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Save the Date

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GRANT CENTRAL STATION



Christmas BREAK

I wasn't sure how it had happened. But Jesse Foster was kissing me.

I was kissing him back, opening my eyes every few seconds to verify it was really, actually happening, to see the twinkle lights and garlands strung up around the basement, the Santa hat listing on the banister post, and sure enough, Jesse Foster above me, his hands in my hair, his brown eyes closed.

Usually, when something you've dreamed about your whole life actually happens, it's a disappointment. The reality never quite lives up to the fantasy, where everything is perfect and you never get hungry and your feet never hurt. But this was everything I had ever imagined it would be, and more.

Whenever I'd had dreams about kissing him—and there had been a *lot* of these, starting from age eleven onward—everything had built up to the kiss. The moment he saw me, the words he said, the way it all seemed to go into slow motion as he bent his head toward mine. And then there had always been kind of a fade-out into blackness, and I'd start imagining the future, the two of us walking down the halls of

Stanwich High together, his hand in mine, as he smiled happily at me.

But kissing Jesse Foster in real life was beyond anything I'd even known to dream about. He was an amazing kisser, to start with, putting to shame the four other guys I'd kissed, who'd been fumbling and hesitant. He was utterly in control, but would pause every now and then, looking down at me, like he was making sure I was okay—and I'd stretch up to kiss him back, losing myself in him once more.

The part of my brain that could still think of things beyond *lips* and *hands* and *oh my god* and *Jesse Foster* was trying to understand how I'd gotten here. I had known Jesse my entire life—when he was six and short for his age, with a mop of brown curly hair; with braces and glasses when he was twelve; and now, at nineteen, his hair cut short, his arms strong and muscular, his legs tangling over mine as he eased me underneath him. He was my brother Mike's best friend, but it wasn't like we'd ever hung out, just the two of us.

I was only here, in the Fosters' basement two days after Christmas, because Mike hadn't come home for the holiday. After what had happened in February, he hadn't been home all summer—he'd stayed at Northwestern and done a summer program, and had skipped Thanksgiving. But up until the last moment, I hadn't quite believed that he would skip Christmas, too. It was one thing to bail on Thanksgiving or the Fourth of July. Not *Christmas*. But he hadn't come home, texting on the twenty-third that his plans had changed. There was no other explanation.

My mother had channeled her anger and disappointment into cleaning, and when she got to Mike's room, she'd found a box labeled JESSE STUFF and had handed it to me to do something with.

And even though I was beyond annoyed at my brother, I'd jumped at the chance. After all, this was a completely legitimate way to see Jesse, one that didn't involve me concocting some excuse. I'd texted him, sending drafts to my best friend, Siobhan, first so he wouldn't be able to

see my three-dot bubbles going on too long, proof that I was hesitating and changing my mind. He'd texted back that people were hanging out tonight at his place and to swing by whenever, which I'd interpreted to mean nine thirty. When I'd gotten there, after changing my outfit five times and working for an hour on my hair to get it to look like I hadn't spent any time on it at all, he'd waved at me cheerfully from across the basement, motioned for me to put the box in the corner, then pointed at the cooler of beers bobbing in melted ice water. I took a Natty Ice, but mostly just held it as I found myself in a conversation with one of Jesse's roommate's friends about how there are multiple timelines and the one we're living in is but one example of potentially infinite parallel universes, and that if I wanted proof, I could find it on the Internet.

I'd nodded and tried to look like I wasn't finding this ridiculous as I watched Jesse out of the corner of my eye. Siobhan called it my Jesse-dar, and she wasn't wrong—I always knew where he was in any room, and how near he was. Jesse had been the center of the party, dominating the beer pong table, greeting people as they walked in the basement door, sitting in a chair backward and arguing intensely about the last season of *Game of Thrones*. Every now and then, he'd look over at me, and I'd smile and then pretend to be really interested in whatever conversation I'd found myself having, needing to prove that I could hold my own with his friends, that I wasn't just Mike's little sister.

But after two hours, I was ready to go. Jesse's friends were starting to gather up coats and hats, the rain that had been on and off all day had started up again, and Jesse appeared very occupied with a girl in a red V-neck who was sitting close to him on the couch, her long black hair spilling like a curtain in front of them, shielding them from view. The bathroom in the basement was locked, so I headed up to the main house, which was quiet and dark, except for the white lights of a Christmas tree in the corner.

When I came back to the basement, I stopped short on the bottom

step. I could faintly hear doors slamming and a car starting up. But mostly, I was focused on the fact that everyone else had departed, and Jesse was sitting on the couch. Alone.

"How long was I gone?" I asked as I crossed the room for my coat, and Jesse smiled without taking his eyes from the television, which I could now hear was playing some kind of sports recap.

"Come on come on," he muttered, leaning forward. "Come—" Something sports-related and disappointing must have happened then, because he sighed and sank back against the couch. He turned off the TV, and then tossed the remote aside, leaving only the sound of the rain against the windows. Then he looked over at me and smiled, like he'd seen me there for the first time. "You don't have to leave, Charlie," he said, nodding at my coat. "Just because I'm a loser and all my other friends have deserted me."

I dropped my coat like it was on fire, but then gathered my wits and made myself walk over to join him on the couch slowly, like this wasn't a big deal at all and I really couldn't have cared less.

Jesse didn't move over from his spot on the middle cushion, so when I sat on the couch, I was closer to him than I had ever been before, except for two memorable occasions—when we'd been stuck in an elevator together at a laser tag place for Mike's fourteenth birthday, and a memorable car ride when I was twelve and we'd been coming back from playing mini golf in Hartfield, all of us crammed into the car, and somehow, I'd ended up in the way back next to Jesse, Mike on his other side. And Jesse kept turning to talk to Mike, which meant he kept leaning into me, his bare leg pressing against mine. It had been a thirty-minute ride home, and the whole time, I'd prayed for a traffic jam, a road closure, a flat tire—anything to keep it going longer. So, as I sat on the couch next to him now, it was with full awareness that this proximity to him—voluntary, as opposed to car-logistic mandated—was a brand-new thing.

His arm had been draped across the top of the couch when I had

walked over, and he didn't move it when I sat down next to him. It even—and this was enough to make my palms start to sweat—seemed to inch down a little, closer to my shoulders.

"You want to watch something?" Jesse asked, leaning over to retrieve the remote from where it had ended up on my side of the couch, which meant he was leaning over me, across me, his arm brushing mine and setting off an explosion of stars in my head.

"Sure," I managed, hoping that I sounded cool and composed and not like I was somewhere between elation and throwing up. Jesse smelled like fabric softer and faintly of the beer he'd been drinking, and when he'd retrieved the remote, he was closer still, and not moving away.

"Maybe a movie?" Jesse asked, pointing the remote vaguely toward the television but not moving his eyes from mine.

It was then that the penny dropped and I finally understood what was happening. I may have only kissed four guys, and the closest thing I'd ever had to a boyfriend was a tenth-grade relationship with my chemistry partner, Eddie Castillo, that had lasted all of three weeks, but I hadn't been born yesterday. I suddenly knew exactly why Jesse had asked me to stay, why I was sitting on the couch next to him, and that it was absolutely not to watch a movie.

"Sure," I said again, making myself keep looking right at him, resisting the urge to leap up and run to my purse so that I could text Siobhan and tell her what was happening and get her advice on what, exactly, I should do. I kicked off my flats and drew my legs up underneath me. "A movie sounds great."

Jesse gave me some options, and I pretended to care about this decision, but I knew we were both just marking time. And sure enough, the movie was only a few minutes in—from what I could tell in my distracted state, it seemed to be about a by-the-book cop who switches bodies with his police dog partner—when Jesse looked away from the screen and into my eyes.

"Hey," he said, one side of his mouth kicking up in a smile.

"Hey," I said back, not able to keep the nervousness out of my voice this time. He reached over and tucked a lock of hair behind my ear, then stroked his thumb along my jaw as he tilted his head and leaned in, eyes already closing.

And then he kissed me.

From the first moment our lips touched, it was clear Jesse knew what he was doing. These were not the shy, tentative kisses I'd had before, and I felt my breath catch in my throat as he kissed me, fast and deep. I was trying to keep up, trying to understand that this really, truly was happening. I kissed him back, hoping that my inexperience wasn't showing. But if it was, Jesse didn't seem to mind. My heart was galloping even as it felt like I was turning slowly to liquid, pooling into the Fosters' worn corduroy couch. Jesse broke away for a second and looked down into my eyes, and I tried to catch my breath, tried to gather my thoughts into something beyond his name repeating over and over in my head.

"So," he said, as he slid an arm underneath my hips and emerged a second later with the remote. He gave me a smile like we were sharing a secret and raised an eyebrow. "I don't think we need this on, do you?"

I smiled back at him. "Probably not." Jesse pointed the remote at the TV again, as the straitlaced police captain exclaimed, "I've heard of a dog's life, but this is ridiculous!" The sound cut off, and it was suddenly darker and quieter in the basement, just me and Jesse and the rain against the windows.

"Well then," he said, smiling at me before bending his head to kiss down my neck, making me gasp and then shiver, while I silently thanked Siobhan for talking me out of wearing the turtleneck I'd been considering. Without even realizing it was happening, he was easing me back on the couch, so that my head was on the armrest. Jesse was above me, his legs tangled in between mine.

He started to kiss me again as he slipped his hands underneath the

hem of my sweater, and I drew in a sharp breath. "What?" Jesse asked, straightening up and rubbing his hands together. "Are they cold?"

"No," I said, sitting up a tiny bit more as I looked down at my bare stomach and my sweater that was gathered around my ribs. Jesse started tracing his fingers across my stomach gently, and I could feel myself start to go melty again. But the most I had ever come close to doing before this was kissing—and even then, I'd never gotten to lying-down kissing.

"Is this okay?" Jesse asked, his eyes searching mine, his hands on either side of my rib cage, his thumbs tracing slow circles on my bare skin. I looked back at him and hesitated a second before nodding. It wasn't that I wanted him to stop—it was just that we were moving at speeds far beyond anything I'd ever experienced. It had taken Eddie a week to get up the nerve to hold my hand. I drew in a breath as his hands slipped back under my sweater, and I lost myself in what was happening, in his hands on my skin and our kisses that were growing more and more fevered, until he pulled my sweater over my head and tossed it aside and his hands went straight for the front clasp of my bra. I stiffened, and Jesse leaned back, his brow furrowed.

"You okay?"

"Just—" I glanced up the stairs. Suddenly I was all too aware that at any moment either of Jesse's parents could come down. And I wasn't sure that I could deal with the Fosters—both of whom had known me since I was five—seeing me half-naked on their couch, kissing their son. "Um . . . are your parents home?"

"They're asleep upstairs," Jesse said confidently, but I saw him look up toward the staircase as well.

I pushed myself up so that I was sitting, feeling like this—whatever it had been—was starting to slip through my fingers. Because I knew I wouldn't be able to go back to kissing Jesse now that all I could think about was his parents walking in on us.

"Tell you what," he said before I could say anything. He leaned closer

to me, smiling. "I know where we can go." He nodded toward the door, and I held my breath, hoping he wasn't going to suggest his car, when he said, "Guesthouse."

I'd never been in the guesthouse, but I'd heard about it—it was why Jesse had always won at elementary school games of hide-and-seek until Mike had figured it out. I nodded, and Jesse held out his hand to help me off the couch. I started to reach for my sweater, but he was already pulling his off, reaching around behind his neck to yank it over his head by the collar. He held it out to me, and I put it on, trying not to be too obvious as I breathed in the smell of him that seemed to permeate the soft gray cashmere. "Won't you be cold?" I asked as I smoothed my staticky hair down. Jesse was now just in his jeans and a white T-shirt, and it had been below freezing the last two nights.

"I'll be fine." He held out his hand to me, making the world tilt on its axis a little, and led me to the door that opened onto the Fosters' backyard. But when Jesse opened it, I took a step back. The rain was coming down harder than ever, and the temperature seemed to have dropped since I arrived; I felt myself start to shiver, and I realized a little too late that I'd left my flats over by the couch.

"Ready to make a run for it?" Jesse asked, squeezing my hand.

"Wait," I said, taking a step toward the couch. "Let me get my shoes."

"It's okay," Jesse said, and he pulled me back and then closer to him. He leaned down to kiss me and then, a second later, lifted me into his arms. "I got you."

I let out a sound that was halfway between a shriek and a laugh, and before I even had the chance to be mortified, Jesse was opening the door and carrying me outside, into the rain.

I wrapped my legs around his waist and he was kissing me as he walked. Jesse stopped for just a moment, both his arms around me tight, and we kissed as the rain poured down on us. It was like I could practically feel his heart beating against mine through his T-shirt. Then Jesse

swung my legs over his arm—when had he gotten so strong? He was carrying me like I weighed nothing—and started to half run, half walk across the grass to the guesthouse.

It was a miniature version of the Fosters' house—a peaked wooden roof and glass panes that ran the length of the house, a balcony on the second story. I thought Jesse was going to go in the main door, but he continued to carry me over to the staircase that led up the side of the house to the second floor. He set me down on the bottom step, but he did it slowly, not dropping me, his hands sliding up my legs to my waist. "After you," he said, and I could hear that his teeth were chattering. Now that we were no longer kissing, I was starting to feel just how cold it was, that my feet especially were getting numb. I hurried up the stairs, Jesse behind me, and then he led the way across the balcony and opened the unlocked second-story door.

Jesse didn't turn on any of the lights, and I blinked as my eyes adjusted. It was an open loft space—maybe the kitchen and living room were downstairs—just a king-size bed in the center of the room with nightstands flanking it and a bathroom off to the side, the door slightly ajar. Before I could even get my head around the implications of this—because a bed, like an actual *bed*, seemed somehow really different from a couch—Jesse had shut the door behind us and was in front of me again. He kissed me—this was never, I decided, not going to feel miraculous—but I could feel how cold his lips were and that his teeth were full-on chattering now.

"Maybe," he said, pulling his T-shirt away from his skin—it was practically transparent with the rain—"we should get out of these wet clothes?" He raised an eyebrow at me as he said it, and even though I laughed, I couldn't help thinking that it might not be the worst idea, just from a practical standpoint, all too aware of how my clothes were soaked, heavy and dripping on the beige carpeting.

Jesse looked down at me and, not breaking eye contact, reached back

and pulled his T-shirt over his head. I just blinked at him for a second—it was all I could do not to reach out and touch his bare chest, trace my fingers down the ridges of his abs. There was a question in his expression, not quite a challenge, but almost. I stood there, my hair dripping, shivering in Jesse's sweater, aware all at once of the implications of what was happening here. I was in a room that was mostly bed with the boy I'd loved practically all my life—a college sophomore, who had experience, who would never have taken weeks to try to hold somebody's hand. He'd kissed me. He'd carried me through the rain. I knew I could leave now—everything that had already happened was so far beyond what I'd ever dreamed might happen tonight—and go home happy, with enough to think about and hold on to for months.

Or I could stay.

I stood there, wishing I didn't have to decide this right now, that I could take a time-out to think about it and get back to him sometime next week. Suddenly, I thought about the guy I'd been talking to earlier and his parallel universe theory. Maybe there had been another version of tonight, where Jesse had waved good-bye to me from the couch and I'd put my coat on and had just gone home, thinking about him like always, not even daring to imagine the situation I was in could even be possible. What would that Charlie have said to me right now, somehow in the throes of indecision because the thing I'd always dreamed would happen to me was actually happening to me?

I took a breath, telling myself that I could change my mind at any time, that this didn't mean anything, while knowing full well that I wasn't going to, and that it did. I pulled Jesse's sweater over my head, and he looked at me, his eyes searching mine, and I nodded.

Jesse found the guesthouse thermostat and cranked it up and we dove under the covers together, him helping me out of my jeans and then kicking his own off, both of us cracking up at how frozen all our extremities were. I'd touch my foot to his calf and he'd yelp, and then

he'd place his hand just over my collarbone and I'd shriek. But soon, as we started kissing again, our legs and feet tangling together, my hands exploring his neck, his chest, his leg, suddenly we weren't so cold any longer. And it didn't seem that funny anymore.

While this was happening, while everything was just his lips and his hands and the spot I'd found on his left side that made him straight-up giggle like the Pillsbury Doughboy, a thought flashed into my mind before I could stop it—*Mike wouldn't like this*.

But a second later, I pushed this away. I didn't at all care what Mike thought. As far as I was concerned, he had given up having his opinions matter. He'd made it clear that he didn't want to be part of our family, when he hadn't come home in a year. And even though Jesse was Mike's best friend, and on some level I knew this was crossing a line, it wasn't like my other siblings hadn't done it.

Mike and I had grown up seeing Danny and Linnie and J.J. basically star in their own soap opera called *Hey, Is Your Friend Dating Anyone?* in which they all dated each other's friends, with disastrous results. So I'd kept my Jesse crush secret from Mike and had never told any of my other siblings either, not even Linnie, because I knew that at some point it would become too valuable to keep. The five of us traded secrets like baseball cards—it was the highest form of currency we had. And I knew that this—me, nearly naked with Mike's best friend—would have been a big one.

"You okay?" Jesse asked, breaking away and looking down at me.

"Yes," I said quickly, trying to focus on him—the last thing I wanted to think about right now was my *brother*. "I'm good."

And he smiled and kissed me again and then, not very much later, he was stroking my hair back from my forehead as he looked into my eyes and asked, "Ready?" and I nodded as he reached down to the floor where he'd tossed his jeans and found his wallet in the back pocket.

There was a pause, and then Jesse muttered, "Shit." I looked over, not

sure what was happening, but not sure if I should ask, or if it would just highlight the depth of my inexperience.

"Are you, um . . . ?" A second too late, I realized I had no idea how to finish this sentence and just let my voice trail off.

"So here's the thing," Jesse said, swinging his legs back under the covers and looking at me, propping himself up on one elbow. "I thought I had one in my wallet—I was almost sure that I did. But . . ."

"Not there?" I asked, and Jesse shook his head. I wasn't sure if I was relieved or disappointed—I seemed to be feeling both equally and at the same time. Outside the guesthouse, I heard thunder rumble somewhere off in the distance and then the sound of the rain picking up again.

"I could get dressed, go out and buy some," Jesse said. "And—oh shit, my car would need a jump first. My battery died last night. We could take your car. . . ." But even as he was saying this, the conviction was ebbing from his voice, and it seemed like he was feeling the same thing I was—that the moment was passing right now, slipping away from us.

"Or maybe," I said, "another time would be better? Like tomorrow or something?" I was warming to this idea even as I was saying it. Tomorrow would give me enough time to talk to Siobhan, get her take on this, let me think about it in the light of day, away from Jesse and the way my brain seemed to turn to mush around him.

Jesse groaned and shook his head. "We're leaving to go skiing tomorrow," he said. "And then I'm heading straight back to school from there."

"Rutgers, right?" I asked, hoping this sounded casual and not like I'd committed this fact to memory since the day Mike had told me where Jesse was going, not like I occasionally visited the school's website, looking at the "candid" pictures of the students wearing a suspicious amount of branded school gear, laughing together in the library or the quad, searching for Jesse in the happy multicultural groups, imagining him walking past that building, those stacks of books.

"Yeah," he said, giving me a quick smile, like I'd surprised him. "Good memory." He dropped onto his back and then pulled me closer to him, so that I was lying next to him with my head on his chest. My left arm was getting totally squished against him, but I didn't know where I could put it if I moved it, and besides, it wasn't like I needed it for all that much anyway. "What about you?" he asked after a moment. "Do you know where you're going yet?"

I shook my head slightly, not wanting to move it too much from where it was resting. I hadn't applied anywhere early decision, so some of my applications weren't even in yet. "Not yet."

He laughed—and I felt it more than heard it, like a rumble in his chest. "Well, where do you want to go?"

I looked up at him as the names of the schools I was thinking about flashed through my head. But the true answer to Jesse's question was that I wanted to stay right here, right where we were. And that if I had my choice, I wouldn't be going anywhere. "I'm still figuring it out," I said, moving closer to him still.

"Nothing wrong with that," Jesse said, running his hand over the top of my head and playing with my hair.

I closed my eyes for a second, just trying to commit it all to memory, since I had a feeling, when I was back in my room, in my house, this would all seem like a faraway dream—that I'd been lying naked in bed with Jesse Foster, his arm around my shoulders, my head on his bare chest, hearing his heartbeat. I didn't want to think about when I might or might not see him again, or what would be happening next year, where I would be. I just wanted this moment, right now, to last forever.

I opened my eyes and stretched up to kiss him again, and as he kissed me back, he pulled me close and the rain started up again, harder than before.