

CHASING THE ALPHA'S SON

EXCERPT

By Penny Jessup

ICE QUEEN

“Watch out!” Todd calls, careening across the ice rink on a collision course with my face. I brace for impact as he swerves, missing me by less than an inch, then skates away.

Unsteady on his feet, he skids around a mitten-clad couple holding hands, almost taking out a child and her fiberglass penguin before purposefully ramming into Simon. Simon, who is much less confident on skates, loses his footing. His legs slip out from under him and he tumbles backward, but not before grabbing hold of Todd’s jacket collar.

The bros end up wrestling in a heap in the middle of the ice, neither letting the other back to his feet. Around them tourists and families skate in circles, trying to give the pair a wide berth.

I sigh and lean against the barrier, staring up at the too-brightly-lit Christmas tree. I used to love coming to skate at Rockefeller in the lead-up to the holidays, but this year it just seems kind of lame. The tree is way over the top—it’s garish and unnecessarily large. The other skaters are annoyingly chipper despite most of them fumbling about like baby deer learning to walk. And it’s way too crowded.

I shiver and glance back at the phone in my hands. My shoulders drop.

Or maybe I’m just feeling bitter this year.

Because for the first time ever I actually want to do all those cheesy, romantic things you see in holiday movies. And for the first time there’s a person I could be doing all those things with—who I want to do all those stupid things with.

But that person hasn’t sent me a single text since September.

I scroll through the countless messages I’ve sent Jasper, the occasional unanswered phone call.

I promised myself I’d do anything to make Jasper see reason—go to the moon and back, chase him to the ends of the world if I have to. But I don’t know how I’m supposed to do that if he won’t even speak to me.

“If you don’t stop looking at that thing someone will mow you down,” Katie says, effortlessly gliding toward me and coming to a perfect standstill.

Honestly, she could be an Olympic skater if she wanted; she has the poise, the grace, and she isn’t afraid to take out the competition if need be.

I shrug and slide the phone back into my jeans before shoving my bone-chilled hands into the pockets of my puffer.

Katie sidles up next to me and rests her head on my shoulder. “Still nothing, huh?”

“Nada.”

She twists her feet and rotates her body so that she’s standing in front of me.

“Don’t get depressed,” she says tugging on my elbows. “This isn’t over. Operation GJA is far from complete.”

I scoff thinking back to the day Katie and I conceived Operation Get Jasper's Attention. It was the day after he and I kissed on the beach and he told me he accepted me as his mate, but that we could never be together—what a load of bull, right?! Katie and I sat down in her mom's freshly wallpapered living room and made a plan. The idea was to make it impossible for Jasper not to notice me. That way, he couldn't just forget and move on, and eventually he'd give in.

Turns out I'm easier to ignore than I thought. And easier to forget.

Nothing has worked. No amount of texting, calling, or letter writing has garnered a response—yes, I stooped to Jane Austen levels of desperate. One time I showed up at his house and Melissa told me he was out of town visiting a friend at boarding school. Another time I sent him a pair of mugs I'd had our faces printed on—psychotic, I know. I stopped taking all of Katie's suggestions so seriously from that point on.

"I think OGJA is dead in the water," I say. "It was always a pretty terrible acronym anyway."

"Come on," Katie says, skating a little ways backward and spinning in a tiny loop. "There has to be something we haven't thought of. When we get to Starry B's after this, let's think it over."

With a huff I push off the barrier, my ankles starting to ache in these cheap rented skates. "There's no point, it's over. It's more than over. It's obvious Jasper was serious when he said he didn't want to be around me, and anyway I'm starting to think..."

"Max, what?" Katie tilts her head. Her pale cheeks are super rosy.

"I'm starting to think he doesn't care."

"How can you say that?! Of course, he—"

"Dude! Seriously, get off!" Simon shouts.

Across the ice things have graduated from a friendly wrestle to a heated scuffle.

"What's wrong with you, man?" Todd replies, trapping his adversary in a headlock.

Katie's shoulders drop and she sighs like an exhausted parent. "One second. I need to stop this before they take out a family right before Christmas."

With her brow knitted, Katie heads out onto the ice, chastising her man-babies and trying to pull them apart.

"Good talk," I huff.



"Cheers!" Katie says an hour later in the coffee shop, raising her festive paper cup.

Over in the corner waiting for their drinks, Simon knocks Todd sideways into the gingerbread display, causing an avalanche of cookie people.

"Way to go, dude, look what you made me do," Todd says.

Katie bites her lip and sets her cup down without bumping it against mine, which is hovering in midair. "Honestly, I can't take them anywhere."

"What *is* going on there?" I ask, only slightly stung that Katie seems to have forgotten it's tradition to *cheers* with our first festive drinks of the season.

"We've all been getting along great," Katie says. "They've seemed pretty okay with the whole double-dating thing. But just in the last couple of weeks they've started getting territorial. It starts as play-fighting and within minutes I'm worried one of them's going to lose an eye or a leg."

Simon has taken to pelting wooden stirrers at Todd, who's commandeered a plastic tray to use as a shield.

"The other day"—Katie leans in conspiratorially—"it got so heated Simon nearly shifted in the middle of the High Line." She fiddles with some errant sugar someone spilled on the table.

I shrink a little lower in my seat, hoping no one notices we're here with the clowns throwing paper straws. It's bad enough she brought them with her to our festive-season kickoff coffee date; the least they could do is sit and stay like good pups.

"Okay," she says, gulping down a sip of toffee nut latte. "I've been thinking—what if we use the holidays as a reason for you and Jasper to see each other, like what if your parents throw a Christmas party and invite the alpha's family!"

I nearly choke on my too-hot peppermint mocha.

"You think the alpha is going to come to my house in Stony Point? He'd barely fit through the front door."

"Maybe he wouldn't come, but Jasper might—"

"I don't think—"

"Okay, well then what about—"

"Katie."

"I was thinking we could—"

"Katie!"

The old couple at the table next to us jump in their seats at my outburst and a few other heads turn to stare at the hot-faced kid disturbing their caffeinated tranquility.

"Sorry," I say.

Katie's big, concerned eyes glisten with questions and just a little pang of hurt. The rest of the coffee shop goes back to their conversations and phone screens, and I lean closer, lowering my voice.

"It's just, I don't want to do it anymore. This whole chasing after Jasper and being ignored time and time again. It isn't fair."

"I know but he's your m—"

"Don't say it. Jasper obviously doesn't care that we're mates, so why should I?"

I catch Katie glancing to where her double mates are wrestling, each trying to stop the other from collecting their drink.

"I know I said I would chase him to the ends of the world. I know I said I don't care that he doesn't want to be with me...but I do. And I should. It isn't healthy all this pining for someone that couldn't give less of a wolf's tail. I always wanted more than to be *just* somebody's mate; maybe this is fate's way of telling me I was right."

Katie sits back in her chair, her shoulders slumping forward.

"Okay," she says, just above a whisper.

"You sure?"

"Yes, okay. You're right." She perks up a little, maybe the caffeine is starting to take effect. "You deserve better, I always said that. So screw Jasper! And Merry fudging Christmas!"

"Merry freaking Christmas!"

We bump our festive cups together.



Once I've dropped Katie and her terrible twosome off at the subway, I head back in the direction of Grand Central. There's a nasty chill in the air, so I shove my hands farther into my coat pockets, but I'm happy to be walking.

It's good practice. The way I'm steeling myself against the cold is exactly what I need to do with Jasper. The Moon Gods know he's about as icy as the rink at Rockefeller and as gray and emotionless as the clouds overhead. I need to brace myself against any lingering mushy feelings, any shred of desire. I definitely need to stop picturing our kiss on the beach every time I close my eyes.

By the time I reach the station I'm almost in a good mood. I pop in the AirPods my parents bought me as a way to say, "Sorry you were almost killed by a pack of rogues, we're glad you're okay," and put on some music. I don't even think about checking my messages.

I know he hasn't texted or called. And I'm okay with that.

I'm okay with that.

How hard can it really be not to look at my phone?

About fifteen minutes into the train journey, I start to feel like an addict going through withdrawal. My foot is tapping relentlessly; my fingers are fidgeting, inching closer and closer to my pocket; I'm grinding my teeth so loud the guy in the wrinkled suit opposite me keeps glancing up from his newspaper.

And then my phone buzzes and I nearly explode. Why would the Moon Gods do this to me when I'm trying so hard to be good?

Fine, I'll look.

With trepidation and a heartbeat faster than a bullet, I pull out my phone. Maybe the new plan worked. Maybe somewhere Jasper could sense that I was over him and felt spurred into action.

Or maybe it's just Katie saying she's made it home already. I send her a quick smiley face in response and sink deeper into my seat.

Dad is waiting for me at the station when the train pulls in.

"Hey champ," he says. Why is he always so damn jolly? "Did you have a nice time?"

"It was fine," I deadpan and get into the car without looking at him.

When we arrive home I slam the front door behind me and head straight for my room.

"Is that you, kiddo?" Mom calls from the living room, but I don't answer. I stomp up the stairs like each step is Jasper's stupid face and I want to break his perfect nose. "Don't you want any dinner?"



I spend the night tossing and turning. Somehow making the decision not to care has only made things worse. I keep glancing at my phone on my bedside table, somehow expecting it to light up even though it's three in the morning and why would Jasper be awake at three in the morning, let alone texting me?

When the sun finally rises, I sit up and rub my bleary eyes. My phone sits lifeless and dark next to me.

Screw this!

I throw on the warmest clothes I can find and grab my sketchbook. It's been a while since I've gone down to my spot by the river, and I could really use some clarity right about now.

Mom is already up making coffee in the kitchen as I pass through.

"Hey, where are you off to?" she asks, clearly surprised to see me out of bed before noon on a weekend.

"To the woods to draw."

"Not without your coat and hat, kiddo, it's below freezing out there."

I sigh dramatically but she's right. Even though wolves tend to run hot, I'd still come home a human popsicle in this weather. Like a begrudging toddler I grab my coat from the rack by the front door and pull my beanie down over my ears.

I step back into the kitchen and throw my arms out. "Better?"

"You look very snug."

"So I can go now?"

"Ahuh, just don't stay out there too long; our insurance doesn't cover frostbite or moodiness."

With an obviously sarcastic laugh, I hurry for the door.

"Just one more thing," Mom says.

I wait for her to keep speaking. She's clutching her coffee mug with both hands and chewing the inside of her cheek.

"Mom? What is it?"

She sighs. "Nothing."

"Great!"

I let the screen door slam shut behind me.

The river isn't flowing when I reach it. It's frozen over. An intricate pattern of crystals dance across the surface.

Carefully, I reach out and press down on it with my boot. I want to know if it will crack under my touch—if under that ice there is still flowing water.

Nothing happens so I press harder.

Still nothing.

Man, it's frozen solid!

So this is my new plan. Be like the river. Frozen, hard, unbreakable.

Jasper doesn't care about me. I don't care about him.

That's all there is to it.

A breeze rocks the barren branches of the trees above me, and I can almost make out a hint of sun behind the clouds.

I open my sketchbook and draw. Pictures flow out of me like they haven't since before the Harvest Moon—the way they used to before Jasper consumed my every waking thought. I draw so long my nose is dripping and my lips are chapped by the time I realize I should probably head home.

There's a lightness in my step and I let my lungs fill with cold, refreshing air as I make my way back through the woods. I'm not going to chase someone who doesn't want to be chased. I'm not going to waste any more time pining like a lovesick pup.

Stepping inside feels like entering a new climate. Every winter Dad says his feet get cold and turns the heating way up, so the kitchen is always sweltering. I shed my layers of winter clothing as fast as I can and drop them in a pile by the door.

"Don't even think about leaving those there," Mom says, coming into the kitchen holding an envelope.

I gather up my coat, beanie, and two sweaters and make to pass her when she holds out the letter.

"This came for you. Must be important—we don't usually get mail on a Sunday."

She slips the letter between two of my fingers and I head upstairs with my bundle of clothes.

The second I'm in my room I drop everything except the envelope and turn it over in my hands.

My stomach drops right out of my ass.

On the front my name is written in a familiar and foreboding cursive.

And on the back is the seal of the alpha.

Gulp.

Maybe forgetting is easier said than done.