

*A friends-to-lovers
prequel novella*

THE MIXED SIX PACK

FRISKY

**WITH
MY**

Bestie

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

DANIKA BLOOM

FRISKY WITH MY BESTIE

A PREQUEL NOVELLA IN THE MIXED SIX-PACK
SERIES

DANIKA BLOOM

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1. Title

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, and events are from the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual people, living or dead, is coincidental. Funny... but coincidental.

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THE MIXED SIX-PACK

Have you read all the brother's journeys to their happily ever afters? Each story is a full-length, steamy romantic comedy.

- Nick & Sophie, his and hers firefighters, in [FIRST IN.](#)
- Dylan & Kama, enemies with chemistry, in [SECOND BREATH.](#)
- Josh & Paige, the love that never waned, in [THIRD PARTY.](#)
- Adam & Lizzy, fake marriage, true love, in [RHODES TO LOVE.](#)

ABOUT FRISKY WITH MY BEST FRIEND

"Frisky With My Best Friend is classic Danika Bloom rom-com. Cue the interfering siblings, the adorable grandmother, and a grand gesture to be remembered." ~Gabbi Grey, USA Today bestselling romance author

"Snappy banter, crackling tension, characters that really pop! I got drawn into the world of this series as the characters hiked their way to a tropey winter escape. Really made me want to binge the series." ~Lainey Davis, Amazon.com #1 bestselling author of small-town romance

Morgan

You've heard the stories. Boy meets amazing girl. Boy gets friend-zoned. Boy realizes he's in love with girl. The aforementioned friend-zone keeps him from making a move.

Okay, screw it, it's me, I'm the boy... well, the man. I'm totally gone for my best friend, Tamara, but I haven't made a move yet. I've been waiting for the perfect scenario to make her see how good we can be as a couple.

Getting stuck in a ramshackle—not to mention *cold*—cabin together just might be what I've been waiting for.

Tamara

It's not that I haven't noticed how hot my best friend is. I'm not blind. Morgan is eye candy and then some. He's also the sweetest guy I know.

Friends since I was twelve, I've worked hard to not get too close, to not catch feelings. I don't want to lose him as a friend. But when we're forced to share body heat for survival, I can't deny our connection.

When morning comes, will I be brave enough to take the leap and see what a future as lovers might look like?

MORGAN

“It’s just overnight, woman! And you realize I am not schlepping your crap, right?”

“Yeah, yeah, Mr. Survivalist. You may be fine living in your own filth for two days, but this girl needs fresh fabrics against her skin at least every twelve hours. And I am quite capable of carrying my own backpack,” Tamara replied with her trademark snark.

There was no doubt she’d be able to handle her bag. She could handle anything the world threw at her—even having me as her best friend since grade ten.

“Nick said the last time he was at the cabin, the previous squatters had left three bottles of wine. So do your weird manifesting thing and picture a case of Howe Sound beer, would you?”

She scoffed. “Well done, idiot. You just mocked the Universe by calling intention-setting weird. Now it wouldn’t surprise me if the last people there left a case of milk.”

I’d tossed one change of socks, a T-shirt, and sweatpants to sleep in into my backpack with my toothbrush, a sleeping bag, and a bunch of dehydrated food. Tamara was still laying out all the things she was planning to take on our five-mile hike into the wilderness. We were headed about an hour from Vancouver to a deserted cabin off an old logging road that we’d access from a little village called Lily Valley. I’d never been but my half brother, Nick, had.

Nick was a career firefighter, and a bunch of the guys he worked with had found the place a few years ago when they were sent to

support the local volunteer department with a forest fire in the area. The cabin had been abandoned decades earlier. It was so far off the hiking and biking trails that until a fire burned a path to its door, they figured nobody had seen it since the last loggers left the area in the 1960s.

Nick and the guys put on a new roof, fixed holes in the floor, and weatherproofed the windows the best they could. Then they used their connections to have a search and rescue chopper deliver a couple of double beds and a small woodburning stove. The place was still barely known outside of the first responder community, but slowly people had been finding out about it.

He'd invited me up on the same weekend I'd promised Tamara I'd be here for her—the tenth anniversary of her brother's death. Jim had died in a car crash on his way to the ski hill on the first day of the Christmas holidays. He was just seventeen.

Jim was my best friend through high school, and Tamara was a third wheel most of the time. She was a year younger and never unwelcome, but we never really considered her in our plans. If she was around and interested in hanging with us, she did.

After Jim died, Tamara was there to fill the hole in my life her brother left. And I guess I did the same for her and we just kind of became best buds. Through college, she was an awesome wingman, making it so much easier to meet women. And I like to think I've saved her from some questionable hookups over the years. Not that she has poor judgment, but she's just too damn nice to tell a guy to fuck off when he starts to be a dick.

Lucky for me, since there have been a couple of times I've tried to cross the line from best friend to bed friend ... fortunately, Nick was always there to stop us from doing something stupid.

Tamara grunted, trying to stuff her sleeping bag into her backpack.

"Okay, I know I said I'd carry my own stuff, but my sleeping bag is twice as thick as yours and I can't get it into my bag. I'll have to leave all the beer here unless ..." Tamara held her hands in prayer position in front of her mouth. Her eyes were wide and sparkled with mirth. Mirth. That was one of her flaky words. "Unless you'd please, please, *pretty* please swap with me? I'll let you have half my beer."

“You manipulative little toad,” I said, picking up my backpack and unzipping it. “Here.” I tossed her my summer-weight bag. Nick said I wouldn’t need more than a light blanket since the woodstove heated the one-room cabin to about a million degrees in under an hour.

“I love you,” Tamara said, handing her arctic-rated sleeping bag to me.

“And I love negotiating with you. That extra beer will taste extra special, knowing you carried it five miles uphill *just for me*.”

“Well, just don’t forget that’s my sleeping bag when we realize Nick’s version of heated and a normal human’s can be quite different.”

“I can one hundred percent guarantee that you’ll be begging me to swap when you wake up soaked in sweat.”

TAMARA

I put on a brave face when Morgan asked if I'd mind spending the weekend with him, Nick, and some firefighter I'd never met before. It was tradition for us to spend this day together, not with other people.

Not that it didn't sound like fun to snowshoe to a hidden cabin with a couple of hot firefighters—well, Nick, who I'd known as long as I'd known Morgan, and some random who I assumed would be hot. It was just that I knew I'd be going through all the feels, like I did every year on Jim's death date, and I wasn't sure I wanted to share that with Nick and some stranger.

Ten years. In some ways, it felt like it was only last week that Jim and Morgan and I were racing down black diamond runs in Whistler. But then a tension in my body would remind my brain of the police arriving at the house after midnight. Of course, it had to be a date that was impossible to forget: December 13, 2011 ... 11-12-13. I've hated that series of numbers ever since. Hated riding in elevators that didn't skip the thirteenth floor since I had to watch the numbers go by—11, 12, 13—and it always made me think of that night.

The cabin would be good, I told myself. Exercising and trying to keep pace with three guys who all had a foot of height on me and were strong enough to carry me five miles in snow would be good to keep me out of my head. That, and the edibles in my pocket would help me sleep since I figured these guys would be snoring the roof off after drinking whatever they were all packing.

“Have you peed? We’re not stopping once we get rolling,” Morgan said, like a pain-in-the-ass dad.

“Have you jerked off?”

“In fact, I have, thank you for caring.”

This was our standard pretrip check/double-check. In all the years we’ve been road-tripping together, I’ve never asked if he was joking. I didn’t want to know.

Morgan drove the winding highway that led to Lily Valley, a village halfway between Vancouver and the ski hill in Whistler. I put on road trip music, even though the drive was under an hour. I knew singing along would keep me distracted when we got to the bend in the road where the truck crossed the center line and smashed head-on into my brother and his girlfriend.

Forty minutes into the drive, Morgan turned down the music and gave me a gentle punch on the thigh as we approached the stretch of road that still freaked me out. “You haven’t given me any good office romance stories for ages. What’s happening behind the scenes in Dramaland?”

“Oh god. Where to start?” I closed my eyes and shook my head.

“The temp. Is she still there?” he asked.

“Clarissa. Yeah. Shockingly. Or maybe not since she’s graduated from flirting with my manager to boning my manager’s boss.”

“I don’t think women bone guys.” Morgan laughed. “He’s the one doing the boning.”

“Whatever, Mr. Technical. Point is, she’s getting payload *and* keeping her paycheck.”

“And you?”

“And me? Paycheck still auto depositing.”

He elbowed me. “Not what I meant. Anyone lucky enough to grab your ass—”

I smacked his leg.

“Attention. I was going to say, attention. I got confused for a second thinking about boning.”

“You’re an ass. And the answer is no.”

I looked over Morgan’s shoulder to the cliff side of the highway, past the barrier, out to the ocean. It really was a beautiful drive, and

Morgan had distracted me long enough to get through the tricky section without looking at the mile marker that broke my heart.

“You’re the best friend ever,” I said.

“I just had to stop you from singing that god-awful song. Who still puts Jet on playlists?” He squeezed my hand and turned up the music again.

MORGAN

Nick and his buddy were already parked off the side of the road when Tamara and I arrived in Lily Valley.

“Took you long enough. Did She of Tiny Bladder make you stop?” Nick asked.

“Unlike *some* drivers,” Tamara said as she hugged my half brother, “Morgan kept to the speed limit.”

“Nana drives faster than him. Guys, this is Devon. Devon, this is my brother and his ...” Nick made a face and held up his hand.

“Friend,” Tamara and I said together.

“A concept Nick finds incapable of comprehending.” I extended my hand to shake Devon’s. “Nice to meet you.”

Devon didn’t even make eye contact with me. He was laser focused on Tamara and said, too quiet for her to hear, “If that friend’s not giving you benefits, I’d like to tap it.”

I may have squeezed his hand a little harder than necessary before dropping it.

“She’s not available.”

“Too bad.”

Nick clapped his hands. “So, here’s the plan. We hike that trail”—he pointed to a small clearing in the forest—“up about 1000 meters. And then we hit the snow line and snowshoe the rest of the way in. Devon and I have made the trip in three hours, but I’m guessing we’ll be closer to five with you two dragging your asses up the hill.”

“Is that a challenge, asshole?” I asked.

“Nope. I would not do that to you. And this close to Christmas, search and rescue have better things to be doing than bailing out weekend warriors who should know better than to overdo it and need to be medivacked out.”

Classic Nick. Even though I knew what he was doing, posturing for Tamara, trying to keep me in the “lame little brother” box, I couldn’t resist taking the bait. He was my brother, and as much as I loved him, sometimes I hated him.

“Last one to the cabin carries all the gear down. You in, Devon?” I looked at Tamara. Her eyes were wide. “You’re exempt, of course.”

Tamara looked from me to Nick to Devon and back to me.

“You know what?” she said in a small voice. “I think maybe I’ll pass on this dick-swinging thing. Can I have your keys, Morgan? I’m going to head home. You can catch a ride back with those guys.” She held out her hand but looked at the ground.

“I have a better idea,” Devon said with far too much enthusiasm. “I’ll drive you back, and we can leave those two to work out their childhood issues.”

“No fucking way.” The words were out of my mouth before I realized I’d even thought them. I put my hands on Tamara’s shoulders and looked her in the eye. Fuck. She was fighting back tears. “I’m sorry. If you want to leave, I’ll go back with you. We don’t have to do this. Not this weekend. Not with these guys.”

She inhaled a long breath. “I was actually looking forward to being out in the snow. Seemed like a good way to remember Jim. But, I don’t know, the energy with you guys is ... it’s too macho. Too aggressive.”

My guts twisted. I hated that I was adding to Tamara’s pain on the worst possible weekend to be doing anything other than trying to help her make it to Monday with as little grief as possible.

“Nick,” I said over Tamara’s head, “you and Devon do your three-hour ascent. Tamara and I will get there when we get there. And if you have the fire burning and the beer on snow, I’ll carry your shit down.”

Tamara pulled me forward and kissed my cheek. “Thank you.”

TAMARA

Nick and Devon hiked with us until we hit the snow line, and then they were gone. Honestly, I was glad. Devon was hot, no doubt about it, but he seemed to think that because I was single, he and I would share one bed. There was nothing subtle about his flirting.

And when I noticed Morgan making fists at one of Devon's propositions, I grabbed his hand and held it to keep him from throwing a punch. When he tried to let go, I made a game out of seeing how long I could force him to keep holding on. I wove my fingers through his and swung our arms like we were little kids. After a minute, he quit fighting. And after twenty minutes, I realized I'd never held anyone's hand for as long as we'd been walking the trail.

Even when it got too narrow to walk side by side, or too steep to be convenient, he still held on. But as soon as I registered how natural it felt to have my hand wrapped inside my best friend's, it got weird and I had to let go.

"I have to pee, so you guys carry on and I'll catch up."

"I'll wait for you," Morgan said. He turned his back while I moved off the trail and squatted behind a tree.

I'd peed a thousand times with him around, but my bladder was suddenly shy. "Can you walk up the trail a little? I'm feeling self-conscious."

Morgan laughed but walked another twenty feet away. I relaxed with him out of earshot and all was fine until I heard a wolf whistle behind my right shoulder. I turned my head to see that the trail had

looped back on itself as it rose, and Devon was standing directly above me, looking at my bare ass.

In my haste to pull up my pants, I lost my balance and fell hard onto the frozen ground. Of course, I screamed as I fell, because when you're being humiliated, the natural thing to do is draw more attention to yourself.

Morgan was at my feet before I could right myself and get my pants up. To his credit, he didn't laugh like the asshat up the hill. Devon laughed until Nick caught up with him and then it sounded like Nick grounded him by the sound of the "Oof!" I heard before Nick spewed obscenities. I guess that's when Morgan realized Devon was looking down from the trail above us. He positioned himself to block the view of me scrambling to wiggle back into my pants.

"Show's over, fuckhead. And if Nick didn't hit you hard enough, I'll do the job right when we get to the cabin." Morgan reached out his hand to help me and didn't let go once I was standing.

All that effort and humiliation only to be right back where I started, with my hand, not awkwardly, wrapped in my best friend's—which created a whole other level of awkward.

"Hey," he said, swinging our arms an extra push forward, "were you with us the day Nick had to take a dump when we were backcountry skiing?"

I jerked away from him and covered my ears, wishing I could unsee the image that had burned itself in my brain fifteen years earlier. "Yes, and please, for the love of Gaia, don't say another word."

We walked in silence, and every time I looked over at Morgan, he was smirking. I was smiling, too, despite how many times I thought Jim would've loved to have been on this adventure with us. I wished Devon was Jim.

"What's so amusing?" I asked him.

"Just replaying old times. Do you remember the first time I came to your place?"

"No." I shook my head. "Do you?"

"Oh, yeah. It left an indelible mark on me."

"Why? Did you and Jim get into a fight or something?"

"You seriously don't remember?"

“You do? Weren’t you, like, eleven or twelve? How do you even remember something that happened more than half a lifetime ago?”

“Some experiences stick with you. And that first after-school playdate with your brother was an afternoon I’ll never forget.”

“Because Jim was so awesome?”

Morgan stepped in front of me and stopped walking. “No. Because he had this little sister who tagged along with us when we went to the skate park. And some older kid—he was probably like thirteen, but he seemed way older and pretty damn big at the time—he sat down beside—”

“I remember. He tried to kiss me. I was ten.” I shuddered at the memory. “And Jim beat the living hell out of him.”

“Jim and *me*. We both beat the guy up. I got grounded for a month and wasn’t allowed to hang out at your place.”

“I didn’t realize you were there for that.” I shrugged.

“Your first knight-in-shining-armor experience, and you forgot it? My heart.” Morgan clutched at his chest and grimaced.

“I’m sorry I got you grounded.” I held up prayer hands.

“Hell of an eye-opener for a kid who’d barely talked to girls, let alone hung out with one. That day made me so fucking glad I didn’t have four sisters to protect. I learned a lot from Jim about respecting girls, women. I was miles ahead of my brothers in that respect—except Josh. He got it.”

“Yeah, Josh is ... singular among the Rhodes and West brothers. But you, my dearest, number one best friend in the world, you are most definitely the brother who’s got the best chance of a perfect happily ever after. Any woman would be beyond lucky to tie your ass down.” I leaned up on my toes and kissed his cheek. “Now, let’s see if we can catch up with Nick and his Neanderthal buddy. I’m feeling the spirit of Jim running pretty strong in me today, and I’m going to tell him what I think of him.”

MORGAN

I wished I could tell Tamara what I thought of her. I'd been ready to let her tie me down since my second year of college, but she kept her walls high when it came to letting things cross the friend barrier. She was always the one pushing me to date, introducing me to her friends, playing the "Have you met my friend Morgan?" game when we were out at bars.

I've had a few girlfriends over the years, mostly casual, one that lasted a couple of years. But I couldn't fully commit, since it felt like I'd have to give up part of my relationship with Tamara if I let things get too serious with another woman. I wasn't willing to do that.

And so I'd been living in a perpetual state of hope that one day, she'd see me as more than her best friend who didn't know shit about how to talk to her about guy trouble, other than to tell her we're all dicks and she was better than any man she'd met yet. *Myself included*, I always thought.

"Look! Snow!"

We'd hit the snow line. It looked as if an invisible wall separated the dirt trail from where the snow fell. It was only a dusting, but from here, things would get more fun.

"How long till we'll need snowshoes, do you think?" Tamara asked.

"No idea. I'd guess another hour of hiking, but that's pure speculation."

"I wonder if Nick's made it yet. Do you have cell coverage?"

One thing we all knew from having basically lived our winters in the wilderness, far too often skiing out of bounds on Whistler Mountain, was to only have one cell phone turned on at a time, so we could always count on a full battery in case of emergency. While we were a foursome, it was Nick whose phone was on. He and Devon also both had their search and rescue pagers with them; the last weekend before Christmas break was often a big one for SAR volunteers, which Nick had been since before becoming a firefighter.

I turned on my phone and waited to see if I had bars. I didn't. The cabin had coverage as long as the sky was clear, since the guys had installed a repeater tower to make sure they could get emergency pages.

The snow deepened enough for us to put on our snowshoes after about forty-five minutes of walking. It made the next two hours significantly easier since we could follow Nick's path and didn't have to rely on finding trail markers to ensure we were still heading toward the cabin.

Tamara and I didn't talk much. We didn't need to. It was enough to be in the fresh air, in the silence, other than the sound of snow crunching underfoot. The forest thinned considerably the higher we got. The area had been clear-cut in the 1950s or '60s, so the trees were young. And then we reached the zone that had suffered the fire four years earlier.

"This is horrifying," Tamara said. "I feel like we're walking through some futuristic cataclysm. The energy is so wrong here."

"I think we're in this for about twenty minutes," Nick said. "And then back to the standard regrowth after clear-cut destruction. Wait. Stop walking. I hear something."

Tamara and I stood still, and the sound of a helicopter approaching moved the air.

"Tourists with enough money to fly in to the ski hill, you figure?" she asked.

I shrugged.

We listened and looked for the bird. Something about a helicopter—I always needed to see what kind it was. I didn't actually expect to catch sight of this one, given the trees, but it passed right overhead.

"Search and rescue," Tamara said.

“Damn.”

We watched as it flew north and then descended not more than a mile from us. My stomach dropped with it.

“That’s not good,” Tamara said.

“Probably not.” I wanted to run, to get to Nick, to help if I could. I looked at Tamara, and it was clear she was reading my mind—or my posture.

“Please don’t leave me,” she whispered. I couldn’t hear her over the air turbulence from the rotors being so close, but I saw her lips say the words. “I’ll try to keep up,” she yelled. “Go. Make sure Nick is okay.”

Bros before hoes, the asshole voice in my head said.

“Not leaving you. I’ll follow your pace.” I pointed up the trail for Tamara to lead the way. She kissed my cheek, and we took off as fast as we could while running with tennis rackets strapped to our feet.

TAMARA

Adrenaline is a glorious thing. I didn't think it would be possible to run flat out for ten minutes on snow, but I did it. Unfortunately, we didn't get to the helicopter before it left. I stopped mid-trail as the sound of the rotors, increasing in speed, filled the air.

"Fuck!" Morgan yelled over the *thump, thump, thump*.

I leaned over to catch my breath. "I'm sorry. I slowed you down," I panted.

He joined me in my collapsed posture. "I wouldn't have gone any faster without you."

I raised my head, and we locked eyes and then matched our breath until we were both breathing normally again.

"The fact that it took off basically as soon as it landed is a good sign," Morgan said.

"Yup. I kept visualizing Nick being totally fine and Devon needing a doctor because his tummy hurt after the gut punch Nick gave him."

That got a smile. We walked with intention for ten more minutes to the clearing where the chopper had obviously landed. It was in the middle of a burn and had lots of clearance without trees.

"Look!" I pointed to two pairs of snowshoes staked in the ground. A piece of paper had been crumpled into the straps of one, a radio clipped to the other. Morgan jogged over and unfolded the note.

Party of five out of bounds. Avalanche. Hero time. Keep pager off unless emergency. Be good.

At first, I laughed. And then my relief turned to tears. I never understood why that happened, but it always did when I was able to relax after being scared.

Morgan wrapped his arms around me. “If I wasn’t an emotionally constipated jerk, I’d join you. Fuck, I am going to crash so hard once we get to that cabin.”

“Are we even still on the right trail, or did we veer off to get here?” I hoped Morgan knew because on my list of superpowers (and potentially fatal flaws), a reliable sense of direction was definitely my biggest weakness as an outdoor adventurer.

“To be honest, I have no idea. But I do know that the cabin is within a thirty-minute hike from here since Nick said that’s how far they hauled gear when they were fixing up the place. And I’ve got the GPS location on my phone.”

“Best. Boy Scout. Ever.”

“Got all the badges to prove it.”

The last stretch of the walk was the hardest, not because it was steep or the trail was difficult, simply because I’d used all my gas—emotional, physical, mental. I stayed focused on taking the next step, not looking up to see how close we were because that game used more energy than it saved.

When Morgan finally said, “We’re here!” I felt a relief I hadn’t experienced since opening the email that told me I’d passed my final exams and was allowed to practice as a registered physiotherapist.

I looked up at the glory of the building that stood mostly hidden among trees.

Morgan dropped his arm over my shoulder. “The upside of Nick not making it—”

“Aside from taking the Devon-statingly handsome man-in-his-own-mind with him?”

Morgan laughed. “Good one.”

“I was hoping to say it to his face, but you know, it’s better not to have to, actually.”

“So the upside of Nick and the asshole not being here is nobody has to sleep on the floor. We each get a bed.” We high-fived.

“I am so sapped, I think I could crash anywhere and be happy. But I won’t turn down a mattress.”

The door to the cabin was padlocked, which is what we’d been expecting. Morgan pulled out his phone to get the code. He pulled open the door and ...

“Oh, shit!” we said together before a raccoon launched itself out of the room between us.

MORGAN

I'd been on a fair number of online dates and met women who were not quite as advertised. But this cabin was so far from the pictures I'd seen in the mental brochure that for a minute, I wondered if maybe I'd opened the wrong door. I looked left, then right to see if there was another building, knowing full well there wasn't.

"Okay"—Tamara stepped in ahead of me—"not even close to what I was expecting."

I inhaled a hard breath, surprised that the place smelled okay. But it looked as if that raccoon had thrown a frat party with a hundred of his closest forest friends. A wood table lay on its side, three chairs toppled around it. The mattresses were filthy, like every animal that had ever visited signed the guest registry, aka the beds, with a set of muddy paws.

Beer cans, baked bean cans, a few empty bottles of Maker's Mark, and garbage that had probably once been in the torn-up black trash bag lay scattered all over the floor.

"Think it's too late to make a new hotel booking?" Tamara asked.

I looked at my phone—3:11 p.m. The sun would set in not much more than an hour. "It's too late to head down. It'll be pitch-black within two hours."

"I'm seriously too tired to even try," Tamara said, kicking a few cans against the wall.

"I wonder how the ... oh, fuck. Look." I pointed at the window on the backside of the cabin. Or, more accurately, the space where a

window once was. There was no glass on the floor, but someone had cleaned the frame so well, it seemed obvious that the last group to sleep here must've broken in.

Tamara sat on the least dirty of the two beds. "Upsides? The stove is still here, and they left some wood."

I wanted to hug her. I thought about the last woman I'd dated and how this scene would have unfolded with her. She'd be screaming for me to use the two-way pager to call for air extraction. Swearing at me for not knowing that we'd be walking into a shit show. And then I realized that would never have happened since she'd never have hiked five miles to spend two nights without being able to post to her IG feed. Aside from my brothers, Tamara was the only person I could imagine coming here with.

"I'm going to see if there's anything in the lean-to beside the cabin that we can use to collect all the garbage. And I'll grab some kindling to start a fire. You want to right the furniture so it looks a little more like my place, circa 2014?"

God love her, Tamara laughed. "That is exactly what I was thinking. I've seen worse, and you have lived in worse. Except maybe for the broken window."

I found a full-size garbage bin. As I filled it with chopped wood, I thought about the advice my mom had often offered about relationships.

"Before you decide on settling down, take the time to experience what that person is like in a crisis, how they react when things don't go to plan. Take a few road trips without a map and make sure you can find your way home without fighting. Not that I'd wish you to get sick, but don't make a full commitment until you've seen how you care for each other when you're not well enough to care for yourselves. And know that if your relationship can survive a tragedy, hold on to that woman and never let go."

I trusted Mom's advice to my very core. I'd given a few women enough time to experience sickness and vacations gone wrong. Nothing to this degree, but a hotel room beside an elevator, one that advertised a pool but neglected to say the pool was closed for maintenance during our stay ... things that seemed forgettable to me but changed the tone of what should have been a good weekend.

And then there was Tamara. Based on Mom's criteria, Tamara and I were a perfect match. But for the minor issue that we had too much history, too many years as friends to cross that line and possibly ruin what we had. We'd talked about it once and agreed it was too risky, that neither of us was willing to lose our best friend on the chance we had what it would take to be a romantic couple.

I carried the bin into the cabin and was shocked at what I saw.

TAMARA

Morgan opened the door, and I danced over to him.

“There was a broom! I felt like one of those late-night TV ads.” I held the broom outstretched in my arm and raised the octave of my voice. “Cleanup is magical with the Ronco Raccoon Wand.”

“Fuck, I love you, Tamara.”

I bowed. “And I, you. How was your foraging and pillaging adventure?”

“I’ve got wood.”

“That’s what he said last night.” I laughed at my own joke, but Morgan gave me his squinty-eyed stare. “What?”

“Nothing. Since you’re such a domestic goddess, step aside and give me room to make a fire so you can cook my dinner, wench.”

“Did you find anything in the shed to cover the busted window? We will not get far heating this place with that hole in the wall.”

“Aside from firewood, nothing except an axe to make kindling,” he said.

“How about I start the fire, since I don’t want to fight the spiders in the woodpile. Can you grab more pieces so we can try filling the gap by stacking firewood in it?” I asked with my best pleading eyes.

Morgan didn’t move. He didn’t answer. He just stared at me with this weird look.

“What? Is there a spider on me right now?” I swatted at my shoulders and down my arms in case something was crawling on me. I shuddered. Not much scares me, but spiders are the devil

incarnate with all those creepy eyes and hairy legs. As I imagined a spider crawling on me, I pretended to gag.

He shook his head, but still didn't speak.

"You're acting weird. What? Did you see something out there you don't want to see again? What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing is wrong with me. Absolutely nothing. I'm kind of in awe at how cool you're being about this. And how fucking smart you are. I was going to stay up all night feeding the fire as an excuse to sit right in front of it and soak up all the heat." He finally smiled.

"You'd have to, with that paper-thin sleeping bag of yours. I will be tasty warm in my arctic bag."

"Tasty warm? Like a mug of hot cocoa kind of tasty warm, or—"

I stopped him before he could say what he was thinking. By the waggle of his eyebrows and the way he licked his lips, I knew it was something I did not want to hear.

"*Toasty* warm. I said I would be toasty warm. Warm like toast." I think. Although I had been having some delicious thoughts about Morgan while I surreptitiously watched him chop wood. Tasty thoughts you don't have about your best friend.

Morgan and I had played the flirty game with each other for years, for as long as I could remember. And it had always felt safe because he was my best friend, and best friends goof around. But in the last few months, something had shifted, and his flirting was feeling less like a joke, like there was actual truth in the pokes, but I couldn't figure out if he'd changed or if it was me who was suddenly wanting more than buddy status with him.

I tried to remember the last time we played, "Have you met my friend Morgan?" Was it last Christmas at my work party? A whole year ago?

"What evil are you scheming?" Morgan asked.

"Who was the last woman you were tasty warm with?"

He sat on the kitchen chair and leaned forward on his elbows. "Why?"

I shrugged. "I don't think you've complained about a date or congratulated yourself for a job well done with a woman in months."

"How long has it been since you made a seriously bad life decision?" he asked.

“What has that got to do with anything? You’re deflecting. How long?” I dropped into the chair beside him, and he spun it around so our knees touched.

“I’m not deflecting. The last hookup I had was the same night you left me at the brew pub with that guy from New Zealand—”

“Australia,” I muttered, looking away, embarrassed at the memory of that night.

“Whatever. Wherever.”

“But that was over a year ago.”

“Fifteen months,” he said.

“Since you’ve been with anyone? No way!”

“How can you possibly be surprised? I’m never going to meet anyone with you sitting at my table every weekend. No woman in her right mind would approach me when I’m already with a beautiful woman who I’m obviously having a good time with.”

“Stop it!” I slapped his thigh, and he covered my hand so I couldn’t move it away.

Morgan shook his head with a sigh, released me, and stood. “I’m going to get the extra wood for the fire. You gonna stack that window so I don’t freeze to death tonight?”

The cabin was the same temperature as the air outside, but when Morgan was beside me, I didn’t feel the chill the same way. And when he placed his hand on mine? My blood came alive in a way it never had before. Something had shifted between us. It was uncomfortable, but not like hiking with a blister kind of uncomfortable, more like having eaten one bite too much of your favorite dessert. It was a welcome discomfort that I decided I wanted to spend more time exploring.

MORGAN

I chopped more wood than we'd need for one night. I chopped enough kindling to light fires for an entire week because exercise was the best way to work out frustration—sexual or otherwise—and I had all the frustrations coursing through me. I was frustrated with Tamara for not seeing what was so fucking obvious to me—that we'd been a couple for over a year, we just hadn't had sex yet.

I was frustrated with myself for having let her take the lead, or more accurately, hold the reins on changing the status of our relationship.

And yeah, I was so far past sexually frustrated, I think it would be fair to say my cock was infuriated, and if I didn't give in to its demands pretty damned soon, it was going to stand up and speak its mind.

I would've kept chopping, but the sun had almost set, and it was getting too dark to safely swing an axe. With the garbage can filled to overflowing, I dragged it back to the cabin to find Tamara had not only closed in the broken window like a Tetris pro, she'd gotten a fire going. Three battery-operated lanterns hung from the ceiling, giving enough light to read under the beams. The rest of the room was lit like an underground club, with dark corners to discreetly explore valleys and mountains of the flesh variety.

The cabin had heated nicely. Tamara stood beside the bed she'd clearly called dibs on and took off her winter layers so all she was wearing was her skintight long johns and a T-shirt that was far too

fucking sexy to have brought to wear around Nick and some playboy fireman. It was a damn good thing Devon wasn't here.

"You okay?" she asked. "You look the opposite of relaxed."

"I'm fine," I growled. I dragged the wood across the room to the stove and started stacking in silence.

"You seem kind of hangry. I wasn't sure if you'd want to eat the beef chili or chicken and rice. It should only take ten minutes to reconstitute since the water's already boiling. Tell me what you want, and I will make it so."

Fucking hell. What I want is for you to stop being so cheerful and perfect. What I want is for you to piss me off. I looked around the small room to find something, anything, to be annoyed about—that she'd left her gear in a mess on the floor or unpacked my bag and piled my shit on a dirty mattress. But the mattresses weren't dirty anymore.

"Wait. How did you clean the mud from the beds?"

"I didn't. I just flipped them over. They look pretty good, don't they? Maybe not the Ritz, but as good as the Motel 6 we stayed in when we climbed in Yosemite. So, chicken or beef?" She held out a package in each hand.

"That was a good trip," I said to myself. Snippets of memory popped into my mind, and I realized I was smiling.

"We haven't had a bad trip yet." Tamara waved the two dried food packages at me. "Chicken? Or beef?"

"Chicken," I said, not actually in response to her question, though, of course, that's what Tamara understood. But I knew better. My cock was calling me a chicken. "Am not," I said out loud. Losing my mind.

Tamara squinted at me. "Yeah, you are."

"Am what?"

"A chicken," she said. She shook her head and dumped the dried food into the pot of boiling water on the woodstove. I sat on the mattress closest to the door and watched as she stirred our dinner, her back to me. When she turned, she had a look in her eyes that was either hunger or fear. Tamara crossed the room and bumped my knees open with a tip of her foot, then pushed between them. "You are a chicken. And so am I."

I looked up. She looked down. Her mouth was open, and she was panting lightly.

“Am not,” I said, grabbing her waist and pulling her to the bed with me. She was on her back, and I straddled her with one pure desire: to fuck my best friend in the world.

TAMARA

Morgan drew me forward by the front of my shirt just far enough to make space for me to pull it off. I grabbed the hem of his shirt and tugged . My bra was off before I had time to think about what was happening. And then Morgan leaned to the side and off me. Off the bed. And I felt naked, even though I was still half-dressed.

I covered my breasts and watched Morgan walk away.

“Get up,” he said with his back to me.

I wanted to vomit.

Then he picked up his sleeping bag. “I don’t care how clean this mattress looks in the dim light, I am not putting my face near it.” He tossed the bag to me and crossed the room to get mine. “And this is so we’re prepared for after I’ve finished what I’ve been wanting to do with, to, and for you for two years, because I know how much you love to snuggle after making love.”

I dropped the sleeping bag and jumped into his arms. I pressed my chest to his and melted into him. The skin-to-skin contact energized every cell in my body. And then my mouth found his. Sweet Mother. Our lips touched, mouths open. I was breathing too hard to seal the space, so I took his bottom lip between my teeth and let my tongue introduce itself to his taste.

“Oh, Gaia,” I moaned. Morgan twisted, forced me to release my gentle bite, and pressed hard against my open mouth. His tongue met mine, a tentative touch at first, which I met with an enthusiastic

swirl around his. He groaned. I moaned again as my blood traveled south, making me feel light-headed. I held his face in my hands, let my fingers explore his cheekbones, his jaw, traced a line down his throat. Touching Morgan like this was next-level erotic, and all my muscles gave up doing their job. I became a dead weight in his arms, sliding down his body.

When my stomach pressed against his hard-on, my muscles magically came to life again with a hunger I'd never felt before. The months and years of pent-up and tamped-down desire for the only man I'd ever been able to imagine growing old with burst from me like that wild raccoon. But I would not run. Not now. Not ever.

We each grabbed a corner of the sleeping bag and covered the mattress.

I started to take off my not-even-a-little-bit-sexy long johns, but Morgan stopped me.

"Let me? Please. I've waited so long for this moment, I want to savor every second."

"Do I get to do you the same way?"

"Fuck me, Tamara ... I don't think I'll be able to hold it together that long. Once I get between your legs ..."

Morgan didn't finish his thought. At least not with words, since his mouth was pressed against my breast and busy doing things that made me unable to speak. I pressed my hands to my solar plexus to ground myself since I felt like I was floating.

"You okay? Is this okay? Do you want me to stop?" he asked, concern in his eyes.

I shook my head. I nodded. I shook it again.

And then we both laughed.

"I might die, but yeah, I'm better than okay." I pulled his face to my mouth, kissed his lips, then gently bit his chin.

"Jesus, Tamara, that's the second time you've bitten me. All these years, and you never told me you were a biter."

I bit his shoulder, hard enough to make him jerk.

"You ... we are in so much trouble," he said, giving me a quick nip on my nipple.

The light in his eyes turned wicked. Morgan pushed back toward the foot of the bed so he was straddling my calves. He grabbed the

top of my panties and dragged the red fabric down my legs, slow as molasses, and followed their path with his mouth, pressing lingering kisses and taking tiny bites along my thighs, knees, and shins.

Morgan pushed off the bed and planted one final kiss on the instep of my right foot, sending shivers up my spine. Before I could complain about being left untouched, he leaned forward and pressed his hands to the inside of my knees, spreading them apart so I was wide open to his gaze.

With other guys, this would have made me feel exposed and vulnerable. But I *wanted* Morgan to look. I wanted him to look and love and touch and taste and then let me do the same to and for him.

His fingertip lightly grazed my clit. He looked up with questioning eyes. I licked my lower lip and his eyes darkened, following the movement of my tongue. I licked again, hoping he understood my wordless answer. He swallowed, lifted his eyes to mine. I nodded, and he groaned, then dropped his head to my folds.

I watched his back lift and fall with his breaths. Breaths he was blowing on me, hot, then cool air, a swirl of his tongue, a long lap from top to bottom. It was the first time I'd ever watched a man pleasure me. Until this moment, I'd always had to keep my eyes closed, to picture a fantasy scene in which I am a sex therapist—a very immoral sex therapist—who treats her patients by forcing them to eat her. It was the only way I could climax.

But watching Morgan, being focused on the movement of his shoulders, touching his hair, knowing it was him between my legs, was hotter than any dirty fantasy I could ever imagine.

The tip of his tongue vibrated back and forth over my clit, and my back arched, pulling away from the pressure.

“Uh-uh,” he said into my sex, pulling me hard against his face. I gave a small, involuntary cry but pressed into him. He apparently took that as an invitation to stop being polite, as permission to torture me.

MORGAN

If I'd known this weekend Tamara and I would finally break down the wall we'd put around our true feelings, I'm not sure I'd have invited her. In fact, I'm damn certain I would not have. The only reason it was safe to bring her was because I knew Nick would cock-block any stupid move on my part.

Not that I didn't want to have my face buried between Tamara's legs—there was nowhere else I'd rather be. But I'd built an expectation of what this moment would be like to such a height and depth, I knew the reality would never match the fantasy. And the last thing I wanted was to feel disappointed with the woman I'd been in love with for most of my adult life. Or worse, to disappoint her.

But the way she was grinding against me, shameless, uninhibited, and watching, was hotter than my imagination could ever conjure. She was not disappointed. And my cock was so hard, I didn't know if it would ever recover.

Tamara whimpered as I pressed one finger inside her. She moaned when a second joined. I hooked them and searched for her G-spot as my tongue continued to work her clit. Her moans got louder and more desperate. My fingers stopped their exploration, and I vibrated them as quickly as I could.

Tamara panted, and the sound was so fucking sexy I lost focus and looked up since I needed to see her face. She was looking right at me, her eyes and mouth wide. Her breasts rose and fell three times, and then she exhaled and scowled.

“Why?” She gasped. “Why’d you stop?” Her breathing was ragged and labored. I did that to her.

“Can I make you come?”

“If you don’t I will kill you,” she said as one word.

“Can I come inside you?”

“Do it!” she yelled.

I went back down on her and licked until she clamped around my fingers so hard, I couldn’t move them. Not good enough. I wanted her to scream. I growled against her core, “Come for me.” I licked faster and felt the pulse of her climax growing. She was almost there. So close. And then, she bucked and pressed hard into my hand. I pulled my fingers out before the first contraction released. I jumped from the floor to the bed and drove my cock so deep inside her, I saw stars. She squeezed like she was trying to break it off. And I fucking loved it.

We maintained eye contact as our bodies fell into a quick and natural rhythm.

“Tamara,” I said her name, trying to process whether this was actually happening.

“Morgan,” she said, “yes.”

With my name on her lips and me so deep inside ... my balls tightened, and I stopped dead. It was too soon to end. I leaned forward and pressed my mouth to hers. Our tongues met and swirled together in a rhythm that slowed our breathing, gave me space to start again. I pulled back until only my tip was in her. She watched so intently, I knew there was nobody else in her world but me at that moment. I surged into her, and we moaned together. Again. Then again. And again. It was torture to move so slowly, but being inside her was also pure pleasure. Comfort. Relief.

I don’t know how many thrusts, how many breaths we took together, but Tamara was the one who stopped it. Her fingers dug into my back, and she pulled her hips against me, driving me fast, hard, and deep inside her. And we were off. My hips pounded against her, harder and harder, no longer holding back. Every surge of my cock felt so deep, I worried I’d break her open. Her breath came shallower and shallower.

I came, my grunt filled with pain. I didn't want it to end. I never wanted to break this connection. I pulled Tamara tight against my chest and rolled us as one onto our sides.

I stayed inside her for minutes after I'd gone soft. We didn't speak. We'd said "I love you" a thousand times over the years. A friendship "I love you" at the start, but for me at least, every "I love you" for the last year has been more. My gut told me it had been the same for Tamara. Words would add nothing to this moment.

Tamara broke the comfortable silence. "I want to have your baby."

TAMARA

I had never had a man withdraw so abruptly as Morgan did when I told him I wanted to have his baby.

He claimed he bolted since he smelled our dinner burning. Which it was. Good and burned to the bottom of the pot. So much for chicken and rice.

Maybe I should have held on to a little more chicken myself and kept that thought in my head.

I didn't mean I wanted to have his baby right now. Or in nine months. I didn't even mean for him to interpret that I wanted to tie him down and start a family. I don't think.

All I meant was that I loved him. And maybe a little more than either of us had been admitting.

I watched his naked butt, then his naked front, as he carried the pot from the stove to the door. He reached his arm out and pulled the pot back in, filled with snow.

"I don't think we'll be using this again." He placed it on the floor by the woodpile and looked around. "Did you see another one?"

I shook my head.

"Well, I guess we're fasting tonight."

Really? Were we not going to talk about what just happened? I shivered and pulled my sleeping bag around me to buffer the chill, which I hoped was from the opened door and not a result of my stupid comment.

“I brought two brownies. We could have those.” I nodded to my coat hanging on the back of a chair.

“Brownies and beer for dinner? Sign me up.”

“They’re edibles,” I reminded him.

“Right. Indica or sativa?”

“One of each.”

Indica, often called “indacouch” since it’s a relaxant and pain reliever, and sativa, the stimulant variety that most people associated with getting stoned and being outrageous.

I wasn’t a big edibles user, but I was a big baby when it came to having to pee outside at midnight in the winter. Spiders and being cold. The two things I hated the most in the world. So I’d brought the edibles to first have silly fun with the guys while they were drinking and then to sleep when they were either still drinking or snoring.

Morgan pulled on his sweatpants and a T-shirt before grabbing the food from my pocket and tossing it on the bed beside me.

If he was getting dressed, I guessed I should be too. It felt weird to be naked by myself. I reached to the floor to grab my long johns.

“What are you doing?”

“Getting dressed...”

“I can see that. But why?”

I stared at him because I wasn’t sure how to answer.

“You coming outside with me?”

“Oh. No. I thought ... never mind.”

“Don’t get weird on me, Tamara,” he said, dropping a kiss on the top of my head. A kiss on the head was common practice in the old Morgan-Tamara paradigm, which made what used to feel normal, feel awkward. Damn it.

I picked up the two brownies and decided that my original plan would hold—with the adjustment that I’d only eat half of each brownie and let Morgan have the other halves. On an empty stomach, after the cardio I just did, I figured I’d absorb that THC pretty darn quick. It couldn’t be fast enough since I wanted to feel a bit more relaxed than normal to have the post-sex convo.

Because this needed to be talked about. Right?

I mean, we weren’t just going to pretend everything was the same, or worse, like it hadn’t happened ... were we?

Oh, Sweet Mother of the Earth, if Morgan didn't get back in here soon, I'd have talked myself into a tizzy.

I peeled open the package and broke the sativa brownie in two, taking the bigger side. He could fill up on beer. The door opened as I was chewing my first bite.

"Indica or sativa?" he asked.

"Saa-tee-vaa," I said, feeling suddenly self-conscious. Had I made the wrong choice? "Why?"

His eyes changed from questioning to smiling.

"Because I have it on good authority that when you have sativa, you get horny." He dropped his pants, pulled off his shirt, and grabbed me in a tight, naked bear hug.

MORGAN

Tamara and I didn't sleep. Not an hour. Not a minute.

We also didn't talk. Not really. I mean, aside from gentle instructions—slow down ... more of that ... Jesus Christ, never stop what you're doing—we acted like spending nine solid hours touching each other was normal for us. I could definitely imagine it becoming our new normal, but I still wanted to check in and make sure she was feeling the same way.

I was hopeful since we made a plan to come back after the new year to replace the cookware we'd destroyed. Maybe even bring a window.

"We should measure it," she suggested. "Do you have a tape measure in your bag?"

"Of course. It's right beside the two-by-fours, hammer, and nails. You gotta reach to the bottom to find it."

"Worst Boy Scout ever." She laughed.

"Bite your tongue. Or no, let me bite your tongue." I winked, and she shook her head, but smiled. I placed my arm against the window frame. "It's about middle finger to elbow wide and middle finger to elbow plus another hand or so tall."

"Not good enough. Give me your dirty T-shirt." Tamara took measurements, making small cuts in *my* shirt to indicate the width and height. She constantly amazed me with her creative troubleshooting. As I watched her, there was only one thought in my mind: "I fucking love this woman. Why did it take so long to act on it?"

We packed up our gear and left the cabin at sunrise, three minutes past eight. It wasn't quite light enough to see the ground, but we were so hungry, we decided it was worth the risk of tripping, of falling, of becoming a meal for a cougar or an insomniac black bear, to leave before the sun reached above the trees.

We walked side by side in silence for the first half hour until we reached the helicopter landing area. From the clearing, we could see the sky was threatening snow.

"Too bad we can't call the SAR chopper to deliver food so we can stay in this place forever," Tamara said, looking at the sky.

I wondered what she meant by "this place." The old cabin in the woods, or the emotional place we'd found by letting ourselves act on long-held desires?

I put my arm around her shoulders, and she pulled me tight against her hip.

"Could you get time off work to stay longer?"

"Could I?" she repeated. "Sure. I have holidays and sick days banked. I mean, it wouldn't be the nicest thing to do to the team, but in theory, I could."

"So, let's stay. I'll call Nick. I can use his pager. Feels like an emergency to me ... we'll starve without supplies, right?"

Tamara wiggled free from my hold. "We can't. That's not right. He's probably still searching for that lost party. And if he's not, he'll be exhausted. He's not going to want to come back up. And honestly, I don't want to be in the cabin with Nick. Or what's-his-face. Let's just get home. Back to the inevitable reality."

I hated the sound of that. Reality. Status quo. Life before last night. No. Not interested in going back—in any way, shape, or form.

"That's a cop-out," I said. "You're the one who believes in manifesting new realities. So let me manifest a helicopter. Some food. A pot to cook it in. A way for us to stay for just another few days. Okay, a week."

Tamara scowled and put her hands on her hips. She was pissed. "That's not how it works, and you mocking me doesn't make me want to stay a minute longer than we have to." She turned and started to walk away.

I followed a few steps behind. "I'm not mocking you, Tamara. The way I see it, we were given the tools to get what we both say we want. That radio could deliver what we need."

"In case of emergency," she called into the air, still walking ahead of me.

"Well, by my definition, this *is* an emergency. And now I'm thinking you don't actually want to spend any more time alone in a cabin with me."

She stopped dead but didn't turn. When I caught up with her, I could hear her growling. I bit my lip to keep from laughing. Of course, she spun around and saw.

"You think this is funny?"

I shook my head but laughed out loud. "I think *you're* funny."

"You infuriate me! Sometimes ... Ohh," she snarled, "I could just —"

"Kiss me?" I took her face in my hands and pressed my mouth against hers to shut her up.

TAMARA

I wanted to pull away from his kiss. I wanted to give him heck for making fun of me and for pretending we could use the emergency radio. But I didn't draw back. I didn't push him away. I kissed him like my life depended on his breath. I wanted to stay in this little magical bubble, away from real life, protected from the reality of this day, December 13, for at least twenty-four more hours.

The image of driving back down the highway, past the spot of my brother's death on the tenth anniversary, popped into my mind, and it was just too much. I snapped.

"Stop it!" I pushed Morgan away with so much force, he fell backward and landed in the snow. "If we hadn't done what we did last night, we wouldn't have ruined the cooking pot. We would have been able to eat—last night, this morning, tonight. But no. We were stupid and lost control and went where we should *never* have gone, and now we have to go back to the city and pretend everything is fine when *nothing* is fine. Everything is so fucked up, it hurts to breathe."

I fell to my knees and let myself cry. I didn't notice that Morgan had stood and left. When I finally looked up, I was alone on the trail. I sat, stunned and angrier than I'd ever been in my life.

"Great!" I yelled. "Just amazing! I show a little emotion, and you bolt. Perfect," I yelled as loud as I could. "Better to find out now than after making the mistake of telling the world that I love you. You ASSHOLE! Can you hear me?"

I was facing down the trail, in the car's direction. I hoped he was close enough to hear but far enough that I wouldn't catch up to him when I started down the hill.

Then I heard snow crunch behind me. I turned, and Morgan was smirking. "Copy that. Loud and clear. Nick heard you too."

I spun around, looking for another body.

Morgan held up the radio.

"Oh," I said, feeling a little embarrassed. But I was not going to apologize. "You left me."

"I left to get a signal. I was just over there." He pointed back up the trail we'd come down.

"Why?"

"To find out how the search for the group in the avalanche was going."

"And?"

"Everyone's home—a few in hospital, but they all survived."

"Good." The word came out choked. They all survived. Grief squeezed my chest like I was the one under a ton of snow. They all survived. Of course, I was happy for them. But it wasn't fair. Why did they survive and Jim didn't?

Morgan closed the space between us and wrapped me in his arms.

"I miss him too," he said.

He held me until I was able to breathe normally again.

"Can I tell you what I think?" Morgan asked.

I nodded.

"I think we are both too hungry, too tired, and too emotionally wrecked to make the four-hour hike down this mountain without risk of falling and breaking an ankle or an arm—"

"I'm fine. I will be fine."

"Maybe. But Nick and the SAR team are flying back to base in under an hour. They'll be going right over our heads again. They're happy to land—"

"And take us down?" For some reason, I felt more disappointment than relief, though the thought of a four-hour march down the mountain was enough to make me burst into tears again.

“Yeah, that’s an option. The other is that they’ll drop off enough supplies for us to stay at least three more days. More if we want. They’re loaded up with food and camping gear since they didn’t know if it would be a quick rescue or a long recovery. So, if you want to stay—”

“Just the two of us, or with Nick and whatever his name is?”

“Just us.”

“I’ll have to call work.”

“You can give Nick the details, and he can let them know we’re snowed in.”

“How long?”

“As long as you want.”

“Forever?”

“Sure ... or close to. How does five days sound?”

MORGAN

After the first drop of food and cookware, Nick organized to have a window and all the tools we needed to fix it delivered, along with two brand-new mattresses, pillows, and bedding.

By our third day, we'd turned the one-room, ramshackle cabin into a winter chalet that we agreed we could easily spend the rest of winter in. Tamara had come to a truce with the odd spider that made its way into our space on a piece of firewood (she didn't kill it, and I returned it to its woodland home), and we repurposed the burned cooking pot as a chamber pot so she didn't need to dress and go out in the middle of the night.

As well as I knew my best friend, I'd had no idea that a human could possess such a small bladder. We learned a lot about each other in the seven days we spent alone. Without internet or books or distractions other than hiking in the forest and chopping wood, the only things we did were eat, talk, have sex, talk, sleep—and talk.

The day before Tamara and I had to leave and get back to two days of work before Christmas holidays, I'd decided I was going to propose. It seemed like a no-brainer, even though as a couple, we'd been together less than a week.

I set the table for a delicious dinner while Tamara stirred the food. Earlier in the day, I'd found a small, stainless steel hose clamp in the wood pile. It looked to me like a hillbilly's engagement ring, and I took it as a sign. I thought Tamara would be impressed that I was looking for signs from the Universe and be amused with my gift.

With our bowls steaming with reconstituted pad Thai, vegetables, and peanuts, and our metal cups filled with ale, I raised my cup in a toast. “To the best friend and off-grid vacation buddy a guy could ever ask for.”

“Or girl. I’ll drink to that,” Tamara said, bumping her mug with mine.

“We should do this again,” I suggested, testing the waters even though I was 99.99 percent sure she’d agree.

“One hundred percent. Every year.”

“For the rest of our lives.”

“For the rest of our lives.”

That seemed like as good of a pre-yes as possible. I pushed my chair out from the table and kneeled in front of Tamara.

“What are you doing?” She looked at me skeptically.

I pulled the plumber’s hose clamp from the pocket of my fleece jacket and took her hand.

“Tamara Maria Tremblay, would you do me the honor of being my wife?”

I tried to slide the ring on her finger, but she closed her fist.

“What in Gaia’s name is that?” she asked, pointing to the “ring” with her other hand.

“It’s a makeshift engagement ring?” Suddenly, I didn’t feel sure.

“It looks like building leftovers,” she snarled.

“To represent a relationship that’s under construction.” I felt myself fall deeper into the hole as the words tumbled from my mouth.

“You know what it looks like it represents to me?”

“I’m afraid to know, but I expect you’re going to tell me.” I stood and went back to my chair, wishing I could start eating and pretend I was joking.

“Morgan, you know I love you. As a friend. Over the last week, as a lover. As the human I most want by my side when I don’t want to be alone.”

“Which is why I thought getting married might be a natural step, since I feel the same way. But I’m getting the strong sense you’re gearing up to say no.”

“Yeah, I’m saying no!” she yelled with so much conviction, I pushed back in my chair. “What did you ask me to do last night—no, what did you *instruct* me to do last night when I said I couldn’t wait to see the look on Nick’s and Dylan’s faces when we told them we were dating?”

I squeezed my eyes closed because I couldn’t stand seeing the anger and hurt in Tamara’s.

“What did you tell me?” she repeated.

“I said, let’s keep this to ourselves while we figure out what our new normal is.”

“Yeah, you did.”

“Well, you didn’t argue,” I said.

“What did you expect me to say? ‘No, you have to tell everyone immediately’? That’s not who I am ... but I’m also not going to joyfully say I’ll marry you if I have to wear a plumbing fixture you found—where *did* you find it?—and keep the meaning of my strange jewelry choice to myself.”

“Never mind. I fucked up. I’m sorry. It was a bad idea. I thought finding a ring—a ring-like thing—was a sign, you know, something you’d have interpreted as a sign ... can we just eat dinner and forget about this?”

“Mmm, that would be a hard no.”

TAMARA

If life had a *Do Over* button, I'd go back in time and change the script on the pad Thai dinner disaster.

How a proposal from the man I love to death turned into the most ridiculous fight in the history of wilderness adventures is a story too embarrassing to tell. Seriously, it made no sense. None of it.

I can't say either of us said anything we regret—nothing mean-spirited, nothing cruel, nothing to apologize for—but still, voices were raised, food was flung, and then ... clothes were dropped. Morgan and I had our first fight sex, and honest to the Goddess Mother, it was hot as lava.

I'd heard about this phenomenon, about how when emotions are high, it can heighten sexual tension and that anger can act as an aphrodisiac. Something to do with blood flow and heart rate, adrenaline, and that thing that happens in your brain when you forget there are rules and boundaries and things we just don't do. At least not normally.

It started when Morgan, who waves his hands around like a Muppet when he's excited, flung a forkful of peanut-sauce covered noodles right at my face. Of course, gravity joined the fun, and the mess landed on my chest. I hate wearing dirty clothes, so I stripped off my sweater, forgetting it was all I had on since we'd stayed long past clean laundry and the T-shirt and bra I'd washed were still drying by the stove.

Long story short, Morgan took my partial strip tease as an invitation to tear off his shirt while we continued to express our frustrations with each other's ideas about how a person should propose and how a person should respond to a heartfelt request to spend a life with another person, despite not having a proper ring.

Shirtless, I reminded him that the issue was not the quality of his engagement ring, it was the fact that our happy news would have to be a secret, per his rules of engagement, so to speak.

"What is the big deal about telling your family that we've changed our relationship status? It's not as if we met in Vegas last weekend."

"In some ways, that wouldn't be as hard," he muttered.

"As hard as what?" I demanded.

"As hard as this," he barked, pulling off his sweatpants, which led to the night we shall forever refer to as "the night we shall never refer to."

And not because we did anything immoral or illegal or indecent—well, at least not by 'cabin in the woods' standards—but because the very mention of that night is enough to have us tearing at each other's clothes. Which is why, at least once a month, one of us whispers, "The night we shall never refer to," and nothing more need be said as foreplay.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

We angry-sexed our way to an agreement that when Morgan had resolved his fear of being the first man in his family to settle down, he would propose properly, with a ring he'd chosen specifically for me, and that we would have a celebration of our commitment with friends and family. And until that day we'd be best friends with best benefits.

By the time we left the cabin, it was almost noon the day after the night we shall never refer to. We were wrung out and underslept. I'd pulled my hamstring, Morgan had tweaked his back, and we were both walking like we'd been in a car accident. Lucky for us, as a physiotherapist, I knew how to treat our musculoskeletal injuries, and we'd been alternating ice and heat to repair our damaged muscles. But for the four-hour hike down the mountain, we suffered, laughing and limping along the whole trail.

MORGAN

Christmas Eve with the extended West-Rhodes family could best be described as controlled chaos.

For as long as I can remember, we've had the five brothers and half brothers and stepbrothers and then our sixth chosen brother, Christopher, *and* all the moms—even my and Nick's mom, Dad's ex-wife—for dinner, with presents after. With the age gap between the eldest, Adam, and the youngest, Josh, just four years, every kid assumed the kid role and every adult had to have eyes in the back of their head.

Since we'd all hit our twenties and presumably were adults now, the only thing that had really changed was how deep the voices of the troublemakers were.

Christmas Eve dinner was always held at Nana's, even after the year food flew and she had to replace the carpet and wallpaper in her dining room. We were all teens that year; it prompted a bunch of new rules about Christmas Eve, including no one other than family could attend—except for Josh's girlfriend Paige. Nana always bent rules for Josh, her obvious favorite.

Despite the ire I knew I'd arouse in Dad and the lecture it would provoke from Nana about respecting house rules, I called Tamara and invited her over for dessert and our Secret Santa gift-giving tradition.

I'd discussed my plan with all my brothers earlier in the week.

Dylan, always the lawyer, said, “I don’t want to know anything that could implicate me in this.”

Nick said, “It’s your funeral. I wouldn’t bite that hand. But you know I’ll be there to patch you up if Nana bites back.”

Adam and Josh both supported me and even offered to help implement the plan.

It was a risk, but it couldn’t end any worse than my first proposal had. Actually, maybe it could—anger sex? Who’d have thought that would work out so well?

Once I had the guys onside, I let Mom and Dad know that Tamara would be coming over at eight. Mom glowed, absolutely beside herself. Dad harrumphed and told me I’d better give Nana a heads-up.

Nana had met Tamara dozens of times over the years at less formal events—barbecues, pick-up baseball games, and birthday parties organized by us, not her. There was no question whether she liked Tamara. She seemed to understand that Tamara was good for me, since she always said, “Still keeping this one out of trouble? You’re either a saint or a martyr. Either way, I appreciate you.”

I knew letting Nana know in person would be harder than calling, but it was the right way to go.

“You’re early,” Nana said when I knocked, then walked into her house without waiting for her to come to the door. “Dinner’s tomorrow, you nut.”

“I’m not here for dinner ... but if you’re offering to make me lunch ...” I stood in the doorway between her living room and kitchen and tilted my head sideways to the cooking area.

“Cheeky bugger. Put the kettle on. Cookies are in the freezer. Don’t tell your father.”

I’d heard about the stash of cookies she wasn’t supposed to be eating, but until now, she’d never let me in on the secret. It felt like a good sign. I made up a tray of tea and cookies while Nana watched television. My plan had been to tell her that Tamara was already invited and coming for dessert.

A text from Nick made me rethink my approach: *Ask Nana to tell you how Grandpa proposed to her. When she asks why, tell her how you screwed it up with Tamara.*

The short story to the series of long stories that took two pots of tea to tell was that Nana refused Grandpa's proposals four times until he got it right.

"I want to get it right the second time," I told her. "I have an idea that I'm pretty sure will work, but I need your advice—and your blessing, Nana."

I filled her in on my plan. She told me it wasn't good enough. She said that to clean up the mess I'd made, I had to prove, in no uncertain terms, that I was ready to face any and every challenge with Tamara—especially the challenges that came with being part of this family.

"What do you suggest, then?"

"Well, you got one part right—inviting her to our family Christmas. But you've basically sowed a seed of doubt that she's not going to be good enough for a Rhodes man." Nana rolled her eyes. I rolled mine. I knew we were both thinking about Dad and his opinions. "Honestly, if I had a choice between Tamara and some of you lot, well, I'd have a granddaughter, wouldn't I?" She winked.

I cannot begin to express how much relief I felt knowing I had Nana onside. "So, Wise Old One, what's your idea to get that granddaughter?"

TAMARA

In all the years we'd been friends, Morgan had never invited me to Nana's house on Christmas Eve. I was a little bit excited, hopeful, even, that this was a small step in the direction I really wanted to keep going with him. I called Mom to tell her.

"So, a strange thing happened yesterday," I said.

"What's that, honey?"

"Morgan invited me over for dessert on Christmas Eve."

"That's nice," she said, as if I'd just told her I bought organic eggs at the farmers' market.

"That's all you've got, Mom? 'That's nice'? It's huge."

"Oh, well, wonderful. That's wonderful, honey!"

"Mom, what's going on? You're being weird."

"I'm a little distracted. Trying to wrap presents ... for tomorrow morning. That's all. I'll see you later. Gotta go."

She hung up without even waiting for me to say, "Bye, I love you."

Whatever. I had no time to worry about Mom's lack of enthusiasm. I had to get the perfect Secret Santa gift for Morgan's mom. He said she'd opted out of the game since there had been an odd number of people. I knew I was getting her a silk scarf—I just had to find the right one. And I only had two hours to get downtown before the boutique closed, early, of course, since it was Christmas Eve.

Morgan said to be at Nana's at eight: not ten to, not ten after. Seemed kind of anal for opening presents, but since it was my first

time, I made sure to get there as directed. I was actually five minutes early, so I waited at the front door and listened to the music and voices on the other side. There was loads of laughing and name-calling among the brothers. When I rang the bell, the din diminished just a bit. Morgan opened the door but instead of inviting me in, he stepped outside with me.

“You ready? It’s kind of chaotic in there. Dylan brought a bottle of single malt scotch, and as they say in the old country, the boys are sozzled.”

“And you?”

“Nah. I had a wee dram, just a taste. Didn’t want to leave you fending for yourself with that pack of animals.”

“Thank you.” I leaned up on tiptoes and kissed him. “So, are you going to invite me in?”

“I suppose. Or we could stay here and make out all night.” Morgan lifted me off my feet and dropped my butt onto the handrail. We kissed for a minute or two.

“I’m getting cold. Can we finish this inside?” I joked. I had no intention of kissing Morgan in front of his family. He’d been clear that he wanted to keep our new status to ourselves, “For now,” he’d said. When I pressed him on how long, he told me that I’d know when the Universe gave me a sign. That was when the angry sex got particularly hot.

“You trying to instigate another night we shall never refer to, woman?”

“Maybe ...”

“I’m sorry to say, I am not going to let that happen. Not tonight. You ready?” Morgan opened the door and pulled me in before I could answer.

The house smelled like heaven, warm and homey. Nana rose from her chair when she saw me, opening her arms for a hug.

“Merry Christmas, Mrs. Rhodes. Thanks for letting me crash your party.”

“Darling, you are not crashing. These boys make up the strangest stories about my rules. One year, *one year*,” she emphasized, “I told them no friends. And somehow, they turned that into a lifetime ban.

I'm delighted you're here. You still keeping that one in line?" She nodded at Morgan.

"Always."

"Good girl." Nana Rhodes sat back in her chair and clapped her hands.

Josh whistled, and the gang quieted.

"Everyone's here. Adam, bring Tamara a plate so she can get some cookies. Dylan, give me that bottle." Nana Rhodes motioned to the three-quarters empty bottle of scotch in his hand. He moved it behind his back, but his mom grabbed it away from him. "Thank you, Isabelle. Has everyone put their Secret Santa gifts under the tree?"

"I need to put mine under," I whispered to Morgan, pulling it from my purse. He took it and dropped it behind all the other gifts. "Thank you." I leaned forward to kiss him, then pulled back, realizing my mistake, hoping nobody noticed.

"You're the worst secret keeper ever," Morgan whispered, his lips brushing against my ear. My breath hitched. He knew that was a dirty move.

"Joshua, will you hand out the presents, please?"

"Sure thing! First up is ... drum roll, please ... Tamara."

"Me? Really?" I was shocked. I looked at Morgan. He shrugged. Josh tossed a medium-sized, soft package to me. "I didn't expect to get something, given the short notice, so thank you, Secret Santa." I looked around the room and smiled at each person in turn.

"Well, open it. We don't have all night. I'd like to get my bottle back," Dylan said. His mom punched his leg.

I opened the present. It was a gorgeous blue, zip-up hoodie from Lululemon, my favorite store in the world. "This is amazing. This is ... this is way more than I expected. Thank you so much, whoever got this for me." I knew it had to be Morgan, but I pretended like it could have been anyone.

"Next gift," Josh called over the chatter, "is for ... well, look at that! It's for Tamara!" He threw it at me before I was ready to catch it, and it landed on the table, on top of my plate of cookies.

"Joshua Rhodes, settle down," Nana reprimanded.

I lifted the wrapped gift, and it had my name on it. "Is this a mistake?"

“Santa doesn’t make mistakes,” Morgan said.

I opened the gift and found a hot water bottle wrapped in a funky star-and-sun-patterned fleece cover. It was beyond perfect.

For fifteen minutes and ten presents, I was the center of attention. There was only one gift left under the tree—the one I’d brought for Isabelle.

“Looks like someone has been very good this year, and the whole lot of the rest of you have not,” Nana said. “It’s a good thing you were here, Tamara, otherwise Santa wouldn’t have left a darned thing under that tree.”

I was speechless. Every time Josh said my name, Morgan just shrugged.

“There’s one more gift,” Morgan said. He stood and walked to the foot of the stairs leading up to the bedrooms. “Kim, Bill, it’s time.”

My parents? “What’s going on?” I stood and followed him. Mom and Dad were all smiles as they descended the stairs.

“You’re making us look bad. She’s never had that many presents in one Christmas in her entire life,” Dad joked.

“First year of many, I hope,” Morgan said, taking Dad’s hand and shaking it.

“What’s going on? Mom, what are you guys doing here?”

Mom raised her shoulders and made the “I have no idea face.”

“You can take our spot on the floor, if you don’t mind.” Morgan pointed to the empty space in front of the couch. He took my hand when I tried to follow them. “You’re stuck with me for this part.”

Everyone stared at us, smiling. It was the first time all night that nobody talked or joked. There was silence. And staring. I felt naked. Mom held up her phone, pointed at Morgan and me.

“What’s happening?”

Morgan got down on one knee. My hands flew to my face.

“Tamara Maria Tremblay, you have been my best friend for half my adult life. I have loved you as a friend for all that time and wanted to be able to love you as more since the night the alternator died on the Cassiar Highway, with no cell service and no hope for a passing car or truck for hours. Do you know what she did?” He turned toward the rest of the room.

The memory of that night made me laugh, but it turned it into a bubbling coughing sound since my insides were effervescent. Was he really doing this? On Christmas Eve, in front of all our family?

“She said, and I quote, ‘This is just perfect. I’ve been wishing we had one more night together in the magic of the mountain air.’ I thought, there is no woman, no human on this planet I would rather be stranded with.” He turned back to me. “And two and a half years later, I can say with all sincerity that I still feel the same way.”

“Me too,” I said.

“You have been here for me through every high and low, and I like to think I’ve been there for you—”

“You have,” I squeaked.

“I love that you make me see the world in ways I never could have imagined without your weird lens—”

I was feeling so self-conscious with everyone staring at me, I put my hand on Morgan’s mouth to stop him from talking.

He looked at me wide-eyed.

“Morgan, if you say one more thing other than, ‘Will you marry me?’ I swear to Gaia I will knee you.”

I am positive that nobody other than me heard Morgan’s actual proposal since all the brothers were laughing so hard and offering to do it for me.

But I heard him. I felt him. He took my hand and held up a ring. “May I?”

My eyes were so clouded with tears, he could’ve been holding the hose clamp and I wouldn’t have noticed. Or cared.

We kissed to a cacophony of cheers. When we finally pulled apart, Mom and Isabelle stood together, both wiping away tears.

As grateful as I was for all the gifts and the outpouring of love and acceptance, I wanted to get out of that room and that house. I wanted to say yes to Morgan with more than a public kiss. And it was Nana who gave us permission to ditch the party.

“So, when am I going to get a great-grandbaby?”

“We’ll get right on it, Nana,” Morgan said.

We were out the door without apology or a backward glance.

TAMARA

Fifteen months later...

It was March 21, the vernal equinox, a sacred day for those among us who believe in the power of the Universe. I wanted to honor the arrival of longer days back at the cabin. Morgan, of course, was keen.

“What have you packed in this bag, woman? We’re going for three days, not three weeks.”

“Taking a few extra supplies up now so we don’t have to carry as much when we go back for the summer solstice and the autumnal equinox. Just planning ahead.”

“Don’t be asking me to swap bags halfway there when you poop out.”

Morgan always threatened to make me carry my own load, but his threats were as empty as his own backpack. Not once in the history of our trips together had I carried my own bag all the way from departure to destination. And soon he’d be carrying my stuff and more.

The snow was still deep, but we’d reduced our hiking time from five hours that first trip to just over four. We made it to the cabin in the early afternoon, and while Morgan was getting kindling from the wood pile, I unpacked my bag, folded my clothes on the bed, and put the heavy stuff on the dining table, hidden under a small blanket.

Morgan kicked open the door. “Spiders have been put on warning to take a holiday this weekend. Your squatty potty has been brushed clean of snow. And I am ready to get out of these sweaty clothes. What say you? Want to clear the energy of other people’s shenanigans with some of our own?”

“I do ... but first...” I bit my lip to keep from laughing. It had almost killed me to keep this secret, but this was where and how I wanted to tell my soon-to-be husband what I’d learned a day ago. “I have a puzzle for you to figure out.” I pulled the small fleece blanket off the table.

“This is what I was carrying the last two miles?”

I nodded like a fool.

He shook his head. “So, you’ve got us building something this weekend. And here I thought I was going to be naked for the next forty-eight hours.”

“It’s a small project. Just a few hours with clothes on.”

“What have we got here? A hammer, a bag of nails, a very cool pocket chain saw. What are we making?”

I pointed to the envelope. “Open it.”

Morgan pulled out the instructions. “A tiny bed? What in the world do we need a tiny bed for?”

“It’s called a cradle.” I handed him the plastic stick I had hidden in my fleece jacket.

“Is this ... are you ... are we ...?” He held the stick and made eye contact with me.

“Look at it. Seems to me to be saying that we’ll be carrying a whole lot more weight on our adventures by this time next year.”

Morgan dropped the stick and grabbed me into a hard, long hug. He released me enough to touch my belly. “How far along?”

“Not exactly sure, but guessing two to three weeks, so it’s still really early, but I don’t think it’s too soon to *literally* start building for this future since I’ve been crystal clear with the Universe that this is what we want.”

“I love you so damn much.”

“I love you, too, my magic mountain man.”

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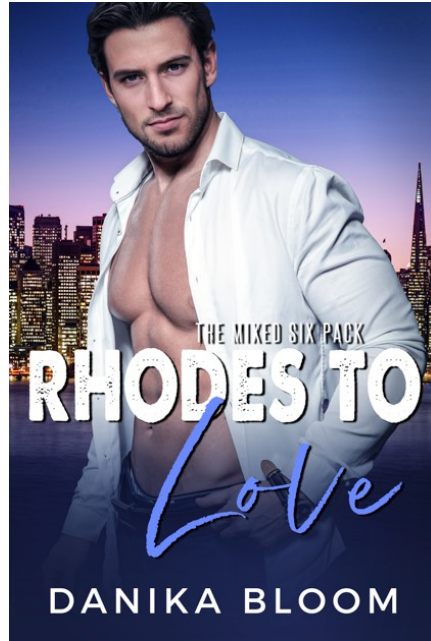
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Born and raised in Montreal, Canada, I spell like an American, use British colloquialisms and swear in French.

Visit www.danikabloom.com to get reader freebies, join my Advance Reader Team and hear about the latest thing I've said that's made my husband or one of my sons put their fingers in their ears and yell, "TMI! TMI!"

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