

Felix

# Navidad

· A Little Village Novella ·



NATHAN BURGOINE

# **Felix Navidad**

## **Synopsis**

Felix doesn't do impulsive anymore. But attending a friend's wedding reminds Felix he's the only one of his friends attending solo, and recent losses have him thinking he's swung too far in the not-impulsive direction.

So, impulse decision number one? Cutting in on a dance with handsome farmer Kevin, the ex of one of the grooms, for a spin at the reception. Impulse decision number two? Planning his first holiday vacation off work. Christmas in Hawai'i will be a gift to himself.

When dancing doesn't work out, Felix keeps high hopes for his vacation right up until the first flight cancellation. After bumping into a stranded Kevin, who lost his flight home, Felix gives impulse a third try: Why not drive to Toronto together? But after ice rain strands them halfway, it looks like Felix isn't going to get to give himself his gift after all. Instead, this Christmas is a small cabin—and Kevin.

# What Reviewers Say About 'Nathan Burgoine's Work

## *Faux Ho Ho*

“The setup is simple: fake boyfriends for the holidays, started as a lie to get someone out of a dreaded family event, but snowballs into a more elaborate ruse. A tried-and-true formula really. But, *Faux Ho Ho*, 'Nathan Burgoine's new holiday release, is anything but formulaic or contrived. The execution is original, and the story is an utter delight. It's charming, fun, and sweet, everything a Christmas romance should be. And, it's also a little bit nerdy! Which, in my book, is a bonus.”—*The Novel Approach*

## *Exit Plans for Teenage Freaks*

“Burgoine (*Of Echoes Born*, 2018, etc.) has created a gay teen protagonist who is a bit goofy at times but who is comfortable in his own skin....Overall, a feel-good, contemporary read with strong LGBTQIAP rep and an unusual fantasy subplot.”—*Kirkus Reviews*

“READ THE BOOK. NOW. IT IS AMAZING.”—*Book Princess Reviews*

## *Of Echoes Born*

“Burgoine assembles 12 queer supernatural tales, several of which interlock...The best tales could easily stand alone; these include ‘The Finish,’ about an aging vintner whose erotic dalliance with a deaf young man named Dennis gets complicated, and ‘Struck,’ in which beleaguered bookstore clerk Chris meets Lightning Todd, who predicts his future wealth and romance. A pair of stories set in ‘the Village,’ a gay neighborhood, feature appealing characters and romances and could be components of a fine *Tales of the City*-like novel.”—*Publishers Weekly*

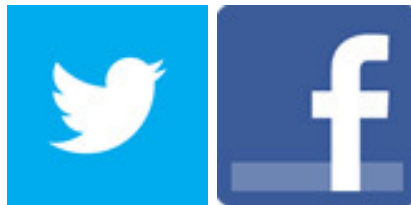
# Felix Navidad

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## **By the Author**

Light

Triad Blood

Triad Soul

Of Echoes Born

Exit Plans for Teenage Freaks

A Little Village Blend

Three Left Turns to Nowhere

### **Village Holiday Novellas**

Handmade Holidays

Faux Ho Ho

Village Fool

Felix Navidad

# FELIX NAVIDAD

*by*  
'Nathan Burgoine



A Division of Bold Strokes Books  
2022

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**Felix Navidad**

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**ISBN: 978-1-63679-411-2**

This Electronic Original Is Published By

Bold Strokes Books, Inc.

P.o. Box 249

Valley Falls, Ny 12185

First Edition: December 2022

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### **Credits**

Editor: Jerry L. Wheeler

Production Design: Bold Strokes Graphics

Cover Design by Inkspiral Design

eBook Design by Toni Whitaker



## Acknowledgments

Welcome back to the Village! I hope you enjoy your visit, though this time we're going to be taking a bit of a car trip. If you've not read any of the other Village holiday novellas—*Handmade Holidays*, *Faux Ho Ho*, and *Village Fool*—don't worry. *Felix Navidad* will stand alone just fine, though you'll maybe find out who ended up with who from the previous stories in the group (not a huge spoiler, really).

Fully half of *Felix Navidad* is my love letter to the queer community and friend groups I've had for more years than I care to count. When I first came out, it was the bears and the drag queens—like Danya, who'll you'll get to know a lot better in here—who took me in, and kept me on my feet during some of the hardest years of my life.

So, I want to thank the Ottawa Bears Ours (it's Ottawa, all the group names are bilingual), those drag queens (especially you, Diane!), for one. I also want to acknowledge the brilliant work being done by Glenn Crawford and the entire Village Legacy Project to make sure Ottawa's queer history—and Ottawa's queer people—are *remembered*. There are a lot of words I put in Danya's mouth in this novella that are very much my own, and I'm always so aware that for the vast majority of us queer folk, we don't inherit a continuance of narrative or history or culture the way most other marginalized communities do. We don't know what we don't know, and the non-queer world is happy to bury, erase, or untell our stories—and even retell them in ways they find more palatable. It's a fight, and it can feel endless, but we need to make sure the queerlings know who came before them.

We also need to listen to the queerlings, because those kids are amazing.

Also, Lori, I can't tell you how much I wish I could have shown you this one. There's a lesson here in not keeping homages secret until publication, I think. I trust you're watching, and I hope this makes you smile.

All right. Before I get too maudlin, the usual suspects: thank

you to my editor, Jerry L. Wheeler, who during this time of endless perpetual social isolating, listened to me go back and forth on this one so many times I'm stunned he was still willing to edit it. Of course, my husky, Max, who refuses to allow even a moment's delay in the walk schedule, even if I'm on a roll. It's not really helpful, but it does provide structure, I suppose. And Dan, husband of mine? You make this possible, and I love you. No one else I'd rather be socially isolated with for two years plus and counting...

And finally, I need to thank the entire crew of the Toronto Romance Writers (and a few of us Ottawa Romance Writers) who isolated, vaxxed, and then got together for a retreat organized by Hudson Lin where the biggest problem I was having with this novella was solved. Farah Heron, Jenn Burke, and Hudson Lin, especially, had a knot that had stymied me for months solved in roughly five minutes. It would have been annoying had it not been so magical. I adore you all and will bake more cookies.

# **Dedication**

For all the nurses in my life, but most especially for Lori. You  
are missed.

# ONE

*December 22*

Haruto Sato and Nicholas Wilson were *finally* getting married.

As Felix Gagnon pulled his Jeep into a parking spot at the end of a row, it struck him again how unfair it was the two men, who he played board or role-playing games with once or twice a month, had been made to wait so much longer than planned. Their first wedding date had been canceled thanks to COVID, and then the same thing had happened again a year later. At one point, when they were all playing their weekly gaming session over their various computers—Felix especially had to keep himself isolated so he could visit his clients—Owen had asked Ru if they'd considered getting married at City Hall instead and throwing a party at some point when everyone could get together again.

“We folded a thousand paper cranes,” Ru had said, shaking his head in his little square on Felix’s laptop, resembling nothing so much as an angry-but-chic reboot of a *Brady Bunch* boy. “We are not settling for anything less than a full-on wedding with our friends.”

Nick, in the little square above Ru’s, leaned over and vanished from his box. He appeared in Ru’s long enough to give him a little kiss on top of his head, then pushed his glasses back up his nose with a little smile that said *Whatever Ru wants, Ru gets*.

“Well,” Felix said. “It’s not like you rushed into anything so far, right?”

That earned a round of laughter from everyone on the call—even Ru, though maybe Nick squirmed a little. Their long, long, *long* road from friends to lovers was notorious.

At the time, Felix thought Owen’s idea had merit. Now, carefully stepping out of the Jeep into the wet December snow, Felix had to admit maybe Ru had been right all along. This was their day, and he, for one, was grateful to be a part of it.

Okay, he was *trying* to be grateful. He kept waiting for the rush of emotions he was expecting and...

Nothing yet.

He'd made it to the front doors of the small church, pausing to eye the sign announcing *The Sato Wedding* and smiling to himself. He knew full well part of the reason they were calling it that was Nick had zero family attending. His family had kicked him to the curb when he'd come out, and Nick had every intention of taking Ru's surname after they married, but Felix also couldn't help but think the sign was telling on a whole other level.

This was, he had zero doubt, going to be an event *entirely* orchestrated by—and about—Ru.

He pulled on the door handle and stepped inside, only to be immediately greeted by strings of blue, silver, and white paper cranes hung from the ceiling like curtains, each of their little folded heads seeming to nod agreement with his assessment.

Apparently, the local Unitarians didn't mind a little redecorating. He was still surprised Ru had acquiesced to his mother's desire for a church wedding for the two of them. It was a wonder Felix hadn't burst into flames the moment he'd stepped inside.

That might have been a relief.

Felix took a deep breath, reminded himself he was here to be happy for Ru and Nick, not maudlin on his own behalf, and passed through the curtains of paper birds, smile in place and a joke at the ready.

And despite the best intentions of someone Felix was truly missing right now, absolutely no one on his arm.

## Two

### *Last November*

So far as Felix had experienced, first visits set the tone for everything that came after, so whenever he met a new client, he did his utmost to deliver three things: something they *needed* to begin their path, something they *wanted* to feel good, and something he *could* do to help out. The first was his job, the second was his way of reminding them they had agency, and the last was something he'd learned could mean all the difference in starting things off on the right foot.

So, when the end of November brought a call from his boss, Parthy, with a new client a few blocks off from the Village, Felix was ready.

With some of his clients, Felix worked a bit harder to inject some cheer into their lives during the holidays—Thanksgiving and Christmas especially—but when it came to Danya Marunchak, he might not need to worry as much. Danya had at least *some* help; someone had obviously come by and placed a few winter decorations outside his porch, including two reindeer made of logs and a wreath with a bright red ribbon on the front door. Danya didn't have any family, Felix knew, and had lost his own husband half a dozen years ago now, but according to Parthy, the man was a force of nature among the local queer community, especially active with the Village Legacy Project, the Community Garden, and the Chantal Roy Memorial Shelter.

It made Felix feel good to know the man who so tirelessly championed their past apparently had people in his present, too.

He unlocked the door with the key Parthy gave him, calling out that he had arrived as discussed. A soft, breathless voice replied, "I'm in the living room." Felix took a few moments to shuck his coat and boots and hat and scarf—sometimes Felix was sure he spent half his life in winter putting on or taking off layers of clothes—and came through to the main living area with his kit bag, where he got his first

glance of Danya, who turned to face him.

At least Danya was up, though swaddled on his couch under blankets. His eyes were underlined with deep purple-blue shadows, and his white skin was quite pale, though clearly the man moisturized well. On the plus side, his silver hair had been brushed, and he seemed alert and well put together, even in what Felix assumed was sleepwear. Danya sported a soft-looking deep green dressing gown with a little *D* embroidered over his heart, beneath which Felix spotted clean cotton pajamas. A rollator-style walker, something Parthy noted he'd been using since he got home from the hospital, stood beside the couch.

“Look at you,” Felix said with a grin. “All up and about. I’m Felix. You must be Mr. Marunchak.”

“Up, I’ll grant you,” Danya said, with that same breathlessness to his voice Felix didn’t like one bit. “But *about* is pushing it.”

“Parthy tells me you just got home.” Felix put his kit on the floor by the couch and sat across from him. “I understand you want to get back to normal, but it’s going to take time,” he said.

“I don’t know if Moe warned you about me, Felix,” Danya said, tapping Felix’s forearm with one hand. “But I don’t believe in delayed gratification.”

Felix chuckled. “I’ll remember that. I’m told I happen to have some impulse control issues of my own, so I think we’ll get along fine.” He paused. “Who is Moe?”

“Haruto Sato. He’s your friend, isn’t he?”

“Oh. Ru. Yes, he is.” Felix shook his head. “I haven’t heard that nickname before. How do you know Ru?”

“Moe helped me out with some of the design work for the Village Legacy Project, and I cajoled him into helping with the annual food drives for the shelter, as well.” Danya took a moment, closing his eyes and taking a slow breath. He was clearly wiped out. “He’s been doing our digital art for years now and makes me give his pay—which is a criminally small

amount to begin with—right back to the drive.”

“I didn’t know he did that.”

“That’s why I call him Moe. He’s a sweet little bean.” Danya sighed. “Pity they had to delay the wedding.”

“Pandemics delay a lot of things,” Felix said. Never, in his entire life, had someone referred to Ru as “sweet.” Well, maybe Nick had. Sarcastic, sure. Blunt? Absolutely. But “sweet”?

He decided to let that particular thread of the conversation pass. Time to get rolling.

“Why don’t we start with me explaining how I usually handle things, and you can let me know if there’s anything you’d like me to approach differently?” Felix said.

That seemed to surprise Danya. He nodded. “Okay.”

Felix walked him through everything he’d be checking, explained why it was important, and made sure he got permission every step of the way. Then they ran through the usuals. Felix checked all his vitals: temp, pulse, respirations per minute, blood pressure, and oxygen sats, none of which were particularly solid numbers, though they all made sense given his recent pneumonia and lung infection, and they took a couple of short walks to get him to the bathroom and into the kitchen. Felix had him sit while he took a quick trip through his cupboards and fridge and got him set up for the day ahead, asking Danya what sort of effort he was capable of putting in for his dinner and deciding “reheat it in the microwave” needed to be the extent of what he was leaving for Danya to accomplish by himself.

Once they’d made it that far along, what little energy Danya had was fading. He’d gained a cough that returned the longer he spoke.

“How about we get you back to bed for a bit,” Felix said. “And you tell me what needs doing.”

“What I’d really like...is to set up...my tree,” Danya said around a short coughing fit. “Victor came by and did my wreath and set out...my deer for me, but Hans and I always...



had the tree up by the first of December.”

Three days away.

“I can absolutely make that happen. Is it in the basement?” Felix said, washing his hands now he’d finished prepping Danya’s dinner.

Danya glanced at him, clearly surprised. “Really?”

“Really.” Felix smiled. “My job is to help you get better, Mr. Marunchak, and if that means putting up your Christmas tree, then I put up your Christmas tree. Help being the operative word, in my opinion, and I happen to have a very wide definition of the word.”

“On one condition,” Danya said, though he was smiling himself now.

“What’s that?”

“You call me *Danya*,” the silver-haired man said, pausing for a cough. “Having handsome younger men call me Mr. Marunchak makes me feel like I’m about to crumble into dust.”

Felix laughed. “It’s a deal, Danya.”

Felix found the tree and set it up in the corner of the living room while Danya slept. Though he didn’t decorate the tree itself, he found and brought up the four boxes of decorations. After Danya’s nap, they had lunch together, and Felix focused on making sure Danya got enough liquids in him while allowing him to direct where the ornaments should go. They worked through the boxes together after Felix draped the tree with white lights and tinsel garlands.

“Hans and I got this on a trip to New Orleans,” Danya said, holding up a delicate-looking ornament in the shape of a Mardi Gras mask, done in purples and golds and decorated with tiny feathers. It was by no means the first time he’d mentioned his late husband. “Every year, we picked somewhere else to go after the holidays. Christmas Eve, he’d close his gallery, and I’d close the bookstore, and we’d get on a plane. That was a great year. The music alone was worth the trip, and the food? Oh.” He put a hand to his chest.

“It’s beautiful,” Felix said, holding it up. “Front and center?” he suggested, holding it by a branch where the mask would be visible to the room at large.

“Definitely,” Danya said. Then he eyed Felix with a shrewd sort of appraising look that made him pause rather than reach into the box again.

“What?” he said. “Something on my face?”

“Only your mask. You haven’t mentioned a boyfriend,” Danya said. “Or a husband. Or a lover. I’ve been dropping personal stories this entire time...” He stopped to cough. “And you’re giving me *nothing*, Felix.”

“Only because I don’t *have* a boyfriend. Or a husband. Or a lover,” Felix said, with a little smile.

“Strapping man like you? That’s a crime.” Danya shook his head. “What do you do for Christmas, then? Tell me one of your traditions.”

“I work Christmas,” Felix said.

Danya stared at him, clearly incredulous, so he explained. “It’s by choice. I don’t have anyone, so if I work Christmas, then Mary or David or Lori can have the day to be with their families, and I have someone to spend the day with, like yourself. I work most of the holidays.” He shrugged. “I really don’t mind.”

“Hrm.” Danya leaned back on the couch, clearly not amused. “That’s so charitable, I can’t even criticize you for it without sounding callous.”

Felix laughed. Okay, this man was a hoot.

“Luckily,” Danya continued before Felix could reply, “I gave up being nice decades ago. Honey, you gotta do stuff for yourself.”

“Cookies,” Felix said.

Danya blinked. “Excuse me?”

“My mother had a brilliant recipe for ginger cookies. Every year, I make a big batch of them. That’s my Christmas

tradition. And lucky you, you'll receive some in a couple of weeks." He reached down into the box and pulled out a beautiful carved wooden sea turtle ornament on a string. He held it up, curious.

"Hawai'i," Danya said, with a warm smile. "And let me tell you, Mr. Works the Holidays, spending time with my Hans in Hawai'i was better than *cookies*."

Felix laughed. He hung the ornament.

"You still got that pen?" Danya said.

"I'm sorry?"

"From the chart thing."

Felix patted his breast pocket. "Right here."

"Okay, write this down," Danya said, holding up his hand, touching his thumb and index finger, and twirling it in the air as though writing.

Dutifully, Felix pulled out his pen, as well as the little notepad he kept for jotting down information on the fly. "Fire away," he said.

"Be selfish," Danya said. "Not always, but sometimes."

Felix flipped the notepad to a fresh page and dutifully wrote down the words. "Got it."

"Hrm." Danya offered a little nod, and they got back to decorating his tree.

## THREE

*December 22*

Vows exchanged, papers signed, and photos snapped, the wedding three years in the making concluded, and it was time to sit down and celebrate the union with a meal, toasts, and dancing. The reception, held at the Village Inn, wasn't far, but given the snow, Felix opted for his Jeep a second time, parking in a place he hoped was between two lines—with all the snow, who could tell?—and climbing out of his car with decidedly less enthusiasm than he'd had for the wedding itself.

Which, to be fair, hadn't been much to begin with.

*What is wrong with me?* He'd just watched two of his best friends tie the knot, and he was struggling to conjure any enthusiasm for the celebration to come. He took a second outside to close his eyes, take a deep breath of the cold winter air, and exhale.

*Don't be the clichéd bitter single guy at the wedding, Felix. You're better than that.*

"Am I, though?" he said to his reflection in the driver's side window.

At least he looked good. That was something, right? Ru and Phoebe had seen to that much. The charcoal gray suit Phoebe had tailored for him fit better than anything he'd ever owned before in his life, and the shirt and tie she'd picked for him—vertical stripes of autumn bronzes, rusts, and oranges—did exactly what she'd said they'd do: draw attention to his eyes. And given he had boring, average, light-brown eyes, that was a miracle. And the woman Ru had sent him to for his haircut, Kelli, had turned his normal short-and-basic into something he might see on the cover of a magazine, all sharp lines around his ears and with a kind of wave down his part.

Okay, the fact that it took Phoebe and Ru working in tandem to make him look this nice implied he couldn't do it himself, which wasn't exactly an uplifting thought...

He shook off the mood and went inside, finding his way to

the main dining room, which was gorgeously decorated in the blues, whites, and silvers he'd already seen throughout the day. He paused at a chart, which told him he was at the "Blue" table, eyed the map—*ah, yes, at the back with a bunch of other single people, of course*—and made his way into the room, one of the first half dozen or so to arrive.

Felix found his table and saw the plate settings all had brown paper packages on them. Initialed bookmarks were tucked into the wrapping string. He found his initials and sat, wondering what Ru and Nick had come up with as a gift for the guests. He smiled as the next person at his table arrived and took the seat next to him. She was curvy, and tall, with deep brown skin. She had paired a coat of some of the brightest red lipstick he'd ever seen with a high-waisted deep garnet dress, and frankly the color combination was perfection.

"I love your lipstick," he said, unable to allow the lippie to remain unpraised.

"Thank you," she said with a little flourish that revealed fingernails painted to match. "I believe in red." She sat down, eyeing the package. "Well, that explains it."

"Sorry?" Felix said.

"Nick has been special-ordering a ton of books and wouldn't let me deal with any of them when they arrived." She pointed one crimson fingernail at the package on her plate.

"Ah, you work with Nick," Felix said.

"Melissa," she said, holding out a hand. "I'm his assistant manager at Book It."

"Felix," he said, shaking. "Friend via Ru's gaming group."

"Ooh, you're the one who did the phone thing, right?" She raised one eyebrow at him.

"That was *three years ago*." Felix sighed and hung his head. "It was an April Fools' joke."

"Well, if someone pulled a joke like that on me, they'd lose their hand," Melissa said, though her smile took some of

the sting out of it.

“See those guys right there?” Felix said, pointing to where Toma and Owen had arrived and were sitting at the table to the left of where Ru and Nick would soon be seated. “Big guy with the beard and the cute nerd with the goatee and the dapper hat?”

“Yes.”

“They’ve been together ever since. They’re going to be fostering two kids because of that joke,” Felix said. “Somehow that never makes it into the story.”

“Uh-huh.” She smiled, making a show of moving her phone to the other side of her plate.

He was still chuckling when the next person arrived at the table.

The impressively tanned white guy—especially given the time of year—wore a simple dark navy jacket over a white dress shirt, the tie matching his jacket, but he wore it well on his stocky frame. Felix had the oddest feeling he *should* know the guy, but he couldn’t place him right away. Reddish-brown hair just short enough not to have to style in any particular way and a neatly shaped beard left the man’s eyes to steal the show, which they did. He had *truly* hazel eyes, the kind with an almost bronze ring around the pupil and a deeper green color around the edge.

*Hello*, Felix thought. He could have *sworn* he’d met him before. Had he?

“Excuse me. Is that blue or cyan?” the man said, pointing at the folded paper crane on top of the arrangement in the center of Felix’s table. His voice suited him, too. He had a sort of deep slow-roll to the way he asked the question.

Which, Felix realized, he hadn’t answered. Because he was still staring at the guy.

“Uh,” he said, trying to remember what the question had been.

“It’s blue,” Melissa said, tapping the little crane. Right.

He'd asked about the color of the crane. Melissa pointed one table over. "That's cyan."

"Thank you," he said. Turned out Hazel Eyes had a nice smile when he let it out, too. He moved over to the next table, looking at the little bookmarks one by one until he apparently found his initials and sat down. He caught Felix watching, and Felix bobbed his head in a little *Weddings, am I right?* motion he hoped translated as something other than *I enjoy staring at you* before looking away.

"You need some water?" Melissa said. "Or you going to stay thirsty?" She picked up her own water glass and took a sip, smiling around the glass and leaving a little mark of red on the rim.

"Please tell me I wasn't that obvious."

"I could *tell* you..." She shrugged one shoulder.

Okay, he liked Melissa a lot. "Well, maybe he didn't notice."

She glanced over at the next table, where Hazel Eyes was now talking to a plump, gray-haired woman who'd sat beside him. "No, I think you're safe. Do you know who he is?"

Felix frowned. "I feel like I should, but I can't place him."

"Well, he's at the other table for those of us who have yet to find a tiny force of nature of our own," Melissa said. "So one of us needs to ask him to dance later. That man has *thighs*."

Felix tilted his head. "Oh, so it's gonna be like that, is it?"

Melissa wagged her perfectly stenciled eyebrows at him in answer.

The next person for their table arrived, another of Nick's friends from the bookstore, a burly, bearded gray-haired older man named Richard, dressed in a nice gray suit. He managed one of the other locations, and Melissa handled brief introductions. Richard seemed nice enough, though maybe a bit shy. Felix got to return the favor a moment later when he introduced the next person to arrive, Nat.

“This is Nat,” Felix said. “They’re a librarian. After Nick’s book won the Lammy, Nat organized this amazing Pride Week event at the library for a bunch of local queer authors. They’re unstoppable, don’t let how young they are or the cute bow ties fool you.”

Nat laughed. “Oh my God, Felix.” They did have a super cute bow tie on, of course: one with kind of an ombré effect that went from dark gold on the outside edges to a bright sunny yellow at the knot, which rocked with their tan suit. Their dark hair had been freshly shorn on one side of their head and left longer on the top, where it fell artfully across their retro-cool hipster glasses.

“They’re also shy and don’t like compliments, so I’ll stop now,” Felix said, getting in one last clear statement of Nat’s pronouns for the benefit of the other two. “This is Melissa and Richard, Nick’s coworkers from Book It. You can all talk book things while I pretend to have read all the books I buy and never manage to actually read.”

“Nice to meet you,” Melissa said, shaking hands. Richard gave a little wave.

“Fantastic to meet you both.” Nat eyed Felix for a moment. “Okay, you look *great*.”

“I’ll try to pretend I didn’t hear the surprise in your voice,” Felix said, but he shrugged. “Ru set me up with his hair stylist, and you will not be surprised to hear Phoebe dressed me. On Ru’s orders.”

“Sorry.” Nat bit their lip, clearly fighting a smile. “But you really do look great. You’re rocking that jacket.”

“Thank you.”

The last two to join their table arrived. André was a fellow graphic artist friend of Ru’s who also ran a local support group for queer survivors of violence, and Kumiko explained how she met Ru when Ru volunteered design work for the Mochitsuki. Introductions went around the table one more time. As a whole, Felix had lucked in on a fun “lonely onlies” table, and he was grateful.



Soon after everyone was seated, the newly married Nicholas and Haruto Sato came into the room to a song Felix didn't recognize but which was definitely cooler than anything he listened to, and everyone rose to applaud the new couple. Nick ducked his head, clearly bashful at the attention, then gazed at Ru, absolutely beaming with pride and love. Ru, for his part, grinned and waved at the room in the manner of a Royal, clearly far more comfortable, then grabbed his new husband by the lapels and dropped a kiss on him that had the whole room whooping and cheering.

Felix smiled, happy for them, but...

*But what?*

He hadn't been to many receptions, and honestly, he'd thought he'd find the experience of this one more...*something*. It had been the same at the wedding. Nick's vows, especially, had moved a lot of people to tears, whereas Felix had sat there listening and thinking, *That's nice. Good for them*.

He forced himself to shake it off and be in the moment, applauding and smiling and eventually sitting once the round of applause tapered off.

The speeches began with Ru's best man, his oldest stepbrother, and Felix had to work to keep his attention on the words. They focused a lot on a time before he'd known Ru and involved a lot of inside jokes among his family, judging by the way most of the laughter came from Ru's mother, stepfather, and the various other stepcousins. He couldn't help sneaking glances around the room, though. He noticed Silas and Dino were holding hands on the top of their table, and Owen and Toma were both making little sniffly faces like all the things Ru's stepbrother was saying were nudging them almost to tears. Fiona and Jenn weren't even trying to put up a pretense: both freely dabbed at their eyes between laughing. Matt and Johnny, another couple who were Nick's friends more than Ru's, passed Fiona and Jenn their handkerchiefs almost simultaneously.

Most of the tables were like that. Happy-looking pairs or polycules listening to Ru's brother talk about the long long

time it took Ru and Nick to finally admit they loved each other, and while it was a really good speech, Felix still felt *removed*.

It was nice.

Good for them.

He crowd-gazed the other table of lonely onlies, and he saw Hazel Eyes looking up at the front holding what Felix thought was a pretty *polite* smile in place. It wasn't bitter, but rather *socially appropriate*.

Huh. Maybe it was a singles thing.

Also, who *was* he?

Ru's stepbrother finished his speech to a round of applause, and then it was Fiona's turn. Felix grinned, genuinely looking forward to this part and regaining some investment in the moment. He had no idea what Fiona was going to say, and given the nervous look on Nick's face, neither did Nick.

"Hi," Fiona started. "I'm Fiona Foley, for those of you who don't know me, Nick's best lady, and I've known Nick for..." She held out one hand, tapping her fingers, then shaking her head. "A long time. In gay years? We're practically dead. We're original members of the Misfit Toys, which he started when he realized a bunch of us had nowhere to go for Christmas."

She turned and looked at Nick, and Nick smiled at her.

"Despite being *very* wrong when it comes to understanding which of the holiday classics are the best—that would be the *Muppet Christmas Carol*, I think we can all agree—that little tradition of his spun into a family most of the people in this room can say has been one of the most important parts of their lives for years."

She paused, looking around, catching the eyes of people here and there in the room.

"It's also the only reason any of us agreed to get dressed up in *winter*, right before *Christmas*, for a wedding, let's be

honest.” She glanced down at herself and pointed with her free hand. “I’m wearing heels. In Ottawa. In *December*.”

That got some laughs. In truth, Fiona looked incredible—more of Phoebe’s work, Felix assumed—in a gorgeous deep green dress that emphasized her curves but was partnered with a short ivory jacket, the sharper edge of which suited Fiona’s personality entirely.

“You two…” Fiona said, and to Felix’s surprise, she had to stop for a second and swallow, clearly moved. She’d never struck him as the sentimental type. “You two came into my life when I didn’t even know I needed you most. And I think I can say that on behalf of more than half the people in this room.”

Roughly that many people cheered, tapped their glasses, or made other noises of agreement.

“See?” Fiona gestured. “I’m always right.”

That got some more laughs.

“I’d like everyone to raise their glass to the newly minted Misters Sato,” Fiona said, lifting her glass high. All around the room, glasses rose. “To the best Christmas gift any of us ever got. Eat your heart out, Santa.”

Laughing, Felix raised his glass and clinked with Nat and Melissa before taking a swallow. He glanced at the next table and saw Hazel Eyes doing the same with the people to either side of him, and it *finally* clicked.

“Oh,” he said.

“Hrm?” Melissa said.

“Thirsty man,” Felix said, dropping his voice and leaning in. “I remember who he is. The beard is new.”

“And…?” Melissa said, clearly intrigued.

“His name is Kevin,” Felix said.

Kevin lived near Oneida, which was Ru’s hometown, where Ru had returned for five or six years to look after his father before he died.

Hazel Eyes was Ru’s ex-boyfriend.

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“Thank you for coming,” Nick said. During dessert, an *amazing* trio of tarts from Sweet Temptations, Ru and Nick had started an orbit of the tables, stopping to speak at each one in turn. Nick still seemed completely overwhelmed, like he was stumbling through some sort of dream or something, and to be honest, it was a lovely look on the bookish Nick.

“I have never seen you grin like you were grinning during your vows,” Melissa said, clearly comfortable teasing him. “Not even when you got to meet Nalo Hopkinson.”

“I nearly started laughing. My glasses fogged up,” Nick said. “Nobody warned me my glasses would fog up.”

“It’s because I’m so hot,” Ru said, leaning in and stealing another kiss, which was roughly their ninth or tenth since they’d arrived to speak to them.

“Congratulations, you two,” Felix said. He held up the book he’d unwrapped from his plate, which was a travel guide to the Big Island of Hawai‘i. “And this is really awesome, by the way. Thank you.”

“Thought it might come in handy,” Nick said. “When do you fly out?”

“First thing tomorrow,” Felix said.

“Enjoy it,” Ru said. “Sit on a beach. Swim. Come back all golden and tan and relaxed. Kiss a surfer. That’s an order.”

“Yes, sir,” Felix said. “When are you two heading to B.C.?”

“The twenty-seventh,” Ru said.

“We’ve rented this cabin in a little town called Fuca,” Nick said. “It’s supposed to be amazing.”

“So, are you going to write books as Nicholas Sato now?” Nat said.

“No. It’s Nick Sato for everything in life, but the books are going to stay Nicholas Wilson for branding and revenge purposes.”

“Branding I get, but *revenge*?” Nat said, raising their left eyebrow.

“His parents are homophobic asshats,” Ru said. “We like to think when they see their family name connected with gay romance stories, it makes their cold, shriveled hearts feel shame.”

Felix choked around a sip of water and followed it up with a mix of coughing and laughter. Melissa gave him a helpful pat between the shoulder blades. To the other side, Richard was smiling, clearly tickled. Kumiko actively applauded.

“I love it,” Kumiko said.

“I knew you’d get it,” Ru said with a sly wink. “Kumiko and I first bonded over revenge.”

“Oh my God.” Kumiko raised a hand to cover her mouth. “That’s technically true.”

“This is a story I need to hear,” André said.

Felix listened as they learned about an organizer at the Mochitsuki who was very adept at doing little but garnering all the credit. Some carefully placed misinformation led to him under-ordering supplies for the festival—supplies Kumiko also ordered in secret, to make up the balance—which led to a very publicly humiliating moment for the individual involved.

“And then, after the guy has been sweating and placing emergency calls and basically admitting he screwed up to *everyone* on the organization side of the festival for nearly half an hour—including Yumi, the organization president, and you do *not* want to piss off Yumi—Kumiko here says, ‘Oh, I’ve got three more boxes in the van.’”

“That’s cold,” Melissa said, eyeing her with what looked to Felix to be a rising estimation of respect. “You’re *cold*.”

“Thank you,” Kumiko said, sipping daintily at her glass.

Ru and Nick said polite farewells and moved on to the next table. Felix couldn’t help but watch. Kevin didn’t say much, though he did rise and give them both a hug, like most of the rest of the people at his table. Ru touched his beard, which

made Kevin shrug. Kevin held up the book Nick had chosen for him, and Nick laughed at whatever it was Kevin said when he tapped the cover.

“So, you know his name,” Melissa said, leaning in, clearly seeing where his attention had gone. “What else do we know about Mr. Thighs?”

“I was calling him Hazel Eyes,” Felix said.

“Fair,” Melissa said.

“He’s Ru’s ex-boyfriend,” Felix said. “And he has a farm up in Ru’s hometown. That’s all I know, actually.”

“Then I guess it’s you asking him to dance?” Melissa said. “Or am I lucky enough there’s a fellow bisexual in the house?”

“I don’t know. Actually, I don’t think so. I vaguely remember Ru wondering if they were settling for each other as the only two gay men in the same postal code or something.”

Eventually, servers cleared the tables and the music began. Nick and Ru danced to Etta James’s “At Last,” and then Ru danced with his mother while Nick partnered with Fiona, both of them clearly doing their best not to snivel again. When more people finally started to filter onto the dance floor, Melissa nudged him, and he glanced down at the travel guide.

*Be selfish.* Advice from a client and a friend.

What the hell, Felix thought. He rose and had *almost* made it to the next table when he saw Leon—a tall, blond, and decidedly handsome man Felix thought might be a friend of Ru’s from his university days—swoop in and stand in front of Kevin, who nodded politely and rose. They stepped out onto the dance floor together, and Felix forced himself to adapt his approach into a nonchalant walk to pick up a glass of wine he didn’t want and bring it back to the table, where Melissa regarded him with a pained wince.

“Please tell me no one noticed that,” Felix said, sotto voce. Nat and Richard had left the table, but André was showing Kumiko something on his phone.

“Only me,” she said. “Promise.”

He sat, and they both laughed once the ridiculousness of the moment sank in. “Can I reserve the first fun song?” he said, nudging shoulders with her.

“You got it. Unless that butch dream in the gray pantsuit asks me, in which case I plan to drop you like old news. Do you know who she is?”

Felix glanced over at the now mostly empty table beside them. He didn’t know who the woman in the pantsuit was, but “butch dream” was definitely the right term for her—nearly shaved head, broad shoulders, and a hint of visible ink on her bronze skin peeking above the neckline of her shirt.

“It’s a deal,” he said. “And no. I don’t. But I can definitely find out from Phoebe. I have zero doubt Butch’s suit isn’t a Phoebe original.”

“Okay, this Phoebe and I *need* to meet,” Melissa said. “Every time I talk to someone who looks amazing at this wedding, her name is the first thing on their lips.”

He checked the room and spotted Phoebe and Dennis dancing cheek to cheek during a slow song, and felt another little stab of frustration with the whole wedding thing. Felix pointed. “That’s Phoebe. The tall glamazon dancing with the hipster otter. I’ll introduce you later.”

“Felix,” Melissa said, raising her glass. “This is the start of a beautiful friendship.”

They clinked glasses, completely agreeing.

His gaze drifted back to Kevin and Leon. Leon was flirting and chatting animatedly, but Kevin had his back to Felix, so he couldn’t see how he was reacting.

Not that he had any reason to be invested.

The next song was also a slow one that kept the pairs on the dance floor in various states of closeness.

“So,” Melissa said, “can I give you new friendship advice?”

“Of course,” Felix said.

“There is no way that dude is letting Mr. Thighs go.”

“Kevin,” Felix said, though another glance confirmed Melissa’s nickname was a good one. Kevin filled those suit pants just fine.

Melissa shrugged. “Whatever. But here’s the thing. At a wedding, you can go over there and ask to cut in, and pretty much everyone is duty-bound to act all polite and charmed-as-shit about it.”

“Oh,” Felix said. “That’s...good.” And suddenly it seemed like the best idea ever. Which usually meant he was doing his impulsive thing Ru and Silas and *especially* Owen told him he needed to do less. “You think?” He was grinning.

“Oh, I think,” Melissa said.

“See, most of my friends try to talk me down from doing stuff like this,” Felix said.

“Felix, I will always be the devil on your shoulder.”

“In that case,” Felix said, rising, “I shall endeavor to return the favor.” He winked and left her there with a slight frown that shifted into something closer to open alarm when instead of heading to the dance floor, he went to the next table and tapped the shoulder of the linen pantsuit butch.

She regarded him, clearly having no idea who he was nor why he’d stopped by.

“Hello,” he said.

“Hi,” she said, drawing out the word, but she cracked the slightest crooked smile.

“The lady at my table over there?” Felix nodded back at Melissa, who was staring a bit fish-mouthed at them both. “She said I should be impulsive, so I’m asking you to go ask her to dance.”

The woman let out a lovely little chuckle, glancing over her shoulder and making eye contact. “Ah. I see.” She regarded him. “Well, thank you. I will.” She rose.

Felix grinned and headed to the dance floor. By the time he



tapped on Leon's shoulder, he was riding a wave of confidence.

Leon blinked, a small line forming between his perfectly shaped eyebrows. Also, Leon had startlingly bright blue eyes. And perfect skin.

The confidence wave started to crash a bit on the shore.

"Sorry," Felix managed, rallying. "But if I may, I'd like to cut in." Each word came out slightly more hesitant than the last, almost a question by the time the sentence ended.

Still, Melissa was right. Leon politely stepped away, and a somewhat nonplussed Kevin nodded and raised his arms for the next dance. Kevin had left his suit jacket behind at his table, and at some point between rising for his first dance with Leon and now, he'd rolled up his sleeves.

Kevin's forearms? Definitely worth the gamble. Farmers had *nice* forearms.

Felix took his hand, and Kevin took the lead, which was fine by him.

"I'm Kevin. It's Felix, right?" Kevin said after they'd found their footing. Kevin wasn't exactly pressing up against him, but they were dancing to a slow song arm-to-lovely-forearm, so Felix wasn't going to argue.

"That's right," Felix said.

Kevin offered him a tight smile. He seemed...frustrated? Upset? He had a definite funk vibe going on. Kevin's posture matched that of a man who smelled something bad, his lips thinned beneath his beard and a tightness in the set of his shoulders.

Maybe Felix shouldn't have cut in. He wondered what to say next, but then Kevin spoke again.

"Should I hide my phone?" Kevin said, flashing a small smile beneath the beard.

"Why is that the *only* story anyone ever knows about me? I know at least three things about you."

“Three?” That made Kevin lean back a bit.

“You’re the ex-boyfriend of one of the grooms,” Felix said. “You have a farm near Ru’s hometown, and you like to lead when you dance.”

“That last one is cheating,” Kevin said, though he chuckled, which was a nice change. He really had seemed down. Was it the whole ex-boyfriend of one of the grooms thing?

“It still counts,” Felix said.

“Well, maybe you should tell me two new things about you,” Kevin said. “To even things up a bit.”

“I can do that.” Felix found himself grinning, buoyed by what seemed to be at least a genuine conversation from Kevin. “One, to grow on the only thing you knew about me before this: I haven’t played a practical joke on *anyone* since the phone thing, though I think I don’t get enough credit for them ending up together, marrying, and becoming foster parents.”

“Seriously?” Kevin said.

“Seriously. I did the universe a favor, right?” Felix said.

Kevin chuckled.

“Two,” Felix said, trying to keep the momentum going. “I’ve never cut in on someone else dancing before, but I took some good advice.”

“Well,” Kevin said. “I’m not going to complain. Hadn’t been going as I expected.”

As he expected? Felix wasn’t sure what he meant, and he tilted his head. The song was ending, but he didn’t step back, and Kevin didn’t let go of his hand, which was nice. “How so?”

“That’s a long, sad story,” Kevin said, shaking his head. Then he slipped his hazel eyes away from Felix’s face, looking somewhere over his shoulder before a tight, tense smile popped into place. “And it repeats itself.”

“Repeats...” Felix said as someone tapped him on the

shoulder.

Leon's smile was smugly triumphant. "May I cut in?"

Well, crap. He couldn't very well put up a fuss given he'd done the exact same thing to Leon one song ago. He stepped aside graciously, and Leon took his place as the next song, "Sway," started to play.

Leon said, "Where were we?" and rather deliberately danced Kevin away from where Felix stood, in perfect time with the more up-tempo beat.

Oof.

Felix went back to his table. If Leon was going to jump in on every new song, Felix knew better than to attempt to outdo his tenacity. He slid into his seat, finding André and Richard chatting lightly at the table.

André paused their conversation to glance at Felix. "You okay?"

"I am," Felix said. "I got hoisted on my own petard." Then he frowned. "And I don't actually know what a petard is."

"It's a siege bomb," Richard said. "Held against a door in a kind of leaning frame to blow it open."

André turned to him. "For real? I didn't know that."

Felix listened politely as Richard explained something about medieval explosives. The spark of fun he'd felt at dancing with Kevin fizzled out completely—not like medieval bombs, apparently—and Felix eyed the book Nick had picked out for him, *Visiting Hawai'i*.

*I'll be there tomorrow.* He'd lose most of the day to traveling, but sometime late at night in Hawai'i local time, he'd be on the island, warm and far away from everything and everyone he knew. He'd found a small house to rent on the northern side of the island from locals who used the profits to fund environmental preservation, rather than choosing to stay in a hotel or going to one of the resorts, and the pictures had made it look like a small slice of sun-drenched heaven on Earth.

He couldn't *wait* to be somewhere else.

Felix wondered how much longer he needed to stay for politeness's sake.

## FOUR

### *Last December*

“I have finally found your nickname,” Danya called.

Felix took a moment to undo his boots and hang up his coat in Danya’s front hall before he answered. “Should I be worried?” Once he’d de-wintered himself, he found Danya in the living room, sitting on his couch, wrapped up in his robe and a blanket, holding his phone up in one hand.

“Ta-da!” Danya said, tapping his phone’s screen.

A speaker on the fireplace mantle began playing Christmas music. It took Felix a second to recognize the song, a jazzy version of “Feliz Navidad.”

“I’m not following,” Felix said.

“Navidad,” Danya said. “*Felix* Navidad.”

Felix laughed. “It’s a little seasonal, but I can’t say I dislike it.”

“Good,” Danya said. “It’s settled. I never feel right with someone until I find the right nickname for them.” He lowered his phone, though he took a moment first to nudge the volume down on the Christmas carols, then twirled one wrist in the air in time with the music. Felix couldn’t help but smile at Danya’s flourish. The man belonged on Broadway. Danya had been quite the drag queen back in his day, Felix had learned. Between evenings in frocks and days at the bookstore he’d owned and operated—the Second Page, which still ran in the Village, though he’d sold to someone else years ago now—he’d had a full, busy life even before he’d met his eventual husband. Given how many charities and organizations he belonged to, he clearly had zero intention of slowing down.

“Have you always done that?” Felix said, setting down his kit and sitting beside Danya. “Nicknames, I mean?”

“Since I was a very young and nelly fag,” Danya said. He rolled one hand, gesturing with his fingers. “But especially during the eighties. My therapist would tell you I sought some

control over the world around me, especially the people, but I like to think there was also some love in it.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever had a nickname before,” Felix said, thinking about it while he unzipped his bag. “My mother always called me Felix, and my friends do, too.”

“Well, I’m glad to be your first,” Danya said, with the sly little grin Felix was learning to expect from the man whenever he dropped his not-infrequent double entendres.

“Let’s see how you’re doing, shall we?” Felix said. By the time they’d run through his vitals and Felix had updated his chart, “Feliz Navidad” was long done, and the playlist of holiday songs had chugged along, dropping them into a particularly upbeat version of “Winter Wonderland.” Felix didn’t mind holiday music at the start of December, but so many of his clients were trying to reclaim a bit of the holiday joy, the charm of holiday music tended to wear thin as December went on.

And there was still a week to go.

“So,” Danya said. “Tell me about the outside world. Do people still laugh? Are there still parties?”

“You are the singularly most dramatic man I’ve ever met,” Felix said, tucking the blood oximeter back into its case.

“Thank you.” Danya winked. “That number wasn’t good, was it?”

“Well, given the ride your lungs took, it’s not the worst. But no. Ideally, we want something in a ninety-six.”

“Oof,” Danya said. “That high?”

“You will get there. I keep telling you, this will take time.”

“I know,” Danya said, leaning back into the couch. “And I keep telling you I’m *terrible* at being patient. Or *being* a patient.” He patted Felix’s arm. “How long do I have you today?”

“As long as you need me,” Felix said. “You are my number one priority.”

“That is something not enough men have said to me over the years. How do you feel about stamps?” Danya said.

“Stamps?”

“I finished the last of my Christmas cards, but I need to stamp and mail them,” Danya said.

“Oh, for sure,” Felix said. “No trouble at all. But can we have our walkabout first, before we start?”

“Ah yes, the *delightful* voyage between the living room, the toilet, and the kitchen. What wonders shall befall me on my journey today?” Danya said, but he held out his arm for Felix to help him up. He used his rollator, and Felix kept a hand loosely at Danya’s back. Though Danya was still unsteady on his feet, he wasn’t nearly as fatigued as he had been a couple of weeks earlier by the time they’d completed their circuit to the kitchen.

After they ate lunch, Felix prepped Danya’s dinner and some overnight oatmeal for tomorrow’s breakfast, then helped him back to the living room, where Danya presented Felix with two large piles of Christmas cards, each tucked into an envelope but not yet sealed, addressed but not stamped.

Felix whistled. “I don’t think I know this many people by name.”

“The luxury of decades, though there’s also the reality of diminishing returns,” Danya said. “Every year, a card or two less to write or to receive. I pack them all away at the end of the season, and then re-hang the last ones I know I’ll receive from those who’ve passed on.” He gestured to the mantel, where three long strings had been set up, one of which was already full of cards. “That top string has the ghosts of Christmas past.”

Felix eyed the string and guessed three dozen cards at a glance. The weight of it settled on his shoulders. “That’s a nice way to remember,” he said, not wanting to be maudlin about it.

“It’s like hearing from them one more time, every year,” Danya said.

Felix picked up the first of the cards and opened a packet

of stamps. At least Danya had a sponge for the envelope flaps. He wasn't going to have to lick them. He eyed the name on the envelope and raised one eyebrow.

"Thick Vic?" Felix said.

Danya leaned forward. "Have you ever heard the phrase 'straight and narrow'?"

Felix nodded, dabbing the little sponge on a stick to get it wet. "Yes."

"Victor is *neither*." Danya's sly smile returned. "If I were twenty—okay, thirty—years younger, I'd be very interested in rescuing some animals, is all I'm saying." When Felix chuckled and shook his head, Danya added, "He's a veterinarian, though the real rescue would be the silver fox himself."

"Ah. Now I see," Felix said. He started working on the envelope flaps first. He'd add the stamps after.

"Do you have any pets?" Danya said.

"No," Felix said. "Given I'm away from my apartment all day, it never seemed right. But I love animals."

"Hrm," Danya said. "I could introduce you to Thick Vic, you know. He's a lovely man. How old are you, again?"

"I'm thirty-eight," Felix said. "Why, is Thick—is *Victor*—in need of a nurse?"

"I was thinking more about playing doctor," Danya said.

"Of course," Felix said. "By the way, I baked this weekend, so if you finish your glass of water, we have ginger cookies as a reward."

"Ah! Your traditional cookies." Danya picked up the glass and made a show of taking a swallow. "I look forward to them. But don't think we're done talking about your romantic options, Navidad. I expect you to have something to do for New Year's Eve, if nothing else."

"I have no illusions about convincing you my love life doesn't need help," Felix said, closing the flap on a Christmas



card addressed to someone Danya called Jilly Bean, and picking up one for Mutton Man. “But I warn you. I’m working New Year’s Eve. I won’t be home until around seven, and I’ll have started at six in the morning, so…”

“Darling,” Danya said. “We talked about this.” He held out his hand, index finger to thumb, and circled it in the air.

Felix eyed him. “Really?”

“Really.”

Felix dutifully pulled out his pen and notepad, turning it back to the page where he’d scribbled Danya’s advice before, a list growing with every visit. “Let me have it.”

“Opportunities must be taken.”

Felix wrote it down. “Got it.” He put the notepad and pen away.

“Good. Because your love life needs resuscitation.”

“Well, then it’s a lucky thing I’m a nurse practitioner, right?” Felix said. “I know how to do that.”

Danya raised his water glass for another swallow, not replying. His expression said just how little he thought of Felix’s declaration. Honestly? Felix wasn’t so sure he had the confidence he was dishing out, either.

## FIVE

*December 23*

Felix woke to wet snow and the pinging of his phone notifying him his YOW to YYZ flight was delayed due to dense fog covering Toronto.

“Fog?” He stared at his phone. “In *December?*”

Welcome to climate change, he thought. He grabbed his suitcase and carry-on and settled on a hoodie and a light red jacket that wouldn't do at all for Ottawa winter weather, but would be enough for inside an airplane and the short walk from his Jeep to the airport, and then got his butt in gear. He didn't care if his flight was delayed, he was getting to the airport on time. Besides, his initial layover in Toronto was multiple hours long. He'd still make it to Vancouver and then onward to Hawai'i.

In Ottawa International Airport, however, his positive attitude was sorely tested. After checking his bag, before he'd started his way through security, his flight number was updated with a second new and even later time.

By the time he'd redone his belt and tugged his hoodie and coat back on and picked up his carry-on from the plastic bin, the word *Delayed* beside his flight had been replaced by a bright red *Canceled*.

He stared at the display, watching as more and more of the flights were either canceled or delayed, until he decided to go to the appropriate desk to find out what his options were. The place was packed, and Felix reminded himself none of this was the fault of the people behind the counters, a fact that seemed to have escaped more than a few of the other thwarted passengers, especially the white dudes in suits. He waited patiently to get to the front of the line, glancing at his phone while he waited, and learned the Toronto fog was worsening into a heavy, drizzling mist alongside a plummeting temperature looming heavy with the threat of turning said mist into ice rain.

“Hi,” he said, looking at the pretty, lightly tanned brunette woman and smiling as he made eye contact. “I’m so sorry this is your day.”

That earned him a big grin, and she lifted one shoulder. “I’ve had worse and I’ve had better. Can I see your boarding pass? Where were you heading?”

“Hawai‘i.” Felix handed them over, and she tsked, likely at where he was versus where he was supposed to be headed. She tapped on her computer, looking like she actually did mean to help as best she could. “Let’s see what we can do for you, Mr. Gagnon.”

The answer, unfortunately, turned out to be “not much,” though she did nudge him onto the last flight out of Toronto that would get still get him to Vancouver with barely time to spare for the final flight of the day to Hawai‘i. Except she couldn’t get him to Toronto.

Felix checked his phone. “The flight from Toronto is in six hours, right?”

She nodded. “That’s right.”

“I could drive,” Felix said. It was snowing, sure, but he dealt with winter driving every day. He didn’t really *want* to drive to Toronto, and parking in the Toronto airport would probably cost him more than he wanted to even think about, but...*Hawai‘i*. “That’d still give me more than an hour to spare, right?”

“Closer to two if you drive like me.” She eyed him, a slow smile spreading across her face. “Let’s get you your bag.”

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Once he had his suitcase, Felix put on his best hustle, aiming himself for the exit and doing the math on getting to Toronto by car. He was damn lucky the agent had scored him a spot on that final flight, so it should be doable, but four and a half hours of driving certainly wasn’t the best way to start a vacation.

Whatever. He’d cope. And then he’d be somewhere with

actual colors other than white, gray, and gray-white.

“No, I understand, it’s not your fault.”

The oddly familiar voice caught Felix’s attention. Felix turned his head, frowning, wondering who it was and then spotted a man picking up a duffel bag and stepping away from a car rental booth. The man thanked the woman working there as he left, and she appeared genuinely sad she couldn’t help him.

It might have been his jeans. They were faded, looked comfortable, and clung to the man’s thick thighs and butt like they existed to do nothing else. The view of him going was frankly the best thing that had happened to Felix all morning. The broad shoulders under the puffy red winter jacket were an added bonus once the man turned around and Felix aimed his sight a bit higher, but the red-brown beard finally made it click.

Kevin. Ru’s ex, Mr. One Dance, he-of-the-rolled-up-shirt-sleeves, from the wedding.

Alongside his winter jacket, he wore well-worn and scuffed winter boots and what had to be a hand-knitted red scarf. Somehow the whole package was just as lovely as he’d been in a suit. What was it about the whole farm boy thing? Well, other than the legs and the shoulders and the beard and...

“Felix?”

He’d been spotted staring. *Again*. Kevin looked surprised to see him, which he supposed was fair enough.

“Kevin,” Felix said once he’d gotten a bit closer. “Were you flying to Toronto?”

“Yeah.” Kevin sighed. “Not anymore, though.”

“Me too.”

“You were going to Toronto?” Kevin tilted his head. “I thought you were one of the locals. The Bittersweets Club?”

“Oh, I live in Ottawa,” Felix said, unreasonably pleased Kevin knew that about him. “But I was heading on vacation.”

He shifted his carry-on from one shoulder to the other. “Hawai‘i.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.” It sounded sincere.

Felix shook his head. “I haven’t given up yet. If I can get to Toronto, and my connecting flight isn’t canceled or delayed, I’m still good. If it is, at least I’ll already be in Toronto when there’s a new flight tomorrow. Maybe I’ll only lose one day out of my week in the sun.”

“Well, good luck. They’re out of cars, so I think I’m stuck here until the flights start again.” He frowned, obviously not looking forward to that particular situation.

“Why don’t you come with me?” Felix offered without thinking. He could practically hear Owen’s voice pointing out he was doing the whole acting-on-impulse thing *again*, but it wasn’t like it would put him out or anything.

“Really?” Kevin’s eyebrows rose.

“I’ve got a Jeep, winter tires, and I’m parked outside. I can get you as far as Toronto. Or home, if you’re on the way.” Felix paused. “I’m sorry, I don’t remember what home is called, I just know it’s where Ru grew up.”

“Oneida,” Kevin said. “But I would *really* appreciate the ride, thank you. I’ve got family who could pick me up in Toronto.” He tilted his head. “You’re sure it’s no trouble?”

“Dude, I’m going there anyway.” Felix shrugged. “Take the opportunity. That’s what they’re for. I know you’re not an ax murderer or anything. We literally just went to the same wedding. I’ve *danced* with you.”

“Right, right,” Kevin said. Maybe his smile faded a bit.

*Nice move, Felix, he thought. Remind him his ex just got hitched.*

“Come on,” Felix said, nodding his head at the exit. “Did you want to grab a coffee or something to eat from the Timmies before we go?”

“I got food in here,” Kevin said, swinging the duffel over his shoulder. “Here, let me grab one of those.” He pulled

Felix's carry-on from Felix's shoulder with his free hand with zero effort. "And thank you. Seriously."

\* \* \*

They didn't waste time, shoving their luggage into the back of Felix's Jeep and climbing in.

"You are officially in charge of the music," Felix said, passing Kevin his phone as they slid into the seats. "It should pair automatically. I'll get you to set up your address once we're on the way, too, but tunes will be necessary with all haste. Otherwise, we'll have to make small talk, and then you'll realize I say all the things that come into my head and reconsider accepting the ride."

"I can get the GPS started first, it won't take long." At least the joke had garnered a small chuckle from Kevin, who tapped on the phone's screen for a couple of moments, and the phone announced they should exit the airport parking lot.

Helpful.

"What are you in the mood for?" Kevin said.

"Anything but holiday music."

That earned him an odd look from Kevin, but he didn't say anything. By the time Felix had paid and they pulled out of the long-term parking, Kevin was actively scrolling options.

"Your playlist names are interesting. What are all these mixes with names? *Mix for Katarzyna*, *Mix for Dorothy*, *Mix for Thomas*?"

"When I have tech-savvy clients, I make a shared playlist with them, and they put their favorite songs into the mixes. It's a fun way to get to know them in between visits, gives us something to talk about that isn't their health, and I find music I'd never heard of before." Felix eyed the falling snow. "Okay, this weather isn't so bad. If we can stay ahead of the worst of this, I think we'll be fine."

"Clients?"

"I'm a nurse practitioner. I do home visits for people who

need ongoing in-home care or recovery help.”

“Oh,” Kevin said, this time with real surprise.

“Insert gay nurse joke here?” Felix said, cracking a smile and glancing at him.

“No, not at all. I just wouldn’t have clocked you as a nurse,” Kevin said, still scrolling the phone. “Which, now that I say it out loud, I don’t even know what I mean. That’s actually a great idea. The playlists, I mean.” He seemed to keep scrolling, then laughed. “Okay, I don’t know what an *In Case of Disappointment* playlist is, but that sounds perfect right now.”

“It’s my ‘I will bounce back’ playlist. Lots of ‘screw you, you won’t keep me down’ type songs,” Felix said.

“Definitely perfect,” Kevin said.

A moment later, Ani DiFranco’s “Shameless” was beating its way through the speakers, and if Kevin didn’t know the song—which Felix was pretty sure was the case—at least his head was bopping to the beat. Felix couldn’t help tapping the wheel. Angry 90s Ani was his favorite Ani.

They made it through two more songs before Felix couldn’t handle the lack of conversation any longer. “So!” he said.

Kevin jumped.

“Sorry,” Felix said. “That came out a little sharper than intended.”

“No, it’s okay. I was miles away.” He drew his words out again in the laconic way he had that was somehow calming, rather than slow.

“I’m trying to think of small talk,” Felix said, “because we’ve got at least four hours ahead of us, but all I can think to ask about is the wedding, and honestly? I’m not really in the mood to talk about the wedding.” He drummed the fingers of his right hand against the steering wheel. “Which probably makes me a terrible friend, but it’s the truth.”

“I’m glad they finally got their day,” Kevin said. “But I

second the motion. Like I said, it was kind of a disappointment.”

Felix supposed no matter how many years went by, it probably never became fun to watch your ex marry someone else. “Sorry,” Felix said, aiming a quick glance at Kevin, only to see him shrug it off.

“It’s fine.”

Okay. New topic.

“You own a farm, right?” Felix said. The question was the full extent of his knowledge about farming, but surely Kevin would have something interesting to say about farms that would lead to a richer conversational option.

“I used to.”

Or not.

“Used to?” Felix wondered if talking to Kevin would be like pulling teeth for the next four hours.

“My sister and my brother-in-law officially took it over at the start of the year. They both have ag degrees—they met in college—and they’ve got a little kid now, and the farmhouse was sort of empty with just me and my mom, so...”

“You sold it to them?” Felix said.

“No. The farm belongs to my mom. Technically I was her employee. But I ran it all. Now they do. They moved in, I found an apartment on my own. It was time, really.”

If Felix had to hazard a guess, he’d say Kevin was understating the impact of the change. His clients said similar things often: “Oh, I can’t climb the stairs anymore, so I sold or gave away almost everything I owned and moved into this small apartment. It was time, really.”

Non-choices falsely framed as decisions.

“So, what’s next for you?” Felix said.

“I’ll still help out at the farm, especially during the peak periods like lambing or harvest. And I’ve been doing small mechanic courses, getting myself certified,” Kevin said. “I



already know the how-to, but you need paperwork if you intend to work professionally. I enjoyed farming, but I think working at a small repair shop would also be good for me: hands busy, you know? Honestly, I'm still figuring the next part out, which sounds pathetic now that I say it out loud."

"No, not at all," Felix said, feeling like he'd basically called Kevin's entire life into question in the space of four questions. A new record, really. Maybe he should let the conversation drop again? "One thing I've learned from my job, it's the whole 'one job for your life' thing is a huge myth for most people," he said, hoping the statement would come across as supportive, and not trite. "I can't remember my last client who only had one job—or even one career—under their belt."

"When did you decide to be a nurse?" Kevin said.

"Oof." Felix laughed. "You're starting with the big questions, huh?"

"It's a big question?"

"Don't say I didn't warn you." Felix glanced at him, and was surprised to see what appeared to be genuine interest in Kevin's remarkable hazel eyes. He turned back to the road. "It was when my mother died. She'd been sick a while, and I was only nineteen when she finally passed. Even though we both knew it was coming, and we'd talked about it and prepared for it, it hit me like a truck. It was all on me at that point, my father was never in the picture. I answered all the questions, and I filled in all this paperwork, gathered her things, and it took ages—God, it felt like it took forever—and once it was done, everyone just *left*. The doctors and the administrators, and everyone, really except for this one nurse, Lori, who'd been there throughout the whole ordeal of my mother dying. She sat with me the whole time after she'd died." He shook his head remembering.

"I'm sorry," Kevin said. "I lost my dad when I was sixteen, but I had my mom and my sister and all my grandparents. That sounds tough."

"Thank you. It was, but I got through it. Anyway. I'd been

asked what I wanted to do with my mother's body, who I wanted to call, if I had a place to go, and I'd answered and explained and all that was finally done," Felix said. "And that nurse, Lori, was still there. And I tried to say thank you, but I was barely holding it together. I cleared my throat and then I apologized when I couldn't really speak, swallowed it down, you know, and you know what she did?"

Kevin shook his head. "No, what?"

"Lori leaned over and she took my hand and she said, 'I think someone told you men don't cry, and I am here to tell you that is utter fucking bullshit.'"

Kevin laughed. "That's really sweet."

"It was. And that was it. I decided I was going to be a nurse." Felix chuckled. "Well, first there was a really long and ugly sob fest, including snot bubbles and blotchy face, but, y'know, right after."

"Sounds like what my mom would call a calling," Kevin said.

"I guess so," Kevin conceded. "It took me a while to figure out exactly how I wanted to do it, though. I didn't have good experiences working in hospitals. My opinion of nurses as the backbone of the medical industry isn't as common among the families of patients as you'd think. Especially not the men." The sheer volume of homophobic crap he'd endured in the name of keeping his patients happy wasn't a particularly fond memory. "But after Lori retired from the hospital—we kept in touch—she was bored out of her mind after six months and started working part-time doing home visits, and one day after we'd met for lunch, I realized *that* was what I wanted to do—especially for queer clients, who don't always end up with caregivers who understand their needs or, hell, even use their pronouns correctly. I went back to school, became a nurse practitioner, and never looked back."

"I should have lunch with some retired farmers," Kevin said. "Might find my calling that way."

"Or maybe I'm full of it and tend to make big decisions

without thinking about consequences, but I get lucky a lot,” Felix said.

“Ru did say that about you,” Kevin said.

Felix glanced at him. “He did, did he? Remind me to thank him.”

Kevin chuckled. “I believe his exact words were ‘if he liked women, he’d be a perfect disaster bisexual.’”

“*Wow.*” Felix patted the steering wheel. “And I went in with Silas and Owen on a *really* expensive coffee maker for them.”

“Really?” Kevin said. “That’s funny. I gave them a gift card for that coffee place he was always going on about and carved them an ornament for their Christmas tree.”

“That’s really nice.” Felix smiled. “Nick has a whole thing about his Christmas tree ornaments.”

His phone interrupted them with a ping.

Kevin sobered. “Accident on the 417. Estimated hour delay.”

“Shit,” Felix said. The 417 was the only way Felix had ever gotten his butt to Toronto by car.

“We could take the 7.” Kevin didn’t seem particularly put out by the news. “Then the 37. Gets us to Belleville. It’s not much longer, and it’s a prettier drive.”

Prettier? Felix wasn’t sure there’d be much to see given how much snow was forecast, but Kevin was right, it was better than waiting an hour for an accident to be cleared—assuming it would *only* be an hour.

“Okay, I can turn around here,” Felix said, spotting a gas station. “We can wave at the airport again on our way by.”

“At least we didn’t get too far,” Kevin said.

Felix sighed. “Let’s hope that’s not an omen.”

## SIX

*Last January*

“Valentine’s Day,” Danya called from the living room.

“As greetings go, that’s somewhat inscrutable,” Felix called back, unzipping his coat. Once he and his kit were in the living room, Danya leveled his usual steely gaze Felix’s way.

“Well, you blew off New Year’s Eve,” Danya said. “Valentine’s Day is an opportunity to ensure you have a plus one in time for Moe’s wedding.”

“Ah,” Felix said. “We’re back on the Get Felix a Date thing, are we? You know I can go to his wedding solo, right?”

“Just because one *can* do a thing does not mean one *must* do a thing,” Danya said, shaking his head. “For example, one *can* wear body spray. One should not.”

Felix laughed. “Fair enough.”

“Besides, if you refuse to allow me the joy of a long night out dancing with some beau and then *not dancing* with some beau, I have only vicarious thrills as my available options.” Danya crossed his arms over his chest, but the menacing glare he was attempting fell into a cheerful smile after a moment.

“You’re feeling better, I take it?” Felix said, opening his kit and sitting beside him on the couch, their usual starting positions.

“I’m sure that demonic finger clip will tell you I’m not, but yes. I feel quite well today. I’ll have you know I finished two books this week.”

“I’m glad.” Felix knew the way Danya had been too tired to even read consistently had really been weighing on his mood. Their trips to the library had been a mixed bag. Danya had wanted them to feel like a good thing, but instead, Felix could tell Danya had felt failure when he’d had to return a book unfinished, and since then he’d taken to only borrowing a single volume at a time.

“Well,” Danya said, waving a hand, “it used to be I’d read that in a day, believe it or not.”

“I believe it.” Felix unzipped the “demonic finger clip”—the blood oximeter—and slid it onto Danya’s index finger. “Ru’s fiancé Nick manages a bookstore, and he’s like that, too.”

“Saint Nick and I have talked often of the joys and pains of the job. I miss my bookshop,” Danya said. “But I don’t miss standing all day, or how I had to turn a profit in September through December or I’d blow the whole financial year.” He tilted his head. “Or fighting with customs because they’d decided some book or other was indecent.”

“Really?”

“Oh, you have no idea.” Danya shook his head. “In the eighties, they’d block anything and everything, and I’d raise hell and try to get any of it to my shelves. You can’t give puritanical assholes an inch. Still, I’m glad I sold it to Bright Eyes. He’s doing the Second Page right.”

The blood oximeter pinged, and they both looked at it.

“See?” Danya glared down at the device. “It hates me.”

“It doesn’t hate you,” Felix said, making a note in Danya’s chart. Eighty-eight wasn’t great, but he was recovering. How slowly definitely frustrated Danya, though. “Cough for me?”

Danya did, and Felix listened. Again, not great, but better.

By the time they were finished with the vitals, Felix thought he might have dodged the Valentine’s Day bullet, but he should have known better. When they’d completed their walkabout and Danya was settled in the kitchen while Felix set up his slow cooker, Danya’s relentlessness recovered.

“So, Valentine’s Day,” he said.

“I’m working.”

“Of course you are.” Danya telegraphed his unsurprised disgust in his tone. “But your day ends at six o’clock, as I know well, so you will have time for a date.”

“Hmm.” Felix tried for noncommittal.

Danya wasn't having it. “At least tell me you're planning to go out. There's a party at the Village Inn Pub. Go with your bitter coffee people.”

“The Bittersweets Club?” Felix laughed. “They all have plans.” He'd intended to come off with a light tone, but he heard the note of defeat in there. He cleared his throat, finishing chopping a green pepper and adding it to the slow cooker for Danya's chili. He took a second to compose his features and glanced over his shoulder to offer a little shrug.

“All your coffee friends are dating someone?” Danya said.

“Yes. Ru and Nick are heading away for the weekend to a B&B,” Felix said, chopping onions. “Silas and Dino are going to someplace fancy in the Market. Silas is the one who made the app I showed you.”

“Oh, yes,” Danya said. “The gay history game you play by walking around I've barely played because I'm not allowed to walk around.”

“Yes.” Felix laughed again. This man was relentless. “*Pride March*. That's the one. And Owen doesn't know what he's doing because Toma hasn't told him yet, but apparently it involves needing a sweater and a warm hat, so my guess is they're doing something on the canal.”

“Well, then,” Danya said, with a slightly smug little shake of his head. “Doesn't all of that sound lovely?”

“Yes,” Felix said. “It does.” And it did. He was happy for his friends. Really. But he also missed the days of celebrating Valentine's Day by watching a science fiction flick in Silas's apartment while they ate popcorn and ranked which of the Colonial Marines was the hottest. (Hicks. It was always Hicks.)

“So, I swear there's a lesson here.” Danya tapped his bottom lip with one finger. “Surely you have someone you'd like to ask out. Who's the last person who made your mouth drop open and your words dry up?”

“Dino,” Felix said, turning his head.

“I thought you said Dino was dating Silas.”

“He is.”

“*Ah*. I see the problem.”

“It’s really not a *problem*,” Felix said. “Truly. I had a completely surface-level, appearance-based crush, but I realized they were perfect for each other. But you asked who my last crush was, and he was it.”

“Appearance-based?” Danya raised one eyebrow.

Felix took a moment to find the now infamous photo on his phone. Silas and Dino had sent it out on Christmas Day three years ago. They were both kind of ruffled and had just woken up, but blond and bespectacled Silas beamed into the camera and Dino’s bronze Greek gorgeous physical trainer shoulders and chest were perfectly visible, as was the clearly besotted smile he was aiming at Silas from behind his beard. Felix turned the screen to Danya, who slipped on his reading glasses, then whistled in appreciation.

“Well now, he’s a very large and attractive man, I’ll grant you.” He paused. “The twink is adorable, too.”

“At one point, I was fishing for whether or not I should ask Dino out—we thought Dino was just Silas’s roommate at that point—and Silas reacted poorly, though he tried to hide it. I figured maybe more was going on there, so I backed off.” Felix put his phone back in his pocket. “Since then, I haven’t really had...what did you call it? Mouth-drop, word-stop?”

“Some people don’t mouth-drop, word-stop, you know,” Danya said. “They don’t lock eyes and have the world tremble at their feet. They work together for years. Or they go to the same bar for months or volunteer together. They’re friends, or friends of friends, or even just acquaintances. And they get to know each other.” Danya waved his hand. “Movies would have you believe falling in love is always like diving into a pool. Sudden, shocking. But some people wade in, and they don’t even realize they’re swimming until they finish a lap.”

Felix considered for a moment. “Like Ru and Nick.”

Danya’s smile was soft. “Like Moe and Saint Nick.”

“Yeah,” Felix said. “They were friends for, like, a dozen years or something before they got together.”

“And had to delay their wedding, *twice*. Hopefully, this year is the charm for my little Moe. And, you know, they both dated people who were wrong for them in the meanwhile,” Danya said. Then he paused, his gaze going somewhere far away the way it often did when he was lost in thought or, more often, lost in a memory.

“Dare I ask?” Felix said.

Danya’s gaze sharpened again, and he raised his hand and twirled it in the air, his usual gesture for one of his life lessons.

Felix took a second to wipe his hands dry and then pulled out his notepad, finding the page he’d started to think of as *Danya’s advice*. “Hit me,” he said.

“Slow isn’t bad,” Danya said. “At least, not necessarily.”

Felix wrote it down, then put the pad away. “You know, I could always take *you* to Ru’s wedding.”

“My dear Navidad.” Danya exhaled a long-suffering sigh. “If your demonic finger clip allows me to go out again, I already have *three* men pining for my company. I’ll be taking whichever one of those suitors turns out to be the best.”



## SEVEN

*December 23*

“Okay, this isn’t wet snow anymore,” Felix said, the third time he felt the telltale delay between turning the steering wheel and the car going around a curve in the road. “Usually, I’m firmly in the camp of ‘slow isn’t bad,’ but this isn’t just slowing us down.”

Kevin, who’d been more or less a silent companion for the last hour, shifted in his seat again. He’d been doing that a lot, like he couldn’t get comfortable. Or maybe he was nervous. “Looks like ice rain.” Felix heard him pull out his phone and unlock the screen. A few moments later, he added, “Yeah. It’s looking worse up ahead. Weather warnings in effect.”

“I don’t think we’re going to get our asses to Toronto in time,” Felix said, blowing out a short, annoyed breath.

They hit a wall of wind, the spatter of the rain growing even louder, almost a constant now. The wipers worked harder, and Felix noticed small bits of ice forming at the edges of the windshield.

Officially not snow.

“I don’t think we should be trying for Toronto anymore,” Kevin said. “Maybe it’s time we get off the road?”

“I think you’re right. Quit while we’re behind,” Felix said, feeling Hawai‘i slip another day further away, but knowing it was the right call. “Can you see if there’s *anywhere* we can stop? My standards are low. Motel, parking lot, dive bar...” He gripped the wheel tighter as the same “not quite right” feeling registered on another curve. At least he wasn’t skidding. Yet. “You get the idea.”

“I’ll look.” Kevin fell quiet while he worked, and Felix had never been happier for the invention of GPS. Trying to figure out exactly where they were on the highway would have been a nightmare, given how little visibility he had. The nearly frozen snow-turned-rain was relentless, and seemed to eat the light from his headlights. When he was a kid, he’d loved being

in a car in snow at night. The view through the windshield had reminded him of the way the stars moved in science fiction shows.

As an adult in control of the vehicle? Far less fun.

“I don’t suppose it’s a good thing the last sign I remember passing said something about the Barrens,” Felix said, just to say something.

“Probably good camping,” Kevin said.

“Okay, when I said my standards were low, I was hoping for at least a roof and a toilet.”

“Oh, well, now you’re being completely unreasonable.” In Kevin’s almost-drawl, teasing came across as delightfully sardonic.

“I know,” Felix said. “I’m a total princess.”

“Ah, here we go,” Kevin said. “It’s still a bit farther on, but after we turn, there’s a place called Cozy Cedar Cabins.”

“Really? This is how horror movies start,” Felix said. “If there’s a lake, one of us will survive just long enough to get pulled into it by some drowned kid.”

Kevin laughed. “Let me call them.”

Felix squinted into the road ahead, which looked the same as it had for the first two hours, really: trees and rocks and a two-lane highway. Every now and then, a sign would remind them they were on the Trans-Canada Highway, but that was it.

“Hello,” Kevin said into his phone. “I’m somewhat close to you right now, and we got caught in this weather...” He paused. “Yes, it’s ugly. I’m wondering if you have any vacancies?” He waited again. “No, we don’t need a family cabin, it’s just the two of us, and...Pardon? Oh, no. No pets.” A longer silence followed, and Felix could hear a woman talking on the other end. Kevin laughed. “No, it’s fine, don’t try. We’ll take care of it. I’m just glad you have something. Thank you so much, we can do all that when we get there. My name is Kevin Croft, and my phone said we were about ten minutes away. I’m thinking closer to half an hour given this

mess. Thank you so much.” Another pause. “Okay, the large red building. Got it. Thank you.” He hung up.

“They have a space,” he said. “It’s two-fifty, but I can cover it.”

“Heck no,” Felix said. “I’ll split. Of course. That’s not bad at all. What were you saying about us taking care of it?”

“She said normally they prep the cabins the morning of. Make sure the fire is set up, linens, that stuff.”

“Ah,” Felix said. He wondered how much like camping this experience was about to be, but for a hundred and twenty-five bucks, if it did indeed have a toilet and roof, he’d be pretty darn happy, and he really wanted to get off the Trans-Canada Skating Rink.

“There’s the turn,” Kevin said, pointing to where they would turn left onto Highway 37. “It’s not much farther after the turn, and it’ll be a right on Sawmill Road and then the right fork onto Cozy Retreat Road.”

“Sawmill Road?” Felix shook his head. “Definitely a horror movie.”

Kevin laughed.

Felix made the turn.

\* \* \*

By the time they found Cozy Retreat Road, Felix’s grip had gotten so tight, he was pretty sure he’d have to peel his fingers off one by one. The patter of rain was now a near-constant hiss, and ice was forming in patches everywhere.

“She said there’d be a large red building...” Kevin said, peering out through the front of the windshield. “Ah, there.”

Felix saw it. Up ahead. It wasn’t particularly interesting, but it fit the description of *big red building*, and the lights were on, which was all he cared about. A moment later, they passed the sign for Cozy Cedar Cabins. Happily, an overhang in front of the main entrance meant the large round driveway hadn’t slicked over yet.

Felix pulled the Jeep up to the entrance and exhaled. His shoulders burned, and he had to make a conscious effort to unclench his jaw.

If the outside of the main building of Cozy Cedar Cabins wasn't much to write home about, the interior did its best to make up for it. Mostly done in smooth, polished wood, large green and brown patterned rugs covered the floor boards, and a chandelier hung from a ceiling of repurposed bottles and old-fashioned pipe fittings. It could have been garish, but the rest of the space was far simpler, so instead it served as a kind of centerpiece. Two real, potted Christmas trees decorated entirely with what appeared to be little hand-knitted or crocheted ornaments stood to either side of the large entrance area, scenting the room lightly with pine, and a long wooden counter awaited them beyond, the front of which had the triple-C logo of the rental place.

"This used to be a barn," Kevin said, glancing around. "It all looks like reclaimed wood." He brushed one hand across the registration counter.

Felix took a second look and realized Kevin was right, though so much had been done to the interior Felix never would have guessed. He supposed it made sense Kevin knew what a barn looked like.

"Be right there," a woman called, and Felix noticed the door behind the counter was cracked open. Sure enough, a few seconds later, it opened and a *very* pregnant white woman came out from whatever room the door led to. "Sorry," she said. "Takes me a little longer to get out of my chair right now." She had chestnut brown hair worn in a simple ponytail, brown eyes, and a friendly smile. "I'm Gabrielle. I'm guessing one of you is Kevin."

"That's me," Kevin said. "Thank you again for this."

"It's terrible out there." She waved a hand. "I'm glad we had room for y'all—though if it's as bad as they're saying, I bet I'll have a bunch of cancellations in the morning. Let's get you checked in."

Felix blinked. Had she just "y'all"ed him? Did people

really “y’all”?

She opened a laptop on the counter and started typing, taking Kevin’s information and swiping the card he pulled out of his wallet. Felix, feeling a little adrift, eyed the various flyers in a small rack while Kevin signed things.

Apparently, if one stayed at the Cozy Cedar Cabins, one could take part in nearby activities such as canoeing, hiking, and a nearby sawmill museum—uniquely named the Sawmill Museum—one of the more attractive qualities thereof being, apparently, the inclusion of a bakery and café.

Yeowch. Hawai‘i this was not.

“Okay, you’re in Cabin Four.” Gabrielle picked up a piece of paper from a stack, flipping it over and showing them a map of the grounds. She traced her finger a shortish distance from the building they were in to a cabin marked with a number four, circling it with a pen. “Your linens and such are right here,” she said, gesturing to a large, lidded plastic tote bin beside the counter.

“I got it.” Kevin picked up the tote with ease.

“Then I guess this is for you,” Gabrielle held out the key to Felix, and he took it.

“Thank you,” he said.

“There’s firewood and a lighter,” Gabrielle said. “I’d suggest you get a fire going once you get in. If you need anything else, give us a call. The instructions are on the phone, Wi-Fi password, too.”

“We’ll be fine,” Kevin said.

“See you tomorrow,” Gabrielle said. “Breakfast starts at six, right through there.” She gestured, and Felix spotted two sliding barn-style doors across the far wall.

“Thanks again for staying up for us,” Kevin said, but she waved him off with one hand.

They tucked the tote on the back seat, and Felix drove the short distance to the cabin Gabrielle had circled. Unlike the main building, there was no cover under which to park the

Jeep. The ground was already getting slick, so they did their best to hustle without falling. Felix regretted wearing the red sneakers rather than winter boots, but he'd intended on being on a plane, not out tromping in an Ontario December. They got everything to the screened-in porch of the small cabin in decent enough time. Felix unlocked the door, and they went inside, Kevin carrying the tote from Gabrielle, and Felix carrying the rest of their bags, bracing for whatever "rustic" horror was about to be revealed.

"Oh," Felix said, once he was inside.

Cozy Cedar Cabin Number Four was *wonderful*. An L-shaped open concept living area formed the bulk of the overall square space, with a kitchenette at the closest end of the L complete with brunch bar and two stools. A wood stove was placed at the apex. The cabin walls themselves were simple wood, as was the floor, but rugs and hangings brought splashes of autumn yellows and oranges, and the long brown couch taking up most of the farthest end of the L was plush, with a low table in front of it, and a single rocking chair to one side. The final quarter of the square cabin's ground floor was a *very* small bathroom, but even as tiny as it was, Felix could see it had a claw-foot tub and an overhead rainfall style shower. To the side, stairs led to a loft space, which overlooked the lower floor.

"We got lucky," Kevin said.

"You said it," Felix said. "I was not expecting something this nice."

Kevin put down his bag and went right to the wood stove, which was empty but had a tray of firewood ready to go beside it. "Let me get a fire going." He knelt down and opened the front of the stove, clearly a man who knew how to light a fire.

Which was good, given Felix was a man who knew how to operate a thermostat.

Felix popped the lid on the tote and carried the towels into the bathroom, then put the fitted sheet, sheet, and pillowcases on the bottom of the stairs. Beneath those, the tote had a few containers of basics he was definitely happy to see.

“There’s coffee, tea bags, sugar, and creamers,” he said, turning around to look at the kitchenette. “And I see a kettle. Want a coffee?”

“Desperately,” Kevin said.

Felix laughed, feeling that. He filled the kettle and put the small containers on the counter, though he tucked the creamers into the small fridge.

“Well,” Felix said, waiting for it to boil, “it might not be a plane to Hawai‘i, but this place is definitely going to be more comfortable to sleep in.”

“I can take the couch,” Kevin said.

“What?” Felix said, glancing around the cabin, until it clicked the loft stairs led to the only bed in the whole space. “Kevin, practically the entire loft up there is one huge bed. It’s fine. You’re cute, but I can control myself, honest.”

“Oh.” Kevin shook his head, then turned his attention back to building a fire. “It’s not your control I’m worried about.”

Felix stared at the back of his head, but Kevin didn’t expand. Felix’s brain was too busy trying to figure out all the various interpretations one could make of his statement.

“There,” Kevin said, rising and rubbing his hands against his jeans. “We have a fire. Shouldn’t be too long before it’s warm in here.” He smiled the smile of a man who hadn’t just said a thing that had put Felix’s thoughts into a total snarl.

Whose control was he worried about? And *how*, exactly?

Behind him, the kettle started to boil.

\* \* \*

Kevin called his family—actually *called* them, using his phone to *speak* with them, rather than sending text messages—so Felix made the coffees, held up the sugar and milk with one eyebrow raised exaggeratedly, to which Kevin shook his head. He handed him a black coffee and then pulled out his own phone, pulling up the group Bittersweets Club conversation.

*So. Guess who's trapped in a cabin in the middle of nowhere Ontario in an ice storm, rather than Hawai'i? He hit send.*

Predictably, Silas answered first.

*What? Are you okay?*

*I'm fine. Flight was canceled, thought I could drive to Toronto to make my connection. Did the smart thing and stopped when the weather really went foul. We found a cabin, and honestly, it's pretty gorgeous.*

Owen spoke up next.

*"We"?* The question came with an eyebrow-raised emoji.

Felix bit his lip. Ru was in this text group, but he hadn't replied yet. Honestly, he imagined he had his phone off, given the whole "just married" thing. Still, he didn't want to lie to the guys, and it wasn't like he'd done anything wrong, was it?

*It's not your control I'm worried about.*

Okay, *why* did he feel weird about this?

He glanced over at Kevin, who was still talking to his mother and munching on a granola bar. He'd had a box of them in his backpack, and alongside an apple and a banana each, it was their dinner.

*Bumped into Kevin at the airport, Felix typed. His flight got canceled, so I offered him a ride.* He eyed it for a few seconds, then hit send.

*That was nice of you.* Silas.

*Who's Kevin?* Owen. Felix winced. Of course Owen didn't know who Kevin was. Kevin and Ru had dated before Owen had met their little group. Ru had already moved back to Ottawa when Owen had had his accident and they'd all met by chance at Bittersweets.

*He was at the wedding,* Felix sent, feeling oddly like he'd lied by omission, then added, *Anyway. Just wanted to let you all know I'm okay.*

*Thanks for the update,* Silas said. *I hope you get to*



*Hawai‘i.*

Felix took a picture of the living area of the cabin, careful not to include Kevin in the shot, and sent it to the group with *I could do worse.*

*Wow. That’s nice,* Owen sent.

*Right? Good night.* Felix hit send. Both the guys said good night in return, and he put down his phone, settling on the other end of the couch from Kevin and taking another swallow of instant coffee. It wasn’t terrible, but it *was* instant. The granola bar and fruit were also good in the same way: it was food, and he was hungry.

“So, how come you don’t like Christmas?” Kevin said.

Felix eyed him, surprised. He hadn’t heard him say goodbye to his mother. Also, the space had indeed warmed up nicely, and Kevin had unzipped his hoodie. The man had pecs, which Felix had already surmised from his wedding dress shirt, but the faded gray T-shirt Kevin was wearing was *snug*.

“What makes you think I don’t like Christmas?” Felix said, dragging his gaze up to Kevin’s face, hoping Kevin hadn’t noticed the journey.

Kevin took another swallow of his coffee first, but then raised his free hand and held up one finger. “You didn’t want Christmas music.” Another finger. “You’re leaving Canada during Christmas to go to Hawai‘i, which is going to be the opposite of what Christmas is supposed to look like.” A third finger. “I know you guys usually do your Misfit Toy thing, but you’re skipping it.”

“Huh,” Felix said, conceding how it probably looked from the outside. “Oh wow, okay. Those are all fair assumptions, really, but no.” He held up his own hand, ticking off his replies with his own fingers. “One, Christmas music is just oversaturation. So many of my clients like to listen to it, I get tired of it pretty fast. Also, there’s a song I’m avoiding right now.” Second finger. “This is the first time I’ve not worked Christmas in...God, I don’t even know how long. The vacation thing is brand new, but it’s not about escaping the

snow. Normally, I work the holidays.” Third finger. “I’m not a Misfit Toy. I mean, I’m sure I’d be welcome, but like I said, I usually work the holidays. I’m definitely part of the Bittersweets Club, and I totally do gaming night, but the Misfit Toys are a different group, kind of.” He frowned, considering. “Honestly? I think they’re more a Nick thing than a Ru thing, but Ru has so many social circles, I can’t keep track. He can talk to anyone and five minutes later, they think he’s the best thing ever.”

“He does do that,” Kevin said, and Felix wanted to smack himself.

“Sorry,” Felix said.

Kevin shook his head. “It’s fine.” Kevin didn’t sound particularly down about it. He took another pull on his mug, but he was regarding Felix so openly Felix waited, thinking another question was coming. Kevin didn’t seem to rush at, well, *anything*. Sure enough, after he swallowed, Kevin said, “You usually work the holidays?”

“You know how I have no family?” Felix said. “Well, if I work holidays, one of the other nurses doesn’t have to.”

“That’s kind. Again.” Kevin aimed those hazel eyes at him, as well as a small smile. “I’m starting to think Ru gave you a bad reputation.”

“In fairness, I probably deserved everything he said, but after the April Fools’ thing, I’ve been trying to hit the impulse button a little less often.” Felix popped the last of his second granola bar into his mouth.

“The phone?”

“The phone.” Felix waved a hand. “Though, again, in my defense, it worked out perfectly for everyone involved.”

Kevin eyed him for a moment, but let it drop. “Why not this year?”

“Pardon?”

“Hawai’i,” Kevin said. “Instead of working.”

“Oh.” Felix chewed and swallowed. “Someone suggested I

be selfish for a change.” He felt his smile grow a bit brittle. “It’s been a rough few years, and I needed a break.”

“I imagine it’s been awful,” Kevin said. “COVID and all.”

“It was and wasn’t,” Felix said. “I see patients in their homes, not hospitals, which was easier to manage distancing and masking and all of that. But bad enough. I volunteered for some vaccination clinics, too. Jabbed a lot of arms.”

“I’m sorry,” Kevin said.

It was Felix’s turn to shake his head. “It’s fine.”

“I *am* glad he got to have his wedding,” Kevin said.

Felix regarded him a moment as he stared into the fire, a thoughtful expression on his face. “Me too,” Felix said. “But like you said before, I think you’re allowed to admit mixed feelings. I mean, I had fun, but…” He shrugged. “I should have listened to the same person who told me to be selfish and bring a date, though.”

Kevin looked at him. “Why didn’t you?”

“I am the only member of the Bittersweets Club flying solo,” Felix said, remembering Danya’s crusading for him not to go to the wedding alone. “But…” He started, then stopped, not wanting to get too maudlin.

“But?” Those hazel eyes seemed to pin him.

“Something fell through,” Felix said. That was almost the truth, right?

“Well,” Kevin said, cracking a small smile. “At least I got a dance out of it.”

“You were the belle of the ball,” Felix said. “I thought Leon was going to cut me if I tried for a second dance.”

“He was…direct,” Kevin said, flushing a little.

“*Direct?* Oh, that’s a good word for it.”

“Yeah, well. I’m done being the convenient hook-up.”

Felix raised an eyebrow, but Kevin didn’t elaborate, instead staring into the fire again.

*Okay, Felix thought. Did he mean Ru?*

The heat of the fire was definitely filling the small space up now, and he put his mug down to tug off his own hoodie. He exhaled, sinking back down into the couch. “Okay, that feels really nice.”

“I might have overbuilt it,” Kevin said. “But it was cold in here.”

“There is no such thing as too warm,” Felix said. “I’m the freezer.”

“What?”

“In every relationship between two people, one of them is always warm, and the other is always cold.” Felix shrugged. “The furnace and the freezer. I’m a freezer.”

“Ah,” Kevin said, then chuckled. “I’m always too warm.”

## EIGHT

*Last February*

“Good morning, handsome man,” Danya said when Felix came into the room and put his bag down. Then he started coughing.

“You know, if I could bottle your attitude for all my other clients, I’d be a very happy man,” Felix said, watching him.

“What, they don’t know you’re handsome?” Danya said, shaking his head. While he looked a bit pale, he seemed to be in a great mood. Not unusual for him. “Are your other patients mostly blind?” He paused. “Do we say blind now? Or is it visually impaired?”

“We say whatever the person wants us to say. But it’s usually blind,” Felix said.

“Well, tell them to use their hands, then. I’m sure you can feel the handsome of that face, too.”

“You are way too good for my ego,” Felix said. “How are you feeling this morning?”

“Much better,” Danya said. “A little tired, a little weak, but I’d like to go to the garden today.”

“Cough for me?” Felix said, making sure to keep his voice light and easygoing.

Danya coughed, and Felix allowed himself the smallest frown.

“It’s just a cold,” Danya said, crossing his arms over his thin chest. He was still in his robe and pajamas, though, which was unusual for him.

“Danya,” Felix said, considering the best approach, “here’s the thing.”

“I am old, with weakened lungs, and I need to slow down?” Danya said, surprising him.

“Yes,” Felix said. “Let’s get through the rest of your vitals before we decide about the garden.” He pulled out his notepad

and pen, as well as the blood oximeter.

Danya eyed him for a few seconds, then nodded. "Fine."

Felix raised one eyebrow. Danya never gave up without at least a modicum of drama. "Who are you, what have you done with Danya, and how long can you stay?"

Danya snorted. "Don't you sass me. In fact, open your little book there." He made the usual gesture, twirling a couple of fingers in the air.

Dutifully, Felix opened the notebook to his page of advice from Danya, which was rapidly filling up.

"Quit while you're behind," Danya said.

Felix took a second to write it down, then glanced at him. "Does that mean you'll stop trying to set me up?"

Danya's laugh descended into a short coughing fit, throughout which he shook his head. "No."

Felix let it drop, not wanting to quash his good mood. "Well, why don't we get you checked out, then? If all goes well, I'm down for some gardening." The community garden Danya owned and organized was quite a few blocks away from his little house in the Glebe. It wouldn't be the first time he'd taken Danya to the garden, nor the first time he'd ended up spending a significant amount of his visit time helping him move containers around or counting bags of soil.

Who knew gardeners started planning so far in advance?

"As long as you promise not to destroy any of the pots," Danya said, opening his mouth for the thermometer.

"I warned you I was no gardener," Felix said. "And they shouldn't have been left where I could step on them." He winked. "And I replaced them."

Danya shook his head, knowing enough to stay quiet until they got his temperature, which was right on target.

"Well?" Danya said once the thermometer had been removed. "Am I still hot?"

Felix laughed. "You're exactly as hot as you should be."

His pulse was also good, as was his blood pressure. After Danya's long fight back from the pneumonia and this series of colds he'd seemed to pick up at the drop of a hat, Felix was very glad to see it. He hadn't bounced back, exactly, and he'd need to regain a lot of weight he'd lost over the last four months, but he was on the right track.

"May I have your hand?" Felix held up the blood oximeter.

"Oh, to hear such a question from a handsome young man." Danya tossed his saucy little smile Felix's way, and Felix couldn't help but grin right back.

Danya rested his hand on his thigh, and Felix clipped the oximeter on his finger, pressing the button and taking the reading. It flashed, lit up, and they waited together, watching the numbers together.

Ninety.

Danya sighed. "Does this mean no garden?" They'd been at this long enough for him to know ninety-six was the number Felix was hoping for, but ninety was one of the better readings they'd gotten.

"Any headaches? Phlegm?" Felix said, not answering immediately. "When you say you're feeling tired, how bad is it?"

"I hacked up something uglier than an Albertan premier this morning," Danya said. "But I've been fine since. I'd say I'm old-man tired, not sick-tired."

"Breathe for me?"

Danya did, while Felix listened with his stethoscope.

"You're going to make me blow the balls, aren't you?" Danya said.

Felix laughed again. "You know full well it's called an incentive spirometer." Danya was projecting the falsest "innocent" eyes he'd ever seen. God, he loved this man. "And yes, I am."

Danya puffed into the device, which had three balls inside it that rose depending on the strength and volume of his

breath.

The results weren't bad at all. In fact, given everything, Felix would call them good.

"I think we're good for the garden," Felix said. "If you sit and make me do all the lifting."

Danya clapped, then regarded him seriously. "Have you ever considered something other than blue?"

"Sorry?"

"When Mary comes, she usually has rainbows," Danya said, tapping Felix's chest with one finger.

"Oh, my scrubs?"

"Yes, your scrubs. You *always* wear blue."

"You sound like my friend Owen. He's always suggesting I try dressing better. If it helps, I also have green scrubs. I wear those sometimes."

"Hmm." Danya didn't look impressed.

"Not all of us can gallivant around in gorgeous frocks, you know." Felix rose. "Is there anything you need me to do around here before we go? I can do your dishes and laundry when we get back."

"Gorgeous frocks earned me rent via my performances, darling." Danya raised both eyebrows, but he let Felix help him up with a little grunt. "What exactly do you think I did when I was your age?"

"According to your stories? Most of the Village." Most of Danya's reminiscences included a fair level of spice.

Danya laughed. "Fair enough. Before I met my Hans, I was reigning Queen of the Lord Organ."

"Lord Organ?" Felix loved Danya's stories of the Village from decades past, even if he had maybe heard most of them at least once. But he didn't remember anything about "Lord Organ."

"The Lord Elgin. It was quite the place in my day. I met



my late Hans there.” Danya tipped his chin toward a trio of paintings hung on the wall above the fireplace. Hans, his late husband, had been a painter and an art teacher. He’d passed a while back, before Felix had started working with Danya, but Felix had spotted at least one piece of Hans’s artwork placed in every room of their home.

The triptych, however, took pride of place.

Felix eyed the paintings. He was no artist, but he liked the way they told a story. The three canvases showed three moments captured during a bright spring day. On the first, pink and yellow blossom petals littered a sidewalk outside a tall, sunlit building, and a half-visible figure stepped through a doorway. The second showed a brightly lit bar scene. That figure, now passing the bar and glancing to the right, seemed to be noticing a second person at the bar. They were the only two painted in realistic detail, with the rest of the crowd left suggested and dreamlike. The first figure’s left hand, raised in a small wave to those suggested people all around him, seemed to say *hang on, friends, I need to stop for a moment*.

Maybe he was having one of those mouth-drop, word-stop moments Danya talked about.

Felix hadn’t noticed before, but this time he spotted how the figure at the bar was reaching out to the one passing by, and the passing figure’s hand reached back.

The third panel was once again outside of the building, forming the other side, and you had to really look to notice the barest glimpse of the two men leaving together on the trailing edge, almost hidden by the spring petals in the wind.

“They’re beautiful,” Felix said, realizing now the building in question was absolutely the Lord Elgin Hotel.

“So was I,” Danya said, raising one hand and patting at his silver hair.

“If I look half as good as you do when I’m your age, I’ll consider myself a very lucky man.”

“Flatterer.” Danya shook his head. Then he smiled. “This is why you’re my favorite. I wrote my grocery list, too, if you

think there's time today?"

"There is absolutely time." Felix got the list once he'd gathered up his kit, held Danya steady while he used the extra-long shoehorn Felix had bought for him to slide into his loafers, and then walked with him down to where he was parked in Danya's driveway. He was much steadier than last week, which was nice to see.

Once Danya was buckled into Felix's Jeep, Felix got behind the wheel. "Next stop, the garden."

Danya let a few moments pass in silence, but wasn't one to go much longer than that while he had company. "So. Tell me something I can enjoy vicariously. What adventures do you have planned?"

Felix thought about it. "It's gaming night tonight."

Danya blinked. "Gaming night?"

"Surely I've told you about this before? Some of my friends and I get together every other week or so to play board games or Dungeons and Dragons." Felix turned onto Bank Street and headed toward the Village.

"Board games." Danya's voice fell deadpan flat.

"Yes," Felix said, not rising to the bait. "There's one we're working our way through right now that's really good. Gloomhaven, it's called. It's got this big story that unfolds while you play, and you have these great characters. When we play role-playing games, Nick is usually our narrator, but he's been spending most of his free time working on another novel, so right now Gloomhaven scratches most of the same itches for us."

Danya listened attentively. When Felix finished explaining some of the game's story, he glanced over at Danya, who conjured a polite smile.

"I warned you," Felix said. "You already live a more exciting life than mine."

"I didn't want to say," Danya said. He pulled out his phone, holding it up. "I know we didn't manage to find you

someone before Valentine's Day went by, but you have *heard* of Grindr, right?"

## NINE

*December 23*

“Okay, I’m beat,” Felix said, rising off the couch after realizing he’d been staring into the middle distance for the last five minutes. “I’m going to shower and then head to bed.”

Kevin, who’d slid down until his own head rested in the crook of the couch, nodded at him. “I’ll take my turn after you.”

Felix grabbed his carry-on and headed into the small bathroom, closing the door behind him. There was just enough space for a single person to stand, but once he was under the rainfall shower, Felix couldn’t have cared less how claustrophobic the bathroom was. He tried not to linger, knowing Kevin was up next, washing his hair with his own shampoo and then scrubbing with the small bar of soap the Cozy people had tucked into the tote.

Once he’d dried off, he pulled out clean boxers to sleep in and realized all the clothes he had with him beyond the single pair of jeans and the hoodie he’d been wearing all day were made for Hawai‘i weather, not Ontario winter.

Whatever. That was a tomorrow problem. He wiped the mirror, brushed his teeth, and then, feeling more than a little self-conscious and exposed, carried his bag and folded-up clothes out of the bathroom.

Kevin gave him a little nod, not quite making eye contact, carrying a few toiletries into the bathroom after him, and Felix couldn’t help but think of what he’d said earlier.

*It’s not your control I’m worried about.*

What did that even *mean*?

In the bathroom, the shower started.

“Don’t be an ass, Felix,” Felix said, grabbing half the linens on his way up to the loft bed. He nabbed one of the pillows and put on a fresh pillowcase before putting it back at the bottom of the stairs. The heat from the fire had the whole

upper area warm and cozy, and it took some effort to get the fitted sheet on. He'd sleep under a single blanket. He heard Kevin downstairs, done with his shower and moving around.

"I left you the sheet and one of the pillows," Felix said, raising his voice. "Is that going to be warm enough for you?"

"It'll be fine, yeah," Kevin said. "There's a couple of throw blankets here on the couch, too. Thank you."

Felix finally slid under the blanket. He reached behind him and clicked the single light switch, turning off the light built into the small shelves at the end of the loft.

"Good night," Felix said.

"Good night," Kevin said.

Felix closed his eyes. Tomorrow was Christmas Eve. He'd get to Toronto, and then he'd be on his way to Hawai'i. He'd lost a day, and most likely he'd lose another, but that was okay. He took a deep breath, letting the stress of the day go, and between the hiss of the rain on the roof and the warmth of the cabin, he drifted off.

\* \* \*

Felix woke slowly, stretching and shifting under the blanket and realizing he'd been completely out cold the entire night. Light was starting to come through the windows, which meant it was probably going on seven thirty, which felt both slothful and decidedly vacation-y.

Alas, he needed to pee.

He wiped at his eyes, not wanting to wake Kevin, but the pee thing wasn't getting less urgent. He did his best to silently slide out from under the blanket and to be as quiet as possible on the stairs. They didn't creak, which helped, and once he was on the ground floor, he grabbed a T-shirt from his bag, then tiptoed around the edge of the stairs, peeking to see if Kevin was still asleep.

He was. And he'd also thrown off most of the sheet and blanket, which were more or less balled around his feet in a

tangle, which left Kevin's arms, shoulders, chest, and stomach fully revealed. Felix stopped, his mouth opening a little.

*Hello.*

Kevin was built strong, in a “works hard” way, not a “works out” way. Thick arms, wide shoulders, and his chest? Egad, the man had a nice chest, complete with dark hair in a swirling pattern that drew a darker line down the middle of his stomach.

Felix shook his head, realizing ogling an unconscious man was icky. He slipped into the bathroom, and when he'd finished his business and came out, Kevin was awake. He'd tugged on the gray T-shirt from the night before—the word *snug* had never been done better justice—and folded up the sheet and throws.

“Morning,” he said, amiably enough, but almost bashful. “I hope I didn't make too much noise last night.”

*Too much noise?* Felix shook his head. “I slept like the dead.”

That seemed to surprise him. “Oh. Good.” He bobbed his head toward the bathroom, and Felix stepped out of the way. They did a kind of dancing shuffle past each other, and Felix headed to the kitchen. “Did you want coffee here?” he called out, mostly to give himself something to do.

“Sounds great.” Kevin's voice was muffled by the bathroom door. “Then we can head over for breakfast, maybe, before we set out?”

“Definitely,” Felix said. He set the kettle to boil, getting two mugs of instant ready, then pausing to tug on yesterday's jeans. When the kettle boiled, he poured the two mugs, then went to the windows and opened the curtains.

“Oh, shit,” he said.

“What's wrong?” Kevin came out of the small bathroom.

“Take a look.” Felix pointed out the window.

Kevin joined him. The view of the trees, path, and driveway outside Cozy Cedar Cabin Number Four shone

brightly in the morning light, sparks of sunlight seeming to burn along every surface. It could have been pretty, except for the reason.

The world outside was covered in a thick layer of ice.

\* \* \*

“You don’t have boots, eh?” Kevin said, eyeing the shoes Felix was wearing.

Unlike Felix, Kevin was bundled and perfectly dressed for winter in his coat and scarf and, as he’d noted, boots.

“I was supposed to be in Hawai‘i,” Felix said, eyeing the path ahead of them to the big red building, both of which shone with a thick layer of smooth ice. But first... “If we get to the Jeep,” he said. “I have ice grips.”

He kept them in his Jeep for himself and his clients to use when things got icy. Why hadn’t he thought to bring them in with him last night?

They both eyed the Jeep. After a short strip of grass, the sheer ice-coated glassy walkway led down to the road, where the Jeep waited, perhaps a dozen steps away from where the grass ended.

The cold was already cutting through Felix’s jacket, even with yesterday’s hoodie on and the hood up. They crossed the short yard, the grass crunching underfoot, and then stopped a second time.

“Let me check how bad it is,” Kevin said, taking a single, careful step off the grass. “I’ll see how slippery—”

His foot went out from under him, and though he tried a valiant pinwheeling of his arms, he fell with a grunt.

Felix winced. “You okay?”

“It’s very slippery,” Kevin said, looking up at him with a remarkably amused smile for a man who’d fallen flat on his ass less than a single step outside their cabin’s yard.

Felix offered his hand, his own shoes still planted firmly

on the crunchy grass. Kevin took it and managed to get back on his feet, though with little grace in the process.

“Penguin walking it is,” Kevin said.

Felix stepped down carefully, pausing a moment before pushing one foot forward, transferring his weight, and then sliding his second foot to catch up.

“Okay,” Kevin said. They started waddling their way together, arms down, trying to keep their center of balance as low as possible. A frigid wind hit them once they were out of the immediate shelter of the cabin.

Felix had almost made it when his left foot skidded.

“Shit!” He tipped, spreading his arms, knowing it was pointless even as he tried to compensate, and then Kevin grabbed his outstretched hand, which would have been gallant had it worked, but instead resulted in Felix falling hard onto his ass on the icy surface of the walkway, pulling Kevin down right beside him. Kevin landed hard on one shoulder.

They stared at each other, and Felix saw the same *I can't even* look in Kevin's amazing hazel eyes he imagined was in his own. “I fucking hate winter,” Felix said.

“Really?” Kevin said, his lips twitching visibly. “Why?”

That did it. Felix broke into laughter, and Kevin joined him, even as they both tried to stand up again. Kevin managed to get up, but Felix fell down again. Kevin offered his hand and Felix made it to his feet just as Kevin wobbled and tipped—taking Felix with him. Felix tried kneeling first, falling again. Kevin started guffawing, his whole body shaking.

“Not helping,” Felix said.

“I'm sorry,” Kevin gasped out, laughing even louder.

After the third attempt to regain his footing had also failed, Felix sighed, one leg tucked under his butt, hands against the ice to either side of him, and shook his head. “So, this is my life now. I live here. At Cozy Cedar Cabins. Forever.”

“Stop,” Kevin said, holding up one hand as if to ward off another wave of laughter. “Please.” He had actual tears on his



cheeks, and he swiped at them with one glove.

“Fuck it. I’m going to army crawl to the Jeep,” Felix said.

That set Kevin off again, and he sprawled out on the ice, face up, laughing little clouds of breath into the air. He had a great laugh, a sort of barking booming noise that didn’t sting anywhere near as much as it should given it was aimed at Felix.

Once he’d covered the last of the distance, he tapped the remote and unlocked the Jeep. Yanking on the ice-covered door without purchase was also beyond amusing, given Kevin’s renewed laughter and *Oh my God!*s coming from behind him while he scrabbled and scrambled. Felix couldn’t help aiming a single finger salute out behind him, even as he burst out laughing himself.

Finally, he got the damn door open and crawled his way into the Jeep. The grips were in the bag he always kept in the back throughout winter. He tugged the rubber and metal webs over his shoes.

He climbed out of the Jeep and stood, triumphant. With the grips on, the ice didn’t stymie him at all. He closed the Jeep door, carrying the other pair to Kevin, and Kevin tugged them on between hiccupping snorts of laughter.

Finally, they were both on their feet.

“So,” Felix said, once they’d gotten to the front door of the big red building. He held it open for Kevin. “What do you think the roads will be like?”

“If everywhere is like this?” Kevin shook his head. “We’re not going anywhere.”

## TEN

### *Last March*

Danya said the community garden only really started kicking in May, when it would be time to plant “early carrots and beets,” whatever that meant, as well as transferring the “storage onions” and Swiss chard, but today they’d be handling the sweet potatoes and onion seeds, both of which would be done indoors in a heated area set up for seedlings.

Felix had done his best to nod along and feign understanding. The scope of the garden and the community it represented warmed his heart, despite the deep chill in the morning air.

A significant greenhouse took up a third of the space on the lot, which was otherwise full of raised gardening beds and frames, and a few projects had already begun inside despite the snow and ice still remaining. The greenhouse turned out to be where Danya wanted Felix’s help. Mostly it was planning, setting up little signs for future watermelon and cantaloupe seeds, as well as shifting a container marked *Slicing Cucumbers*.

He hadn’t known there were different sorts of cucumber, either.

“You warm enough?” Felix said, putting the watering hose back on its hook by the door once they’d “planted” the sweet potatoes in some water to sprout.

“I am. And we’re almost done,” Danya said. He was at a desk by the door, writing in a large binder. “All the volunteers have been really on the ball,” he said.

“Hello?” came a woman’s voice.

“In here,” Danya called out, which started a short coughing fit. Felix joined him, listening and watching, but Danya recovered quickly enough. He cleared his throat and sighed. “You’re going to give me an ‘I told you so,’ aren’t you?”

“No,” Felix said. “But I am going to ask you to wrap it up

soon.”

While Danya grumbled, three people came into the greenhouse, and to Felix’s surprise, he recognized two of them: Marion, a gray-haired woman he saw often in the Village, and André, who led a group of queer men who were survivors of violence. They walked in side by side, Marion’s cane tipped with a four-pronged spike for dealing with the still-present ice. Both she and André were bundled up in warm jackets—Marion’s an elegant eggplant purple to André’s simple black—and they both stomped their feet a little to dislodge the slush. The person Felix didn’t know was a stocky, broad-shouldered silver fox in comfortable jeans. His jacket was already open, revealing a brown Henley matching his eyes.

“Danya!” Marion’s voice rose with delight. She crossed the space with her cane clicking on the concrete tiles, and then leaned down to hug him. “It’s so good to see you.”

“My jailer let me out for the day,” Danya said, with a flippant finger aimed Felix’s way.

“Hi, Marion,” Felix said, offering his hand. “I’m his nurse, not his jailer.”

“I assumed,” Marion said with a small smile.

“Mother Marion, you already know my Felix Navidad?” Danya said.

“Felix and I bonded over getting Dorothy to accept home visits after her stroke.” Marion’s smile completely downplayed how much of an uphill battle it had been to get Dorothy Cheung to agree to *any* sort of health care. “His crew takes care of half my poker club these days.”

“Delightful,” Danya said, though to Felix’s ears, he actually sounded let down he wouldn’t be making an introduction. “In that case, Andy Pandy—”

“We’ve met, too,” André said, with a small smile. “Hi, Felix.” André unzipped his jacket, revealing a simple button-up white shirt and dress pants. He’d probably come from work, Felix thought.

“And how do *you* know my Navidad?” Now Danya sounded openly grumpy.

“He led a workshop at the Survivors Thriving,” André said. “It was great.”

“Thank you,” Felix said, meaning it. He’d done a talk with the group about the physical effects of trauma, with an eye for the survivors of the group being gentle with themselves while learning what triggers they’d yet to encounter, as well as presenting some healthy living shortcuts for days where everything felt tougher. He turned to Danya. “See? I’m not a shut-in.”

“Should I introduce Thick Vic, or have you already met him, too?” Danya said, with a nearly petulant air.

“Victor is fine,” Thick Vic said, offering his hand. Felix shook. Victor had rough hands and a strong grip and was, indeed, thick. “Nice to meet you. I’m a veterinarian, I work at Furever.”

“Felix,” Felix said. “I take care of grumpy former drag queens instead of dogs and cats.”

“Oh, I see how it is,” Danya grouched.

“We were coming by to make sure everything was okay, but it seems you beat us to it,” Marion said, crossing to eye the open binders in front of Danya, one of which seemed to be an activity log with to-do lists.

“I had to get out of my house,” Danya said. “And it’d been too long since I checked the actionables.”

“We’re happy to cover, Danya,” André said. “You know that.”

“You’re all wonderful volunteers, but this is my garden, and I don’t want to impose,” Danya said. He closed the binder, put it back on the shelf, then turned back to André. “But since you’re here, I’d love your opinion on the sweet potatoes. We’ve just set them up to sprout.”

The two of them investigated, but Felix stayed back, letting them have a chat. Marion was fussing with packets of

seeds and the reusable small chalkboard signs on spikes they seemed to label everything with, and Felix was happy to let people who actually knew what they were doing take the lead.

“Hey, Felix?” Victor said. He’d taken up a position by another series of racks someone had set up for new plants. Each of the little pots had soil in them, but nothing else. Felix joined him, glancing at the labels. Apparently, these would be cauliflower and broccoli, and there was a note already in place saying *don’t forget to note proper date to move to the cold frame.*

Gardening had, it seemed, a complicated and completely unknown world to it. What the hell was a cold frame?

“I was wondering if I could ask you a favor,” Victor said.

“Fair warning,” Felix said. “I have no idea what I’m doing.”

Victor smiled, making small lines appear beside his eyes. “It wasn’t for the garden.”

“Oh, in that case, fire away,” Felix said, smiling.

“I run the local Primetimers group. We do events, get together every month, volunteer...Most of us have lost partners or we’re otherwise single, so it’s as much making sure we stay connected to each other. Keep ourselves out and about, y’know?” Victor shrugged. “I was wondering if you’d be willing to come talk to us, like you did for André’s group.”

Felix nodded, intrigued. “What about?” Had Victor lost a partner? Danya had never said.

“Our health,” Victor said. “We’re a bunch of queer men in our fifties and older. I thought it might be a good idea for one of our growth sessions. We already did an emergency first aid and CPR thing, but maybe something more *general*. Stuff to watch out for, lifestyle things we should maybe be changing? Is that the sort of thing you could do?”

“Sure,” Felix said. “Let me talk to my boss, Parthy. Between us, we’ll come up with something.”

“That’s great, thank you.” Victor’s smile lines appeared

again, and Felix had to admit, at a glance, he wouldn't have guessed "fifties and older." Thick Vic, apart from the silvering hair, was definitely aging fine.

Still, as much as the man was attractive—he definitely was—Felix couldn't help but notice talking to him had been easy. Not even a moment's mouth-drop, word-stop.

Not that he imagined it would slow down Danya in the slightest now he'd seen them talk to each other.

\* \* \*

To Felix's surprise, it wasn't until they were back in Danya's driveway and Felix was carrying Danya's groceries into his house that Danya, sitting at his little kitchen table, said, "So, are we thinking Thick Vic for the wedding, then?"

Felix laughed. "You are *relentless*."

"I am," Danya said. "But do let me know, because I've got other irons in the fire, and if you and Thick Vic hit it off, I'll need to change them."

Felix closed the cupboard and turned. "Change them... Wait. What other irons?"

"Look, I've decided you're not going to Moe's wedding alone," Danya said, crossing his arms and aiming an imperious look Felix's way.

"I'm not?"

"You're not."

"And how, exactly, are you accomplishing this?" Felix couldn't help the small smile growing on his face.

"Do you really think I'm going to tell you before you can't back out of it?" Danya said. "You're the slipperiest, Navidad."

Alarm bells rang in Felix's head. "You're being serious."

"I am serious, yes," Danya said. "Navidad, you are a wonderful man, you don't *want* to be alone, and I happen to know exactly what you like."

Felix raised both hands. "Is there a way to make this stop

or..?”

Danya waved his hand. “Hardworking nurse with a flippant façade hiding genuine empathy seeks compassionate man with preference for simple joys, small social gatherings, board games, occasional outdoor treks, and easy laughter. Fussy fashion not required, early evenings a plus. Broad-shouldered bearded brunettes should definitely apply.”

Felix stared. That was...*wow*.

“Did I miss something?” Danya said. “I thought about adding ‘well-hung,’ but it seemed a little on the nose.”

Felix burst out laughing. “Maybe a little.” He took a second to recover. “But otherwise...that’s a fair assessment.”

“Well then, I’ll work on that.”

“Danya,” Felix said. “I don’t think—”

“I know you better than you think, Navidad,” Danya said. “But when I find you an irresistible slab of mutton, you need to promise me you won’t even *try* to resist.”

“You want me to promise not to turn down my dream man if you find him?” Felix laughed. *Slab of mutton?* Lord, Danya was a riot. “Gosh. I’ll try.”

“Shake on it.” Danya held out his hand.

Felix reached out, then hesitated. “Wait. Danya. Just to be clear. This is theoretical, right? You’re not *actually* planning to —”

“What did you think of the garden today? I can’t wait to show you when things are actually growing.” Danya shook Felix’s hand once, cutting him off with a tone he knew all too well. He’d get nothing else out of him on the topic today.

He should probably be grateful.

So, why was he worried?

“It’s nice,” Felix said.

“Just nice?”

“No, not just nice. It’s honestly a testament to compassion

and community, and I'm both embarrassed I hadn't realized how much food you manage to supply for the shelter and the food bank, and pleased projects like this still exist."

"That's because you're a caregiver. You've seen the power of caring for people. And you understand our community. You get how *scattered* we are. How we have to find each other. How those of us still around need to set things up for the future." Danya's eyes were a little wet. "How we have to take care of each other, because no one else will damn well do it."

"I understand." Felix was surprised to find his own eyes a little wet.

"You really do," Danya said, his expression softening in a thoughtful way. "I was right about you. It's tedious being right all the time, but there you are."



## ELEVEN

### *Christmas Eve*

The big red building offered a warm and welcome relief, and the sliding barn doors had been opened to reveal a simple dining room with plain wooden tables and chairs that fit the whole refurbished farm aesthetic, though the center of each table had been dressed up with small sprigs of greenery tied up with red ribbons. Felix supposed they were probably cedar. He could smell eggs and bacon, and his stomach growled audibly.

Kevin glanced at him. “Hungry?”

“The granola bars were good, but they did not a dinner make,” Felix said. “And I’m usually three hours and at least two coffees into my day by now.”

“I hear that,” Kevin said, rubbing his beard. “Farm life is the same.”

Gabrielle greeted them from behind the counter, and Felix did a double take. She wore a bright red maternity dress edged in white lace with a large embroidered—and *pregnant*—gingerbread woman on the belly. Beneath the very pregnant cookie, in a font reminiscent of icing, were the words “cooking up something special.”

Felix apparently didn’t school his expression fast enough because Gabrielle held up one hand. “It was a gift from my niece. She’s five.”

“Sorry,” Felix said. “It’s, um, seasonally festive.”

“It’s hideous,” Gabrielle said. “But there’s a chance I’ll see her today, so I’m wearing it. Although maybe the chances are slimmer given the ice. Quite the storm, eh?”

“It’s beautiful, but we did a whole slapstick routine out there,” Felix said.

“You didn’t hurt yourselves, I hope.”

“Just our dignity,” Kevin said.

Gabrielle laughed. “Join the club,” she said, pointing at the

pregnant gingerbread woman.

“Any news about the roads?” Felix said.

“Yes, and it’s all bad. It’s a huge mess out there,” she said. “Accidents, road closures, power lines down all over the place.” She exhaled. “There’s a chance the ice will melt in the late afternoon, and Hydro and the trucks are all out there as much as they can...” She lifted one shoulder, her dubiousness clear.

“I don’t suppose our cabin is still available if we can’t get on our way?” Kevin said.

“The phone has been nothing but cancellations all morning. If you’d like to stay, don’t worry.” Her lips turned up in a smile. “Despite the season, there is room at the Inn.”

Felix smiled. “No manger for you.”

She held up one hand. “I have a whole month left to go. This is *not* going to be a Christmas miracle.”

Kevin eyed Felix. “It might be safer to stay.”

“Definitely,” Felix agreed, feeling a tug of something in his chest as Hawai‘i got yet another day further away. “Can we make the arrangements after breakfast?”

“For sure,” she said. “Go on through. You’ve almost got the place to yourself.”

She wasn’t kidding. Only two other tables had people at them, and they didn’t have to wait at all before the waitress—a freckled ginger girl with braces and a Cozy Cedar Cabins T-shirt—dropped off two plates and told them to help themselves at the buffet across the rear wall of the dining room, then lifted a full jug of coffee.

“Coffee?”

“Please,” they said in unison, and she smiled at them.

“Where are you from?” she said.

“I’m from Ottawa,” Felix said.

“Oneida,” Kevin said.

She eyed them while she poured. “Is this your first Christmas together?”

Felix took a breath, but Kevin offered up a big smile before he could reply.

“It is, yes,” Kevin said.

“That’s sweet,” she said, and she was on her way again.

Felix aimed an amused glance Kevin’s way. “Our first Christmas together, huh?”

Kevin shrugged. “It’s technically true.”

“Says the guy who slept on the couch,” Felix said, picking up his plate and heading to the food.

Kevin laughed, and followed.

\* \* \*

Two plates each later—and a second cup of coffee—Felix bit the bullet and pulled out his phone, unlocking the screen and reading his notifications. The flight from Toronto yesterday had apparently been canceled, and at a glance, it wasn’t looking like he had other options, even if he could get to Toronto somehow.

Which, given what his phone and most of social media was telling him about the highways, he couldn’t.

Time to face reality.

“I think I need to cancel my house and car in Hawai‘i,” he said. “And I’m pretty sure I’m not going to get any of my deposits back. This is going to suck.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Not your fault,” Felix said with a small smile. He found the first contact number and started working his way through. Even if the roads cleared up later today, by the time he got to Toronto, he’d be halfway through his week off. Add in flying to Hawai‘i and back, and it wasn’t worth it. He’d spend more time in airports and planes than the rental house.

*Damn it.*

When Kevin went to the bathroom after they'd finished breakfast, Felix swallowed the last of his coffee, pulled out his phone, and opened the group chat with the Bittersweets Club.

*Guess where I'm spending Christmas Eve?* he typed.

Silas answered first. *Is it Hawai'i? Please say it's Hawai'i.*

*Oh no,* came Owen's reply, a second later. *Did you get out of the storm in time?*

*We so did not,* Felix replied. *Plus side? There's still room here at the cabin. But there's no way I'm going to get to Toronto today, let alone Hawai'i tomorrow.*

*I'm so sorry,* Silas said. *Are you going to come back to Ottawa? I heard most of the roads are a mess.*

*Right now we're not going anywhere.*

\* \* \*

When he stopped at the desk to sign for another night's stay, Felix again noticed the two potted Christmas trees with all the little crocheted ornaments hanging from them. There were three different designs, in multiple colors. Little toques with pom-poms, little mittens, and little jackets. For the first time, though, he saw a little sign saying they were for sale, with proceeds going to the Sawmill Charity Fund.

"I'll take one of those as well," he said, glancing around to make sure Kevin wasn't coming. He'd stuck around to ask the waitress for an order of sandwiches to go for their lunch, which they could eat in their cabin.

They'd come back to the restaurant again for dinner.

"Go ahead and take whichever one you'd like," Gabrielle said, so Felix snagged one of the blue hat ornaments. A Christmas toque. He showed Gabrielle, and she typed it onto the bill. Felix spotted Kevin approaching with a to-go bag from the restaurant.

Felix took one of the Sawmill Museum flyers to cover sliding the ornament into his pocket.

“You thinking on checking out the museum?” Kevin said, looking at the flyers and then turning back to him, one eyebrow rising.

“Maybe,” Felix said. *Super smooth. Not awkward at all.* He turned back and signed for the extension to their stay in the cabin, thanking Gabrielle.

“Oh, before I forget,” she said. She pulled something from behind the counter, a little red gift bag. “Two hot chocolate mixes with mini-marshmallows, two gingerbread men, and two candy canes. I know it’s not the Christmas Eve either of you were looking for, but maybe this will make things a little nicer.”

“Thank you,” Felix said, taking the bag. “That’s really sweet.”

\* \* \*

“What is your usual Christmas Eve?” Kevin said, once they were back inside their cabin. “Other than Hawai‘i, I mean.”

Felix put the little red bag on the countertop of the small kitchenette and thought about it while he hung up his jacket. “Normally it’s a workday,” he said, shrugging.

Kevin regarded him. He’d put the sandwiches away and taken off his own winter coat and just looked at Felix.

Those hazel eyes could really pin a guy down.

“What?” Felix said.

“No traditions?” Kevin said. “At all?”

“Oh,” Felix said. “I make cookies. Swiss ginger cookies. Every year. Share them with all my clients and the Bittersweets Club.” He smiled. “My mom had the most amazing recipe for Swiss ginger cookies, and it’s not really December without them, y’know?”

“My mom always makes shortbread.” Kevin looked around the small but cozy space, then went to fiddle with the fire. “I’m glad you’ve got something,” he said once his back

was to Felix.

“Would it really bother you if I didn’t have Christmas traditions?” Felix kept his voice on the edge of teasing, but he found it charming, truth be told.

“Maybe,” Kevin said, in a tone saying “yes.” “I guess it makes me sad when people have nowhere to go on big days.” He rose, the fire once again crackling.

He’d barely touched it. How did he do that? Magic. He was magic.

“Hrm,” Felix said. Kevin reminded him of Danya again, and Danya’s advice about being a little selfish now and then. He thought back to when it had been just him and his mother. She’d made those cookies with him, and it had been a whole event filling one of her rare days off. With an adult’s eye looking back, he saw how hard his mother had worked to make sure he had those moments, which became a big part of why he tried to make sure he worked holidays.

For clients who didn’t have someone, either.

He remembered heading to school, walking hand in hand with his mother in the early winter mornings in Ottawa, and something else occurred to him.

“Snowflake wishes,” he said.

“Snowflake wishes?” Kevin moved to the couch, sitting at one end, pulling his feet up and gesturing to the other side. “Actually, wait. Here. Sit. We have nowhere to be, our bellies are full, and there’s a fire. It’s Christmas Eve. Come be a sloth with me.”

Felix took the other end of the couch. Their feet crossed past each other, and he was hyper-conscious of how much they were touching, but it was comfy, and they were facing each other in a way that felt companionable.

Okay, maybe it felt a little nicer than that. Kevin pulled the throw blanket from the back of the couch and draped it over them both, clearly settling in for the story. From this angle, their legs pressed beside each other, it was impossible not to notice how present and solid he was.

And handsome.

“Okay. What are snowflake wishes?” Kevin prompted him to continue.

“Right. Well, they’re another tradition.” Felix tried not to stare too much into Kevin’s eyes. “On snowy mornings, when the sun hadn’t come up yet and my mom had to walk me to school before work, motivating little Felix to get out of bed was an uphill battle.”

“You weren’t always a morning person?” Kevin settled back against the armrest, smiling.

“Not as a kid, and even less so as a tween. But if the streetlights were on, and the snowflakes were big and fluffy enough? Snowflake wishes.”

Kevin shook his head, but his slow smile made it clear he was enjoying the story, even if he didn’t know where it was going yet.

“When it snows, the streetlights are sometimes bright enough for the individual flakes of falling snow to cast shadows,” Felix said. “And depending on the wind and where you are, there’s one spot underneath the lamp where all the shadows of the snowflakes look like they’re racing toward you—little gray spots on the white snow on the ground, all coming your way.” He smiled. “My mother told me if you walked through enough of those spots and made a wish, it would come true.”

“So, you’d keep walking from streetlight to streetlight?” Kevin said.

“See, you’re smarter than little Felix.” Felix held out his mug. “Little Felix ate that wish stuff right up.” He’d wished for all sorts of things when he’d been really young, for games, or for his mother not to have to work so much, but once he’d hit elementary school, mostly he’d started wishing for friends. To find people like him. Then for people to like him. Or, later, for someone—for some guy—to *really* like him.

“Do you still make wishes?” Kevin said.

“Maybe.” Felix glanced down, hostage to a rare moment of

embarrassment. He couldn't remember the last time he'd told anyone about snowflake wishes. As an adult, he couldn't help but see his mother's game as exactly what Kevin had spotted: a way for an overworked mother to get a sleepy kid to hurry the heck up on cold winter mornings.

But here, in the cabin, tucked on the couch with Kevin and a shared blanket and the fire, something occurred to him.

Most of those wishes had come true.

"My family always does one present on Christmas Eve. Sort of a warm-up. But we also stuck to the four gifts thing for Christmas Day," Kevin said, rolling his head back and looking at the ceiling. "Still do."

"Four gifts thing?" Felix shook his head.

"Just four gifts for each of us, every year." Kevin held up one hand, lifting a finger at a time. "Something to wear, something to read, something you want, something you need." Then he lifted his thumb as well. "Four things, which sometimes felt like less than a lot of the other kids at school, but our stockings were *amazing*."

"Really?" Felix considered. "My stocking was usually candy, socks, bubbles..." He shook his head. "Little fun things."

"Our stockings were *great*," Kevin said. "My dad would carve us each something. My sister usually got animals for her toy farm, but he made me superheroes. I had the best superheroes—still have them, actually." Kevin's voice softened with nostalgia. "He was so damn talented."

"You carved an ornament for Ru and Nick."

"I'm nowhere near his level, but I do okay." Kevin took a breath. "Anyway. The stockings. My mom would somehow know all these little things we wanted or we'd like. She works on the stockings all year long, y'know? Like, in January, she's already thinking of stocking stuffers." He laughed. "She has this chest in her bedroom, with individual boxes inside it for everyone in the family, and she adds to them all year long. Come Christmas, she's ready."



“That sounds nice,” Felix said. “I can’t imagine being that organized.”

“My sister and I always end up panicking when it’s time to make my mom’s stocking.” Kevin chuckled. “You’d think we’d learn.” He took a long, slow breath, then shifted on the couch. Felix wondered if he wasn’t comfortable. “But my mom pretends we’ve done a good job anyway.”

“I’ll get you there. Tomorrow,” Felix said. “I’m sorry it can’t be today.”

“Please.” Kevin shook his head. “If it wasn’t for you, I’d still be in the Ottawa airport.” He turned his head to the side and smiled as he spotted something. He reached out one arm—offering a great view of his biceps—and tugged at something from the shelf under the table in front of the couch. It was a small, wooden cribbage board. Kevin glanced at him. “Do you play cribbage?”

“I’m a nurse practitioner who deals with mostly senior clients,” Felix said. “I know *all* the card games.”

“Game on, then.”

\* \* \*

Their day passed mostly in the cabin, with warmth, easy conversation, and with Felix not even winning a single one of their half dozen cribbage games throughout the day. He even got skunked by Kevin twice.

“I wish I had a *Magic* deck with me,” Felix said, narrowing his eyes. “Then I’d even the score.”

“If you say so,” Kevin said. He tilted his head. “I know you guys play Dungeons and Dragons. Magic, too?”

“Board games, card games, RPGs. I have quite a few I’ve introduced to clients, too, if they’re at all interested.”

“I’m trying to picture seniors playing Dungeons and Dragons,” Kevin said.

“If I could narrate worth a damn, I’d organize a group.”

Kevin smiled.

They had their sandwich lunches and agreed to save their hot chocolate for tomorrow morning, but decided they could eat their gingerbread men and candy canes after dinner. Kevin called his mother again, and Felix snuck upstairs to the loft for a nap before dinner, though first he managed to palm the Sawmill Museum flyer and ornament while Kevin wasn't paying attention, and managed a serviceable version of "wrapping" it for tomorrow morning.

He felt a little silly, but Kevin seemed to be doing his best to maintain a positive attitude about this whole mess, and Felix wanted to encourage the same mood. He deserved a silly present for Christmas morning.

And, okay, he was enjoying himself. It wasn't Hawai'i, but as he lay down to attempt his nap, he couldn't help but think as Christmas Eves went, this one was somewhere in his top ten. Was that sad?

His phone buzzed, and he grabbed it.

*You're trapped in a cabin with Kevin?* It was a text from Ru, and it wasn't on their group chat.

*Correct*, he typed back, feeling a little weird about the conversation, and not knowing why. Kevin was Ru's ex. Ru just got married. In fact... *How goes married life?*

*Breakfast in bed every day*, Ru sent. *Nick keeps referring to himself as Mr. Sato. It's relentless.*

*It's adorable and you love it*, Felix sent. *Admit it. You're living your fairy tale life.*

*I am*. The little gray dots bounced, then vanished, then bounced again, then vanished.

Felix waited.

*I'm sorry about Hawai'i. Is Kevin going to make it home before Christmas Day? He's really tight with his family.*

Felix took a second of his own. *I'll get him there*. His thumb hovered over send. Yeah, everything about this conversation felt weird. He tapped it.

*You're a good guy*, Ru sent back, which surprised Felix, coming from Ru. Then another message appeared. *When you're not being an impulsive jerk*. Ah. There it was.

*Merry Christmas to you, too*. He added a few snowflake emojis.

*Merry Christmas*. More bouncing gray dots. *You could be stuck with worse company. He's a great guy. He was never my guy, but he's a great guy*.

Felix took a deep breath. He typed the words before he could stop himself—what had Ru just said about impulsiveness?—and hit send.

*I've noticed*.

Ru sent him a smiley face, and that was the end of their conversation. Felix put his phone down, and though he tried to nap, he didn't succeed. The time ticked on, and eventually, it was time for their Christmas Eve dinner at the Cozy Cedar Cabin restaurant.

When he came back down from the loft, Kevin had had a nap of his own on the couch, but he'd pulled on a green hoodie and looped a yellow scarf around his neck. He held out his red scarf to Felix. "Here."

"You have two scarves?"

"I have a mother who knits," Kevin said, smiling. "I have way more than two scarves. I found the yellow one in my bag. I didn't pack it, so it probably means she did, because she didn't trust me to remember to pack one for myself."

Felix put on his hoodie, his red jacket, and the scarf, and they pulled on the ice grips for their journey up the path to the restaurant, walking in a comfortable silence. The sun was already going down, and the sky was cloudless, stars already appearing above them. It was cold, and Felix's lighter jacket wasn't doing enough, but the scarf helped.

Also, it smelled faintly of soap. Kevin's soap. Which was nice.

"You okay?" Kevin said, glancing at Felix. His breath sent

a little cloud into the night air.

*He's a great guy.*

*I've noticed.*

“Yeah,” Felix said, hoping the flush on his face was easy to ascribe to the cold. “Just trying to watch my step. Don’t want to fall.”

They got to the big red building.

“After you,” Kevin said, pulling open the door and gesturing for Felix to go in first. “Our amazing Christmas dinner awaits.”

“Do you think it’ll be a buffet?” Felix said, chuckling.

“Meh, it’s all about the company, anyway,” Kevin said.

This time, Felix was pretty sure Kevin knew full well the flush had nothing to do with the cold.

\* \* \*

The Christmas Eve dinner at Cozy Cedar Cabins turned out to be a French Canadian affair, and after a cup of pea soup—which Felix admitted he’d never tried before—they’d moved on to tourtière and butter-thyme carrots and turnips, delicious little meatballs, and roasted potatoes. It wasn’t a Christmas meal Felix had ever had, but it was *delicious*, and he told the freckled ginger girl to make sure she told the cook so.

That earned them free little maple crème brûlées.

By the time they were back at their cabin, Felix found himself more relaxed than he’d been in...

God, he had no idea. Ages. Years?

“It *is* the company,” Felix said, pulling off his boots.

“Pardon?” Kevin said.

*I said that out loud*, Felix realized. He swallowed. “I had a great time today. Thank you. I know you’d rather be with your family, but I appreciate it.” Boots off, he joined Kevin on the

couch. They'd taken their usual sides.

*You don't have usual sides. You've known this guy two days.* Felix tried to waylay his errant thoughts, but it didn't work. *Yeah, but they've been a great two days.*

"I'm glad." Kevin nodded. "And me too." Then he yawned. A jaw-cracking, amazingly wide yawn that made Felix yawn right back at him.

"Sorry," Kevin said, laughing.

"How can lounging around and eating be this exhausting?" Felix shook his head. He pointed at the loft. "Okay. If you're not going to join me in the massive, massive bed, then you take it. I can have the couch tonight."

Kevin exhaled. "I can't."

"You can't take the bed?" Felix didn't follow.

"No, I mean I can't join you. I will take the bed, if you're sure, but..." He let his head fall back, then rolled it to the side, hazel eyes meeting Felix's with what might be embarrassment. "My legs never stop moving. Especially when I try to sleep."

"You have RLS?" Felix said. Restless Leg Syndrome could be anywhere between annoying to debilitating.

"That's right." Kevin looked surprised, then chuckled. "You're a nurse." He nodded. "It's not as bad as it used to be. My iron was low, so now I take supplements. I'm fine in a car or on a couch for the most part these days, though it can creep in then, sometimes, too, but when I'm falling asleep?" He blew out a breath. "It's a nightly battle. If I'm in a bed with someone? It's *impossible*. I spend the whole night desperately trying not to move my legs, afraid I'm going to wake them. Or kick them."

"*It's not your control I'm worried about,*" Felix said, remembering what Kevin had said last night. "Oh. Now I get it."

"What did you think I meant?" Kevin said, one eyebrow creeping up.

"Oh, come on." Felix crossed his arms. "You have to admit

it was a loaded statement.”

“Maybe,” Kevin said. Okay, Felix was starting to realize Kevin was a sly teaser. Huh. Kevin chuckled, then sighed. “But it’s the truth. I can’t share the bed. Neither of us will sleep if I do.”

“Speaking of loaded statements.”

Kevin laughed. “Not in a fun way.”

Was that a brush-off or more sly teasing? Ugh. The man was impossible. “Take the bed,” Felix said.

“If you’re sure.”

“I am.”

Kevin nodded, then rose. “What time do you want to get moving tomorrow?”

Right. That. Christmas day in a car. Given he would be dropping Kevin off and then driving all the damn way back to Ottawa... “Is it okay if I say pretty early? It’s been melting a bit, but I’ve got a lot of driving ahead of me.” Felix lifted his hand. “Would seven be okay?”

“Of course,” Kevin said. “You’re the one doing me a favor. Can you set an alarm so we have time for breakfast before we head out?”

“Sure.” Felix tapped it into his phone.

“All right,” Kevin said, glancing upward. “I’ll head to bed, then. Good night, Felix.”

“Good night, Kevin.”

## TWELVE

*Last April*

Bittersweets was hopping despite the rain, and Felix was glad to see Silas had managed his usual magic of grabbing their traditional table before the morning rush. Well, not magic, but it was one of the benefits of living right above the place with his boyfriend, he supposed.

Felix stopped beside him long enough to drop his jacket at the table, noticing he didn't have anything in front of him. "You didn't order?"

"There was a guy with a laptop eyeing our table, so I decided to grab it and wait for one of you to arrive." A short, slender blond fellow sporting thick-framed glasses, Silas had a whole "nerd twink" thing going for him, even in his thirties.

"You denied the table to someone in need? That's borderline vicious for you," Felix said, crossing his arms and grinning. Silas shifted uncomfortably on his seat, and Felix couldn't help rubbing it in a little more. He applauded. "Well done."

"Your approval fills me with shame," Silas said, grinning right back.

"Pft. This is the continued growth Ru and I are always talking about. I'll grab your coffee." He turned to go, then paused, returning to face Silas again and wincing as he tried to recall what Silas liked to drink. "Dark roast, black?"

"No." Silas shook his head, looking more amused than offended Felix didn't know his order. "I'm medium roast, two milk."

"Right, sorry." Why was his brain like this? He could remember complex medication schedules and was a master of charting, but he had three good friends who met twice a week here and who always ordered the same thing, and *nothing* stuck. Felix got in line, muttering "medium roast, two milk" under his breath. Maybe that would help. Both Kira and Jackson were working today, so he didn't have to wait long.

He ordered the two coffees and two chocolate croissants—like the coffee order, Felix had no idea if Silas liked them specifically, but he'd definitely gamble on chocolate croissants—paid up, got his card stamped twice on both sides (two for Bitter, two for Sweet), and carried everything back to their usual table with the long-practiced skill of someone used to carrying more than one object at a time, popping the first plate down in front of Silas.

“Ooh, chocolate,” Silas said, Felix giving himself an imaginary but well-earned pat on the back.

It wasn't unusual for them to be the first to arrive. Both of them were wired to rise early.

Just short of mouth-scalding hot, the current dark roast was borderline perfection, to Felix's mind. The owner, Pete, did all the roasting himself, and as far as Felix could tell, Bittersweets Pete continued to be the best thing that ever happened to coffee beans.

“How'd the update go?” Felix said, once he'd had his first swallow of coffee. “That was this morning, right?”

“It went really well, thank you,” Silas said, sounding surprised.

“I may not remember your coffee order, but *Pride March* is my favorite game,” Felix said, pulling out his phone. “More than half my clients play it as part of their daily walks now. Did I mention that? Even some of the ones who aren't queer. But I didn't download the update yet. Wanted to make sure it went well.” He tapped the little *Pride March* icon, and it started updating. “For the record, I *still* haven't gotten an Alan Turing.”

“The cards are random. You know that.” Silas shook his head, smiling. “And the update went about as well as an update can go. There are over a hundred new cards this time, and the walkback update, which I'm really excited about, and I'm already looking for the next batch of queer historians and artists.”

“Walkback update?” Felix said.



“So, up until now, you’ve earned cards by using the step tracker, right?” Silas said.

Felix nodded. The game had a pretty basic premise: it kept track of how far you’d walked in a day and rewarded you with little “cards” full of facts about queer history or queer people. The cards came in sets, and different colors based on the various Pride flags, and collecting sets earned you little outfits for your avatar, as well as unlocking people who would walk alongside your avatar in your ever-growing Pride Parade. There were goals you could set for yourself, too, and changing daily and weekly targets would earn you bonus rewards.

He’d used the app with clients who needed a little motivation to be more active.

“Well, the walkback update lets you set a home position,” Silas said. “And when you’re out somewhere, you can send your parade to walk back home. They’ll march their way back and bring you little prizes. Outfits for your avatar, new people for your parade.” He grinned and leaned forward. “There’s even a ‘Gay Nurses Go All Night’ T-shirt you’ll be able to find.”

“I adore you,” Felix said. “So, how soon are you quitting your job?”

Silas laughed. “It’s been more successful than I ever hoped, Felix, but it’s still a queer-history walking app. No one’s retiring. But the fact I can afford to pay queer historians and artists? That’s been *amazing*. There’s this new nonbinary artist in Toronto, Lin, and ze is killing it with the new portraits. And people have been mostly positive about the game as a whole.”

“You’re not reading reviews, are you?” Felix frowned. There’d been an incident the Christmas Silas had launched *Pride March* that had catapulted Silas’s social media presence—and his game’s fundraiser—into a minor viral sensation. It had been mostly good, but of course the bigots had found him, too. Ru and Owen were more tech savvy than Felix would ever be, and they’d helped Silas navigate the worst of the ugliness.

“Dino still screens all my public social media stuff,” Silas said, somewhere between annoyed and charmed. “I made my personal accounts private pretty much right after the whole kicking thing.”

“Good,” Felix said.

“Hey, fellas.”

Felix turned. Ru had arrived. Snappily dressed as always in a deep red button-down shirt and black skinny jeans, he collapsed his sleek, black umbrella, ran a hand through his short, spiky hair, and pulled off his chic, rimless glasses to wipe them. “It’s raining sideways out there,” he said. He glanced at their table, then at the line. “Did I beat Owen here?”

“You did.”

“I should get his coffee, then,” Ru said, popping his glasses back on. “So I can have the stamps.” He frowned, a look so recently familiar on his face, Felix had to snort.

“Kira knows his order, I’ll bet,” Felix said.

“You’re both *completely* oblivious,” Silas said. “Owen drinks dark roast with cream.”

“We’re not oblivious,” Ru said. “You’re a saint.”

“Ah, but he blocked a laptop squatter from taking our table earlier,” Felix said.

“Go tiger!” Ru gave Silas an impressed thumbs-up before he left to get in line.

“Still makes me feel shame,” Silas said, tearing off a corner of his croissant.

Felix’s phone hummed, and he glanced at the screen. Parthy’s name and a picture of his smiling face appeared, surrounded by his wife and three kids, all of them covered in multicolored powder after they’d competed in a charity color-run. It was his favorite picture of his boss, showing the rarely seen fun side of an incredibly organized and compassionate man.

“Uh-oh,” he said, scooping it up as it hummed again.

“Parthy.”

Silas gave him a wince of sympathy. Generally, Parthy Chandrasekaran only called when something had gone wrong with a client, or one of the other nurse’s clients, or—worst of all—one of the other nurses. Likely, his day was about to get far more complicated in some fashion, but that was the nature of the gig. Healthcare was rarely convenient.

“Hey, Parthy,” Felix said. “What’s up?”

“Hi, Felix,” Parthy said, and his tone was the carefully gentle voice he only used to deliver the worst kind of news.

Felix closed his eyes and exhaled. “Who?” he said.

It wasn’t the first time he and Parthy had had this conversation, and they were both direct sorts. Say the thing, don’t dance around it. “Danya Marunchak,” Parthy said. “Last night, in his sleep. Nothing traumatic, he just went.”

“Shit,” Felix said, his eyes filling with tears. Across from him, Silas went still, his face softening in concern.

“I know. I wanted to make sure you knew as soon as I heard.” Parthy didn’t tend to try and soften the news, either, which Felix appreciated. No statements about “having lived a good life” or remarking on how old a client or former client was. Just the reality: they were gone, and that sucked.

“Thank you,” Felix said. “I appreciate it.”

“I’ll let you go,” Parthy said. “Call me if you need anything.”

“Will do.”

Felix hung up. He wiped at the first tear.

“You okay?” Silas said.

“Danya,” Felix said, his voice cracking a bit on his name. He swallowed, using his Bittersweets napkin to dab at his face.

“Oh no,” Silas said. It probably said something Silas knew Danya’s name. Felix had talked about him often. “When?”

Ru returned to the table, putting down two mugs and then

stopping, glancing back and forth between the two of them, clearly alarmed. “What happened?”

Felix sighed. “Lost a former client last night. You knew him, too, actually. Danya Marunchak.” He was still crying, and the napkin was not up to the challenge. He dug into his pocket for a handkerchief, leaving the paper crumpled on the tabletop.

“Oh no,” Ru said, his own features trembling. He sniffed.

“Oh, that’s right.” Silas put a hand on Ru’s shoulder. “I’m so sorry.”

“He sent work my way when I had to move back to Oneida to look after my dad. He came up with half my first freelance client list. Damn,” Ru said, swiping at his eyes. “Oh, man. He was going to come to the wedding. This fucking *sucks*.”

Felix wiped his own eyes again. His final visit with Danya had only been two weeks ago. Danya had recovered about as much mobility as he’d had before the pneumonia and had been so happy to get back to his usual routines and his life in the Village.

This wasn’t unusual. Felix knew that. In fact, since he started working with Parthy, he couldn’t remember a year going by where they *didn’t* lose a client, former or otherwise. They took care of dozens of people dealing with illnesses and accidents and the frailties of age.

“It does,” Felix said, both to answer Ru and to remind himself it was okay to feel this way. “It really does.”

\* \* \*

A few days later, Felix’s phone rang as he got to his Jeep at the start of a busy client day. He didn’t recognize the number but knew better than to let it go to voicemail. So many of his clients preferred to phone him directly and weren’t shy about handing out his number to their loved ones. He stopped, putting his travel mug down on the hood, and tapped the phone to answer.

“Hello,” he said.

“Hello,” a woman’s voice said. “Is this Felix Gagnon?”

“That’s me,” Felix said. He picked up his mug and took a swallow of coffee.

“My name is Jill Binder. I’m executor of the estate of Danya Marunchak, and you’re listed as a beneficiary.”

“I—*What?*” Felix coughed, choking. “I am? But we only met last year.”

“You are,” Jill said. “Danya added some codicils to his will. You were the subject of one of them.” The woman chuckled. “You’re by no means the first to be surprised. Danya was a very big fan of codicils.”

“Oh.” Felix didn’t know what to say to that. Truth be told, he didn’t even know what a codicil was.

“If you have any time in the next few days, I’d like to meet so we can discuss the process.”

“Process?” Felix took a second. “Wait. What exactly are we talking about, here?”

“He left the garden to you, as well as a carved turtle ornament.”

The turtle. Felix smiled. Then the rest of what the woman had said registered. “Wait. I’m sorry. The garden?”

“His garden, the Village Garden?”

Felix put his mug down. *That* garden?

“Do you not know it? It’s on...” Felix heard her shuffling papers. “Lisgar Street?”

It took everything he had not to sit down in the parking lot beside his Jeep.

“Mr. Gagnon?”

“Sorry.” He took a breath. “Yes... Yes, I know it. I...Um. Look, I’m a nurse practitioner, and I’ve got clients all day today, but I’m done at six o’clock, if that isn’t too late?”

“That would be fine,” Jill said. “I’ve booked one of the rooms at the Village Business Association building, if you

know it?”

“I do.” The VBA ran out of one of the buildings in the Village. He’d used one of the rooms there himself once or twice to give workshops or take part in discussion groups.

“I’m in the Blue Room. I have it booked today until seven thirty.”

“Okay,” Felix said. “I’ll see you there at six fifteen or so. My last client is near the Village.”

They hung up. Felix stared at his phone for a long second, then opened the group chat with the Bittersweets Club.

*I just inherited a fucking garden,* he typed, then hit send.

*What?* Owen replied first.

*Pardon?* Silas, a second later.

*What the actual fuck?* Ru.

*The garden they use for the Village food bank. Danya left it to me. I’ll know more later today, after which I’ll answer all your questions while getting drunk because WTF? Related: anyone free for dinner and a complete fucking meltdown?*

Silas replied first: *Let’s make it coffee so we can think things through, okay?*

Owen agreed: *I’ll stop at Sweet Temptations. We’ll do sugar instead of alcohol.*

*Fuck that,* Ru texted. *I’ll bring Baileys for your coffee, Felix.*

Felix laughed, letting out a breath. He still had a whole day ahead of him, but at least when it was done, he’d have the guys with him to help him figure out what the actual hell he was supposed to do with a goddamned *garden*.

## THIRTEEN

### *Christmas Day*

Felix woke to the sound of Kevin pouring water into the kettle in the small kitchenette, and he stretched under the sheets and blanket. The couch was far more comfortable than it had any right to be, really. He rolled over and watched Kevin, who was still in his boxers, though he'd tugged on that gray T-shirt again.

Good Lord, but the man had nice thighs. And calves. And a butt you could sink your teeth into if you had half a chance —

Kevin turned around, and Felix snapped his gaze upward, hoping he hadn't been spotted.

"Merry Christmas," Kevin said with an amused smile that drew little lines beside his eyes. Was the smile for catching out Felix checking out his butt, or was it for their less-than-ideal Christmas morning?

He didn't know but decided to roll with it.

"Merry Christmas," Felix said, sitting up. He rubbed his eyes. "I was out like a light again. That never happens."

"Cabin magic," Kevin said. "I know you said you were tired of Christmas music, but..." He lifted his phone. "May I? I always listen to carols on Christmas Day."

"Sure, it's fine, go ahead," Felix said. No reason to grinchify Kevin's already less-than-perfect Christmas morning. Also, he'd probably agree to anything if Kevin kept the gray T-shirt-and-boxers combo going.

Kevin tapped his phone, and a moment later the speaker on the fireplace was issuing forth the Waitresses' "Christmas Wrapping" and Felix lifted his chin.

"Okay, nice choice."

"It's a playlist I found called *Christmas Music You're Not Sick Of*. Seemed appropriate," Kevin said. "I can't vouch for

the rest.” The kettle started to whistle. “Ready for Christmas morning hot chocolate?”

“Bless you.”

Kevin laughed and got to work on making them drinks. Once they were poured, he joined Felix on the couch, handing him his cup before he sat, and then—with another appearance of the smile lines—Kevin pointed at the small table in front of the couch.

Felix looked and...

“Is that a present?” he said. Sitting on the table was a small lump wrapped in green paper decorated with white snowflakes. “Did you get me a present?”

“It’s nothing huge,” Kevin said.

“That’s so funny...” Felix said. He put down his mug and got up, heading to his backpack and pulling out the ornament he’d grabbed for Kevin. “I didn’t find wrapping paper, though. Where did you get wrapping paper?” He brought the ornament over for Kevin, handing it to him. Felix had wrapped it in a flyer. He could still make out the Sawmill Museum timetable.

“I asked Gabrielle if she had any,” Kevin said, but he grinned at the lumpy flyer-present. He nodded his bearded chin at the table. “Go ahead.”

They unwrapped their presents side by side, and when Felix saw the little crocheted sweater ornament, he laughed out loud. He looked over, and Kevin was holding up the little crocheted toque. They’d even bought the same color: the blue and white ones.

“They match,” Kevin said. He hooked the little hat over his pinkie, smiling at it. “It’ll look good on my tree.”

“I’ll have to get a better tree,” Felix said.

Kevin eyed him. “A better tree?”

“I have this little two-foot tree,” Felix said, approximating it with his hands.

Kevin stared, his hazel green eyes telegraphing



disapproval.

“I know, I know.” Felix raised a hand. “But in my defense, I usually work on Christmas Day.”

“Sorry,” Kevin said, cracking a smile. Then he chuckled. “You’d probably rather *be* at work, given how this turned out, eh?”

“Honestly? No. Thank you for this.”

“This?” Kevin shrugged. “It’s just hot chocolate and an ornament.”

“It’s still nice,” Felix said. And it *was*, but if he was honest with himself, most of the *nice* in this admittedly not-as-planned holiday morning had nothing to do with the music or the coffee or even the cute little sweater ornament, but rather the company he was keeping.

Kevin took a sip from his own mug, but his shoulders relaxed a bit, and he nodded. “It is.” He had marshmallow in his mustache.

“You have a little...” Felix reached out, and Kevin held still while he wiped it off. Then he realized what he’d just done. “Nurse habit. Sorry.”

“Uh-huh.” Kevin smiled at him, and Felix knew he hadn’t bought that at all.

*I just wanted to see how soft your beard was.*

Felix glanced back at his mug, clearing his throat. Was it suddenly awkward in here, or was it just him? The song changed, and it took a few bars before Felix recognized the particular rendition of the tune, which landed on his chest and squeezed his breath out.

Felix considered sniffing back the tears, but as always he heard Lori’s voice from the hospital decades ago. *I think someone told you men don’t cry, and I am here to tell you that is utter fucking bullshit.*

So he cried. A single tear at first, which he wiped away with a finger, but more followed, and he let them come.

Kevin didn't notice right away. He was drinking his hot chocolate and looking at the little toque ornament on his finger, but Felix saw those remarkable hazel eyes widen the moment he did.

"Felix?" He paused, drink halfway to his mouth. "You okay?"

"Yeah," Felix said, wiping his eyes again. "Remember I said there was a song I was avoiding?"

Kevin put down his mug and reached for his phone.

"No," Felix said. "It's okay. Let it play."

Kevin put his phone back down. "You sure?"

"You know the friend I told you about? The one who suggested I go on a trip this year? To be selfish now and then?"

"Yes." Kevin seemed wary, like he was ready to leap into action if Felix's tears turned into anything close to a sob. It was *such* a typical guy response to any show of emotion, he couldn't help smiling.

Besides, Felix knew these tears weren't going to shift into sobs. This sorrow belonged to the gentler side of things. "Well," he said, clearing his throat around the slight roughness of emotion, "he wasn't just a friend. He was a client—a patient—and he died."

"I'm so sorry."

"Thank you." Felix took a breath. "He had this habit of giving everyone nicknames, and this was mine, because of..." He waited for the song to get to the right moment, and sang along, changing the first word to his own name. "Felix Navidad." Another tear came, as though it was chasing the words. He wiped again. "That's why I was avoiding the song."

"Wait." Kevin blinked, his eyes widening, mouth opening, and eyebrows rising in a perfect trifecta of *I beg your fucking pardon?* Felix leaned back in his seat. "*You're* Navidad?"

Felix took a shaky breath. "Yeah."

“*You’re* Navidad. *You?*” Kevin’s mouth opened again, and he shook his head, as if he had no other words at hand. “*You?*” He let out one of his loud bark-laughs.

“Yes,” Felix said, not seeing what was funny.

“I’m the Mutton Man.” Kevin tapped himself on his incredible, thick, gray T-shirted chest. His gorgeous hazel eyes darted back and forth. “Oh my God. *You’re* Navidad.” He lifted both his hands, like he was about to grab Felix by the shoulders, but stopped halfway. “You!”

“I don’t think I follow.” Felix frowned, then stopped. *Mutton Man*. That was familiar. Where had he heard that before? It hit him. He hadn’t heard it at all, he’d seen it. Written. On one of Danya’s Christmas card envelopes. “Wait. Mutton Man as in...you knew Danya?”

“Only a little, and only through Ru,” Kevin said. “In fact, I only met him face-to-face once. Ru and I drove down for one of those Misfit Toys parties when we first started dating. Ru was doing some design work for Danya for the shelter or the food drive, and I brought some cuts from the farm to donate. He started calling me Mutton Man after, because apparently the food drive had never gotten a donation of mutton before. I’ve sent something from the farm every year since for the holiday food drive, even after Ru and I broke up. Danya sent me a Christmas card every year thanking me. When he heard from Ru I’d passed the farm to my sister and her husband, he emailed me asking what I planned to do next.” Kevin shook his head. “He didn’t ask if they’d keep offering donations—which of course they did—just whether or not I was okay and had a plan. He was such a good man.”

They stared at each other. Felix wiped the last trace of tears from his cheeks. “I sealed the last Christmas card he sent you. On one of my visits.”

“Oh.” Kevin covered his mouth with one hand. Then he laughed out loud again, another bark-laugh of half-disbelief. “He wanted me to take you to Ru’s wedding,” Kevin said. “He was going to introduce us.”

“*What?*” Felix said.

“He didn’t tell you?”

“No, he...oh. Oh shit.” Felix laughed. *If I find you an irresistible slab of mutton, you need to promise me you won’t even try to resist.* “Slab of mutton. Son of a bitch. Yes, he did.”

Kevin laughed again. “You’re Navidad. Not Leon.”

“What?”

“I asked him,” Kevin said. “At the wedding, when he cut in again after you and I danced. I mean, he came right at me for the first dance, and he was determined to get me back after you cut in, so I asked him if he was Navidad.” He shook his head. “He said he was my Christmas present, and I thought that meant he was the person Danya wanted to set me up with.”

“I’m pretty sure Leon would have said he was the donkey from Christ’s manger if it gave him a shot.” Felix crossed his arms. “Have you seen yourself in a suit?”

“He was *so* awful.” Kevin laughed. “I was so fucking *disappointed*—he was so not my type, and Danya swore I’d like him, I mean Navidad, I mean *you*...”

“He told me I’d find you irresistible,” Felix said. “Even made me promise not to try. Resisting, I mean.”

They stared at each other, and suddenly the silence in the cabin felt like it had been pulled taut and someone was about to let one end go.

“Do you?” Kevin said, finally. His voice had softened, and those damned gorgeous eyes didn’t look away for a second.

“Do *you*?”

“That’s not fair.”

“You know what isn’t fair?” Felix said. “That gray shirt isn’t fucking fair.” He pointed at the shirt—okay, fine, the pecs and shoulders and arms—in question.

Kevin glanced down, then back up, a slow smile forming. “You don’t like my shirt?”

“You *cannot* be oblivious to how good you look in that

shirt.”

“Maybe.” Kevin’s smile grew. “All this time. It was you.” He let out a little breath of amusement. “He was *so sure*. Said we’d hit it off at the wedding and then he’d get to watch us grow great things together.”

“Oh, fuck me.” Felix blinked. “The garden.”

“What?”

“The goddamn *garden*. Danya’s community garden. That’s why he left the bloody thing to me.”

“Danya left you his garden?” Kevin’s eyes widened. “Oh, wow.”

“Tell me about it. That *manipulative*...” Felix shook his head, then turned back to Kevin. “Wait. Will you?”

“Will I what?”

“Grow great things with me. Help me with the garden, I mean,” Felix said. “Teach me, or show me, or...God, I don’t even know. Please. I’m completely lost, and I have no idea what I’m doing. The volunteers need someone who understands how to schedule and organize plants. There are different kinds of cucumber, Kevin.”

“Of course there are.”

“See? I need help from someone who already knew that.”

“Okay.” Kevin grinned and took a little breath, as though he was about to say something, then let it out, shaking his head. Felix waited him out, until Kevin, still smiling, finally opened his mouth again. “I live in Oneida. You live in Ottawa.”

“That’s true,” Felix said. He swallowed. “But I seem to remember you declaring you didn’t want to be anyone’s convenient hook-up.”

“That’s right,” Kevin said, the smile not dimming in the slightest.

“Well then,” Felix said. “Can I interest you in being a completely *inconvenient* something else? Because honestly, I

have no idea how to even begin with *this*.” He waved a hand between them. “But I’d really, really like to try.” He paused. “Because yes. I do happen to find you irresistible.”

Kevin leaned forward, closing the distance between them, and Felix let him cover almost the whole ground himself, waiting until the last moment to lean forward, take Kevin’s face in both hands, and join him in a first kiss that started soft and a little hesitant but progressed into something firmer. Kevin parted his mouth in a lazy way so perfectly, laconically *Kevin* to Felix, he wanted to moan.

So he did.

He could feel Kevin’s lips turning in a smile while the kiss continued. Eventually, Kevin slid one arm, then the other, around Felix’s waist, pulling them together as his tongue gently teased.

Finally, they pulled apart.

Felix felt his mouth drop open, and couldn’t think of a single thing to say.

“That’s a good look on you,” Kevin said. His face and neck were flushed, and he was breathing a little heavier than usual.

“Mouth-drop, word-stop,” Felix said.

“Pardon?”

“Nothing,” Felix said, shaking his head. “Could we do that again?”

They did, and this time Felix found out how soft that damn gray shirt was and just how solid Kevin felt beneath it. Slab of mutton was, Felix decided, an understatement.

His phone started chiming, and they broke apart for a second time.

“What’s that?” Kevin said, his voice low and rumbly.

“The alarm you asked me to set so we could have breakfast before we hit the road.”

Kevin groaned. “You’ve *got* to be kidding me.”

“Nope.” Felix lowered his head and let his forehead collide with the solidness beneath the gray shirt. All he wanted to do was get his hands under it and do some more of that kissing again. Ugh. Stupid time doing its stupid job of moving forward at a fixed rate.

“So,” Kevin said.

“So,” Felix said, forcing himself to lean back and look up at those hazel eyes. “Breakfast. Then hit the road?”

“This is torture,” Kevin said.

“Don’t blame me, *Mutton Man*,” Felix said. “Blame Danya.”

“Spend Christmas with me?” Kevin said.

“Sorry?” Felix didn’t follow. Again. When had he lost the ability to navigate conversation?

*Two kisses ago.*

“Don’t drop me off. Stay.” Kevin leaned forward, taking his hand and squeezing. “My family makes a great Christmas dinner, and you can drive back later. Boxing Day maybe. Or whenever you were supposed to get home. You lost your holiday. Spend it with me.”

“You do realize you’re asking me to come meet your *entire* family, right?” Felix said, his stomach clenching because meeting Kevin’s *mother*? On Christmas Day? *Unannounced*?

This wasn’t just impulsive, it was terrifying.

“I am,” Kevin said, that slow smile of his returning. “Besides, it’s the only way I can think of that gets my hands on you again in the immediate future, so...”

“Okay,” Felix said. “I’m in.”

“That easy?” Kevin said, laughing.

“Yeah,” Felix said. “You should have led with the whole hands-on thing.”

## FOURTEEN

*Last May*

“Jesus Christ, Danya,” Felix said for the fifth time, staring up at the ceiling of his apartment. He took a sip of his cider, then lowered his gaze. Ru, Silas, and Owen all gave him various looks of support. Well, Silas and Owen did. Ru looked like he was fighting off the giggles. Again.

In his defense, Ru could not hold his cider, and they’d all moved on to a second can already. Silas had brought them, a brand Dino had introduced him to. It had an otter drawn on the can.

He’d gotten the official notice today. He was, in every legal sense, now the owner of the Village Garden. The plot of land, the greenhouse, the water bill, the electricity bill, the goddamn *property taxes*...

“I’m so fucked,” Felix said. He’d sent out a panicked 911 message into their group chat because it had all suddenly been way, *way* too much, and the guys had rallied as always. They’d already polished off a Sweet Temptations bag of coconut snowballs and chocolate dominos, and while it was a *terrible* pairing, the ciders were definitely going down easy.

He’d regret this tomorrow. He didn’t usually have more than one drink when he drank at all. This was a terrible coping mechanism, exactly the thing he told people *not* to do.

Beside him on Felix’s short couch, Owen squeezed his arm. “You’ll figure it out. You said when you met with Marion and Victor, the volunteers and the schedules were all set up for this year already. You’ve got time before you need to take the lead. Half a year, maybe.”

“Half a year to figure out how to run a volunteer garden that feeds a ton of people who *really* depend on it?” Felix shook his head, turning back to Owen and blowing out a sharp huff of disbelief. “What was Danya *thinking*?”

“Hey,” Silas said from where he sat on the floor hugging his arms around his knees. “You can do this.”



“I barely weeded without causing mass destruction. He made fun of me for it. Said I had a black thumb. Guys...half a year or ten years, this is beyond me. I do poorly at thought-out plans at the best of times.”

“Oh, we know,” Ru said, with a little snort. He had the reclining chair. He’d pulled out the footrest and leaned it all the way back, balancing his can on his chest.

Felix laughed. “Thanks. Thanks for that.”

“You know, we all heard the way you talked about Danya, Felix,” Owen said.

Felix waited, not sure he could make words at the moment.

“He wasn’t just a patient,” Owen said. “He was your friend. And I think this really is a gift from a friend.”

“If it is a gift?” Felix managed to laugh. “I really wish he’d given me the damn receipt.”

“Okaaay,” Ru said, aiming the word at the ceiling with an exaggerated exhalation. “Enough self-pity! The paperwork is done. It’s your garden. Now. Tell us. What do you *need*?”

“You’re right. I’m being a dick.” Felix blinked and took a deep breath. What *did* he need? “Okay. That garden is important. It has to run, and it has to run well. People depend on it. Which means I need someone who knows what they’re doing, because I don’t,” he said. “Maybe the volunteers have someone who can step up. The executor said I owned the land, but she pointed out it didn’t mean I have to run the place. I just get to pay property tax. Danya’s estate is covering the first year, but after that it’ll be all me.”

“Can you afford it?” Silas said, his eyes widening.

“Yes.” He could. It wasn’t exactly a welcome new addition to his finances, but Parthy paid him well enough for his time, and it certainly delayed his nebulous notion of trying to get a small place of his own within the decade, rather than renting his apartment. “That’s not the problem.”

“So, is the problem you don’t know how, or is the problem you don’t *want* to own the garden?” Ru said.

“Both. No. I don’t know.” Felix took a breath. “I don’t want the garden to vanish, that’s for sure. I can’t sell it. I mean, unless the person I sold it to promised to keep running it...” He shook his head. “I don’t even think you can demand that sort of thing when you sell land. So. No, I can’t sell it. I won’t. I can’t. The problem is I’m overwhelmed. I inherited a community garden and a turtle from a patient—” He saw Owen tilt his head. “Fine, *friend*—I miss way too much.”

“Sorry, back up,” Ru said. “A turtle?”

Felix chuckled and pushed off from the couch, going to his kitchen and coming back with a small box. “This is the other half of my inheritance.” The executor had given it to him.

Inside the box sat a small item wrapped in tissue paper on a nest of even more tissue paper. He tugged it free, and despite his mood, he smiled at the sight of the beautifully carved wooden sea-turtle ornament on a string.

“That’s pretty,” Silas said.

“This part I understand,” Felix said. “Not like the garden.”

“You *understand* the turtle?” Ru’s left eyebrow crept up. “Owen, take his cider,” he said in a stage whisper. “He’s had enough.”

“I’m not drunk. Danya liked to give little life lessons. This?” Felix laughed. “This is a reminder of one of his lessons. Danya and his late husband used to...” Felix closed his eyes, feeling tears coming. He didn’t stop them, of course, but he blinked a few times. “You know what? Just hold on a second.” He pulled out his phone.

“Oh God. Is he drunk dialing?” Ru said, leaning forward.

“Stop it,” Silas said, nudging Ru’s shoulder, though he didn’t look entirely *unconcerned*, either.

“I told you. I’m not drunk,” Felix said, though, in all honesty, he wasn’t exactly sober. He was being impulsive, and despite multiple promises to multiple people—most centrally the people in this room—he felt good about this in a way he hadn’t felt in weeks.

No, not weeks. Months.

Years, maybe.

He pulled up Parthy's contact and considered texting, but tapped the phone icon instead. A moment later, Parthy's deep voice answered with a simple, "Hey, Felix. What's up?"

"I know it's only July," Felix said. "But I wanted to float actually taking holidays this year for Christmas. One week. I don't need two or anything."

"Felix, you've never asked for time off in December in all the time you've worked for me," Parthy said. "Of course you can." He paused. "Everything okay?"

"It will be, I think." Felix eyed the turtle, lifting it up to watch it turn on its string. "I've decided I'm going to do Christmas in Hawai'i this year."

"That sounds fantastic. And if you don't mind me saying so, long overdue. We'll make it work," Parthy said.

"Thank you. I'll let you know once I have the dates," Felix said.

"You got it," Parthy said.

Felix hung up. "There," he said. "That did absolutely nothing to help with the garden and made me feel way, way better."

Silas applauded. After a moment, Owen joined in.

Ru, however, straightened the chair back to a seated position and crossed his arms.

"Just to be clear," Ru said. "You're going to Hawai'i *after* my wedding, right?"

## FIFTEEN

### *Christmas Day*

If there was a non-awkward way to meet your crush's mother on Christmas Day after you and your crush had just started making out—and more or less just *met*—Felix hadn't discovered it by the time they finally came to a stop at the end of the long driveway at Kevin's mother's farmhouse.

Felix parked behind one of three black Ford F-150s in the driveway and turned off the Jeep. There was a large red barn on the other side of the driveway, and another, longer building beside with a sloped metal roof. There were probably animals in it or something. Mutton meant sheep, right?

*Slab of Mutton's mother is in that house.*

“Are you *sure*?” Felix said, in rising panic, eyeing Kevin. It was Christmas Day. Kevin's whole family was in there. “I don't have to stay.”

“I already told them you were coming, to thank you for the ride,” Kevin said. Though he sounded a great deal more comfortable than Felix felt, a dash of apprehension was present, too. “Don't worry. I didn't tell them we...” He waved a hand, and Felix would have paid good money to learn what words Kevin would have used. Made out? Kissed? Groped like teenagers?

“I can't believe how nervous I am,” Felix said.

“Me too,” Kevin said, chuckling. “But...my mother is expecting you. It's too late now.”

Not exactly the most inspiring words. Also, was he relieved or let down Kevin hadn't told them they'd kissed? He didn't know. Was he overthinking this? He was overthinking this.

“Right,” Felix said. “Okay.” He glanced at his reflection in the rearview, then shook his head. “Okay.” He didn't move, though.

“Hey,” Kevin said. “Navidad?”

Felix jolted at the nickname, looking at him, and Kevin leaned across the seat and kissed him. The press of his lips, and the softness of his beard, and the warm things both conjured in Felix's chest and stomach and all through the rest of his body shook some of the nerves off.

Kevin leaned back. "Better?"

"Better."

The last of Felix's nerves vanished at the door. Kevin's mother—a gray-haired, hazel-eyed, broad-shouldered woman in a simple red blouse and comfortable jeans—started by grabbing Kevin in a hug and saying, "You made it!" then pulling back and wrapping Felix up in an equally enthusiastic hug and saying, "Thank you so much, Felix!" like she'd known him forever. and he'd single-handedly saved Christmas or something. Then she pulled back. "I'm Amy, don't even think of calling me Mrs. Croft."

"Okay," Felix said. "Amy it is."

And she didn't stop surprising him there.

In fact, Amy Croft seemed determined to break all of Felix's expectations as a matter of course, introducing him to Kevin's sister, Wendy, her husband, Randall, and his adorable nephew, Bobby, before telling him to make himself at home by grabbing himself a hot drink from the kitchen. In her words, "This is your house today."

"We don't do formal," Wendy said, stepping in for a hug herself. "Thank you for bringing my brother."

"You're welcome," he said.

Wendy had the same brown hair and hazel eyes as Kevin and her mother, but Felix's nephew Bobby had strongly taken after her husband and had his dark brown eyes and curly brown hair to match. Randall offered a polite handshake. Bobby leaned on his father and stared shyly.

"I'll get us coffee," Kevin said, vanishing into the kitchen.

"Wendy and Randall will serve dinner in about an hour, but other than that, family helps themselves in this house. I'm

not kidding when I say you should grab what you want when you want it,” Amy said, then smiled at him. “I really can’t tell you how grateful I am you got him home today.”

“Well, I’m grateful for you having me over for dinner,” Felix said. “How about we call it even?”

She laughed. “That’s a deal, Felix.”

Kevin came back with two mugs, and Felix wrapped his hands around his, taking a sip.

Amy eyed Felix’s hoodie, frowning. “You warm enough, Felix? Kevin, go get him a sweater.” She shoved her son in one shoulder. “Then get that man to the fireplace.”

\* \* \*

Dinner itself turned out to be the single most traditional event of Felix’s entire life, and to his surprise, he loved every second of it. Kevin’s mother had Kevin’s brother-in-law carve the turkey because he was the current man of the house. It was dished out onto plates then laden with stuffing, mashed potatoes, cranberry sauce, a mandatory selection of no less than three vegetables from the six dishes available—Felix chose asparagus, carrots, and green beans—and all of it topped with what he’d decided was the world’s best gravy. They even had Christmas crackers, and after they pulled them, they actually read the jokes—every single one terrible—and even wore the paper hats.

Felix’s hat was pink. “Oh, now that’s perfect,” he said, unfolding the paper crown and putting it on his head with a small flourish. “How does it look? I’ve never worn one before.”

“Never?” Bobby said with stunned amazement, his blue hat tipping over his eyes a bit. “We do it every year!” He’d warmed up a bit to Felix over dinner, but was clearly the shy type, happy to focus most of his attention on his plate.

“Looks nice,” Wendy said. She’d gotten purple. “But don’t worry, we don’t wear them for the photos.”

“Speaking of photos,” Amy said, aiming a meaningful

glance at Kevin, “you need to take care of business.” She tapped her chin.

“Mom,” Kevin said. “Really? It’s been such a long day.”

Felix looked between the two of them, not following.

“You promised me at Thanksgiving,” she said, crossing her arms. “You said ‘Just until Haruto’s wedding.’”

“I feel like I’m missing something,” Felix said to Wendy, dropping his voice to something conspiratorial.

“We take a family photo every Christmas,” Wendy said, also nearly whispering. “Kevin promised Mom he’d shave off the beard.” She raised her voice to teasing sister levels. “He only grew it in to be all lumberjack manly-man for some blind date he heard had a thing for beards, but Mom hates it.”

“For a blind date, huh?” Felix said, raising his eyebrows and deciding a little teasing was definitely in order. He aimed a smile Kevin’s way. “Did it work? Did the blind date turn out to swoon for lumberjack manly-men?”

Kevin narrowed his eyes at him, and too late Felix realized Kevin was absolutely willing to turn the tables. “I don’t know, Felix,” Kevin said, not even pretending they weren’t talking about Felix himself. “Did he?”

Silence fell. Felix could feel his face burning. Wendy, Amy, and Randall were all looking at him expectantly now. At least Bobby was too busy playing with the plastic toy from his Christmas cracker to join the audience.

Felix cleared his throat. In for a penny... “He did, yes.”

Wendy glanced back and forth between Kevin and Felix, then cheered. “I knew it!” She held a hand out to her mother. “Pay up, Mom. I *told* you there was no way he was inviting someone home on Christmas just to say thank you for a ride.”

Kevin’s mother pulled a bright blue bill from her jeans and passed it to her daughter.

“Oh my God,” Kevin said, shaking his head, but he was chuckling.

“You cost me five dollars,” Amy said. “You better not argue about shaving now.”

“Fine, fine,” Kevin said, rising from his seat and raising both hands in surrender. “It’s going to take me a little while.” He stroked the beard. “I may weep.”

“Does he look that bad without the beard?” Felix said.

Kevin gave him a mock dirty look, but left them, heading up the stairs.

“He’s just self-conscious,” Wendy said, which was one hell of a non-answer given how handsome Kevin was, but Felix didn’t press. Wendy started clearing plates while Randall took Bobby to wash his face, so Felix joined her in the cleanup. Between the two of them, they got the dishwasher loaded and running with the first load of dishes by the time Kevin came back down the stairs. Felix turned around just as Kevin stepped into the kitchen.

“Ta-da,” Kevin said.

He had *dimples*. Honest-to-God *dimples*.

Kevin’s mother crossed the kitchen and dropped a kiss on either cheek. “There’s my boy,” she said.

“You have dimples,” Felix said, stating the obvious.

“Part of the reason I grew the beard in the first place?” Kevin said with a false grumble. “Everyone mentions the damn dimples.”

“Because they’re handsome,” Amy said.

“Yeah, you need to listen to your mother,” Felix said, barely resisting the urge to stroke the dimples in question with a fingertip. “The dimples are *cute*.” Kevin looked good with a beard, and his eyes still stole the show, but the dimples?

There was some superhero-style hot happening on that man’s face right now.

“Oh, I like this one,” Amy said, patting Felix’s shoulder. “He’s got a good head on his shoulders.”

Felix laughed.



“Come on,” Amy said. “Living room. Randall has the camera set up.”

Felix picked up a towel, figuring he’d get started on some of the glasses that hadn’t fit in the dishwasher, but Amy took it from his hands and put it on the counter. “You too, Felix.”

“Oh, Amy,” he said. “I couldn’t—”

Amy patted his shoulder again. “It’s so sweet you think you can argue with me.”

He blinked. “Oh. Uh, okay.”

Kevin laughed, wrapping one arm around him and leading him into the living room, where he and Kevin took one end of the couch, with Wendy and Randall on the other, and a freshly cleaned Bobby perched in Amy’s lap.

The camera flashed.

\* \* \*

A few hours later, the rest of Kevin’s family had gone to bed, and it was finally just the two of them in the living room by the fireplace, which Kevin had banked into a slow, low blaze for overnight before joining him on the couch.

“I need to touch the dimples,” Felix said, in a deadpan serious voice. “Desperately.”

Kevin chuckled, shaking his head, but leaned forward, and Felix finally got to touch them.

“I lied earlier,” Felix said. “They’re not cute. They’re *hot*.”

“Yeah?” Kevin said, cracking his slow smile.

“Yeah,” Felix said, nodding earnestly.

Then, roughly one half-second later, Kevin slid a hand up the back of Felix’s neck, and they were back where they’d been that morning, kissing and touching, only this time Felix’s tummy was full, not growling, and they didn’t have any timers set, ready to ruin things.

Alas, instead of having a small cabin to themselves, Felix was acutely aware Kevin’s mother, sister, brother-in-law, *and*

nephew were all in the same building.

So, as infuriating as it was to resist, Felix held off on the impulse to tear the man's clothes off, and Felix did his level best to keep their make-out session G-rated.

Kevin's hands wandered.

Okay, maybe PG-13. He wasn't made of willpower.

## EPILOGUE

*Christmas Eve, one year later*

The sun had set around six in the evening, local time, and after the sun had gone down, a chorus had risen from the woods to either side of their small, rented house. Sitting on a cushioned couch on the front porch in shorts and a slightly baggy gray T-shirt, Felix closed his eyes and listened to the insects, frogs, and who-knew-what-else, enjoying the warm air and the scents of flora on the breeze.

“Okay,” Kevin said, his voice making Felix open his eyes. He’d come out onto the porch with two mugs and handed one to Felix before sitting down beside him. “I’m just going to say it. It sounds like the bridge of the original *Enterprise* out here.”

“Oh my God.” Felix blinked. He tilted his head, listened, and then stared at Kevin, who innocently sipped from his mug of coffee like he hadn’t shattered the magic of being in Hawai‘i on Christmas Eve. “It does. Way to take the wonder out of the moment, mister.”

Kevin smiled, deploying full dimples. “What? You like *Star Trek*.” His eyes flicked down, then back up. “So that’s where my T-shirt went.” He’d pulled on a different T-shirt, a green one, which frankly flattered him as much as the gray one did, but the gray one had the additional weight of memories.

“I’d apologize, but we both know it’s my favorite,” Felix said. “When you wear it. When I wear it. When neither of us are wearing it...” He leaned over and planted a quick kiss on Kevin’s cheek.

Kevin wrapped an arm around him. “This is incredible. Even if there’s no snow.”

“No snow is part of what’s making this incredible,” Felix said, snuggling in. “But I get what you’re saying.”

Hawai‘i was alive, warm, colorful, warm, and beautiful, and did he mention *warm*?

They couldn't actually see much of anything since the sun went down. The rented house was on a sloped side road that didn't have much in the way of streetlights, and their view from the porch looked across at more woods, but the tall trees with bright orange blossoms were still full of leaves, which shifted in the wind to create a softer susurrus alongside the peeping, whistling, and clicking chorus of the night sounds of the Big Island.

Somewhere on the other side of those woods was a pathway they could walk to get down to the coast, and there was a town farther up the road where they'd stopped to shop and stock their rented kitchen with groceries, but after spending the entire day before on planes or in airports, that had been all they'd accomplished on this, their first full day in Hawai'i.

Well, groceries and a whole lot of making out.

"I have a confession," Felix said.

"You do?" Kevin's eyebrows rose.

"I *love* the separate beds thing," Felix said, reaching up and squeezing Kevin's hand.

"You do?" Kevin eyed him, bashful. "*Really?*" The rented house had two bedrooms, and as always, he and Kevin had—after the aforementioned making out—retreated to the two beds to try and get their five-hour jet lag a bit more aligned with where they were instead of where they'd come from.

"Really," Felix said. "I love it when you join me in the morning. It's the best way to wake up. And I like climbing into your bed, too..." He faced Kevin. "It always feels a little bit risqué. Like a secret rendezvous."

"You're adorable," Kevin said, dropping a quick kiss on Felix's lips. Then he bit his bottom lip. "So...I have a Christmas Eve present for you."

"You do?" Felix said, charmed. It was a family tradition of the Crofts, he remembered.

"I do." Kevin pulled him closer, kissing him gently and then pulling back just far enough to aim those hazel eyes of his

directly at him. “Want it?”

“Gosh. Do I want my amazing boyfriend to give me a present while we sit on a porch, in Hawai‘i, in December, in shorts, listening to nature singing us a song?” Felix tapped his chin. “Is this a rhetorical question?”

Kevin laughed and pushed off the couch, heading back inside. “Be right back.”

Felix paused to take a sip of his coffee and pulled out his phone. It was almost time. He put the phone down on the couch’s arm and waited, glancing up and catching a glimpse of a star or two.

*Well. It took a year, Danya, but I made it to Hawai‘i. And with your slab of mutton, no less.* He smiled at Danya’s memory, shaking his head.

What a year. He and Kevin had alternated who made the trek to the other, except for when he’d needed Kevin in Ottawa for the garden, or when Kevin was helping on his family’s farm and couldn’t get away, but their “inconvenient something else” had been anything but. Felix worked with his clients and then would make the drive up to Oneida the night before his days off, or Kevin would come down to Ottawa whenever he had a break. They’d even met up at Cozy Cedar Cabins twice, once for Felix’s birthday and once just because, renting “their” cabin. They’d even taken the tour of the Sawmill, and it turned out the café there was adorable. Kevin had finished his small engine repair certification and had started the hunt for work closer to Ottawa, which they both knew would take time, but Felix found he didn’t mind waiting. Despite drives sometimes as long as five hours, at no point had Felix even thought to reconsider their relationship. He didn’t always enjoy the commute—winter especially—but he absolutely loved the man at the end of it.

Almost as though he’d been conjured by the thought, Kevin returned, a small green-and-white-wrapped present in his hand. He sat down again, handing it to Felix.

“Merry Christmas,” Kevin said. “I love you.”

“I love you, too,” Felix said, kissing him long enough to underline how much. Then he ripped at the wrapping on the present, revealing a small box. When he opened the box, he found a hand-carved wooden ornament on a bed of shredded paper. It looked like a little house, and he held it up, turning to Kevin and seeing Kevin was intently watching him.

“You made this,” Felix said, delighted. It was adorable. And it would get pride of place on his tree back home. “Didn’t you?”

“I did,” Kevin said. The dimples were back. “Take a closer look.”

Felix did, holding it out so he could use the porch light. It wasn’t a house, he realized, but a store or shop. There was even a sign above the door and front window: *Kevin’s Small Motors*. Felix turned back to Kevin. “Wait. Does this mean...?”

Kevin’s smile was as bright and as warm as that morning’s sun had been. “So, I found a man who has a small engine repair and parts shop who wants to retire. In Almonte.”

“Almonte,” Felix said, grinning himself now. “As in the town forty minutes away from Ottawa, *that* Almonte?”

“That’s the one,” Kevin said. Then he nodded at the ornament. “You need to keep looking. You’re not done yet.”

Felix turned his attention back to the ornament, though all he really wanted to do was whoop and cheer. Kevin working in Almonte would mean Kevin could *live* in Almonte, which meant they could be together so much more often and... He turned the ornament over in his hands and spotted a little clasp on the bottom. It was a box, too. He opened it.

A key dropped into Felix’s hand. He stared at it.

“Is this the shop key?” Felix said. Was the transfer of the shop a done deal already?

“Nope,” Kevin said. “That’s your key.”

Felix blinked. “My key?”

“For my apartment in Almonte,” Kevin said. He leaned

forward and wrapped both arms around Felix's shoulders, tugging until Felix shifted and leaned back against his chest. "And maybe someday, *our* apartment in Almonte." Kevin kissed the top of his head. "I know your clients are all in Ottawa, and there's the garden, and I'm not saying you *have* to move in full-time, but it does mean I can be more hands-on with the garden, too." He took a deep breath, making Felix rise and fall. The man never babbled like this. It was *adorable*. "It's absolutely fine if you want to keep your apartment. I just wanted to be clear about the offer, and make sure you knew there was space for both of us to spend the night. I'm not pushing, I—"

"Kevin," Felix said, twisting his head back and arching his back, until Kevin, flustered, met him halfway for an awkward kiss that got less awkward when Felix turned around in Kevin's arms to get more comfortable.

When they came up for air, they were both a lot more relaxed. And also *not* relaxed.

"You like the present?" Kevin said.

"I like the present," Felix said. At the very least, they could try it out, see what the commute did to his daily routine, but even the offer meant the world to him. "Forty minutes is way, way better than four hours," Felix said. "Borderline convenient, even." He narrowed his eyes. "Wait. Are you trying to turn our inconvenient something else into a convenient hook-up?"

Kevin laughed and pulled him in for another kiss, his hands wandering under the borrowed gray T-shirt and making it clear this particular kiss was an invitation for more.

Behind them, Felix's phone pinged. He pulled away from Kevin and grinned. "It must be seven."

"You set an alarm for seven?" Kevin said, frowning.

"No, I set *three* alarms."

"Three?"

Behind them, his phone pinged again. Felix held up two fingers. After another moment, it pinged a third time, and he

raised a third, grinning.

“What’s going on?” Kevin said.

Felix picked up his phone, opening it to the group Bittersweets Club chat and laughing at the string of expletives Ru had sent through. He’d been first, for a change, rather than Owen or Silas. He showed the screen to Kevin, who frowned.

*You’re the fucking worst. Total shit-head. We were dead to the world. I hate you. Merry Christmas, asshole. Nick hates you, too.* It was followed by six poop emojis.

Beneath Ru’s message had come Silas’s: *What is wrong with you? Merry Christmas. I’m going back to bed. Dino says I get to kick you next time I see you.*

And, finally, Owen: *I hope it rains every day you’re in Hawai‘i. Merry Christmas from both of us, jerk. You suck.*

“I don’t get it,” Kevin said. “Isn’t it midnight back home?”

“Hey, if they didn’t want to wake up and wish me Merry Christmas, they shouldn’t have left their phones out where I could set reminders and alarms,” Felix said, lifting one hand.

“Oh my God,” Kevin said, but he chuckled. He shook his head, still laughing. “They’re going to run you out of town when you get back.”

“Well, it’s a good thing I’ll be living somewhere else, then,” Felix said, holding up the key. The words came out without thinking, but the moment they were said, he felt how right they were. He grinned.

Kevin looked at him, his hazel eyes widening. “Really? You don’t want to do a trial run, or maybe take time to think about it?”

“There’s something you should know about me, Kevin Croft,” Felix said, leaning forward and putting a finger over Kevin’s lips. “Sometimes I’m impulsive.”



## About the Author

'Nathan Burgoine grew up a reader and studied literature in university while making a living as a bookseller. His first novel, *Light*, was a finalist for a Lambda Literary Award. *Triad Blood* and *Triad Soul* are also available from Bold Strokes Books, as is his YA novel *Exit Plans for Teenage Freaks* and his first collection, *Of Echoes Born*. For novella lovers, *In Memoriam*, *Handmade Holidays*, *Faux Ho Ho*, *Village Fool*, and *A Little Village Blend*, are shorter queer romances (often with a dash of speculative fiction). A cat lover, 'Nathan managed to fall in love and marry Daniel, who is a confirmed dog person. Their ongoing cat-or-dog détente ended with the rescue of huskies. They live in Ottawa, Canada, where socialized health care and gay marriage have yet to cause the sky to cave in.

## **Books Available From Bold Strokes Books**

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**A Spark in the Air** by Dena Blake. Internet executive Crystal Tucker is sure Wi-Fi could really help small-town residents, even if it means putting an internet café out of business, but her instant attraction to the owner's daughter, Janie Elliott, makes moving ahead with her plans complicated. (978-1-63679-293-4)

**Between Takes** by CJ Birch. Simone Lavoie is convinced her new job as an intimacy coordinator will give her a fresh perspective. Instead, problems on set and her growing attraction to actress Evelyn Harper only add to her worries. (978-1-63679-309-2)

**Camp Lost and Found** by Georgia Beers. Nobody knows better than Cassidy and Frankie that life doesn't always give you what you want. But sometimes, if you're lucky, life gives you exactly what you need. (978-1-63679-263-7)

**Felix Navidad** by 'Nathan Burgoine. After the wedding of a good friend, instead of Felix's Hawaii Christmas treat to himself, ice rain strands him in Ontario with fellow wedding-guest—and handsome ex of said friend—Kevin in a small cabin for the holiday Felix definitely didn't plan on. (978-1-63679-411-2)

**Fire, Water, and Rock** by Alaina Erdell. As Jess and Clare reveal more about themselves, and their hot summer fling tips over into true love, they must confront their pasts before they can contemplate a future together. (978-1-63679-274-3)

**Lines of Love** by Brey Willows. When even the Muse of Love doesn't believe in forever, we're all in trouble. (978-1-63555-458-8)

**Manny Porter and The Yuletide Murder** by D.C. Robeline. Manny only has the holiday season to discover who killed prominent research scientist Phillip Nikolaidis before the judicial system condemns an innocent man to lethal injection. (978-1-63679-313-9)

**Only This Summer** by Radclyffe. A fling with Lily promises to be exactly what Chase is looking for—short-term, hot as a forest fire, and one Chase can extinguish whenever she wants. After all, it's only one summer. (978-1-63679-390-0)

**Picture-Perfect Christmas** by Charlotte Greene. Two former rivals compete to capture the essence of their small mountain town at Christmas, all the while fighting old and new feelings. (978-1-63679-311-5)

**Playing Love's Refrain** by Lesley Davis. Drew Dawes had shied away from the world of music until Wren Banderas gave her a reason to play their love's refrain. (978-1-63679-286-6)

**Profile** by Jackie D. The scales of justice are weighted against FBI agents Cassidy Wolf and Alex Derby. Loyalty and love may be the only advantage they have. (978-1-63679-282-8)

**Almost Perfect** by Tagan Shepard. A shared love of queer TV brings Olivia and Riley together, but can they keep their real-life love as picture-perfect as their on-screen counterparts? (978-1-63679-322-1)

**Corpus Calvin** by David Swatling. Cloverkist Inn may be haunted, but a ghost materializes from Jason Dekker's past and Calvin's canine instinct kicks in to protect a young boy from mortal danger. (978-1-62639-428-5)

**Craving Cassie** by Skye Rowan. Siobhan Carney and Cassie Townsend share an instant attraction, but are they brave enough to give up everything they have ever known to be together? (978-1-63679-062-6)

**Drifting** by Lyn Hemphill. When Tess jumps into the ocean after Jet, she thinks she's saving her life. Of course, she can't possibly know Jet is actually a mermaid desperate to fix her mistake before she causes her clan's demise. (978-1-63679-242-2)

**Enigma** by Suzie Clarke. Polly has taken an oath to protect and serve her country, but when the spy she's tasked with hunting becomes the love of her life, will she be the one to betray her country? (978-1-63555-999-6)

**Finding Fault** by Annie McDonald. Can environmental activist Dr. Evie O'Halloran and government investigator Merritt Shepherd set aside their conflicting ideas about saving the planet and risk their hearts enough to save their love? (978-1-63679-257-6)

**Hot Keys** by R.E. Ward. In 1920s New York City, Betty May Dewitt and her best friend, Jack Norval, are determined to make their Tin Pan Alley dreams come true and discover they will have to fight—not only for their hearts and dreams, but for their lives. (978-1-63679-259-0)

**Securing Ava** by Anne Shade. Private investigator Paige Richards takes a case to locate and bring back runaway heiress Ava Prescott. But ignoring her attraction may prove impossible when their hearts and lives are at stake. (978-1-63679-297-2)

**The Amaranthine Law** by Gun Brooke. Tristan Kelly is being hunted for who she is and her incomprehensible past, and despite her overwhelming feelings for Olivia Bryce, she has to reject her to keep her safe. (978-1-63679-235-4)

**The Forever Factor** by Melissa Brayden. When Bethany and Reid confront their past, they give new meaning to letting go, forgiveness, and a future worth fighting for. (978-1-63679-357-3)

**The Frenemy Zone** by Yolanda Wallace. Ollie Smith-Nakamura thinks relocating from San Francisco to her dad's rural hometown is the worst idea in the world, but after she meets her new classmate Ariel Hall, she might have a change of heart. (978-1-63679-249-1)

**A Cutting Deceit** by Cathy Dunnell. Undercover cop Athena takes a job at Valeria's hair salon to gather evidence to prove her husband's connections to organized crime. What starts as a tentative friendship quickly turns into a dangerous affair. (978-1-63679-208-8)

**As Seen on TV!** by CF Frizzell. Despite their objections, TV hosts Ronnie Sharp, a laid-back chef; and paranormal investigator Peyton Stanford, have to work together. The public is watching. But joining forces is risky, contemptuous, unnerving, provocative—and ridiculously perfect. (978-1-63679-272-9)

**Blood Memory** by Sandra Barret. Can vampire Jade Murphy protect her friend from a human stalker and keep her dates with the gorgeous Beth Jenssen without revealing her secrets? (978-1-63679-307-8)

**Foolproof** by Leigh Hays. For Martine Roberts and Elliot Tillman, friends with benefits isn't a foolproof way to hide from the truth at the heart of an affair. (978-1-63679-184-5)

**Glass and Stone** by Renee Roman. Jordan must accept that she can't control everything that happens in life, and that includes her wayward heart. (978-1-63679-162-3)

**Hard Pressed** by Aurora Rey. When rivals Mira Lavigne and Dylan Miller are tapped to co-chair Finger Lakes Cider Week, competition gives way to compromise. But will their sexual chemistry lead to love? (978-1-63679-210-1)

**The Laws of Magic** by M. Ullrich. Nothing is ever what it seems, especially not in the small town of Bender, Massachusetts, where a witch lives to save lives and avoid love. (978-1-63679-222-4)

**The Lonely Hearts Rescue** by Morgan Lee Miller, Nell Stark, Missouri Vaun. In this novella collection, a hurricane hits the Gulf Coast, and the animals at the Lonely Hearts Rescue Shelter need love, and so do the humans who adopt them. (978-1-63679-231-6)

**The Mage and the Monster** by Barbara Ann Wright. Two powerful mages, one committed to magic and one controlled by it, strive to free each other and be together while the countries they serve descend into war. (978-1-63679-190-6)

**Truly Wanted** by J.J. Hale. Sam must decide if she's willing to risk losing her found family to find her happily ever after. (978-1-63679-333-7)

**A Good Chance** by Ali Vali. Harry, Desi, and Desi's sister Rachel are so close to getting everything they've ever wanted, but Desi's ex-husband is coming back to get his revenge and rip apart their chance at happiness. (978-1-63679-023-7)

**A Perfect Fifth** by Jaycie Morrison. Streetwise pianist Zara Keller and Lady Jillian Stansfield couldn't be more different; yet their connection brings a new awareness of who they are and what they truly want in their lives—including each other. (978-1-63679-132-6)

**Catching Feelings** by Ana Hartnett Reichardt. Andrea Foster expected to catch a lot of pitches from the Alder Lion's star pitcher, Maya, but she didn't expect to catch feelings. (978-1-63679-227-9)

**Defiant Hearts** by Lee Lynch. In these stories, you'll find your lovers, friends, and lesbians you wish you knew—maybe even yourself. (978-1-63679-237-8)

**Love and Duty** by Catherine Young. All Princess Roseli wants is to marry her three lovers, but with war looming, she must instead marry Princess Lucia to establish a military alliance between their planets. (978-1-63679-256-9)

**Murder at Union Station** by David S. Pederson. Private Detective Mason Adler struggles to determine who killed a woman found in a trunk without getting himself killed in the process. (978-1-63679-269-9)

**Serendipity** by Kris Bryant. Serendipity brings jingle writer Annie Foster and celebrity pop star Bristol Baines together, and their undeniable attraction keeps them close, but will their different paths drive them apart? (978-1-63679-224-8)

**The Haunted Heart** by Jane Kolven. A ghost, a ring, and a quest to find a missing psychic—it's a spell for love. (978-1-63679-245-3)

**The Rules of Forever** by Nan Campbell. After reconnecting at their high school reunion, Cara and Lauren agree to embark on a textbook definition friends-with-benefits relationship, but trying to keep it uncomplicated is harder than it seems. (978-1-63679-248-4)

**Vision of Virtue** by Brey Willows. When virtue and desire come together, be prepared for sparks in this next installment of the Memory's Muses series. (978-1-63679-118-0)

**Cherry on Top** by Georgia Beers. A chance meeting leaves Cherry and Ellis longing for a different life, but when Ellis's search for truth crashes into Cherry's insta-filter world, do they have any hope at all of a happily ever after? (978-1-63679-158-6)

**Love and Other Rare Birds** by Angie Williams. Ornithologist Dr. Jamie Martin and park ranger Rowan Fleming are searching the Alaskan wilderness for a bird thought to be extinct and they're about to discover opposites really do attract. (978-1-63679-108-1)

**Parallel Paradise** by Mayapee Chowdhury. When their love affair is put to the test by the homophobia of their family, community, and culture, Bindi and Rimli will need to fight for a chance at love. (978-1-63679-204-0)

**Perfectly Matched** by Toni Logan. A beautiful Cupid named Hannah, a runaway arrow, and just seventy-two hours to fix a mishap that could be the best mistake she has ever made. (978-1-63679-120-3)

**Royal Exposé** by Jenny Frame. When they're grouped together for a class assignment, Poppy's enthusiasm for life and love may just save Casey's soul, but will she ever forgive Casey for using her to expose royal secrets? (978-1-63679-165-4)

**Slow Burn** by Missouri Vaun. A wounded wildland firefighter from California and a struggling artist find solace and love in a small southern town. (978-1-63679-098-5)

**The Artist** by Sheri Lewis Wohl. Detective Casey Wilson and reclusive artist Tula Crane are drawn together in a web of passion, intrigue, and art that might just hold the key to stopping a killer. (978-1-63679-150-0)

**The Inconvenient Heiress** by Jane Walsh. An unlikely heiress and a spinster evade the Marriage Mart only to discover true love together. (978-1-63679-173-9)