course, asking Blake to keep his pants zipped is like asking a dog not to lick his balls, so I've banished him to the far end of the sofa for the time being.

"The game's over," he complains.

I glance at the TV and realize he's right. The Chicago game has been replaced with the news. "Watch something else, then."

"Okay. Take off your clothes and I'll watch you."

"Blake."

"What?"

"I'm about to give you the best surprise of your life," I inform him. "The least you can do is quit whining like a preschooler."

He heaves himself off the couch. "Fine. I'm taking a shower, then." One brow arches at me. "And maybe I'll shake the snake when I'm in there, how do you like that?"

"If it shuts you up? I'll take it." I wave my hand toward the hallway. "Go. I'll come get you if the delivery shows up before you're out."

"You're no fun, J-Babe."

His footsteps thump on the hardwood as he trudges off. He might be pouting now, but that'll change once he sees what I have in store for him. I've been shaking with excitement for three days now.

I hear the faint sound of running water from the direction of the master

bedroom and nod in approval. Good. I hope he *is* jerking off in there, because once that door buzzer goes off, we probably won't be having sex at all tonight.

Knock knock.

My head jerks toward the door. What the hell? Nobody gets into the building without getting buzzed in first—the doorman in the lobby makes sure of that. Besides, my delivery person is supposed to text me when she's downstairs.

Wary, I rise to my feet and walk to the front hall. Blake's door doesn't have a peephole, so I keep the chain on as I open the door just slightly.

A gasp gets stuck in my throat when I find Molly standing there.

Her expression darkens the moment her eyes meet mine, her pretty face a mixture of shock, anger and annoyance. "What are you doing here?" she demands.

I force myself to remain calm. But seriously? "Um, I think the more important question is, what are *you* doing here? And how did you get up here?"

Molly's lips tighten. "Can you please take that chain off? It's rude."

I'm the rude one in this equation? Ha. Still, I slide off the chain and open the door a bit wider. But I don't invite her in.

"The doorman said it was all right for me to come up," Molly explains, averting her eyes. "I told him I knew Blake."

Oh brother. This guy must be new then, because no one who's worked in this upscale building for more than a day would ever let unapproved visitors into the elevator. I bet a hundred puck bunnies show up here daily claiming to know Blake or Wes.

I make a mental note to tell Blake to have a chat with the guy.

"Is he here?" she asks, trying to peer past me.

"He's in the shower."

Blake's ex bites her lip. "Oh. I see. And you?"

"And me what?" I can't stop a sarcastic retort. "Am I in the shower? No, Molly, I'm not in the shower."

Irritation flickers in her eyes. "I need to speak to Blake. May I come inside and wait for him?"

I gape at her for a second. Then I answer in an incredulous tone. "No offense, but I don't think Blake would appreciate coming out of the shower and finding you sitting on his couch. If you need to speak to him, why don't

you give him a call?"

She scowls, and it's not a good look for her. "Because he's not answering my calls." She adjusts the strap of her black leather purse. "Look, I need to talk to him."

"Why?" I ask bluntly.

Apparently Molly doesn't like to be questioned, because she scowls even harder. "That's none of your business, Janet."

"It's Jess," I say in a tight voice. "Which you already know. And FYI? I'm sure you're trying to make me feel inferior or some shit by purposely screwing up my name every time you see me, but it's not working. You can call me Janet or Jackie or Julia-fucking-Child, but it won't change the fact that I'm Blake's girlfriend."

God, I should probably shut my mouth already, but for some reason, I can't stop talking. The sight of this woman—this woman who had the greatest man in the world and then lied to him in order to "keep" him...it's infuriating.

"He kept your secret for five years," I say in a low voice. "He allowed his family to think the worst of him. He allowed you to be the martyr when, in reality, you broke his heart. He did this because your reputation was more important to him than his."

Molly has the decency to wince.

"But you didn't deserve it," I say frankly. "And you don't deserve to even be in the same room as him. You're here to apologize, right? To try to win his forgiveness so he talks to Brenna on your behalf? So your best friend stops thinking you're a monster?"

Her cheeks redden.

"Do you realize how unfair that is?" My voice softens. "I won't let you drag him back into your bullshit, Molly. I'll tell him you stopped by. I'll pass along whatever message you want me to give him, but if he asks for my opinion, I'm going to tell him that you're not worth his time."

"Jess," she pleads, and there's desperation in her eyes. She must be desperate if she's actually using my name. "You need to do this for me. If you don't, I'll tell the WAGS you're a gold-digger, and they'll shun you."

"Knock yourself out," I growl. "I don't give a crap about joining some club, even if they do make really yummy daiquiris. You *hurt* Blake. You hurt him, and I'm not letting you hurt him again, you hear me? So turn around, put your weepy, lying ass in the elevator and pick up the phone to leave him a

message. Because there's no way I'm letting you step foot in this apartment!"

Her mouth opens in a protest, but I'm already shutting the door. Then I lock it for good measure.

Maybe I was out of line. Maybe I overstepped, crossed a line that's going to make Blake furious with me, but—

"Thank you."

The gruff voice has me spinning around in shock. Blake is right behind me, clad in nothing but a towel that rides low on his hips. For once, he doesn't offer a cocky remark about his nearly naked state. He doesn't give me his goofy Blake grin or make some inappropriate comment.

He simply stands there, staring at me with something akin to wonder.

"How much of that did you hear?" I ask ruefully.

"Most of it." His throat bobs as he swallows. "Nobody's ever..." He clears his throat. "Ah, nobody's ever defended me like that. I mean... Cheezus, Jessie, I think you actually would've beat her up if she tried coming in here."

"Very likely," I admit.

Now he grins. My Blake is back.

Blake

Closure. It's a funny thing.

Five years ago, I was going to marry a girl named Molly. I loved her. I thought she loved me. And...it didn't work out. Then I spent five years trying to pretend it hadn't ruined my entire view on relationships. I played along with a crazy lie because I didn't want my family to get hurt by Molly the way I'd been hurt. But despite that, I'd thought I'd moved on.

I *have* moved on, but I didn't realize until this very moment that there's been a thundercloud following me around since then. I've smiled and I've laughed and I've fucked, but that cloud was always there.

Not anymore. Because Jess Canning just shot her rays of sunshine into that cloud, and now my sky is so blue that I can't even remember the gray. She defended me. She made it crystal clear that she's never, *ever* going to let anyone hurt me.

Nobody's ever done that for me before.

I exhale in a big fat rush, and then I just fucking ask what I've been wanting to ask her for weeks. "You wanna move in with me?"

She blinks. "I'm sorry. What?"

"Do you want to move in with me? In here. Together."

The surprise doesn't leave her expression. But it's joined with suspicion. "Are you only asking because you feel sorry for me?"

"Fuck no," I say immediately. I march over and plant myself next to her. "I'm asking because I want you to move in." When she looks ready to object, I hold up my hand. "I wouldn't dream of offering you a free ride," I add in a wry tone. "You can pay rent or utilities or whatever you feel comfortable paying, okay? This isn't a handout or a pity offer or some trick on my part. I just want you to come live with me."

She studies my face. "Why?"

"Because I love you." I roll my eyes. "Fucking duh."

Her face softens. But then her phone rings, goddamn it. And I don't blame her for checking it because she's been waiting for this call since we got home.

"Hold that thought," my girl says. "But, actually, your timing is a little weird. Because there's someone else who needs to be your roommate."

"What?" I try to guess what she means and come up blank. "Like, a threesome?" I joke.

"Riiight. Only your mind would go there," she says as the concierge's buzzer rings. Jess marches over, grabs the handset and says, "Send her up."

Even I forget that we were sort of having a moment there, because Jessie disappears into the hallway and shuts the door behind her.

"You know you just locked yourself out, right?" I call through the wood.

"Guess I should have asked for my own key first," she replies.

I hear low voices a minute later. Jess confers with someone, then taps politely on the door. "Blake? Are you ready to be surprised?"

When I pull open the door, Jess is standing there with a nervous smile on her face and a chocolate lab puppy in her arms.

Holy shit.

Shyly, she says, "This guy is all yours if you want. Jamie and I will walk him when you're on the road. And there's a doggy daycare just four blocks away if you want him to have more fun..."

I should probably be listening to every word she says, but that's hard

when the puppy opens his mouth in a goofy smile and looks up at me.

“Oh!” I reach for him. “Aren’t you the cutest thing I’ve ever seen?” I hold him up and he wiggles in my hands, his soft puppy fur tickling my wrists. I stroke his floppy ears as I gape at Jess. “Where did you get him? Puppies cost a mint.”

“Well, after I heard what happened to your dog, I called Paula from Broken Paws and told her I wanted to get you a dog. And she had a pregnant one at the shelter.”

“No way. Puppies go quickly, though.”

Jess smiles. “She saved him for you because that woman would do anything for you. And if you decide this idea of mine is just too crazy, she said she could find another home for him with one phone call.”

I let the puppy lick my nose. Cheezus. I’ve had him for under five minutes and already there’s no way I’m letting him go.

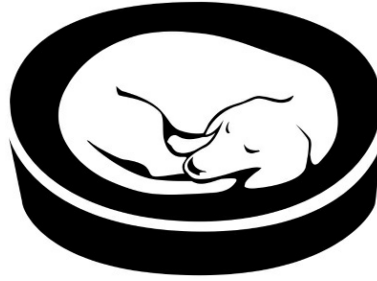
“I love him,” I declare. Then I catch myself, because I’m not going to profess my love for a dog—even one as cute as this—before I say it to my girlfriend. “Wait. I love *you*. So move in with me.”

Her chest expands with a big breath. She rocks back on her heels and smiles at the ceiling. “Okay. It’s a little nutty, but I’ll do it. I want to be with you.”

“It’s not nutty,” I object. “Well...” That line of argument is a lost cause because I’m a little nutty all the time. It’s part of my charm. “Embrace the nutty, J-Babe. Move in. Study for your tests on the couch with the puppy. Sleep naked in my bed.” I take a step closer and touch my lips to hers. “You make Blake Riley Smiley.”

“I know,” she says, kissing me back.

The puppy thumps its stubby tail against my chest and everything is perfect.



Jess

For the very last time, I stand in front of the tiny dorm room mirror on the back of our door and check my outfit. “What do you think?” I ask Violet. I’m wearing skinny black jeans and a low-cut cashmere sweater, my boobs hiked up to my chin by my most ambitious bra.

“You look hot. As usual.” Violet sits on her own bed with a textbook, looking blue. “You know there’s a quiz tomorrow, right?”

“Yep. I studied all afternoon. It’s going to have to do.”

“Because you have other things to do tonight. Like Blake Riley.” Violet tries to apply her usual snippy tone to this remark, but it doesn’t quite work. She watches me with jealous eyes.

“Take a study break, Violet,” I urge. “Call Keith. Have a quickie and then quiz each other.”

“He’s gone to a bar to watch the game on TV.”

“So go with him?”

She just shakes her head. Apparently her folks were less than pleased with her exam performance last month, so she’s hitting the books harder than ever these days. “It just won’t be the same around here without you.” She casts an eye over the duffel bag and two boxes on the bed. Jamie will show up any minute now to pick me up. After the game we’ll unload my stuff in the parking garage of what is now my building, too.

“Violet, you won’t miss me. Think of all the quiet you’ll get now. And nobody will eat Cup o’ Noodles on the sly and hide the evidence in the student lounge trash.”

She looks properly horrified. “Cup o’ Noodles? Gross.”

“They’re very budget friendly.”

“What’s budget friendly?” my brother asks from the doorway.

“Hey! You look great,” I tell him. “Even if that shirt is an awfully bright color for you.”

Jamie looks down at the lime-green check pattern on his shirt and smiles. “I love this shirt. Are you ready to go?”

“Born ready.” But now Violet looks stricken. “Okay, let’s hug it out, bitch.”

My roommate gets off the bed and gives me one of her angular hugs. The girl could take some lessons from Mama Riley.

“I’ll still see you in class. You know that, right?”

“Now you have to commute to school,” Violet points out.

She’s right, but it’s totally worth it. All that extra time with Blake and the puppy. “How is Puddles?” I ask my brother, releasing Violet.

He grins. “Took a couple of new pictures. Couldn’t help myself.” He pulls his phone out of his pocket, unlocks it and shows me the screensaver.

“Awwww,” Violet croons.

Puddles—named by Blake, of course—is rolling on his back on the rug like a frowsy milkmaid in a haystack. I can’t decide who I’ll cuddle first tonight, Blake or the puppy. Maybe both at once. Is that weird?

“Let’s do this.” Jamie picks up my box of textbooks. “Jesus. This is a backbreaker.”

“Sure is!” I say cheerfully. I have almost as many shiny, complicated textbooks as Violet now. I’m not afraid anymore. The work is still hard, but I can tough it out. I grab the duffel and heft my smaller box. “Come on, baby bro. Let’s go beat Dallas!”

TRAFFIC SLOWS US DOWN, unfortunately. By the time we’re speed-walking through the stadium corridors, the game is already in progress.

This time, Jamie and I don’t head for his usual seats. Tonight we’re watching from the WAGS box. I follow my brother up an escalator and down a corridor to a set of shiny turnstiles. Before we reach them, Jamie digs something out of his shirt pocket and hands it to me. I look down at a plastic team ID card with my photo on it.

Jessica Canning, it reads. Role: WAGS (Riley.)

“Omigod!” I yelp. “It’s so official. That’s cuckoo.”

My brother waves his card in front of the turnstile, which springs open for him. "All part of the fun."

I use my card at the turnstile, too, and then Jamie leads me along a curved corridor lined with fancy wooden doors, each with a corporate plaque beside it. I see boxes for Canada's two largest banks and an insurance firm. The fourth one simply says: WAGS. Jamie opens the door and ushers me inside.

Katie Hewitt spots us first, waving her tequila bottle in our direction. "You're late!" she hollers. "Get over here, Cannings."

I have a sudden thought. "Jamie? Is there going to be hazing?" Since I've become a nerd again, my tolerance for alcohol has plummeted. How embarrassing would it be to get plastered and throw up on the WAGS my first night here?

My brother chuckles. "It depends what you mean by hazing. You'll see."

"Ladies! Our newest member has arrived. Get the bag."

I reach Katie, who grabs me into a hug. "Jessica, you were holding out on us, you sneaky Pete! Blake told Eriksson who told Luko who told Estrella that his new girlfriend would be here tonight! And I was all, what new girlfriend? And then I saw they made you an ID card, so we had to hustle with your welcome packet! Why didn't you say anything the last time we saw you?"

She puts a hand on her hip, and I'm momentarily distracted by a retina-searing flash of brilliance. It's the four giant diamond rings on her hand.

Focus, Jess. "Well... It's a new thing."

Katie smiles at me, her Toronto-shade lipstick perfect again tonight. "Usually the girlfriends practically do a pole vault to get in here. We're glad to have you, though. His last girlfriend..." She rolls her eyes. "We called her Velcro. I knew it wouldn't last, and when he came to his senses she did *not* go quietly." She shakes her head. "Blake deserves someone as sweet as you are. I could not be happier for the two of you!"

"Thank you. This is, uh, a nice place you've got here." I glance around at the rich wood paneling and the candlelit buffet. I wouldn't even know I was in a hockey stadium.

"Well, make yourself comfortable. We spend a lot of time in here. Are you ready for your welcome packet?" She doesn't wait for a response. "Girls!" she yodels. "Let's give Jess her party favors!"

“Should be fun,” my brother murmurs under his breath.

“Wait—she needs a drink first,” Estrella says.

“Where are my manners?” Katie yelps. “Champagne? Margarita? Beer?”

“I would love a beer,” I tell her, choosing the simplest option.

Two seconds later Estrella is pushing one into my hand. “All right. Let’s tell her what she’s won, Johnny!”

Katie reaches behind a leather wingback chair and emerges with a giant shopping bag. Blake would love it—the bag is coated in Toronto-red glitter. “Ta-da! The welcome packet.”

“Wow.”

She slides one hand into the bag and pulls out a sheaf of papers stapled together on the edge. “This is the WAGS booklet of tips and tricks. It’s your basic How-To-Sneak-Into-A-Hotel-On-The-Road handbook. How to shake off a pesky reporter, that sort of thing.”

“Um, thanks.” I didn’t know that being Blake’s girlfriend would come with a user’s manual, but what’s one more textbook in my life?

“And now for the fun stuff.” She digs into the bag again and extracts a bottle of Chanel nail polish in—wait for it—Toronto red.

“Oh! I love it.” My poor nails don’t get any attention these days. I’ll have to fix that. “Thank you!” I tuck the bottle into the small handbag I’m carrying tonight.

Estrella shakes her head. “You’re going to need the whole bag, babe. We’re not done here yet.”

Oh.

The next thing Katie removes from the bag is a jersey. And it is *not* regulation. It looks much tighter than anyone could play in, and it just happens to have a sweeping V-neck. Katie turns it around so everyone can see the back. It reads, *Riley is mine*.

I burst out laughing.

“Cute, right?” she says, draping it over my arm. “We had to get team boxer shorts for your brother instead.” She dips back into the bag. “Next we have the family-size Tums, for those stressful games when your man is struggling.”

“Aww,” everyone says.

“I got those, too,” Jamie tells me.

Katie tucks the antacids back in the bag and then grins wickedly. “This

is something else you're going to need." She pulls out a long, slender box and puts it in my hands.

Confused, I lift the lid. Then I quickly drop it again when I realize I'm holding a luxury vibrator. My face gets hot. "Thanks?"

Katie pats my hand. "Keep it on the charger, hon. Because road trips are long. And, in a similar vein..." She slaps her thigh. "I said similar vein!" The other women laugh as she pulls out a Clone-A-Wang kit.

Do It Yourself... And Then Do Yourself, the box enthuses.

"Oh my god," I sputter. Though the idea of a Blake dildo is honestly appealing.

"Got one of those, too," Jamie says. "Totally works."

"EEEEK!" I clap my hands to my ears. "I do *not* want to hear about your sex life. Not because it's with a guy, but because you're my brother."

"Whoa!" He holds up his hands. "I totally get it. Feel free to keep all the naked details to yourself, too."

"But, wait." Sheila, the goalie's wife, tugs at my elbow. "Is it true that Blake has a giant dick?"

Yikes. I'm really not willing to answer that question. Not on my first beer, anyway. Luckily I don't have to, because something exciting seems to be happening down on the ice.

"Power play," a voice blares over the loudspeaker, and all the women lean toward the rink, tensing.

"We can do this!" Katie yells. "Yes!"

I'm not in a good spot to see the action, so my eyes fly to a large-screen TV on the wall, showing the televised coverage. The boys are engaged in a high-speed game of keep-away. The camera zooms in on Eriksson, who passes to Wesley. Who passes to Blake.

Who shoots!

The whole arena roars and the announcer's voice shouts, "GOAL!"

"Oh my God," I shriek. As I check the scoreboard, it changes from 0-0 to 1-0. Blake has just scored the first goal of the game.

"Hey, Cannings!" Katie yanks her tequila off a table. "You both have to do a shot. One for the goal and one for that assist."

"No can do." My brother shakes his head. "I'm driving. Sad but true."

She wrinkles her perfect nose. "What a shame. Jess?" She pours a shot of tequila and hands it to me.

In for a penny, in for a pound. I toss the shot back, and the sudden burn

of tequila makes my eyes water. Now that I'm a nerd, I probably can't hold my liquor. If Blake gets a hat-trick, they might have to carry me out of here on a stretcher.

Jamie hands me a wedge of lime, amusement in his eyes.

"Thanks," I manage. Several women congratulate me, and I have a moment of embarrassment. "I didn't have anything to do with Blake's goal," I whisper to my brother, feeling like a fraud.

He puts two strong hands on my shoulders, and squeezes. "I hear you. But you make Blake happy, right? He goes to work feeling good. And sixteen thousand fans appreciate that right now. I'm pretty pumped up when my kids score a goal, and I didn't shoot it myself."

"You're their coach," I point out.

"Is it really that different?"

This idea gives me a happy rush. Or maybe it's just the booze. "Jamester, I'm going down to the stands to say hello to Mama Riley for a minute, while I'm still sober." I burp. "Sober-ish."

"Good plan." He pulls something out of his pocket. "Want these?" He hands me a pair of disposable earplugs.

I press them away. "Nice thought, but she'd be offended."

Downstairs, I discover that my WAGS ID is like a master key to the arena. Security guards wave me through doors and nobody blinks when I make my way to the reserved seating behind the home-team bench. I spot Blake's parents. Or rather, Blake's mother. She's on her feet, of course, shouting loud enough to make everyone around her wince.

"MOW 'EM DOWN, BLAKEY! CUT THAT LAWN!"

Her head swivels abruptly when she notices me. "Jessica! GET OVER HERE!"

Two seconds later, I'm enveloped in one of her mama bear hugs and sporting at least two broken ribs when she finally releases me.

"Did you see our boy's goal?" she exclaims. "THING OF BEAUTY!"

"It was pretty awesome," I agree. "I just came down to say hello." I smile at Blake's dad. "Hey, Mr. Riley."

"Papa," he grunts. "You call me Papa."

"Ah, okay. Papa."

"You want to sit with us for the second period?" Mama Riley offers.

"No, I promised the WAGS I'd sit upstairs tonight. Next time," I promise.

Her gaze drifts back to the ice, where the final two minutes of play are unfolding. Toronto's still up by one, but Dallas has regrouped and they're rushing our net. Sanders, one of the d-men, is too slow to stop the attack, and the Dallas forward unleashes a slapshot that makes the crowd give a collective gasp. And then...*ping*. The puck bounces away.

"SAY HI TO THE POST, DALLAS! NO GOAL!"

Mama Riley's shriek nearly shatters my eardrums. "No goal!" I echo in a normal human volume.

Blake's mother frowns. "Jessica. What was that?"

"What was what?"

"Is that how you root for our boys? Where's the enthusiasm? WHERE'S THE HEART?"

"Uh." I shift awkwardly. "I'm not much of a screamer." And in the back of my mind, I hear Blake's cocky voice wholeheartedly disagreeing with that.

"Unacceptable," she says firmly. "You're a Riley now, Jessica. And you know what Rileys are?"

Insane?

"LOUD," she finishes. "So what'll it be, Jessie? Are you a soft-spoken, not-cheering-from-your-heart fan, or are you a Riley?"

A slow smile stretches my mouth. "I'm a Riley."

"Good. Now let's make these last thirty seconds count."

And for the next thirty seconds, I stand in the aisle with Mama Riley, and the two of us scream, shriek, yell and shout until my throat is raw and my ears are ringing.

After the buzzer goes off, I take a much-needed sip from the water bottle she hands me and wonder if my larynx might be permanently damaged. But then all thoughts of my broken vocal cords disappear, because Blake suddenly appears in front of the glass at the home bench. Grinning widely, he taps the plexi with one gloved hand, waving for me to come down.

I'm slightly self-conscious as I hurry down the steps. Blake is making his way toward the entrance of the chute, still gesturing for me to follow. There are dozens of people leaning over the railings at each side of the tunnel, screaming and cheering and snapping pics of the players as they lumber past. I elbow my way through the mob until I'm in the front of pack, just as Blake reaches me.

His helmet is tucked under his arm, sweaty hair stuck to his forehead, and he's pretty much a giant because he's still wearing his skates. He leans in

until his mouth is practically glued to my ear.

“Blew you a kiss after the goal,” he whispers. “Did ya see?”

“I saw.” I give his damp cheek a quick peck, which triggers several high-pitched shrieks from the females in our vicinity. Sounds of betrayal rather than approval. “Uh-oh,” I whisper back. “I might start a riot.”

He tips his head and grins ruefully. “Yeah, you might wanna head back to the WAGS box. The Blake Brigade is kinda possessive.”

“The Blake Brigade? Seriously?” I roll my eyes. “You named your groupies?”

“They named themselves,” he protests. “They’ve got a website and everything.”

I sigh. Of course they do.

“Anyway, gotta go. Just wanted to tell you how hot you look.” My boyfriend leans in and smacks a very loud kiss on my lips, which I’m pretty sure is captured by every news camera and cell phone in the rink.

Instinctively I look up at the jumbotron. Sure enough, the screen is frozen on a shot of Blake kissing me. THE KISSCAM STARTS NOW, FANS, it screams.

“Cheezus,” I mutter. My five siblings are probably laughing their asses off right now.

“Babe. You said cheezus.”

“I did no—yeah.” I grin up at the loud, crazy, incredible man I love. “I guess I did.”

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The next book in the WAGs series is STAY! Can you guess which player’s story is next? [Find out here.](#)

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank Benjamin Kimelman and Samantha Estrada for their tips about nursing school! Thanks to Edie and Eagle for their excellent editing. And to Nina and Sarah Hansen for their help, as always.

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Cover design by Sarah Hansen. Cover photography by Wander Aguiar.

ISBN: 978-1-942444-30-5