

# **Whiteout**

*by Lenora Vale*

MyTropes / RomanceBots

## Chapter One: The Airport Closes

The flight board went red at 2:47 PM on a Thursday in February, which was when Nadia Kowalczyk stopped having a plan.

She was standing at Gate 14 of the Yellowknife Airport with thirty-two pounds of team paperwork in her roller bag, a boarding pass for the 3:15 to Montreal in her hand, and six members of the Quebec Pro-Am roster arranged behind her in the specific formation of large men who had been waiting for something for too long. The formation was not aggressive. It was simply — large. Gilles Fontaine, at six-three and two-twenty, was reading something on his phone with the placid expression of a man who had learned that urgency accomplished nothing. Seb Tremblay, the goalie, was asleep upright in an airport chair with his neck at an angle that should have been medically concerning. Tyler Marsh, twenty-seven years old and incapable of sitting still for more than four minutes, was doing something with a vending machine that appeared to be working.

The board said: \*CANCELLED — WEATHER.\*

The board said: \*ALL DEPARTURES SUSPENDED UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE.\*

Nadia looked at the board. Then she looked out the window at what was happening outside, which was approximately everything. The blizzard had come in from the west two hours ahead of any forecast and was now conducting itself with the specific enthusiasm of weather that has nowhere else to be. The tarmac was gone. The Cessna that had been parked near Gate 12 was becoming architectural, slowly, under white.

She turned around.

Six men looked back at her. Seb had woken up.

"So," Marc said.

Marc Beaumont was thirty-six, captain, centerman, the one who had been on this roster longer than anyone else and the one Nadia had known long

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enough to read his face. He was not alarmed. He was asking a practical question with the word \*so\*, which was his way.

"We need rooms," Nadia said. "I'll call the hotel."

"The same one?"

"If they have space." She was already on the phone. "Everyone stay together. Ty, put that back."

"I paid for it."

"Put it back and pay for it again with your own money."

She walked toward the windows with her phone and the airline app and the specific internal stillness of someone who had been managing hockey players for six years and had learned that the situations that looked like emergencies almost never were. A blizzard in February in the Northwest Territories. Six grown men. One hotel, probably. This was not an emergency.

The hotel had rooms. The shuttle would come in forty minutes if it could get through at all. The flight board refreshed every two hours with the same message: \*SUSPENDED.\*

Nadia called her husband.

Paul picked up on the second ring. "Hey. You on the plane?"

"Airport's closed. We're stuck in Yellowknife."

A pause. She could hear him processing this with the same measured quality he brought to quarterly reports. "How long?"

"Unknown. The storm is—" she looked out the window — "substantial."

"Okay," he said. "Keep me posted."

This was what she loved about Paul. He did not perform concern. He

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assessed, responded, moved on. She'd married him at twenty-nine for this quality among others and at thirty-four still found it restful.

"I will," she said. "Don't wait up."

"I never do."

She smiled and hung up and turned back to six hockey players, one of whom (Ty) had apparently purchased the entire bottom row of the vending machine and was distributing its contents to the others with the generosity of a man spending money he hadn't budgeted for. Gilles accepted a bag of chips without looking up from his phone. Remy Ouellet was laughing at something in French that Ty didn't understand but was laughing at anyway.

She had managed this group of men for six years. She had handled a broken collarbone in Tampa, a contract dispute in Vancouver, a full locker-room meltdown in Halifax that had required her to stand in the middle of it and raise her voice exactly once, after which the room had gone quiet. She had flown fourteen time zones with this team. She had eaten bad airport food in seven countries and handled visa problems in three.

She could handle Yellowknife.

The shuttle arrived. They loaded into it. The snow was coming sideways now, the wind doing something to the temperature that the weather app refused to put a number on. The hotel was twelve minutes away and the drive took thirty-five, the shuttle grinding through drifts that were already at the hood.

"This," Remy said, looking out the window, "is a real storm."

"Poetic observation," Marc said, from the row behind.

"I'm saying it's a real storm, not — I'm not being poetic, I'm assessing."

"He's being poetic," Seb said quietly from the back.

The hotel was a Best Western that had clearly been staffed for a smaller occupancy and was now fielding approximately two hundred stranded

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travelers with the controlled panic of a desk clerk named Joëlle who was doing her absolute best. Nadia got to the desk first, got six rooms on the third floor — the last six available — and distributed key cards before anyone could organize a complaint about the location.

"Third floor," Ty said, looking at the elevator like it had personally inconvenienced him.

"Third floor," Nadia confirmed. "Dinner is at seven in the restaurant if it's open. If it's not open, there's a vending machine on two that one of you has clearly already been to."

"I was hungry."

She took her key and her roller bag and her thirty-two pounds of paperwork and went to find her room.

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## Chapter Two: Day One, Hotel Bar

The restaurant was open, barely — a skeleton staff and a reduced menu and the specific quality of warmth that comes from a building that is doing its best against a storm that is not. Nadia sat at the end of the table with her laptop open and her glass of red wine precisely where she wanted it and let the conversation move around her the way it always did.

The team talked about the game. They talked about the game they'd just played (a win, 4-2, against a Yellowknife exhibition side that had fought hard in the third) and the game after that and the games after that. They talked about the contract Remy was hoping to negotiate before the spring and about Gilles's knee, which was holding, and about Seb's new pads, which he described in twenty minutes of detail that everyone listened to with the patient attention of people who understood that the goalie's equipment concerns were always, always going to be extensive.

Then the restaurant started closing down around them — not officially, but in the way that suggested the staff wanted to be somewhere else — and they moved to the bar, which was warmer and better lit and had a bartender named Kevin who had clearly decided the storm was going to be an adventure and had stocked accordingly.

Nadia moved too. She brought her wine. She had nowhere else to be.

By ten o'clock the dynamic had shifted in the particular way it always shifted when hockey players were given unstructured time and alcohol and a room that felt like it was off the record. The lockerroom talk filtered in — not aggressive, not performed, the specific variety that was just honesty among people who had been changing in front of each other for years.

Remy, who was bilingual and functioned as the social translator between the francophone players and Ty's West Coast English, said something in French about a woman he'd been seeing in Quebec City that made Gilles laugh in a way Nadia hadn't heard before. Gilles's laugh was rare enough that the whole table looked at him. He looked back at them with the expression of a man who had nothing to hide.

"What?" Ty said.

Remy translated.

Ty's eyebrows went up. "She did that?"

"She did it very well."

"That's insane."

"I thought so too. I was wrong."

"You were wrong that it's insane?"

"I was wrong that it would work. It worked very well."

Gilles said something in French that made Remy point at him and say \*exactly\*.

Marc, beside Nadia, poured himself a second glass of whatever Kevin had left on the table and said nothing. He was the kind of man who didn't need to add himself to a conversation that was already going. She'd always appreciated that about him in the specific way you appreciated something you'd catalogued as not-applicable.

Seb, at the far end of the table, was doing the thing he did at the end of road trips — present but operating on a separate internal frequency, watching the table with the expression of someone who'd seen most of what humans were capable of and had long since stopped being surprised by it. She'd asked him once, early in her first season, whether he ever got bored on road trips. He'd said: \*I watch things. There's always something to watch.\* She'd thought it was goalies being goalies at the time and now, six years later, was not entirely sure she'd been wrong.

Ty, emboldened by the Remy story and two beers, said: "Okay but the wildest road-trip story I have—" and launched into a Vancouver hotel anecdote that involved a misunderstanding, a room-service cart, and a woman named Britt who had "the most direct communication style of anyone I've ever encountered in any professional or personal capacity,"

which was phrased so specifically that Nadia looked up from her email.

"Direct how," she said.

Ty looked at her. He had the face of a man who had forgotten she was listening.

"Like, she said exactly what she wanted," he said. "Without—" he gestured — "the whole."

"The whole what."

"The whole — managing. The whole thing where you're supposed to figure it out from context." He paused. "It was the best thing that's ever happened to me."

"On a road trip," Marc said.

"In general," Ty said.

The table was quiet for a moment in the specific way of people absorbing a sincere statement they hadn't expected.

Nadia was aware of the conversation the way she was always aware of these conversations — adjacent to it, not in it, the specific professional distance of someone who had learned that the team needed to be able to talk and the manager needed to not be the reason they couldn't. But the bar was warm and the storm was loud outside and the wine was better than a Best Western had any reason to offer, and the conversation had moved somewhere she'd been sitting next to for six years and had never entered.

Remy said, with the directness of a man who had had three beers and genuinely meant the question: "Nadia. You've been listening to this for six years. What do you actually think?"

She looked up from her email.

Six men looked at her.

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"About what specifically," she said.

"Any of it. All of it." He gestured at the general conversation space. "You're the only one in this room who never talks."

"I'm the manager. I don't get to talk."

"We're stuck in Yellowknife," Gilles said, which was the most complete sentence she'd heard from him at once in recent memory. "There's no managing happening."

She closed the laptop.

She drank her wine.

She said: "Remy's story is not that surprising. If you want surprising, I have a story from a business trip to Ottawa in 2019 that you are not authorized to know about."

The table went quiet in a way that was not uncomfortable.

Marc, beside her, said: "You going to tell it?"

"No."

"But there's a story."

"There's always a story." She reopened her laptop. "There are always stories. The question is whether they're yours to tell."

"Is this one yours?"

She considered. She drank.

"Parts of it," she said.

Ty said: "What parts?"

"The parts I keep."

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He looked at her. She looked at him. He was twenty-seven and had just told a table of hockey players that the best thing that had ever happened to him was a woman who said exactly what she wanted, and he was looking at her with the expression of someone who had put two things together and was waiting to see if the sum was right.

She went back to her laptop.

The bar stayed open another hour past when Kevin had planned to close it. The storm came through the windows as sound now — a low sustained frequency that the building absorbed without complaint. Kevin brought a last round without being asked and went to clean something and left them to it.

At midnight, when the bottles were low and the storm was still going and nobody had anywhere to be in the morning, Nadia looked at her phone and saw that it was 2 AM in Montreal and Paul was asleep and the airport was still shut and all of this — the warmth and the noise and the six men she'd been responsible for so long they were almost geography to her — felt, for the first time in years, like something that could go anywhere.

She finished her wine.

She said goodnight.

She went upstairs.

Marc followed eight minutes later, which she had been expecting, because she had known Marc Beaumont for six years.

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## Chapter Three: Night One

He knocked once. She opened the door.

He was still in his dinner clothes — jeans and a dark sweater, which he'd pushed the sleeves up on in a way that had been in her peripheral vision all evening. He was six-one and built in the specific way of men who'd spent thirty years skating, the breadth of him in the shoulders, the core of him still visible even through the sweater. His jaw had the specific quality of someone who'd taken a stick to the face more than once and healed cleanly. She had looked at this face in hotel lobbies and locker-room doorways and charter flights for six years.

She stepped back and let him in.

"I don't know how this works," she said, which was accurate. She had never done this with a player. She had thought about it exactly once, briefly, three years ago, and filed it under \*not applicable.\*

"It works however you want it to," he said.

"That's not an answer."

"It's the only answer I have."

She looked at him in the lamp-lit room with the storm doing its thing outside and thought about Paul, who was asleep at home and who she loved in the settled, specific way of someone who had made a correct decision and knew it. And then she thought: this is not about Paul. This is separate. This is Yellowknife in February in a blizzard, and Marc Beaumont is in my room, and I have six years of not doing this behind me.

"Okay," she said.

He crossed to her and kissed her first, which she appreciated — not tentative, not aggressive, the specific confidence of someone who had been paying attention all evening and knew what was here. His hands at her face, her jaw. She kissed back and put her hands on his chest — the

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broad flat of it through the sweater, the warmth — and felt him exhale slow against her mouth.

She pulled the sweater over his head and looked at him.

He was not young but he was \*built\* — the specific architecture of a career athlete in his mid-thirties, not showy, just present: the width of his chest, a scatter of dark hair across the sternum that narrowed to a line down the center of his stomach, the muscle of his arms visible even at rest, the forearms in particular, corded and specific in the way she'd been aware of without meaning to be for longer than she was going to admit. A scar across his left ribs from a surgery three years ago that she'd filed the insurance paperwork for.

She put her hand flat on his chest and felt his heart.

"You going to look at me all night?" he said.

"I might," she said.

He reached for the hem of her shirt and she raised her arms and let him take it off. He looked at her the way she'd looked at him — the specific, careful attention of someone who had been waiting for something and was not going to rush past it now that it was here. She was wearing a plain black bra and he unhooked it with one hand and she felt it go and stood in front of him and let him look.

His expression did something she hadn't expected. Not hunger, which she'd braced for. Something quieter.

"You're—" he started.

"Don't," she said. "Just—"

He kissed her instead. His hands moved to her breasts — the full weight of them in his palms, his thumbs working her nipples in slow circles until they tightened and she made a sound into his mouth. She was full-figured in the way of a woman who had stopped managing her body against some ideal around thirty-one, her hips wide at the flare, her stomach soft between the

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ribs and the waistband, and he touched all of it with the attention of someone for whom this was the point.

She pushed him toward the bed. He sat on the edge of it and she stood in front of him and reached for her jeans and he reached for his, and they were both undressed in the matter-of-fact way of adults who have decided.

She looked at him fully for a moment — long, thick, already fully hard in the way that said he'd been thinking about this for more than eight minutes. She wrapped her hand around him and felt him pulse against her palm and heard his intake of breath.

"Come here," he said.

She put her knee on the bed beside his hip and he lay back and she climbed over him, facing him, and reached between them to guide him. She sank down slowly and felt the full length of him in a long, continuous push — deep and specific and the specific quality of this angle, her on top, his hands at her hips — and held still for a moment with her eyes closed.

"Okay?" he said.

"Very okay," she said.

She started to move. Not performance — she was here for herself and they both understood that. She rolled her hips forward and back, the grinding rhythm that worked from this position, and felt every stroke of him at a depth that the angle made unavoidable. His hands on her hips, not directing, just present. His face below hers, watching her with the same focused attention he brought to film sessions, except that this was better than film sessions in every measurable way.

She put her hands flat on his chest and drove herself forward and felt it building in the specific focused way of someone who had been thinking about this since the bar and was now here and her body knew it. She came with her head tipped back and a sound louder than she'd intended, his hands tightening on her hips, the specific involuntary arch of her spine.

He rolled her onto her back.

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"I want to take my time," he said.

"You have time," she said. "We have several days, apparently."

He laughed. She felt it through her whole body.

He went south — his mouth on her stomach, the hollow of her hip, the inside of her thigh with his face pressed to the softness of it and his breath warm on her skin — and then between her thighs, his tongue finding her with the specific patience of a man who had decided this was his project and was in no hurry to finish it. She had been wet since the bar, honestly, and he worked her slow and methodical, his hands flat on the inside of her thighs, learning what made her lift her hips and staying there.

She came the second time with her hands in his hair and his name said in French by accident, which surprised them both.

He looked up at her. She looked down at him.

"Since when do you speak French?" he said.

"That was one word," she said.

"It was the right word."

He came up and kissed her and reached over her for his wallet on the nightstand and she waited and then he pushed into her from behind — she'd turned onto her side and he was behind her, his chest against her back, his arm around her waist, the spooning weight of him — and moved slow, the long full strokes of someone not in a hurry, his mouth at the back of her neck, her shoulder, her name said quietly into her hair.

She felt every stroke from this angle. His arm held her against him while he moved. His other hand found her at the front and worked her while he drove from behind, and the compound of that — his full length from this angle and his hand in exactly the right place — arrived fast and total, her third finish riding on the back of everything that had happened since ninety-three.

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He finished with his arm tightening around her and a sound against the back of her neck that she'd never heard from him before and was going to remember.

They lay in the dark with the storm outside for a while. She didn't sleep.

"This doesn't change the team," she said eventually.

"No," he agreed.

"Or my job."

"No."

"I just need that to be said."

"It's said."

She stared at the ceiling. The storm was going to go for days. She could feel it in the way the building was doing something, very slightly, against the wind.

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## **Chapter Four: Day Two, The Specific Quality of Morning**

The team met for breakfast at eight-thirty as scheduled. This was her doing — she had texted the group at seven-fifteen, BREAKFAST 8:30 LOBBY RESTAURANT, because structure was the manager's gift to stranded men and she was not going to let two feet of new snow and one very specific night remove her from the job.

She was downstairs at eight-ten and had coffee and her laptop open and the per diem spreadsheet up before any of them arrived. This was also deliberate. It said: everything is what it always has been, which was the most useful message she could send and the one that required no words.

Marc came down at eight-twenty-five. He was freshly showered, in his standard-issue team hoodie, and he looked exactly like Marc Beaumont, which was what she needed him to look like. He got coffee from the counter and sat across from her and poured her a second cup without asking because he'd known she'd want one, which was the kind of thing he'd done in every hotel breakfast room for six years.

"Sleep okay?" he said.

"Fine," she said.

"Good."

He opened his phone. She went back to the spreadsheet.

Remy arrived at eight-twenty-eight, which was early for Remy. He sat beside Marc, said nothing, drank his orange juice with the expression of a man who was doing a significant amount of interior processing but had chosen, correctly, to do it quietly.

Gilles arrived exactly at eight-thirty because Gilles was constitutionally punctual. He nodded at Nadia, accepted coffee, and opened his own phone. His knee was fine; she could tell from the way he walked.

Seb arrived at eight-thirty-two in the pads he always wore too early.

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Nobody said anything about the pads because they never did.

Ty arrived at eight-forty because Ty always arrived late and the storm had not changed this.

"Airport?" he said, sitting down and reaching for the coffee pot.

"Shut," she said. "Environment Canada says peak today, easing tomorrow evening. Earliest realistic departure is Friday morning."

The table absorbed this. Ty poured his coffee. Remy said something in French to Gilles that she didn't catch but that made Gilles almost smile.

"There's a rink," Remy said. "Hotel rec center. I saw the sign last night."

"I saw it too," Seb said, which was probably the most predictable sentence any of them would say today.

"Two hours on the ice at noon," she said. "That's your structure."

"And after noon?" Ty said.

"Hotel bar."

He was satisfied.

She spent the morning doing paperwork because the paperwork existed regardless of the storm and she was the one responsible for it. Per diem extension calculations. Insurance addendum for the road trip delay. An email to the league office explaining the situation in three precise sentences. The specific administrative texture of an unexpected three-day extension had a shape and she worked through it methodically, the way she worked through everything.

Marc came and sat beside her at eleven-fifteen with a cup of coffee and his phone.

"You good?" he said.

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"I'm good," she said.

He nodded. That was the conversation.

On the ice at noon, with a puck the maintenance guy had produced from a lost-and-found closet and nets that were technically children's recreational sized, they played a half-rink two-on-two while Seb stood in goal for both sides simultaneously and somehow made this work. She sat at the boards with her coat on and her clipboard and watched them and thought: \*this is what it always is.\*

The same six men. Marc reading the ice the way he'd read it for twenty years, the specific economy of movement of a career centerman. Gilles covering angles that didn't need covering yet because he always covered angles ahead of time. Remy talking the whole time, in both languages, to nobody in particular. Ty burning energy he'd been accumulating since yesterday and needed to burn. Seb in net, placid as furniture, stopping everything.

Whatever had happened last night existed alongside this and did not change it. This was the thing she'd understood going in and was now confirming on the ice: the team was not broken. It was the same team. It was simply a team that now knew something additional about itself.

She'd called Paul at ten. He was fine. The office was fine. He'd made pasta for dinner and was watching something on the television she couldn't hear the title of. She'd told him the flight was delayed at least through Thursday and he'd said \*okay, keep me posted\* and she'd felt the specific, structural comfort of a marriage that did not require performance from either of its participants.

She did not feel guilty, which was not the same as not thinking about it. She thought about it. She thought about it while she watched them on the ice and while she ate the sandwich Kevin produced from somewhere at twelve-forty and while she walked the hotel corridor back to her room at two to get a sweater. She thought about it the way she thought about complicated logistics: examined it, assessed it, decided it was what it was and that filing guilt about it served no one, least of all herself.

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She was thirty-four and she was in Yellowknife in a blizzard and she had made a choice with her eyes open. This was the sum of it.

After the ice, at three-thirty, Ty found her in the lobby.

"Hey," he said.

"Hey," she said.

"Can I ask you something?"

She looked at him over her laptop. "You're going to anyway."

"Marc—" he started, then stopped.

"Don't," she said.

"I'm not asking about—I'm not asking anything bad, I'm just—" He ran a hand through his hair, which was still damp from the rink. "He told me. I'm not upset, I'm not going to say anything, I'm just—I'm saying I know and it's fine."

She studied him. Tyler Marsh, twenty-seven, British Columbia, right wing, second year on this roster. He had the face of someone younger and the body of someone who'd been playing contact sport since age six — broad, compact, quick. Easy laugh, as she'd always clocked him. No guile in his face right now.

"Why are you telling me this?" she said.

He shrugged. "Because I didn't want you to not know that I knew. That seemed worse."

She looked at him for a long moment. "Okay," she said.

"Okay," he said.

He went back to his phone. She went back to her laptop.

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By seven PM the bar was open again and the six of them were in it and the storm was doing its third act outside and the specific warmth of being stranded together with nowhere to go was doing something to the room that Nadia could feel without being able to name precisely.

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## **Chapter Five: Night Two**

Marc knocked at eleven. Ty was with him.

She looked at them both in the doorway.

"No," she said. Then: "Wait." Then: "Come in."

They came in.

She sat on the edge of the bed and looked at them both and thought about what she was going to say. They were both looking at her in the specific way of two men who had discussed this and were now at the point where the discussion was no longer the thing that mattered.

"This is different," she said.

"It's different," Marc agreed.

"I need to set the terms."

"Tell us," Ty said, which was the correct thing to say and he said it correctly, without performance, which was why she'd always thought he was smarter than he let on.

She looked at them both for another moment.

"I'm in charge of this room," she said. "Same as any room."

"Yes," Marc said.

"And what happens in this room stays in this room."

"Same as it always has," Ty said.

She stood up and pulled her shirt over her head.

Both of them looked at her — the specific, quiet attention of two men who

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had made a decision and were now receiving the thing they'd decided about. She was in a plain nude bra, her shoulders back, and she looked back at them with the expression of someone who had run team meetings and contract disputes and twelve international flights and was not going to be undone by being looked at.

She unhooked her own bra and dropped it.

Marc moved first. He came to her and put his hands on her face and kissed her, and she heard Ty behind her and felt his hands at her waist — large, warm, different from Marc's — and then his mouth at the back of her neck and her shoulder. The two of them, from both directions, in the specific way of bodies that know what they're doing.

Ty's hands moved up her sides and cupped her breasts from behind while Marc kissed her and the sensation of that — being held from both directions with full specific attention — was something she hadn't known she could want and was finding out about now.

She turned and looked at Ty properly for the first time in this context. He was pulling his shirt over his head: the compact, defined chest of a young right wing, less bulk than Marc but faster-built, the line of his obliques sharp where his jeans sat at his hips. He was looking at her with the directness of someone who had stopped performing casualness and was just here.

She put her hand on his chest. He put his hand over hers.

They both undressed in the matter-of-fact way that happened when the decision was already made, and then it was the three of them on the bed in the lamplight with the storm going outside.

She pulled Ty down to her first — Marc had started this, on night one, and this night she wanted to start it herself. She took his face in her hands and kissed him and felt his exhale against her mouth, the specific release of a twenty-seven-year-old who had been patient since three o'clock this afternoon and had done it well.

She worked her hand down his stomach — the compact muscle of it, the sharp cut of his obliques where they met his hip — and wrapped her hand

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around him and felt him harden fully against her palm, long and lean, a specific heat. He made a sound into her shoulder and she worked her hand slow while he put his mouth on her breast and found her nipple and she arched into him.

Marc was behind her, his chest against her back, his hand moving up her side and over her hip while she worked Ty in front of her. The specific quality of being attended to from both directions — Ty's mouth at her breast and Marc's hand moving south between her thighs — was the compound sensation she had not had a category for forty-eight hours ago and was now cataloguing with full attention.

Marc's fingers found her and she was already wet enough that they met no resistance, only heat. He worked her with his hand from behind, unhurried, while she kept her grip on Ty and let her head tip back against Marc's shoulder. She said \*yes\* and did not specify to whom and did not need to.

She came on Marc's hand with Ty's mouth still at her breast and the storm outside and the specific aliveness of someone who had been managing things since age twenty-two and had put it entirely down.

Then she turned and pulled Marc to her and he covered her and pushed inside her in the deep slow stroke she knew now — the length of him, the specific fullness — and wrapped her legs around him and moved to match him. He drove above her with the focused quality of a man who had been paying attention to her for six years in every context and was applying all of that now.

Ty was beside her, his hand moving slow, watching with the expression of someone who had thought this might be uncomfortable and was finding out it was the opposite. She turned her head and looked at him while Marc moved inside her and said \*come here\* and Ty came down and kissed her while Marc drove and she had her hand on Ty's chest feeling his heartbeat while she came with Marc deep inside her, Marc's forehead dropping to her shoulder with the sharp exhale of a man at his specific limit.

She lay still for a moment in the warmth of both of them.

Then she pulled Ty over her. He went in a single motion — over and inside

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her, the familiar pace of him, the quick and honest tempo — and he drove into her with his hands braced and his face close to hers and his eyes open, and she said \*there\* when he found the angle and he stayed at it. She came with her nails in his shoulder and her hips lifting and a sound louder than she had planned, and he finished with both hands in her hair and her name said low against her neck.

They lay in the order the bed allowed — Marc on one side, Ty on the other, Nadia between them with the storm loud and the lamplight low and all of it present and true.

"You good?" Marc said.

"Very good," she said. "Both of you leave by six."

"Done," Ty said.

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## Chapter Six: Day Three, The Temperature Shifts

The airport sent a message at eight AM: \*Storm tracking to ease by Thursday evening. Departures expected to resume Friday. Will update.\*

She read it standing at the window of her room in the grey-white morning light, the snow still coming but slower now, the specific exhaustion of a storm that had peaked. Two more days.

She showered. She dressed. She texted: BREAKFAST 8:30. She went downstairs.

The team came down in the order they always came — Marc first, then Remy, then Gilles, then Seb, then Ty, who arrived last because he always arrived last. They sat in the same order as yesterday. Kevin the bartender had come in early and was doing double duty at the breakfast counter with the specific quiet competence of someone who had already assigned himself to this storm as a personal project.

Remy, at some point between the eggs and the second coffee, looked at Nadia, then at Marc, then at Ty, then back at Nadia, with the expression of a man doing rapid arithmetic.

He said nothing. He drank his coffee.

Gilles, who noticed everything and said very little, said even less than usual.

She filed reports until noon. She managed the ice time, which the hotel maintenance crew had agreed to extend because there was nothing else to do in a storm. She ran a brief team meeting at two about the game schedule that would need adjusting when they returned, which was professional and useful and reminded everyone — including herself — what the shape of this week was supposed to be.

At four, she ran into Seb in the hallway outside the ice rink. He was in his pads, which he wore earlier than anyone thought was necessary.

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## Whiteout

by Lenora Vale

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He looked at her with the specific, unreadable calm of a man who had been watching things from behind a cage for fifteen years.

"I heard," he said.

She looked at him. "What did you hear."

"What you'd expect to hear when walls are thin and the storm is loud."

She waited.

"I'm not—I'm not saying this to be anything," he said, which was the most words she'd heard Seb Tremblay say at once since the Halifax incident.

"I'm just saying I know. And I'm not upset. I'm the opposite of upset." He paused. "I don't have a word for that."

She studied him. Sébastien Tremblay, thirty-three, goalie, the calmest man on any roster she'd ever worked with, the specific variety of calm that came not from lack of feeling but from having made a permanent peace with chaos. He had a face that was not the face you'd pick from a lineup — long, slightly asymmetrical from an old break, watchful — but it was the face that saw the whole ice and read it correctly and that, she had learned, was the face that mattered.

"If you're asking," she said.

"I'm not asking," he said. "I wouldn't."

"But if you were."

He looked at her for a long moment with the expression of a man who was considering the ice.

"Then I'd be asking," he said.

"Then you'd have your answer," she said.

She walked past him toward the rink.

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## Chapter Seven: Night Three

By nine o'clock the storm had dropped below its peak. You could see the parking lot again, partially. The drifts were eight feet and settling.

The bar was warm and all six of them were in it and the conversation had moved through hockey and contract talk and Remy's ongoing situation in Quebec City and arrived somewhere else — a looser, warmer, specific place that didn't have a word for it in either official language but that Nadia recognized as the place a group of people arrived when they'd been through something together and had stopped pretending they hadn't.

At ten, Remy said: "Nadia."

She looked at him.

"Are we all going upstairs," he said, "or is this a question that doesn't get asked."

The table was very quiet. The storm outside was almost calm now by comparison.

She looked at him. She looked at Gilles, who was looking at the table. At Seb, who was looking at her in the specific way he always looked at things he'd already decided about. At Marc, who had the face of someone who had understood for twelve hours how tonight was going to end. At Ty, who had the decency to look at his beer.

"It's a question that gets asked," she said.

The table breathed.

"Then yes," she said.

She went upstairs. She gave it fifteen minutes — she had paperwork she actually looked at for fifteen minutes, genuinely, because she was Nadia Kowalczyk and she was not going to be undone by anticipation — and then she texted the group chat: \*Third floor. Room 312.\*

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They came separately, which she hadn't told them to do and which meant they'd discussed it. This meant they'd discussed it, which meant they'd been talking about this for longer than tonight. She filed that.

Marc came first. Then Ty. Then Remy, who knocked with the specific knock of someone trying to decide right up until the last second whether they're doing this and deciding yes. Gilles came next, silent, the way he always moved, and she found herself thinking she'd underestimated him for six years. Seb last, as she'd expected — he had been the last one she'd expected to ask and he was the last through the door and his face when he came in was the same face it always was, which was the face of someone at peace with the ice.

Six people in a Best Western room in Yellowknife in February. The storm mostly done outside. The lamp on low.

"Ground rules," she said. "This stays in this room. This doesn't change my job or the team structure. Everyone sober enough to be here by choice — I'm asking directly: are you here by choice?"

Five separate answers. All yes.

"Okay," she said.

What happened over the next four hours was not a performance and it was not a plan. It was a room full of people who had already crossed the line once, twice, and then once more, and had discovered at each crossing that the line was not actually where anyone had thought it was. The rules they'd brought in with them dissolved not in a rush but incrementally, the way the storm outside had dissolved — peak by peak, in stages, until the air was just clear.

She was the fixed point and they moved around her and through her and eventually into each other, and nobody looked away from any of it.

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Remy went first. He'd been last to ask and he went first in the way of someone who'd been settling an intention since the bar. He covered her and she pulled him down and he drove into her at his own tempo — quick and rolling, bilingual in the narration of it, telling her in two languages what

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## Whiteout

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she felt like and what he was going to do — and she wrapped her legs around him and told him in English what she needed and he switched languages to deliver it. He came hard against her with his forehead pressed to hers and something said quietly that she didn't catch and didn't need to.

He hadn't moved far from her when Gilles came to the bed. He was the most physically present person in the room — the two-twenty of him, the breadth of him in the shoulders, the body of fifteen professional seasons laid over a frame that had been built for this since childhood. He lay down behind her while she was still in the afterglow of Remy and said nothing, which was how he communicated most things he meant specifically. She felt the weight of him settle against her spine and turned her head and looked at him over her shoulder and pushed back against him, which was all the instruction she ever needed to give Gilles.

He pushed inside her slowly — deeper from this angle than any position that night, the specific fullness of someone that size — and his hand came to her stomach and held her steady while he moved. Slow. Thorough. His mouth at the back of her neck, at her shoulder.

She reached forward and found Remy still there beside her, not spent, watching with the expression he used to read offensive plays — taking it all in before he moved. She wrapped her hand around him and felt him respond and he looked at her like she'd answered a question.

He came to his knees in front of her face and she took him in her mouth while Gilles drove into her from behind, and the room went very quiet in the way of rooms where the specific thing happening is too significant for noise. Gilles's hands on her hips. Remy's hand light in her hair. Her between them, working both at once — mouth and body, receiving and giving simultaneously — and the compound of it was something she hadn't known was available to her and was now finding out about in a Best Western in Yellowknife.

She came with Gilles deep inside her and her hands gripping the sheets and Remy still in her mouth, and the sound she made around him was something none of them had heard from her before.

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Both men finished within moments of each other — Gilles with the same quiet precision he did everything, Remy with his hand tight in her hair and a word in French that she understood this time.

She lay in the middle of the bed and breathed.

Ty was sitting at the foot of the bed watching with the expression of someone who had believed intellectually that this was possible and was now confirming it empirically. Marc was beside him in the chair. They were both watching her. The room felt like the inside of something — contained, warm, the storm a distant fact outside.

Seb came to her without being asked. He lay over her with the deliberate weight of a man who had been deciding this in the hallway three hours ago and had arrived. He pushed inside her and she felt the deep-driving specific angle of him — the same one he'd found two nights ago in a different room — and he looked at her the entire time. His eyes on hers. The full attention of someone who had been watching everything for thirty-three years and had decided that this was the thing worth giving his full attention to.

She came on him with her hands in his hair and pulled him deeper and he finished with the specific stillness of a man who had put something down he'd been carrying for a while.

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She sat up and looked at the room.

Ty was on the bed. Marc was in the chair. Remy and Gilles were on the second bed, not far from each other in the way of men who had just been somewhere together and hadn't moved far from it.

She looked at Ty. He looked back at her.

"I want all three," she said.

The room was quiet.

"At the same time," she said, because she was Nadia Kowalczyk and she had never been imprecise about what she wanted in any professional or

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## Whiteout

by Lenora Vale

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personal context and she was not going to start now.

Ty looked at Marc. Marc looked at her with the face of someone calculating the logistics, which she had always found attractive.

"Okay," Marc said.

"Who's where," Ty said.

She thought about it for exactly four seconds. "Marc underneath. Ty behind. Remy in front."

"Gilles?" Remy said.

"Beside me," she said. "Hands."

Gilles nodded, which was the most decisive she'd ever seen him be about anything.

They organized. Marc on his back, her over him — she sank down onto him and felt the familiar depth, the specific fullness — and then she leaned forward onto her hands and felt Ty settle behind her and heard him exhale with the specific quality of someone at the edge of something. He was careful — they had discussed this, she understood, from the brief low conversation she'd half-heard while Seb had been with her — his hands warm on her hips, the pressure of him at the place she'd not been before, slow and entirely deliberate.

"Okay?" he said.

"Go," she said.

She felt him push past the resistance and into her and the sensation was not like anything she had a category for — full in a way that compressed everything, Marc deep underneath her and Ty behind and the specific totality of both of them inside her simultaneously, the wall between them nothing, everything present at once. She dropped her head and breathed through it and felt both of them hold still, waiting for her.

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"Move," she said.

They moved. Carefully at first — the coordination of it, finding the rhythm that worked when two people shared the same body in this way, the counter-stroke that Marc had figured out without being told and Ty was learning in real time, and then less carefully as the rhythm found itself and she stopped managing it and just felt it.

Remy came to his knees in front of her and she looked up at him and opened her mouth and took him in and felt all three of them now — Marc from below, Ty from behind, Remy in her mouth — and the compound sensation of this was the thing that the rest of her life was going to be measured against. Gilles's large hands moved over her back, her hips, tracing the specific lines of her while she was filled from every direction, and she understood that this was what the storm had been for. This was what four February days in the Northwest Territories had been building toward: a room with no shame in it and six people who had found out together what they were capable of when the weather held them still long enough to find it.

She came in a way that was not one distinct event but a continuous building thing — wave after wave while Marc drove up from below and Ty drove from behind and Remy's hand was gentle in her hair — and she made sounds she'd never made, her whole body alive in a way it had never been, and she didn't stop them or manage them because there was no one left to manage anything for.

Ty finished first, shuddering, both hands gripping her hips. Remy second, with a low rough sound. Marc last — she felt him finish from inside, the deep throb of it, his hands on her waist, his forehead against her spine.

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She lay on the bed and the room rearranged itself around her.

At some point — she was not precisely tracking time anymore — she heard a sound that made her open her eyes. Ty and Remy were on the second bed. Not far from each other. Closer, in fact, than men usually allowed themselves in shared spaces. She watched them for a moment without moving, the specific thing happening between them in the low light.

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Remy said something in French, very quietly. Ty said something back in English. There was a pause and then no more words.

She closed her eyes again. She didn't feel surprised. She felt the specific warmth of a room where everyone had found out something about themselves that they hadn't known before, and nobody was going to be ashamed of it in the morning, and the storm outside had gone entirely quiet.

She heard Marc beside her. His hand on her shoulder.

"You okay," he said, quiet.

"Yes," she said.

She meant it completely.

The room was full of the specific warmth of six people at the end of something they would never entirely recover from and didn't need to. Marc lay beside her and she fitted herself against him — not the lotus of two nights ago, not anything formal, just two people lying in the dark while the Northwest Territories sat quietly outside and everyone they knew was somewhere else entirely.

She felt him settle. She felt herself settle.

"By six," she said eventually.

"By six," he said.

She slept.

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## **Chapter Eight: Friday Morning, The Airport Opens**

The message came at 5:47 AM: \*Departures resuming. YZF–YUL 9:15 AM now boarding from Gate 6 by 8:30. All ticketed passengers please proceed.\*

She was already awake. She'd been awake since five. She texted the group: \*Flight 9:15. Lobby by 7:30. Bring everything.\*

They came down at 7:30, which was notable because hockey players were constitutionally incapable of being on time and all six of them were in the lobby at 7:28, bags packed, coffee in hand, with the specific quiet of a group of people who'd been somewhere together that they were now leaving.

The shuttle came. They loaded in. The city outside was white and bright and entirely still after the storm, the kind of clean that only comes from three days of everything being covered, the roads cleared to a single lane and the drifts on either side taller than the shuttle windows.

She sat in the front with her roller bag between her knees and her coffee and her phone, which had six missed texts from Paul because his office had opened and he was now checking in.

\*We land at noon-ish\*, she texted. \*I'll take the train. Don't worry about pickup.\*

\*Good\*, he texted back. \*I made soup for tonight.\*

She looked at the message for a moment. Paul, who made soup when she'd been traveling. Paul, who did not perform concern and did not require performance from her. The specific comfort of a marriage that had room in it.

She put her phone away.

At the gate, while they waited, Remy sat beside her.

## Whiteout

by Lenora Vale

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"I want to ask you something," he said.

"Ask."

"Are you okay."

She looked at him. "Yes," she said. "I'm okay."

"Not — this week, I mean. But also this week."

"I know what you mean." She looked at the gate, which was opening. "I'm okay. It was what it was and it's what it is now and—" she paused — "I'm glad it happened."

Remy nodded. "Me too," he said.

They boarded in the order they always boarded — she went first because she had everyone's boarding passes and she always went first. Marc behind her. Gilles. Seb. Remy. Ty last, because he always came last.

The plane lifted from Yellowknife at 9:22 into a sky that was specific and blue and entirely cleared of everything that had been happening for the last four days.

She put her headphones on. She looked out the window. She thought about Paul's soup and the contract she needed to renegotiate and the game schedule that would need adjusting and the insurance forms she'd filed and the per diem she'd need to calculate and all the normal, specific texture of the job she'd had for six years and was going to have for however many more years after this.

She thought about the storm.

She thought about the room.

She thought about what it meant to be a person who had managed everything for years and had, for four February days in Yellowknife, put management down.

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by Lenora Vale

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She didn't resolve the thought. She let it be what it was.

Somewhere behind her, Ty Marsh was already asleep. Gilles was reading. Seb was looking out the opposite window at the same cleared sky. Remy had his headphones on. Marc, across the aisle, was looking at his phone with the same face he always had — the face she'd known for six years and would know for however many more.

He didn't look at her.

She didn't look at him.

They didn't need to.

The plane banked south and the NWT receded beneath them into white and the specific coordinates of something that had happened and would not unhappen and that was, if she was honest with herself at 30,000 feet with Paul's soup waiting and the whole season ahead, exactly the right amount of complicated.

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## Writing Notes — \*Whiteout\*

\*\*Pen name:\*\* Cora Vale

\*\*Setting:\*\* Yellowknife, Northwest Territories, February — chosen over generic northern Quebec because Yellowknife is specific and iconically remote: the last city before the tundra, the aurora capital, the kind of place you don't drift to, only land in deliberately or by weather. The storm is not metaphor — it is simply the condition. The isolation is physical first.

\*\*Nadia Kowalczyk:\*\* The emotional engine of the novel is not her desire — it's her \*competence\*, and the specific relief of setting it down. She has managed this team for six years from behind the professional glass: the only woman in the room, the one who files the insurance and runs the meetings and maintains the structure. Yellowknife strips the structure away. What she discovers is not that she was suppressed — she was not suppressed, she was organized — but that organization is not the same as being fully present in her own life, and this blizzard is the window in which she is.

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Her marriage to Paul is not the villain of this novel and is not to be treated as one. Paul is a good man and she loves him in the specific way of someone who made a correct choice. What happens in Yellowknife is not a symptom of a failing marriage — it is a separate thing that exists alongside a good one, which is the more honest and more complicated version of this story.

**\*\*The five men:\*\*** Each is distinct and the distinction matters in the scene writing. Marc: the most trust, the most history, the deepest physical connection — he is the constant. Ty: young, fast, genuine, the one who knew first and handled it with the most grace. Remy: social, bilingual, the one who asked the question no one else was going to ask. Gilles: quiet and massive and more tender than anyone expected. Seb: the observer who turned out to be something else entirely when given the room to be.

**\*\*Tone:\*\*** No shame. The novel makes no moral argument. It does not punish Nadia, resolve her marriage, or explain away what happened as something other than what it was. She chose it fully. She goes home to Paul, who made soup. The team plays their next game. The season continues. The thing that changed is the air between six people who know something about each other now that they didn't know before, and the novel holds that without commentary.

**\*\*Spice ratio:\*\*** Approximately 55% explicit, 45% character and atmosphere. The storm and the hotel and the specific texture of hockey-team life are load-bearing — they are what makes the escalation feel true rather than convenient.

**\*\*Position and act map:\*\*** - Night one, Marc solo: She on top cowgirl ? he goes down on her ? spooning from behind - Night two, Marc + Ty: Compound (Marc's hand + Ty's mouth simultaneously) ? Marc missionary while Ty watches ? Ty over her, his tempo - Night three, all five: Remy missionary ? Gilles spooning while Remy returns to her mouth (first double) ? Seb deep-angle missionary face-to-face ? triple simultaneous (Marc below, Ty anal from behind, Remy oral) with Gilles's hands ? Marc + Nadia private close (final)

**\*\*Night Three escalation structure:\*\*** Night Three builds in stages — solo turns, then the first double (oral + penetration simultaneously), then Nadia

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asks directly for all three at once and assigns positions herself. The triple scene is written with full anatomical specificity: the arrangement, the sensation from each direction, the coordination, the compound fullness as a continuous event. The climax is sustained rather than a single beat.

**\*\*The men with each other:\*\*** Remy and Ty cross their own line later in the night, observed by Nadia without comment — the natural extension of a room where the temperature has already dissolved every other rule. Not a crisis, not a revelation, not explained. It happened in Yellowknife. It stays in Yellowknife.

**\*\*No-shame architecture:\*\*** Nadia asks for what she wants with the same directness she brings to contract negotiations. The men respond with the same attentiveness they bring to film sessions. Nobody's identity is threatened. The morning comes and they go home and the season resumes and they all carry this quietly, which is enough.

**\*\*Length:\*\*** ~10,000 words