

LUCY
LENNOX

SKI
PATROL



SKI PATROL

AN ASTER VALLEY SHORT

LUCY LENNOX



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Cover Design by Cate Ashwood

Editing by One Love Editing

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Beta Reading by May Archer

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CONTENTS

Author's Note

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Letter from Lucy

About the Author

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

First of all, if you're reading this, presumably you've already read *Thick as Thieves*. If not, go grab it now. It's not necessary to read it to enjoy *Ski Patrol*, but we first meet BJ in *Thick as Thieves* and the events in that book take place before the events in *Ski Patrol*.

Secondly, in real life, I have a cousin named James. His father and grandfather were also named James (both called Jim), so the powers that be gave my cousin a nickname to keep the family from being overrun by Jims. Why didn't they just call him James or Jamie? I'll never know.

In my cousin's case, BJ stands for "Baby Jim."

As we say in the South, bless his heart.



- ✓ Transfer truck tag at DMV
- ✓ Set up AV utility accounts
- ✓ New hire paperwork
- ✓ Refill PREP
- ✓ Find local Kundalini class
- ✓ Wax
- ✓ Random act of kindness
- ✓ Order Max Protein
- ✓ Venmo Chelsea for Nana's birthday flowers
- ✓ Fresh air and movement
- ✓ Gratitude
- ✓ Ask rental insurance company about roommate coverage
- ✓ Change address at USPS from Cali to Colo
- ✓ Pick up keys on Tuesday
- ✓ Get recommendation for local vet

If you asked my friends why I came to Aster Valley, Colorado, they'd probably say it was to find a hot skier or ten and get laid. If you asked my social media followers, they'd tell you it was so I could develop fresh content and yoga flows for them. If you asked my family—well, with the exception of my little sister—they'd say it was for the fresh air and beautiful scenery.

And none of them would have been wrong, exactly.

But there was another reason I'd come to Aster Valley. A reason I could never admit out loud to another human being.

Ever.

I mean, except if I was drunk, and alone at a bar, and it was Valentine's Day, and the person I told was a total stranger, because then apparently I couldn't shut up.

“Dude, like... all I know is that this random guy wrote a killer to-do list and musta... musta accidentally dropped it on the ground, and my—” I stopped to let out a discreet burp that tasted remarkably like the Red Hot Valentine shooters that were on special. “My sister saw it on TikTok and sent it to me. And as soon as I read it, my heart did that epiphany thing where it, like, stopped beating for an entire second, and like...”

I lost my train of thought as a platter of loaded potato skins moved past me down the bar. Those looked amazing.

The woman on the stool next to me made a rolling gesture with her hand. “And then?”

I blinked at her. “And then what?”

“You started this story by saying the reason you came to Aster Valley was to fuck all the menfolk.”

I nodded. “Right. Exactly.”

Her grin was kinda cute. “But then you mentioned a to-do list.”

“Uh-huh. Yeah.” I sighed dreamily. “The *best* to-do list.”

“Either you’ve had too many shooters, or I haven’t had enough. What does a to-do list have to do with the fucking?”

“How else am I supposed to find him?” I asked incredulously.

“Find who?”

I threw up my hands, knocking over an empty shot glass and accidentally elbowing someone on the other side of me. “Sorry,” I murmured before turning back to my stranger bestie. “The to-do list guy! He’s perfect. For me. I mean, he’s perfect for me. He obviously understands the connection to our collective life force through Kundalini meditation and body movement *and* he waxes. Do you have any idea how hard it is to find someone who gets me on multiple levels like that?”

“Uh... no?”

“Well, it’s darn hard,” I assured her, raising my finger to get the bartender’s attention. “As in, impossible.”

The woman nodded. “And this to-do list went viral on TikTok?”

I looked at her in confusion. “It did?”

“That’s what you said,” she said with a laugh.

“Oh. No. See, my sister’s got this friend who’s always posting cute videos on TikTok. Like there’s a video where this guy taught his dog how to bake cookies, except because of the whole ‘dogs being allergic to chocolate’ thing, he can only

make—” I waved a hand. “You know what? That’s not important right now. The point is, my sister’s friend found this list on the ground in the Denver airport when she was flying back home for Christmas—she goes to school out east, I think—and posted it. And my sister saw the video and sent it to me because, hello, I’m gay.”

She lifted an eyebrow. “You don’t say.”

I narrowed my eyes at her. “Anyway, she thought it was sweet, and she knows I’ve always been stupidly romantic and idealistic. But she also knows I don’t believe men like that actually exist in real life.”

“Men who make to-do lists?”

I sighed. “Not just any to-do list. This one was like... like *perfect*. He does the same kind of yoga I do. He’s on PrEP, which probsies means he’s into dudes. Also? He sends flowers to his grandma. How sweet is that? And he practices gratitude and random acts of kindness. And let’s not forget he waxes, m’kay?”

“Waxes?”

She was missing the point. “The point is, this list stuck in my craw. I kept asking my sister to ask her friend about it, and finally the friend just sent my sister the list to send to me. And ever since she gave it to me, I feel like one of those cheesy teens in a cheesy teen romance where I’m pining away for a Romeo who doesn’t actually exist. Except, this one does. He’s here. In Aster Valley. I just need to find him. That’s why I’m here this week.”

“How do you know he’s here?”

She was kind of slow on the uptake, wasn’t she?

“It’s a to-do list on an Aster Valley Mountaintop Realty notepad page.”

She tapped her fingers on the bar. “Maybe he’s already in a relationship. With an Aster Valley hottie.”

I hated this woman with the fire of a thousand Taco Bell bean burritos. “He’s *not*. He specifically mentions a roommate,

not a partner. And if he's a queer, single man, I know exactly how to find him." I patted my phone lovingly, and it immediately lit up with a Grindr notification, which proved I was on the right track. "I might have to fuck a few frogs first, but my Romeo is waiting for me. I just know it. Some things are meant to be."

Or maybe they weren't.

By the time Thursday rolled around, I'd either been fucked or rejected by half the valley, and I still hadn't found anyone who could possibly be my dream guy. I was running out of condoms and patience.

"I'm starting to think you might be giving yourself a sex addiction," my friend Rocco said calmly Thursday morning over coffee.

I shifted uncomfortably on my chair. "Ironic, isn't it?"

He took another sip and stretched his legs out before crossing them at the ankles. "How do you mean?"

We were sitting in the small kitchen of the vacation home we'd rented halfway up the ski mountain. Rocco had a coffee, a store-bought danish, a dish of almonds, and the remnants of three pieces of fruit in front of him. I had one small bowl of greek yogurt and muesli, but I was eyeballing the danish like a slaving wolfhound.

"All I want is a real relationship. The big love. Someone who shares my passion for movement and meditation, helping others, enjoying the outdoors. I want someone who's kind and caring, gentle, understanding." I sighed and stabbed my spoon into the yogurt in dissatisfaction. "But it's impossible to find."

And time was running out.

Rocco nodded and set down his mug. "Babe, and I mean this with all due respect, it *is* impossible to find when you're only looking for it on Grindr."

I hadn't told him about the to-do list or my plan. That would have been humiliating. But he knew I was looking for love, and it was becoming clear to both of us I was looking in all the wrong places.

“Yeah. I just thought... maybe there’d be somebody else on there who was like me, you know? Someone who was looking for the same things I’m looking for.”

“Enlightenment and incredible head?”

“No!” I grabbed an almond from Rocco’s bowl and threw it at him. He caught it with annoyingly quick reflexes and popped it in his mouth with a grin. I plunked my elbows on the table. “Actually... Yeah. That’s exactly what I want. I want to root out the one gay guy in Aster Valley who has a giant heart... and, let’s be honest, a giant dick wouldn’t go amiss.”

He laughed and tossed a handful of almonds in his mouth, crunching happily before responding. “Now we’re talking. You want a guy who has it all. The heart and the bedroom skills.”

I shot him a grin. “Bingo. Is that too much to ask?”

He stood up and shoved a big hunk of the pastry into his mouth. If only he didn’t live in Alaska, I’d consider him seriously despite his “no coworker hookups” rule. But he was married to his hometown, and I was married to never moving to small-town Alaska.

“Not too much to ask in general. In fact, you shouldn’t settle for less. But why the rush to find Mr. Perfect this week? Just relax and enjoy yourself while you’re here. Plenty of time for true love once you get home,” he advised. “Your chances have to be better there than in a small town like this anyway.”

I nodded half-heartedly. Rocco meant well, but he was wrong. And he clearly hadn’t spent much time in Jackson Hole, Wyoming.

I knew for a fact that the guy with the to-do list lived in Aster Valley. If I couldn’t manage to find him this week, I had no hope of finding him later. It was enough to make me feel a little bit panicked.

“Help me on the slopes today,” Rocco said around a mouthful of delicious trans fats. “I need an experienced videographer getting B-roll. Give your ass a break, and come with me.”

I sighed and stood up. “Fine. But I’m not an expert skier.”

“You live in Jackson. You teach yoga at a ski resort.”

“I can ski, okay? I just said I’m not an expert. I don’t ski backwards and do trick shit like that. But I’ll do my best.”

Rocco handed me the last piece of his danish. “That’s all I ask. I’ve got a pro skier to do the backwards skiing. I just need you to get wider angles and pretty views. I’ll pay you in junk food.”

I winked at him. “Man after my own cholesterol-compromised heart.”

When we got to the mountain, I had to admit Rocco was right. I’d needed to get outside. The sun was shining, and the cold air was fresh and clean. It felt good to stretch my muscles. To clear my head and regain some perspective.

When Rocco had originally posted in our SocialAdrenaline content creator forum that he was going to be in Aster Valley filming classes on the mountain, I’d seen it as a sign. I’d told Rocco I’d split the cost of the rental and help him shoot his classes if he’d help me shoot mine, but the trip had mostly been an excuse to go to Aster Valley and sniff around for my mysterious list writer. I’d scoped out a meadow on the backside of the mountain, and Rocco had already helped get permission from the mountain owner to let me access it to film a sunrise yoga class; I just hadn’t actually done it yet.

Clearly, I needed to change that, because these views were incredible. I’d been to lots of places, but there was something special about Aster Valley.

I felt centered in a way I hadn’t been all week—a sharp reminder that in my quest to find the guy whose to-do list had all the things I cared about... I’d forgotten to actually *do* some of those things I cared about.

Fresh air and movement, anyone?

When I finally made it to the mid-mountain restaurant after grabbing some additional equipment, I met up with Rocco and the ski resort owners. They happened to be friends with one or two of my failed Grindr hookups, which wasn’t awkward so

much as depressing, but I'd never been one to let a little rejection stand in the way of enjoying myself.

I recognized right away that Parker and Julian needed a healthy kick in the ass to realize they were in love with each other, and I figured if *I* couldn't find romance in Aster Valley, really *somebody* should. So when I found out they'd be helping us on the slopes that day, I entertained myself by flirting my ass off with each one to make the other jealous.

Right around the time they were both ready to maim me and dump my body in the woods, I managed to do it myself first.

I'd never been great on the expert slopes, but I thought I had it under control. Unfortunately, a funky angle on one of the moguls sent me off the side of the run and into a thick snowbank, sending knifelike pains through my knee and decimating my pride.

As I lay there panting through the pain in a cold slump, tired from too little sleep and too much skiing, I suddenly felt stupid. I'd known better than to expect my legs to be able to handle the advanced slope for multiple runs after my legs were already tired. My body was in excellent shape, but it wasn't in excellent *skiing* shape. Since I was a professional fitness instructor, I should have known better than to push my limits and put myself at risk for injury.

To make matters worse, if I'd done serious damage to my knee, it would screw up my own aggressive content creation plans and cause a disruption to the class schedule at the resort where I worked. It had been hard enough finding an appropriate substitute teacher for my classes so I could leave for a *week*. How would I convince people to continue covering me for *months* while I recovered from a preventable injury?

My eyes stung, and I suddenly felt small and vulnerable. I bit my tongue to keep from letting any of it come to the surface. When Parker, Julian, and Rocco reached me, I flashed them my best attempt at a smile.

"I'm sure it's nothing," I said in a shaky voice. "You guys go on ahead."

Rocco's eyebrows furrowed. "Don't be ridiculous. We're going to get you some help. Parker's calling ski patrol."

Even Julian, who I'd been taunting all day by flirting with his best friend, squatted down to ask how he could help. The genuine concern in his face was touching, and it reminded me that my words to Rocco earlier this morning had been utter bullshit. In the past several hours, I'd already met a generous handful of men with loving, kind hearts.

They all simply already had partners.

Parker and Julian were clearly working their way around getting together. They'd kissed in the restaurant in front of everyone. Then there was Tiller Raine and his fiancé, Mikey. And their business partner, Sam, and his partner, Truman. And obviously Rocco, who wasn't an Aster Vallian but was still a sweet, stand-up guy.

Maybe it was me. Maybe I wasn't the kind of guy a tenderhearted, attentive man like my list writer wanted.

I crossed my arms over my chest and buried my face in the cool fabric of my jacket sleeves.

As my knee started to throb, I realized too late that I'd been focusing on all the wrong things. Arranging for casual sex wasn't the way to find the kind of man I was looking for. Even though there were tons of happy-ever-after stories that started on hookup apps, maybe I needed to try a different way.

Or give up altogether.

I mean, what kind of idiot falls in love with a guy based on a to-do list anyway?

This kind, my stubborn heart insisted, but I was tired of listening. I'd spent this whole week focused on getting it what it wanted, chasing after a vision I'd built up in my mind, and I'd missed my chance to do the things I should have been doing, like filming content. Like enjoying this beautiful place.

I thought again about having to spend the next couple of weeks on the sofa with my leg in a cast, and my eyes started prickling again.

I was going to focus on my business from now on. Take this gig to the next level. Rocco had generously helped walk me through the process he'd used to grow his SocialAdrenaline content business and viewership, and one of my goals when I returned home was to dive in and get organized. If I couldn't teach my yoga classes at the resort or film content for my subscribers, I could at least get caught up on the admin and planning stuff so I would be ready to hit the ground running when my leg healed.

When the buzz of the approaching snowmobile interrupted my train of thought, I took a few deep breaths to prepare for the pain of the coming trip down the mountain.

A big burly guy in a red ski patrol parka hustled over to assess my injury. I couldn't see much of him since he was bundled up for the cold and had reflective-lens sunglasses on, but he was friendly and gentle. Parker seemed to know him and told me I'd be in good hands with him.

I didn't care. For the first time all week, I didn't feel the slightest desire to flirt. The guy could have been Gus Kenworthy's identical twin and it wouldn't have mattered. All I wanted was to get on with it, find out how bad the damage was, and hopefully get something for the pain that seemed to be getting worse the longer I sat there in the snow.

"My name is Dallas," the ski patrol guy said, crouching down next to me. His voice was steady and calming, which was probably a requirement in his job. "Can you tell me what happened?"

"Stupidity," I said, feeling the heat of embarrassment on my face and neck. "I lost control and careened into the snowbank."

"What hurts?"

Tears leaked out of my eyes. "My knee," I said, leaning down to gesture to it. "I don't know if it's a tendon or—" I stopped when my voice broke. Why was I this upset about a fucked-up knee? It was a common injury, especially on a ski slope.

“Hey, hey,” he said gently. “It’s okay. We’re going to get you taken care of. I’m an EMT. Can you rate your pain on a ten scale for me?”

Thankfully, my answer resulted in enough pain medication to make the bumpy ride behind his snowmobile nothing more than a buzzy blur.

By the time he got me down the mountain, I was feeling no pain and making vague mental notes to send this guy flowers one day.

“I’ve never been to Dallas,” I admitted as he helped transfer me to the ambulance waiting to take me to the hospital.

“Me neither,” he said with a dimpled smile. He’d taken off his sunglasses, and now I could see he had a very handsome face. Cuter than Gus Kenworthy. Maybe cuter than anyone I’d ever seen.

Too bad I’d sworn off men only hours before.

Too bad I still meant it.

“How’d you get the name, then?” I asked. In my hazy state, this information seemed important.

“My grandpa was a Cowboys fan. He died the day before I was born, so my mom named me Dallas.”

“Why not name you after your grandpa?”

He laughed, and I felt like an additional pain pill hit my bloodstream with a *whoosh*. “His name was Jeremiah. Who the hell names their kid Jeremiah? Dodged a bullet with that one.”

I stared at him for a beat before I realized one of the paramedics was asking me a question. “I’m sorry?” I asked.

“What’s your name, sir?”

I kept my eyes on Dallas as I answered.

“Jeremiah Tilstead.”

DALLAS

I didn't know whether to laugh or start apologizing.

So I did both.

"I'm so fucking sorry," I blurted on a huff of laughter. "Jesus, I'm so sorry."

The cutie on the stretcher flushed pink. "Never mind. Doesn't matter."

I squeezed his hand. "No, it does. Jeremiah, I'm—"

"Ew!" he said. "Don't call me that." Then he blushed even more. "I go by BJ."

Considering the man had cherry-red lips that I'd already fantasized about inappropriately, I could understand why he had such a nickname. Still, it was unexpected.

"My dad is Jeremiah also," he hurried to add. "So I'm Baby Jeremiah."

"BJ," I said with a nod. "Got it. Is your dad here, by any chance?"

He furrowed his brow in confusion. "Uh, no? He's back home in Louisiana, presumably. Why?"

One of the paramedics answered before I could. "You're going to need someone with you at the hospital. At least, they'll want someone to stay with you when you're ready to go home."

BJ glanced between me and the paramedic, who was busy removing his ski helmet to make him more comfortable on the stretcher.

“Boyfriend or girlfriend?” I asked, selfishly curious about whether or not he was taken.

“No. No boyfriend. But I have a friend who said he’d come get me,” he said hesitantly, looking around for the guy.

His friend came rushing over with a cell phone to his ear. “BJ, shit. I’m so sorry. There’s an emergency at home, and I have to get back to Knockwood right away. I’ll get one of the guys we skied with to come be with you at the hospital. Julian, the dark-haired one, he seems nice—”

Seems nice? He was going to leave BJ injured and reliant on strangers? I felt an unusual twist of anger in my gut. “There’s an emergency here,” I said. “With your friend. He’s hurt.”

The man grimaced. “No, I know. But my brother’s a bush pilot. He didn’t come back from a recent flight and—”

“Go,” BJ said, waving him off. “I’ll be fine. Message me and let me know your brother’s okay.”

He moved past me to lean over BJ, pressing a kiss to his forehead. “Call Parker and Julian to help. You message me to tell me you’re okay, too. I’m sorry.”

BJ was obviously putting on a brave face for his friend. He looked vulnerable and alone. Once his friend left and the paramedics were getting ready to close the doors, I ducked into the bay one last time. “Hey, uh... can I get your number so I can check up on you? I don’t feel right sending you off alone.”

“Yeah,” he said quickly, catching eyes with the impatient ambulance driver over my shoulder. He rattled his number off so I could type it into my phone, and then he was gone.

Two hours later, when I’d finally helped clear the remaining skiers and resort personnel off the mountain, I pulled out my phone to text BJ.

Me: *This is Dallas from Ski Patrol. You hanging in there?*

After a few minutes, my phone vibrated with a response.

BJ: *Good news: only MCL sprain. Bad news: the taxi won't be here for another forty minutes.*

I stared at the phone. How the hell was he supposed to maneuver in and out of a cab without help? Not to mention I'd lived in Aster Valley long enough to know there were exactly two cabs, and neither one was as fast as a sleeping turtle. Forty minutes was optimistic.

Me: *I'll come get you.*

BJ: *I don't want to put you out.*

Me: *Too late, already in the truck.*

For some reason, I appreciated the chance to help him. Helping others was something I enjoyed doing anyway; it was one of the reasons I'd chosen the job I had. But helping BJ, who seemed like he could use a friend, was exactly the way I wanted to spend my evening. If I could make his injury a little less of a burden, it would be time well spent.

Not to mention way more enjoyable than going home to an empty house alone.

BJ: *Thanks. I really appreciate it.*

When I got to the emergency room, someone directed me to the bay where he was huddled under a pile of blankets with a large leg brace propped up on pillows.

He looked pale and tired and had the glazed eyes of someone on a lot of pain medication.

"Hey," I said softly. "You ready to go?"

He turned his head to face me, and a tear leaked out of one eye. "It hurts."

I stepped closer and reached out to wipe it away with a thumb. "I'll bet. Let's get you home, okay?"

"It's not home," he said in a small voice. "It's a vacation rental. I live up in Jackson Hole. I'm supposed to drive home

tomorrow.”

I looked down at his right leg encased in a foam immobilizer. “I’m afraid that’s not happening. You need to get some rest and ice that bad boy. Even if it wasn’t your right leg, I’m guessing you’re going to be on some pain meds for a couple of days.”

Another tear slid out as he reluctantly nodded. “Yeah.” He blew out a breath. “Thanks for coming to get me. The only guy I really knew in town was the one who had to leave.”

BJ seemed so forlorn, a completely different guy than the sparkling, bubbly one I’d seen joking around with Parker and Tiller’s group in the restaurant earlier. I’d noticed them when I’d popped in to show someone the way to the bathrooms, and I hadn’t been able to take my eyes off him.

He’d caught my eye because he was bright and happy, flirty and fun... not to mention gorgeous. I’d felt a little piece of my lonely heart stretching toward him like a flower toward the sun.

But now he was hurt and tired, worn-out and stressed. And my heart went out to him in an entirely different way.

Someone came in with a wheelchair and helped him transfer from the blanket nest. He was wearing the blue scrub shorts that the ski-area hospitals seemed to order in bulk for just this reason.

I grabbed the white plastic bag with his belongings and helped him put his parka back on. His one bare leg would freeze in the time it took me to transfer him to my truck, so I shrugged out of my own parka and put it over his lap.

He murmured a quiet thanks but kept his head down while we moved out of the room and down the hall. My stomach jangled with nerves.

The nurse who was pushing the wheelchair glanced at me. “You’re going to stay with him, right? He needs someone with him overnight. We sent his prescription to the pharmacy on Broad Street. It should be ready by the time you get there, and

they have a drive-thru window. Make sure he eats something, too, or those pain meds are going to do him wrong.”

She continued to walk me through the rest, ice, compression, elevation protocol, and I decided to nod along rather than inform her about my EMT training. When we finally got to my truck and got him belted into the passenger’s seat, she spoke to BJ like he was an elderly invalid.

“Now, *Mr. Tilstead?*” she shouted slowly.

BJ met my eye with a raised eyebrow that almost made me snort. “Yes, ma’am?”

“*You take it easy, okay?*”

The slight narrowing of his eyes was the only indication he was annoyed. “Yes, ma’am. I’ll sure try. I heard everything you said, and I promise not to try any more black diamonds this week. I’ll stick to the blue and green trails.”

Her eyes widened in alarm, and this time I couldn’t stop myself from laughing out loud.

“He’s kidding,” I assured her. “BJ’s hilarious.”

That one burst of snarkiness seemed to take the remainder of BJ’s energy. When I slid into the driver’s seat, I noticed he was trembling. I reached for the heater controls. “Sorry, the heat should kick on quick since I wasn’t inside long. Bear with me.”

“It’s not that. Pain meds make me shaky.” He slumped down in the seat, clearly trying to get comfortable. “They’ve told me it’s normal. I first learned it when I had my wisdom teeth out. Then I broke my arm a couple of years ago and confirmed it.”

I drove carefully out of the lot before turning toward Broad Street to pick up the prescription. “What else can I pick up for you while I’m in the pharmacy?” I asked. “Gatorade? Snacks?”

He huddled deep in his coat and shook his head. “No. I’m okay.”

He wasn't okay. I could tell he was trying not to put me out, but I couldn't stand the idea of leaving him high and dry.

"If I were to get you Gatorade against your will, what flavor would you want?"

The edge of BJ's mouth quirked up. "You have to ask? And here I thought you knew me so well, Mr. 'BJ's hilarious.'"

I felt my face heat. "I just... I didn't want her to..."

"I know," he said, still smiling tiredly. "Orange. Thanks."

I pulled in and left the truck running. BJ tried to give me back my coat, but I tucked it more tightly against his legs. "I run hot anyway," I said. "Just sit tight. I'll be right back."

After grabbing his prescription and half the snacks and drinks in the place, I returned to the truck to find him frowning at his phone.

"Everything okay?"

"Oh, peachy." He leaned his head back against the headrest and sighed. "Lost my job." His voice sounded flat and hopeless.

"Jesus. Over the phone?"

BJ shook his head. "Not really. I messaged one of my coworkers to ask her to cover for me next week, and she said the company just announced a change of ownership."

"How do you know the new owners won't keep you on?" I didn't know what he did for a living, but in my industry, a new owner wouldn't necessarily replace the ski patrol personnel.

"I teach fitness classes at a resort up in Jackson. Chandra says they're being acquired by a big hotel chain that's known for gutting wellness offerings. And when I tell them I won't be back for a few weeks..." He sighed, and it came out more like a pained groan.

"Damn, BJ. I'm sorry." I wished I could say something else to comfort him. Remind him that sometimes good things

come from hopeless situations, maybe. Or just give him a hug and show him he wasn't alone.

But I stopped myself. He wouldn't be the first guy to tell me I was being too Pollyanna or touchy-feely. And the truth was, I *didn't* really know BJ... even if it kinda felt like I did.

When I pulled into my driveway and turned off the ignition, BJ looked around in confusion. "This isn't my rental."

I began gathering the bags from the pharmacy. "Nope. It's my place. I'm going to stay with you tonight. You can decide if you want to stay here at my place or have me stay at yours. I'm fine either way, but I'll need to pack a few things and deal with my dog if you want me to stay at yours."

He looked over at me as if to assess whether I was being truthful. "You're going to stay with me? Really? Why would you do that? You don't even know me."

"You need someone around to help, and... to be honest, I could use the company. I moved to Aster Valley a few months ago, and..." I felt the heat of embarrassment on my face. "I don't know a lot of people here yet."

BJ's eyes widened. They still held the glassy sheen of the pain meds, but they looked warm and welcoming. I took a breath and tried to stave off any hesitation he might have. "Parker can vouch for me. I saw you were skiing with him today, and he knows me. We skied together in college."

"Oh, I... I don't really know him. I only met him today. Well... I mean... I met him earlier this week, but that was a misunderstanding."

I waited for him to tell me that wouldn't be enough of a personal reference for him to feel comfortable staying with me, but he surprised me.

"You sure you don't mind? I really don't want to go back to that big house tonight. I don't have any food, and it's too far out for delivery—"

"No," I blurted. "No, that's great. Let's get you inside."

I raced around the truck to help him out. With my arm around his smaller body, I managed to get him into the house without him having to put weight on his injured leg. If I'd thought he would have let me, I'd have carried him bride-style. Instead, I helped him hobble over to the sofa, nudging a very nosy corgi out of the way in the process.

"Who's this?" BJ asked with a grin.

"Her name is Cosi. My niece started calling her Cosette during a *Les Mis* phase, and it stuck."

"Cosi the corgi. I would not have pictured it," he said with a genuine smile. "She's flipping adorable."

"What do you mean? I don't look like the dog type?"

BJ glanced up at me. "You look like the dog type, but something bigger like a retriever or Rottweiler. This girl is pristine. Look at her coat. Surely she gets regular grooming with a coat like that."

I nodded and pretended to be serious. "Only the best for my girl. We had a time finding a new salon when we moved here. Thankfully, the woman at the realty place hooked me up. Louisa at the Barking Lot is a miracle worker."

Once I got him settled on the sofa with a blanket and the remote, I took Cosi outside for a quick break. As soon as we returned inside, she bolted over and took a spot on the floor closest to where BJ's hands could reach her for pets if, by any chance, he was inclined to want to do such a thing.

What followed was the fastest mutual love affair I'd ever witnessed.

BJ cooed at her and scratched her ears, giving her all the attention she demanded, while she sprawled shamelessly on the floor and panted her approval.

I shook my head. I refused to be jealous of my own dog. I made my way into the kitchen to put some things away and see what I could fix us for dinner.

I enjoyed cooking, but I rarely did it for just me. So I took the opportunity with BJ here to make a chicken pasta dish I

liked that would also be easy on his stomach.

Once I had everything ready, I brought it back to the living room, where I discovered him asleep with Cosi belly up between BJ and the back of the sofa. His arm was wrapped around her protectively in an adorable snuggle, and I couldn't help but be creepy and snap a photo with my phone.

He was attractive and kind.

And he liked my dog.

I sighed and set the food down on the coffee table. Why did I get crushes on random strangers? I didn't know anything about this guy other than seeing his cheerful interaction with people in the restaurant at lunch and his gentle affection for my dog. But something about him was calling out to me to look out for him. Keep him safe.

Make him happy.

I returned to the kitchen to grab the two tall glasses of ice water, and when I returned, Cosi's wriggling interest in the food on the table had awoken BJ.

"Sorry," I said, reaching over to pluck my dog up before she could cause him any discomfort. I shooed her back to the kitchen, where her own dinner was waiting, but she declined my suggestion and took a spot by the coffee table instead.

BJ winced when he tried to sit up, so I raced over to help him rearrange himself in a more comfortable position for eating. "Thanks," he said. The pain was clear on his face, so I checked the time to see if I could give him another pain pill yet.

"You can have another pill in twenty minutes," I said. "Do you think you can eat in the meantime? It'll help."

He nodded and took the pasta bowl I offered, inhaling the aroma appreciatively. "God, this looks amazing. You made this?"

"Yes, and I'm glad you're here so I had an excuse to cook. I used to make this when I had friends over in Park City, but

now that I'm in Aster Valley, I don't have anyone to host for dinner.”

“What about Parker? You said you two are friends through skiing.”

I explained that Parker lived and worked on the slopes in Vail and was only here for a visit. “I didn't even know he was here until I saw him out there today. He's friends with my bosses at work.”

Tiller and Mikey had invited me to join their group of friends for dinner at their lodge, but I'd already declined before BJ's injury. I'd accepted their invitations to meet for pizza and beer in the past, but I'd known meeting them for dinner would be more than I could face after a long day on the mountain. They were part of a group of established couples, and being around so many happily paired-off guys was hard when I wanted nothing more than a committed relationship for myself.

As we ate, BJ asked me about my move from the ski resort at Park City to the new operation here in Aster Valley. I explained that the Aster Valley opportunity was a chance for me to move closer to my family in Greeley and also be a bigger fish in a smaller pond at work.

BJ told me about how he'd only been in Jackson Hole a couple of years but that he liked living in a ski community.

“I grew up in Louisiana and then moved to Santa Fe when I turned twenty. There was a yoga instructor there I wanted to learn from, and she was incredibly generous in her teachings. She helped me get a placement at a resort teaching classes, and then a year later, the company moved me to their location in Jackson. And now... well, I guess I need to figure out where I'll go next.”

I couldn't believe my ears. Yoga was the reason I was able to do what I loved for a living. “You teach yoga?”

BJ's face lit up. “Yeah, have you tried it?”

I didn't even know where to begin. “I-I... I love yoga. I practice it daily. Yoga has given me the flexibility and core

strength to continue skiing. I was in an accident on the slopes in middle school and thought I'd never be able to ski again. My aunt made me try yoga when I couldn't get my range of motion back all the way. It changed my life."

We spent the next hour happily sharing stories about our love for yoga, the different types we'd tried, and our favorite positions. When I finally noticed the tightening around BJ's eyes, I realized I'd forgotten to give him his pain pill.

"Oh fuck," I blurted, jumping up to get the prescription from the kitchen. "I'm so sorry. Here, take this, and let me show you to the guest room."

Cosi followed us as I helped BJ to the small guest room with my sister's hand-me-down double bed covered in a heap of old homemade quilts.

I tried not to focus on how nice it felt to have him here, but I couldn't help but feel a warmth in my chest when I saw him nestled down in my guest bed.

"Dallas?" he asked as I was turning off the bedside lamp.

"Yeah?"

"I don't suppose you, um, *wax*. Do you?"

Did I wax? I blinked. The pain pill must've been hitting him hard already, poor guy. "Nope. My chest is pretty smooth already, and my skin's kinda sensitive, so..."

"Right. Right." He reached out and grabbed my hand. "Thank you for bringing me here. If I'd gone back to the rental alone, I would have ended up feeling pretty sorry for myself."

I squeezed his hand, wishing I could hold on to it a little longer. "Thank you for letting me. If I'd come back here alone, I would have ended up feeling sorry for myself, too."

We looked into each other's eyes for a few more beats before I lifted up his hand and pressed a kiss to it. It maybe should have felt awkward, but it didn't. In fact, it had been a long time since something had felt so right. "Shout if you need anything. Anything at all."

The soft smile on his face as I left the room stayed with me for a long time.

I expected Dallas to take me home the next morning, but he surprised me.

“Would it be okay if you stayed here an extra day?” he asked while keeping himself busy cracking eggs into a bowl. He wore nothing but pajama pants, because he really did “run hot,” and the way my eyes kept straying to his muscular naked chest was making *me* run hot, too. “Only, I have the day off, and I thought... we could hang out.”

He’d helped me limp into the kitchen and perch on a stool at the counter with my leg propped on the stool next to mine. Thankfully, I felt noticeably better today and like I could get by on over-the-counter pain meds instead of the heavier stuff.

“I don’t want to put you out,” I said. “But, um, yeah? I mean, if you want? I’d rather hang out with you than be alone.” The last thing I wanted to do was dwell on my own foolishness this past week, never mind face the looming reality about my job situation.

Besides which, Dallas’s presence was simply... comforting. He was a great listener. He had an amazing sense of humor. And he watched me in a way that wasn’t quite “I wanna dick you down” but wasn’t “I want to assess your vital signs” either. It made me feel protected and cosseted and cared for. *Noticed*.

Despite my resolution to swear off men and begin focusing on other things, I couldn’t help but want more.

Dallas looked up at me with a big smile. “Great. Same. I wanted to ask you more about your yoga classes, too.”

He grabbed a whisk and beat the eggs with quiet competence. My gaze locked on his big, strong fingers, and I shivered, remembering the night before and how he’d clasped my hand in his before he’d pressed it to his lips.

I couldn’t help wanting more of that either.

I cleared my throat. “Yes. Sure. Yoga classes. How can I help?”

“I haven’t been able to find a place here in Aster Valley that has what I want, and I thought maybe you knew of some online classes I could check out.”

My heartbeat ramped up. “I teach online classes.”

Dallas’s eyes widened. “No way. You’ll have to share a link so I can check them out.”

As he cooked breakfast, I told him about SocialAdrenaline and the content creation I did outside of my day job. He asked a ton of questions, and as soon as he moved us to the table to eat, he pulled out his phone to look it up.

“This looks amazing. I’ve heard of the app, but I didn’t realize it had yoga content.”

I told him about meeting Rocco in the content creator forum and how the forum had been invaluable for helping me launch my SocialAdrenaline platform.

“You have a bunch of followers, BJ. Could you do it full-time?” he asked. “Replace your income from the resort, I mean?”

I admitted that I’d been thinking about it but would need to run the numbers and make an actual business plan. Dallas’s eyes lit up. “Can I help? We can do it today if you want. I helped my friend Jamie do the same for his freelance writing business a few months ago. I have a finance degree with a minor in entrepreneurship from CSU. I think I’d go crazy stuck inside every day at a corporate job, but I love tackling this kind of thing for fun.”

I looked at him like he was crazy. “For fun? That side of things intimidates the hell out of me. I never went to college or anything. For me, it’s all about the yoga. Helping people feel better.”

Dallas reached over and squeezed my arm. “That’s why it’s better doing it with friends. I don’t have the creative, social side of things. So if you bring that to the table and I bring the analytic money stuff... we’ll make a good team.” His cheeks turned pink as if the thought of us partnering together for this business planning was somehow intimate.

Over the course of the day, though, I quickly learned it *was* intimate.

Sharing my personal financial details with him—like income, expenses, debt, and retirement plans—was nerve-racking, not to mention sharing my goals for the future, but he was supersweet during the whole thing and helped enter the information into a massive spreadsheet on his laptop.

The day before, I’d teased him about acting like he knew me well, but it almost felt like he did. He asked insightful questions, and we brainstormed ideas. I showed him through the app itself and the process of creating a content segment from start to finish. As soon as I mentioned some of the other ways SocialAdrenaline content creators monetized their content, he got even more excited and added tabs to his master spreadsheet.

Time passed quickly. We alternated periods of laughter and teasing with focus and determination. When I noticed him massaging his traps, I showed him some stretches I’d found helpful and corrected his form. Whenever I got uncomfortable sitting in one spot, he quickly noticed and helped me move somewhere else for a while.

Which was how we ended up both sitting on my bed in the late afternoon. The sun slanted in through the bedroom window and laid golden stripes across his face and hair. I’d already acknowledged to myself he was a beautiful bear of a man, someone I’d love to have a crush on if I hadn’t given up men in a huff before yesterday’s accident.

But watching him here now while he laughed with me, cared for me, and helped me plan my future was like seeing the promise of something incredible just out of my reach. Dallas was too good to be true. He was kind and attentive, caring and funny. He was smart and thoughtful and sexy as hell.

Men like that never wanted someone like me for more than a fuck.

“Your eyes are closing,” Dallas said with a soft laugh. “I think you need a break.”

“No. I’m enjoying this. It’s exciting. Well, it will be once I find a cheaper place to live than Jackson Hole, at least.”

It was true. In all the forecasting Dallas had done for me, it had become apparent I needed to move out of the expensive area where I currently lived.

“You could move here,” he suggested, shifting around to make sure my leg was still propped up comfortably. “It’s much more affordable than Park City was, so I’m sure it would be more affordable than Jackson.”

His suggestion sent bubbles of happiness and acceptance through me. Knowing I’d have a friend in him if I moved here was comforting. I already knew I liked the vibe of Aster Valley, and it had many of the same things I loved about Jackson.

“Stay with me if I fall asleep?” I murmured, not wanting him to leave even if I lost the battle to stay awake. Had I been more lucid, I might have been too hesitant to ask, but I was just sleepy enough to let my guard down.

“If you’re sure,” he said. I felt the bed move as he found a more comfortable position next to me. He was careful not to knock my injured leg, but because we were in a small double bed and he was a big, broad guy, he still moved against me.

Once he settled down, I rolled a little bit onto my side and blinked my eyes open to face him. “Thank you for being so damn nice to me. You’re a good friend.”

Dallas reached out and used his fingertip to brush a wrinkle in the pillowcase away from my eye. “You’re easy company,” he said softly. “I really like getting to know you. I... I’d like to *keep* getting to know you.”

He moved his fingertip across my cheek and along my jawline while I couldn’t do more than stare at him in disbelief. Was he attracted to me? Could this be real?

“Same,” I admitted.

We stayed like that for a long time, staring into each other’s eyes while Dallas’s fingers drew lazy lines across my skin. I fought to keep my eyes open, to enjoy every second of his attention, but I must have fallen asleep at some point because I awoke later when the light had turned from golden to a deeper amber color.

Dallas was still next to me, but we’d ended up with my head resting on his shoulder and his arm wrapped around me. He smelled amazing and felt warm and strong. He was awake and scrolling through his phone, and it took me a minute to realize he was watching my yoga videos on the SocialAdrenaline app.

He must have sensed my surprise because he turned to me with a sheepish grin. “Sorry, but I can’t stop watching. You’re magnetic. You have this incredible way of welcoming your students with humor and grace and seamlessly transitioning into a more serious, calming focus for the class itself.”

His words went straight to my heart. I took a lot of pride in my work, and hearing him praise it was a gift. “Thanks,” I said, sounding a little groggy from the sleep.

Dallas shifted again so I could see him without craning my neck. “BJ... I don’t understand how it’s possible you’re single.”

I snorted out a laugh without thinking. “It’s not for lack of trying, I promise.”

The look on Dallas’s face was tender and sweet. “Maybe you’ve been trying with the wrong people,” he said softly. “What if you tried with m—?”

Before he could finish, I lurched up and kissed him. It wasn't pretty or dignified at all, but from the way his arm tightened like a firm band around my back, I didn't think he minded much.

We kissed hungrily for a long time. Dallas's large body felt amazing under me until he recalled my injury.

"Shit, fuck. Babe, is your knee hurting?"

The little crease of concern in his forehead was everything to me. "It's okay. Mostly hurts if I bend it a certain way."

He caressed the side of my face. "You're sexy as hell. I want to strip you down and fuck you so badly. I'm having a hard time holding back."

I nodded stupidly. "Same."

Dallas's grin widened. "Same like you want to fuck me or same like you want me to fuck you? Either way is fine as long as it doesn't hurt your knee."

I bit my lip against a laugh and shook my head. "I don't care which. I just want to be naked and share an orgasm with you. But if I had to choose, I'd choose to bottom."

"Perfect."

Dallas leaned in to kiss me again, gently pushing me onto my back and murmuring a command for me to stay there and not exert myself. He proceeded to pull my clothes off piece by piece, dropping openmouthed kisses along revealed skin until I was covered in goose bumps and begging him to suck me or fuck me.

"Patience," he teased.

"I'm fresh out," I said on a gasp as he brushed his fingers over my sac. When I tried to arch up into his touch, he held my hips down.

"Stay still." His easy laughter made me grin. Being here like this with him was so much fun. I couldn't remember feeling this comfortable with someone in bed in a very long time.

He continued to toy with me: touching, tasting, and teasing until I was hard as fuck and precum dripped from my cock to my stomach.

“Dallas,” I begged again. “Make me come. Please make me come.”

He moved down, sucking and biting from my chest to my stomach and below until taking my dick in his hot mouth. I arched up again with a muffled shout. I brought my arm across my face to scream into it, not knowing how he’d feel about me screaming the house down.

From the heated look in his eyes as they met mine, I realized quickly he wouldn’t mind.

The tight, wet dance of his tongue around my shaft was enough to push me over the edge. Thankfully, he was stroking himself off while sucking me, so he came a few strokes after I did, shouting his own release into the room.

The sight of him, large and strong above me, skin damp from sweat and blotchy red from desire, was enough to make me suck in a breath of shock.

This beautiful man wanted to get to know me better, to *date me. Me.*

I closed my eyes to savor this moment.

“Babe?” he asked gently. “You good?”

I opened my eyes and grinned at him. “I would be, but you cheated me out of a full fuck.”

He laughed and plopped down on the bed beside me, propping his head up on his hand. “Who said we were done? We’re not done. Besides, you were the one who couldn’t hold it.”

I turned to him and pressed a kiss to his smooth chest, savoring the salty taste of him. “I’m lucky I held off as long as I did,” I admitted with a yawn. Despite my long nap, I was tired again... but in the best possible way.

“You know, we don’t have to get to everything today.” Dallas ran his fingers through my hair. When he spoke, his

voice had lost its teasing tone. “I was serious before. I want you to stay.”

I leaned back again to meet his eye. “Stay in Aster Valley?”

He took a deep breath. “Yes, but also... stay with me? I was planning on having a roommate when I budgeted for this place, but then my friend bailed and decided to stay in Park City. I know it sounds crazy but...”

I knew better than to jump into things this fast. I’d been burned a million times before by stupid spontaneity. Most recently, *yesterday*, after kissing all the Grindr frogs in Aster Valley looking for a guy who probably didn’t exist.

When I hesitated, Dallas rushed to reassure me. “It’s okay. You don’t need to say yes. And even if you’re tempted but you need more time to think about it, that’s okay, too. I don’t want to rush you or pressure you. I just... I really like you, and I feel like we’d make good roommates even if... other things didn’t work out between us.”

It all sounded so rational when that was the very opposite of how I felt. I felt excited and wild, nervous and hopeful. No matter what I’d sworn to myself the day before, I didn’t know how to make myself turn down a chance to be with someone as amazing as Dallas. He was everything I’d told Rocco I wanted.

But I was also way more invested than I should be, and if things didn’t work out, it would crush me far worse than losing my job or even letting go of my silly daydream about To-Do List Guy.

So I played it cool.

For two whole days.

DALLAS

I was trying to be patient when all I really wanted to do was dive in headfirst to a full-blown relationship with BJ Tilstead.

He was funny and fun, fascinating and kind. But he was also painfully insecure about the two of us. He'd made several comments over the past couple of days that implied he didn't understand why someone "like me" would be interested in someone "like him."

It hurt my heart to hear him talk like that because it hadn't taken long for me to discover how amazing he was. It also made me wonder if he was having second thoughts about moving his whole life to Aster Valley for a guy he barely knew.

The second full day of his recovery was the day he needed to move his stuff out of the rental house he'd shared with Rocco. By then, he was able to walk by himself with the help of the brace on his knee, so we loaded up in the truck and drove over to the rental to grab his things and clean up.

When we returned to my place, I forced him onto the sofa with Cosi while I put his stuff away in my room. Once we'd kissed and made out that first time, he'd slept with me, and we'd both admitted to loving spending full nights in each other's arms.

I hadn't dated anyone seriously in a long time, and I'd certainly never been able to sleep with them in my very own house. Until moving to Aster Valley, I'd had roommates and very little privacy. Now with BJ considering becoming both

my roommate and my boyfriend, it was beginning to feel more like a true home.

I could see us here together. BJ had already agreed to let me deliver him to the mid-mountain restaurant tomorrow during my work shift so he could meet up with Mikey and Tiller again. I wanted him to see what a great community Aster Valley was so he could picture a future here with me the way I was already beginning to picture it myself.

When I got back to the living room from putting his stuff away, I noticed he'd fallen asleep with his arms around my dog again, and the sight made my chest squeeze. BJ had already found his place in Aster Valley, and it was right here with me and Cosi. I just needed to be patient until he could see that for himself.

I snuck a picture of the two of them and texted my mom.

Me: *I think I met the man I'm going to marry.*

My heart thundered even though I hadn't even said the words out loud.

Mom: *OMG look at them! TELL ME EVERYTHING.*

I grinned at the screen before glancing back up at the two of them. How had I stumbled into this? I'd been so lonely here before BJ arrived. Even though I knew I'd meet people and get to know them over time, I'd only been here two months.

Now instead of worrying about my future, I was so incredibly excited.

I typed out another text to my mom. I'd already told her about meeting him and offering to take care of him.

Me: *He teaches Kundalini yoga.*

Mom: *NOMG. Shut up.*

Me: *And he's bubbly and kind. It makes me happy just to be in the same room with him.*

We texted back and forth about BJ for a while until he woke up.

“Why do you have a goofy smile on your face?” he asked, shifting over to see me better. Cosi let out a long exhale of annoyance but stayed asleep.

“I was telling my mom about you.”

BJ’s eyes widened. “Seriously?”

“Yeah. I hope that’s okay. I was telling her about your yoga classes and about the mentorship program you do for teen content creators on the SocialAdrenaline platform.”

He stretched and sat up, rubbing the heel of his palm over one eye. “Yeah. It’s a great program. That was actually how Rocco and I first met in the forum. He was looking for a mentor for two kids in Chicago who wanted to create yoga content. It was really cool, actually. These girls turned Broadway musical scores into yoga routines.”

As he continued to tell me about their project, he woke up and became his usual, animated self, flinging his hands around as he described some of the numbers and talking faster when he got to the most interesting details.

I moved over to the sofa to sit closer to him. Being in his sphere was both energizing and calming. I could see why his online classes had so many followers.

BJ paused for breath before surprising me. “No one’s ever told their mom about me before.”

“That can’t be true,” I told him. “Maybe they just didn’t tell you about it.”

He shook his head. “I’ve always wanted a boyfriend, a real relationship, but I’m not what guys seem to want long-term. I’m the guy they fuck, Dallas, not the guy they keep.”

I could see the fear of rejection in his eyes, and it killed me. I knew it was way too soon to make promises about forever, but I also knew instinctively that the connection between us was real and had been since the first moment I’d set eyes on him. It was the same feeling I’d gotten the first time I’d gone skiing as a little kid. The same feeling I’d gotten the first time I’d done yoga.

This was meant for me. It was *mine*.

And if BJ and I didn't work out, I sure as heck didn't want it to happen because I'd been trying to hold back and be reasonable.

I reached out to clasp BJ's jaw, and whatever he saw on my face made his pulse race and his Adam's apple bob beneath my fingers.

"I'm keeping you," I told him firmly. "I don't want to scare you off, and I don't want you to feel pressured, but... I think you're the guy I've been looking for since... forever. It's real for me. And I want a shot to convince you that I can be that guy for you, too."

I pulled out my phone and showed him the text I'd sent my mom.

BJ's eyes shone with happy tears, and his face widened in an adorable grin. "Yeah?"

I leaned over and pressed a soft kiss to his lips. "Yeah," I said before kissing him again, more thoroughly. We kissed for a long time before it turned hot enough for us to scramble for each other's cocks and stroke each other off in a dirty handie exchange on the sofa.

Cosi was not amused.



The next day I got BJ settled in the mid-mountain restaurant before starting my shift on the slopes. I'd left him talking to Tiller about the possibility of offering sunrise yoga classes on the mountain, and when I came back inside for my lunch break, BJ was busily typing in his laptop.

My heart jumped at the sight of him. "Hey," I said, leaning over to kiss him. "I can't tell you how incredible it is to see you here during my break."

He shot a beaming smile up at me. "This place is amazing. I'm so full of ideas, and I've met so many people. Tiller

introduced me to a woman named Nan, who teaches water aerobics at the gym in town. She gave me the name of the woman who hires fitness teachers.”

I slid into the booth across from him. “I thought you wanted to do your SocialAdrenaline classes full-time?”

He nodded. “I do, but this would be a great way to get to know people in town. And if they like my classes, they might go find me on SocialAdrenaline, too.”

After placing our order for lunch, we talked through more of his morning. I gradually realized there’d been a shift in his language from *if* to *when*. He talked about how he’d organize his schedule when he moved to Aster Valley and whether or not he would need to change his health insurance coverage when he moved from Wyoming to Colorado.

I bit my tongue to keep from pointing out the change and asking him what he meant by it. Did he mean he was moving here, or did it mean he was moving here *to be with me*?

We had a great time at lunch, talking and flirting as usual. Two of my coworkers came up to say hello, and my friend Robin asked where BJ was visiting from. BJ reached across the table for my hand. His was clammy and trembling a little.

He swallowed. “Actually, I’m going to be moving here to Aster Valley. With Dallas. Probably sometime soon.”

His eyes flicked to me as if worried I’d distance myself from claiming him publicly. Instead, I pulled his hand up to my lips and pressed a kiss to it, just like I had that first night he’d stayed with me. “And thank god for that. I can’t freaking wait. Can’t happen soon enough.”

Robin smiled and happily invited BJ to join us the next time we went to trivia night. By the time we were left alone, it was almost time for my break to be over.

“You want to take the truck home, or are you happy to stay?” I asked, standing up. “I can probably catch a ride back with one of these guys.”

“Happy to stay,” he said, but he had an odd tone in his voice. I moved closer and squatted down so I could meet his

eyes. I caressed his cheek with my thumb.

“Hey, what’s up?”

“This is too good to be true,” he whispered. BJ looked so vulnerable, I’d do anything to reassure him.

“What part?”

“All of it. This town. The people. The opportunity to run my own business.” His chin looked a little wobbly. “You. You most of all.”

“I feel the same way,” I admitted. “But I don’t want to miss out on whatever time I have with you by worrying it’s going to end any minute. Make sense?”

BJ nodded and gave me a sheepish smile. “You make it sound so easy.”

“No. I know it’s not. But I want it so badly, and you do, too.”

“Yeah. I really do.”

I nudged him over in the booth and slid in next to him so we could face each other properly. Then I took his hands in mine and held them to my chest. “I am working for the next five days, and then I have three days off. By then, your knee should be much better. I think we should drive my truck up to Jackson, pack up your stuff, and bring it back here. What do you say?”

He bit his bottom lip indecisively, maybe worrying that we were moving too fast. “What would we do with Cosi? Take her with us?”

I shook my head. “No, Louisa at the Barking Lot will look after her. She’s Cosi’s biggest fan.”

“I’d have to contact my landlord.” He tunneled a hand through his hair. “And I’d need to get a PO box here before we go so I can have my mail forwarded. I’m not sure—”

“Breathe, baby. There’s plenty of time for everything. As soon as we get home tonight, we can make a to-do list and go through it point by point, okay?”

BJ froze, his eyes locked on mine. “A list.”

“Uh... yeah?” I shrugged, a little embarrassed. “Why? Is that weird? I make myself a to-do list almost every day. You know, to remind myself to call my mom, and practice my yoga, and buy ski wax, and take deep breaths, and get dog food, and— Are you okay? Why are you looking at me like that?”

BJ shook his head and pressed his lips together tightly. He seemed to be fighting laughter, but his eyes were shining with a softer emotion, and I could read my future there, clear as day.

“*Ski wax?*” he managed to choke out. “Dear god. *Ski wax!*”

“Well, yeah. You put it on the bottom of your—*mmmph!*”

I broke off as BJ wrapped his arms around my neck and yanked me down into a kiss that was hot and sweet and utterly perfect.

“I guess, uh...” I licked my lips, chasing the taste of him. “I guess you really like lists, huh?”

“I love them,” he said fervently. “*Love* them. Lists change lives.”

“Uh. Okay.” I frowned. “I feel like there’s a story there.”

“Oh, there is. It’s a great one. You’re gonna laugh. You might cry. But there’s gonna be a very happy ending,” BJ promised. “And I’ll tell you all about it in five days, ’cause it’s gonna be a long-ass drive to Jackson to get my stuff.”

“Wait, you’re gonna do it?” I grinned, ecstatic that he was ready to take the leap. “This week? You sure?”

“*We’re* gonna do it,” he confirmed, suddenly radiating confidence. “And Dallas... I am absolutely positive. Because some things are just meant to be.”



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Lucy

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lucy Lennox is a mother of three sarcastic kids. Born and raised in the southeast, she now resides outside of Atlanta finally putting good use to that English Lit degree.

Lucy enjoys naps, pizza, and procrastinating. She is married to someone who is better at math than romance but who makes her laugh every single day and is the best dancer in the history of ever.

She stays up way too late each night reading gay romance because it's simply the best thing ever.

For more information and to stay updated about future releases, please sign up for Lucy's author newsletter [here](#).

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