



NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
HELENA HUNTING

PUCKED UP

BY HELENA HUNTING

KINDLE EDITION
Copyright (c) 2015 Helena Hunting
All rights reserved

Published by Helena Hunting

Cover art design by [Shannon Lumetta](#)

Cover font from [Imagex Fonts](#)

Cover image from [Scott Hoover Photography](#) and back cover image from
[@konradbak](#) at Depositphoto.com

Formatting by LJ Anderson of [Mayhem Cover Creations](#)

Editing by Jessica Royer Ocken

Proofing by Marla at [Proofing with Style](#)

Pucked Up is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are all products of the author's twisted imagination and are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locals, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Except as permitted under the US Copyright Act of 1976, no part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed or transmitted in any form by any means, or stored in a database or retrieval system, without the prior written permission of the author.

DEDICATION

To my family, thank you for having my back, for being my cheerleaders and for letting me foster this dream. I love you.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Husband of mine, you really are the best. I couldn't do any of this without you. Thank you for giving me a chance to do this thing. I love you.

Debra, you're the pepper to my salt. Even the hardest parts are easier with you around.

Kimberly, you are made of awesome. I'm so glad you had lunch with Nina and the stars aligned. This has been an incredible journey so far, thank you for being a source of encouragement, for the feedback, for the brainstorming and for making this roller coaster so much fun to ride.

Nina, I don't know how you do it, but I'm grateful that you do. Thank you for years of friendship and putting up with my neurotic squirreliness.

Shalu, you have so much talent. I can't wait to see you shine. Thank you for making the outsides reflect the insides.

Jessica, I always know I'm in good hands with you. Thank you for all your patience, even when I kept on changing things at the end. Marla, thank you for cleaning up the crumbs and the typos. Mayhem, so many texts in this one! You make amazing innards! Daisy, Kelly, Julia, Liv, thanks for not only being eyes on this, but for being my friends, for talking me down, and for loving my words when all I want is to press backspace. Liv special thanks to you for the conversation which essentially led to the naming of this series. You're pucking awesome!

To My Filet Chignon's, The Pams, The Nap Ladies, the 101 ladies, the Indies, the One-Clicks, The PUCKED Locker Room girls, and The HH Street team, you make me feel so supported. Thank you. You give me motivation to keep on going when I hit rough patches

To my BBBabes, thanks for tolerating my overshares. They're frequent and many. I love you.

Maven, every time you're not at an event I have a little panic, and then I remember all the nice things you say to build me up, and I manage to get through it. Thank you for the hand holding. Kandace, you're an incredibly special person. Thank you for being part of my journey.

Jessica R Hodnett, thank you for sharing your horrifically painful wolf spider story with me—and the pictures. They were helpful in ways I'm sure you'll understand soon enough.

To my WC crew who have watched all of this unfold, thank you for supporting both sides of my life and being my friends and cheerleaders

along the way.

As always, to the originals, my fandom friends who have been with me from the beginning, I'm here because of you.

OTHER TITLES BY HELENA HUNTING

PUCKED SERIES

[Pucked \(Pucked #1\)](#)

[Pucked Up \(Pucked #2\)](#)

[Pucked Over \(Pucked #3, coming January 2016\)](#)

THE CLIPPED WINGS SERIES

[Cupcakes and Ink](#)

[Clipped Wings](#)

[Between the Cracks](#)

[Inked Armor](#)

[Cracks in the Armor](#)

STANDALONE NOVELS

[The Librarian Principle](#)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

[CHAPTER ONE](#)

[CHAPTER TWO](#)

[CHAPTER THREE](#)

[CHAPTER FOUR](#)

[CHAPTER FIVE](#)

[CHAPTER SIX](#)

[CHAPTER SEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER EIGHT](#)

[CHAPTER NINE](#)

[CHAPTER TEN](#)

[CHAPTER ELEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER TWELVE](#)

[CHAPTER THIRTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER FOURTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER FIFTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER SIXTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER SEVENTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER EIGHTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER NINETEEN](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN](#)

[EPILOGUE](#)

[ABOUT THE AUTHOR](#)

[CONNECT WITH HELENA HUNTING](#)

[OTHER TITLES BY HELENA HUNTING](#)

[EXCERPT FROM THE LIBRARIAN PRINCIPLE](#)

[EXCERPT FROM FIRE IN THE HOLE](#)

CHAPTER ONE

WASTED IS AS WASTED DOES

I'm super wasted. Like, messed up to the point that Lance, my teammate, has two sets of eyes.

"I'mma go home." In my head those are the words I'm speaking, but in reality I think it comes out more like a groan. I take an unstable step toward the line of waiting cabs outside the bar.

Lance puts a hand on my shoulder, his grin sloppy. He's almost as drunk as me. "Your car's at my place, Butterson. Come back with us."

"I can get it in the morning." My words run together, but he seems to understand.

"Just get in the limo, man." Lance looks to Randy, another teammate and one of my closest childhood friends, for backup.

"The trainer'll be at Lance's at ten-thirty, remember?" Randy says. "You can roll out of bed and right into the pool."

"Then I don't have to call you fifty times to get your ass up," Lance adds.

"Come back with us, Buck!"

One of Lance's puck bunnies uses the nickname I've answered to since I was a kid. My real name is Miller. I wasn't named after beer. Plus Buck Butterson has a nicer ring than Miller Butterson—too many "ers" in it.

The three girls Lance has convinced to come back to his place are fixing each other's hair and messing with each other's makeup while I debate making bad choices.

Lance smiles—all horny bastard—and pats me on the back. "Come on, man, you're gonna be away for a couple weeks. Last chance to party it up."

I mumble something even I can't understand and lean on the limo so I don't have to hold my own weight. The shooters were a bad idea. There were too many. I might have paid for them.

I wait while the girls get in the limo. As drunk as I am, I still have a few manners left. The last one bends over, and her micro-mini rides up, giving me a full shot of naked beaver before she sits down. I'm definitely not getting in beside her.

Lance elbows me in the arm. "Get in, Buck."

"You first. They're your bunnies."

Going back to Lance's is not a good plan, but I've already said I would, and he has a point about my car being at his place.

He shrugs and holds on to the door frame, sticking his head inside. "Whose lap am I sitting on?" He throws himself into the limo.

The girls squeal, and laughter follows.

I put a hand on Randy's chest to stop him before he gets in, too. "Don't let me do anything stupid, 'kay, man?"

"Don't worry, Miller. I'll take on two if I have to." He winks, but he's serious.

Randy's one of the few people who uses my real name, aside from my dad when he's pissed. Growing up in Chicago, he lived down the street from me. We've played hockey together since we both learned how to skate. When we were drafted to the NHL in our first semester of college, we ended up on different teams. Five years later, we're back on the same team again, Randy having been traded to Chicago after the season ended. Being off season, it took him all of two weeks to move back. It's good to have him here. We've stayed tight over the years; if anyone is going to help keep me from fucking shit up, it's him.

Randy gets into the limo and sits between two of the girls. This leaves the bench seat wide open for me. I slide in and stretch out, taking up the entire thing.

Lance already has his arm around Flash Beaver, and her friend in the middle seems like she's not sure what to do. When she makes a move to sit with me, Lance hugs her to his side and whispers something in her ear. Her eyes widen, and she bites her lip, but she stays where she is.

Going home in a cab by myself would've been the smarter move. Then I wouldn't be facing unnecessary temptation. Sometimes it's hard as fuck to make the right choices, like removing myself from a situation in which bunnies will inevitably offer up pussy that I'll have to turn down.

It's not that I can't go without. I've just been choosing the alternative for the past five years. And quitting cold turkey has been way more difficult than I ever expected. Lance and Flash Beaver have turned toward the corner of the limo now. I'm pretty sure he's got his hand up her skirt already, judging by the giggle followed by a moan. I close my eyes and lean against the armrest. I'm tired. And hungry. I need pizza.

I root around in my pocket for my phone. I have messages: a couple of texts and a voice mail from my sister, Violet, and a few more from my

girlfriend, Sunny. Well, she's kinda my girlfriend. I want her to be my girlfriend. Sunny's the reason Randy—or maybe Lance—is taking one for the team, and I'm sitting over here by myself.

I've been doing everything I can to move things in the girlfriend direction for the last few months, but Sunny's hard to pin down. Way worse than me, but not in a slutty way. Sunny's the opposite of slutty. She's not as easily charmed by me as most women. I actually have to work to get her to date me.

It doesn't help that her brother, Alex Waters, is one of my teammates. He's also engaged to my sister, and he's captain of the team. Waters hates me. It's complicated. The first night I met Sunny, I considered—for half a second—sleeping with her to get back at him. I'm a player, not an asshole. Besides Sunny wasn't interested in getting naked with me. She actually wanted to talk. And I liked her. So I got her number instead. That was months ago. She still won't sleep with me. Yet. I'm hoping to change that soon.

I try to read my text messages, but my vision is blurry, and the words all jumble together—even worse than usual. I can't use the text-to-speech app in here like I normally would because the music's too loud and everyone will hear my business. Plus sometimes my sister's messages are asshole. She has no filter. At all.

"I'm hungry. Anyone else hungry?" I yell over the music.

Lance is too busy sucking face, but Randy raises his hand. The girls on either side of him shrug. The one stuck in the middle of everything looks like she'd rather be anywhere but here.

I pull up Siri and ask her to call my favorite pizza joint. It takes a few tries to get her to do what I want, partly because I'm slurring my words and partly because the music interferes. Finally someone turns it down so I'm able to put an order in.

"Is the address five-two-one or two-five-one?" I ask Randy when they get to that part of the ordering process.

"Five-two-one."

"You're sure it's not two-five-one?"

Lance takes a break from sucking the chick's face off to get on my case. "You've been at my house a million times, and you still can't get the address right?"

I flip him the bird. “I’m dyslexic and drunk, but thanks for being an asshole about it.” I probably shouldn’t have said that. It’s not something I usually talk about in front of bunnies. It’s frustrating to be twenty-three and shitty at reading. I give the pizza guy the right address. Then I end the call and slip my phone back into my pocket.

Ten minutes later, we pull into Lance’s driveway. I’m the first out of the car, and I practically fall up the steps to his door. I use the doorjamb for support while I wait for everyone else. I should know the code to get into the house, but I always forget it.

Lance and Flash Beaver are last to get out of the limo. True to her name, she gives us all a beaver shot—my second of the limo trip—as she slides across the bench. When her feet hit the ground, Lance steps in front of her, blocking her from view. He leans down to adjust her skirt, which is nice. When he’s in a mood, he’ll let girls makes fools out of themselves and laugh about it later. He can be a dick sometimes.

Her friends are giggling and whispering, being bitchy and judgy. Well, the one who was sidled up to Randy is; the other one looks uncomfortable. Of the three girls Randy and Lance picked up tonight, she seems the most reserved. Maybe she’s not all that excited about sharing a dick.

“You’re the best, man. Have I told you that lately?” I ask Randy, while I rest my head on the closed door and attempt to hit the doorbell. I keep missing it.

“That’s what the girls tell me.”

I scoff and aim for the doorbell again, hitting it this time. The tone is actually a line from a movie. I can’t quite remember which one, but it’s funny, so I keep punching it until Lance and Flash Beaver finally make it to the door.

Lance keys in the code. “I don’t think that’s a good place to stand, Butterson.”

“I’m fine.” My eyes are closed. I’m feeling like bed might be a nice place to be. Screw the pizza.

His meaning doesn’t register until the door gives way. I put my hands up to grab for the jambs, but I’m not quick enough. I fall face first into his front foyer. The hardwood floor doesn’t make it a soft landing.

I grunt on impact, and one of the girls rushes over to help me while Lance laughs his ass off. I tell her I’m fine and lie there for a few seconds before I roll over onto my back. Flash Beaver gets me again. I can see right

up her skirt from the floor. It's like a loose meat sandwich up in there. I've seen more beaver in the last thirty minutes than I have since I started trying to date Sunny.

Randy puts a hand out to help me up.

I wave him off. "I'll stay here until the pizza arrives, yeah?"

"That could take a while. Let's get you a couch." I take his hand, but make no effort to help with the whole standing-up business. When he's about to give up, I yank his arm and he ends up on the floor with me. I put him in a headlock.

He scrambles to get out, but he's drunk too, and I have the element of surprise. "Fuck you, asshole," he tells me.

"Oh my God!" One of the girls screams while we wrestle on the floor like idiots. "Are they seriously fighting? Shouldn't you stop them?"

"They're fine." Lance puts a hand on two of the ladies' lower backs. "Come on. Let's get some drinks and hit the hot tub."

Randy elbows me in the side, and I let him go. He rolls over and pops up, weaving as he follows Lance and the bunnies. It's a lot of work to get my ass off the floor, but I manage. I slide-walk down the hall with my shoulder against the wall to stop from falling over again.

I need water—and that horrible drink my trainer, Natasha, gives me when I'm hungover. But Lance's kitchen is way far away. I stumble into the massive living room and over to the unoccupied couch. When my knees hit the arm, I fall forward like a tree. My aim is bad, and I'm on an angle, so I roll off and smack my head on the coffee table.

"Ow! Fuck!" There isn't enough space for me to turn onto my back, so I lie there instead, wedged between the couch and the coffee table.

Lance laughs. "You all right, Butterson?"

"There's a spent condom under here."

"Oh yeah? Wanna get that for me."

"Pretty sure I don't." It's covered in dust, but I can tell it's red—so he definitely got it from me. Or maybe I'm the one who used it. I have no idea. I always order the assorted rainbow pack that comes with the big container of lube.

I've nicknamed the condoms according to color: red is for devil dick, green is the green giant, blue is for smurf cock, and the black is the sledgehammer. I'm not a fan of the yellow ones; they look less banana-y

and more like my dick has jaundice. My personal faves are the glow-in-the-dark ones, which make my dick look like a big glow stick.

“You gonna lie on the floor, or are you coming outside to hang in the hot tub?”

“I’ll be out in a few minutes.”

“Whatever you say, Butterson. But if you fall asleep there, I’m not waking your ass up.”

“That’s fine.”

I watch pointy heels teetering toward the patio doors.

“I don’t have a bathing suit,” says Flash Beaver.

Lance puts an arm around her waist, his hand settling on her ass. “Who needs bathing suits?”

Loud music blasts through the house and the outdoor speakers. I hear a distant splash and a scream. Someone got thrown in the pool. I lay with my cheek mashed against the floor, staring at the dusty condom, wishing I’d gone home instead of coming here. I must pass out like that, because the next thing I know, the doorbell’s ringing. It takes me three tries to get up. Then the door isn’t staying still, so it’s hard to get to.

I pay the pizza guy with my credit card and take the boxes and six-pack of soda. I don’t bother to call the other guys. If I know Lance, he’s got those girls down to their bras and underwear—except for the one who wasn’t wearing any in the first place.

I take the pizza over to the coffee table, crack a soda, and chug it. I need to hydrate so I don’t puke like a pussy during tomorrow’s training session. Water would be better, but I’m already sitting down. Before I dig in, I take off my pants. I’m not worried about spilling food on them; I’m just tired of wearing jeans. I also like the freedom from clothes. I run hot, so it’s nice when I can strip down to the bare essentials, which is often nothing.

Since I’m not in my own house, I keep the boxers and T-shirt on. I don’t normally do underwear, but clubs are hot. They make my balls stick to my leg otherwise. I get comfortable on the couch. It’s white leather, which is a stupid color choice, but whatever. I flip open the pizza box, groaning at the sight of melted cheese and piles of meaty awesomeness.

When Sunny and I order pizza, there isn’t even cheese. She doesn’t eat anything with a face, or that came from something with a face. I don’t think I could live without cow in my life, but that’s me.

As I tear a slice free, the cheese clings to his brothers like he's terrified of his fate. I lean over the box—I'm too lazy to go to the kitchen and get a plate—and take a huge bite. It's hot. Like, out-of-the-oven hot, which is crazy because it's clearly not just out of the oven. If I was less drunk, I might have paid attention to the puff of steam when I tore out the first slice, but I'm in too much of a hurry to get food in my belly.

The cheese scalds the roof of my mouth and strings settle on my chin, burning that, too. I drop the slice, half of it drooping over the edge of the box onto the coffee table and the most recent edition of *The Hockey News*. Cracking another soda, I chug half the can to cool my mouth. I suck at life tonight.

While I wait for the pizza to cool, I search for the remote. It's not on the coffee table or under the pizza box. I find it stuck between the couch cushions along with a pair of panties. I leave those where they are.

Two in the morning doesn't boast much in the way of quality programming. Other than infomercials and porn, I have a choice between sports highlights and old sitcoms or the music video channel. I flip aimlessly, pausing at some bad porn. I doubt I'll have the energy to whack off later. I might be drunk enough to have whiskey dick, even though I don't drink whiskey.

I settle on the music video channel and get back to the pizza, which is now cool enough to eat. I devour half the box and nod off on the couch. The only reason I wake up is because my phone rings. It's in my pants, which are on the floor about twenty feet away, so I miss the call. I decide I'd rather sleep in a bed than on Lance's couch. I've crashed here enough times since I was traded mid-season to have a room I call dibs on when I get too wasted to take my ass home.

I have no idea if Lance and Randy are still outside with the girls. If they are, there's a good chance that hot tub is going to need a serious cleaning tomorrow. I almost trip over my pants on the way upstairs. I drag them with me to the second floor and crash into the spare bedroom.

Kicking the door closed, I pull my shirt over my head, drop my boxers, and fall face down on the mattress. Music still pounds through the speakers outside, making the whole house vibrate. It's not pop anymore; it's some cheesy love ballad from the eighties. It sounds like something Sunny would like.

Thinking about her makes my dick excited, which sucks because I don't have the coordination to do anything about it. I hate that she doesn't live closer. Canada isn't that far from Chicago, but it's enough distance that it makes this whole dating thing that much harder.

I want to call her. I know it's a bad idea. I'm drunk, and she's probably asleep, considering it's after two in the morning. Or maybe it's already five. I can't read the clock. My logic filter isn't working, so I feel around for my pants. They're on the floor. I almost fall out of bed trying to get them. I dig the phone out of the pocket. The battery reads nine percent. It's enough for a quick call. It'll probably go to voice mail anyway.

As predicted, it rings four times, and I get her message.

"You've reached Sunshine Waters. I'm probably busy cleansing my chi, but when I'm done I'll give you a dingle. Remember, karma is your friend!"

I hang up without leaving a message and call again. I get voice mail a second time. On the third try, she picks up.

"Hello?" Her voice is raspy with sleep. It's similar to how she sounds when she comes. I've only been able to do that with my fingers so far. Sunny wants to take things slow. I need to get control of the puck before I can score my favorite kind of goal.

"Hey, sweets. Did I wake you?" It's a stupid question. Of course I woke her; I called three times in the middle of the night.

"Miller?"

"I'm sorry. It's late isn't it?" I roll over onto my back and starfish, letting my balls breathe. The rustle of sheets filters through the phone. I imagine what she might be wearing based on our late-night Skype chats. She's a baggy-shirt-and-shorts girl. Sometimes she wears one of those sheer shirts so it's like she's naked, but not. Sadly, she always wears a sports bra with it. Those things are the worst invention in the world. They ruin perfectly good cleavage.

"What time is it?"

"Uh," I squint at the clock on the nightstand, as if that's going to make it easier to read the numbers. I'm better with analog clocks than digital ones. "Pretty early."

"In the morning?"

"Yeah."

“Is everything okay?”

“Yeah.”

There’s a long pause in which neither of us speaks. “Were you out with the boys tonight?”

“Yeah.”

The softness in her voice is replaced by sharpness. “Who?”

“The usual. Randy Ballistic and Lance Romero. A few of the other guys showed up later.”

“So you’re drunk?”

I knew I shouldn’t have called. I wish I had someone around to stop me from doing stupid shit all the time. At least Randy kept the bunnies occupied and away from me. Most of the time Lance isn’t much help. He encourages bad decision-making.

“I had a few drinks. I wanted to hear your voice.” It sounds like a line, but it’s not. I really do want to hear her voice, even if that makes me seem whipped.

She makes a little noise, like maybe she’s stretching or trying to get comfortable. It goes straight to my dick, inflating it like a helium balloon.

“That’s sweet, Miller,” she says on a sigh. I love that she uses my real name instead of my nickname. “But don’t you think it would be better to call when you’re sober and it’s not the middle of the night? You interrupted a nice dream.”

“What kind of dream? Was it a sex dream?”

“I’m not telling you.”

“It was, wasn’t it?”

“I’m not saying anything.”

“It’ll be a million times better when you let me get you naked in real life.”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself, Butterson.”

“I’m just sayin’, when you let it happen, it’s gonna be awesome times a billion.”

She sighs.

“Sweets?”

“You should sleep off whatever you drank. Are you still coming tomorrow?”

“I’ll come for you right now, baby.”

There's a knock on the door. I hear Randy's voice followed by a giggle. I cover the receiver, at least I think I do, and shout, "I'm sleeping!"

"Are you at home? Who's with you?"

"I'm at Lance's."

After a sharp inhale she asks, "Are you staying there overnight?"

"Natasha's coming in the morning."

"Who?"

"Our trainer. We're using the pool for plyometrics." I'm way less slurry now, so I can get that word out without messing it up. "Plus my car's here, and I'm being responsible by not driving."

"Are there girls there now?"

"Lance invited some friends back. I'm in bed."

"How many friends?"

"A few."

"Are any of them your friends?"

"No, baby. The only friend I have right now is my left hand."

A long silence follows.

"Sunny? You still there?"

"I'm here. I should go, though. It's late. I have to teach yoga first thing in the morning."

"You sure you don't want to tell me about that dream you were having?"

That gets a half-hearted laugh. "You're impossible. You should lock your door. 'Night, Miller."

My phone dies before I can answer her. I don't have a charger handy, and I'm too tired to put clothes back on and look for one. Instead I shut my eyes and picture Sunny in her bikini—that's the least amount of clothing I've seen her in—and grab onto my kinda-hard dick. I don't have enough coordination, brain power, or energy to keep the image in my head and rub one out, so I just hold my handle in one hand and my dead phone in the other.

Then I pass the fuck out.

CHAPTER TWO

DICKFACE

My head hurts, and my mouth tastes like ass. I try not to move, but I can hear horrible music coming from somewhere outside my room, and it's ruining my sleep. I crack a lid and cringe at the brightness coming through the curtains. The first thing I notice is that I'm not in my own bed. It takes me a while to remember I'm at Lance's. I have a very vague recollection of a limo ride and lying on the floor in the living room. I remember a condom and a bare beaver and panic sets in.

The other side of the queen bed is empty, so I'm taking that as a good sign. My raging case of morning wood and my aching balls are also solid indicators that I didn't put my dick anywhere I shouldn't have.

A few months ago the unused pillow would have been occupied by a very satisfied, very well-used puck bunny. I used to be a dog. I probably still qualify as one, but I'm working on becoming reformed. It's not that easy. Women want to ride my dick all the time. Not bringing honeys home is like passing by McDonald's during training camp: you know you can't have it because it's not part of the meal plan, so you want it even more.

Instead of sex, Sunny and I text or have video chats. I like those best, especially when it's late at night. She hangs out in her bed, and I can ogle her while we talk.

Eventually I'm hoping we'll graduate past conversation to Skype sex. We haven't even had real sex yet, so there's no damn way I'm asking her to have not-real sex with me over video chat. I need to get past third base and all the way to home first. Until then, I'll keep up with the post-Skype-ogle whack-off sessions. It's frustrating, even though I like that she's not slutty like the puck bunnies I'm used to.

All this means my dick has gone unused for the last few months. We've done some groping and making out, and she's had her hand down my pants and vice versa, but that's it. It's weird. I've never not had sex on the first "date."

Before Sunny, if I needed company, all I had to do was pull up my contact list, go to my honeys, call one, and wait. Usually said honey would arrive within half an hour; the ones who wear too much makeup take longer. It's almost like ordering pizza.

It wouldn't matter if I'd just come home from a workout or practice. I didn't even have to shower. I could be sweaty and gross, or eat a goddamn head of garlic raw, and they'd still come and bounce on my dick.

Now that I'm trying to get Sunny to be my girlfriend, that's not an option, so I'm stuck with my hand. In theory, if I can go without eating wings for a few months, I should be able to go without sex. It's a lot harder in practice.

I lie in the bed that's not mine, trying to remember the end of my night. I have a feeling I might have drunk-dialed Sunny. I hope she didn't answer the phone. From the little I remember, I wasn't in very good shape.

Off season is like this—late nights, lots of partying, drinking, and eating shitty food, then regretting it all when hardcore training starts again. I reposition my pillow over my head to drown out the bad music.

I'm drifting off when there's a knock at the door. "Natasha's gonna be here in twenty. Get your ass out of bed, Butterson," Randy yells.

I peek out from under the pillow and stare at the numbers on the clock, willing them to stop moving around so I can read them. It's after nine. My phone alarm should've gone off half an hour ago. Usually I hit the snooze button a minimum of four times every morning. I hate waking up almost as much as I hate asparagus pee. And pop music.

A few minutes later there's another knock at my door. "Buck?"

It's a female voice this time. It's vaguely familiar. I ignore it.

Another knock. "Randy told me you need to get up."

I still don't answer. There's whispering and giggling on the other side, followed by the sound of the doorknob turning. It's unlocked. I'm out of bed in a flash, slamming my shoulder into the door to hold it closed. I'm naked. With morning wood. And my head hurts like hell.

I slide to the floor, pressing the heels of my hands against my eyes. "I'm up. I'll be down in, like, ten."

More giggling follows and then the patter of feet as they move on down the hall, yelling, "He says he's up!"

I'm still sitting on the floor with my head in my hands several minutes later when Randy comes knocking. "If you're not down there in eight minutes, Natasha's gonna make you do suicides."

"I'd like to see her try."

Natasha's been my trainer since I was traded from Miami to Chicago. She's tough, but awesome. Sometimes I hate her for it. The threats are

enough to make me pick my ass up off the floor. I flip the lock, though, in case someone else decides they want to barge into my room.

I check the nightstand for my cell, but it's not there. It's not on the floor either, so I sweep my hand across the comforter to see if I accidentally brought it to bed with me. I find it under the pillow. I take it to the bathroom with me, pushing the button so I can key in my password and check my messages, but the screen stays blank. My battery must have died. I set it on the back of the toilet and flip up the seat. I'm hard, so it's almost impossible to pee.

If my phone wasn't dead, I'd pull up a picture of Sunny and take care of my problem like that. Instead, I have to use my imagination. This morning sucks worse than usual. Since I haven't seen her naked yet, I have to cobble together images of her mostly naked in her bikini and imagine what her bare tits would look like. Eventually I give up and grab one of the trashy magazines from the rack on the floor and flip it open. It lands on a hot blonde with fake boobs. It'll do.

When I'm about to blow, I brace my hand on the wall and let my shins rest against the toilet seat. My knees buckle at the end, and my aim is off, so I hit the back of the toilet lid. The whole unit shakes with my weight, and my phone shifts forward.

I'm too slow to catch it. It bounces off the seat, and instead of landing on the floor, it falls straight into the bowl.

"Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!" I reach in and grab it, not caring that I'm sticking my hand in toilet water and my own jizz. Shaking it off, I grab the closest towel and wipe it clean. The battery's already dead, so I have no idea if I've ruined it or not.

And of course, that's when there's another goddamn knock on my door. I stalk my way across the room, holding the potentially ruined phone in a hand towel. I throw open the door.

"Dude, are you—" Randy stops mid-sentence.

There's a girl behind him. She looks vaguely familiar. She's sporting last night's makeup and wearing Randy's too-big shirt, and possibly nothing else. Her eyes drop below my waist.

"Oh my God!"

I'm naked and still half-hard after the whack-off session. I cover my junk with the hand towel. Randy puts a hand up to cover her eyes. She tries

to pry it away, but Randy has huge hands, and he's way stronger than she is, even if he is hungover as shit.

She points in my direction even though she can't see me. "You have something on your—"

"Baby, why don't you go downstairs and see what the girls are doing?"

"But—"

"I got it covered." He whispers something in her ear. One of his hands slips under the shirt. I look away, because I don't want to see as much of her as she's seen of me.

She laughs and takes off down the hall, yelling, "I saw Buck's dick, and it's huge!"

"Seriously, man?" Like I need this shit.

"You're the one answering your door like this." He motions to my lack of clothing. "The world isn't your locker room, Miller."

"My fucking phone fell in the toilet!" I hold out the hand towel with my phone still wrapped in it.

"Facebooking on the shitter again?"

"Laugh it up, asshole. All my contacts are in there."

"Does it work?"

"The battery died, so I have no idea." He throws me a pair of swim shorts.

"Put these on and bring it downstairs. I'll get a bag of rice."

"What the hell's rice gonna do for my phone?"

"Calm your tits, dude. It's supposed to dry it out or something. We'll charge it and put it in rice. Hopefully it'll be working in a couple of hours."

I pull the suit on, tuck my deflated junk away, and follow him downstairs. Randy doesn't look nearly as rough as I feel this morning.

Two girls—the one who announced the size of my junk to the entire house, we'll call her Dick Yeller, and another one I vaguely recognize from last night—are sitting at the breakfast bar with coffees. Another one lounges on the couch in the living room, clicking away on her phone. The girls at the breakfast bar stare at me, then drop their gazes to their cups, shoulders shaking.

"Showing off your jewels again, huh, Miller?" Natasha, our trainer, says from the other side of the kitchen, focused on the fruit she's throwing in the blender. She seems like she's in a mood, which means our workout is going to be extra painful today.

“Not on purpose.”

She’s got one hand on top of the blender and a finger poised over the button. She looks up as she hits the switch. I don’t have time to cover my ears before she lets it rip. It’s like a bomb going off in my head.

Natasha’s eyes bug out, and she barks out a laugh, dropping to the floor. I’m grateful the blender stops grinding.

The room is filled with snickering. “What the shit? Is everyone high?”

“You said you were going to take care of it,” Dick Yeller says to Randy.

He shrugs.

“Take care of what?” I’m totally confused.

Dick Yeller shakes her head and rolls her eyes. “Go look in the mirror.”

I drop my phone on the counter and step into the closest bathroom. On my forehead, in black marker, is a giant jizzing cock. It even has ball hairs. “Who did this?”

“It wasn’t me,” Randy yells. “I can’t even draw stickmen.”

I pump a handful of soap into my palm and rub at my forehead, but the ink stays put. I stomp out of the bathroom and yell, “Get ready for an ass kicking, Lance! If anyone took pictures I’m going to stick you in the balls, motherpucker!”

The two girls at the counter look like they’re trying to decide whether they should laugh or run. Natasha is still on the floor, and Randy has his hand over his mouth.

Lance opens the sliding door leading out to the patio and the pool. “It’ll wash off eventually.”

“I have a goddamn flight tonight. They’re not gonna let me into Canada with a dick on my forehead.”

“That’s tonight?” Lance asks.

“Yeah, man. I told you that already.” At least I assumed I did.

Natasha stops laughing long enough to ask, “Are you going to see Sunny?”

“Not if I can’t get this off!” I point to the dick on my forehead.

“Who’s Sunny?” Dick Yeller asks.

“Miller’s girlfriend,” Randy says.

“I thought his name was Buck.”

“It’s a nickname,” I reply. “What is this? Permanent marker? How do I get rid of it?”

“Makeup remover might work.” the one from the couch says.

“Do one of you girls have some of that handy?”

The two at the breakfast bar shake their heads. The quiet one on the couch perks up. “Oh! I have hand sanitizer!” She jumps up and runs off. One minute later she comes back with three little bottles and pats a stool.

I take a seat. She pours a bunch into her palm; it smells fruity.

“You’re sure this is going to work?”

“It’s worth a shot.” She grabs a napkin and dabs it in the sanitizer. “It’s got alcohol in it.” She starts working on my forehead. “Wow, this stuff is hard to get off.” She uses a bigger glob, and this time it goes in my eyes. It burns like crazy.

“Oh! Sorry! Maybe it’d be better if you lie down.”

“When you’re done with the dick removal, drink this and come outside.” Natasha sets a glass on the counter, along with two painkillers, and saunters out of the kitchen. Randy takes Dick Yeller and the other one at the breakfast bar outside with Natasha.

Natasha’s used to this bullshit, including arriving when there are still leftovers from the night before wandering around the house. Lance’s pad is a revolving door of chicks and parties.

I lie on the floor, even though the couch is less than ten feet away, and the quiet chick sits beside me, crossing her legs.

“I feel like if you’re going to rub a dick off my forehead, I should know your name.”

Her smile is muted by her pursed lips. “I’m Poppy. Lance is a real joker.”

“Yup. That’d be him. Thanks for taking care of the dick on my head.”

“No problem.” She rubs some stinky hand sanitizer into my skin. “Kristi’s been following his career ever since he got drafted.”

“Who?”

“The girl he was with last night.”

“The one without the underwear?” I’m not going to be the one to tell her Lance goes through girls like a hooker goes through johns.

“That’d be Kristi. And I didn’t sleep with Lance when she was done.”

“Uh—”

“Sorry. I don’t why I told you that.” She pours some of the sanitizer directly on my forehead. I can’t see her face, but she sounds embarrassed.

“Lance is fun. He’s not down for a relationship, you know?”

“Oh, I know. I went to grade school with him; then we moved away for a few years. He used to tease me all the time. Anyways, we were kids. He’s different now. But then, so am I, I guess.”

I’ve only known Lance since I was traded, so I don’t know what he was like before he made the NHL. He’s a cocky bastard at the best of times now. “Does he know you know each other?”

“I don’t think he even remembers me. It’d be better if you didn’t tell him. You guys are good friends, right?”

I can’t decide if she’s a stalker, a fan, or something else. She’s got this look on her face, similar to the one I get when I’m not allowed to order chicken wings.

I give her a vague nod in reply. “Now you gotta tell me why you don’t want him to know you know each other.”

“No way.” She wipes at my forehead more aggressively. “This is on really good.”

“I’m gonna punch Lance in the dick.”

“It’s a pretty great drawing.”

“So what’s the history with him?”

“It’s nothing. It’s stupid.”

“Was he, like, your first crush or something? Did you want to hold hands and shit?”

She takes a break from scrubbing my skin, and I use the opportunity to look at her. Her entire face is red, and her lip is between her teeth. She’s pretty, maybe even beautiful under the day-old makeup. She’s exactly what Lance’s type would be if he took a time out from fucking everyone with a pussy: petite with strawberry blond hair, freckles, and soft curves.

“He was! Holy shit.” I can’t believe I’m right. “How does he not remember you?”

“It wasn’t like that. And it was ten years ago. He was two grades higher. I have an older sister. I tagged along to a high school party and there was, like, that game, you know? Seven Minutes in Heaven or whatever it’s called?” She buries her face in her hands. “Oh my God. This is so embarrassing. I’m shutting up now.”

I sit up, totally interested. This is like one of those terrible teen sitcoms, but real. I love that shit. “Did you fuck him?”

She drops her hands. “I was twelve!”

“Right. That’d be kinda slutty, huh?”

She punches me in the shoulder.

“So did he feel you up?”

“No!”

“Really? I would’ve given my right nut to feel up a chick when I was that age. I didn’t get my hands on a set of naked tits until I was sixteen.”

“Seriously?”

“Truth.” I make a fist and tap over my heart twice.

“Wow. Well, I guess you’ve made up for that, haven’t you?”

“Yeah. Probably more than I needed to.”

She pushes my shoulder, and I lie back down on the floor so she can finish rubbing the stupid dick off.

“So do they call you Buck because you walk around naked all the time?” she asks.

“Nope. I had bad teeth as a kid.”

“Oh. That’s mean.”

“Kids are assholes. The nickname stuck, and after a while I didn’t care anymore. My teeth are perfect now, but none of the ones in the front are real.”

“What happened?”

“I got a puck in the face playing street hockey.”

She sucks in a breath. “That must have hurt.”

“Lots of things hurt. They were gonna put braces on me, but then they didn’t have to. I got these titanium implants, instead. They give you good drugs when they put those fuckers in. Anyway the accident fixed my teeth in the end, so I guess the pain was worth it.”

“That’s a lot of pain for a nice smile. I hope you wear a cage now.” She wipes my forehead one last time. “Okay. It looks like you’re dick free.”

I sit up. “Thanks for taking care of that.”

“No problem.”

I stand and extend a hand to help her up.

“You’re a lot different than I thought you’d be.”

“Is that good or bad?”

She smiles. “It’s good. You’re nice.”

Lance yells for me to come outside. When Poppy doesn't make a move to follow me, I pause. "Aren't you coming?"

"I need to use the bathroom, wash all this stuff off my hands. I smell like a fruit salad."

"Okay. See you in a few." I grab the shake Natasha made, the bag of rice with my phone, and the charger and go outside, where Lance and Randy are already in the pool. I plug in the phone near the barbeque, check to see if it's working—it isn't—and down my shake.

Lance looks like he's having trouble keeping up. Randy seems to be doing okay, though. I jump in, dunking my head and rubbing my hands over my face to wash off the residual hand sanitizer and the artificial-fruit smell.

"Took you long enough," Lance says through heavy breaths.

"No thanks to you, dickface."

"Shut up, both of you." Natasha blows her whistle. I hate that thing. "Miller, suicides in the shallow end. I want twenty."

Lance grins and gives me a thumbs up.

Natasha points to him. "You too, Lance Romance."

At least I'm not alone in hell this morning.

CHAPTER THREE

ALL THE HONEYS IN THE HOUSE

After half an hour, I notice that Poppy, the girl who rubbed the dick off my forehead, hasn't come outside. Maybe she went back to sleep. I don't have time to ask questions; Natasha is on a rampage. She's definitely annoyed with Lance, who's the least motivated of the three of us.

He keeps getting distracted by Flash Beaver, the chick he boned last night. He must have had a few bikinis lying around his house, because she's dressed in a tiny white one that barely covers anything. Dick Yeller is wearing a pink bra and yellow panties. I try not to look at either of them and stay focused on the exercises.

Plyometric workouts are intense on dry land, in water and hungover, they're pretty much torture. We're on round three of cardio break when the doorbell rings.

I look to Lance, who's sitting on the edge of the pool, not doing what he's supposed to. "Who's that?"

"I invited a few people over." He nudges Flash Beaver and asks her to let whoever it is in.

Lance doesn't invite "a few" people over. It's not how he works unless it's to get his fuck on with some bunny, like last night. That these girls are even still here is surprising. Usually he calls them a cab first thing in the morning and ships them off. Flash Beaver must've been a lot of fun.

"Where's your friend?" I ask Dick Yeller.

She looks up from her phone and gives me a funny look. "She went to answer the door."

"No. The other one." I motion to my forehead. "The dick remover."

"Oh! Poppy? She wasn't feeling well. She took a cab home." She goes back to staring at her phone.

This chick seems like a seriously shitty friend.

Natasha's already out of the pool, packing up her stuff. I'm sure we weren't finished, but it's clear she's given up. Flash Beaver comes back with a couple of guys from my team and some girls I've never seen before, which is a good thing. I lift a hand in greeting, then grab the weights and bands we didn't get to use. Lance gets off his ass, not to help, but to greet his company.

“Sorry about today.” I fold everything up the way Natasha likes it and pass it over so she can pack it in her duffle bag.

“You were fine; the other two were the problem. I don’t think these home sessions work very well.”

“It woulda been fine if Lance had gotten rid of the bunnies.”

Lance lives outside of the city on a massive piece of property in a gigantic house. He has a complete weight room and a track in his backyard. His pool kicks ass. And the hot tub is great after a serious workout. I won’t be using it today, since I don’t know what happened in it last night. We started scheduling training sessions here when the weather got warm. That way I wouldn’t have to deal with all the bunnies at the gym. Unfortunately, Lance started bringing them here instead.

“Yeah, well, he didn’t, so I’m done.” Natasha grabs her bag.

“Sorry about him. You know how he gets.”

She shakes her head. For some odd reason, I get the feeling there’s more going on between her and Lance than I realized. She’s been his trainer for two years, so she knows what a dick he can be. Hitting on girls is a compulsion for him, and I know Natasha isn’t exempt. It’s understandable. She’s super fit—even I can admit it’s hot that she could kick my ass. There’s gotta be a line of guys wanting to tap that, Lance included. I don’t think she’s the kind of chick who would fall for his crap. You never know, though. People do a lot of stupid things when sex is involved.

“You’re gone for a couple of weeks after this, right?” she asks me.

“Yeah. I fly to Toronto tonight. I think my flight’s at nine or something.” I should check that when my phone works again.

Her eyes light up. “You excited to see Sunny?”

“Why are you so interested in my sex life?”

Natasha laughs. “It’s your lack of sex life I’m interested in. Is she still holding out?”

Natasha knows a lot more about my personal life than most people. She’s watched me blow through bunnies since I moved here and then struggle to deal without any outlet for the past three months while I wait for Sunny to come around.

When I don’t answer, she gives me a knowing smile. “So after you visit Sunny, you do that camp thing, right?”

“Yeah. Randy’s meeting me in Toronto, and we’re road tripping together.”

“You’ll have fun. It’s not the usual hockey camp deal, is it?”

“I wanted to change it up this year, and it’s close to Sunny.” That I managed to get Randy to agree to come was a serious feat. I sold the whole “camping experience” like we used to have back when we were kids. He’s also got a few friends up that way, having played for Toronto during his first year.

“Smart. You coming back after that? Or do you have more stuff planned?”

“I have ideas for another project, but it’s local, and I’mma need Vi’s help.”

“How is Violet, anyway?”

“Annoying.” Being the team trainer, Natasha’s met her a few times.

“It’s amazing she deals with you at all.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’m awesome.” I give her a cheeky grin. “Vi’s good. She and Waters got engaged.”

“I heard. You don’t sound very happy about that.”

“It’s whatever. I mean, they haven’t been together that long. Like, six months? It feels way soon, ya know?”

“Sometimes when you know, you know.”

The first night I met Sunny, I knew she wasn’t the same as the girls I usually spent my nights with. Or my early mornings. I don’t think that’s what Natasha means, though. “I guess. She’s a big girl, and she can make her own decisions, but if he fucks her over again, I’m gonna break his face.”

“I’m sure he’d do the same if you screwed Sunny over.”

“Truth. That’s not gonna happen.”

I fish my phone out of the bag of rice Randy—or one of the girls, more likely—put it in. It’s been plugged in this entire time, but I’ve still got nothing except a blank screen. Natasha emails me a few dates for sessions that I’ll have to check at home, before I leave for the airport. I want to call Sunny and check in, but I’ve never been great at memorizing numbers, so I don’t have hers banked. It’s a weekday, so she’s probably teaching yoga or volunteering at the animal shelter, anyway.

Natasha gives me a one-armed hug and waves to Randy, who’s floating on his back in the pool. Well, the top half of his body is floating, thanks to the pool noodle, but his legs are sinking. She doesn’t so much as

look at Lance as she walks past him to cut through the house, and he's too busy socializing to notice.

I shove my phone back into the rice bag. I'll have to check it again later. I'm not sure how long it needs to dry out before it starts working. If I'm still having problems in a couple of hours, I'll have to hit up the phone store. I don't like not having access to people when I need it. I'm hoping this camp isn't so remote I can't get a signal. That'll fuck things up for me. I rely on daily messages to Sunny so she knows she's on my mind.

All of a sudden there's a music change. We go from rock—which is how we work out—to some pop dance crap.

Lance scans the patio. "Where's Tash at?"

"She left."

"What? When?"

"A minute ago."

He jumps up and jogs across the concrete, his brows creased. I have to wonder what the deal is there. Sometimes I feel like all the flirting Natasha puts up with from Lance isn't just him being him. Lance digging on her would be all kinds of fucked up since she knows exactly how frequently he lets the bunnies eat his carrot.

Randy paddles over to the edge of the pool, and hoists himself out. "What was that about?"

"I'm not sure," I say, because I'm not, and I'mma keep my hypothesizing to myself.

Lance's doorbell goes off and, like Pavlov's dog, Randy goes running. He comes back a few minutes later, piggy-backing one of the newly arrived girls. The other three are practically tripping over themselves to get next to him. A couple of months ago when Vi and Waters were on the outs because he was—and I maintain still is—a huge fuckwad, I suggested she go on a date with Randy. Even though he's my friend, I'm glad that never happened.

I recognize a couple of these girls. I hope my dick hasn't been inside any of their holes. Although there's a good chance it has.

Randy doesn't waste any time. He starts running for the water with the girl on his back. Her eyes go wide when she realizes what he's going to do, and she starts screaming and kicking. He's got a solid hold on her legs, so she doesn't have a chance in hell of getting free. She bites his shoulder as he takes the leap. I smile at her absolute horror.

Dick Yeller stomps past Flash Beaver, heading for the house. The new girls notice and whisper among themselves. It's too much drama too early in my day.

I hadn't expected the bunnies today, although I probably should have. Lance doesn't do the chill-out thing very often. Usually when Natasha comes by, she hangs out for a while after the workout. We BBQ and swim, and then she takes off and we plan our night. Lance always walks her out. I figured it was him being all polite or whatever, but now I'm not so sure.

"This must be torture," Lance says from beside me.

I glance over at him. While I was busy scoping the scene, he must have come back outside.

"What do you mean?" I drain what's left of my bottle of water.

"All the girls."

"It's no big deal." Honestly, I figured it'd be a lot harder than it is. Although the bunnies are damn hard to avoid, especially with friends like Lance who throw parties all the time.

I change the subject. "Did you find Natasha?"

"Nah. She was already gone by the time I got inside." A twitch under his eye is the only tell that I've hit a nerve. "You know, if you disappeared with one of the bunnies for a while, no one would say anything."

I take off my sunglasses and pin him with a cold glare. "My balls could be so fucking blue they look like they've been handled by a Smurf, and I still wouldn't do that to Sunny."

He raises his hands in the air. "I'm sorry, man. I didn't mean to upset you. I just figured . . . I don't know. It can't be easy. She's all the way in Canada, and you're here. Long-distance relationships don't really work, you know?"

I drop my sunglasses back in place. I don't want to think about it not working, which is a real possibility. I don't know the stats on long-distance relationships, but I'm guessing they aren't good.

Realistically, if me and Sunny are going to be long term, one of us will have to relocate. Since my job is always subject to change, that would mean Sunny going where I go, and she'd need a job that's easy to do anywhere. It's something I've already put thought into, which says more than I'm willing to admit about how I feel about her.

I nab one of the lawn chair floaty things and toss it in the water, jumping in after it. This isn't a conversation I want to have with Lance, not

before I see Sunny. Sometimes I feel like this whole thing is set up to be a failure from the start.

I must fall asleep on my floaty chair, because all of a sudden I'm really fucking awake, and I have to take a piss. Getting out means dealing with the bunnies. I paddle over to the edge and hoist myself up. Instead of passing about twenty of them to get into the house—they've multiplied while I napped—I head for the pool house bathroom. No one else is in here, thank God. I've accidentally walked in on people getting it on more than once.

When I come out of the bathroom, a familiar-looking girl is waiting outside the door.

"Buck!" She wraps her arms around my neck.

"Hey." I pat her back, fully aware she's wearing nothing but a tiny string bikini, and there's absolutely no ass to the thing. I can feel her boobs against my stomach. There's too much skin. My dick wants to react. I think about dead kittens and roadkill to stop a hard-on from forming.

Eventually she lets go and takes a step back. It's not enough. She's still too close. I keep my eyes on her face and try not to see her cleavage. I wrack my brain for a name, for something beyond the customary "Honey" I'm used to. I've got nothing.

"It's been a while," she says. "I haven't seen you at the bars. You hanging somewhere new these days?" Her desperation isn't attractive.

"I haven't been going out as much."

She pops a hip and pouts. Her lips are red like cherries, or blood, or Satan's ball sac. "That's too bad. I think some of us are going to the club tomorrow night. You should come."

"I'm out of town. Maybe another time." I step out of the way so she can get to the bathroom. "I should, uh . . . give you some privacy. The fan doesn't work in there."

It's a stupid thing to say, but I don't care. I need to get away from this mostly naked chick who I evidently have a brief history with. I leave her to do her thing and head back to the pool. It's no better.

A few girls have gotten in the water. Two of them are latched onto Randy, their hair pulled up in ponytails. More of them are losing their shirts and shorts, so it's skin, skin, and more skin. Some chick hands me a beer, and I take it, since it's the polite thing to do.

Unwilling to get back in the pool with all the half-naked girls in there, I drop down in one of the lounge chairs on the patio.

“Oh my God! You’re Buck Butterson! But your real name is Miller, right?”

A curvy brunette is standing right in front of me, and her friend, a skinny blonde, looks horrified. I’m shocked she knows my real name.

“I’m sorry. I don’t mean to—God, I can’t—you’re amazing. I love you. I mean, you’re an awesome player. Chicago won after you got traded! And that was bogus on Miami’s part. You didn’t do a damn thing wrong. The media can suck it. Anyway, you were outstanding during the finals. I’m so sorry. I don’t think I can stop myself.”

I smile. She’s a real fan—the kind who gets genuinely excited about the game, and not just about my dick.

“It’s cool.” I extend my hand.

She grabs it and squeezes, shaking harder than necessary. “Jessabelle.” Her cheeks go a vibrant shade of red. “But my friends call me Jellie.”

“Like peanut butter and jelly?”

“But with an -ie on the end. Is that weird? It probably is. Is it okay for me to call you Miller? I know you go by Buck, but if it’s okay—”

“It’s cool. You’re cool. Take a breath.”

“Wow. Great. Awesome. You’re so blond. You’re like a real-life Ken doll, but your hair’s not plastic. Who’s the girl who always posts stuff about you being a yeti?” She glances at my arms. “You don’t have that much hair.”

Fucking Vi and her comments on Facebook. “I only turn on the yeti moon.” When all I get is a blank look, I say, “My sister thinks it’s hilarious to post that BS.”

She nods like she understands. “She’s funny, right? Do you think I could get a picture with you?”

“Yeah. Sure.” I don’t consider her outfit—she’s in a pair of booty shorts and a bikini top that barely covers her nipples—or that I’m only wearing a pair of swim shorts.

She pulls her phone from her back pocket and hands it to her friend. Then she drops down in my lap and wraps herself around me. Before I can stop her, Jellie’s friend starts snapping pics.

“Whoa! Hold up!” I raise my hands in the air so I’m not touching her anywhere. Well, except for where she’s touching me with all her bare skin, which is a lot of places. “You can’t post those.”

Her friend stops clicking away and once again looks like she's about sink into the cement. I move Jellie off of me, touching as little of her as possible. "I have a girlfriend. My lap isn't your chair."

"Oh! Oh shit. I thought that was a rumor. I mean, God. You've never had a girlfriend, and I thought maybe since there weren't any pictures in the last few weeks you were done . . ." she trails off.

"We're not done."

"Not even after last night?"

What would she know about last night? "I was out with the guys."

She gets this weird look on her face. She shakes her head. "I'm sorry. I just . . . you're an awesome player." She snatches the phone from her friend and starts deleting pictures, or that's what I assume she's doing. I don't want to be a creepy asshole and stand over her shoulder to make sure she deletes them all.

"It's cool. I just don't want problems. You know?"

"Sure. Right. Of course."

I let her friend take another, far less problematic picture of us standing next to each other, somewhat awkwardly, while smiling. "Well, if you ever break up and you're looking for someone to make you feel better, you can always hit me up on Facebook."

She holds up the phone so I can see her profile. Her avatar is mostly her boobs. Below is a picture of her sitting in Lance's lap. Up until this point I kinda liked her, in a player-to-fan way. Now she's just another bunny making chairs out of us.

CHAPTER FOUR

FLASHITY FLASH WATCH YO ASS

Twenty minutes later, I've abandoned the beer, and I'm nursing a mineral water, flipping burgers on the BBQ. This seems to be the safest place to hang out, away from the bunnies in the pool who are buzzed enough to stop protecting their hair. Randy comes over with my phone. "I think you need to check this."

"Is it working again? I got nothing an hour ago."

He drops the device in my palm. "Yeah, man, I turned it on, and it's good to go. You got a shitton of messages. You might want to look at your flight details—you know, to make sure you got the time right."

That was probably the one thing I forgot to do—turn it on—but I keep this to myself because I don't need to look like an idiot. Usually I can count on Amber, my Personal Assistant to send me a million messages—most of them audio—so I don't forget important things like flights and dates and events. But since she's away on some portaging trip in the middle of nowhere for the next two weeks, I can't count on her managing my life, which means I have to do it myself.

"That's a good idea." I don't like the look on his face as I pass him the flipper. I key in my code; he's right about the messages. A lot of them are from Sunny. Some are from Violet. And there are voice mails. Several of them.

"I'll be back in a bit."

"Take your time. I've got this. 'Sides, I need a break from the bunnies. It's like mating season."

I pat him on the back, bypass the kitchen where some of the bunnies are hanging out, and head for the stairs. I hit the spare bedroom on the second floor and lock myself in.

I start with the voice mails. They don't require reading so they're easiest to deal with. The first message is from Vi. I hold the phone a foot away from my ear, and I can still hear her screaming. She's loud when she's angry.

"You're a fucking asshole! What the shit is wrong with you? Do you have any idea how much shit you're in? Alex is going to rip your balls off, not

that it matters since they're the size of raisins, and your dick can only be seen by a microscope. You better call me as soon as you get this. You're fucked. Get ready for the ass-kicking of a century, you yeti bastard!"

I have no idea why I'm in so much trouble, but I figure it's in my best interest to listen to a few more of the messages before I call her back. The time stamp on that one is from early this morning—either two or five. I'm too worried about what's made her this mad to absorb the numbers.

The next message is from Sunny. It looks like it's from about an hour ago, if I'm right about it being after two in the afternoon now. I can't understand a thing she says because it's garbled. The only words I make out are *pictures* and *bunnies*.

Shit. This can't be good. It has to be a misunderstanding. God knows there've been enough of them in the past few months. I can't seem to stop messing things up with her, no matter how hard I try. That's been the biggest roadblock to progress with Sunny. People post pictures all the time. Sometimes they don't even ask before they snap their shots. It's crazy.

There are two voice mails from my PA, but they can wait. This drama needs to be taken care of first. I flip to the text messages. These are way more of a challenge to go through. I've always been a slow reader. The only As I got in high school were in construction and gym.

It wasn't that I didn't get what was going on, it just took me seven million times longer to read the same thing everyone else did. It made me look stupid. People assumed because I was a jock I couldn't be smart, too. So I stopped trying. Since my dad was a scout for the NHL and I had no mom—she died before I was old enough to really know her—teachers tended to be lenient.

I got tutors once I hit sophomore year, especially after I got my teeth knocked out and missed a bunch of classes. Once the new teeth were in and the bite problem fixed, tutors were more than willing to help me. More often than not, there'd be an "exchange" of services. They'd help write my essays, and I'd work on perfecting the art of orgasm by fingers. By senior year there were a lot of girls looking to help me manage my school work. My grades weren't awesome—they weren't even moderately decent—but I still managed to secure a hockey scholarship for college, which was all that mattered since that was the only thing I ever wanted to do.

Once I got drafted, there wasn't enough time to do all my assignments, even with some flexibility from the college, so I dropped out. It didn't make sense to struggle through a diploma I'd never use when I was going to make a shitton more money without it.

I have an endless number of texts from Vi and Sunny, but one is from Waters. He normally doesn't message me. His is easy to read:

YOU'RE FUCKING DEAD, ASSHOLE.

The ones from Violet and Sunny are more of a challenge. There seems to be a lot of autocorrecting and text slang—which is the worst thing ever created. It makes the words more difficult to decode.

I bring up the text-to-speech app and listen as it takes the butchered English and turns it into Violet ranting. It's much easier to understand, even with all the inaccurately corrected words.

Why the fork would you let someone draw a dick on your face?

Duck

Fork

Goddamnit Dick Fucking DICK, not duck. Autocorrect can suck my clot.

Clit. Asshole

The next set of messages came several hours later. The first one has twenty or so angry face emoticons attached to it.

Seriously?!!!!!! You're naked! Who is that chick?

Did someone lobotomize you?

The question is followed by several screen shot pictures. The first is one of me sleeping. It wouldn't be a big deal if I wasn't obviously naked—my left ass cheek is visible—and if I didn't have a huge dick drawn on my forehead. Worse is that Lance's bunny—Flash Beaver—is giving the thumbs up and pretending to ride me from behind.

I'm seriously going to kick Lance's ass.

A few are from last night. They don't look nearly as bad—just me with the guys and a few bunnies taking selfies. But the one from today with the mostly undressed chick in her little bikini top sitting in my lap is damn incriminating.

Where the hell are you?

You better fucking call me.

I'm coming to your house.

Those last two were sent ten minutes ago.

Why aren't you here? You have a flight to catch!

I'm coming for you.

My phone rings as I finish listening to her texts. It's Vi. Answering it is better than letting it go to voice mail again.

"I'm at Lance's front door. Let me in."

"What? How did you know I was here?"

"Because I'm psychic, and Instagram is my oracle. Now let me in. You are seriously interfering with my weekly orgasm quota right now."

I have no interest in hearing more about that. I run down the stairs to the front door. Before I open it, I ask, "Is Waters with you?"

"Are you kidding? I left him at home. I'm not interested in reducing our sex life to conjugal visits. Besides, he's too pretty for prison. They'd probably make him bottom because of his monster cock."

"That's more than I needed—"

"I don't care what you need. I need Alex to not be pissed off. I can see you through the damn door. Open it."

Violet is a small person. Maybe five four in heels, but she's got an enormous personality to make up for her lack of size. I have a feeling I'm in for the verbal beat down of a lifetime.

"Should we shave your body hair so they can make wigs for the elderly?" she asks as soon as the door opens.

"What are you talking about?"

“After Alex kills you, you can donate your fur to charity. And maybe some of your more viable organs. I’m pretty sure everything but your liver is good. Ooooh, maybe they can use your micro-penis for a clitoris enlargement surgery.”

“This isn’t funny, Vi.”

“I think the brain surgeons would love to take a peek inside your head—you know, for science, so they can learn more about what happens when yetis and humans mate.”

I’m about to close the door in her face. She drops the sarcasm. “What the hell were you thinking?”

I step outside and close it behind me. “I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“You didn’t do anything wrong? Are you serious? Did you happen to see the pictures I sent you today? Those aren’t even the worst ones. What’s wrong with you? And why haven’t you been answering your phone? Do you know how suspect that makes you look? Also, why aren’t you at the airport right now, catching your damn flight?”

“It’s not until nine, and it’s only, like, two in the afternoon. I’ve got lots of time.”

“It’s five, not two. And your flight leaves in an hour. You missed it.”

“But I checked—”

“Apparently not. Jesus, Buck. Isn’t this why you have a goddamn PA? Even your agent called me this morning when no one could get in touch with you.”

“Amber’s on vacation.”

“And she also knows how bad you are with dates. I can’t imagine her not putting an alarm on your phone, or calling or something.”

“My phone was giving me problems. I thought I had it all sorted out. I guess I got the times mixed up.”

Violet rubs her forehead. The giant, marble-sized diamond on her ring finger sparkles in the sun. It’s insanely huge. She expels a breath and looks up at the sky. She’s wearing sunglasses, so I can’t see her eyes. She swallows a few times.

When she speaks, it’s quiet and too calm. “I know flipping numbers is a thing for you, but it’s *Sunny*, for Christ’s sake. You should be on top of this.” She takes off the sunglasses.

Her eyes have that watery thing going on. It makes me nervous. I can deal with Violet’s sarcasm and anger, but when she gets emotional, I don’t

know how to manage her other than to give her ice cream.

“You know, if you’re not interested in that relationship, you better man up and deal with it instead of blowing her off. I won’t have you fucking up my sex life because she’s not interested in your tiny dick.”

“My dick isn’t tiny.”

She’s back to being pissed, thankfully. “Who fucking cares? That’s not the point. Why are you here anyway? Lance is a douche.”

“He’s not—”

A song about peacocks starts playing from her back pocket.

“Hold on.” She answers it. “Yes, he’s still here.” She looks me over and twirls her finger in the air. “Turn around.”

I don’t argue. I do what I’m told.

“He’s shirtless, and I don’t see any nail marks or hickeys through his matted fur.” There’s a pause. I can hear Waters muffled voice. Judging from his tone, he’s not very happy. “No. Absolutely not. That’s where I draw the line, Alex. I’m not interested in requiring therapy.” She purses her lips and glares at me. “Are you going to Hulk out? . . . Are you sure? . . . Fine.” She passes me the phone. “Alex wants to talk to you.”

My phone buzzes with new texts and messages. I need to call Sunny. More than that, I need to reschedule my flight and get my ass to the airport. But instead I put Vi’s phone to my ear.

“Butterson, if you give me one of your bullshit excuses, I’m going to break your goddamn knees.”

Violet is making hand gestures. I can’t listen to Waters’ heavy breathing and the buzz of my phone and watch her at the same time.

“If you break my knees, you’ll be out for the season,” I say.

“I’ll get Violet to do it.”

Violet’s not very strong, so that’s not much of a threat. I don’t share this with Waters, though. He’s already pissed off enough. I make a noise of disbelief instead. Turns out that’s almost as bad as saying what I’m thinking.

“You think this is funny, Butterson? My sister is bawling her eyes out over fucking media snapshots of you and all your goddamn pucks sluts—”

“I was asleep. I didn’t know they drew a dick on my face until this morning. And that girl dropped into my lap and started taking pictures. I didn’t do anything wrong.”

He exhales like Darth Vader. When he speaks again, it's much more softly. "This is your last chance, Butterson. If you don't fix this mess, I'm going to schedule a meeting with the manager to tell him you're a cancer to the team and you need to be traded."

It pisses me off that Waters, of all people, drops threats like this. He knows better than anyone how the media misconstrues things. "That's not fair."

"What's not fair is you playing my sister and thinking you can get away with it."

"Kinda like you played mine."

"Don't even start with me. You have no idea what it's like to make sacrifices for someone else. Put Violet back on the phone."

"Your boyfriend's an asshole," I mutter, passing the device back to her.

"Fiancé," she corrects, flipping me off. She turns away while she has a back and forth with Waters.

I pull up my email and search for messages from Amber. She forwarded me one with my flight details last night. I open it and stare at the numbers and letters swimming together on the tiny screen. Under the flight times in her message is my entire monthly calendar. Everything is color-coded so I know what it means without having to read it. Practice is highlighted in red (there aren't any this month because we're off season), workouts in blue, free days in pink, travel days in purple, and time with Sunny is a red heart. I tried to get Amber to change that one, but she thought it was cute and refused.

At first I think I'm right and the flight is at nine tonight, until I read the message underneath. I'm off by three hours because I flipped the number upside down. I go back to my emails and scroll through the most recent ones. Amber sent one this morning. It's a voice memo, thank Christ.

I hit play. "Just a reminder that you fly to Toronto this evening at six. Your tickets are attached in the email. I also picked up a few of the items on the list of things you felt might make good gifts for Sunny. Those are packed in your carry-on bag. Your luggage for the camp has been sent directly there to minimize the number of bags you have to take with you."

Damn, she's good. And she's not even finished.

"An SUV has been rented for you," her message continues. "All you have to do is pick it up at the airport in Toronto once you arrive. Sunny's address and the directions to the camp will be pre-programmed into the

GPS system. I hope you're managing without me. Call if you need anything. I should have phone reception between today and tomorrow, but I'm unsure after that. You can always call Violet; she has all the information. So does your dad, but remember he and Skye are on a cruise for the next two weeks.

"This message will self-destruct in thirty seconds. Kidding! You'll be fine, Miller. Good luck with Sunny."

I should've known I'd mess this up. Things can't ever be easy for me when it comes to dates and times.

I check the time on my phone. Vi's right; it's after five.

Even with my bags already packed, there's no way I can make this flight.

"Come on, let's go." Violet grabs my wrist and pulls me toward an old-school Torino. It's Waters' car. I've only seen him drive it a couple times.

"I have my car, and I need my wallet."

"Leave your car here. You need to rebook your flight, and you don't need to be distracted with driving. It's too much for your yeti mind to handle."

"Can you give the damn yeti jokes a rest, please? I feel shitty enough without the insults, today, thanks."

As I turn to go back into the house, the door opens. "Hey, man! There you are! I thought you'd taken off already." Randy glances behind me at Violet. "Hey, how's it going, Vi?"

"Hi, Randy." She makes this sound, like she's choking on something. Here we go. It happens every time she sees him. She can't get past his name. And she thinks *I'm* immature.

I look over my shoulder; her whole body is shaking. She balls her hands into fists and pulls them up like she's getting into a fighting stance. Then she thrusts her hips, not once or twice, but three times. When she's done, her face is blotchy, and she pretends to be mortified.

"Get your wallet. I'll be in the car." She spins around and almost trips on her way down the front steps.

"Bye, Violet," Randy calls after her.

She waves over her shoulder. "Bye, Ran—"

She stops, turns again, and gets back into a half squat. Her face is all pinched and weird looking. She cups her hands like she's holding a pair of melons. "Balls! Randy Balls!" she yells.

“You do know my last name is Ballistic, right?” He’s smiling.

“You’ll always be horny nut sac to me!”

Then she runs the rest of the way to the car and slinks down in the front the seat like she’s trying to hide. It’d be way funnier if I wasn’t in shit.

“She’s a little crazy, huh?”

“Uh yeah. You get used to it. Eventually. I gotta go; I missed my flight,” I tell Randy as I brush past him, back into the house.

“You said it wasn’t until nine.”

“I got it wrong.”

“I’m sorry, Miller.”

“Yeah. Me, too. I’ll check in with you when I get to Toronto. You’ll have to send me your flight details so I know when to pick you up from the airport for camp.”

“You got it. Don’t worry about it now. We’ll get it handled.” He pats me on the shoulder. “I’ll tell Lance you had to bail.”

“Thanks.” Randy is good people, even if he is a dickwhore.

I run up to the spare room and grab my clothes from last night, along with my wallet. I can get anything else I’ve forgotten when I get back from the trip. Lance won’t care.

Once I’m in the car, Violet revs the engine and books it back to my house. If Waters knew how she was driving his ride, I bet he’d shit a brick. Not that I care to tell him. That would mean talking to him.

While Violet drives like a maniac on crack, I call the airline and rebook my flight to the tune of two thousand dollars. This flight doesn’t leave until nine thirty-eight. I buy a seat in first class so I can have priority everything, including check-in and boarding, to make things easier. It should leave me plenty of time to make sure I have all my crap organized.

I call Sunny, but her phone goes directly to voice mail. I leave a message explaining that Amber’s on vacation, and I mixed up the flight times, but that I’ll be in Toronto by about eleven and at her house around midnight. Hopefully she’ll let me in.

“I’m coming up with you.” Violet shoulders her purse and gets out of the car.

“I’ll only be a few minutes.”

“Like hell. Plus there’s no air in that stupid car, and it’s hotter than a nut sac in a cup.”

“That’s disgusting.”

“I know. You’re welcome.”

We leave the car parked in front of my building. Violet stops at the front desk to ask about the bag Amber apparently sent. They’ve had it since yesterday morning. She asks Travis, the front desk guy, to throw it in the back of the Torino.

I thank him and follow Vi to the elevators. She checks her messages as we head for the penthouse floor. “Great. Now Sunny isn’t answering my texts. I hope you haven’t screwed this up permanently.”

She crosses her arms over her chest. She’s pissed. Really pissed. Probably the angriest she’s ever been with me. I send Sunny a message, but I get nothing back.

My condo is spotless. I don’t keep it that way; I pay someone else to do it for me. I head straight for my bedroom. The bag I packed two days ago at Amber’s insistence is in my closet. Inside the front pocket are my passport and travel documents, including printed directions from the airport to Sunny’s parents’ house in Guelph. There are also directions to the camp, which is farther north.

Since it’s an international flight, I can’t mess around. It’s already six. I’m not taking any chances. With my luck, there’ll be a fifty-car pileup on the freeway.

When I come out of my bedroom, Violet’s standing in the middle of my living room, frowning at her phone.

“I’m ready.”

She looks up and arches a brow. “Oh, really?”

“I told you it would only take a minute.”

“You don’t think you should clean yourself up? Maybe take a quick shower? Put a shirt on? Or does that covering of fur count as clothing in your mind?”

I drop the bag on the floor. “Look, I get you’re pissed at me. No one is more pissed than I am, but seriously, I already know I’m a fucking idiot. Okay?” I stomp back in the direction of the bathroom.

“Buck.”

“What?”

“I’m sorry. I know you’re not an idiot. I wouldn’t say things like that if I believed it was true.”

I run a hand through my hair. It feels gross. “I know I fucked up. It’s clearly what I do best. I need your help right now, and that includes not

making me feel worse than I already do, 'kay?"

"Sure. Got it. Do your thing."

Fifteen minutes later I'm showered. If I had enough time I'd do a full-body trim, but it's a lengthy process. I throw my trimmer and a couple of razors in a bag so I can handle that situation later—when I'm not at risk of being late for another flight.

I check out the bag of gifts for Sunny on our way to the airport. It's half an hour from my condo without traffic, and the roads are clear, so we make good time. Amber did a great job picking things out from the list I gave her. Everything is holistic and organic cotton, and no animals were harmed in their making.

Violet pulls up to the curb and gets out to give me a hug. "I'm always on your side, Buck. You know that right?"

"I know."

"Just remember that Alex is always going to be on Sunny's, so if you can't figure out what you want, you need to stop chasing her like she's some bunny you want to catch."

"She's not a bunny."

"Exactly."

I must wear a blank expression, because she sighs and looks up at the sky. Actually, she looks up at the roof of the overhang.

"If you want to have a relationship, you have to make compromises."

"Gotcha." I don't really, but it's seven, and I don't want to be late for my flight.

"Send me a message when you get there."

"Kay."

I watch her drive away in Waters' car and wonder what compromises she's been making for him, and what Sunny will have to give up to be with me. If she still wants to.

CHAPTER FIVE

WINGBACK CHAIR MEMORIES

Though I do manage not to miss my flight on the second attempt, it's two-thirty in the morning by the time I finally make it to Sunny's house. I should've been here more than two hours ago. There was construction on the highway, and the GPS cut out while I was on a detour. I accidentally put the wrong address back into it, and I'd gone forty kilometers in the wrong direction by the time I noticed. The open field of cows was a dead giveaway I'd missed a turn somewhere.

I grab my duffle bag from the front seat, exhausted. I still have to deal with the fallout from today. The more I think about it, the more I recognize that the pictures from last night and today don't look good, especially taken out of context. The one of me naked with Flash Beaver is the worst of them. I'm not known for being the kind of guy who sticks with one girl. It still sucks that no one believes I can manage an actual relationship.

The motion sensor kicks in as I get out of the car, flooding the driveway with light, and nearly blinding me. Sunny's tiny, ugly eco car is parked in front of my rented SUV. She left it at an angle, and the front passenger-side tire is in the garden, crushing her mom's flowers.

I shoulder my bag, lock up my rental, and hit the doorbell. Anxious barking accompanies the clip of nails on the stairs. Titus, a Papillion, and Andromeda—Andy for short—are Sunny's dogs. They're both rescues with serious anxiety issues. Titus likes to lick people's toes, and Sunny doesn't seem to mind. It's weird.

Andy's a Dane, so I can see him through the curtain covering the front window. He paces back and forth, whining. I have treats in the car for him. I run back to the SUV and grab the bag with all the gifts. Fishing out the gourmet dog biscuits, I slip one through the mail slot. Andy snarfs it down and then pokes his nose back through, looking for more.

When Sunny still hasn't come down a minute later, I pull up her contact and hit the microphone.

"I'm at your front door."

I must not enunciate properly because *front door* is autocorrected to *foghorn*. I hit the doorbell a second time, erase the message, wait for Andy to stop barking, and try again, speaking more slowly this time. I can't

dictate for shit when I'm tired. This time front door comes up looking mostly right. There aren't any red lines, so I press send.

I get a message back almost instantly.

WTH? Y r U at frat dorm?

I read the text and frown, then hit the text-to-speech function so I can listen to it, because it's half random letters instead of words. I know she's angry, but I should be able to make things better. I'm pretty decent at cleaning up messes, except for when I was traded to Chicago. There wasn't anything I could do to cover up that one. The pictures of me and the coach's niece in the bathroom stall went viral in a hurry.

The sexy British chick in my phone reads the words *frat dorm* back to me instead of *front door*. Jesus. That's what I get for not listening before I send something.

Sory. Attocorect. Front Door. Please let me in.

I figure short and to the point works better.

I crouch down and open the mail slot. Andy stops pacing and sticks his nose through the hole. "Hey, buddy. Can you go get Sunny for me and bring her down here? Go get Sunny. Go get 'er. Go on." He runs to the stairs and looks back at me. "Good boy. Go get her for me. I got more treats if you bring Sunny."

He turns toward the stairs and barks a few times, then runs back to the door and sticks his nose up to the mail slot.

"Ya gotta get 'er." It only takes a little more coaxing before he finally runs up the stairs. But he comes up and down twice more without her, so I ring the doorbell and knock.

Sunny's light on her feet, so the only way I know she's coming down is because she yells, "For doody's sake! I'm coming. Stop it, Andy! I'm answering the door."

I grin. Sunny doesn't swear. It's fucking adorable.

The light in the front foyer turns on, and the door swings open. Andy rushes me, jumping up so his paws are on my shoulders and his nose is level with mine. I don't turn away when he licks my face.

"How's my buddy?" I scratch behind his ears. "Good boy. You're a good boy." I reach into my back pocket and pull out a treat. He gets into

position, sitting on his haunches with his nose in the air. I set the treat on the end of his nose. He adjusts his stance but waits until I give him the go ahead. Then he flips it up, catching it in his mouth.

Sunny stands at the threshold, looking unimpressed, one hand propped on her hip. Titus hides behind her ankles. There's a good chance he'll pee on the floor if he gets too anxious.

Sunny's sandy blond hair is lighter than the last time I saw her, with streaks so pale they're almost white. It's pulled up into a messy ponytail. She's wearing a pair of loose shorts and a T-shirt with a unicorn in a forest on it. I'm nine thousand percent sure she's not wearing a bra, but I'm smart enough not to stare at her chest.

Her soft, usually pouty lips are mashed into a line and turned down at the corners. Her eyes are puffy. Her sun-freckled cheeks are blotchy and red. And she's still absolutely beautiful.

She's been crying. It's my fault.

"It's too late for Andy to have treats."

"I'm sorry." I shift from one foot to the other.

She crosses her arms over her chest. "You're not forgiven."

"It was just a couple of cookies." Andy sits on my foot and nudges my pocket with his nose. There's another biscuit in there, and he knows it.

"I don't care about the dog treats!"

"Right. Of course. I'm sorry I missed my flight. I got the time wrong. I thought I was supposed to fly at nine, not six. My phone fell in the toilet, so I couldn't check to make sure. We had to put it in a bag of rice for most of the day to dry it out. The rice worked, though, so that's good, right?" I get silence, so I tack on, "Amber's on vacation, and you know how I am with dates and stuff."

Her jaw tics. Nothing I've said seems to be making this better. If anything, she looks angrier since I started talking.

"Andy, inside." She has to say it twice more and snap her fingers before he obeys. For a second I think this means she's going to let me in, but she widens her stance and bars my way with her arm across the jamb.

This is going to take way more than a sweet talking to get out of. I should've had one of the gifts Amber picked up in my hands. Like the basket of organic treats—that would've been smart. Even flowers and chocolate, or that chocolate substitute Sunny eats, would've been helpful. Instead I have myself and my mouth to fix the problem.

“You think I’m upset because you’re a few hours late? I expect you to be late. I don’t think *on time* even exists in your world.”

“Well, I—it’s not . . . I try to be on time. Amber’s away.”

She throws her hands up in the air. “Your PA being away is not an excuse, Miller, and it doesn’t explain the hooker bunnies hanging all over you, snapping their selfies today!” I think she’s mixing up the term *hockey hooker*, which Vi taught her, with *puck bunnies*.

Usually when I deal with a jealous honey, I say a few nice things and smooth it all over. Orgasms work well. Lots of them. I need a different strategy this time. Sunny isn’t in this for the sex. Instead of digging myself out of this hole, I say something stupid, proving words definitely aren’t my forte.

“You know how the fans are.”

“The fans? The *fans*? What fan draws a penis on your forehead? You were naked! And there was some hooker bunny in that bed with you! It’s all over Instagram. It’s on my Facebook now! Who is she? Were you with her?”

“I was passed out. I didn’t even know she was in there with me.”

“Who took the picture? What if that had been a tattoo? It would’ve been permanent.”

“I don’t think I would’ve slept through a tattoo. Especially not on my face.”

“Ugh!” She goes to shut the door, but I slide my arm in before she can.

Sunny’s a yoga instructor; she’s stronger than she looks. It’s a lot of pressure on my forearm.

“Sweets, come on. Things get taken out of context. I was hanging with Lance and Randy. He invited some friends over.”

She makes a disgusted sound.

“They’re not bad guys; Lance just likes parties. He invited a bunch of people by, and you know how that goes. You invite a few people who invite a few more people . . . I can’t control what he does.”

“Oh, right! Of course that explains why a naked hooker bunny ended up in your lap.”

“No one was naked, Sunny.”

“Pretty darn close!” She holds her phone up in front of my face. It’s the picture of the girl sitting in my lap. There really isn’t much to her outfit:

a tiny bikini top and a pair of little shorts. The fact that I'm shirtless doesn't make it look any better.

She turns the phone around and swipes angrily across the screen, then holds it back up for me to see. "And last time I checked, *this* counts as being naked."

It's the picture of me, asleep in bed with that stupid dick on my forehead. I'm definitely naked there.

"I wasn't conscious."

"Because you passed out drunk. Wanna know how I know?" She doesn't wait for an answer. "You called me last night. Do you even remember that? I bet you don't."

"I remember calling you."

"No, you don't."

"Yes, I do. I told you I wanted to hear your voice." I'm guessing here, but it's pretty safe. I always want to hear her voice. At least I do when she's not pissed off at me.

"There was more to the conversation than that."

"I've been on the road all day. Can I come in so we can talk about this? I rebooked my flight so I could get here tonight. You haven't answered any of my calls. There's two sides to every story. You haven't even heard mine yet. Please."

She takes several deep breaths. "There's three sides to every story."

"What do you mean?"

"There's your version, the other person's, and then there's the truth, which is somewhere in the middle of the two."

I think about that. She's right, in a way. But in the case of the dick picture, my version is missing the whole part where the event took place, being passed out and all. The girl in my lap is a case of her word against mine.

"Are you willing to hear my side?" I give her my best I'm-sorry face.

Eventually she steps away from the door and lets me in, locking it behind her.

Sunny still lives with her parents. She's only twenty, and she's in school. She's already completed a diploma of general arts and science, and she got her yoga certification. Last year she started a Public Relations program. She's great with people and animals and all sorts of stuff, so whatever she decides to do, I'm sure she'll be awesome.

This summer Sunny's teaching yoga part-time and volunteering at an animal shelter. Thankfully her parents, Robbie and Daisy, are out of town for the weekend, so I don't have to deal with them. It's not that I don't like them. I do. They're cool for parents, but they're the only ones I've ever met on purpose, so I don't have much of a basis for comparison. Her mom, Daisy, likes to be involved in everything, so her not being here means I can focus on making things better with Sunny without any interference.

I glance around the front foyer. The Waters' house is dated. Most of the furniture is new, but the curtains are poufy, and there are a lot of knickknacks. None of the colors seem to belong together. Vi calls it a boxing match between a bohemian gypsy and a southern belle. I'm not sure what that means, but it's hard to look at.

I set my bag down by the front door. Sunny'll let me stay the night. I already know this. She's too sweet to make me leave once she's let me in. I think it might be the Canadian in her. The question is, where will I be sleeping? If I can say the right thing, I might get a spot in her bed. If I don't, I'll be taking the spare room.

"Can I use the bathroom?" I've had to go for the past hour.

"You know where it is." She doesn't make a move to touch me, or hug me, so I take off my shoes—something Canadians seem hung up about—and head down the hall.

The main-floor bathroom is small, so there isn't much to help me out in the freshening-up area. I find mouthwash under the sink and rinse with that. I've been wearing my hat since I got out of the shower, so I have to wet my hair to fix the hat head I'm sporting. My armpits could use a shot of Axe, but it's not as bad as it could be. Another shower would help. I find some Lady Speed Stick and rub it under my pits. I smell like flowers and cucumbers, but it's better than BO, so I'll take it.

Sunny isn't in the living room when I come out. I detour to the kitchen; she isn't in there either. After a tour of the main floor, I come up Sunnyless, so I hit the stairs. I hope she hasn't gone to bed. That would suck. I don't like unresolved issues, especially before bed—it interferes with sleep. Her door is open a crack.

I peek around the jamb in time to get a glimpse of side boob before she pulls a sports bra over her head. Then she goes back to digging through her drawer to find a shirt.

Sunny isn't one of those super-skinny girls. She's got curves, and she's taller than average. I still have a good head on her, but she comes up to my chin. She's active, always out biking or hiking or teaching yoga, so she's in awesome shape, and she's extra bendy. I haven't had a chance to find out exactly how bendy, but I plan to. Hopefully soon. Maybe this weekend. Shit. I'm getting hard. The blood in my head needs to stay where it is so I can have a conversation. I move out of her line of sight and knock, calling her name.

"Just a sec." The rustle of fabric makes me sad. A few seconds later she opens the door.

She's changed into some loose, sporty, sheer tank-top thing. It's meant to be worn with something underneath it. Her chest is significantly flatter than usual, thanks to the sports bra. I'm not a boob man. Well, I guess that's not true. Every heterosexual man loves boobs. I don't care about the size of them. As long as there's a nipple and something to hold on to, I'm happy.

My favorite part of a woman's body is legs. Sunny's still wearing loose shorts that come high up on her thigh. I glance down, all the way to the floor. Her toenails are painted bright orange, except for the big toes. Those are painted blue with a palm tree on the beach.

I'm about to step inside her room, which I've only been in once before, when Sunny puts a hand on my chest. She doesn't seem as angry anymore, instead she looks sad and guarded. "We can talk downstairs."

"Right. Sure. That's cool. I couldn't find you; I wasn't sure if you'd gone back to bed."

"I wanted to change into something more comfortable."

This is Sunny's version of real clothes. I've only seen her in a pair of jeans once. That was the first time I met her. Mostly she wears skirts and flowy dresses if she's leaving the house. The rest of the time she's in athletic wear, like she's always ready for a spontaneous workout. It's so fucking hot.

She closes her bedroom door and steps around me. There's nothing for me to do except follow her downstairs to the living room. On the up side, I get to stare at her legs. Sunny has nice calves. I want to bite them. She sits on one of the uncomfortable pink floral wingback chairs.

I sit in the middle of the couch and pat the cushion beside me. "Come on, Sunny Sunshine. Talk to me."

She pulls her legs up and tucks her feet under her. “I can do that from here.”

I keep patting the cushion, and she keeps glaring. Eventually I abandon the couch and go to her, kneeling so we’re at eye level. “I know you’re mad, and I don’t blame you, Sunny, but you know how things look through social media. Think about all the pictures of your brother floating around out there.”

She twists her hands together and sighs. “It’s not the same, and you know it. All that stuff about Alex is garbage, and all the stuff about you is true.”

“Used to be true. That’s not how it is anymore.”

Up until the last few months, the pictures that appeared on the hockey fan sites and gossip columns had been just what they seemed. I’ve been with a lot of bunnies. I tried to keep Sunny from finding out an exact number—not that I can give her one—but she looked up my history after her friend Lily, who hates me, told her she should be careful about dating me.

Sunny wasn’t all that concerned at first. She’s a free spirit. She liked my aura, and that was enough for her. Then reality smacked her in the face like an unwashed dick. And the pictures in the media have kept happening, but not because I’m taking girls home—I’m not. I just don’t want to be rude to my fans.

Unfortunately a lot of my fans happen to be women who dress slutty.

I need to find a way to convince Sunny I’m not full of shit. It’s gonna be a challenge.

Sunny sighs. “How do I know you weren’t joining the Kilometer-High Club in the airplane bathroom with some hooker bunny?”

“I didn’t even use the bathroom on the plane. They’re disgusting. I try to go before I get on.”

“So maybe you waited until after you got off the plane. Maybe you did it in the rental car. Maybe you stopped at her house on the way here. And then maybe you had a shower so I wouldn’t suspect anything and then had sex again in the shower with her, and I bet she gave you her number and—”

“Who are you talking about? Is there some rumor or something that I don’t know about? I didn’t meet any bunnies on the plane. No one even sat beside me, and the flight attendant was a dude.”

Sunny throws up her hands. “I’m being hypotheatrical.”

“Do you mean hypothetical?”

“Don’t put words in my mouth! Didn’t you land around eleven? You were supposed to be here hours ago, even with your missed flight. How do I know you actually missed the flight in the first place?”

“You can ask Violet. She dropped me off at the airport.”

She crosses her arms over her chest. “Pfft. How do I know she wouldn’t lie for you?”

“There’s no way in hell Vi would lie for me, especially about something like that.”

She gives me an incredulous look. “You forgot you were coming to see me!”

“I didn’t forget. I got the flight times wrong.”

Her cute little chin starts to tremble. I’ve seen this happen before. Not with Sunny, but with Vi. I think it means she’s going to cry. Up until now, I haven’t seen tears, and I’m not sure how to deal with them. With Vi I usually get her a dairy treat, and we play violent video games until her lactose intolerance gives her stomach cramps and she makes me leave so she can hole herself up in the bathroom and let the terror rain down. Sunny doesn’t play video games, and she doesn’t eat dairy, so that’s out.

“How do I know you didn’t stop at a frat dorm tonight and you’re using autocorrect as an excuse? You do that a lot, you know.”

“You also know I suck with spelling.”

“That’s not the real issue, and you know it.”

I sigh and drop my head to her knee. Her skin is soft and warm, and it smells like her name. Or what I think sunshine would smell like if it were something I could actually smell. Her whole body tenses. After a few seconds she runs her fingers through my hair. I totally get why dogs love to be scratched behind their ears. I forget there’s a question and rub my cheek on her leg.

Her fingers curl at the crown of my head, and she lifts me by my hair. Her normally soft green eyes are hard.

“What am I supposed to believe, Miller?”

“I’m sorry about the pictures. I wasn’t even awake for the dickface ones, so you can’t really be mad about those.”

“But you were naked.”

“I can’t sleep with clothes on.”

“You were at Lance’s house. And there were hooker bunnies!”

“I’ll wear boxers to bed when I stay at Lance’s from now on.”

“Boxers aren’t going to solve the problem. I don’t know why you have to stay at his place at all. It’s, like, a twenty-minute drive to your place, isn’t it?”

I don’t know how she knows this. Sunny’s never been to my place, or Lance’s. Sometimes we talk on the phone while I’m driving there, so maybe that explains it. It’s not important now, though.

“We’d been drinking, and Lance scheduled a workout at his place in the morning. I was being responsible by staying put. I’m trying here, Sunny. It’s been a long time since I’ve done the relationship thing, and it’s a lot different than it was in high school, you know?”

“You’re just figuring that out now?” She’s doing that thing she does with her hair when she’s nervous or upset, twirling it around her finger.

“Well, yeah. I’ve been doing my own thing for the past five years—”

“You mean playing the field.”

“I guess. If that’s what you want to call it.” It sounds a lot better than bunny banging. “There’s a learning curve involved here. I really like you. I wanna see if we can make this work. I’m asking you to be patient.”

“I have been patient. And tolerant. Put yourself in my sandals, Miller.”

“My feet are way too big for your sandals.”

“I’m being serious. How am I supposed to believe what you say when all the pictures of you out there make it look like the exact opposite?” She holds up her phone and scrolls through the posts of girls hugging me. There are a few new ones from the bar last night that I don’t remember. In one I’m doing shots with Dick Yeller and Flash Beaver. I’m not doing anything wrong, but the comments in the post make it seem like something happened that didn’t.

“Shit. Okay. That looks way worse than it is. I didn’t hook up with any of those girls, Sunny. I haven’t hooked up with anyone since we started talking. I promise I’m only using my hand when I’m horny.”

She’s staring, and she looks confused, or maybe disturbed, so I keep going, hoping to clarify.

“Last week I considered sticking my dick in a bag of marshmallows that I’d left in the sun because they’re soft and warm, but I figured it’d be a messy clean up and kinda fuckin’ weird, so I went with lotion instead, but I wanted to try it. Technically that means it’s not just my hand, but if I don’t

use lotion I chafe, especially during the regular season when I'm always wearing a cup and all my gear. Is that too much detail?"

Sunny covers her mouth with her palm. I hope she doesn't puke.

"It's too much detail. It's all the time I'm spending with Vi. Her lack of filter is rubbing off."

A laugh bubbles up, and Sunny's shoulders start to shake. "You know, that explains a lot."

"Vi's a bad influence."

"No, she's not. And that's not what I'm talking about. When Alex was a teenager I used to wonder why he went through so much lotion, and so many pairs of socks."

I don't know why she's bringing up her brother and his sock issues when we're talking about me whacking off. "What do socks have to do with anything?"

"He used them when he . . ." She gestures below my waist and makes a whacking-off motion. "You know, to contain the explosion."

Her cheeks go pink, and she looks away. Then she pokes at her cheek with her tongue, giving me the BJ signal. I don't think it's intentional, since the only thing she's done so far is put her hand down my pants. Aw, fuck. I'm hard. And distracted.

"He blew his load in a sock?"

Her nose scrunches up in this cute way, similar to her reaction when I suggested we go for wings and beer, before I knew she didn't eat animals.

"Man, he must have gone through an awful lot of socks." When I was a teenager I blasted the cannon three times a day, if not more. Sometimes in high school when Barbie Claremont wore her little white sundress that didn't fit dress code, I'd have to take a time out during second period so I could manage the rest of the morning. And that was after I'd already taken care of my morning problem in the shower.

"He went barefoot a lot. His sneakers smelled awful."

"I bet. It's kind of genius, eh?" It would cut down on the use of tissues, that's for sure. "Wait. How do you know about Waters' masturbating habits?"

"I used to do his laundry 'cause he always helped me with homework and stuff. But I stopped after I discovered his mountain of crusty socks."

"I can see how that might happen. I usually stick to tissues or whacking it in the shower. I've tried aiming in the sink or the toilet, but the

trajectory isn't always predictable, and my dick isn't bendy when I'm hard." I'm still kneeling in front of her, so she can't see my current wood. "We should probably talk about something else, yeah? Other than my whacking-off practices." I'm not even sure how we got on this topic in the first place.

"Probably." Sunny brushes the hair she's twirling between her fingers across her lips. She never wears lipstick, so the soft strands sweep across without getting caught in any gunky, sparkly crap. Kissing Sunny is nice. I don't end up looking like I made out with a circus clown, and she doesn't taste like artificial candy flavor.

I lean closer until my chest is pressed against her knees and our faces are only inches apart. I can tell she thinks I'm going to kiss her. It's what I want to do. But she still looks uncertain, and I'm not willing to make more mistakes than I already have.

Instead, I twirl a lock of her hair around my finger, watching the silky, golden strands slip around and around. I twist them until they fan out like a paintbrush and rub them over my lips to see what it feels like.

Sunny laughs. It's a soft, breathy giggle. Cute. Sweet. A little uncomfortable, even. "What are you doing?"

"I don't know. What are you doing?"

Her gaze shifts past me. "Thinking."

"About what?" I drop her hair and run my fingertip along the contour of her bottom lip. She has fantastic lips. I haven't had them on mine in more than two weeks. I want to fix that right now.

"About how I'm not sure what you want from me."

I drop my hand and hold onto the armrests instead. "You still think I'm trying to play you?"

"You're always talking the talk."

"You think so, eh? Well, why don't we look at the facts?" I drop that bit of Canadian in there to make her smile. She does, but it's gone almost as quickly as it appears.

"There you go again! You're doing it right now."

"Doing what?"

"Saying *eh*, being all cute."

"You think I'm cute?"

She pushes at my chest with her toe. Annoyed. "You have the biggest ego in the world."

I grab her ankle and run my hand up the outside of her calf. Her legs are amazing—long, toned, and sun-kissed. I want my hands and my mouth on every last inch of skin, starting at her ankle and ending at her mouth.

“Your brother has the biggest ego,” I tell her. “It’s at least ten times the size of mine.”

“He does not.”

“Fine. My ego is bigger. Let’s get back to the facts. How long have I been calling you?”

“Since you came to Toronto.”

“How many times have I come to Guelph to see you?”

“This is the third.”

“How many times have I tried to get in your pants?”

Sunny taps her lip with her finger. “You mean for sex?”

I release her leg and hold onto the arms of the chair again. My knees hurt from kneeling for so long, but I’m making a point, one I hope is going to win a lot of favors. “Yeah, I mean for sex.”

She looks down, her eyes on my chin rather than my face. “Never.”

“That’s right. Never. So you tell me, Sunny. What do you think I’m here for?”

She peeks up, her expression sweet like those maple candies I steal from my sister all the time. “Just me?”

“Not *just* you. *You*. I’m here because I want to be with you, and no other reason.”

This is way different than placating a bunny. I’ve only ever dealt with this once before, way back at the beginning of college when crushes crushed a kid. This is different; the feelings feel a lot more real now. It’s about more than how hard she makes me.

“Come on, Sunny Sunshine. You know how much I like you. I’m trying hard not to screw it up.”

She exhales slowly, finally letting her guard down. She parts her legs and they slide along either side of me. It gives me the access I’ve been waiting for since I walked in her door. I’m not an idiot, though. I don’t move into the space.

Instead, I run my hand up the outside of her bare calf again. Stopping behind her knee, I stroke with my thumb before I reverse the movement, kneading all the way to her ankle. Sunny’s a big fan of the leg massage, and I’m damn good at it. On the way back up, I follow her shin bone with my

thumbs. All her muscles are tight. Sitting back on my heels, I get a glimpse of pale blue cotton through the small gap between her shorts and her inner thigh.

Panties are panties: frilly, frilless, plain, fancy, lacy, cotton, satin. By the time I usually get to look at them, they're about to come off. But for some reason, I want to know what style Sunny's wearing. Will they be regular bikini briefs? Boy shorts? Cheekies? I want her to parade around in them, and then I want to get her naked and keep her that way for hours. But first I need to get her excited enough to want that. And I need to make her forget how frequently I mess shit up.

I continue rubbing up and down the back of her calf until she starts to sigh and shift. Her head drops against the back of the chair, and her eyes flutter shut. Her toes curl against my forearm, and her lips part, which tells me she likes what I'm doing.

"You're real tight. That feel good?" I go up higher, avoiding the ticklish spot on her knee, getting at her IT band and keeping my palms to the outside of her thighs.

"I taught three classes and then ran five miles with this new greyhound we got at the shelter."

"You must be tired."

She cracks one lid. "Probably not as tired as you. You're the one who got on a plane and then drove here."

"I'm the one who caused you all kinds of stress today." I might as well acknowledge it.

"I'm over it."

"You sure about that?"

She traces one of the ugly flowers on the arm of the chair. "I'm mostly over it."

"Anything I can do to help you get totally over it?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know, or you don't wanna tell me?"

I spread my fingers wide, covering the tops of her thighs. When I'm a few inches from the hem of her shorts, I graze her inner thighs with my thumbs. It's a sensitive spot, holding the promise of something way more fun, like wet fingers and Sunny's little moans of excitement.

I've had my hand down Sunny's pants a total of four times. It's a fucking world record for me. Usually by this time I'd have bagged a bunny

in every conceivable position.

The first time I ventured south of the border with Sunny I was nervous. Not because I didn't think I could get her off—I'm almost as good at giving orgasms as I am at hockey—but I wasn't sure what I was going to find. I'm not being a dick. It's just the truth.

Sunny's granola. She takes less time to get ready than I do. She doesn't wear makeup, and I don't think she has any idea what to do with hairspray, which is insane considering her mom must go through a can a day with the eighties hair band look she's rockin'.

Anyway, my concerns had more to do with the potential for the "authentic granola experience," as Vi so kindly dubbed it. She told me I was too accustomed to the bunnies. Those girls might wear too much makeup, but they're always groomed. And by groomed I mean the only body hair they have is on their heads.

The first time I stuck my hand down Sunny's pants, I was sure it was going to be the beginning of the end. Right where there's usually smooth skin was a patch of soft fuzz. It was only two fingers wide, and it wasn't like an overgrown bush or anything. I really like her, so I kept going, figuring I'd take one for the fuzz team if I had to. I could convince her to get rid of it eventually. I'd use promises of orgasm by mouth as leverage.

Turns out I had nothing to worry about. Once I passed the mountain and dove into the valley, I got nothing but smooth, soft skin and wet, warm pussy. It was a landing strip—pointing me in the right direction.

I'm not gonna lie, it was a goddamn relief. I got her off twice with my fingers. Then she held my dick. It was like high school, but way better. Sunny has great hands and super strong forearms.

Three months in now, and I still haven't put the puck in the net. I haven't even put my face in the net. Not for lack of trying, but opportunity hasn't been on my side. More than once, Vi's suggested that maybe I'm only into Sunny because she won't give it up, and I like the challenge. In the past five years, I've never had anyone do anything but drop their panties and spread their legs—until Sunny.

It's nice. So maybe part of it is the challenge. But when I see her, I'm pretty sure the tingly feeling in my dick matches that weird feeling in my chest.

That I'm willing to fly all the way out to see her, knowing there's going to be a situation I need to handle, has to mean something, too.

I run my hands down to her knees and begin the slow ascent again. Sunny bites her lip and slouches in the chair, as if she's trying to get closer, or get my hands to go higher. I'm not making a move, yet. I've held out this long; I'm sure I can manage a while longer.

I lean down and kiss the inside of her knee. "I'm sorry I made today difficult."

"I know."

Tension makes her thighs clench. I'm between them, so they tighten against my ribs. I keep my hands where they are, thumbs rubbing circles close to her femoral artery. Her skin is flushed, warm; her pulse is racing. She's exactly how I want her to be, turned on and distracted. Backing off, I rest my hands on her knees and bite the inside of my cheek to stop from smiling when she frowns.

"I don't want you to be mad at me anymore, 'kay, Sunny Sunshine? I'm trying my best. I know it's probably not good enough, but maybe you can tell me what I need to do so I can get better at it." I'm not feeding her a line, even though I'm notoriously good at those.

Sunny's knees press hard against my sides for a long moment. Her fingers flutter close to her hair, like she's thinking about doing that twirl thing. I can tell she's trying to keep her hands to herself, that she wants to stay angry a little longer, but can't. I'm not sure what it is about me that makes her fold—'cause let's face it, I'm not prime boyfriend material—but whatever she sees, I'll take.

She reaches up and pushes her fingers through my hair. Her nails scratch my scalp. I love it when she does that. Then her fingers tighten and release, over and over. I love it when she does that, too. If I had a tail, it'd be thumping on the ground about now.

"Stop letting the hooker bunnies take pictures."

"They're fans."

"They're sluts."

"They're also fans."

"Who have their hands all over you."

Her fingers tighten again so I smooth my hands up her legs and squeeze when I get to the hem of her shorts. I'm diverting her attention again. It's not fair. She makes a good point. I wouldn't like it if it was the other way around. I don't always have control of where other people put their hands. I can only control what I do with mine.

“You’re the only one who matters, though.”

Sunny’s uncertainty is obvious in the tightness of her jaw and the flexing of her fingers in my hair. Some people avoid confrontation. I don’t. This whole situation is the perfect catalyst for a sweet make-up session. Keeping her on the edge of anger and fusing it with desire is the best way to finally get what I’ve been waiting for all these weeks.

Her anger simmers like almost-boiling water. Sunny cups the back of my neck and yanks me forward, our lips connecting. It’s amazing after two long weeks of nothing.

Kissing is an art. It’s the most important part of foreplay. Everything I’ll do to the rest of her body with my fingers and—sweet Christ, please let this be the night—my dick is simulated with kissing.

She tries to be aggressive, to push her tongue past my lips, but I nip her with my teeth. She makes this pained sound, frustrated and needy at the same time.

As soon as her lips part I slip my tongue inside, stroking slowly. She tastes like the cinnamon and clove toothpaste she uses. It reminds me of gingerbread cookies. Interesting. That means she stopped to brush her teeth before she answered the door. Even as pissed as she was, and maybe still is, she prepared for this.

I run a hand up her arm and across her shoulder until I’m cupping her cheek in my palm. Then I suck on her tongue. It drives her fucking crazy when I do that.

Sunny groans and winds herself around me, hooking her feet at my waist, fingers twisting in my hair to keep me from backing off again. That’s not part of my immediate plan. I’ve had far too few make-out sessions with Sunny to stop right after we’ve started.

I inch my palm up her thigh until the tip of my middle finger is under the hem of her shorts. Sunny mashes her chest against me, getting as close as she can. I ease my hand back down her thigh to her knee, staying away from all the most exciting places.

I’m playing with her. It might seem mean, but she’s enjoying it, and I’m having a good time getting her all excited. If I’m ever going to get her naked, I have to get her to the point where all she can think about is the orgasms I’ll give her if she lets me.

“I hate it when the hooker bunnies are all over you, and I hate being jealous,” Sunny mumbles around my tongue.

I back up until her face comes into focus. “You don’t need to be jealous. You’re the only one I want all over me.”

Sunny’s hands leave my hair and ease down my back. Her palms find my ass, and she shifts forward. It’s magic for my dick. Anything besides my own hand is beyond awesome. She wiggles her fingers under my waistband. I’m commando. Underwear is mostly useless. My balls like to be free, not confined by material. This time I feel the sharp bite of her nails when she grabs my ass.

I’m cool with this kind of aggression. I’ve had sex with all kinds of women, from the quiet ones who like missionary, to the ones who think it’d be fun to tie me up and take control—not that I’ve ever let that happen.

I move the hand on her upper thigh to her waist. I don’t even try to go under her shirt. I keep it at her ribcage, my thumb two inches shy of the underside of her boob. Sunny has smallish boobs; they fit in my palm. And her nipples are little and pink. She can do the braless thing if she wants without it being obvious. They’re fucking awesome. I can’t wait to have them in my mouth.

The less I touch where she wants me to, the more frantic she gets. Sunny’s hand retracts from the back of my pants. She grabs the hem of my shirt, pulling it up. I don’t break the kiss right away. Instead I keep going back to suck on her bottom lip and nibble on her chin. When she makes a frustrated noise I back off. She yanks my shirt over my head and tosses it on the floor, then sighs.

I’d say it doesn’t inflate my ego at all, but that’d be a total lie. Sunny knows exactly how hard I have to work to stay in shape. She appreciates the time and energy I spend conditioning my body. So, yeah, she’s ogling, but it’s not because she can’t wait to tell her friends she got to bag an NHL player.

She runs her fingers through my hair, nails scratching lightly down the sides of my neck. When she reaches my shoulders she pauses, her eyes moving over my chest and down my abs.

“You look so good without a shirt on. I wish it was summer all the time.”

“I won’t wear one while we’re in the house.”

“Or by the pool.” Her fingertips drift down my arms.

“I won’t even wear shorts, if that’s what you want. I’ll swing free all weekend, just for you.”

“Just for me, eh?”

There’s the cute Canadian twang I like so much.

“Mmm. Just for you.”

“That’d be fun, but the neighbors can see everything.”

“Aren’t they, like, ninety?”

“Yeah, but the old guy’s a pervert. He watches me sunbathe with binoculars.”

“Seriously?”

“Sometimes. He’s harmless. I doubt he’s had a real hard-on since the early nineties.”

“I’m gonna skinny dip tomorrow so I can make him jealous.”

Sunny laughs and runs her hands over my shoulders. “I think you want to get naked in front of me.”

“Look at how excited you are about me being shirtless. I don’t know if you can handle me naked, baby.” I grin at her put-out expression. Leaning in, I drop a kiss on the end of her nose, and another on her chin. “I’m fucking with you, Sunny. I think you can handle me fine.”

She cups the back of my neck, drawing me in for another kiss. Our tongues meet and tangle, softness changing to need as the kiss gets deeper and Sunny starts rubbing up on me. I cup her ass and help out with some friction.

Sunny’s hand wanders from my shoulder, down my arm to my side. I know where she’s headed when her fingertips reach the waistband of my shorts. Normally I’d be damn excited about this.

Unfortunately, I was in a rush getting to her, so I didn’t have time to rub one out before I got on the plane. It’s three in the morning. The last time I self-loved was yesterday. I whack a minimum of twice a day. Usually first thing in the morning and before bed. I’m behind, which means if she puts her hand on me, after two weeks of only my own, I’m likely to blow real fast. And I could probably use a quick clean-up with a razor. It’s not pretty in my pants right now.

Thankfully, we’re pressed up right against each other, and I’m grinding all over her, so it’s a struggle to get a hand between us. She gives up after a minute, her hands going back to my ass.

“Maybe we should go upstairs,” she says when I break free from her lips and kiss a path down her neck.

“That’s an idea.”

Except it will take us out of the moment. Plus, there's something extra hot about making out with her in one of these hideous chairs, in the middle of her family living room. I scan the room; all the curtains are drawn, so her pervy neighbors can't see inside. I decide I want to make her come here. That way, every time I have to sit in this room and chitchat with her parents, I'll have this awesome memory.

I inch toward the top of her thigh. Sunny groans and her legs tighten on my hips.

"Let's go to my room."

"Whadda you wanna do up there that we can't do here?" I bite her collarbone through her shirt.

Sunny arches, pushing her chest out. Her cleavage might be ruined by the damn sports bra, but it's not padded; I can still see the faintest outline of nipple through her shirt. I brush over the spot with a knuckle.

"Miller."

"Sup, baby?" This time I slide a hand under her shirt, tickling along her ribs. When I reach that stupid bra I push it up until her breasts pop out the bottom. Now I can see her perfect nipples through the sheer fabric. It's almost better than having an unobstructed view.

"Let's just go—"

The words die when I cover her nipple with my mouth.

"Oh, God." She wraps both arms around my head.

I'm kneading one boob while I suck on the other nipple, leaving a hand free. I feel my way up into her shorts until I reach the edge of her panties. I don't go under, though, because that's exactly what she wants me to do. Instead I follow the elastic down to the juncture of her thigh and the most exciting spots.

I could get her naked. It'd be superhot. But here's the thing about foreplay: sometimes it's hotter with clothes on. There's something extra sexy about making a woman come fully dressed. Well, as much as Sunny's outfit counts as being fully dressed.

I palm her through the damp cotton, and she tries to lift her hips. It's a challenge considering her back is arched, and she's sitting in a chair.

I release her nipple. The pale pink shirt sticks to her boob where it's wet. "You still wanna go upstairs?"

Sunny blinks, her confusion cute. "What?"

“Upstairs? You wanna go there?” Her panties are blue with a tiny white and dark blue polka dot pattern. I slide the tip of my finger under the elastic at the crest of her pelvis.

“Right now?” Her expression is priceless.

“If you want.”

“I’m good here.”

“You sure are,” I mutter as I drag a knuckle over soft, smooth skin. She’s wet and hot, and *dude*, I want to go pussy diving so fucking bad. Maybe I’ll finally get to later tonight.

I unwrap her legs from around my hips, and Sunny shifts forward, slouching down. She drapes one leg over the arm of the chair, the other one I hook over my forearm. The view is fucking awesome.

I use my thumb to push her panties to the side, exposing that perfect pink slit.

“Know what I can’t stop thinking about?”

“Hmm?” Her gaze is slow to lift from where my fingers are.

“The way you look when you come.” I rub a few slow circles around her clit.

Sunny’s eyes close, and she bites her lip.

“And all those little moans when I find the right spot.” I slip one finger inside, and she makes the sound I’m hoping for. “Just like that.”

I add another finger, going deeper until her cheeks flush and her mouth drops open. She clutches my forearm.

“Holy—” she gasps. “Sweet—oh, God. I—*Miller*.” She draws out my name, eyes wide, her expression reflecting her need.

“Am I hitting the right spot?”

She nods furiously, her grip tightening. “You always hit the right spot.”

“Want me to fumble around a little?”

“No!” She digs her nails into my skin. “I’m right th—”

She contracts around my fingers, showing me what she was about to tell me. Sunny’s eyes meet mine, wide with shock. I don’t know why she’s always so surprised when she comes, like it’s unexpected.

She releases my arm and grabs my shoulders, pulling me forward until our lips collide. Her tongue shoots into my mouth, twisting with mine as she moans. I feel like the motherfucking man.

That is until she breaks the kiss, flops back in the chair, and says, “I kinda hate that you’re so good at that.”

There's a bite to her words. Looks like she's not as over the social media stuff as she thinks. I remove my hand from inside her panties, adjusting her underwear so they're back in place, and lower her leg to the floor. "You hate that I can make you come with my fingers? Yeah, I can see how that's real unfortunate. I can always pretend I don't know what I'm doing." I make a joke out of it, but there's a weight in my chest. I don't like it. I can't help that I'm good at the sex.

"I don't mean it the way you're taking it." She cups the back of my head to stop me from moving away. "It's just that I come every time. What if I can't do the same for you? It's a lot of pressure, and I don't have nearly as much practice . . ." She lets the sentence hang.

"You're worried about not being able to get me off?" I sound confused because, well, I don't get it. There isn't much skill involved in stroking a cock. It's essentially an up and down motion. Women aren't nearly as mechanically simple.

"Well, yeah. I mean that happens, right? Sometimes guys can't—"

"Blast the cannon?"

"Yeah."

"I guess. I mean, I'd have to have some serious whiskey dick, or maybe if I whacked off, like, twenty times that day I might have a problem, but a strong breeze is usually enough to get me hard."

Her eyes dart down, and her hand moves from my chest to my waistband, palming me. "You're already hard."

"Uh, yeah. I got to watch you come on my fingers. For sure I'm hard."

"That turns you on?" I can't tell if she's surprised or curious.

"Definitely."

She gives me a squeeze. "Fingering me made you this hard?"

Those words coming out of her mouth, combined with the feel of her hand on my dick, even through my shorts, reroutes even more blood below my waist. There are a lot of factors that got me to this level of hardness. It's the argument, followed by the make-out session, and the way I can still see her nipples through her shirt because her bra is pushed up. It's how she's sitting in the chair, that she's fully dressed, that I watched what I was doing while I was getting her off—all of it together makes me this hard. And the fact that I haven't whacked it since yesterday morning.

But the simple answer is, "Yeah. Fingering you makes me this hard."

"Oh. That's . . . wow. I make you really hard."

I hold back a laugh. “You sure fucking do, Sunny Sunshine.”

She goes for the zipper, and I put my hand over hers.

My balls are going to hate me. But I can’t have her hand on me yet. I’ll embarrass myself, so I use the only reasonable excuse I have for not wanting her to touch my dick. “Baby, I’ve been traveling all night. I should probably get cleaned up before you go sticking your hand down there.”

“I don’t mind. You smell good to me.” She makes another attempt.

I grab her hand and lift it to my lips. “Sunny, sweets, I appreciate your enthusiasm, and I share it, but I could use a shower.”

“You could shower after. It probably won’t take long, right?”

I can’t stop the laugh this time. “I’d much rather you put your hand on my dick when it’s freshly washed and hasn’t been marinating in my pants all day. And to be honest, I’d feel a lot better if it did take a long time—you know, instead of two minutes or less.”

“Oh! Right. Of course. Longer is always better.” Her huge grin is a front-row seat to a sunrise. It makes the near-embarrassment worth it. She adjusts her bra so her boobs aren’t hanging out the bottom, then swings her legs over the edge of the chair, bouncing to her feet. She holds out her hand. “Come on!”

I rearrange my dick so I’m not tenting my shorts and lace my fingers with hers.

I grab my bags from the front hallway on our way to the second floor. Sunny’s parents are smart when it comes to protecting their only daughter’s virtue. Her bedroom is down the hall from theirs. To get there, you have to pass the master suite. There’s an office separating their rooms, and the spare bedroom is at the very opposite end of the hall. That’s also where the staircase leading to the third floor is. Her brother had the room there growing up.

The two times I’ve stayed here previously I slept in the spare room. It’s a landmine of squeaky spots to get all the way to Sunny. I sure as hell tried. Also, Titan sleeps outside her door; he might be small, but he’s got a loud, yappy bark. I had to pretend I forgot where the bathroom was when her mom came out to see why he was making so much noise.

I head for the spare room out of habit, but Sunny grabs my hand and leads me down the hall. “You can use my bathroom.”

Sunny’s room resembles a student apartment. She has a quilt made out of concert T-shirts in place of a duvet. A desk takes up one corner to create

an office-like space. It's separated with strings of beads hanging from the ceiling. Titan comes running through the room, making the beads jingle as he jumps up on her desk chair. It spins around as he sits there, tongue lolling.

The best part about Sunny's room is her bed. She has a California king. It's the only mistake her parents made, from what I can see—that and leaving her alone this weekend so I could come and visit without supervision. If I had a daughter, she'd be sleeping in a single bed until she moved out. I want to get naked, roll around on her concert duvet, and test out her flexibility while we fuck our brains out on that huge bed.

But I need to shower first.

CHAPTER SIX

DOWN WITH THE COOKIE, UP WITH THE OS

I drop my bags and follow Sunny into the bathroom. She opens the linen closet and hands me a towel, then gestures to the tub with the see-through curtain. “There’s shampoo and soap and my loofah in there, if you want to use it.”

“Awesome. Thanks.”

“Do you need anything else?” She glances down at my crotch.

I still have a hard-on. “I think I’m good.”

“You don’t need anything else?” She waits a few more seconds, eyes darting from my crotch to my face and back again.

“I think everything’s covered.”

“You’re positive?” She takes a step toward the door; she doesn’t look all that excited about leaving.

“I’ll be out in, like, ten.” I turn on the water, and Sunny backs out into her room, closing the door behind her.

I let out a relieved groan. I’d love to invite her to join me, but I’m already blueballed out the ying-yang. If she gets naked and wet and puts her hand on me, I’m going to come instantly. Then she’ll never want to have sex with me because she’ll think I’m a two-pump chump. Better to take care of this situation on my own. It’s not like I’m going to need much recovery time. I’ll probably be ready to go again as soon as I’m out of the shower.

Shoving my shorts down, I set my dick free. It sticks straight out. My balls aren’t even hanging, they’re so tight. I step under the hot spray, grab my handle, and give it a couple of test jerks. It’s not even enjoyable, my balls are so achy. Also, my hands are still postseason rough, upping the sensitivity factor.

Usually I get those paraffin wax hand treatments to keep them softish, but the chick that does it for me was also on my honey list. She has a spa set up in her house, which is conveniently located down the street from my condo. Afterwards she used to take care of my dick—by wrapping it in her vagina. Since I’m seeing Sunny, I need to find a new place where that isn’t an expectation.

I grab the closest bottle and squirt some of its contents onto my hand to help speed things along—not that I need much help. The minty aroma fills the steamy space. It explains why Sunny’s hair always smells like a mojito. I don’t take into account that mint opens pores. I’m stroking away, and all of a sudden things start to get hot. I turn into the spray to wash it off, but it compounds the heat. My dick is on fire.

I have to bite my knuckle to keep from swearing. Even with the blue balls and the fire dick, I finish in less than two minutes. I have zero control over my aim, so I accidentally come all over Sunny’s loofah sponge thing. I rinse it off, but there’s no way I’m using it to wash my body.

Now that I’ve taken care of issue number one, I check out the state of my balls. The situation could be worse. For now I’ll have to make do with a clean up. I use the pink razor in the shower since mine are in my bag. Using it means my balls have now vicariously touched Sunny’s legs, and possibly her pussy. Yup. I can already feel blood rushing back down below the waist. I hurry through the rest of the shower.

It isn’t until I’m toweling off that I realize I left my clean clothes in my duffle bag, which is sitting on the other side of the door. I peek my head out, expecting to find Sunny lying on her bed, waiting for me—in my head she was naked—but I don’t see her anywhere. She doesn’t respond when I call her name.

I cross over to my bag and drop the towel on the floor, letting my balls air dry as I hunt for a pair of shorts. Just as I find what I’m looking for, the floor creaks.

“I brought you a giant penis.” Sunny is standing in the hall holding a bottle in each hand. “I mean a drink, since you already have one of those.” She uses the beer bottle to point in the direction of my crotch.

“You think my thunder stick is gigantic?”

“Thunder stick?”

“Is lightning rod of pleasure better?”

She sets the drinks down on the nightstand and sits on the edge of the bed. “You’re ridiculous.”

I consider forgoing the shorts and walking around naked, like I would if I was at my own place, but Sunny’s had an orgasm. I can’t be sure she wants to get right back to it like I do. I turn to the side and fumble around, trying to get my foot in the leg without flashing her again. I’m hoping the shower intermission doesn’t backfire on me and they come off again soon.

Her eyes drop to my waist as I tuck myself into the shorts. “You’re not hard anymore.”

“Dicks are like balloons, they deflate.”

She cocks an eyebrow. “Did you make it deflate?”

There isn’t much of a point to lying. “Yeah.”

She crosses her arms over her chest. “I wanted to make it deflate.”

I walk over and stroke her cheek. “Sunny, baby, you can deflate my dick any damn time you want. You don’t even have to ask.”

She rolls her eyes, but leans into the touch. “Was the shower an excuse to deflate?”

“That and I always feel gross after flying.” Violet’s the one who made it a problem after she mentioned that I’m breathing recycled air, and it’s full of people’s skin particles and shit floating around in the confined space. Sometimes she’s a real asshole.

“So you—” She gestures to my crotch, making the whacking-off motion. She’s generous in the way she holds her hand in a “C” shape, so it looks like I have a beer can for a dick. I’m hung, but that’s more in line with a circus dick.

“I did.”

“I hope you cleaned my shower after you spanked your monkey in it.” She moves back on the bed, making room for me.

“Spank my—did you—” I follow after her. “I think you’ve been talking to Violet too much.” I’m definitely not telling her I blew my load on her loofah. I need to remember to throw it out before she uses it again.

“I have an older brother, remember? His skating friends were always here, being gross. I went to my first party before I was legal to vote. I might not have the personal experience you do, but I’ve heard it all. Oh, and those boys in figure skating are way worse than the ones who play hockey.”

“Really?” I know Waters figure skated for a lot of years before he went to professional hockey. Almost every professional hockey player does a year of figure skating. It helps develop skills on the ice.

“Well, yeah, there are girls in figure skating. Those boys were always trying to get with them. It was all incest-y. Everyone was dating everyone else. Except Alex. He didn’t date anyone ’cause he was too busy.” She cocks her head to the side. “I bet the girls loved you when you were in figure skating. Those spandex outfits don’t hide anything.”

“I didn’t have to wear any spandex. I just took the lessons. I didn’t do the performance stuff.”

“Probably better that way. You would’ve terrified the ladies with your sword of lust.”

“I like that one.” I straddle her legs and lie on top of her, bracing my weight on my forearms, like a plank, and settle my head on her chest.

“What are you doing?”

“Cuddling with you.”

I’m not a pussy. I just like the snuggles. With bunnies I try to limit it to three minutes tops, otherwise they start to get the wrong idea. But I don’t have to limit cuddle time with Sunny.

We lie there for a while, not saying anything, existing. When it’s me and her, and there isn’t any bunny BS to get in the way, things are easy. We don’t have to fill silence with meaningless conversation.

From my spot on her chest, I have a close-up view of her nipple through her bra and shirt. It’s right there, almost staring back at me, so I do the logical thing and start circling it with a fingertip. Then I go over it with my knuckle like it’s a tiny speedbump and my finger is a miniature car. In my head I make the accompanying sound effects.

“Miller?” Her voice is breathy.

“’Sup, baby?”

“Can you lift your head for a second?”

I don’t want to, but I do it because she asked. Sunny arches up, pulling her shirt and that horrible sports bra over her head. Bam! Just like that she’s topless. And I’m hard again. Faint tan lines highlight her breasts.

“I thought maybe we could pick things up where we left off.”

“I think that’s a great idea.” I shift so I’m on my side next to her, one of my legs between hers. I don’t dive right in and start sucking on her nipples.

With guys, all the foreplay is nice but unnecessary. We’re happy with a handle grab and some stroking. Women are different. They need more than physical contact. It’s psychological. It’s always better when there’s lead up. I’ve seen some cool documentaries on the topic. It’s like research. Porn is probably the worst possible thing a guy can watch to get pointers on what gets a woman off. Pounding away like a jackhammer isn’t going to do it. There has to be connection. I’m good at that. I say all the right things, use

all the right techniques. If there was a Masters in female orgasms, I'd have one.

I kiss her neck and rest my hand on her waist, inching my way up her side until I'm almost palming the swell. Leaning to the side, I prop myself up on an elbow and go back to circling her nipple with a fingertip. I kiss my way across her jaw until I'm at her lips.

We make out like that for a while, and every time things start to heat up, I change my approach. Her little hums and moans turn desperate, so I nibble along her throat and over her collarbone until I reach her boob. When her hands go into my hair and she arches her back, I lick her nipple.

"Miller." It's more groan than word.

"You want a little more of that?" I ask.

Her palm curves around the back of my neck, pushing my face into her boob. "That'd be great."

"Like this?" I cover her nipple with my mouth, sucking softly.

"Exactly like that."

While I use my mouth on the top half of her body, I ease a hand down to palm her through her shorts.

"What're you doing?" Sunny asks.

I stop sucking her nipple so I can answer. "Uh . . . touching you? Do you want me to stop?" I can't see why she would considering she's been rubbing herself on my thigh since I started with the nipple love, but it's always better to ask than assume.

"Yes. No. Wha—I don't, but you already did that."

"I'm happy to do it again."

"But I already came, and you haven't."

"It doesn't have to be a one-for-one thing, Sunny, if that's what you're thinking. I'll make you come as many times as you want me to, unless you have a thing against multiple orgasms." It's supposed to be a joke, but when she doesn't answer right away I lean back. "Sunny?"

Her eyes dart to the ceiling, away from mine. "I've never had more than one."

"Seriously? But you can have, like, four million in a row." If I was chick I'd get myself off all the time, every hour of every day, probably. I guess it's a good thing guys can't have that many in a row. Otherwise we'd never get anything done.

Sunny shrugs one shoulder. “I’ve never tried to have another one. Usually my wrist is sore after the first one since it takes so long.”

“It didn’t take long for me to get you off downstairs.”

She bites her lip. “It didn’t.”

“You cool with it if I try again, then?”

“Okay. If you want, but don’t worry if you can’t make it happen.”

“Oh, I’ll make it happen.” I sit back on my knees and hook my fingers into the waistband of her shorts, ready to get down to business. “Can I take these off?”

At her nod, I drag them over her hips and down her legs. I take a moment to appreciate her panties, which isn’t something I usually do. They’re not satin or lace, they don’t have bows or ribbons or bling on them, and they don’t say anything dirty, but they lead to the one place I want to bury my face in more than anything else in this world right now, so they’re awesome.

“Can these go, too?” I ask, fingering the waistband.

She lifts her hips, pulls them down, and tosses them over the edge of the bed—along with her shorts.

I let out a low whistle as I catalog every bare inch of skin. “Well, my imagination sucks. You look way fucking better naked than anything my brain cooked up.”

Sunny laughs and then sighs as I run my hands up the outside of her thighs. All her naked skin touches my naked skin—except for where my shorts act as a buffer—as I settle between her parted thighs. Starting at her lips, I kiss my way down her body, stopping at her nipples before moving on. Halfway down her stomach, she grabs me by the hair. “What are you doing?”

“I’m gonna make you come again, remember?”

“But—I—you—down?”

She seems flustered, so I explain, in case my actions aren’t clear enough. “I wasn’t planning on using my fingers this time.”

“Oh. You want to—”

“Go down on you.”

“With your mouth?”

“That’s generally how it’s done, unless you know another way I’m unfamiliar with.”

“Uhhhhhhh . . .” She draws it out.

“Unless you don’t want me to.”

“It’s not that.”

“Awesome. This is gonna be kickass.” I’m about to go back to kissing the spot below her navel again, but her fingers tighten in my hair.

“Miller.”

“’Sup, sweets?”

“I have to tell you something.”

“Sure. Fire away.”

I glance up. Her cheeks are flushed, and I haven’t even gotten started yet. Her blond hair is fanned out all over the pillow and messed up from the making out. It’s so damn sexy, apart from the fact that she seems self-conscious.

“It’s nice that you want to try to make me come with your mouth, but that’s never happened before. So don’t, like, sprain your tongue trying or anything.”

Hear those tires screeching? That’s my brain backing up. “Whoa. Wait. What?” I must have heard that wrong. “Do you mean no one’s ever made you come with their mouth, or no one’s ever gone down on you before?”

“Well . . .” There she goes, twirling her hair around her finger. “I mean, until you no one had made me come, like, ever.”

“What the fuck? You never had an orgasm until me?” Inside my head there’s a stadium of people cheering me on, because that makes me seriously awesome.

Sunny stares at my forehead. “I’ve had orgasms.”

I need more intel. “So what do you mean it’s never happened before? No one’s ever eaten your cookie?”

“No. I mean, yes. I mean—God, I shouldn’t have said anything.”

I’m embarrassing her. I want to ask more questions about how the hell she managed to have a long-term boyfriend in high school—that’s the information Violet passed on to me from Waters—and never managed to have an orgasm. But I don’t want her to feel bad about it. I do want to find the guy and smack him upside the head—and possibly thank him at the same time. His inadequacy makes me a certifiable god.

I plant an elbow on either side of her ribs and hover over her so we’re face to face. “Yes or no questions only, okay?”

“Okay.”

“You’ve had orgasms?”

“Yes.”

“On your own?” I’m clarifying. Also, it’s hot.

“Yes.”

I want to mention how sexy I think that is, but I need to stay on point.

“With your fingers?”

“Yes.”

“Anything else?”

Her cheeks flame. “That’s not a yes or no question.”

That’s definitely a yes. “We’ll come back to that one later. Has anyone else ever gotten you off?” She’s already told me the answer to this question. I’m making one-hundred-percent certain I heard her correctly.

“No.”

“Never?”

“No.”

“Really? Like, for real?” I don’t get how that could happen. Or not happen.

“Miller.” She clamps her legs against my sides.

I lean down and kiss the side of her jaw. I also shift my hips, rubbing up on her. “But you’ve had sex before, right?” This better be the case. I haven’t been with a virgin since I was in high school. I’d feel bad if I ended up being the person she gave it up for since I’m about as far from a virgin as a person can get, aside from real hookers.

She ducks her head so the top of her head is tucked under my chin and her nose is at my throat. I like that she’s shy about this stuff. I’m not used to it.

“Sunny?”

Her head moves.

“Is that a yes?” When she bites my collarbone, I press my hips into hers. “You do realize I’m on a mission now, right?”

She releases my skin from her teeth. “What kind of mission?”

“An orgasm mission. I’m gonna make you see stars with my tongue.”

“You can give it a shot.” She says this like she expects it not to happen.

It’s on like motherpucking Donkey Kong now. “Pfft. It’ll happen, baby.”

Now I have a goal. After I get her off with my mouth, I’m gonna try for a real-sex orgasm. I cut the conversation. All the talk is sidetracking me from my objective. I make my way down her body with my mouth, taking a

detour across her right hip to her navel. Her muscles tighten as I kiss along that sensitive place between the top of her thigh and her pelvis. Her legs part farther, so I know as much as she's unsure, she's also interested in finding out whether I can make good on my promise.

Moving lower, I run my hands up the inside of her thighs and then back down. Hooking a palm behind her knee, I kiss the soft skin there. I glance up on her sharp inhalation, taking in all her long limbs and soft curves.

This is about more than the orgasm; it's about Sunny and her absolute lack of them. I remember being fourteen with messed-up teeth, wondering if anyone would ever be willing to put their hand on my dick.

Having a complex meant I put extra effort into learning what girls liked. And all that practice paid off; girls went from "friend" to "friend with benefits" real fast. I spent my junior year banging my way through the senior class. I learned a lot from those girls. Specifically, what did and didn't work. By the time I got drafted I was raking in the Os like a center pulls goals, and it opened up a whole world of bunny love.

Nothing beat the feeling of someone else's hand, or mouth, or pussy making my dick explode.

I don't want Sunny to have to go to the bathroom after we get busy and hide out there for an extra five minutes rubbing one out—not that girls actually do that. But it would suck if she had girl blue balls.

I take things slow at first, starting at her knee and kissing my way higher. I pay special attention to her moans and the way her hips shift to help me gauge what she likes. After a few minutes of teasing, I move over an inch and nibble right at the juncture between her thigh and her pussy. Her clit is peeking out, all swollen and looking to be licked, so I do.

"Oh my God." Sunny's legs clamp around my head.

"Too much?" I prop myself up on my elbows and put a palm on the inside of her thighs to keep them open.

"Yes. No. I'm not sure."

"Should I try that again?"

"Okay." She nods vigorously. "Please."

"Cool." I dive back in, but keep my eyes on her as I give her clit a kiss. She doesn't try to vice-grip my head with her thighs this time, so I press my tongue flat against her and lick up, real slow. Her brow furrows and her mouth drops open.

“You tell me if it’s too much, ’kay?”

“It’s not too much. It’s incrawsome.”

“Is that good?”

“Sorry.” She sucks in a deep breath. “I meant to say awesome or incredible, but it came out as one word.”

“Nice. I like it.” I drop my head and get back to business, sucking and licking and nibbling, taking my cues based on how much she wants to decapitate me with her thighs. My forearms are getting a serious workout from holding them open.

I can tell from the way she’s gripping my hair and her toes curling at my ribs that she’s getting close. I suck on her clit and slip two fingers inside her, glancing up to see her eyes roll back.

“How’s that feel, Sunny Sunshine?”

“Gooooood.”

I do it again. “Just good?”

“So good?”

“You tell me when it’s amazing.” I watch her face as I move my fingers faster and suck harder.

“Oh . . . that’s—” She throws her head back, and a needy whimper escapes.

“How’s that now?”

“Amazing.”

“If I keep it up, you think you’re gonna come?”

Her nod is frantic. She keeps one hand in my hair, the other grips the sheets. All of a sudden her eyes pop open and her mouth drops. Her shock as her whole body tenses is the best damn thing I’ve ever seen.

“Ride it out, baby.”

She keeps her eyes on me while she does just that. I give her one more courtesy finger curl, in case of residual orgasm shocks. She shudders, then goes loose again.

I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand before I kiss my way up her body. She’s breathing hard, and her entire body is limp. I sweep a few strands of damp hair away from her face and wait for her to open her eyes.

“Hi.”

She gives me a dopey smile. “Hi.”

“Was that fun?”

Sunny nods. “So fun.”

“How you feeling?” I ask when her eyes finally stay open.

“So relaxed. It’s so much better when it’s someone else doing all the work.”

I laugh. “Right?”

“Your mouth is made of awesome.”

“You think so?”

“Totally made of awesome.” She wraps her arms around my neck and her legs around my waist. My cock is nestled right where my mouth was a minute ago. I’m so damn hard right now. My balls are back to being achy.

Sunny sucks on my bottom lip before she slips her tongue inside my mouth. Breaking away, she asks, “Is that what I taste like?”

“Mm-hmm.”

She sucks my top lip this time. “Do you like that? The way I taste?”

Coming from someone else’s mouth, that might sound dirty, or warrant a dirty response, but this is Sunny, and she’s genuinely curious.

“I love the way you taste. I’ll go down on you whenever you want.”

“Really?”

“Definitely.”

“Like, if I asked you to do it again right now, you would?”

“You want me to, and I will.”

“You’re serious.” She looks baffled.

“For fucking right I’m serious.” I make a move to head back down, but she tightens her legs around my waist.

“You can eat me again later.”

“Oh, I plan to, baby.”

She ends the conversation with her tongue in my mouth again.

Eventually her hands start to wander. She pushes my shorts over my hips. The waistband gets caught on the head of my cock, but we manage to wrestle him free.

As soon as I’m naked, we line everything up so we’re playing slip ‘n’ slide with my cock. She’s so wet and hot and soft. Holy chocolate-covered Jesus popsicles, I want to get in there so bad.

But I don’t tell her that. Instead I push up on my arms, which nestles my dick in even snuggler. “We don’t have to have sex.”

I’m serious. I want it, but I don’t expect it. I’d be happy with a blow job. Okay. That’s bullshit. I’d much rather have hot, sweaty sex with Sunny,

but a BJ would be a decent consolation prize. I'd even take a handy. Hell, I'd slip 'n' slide my way to the land of Jizztopia at this point.

For a long moment we stare at each other, not moving. I try not to focus on the absence of friction. Instead I study her face the same way I would the offense when I'm figuring out the next play. There's a flash of uncertainty. That's all I need. Just a hint that she's not sure she wants this, so I back off.

Sunny's legs wrap tighter around my waist and those nails of hers dig into the back of my neck again. I'll be surprised if she doesn't draw blood, which is kinda hot. Shifting so my weight is on my left arm, I pick up a lock of her hair and twist it around my fingers, brushing it along her neck. "I'm not pushing for anything from you, Sunny. I know I keep messing things up. I don't wanna risk you feeling bad about your decisions when it comes to being with me."

Here's the thing: I don't blow smoke up girls asses. It's never been my style. I've always been a straight shooter. Well, mostly. My dick curves a little to the right, so I compensate for that, but when it comes to my relationships, or non-relationships, I've never been a bullshitter. So everything I've said to Sunny I mean, even though it'll suck the heat right out of my balls if she puts the brakes on.

There's nothing tentative about the way she shifts her pelvis so my dick goes real low. There's no hesitation when she turns her cheek and bites the fleshy part of my palm before she kisses it.

"I'm the only person you're seeing?"

"It's been me and my hand—and yours, when I see you." I leave out the part about my porn mags. Those don't count since they're only two-dimensional. Plus I always close my eyes at the end and pretend it's Sunny's callus-less hands when I jerk off.

"Me, too." She smiles, but it turns pensive almost immediately. "Well, mostly."

I tense, because what the fuck does that mean?

Her eyes go wide, possibly at my expression. "I mean, it's just been me, but sometimes I use . . . helpers."

"Helpers?" I have no idea what she's talking about. It makes me think of little elves running around down there, rubbing her clit for her.

"Mmm . . . I have this little vibrating thing called a bullet, but it's still just me touching myself. I'm gonna stop talking now so we can have sex."

She pulls me back down to her mouth. We're slipping and sliding until it gets to the point where we're both moaning, and I'm at risk of blowing my load all over her stomach if I don't get in there soon. I glance down at the floor where my pants lie in a heap, wondering how I'm going to get to my wallet. Which is when I realize, I'm not packing.

CHAPTER SEVEN

BAGGY LOVE GLOVE

“Shit.” I bury my face in her neck and stay where I am, nestled nice and snug against her skin. I didn’t come with soldiers.

I haven’t been carrying condoms for a while now because I don’t have a reason to use them. Having them on me is like letting an alcoholic carry around a bottle of booze and expecting him not to drink it. It’s better to go unprepared so I don’t accidentally do something I regret. Up until now it’s worked out damn well. Now it’s stupidity on my part.

“What’s wrong?” Sunny runs her foot up the outside of my leg, shifting things around. I go lower, away from the safety of her clit and closer to the hot heaven below.

“I didn’t come prepared.” If my dick were a person, he would grow arms and legs and kick the shit out of me. I’d ask for a blow job, but I almost don’t deserve one for not having packed the most important damn thing of all. And I’m supposed to be a top-tier boy scout. Fucking fail.

“Prepared?” She runs a hand through my hair and tilts her head back, giving me access to her neck. Her other hand comes to rest on my ass.

I kiss along her throat to her lips. “I didn’t bring any condoms.”

“Oh.”

Her obvious disappointment makes me feel better and worse at the same time. I almost want her to say it’s okay to do it without one. She could tell me she’s on the pill, or gets the shot, or has one of those DUI things, and I’d still bag it. I can barely take care of myself at this point in my life; I don’t need to make it more complicated with unexpected surprises.

“Oh! Wait! Alex always used to keep some in his bedroom. I’ll go check!” She unhooks her legs and pushes on my chest. I’m quick about getting off her, excited by the prospect that this could still go down. Sunny rolls out from under me as soon as there’s enough room and bounces off the edge of the bed. She stops at the door. “Don’t go anywhere. I’ll be right back.”

I lie on my side, my hard-on hovering a few inches off the bed, suspended in mid-air. “I’ll be right here, in this exact position, when you get back.”

She bites her lip and looks me over, then turns and runs down the hall, her pert ass jiggling. As I lie on her bed, waiting for her to return, I wonder how she knows about her brother's stash of condoms. Maybe she snooped in his room. I can't imagine Waters offering up that information willingly. He's far too protective of Sunny to help her out in the prophylactic department. If he knew she was about to use them with me, he'd probably make a noose with the leftovers and hang me by my dick from the rafters in the attic.

Sunny returns a minute later wearing only a huge smile. She jumps on the bed, her perky boobs bouncing, pink nipples standing at attention thanks to the air conditioning. "Jackpot!" she shouts and drops a pile of condoms on the comforter.

At first I think it's awesome, because clearly this means Sunny wants to get her serious fuck on with me. Maybe we can have multiple rounds tonight. Morning sex could be an option—along with afternoon, mid-afternoon, early evening, and late-night sex. I can make up for months of no pussy all in one weekend. Then I pick up one of the gold squares and flip it over. It's not a regular, run-of-the-mill Magnum. It's a Magnum XL.

"These came from your brother's room?"

"Yeah!"

"Did you bring his entire stash?"

"Nope. There's loads more if we need them!" She's bouncing, and her boobs shake with the movement. It's distracting. "He used to have a couple of boxes in there, back before he moved to Chicago. I figured I'd take a chance and see if there were any left, and this is what I found. I guess he probably doesn't need them anymore, so they're all ours."

I ignore the last part. I don't want to think about what he and my sister get up to since I've already witnessed the tail end of fuckery—literally—in the team locker room after he got ejected from a game for fighting. No amount of brain scouring will get rid of walking in on that. The only good part about that night was meeting Sunny.

I sift through the pile, flipping them over as I go, looking for something more my size. So far all I'm finding are the XLs. "You think he used these?"

Sunny nods.

"You're sure he didn't get them for promo or something?" I've never checked out Waters' junk on purpose, but we all walk around the locker

room and air our shit out after it's been cramped in a cup. Except Randy. He's weird about shit like that. Waters doesn't look like he should need these. I'm way bigger than he is when I'm hanging low. But then I'm a shower, not a grower.

"I have no idea. All I know is he keeps them in his closet."

"You said he wasn't a dickwhore. Why would he need all of these if he wasn't planning on using them?"

She waves off the comment. "I don't think he usually has this many. His friend Reid gave these to him as a joke for his twenty-fifth birthday."

"Huh. Well, I guess we lucked out. It looks like you found the mother lode." Now I know way too much about Waters' dick and the reason for Violet's awkward gait when they were first dating. I guess she must have gotten used to him by now.

I sift through the pile and finally find a green foil square, thank Christ. Here's the thing about condoms: it definitely sucks if they're too small. No one wants to feel like the circulation is being cut off in his dick. But I'd sure as hell rather wear a condom that's a little on the snug side than go with one that's gonna make my lightning rod look like it's wearing a baggy sock.

I've used the green ones before. They're extra snug, and it makes my junk look more impressive when I have to fight to roll it on. The shaving routine helps make everything look bigger, too. Not that I need any help there.

"So . . . um . . . do you think one of those will work? I checked the expiration date. They're all good for, like, two more years."

She's doing that thing with her hair again. I hold up the green foil square. "This is perfect. I'll thank your brother the next time I see him."

Sunny's eyes go wide. "You better not! He'll castrate you."

I slip an arm around her waist, and condoms crinkle under us as I roll over on top of her. "You don't think he'd be cool with us being safe?"

"Alex would like to think he's done a great job acting as my guard dog since high school."

"You're right. I won't thank him. We'll keep his secret stash between us." I drop a kiss on her chin and another on her lips.

Now that I know this is for sure going to happen, I'mma take my time and make sure I do Sunny right. There's also the whole thing about me being the first guy to give her an orgasm. It's almost more important than

being the first guy she had sex with—not that I want know anything about that.

Being the provider of the first big “O” gives me some power. It elevates my status. I’m the White Knight in the land of Orgasmia, wielding my magical sword of awesome.

We make out until Sunny claws her way down my back and starts jabbing her nails into my ass, trying to make my dick go lower. I sit back on my knees and grab the foil package I’ve set aside, but Sunny takes it from me and sits up.

“I want to do it.”

“It’s all you, sweets.” I motion for her to do her thing.

There’s something extra hot about having a woman put the condom on. Sunny’s right at eye level with my cock, and my dick twitches as she gives me a few slow strokes. She tears open the wrapper, inspects it to make sure she has it the right way around, then rolls it over the head.

Her tongue peeks out, and she glances up. “Are you sure this is gonna work? I think the gold ones are bigger.”

“This’ll work fine.” I put my hand over hers and help her roll it down the rest of the way.

Sunny folds her legs underneath her and rises up on her knees. She still has one hand on my cock. The other one smooths up my chest. I bend to meet her.

“You’re all ready for me,” she whispers against my lips.

“I sure am.” I wind an arm around her waist and use my knee to spread her legs wider as I lower her to the mattress. She rubs the head of my cock over her clit, then goes lower. I push up on my forearms so I can see her face as I ease inside.

I have to fight to keep my eyes open. I don’t know if it’s because it’s been more than three months since I’ve had sex, or because of the anticipation tonight, or because it’s Sunny—maybe it’s all of the above. The reason doesn’t matter, but the high is close to how I felt when we won the Cup.

A soft sigh falls from her lips. The nails digging into my left ass cheek retract. I can’t focus on any one sensation without being sidetracked by another. The visual and physical stimulation are putting my brain and body on overload.

Sunny's fingertips sweep up my back, the lightness of her touch causing my muscles to jump. When she reaches my shoulder she makes a circle, then draws a line up my neck, following the contour of my jaw to my chin.

Even though she's underneath me, she's the one in control. I won't move until she tells me to. And I'm perfectly cool with not moving. Being inside her is a whole different level of magical.

Sunny's fingers drift over my lips, her eyes searching mine. Her smile is as soft as her touch. "Kiss me, please," she whispers.

So I do. It's unhurried, gentle brushes of lips and warm sweeps of tongue. There's none of the earlier aggression when I wanted her worked up. A black knot of guilt settles in my stomach. For a second I worry that maybe I haven't been fair about how we got here, maybe I've manipulated her into this position. But then Sunny shifts under me, circling her hips, and I forget everything but the feel of her.

We move together, and for once it doesn't feel like a performance. It's not about reaching the goal, about making her come—although that's an objective for sure—it's about experiencing her.

There aren't any acrobatics on her part. She doesn't try to bend herself into a pretzel, and she doesn't scream my name, or slap my ass, or tell me how the rumors are *so true*. We kiss and move and groan into each other's mouths. I never pick up the pace, I just change the angle a bit and draw her left leg up higher so I can hit that sweet spot with every slow thrust.

She gasps, and her moans get louder. I push up on one arm, holding the back of her head in my palm. I like the feel of her hair sliding between my fingers and the weight in my hand.

Sunny's fingertips rest under my bottom lip and her palm curls around my chin. It's intimate and dominating at the same time, both of which I'm okay with. Her eyes are locked on mine again, something like surprise or awe behind them.

She starts to tremble, her legs tightening around my hips, her left knee pulling higher. I hold it there, between my ribs and my biceps, helping to keep the angle for her.

"Oh God, Miller. I think—" The words are cut off by her ragged inhalation. Her grip on my chin tightens as her mouth drops open, and she shakes her head like she doesn't believe it's happening.

“Just let go, baby.” I’m right there with her, unable to look away as every muscle in Sunny’s body clenches with her first-ever sexgasm. With me.

Something happens then, and it’s unexplainable. It’s like being body-checked by all the sensations I associate with orgasms: the tingle, the burn, the tightness, the expansion, and the final explosion—all of it happens at the same time. With it comes some weird emotional cocktail that I don’t know what I’m supposed to do with. It’s that high feeling again, but more extreme. I feel like I’m submerged *in* her. Like I’m inside her in more than just the literal sense. I don’t feel attached to my own body.

When I’m finally done coming, I struggle to keep from collapsing on top of her. I slide my arm under her and roll to the side, taking her with me.

“I don’t even know what happened there,” I mumble into her hair.

She makes this contented little noise. I feel her nose on my cheek and her lips moving along my jaw.

When her lips reach the corner of my mouth I turn my head and kiss her, going deep, holding her close. My cock kicks, like maybe he’s fighting to get hard again and keep going. It’s not going to happen right now, though. Maybe in half an hour. He kicks again, as if trying to prove me wrong.

“You still taste like me,” Sunny whispers.

“You want me to wash my face?”

“No. I don’t want you to go anywhere.”

We make out until I’m on the verge of getting hard again. I’m still inside her. Usually after sex I hit the bathroom and clean up, get some distance from whoever I’m in bed with. Not tonight. Sunny’s the one who breaks the kiss. She pushes on my chest, and when she tries to wriggle out of my grasp I throw my leg over hers.

“Miller.” She giggles when I burrow through her sweet-smelling hair and nibble on her shoulder.

“You don’t want to cuddle with me anymore?”

“I need the bathroom.”

“I can come with you.”

“Ew. No thanks.”

“Not into that, eh?”

“I’ll be right back.”

I loosen my hold, but she still has to work get out of my arms, giggling the entire time. She kneels on the bed beside me, naked, her skin still flushed. She looks happy, relaxed, and tired. She wraps her index finger and thumb around the base of the condom.

“What are you doing?”

“Getting rid of this for you.”

“You don’t want to keep it as a memento of your first orgasm during sex?”

She makes a gagging sound. “I think the memory is enough.” She slides it off and holds it out as she bounces off the bed.

I take in the bare expanse of her body as she skips to the bathroom. Sunny pretty much dances everywhere she goes. She’s light on her feet, and her long legs give her a gazelle-like quickness.

She’s in there for a few minutes. I hear the toilet flush and the sound of running water. The door to the bathroom opens, and she’s still magnificently naked. She crosses over to the vanity and starts braiding her hair, working from the right side to the left so it travels along her hairline at the base of her neck and over her shoulder.

I alternate between watching her reflection and appreciating the curves of her body. I’ve been with a lot of women. I’ve seen a lot of bodies. I’ve been with models and those waif types who look like they should probably score a few meals at an all-you-can-eat-buffet. Sunny, however, is my ideal, or she’s become it. Her long limbs are defined with strength, and there’s softness to her in the places there should be. She’s confident and comfortable in her own skin; it’s sexy.

“You coming back to bed so we can snuggle?” I hold my arms open.

She turns off the light in the bathroom and climbs up beside me. “For a big bad hockey player, you’re kinda a softie, you know that?”

“Don’t tell anyone. You’ll ruin my reputation.”

Sunny snorts as she curls into my side. She traces the line of my eyebrow. “I wish it was always this easy to be with you.”

I lift her chin so our noses touch. “I’mma work on trying to make that happen, ’kay? Just give me some time.”

She presses her lips to mine. “’Kay.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

UNFORESEEN THWARTS

It takes me a good thirty seconds to orient myself when I wake up. The bed is unfamiliar, but the smell of the sheets isn't. It's a combination of sex and Sunny. I glance to the right, where she should be; her pillow is empty. The clock on the nightstand tells me it's way late already. But then, we were up until five in the morning getting busy. I stretch and yawn, debating whether or not I'll fall asleep if I close my eyes again. My time with Sunny is limited. I only have today and tomorrow before I have to leave for the camp.

Even if I invite her up to visit, we won't have much in the way of alone time. She'd have to stay in a cabin with other people. I'll be in with the male counselors. Sex would be off the table. There'd be zero privacy, and humping on her in the forest, while fun, could prove problematic. There's no coed business going on at camp since the junior counselors are usually a bunch of horny almost-adults.

When I went to hockey camp as a teenager, I always had the most insane hard-ons. They were a pain in the ass to get rid of, until I became a senior counselor. Then I got to break all the rules I made everyone else follow. Nature makes me wanna get my fuck on. I don't know why. If I'd been put in a coed room, it would've turned into a damn orgy. Okay, probably not, but I would've dreamed about it becoming an orgy.

The sheets tent at my waist thanks to my reminiscing. It would be nice to have Sunny there with me, even if we can't get naked. She'd get to see me doing something other than playing hockey and being an asshole on social media. I'd get to spend more time with her, in an environment where I know she'd have fun. The only real issue would come from not being able to get all up inside her the entire time. On second thought, having her there might be like torture.

After last night, it's gonna be a real challenge to keep my clothes on when we're alone together. Sex with Sunny was way more intense than I'd expected. Even more amazing is that I pulled an orgasm hat trick of firsts on her: I made her come with my fingers, my tongue, my dick, and I gave her her first set of multiples. That beats out any other hat trick in the history of hat tricking. It's a Super Hat Trick with the multiples thrown in there.

I'd tell Randy, but he might slip up and tell Lance, and Lance can't keep his mouth shut about anything.

I want to tell someone, though. I find my phone, which ended up on the floor a long ways away from my pants. Cuing up my contacts, I call Violet. It's after eleven, so she's definitely awake. Sadly, it goes to voice mail.

"Hey, sis. Call me when you get this. I hat tricked last night, and my hat trick kicks Waters' hat trick's ass."

My phone rings in the middle of my message, so I end my call with Violet to answer the one coming through. I can tell it's my PA by the ring tone. I get it before it goes to voice mail.

"Hey, 'sup, Amber? How's the portage trip going? You do battle with any bears yet?"

"No battle of the bears, thankfully. We got rained on last night. We're taking a break for lunch. I thought I'd call you since we have decent reception on this leg of the trip. I'm so sorry you missed your flight. I thought I'd put enough reminders in your calendar, and then Violet told me you mixed up the times."

"It's cool. It's not your fault. My phone died, and I had it in my head that I was leaving at nine, not six. You know how I am."

"I should've been on top of that. I feel awful. I saw the social media insanity. How much trouble are you in with Sunny?"

"We're good. We got things sorted."

"Talked your way out of it, did you?" She doesn't sound all that surprised.

I think about all the ways I made Sunny come last night. "It always looks worse than it is. But yeah, I managed to smooth things over."

"So you found the box of condoms in the bag of gifts, then?"

"Box of condoms?"

"I got you two, in case you were extra busy."

"No shit. You're the best, Amber."

"Remember that when the bill for my birthday present comes in this year."

I don't think she's joking. "You're always saving my ass, so you deserve whatever you choose—as long as it's not a car."

"Well, there goes that plan." She sighs dramatically. "So I wanted to talk to you about the camp and some possible promotion opportunities."

“You know how I feel about that—”

“Hear me out before you say no.”

I sigh, but give her the chance to try to sell me on whatever she’s planning before I shut her down.

“I think it would be a good idea for you to let one of the local papers come up and interview you.”

“You know I don’t do well in interviews.”

“You don’t do well in scripted interviews. You’re fine when there aren’t any lines to learn. It doesn’t have to be a big thing, just a few questions about your role at the camp.”

“It’ll be a circus.”

“It won’t. It’s small town out there, Miller. It’s not like being in Chicago where everyone goes crazy over you guys.”

“Okay. I’ll think about it. Oh, hey, Randy emailed me something about a car wash fundraiser out near the camp. I’m probably going to go with him if the timing works out.”

“Do you know who’s hosting it?” Amber asks.

“No. Some guy Randy knows from when he played for Toronto. Randy says he puts on a lot of events.”

“What’s the charity? Can you forward me any information?”

“It’s for breast cancer. And sure, I’ve got an email I can flip you.”

“Okay. Sounds good. I’ll make sure it’s on the up and up.”

Any cancer fundraiser gets me, and Amber knows it; so does Vi. “Okay. Yeah. And I’ll check with Balls.”

“Great. Perfect. Don’t forget you’re picking him up from the airport, either. I’m sending you his flight details. You’ll have time to connect with him before Sunday?”

“Yeah. Of course.”

“Just checking. You might be busy blowing through all those condoms.”

Amber has a sense of humor. She has to if she wants to work with guys like me. “Ha ha. I’ll take a ten-minute break to deal with details.”

“Have fun with Sunny.”

“I plan to. Repeatedly. Enjoy the bears.”

“Fuck you, Miller.”

I get a dial tone and smile. Amber’s an awesome PA.

Before I go looking for Sunny, I decide now is a good time to get the trimmer out. I'll be off to camp soon enough, and mosquitoes have a tendency to get caught in my arm hair and bite the shit out of me if I don't take it down to a number three.

I'm not as hairy as Vi makes me out to be with her mythical fur-covered creature comparisons. Some of the guys on my team are way hairier, especially around playoff time when the beards are in effect and the neck hair meets the chest. Being blond means I can get away with a little less in the personal grooming department than the average guy.

Trimming is messy business, so I step out on the balcony overlooking the backyard. There's lattice for privacy, but I don't want to flash the neighbors, so I leave my shorts on.

I check the trimmer blade to make sure it's the right one. The two lasts longer, but it makes things prickly, and I'm going for soft, not efficient, tonight. When I first started seeing Sunny, I tried the number two. Vi had been making the usual yeti jokes, and I got self-conscious. But I had to wear long sleeves on my date with Sunny during a heat wave. My arms felt like a cactus for a good week before the hair grew out.

Resting my foot on the railing, I start on my left leg. I go over everything twice. My shorts prove to be a problem, though. They're in the way. I don't want to end up with the equivalent of a reverse farmer's tan, except with fuzzy thighs instead of overly white skin. I peek around the lattice. I can see the edge of the pool. On the other side is the neighbor's patio. An old dude sits in a lounge chair, drinking iced tea and reading the paper in his bathrobe. There's a pair of binoculars on the table beside his drink. This has to be Sunny's pervy neighbor. But he can't see me, so I'm safe to drop the shorts.

After I finish round two with my legs, I run a hand against the grain. The resulting semi-smoothness is gratifying.

Once I shaved my legs with a real razor. Actually, I used four of them. I wanted to see what it felt like. It was winter when I did it, so I didn't think anyone would see them. Unfortunately, I forgot about the part where I'm an NHL player and I get changed in a locker room with other guys who would notice my hairless legs and razz me about them. Which is what happened.

I lied and said one of the bunnies I'd been with must have done it while I was sleeping. It seemed believable. Some bunnies get territorial.

Those are the ones I cut loose in a hurry. Or used to cut loose. Before Sunny.

Moving on to my arms, I resume my mission to tone down the fur. When the breeze picks up, the trimmed hairs swirls around in the air before they go over the edge, floating toward the neighbor's yard. I bet the birds will love it. Sunny says it makes great nests.

On the final pass with the trimmer, a strong gust of wind lifts the liberated hairs, and the cross-breeze from inside the house creates a cataclysmic weather system. A mini-tornado spins the fluff around in a circle. The tumbleweed of blond rises into the air, disappearing over the edge of the balcony.

There's some sputtering and clanging from the patio next door. "What is that?" A yippy dog barks in distress as the yelling continues. "Thor! You made me spill my tea!"

I turn off the trimmer and flatten myself against the sliding door. Shimmying over a couple of steps, I peek through the lattice. Sunny's neighbor has knocked over his chair and drink. His dog, Thor—which, incidentally, is tiny—chases after one of my fuzz tumbleweeds.

"Is everything okay?" That's Sunny checking on her neighbor.

"Oh, hello, Sunshine. Thor's chasing fluffs."

"That's nice—Oh! Mr. Woodcock! It looks like you forgot to put on your pants again."

I take another peek through the lattice. Mr. Woodcock's robe has come undone, his saggy nuts and his wrinkled wang hanging out. I hope my nuts never droop that low.

I slip back into the house and return to Sunny's room. I still need to trim around the cannon. Last night all I managed to do was clean up my balls. I can't take care of everything else and leave my dick the way it is.

I lock myself in her bathroom, keeping the number three for the treasure trail. I want to be groomed, not look like my dick is attached to the body of a twelve year old. I'm thoughtful enough to do it over Sunny's toilet so I can contain the worst of the fuzz droppings.

Once I've cleaned up around the junk, I switch out the number three attachment and straddle the toilet seat. I flatten my dick against my stomach and wrap my nuts around like it's a hot dog so I can make sure I did a good enough job last night.

I snicker to myself at the way half my cock sticks out the top like an oversized wiener. I run the trimmer over the sensitive skin. I flick the loose hair off and inspect my work. Everything looks good. My chest I leave alone. Sunny likes it.

I do a quick rinse-off in the shower and throw on a pair of swim shorts. I find the condoms Amber was talking about and shove a couple into my back pocket, just in case.

On my way to find Sunny I cut through the kitchen and pour myself a cup of coffee. I go in search of sugar, but all I can find is organic maple flakes. I guess they'll do. I dump half a spoon in and stir. It smells decent. My next mission is checking for cream.

Sunny's a vegan, which is like a hardcore vegetarian. She doesn't even eat cheese or drink milk. Everything she puts in her super-tight, extra-bendy body comes from plants. Thankfully, Robbie and Daisy indulge in the cow juice. I pour in some cream and go outside.

Sunny's sitting in a lounge chair with her laptop in her lap. She's wearing a pale green bikini and a sheer white cover-up. Now that I've been up in that, it's all I want to do for the rest of the weekend. I'm already sporting a semi.

Titan and Andy are sleeping at her feet. She's wearing headphones and concentrating on whatever she's reading, so she doesn't hear me.

She's so engrossed that she still hasn't noticed me standing behind her. Her hair is twisted up in a clip, but a few strands have fallen loose, and they sweep across her shoulders when the breeze picks up. I glance around the backyard, checking to see how visible we are to Mr. Woodcock. It seems protected. Only the second-floor windows of his house have a view of the pool. I decide it's safe to announce my presence.

First I set my coffee on the ground next to the side table. Then I unfasten my shorts. Coming around beside her, I pull out my semi and tap it on her shoulder. Sunny screams and swats at my dick. Thankfully she doesn't hit it. Her high-pitched scream wakes up Andy and Titan, who both start barking. She swivels in her chair, her face at the same level as my crotch.

"What the heck, Miller!"

"I was getting your attention." I can't keep a straight face. She looks mortified. It's seriously awesome.

She covers her face with her hands, her shoulders shaking. Peeking out from behind them she tells Andy and Titan to shush through her laughter.

“It worked didn’t it?” I take the laptop from her and set it on the side table.

“You’re ridiculous!”

“You love it.” I uncross her ankles and kneel at the end of the chair between them.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m saying good morning.”

“It’s almost noon.”

“So it’s still morning.” I run my hands up the outside of her legs and fit myself between them. Without tucking myself back into my shorts, I lie down on top of her. Bathing suit material is all that separates us. “And I woke up to an empty bed.” I kiss her collarbone and make a path with my lips all the way to her mouth.

“My ancient neighbors are probably watching.”

“He flashed you. It’s only fair I flash him back.” I reach behind me and shove my shorts down past my ass, grabbing the condoms while I’m at it.

“You saw that?”

“If he’s creeping on us, we might as well give him something to look at.” I slap the condoms on the side table.

She glances over. “Miller! We’re outside!”

“You don’t have to lose any clothes.” I slip a hand between us, moving her bathing suit to the side and drag the head of my cock over her clit. “You just have to be quiet.”

An hour later we’re still hanging out by the pool. I have a bite mark on my shoulder from when Sunny came. She’s extra relaxed.

“You should let me put some sunscreen on your back.” I’m looking for an excuse to touch her again.

“Am I getting burned?” She glances at her shoulder.

“You’re okay for now.” I pat the space between my legs, inviting her in.

She eases between them, sitting too far forward for any of our body parts to rub together. Her shoulders are dotted with freckles from being out

in the sun so much already. Sunny spent a few days last month volunteering at a community garden, planting flowers as part of a revitalization project. She's into stuff like that. It's one of the things we have in common.

"So I head out to that camp tomorrow," I tell her, smoothing lotion over her skin.

"I think it's a great thing you're doing."

"Thanks. It's fun. And I have the time right now." I make sure I get under the halter strap on her bikini. I love this bathing suit. She was wearing it the first time I copped a quick feel.

"Anyway, I was thinking maybe you'd want to come up and visit while I'm there?" At her silence, I rush on. "You could come at the end if you're not into the whole hockey camp deal. You could even meet some of the kids if you wanted to, or not. They have cabins, so you wouldn't have to tent it. Then we could rent a cottage for a few days if you can get the time off from work and volunteering."

She's quiet for another moment. "That sounds fun. I wish you would've asked me sooner." Sunny turns so she's mostly facing me.

Oh shit. I know this look. It's a bad one. It reminds me of what I probably look like when I'm getting ready to let a honey down easy.

"If getting time off work is a problem maybe I can take care of it—"

"Getting time off work isn't the issue, Miller."

"So it shouldn't be a problem, right? You can come, then. Unless you don't want to."

She puts a hand on my knee, squeezing softly. "So . . . you know how all those pictures showed up on the Internet."

"You said you were over those." I don't get it. Last night was awesome, and this morning was awesomer. I haven't had a chance to mess anything else up yet.

"I am, now, but when I saw them, I was upset. It seemed like you were playing me, and then there was the drunk dialing and—"

"I thought we sorted this out."

"We did. I'm trying to explain. I'd love to come visit you, but I can't."

"Because of the stuff on Instagram?"

"No. Well, kind of. Lily invited me to come camping with her. She asked a long time ago, but I wasn't sure I wanted to go. Then those pictures showed up, and I decided maybe I should. Just to get away from everything

for a while. I already had a light schedule because I knew I was seeing you this weekend. I had my volunteer shifts covered.”

Sunny isn’t used to actual camping. I know this because she’s grown up doing the cottage thing. It’s big in Canada. People buy houses on lakes and drive through terrible traffic on the weekends so they can get shitfaced on a dock and hang out in the water and have campfires.

“So go camping with her for a few days and then come visit me.”

“I’ve already committed to it. I don’t want to back out.”

This doesn’t work with my plan. I should’ve asked before I came, but I wasn’t sure what this weekend was going to look like. I didn’t want to get ahead of myself, and now I’m screwed. Things start to wind back up for training soon. I have a bunch of endorsement stuff to do. I want to find a way to get her to ditch Lily and come with me instead.

“There’s no way you can cut it short?”

Her eyes drop, and she traces a circle around my kneecap. “Lily’s been supportive through this whole thing. I’m constantly bombarded with all the social media stuff.”

I tuck a few loose strands of hair behind her ear. “I’ll be better about that.”

“It’s not just you, Miller. It’s my brother, too. It’s not all bad, but sometimes I need a break from it. I try not to let it affect me, but it’s hard. Lily and I want some time away, get perspective and stuff.”

Lily isn’t my biggest fan. I’m sure she worked hard to get Sunny to agree to go. “Well, where are you going? I could meet you up there afterward. Can I drive?”

“It’s called Chapleau. It’s about eight hours by car, I think.”

“What about flying? Can I do that instead?”

“There isn’t an airport nearby. We could plan another visit for a few weeks from now, before my fall semester starts.”

No way am I leaving it that long. I need to see more of Sunny, not less. “I’ll drive out there after I’m done at the camp. We can spend a few days doing whatever. Then we can drive back together. I just need to know where it is.”

I’ll take whatever time I can get with Sunny, even if it means having to deal with her bitchy bestie. That chick isn’t going away, so I’ll have to find a way to get her to like me.

“That might be an issue, too. We won’t have an actual campsite or anything. It’s, like, out in the wilderness. I’m not sure how great my reception will be while I’m there.”

“Everywhere has reception. Even the rain forest.” Okay, so that’s not true, but this is Canada. Everyone should be able to use a cell phone, even in the damn forest.

“It’s really far north. People don’t do the cell phone thing out there. It’s all real landlines and stuff. That’s the whole point of getting back to nature, Miller. We’re going to put up tents in the middle of nowhere.”

Having no line of communication with Sunny isn’t ideal. I was without a phone for less than twenty-four hours and look how that blew up in my face. Sunny alone with Lily for a week could undo the last twenty-four hours.

“So how will I let you know when I’m on my way?”

“We’ll probably go into town for food and stuff every few days. There’s one about half an hour away, I think. Maybe we can touch base then? I’m sorry, Miller. I’ve been thinking about backing out since I woke up this morning, but Lily thinks it’ll be good for my soul, and so does Alex. I kinda have to agree with them.” She’s doing that thing with her hair again, wrapping it around her finger and brushing it over her lips.

Fucking Waters and Lily. They must be colluding. This is obviously a sabotage. Where the hell is Vi in all of this? She’s supposed to be backing me up. I need to have a chat with her. It occurs to me that Sunny’s directionally challenged. Driving out into the middle of the Canadian wilderness to go commune with nature is all well and good, as long as she has someone else to navigate. I have no clue how adept Lily is when it comes to this kind of thing.

“So it’s you and Lily going? Who’s going to drive? What car are you taking? Does she go camping a lot?”

“Lily goes camping all the time with her boyfriend. She was in Girl Guides all the way to Pathfinders.”

I have no idea what that is, but it sounds like it might be like Boy Scouts for girls in Canada. “So her boyfriend’s coming, too?”

Sunny traces a vein in my forearm to my wrist, then follows the line from the center of my palm to the space between my thumb and index finger. “There’s a group of us.”

“That’s good. You can all take turns driving. Who else is going?” Lily is the only friend of Sunny’s I’ve met so far.

“Lily’s boyfriend, Benji. You haven’t met him yet, and then there’s Kale.”

Benji sounds like it should be a dog’s name. “Kale? Is that a guy or a girl?”

“Kale’s a guy.”

“And his name is Kale? Like the vegetable?”

“Short for Kaleb. He’s nice.”

Like that makes his name less weird. It’s bad enough that Lily is going to have the week I wanted Sunny to be with me. But now she’s going on a road trip with another guy? “He’s a friend of yours?”

“We’ve all known each other since high school.”

Something about the way she won’t look at me makes the time-out buzzer go off in my head. “Did you date him or something?” I mean it to come out sounding more like a joke than an inquisition.

Her eyes stay focused on her wiggling toes. “It was a long time ago.”

Sunny’s only twenty. High school ended for her two years ago. “How long is a long time?”

“We broke up senior year. It was forever ago. He’s over it.”

There are so many things I want to say right now that I can’t. I need to call Violet. I can’t see the appeal in going on a trip with my best friend and her boyfriend and a goddamn ex. It would be insanely awkward.

“Are *you* over it?”

This time she looks at me. “Of course! Why would you even ask that?”

“Because you agreed to go on the trip when you were angry with me, and I can bet Lily was all about convincing you it would be a good idea. Does Alex know Corn Chip is going with you?”

“It’s Kale, not corn chip, Miller. And yes, Alex knows, and he still thinks it’s a good idea.”

“Of course he does!”

“Why are you bringing my brother into this? He has nothing to do with anything.”

“Yes, he does! You listen to what he says all the time, and he hates me. Of course he’s going to be all for you taking a road trip with your high school ex and Lily and her boyfriend.”

“Kale and I have been friends for years.”

“Who broke up with who?” I don’t have much experience with legit relationships. But if I know anything, it’s that guys can hold secret torches for chicks for years.

I saw it happen to Violet a couple of times when she was in high school. These guys would come over to hang out and get help with math, because Vi is ridiculously good at math. They were always jocks, and I was totally familiar with the game. Whenever she’d leave the room for a minute to get a glass of water, I’d tell them I’d break their faces if they so much as laid a finger on her. She’d always be oblivious to the fact that these dudes were drooling all over her rack.

“It was mutual.”

“Really? So at the exact same time you both decided you didn’t want to be with each other anymore?”

“Well, I initiated it, but he agreed it was better to stay friends.”

“You suggested you should stay friends?” I don’t care who the guy is, friends never works.

“He’s Lily’s boyfriend’s best friend. We were going to see each other all the time anyway. We had to stay friends.”

All this information isn’t making me feel better about the trip she’s going on. I’d cancel the camp if I could and tag along on the soul-cleansing adventure, but I’d be disappointing way too many people. Myself included.

“Does he have a girlfriend?”

“He’s between relationships.”

“What does that mean? Is it like being between jobs? He had one, and he’s looking for another one?”

“She broke his heart. He’s not looking to get into anything serious right now.”

I’ve seen a couple of guys on my team go through the rebound phase. It’s one of the many reasons I haven’t tried to do the serious-relationship thing. It seems to be a six-month cycle. The girls they’re dating get all kinds of antsy. They call all the time, get clingy, and start making unreasonable accusations, worrying about what the guys are doing after the games and who they’re doing it with. Sometimes the worry is justified; other times it’s paranoia.

Playing professional hockey means a lot of traveling; sometimes we’re away for up to two weeks. It’s usually during one of these long stints that the call comes: She can’t take it. It’s too much. It’s her, not him. Then the

rebound bunny-pucking begins. The guy goes home with a slew of new bunnies, hoping to sex out the feelings or whatever. It never works. They mope around and get into fights on the ice. I don't want to end up being one of those guys.

"So he's on the rebound?"

"He wants a break. He sees her all the time since they work for the same not-for-profit organization. They were supposed to go on this trip together, but obviously that's not happening, so I'm taking her place."

"Lily must love this."

"She's looking out for me, Miller. She's been my best friend since first grade. She's only met you once, and she doesn't know you apart from what she sees on social media. Most of that isn't very positive. Maybe if you were more open about all the good things you do outside of hockey, and parties, and going to the bar, people would have something else to focus on besides all the hooker bunnies."

I sigh and lean back in the chair. I feel a lot like the squirrel sitting on the telephone wire, waiting to be electrocuted. This conversation is on the road to becoming another fight.

"It's complicated, Sunny. If people know where I'm going to be, it floods programs with kids who don't need the support." As it is, I usually have a campaign set up to fund the highest-need families. I get Amber and my dad to go through the applications first and pick the top five. I find it too hard to choose on my own. And I make sure any promo stuff happens after the fact, so the camps are full for the following summer.

I wrap my arms around Sunny's waist and pull her against my chest. I need to work this from a different angle. Playing the possessive boyfriend isn't a good idea. I need to be understanding. "I get that you made these plans with Lily, and you don't want to back out of them. You're a good friend. I don't want you to bail on your friends for me."

I need to focus on making the most of the time we have left together and make sure I secure more sooner rather than later.

"September is coming fast," I continue. "You'll be back in school, and I'll be in training. Then the season starts, and I'll be traveling a lot. I want more than a couple of days here and there."

"I want that, too. I like being with you."

I kiss her shoulder. "So it's cool if I come out there and do the drive back with you? Maybe I can get Lily to warm up to me."

“That’d be nice. She’s a great friend.”

“Will I get to meet this ex of yours before I leave?”

“That’s the other thing I was meaning to tell you . . .”

This doesn’t sound good.

“Lily is picking me up tomorrow morning.”

“Morning? I thought we had the day together.” Randy sent me his flight details. I don’t have to get him from the airport until five in the evening.

“Lily said eight, but she’s always late, so probably closer to nine or ten.”

“Why so early? Can’t you leave in the afternoon?”

“It’s a long drive. We need to be there before dark so we can set up camp; otherwise we’ll all have to sleep in the trailer.”

The idea of Sunny sleeping in a trailer with her ex-boyfriend definitely makes my rage meter spike.

Sunny’s voice softens as she explains. “I made the plans before you showed up—after I saw all the pictures and couldn’t get a hold of you. I didn’t think you were coming. I wasn’t even sure I wanted to see you, and then there you were, knocking on my door at two in the morning.”

I trace the edge of her jaw with a fingertip. I’m pulling out all the stops. “You don’t have to explain. It’s my fault.”

“It was a misunderstanding.”

“Because I’m an idiot.”

“No, you’re not.”

“Sometimes I am.” I kiss the bottom of her chin and the tip of her nose, hovering over her lips. “You wanna go inside?”

“Inside?”

“I feel like I should apologize.”

“And we need to go inside for that?”

“I like to demonstrate how sorry I am with actions, not words.”

“What kind of actions?”

“The kind that result in multiple orgasms.”

“Oh. Well, we should definitely go inside then.”

CHAPTER NINE

SNEAK ATTACK!

Sunny and I spend the afternoon in bed, working up a serious appetite while I discover exactly how bendy she is. By the time we're done, she's had four orgasms, I've had two, and we've had sex in positions I'd never considered feasible.

"I'm starving." I'm still between her legs, enjoying the feel of Sunny's hands running up and down my back. The come-down from my orgasm lingers. It's an incredible feeling, second only to winning a hockey game.

"I don't think you need any more cookie today."

"I haven't even eaten—" I lift my head from her chest. She's got the cutest look on her face, all wide-eyed and pleased with herself. "You being funny, Sunny Sunshine?"

She grins.

"I can always eat more cookie." I start kissing a path down her stomach, but she grabs my head in her hands.

"If you go down on me again you're either going to have a callus on your tongue, or I'm going to have one on my cookie."

I laugh and kiss my way back up to her mouth. "I need to eat some real food anyway. Let's put clothes on and go out. I wanna take you somewhere nice."

"Oooh! I know the perfect place. You're gonna love it!"

Sunny pushes on my chest and rolls out from under me, hopping to her feet.

Half an hour later we're dressed and in downtown Guelph. My idea of the perfect place to eat isn't the same as Sunny's. We're at a vegan restaurant. I'm not knocking the food. Plants are actually pretty tasty. I just know I'm going to be hungry by the time we get back in the car. Still, she's excited, so I order half the menu and stuff my face with food that's never canoodled with a cow or even a fish.

I falsely believe that no one who works here can possibly watch hockey. They all have dreads and wear shoes made out of hemp. But I'm dead wrong about the hockey thing. The guy who seats us knows exactly who I am, and he can't stop talking about how much he wishes I'd been traded to Toronto.

Sunny must come to this place a lot, because the wait staff seem to know her. She introduces me to a bunch of people, but I can't keep their names straight, and my usual nicknames don't work since they're all the same variety of granola. She also doesn't call me her boyfriend. She doesn't call me anything other than my name, but we sit on the same side of the table instead of across from each other, and she snuggles into my side. That says a lot more than a title.

Later, when we get back to her house, we watch a movie. Naked. Well, there isn't much watching after the first fifteen minutes, but it was fun while it lasted, and even more fun afterward. When Sunny falls asleep on the couch, I raid the fridge. I don't find much aside from healthy options and rice or almond milk. I think I've hit the jackpot when I check the freezer and find it full of baked goods. Sadly, all the lids have those red circles with the line through them covering the face of a stick man eating the contents. There's also a pot leaf on there. It must be Sunny's dad's research. He works for a medical marijuana lab, perfecting strains. He's insanely smart. Apparently Sunny likes to help with the baking part of that. I call a local pizza shop and order myself a snack.

Sunny wakes up as I'm polishing off my midnight meal. A pile of cleaned-off chicken wing bones sits next to the Styrofoam container. Sunny stretches, and the blanket I've covered her with falls so her nipples peek out.

"What're you doing?"

"Staring at your boobs."

She blinks blearily, pulling the blanket up to cover the goods and leans forward to inspect what's in my bowl. Her nose crinkles in that cute way that tells me she's grossed out. "Your bowl is an animal graveyard."

"It's delicious, though."

"You like a box of death for a snack?"

"It sounds way less appealing when you say it like that."

She stands, dropping the blanket on the floor. "I'm going to bed."

I drop the last bone in the bowl. "Hold on. I'm coming, too."

"You can't leave those there." She points to the death bowl. "Andy will eat them and be sick."

I rush to clean them up as she heads for the stairs.

Tonight's the last night we get to sleep together. Tomorrow morning she's leaving on that stupid road trip. I need to make sure I'm on her mind

while we're apart. I don't try for sex again; I go for a snuggle instead. Sunny falls asleep wrapped around me, her warm cheek on my chest.

I wake up to terrible, humid breath in my face. I crack a lid to find Andy's nose an inch away from mine. "Hey, buddy. You need a mint." I roll over, but Sunny's side of the bed is already empty. It's only seven in the morning, still early, but she's leaving in a couple of hours, so I drag myself out of bed, throwing off the heavy hands of sleep. I don't bother with boxers. My plan is to find her and use my morning wood to my advantage.

When I reach the stairs, I'm hit with the sweet smell of cinnamon. Sunny can bake, as evidenced by the treats in the freezer. Her cookies are the best. I snicker as I take the stairs down to the kitchen. Now that I've eaten her cookie, I have all kinds of dirty baked-goods jokes. Unfortunately, it's another one of those things I can't share with the guys.

I find her in the kitchen. Her hair is still in the same braid from last night, except it's a mess. The sun streams in the window over the sink where she's rinsing fresh fruit, the light catching the fine blond flyaways, creating a halo. She's wearing shorts and a tank top, and she's braless.

She doesn't notice me right away, so I lean against the doorjamb to watch her. She hums along to the radio as she peels peaches. I wish she wasn't leaving this morning.

I circle around behind her, wrapping an arm around her waist. It would be so easy to get her naked and get inside her right on the counter. She gasps, and at first I think it's out of surprise, but then I notice the fine line of blood welling across the pad of her index finger.

"Ah, shit, Sunny. I'm sorry." I shimmy us over to the sink, turn on the tap, and adjust the water temperature. When it's cold I put her hand under the stream. So much for a good-morning surprise.

Sunny turns her head away, pressing her cheek into my chest. "Is it still bleeding?"

I put pressure below the gash, checking to see how bad it is. It's a clean cut, and it's not too deep, just a surface wound. Blood wells again so I move her hand back under the water. "It's not bad. It doesn't need stitches or anything." I kiss the top of her head.

She does this shuddery thing.

“You got bandages down here?”

“I think there might be some in the drawer.” She flops her hand in the general direction of the cupboards to our right.

“I’ll get one, then?” I can’t move until she stops leaning on me.

“I think I need to sit down.” The words come out all drunken sounding. Then Sunny slides down my body. I catch her under the arms before she hits the floor.

“Sweets?” I crouch, using my shoulder to stop her head from lolling around. Her eyes are rolled up, and she’s total dead weight. She fainted. I prop her against the cabinets, adjusting her limp body so she won’t fall over. This isn’t going the way I planned.

The paper towels are a couple inches out of reach. To prevent her from falling over, I stand in front of her, bracing my thigh against her shoulder to hold her up. It isn’t the best position, well, not for the situation, anyway. My dick is two inches from her face, and I’m naked.

She starts to come to as I snatch up the paper towels. Ripping off a couple of sheets, I reposition to crouch again, but she wraps her arms around my legs and face-butts me in the junk. I grunt, pain shooting up my spine and nailing me right in the back of the throat. Bile comes with it, as does the sensation that my balls are going to forever reside below my Adam’s apple.

I drop to the floor in front of her, gritting my teeth. My vision blurs and then clears.

“Miller?” She’s all breathy and confused.

I feel her palm on my cheek. Her piercing scream makes my ears hurt as much as my balls. Then she faints again.

I wipe at the damp spot on my cheek and check my fingers. There’s a faint streak of red, almost dried already. I wet the paper towel and wipe my cheek until it comes clean. Then I wrap a clean paper towel around her bloody finger and wait for her to come around a second time. My balls still really fucking hurt, but they’ll be fine in a couple hours. A face-butt to the groin is nothing like a puck or a stick to the cup.

Her eyes flutter open.

“Hey.”

She glances around, taking in her position on the floor. “Did I faint?”

“Twice.”

“I don’t handle the sight of blood well.”

“I figured that out.”

“Sorry.”

“Aside from the face-butt to the balls, it’s cool.” Chicks don’t understand how much it hurts to get bagged. I’ve heard Vi talk about how chicks give birth, and I’m sure that hurts like a motherpucker, but at least there’s the option for drugs to take away the pain. When a guy gets a shot to the nuts, there’s nothing we can do but put a bag of frozen peas on it and wait for our balls to come back down from our throats.

“The face-butt to what?”

“Nothing. Don’t worry about it. I’m going to get you a bandage now, ’kay?”

At her nod, I stand and turn toward the cabinets she pointed to in the first place.

“You’re naked.”

“Yup.” I open the drawer and rummage around, looking for a bandage. I move aside a ball of elastic bands and a million pens and pieces of scrap paper.

“Why?”

I glance over my shoulder. “I’m giving being a nudist a shot. What do you think?”

“Naked looks good on you.”

She gives me a weak smile and sits cross-legged on the floor, showing me her lack of panties under her shorts.

“Not as good as it looks on you.”

I find the bandages at the very back of the drawer, along with some antibiotic cream that’s two months out of date. It’ll do.

Getting back down to her level, I sit on the tile floor. My balls clench up, and my dick shrinks, trying to get away from the cold. Sunny closes her eyes as I unwrap the paper towel and check the cut again. It’s stopped bleeding for the most part, and it’s already clean, so all I need to do is cover it up. I use two bandages instead of one, in case there’s some bleed-through.

I toss the bloody paper towels in the trash and kiss the back of her hand. “All done.”

She peeks up, her expression wary until she sees the bandage.

“How’d you ever manage to make it through a hockey game?”

It’s kind of a joke, but kind of not. Hockey players get roughed up all the time. Everyone who plays professional sports should expect a few

stitches along the way, especially with skates in the mix. I've had at least five occasions I can think of where I've needed stitches, whether from skates, a fast-moving puck, or a stick to a place without much padding. Most of the time, if it isn't too bad, I get sewn up on the bench and get back in the game.

"I try not to look when people get into fights. I can handle it on TV, but in real life . . ." She shudders and pales.

The oven beeps, and she uses my shoulders to pull herself up. I stand along with her, gripping her at the waist when she falters.

"Why don't you let me get it?"

"I'm fine. I can do it myself." She's almost snippy.

I let go, and she face-plants into my chest. Wrapping an arm around her waist, I lift her easily on to the counter. She grunts and makes an attempt at resisting, but she's too unsteady, so she ends up gripping my arms instead.

"I can take a pan out of the oven, Sunny. Heating frozen food until it's edible is one of my specialties."

She makes a sound somewhere between a stifled laugh and an aggravated sigh.

"I'm not joking. I'm the best cook of frozen food in all of Chicago. I'd go as far as to say all of Illinois, but I don't want to seem like I have a big ego or anything."

"Miller."

"Sunny."

The oven beeps again. This time she lets go of my shoulders and motions toward it. I grab an apron off the counter and tie it around my waist to protect my dick before I open the oven. Inside is a huge pan of cinnamon buns, covered in pecans and bubbling around the edges. I put the mitts on and take them out, setting them on the granite counter.

"Where did you get these?"

"I made them."

"When?"

"This morning, while you were sleeping."

"Like, from scratch?"

"Yup."

"Dough and all?"

"I'm pretty sure that's what *scratch* means."

I stop ogling the buns and look over my shoulder. I'm almost a hundred-percent sure that was sarcasm. She's still sitting on the counter, her feet and head dangling.

"I'm impressed." I search the cupboards for a couple of plates and rifle through the drawers until I find something to help remove them from the pan.

"They still need to be iced."

"I don't need icing."

I'm about to dig in when I hear the soft thud of her feet hitting the ground.

"You're impatient." She hip-checks me out of the way and grabs a serving tray.

I step aside and lean against the counter while she places the tray over the buns and then flips the whole thing upside down. Jiggling it around, she lifts the baking pan to reveal glistening, pecan-and-syrupy rolls. Fragrant steam wafts into the air. My mouth is watering, and I'm starving. My post-sex wings last night have already been burned off. I need to feed the beast.

I go to grab one, and Sunny smacks my hand. "They're too hot."

"I'll be fine."

"Let me put the icing on first so you don't burn off your tongue."

"I'm hungry."

"As hungry as you were last night?" She's looking at the bowl, not me.

"Is that an invitation or a request for a repeat?" I move in behind her, pressing my sort-of hard-on against the small of her back. "Because I'm definitely interested in more of last night, and more of this morning."

"This morning?"

"Well, maybe not the fainting part, or you trying to dice off your fingertip, but this—" I gesture to the kitchen and kiss her shoulder. "What we're doing here, I like this. I've never done it before."

"Had someone faint on you?" She stirs the icing, but her breath hitches and a flush creeps up her neck.

"Woken up to someone I like making me breakfast."

"No one's ever made you breakfast?"

"Nope. Except for Skye, but that doesn't count since she's my stepmom, and everything she makes comes from a package."

Sunny turns around in my arms, her expression pensive. "What about when you were a kid? Didn't anyone make you breakfast before school and

stuff?”

“Mostly I ate cereal in the morning, since it was just me and my dad and he’s a sucky cook.” I stare at the cupboards, taking in the details. Memories of my mom are vague. Also, most of them aren’t nice, and it’s not something I talk about much. Up until now I’ve avoided it with Sunny.

Sunny runs a finger up my arm and over my shoulder until she reaches my jaw. She curls it around my chin and angles my head so I’m looking at her, not into space. “What happened to your mom?”

I twirl a lock of her hair between my fingers, considering how much I want to share. Fanning out the end, I brush it back and forth across my lips before I speak. “She had an inoperable brain tumor. She died when I was three.”

Sunny strokes my cheek. Her affection doesn’t feel like it’s made of pity. “I’m so sorry.”

I shrug. “I don’t remember her much. She got headaches a lot. They thought they were migraines. Mostly I remember her being in the hospital. Then it was me and my dad for the most part. Even before she was gone it was my dad taking care of things.”

“That must’ve been so hard.”

“It was hardest on my dad. I was too young to get what was going on. I wasn’t an easy kid. I had lots of energy. School was hard for me. I needed a lot of attention, and my dad worked long hours.”

I leave out the hardest part to talk about: that none of Dad’s attempted relationships worked out because of me. Single dads are only cool in movies. It was clear early on that school wasn’t going to be my thing. I didn’t pick things up as fast as I should have, so I lagged behind the other kids. One chick told my dad she didn’t sign up for a special-needs kid. She dropped the “R” bomb. I never saw her again after that.

There weren’t any other girlfriends until my junior year of high school—none that I ever met until my dad started dating Skye, Vi’s mom, anyway. She was nice and fun to be around.

“Sidney raised you on his own?”

“Yeah, for the most part. I spent a lot of time at Randy’s when I was growing up. His mom cooked and stuff, but it was different.” Not that his situation was much easier. His dad played professional hockey and was gone a lot. His parents divorced when he was eleven.

Sunny’s eyes go the kind of liquid I equate with sadness.

“Anyways, it’s nice to have someone want to do things for me.”

I don’t want to talk about depressing shit. It reminds me that this thing me and Sunny have going is complicated. Before her, I never would’ve considered spending a weekend with the same woman. In the past, last night would’ve been followed by either more of the same come morning, or a quiet departure on the part of the bunny. If it was one of the girls I saw more regularly, I might make coffee or order in some breakfast before I sent her on her way, but none of them ever went out of their way to make breakfast for me. It feels good—less like I’m an occasional convenience and more like I’m important beyond my ability to provide orgasms in bulk.

I reach for one of the cinnamon buns, done with talking. A puff of steam follows, and my fingers instantly heat to the point of being uncomfortable. Still, I want to end this conversation, and I’m hungry.

“Those are still too hot!” Sunny grabs it out of my hand.

I hold onto her wrist and try to pull it toward my mouth, but she drops it.

“That was a waste!” I debate eating it even though it’s been on the floor.

“It was burning my fingers!”

“Let me see.” The tips are pink and covered in cinnamon-bun goo, so I suck each one into my mouth and finish cleaning them off with a kiss. “Better?”

“Better.”

I push the bowl of icing out of the way and lift her onto the counter. “I know what we can do while we wait for those to cool.” I part her legs with my palms and step between them, pulling her close to the edge. My erection sticks straight out under the apron. Sunny reaches around and pulls the tie, setting me free.

“You have the best ideas.”

“I know, right?” I pull her tank over her head and palm her breasts.

She wraps her warm fingers around my cock and starts stroking. We make out, feeling each other up until Sunny lets go and shoves her shorts down her thighs. Everything goes from playful to frantic when she hooks her legs around my waist and pulls me in tight against her. I rub my cock against wet pussy. Which is when I remember that all the condoms are upstairs, in the bedroom.

I drop my head into the crook of her neck as I slide through that heavenly, hot wetness. I've only had sex without a condom once. It was back in high school with the girl I thought I was in love with. The paranoia after the fact was almost worth how good it felt. *Almost*. The two weeks I spent terrified I'd gotten her pregnant ruined all the fun.

I groan as she swivels her hips. "We need to go upstairs."

"I like it here just fine," she says.

"The condoms are in your bedroom."

"I've been on the pill since I was sixteen." She's giving me permission to go bareback. It's hard to say no to that.

"It's not a hundred-percent effective." It sounds more like a question than it does a statement.

"You can pull out at the end if you're worried."

I bite her shoulder and then along her neck. Sunny gasps and shifts her hips. I slide low. Really low. Almost to door number two.

"Oh no! You're not pulling that trick on me!"

I lift my head, confused. "What?"

"Nuh-uh. We're not doing anal."

I almost do a spit-take. "Say what now? I wasn't trying to—"

Her voice is high pitched. "My ex-boyfriend tried to get me to have anal all the time because he said it was less risky, and we wouldn't have to use protection."

It sounds like Sunny's had some douchey exes. I sure as hell hope this Kale dude isn't the one she's talking about. "What did you think I was going to do, Sunny? Just try to slip it in there?"

"That's what he used to do!"

"How small was his dick?"

She holds up two fingers.

"Is this the same guy who couldn't get you off?"

I'm not surprised when she nods. I mean, seriously, that's a way-below-average dick. I grab the hand she's holding up and wrap her fingers around my cock. Talking about anal gets me stupid hard. I can't help it. I'm a guy. I want to go where I'm not supposed to.

"Baby, do you think I could slip this into your ass without you noticing?"

"Well, no, but—"

"But what, Sunny? You think I'm gonna sneak-attack you?"

“I’m just saying, you wouldn’t be the first to try it.”

“But would I be the first one to actually succeed is the most important question.”

I’m totally joking, and then she says, “I’m not answering that.”

I don’t get to ask any more questions. All of a sudden Andy and Titan start barking their heads off. It’s only eight. Sunny’s ride isn’t supposed to be here yet.

“Sunshine? Sweetie? We’re home.”

Oh shit. The ’rents are back early.

CHAPTER TEN

SURPRISES SUCK. SO DOES KALE.

I'm naked. Sunny's naked, and we were about to fuck on her mother's counter. It would've been superhot.

I grab Sunny's tank from the floor, toss it to her, and wrap the apron around my waist. Then I bolt. My first thought is to go for the pantry, but then I'll be trapped in the kitchen. My rental is in the driveway. They know I'm here.

I bust it down the hall toward Robbie's office, skidding to a stop before I hit the living room. I can hear her parents, but I can't tell where they are. The stairs are too risky, being close to the front door.

A pair of my swim shorts is hanging on the line outside by the pool. If I can get to them, Sunny and I can avoid this being more of a shitstorm. I'm not sure the 'rents are going to be all that happy about my presence this early on a Sunday morning. It makes it questionable whether I slept over. Sunny might be an adult, but her parents are damn protective of her. I haven't had to deal with a disapproving dad since I was drafted and gave up the girlfriend bullshit.

I'm about to hit the sliding door when Daisy's voice filters down the hall. "It smells wonderful in here! Oh! Those look delicious."

She's in the kitchen. This is perfect. It means I can make it without being seen.

"Whose car is in the driveway?" Robbie asks.

"Miller stopped by to visit." Sunny's voice has that high, reedy quality that comes with getting caught doing something she shouldn't have.

"Miller's here? That's great! I was afraid you weren't seeing him anymore!" Daisy replies, her enthusiasm appreciated on my part.

"Mom!"

"Well, it's been a few weeks. I know how Alex feels about all that stuff on the Twatter. I was worried maybe you'd changed your mind."

Jesus. Daisy knows what Twitter is? That's not good. I have no idea what the content of "the stuff" could be, but it can't be very flattering if Waters has mentioned it. I need to be more careful about things like that. And not just because it makes Sunny look bad. It makes me look bad, and it makes her parents less likely to like me.

“It’s Twitter, Mom.”

“Right. The Twitter. Anyway, I’m pleasantly surprised. Well, where is he? I’d love to say hello.”

“Yeah. Where is Miller? When did he get here exactly?” Robbie’s usually calm voice has an edge to it.

“Um . . . Well . . . He, uh . . . He was visiting a couple of friends in Toronto, and he’s got this camp thing he’s volunteering at in Muskoka—did you know it’s close to Alex’s cottage?” She’s stalling, trying to come up with a lie. Sunny’s not an inherently good liar. She’s too honest and sweet. I slip out onto the patio, accidentally kicking Andy’s favorite ball. He rushes past me, running after it. I don’t have time to corral him. I need to be not naked. I jump up and yank my shorts off the line, almost falling on my face as I drag them up my legs.

Birds tweet overhead, their stupid oblivious happiness getting on my nerves. I glance around as I stuff my now ninety-percent-soft dick into my shorts and make sure everything is done up. Across the yard I see a flash of white hair and what I’m sure are binoculars. I’d call Mr. Woodcock out, but I don’t have time. I toss the apron over the line and cover the distance to the pool in two long strides, diving in.

I swim across to the other side. Andy drops the ball at the edge when my head pops out, barking excitedly. I snatch up the ball, toss it across the yard, and pull myself out.

“We’ll play later, buddy. Come on, let’s go in and see Sunny.” Grabbing a towel from the back of the chair, I run it over my chest and wrap it around my waist. Andy trots behind me with that ball in his mouth, desperate for more attention.

I pop my head in the door leading to the kitchen. “Hey, sweets, you gonna come for a swim before you gotta leave?” I fake surprise and almost choke on my tongue when I get a load of Sunny’s mom. “Mr. and Mrs. Waters! How’s it goin’?”

Daisy Waters is a fashion nightmare resurrected from the eighties. Her helmet-y hair keeps hairspray companies in business. Currently one side is flat, like maybe she fell asleep on the way home and crushed it. I swallow my laugh. “I wasn’t sure I was gonna get a chance to see you.”

I stay on the mat by the door, since I’m dripping water, and assess everyone’s stance. I can’t read Sunny’s expression to tell if she’s stressed

out or not. I think her tank top might be on backwards. I'm worried about what I might have missed while I was getting my shorts.

"I guess it's a good thing our flight was changed!" Sunny's mom crosses over and gives me an affectionate hug. Her over-sprayed hair hits my wet cheek. "Don't stand by the door. Come on in, Miller! It's been a while! I'm so glad you came by. Are you hungry? You must be starving!" She squeezes my bicep. "You must be the reason Sunny's making her cinnamon buns!"

"I've never had them before."

I let her slip her arm through mine. Daisy loves me, despite how much I keep fucking things up with Sunny.

"Well, you're in for a real treat."

Robbie's leaning against the doorjamb, eating one of Sunny's cinnamon buns. He's wearing a pair of plaid shorts and a tie-dye T-shirt with a band I've never heard of on it. He doesn't look quite so excited to see me. I can tell he's suspicious. Sunny's poor lying skills are probably part of the reason. "Sunny tells us you stopped by this morning."

I avoid answering the question directly so I don't have to lie outright. "I couldn't go to Muskoka without stopping to see Sunny. I'm disappointed she's gotta leave this morning."

Robbie glances at Sunny. "Leave? Where are you going?"

Sunny twirls her hair around her finger. "Remember before you left when we talked about me going camping for a few days with Lily? Up in Chapleau? Well, we decided to go for, like, a week, maybe a little longer."

Daisy looks absolutely horrified. "Camping? You've never gone camping. And that's so far away. Will you even have cell phone reception? What about running water? Why wouldn't you use Alex's cottage? He's not there this week—at least I don't think he is, and even if he was I'm sure he'd be more than happy for you and Lily to come along. It has six bedrooms. There's plenty of room."

Robbie gives Daisy a look, but she's too busy being appalled by the idea of camping to catch it. "What about your shifts at the shelter?" he asks.

"Those are all covered, and my yoga classes, too. I've taken care of everything."

"But you don't camp." Daisy's stuck on this point.

"I do too camp."

“Spending one night in a tent in Alex’s backyard at the cottage doesn’t count, Sunshine,” Daisy says.

Sunny puts her hands on her hips. “I’ve camped with Lily before.”

“Don’t her parents have a trailer on Lake Erie?”

Sunny huffs, annoyed. “Well, I would’ve camped if you’d let me go to Girl Guides, but Alex always had those hockey camps, and I never could!”

Robbie picks up another cinnamon bun and takes a bite. “These are fantastic.”

“Thanks, Dad.” Sunny looks at Daisy. “Lily says we’re borrowing a camping van or something, and she has all the gear we’ll need. It’s gonna be great!” She sounds less enthusiastic about it than she did yesterday. Maybe she’ll end up cutting it short.

“Is it just you and Lily going?” Daisy asks. “I don’t know if I like that idea.”

“There’s a group of us.” Sunny’s hair twirling gets more and more aggressive until it’s twisted all the way around her finger, cutting off the circulation. She’d never make it as a professional poker player.

“Who else is coming with you?” Robbie’s eyes shift in my direction as he takes a huge bite of bun. I want one.

The doorbell rings, cutting off Sunny’s response. I check the clock on the wall—it’s analog, so I can read it easier. It’s after nine. Shit. Lily’s here, and my time with Sunny is almost up. I didn’t even get to give her a good morning/see you soon orgasm. Damn it.

Sunny skips around the counter and gazelles her way to the front door, throwing it open with a squeal. Her extra crunchy granola bestie throws her arms around her, and they do that weird overly affectionate hug thing girls do when they haven’t see each other in all of five minutes. Although, I’ve been here for the past two days, so it’s been at least that long since they’ve seen each other, but likely not longer.

Lily has short black hair and dark eyes. She’s almost as tall as Sunny, but with less boobs and no curves. She looks more like a prepubescent boy than a twenty-year-old woman, or maybe I’m being an asshole because she’s not my biggest fan.

Her smile widens when she sees Robbie, and then slides right off like her face is made of Teflon when she sees me. She whispers something to Sunny, her eyes wide with surprise.

“Lily!” Daisy flails her arms like a cheerleader on PCP. Lily turns away from her huge hair and accepts the hug.

“Hi, Momma Two. How was your weekend away? Did you have fun?”

“Too much to talk about without embarrassing everyone!” Daisy winks.

I glance at Robbie. He gives me a smug smile and nabs another bun. I think he might have already been into his research today.

“Oh! Kale, Benji! I didn’t see you there!” Daisy’s voice is high-pitched, and she gives Sunny an odd look.

Right behind Lily are two other guys. They look like they could be brothers, or hipster soulmates.

They’re clearly trying to join the beard brigade and failing. While there’s hair on their chins and cheeks, it’s patchy and ungroomed. It makes them look like homeless douches who stole clothes off the rack from the Khaki and Plaid Depot.

So one of these guys is Sunny’s high school ex-boyfriend? I’m definitely in way better shape, and I can grow a legit beard. And I can give her orgasms. All this should make me feel better, but with the way Daisy is looking at Sunny, it doesn’t.

Robbie gives me an eyebrow lift, grabs a fourth cinnamon bun, and nods in the direction of the door. “You better get over there, son.”

The skinnier of the two guys gives Daisy a hug. When he sees Robbie, he gets stupid excited. “Hey! Robbie, how’s it going? I was all bummed out thinking you wouldn’t be back until later today.”

“Our flight got changed at the last minute. It was an early morning, but otherwise I can’t complain.” Robbie’s eyes pass over me again.

Kale goes in for a man hug when he’s finished mauling Daisy. I have to wonder how long those two dated, based on how familiar he is with her family. Or maybe it’s been a long-ass time since they’ve seen him. Either way, their reaction says a lot. He’s the beef tenderloin, and I’m the McDonald’s Big Mac.

I make sure I’m not leaking pool water all over Sunny’s mom’s floor before I cross the hardwood.

“Hey, Lily, how you doin’?” I open my arms like I’m looking for a hug.

Her eyes do this weird widening thing and her lips contort, as if she’s fighting not to make a face. She ends up looking like she’s having a facial

seizure. She leans forward and pats my back, straining her neck so almost none of her touches me. It'd be funny if I wasn't already offended.

I loop an arm around Sunny's waist from behind.

"Miller! You're all wet!"

"That makes one of us." I don't mean it the way it sounds, but everyone's eyes shoot in my direction. Sunny's cheeks go pink, Lily looks mortified, and Daisy looks stunned. Only Robbie's too engrossed in licking his fingers to notice. Kale's reaction is the best. He looks annoyed.

I pretend like I haven't said something inappropriate and stick out my hand to the guy I know didn't date Sunny. "You must be Lily's boyfriend. I'm Miller."

"Oh, I know who you are." He takes my hand and squeezes like he has something to prove. "Benji."

I squeeze back until he flinches. "You watch hockey?" This guy looks like golf or hacky sack are more his speed.

"Sunshine watches a lot of hockey, so that means we all watch a lot of hockey," Lily says.

"When Toronto's out, I go for Chicago because of Sunshine." He winks at Sunny. If he wasn't dating Lily, I'd probably want to punch him in his damn face.

"It's not like Alex had any choice what city he plays for." Sunny laughs, but it sounds forced. "Oh! Kale, this is Miller. He plays on the same team as Alex."

There's no introduction as her boyfriend. No suggestion that there's anything going on between us aside from me knowing Alex. I can't tell if it's intentional, or she's nervous.

"Is Alex here this weekend?" Kale stretches up, like he's trying to see over my shoulder.

"Um, no. Alex isn't here. He's at home. Miller's sister is his fiancée."

Kale seems even more confused. It makes me wonder if he knows about me. "So, you came to Guelph . . ." He trails off.

"To see Sunny." I bite back a smile as understanding finally dawns.

Daisy breaks the awkward stare-down. "You don't have to leave right away, do you? Why don't you all come in for a visit? I'll put on some coffee, and herbal tea for you, Lily. Sunny made cinnamon buns!"

"They're delicious." Robbie pats his stomach.

"And they're vegan, of course," Sunny chimes in.

“I love your buns!” Kale has the nerve to wink at Sunny.

“I’m looking forward to trying one. I’ve only ever eaten Sunny’s cookies.” I adjust the strap of her tank top.

Sunny flushes and elbows me in the side. Lily gives me a look. Daisy misses the innuendo and links arms with Lily, leading her into the kitchen.

“I could go for some cookies right now.” Robbie saunters over to the fridge and opens the freezer.

“I’m gonna put on some dry clothes,” I say as the rest of the group follows him.

“Okay. I guess I’ll be in the kitchen.” Sunny seems conflicted as I grab her wrist to stop her. I consider telling her she should put a bra on. I can see her nipples poking through her shirt, but I decide against it. Instead I lean in close, kiss her cheek, and say, “I’m sorry you had to lie, but I wish we hadn’t been interrupted.”

“Me, too.”

I head up the stairs, taking them two at a time. I want to get a bead on this Kale fucker, so I don’t want to be gone long. My plan is two-fold; changing means I can get all my shit out of Sunny’s room and into the spare bedroom before her parents make it upstairs. Otherwise they’re going to know Sunny lied—if they haven’t figured it out already. Plus there are condoms and condom wrappers all over her floor from the past two days.

I grab my duffel bag and stuff all my shit into it. Whatever I left in her bathroom can stay there. I’ll make a stop in Muskoka if I need something. I pick up a bunch of empty condom wrappers and kick a few more under the bed as I go. Based on the mini snowstorm of wrappers, Sunny and I got our serious fuck on this weekend. I’m surprised she’s not complaining about being sore, and that I don’t have a chafed dick.

Andy comes into the room and does a circle around me, nudging me with his nose.

“Psst. Hey, buddy, you gotta go downstairs.”

Robbie calls for him somewhere from the floor below. Andy ignores him, like he does pretty much everyone but Sunny—and sometimes me if a treat is involved.

“Go, Andy. Go see Robbie.” I push his butt toward the door, but he runs into the bathroom and shoves his head in the garbage can. I don’t know what he steals, but I need to get the hell out of Sunny’s room before

someone comes up here, especially Sunny's dad. As mellow as he is, I don't think he'll be cool with me banging his daughter all weekend long.

I scan the room one more time and notice a pair of Sunny's underwear peeking out from under the bed. It's the pair with the tiny pale and dark blue polka dots on it. I scoop them up and rub the soft cotton between my fingers.

I don't know what I'm planning to do with them. I've never been a panty collector, but they're my First Time With Sunny underwear. They're also the underwear she was wearing before I gave her her first-ever cookie-eating orgasm, and her first-ever sex orgasm, so that makes them special.

I shove them in my bag as the sound of a throat clearing draws my attention to the door. Robbie's standing there with that suspicious look again. He pops a cookie into his mouth and chews.

I make sure the panties are tucked away safely. "Hey, Robbie. Sunny must have left her door open. Andy came in here, and I wanted to make sure he didn't get into anything. You know how much he loves to eat out her trash." When he blinks at me, I review what I've said and rewind. "I mean, eat out of her garbage can. I don't want him to get sick."

He surveys the room with a critical eye. I think I managed to get rid of most of the condom wrappers. At least the ones in plain sight.

"You should come downstairs and get one of those cinnamon buns before they're all gone."

"I'll be right down. I just need to get changed."

"Everyone's on the back deck." He stuffs another cookie in his mouth and waits for me to leave the room before he closes Sunny's door. I stop in the guest bathroom to change out of my wet shorts.

Less than two minutes later I'm on my way outside. That Kale dick is sitting right next to Sunny, and Lily is on the other side. The only open seat is next to Daisy. It looks like she fixed her hair, or tried. Both sides are even in terms of bigness now.

"Miller! I saved you a cinnamon roll." Sunny holds up the plate and smiles, but there's still tension underneath.

I make a point of circling the group instead of reaching across the table. Leaning down right next to Kale, I tuck invisible strands of hair behind Sunny's ear and brush a kiss over her shoulder, keeping it polite for current company. "Thanks, baby."

The conversation consists of a lot of inside jokes from Lily and Kale, which is damn annoying. Kale also tries to reminisce with Daisy, who doesn't seem all that comfortable or happy with the situation. It sounds like he used to spend a lot of time at the Waters' place. I don't like it, and I don't like that Sunny's spending time with him in cramped quarters. At best, they'll have separate tents. At worst they'll all be sleeping in the trailer together. Of course this inspires images of the four of them engaged in an orgy, including a Sunny sandwich. I need to talk to her alone before she leaves today.

"Miller?"

"Huh?" I glance around the table. Everyone is looking at me—except Lily. She's busy texting under the table. I realize I've been staring off into space. Actually, I've been staring at Sunny's chest. Her nipples are saluting me from under her tank. If I'd mentioned them before, I could have had a minute with her upstairs.

"What's the name of the camp you're volunteering at again?" Sunny asks.

"Oh. It's Camp Beaver Woods." Me and Randy had a good laugh about that.

"Why'd you pick one in Canada? It seems out of the way." Kale picks a dandelion fluff out of Sunny's hair. I want to shove it up his left nostril with my fist.

She's fixed her hair since I first came downstairs. It's not the wild mess it was. The braid is smoother, but tendrils have already escaped, blowing around her face when the breeze picks up.

"Usually I do a couple of weeks in the Chicago area so I can visit my family, but now that I'm back there, I figured I'd do something different this year. And I wanted an excuse to see Sunny. I was hoping to convince her to come visit me for a couple of days out there, but it looks like you got to her first."

"Looks like." He grins.

I lean back in my chair and return the smile. "I don't mind sticking around for a few days after the camp is over, though."

The tension at the table is thicker than my playoff beard. I'm aware I'm having a pissing contest with this skinny douchebag in front of her parents, but I want to establish myself as real competition.

Lily puts down her phone. “So this camp you volunteer for, it’s for hockey brats?” She says it more than she asks.

I frown. “It’s a sports camp, but a few of the kids have special needs.”

“Miller subsidizes it so struggling families can afford it,” Sunny says.

Ironically, Lily seems shocked. “Oh. I didn’t realize that.” Everything she knows about me is based on media coverage and Instagram pictures posted by bunnies, so it’s a narrow view.

“It’s not something I advertise.”

“What’s it called again?” Lily asks.

“Camp Beaver Woods,” Sunny replies for me.

The conversation makes me feel uncomfortable—like I’m on the hot seat facing a bestie interrogation. Lily has this look on her face like someone shit in her cornflakes.

Daisy pats my hand. “You’re always doing such wonderful things. You’re so generous. Isn’t he, Sunny?”

She gives me a small smile. “He is.” She looks almost guilty. I can’t imagine why.

“It’s no big deal. I don’t think something like money should get in the way of a kid’s opportunity.”

“Must be nice to have lots to throw around,” Kale says, loud enough that we all hear him.

I want to give this dickhead a swirly. He’s being antagonistic. If I was on the ice, I’d stick him in the shins, but I’m not. So I only have words as an option. “You think helping pay for kids who otherwise would never have a chance to go to a camp like this is throwing money around?”

“I don’t think Kale means it like that,” Sunny interjects.

“I just think there are other causes you can donate to that would have more of an impact.”

I know exactly the kind of guy Kale is. He’s the same kid in my classes in high school who used to have a comment for everything, the one who would find a weakness and exploit it to make someone feel dumb. I’m done with his superiority complex.

“Really? So you don’t think subsidizing a camp for low-income families or financing a partnership with an inclusion program for kids with special needs is going to have an impact? That’s an *interesting* perspective.”

He blinks like I’ve high-beamed him. Lily looks stunned. Sometimes the stereotypes associated with being a professional athlete piss me off. I’m

glad I remembered the explanation Amber sent when we were figuring out what camp I'd contribute to this year.

"Miller's involved in a lot of charity work." Sunny's eyes bounce between the two of us.

I don't want to defend myself to this jerkoff, or have Sunny do it for me. I work hard for the money I make. And yeah, it's a lot, which is why I do what I do.

I'm also aware that my current career is limited. I'm only going to be able to do this for so long before my body starts to break down on me, before I'm not fast enough or good enough to keep up with the younger players. I've started doing the charity stuff now so I can continue it later and have something beyond professional hockey in my life when that's over.

Lily puts an end to the smoldering argument before it can really ignite. "We should get going. It's a long drive, and we'll want to set up camp before it gets dark."

Andy sticks his head between Sunny and the douche, nudging her with his head. "What's up, Andy?" Sunny takes his drooly face between her hands and goes nose to nose with the dog. Usually she'd get a kiss, but he keeps his mouth shut. "What're you eating? Give." He doesn't listen right away, so Sunny holds out her hand. "Drop it."

A gummy, green blob covered in drool lands in her palm.

"What is that?" Kale gets in closer.

I lean over so I can get a better look. It only takes a second for me to recognize it. It's one of my Green Giant condoms. Andy must have dug it out of the trash in Sunny's bathroom. I'm out of my chair and around the table with a napkin before anyone else can identify it.

I scoop it out of her cupped palm. "I got this, sweets. You should wash your hands."

"It looked like chewed gum," Daisy exclaims. God bless her.

"He was digging around in your bathroom when I went upstairs to change. You know what he's like, always loving on your used tissues and stuff."

"Oh no! Bad Andy! That stuff makes you sick!" She gives him a tap on the nose. He whines.

Robbie makes a noise from the other side of the table. I peek over in his direction. I have a feeling he might know what it was, too.

We help Daisy clean up the plates and cups and bring them inside. Lily excuses herself to the bathroom while Sunny gets her bags. Anything I want to say before I go I can't, like *don't go*, or *I hate your ex-boyfriend and I want him to get eaten by a bear*.

I'm about to find a reason to run upstairs when Lily comes out of the bathroom. I need to get her on my side; that way she won't be pushing Kale on Sunny while they're away.

"I think we've gotten off on the wrong foot," I tell her.

She crosses her arms over her chest, looking like she wants to be anywhere but trapped with me in the hall. "What makes you say that?"

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe it's the way you hate me."

"I don't hate you, Miller. I don't trust you. You're too smooth and too . . ." She waves her hand around.

"Too what?"

"Too . . . Ken."

"Ken?"

"You know, like Barbie and Ken."

"What does that even mean? Ken's not a bad guy." Randy's little sister used to watch Barbie movies all the time. We'd get stuck babysitting when his mom had to work.

"You're a player."

"You think Ken's a player?" If anything, Ken was whipped.

Lily rolls her eyes. "All this charity stuff you do doesn't change the reputation you have with women. Sunny's my best friend. I don't want to see her get hurt, and you seem like a guy who does that often."

"How do you get to decide what kind of guy I am based on the little you actually know of me? I'm not looking to hurt Sunny. I care about her. I'm trying here, Lily, but you're not giving me much to work with."

She plants her hands on her hips. Oh, man. Here we go.

"I'm ready!"

I look up to see Sunny at the top of the stairs with two wheeled suitcases. It seems like she prepared for an all-inclusive vacation rather than a camping trip. I sprint up to help her. It's unnecessary. She's more than capable.

The guys come out of the kitchen with Sunny's parents. Everyone shoves their feet into Birks and heads outside. I have my bag with me since

I'm planning to leave at the same time, even though I don't have to be at the airport for hours.

The door opens to reveal not one of those beat-down camper vans, but a for-real camping trailer. Where people can sleep. It's old, but seems well maintained. Still, I don't want Sunny stranded anywhere with Kale. I also want to check out the inside so I can see the sleeping sitch.

Daisy hugs everyone while Robbie shakes hands with Ben and Kale, then hugs Lily and Sunny. I stand back, observing the interactions, wishing I was going instead of that Kale fucker. When it's my turn, I go for Lily first. It's like hugging a steel pipe. I shake her boyfriend's hand, then I turn to Kale. He's looking too smug. I need to fix that.

I take his hand and squeeze harder than I need to. "Take care of my girl for me." I know Sunny's going to be annoyed at me for saying something she likely considers sexist, but I need to make it clear I'm in this for the fight.

"You've got nothing to worry about. I always do." He gives me a pat on the shoulder, his satisfied smile pushing my last damn button.

I lean in close and give him a slap on the back, lowering my voice so only he can hear. "Not as well as I do." I wink and turn to Sunny.

She's not happy. I can tell by the pinched look and her pursed lips. I pull her into my arms and hug her tight. Putting my lips to her ear, I whisper, "He gets you for a week. I only got you for two days."

I take her face in my hands. If her parents weren't here I'd tongue-fuck the shit out of her mouth. Instead I brush my nose against hers, then kiss the tiny dimple on her left cheek. "Have fun, Sunny Sunshine."

"I'll try."

"But not too much." This time I press my lips softly to hers.

She holds onto my forearms, fingernails digging in. "I won't."

I'm relieved when Benji and Kale get into the front seats, and Lily and Sunny get in the back. I can see right inside. There's a table with cushioned seats that turn into a bed. I grab the door before Sunny can close it and peek in. There's definitely room for a four-person orgy in here.

"Wow. This is spacious. How many does it sleep?" I wait for one of them to meet my eyes.

"There's two double beds," Kale says from the front seat, back to being a smug jerkoff.

"And we have tents," Sunny says.

Her panic is clear. She's expecting me to say or do something to cause a scene. I want to. We need to have a conversation, but it isn't going to happen now. It's a shit situation. Still, I drop my bag on the driveway and cram myself into the confined space. I'm blocking her parents' view since I fill the entire door.

This time I lay one on her. She gasps, and I slide my tongue between her parted lips. At first her hand goes to my chest like she's about to push me away. I suck on her tongue, and she fists my shirt, making a plaintive noise that tells me she'd like me to continue. Lily coughs, reminding me we have an audience. I'm completely aware of this.

I break the kiss and bite the inside of my cheek when Sunny tries to keep our mouths connected. "I'm sorry I keep messing things up. I get it. No more bunny pictures. I promise. Just remember how much fun we had while you're away with your friends." I pull my phone out of my back pocket and hold it up, snapping one of the selfies I usually hate while I kiss her on the cheek.

I point at Lily. "Make sure no bears eat her." Sunny's confusion matches my frustration as I close the door.

Everything good about this weekend evaporates as they drive away.

"I hope she has an okay time." Daisy pats her hair.

I'd forgotten Sunny's parents were standing in the driveway with me. "Yeah. Me, too." I pick up my bag. "Well, I should be heading out. I have to pick up a buddy at the airport on the way to the camp."

Daisy goes in for a hug. I turn my face in time to avoid the hairspray assault. "It was nice of you to stop by, Miller. I hope we get to see you real soon." She pats my cheek and sighs.

Robbie stays behind while I throw my bag in the back of the SUV. I shake his hand, wanting to get the hell out of here. I need to call Randy and check flight times, and I need to call Violet. I'm not feeling too good about how things ended here. I also want to text Sunny, and I need to use the voice-to-text function so it doesn't take a year.

"Thanks for the hospitality, Robbie. I'm sure I'll see you before the season starts."

"You take care of yourself, Miller."

He stands by my door as I turn on the engine. As I'm about to pull out of the driveway, he knocks on my window. I roll it down. My palms are clammy, and I have the lip sweats. "'Sup?"

He inhales and releases the breath slowly. “I know Sunny lied to us.” Leaning on the edge of the window he makes a clicking sound with his tongue. “The neighbors said this vehicle has been here since late Friday night.”

“I didn’t want to get her into trouble—”

He holds up a hand. “Sunny’s a big girl, but she’s still my little girl, so I’m going to ask you to be careful with her. I like you, Miller. I think you’re a nice kid, and I know the media skews things, but I’d hate for my baby to get hurt by someone who’s stringing her along.”

“It’s not like that. I really like Sunny.”

“Then I suggest you step up your game.” He taps the hood of the car as he strolls up the driveway, Andy following.

His parting words don’t make me feel better at all.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE KICKER OF PANTS

I drive around the corner and park the car. I don't have to be at the airport for another seven hours. I have an entire day to kill, and all I can think about is how this weekend went from awesome to total shit. All because of Kale. Well, all because of me and the bunnies and the stupid pictures I can't control posted all over Instagram and Tumblr and wherever the fuck else. And Kale.

I pull my phone out of my back pocket. I have messages from Sunny:

I wish weed had alone time b4 I left.

Thx 4 cuming 2 visit me.

I had fun. <3

I send her one back, along with the selfie, using voice-to-text so I don't mess it up:

Me too. I can't wait to see you again. Message me when you get to camp if you have reception.

When I'm done I set the picture as my wallpaper, and then I post it to every social media platform I have access to, and tag her. I add the caption "Spending time with my favorite Canadian girl." It's not as in-your-face as I'd like to be, but I think it gets the point across. If any pictures are going up of me with bunnies, I'll combat them with nice ones of me and Sunny.

I check my emails while I wait for a reply. Randy's sent two. I use text-to-speech to listen to those. Apparently his flight times have changed, and he'll be in a few hours earlier. He says he's cool to wait at the airport in the bar however long he has to. Since Sunny's already gone, he won't have to. I shoot him a quick message instead of an email so he gets it right away. Sunny still hasn't responded, so I call Vi. She picks up on the third ring.

"Buck." She says my name like a swear word. I don't even get a chance to say hi before she fires off threats. "Care to explain the hat trick

message you left for me yesterday before I beam myself to Canada and beat your ass with a nine iron?"

I forgot about that message. Since I know I'm not in real trouble, I decide to be a jerk, hoping it'll make me feel better post Kale-introduction. "You don't golf."

"I might start. It seems like it might be fun if I'm aiming for your balls. It'd be challenging though, since they're the size of peas."

"My balls are the size of Canada, and everyone knows the world maps are wrong, and Canada's the biggest country out there."

"Actually, I'm pretty sure that's Australia, or maybe it's China or Russia. Geography was never my thing. Seriously, Buck, I'd like to believe you're smart enough not to brag to me about bagging three bunnies when you're supposed to be with Sunny."

"I hat tricked *with* Sunny."

"You did what?" She screams so loud, my ear starts to ring. Her voice is muffled when she says, "Everything's fine. I'm talking to Charlene. She bought another purse off the shopping channel." There's a few seconds of fumbling around and then, "You better explain yourself. Quickly."

"So, like, Sunny had a boyfriend in high school, right?"

"What the hell does this have to do with a hat trick?"

"I'm getting to that. So get this, he was terrible at sexing."

"Everyone's terrible at sexing in high school."

"That's not true. I was awesome." At least that's what the girls said.

"Says you. I'm still not understanding what this has to do with hat tricks."

"Apparently the guy never gave Sunny an orgasm. Not once."

Violet gasps. "You're kidding."

"Nope." Clearly I'm not alone in thinking that's poor boyfriend form. The first thing a guy should do is figure out what gets the girl off, especially if he wants a repeat.

"If that's true, it really is terrible."

"What do you mean, 'if it's true'?"

"You're sure Sunny didn't tell you that to boost your ego?"

"Why would she do that?"

"To make you feel good about yourself?"

"Do girls really do that?" I can't imagine lying about not having orgasms, and Sunny isn't much for dishonesty. That's more my area. And I

usually just leave out details so they can draw their own conclusions.

“I don’t know. Sometimes? Maybe. I’ve lied to Alex about . . . never mind.”

“You can’t not tell me.”

“You don’t want me to finish that sentence, Buck. I promise it won’t make a difference to this conversation, other than causing irreparable emotional damage.”

“I highly doubt that. What have you lied to him about? Sex stuff? Orgasms? About never having one before?” I try not to think about the two of them together in the locker room last spring.

Vi barks out a laugh. “Hardly. I’m like a coming machine. I can have, like, eighteen orgasms in a row. It’s awesome.”

Girls don’t realize how good they have it. Unless I learn Tantra, I’m good for a max of six a day, and that’s spread out over a twenty-four-hour period. “So if you didn’t lie about orgasms, what did you lie about?”

“You’re sure you want to know?”

Vi has a tendency to overshare and say exactly what’s on her mind at any given time. If she’s censored herself, it has to be bad, which makes me want to know even more. “I’m sure.”

“Once I lied about my level of leakiness.”

“Leakiness?”

“Leakiness.”

“What does that even mean?” I regret the question as soon as I ask it.

“How wet I get.”

I gag. “Shit, Vi. I didn’t need that information.”

“I told you you didn’t want to know, but you wouldn’t listen. It’s not my fault I’m a naturally lubey person.”

“Okay. Enough. I don’t want to hear any more. Sunny wouldn’t lie about her lack of orgasms. She looked way surprised every time I gave her one.”

“Maybe that’s her O face.”

I might agree if Sunny’s reaction to me going down on her had been different. “I also gave her first orgasm by mouth and her first sex-gasm, so there’s my hat trick. It totally kicks Waters’ fake hat trick’s ass, right?”

Once, a long time ago, a rumor circulated that Waters had slept with three different chicks in one night. It wasn’t true, but it caused a shitload of issues for him when Vi found out about it. Eventually he set things straight,

and it ended up being a prime example of how the media can twist information.

“You do realize you called to brag about bagging my fiancé’s sister, right? Super classy, Buck. Who else have you told?”

“No one. I called you because I can’t tell anyone else. And I didn’t bag her; we had sex. Lots of it. All over the damn house. Believe me, if I could talk to anyone other than you, I would, but I can’t. So fuck you, Vi. I’m oversharing. You do it all the time.”

She sighs. “I guess you have a point, and I’d rather you tell me than one of your hockey buddies. Those guys have big mouths. So obviously Sunny forgave you for being relationship-challenged.”

“Yeah. She got over it.” That’s not one-hundred-percent truth, though, considering where she is right now versus where I’d like her to be.

“That’s good. I’m glad. So I’m taking it your weekend’s been good?” Crunching follows.

It could be cereal. Or chips. I’m hungry. “It was up until an hour ago.”

“What happened?” She doesn’t immediately throw the blame at me.

“So you know how all those bunny pictures got me into trouble in the first place.”

“I’m familiar, yes.”

Vi’s disapproval is obvious from her tone. I’m glad this is a phone conversation. “Well, I guess Lily, Sunny’s bitchy bestie, found out about them—”

“That shouldn’t be a surprise.”

“Yeah, well, Lily doesn’t like me much. She convinced Sunny to go on a camping trip way up north, like, super far away. They left right before I called you.”

“You have to go to Muskoka today anyway, don’t you?” There’s more crunching. My stomach growls. That cinnamon bun didn’t cut it, no matter how delicious it was.

“Yeah, but I would’ve had the entire day with her. Plus it’s not just Lily and Sunny going. Lily’s boyfriend is coming and so is his bearded hipster-twin, Kale.”

“I think bearded hipster is redundant. Don’t all hipsters have beards?” Vi snickers. “Wait. Kale? Why is that name familiar?”

“Because it’s a vegetable?”

“Maybe. Does he spell it with a K or C?”

“Who cares what he spells it with? He’s ultra granola with crunchy green turds in it. And he dated Sunny in high school. And now they’re camping together this whole week.”

“Oh.” She chews loudly for several seconds, maybe processing. “Did you meet him?”

“Yup. They all showed up at the house this morning, right after Robbie and Daisy came home early.” I roll down the window and recline the seat. A girl in running shorts and a sports bra jogs by with her dog. I don’t even check her out.

“Was everything okay with the ’rents?” Vi’s well aware of how protective Sunny’s parents are.

“It was mostly fine. Sunny didn’t tell them I was coming to visit. They almost walked in on us getting it on. Robbie knows I spent the weekend. He had the neighbors watching the place.”

“Oh, shit.”

“Surprisingly, he didn’t seem too upset. But he gave me the ‘don’t fuck with my daughter’ talk.” Now that I think about it, it seems like Sunny might have purposely forgotten to mention my visit, considering we planned it last time I came to see her. It makes sense if she did it to make sure we had the house to ourselves; otherwise all the sexing wouldn’t have happened.

“You’re lucky. Imagine what it would be like to know your daughter is dating a half-man-half-yeti who’s boned fifty percent of the women in the continental US.”

I ignore her dumb joke. “I haven’t had sex with that many people.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“I’m sure I haven’t had sex with a hundred and fifty million people. But Lily thinks I’m playing Sunny.”

“Of course she does. It’s not like your reputation with the ladies is going to evaporate because you’ve started dating someone.”

The sun peeks through the trees and hits the windshield. I flip the visor down and put on my sunglasses to keep from being blinded. “I haven’t been with anyone since I met Sunny.”

“I know that, but Lily doesn’t. You’re still at the bars with your buddies all the time, and the pictures with the bunnies haven’t stopped showing up. And then there are the parties at Lance’s with the mostly naked chicks. Where the media is concerned, you’re not acting like a guy in a

relationship. People believe what they see, even if it's not true. You know that better than anyone. It's the situations you get yourself in to that are the real problem, Buck. Anyways, we're off topic. This is about the vegetable dude and Sunny going camping. You said they dated in high school?"

"Yeah."

"You're sure about that?" Her tone makes me nervous.

"That's what Sunny said. Why?"

"I think Sunny only had one boyfriend in high school."

"So she didn't do a lot of dating. That's not a bad thing." The asshole in me likes the idea that Sunny didn't get around during those prime years for hormonal experimentation.

"Not necessarily . . ." She hedges. "Hold on a second. I need to ask Alex something." She covers the receiver. Her voice is muffled and then she's clear again. "Charlene returned the purse. I'm talking to Buck now. No. No. Don't even." There's some fumbling. "I won't touch the MC for a week if you do that! I mean it! Stop." When Violet turns her attention back to me, she's slightly breathless. I don't want to think about what was happening on the other end of the line. "I was right. Kale's the only guy Sunny dated in high school."

"But that was a long time ago, so it shouldn't be a big deal, right? She's gotta be over him. She said she broke it off, so that has to count for something. Apparently he got his ass dumped again recently, so it shouldn't be a big deal that they're going on this camping trip." I need some confirmation this is going to be okay.

"I don't know, Buck."

Her lack of confidence is disconcerting. "You're not making me feel better about this."

"Did she tell you when they broke up?" Violet asks.

"During senior year, I think? That was two years ago, though. That's plenty of time to move on, isn't it?" Two years seems like a long time, but then that's me. I waited all of two days to move on when I found out the girl I'd been dating was screwing around with half the hockey team at her college, two states away. Then I fucked all the depression out. It wasn't the most effective strategy, but it kept me busy. That was five years ago. Then I got drafted.

"In theory."

"Why in theory?"

“They started dating when Sunny was a freshman and Kale was a sophomore. He stayed an extra semester after graduation so he could be with her. He planned to take the last semester off to work and then they would go to college together. She broke up with him because he was being a clinger and not very motivated or something. That’s Alex’s version of the story. I don’t know Sunny’s side.” I must not say anything for a long time as I process this shitload of important information. “They dated for four years, Buck,” Vi finally adds.

“I can do the math.” That’s almost as long as I’ve been playing professional hockey. “I can’t believe he never gave her a goddamn orgasm. Seriously. What the fuck is wrong with that guy, and why the hell is she in a camping trailer with him for a week? We’ve been together for like, what, three months, maybe a little more? I’ve already given her, like, fifty. She should’ve bailed on that trip and come with me.”

“Unfortunately, it’s not all about the orgasms.”

“Well, it should be. That’s the first thing I give myself in the morning, and the last thing I take care of at night. They’re essential. Orgasms are like breathing.” I’m panicking. I know this. I’m also sharing a lot of information I probably shouldn’t—not that this whole conversation hasn’t been an epic overshare. We should be drunk so we can forget all the crap we’ve just told each other.

“Look, I know this is hard for you to understand. You’ve been slutting it up for a long time, but in real relationships that don’t involve bunnies, it’s about a lot more than the number of orgasms you can provide. Sex is awesome. Orgasms are awesome. Someone else providing those orgasms is the best thing ever, but that’s not the only thing that matters.”

The panic turns into full-blown hysteria. Okay. No, it doesn’t, but I’m kinda freaked out. In reality I already know this—it’s why Sunny and I hadn’t gotten past finger-fucking until this weekend. We talk a lot, about real stuff and not just hockey. But I put a lot of eggs in the orgasm basket, hoping it was going to take us to another level of seriousness.

“I put all this energy into making Sunny feel good this weekend. No one has ever given her what I have. That has to mean something.”

“I’m sure it does, Buck. But you also have to remember that for the past three months she’s been seeing pictures of you with hockey hookers all over social media. One weekend without media coverage doesn’t negate

that. I'm sure there was more to it than a fuck-a-thon. At least I'm hoping there was. Did you act like an asshole when she left with veggie man?"

"No." I reconsider my answer. I might have been a bit dickish with him; only because he was being that way with me. "Maybe a little. But mostly no."

"Care to elaborate?"

I explain what happened with Kale and try not to leave out details or paint myself in a more favorable light. It's hard. I feel like shit. Sunny still hasn't responded to my text.

When I'm done, Vi exhales into the receiver. "You haven't done anything wrong. He provoked you, and you responded. I'll ask Charlene and maybe one of the girls at work for their opinions, because I'll be honest, I think it's hot when Alex gets all possessive over me. Remember that guy in my building, Melvin? The one who smells like dick cheese and two-year-old socks?"

Vi is notorious for going on tangents. "I remember him, yeah." I have no idea what this has to do with me and Sunny and her being with her ex-boyfriend who she happened to date for four years, a detail she conveniently left out. It seems like a significant one. I kind of want to be mad at her.

"He used to ask me to hang out all the time. Even though he wasn't a threat, Alex always wanted to get it on in the living room when he came to my place. I think it was so Melvin could hear my MC love professions."

"MC?"

"Monster cock."

"For Christ's sake, Vi. I have to play hockey with this guy. How am I supposed to be able to look at him, let alone talk to him, when you tell me shit like this?"

"I'm making a point. And you guys walk around naked in front of each other all the time, so you know what Alex's junk looks like. It's homoerotic, if you think about it. Anyway, I like that Alex is on the club-over-the-head, barbaric side. It's hot. I don't know that Sunny feels the same way I do."

"So you're saying I might have fucked things up again?" I can't win at all.

"I don't think you fucked up. All women are different. Sunny's not a bunny, so the whole orgasm-a-thon, while awesome, isn't what it's about between you and her."

“This dating crap is hard.”

Violet laughs. “It sure is. Relationships aren’t a game. No one wants to get screwed around, except maybe people who like a lot of drama and want to end up on those terrible reality dating shows.”

“I’m not playing Sunny, but now I have to wonder if she’s playing me.”

“Because of this camping trip with the ex.” It’s not a question.

“And she left out how long they dated. When we were talking, she made it sound like it wasn’t a big deal, but obviously it is. I want to be pissed, but I don’t know if I have the right to be.”

“Honestly, if you weren’t pissed, I’d be concerned. If it was another girl I’d say she was playing mind games on you, but Sunny’s . . . well . . . Sunny. It’s hard to know what her motivation for leaving that out is unless you talk to her.”

“I guarantee most of this is Lily and probably Waters.”

Vi sighs. “Maybe, but Sunny’s her own person. She can make her own choices. She has to know you’ll find out eventually, which could be the point. You need to consider that you’ve spent your entire dating life playing girls, so Sunny’s going to be wary.”

“I never played anyone.”

“Maybe you didn’t string the bunnies along with false promises, but you’ve perfected the art of smooth talking. You can say almost anything to a girl, and she’s going to drop her pants for you, which is honestly amazing. Your body hair is like its own ecosystem. It’s a wonder you’ve never lost anyone in there.”

“I don’t get your obsession with my body hair.”

“I don’t get why we have body hair in the first place. On our heads I can understand, but the rest of it seems so unnecessary.”

“It’s protection.”

“Maybe for you it is. I’m sure yours is made of titanium and makes you bulletproof, but for women around the world it’s yet another source of unnecessary pain. Oh, hey, I can’t believe I haven’t asked you this yet; is Sunny as granola as I thought she might be?”

“She takes care of her business.”

“Really? Wow. I was almost positive she was a natural girl.”

“I don’t think anyone’s natural these days.”

“Truth. Look, I gotta go. Alex has the Scrabble board set up, and I’m going to kick his ass.”

“Have fun with that.” Scrabble is my least favorite game in the entire world. “Thanks for the advice and your usual overshare.”

“No problem. I don’t know if I’m the best person to ask for advice on relationships, but I’ll help where I can. Sunny will only tell me so much. She’s smart enough to know I’ll share the important shit. Make sure you contact her every day. Even if she’s in the middle of nowhere and can’t get the message. You need to be as persistent as a yeast infection.”

“What if that’s not enough?”

“You can’t control other people’s feelings. All you can do is put yourself out there and hope she’s going to feel the same way.”

“And if she doesn’t?”

“You’ll move on. But you can do this. Relationships are scary. Especially new ones with guys who have seriously questionable reputations for being womanizers. Sometimes it’s easier to go back to what we know because it’s familiar and comfortable rather than put ourselves on the line. If you want this—if you want her—it’s you putting yourself on the line, not the other way around. Call me tomorrow if you need to; Alex has a workout scheduled at nine in the morning. I’m planning to watch him sweat while I pretend to exert myself on a recumbent bike.”

She hangs up with a screech and a giggle.

I went into this weekend with a plan to get past third base with Sunny. I succeeded. Not once did I consider the possibility that going back to her small-dicked, orgasm-challenged ex-boyfriend would feel like the safer option to her.

Robbie and Violet are right. I need to step up my game. Otherwise I might lose Sunny to Bushman Tiny Dick.

CHAPTER TWELVE

BIG BETS AND VAGUE MEMORIES

After the call with Violet, I find an all-you-can-eat buffet and gorge. Then I drive to Toronto to pick up Randy. While I'm waiting for his flight, I mess around on social media. Bushman has been tagging Sunny in pictures. She and Lily are sitting at the table in the backseat, arms around each other with big grins. There's another one of Sunny with her face right next to Bushman's scruffy beard, holding up a bag of those damn kale chips. I hate him and his stupid name.

I add comments to the posts on her wall, so Bushman knows I'm watching his ass. I want to message Sunny about the whole four-year thing, but I don't want to rock an already rocky boat. None of the pictures being posted so far are a problem, but it's just the drive there. Who knows what other shit is going to happen as the week progresses.

Randy's all smiles and "fuck yeah, camping!" when I pick him up. I try not to let my crap mood ruin his. He reclines his seat and adjusts his baseball cap. He's like a walking billboard for Chicago.

"So? How was the weekend with Sunny? I figured it couldn't have gone too bad since I only heard from you once."

I struggle to maintain a neutral expression. "It was good."

"Just good? Come on, Miller, give up the details. You've been radio silent all weekend. Did you finally get some action or what?"

In the past we've traded bunny stories. When Sunny and I first started seeing each other, I may have given Randy and some of the other guys the impression I'd sealed the deal. It wasn't like I out and out lied about it, more that I omitted the details. Vi ripped a strip off of me for that. I saw her point. While it was unheard of for me to not get action, it made sense that I wouldn't want to paint Sunny with the bunny brush. Especially since she's Waters' sister, and he'd probably castrate me with his hockey stick if he found out.

He's chopped me in the shins a couple of times in the past month when we've played rec after workouts. He also got me good in the kidneys. That one hurt. I was sore for a couple of days. If he knows I'm sexing with Sunny, that stick is going to be aimed directly at my balls.

The GPS pipes up and tells me to get on the 401 East. I follow the signs, avoiding an answer.

“Miller?”

“Sup?”

“You gonna answer or what?”

“We had a good time. Let’s leave it at that.”

“Oh, shit. You didn’t bang her? How fucking blue are your balls right now?” He pulls out his phone.

“What are you doing?” The traffic here is nuts. People cut across lanes without even looking. There are signs everywhere and assholes going ninety in the slow lane, then cutting in, forcing everyone behind them to slam on their brakes.

He’s thumb typing, and he hasn’t shut the sound off, so I hear every annoying click. “Texting Lance.”

“What the hell for?”

He stops typing to talk. “Because I owe him a case of beer.”

“For what?”

“I lost the bet.” He’s got that cocky grin going again.

“Bet?”

“Yeah. I bet him a case of beer you’d be able to get Sunny to ride your dick, and he bet me you’d pussy out.”

I slap his phone out of his hand, knocking it to the floor. In the process I swerve and cut into the lane next to me. A chick in a sporty BMW honks and flails her hands.

“Dude! What’s your damage?” He goes to pick up his phone, but I crossbar him with a forearm to the neck.

“Text Lance and I’ll leave you on the side of the highway.”

“I won’t. Jesus, man, what’s going on with you? What happened? Did you and Sunny get into a fight? I figured you’d smooth things over like you usually do with the bunnies.”

“Sunny’s not a bunny.” The rhyme irritates me.

“I know that.”

I run a hand through my hair and give him the side eye. “You wanna make bets on the bunnies, you go right ahead. But don’t bring Sunny into your bullshit. She’s not some slutbag I’m trying to pull a fuck-and-chuck on.”

Randy settles back in his seat when I withdraw my arm. “I know that, man, but you know how Lance is; everything’s a game for him.”

“You’d think it was obvious at this point that I’m serious about Sunny.”

“Right? Who keeps seeing the same chick for three months if it isn’t about more than fucking.” Randy looks out the window and rubs at his beard. “I know I sure as hell wouldn’t.”

I don’t say anything while Randy fiddles around with the radio and finds a station he likes. He’s big into country music.

Here’s the thing: I know I shouldn’t say anything, but like Randy said, I’ve been waiting for months to get to this point. I can’t give details to Violet, because that shit’s awkward and weird. I mean, mostly she’s like a girl version of Randy, minus all the whoring and the equipment below the belt, but stepsister or not, we’re quasi-related, and we’re close. I can’t go there. However, Randy’s one of my closest buddies, and old habits die hard. I should be able to trust him not to run his mouth.

“You can’t say anything to Lance.”

He stops messing around with the radio. “I won’t. Scout’s honor.” He holds up two fingers and gives me a cheeky-ass grin.

“I’m serious.”

“Sorry. I can’t help it. But yeah, I won’t say anything—not to Lance or anyone else.”

“So Sunny was pissed when I got there, but we talked it out, and I smoothed it over.”

“So you did get some action?”

I smile. It’s enough of an answer.

“I fucking knew it! You owe me a case of beer, asshole. How was it? She teaches yoga right? I bet she’s better than a porn star in bed. Just bend her in half and give ‘er—” He makes thrusting motions.

I want to punch him in the side of the head. I suck my teeth.

“Sorry. Sorry, man. That was probably out of line.” He pats me on the shoulder. “I know you’ve been blue-balling it over this girl, so I’m glad you finally got some.”

I can tell he wants details. Before Sunny, I would’ve given them in 3D Technicolor. All the bunnies like to share details—some of them seriously exaggerated—in online bunny groups, so it only seemed fair. It’s weird. Up until now it didn’t feel like I was doing anything wrong by sharing, but

Sunny isn't going to post anything about our weekend sex-a-thon, so I feel like I should keep most of it to myself.

"What about you? How was your weekend?" I ask, shifting the focus.

"You know how it goes when Lance is on a bender. He keeps inviting more people. There were a shitton of girls there this weekend. When I left this morning he was looking rough."

That's not an answer. Not the kind I expect from Randy. He's usually all over providing excessive details. Right now he seems irritated more than anything.

"Natasha was pretty annoyed?" I probe.

"Right? She was a drill sergeant. Lance puked his guts out later. It was epic."

I hit the brakes when the guy in front of us slams on his. Ahead of me is a sea of red lights and a lot of pickup trucks with huge tires. It's like we're on the way to a monster truck rally. It's Sunday afternoon. We're in Canada, with an endless supply of land, and we're sitting in bumper-to-bumper traffic. I don't get it.

"You think there's anything going on there?" I ask.

"Between Tash and Lance? He flirts with her, but then he flirts with everything that has tits. That would be stupid on Tash's part. Lance is fun to be around, but he's dirty. Why? Tash say something to you?" Randy goes back to messing around with the radio stations.

"No. Just a feeling I get."

Randy's a fidgety motherpucker. If I didn't know him as well as I do, I'd think he was strung out on something most of the time. He's not. I don't think he even smoked weed in high school. He taps his fingers on his knees and hums along to the song.

He stops drumming. "You know, maybe you're right."

"About Tash and Lance?"

"He was in a shitty mood after she left, bitching about how she didn't even say she was going and how she short-changed us on the workout. I figured he was in one of his moods, 'cause he was hungover as shit, and it wasn't like he was actually doing anything other than being a pain in the ass. But that was when the party started to get out of hand. He was slamming back the shots. Then he took a porcelain throne break. He came out an hour or two later, called half his bunny list, and went back to getting

wasted. I cut back on the drinking because I was worried he'd get into a fight, and flying hungover sucks."

Lance has a short fuse on the ice and an even shorter fuse when he's wasted and someone says something he doesn't like. I have my moments, but Lance is way worse. It's probably all the ginger in him.

"Anyway, he passed out around eight, and I figured that'd be the end of him, but he got back up at midnight and kept going. He was still asleep when I left today. I should call and see how he's doing later."

Sometimes I worry about Lance and whether he's going to be able to manage himself. He's two years into his career and still a hotheaded rookie. He's stupid with his money—blowing it on parties and his collection of cars. I'd probably be doing the same thing if it wasn't for Violet. She essentially gives me an allowance so I don't waste what's supposed to be my savings on frivolous crap—not that I don't buy dumb, useless things. I just buy them less often. Plus, living in a condo makes it impossible to have fifty people at my place. Having Lance as a friend allows me to experience the parties without having to manage the cleanup or the actual expense.

"Whatever happened to those girls you guys brought home?"

"Which ones?"

"The ones from the bar the night before I left."

His expression is still blank.

"The chick in the dickface pictures. The ones that got me into a shitload of trouble with Sunny."

"Oh. Yeah. Lance felt bad about that."

Not so bad that he apologized, but that isn't Lance's style. He doesn't do apologies. He lives like the world revolves around him. It's another reason I'm not so sure he'll make it too many more seasons. He isn't much of a team player. That doesn't work well when you play professional hockey.

"So what happened to them?"

Randy shrugs. "Who knows?"

"One of them knew Lance, eh."

"Eh?" Randy smirks. "Sunny's starting to rub off on you."

My response is automatic. "She's done a lot more than rub off on me."

Randy laughs. "You better not say that in front of Waters or he'll use your balls for shoot-out practice. What do you mean one of them knew Lance? Pretty much everyone's had a piece of that guy."

“The girl who cleaned the dick off my forehead said she went to school with him back in the day.”

“Seriously? She was hot. Did he even bone her?”

“Nope. He bagged Flash Beaver. I don’t think he recognized her. She said she was younger. Like middle school or something. There was some party her older sister dragged her to, and they ended up in a closet together.”

“No shit! Are you going to tell him about it?”

“I don’t see the point. It’s not like he’s gonna give a shit. Besides, she seemed liked a nice girl. I felt bad for her that he fucked her friend.”

Randy makes a disapproving sound. “That’s kinda low. What was her name?”

“Poppy.”

“Poppy what?”

“I don’t know. Poppy from the garden. I’d say ask Lance, but he won’t remember. Anyway, she was a nice girl, definitely not a bunny. Apparently Lance was her first kiss.”

“Wow. That sucks for her.” Randy reclines in his seat again and stares out the window, tapping his fingers on his lips to the beat. “You know, I don’t even remember my first kiss. There’s been so many girls. I can’t keep track anymore.”

He’s not bragging. In fact, he seems sad about it.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

GROUND RULES

Once we get past Toronto, the traffic thins. By the time we reach Muskoka and turn off the main highway, there are hardly any cars on the road. We pull into the camp around dinner time, so all the kids are likely busy shoveling food into their faces. Randy and I stopped at a burger joint on the way up and scarfed down half a dozen burgers each, so we're not starving. Having volunteered at these things before, I'm highly aware of the quality and quantity of food they serve.

It's not that it's bad. It's camp food, prepared en masse for kids who don't have much in the way of appreciation for flavor. Legit, full-on hockey camps are different. Those kids are playing four to six hours a day. It's serious training for NHL players in the making. It's also hella expensive, so the food is better and plentiful. You can't serve the basics to a bunch of pre-teens or early teens who've been playing like they're trying out for the pros all day.

This isn't that kind of camp. It's for kids with more going on than making Triple A and getting scouted. While a select few may have serious potential, most of them are here because they love it. The camp is heavily subsidized, partially by me, partially by other foundations that work with underprivileged families or kids with special needs. One of the kids this year might not even make it to his teens. That's why I picked the camp. No one appreciates—and deserves—life's joys like someone who's aware of his own expiration date.

I follow the directions of one of the junior counselors, who gets all bug eyed and excited when we tell him who we are and what we're here for. We park in the staff lot and cut the engine. Two girls in shorts and camp shirts that read STAFF across the back come out of the mess hall. Randy watches them bounce across the grass toward the cabins, a huge grin on his face.

Like most sites, this one includes two separate sports camps, one for girls and one for boys. The boys' camp is on the south side of the lake and the girls' on the north side. The mess hall is central, so they eat together. There are coed events during the day, but at night, when it comes to sleeping, the genders are separated, with the counselor cabins at each camp reinforcing the boundaries. On the Friday before camp ends, there'll be a

dance, which will be a pre-teen hormone fest, all of them dry-humping on each other, trying to disappear into the forest.

I press the lock button before Randy can get out of the car and keep my thumb on it. “We need to set some ground rules for the week.”

“Huh?” He’s not paying attention. He’s too busy reefing on the door, staring at their asses.

“Ground rules. You need to listen.” I snap a finger in his face. That gets his attention. “The junior counselors are sixteen and seventeen. The senior counselors are eighteen and up.” I know this because Amber read me the program information when I said I wanted to volunteer here instead of at one of the serious hockey camps this summer. “There’s a no-fraternizing policy in effect.”

Randy snorts. “Does anyone actually take that seriously?”

“You need to take it seriously.”

“Do you remember hockey camp, Miller? I sure do. It was a no-holds-barred fuck fest.”

“This isn’t that kind of hockey camp, and we’re not attending, we’re volunteering. Don’t make me regret inviting you.”

A group of four girls comes out of the mess hall; one has a staff shirt on, and the other three are dressed in regular summer clothes. “How do I know if they’re senior or junior counselors?”

“You ask.”

“Awesome. Let’s go.” He reefs on the door again.

“We’re not done laying ground rules yet. If you’re going to hook up with a senior counselor, you need to limit it to one.”

“One?” He looks like his head is going to explode.

“Yeah. One. All these girls know each other. They’ve probably been coming here since they were little kids. They’re going to talk, and if you bang your way through them, I’m never going to be invited back. And I don’t need the drama.”

“So just one.” He cracks his knuckles and rolls his shoulders like he’s getting ready to take on an opponent. “Okay. I can do that, I guess.”

“Choose wisely, Balls.”

I release the lock, and he gets out of the car, stretching before he leans against his door and watches another gaggle of teenagers burst out of the mess hall. This time one of the counselors pushes a kid in a wheelchair.

Randy's up the stairs and offering assistance before I can unbuckle my seatbelt.

My phone dings several times in a row with new messages.

<3 the pic!

Made it 2 the camp. How ru?

Forgot my charger :(hav 2 go 2 town 2 get 1

Fuck. This isn't good. I don't bother with messaging. I hit her contact and call right away. She picks up on the second ring. The connection is full of static.

"Hey, sweets."

"Miller! I don't have much battery left."

"That's okay. I wanted to make sure you made it up there all right."

"You're sweet. The drive was great! Kale and Benji are making a fire, and me and Lily are in charge of dinner."

It's like a double date out in the middle of nowhere. The only good thing is the lack of shower options. I'm hoping Sunny also forgot deodorant and soap so she gets ripe fast. Knowing Kale, that would probably be an aphrodisiac. I bet he showers once a month.

"We won't get to town for a couple of days. I'll try to message from Lily's phone, but her reception is almost as bad as mine."

"That sucks. I was hoping for daily updates."

"I know. I'm sorry, Miller. I'll message as soon as I get a new charger. I still have to let my parents know I'm here, so I should go before my phone dies." The crackling on the line makes it almost impossible to hear her.

"Okay. Be careful up there. When I see you next I think we should talk ____"

Her shriek forces me to pull the phone away from my ear. "Kale! Stop it! I'm on the phone with Miller! Put me down—"

The call drops; beep-beep-beeping is the last thing I get.

I stare at the blank screen, a hot feeling creeping up the back of my neck. If I was on the ice right now, I'd probably get myself a penalty. I feel like I might be getting fucked around, and I don't like it.

This is going to be a long, shitty week of wondering.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

BIG BALLS

Randy manages to keep his dick in his pants for the first two days, which is a miracle. There are way more counselors than I'm used to, probably because the kids require more supervision and assistance. At least I have Randy as my shield against the female senior counselors, which are in abundant supply thanks to the neighboring girls' camp. They aren't bunnies, but they're equally as interested in getting up close and personal.

I thought the Sunny wallpaper on my phone would function as a deterrent, but I discover that girls like guys who have pictures of their girlfriend on their phones. At first I think they're hitting on me, but then I realize they want to be my friend. Girls are funny about the whole *being friends with a guy* business. They're flirty, and overly touchy, but there's no expectation that I'm going to find an empty cabin and show them what I can do with my lightning rod. It's like having a whole bunch of sisters like Vi who engage in the overshare.

Randy has the exact opposite issue. Once it becomes clear he doesn't have a girlfriend, he's fair game. It's like watching turkey vultures fight over a carcass on the highway. They'll peck each other's eyes out to get to him.

By the morning of day three, I still haven't heard from Sunny. Between coaching sessions and games with the kids, I check her social media accounts, but there's nothing new apart from a picture posted on the first day—not by her or Lily, but by Patchy Bushman. The four of them have their arms wrapped around each other, standing in front of the camping trailer-van, being all happy together. I get it better now more than ever why she reacted the way she did to those bunny pics. Bushman has his arm around Sunny. I want to rip it off and beat him with it, but I also know that things aren't always the way they look. Unfortunately, I'm also aware that sometimes they're *exactly* how they look.

The longer I don't hear from her, the more pissy I get. I know they're all friends, but this doesn't seem much different than the shit she gets upset at me over.

I combat the happy, smiley picture with multiple pics of me and Sunny from our weekend at her place. Even though I'm annoyed, I message her

every day with little updates. The reception up here isn't the greatest unless I'm in the mess hall or by the water where there aren't as many trees obstructing the signal. This means I have to type most of my messages. I won't use the voice-to-text thing in front of other people. Some of what I have to text is private.

I'd get Randy to check the spelling, but I don't want him to razz me about it. I'd vet them through my PA like I sometimes do, but she's still out in the middle of the wilderness, so it's not an option.

By the end of the fifth day, I'm bagged. Kids are a lot of work. I must've been hard for my dad to manage as a kid, especially having hockey practice five days a week. But I think sometimes that was a good way to get me out of my dad's hair so he could get shit done. And eventually my practices were a good place for him to scout.

While I never had a problem with going to practice, school work was always a fight. I feel like it's the same way for some of these kids. I've already sent my dad an email with the names of a couple kids who have serious potential, but likely can't afford the training they'll need to make hockey a career. I don't expect to hear from him until he's back from his cruise, but I like to keep him informed.

I hit the staff showers, which allow some privacy, and wait until the water gets hot before I step under the spray. I ignore the spiders living in the corner of the stall and the slight, mildewy smell. Sometimes it's nice not to have the conveniences and luxuries of home. It reminds me how lucky I am that playing professional hockey has worked out. However, I am relieved to find the water pressure is decent. I must have played six rounds of ball hockey today between sessions with the kids and playing with the junior counselors.

I consider rubbing one out in the shower. It's been two days since I've been able to take care of my business. If I don't help myself out soon, I'm going to have a raging case of blue balls. They're already achy, and the only pictures I've been looking at are the ones of Sunny in her bikini.

Lathering up, I grab my handle and give it a quick tug. My balls tighten like little fists. This won't take long at all. With my back to the spray, I start stroking. I keep my eyes closed so I can picture Sunny naked, under me, her legs wrapped around my waist. I don't think I last much more than two minutes. I'd be embarrassed, but efficiency is more important than longevity in this case.

I cut the water and towel off, putting on a fresh pair of shorts and a T-shirt. I almost bowl over one of the female counselors on my way out. She's in a two-piece bathing suit, but it's not like the ones the bunnies wear. It actually covers all her important parts. Her ass isn't even hanging out the back.

Randy's standing beside her with his towel and a change of clothes. "You go first." He nods to the open stall.

"You're sure?" She's all blush-y and lip bite-y.

"Yeah. Definitely. I'll catch up with you later."

"Okay. I'll see you in the mess hall before the campfire?" She twirls her ponytail around her finger.

"Sure thing." He winks, and she practically trips over her own feet getting into the shower.

As soon as she's locked inside, I ask the most important question: "How old is she?"

"Nineteen."

"You sure about that?" Most of these girls don't wear makeup; it isn't always easy to tell how old or young they are.

"She showed me her driver's license."

"You're sure it's not a fake?"

"It didn't look fake." He pats me on the shoulder. "Don't worry, Miller. I've got a handle on the situation."

Another stall comes open, and he grabs it before I can question him further.

I've got time before the campfire, so I walk down to the lake where the reception is better and I can get some privacy. Sunny said she'd try to call tonight. The last I heard from her was two nights ago. She left a choppy message saying her reception was bad. She didn't sound particularly happy. It shouldn't have made me feel good, but it kinda did.

Tonight they're supposed to be at a bar in town. Lily isn't much of a drinker, so she's the DD. Their ride is portable, so even if she does get drunk, they could park and sleep it off. Sunny's a friendly, touchy drunk. Usually I'm cool with it, but I'm not there, and Patchy Bushman is.

The first night I met Sunny, she was blitzed after three drinks, two of which I bought for her. I ordered her a non-alcoholic mojito while she was in the bathroom to help sober her up. At the time I didn't want to feel guilty if we got naked together later. We ended up at an all-night breakfast place

instead. She ate an insane amount of food, which was hot, since most girls pick at a salad and pretend they're not hungry. We talked for hours.

I cabbed it back to her friend's place with her at four in the morning, but she didn't invite me in. Instead we made out on the front porch. Then I asked for her number and gave her mine. On the way back to the hotel, I voice-texted her so I wouldn't mess up any of the words and told her I had a great time and wanted to see her again. When I got back to my room I hit the showers and rubbed one out instead of going back to the bar to score a bunny.

The sun dips lower on the horizon, but dusk is an hour away, so I should be safe from the mosquitoes. They're terrible up here. Worse than I've ever seen in Chicago. I haven't shaved since I arrived. I left my razor and trimmer at Sunny's, and I didn't think to buy anything when Randy and I stocked up on snacks at the grocery store. Even with my trim job at Sunny's, I have clusters of bites all over the place. I've been bathing in bug spray every night before the campfire, but it's not doing much good.

I head out to the docks and drop into one of the chairs, brushing away a few cobwebs and a spider or two. It's quiet out here with everyone getting ready for the fire. I feel guilty for not helping out like I usually do, but I need a few minutes to myself. I'm hoping to get directions from Sunny for when camp is done.

Pulling up my messages, I find nothing new from her. Since I'm out here alone, I can use the voice-to-text function. I dictate a quick message, then hit my Instagram feed. Sunny isn't big on updating, but Patch McBushman has tagged her in half a dozen pictures. His Instagram handle, @Kurly_Kale, is as douchey as he is. He's taken a bunch of pictures of Sunny with Lily. One caught them in a candid moment with their arms around each other, laughing. Lily is actually pretty when she isn't busy hating me.

I'm okay with those pictures. Sunny should have fun, even if she's far away and her motives for going are questionable—and partially my fault. But the farther I scroll through the feed, the less happy I am. There are pictures of Sunny with Patchy Bushman. She's in my favorite bikini, and his arm is around her waist. I hate that guy—and Lily for convincing her to go on this trip.

I'm about to comment on a couple of the pictures when a sharp sting has me out of the chair and on my feet. My phone clatters to the dock and

bounces once. It spins on its side before falling away from the crack in the boards. My relief is short lived. A huge spider falls out of my shorts and lands on top of my running shoe. I shout and kick it off, then stomp on the fucker until he's nothing but a splatter mark.

Making sure I'm still alone first, I unbutton my shorts to check my parts. The issue feels like it's closer to my taint than my dick. It's hard to see without dropping my shorts completely and mooning anyone who might accidentally find me. I stick my hand down there, feeling my balls where the sting is the worst. There's a bump on my left nut. It hurts to touch.

"Um . . . is everything okay?" The voice is female and vaguely familiar.

I immediately retract my hand and button my shorts so I don't look like I'm jacking off on the middle of the dock like a pervert. Once everything is tucked away, I turn around. It's one of the senior counselors. The same one who's been following me around for the past few days. She turned eighteen last week. She's told me seven thousand times already. It's a harmless crush—I think—but I've been trying not to end up alone with her. Like I am right now.

She looks around, confused. "I heard a girl scream."

"A spider bit me."

"Oh. Are you okay?"

I'd be embarrassed by the evidently feminine quality of my scream, but the bite stings, and it was a big fucking spider. "I'll be fine. Nothing some Bactine won't fix."

There's no way I'm putting Bactine on this. It already feels like I dipped my balls in acid.

"Do you want me to take a look?" She takes a few steps toward me, and I take a couple back.

"That's okay. I can handle it."

"I should check it out for you. I might be able to figure out what type of spider it was. Last week one of the kid's hands swelled up to twice its size because she got bit by one of those dock spiders. Sometimes when they're pregnant they lay their eggs under the skin."

I shudder at the thought of a thousand baby spiders exploding from my balls. It's like a damn horror movie.

She sidles closer. If I was anywhere but the dock it'd be easy to get around her. Water prevents me from doing that. I want desperately to grab

my balls, but it'll look inappropriate. I back up, hoping to escape her. I don't take into account how close I am to the edge. I almost lose my footing and fall in, but recover myself before it happens.

She puts a hand on my shoulder, as if to steady me. "God. That was close. Are you sure you're okay? I have first aid. Where'd it bite you?"

"Not in a spot I want you looking at." It feels like something is happening in my pants, and it's not good.

I move her out of the way by her shoulders. In my hurry to escape, I almost step on my phone. I scoop it up and shove it in my pocket, heading back to the cabins. She calls after me, but I wave over my shoulder and start jogging. It's uncomfortable. I have to throw my leg out to the side so I don't cause unnecessary ball friction.

My cabin is empty, thankfully, so I drop my shorts and inspect the damage. I have to wrap my balls around my dick to get a good look. The bite's red and angry. My left nut is now significantly larger than the right one. Usually it hangs lower, but it's way swollen.

I remember one time at hockey camp, way back when I was a teenager, a spider bit me and it swelled. That was my foot, though. It was uncomfortable, but not a real problem. This isn't the same. I need an antihistamine at the very least. And a serious dose of painkillers. This bastard is going to be itchy as hell, and if my ball keeps swelling, I'm going to be sporting one hell of a moose knuckle. I can't be having that when I'm dealing with a bunch of pre-teens.

I pull my shorts up and check the first aid kit. The medicated wipes and bandages aren't going to cut it. My only other option is to visit the clinic. Because of the nature of the camp, there's always a nurse on call. I almost trip over the girl from the dock on my way out the door.

"Everything okay? They're starting the campfire soon. You're coming, right?"

"I'll be there. I need to make a quick stop first."

My shorts chafe against my swollen ball, forcing me to hobble. The girl bounces along beside me. She's got great energy when it comes to working with the kids, but right now I find it irritating, mostly because I'm in pain.

"Oh wow. You're limping. Did it get you on the leg?" She bends at the waist like she's trying to see. Her head is almost at crotch level.

I want to get there as quickly as possible, but the faster I move, the more it hurts. “I didn’t get bit on the leg.”

“Where’d it bite you?”

“On the balls.”

“Oh. Oh, God.” That stops the questions.

We run into Randy on the way to the medical clinic. He’s with that girl from the showers. He frowns when he sees me walking like a felon who caught a bullet in the ass. He glances between me and the girl. It’s the first time I’ve noticed she’s blond and looks a little like Sunny. That might explain my subconscious attempt to get away from her.

“What happened to you?” Randy asks.

Sunny’s doppelganger bounces excitedly. “A spider bit Buck on his balls!”

“How did that happen?” Randy’s suspicion is offensive. I managed to go without pussy for three months. I’m not going to fold after five days because the chick beside me looks like my sort-of girlfriend, who’s currently seven hours away. Without cell phone reception. And who’s all buddy-buddy with her ex-boyfriend of four years.

“I’m assuming it crawled into my shorts, took one look at my balls, thought, *hey man, those look tasty*, and chomped down. But I’m not a spider-whisperer, so I have no idea how spiders make those kinds of decisions. That’s just a guess.”

Randy has the audacity to check with Doppelganger to verify whether I’m indeed telling the truth.

She lifts one shoulder and lets it fall. “I heard a scream and went to check it out. I was worried some of the kids might have snuck down to the water without permission. I found Miller on the dock. He squished the spider. It was hard to tell what kind it was, but it was probably a dock spider because he was on the dock.”

This whole conversation might be okay if it didn’t feel as if my balls were about to explode like the sun. “I need to hit the bathroom.”

“I still think you should let me check it out. You look uncomfortable.” She makes a face. “And you’re sweaty.”

Randy pats me on the back and steers me in the direction of the staff bathroom. “Come on, let’s go.”

I’d make a douchey comment about how only girls go to the bathroom together, but I’m worried about how tight the front of my shorts are.

I'm relieved to find the bathroom empty. I close the door, and Randy stands in front of it. There's no lock on the inside, so he's my barricade while I'm checking the damage. "You need to tell me how bad it is. I can't see the bite."

Randy crosses his arms over his chest. "I'll man the door, and you can check it out in that mirror."

"Fine. But don't let anyone in here." I hobble across the room. The mirror is so old it has a cloudy haze to it. It's also high up on the wall. At 6'2" I'm tall, but the mirror only reaches my waist. I drop my shorts and jump up. All I catch a glimpse of is the head of my dick—not my swollen balls. "I can't see anything."

"Try taking the mirror off the wall."

"It's fastened with screws." I turn around, prepared to show my irritation with a hand gesture.

All the color drains from Randy's face as he stares at my junk. "Holy fucking shit, dude. You need to see a medic."

I glance down. I don't need a mirror to see the problem. In the time it's taken me to walk from the cabin to the bathrooms, my left nut has swollen to twice its normal size. I gingerly cup my balls in my palm and move my dick out of the way for a better look. My perspective isn't great, though. It's enough to see that they're swollen, and it feels like I've given them a bath in lava. "I need an antihistamine, some Tylenol, and maybe a bag a of frozen peas."

"I think you might need more than that." He moves closer and leans in.

I'm assaulted by a flash of light. Momentarily blinded, I raise my hands, and my shorts drop all the way to the floor.

"You can't post that anywhere!" I grab for his phone, but he holds it out of reach, clicking buttons with his thumb.

"It's just your junk, dude." He shows me a close-up pic of my branch and berries. "There's this site where they can identify medical stuff through pictures. Maybe they can figure out what kind of spider bit you."

"I don't want pictures of my dick on the Internet!"

This is the exact moment the door flies open, slamming into Randy from behind. He stumbles forward and almost face-plants into my giant balls. I stop him with a palm on his forehead. A senior counselor—I recognize him from mess hall duty—stands inside the door. He starts to

apologize, but it turns into a croak when he sees me fisting my dick and Randy on his knees in front of me with his phone in his hand.

Because this day wasn't bad enough already, shit had to get even stupider.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

NOTHING IS EASY. EVER.

“Uh—” Bathroom Interloper’s eyes dart back and forth between us.

“A spider bit me on the balls.” I put both hands in the air before he gets the wrong idea. Which he clearly already has, so it’s useless.

“I’m gonna—” He thumbs over his shoulder and starts to back out of the bathroom.

Randy grabs him by the shirt and yanks him inside, slapping his free palm against the door to prevent anyone from entering or exiting. “You’re not going anywhere.”

“I-I don’t—I’m not. I like girls.”

“Randy, chill out and let him go.” Bathroom Interloper looks like he’s about to pee his pants. Which is understandable considering the situation he walked in on and Randy’s misplaced aggression. “This isn’t how it looks. A spider seriously bit me on the balls.”

I’ve got enough crap to contend with where Sunny is concerned. I don’t need more rumors circulating.

His eyes drop down and then flip right back up. His horror confirms what I already know. I need to get this taken care of. Sooner rather than later.

To drive the point home, Bathroom Interloper says, “That doesn’t look normal.”

“No shit.”

“You should probably see someone about that.”

“That’s the plan.”

He nods like it makes good sense, because it does.

I carefully zip my shorts to avoid any additional unnecessary pain. Randy and our new friend walk two steps in front of me, acting as a shield so I don’t traumatize any of the kids or junior counselors milling around. The girls run up as we’re about to go into the mess hall. Sunny’s Doppelganger gets in front of us and throws open the door. “Buck has a spider bite!” She pauses for greater effect. “On his balls!”

It wouldn’t be so much of an issue if it was just me and Randy and Bathroom Interloper, plus the two girls. But it’s not. A group of kids are off in the corner, some playing cards and others on their devices, since this is

the best place to get reception. Several junior counselors sit at a table, preparing snacks for the campfire. We're having banana boats. They're my favorite. I hope my balls don't prevent me from being able to go. I really want one. Or six.

Everyone stops what they're doing to stare at my crotch. I can understand why; my shorts are tight across the front, giving everyone an awesome view of the outline of my now oversized balls. I use my hands to cover myself, but it's too late. They've all seen the monstrosity taking up way too much real estate in my shorts.

"You should probably see the nurse," one of the girls at the table says. Her eyes are still below my waist.

"I need an antihistamine. You got a bag of frozen vegetables in the kitchen I can borrow?"

Everyone continues to stare. Randy coughs from beside me.

"Fine. How about a bag of ice instead? That way I won't have to return it after I put it on my balls." I glance at the kids in the corner. They're all gaping, too. "I mean my testicles."

That gets a few giggles. It's nice that this is entertaining for someone.

Bathroom Interloper puts in his two cents. "I still think someone should check that out."

"I offered!" Doppelganger's hand shoots up in the air. The girl beside her forces her hand back down to her side.

"I've checked it out." I point to my chest. "It's just a little swollen."

Randy coughs again.

"Okay. It's a lot swollen. But I've had way worse, so this is no big deal." The burning in my balls is now accompanied by a horrendous itch. It's unreal. I have the strangest urge to dip them in ice-cold water. It's about the last thing any guy usually wants to do, and a sure sign things are way worse than I thought.

"Let's go find Debra," Doppelganger suggests. "She'll take care of you."

I stop arguing. If I don't accept medical attention, I'll be setting a bad example. Plus, no one's balls should ever be this big. My growing entourage makes their way through the mess hall to the area where the medical center is. It's like a mini-triage unit crossed with a physiotherapy center. I'm familiar with a lot of the equipment. When we get there and no one moves to leave, I clap my hands together. "Okay, everyone. Thanks for

getting me here. I appreciate all your help, but I don't think I need a cheering squad for the rest of this."

"Um . . ." Doppelganger raises her hand like we're in class and I'm the teacher. "Can I get a quick picture with you?"

"Group photo!" Randy says, a stupid, jerky grin on his face. "Everyone in!"

He mashes everyone together, Bathroom Interloper and Doppelganger on either side of me. My smile is more grimace than anything else. I'd flip the bird, but this will undoubtedly make it to the Internet. I hope he doesn't get my actual package in the picture.

Finally, once the photo shoot is over, they all leave.

In the far corner of the clinic, a kid is hooked up to a bunch of machines, an IV bag running to his arm. As soon as he sees me, he ducks his head like he's embarrassed to be here, or he witnessed that display of idiocy.

I recognize him from earlier in the week. He hasn't signed up for any of the competitive hockey business, but he's been to every lesson. He's an amazing player, but he's quiet, always leaving as soon as the lesson is over before I can talk to him. He's missed the campfire a couple of times.

"Hey, man. I'm Miller. I've seen you playing this week. How's it going?"

He lifts his head, his eyes widening in surprise. "Uh, I'm Michael." He looks at the IV drip. "I guess it's okay."

"You getting gassed up so you can play with me tomorrow?" I nod to all the shit he's hooked up to.

He smiles, but it's sad and old, way older than it should be for a kid. "Something like that."

Nurse Debbie appears in her white running shoes and scrubs. I'd like to say she's in her mid-fifties and looks like my aunt. She doesn't. She's more *Debbie Does Dallas* than Nurse Ratched. She's probably in her early to mid-thirties—I've slept with older—with dark hair pulled back in a tight ponytail. She's soft around the edges, but it works for her. She's too attractive to be a nurse. I'm not sure how I feel about her having to look at my junk. But the itch has become as pervasive as the burning sensation. I'm getting close to not caring that there are people around to witness me scratching my berries.

She does that thing women do when they see something they like. She pats her hair and smooths a hand down the front of her scrub top. It's an unconscious reaction. She clears her throat and props her clipboard on her hip, flipping into professional mode. "How can I help you?"

"I got bit by a spider, and it's swelling." I want to shove my hands in my pockets, but there's no room.

"Why don't you have a seat so I can take a look?"

"Uh . . ." I incline my head in the direction of my young friend. "We're gonna need privacy for this."

Nurse Debbie's eyebrows shoot up into her hairline. She does that strobe-light blink thing. "Privacy?"

"It's not in a PG spot."

She strobe blinks a couple more times and gestures to one of the cots. She hands me one of those gown things and closes the curtain while I drop my shorts and put it on. I've never put the lightning rod on display under such shitty circumstances.

When I'm gowned up, I invite her in. Nurse Debbie doesn't bother to mask her shock when I show her my junk. "Oh my God."

I'm not sure if it's an optical illusion, but my balls seem even bigger than they were last time I looked. They're about the size of a softball now, with one side significantly more swollen than the other. They usually resemble a couple of plums hanging out together. Right now the left one is massive, and the swelling has traveled to the other side. It makes my dick look a lot smaller than it is. And the shaft is swollen where it meets my balls, so it's taken on a torpedo-like shape. If I had an orange condom, I could paint my balls green and call it carrot dick. Except I don't think I could get a hard-on right now if I tried.

"It's a little swollen."

Nurse Debbie's eyes flip up to mine, her disbelief obvious. "A little?"

"Okay. A lot. But it's not a big deal, right? The swelling'll go down if I take an antihistamine and ice those babies."

"Do you know what bit you?"

"A spider. I squished it when it fell out of my shorts."

"It fell out of your shorts?"

"Yeah. I was chilling on the dock after dinner, checking my emails, 'cause it's peaceful out there, and the reception is decent." I don't know

why I'm explaining. What I was doing isn't important. It's the state of my balls that matters.

"If you were on the dock, it was probably a fishing spider. It's hard to know for sure until I get a better look." She snaps on a pair of gloves. "This is a pretty extreme reaction, though, possibly because of the location. Do you have any allergies?"

"I'm only allergic to penicillin."

"Ah. That could explain this." She motions to my huge balls.

"An allergy to penicillin can explain my nuts turning into grapefruit?"

"The spider venom has similar properties to penicillin. It means you'll have a more significant reaction."

My giant balls do seem damn significant. I glance at the clock on the wall; it's already after eight. "How long do you think this is going to take? I need to go to the campfire tonight; the kids are expecting me. Tomorrow morning we're playing kids-versus counselors before their parents pick them up. I need the swelling to go down so I can play." Plus there's going to be some local journalists stopping by, as per Amber's suggestion.

"We can get your teammate to cover for you."

"I don't need Randy to cover for me. I want to hang out with these kids and play hockey and roast banana boats on an open fire. Just give me some antihistamine and a couple of painkillers. I'll be good to go."

My man unit is still hanging out. Nurse Debbie is still staring. I can understand why. I'm gonna snap a couple of pics before the swelling goes down because they're so crazy huge. I'll threaten Vi with them if she gets on my nerves.

Debbie crosses her arms over her chest. I should know better than to tell a medical professional what she needs to do. "I need to take a better look at the bite before I do that."

She makes me put my legs up on the cot and spread them. It's an awkward, exposed position, way worse than *look to the left and cough*. She gets right in there and fondles my fuzzy, burning balls. Then she makes me roll over on my side and lift a leg. It's like a porno, except not arousing at all. I consider how uncomfortable these positions must be for the chicks who star in the hardcore movies.

The longer she's down there, the more worried I become. My biggest concern is that some spider has mutated into a highly venomous ball biter and moved to Canada. It's not logical; almost all of the most deadly spiders

are found in Australia. Getting here means crossing an ocean on a twenty-four-hour flight.

I calm my anxieties by reviewing the list of Canada's most dangerous creatures while Nurse Debbie pokes at my balls. Moose are lethal if they walk out onto the highway and run into a car. Beavers get territorial over their wood. Bears are bears. I'm not sure about the rest of the animal population here. I guess it's tame, like the people.

Eventually I'm allowed to sit up. Nurse Debbie hands me a sheet to cover my business.

"As suspected, it's a fishing spider bite. It won't cause lasting damage if it's treated properly, but with your allergy to penicillin, it's definitely worse than it should be. Plus the location is sensitive, as is the tissue there. I'd like to do a blood test to rule out toxicity, and I'll give you something for the swelling and pain. I'll need you to come back in a couple hours so I can check again, and then again tomorrow morning before I can clear you for games."

"It'll be fine by morning. I've taken a puck to the balls before, and my junk works fine. No stupid spider is going to get in the way of me playing tomorrow."

"If I don't clear you, you can't play."

I'm about to plead my case, but she puts up her hand. "I deal with athletes with medical issues for a living. You can argue with me until you're blue in the face, but if I tell you it's not safe to play, it's not safe to play. You'll find another way to do what you came here to do."

"Come on, Debbie. It's the last day."

She puts one hand on her hip and points at my sheet-covered crotch with the other. There's an obvious bump. "You only get one set of those. They're not car parts. You can't replace them. It'd be a shame if nothing worked because you decided to be stubborn, wouldn't it?"

I consider what she's saying. I've had so many hockey injuries; ninety percent of the time I'm fine in a couple of days. Sure there's residual pain. Sometimes there are creaks and cracks that shouldn't be there, considering I'm only twenty-three.

The occasions when it takes longer to heal, I dial back the workouts, do some physio, swim instead of run, and take the required herbs and supplements to get my body back in order. The possibility that my man unit might not work the way it's supposed to thanks to a spider bite is some

scary shit. I've just started using it again. I need to make sure I'm functional when I see Sunny, which I'm hoping is soon.

I expel a heavy breath. "Okay. But let's do what we can to make this better as quick as possible. I want to make tomorrow count. Plus I'm supposed to see my girlfriend, so the faster things are back to normal, the better."

"You'll need the better part of a week to recover from that bite."

"Yeah. That's way too long."

"We'll discuss options after the blood tests." She slips out through the gap in the curtain, leaving me alone.

I take out my camera and snap a few pics of my swollen nut sac. From below it looks massive, and my dick looks average. It's not flattering. I may not show this to anyone.

I tap into the Wi-Fi and check my messages. I still haven't heard from Sunny, which is a bit of a pisser considering dickfaced bearded wonder has been posting pictures, again.

I send her a text. I can't tell if autocorrect is screwing me or not, but I can't listen to it because of the kid beyond the curtain. I mention the posts from Patchy Bushman. I've been dealing with this for less than a week, and I'm already frustrated with it. I hate this feelings crap. For the first time since fifth grade—when I got my stupid nickname—I'm insecure. Today can suck my gigantic balls.

Next I search the Internet for images of fishing spiders. I shudder as countless pictures pop up on the tiny screen. Those things are huge. I'm almost positive that's what bit me. Because I'm curious, and sometimes stupid, I add the word *bite* after *fishing spider*.

"Holy fucking shit." I clamp a hand over my mouth. That Michael kid is out there, and I shouldn't swear in front of him. Then I start to hyperventilate. The bites featured are right out of a horror movie. I'll be lucky if I still have my balls when this is over.

Nurse Debbie comes back, and I hold the phone up. "You said the damage wouldn't be lasting!"

She takes the device from me. "That's a brown recluse bite, not a fishing spider bite." She clicks on another picture and hands me the phone. It's bad, but not nearly as terrifying. Still, it's my balls.

Nurse Debbie takes some blood and offers me painkillers and a strong antihistamine.

“How long do you think it will take for the swelling to go down?” I put my shorts back on. Tucking everything in is a feat.

“It depends. It could take several hours or a few days.”

“A few days? Is there any way to make that happen faster?”

She taps her pen on the clipboard. “Antihistamine injections work faster than taking them orally.”

“Do you have to inject it into my balls?” I can’t hold back the shudder.

She laughs. “Oh, God no! The arm or the butt works best.”

“Let’s do that, then.”

She gets a syringe and stabs me in the arm. It doesn’t deflate my balls instantly, or relieve the burning itch. If this is anything like an STD, I never want one. “So I’m good to go?”

“For now. I’d still like you to check in after the campfire, and then again in the morning. I should have the blood test results by then as well, although I expect they’ll come back clean.”

“Sure. Sounds like a plan.”

“I’ll see you in a couple hours.” She opens the privacy curtain and heads over to see my buddy across the room. She checks the monitor and pats him on the shoulder. “Okay, Michael. It looks like you’re all set.”

He looks tired and embarrassed as she sets about removing all the crap that keeps him tethered to the bed.

“You coming to the campfire tonight?” I ask him.

He throws his legs over the side of the cot, his eyes on the floor. “I don’t know if I’m allowed.”

Nurse Debbie shoots me a look that tells me I’ve made her life difficult.

“It’s the last night. We’re having banana boats. You gotta come.” I throw on my best panty-melting smile.

Michael looks to Nurse Debbie. “Can I go?”

She hesitates. “I don’t know if that’s a good idea. You should probably rest up tonight if you want to participate tomorrow.”

His head drops in a curt nod, like he expected as much. Long hair falls forward to cover his face. He can’t be more than twelve, thirteen at best. He’s got the lanky build of a kid who’s going to be tall and broad in a few years. His sullen attitude is another sign the teen years are about to hit, although I feel like his might actually be justified.

“We’ll be sitting the whole time. It’ll be low key.”

I can tell she's debating whether or not she's going to let him go. I can also tell Michael is resigned to being told he can't.

I give it one last shot. "I'll make sure he doesn't try to run a marathon or anything."

"Give us a minute, okay, Michael?" She crooks her finger, and I limp behind her until we're out of hearing range.

I speak first. "It's the last night. He shouldn't miss this."

She rubs her forehead and closes her eyes. "This is the second time he's been in the clinic this week. He's tired, and he's been pushing the limits. Last time he went to bed straight away. He won't tell you if he's feeling unwell. He'll want to stay to the end, and he doesn't want to be left out."

"He looks like a healthy kid. What's he been in here for?"

"He was diagnosed with cancer two months ago."

He's one of the kids I sponsored. "He has a brain tumor."

Her eyes go wide. "Did he tell you that?"

"Is he gonna be all right?"

She purses her lips. "They rescheduled a radiation treatment so he could be here this week."

"But it's working, right?" I focus on the present, not the few memories I have of my mom in a hospital bed, in too much pain to even hug me.

"They're hoping they can reduce the size enough to make it operable. I shouldn't be telling you this."

Vague answers suck. "I won't say anything." I stuff my hands in my pockets and grimace when I rub up on my 'nads.

Brain tumors are tricky. Even if they can take it out, it doesn't mean he'll be the same kid when they're done, or that the cancer won't come back.

"Let him come to the campfire." I glance at the kid. He's sitting on the edge of the bed, head still hanging, looking like he hates his life. "I'll keep him with me the entire time. I'd hate to be the kid who has to lie in bed, wishing he wasn't so damn sick that he couldn't even handle a campfire. It's the best part of the day."

I can tell how hard this is for Nurse Debbie. The medical professional in her wants Michael to rest. The human being in her wants him to have this experience. If treatment doesn't work, he might not be able to have it again.

“I’ll take good care of him, and I’ll make sure he doesn’t push himself.” I make a mental note to get more information on his family and their financial situation when I get back to Chicago and have access to the applications again.

Nurse Debbie releases him with some trepidation. She fusses over him, much like he’s her own kid, and finally sends us on our way. The stipulation is that I take him in a wheelchair since he’s sloppy about walking. He doesn’t seem all that excited, but when Randy and the girls meet up with us, and they fight over who gets to push him, he eases up.

The campfire is awesome. The counselors tell stories. We eat treats and talk about what’s planned for tomorrow. The kids share their favorite part about being here. A few of them say it makes them feel normal. Michael holds up through the entire thing, but at the end I can tell it’s taken everything he had to stay awake this long. One of the other counselors comes by to collect him—sleepy and happy and full of sugary treats.

By the time the campfire is over, the pain in my balls has reduced to a slight ache. I’m still straining the front of my shorts, but Michael’s situation puts mine into perspective.

As directed, I check in with Nurse Debbie on my way back to the cabin. She still seems concerned by the swelling, but happy about the lack of pain. In the cabin, a few of the senior counselors are playing cards and drinking contraband beers. Randy is nowhere to be seen.

I check my phone, hoping Sunny’s called. She hasn’t. It’s already eleven. She’s probably out with Patch McBushman and the gang.

The connection is in and out, but I manage to get on Instagram. While I wait for it to load, I stare at the wooden slats of the bunk above me. We decided it’d be best if I didn’t sleep on the top, in case I ended up being too heavy. Nothing says shitty camping experience like being crushed by a bunkmate in the middle of the night. It happened back in high school during one of my summer hockey camps. Carved into the wood are names. Some are tagged with “waz here” and other say “+ so-and-so” but there’s a name instead of so-and-so.

The first girl I ever groped I met at hockey camp the first year I was a junior counselor. My buckteeth—thanks to my thumb-sucking as a kid—were finally en route to being fixed. And by kid I mean ten years old, still trying to break the habit. I started after my mom died, according to my dad.

I didn't do sleepovers with friends because there was a damn good chance I would wake up with my thumb in my mouth. It was fucking embarrassing.

Anyway, this girl was dorky, but she was amazing at hockey, and she had great legs, so I liked her. We were walking from the lake to the mess hall, and she pulled me off the trail, behind some big evergreens. Then she laid one on me, just crushed her mouth against mine and rammed her tongue right in there.

I didn't know what to do. Well, that's not true. I'd watched enough movies and checked out the magazines my dad had hidden in his workshop to understand the mechanics, but she took me by surprise. When I recovered from the shock I full-on groped her and kissed her back.

It was close to dark, and the mosquitoes were terrible. I was covered in bites when we came back out five minutes later. It was worth it, since I managed to go right past first base and directly to second. Sadly, I found out later that night that Slutty Shellie—that was her nickname, not created by me—had kissed almost every single junior counselor in the camp. At least I got in the extra boob grope.

I imagine the number of guys she made out with might have been a bit of an exaggeration. Either way, it took some of the shine off the moment.

I think about that Michael kid, and how his future is up in the air. If treatment doesn't work, he might never have the chance to get past first base. All those experiences, the good and the bad, will only ever be ideas in his head. Sometimes the world sucks.

My phone vibrates with an alert. There are new pictures. Some are posted by Patchy Bushman, but there are also a few from Lily and two new ones from Sunny. They were all added a few minutes ago. In one, Bushman has his arm around Sunny's shoulder, his hand perilously close to her boob. It's a selfie. They're holding up bottles of beer. Bushman is staring right at her while she looks at the camera. In another, posted by Sunny, she's in the middle of a Lily-and-Bushman sandwich. They're, hugging her from either side. He's not groping her, but it doesn't seem particularly innocent, either.

At first glance she looks happy, but upon closer inspection her eyes are puffy and her cheeks are blotchy. I can't tell if it's the quality of the picture or not. Still, they're smiling, and I'm not there to stop whatever might happen later in the night. And she hasn't bothered to call me.

My phone rings. It's not Sunny; it's Violet.

I don't have a chance to say a word before she yells, "Why are your disfigured balls all over the Internet?"

I'm going to drown Randy in the lake when I find him.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

ALWAYS WITH THE OVERSHARE

I roll off my bunk and limp-run to the porch so I can get some privacy.

I go with the most logical reaction. Denial. “What are you talking about?”

“Your inflated balls are everywhere, clogging up my feeds.”

The next step is deflection. “How would you know it’s my balls, unless you’ve been looking at that naked spread I did a couple of years ago? It’s okay, Vi. You can tell me.” I never did a naked spread. I was asked; my agent thought it best not to go there.

“You’re the most disgusting person in the entire world, Buck. Seriously. I’m going to assume they’re yours because you were tagged. Plus the shrinky-dink seems about the right size for you.”

“My balls are swollen. It makes my dick look way smaller than it is.”

“So it is a picture of your dick!”

“I didn’t say that!” Shit. I hate it when Violet gets up to her trickery.

“Yes, you did!”

“Didn’t.”

“Di—I’m not playing this game with you. It’s your dick. I recognize the shorts. You wore them the last time I saw you, jerkface. What I want to know is how and why it ended up all over social media. You’re supposed to be at a camp, not flashing your balls all over the place. Plus there’s another picture of you in the same damn shorts with a Sunny look-a-like hanging off you. She’s been posting the picture everywhere, which wouldn’t be so bad if the one of your damn balls wasn’t right beside it. You better not be messing around on Sunny. Alex won’t have to kick your ass. *I will!*”

“Hold on.”

“Don’t tell me to hold on—”

I take the phone away from my ear. I can still hear her giving me shit as I type in a search of my name + dick. The first link is a medical site with the picture Randy took, along with the question. “What kind of spider bite causes this sort of swelling?”

After that is the group photo with me and my unfortunately swollen nuts. My balls are circled in red, and Sunny’s Doppelganger has reposted it, along with the ball pic. And she’s also posted one where she cropped

everyone else out but the two of us and made it her damn profile picture. So much for her concern about me. It's amazing how quickly pictures I don't want circulating can go viral within the span of a couple hours.

There's nothing I can do to stop this trainwreck now that it's happened. I go to my own social media profiles to find I've been tagged by an insane number of people. There's loads of bunny love offering to come take care of my balls for me, and wishing me a speedy recovery.

"It looks bad, doesn't it?"

"Bad? It looks like you're messing around on Sunny with someone who looks like Sunny! How am I supposed to help you when things like this keep showing up?"

I scrub a palm over my face. "This relationship is doomed to fail." I explain what happened with the whole spider bite fiasco.

"Well, I see what you're saying, but I still think maybe you're right," she mutters. "It's doomed if you keep pulling stunts like this. I don't even know what to say to you anymore."

"Thanks a lot, Vi. You're an awesome source of support."

She sighs. "I love you, Buck, but sometimes you make it harder than it needs to be. Why aren't you posting pictures of you with all the kids at the camp? You must have taken a million of them by this point. You always do. You need to jam your feed with something positive, not all this garbage about your balls being swollen."

"It takes the altruism out of it if I post the pics of the camp."

"No, it doesn't. Not even a little. All those kids' families sign a waiver for that purpose."

"How do you know that?"

"Because I read the emails Amber sends me. We've been over this before. I get that this is personal for you, but it doesn't help anyone if you aren't more vocal about all the good things you do. How do you expect to inspire other people if you keep it to yourself? All the positive things get shoved under the blanket of hockey hooker pics. Your life isn't a frat party, but that's the only version of you that people see. You've got all these great plans, but you're not doing anything to promote your goals—unless your plan is to set up a hockey hooker support group."

I stare up at the sky, a million stars winking at me. Violet has a point. Amber has been on me about this for a long time. She's been asking me to be more of a spokesperson for the charities I support. I need to put some

energy into following through. The offseason is a good time to get this ball rolling, and do something on my own. My end goal is to create a foundation so fundraisers for deserving kids and their families are ongoing.

“Okay, Vi. I hear what you’re saying. I’ll put a few posts up about the camp. I also have an idea where I want to start with a project I manage. I’m thinking a charity game might go over well, especially preseason. I’ll talk to Amber, and we can start planning when I get back to Chicago. And I’ll email Dad and get him in on it since he’s got so many contacts.”

“This sounds so much better than hockey hooker support. You need to do something that showcases your generosity beyond sharing your yeti love.”

I roll my eyes. “You can’t help yourself, can you?”

“I really can’t. I should go.”

“Wait. I have another problem.”

“Not the kind that might make Alex try to break your dick off, I hope.”

“Pfft. Waters couldn’t break my dick off if he tried. It’s made of straight magic, like a unicorn horn. Except not sharp. And made of flesh instead of whatever mythical substance unicorn horns are made of. But it’s unbreakable.”

“Have you been smoking the greenery while you’ve been up there in Canada?”

“No. Why? Never mind. So you know how Sunny’s on that camping trip with stupid Bushman?”

“You mean Kale?”

“Yeah. I’m worried she may have forgotten about my superior snuggle skills, or how fun naked movie-watching was, because there are pictures of him all over her like a horny dog.”

“There’s so much about that sentence I don’t even want to think about. I don’t need an overshare right before bed.”

“Can we not debate what constitutes an overshare right now? I don’t know how pissed I should be.”

“Sorry. Okay, tell me about these pictures. She’s not naked is she? Alex will flip his lid.”

“He’s got his arm around her.”

“While she’s naked?”

Sometimes Violet is frustrating. “No.”

“Is he fondling her boob over her shirt?”

“No.”

“Under her shirt?”

“No.”

“So he’s trying to kiss her or something?” She sounds disgusted, which would make me feel justified in my anger, if that was the case.

“No.”

“He’s got his dick hanging out?”

“Jesus. No. He’s got his arm around her.”

“Oh. Well, what’s she doing?”

“Smiling. They’re both holding beers. She posted it recently. They’re at a bar.”

“There’s no inappropriate hand placement?”

“Fuck no. I’d be on my way there right now.”

“Hold up there, Ragey McRageron. Think about what you’re saying. Some guy has his arm around her shoulder, and you’re considering driving eight million hours north into the middle of nowhere to do what? Yell at him? Yell at Sunny? Throw her over your shoulder and move to a cabin in the woods with no running water and an outhouse so you can keep her in a cage and take her for walks on a leash?”

“You’re making me sound like a caveman.”

“If the loincloth fits . . .”

“He’s her ex. They dated for four years, Vi. What if she gets drunk and decides his tiny dick is better than my above average, magical unicorn dick?”

“I think you need to stop worrying about your mythical man unit and focus on the real problem. You’ve made some mistakes with Sunny. She has legitimate reasons to be wary about getting into this relationship with you. It sucks. I know that. *But* you have lots of redeeming qualities. You’re awfully considerate and sweet when you’re not out whoring your dick. Which you haven’t been, but it still looks bad, and your reputation precedes you.”

“I can’t take back all the bunnies.”

“Nope, you can’t. Which means you have to work a lot harder than most to earn her trust.”

I contemplate that. “I get what you’re saying, but I don’t think it’s fair that I take all the heat on this. All those pictures since we’ve been dating haven’t been intentional.”

“Do you think these are?”

“What if she’s letting him take all these cozy pictures to get me back?”

“You mean to make you jealous?”

“I guess. People do that sometimes, right?”

“Sometimes. I don’t see Sunny being vindictive about it, but you need to talk to her. Maybe it’s intentional, maybe it isn’t, but unless you have that conversation, all you’re doing is spinning your wheels, making up worst-case scenarios.”

Vi’s right. I exhale loudly into the phone. “Are relationships always this hard?”

“Not always. But the ones that are worth it are the ones you have to fight for.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

VIDEO KILLED THE BATHROOM STALL

I'm half a second away from calling Sunny when my phone rings. At first I think it's Violet calling back with some final insult of the night, or parting words of wisdom—both are equally likely. But it's Sunny, and she's on a video call.

My first thought is phone sex. I don't know why. I have no real privacy here. I'm kinda pissed at her, and we've never had it before. Also, my balls still hurt. I have a feeling it would be almost impossible to get a hard-on, let alone come.

I answer the call. The screen remains black for several seconds before Sunny's tear-stained face appears.

My anger dissolves into worry. "Sunny? What's wrong?" I try to assess her surroundings, but she's holding the phone close to her face.

"You promised!" She's drunk. I can tell by her slur and the heaviness of her eyes. I've seen Sunny tipsy a couple of times. She was cute and fun and touchy. That's nothing like she is right now.

I can only assume she's seen the pictures of my dick. "Sunny, baby. I can explain."

"You can always explain! You're so good at it. Why do you have to look so good? Why do you have to be so sexy and sweet and good at sex? You're all I can think about and—and—and—" She breaks down in a fit of tears.

I can't see her face anymore. I think I'm looking at her hair, but it's hard to tell. Music gets loud and then quiet again. Voices in the background sound male. I wish I had my earbuds. Sunny's a loud crier, and sound carries around here. Even with the buffer of forest surrounding the cabins, our private conversation is public.

"Sunny Sunshine, take a breath. It's okay. I wish you would've called me or messaged this week, then you'd know you don't have anything to worry about."

"We didn't have very good reception. Well, I didn't. I shouldn't have gone with the cheaper phone package. I mostly only had one bar. Sometimes I could see your texts, but I couldn't reply. Lily's reception

wasn't any better. I tried to use her phone, and there were all these pictures —" She hiccups.

"Let's talk it out."

She lifts her head and looks blearily at me. "Your penis is all over the Internet. It was supposed to be *my* penis."

"It is yours, baby. I'm sorry about the picture. I got bit by a spider today. I didn't know Randy was gonna put that picture up."

"I don't care if everyone sees your penis. It's a nice penis. Except your balls looked really big. Like, not-right kinda big, which I guess is from the spider bite? It was the comments on your wall. I didn't like them. I can't—" She hiccups. "Did you know there's a hooker bunny group dedicated to you?"

I sure do. I stumbled on it one day when I searched my own name. I created a fake account under the name Beaver Bunny and joined so I could see what they posted. There were a lot of selfies, many of them with me sleeping and the girl giving the thumbs up. Sometimes there were pictures of my junk hanging out. None of that is going to help make things better between me and Sunny.

"Baby, you don't want to look at that stuff. You know how people like to skew things." As for the comments on the picture of my balls, I can't control bunny condolences.

Sunny sits up straighter and flips her hair over her shoulder. She twirls a thin braid between her fingers and rubs it over her lips. "I didn't try to join the group. I know what you're like. I know, and I still—" She sighs. "Lily and Benji are fighting a lot. I was going to sleep in the tent last night, but there's bear poop around the site so I didn't. I don't think Kale is over me. Are you over me?"

I'm definitely worried about how drunk she is, based on her inability to stick with one train of thought. I'm also concerned about her location. I have a million questions, such as where the fuck is she sleeping if she's not in the tent close to the bear poop, and what exactly has been going on with Patch McBushman for her to say he's not over her. I'm back to being pissed, but I recognize that expressing my frustration is useless with her in this state.

I address the last question, because it's the most important and likely the only one she remembers. "No, of course I'm not over you. Why would you think that?"

Her eyes drop along with her voice. “We had sex. I figured once you had the milk you’d throw away the cow.” She looks up again, tears sliding down her blotchy cheeks. “Why do you think I held out for so long?”

“You thought I wouldn’t want to see you anymore after we had sex?” This is definitely not a conversation I want to have on the phone.

“Well, yeah. You’re so good at the sex, and I’m not. I bet the hooker bunnies are good at it. I bet they give blow jobs. I should’ve given you a blow job. You’re amazing at sex. I already told you that didn’t I? I think I’m kinda drunk.” She blows her hair out of her face. When it doesn’t work she pushes it away with heavy, uncoordinated fingers. “If there was a Stanley Cup for orgasms, you’d definitely get it. I could make one for you in my pottery class. I miss you. I’m so mad at you. You promised no more bunny pictures and poof!” She snaps her fingers sloppily. “One magically appears. She looks like me. Do you think she’s prettier? She was wearing makeup. Should I wear makeup?”

Her honesty makes me feel ill. There’s so much about what she’s said that’s unsettling. This isn’t how I want things to be between us. I didn’t push for sex because I didn’t want her to think that was my only reason for being with her. I thought I’d made that clear. But again, she’s not in any condition to have that talk. “I think you’re gorgeous without makeup. And that wasn’t a bunny. It was one of the camp counselors. Sunny, baby, where are you? Where’s Lily?”

“I already told you, she’s fighting with Benji.” She shifts around, leaning against a wall. Words are written on it in marker, or scratched into the surface, exposing silver where there was paint before.

“Are you in a bathroom?”

She nods and sniffs. The sound of toilet paper being pulled from a roll follows. She brings the wad to her nose and blows. “It smells horrible in here.”

“I bet. Why don’t you go outside? It’ll smell way better and be quieter.”

She drops her voice to a whisper. “I’m hiding.”

“From who?”

“Kale. He tried to kiss me. He hasn’t brushed his teeth since we got here, I don’t think. Or maybe he has cavities. Anyway, his breath is bad. And his beard—I don’t like it. It’s not soft like yours was during playoffs. I like your beard. It feels nice on my nipples.” She strokes along her

collarbone. She might be wearing a dress, but I can only see from her shoulders up. “I like you a lot, Miller. Everyone thinks I shouldn’t. Except Violet and my mom. She thinks you’re perfect and that you’ll take care me, but I can take care of me. Lily tells me I’m gonna get hurt, and maybe she’s right, but I don’t wanna listen because I want to be with you, but sometimes it’s so hard.”

Her candidness gives me a lot to process. There’s a quick burst of noise. Country music and male voices filter through the phone, along with a flush and the sound of water running.

“Sunny, can I ask you a question?”

“Sure.”

“Are you in the men’s bathroom?”

“Uh-huh. No one will look for me here ’cause I have a cookie, not a penis.”

She’d be funny if I was there to take care of her. I’m angry at Lily for not being a better friend and Patch McBushman for making her feel like she needs to hide. “You need to get out of there, sweets.”

“I can’t. There are urinals. Men pee in rows. It’s weird—like cows feeding at a trough, but they’re peeing. They’re right outside the stall. I’ll see penises. Or is it peni? I don’t know what the plural is.” Her eyes are wide with drunken horror. “I only want to look at your penis.”

“I’m glad you feel that way. But the men’s bathroom isn’t a good place for you to be. Just cover your eyes and head for the door.”

She takes a couple of deep breaths.

“You can do it, Sunny. I’d come get you if I could. Camp’s done tomorrow. I’ll come as soon as the kids leave.”

“I don’t need you to save me, Miller. I’m self-succinct.”

I think she means self-sufficient, but she’s mixing up her words. “I know that. I’m just worried, and I don’t like that you’re upset. I want to be there to make it better.”

She licks her lips. “I like it when you make it better. Better always feels good.”

“I’ll make you feel really good when I see you, ’kay?” I hope it’s loud enough in the bathroom that no one else can hear our conversation.

“Okay. Maybe. First I want to be mad about the picture of you and that girl who looks like me.”

“That’s cool. You can be upset about that. We’ll talk about lots of stuff.” We both have things to be unhappy about. “You gonna get out of that bathroom, now?”

“Okay.” She nods, resolved. “I’m gonna put you in my bra.”

“I love being in your bra.”

“I know. Oh, wait. I’m not wearing a bra. Hmm. I’ll put you in my underwear.”

“Even better.”

She’s definitely wearing a dress. She stands and hikes it to her waist, shoving the phone down the front. It’s the closest I’ve been to her pussy in a week.

There’s a rattling sound, then Sunny panicking. I try to tell her to calm down, but since I’m in her underwear, she can’t hear me. All of a sudden there’s a loud slam. Deep voices issue shouts of surprise and a couple of whistles.

“Sunny? What are you doing in here?” I know that voice. It’s Patch McBushman.

There’s some fumbling and arguing. The music gets obnoxiously loud, then there’s crunching. Gravel, maybe. More muffled talking. All of a sudden it’s not dark anymore. Sunny’s phone drops out of her underwear and onto the floor of the trailer. I can see her legs and her panties. They have little flowers on them.

A hand covers the screen like a spider. It’s not Sunny’s face I’m met with afterwards. I almost gag; it’s Bushman.

I point at him. “I’m coming for you.”

He might smirk, but I can’t tell because his beard covers his mouth.

“Come on, Sunny Bunny. Let’s get you into bed.”

“Don’t call me that! Hey, where’s my phone? Give me that.”

He ends the call before I can say another word. I try to call back, but I get voice mail.

It’s on. I’m gonna take that fucker and his stinky breath down.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

DEFLATED

The next morning I get up early, partly because I can't stop thinking about Sunny, and partly because my balls hurt, and I have to pee. I head to the bathroom, still hobbling, but not quite as bad as I was last night. I'm unhappy to see that my balls are still bigger than they should be when I free the lightning rod. The swelling hasn't gone down the way I'd hoped it would overnight.

I stop by the medical clinic before breakfast. I'll get another shot of antihistamine, participate in closing activities, and get my ass to Sunny.

I drop my drawers; Nurse Debbie's expression remains neutral as she inspects the situation.

"Shouldn't the swelling have gone down more than this?" I ask.

"It's not the swelling that's the issue. It's the fluid."

"Fluid?"

"Sometimes this happens, especially when there's an allergic reaction to the bite. The site fills with fluid."

"Like a blister?"

"That's a reasonable comparison, yes."

"Okay. So will it go down on its own?" I can't be walking around with balls the size of grapefruits. And I have a long drive ahead of me. Sitting isn't going to be comfortable like this. Most importantly, I need my parts to work again. Soon.

"Eventually, yes."

"How long is eventually?"

"It could take a few days, maybe longer."

"That's no good. Isn't there something we can do? Something you can give me?"

Nurse Debbie clears her throat and looks at her clipboard. "The antibiotics I gave you last night should help. There's another option—"

I slap my thighs. "Well, what is it? Anything is better than having a giant nut sac."

"I can drain the bite."

"Drain it?"

She nods. "That will definitely alleviate swelling."

“So you’d do that by . . .” I let the question hang. I have a feeling I already know the answer. There’s only one way to drain fluid.

“Using a needle.”

“Right. Okay.”

I run my hands up and down my thighs. My stomach feels like it’s hanging out in my toes. I’ve had stitches plenty of times without any freezing. I’ve watched the team doctor put a huge needle in a gaping wound on my arm, and it didn’t even faze me. But a needle in the balls is different. They’re attached to the center of my universe.

“My balls will go back to being their regular size?”

“It should help significantly.”

“I’ll be in working order sooner?”

“You should be if you take it easy and don’t overexert yourself. You’ll have to sit out today, and no strenuous activity for the next few days.”

“What’s considered strenuous?”

“Anything high impact. I’m also recommending that you wear briefs to reduce friction.”

“I’ll get briefs today.” I can make sex with Sunny low impact if I need to for a few days. “Okay. Let’s do this.”

“If you’re sure.” She’s giving me an out.

I can’t take it now even if I want to. “I’m sure.”

“I’ll numb the site first.”

“Sounds good.” I’m not above making this more manageable.

Nurse Debbie gives me another one of those hospital gowns to change in to. It’s ironic that she gives me privacy for that, since she’ll be spending time with my nuts again shortly, but I put it on and sit back down. I have to keep my legs spread so I have enough room for my swollen parts. After the numbing, Nurse Debbie leaves me alone again while we wait for it to take effect.

Since there’s no one else around, I use the voice-to-text function to send Sunny a message. I honestly don’t know why people bother typing. This is so much easier.

How are you feeling this morning?

I flip through my emails while I wait for a response. It looks like Amber had access to the Internet yesterday. I have twelve new emails from

her. Most of them are audio messages.

Nurse Debbie comes back with a covered tray. I stop checking messages and let her do her thing, keeping my eyes on the ceiling. I have no interest in seeing the needle she plans to use.

“Okay. There’s going to be a pinch, but I need you to stay as still as you can.”

I’m trying to stay relaxed. The “pinch” feels more like someone jabbed me in the balls with a hot poker.

When she’s done, she swabs the site and covers it with gauze and medical tape. That’s going to be a bitch to get off. I sit up and check out my package. It’s not as swollen. I get another shot of antihistamines, a straight shot of antibiotics, and a couple more painkillers. I’m still not allowed to play in the tournament this morning, which blows, but not as much as giant balls.

I slide off the bed and give walking a shot. My limp isn’t as pronounced anymore. Still, I’ll take Nurse Debbie’s advice and get myself some briefs.

After the clinic, I hit the mess hall. I can sit with the counselors, but sometimes it’s nice to hang out with the kids and shoot the shit. It’s still early, and they’re trickling in a few at a time. My buddy Michael sits at a table by himself, poking at his pancakes.

I gingerly sit beside him and ruffle his hair. “How you doing this morning?”

He gives me a halfhearted smile and lifts one shoulder. “All right.”

“You party it up last night?”

“We stayed up ’til midnight.” He gives me a cheeky grin.

“Hardcore. You tired today, then?”

“I’m okay.” He looks around, making sure no one else is near. “The medication they give me makes me feel sick. I didn’t want to have the treatment yesterday, but they said I had to, and now I can’t play today. I hate this.”

“I bet. That has to suck.”

He pushes his food around his plate. “It does. I never used to get sick, and now it’s like I’m always feeling crappy.”

“You gotta take care of the body first, though, right? So it can get better?” I cut into my short stack, which is actually seven pancakes layered with margarine and fake maple syrup. “I can’t play today, either.” I shove

food in my mouth and chew. Now that my balls aren't the size of my head, I'm hungry again.

"Why not?"

"I got a spider bite."

His cheeks flush. "I wasn't sure if it was a rumor."

"I wish. I'm on coaching duty; you wanna be my junior coach today?"

His eyes light up like I've told him I'm buying him a Ferrari. "Seriously? Like f'reals?"

"Yeah, man. I'mma need some help. You in?"

"For sure."

"Cool." I take off my ball cap and put it on his head. It's way too big, and I probably have the worst case of hathead ever, but I don't care. I've got that warm feeling I get when I do something that makes someone else feel good. It's a rush. I pull out my phone and snap a couple of pictures. "Is it okay if I post these?"

"Yeah. Totally."

I put up one of the pictures and caption it: *Stratigizing with my junor caoch over bfast. Team Butterson has it in the bag.*

"How do you do in school?" I ask him.

"Good. I get mostly As. Except in music."

"So you're good with spelling?"

He nods. "Yeah, I guess I'm decent."

"Cool." I do something I've never done before, because it feels right. "You wanna check that over for me before I post. My spelling sucks."

"Really?"

"Yup. I'm dyslexic."

There's no hesitation or judgment, which is the great thing about kids. He sits up straight. "One of my friends has that! He sees all this stuff backwards. It's like it's all mixed up and upside down, right?"

"Pretty much." I pass him my phone. He checks it over, and we tag him, which is great. It means I can monitor his progress, and see what kind of financial need his family has.

Four hours later, I'm standing at the edge of the parking lot with Randy, giving autographs to parents, hugging kids, and taking pictures. I haven't

had a chance to give him shit over the balls picture, but we'll be in the car soon enough.

The people from the local paper are here, just like Amber said. They interview me and Randy, as well as a few of the kids. Amber was right about them; they're not like the usual reporters I deal with. Everything is way more relaxed up here.

Michael's parents pick him up in an older van. It's not a junker, but it's definitely on its way out. His mom's out of the car before it's even in park. She embarrasses the shit out of Michael by hugging him and kissing his face while crying. She checks him over the way moms are supposed to, with a critical eye full of love.

When she's done making him wish he could sink into the ground, she drags him over to me and Randy. Michael stuffs his hands in his pockets and mumbles an introduction. His mom cries even harder and hugs me, thanking me for giving him this opportunity.

They're a great family, and they look like they're managing, for now. I don't know if that will change with Michael's treatment. He's a kid. He could need full-time care for months, which would mean someone staying home instead of working. I need to find out if that's going to be an issue. I get their information so I can keep in touch. I know exactly how I want to move forward now with the fundraiser. If Vi and Amber want some positive media coverage, they're gonna get it.

Once all the kids are gone, I throw my bags in the back of the rental and check my messages. I hope Sunny's gotten back to me; otherwise it's going to be a challenge finding her out in the middle of butt fuck nowhere, Canada. I have five new messages from her, all of them sent within the last hour.

The first one makes no sense:

Rsodfld fluck bod

The next one is super clear.

Don't come 2 Chapleau

It's a kick in the already achy balls until I read on.

We r at Alexs cottage. Let me no when ur cuming

She links directions. The final message makes me wonder how much of last night's conversation she remembers. I don't need text-to-speech to get it.

Cnt wait 2cu

I don't send a message back. I want to see her, but I'm still not happy about last night, or all the pictures this week. Her lack of communication might not be her fault, but the rest of it is up in the air.

They can't have been there long since last night at midnight they were at a bar, and it's only two in the afternoon. Looks like Waters' cottage is only about a forty-five-minute drive from camp. I have to wait for Randy to finish consoling his girl of the week before we can go. She's a puffy-eyed mess as he hugs her goodbye. She goes in for a kiss, but he pulls the forehead move. Oh yeah, he's done with this one for sure. He has to pry her off him to get in the car.

Once we're on the road, he lowers the window and heaves a sigh of relief.

"Made a bad choice with that one, huh?"

"I can't even tell you. She was up for anything, though. Speaking of getting it up, how're your balls?"

"Don't you worry about my balls. Worry about your own. I hope the Internet stalking is worth the contortionist tricks."

"I've already blocked her." He's not smiling, so I know it's not a joke.

I shake my head and bite my tongue. I was as bad less than four months ago, so I can't say anything.

"Thanks for posting the picture of my balls, by the way. I told you not to. It caused me an assload of problems with Sunny last night."

"What? But your face wasn't even in the picture. How could she know it was you?"

"Because you posted it using your own damn name."

"Oh shit. But it could've been anyone's balls. How did she trace them back to you?"

"It wasn't just Sunny. Bunnies galore, which is the bigger problem. That other picture you took at the clinic went up on your feed. Sunny's Doppelganger posted it every damn place, and my shorts are the same in

both pics, obviously. That's how Violet knew it was me, and everyone else too."

"I'm sorry, man." Randy looks horrified. "Is Waters shitting a brick? Do you need me to talk to him? Explain what happened? I'll talk to Sunny for you."

He means it. Which is why I can't stay mad at him for long. He wouldn't have posted the picture if he'd known it was going to mess things up.

"What's done is done," I tell him, checking the GPS to make sure we're still on track. "So there's a change of plans. I'm not going to Chapleau anymore."

"I messed things up that bad for you?"

"Sunny's at her brother's cottage, not all the way in BF Nowhere, so that saves me seven hours of driving."

"So what's the deal? You still gonna drop me at the hotel?" He checks the time. "I should be able to check in. I've gotta kick around until tomorrow for that charity car wash I'm supposed to go to."

"Cancel the reservation; you don't need it. Waters' cottage isn't all that far from here. You can come with me, but that means dealing with Lily and the khaki twins."

"I'm in. I'm looking forward to the entertainment. Will you come with me tomorrow afternoon now? We could wash this kickass rental."

"I should be able to. I want to talk to the guy who runs it. After this week I want to get started on that project I've been talking about." Other than Vi, my dad, and my PA, Randy's the only person I've talked to about setting up a fundraiser.

Randy pats me on the shoulder. "I think that's a great plan. Whatever help you want, I'm in."

We make a quick stop on the way to Waters' cottage in a tiny town called Bracebridge. The only store I can find is Walmart. I pick up a six-pack of briefs. They're red. I'm not a big fan of wearing them, but they do a good job of containing my boys and reducing the friction like Nurse Debbie said they would. The swelling has gone down since this morning. I've got small apples instead of grapefruits.

In under an hour, we're there. Waters' cottage isn't really a cottage. It's two stories of stained cedar and massive windows with a wraparound deck. The landscaping is better than at my parents'. Huge pines and birch trees rise up around the house, sheltering it from the neighbors. The camping trailer is parked in front of a three-car garage. There's music coming from inside. I take a peek in one of the windows. Lily's boyfriend is passed out. He's shirtless. And Violet thinks I'm hairy. I've got nothing on this guy. He has tufts on his shoulders.

"I'mma pretend I'mma bear and scare the piss out of him," Randy whispers.

"They're probably his distant relatives."

He grabs the door handle, but I put a hand on his shoulder to stop him. "Later. I wanna find Sunny first."

Randy shrugs and follows me down the driveway to the deck. From where I'm standing I can see all the way to the lake. Patch McBushman is sitting on the edge of the dock with his feet in the water. I hope one of those fishing spiders climbs into his shorts and bites him on his tiny dick.

I find Sunny around the other side of the deck, lying in a hammock. She's in the bikini I love. The top is untied, the straps tucked into the cups so she doesn't get unnecessary tan lines. She's fast asleep, her soft lips parted. The bridge of her nose is pink from too much sun. She has scratches on her arms, scabs on her knees, and a load of bug bites, along with a number of purple spots on her shins. I don't like all the bumps and bruises. She looks innocent, vulnerable. But right now I'm not so sure that's the truth. My frustration over the past week merges with an unsettling need to touch her.

Randy elbows me. "I'm gonna go inside and find a bathroom."

I nod and crouch beside Sunny. I'm still upset, but seeing her does something to me. Especially after spending a week with a kid who's life is up in the air. I run the tip of my finger across her blond lashes. She shakes her head and bats at her face.

"Sunny Sunshine, wake up."

She hums, but doesn't move otherwise.

I trace the contour of her jaw with my fingertip, moving down the side of her neck to her throat and over her collarbone. The sound that comes out of her is more moan than a hum. Her eyes flutter, and she blinks against the

sun. Surprise crosses her delicate features. It's followed by recognition, relief, and then wariness.

Despite the final emotion, Sunny reaches up and strokes my beard. I haven't shaved since I left for the camp, so it's grown in over the week. "You're here."

"I am."

She licks her lips, eyes roaming over my face. "I'm glad."

"Me, too."

"I was upset with you last night," she says sleepily.

I nod. "I could tell. But I didn't have anything to do with the pictures that went viral."

"Always with the explanations." She's still stroking my beard. Her fingers drift over my lips.

"I thought you'd want to know what happened. Maybe hear my side of things."

"I did. I do."

I take her hand in mine and play with her fingers, just so I can touch her. Her nails, usually filed into curves, are ragged and chipped. "I didn't like seeing you cry and not being able to do anything about it."

"I was really drunk."

"I didn't like that either. I also didn't like that you were stuck in a men's bathroom, hiding from Bushm—Kale. Or all the pictures of you he posted this week. When did you get here?"

She stares at my chin when she answers. "Around eight this morning. Apparently I insisted we drive here, and Lily is fed up with Benji, so here we are. I think she drove the whole way. I don't know where she is."

"Probably inside, I'm guessing." Or it's a full moon and she's changed into a werebear.

"Probably." Sunny cups the back of my neck and tries to pull me down.

When I'm an inch from her lips, I resist. "We should talk."

"We should." Her voice is soft, almost breathless.

I don't want to say what I'm about to, but I liked what we had before sex and orgasms became part of the equation. It felt like a real relationship. "Before we start making out."

"I disagree. We should kiss first, then talk."

"Why's that?"

“Because I missed you this week, and you promised you’d make me feel better when I saw you.”

She clearly remembers our conversation from last night, which is a surprise. “And you think a kiss is going to make you feel better?”

She searches my face. “It doesn’t hurt to try.”

When her tongue peeks out to wet her bottom lip I give in. I brush my lips over hers. Her grip tightens on the back of my neck. Sunny sucks on my bottom lip, then slips her tongue inside my mouth. There’s aggression and something hot and needy simmering below the surface. My rational side takes a back seat to the horny side.

I’d like to get her naked right now, but Bushman’s within earshot. Randy and Lily aren’t all that far away, inside the cottage. And talking still takes precedence over taking our clothes off. I settle for deepening the kiss.

A shriek comes from somewhere in the cottage. Sunny sits up with a start, ending what we just got started. Her bikini top falls, her boobs popping out as the sliding door opens and Randy comes tripping out onto the deck. His hands are over his head like he’s protecting himself.

Lily skids to a halt behind him. She’s wielding one of those toilet paper holder stands. Three rolls flutter in the breeze, the paper unraveling behind her. She’s wearing a towel with shoulder straps. Her legs are covered in shaving lotion.

“Someone just tried to—”

She stops when she sees me. I’m cupping Sunny’s bare boobs so Randy doesn’t get a look at them.

“This pervert must be one of your friends!” She jabs the toilet paper holder in my direction and then swings it toward Randy.

“I was looking for a bathroom, honey.”

“Don’t honey me, you, you—he tried to . . . he was going to . . .”

His eyebrows lift, along with the corners of his mouth. “What exactly do you think I was trying to do, sweetheart?”

Lily is shaking and brandishing the toilet paper holder like it’s a sword. She seems to be having trouble with words. And her face is bright red. It’s the most flustered I’ve ever seen her. Sunny pulls the cups of her bathing suit up over my hands. I give her boobs one last courtesy squeeze before I let them go.

“I was in the middle of shaving my legs! You burst into the bathroom. I’m naked under this towel!”

“Oh, I’m well aware of what’s going on under that towel.” Randy smirks. “If you’d locked the door maybe I wouldn’t have gotten a front-row seat to the beaver show.”

“You—I—you’re disgusting!” As she spins around, the two sides of the towel fly open, giving everyone another shot of beaver.

“I like the natural look,” Randy says.

She flips the bird over her shoulder as she storms away. “My waxer’s been sick.”

“I’m happy to help out, if you want,” Randy calls after her.

“You’re an asshole.” The screen door slams shut.

“So . . . I guess you met Lily.” Sunny swings her legs over the edge of the hammock and uses my shoulders as a brace to stand. “She’s not usually like that. She and Benji broke up last night. Again. For the fourth time on this trip, so she’s in a bit of a mood.”

“Is that the guy sleeping in the trailer out front?” Randy asks, staring at the screen door. He takes off his hat and spins it on his finger. That’s his contemplation move. It means he’s sizing up the competition and coming up with a plan of attack. I wish him luck. Lily’s vagina probably has teeth—like Jaws.

“Mm-hmm.” Sunny runs her fingers absently through my hair. “He’s been in there since we got here.”

I catch movement in my peripheral vision. Glancing toward the lake, I see Bushman. He’s standing on the end of the dock with one hand shading his eyes from the sun, looking up at us. I stand, skimming Sunny’s sides with my fingertips, enjoying her shiver. “We should find a place to talk so we can sort through this.”

“Okay.” Her hands are still on my shoulders. One slips behind my neck, and she stands up on the balls of her feet to pull me in for another kiss. I shouldn’t let it happen since I’m still questioning a lot of her motives, but Bushman heads for the stairs, so I let her have what she wants.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

MOTHERPUCKING FAIL

Bushman comes storming up the stairs, his skinny legs almost buckling under his non-existent upper body. Okay, he's not that skinny, but I'm a big guy, so he looks tiny in comparison. Or that's how I want to see him, since he tried to mack on my girl. I still need the details so I can determine whether or not I'm going to dick-punch him.

Sunny sighs. "Here we go. He's about to have a hissy fit."

"I thought only girls under the age of twelve threw those."

"And Kale. It's one of the many reasons I broke up with him." She takes a small step away from me. "I don't think he expected you to be here."

"Is it a problem that I am?" I don't like that she's put distance between us. It tells me things her words don't, like that his feelings matter to her.

"No. Of course not." She laces her fingers through mine. "It's . . . complicated."

I hate that word. I've spent my entire life managing complicated bullshit. School was complicated. My mother's death was complicated. My career makes this attempted relationship complicated.

"Uh, you could avoid him if you go inside and find a room to hide in," Randy suggests.

I'd forgotten he was on the deck with us.

"Seriously. Go. I can deal with his scrawny ass." He cracks his knuckles and grins. "It should be fun."

Sunny grabs my hand. I follow her inside, through a huge living room with vaulted ceilings and a massive stone fireplace that burns real wood. We pass the kitchen. On the table is a centerpiece that looks a lot like a giant dick. She pauses briefly at the front door and shoves her feet into a pair of Birks before we head back outside. We pass the trailer and go right, through a narrow gap in the trees, onto a path.

"Where are we going?" What I really want to know is why we're avoiding Bushman and not telling those hipster douches to take their trailer and GTFO.

"There's a trail up here; it leads to the water. It's private, and we can talk without any interruptions. Make sure you stay on the trail; there's tons

of poison ivy out here.”

“I’m immune, but thanks for the warning.”

“Immune? How do you know that?”

“I fell in a patch when I was a kid. Nothing happened.”

“Wow, that’s lucky, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. Real lucky.” The kid I was with had to go to the hospital. He was covered in the rash.

Sunny’s moving so fast it’s almost a jog.

“Is the running necessary?” My balls, which are in way better shape now than they were this morning, still aren’t perfect. All the movement is making them achy and itchy. Also, seeing Sunny’s boobs a few minutes ago has given me a semi.

“What? Oh. No. Of course not.” Sunny slows to a brisk walk. “Are you limping?”

“I’m fine.”

“No, you’re not. Is this because of the spider bite?” Sunny takes it down to a stroll.

“It’s a lot better, way less swollen than it was.” I don’t need to tell her about having it drained. I’d rather leave that memory in the discard pile. “Don’t worry about me. I’m full of antibiotics and antihistamines. I’m good to go.”

“I can make you an antiseptic compress when we get back to the cottage.”

“Sure, if you think that’s gonna help.” Who am I to say no if Sunny wants to make my balls feel better?

A minute later, the trees end at the edge of the lake. Far away on the opposite shore are boathouses and more “cottages” bigger than most homes. It’s incredible excess and peaceful at the same time, apart from the hum of boat engines. Sunny sits on a fallen tree close to the water and pats the spot beside her. I straddle it so I’m facing her. Birds tweet overhead. All we need is some cheesy music and a unicorn trotting by to make it perfectly romantic, apart from the fact that we’re mad at each other.

She tucks her hair behind her ear. If she remembers our conversation from last night, and I believe she does, then she knows she’s not alone in her anger.

I still want to run my fingers through her hair, though. I want to forget about talking and make her feel good instead. The last time we did this, I

was apologizing. This time it's different, not so one-sided.

Sunny shifts around to face me as well. She's only wearing a bikini, so the bark can't be all that comfortable on her ass. I take off my shirt, fold it in half and offer it to her. She lays it on the log and sits.

I lean forward and rest my elbows on my thighs. "Let's deal with the issues."

"Lily doesn't think I should date you."

I already know this. Sunny said so last night. "What do *you* think you should do?"

"I don't know, Miller. I'll be honest; I was done last week before you showed up at my house . . . And then we—" Her cheeks flush. "It changed things. And then there's Kale being the way he is. I'm confused."

"Are you saying you want to get back together with that guy? Last night you were hiding from him." There's this feeling in my throat, as if someone's putting pressure on my windpipe.

"Kale and I are just friends."

"So what's the confusion about? I get that you and Lily are close, but she shouldn't make your decisions for you." I believe Lily has Sunny's best interests in mind, even if she's making my life more difficult.

"It's not just her; it's Alex, too."

"Your brother hates me because I broke his nose."

"That's a very small part of why he doesn't like you, and you know it, Miller. He still thinks you're only interested in me to get back at him for dating Violet." She picks at the moss-covered bark.

"Obviously that's not true. You have to be able to see that now."

"Was that ever part of your plan?"

"Was what ever part of my plan?"

"To sleep with me and dump me?" Her throat bobs with a thick swallow.

This conversation is hard. It hurts in a way I don't expect that she's been seriously worried about this. "Is that the kind of person you think I am?"

"Lily thinks—"

My frustration gets the better of me. "Who fucking cares what Lily thinks? She's not in this relationship with us. She hasn't even given me a chance, as far as I'm concerned. All she's done is look at what's on social

media and taken it as gospel. In all the time we've spent together, have I ever given you the impression that all I want you for is a fuck?"

"No, but—"

"But what, Sunny? How many more times do I have to apologize for things that are outside of my control? I got bit on the balls by a damn spider trying to get in touch with you."

I take her hand in mine before she can start with the hair twirling. "I'm not gonna lie; I was pissed at Waters for fucking my sister in the locker room. At the time, all I knew was that he had the same bad rep that I did, and I thought he was playing my sister. Like he thinks I'm playing you." I look up at her. She's nervous, like me.

"I never would've coerced you into bed to get back at him. That's just asshole. But I also didn't think it would be all that bad for him to know how it felt to have someone he didn't like go after his sister.

"I was gonna buy you some drinks and make sure you got home okay. But when we started talking, you were fun, and sweet, and gorgeous—and you weren't all up on my dick three seconds after we were introduced. I knew I wanted to see you again, even if Waters was going to be on my ass about it. It would've been easier to say *screw it*, but that wasn't what I wanted then, and it isn't what I want now."

Sunny's quiet for a long time. "I think in the back of my mind I've worried you had ulterior motives when it came to being with me."

"You thought that, or Lily and Waters made you believe that?"

"I don't know. Both, maybe?" She peeks up with watery eyes.

Hearing her say that is like taking a stick to the throat. "What else do I need to do to make you believe you're the only one I'm interested in? You gotta stop thinking the absolute worst about every picture you see, especially when you already know how easy it is for things to be misconstrued, Sunny. I can't police what goes out there, or stop the bunnies and the way they react because of how things were in the past. What I can control are the things I say and do when it comes to you. At some point you're gonna have to put some faith in me."

"It's hard when the pictures keep showing up, even when you're not at parties."

I nod. "For me, the hardest part is dealing with how my past impacts my present, and how it affects you." I can't change anything that's already

happened, and that sucks. “Is that why you went camping with Lily and your ex, even after we made up?”

“It’s not the only reason.”

“Convenient how you left out the part about how you and Kale were together for four years.”

Her head snaps up, eyes wide.

I answer the question she doesn’t ask. “I talked to Vi after you left. I was concerned, obviously, about you spending the week with him. I wanted to know what I was up against.”

“Up against?”

“That dude is walking around with a divining rod in his pants aimed at you.”

“It’s not like that. Our relationship has always been difficult. He’s Benji’s best friend. We have to see each other.”

“You want honesty from me? Well, that goes both ways, sweets. Are you sure you’re not looking to get back together with Bushm—Kale? You two looked cozy in all those pictures he posted this week.” We might as well get it all out now. It’s strange; I expected her to be the one getting angry, but here it’s me.

Sunny bites her lip, white teeth pressing into plush pink skin. I miss her mouth. I miss everything about her even though she’s right in front of me. Maybe this is what love is. If so, I’m not sure I like it all that much. This feels like I’ve taken a puck to the balls, except it’s hurting from the inside out instead.

“I don’t want to be with Kale.”

“Does he know that? You strung him along this week for what? To see whether you still had feelings for him? To make me jealous?”

“Do you have any idea what it’s like dating you? Do you know how often I have to defend why I’m with you? How many times I’ve checked my own stupid social media to find someone has tagged me in a picture of you with another girl?

“Has it ever been me posting the pictures?”

“No, but it makes me look stupid for being with you when there are pictures of you with someone who isn’t me all the time!”

There’s the anger I’ve been waiting for.

“People assume you must be sleeping with them because that’s what you’re known for doing! Sometimes it’s hard not to question whether it’s

true. And then there was the one yesterday with the girl who *looked* like me. So the answer to your question is *yes*, Miller. I *want* you to be jealous, because that's how I feel all the time when I'm not with you. Happy now?"

"No. It doesn't make me happy; it makes me feel like shit. That was a group shot with counselors at the camp. Not a party. There was nothing illicit happening."

"I know that."

"Do you? It sounds to me like you think as soon as the camera was gone, me and that chick got naked—people standing around, spider bite, and all."

Her gaze is fixed on the log. She's fidgeting with her hair. "She looks like me."

"She was a counselor at the camp. She's *not* you."

I shift closer until my knees are on either side of hers and I'm inside her personal space bubble. "How are we ever going to make this work if you can't trust me to do the right thing?"

"I'm scared," she whispers.

I tip her chin up until her eyes meet mine. "Of what, baby?"

Her chin trembles. "Of how I feel about you."

Her vulnerability is exactly what I need. I might not know what I'm supposed to do here, but I've seen enough of those chick flicks, thanks to Skye and Violet, to have an idea of what could work. Besides, I like those movies. I'll never tell anyone, though.

I place my palm on her cheek. Then I do what they do in movies. I brush away her tears with my thumb. It's not that effective. Mostly it's just spreading the wetness around. I do the same thing with the other hand, but the tears are already sliding down her cheeks, so now my palm and her entire face are damp. Also, it's not making the tears stop. In fact she starts crying harder.

"Why do you have to be so sweet? Why can't you be an asshole?"

"You want me to be an asshole?" Women are confusing when there's more than sex involved.

She makes a noise somewhere between frustration and maybe a snifflish laugh. Then she moves closer and buries her face against my neck so I can't wipe away her tears anymore.

I wrap my arms around her, not too tight because I don't want to crush her, but enough that she has to know I don't want to let her go. I press my

nose into her hair. She smells more like the outdoors than her shampoo, and there are few pine needles stuck in there, so I rest my chin on top of her head and hold her.

I get why she's scared. I feel the same way. It's not horror-movies scared, or spider-bite-on-my-balls terrifying, but an inside kind of fear. This is what it's like to really care about another person, I realize.

"I'm sorry I've been making you jealous. It wasn't intentional, but I get it now. Seeing all those pictures of you with Bush—Kale this week drove me nuts. And not being able to talk to you, not knowing what was going on made it even worse. I didn't like the way I felt, and I don't want to make you feel that way."

I feel the warmth of her breath on my neck as she exhales and snuggles in closer. She slides her hands up my arms. I'm acutely aware of how little clothing she's wearing and how much I want to touch her, all over her mostly naked body.

I drop my head as she lifts hers. Her fingers dance across my lips.

"Are we done talking?" I ask.

She nods.

"Are we okay now?"

"I think so."

She leans in, clearly waiting for me to kiss her. I have a couple more questions first.

"Are you going to put some trust in me from now on?"

"Yes."

"No more using Kale to make me jealous?"

"No more."

I put my palm on the side of her neck, feeling the rapid thud of her pulse. Her heart is beating almost as hard as mine, and my dick is swelling at the same rate. When our lips meet, it's like fireworks going off in my pants.

Her tongue is soft and warm, like all the other parts of her body I love. And it's wet, which is like my very favorite part of her body. I have to remind myself this is just a kiss, and we're in the middle of the woods, right by the edge of the lake. While I find the whole idea of doing it out here in nature highly appealing, she might not.

Sunny answers that unasked question when she scrambles into my lap and wraps herself around me. "I hate how jealous those pictures make me."

“Same here.”

“I’m so sorry, Miller. Things got intense between us so fast. I didn’t know how to deal with it.”

“I know, baby. I’m sorry, too. I can make it up to you, however you want.”

She swivels her hips, grinding on me. Everything is hypersensitive in my shorts. It’s a combination of my still-sore balls, the lack of opportunity to whack it this week, and all of Sunny’s bare, sun-kissed skin touching mine.

She runs her fingers through my hair, gripping it hard. Her tongue slides against mine aggressively. I don’t try to take over or tone it down, but let her have whatever she needs from me. Plus, it’s hot. She fumbles with her bikini top, pulling at the string around her neck, and then the one around her back. It drops to the ground beside us.

I cup her breasts. The first thing I notice is the almost complete absence of tan lines. Freckles dot the swells. “Have you been tanning topless?”

Sunny bites her lip. “Maybe.”

“Maybe?”

“We were in the middle of nowhere. It’s not like anyone could see us.” She massages my scalp, as if it’s going to distract me.

“What about Kale?”

“He’s seen my boobs before. Not like it’s anything new.” When all I do is blink, she purses her lips. “Your penis was all over the Internet for everyone in the world to see.” After another short pause she tacks on, “I only sunbathed topless when he was napping.”

“Are you saying that so I don’t punch him out?” I sweep my thumbs over her nipples.

“No.” She’s breathy now. “Besides, he thinks they’re too small.”

“That guy is a fucking idiot.” I press a tiny kiss to her left nipple.

I make a sound that’s mostly a growl and close my lips around that warm, pink skin. Then I add a little teeth.

Sunny’s eyes go wide. “Miller!”

“Just playing, baby.” I go back to sucking.

“You can do that again.” She arches her back, pushing her chest out.

I release her nipple. “Do what again?”

“Make that sound and use your teeth.” She runs her hands down my biceps and over my forearms until she’s covering my hands with hers.

“You like that, eh?” I make the same deep noise and take her nipple between my teeth, but I don’t use any pressure. When I can tell she’s getting impatient, I suck her entire nipple into my mouth and bite very, very gently.

I’m rewarded with an amazing moan. It scares the birds above us, sending them fluttering away. I do it again, and then move to the other breast, giving it the same level of attention. I’m not sure how far we’re going to take things right now, but I’m having fun making Sunny feel good.

After a few more minutes of making out, Sunny shimmies away in my lap and pops the button on my shorts. I hold her hips to keep her steady, not that she needs me to, Sunny’s a tight body of perfectly proportioned muscle. Her balance is incredible.

“You’re wearing underwear.”

“I’m trying something new.”

“Hmm. I like the color . . .” She fingers the red band.

I catch her before she can slip a hand inside. “Uh . . . go easy, ’kay? Things are tender after my run-in with the spider.”

“My poor baby.” She does that thing where she cups my chin and the heel of her palm rests above my Adam’s apple. Then she presses a soft kiss to my lips. It’s weird how much I like that. “You tell me if it’s too much.”

“I can handle it, as long as you’re gentle.”

She pulls the band back and peeks inside. I’m hard. “He looks okay.”

“You can touch him if you want to make sure.”

She strokes the head with a fingertip. It feels awesome—so much better than the few times I jerked it in the shower this week, and it’s just the tip of her finger. I can’t wait for her entire palm to be wrapped around my cock. Or any other part of her body she wants to wrap around it. Except for her armpit. That’s where I draw the line.

“I think it’d be easier if you were naked,” she says, her tongue peeking out to wet her lips.

“Sure. I’m good with that.”

Sunny moves off my lap, her legs parted over the sides of the fallen tree like she’s riding a log-horse. I step out of my shorts and lay them on the log so my already-sore balls won’t scrape against bark. It’s moss-covered, but still. I’m not interested in another spider bite on top of the one I’ve already suffered; my balls might actually explode this time.

I hook my thumbs into the waist of my briefs. Sunny puts her hands up in the air and waves them around. “Oh! Wait!”

For a second I think she’s changed her mind.

“I want to take them off.” She bites the tip of one of her fingers. “If that’s okay with you.”

This woman might as well put a collar on my dick and walk it around with a leash, because she owns me. “You do whatever makes you feel good.”

I straddle the log and stand in front of her, hands at my sides. Sunny takes a deep breath, preparing for the unveiling of my cock, I guess. I’m not sure why it’s so momentous. She’s seen it before. Touched it before. Had it inside her before. All the mental images accompanying these thoughts make my dick kick behind the confining fabric.

Sunny squeals.

I wink. “I think we’re all excited here.”

“Mm-hmm.” She nods vigorously. “Can you turn around for a sec?”

I’m interested to see what she’s going to do, so I comply. Sunny’s hands start at my waist and skim the outside of my thighs. On the way back up she cups my ass and gives it a squeeze. “You have the nicest man bum in the world,” she says.

I laugh. “Thanks. I didn’t know that was a thing.”

“Mmm. It’s my thing.” She pulls down one side of my briefs. I feel her lips on my ass and then her teeth.

I look over my shoulder. She’s grinning.

“Are you biting my ass?”

She nods, does it again, and then lets my underwear snap back into place. She follows with a smack. “Okay. You can turn around again.”

She’s almost giddy, she’s so excited. I like this side of her. It’s new—well, not really. She’s always fun, but until now it’s been me in the driver’s seat where sex is concerned. Sunny carefully pulls the briefs down, the tip of her tongue caught between her teeth. My cock springs free, sticking straight out. She pulls them lower, until my balls appear. They’re not nearly as red or swollen as they were before.

“Oh, Miller. Are you sure—”

I don’t even let her finish. “I’m totally fine.”

She wraps her warm fingers around my cock and presses it against my stomach. With her other hand, she gently cups my balls. I don’t know how

to describe the feeling. I probably, most definitely shouldn't be entertaining any of this right now. As good as it feels, it's also slightly uncomfortable. I'm willing to power through, though.

"Is that okay?"

I groan in response.

Sunny's grip loosens. I clamp my hand over hers. "It's good. You're good. You don't have to stop."

"You're sure?"

"Positive."

"Okay." She's still for a few beats. "You can let go of my hand now."

"Oh, right." I stroke her cheek. She smiles up at me, then goes back to staring at my dick. It's at face level. I won't lie. I want her to put it in her mouth. It would be so warm and wet and . . .

Sunny stands. I can't say I'm not disappointed. If there were ever an ideal scenario in which to get a blowy, it would be here. But I'm happy to take a handy, if that's what she's offering, or whatever else is on the table. Still holding on to my dick, Sunny gives it a few slow strokes and kisses my shoulder. Moving lower, she stops at my nipples, doing the same suck-and-nibble thing I did to her. It feels good, and I wonder if it feels better for women than it does for men since their nipples have an actual use apart from being decorative.

Then she goes lower. I don't want to get excited all over again, but anytime a woman goes lower than nipples, she's usually planning to go all the way south of the border. I wish I was better prepared than this. I haven't shaved my balls in over a week. It's not a jungle, but it could look better. At least I showered before we left camp. I don't have sweaty balls, but I haven't had a chance to whack it, so my longevity won't be stellar.

"Sweets . . ." I don't know what my reservations are about. My dick has been in a lot of different mouths over the years, but this is different. I'm pretty sure Sunny qualifies as my certified girlfriend now. Girlfriends give their boyfriends blow jobs, just like boyfriends eat their girlfriends' pussies until they come all over their face. My face. *Fuck*. I want her mouth on my dick.

She looks up from her spot above my navel. Another inch or two and she'll be licking the head. "Don't you want me to?"

It's almost impossible to read her expression. I can't tell if she's concerned, offended, disappointed, scared, or something else.

“Are you kidding? I’ve been fantasizing about this since the day I met you.” I reach down and trace the curve of her pouty bottom lip. She lifts her chin and bites the end of my thumb, then sucks softly.

“Are you too uncomfortable still?” She circles the head with her fingertip, over and over. It feels amazing. Good enough that although the dull ache in my balls occasionally becomes a sharp stabbing pain, I won’t ask her to stop.

“I don’t want you to feel obligated or anything.”

“I don’t feel obligated.” She kisses below my navel, about three inches away from the base of my cock. “But I’m not very good at this. I wanted to give you fair warning.”

“Not very good? What does that mean?” My first thoughts are not the chivalrous kind.

Her cheeks flush. “I haven’t had a lot of practice.”

“Oh.” I grin. I’m happy about that, and I don’t care if it makes me a jerk. “You can practice on me all you want.” My reassurance doesn’t have the effect I’m hoping for, which is her lips wrapped around my cock. Instead, she looks uncertain. “But only if you want to.”

“I want to. You’ll tell me if I’m doing it wrong?”

Unless she’s chewing on it like a cob of corn, it’s difficult to fuck up a blow job. “You’re gonna be perfect.” I’m not spouting BS. All anyone has to do is look at her; she’s this angelic-looking blonde with full, lush lips and gorgeous green eyes. She kisses like she fucks; I’m positive she’ll give head with the same dedicated enthusiasm.

She lowers her mouth to my cock. But she doesn’t just go for it. Nope. Sunny is the best kind of giver. She kisses the tip and brushes it back and forth across her lips, like she does with the ends of her hair. Then she kisses down the shaft and back up before running her tongue around the ridge.

I keep my hands fisted at my sides, taking in the sight and the sensation. Both are incredible. When she engulfs the head, she sucks hard, like my cock’s a lollipop someone’s trying to steal.

I groan at the suction and sift my hand through her hair, ready to guide her mouth.

“Okay?” she asks, the word distorted by my cock.

“Way better than okay.”

No sooner are the words out of my mouth than I feel the distinct press of teeth below the head. My loose grip on her hair tightens reflexively.

“Wha—”

Sunny’s eyes lift, and she strokes the underside of my cock with her tongue. Strangely, as panicked as I am over the possibility that she might bite my dick, it feels good.

“Easy,” I murmur.

She grins, and her teeth are replaced by soft suction. Her eyes stay locked on mine the entire time. I can’t imagine anyone telling her she isn’t any good at head.

I’m on the verge of coming, so I ease her off, wanting to save that particular selfish act for another location, if she’s willing to let that happen.

“Was that okay? You didn’t come.”

I sit down on my shorts, which are draped over the log, and lift her so she’s straddling me again. My wet cock rests against the inside of her leg, the head pressed up against the bathing suit material.

“I didn’t come because I didn’t want to.”

“Why wouldn’t you want to?”

I kiss her puffy, wet lips. “I want to be inside you for that. I want your mouth on mine when I come.”

“But it was okay?”

“You were a million times better than okay.”

Her smile is more radiant than a sunrise.

I pull the ties on either hip and the front folds down, exposing her pink slit. I slide a knuckle low, rubbing her clit as we kiss. When she starts making those soft noises, I slip one finger inside her and then another to make sure she’s ready.

And then I remember I don’t have a condom with me.

Again.

Motherfucking fail.

CHAPTER TWENTY

LOG RIDE

I keep moving my fingers and kissing her, trying to come up with a way to make this work. I wanna get inside her so bad I can taste it. I can smell her, not in some weird creepy way, but my fingers are in her pussy, and she's wet. I kinda want to go cookie diving for a while, but the log is rough, and there are bugs, so that'll have to wait until later.

But I can pull out.

Maybe.

No.

I shouldn't.

Pulling out is a bad idea. That's how people end up having fourteen kids and being all, "I don't know how that happened!" Except Sunny told me she's on the pill. And I saw it in her medicine cabinet when I stayed there last weekend—right between the toothpaste and her face wash.

Sunny's responsible. She doesn't forget things like I do. Still, it'd be safer to dome up. I figure I can keep going like this and get her off, then we can go back to the cottage and have some super-gentle sex to avoid prolonging the recovery of my balls.

"Miller." Sunny's hand covers mine. She pushes my fingers deeper and shifts her hips, helping me out.

"That feel good, baby?"

"Mm-hmm." She winds her other arm around my neck and bites along my jaw. It's covered in scruffy, unkempt beard, so I can barely feel her teeth. "I want you in me."

This is one of the things about Sunny that I appreciate. She doesn't use trashy words the way the bunnies do, like they're trying to impress me with sluttiness. Sunny is her sweet self, and she doesn't try to be a porn star in bed—or on a log in the forest.

"I want the same." I move my fingers faster and circle her clit with my thumb, trying extra hard to get her off. I don't want to leave her hanging before I propose going back to the cottage to finish things.

I go with some toned-down dirty talk, because it might help me get her there quicker. "All I could think about this week was how good it was

gonna be when I could put my hands on you again. I missed the way your skin tastes.”

She moans and grinds herself harder on my hand.

“I love those sounds you make when you’re getting close, and how soft your mouth is, and that thing you do with your tongue when we’re kissing. I wish you could see how amazing you look, naked like this, ready to come on my fingers. When we get back to the cottage I’m gonna eat your —”

Sunny groans and crushes my mouth to hers. Every muscle in her body vibrates with tension. She keeps shifting, riding my hand until she goes lax, then she slumps against me. I rub her back and kiss her shoulder, smiling with private satisfaction.

Sunny lifts her head and gives me a dopey smile. “I think you’re my orgasm soulmate.”

“I’ll be whatever kind of soulmate you want, Sunny Sunshine. I told you I’d make you feel better, didn’t I?”

“Uh-huh.”

I slowly withdraw my hand, sad that I’m not going to be putting another part of my body into all that tight, warm, and wet. Usually I’m sly about wiping my hand on the sheets, or in the case of immediate post-fingering sex, using it to lube up my dick before I roll on a condom. Here all I have is the log and some moss to work with, neither of which is very covert. Once we’re dressed I can always wash them in the lake, I guess.

Sunny clearly has a very different idea about what’s going down. She grabs my cock with one hand and uses my shoulder to hold herself up with the other. Her actions don’t register fully until she runs the head of my cock over her clit.

“Sweets, we’re gonna have to wait until we’re back at the cottage before we take this any further.”

“Why? You haven’t come yet, and you look like you need to.”

This is true. I definitely need to come. The head of my cock is almost purple. All this holding off and waiting after the week I had is making my balls explosive.

“I don’t have a condom with me.”

“Oh.” Her face falls.

This makes me want to engage in bad decisions. “They’re in my bag, back at the car.”

She tells me what I already know. "I'm on the pill."

"I get that . . ."

"And I'm good about taking it."

"That's great, but—"

"You could pull out. Then you don't have to worry."

Maybe we are orgasm soulmates, as she's read my mind. It's difficult to be rational with Sunny rubbing the head of my dick on her clit. It's like a precursor to how amazing things could get if she went a couple of inches lower.

"Or we could go anal."

She says it flippantly. There isn't even a hint of smile or that devious twinkle in her eye.

Here's the thing about a proposition such as this: every guy, I don't care who he is, wants to go where no man has gone before—or in Sunny's case, where her ex-boyfriend, who I want to kill, tried to go all the fucking time. But it's one of those activities that needs to be worked up to, *if* it happens at all. Ever. I'm not delusional enough to believe it will. Contrary to popular male fantasy, anal isn't as prevalent in real life as it is in porn.

"Uh . . ."

Sunny's left eye twitches; then she bursts into a fit of giggles. "Oh my God! Your face, Miller. So awesome."

"You know . . ." I squeeze her ass. "You do an awful lot of joking about me getting in your ass."

"This the only time I've joked about it. Last time I thought you were pulling a sneak attack." She does the slip 'n' slide with my cock again. This time she sinks down a couple of inches. I watch the head disappear inside her.

"Sunny." It's not even a warning; it's just me saying her name.

"You made me feel good. Why can't we feel good together?"

I should be more responsible, but I don't want to. I let her sink all the way down until her ass is resting on my thighs. She starts with the hip swivels. I want to say it's awesome, and it is because it's Sunny, but I'm still sore, so there's some discomfort along with the pleasure. I wrap my arms around her and keep her nice and close to prevent vigorous bouncing. That I definitely can't handle.

"Why is it always so good with you?" She pushes her tongue past my lips, making it impossible to answer.

I know exactly what she means. It's better with Sunny than it's ever been, even with things not in perfect working order. Her hands are in my hair and on my face, her warm breath washing over my lips with every easy stroke. When she's getting close to another orgasm, I shift around to make sure she gets the friction she needs.

I'm holding off, trying my best to wait until the magic has happened before I let the cannon blast. Her mouth drops open, her eyes wide with familiar surprise before they flutter shut. I hold her hips, helping keep the rhythm as her muscles lock down. As soon as she stops clenching around my cock, I lift her off. Her boobs are right in my face. I want to suck on a nipple, but I'm too busy aiming my dick away from her to multitask. Instead, I mash my face into her chest and hold her tightly.

The orgasm is like an atomic detonation. It's a week of pent-up insecurity, anger, frustration, and missed whack-off sessions rolled together with an argument and making up. Plus a spider bite. It feels good, and it hurts like hell at the same time. I'm panting and sweaty, but I feel a whole lot better when it's over. Sunny settles back in my lap and wraps around me like a human blanket.

"Is sex always supposed to be this awesome?"

"I don't know. I guess it won't be this awesome when we're eighty, but for now, sure."

"Now I get why people want to have it all the time."

I rub her back. I feel bad that Sunny's experience with sex has been so *meh* before now. But I like that it makes me her orgasm savior.

"We should probably get back to the cottage before Lily murders Randy, or Randy murders Bushman," I mumble into her neck.

"Bushman?"

"Sorry. Kale."

"Oh." Sunny laughs. She leans back, her expression turning serious. She holds my face in her hands. "I'm sorry again that I used him to make you jealous. It was immature and stupid. I just . . ." She swallows hard. "I like you a lot, Miller. Like, really a lot. We fit, and that scares me sometimes."

I pick up the end of the thin braid hanging in her face and brush the ends over my lips in contemplation. "I want this to be fun, not scary." I put a hand over her heart. It also means I'm palming her boob. "I'm gonna do my best to keep this safe."

It's the closest I'll get to telling her how I feel about her. For now.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

THAT GIRL IS POISON

I help Sunny tie her bikini bottoms before I put my shorts back on. She picks up her top and shakes off the dirt.

“That isn’t poison ivy, is it?” I point to the plants her bikini top was lying on.

She barely glances at them. “It’s Virginia Creeper. They look a lot alike.”

The Boy Scout in me wants to question that, but she’s been up here enough to know the difference. She ties the string behind her back and adjusts the cups so they cover her nipples.

My clothes didn’t get too dirty, thanks to the moss. My shorts are damp, probably from the sex, even though it was tame. I’ll have to change when we get back to the cottage either way. My shirt is in far worse shape. When I aimed my jizz away from Sunny, I managed to shoot it all over my T-shirt rather than anywhere else in the damn forest. I rinse it in the lake, along with my hands. We follow the trail back to the cottage with my soaked and jizzy shirt in my hand instead of on my body.

“When do you think Bushman and Benji are gonna leave?” I ask as the camping trailer comes into view, still parked in the driveway. “They don’t need to be here anymore. We can take you and Lily back to Guelph whenever you’re ready to go.”

“Benji won’t leave until he and Lily are back together.”

“Is that gonna happen anytime soon?”

Sunny shrugs. “Who knows with those two?”

I grab my bag from the rental. “Does this break-up thing happen a lot?”

“I guess it depends on what *a lot* is. They break up three or four times a year.”

That sure seems like a lot. “What’s the point of getting back together at all?”

“Lily says the sex is really good.”

Really good wouldn’t be good enough for me to put up with that shit, but I don’t say anything. Lily is Sunny’s bestie. If I know one thing about

girls, it's not to talk shit about their friends.

I peek inside the trailer as we pass. Benji seems to have gotten his ass up. The question is, where is he now, and how soon will he be leaving? His location becomes obvious when we walk into the cottage. Lily and Benji are in the kitchen having an out-and-out screaming match. Actually, Lily's the screamer. Benji leans against the counter while she gets in his face.

Randy sits at the table across the room, eating a bowl of cereal and browsing a magazine like nothing is happening. The weird dick sculpture wearing the superhero cape is still on the table. I need to check that out later. Bushman is nowhere to be seen.

"We're done, Benji! I'm not doing this anymore with you! How many times do I have to say it's over before you get it?"

"You say this every time, and then we get back together." He's cocky about it, smirking like a jackass.

"Not this time!" Under all that anger are tears. She's fighting them. I can see the tremble in her chin, even from across the room.

Benji laughs. Maybe it's because he's got an audience. Then again, maybe he really is a giant dick. "If I leave, you know you'll be calling me in a couple hours, crying like you always do. So why don't you take the bitch down a notch?"

Now Lily has been a serious pain in my ass where Sunny's concerned. But no matter how I feel about her interference, I'm not cool with guys calling their girlfriends bitches. It's demeaning. And he's doing it in front of other people, which makes me wonder what he says to her when no one else is around. I'm about to say something, but Randy beats me to it.

He pauses with his spoon halfway to his mouth. "The fuck you say to her?"

"Mind your own business," Benji snaps.

Randy's eyebrows lift, and he drops his spoon in his bowl. Milk splatters the table, his beard, and his shirt. He doesn't seem to notice or care as he pushes his chair back. "Mind my own business?" Randy crosses the kitchen until he's towering over Benji. Randy's tall, but not as built as me. I tell him he's skinny all the time. In hockey he's lean; in the real world he's intimidating, and he's got about fifty pounds on Benji.

Randy thumbs over his shoulder at Lily. "You've been following her around the house like an untrained puppy for the past twenty minutes,

needling the shit out of her right in front of me. Maybe it's time you take a fucking hint and leave like she's been asking you to."

"I'm not going anywhere."

"You sure about that?" Randy cracks his knuckles.

"I have a brown belt in karate."

"And I have a black belt in kick your fucking ass."

Then the weirdest thing in the world happens. Lily grabs Randy by the shoulder, spins him around, and suctions her mouth to his.

"Is there a full moon?" I ask Sunny, who looks as shocked as me.

She doesn't even have to think about her answer. "It's not until next week."

Randy's hands are up in the air. His eyes are as wide as Sunny's—and Benji's. It'd be comical if it wasn't so fucked up.

"Fuck you, Lily!" Benji yells and stomps off.

Lily breaks free from Randy's mouth, covers his ears with her palms, and shouts, "No. Fuck you, Benji!"

He turns around to say something else, but Lily glues her lips to Randy's again. Benji slams through the front door in a snit.

At this point it's safe for Lily to disengage, but that doesn't seem to be happening. Eventually, Randy takes her face in his hands and unlocks their mouths. Both Sunny and I are still staring.

"I think you proved your point, honey."

Lily blinks. "What?"

"I think he got the message. You're good."

She shakes her head. "Oh. Oh! I'm sorry. I didn't mean. Shit." She lets go of him like he's a grenade without a pin.

"Unless you wanna keep going. I've already seen you naked, so we're halfway there, right?" He grins and winks.

"Ugh. You're a pig!"

Randy laughs as she pushes past him and heads for the stairs, her face an interesting shade of red. "I like your friend, Sunny. She's fun."

Randy laces his fingers together and stretches his arms over his head as he watches Lily run up the stairs. "I think I'm gonna go for a swim."

It's hot, and I smell like sex, so joining him seems like a smart plan. "I'mma do that, too. You coming?"

Sunny scratches the underside of her boob. "I'm gonna change my bathing suit first. I think there might be pine needles stuck in this one or

something. I'm itchy."

"You want help with that?" I slide a finger under the fabric and graze her nipple.

"Later I want help with a lot of things. I should check on Lily first."

"Sure thing, sweets." I kiss her and then wait until she's up the stairs and out of sight before I search my bag for a pair of swim shorts. I strip in the middle of the living room and change while Randy cleans up his mess. He's already in swim shorts, so we go down to the dock together.

The camping trailer isn't in the driveway anymore. Maybe that means Bushman is gone for good. Things are finally looking up.

We spend what's left of the afternoon down at the dock. According to Sunny, the khaki twins have gone home for good. She called Bushman and told him, over voice mail, that they'd only ever be friends, and she hoped she hadn't given him the wrong impression. I almost feel bad for him. Except he's an asshole.

When the sun hangs over the tree line and my stomach starts to rumble, we go back up to the cottage to make dinner. While Sunny prepares some stuffed pepper deal, I check the fridge for animal products to go with it. I should know better—it's full of tofu and fresh produce. The only item that isn't plant-based is a container of non-dairy creamer, and that's synthetic junk. If we're going to stay a while, Randy and I will need to pick up some bacon and burgers at the very least. When I check the freezer, I find lobster tails and crab legs. If I'm going to eat Waters' food, it might as well be the expensive stuff.

We don't eat dinner until almost nine, which Sunny tells me is typical at the cottage. As long as there's lots of food and it tastes good, I don't care about timing. Lily comes down and surveys the table. It seats eight comfortably, but the only unused place setting is beside Randy. None of us—apart from Sunny—has seen her since the blowout with Benji and the face sucking with Randy. She doesn't so much as look at him, but her face is red again, and she's uncommonly quiet.

She guzzles her glass of wine and tops it off, staring at the contents while conversation goes on around her. Sunny and Randy get along well, which is a bonus. If I could find some common ground with Lily, we'd be

golden. I can tell she wants to escape, but she stays, maybe because she doesn't want to be rude.

"What is this thing, anyway?" She picks up the orange sculpture from the center of the table. The cape around its neck looks like it's supposed to be for Superman, except it has the letters MC on it. There are googly eyes and a mustache.

"Let me see that." Randy holds out his hand, and she passes it over. He flips the cape up and starts laughing so hard he almost falls off his chair. "It's a superhero dick."

"I bet a million dollars that's Violet's work," I say.

"What's the MC stand for?" Randy asks.

"I think that's what Vi calls Waters' dick. Monster Cock or something," I offer. Everyone stops eating. "She does a lot of oversharing."

Randy snorts. "Waters' isn't that hung."

"That's what I thought, but he's got a stash of Magnum XL in his bedroom," I reply. "Sunny can vouch."

"No shit. He must be a serious grower." Randy stabs a green bean and bites it in half.

"I can't deal with this conversation." Lily drops her fork on the table and grabs the dick sculpture. She and Sunny decide to take pictures of it all over the cottage.

The two of them are ridiculous, giggling their asses off as they hide the Superhero dick behind pillows, on the fireplace mantel, and in the fridge. It's the first Lily's smiled since Randy and I arrived.

When they're done, Lily and Randy take care of the dishes while Sunny and I go outside to build a campfire. She swats at the back of her neck and scratches under the collar of her shirt.

"You okay? Still itchy?"

"It's fine. I think it was a mosquito. I'll put on some bug spray once we get the fire started."

I wait until we're away from the cottage before I say anything about our friends still inside. "You should probably warn Lily about Randy."

"I already did."

"Yeah, but—"

Sunny puts a hand on my shoulder, rising up on her tiptoes to plant a kiss on my lips. "They're adults."

“Yeah, but she’s probably not going to be making the best decisions, and Randy can be smooth.”

“Like you?”

There’s a difference between me and Randy. He’s a different kind of smooth. He’ll get involved with a bunny until it gets too serious, and then he cuts ties. Completely. I’ve watched him shut girls out like a door in the face. I know why he does it; he doesn’t want to end up doing to someone else what his dad did to his mom. Unfortunately, it means he leaves a trail of discarded, emotionally crippled bunnies in his wake.

We were eleven when Randy’s parents split for good. His dad was mostly farm team with only a couple NHL seasons under his belt. He wasn’t very good about keeping his dick in his pants on the road. Randy’s mom put up with it until she couldn’t anymore. I think Randy’s afraid he’ll follow the same path, so whenever it starts to get too real, he bails.

I’ve always been upfront with bunnies about how things will go down. It’s been about having fun, not getting serious. Until now. Sunny makes me see the value in being vulnerable with someone. Sometimes consistency is better than variety.

Still, her comment hits me right in the chest.

She must read it in my face. Her fingers curl around my chin. “I don’t mean it the way you’re taking it, Miller. Well, in some ways I do. You know what to say and when to say it, and you definitely know what to do and how to do it well, but I never feel like you’re feeding me lines.”

“That’s because I’m not.”

“I know. Lily’s been with Benji for a long time. She hasn’t been happy for a while. I think this week made her realize things aren’t going to get better.” She picks up a stick and twirls it between her fingers. “It’s another reason I didn’t want to flake out on Lily for this trip. Benji’s got some . . . issues. Sometimes he can be mean. Anyways, it might be good for her to have a fling.”

“As long as she gets that that’s all it is.”

“She knows all about you hockey boys.” She grabs my hand and moves toward the forest. “Come on, let’s get some kindling.”

We end up making out in the forest against a tree. Making out turns into moving Sunny’s shorts to the side and taking her from behind. I hang the spent condom from a tree branch when she isn’t looking. Outdoor sex is the fucking bomb. Afterward, Sunny demonstrates her master campfire-

building skills. She manages to get a roaring fire going without dousing it in gasoline or lighter fluid.

Once it's blazing, I go back to the cottage to look for marshmallows and roasting sticks. Campfires aren't campfires without them. I also want to head off any potential fuckery between Randy and Lily.

I'm too late, though. I find them in the kitchen. Randy has Lily pinned against the counter. Maybe *pinned* isn't the right word. Lily is fisting his shirt, and he's got a hand braced on either side of her. He has one knee between her legs, dry fucking her while they suck face.

I close the screen door harder than I need to. Lily shoves him away and spins around, dunking her hands in the sink. Her back expands and contracts with every heavy breath. Randy wipes his mouth with his sleeve as he glances over his shoulder. "Sup, Miller? You get a campfire going yet or what?"

"It's marshmallow time." I wrangle up a bag from the pantry along with graham crackers. I can't find a chocolate bar, so I make do with Nutella. "You guys coming, or are you planning to get it on in the kitchen some more first?"

He slips an arm around Lily's waist and nuzzles her neck. "I'm partial to option two, but I'll leave the decision to Lily here."

"We'll be right out," she croaks.

Randy chuckles. I shake my head and shut the screen door behind me. For someone with a big hate-on for players—perceived or real—Lily seems intent to hook up with one. I wonder how long it'll take for her to regret it.

I soon discover that Sunny doesn't eat marshmallows. Gelatin is made from bone marrow, and bone marrow comes from animals, so they're a no-go. Being a vegan seems like food-deprivation torture.

We stay outside for a few hours, but Sunny's itchy, even with all the bug spray. Everyone's drunk by the time we decide to call it a night. Sunny sets Randy up in the room right next to Lily's. I'd say it's a bad idea, but based on all the groping going on at the fire, those two'll get their fuck on regardless of how far apart their rooms are. I hope Sunny's right and Lily takes it for what it is: a rebound lay.

Sunny's bedroom is decorated for her. The walls are painted a soft, pale yellow. The comforter is covered in sunflowers. It's a girly room. It gives me a better understanding of how close Sunny and her brother are.

"I need a shower; my hair smells like campfire," Sunny says once she closes the door.

I wrap my arms around her from behind and shove my nose in her blond waves. "You smell like toasted marshmallows. I like it."

"I smell like smoke and bug spray. And I'm itchy."

"I'll give you a hand, then, eh?"

She turns around, her grin sloppy and her eyes glassy from all the mojitos. "I love it; my Canadianness is rubbing off on you."

"I like it when you rub your Canadianness all over me."

I kiss her. Even her lips taste smoky. Easing my hands down her sides, I squeeze her ass. On the way back up, I pull her shirt over her head. She's not wearing a bra. I'm about to take full advantage of that fact, until I notice the rash. Streaks of red cover her chest. I move her hair out of the way and note the same rash around the back of her neck, as if it's followed the line of her bikini.

"Do you have any allergies?"

She looks down and screams, then brings her hands up to touch her boobs. I grab her wrists before she can make contact.

"Sweets, are you sure that was Virginia Creeper in the forest today?"

Her eyes shoot up to mine, tears already brimming. "Oh my God! I have poison ivy on my boobs?" It's a question, like she doesn't want to believe it's possible.

I can't lie to her. The evidence is splashed across her chest in a red, blistering rash. It's even on her poor little nipples.

"Are you itchy anywhere else?" I just hope it hasn't spread.

"No. I showered as soon as we got back from our walk in the forest." She goes for the button on my shorts.

"What are you doing?"

"Checking your lightning rod."

"I think I'd notice if I had poison ivy on my dick, Sunny. Remember I told you I'm immune?"

"What if you're wrong? Why aren't I immune?"

I move her hands away, unbutton my pants, and drop my shorts, along with my underwear—to humor her. My balls are almost back to their

regular size, and I've got a semi. "See? No rash."

The door bursts open. "Is everything okay? I heard Sunny sc—" Lily stops short. "Holy geez! You weren't lying." Her eyes are fixed on my half-mast lightning rod.

Randy's right behind her. He's in a pair of boxers, and Lily is wearing his shirt, I realize now. That didn't take long. I pull the underwear back up, but leave the shorts where they are, wrapped around my ankles, and put my hands up to shield Sunny's boobs. Randy's already turned away.

"Nice tightie-whities, Butterson."

"Nice patch of chest hairs, Ballistic. What are you up to now, three or four? And my underwear is red. Not white."

"Would you two stop it! What am I going to do, Miller? I have poison ivy on my boobs, and it's itchy!"

Lily closes the door on Randy and elbows me out of the way. She pulls Sunny into the bathroom and flips on the light. I'd be all over the girl-on-girl action if my girlfriend—I'm calling her that now—wasn't crying and didn't have a rash on her boobs. Also, I don't want to share her. With anyone. Not even her bestie.

Lily sticks her head out. "Get me baking soda, please."

"You got it." Baking soda is one of the few things that can take the itch out of poison ivy. I learned that in Boy Scouts.

I hunt down the baking soda in the kitchen while Lily calms Sunny. It takes forever to find it. By the time I get back, the shower is running and Lily is standing in the hall with Randy. They're close-talking and so absorbed they don't even notice me ease past them into the bedroom. I rifle through my bag until I find the box of condoms. I toss it to Randy. "I've got Sunny from here. You two play safe." Then I shut the door and lock it.

I make a paste out of the baking soda, and when Sunny gets out of the shower I slather it all over her chest while she lays on the bed and snuffles.

Then I eat her cookie to make her forget about the itch.

It works. Twice.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

PORNO CAR WASH PROBLEMS

The distractions worked well enough last night, but they're not so effective this morning. Overnight the rash has gotten worse.

"What am I going to do? This looks awful!" Sunny gestures to her bare chest.

"It's not that bad, baby." I'm sort of lying. It doesn't look great.

She can tell. "Are you serious? I have to teach yoga in three days. I can't do that like this!"

"You'll be wearing a shirt, though. Won't that cover it?"

"I wear tank tops. It won't cover this!" She motions to her neck and collarbones.

It wasn't until Randy knocked on the door and reminded me we had to get a move on that I remembered the charity car wash this afternoon. It's already eleven forty-five. I need to shower and get dressed, but first I need to calm Sunny down again.

She wouldn't have sex this morning without a shirt on no matter how much I assured her that I don't care, and the rash isn't contagious. She's self-conscious. Overnight it's crept up her throat, blossoming into blisters that nearly reach her face.

I feel terrible. If we hadn't had sex in the forest, she wouldn't have this problem. The only upside is that I don't have to make excuses as to why she can't come to this fundraiser with me. Any other time I'd want her there for bunny cover—and because she's awesome—but since I want to pick the dude's brain who's running it, and it pertains to a venture I'm hoping might eventually include Sunny, the poison ivy is an unfortunate blessing.

"Maybe it'll clear up by then."

"In three days? I'm blistering. Do you know what happens to blisters? They turn into scabs. I'm going to be scabby. I'll be disgusting!"

She has a point. She's being extreme, though. "You could put makeup on it or something."

"I don't wear makeup. Besides, you can't put makeup on open sores."

I run a hand through my hair, trying to come up with a solution, even if there isn't one. "Should we take a trip to a medical clinic?"

Her frustration softens. “They can’t do anything about it.” She sighs. “I wanted to come with you to the fundraiser, but I can’t go looking like this.”

“I still think you’re beautiful.” At least where she isn’t covered in poison ivy she’s beautiful. And on the inside.

“I look like I have a disease. Can you imagine if people took pictures and posted them on the Internet? The rumors would be awful. Neither of us needs that.”

While Sunny and I haven’t been out much in public, the few pictures of us from my weekend at her place are now hashtagged with #bunny or #thebarbieandkenofhockey. The recognition that we’re a couple is something, but the nicknames are not my favorite—and not Sunny’s either. Sunny with blisters all over her would probably be tagged with something even worse.

I pull her into a hug. “I shouldn’t have used a log as a bed.”

“You weren’t alone. I’m just as much to blame. It was fun at the time. Nature makes me horny.”

“Me too. Next time we’ll bring blankets.”

“Next time?”

“If you want there to be a next time. Otherwise we can stick to indoor sex.” Talking about sex is making me hard again. “I’m sorry your boobs are itchy.”

“Me, too.”

“I’ll bring back Calamine lotion. I’m glad it wasn’t your cookie.” I kiss the edge of her jaw.

“Oh God. Don’t even say that! We would’ve had matching damaged parts!” She pats my nuts and my semi through my shorts. “I’m so relieved everything’s almost back to normal.”

The left nut is still somewhat swollen, but it’s healing up nice. Sunny keeps patting; we stop talking and start kissing. Clothes come off—except for Sunny’s shirt. We have slow, easy sex on her sunflower comforter. If it weren’t for wanting to keep her in my life in a more permanent way, I’d blow off the fundraiser and my research mission to stay in bed with her all day.

Randy knocks on the bedroom door about ten minutes after I give Sunny her second orgasm. “We’re only gonna be gone a couple hours, Miller. Give your girl a break.”

Sunny lifts her head from my chest and smiles. “You should go so you can come back.”

“Good call.”

I throw on a golf shirt and a pair of shorts and fix my messed-up hair. Sunny’s curled up in bed, reading a book for one of the classes she’s taking this fall, by the time I’m ready to go. She wants to get a head start. Sunny’s a different smart—like me. The book part is tedious for her too; the part where we get to put it into action is where we shine. We’re the same in a lot of ways. I kiss her on the forehead and then the lips. She looks sad when I pull away.

“Are you okay?” I tuck a few strands of hair behind her ear.

“Just tired from all the exercise.” She stretches and puts the book down on her stomach, her grin cheeky.

As I stare down at her, a weird, unsettled feeling makes my chest clench. “I don’t have to go if you don’t want me to.”

“It’s for a good cause, so you should definitely go.” It sounds more like what she thinks I want to hear than what she wants to say. “I’m probably going to catch a nap, maybe paint my nails with Lily or something else girly so I can find out what happened last night.”

I’ll be fishing for the same information on the ride to the fundraiser. “You’re a hundred-percent sure?”

“Yup. You go do good things.”

“Okay.” I drop another kiss on her lips, slipping her a little tongue before I head for the door.

“Miller.”

I turn to find her twirling her hair around her finger. “Sup, sweets?”

She hesitates and then asks, “There won’t be any hooker bunnies, will there?”

I come back to the bed and lie down beside her, stealing the lock of hair from between her fingers. “It’s not gonna be like one of those parties at Lance’s. It’s a fundraiser for breast cancer. I don’t know who all is gonna be there, but people will take pictures. It’s inevitable. This is where that whole trust thing comes in, Sunny. It’s a social event. I’m there to make a donation, and then I’m coming back to you, because you matter. The

bunnies don't. Can you try to keep that in mind when the pictures start rolling in?"

She nods.

"I should put on some hooker-bunny repellent to be safe, shouldn't I?"

Grabbing her by the ankles, I drag her to the edge of the bed until her legs hang off the end.

"What are you doing?"

I hook my thumbs into the waist of her shorts and pull them down, along with her panties. "Putting on bunny repellent." I drop to my knees on the floor. Her book is still lying open on her stomach. "I'll be thinking about you the entire time I'm there. As soon as I get back I'll rub some of that pink lotion on your poison ivy."

"'Cause that's so sexy and all."

"You don't think so?" I kiss the spot below her navel. I don't have time to warm her up.

Randy knocks on the door. "Butterson, we gotta go unless you wanna be there all day."

"Two minutes!" I shout back.

Then I put my mouth on her and erase the sad look from her face, replacing it with another orgasm.

The fundraiser is about half an hour away. We don't take the rental, which would be lame. Instead we borrow one of Waters' cars. He has two in the garage. One's a truck with sweet rims. The other is an old-school Iroc Z with an eagle painted on the hood.

"Waters is a weirdo, isn't he?" Randy eyes our ride.

"He's marrying my sister, so yup."

"Not that I'm complaining." He slides into the red-leather interior. The whole thing has been redesigned so the inside looks like a racecar.

I don't expect we'll be gone too long. All we need to do is write a check, get the car washed, schmooze with the host, and I can get back to Sunny. We've only got another night or two before Randy goes back to Chicago. I don't have to get back right away, but Sunny has work, and that means going back to Guelph. I'll bite the bullet and stay a couple extra days

there, even if it means awkward dad conversations and sleeping in the spare room.

As soon as we pull out of the driveway, I start with the questions. “So? What’s the deal?”

“Huh?” Randy’s on his phone, texting. He pauses and sniffs. He lifts the bottom of his shirt to his nose and follows with his fingers. “What’s that smell?”

“Bunny repellent.”

“Say what now?” He arches a brow.

I repeat myself, but don’t elaborate.

“It smells a lot like pussy.” He cracks a window and goes back to texting.

“Speaking of, what happened with Lily?”

She came through the kitchen to get coffee while I was cutting peaches for Sunny and me. She was wearing Randy’s T-shirt. She was also friendly. It was very un-Lily.

“We had fun. Several times.” He doesn’t pause his texting. “I’m hoping to have even more fun tonight.”

“Oh, yeah?” I try to see what’s on his screen, but it’s impossible to read and drive at the same time. “Who’re you texting?”

“No one.”

“Please tell me you don’t have plans to meet up with a bunny this afternoon?” I don’t need more drama. I’ve already had enough over the past week.

“No, man. I’m not a total asshole.” He sends one more message and pockets his phone. About two miles down the road from Waters’ cottage, I spot a camping trailer parked halfway in the bushes. I slow down.

“Is that Bushman and Benji?”

Randy frowns as we pass. “Maybe? It’s hard to tell.”

There’s a car behind us, so I speed up again. “If it’s still there on the way back, I’m definitely stopping. Those guys are as persistent as the stalker bunnies.”

“No kidding. That dickhead kept texting Lily all night. Eventually I made her shut off her phone, otherwise I would’ve thrown it out the damn window. Or gone to find the fucker and broken all his cocksucking fingers.”

He flips through radio stations and taps his fingers on his knee.

“So?”

He stops fidgeting to look at me. “So what?”

“That’s all I’m gonna get? You had fun.”

“Don’t forget the several times part.”

“I’m guessing I was wrong about the vagina teeth if you managed to get in there more than once.”

“Vagina teeth?”

“Yeah. I figured she’s kinda snarly, so maybe her vagina is, too.”

Randy shakes his head. “Butterson, sometimes your brain is a fucked up place to be.”

He flips down the visor and checks his reflection in the mirror, smoothing out the short ponytail he’s sporting. He’s joined the man-bun fad. I think he looks like a douche, but the ladies seem to like it.

“She wasn’t snarly with me at all.”

“That’s because you were boning her.”

“Lily’s actually a lotta fun.” His mouth quirks up in a private grin. He flips the visor back up. “She has a cousin who was at Camp Beaver Woods this past week.”

“With us?”

“Yup.”

“No shit.”

“She said he’s been playing hockey since he could hold a stick, but her aunt and uncle have, like, six kids, and they can’t afford all the lessons, or whatever. Don’t tell her I told you, though. I think he might’ve been one of the kids you helped subsidize.”

“Huh.”

“I don’t think she hates you as much as you think.” His phone buzzes in his pocket, and he checks the message, ending the conversation.

I try to decide if Lily has been different with me since we arrived yesterday, but I’m not sure. It’s hard to tell with all the Benji BS and Sunny’s poison ivy.

The fundraiser takes place at a cottage on top of a hill. The driveway curves around a rocky bend, making the actual structure impossible to see. Cars snake upward in a slow line—luxury rides interspersed with moderately expensive vehicles. Based on the sheer number of cars, we’ll be sitting here for a while. It’s like a small version of a car show. The rental would’ve sucked compared to Waters’ car.

Randy pulls his phone out and sends a few more messages while we wait, so I do the same, including a warning to Sunny that we saw a camping trailer parked a couple miles down the road from the cottage.

Sunny messages back. They're hard to decipher without listening to them, but the last one has a heart and a kissy lips emoticon, which is cool.

Randy passes over his phone with our invitation to the suits manning the gates. The dude passes me a clipboard with a bunch of forms to sign. I pass it to Randy to scan, otherwise we'll hold up the line.

"It's a bunch of waivers for photos. The usual." He passes it back to me, I sign, and we move forward.

As soon as we round the bend, the cottage comes into view. It makes Alex's pad look like a dump, and that's saying something. Three stories of glass, wood, and stone are built into the side of a steep, rocky incline. The view is spectacular. The top floor is the only one accessible from the driveway. I'd love to appreciate the architecture more, but I suddenly realize I'm in trouble. Cars worth a quarter million dollars and up line the edges of the driveway. Two Ferraris—one red, one yellow, a black Mercedes, and an orange Lambo are among the nicest.

I'm a guy. I have a hard-on for cars. I don't own anything quite so insanely expensive, only because Violet won't let me. The money's there, but she wants me to wait a few years before I do something stupid with it—like throw it away on a car I'll never fit in comfortably.

But the cars aren't where the trouble is. It's what's happening with the cars: bikini models drape themselves over the hoods, or the owners who stand with them, holding fake checks that represent donations. I can't read the amounts from where I am, but based on the cars, they've gotta be significant.

One of the models saunters up to the hood of our car, a wet, soapy sponge in one hand, a half-full bucket of water in the other.

Randy and I look at each other. "Dude."

I look anywhere but the hood of the car. "Is she topless?"

He glances back at the model. "It sure looks that way." She dips her sponge into the bucket, then rubs it over her already soapy chest.

"We're so fucked."

Randy holds a fake smile as he gives the girl a thumbs up. "Maybe we should write a check and leave."

I know things are bad if Randy's making that suggestion. A photographer chases around after the model, snapping pictures. She rounds the passenger side, then stretches out over the hood. Holding the sponge above her chest, she squeezes, releasing a white, foamy spray that bounces off her boobs and lands on the hood and windshield. Then she rubs her chest all over the eagle. It's a scene right out of a B-rated movie.

"I'm not so sure your bunny repellent is going to work," Randy says as she comes around to my side of the car. She drops the sponge in the bucket and takes a towel from one of the men lining the driveway. Then she picks up a clipboard and a pen and struts over to my window.

I try not to look below her neck. It's impossible. I'm relieved to find her bikini top is flesh-colored and blends in with her skin. Even after our talk yesterday and all the making up we've done, I don't think Sunny would be cool with pictures of me and a topless model, despite it being a charity event.

The model leans on the side of the car. "Fun ride, boys! You can pull into that spot right there. Fill out this form with your donation amount, and we'll get you set up so the girls can start washing. You've already signed the photo release form?"

"Yup. We're all set." I make sure I hold eye contact and don't look down again.

She guides my car into a spot like she's getting ready for a drag race. Her hair's in a swishy ponytail.

"Did you know it was gonna be models?"

"Well, yeah, but I didn't think it was gonna be like this." Randy runs an anxious hand through his hair, messing with his dumb ponytail stub.

"What are you all worried about?"

"I don't know. There's a lot of girls."

"This is usually your thing! No one said you had to fuck any of them."

"Screw you, Miller. That's not what I mean. It's not gonna look good."

"No shit."

Now that we're in, there doesn't seem to be any way to get out, based on the insane line up of cars filtering in behind us. I assumed because it was a cause I could get behind, the event would be all civilized. I should've known better.

It's like the set of a fucked up porno. The topless-looking models rub down the cars with soapy sponges, then rub their girls on the car so their

boobs are covered in foam while professional photographers take their pictures. Apparently, a magazine is shooting their annual bikini model edition as part of the event. That would've been good to know. I scribble my way through another release and the donation form, while Randy does the same. I'm distracted by the way girls are hanging off the other donors while photographers snap pictures.

Randy leans over and checks out my papers while I flip to make sure I've signed in all the right places. "Miller, that's—"

Another model sticks her head in the window. "All set?"

"Good to go." I hand over my forms and pass her his as well.

"It's good; don't worry about it," I tell Randy, who looks seriously stressed.

The model checks our information and gives us a megawatt smile. "I'll be right back."

"Sure." I want to text Sunny and let her know I'm stuck and it's not what it looks like, but I don't have a chance. Models swarm the car. They hold open the doors; Randy and I have no choice but to get out. One of the girls passes us fake checks with our donation amounts on them. They prod Randy into a picture with me.

"Dude," he hisses out of the corner of his mouth. "I would've bumped my donation amount if I'd known you were throwing in five grand."

I meant to donate two. "Sorry, man. I flipped the numbers," I whisper back.

Two other models—these ones are actually wearing normal bikini tops and daisy dukes—flank us, and two more drop into odd, contortion-y poses in front of us. The girls on either side put their hands on our shoulders and lean in, making kissy lips. I turn toward the model with the intention of protesting. Her lips are hot pink and half an inch away from mine—thanks to her monster heels—which is the exact moment the flash goes off. I've been here for less than five minutes, and already I'm screwed.

As soon as they're done, I try to get my phone out of my pocket so I can warn Sunny, but the girls take our arms and usher us toward the house. I want to shake the bikini-model entourage, but I don't want to be rude or attract any more attention. I let them guide me around the back of the mansion and up stone steps to a massive deck. It drops in tiers to a stone surround and an Olympic-sized pool. I'm not sure what the deal with the

pool is since there's a lake below us. It seems wasteful and excessive. Sunny wouldn't approve.

Music blasts from the speakers, and more bikini-clad models with trays of drinks and appetizers strut around, posing every time they stop to offer a snack. I decline the booze. The whole scenario is exactly what I promised Sunny I would avoid. Unintentionally, Randy has screwed me again.

But I'm here, so I don't mess around. I seek out the host, Gene. My intention is to chat with him about the business side of setting up a fundraiser—with less partial nudity—and make a plan to talk more at a later date, when he's not hosting a party with hundreds of people. Then I need to find Randy, who's nowhere to be seen, so we can get back to the cottage, and I can get back to Sunny.

I manage to find Gene and secure an introduction. He's a big hockey fan, so we end up talking about the coming season and training for a bit. Then I get sucked into an hour-long conversation about endorsements, career longevity, and philanthropic pursuits. He's business savvy. Apparently he knows all about my involvement with the summer camps, including the one I left yesterday. The interview I gave has already been printed in the local paper. It's sitting on the coffee table in his living room, open to a picture of me with Michael and his family.

My phone buzzes in my pocket more than once while we're talking. I can't excuse myself, knowing this is an opportunity I'm not going to get again. After a while, Gene and I exchange contact information, which is exactly what I'd hoped would happen.

I'm searching for a way to end the conversation—dude is seriously chatty—when Randy finally shows up. He's wearing a strange, fake-looking smile. Gene gives him one of those back-pat hugs and invites us to stay for dinner.

"We'd love to, but we've got to get back. Butterson's girlfriend's sick." Randy's still wearing that messed-up smile.

"I'm sorry to hear that."

I take the cue and stand. "She'll be okay. I just don't want to be gone too long."

Gene nods and Randy ushers me out of the house, but it's another half hour before we get back to the car with all the handshakes and conversations we're forced into on the way.

“We gotta get back to the cottage *now*,” Randy says as he slides into the passenger seat.

I check my messages. I have tons of texts from Sunny and several from Violet. Reading them all is going to take forever. Based on Randy’s panicked expression, I shouldn’t be wasting time. I toss him my phone. “What’s going on? I need you to read those to me.”

“Waters and your sister showed up at the cottage a while ago. According to Lily, Waters is raging. Lily is pretty pissed too. She called me a ball-licking anus pimple.”

“She’s creative. Is Waters upset about us taking his car?”

“Probably? It’s hard to tell from Violet’s messages. She mentions something about the poison ivy and veggie man. There’s a lot of autocorrect going on.” Randy scrolls through my messages. Some of it is probably personal, but he knows most of my business anyway. He flips back and forth between his phone and mine.

“Fuck.”

“What?”

“The exes came back to the cottage.”

He hits a button and brings the phone to his ear, tapping the dash with anxious fingers. Whatever’s going on can’t be good. “Hey. Shit. I’m glad you finally answered. I was getting wor—”

He stops abruptly, his eyebrows pulling down. “Whoa. Hold up a second. What do you mean you’re leaving? He can’t do that—Can you stall? We’re on our way back now.”

I can hear Lily through the phone, her voice high. Randy bangs his head against the back of the seat. “Come on, Lily. It’s not like that.” After a brief pause he holds the phone away from his ear and checks the screen. “Fuck.”

“What now?”

“She hung up.”

“On purpose?”

“Maybe? I don’t know. I could hear Waters in the background. I think he might have been fighting with Sunny, but there was too much yelling to tell. We need to get back. I think there’s a lot of misinformation happening, and it’s making us both look like assholes.”

I rub my forehead and take a bend in the road too fast, almost fishtailing around the corner. Waters will have my balls if I ruin his car.

Randy checks my messages every few minutes, but the ones from Sunny stopped about an hour ago. The last one I received from her was about Waters being at the cottage and how he wasn't happy.

I almost ram Waters' car into the back of the camping trailer when I pull into the driveway. They're backing out as I'm pulling in. The unsettled feeling from earlier slaps me in the face as I park the car, blocking them.

Bushman sticks his fuzzy, patchy face out the open window. I shift the car into park. I can see Sunny in the back window, twisting her hair around her finger.

"Get your car out of the way, asshole, before I back over it!" Bushman yells.

"Go ahead and run it over, Tiny Dick!" I jump out of the car, leaving the door wide open, and head for the trailer. Bushman backs up, almost hitting me. Before I can get to Sunny, the door of the cottage slams open.

Waters takes up almost the entire frame. "I'm gonna fuck you up, Butterson!"

We're close to the same size. I'm a little broader and I might have a few pounds on him. He's a center; I'm defense, so being lighter works in his favor on the ice. I don't think the slight size difference is going to mean much if we get into it. He looks pissed.

For a split second I consider running back to the car and locking myself inside. He's not going to beat on his own car. At least I don't think he will. He probably has a spare set of keys, though, so he'll get in eventually. It'll also make me look like a pussy, which I'm not.

"Alex!" Violet grabs his arm and hangs off it.

He stops with the stalking business and gives her his attention. "I just want to talk to him, baby."

"You said you were going to fuck him up!"

"With my words." He pries her off his arm and goes back to stalking toward me. He's wearing flip-flops. They slap against the ground and kick up stones with each step. He doesn't acknowledge Randy when he gets out of the car. His rage is all for me.

Randy decides now is a good time to come to my defense, and his own. "I think there's been a misunderstanding—"

Before he finishes the sentence, Sunny throws open the trailer door. She must not realize how close I am; the steel frame hits me in the face, the sharp edge bashing into my forehead.

“Oh God!”

“Alex, don’t!” Lily yells.

I don’t have a chance to recover before Waters’ fist slams into my face. There’s a crunch inside my head. Pain explodes, turning my vision white.

“Alex! What’s wrong with you?” That’s Violet screaming.

“You didn’t need to punch him in the face! He’s already hurt!” Lily yells.

I don’t know why the hit is unexpected. Waters has been dying to get me back for breaking his nose when he screwed Violet over. I fall backward, like a cut tree. Pines and birch rise around me, blue sky broken by fluffy white clouds. My head hits the gravel. The sun is a bright ball in the middle of it all. It expands, filling up the blue and eclipsing the clouds until it’s everywhere.

I blink and the clouds are gone. There’s just white and a spot of black in the center. I try to sit up, but I can’t. I have a feeling that was a hard hit.

I hear screaming. Girl screaming.

“What happened to using words?” Violet’s yelling again.

“Baby, calm down. He’s fine.”

“He’s not fine! You knocked him out!”

A disembodied hand appears in my vision. I think it’s mine. I swipe across my face. My palm comes back wet. Pain radiates through my skull in more than one location, multiplying the black spots in my vision. White turns to red as I bring my hand up in front of my eyes. Those black spots take up more room.

Gravel digs into the back of my head, and there’s a huge rock under my right shoulder. I want to move, but I’ve had the wind knocked out of me. I might even be concussed.

Sunny’s voice permeates the fog. “Oh my God! He’s bleeding!”

I want to tell someone to make sure she doesn’t come near me; Sunny and blood aren’t a great combination.

“Sunny, you should sit down,” Lily says. She must know what happens when Sunny sees blood.

“Catch her!” That’s Randy. He’s a good friend, watching out for my girl.

I should be the one to do that. I struggle to sit up, but Alex moves fast, getting to her before she hits the ground.

A shot of cold has me sitting up in a rush. It's Bushman, with a bottle of soda. Asshole. Jesus, Waters hits hard. Bushman empties the rest of the soda on my face.

"Keep it up, Bushman, and I'll shove that bottle up your dick hole!" Randy yells.

With Waters as his bodyguard, the little fucker has grown a set of balls. He sprinkles the last few drops on the ground next to me and backs away.

"Get her in the trailer," Waters orders.

Bushman struggles to pull an unconscious Sunny up the two steps into the vehicle. Once she's mostly inside, Lily pushes him out of the way and drops down beside her. I try to stand, but I'm way off balance. Waters is definitely going to gloat about this. I manage to get to my feet as Bushman turns over the engine.

Randy hands me a shirt to wipe my face with. It's sticky from the soda. And bloody from one of my face wounds.

I take a stumbling step towards the trailer. "You can't send Sunny home with him."

Waters puts a hand on my chest and pushes. I drop back to the ground on my ass.

"Enough, Alex!" Violet gets between us. It reminds me of what she did in the locker room after I discovered Waters banging her there—except that time she was defending Alex, not me. "Do you realize what a hypocrite you're being? I don't even like you right now!"

"He's been fucking my sister around for months!" Alex shouts back.

She throws her hands in the air. "No, he hasn't!"

"Get over your goddamn ego, Waters," I shout from the ground. "If you yell at Violet again, I'm gonna beat your ass."

"You can't even stand up right now, Butterson."

"Alex! Just stop!" Violet seems as pissed as he is.

Commotion inside the trailer stops the yelling match, which is good, because it's making my headache worse. Sunny opens the door again, more cautiously this time. Lily is right behind her, looking like she's prepared for fainting, round two. Sunny elbows Bushman out of the way and holds on to the door frame, still unsteady.

Looking at her makes me feel like shit. The only emotion on her face is resignation.

Lily puts a hand on her shoulder, looking past us to Randy, behind me. “Sunny, maybe—”

She shakes her off. “Alex, let’s just go.”

“Are you serious with this? Come on, Sunny. What is even going on right now?”

Her gaze swings slowly to me. “There’s too much drama, Miller. We can talk about this later, when everyone’s calmed down.”

“Later?” I gesture to the trailer. “You’re leaving. What kind of later is there?”

“I’ll call you tonight.”

“What’s the damn point? You’re gonna keep listening to whatever everyone tells you. All I asked was that you have a little fucking faith that I’m gonna do the right thing, and what happens? Your brother shows up and gets his dick all tied in a knot over some pictures he doesn’t like, and you decide you’re gonna go home with this fucking joker?”

“It’s not like that, Miller. Alex is worried.”

I turn to Alex. “I’m not with Sunny to get back at you, you self-absorbed fuck.” I hold a hand out to her. “Come on, sweets, come out. I’ll take you back to Guelph if that’s where you want to go. Let’s just have a conversation.”

“Miller, I—”

Her hesitation is my tipping point. It’s a kick in the balls I don’t need. “You know what? Forget it. Go back to Guelph with Tiny Dick and the gaping asshole.” I look to Waters. “You win. Congratulations. I hope you’re fucking happy.”

Sunny steps down from the trailer. “Miller, wait.”

“For what, Sunny? For you to finally believe I’m not fucking you over? I can’t do this anymore. It’s like being a goddamn hamster on a wheel. Stay or go, Sunny. Do whatever you want. Either way, I’m outta here.”

I drop the shirt from my forehead to check if the bleeding has stopped. Sunny faints again, and Lily catches her, just barely. I want to do something other than say *fuck it*, but it’s useless. I can’t make Sunny trust me, I can’t change my job and the craziness that surrounds it, and I can’t make Waters less of an interfering asshole.

I head for the back of the trailer, then remember it’s Waters’ car, not mine, parked behind it. They’re all blocking me in, making an exit

impossible. I want to spin my tires and spray some gravel, maybe do a few fishtails and drive some of my anger out.

“We’ll all be out of your way in a minute.” Waters looks way too pleased right now.

“I’ll be inside, packing up my shit.”

“Stay the fuck out of my cottage,” he says.

I give him a WTF look. “Really, man?”

“Alex, you’re being a complete jerkoff,” Violet says. “You can go in the cottage, Buck.”

“Forget it. I’ll wait in the car until the jerkoff leaves.”

I climb into the rental and lock all the doors, glad the windows are tinted. I grab a ball cap from the backseat and pull it low, gritting my teeth when it hits the cut on my forehead. I check the rearview mirror. Randy’s holding the trailer door open. I assume he’s talking to Lily, or trying to. There’s so much shit going down, I can’t imagine it’s a very productive conversation.

Vi and Waters have a hand-flailing argument in front of the trailer. When Waters goes to hug her, she puts her hands on his chest, fending him off.

He pulls her close anyway, her hands trapped between them. When he tries to kiss her, she gives him her cheek. I don’t want to feel responsible for their argument, but I do. He takes her hands in his and clasps them behind his neck. Then he tilts her chin up. I’m an interloper on their private moment. His expression is earnest as he close-talks, their noses almost touching. Eventually Violet lets him kiss her, but she’s still stiff.

She shoves her hands in the pockets of her shorts while she waits for Waters to move his car. Randy steps back out of the trailer with a grim expression. He shakes his head as Bushman does a seventeen-point turn, clearly incapable of backing out. Waters jumps in the trailer before it takes off down the driveway.

Rain clouds roll in, blocking out the sun. My chest feels like someone punched a hole in it as the trailer disappears around the corner with my Sunshine.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

FIX IT IF YOU BROKE IT

I could get out of the car now, but I don't. I sit there, staring through the rearview mirror at the empty space where the trailer was a minute ago. I don't know if I wish I could take back the words or change the outcome of the whole situation.

Violet knocks on the window, looking stoic. Since the car isn't running, I can't roll down the window. I have to open the door instead.

"I'm sorry, Buck."

I tear my gaze away from the rearview mirror. Sunny isn't coming back. I know that. "What for?"

"This whole clusterfuck." She looks so sad. It's an echo of what's going on inside me. "Why don't you come out so I can take a look at your head?"

It takes a lot of effort to get out of the seat. My face hurts, and I'm dizzy. "I was trying to do a good thing with that fundraiser."

"We didn't know it was going to be like that," Randy says from behind her.

"Balls, you mind giving us a few minutes? Maybe you should get your bag together. Clean up all your used condoms and such." She doesn't even thrust once.

His head drops, and he rubs the back of his neck. "Sure thing, Vi." His shoes crunch on the gravel drive as he retreats. The screen door slams shut. A bird twitters somewhere above, and a squirrel makes that weird clicking sound. Fuck the happy sounds of nature.

Vi's angry. And emotional. She's on the verge of tears. I've witnessed a lot of girl crying lately. I don't like that I seem to be the cause of it so often. My apology is reflexive. "I'm sorry."

"Why? You don't have anything to be sorry for. Well, maybe you can be sorry for the poison ivy on Sunny's boobs, but even that wasn't your fault. It's not like you forced her to get naked in a forest at hard-on point."

"Uh, no. She took her top off all by herself."

Vi nods and keeps her hand close to my elbow as we walk over to the deck. I don't know what she thinks she's going to do if I drop. It's not like

she can catch me. I weigh twice as much as she does.

I sit on the edge of the deck and let her inspect my forehead. “You’re going to need a few stitches, and I think your nose is probably broken.”

“I figured as much.”

“I have to take you to the hospital.”

“I know.” I rest my elbows on my knees and press the heels of my hands against my temples, hoping to alleviate the throb. “This isn’t how I thought today would go.”

“That makes two of us.”

“Are you and Waters okay?”

Vi shrugs. “We’ll work it out. Eventually. But Boobgate is in full effect right now. I’m not happy about the way he dealt with this.”

I don’t ask what Boobgate is. I’m pretty sure I know. “The models weren’t topless, even though they looked like they were. We tried to get in and out of there as fast as we could, but it took way long, and now everything’s fucked.”

“It definitely didn’t look good, that’s for sure.”

“We would’ve left if we could.”

“I know that, Buck.” Vi pulls up an image on her phone of what looks like me being kissed by a topless model while another one rubs her boobs on Randy’s arm. “This is what everyone saw today. You left Sunny here with Lily, who’s still on the fence about you, and went to that fundraiser with Balls. Who, incidentally, can’t seem to keep a handle on his dick anywhere he goes.”

“Sunny warned Lily. I talked to her about it.”

“You should’ve warned Lily, and you should’ve told Balls to keep his hands off. Anyway, Balls and Lily are the least of your worries right now. They can sort out their own shit, or not. The fundraiser wasn’t mandatory. You could’ve skipped it. Your girlfriend being covered in poison ivy is a legitimate reason to miss a porno car wash.”

“It was supposed to be a good thing, and I wanted to talk to the guy who runs it. I didn’t know it was something I should avoid until I got there, and by that time it was too late. Sunny and I even talked about how there’d probably be pictures. I knew she wouldn’t be happy about them, but I didn’t think it’d go like this.”

Violet runs her hand over her face. “I hate the way this went down. Alex better keep Kale away from her. That dick-knob seems like the kind of

guy to take advantage of how vulnerable she is right now.”

I lift my head to see if she’s serious. “You don’t think she’ll get back with him, do you?”

“I don’t know, Buck. I sure hope not. I get that you’re upset about the situation, but everyone was heated, and I’m not sure anyone was making good decisions.” She kicks at the gravel. “Sunny wasn’t wrong about letting people calm down. It would’ve been better if you could have talked to her, but Alex wasn’t going to let that happen, and she knew it. She was trying not to make the problem worse.”

“Why the fuck does Waters’ opinion matter to her so damn much?” I hate how difficult he’s made things.

“He’s her brother. He sees you hanging out with these guys who don’t seem to care whose reputation gets dragged through the mud. Then he gets to the cottage and finds her covered in poison ivy while you’re at some fundraiser that looks like a setup for a porno.”

“He knows how things can be taken out of context.”

“He sure does. But you saw what I went through when Alex publicly denied being with me on national TV. You even broke his nose over it. Yet you still seem to be okay with Sunny looking like one of your bunnies while you go out and party it up.”

“But I wasn’t—”

“I know. You weren’t partying it up, but that’s what it looks like. I believe you because I know you better than that. Alex is going to take some work.”

“All I want to do is get the fundraiser stuff going. It just backfired on me.”

“It sure did.” Her phone beeps. She pulls it out. A picture of her and Waters—taken before they even started dating, with her tongue in his mouth—fills the screen. She shoves it back in her pocket.

“Aren’t you going to check that?”

“I will in a few minutes. He can wait.”

I’m not sure if me being a priority over Waters is a good thing. “Can I ask you something?”

Vi rests her cheek on her knee. “Sure.”

“Why’d you get back together with Alex after the relationship denial?”

“You mean aside from the fact that he has a giant cock and can make me come like a freight train on nitrous?”

“Don’t be an asshole right now, Vi.”

She sighs. “It’s complicated. I love him even though he hurt me. I wanted to hate him for saying we weren’t together in such a public venue, but I couldn’t. People make bad decisions, especially when they’re under a lot of pressure. Some are worse than others. He knows he fucked up hardcore, and I didn’t sugar-coat how badly. I also don’t pretend to be over it.”

“You mean still?”

“I have moments of insecurity. He’s good about it.” She spins her engagement ring around so the diamond is facing her palm. “What I have with Alex, it’s all-consuming when I’m with him, and when I’m not. And it’s rare. It’s not perfect, but we work, and that makes it worth fighting for.”

“I thought maybe I’d have that with Sunny. I guess not.” I saw how hard it was on Vi when Waters screwed her over. She bawled her eyes out over that asshole for weeks. And then just like that, they were back together. I’m angry at Sunny for not having faith in me, and for letting other people affect her decisions. But I still hope she doesn’t get back with Patchy McBushman Tiny Dick.

“You had an argument, Miller. That doesn’t mean it’s over.”

“I’m pretty sure I broke up with her.”

“It doesn’t have to be the end. I’m mad at Alex right now for being an asshole to you. I won’t be mad at him forever, but I’m going to let it ruminate for a while. It’s why he’s going back to Guelph with Sunny, and I’m here with you.”

“We fucked up a vacation for you, didn’t we?”

“Alex fucked it up by overreacting. I swear he could have a second career on the stage if he wanted. We can come back up once we get things sorted out. Sunny was willing to talk. I’m sure she still is. I think what it comes down to is deciding whether she’s worth the effort. Relationships take a lot of energy. I get that you want her to trust you, but you have to give her some time. One conversation about it isn’t a magic recipe for perfection. Loving someone is a lot of work, Buck.”

“Maybe I’m no good at relationships.” I don’t want to be doomed to a life of bunnies and no substance. They’re not what I want. I want someone consistent. But caring that much about someone gives them a lot of power, and that makes me nervous. Power hurts people. Then I admit the thing

that's been gnawing at me ever since I went to visit Sunny in Guelph and we finally sealed the deal: "I think I might have fallen in love with her."

"Then you need to talk to her, Buck."

"I need some time to think first." I wipe away a trail of blood from the bridge of my nose. "I wish there was a drive thru for relationship problem-solving."

Vi laughs, but it's humorless. "Don't we all." She stands up and wipes the dirt off the back of her shorts. "Come on. Let's see how Balls is doing. Then we need to get you to the hospital. You probably have a concussion, and I won't be able to forgive Alex if anything happens to you. Then my whole future's fucked, and I'll have the moops for the next year, and I'll probably start dating Balls because I'll have to break off the engagement."

I know she means it as a joke, or that's how she wants me to take it, but there's an undercurrent of worry she's trying to hide.

Her phone buzzes again. It's the song about peacocks. "I have to get this."

She wanders out of earshot, but I don't need to hear the conversation to read her body language. She runs a hand through her hair, stunted by her ponytail. Then she stares up at the sky.

Violet's jaw is hard; her eyes glitter. I know this face. She's holding back tears. She lifts her hand as the sun peaks through the clouds and watches the diamond catch the sun, sending prisms of light dancing over her face. Then she spins the diamond to face her palm and closes her fingers around it. She brings her closed fist to her mouth.

Maybe it's better if I leave things with Sunny alone, even if it hurts more than a puck to the balls after being bitten by a damn spider. I don't know if I ever want to love someone as much as Vi loves Waters. It seems to cause an awful lot of pain.

Apparently Lily wasn't too happy about the pictures of Randy with the models at the fundraiser. All of his clothes have *ASSHOLE* scrawled across them in various colors of permanent marker. On the front of his boxers is the warning: *SMALL DICK INSIDE*. It'd be funny if it happened to someone else.

Usually he and Lance would laugh off something like this. Not this time. Randy looks legit sick over it, and not in an I-have-a-new-stalker way. It's in a this-is-fucked-up way instead. He throws the last of his ruined clothes into his bag and zips it up.

"We should get you to the hospital; that needs stitches." He points to my forehead.

"Vi's gonna take me."

"I can follow in the rental." He picks up a note off the nightstand, flips it open and scans it, then shoves it in his pocket.

Vi appears in the doorway. "That's okay. It might take a while. You can head back to Toronto if you want and I'll bring Buck back with me."

"Won't it be outta your way if you have to take me to the airport?" I ask.

"It's fine. I don't mind."

My head hurts too much to argue, so I let Randy deal with the rental vehicle. I have to wonder if he's going to make a stop in Guelph. If that's the case, he should probably stop at a sports store and grab a cup, just in case.

Violet runs back into the cottage once the car is loaded to grab something she forgot. She comes back holding the orange Play-Doh sculpture with the superhero cape. She hugs it, then tucks it safely into the backseat with a sweatshirt wrapped around it.

"Do you wanna explain that?"

She pats the head. "It's the Super MC. It's an homage."

I shouldn't ask the next question. I'm almost positive I don't want the answer. "An homage to what?"

"The near-fatal strangling of Alex's MC when I made it into a superhero. It's a long story. I promise you don't want to hear it, but someone might tell it at our wedding—if we end up having a wedding. I hope I can convince him to elope."

I was right. I didn't need to know any of that.

We find our way to a hospital in Bracebridge. It's small compared to the ones in Chicago, but the people are nice, as is typical in Canada. Someone recognizes my name, and Violet knows all the right things to say, so they

see me almost right away. Head injuries always take precedence. I'm concussed, but only mildly. My nose is broken, and the gash on my forehead takes six stitches to close. Up until today, I'd managed to get by without breaking any parts of my face since I got my teeth knocked out in high school. Figures it'd be Waters who changed that.

I get the usual spiel about having someone wake me up every couple of hours. A doctor sets my nose and bandages it. The black eyes haven't appeared yet, but I'm sure they're coming. While I wait for someone to give me the requisite painkillers and sign off for me to leave, I check my messages. I have emails from Amber that, had I checked them yesterday, would have given me the information I needed about the fundraiser and why it might not be the best idea. I wish I'd read them sooner. Or checked my voice mail, since I missed a call from her as well. Sometimes I feel as dumb as people assume I am.

I've got nothing from Sunny. I hope Bushman isn't consoling her right now. I want to message her, but at the same time I don't. I'm conflicted, and it sucks.

From the hospital we drive toward Toronto. The canvas of pale blue dotted with soft white turns pink at the edges as the sun starts to sink behind the tall trees lining the highway. It's already late; by the time we get to Toronto it'll be dark. I feel bad that Vi has to drive. I'm on pain meds, so I'm not safe behind the wheel.

"I'mma call the airline and see if I can get a flight out tonight."

"Why don't you come back to Guelph with me?"

"I don't see the point. It's not gonna change anything. Sunny's still not gonna trust me, and Waters and Lily are still gonna hate me."

"Lily doesn't hate you."

"Randy said the same thing. I have a hard time believing it, though."

"Even she was trying to get Alex to calm down. Randy's a whole different story. I don't know what happened with those two, but man, is she scorned. You're also lucky I'm the one who went through your bedroom, not Alex. Do you and Sunny even know what a garbage can is?"

"Why were you in Sunny's bedroom?"

"Alex wanted me to check her poison ivy. Poor thing. Her boobs look bad." Vi grabs her own boob as if she's suffering sympathy pains. "Anyway, I don't want Alex to be a prison wife. If he'd found those

condoms after seeing the pictures at the fundraiser, you'd have a lot more than a broken nose."

I want to mention the lack of fairness, considering what I walked in on with Vi and Waters, but I get that this is a different situation, and my fuck-ups outnumber his.

When we get close to Toronto, I insist she take me to the airport.

"You're sure you want to do that? Maybe you should get a hotel room for the night and sleep on it."

"I have things I need to deal with when I get home."

"Are you still going through with that fundraiser?"

"I don't know. Maybe." I think about that Michael kid and how much harder his life is than mine. "Yeah. I'm still gonna do it."

"Good. It's about time you did something that shows people how great your heart is."

"I hate the interviews."

"You need to get over that."

"I have to memorize everything. You have no idea what it's like to be dyslexic."

"Nope. I sure don't. I do know what it's like to be awkward."

"That's not even remotely the same. Speeches were the worst in middle school."

"Speeches are your beef? You think it was any easier to be in the enriched math classes as a girl? Fuck that. It sucked. Like I wasn't nerdy enough without that label slapped on me. None of those guys even bathed regularly. And then there was you, needing 'help'." She makes air quotes. "When really you were screwing everything with a pulse, getting everyone to do your bidding because you were King Jock of Turd Hill. Being your stepsister was a pain in my damn ass in high school. But I got over it. So should you."

"Yeah, but you're super smart and shit's easy for you."

"Easy? Because I'm good at math? You do realize I have to work more than sixty hours a week to make less than two percent of your yearly salary, right?"

"Less than two percent?"

"Plus bonuses, but yeah."

"Wow."

“It’s cool. I’m marrying a millionaire who likes to buy me ridiculously expensive things. I’m sure I can handle my crappy salary, all considering. This isn’t about me, though. I get that you work hard, too, but come on! You’ve got an incredible skill set that allows you to get around your perceived deficiency, which, if you decided to be more vocal about it, might actually win you some serious points.”

“No one wants to hear about my deficiencies.”

“Are you kidding? People always want to hear about other people’s challenges. It makes them feel like anything is possible. And it makes some people feel better about themselves because they’re assholes.

“If you wanted, you could go into schools and talk about how hard it was for you and how you struggled to pass your classes, but that you persevered. I mean, obviously you don’t want to tell them you fucked all your tutors, and your poor stepsister had to listen to loud music in the next bedroom while it all went down. But you can give millions of kids false hope, and a few awesome kids the inspiration they need to make it to the next level.”

I ignore the part about screwing all my tutors. I’m not going there with her right now. “I don’t know, Vi. That’s like . . . personal.”

“Personal? Are you kidding? This coming from a man who lets his friends take pictures of his balls and post them on the Internet?”

“I didn’t *let* him do that. And anyway it was to figure out what kind of spider bit me. No one was supposed to know they were my balls.”

“And that makes it so much better.” She twists her ring around her finger. “I don’t get why being classified as a manwhore is so appealing—especially when being the guy who’s overcome challenges and volunteers at camps and even helps kids afford them is so much less offensive.”

“I’m not trying to be a manwhore. I was trying to be Sunny’s boyfriend, and look how that turned out. I spent my teen years dealing with all the shit that came with being the dumb kid; I’m not interested in going back to that.”

“Who says you have to? Come on, Buck. Life is tough. Teenage years suck balls—cheesy ones that haven’t been washed in a week. You make five million dollars a year. You’re not dumb. Relationship-inept maybe, but definitely not dumb. If you want to change how things are going, you need to do something selflessly selfish.”

“That doesn’t even make sense.”

“Let me explain. Did you know you’re mentioned in an article recently that has nothing to do with who you’ve boned?”

“The only person I’ve boned lately is Sunny. I mean, had sex with. I’m not boning Sunny. That’s not what you do with someone you care about.”

“Sometimes all you need is a good boning, even with the person you love. Anyway, I’m not talking about media perception of who you’re boning. I’m talking about that camp you went to. You did an interview, and it was awesome. People are already falling in love with you.

“Get more positive attention. Stop going to the bars, stop going to Lance’s for parties, and stop getting yourself into more trouble. Find out what’s going to be happening at places before you show up. Regardless of what goes down between you and Sunny, this thing you want to do is good. It’s the version of you everyone should get to see.”

Funny how losing someone important is the thing that finally makes me decide to step outside my comfort zone. Now I wish I would’ve done it sooner.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

MAKING CH-CH-CHANGES

Despite her repeated attempts to get me to stay in Toronto for the night, Vi drops me at the airport.

“You gonna be all right to drive to Guelph from here?” I ask her. It’s almost ten. It’s been a long day.

“I’m good. I’ll stop at a Timmy’s and get a coffee.”

I grab my bags from the trunk. “Thanks for being here for me today.”

Vi wraps her arms around my waist and gives me a hug. “What are sisters for?”

I drop the bags and return it. We might not be related for real, but we’re tight like siblings should be.

“Message me when you get to Guelph so I don’t worry, okay?”

“Okay. And you do the same when you get back to Chicago.”

I wait until she’s in the car and on the road before I go into the airport. I get a seat on a flight that leaves in less than two hours. I upgrade so I can hang out in the VIP lounge and maybe catch a nap.

Vi messages me right after I get through security to let me know she’s made it to the Waters’ house. I don’t ask about Sunny, even though I want to. I do ask how things are with Waters and whether I need to break his nose again for her. I get a voice memo telling me she’ll be the one breaking things if it comes to that. She sounds sad. I don’t like it, but it’s not my relationship to manage, and Violet knows how to deal with Waters better than me.

I set an alarm so I don’t miss my flight and stretch out across one of the couches. Holding my phone to my chest, I close my eyes. It feels like I’m only out for a few minutes when vibrating wakes me. It takes me a while to clue in that it’s a call, not my alarm. Prying my eyes open, I hold it up and wait for it to come into focus.

Sunny’s face flashes across the screen, her bright smile darkening my mood. I let it go to voice mail. I’m not capable of dealing right now. Regardless, I wait to see if she’s going to leave me a message. Less than a minute later, my phone chimes with a new voice mail.

I key in my code and let my finger hover over the play button. Eventually I give in and listen. Sunny’s voice is a warm hug and a knife in

the chest.

“Hi, Miller. I guess you’re not answering your phone right now. Or maybe you’re not answering for me.” Her voice cracks. “I know I shouldn’t have left with Alex today, but I didn’t want you two to fight. And with Kale and Benji being there, I worried things would get way out of hand, and Lily was upset about . . . well, everything. Violet got here a while ago. She said Alex broke your nose, and I gave you stitches.” She hiccups. “I guess maybe I wasn’t ready for this relationship. I’m sorry I couldn’t trust you . . . never mind. Can you just call me?”

Every time I replay it I’m dragged farther down into emotional sludge. It doesn’t sound like she wants to get back together. It sounds like she’s done.

The flight home sucks. Some over-processed chick has the seat beside me in first class. She wants to talk. It’s almost midnight; all I want to do is get my ass home and wallow. I’ve never been a wallower before, but it seems appropriate, considering.

Once I’m back in Chicago, I spend the next two days playing video games and eating meat-lovers pizza and suicide wings while drinking soda. I avoid Lance and Randy when they call. I don’t hear from Sunny again, and I don’t return her call. What is there to say? I do, however, hear from Violet. She’s damn well relentless with the phone calls and messages and emails.

On day three of my undetermined wallowing period, my door buzzer goes off during an epically shitty video game session. I’m not expecting anyone.

I get up off the couch and shuffle to the intercom. “Yeah?”

“Buck?”

“Dad?” *What the fuck?* “I thought you and Skye were away.”

“We got back last night.”

“Oh. How was the trip?”

“Good. You wanna let me in, Son?”

“I’m here too!” That’s Skye, my stepmom. “The trip was better than good, but I can’t share the details without embarrassing Sidney!”

“Don’t start, Mom. I’m here, too, Buck,” Violet says. “Open the door.”

“Sure. Okay.” I hit the buzzer and wait for the sound of the door opening before I release it. Violet has to be the reason for the family visit. I glance around my condo. It’s amazing the mess I can make in two days. I don’t even have the energy to care.

Also, I’m naked, since that’s how I roll when I’m alone and wallowing, or even not wallowing. Priority one is putting on clothes.

I find a cleanish pair of shorts and a shirt on the floor. There’s a knock a minute later. I open the door. Skye stands there with her arms wide. Then her smile freezes, along with the rest of her. My dad gives me the raised-eyebrow onceover.

Vi’s holding a tray of fast-food ice cream sundaes. Her nose crinkles. “Oh. Wow. Breakup does not look good on you.”

I ignore her. I’m not that bad, I don’t think. “Hey, family. Come on in. The place is a mess.” I step aside and gesture to my living room. The coffee table is covered in pizza boxes and Styrofoam containers of wing bones. Empty soda cans litter the floor.

“Oh, Buck!” Skye unfreezes and hugs me. She and Vi are almost exactly the same, from the way they look to the way they act, except Skye’s in her forties rather than her twenties. “I’m so sorry about you and Sunny.”

I pat her on the back. “Yeah, me, too.”

After she lets me go, my dad gives me a back pat. “You could’ve called. Even if I’m out of the country, I’m always here.”

“Yeah, I know. Things were cool until a couple of days ago. I wanted some time to myself.” My dad and I are close, but more in a hockey-talk way than deep feelings.

“Please tell me you didn’t eat all of this on your own.” Vi motions to the coffee table. “Never mind. Based on the smell in this place, I’m thinking yes. First things first: you need a shower. You smell like an actual yeti, if yetis were real. Then we’re staging an intervention.”

“An intervention?” I run my hand through my hair. It feels greasy.

“Yeah. You’ve had two full days of moping. That’s all you get.”

“Didn’t you mope for weeks after you and Waters broke up?”

“He has a first name, Buck. It’s Alex. And yes, I did. But I’m a girl. We get way more moping time than guys.” She searches through my kitchen until she finds a huge black garbage bag. “You.” She points at me. “Go shower. We’ll clean this up.”

“How are you even here right now? Don’t you have to work?”

“I have an emergency business meeting with a client. Go shower.”

I’d argue, but I’m pretty ripe.

Twenty minutes later I’m clean, but still unshaven, in clothes that don’t smell like stale food, and my living room doesn’t look like a pizza bomb went off anymore. All my windows are open, and Vi’s made coffee.

“Let’s sit on the balcony.”

My dad and Skye humor me by telling me about their cruise. I know it’s not what they’re here for. They don’t make me talk about Sunny, which is good. After a while, Skye and Vi decide I need groceries since all I have in the fridge is soda and a jug of milk that’s gone off, so they leave me and my dad alone.

“You and Alex gonna be able to manage yourselves on the ice when the season starts?” he asks.

I shrug. “I sure hope so. He threatened to go to the manager and have me traded if I fucked Sunny over.”

“Well, you didn’t, so there’s no reason for him to.”

“I don’t know that he sees it the same way you do.”

“Vi’s talked to him, and so have I.”

“When did you do that? And why would you do that?”

“This morning, after Vi came over, before we came here.” He laces his hands behind his head. “He’s going to be part of this family. And I did it because when my kids are unhappy, so is my wife, and none of that works for me.”

“What did you say to him?”

“That I get that he’s worried about Sunny, but punching you out over it isn’t going to solve any problems, or make his relationship with Violet any easier. She’s struggling with this, although she won’t say it out loud. She already ate a damn sundae at our place and killed the bathroom.”

“Wow. She must be worried then. Are things okay between the two of them?” Her messages over the last two days seemed upbeat, but she hasn’t mentioned Waters at all, or Sunny.

“She talks to Skye more than me, but she’s stressed. She wants things to be okay with you and Alex. You know how she is.” He stares out at the skyline. “Sometimes I feel like I didn’t do the best job preparing you for relationships.”

“Hockey was my girlfriend.”

My dad laughs. “You and me both. I know Skye’s been good to you, but before that . . .”

“We’re good, Dad. You did a great job. Look at this.” I motion to the skyline. From my balcony I can see the city and waterfront in the distance. It’s a great location—close to the buzz, but not in it. “My life is good.”

“It’s nice to have someone to share it with, though, Miller.”

“Maybe one day.” I swirl the dregs of my coffee. “Did you get my email about the fundraiser I wanna plan?”

“I did. That kid really made an impression, huh?”

“He’s an excellent player.”

“I know. There was some camp footage a couple of days back. The interview was a smart move.”

“Amber and Vi think so, and I guess if I wanna get moving on other projects, I need positive publicity.”

My dad smiles and nods. “I’ve already started talking to some of the coaches for the minors to see if they have players who might want to be involved. Whatever you need, I’m here for you—and not just for business stuff, either.”

“I know, Dad. It’s just easier for me to focus on the fundraiser right now.”

He doesn’t push it, which is one of the great things about my dad. He’ll offer his help, but he won’t force it on me. We spend the next hour compiling a list of contacts and players we think will want to be involved in the exhibition game. If I want this to happen, I need to work fast so we can set it all up before training starts in a little over a month. It’ll be a lot of work, but I need something to fill my time, so I’m ready.

Over the next week or so Violet stops by often to help me work on setting up the fundraiser. She maintains that things are okay with Alex, and I trust her to tell me if it’s not. Also, she’s a seriously sucky liar.

“Soooo . . . I was talking to Daisy yesterday,” she says, faux casually on Wednesday.

I don’t look away from my laptop screen. “Oh, yeah?” I don’t want to care about what’s going on with Sunny, but I do. I can’t stop thinking about her. I’m obsessive about visiting her social media feeds. The only thing

she's posted is an inspirational quote about karma. I haven't called her back, and now that it's been more than a week, I don't even know what I'd say.

"She says Sunny's still moping."

"You said that's normal for girls."

"She won't even do spa days with Daisy when she has time off. And she's not eating."

"None of that sounds good." Since the family intervention, I've been going to the gym daily, and I'm back on my preseason diet. It means eating nothing I enjoy and being exhausted at the end of every day. But that makes it easier to sleep. It also means I'm completely unavailable to go out at night with Lance and the other guys. I'm not drinking, so the bars aren't fun. I've also deleted all the honeys on my contact list. Regardless of whether Sunny and I get back together, I'm not going back to that.

"It isn't good for the people who have to live with her every day, but for you it is," Vi explains. "The stages of relationship mourning are complex for women. We have phases. The moping part means she's not happy about the choice she made. No spa days means she's punishing herself for not talking things out—or whatever she needs to punish herself for. The not eating is something some girls do when they're sad."

"You don't not eat." When Vi and Waters broke up earlier this year, she was all over the dairy treats, even though she can't actually tolerate them.

Vi flips her ponytail over her shoulder. "That's where the complex part comes in. Not all girls stop eating. Some of us do the opposite. Like me. I eat ice cream because it tastes good and it makes me feel like crap on the inside. It gives me the moops, so it's like punishment, and it ensures I won't gain the post-breakup ten pounds because it all comes out the other end anyway."

"That's seriously messed up, Vi."

"Maybe, but it serves its purpose."

"You were eating ice cream earlier this week."

"I was sympathy eating. Sometimes I pick fights with Alex so I have an excuse to eat dairy. Don't you ever tell him that, or I'll wax a spot on the top of your head so you look like you're losing your hair." She makes a circle over her skull.

She's always threatening to wax and/or shave parts of my body. She has yet to actually follow through, so I'm not worried. "Why would you pick a fight with him?"

“Not like a real fight. Just, like, you know, leaving the dishes out of the dishwasher, or the cap off the toothpaste, or forgetting to buy new lube so we can’t have marathon sex—that kind of thing.”

I give her the eye. “Sometimes it’s like you’ve been my sister my entire life, and then you have to go and overshare and ruin it all.”

“Isn’t that what makes our relationship awesome? Can you imagine if you’d had a crush on me when our parents first got married? That would’ve been wicked messed, eh? We’d probably have our own reality TV show.”

I don’t respond. I have nothing to say to this. Once I made a passing remark that she took the wrong way. She was hammered off of three light beers. She took it out of context and hasn’t ever let it go.

“So if things don’t work out with Alex and me, and you and Sunny don’t get back together, and your career takes a dump, and we need to make some money because you spend all yours on booze and hookers, we should totally pitch that to a TV station. They’d pick it up in a hot herpes minute.”

“Hookers are unnecessary. I’ve never had to pay for sex. If things don’t work out with Alex, I’ll set you up with Randy.”

I grin as her face scrunches up. She sets her coffee on the table, lifts the laptop from her knees and makes her standard thrusting motion. “It would never work. I can’t control the air hump. It’s embarrassing enough on the occasions when I see him now.” She settles back in her chair cross-legged and repositions her laptop. “In other, more exciting and important news—sit your ass down for this—”

“I’m already sitting.”

“Fuck you for ruining my intro.” She pretends to wind up her middle finger like a jack-in-the-box. “Apparently, Mr. My Balls Get Fondled By the World has been trying to contact Lily since your orgy weekend at the cottage.”

“There was no orgy.”

“That was a test. Good to know. But anyway, your ballsy friend tried to see Lily after the car wash fiasco. It didn’t work, but get this, she hasn’t gotten back together with that douchey guy, Benji. I met him, by the way. He’s a huge dickface. She could do way better. She’s actually nice.”

Following a conversation with Violet is like trying to watch a professional ping-pong tournament. “To you maybe.”

This is news about Randy trying to see Lily. He’s only mentioned her once since we’ve been back in Chicago. He’s been doing the gym with me

the past few days, and he's come back to my place instead of going to Lance's, too. I thought it was a moral support thing, like he was trying to make it easier for me to cut the bar scene. Maybe his motivation is different than I assumed.

"Have you called Sunny yet?"

"No." I go back to staring at the screen. She asks this every time I see her.

"Why not? You're obviously miserable without her, and she's miserable without you."

"I don't know. What am I supposed to say?"

"Honestly, Miller . . ." She makes another one of her faces. "I can't do it. I can't call you Miller. It has to be Buck. I keep trying it on, but it's like a cheap pair of underwear. It doesn't fit right. I can't get comfortable."

"No one said you had to call me Miller."

"Yeah, but Sunny calls you Miller and so does Randy. I feel bad that I can't make it work for me."

"Don't. Buck is a multipurpose nickname. If you want to feel bad about nicknames, stop calling me yeti."

"If you had dark hair, you'd look like a Sasquatch."

"I would not. I keep everything trimmed all nice-nice. Except my balls. Those are bare, like two squishy, smooth, flesh-colored plums."

She makes a sound like she's coughing up a hairball. "Thanks, asshole. I liked plums up until now. If you stopped trimming for three weeks, you'd look like one of those wolf people. If we get that reality TV show going, we could dye it all to prove I'm right, but I think we should go purple so you look like a giant wine-dipped yeti."

I shake my head and fight a chuckle. As ridiculous as Vi's tangents can be, they're entertaining, and this one has lifted my crap mood marginally. Relationship limbo sucks. Probably because I was, and still am, way more invested in Sunny than I've ever been in a bunny, and I'm not drinking or boning my way out of my funk.

"Are you going to stop with the insults and the reality TV show dream so we can talk about real, actual, important things, like this fundraiser? How are we on the finances front?" I pull up the spreadsheet with the figures and itemized lists of things we need to pull this off. If things go well, I'll have a solid chunk of funds to donate to Michael's family.

After I stopped moping, I looked into their situation. It isn't very good. Neither parent has benefits, so they're out of pocket for all the medication. Applications for support can take months. It also looks like they'll have to pull Michael out of hockey because they can't afford it. Dealing with cancer as a kid is bad enough without losing one of the things that makes life fun.

"Sidney and I have contacted a bunch of people, and we've already secured a few significant donations," Vi reports. "And you've contacted the porno car wash guy, right?"

"Yup. Gene's all over donating as long as he can get center-ice seats."

"Easy enough." Vi types frantically on her laptop. "Overhead is covered, apart from a few thousand dollars, so almost everything beyond that will go to Michael's family. So far it's looking good. I have a list of volunteers for the day of, and Sidney's secured an arena, vendors, and security close to Michael so he won't have to travel. We can start promoting ticket sales as soon as the teams are finalized."

"Awesome." I'm amazed at the number of people required to run this event and how quickly we've been able to pull it together. My donation to the car wash fundraiser and my involvement in the camp have gone a long way in helping build positive buzz and to making this whole thing easier. Gene has been a great about sharing information and strategies, and he's given me some new contacts.

"I ordered the T-shirts," she adds.

"Nice. Wait. What? Why would you do that? I haven't made a decision about the name yet."

"I made it for you." She taps the space bar on the computer, pretending to do something so she doesn't have to look at me.

"I wish you hadn't done that. Now I'm going to have to look at hundreds of people wearing shirts with Project Sunshine in huge yellow letters."

"They're great shirts."

"Yeah, but—"

"Yeah, but nothing. Sunny needs to see for herself what she let go. Besides, it's too late to cancel the order for the shirts or the jerseys." She gives me a big, jerky grin. "Also, Alex is going to the gym this afternoon."

"So?"

"You still need a few more players, right? He's been asking about it, but it's not up to me if he can play or not. You might want to clear the air

before the season starts so you don't murder each other on the ice."

"We've punched each other out; we should be even." I'd like to punch him again, but I won't. "I guess it might be a good idea since you're gonna marry him and all, huh? I'm gonna have to deal with him no matter what."

Vi sniffs and wipes away a fake tear. "Look at you, growing up, being the man. I'm so proud."

"Suck it."

"Alex was unreasonable. We're mostly okay, but I'm still not happy with how he managed himself. I've been doing a lot of withholding. It hasn't been easy, but I think he's starting to get it."

"Withholding?"

She gestures to herself. "He gets none of this right now. So I'm responsible for taking care of my own orgasms. It's seriously fucking inconvenient for me, but I'm willing to take a stand for you, so remember that."

I try to speak, but there aren't any words to express the level of overshare or my gratitude.

Violet waves a hand around. "Alex hasn't always done the right thing when it comes to Sunny, and he knows that, even if he won't ever admit it to you. He also knows how miserable she is right now, and he's worried. At the end of the day, he wants her to be happy."

He can't be all bad if Vi's willing to spend the rest of her life with him.

"I'll talk to him when I see him." I don't want to get into another discussion about calling Sunny, so I change the topic. "How're the wedding plans coming?"

Every time I bring this up, Vi has a mini freak-out. It's fun to watch.

Her eye twitches, and she rubs her palms on her legs. "Ugh. Seriously. We haven't been engaged that long. And with all this bullshit going on . . . you'd think we were in a state of emergency or something. Daisy and my mom are psycho about it. They have a running list of, like, two hundred people, and that's just for the engagement party. I keep telling Alex we need to elope. I can't deal with a five-hundred-person wedding. We're not even Italian. It's craziness.

"I don't get the whole need to be a princess for a day. I don't want to be a princess. I want to be Violet Waters so I have a princessy, romantic name. The rest of it is total crap meant to propagate false expectations for marriage."

“Wow. Way to sell it, Vi.”

“Screw you, Buck. You just wait. Your day will come, and when it does I’ll laugh it up like you are. Talking about this is giving me hives.”

At first I think she’s being dramatic, but then I see irregular red dots appear on her arms.

“Does Waters know you’re this stressed out?”

“Say one word and I’ll—”

“Shave my balls. I know.”

“I was gonna say armpits, but you had to go for the genitalia, didn’t you?”

“Shouldn’t you be excited and not stressed? Don’t girls love this shit.”

Violet scratches the angry red welts expanding on her arm and ignores my questions.

The sound of the patio door opening in the condo next door puts me on alert. A new chick moved in while I was away. I haven’t officially met her, but we’ve chatted, and I’ve met her yappy dog’s nose through the tennis-ball-sized drainage hole where my privacy wall meets hers. The patter of nails on the tile follows, and his little brown nose appears in the hole, then it disappears and his paw shows up. He whines, aware he can’t get to me.

“Doodle! Stop being a pest!” The woman next door snaps her fingers and calls out, “Hi, neighbor!”

“Morning.” I call back.

Vi whispers, “Doodle? She named her dog after a penis?”

I shake my head and motion for us to go inside. This lady can be chatty for someone I’ve never seen, and for some reason her voice is familiar. We sneak back inside and finish planning the next phase of Project Sunshine. In two days I fly to Toronto to see Michael. We have a promo video to make—it’s been scheduled so it’s before his chemo treatment. Then I’m hanging around for that to keep him company.

Vi leaves before lunch, and I head to the gym. I staunchly avoid the coed section and the smattering of bunnies hanging around looking to chat. I also note that Randy avoids the bunnies, which is atypical for him. After two hours of hardcore training, I hit the showers.

Waters is already in there with his back to me. This is the first time I’ve seen him since he broke my nose. Here’s hoping he’s going to be civil about it. I leave a shower between us and turn on the spray, adjusting it until it’s hot enough to relax my tight muscles.

“Waters.”

“Butterson.” He glances my way briefly and motions to my face. “Looks like you’re healing up good.”

“Yup.” Most of the bruising has faded to that ugly yellow-green, and I’m done with the bandage. The stitches came out a couple of days ago.

“That’s good.”

“Yup.” I love awkward, naked conversations.

“Violet stopped by your place this morning.”

“Yup. We had a breakfast meeting. Business stuff.”

“She’s been at your place a lot.”

“We’re working on a project.”

“Yeah, I know.” He rubs a bar of soap over his almost hair-free chest. “How’s that going, anyway?”

“It’s good. I think it will be successful.” Now would be a good time to get him involved. Except he beats me to it.

“You know, if you need extra players, I’d be happy to join.”

“Sure. Yeah.” I cut the water. “That’d be cool. There’s a couple spaces left. Vi’ll fill you in on the details.”

“Great. Good. I think what you’re doing is commendable.”

“Thanks.”

There’s an awkward pause and then he asks, “Vi seem all right to you?”

“She’s been fine with me. Why? Is something going on?”

“Skye and my mom want to plan an engagement party. I’m not sure Vi’s too thrilled about it.”

“She mentioned that.”

That gets his attention. He stops washing his hair to focus on me. “She say something?”

“You know how she is about being the center of attention. You can always tell how stressed Vi is by how much ice cream she eats.”

“Two nights ago she ate a whole pint of Ben and Jerry’s and had to sleep on the bathroom floor.” He’s not laughing about it the way I usually do.

I consider the conversation Vi and I had about ice cream being punishment. I can’t imagine why she would feel the need to punish herself over being stressed about their engagement party. “Sometimes I replace the ice cream with frozen yogurt. The aftermath isn’t as bad. If you can get her

to eat sorbet instead, you'll avoid the whole issue." This is a weird-ass conversation to be having in the shower.

"Thanks for the tip. Did she say anything else to you?"

He's legit worried about her. I don't mind putting him on the edge. "What Vi and I talk about is in confidence. I've already said more than I should." I grab my towel.

Waters is quick about rinsing off as I collect my shampoo and soap. "Come on, Butterson."

"Just talk to her. I'm sure she'll tell you what's what." Both Waters and I know that's not true. Vi can sit on a problem for weeks before she finally says something about it. It's her personality. She's a marinater.

"I know you two are close. If you know something important, it'd be great if you told me, Miller."

I don't think Waters has ever used anything apart from my last name to address me. I wrap the towel around my waist and face him. This is the opportunity I've been looking for. It's perfect. He's stressed over Violet's stress. I'm happy about that. It means he cares.

"Vi left my place today with hives because I asked her about the wedding. They popped up out of nowhere. She's stressed. If I were you, I'd take good care of her right now. Make sure she's okay with what's going on. You don't want to end up swimming in shits creek with me. I remember what you were like the last time she dumped your ass. It wasn't pretty."

I expect some asshole reply, because that's usually what I get, but I'm met with silence. I turn to walk away.

"Miller."

"What?"

"Do you think she's okay? I mean after this shit—" He motions between us. "Should I . . ."

"Be worried?" I finish for him. "Yeah, man. She may not be my blood, but she's my family, and me and Vi, we're tight. Right now you're fucking things up."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

PUCK WATERS AND HIS TIMING

Late the next night I get a phone call from a number I don't recognize. I'm apprehensive about answering. If it's a bunny, I don't want to deal—I've had more calls than usual since I got home, or maybe I'm noticing them more now that Sunny and I aren't talking every day. It's late for a business call. Still, I don't want to miss something important. I've been fielding a lot of calls for Project Sunshine this week.

"Hello?"

"Hi, is this Miller?"

The female voice is familiar, and she doesn't call me Buck, so it can't be a bunny. "Yup. Who's this?"

"It's Lily."

"Oh. Hey." I have a million thoughts, most of them of the *WTF* variety. "Is Sunny okay? Did something happen?"

"She's okay. Well, mostly."

"What do you mean *mostly*?" I'm already throwing off the covers.

"Nothing bad has happened, not apart from you breaking up with her."

That sounds like a dig. I lay back against the pillows, the kick in my chest settling. "If she's okay, what's going on?"

I get silence for so long I think she's hung up. Finally she clears her throat. "I wanted to apologize."

Lily doesn't seem like the type to do the apology thing. Not without some difficulty, anyway. Maybe she's different with people she likes more.

"For what?" I ask.

"I was wrong about you. I feel bad about the way I've treated you. I just—I didn't want Sunny to get hurt, and I made some assumptions I shouldn't have."

"Oh. Well, thanks, I guess . . . is that the only reason you called?"

"Yes. No." She clears her throat. "So . . . uh . . . I don't know if you know this, but my cousin was at Camp Beaver Woods when you were there."

"Randy mentioned something about that."

She makes a weird sound. "Yeah. I guess he would tell you, eh? Uh . . . anyway, my cousin, Brett, couldn't say enough nice things about you. He

and Michael have stayed in touch through Facebook and stuff. What you're doing for him is great."

I'm still processing the apology, so this ups the shock level by a million. Publicity for the game went into full swing this morning. Tomorrow we're filming a promo video. "It's not a big deal."

"Yes, it is. You're a really good person. I'm sorry I didn't give you a fair shot." Her voice drops and she mutters, "She's gonna kill me for doing this. Sunny's a mess over you. Like, really a mess. I've never seen her so, so . . . sad." She speeds up as she talks. "And I know some of it is my fault. I kept telling her you weren't any good for her."

"Maybe you're right." It's something I've been thinking about and the reason I still haven't called Sunny back.

"I'm not right. I judged you before I knew you. If you still want to be with her, you should give her another chance."

"Yeah. I don't know about that."

"You haven't even called her back. She's in limbo right now."

"Like she left me in limbo while you guys were away on your camping trip?"

"That wasn't intentional. She didn't have reception. She tried to call you every day, but her phone wouldn't work. Look, it's obvious you care about her or you wouldn't be putting together a fundraiser with her name on it. She's never been like this over anyone else before. That has to mean something."

"It can mean something and still not work out."

I don't know if it's as simple as I'd like it to be. Even if we get back together, I'm going to be gone half the year, and we don't live in the same country. I can do all these things to reassure her we'll be great, but eventually the distance is going to be a barrier. Unless she wants to move closer to me, this is as far as our relationship can go.

"She's coming to Chicago next weekend to visit Alex."

"Oh yeah? Thanks for letting me know." I glance at the empty pillow beside me. For the last five years it's been a revolving door of bunnies. Now all I can think about is how much I miss Sunny and how I'm half-glad I don't have a memory of her in my bed to miss as well. "I appreciate you calling to smooth things over. It means a lot."

"I wish I'd been nicer to you sooner."

“Meh. You were just protecting Sunny. I get it. It makes you a good friend.”

“I don’t think she’d agree with you right now. Anyway, I thought you should know what was what. I should let you go. Have a good night, Miller.”

“Hey, Lily.” I catch her before she hangs up.

“Yeah?”

“I don’t know what’s going on with you and Randy, if anything, but he’s been laying low since we got home from Muskoka, and that’s not like him. Just figured you should know. Talk to you later.”

I let her go before she can answer or ask me more questions. I’m not one for interfering, but in this case, maybe a nudge in one direction or the other isn’t a bad thing.

The next morning I’m up early for my flight to Toronto. I’m actually looking forward to the publicity shit. Violet and Amber leave me a million messages apiece, clogging up my phone. It’s all coming from a good place, so it’s not as much of an irritation as it could be.

Michael’s in good form when I get to his place, where we’re doing the filming. He’s nervous, but excited. We get through the promo shoot and the interview BS with hardly any issues, apart from when they insist I wear makeup to cover the bruises from Waters. They’ve faded to a light yellow-green under my eyes and across the bridge of my nose, but that won’t be attractive on camera. It’s a pain in the ass to sit through all the powder and crap, but Michael thinks it’s hilarious, so I don’t put up much of a stink.

I’ve memorized almost everything, and the few things I haven’t I wing, which works out well according to the chick who’s directing the thing. Michael’s a natural in front of the camera, and the nerves disappear as soon as they start asking him about the camp, his outlook on treatment, and what he wants for his future.

His answer is simple and poignant; he wants to survive, so he can grow up and be like me.

He makes the interviewer cry. I may or may not have to blink a lot after that. From a promotional and media standpoint, it’s gold. If it means we can help his family stay out of financial trouble, then it’s worth it for

me, too. It's a great start to the day, but there's a gray cloud hanging over Michael's head, because we both know the afternoon's chemo treatment isn't going to be fun.

I want to be a distraction for him. I'd stay the night, but then he'd want to hang out instead of get the rest he needs. Plus I have meetings all day tomorrow and a workout I shouldn't miss. I don't particularly like hospitals, since most of my memories of my mom happen to be based there, but I'm willing to deal with that for Michael.

He and I play cards while he's hooked up to all the IV garbage. We're on our sixth game of crazy eights, which I apparently suck balls at since I've lost five times so far, when there's a knock on the door to his room.

Another kid I recognize from camp peeks his head in.

"Hey, Brett!" Michael's eyes light up.

I can't figure out why that name is so familiar until Lily comes in behind him, followed by Sunny.

Brett and Michael fist bump, and Michael gives Lily a huge, long hug. I don't know much about what's going on, but it feels like a setup.

"Michael, this is my best friend, Sunshine."

"Oh, hey!" His eyes go wide, darting to me and back to her.

Sunny smiles and returns the greeting, then her gaze shifts to me, and she gives me a shy wave, which I return.

She looks tired, like she's not been sleeping all that great, and she's maybe a tiny bit thinner, but she's beautiful. I definitely still have a whole shitton of feelings for her based on the way my heart is jumping around in my chest, looking for a way to get out.

Michael looks from me to her and back again. "Your name is Sunshine?"

"Mm-hmm." She nods, still smiling. She grips the strap of her purse, her fingers climbing higher until they reach the ends of her hair.

He tilts his head. "Is she the reason for Project Sunshine?"

"Uh . . ." I rub the back of my neck, not expecting to be called out. "Sunny's who it's named after. But you're the reason for the fundraiser."

"Cool." He nods like he gets it. "You must be super important to Miller."

There's some awkward laughter.

Lily breaks the tension when she asks, "Michael, do you want something to drink? Maybe a ginger ale?"

“That’d be great.”

She looks at me.

“I’m good.”

“Are you sure?” Her eyes dart to Sunny, then back to me.

It takes me a second to get what she’s trying to do. I slap my thighs and stand up. “Actually, I’m kinda thirsty, too. Brett, you wanna take over my hand? Michael’s kicking my ass, here—I mean, my butt.”

Brett and I switch places. “Sunshine? You wanna come?” I ask her.

“Sure. That’d be great.” She fingers the ends of her hair, a sure sign she’s nervous.

Brett decides he might need a snack, which makes Michael think about it, and in the end we get a list of things, which Sunny promptly types into her phone. Then we go in search of a vending machine or the cafeteria. As soon as the room door closes, Sunny grabs my hand and pulls me toward the stairs. In the stairwell, she lets go and steps back until she’s leaning against the railing.

She gestures to my face. “Your nose looks good. You can’t even tell it was broken. Alex has this bump. I don’t think it’s ever gonna go away, not without surgery.”

It’s quite the ice breaker. “Uh. Yeah. It healed well.”

“Alex had bruises for, like, forever.”

I’m glad I caused him more damage than he did me. “Michael and I had a promo shoot today so they put makeup over the bruises. But they’re almost gone.” I lean against the wall and cross my arms over my chest. “How’d you know I was gonna be here?”

She ducks her head and toes at a black spot on the tile. She’s wearing a pair of silvery fabric shoes and fitted jeans that hug every defined muscle in her long legs. Her T-shirt is pale pink, the outline of her nipples visible through her asshole sports bra—not that her nipples are my main focus. It’s all of her. I stand there absorbing her, the smell, the sight, the foreignness of the emotions I’m processing after not seeing or talking to her for two weeks. I almost miss her reply.

“Michael told Lily’s cousin you’d be here. Lily thought I should come so I could maybe see you and apologize, but now that I’m here, I’m not sure it was such a good idea. Maybe I’m making things awkward. I should probably go—”

She moves to take a step around me, but I grab her wrist and stop her.

“Apologize for what?”

“For hurting you. For not trusting you and listening to Lily and Alex instead of staying strong and doing what I wanted.” Sunny’s thumb brushes along my wrist.

It’s hard to focus on her words with all the feels going on. I let go of her hand and shove mine in my pockets to stop from hugging her, and maybe rubbing up against her since that’s what my dick wants me to do. “Which is what?”

She ducks her head again, her voice dropping to a whisper. “To be with you.”

“What about Bushman Tiny Dick?”

“What?”

“Kale.”

A door opens somewhere above us, the metallic clang a reminder that we don’t have much privacy. This is a much bigger conversation than a few minutes in a stairwell.

“I don’t want to be with him.”

“But you let him take you back to Guelph.”

“Because Alex insisted.”

“You were the one who said you should leave.”

The patter of feet coming down the steps halts our conversation. We move aside to let the couple pass.

Sunny waits until the sound of another steel door opening and closing confirms we’re alone again. “I didn’t want you two to fight anymore. You’re both hotheaded. I made a lot of mistakes that day.”

Another door opens and the sound of male voices filters through the stairwell.

Sunny sighs. “How long are you staying in Toronto? Can we talk after your visit with Michael?”

“I have to be back at the airport around six thirty.”

“That early?”

“I have meetings in the morning.” I regret already that I didn’t plan to stay the night, and that I didn’t call her before I came.

“I could drive you to the airport,” she offers shyly.

“That might work.”

“Only if you want me to, though.”

“Sure. That’d be good. Then we can talk.”

“That’d be nice.” Sunny bites her lip and takes a step closer. “Can I hug you?”

“I guess. If you want to.” I open my arms, and she moves into the empty space, clasping her hands behind my back and pressing her cheek against my chest.

I’m already sporting a semi—maybe a third of the way hard. She can’t feel it yet, but if we stand here long enough, she definitely will. She smells like sunshine and that mint shampoo she uses.

Another door opens somewhere below us, and we break apart. Why don’t people use the damn elevator?

“We should go get those snacks.” I open the door and usher Sunny out ahead of me. The jeans look fantastic on her ass. I wish she wasn’t so easy to look at and I didn’t care about her so much.

We spend the next two hours hanging out in Michael’s room, talking about camp and the upcoming fundraising game. Sunny’s quieter than usual, but Lily has all sorts of questions, and she offers to help out however she can, especially since we’re holding it in Guelph, I think my Dad must have used some of Waters’ connections to make it happen. It’s nice that she and I finally seem to be okay with each other. When I tell her Randy’s going to be playing with me in the game, she gets all blushy and flustered.

Once treatment is over and Michael’s mom has taken him home, we all pile into Lily’s beat-up Honda civic.

“Can you take Miller and me to Alex’s condo?” Sunny asks.

“Sure.” Lily smiles from the front seat.

“You talk to Randy lately?” I ask as we crawl through the streets of Toronto toward the lakeshore.

Her fingers tighten on the steering wheel and a flush creeps up her neck to settle in her cheeks. “He called me a few days ago.”

“He did!” Sunny shrieks. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I missed the call. He left a message.”

I keep my mouth shut, but when I get back to Chicago I’m definitely going to mention something to Randy. I think he’s way more hung up on Lily than he wants to admit. I don’t want him to pull his usual crap where he gets involved and then bails. And not just because it’ll cause problems for me and Sunny—that ex of Lily’s seems to be a big douchey problem. She doesn’t need any more.

After forty-five minutes, Lily drops us at a huge condo building. It's not the distance but the traffic that made the ride take so long. Since traffic always sucks here, we'll have to hit the road right away. At least we can talk and drive.

First Sunny takes me up to Waters' condo on the top floor of the building. The space is massive, boasting a sweet view of Lake Ontario. It's not a lake anyone wants to swim in, according to Sunny. Apparently pollution means going for a dip could result in extra arms growing out of funky places. I'm not sure if she's serious or not, but I'll take her word for it.

She lifts a set of car keys from a hook by the door. "I wish you didn't have to go so soon."

"Yeah. Me either."

"You could catch a later flight." She peeks up from under blond lashes.

"Is that what you want me to do?"

She flips the keys over in her hands. "Only if you want to."

We're here now. We might as well have the conversation I've been stupidly avoiding. I call Amber. She checks into alternate flights. There are only two options, and neither gives me a whole lot of extra time.

"Hold on." I cover the phone. "I can either fly out at nine thirty or ten ten."

"That's the latest you can stay?" She doesn't look happy.

"That's all they've got for tonight. I have meetings in Chicago in the morning."

"Can you take the ten-ten flight?"

I nod. Amber rebooks the flight and makes sure I have the correct information. The change gives me and Sunny an extra hour; I set an alarm on my phone so we're not late getting to the airport. Sunny rummages around in the fridge for something to drink. She finds a couple bottles of beer and some Perrier. I opt for the latter so beer doesn't interfere with our conversation.

I flop down on the black leather couch in the living room and put my feet up on Waters' coffee table. Sunny puts down two glasses of fizzy water and sits beside me, close but not touching.

She starts before I can. "I'm sorry for not trusting you."

"Yeah. Me too."

"I should've had more faith in you."

“I can’t change the past or how often pictures are taken, Sunny. I can only take ownership of what I say and do—not the context it’s taken in, not the way the media wants to skew it. You can tell me you’re sorry and that you should have trusted me, but it doesn’t change how you handled things or give me any indication you won’t handle them the same way again.”

She tucks her feet under her and picks at a loose thread on the knee of her jeans. “So you don’t want to get back together?”

“I didn’t say that.”

She stops fiddling to look at me. “So . . .”

“I’ve been telling you from the beginning that I want this to work. That hasn’t changed for me. I just don’t know if it’s possible.” I run a hand through my hair, aware that I have to lay it all out. “What was I supposed to think when you opted to drive home with Bushman Tiny Dick over staying to talk things out with me? I get that my past is problematic. I understand that it’s going to take some time to get used to managing the media crap, but it’s not something you’re not already exposed to.”

“It never had anything to do with me directly before. The rumors were always about Alex and the hooker bunnies. This is different.”

She has a point, but so do I. “Okay. I can understand how that might have been a problem in the beginning. I know I wasn’t good about the pictures and all that stuff, but that’s changed. I’m trying to be more careful and aware. I had no idea what that car wash was going to be before I got there, and then it was too late. I need to do better about that stuff, but I can’t keep having the same argument with you, over the same issue. It gets tedious. I think I’ve been pretty damn clear about where I stand, haven’t I?”

“You have.”

“Then why all the jumping to conclusions? I don’t get it.”

She’s back to fidgeting. “I guess I haven’t been completely up front with you.”

I don’t like the way that sounds. Not at all. Maybe she slept with Bushman Tiny Dick while we’ve been on the outs. Maybe he finally gave her an orgasm with his mini-cock and my orgasm magic isn’t magical anymore. It occurs to me I’ll see her at Vi’s wedding. I’ll have to get drunk to manage, or I’ll bring a trampy date so I don’t have to go alone. I don’t have my honey list to draw from anymore and I don’t want to create a new one.

“Up front how?”

“No one ever pushed me to be good at anything besides being pretty when I was growing up. All the focus was on Alex and how talented and smart he was. I refused to figure skate, which might have been part of the problem. My mom was crushed when Alex chose hockey as a career. It was crazy. She refused to see that he loved it so much more, and that doing both was making him miserable.”

“How long did he do both?”

“Ten years.”

Well, that definitely explains why he’s such an awesome skater. “That’s a long time.”

“Anyway, she got over it eventually. She didn’t really have a choice. Then she started to see things differently. Alex makes a lot of money. All the good players do—you know that. After a while I think my mom decided I’d end up with one of his hockey friends. That way I’d be taken care of or whatever.”

“What do you mean by taken care of?” I have an idea where this is going, and it’s kind of messed up.

“Financially.”

“Why would you need someone to do that?”

She gives me a small, patronized smile. “Because I’m not Alex-smart or talented. Living in his shadow was hard growing up. It still is sometimes. In high school I started dating Kale because he was the opposite of my brother and all his friends. The only thing he did was smoke weed and pretend to be on the debate team. He had zero ambition, and nothing has changed. I mean, the guy has half a university degree and works part time. He still lives in his parents’ basement and probably always will.”

“But you dated him for four years.”

“We were teenagers. He was consistent, and he liked me for me, not because my brother played professional hockey and he wanted tickets to games or introductions to players. He doesn’t even play sports, unless you count beer pong. Lily was dating Benji, and he and Kale were best friends. My parents thought Kale was harmless, and my mom figured I’d outgrow him. She was right.”

“Daisy still seems to love on him, though.”

“Only because I’m not with him anymore. We’d been friends for a long time. He was easy to be with. When high school ended, I figured it was a good time to move on. It was awkward at first with Lily and Benji

still together, but eventually Kale started dating someone else, so it was better.” She sets her glass on the table and runs her hands down her thighs. “I shouldn’t have gone on that camping trip with him. He was on the rebound, and I knew it. But I also want you to know that decision was about more than the pictures of you and the hooker bunnies or making you jealous.”

“What was the point, then?”

“I love my mom. She’s a great person, and she has the best intentions, but I don’t want to become her.” Sunny sighs. “When you started calling, she was all over it working out between us, and not just because you’re a great guy, which you are. My mom likes her lifestyle. She likes not having to go to work every day and going to the spa and lunch dates with her friends. She figured I’d want the same, but I don’t.

“So part of going on the camping trip was me trying to figure out if I could handle this with you, especially having seen how hard it’s been for Violet. I don’t want who I am to be swallowed by who I’m with.”

That makes some sense. I like that Sunny has ambition and drive. She could coast along and sponge off her brother if she wanted—he’d definitely support her—but that’s not her MO. “I would never want that.”

“I know.” She shifts closer and crosses her legs so her knees touch the outside of my thigh. “I’m just explaining why I had such a hard time.”

“And you thought I was gonna fuck and chuck.”

“I know that’s not true.”

I stretch an arm out across the back of the couch. “It took a while for you to believe me.”

“It shouldn’t have. I should listen to my intuition over other people.”

“Three months of daily conversation and me coming to visit, even with parent supervision, should’ve been a dead giveaway.”

“You’d think so.” Sunny leans her head on my arm. “And then there’s the whole Project Sunshine thing.” Her nose brushes my skin, and she presses her lips to my bicep.

I wrap a tendril of her hair around my finger, avoiding eye contact. “There is that.”

“How long have you been putting that together?”

“A while.” I’m definitely not going to be totally honest with her. Not yet. After my first visit to Guelph, I knew I was looking at something more substantial than bunny action. By the time we got to the actual sexing stage,

I was trying to figure out how to make the long-distance crap manageable and create a long-term life for us. But we're not even officially back together, so I'll keep that to myself until I've got some concrete evidence that we're going to give this a solid shot at being something real.

"How long's a while?"

"Does it matter? Will it change anything?"

Sunny uncrosses her legs and tucks them under her. "No."

"So why ask?"

"I'm just curious." She gets in close and skims my jaw with her fingertips. "You're an incredible person."

"Not really."

"Yes, really." Her lips hover close to mine.

I'm not sure what's happening here. We were having a serious conversation and now all of sudden Sunny's up in my space. At least she's in jeans and most of her skin is covered, otherwise I'd be screwed.

"Miller."

"Yeah."

She settles her palms on either side of my neck. "I missed you."

"I, uh—"

Her lips touch mine. "I missed talking to you. I missed hearing your voice. I missed knowing you were thinking about me. I missed being with you."

"I missed all those things, too."

Sunny slips her tongue into my mouth. I'm guessing this means we're back together. She straddles my lap and wraps her arms around my shoulders, hands going into my hair.

"Um, Sunny?" I say around her tongue.

"Mmm?"

"Aren't we supposed to be talking?"

She leans back far enough that her eyes don't merge into one and she stops looking like a cyclops. "I thought we were done," she says. "Is there something else you wanted to talk about?"

"Uh . . ."

She rocks her hips, pressing down on the erection forming inside my pants. She moves in to kiss me again.

"What about the distance?"

She skims my cheeks with her fingertips. "We'll manage."

“I’ll be traveling a lot after next month,” I say.

“I’ll be done with all my courses at the end of December. I’ll only have my placement left. I can do that anywhere.” Her lips hover over mine. “We don’t have much time before you have to go, Miller. We can talk about that later, can’t we?”

If I’m hearing her correctly, she’s thinking long term, like me. She’s right. We have to leave for the airport soon, so we might as well take advantage of the time we have left.

Her mouth tastes like lemon from the Perrier. She grinds all over me as we kiss and grope and make up for all the time with no words and lots of uncertainty.

As I’m about to pull her shirt over her head, my phone starts beeping. It’s the twenty-minute warning.

“Just ignore it,” Sunny begs.

“I can’t miss my flight.”

“I can be quick.” She pulls her shirt over her head—along with her bra.

I glance at the clock on the wall and then back at her bare chest with faint tan lines and perfect nipples, free of poison ivy. It’s not a lot of time, but it’s enough. I can get her off real fast. We can have frantic makeup sex and next time take it slow.

I yank my shirt over my head. Sunny takes the cue and kicks off her jeans and panties while I shove my pants down to my ankles. This isn’t going to be romantic, but it’s definitely going to feel good. My dick is super fucking excited, along with the rest of me.

As soon as Sunny’s naked, she straddles my lap. We kiss for a minute, rubbing up against each other until my dick is slick and we’re both making sex noises. I need to give her a quick primer before I get in there, so I break the kiss and run a finger over her lips. She parts them and I slip it inside, watching it disappear almost all the way to the third knuckle. I have big fingers. It reminds me of what Sunny looks like with my cock in her mouth.

She holds my wrist and moves to my middle finger, sucking on that one, too. When she’s done giving my fingers head and my dick feels like it’s going to explode, I move my hand between her legs to rub her clit. She sighs, and her eyes close when I push inside. Finding the sweet spot, I flutter my fingers until her mouth drops and she starts making soft, needy sounds.

The alarm on my phone goes off again. I don't have any baggage. I should make it. Hopefully.

"How much time?" Sunny asks, her voice hoarse.

"Ten minutes."

She pushes my hand away and grabs my cock, which has been nestled against her warm inner thigh up to this point. She lines everything up and drops down.

We both groan. Sunny's eyes roll up. "I missed you."

"Me, too."

Using my shoulders as leverage, she rises up until just the tip is hugged. Reversing the motion, she drops down slowly, then does it again. "Why does it always feel so good?"

"I dunno, but I could do this every day for the rest of my life and I'd be pretty damn happy." It feels like I'm wrapped in the smoothest, velvety-est vice, lined with hot marshmallows.

Sunny cups my face in her hands. "Miller."

I make a noise that's supposed to sound like a yes.

"We're back together, right?"

I'm inside her, so I'm thinking that means we are, but I figure it's good to confirm. "As far as I know, yeah."

"Okay. Good." We kiss until the momentum picks up and keeping our lips attached is dangerous because the friction might cause teeth clashing. Sunny's knees tighten against the outside of my thighs and goosebumps rise along her arms. She rolls her hips hard and fast. The alarm goes off a third time.

"I'm right th—" Her words are stilted by her groan. I hold her wide-eyed gaze as she comes.

I'm right at the edge, but I slow it down so she can recover. Holding her hips, I shift her over me, nice and easy, chasing down my own orgasm.

"I love you, Miller," she whispers, fingers curling around my chin.

"I love you back."

I thrust one more time, and the orgasm body checks me. It's damn well magical. I see unicorns prancing behind my eyes instead of stars.

The awesomeness of the orgasm is destroyed when the front door swings open.

I've about had it with Waters ruining all my goddamn moments.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

FLASHES OF BEAVE

“Oh, poop,” Sunny mutters.

From where I’m sitting on the couch, with Sunny straddling me, I have an awesome view of Waters’ horrified expression. If it wasn’t an interruption to our make-up sex and the love professions, I’d think it was funny. Right now I’m annoyed more than anything.

Waters turns away. “What the actual fuck is going on?”

“Miller and I are talking things out.”

It’s pretty clear there’s no talking happening here, so I’m not sure why Sunny bothers with the lie, or why Waters asks in the first place.

“You’re fucking naked! On my goddamn couch! Butterson, you better get your hands off my damn sister or I’m gonna rebreak your fucking face.”

“You will do no such thing!” Sunny yells back.

I lean over and grab my shirt from the floor. Sunny holds out her arms and I pull it over her head so she’s not naked anymore. Waters and I have seen enough of each other’s bare asses in the locker room.

I help Sunny off my lap. My dick flops onto my leg with a wet smack. Sunny makes a face and gestures to my lap. “That’s messy, isn’t it?”

“So help me God, Butterson, if you get your jizz all over my couch—”

“Enough! I’ve had it up to here with the threats, Alex!” Sunny gestures above her head. My shirt lifts to the point where Alex and I get a beaver shot.

“Keep your hands down!” He puts one of his own in front of his face.

“Don’t tell me what to do!”

I place my hand gently on her back. “You’re showing off your cookie, sweets.”

“Oh.” She drops her hand and props it on her hip instead. “You still don’t get to tell me what to do, Alex.”

“What are you two even doing here? Since when have I ever said it was okay to use my condo as a fuck pad?”

“We came here to talk.”

“Yeah, well, that sure as hell didn’t look like talking to me. Butterson, put some damn clothes on!”

“Don’t talk to Miller like that!” Sunny shouts.

“It’s my damn condo. I’ll talk to him however I want to. Get dressed, Sunny. I’m taking you home.”

“I’m not going home with you, Alex.”

“You don’t think so?” he challenges.

“You wanna be belligerent with me, you go right ahead, Waters. But don’t think I’m gonna let you talk to Sunny like that.” I grab my pants from the floor and jam my legs into them.

“No one is fighting!” Sunny shouts.

Waters puffs out his chest like he’s getting ready to take me on. Sunny streaks over and gets right in his face. She’s shaking. “I am so done with this overprotective crap. I’m almost twenty-one. I can make my own decisions, and that includes what I do and who I do it with.”

“It doesn’t include fucking on my damn couch.”

“Are you even serious with this, Alex? How much of a hypocrite can you be? You had sex with Miller’s sister in your team locker room *during* a game! Everyone walked in on it! Everyone! The whole team talked about it for weeks!” She pauses to breathe. “And we weren’t fucking! We were having make-up sex because you keep interfering and messing up my damn life.”

Waters looks shocked, whether because of the outburst, Sunny swearing, or her standing up to him I can’t be sure, but I want to snap a picture of the look on his face and frame it.

“I’m not trying to mess up your life; I’m trying to keep you from getting hurt.”

“How are you keeping me from getting hurt?”

“I—”

She cuts him off. It’s epic. “By trying to run my life? By overreacting every time you see a picture of Miller with anyone but me? By breaking my boyfriend’s nose? You’re not protecting me, Alex, you’re being an a-hole. Have you even apologized to Miller for what you did?”

His lips mash into a thin line, his eyes darting to me and back to Sunny.

She throws her hands in the air, and we narrowly miss another beaver shot. “Honestly! You promised you’d apologize!”

Waters shoves his hands in his pockets. “I haven’t had a chance.”

“Well, here he is.” She gestures to me. “The opportunity is yours.”

Waters stares at a spot above my head. "I'm sorry I broke your face." He doesn't sound like he means it. Not even a little.

Sunny calls him on it. "That's the worst apology ever. Try again."

He heaves a sigh and runs a hand through his hair. This time he looks me in the eye. "I'm sorry for being an asshole."

Sunny motions for him to keep going.

"And for breaking your nose."

When it's clear she expects more, he rolls his head on his shoulders. "And for interfering. I just want what's best for Sunny. She's my only sister. Up until I met Violet, I wasn't a very good role model. I guess maybe I was trying to make up for it, and I took it too far. I know you care about her, Miller. I can see that. I haven't been very fair. So, yeah. I'm sorry. Can we call a truce?"

He steps forward and holds out his hand. I meet him halfway, then think about where my fingers have been. "Uh, maybe props would be better." I make a fist and hold it up.

His brow furrows, and then he makes this face. He gets what I mean. "I had that coming, didn't I?"

"After the locker room? You sure fucking do."

We bump fists.

"See? That wasn't so bad was it? I mean, you're gonna be brothers anyway, so you might as well start getting along, right?" Sunny gives Waters a quick hug and then throws her arms around my neck.

"Sunny, I'd appreciate it if you put some clothes on now." Waters is staring at the ceiling.

I look over Sunny's shoulder to find her ass hanging out the bottom of the shirt.

"Oops!" She drops her arms and covers her ass with her palms, not that it's necessary anymore.

"That elevator takes forever!" Violet comes through the door carrying a bag of takeout. "Oh, hey, guys . . ." She surveys the scene: Alex is checking the ceiling for spider webs. Sunny's in nothing but my shirt and holding her ass, and I'm in a pair of pants with the rest of our clothes strewn all over the floor.

She shoves the takeout at Alex and rushes Sunny. "Oh my God! Are you two back together?"

"Uh-huh."

“Oh, thank fuck! You guys are so stubborn I was worried it was never going to happen.” They jump around and hug each other like they scored backstage passes at a boy-band concert. Then Waters and I stand awkwardly while they whisper back and forth. I can’t hear what they’re saying, but Sunny’s blushing, so I’m sure it’s an overshare.

My phone rings from somewhere under the pile of clothes. “Oh shit. What time is it?”

“Seven-thirtyish? You guys want to have dinner with us? Or have you already eaten?” Violet snickers.

Waters rolls his eyes.

“Uh. Thanks for the invite, but I’m supposed to be at the airport, like, now.” I was cutting it close already; I’ll be lucky to make it at all.

“What time’s your flight?” Violet asks.

“Ten.”

“Yeah, you’re not going to make that.” Waters drops the takeout on the side table and kicks off his shoes. “You might as well reschedule and stay the night. There’s a spare room down the hall.” He crosses over to the cupboard to grab some plates.

So I reschedule my flight, again, and talk my dad into attending my meetings in the morning. Sunny and I spend the night in her brother’s spare room having quiet make-up sex.

The next morning she drives me to the airport. We kiss for way longer than we should in a highly public place. I take off my baseball cap and hold it up so we don’t offend anyone or attract too much attention. Pictures still end up on the Internet, but I don’t mind. Neither does Sunny, apparently. She uses one of them as her avi on social media. It’s not in-your-face at all.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

DEFUZZING IS DANGEROUS

Once I get back to Chicago, I put nearly all my time and energy into the fundraiser and workouts to prep for it. It's just three weeks away, and we've already sold half the tickets. The promo video went up yesterday. My dad expects the event to be sold out before the end of next week, which means we'll raise an easy fifty grand for Michael's family.

Based on the success so far, I've decided this is exactly the kind of thing I want to do more of. I don't need to wait until my hockey career is over. I have to work out the logistics with Vi and my agent, but it seems like a good way to broaden my reach, and it's definitely helped spin the media attention in a different direction. The pictures of me and Sunny at the airport haven't hurt either.

I get an awful lot of help from Randy in both the workout and fundraising-prep departments since he's still not going out all that much. Lance rides his ass about it more than he does mine, but even he's let up. Last week when we did a home workout at his place, Lance was on his best behavior with Tash, and there wasn't one bunny.

Sunny and I have Skyped every night this week. She's flying in this morning for the weekend. I want to hijack her right away, but she's supposed to be visiting Waters and Violet. I'll give those two the day with her, but she's coming for dinner at my place tonight. My plan is to turn it into a sleepover and get her to stay with me for most of the weekend. I don't think Waters is likely to object considering Vi is already in on it.

Just before eleven, Vi stops by. She's here to help me prepare. She took the afternoon off for a business meeting, part of which consists of picking up Sunny from the airport. I'm not sure it's legit.

"What's up, brother from another mother?" She's holding a huge box. "And father," she tacks on, then wrinkles her nose. "That wasn't even funny, was it?"

"Uh, no."

She drops the box on the counter. "I think my sense of humor is being affected by this engagement-party-planning shit. I wonder if it's possible to have an allergy to being engaged."

"I have my doubts."

She points a candle at me. “You’re not helpful. I need to put a stop to my mother’s insanity. I can’t deal with this craziness. She’s trying to force her way into my girl’s afternoon with Sunny. I said no way. Neither one of us wants blue-eye-shadow makeovers.” Vi stops her tirade to look around my condo. “Have you done anything to get ready for Sunny?”

“I changed my sheets, and I cleaned off the dining room table.” I relocated all the papers to the coffee table so we have somewhere to eat.

“You’re such a bachelor.”

I unpack the box of stuff while Vi rummages through my cupboards. “This must be yours.” I toss her a box with a woman’s leg on it. It looks like a shaving product.

She puts her hands up, shielding her face. It hits her in the chest and drops to the floor at her feet. “Ow! Don’t throw things at me!”

“I didn’t throw it. I tossed it. Underhand. It helps if you don’t cower and actually try to catch it.”

She picks it up off the floor and hurls it. I snatch it out of the air before it beans me on the head. Her aim is getting better—either that or it was a lucky shot. “That’s for you.”

“What is this? Shaving cream?” I turn the box over and scan the back, waiting for her to explain. She can tell me in thirty seconds what it’ll take me five minutes to labor through on my own.

“It’ll take down your forest of body hair.”

I run a hand up my arm. “I don’t need this. You can take it home and use it on your mustache.” I slide the box across the counter toward her.

Violet puts her hand up to her mouth, then drops it. “I do *not* have a mustache. You, however, should consider grooming your yeti ass. You’re having Sunny over to your place for the first time ever. You’re probably going to engage in excessive boning.”

“I’m already groomed. I took care of business yesterday. I even shaved my balls.”

She makes a gagging noise. “More than I wanted to know. Suit yourself, but it’s supposed to be hot tonight. You could manage your arm fur so she doesn’t get lost in there.” Her phone beeps. “I gotta go. I’m picking Sunny up and then we’re going to the spa. She and I have a date with my waxer.”

“Your waxer?”

“You can thank me later.”

“Make sure they leave a landing strip.”

“Why? You have a hard time navigating the land of beave without it?”

“No, I like it. And I’m not talking about this with you. Just don’t torture my girlfriend.”

“Aw, you’re so cute with this *girlfriend* stuff. I’m not surprised you lured her back with your yeti magic.” She grabs a Vitamin Water from my fridge. Suddenly, loud moaning comes from the wall adjoining my condo. We both freeze. “What the hell is that?”

“My neighbor? Or a cat in heat?” I’ve only heard her dog before, and never through the walls.

We both cringe as the pitch and volume increase. It sounds as if my neighbor—or the cat—are on the verge of a stellar orgasm. Sunny’s a quiet comer. It’s nice. Very un-porn starish.

Vi stares at the wall. “Does that happen often?”

“This is a first. She moved in before I left for the camp. Maybe she’s getting some morning penance in.” Right before my neighbor hits what sounds like the magical O, the sound cuts off. We look at each other, perplexed.

“Huh. That seems unsatisfying.” Vi shakes her head. “Maybe your neighbor likes to watch loud porn.”

“Or she has a thing against coming.”

“If it happens again, can you record it so I can make it Alex’s ring tone? It’ll be awesome.”

Vi’s ridiculous, but I’d pay to see Waters’ face if she managed to make that happen. I hope there aren’t any more of those sounds while Sunny’s here. They’d make an embarrassing soundtrack for the evening I have planned.

Vi’s phone goes off again. “Okay. Now I gotta go. I’ll be back in a few hours. You should reconsider using that stuff.” She taps the box on the counter and leaves.

I ignore her suggestion and rifle through the contents of the bag. I have to admit, she picked up some useful stuff. If she lived on her own and didn’t have access to Waters’ fortune—he’s already set up a joint bank account where she gets what she thinks is a stupid amount of money every month, seventy-five percent of which she invests—I’d want to pay her back. But there’s also a good chance she’s added it to her bill for this month’s

financial-management fees. Either way, she's gone out of her way for me, and that says a lot.

She picked up a whole crapload of candles, all of them in some holistic, natural scent called Sensual Seduction. They smell nice. I've never done the candle thing before; it hasn't been necessary. But it seems like now's a good time to get on the romance train. Violet also purchased massage oil, bath oils, and what I at first assume are a pair of women's panties. They're not. She's bought me a pair of men's bikini briefs. I have no idea how I'll fit my junk into them, but I'm down with giving it a shot for shits and giggles.

At the bottom is a book about the legend of the yeti and a comic strip. Upon closer inspection, I discover Vi has created her own How To Have Sex guide. I'm a yeti, and Sunny is a sunflower. It's asinine, but it makes me laugh.

Since my housekeeper was here earlier in the week, I don't have to worry about dusting or anything. It's the crap lying around that's the problem. I'm not very good at organizing. I get bored fast and stop in the middle.

I give tidying an honest effort, but after twenty minutes I've gotten distracted four times and ended up back in the kitchen with my head in the fridge. I throw all the stuff lying around my living room in a box and shove it my closet. Then I take the candles to my bedroom and line them up along my dresser. The massage oils I leave by the bed; the bath stuff goes by the tub.

Now that everything's set up, all I can do is wait for Violet to come back. I send Sunny a voice text to avoid autocorrect.

I can't wait to see you tonight.

Three minutes later I get a message back:

Me 2 :) <3

On my way through the kitchen, I stop to leaf through the yeti book. It's mostly pictures and cartoons.

The box with the woman's legs on it sits on the counter where Vi left it. Purely out of curiosity, I pick it up and read the back. It takes a while since it's fine print, but I get the gist. Apparently this cream is made of

magic. I put it on my arms, leave it for just under an hour, and boom—all the hair disappears. It might be nice to have smooth arms. According to the directions, they'll stay that way for days, and the hair is softer when it grows in, which could be beneficial. I've got another hour to kill before Vi gets back . . .

I strip down to nothing so I don't have to worry about getting this stuff on my clothes. It takes longer to apply than I'd banked on. I have to go all the way to my second knuckle and up to my shoulder, minus my pits, so it's not uneven and funky looking. I set the timer and get out the video game console.

My elbows are the only part of my arms without the cream crap on them. I rest them on my knees so I can play in relative comfort. However, by the thirty-minute mark, my arms feel like they're on fire. It's making me lose games. I check the instructions again. It's tiny, pain-in-the-ass print. This stuff better work for all the discomfort it causes. Plus it has this horrible chemical odor masked by a fake flowery smell. I can't tell if my whole condo smells like the stuff, or just my arms.

Ten minutes later, I can't deal with the burn anymore. I'm en route to the bathroom when the intercom buzzes. I debate ignoring it, but it could be Violet, or maybe even Sunny. I hit the button and call out a greeting.

"I'm back!"

It's Violet. "Can you come back in fifteen?"

"Why do I need to come back in fifteen? It's eight billion degrees out here. I have underboob sweat from walking to the door from my car. Let me in."

"Hot. Can you see it through your shirt? Is it embarrassing?"

"Will you let me in already?"

"I can't. I'm airing out my ball sac. Enjoy the sunshine." This part is actually true. I haven't put any clothes back on since I applied this crap. It's getting to the point where I want to scratch the stuff off, even if my skin comes with it.

"Airing out your berries? Doesn't the yeti fur impede that?" she yells.

"Berries? My balls are the size of grapefruits."

"Pfft. Only after you've been bit by a spider. Now let me in. I'm not wearing sunscreen. I'll be the color of a tomato in fifteen minutes, and it'll be your fault. Alex will punch you in the face again."

"How is it my fault you're pasty?"

“Screw you, wildebeest. Never mind. Someone’s going to let me in. You’re a dickface.”

Static follows, along with some muffled conversation between Violet and what sounds like several guys. The door buzzes, and I can’t hear her anymore.

Sometimes it takes a few minutes for an elevator to get to this floor. It’s the only drawback to the building, but it’ll give me enough time to wash the acid cream off my arms so I can put clothes on.

I turn on the shower; the burning is almost unbearable, and the smell is just as bad. I step under the spray to rinse my whole body since the pain has caused me to sweat. All my parts need to smell good when Sunny gets here, especially my balls—in case she wants to put them in her mouth or something.

The cream immediately washes down the drain, along with patches of hair from my forearms. It doesn’t take long before the burning feels more like fire ants gnawing at my skin, followed by a hot lava shower.

I might be screaming. It might be high pitched, but no one’s around to hear me, so there’s no way to prove it happened.

I’m quick to get out from under the scalding spray. The arm hair, which should’ve magically disappeared, is patchy, and my arms are an angry red color. A loud rap tells me I’ve run out of time. I wrap a towel around my waist and head for the door. Leaving Violet in the hall is a bad idea at the best of times—she’ll talk to anyone, and she can be loud.

“Take something! My arms are about to fall off,” she bellows when I let her in.

She’s laden with bags. She unloads everything but one of them into my arms, which leaves me unable to ensure the security of my towel. It feels loose.

“I think your neighbor might be a porn star or something.” Vi crosses to the kitchen and drops her bag on the counter. Two lemons roll out and bounce to the floor.

“Why do you think that? Did you see her up close? Does she have huge fake boobs?”

“Why is it always about the boobs? Three guys were in the elevator with me on the way up. They were all disgustingly buff, and they knocked on your neighbor’s door.”

“And she answered it naked?”

“No, I didn’t see her. I’m surmising based on the sounds we heard this morning. And they were talking about how hard it is to have a four-hour hard-on.”

“Really?”

“No. I made up the last part. But who else has three overly buff guys with unattractive faces over unless they’re in the adult movie industry?”

What my neighbor does or doesn’t do for a living isn’t something I care about right now, so I derail the conversation by asking an unrelated question. “How’s Sunny? How soon is she gonna be here? Did you make sure the waxer played nice?”

“She’s good. Excited and nervous. I didn’t ask about the trim job they gave her beaver. I dropped her off at Alex’s on my way here. She’s getting ready, and then she’s getting a ride over. You’ve got half an hour.” She bends down to pick up a fallen lemon.

I’m still holding the bags, and there’s something cold inside. It feels nice so I haven’t set them down yet. Violet’s face is at waist level when my towel unravels and falls to the floor.

“Oh my God!” She gets an eyeful of my man snake. He’s dangling out there for the world to see. Well, the world inside my apartment. “What the fuck, Buck?”

She rears up and throws the lemon. It hits me in the cheek, which is surprising. Maybe Alex has been teaching her how to play sports. He’s braver than I thought.

I move behind the island to hide my junk. “It’s your damn fault for handing over all that crap!”

“My fault? You knew I was coming up! Why wouldn’t you put on some clothes before you open the damn door?”

I set everything on the counter and retrieve my towel from the floor. “I was washing that shit off my arms. It didn’t work by the way. Look at this!” I hold out my raw, red forearms. Most of the hair is still there, with small irregular patches missing.

Vi stops freaking out about seeing my junk, frowns, and grabs my wrist.

“Ow! Don’t do that.” I slap her hand, and she lets go.

“That is *not* supposed to happen. Did you have an allergic reaction?”

“Maybe. I couldn’t even keep it on the whole time. I don’t know what the actual benefit of that crap is. It stinks, and it takes forever. It’s like I’m

molting.”

“Like a yeti in the spring.” She’s grinning like the jerk she is.

“It’s not funny!”

“How long did you have it on for?”

“I made it to the forty-minute mark before it felt like it was eating off my skin.” The burning sensation is back, and it’s getting worse.

“You’re only supposed to keep it on for twenty minutes.”

“I thought it said fifty. That seemed like a damn long time.”

“It’s probably a chemical burn.” Instead of doing what she normally does, which is make me feel like an idiot, Vi turns the tap on and ushers me over to the sink. “I’m sorry. This was a bad idea.”

Cold water eases the burn. She plugs the sink, gets an ice cube tray out of the fridge, and dumps it in. The cold water stings first, then numbs.

“What am I gonna do? Sunny’s gonna be here soon, and it looks like I have flesh-eating disease.”

“It’s not that bad.”

I look at my forearms and then at her.

“It could be a lot worse. You can wear long sleeves to cover it up.”

“Maybe.” I’m not sure that’ll work out so well. It’s hot as balls, and I have a feeling anything touching my arms is going to sting like a bitch. This is worse than the time I went to Cancun and forgot to wear sunscreen. I was the color of a lobster for the entire week.

Vi does a quick search on the Internet. I put some antibiotic ointment on the worst spots—where most of the hair is missing—but I don’t want to be too liberal with Sunny on her way here. I take one of the painkillers they gave me after Waters broke my nose and hunt down the numbing spray I pilfered the last time I got stitched up during a game. It stings like a motherpucker, but once it takes effect, it feels a lot better. By the time we’re done managing my chemical burn, it’s five minutes to five. Sunny’s punctual. I’m only wearing a pair of shorts.

Vi cleans up the kitchen and puts all the crap away in the bathroom while I throw on clean clothes, including the bikini briefs from the bag. I’m right; I can hardly get my parts to fit inside, but it’s too late to turn back now.

Vi meets me at the door when the buzzer goes off. She cringes at the state of my arms. “Everything’s a go. The vegan menu is on the counter

with all of Sunny's favorites highlighted. Order one of each, and you'll be golden."

"Okay. Thanks for all your help, except the arm cream."

"Does it hurt a lot?"

"It feels like I doused them in acid and threw some vinegar on them for good measure."

"I'm sorry. I'll eat ice cream as penance when I get home. Put gauze on it before you go to bed, or you'll stick to your sheets." She gives me a huge hug. "I'd wish you luck, but coming from me it's like the kiss of death."

I follow her to the door, clear my throat even though it's not scratchy, and hit the intercom button. "Hello?"

"Miller? It's Sunny."

"Hey! Right on time. I'll buzz you in."

"Okay. See you in a minute."

Vi slips on her blinged-out flip-flops, pats me on the cheek, and leaves. I do one more check through the condo to make sure I haven't left any crap lying around, spray my arms with the numbing solution again, rinse with mouthwash, make sure the wine is chilling in the fridge since Sunny likes white, and wait for her to knock on the door. After a couple minutes there's still nothing, so I peek out into the hallway.

She's out there, except she's standing in front of my neighbor's door. "Hey," I say before she raises her hand to knock. If Vi's right about my neighbor being a porn star, she's the last person I want Sunny to meet right now.

She stops and looks my way, her confusion turning into a smile. "I almost knocked on the wrong door," she whispers and tiptoes down the hall toward me. She's wearing a summery dress. It's off white with wide straps. I doubt she's wearing a bra. The promise of fall gives a chill to the evening air. If she gets cool enough, I might be able to see her nipples through it. I stop thinking about sex long enough to answer with an appropriate, non-offensive reply.

"You're good. I caught you." I wink and open the door wide. "Come on in."

Sunny kicks off her shoes and looks around. "This is nice. It's big."

"Thanks. It's nothing like Waters' cottage or his condo in Toronto, but it's got an outdoor pool. And it's dog friendly." I don't know why I tell her

that. It's not like she's going to bring Andy or Titan on a plane to visit for the weekend.

"Really? That's great."

She fiddles with her hair, and I hook my thumbs into my pockets—even the backs of my knuckles are burned from that hair-removal crap.

We stand there for another minute. It's probably not that long; it just feels that way because neither one of us is talking—instead we're staring at each other.

Any other time I've had a woman back to my place, it's been for the sole purpose of fucking. Sometimes there's food involved, but that's usually afterward. Sex makes me hungry. This is the first time I've ever done this with the intention of having real conversation and dinner prior to getting Sunny into my bed. I wish there was a manual to consult.

"Can I show you around?" I gesture to the open concept living room-kitchen-dining room combo.

"Can I hug you first?"

"What? Oh. Yeah. For sure." Physical contact I can do. I hold my arms out. She presses her entire body against mine. It feels really nice. I wrap my arms around her shoulders and drop my face into the crook of her neck. I wish I could turn her smell into an air freshener.

Sunny sighs and burrows in, her arms tightening around me. We stand like that until I start to get an obvious hard-on. I back off, expecting Sunny to do the same. Instead she lifts her head and licks her lips.

It's the sign.

The one where she wants me to kiss her. It's been almost a week since I've had my tongue in her mouth, so I'm all over accommodating her wishes.

I lower my head an inch, and Sunny lifts her chin. The first kiss is soft, lips touching lips. Sunny sucks my bottom lip. I open for her, letting her take the lead. All the nervousness melts away like cotton candy on my tongue. The emotions I couldn't or didn't want to name before we made up in Toronto are clear as exploration makes my hard-on ache.

She frames my face with her hands and breaks the kiss to get some air. "This week was long. I like you better in 3D than I do through a computer screen."

"It's way easier to make out, isn't it?"

"Definitely."

We go back in for round two of tongue wars. She has to be able to feel my hard-on by now. Girls are lucky. All their signs of horniness can be hidden. Guys have this big—if we're lucky—stick that jabs people in the stomach to let them know what's going down. Or up.

Sunny starts to run her hands over my biceps, but I catch her wrists. "Maybe don't do that today."

She glances at my arms. "Oh my God! What happened?"

"I uh . . . I had an allergic reaction to some cream." It's not a total lie.

"Geez. That's terrible. What kind of cream was it?"

"I can't remember the name. Anyway, it looks worse than it feels. It'll be fine in a couple of days." I hope it doesn't scab. I have interviews, and if my arms are a mess, I'll need to wear a long-sleeve shirt. I like golf shirts better; then I don't have to mess around with a tie.

"Is it only on your arms?"

"Yeah."

"I'll have to be extra careful with you then, won't I?"

"Not too careful."

Sunny's expression turns devious as she runs her hands down my chest and slips them under my shirt.

Which is the moment a loud moan filters through the wall. The timing couldn't be worse.

Sunny freezes. "What was that?"

"I think my neighbor's dog's in heat."

The next moan is louder.

"That doesn't sound like a dog."

I'm positive it's not her dog, but I'm hoping it'll stop soon. "I'll turn on some music." I grab the remote from the back of the couch and flip on the TV, but I'm not fast enough.

This time words accompany the moan. "Oh God! That's it. Right there!"

"Um—"

"My neighbor moved in while I was away at camp. I haven't had a face-to-face meeting with her yet." It does nothing to explain what's going on over there. Until now, the only thing I ever heard was the occasional thump. Penthouses shouldn't have sound issues.

The noises stop as quickly as they started. I don't trust that this is the last time it's going to happen, and I don't want more interruptions of the

moaning variety tonight, unless they're coming from Sunny. "I'll be right back."

"Where are you going?"

"I'm gonna go talk to my neighbor."

"But they're having sex. Or something." Sunny's eyes drop to my crotch. I only have a slight semi—nothing obvious, thankfully.

"They can do it less loudly."

Sunny peeks around the jamb while I walk barefoot down the hall. I knock and wait. It takes a minute before someone comes to the door. I recognize her face immediately. She's definitely a porn star. I will never, ever tell Sunny I've seen her naked, even though it was only on a screen and for purely whacking-off purposes.

Fortunately, she's not naked or even partially naked. She's wearing jeans and a T-shirt, which is pulled tight across her extra-large chest. She looks like she has water balloons tucked under there. She's also holding a stack of papers. Behind her in the living room are the three buff guys Violet mentioned. They're all fully dressed, too. One of them is reclining on the couch, and another one is standing with a foot on it, pretending he's holding something. The third guy stands behind the couch, giving stage directions to the other two. It's whacked-out as far as neighbor intros go.

"Can I help you?"

"Uh. Yeah. I'm Miller. I live down the hall." I thumb over my shoulder, and she peeks out as Sunny does the same.

She smiles and waves at Sunny, then extends her hand. I take it, hoping it's clean and hasn't been wrapped around any dicks lately. "I'm Nina. We're rehearsing a scene." She gestures to the guys in her living room.

"Yeah. About that." I scratch the back of my neck. "We can, uh, hear you through the wall."

I glance down the hall to see Sunny barefoot, prancing toward us. Oh shit.

"Oh! Really? Did it sound good?"

"It sounded authentic." This is super awkward.

"Very authentic!" Sunny tucks herself under my arm and waves to the guys on the couch. The one standing behind it is fake thrusting. They all wave back. I pull her in tighter to my side and kiss the top of her head.

"This is my girlfriend, Sunny."

She and Nina shake hands.

“We’re having date night!” Sunny smiles up at me.

“Oh! I’m so sorry. This must be distracting! Normally we rehearse at Igor’s, but he’s having his living room painted, so we came here instead. We’ll take it to the bedroom so it won’t be as loud.”

Igor isn’t a very porny name.

“Great. Thanks. We really appreciate it!” Sunny says. “And if we get too loud, and you can hear us through the walls, let us know!”

Nina’s boobs jiggle in tandem when she laughs.

“It was nice to meet both of you! We should do coffee sometime.”

“Definitely. Enjoy your rehearsal.”

“Oh, I will.” She winks at Sunny. “Enjoy date night.”

“Oh, I plan to.” Sunny laces her fingers through mine. “Come on, Miller.”

Sunny puts extra sway in her hips as I follow her down the hallway. She waits until the door is closed before she whispers, “Only you would have a porn star for a neighbor. Why are you such a lightning rod for slutty women?”

I lock the door behind me. “You’re not slutty.”

She raises a brow. “I had sex with you in a forest. Twice.”

I wrap an arm carefully around her waist and pull her against me. “That’s not slutty; that’s adventurous and a little exhibition-y.”

“It was fun. The aftermath not so much.” She presses her hips into mine. “Your neighbor better not ask you to be in one of her pornos.”

“If she does I’ll move.”

“You’re ridiculous. And so are your neighbor’s boobs.” Sunny glances down at her own rack and frowns. “Mine are too small for porn.”

“Your boobs are perfect. Just like the rest of you. And seriously, if she asks me to be in a porno I’ll put my condo on the market. I think the house next to your brother’s is for sale. I’m sure he’d love to have me for a neighbor.”

Sunny rolls her eyes.

“You don’t think I’d do it? You gotta know by now you’ve got me wrapped around your finger.”

She smirks. “I kinda do, don’t I?”

“Mmm . . . don’t look so happy about it.” I brush my lips over hers. “Maybe you have some parts you’d like to wrap around me, to make it

fair?”

Sunny’s laugh is as warm as her name. We get back to kissing. “You should take me on that tour now,” she says with her lips still attached to mine.

“My condo is pretty boring. I was liking the making out thing we’ve got going on here.”

“Me too, but it might be nicer if we could do it lying down and naked.”

“You have the best ideas.” I lead her down the hall, still half-kissing while I point out rooms. There aren’t many, so it’s a quick tour.

I open the bedroom door and realize we haven’t even had dinner. “Wait. This is a date. We’re supposed to eat food.”

“We can do that later.”

“But—”

Sunny pulls her dress over her head. I’m right. She’s not wearing a bra. She twirls around. She’s wearing a thong. Violet must have taken her shopping. “You don’t see anything you want to eat?”

“Eat? No.” I give my head a slow shake. “Devour? Definitely.”

Goose bumps rise along her arms. She backs up until she hits the mattress and sits on the edge. Tucking her feet under her, she rises to her knees, motioning me closer.

Every part of me wants to tackle her and do exactly what I said, *devour*. But that implies quick and dirty. It’s been a week. I want slow and long right from the start. I sweep her hair over her shoulders and skim the length of her arm.

Starting at her shoulder, I follow the line of her collarbone to her neck with my lips. When I reach her jaw, I brush one nipple with the pad of my thumb. Sunny moans.

“I missed that sound.” I circle her nipple to see if she’ll do it again. She does. Sunny grabs the hem of my shirt and pulls up. “Easy, baby.”

“Oh, right. Your arms.”

I take care of getting my shirt off. It doesn’t feel good. My arms are red and sensitive.

Sunny smooths her hands down my chest and glances up, the tip of her tongue pressed between her teeth, when she reaches the waistband. She flicks open the button and pulls down the zipper, exposing the red underwear. The head of my cock is playing peek-a-boo. “Looks like someone’s excited to see me.”

“We sure are.”

She strokes the tip with her finger. “What’s with the underwear?”

“Tryin’ something new.”

“Hmm. They’re a little inadequate, don’t you think.”

“You wanna get a better look? Give me your assessment?”

She sits back on her knees. “Go for it.”

I drop my shorts. “I think they do a good job of highlighting my business.”

“They’re way too small. You should take them off.”

“Maybe you should do that with your teeth.” I tackle her to the bed and she dissolves in a fit of giggles. “I love that sound.”

Sliding an arm under her, I lift her and army-crawl us to the pillows. The comforter feels like sandpaper on the chemical burns, but everywhere else it’s soft skin against mine, so I’ll live. I kiss her chin before I take her lips again. I could spend hours with my mouth on Sunny’s. Eventually I move to her breasts and devote some attention there. I keep moving south, appreciating the hitch in her breath when I get below her navel.

I lift the waistband of her panties and take a peek inside, exhaling relief when I see the waxer left the landing strip. I sit up on my knees and pull the thong over her hips. The landing strip is an arrow.

“Let me guess; Vi put you up to this.”

She grins. “I thought it would be funny.”

I slide the fabric down her soft, smooth legs. “I bet you did.” Holding up the material I ask, “And this?”

“I wanted to try something new, too. It feels like a permanent wedgie, though.”

“I vote no underwear forever and only dresses; then I can have cookie snacks whenever I want.”

“Best idea ever.”

I spread her thighs and lower my head. “We’re gonna have so much fun this weekend.”

Sex with Sunny isn’t crazy or loud, but it’s fun and bendy and about more than just a trip to Orgasmia.

Later we have a shower and order takeout. I don’t bother putting clothes on, because screw that. Also, it’s a lot easier to have spontaneous sex when we’re already naked. Which is exactly what we do, several times.

I think Sunny's passed out on my chest after I put on a movie, but she surprises me when she lifts her head. "Can I stay here tonight?"

"You can stay here all weekend. The right side of my bed is yours whenever you want to use it." I kiss the top of her head.

"Speaking of bed, I'd like to go there now."

"You tired, sweets? You wanna go to sleep?"

"No. I want you to love me."

"You're not tired of being loved yet?"

She touches her lips to mine. "Never."

EPILOGUE

WALKING ON SUNSHINE

Three Weeks Later

I scan the packed arena, satisfaction and pride making me feel invincible. We're up two-one against Waters' team. He's pissed. It's awesome. The game's supposed to be for fun, but you can't pit a bunch of professional hockey players against each other and expect them to ignore their competitive edge. With only three minutes left it's unlikely Waters team will make a comeback. Unlikely, but not impossible.

Waters and Randy face off against each other. He's going to give Waters a run for his money this season. He's fast and aggressive on the ice. The only thing Waters has over him are experience and all those years of figure skating.

Michael's on the bench beside me, bouncing with excitement. There's a check for fifty thousand dollars ready to be handed over at the end of the game. Things are looking up for him. Chemo and radiation, while shitty, are proving effective. If things keep going the way they are, he'll have surgery before the holidays. The prognosis is positive, which is good, 'cause I've gotten attached to that kid, and so has Sunny.

She stands behind me with her hands on my shoulders. The contact is as welcome as it is distracting. She's been fantastic these past few weeks, helping make this whole event come together and spending time with Michael when I can't. She's way more organized than I can ever hope to be. We make a good team. A great one, even. I love her more every damn day. It's terrifyingly awesome.

My dad stands beside her, his arms crossed over his chest, a small, smug grin tugging the corner of his mouth. The puck drops, and Balls snatches it from Waters, shoulder-checking him out of the way as he flies down the ice. I can't wait for training to start next week. I'm ready for this season. I'm ready for a lot of things.

Shift change is coming. Before I get back on the ice to finish off this game I lift my cage and turn to Sunny. She's wearing a hockey jersey, her cheeks and nose are red from the cold, and her eyes are bright with the same excitement that makes the crowd buzz. I tap my lips with my glove. "I need some luck, Sunny Sunshine."

Her smile is soft as she plants a chaste one on my lips. “Kick my brother’s ass. But not literally.”

I drop my cage, locking it in place, give Michael props, adjust my gloves, and skate out onto the ice, replacing Lance. We knock gloves as we pass, and I zip down the rink toward our goalie.

I deflect a goal, and Randy scoops up the puck again, shooting off down the ice toward the opposing net. The seconds are counting down. With less than a minute to go, Waters’ team gets control of the puck.

Waters is on it, barreling down the ice with the grace and speed that helped us win the Cup this year. I position myself so getting to the goalie will be next to impossible. We both know the turn Waters makes is too tight as he aims the puck beyond me. My options are limited—get out of the way and let him score, or try to make the save. I go with option two, even though I know I’m in for a serious hit.

One second I’m defending my goalie, the next I’m slammed into the boards by two hundred and twenty pounds of Waters. We both scramble, grabbing each others’ jerseys to keep from going down. There’s a whole lot of noise from the crowd. I drop and take Waters with me. My head hits the ice; thankfully the helmet does what it’s supposed to, but the impact still stuns me. I try pushing him off, but he’s heavy, and I don’t have much leverage, ice being slippery and all. Finally he rolls off and gets to his knees.

“Miller?” Waters drops his glove. For a second I think he’s going to hit me. Then he snaps his fingers in my face. “You all right, man?”

I give my head a shake. “I’m fine. Just don’t go punching me in the face again.”

I grab his jersey instead of his hand, and he loses his balance again. A whistle blows, and the buzzer sounds.

“Stop trying to make out with me and give me your hand, Butterson.”

I drop a glove and manage to take his outstretched hand this time. “Stop trying to hump me on the ice.”

He grunts as he pulls me to my feet. Then he laughs and keeps a solid hold on my jersey until I have my balance. “You were supposed to get out of the way so I could score.”

“Fuck that.” I butt my head against his. “I wanna win more than I want you to like me.”

He raises my arm in the air, boxer style. “Nice save. Next time you won’t be so lucky.”

It’s then that I realize stopping the goal won us the game.

It’s a whirlwind of excitement and activity as players flood the ice. The high is almost as good as when we won the Cup. I skate over to the bench and get Michael out on the ice. We carry him around on our shoulders like he’s the Cup. In a way he is. He’s the reason we all came together for this—and the reason things just keep getting better between me and Sunny.

She’s waiting for me when I step off the ice, looking adorable in her too-big jersey. There’s local media waiting to interview me. I haven’t prepared a damn thing, and Amber wanted it that way. They can wait, though, because Sunny’s more important. She’s my best everything.

As soon as I drop my gloves and helmet, she takes my face in her hands. Her nose scrunches. “You’re sweaty.”

“I’m gonna kiss you anyway.”

She laughs when I grab her around the waist and lay one on her. Cheesy music from the eighties blasts through the speakers about walking on sunshine. The flashing cameras don’t ruin the moment. Not for me, anyway.

“What is this?” she asks against my mouth.

“It’s our song now. I thought it was appropriate and way less depressing than You Are My Sunshine. Waters isn’t the only one who can pull off cheesy moves.”

Her smile is all the best sunrises put together. “I love you.”

“I love you back.”

There are no refunds and no exchanges with love. It comes with flaws and imperfections. It’s raw, unfiltered, and sometimes it isn’t easy. But I’ve found the best things in this life are the ones I’ve had to work hardest for. Especially Sunny.

THE END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR HELENA HUNTING

NYT and USA Today bestselling author of PUCKED, Helena Hunting lives on the outskirts of Toronto with her incredibly tolerant family and two moderately intolerant cats. She's writes contemporary romance ranging from new adult angst to romantic sports comedy.

CONNECT WITH HELENA HUNTING

[AMAZON](#)
[FACEBOOK](#)
[WEBSITE](#)
[TWITTER](#)
[INSTAGRAM](#)

OTHER TITLES BY HELENA HUNTING

PUCKED SERIES

[Pucked \(Pucked #1\)](#)

[Pucked Up \(Pucked #2\)](#)

[Pucked Over \(Pucked #3, coming January 2016\)](#)

THE CLIPPED WINGS SERIES

[Cupcakes and Ink](#)

[Clipped Wings](#)

[Between the Cracks](#)

[Inked Armor](#)

[Cracks in the Armor](#)

STANDALONE NOVELS

[The Librarian Principle](#)

Read on for excerpts from Helena Hunting's romantic comedy *The Librarian Principle* and Debra Anastasia's *Fire In The Hole*!

THE LIBRARIAN PRINCIPLE

1

Signs & Signals

Annaliese Harper approached the threshold of the ornate library, a live wire of anxiety and anticipation. In mental preparation, she'd donned her mask of fake composure and steeled herself against the inevitable onslaught of awkward introductions. Still, nervous tension twisted her gut as she checked out the staff of Fullerton Academy of Higher Learning from the safety of the hall.

Before she could make her move, Liese's phone chimed in her purse, the volume loud enough to startle her. She whirled from where her colleagues were gathered, muttering a cleaned-up curse. The cavernous hallway had amazing acoustics, judging by the impressive echo of her heels on the marble floor. She glanced over her shoulder, but no one seemed to have noticed the noise.

She rooted around in her purse and located the device; palming the phone, she muted the volume before it could chime again. Too wound up to head back toward the library straight away, she keyed in her password and clicked on the message. An image appeared on the tiny screen.

"Oh my God," Liese snorted. She slapped her palm over her mouth to stop from laughing aloud as she gawked at the photoshopped image. In a perverse gesture of camaraderie, her best friend had sent an *interesting* picture of Liese's new boss, the incredibly attractive principal at FAHL, Ryder Whitehall. The face, at least, was his, but based on the substantial endowment hanging a little to the left, the body belonged to a porn star. She couldn't wait to get home to view the full-screen version in her email.

"Ms. Harper?" The voice came from behind her.

She jumped and fumbled with her phone. In a protective, graceless move, she clutched it to her chest for a moment before frantically punching the off button. She shoved it back in her purse and turned to find the principal in question standing mere feet away.

Her eyes were level with his chest, and his brilliant red tie seemed to function as an arrow, pointing down to where she shouldn't be looking. Despite herself, Liese took a moment to appreciate the fit of his suit and the

way it hugged the long, muscular lines of his body. His shirt had to be tailored with the way it pulled across his chest, highlighting broad shoulders that tapered into a narrow waist. She imagined he must be cut under all those clothes, a thought she knew she shouldn't ruminate on overly much.

She looked up; at five-foot-seven Liese wasn't particularly short, but her principal had a good six inches on her, forcing her to tilt her head back to make eye contact. She made a concerted effort to keep her eyes on his face, lest her gaze wander lower, her mind still stuck on the pornographic image she'd been ogling.

Not that looking at his face was a problem. His eyes were a vibrant, rather mesmerizing shade of aquamarine, sucking her in. His short, dark hair was neatly styled, and Liese had the inexcusable desire to run her fingers through and mess it up. The straight line of his nose contrasted sharply with the soft, full curve of his lips.

"Mr. Whitehall, hi, hello." Liese cringed internally at the high, edgy tenor of her voice.

Mr. Whitehall leaned in, close enough that she could feel the apocalyptic heat he emitted. "It's just Ryder unless there are students present, Ms. Harper." His amused smile should have helped relax her, but it flustered her more. As did his proximity.

"Right, of course, Ryder."

"Nervous?"

"Unbearably."

He gave her shoulder a gentle squeeze. "You have nothing to fear. You'll fit in perfectly here." He inclined his head in the direction of the library. "If you find it helpful, we can discuss any additional questions after orientation."

"That sounds great." Liese gave him a genuine smile as he guided her down the hall and through the door, his fingertips brushing the back of her arm. The unexpected contact sent a shiver down her spine. He motioned to the right, where a table had been set up. Liese signed the attendance sheet while Ryder bent next to her and located her orientation package.

Unfamiliar colleagues milled about, many finding a place to sit. Worried about the seating arrangements and not knowing anyone, Liese scanned the room for empty chairs while also scoping out her coworkers. Her unease must have been obvious because Ryder took pity on her and introduced her to several staff members. She tried to pay attention to her

colleagues' names and disciplines rather than fixate on the number of times Ryder touched her arm. She was almost relieved when Harvey Little, the assistant principal, motioned him to the front of the room. Ryder flashed Liese an encouraging smile and joined his second-in-command.

Dry mouthed, she grabbed a refreshment and set her things down at an empty table. She didn't like the way Ryder's touch affected her ability to think straight. The raw attraction that accompanied such benign contact with him caused alarm bells to ring in her head. Having a good-looking boss was one thing; crushing on him was entirely another.

Liese pretended to be interested in her orientation packet to pass the time. She hated the initial discomfort that accompanied meeting new people. Her goal wasn't just making friends; she needed to suss out her colleagues. High school teachers, like high school students, could be cliquy. The last thing she wanted was to take up residence beside the chatty teacher who would talk through the entire meeting and made her look bad.

"Hey, mind if I sit here?"

Liese looked up to find a tall, lean, well-dressed man with sandy blond hair and brown eyes smiling down at her. He looked safe. "Sure. Go ahead." She returned the grin and motioned to the empty seats.

"You must be our new librarian." He dropped into the chair opposite her and leaned back, stretching his legs out.

"Um, yeah, that's me. How'd you know?" She held out her hand. "I'm Liese Harper."

"Blake Stone, lone drama teacher." He leaned forward and shook her hand before reclining in his chair once again. "There were only two new hires this year. The other guy teaches science, and I met him when I was grabbing a coffee," he said.

"Oh right. Well, it's nice to know I'm not the only new person here." She glanced around the room. No one else looked as out of place as she felt at that particular moment. Nonetheless, Liese steered the conversation, asking questions about Blake's program and what it took to run a full production as the sole drama teacher. "It must be a huge time commitment for you," she prompted.

"Sure, but I love doing it, and so do the students, so it's worth it. If you want to help out with this year's play, let me know. No pressure, though." He winked and looked over her shoulder, waving enthusiastically.

Liese turned to see a tall slip of a woman slide into the seat beside her. Her short blond hair was cut into a straight-edged bob, and thick-framed, funky glasses perched on her nose. “Don’t tell me he’s already trying to recruit you to help him with one of his plays. Don’t do it. Blake is a perfectionist pain in the ass. You’d think he was running Broadway or something with his diva attitude.” Authenticity was absent in her warning. She gave Liese a warm smile. “I’m Emily Captain. I teach art and art history.”

“Liese Harper, the new librarian.” She took Emily’s outstretched hand.

“Don’t listen to anything this one says.” Blake brushed off Emily’s comment. She retaliated by flicking a paperclip at him. Theirs seemed to be a long-standing friendship.

Conversation turned to summer holidays and start-up plans for the fall, with more teachers joining the table as it drew closer to nine o’clock.

Emily flipped through her package and turned it around to Blake. “Have you seen this? They haven’t tried to outlaw it, but they sure are making it a big deal.”

Highlighted by bright yellow paper was a photocopied article on workplace harassment issues, including a bolded section on inter-collegial dating.

Blake scoffed. “I bet this is because of that principal in Berks County.”

“What principal?” Liese asked.

“The one who got caught having an affair with a teacher,” Emily explained.

“I’m pretty sure it wasn’t an affair. Neither one of them was married, from what I read, so that makes it a relationship.” Blake noted as he flipped through the pages of the orientation package.

He appeared uninterested in the topic, and Liese looked surreptitiously at Ryder. Her thoughts turned to the slew of images her best friend had been sending since Liese had accepted the position at FAHL. She’d gone on endlessly about Ryder’s attributes, both physical and intellectual, and in return, Marissa had indulged her with ridiculously porno-riffic pictures. Liese hadn’t thought it much of an issue until now. However, keeping a folder of doctored images featuring her principal might not be the most ethical practice.

If you enjoyed PUCKED, you should read on to experience the hilarity of:

FIRE IN THE HOLE

BY DEBRA ANASTASIA

Dove stood in her hallway for longer than a reasonable person should. All she could picture was Duke downstairs, taking off his crazy outfit. Shit, he'd probably poke his eye out getting that guyliner off right now.

She padded down the stairs and pushed open his door, which was slightly ajar. The light from the bathroom spilled into the living room, and she tiptoed in, and sure enough, he was standing in front of his mirror, dabbing at his left eye over and over and cursing.

She opened the door the rest of the way and waited a second until he saw her. He didn't say anything. Standing there in unbuttoned jeans, a tight, sleeveless tank, and wild hair, he looked like he belonged on the cover of a dirty book. A filthy dirty book.

Dove grabbed a handful of toilet paper from the roll and scootched in front of him to moisten it lightly with water from the tap. She went to hop up on his sink, and he put his hands on her hips to help her.

"I figured you'd be down here turning your eyeball into a pile of mush." She bit her bottom lip and ran the paper lightly under his eye, eliminating the smudge that wearing it had caused.

The normally chatty Duke was quiet, but his breath was coming faster and faster.

She moved to his right eye and did the same. The liner was still there, but just a hint now. She tossed the paper in the trash and ran her hand through his hair.

"What kind of product did she put in here? Her orgy-proof stuff is scary." His hair was stiff but still soft somehow, and she ran her fingers through it a few times. He set his hands on either side of her, and his knuckles went white as if having her touch him caused him pain or made him want to hit something.

She looked from his hands to his eyes, and the lust there was so apparent it was scary in the most sensual way.

"He's gone. Johnson left." She ran her hands down his ridiculous biceps. "It's us. Here."

He put his hands on her ass and pulled her hard against him. "Damn it, Dove." His voice was gravelly. "I want to tell you to leave. To go—because

you're too indecisive and it hurts me, but the truth is I'll take whatever you're willing to give me."

She ran her hands down his chest, making sure to graze his nipples. He made an almost imperceptible growl. "That's not fair."

Duke put his forehead against hers.

"For you. You deserve more. What about Flower?" She touched her nose to his.

"Did you come downstairs and put your legs around me to talk about other people?" And that anger was there again, just resting beneath the passion he was barely keeping a lid on.

She locked her feet behind his back. She hadn't even done it consciously. "No. I came down here because I needed to see you."

Was this the same guy who had gay porn embedded on his TV? Was this the guy who wore chicken tighty-whities like a uniform?

His outfit was killing her in her ovaries. She set her hands behind her and pushed out her breasts, knowing her nipples were hard.

"I need you naked. Screaming my damn name. If that's not happening tonight, you need to get the hell out of here." He pointed at the door while looking at her chest.

"Duke. I'm not decided about Johnson. I just..." He was right. She should leave.

"Dove." He grabbed two fistfuls of her hair. "I'd fuck you while he watched if I had to."

She was supposed to make words, but the closest she got to them was a desperate, moaning hum. He was coiled and ready to pounce on her. The power to flip his switch was in her hands.

Dove put her lips next to his. He was shaking—just a tiny bit.

And then she unleashed him with one word.

"Please."

Duke heard her permission through the blood pounding in his ears. It was going to be a fucking mess. She lived upstairs, she wasn't sure which guy she wanted, but she was here and she was ready. Duke had watched too much porn to not take an offer of sex when he got one.

From her.

Her.

He kissed her so hard and deep he was pretty sure he could change her religion with his tongue. Her breasts missed him—he could tell; they’d been talking to him ever since he tasted them, even if Dove hadn’t realized it. He tore her shirt open, not really intending to, but her pajamas were so damn old her top reacted like a piece of paper to the force of his hands.

He looked in her eyes and watched her pupils get larger. Aroused. *Damn it.* He ripped it the rest of the way and attacked her with all his pent-up feelings. Lust. Love. So much love. He adored her as his fingers pressed into her thighs, as his tongue circled her pretty pink nipple. His dick was ready to light a stick of dynamite and blow its way out of his jeans. She rubbed against him hard, letting her head loll back, little gasps of want coming from her mouth.

He’d spent approximately four hundred thousand hours picturing this very thing again. To have her skin and his skin touching. She was yanking at his tank, and he paused to help her. Skin against skin, he pulled her in for a hug, stopping the flow of all his wild need for her for a minute. She was panting as much as he was.

“You still with me?” he breathed against her ear, and she shivered, nodding. Duke slipped a hand between her legs and felt the dampness on her pajama pants. He felt like he had won an Olympic medal on the moon right then. He was a god.

She nodded again.

“Say it.” Duke stopped caressing her, even though he’d have rather gnawed off his own dick than do so.

She stilled, wrapped her arms around his neck, and told him the three words he was dying to hear. “You’re my stepbrother.”

“Shit.” He lifted her then. His dick was a Command hook and she was a soggy towel that needed drying; they fit together like they were made for that very purpose.

He maneuvered her around the open door and put her against the sturdiest wall. She kissed him like she’d just discovered what girls and boys could do with each other. Greedily.

It was amazing, more than he’d hoped, and he had a nagging feeling—well more than one—that he shouldn’t be doing this with her. Not now. Her boyfriend had left her emotions in tatters.

She dragged her fingernails down his back.

He set her down on her feet, grabbed her hand, and pulled her toward his bedroom. He made a short detour to kick his front door shut, thinking for a second he saw someone outside it. He locked it just to be on the safe side. He didn't want Johnson wandering in and changing Dove's mind.

He opened his bedroom door, and caught her in a tight embrace. Then he placed his feet on either side of hers and pushed her backward onto his bed.

"Your stepbrother wants things from your body." He spoke into the soft skin at her neck.

"I have no idea why that is the sexiest thing I've ever heard." Dove reached for him.

"It's magic." He meant her, with her hair spread out around her head and her welcoming him into her arms. It was magic. She was magic.

She smiled. "Let's see what it's made of."

Duke kicked off the horrible boots and climbed on top of her.

"The liner works, the hair, the giant muscles in your arms..." She initiated the kiss.

Duke stopped thinking right then and instead, began memorizing. Her touch, her taste.

Her.

Want more Gynazule?

It's FREE for Kindle Unlimited users!

[Fire Down Below \(Book #1 in the Gynazule Series\)](#)

[Fire in the Hole \(Book #2 in the Gynazule Series\)](#)

Are live NOW!

OTHER TITLES BY DEBRA ANASTASIA

[Crushed Seraphim](#)
[Bittersweet Seraphim](#)
[Poughkeepsie](#)
[Return to Poughkeepsie](#)
[Saving Poughkeepsie](#)
[Poughkeepsie Begins \(coming 11/22/2015\)](#)
[Shackled](#)
[Late Night with Andres](#)
[Fire Down Below \(Gynazule Volume 1\)](#)
[Fire in the Hole \(Gynazule Volume 2\)](#)
[*The Revenger \(coming 2015\)*](#)

CONNECT WITH DEBRA ANASTASIA

[AMAZON](#)
[FACEBOOK](#)
[GOODREADS](#)
[WEBSITE](#)
[TWITTER](#)
[PINTEREST](#)
[INSTAGRAM](#)



Your gateway to knowledge and culture. Accessible for everyone.



z-library.se

singlelogin.re

go-to-zlibrary.se

single-login.ru



[Official Telegram channel](#)



[Z-Access](#)



<https://wikipedia.org/wiki/Z-Library>