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**SHUT OUT**

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*Cathryn*  
**FOX**  
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR



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## COPYRIGHT

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Shut Out  
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I grip the steering wheel tighter, and the snow crunches beneath the tires on my old 1998 Subaru Outback. It's a good thing my buddy Beck recently gave the old girl a tune up and helped me put on my winter tires. Driving from Halifax, Nova Scotia, to Summerside, Prince Edward Island, in the winter is always risky. But right after a heavy snowstorm, now that's a little trickier and slow going—especially when I have precious cargo on board.

Speaking of precious cargo.

I take a fast glance at Alysha and find her clasping her hands tightly, her eyes glued to the white road ahead. I don't normally carry anything so precious in my old vehicle, but this year, I'm bringing Alysha Tiffany home for Christmas. Partly because she doesn't want to go back to the Hamptons—I've yet to find out why—and partly because she sprained her ankle in last night's Christmas performance and needs a friend. Bringing her home with me has nothing to do with the fact that I've had it bad for her for a long time now. Nope, nothing to do with that at all and it's a good goddamn

thing, considering she's practically engaged. Which raises the question: if her guy is waiting for her, why doesn't she want to go home?

I want to ask, but it's not my business. Nope, my business is to be her friend, help her with her injury, and enjoy our down-home Christmas where my mother goes all out, using recipes that have been passed down from generation to generation, and presents are made, not bought. It's simple, wholesome and unpretentious and I wouldn't have it any other way.

Alysha though... I like the girl a lot, and while I like the idea of her around our tree and table, I'm sure our humble holiday is a lot different than what she's accustomed to. But that doesn't mean it won't be fun for her. I'm going to personally guarantee that it is. Sure, I get it, she'll never see me as anything more than a friend, but where I grew up, a person helps another when they're in need. Right now, it seems to me Alysha is in need—of a friend.

"Doing okay?" I ask, my gaze quickly moving to her foot, which I insisted she prop up on a few pillows below the dash. She's in a pair of untied sneakers today. Her foot was too sore and too swollen to get into her boots.

She tosses me a wobbly smile, and I try to ignore the wobble it causes in my chest, right around the vicinity of my heart. She's hurt about something. I mean, she has to be, right? Who doesn't want to go home for Christmas? She used to live with my friend Daisy, until Daisy got together with Brandon. Now Alysha is in her own condo. From what Daisy explained, Alysha comes from a great family. Heck, her father just recently bought an NHL team in Boston, although Alysha's never mentioned it.

"I'm okay," she answers quietly, softly. "Are you okay?"

Nope, not okay. Not okay at all. How could I be when the girl who's invaded my dreams for nearly a year now is sitting next to me—coming home with me—her sweet scent filling the car and teasing all my senses, and there isn't a damn thing I can do about it.

"Yeah, good."

She wipes her hand over the still frosty passenger side window. "The roads are pretty bad. Maybe we should have waited a day."

"It's okay. I'm used to driving in the winter." She twists her fingers together, and without thinking, I reach out and give her hand a squeeze. Her gaze shoots to mine. "Don't worry. I won't let anything happen to you."

Her smile is warm and grateful, and I think she actually believes me. We've not spent a whole lot of time together—other than the night I slept on her sofa—but I like that she trusts me. That night, though, when I slept—didn't sleep a wink, actually—on her sofa, it took every ounce of my strength not to follow her to her room, to her bed, and just hold her and tell her everything would be okay. I had no idea why she was crying as she walked along the Halifax waterfront. But when I came upon her on my way home from a friend's place, and found her shaky and sad, no way was I going to leave her. Daisy wasn't home, so I planted my ass on her sofa and stayed there until morning. Until I knew she was okay.

"Thanks, Ryan...for everything."

My heart pumps a bit harder as she hugs herself, and I jack the heat. "I'd put on the seat warmers..." I tap the dashboard. "...but this old beast doesn't have any."

A smile spreads across her pretty face. "That's okay. I really like your station wagon."

I chuckle. Not too many guys my age drive a wagon, but I don't care. This was my father's car. He bought it the year I was born, and I inherited it when he passed away. I was only twelve, so it sat for a few years before I was old enough to drive it. But I love everything about the old car, just like I loved everything about my old man. Jesus, I miss him.

"You don't have to say that." I wink at her. "Gertie has a thick skin."

"Gertie?"

I rub the dashboard. "That's what Dad called her, and I think it's fitting."

She grins, and I can't help but think how adorable she looks in my big-ass passenger seat. She's so tiny the plush seat nearly swallows her whole. Yeah, it's probably a good thing she'll never be mine. I'm six-four and tower over her. There's no way we'd ever fit together.

"It's a perfect name and I'm not just saying that. I like... Gertie." She shifts and stretches her injured leg out even more. "Look at the leg room." She nods toward the back. "I could even take a nap in the back if I wanted to."

"Been there done that," I say with a laugh. Yeah, in my younger years at the Academy, I slept off a few party nights back there, and well, there were nights I didn't get any sleep either. I'm so past that shit now, though.

"Oh yeah... Wait?" Blue eyes that look big against her tiny face and prominent cheekbones widen as she eyes me. "Do I want to know?"



I snicker as I pull onto the highway. “No, probably not. But if you want to sleep, go ahead and close your eyes. I know you didn’t get much last night.”

“Neither did you.”

“How did you know that? Wait. Did you sneak into your spare room and check on me?”

She shifts, and OMG, she did, she totally did.

“No, I just...well, I had to go to the bathroom and your door was open and you were tossing and turning.”

“So you were creeping me.” In real life and in my dreams. Although in my dreams, she wasn’t creeping, she was nestled beneath me as I put my mouth on her body.

Abort.

*Do not go down that path, Ryan. She’s practically engaged.*

Her phone pings, and she jerks her gaze away, looking grateful for the reprieve. I turn back to the road, but her worry, her angst-ridden anxiety, wraps around me as she slides her finger across her phone and reads the message.

After a moment, she sets her phone down and the radio fills the silence. I toss her a glance. “Thanks.”

“For what?” she asks.

“For saying you like my car.” It actually means a lot to me. “It was my Dad’s.”

“Well, he has good taste in cars.” I grin, and she asks, “What do you do for fun in PEI?”

“You know the usual. Drag racing, cock fighting...knitting.”

When she doesn't respond, I cast her a glance and find her lush lips parted, disbelief mixed with worry in her eyes. "What?" I ask with a laugh. "You don't do those things?"

"No."

I wink at her again. "Don't worry, only one of those things was true."

"God, which one?"

"Knitting."

"You're lying."

"No, I'm not."

She folds her arms, and whatever had her worried a moment ago, is now gone, and I'm happy I can make her forget for a little while. "You knit?"

"You don't?"

Astounded. That's the only way to describe the look on her face. "No."

"Cock fighting?"

She whacks me and laughs. "No, and I'd better not see any of that. I love animals."

"Then you're going to love the farm. We have lots of animals."

She settles back in her seat, a small smile on her face. "Yeah? Like what?"

"Mr. and Mrs. Potato Head."

She laughs at that, her mood lightening, and I let my shoulders relax as I navigate the slushy highway. “Do you play fetch with them?”

“No of course not. They’re chickens” I give her a look that suggests she’s dense. “I played with Carter.”

“Not a chicken?”

“Of course not, he’s my dog, of course. Was, I mean. Carter is gone now.”

“I had a dog when I was little. One day I came home, and he was gone. Mom told me he went to a big farm. I wonder if it was your farm.”

I cast her a sideways glance. “Ah, you know that’s just what parents say—”

“Wait, are you telling me that my dog died?”

Shit. I break out into a sweat. “Alysha—”

She whacks me. “I’m kidding. I did have a dog though and Mom did tell me that. Tell me more about your game of fetch.”

“Carter and I played, but when he died, I tried turning to Sam.”

“Sam?”

“It’s not like I could play fetch with Sam. Not anymore, anyway.”

“Sam is a dog?”

“Ah, no.” She arches a brow, and I make a hissing sound as I wince like I’d just eaten something sour. “Not a dog.”

She gathers her long dark hair in her hand, and pulls an elastic off her wrist to tie it up. "So you don't play fetch with chickens, but you play fetch with something that isn't a dog?"

"Did you miss the part where I said not anymore?"

"What did you do, Ryan?" Her voice is light and full of laughter as it wraps around me and squeezes tight.

"Well..." I begin and exhale as I remember our pet pig. Of course, he wasn't supposed to be a pet, and that's why you never name animals on a farm. "There was this incident."

She angles her head, her blue eyes narrowed in on me. "Incident?"

"Yeah, that's how we refer to it now."

She laughs harder. "Oh, God, maybe I don't want to know."

I laugh with her, and turn on my wipers as a truck flies by and covers the windshield in slushy snow. "Goddamn idiots," I say under my breath.

The conversation shifts, the mood in the car changing as she hugs herself again. "I wouldn't want to be out in this in my car."

She drives a tiny little blue Mini that would have been buried under by that truck's spray. It's a cute vehicle and suits her, but useless in the snow. "I'm glad you're not driving back to the Hamptons in this weather."

She gives me that grateful smile again and ignores her phone when it pings. I glance at it, but can't tell who's texting. "What do you do for fun back home?" I ask. Her head dips and she frowns, like she's trying really hard to figure that out. "You must still have friends there." Still no answer so I add, "You and Linc must do a lot of fun things together."

*Okay Ryan, way to be subtle.*

She nods. "Yeah, we do. We like to go to restaurants, and concerts, and things like that."

"Dancing?"

Wow, did she just physically tighten? How could dancing be a sore spot when it's what she studies and wants to do after college?

"No, not really." She lifts her head, her eyes half closed. She looks at me through dark lashes and asks, "Do you...dance?"

"Sure. I mean It's not pretty. I'm all legs, and I jump around like a cricket in a hot frying pan, but yeah, I dance."

"Wait, you put crickets in hot frying pans?"

"You don't?"

"Ohmigod," she says as she playfully reaches for the door handle. "Tell me you're kidding or I'm jumping."

"Okay, I don't. I'm not that great of a cook, but I can't say other people in my family don't."

"Ryan!"

I laugh. "No, we don't eat crickets in PEI. We eat potatoes. Lots and lots of potatoes."

"I don't usually eat potatoes."

"You will be this holiday."

She shrugs. "Okay."

Wow, that was easy. If I told her she'd have to be beneath me in my bed, would she agree just as easily?

*Cut that shit out, Ryan.*

Her phone pings again and she picks it up and exhales as she stares at the screen, her brow furrowed.

“Go ahead and text.” I stare at the road to give her privacy. “I don’t mind.”

“It’s Linc,” she says quietly as she turns her phone over to hide the message and sets it on her lap.

There’s no missing the sadness in her voice. I guess maybe he’s not the reason she doesn’t want to go home. I don’t know why that guts me. I want her happy, and if Linc makes her happy, then so be it. “I guess it’s hard for you not seeing him over the holidays. Is he pretty upset about it?”

Her head moves slightly, the smallest nod I’ve ever seen. She laughs, but it holds no humor. “It’s not like we would have seen a lot of each other anyway.”

She snorts, and it holds a measure of frustration and something else, something just below the surface that could be... relief? Does she not want to see her almost-fiancé? I’m not sure, but my interest is seriously piqued.

“Yeah?”

“He’s a lawyer. He works for my father, and with the new...” She goes quiet and her fingers tighten on her phone.

“The new team?” I ask. Why does she not like talking about it?

“Right, and so there is a lot of work, which doesn’t stop because it’s the holidays, plus...”

I go quiet and wait for her to continue. When she doesn’t, I reach for my Thermos mug and take a sip of coffee. “Anyway, it’s nothing.”

Nope, not nothing at all. Just nothing she wants to talk to me about, and that's fine. We're friends, and she doesn't have to tell me anything she doesn't want to.

She reaches over and puts her fingers on the cuffs of my well-worn winter sweater. "Will you show me?"

"Show you what?" I ask, thinking about all the things I'd love to show her and all the things I'd like for her to show me in return.

*Jesus, don't go there, Ryan.*

"How to knit?"

"Sure."

She sinks deeper into her seat, and says, "Okay, now tell me everything about Sam and the incident that forever changed your game of fetch."

I sit up straighter as we cross the Confederation bridge and try to see over the sides. “It’s really eight miles long?” I ask. He jokes about a lot of things, and I’m never entirely sure if he’s kidding or being serious.

“Yup, longest bridge in the world crossing over ice-covered water. It opened a couple of years before I was born, and before that there were only ferries, one from Nova Scotia and one from New Brunswick. That could be slow going, from what I heard.”

“I think the ferry would be fun.”

“In the summer, not the winter. If you come home with me again in the summer, we can take the ferry.” His words bang around inside my head and I sink back into my seat. I won’t be going home with him in the summer. Honestly, I can’t believe I’m going home with him now. Well, maybe I can, because deep down, I’m a big coward. Pathetic, I know, but that’s what I am. I should be going home and facing Linc, but instead I used my twisted ankle as an excuse. I could have



flown home instead of driving, like Linc suggested, but I played into my injury, and laid it out like mobility was near impossible. Like I said...pathetic.

“You only have to pay a bridge toll when you leave the island,” Ryan says as we reach the other side and drive by a bunch of shops. “That’s Gateway Village. If you’re thinking about souvenirs, we can stop.”

I shake my head. “I’ll look for something later.” I don’t want to be rude, but there is no one in my life back in the Hamptons that would want a trinket from Prince Edward Island. My mother doesn’t have anything nice to say about Canada as it is. She thinks all Canadians live in igloos and eat seal blubber. So rude.

But maybe that’s why I chose Halifax for my higher education. Don’t get me wrong. I love my mother and father, totally, but I needed to get away from the pressure. I want to be a dancer, not a socialite like my mom—a beautiful, talented dancer who gave it up to cater to my dad and turn a blind eye to his affairs. A sound crawls out of my throat.

“You okay?”

“Yeah,” I say. “I was just thinking about poor old Sam.”

“Don’t worry, Sam might be bad at playing fetch, but that old pig lived a good life, was spared from the butcher, and no cows were injured during our game.”

I grin. “Maybe not, but Mr. Burke didn’t fare so well.”

He laughs. “Sure, he did. Now if it was the bull that charged him, we’d be telling a different story, but it wasn’t, and he, for all his troubles, now has a lifetime supply of potatoes.”

“Blackmail potatoes. He could have sued you.” I shake my head and laugh. “I can’t believe Sam chased the ball into the cow pen and scared the crap out of them like that.”

“Oh yeah, there was crap.” He crinkles his nose like he’s knee deep in something stinky. “A lot of crap.”

Poor Mr. Burke. From the way Ryan told the story, the man was simply walking by when a herd of frightened cows broke through the fence and took off running down the road and bowled him over. I laugh, but it’s not funny. Okay, it’s sort of funny—if you have a sick sense of humor, like Ryan and I do. Who would have thought we’d have that in common?

“I can’t believe he didn’t sue.”

“We’re Canadians. We don’t sue over a good old-fashioned cow herd running you down.”

I stare out the window and look at the snow-covered fields. I revel in the wide-open space, and can only imagine how lush it must be in summer.

“Are we close?” I ask, suddenly finding myself excited about spending the holidays on his big family farm, even though I’m being a coward. But going home...Mom throwing a big fake party, Dad schmoozing with the guests and no doubt looking for some young thing to take to bed, and Linc...well, I’m pretty sure, when he’s not working, he’s going to get down on one knee before me. My lungs constrict and a strange wheezing sound catches in my throat.

“Are you okay?”

“I think I need a drink.”

He reaches into the back and produces a water bottle. "Thanks. But I'm not sure this is strong enough." He eyes me. "My ankle," I fib. "I think I moved my foot the wrong way."

"Is there a right way when you have a bad sprain?"

"No, you're right."

"We're almost there, and then we can get your foot properly elevated."

I take a long pull from the bottle and recap it. "Are you sure your family won't mind me just showing up over the holidays?"

"It's a farm, Alysha. We take in strays all the time."

"Hey," I whack him, and the second my hand lands on his hard chest and lingers for a second too long he takes a fast look at me, and I can't help but think he liked me touching him as much as I liked doing it. But he's well aware that I have a boyfriend at home and he's definitely not the kind of guy to make a move on a girl who's attached.

*What if you weren't attached, Alysha?*

Whoa!

I quickly shut that thought down. Heck, Ryan is a good guy and is helping me out. There's nothing more between us, and maybe the heat I spotted in his eyes a second ago was wishful thinking.

Wait...what?

I am not wishfully thinking about anything. I think my sprained ankle is affecting my brain somehow. Or maybe I'm just feeling emotional because every house we pass is deco-

rated for the holiday and while I don't approve of the way my parents live, I still miss them.

"We're here," Ryan says and I sit up a little straighter as he turns into a long driveway. I take in the acres of snow-covered land and all the big red buildings on the property.

"It's huge." I scan the area as he pulls up in front of a big house, a couple of cars in the driveway.

"What were your sisters' names again?"

He laughs. "Lucy is the youngest, Monica is the middle, and Lauren is the oldest."

I repeat the names in my brain as a part of me really hopes they like me. I've always wanted a sister. "And your mom is Patricia and your grandfather is John."

"That's right. You got it."

I reach for the door, and he puts his hand on my arm to stop me. Okay, his touch should not be warming me from the inside out like that. What is going on with my body? Sure, I haven't been touched in a very long time, and the last time I was home, I barely got a peck on the cheek from Linc. He was in the middle of some big negotiation and was working around the clock. The thing is, though, I wasn't really upset about it.

"Let me help."

"I can walk."

"The doctor said to keep it wrapped and elevated, so I'm not letting you walk into the house."

I stare at him. "You are not carrying me."

"I carried you to the car."

We didn't have an audience then. "Yeah, but your family...I don't want them to think you're carrying me over some threshold or that we're a couple or anything." I'm not entirely sure I'm telling the whole truth here. I liked it a lot when he carried me, too much really.

He goes quiet for a second, and his eyes narrow. I'm not sure what's going through his mind, but I know I'm not going to like it.

"Wait here."

He hops from the car, and I sit still as he disappears around the side of the house and comes back with a wooden sled. He opens my door.

I shake my head as I stare at the wooden slats. "Are you kidding me?"

"Nope."

"I'm not getting on that thing." Determined to walk, I put my legs outside the door, and push up, standing on my good foot. Before I can take a step, he scoops me up and sets me on the sled. "This is ridiculous."

"What's ridiculous is how stubborn you're being. You do want to dance again, right?"

I let out a breath and everything inside me softens. How could I be upset when Ryan cares so much about my career? He's the only man in my life who does.

"I do, but this is kind of embarrassing."

"Nah, it's not." His breath turns to fog in front of his face as he talks. "But I can carry you."

"I'm good, let's go."

He grabs the rope and I brace myself as he pulls me over the snow. He turns to face the house as he carefully negotiates the wooden sled over a bump, and unfortunately for me, the sled goes one way and I go another.

I gulp as I faceplant into the snow and I swear to God, I'd rather stay put until spring—my face buried in the snow—then face anyone who might be looking at my ass in the air.

“Shit, I'm so sorry,” Ryan says as he scoops me up. His dark eyes move over my face, and he drops down on one knee, sitting me on his leg as he brushes snow from my face. His lips quirk.

“You better not be laughing,” I warn.

“I'm not,” he says. “Nothing about this is funny.”

“Right, everything about this is funny, and if I didn't have a bad ankle I'd run all the way back to Halifax, or maybe Siberia.”

He smiles at me and I shake my head and smile back. “That sled is out to get me.”

“It's a pretty mean fucker.” He glances at the sled. “One time when I was a kid, that bastard ran me right into a tree. Look.” He pulls his hair from his forehead to show me a scar.

I glance at the slats of wood on the sled. “Maybe we could have a bonfire later. Prop him by it, let him know who's boss.”

Ryan's fingers graze my cheek as he brushes my damp hair back. “I like the idea of a fire. You didn't hurt your ankle, did you?”

“Nope just my pride.” I look around, praying no one saw me. “I don't want to be known as an ‘incident’.”

He laughs. "We need to get you inside and warm. I'll come back for our bags." As the sky grows darker, the outside Christmas lights flicker on and I might be on a farm, but it feels more like I'm stuck in a Norman Rockwell painting. Mom decorates too. Or rather, she hires out for it, and it's lovely, but there's something a little more real and warm about the lights that aren't in a perfect strand.

Instead of moving Ryan continues to balance me on his knee. "I can stand so you can get your key."

"Key? Where do you think you are? This is Summerside, PEI, Alysha. No one locks their door."

"What if someone breaks in?"

"Then they probably need what's inside more than we do." He nudges the door open with his shoulder, and the sweet scent of cinnamon fills my nostrils.

"Mom's famous cinnamon rolls."

"Ohmigod, that smells good."

He gently sets me down and I balance on one foot as a woman about my height comes around the corner, wiping her hands on a dish towel, a huge smile on her pretty face. "Ryan," she says and he picks her up and swings her around. I smile as I watch. I remember once someone told me to watch how a boy treats his mother and that it was a good indication how he'd treat a girlfriend or wife.

He finally sets her down. "You must be Alysha."

I hold my hand out to shake hers, but nope, she's not having any of that. She pulls me in for a tight hug, and I stand there, soaking in her comfort and trying to remember the last time

I was hugged this hard or this long. Oh yeah, I remember. Never.

She breaks the hug and there's a deep warmth in her dark brown eyes as she threads her arm through Ryan's. As I revel in their closeness—almost a little envious—I chuckle as Ryan hovers over his mom. Is that how I look standing next to him? Probably, and he probably got his height from his dad.

“It's so nice to meet you, Mrs. Potter. Thank you so much for opening your home to me over the holidays.”

She waves the dish cloth in a dismissive way. “Any friend of Ryan's is a friend of ours and always welcome, and please call me Patricia.” A line forms in the center of her forehead as her gaze drops. “I'm so sorry to hear about your ankle.” She taps Ryan's arm. “Why don't you carry her to the sofa, Ryan, so she can rest? I'll bring in coffee and cinnamon rolls.”

“I can wa—”

Scoop.

I yelp, and throw my arms around his broad shoulders. Who knew working a potato farm would give a guy such hard muscles?

“Your grandfather and the girls will be home shortly. They went to the store to pick up some groceries for me, and a trip to Cow's was involved.”

I grin. Prince Edward Island is known for their award-winning Cow's ice cream. We even have a kiosk on the Halifax waterfront, and I too would suffer through grocery shopping if Cow's was involved afterward.

Ryan carries me to the sofa and sets me down. He puts my legs over his and slowly removes my untied sneaker. I lean



forward to take a look. "It looks like the swelling is down a bit."

He lightly touches my ankle as he adjusts my sock. Small goosebumps break out on my skin.

"Are you cold?"

"Yeah. I guess I shouldn't have eaten all that snow, huh?"

He laughs and rolls his eyes. "City girls."

He turns his attention to my other foot and unties my laces. I have no idea what is going on or why I can't seem to take my eyes off his big fingers as he removes my sneakers. You'd think a guy as big and strong as Ryan wouldn't know how to be gentle, or wouldn't be good at all this nurturing stuff.

Needing a distraction, I glance around the living room, but something is missing. "You guys don't put up a tree?"

"Sure, we do." He stands and sets my feet on the pillow. "They were just waiting for me to get home. Dad and I cut one down every year when...well, when he was here. I've taken over the tradition. We grow our own trees at the back of the property."

An almost giddy thrill goes through me. "Are you serious?"

"Yeah, want to come?"

Watching Ryan work an axe. Hell yeah, I want to see that. I frown as he adjusts the pillow under my feet. "I do, but I can't."

"We'll find a way." I open my mouth and he holds a hand up to stop me. "No sleds will be involved."

I laugh. "Or carrying." He arches a brow. "You can't carry me and use an axe, Ryan."

“What’s this about carrying you?” Patricia asks, as she comes into the room with a tray. She sets it on the coffee table, and hands me a cinnamon roll.

“Alysha wants to watch me cut down our tree.”

“Oh, fun. We’ll all go first thing tomorrow after everyone is up. I’ll make hot chocolate.”

Ryan adds a teaspoon of sugar and a dash of milk to a mug, stirs it and hands it to me. How does he know how I like my coffee? We’ve all been out together before, but I can’t imagine he cared enough to watch. I snort. I’m sure Linc has no idea what I put in my mug, but thoughts of him bring pain to my chest. I’ll have to text him before bed, but right now, I just want coffee and treats.

“You’ll be sleeping in Ryan’s room while you’re here,” Patricia says, and I nearly choke on the big bite of pastry.

“What?” I glance around. This big old farmhouse must have at least a dozen rooms.

“His bed is much more comfortable than the one in the spare room. I’ve been meaning to buy a new one, but we don’t often have overnight guests and I keep forgetting.”

“Oh, okay. I thought—”

“You thought Mom was putting you in my bed with me,” Ryan says with a devilish smirk.

Yes, I did think that which is crazy. “Your mom said you don’t often have guests, and here you said you often take in strays.”

Ryan grins and his mother’s mouth drops open. “Ryan, what a horrible thing to say.”

“I was kidding, Mom.”

Patricia shakes her head. "I'm sorry my son has a strange sense of humor. You are not a stray and Ryan hasn't brought anyone here in a while. Last time was his friends Kennedy and Matt. They were the sweetest couple." Her gaze goes from me to Ryan and back to me again.

Wait, does she think?

"Oh, they are a great couple, but Ryan and I are just friends. He's just helping me out. Travel would be hard." *Stop freaking rambling, Alysba.* "We're not a couple or anything. That would be..." I let my words fall off, because while crazy is hovering on the tip of my tongue, why would it be so crazy. Ryan is a nice guy.

Oh right, it would be crazy because I'm practically engaged.

"Is crazy the word you're looking for?" he asks, and for a split second I think I see hurt in his eyes.

"No, I just mean, we're...friends." Ryan is friends with a lot of girls back on campus. I'm not even sure I've ever seen him on a date, and no girls talk about hooking up with him. That's when another thought hits and I blurt out, "Do you have a girlfriend here, on the island?"

His mother sits back in her chair, her body tightening, and the muscles in Ryan's jaw ripple as he clenches. Clearly, there's a story here, and it's not a happy one.

"No." His voice is deep and hard, and he turns his attention to pouring milk into his cup. I sip mine, needing to occupy my mouth before I blurt something else out—something that's none of my business. "I'll get the bags."

He disappears and I take a sip of my coffee. "Tell me about your dancing," Patricia says.

“My mom was a dancer.”

Her eyes light. “You’re following in her footsteps. How lovely.” She glances down, a frown on her face as she stirs more sugar into her mug. “Ryan is following in his father’s footsteps.”

“His father was in the NHL?”

she shakes her head. “No, no. Farming.”

Wow, it doesn’t sound like she likes that idea at all. Wait, is she saying he wants to move back to PEI? “I thought he wanted the NHL?”

Before she can answer, in comes Ryan with his grandfather and his sisters, tromping through the front entranceway like a herd of elephants. Patricia jumps up as everyone talks at once and hugs Ryan.

“Girls, John, come and meet Alysha.”

I shift and put my foot on the floor as his sisters, every one of them gorgeous, come into the room.

“Sorry to hear about your ankle,” the tallest one says and the other two agree. Patricia introduces them as Ryan runs the bags upstairs. He comes back, and holds his arms out. “Uh, didn’t anyone miss me?”

“We already hugged you,” Lauren says and rolls her eyes at me. I grin, loving the comradery.

“How was Cow’s?” I ask.

Monica rubs her stomach. “So good.”

John comes in and we exchange pleasantries for a second and then he says, “Okay girls, come on, the groceries aren’t going to put themselves away and you’ll have plenty of time to get

to know Alysha.” He winks at me. “We don’t want her getting sick of us and trying to run off. Although she’s not going to get far. Not with that ankle.”

After everyone leaves me alone with Ryan, he puts his arm over his shoulder and rubs the back of his neck. “Come on. I’ll show you to your room.”

I push to my feet and he moves toward me. “Fine,” I say and let him pick me up. “I’m sure by tomorrow, I can put more pressure on it.”

He carries me upstairs, and sets me down outside his room. He looks over my shoulder. “Don’t be snooping through my things.”

“You have something to hide in there. Dirty magazines?” Oh, God, why did I ask that? Heat moves into my cheeks.

He leans in, his body close, as his breath stimulates the shell of my ear. “Don’t check under the mattress.”

He’s kidding. I think. I’m never really sure with him. “Now I have to.”

“Oh, you’re one of them, are you?”

I turn and glance around the room. Everything about the room feels like Ryan. Warm. Comfortable. Homey.

I spot my bag on his bed, and I turn back to him. “Ryan, I’m sorry I asked about a girlfriend. That’s not my business. I shouldn’t have asked. I just...”

He leans into me again, his big body eating up the entrance way. He’s so close I can smell his skin, the shampoo he used on his hair this morning—my shampoo. He didn’t have to stay the night to watch over me, and I told him that, but deep inside, it was kind of nice having him at my place.

“It’s okay. It’s been over for a while. You can ask me whatever you want.”

“Did she...hurt you?”

He takes a step closer, and my body should not be tingling the way it is. “Yeah.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Nothing for you to be sorry about.”

His head dips, and his gaze moves to my mouth. I instinctively wet my lips as my heart pounds a little faster against my ribs. Ohmigod, is he going to kiss me? Do I want that? I must be reading this wrong. Ryan would never try anything with me, not when I have a boyfriend. Right? I guess I’ll never know now, because my phone just pinged and Ryan is inching back, scrubbing his hand over his face.

“Linc,” I say. I shake my phone. “I should probably...”

He gives a curt nod. “I’m sure he’s missing you.”

My throat tightens and I force my words out. “I probably wouldn’t have seen much of him anyway.” He doesn’t answer, but his eyes are full of questions. “Like I said, he’s one of Dad’s lawyers and always working around the clock to make a name for himself.”

He nods like he understands, but I’m not sure how he can. “I’m sorry you’re missing him.”

I stare at his broad back as he turns and disappears into the room across the hall, and before I can blurt out, *I’m not*, I shut my door, lean against it, and wonder exactly why I’m not missing Linc, and why I wanted Ryan to know.

I wake, and the second reality replaces the dream in my brain, I glance around the room, and stretch as my mind goes to Alysha—snuggled in my bed. Last night it drove me crazy to think she was in there on the phone with Linc. Christ, they were probably sexting, or maybe they were on a video call and she was touching herself as she writhed on my bed.

I groan and roll over, my early morning boner tenting my boxers. I'm just about to take it into my hand but stop myself. I should not be tugging one out while thinking about a girl who is unattainable.

Fuck, I wish I didn't have it so bad for her. Last night, what the hell was I thinking? I nearly kissed her. How could I not when she was standing in my bedroom door, looking warm and soft and sexy. It was all I could do not to take her to my bed and crawl in with her. Not that I've ever done that in my family home. I'm the oldest and supposed to be setting a good example, but Christ. I really like Alysha—who is practically engaged. What the hell does practically engaged even

mean, anyway? You either are, or you aren't. If I were Linc, I damn well would have put a ring on it a long-ass time ago.

Dishes clang downstairs and I get my dick under control before I kick off my blankets. The cool morning air hits my skin and I tug on my jeans and sweater. Outside, there's a fresh new layer of snow on everything, but it's letting up, which means we'll be able to go get our tree. I make a quick trip to the bathroom and walk past my bedroom door. I stand for a second, and debate on knocking, to see if she wants to come down for breakfast. But if she's still sleeping, I probably shouldn't wake her. I just don't want her negotiating the stairs on her own. I'll listen for her and dash back up to get her when I hear her door open.

I head downstairs and I'm taken aback when I find Alysha seated at the big kitchen table with my mom, grandfather and Lauren, who has both feet on the chair and her big sweater pulled over her knees. I stop dead in my tracks the second I realize Alysha is wearing my flannel pajamas. Wow, who knew I could be jealous of a pair of pajamas?

"I hope you don't mind," she says and toys with the button on the loose-fitting top. My God, I never thought flannels were sexy before.

"No, not at all."

"I forgot to pack pajamas, and I got cold through the night."

"Help yourself to anything in my room."

*Myself included.*

"Hey kiddo," I say and ruffle Lauren's hair the way she hates. "What are you doing up?"



“Ryan!” she squeals and whacks me. I catch the grin flirting with Alysha’s lips.

I turn my focus back to Alysha. Yeah, that’s right. I can’t stop staring at her. “How’s the ankle?”

“Good, actually.” She sticks her leg out, and tugs the pants up to show me her ankle. “The swelling is down.”

That makes one of us.

“Doesn’t hurt quite as much to walk on it,” she adds.

“You should have woken me.” I head to the cupboard and pull out a mug. “I would have carried you downstairs.”

“I went slow, and I used those.” I follow her gaze and set eyes on my old crutches. “I found them in your closet when I was searching for something warm to wear. I hope you don’t mind.”

She must really hate it when I carry her. “Right, I forgot I even had them.” I set my mug on the counter. “Sleep good?”

She makes a moaning sound that teases my cock, and Jesus, now is not the time for a boner. “Your bed is so comfortable. I might never leave.”

I laugh. “That’s why I keep coming back.” I grab the carafe and pour a cup of coffee. I hold it out to see if anyone needs a refill, and my grandfather points to his mug.

“Time to hand his bed down to me,” Lauren grunts as she fixes her hair. “I saw one on the side of the road last week. Looked good and lumpy.”

“Hey, are you saying you don’t want me coming home?”

“Not if you’re going to mess up my hair.”

I pull out a chair and drop down next to Alysha, and as our thighs bump, I try not to react, even though my body is buzzing from her close proximity.

“He won’t be coming back once he’s drafted,” Grandad says before taking a big drink of coffee, and my chest constricts. It’s what he wants for me, what everyone here wants—everyone but me. The truth is, I love the game, but my heart is here on the island. Everything I love and want is here.

“Yeah,” is all I say as Alysha stares at me, confusion on her face. “What time should we head out to get the tree?”

“Snow’s letting up. We can go as soon as the girls are up.”

Alysha sets her mug down. “I’m not so sure I can go.”

“We’ll take the sled,” Grandad says, and Alysha opens her mouth, about to protest.

“Not that one,” I hurry to explain. “The one the horses pull.”

Her brows bunch together as she questions, “You have horses?”

“Yeah, do you ride?”

She smiles. “I used to, years ago.”

“Today you can ride in the sled with mom and my sisters. Grandad will drive and I’ll take the snowmobile with a different sled attached to get the tree back. Sound like fun?”

“Yeah, it does. I’ve never been on a sleigh ride.”

“It’s a lot of fun,” Mom says. “And of course, hot chocolate.”

“I’m in,” Alysha says and lifts her mug in salute. “Oh wait, I don’t have boots.”

“I have a big pair you can pull on. They’ll keep you warm and shouldn’t hurt your ankle.” Her smile wraps around my chest and squeezes. “Mind if I pop into my bedroom to get clean clothes?”

“No, I’ll go with you. I need to get changed too.”

She pushes from the chair and uses the crutches to follow me to the stairs and I work hard to stare straight ahead and not glance back at her. I should not be admiring the way my pajamas hang on her body and just how sexy she looks.

I take a fast look over my shoulder, and her head lifts slowly, too slowly, because yeah, I just caught her staring at my ass—and I liked it.

“It’s all good?” I ask, my voice coming out rough and strange.

Her eyes go wide. “Ah, what?”

“The crutches, the stairs. You good or do you need my help?” She hesitates for a second, and that’s all I need to add, “If you let me help, you might be back to dancing sooner rather than later.”

“I can’t stop dancing,” she says quietly, and I angle my head, because yeah, that’s kind of a strange thing to say.

My heart aches at the worry in her voice. “Hey, Alysha, it’s just a sprain. I know you can walk, and it’s going to get better. I don’t mean to worry—”

My words fall off as she shakes her head hard. “No, I know you’re being kind. I know I’ll dance again. It’s my...I want to dance.”

“I guess that’s why you’re a dance student, huh?”

Her laugh holds a measure of embarrassment and I no longer wait for her permission. I slide my hands around her body and lift her. Her arms go around my neck, and I simply love the way she clings to me. She's a girl who's been living on her own, and I know she can take care of herself, but I like taking care of her. Maybe it's because I have younger sisters and have tried to be the man of the family since we lost Dad, but either way, I pull her in a little closer and splay my fingers around her back.

"That was a stupid thing to say. I'm just saying I don't ever want to give it up."

I head up the stairs, and take in the tightness in her face. Not my business but I ask anyway, "Who wants you to give it up?"

Her eyes flash to mine, big and blue and worried, like she'd said too much. "I didn't say that."

"Okay."

She falls quiet as I take her to my bedroom and deposit her on my bed. Her phone pings and she stares at it. I turn to give her privacy and pull open my closet. "Linc wants me to," she says so quietly, I nearly miss it.

I turn back around and find her picking invisible lint off her pajama pants. "Why would he want that?"

"It takes up a lot of my time. We hardly see each other."

"Okay, wait, let me get this straight. He wants you to stop pursuing your passion because he doesn't get to see you enough? Didn't you just tell me he's a lawyer who works around the clock?" She nods. "Then maybe he should give that up." Okay, that came out louder and harsher than I intended. I crouch on the floor in front of her and soften my voice. "I'm sorry, Alysha. I'm not trying to judge anyone here."

It's just..." I scrub my face, and glance around my room, my gaze flitting over all the trophies and medals I won at hockey. "I understand when you want to go one way and those around you are pushing you another."

She lightly brushes my hair from my forehead, and I swear to God if she didn't have a boyfriend, I'd lay her out on my bed and kiss the hell out of her. But she does and I can't. I jump to my feet, walk to my window and stare out at Granddad as he walks to the barn to get the horse ready.

"I just want you to live the life you want. I'm sorry Linc doesn't support that."

"My parents want me to dance as a hobby."

"What do you want?"

A smile instantly forms on her pretty face. "I actually want to teach dance. I volunteered at a studio back home, working with little girls. It was so much fun, Ryan."

"You have to live your own life, Alysha, the life you want."

"You say that like it's so easy."

"Nothing is easy," I tell her. Jesus, after Dad died, life was hell and trying to be the man of the house and taking over his role was hard. Mom had Granddad of course. The business was his before Dad took over. In fact, it's been in our family for generations, and I was going to do my damndest to learn every aspect of it, back when I was only twelve, going to school, and playing hockey. "My Dad used to say, work hard to get what you need; work harder and you'll get what you want."

"Ooh, an inspirational speaker and a potato farmer."

I laugh at that. "He would have liked you."

"I'm sorry I never got to meet him, Ryan."

As my chest squeezes tight, I head back to the closet. "Did he want you to make it to the NHL, too?"

"Too?" I ask.

"From what I understand, sounds like your mom and grandfather want you to focus on hockey." I nod. "Is that not what you want?"

"It's what my ex-girlfriend wanted too." Alysha goes very quiet and I wish I hadn't brought up Lexi. There must be a storm coming or something, and it's messing with my brain. Alysha and I don't usually talk about personal things and talking about what happened with my ex still leaves a bad taste in my mouth and a hole in my gut. I still can't believe the extremes she went to, to convince me to make it to the NHL.

"Is she here...on the island?"

"Not anymore." I shake off the memories and lift my chin. "I want to farm," I say pointedly.

She nods, and for some reason, I get the sense that she doesn't believe that. Sure, all boys who grow up playing want to make it into the NHL. But I'm simply not one of them.

I search my closet and pull out a big pair of sweatpants and a hoodie. Alysha must read something on my face when I turn back to her. She studies me for a second and then says, "Kind of a deep conversation on a Saturday morning before your second cup of coffee, eh?"

I grin at the use of Canadian slang, and hold the clothes out to her. "I'm not sure what you packed, but you're going to need something really warm."

A grateful smile passes over her face. "Thank you. I definitely did not pack for rural PEI. Not that I could have. I don't have the proper clothes, even at home."

"What's mine is yours," I tell her as she brings the clothes to her nose. "Ah, did you just smell my clothes?"

She laughs. "They smell so good. I need to find out what fabric softener your mother uses."

I put my hand over my mouth and laugh as I cough into it. "Freak."

She laughs and throws a pillow at me. But she's not the freak. I am, for counting down the seconds until I see her in my sweats, and wishing I could be the guy to help her on with them—off would be preferable—and really, both thoughts are inappropriate and never going to happen.

I tug out my own clothes, and speaking of tugging. Yeah, it's true, I might just have to tug one out in the shower before we head out into the tree lot out back, otherwise, I'm afraid when I swing the axe, it might hit wood, and I'm not talking about the tree trunk.