

Snowed in with Summer



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Chapter 1

Flying Solo

MOVIES LED ME TO BELIEVE that people run through airports for two reasons:

1. You're running toward someone, say, to tell a woman you love her before it's too late.
2. You're running away from someone, say, the assassin who's chasing you in pursuit of a relic.

But what if the reason you're running isn't someone else at all? What if you're running because you can't bear to stay in the place that holds the shattered remains of your heart?

My breaths rasp out of me as I weave through the crowd. I can't miss my flight. I need to get out of here.

At the security checkpoint, where the stagnant, dry air carries the aroma of everyone's feet, I remove my snow boots and down jacket with trembling fingers. They go in a gray bin on the conveyor belt, along with my carry-on luggage, backpack, phone, and passport.

I speed-walk through the metal detector—and, of course, it beeps. Waiting is agony while a stern-looking woman runs a handheld device over me. She'd better not think I'm sweaty and wide-eyed because I'm guilty of something. She holds my gaze, then waves me on.

As my stuff passes through the scanner, my ears fill with clattering bins, beeping machines, shuffling clothes, and the hum of conversa-

tions. The sound of couples and families talking seems to expand, making the building vast and desolate with me in the middle.

Alone.

The bin with my phone emerges. I grab it and check the time, my heart missing a beat.

Boarding started twenty minutes ago. Why did I do this to myself? This is so unlike me.

My bag emerges next—and I watch in horror as the agent on the other side of the glass pulls it toward him.

I almost yell, *Dammit, no!* But that attitude never helped anyone in an airport. I tug on my boots, grab my stuff, and dash to the end of the conveyor belt in time to watch him expose my heap of clothing to the world—unfolded, wrinkled, too many pairs of underwear hastily thrown in.

“Did you pack hand warmers, ma’am?” he asks in a bored tone.

“Yes.” I check the time. “My flight is boarding.”

Ignoring me, he pushes my clothes aside to take out the brand-new, brick-sized package of ten. “There’s a limit. I’m going to have to take most of them.”

He can take my entire luggage for all I care, as long as he makes it quick so I can get on that damn plane. “Okay. Sure.”

What a waste of money and hand warmers. And now I won’t have enough to last the week. I’d better not lose a finger to frostbite because airport security has a stick up their ass.

I check my phone again. The gate attendants are probably calling my name over the PA. “*Would Miss Avery Graham please report to Gate B-23?*”

He returns my luggage, and I zip it up without folding or rearranging anything.

Also unlike me.

My mind and body disconnect as I sprint toward the gate, wheeling my lumpy carry-on behind me. My palm is slick on the handle. Am I really doing this? Am I really giving everything I have to making my flight?

An hour ago, I was convinced I would stay home. But when I looked at my phone to find the background picture of Nolan and

me—our breakup so fresh I hadn't even had time to change it—I thought, *screw it*. I can't let that asshole ruin the trip I spent months looking forward to. Not to mention thousands of dollars on booking. I'm going to have a great time by myself.

"I—I'm on this flight," I tell the gate attendant, the words jumbled beneath my wheezing. I hold out my passport and phone with the boarding pass open.

As she accepts them, her lips press together, and her eyebrows lift in an "mm-hmm" expression.

My face burns. I can't believe I'm *that person*, inconveniencing everyone around me. "I'm so sorry."

She says nothing, scanning my boarding pass.

The Avery in my passport photo gazes blankly up at her. The version of me in that four-year-old photo was pre-Nolan, and it feels like a lifetime ago. I hadn't even started my event planning business yet and was still doing trade shows for SolarGrid+. I look youthful, my pale skin a little tanned, my face round, my shoulder-length blond hair a shade darker.

Huh, have I really gone that much blonder since then? Is my hair too light now?

The attendant returns my passport and phone and opens the gate for me to pass, still looking unimpressed.

"Thank you. I'm sorry. Thanks." I grab my luggage and enter the jet bridge.

Holy shit, I made it. *I—made—it*.

Yukon, here I come.

The familiar, musky airplane smell hits my nose, triggering a hint of travel anxiety. It's a Boeing 747 with three seats on either side of the aisle, and most overhead bins are full and shut. Everybody is seated, their eyes following me as I do the walk of shame to find my seat.

"Sorry. Sorry." My carry-on bumps into everything and everyone as I struggle along the narrow aisle.

I have a window seat near the front, which I chose the moment check-in opened yesterday.

The middle one was supposed to be for Nolan.

But there's no need to dwell on the seat's emptiness because a woman is sitting in it. She's about my age, pale, freckly, with her blond hair piled in a high bun and a brand-new-looking winter coat overflowing onto my seat.

A spark of annoyance hits me to see her in Nolan's spot—but, of course, it's not his spot. The unclaimed boarding pass in my inbox proves it.

"Excuse me." I point to my seat with the hand holding my phone and passport.

"Oh, yep," the woman says. "Are you alone?"

"Yes." I scan the overhead bin for where to fit my carry-on. It's jam-packed.

"We were sitting across from each other and shifted over when we saw this empty row," she explains with a note of apology, putting her hand on her partner's knee. Her engagement ring catches the light and stabs me in the eye.

Another pang of annoyance.

Her partner smiles at me. He's a tall, handsome Black man with thick-rimmed glasses who's also wearing a brand-new-looking winter coat. They must be from somewhere warm if they bought new jackets for the occasion.

"Do you mind?" the woman asks me.

Yes, I do mind. I want nothing more than to sit by myself and not have to be chatty with strangers while I process the state of my life over the next two and a half hours.

But I don't want to be difficult and stop these two from enjoying the flight together, so I do my best to smile. "No problem!"

I go back to scanning the overhead compartments. Dammit, where am I going to put my luggage?

The flight attendant comes over to help. "There's a spot near the back."

Great. Now I'll be twenty rows away from my bag. I surrender it to her, and she frowns at it.

"You're going to have to close your bag properly so it fits."

My face is on fire as I grab the zipper. It won't close over the heap of clothing. I open the suitcase, yank out my scarf and wool toque

with the ridiculously large pom-pom on top, fight with the underwear that wants to fall out, and close it.

We do a little square-dancing shuffle: the couple gets out of their seats, I get in, they get in, and the flight attendant continues on with my luggage.

The woman smiles at me. “Yukon on the winter solstice, huh?”

I shove my jacket, scarf, toque, and backpack under the seat in front of me, using my feet to get everything in. “Yep.”

December 21st isn’t for another four days, so I have the whole week of maximal hours of darkness to see the northern lights.

The tiniest spark of excitement tries to flare to life inside me. It’s about time I made this trip happen. I’ve wanted to do it for, like, nine years—ever since I was eighteen and dating Summer Joshi.

I remember sharing the idea with her on my bedroom floor one afternoon, the way her brown eyes lit up and she got a dreamy, far-off look on her face. We immediately huddled closer, our arms brushing, and started researching things to do in the Yukon.

I clench my jaw, a balloon deflating in my chest. Thinking about her, about the dream we never fulfilled, is just as painful as thinking about Nolan. Why do I do this to myself? It’s like my brain is spiraling, one heartbreak leading into the memory of another.

I guess I was always destined to do this trip by myself.

“Are you meeting with a tour group or going alone?” the woman beside me asks.

“Tour group. Alone. Alone in a tour group.”

My annoyance seeps into my tone, spurred on by how many times she’s made me say the word *alone*. I inhale deeply, trying to let it go. It’s not their fault my love life is in shambles. I can’t blame them for wanting to sit together. Nolan and I would have done the same if we’d seen an empty row beside us.

It’s also not their fault that they look like a foggy reflection of Nolan and me. I mean, I don’t have freckles, Nolan doesn’t wear glasses, and there’s a rock on her finger—but there are enough similarities to spark recognition.

Or maybe I’m just looking for it. Maybe I’m doomed to see reminders of Nolan everywhere for the rest of my life.

I fix my flannel shirt, which is comfortably oversized but likes to get twisted around my butt, then pull out my phone to change the background to anything other than Nolan and me being happy together.

The plane rolls back. *Wow*, I cut it close.

My heart is still pounding, my nostrils flaring, as I try not to openly wheeze for breath.

“Was your connecting flight delayed?” the woman asks.

“No, I’m from here. Like, an hour outside of Vancouver. I was just late.”

“Oh.”

A few seconds of scrolling makes me realize every picture I have reminds me of him, so I pick a generic photo of a bouquet from a corporate event I planned last week. I put my phone into airplane mode.

Feeling squished, I angle toward the window. I have half a mind to ask them to vacate Nolan’s seat so I can have the breathing room. But there’s no sense in inconveniencing them because I’m having a mild panic attack. I’m fine.

“Where are you from?” I ask, trying to look less miserable.

“San Diego,” the woman says.

I nod. “Ready for the cold?”

The guy laughs and shakes his head. “She’s forcing me into this.”

She pats the sleeve of her new jacket. “We’re as ready as we’ll ever be. What tour company are you with?”

“Wild North Lodge.”

“No way! Us too! I’m Hannah.”

I smile. “Avery.”

“Trevor,” the guy says with a little wave.

“Nice to meet you both.” Shit, I hope I didn’t make a bad first impression.

In the way of travel companions, they seem all right. I’ve traveled a few times in my twenty-seven years and haven’t always liked the people I’m stuck with on tours.

Hannah glances back at the rest of the plane. “I wonder who the other three people in our group will be.”

“Two,” I correct her. There are three cabins at the lodge, so there will be two others in our group—or maybe just one, if the other party is a solo traveler.

And now I’ve opened my big mouth and have to explain about the absent person.

“My boyfriend was supposed to come with me,” I say. “Ex-boyfriend. That would be his seat.”

Her face falls. “Oh. Wow. That sucks.”

“That’s life,” I say valiantly, but my throat tightens around the words.

The plane’s engine gets louder as we taxi to a runway.

“How long were you together?” she asks.

“Two years.” I stare at my pile of belongings, debating rummaging for my headphones, but something compels me to say more. Maybe it’s because I haven’t told anyone about the breakup yet, not even my parents or my Zucchini Muffins group chat. The friends in that group, named for some in-joke none of us can remember due to wine, will be the first people I tell.

For now, I want sympathy from strangers. “He was going to propose to me under the northern lights. Instead, he dumped me last night. Just zipped up his luggage and...drove away.”

To put it lightly. There were words. Loud words.

Hannah gapes. “What a dick!”

Trevor grimaces. “That is a bit of a dick move.”

The engine revs, and I suck back as the plane speeds up. My heart-beat accelerates with the plane, and then we’re in the air, soaring over rainy Vancouver and away from yesterday’s bullshit.

Hannah and Trevor’s reassurance soothes me. Nolan *is* a dick, and he ruined a perfect trip. This was all supposed to be part of our plan:

1. Get engaged. The photo of the moment would be picturesque, candid, and so perfectly “us.”
2. Get married. Small ceremony, big reception.
3. Spend our lives building and nurturing our perfect home.

Step three has its own sublist in my notes app, to which I constantly add items when inspiration strikes: DIY renovations, garden plans, sustainability upgrades. I even had solar panels picked out.

Hannah raises her voice over the whining plane. “So...you even talked about a northern lights proposal, and he backed out right before your trip? Who does that?”

I hesitate. “Well, sort of. Like, he knew that’s what I wanted.” My cheeks heat up. My words came out like he’d bought the ring and planned to do it. In reality, it was a hope I had, but he obviously didn’t share it. “I thought the northern lights would have been the perfect spot.”

Trevor chuckles. “You’re so like Hannah. She planned my proposal for me too.”

She smacks his arm. “I did not! I only told you I wanted it to happen on a hike.”

“Uh-huh.”

They exchange a gooey, teasing look that hurts my heart.

Fine, he might be right that I planned Nolan’s proposal for him.

But men are impossible. If you don’t tell them exactly what you want, they’ll never figure it out. They’ll look at you in confusion on February 14th, wondering why you seem subdued, whereas a woman will wake you up with a dozen roses and a heart-shaped pie before you even realize what day it is.

Hannah turns back to me. “I guess it’s good he did it before the trip instead of during.”

“I guess.”

Except his timing gave me no chance to find someone else to take his place. If I’d had even a day or two, I could have called a friend, a cousin, the girl who does my lash extensions... Literally anyone.

Maybe I was always doomed to make this trip alone. When I told people I was going up north in the dead of winter, the most common reaction was an expression of horror. Even Nolan took convincing.

The only person who ever seemed excited about doing this trip with me was Summer.

But that’s enough thinking about Summer.

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As we reach cruising altitude, I take out my headphones, and Trevor turns on his tablet. He puts on a James Bond movie, and Hannah leans on his shoulder to take an earbud and watch with him.

My chest tightens, and my wish for an empty middle seat returns. Time for my meditation app.

Beyond the window, the view shifts from Vancouver's light dusting of snow to a gorgeous, jagged range of white mountains. Vancouver is behind me, and ahead is a snowy, subarctic adventure. The faintest wisp of excitement flares in my belly, but it dies quickly, as if there isn't enough air inside me to keep it alive.

Who would I be if I hadn't made that mad dash through the airport?

I'd be a girl sitting alone in a townhouse full of memories, staring at my empty luggage, weighed down by every regret in the world.

Instead, I'm a single girl on an airplane, breathing through a suffocating mix of anger, hurt, and determination, hoping this trip is worth it.

Chapter 2

Avoiding Summer

WHEN YOU'RE TRAVELING, THERE ARE always more pressing matters than broken relationships and everyday life—like waiting for everybody else to disembark so you can get to your carry-on bag at the back of the plane.

Annoyance twisting my gut, I finally extend the handle of my luggage and exit, the last one to thank the pilot and flight attendant on my way out. Sweat prickles across my back, and my snow boots clunk obnoxiously across the floor.

In Arrivals, Hannah and Trevor stand before a woman in her thirties holding a Wild North Lodge sign and a clipboard.

Good. Let's get outside so I can breathe fresh air. My down jacket, scarf, and toque are suffocating.

Someone else is standing with them, a woman around my age wearing a red jacket and a huge backpack and—

I stop in my tracks. My heart drops into my feet.

No, no, no.

I blink, waiting for my eyes to pick out a feature that proves it's just someone who looks like her.

But there's no denying it. I'm looking at the side profile of Summer Joshi.

She looks infuriatingly hot. She's cut her dark hair into a long bob that grazes her shoulders in beachy waves. Her brown skin glows like she's been in the tropics—which is possible if she's been traveling as much as she said she would. Her liner is the same as when we were

teenagers, a subtle smokey eye that makes her light brown irises pop. Her full lips are curved upward in a little smile as she listens to the others.

She got her nose pierced. A diamond stud. She talked about wanting to do it around the time we started dating in grade 12, but she never built enough courage to swing a third strike against her parents.

Seeing her again freezes me in place, thrusting forward memories of our three years together: pushing her back against a wall, a bed, a table, a couch, a bathroom stall, a tree trunk, the back seat of a car, anywhere and everywhere. Her hand between my legs, the sensation so good it left me dizzy. Her warm breath on my neck, hitching as I pushed her thighs apart. Her teeth sinking into my shoulder as she cried out.

Hannah and Trevor see me, and Summer begins to turn as well—and I pull my scarf up over my nose and tug my toque firmly downward. I drop my gaze to my luggage before we can make eye contact, pretending to struggle with it.

Oh my God, she's on the same tour as me? Kill me now. There's no way I'll be able to avoid her for a whole week, which means we'll have to talk.

And if we talk, will we pick up the argument where we left it seven years ago?

I can't handle that right now. Not when I'm already in emotional turmoil.

This was a bad idea. I should get back on the plane.

"Here for Wild North Lodge?" the host asks me.

"Yep," I grunt through the scarf, forcing my feet to move closer to the group.

I'm being weird and rude, but it's better than having an awkward reunion in front of all these people.

She looks at her clipboard and opens her mouth, and before she can do anything disastrous like say my name, I tap my info on the paper.

She nods. "Great. I'm Chantal."

Phew.

She's the person I emailed when I booked, and she's younger than I expected for someone who runs a lodge and tour company—maybe in her early thirties. She's tall and fit with long, brown hair, golden-brown eyes, tan skin, and the relaxed smile of someone who loves what they do for a living. "Welcome to paradise," she adds.

Trevor looks pointedly out the window, where the tarmac looks like an arctic wasteland.

"I'm Summer," Summer says.

I let an awkward beat fill the silence, refusing to meet her gaze.

Chantal scans the clipboard again. "My trusty guest list tells me we're one adventurer short. Did you arrive with someone else?"

"Oh, he's not coming," Hannah says gently, almost a whisper. "Last-minute cancellation."

Chantal looks at me for confirmation, and I nod stiffly.

After a beat, she smiles understandingly and turns to the others. "Okay, friends. I'll be your wilderness guide and host. It's my job to ensure that by the end of this trip, you understand why I called this place paradise." She lowers her sign and waves for us to follow. "Let's hit it."

My shoulders drop. I could hug Hannah. She's being sweet by sparing me from saying I got dumped before the trip, but she doesn't realize the full extent of what she's saving me from. I meet her gaze, hoping to convey my gratitude through the slit I've left for my eyes.

I get a searching, concerned look in response.

"Anyway, it's hard to pick," Summer says to Chantal, apparently continuing a conversation. "I've always wanted to see the northern lights on the winter solstice, so that was my main reason for booking. But the dogsledding is what sealed it for me."

I roll my eyes. It was my idea to see the northern lights on the winter solstice. She stole my idea, and now she's here, invading my plans.

I trail behind everyone. I didn't tie my laces before leaving the plane, and my heels lift inside my snow boots as we walk. *Clunk, clunk, clunk.* The hollow, rhythmic stomping seems to fill my insides.

The trip wasn't supposed to begin this way. It's the first one I've done in over a year, and it was supposed to start off with me being

chatty, getting to know my travel companions, and making new friends. Instead, I'm being silent and reclusive, and a scarf is covering three-quarters of my face.

"Ooh, me too," Hannah says. "I can't wait to try it. Trev's excited to try ice fishing."

"Gonna catch a big one," Trevor says, putting on a boastful voice.

"Those are usually our two big draws," Chantal says. "We'll make sure to snap some good photos of you so you have the memory."

Summer turns her head and flashes a bright, wide smile, and it's infuriating to feel the imprint of what that smile used to do to me. I guess I didn't erase my memories of her as much as I thought.

I'm looking forward to visiting the wildlife preserve, I want to say. A hot surge of anger swells inside me at Summer for ruining my chance to join the conversation.

I glare at the back of her head as if hoping she can feel my blistering gaze. How dare she show up here?

Ugh, I should just reveal my face and get this over with.

But then what? We have an awkward, bitter reunion in front of strangers?

No, I need the right moment—somewhere we can have a civil conversation away from the others. Or at least some privacy if civility is not in the picture.

"Brace yourselves." Chantal looks each of us over and lingers on Trevor. "Better zip up that jacket."

He does.

We step out the sliding glass doors, and through my jacket, toque, scarf, and leggings, the cold slams into me.

Holy shit.

I cough as if my lungs are trying to reject something toxic.

Trevor exhales sharply. "Fucking fuck. What's the temperature?"

"Minus fifteen," Chantal says brightly.

"What's that in Fahrenheit?"

Chantal looks skyward, apparently doing the math. "Five. Pretty mild, to be honest. Winters have been getting warmer around here."

“This is *amazing!*” Hannah shouts, running ahead of us with an arm out like she’s frolicking in a meadow. Her luggage bumps along behind her. “Have you ever felt anything like it?”

I draw a deep breath of very dry air, struggling to adjust to the temperature shock. Why didn’t I book a trip to Mexico instead?

Chantal leads us across the parking lot to a white van with the Wild North Lodge logo. A husky silhouette runs beneath the words, framed by two pine trees.

Hannah runs back to us, out of breath and grinning. Trevor shakes his head at her.

“How long have you lived in Whitehorse?” Summer asks.

“Born here.” Chantal opens the back of the van for our luggage. “My life and soul. I’m a member of the Kwanlin Dün First Nation.”

“Oh, wow!” Summer’s cheeks dimple when she smiles. I forgot about her dimples.

I look at my feet, burying my face deeper into my scarf. She’s my personal Pink Elephant Problem—if you tell yourself not to think about a pink elephant, all you can think about is a pink elephant.

Don’t look at Summer, don’t look at Summer, don’t look—

Dammit, I’m looking at Summer.

There’s a chance I’m making a bad judgment call. The longer I wait, the worse this will be because I’ve spent all this time hiding and not saying hi.

“How long have you been running the business?” Summer asks.

Chantal finishes stacking our luggage and shuts the back doors. “Four years as the owner and five years as an employee before that. That was back when Fred Lockwood owned the place. Heard of him?”

We all shake our heads. It’s the most I’ve participated in the conversation.

“The man, the myth, the king of canines. He was a famous musher.” Chantal slides open the van’s side door. It has three passenger rows. Hannah and Trevor climb into the first one, and Summer motions for me to go ahead.

I bow my head and climb in, dread simmering in my gut.

Oh, God, she’s going to sit next to me. Our awkward reunion is going to happen in an enclosed space with an audience—or else I’ll

have to keep my head turned away from her and my scarf over my face for the next half hour.

“You bought the business from him?” Summer asks.

There she goes, effortlessly chatty and making friends as always.

I move on toward the back row and put my backpack on the seat next to me, avoiding her eye.

After a hesitation, Summer reads my body language and sits in the middle row, putting her backpack on the seat beside her.

I let out a breath. At least I’ll have the drive to sit in peace and avoid being discovered.

“He was in his seventies and decided it was time to hang up the mushing harness.” Chantal rolls the door shut and goes around to climb into the driver’s seat before continuing. “I didn’t have the finances myself, but I pitched it to my parents. That took some work. Mom expected me to have a more conventional career—she’s a grade-1 teacher—and Dad’s a chef and not a social guy, so he didn’t get why I’d want to talk to strangers for a living.”

“Trev’s a second-grade teacher!” Hannah says.

I can picture it. He seems patient and soft around the edges.

“Yeah?” Chantal meets their gazes in the mirror as she takes us out of the parking lot. “Hats off to you. I couldn’t do it.”

He tilts his head. “There are good and bad days.”

“Well, my parents agreed to help with the investment in the end,” Chantal says, “so I made Fred an offer. Now he’s enjoying his golden years an hour away in an off-grid cabin with his wife and a few dogs.”

“What a life,” Summer says wistfully.

I always thought she would get bored living somewhere remote—she’s so social—but she insisted her retirement plan was to be a homesteader in northern BC.

I open my mouth to ask Chantal what it’s like being off-grid all year, then close it. I’ll break my silence and say hi to Summer at the lodge.

Chantal drives us up the Alaska Highway, the van’s tires grinding and crunching over salt and packed snow. Everything outside looks frigid, from the ice-encrusted road signs to the stunted, white-tipped trees.

Inside the van, however, the heat is blasting. Uncomfortable, I pluck at my scarf to let some air hit my face. Loose strands of Summer's hair flutter in the circulating air, and she gathers it into a ponytail, drawing my gaze to the back of her neck. How many times did I kiss her there—one hand sliding around her hips, the other on her throat, running my tongue over the most sensitive parts of her body until she couldn't take it?

I avert my attention to the front row, where Trevor puts his arm around Hannah's shoulders. A lump forms in my throat. That should be Nolan and me right now. Instead, the empty seat next to me feels like a canyon.

After half an hour of staring out the window, sweltering and itching inside my arctic disguise, we turn off the highway onto a bumpy road of compacted snow. The same stunted, frostbitten trees crowd the sides of the road. We must be out of cell range now.

I check my phone, and sure enough, it shows no service. A few messages await from my Zucchini Muffins group chat.

Olivia: Have the best time in the Yukon, Avee!! Send pics!!

Kai: I've always wanted to get it on inside a yurt. Tell us what it's like.

Ming: Ooh, do it in the wilderness under the northern lights.

Roya: Sounds like a good way to get frostbite on your vag.

Olivia: UM, AGREED. Don't do that, please.

Far from cracking a smile, I sink deeper into my seat, my gut lurching. I still have to tell my friends I got dumped. At least they're engaged listeners who gasp in all the right places, so I'm sure we'll end up venting about what a shitbag Nolan is until we all run out of air.

I'm just not looking forward to the tears that are sure to come as I type the words.

"Oooh!" Hannah and Summer cry.

I look up, and my breath catches. Wild North Lodge sprawls before us—and I have never seen so many dogs.

Across a snowy yard the size of a hockey rink, a hundred or so sled dogs are tethered outside wooden kennels and corralled inside large, chain-link enclosures. A cacophony carries through the van's closed windows, barking, howling, and other husky sounds that can only be called screaming. I wait for a jolt of excitement to hit me at the sight of the dogs, but a block of ice must have encased my heart because I only get a dull ache in my temples.

"Do they live outside?" Hannah asks with a note of concern.

"They have to. Their coats are so thick that they overheat if it gets up to minus ten. Uh, fourteen Fahrenheit," Chantal adds, meeting her eyes in the rearview.

"Holy crap," Trevor says.

As someone who let the family mutt sleep in the bed with me, I feel better hearing this. Working dogs like these are probably happier here than in a hot downtown apartment.

"We also rotate them in and out of the paddocks, depending on whether they'll be running that day," Chantal says. "Don't worry, these pups are my babies. They live on premium diets and kisses."

Peering out the window at the mayhem, a bout of nerves hits me. I expected a bunch of floofy, chunky huskies—the kind you see talking back to their owners in funny videos. But these dogs are shaped more like cheetahs than teddy bears. Am I seriously going to jump on a sled behind a pack of these fifty-pound balls of energy? What have I signed up for?

"The puppies and retired dogs live in the lodge, though," Chantal adds. "We're a big, hairy family in there."

Summer fist-pumps. "Yes!"

Trevor lets out a soft groan, and Hannah pats his back, grinning. I wonder if he's not much of a dog guy.

I try to summon a wisp of happiness. I've got all the necessary pieces—dogs, impending adventure, the promise of good food, and a cute yurt to sleep in—but happiness might be a little harder to find than anticipated after getting dumped, especially given the looming prospect of facing my ex-girlfriend.

We park in front of a wooden cabin that must have once been a house. The roof is covered in solar panels, and the hum of a genera-

tor can be heard beyond all the barking. Wooden outbuildings to the right have their doors open to reveal sleds, harnesses, tools, firewood, and more. Beside the cabin are three yurts—round, green pods with peaked roofs and wooden signs over the doors reading *Kodiak*, *Grizzly*, and *Polar*. More than anything, I can't wait to cozy up in mine and decompress tonight.

As we get out into the breathtaking cold, the dogs become so loud that my ears ring, and a smell hits my nose through my scarf. Looking around at the yellow and brown patches on the snow, it's clear that rain hasn't graced this place for weeks, and the extreme cold has fixed the dog excrement to the landscape.

I scowl, hunching against the frigid air. I think I'm doomed to be surrounded by shit this week.

Chantal unloads our luggage with practiced efficiency. "Hannah, you can say hi to them in a minute. Let's get your snow gear and digs sorted first."

I look around to find Hannah speeding toward the nearest dog pen while its occupants jump and bark. She turns back, slumping a little. "They're so wiggly..."

"Come on." Trevor crosses his arms, hunching against the cold, his expression telling me he's wondering why he agreed to this.

We enter the lodge with a hollow clunk of boots on wood, our jackets shuffling, our luggage bumping into the walls and each other. My heart lurches. It's almost time to take off my scarf and say hi.

"Wild North Lodge is proudly sustainable," Chantal says, kicking off her boots, "so we ask that you be mindful of your usage. A flicked switch, a shorter shower—it all makes a difference."

I nod. The sustainability pledge was a selling point when I chose this tour.

"Other than that, this is your home for the week," she says, patting the log wall on the way past, "so feel free to use the TV, games, anything you want."

I feel a trickle of the comfort she's promising. Something about being in a wood cabin is calming. Maybe there's hope that I can enjoy this trip.

Two free-roaming huskies come to greet us, and they have to be the oldest, boniest animals I've ever seen in my life. Their tails wag as they hobble over and sniff our knees. These must be some of the retired dogs.

"Oh, they're so cute!" Summer coos, leaning down to scratch them both.

"The black furball is Dash, formerly our little speed demon. Still thinks he is one. The gray one is Smokey. Both have fathered quite a few of the pups outside." Chantal walks behind a reception desk covered in forms and pens. A section of art and clothing with price tags fills up the right side. "Dinner is in the dining room here at six. Feel free to explore the yard and say hi to all the dogs once you get your snow gear on. They're all friendly."

Hannah bounces excitedly.

A pang of homesickness hits me in the chest as the lull of the afternoon stretches before me—an unbidden wish that Nolan was here.

No. I do *not* wish he was here. He's not the guy I thought he was, and I deserve better than someone who packs up and leaves right before a romantic getaway.

Anyway, this afternoon won't be a lull. I have a plan: gear up, say hi to all the dogs in the yard, freshen up before dinner.

A chorus of high-pitched yips interrupts my thoughts, and five puppies stampede in from the living room, followed by a lean, tan dog who brings to mind a doe.

The block of ice encasing my heart melts a little.

"Doing all right, Pippi?" Chantal asks.

Summer gasps and shrugs out of her heavy backpack, bending closer to the stampede of puppies. "Pippi, are these your babies?"

Pippi wags her tail and leans into Summer's legs. Dogs always did love her. Our family mutt, Stitch, used to pee in excitement when she walked in the door.

"We went with an artist theme for this litter," Chantal says. "Leonardo, Frida, Vincent, Georgia, Pablo."

"Aww, how dignified!" Summer bends down to coo at them.

“Trevor, Hannah, let me grab some signatures from you here.” Chantal holds out a couple of pens and forms. “You’ll be in the Kodiak yurt.”

I bend to pet the puppies clawing at my legs. They’re round with stubby tails, each one a different color, all of them baby soft with loose skin. “Hi, sweet—ouch!”

I pull my hand back as a white one clamps its sharp puppy teeth over my fingers.

“Pablo, gentle,” Chantal snaps, though the puppy doesn’t seem to know his own name yet and ignores her.

While Hannah and Trevor fill out forms and Summer and I wait our turn, the entryway is quiet, filled only by scratching pens and whining puppies.

Okay, I should pull my scarf down and say hi.

No, I should ask her to step aside and tell her out of earshot.

No, I’ll wait until we’re back outside. That’ll be the least public way to do this.

Pablo jumps relentlessly at my calf, aiming for my fingers again.

I crack a smile, bending to pet his chubby body.

As he wiggles beneath my fingers, I let out a laugh—and, God, it feels good to laugh. Are puppies the cure for heartbreak?

“Look at you!” I rub his pink belly as he gnaws on my hand. “You’re just a little potato!”

Summer stiffens. Slowly, she straightens up, her eyes wide with recognition—and maybe a flash of panic. Her mouth forms an *O*.

I freeze, cold dread pulsing through me.

Busted.

Chapter 3

A Lot of Layers

IT WAS THE POTATO THING. I always call little animals potatoes. Summer's gaze darts to Chantal, Trevor, and Hannah, who are busy with the forms. By the time she looks back at me, her eyes have narrowed.

Shame pulses through me as the reality of being caught settles in. I feel my expression shift to panic, my eyes asking her not to make a scene in front of everyone. This is bad enough without adding public embarrassment to the mix.

She backs away from the reception desk toward an open door. "Let's get out of the way, puppies!"

The puppies bound after her, biting her laces. I follow with heavy feet, feeling like I'm walking into a fighting ring.

"This is a big waiver," Trevor says behind us, apparently continuing his spiral of regret.

"Big waivers mean big fun," Hannah says brightly.

"What? That's not a thing."

"Don't worry," Chantal says. "It sounds scary, but it's a standard form for activity-based vacations..."

Summer and I step into a mudroom with a lot of parkas, gloves, and boots. "Is this why you were being—why you didn't—" she whispers, her gaze darting over me. She might be piecing together my standoffishness since the airport.

I rub my face—and then regret it because I haven't washed my hands since being on an airplane and touching a bunch of dogs. "It

wasn't supposed to happen like this," I hiss back. "I planned to say hi to you—"

She rolls her eyes. "Your famous catchphrase."

"Excuse me?"

"*It's not supposed to happen this way. It's not the plan.*" She waves her hands, which look tiny sticking out of her massive jacket. "What was the plan, then?"

Anger roils in my gut, heat building inside me like steam. Did she just *mock* me? "Well, it didn't involve running into you."

We glare at each other. Picking up where we left off, just like I expected. I was right to avoid having this reunion in front of the others.

They'd better not be able to hear us.

"It's been *seven years*," I whisper.

"And it seems you haven't changed a bit." She unzips her jacket with jerky movements. "I cannot believe we came all the way here from the airport and you were just hiding like a gremlin."

There's a scuffle at our feet as the puppies continue attacking Summer's laces, their claws scraping the floor and little playful groans rumbling from their throats.

Sweltering, I tug at my scarf. "Were we on the same flight? Vancouver?"

She nods stiffly, shrugging out of her jacket.

"And you didn't see me?" My tone is accusatory, like this is all her fault.

"I'm good at sleeping on planes."

Wow. We spent the whole flight together and didn't know it. I guess if I hadn't been so late, I might have run into her in the waiting area before boarding.

Would I have turned around and gone home then? Or would I have stuck it out?

"So you were actually in Vancouver?" I ask, deadpan.

"Layover."

I scoff. Of course. "Still afraid to commit to a city, huh?"

"Still obsessed with having a plan, huh?" she snaps back.

I clench my teeth, my jaw throbbing. Fury returns after years of lying dormant. The fact she thinks that about me is enraging. All I

wanted was to know where our relationship stood. “I forgot you can’t discuss anything but the present moment.”

She tosses her coat onto a bench, her cheeks red. She’s wearing a flattering beige cardigan with wooden buttons and a plunging neckline. She’s smaller than I remember, her shoulders slight, the top of her head only coming to my nose. Maybe I got used to being with a guy over the last few years—or maybe she just takes up so much room in my memory that I remember her being taller.

“I told you I wanted to travel,” she says.

I unwrap my scarf, which is driving me nuts in the heat of the lodge. “You sure did.”

Specifically, the day after finishing her two-year software engineering diploma, she told me she wanted to work remotely and spend the next several years backpacking. Though I’ve always liked traveling, I was never interested in being away from home for as long as she wanted—especially not when I’d just landed a job at SolarGrid+. Traveling for a couple of weeks? Sign me up. Taking off for months or even years? Uh, not unless you want me crying into my pillow from homesickness.

So, after three years together, she packed up and followed her dreams, leaving me behind.

Why does everyone in my life eventually pack up and leave?

“Your first stop of the tour is the mudroom,” Chantal tells Hannah and Trevor, startling both of us. “We’ll assign you snow gear for the week.”

Summer kicks off her boots, leaving them to the puppies, before stepping toward the door.

“Was it the potato thing?” I ask.

Summer turns. “What?”

I yank my toque off my head, taking a clump of hair with it. “Just now. When you knew it was me. Was it because I called the dog a potato?”

“Yes.” She purses her lips, and my mouth tries to twist into a smile, but I firmly stop it. “That and your laugh,” she adds, walking away.

I shed my jacket and boots, feeling naked in my flannel shirt and leggings. I squeeze past Trevor and Hannah and hurry to the front desk.

“Waiver, medical form, autograph here and here,” Chantal says.

A stiff silence swells between Summer and me as we skim through the forms and sign where we need to.

“Avery, right?” Chantal asks. “Your travel buddy is officially a no-show?”

A sensation like molten lava oozes through my gut.

“Yep,” I say without looking at Summer.

“Okay. Because you’re both lone wolves, I’m going to assign you to the same yurt.”

I freeze, her words swirling over my head like hummingbirds around a feeder.

Summer and I stare at her.

My chest seems to collapse on itself. “But—but you have three, right? We could each have our own.”

“Yes, but seeing as you’re both solo travelers, it’s our policy to pair people up. Heating and powering each yurt is a resource guzzler when it’s this cold out. It’s in the fine print of our sustainability pledge.”

The fine print. Of course. Why would I have read the fine print for solo travelers?

Damn sustainability pledge.

“You’ll be in the Grizzly yurt.” Chantal smiles. “No keys or locks on anything. We don’t need those here.”

Summer nods. Her expression is blank, unreadable. I can’t tell if she’s pissed off or resigned to our fate.

I let out a slow breath. When I decided to get on the plane this morning, I thought I’d at least have a room to myself to mourn my breakup in peace. Maybe sob a little. Now I’ll never have privacy. And I’m being forced to room with Summer of all people?

Chantal furrows her brow, looking between us as if trying to figure out why we both seem reluctant to share.

“We used to know each other,” Summer says.

A spike of irritation shoots through me. Okay, I guess we’re telling people.

“Oh!” Chantal’s eyes widen.

Behind us in the mudroom, the shuffle of Trevor and Hannah’s jackets pauses. They definitely overheard.

Everybody is clearly waiting for us to elaborate. Ugh, this is as awkward as I thought it would be. I should’ve gotten back on the plane and flown home.

“We used to date,” I say, hoping my casual tone conveys that I’m *so* over it.

If she wants to tell everyone, then fine, we’ll tell them.

Summer shoots me a look I can’t interpret. Maybe she heard the urgency in my tone—the desire to one-up her.

Holding grudges? Who, me?

“Okay.” Chantal looks down at the paperwork as if gathering her thoughts. She’s obviously never had to deal with this particular type of trainwreck before. “Well, if you want, we could... I mean, it’s our policy to pair up...”

“It’s okay.” Summer offers Chantal a smile. “We won’t be difficult for you. This’ll be a fun reunion.”

She turns a blank smile onto me before continuing with the forms.

I want to argue. I want to insist I have my own room. But that would mean causing a scene and getting off to a bad start with Chantal and everyone. More than my desire to have my own space, I don’t want to be difficult.

“It’ll be the time of our lives,” I say through my teeth.

I’m not sure who won this conversation. Maybe everybody loses.

When the forms are signed and we’re gathered in the mudroom, Chantal grabs snow gear for each of us—insulated overalls, parkas with hoods, boots, and mittens. All of it is rated for extreme cold, and by the time I have it on, I feel like I’m wrapped in sleeping bags.

“The long winters must get to you here, hey?” Trevor asks, standing with his arms out in a way that reminds me of the overdressed snowsuit kid in *A Christmas Story*.

“Sometimes I dream of piña colodas on a beach.” Chantal riffles through a box of parka hoods. “But when springtime swoops in, it’s like nature’s grand apology. You should visit us in June. I dare you to find a place that’ll steal your breath away quite like here.”

I zip up my parka and grab the mittens. My face is clammy from the gear and embarrassment.

“Looking good, friends,” Chantal says, scanning us. She walks behind me and tugs the collar of my parka. “You’re missing a hood.”

I reach back to confirm, my hand flailing across open air. “Oh. It’s okay.”

“No, it’s not. One sec, I’ll get you one.”

Damn, just how cold is it going to be? I feel like a marshmallow.

“Chantal, I think I need bigger boots,” Hannah says, wincing as she tries to cram her foot into one.

“Sure. Let me get you a size up.” Chantal grabs a hood from a bin and hands it to Summer. “Can you zip this onto Avery’s parka?”

No. Can’t someone else do it?

Summer takes it, looking like she wants to say no as well. She walks behind me, and I stand there while she struggles to connect the zipper ends. Her fingers move intimately close to my cheek, threatening to graze my neck at any moment. I can hear her every breath.

I stare ahead, pretending not to care about the proximity. She must have used hand lotion because a floral scent drifts into my nostrils. It’s soothing, feminine—awakening the part of me that’s been dormant for years.

Memories push forward, softer, hazier ones: leaning back on the couch so I can settle in against her chest, scooting back against her so I can be the little spoon, feeling her arms slide around my waist and her lips on my neck as she sneaks up behind me in the kitchen.

My heart skips a beat. Why am I thinking about these things? I thought I got rid of those memories long ago.

Heat rises into my cheeks, making my skin clammier. I probably look like a tomato.

Hannah finishes lacing up her boots and runs outside, abandoning her luggage. “Here I come, puppers!”

Trevor sighs, looking around as if trying to find a hole to climb into, before following. He moves stiffly and slowly in all his layers.

We plunge into silence, and Summer finally zips the hood onto my parka. She steps back. “Done.”

“Be free,” Chantal says, tidying up the clothing explosion on the benches. Her hair falls across her eyes, and she blows it back. “Settle

into your yurts and explore the property, and I'll see you at six for dinner."

Summer heaves her backpack on and leaves.

I grab my backpack and luggage, a mix of relief and regret simmering in my chest. I'm relieved she didn't say anything to make that awkward or hostile in front of everyone. But I regret we argued in the first place. Maybe I should have just apologized for hiding and stayed quiet.

I guess seven years weren't enough to make the hard feelings fizzle. For either of us.

The air bites my face, but the rest of me is dressed for it this time, and it's a relief not to want to die the second I step outside. The lingering heat of embarrassment probably helps too. Dogs continue to howl, and the dirty, packed snow squeaks beneath my boots as I follow Summer toward our home for the next week: the yurt with the sign above the door reading *Grizzly*.

The circular structure is cozy inside, with walls made of a wooden lattice and thick material. The ceiling is supported by thin, narrowly spaced rafters. A sled hangs upside-down above us, and white clouds are visible through a skylight at the peak. Mismatched rugs cover the wooden floor, looking well-worn after warming the feet of hundreds of guests. The furniture is all handcrafted wood—two queen beds, end tables with drawers, a table and two chairs, a couch, and a bookshelf with a few games and books. A wood-burning fireplace with a teakettle on top stands ready to pump out extra heat, though it's warm already.

Comfort hovers at the edge of my senses, trying its hardest to penetrate my skin and make me relax. But I can only stand here, stiff and uncomfortable in this romantic little dwelling with my angry ex-girlfriend.

The overpowering dog smell has also worked its way into our yurt. I guess that's unavoidable at a place like this.

Summer drops her backpack onto the bed further from the door. I take the closer one, dragging my luggage to the end table and leaving it for later.

I want to say something to break the silence. Do I ask how she's been, or would she roll her eyes at the basic question?

Before I can come up with something, she says, “We could try harder to be in separate rooms. I mean, you did pay for two people, and I’m willing to pay a solo traveler fee. I’ve done it before in tour groups. I doubt she’d say no if we’re willing to offset the cost.”

The anger has left her voice, her smooth, natural tone filling the air between us. She crosses her arms as she studies the worn-out games and coffee table books on the shelves.

“True.” I hesitate. The thought of going back to argue with Chantal is nauseating. She shouldn’t have to go out of her way to accommodate my petty request. Anyway, now that I’m in the yurt, it’s spacious enough. There are two beds, and that’s a win. “I guess I’m fine sharing if you are.”

Summer’s gaze lingers on me, making me wonder what’s going through her head. “Yeah, I’m fine with it.”

There. We said words that weren’t angry.

She walks past me and leaves.

I look around, shifting on my feet. Art in the distinctive Northwest Coast style covers the lattice walls—animals carved into wood and painted black, red, and blue, a mask, a drum. Over my bed hangs a canvas painting of an enormous octopus with long, winding tentacles rising out of the water. The caption says *Tlingit Octopus at Sunset*.

It’s a beautiful place—everything I hoped it would be and more.

I breathe deeply to loosen the tightness in my chest. This is the first time I’ve traveled solo, and it feels...empty. Lacking. I’m ready to share this experience with someone, but that someone isn’t here.

Instead, I get Summer.

The barking outside swells. She’s obviously gone to say hi to the sled dogs.

I don’t know what to do except sit here and feel the weight of being alone, so I head outside too.

As I step into the snowy expanse of the Yukon, the sight of a hundred huskies greets me. Across the yard, Summer bends to cuddle one, laughing as he licks her face.

My stomach twists. Time to figure out how to cope with the fact that I’m rooming with my ex-girlfriend all week.

TO CONTINUE READING,
PLEASE PURCHASE

SNOWED IN WITH SUMMER

BY TIANA WARNER

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