



CATCHING OUT



NICKY JAMES

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Rail Riders

Nicky James



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Freight-Hopping Terms

Catching Out – Leaving the city via freight train

On the fly – Catching a freight train while it's moving

Bulls – Railyard police (they have the power to arrest)

Greenhorn (or green) – A newbie rider

Slack Tension - Slack can build between the “knuckles” (joints) of each train car due to changes of speed. This results in sudden “pops” or violent jerks, often throwing or killing riders. Mostly happens during starting and stopping.

Riding suicide – Standing or balancing in a spot on a moving freight train where there is no solid ground between you and the tracks below.

Coupling/uncoupling – putting train cars together or taking them apart. Sometimes referred to as “humping”

Boxcar - Enclosed freight car, typically with sliding doors on the sides that are not usually unlocked. Very ideal for riding inside (if you can get in); not equipped with a low-hanging ladder, which makes them difficult to jump if the train is moving.

Grainers - Type of car with a slight overhang. Good for riding and hiding.

Stackers/Intermodal Stackers - Cargo containers. Generally going long distances. At the end of each container are wells (not always usable). Can be single or stacked two high. Double stackers can sometimes provide an overhang for protection from the weather. Access to inside is usually unavailable (like boxcars) but on occasion an open door can be found. They are located on the ends.

Gondola - Lowest priority freight car usually filled with junk (bulk materials, scrap metal, logs, lumber, steel, sand, copper, iron ore, wood chips.) Like a big dumpster with no lid. Exposed to weather and generally aren't going far and can be left in remote areas. Not ideal.

Piggyback Car - A flatbed train car that is carrying a semi trailer.

Chapter One

Dodger

Was it possible the answers I'd been seeking for years were on the eighteenth floor of a high-rise in downtown Toronto? I was about to find out. Call it a hunch, but meeting this stranger felt like a step in the right direction, and I'd been spinning my wheels for too many years.

Things were going to change. I could feel it.

On the busy sidewalk in front of the tan brick building, I craned my neck as I tried and failed to count how many stories high this particular apartment went. The inset balconies blurred the higher I got, and I kept messing up. It didn't help when some woman on her cell phone, who wasn't watching where she was going, knocked into me. She had the audacity to give me a dirty look as she wobbled on her high heels and clip-clopped away.

I gave her the finger, but she didn't see since she'd already turned her back.

Drawing deeply from my last cigarette, I squinted into the afternoon sun and watched the traffic zipping up and down Eglinton Avenue. Smog hung over the city, a thick inescapable haze of pollution. It was busy and noisy, two things I always associated with Toronto. The temperature was decent for a change. It hadn't been this warm a few days ago, and I was hoping it would stick around. May was at an end, and June meant summer.

June meant freedom—for a few months at least.

After one last drag, I flicked my cigarette butt to the ground and stomped on it before blowing a thin trail of smoke from my lungs. I heaved my rucksack off the bus stop bench and hooked it over my shoulder, turning to the front doors of the apartment.

This was it. Time to meet this Brady Thompson stranger and see if he had the answers I didn't.

I buzzed the apartment number he'd given me. A minute passed before a crackly voice came over the intercom.

“Hello?”

The guy knew I'd landed outside the railyard a few hours ago. I'd texted him, but it had taken time to get to York and find his place.

“Hey, it's me. Dodger.”

“Oh. Okay, cool. Um... come on up.”

The door buzzed and clicked, and I grabbed the handle, yanking it open. There was no way in hell I was climbing

eighteen flights of stairs. I wasn't one of those hippy health nuts who needed to prove themselves with their Fitbits and gym memberships.

I stayed active in other ways—like chasing freights.

The elevator was slow and rattly. It gave me another minute to process the randomness of the whole situation. It had been a week since my good buddy RaptorZ had contacted me about this U of T student, and I'd agreed to help him out without a second thought.

Help him do what? I had no idea. All I knew was Brady Thompson had information about the CP Rail killer, and proving a killer truly existed had become my life goal, so I'd agreed to travel to Toronto to meet him.

On the eighteenth floor, the doors clattered open, and I found myself in a dimly lit hallway that smelled of cabbage and old cigarette smoke. The carpeting was shit brown with a mosaic patterning meant to hide stains.

It didn't.

I followed it along, listening to the commotion from behind several doors. People living their lives. A baby cried. A dog barked. Someone had their TV set at max volume, the theme song for *SpongeBob SquarePants* leaking into the hall.

I checked the numbers on the doors until I came to the one marked 1812. The little brass number two on the end dangled upside down. I stared at the peephole, wondering if Brady Thompson was watching me from the other side.

Without further ado, I knocked. I wasn't one to get nervous or overthink circumstances. I was a go-with-the-flow type. If anything, seeking out this Brady character had filled me with excited energy. He was a believer like me. Most people didn't think the rail killer existed.

Apart from RaptorZ, the rest of my friends thought I was nuts. They were convinced the whole thing was a myth to scare riders.

The door opened two inches, catching on the inside chain. A single, smoky-blue-colored eye peeked around the corner. Above the eye was a perfectly sculpted blond eyebrow set at a wary angle. The apartment was brightly lit, highlighting the stranger's wheat-colored hair and fine-boned profile.

I couldn't get a read on his age since I was only looking at half his face.

“Dodger?”

“Are you expecting someone else?”

“No.” Brady huffed a nervous laugh, closed the door, slid the lock free, and opened it again. “Sorry. You can never be too careful. Please, come in.” He made a flourishing gesture, granting me entrance.

Before closing the door, he glanced down the hall. “Are you alone?”

“Um, yeah.”

He frowned as he closed the door. “Oh.”

First impressions? Brady Thompson was preppy. He wore wrinkle-free chinos, a white cotton button-down—the sleeves rolled to his forearms and the front open to expose his throat and prominent collarbones—a sweater vest, and argyle socks.

His blondish hair was stylish with a slight wave. It reminded me of how those posers and academics at university tended to wear their hair. I'd done jobs for guys like Brady while working as an electrician for my dad's company back home in Moose Jaw. I'd have bet the guy's trust fund he came from money. He was well-groomed. Primped, if I had to choose a word. Like he'd fussed extensively before I'd shown up.

Brady examined me in much the same fashion, and I could only imagine the stereotypes he was ticking off on a checklist inside his head as he took in my riding gear, tattered rucksack, and enervated attitude. I was exhausted and smelled like diesel fuel, a side effect of having traveled thirty-five hours on a freight to get to Toronto. He probably thought I was some homeless chump who would just as soon steal from him as help him.

It couldn't be helped. The guy shouldn't judge if he wanted my help.

“So, hey.” I held out a hand. My mother had taught me manners, and my father had smacked me upside the head enough times I'd learned to use them. Besides, someone needed to cut the awkward tension, or we'd be standing in the entryway to his apartment, staring at each other, all day. I had better things to do. “Good to finally meet you. Not gonna lie,

I'm pretty hyped to hear what you've got on my killer. Rap said you needed some help, is that right?"

Brady seemed to hesitate a moment before accepting the handshake. "Yes. Um... thank you for coming all this way. So, is Dodger a nickname?" He made a little gesture with his hand, waving a finger at me as he asked. There was a slight campiness to his voice, a faint lilt.

"It is, but only the privileged get to know my real name, so don't ask."

"Fair enough." He rubbed his hands together. "I won't try to cipher the meaning behind it. Although, if we're going to work companionably with one another"—he made a railroad gesture, swinging two fingers between us—"it might be in our best interest to inject a little trust into this alliance."

"No."

He dropped his hands. "Oh. Okay. I understand. Well, I guess we can get to it. Um... do you mind leaving your boots at the door?" He indicated my feet, wrinkling his nose at my mud-caked footwear. "They make us pay a hefty deposit on these places, and I have no desire to spend half a day scrubbing muck out of the cream carpeting." Another flailing gesture over his shoulder as he motioned to the other room and his precious carpeting.

"No problem."

The guy was clearly one of those people who talked with his hands. He was a little over the top, expressive, but I bit my

tongue and untied my boots, kicking them off and leaving them on a plastic mat by the door. I dropped my rucksack beside them since I doubted I needed it.

“Can I get you a drink or something to eat?”

“Maybe in a bit. I’d like to know why I came all this way. Rap said you weren’t forthcoming, but you needed help with something. Not gonna lie, I’m curious. The CP Rail killer has been a personal project of mine for a long time. It’s a bit of an obsession. Most people think it’s hooky nonsense, so it’s nice to find someone who doesn’t.”

Brady stalled, one hand on a hip, the other near his mouth, and he stared at me like I was some rare piece of art. He didn’t move into the apartment and kept searching my face for something I couldn’t discern. Maybe he was trying to decide whether he could trust me.

I cocked a brow. “What? Why are you staring at me like that?”

“It’s not hooky nonsense. There *is* a killer.” He flashed his attention over his shoulder. “I’m glad we’re on the same page. I might be a bit obsessed myself. I’ve rationalized my fixation by loosely turning it into the focus for my thesis.” He rolled his eyes with a frustrated sigh. “I’m still working on it. It’s a mess. Anyhow, I don’t have people over often, but when I do, they... don’t understand.”

“Now I’m intrigued.”

“Let me show you.” He made a rolling motion with a hand, allowing me to go ahead.

I already knew Brady Thompson was brilliantly smart. RaptorZ had told me he was taking some forensic or behavioral science thing at the university. His intelligence showed in his manner of speech and presentation. When I looked at some people, I could tell that they were way smarter than the average Joe. Brady was one of them.

If I hadn't known in advance, Brady's apartment would have been a dead giveaway.

I'd heard the workings of a genius's brain could be categorized as anarchic. Too much going on inside for them to think in a straight line. It leaked out their ears or some shit. Brady's apartment reflected that sentiment to a T. Not in a messy way, but in a controlled chaos sort of way. It was an explosion of the inner workings of his brain. It was a Dr. Sheldon Cooper meets Dr. Spencer Reid type of moment, and my jaw came unhinged.

“Holy shit.” I spun, gaping, unwilling to blink and miss anything.

Brady stood off to the side, his expression wary. He had one arm wrapped around his middle and the other balanced on top, hand poised over his mouth. “It's excessive. I know.”

“It's fucking incredible. I'll say it again. Holy shit.”

The largest wall in the living room was covered with an oversized, cross-country map of all the CP and CN Rail lines. I

had a similar one in my basement apartment at my parents' house back in Moose Jaw, but it was half the size and far less detailed. This one showed decommissioned lines going back a hundred years. Where he got the map, I had no idea, but I was jealous as fuck and wanted one. It was easily six feet long and four feet high.

Off to one side were umpteen photographs, lined up in a perfect grid format, four across and three down. They were some of the missing riders, the ones who had turned up dead. I knew because I had the same collection on my wall at home. Brady was missing a few. I didn't know the riders personally, but I had been keeping my own notes since this whole strange thing had begun.

Surrounding the map were charts and various handwritten notes. Oddly, there were white eight-and-a-half-by-eleven pieces of paper taped beside each. Thumbtacks and colored string tied each section of notes to a specific part of the map. It wasn't hard to sort out. The notes corresponded with the location where a body had been found. There were twelve.

On another wall, Brady had hung clipboards filled with wads more paper. I couldn't read them from where I stood, but above each was a small, colored strip of tape with a bold string of numbers written in black marker. I wasn't sure what they meant.

Whiteboards were balanced against the third wall, with illegible scribbles filling every square inch of space in red and blue and black dry-erase ink.

There were file boxes stacked around the room, some with their lids off, displaying fat folders and loose papers. A stack of textbooks and newspapers littered the coffee table. They surrounded an open laptop.

Lastly, a narrow bookshelf sat at an angle in one of the corners. It was filled with more textbooks, vastly focused on forensic science and criminal psychology.

There was no TV in the room, no game system, no knickknacks or plants or decorations of any kind. It was the essence of madness. It was a room more fitted to those cop shows than one belonging to a university student, and I was in love.

I circled the room twice, unable to pick my jaw up off the floor, absorbing every detail. There were no words for what I was feeling. My room back home was similar but on a much, much smaller scale.

On my third circuit, I paused, staring at the odd display of blank white papers around the map beside his notes. They seemed to be covering something. Frowning, I approached and reached out, intent on lifting one to see what was hiding underneath.

Brady was beside me in a flash, clamping a hand around my upper arm, finger theatrically poised in the air, asking me to hang on a second.

“A word of warning, if I may. I wasn’t sure how squeamish you were, so I covered the more graphic photographs before you arrived. As a precaution and courtesy.”

I studied Brady's expression. His eyes were bluer than I'd originally thought, and they reflected the lamplight, showing flecks of silver and granite. His attention was riveted to my face, and he was serious. I mean, why would he lie about something like that?

"What do you mean graphic?" It might have been a dumb question, but if he meant what I thought he meant, then he had a lot of explaining to do. "What's under there?"

Brady flicked his attention to one of the sheets of white paper and back. "They're crime scene photographs. Not pretty."

There was no hint of deception in his tone or body language, so I approached the closest group of pictures and lifted the white paper to see for myself. The instant I laid eyes on the image underneath, I tore my hand away like I'd been burned. My stomach muscles tightened as the paper fluttered back into place.

"Dude. What the fuck?"

"I did warn you."

He had.

My attention jumped from one white piece of paper to another. There were dozens. The information surrounding the map was segmented into groups. If my assumption was correct, each pertained to a specific rider. The strings showed where the bodies had been recovered.

And each group, apart from two, contained at least two covered photographs.

“How the hell did you get crime scene photos? I thought the police dismissed their deaths as accidents.”

“In essence, they have. When a dead body is found, the authorities have an obligation to investigate. A case is automatically formed until the cause of death is determined. These riders’ deaths”—he made a large circular motion over a section of the wall—“were deemed accidental in most cases. Two of them”—Brady pointed—“are technically unsolved since their districts investigated their deaths as suspicious.”

“That doesn’t explain how you got these pictures.”

Brady shrugged. “I have two degrees from the U of T. Behavioral science and forensic psychology. I also minored in criminal justice. I’m also in the process of writing my thesis, so I was able to sweet-talk my way into getting the information surrounding these deaths. None of them are open investigations. It wasn’t as hard as you think. You just have to know the process, and I do.”

His satisfied, lopsided grin told me he was quite proud of himself.

Well, goddamn. I was impressed too. The guy might have been a bit preppy and flashy with his excessive hand gestures, but he had bigger balls than me. I would have never thought to contact the police to ask for crime scene information.

“I also have autopsy reports and detailed information taken from the accident scenes.” He waved a hand at the clipboards on the walls. “There are plenty of holes, but to be fair, mostly these cases weren’t treated as suspicious. Or, rather, not for long.”

“No, I get it.” I edge closer to the covered picture I’d peeked at a moment before and lifted the paper again, better prepared for what was underneath. “It’s hard to tell if there’s foul play when a train is involved. I know the police think these guys fell or whatever. Clumsy riders. I don’t buy it.”

My stomach cramped at the devastation on the glossy print. My gorge rose, but I swallowed a few times, forcing the acid down. Without thinking too much about it, I tore the blank paper from the wall, then the next, and the next, until I’d revealed all the grisly images Brady had covered for my benefit. If I was doing this, I wouldn’t allow myself to get queasy. It was all in my head. It was a mindset. I could turn it off like a light switch. Voilà, done! These were guys from my community. I may not have known them personally, but they were *my* people, and I’d dedicated myself to finding their killer and getting them justice.

Brady followed me around the room, scooping up the discarded pages as fast as I threw them on the floor. He straightened them by tapping their edges on the coffee table and set them aside.

Yes, because I’d messed up his nice, neat apartment. God forbid. I barely contained an eye roll. Organized chaos, I

reminded myself. The poor tormented genius.

“Overall, I’m impressed,” I said, nodding at the display. “I have a similar setup back home but not nearly this detailed. “However, you’ve only focused on the riders who’ve turned up dead. That’s where I’ve got you beat, my man.”

“What do you mean?” The flash of intrigue in Brady’s eyes made me chuckle.

“There are at least five other riders that I know of who’ve gone missing from the community. No rhyme or reason. They just up and vanished one day without a trace.”

Brady’s manicured brows rose. His fine lips parted, and his gaze turned inward as that intelligent brain of his worked. “Interesting.” It was said almost to himself. “That fits... Yes. Yes, this could be it... We need to talk about this. Do you have information about them?”

“Some. I took pictures of my set up at home before leaving, in case we needed it, but—”

“Let me see.” Brady perked up and waved a hand.

“Hang on. Tell me why I’m here and what you want me to do first. Explain all this shit.”

Brady dropped his hand, his lips puckered to the side as he studied my face. “Okay. That’s fair.” He glanced around the room, eyes squinting like he was trying to take it all in at once or see the bigger picture. “Your information might change things. It wasn’t something I considered. How could I have been so stupid? That’s why I have gaps. Of course there are

ones who've gone undiscovered. It makes perfect sense." He glanced at his map. "I see it now. It's already coming together."

"Dude, you're babbling. You've gotta explain yourself. How does my info change your info?"

He snapped out of his trance and pinned me with a wild, almost giddy expression. "There's a lot to explain, but the long and short of it is, I think I know how this guy operates. I think I have a solid idea of his pattern. Until now, there have been a few holes in my theory, which is why no one will listen to me. But this—" He rattled his head as though forcing himself not to segue off course. Then the hands started again. "My initial goal in asking you to come here was to have you confirm a few things about my theory."

"How so? What do you mean?"

"What do you know about serial killers?"

"Not much. Just the shit I've seen on TV."

"No. No, no, no." Brady began to pace, hand over his mouth again and gaze far away. "All right. Let me summarize. One of the things we look for is geographical patterning. It's rare to see something this widespread." He tipped his chin at the map. "Usually, killers of this nature stick to a much more condensed area, like *one* city or *one* county. Killers like this who operate on such a large scale aren't caught sooner because the deaths aren't connected. There are too many jurisdictions all dipping their hands in the pot. The information isn't shared, and

therefore, the deaths go unsolved or are mistakenly filed as accidental.”

Brady waved a dismissive hand as though he'd been rambling. “It’s all part of what I’m trying to write in my thesis. Somewhat. Not the point. Anyhow, we’re trained to look for geographical patterns. Our rail killer has been speaking to us, but no one has listened.” He leaned in, lowering his voice. “No one but us.”

A shiver raced up my spine, raising goose bumps along my neck and over my scalp.

The intensity of Brady’s piercing blue eyes was unsettling.

“So there’s a pattern?”

“Indeed. Until now, there have been holes in the pattern. Holes big enough I can’t get a single district to listen to me. Of course, when I approached them, I was just a student. I hadn’t quite finished my degrees, so what would I know, right? But I felt confident, that with help, I could fill in those holes. Hence why I reached out to the riding community.” He huffed a laugh, and a coy smile filled his face—that same lopsided grin appeared. His top lip caught on the edge of an eyetooth, making it peek out a fraction. “And then you stroll in with information I didn’t have and potentially confirm my theory without doing anything at all. It’s fate.”

My brows kissed my hairline. “Excuse me? Dude, no offense, but you’ve got this look on your face like you’re so happy you could kiss me right now, and it’s kinda weird.”

The smile vanished in a flash, and Brady dashed his gaze away, then back, his cheeks a light shade of pink. “I’m sorry. It’s... I’m excited is all.”

I laughed. “I was teasing. Chill. Can you elaborate? I’ve been here twenty minutes. I’m not sure how I confirmed your theory or connected your dots or whatever.”

“If I’m right, if my pattern is indeed a pattern, I may be able to locate some of your missing riders.”

The tables had turned. I was pretty sure it was me who was looking at Brady like I wanted to kiss him now. “No shit.” I understood. “Fucking fate.”

Brady wiggled his brows. “Indeed.”

Chapter Two

Brady

I had rules for a reason. Some of them helped me function so I wouldn't spend all night working and remembered to get adequate sleep. I might have a higher-than-average IQ, but I was a bit of a dolt when it came to self-care. I'd been like that my whole life. Without a slew of reminder alerts on my phone, things like eating and grocery shopping tended to go forgotten.

My other rules were strictly for self-preservation. I'd learned over the years. I tended to make a lot of judgment errors when it came to people in general. I was awkward and miscalculated social cues on a regular basis.

Dodger had been in my apartment for all of twenty minutes, and I'd broken the single most important rule in my repertoire. The golden rule.

Never flirt with a straight guy.

To be fair, I didn't know if he was gay, straight, bisexual, or otherwise, but if I'd learned anything growing up, it was that it was always safer to err on the side of caution. Besides, I

hadn't flirted on purpose. It was pure elation at the idea that our two worlds had come together so perfectly. It was symbiosis. Fate, as I'd stupidly called it. Not that I believed in supernatural developments or that they could occur between two people, but it was the only way to explain it. I was still reeling, although in a much more controlled fashion since Dodger had called me out.

He was not who I expected.

After spending a few months browsing the freight-hopping community forums and learning what these people were all about, I'd taken a leap of faith and made a post, reaching out for some help. Most of the members seemed to be ragtag teenagers or kids in their early twenties who were out to break the rules and prove something to the world. Vagabonds with a misguided sense of right and wrong. I was less inclined to call them homeless, but I supposed that was what they were.

The freight hoppers I'd met online were wanderers at heart. Drifters by nature. They lived where they landed and seemed to like it that way. They were rough around the edges with tattered, filthy clothing, gaunt, underfed frames, and more times than not, poor dental hygiene. Their hair was scraggly, and their faces were dirty.

Was I stereotyping? Absolutely, but there was much to be desired in the hundred or so profile pictures I'd flipped through while seeking a person who might be willing to help me. Honestly, I hadn't expected to find much help online. It was a last resort since I'd hit a wall.

Dodger didn't quite fit the mold. He was not homeless, so far as I understood, nor was he in the age bracket of the majority of the freight-hopping crowd. If I had to guess, I would have said he was closer to thirty, which surprised me. He was a healthy weight, not scrawny and definitely not fat. His chestnut brown hair was glossy and clean, longer, almost to his shoulders. It framed his face, cutting with gentle ski slopes near his chin. The smile he aimed in my direction showed nice teeth.

Although he stank of diesel fuel and cigarettes, his clothing was in good repair. There was intelligence behind his coffee-brown eyes—for which I was grateful—but his dark-framed glasses were smudged in several places, and it was bugging me to no end because he didn't seem to notice.

His attention was back on the map. He'd moved closer and was studying it with his mouth agape, following the lines of string I'd attached from victim to location. Would he notice? Was he familiar enough with the rail lines to understand the significance behind the pattern? Would he pick out the same gaps that had caught my attention?

I doubted it. It had taken me months of research to figure it out, and he didn't have the same access to certain files.

“How about I order some food and catch you up on my research? Your last ride was a long one, correct? I researched it. Thirty-some-odd hours? You must be hungry.”

Dodger glanced over his shoulder. “Thirty-five. I could eat, I guess. What did you have in mind?”

“Take your pick. You can get pretty much anything around here. My palate is versatile.”

“Your palate is versatile? Who says that?”

I grimaced and pointed at myself. “Socially awkward individuals. Forgive me. I’ll grab the takeout menus I’ve collected.” I thumbed toward the kitchen then excused myself.

I rarely cooked, so the stack of menus I kept in the kitchen drawer was extensive. When I returned to the living room, Dodger had one of the clipboards in hand and was paging through it with a frown. They were autopsy reports. They’d been tricky to acquire, but as a student taking forensics, I’d sweet-talked my way into a lot of things when it came to this case.

“Do you understand this shit?” Dodger waved the clipboard at me.

“I do.”

“It’s all medical mumbo jumbo.”

“Very informative medical mumbo jumbo. It gives us a cause of death.”

Dodger peered up from the form with a quirked brow. “And how’d they die?”

“They all fell off a train.”

“Are you shitting me, or are you for real?”

“I don’t... shit people.”

Dodger snorted and rehung the clipboard. “Wow, you’re something, aren’t you?”

I didn’t know how to respond to that, so I handed him the takeout menus.

He spent several minutes going through them while I stared at the smears on his glasses.

“Do you require corrective lenses to read? Rather, are those bifocals?”

“Nah, just for distance. Why?”

“Good.” I carefully removed them from his face. “Then I’m going to clean them before it gives me a coronary.”

“What the hell are you doing?” Dodger made a grab for his glasses, but I ducked around him, heading for the kitchen.

“You’ll thank me. I don’t know how you see anything out of them. They’re filthy.”

“Dude, you don’t go taking someone’s glasses off.”

I paused, evaluating the social protocol and deciding Dodger was probably right, but I didn’t care. If I didn’t remedy the situation, I would never be able to focus on the task at hand, and we had a lot to talk about.

He followed me into the kitchen, squinting and sneering. Instead of fighting me over the glasses, he waited while I took my time polishing them until they shined. When I finished, he made a grab for them—which would have resulted in oily finger smears all over again—so I tutted and pinned him with

a don't-you-dare expression. His attempt at animosity was canceled out by the way he tried failingly to bring my face into focus.

When he relented, I carefully set his glasses back on his nose. "There. Much better. You're welcome."

For a solid minute, he glared. I almost looked away but held my ground, glaring back.

In the end, he huffed, fighting a grin and shaking his head. "Don't ever do that again. Here." He shoved a menu against my chest. "Thai. Order whatever you usually get times two. I'm easy."

I used my favorite takeout app, and once the order was placed, it was time to get down to work. Protocol suggested I invite my guest to have a seat, but where? The private investigation I'd undertaken months ago had spread like a disease through my whole apartment. The only place unaffected was my bedroom because who could sleep surrounded by graphic images of dead bodies? Not me.

However, I wasn't sure I should persuade a stranger to venture into my bedroom, regardless of my reasoning.

In the living room, Dodger didn't seem inclined to sit. He was too busy studying my work. Pride bloomed in my chest. I was eager to share information and hear his thoughts, but first, I had questions. I didn't know a thing about this guy.

"How long have you been riding?"

He didn't take his eyes off the map. "About ten years."

“Ten years. Huh. So, you took to the rails when you were... how old?”

Dodger glanced over his shoulder. “Why don’t you just ask me how old I am instead of beating around the bush?”

“Fair enough. How old are you?”

“Twenty-nine.”

I was right. He was outside the average age range of the riders in the forum. It opened a slew more questions.

“You live in Moose Jaw?”

“My parents live in Moose Jaw. I hang out there in the winter and work for my dad’s company, but I don’t stay.”

“How come?”

He was quiet for a long time before he shrugged. “I prefer the freedom. I have no desire to settle down and work a nine-to-five for the rest of my life. I’d die of boredom. I’d rather die on the rails while living it up.”

“Oh.” That sounded... lonely and depressing, but I knew enough not to share my opinion. I wasn’t a rider, so who was I to judge? Plus, RaptorZ had mentioned Dodger traveled a lot with a group of rider friends, so maybe it wasn’t as bad as I pictured.

“How about you?” Dodger asked, glancing over his shoulder again.

“Huh? I’m sorry. What about me?”

“How old are you?”

“Oh. Twenty-seven.”

Dodger faced me, scanning me head to toe before cocking his head to the side. “Are you telling me you’ve been at the university for nine years? You went from high school, no?”

“I did, but nobody, no matter how brilliant, could complete two majors and a minor all at once. I achieved my master’s in behavioral science first. I enjoyed it enough I wanted to expand into forensics. Then I took a criminal justice minor to round it out. I like school. The goal is to work as a behavioral analyst someday, but it’s not as easy as that. Lots of little steps to take to get there. Need my doctorate, which means writing a thesis, which means this.” I waved a hand at the wall of chaos.

Dodger huffed a laugh. “Yup. That’s what I thought. Dr. Spencer Reid in the flesh.”

“Dr. who?”

“He’s someone else altogether. Dr. Reid. *Criminal Minds*? You can’t tell me you’ve never seen it.”

“Those shows are highly inaccurate.”

“Whatever. Do we have to keep going with the whole getting-to-know-you bullshit, or can we cut to the chase?”

“Oh. I thought building a rapport was essential to gaining trust. If I’m tasking you with an important mission, then—”

“You aren’t tasking me with shit. I’m here because I’ve been working to prove this killer exists for years. I’m here for me, not you. Get that out of your head right now. We don’t

need a rapport. We don't need trust. We don't need nothing. Understand?"

"That's a double negative, which implies we do need something."

"Huh?"

I shifted my weight. "Never mind. Maybe you're not the person for the job."

Dodger tipped his chin to the sky and heaved a sigh like I was annoying him. "First of all, it's not a job because you aren't paying me. Second, there is no one else with the knowledge I have. Trust me."

"RaptorZ—"

"Isn't a rider. He's an enthusiast. You said you needed someone to take to the rails. It's me, or it's no one. Take your pick."

There was no decision. Not really. Dodger had information and skills I didn't. If I sent him away, I'd be no further ahead. I'd lucked out already since he wasn't some ragged homeless teenager with most of his teeth missing. Dodger had half a brain and maturity on his side. The guy might be brash, but it wasn't like I needed to spend a whole lot of time with him.

He was right. We didn't need to be friends. We could take the rest of the afternoon, share information, and make a game plan. By tonight, I could send him off to take care of business. Done and done. He would send me updates and reports as he

checked things out, and with luck, we would both get what we wanted.

Answers.

I made a flailing gesture, both hands rolling outward as I half bowed. “I concede. Forgive me. You are the man I need. Please stay so we can chat. I’ll try to keep things impersonal.”

Dodger didn’t even try to hide his eye roll, but he was grinning wide enough his teeth showed. “Wow. You’re very... theatrical.”

I bit the inside of my cheek, resisting the urge to apologize or stuff my hands into my pockets. He wasn’t the first person to point it out. I’d been told enough times growing up how my penchant for talking with my hands gave away my sexuality. I didn’t agree. Lots of straight people talked with their hands. How could it possibly make me *look* gay? It was insulting. I’d never understood it, but enough people had said it to my face, I had to believe they were onto something.

Regardless, I didn’t know what type of person Dodger was or how he’d feel about associating with a gay man, so I did my best to curb my theatric tendencies.

“Sorry. Ignore me. I don’t have people over often. I’m... socially awkward as I’ve clearly demonstrated. Um...” I cut my attention to the information hanging around the room. “I’ll paint you a picture of all I’ve discovered.”

Dodger turned back to the map, seemingly unaffected by my discomfort. I kept my hands at my sides, nails digging into

my palms as a steady reminder to not use them while I spoke.

“Where do I start?”

I was speaking more to myself, but Dodger answered. “How about I ask questions and you answer them?”

It was far from a linear approach, but it would get us started. “Okay. Sure.”

Dodger crossed his arms over his chest and faced me. “I’ve gone on the assumption we are looking at a copycat killer.”

“Robert Joseph Silveria Jr. Yes. Absolutely. Correct. Without a doubt, there are similarities. However,” I raised a finger then fisted my hand and put it down at my side again, cursing internally. “However, I don’t think the motivation is the same.”

“Explain.”

“Silveria was a heavy drug user. He was also part of a gang. The Freight Train Riders of America. You knew that, right?”

“I didn’t know the FTRA was considered a gang, but go on.”

“They were. Robbery and assault were part of their MO. The gang was known for being violent, but Silveria took it too far. He had a sick and twisted mind. He admitted to initiating contact with his victims, spending time partying with them, then provoking an argument so he could unleash his rage. He admitted he had anger issues and beat his victims to death before leaving them beside the tracks. When they were dead, he would rob his victims, taking any personal belongings he

found beneficial, including their ID. Then he would use their ID to collect welfare, benefits, food stamps, all that. Our guy”—I tapped the map—“in my humble opinion, doesn’t have the same thirst for violence. If anything, his methods suggest the opposite. Our guy kills partly for sport—it likely makes him feel powerful, suggesting he grew up in a home with dominating and abusive parents—but he isn’t as aggressive. Like Silveria, I believe he robs his victims. Our guy is a survivalist, and I’ll tell you why I think that.”

Dodger was staring at me with that quirked-brow expression, and I knew my eagerness had surfaced in the form of a goofy grin and wild gestures—despite my adamant attempt at curbing them.

I held up a finger on each hand. “Don’t say it. I see it. I’m too animated. I’m toning it down. I swear.”

“No. Please. Don’t. I like your passion. It’s... refreshing. Trust me, it’s hard to find people as interested in this shit as I am. I’m right there with you.” He flailed his hands wildly. It could have been mocking, but I was pretty confident it was more a mark of solidarity.

My shoulders fell in relief. “Okay, good. I’m glad.” I rubbed my hands together and motioned at the map. “Like I said, our killer’s methods vary slightly from Silveria’s.

“How so?”

“I’ll show you.” I aimed for the clipboards and removed the first one from the wall, flipping through pages until I found what I needed.

“Those are autopsy reports?”

“Yes.”

“What are these numbers up here?” He traced the colored tape I’d stuck on the wall. Eleven of them contained a string of numbers. One of them had a name.

“The victims were never identified, so they gave them numbers. Except that one.” I pointed.

Dodger frowned. “I may be able to help with some of that too.”

I did my best to contain my excitement since his expression seemed to indicate he felt anything but excited.

Dodger nudged the clipboard in my hand. “You said the causes of death were consistent with a fall off a train.”

“Correct.”

“I’m confused.”

“The word *fall* is subjective.”

Dodger thought about that for a second. “So you’re saying they were pushed.”

“I’m so glad you aren’t stupid. Honestly, I was worried I was going to be dealing with an imbecile after going through that forum.”

Dodger snorted. “I can’t tell if you’re being sarcastic.”

“I’m rarely sarcastic. I find sarcasm unappealing and, quite frankly, rude.”

Dodger rattled his head. “Was *that* sarcasm?”

“No.” I waved the clipboard at him. “Can we focus on this?”

“Sure. So you’re saying they didn’t fall. They were pushed?”

“Correct.”

“How does an autopsy show the difference between the two?”

“It doesn’t.”

“No offense, Brady, but you’re starting to get on my nerves.”

I grinned. “You may not be a dolt, but your patience leaves much to be desired.”

“Keep testing it and find out how short that patience is, Dr. Reid.”

I wasn’t sure what I thought about the nickname, but I figured I should move things along in case he wasn’t kidding. “Here.” I handed him the clipboard and pointed to the first section I’d highlighted. It took up three pages of the report, and there were small inlaid photographs next to each paragraph. Dodger blanched when he saw them. To his benefit, he didn’t look away or hand it back, but his discomfort showed.

I sometimes forgot that not everybody was as desensitized to viewing corpses as me. Another social blunder. I needed to

pull up my socks and remember Dodger was a regular guy and not a fellow student.

As he looked at the first report, I pulled another clipboard off the wall, found the same section in that report, and piled it into his arms. Then I did the same with another and another. “You’ll find the same thing here, and on this one, and this one too. And...” I reached for another clipboard.

“Whoa, whoa. Slow down. I get it. You’re showing me something. Let me look at it.”

I waited while Dodger squinted and frowned at the summary beside each photograph. He flipped pages, scanned, lifted the top clipboard, then studied the one underneath. He dashed a quick glance in my direction a few times, brows knit. The sections I’d highlighted were concise and straightforward, so when he’d been puzzling them for an extended period of time, I got antsy.

When I got antsy, I fidgeted.

When I fidgeted, Dodger noticed.

He thrust the stack of clipboards into my arms and pierced me with a look of disdain. “Well, sorry to break it to you, but you’ve got a dolt, or whatever you called it, on your hands. This grade A imbecile doesn’t understand a word of that medical nonsense, so best explain it in small words for the guy who never went to college. I have no idea what I’m looking at.”

My stomach dropped. It wasn't that I'd expected a huge *ah-ha* moment. It had taken me more than a few readings to see it, but I'd misjudged my actions.

Again.

Instead of tripping over apologies, I nodded at a small area beside the kitchen and a two-seater table where we could work.

Dodger sat, his expression pinched with annoyance. I took the spot across from him and lined up the clipboards we'd taken down, reminding myself not to talk down to him or get overzealous and use big words, lest I upset him more.

"The medical jargon in these sections describes the injuries found on the surface of the bodies. The accompanying images are simply a visual recording of the same thing. A person who falls, jumps, or gets pushed off a train will have similar injuries, do you agree?"

Dodger's expression was grim as he stared from one photograph to the next. "Yeah." He cleared his throat when the word caught and came out rough. "They're pretty beat up."

"They are, and the dozens of abrasions and contusions are to be expected. The thing is, when these bodies—"

"They were people," Dodger snapped, an edge to his voice. "They were part of a community that is very important to me. Can we stop calling them bodies like they were nobodies?"

"I'm sorry." I hadn't meant to be insensitive. It was a form of dissociating from the grisly aspects of the job. Humanizing

a victim made everything harder, but he was right.

This was personal for Dodger, and I had to remember that.

“When these *riders* were found, there was little doubt as to the cause of death. Calling it an accident or suicide was easy. The authorities would have ruled out a direct hit by a freight train due to the condition of the... person. That would have been far worse. An autopsy would have been performed to confirm their suspicions and ensure there was no underlying cause like a health problem. They might check for seizures, aneurysms, heart conditions, intoxication, you name it. There was little reason to believe these riders were victims of assault.”

I paused, not wanting to overwhelm him. Dodger hadn't taken his eyes off the pictures, a faraway look in his eyes. I got the feeling I'd made this all too real for him. Maybe my plan was a bad idea.

“Go on. I'm following.” His voice was tight.

“Like I said, this is a detailed list of the surface injuries sustained. The other sections of the report break down internal injuries. All of the recorded findings are things one might expect for a person who fell from a train. The problem is, the external injuries are in themselves extensive, and they mask other injuries *not* sustained from the fall. It's easy to eliminate foul play when the cause of death is predetermined to be accidental. The investigating team likely planted the idea into the pathologist's mind, which—and I'm not discrediting their work—meant they only saw what was in front of them.”

I paused, wanting to be sure Dodger was following.

His lips were pressed into a thin line. His brows met in the middle. I felt guilty for the wary expression he wore, but when he peered up over his glasses, I took it as a sign I should continue.

“Because each victim was discovered in a different province, jurisdiction, city, town, whatever, thousands of kilometers apart, no one ever looked at the bigger picture. No one ever made the connection because to them, they had *one* random riding accident on their hands. Not several.”

Dodger leaned over the first clipboard, focusing on the written summary. I gave him time, knowing he understood what to look for now. After going through the first, he shifted to the second, then the third. He held a finger over a piece of information that caught his attention as he rescanned the first and second reports.

His eyes widened, and when he flashed his gaze to the other clipboards hanging on the wall, I knew he understood.

“They’re all the same,” I confirmed.

“Show me on the pictures. I can’t find it. Can you see it? Is it there?”

I scooted my chair around the table until I sat beside him. When our knees knocked, I backed up an inch, apologizing under my breath. He didn’t seem to care or have personal space issues. His whole attention was on the autopsy reports.

The marks he wasn't seeing were tiny, less than the diameter of a pencil, and easily hidden among the various other welts and abrasions on the skin. It wasn't that I thought the doctors who'd performed these autopsies were lazy, but they'd been given a solid potential cause of death, and it would make the best pathologist blind to the truth. It wasn't like they had a string of victims presenting with similar marks.

"Here, and the second mark is barely visible due to this cut, but if you look closely, it's there." I indicated a tiny circular bruise, then slid my finger over a fraction to where the second was almost swallowed up by a much more severe mark. Only because I'd been looking for it had I managed to pick it out.

Dodger pushed his glasses up his nose and bent over the image, no longer squirming at what it represented as he sought the marks I pointed out. He gasped. "I see them."

In the next autopsy photos, I showed him two similar marks. Same spacing. Same quality. They were equally camouflaged. Only two of the twelve victims had presented with clearer marks. They were the same two who'd fallen into the category of suspicious deaths. Unfortunately, the districts investigating their deaths hadn't put in much effort. These were nameless, homeless guys. They had no family fighting for answers, so in no time, their cases were marked as unsolved and filed accordingly. But it was because of those two victims I was able to make the connection to the others.

"Okay, I see it, but what am I looking at?"

"They are the residual marks from a stun gun."

Dodger swung his head in my direction. “You’re shitting me.”

It was then I realized how close we were sitting. While showing him my findings, I’d leaned against his side, and our faces were only inches apart.

Dodger had sharp features, a well-cut jawline, nice cheekbones, and a prominent ridge where his dark brows sat over his equally dark eyes. There was nothing pretty about him, but he was attractive in a rough and rugged sort of way. His lips were thin, but he had a strong, shapely mouth, and my gaze traveled there a moment before I came to my senses and snapped my attention up.

I shuffled back a few inches, clearing my throat. “I, um... told you. I don’t shit people.”

“You think you’re a funny guy, don’t you?”

“I know I’m not. I’ve been accused of being far too serious.”

Dodger chuckled. “Shocking. So, a stun gun. These guys were disabled so they couldn’t fight back, then they were tossed off a moving freight?”

“That’s my theory.”

“That’s terrifying. How come the autopsy doctor, or whatever they’re called, didn’t figure it out?”

“Pathologist, and in two counties, they did.” I pointed at where the rest of the clipboards hung on the wall. “The sixth one and the last one over there. Those two deaths were filed as

suspicious, and this is why.” I tapped the reports on the table. “It’s my belief these other ones were missed because of the nature of their deaths and the way the marks ended up blending with other injuries. Although likely just as skilled, these pathologists didn’t perform a histology on these particular marks and therefore missed the electric-current-related changes to the tissue. They were passed off as impact injuries.”

“And all these fucking idiots don’t work together, so they don’t share information beyond their districts, and no one knows shit. That’s what you’re saying?”

“In essence. Although, I would have summarized with less swearing, but you’re correct.”

Dodger leaned back in his chair, chuckling and shaking his head. “Fuck me. This is a lot to take in, but you are definitely comic relief.”

“Oh.” I wasn’t sure how to take that.

Luckily, the doorbell rang, saving me the trouble of determining whether the comment was meant to be teasing or insulting.

“Food is here.”

Chapter Three

Dodger

While we ate, Brady insisted on giving me a full rundown of the workings of a stun gun, even though I didn't ask. The poor guy could barely eat given his excitement to share information. He had to keep putting his fork down to gesticulate as though I couldn't understand him otherwise. The intonation in his voice changed too. The faint lilt and touch of campiness I'd noticed earlier came through like he was no longer trying to hide them. I felt like I was seeing a more natural side of Brady.

I regretted my earlier comment about his theatrics. Brady was animated, sure, but it wasn't a bad thing. The more I watched him talk, the more it amused me. I didn't think he had any idea the energy he exuded when he spoke. I liked it. It was refreshing to see someone with such passion. It made me wonder if that was how I looked when I got on a tangent about the CP Rail killer with my rider friends. They'd always teased me, but if this was what they saw, then I understood.

Brady explained in extensive detail the patterning of burn marks caused by stun guns and the subsequent tissue damage it left behind. I wasn't absorbing the information. He fascinated me more than the details of how the weapon affected the nervous system.

We were nothing alike, yet we shared a desire to prove Canada had a serial killer at work. That was enough to connect us. It was a breath of fresh air being around someone who understood and didn't mock me. Brady was fascinating in a quirky, nerdy sort of way. When he got on a tangent—like now—the gears in his brain went into overdrive, and his mouth ran a mile a minute. He seemed to forget I was an uneducated chump and pulled out all the big technical words that went over my head. I let it go.

Whereas I'd gone through most of my helping of food, Brady had barely touched his. I knocked his foot under the table to draw his attention.

He snapped his mouth shut and slowly lowered his hands as though self-consciously realizing he'd been flailing them about. His eyes widened, and an apology was on the tip of his tongue, so I jumped in.

"Don't take this the wrong way, but you're a bit of a chatterbox. Your food's getting cold. Eat."

He glanced at his plate like he was seeing it for the first time. "Oh. I forgot about it. Sorry. I tend to get sidetracked."

"It's all good."

“No, it’s not. It’s a legitimate problem.” He tugged out his phone and did something with it before setting it aside. “I actually have to set daily reminders so I don’t forget to feed myself. Stupid, huh?” His cheeks pinked, and he wouldn’t meet my eyes as he snapped up his fork and stabbed a piece of chicken from his pad Thai. “This stuff gets me excited. It’s been a long time since I’ve had anyone to talk to about it.”

I watched him eat, curious what it was like to be inside his head. He’d called himself socially awkward more than once, and I could see it. I had some weird friends, but Brady took the cake. Did he have many friends, or did he stay holed up in his apartment with his nose in a book all the time?

When his focus shifted to my face, and I was caught staring, I tucked back into my food. “You’re passionate, Brady. Nothing wrong with that. I’m the same way with riding. I mean, I guess it’s not the same, but it consumes me, you know. Takes over my life. Like, when I’m home in the winter, life is suffocating. All I can think about is the next time I can get out there and hop a freight. Feel the wind in my hair. It’s why I stay tight with the community. They’re people who get it. My mother would sacrifice her left arm if I would settle down and marry a nice girl, but I can’t even think about it. The itch to ride is too intense to ignore. It never goes away. Steals my focus. Makes me disregard other things. Things I should probably care more about, but I don’t. I don’t think I’ll ever settle down. It’s not me.”

I shrugged, glancing at Brady who was watching from under long lashes as he ate. He had soft features, almost

delicate. And pouty lips. I dashed my attention back to my food because it was a weird thing to notice.

“Anyhow. Like I said, not the same, but I understand your passion.”

“Studying is like that for me. Researching. Learning in general. It consumes me. That thirst for knowledge, I guess. It drives me to the brink of insanity sometimes. I like solving puzzles. I hate not having answers. In high school, they made us take this career aptitude test. You know the ones that dissect your personality traits and interests and are supposed to give you a comprehensive and scientifically proven direction for a career path?”

“I remember taking that. It said I was supposed to be a mechanic. Those things are bullshit.”

“I concur. Although, at the time, I felt differently. In fact, I took the test four times because some of those questions were hard to answer, and I thought the slight variances in my responses would make a difference with the end results. Needless to say, I took the test far too seriously. To the point, my guidance counselor had to intervene because I was getting upset. Every time I took the test, regardless of how I answered the questions, the results were the same.”

“Which was?”

“Basically, it told me I should enter the field of scientific research. It wasn’t what I wanted to do. My counselor tried to tell me the test wasn’t finite, and I could explore anything I wanted, but to me, it invalidated my dreams.”

“What were your dreams?” I helped myself to another piece of chicken satay and dunked it into the peanut sauce.

“To be a doctor. Specifically, a behavioral psychologist.” Brady grinned, and his lip caught on his eyetooth, making it lopsided. He forgot about eating—again—and his hands joined in on the conversation as he kept talking. “And you’re thinking, but Brady, doesn’t a behavioral psychologist conduct research studies using conditioning and stimuli to study human behavior?”

It wasn’t what I was thinking because I had no clue what a doctor of that caliber did, but it didn’t matter. It wasn’t an actual question, and Brady plowed ahead at top speed.

“The answer is yes. The thing is. I was a kid and a victim of not thinking outside the box. I heard *scientific research*”—he put quotes around it—“and my mind instantly thought physics and laboratories, analyzing quantum theories and sitting at a computer for the rest of my life. Pretty dumb for a smart guy, huh?”

I reached across the table, caught his wrist, and lowered the hand holding the fork back to his plate. “Can you not talk and eat at the same time? No wonder you’re so damn skinny.”

He flushed, but I didn’t want him to be embarrassed, so I asked, “When did you put two and two together?”

He wound noodles around his fork. “Three years into my first degree. One day, it dawned on me that breaking down a person’s mind and analyzing behavioral patterns was essentially the same thing. It *was* scientific research, and I

wasn't stuck in a lab using math formulas I vehemently hated in high school." He put the noodles in his mouth, then rolled his fork. "Ta-da," he said with his mouthful. "I needn't have worried. The assessment was spot on."

Maybe I shouldn't have encouraged him to eat and talk.

I couldn't contain my laugh, and it had nothing to do with his story and everything to do with the sauce dripping down his chin.

I shoved my empty plate aside and tossed a napkin across the table. "Your face."

Brady turned an interesting shade of red as he wiped his mouth.

I nodded at his still heaping plate. "How about a time-out while you eat your food? How did we end up on this subject anyhow?"

Brady did not eat his food.

His gaze shifted to the side, and I knew he was accessing some Rolodex in his mind. "Oh, right." His vision cleared. "My extreme passion for this case bled through, you compared it to your love for riding, and I rebutted by once again expressing my passion for research and how it came about."

"Huh?"

"You asked how we got on this topic. Do you want to hear about the pattern now?" He flashed his attention over his shoulder to the map on the wall.

“No. Good grief. Not until you’ve finished eating.”

“Right.” He ate four bites before his mouth started again, and I gave up. It was impossible. “So, you said your mother would sacrifice a limb if you’d stop riding and settle down. Does this mean you don’t have a girlfriend? If that’s too personal, you don’t have to answer. I’m not good at small talk.”

“Wow.” My face hurt from smiling. “Ah, no girlfriend. I don’t really date, but before you keep yapping and poke further into my personal life, let’s lay down some rules.”

He lowered his fork as he glanced up. “Rules? Um, okay.”

I snapped my fingers and pointed at his plate.

He resumed eating.

“In the riding community, there is an unspoken code that you should never pry into another rider’s personal business. You can ask whatever you want, but if they don’t want to tell you, you respect that and let it go.”

“Oh. I understand. You’re saying you don’t want to divulge your personal life to strangers, and I’m a stranger.”

“I’m not a big sharer, especially about my life back in Moose Jaw. You wanna talk about riding, I’m game.”

“Fair enough.”

He ate in miraculous silence for the following four minutes, but his brain didn’t stop spinning. I may have only known

Brady for a couple of hours, but I saw the signs of an active mind. Did it ever stop?

When he finished, we collected the dishes, left them in the sink, and put the leftovers in the fridge.

Back in the living room, I wandered to the map, shifting my attention from one lost rider to the next. “I’ve always assumed there was a pattern. It was just something I couldn’t figure out. I didn’t have access to the information you do, but I had this gut feeling the killer was moving west and leaving a trail of death behind him. I couldn’t prove it for sure.”

“You’re correct.” Brady came up beside me, standing so our shoulders brushed. “The autopsy reports give us a window for when they died, and these riders, although not found in the same order they were murdered, were discovered in locations that place the killer on a path moving east to west. The autopsy reports also tell us there is anywhere from one to three months between kills.”

“Is that what you mean by a pattern?”

Brady’s eyes sparked to life, and his lopsided smile returned. Excited energy poured off him in waves, and I knew before he spoke this was going to be another over-the-top, animated moment.

“Part of it, yes, but there’s more.” He rubbed his hands together and faced me. “Are you ready for this?”

It was impossible not to match his enthusiasm. I couldn’t contain my grin and smacked his shoulder. “Lay it on me,

smarty pants. Show me what you've got."

And he did.

I couldn't express how it felt to be in the presence of someone who shared my passion. Even though Brady was quirky and the victim of a high IQ with limited social skills, I loved listening to him. It was refreshing. Invigorating.

"Did you notice these marks?" He tapped a few points on the map that had been circled with a blue marker. Beside the marks were a string of numbers I didn't understand.

"I noticed. They seem to vaguely correspond with where these guys were found." I traced my finger along one of the taut strings which ended near a blue circle.

Brady beamed. "Yes. You're right. Do you know what they are?"

"Should I?" I studied them more closely, moving around Brady to see the ones farther down the map. "I'm not catching on."

"Hang on. Let me show you." Brady pulled out his phone and took a minute to type. Absently, he gestured at a string of numbers beside one of the blue circles. "Those are coordinates. This took me ages to figure out. Look."

He waved me over, and I shimmied up beside him, shoulder to shoulder again so I could see what he'd pulled up. It was a satellite map, zoomed in enough to show a building. I moved my fingers over the screen, scanning the area, noting train

tracks running directly past the building but nothing more. The area was desolate.

I glanced at the map on the wall, then down at his phone, then back to the wall. “Wait a minute.” I’d studied enough rail maps in my life that all the pieces were starting to fall into place. “Is that an old train station?”

“Yes! Abandoned in 1992 and left to rot in the middle of nowhere.”

“These lines are decommissioned, aren’t they?” I ran a finger along the train tracks beside the blue circle on the map. They were an intentionally faded gray as opposed to the other lines which were marked in black.

“They are, and technically, our DB was found ten kilometers away along this intersecting line which is still in use and closer to the town, as you can see.”

“DB?”

Brady’s smile fell, and he paled. “I’m sorry. Our rider. The... victim.”

It took me a second, but I figured out the acronym on my own. Dead body. Instead of giving him shit, I turned back to the map. Those were his technical terms, and I didn’t want to fight him on it. He seemed a bit sensitive, but when it came to the riding community, so was I.

“These other blue circles you marked. What are they?”

“Exactly the same. They’re old, abandoned train stations that once serviced nearby towns that are no longer in

existence. They were likely used to pick up workers to take them to mines or oil fields or what have you. Places that have long ago shut down, so they don't use the tracks or stations anymore. They're nothing but decrepit buildings that should have been torn down decades ago."

I glanced from one mark on the map to the next. Was it a coincidence? How many abandoned stations were there across the country? A lot. Over the past century, things had changed drastically, and more times than not, old stations and decommissioned lines were left abandoned. The funding to remove them just wasn't there.

"What does this mean?" Something rotten churned in my gut, and it wasn't the dinner we'd eaten. It was the wealth of information trying to sink in.

"This is my working theory. Our killer is moving east to west across the country in increments. I believe he is squatting in these old buildings. Originally, I intended to have you check them out and look for proof, but we'll get to that. Based on the kill pattern, I'd say he stays put for a few weeks or a month at a time. Maybe until he exhausts resources. Maybe he gets bored. I'm not sure. Each of these locations is relatively close to a small town, so he could wander there to replenish supplies if need be."

"What's relatively close?"

"Ten or fifteen kilometers." Brady showed me on the map. "So, I think he travels these lines that are still in service. It's where the riders were found. As the freight nears the town—"

I caught on and took over. “He shoves them off. Then once he’s at a decent speed, he makes the jump. The old, decommissioned line isn’t far away, and the abandoned station is just a dozen or so kilometers farther along. He heads that way and hides out.”

“Yes. After a few weeks of squatting, he moves on. See these red marks?” Brady touched the few he’d marked on the map. There weren’t as many. I’d noticed them and had filed the question away to ask later.

“What are they?”

“Other stations, and they fall along our suspect’s projected route. They almost exactly fill in the gaps between the riders found on either side.” Brady slid his finger from one to the next. There were four red circles across the country, and each of them was spaced between two blue circles. “There are probably tons of abandoned stations, but these ones stood out to me because of how perfectly they fit along the path I think our killer took. I noted them only because they made sense, but I couldn’t connect them with our guy. Until now.”

“But there were no riders found near them?”

Brady pressed his lips together and studied my face a little too long. His excitement had simmered. In its place was trepidation.

“Say it, Brady. The hedging is annoying.”

“I have a strong feeling we might find some of your missing riders near these locations.”

The wind was knocked right out of my lungs.

I needed a minute.

What Brady proposed made sense, but I had to let it sink in.

Threading fingers through my hair, I backed up and spun, unable to look at the map, unable to face the reality that we might find some missing riders.

But the likelihood was, we wouldn't find them alive.

"I... Is there a store nearby where I can buy smokes?"

"Um... Yes. On the corner, if you head right when you go out the front door. It's not far."

I skipped around Brady and aimed for the door where I tugged on my muddy boots.

"Are you coming back? Did I upset you? I'm so sorry. I wasn't being intentionally insensitive. I don't always say the right things. Are... are you still going to help me?"

Brady stood close. He'd taken that stance I was beginning to associate with worry. The one where his hand covered his mouth and the other arm wrapped around his middle.

Heaving my rucksack to my shoulder, I turned to face him. "Relax. I'll be back. This"—I nodded toward the living room—"all you've discovered and pieced together, it's fucking phenomenal. You've done incredible, man. Trust me. I'm not leaving. I just need to catch my breath. This is personal. These are my people. It could have been me or my friends left for

dead out there. It's a lot to take in. Give me ten minutes. I'll be back."



Outside, the sun had set. Traffic was less congested with the later hour, but the blaze of headlights zipping up and down Eglinton Avenue still made me squint. I tugged out my phone to check the time. There was a text from Willow, but I ignored it. It was after ten. Where had the time gone?

I found the store, bought a pack of smokes, and made my way back to Brady's apartment. I sat on a stone wall surrounding a garden bed and smoked two of them as I absorbed the details of what I'd learned. I thought of Tyler, one of my best friends, who'd been skipping across the country all winter by himself. A cold chill ran up my spine. It could have happened to him. Or Elian. Or any of us. Riding in a group didn't necessarily eradicate the danger. It might reduce it, but I didn't know. I'd wanted to prove this theory for so long, but now that I was staring at proof, it was grim.

I drew out my phone again and checked Willow's text.

Willow: How are you making out with the mysterious Brady?

I smiled for the first time since Brady had laid the truth on me.

Dodger: The guy is nerdy to the core, but he knows his stuff. Too much to explain, but I have a feeling I'll be on the fly this summer. Try not to miss me too much.

I didn't know if I'd get a response, and I was sure I'd take shit for not heading to Montreal to meet up with the gang, but I'd spent too long wanting to prove this killer was real, and now was my chance. I couldn't walk away.

My phone buzzed.

Willow: For real? I hate you. We barely got a chance to catch up. How can you take off?

Dodger: This is important to me.

Willow: I know. Still gonna miss you. I'm staying in TO for a couple of days. If you leave, make sure to say goodbye.

Dodger: Will do. Love your face.

Willow: xoxo

The string of *X's* and *O's* made me smile. For a hot five minutes over two years ago, I'd thought Willow could have been something more than a close friend. She was a rider. She understood the draw to take to the rails and be free. She was wildly strong-willed and a force to be reckoned with. No one told that woman what to do, and I like that about her. But when I'd considered what more than a close friend entailed, I couldn't envision it. It was too weird. Willow was more like the sister I'd never had than girlfriend material.

I stuffed my phone into my pocket and filled my lungs with the night air before heading back inside. Two cigarettes and a bit of fresh air had made me realize how exhausted I was. I hadn't slept well on the freight from Moose Jaw to Toronto, so

I was out of steam. Buddy boy Brady would have to put me up for the night, and we could pick up the following day.

I found Brady sitting at his laptop, gnawing a thumbnail as he scrolled through some spreadsheet. He closed it the minute he noticed me and jumped up like he was ready to resume from where we'd left off.

I held up a hand. "Before your tongue flaps, I have to call it a night. I've slept maybe four hours in the last two days, and I have nothing left. Kinda feeling like a bag of shit right now."

"Oh. Of course. Um... Should we meet back up at breakfast? Where are you staying?"

"On your couch. Move your shit."

His eyes grew. "On my... I... don't think that's a good idea."

"I don't care what you think. You want my help, you're gonna put me up for the night. Probably for a couple of nights because there is no way I'm catching out for at least a couple of days."

His jaw hung loose, and he stammered, but it was nothing coherent. "But... I... You... I don't even know you."

"Doesn't matter. Get over it." I still had my rucksack over a shoulder and thumbed at the hallway where I assumed I'd find a bathroom. "I'm gonna use your shower while you move your shit and find me a blanket."

"Oh... Okay."

I didn't wait for him to find a new argument. He could silently freak out while I got cleaned up. If he wanted to involve himself with riders, he needed to understand how we operated.

The first door I opened wasn't a bathroom. It was Brady's bedroom. A light was on beside his bed, casting a yellow glow over the room. It was a vastly different space than the rest of his apartment, and I stalled, taking it in. There was warmth in this room that was lacking elsewhere. Maybe it was the soft moss-green paint on the walls or the knitted throw draped over the end of his bed. Maybe it was the framed pictures on his dresser. Everything in this room was neat and tidy. His bed was made, and several throw pillows had been organized on top. There was no dust or disorder of any kind. No clothes on the floor. No chaos.

My attention was drawn to a large, framed print hanging over his bed. It was a simple painting of a beach with a rocky shoreline. The ocean spanned into the endless distance until it kissed the sunset on the horizon. Small swells rippled the glassy surface of the water. There were birds in the sky and a sailboat far out at sea.

“That's not the bathroom.”

I startled and slammed the door, spinning to face Brady. His lips were pressed in a firm line, and his gaze was dark.

“I see that. My bad.”

Brady gestured. “That door. I'll get you a fresh towel.”

“Thanks.”

He marched off, leaving a cold breeze behind. He wasn't happy about my little exploration of his bedroom. It wasn't like I'd done it on purpose.

By the time I'd showered and returned to the living room, he'd cleared a spot on his couch, and there was a folded fleece blanket and a pillow on top.

Brady was nowhere to be found. I glanced back down the hall to his bedroom. Sighing, I dropped my rucksack beside the couch and aimed back toward the hall.

I rapped on his door.

A long stretch of time passed before he muttered, “What?”

It wasn't an invitation to enter, but I cracked the door nonetheless and poked my head in. He was sitting in the middle of his bed, legs crossed, nose in a fat textbook, laptop open beside him. The knitted throw was over his shoulders.

“Are you seriously pissed off because I'm staying?”

“No.” He didn't lift his gaze from the book.

“Are you pissed because I'm tired and I can't keep going tonight?”

“No.”

“Are you pissed because I invaded your privacy, even though it wasn't on purpose, and I thought this door led to the bathroom?”

No answer.

Bingo.

“I wasn’t snooping.”

“It’s fine. There’s a blanket and pillow on the couch for you.”

“I saw. Thanks.” I was about to retreat but instead asked, “You don’t spend much time in here, do you?”

No answer.

I was too tired for this. “Look, if you need to sit out in the living room and work while I sleep, I don’t care.”

I caught a hint of stormy blue eyes when Brady lifted his head a fraction.

“I’m serious. Please don’t think you have to give me privacy. I’m not like that. You won’t bother me.”

“I... It’s just... I don’t allow myself to work here. It’s a bad habit. I restrict my sleeping quarters for sleep only. That way when I get into bed, my body understands work time is over, and it’s time to rest. I don’t expect you to understand. I have these rules in place for a reason. For... my health.”

I wasn’t about to argue. His quirks were glaring, but I didn’t give a shit.

“I assume you aren’t tired, and you wanted to work more.”

“I don’t go to bed until midnight.”

“And what time does your alarm go off in the morning?”

“Eight.”

I chuckled, understanding. “Got it. All part of your schedule, right? Strict bedtime and wake time.”

He nodded but wouldn't meet my eyes.

This guy was too much. “Get your shit and get your ass back out here then.”

He didn't move.

“Seriously, man. If I have to, I'll come in there and drag you out. Let's go. I'm tired and getting crankier by the second. I don't have the patience for this nonsense.”

That time Brady collected his things and met me at the door.

Before we left his room, I glanced again at the framed print on the wall.

He caught my attention. “It's the ocean.”

“I see that.” But I got the feeling there was more to it.

“I bought it at an art show last year. It's... calming. I've never seen the ocean in real life. Someday, I want to stand on a beach like that and watch the sunset.” He shuffled and shrugged. “It's dumb. I know. I don't expect you to understand.”

I stared at the strange man I'd met for the first time that afternoon and caught the longing and sadness in the depths of his blue eyes, and it made me wonder who this guy was when he wasn't absorbed in his studies. Was he a slave to his overly smart mind? Did he know how to make it stop?

Chapter Four

Brady

A stranger was sleeping on my couch, and I had no one to blame but myself. I'd asked for this. I'd sought him out and invited him over. Dodger's presence had turned my once rigid and comfortable routine on its head. What was worse, his easy, laid-back attitude, along with our mutual interest in this killer, was leaving me with a false sense of adoration.

Okay, fine. It was attraction. But it was stupid and dangerous, and it was best I remembered that before it got me in trouble.

I had a teeny tiny weakness for bad boys. The leather-jacket-wearing, tattooed guys who hung out around campus never failed to turn my head. It was the attitude they carried around. Growing up, it was the troublemakers in school who'd caught my attention. The unattainable guys with chips on their shoulders. The ones my mother would warn me away from. Those who didn't know I existed were probably straight and would beat me black and blue if they caught my lustful stares.

It was an issue.

I'd chalked it up to an innate desire to rebel. I'd been the good kid all my life. I'd never skipped school or smoked cigarettes or done drugs. I got straight A's, adhered to a strict schedule, and followed the letter of the law to a T. It was important that I succeeded and was recognized for my hard work. I wanted to go far in life.

People like Dodger who said what they wanted, did what they wanted, and didn't care what other people thought, intrigued me. Called to me. It was unhealthy. I recognized it. Maybe it was a bit of hero worship because Dodger possessed a personality I could only dream of having. He evoked fantasies I had only dared entertain in private.

But that was all they were. Fantasies.

I was about eighty-seven percent sure Dodger was straight, and, well, I had rules for a reason.

Regardless, my world had turned upside down at some point in the afternoon, and I couldn't seem to right it. My head was a roar of noise and possibilities. Some of them were achievable, like finally getting answers to questions about this case I'd been puzzling for months, and the rest were secret daydreams that could never come true.

A guy could hope, right?

Dodger slept on his stomach, hands folded under the pillow I'd given him, hair covering most of his face. One leg had fallen to the ground, while the other was stretched long on the couch. His joggers and T-shirt didn't meet, exposing a patch of

skin at his waist I'd shamelessly stared at for the past hour like a creep while my heart beat out of control.

The position didn't look comfortable, but when I considered this guy often slept on freight trains, I guess a couch was luxury.

I jerk my attention back to the open textbook in front of me, telling myself for the hundredth time to focus. So much for working. With a stern lecture, I angled my body away from Dodger and kept reading, but the words blurred, and those private fantasies took over.

What if he's bisexual? I could hope, right?

I don't know when it happened, but I fell asleep.

An indeterminate length of time later, someone shook my shoulder, calling my name. The pages under my cheek crinkled and stuck to my face as I rolled my head, doing all I could to grasp the fleeting tendrils of my dream.

"You're drooling on your book, genius," a voice said.

Another shake and the dream evaporated. I didn't want to wake up. I wanted to return to the euphoria of being kissed to within an inch of my life. I wanted to feel those rough dream hands touching me. I wanted to...

"Brady. Hey. Are you learning through osmosis or what? Wake up."

The person chuckled, and my brain cells realigned.

I snapped my head up as an icy chill ran down my spine, and I stared wide-eyed at the man who'd been ravishing me in my dream. And, oh crap, I was hard as a rock. It was a good thing I was sitting at the table because I was sure the evidence of my erection wouldn't have been hidden otherwise.

My cheeks flamed. Panic surged.

“There you are. Now get up and go to bed. This can't be comfortable.”

A cold rush of terror washed out my ability to respond. All I could do was gape. I couldn't stand up. Not yet. I needed a minute.

“Oh my god, you are so out of it.” He snapped his fingers in front of my face. “Hello. Are you in there? It's past your bedtime. You were sleeping on the table. Do you understand anything I'm saying? Come on. Get up.”

“Um...”

Dodger snagged my arm, heaving me out of the chair. I tried to fight him off, but it was no use. I was uncoordinated and groggy. If he noticed my state of arousal, he didn't say anything. He aimed me in the right direction and marched me down the hall.

My mouth was dry. My lips felt raw and abused from all the dream kissing—which I knew they weren't. I was on fire and tingly. It was all so fresh in my mind. He'd had me pinned to the bed, his mouth brutal and demanding, and his gaze hungry as he touched me everywhere at once.

I stumbled over my feet.

“Whoa. One foot in front of the other. Almost there.”

I needed to stop thinking about it because I wasn't helping matters.

Dodger opened my bedroom door and patted my back. “I'll let you handle things from here. Take your clothes off. I'm sure you have rules about sleeping in them or some shit. Wake me up when you get up tomorrow.”

Then he closed the door, and I was alone.

His words, *Take your clothes off*, still rang in my ears, and I groaned, pressing the heel of my palm to the strain in the front of my pants. Taking my clothes off would be a terrible, horrible idea. I collapsed on the bed, buried my face in a pillow, and drew up images of dead bodies and crime scenes and statistic charts so my erection would deflate and I wouldn't be tempted to touch myself.

Oh god, I wanted to touch myself so badly. That was all I needed—for Dodger to hear me jerking off. He already thought I was weird. Even if he didn't know what I was imagining, it would be a disaster. He'd probably leave, and I'd be back at square one with no one to help me prove there was a serial killer out there.

I tossed and turned for the following hour, uncomfortable and unable to shed the lingering images from my dream. The sooner I could get Dodger up to date with my plan, the sooner

I could send him packing and have my apartment to myself again.



I woke before my alarm. I'd had a restless night. Bumbling down the hall to the bathroom, I brushed my teeth as I organized my day. The distinct scent of coffee filled the air, and I frowned around my toothbrush. Coffee? I didn't own a coffee pot.

I finished in the bathroom and found Dodger in the living room, studying the rail map, a steaming takeout cup in hand. He'd tied his hair back, but a few strands that weren't quite long enough framed his face.

He glanced in my direction, scanned me up and down, and huffed, shaking his head. Then he resumed examining the map. "You slept in your clothes."

I looked down and frowned at my rumpled slacks and half-untucked shirt. My sweater vest was twisted funny around my middle and pulling up on one side. I straightened it.

"There's coffee and donuts in the kitchen. I found a café down the road. They didn't sell real food, just sugary deep-fried crap, so if you have diet restrictions or rules about how much sugar you consume for breakfast, I'm sorry."

"You..." I glanced toward the kitchen, the gears not quite spinning at full speed. "How did you get back in after you left?"

“I found your keys and borrowed them. I needed a smoke, saw the café when I was out last night, and thought, why not? Don’t worry, I put your keys back on their designated hook by the door.”

“Oh.”

“Do you drink coffee? There wasn’t a coffee pot, so I wasn’t sure.” He glanced over his shoulder again.

“Not often. I like it, but it makes my head spin faster than usual.”

Dodger chuckled. “Wonderful. I didn’t know what you took in it, so there’s cream and sugar on the side.”

“Thanks.” I blinked at him a minute longer. He was engrossed in the map. My dream was more removed than it had been in the middle of the night, and in the fresh light of day, it all seemed ridiculous. I was simply infatuated with our shared interest in the case.

Brushing it aside, I headed to the kitchen. The coffee he’d purchased was still hot, so I added a splash of creamer before helping myself to the biggest, gooiest, and most iced donut in the box. These were treats I didn’t allow myself often. If I was going to be hyper today, I might as well go big or go home.

I had one goal. Get Dodger up to speed and send him on his way. Then I could have my space back, and hopefully, I wouldn’t get caught off guard by any more erotic dreams while entertaining a stranger in my house.

Back in the living room, I hovered, studying Dodger while he studied the map. I nibbled the fat apple fritter and groaned. Holy crap it was good. It was covered in icing sugar, and I licked it off my lips after every bite, savoring the overly sweet treat, unable to suppress the sounds of delight as they slipped out.

“So yesterday,” Dodger said, glancing back once with a strange look on his face. “You mentioned you originally wanted me to check out these abandoned stations to look for evidence our guy was using them.”

“Mmhhh.” I couldn’t talk with my mouth full, and yet, I couldn’t seem to stop stuffing my face. The fritter was to die for. I inadvertently groaned again as a burst of cinnamon and apple hit my tongue.

My response amused Dodger if his eye roll and grin said anything. He’d stop talking to watch me eat.

I set my coffee down and held up a sticky finger, asking him to wait a minute as I stuffed the rest of the fried dough into my face like I was a grown-up version of Cookie Monster with no manners. But it was too freaking good to set it aside. The sounds I made were obnoxious, but I would not apologize.

With his brows at his hairline and a smirk making his dark eyes shine, Dodger waited as I chewed and swallowed the final bite.

I couldn’t talk until I’d licked the stray icing off every single finger. Twice. “Okay,” I said, studying each digit a final

time. Finding a smidgen more icing on my index finger, I licked it, then decided to just suck it clean because why not?

Dodger laughed. “Jesus. It’s getting a little hot in here. Do you want some privacy?”

My face flamed as I stood there with one finger in my mouth and the rest of them wet with saliva.

Dodger held up a hand. “You know what? Don’t talk. Not a word. Just... hang on.”

He aimed for the kitchen and came back with a wet washcloth. Instead of handing it to me, he took my hands one at a time and wiped them clean as he shook his head.

“That was spectacular. I mean, totally epic, but no more donuts. I’m pretty sure that was a near orgasmic experience for you, and I was unprepared to witness it. That was some behind-closed-doors-only shit. I’m just saying. It was... Yeah. Moving on. You need to never eat a donut in front of me again.”

“I was cleaning my fingers just fine without a cloth.”

“Oh, I know, but your method was making me uncomfortable. It’s...” He shook his head, huffing a laugh, but he didn’t finish the sentence.

He set the cloth aside and handed me my coffee. “Are you good to work now?”

“I was fine before.”

“You were crippled by a donut. I have to say this, but don’t think I’m hitting on you or anything. I’m not. You are too fucking cute, Brady Thompson. Like, over the top. I hardly know what to do with you. You just have this whole brainiac bashful innocent thing going on. I love it. You have no idea.”

My heart whomped in my ears. His comment both excited me and confused me. Before I could process the meaning behind his *I’m not hitting on you* statement and his *You are too fucking cute* comment, he turned away and went back to puzzling the map.

“So, now that you’re finished having a donut orgasm, tell me the game plan.”

I gave myself a mental shake and focused on the task at hand. This was a prime example of me misreading people and getting myself in trouble. I had to let Dodger’s comment go and move forward. Although now I was only seventy-eight percent sure he was straight. I was getting hopeful, and that was dangerous.

“The old stations. Yes. I had originally thought you could check them out and prove my theory.”

“That he squats there.”

“Yes.”

“A lot of people probably squat in those buildings. Not just riders. Teenagers probably use them to get high or have sex. It’s not too far from town like you pointed out.”

“I considered that. But I’m looking for specifics. Things you and your rider friends would know to look for.”

Dodger spun to face me, his attention rapt.

My insides grew jittery, be it from the sugar rush, the coffee, or nerves, I didn’t know. Keeping my hands still was going to be impossible.

“None of these riders were found with their gear. Unsurprising since they *fell*”—I made air quotes—“off a moving train. However, no reports were filed by CP stating they’d found gear either, so—”

“I doubt they would report that. It’s trivial. Shit gets left behind by riders all the time. Just another day.”

“True, but I made phone calls. I pushed for information. Based on what I learned, inspections would have taken place when these freights offloaded the majority of their cargo. Not just of the cargo itself but of the whole freight before it continued on.”

Dodger ran a hand over his goatee. “That’s true, but still.”

“I spoke with several places and pushed them to make some inquiries to see if anyone conducting those inspections remembered coming across a stray rucksack on one of their cars. Nothing.”

Dodger glanced at the map. “And those lines don’t diverge much. There are only so many drop points.”

“Exactly, so I was confident I might track down at least *one* person who found *one* abandoned rucksack. We have a lot of

DBs... um, riders. Sorry.”

“And you didn’t find one?”

“No. Our guy takes them. I’m sure of it. Like I said before, I think he’s a survivalist. He won’t let anything go to waste.”

Dodger didn’t look convinced. “Okay, I hear you, and I get what you’re saying, but you’re talking about vagabonds. Let’s call them homeless travelers because it’s what they are. They might carry thirty pounds of gear at most. Minimal food. Limited cash. What’s the appeal? There are a lot better targets out there with more to offer. He can’t be killing them for profit. It makes no sense.”

“True. I agree. But I don’t think that’s his whole driving force. It’s a compulsion. Getting his hands on a rucksack is a bonus. Our killer is homeless too. I’d bet on it. When you have nothing, every little bit is appealing. Don’t you agree?”

“Sure.”

“Plus, look how easily he can get away with it. This has been going on for a long time. If I’m right, then I think you’ll find evidence in these old stations.” When Dodger grew introspective, I added, “But I have a bigger plan now.”

My excitement bubbled over, and it took everything in me not to bounce in place.

“Yeah, I know. I figured you out. You want me to investigate the red marks on the map. You want me to find the missing riders because you’re convinced their bodies haven’t

been discovered yet. And if I find them, it connects your dots and proves you're right about his projected route."

Dodger had lost his enthusiasm. The spark in his eyes dimmed, and the grim expression on his face gave me pause. I felt instantly guilty for my eagerness.

"Yes. But... I'm sensing you don't want to."

"It's not that. Think about what you're asking me to do."

I held my hands up in defense. "I understand your feelings, but think about it this way, if you can uncover evidence in these old stations"—I tapped the map over the places I'd marked—"if you can fill in the gaps in my pattern and uncover more victims." I traced a line, connecting it all. "I can present a solid report to the RCMP. One they *can't* ignore. One they *can't* dismiss. We could set them on the path to catching this guy. We can get justice for your riders. For your community. Don't you want to be part of the solution?"

He couldn't say no. I needed him or the Royal Canadian Mounted Police wouldn't listen. I'd do anything to make him agree.

Dodger studied me a long time before turning back to the map. He tugged the elastic from his hair, then combed it back with his fingers as he fixed it in place again. When he was done, he removed his glasses and buffed them on the bottom of his shirt. Putting them back on, he stood motionless, eyes glued to the map, back turned. There was a rigid set to his shoulders.

After another extended pause, Dodger traced a path over the map, muttering under his breath. Once he'd dragged his finger from one section to the next and from one side of the map to the other, he dropped his hand and turned around.

“All right, I'll do it. On one condition.”

I worked hard to contain my excitement. My blood popped and fizzled. Finally, I was going to have answers. “Anything.”

“You're coming with me.”

My excitement dropped like a stone, and I opened my mouth to protest, but nothing came out. He was kidding. It was a joke. It had to be a joke. This was some sort of humor I wasn't understanding.

Dodger stared at me unblinking, his expression hard and unreadable.

My mouth hung open as I waited for him to start laughing and tell me he was pulling my leg, but he didn't, and the moment stretched on and on.

It was me who broke the tension. A manic laugh escaped, and I pointed at him. “You're funny. Oh shit. You had me going. You're kidding, right?”

“I'm not kidding. We do it together, or I walk.”

“But...” My eyes had blown so wide the cold air stung. I shifted my attention from Dodger to the map and back to Dodger. “I can't... No. I'm not a rider. Are you crazy? I can't... There is no way I'm...” I crossed my arms, piercing him with a frown. “Absolutely not.”

Dodger shrugged. “Fine. See ya later, and good luck.”

He marched to the door. I didn’t think he was messing around. The guy was leaving. Dodger was the only hope I had when it came to proving my theories were true. I couldn’t see myself convincing another rider. Especially if they didn’t share my passion for learning the truth. RaptorZ had told me Dodger was it. He was the one and only person in the community who would get it.

I had a feeling if I let him walk out the door, it would be over. All my hard work, my potential thesis, everything. Gone. Done.

I darted to the door where Dodger was bent over, tugging on his boots. Taking his arm, I forced him upright, almost off-balancing him. “Wait. Please. Just talk to me.”

“I’m not negotiating. If you want my help, fine, but I’m not doing this alone.”

“Alone? What? No, not alone. I would never ask you to go alone. That would be reckless and foolish, especially knowing there’s a killer out there who targets lone riders. I was made to understand that you had a group of rider friends you traveled with?”

Dodger shrugged me off. “None of my friends are going to bounce across the country on a whim. They think this serial killer stuff is a joke. They think I’m crazy to begin with. They have better things to do with their time. I came here solo, Brady, and I’m not going back out there solo.”

“What about RaptorZ?”

“He’s not a rider.”

“I’m not a rider!” My voice rose to nearly frantic levels. “I can’t do this. Not only is it illegal, it’s highly dangerous. Do you know the risks involved in freight-hopping?”

For the first time since laying out his demands, Dodger smiled. “I know *all* the risks. It’s thrilling, Brady. Riding gives me life. It makes my soul come alive like nothing else. I’m not asking you to join me because I need company. I’m asking you to join me because you’re way smarter about this stuff than I am. I don’t know what to look for. I don’t know how to…” He waved a hand. “Investigate a murder. What will I do if I find one of my guys out there? I don’t know if I can handle it.”

Dodger poked my chest. “But I can get *you* from place to place. I can teach *you* to freight-hop. I can keep you safe, but I can’t be the brains of the operation. You get me? I don’t think I have it in me. These are my people.”

My heart was going to pound right out of my chest. There were a thousand reasons I couldn’t go with him, not the least being the stupid attraction I felt and how much worse it would get if we were together twenty-four-seven.

“Please don’t leave. Not yet. Let me think about it.”

When he resumed putting on his boots, I panicked.

“Relax. I’m going outside to have a smoke and clear my head. I’ll be back.” He snagged my keys off the hook on the wall and dangled them in front of me. With a wink, he left.

Rooted in place, heart pounding, I stared at the wooden door as a tsunami of noise filled my head. I couldn't think. In no universe did I ever envision myself hopping trains. It was preposterous. I was not made for that sort of activity. It sounded physical, and I'd been the kid picked last in gym class every time for valid reasons. If I couldn't throw a ball or swing a bat or toss a frisbee, how was I going to chase trains? I was not cut out for stuff like this. Academics, sure. I didn't enjoy mathematics, but I'd rather solve complex equations for the rest of my life than jump on a moving train. What if I fell off and died? What if the police caught us and we were arrested? It would be the end of my career, and it hadn't even started yet. I had plans. Big plans.

What if I annoyed Dodger to the point he decided I was too much of a hassle and he abandoned me in the middle of nowhere? That was a real possibility.

What if I had more dreams like the one I'd had the previous night and Dodger was indeed straight and he found out I was gay? He'd kill me.

Funny, of all the issues, that one concerned me the most. Maybe if I was upfront with him about my sexuality, he'd change his mind and this problem would resolve itself. Maybe Dodger was the type of guy who wouldn't want to hang out with a gay man.

But then what if he ditched me altogether?

It was risky, but what else could I do?

I couldn't go with him. That was not an option. I had work to do at home. I had a thesis to start. I had books to read and research to conduct. I had...

The door opened, and only then did I realize I hadn't moved since Dodger had gone outside. My presence in the front hall caught him off guard, but it didn't last long. He kicked off his boots, eyeing me.

“Did you come to a decision?”

And that was when all my social ineptness decided to surface, and I blurted, “I'm gay.”

Chapter Five

Dodger

Brady's eyes bugged right out of his head once the words left his mouth. He froze, unblinking, looking like he was prepared for me to go on the attack.

Was he trying to throw me off? It took everything in me not to burst out laughing. The guy had no idea my core group of friends all landed somewhere on the rainbow. What the fuck did I care if he was gay or not?

“Good for you. Not to stereotype or anything, but I already figured that out.”

He still didn't move or blink. His jaw had come unhinged, and he'd gone pale.

“Close your mouth.”

He closed his mouth.

“Breathe.”

He sucked in an audible breath.

“Good. Now...” I gestured to the other room. “I’m going to assume you still don’t have an answer for me and go get myself another donut.”

I slapped his shoulder and moved past him, heading to the kitchen. He didn’t follow. Leaning against the counter, enjoying a jelly-filled, powdered-sugared treat, I waited for Brady’s system to come back online. I gave it three minutes. To entertain myself, I checked the time on the microwave. 8:37. The countdown was on.

The clock clicked over to 8:41 when Brady slinked into the kitchen, one hand over his mouth, his other arm hugged to his body, eyes still unnaturally large.

“Damn. Off by one minute.”

“What?”

I chuckled and waved the comment away.

“Um... Please excuse my rather blunt announcement at the door. It was a... poorly executed attempt at reasoning. The point is, you probably don’t want me to join you.” The hand at his mouth gesticulated more than ever before returning to cover it when he finished talking.

I cocked a brow. “Because you’re gay?”

“Yes.”

“I’m not following. Why does that matter?”

His brows scrunched, and he moved the hand from his mouth and fisted it under his chin, propping his head up. He

looked baffled. Confused. He pondered for a few long minutes before eyeing the box of donuts I'd left open.

I reached out and closed the lid. "No way. Get that out of your head. I don't think I can watch or listen to you eat another donut."

He looked longingly at the box, then sheepishly at me.

I popped the last bite of my own donut into my mouth and turned to run my fingers under the tap. "Look, here's the thing. I don't care if you're gay or straight or how you identify. All my best friends land somewhere on the rainbow, so if you thought that might be a deterrent, it's not. I'm a solid ally. I don't give a fuck."

"Ally," he mumbled under his breath, nodding. "I knew it."

"What?"

"Nothing." Brady wouldn't look at me. His gaze was fixed on the floor.

"Is there another reason, or are you just scrambling for excuses?"

He was quiet a long time before he muttered, "It's really dangerous, and I don't think I'm cut out for riding."

"So you want me to go chase a killer who hunts lone riders by myself?"

"No! God no. I didn't realize your friends wouldn't be with you."

"You know I won't let anything happen to you, right?"

“You can’t promise that.”

I sighed. “No, I guess I can’t. But I’ll teach you the skills, which will give you the confidence to ride. It sounds scary, but it’s not so bad. Come on, Brady, I know you’d rather investigate this case on your own. You’re as passionate about it as I am. I can see it. Do you really want to send some nobody out there to do your work? I’ll mess it up, I promise you.”

“We could rent a car. We could drive to these locations. Hike along the tracks to—”

“Fuck. That. No. No deal. I’m stuck at home working all winter. My summers are for me. For riding. I’m not spending it in a car. Ride with me, Brady. Let’s go prove this asshole is for real. Let’s get answers. It will be an adventure. I’d bet my left nut you’ve never had an adventure in your life.”

The poor guy looked so distraught. The thing was, I wanted to go check these places out as much as he wanted me to. But I didn’t want to go alone. Everything I’d said to him was the truth. I wasn’t the brains of this operation. My little setup at home was a joke compared to all Brady had figured out. Plus, I didn’t know if I had the stomach for it. The idea of finding one of my guys out there made my chest hurt. I didn’t know how Brady detached and made it okay. I didn’t know how he looked at those pictures on his wall day in and day out without losing his mind, but it wasn’t me.

I needed him.

Except Brady was a shut-in, and the sheer prospect of taking to the rails was making him lose his shit. Did the guy ever leave the house? Hell, did he ever do anything fun? Was his whole life bouncing from home to campus with his nose in a book?

Brady shook his head. “I can’t. I can’t, I can’t, I can’t... I’m sorry. No.” He was vibrating.

I caught his arm. With the contact, he lifted his head. His color wasn’t good, and it made his rosy lips stand out even more. They parted as his gaze shifted all over my face. Terror swam in the stormy blue depths of his eyes, but there was something else, and I couldn’t put my finger on it.

I gave his arm a rub, trying to calm him down. “Stop freaking out. Come with me. I want to do this. You do too. I know you do. I want to take this fucker off the map once and for all. Help me prove he’s real.”

Brady’s chin quivered. “I can’t. It’s too much. I can’t.”

“You can. I believe in you, Brady Thompson. I know you don’t wanna sit here in your apartment and let someone else do the work for you. I know you want to be part of it. If I didn’t think you could do this, I wouldn’t ask. Hell, one year ago, my friends and I took a guy far prissier than you on the rails for the first time and taught him to ride. The guy’s an old pro now. You should see him. Top dog. If he can do it, I know you can too.”

“It’s illegal.”

I pondered my next words for all of ten seconds. It wasn't often I gave a piece of myself away, but something told me it might help bring Brady to my side. "I'm going to tell you a little secret. Can I trust you?"

A small light shone in his eyes as he nodded.

"My real name is Troy. Troy Hector Valmai. I fucking hate that name, so I swear to god if you ever use it, I will pound your ass, and not in the way you queer boys like it. Do you know why everyone calls me Dodger?"

Brady shook his head, enraptured. "Tell me."

I didn't know why we were suddenly whispering, but the moment felt fragile, so I went with it. Anything to get Brady to listen. "They call me Dodger because I'm a pro when it comes to evading the bulls."

"What's a bull? I assume you don't mean a cow."

I chuckled. "No. The rail police. I've been riding for years. I've been in over my head more times than I can count, but not once have I been caught. I know what I'm doing. I didn't earn this nickname for nothing. You can trust me when I say I'll take care of you the best I can. Yes, it's illegal, but we won't get caught. Don't let that come into the equation at all, okay?"

Brady pinched his eyes closed and whimpered. "Hypothetically, how long would we be gone?"

I considered all the stops we had to make along the way. There were a lot. The lines we needed to ride weren't ones I knew well, so I'd have to do some research. "Probably a

couple of months. My guess is we won't be back until September."

"Three months. But my thesis. I have to work on it. I haven't even started. I'm so behind."

"Are you making excuses?"

His shoulders fell, and he met my eyes again. "No, but... Okay, yes. I've been making excuses about that damn thing for six months."

"Don't make me beg, Brady. I'll do it. I'll get down on my knees."

A wary smile twitched at the corner of his mouth. "You should never say that to a gay man. I'll get the wrong idea."

I snorted. "Come on, pretty boy."

I was getting to him. I was winning. Releasing his arm, I poked him in the ribs. "Come on, Brady. You know you want your name on this. You know this could mean big things for your career. Think about it. You aren't even a doctor yet, but you're gonna pin down a countrywide serial killer no one knows exists but us. This is huge. It will look kickass on a résumé, am I right?"

His smile was almost full. The sneaky eyetooth poked out before Brady ducked his head. "It would."

"Damn right it would." I poked him again. "Say yes. Ride with me. Come on, Brady. You know you wanna. If you say yes, I'll let you have another donut."

Brady's brow shot up, and he glanced at the box on the counter.

"Yeah, that's right. Now we're talking. You want that sugar, don't you? I know you do. They're damn good, aren't they? All that icing and sugar and jelly in the middle. Mmm."

"If I go with you, I'll drive you crazy."

"How? Because you're quirky and awkward and too smart for your own good? I think I can handle it."

"You can't abandon me out there. Promise me."

"I would never do that."

He wet his lips, leaving a glistening trail of moisture behind before squaring his shoulders. "And if I say yes, I can have another donut?"

I laughed. "You can have the whole box."

He held out a hand between us as his brilliant smile turned to me. "You have yourself a deal, Troy Hector Valmai."

I gaped. "You did not."

Brady just grinned, and for whatever reason, I didn't give a fuck that he'd used my real name. However, I couldn't have him thinking I was a pushover, so I snagged his hand to shake on the deal and tugged him against my chest instead.

Whispering in his ear, I aimed to sound harsh but somehow failed. "That shit is gonna stop right now, you lippy asshole. You hear me?"

Brady laughed and tried to get away.

I tightened my hold.

“Let go. I want my donut.”

He squirmed, and I held my ground, keeping him pinned against me. “No way. What’s my name?”

“Troy.”

“Try again.”

I got the feeling he wasn’t fighting too hard to get free.

We both laughed, wrestling for a solid minute before I released him.

He beelined it for the donuts, all smug and full of self-satisfaction as he picked the biggest one that was left and brought it to his mouth.

“Oh boy. Here we go. Let the donut orgasm commence.”

Brady almost choked on his first bite, and I wasn’t sorry.



Since Brady had agreed to come along, I had my work cut out for me.

“We need to gear you up to ride.” I flicked through the clothes hanging in his closet, scrutinizing everything. It was all chinos, slacks, and button-downs. There was a ridiculous amount of sweater vests as well. His color choices ranged from soft yellow to coral and baby blue. He liked his pastels.

The guy owned one pair of jeans so far as I could tell. “We can stick to the basics. We’ll share major things like the tent,

solar charger, and scanner. No reason for you to have them. What you need are clothes—”

“Wait. A tent? I have to sleep in a tent? Like, on the ground?” Brady sat on the edge of his bed, watching me. His knee hadn’t stopped bouncing, but I thought it was more to do with excess sugar than nerves.

“Yeah. Like on the ground. Haven’t you ever camped out?”

“No. But in a tent with you?”

“Yes, with me.”

“Isn’t that... um...” Brady dashed his attention to the sole pair of dark cargo pants I found at the back of his closet. I tore them off their hanger and chucked them at the bed. “But I’m gay.”

I snorted. “Yes, Brady. I know. We covered that. Trust me. If I can sleep with Killer all up in my face because he decides he’s cold, I think we’ll be okay.”

“I’m sorry, who?”

“Killer. It’s a nickname. He’s a friend. A very gay friend who I’ve been riding with for years. Brady, it’s cool. We’re good. I promise. Your sexuality is not a problem. I don’t get weird like that.”

He didn’t look so sure.

“Do you own any more cargo pants in a dark color?”

He joined me at the closet and rooted around in the back until he came out with a tote. “In here maybe. I haven’t worn

these clothes since high school. I'm not sure they fit anymore."

"And yet you still have them."

He shrugged and removed the lid.

"This might be a long shot, but do you own hiking boots?"

His face scrunched in thought, then he headed back into the closet and found a decent pair. They didn't look like they had ever been worn.

"Perfect. How about a dark hoodie?"

"You know it's almost summer, right? I'm going to cook in all these clothes."

"It's just for riding. Helps us stay hidden. We can change into summer clothes when we're off the train."

Pondering the few items I'd found that were suitable, I frowned. There were a lot of essentials missing. "I don't mean to be nosy, but how's your cash situation?"

Brady frowned. "Why?"

"You need more stuff. I can probably snag a lot of it secondhand, but it's still gonna add up."

"What kind of stuff?"

"A balaclava is a must. A bag of some kind, and no, not your old high school knapsack," I tacked on when he looked like he was about to interject a response. "You'll need a rain poncho, but I can probably find that cheap. You can get away with a rolled-up blanket for sleeping. Like you said, it's going

to be summer, so a sleeping bag isn't necessary. A headlamp would be a good idea. Gloves for catching are important so you don't tear up your hands. All in all, I can probably get it all for under a hundred bucks if I'm careful."

I had a feeling Brady wasn't hurting for cash. His apartment alone told me he wasn't a poor, half-starved student. Be it rich parents or a trust fund, I didn't know, but Brady was doing okay.

He hesitated for a minute, then dug some cash from his sock drawer and handed it to me. I counted it. There were six twenties and two tens. One hundred and forty bucks.

"Perfect. Here's the deal." I stuffed the money into my pocket. "You organize your clothing and extras. Think minimal. You want to pack *essentials* only. Toothbrush, yes. Deodorant, please, especially if I'm sharing a tent with you. Eyebrow waxing kit, or whatever you use to make them all pretty, not necessary. I'm sorry, but you'll have to deal with rogue eyebrows while on the road."

Brady looked adequately insulted, which made me laugh.

"Think of it as a compliment. You have nice eyebrows. Not that I'm gawking at your eyebrows. Whatever you bring, you have to carry, and it all has to fit in a bag about the same size as mine. Understand?"

"Yes."

"Minimal."

"Got it."

“Leave room for some basic food items. I’m heading out for a couple of hours to see what I can find.”

“Are we leaving tonight?”

“No. We’ll go tomorrow night. I need one more solid sleep on your couch, and I’ve gotta make a game plan for what route we’re taking.”

The glimmer of trepidation was back.

“Are you good if I leave you for now? You’re not going to freak out?”

“No.”

He didn’t sound so sure, but I let it go. He was an incredibly intelligent grown man. I’d given him a simple task. “You know what you have to do?”

“Yes.”

“Minimal, Brady.” I held my fingers an inch apart. “Don’t go crazy.”

“I won’t. I understand. Minimal.”

I was gone for four hours. They were a successful four hours on my part, and I’d managed to gather all the little extras Brady was missing. When I got back, I witnessed firsthand the ramifications of leaving a genius brain with a problem he couldn’t solve.

Not only was Brady’s bedroom in a state of chaos, so was Brady.

I'd taken his keys, so when I let myself in and the apartment was suspiciously quiet, I was concerned.

“Brady?”

No answer.

I kicked off my boots and carried my purchases through to the living room. No Brady. The clipboards were gone. The photographs and notes that had once hung on the wall around the map weren't there anymore. There were tiny holes where the pushpins had held the important information. Unease grew in my belly. This was not good.

He wasn't in the kitchen either, but I did note the box of donuts was empty.

“Oh shit. What have I done? Brady?”

I found him in the bedroom, sitting on the floor among piles and piles of neatly folded clothing, an array of toiletries, stacks of textbooks, his laptop, a mountain of folders, clipboards, and stray papers. He had dug out a first-aid kit, a plush comforter, two pillows, a portable printer, a package of colorful gel pens, notebooks, two boxes of tissues, toilet paper, Q-tips, dental floss, mouthwash, styling gel, a flashlight, slippers, a bathrobe, one of those poufy wash things my mother used when she showered, a pumice stone, and so, so, so many more items, I had to stop looking.

I didn't know if I should laugh or cry.

Brady sat cross-legged among the mess, face buried in his hands.

“Um... What happened in here?”

“I can’t go,” he mumbled from behind his palms.

Dropping all the purchases I’d made by the door, I removed my glasses and pinched the bridge of my nose, praying for strength. I told myself this wasn’t his fault. It was my fault for assuming he had any idea what it was like to live on the fly.

“Okay.” I blew out a breath. “New plan.” I was proud of my level tone. “Get the fuck out of here. Right now.”

Brady lifted his head, horror and shame filling his face. “But... it’s just, you said to pack minimal. Minimal means essentials. My first thought was, I can do this. But as I was putting things together, it dawned on me, one person’s idea of essentials isn’t necessarily the same as another person’s. I was organizing my socks and underwear when I realized I had no idea how often we would get to wash our clothes. So did that mean I should pack three pairs of underwear or eight or all fourteen? Underwear is essential.”

“You own fourteen pairs of underwear?”

It was like he didn’t hear me. “Then I considered we’d be on a mission to prove this killer exists, right? So I would need my *essential* notes.” He used air quotes. “I took them all down, but when I was organizing them, I thought about the mountain of information on my laptop. I refer to it all the time. It’s necessary to this case. *Essential*.” More air quotes. “But then I remembered I often have to refer to passages in my textbooks. By the time I’d organized all those things, I knew it was too much.”

“But you didn’t stop.”

“I couldn’t.” The desperate plea in his eyes begged me to understand. “I hadn’t even considered hygiene items. This is where I ran into a problem.”

He’d run into a problem long before he got to hygiene items, but he didn’t leave me a big enough gap to point it out.

“How am I supposed to know what’s frivolous and what’s not? My eyebrows are important to me. Do you know how hard it is to attract guys when you have a unibrow? Not that I have a unibrow. I don’t. But that isn’t the point. If I stopped plucking, I might grow one. How unattractive would that be? Isn’t it bad enough I’m socially awkward? If I had a unibrow too, I’d never get laid. Not that I get laid very much.” His cheeks pinked, and he struggled to hold my gaze. “The point is, it made me unsure about other things. Like this.” He picked up a small container. “This is frivolous, right?”

“I don’t know what you’re showing me.”

“It’s moisturizer.”

“Definitely frivolous.”

“See? I use it daily, so it feels essential. Once I gathered all the toiletries I use in a given day, I knew it was too much, but I didn’t know what to leave behind. So I moved on to other things.” He glanced around at the landfill of items surrounding him. “It got out of hand. I don’t think I’m cut out for this. I’d be better off operating from a home base and instructing you

via phone calls or something. Don't you agree? This is a terrible idea."

"No, it's not. It was a terrible idea asking you to pack, but we can fix this." I leveled my tone. "Listen, Brady, I'm going to say this in the nicest way I can. Please get the fuck out of here right now. You're fired from packing. I'm officially giving you your first F. I don't want to see you in here again tonight. I'm taking over. You have a new job. Find us something for dinner. Make it or order it. I don't care. Just get out of here for one hour while I pack you a bag."

He didn't move and blinked with incredulity. "One hour? You can pack in one hour?"

"I'm pretty awesome like that. Come on." I held out a hand to help him up. After some reluctance, he took it. Once he was on his feet, we stared at each other for a long minute.

"I'm already frustrating you, aren't I?"

"A little bit, but it's my own fault for giving you a complicated task. I misjudged your smart brain."

"I'm usually good with complicated tasks."

"I bet you are. Can you manage dinner?"

"Yes."

"Not too complicated?"

"No."

"Since you had donuts for breakfast and lunch, please choose something nutritious."

Brady's lopsided smile snuck out, and it worked wonders to erase the worry from his face. "On it. Do you have food allergies?"

"Nope. I'll eat anything."

He glanced back at the disaster on the floor. "Are you sure I can't help?"

"I'm begging you not to. You've helped enough already."

"But I was right to gather the information, wasn't I? It's imperative. We'll need it."

"It was smart thinking. How much can you access from your phone?"

His gaze flitted side to side. "A lot of it. More if I moved my notes to a cloud. But the autopsy reports and files I got from the police are all hard copies. I don't have them uploaded, and I don't own a scanner."

"No problem. After dinner, we'll take pictures of what we need. Simple as that. The rest we can do without. Trust me."

With his lips pinched together, he nodded. He was about to walk away when I snagged his arm and leaned in like I was imparting a secret. I lowered my voice. "Are you seriously freaking out about your eyebrows?"

He smiled, but it was tinged with sadness. "I guess not. It's not like I have anyone to impress, right?"

"Just me, and I'm pretty sure you're one of those guys who could never look ugly, not even with an Oscar the Grouch

brow. I'm convinced you could let them grow wild and still walk a runway." It was a teasing remark, but Brady stared at me for an extended amount of time like he couldn't quite figure me out before heading to the kitchen.

I remained in his bedroom, faced with the challenge of packing Brady's bag.

Chapter Six

Brady

I wasn't a chef, but I scrounged together the ingredients to make spaghetti while Dodger was alone in my bedroom packing. I wasn't sure how I felt about him invading my personal space. It wasn't like there was anything embarrassing for him to find. I didn't have a drawer full of dildos or other sex toys lying around, but it still unsettled me. More than once, I wanted to sneak down the hall and see how it was going, but I didn't.

I'd made a big enough mess, and I was grateful Dodger hadn't lost his shit when he'd gotten back from the store.

We ate in relative silence. The whole time, I kept stealing surreptitious glances at the man across the table, trying to sort him out. His hair was down again, and it sloped around his chin when he bent his head to eat. More than once, he adjusted his glasses. They were smudged, and I was fighting the urge to point it out. I took him in while he was busy eating. He wasn't as pale as me. His complexion was more naturally tanned. His fingernails were blunt but not manicured—a working man's

hands. Despite knowing he smoked, they were not tinged yellow from nicotine. His arms were covered in dark hair, and he filled out his shirt nicely. He was lean but not obnoxiously so.

When he lifted his coffee-colored eyes and caught me staring, he quirked a brow.

I ducked my chin and continued to eat, but not before noticing the spaghetti sauce had made his lips redder than usual.

This trip was a bad idea. What was wrong with me? I'd known the guy for one day. Surely I couldn't be this infatuated by him already. He wasn't classically handsome, or cut like an Adonis, or even deserving of a page in GQ, yet I couldn't stop staring at him. It all came down to attitude and self-confidence. Dodger had that in spades, and it was attractive.

His *ally* comment earlier seemed to confirm he was straight, yet some of his actions and remarks gave me pause. After pondering all through dinner, I'd decided it was one of two things. Either I was reading too deeply into his flattering remarks and Dodger was just one of those men who was extremely secure in his masculinity, or he was unconsciously flirting and somehow oblivious to the signals he was putting off.

The former seemed far more likely than the latter, especially knowing my track record for reading social cues. Dodger was straight, and he wasn't flirting. The end. I had to remember that.

After dinner, we spent two hours cleaning up the mess I'd made in my bedroom and ensuring we had access to all the pertinent information we might require while traveling across the country. It meant taking a lot of pictures with my phone and transferring other documents from my laptop onto a cloud.

A full rucksack sat on the floor against the wall. A single blanket, rolled into a tight log, was strapped to the side. Both my pillows were back on my bed—*not essential*. My entire life for the following couple of months fit inside an overly large knapsack. It was surreal.

When we were done tidying, I floundered, wanting to suggest we hang out and maybe watch a movie on my laptop. The words got caught in my throat when I overanalyzed them and worried Dodger might take it the wrong way.

It didn't matter. Before I could get the words out, Dodger said he had to make a phone call and was heading outside for a smoke to make it. As he was getting his boots on, he placed the call, and as the door shut behind him, I heard him say, "Hey, pretty lady. How's my favorite girl?"

I sagged. It shouldn't have surprised me, but hearing proof he was indeed straight was disappointing. Dodger had claimed he didn't have a girlfriend, but clearly there was someone important in his life. I needed to shove my inappropriate feelings into a box and let them go. Otherwise, I would do or say something stupid and ruin everything.

Work came first. Our goal was to prove there was a killer hunting down and murdering riders. There wasn't room on this

expedition for lust and crushes that would amount to nothing but heartache. I had rules, dammit. In twenty-seven years, I hadn't let my libido be in charge. I was not about to start now. Especially not with a straight guy.

It was getting late, and I didn't know what tomorrow would bring. When I thought too much about it, panic set in, and I wanted to back out. I didn't think I had to worry about inappropriate dreams taking over my subconscious that evening. I was more likely to dream about fatal train-hopping accidents or getting arrested.



Much to my disappointment, Dodger spent the majority of the following day on my laptop with a tattered CP Rail map spread out on the coffee table. He wore a frown. When I asked what he was doing, he explained he was trying to piece together a rough idea of our travels. When I asked if I could help, he said no.

I entertained myself reading a textbook until he made a short list on a Post-it Note and sent me to the grocery store to get essential food items for our packs. I was given explicit instructions to stick to the list.

By evening, we were ready to head out. I glanced longingly around my apartment, wondering if I'd ever return. If I didn't, would my mother be stuck with the task of going through my things? It would kill her. I'd opted not to tell her about the excursion. It wasn't a hasty decision. She was a worrier by

nature, and no good would come of it. After my father's death six years ago, she'd turned overbearing. It had taken me a long time to establish myself as an independent man who didn't need her help. If she caught wind of my plans, she would lose her mind. I wouldn't put it past her reporting it to the police to stop me.

So as I locked my door behind us, I prayed they wouldn't peel my dead body off the tracks somewhere and that my mother would be none the wiser about my summertime adventure.

Dodger was busy texting someone as we took the elevator to the ground floor. I caught sight of my reflection in the mirrored ceiling and glanced up, studying the stranger looking back at me. Charcoal cargo pants, a black T-shirt—the hoodie I required for hopping was packed away for now—hiking boots, and a massive, exceptionally heavy rucksack on my back. The thing weighed a ton, and I was used to lugging textbooks around campus. My neck and shoulders ached already, and I started to understand the meaning of the word *minimal*.

“Do you know where Cruisin’ is located?”

I shifted my attention from the ceiling to Dodger, who glanced up from his phone. “Um... Yes, it's downtown. It's a gay bar. Why are you asking?”

“Because we gotta go there first. Can we walk from here?”

“It's kind of far. We could take the bus.”

“Perfect.”

I was about to ask why we needed to go to a gay bar, but the elevator doors slid open, and Dodger walked away.

At the bus stop, Dodger pulled out a cigarette and lit up as he stared down the street, squinting in the direction of traffic. There was no sign of the bus. It was rush hour, and the sidewalks were bustling. Cars zipped by in both directions, bumper to bumper, everyone in a hurry to get home. Four other strangers were waiting for the bus, all standing apart, all staring at their phones like zombies. One was a woman with a stroller. She methodically rocked it back and forth, seemingly not hearing the baby’s wails as she played Candy Crush.

“Once we get to the railyard, I’ll talk you through the basics. I was hoping you’d have more time to get used to the weight of the pack, but I think we’re catching on the fly tonight.”

“Which means?”

“Jumping on a moving train.”

“Lovely.” My voice croaked. “Just what I always wanted.”

“I thought you hated sarcasm.”

“It felt appropriate. Why are we going to a gay bar?”

“I promised Willow I’d see her before I left. Is that cool?”

“Sure. Who’s Willow? Is she the one you were talking to on the phone last night?”

“Yeah. I was running some stuff by her. She’s a friend.”

“A girlfriend?”

Dodger snorted. “No. Not like that. I told you, I don’t do the girlfriend thing. She’s a rider. More like a sister. She’s still a bit shaken. She and a couple other rider friends were on a freight that crashed about a week ago. It was scary.”

My lungs seized, and I grabbed Dodger’s arm, jerking him around to face me. “Excuse me? A train crashed, and you’re just telling me this now?”

“It was bad luck, and I probably shouldn’t have told you because now you’re going to freak out.”

“Of course I’m going to freak out. This is the kind of thing I was talking about.”

“Brady. Please be cool. I’ve been hopping trains for years. That was a first. It’s not the norm. Everyone was okay. It’s not a big deal.”

“Not a big deal. I’m going to die. All because I need to prove I’m right. This is what my father warned me about in high school. He said, ‘Brady, one day your smart brain is going to get you in trouble because you don’t think about consequences.’ Here we are. Deep in the thick of it. My father is glaring down at me right now saying, ‘I told you so.’”

Dodger’s expression morphed to concern at the implication of my father no longer being around. But he didn’t get to ask because the bus pulled up along the curb at that exact moment.

I slapped him on the shoulder and backed up. “Good luck. Go on without me. Stay safe.”

Dodger did not go on without me.

Rolling his eyes, he snagged the front of my T-shirt and tugged me toward the bus, spun me, and shoved me up the stairs when the doors opened. “You are such a freaking spaz. Live a little. It won’t kill you. The only way you’re going to die out there is if you drive me batshit crazy, and I smother you in your sleep.”

“That is highly probable,” I said, stumbling along. “In case you haven’t noticed, I’m incredibly irritating.”

Dodger laughed. “Believe me, I noticed.”

Cruisin’ was not one of the more popular gay bars in the city. Whereas some gay establishments leaned more toward gay men or lesbian women, Cruisin’ was more of a mixed crowd. Compared to other gay bars, it was low-key and nondescript on the outside. It could have passed for any other bar or restaurant. It had a flashy neon sign that stood out at night, but the colors were faded in the bright afternoon sun, and the imperfections showed. In the daytime, it just looked tacky. The windows were covered in dark paper so passersby couldn’t see inside. The brick work was painted black, but years under the sun had washed out the color. It was peeling and aged.

At five o’clock on a Wednesday evening, Cruisin’ was practically empty. The lights inside hadn’t been dimmed, the music was still low, and the dance floor was empty. A sleek black bar took up a huge portion of the back wall, and a mosaic pattern of stained glass acted as a backsplash behind

the bottles of liquor all lined up on glass shelves. The walls were painted black, the tiles underfoot were black, and the tables and chairs lining the side of the large room were black. At night, fairy lights and other colored strobe lights made the place come alive. It lost something at this earlier hour, and the whole place felt worn out and sad.

There were a handful of people sitting on barstools. Two older men in suits sat at the far end, and a younger woman with black hair and makeup, which stood out against her pale skin, sat at the other. She had a drink in front of her, but her face was buried in her phone.

A couple of college-age guys shared one of the high tables off to the side of the room, and a lesbian couple shared a laugh at another as they sipped cocktails. Otherwise, the place was deserted. One person was working, a woman with a crop cut and a few inches of dark mahogany curls on top, messy yet stylish. She wore bootcut Levis with a brown belt and a black fitted T-shirt with the bar's name on the front. Sleeve tattoos covered both her arms and drew the eye to her fiercely muscled biceps. She was not butch, but she was extremely fit like she lifted weights or worked out religiously. She carried herself in a way that screamed tomboy, and I was embarrassed to admit she gave off an aura that scared me a little.

“You ever been in here?” Dodger asked, drawing my attention away from the bartender.

“What? Um... no. Not this bar. I've been to gay bars. A few of them. Not this one.”

“I can’t picture you at a bar.”

“In my first year of college, I went a fair bit. But that was when I was looking to... Nothing. You know what? Never mind. I rarely go anymore. In fact, I don’t... go out much at all.”

“I figured. Come on. There’s Willow. I’ll introduce you. She’s been dying to meet you.”

“You told her about me.”

Dodger laughed. “Yes, I did.”

Willow was the goth-looking girl I’d noted at the bar. Dodger made a cat-call whistle, and she spun around, a huge grin on her face.

“Holy shit, she smiles,” Dodger said as he opened his arms.

Willow jumped off the stool, and the two hugged like they hadn’t seen each other in ages. It was an awfully friendly hug and made me question Dodger’s insistence that he wasn’t interested in her in that way.

“You should smile more often,” he said. “It makes your face all pretty.”

“Shut up.” Willow pulled out of his arms. “I can’t believe you’re taking off all summer. Have you messaged Killer? He’s gonna be pissed.”

“Yeah, he knows. It’s important. You know I gotta do this.”

“Doesn’t mean I have to like it.”

“Have you heard from Ty?”

“No. I’m worried about him.”

“Me too. Keep me posted. If Silent Bob doesn’t keep his promises, I will make a detour.”

“I’m sure your macho attitude won’t be appreciated.”

I stayed off to the side, not knowing what they were talking about. While I waited, I debated if we would be there long enough I could put my rucksack down and massage the cramps out of my muscles. As I decided any amount of relief would be welcome and slid my pack to the ground, Dodger turned and clasped the back of my neck, drawing me to his side. I did everything I could to ignore my reaction to his firm and controlling touch. His thumb stroked along my hairline, but I wasn’t sure he’d done it consciously.

“Brady, this is my girl, Willow. Willow, this is Brady, a.k.a. Dr. Reid in the flesh.”

“Please, just call me Brady.” I offered a hand, and we shook. “I can’t understand Dodger’s insistence on calling me Dr. Reid. I’m not a doctor nor does that show bear any relevance to my future career since it’s fiction and a highly inaccurate portrayal of behavioral analysis units, American or Canadian. I’ve told him that, but he doesn’t seem to want to believe me. So, I hear you’re a rider too.”

Willow’s face was unreadable as she shifted her attention from me to Dodger. She cocked a brow in silent question.

“I told you.” Dodger grinned. His thumb stroked the back of my neck again, lighting my blood on fire. Did he have any

clue what he was doing? “One hundred percent Dr. Reid, am I right?”

“Wow.” Willow sized me up and down again. “Unbelievable. I’m sorry to be the bearer of bad news, Brady, but you’re going to die out there on the rails.”

My eyes bugged. “Um... excuse me?”

“Don’t freak him out. It took me all day to calm his neurotic ass down.”

To Dodger, Willow said, “He deserves to know. I give it less than a week before you want to strangle him. This guy isn’t going to survive.”

Dodger shrugged, dropping his hand and giving me the side-eye. “I don’t know. I think you’re wrong. He’s growing on me. Blissfully innocent. He kinda reminds me of Green.”

I didn’t know who Green was, but I relaxed somewhat now that I understood what Willow meant. She was teasing, but she was right, and I’d said it once before. I was going to drive Dodger crazy. He didn’t seem to realize how annoying I could get.

“So you believe in this serial killer nonsense?” Willow asked.

“Definitely. It’s not nonsense. It’s a fact. I’ve been researching it for months and have a solid theory, which we intend to prove. If we can connect a few more dots, we’ll have enough evidence to file a report with the RCMP. They won’t be able to disregard it.”

“So you’re not chasing down a killer. You’re gathering evidence.”

“Correct. It would be highly risky to chase down a killer without following proper procedures. That was never the intent. I wouldn’t be stupid enough to do that.”

“Maybe not, but he would be.” Willow thumbed at Dodger.

“Fucking right. If I catch up with this guy, I’ll throw him off a goddamn train and see how he likes it.”

“See?” Willow rolled her eyes. “I was going to tell Dodger to keep an eye on you, but maybe you should be the one keeping tabs on him so he doesn’t play vigilante out there.”

Startled at the notion, I turned to Dodger. “You understand the objective of our mission, right? We aren’t hunting down a killer. We’re gathering evidence.”

“I know, I know. Ignore her. She’s trying to get a rise out of you.”

“Have you ever ridden before?” Willow asked, changing the subject.

I made a note to further discuss the matter with Dodger later. I needed to affirm he wasn’t veering off course.

“Um... no. First time. I can’t say I’m too thrilled about it either, but I wasn’t given a choice.” I sneered at Dodger.

“Nope, he wasn’t. So, am I gonna get to meet the elusive Billie while I’m here?” Dodger rubbed his hands together and wiggled his brows.

The shift in conversation was giving me whiplash.

Willow studied Dodger with hard eyes and a firm set to her mouth. She had many piercings, and the pause was long enough I tried to take stock of them all. Eyebrow. Lip. Nose. Both ears all the way around. She had a small tattoo by her eye.

“Fine,” Willow bit out. “But be nice, or I’ll rip your balls off. Don’t test me, Troy. You know I’ll do it.”

“Wow. Pulling out the big guns.” To me, he said, “Don’t get any ideas. She’s not supposed to call me that either.” Then to Willow, he said, “Come on. Introduce me. I can be nice.”

Willow held his gaze for a minute longer before glancing around the bar and catching the eye of the only bartender. The edgy woman I’d seen when we’d first come in.

Willow hitched her chin, calling her over. “Don’t make me regret this,” she muttered under her breath. “I will kill you.”

The woman Dodger had called Billie flicked a dingy dishtowel over her shoulder as she approached the table, eyeing each of us in turn. She had a pretty face despite the serious set to her mouth. A noticeable scar bisected her eyebrow, and she too had a tattoo near her eye. A heart. I flicked my gaze at Willow, noting hers was identical.

Billie stood beside Willow, who was seated backward on a bar stool. I didn’t know either of these women, but I got a protective vibe from Billie as she scanned Dodger. She barely spared me a glance. Maybe I didn’t look threatening. Instead

of offering Dodger a hand to shake, she hitched her chin in greeting.

“You’re Dodger, am I right?”

“That’s me. And you’re the mysterious Billie Willow refuses to talk about.”

She made a noise of assent. “Funny, I’ve heard all about you.”

“All good, I hope.”

“Debatable.” Willow elbowed Billie in the side, and Billie cracked a smile, nudging her back. “I hear you’re taking off again.”

“Off to find his copycat killer,” Willow said.

“Yup. Me and my new buddy Brady.” Dodger smacked my arm. “We’re gonna prove once and for all this shit is for real.”

“I wish you good luck. Do me a favor and keep in touch, or this one will worry herself sick.”

“He knows better.”

Dodger eyed Willow a second before tilting his head and narrowing his eyes at Billie. “So, you ever gonna hit the rails with us?”

Billie huffed, and a half smile appeared, taking down the menacing look she’d had by a few degrees. “Not a chance, big boy. I don’t have a death wish.”

“See?” I jumped in. “Me either. That’s what I told Dodger, but he didn’t listen. She gets it. I’m on your side.” Then I

stupidly offered a fist to bump, thinking it was the proper social protocol when forming an alliance.

Billie's attention turned to me, and I shrank under her hard-eyed glare, dropping my fist and inching closer to Dodger.

He laughed and swung an arm around my shoulder. "Relax. No one has a death wish."

"No, but I've got a bar to run," Billie said to Dodger. "Even if I wanted to, there's no time for riding."

"I'm sure you get time off. Willow would teach you the ropes. She'd love it if you tagged along one time."

"Nope."

"Let it go, Troy." Willow's warning was quiet but held weight.

Dodger acquiesced, and I got the sense this was a fragile topic of discussion and one he knew better than to pursue.

Willow slid off the stool and said something in Billie's ear. Billie rubbed a knuckle against Willow's thigh and winked—a move I didn't think she intended anyone to see—then she made excuses about getting back to work and said goodbye.

"Come on. I'll walk you out," Willow said.

Out on the street, Dodger rooted through a pocket and pulled out his pack of cigarettes. Willow tore them from his hand and shoved him away when he went to grab for them.

"Give me my smokes back, you brat."

“You need to quit this nasty habit. It’s disgusting. Am I right, Brady?”

“I’m not getting involved.”

Dodger wrestled her a bit longer before she gave in and handed him back his cigarettes. Shaking his head, he lit one and blew a whisp of smoke into the air. “I’m quitting.”

“Yeah right. I’ll believe it when I see it.”

“If you spent a winter with my parents, you’d smoke too.”

“Have you figured out your route?” Willow asked.

“Mostly. Did you think about what I asked you?”

Willow eyed me and blew a chunk of hair off her face before facing Dodger. “Yeah. I can’t figure it out either. Every single one of them seems off the beaten path. No rhyme or reason so far as I can see.”

I shifted my attention between them, not having a clue what they were talking about.

“Do you think they were lured?”

“It makes more sense to me than if they chose to take those routes.”

“That’s what I thought too.”

This definitely had something to do with our case. “What are you talking about? Lured? You mean our dead guys were lured?”

I got a matching pair of harsh glares and cringed. “I’m sorry. The... rider victims.”

“I’ll fill you in at the railyard. We’ll have time to kill.”

“Send me your route and keep in touch,” Willow said.

“I will.”

“I’m serious, Troy.”

“I know.”

“Are you stopping in Montreal?”

“Only to swap over to a CP commercial line heading toward Québec City. I don’t want to get tied up. We have a lot of ground to cover, and Brady’s never ridden before, so I’ve gotta take things a bit slower at first. I don’t want to dick around.”

“I get it. Good luck. Stay safe.”

The pair of them hugged for a long time, and Dodger whispered, “Love you, pretty lady. We’ll be okay.”

“I hope so. I love you too.”

“When you’re ready to come clean about Billie, I’m ready to listen. She’s kinda hot in a scary sort of way.”

“Ass.” Willow shoved him, and Dodger laughed.

“I’m kidding. She seems nice.”

Willow offered me a hand to shake. “It was good to meet you, Brady.”

“You as well.”

“Don’t let this guy push you around. He can be a bit of an asshole at times. Believe it or not, he’s a softy when you get to

know him. His mouth gets the better of him, but try not to take it personally.”

“We’ll be fine. Right, Brady?” Dodger’s hand landed on the back of my neck again, sparking a fire in my belly. At this rate, we would *not* be fine.

“Yes. I... hope so.”

Chapter Seven

Dodger

The Toronto railyard was one of the biggest yards across the country and the most confusing when it came to being in the right spot at the right time to catch the right train. As I'd explained to Brady before we arrived, we weren't catching out *in* the yard but a quarter mile or so outside it. Far enough away to be out from under the spotlights but close enough our freight's speed would be acceptable for jumping.

The dozens of tracks that converged and crossed one another could be complicated for anyone who hadn't ridden before. Even with my years of experience, I had to puzzle through maps and listen intently to the scanner to ensure we got on the right train. Otherwise, we could end up somewhere we didn't want to be.

The cacophony of noise was familiar to me, but Brady jumped every time there was an overly loud crash of coupling cars in the distance. His eyes bulged, and he held a firm grip on the straps of his pack.

“We’re going to hang tight here. Our ride should be passing through around eleven thirty. We won’t know which line until it arrives, but it’s not a big deal. I’ll sort it out.”

Brady didn’t respond. He’d gone quiet, which I deduced was unusual for him. The look of sheer panic hadn’t left his face since I’d explained the basics about how to catch a moving freight. I was waiting to turn around and find him gone. So far, he was still beside me.

We’d found a niche of bushes a good distance from the tracks. When it was time to break cover, we had a ten-foot-high rusty fence to scale, a CP service road to cross, which ran parallel to the tracks, and likely a few lines to skip over to connect with our train. We would need to stay low and move fast. The bulls were rampant in this yard and were up and down the lines regularly.

“How are you doing?” I’d been afraid to ask until now.

“Nauseous. Dizzy. Is that normal? It could be blood sugar. Plus, I feel like I’m going to throw up. I’m also clammy, and I can’t stop shivering. It’s not even cold. According to my phone, it’s twenty-two degrees. I’m sweating under all these clothes. Shivering *and* sweating. What if I have a fever? These symptoms are flulike. Maybe I’m coming down with something.”

He’d been fiddling with his new balaclava since we’d settled in our spot. His eyes were focused on the distant train yard. Under the moonlit sky, he was pale as a ghost.

I tugged off a glove with my teeth and felt his forehead. He was so lost in his head the action made him startle. Checking his temperature was all for show. Brady was fine. His skin was warm under my palm—and soft. No fever.

Brady's eyes searched my face in the dark.

“What are you doing?”

“Checking for a fever.”

“And?”

“You're definitely sick,” I said, much to his surprise.

“I am? I mean, I knew it. I can feel it.”

“Yup. You're suffering from an acute onset of sidediri—Dammit. That's not it. Hang on.” I turned on my phone and referenced the Google search I'd done a few minutes ago. “Here we go. Siderodromophobia. That's what you have. Unfortunately, it says here the only cure is getting your ass out there and hopping a freight with me.”

The puzzled look on his face made me snort. He grabbed my phone and read. “A broadly encompassing diagnosis that includes all fears related to trains. Really? You're making this into a joke.”

“No. I think you are honest to god affected. Like I said, though, the only cure is to face your fears. Jump the train. Fly with me, Brady.”

He threw my phone back at me with a scowl. I couldn't help laughing.

“I’m terrified. I don’t want to be here, and you think it’s funny. Willow was right. You can be an asshole sometimes.”

“Oh, come on. Lighten up. I’m teasing. I’m trying to help.”

He did not lighten up. Instead, he continued toying with his balaclava with a deep frown. Coddling and helping people feel better were not parts of my skill set, but I had to do something. The poor guy was going to give himself an ulcer before our ride got there.

Be nice, Willow had warned. I was trying. Considering how different we were, I liked Brady. His passion and intelligence were inspiring. The way his brain worked intrigued me more than I expected. He didn’t speak plainly. Everything that came out of his mouth was a flourish of words no normal person would say. I liked listening to him talk, especially when he went on a tangent.

Sadly, I got the feeling Brady didn’t get out much. He’d remarked several times about how his social skills were limited. It made me wonder if he’d been that kid in school who’d been teased for his intellect. What sucked more was that I’d have been that kid who’d picked on him.

I would have to try to remember that. This wasn’t high school, and as much as it was my default setting at times, I didn’t want to be the bully anymore. We had to spend a lot of time together, and it would be better if we could do it as friends rather than enemies.

Right now, we had time to kill, so I needed to bring his anxiety down. I needed to take his mind off the jump and

focus it elsewhere.

“You know, your face is a lot prettier when you smile. That frown gives a nasty preview of what you might look like with a unibrow.”

My comment washed away the scowl almost instantly. The corner of his lip twitched, and he glanced up from under his long lashes. Man, the guy soaked up compliments like he'd never gotten one in his life.

“Are you pissed at me for joking around?” I asked when I had his attention.

“No. I'm out of my element, which is making me reactive. I have concerns, and since I've not been able to address them or work them out, they're leaving me out of sorts. I apologize.”

“What concerns?”

“For one, this pack is extraordinarily heavy. It surpassed my expectations, and I feel compromised. The way you explained it, I have to run alongside a moving train while simultaneously grabbing a ladder and heaving myself up onto the freight, all while wearing what amounts to an added thirty or more pounds of weight. Plus, I have to do it all without falling. Here's something you may not know about me. I've tripped over my own feet walking to the elevator. More than once. I'm clumsy. Also, the last time I ran was in high school when we were forced to run the mile for tenth grade phys ed. Full transparency. I came in last. Do you know how long it took me to run a mile? Eleven minutes. Most guys did it in under five. Gym was my worst subject, and I only managed a B minus. I

think the teacher took pity on me. The grade was earned from sheer determination, not skill. Lastly, this whole experience sounded a lot more doable in the safe confines of my apartment. Here in the yard, it's a reality check. I'm not so sure I can do this anymore. Please don't make fun of me. The last thing I want to do is burst into tears and make an even bigger fool of myself."

"Okaaaay." I removed the balaclava from his hands before he tugged the thing apart. Shimmying closer, I tucked a hand under his chin, forcing his head up to look at me. "You're allowed to be scared. I think when I tease, it can look like I'm making fun of you when really, I'm trying to lighten the mood. I'm sorry. I remember my first jump, and I was freaking out on the inside too. It's the unknown. It's the monstrous engines and the power they exude. I get it. You're making it way harder in your head than it is. Yes, the pack is heavy, and yes, it's going to slow you down, but it will be the last thing on your mind when we get out there. Adrenaline will fuel you the whole way. You'll be stronger and faster than you think, and I'll be beside you the whole time. I promise. I know you can do this."

Brady wet his lips, and they glistened in the moonlight. He stared at me with raw intensity, a look in his eyes I couldn't quite make out.

"Are you with me?"

He nodded, and I dropped my hand. I didn't move away because it looked like he wanted to say something.

“What’s up, Brady?”

“Um...” He rattled his head as though clearing a thought, then pointed at my face. “Your glasses are dirty. May I clean them? It’s driving me crazy. I’ll feel better if you say yes.”

I huffed a laugh and pulled them off, handing them over. Brady went to town buffing them until they shined. I’d deescalated his panic several degrees, and I was proud of myself. I needed to keep him engaged and thinking forward so he wouldn’t get consumed with worry again.

Instead of handing my glasses back, Brady insisted on setting them on my face, stating I would smudge them otherwise. It was weird but also one of those uniquely quirky Brady things, so I bit back any teasing remarks.

Our goal was to head east. Once we landed in Montreal, I needed to sort out catching a freight heading up a CP commercial line toward Québec City. CN had a few trains heading that way, but they were passenger trains, and they veered too far off course. Our first mark on the map was just outside a little town where the CP lines diverged. If I was right, there would be a stopping or slowing point where we could get off. Unfortunately, the lesser-used commercial lines weren’t anything I’d ridden before. Therein was the quandary I’d been puzzling since that morning.

As I’d drawn up our plans, it had dawned on me that every single rider who’d been killed had been off the beaten path. In other words, they’d been tossed off freight lines where it was rare freight hoppers would venture. I’d run it past Willow, and

she'd agreed it was odd. It was time I brought Brady into the loop. It wasn't something he would have ever figured out on his own since he wasn't a rider.

“I need to run something past you.”

“Sure.” He was still adjusting my glasses, and I resisted the urge to bat his hand away.

“There's another pattern you didn't know about. Not because you aren't smart enough, but because your freight-hopping knowledge is nil. In fact, I just picked up on it last night and only because I was planning to follow our lost riders' routes.”

Brady's eyes lit up, and he forgot all about my glasses. “Is this what you were discussing with Willow? You said lured. Do you think these riders were lured? I'm glad you brought it up. I've wanted to know what you meant by that, but I was preoccupied by the impending danger, and I forgot all about it.”

I pinched his lips together. “Shush. Let me talk.”

He brushed my hand away. “Sorry. I'm shushing.”

“Yes, I think they were lured. Here's the thing. All these transient riders in the community usually have the same goals. They travel from big city to big city. The routes are similar, depending on where they want to land. For the most part, unless they have specific business in little off-the-grid towns, they don't diverge from the main lines. When you're homeless, a big city has more to offer. Shelters, food banks,

soup kitchens, you name it. You can't find that in small communities. Hence, why go there?"

Brady was making that face again. The one that drew his eyebrows together in the middle. I huffed and reached out to smooth the line away.

"Stop scowling or I'm gonna start calling you Oscar. I prefer it when you have two eyebrows, not one angry one."

"I don't have a unibrow. I pluck religiously. You're going to make me self-conscious."

I laughed. "Good grief. Shut up and stop making faces is all I'm saying. I'm trying to share information here."

"I was listening, then you made fun of my thinking face."

"It was a cute thinking face. I couldn't help it."

My comment earned me a look of confusion before he picked up his balaclava from where I'd left it on the ground and started fiddling with it again. "Keep talking."

"What I'm saying is, a lot of these guys were found along out-of-the-way, lesser-used CP commercial lines. CN still uses some of them for passenger trains, but they only service small towns in the middle of Boonsville."

"Is Boonsville a place? I'm not familiar."

"No. In the boonies. The middle of nowhere."

"Oh. Right. Go on."

"These commercial lines don't really go anywhere that would be important to a rider. I can see a rare occasion where

someone might head to one of these small towns if they had a specific reason, but doesn't it seem suspicious that *all* the riders who were found dead were off the beaten path?"

Brady's gears were turning. "Hence, you believe they were lured."

"I do. Considering these lines don't go anywhere important, yet all our riders were found dozens or hundreds of kilometers along them, doesn't it make sense to consider our suspect was traveling with his intended kill? He didn't randomly run into other riders going the same direction. Not possible. I can't believe that. Somehow he convinced them to travel with him."

"Oh. Like Silveria did. He made friends with the riders initially, and they traveled together."

"Exactly. Like I said, no one travels these routes willingly or without a solid reason. For all of these riders to choose to head off the main lines, I think they'd have to be lured. This guy, whoever he is, promised them something to get them on those specific freights."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. Money. A job. Maybe drugs. It could be anything. You're talking about homeless, desperate young men. Maybe it was sexual promises. Fuck if I know."

Brady frowned again. "Until we uncover more evidence, I'm hesitant to think it was sexual or drug-related. The autopsies showed no signs of assault of that manner, and the

tox screens were clean. However, the rough profile I've sketched out does align with the idea of them being lured."

"Wait. You have a profile?"

"Of course. You don't?"

I chuckled. "No, Brady. I didn't get that far."

Brady perked up. "Oh. I'll happily share mine with you. I'm so sorry. We should have started there." He sat up, drawing his phone from his pocket, no doubt to educate me on our suspect. "Let me make a few adjustments, and I'll read what I have."

Academic Brady forgot all about his freight-hopping worries and typed frantically on his phone. The expression that crossed his face made me smile. The guy was in his element with stuff like this.

"Okay. Here we go. Ready?"

"Lay it on me."

"Our killer is an experienced rider, likely between the ages of thirty-five and forty-five years old. He's male. White. Friendly. Personable. Laid-back but also a loner. He will avoid spending too much time in cities and will likely only venture there for supplies, doing all he can to stay under the radar. Although he prefers solitude, he's companionable and a smooth talker, which makes it easy for him to lure young, unsuspecting riders into a trap by encouraging them to tag along with him. He won't associate with multiple riders at once since it would shift the power balance and be too much of a risk." Brady glanced up. "I also have a section detailing

his background and family structure. Would you like to hear it? It's extensive, but I feel it's equally important."

"Not right now."

Brady's shoulders sagged. "Oh. Why not? I thought you would want to familiarize yourself with the working profile. I can add your input if you feel I've missed anything. I don't mind. Although, my working knowledge of killers is probably firmer than yours, but—"

"Later, Brady. I promise. It's almost time to go. We've got a train to catch."

His face fell. "Oh. Now?"

I patted his cheek as I scrambled to my knees, getting my pack on. "Yes, now. Stop fretting. This is the best part." I stood and offered him a hand.

He accepted it and let me pull him to his feet. I took his face between my palms and looked him right in the eye. It was time to get serious.

"You can do this. I believe in you. Say it."

"I can do this." His voice was barely a whisper.

"Louder."

"I can do this."

"Again."

"I can do this."

I grinned. "You're pretty amazing for a bookworm who doesn't get out much. I'm proud of you."

There was something about earning a peek at that eyetooth and seeing the light shine from behind his eyes. It knocked me off-balance every time.

“Let’s catch out,” he said, using the lingo I’d taught him.

“Let’s catch out.” I patted his cheek again, but it took an extra second to release him. For some reason, I got lost in his smile.



The first time I ever caught out, I was with a group of people in Moose Jaw. It had been nothing more than teenage joyriding. Something to do to entertain ourselves during summer break. It had been a steppingstone, one that had launched me into a whole new world I never knew existed. Riding gave me life, and I’d never looked back. It was freedom. It was ballsy. It was exhilarating. Nothing before had set me on fire like catching a freight and riding the rails—and nothing had since. It was the reason I refused to settle down.

It was easier learning how to catch a moving freight while with a group of people. The newbie was crammed in the middle with a skilled rider in the well, helping from one angle. Another skilled rider ran alongside the train beside them, giving directions.

It was how we’d taught Leo almost a year ago when we’d found him in Montreal.

The experience would be different with Brady. I didn’t have an extra pair of hands, which meant he needed to take on

certain tasks solo since I couldn't be everywhere at once. He was competent, I had no doubt, but he was terrified, which compromised his abilities since he second-guessed everything. My pep talks were foundational. He needed to know I believed in him, or he'd never believe in himself.

But confidence and determination only went so far.

The first time Brady fell was scaling the rusty fence. It took four tries to get him to the top. He hadn't been kidding when he'd claimed he was no athlete. The guy could barely pull his body weight, never mind the added encumbrance of a rucksack. I bit back teasing remarks and helped him the best I could.

On the other side of the fence, with our balaclavas in place, I squared off with Brady, holding his shoulders. "Stay close and move fast. Keep one hand on me at all times so I know if I lose you. I have to watch for bulls and seek out a decent well. I can't worry about where you are too. When I find us a spot, you're going up first, so be ready. You can't hesitate. Understand? We went through this. You know what to do."

He nodded, but the fear in his eyes wasn't masked. "I'm ready."

I slapped his shoulder and gave him a reassuring smile.

Crouching low, I scanned the service road and the tracks beyond. Our freight had just pulled through the yard and was moving at a decent catching pace down the line. We had a solid fifty yards to cover to get there. Once the coast was clear, I scrambled forward, moving swiftly and keeping low. Brady

did his best to keep up, but I lost contact with him too many times and had to keep stopping to look back. Each time he was lagging behind, and I had to wait for him to catch up.

I took his hand instead and dragged him along. It helped.

As we hit the tracks, I crouched low behind an electrical box and pulled Brady close, hissing in his ear. “Careful of your footing here. There’s a lot to trip on. That’s our freight.” I pointed. “I’m going to need both hands to check the wells. I can’t keep holding onto you. I need you beside me. Stick close.”

He nodded.

We burst from our hiding place when it was clear, and I kept a tight lock on his hand until we made it alongside the train, then I had to let go. My head was on a swivel, checking for signs of bulls, keeping an eye on Brady, and hopping on and off ladders outside grainers and stackers to see if their wells had solid bottoms or not.

It took a few minutes before I located a grainer that wasn’t a suicide ride. At that point, Brady was straggling behind by half a car length.

“Move it,” I yelled, jogging back to snag his arm. “This one. Pick up your feet. Remember what I told you about grabbing the ladder and pulling yourself up. Do it now. Think about it. Once you’re up, you don’t have to run anymore. Put on a burst of speed and get over the edge.”

I moved him in front of me, ready to assist any way I could. He was ten feet from the ladder and about four feet from the giant engine moving along the track when he fell for the second time. Maybe I was pushing him along too fast. Maybe he'd tripped on his feet. Maybe there had been a protrusion in the ground he'd missed.

Either way, he went down hard, and I followed, landing on his back. But with his pack, it was like landing on a camel's hump, and I tumbled off toward the train, crashing onto the hard ground a half foot from danger, snagging Brady at the last second so the momentum wouldn't take me closer. My heart battered my ribs, and for the first time in years, a flash of fear rolled through me.

The danger was real.

The freight was close enough to our left I felt its vibrations under my skin and the displacement of air on my face despite my mask. This was how riders died. They fell while catching out and landed on the tracks.

It took a second for the fear to ebb. I scrambled to my feet, tugging Brady up with me. The viable grainer was long gone, and there was no way Brady would be able to chase it down.

Back to square one. The longer we were in the open, the higher the chances we'd be caught.

It took a solid four minutes to locate another decent well. That time, I was careful not to urge Brady along faster than his feet could carry him.

“Grab the ladder. Come on, Brady. Get up there.”

I was getting frustrated. He just couldn't seem to run fast enough.

I feared his pack would be the death of him. He could barely scale a rusty chain-link fence without help. If he couldn't get his ass over the lip of the car, we were in trouble. I could only help so much from my end.

For a second, I debated going first so I could heave him inside the well, but then I feared he'd never catch the rail and I'd have to jump off or leave without him.

Brady caught the ladder with one hand and ran for a few dozen feet as he held it.

“Come on. Get your foot up. Go, go, go.”

I envisioned him going down and not releasing the rail, the train dragging him along to his death.

“Brady, get the fuck up on the ladder.”

It was the scariest part, and I knew it. I understood his hesitation, but the longer he didn't act, the higher the chances he'd fall again. I didn't push, but I put a hand on his pack, ready to counter his weight if it shifted. The minute he pulled himself onto the ladder, I added pressure to his pack, keeping him from falling backward.

I hated how compromised my attention was. I hadn't scanned for bulls in at least a few minutes, and I was not watching my footing. Under my heavy clothes, I was sweating profusely. Although my balaclava had a larger eye hole, which

helped compensate for my glasses, the lenses were fogging up from my heavy breathing. In a few minutes, I wouldn't be able to see at all.

Brady had both feet on the lowest rung of the ladder, and he managed to swing a leg over. Another hard shove from me and he toppled inside. I didn't give a fuck if he landed on his head and cracked his skull open. He was in and safe.

The minute he was off the ladder, I hopped it and followed with much greater skill. I landed on top of him, breathing heavy, heart racing like it had the first time I'd caught out as a seventeen-year-old kid.

I shed my pack, tore Brady's off too, pushing them aside, then I stayed right where I was, on his back, pinning him to the foot of the well. He turned his head, a beaming smile showing through the small mouth hole of his balaclava. A single eyetooth glowed in the moonlight. His eyes sparkled with joy.

"I did it."

"You did." The relief was overwhelming. I buried my face in his neck and laughed. "Fucking A, you did. You are one badass motherfucker, Brady Thompson. I'm so proud of you."

I told myself I was lying on top of him to ensure he stayed down while we moved away from the train yard, but the truth was, I was there because I'd never been more scared in my life. It was one thing to catch out with friends, but I'd made Brady my responsibility, and he'd been clear about his lack of skill.

I'd promised I wouldn't let him get hurt, and for a second, when we'd fallen beside the train, I'd been afraid I'd made a mistake insisting he come along.

I lay there because I was relieved we'd made it.

I lay there because I needed to assure myself he was alive and well and still breathing.

I lay there because, for some reason, I didn't want to move.

Chapter Eight

Brady

Between the weight of Dodger on my back and the unforgiving steel of the car's well beneath me, I was uncomfortable, but I didn't want him to move. After what amounted to the most terrifying experience of my life, his presence was grounding. I felt safe and protected... and crushed. I couldn't breathe, and it was going to be an issue before long.

The adrenaline was simmering. The train was picking up speed, but Dodger still had his face buried in my neck, and he clung to me in a way that confused and warmed me. I was all too aware of the hard line of his body. Since I was no longer in mortal danger, a flood of endorphins swamped my bloodstream. With the natural high, my body awoke in a new, dangerous way, and our closeness was becoming an issue.

"You have to get off me," I squeaked.

When I tried to squirm out from under him, my ass registered the bulge of his package in the front of his pants. A bulge that was sitting in perfect alignment to where I wanted

it. Dodger wasn't hard, nothing like that, but it took all my willpower not to press back against him, offering myself out like a desperate whore. This was going to fuel more dreams. I was in so much trouble.

His weight vanished as he rolled over, landing beside me. He peeled his mask off, careful to avoid knocking his glasses askew. They were steamed up, and his hair was a mess. Tipping his head to the side, I was gifted with a beaming smile. I'd expected him to be pissed since I'd royally screwed up more than once, but he didn't look mad at all. In fact, he looked thrilled.

“Take off your mask. Just stay low for a bit.”

I tugged my face free from the confines of the balaclava, and before I could brush the hair out of my face, Dodger was there doing it for me. “You're sweaty.”

“That happens with near-death experiences. I was freaking out.”

“You did great.”

“No, I didn't. I almost got us killed.”

“Nah. A couple of hiccups. You just made everything more exciting.”

“I think we have different ideas about what's exciting.”

I removed his glasses without asking and buffed them on my hoodie. Dodger watched but didn't comment. He was still slightly winded, his cheeks flushed. When I fit them back on his face, he thanked me with a soft smile.

“You’ll get better. Now that you have one jump under your belt, you know what to expect. The next one will be smoother. Not all yards are that complicated. Toronto is the worst.”

“I’ll improve.” I rolled to my back and lay beside him, staring up at the starlit sky. “So what do we do now?”

The freight was loud, and I was grateful Dodger had purchased me earplugs. It meant we had to talk in raised voices, but it wasn’t too awful. The rattling of the engine resonating through the steel floor was going to make my bones ache, but I’d worry about it later. I was still riding an adrenaline high and not ready to come down.

“Now, we enjoy the ride. We have a solid six or so hours until we hit Montreal. Sleep if you can.”

“Sleep? Are you kidding?”

“It’s bedtime, Brady. Look.” He held up his phone between us, showing me the display. It was a few minutes after midnight.

“Yeah. Schedule or not, I’m not sure I can sleep on a train.”

“You’ll get used to it.”

“Are you going to sleep?” The idea of him drifting off and leaving me on my own sent me into a slight panic.

Dodger must have noticed. “Nah. It’s your first ride. Let’s enjoy it. Hang on.” He shifted upright and unhooked the blanket he’d rolled and attached to my rucksack. He fixed it into something resembling a pillow and urged me to lift my head.

It wasn't big enough for both of us unless we lay close, so that was what Dodger did. His head landed next to mine, our bodies flush together on one side. I could smell his shampoo. Honey and hazelnut. I would never have recognized the combination of smells, but I'd seen the bottle as he'd repacked it in his bag earlier. I liked it.

"Is that better?" he asked about the make-shift pillow.

"Yes. Thank you."

For a long time, we rested on our backs, staring at the night sky as the freight shook and rattled us along the tracks. Neither of us said a word. I was all too aware of everything Dodger. The way his leg pressed against mine. The soft tickle of his hair on my cheek. The compression of our shoulders.

His hands were folded across his stomach.

The void of silence between us demanded to be filled, but I didn't know what to say.

It was Dodger who filled the void first. "When did your dad pass away?"

I turned my head and caught him staring at me with a downward turn of his mouth. "How did you know?"

"You kind of alluded to it in a passing comment back at your place."

"Oh. Right. I did."

"You don't have to answer. You can call code, and we can leave it at that. I know it's personal."

“No, it’s okay. He died six years ago. An aggressive form of stomach cancer. They caught it late.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Thank you.”

“Is your mother around?”

“Yes. She is. She lives in the city too. His death changed her. She used to be easygoing and led an active lifestyle, but now she’s just a worrywart who stays home all the time. They had the real thing. Their love was obvious to anyone who spent five seconds with them. For the record, my mother has no idea what I’m up to, so if I die on this adventure, she will be really angry with me, and you should expect her to hunt you down.”

Dodger chuckled. “Good to know. Did your dad know you were gay?”

“He did. I came out in tenth grade. I was fifteen. Dad was my biggest advocate. He took me to my first Pride parade and joined the PTA so he could form a gay lesbian alliance at my high school since we didn’t have one. He wanted me to feel included.”

I missed him. The topic was heavy, and I didn’t want to explore it further.

“That’s really cool. Sounds like he was a great guy.”

“He was. Are you close with your parents?”

“Meh. We get along for the most part. They’re overbearing. I march to the beat of my own drum, and they don’t like that. They think they know what’s best for me, and they’re convinced all I do is make poor choices. They tell me I need to grow up and settle down. They hate the riding lifestyle. They hate my riding friends. It causes a lot of friction.”

“You said you work for your dad’s company during the winter months. What do you do?”

“He owns an electrical company. Valmai Electric. He trained me up as his apprentice when I finished high school, and he wants me to stick around and take over the company when he retires, but I get stir-crazy when I’m home too long. It’s not that I don’t like the work. I do, but too many months in one place and the itch to ride becomes insatiable. I don’t know. The idea of settling down and living the working man’s life... I have trouble picturing it for myself.” Dodger shrugged, the movement radiating through me. “Not for me, I guess.”

“And there’s no special girl in your life?” I was torturing myself with the question, but I couldn’t stop the urge to dig a little deeper into Dodger’s personal life when he was willingly sharing.

His grin was coy, and he wiggled his brows. “There are lots of special girls in my life. I just don’t want to tie myself down to one.”

“Oh.” It would figure. “Love them and leave them, huh? You’re one of those guys.”

He rolled his eyes. “Nah. I’ve never been in love. Not sure it’s in the cards for me. I don’t lie to the girls I’m with. They all know I don’t want to settle. They all know I don’t want to date. I spell it out for them right from the start.”

Teasingly, I held up a hand, acting like I wanted to shake. “Hi, I’m Dodger. I just want in your pants, nothing more.”

He shoved me, laughing. “Shut up.”

I laughed too. “Are they okay with that?”

“A handful of them, yes. The rest all think they can change me. What about you? Any special guy in your life?”

It was my turn to snort. “Um... that would be a big fat no.”

“You say it like I’m ridiculous for thinking such a thing. Come on. You’re an attractive guy, Brady. I would think you’d have men lining up at your door.”

All I heard was, *You’re an attractive guy*, and I couldn’t find the words to counter the outrageously inaccurate statement that had followed.

“So there’s no guy right now, but you’ve dated, right? Isn’t that part of the whole college experience? I mean, you live in Toronto. No shortage of gay men there. You’re not some floundering twenty-seven-year-old virgin, too afraid to get out there, are you? God, please tell me you’re not. If that’s the case, we’re going to make some stops along the way and change that.”

The gears in my brains seized. I opened my mouth to ask what he meant because surely he wasn’t implying *he’d* sort out

that problem personally. Was he?

“Oh my god, you’re a virgin, aren’t you? We have got to get you laid.”

“No! I’m... not a virgin. We don’t have to get me laid. I’ve dated. A bit. Not a lot. Some. I’m... Most people find me to be a handful. Dating is... It hasn’t been my strong suit.”

“I can’t imagine.”

I couldn’t tell if his comment was meant to be sarcastic or if he was truly baffled. I decided it was best not to say anything more on the subject lest I dig myself a bigger, more embarrassing hole. The whole college experience, as he put it, had lasted one year. I’d gone to gay bars. I’d explored my sexuality, but it had been hollow. Hookups weren’t interested in sharing an intellectual conversation after a quick bathroom blow job. And the one guy I’d dated in my program had been more interested in academic competition than talk, and it had grated on my nerves. In the month and a half we’d been together, we’d gotten into more heated debates than I could count.

“Tell me about your friends,” I asked an hour into our trip.

We were still side by side, staring at the night sky. Without Dodger’s presence beside me, I would have complained I was uncomfortable. But I wasn’t. In fact, I didn’t want to move. The closeness was nice. Calming, especially since I was doing something outside the realm of normal.

He'd mentioned he had a close-knit group of rider friends. He'd also mentioned most of them were gay. I was curious.

"My friends?"

"You talked about someone named Killer?"

"Yeah. His real name is Killian, but I'm sure he'd kill me for sharing it. He loves his name about as much as I love mine. He's a solid. We've known each other for years. He and his boyfriend Leo are in Montreal. Leo's new to the scene. We picked him up last fall when he was in some trouble, trying to get out of the city. We nicknamed him Green."

"Why Green?"

"A greenhorn is a newbie rider with no skills. Kinda like you. The shoe fit. We brought him up to speed and taught him to ride. He's pretty kickass now. Willow, you met. She's one of my favorite people in the world. Love that girl. She'll never bullshit you. Tells it straight to your face, like it or not."

"And she's *not* your girlfriend."

"No. Jeez." Dodger laughed. "Why are you trying to hook me up with her? We're tight, but it's not like that. Besides, she's got eyes for someone else."

"Billie."

"You saw it too?"

"Was hard to miss."

"Yeah. They're close. I guess they grew up together. I know Willow had it tough at home. I think Billie's family helped her

a lot.” Dodger shifted to his side, propping his head on his hand. “Then there’s Tyler. Sometimes we call him Ronald because he has crazy red hair like the McDonald’s guy. He’s a wandering soul. Soft-hearted. A little distant. All around decent guy. I think he had it tough growing up, but he doesn’t like to talk about it. His past is private and not something he shares. He’s in Winnipeg right now with his boy Elian. They’ve had a tough few years. Lots of shit happened, but I think they’re gonna be okay. Elian’s a rider too, but we don’t know each other well. He’s been flying solo for a long time, but I think he wants to stick with Ty now, so he’s moving into our fold.”

“So you don’t always travel together.”

“Not always, but we’re close. We keep in touch. Those guys are like family to me. There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for them.”

“That’s pretty amazing. I wish I had friends like that.”

Dodger’s brows came together, but before he could comment on that sad tidbit of information, I asked, “How come we aren’t meeting up with Killian and Leo in Montreal?”

“Because we’ve got a lot of ground to cover. This freight we need to catch next doesn’t go through often, so we need to jump it while we can.” He lay down again, and almost too quiet for me to hear, added, “And I’m not sure I’m ready to share you with those weirdos yet.”



As it turned out, detraining was almost as complicated as catching out. Dodger explained there was an art to it. The idea was to hit the ground running. You needed to match your speed to the train's when you landed. If you failed, the momentum would cause you to fall. Falling could be disastrous and fatal.

I remarked it sounded an awful lot like jumping out of an airplane. I'd meant the initial burst of bravery required to execute the sudden departure. Dodger took the comment too literally and laughed, claiming they were nothing alike.

I didn't bother to explain myself. The point was, it was terrifying, and I didn't want to do it. But I'd whined enough for one lifetime and would suck it up and once again hope I didn't die.

I hated running with a passion.

I hated running more with a heavy pack on my back.

After my proven failure hauling an overweighted rucksack, Dodger had me strip out of it before we jumped, insisting we could toss it from the car and go back for it once we cleared the train.

“Better you get a feel for the dismount a few times before you add the weight to your back.”

So at a quarter past six in the morning, a short way from the Montreal train yard, we made the jump. The pack went first, I went next, then Dodger took up the rear. When I landed, it jarred my shins so badly I was sure they'd splintered. I wasn't

going fast enough and stumbled several times, pinwheeling my arms to keep my balance. Run, he'd told me. So I ran. I made it a solid five stumbling feet from the train before I tripped over my boots and crashed to the ground, smashing a knee on an unforgiving rock. I sucked air between my teeth at the stabbing pain. But hey, I hadn't landed on the tracks, so that was worth celebrating.

Dodger was beside me a second later, one hand on my back, the other yanking me upright by the arm. "Close. You almost stayed on your feet. Head that way to the trees and stay low. I'll grab your pack and meet you there."

The sun was up, but it was early morning, and a light fog hovered over the dewy ground. It wasn't thick enough to compromise the view, so I saw where Dodger wanted me to go. I hobbled, half running, half walking—my kneecap throbbing—to the tree line where I ducked out of sight and waited for Dodger to catch up.

He arrived a moment later and told me to put my pack on. I whimpered on the inside but complied.

"Let's find somewhere more out of sight. I need to figure out how to get our next ride. I've never taken this route before, so I'm not sure about our game plan. It's going to be tricky."

We didn't go far. The spot was more secluded with trees, but we were close enough to the tracks to see the passing trains through the foliage. I sat with my back against a tree on the uncomfortable ground, my rucksack beside me. I missed

the comfort of my apartment already and wasn't sure how I would survive several months on the road.

As Dodger worked out a game plan, a wave of tiredness hit me out of nowhere. Our sleepless night, along with the exertion and adrenaline from the previous day, had caught up with me. My head bobbed a few times as my eyes closed, and I jerked awake, squirming as I fought off sleep.

Again and again and again until I couldn't lift my head and submitted.

"Hey." I startled awake, snapping to attention at Dodger's voice. He was beside me, hand on my knee. "Lie down for a bit before you fall over."

"What?"

"Come here. You're whipped, and you're going to end up falling on your face." He'd put my blanket on his lap and patted it. "Lie down. Sleep some. You have time."

"Lie down?"

"Yeah." He chuckled, probably thinking I wasn't processing.

I didn't move right away, stunned and unsure I understood correctly. He wanted me to lay my head on his lap? Wasn't that...intimate? Weird?

I moved slowly. Cautiously. Dodger had his back against a tree and didn't look at all ruffled by the suggestion. When my head hit the blanket, my whole body sighed. The ground was lumpy and uncomfortable. I missed my soft cotton sheets. It

was also broad daylight, but it felt good to let go and relax. My schedule was upside down, and I'd felt off ever since leaving the apartment, but this was good. This was nice. This was perfect.

My eyelids grew heavy.

"There you go. Sleep some. I have good news and bad news. I'll tell you when you wake up."

"Tell me now."

"Our next freight leaves here midday, but it stops to shift loads around, so we won't be catching on the fly."

"You said daytime hopping was bad." My words were marbled and groggy.

"It is, but I'll sort it out. We'll be okay. Don't worry." He brushed the hair off my face, and I refused to open my eyes to see if it was on purpose or if he'd done it without thought. I was too tired to contemplate those mixed messages, so I reveled in the touch. I absorbed it. I savored it.

"I don't have to hop a moving train this time?" The processing center of my brain was off-line. Had I heard him correctly?

"Nope. Not this time. I'll figure out the other obstacles. You have a couple of hours. I'll wake you up when it's time."

"What about you?"

"I'll catch some Zs on the next train."

His touch was long gone. It had been nothing more than him moving the hair from my eyes. It meant nothing. But the warmth and impression remained, and I took it with me as I drifted off to sleep.

Chapter Nine

Dodger

He didn't talk in his sleep, but his face was expressive, like his hands when he babbled nonsensically about something he was passionate about. It was distracting. When I should have been responding to RaptorZ—who was busy getting me a layout of the Montreal yard and schooling me on the best places to catch in broad daylight—I was staring at Brady's mouth as it twitched at the corner, hooking into an unconscious half smile. He'd wet his full lips more than once, leaving a glistening trail behind. His eyebrows moved as though he was speaking, even when he didn't say a word. It made me wonder what he was dreaming about.

As I waited for RaptorZ to respond to another text, I played a little game with myself, making up the conversation Brady was having in his sleep. I could almost hear the informative tone of his voice and the soft lilt that came out every once in a while when he got excited. I chuckled to myself, knowing whatever he was saying would be factual and delivered with zeal.

My phone chimed, and I pulled my attention away from Brady's mouth to check the message.

RaptorZ: Based on what I can tell, they'll be humping cars for a solid hour or so. You'll want to be on the north end near the departure lines. It's going to be risky, but you have a pocket of time when no other trains are coming through on the mainlines, so you can use it to snag a spot. Watch for cameras. You'll be in the yard.

Dodger: What about inspections?

RaptorZ: It's a risk, but I think if you cover up, you'll be okay. How's the greenhorn?

I checked on a sleeping Brady. His face had gone slack. No more secret smiles. No more talking eyebrows.

Dodger: He's a trooper but not an athlete. First jump was rough.

RaptorZ: He's got the best teacher there is.

Dodger: Thx, man. I'll keep you posted.



At just after noon, Brady and I took the long way around to the opposite side of the yard. We huddled out of sight so I could get a read on the commotion within. A large, chain-link fence topped with razor-wire stood in our way, but I thanked every god there was that someone had snipped a sizable hole in the fence, leaving us a spot to enter the yard without having to go around or over.

The fencing ended about a quarter mile away, and it would have been a headache. Had I been flying solo, it would have been a different story. Going over the top was not an option. Not even if it was dark. The hole meant less ground to cover. Quick ingress or egress if we ran into a problem. A more direct route also meant less chance of being discovered, which was better for Brady since he was so fresh.

Not only was this a daytime catch—a huge faux pas in the riding community—but we had to do it from within the yard. Could we have caught on the fly once it left? Yes, but not without major risks. I'd had to make a judgment call. With Brady's skill level, the chance of detection would have been greater. He'd made one messy jump, and I didn't trust him to make the second flawlessly. At midday, there was little room for error unless you wanted to get caught. Hence why we were doing it this way.

There were cameras angled in all directions and bulls and workers everywhere. Thanks to RaptorZ, I had a good idea how to make this happen, but it wouldn't be easy. Instead of an athlete's skill, we needed to pull some James Bond maneuvers.

Once our freight had been moved into the departure yard, I planned to go out alone and find us a spot to ride. There was no sense dragging Brady along with me, not when the train was stationary. In the departure yard, final checks were made, and once the green light was given, it would leave, moving onto the mainline. If possible, I needed the window between checks and departure. If we got caught during an inspection, it would all turn to shit.

And I was *not* giving up my title as a top-rated bull dodger in the community. Never-fucking-ever. We would not be caught.

When the time came, it was tricky. I left my pack behind with Brady and made like the wind, slipping through the fence and keeping low, aware of every person and camera. The inspection crew was making their way along the line, and I waited them out, ready to take the first opening so I could find us a good car. It took twenty minutes, but I was finally able to break free. I found a decent well by sheer luck on my third try and spent no time getting back to Brady. The clock was ticking. Unless the crew found a problem, this freight would be leaving soon, and we needed to be on it.

I climbed back through the fence and met Brady a dozen feet away in a ditch. He was pale, his nerves on the surface, but there was determination behind his eyes.

“Did you find one?”

“Yep. Are you ready?”

He pressed his lips into a firm line and nodded.

Nope. He wasn't. It was a lie. Brady needed a pep talk. I could see it. I crouched beside him in the ditch, slinging my pack over my shoulders before squaring off with him.

“Listen. This won't be as bad as catching on the fly. This is way easier, which is why I chose to do it this way. The worst part is avoiding detection, so there won't be constant running.

We need to slink over there like shadows under the midday sun. You can do this. Stick close and stay low.”

I gave his shoulder a squeeze and waited for him to acknowledge before we set off.

As I’d predicted, Brady was much better at stealth than agility and speed. I had to commend his attention to detail. He helped me watch for workers and bulls while I planned our movements one step at a time. When we tumbled into the well, I urged him to shed his pack as fast as he could and leave it tucked away in a corner. I put mine in the opposite. Then I told him to lie down alongside the bottom edge of the well. With the angle, if we stayed tight and the inspectors did another round of checks, they might miss us. I doubted they would come by twice, but I wasn’t taking any chances.

I lay beside him, my body pressed to his, covering him head to toe and forcing him as flush against the steel edge as possible. We needed to make ourselves small. It was awkward. Brady squirmed, but I pierced him with a hard look, and he stopped. It was all part of the joy of riding. This wasn’t my first rodeo nor was it the first time I’d had to get cozy with friends.

Face-to-face, forehead to forehead, and legs weaved together, I grinned at Brady, who was wide-eyed and staring back at me in horror. We hadn’t bothered with balaclavas since it was daylight, and we were more apt to blend in without them. His cheeks were pink, and his lips were extra rosy.

“Sorry, buddy boy. We gotta get close for a bit. I’m not trying to feel you up or anything, just trying to go unseen.” I winked and grinned to kill the tension.

“O-okay.” His breath ghosted my chin.

We stayed like that for the following half hour before the freight moved out of the yard. Brady squirmed a few times until I pinned his arms and made him stop. I tucked his head against my shoulder and hissed in his ear, “Stay still for fuck’s sake. You’re so squirmy.”

“Sorry.” The word was muffled against my neck, his exhales fanning moisture. I felt it each time he blinked because his long lashes brushed my skin. At least he wasn’t moving anymore. The lingering hints of his sandalwood shampoo wafted from his hair. It was mixed with the familiar scent of diesel. A few wheat-blond flyaways tickled my chin and cheeks, but I didn’t move to brush them away. They weren’t bothering me that much.

I kept Brady in place until we’d been on the move for almost twenty minutes. The whole time, I counted his labored breaths and cataloged all his quirks. When it was safe, I tipped his chin up so I could see his face. I headbutted him playfully. “Are you good, squirmy pants?”

“Yeah,” he squeaked.

“I’m gonna see where we’re at.”

“Okay.”

A quick scan told me we were well on our way. The scenery had changed drastically from city to desolate countryside.

“We’re good. You can sit up. Keep your head below the well for now.”

Brady scrambled upright, eyes wide, watching me with something akin to curiosity and mild panic. He was a weird cat. I didn’t have time to puzzle out his scrambled head. Whatever the issue, I had faith he’d figure himself out on his own. I needed to sort out how long we had before we needed to detrain so I could set an alarm and grab some sleep. I was exhausted.

I managed an hour and a half, which wasn’t enough, but I’d set the alarm to wake me a bit sooner than required since I didn’t want to miss our potential spot. It was a good thing too since Brady had conked out beside me. Clearly, sleeping on a train was no longer an issue.

I pulled up a GPS map on my phone and studied our location. If I was right, the freight would slow near an old crossing labeled on my map as Trois-Rivières. Decades ago, that was where the old, decommissioned tracks would have veered off. There was a small town nearby, and it was almost exactly where we needed to be. Usually, freights slowed when they went past populated areas, but I didn’t know how close we’d be to the town, and it would make a difference. If I was wrong about the train slowing, I had no clue when we’d be able to get off or how much backtracking we’d be doing.

Considering we were going on the assumption our killer had used this exact freight, I had to assume we'd be able to get off.

I shook Brady awake as we approached Trois-Rivières. He'd done well enough detraining when we'd tossed his pack first—albeit he'd fallen—but I planned to let him go packless again until he was comfortable and started landing on his feet.

We'd been on the go for less than twenty-four hours, yet Brady looked thoroughly debauched. Nothing remained of the straitlaced guy who'd answered the door to me a few days ago. His hair was windblown, his pale cheeks were flushed, his eyes were a brighter blue than I'd ever seen, and his smile was priceless as he leaned against the rail of the well, watching the world go by.

I leaned beside him, mesmerized by the rolling hills, vast fields of prairie grass, and the endless stretch of cloudless sky that went from horizon to horizon.

"It's breathtaking," Brady said with awe. "I've never seen anything like it. I was born and raised in the city, and I'm embarrassed to admit I've never left."

"Not even for a holiday?"

"Once. My family went to France. I was twelve. Dad had a conference and turned it into a family getaway. We did touristy stuff. The Eiffel Tower, the Louvre. This isn't the same."

"Wait until you see the mountains out west. If you think this is breathtaking, you'll shit. I can't describe it. I'd show you pictures, but it wouldn't do it justice. We're going that way

eventually. I'd rather show you. Some things have to be experienced for you to truly appreciate them. The mountains are one of them."

Brady gawped at the passing landscape, and I was captivated by the wonder and relaxation on his face. His stress lines had vanished.

When he turned his head and caught me watching, it threw me off guard, sending a spike of adrenaline through my system. I struggled to brush away the odd feeling, unsure where it had come from. Why had I been staring? What the hell was it about Brady that enraptured me?

The sun caught on a few of the more golden strands of his hair as they whipped in the wind, wild and free. I couldn't read the expression on his face, but it made my heart beat in my throat.

"Thank you for twisting my arm and making me come with you. I know I've been a pain in the ass already, but I'll figure it out. I promise."

"You're doing great." A slight rasp made my voice catch, and I coughed to clear it.

I sensed the shift in momentum before Brady did, but I was far more attuned to those sensations and had been waiting for it. We were slowing. A wash of relief flooded through me, another unexplainable reaction.

I referenced my phone. "We're almost there. I hope we slow enough. Be ready."

The concern over being caught was slim. We were in the middle of nowhere. The small town ahead was insignificant, and the plan was to be off long before we got there. Even if someone saw us and reported us, we'd be gone before anyone of authority was notified.

The train slowed, but its speed was sketchy. Brady wasn't a fast runner, and the velocity was cussing the edges of my limits. Regardless, I made the decision we should go for it.

Like before, we tossed Brady's pack first with the intention of backtracking to find it after. Next, I encouraged Brady to jump. "Run like the wind," I told him. "We're still going fast, but you can do it. Stay on your feet, at least until you get far enough from the tracks to be out of danger. Please don't die."

I had to give him credit. He hesitated less that time. Before he launched from the well, he grabbed my hand and squeezed. I didn't know what it meant, but I squeezed back, giving him reassurance.

Thankfully, he landed on his feet. However, he wound up on his knees again ten feet from the tracks. It was a nasty fall, which I caught from the corner of my eye as I jumped. The momentum took him down hard, and he was lucky he got his arms out because he would have lost teeth if his face had connected with the ground. The fall tore a hole in his pants and took the skin off both his knees. He rolled to his back, his face pinched in agony as I jogged up beside him.

I peered down, grimacing, taking stock of his visible injuries. "You keep breaking the rules, mister. I said no

falling.”

“No. You said wait until I was at least ten feet from the tracks to fall. And you said don’t die. I followed your instructions explicitly.” Brady clenched his teeth, cradling the knee I assumed was hurting the most. “That hurt. I am not a track star. That was not fun.”

“The train was going a bit faster than I would have liked. Can you walk?”

“Not yet. Give me a minute.”

“I’ll grab your bag.”

I left my pack behind and went to retrieve his. We took a few minutes to tend to his injured knees—mostly because he was bleeding all over his pants. He let me clean them with an alcohol wipe and plaster them with bandages. When I was done, I admired my work.

“Do I need to kiss your boo-boos better?”

“Yes, please expose my injuries to the crawling bacteria in your saliva so I get an infection while we’re in the middle of nowhere. That would be fantastic.”

“That’s twice with the sarcasm, Mr. I Don’t Use Sarcasm, and I’m not crawling with bacteria.”

“Everyone’s mouth is crawling with bacteria.” Brady pulled down his pantlegs as I packed up the first-aid kit. “It wasn’t an insult. It was a biological fact.”

“Gross. Now I’m going to be thinking of that every time I kiss a girl. Major buzz kill.”

“Then maybe you should start kissing boys instead.” The coy smirk he gave as he got to his feet made me laugh.

“Oh really? And how is that any different? You said everyone’s mouth is filled with bacteria. Ergo, boys and girls.”

“True, but you said it would be all you thought about next time you kissed a girl. That tells me you aren’t invested in the experience since your mind wanders to biological facts instead of staying in the moment. Perhaps kissing boys would help your thoughts wander less.” He shrugged.

“Yeah... I don’t think so. I think my brain would be all, ‘What the fuck are you doing kissing a dude?’”

“Guess you’ll never know.” Brady collected his rucksack and put it on.

“Did you hit your head when you fell?”

“No. Why?”

“You’re acting weird.”

He deflated, rolling his eyes almost to himself as he cut his gaze to the landscape. “I’m not good at normal conversation. I was trying for friendly banter. I’m sorry. Never mind. Shall we?”

I let it go, but I couldn’t shake the feeling I was missing something.

Since it was hot and we were overdressed, we stripped off our hoodies and stuffed them away before heading out. We set off in the direction of the decommissioned tracks. Brady hobbled, and I dragged my feet. Lack of sleep was catching up with me, and we hadn't eaten since sometime the previous night on the ride from Toronto to Montreal.

After twenty minutes, we made it to the old train tracks. My map was useless since it didn't have these decommissioned lines on it, so Brady pulled up the photographs he'd taken of his map back at the apartment. He'd written down all the coordinates for the abandoned stations, and I typed them into my GPS to see how far we had to go.

I groaned. "We have about seven clicks to cover."

Brady's face fell. "Seven? As in kilometers?"

"Yes." I scanned the desolate area. There was no civilization for as far as the eye could see. Mostly it was wide-open land, long grass, and the odd misplaced tree, leaves rustling in the warm afternoon breeze.

"You know what. We've been going nonstop for almost twenty hours. It's after five. Let's call it a night, pitch a tent, and get something to eat. We can make the trek tomorrow. Start fresh. How's that sound?"

The relief that washed over Brady's face made me chuckle. "I'd say I'm so happy I could kiss you right now, but, you know, bacteria and all."

"Right. Bacteria is what's stopping you."

Brady dropped his rucksack and mumbled, “No. You being straight is what’s stopping me.”

I didn’t think I was meant to hear that, but I had.

And all the pieces clicked into place.

Chapter Ten

Brady

I'd made it weird. Me and my stupid unfiltered mouth.

Never flirt with a straight guy. How hard was it to adhere to that rule? Maybe if Dodger possessed some semblance of boundaries, we'd be okay. But no. He was messing with my head. He touched me constantly and not in a buddy-buddy sort of way. He brushed the hair off my face. He tucked my head against his neck. He lay beside me, close enough his scent enveloped me. He insisted I sleep with my head on his lap. Then he complimented me, calling me cute, admiring my eyebrows. If I didn't know with ninety-nine point nine percent certainty that he was straight, I'd have thought he was downright flirting.

But he *was* straight.

Dodger. Was. Straight.

And I was pretty sure my mumbled comment had been overheard if the chain-smoking and deep furrow in his brow was any indicator. He was on his third cigarette as he set up

the tent. He hadn't so much as looked at me in almost half an hour. I got the sense it didn't usually take this long to erect a tent, but he was killing time as he worked through some inner conflict.

When I'd asked if I could help, he'd huffed like it was the most ridiculous suggestion in the world and told me to find something to eat, waving me toward his pack.

Dismissed. I'd been dismissed.

I wanted to fix it, but I was convinced anything I said at that point would make it worse, so I found something to eat and watched him work.

The tent was small—ridiculously small. A burst of panic overcame me when I realized we'd both have to sleep in it tonight. There wouldn't be much room between us, let alone the canyon of space I would require to ensure not a single part of me touched a single part of him. We were bound to wind up lying on top of each other.

This was bad.

He flopped onto the ground beside me and shook his head when I offered him the sleeve of crackers I'd been munching on. He drew another cigarette from a crumpled pack instead, placing it between his lips as he fumbled in a pocket for a lighter.

I removed the cigarette from his mouth—earning a scowl—and set it aside.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m not going to do it if that’s what you’re afraid of. My mouth got ahead of me. Please eat something before you give yourself lung cancer in a single evening.”

He took the crackers and stuffed a few into his mouth, talking around them. “Do what? What the fuck are you talking about?” The wary way he snuck a glance in my direction told me he already knew and was playing dumb.

“Kiss you. I know you heard me. It was an aside. A comment meant only for me. Inner monologue that slipped out of my mouth unintentionally. It should have stayed within the confines of my brain, but I’m an idiot like that. It was entirely accidental. I’ve made things weird, but I assure you, I have no intention of—”

“Brady.”

“Yes.”

“Shut up.”

“Okay.” I ate a few crackers.

Dodger ate a few as well.

They were dry and stuck to my throat. I swallowed a few mouthfuls of warm water from one of the liter bottles we’d brought. The awkward silence pressed in on me, and I couldn’t help filling the gap.

“I know you said you were fine with my being gay, but I should have been more transparent before we left Toronto. I should have expressed that I was slightly attracted to you, knowing it could make things uncomfortable. I stayed quiet

because I have a habit of getting social cues wrong. Regardless of my feelings, I want you to know—”

“Brady.”

“I’m shutting up.”

He waved a hand at the cigarette I’d set aside. When I didn’t move to give it back, he sighed. “I’m not going to smoke it. I’m putting it away.” When I returned it, he put it into his pack and got to his feet. “I’m going to bed. I’m tired. Try to get some sleep tonight too. Tomorrow could be a long day.”

Without glancing back, he went inside the tent, and I didn’t hear from him again. It was seven o’clock in the evening. The sun was still up. I’d caught a few hours of sleep at the train yard in Montreal, so I wasn’t tired. Plus, my head was spinning over the absentminded verbal diarrhea I’d spewed when we’d stopped. Leave it to me to put my foot in my mouth. There was no coming back from that. Dodger knew how I felt, and all I could do was not give him cause to freak out or worry I was going to come onto him.

I’d downloaded a few PDFs of my course textbooks before leaving Toronto, so I pulled one up on my phone. I nibbled crackers while I read, trying to dispel the budding anxiety in my core. When it got dark and the weight of our travels caught up with me, I cautiously crawled into the tent, knowing I needed to try to sleep.

Dodger was out cold, sleeping on his stomach, hands folded under his head, sprawled across the top of his sleeping bag. He’d thrown on a pair of black jogging pants, but he hadn’t

bothered with a shirt. The pants rode low, showing two perfectly formed dimples at the top of his ass. Of course he had ass dimples. Life was so unfair.

I groaned internally, uttering the mantra I'd been reciting all afternoon.

I will not fantasize about straight men.

I will not flirt with straight men.

I will not dream about straight men.

Fully dressed, I lay on the blanket Dodger had placed on the other side of the tent, faced away from him, and pinched my eyes closed, praying for a dull, dreamless sleep.



“I see it.” I pointed ahead to a spot in the distance where a building had been slowly materializing over the past ten minutes. “That has to be it.”

We'd been walking along the tracks for well over an hour. It had felt like ten since we'd woken with the same tension between us as the previous day.

Conversation had been stilted, and we'd barely uttered five words to each other while eating handfuls of dry granola and crossing the seven or so kilometers toward the old station.

Dodger squinted from behind his glasses, hand up, shielding his eyes from the morning sun. “Yep. I think it is.”

Our eyes briefly locked. We'd been following the tracks, each of us walking on opposite sides, leaving a gulf between us. Dodger's grin was wide, but it quivered, and he glanced away almost as fast.

In silent agreement, we picked up our pace. Before long, we arrived at the old, decrepit building that had once been a train station.

The windows were boarded up. The pale beige brick was crumbling. The wooden framework along the roof was rotting away, and the few shingles remaining were decomposing after years of rain and snow and sun.

A thick rusty padlock hung from the main doors. It was hooked through an eyelet and attached to a crude steel plate that had been bolted in place. Long, dried-out prairie grass grew up the side of the bricks, straight out of the gravel covering the ground. An old bench that had once served as a waiting place for passengers was nothing more than broken beams of wood, splintered and left covered in years of dust and debris that had blown across the barren land.

Dodger's mouth hung open as he scanned the building. "This looks like it came right out of a postapocalyptic movie set."

"Do you think there's a way in?"

"Well, if your theory holds any water, then yes."

Neither of us moved.

The wind tossed Dodger's hair around his face when he turned to me. He pinned it back with a hand. It was the longest he'd held eye contact since the previous day.

"How do you want to do this?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, we're looking for evidence, aren't we? Does that mean we have to be careful so we don't disturb things?"

"Smart, but seeing as there is a high possibility this place has been used by other squatters over the years, let's not get overly worried unless we see something that stands out. It's not like I can convince the police to rush out here and process the scene. Too much time has passed. Plus, my first goal is to prove we have a problem. If we find anything, we'll document it and go from there."

"Sounds good."

He kept staring and didn't move toward the building. I shifted, cutting my attention to the nearest boarded window. The heat of his gaze remained.

"Look, Brady. About yesterday."

"I'm already humiliated. I didn't intend for you to find out. We don't need to talk about it. I can assure you I won't make a pass at you or anything. In fact, after you went to bed last night, I stayed up and—"

He touched my arm, and the words I'd carefully planned fell away.

“Look at me.” His voice was raw and husky.

My cheeks burned, but I looked.

“I’m very secure in who I am. It doesn’t bother me that you’re attracted to me. It’s kinda flattering.” A soft smile crossed his face. “I’m pretty sure you’re the first guy who’s ever looked at me like that.”

I huffed a laugh. “Believe me. That’s not possible.”

“Well, if Killian thinks I’m hot stuff, he’s never mentioned it. He’s got a big mouth too, so I doubt it’s something he’d keep to himself.” His light humor helped bring my anxiety down a notch or two. “What I’m saying is, I’m cool with it, and you don’t need to worry I’m going to freak on your head or anything. I’m not one of those straight guys who’s going to pitch a fit and threaten to beat you up because you looked at me a certain way or admitted something you can’t help. I respect your honesty.”

“Then why did you get quiet last night? You seemed upset.”

Dodger rubbed his lips together as a furrow appeared in his brow. He looked away, then back, but the tension in his shoulders had returned. “It was... I was trying to sort something out.”

“Meaning?”

“Can we just leave it at that?”

I felt it was best not to push. “Sure.”

“Are we okay?”

I smirked and shrugged. “I guess so. I mean, it’s not like we can kiss and make up, right?”

“Yeah. Bacteria.”

“Exactly. A mature, adult conversation will have to do.”

Dodger laughed and bumped my shoulder. “What do you say we find a way into this building and look around, Dr. Reid?”

Even when the authenticity of the nickname was off, I beamed. “Let’s do it.”

We split up, both wandering around the building in opposite directions as we checked the boards over the windows and looked for other doors that might not be as securely locked as the one in front.

I ran my fingers along the edges of the old plywood, banging on surfaces, checking for areas that may have been loosened over the years. They were all secure. I gave myself a nasty splinter on the second window when I tried to dig my fingers under a suspicious lip and pry it up. Cursing, I pulled the jagged piece of wood from my index finger, then stuck the wounded digit in my mouth when blood pooled to the surface. Great. I would need another Band-Aid.

As I checked the wound, a sharp whistle pierced the air right before Dodger called out, “Found it.” A burst of excitement made me forget my finger as I dashed around the back corner of the building and met Dodger at another

window, shrouded by an overgrown dead bush that was nothing more than brittle twigs and thorny snags.

“Careful. That thing bites,” Dodger said from where he’d wedged himself between it and the brick building. He had his fingers under the lip of a loose board. “It was balanced on the sill, but when I pulled it out, it swung to the side. It’s only attached in that corner up there.” He pointed to the top edge. “Someone removed the rest of the nails. Put on your gloves. There is rusty metal everywhere, and the last thing we need is to slice a—” His words stopped dead. “Did you cut yourself?”

He was staring at my hand. The tip of my finger was coated with blood. “Not on metal. A splinter. It’s fine.”

He chuckled. “I’m going to wrap you in bubble wrap. Do you need a Band-Aid?”

“I’ll live.” I pulled my gloves from my pack and put them on, disregarding the bloody digit.

“Leave your pack with mine. Do me a favor and grab the headlamps. It’s dark inside.”

By the time I collected the headlamps and joined him at the window, he’d pulled the board aside and was sitting on the ledge of the window frame, studying whatever was beyond. Instead of going inside, he hopped down.

“You go first. That way I can help you up.”

I didn’t possess a single acrobatic skill, and he knew it.

With Dodger’s help, I managed to get on the ledge and swing around, dropping to the ground inside. The interior was

a wide-open space that had once held a closed-in ticket booth on the far side. Benches ran in a long line down the middle of the room. A line of rusty abandoned lockers covered a small portion of one wall. They were covered in graffiti.

Dodger jumped down beside me, his light adding to mine, giving the room an eerie glow but illuminating it enough so we could investigate.

“I’m going to have nightmares tonight,” he muttered. “This is your rodeo, detective.”

“No. It’s *our* rodeo, and I’m not a detective.”

“What are we looking for exactly?”

“Anything that points toward our killer or the men he killed.”

“That’s vague. Should we split up?”

“Might as well.”

The air inside was stuffy, warm, and stagnant. It stank of old piss, mold, and rot. The beams that had once crisscrossed the ceiling were either lying on the ground or hanging haphazardly from the joists, crumbling and in ruins. Studying the sagging roof, it occurred to me we might not be safe inside the building. It should have been torn down or condemned years ago.

As we’d guessed might be the case, the ground was littered with debris that had been left behind by years of squatters. Dozens of crushed beer cans and broken bottles, plastic bags, old takeout food containers, cans from soft drinks and soup,

anything and everything. There was old clothing, a lone Adidas sneaker that had once been white but was stained with rust and mud, a discarded pizza box, empty cigarette packages, and a rusty bicycle with a dented front wheel and no rubber on the frame. The old tiles underfoot were peeled and chipped, revealing the cement underlayment. There was evidence of mice and other rodents who'd taken refuge in the dank building. Nests had been built in the corners out of old newspapers and the fluff from the inside of an old sleeping bag that was chewed to shreds.

“Hey.” Dodger’s sharp voice made me jump and spin. “Don’t go digging around with your hands. There are old needles over here. Be careful.”

“Good to know.”

We continued our search. Back in my apartment, I’d been convinced my theory was correct. It made sense on paper. On location, those hopes died with the presence of too many objects that could mean everything and nothing. How were we supposed to differentiate between what might have belonged to our killer or rider and what belonged to other squatters?

“Um... Brady?”

“Yeah?” I’d been toeing through a mound of old clothing, pushing them aside with the thick sole of my boot to see if there was anything noteworthy underneath.

“I think I found your proof.”

My head snapped up, eyes widening. Dodger was staring at something on the ground on the far side of the station near the ticket booth. When he glanced my way, the beam of his headlamp blinded me, and I held up my hand as a shield.

“Shit. Sorry. Come here.” He angled his head so the light was directed back at the floor.

“Are you sure it’s proof?” I didn’t mean to sound skeptical, but anything in this building being remotely related to our guy felt sketchy.

“You tell me.”

Dodger had been shifting stuff aside as well, much the same way I had. When I followed the beam of his light to the object in question, the air left my lungs, and my skin crawled with goose bumps. “Oh. I’d say that’s proof.”

An old laminated high school ID card lay on the ground. The student’s image was too grime-covered to make out, but the name was visible. Kyle Brovick.

“There’s also that.” Dodger gestured to a half-buried rucksack lying nearby. “Not saying it’s his, but a rider doesn’t usually carry a high school backpack. That thing is meant for going distances and living on the fly.”

Very few of our deceased riders had full names. Most of them, according to the police reports, had none at all. They were numbers on an autopsy report. Dead homeless kids who no one cared about. It was a huge reason this whole thing had been discarded.

But Dodger had brought some of those missing pieces with him when I'd invited him to join forces. Dodger had given a lot of the numbered men identities. Names—mostly only first names—but names nonetheless. He knew the riders from the community. Not personally, but that didn't matter. The community was a network of vagabonds, transient teens, and young adults, and they'd built connections with other vagabonds over the years. They'd mingled. Made friends. Shared stories.

It wasn't unusual for adults to hop freight trains as well, but Dodger had explained that there came an age when those riders just didn't associate with the younger generation.

Kyle Brovick had been the only exception to the nameless riders found dead across the country. He had been one of the few bodies that had been properly identified due to a missing person report his parents had filed when he'd run away from home at seventeen.

After four months of investigating his disappearance, the police had found his body a few kilometers from where we stood, and they'd delivered the news of the tragic accident to his parents. *Accident*. No one had a reason to question the circumstances surrounding his death.

I removed my phone from my pocket and squatted to take pictures. Once I'd gotten a few at various angles, I moved to the rucksack and took more. After, Dodger used his boot to lift the flap and see inside.

“Empty,” he said.

“Not surprising. Our guy would exhaust any resources before moving on.”

“Are we done in here? I think I need fresh air.”

I glanced at Dodger, and under the harsh light of our headlamps, the shadows across his face were more pronounced. He was pale, a troubled look behind his eyes. This was personal for him.

“We’re done.”

Chapter Eleven

Dodger

“I look dreadful. How do people live like this? Look at my hair. Why didn’t you tell me it was sticking up everywhere?” Brady glowered. He was using the forward-facing view on his cell phone’s camera like a mirror.

“If I told you, then you’d want to fix it, and I like the cowlick. It’s playful. Fun.” I brushed my fingers over it for emphasis.

Brady batted my hand away, and the glower turned on me. I laughed, then he shoved me hard enough I collapsed against the side of the well. It only made me laugh harder.

“Tell me I’m cute. Talk to me about my eyebrows again. I may be highly intelligent, but my looks are important to me. I’ve given up my entire skincare regimen to ride with you. Do you know how hard that was? A gay man needs to know they’re still attractive to other men after five days on the fly.” I loved how he used the lingo. “You’re all I have. Shower me with compliments. I need it. I won’t tell anyone. I promise.”

I rolled my eyes but played along as I had been for days. It had become a game of sorts. “You’re drop-dead gorgeous, Brady Thompson. You could be the cover model for *Rail Riders of Canada* magazine. If there was such a thing.”

“That was not a compliment.”

“Your eyebrows are pretty.”

“Better. They’re only nice because you packed my tweezers. Have I said thank you?”

“I’m a nice guy like that. Besides, Oscar the Grouch scared me as a kid.”

“Scared me too.” Brady tipped his face side to side as he studied his reflection. I didn’t have a clue what he was looking for, but it didn’t matter. His once pale skin was tanned after so many days in the sun. His hair had lightened to a sun-kissed blond, and as much as he hated it, I thought the carefree, windblown look suited him. He was a long way from the stuffy shut-in I’d first met in Toronto. The fresh air and sunshine had done him good.

A door had opened between us. Things had shifted and changed after he’d accidentally announced his crush back at our first stop. Brady had relaxed and turned bolder, constantly pushing limits. Teasing. Maybe he was testing me to see if I truly didn’t care about his sexuality and attraction. If that was the case, I hoped I’d passed the test.

Like I’d told him, I wasn’t one of those guys. His being gay didn’t bother me. In fact, his admitted attraction gave me a big

head. It made my chest puff up, and I found myself seeking and absorbing all those small flirtatious moments that came up on occasion simply because they made me feel good about myself. Man, Willow would have a heyday with that.

When I played along, Brady's grin was rewarding enough. And when that lopsided smile was directed at me and I got a sneaky peek at that eyetooth, I felt like I'd won the lottery.

The past five days had been arduous. Getting a ride back to Montreal had proven to be more difficult than expected. We'd wound up hiking for two days straight along a dusty country road before hitching a ride from a guy with no teeth and skin like leather who'd claimed his name was Gunther. Gunther and his truck stank like crude oil. He claimed he'd worked in the oil fields all his life.

Back in Montreal, we'd caught on the fly toward Toronto again. We'd stopped in the big city long enough to restock our food and water supply, then we'd caught out, heading northwest toward our second destination. Brady had shown minimal improvements. Although he complained less about the weight of his pack, he still couldn't scale a fence or run for shit.

I had yet to have him detrain while wearing his ruck, but the last time we'd jumped, he'd stayed on his feet, so I had my fingers crossed we were making progress.

Brady put his phone away and sighed, leaning back against the side of the well. We were side by side, the long lines of our

bodies close enough to touch. “Have you ever had a girlfriend in the community?”

“What do you mean? Like the rainbow community? Like have I dated a bisexual woman?”

“No, no. Like the riding community. Have you ever dated a female rider?”

“Oh. No. They’re a lot harder to come by. Willow’s the only one I know. There are others, but I’ve never met them outside forums. Why?”

“I was just thinking, if you met a rider you were interested in, maybe you’d be more apt to settle down. If you found someone who understood your passion and who would take to the rails with you when you needed to escape, then it might not sound so bad. You said the girls you’ve been with don’t understand and want to change you. Another rider wouldn’t. Maybe you aren’t looking in the right place.”

“True. I don’t know if that would make a difference. Maybe it’s not the girl so much as it’s about the feeling of being complete. Whole. Riding does that for me, but another person never has. I’ve never had a relationship that’s felt important enough I don’t want to let go.”

“Fair enough. You’re still young.”

I huffed. “Yeah. I’ll be thirty this winter.”

“And a very sexy thirty you will be.”

I tipped my head to the side, staring at Brady’s profile as he studied the pale blue sky. It was early morning, and the sun

made his face glow. He had a stray chunk of hair standing askew, so I reached up and fixed it, drawing his attention. When our eyes locked, I smoothed my thumb over each of his eyebrows, one after the other.

“Just making sure they aren’t going wild,” I explained when he gave me an inquisitive look. “What about you? You said dating was hard for you. How come? I’d think you’d be a catch. You’re smart, good-looking, and you have all kinds of cute little quirks. I would think those are winning qualities. Especially when you talk with your hands. Man, that’s awesome. Every time you open your mouth, your hands fly. I love it.”

Brady made a theatrical, dismissive gesture and *tsked*. “Stop calling me cute. I’ll get the wrong idea. Besides, it’s wildly untrue. I’m not a catch. My IQ is a turn-off for most people.”

“Do you cruise the gay bars?”

“Not as much anymore. I did during my first year at university, but it gets old. Those guys want bathroom blow jobs, not relationships.”

“Is that what you want? A relationship?”

He returned his attention to the sky, a wistful look in his eyes. “I don’t know. Yes, I suppose, but I’ve given up trying to have one. My career is my focus now. If I could get my ass in gear and write my stupid thesis, maybe I could make my dreams come true, but it’s turned out to be the biggest pain in the butt.”

“How come? You’re smart enough. What’s the holdup?”

“I don’t know. I keep overthinking it. This big brain gets in the way sometimes. Maybe the timing isn’t right. I can’t even settle on a specific topic. I have a general idea, but it shifts and changes so much I haven’t been able to start.”

I didn’t know what to say to that since I’d never extended my education past high school, so I didn’t quite grasp what it meant to write a thesis.

“I can’t picture you in a bar bathroom on your knees giving a blow job. That doesn’t jibe with the Brady I know. Have you really done that?”

He snorted, his cheeks pinking. “Of course I have. You can’t picture it because you’re straight. Envisioning me, a slightly flamboyant gay man, on my knees, choking on some guy’s cock, regardless of the location, would be a challenge for any straight man. And likely an unpleasant visual since I assume it would be a massive turn-off.”

My mind decided to test that theory, and it turned out to be easier than I expected. However, when I envisioned Brady’s full rosy lips wrapped around some stranger’s cock, it bothered me for reasons I couldn’t explain. It wasn’t disgust nor was it a massive turn-off like he said. It was more like irritation and annoyance that some random stranger would have the gall to take something so intimate without fully appreciating the whole Brady package. I shook the image away and was once again left with nothing to say.

I stared at his profile, at his glistening lips under the morning sun, and the image returned.

Brady let out a massive, jaw-cracking yawn, breaking me free from the unsettling daydream. He'd had a hard time adjusting to life on the fly, and I knew he spent many hours awake at night when he should have been sleeping. I'd seen the soft glow of his phone when he lay awake reading until all hours. When he did manage to sleep, it was restless.

“How about you lie down and sleep some? We have about two hours until we gotta blow this joint.”

Brady chuckled to himself as he nestled closer, resting his head on my shoulder as though it was the most natural thing in the world. I didn't mind. The soft wisps of his blond hair blew in the wind, tickling my cheek. In moments, he was asleep.



Sudbury railyard wasn't one I was familiar with, but it was the location of our next transfer point. I conferred with RaptorZ again since he was doing a lot of the legwork via virtual reconnaissance. The line we needed ran east from the Sudbury yard, moving around the northern edge of Lake Nipissing to a place called Sturgeon Falls. The decommissioned line and abandoned station were a little jag from the small town, but with luck, Sturgeon Falls was our exit point.

It was late morning when we landed on our feet in Sudbury. Rather, I landed on my feet, and Brady took the skin off his knees again.

“According to Rap,” I said, double-checking the messages we’d exchanged, “we have three days before our freight moves out.”

“Three days?”

“Yep. What do you say we treat ourselves to a motel room, hot showers, and takeout food?”

Brady nearly flapped his hands with excitement. “Are you shitting me?”

I laughed. “I don’t shit,” I said, stealing his phrase.

“Careful. You keep talking about motels with real beds and hot food, I won’t be able to hold off any longer. I will kiss that handsome face of yours. Don’t make me do it.”

“Yeah, yeah.” I tugged his arm. “Come on, Romeo. Let’s get out of here.”

“I think you’re afraid of my mouth bacteria.”

“Nah. Not much scares me.”

“Lies.”

Brady was in rare form. Maybe this was what he was like when he felt comfortable with someone. It gave him a sense of freedom he didn’t usually feel. Maybe it was getting out and enjoying life away from all those strict, self-made rules he adhered to day in and day out. Whatever the reason, I like seeing him happy.

“My mouth bacteria totally freaks you out,” he said coyly.

“You’d better be careful, or I’ll prove just how indifferent I am.”

“I double-dog dare ya.” Being a smartass, Brady puckered his lips as he walked backward through the brush, almost tripping more than once on fallen branches and roots.

“Put your lips away and watch where you’re going, you dork. You’re going to fall again.”

As I spoke, his heel caught on a stump, and I snagged his arm, yanking him against me before he tumbled backward.

“Oops. I’ve fallen into your arms.” The goofy grin on his face was too much.

“Did you find the joint I had tucked away in my bag and smoke it or something? What’s gotten in to you?”

“A joint? You have drugs? My mother warned me about guys like you.” He poked my chest. “You’re bad news, mister.”

“I bet she did. The joint is to share with Green. Now turn around and walk properly. I’m running out of Band-Aids.”

Brady walked beside me as we trudged away from the train yard to a commercial part of the city, then into the city proper. His flirtations simmered, and there were no more kissy faces as he tried to convince me to share his bacteria.

“Green is Leo, correct?”

“Yep. Killer’s boyfriend.”

“And you two smoke pot together?”

I laughed. “One time. It was our bonding moment, I guess you’d say. Long story. Green comes from a whole different world than us. When we took him in, he had been deprived of the simple things in life, and this is a guy who grew up bathing in money. He had everything, yet it was like he knew nothing. Anyhow, Leo and I took a bit longer to find our groove. Now we’re solid.”

“Will I ever meet them? Leo and Killian.”

“Do you want to?”

“I don’t know. We’re friends now, aren’t we?”

“Sure. When this little adventure is over, you can meet them.”

My comment earned me a toothy smile.



It took over an hour to hike into the city and find a cheap motel. I had decent savings from my work over the winter with my dad, but I was careful how I spent it. Motels were frivolous, but I knew Brady would appreciate the break. We’d been camping out in a tent for almost a week, and he hadn’t complained once.

Brady pitched in and bought us dinner from a mom-and-pop burger joint across the street. We gorged on double-stack bacon cheeseburgers, fries, and Coke. The sugar in the soft drink was enough to send Brady into a tailspin. His mouth went a hundred miles an hour as he talked about the case and

how he was adamant we'd be able to form a proper report for the RCMP, one they couldn't ignore.

“We have proof. I snapped pictures at the station. If we keep gathering more evidence and locate more riders, we actually have a case. Do you know how big this is? I never thought it would amount to anything. Now we might be able to send authorities on a hunt for this guy. If he's caught, we played a huge role. It could mean...”

His hands moved as fast as his mouth, gesticulating to the point he almost gave me a black eye more than once.

The third time he swung a little too close, I caught his wrist, hauled him off the bed since he'd finished eating, and forcefully walked him toward the bathroom, pinning his arms to his sides.

“Enough. I'm done with you. My ears hurt, and you've almost punched me three times. You're taking a long, long shower. Right now. And you're going to breathe and let your energy come down. No more sugar. Ever.”

He squirmed and fucking giggled like he was ten as he tried to break my hold. I wouldn't release him until he was in the middle of the bathroom. When I let go, I slipped out the door and slammed it. “And don't come out until you're calm.”

“You know what's a good way to expel excess energy? I mean, you did say you're indifferent to my bacteria.”

“I'm not listening.”

He laughed, but a moment later, the shower turned on.

I lay on one of the beds, checking my messages to ensure I hadn't missed any from RaptorZ. Then I flipped through the pictures I'd taken over the past week while we'd been in the middle of nowhere. I had a thing for aesthetic train track shots and took them all the time. The good ones earned a place on my wall at home. The abandoned station appeared in a few shots. I'd captured its squalor and had to admit the pictures were really cool. Brady had taken the ones inside the building. I hadn't been able to bring myself to do that. Finding evidence of Kyle Brovick had hit hard. Every bit of proof we uncovered made the reality a little harder to swallow.

It hurt.

I came across a few shots I'd taken of Brady. They were random moments I'd captured along the way. They would earn a place of honor on my wall back home. All my friends were displayed in collages and candid shots. Brady was more than deserving of a place too.

I scrolled through the few I'd taken, deciding which one I liked best. The fourth one I came across was the hands-down winner. He wore a joyous smile, a hint of his tooth protruding where it caught on his lip. His eyes glimmered in the sunlight, a kaleidoscope of blue and silver. His hair was tousled, his brows perfect. We were on a train, and the freedom on his face caught me in the chest.

God, he looked good like that with a smile on his face.

The longer I stared, the more aware I became of odd feelings moving through my belly. I'd first noticed them

almost a week ago. The day Brady had admitted his attraction. Since that day, they caught me off guard at random, unexpected times. Often it was during silent moments of contemplation while I watched Brady when he was too busy doing something else to notice.

I'd always considered myself open-minded, secure in my sexuality and who I was. When people commented that it was strange I had so many *gay* friends, it pissed me off. I would immediately correct them, saying I have many *friends*. Their orientations had nothing to do with it. We were like-minded people. Why did it matter who they slept with?

This was the first time I'd hung out with a guy who identified as gay where it seemed to always be at the forefront of my mind. It didn't help that Brady never let me forget it, reminding me regularly and purposefully flirting to get a rise out of me. It was fun. Playful. I wasn't bothered by his banter, but something about our exchanges set me off-balance. I reacted each and every time. Not outwardly but on the inside where no one could see.

The odd feeling wasn't necessarily unpleasant. It was like the flutter of anxiety I got right before doing something scary. It was that small burst of adrenaline that coursed through my veins at the peak of a roller coaster ride. In fact, the sensation was one I chased whenever it arose. I wanted to hang onto it, so I encouraged more teasing and banter. It was like getting high. That precious, beautiful moment when the drug soaked into your system, coating you head to toe, taking you away to

that happy place where you floated on a cloud and never wanted to come down.

That was akin to what I felt when I stared at Brady's picture.

The shower cut out, and I scrambled to close the gallery on my phone. The action was reactive, and only after I'd tossed my phone aside like it had burned me did I wonder why I felt so panicked. Why was my heart rate jacked up?

Brady emerged from the bathroom a few minutes later, a towel slung around his neck. His skin was pink from the hot water. He wasn't wearing a shirt but had put on a loose pair of basketball shorts. As he stood in the center of the room, one hip jutted to the side, he used the towel to dry his hair.

For reasons I couldn't explain, I stared.

"That felt amazing. I fixed my eyebrows, by the way. A few strays were trying to take over. What do you think?" He leaned in close, turning his head this way and that as he batted his lashes.

When the odd sensation in my low belly grew more intense, I jerked my attention away and scrambled off the bed.

"They look great. My turn."

Usually, a hot shower would have been enticing, especially after so long on the fly. Not today. I turned the knob all the way to the blue *C* marked on the wall, letting the freezing water cascade over my skin. It was biting cold, but I refused to move. I was burning from the inside out and needed to put out the flames.

I wasn't stupid nor was I in denial. It had all dawned on me the minute I'd stared at Brady's smooth chest and pronounced hip bones, sitting proudly above the elastic hem of his shorts, as I stared at the soft patch of hair that traveled from his navel to places I couldn't see. It was clear to me the moment I took in the curve of his mouth, the playful gleam in his gray-blue eyes, his collarbone, the dip at the base of his throat, and the hard buds of his nipples. When he lifted his arms and dried his hair on the towel, showing off the patches of hair under his arms, my saliva glands responded. When I tried to look away and caught sight of the distinct mound under the thin fabric of his shorts, I was right back to envisioning Brady on his knees in a bar bathroom.

Nope, I wasn't stupid. I knew exactly what was happening.

It didn't mean I was prepared to face it. For all I knew, I was overtired and after a good night's sleep, it would go away.



It did not go away.

Three days later, we caught on the fly outside the Sudbury railyard. It was another daytime catch with some added stealth maneuvers involved, and Brady struggled. I'd almost had to abort when he couldn't get enough speed to catch the ladder on the first well I'd found. When he tripped on his feet and almost fell, a wash of fear engulfed me.

We made it but barely.

Instead of reprimanding him about his poor skills, I tried to find a positive. “You’re hesitating less,” I said once we’d settled in the well of a stacker.

Brady beamed at the small compliment, and not for the first time, I couldn’t fight the draw to stare at his mouth. His contentment, his joy, it did something to me.

I’d done all I could over the past three days to act normal, but inside, I was a mess of confusing thoughts. There were so many what-ifs to think about it was making it hard to concentrate on our task. If Brady had noticed my diverted attention, I couldn’t tell. More and more, I caught myself staring at him in wonder, asking myself questions I’d never asked before.

I wasn’t as freaked out as I thought I should be. The idea of two men together had never been appalling to me. It had simply been their thing, not mine. To each his own. I won’t judge you if you don’t judge me. That was my philosophy. You can love whoever you want. You aren’t hurting anyone. I was starting to wonder if my easygoing personality had made me more receptive to the idea of this newfound attraction. As it stood, I was more concerned about making a mistake and ensuring I wasn’t misinterpreting my feelings. The last thing I wanted to do was upset Brady or give him the wrong idea.

So we continued as we had for the past week. Brady poked fun and flirted, and I reciprocated with offhand compliments as I teased him back, ensuring he saw me as supportive and uncaring in regard to his sexuality.

Little did he know, it was my sexuality in question.

We detrained outside of Sturgeon Falls—another crash landing—and referenced the GPS before heading toward yet another abandoned station that lay along more decommissioned lines on the outskirts of nowhere. It was a solid two-hour hike. As we walked, we shared easy conversation about everything under the sun, including those deeper conversations I usually wouldn't touch with a ten-foot pole, like religion and our beliefs, politics, and the history of the LGBTQ movement. Brady was a wealth of information on that topic. He said he'd studied it obsessively when he'd come out. He got on a rant about the government and the AIDS epidemic that had run rampant through New York and San Francisco in the early eighties. When he got flustered and emotional, I stopped him with a touch to his arm.

“I admire your passion, but you're getting all worked up.”

“I read so many books, and it bothered me for a long time.”

“I can tell.”

“I know times have changed drastically, but they were people like me, dying left and right, and the government didn't care. They figured we deserved it.”

“I know. I read some too.” I wanted to smooth the worry lines on his forehead. I wanted to draw him into a hug and hold him tight to my chest until the fire that had raced up his neck and settled in his cheeks burned out. Yet I also wanted to listen to him talk, let him get it all out because I knew it was

eating at his core. But I was still sorting out my own quandary, and it prevented me from knowing how to proceed.

“Do you want to talk about something else?” I asked. “I hate seeing you so upset. Not that what you’re saying isn’t valid, but...”

“No. That’s a good idea. Something else.”

So we talked about school and our childhood memories as we continued along.

We were both only children, but we hadn’t grown up the same. Moose Jaw was practically a country town compared to the enormity of Toronto. Whereas I took a school bus to school every day, Brady had taken the TTC from the time he was twelve. It was simply part of city life, he told me.

“My father was a neurosurgeon,” Brady said as he balanced along the edge of the rail, arms extended so he wouldn’t fall. “So we had money. Mom was a medical receptionist for one of his colleagues. They met through him. When Dad died, I learned he left me with half his estate.”

“Holy shit.”

“Yeah. It was a shock. I expected him to leave it all to my mother. I worried she would be upset with his decision, but apparently, she knew. She went with him when he adjusted his will after his diagnosis. I was a legal adult at the time, and he wanted me taken care of. Mom got the house, cars, and other assets, but half of his money went to me. And it wasn’t small change. My dad had made a lot of profitable investments. He

didn't want me to worry about living expenses while I was in school. He wanted my education to be paid for. He wanted me to follow my dreams and not have anything holding me back."

"That explains the apartment."

Brady shrugged. "Mom was upset when I moved out. I think she expected me to live at home while I was in school, but I couldn't. She became overprotective after he died. I couldn't go anywhere or do anything without her worrying. I needed space to breathe."

"I know what that's like. My parents aren't overprotective, but they smother me, trying to shove their ideas down my throat whenever I'm home. They're convinced marriage, kids, and a white picket fence are the only reasonable path in life. Don't get me wrong. I love them. I appreciate all my dad has taught me, but I want to be my own person. The harder they push, the harder I want to push back."

"Why don't you get your own place?"

"Because I'm not there enough. It's not worth it."

"Ah, yes. Dodger the wanderer. Home for a few cold months, then off to take on the world."

I chuckled. "Something like that."

Conversation with Brady was easy. For the first time in my life, I shared openly about who I was and my ideas and thoughts about world issues, big and small. It was new for me. No one had ever given me this sense of freedom. I was used to protecting my privacy from people I didn't know, but Brady

was different. He'd transitioned from weird stranger to close friend in no time, and nothing was out of bounds for us.

We made it to the old station in the late afternoon. It was in the same disrepair as the first one we'd visited. Unlike the first, this building was constructed of old batten board siding, which had once been painted beige. The paint peeled and flaked, showing the raw, weathered boards underneath. The whole structure had an uneasy lean like the years had caught up with it, and it was tired. It was two stories high, but I suspected the second floor wouldn't be accessible—at least not safely. The windows were boarded up, the same as the first building. There was graffiti in places, which spoke of its use by squatters and teens alike.

The lock on the front door had been smashed long ago. Its rusty remains lay on the crumbling concrete platform. It was easy to get inside. No climbing. No struggle. We simply shoved the heavy warped wooden door out of the way and walked in.

Before we crossed the threshold, Brady touched my arm. “Do you want me to check it out by myself? I know this part isn't easy for you.”

His warm gaze traveled over my face. There was tenderness and understanding in his eyes. He'd seen how hard it was for me at the last building, and I appreciated his concern.

“I'm okay. Let's do it.”

He nodded, but before he could walk away, I snagged his hand. It was sweaty, but his skin was soft, not calloused and

rough like mine. “Be careful. This one looks like it’s full of hazards. I don’t want you to get hurt. We’re a long way from help.”

“You too.”

I squeezed his hand and let go.

We explored the abandoned station for the following half hour. As I’d guessed, access to the second floor was no longer available. The stairs leading up were sagging and rotting so badly I knew any weight would make them collapse. Halfway up, four stairs were missing. Nothing but a gaping hole remained.

It was the same mess of debris. Beer cans, dozens of cigarette butts and empty packs, food containers, rotting clothing, and stray footwear. How was it so many people lost shoes? This building had more spider webs and rats. As I pushed aside an old metal postcard rack, a rodent scurried over my boot, making me jump.

In the end, Brady uncovered a rucksack with a sleeping bag still attached, a broken headlamp, and the shattered plastic shell of what looked like a scanner. They weren’t definitive pieces of evidence, but I’d have bet my left nut they belonged to our dead rider. Brady snapped a few pictures, getting low for a few close-up shots, trying not to disturb the area any more than he had to.

“What was this victim’s name?” Brady asked as we sifted through more debris near where we’d found the gear.

I referenced my phone for the notes Brady had shared with me over his cloud. “Rodney. No last name that I know of. Or rather, autopsy case number 472963. Male. Caucasian. Between the ages of twenty and twenty-five.”

“Are you being flippant?”

“What the fuck is flippant?”

“Cheeky. Insolent.” Brady gave me a sideways smirk and hitched a brow. “Sassy?”

“You’re sassy. I’m never sassy. I was being sarcastic. Okay, insolent. Yes. I hate how they dismissed these guys like they were nobodies. They’re numbers to them, not people. It’s... insulting. Hurtful.”

“You can’t fault the authorities for assigning them numbers when they had no way of knowing who they were.”

“I know. I’m sorry. It’s just... Are we done? It’s suffocating in here. I don’t feel so good.”

Brady stood from where he’d been squatting and looked around. He took on a whole different demeanor when he shifted into Dr. Reid mode. He was professional to a fault, and none of the dank, eerie qualities of our research fazed him. It was like he was immune to the horrors. I admired his ability to turn it off. He was stronger than I thought. Maybe he floundered when his athleticism was put to the test, but in the abandoned building, investigating a killer, he was in his element.

Brady was meant to do this. I could see the cogs in his brain whirling around, spinning theories, making connections.

When his attention shifted to me, the look he returned made my belly swoosh. Even inside a dimly lit, desecrated building, he was too good looking for words. And the longer we were together, the more I couldn't deny it. These fluttery feelings were not going away, and they hit me at such random moments it was making me crazy.

“How about you go outside and get fresh air. Give me a few more minutes. I just want to be sure we didn't miss anything. I'll do one more walk around and join you.”

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely.”

“Please be careful. This place is a death trap.”

“I will.”

Outside, I paced. My skin was alive, tingling with a fresh spike of adrenaline as it coursed through my veins. My heart raced like I'd just caught a train. I walked a distance from the building, far enough Brady wouldn't hear my conversation if he came outside, and I called Willow.

I'd wavered with the idea of seeking her advice, knowing I was potentially setting myself up to be teased, but something had to give. I couldn't keep going like this. Willow was my go-to. She knew all my girl troubles, so why not hear about my boy troubles?

I snorted at myself as the phone rang. Never in a million years did I think this would be a conversation we'd share. I had boy troubles. She was going to have a shit fit.

“Troy! Oh my god, did you kill him? I told you, best friend or not, I would not help you dispose of any bodies. He's dead, isn't he.”

“Hey, pretty lady. Where're you at?”

“Just got to Montreal two days ago. Staying at Killer and Green's new pad.”

“Oh yeah? Is it nice?”

“It's pretty sweet, except I'm living with three guys who are all pigs, so there's that.”

I frowned. “Three guys? Who's with you?”

“Ty's here.”

“What? What happened? Where's Elian?” My back stiffened. The last I'd seen Ty, he was staying with Elian in his hometown outside Winnipeg as they sorted out their new relationship.

“Relax. Elian sent him to us.”

“And where is that motherfucker? I swear, if he did a runner again, I'm gonna kick his ass.”

“Relax, you neanderthal. He's at home.” Her voice dropped, and I heard a door close. “He's starting therapy. I think it's a good thing. He didn't run. I've been texting him. He's trying to get better.”

“Oh. How’s Tyler? This must be killing him.”

“He’s getting there. I think he’s finally embracing us as family.”

“About fucking time. Give him a bear hug from me and tell him I love him.”

“I will. Why are you calling? Aren’t you out solving crime or some shit?”

Heat bloomed in my low belly. I shifted around, checking to ensure Brady hadn’t come outside yet. “I... have a situation. I need your advice.”

“Wow. Should I be flattered? Usually you tell me you don’t want my advice.”

“Can you be serious for five minutes?”

Her tone changed. “What’s going on?”

I blew out a breath. “Okay, so you can’t make fun of me.”

Willow huffed on the other end of the line. “Yikes. That’s asking a lot. But for real, you’re worrying me. Are you okay?”

I kicked at a clump of dried dirt on the ground and braced for impact. “How do you know for sure if... if...”

“If what?”

“Ah, fuck it. I’m just going to say it. How do you know for sure if you’re bisexual?”

My question was met with silence. A long stretch of rattling, aching silence that rang in my ears. I didn’t appreciate it.

“Willow, come on. Help me out.”

“Um... I’m here. I... Okay. Are you serious?”

“Does it sound like I’m joking?”

“I assume this has to do with Brady?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you want to give me some context?”

I huffed a laugh. “No, not really.”

“Troy, you called me, remember? Talk. I’m not going to make fun of you. I swear.”

Her use of my real name and the tone of her voice told me she understood. Her concern made it easier.

“I keep getting these weird feelings at random moments, and I don’t know what to do about it. They won’t go away. They aren’t bad feelings, but... like butterflies, or how you lose your stomach when you crest a hill too fast in a car. I mean... there was this girl in my tenth grade English class, Olivia, who used to give me those feelings, but I was too much of a chicken shit to talk to her back then. I don’t know what to do with this, and I don’t know what it means.”

“Um... okay. How does Brady feel about it?”

“Are you kidding? I haven’t told him. It all started about a week ago when he admitted he was attracted to me. He thought I’d be weird about it because I’m not gay.”

“He clearly doesn’t know you very well.”

“I know. That’s what I said. I laughed and told him I wasn’t like that. But ever since, when he playfully flirts and kids around, I get that swoopy feeling in my belly, and I flirt back. I can’t help it. I was unconsciously doing it at first, but now I do it on purpose. And…” I couldn’t find the words to finish the next sentence.

“And what?”

“And… I can’t stop wondering what it might be like to kiss him.”

“Wow. I did not see this coming.”

“Yeah, me either. Now what the hell does it mean? I’m not gay. My track record with girls seems to make that very clear, but I didn’t think I was bisexual either. I mean, wouldn’t I have known by now if I was?”

“Not necessarily. Sometimes we don’t discover things until later in life. Sexuality can evolve and change as we get older. It’s not always black-and-white.”

“Really? I didn’t know that. Okay, but what if I’m not bisexual? What if it’s just our proximity and the fact that we spend every waking moment together that’s caused these feelings? How do I know for sure if they’re real?”

“Kiss him.”

“Excuse me?”

“Kiss him. If you’re bisexual and attracted to him, then kissing him will feel good and right, and you’ll want more. If you’re not, then you’ll know.”

“Right, and if I’m not, it will give Brady the wrong idea and make everything weird.”

“I have a feeling it won’t go that way.”

“How do you know?”

“Because I’ve known you for years, Troy. You’re an open book. You don’t bullshit. You don’t beat around the bush about anything. You’re one of those people who never has a hidden agenda. What you see is what you get. If you’re calling me, it’s not because you don’t know. It’s because you needed to say it out loud to someone you trust before moving forward. I’m a safe spot for you.”

I absorbed her words. She was right. I’d known the answer long before I’d made the call. I’d known three days ago at the motel. It was a bit scary, and Willow had always been my sounding board, so it was reflexive to seek her advice.

“Well shit. I did not see this coming. I’m going to get razzed so bad when the guys find out.”

Willow laughed. “Yeah, probably. The real question is, what the hell does Brady see in you? He called you attractive? Does the guy not get out much?”

“Shut up, brat. Lots of girls find me attractive. It stands to reason guys will too, and Brady is one of them. It’s flattering.”

“Great, just what your ego needed.”

We laughed.

Brady emerged from the building, pulling his headlamp off and ruffling his hair. He glanced around and smiled brightly when he saw me, giving me a wave.

I waved back and held up a finger, telling him to hang on. “I gotta go.”

“Good luck. Keep me posted.”

“I will.”

“Hey, Troy?”

“Yeah.”

“Do a girl a favor and keep the details to a minimum.”

I snorted. “We’ll see. You like the play-by-play.”

“I really, *really* don’t. Spare me. I beg you.”

“Yeah, yeah. Thanks for listening, pretty lady.”

“Always.”

I hung up and pocketed my phone.

Moment of truth.

Feet in motion, I crossed toward Brady, who’d move to where we’d left our packs.

“Find anything?” I asked.

“Possibly. I need to reference the pictures you had of those riders.” He gestured to my phone, which I clutched with a white-knuckle grip. Brady seemed to notice something was off and cocked his head to the side. “Who were you talking to?”

“Willow.”

“Oh. Is everything okay?” Worry crossed his face as he studied me, seeking answers I feared might be written all over my face. His perfect brows crinkled, and I fought the urge to smooth them out.

“I’m great. Never been better.”

“Good. Could I see those pictures?” Again, he gestured to my phone, but his analytical gaze never left my face.

“Not yet.”

I tossed my phone on top of my rucksack, stepped forward, took Brady’s face between my palms, and kissed him.

Chapter Twelve

Brady

There was barely a second for me to register what was happening. Dodger tossed his phone aside, stepped forward, cupped my cheeks, and pressed his lips to mine before I could get a word out.

My hands flew to his waist of their own accord, and I whimpered or squeaked or made some sort of unintelligible, mortifying noise before closing my eyes and melting against his mouth.

Was this really happening? What was going on?

It wasn't a shy kiss either. There was no hesitation or uncertainty behind it. Dodger was aggressive and bold, the way he was with everything. Confident to a fault. His tongue nudged the seam of my lips, and I opened, letting him in. They brushed together, the velvety rasp sending shivers up my spine, a flood of pleasure coating me head to toe. My body came alive, pulsing with a suppressed yearning I'd been doing my best to ignore for over a week.

It was dangerous and wholly unexpected.

What had come over him?

As Dodger explored my mouth, his thumbs moved over my cheeks in a gentle caress, scraping against the light stubble that had grown since I'd shaved at the motel. He pulled back a bit, nipped my lower lip almost playfully, sucked it into his mouth, then kissed me again.

This had to be another dream. I must have fallen asleep on the train. None of this was real. It was impossible.

But it felt more real than all my other dreams combined. I could taste him, a hint of the oranges we'd shared at breakfast and the lingering presence of the cigarette he'd last smoked on our long walk to the station. His scent surrounded me, invading my nostrils with each inhale. On his hands, there was a suggestion of iron from where he'd clung to the rusty rail of the well. His hair carried a whisper of honey and hazelnut, but mostly, it was the unique scent I associated with Dodger.

Dreams usually lacked the presence of gustatory or olfactory sensations, so that in itself should have been the tell-tale factor, hinting at reality.

I didn't care. Dream or not, it was amazing.

The kiss came to a natural end, but Dodger didn't release my face. He hovered close, his panting breaths ghosting my lips as our eyes locked. He was trembling.

"Um... hi," I said. "That was unexpected. Wh-what's going on?"

His eyes smiled behind his slightly fogged glasses, and he ran his tongue along his lips, sucking them into his mouth as though tasting me again. “I... don’t know.”

“I’m confused. I... thought you were straight.”

“I thought so too, but... then I couldn’t stop thinking about kissing you, so maybe it’s not that simple. I’m still trying to sort it out. You look freaked out.”

“Oddly, you don’t.”

He chuckled. “Go with the flow, I say. Did I make a mess of things?” He let his hands slide from my face. They coasted along my arms until he reached my hands, and he held them, taking a half step back.

“I’m still deciding if this is another dream.”

“*Another* dream? You dreamed about me before?”

My cheeks blazed. “Um... a little bit. Yes.”

“Your cheeks are red.”

“I’m embarrassed.”

“What were we doing in your dreams?”

“I’d rather not say.”

He chuckled. “Suit yourself. I will flounder along directionless in that case.” The bewildered look he wore shifted to something a little more somber. “In all seriousness, did I cross a line? Was that okay?”

“I think it requires more analysis before I can give a definitive answer. More testing. As it stands, we only have a

single instance for which I was able to gather data. It's not enough."

Dodger's left brow rose. "Are you being cheeky?"

"Flippant."

"Sassy?"

"Always."

He kissed me again. It was slower that time like he was taking it all in, absorbing the new experience. I sighed when we came apart, and I was sure I looked punch-drunk with pleasure.

"Was *that* okay?"

"Still gathering data, but the outlook is promising."

"I can't with you."

"Did you think about bacteria?" I asked.

Dodger snorted and stepped back, releasing me and wiping a hand over his face. "Oh my god. You're too much. Stop. Who are you, and what have you done to me?"

"Well, were you? It's an important part of the case study."

"No, I was not thinking about bacteria. It was the furthest thing from my mind."

"Ah-ha!" I snapped my fingers and pointed at him. "So I was right. I knew kissing boys was the answer."

"I guess so." He batted my hand away.

We shoved each other playfully once or twice before calming, then we stood in silence for a long time, both staring at one another, assessing the situation. My face hurt from smiling. I was under no illusions. Dodger wasn't the first straight man to dip his toe into the pool to see what it was like on the other side. The likelihood was, he'd change his mind. So long as I remembered that, hopefully, I could shield my heart from getting hurt—or ensure I didn't get overly invested in the idea we could become something more. He hadn't wanted more from women. Why would this be any different?

“What are you thinking?” I finally asked when it had been quiet between us for too long.

“I'm thinking I really like you, Brady. It's kind of taken me off guard. Full transparency. I don't know where these feelings came from or why this is happening now, but I'm not freaked out. I'm okay with it.” He shuffled, glanced at the old building, then back. “Are you?”

“Okay with it? Definitely. In case it wasn't blatantly obvious before, I kind of have a small crush on you. And by small, I mean enormous.”

“A crush? Isn't that a grade school thing?”

“No.” I stepped forward, removed his glasses, and buffed them on the bottom of my shirt as he watched me affectionately. “It's a one hundred percent adult crush.” When I was done, I set his glasses back on his nose. “Sorry. You were smudgy again. It bothers me. It was probably from the kissing.” I shrugged, still grinning.

He took my hand so I didn't step away. "Thank you."

I wanted to kiss him again, but something told me to let Dodger be the initiator. At least for now. He might not be acting freaked out, but there was no way he wasn't a little apprehensive on the inside.

"Um... You wanted to see pictures?" he asked, glancing at his phone.

"Oh. Right. I almost forgot. I blame you. How dare your evil mouth divert me from my task."

"How dare it." He rolled his eyes and retrieved his phone, handing it to me. "What are you looking for?"

"The pictures of the missing riders you took from your wall back home."

"In the gallery. You'll see the folder."

It took me less than a minute to find what I was looking for. Rodney with no last name. Dodger hadn't labeled the pictures, but I knew which one was him. To be sure I was right, I turned the phone to show him.

"This guy?"

"Yep."

"See this?" I pointed to an army-green, canvas-covered canteen the man in the picture had slung over his shoulder. It had been personalized with gray embossed stitching on the front—the letters *R* and *D*. Rodney's last name must have started with a *D*.

“Yeah, I see it. Why is that important?” There was an inflection in Dodger’s tone like he knew where I was going.

“Hold this.” I handed him his phone and drew mine from my pocket. Once I found the picture I’d taken a few minutes ago inside the building, I showed him. “Same one.”

“Shit. We’re two for two. That’s pretty definitive evidence.”

“I’d say.”

“You’re documenting all this, right? I mean, you’ve taken notes and pictures. Will that be enough?”

“I can be very persuasive in my arguments. I will prove this man exists if it kills me. We’ll have every cop in the country looking for him once I get the RCMP on board. We’ve already closed gaps.”

“You already proved he exists, smarty pants.”

“*We* already have.”

“Nah, you. I’m just the sexy sidekick.”

“You don’t give yourself enough credit. Without you, I’d have never done this. Hopped on trains. Lived on the fly.”

“I love it when you talk like a rider, especially when I know you have this nerdy Dr. Reid persona underneath all those clothes.” Dodger snagged my hand and leaned in like he was about to kiss me when his phone went off. He glanced down at the name flashing across the screen.

Killer.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake. I’m gonna kill that woman. The cat’s out of the bag. Here we go.”

He declined the call and sent Killian a single-word text.

No!

I laughed, and Dodger hooked a hand behind my neck, drew me in, and fused our mouths together.



We made the long trek back toward Sturgeon Falls and Lake Nipissing. The day was hot. It wasn’t officially summer, but Mother Nature didn’t care. Despite having changed into cargo shorts and a T-shirt, my clothing and hair stuck to me, and beads of sweat trickled down my cheeks from my temples. I was starting to get sunburned on the tip of my nose and regretted not packing sunscreen.

Dodger wasn’t faring any better. When he suggested camping out on the lake for a night before thumbing a ride back to Sudbury, I agreed. My feet hurt from walking most of the day, and my shoulders and back ached from carrying the heavy pack for so long. We had enough supplies to get us through a few days, and a refreshing swim sounded fantastic.

It was early evening when we found a secluded spot on Lake Nipissing to set up camp. The sun was setting on the horizon, sparkling crimson and gold off the still water. The minute we arrived, we dropped our rucksacks, stripped to our underwear, and ran along the sandy beach into the water.

It was almost mid-June, and the water temperature was still frigid from the past winter. We didn't care. We were so hot from our long walk under the blazing sun, it was heavenly. The second I was out far enough, I dove under the glassy surface and swam, savoring the blissful coolness against my overheated skin. It was cold enough to take my breath away, but with vigorous strokes and Dodger chasing me, I quickly adapted.

I'd gone a fair distance, but when I tried to stand, Dodger attacked. He wrapped his arms around me from behind, lifted me, and tossed me as far as he could. I went under but came up fighting.

We wrestled and splashed each other for a long time. I got the sense Dodger was using the horseplay as an excuse to touch me. I didn't mind. More than once, he pinned me from behind, burying his nose in the crease of my shoulder and neck. Each time, he raked his teeth over my skin, making me shiver. He had no idea what he was doing to me.

The moment would break, he'd let go, and we'd battle it out again.

I wanted to get closer. I wanted to ease his anxiety and let him know it was okay to touch me, to explore this, but I didn't want to push.

It turned out Dodger was braver than I gave him credit for.

After we'd been horsing around for a solid half hour, he hooked an arm around my waist—like he'd done a dozen

times before—but instead of dunking me or throwing me, he drew me in until we were face-to-face.

The water was up to our midchest, so when he heaved me into his arms, the buoyancy made it easy and almost natural to wrap my legs around his waist. The water might have been icy cold, but my internal temperature was high, and I'd been sporting a semi the whole time we'd been goofing around.

He would have to have been stupid not to notice once I was in his arms.

I clasped my hands at the back of his neck, linked my ankles behind his lower back, and peered down at him, resting my forehead to his.

He'd left his glasses on the beach, but we were so close, he no longer had to squint. Rivulets of water ran down his face, catching on his lashes and lips. The drops glistened in the fading sunlight. We panted from the horseplay, chests heaving in time with one another. One minute we were taking each other in, and the next, we were kissing. It was a thousand times steamier than back at the old station, and I was fully hard in an instant.

It didn't hurt that we were both half-naked. Save our underwear, our bodies were crushed together, skin to skin. If it bothered him having another guy's erection pressed against his abdomen, he didn't say. He was nervous, but he was doing a stellar job hiding it. The only indicator was the vibration running through his body. I suspected it was only partly to do with the cold lake and more to do with circumstance.

After an extended period of heavy kissing, I tried to simmer things down when I wanted nothing more than to get off. Dodger's hands had remained unmoving on my hips like he was too afraid to explore further. I used his shivers as an excuse.

“You're frozen. We should get out and dry off. Warm up.”

As I suspected, he didn't argue.

We swam to shore. There was no hiding my erection as we crossed the sand. My briefs were already tight, but wet, they showed everything. Dodger kept his body suspiciously angled away from me, so I figured he was having the same issue.

It was a good sign. If his body was responding to our little make-out session, then it might not be simple curiosity.

We let the fading sun dry us as we sat on a large piece of driftwood that had washed up on shore. We shared peanut butter crackers, vanilla pudding cups, dried Crispix cereal, and bananas—an eclectic array of foods I was becoming used to eating.

“We should set up the tent before it's dark. The temperature will drop. We should get dressed too.” He said all this with his gaze fixed on the horizon, his mind far away.

We worked in silence. Dodger dressed first—jogging pants and a T-shirt—then worked on getting the tent up. I'd learned how to be helpful, holding corners taut as he got the poles in place and securing the tarp straps once it was upright.

We ended up inside, lying prone on our sleeping bags as we went over the pictures I'd taken that day before studying the map and deciding our next course of action.

"Great," Dodger mumbled when he saw what came next. "Red circle time."

Red circle time meant we'd be traveling to an area I suspected fit onto the path our killer had taken. A spot where, if my suspicions were correct, we might uncover one of Dodger's still missing riders. I knew he was apprehensive about the idea of searching for a dead body, but if we could fill in these tiny gaps, it would be the glue that would tie our case together.

He was quiet as he studied the train routes, determining where we needed to be. Tension marked a path across his forehead. He sent some texts to his buddy RaptorZ and tossed his phone aside, burying his face in his hands, shoving his glasses up in the process. "I hate this."

"I know."

I plucked his glasses off before they fell and set them aside. We lay close enough I didn't think I'd be too blurry. Next, I tugged the elastic from his hair, letting it fall around his chin. He tilted his head to the side, peeking out from behind his fingers.

"I don't want to find them."

"I know."

"But I know they're out there. I'm not stupid."

“They may not have families looking for them, but they deserve to be found. They deserve a proper burial.”

“They deserve justice.”

“And that’s why we’re doing this, right?”

He dropped his hands and nodded, looking glum. We’d hung a small, battery-operated lantern from the tent ceiling, and the angle of the light left a lot of Dodger’s face in shadow, making his worry lines deeper and more pronounced.

“I’m not backing out.”

“I know.”

“I’m doing this for them.”

“I know.”

“It’s just...” He rolled to his side to face me. “I’ve been having fun.” He tentatively brushed his fingers over mine, staring at the connection rather than making eye contact. “Riding with you. Talking to you. Getting to know you. Seeing places I’ve never seen.” He paused, wet his lips, then quieter, “Doing things I’ve never done. It’s been amazing. But then I remember why we’re here, and I hate myself. I feel guilty.”

“Don’t. Enjoy the summer. This is your thing. This is why you work so hard all winter, so you can have the freedom of riding in the summer. You’ve told me how much you love it. How important it is to you. I see it. Don’t let any of this”—I gestured at the darkened phone where we’d been reviewing evidence—“steal the joy of the experience. Think of what we’re doing as only one small aspect of the adventure. Every

now and again, we have to stop having fun and do an unpleasant job. When the job is done, we can go back to having a good time.”

He glanced at the darkened phone screen. “I guess.”

“No, I’m right, and right now, we are finished doing work stuff. Back to having fun.”

For the first time since the conversation got heavy, Dodger peeked up, making eye contact. A quirk in his lips hinted at amusement. “It’s kinda late. What did you have in mind?”

I’d told myself to let him take the reins, be the guide. I’d told myself not to push him beyond lines he wasn’t ready to cross. Let him make the first move. Do not jump him and hump his leg.

But I’d used up all my willpower in the lake, and his question rang with suggestion.

I brushed his hair back, tucking it behind an ear, then I leaned in and kissed him. Dodger didn’t resist. He melted back against his sleeping bag and tugged me on top of him as he slipped his tongue into my mouth. I straddled his thighs and lost myself to the fantasy I never thought could exist.

His apprehension lingered in the background. I wasn’t imagining it, but it was eclipsed by a burst of confidence. Unlike at the lake, Dodger explored, touching me, trailing his hands over my body. The movements were tentative at first but grew bolder the longer we made out. Maybe it was because we

were dressed and not practically naked. It didn't matter. I loved having his hands on me.

First, he mapped the length of my spine, up and down, adding pressure so the space between us shrank. He clung to my hips and smoothed a path up and down my arms. He threaded fingers through my hair, cupped my face, and emitted small notes of pleasure as his tongue tangled with mine.

Every touch was a little unsure, a little overthought.

He broke the kiss several times, panting, staring into my eyes like he wanted to say something or was deciding how he felt, but the kissing would resume without a word.

In time, he bravely moved his hands to my ass, gripping two handfuls and drawing me down as he hitched his hips higher.

We were both aroused. There was no hiding the evidence.

I couldn't fight the urge to grind against him again and again. My cock wanted attention, and since he'd initiated the action, I didn't think he would mind a little rutting.

I was right. The minute I moved with more purpose, our kiss stuttered and stopped. We stared at one another as we moved like that for many blissful minutes. The pleasure built to a point I wanted to shed clothing and get down to business. I wanted him to pin me down and fuck me, but I was afraid that was beyond him just yet.

"You feel good," he whispered, rocking against me, his breathing shaky.

"I can make it feel even better."

A smirk filled his face. “Oh yeah?”

I brought my mouth to his ear while keeping a steady grind going below and whispered, “How freaked out would you be if I sucked your cock?”

A full shiver rolled through him, and he groaned, his hands on my ass tightening.

I chuckled and nipped his ear. “Is that a yes?”

“I’m not freaked out.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

He lifted my head, his eyes roving over my face. “Ask me again.”

“Can I suck your dick, Troy?”

In the low light of the tent, I thought his pupils responded to my use of his first name. He didn’t admonish me, so maybe he didn’t hate it as much as he claimed.

His Adam’s apple bobbed, and he nodded.

We spent another minute kissing. I waited until his tension relaxed a degree before I slipped down his body. At the waistband of his joggers, I paused, mouthing the swell beneath the fabric, breathing hot air over his erection.

He made a noise in his throat and brushed his fingers over my hair like he wanted more but couldn’t quite find the courage to guide my movements.

When I glanced up to check in, there was nothing but anticipation staring back at me.

Dodger glided his fingers over my lips. “Not gonna lie, I’ve been picturing this pretty mouth doing dirty things to me for a couple of days.”

“Oh yeah? Let’s see if I live up to those fantasies.”

He lifted his hips as I tugged his joggers and underwear down and off, revealing the hard length of his cock, sitting proudly in a dark patch of hair. The tip glistened, and when I licked my lips in anticipation, it twitched.

Dodger mumbled, “Jesus.”

I couldn’t help chuckling at his reaction. I rubbed my nose along his inner thigh, nipping and planting small kisses as I made my way to my destination. Taking him in hand, I gave him a few slow strokes, milking more precum to the surface. I mouthed his balls, taking one at a time into my mouth, sucking them and toying with my tongue.

“Holy shit,” he whispered, his voice hoarse and raspy. “I can’t believe this is happening.”

“You and me both.”

At the base of his cock, I flattened my tongue and took a slow journey to the tip, where I lapped at the clear bead of moisture. Dodger let out a long groan when I hummed with pleasure.

I paused, checking in again. “Gonna blow your mind, Troy.”

“Wait. Holy fuck. Hang on.” He slapped around until he found his glasses and put them on. “This is something I want to remember clearly later. Oh my god.”

“Are you ready?” I teased my tongue along the ridge of his cock head and lapped up more precum.

“God yes.”

I mouthed his head, teasing, offering light suction but nothing more as I fondled his balls and watched every reaction.

Dodger groaned. “You’re going to be the death of me. Suck it already. Why the suspense?”

“It’s part of the fun.”

But I didn’t make him wait endlessly. I was as eager to get to the main event as he was. I might not have had many boyfriends, and I might not have spent as much time cruising gay bars as other guys my age, but I took pride in my oral skills. I’d been told more than once I had a knack for sucking cock.

Partly out of fear Dodger would change his mind and partly because I was driven to impress him and make him feel good, I drew on all the skills I’d picked up over the years and applied them. My nonexistent gag reflex was helpful. My ability to use my throat muscles to massage was always a winner.

In no time, I had Dodger cursing and begging. When I told him to fuck my mouth and he didn’t have to be gentle, he did. All evidence of shyness was gone. I squirmed out of my pants and had a hand around my cock, stroking myself while I took him to the edge over and over before pulling back and driving him out of his mind.

“I need to come. Please,” he sputtered. His whole body quaked and trembled. “Please, Brady.”

I took pity on him and set a more determined pace. When his legs twitched and his breathing turned staggered and choppy, I took him to the base and worked him with my throat muscles until his hips jerked up, and he came on a cry.

I took every drop of his release, swallowing and milking his orgasm for as long as possible. He collapsed, panting, a mess of sated jelly limbs when it ended. I shuffled upright, straddling his waist, my hand flying over my cock as I cussed the edge.

“Take your shirt off. Hurry.”

Wide-eyed, Dodger scrambled to comply, almost losing his glasses in the process. His gaze was welded to my cock as I stroked myself faster and faster.

“Are you going to freak out if I come on you?”

He snapped his head back and forth. An adamant no.

“Good.” The tidal wave of pleasure hit at that exact moment, and I cried out as I shot great spurts of cum over his chest.

When the pleasure ebbed, I sat back, his sated and softening cock nestled under my bare ass. Dodger was likely too bewildered at the whole experience to notice.

Careful not to lie in the mess, I braced myself on the ground next to his head, leaned over, and kissed him.

“How are you doing?” I asked when we came apart.

He touched my lips with a look of awe. “No one has ever sucked my cock like that before. Are you some kind of god, or have I just had really bad luck with women over the years? I mean, don’t get me wrong, they weren’t awful, but they were nothing like that.”

Pride swelled in my chest. “I’m not a virgin. I know what I like, so it stands to reason I have a pretty good idea what another guy might like. I’ve been honing my skills for a while. I have a passion for learning and perfection, remember?”

“Well, that was phenomenal.”

We kissed some more. My lips were raw and swollen, but I didn’t care. I could kiss him all night. In fact, given some time to recuperate, I could go for a repeat. However, I had the feeling Dodger would need some time to process, so I let the kiss simmer naturally without pushing him further.

When we came apart again, we cleaned up and found our clothes. Dodger flicked off the light, and we lay on our backs, heads together. Neither of us was asleep, and I could almost hear the cogs spinning in Dodger’s head.

“Want to talk it out?”

“Hmm?” he asked, tipping his head to the side to look at me in the dark. “What do you mean?”

“I can hear you thinking. I imagine this must be a lot to process. You’ve identified as straight your whole life, and now this. It must be a bit scary.”

“I’m not freaking out, Brady. Trust me.”

I sighed. “All right. What if I told you I was?”

He rolled to his side and rested a hand on my chest. “Why are you freaking out?”

“Because I like you, and I feel like I’m putting my heart out there. I’m afraid of you changing your mind or me taking things too far and you deciding it’s a line you don’t want to cross. For example, I wasn’t sure how you’d feel about me getting off with you. About me coming on you. I was a bit unsure if I should even take my pants off.”

“Oh.” He was quiet for a minute. Contemplative. “I see what you mean. Let me try to alleviate some of those fears. I’m not a bullshitter, Brady. Ask any of my friends. I tell things straight even when sometimes it hurts people’s feelings. Maybe it’s a character flaw, but I’d rather lay it all out for people than coddle them. So this is me, black-and-white. Not gonna lie. The fact that I have feelings for you at all is throwing me off-balance. I don’t know where they came from and why it took me until I was twenty-nine to have them. But they’re *good* feelings. I like them. A lot. I don’t want to deny them simply because it goes against the grain of who I thought I was. I’d rather accept that my interests have changed. Or grown. I don’t want these feelings to go away. When I tell you I’m not freaking out, I mean it. But this does scare me a little, just not in the way you’re thinking. I feel out of my element. I’ve been with a lot of girls, and I’d like to think I know my way around sex. Suddenly, I’m thrown into a situation where I

don't really know the rules, and I don't want to embarrass myself or get it wrong."

"I'm pretty sure gay and hetero sex follow a similar set of rules that are mostly transferable. I mean, sex is sex, right?"

"Brady, I've never sucked a guy's cock before. I've never considered the receiving aspect of anal sex. It's not all transferable. The mechanics are a bit different. I wouldn't even know where to begin, and my inexperience will show. For me, that's embarrassing. I don't want to look like some floundering virgin. You have mad oral skills. I've experienced them. I thought I had skills too at one time, but that was with the opposite sex. Again, not exactly transferable. I haven't got a clue what I'm doing. I've never touched another cock other than my own. Do you see what I'm saying?"

"I do. You don't have to be embarrassed. Not with me. I'd happily guide you through all of it without judgment."

He chuckled. "I know you would, and I appreciate it. Willow would tell you it's my ego taking a bit of a hit, and that's where the problem lies."

"Well, knock it off."

"I'm trying."

We both laughed. Even in the dark of the tent, I saw the shift of emotions on his face. He brushed his knuckles along my jaw. "I'm not freaked out. I like this. I want to experience more of it. I just don't want to come across as a clumsy idiot."

"You know what they say?"

“What?”

“Practice makes perfect.”

Dodger brushed his lips over mine, teasing with an almost kiss. “Wanna practice some more?”

“Yes, please.”

Chapter Thirteen

Dodger

We scored a boxcar on our ride out of Sudbury, and there was nothing better than sitting in the open door with the golden landscape sprawled out in front of us for as far as the eye could see while the wind whipped our hair. The scent of freedom surrounded us. It was earthy and wild. It was a scent I'd been chasing for many years. It filled my heart with joy. Sharing it with Brady was nothing short of amazing.

The majority of the ride to Thunder Bay was wide-open land of rolling hills, golden grass, and long stretches of evergreen forests and wilderness, a signature part of northern Ontario. It was breathtaking, something most people only saw depicted in photography.

Brady took it all in with a look of awe and wonder lighting up his face. This was a guy who had never left the city. I was as much inspired by him as I was by the scenery. Brady had done something to me, and I was still absorbing it all. This was a first, not just being with a guy but being with someone I

cared about. I cared about what he thought, what he liked and didn't like, everything.

I'd dated in high school in typical teenage fashion—going to the movies and holding hands in the hallways. We'd make out at our lockers and count anniversaries as though two weeks or one month were significant. But since, women had more or less been a means to an end. I was sure some people would see me as shallow, but I'd never given them the impression I wanted more. They knew where I stood from the start.

Brady was different.

It had been three days since our escapades at the lake. Three days since we'd fooled around for half the night, and I'd slowly explored something brand new and inexplicably exhilarating. After he'd blown my mind with his oral skills, we'd frothed, naked, until we'd both come again.

We'd been in travel mode ever since, so apart from the odd shared kiss, we hadn't gone further. Our ride to Thunder Bay was a solid twelve or more hours, so once we'd cleared the city, I'd encouraged Brady to sit with me at the door and watch the world go by. The Canadian wilderness was something to behold, and I wanted him to get a raw, unfiltered view. I wanted him to feel in his heart what I felt every time I took to the rails and traveled these lines.

“This is beautiful.”

We had to almost shout to be heard over the train and the whipping wind, but it didn't taint the moment. Nothing could.

I had my arm around him, resting at his low back, and he had a hand on my thigh, clinging with residual nerves.

I kissed his cheek. “Yeah, you are.”

His toothy, lopsided grin made my stomach flutter.

“Flatterer.” He turned his face, and we shared a kiss, then another. My blood tingled every time his tongue brushed mine. I was like a teenager again with raging hormones I didn’t know what to do with. Every tiny connection set me on fire, and I wanted more, more, more.

The kiss ended, and Brady rested his head on my shoulder. I brushed my nose in his hair, inhaling. Not for the first time, I wondered what would happen after we gathered all our evidence and finished this adventure. Winter would come, and so far as I knew, Brady was returning to school. My father would expect me home, and I would be back to the grind, suffocating in my parents’ basement, counting the days until I could set my heart free again.

“Have you put any more thought into your thesis?”

Brady gave me an exaggerated pout. One of his more theatrical expressions. “No. I’m making this far more difficult than it has to be. I have ideas. Most of them revolve around this case, but I can’t narrow it down and focus.”

“Like what?”

He lifted his head, and whimsical Brady vanished, replaced by the goal-driven academic I’d first met. I like both sides of him equally.

“Well, bear with me because the ideas aren’t fleshed out, at least not into anything that can be formally recognized as a proper thesis argument yet.” He shifted to face me, gesticulating as he spoke, making me smile. His soft lilt was more pronounced. “My main idea is to somehow show how our current system for documenting, recording, and investigating unexplained deaths—more specifically suspected murders—has too much potential for failure since it’s often localized within each county’s system. I mean, we do have databases where information is stored, and that information can be accessed nationally, but the time and energy involved in making sure those key pieces of evidence are recorded often aren’t there. Or some Joe Blow doesn’t see what they have as significant and therefore doesn’t record it. By mandating a more thorough, nationwide system, I feel cases like this would have been identified and potentially solved long before now. We have the technology to develop a computer system that could scan for keywords among hundreds of thousands of cases. It could easily be programmed to compile data in an organized fashion to rate connections and show links should enough of them arise. Why aren’t we doing this?”

“Basically, you’re saying we need a more thorough national recording system for crime to break barriers between counties and provinces?”

“In essence, yes. But what do I know? Besides, all these police divisions hate working together. They covet their cases and would be horrified at the idea of other districts dipping their toes into their business. It’s probably a stupid idea

anyhow since I can't seem to form a proper argument in my head. I've been trying to figure out how this whole thing could have been avoided or solved before now. Technically, we're both civilians hunting down proof that the cops should have picked up on. At the very least, someone should have listened to me when I brought the idea forward in the first place. If these riders' deaths had been better recorded, then maybe the idea of there being a serial killer would have stood out before now. I mean, I'm no expert, but look what I've uncovered. Look what you've uncovered."

"You don't give yourself enough credit. You have years of education on your side. You aren't a civilian. You knew what to look for. I'm just an enthusiast. You're the one who gave enough of a shit to look at the deaths of a bunch of homeless guys and ask for case reports and autopsies."

"That leads to another possible thesis topic. The handling of cases according to class." Brady sighed, but instead of sharing his thoughts, he leaned against me again, his frustration showing.

"You'll figure it out." I kissed his head. "Maybe when this is all said and done, it will come to you."

We sat on the edge of the boxcar, feet dangling for the better part of two hours. It was peaceful, almost surreal. There was no need for excess conversation. We shared the moment by holding hands and absorbing the endless stretch of blue sky and the sun on our faces. I'd never felt like this in my life.

At one point, I pulled a pack of smokes from the pocket in my hoodie, plucked a cigarette from within, and fit it between my lips. Brady didn't say anything, but I knew he wasn't a fan. I caught the subtle glance and the way he shifted over a few inches to give me space. After a few hauls, I flicked it away.

"I'm sorry. I've tried to quit but not with any real enthusiasm. I know you don't like it."

"None of my business."

"I'm pretty sure if I'm sticking my tongue down your throat, it's kinda your business."

His eyetooth caught on his lip as he grinned. "I like your tongue down my throat."

"I think you're missing the point of the conversation."

"Your habits are your own. If I couldn't stand it, I wouldn't be engaging sexually with you."

"Noted." Regardless, I made a mental note to buy a pack of gum the next time we stocked our supplies. It wasn't a cure-all, but maybe it would help me cut back. If nothing else, at least he wouldn't have to suffer from the negative effects of kissing a smoker.



When we got to Thunder Bay, we had a five-day wait until our next freight was scheduled to depart the area, so we treated ourselves to a few nights at a motel, hot showers, and real food. The next stint of our journey had me a little worked up,

and Brady recognized it, so we ate pizza in bed, laughed, shared more stories, and spent a whole night forgetting about the raw truth behind our little expedition.

Long past midnight, we ended up a tangle of naked twisted limbs as we kissed and rutted and found pleasure in each other's bodies. Brady was more than pleased to show off his blow job skills, and I wasn't about to object. After, I decided it was time to step it up and learn how the fuck I could make him feel just as good.

I rolled him to his back, still catching my breath as the aftereffects of my orgasm shivered through me. Brady hadn't come, and tonight, I was making his pleasure my responsibility.

“Lie there and let me... figure this out.”

I kissed over his hairless chest, raked my teeth along his collarbone, and shoved his arms over his head so I could bury my nose in his armpit and savor the masculine scent of him. But talking myself into going lower seemed to be a challenge.

Brady must have noticed. He lifted my head and tucked a strand of hair behind my ear before brushing his fingers over my cheek. “You don't have to.”

“I want to. Tell me if I'm doing it wrong or give me tips. This is a first, remember?”

“Just watch your teeth. Otherwise, you can't do it wrong.”

“Teeth. Yeah, I've experienced that pain. Got it.”

Before I could resume kissing my way down his body, he stopped me. “If you decide you don’t enjoy it, that’s okay too.”

“I don’t think that will be a problem.”

I’d wanted to freely explore Brady’s body since the day I’d first kissed him. Enough delaying. Enough second-guessing. I planned to take my time, commit every part of him to memory, and give him as much pleasure as he’d given me.

I planted kisses down his chest to his navel. I swirled my tongue around it before dipping inside. A trail of blond hair marked a path to his cock, but I didn’t take it. Not yet. I moved to his hip bones, nipping the tender skin, making him squirm as I sucked purple welts into his flesh, marking him.

I licked a path from one hip bone to the other, all too aware of what lay a short distance farther south. He was hard and waiting. His head was wet with moisture, beading precum. I buried my face in the crease of his upper thigh, distributing more kisses, licking his essence, moving toward my destination as my heart beat like a war drum.

He hiked his knees up and spread his thighs, giving me better access. His heavy balls hung between his legs, inviting me to do nasty things to them. I cupped them, tugging and rolling them in my palm while staring intently at his swollen cock. Watch the teeth, I reminded myself.

Before I could overthink it, I swiped my tongue over the bead of precum at his tip. My first taste of him made us both

groan. The sharp flavor made me instantly hard again, and I was surprised at how desperate I was for more.

I wrapped my mouth around his head and gave a testing bit of suction. Brady's response was the fuel I needed to keep going. His sweet moans filled the room, and before long, I was moving up and down his shaft in short passes, ensuring I didn't push past my limits and trigger my gag reflex. That would have been embarrassing.

Brady was vocal, encouraging me to keep going, instructing me to suck harder or move faster or slower, indicating exactly how he liked it. I did everything he asked, wanting nothing more than to please him, to send him soaring like he'd done me. If he was frustrated at my amateur skills, it didn't show.

I got into it, finding as much pleasure in the act of giving as I did receiving. It was sloppy, but it couldn't be helped. I went too deep on a few passes and came up coughing and sputtering, but I didn't let it stop me.

When Brady asked me to tug his balls, I did.

When he asked me to stroke him at the same time as I bobbed on his dick, I did.

I wasn't coordinated, and the whole thing felt imperfect, but Brady was losing his mind, and that was enough to make my chest swell.

I was so turned on, I wanted to jerk myself while I sucked him, but it proved too difficult to do everything at once. In the end, I returned all my attention to making Brady come.

It didn't take long. I felt the rise of his pleasure and knew he was cussing the edge. He tried to pull away, saying, "Troy... move. I'm gonna.... Oh shit. Troy..."

I refused to move and took every spurt of his release in the most ungraceful way possible, but I didn't care. It overwhelmed me, and I failed in my task to impress him. I came up choking and coughing, making a horrible mess, but I was pretty damn proud of my accomplishments.

I crawled up his body and shared his flavor in a deep kiss as I rutted against his thigh, needing to come again so badly I couldn't contain it.

He encouraged me, pulling back from my mouth and watching with hooded eyes as I trembled and shook with my impending release. I was already right at the edge when he said, "One of these days, I want you to fuck me."

That did it. My body jerked, and I shot cum all over him. Brady caught my cries and kissed me again, rocking against me, taking me through each wave. We were a mess, but we lay there for a long time as we came down from the high.

"You would want that?" I asked after my heart had calmed.

"Want what?"

"Me to fuck you?"

"God yes. But not if you—"

I shut him up with a kiss. "I want that too. Holy fuck. I can't even imagine what that would be like."

“It would be amazing.”

The suggestion was on the table, but we didn't venture there that night or the following or any nights we stayed at the motel. Maybe I was still apprehensive about crossing certain lines and needed another day or two to work myself up to the idea.



From Thunder Bay, we traveled due west toward a small northern Ontario town called Fort Francis. The rail line we used wasn't owned by CP. It was owned by CN, the Canadian National Railway. CN ran a passenger train to the town once a day but allowed CP commercial use for semiregular deliveries to a factory on its outskirts. At one point long ago, a bisecting line about ten kilometers outside of town allowed for shipments to a separate warehouse that had since been shut down. The bisecting line was the decommissioned one Brady had marked on his map and the location of an old station that hadn't been used for any purpose in over seventy years.

If Brady's theory was correct, another rider had been killed in these parts, and we had every intention of tracking down his undiscovered body. The location made sense. The spacing on the map seemed to line up with the pattern Brady had identified. All we had to do was prove it.

We detrained about ten kilometers from town as the freight slowed to move through the area before continuing to the

shipment yard. Brady's skills hadn't improved, and every time he stumbled and fell, I lost my stomach.

Brady referenced the rail map on his phone. He wore his stern, scholarly face as he puzzled out our next step. "We need to backtrack. If this location correlates with the others, the rider we're looking for would have been pushed off the train long before it decreased speed as it came toward town, which means we need to follow these tracks back a dozen or so kilometers. Based on the discovery of the other bodies, we should focus our attention anywhere between twelve to sixteen kilometers from town."

"That's a lot of ground to cover."

"True. The good news is, a body won't go far after being pushed off a train. Our search distance on either side will be no more than five or ten feet, and that's allowing for roll momentum."

"For the record, your detachment when you talk about dead bodies is not sexy at all. I hate it."

His face fell, and he looked guilty. "I'm sorry. I'm doing it again. I don't mean to be insensitive."

"It's fine. I get it now. I kind of wish I could detach as well. Make it less personal."

"I've spent a lot of years studying criminal activity. We actually had to dissect a human body in one of my classes. It was... awful. You get desensitized after a time. It's not always a good thing."

“It’s fine. I don’t mean to give you a hard time. Shall we?”

We walked along the side of the tracks. There was no sense scouring the ground yet. We were far too close to town. We had several kilometers to cover before we needed to slow down and pay attention.

“I have another theory,” Brady said after we’d hiked for a while in silence.

“Lay it on me.”

“I’m willing to bet our rider will be among heavy brush or debris. Somewhere where the wilderness has grown close to the tracks. Maybe in a ditch if there is one.”

“Why is that?”

“If he was out in the open, he’d have been found by now. The engineers or a passenger on any one of the trains going through would have spotted him. They have eyes on the tracks all the time. I can’t imagine this rider lying in plain sight and having been missed this whole time.”

“Or he’s not there at all, and we’re wrong.”

Brady didn’t comment, and I knew it was wishful thinking on my part. Call it gut instinct, call it a premonition, but we were going to uncover a dead body today. I felt the truth in my bones, and I didn’t like it.

It was a hot and quiet hike. The midday sun beat down on us from a cloudless sky. We stopped at one point to change into our cargo shorts and T-shirts and grab a quick bite to eat, but then we were off again.

Brady held out his arms at one point, showing off his golden skin. “I have never tanned like this before in my life. My poor skin. I’m going to end up with melanoma.”

“From one summer outdoors? I doubt it. You needed some color. You were too pale.”

I held out an arm, placing it beside his to compare. I’d had a darker complexion to begin with, but after spending so much time outdoors, I was a nice shade of light brown. The hair on my arm was black, a direct contrast to Brady’s.

I chuckled. “Your arm hair is so sun-bleached it’s practically white.”

“All my hair is sun-bleached. I don’t think I’ve been this blond since I was a toddler.”

“I like it.” I ruffled the windblown mess on his head before he ducked out of the way, batting at my hand.

“Were you super blond as a kid?”

“Yep. I’ll show you pictures sometime. My hair was practically white.”

A ringing brought us both to a halt. For once, it wasn’t my phone. I’d been fielding calls from the gang all week since they were a bunch of nosy snoops who were looking for the dirt on my newly discovered sexuality.

Assholes.

“I think it’s your phone,” I said, pulling mine out to check even though it wasn’t my ringtone.

Brady frowned as he checked the screen. “Crap. It’s my mother.”

“What’s the problem?”

“I don’t want her to know what I’m doing. She’s a worrywart.”

“So don’t tell her.”

“You don’t get it. She’s probably calling because she wants to come by my place for a visit or have dinner.”

“Then tell her you’re out of town for a couple of weeks.”

“Doing what? I hate lying to my mother.”

“Doing your new boyfriend.” The words were out before I could stop them, and I blanched.

Brady’s eyes came up. His lips parted. We hadn’t used the B-word yet.

“Um,” I said.

His phone fell silent, but it started ringing again almost immediately, the only sound in the vast empty plains surrounding us.

That and my heart thrumming in my ears.

“You should answer that.” I was burning up on the inside and trying hard to play it cool. I’d put my foot down ages ago when it came to relationships and girlfriends, but that was before I’d met Brady.

“Did you say boyfriend?”

“Answer the phone.”

“Is that what this is? Is that what *we* are?” Of course, he couldn’t let it go and pretend I hadn’t made that slip.

I shrugged, but my effort at acting casual failed. “Yeah. I mean... I... Yeah. Why not?”

“Are you asking me out?”

“Um... I haven’t asked anyone out in probably ten years. Is that still a thing when you’re an adult?”

“Quit dodging the question. Are you asking me out?”

The near panic in his eyes was too freaking adorable. He fanned his face like he was overheating. This was whimsical Brady, academic Brady’s opposite. “Yes, Brady. I guess I’m asking you out.”

“But... I thought you didn’t date.”

“Well, I thought I was straight too, and we both know how that turned out. You didn’t answer.”

“Yes. Of course, yes. Oh my god. We’re dating.” And I was rewarded with his trademark lopsided, toothy grin.

“You’re making me uncomfortable.” I gestured at his phone. “Answer before she hangs up again.”

“You don’t know my mother. She’ll just keep calling back.”

“Tell her you’ve gone out of town with your new *boyfriend*, and you’ll be home in a couple of weeks. It’s not a lie.”

Brady stared at me for a long time, his eyes shimmering and pooling in the sunlight.

“Oh no. No, no, no. Stop that.” I brushed away a tear when it tried to run down his cheek. “Why are you crying? What am I supposed to do with this? I hope these are happy tears or you’re going to give me a complex.”

“Happy tears. I swear. I cry over romance movies too.”

“You’re such a sap. We aren’t gonna be that couple. I don’t watch romance movies.”

“We’ll see about that.”

“Dork.”

He pecked my lips, then answered his phone, ducking his head and walking away. “Hey, Mom. How are you?”

I found a seat in the grass and picked at a bag of peanuts as Brady talked to his mother. He’d gone far enough away I couldn’t hear the conversation, but he was as animated as ever, and I enjoyed watching the show.

The discarded shells from my nuts attracted a pair of blue jays, who pecked at them with curiosity before hopping along the ground near my feet.

“What? They’re peanuts, not birdseed. You want one?” I tossed a few in the grass, and the pair snatched them with their beaks and took off to a nearby tree.

I watched them as they sat on a high branch, stabbing the shells until they uncovered their prizes.

“Weirdos.”

They kept returning for more, so I shared my snack, entertaining myself as Brady had a long conversation with his mother.

When he hung up and wandered back, he made a dramatic display of dragging his feet like he'd endured the biggest hardship known to humankind.

“That bad?”

“Well, your brilliant idea of telling her I was away with a boyfriend landed me in the middle of a game of twenty questions, which ended with me promising that as soon as we were back, she could meet this elusive boyfriend I'd never mention before over dinner.”

“Isn't it kind of soon to meet your mom? I mean, we've been dating for, like, twenty minutes.”

Brady snorted and kicked my boot before flopping down on the ground beside me. “Too bad for you. By the time we get back to Toronto, if you haven't run for the hills, we will have been dating long enough, and you will meet my mother, or I will suffer the consequences.”

“Sounds scary.”

“Again, your brilliant idea.”

“Hey, you got a hot boyfriend out of it, so shut up.”

Brady laughed, and the pure joy lighting up his eyes made it impossible to look away.

“You really do have an enormous ego, don't you?” he said.

“Meh, it’s a matter of opinion. Willow thinks so.”

I offered him the bag of peanuts and pondered that future dinner. Originally, I’d intended to take Brady home when this was said and done. From there, I was either heading to Montreal to meet up with the gang or taking the freight back to Moose Jaw to work with my dad—depending on how long this adventure lasted.

For the first time, the future was hazy and unclear. Where would Brady and I be at the end of this? Was this a passing fling born from the intimacy of traveling together? It felt different, but I wasn’t sure I wanted to examine it more closely just yet. Instead of worrying about it, I focused on the present.

As Brady cracked peanut shells, our conversation turned to a companionable silence. The blue jays returned, looking for a handout. I stole a handful of nuts and tossed them at the birds.

“Did you know blue jays eat peanuts?” I asked.

“Can’t say I did.”

“Watch.”

We sat for a time, feeding the birds, absorbing the sun and companionship. When the bag was empty and we had nothing more to offer, the blue jays lost interest and flew off.

Brady leaned his head on my shoulder. “Are you sure about the boyfriend thing, or were you just messing around and giving me an excuse I could feed my mother?”

Even though Brady was offering me an out, I didn’t hesitate. “I meant it.”

He tipped his face to look me in the eyes, and his smile made me feel like I was floating.

“Should we keep going?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

We shared one more kiss, a little longer, a little deeper, then we hauled ourselves up off the ground.

We continued our journey along the tracks, chatting like we always did about light topics and heavier ones. Brady loved to debate, and although he was far smarter than me, I was pretty good at arguing points, which I think he appreciated. He'd laughed and called me a viable opponent more than once when I outargued him. Things never got bitter or hostile between us. We were both open-minded enough to hear each other out and express our opinions.

After a solid three hours of walking, Brady stopped out of the blue and surveyed the land. He checked his phone and scanned again. Something in his body language changed, and I knew what was coming before he opened his mouth.

“I think we need to spread out and keep our eyes peeled. We're in the red zone.” He pointed ahead. “And it looks like I was right. These tracks are running close to the forest's edge, and there is a shallow ditch along this side. Perfect conditions for concealing a body.”

“The other side is more open. Should we stick to one side?”

The gears in Brady's head spun as he contemplated. I could always tell when he was rolling thoughts around. He got this

look like someone working through tough equations. “No. We should split up. How about you take that side.” He gestured to the open planes along the far side of the tracks. The best I would have to contend with was tall grass and thick weeds. “I might need a slower pace is all.”

I knew what he was doing. “Are you trying to protect me?”

He pressed his lips together in a thin line, grooves marking his forehead, but Brady knew I hated being bullshitted. “Would you be offended if I said yes?”

I thought about it but shook my head. “No.” In all honesty, I appreciated his forward-thinking, knowing I wouldn’t do well if I uncovered the body. “Thanks.”

His smile was soft and understanding.

Our pace slowed by more than half as we picked our way along the sides of the tracks, scanning the ground. There wasn’t a whole lot of looking involved on my side, so I couldn’t help it when my gaze roamed to Brady more than it did the ground around me. He was walking in the shallow ditch, ducking under low shrubs and branches that encroached from the forest’s edge and shoving aside tangles of thorny bushes as he went along. The long grass and old dried leaves that had blown into the ditch provided the perfect cover for concealing a body.

The whole time we walked, my teeth were on edge, my muscles were taut and aching, and the anticipation ate at my core, making me feel sick.

“Have you ever seen that old movie *Stand By Me*?” I asked. “I think it was written by Stephen King, like, a hundred years ago or something.”

“You know Stephen King is still alive, right?”

“Whatever. Have you seen it?”

“No. What’s it about?”

“Well, it’s not a romantic comedy, so don’t go getting all excited.”

Brady laughed and gave me the finger, his gaze never leaving the ground in front of him as he moved along one small pace at a time. “Why are you bringing it up?”

“Because I can’t help thinking this whole scene with you and me is similar in a way. In the movie, a bunch of kids set out to look for the dead body of this guy they knew from school. They find him near the train tracks. He wasn’t murdered like our riders. He was hit by a train while picking blueberries or something.”

“Sounds sad.”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. It’s a good movie, but it’s fiction. This is far too real for my liking. I mean, why would anyone —”

Brady made a noise in his throat, which brought me up short. I thought he’d scraped himself on a branch, but there was a stillness to his body that told me it was something else entirely.

He stood in the ditch on the other side of the tracks, holding a low-hanging branch from a sagging tree out of the way. The area in front of him was overgrown. Cattails and reed grass made his path almost impassable. It was there where Brady's attention was focused.

“Brady?”

He held up a hand, warding me off without turning around. “Why don't you take a walk.”

I was far enough away, I couldn't follow his line of sight into the ditch, but I knew why he'd stopped. I knew what he was seeing. “Brady?”

He glanced over his shoulder, pain and sympathy bleeding from his eyes. “Take a walk, Troy.”

“You found him?”

He nodded. “I think so. I want to take a closer look to be sure, but you don't need to see this.”

I blew out a shaky breath, nausea stirring my belly. Despite the blazing sun overhead, I shivered. “No. I do. I'm coming over.”

But my feet wouldn't move.

Brady abandoned the ditch and crossed the tracks until he was directly in front of me. He took my face between his palms and kissed me thoroughly before staring with as much seriousness as I'd ever seen. “You need to trust me to do this on my own. Please don't argue. I'm prepared to handle this.

You're not, and that isn't a slight. You have a personal attachment to this case. Please take a walk."

"But—"

"I'm trying to be sensitive to your feelings. This guy has been out here for a long time, Troy. Please understand when I tell you, this isn't something you want to see."

"Okay."

Brady kissed me again, and I backtracked, walking away from him as he returned to the ditch. Blood whomped in my ears, and the world seemed to fade in and out on the edges, the fragile threads of reality playing tricks with my mind. After a few dozen feet, I was too dizzy to go on. I found a spot to sit, buried my face in my hands, and just breathed.

This wasn't supposed to be real.

Chapter Fourteen

Brady

I didn't want to disturb the scene, but I wanted a closer look to visually document as much about the remains as possible. Any evidence of stun gun marks was long gone, even if I was inclined to look for them, which I wasn't. The body—what was left of it—was in the advanced stages of decomposition. It had been out here for many months, and between the wildlife and the elements, the sight was not for the faint of heart.

If my theory was correct, this rider would have died a year or more ago. Surprisingly, the body wasn't as far along in decomposition as it might have been in an otherwise controlled environment. It didn't take much consideration to understand why. We were in northern Ontario. The winters were long and cold in this area. The body had likely been frozen for as many as six or seven months of the year, which would have greatly affected the rate of decomposition.

Since I wasn't the police nor was I any type of official investigator, I kept my survey of the scene short and did all I could not to trample too close to the body. I snapped pictures

and moved them to a secure folder on my phone so Dodger didn't accidentally come across them, then I noted as much about the scene as seemed important in the notebook app of my phone. It mostly consisted of what the rider seemed to be wearing. Boots, dark cargos, and a jacket, and I thought I could make out the remains of fingerless gloves, although it was hard to tell for sure. As for a physical description of the rider, all I could manage was hair color. Dark brown. I wanted to be thorough when I brought the evidence forward to the RCMP, so I documented everything.

Once I was satisfied, I climbed out of the ditch and went looking for Dodger. The next snag was reporting the body, and we needed to discuss how we wanted to do that.

I found Dodger about fifty yards away, sitting on the ground with his head in his hands. I sat beside him and wrapped an arm around his shoulder, tugging him against my side. He was trembling. "I'm sorry we had to do this. It sucks."

"I didn't want it to be real."

"I know."

"Could you tell who it was?"

I paused, but only because I knew the answer would hurt. "No." I didn't think I needed to explain.

"What do we do now?" He lifted his head and stared blankly across the plains and valleys stretched out before us on the less forested side of the tracks. His eyes were vacant.

"Well, we need to report it, but that could be tricky."

“How come?” When he glanced at me, I noted new smears on his glasses and removed them to buff the lenses on my shirt. He’d stopped objecting to my neurotic need to clean his glasses long ago.

“Well, technically, if we report it, they will expect us to be present at the scene when they arrive. They’ll have questions, and they’ll want us to give statements, telling them why we were out here and so forth. It’s standard procedure.”

“Okay. I’m not following. Isn’t our goal to bring the evidence forward eventually? Why can’t we do that?”

I set his glasses back on his face, which earned me a soft smile of thanks.

“I’m concerned we might put a target on our heads.”

“How so?”

“Why are we out here? How did we get here? How do we answer those questions without implying illegal behavior? If they suspect we’re freight-hopping, we put ourselves at risk of arrest.”

“They can’t arrest us unless they catch us in the act.”

“I suppose, but they will have eyes on us. This will be suspicious to them. Also, I have a career to think about. I don’t imagine they would look too highly on this little adventure we’ve put together. My credibility would be tainted when I need the authorities on my side.”

“I get it.”

“I’m not saying we shouldn’t call this in and follow the rules, but I’m concerned about the possible ramifications. Especially when we have plans to find more missing riders and potentially make more of these phone calls.”

“What about an anonymous tip?”

“When I go to the RCMP later, they’ll put two and two together. It could be just as damaging.”

“Maybe not. What if I do the calling? I can be nothing more than your hired investigator. You originally wanted to send me off on my own to gather information, right? You wouldn’t have been directly involved. How I chose to travel would have been my business, not yours. You pay me to find the information and deliver it to you. Legally, it would have been my responsibility to make the call anyhow. So, as far as the police are concerned, that’s how it happened. We’re strangers. You’re not here. You’re back in your cozy apartment in the city. I’m the rider, and you know nothing personal about me. You met me on the forums. So I say we head back toward town, make the call from there, and they won’t know any different. They can’t hold me responsible if they don’t know who or where I am.”

“What about the old station off the decommissioned line? Aren’t we checking it out? It might tell us who this rider is.”

“Oh yeah. We’ll go there first. I can call from there.”

“I guess that would work.” I studied Dodger’s face. He looked tired. “Are you okay?”

“Honestly? No. They’d better catch this guy.”

“We’ll give them the best possible chance. The more evidence, the better.”

“All the more reason not to get caught up in their sticky procedures.”

“Exactly.”

“Ready for the hike back?”

I groaned. “No. My back is killing me, but let’s do it.”

By the time we made it to the decommissioned line and hiked the added five kilometers to the abandoned station, we’d walked close to seven hours total that day. It was late, and the sun was setting. The golden glow licked the tips of the prairie grass as it swayed in a gentle breeze. The bruised sky was filled with low-hanging clouds that had moved in that afternoon.

Since it was getting dark, we decided to pitch the tent and call it a day. Searching the old station could wait. We were both dead on our feet.

Dodger made the call to the local police station, remaining anonymous as he reported a dead body in the ditch along the tracks, giving the exact location and claiming he didn’t want to stick around or get too close since he was rattled and upset by the find. When they started asking too many questions, he panicked and hung up.

“They made me feel like a suspect,” he said, collapsing beside me where I was sprawled on top of his sleeping bag in

my underwear. “Could they trace my call?”

“No. You weren’t on the phone that long, plus you called their crime hotline. They are inherently anonymous.”

Exhaustion was setting in. We both lay immobile for a long time, taking in the quiet night. I was glad to be off my feet. The sounds of nature were soothing, louder than I had ever imagined was possible. Crickets. Owls. The wind whistled a haunting tune as it howled in the trees and brushed fingers through the grassy plains. After growing up in the city, it was a nice change of pace. Peaceful. Serene.

Dodger drew lazy circles over my abdomen and skated his fingers along the hem of my underwear more than once. He never ventured lower. If he felt anything close to the exhaustion I felt, he was too tired to make an advance, which might mean committing to further activities neither of us had the stamina to enjoy.

It was nice lying beside him, sharing the simplicity of the moment.

“I have a proposition,” he said, dotting my bare shoulder with light kisses as he shuffled closer, hooking his leg over mine. The rasp of our leg hairs rubbing together made my tired body hum.

“What’s that?”

“If we find evidence in the station tomorrow, I say we consider that enough proof our guy squats in these abandoned buildings after he kills, and we skip ahead.”

“Meaning?”

“We exclusively focus on hitting the red circled areas. The locations you pinpointed where the riders haven’t been found yet. If we uncover more bodies, we connect more dots and prove a pattern exists. The RCMP should have enough by then. They can do the rest. They’re going to want to go back to all the old stations anyhow, won’t they? With their forensic teams, or whatever you call it, to collect those items we found and do a more thorough search.”

“Likely.”

Dodger had a point. I knew some of the routes we had to take were a bit of a headache—and a risk—to travel and navigate. His and Willow’s theory about the riders being lured made more sense now that I was out on the rails, experiencing it for myself.

“So what do you say? Will it mess with your OCD brain? Do you need to do everything in a linear fashion? Can I reprogram you and bend you to my will?”

I pinched his side, which made him shout in surprise before swatting me away as he laughed. “You’re evil,” he said.

“I don’t have an OCD brain.”

“Um, when I met you, you had a sleeping and eating schedule with alarms on your phone.”

“Because I’m forgetful when I work.”

“Your apartment looked like something right out of one of those crime shows. An explosion of your chaotic thought

process.”

“I have a busy brain.”

Dodger nuzzled his nose against my temple and flicked his tongue against my earlobe. My body warmed at the contact. “I’ll leave it up to you,” he whispered, his hot breath ghosting my skin. “I’m just the sexy sidekick.”

“I’m going to start calling you Ego-Man.”

He chuckled and brought his fingers to my chin, turning my head and stealing a kiss. “You can call me whatever you want. Why are you so addictive?”

I didn’t get a chance to answer. Dodger rolled on top of me, and we both seemed to forget just how tired we were after the long day of hiking.



The following morning, we took our time going through the abandoned train station. It was by far the oldest one we’d encountered to date. The single-story, whitewashed building had been long neglected, and for some reason, it reminded me of an oversized mausoleum with its intricate stonework around the main door frame and the pillars standing like old, withered soldiers on either side. If a building could look tired, this one was doing a fine job. It had an abundance of thin, arched windows evenly spaced on every wall, each of them boarded up. A gently sloping, red-tiled roof provided a deep overhang all around, where long ago passengers would wait outside on benches during the nice weather. The benches were gone, and

the concrete pad where they'd once been was cracked and crumbling into ruins. Brittle grass grew along the outside walls, a trailing vine crept partway up the north side, and weeds grew in places that seemed impossible. Nature was trying to take this piece of land back, and I doubted the building had any stamina left to put up a fight.

In the end, we didn't have the same luck as we'd had with the other two buildings. It was a lot of the same debris, but nothing that directly pointed to our rider or his killer. Sadly, the man in the ditch remained nameless. I think that aspect bothered Dodger most of all.

Discouraged, we made our way into Fort Frances. It was a small rural town with a population of just under eight thousand. After a quick Google search, I learned it was a popular fishing destination since it sat at the seat of the Rainy River. Fort Frances was a border town, connected to International Falls, Minnesota, by the Fort Frances International Falls Bridge. It was also known as a mining community after some company called New Gold had acquired the mineral rights and started processing ore close to ten years ago.

It was cute with its brick-facing storefronts done in a classic Victorian style with gingerbread sculpting around the rooflines. Large windows with carefully crafted displays gave the boutiques and shops a welcoming feel, inviting strangers and neighbors alike to come in and take a look at their wares. There was an old bookstore—which called to me—a soft-serve ice cream parlor with a flashing neon image of an

oversized cone in the window, a barbershop, a bakery, an outdoor shop—boasting live bait and local fishing tournaments—a small market, a retro diner, and several off-beat specialty clothing stores with items I couldn't imagine anyone buying and wearing.

We were in the market, adding items to a handheld basket when I overheard two elderly women sharing the most recent town gossip.

“Matilda’s husband is a cop, so I tend to believe it. She’d know. That’s right from the horse’s mouth, that is,” the woman with a teased bird’s nest of fluffy white curls said to the other as she peered around conspicuously as though imparting a secret.

“Do they know who it was?” the other inquired, tipping her glasses down her nose to stare directly at her companion as though she couldn’t quite believe what she was hearing.

“Matilda said that Ron said that the body had been out there a long time.” The first woman *tsked*. “A right mess. Terrible thing to find. They don’t even know for sure if it was a boy or a girl.”

Woman number two held a hand to her throat. “Hit by a train, huh. That’s just awful. How did no one miss that poor child?”

At that moment, a kid of three or four came whipping around the top of the aisle and ran smack into me. Wide blue eyes were framed by a mess of blonde curls, and the stunned

little girl paused only long enough to assess me before a second, older child came racing around the corner next.

The girl squealed, dodged around me, and ran. The boy made chase. Not a second later, a young woman with long, stringy black hair and poorly applied makeup followed, pushing a cart as she muttered something about never getting anything done. Then she yelled after the two kids, exasperation in her tone as she made threats to take away everything they owned.

By the time I glanced back to where the elderly women had been, they were gone. So was Dodger.

He'd strolled ahead, clearly not having heard the women's exchange. I ran to catch up, finding him in the cracker section.

"Do you have a preference," he asked, holding a box of peanut butter stuffed Ritz and cheese stuffed Ritz.

"No. Whichever." Leaning close, I whispered, "People in town are talking about the body. Rumor is he was hit by a train."

Dodger stared at me like I had six heads. "How the fuck do you know this? We've been in town fifteen minutes, and you're up to date on local gossip?"

"I pay attention. A couple of older ladies were talking by the milk cooler."

"By the milk cooler." He laughed. "Did you join the gaggle?"

“A gaggle is a group of geese. Are you referring to them as hens? That would be a brood.”

“Oh my god. Whatever. Are you hanging out at the milk cooler, soaking up the gossip now?”

“I’m confused.”

Dodger’s grin widened.

“You’re making fun of me, aren’t you?”

“Yes.”

“I hate you.”

“Lies.” Dodger glanced over my shoulder. “But for real. You heard that?”

“Yes. One of the women heard it from another woman whose husband is a cop. The assumption seems to be he or she, since they also said the sex hadn’t been determined, was presumably hit by a train.”

“Anything about the anonymous call?”

“No, but then some kids ran into me, and by the time they ran off, the women were gone.”

“Are you buying something or just chatting? You’re blocking the crackers. Move.”

We both turned and found a greasy overweight man with a deep scowl set into his mashed potato face. He had tiny, beady eyes and was breathing heavily through his mouth. He smelled like a deep fryer, and his once white shirt was gray and pit-stained, pulling tight over his massive belly.

Dodger, unfazed by the ignorant man's request for us to move, held up the choices of crackers once again.

"Peanut butter," I said.

He added them to the basket on his arm, gave the man an indignant glare, and took my arm, steering me to the other side of the aisle.

The fat man moved his cart to where we'd been standing, and his fry-oil scent mixed with the heavier stench of body odor.

With his back to us, we had an unappreciated view of where his black jogging pants hung too low and showed his hairy ass crack.

"Oh, gross. Come on." Dodger dragged me around the corner into another aisle.

He sifted through the items in the basket. "This will do for now. We should try and hitch a ride out of here ASAP. This town is small, and if the locals identify us as outsiders, it could make for unwanted attention."

"You're worried about your phone call?"

He shrugged. "We have the look of riders. I'd say we'd mostly go unnoticed since the cops aren't like the bulls and wouldn't pick up on it, but with a dead guy in the ditch by the tracks, we might get suspicious looks, and I don't want the attention."

So we purchased the few things in the basket to top up our supplies, grabbed a couple of slices of pizza at a local parlor,

then hit the road, thumbing a ride back toward Thunder Bay.



Three days later, we were on a twelve-hour freight ride to Winnipeg. We'd debated our course of action many times since we'd been unsuccessful at finding evidence at the abandoned station outside Fort Frances. Dodger still wanted to skip ahead, but I thought we could do with more proof of the stations' validity in my theory, which meant hitting a few others and securing more evidence.

Our differing opinions and mutual stubbornness to concede to the other's argument led to our first fight, and we spent the rest of the twelve-hour trip not talking to each other.

"You aren't looking at the risks, Brady." He'd been arguing the same point over and over like I was a simpleton. He'd gone from levelheaded to shouting as though that would somehow make me better understand his point. I'd refused to back down. "So far, we've been lucky, but these lesser-used freights don't run on frequent timetables, so figuring out when and how we can get on them is a headache. We've made more daytime catches than I cared to ever do in my life. That's asking for trouble. Plus, there is never a guarantee that these freights will slow enough for us to get off when they slip through these tiny towns. At least not enough for you."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Come on, Brady. You can't run to save your life. We've already had an issue. You took all the fucking skin off your

knees, remember?”

“That was a lot of jumps ago. I’m better now.”

“No, you’re not. You’re a fucking newb who hasn’t jumped once with his pack on. And you still land on your ass more than half the time. Do you know how dangerous that is?”

My cheeks burned at the hostility in his tone. “You knew I wasn’t a rider when you insisted I tag along, so don’t blame me for lacking skill. This was your bright idea, not mine. We need to go to these places and check for evidence. That was the purpose of this whole endeavor. It was the parameters I set when we first set out. If we skip them, we’re no further ahead, and it compromises our investigation.”

Dodger threw his hands up. “What the fuck are you talking about? We are already further ahead. We found another body. We made solid connections at two of the old stations.”

“It’s not enough.” It was my turn to shout.

“No, you know what this is?” His spiteful smirk made my blood boil. “You’re just getting a thrill from playing your own solo version of Sherlock fucking Holmes, and you forget what one tiny mistake could cost us. We could get arrested doing all these day jumps. You ever think of that? How would you like to spend time in jail?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I was under the impression you were the best of the best at avoiding the bulls. Isn’t that why you adopted that idiotic nickname, *Troy*.”

“Don’t fucking call me that. The risks are exponentially higher. No rider in their right mind would be making daytime jumps this often. And the only reason we might be caught is because you run like my grandma. And what happens next time you fall because the train is going too goddamn fast? What if you land the wrong fucking way? I’ll tell you what. Game over, Brady. It only takes one bad landing, and you die.”

“So am I to understand all those times you praised my growing skill you were lying?”

“Yes! All lies. You’re a fucking amateur, shitty rider, and you aren’t getting better. Leo had more skill on his second jump than you have on all of yours combined, and he was nothing but a prissy, stuck-up rich kid wearing fucking oxfords.”

“You know what? You’re an asshole.”

“Whatever. Not the first time I’ve been called that.”

“Go to hell.”

He gave me the finger and lit a smoke, effectively ignoring me from that point on.

The roar of the freight train ambling down the track was all the more deafening in the aftermath of our fight. Unfortunately, we were stuck in a small well at the end of a stacker, and we couldn’t walk away from each other or take a moment to ourselves to breathe. Instead, we simmered in silent anger for the rest of the trip, both of us huddled on opposite

sides of an invisible line we'd drawn down the center of the well, exchanging the odd sneer.

We rolled into Winnipeg at close to four in the morning. It was a dark night. Low clouds blocked out the moon and stars, so with our balaclavas down and our dark clothing, we were nothing more than shadows hustling to collect our gear.

Although I knew better than to take what Dodger had said to heart, I was still raw from his insults, incensed that he'd called me a shitty rider when I'd tried hard to grasp the skill and make him proud. It was why I fed my arms through the straps of my pack instead of handing it to Dodger when he held out a hand, expecting to take it so he could toss it before we detrained.

“What the fuck are you doing?”

I pierced him with a scathing glare but refused to answer.

“Take off your pack, you idiot.”

“No.” I shoved him out of my way and leaned over the edge of the well, trying to get a bead on our speed in the dark, but Dodger's caustic remarks from earlier were correct. I had no clue what I was doing. I was an amateur. To this point, I'd done as I was told and hadn't learned a thing.

“Give me your pack, Brady.” He shoved my arm, trying to turn me away from the rail.

I shrugged him off. “No. I'm fine. I can jump with my rucksack on and land on my feet. I'll prove it. Let's go.”

“Why are you doing this?”

I didn't answer.

"Fuck," he roared. Forcefully inserting himself between me and the rail, he took hold of my arms in a painfully hard grip, refusing to allow me to pull away. "Listen to me."

"No. Let go of me. I'm jumping just like this."

When I tried to pull away, he yanked me back. Without pause, he tore my balaclava off my face and snagged my chin with enough force I stopped fighting. I was going to tell him he was hurting me, but I didn't want him to add wimp or sissy to his list of unsightly complaints. I'd heard those insults enough back in high school to last me a lifetime.

"I said, listen to me." When he registered I was done fighting, he released my chin and shoved his face mask up too, almost losing his glasses in the process. We both scrambled to catch them, and he reset them on his nose.

When he spoke again, the heat had come out of his tone. "Please don't try to prove yourself because of the bullshit things I said. I don't have much of a filter, and I can be a massive jerk when I'm tired or stressed. I'm both right now. You can believe me or not, but I'm trying to look out for you. I don't have time to fix this right now." He swung a finger between us. "We gotta get off this train in less than five minutes. Just..." He sighed. "Look. You can hate me all you want, but the truth is, you aren't good at this. It's why I don't like the idea of us skipping down these particular lines. I'm scared you're going to get hurt." He paused, then quieter, "Or dead, and it will be my fault because I made you come along.

Please don't try to prove yourself right now because I was a dick and said things I knew would hurt you. I need you in one piece, Brady.”

The worried expression in his eyes spoke the truth. I didn't know if I was ready to forgive him, but I shed my pack and handed it over.

“Thank you,” he said.

When I went to pull my balaclava down, he touched my arm. “For what it's worth, I'm sorry.”

All I could do was give him a clipped nod of acknowledgment.

Of course, when we jumped, I didn't land on my feet. Why was it so difficult? My feet adamantly refused to go fast enough no matter what I told them. I fell forward, adding more bruises to my already bruised knees. I was pissed. Had I been carrying my pack, the weight would have pulled me backward, and I could have easily landed too close to the tracks. At least I'd learned to fall away from them, not that falling in any capacity was wise.

Dodger's arguments were valid, and I needed to pack away my hurt feelings and accept that riding was simply not something I was good at. Like all the sports I'd been forced to participate in at school, it required a level of skill that was beyond my ability to achieve.

Dodger had no comment when he ran up beside me and offered to help me up. I refused to take his hand and got to my

feet with as little grumbling as possible before running back and collecting my bag. We slinked off into the night without a word exchanged. It went unsaid that we were heading into town to find a motel. Nothing had been decided about where we were heading next, and I knew I would have to concede to Dodger's wishes.

We were walking along the shoulder of a quiet road that led out of the industrial part of town into the city when I finally spoke. "I admit my lack of skill when it comes to riding, but you didn't have to be so mean about it. You're kind of a bully."

"I know." He'd been fiddling with an unlit cigarette for the past five minutes like he couldn't decide if he wanted to smoke it or put it away. "My mouth gets away from me. I don't always hear the things I say until after."

"Perhaps make it a habit to say things in your head first before lancing me with daggers."

"I'll try."

"I recognize my safety is in jeopardy and our livelihood at risk if we continue this way. We should follow your plan and hit only the designated spots I marked where we might find more riders."

Dodger said nothing. In the end, he lit the cigarette and smoked about half before flicking it away. The ember burned out before it hit the ground. He stopped abruptly, dropped his rucksack, shed his hoodie, then stuffed it inside.

I did the same. Even at this predawn hour, the heat was enough to make me sweat.

When he got his pack back on, he didn't walk. He took my hand and pulled me toward him. I resisted for a second, unsure if I was ready for contact. In the end, I let him wrap his arms around me. He buried his face in my neck and squeezed me so tight I was about to complain about my inability to breathe.

He spoke with his mouth against my neck. His voice was muffled, but the raw emotion in his tone wasn't hidden. "Every time we have to get on or off a train, I feel sick to my stomach. I'm terrified you'll stumble, or miss catching the rail, or snag your clothes, or trip on your shoelaces. I can see every single way it might go wrong, and it's hard to watch. I brought you out here, so I feel responsible for your safety, but the thing about hopping is, I can't do it for you no matter how much I want to. God, Brady, I couldn't live with myself if something happened to you. You aren't just some random nobody I'm teaching to ride. You... mean something to me. I'm scared for you."

I hugged him back, sinking into the security and warmth of the embrace. "I am trying."

"I know you are. It was a real dick move for me to throw all that in your face. You didn't deserve it. You're right. I'm an asshole and a bully. Will you forgive me?"

"I'll think about it. I have hurt feelings. You may need to grovel a little more."

He chuckled and lifted his face to mine. He still wore his riding gloves, so when he brushed his fingers over my cheek, I was accosted by the heavy scent of leather, metal, and cigarettes. He pressed his mouth to mine, and I kissed him back.

When we came apart, he made a fret-face. “I taste like an ashtray, don’t I?”

“It’s fine.”

“No, it’s not. I’ll stop at a store and grab some gum. I meant to before now, but I forgot.”

“It’s not a big deal.”

“It is to me. Come on. Let’s find somewhere to rest. I have a lot of groveling to do.”

He took my hand in his, and we continued along toward town, the essence of our fight nothing more than a distant memory.

Chapter Fifteen

Dodger

I knew it was only a matter of time before I stuck my foot in my mouth. Brady seemed to have forgiven me, but I felt like an ass. Willow would have cuffed my ear if she'd been around to hear me. She always said I had a nasty habit of speaking without thinking, and she was right.

At the marrow of it were my ever-growing feelings for Brady. Each time we caught out or detrained, the souring in my belly intensified. I always worried about the people I rode with. The dangers of hopping were real. Even skilled riders made mistakes. But the dread and panic I felt every time he stumbled off the train had grown out of control. It was to the point where I was so consumed and distracted by Brady's lack of skill, it was compromising my own. I wasn't paying enough attention, which put me at risk of making my own mistakes.

We rented a cheap motel room in a sketchy neighborhood not far from the railyard. It was the type of place that rented rooms by the hour and didn't ask for ID. Despite the peeling paint, threadbare, puke-green carpeting, and musty scent

lingering in the stale air, the starched bed sheets were clean, and there was hot water for showering.

I let Brady go first. He still hadn't said much, but the tension between us had somewhat dissolved. While the water ran, I used Brady's phone to look over the marked-up freight map we'd been using while I gnawed a thumbnail and decided how we should proceed. The abandoned stations he'd numbered three and four, close to where two other riders' bodies had been discovered, were relatively close. One of them was a short jaunt southwest, not far outside town. The other was halfway between Winnipeg and Moose Jaw. The next red circle area—where we anticipated finding another victim—was a stone's throw from my hometown. It was one of the few commercial lines I was actually familiar with because I'd spent a lot of time honing my skills on that line during my last year of high school.

I recognized Brady's desire to gather as much information as possible. It killed me to upset him. If I agreed to check out the abandoned sites nearby, I wondered if he'd be more agreeable to eliminating the rest. The fewer trains we had to catch to complete this project, the better.

Any number of jumps worried me. I didn't know how to help Brady improve his skills. For as determined as he was, the guy just wasn't cut out for this. He couldn't get his long lanky legs to cooperate. His brain might have been able to do mental acrobatics around most people, but when it came to physical exercise, Brady functioned like he had two left feet.

The shower cut off as I came to a decision. Brady emerged a few minutes later with nothing but a flimsy towel wrapped around his waist, his rangy frame on full display, sinewy muscles showing under his pale pink skin. The sight of him stole my breath and awoke a kaleidoscope of butterflies in my belly.

He carried his dirty clothes in his arms and dropped them on his rucksack. “We need to find a laundromat. Only when I’m clean do I realize how bad we smell.”

I chuckled. “Welcome to the life of a vagabond.”

“Well, I don’t complain about much, but the ongoing lack of proper facilities to clean and piss and shit is starting to get to me. I’m not saying I need to live in luxury, but there is something immensely satisfying about having a shower and a toilet.”

“Do you miss your cashmere sweaters?”

“I do. Do not make fun of me. I also miss comfortable shoes. And trousers. And hair gel. And face cream. And—”

“I hear you, Brady. Are you homesick?”

He sighed. “No. Just being ornery.”

“I think they have a coin op down the hall. If we pool our change, I can throw in a load before I shower. Would that help?”

“That would be lovely. I’ll do it. Go strip and give me everything.”

“Are you gonna waltz down the hall in just a towel?”

Brady cocked a hip and rested a hand on top as he raised a brow. I couldn't have been happier to see whimsical Brady return. “Is there something wrong with that?”

“Depends. Are you going to sashay all sexy like and call attention to yourself?”

“I might. Problem?”

My gaze roamed to the slight rise in the front of his towel. “I don't have a problem, but I'm pretty sure there are laws against carrying a concealed weapon.”

His cocky smirk calmed all the lingering anxiety that had been eating me up. He pressed a heel to his groin. “You keep staring at me like that, and you won't make it better. Go get naked. I need your clothes.”

“So bossy.”

“I'll give you bossy.”

I headed to the bathroom and stripped. Unlike Brady, I didn't bother with a towel and strutted naked into the room to give him my clothes. He gave me an appreciative once-over, a shimmer of mischief in his eyes.

“I'll be back. Go get cleaned up.”

As I watched him strut from the room in his low-hanging towel, I decided I never wanted to put that man back into his starchy trousers and sweater vests again. For as horrible as he was at hopping freight and for as much as he complained

about the lack of luxuries, being on the road had set Brady free. He was not the same person I'd met several weeks ago in Toronto.

I had a long hot shower, washing every inch of my body twice, unsure where the night might lead. I got it in my head that if I wasn't still in the doghouse for my behavior, maybe Brady would like to take things somewhere new.

I brushed my teeth and rooted through a side pocket in my rucksack, keeping my fingers crossed my emergency stash of condoms wasn't depleted. I found a couple and checked their expiration dates. We were in business.

Only then did the nervousness kick in.

Pausing and assessing the root cause, I decided it was a combination of many things. First, my inexperience with guys and having to rely on Brady's guidance. I was beginning to realize I really did have profound ego issues. But it was also the ever-growing feelings I'd developed for Brady. They caught me off guard. It was one thing to be attracted to another person and mess around for a while. I'd done that plenty, especially over the winter when I was home in Moose Jaw. But it had been years since anyone had triggered deeper emotions.

"Are you alive in there?" Brady called from the other room. "It's awfully quiet."

I shook away my nerves and wrapped a towel around my waist. My glasses were still steamed from the shower, so I

buffed them before putting them on. With a condom tucked into my palm, I headed back into the room.

Brady was sprawled on the bed, propped on a few pillows, his long legs extended. The hair on them was a darker blond than on his head, bristly and masculine. His knees were scuffed with old scabs and purple bruises, a reminder of how many times he'd stumbled and fallen off the trains.

He had the ancient, wood-framed boob-tube on and was flipping through channels, his other hand lazily resting on his lower belly. The towel was still in place, but it only covered the bare minimum, and I soaked in the sight.

He cut his gaze from the TV for a moment, asking, "You all clean?"

"I am." I crawled onto the bed and lay on my stomach beside him, propped on my elbows. "Are you still mad at me?"

My question caught his attention, and he abandoned channel surfing to study my face, a ponderous look in his blue-gray eyes. "We're okay. Maybe next time you want to make a valid point—because it was valid—you can do it without schoolyard insults."

I kissed his bare shoulder. "I'll definitely try to do better. I can't promise my mouth won't get away from me again. It tends to run away on its own, but I'll make an effort. I have a compromise to our situation. Will you hear me out?"

"Go ahead."

“The next two abandoned stations on the map aren’t too far away. How about we hit those two, check them out, then from there, regardless of if we find evidence or not, we move on and finish the trip with red circle areas only.”

Brady pressed his lips into a thin, straight line as he considered. “I can agree to that.”

“Also, as much as I hate seeing you fall so many times when we detrain, I do recognize how you use the momentum and turn your body to ensure you land farther away from the tracks.”

“It would still be better if I landed on my feet.”

“I know. But I can see you’re trying.”

The TV played in the background, low enough it was nothing more than mumbled voices. I didn’t turn around to see what was on. It didn’t matter. Outside, it had started raining. A gentle pattering sounded on the windowpane.

“How long until the clothes need to go in the dryer?” I asked.

Brady shrugged. “Not sure. I figure about an hour. I put it on a heavy load to give it an extra clean. This place isn’t busy, so I’m not too worried.”

I brushed my lips over his warm skin, peppering kisses in a trail along his arm. He didn’t shove me away, so I took that as a good sign. When he removed my glasses, gently placed them aside, and encouraged me to move closer, I did. I continued

kissing his bare chest and inhaling his shower-fresh scent as I made my way to his mouth.

“Brady?”

“Mm. Yeah.”

“I need you to walk me through something.”

His eyes had fallen shut with my ministrations, but they fluttered open again, a tiny divot appearing between his brows. “What do you mean?”

I crawled over top of him, straddling his thighs and finding his mouth. We kissed for a long time. Like every time before, being near him and sharing this intimacy awoke something inside me I couldn't name. All I knew was, I wanted more. I wanted it all the time, and I hated that we'd spent the last freight ride not talking.

When I broke from his mouth, I found his hand and tucked the condom inside. “I've got a pretty good idea what I'm doing, but I may need some pointers.”

Brady glanced at what I'd given him. His brows rose, and his pupils dilated. “Are you sure?”

“More than sure.” I took his earlobe in my mouth and sucked before adding, “I want to be inside you. I want to be as close to you as I can get.”

He groaned and tipped his head to the side, granting me access to his long neck. I licked along the pulsing vein and down to the hollow of his throat. I followed his collarbone, nipped the sensitive skin by his armpit, then traveled lower,

tasting every square inch of him. When I got to his navel, I tugged both our towels off and tossed them aside. Then, without a moment's hesitation, I took him in my mouth, determined to perfect this new skill.

I gave myself props for controlling my gag reflex better than the first few times. I was able to take him down my throat with more ease and had learned to coordinate jerking him off while sucking him at the same time.

Brady grabbed a fistful of my hair and moved his hips off the bed, forcing himself deeper and making me cough.

"I'm sorry. Oh god, that's good."

I rolled his balls in my palm and applied pressure to his taint before dragging a finger over his entrance.

"Wait. We need lube of some kind."

"Did you pack some?" I asked, lifting off his dick, leaving it glistening with saliva.

"You packed my bag, remember?"

"Shit. What can we use?"

"Bathroom. Is there complimentary lotion?"

"I'll check."

When I returned with the tiny sample bottle, Brady was stroking himself, his legs parted, knees fallen to the side. The lustrous look in his eyes was aimed at me, and my dick ached at the sight.

"Goddamn. You're sexy as hell."

I knelt beside him, enjoying the show. Before Brady, I'd never watched a guy pleasure himself. I'd decided it was one of the hottest things I'd ever seen. Maybe it was limited to this one person, but I didn't care. I couldn't look away.

“Are you going to keep sucking me, or do you just want to watch the show?”

“Um... Hell no. I wanna participate.”

Brady grinned. “Then come on.”

“I gotta prep you, right?”

“Yes. Do you need me to walk you through it?”

“Maybe a little. Let's see how I do.”

I ran a hand over his leg, eyes trained on the bead of precum leaking from his tip. “Are you... I mean... Do you always bottom?”

“No. I'm vers, but I expect you aren't quite ready to flip fuck yet.”

I gave a nervous laugh and felt my cheeks heat. “One thing at a time. I'm adventurous at heart, but let's not push it. Maybe another day.”

“I'll hold you to that.”

I settled between his legs again and focused on giving Brady pleasure with my mouth until he was begging me to give him a finger. This was a whole new experience for me. I'd never so much as explored my own prostate, let alone gone seeking someone else's.

I made sure to add lots of lotion, then started.

When I pressed a single finger inside, Brady's response was enough to turn my apprehension into pride. The sounds spilling from his mouth were sheer ecstasy. I was the one making him squirm. I was the one giving him pleasure and making him moan and beg and writhe.

I let him guide the process, instructing me when he was ready for more. When I added a second finger, I got a hefty taste on my tongue and groaned. Coming up for air, still finger fucking him, I said, "You'd better not come until I'm buried in your ass."

He groaned at the suggestion, his lust-filled gaze seeking mine.

"So good. More."

"Three fingers?" It seemed like a lot, but what did I know?
"Are you sure?"

"God yes. Please."

So I gave him three, no longer sucking him off but watching him squirm with pleasure. He leaked a steady stream onto his abdomen, his cock so strained the tip was deep red.

Brady's eyes fluttered open, and he handed me the condom.
"Enough. Need you."

I suited up and used more lotion than was probably necessary, then I crawled over top of him until I was peering down into his half-lidded eyes. Brady wrapped his legs around

my waist, locking his ankles and urging me closer until the tip of my cock brushed his entrance.

“Any instructions?” I asked, lips brushing his. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

He shook his head. “Just go slow at first. Let me get used to you.”

Sex wasn’t new, but there was something altogether different about what we were about to do, and it had nothing to do with Brady being a guy. For the first time in my life, my heart was invested in someone else. I cared what Brady thought of me. I cared about his health and welfare and happiness.

I was the first to admit I was a selfish person at my core and had been plenty cold and aloof with my bed partners in the past, but as I entered him, as he took me into his body, my whole focus was on how I could make this experience the best thing that had ever happened to Brady.

Fully seated, I paused, my skin on fire, blood racing through my veins like a runaway freight. “Holy shit,” I breathed.

“I’m good. You can move.”

“No, I can’t. I’m never gonna last. Holy good god. How are you so tight?”

“Move. Please.”

“If I move, I’ll come.”

Brady's lopsided smile staring up at me made my heart swell. He took my face, kissed me, and said in the softest whisper, "That's the goal. Move, Troy. Let me feel you."

I pinched my eyes closed and rocked slowly from his body before entering him again. It was earth-shattering, and I shook my head, stopping. "Nope. Too good. Can't. Oh god, if I come in less than fifteen minutes, promise me you won't tell anyone."

Brady drew me down for another blistering kiss. I couldn't get enough of his mouth. "Fuck me, Troy. It's no one's business but ours."

Troy.

He'd taken to calling me by my given name whenever we were intimate, and for once in my life, I didn't hate it. I liked how it sounded coming from Brady's lips. I liked how it sang inside me and felt personal and private.

I didn't *fuck him* as he asked, but I refused to call it what it was because the notion of what we were really doing frightened me. I moved inside him, slowly, deliberately, watching the bliss of the moment play out in his eyes. I watched his lips tremble, his eyes sparkle. Each of his stuttering pants ghosted my lips.

My whole body sang, and I never wanted it to end. Sex had never been like this before.

I don't know how long it lasted. It could have been ten minutes. It could have been ten hours. Time was suspended

while we shared this new intimacy. I was rooted in the moment, savoring every second, wondering at these new feelings budding to life in my core. Where had they come from? Why now? Why him? Where would this lead?

I couldn't answer any of those questions, so I dismissed them and got lost in what we were doing.

With each thrust, Brady ground his erection against my abdomen, and the sweet noises falling from his mouth told a story of insurmountable elation and growing pleasure. I worked hard to keep them coming, bringing him closer to the edge, until we were both a mess of trembling limbs, teetering on the brink of no return.

Brady came first. He cried out, head tossed back as his hot release spilled between us. He scraped his nails down my back, scoring the flesh. I followed moments later, burying myself to the hilt, holding him tight and riding it through to the last wave.

Our hearts knocked in a syncopated rhythm. We were slick with sweat and cum. I couldn't catch my breath.

Once my vision cleared, I rolled off him and removed the condom. I snatched one of our discarded towels off the floor and cleaned us both up. Brady lay on his back, a glazed, sated look in his eyes as he watched me. He looked drunk on happiness.

“Are you all right?” I asked.

“More than all right.”

I lay on my stomach again, staring at him. He was fuzzy without my glasses, but if I squinted, I could make him clearer.

“What are you thinking?” he asked, pushing my hair behind my ears.

“I don’t know. I’m just absorbing it all.”

“Did you enjoy it?”

I laughed. “Um, yes. A lot.”

“Good. So we can do it again later once I’ve had a nap?” He yawned, punctuating his exhaustion.

“We can do it as many times as you want, or until I can’t get it up anymore.”

It was Brady’s turn to laugh. He reached out and skated his fingers lightly down my cheek. I caught his hand and kissed his knuckles.

“I have a confession,” I said. “I like it when you use my real name.”

Brady cocked his head to the side. “Oh really? I thought you hated it.”

“Not when it comes from you. Not when we’re, you know, close like that.”

“I like your name. It’s mature.”

I snorted. “Well, in that case, maybe you should refrain from using it altogether since I’m anything but mature.”

“Stop it.” Brady’s eyelids were getting heavier. His blinks lasted longer. “Lie with me?”

“I will. I’m going to take care of the laundry. I’ll be back. Sleep.” I kissed him, lingering, absorbing. His eyes fell shut, but a soft smile remained on his lips.

It warmed my heart.

I grabbed my glasses, phone, and a towel to wrap around my waist before slipping out of the room. Brady was out cold before the door closed.

After starting the dryer, I hopped up on top of the machine and sat with my phone. I’d been actively ignoring all calls and messages from the gang since my random phone call to Willow a while back. They all wanted to know what was going on.

I wasn’t ashamed. I just wasn’t ready to deal with them quite yet.

I texted Willow.

Dodger: You around?

My phone buzzed with a reply almost immediately.

Willow: OMG he lives!

Chuckling, I called her number, and she picked up on the second ring.

I heard the smile in her voice when she said, “Well, well, well. Look who decided to surface. You can’t drop a bomb on us like that then go silent.”

“Shut up. I’ll do what I want. Are you alone?”

“Nope. Can I put you on speaker?”

“Hell no. I’ll hang up. I’m not ready to deal with everyone yet. Go lock yourself in the bathroom or something so I can talk to you.”

“You’re such a drama queen.” I heard her shuffling around, and the background noise changed, so I figured she was on the move.

A door closed, then she said, “I’m locked in the bathroom, Your Highness. What’s up? Did you kiss him? Did you get your answer?”

“Oh, I got my answer all right. We kissed and then some. And I’m not talking about preliminary, high school necking and touching below the belt stuff. We’ve done it all. Kissing, jerking each other off, oral, anal, you name it. Fully and completely. I’m *definitely* bisexual.”

“We need to discuss boundaries.”

“There’s more.”

“No. Stop. If you tell me more, I’ll throw up.”

“You’re in the bathroom. Who cares? Vomit in the toilet. I need to talk.”

“I’m going to need therapy.”

“Who’s the drama queen now?”

“Why can’t you talk to Killer about this? Or Leo. Anyone else. Why is it always me?”

“Because Killer’s incapable of having an adult conversation and would make fun of me. And... I don’t know Leo well

enough yet.”

“Tyler. I’ll get Tyler.”

“Tyler was a virgin until, like, five minutes ago. Please.”

“Killer would be serious if he knew it was important.”

“Willow! Shut up. I’m trying to tell you something, and I’m a bit freaked out.”

She fell silent. My tone was verging on frantic, and I tried to dial it back.

When I went to express myself, the words got jumbled and caught in my throat, so I cursed instead. “Shit. You know what? Never mind. I don’t know why I called. I gotta go.”

“Troy, wait. You can talk to me about anything. I’m giving you a hard time, but you know I’m here for you. What’s going on? You sound really out of sorts.”

The words were on the tip of my tongue. I could taste them, feel them pinching in my chest. Once I said them out loud, there would be no retracting them. No denying them. Was I sure?

My heart knocked a frantic pace as I thought about the intimacy Brady and I had shared earlier. When I considered the deeply rooted fear I harbored for Brady’s safety and the frantic urge I felt every second of every day to keep him safe, it seemed obvious. I saw his toothy smile in my mind, his stormy, gray-blue eyes, the sassy way he got when he was feeling especially playful. The way he babbled and expressed

his tangled web of thoughts and ideas using exuberant hand gestures.

“Troy?”

“Nope. I’m not ready.” I hung up before she could protest or push me to talk.

I stared at my phone for a long time as text after text came through. All Willow asking what was wrong and expressing concern. I dismissed them all.

I couldn’t give it a voice. It was still only a tentative, unstable sensation. What if I was wrong?

Who was I fooling? I knew I wasn’t.

I’d never felt this way about anyone in my entire life.

I was falling hard for Brady Thompson.

Chapter Sixteen

Brady

I woke alone the following morning. The bed beside me was cold, but there was a barely legible, handwritten note on the pillow that read, *Gone for coffee and food. Be back soon. -D-*

The ancient air conditioning unit in the window chugged and whined noisily. It was unpleasantly hot and humid in the small room. Dodger had fiddled with it at some point during the night after we'd woken and had a full repeat of the sex we'd shared before bed. He'd announced the machine was a piece of junk but had left it on regardless since it was blocking the only window that could be opened.

I stretched out on the bed, kicking the sheets to the ground. My ass was pleasantly sore, and my muscles were sufficiently relaxed. I needed another shower after two rounds of messy sex, so I rolled out of bed on a yawn and wandered naked to the bathroom.

By the time I got out, I heard movement in the other room. Wearing only a towel, I found Dodger repacking our rucksacks with our freshly laundered clothes.

He glanced over his shoulder when he heard me enter the room, gave me an appreciative once-over, and hitched his chin at the bed. “I left you a change of clothes. There’s coffee and a very special something for breakfast, but you can only have it if you make me a deal.”

“That sounds ominous. What is it?”

He grinned but continued to pack.

I opened the paper bag beside the coffees and found four donuts inside. “Oh no. You didn’t. Coffee *and* donuts? Didn’t you learn your lesson last time? Me, sugar, and caffeine are a bad mix.”

Dodger came up beside me, stole the bag, and helped himself to the double chocolate dip. “This one’s mine.” He held out the bag to me again. “Now, promise me you will use your energy for good and not evil.”

“How far is the next abandoned station? Maybe we should walk.”

Dodger almost choked on his first bite. “Walk?” he said with his mouth full. “It’s upward of a hundred kilometers. That would be a big fat no way.”

“Fine. I make no promises then. I get squirrely with this much sugar. Are the rest of these for me?” My mouth pooled with saliva as I tried to decide which one to start with.

“Hell no! Are you insane? You are not eating three donuts. Save me one more.”

“Do you have a preference?”

“No, but I picked the powdery jelly-filled one specifically for you.”

“You don’t like jelly-filled donuts?”

“Love them. I just wanna watch you eat it.”

I laughed and helped myself to the donut in question. The icing sugar coated my lips the minute I took my first bite. It was glorious.

We sat on the unmade bed and had our coffee and treats. I let Dodger lick the powder off my fingers, which was enough to make me hard since he went out of his way to do it in the most provocative way possible.

When I caught a blob of jelly on my tongue before it dripped, he dove at my mouth, and we shared an intense and nearly pornographic kiss. It was sticky and messy, but neither of us cared.

The sugar went straight to my bloodstream, but we found an excellent way of dealing with the excess energy without ever leaving the bed.

In the end, we both needed another shower.



The following six days were dedicated to travel and exploring more abandoned stations. The commercial freights we needed were less predictable, which meant Dodger had to consult with his buddy RaptorZ several times to determine when they were departing and the best places for us to detrain. It was a lot of

days on the road. A lot of long waits. A lot of exhausting kilometers of walking. A lot of intimate, shared conversations. Summer was at its apex, and the days were long and hot.

I worked hard to try to improve my hopping skills. Unfortunately, I showed little progress. Each time I landed on my hands and knees or stumbled while trying to snag a ladder when we caught on the fly, I read the worry in Dodger's eyes. He never admonished my failures—not anymore. Each time I took the skin off my knees, he patiently bandaged them and added more duct tape to my pants since I'd torn them to shreds.

I was a risk, and it was causing Dodger a lot of turmoil.

The first abandoned station, located a stone's throw from Winnipeg, gave us exactly what we needed. We found plenty of evidence of riding gear. Although it could have belonged to anyone, we both had no doubt it had once belonged to the victim we knew only as twentysomething Jim. Or autopsy case number 162311, but Dodger didn't like identifying the riders in such an impersonal way.

The abandoned station halfway between Winnipeg and Moose Jaw had been a headache to get to, so it came as no surprise when we discovered the building had been scarcely used by squatters. The town it had once serviced in the twenties was no more. Therefore, no delinquent kids were hanging around, using it as a drug den, hideout, or sex cave.

It was my opinion that the debris that had been left behind—which was minimal—had all belonged to our suspect. There

were several empty cans of food, crushed, empty packages of cigarettes, the tattered remains of an old sleeping bag, and the scant remains of yet another set of picked-over riding gear.

Two sites and both showed enough suggestive evidence to satisfy my theory.

I took several pictures and documented everything.

On the seventh day after leaving Winnipeg, we landed outside the Moose Jaw yard just after four in the morning.

“Lo and behold, he landed on his feet! Holy shit!” Dodger pumped a fist in the air before wrapping his arms around my middle and heaving me off the ground in a crushing hug.

We both laughed as he spun me in a circle.

When he set me back on my feet, I saw the glimmer of relief in his eyes.

“Don’t get too excited. It was probably pure luck.”

“That freight slowed more than the ones we’ve been taking lately.”

“My knees are grateful.”

“My heart is grateful.”

The random comment drew me up short. We stared at each other for a long second as yet another unidentified undercurrent flowed between us. Dodger broke eye contact first, peering down the line to where we’d tossed my ruck before our jump.

“Collect your gear.”

Once I had my bag, I jogged up beside him. He'd moved to a secluded spot a short distance from the tracks and was checking his phone. We were in Moose Jaw. Dodger's hometown. I hadn't asked about the game plan, but I wondered if he might take me home. If so, how did he plan to introduce me to his parents?

"Where to?" I asked.

"Rap hasn't got back to me yet about our next ride, so I figured we could camp out for a few hours until we know what's what. For all I know, the freight we need leaves sometime this morning. Or we might have a couple of days before we can catch out again. Are you tired? We've been going steady for a week. If you need downtime, we can get a motel for a couple of days. Riding steady is tough on the body."

"A motel? Not ready to take me home yet, huh?"

Dodger cut his eyes to the distant tracks. Shadows sliced across his face, covering his expression, reflecting off his glasses and hiding his eyes. When he glanced back, he shifted his pack on his shoulders.

"It's not that. My parents are really pissy about my riding. They hate it. Dad and I kind of had an argument when I left in May, and I can't really go and grovel my way back to his good side while at the same time telling him we're taking to the rails again in a few days. It's bound to get ugly. You don't need to be in the middle of that."

"So it's not that you're ashamed of me?"

Dodger flinched. “What? No. Good god, no. Not at all. I mean, I’m pretty sure my mother will faint if I tell her I’m dating a guy, but I’ll be lucky if she doesn’t try to throw us a wedding and give us pamphlets about adoption. It’s all about grandkids with her.”

I laughed. “Wow. She doesn’t do things by half, does she?”

“No. Once the shock wears off, we’ll be saying *I do* and interviewing surrogates. I don’t know about you, but I’m not ready for that future yet.”

“No pressure from me. Will your dad be okay with you being bisexual and dating a guy?”

Dodger took a second to think about that. When he spoke, there was a hitch in his tone that suggested wariness. “I don’t know. I really hope he’s cool with it. I’d hate to think my father’s a bigot. If he is, I’ll walk away and never look back. I’ve never heard him say hateful things before or discriminate against minorities. He’s not racist, so... I don’t know. It might take him a minute to come around, but I’d like to think he’d be accepting.”

I found his hand in the dark and gave it a squeeze. “I hope so too.”

The pinch in his brow deepened. “You know what? Fuck this. I’m not sure I want to wait around and find out where my dad’s opinion lies. I want to know right now. Brady, would you like to come home with me and meet my parents?”

I gave him a coy smile so he knew I was playing around.
“Depends.”

“On what?”

“Do I have to wear white at the wedding? It washes me out. I don’t have the complexion for it. I’d rather wear matching black tuxes if it’s all the same. We could have mauve as an accent color. I like mauve. It would be a good color for both of us. Oh, and where do you sit on the name Abigail if it’s a girl? I always liked that name. I’ve had it on reserve for a while.”

Dodger rolled his eyes and tugged me along by the hand.
“No weddings. No kids. Good grief. Let’s catch us a serial killer first and talk about future shit when things calm down.”

“For the last time, we aren’t chasing a serial killer with the intent of catching him.”

“I know. I know. We’re *gathering evidence*.” He used air quotes.

I cocked a brow. “Troy Valmai, was that a mocking tone? It sounded mocking. In fact, it sounded sarcastic. You know how I feel about sarcasm.”

“Yes, I know. And yes, it was. How do you remember my last name anyhow? I told you one time.”

“I have a brilliant memory. Not eidetic, but I retain information at a vastly higher level than most people. But for real, you’re messing around, right? If you think our goal is to catch a serial killer, we need to have a long, *long* chat.”

Dodger turned to face me and gave my hand a yank, tugging me against his chest. “Yes, Brady. I’m messing around. Complete and total sarcasm, which I know you hate, even though I’ve heard you use it at times. I’m sorry. I know we aren’t chasing a serial killer. You’ve made that abundantly clear. You’re not very good at identifying humor, are you?”

“No. I’ve learned sometimes humor is intended to be hurtful. It’s best not to assume. As a gay teen, I was the victim of a lot of teasing and joking comments that were done maliciously, but I didn’t know it at the time, which resulted in me making a bigger fool of myself. It’s why I’m not a fan of sarcasm. At its root, sarcasm is cruel.”

“I get what you’re saying. I was playfully teasing. I promise you, it wasn’t malicious. Your intellectual side is adorable as all fuck, and I love it.”

I couldn’t tame the goofy grin that monopolized my face at the comment. “Oh yeah?”

Something changed in Dodger’s eyes. We were under heavy tree cover, and the moon couldn’t penetrate the thick foliage overhead, but I sensed the shift and saw his humor transform into something different like he was working something out in his head. What little light crossed his face highlighted a ponderous, almost wonderous expression.

“What other sides do I have?” I asked. “Besides an intellectual side.”

“A whimsical side. A tender and sensitive side. A sassy and sexy side. I like that one a lot. In fact, I like a lot of things

about you.” His voice was barely a whisper, passing through the air between us like a secret that was not meant to be shared. “You’re pretty amazing, Brady.”

“You’re pretty amazing too.”

“Most people don’t think so.”

“I’m not most people.”

“No... You definitely aren’t.”

His lips parted like he wanted to say more, but after a long minute peering deep into my eyes, he cleared his throat and cut his eyes away. “We should start walking. I figure we’ll make it to my neighborhood in about an hour or so. We can find a diner and have something to eat before I take you home.”

I didn’t ask him about the thing he hadn’t said. The undercurrent between us was strong. My gut told me we were on the same page, feeling the same things. I figured Dodger wasn’t speaking up for the same reason I’d held my tongue these past few days.

It was too soon.



After a breakfast of scrambled eggs, bacon, and toast—I had a less hyper-inducing green tea instead of coffee—Dodger steered us toward his neighborhood on the east end of Moose Jaw.

“Will they be awake?” I asked. “I feel like it’s early to be barging in unexpectedly.”

The sun was up, but it was only six thirty in the morning. It was early to make a house call without warning.

“Dad leaves for work at eight, but he’s usually up by six. Mom gets up with him. She does the company’s accounting, but she works from home. She used to work at a bank, but about ten or fifteen years ago, when Dad’s old accountant retired, she took over. They’ll be up.”

A short time later, we entered a middle-class neighborhood with raised-ranch-style houses, oak, sycamore, and elm trees lining the street. Each property sported vibrant green lawns and colorful garden beds. An elderly man and woman sat in matching rocking chairs on a covered front porch as they enjoyed a morning coffee. They waved as we walked past, greeting Dodger by name.

“Mr. and Mrs. Piccadilly. Their daughter, Samantha, used to babysit me when I was little.”

The front lawn of the house next door was littered with children’s toys. A minivan took up residence outside the open garage door. A window was open somewhere, and a ruckus of young voices squealed and shouted from within.

Dodger gestured. “The Howards. They have, like, five kids or something.”

We passed a driveway where a sleek Triumph Bonneville Bobber gleamed in the early morning light. Dodger slowed,

admiring it with an appreciative grin.

“Eddie Dorchester lives here. The guy’s a motorcycle fanatic. This baby looks new.” Dodger abandoned the sidewalk to circle the machine and get a closer look. “Sweet ride. He has a few more in the garage. Mostly Harleys. He and his partner, Davey, go on those cross-country motorcycle rides. They own a bike shop downtown. He must be heading out soon, or this baby would be undercover somewhere.”

“You ever ridden on a motorcycle?” I asked.

“No, but I bet it’s thrilling as hell. I’m not around much in the summer, but I’ve seen Eddie and Davey out and about, which makes me envious. You ever ridden?”

“Once. As a passenger in my first year of uni. It was terrifying.”

“No shit. You’re just full of surprises. Is there a badass Brady in there I don’t know about?”

I batted my lashes with exaggerated innocence and mimed zipping my lips. “You’ll never know.”

“Oh, I’ll find out. Badass Brady might be a fun guy to know.”

I chuckled. “He was only around during my first year of university. That’s what happens when your mother finally cuts the apron strings and lets you fly free.”

“Ah, yes. The days of bar bathroom blow jobs, right?”

I *tsked*. “So crude. But yes. Also true. Bathroom blow jobs, random hookups, parties, drinking, motorcycles. No drugs. Never did that.”

“Leather?” Dodger looked hopeful.

I snorted. “Please. Badass Brady still wore his cashmere sweaters and trousers.”

“Ah, clandestine badass Brady. Interesting. A rebel disguised as a straight-A student.”

“Hardly a rebel, but I *was* a straight-A student.”

Dodger wandered back to the sidewalk and studied me. “What else haven’t you told me about clandestine badass Brady?”

“Hmm.” I tapped my lips, thinking. “Well, there was this one time I made out with a girl at a party. Just to see what it was all about, you know? I touched her breasts and everything.”

Dodger staggered backward theatrically, gasping and clutching his chest. “What? Say it ain’t so? Are you serious? Never mind, you’re always serious. What the hell? Have I fallen into the twilight zone? Who are you?”

I laughed. “To be fair, I was super drunk, and the girl was absolutely convinced if I tried being with a woman, I would like it. She made a solid argument, and my drunk brain was in no condition to retort. I already knew I was gay, but I figured, what the hell? Might as well gather the data and prove it

without a doubt. Again, I was very drunk. These contentions seemed a lot sounder at the time.”

“How far did it go?”

“Not far. A bit of fondling. We lost some of our clothes. It was all wrong. She was into it, but my body was not having it.”

“Even touching her boob, the old soldier wouldn’t stand at attention, huh?”

I made a sour face. “Nope. It was... not my thing. The next day when I sobered up, I was utterly mortified, ashamed, a little nauseous—which was probably alcohol-related—and still assuredly gay. She was gone, and I was glad I never saw her again.”

“Wow. Okay, so we are bookmarking this conversation to continue later. I want to know all about the adventures of clandestine badass Brady.”

“Only if you share embarrassing stories with me. Trade for trade. This cannot be one-sided.”

“Deal.” And he sealed it with a peck on my lips.

We continued down the road until Dodger stopped in front of a tan brick house sporting a gently peaked roof, large windows, and a two-car garage. We’d arrived. A giant oak tree cast its long morning shadow over the house.

In the driveway were two gleaming white Ford F-150s with decals on the side doors advertising Valmai Electric.

Dodger had been holding my hand for most of our walk, but he dropped it as he turned to face me. “We have arrived. Are you ready?”

“I am. Are you?”

He blew out a heavy breath and shrugged as he eyed the house. “I don’t know. I guess. It’s weird. I never thought this would be a thing.”

“What? You dating a guy?”

“No. Me bringing someone home to meet the ’rents.”

“And I’m a guy.”

He brushed the comment off with something close to annoyance. I needed to stop projecting my concerns on Dodger. He clearly didn’t give a shit about his recently discovered bisexuality or who knew about it.

“Let me try to smooth things out with my dad first before I go making big announcements. Is that cool?”

“I’ll follow your lead.”

We crossed a neat cobblestone path to the front door. Finding it locked, Dodger rang the bell, informing me he’d given his house key back last time he’d left.

A few minutes later, a female voice bled through from inside. “No, I don’t know who it is. It’s six in the morning.”

The door opened inward, and a pretty woman appeared. She had long, chestnut brown hair streaked heavily with silver. Wrinkles bracketed her deep hazel eyes, and she wore a pale

pink terrycloth bathrobe over a long nightie. The resemblance to her son was uncanny. They shared the same facial structure, same nose, and mouth. Dodger was taller, but his mother wasn't short by any stretch of the imagination.

When her gaze landed on Dodger, a look of confusion crossed her face.

“Hey, Mom.”

“Sweetie? What are you doing home? I thought you left for the summer.”

She flashed her attention in my direction, then back to her son.

“I did. We're just passing through. I thought we'd stop in and say hi since we were in the neighborhood. This is Brady. Brady, this is my mom, Linda.”

“Nice to meet you, ma'am.” I offered a pleasant smile and got a tight one in return.

“Hello, Brady.” She checked over her shoulder once before asking, “Are you coming in?”

“If that's okay. I know Dad's pissed I left early, but he needs to get over it. He knows the deal, and we have the same fight every year. It's time—”

“Who is it, Lyn?” a deep male voice rumbled from another room.

“Hey, Dad,” Dodger called. “It's me.”

Linda stepped aside and welcomed us inside as Dodger's father appeared in the front hall with a scowl on his face. He was a tall, burly man with thinning hair and middle-age spread. He was much bulkier than his son. The only feature they seemed to share was their eyes. They were the same rich coffee-brown as Dodger's, and he too wore glasses. Unlike Dodger's mother, his father was dressed in faded denim and an amber T-shirt with his company's logo on the breast pocket.

His dad eyed me up and down, took in my riding apparel, then addressed his son. "Not home to work, I take it?"

"No. Just passing through town. I thought we could chat." He stalled, glanced at me and back to his parents. "And I wanted you to meet someone."

"This is Troy's friend Brady," his mother explained, pulling the ends of her robe.

"A riding friend. You know I don't prefer you bring them around here."

Dodger sighed. "Are you gonna make me do this at the door, or can we come in?"

"Do what?"

"Dad. Come on. I'm here for a reason. Is there coffee on?" he asked his mother.

"Of course. Please come in. Excuse me while I get dressed. I didn't know we'd have company at six in the morning."

We left our gear and boots at the front door, and I followed Dodger and his dad into an open kitchen at the back of the

house. The morning sun gleamed through big windows, reflecting off white cabinetry and granite countertops. It smelled of brewed coffee and cinnamon.

An open breakfast bar with high stools separated the kitchen from a small dining area where a country-style wooden table and chairs sat. In the center was a hearty Christmas cactus sitting in a clay pot on a frilled doily. My mother liked growing Christmas cactuses too. She always called them finicky things.

The walls were filled with framed art, and a small display cabinet held a collection of interesting ceramic sculptures.

“Are you drinking coffee, son?”

I snapped back to attention and redirected my focus to Dodger’s father. “Um. No thank you, sir.”

I caught Dodger’s grin as he moved to the kettle sitting at the other end of the counter. “I’ll boil some water for tea.” Once he had it set, he waved a hand at his dad. “We missed proper introductions. Brady, this is my dad, Sean. Dad, this is Brady.”

I held out a hand, and Sean shook it, but the harshness in his eyes hadn’t left. “You a rider?” he asked.

I flashed a look at Dodger, who shrugged, basically telling me to go ahead and answer truthfully. “Not really, sir. This is my first time on the rails. We’re... doing some research.” I didn’t know how much Dodger’s parents knew about his obsession with the CP Rail killer, so I left it at that.

“Brady’s a student at the University of Toronto. He’s working on his thesis to get his doctorate.”

Sean’s face brightened. “Oh yeah? What are you taking?”

“I’m a double major. Behavioral science and forensic psychology. I also have a minor in criminal justice.”

Sean let out a low whistle. “Impressive.”

From the corner of my eye, I caught Dodger puffing up a bit at his father’s compliment.

“See? I don’t always hang out with low-life bums. Sometimes my friends are smart as shit,” he said.

His mother came into the kitchen, wearing dark leggings and a soft knitted sweater. Her hair had been tied into a messy ponytail. She looked too young to be Dodger’s mother. If it weren’t for the faint age lines on her face and her silvering hair, I’d have thought she was in her early forties. Knowing Dodger was nearly thirty, I knew that wasn’t possible.

“Why are we all standing in the middle of the kitchen? Take your drinks and go sit down.” She shooed us to the dining room and the table.

Sean regurgitated my academic accomplishments to his wife as we went, and Dodger leaned in and whispered, “He’s singing your praises already.”

At the table, Sean launched into shop talk with Dodger, who entertained him for a while. They talked about new reno houses going up and contracts the company had signed

recently. I got the sense whatever discord there had been was already resolved.

Linda placed a gentle hand on mine. “So you’re from Toronto?”

“Yes, ma’am. Born and raised.”

“Call me Lyn. None of that ma’am stuff. Why is a smart boy like you making poor decisions and riding with this yahoo who won’t grow up?” She thumbed at her son. “It’s horribly dangerous. Your mother must be worried sick.”

If my mother knew, she would be.

“We’ve been telling Troy for years to grow up and knock it off. I worry every year I’m going to get a call they’ve found his body out there on the tracks.” She shook her head. “I’ve seen his walls in the basement. All those gruesome stories about riders who have accidents and die make me physically ill. Why does he do this to his poor mother?”

“Those riders didn’t have accidents, ma’am. Sorry, um... Lyn. For my thesis, I’ve been researching some theories. It’s my belief they died under suspicious circumstances. Not accidentally. I sought Dodger, um, Troy’s help to gather more evidence. It’s my goal to bring my findings to the proper authorities so they can investigate it. That’s why I’m traveling with him.”

Linda pressed her lips in a tight line. “So you believe this nonsense too?”

“It’s not nonsense, Mom,” Dodger interrupted, joining our conversation. “Brady had even more proof than I did.”

Linda sipped her coffee instead of responding, but the wariness behind her eyes wasn’t hidden. I guessed hearing there was a serial killer hunting freight hoppers wasn’t any more soothing than knowing her son liked the adrenaline rush of riding trains illegally.

I stared into my tea and wished I’d kept my mouth shut. Once again, I’d not thought about social cues and whether discussing murderers was appropriate.

“Are you staying tonight?” his father asked.

“Are we welcome? I know you don’t like my *rider friends*, so I wasn’t sure if it would be okay. We could do with a place to crash for a few days. We’ve been on the go for a week straight.”

“No, I don’t like your rider friends.” Sean pinned me with a venomous look like it was all my fault. “But you may as well stick around since you’re in the city. Better than sleeping on the street, and god knows you’ll just resort to that if I say no.”

Dodger shifted so he was sitting more upright. “Well, in that case, maybe I should tell you why we came first. It might matter. Maybe you’d rather we pitch a tent in a park.”

His mom and dad both looked at him questioningly.

I knew from experience that coming out was no easy thing. It had taken me three years of deliberating and waffling before I’d finally made the announcement to my parents. Since that

day, I'd come out at least a hundred times over. It was a fraction easier now, but that was the thing with being gay. It was never over. You were coming out for the rest of your life. Each new person you met, every new setting you found yourself in, there was always that breath-holding moment where you exposed yourself and hoped for the best.

These people were strangers to me, but I wanted their approval as much as I wanted them to be accepting of Dodger.

It was rare to see Dodger tongue-tied and scrambling for words. He was usually outspoken and sure of himself. With all the attention on him, he stalled and struggled to meet his parents' eyes.

“What is it, sweetie?” his mom asked, kindly but with an edge of wariness. A mother's instinct had kicked in, and she knew whatever Dodger wasn't saying was important.

Like someone had flicked a switch, whatever apprehension Dodger had been fighting vanished. He glanced between his parents, chin high, resolute and unwavering. “You always preach at me that I need to grow up, find a nice girl, and settle down. I'm not getting any younger, right?”

It was subtle, but Sean's gaze flicked to me for a brief moment, and I thought he knew exactly where this conversation was going.

“Well,” Dodger continued, “I'm not saying I'm settling down or that I'm ready for marriage and kids and white picket fences.” He glared pointedly at his mother. “I'm still sorting myself out, and life is complicated, but...”

“Troy?” his mother prompted when he stalled for too long.

“Um... What I’m saying is... What if I didn’t find a nice girl to date and found a decent guy instead?” He took my hand, weaving our fingers together on the tabletop to make his point.

There was a familiar lull that followed his statement. A held breath. A stillness. I’d been privy to these types of moments too many times to count. They were unnerving. It was the roll of a die, and it was always scary when you didn’t know how it would land. You braced for impact, just in case. I knew what was going on inside Dodger’s head at that precise moment. I’d been there done that. It was a roaring madness. It was crippling fear. It was hopefulness.

Sean’s expression was unreadable, but after a moment, he looked at his wife as though seeking her guidance to know how to respond. Linda’s eyes shimmered, but she was neither smiling nor frowning. She covered her mouth and blinked with uncertainty at her son as though piecing through his words, allowing them to sink in or determining if she’d heard him right.

Then the moment broke, and she covered our joined hands with her own. “Oh, Sean... Oh, Sean, he’s going to settle down.”

Dodger, clearly confused as to whether he should release his held breath or not, glanced at me. I offered a reassuring smile and a nod. This was good. He was halfway there.

“Don’t get too excited, Mom.” His voice was raw, a testament to his anguish. “It’s new. It’s only been a month. Are you... are you guys cool with this?” he asked, eyeing his dad.

His mom launched from her chair, rounded the table, and pulled her son into a massive hug. “Of course we are. I’m thrilled. I never thought I’d see the day my baby boy would fall in love.”

“Um... Mom...” Linda had knocked his glasses crooked as she pet his hair back, and Dodger tried to dislodge himself unsuccessfully. “Okay. Enough. Stop.” He peeled her off.

When she released him, he glanced again at his father, who had yet to comment. “Dad?”

Sean seemed to choose his words carefully. When he spoke, it was quiet but reassuring. “I don’t give a shit if you’re gay or straight, son. I hope you know that. I give a shit about your future and your safety. Always have. At least Brady here has a half a brain on his shoulders and isn’t like those airhead blonde bimbos you keep dragging home week after week.”

“Dad!” Dodger admonished at the same time Linda said, “Sean!”

“Well, it’s true,” Sean said to his wife. “You’ve seen them. At least this young man shows promise for a future. He’s educated. He’s working toward a fantastic career. A fine young man.”

The praise made me squirm. “Thank you, sir.”

“Sean,” he corrected.

“It’s early days, Dad. We’re still getting to know each other.”

“And when the summer’s over?”

Another gulf of silence swelled all around us.

Dodger didn’t look at me, but I watched him from the corner of my eye, just as curious about his answer. We hadn’t talked about what happened when this little adventure was over. Moose Jaw and Toronto weren’t exactly neighbors. A long-distance relationship would be difficult. If I’d thought we were only having a bit of fun while on the road, I might have conceded to Dodger telling his parents he was still coming home to work in the winter, but there had been that unspoken moment between us earlier. We may not have named it, but I got the feeling we both saw there was a lot more potential to what we were building than a summertime fling. We both felt more than we’d admitted.

“Oh, Sean, don’t pressure him. Let him explore this at his own pace. Don’t you remember what it was like to be young and in love for the first time?”

“Mom. For Pete’s sake, I just said it was new. Can you stop with the L-word?”

I bit back a smile as color rose to Dodger’s cheeks.

“I’m just happy,” Linda said, stroking her son’s cheek.

He batted her hand away, and Linda sat again.

I rested my hand on Dodger’s thigh under the table. We exchanged a look. There was relief and happiness in his eyes.

I knew that feeling too. There was nothing more comforting than gaining the acceptance of your parents, even if they embarrassed you and threw the L-word around long before you were ready to say it.

Chapter Seventeen

Dodger

“I hired Tom back,” Dad said as he took the last clean plate from the dish rack and ran a towel over it to dry it.

It was evening, and we were alone in the kitchen, cleaning up the dinner dishes. Mom and Brady had gone for a walk to the market. They were far chummier than I liked, and I could only imagine what they might be talking about.

We’d been at my parents’ house for four days, but RaptorZ had contacted me the previous day to inform me our freight was scheduled to pass through the Moose Jaw yard tonight, so we were stocking up and getting ready to catch out.

“Tom’s solid. Isn’t he the one who usually picks up my slack when I leave in the summer?”

“Every year for four years.” Dad opened a cupboard and put the plate away before slinging the dishtowel over his shoulder and leaning against the counter. “He works for another company part-time, so I have to take what I can get. He’s a great guy, but he’s not always available. Knows his stuff,

though. The man has three kids at home. He could do with something more stable than bouncing jobs.”

I wasn't sure where he was going with this. “Okay... And?”

“I know you said this thing with your young man is new, and you're not ready to admit it might be serious, but we have to talk business.”

“Dad—”

“No. I've spent the last ten years hoping I could hand this company over to you one day. It's yours if you want it, but I'm beginning to think you don't want it. I tell your mother year after year that you will eventually settle down and come to your senses. I swore up and down all it would take was meeting a nice young lady.” He paused and cut his attention to the window that overlooked the backyard. The setting sun shone through the thick foliage of an elm tree. “I didn't know you had an interest in the lads as well,” he said, quieter.

“I didn't either. Does it disappoint you?”

“No. After you told us the other night, I've thought a lot about it, and maybe I'm not that surprised.”

“Really? I kinda was.”

Dad turned his attention to me. “Oh?”

“I didn't know I was bisexual until I met Brady. Like I've been saying, it's very new. Not just the relationship but the whole discovery of who I am.”

He thought about that, a pinch in his brow. I hoped he didn't ask if I was sure. I didn't know how to explain it.

"Life can be like that. It's a constant journey of discovery. Son, if you like this young man enough to be involved with him, enough to bring him home and come out to your parents, he means something to you. I think that's great. Your mother is over the moon. In case you haven't noticed, she adores him."

"Yeah, I can see it. She better not put the idea of marriage and kids into Brady's head."

Dad chuckled. "Oh, I'd count on it. Look, son, I'm a realist, and I have a business to run and a kid who's been unsettled for most of his adult life. You're almost thirty years old."

"I know."

"This young man lives in the big city where jobs in his field will be more available and plentiful. Call it a hunch, but I think once you finish this ridiculous summer adventure, which I still don't approve of," he added with a raised finger, "you'll realize you don't want to come home to Moose Jaw. Electricians are in demand pretty much anywhere you go. In Toronto, you'd get work easily enough."

"You sound like Mom. You have me living with the guy already."

"Troy, grow up. How long have you been together?"

"Only a month."

"That's a month longer than you've kept any girl around in ten years. Either that man means something to you, or he

doesn't. And if you say he doesn't, I call bullshit. I'd like to think I know my son well enough to know when he's happy. For the first time since you left high school, you look happy. All those bimbos never lit a spark in your ass. This one..." He huffed a laugh, almost smiling. "He's something. Your mother said it best. You're walking on air."

"Good grief. I don't need this pressure. It's new. Mom's been trying to marry me off for years."

"You're her only child. What do you expect? She's been planning your future since you took your first breath, Troy."

"She smothers me."

"She means well."

"I know."

"Son, tell it to me straight. Am I losing you? Should I make plans for this company's future?"

Heat flooded my belly and seeped through my veins. "I don't know, Dad. I can't answer that yet. Please don't make me. I always liked the security of knowing I could come home, work, then be free to ride whenever the notion took me. I don't know if I'm ready to let go of that yet."

"But you did that because you were unsettled here."

"It's not just that. It's... Riding gives me a sense of freedom. A sense of abandonment. When I'm out there, I feel alive. Like I'm on top of the world."

"It makes you feel like you're walking on air?"

“Yes, exactly! And I—Oh.”

Dad’s smirk drew me up short. “I’m pretty sure this young man makes you feel all those things too, doesn’t he? And you can’t understand why I’m asking you these hard questions.” He hung the dishtowel on the oven door and grabbed hold of my shoulder, giving it a fatherly squeeze. “I’ll tell you what. I’ll stop pressuring you, but the minute you know where this relationship with Brady is going and what your future looks like, you call me.”

“Dad—”

“I’ll be fine with whatever you decide.”

The front door opened, and Mom’s and Brady’s laughter drifted down the hall.

Dad winked and left me alone in the kitchen with my thoughts.



We spent three days camped out in a remote area along the tracks where Brady was convinced we’d find another dead rider. But after three full days searching up and down the line on both sides in a five-kilometer stretch with no luck, I announced it was time to move on.

Brady didn’t want to. He wanted to expand our search another couple of kilometers, adamant the location made sense and the guy had to be out there somewhere. When I put my foot down, we ended up having our second big blowout.

It was the day I learned Brady didn't take well to failure. I would have bet he'd spent his whole life in some kind of academic competition with his classmates, determined to be the best. He was certain about his theory, and not finding evidence was hard to accept.

At least that time when we fought, we weren't stuck on a freight train, so after traipsing several kilometers along the track in silence, we reconciled our differing opinions, hashing it out like grown adults. Brady still wasn't happy. His glum expression made his lower lip pout, and I had to refrain from telling him it was adorable because I was convinced he'd hit me for being a smartass.

When Brady suggested we check out the abandoned station he claimed corresponded with the location, stating he would accept the idea of moving on if we found no evidence there, I agreed.

We found nothing noteworthy at the old building either.

Deeply frustrated, Brady eventually conceded the site was a bust, and we moved on.

Every night after we left the area, Brady spent hours poring over information and maps, stewing and mumbling to himself. He didn't sleep. His brain wouldn't calm down. Nothing I did helped. We had a lot of sex—which was the only thing I could think of to relax him—but in the end, I left Brady to his downloaded textbooks and research notes and bit my tongue when his already poor hopping skills were further compromised by exhaustion.

Since our new goal was to stick with the marks on the map where we anticipated we might find the bodies of riders who had never surfaced, our next leg of the journey was much longer. We continued west toward Calgary, then headed north toward Edmonton before catching out on a commercial freight heading into the mountains of northern Alberta.

The scenery on this stretch of our journey was nothing short of breathtaking, and we spent a lot of time standing at the rail and absorbing the view. There was no civilization for miles, so there was no concern about being seen.

Traveling these mountainous routes required a rider to stay alert since it wasn't uncommon for the freights to go through long tunnels. Tunnels could be dangerous if a rider wasn't prepared or didn't know how to handle them. Unlike a passenger train where you rode inside with a fresh supply of oxygen, riding outside on a freight through a tunnel meant exposure to a suffocating amount of diesel fumes since they couldn't dissipate into the air and instead got trapped around us. Without precautions, it could poison and burn your lungs. At the very least, you could make yourself sick.

“Soak your bandana. Not just a little bit. Drench it.” I demonstrated, pouring over half of my water reserves over the swath of cloth I kept in my rucksack for just such an occasion. “You want it good and wet.”

Brady copied, using my spare bandana.

“We don't need to put them on until we enter the tunnel, but it's coming up soon, so we want to be ready.”

“This acts as a filter?”

“Yep. We’ll tie them tight around our nose and mouth and breathe through them. You’ll still taste diesel at the back of your throat, but it will help you not suffocate. According to Rap, the few tunnels on this line aren’t too long. Ten minutes tops. Some are even shorter. I’ve been through some that take over a half hour to get through. They were brutal, so this isn’t too bad. It will be pitch black the whole time, but I promise, there is nothing to worry about. It can be scary.”

Brady got that cocky, playful grin on his face. “I won’t be scared. Not if you hold my hand.”

“I think I can manage that.”

Once our bandanas were prepped, we tied them loosely around our necks so they were within easy reach, then we leaned against the rail again and took in the view. The remote mountainous terrain was stunning. We were traveling through a valley that wrapped around the edge of a small hidden lake on one side and kissed the base of daunting mountains on the other. The various shades of summer green went on for miles, and although the scent of diesel never quite went away when you rode, the air was crisp and fresh. It was wilderness at its finest and far more wondrous than any nature program you’d see on TV or postcard you’d buy at a store. *National Geographic* and their brilliant photographs had nothing on the real thing.

The wind beating down on us was warm, and the sun licked a golden path over Brady’s tanned face. With his wild, wavy

blond hair blowing in the wind, the bronze glow to his skin, and his tall, slender frame, he looked like a stereotypical California surfer boy. All he needed was a wetsuit and a board. It was a vast change from the man I'd met at the end of May.

Brady was mesmerized by the picturesque landscape, his head on a swivel as he took it all in at once, jaw unhinged. In these instances, I was sure he forgot all about our task as he got lost in the adventure of traveling across Canada in a way most people never did. If nothing else, I'd managed to give Brady the experience of a lifetime.

It had been eleven days since we'd left my parents' house back in Moose Jaw. Eleven days of trying to understand the heart-swelling emotions that overtook me when I looked into Brady's eyes or watched the joy radiate from his core. It wasn't always perfect between us. We were in each other's faces every hour of every day with no time apart. Having the odd disagreement was inevitable. When we fought or bickered, it was often to do with my concern over his wellbeing—his lack of sleep, his ambitious nature, or his refusal to accept failure. Those things, coupled with my lack of couth and penchant for putting my foot in my mouth, were a bad mix. But we did okay.

Every day, our bond deepened.

The prospect of what might happen at the end of the summer hung over my head. The idea of returning to Moose Jaw didn't sit right, yet the notion of settling in Toronto gave me an equal sense of disquiet.

Because that was exactly what it would be.

Settling.

It meant hanging up my riding gear and becoming the adult my parents had always wanted me to be. Was I ready to do that?

Realistically, Brady wasn't going to hop trains again. Not like this. Not if he could help it. As much as I thought he was enjoying himself, it wasn't his thing. With his questionable and unimproved skill, I wasn't sure I would want him to.

Yet, the alternative was terrifying.

Every year for the past ten years, the summers had been mine. I lived for them. I craved them. I squeezed every ounce of joy I could from them. The sense of liberty riding gave me, the autonomy, the thrill, it was something I didn't think I could live without. I rode so I could breathe. Yet, when I considered a summer without Brady, leaving him behind to work or do whatever it was he wanted to do while I took to the rails alone, my lungs constricted until I thought I was going to suffocate. It was a paradox.

I was conflicted, yet at the same time, I wasn't.

The answer seemed obvious, but it meant confirming my feelings. It meant facing the truth.

Brady's eyes brightened, and he gasped, pointing into the distance. "Look. Oh my god, oh my god."

I followed his finger to where a bunch of deer grazed along the side of the mountain in the distance. There had to be ten of

them. They lifted their heads and watched the train pass, still as statues.

Brady glowed.

I kissed his cheek and spoke in his ear. “Beautiful, huh?”

“I’ll never forget this. This is the most exciting thing I’ve ever done in my life. Thank you for insisting I come with you.” He turned his attention from the deer to me, and I was rewarded with my favorite kind of Brady smile. Toothy and lopsided.

Those sacred words were on the tip of my tongue. I’d never said them to anyone before, and until now, I never thought I would. As I decided whether it was the time for big revelations or not and if I had the courage to bear my heart, the curve in the tracks up ahead caught my eye, and I saw the up-and-coming tunnel we’d been waiting for.

“Shit,” I muttered under my breath.

“What’s wrong?”

Since there was no way I could express my disappointment at the lost moment, I pointed to the tracks up ahead. “Tunnel time. Bandana up. Tie it tight. Make sure it’s flush to your face, and don’t panic if it gets hard to breathe. This will help. I promise.”

We sat in the well with our saturated bandanas stuck to our faces as we entered the tunnel. The bright, mid-July day vanished as we were plunged into darkness so thick you couldn’t see your hand in front of your face. Brady reached for

me, grabbing hold of my thigh and digging his fingers into my leg. Tunnels were always nerve-racking the first time you went through them. I found his hand and linked our fingers.

“Are you doing okay?”

“It’s kind of freaky.”

“Try to stay calm. The last thing you need is to start hyperventilating. Breathe normally.”

“I’m trying. Talk to me? I need a distraction.”

I wrapped my arm around him and pulled him against me, chuckling. “Badass Brady can ride motorcycles, but he can’t handle a short train tunnel?”

“Don’t tease me. Not right now.”

It wasn’t easy to talk with a cover over my face, but I sensed Brady’s mounting anxiety.

“All right. I owe you an embarrassing story. Trade for trade, you said. This is to match your make-out session with a chick.”

“Oooh, I’m listening.”

“God help you if you share this with anyone.”

“My lips are sealed.”

“All right. For the record, I’d completely forgotten about this moment until recently. It was just one of those wretchedly embarrassing things you experience when you’re young, but time and life make it fade into the background until you forget about it altogether. I long ago dismissed it, but I think maybe it

bears significance. I told you I'd never had a second thought about being with a guy before, right?"

Brady lifted his head from my shoulder. Even though I couldn't see him, I knew he'd perked up.

"Yessss. I like where this is going. Go on." His tone was playful and intrigued.

I rolled my eyes, even though he couldn't see me.

"Well, I guess it's not entirely true. I mean, consciously, I'd never considered being with a guy before. Unconsciously... Well... maybe my brain was trying to tell me something, and I refused to listen." I ran my thumb along Brady's hand, wet my lips, and drew up the memory I'd long forgotten until the other day.

"I was twenty or twenty-one, working for my dad one winter. We often get paid to do work in these massive, million-dollar homes in the rich neighborhoods where the owners are upgrading their mansions, or renovating, or adding track lighting or hot tubs or outdoor patio areas. Anyhow, it was one of those types of places. It was a kitchen reno, and Dad left me in charge of doing all the track lighting they wanted to put under the new cupboards. He took off to do another job since it was a simple enough project he knew I could handle."

"Were you still an apprentice?"

"Yeah. But I had a few years under my belt, so he left me alone and usually came back to check my work when I was done instead of hovering over my shoulder like he did in the

beginning. I was more than competent at that point. So I got an early start that day and was on-site and working at just after eight in the morning. The house owner had set me up and left me to it, telling me his kids might be in and out and not to let them get in my way. I figured he meant little kids like eight or nine or something.”

“But they were older?”

“Yeah. Twin nineteen-year-olds. A boy and a girl. She came into the kitchen first, and let me tell you, Brady, she was a fucking knockout. Like, model material. Gorgeous.”

“I don’t like this story anymore.”

I chuckled and kept going. “Me, being the cocky twenty-year-old I was, only knew how to think with my dick. I laid it on thick, flirting up a storm, completely forgetting I was supposed to be working. Looking back, I’m embarrassed, but what can you do?”

Brady had gone quiet and still. It was probably in bad taste to tell him how I felt about her, so I plugged on, getting to the point.

“For the record, you’ll be happy to know, she cold-shouldered me, made herself some fancy protein shake, and fucked off without a word of acknowledgment. Like I was nothing more than cow shit on the bottom of a farmer’s boot. I was hurt and irritated, but I got back to work, sulking and feeling sorry for myself as only a rejected twenty-year-old can. A few minutes later, her brother wandered in. I was friendly and greeted him but kept working, my ego sufficiently bruised.

Only, this guy hung around, leaning on the counter beside where I was working and chatting me up.”

“What did he look like?”

“Does it matter?”

“Hello, yes, it matters. I’m gay, and I need a proper visual for this story.”

I huffed in mock annoyance, and Brady pinched me.

“Tell me.”

“Fine. He was... Well, he kinda looked like you. Blond, tall, and slender. He had freckles on his nose and wore these stylish glasses that suited the shape of his face.”

“Did he have a nice ass?”

“Are you serious right now?”

“I’m an ass guy. I need to know.”

“I don’t know. I didn’t look at his ass. Anyhow, I was... Wait. Do you think I have a nice ass?”

“Um, yes. Superb. You also have ass dimples, which is a bonus.”

“I do? Seriously?”

“Story, Troy. Focus.”

“You’re the one sidetracking me. Where was I?”

“He was leaning on the counter, talking your ear off.”

“Oh, right. Okay, so I was completely oblivious that he was flirting until he told me he had to go and asked if I had plans

after work. I must have looked confused, so he took my hand and slipped a piece of paper into it. His phone number was scrawled on the inside. He said, ‘Call me. Maybe we can go out sometime.’ I almost laughed. Not at him, but at the irony of the whole situation since his super-hot model of a sister had totally blown me off. I told him I was straight but flattered, and he squeezed my arm and said it was cool. He winked and left, and I continued with my day. That night, I had a dream about his sister.”

“A sex dream? If so, spare me the details.”

“Let me tell the story. I dreamed we were chatting in her kitchen. The house was empty, so it was just her and I. At one point, she pressed me against the counter and started kissing me. It was dirty kissing, like porn quality.” I paused. It had been a long time since I’d relived this. With the typical ambiguity of dreams, I couldn’t quite remember how or when it had shifted. “Her hands were all over me. At some point, she pulled away, and... well, it wasn’t her anymore. It was her brother.”

“Oh, now this dream is getting good. *All* the details.”

I laughed. “Yeah, yeah, calm down.”

“So you ended up making out with her brother. Did dream Troy freak out?”

“No, he did not. He was too busy having his dick fondled and neck sucked.”

“And?”

I hesitated.

“And?” Brady said again with more emphasis.

“You can’t tell anyone this part.”

“And?”

“And I woke up a little... a lot damp.”

Brady hooted with laughter. “Nice! Then did you freak out?”

“Of course I did. I panicked. I didn’t know what it said about me. I mean, dreams are fucked up like that sometimes, so I told myself it was nothing. I made every excuse in the book for why it had happened, and I did my best to forget about it. In the end, I figured I had no control over my dreams, so it didn’t matter. It meant nothing. I knew I was straight, and even if the dream made me feel good—”

“The dream made you come.”

“Shut up. Even though it made me feel good, it didn’t change anything. I dismissed it, told no one, and moved on.”

“It never happened again?”

“No, and I didn’t remember it until the other day. It came back to me out of nowhere. Now I wonder if my brain was trying to tell me something way back then. I mean, I was never once disgusted by the dream. Confused, if anything. Embarrassed since I... you know, like I was fifteen or something. Who knows? It was a long time ago. I don’t even remember the guy’s name.”

“Do you remember his sister’s name?”

“Nah.”

With the same suddenness as we’d been plunged into darkness, our world lit up again like someone had flicked on a light. We’d emerged from the tunnel, and the bright sunlight was blinding.

We both squinted and blinked against the assault as we pulled off our bandanas.

“That was fast,” Brady remarked.

“Helps to have a distraction. Are we even now?”

His grin eclipsed the sun. “For now, but if you want more badass Brady tales, you’ll need to share more of yours too.”

“I’ll share anything with you, Brady.”

There they were again. Those sacred words tickled my tongue, wanting out, but Brady leaned forward and kissed me before I could decide to do anything about it. When he pulled back, it was only a few inches.

“I love you, Troy. I love that you’re willing to be vulnerable in front of me. I hope that doesn’t scare you.”

I was rendered speechless as I stared at the shimmer of hope and tenderness in Brady’s gray-blue eyes. It took a second to find my voice.

“Not at all,” I croaked. “It’s like you read my mind.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning... I’ve fallen head over heels for you too, and I couldn’t figure out how to get the words out.”

“I think you just did.”

“Yeah, I did. I love you. I’ve never loved anyone before. Not like this. It’s...”

“Amazing?”

“Incredible... Freeing.”

I pulled him in for another kiss, and for the first time in my life, I saw a future that was entirely different from the one I’d been planning and holding onto since I was a teenager. I’d always thought they would have to scrape my old dead bones off the tracks one day because settling down wasn’t in the cards for me.

But maybe it was.

Chapter Eighteen

Brady

We found another body.

It was a rough day. The unshakable Dodger I'd come to know didn't do well with these discoveries. I supposed the average human being with half a heart wouldn't. It was only because of my intended career path that I managed better. It didn't help that Dodger stumbled upon the body first. The moment had crippled him.

I'd sent him off to let me handle it, but he had yet to lose the thousand-yard stare, and he had yet to speak. Despite his deep summer tan, he was ashen.

I'd done a cursory examination of the body, noting what I could without getting too close or disturbing the scene. After scanning the photographs Dodger had provided of the still missing riders, I'd identified the deceased as a young, eighteen-year-old kid named Truett who'd gone missing six months ago. The state of the body seemed to confirm the time frame if I took winter conditions into effect. Once again, we were way up north in the mountains, a place where snow and

freezing temperatures were a given for several months of the year.

I'd shared his name with Dodger, and he'd tried to make a post to the forums to announce the teen's death, but he had no service, and neither did I. It also meant we couldn't call it in. Not yet.

It had been over three hours, and Dodger had yet to utter a word.

We'd been lumbering along the tracks in the direction of the abandoned station I presumed our suspect had used after killing Truett. Dodger kept a few paces ahead of me, eyes on the ground, body tense.

When we arrived at the dilapidated building, I caught Dodger's arm and pulled him to a stop, turning him toward me. "Why don't you let me take care of this while you set up the tent." It was late afternoon, and I doubted we'd get far before the sun went down, so I figured it was best we camp out since we'd been on our feet all day.

"I don't want to stay here." He wouldn't look at me. He stared somewhere over my shoulder.

"It's after four. We aren't getting back to the city before dark, so here is as good a place as any."

"I need to make that call. I can't do it here. I need service."

"The call can wait. He's been out there six months or so. One more day won't hurt."

Dodger's jaw was as tight as the rest of him, and as he thought about what I said, a trace of a quiver came and went. His eyes shimmered. "I don't want to do this anymore."

"I know."

With a suddenness that surprised me, he dragged me against his chest and buried his face in my neck. I held him. His body quaked. His exhales ghosted my skin, wet with emotion.

After a while, I let him go and urged him to set up the tent while I did a scan of the building.

"I won't be long."

"Be careful."

"I will."

I left my rucksack behind. Dodger's gaze burned the back of my neck as I moved toward the building to find a way in. I knew the minute I was out of sight he'd find his cigarettes and chain smoke through a few. He'd been doing his best to cut back, despite the dozen or so times I'd told him I didn't care. When he caved and had a few, he always took a walk. When he returned, he would brush his teeth and chew gum.

"If you need a hand climbing in a window or something, give me a shout. Don't hurt yourself."

"I'll be okay."

All the derelict stations were the same inside. Health hazards that needed to be demolished. Every one of them was rotting away from neglect. There was less evidence of

squatters in this one, but it was still full of debris. Empty food containers, wrappers, and beer cans. Broken benches, moldering wood, and animal carcasses. Vandalism was a given. Evidence of drug use was almost a guarantee.

It took no time to locate what I was looking for, and my heart ached, knowing I'd have to tell Dodger there was indisputable proof Truett's killer had stayed there. Truett's rucksack had been left in a corner. Rats had nested inside, and most of the clothes he'd kept in the bag were spilled on the floor, chewed full of holes by the rodents. But it was the black, vintage Pac-Man T-shirt that told me this rucksack had once belonged to our rider. It was the same T-shirt Truett wore in the photograph Dodger had on his phone.

I snapped a few pictures, glanced around one last time at the detritus of empty cigarette packages and broken bottles, then ended my search. There was no point digging deeper. The authorities would search the building properly and catch whatever else might be lying around.

I found Dodger sitting on a cracked stone bench outside the station, his clothing reeking of cigarettes. He hadn't set up the tent.

I sat beside him and said nothing.

After a long minute, he sniffed and rubbed his nose with the back of his hand. "That didn't take long." His voice was rough.

"No."

“Did you get what you needed?”

“Yeah.”

He nodded, still staring off into space.

“Do you want to head home?” I asked.

He didn't answer.

“To be honest, with this evidence, I should have no trouble convincing the RCMP to look for the other bodies. Your rider friends will be found. We don't have to keep going.”

Still, he didn't speak.

I wrapped my arm around him and let him lean against my side.

“How long do you think he hangs out in these places?” Dodger asked after several minutes had passed.

“I don't know. Weeks, maybe. It's hard to say. Based on the approximate time span between kills, he isn't constantly transient. He takes root for a while before moving on. Shacks up before he feels the need to take off.”

Dodger nodded, a pinch in his brow. “Let's do one more.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. But let's skip to the last suspected spot. The one near Prince George.”

“Northern BC?”

“Yeah.”

I considered the request as I tried to read Dodger, but he was closed off. “That’s the one location I’m not positive about.”

“I know.”

I stared at his profile, but he wouldn’t look at me.

“We’re not chasing a killer, Troy. It’s dangerous.”

He pressed his lips together, his nostrils flaring, but he didn’t respond. It was exactly where he was going with this.

“Maybe we should turn around.”

“No. One more.” The words were clipped. Determined and angry.

If my theory was correct and our killer’s movements were accurate, British Columbia was his most recent hunting ground. If our killer was still active, I suspected it was within that province.

Dodger knew it too.

“This is too personal for you. We should stop.”

He turned to face me, his eyes bloodshot behind his glasses. The pain in his core was evident. “One more, Brady. Do this for me. For them.”

“Okay. But before we head out into the unknown, I think I should take our findings to the RCMP headquarters in the area. I believe it’s in Surrey, BC.”

“No. If you report this, our quest to find answers is over. We put this investigation in their hands. They won’t want us

poking around anymore, and you know it. Come on, Brady, I'm not an idiot. I see what you're doing."

"You're right. I'm sorry. You're angry and hurt, and I think you have a slight vigilante complex brewing. I don't think you're considering the dangers."

I knew I was right when he didn't dispute my claim.

After a minute, Dodger's shoulders fell. "Do you really think I'm hunting down a killer?"

"Yes, and I get it. I don't blame you. These were your people. Your riders."

"This is a vast country, Brady. Even if we could be absolutely certain this guy was in BC somewhere, we aren't going to find him. Maybe a small part of me wishes I could throw that motherfucker off a train to see how he likes it, but I know, realistically, it's stupid."

"Then let's go home. Let's let someone else take care of this now."

"No."

I sighed.

"I still want to go to the coast."

"Why?"

Dodger waffled his head back and forth, and a faint smile touched his lips as he caught my hand. "Because I want to show you the ocean."

My heart skipped a beat, and I sat up straighter. “Like on my painting?”

“Like on your painting. You said you’ve never seen it. I’m not good at romantic gestures. I don’t watch those movies like you do, but... I know it’s something you’ve always wanted, and it’s something I can give you. We’re so close to the coast. Let me take you. Let me show you.”

“Troy.” His name caught in my throat, and tears burned my eyes.

Dodger leaned in and kissed me gently. “Don’t cry. You know I don’t know what to do with tears. Can I take you to the ocean, Brady? Can I give you that? Then we’ll go home.”

Home.

We hadn’t discussed what that meant despite throwing the word around here and there like it had some specific definition.

I wasn’t going to wonder about it or question it then.

“I’d love that.”

“Me too.”

It was decided. Our official expedition had come to an end. The evidence we’d compiled would have to be enough. I was confident I could convince the RCMP to look into this case with all we’d found. From this day forth, we were simply a new couple on vacation to the coast.

The following day, we hitchhiked back to Edmonton and caught out on the next freight heading to Calgary. From there, we were Vancouver bound, and I was going to see the ocean for the first time in my life.

It took five days to get there—mostly because we took our time.

After some planning, we decided to take a bus from Vancouver to Victoria and spend a weekend on the island. It was a pricey place to stay, a tourist trap, but I had spending money to spare thanks to my father, and I didn't mind coughing up the big bucks for two nights in a fancier hotel. Otherwise, we kept it simple and ordered takeout or room service instead of venturing to the classier restaurants or pubs in the area. We wouldn't have been presentable anyhow. We'd been on the road too long, and every pair of pants I owned had holes in the knees which had been patched too many times with duct tape.

I could have bought something decent to wear, but it wasn't important.

On our second day in the city, we traveled to a wilderness trail that led us to Chesterman Beach and the sandy coast overlooking the Pacific Ocean.

Dodger took my hand and guided me to the water's edge where the ebb and swell of the gentle surf licked the ground at our feet.

Even with the early hour, a few giant umbrellas dotted the beach in the distance along the uneven shoreline. Sunbathers

were sprawled on brightly colored towels. Kids in floppy sun hats built sandcastles. A lick of coconut suntan lotion drifted on the air, mixing with the briny scent of the sea.

We kicked off our boots and waded through the fizz of foam along the shore until we were ankle-deep in the crisp water. Tiny pebbles and slick mud oozed around my toes as the soft waves lapped at my shins. I was speechless. Awestruck.

Dodger wrapped his arms around my waist from behind, resting his chin on my shoulder as I took in the view.

“What do you think? I know it’s not a sunset, but it’s still pretty awesome, isn’t it?”

“This is better than I ever imagined.”

The air tasted of salt, and the warm summer wind blowing in off the ocean ruffled my hair. I squinted against the reflection of the sun as it glistened off the water.

“Thank you for this.”

“I’d do anything for you, Brady.”

I weaved my fingers through his, keeping his hold on me tight as I asked something that had been on my mind a lot lately. I didn’t want him to escape.

“Will you stay in Toronto with me?”

Dodger’s breathing hitched. I felt the air movement since his mouth was by my ear. It was not a quiet morning. Seagulls circled around the blue sky, calling out, squawking, and diving for food. Children on the beach shouted and squealed as they

ran and played. A boat horn sounded from somewhere in the distance, and snatches of conversation drifted toward us from down the beach. The waves were like their own gentle sonata, playing for the world at large.

I held my breath, waiting. The question had hung in the air between us for the past couple of weeks, but this was the first time we'd faced it head-on. I needed to know.

"Yes," he breathed a few minutes later. His voice was barely audible, but he held me a fraction tighter and continued. "I think I'd like that."

"You'd move in with me?"

"Do you want me to?"

"I do."

I turned in his arms. His glasses were smudged and sat crooked on his nose, but now was not the time to deal with them. I took his face between my palms and kissed him.

When we came apart, it was Dodger who spoke first. "I love you. If you can put up with me being a dumbass sometimes and forgetting to filter my comments and probably pissing you off from time to time, I'd love to live with you."

"You make yourself sound awful. I have my own flaws, and I'm about to plunge into writing my thesis, which will bring out the crazy in me."

"There's a crazy Brady in there?"

"Yes! You have no idea. He's a nightmare."

Dodger brushed his fingers over my cheek. “I’m sure I’ll love him like I do the rest of you.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

“What about working for your dad?”

“I think he’s prepared to hear I won’t be home this winter.”

We spent the rest of the day at the ocean, soaking up the sun, swimming, lying on the beach, and for once, talking about the future.

As the sun set, we sat side by side in the sand to watch, and it was better than anything I’d ever imagined.

Two days later, we took the bus back to Vancouver, where we made the long trek to the railyard on foot. Our freight didn’t leave for another ten hours, so we found a spot in an overgrown, secluded area half a mile from the yard and hung out.

Dodger texted on his phone while I went over my notes and wrote up summaries of what we’d found so I was organized when we brought this forward.

We were both leaning against the same tree trunk, shoulder to shoulder when Dodger groaned and said, “Please don’t hate me.”

I diverted my attention from my notes as he held out his phone, angling it so it faced us both.

“What? Why? What’s happening?”

“You’re officially meeting the gang. They will not be put off any longer. I’ll apologize now for the harassment we are about to endure.”

Then he clicked a call button, and a small image of us together appeared in a little inlaid window in the bottom corner of the screen.

A moment later, the call was picked up, and we were greeted by not one but a literal smushed-together pile of five faces, all trying to get in the frame at the same time.

They were all grinning and talking at once, but the second the video call cleared, Dodger whistled to shut them up.

“First off,” he said, pointing at the screen. “You can all fuck off with your comments because I don’t wanna hear them. You’ve all had enough time to soak up the news, so just, fuck off.”

His statement was met with riotous laughter and clapping, making the audio cut in and out.

“I hate you all,” he muttered under his breath, but I didn’t think anyone heard him but me. When the group calmed, a dark-haired guy said, “Introduce us to *yo man!*” He dragged out the last two words, adding extra pulses of emphasis.

“Fine.” Dodger squished his face to mine and made sideways pucker lips like he was trying to kiss me and look at the camera at the same time. “This sexy-as-fuck stud here is Brady.”

“Who is your...” Willow, the only one of the group I knew, rolled her hand, encouraging him to fill in the blank.

“Who is my *boyfriend*. Go on, get it out of your system before I hang up on you all.”

We were met by huge grins all around. “Dude, this is awesome,” the dark-haired guy said. “I’m legit shocked and super excited. Did we ever have a chance? I mean, if I’d known...”

“Hey,” said the blond beside him, giving him a dirty look.

“Shut up,” Dodger grumbled.

“No way, man. My mind is blown.”

“I said, shut up, Killer.”

I turned to Dodger and pecked his cheek, which earned us more whistles. “Introduce me.”

“All right. That asshole”—he indicated the man with the dark hair—“is Killian, a.k.a Killer. The blond beside him is his boyfriend, Leo, a.k.a Green.”

“Do any of you go by your first names?” I asked.

“You know Dodger’s first name, right?” the one named Leo asked.

“I do. It’s Troy.”

“Holy crap.” Killian nudged his boyfriend, mock whispering, “This is mega serious.”

“Killer, I swear to god.”

“I’m shutting up.”

“The one with the hair.” Dodger pointed to a guy with wild red curls. “He’s just Tyler. No nickname. No last name.”

“Sometimes we call him Ronald,” Willow said.

“True.”

“Like Ronald McDonald,” I said. “I remember you mentioning him.”

Tyler grinned and gave his head a shake. “You know it.”

“It’s good to see you smile, Ty,” Dodger said. “Looks good on you.”

Tyler gave the camera a wink.

Dodger continued with introductions. “The guy clinging to his arm is Silent Bob.”

“My name is Elian, thank you very much.”

“Whoa, he speaks! Did you all hear that?”

Elian stuck out his tongue. “Sometimes.”

“When did you get to Montreal, Bob?”

“A few days ago.”

“You all good now?”

“Getting there. You got my message?”

“I did. Thanks for following through and taking care of my boy.”

Dodger and Elian shared a smile. I didn't know what they were talking about, but it didn't matter.

“And that pretty lady you've met,” Dodger said, pointing at Willow.

“You know, Troy, I'm starting to think you have a type,” Willow said, eyeing me up and down.

Dodger frowned. “What's that supposed to mean?”

“They're always blond with blue eyes.”

“Not true,” Killian chimed in. “Megan Fox is a brunette, and we all know how Dodger—”

“Hey,” Dodger shouted, cutting him off as he pointed at the camera. “None of that. Brady doesn't know that story yet, and we don't need to share.”

Killian made the motion to zip his lips.

Leo giggled.

“I still say he has a type,” Willow said. “Megan Fox is just his wet dream, but all the girls he's told me about were blonde.”

“Seriously, shut your mouth, woman. It doesn't matter anymore. I traded in boobs for dick, and I'm happy. End of story.”

The guy he'd called Leo buried his face in his hands, chuckling and shaking his head. “You're so classy.”

“Why couldn't you say you traded in Barbie for Ken?” Willow asked.

“Because that would require tact. Something Dodger doesn’t possess,” the man he’d called Tyler said.

“You always have to be crude,” Willow said. “I pity you, Brady. This guy is a mouthpiece.”

“He’s okay.”

“Just okay?” Dodger gaped, turning to me with mock hurt.

I kissed him right in front of his friends, making him blush. “More than okay.”

“Is anyone else still in shock?” the one named Killian asked.

Tyler raised his hand.

Leo smothered a grin.

Willow rolled her eyes. “God help me if I get texts about your sex life, Dodger. I will break your face.”

“So what’s your game plan?” Tyler asked. “You guys are in Vancouver, right?”

“For now,” Dodger said. “We’re making the long trek home. Once we’re there, we have a date with the RCMP.”

“Did you prove it?” Leo asked. “Is there really a killer?”

The mood shifted, and all the once happy faces turned sullen. This wasn’t just personal for Dodger. It was personal for all of them.

Dodger looked at me, nodding and letting me know I should take over.

“There really is a killer. We have enough evidence they won’t be able to ignore it. With luck, they’ll open a proper investigation and catch this guy.”

The one Dodger had called Silent Bob looked worried. If I remembered right, his name was Elian. “Do you think he’s still active and in the country?” he asked.

“I think it’s possible. He could have slipped down the coast, but I get the feeling he’s around.”

“Right here in BC if Brady’s theory is correct,” Dodger added.

No one was smiling anymore.

“You guys stay safe,” Leo said.

“We’re fine. The guy hunts solo riders. It would be unlikely he’d try to take on two at a time. He’d lose his power advantage,” I explained. “It would be a big change to his MO. I don’t suspect we’re in any danger.”

“But that also means you fuckers go nowhere on your own until this guy is caught, you hear me?” Dodger pointed at the screen. “I’m especially talking to Ronald and Bob over there. No more solo riding until this guy is caught.”

“We hear you,” Tyler said.

“We’re sticking together from here on out,” Elian added.

“Willow?” Dodger pointed at her.

“What?”

“This goes for you too.”

“He’s never killed a woman,” I said. “That too would be outside his MO.”

“I don’t care. Maybe he’s never killed a woman because there aren’t as many female riders out there. Don’t risk it. I know Killer isn’t going to LA this year, and if Ty and Elian are doing their own thing, you better find a traveling buddy. You hear me?”

“I’ll figure it out.”

“I’m serious, Willow.”

“I hear you. I said I’ll figure it out.”

“Are you going to swing by Montreal?” Killian asked, changing the subject.

“I don’t know.” Dodger glanced at me.

“We could. The RCMP’s main headquarters is in Ottawa. After we put everything together at my place, we could go there, make our report, then hit Montreal before returning to Toronto.”

“All right. We’ll be there,” Dodger told his friends.

We all said goodbye, and Dodger ended the call. “Well, that could have been worse.”

I chuckled. “You have nice friends.”

“They’re a crazy bunch, but I love them. They’re my family, so I hope you get used to them. We’re all really close.”

“I’m sure we’ll get along fine.”

He checked the time on his phone and blew out a breath. “Don’t hate me. I’m out of smokes, and I thought I’d be fine, but I’m already feeling squirrely. I’m going to hike to the train station. It’s about five kilometers down the tracks. They have a small store there. I won’t be long.”

“No worries. I’m going to keep writing on this report.”

“Do you want anything?”

“Chocolate?”

“Won’t that make you stupid hyper?”

“Yes.”

He laughed. “We’ll see.”

He bent down and kissed me. “I’ll be back. Give me about an hour.”

“I love you.”

“You too.”

He was not back in an hour.

But I didn’t panic until I got his first text.

Chapter Nineteen

Dodger

The five-kilometer walk to the train station was hot. I was dressed to ride and sweating through my cargos and dark, long-sleeved shirt. My glasses kept slipping down my nose, and the few strands of hair that had fallen from my ponytail stuck to my face.

Out of habit, I'd grabbed my rucksack and was hauling it along unnecessarily. I should have left it behind with Brady, but I hadn't noticed my error until over a mile into my walk, and I didn't want to go back. It was an exhausting trek under the late-afternoon sun with the added weight. Beads of sweat ran down my temples, and I stopped twice to remove my glasses and mop my face with the bottom of my shirt.

By the time I made it to the station, I was in dire need of a drink and shade. The small store at the train station wasn't anything special. It sold the usual convenience store items people might look for before taking a trip. Drinks, snacks, gum, magazines, lottery tickets, and cigarettes.

I bought a bottle of Gatorade, a new pack of smokes, some gum, and a lighter. As the cashier rang me through, I browsed the selection of chocolate bars and added a Snickers to my purchase for Brady, shaking my head and smiling to myself the whole time. I could just imagine what he'd be like hopped up on chocolate. If it was anything like when he ate donuts, I was doomed.

Back outside, I moved around the side of the building where it was shadier, and I was out of the way of other travelers hustling around and buying their tickets. The bathrooms were along this side, two doors marked with stick figures, the traditional man and woman.

I dropped my rucksack on the ground by the wall and uncapped my drink. I chugged the Gatorade until it was gone, then tossed the empty plastic bottle into a blue bin that sat beside a full garbage can.

The clatter upset a swarm of bees, and I had to step back in a hurry, shooing them with a hand. Once they'd settled back in the can, I pulled the cellophane off the new package of cigarettes I'd bought and carefully deposited it on top of the garbage, trying not to disturb the bees a second time.

I plucked a cigarette from the pack and fit it between my lips as someone emerged from the bathroom behind me. The heavy door clunked closed just as a man's voice groused, "For fuck's sake."

From the corner of my eye, I caught the man chucking something toward the garbage bin. The item—an empty

package of cigarettes—clipped the edge of the can—disturbing the bees—and fell to the ground.

Marlboros.

Back in the day, when my father had smoked, that had been his brand. I hated them. When I was a teenager, I'd steal them from my old man, not knowing the difference, but once I'd been old enough to buy my own, things had changed.

Dad had long ago quit smoking, but I would never forget the taste of Marlboros.

I glanced over my shoulder to see if the guy would be bothered to pick up his garbage and caught him giving me a once-over.

When our eyes locked, he tipped his chin in a nod. “Hey. Mind if I bum a smoke? I’m all out.” He waved a hand at the trash on the ground.

The guy was rough-looking. I pegged him to be in his midforties. He was thin with a craggy face covered in silver and dark stubble, dry, cracked lips, and washed-out hazel eyes framed with heavy creases. His skin was weathered and hung off his gaunt face. His dark hair was long and scraggly, hitting his shoulders, streaked with the same thick amount of silver as his unshaven face.

He might have been a decent-looking guy at one time, but not anymore. Life had beaten him up bad.

Despite my initial observation, what stuck out the most was his clothing. I knew the look. He wore forest-green cargos, a

black long-sleeved shirt, dark brown hiking boots, and had a bandana tied loosely around his neck. Over one shoulder, he carried a well-worn, army-style rucksack, a sleeping bag rolled under the top straps, and a dented canteen dangling off the side. We were one and the same.

It gave me pause, but I wasn't one to be overly paranoid, so I quickly dismissed my initial reaction. I ran into all kinds of riders while out traveling, and most of them were no different than this guy. Regardless, a bit of caution wouldn't hurt. After all, we had been tracking a killer all summer.

I held out my fresh pack of smokes and lighter as I took him in. He helped himself to two, stuck one behind his ear, and lit the other before handing the pack and lighter back.

"You're a rider," I said, stuffing my smokes into a pocket. It wasn't a question. I knew my people. We were a bedraggled clan, and when you were part of the community, you had no trouble identifying others who were part of it too.

The guy squinted at me as he drew smoke into his lungs. He wore ratty, fingerless gloves. Another sign. His attention moved to my dark clothing, similar in style to his. When he realized I wasn't wearing a pack, he scanned the ground until he found it leaning against the wall near the bathroom doors.

He thumbed at the rucksack. "Takes one to know one." He grinned and offered a fist to bump, which I returned.

"You catching out or just landing?" I asked.

He took another haul off the cigarette and blew a wisp of smoke into the air before answering. “Just hit town for supplies. Been hunkered down for a while, but it’s time to move on, stretch my legs. Need the wind in my hair again. You?”

“Catching out tonight.”

“Nice. Where to? Maybe we’re going in the same direction.”

“Maybe.” It wasn’t an answer, and the well-known rider’s code should have ended the conversation there.

The man chuckled and shook his head as he turned and spat a wad of phlegm on the ground. “Yeah, yeah. Don’t ask, don’t tell, right? That’s cool, man.”

He balanced the cigarette between his lips and offered a hand to shake. “If it helps, you can call me Fish. Now we ain’t strangers.”

I slapped a hand in his, shaking. “Dodger. But that changes nothing.”

Fish held up his hands in surrender. “I figured. Code is code. I know the rules. You just cruising the rails, or are you heading somewhere particular?”

“Mainly soaking up the sun while it’s nice.”

“Here, here. Ain’t nothing worse than riding in the winter, am I right? Fucking arctic wind is enough to freeze your balls off in these parts.”

“Word.”

We both smoked in silence for a few minutes. I got the sense Fish was taking me in as much as I was him. Even before I knew we had a serial killer on the line, I’d learned to be cautious of other riders. Not that I was unfriendly, but I liked to get a read on people first. We might have been a tight-knit community of like-minded folks, but I’d come across a few people over the years who were in such dire straits they had a tendency to leech off other riders. Desperate times called for desperate measures, and when you were homeless, you did what you had to do. I didn’t blame people, but I wouldn’t be taken for a sucker.

When I’d smoked to the filter, I flicked the cigarette to the ground and crushed it under my boot, kicking the butt away to the grassy area off the cement pad. I collected Fish’s litter and tossed the old Marlboro pack into the trash can before pulling out my new pack of cigarettes and removing a couple.

I held them out to Fish. “Here. For the road, my man. I’m trying to quit, so the less I have, the better. I’ve gotta split. You take care.”

He accepted the cigarettes with a nod of thanks before flicking his butt away into the grass. “You heading to the yard?”

“Thereabouts.”

“Mind if I walk with ya?”

I hesitated. Something wasn't sitting right. "Dude, we aren't catching out together. I've got a buddy waiting for me, and we're not looking for a third party."

"No worries, no worries. Chill. I'll stay out of your hair. For the most part, I'm a solo rider. I do my own thing."

I shrugged and heaved my pack to my shoulders. I didn't know if I should believe that statement or not. I wasn't keen on this guy tagging along with Brady and me, but we could always bullshit him and tell him we were grabbing a different ride if he thought to snag the same freight as us. Or we could head back to town and get a motel for the night if it became a problem.

We walked without speaking, staying out of sight as we followed the tracks away from the station. Night was falling, so I knew it was close to nine. I had a rough idea of when our freight to Calgary left, but I had half a mind to come up with a backup plan if Fish decided he was going the same way.

To break the silence and because a niggling suspicion wouldn't leave me alone, I asked, "So where've you been hunkering down? My friends and I pass through the area a fair bit. It's always good to know of a few locations where we can lay low if we need downtime. We don't all have connections in the city, right?"

"I hear ya. I spend all my time riding. I only pop in and out of cities for supplies, then find somewhere secluded and take a few weeks off to recharge before moving on. Not sure this place is what you're looking for. It's a hop, skip, and a jump

up a commercial line, so it takes a song and a dance to get there. Doubt you and your friends would like it.”

The hairs at the back of my neck stood on end, and my pace faltered as Fish kept talking, unaware his story had triggered me.

“I’m an off-the-beaten-path kinda guy. Been all over this country, up and down every line there is. Not many riders can say that, but I’ve been at it for decades. How long have you been riding?”

“Um... about ten years.”

“Nice...” He kept talking, but my mind raced out of control, and I stopped listening.

The air in my lungs sat stagnant as I took in the last fifteen or twenty minutes, from the time this guy had stepped out of the bathroom to now.

Marlboros.

All those abandoned stations.

The mountain of litter we’d found at each one.

Empty cigarette packages on the ground.

Marlboros. There were always Marlboros.

I had absently registered it because of my dad and his history with that brand of cigarettes, but I’d dismissed it as nothing. Now I wasn’t so sure.

Had it been every station? Was I jumping to conclusions?

It’s a hop, skip, and a jump up a commercial line.

So was the abandoned station we'd decided not to check. I stared at the man named Fish with new eyes as Brady's vague profile of our serial killer swirled in my brain.

Our killer is an experienced rider, likely between the ages of thirty-five and forty-five years old. He's male. White. Friendly. Personable. Laid-back but also a loner. He will avoid spending too much time in cities and will likely only venture there for supplies, doing all he can to stay under the radar. Although he prefers solitude, he's companionable and a smooth talker, which makes it easy for him to lure young, unsuspecting riders into a trap by encouraging them to tag along with him.

My stomach clenched. Fish fit the profile.

I had to think on my feet. If this was him—and my alarm bells were officially ringing—then I needed to do something.

But what? And how could I be sure? Was I projecting? Was this really happening? What were the chances?

Fish knew I was meeting up with a friend, so I didn't think I was at immediate risk, but taking him back to where Brady and I had been camped out didn't sit right with me either. Not without warning Brady first.

He wasn't going to like this. I'd already been gone far longer than I'd planned, but I slowed my pace and tugged out my phone, pretending I'd just gotten a text and had to check it.

Fish stopped and glanced back, so I angled my phone so he couldn't see the screen.

“Sorry. It’s my buddy.”

I pulled up Brady’s name in my list and typed out a short and concise message, hoping he would read between the lines and not freak out.

Incoming with company. Be on alert, but stay cool. This guy ticks all the boxes. Can’t shake him.

When I hit Send, I silenced my phone, knowing Brady would blow it up the second he received my message.

When I pocketed my phone, Fish asked, “All good?”

“Yeah. Change of plans, I think. We might be heading back into the city tonight instead of catching out. Another buddy of ours is gonna be around tomorrow. We haven’t seen him in a while.”

“I see. Gotta do what you’ve gotta do, right?”

“Truth.”

“Close-knit group?”

“Somewhat.”

We continued walking. I hoped Brady knew enough to play along and didn’t freak out the second we got there. I could see that happening.

Halfway back to the secluded spot where I’d left Brady, Fish lit another smoke. The itch to grab my own was real, so I opened the fresh pack of gum I’d bought and stuffed two pieces into my mouth instead. It wasn’t the same.

I wanted to pick this guy's brain and get a better sense of whether or not he was who I thought he was, but how did one go about nonchalantly asking a stranger if they were a serial killer?

I huffed a humorless laugh under my breath. Christ. A serial killer. What were the chances? Was it possible I'd randomly run into the guy? Never in a million years did I ever think I'd end up walking side by side with the mythical CP Rail killer.

I felt surprisingly calm, considering.

I spent the last half mile of our walk envisioning ways I could pin this fucker down and have his ass arrested. He was older. I had no doubt I could take him in a fight. Brady had said once he suspected our killer likely used a stun gun for that reason. He wasn't confident he could outmaneuver or overpower a young kid, and he didn't want to take a chance of losing the upper hand, so he debilitated his victims.

Maybe I could take him down when he least expected it. Tie him to a tree or to the railroad tracks like I'd seen a dozen times in the cartoons I'd watched growing up. A sadistic part of me liked the idea of a little poetic justice, but the more humane side of me knew I wasn't the vigilante Brady had once accused me of being. I didn't have it in me to harm another human being. Not even a serial killer.

But I couldn't let this guy walk away. Not if he was the CP Killer.

"You got a home base?" I asked after some significant pondering.

“Me? Nah. I’m a drifter. Haven’t called anywhere home in more years than I can remember.”

“I got ya. So you must have a lot of cozy, out-of-the-way places where you hunker down and recharge.” There was a bite in my tone I couldn’t hide.

“Yeah. A few. Why do you ask?”

I shrugged. “Just makes sense. You get on the forums much?”

Fish laughed. “Buddy, I’m old school. Do I look like one of those guys on your *forums*? I don’t carry a fancy phone like all you kids. Hell, I didn’t run away from home like half the riders I’ve seen out on the rails, thinking it would be better away from mommy and daddy. No, I’ve been doing this my whole life. Caught my first ride when I was seven years old. Ain’t never looked back. I use paper maps and intuition.” He tapped his temple. “I don’t have connections in the cities, and I don’t play by your code or your rider rules or whatever the fuck they’re calling it these days. Shit, it’s like a game for you guys. You young kids don’t appreciate the old-fashioned ways. You don’t know the real gritty aspects of what it means to stay alive.”

“Oh yeah? What gritty aspects would those be?”

Fish huffed as he flicked ash from the end of his cigarette. “When you’re truly homeless, life is a battlefield, and you don’t ever leave the trenches. You fight, and you fight hard. It’s every man for himself.” He waved a dismissive hand. “Bah. Never mind. Don’t listen to an old fart like me. What do

I know, right? You're from a different generation, kid. I've seen your type out and about on the rails. You are exactly the kind of little shit I'm talking about. You play at being a vagabond, but you don't know what it is to freeball it in this world. Kids today *think* they have it hard. They run away from home for a time, but they always go back when they realize they can't do it. Fucking crybabies. You're transient, sure, but you don't know shit about the hard life."

"And you know all that about me after knowing me for, what, a half hour? Awfully presumptuous."

"You aren't homeless."

"Never said I was. I don't have to be homeless to ride. Maybe I do it for sport because I like it."

Fish stopped walking and faced me. He sucked on his cigarette, eyes squinting as he took me in again like he'd done back at the train station. "Too bad you've gotta meet up with your friend. I could have taught you a thing or two about the real ride." He pointed at me with two fingers, cigarette balanced between them as wisps of smoke dissipated into the air. "You're a smart one, Dodger. I'd have loved to have you tag along with me for a bit."

"Thought you did things solo."

A slick smile spread across his face. "Sometimes. Sometimes I like to teach your generation some hard truths about riding."

"I bet you do. Another time, I guess."

Fish nodded, taking one last haul off his cigarette and flicking it away. “Another time.”

My blood boiled. Was this how he did it? Used his old-school ways to convince young, innocent riders to join him on the rails so he could teach them about the hard life and how to survive. It made a sick sort of sense. I may not have been homeless, but I knew enough people from the community to know it wasn't as black-and-white as this guy made it sound. Some kids didn't choose to walk away from home. They were kicked out or orphaned. If they were new, they might jump at the chance to learn new survival skills from a lifer. Especially one as personable and self-assured as Fish.

But I saw through him. The guy had a chip on his shoulder, and his hate for the younger generation ran deep.

The more we talked, the more the rage inside me expanded. I was convinced this was our guy. There wasn't a doubt in my mind. He was smooth and calculating. Had I been traveling alone, he'd have done everything in his power to get me to tag along.

As much as I'd promised Brady our goal wasn't to chase down a serial killer, I knew I couldn't let this asshole walk away. Not when he'd taken out so many rider friends. Not when I'd been hunting him down for years. He'd burrowed under my skin long ago. Meeting him in the flesh had only made it worse.

I'd stared at the face of death twice this month in the form of murdered riders who had been left to rot on the side of the

tracks with no family to claim them. Riders who'd met their fate at the hands of this sadistic, smooth-talking motherfucker.

Bile stirred in my belly, and I clenched and unclenched my fists, chewing obsessively at my gum so I wouldn't say something I'd regret and inadvertently put myself in harm's way.

My heart thundered as we pushed through the copse of trees and shrubs to get to the spot where I'd left Brady. The crisp scent of pine and diesel filled my nose, and the tang of ozone was ripe on my tongue. In the distance, the clang of a passing train filled the air, blocking out the concentrated effort it took to breathe normally. We weren't far from the tracks. The mighty engine rumbled along, vibrating the ground under my feet. It also covered the sound of our approach.

When we emerged into the clearing, Brady was on his feet, pacing, staring at his phone. He froze when he saw us, face ashen, body rigid, and eyes wary. I held his gaze, doing all I could to impart a warning. *Keep your mouth shut and play along.*

Brady's throat bobbed, but his strained smile told me he understood. He tucked his hands into his pockets in a failed effort to look casual and composed.

I opened my mouth to introduce him but slammed it shut again, teeth clacking. I didn't want buddy boy Fish to know Brady's real name, and I hadn't come up with an alternative plan either, so I was scrambling.

Fish spoke first. He tipped his head in a nod and extended a hand. “You must be the friend. Nice to meet you. The name’s Fish.”

Brady hadn’t taken his eyes off me. Their usually smoky blue color was a deeper gray under the shadows of the trees, and they were brimming with questions. Slowly, he shifted his attention to Fish, staring at the offered hand for an extended period of time.

“Yeah.” I cleared my throat, cutting into the far too still moment. “This is the buddy I was telling you about. We call him... um... Snickers.” I pulled the chocolate bar I’d bought from my pocket and tossed it at Brady, making him flinch.

He fumbled it when it hit his chest and stared from me to the candy bar with a dip in his brow before his expression cleared to one of understanding. At least I’d managed to knock him from his daze.

He stood straighter. Acknowledging Fish’s extended hand, he took hold of it, shaking. “Yeah. Um... The name’s Snickers.” He waved the chocolate bar in the air between them with a painfully awkward smile.

“I’m sure it is.” Fish chuckled.

“Are you ready to take off?” I asked Brady, brow arched. Before he could respond, I turned to Fish. “Sorry we can’t hang out, man. We don’t get to see our buddy very often. You understand. Maybe we’ll catch you on the rails again sometime.”

“Maybe.”

We shook hands as Brady collected his rucksack off the ground and hitched it over his shoulders. I sensed him watching us closely, felt his nervous energy like it was my own. The air surrounding the three of us was electric like the moments before a storm rolled in.

I didn't think Fish suspected we knew anything about him, but it was unnerving just being around him. Moreover, I didn't want Brady around him. I had always been overprotective of those I was close to, but in less than five minutes, I'd learned it was a thousand times worse when it was someone you loved.

Brady came up beside me, confusion marking a path across his face. He stood close enough I could smell the sun on his skin. I gave Fish one last wave and took Brady's arm, guiding him through the trees and out of sight on a path that led away from the train tracks.

We'd gone about fifty yards when I tugged Brady to a stop behind a large tree and looked back to see if we were being followed.

“What the hell is happening?” he hissed, speaking for the first time as though he had finally found his voice.

“You got my text?”

“Are you telling me—”

“That buddy boy Fish is our guy? Yes.” I squinted through the trees, but the encroaching night was playing tricks with my eyes, and shadows danced in the distance, making it hard to

decipher if we were being followed or if it was simply the wind moving the leaves in the trees.

Brady jerked my arm, forcing me to face him. “Are you talking off the top of your head, or are you basing this accusation on some kind of evidence?”

“I got a bad vibe.” I pulled loose from Brady’s hold and glanced around the tree again. “We need to circle back and see if he’s still there or on the move.”

“A bad vibe? You’re accusing a guy of being a serial killer based on a bad vibe?”

“No. He fits your profile, and... it’s him. I know it.”

“What parts of the profile?”

“All of it. Well, most of it. He’s in the age bracket. He’s a loner. He’s a smooth talker and extremely personable. If I hadn’t been on alert and if I had been alone, the guy might have easily lured me into following him. Plus, he claims to have a spot down the commercial line. Sound familiar? Come on.”

I tried to tug Brady along with me, but he resisted. “Have you lost your mind?”

“I don’t want to lose him.”

Brady rattled his head like he wasn’t following. “Wait. Back up. What happened? Tell me everything.”

I scanned the landscape again, annoyed at the delay. When I was certain it was clear, I crouched low and encouraged Brady

to do the same, then I told him everything that had happened back at the train station and all about the conversation we'd had on our trek back.

When I finished, Brady's eyes were unfocused, darting one way then the other, and his gears were spinning. "This is... We need to get to the RCMP. I'm not sure I'm quite prepared to present all our data, but the facts are all there. I can wing it. It would be better if I'd had more time. Most of the information is adequately compiled, but a lot of it is at home. I just need to —"

"No! Brady, listen to me." I took hold of his shoulders, shaking him until he focused on me and not his internal databank of information. "We need to figure out where he's going. Right now. Before we lose him."

"Are you nuts?" His voice squeaked, and I didn't think it was possible for him to lose another shade of color, but he did.

"If we go to the RCMP, we're going to lose him. It will take well over an hour to get to Surrey, even if we call a cab. Then you need to convince someone to listen to you. We don't have an appointment to see anyone, and it will be long after ten at night. Do you honestly think they'll bother with us? Look at us, Brady. We've been on the road for two months. Even if they did entertain us, how long will it take for you to get all this out?" I tapped his temple.

"Concisely? A couple of hours. It would be easier if I had access to my laptop. That way—"

“A couple of hours. See? And then, *if* they listen and take action immediately—which they won’t—they will need to pull together people to come down here. They have processes and procedures to follow. This shit doesn’t happen in five minutes. You of all people know that. By the time they pull anything together, it will be morning or afternoon. Heck, it might be three days from now. He will be long gone, and we won’t know what train he got on or where he was heading. I couldn’t even get a picture of the guy because it would have been too obvious, and he was watching me like a hawk. We have to backtrack right now and follow him.”

Brady’s face shifted in horror. “No.” He shook his head for emphasis. “No. Absolutely not. We are not hunting a serial killer. I said this back in Toronto. I’ve reiterated it a dozen times over the last few weeks. No! No, no, no.” He was borderline hysterical. “That is not proper procedure. I won’t do it.”

“Fuck procedure!” I shouted. “You aren’t a fucking cop. You aren’t a detective. And this isn’t even an open case. You are a fucking university student, a wannabe profiler who hasn’t written his goddamn thesis yet. Get it through your thick skull. This guy has killed at least a dozen riders. *My friends*, Brady.” I slapped my chest, my entire body quaking with anger.

“You didn’t even know them!”

“They were part of my community. It’s the same goddamn thing.”

“It’s not.” His volume matched my own. “You don’t even know their full names. You don’t know where they’re from or who their families are. They’re strangers who met an unfortunate end, but you don’t *know* them. And fuck you, Troy.” He shoved me hard enough I toppled to my ass. “Why do you always have to be such an asshole.”

Brady scrambled to his feet, sneering down at me. “I might be nothing more than a wannabe profiler to you, but at least I have enough common sense and self-preservation to not go chasing down dangerous men. What’s your big plan? You want to follow him, but then what? Are you going to take him on? Do you think a macho attitude is enough? Well, this isn’t a schoolyard bully. This is a psychopath. This is a deranged individual who kills for sport.”

I got to my feet, brushing dried pine needles from the seat of my pants. “I want to know where he’s going. If we can get a location, we can tell the police where to find him. If we walk away now, he’s in the wind. Maybe forever. Then more people will die.”

“It’s dangerous.”

“Then fuck off. I’ll do it myself. Go do things the Brady way. Go sit with a bunch of fucking brain-dead cops who haven’t listened to you and tell them what we found. Lay out all your precious evidence. In three days, when they decide to stop wanking their dicks and do something about it, Fish will be long gone, and they won’t know what way to go, but maybe I will. I’m done watching my community suffer because of

this jackass. I'm done logging onto the forums only to find that another guy has gone missing."

"Troy."

"Don't call me that!" I roared, kicking the tree trunk, popping my knuckles. "Fuck this. I can't even talk to you. I'm out."

"You're just going to walk away and leave me here in the middle of nowhere?"

"Yep. Have a nice life."

"What the hell am I supposed to do?"

"Go to the police. Make your report. Do me a favor. Don't call me."

There was no traffic on the rails as I stomped away, and the piercing silence that followed my exit made my ears ache. An early-to-rise owl asked an accusatory question in a nearby tree, and random birds screeched in the distance. The clang of coupling cars in the train yard seemed dampened by the roar of blood pulsing in my ears.

My heart thudded triple-time, and I was shaking with residual anger.

I'd gone a dozen or so yards before my feet refused to take me any farther. I grabbed at the trunk of a young sapling, but it wouldn't hold my weight, and I went down on my knees. My ears rang. My eyes burned. Anger seared my chest. I swallowed around a tight knot in my throat and glanced back from where I'd come. Brady was no longer in sight. The sun

had dipped below the horizon, and although a lingering hint of the day remained in the sky above, the darkness under the canopy of trees stole my ability to see far.

The cruel, harsh words I'd spoken echoed inside my head, but they were eclipsed by seething rage. Not at Brady and his levelheaded thinking, but at Fish and all he'd done. I was torn. I knew the right choice was to walk away from him and bring our findings to the authorities, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. The man was within my grasp. I couldn't let him walk away.

He'd taken from my community. When no one had cared, I'd fought to find the truth, and maybe I hadn't gotten far until I'd found Brady, but we'd proven his existence. And I had him. He was here. How could I turn around and walk away? How could I risk him never being found again?

I would never forgive myself.

But at what sacrifice?

With a deep-throated growl, I punched the ground.

I wanted to turn around, find Brady, and grovel for forgiveness because he was right. I was an asshole, and I couldn't seem to keep my foot out of my mouth. I'd never claimed to be perfect, but I had tried. I had tried really hard.

Maybe it was best I walked away now before he realized it was a character flaw I couldn't fix. If he stayed with me, he was doomed to always suffer my cruel, runaway mouth.

I took a few deep breaths, doing what I could to calm the tremors, and pulled myself up off the ground. I studied the darkening world around me. First, I stared in the direction from which I'd come. No Brady in sight.

I scanned the terrain in the direction I'd been heading. No Fish.

A train whistle sounded down the line, its high-pitched screech shivering in my bones. A flock of birds in a nearby tree took flight at the sudden noise, the simultaneous beating of wings slowly fading into the distance.

With regret in my heart, I pulled myself to my feet and continued toward the small area where Brady and I had originally been waiting to catch out.

The area where we'd left Fish.

Chapter Twenty

Brady

I stared after him until Dodger vanished into the trees. Mouth agape, still reeling from all he'd said and the fact that he'd walked away, I couldn't move. The mountain of information he'd laid at my feet about Fish and their encounter spun on repeat in my head. Coupled with Dodger's insults and harsh words, the best way to describe how I felt was stunned.

It sounded entirely plausible that Fish could be our man. The official CP Rail killer. The one who'd murdered several innocent riders across the country.

And my would-be boyfriend had just gone after him despite all the times I'd warned him that chasing down killers was not our purpose or our mission.

Plus, he'd abandoned me in the middle of nowhere, the one thing I'd begged him not to do when we'd left Toronto.

Fear gripped my heart and squeezed. If I went after Dodger, if I tried again to talk sense into him, I had a feeling it would

result in an even bigger fight, yet I couldn't in good conscience leave him to the fate of a man known to kill riders.

Dodger wouldn't be stupid enough to get on a train with Fish, would he?

"Yes," I said under my breath. "He probably would."

Because Dodger was cocky and bullheaded... and hurt and angry. I'd known from day one this was personal to him. I'd seen it in his eyes when we'd uncovered those two bodies. I'd felt it when he'd clung to me on the nights following our discoveries, doing all he could to hide his tears and pain.

Logically, I should get my ass to the RCMP headquarters in Surrey and break this whole thing wide open. How far away was that? How long would it take for me to get there and relay all the information we'd gathered? I didn't have it fully organized. It was mostly on my phone but in poorly taken photographs and random documents. I didn't have my laptop or the pertinent reports we'd left behind at my apartment. I needed the autopsies, the giant map from the wall, the clipboards with the reams of information I'd gathered over the past year. If I was going to get anyone to listen, I had to be better organized so I wouldn't look like...

My shoulders sagged. "A wannabe profiler and amateur detective. Asshole."

I pulled out my phone as I peered off into the distance again. Dodger was long gone, and it was getting darker. I couldn't ensure his safety and race to the police station at the same time.

I had to hope and pray he wasn't about to do anything idiotic. Besides, he'd been blunt when he'd told me to get lost.

A quick Google search told me Surrey was over thirty kilometers away. Even if I flagged down a cab, it would take me upward of a half hour to get there. Over an hour when I accounted for the walk I'd have to endure to the train station five kilometers away. Never mind the hoops I'd have to jump through to get anyone to take me seriously. *If* they took me seriously.

We'd been on the road for two months. I looked like a homeless guy.

I cursed under my breath. Dodger was right.

I'd grown accustomed to the rail noise over the past several weeks, but tonight it rang louder in my ears, urging me to make a decision. To do something. There wasn't time to waste, and the longer I stood inactive, the higher the danger.

I didn't know what to do.

I pulled up Dodger's name on my phone and typed a message.

Please don't do this. I'm begging you. You're scaring me. Come back.

I didn't get a response, so I tried one last plea.

Please.

Nothing.

Frustrated, I followed the same path back to where we'd been waiting to catch out, hoping to find Dodger lingering around. There was no sign of him. My heart was in my throat as I kept my eyes peeled for Fish as well. I had no clue when the freight to Calgary was coming through. It was the freight we'd planned to be on. Dodger was the one with the scanner, and I'd never taken on the responsibility or learned the process behind catching out. The sheer number of lines running in and out of the railyard was astronomical, and I was too inexperienced to have the foggiest clue where they all went. To say a railyard was complicated was a vast understatement.

For all I knew, Dodger had found Fish and followed him to a different area outside the railyard where other freights were headed in other directions. They could be anywhere, and I was clueless.

After fifteen minutes, Dodger still hadn't responded to my texts. My choices were fast diminishing. The only way I could help him was to get the police involved as soon as possible. Maybe I looked like a bum, maybe they would throw me out on my ass the second I opened my mouth and spoke of nationwide serial killers, but I had to try.

I hiked the five kilometers to the train station and flagged down a cab dropping off a young couple who looked set to go on vacation. As they pulled their bags from the trunk, I slipped into the back seat and told the driver to take me to the RCMP headquarters in Surrey.

He peered over his shoulder and scanned me up and down. “That’s gonna cost you a pretty penny, my friend.” Even through his thick black beard and the shadows in the cab, I read the look of skepticism on his face loud and clear.

“I’m good for it.”

He tutted and held out his hand palm up, rubbing his fingers together. “I’ll need a deposit, or we ain’t going nowhere. I’ve been burned before.”

Aggravated, I gave him all the cash I had on me—which wasn’t enough for a thirty-minute cab ride to Surrey—then waved my debit card in his face. “You have your deposit, and I have the rest on here. Either give me the machine now and I’ll pay in full before we go, or drive.”

The driver shrugged, seemingly satisfied, and we were off.

With traffic, it took forty-five minutes to get to Surrey and the RCMP headquarters. I checked my phone repeatedly, but there was still no response from Dodger.

It was eleven at night when I arrived, and I had to buzz at the front doors to get in.

The reception area was dimly lit. Drab beige paint covered the walls, red oak wainscoting running the length of the room at waist height. There were framed photographs of all the commissioners going back decades. Little brass plates were positioned underneath each with their names and dates of service embossed in the metal. The tile flooring was freshly mopped and glistened with a sheen of moisture. Two bright

yellow plastic signs were propped at either end, issuing warnings of *proceed with caution* and *slippery floors*. A hint of Pine-Sol and bleach lingered in the air along with the distinct musty odor of an old mop head that hadn't been changed in a while.

The man behind the front desk had a bushy white mustache, two extra chins, and scorn written over his weathered face. His thinning hair was combed and greased to the side, and his shirt buttons pulled tight over his midsection, threatening the tensile strength of the threads holding them in place. Where it looked like he might have once had layers of muscle in his youth, he now carried an extra pillowy layer of fat.

An abandoned game of solitaire was open on the desktop. The man leaned back in a creaky leather chair, hands folded over his round belly as he waited for me to announce why I was there.

"I'd like to speak to someone," I said, unsure how to quite explain the sheer enormity of what I had to discuss without sounding half-insane.

The older man smoothed a hand over his mustache and scanned me up and down. "Is that so? I suggest you come back in the morning."

"I can't do that. Time is of the essence. Please. It's important."

The man sighed, sounding bored. He puffed up his chest and leveled me with a look of irritation like he was tired of

dealing with my type. “If it’s an emergency, I suggest you take it to the local police station.”

“It is an emergency, but this is above the local police. I assure you.”

The man narrowed his eyes. “What is it regarding?”

“Serial murder. At a federal level, hence why I’m here. Sir, I’m not a nutjob. My name is Brady Thompson, and I’m a university student from Toronto. I’ve been doing research for my thesis, and I’ve come across a concerning amount of evidence that suggests the existence of a countrywide serial killer. It is my belief that the man in question is in the area right now. If I wait until morning, that may no longer be the case. Please. Let me talk to someone and let them decide if what I have to share is real or not.”

The man’s mustache twitched, and the deep crevasses on his face that represented his age seemed to shift and move as he examined me.

When he remained undecided, I pulled out my wallet and showed him my university student ID card. “I’m not a fake. There is a perfectly rational explanation to why I look like a bum, but I assure you, I’m not. Please. This is urgent.”

With a heavy sigh, the man rocked forward on his flimsy chair and pushed off the floor with his feet to make it roll down the length of the desk toward the phone. He snapped up the receiver before punching a few buttons, his leery eyes never leaving my face. When someone picked up, he mumbled into the phone, half the words unintelligible.

After a muffled, “Yep. I’ll tell him,” he hung up. Standing, he strutted around the desk, letting himself out the secure door, and met me on the other side. His thumbs were hooked into the belt loops on his pants. He was a short man. Five seven or five eight at most, but he lifted his chin to glare at me with authority. “Inspector Marseille will be down to get you in a minute.” He tipped his chin at my rucksack. “I’m going to have to take a look inside that. You understand.”

I dropped it on the ground and stepped back, shrugging. “Have at it. It’s a bunch of dirty laundry and food.”



Inspector Marseille was a tall, fit woman in her midthirties with warm brown skin, a heart-shaped face, a calculating stare, and a nerve-racking demeanor that would outshine any drill sergeant. She wore form-fitting black dress pants and a white blouse under a black jacket. Her makeup was subdued. Her lips were glossy. A plum-colored, fashionable scarf was tied around her neck in a complicated knot. Her shiny black hair was pulled back in a tight bun. She wore a silver watch on her left wrist and a wedding band on her ring finger. Otherwise, she didn’t wear jewelry.

Without a word, she guided me down a long corridor—her hard-soled shoes clicking on the linoleum—and into an austere, windowless room where she left me, the door securing unnervingly in her wake.

And I was alone for over an hour.

By the time she returned, a pad of paper in hand, I was frantic and irritated and straddling the line of panic, wondering if I'd made a mistake.

She tossed the pad of paper on the table and pulled out the chair across from me. For a long minute, she took me in without saying a thing. "University of Toronto. You majored in behavioral science and forensic psychology with a minor in criminal justice. Top of your class. Impressive, Mr. Thompson."

"You looked me up."

"I did. When someone walks into RCMP headquarters in the middle of the night and makes claims there is an active serial killer in my neighborhood and that person is dressed like they live on the street and is carrying a pack that corroborates this suspicion, call me skeptical."

"I understand."

She held out a hand. "Inspector Diana Marseille."

Her firm grip warned me she was not going to take any nonsense. "Thank you for seeing me, Inspector."

"Tell me what's going on." She produced a pen and drew the notepad closer.

Over the following hour, I did my best to describe every last thing about the case I'd been trying to prove for the past year, how I got started investigating it, and all the information I'd pulled together prior to setting off across the country to help connect loose ends. I didn't hesitate to inform her that I'd

brought my concerns to the authorities in the past and how I'd been turned away and ignored. When I scrambled to show her pictures and documentation on my tiny phone screen, she had someone find us a printer, and we started printing things off.

For the most part, Inspector Marseille didn't interrupt. She took a lot of notes and meticulously examined the evidence I provided. For as much as I knew it could be damaging to my future career, I told her about how I'd sought Dodger on the riding forums and how we'd set out to fill in the blanks about the case. I told her about freight-hopping, about the bodies we'd found, the anonymous calls we'd made to report them, and the evidence we'd gathered in the abandoned stations.

I left nothing out.

My original plan had been to remove myself from blame and state only that I'd hired someone to gather information for me, but given how I was dressed, I knew I had to be honest if I wanted her to take me seriously. Besides, Dodger was out there on his own, chasing down a suspect. I didn't care about the consequences. I needed him safe.

It was after four in the morning when my phone chimed with an incoming text. My heart lurched to my throat as I scrambled to check it. It was a message from Dodger, but all it said was *4:37 freight leaving VC RY heading N along the commercial line. 37 cars back. Gondola.*

I stared at the words, reading and rereading them.

Inspector Marseille used a finger to tip the phone so she could see it too. "Is this your friend?"

“Yes.” The single word got caught in my throat.

“Is he on the train with him?”

“I don’t know.”

“Find out.”

My hands shook as I typed a response.

Brady: Where are you?

Dodger didn’t reply.

I glanced at Inspector Marseille, desperation painting a clear picture across my face. She’d been stoic and unemotional through the hours of our interview. She stared back at me for a long time, lips pressed into a firm line, an expression on her face I couldn’t read. It was as though she was reviewing all I’d told her and was contemplating how to proceed.

After a beat, she pushed away from the table and stood. There was a mountain of printed sheets scattered in front of us. She flipped through them, gathered a few, and banged their edges on the table to align them. She placed her notepad on top and gestured to my phone. “Can you write your friend’s name and number down for me?”

I nodded, took the offered pen when she held it out, and copied Dodger’s name and number on her notepad.

“I’ll be back in a few. Sit tight. Would you like a drink or something to eat?”

I shook my head, a lump growing in my throat.

“Do you need to use the bathroom?”

“No thank you.” The words were barely audible.

With a faint nod, she left the room, and I stared at my phone.

I didn't know if Dodger was purposefully ignoring me or if it was something else, but I sent him another text.

Brady: I'm at the RCMP. I've explained everything. They have your information, so I'm not sure if they'll try to contact you. Please tell me you're somewhere safe. I'm worried.

My eyes burned. My knee jumped up and down. It was a vile combination of exhaustion, emotion, and nerves all mixed together. I pressed my fingers into my eyes as I lowered my forehead to the table. I'd done all I could. I hoped he was safe.

I was startled awake sometime later when Inspector Marseille returned. I didn't remember falling asleep. She had a man in tow, stocky but fit, younger, clean-shaven, and with auburn hair, cropped military short. He too carried a hard, unreadable expression.

I shuffled upright, wiping the sleep from my eyes and apologizing.

“Mr. Thompson, this is Inspector Ramone. If you don't mind, we're going to go over everything again.”

“Again?”

Inspector Ramone held out a hand to shake, ignoring my question.

I glanced between the two inspectors. “But what about the freight? Did you send people out there? Are they looking into it?”

“We’ve made some calls,” Inspector Marseille said.

The two inspectors pulled their chairs up to the table, unloaded their arms of several file folders—filled with the copies we’d printed earlier—a clean notepad, a few pens, and a recorder.

“Do you mind?” Inspector Ramone asked, waving at the device. “In case we need to review the information later.”

“That’s fine.”

We started from the beginning. Inspector Ramone interrupted several times with questions. When I discussed my findings in the autopsy reports, apologizing for not having those copies on me, he excused himself from the room, returning a few minutes later. I wondered if he’d put in a request for his own copies.

By the time we finished the second interview and the two inspectors had left me alone once again, I was beginning to wonder if I was making any progress. They seemed to be listening, but it could have all been for show.

It was Inspector Ramone who returned. It was after nine in the morning, and I could hardly keep my eyes open. The monotony of sitting in a small, windowless room for hours on end was taking its toll.

Inspector Ramone sat down. His hard expression was gone, and in its place he'd adorned a more friendly temperament. "What are your plans for when you leave?"

"Um..." The question caught me off guard. I hadn't thought beyond getting the RCMP involved. "I... should probably return home, I guess. Did you stop that freight?"

"By what means will you be traveling? You understand the activities you and your friend have partaken in are illegal, correct?"

"Yes, sir. I won't be doing it again." No sense telling him I wouldn't have a clue how to hop freight on my own anyhow.

"I'm going to need your contact information. Home address, phone number, and an email where I can reach you."

I figured he already had two out of the three things he'd listed, but I obliged him and wrote down my information on the paper he provided.

"What's being done?" I asked. "Are you taking me seriously, or is this getting tossed the minute I walk out the door?"

Inspector Ramone sniffed and leaned back in his seat, crossing his arms over his chest. The action seemed more relaxed than intimidating. "You've brought us some interesting information. It's concise and straightforward. We need to look into things on our end, but I can assure you, we aren't ignoring you. Whether we come to the same conclusion is yet to be determined. These things take time."

That was fair, but he still hadn't answered me about the freight and our suspect.

I tried again. "And the guy who called himself Fish?"

"I can't discuss that, but we made some phone calls."

I sighed and rubbed my eyes. They felt like they were filled with sand. "I understand." I knew how these things worked. It wasn't the answer I wanted, but it was the one I expected.

"Do you need a ride somewhere?" the inspector asked.

I glanced at my phone.

Still no response from Dodger. It had been hours. I didn't have a means of contacting his friends, so I had no clue if he'd fallen off the map completely or if it was simply me he was ignoring. I was beginning to feel it was me. Dodger had said his piece. He'd told me not to call him. He'd told me to get lost.

I thought they were words said in anger, but maybe he'd meant them.

"I... Could I get a ride to the airport?"

Inspector Ramone rapped his knuckles on the table. "Sure thing. Give me a few minutes."

Chapter Twenty-One

Dodger

When I got back to the area where we'd last seen Fish, he was gone, but I wasn't ready to give up. The guy couldn't have wandered far. Brady and I had argued for ten minutes tops, but I didn't suspect Fish was in a hurry.

I scanned the area, playing through a few scenarios. Fish was a rider and looking to catch out. I didn't know what freight he planned to be on, but there was a pattern to hopping. There were locations and conditions that had to be met before anyone with any skill would take to a train.

I moved toward the tracks, scanning and rescanning the area as I went, keeping my ears alert despite the steady rumble coming from the railyard nearby. More than once, I glanced back to see if Brady had followed me. Part of me wanted to find him storming after me, shouting and screaming and putting me in my place. I deserved no less. But that wasn't in Brady's nature. He wasn't the type who spoke without thinking, who let emotions take over, who took low blows simply to make a point. No, that was me.

Brady was nowhere in sight.

Nearer to the tracks, where the suitable tree cover ended, I squatted and pulled out my phone. There was a heartfelt plea from Brady, begging me not to do this. I hovered a finger over the message, wanting to respond, but as much as I was sorry, it didn't change what I needed to do. I didn't expect him to understand. I'd made plenty of mistakes in my life, and choosing to follow Fish might have been the icing on the cake, but if I didn't go after him, I knew I'd regret it for the rest of my life.

I stared at Brady's text. I was likely to regret this for the rest of my life too.

With a silent apology, I dismissed his message and drew up a CP Rail map, focusing the screen over the Vancouver railyard. To anyone without freight-hopping experience, it was a dizzying and complex display of lines that all had a purpose.

I removed my scanner and spent the next twenty minutes getting a sense of what freights were moving through that night, their intended destinations, and what lines they'd be traveling on so I had a sense of where I needed to look for Fish.

Following a hunch, I texted RaptorZ to see if he could get more information about the commercial line heading north. If I was correct, it was scheduled to depart in the early morning. Since I was unfamiliar with those particular routes, I liked to get a second opinion about the best place to catch out. RaptorZ may not be a rider, but he was a wealth of information and

could contact almost anyone in the community to find answers if he didn't know them himself.

He got back to me in less than forty minutes, and I shot him a text, thanking him before taking off into the night, heading to the location in question. I had a hunch Fish was heading back to his hideout at the abandoned station near Prince George. It was the first place I wanted to check.

I had to hike for over a half hour and detour around a massive section of the yard so I'd be on the north end. From there, I followed RaptorZ's instructions to a spot that other riders had confirmed was good for taking cover before catching on the fly. I stayed quiet and kept to the shadows. When I was within the area, I slinked around with greater caution, scanning the night and looking for any sign of the man I'd met at the train station.

I was about to give up when I saw him. My heart lurched, and a prickling heat filled my veins. I was right. He was returning to the abandoned station up the commercial line. If I'd had any doubt about who he was before, I was certain now. Reflexively, I turned to express my enthusiasm to Brady, but he wasn't with me, and a fresh wave of grief and regret caught me in the chest. It had me clutching for the nearest tree when my knees tried to buckle.

Again, I got the urge to take out my phone and text him, call him, or simply turn around and go after him. But I didn't know what to say. I'd been a complete douche, and if I were Brady, I'd never want to see my condescending, asshole face again.

Keeping hidden, I watched Fish for a while, getting an idea of what he was up to. He was sitting on the ground, relaxing back against a tree. Unmoving. I thought his eyes might be closed, but it was too dark, and I was too far away to be sure. His rucksack was on the ground beside him. It didn't look like he was going anywhere soon, and the freight wasn't scheduled to depart until closer to morning.

I retreated, putting another fifty or more yards between us. I dropped my ruck, squatted, put my back against a thick tree trunk, and pulled out my phone. I had time to kill and a massive boyfriend problem to take care of.

I huffed a humorless laugh. *A boyfriend problem.* Who'd have thought this would ever be my life?

I read the texts from Brady repeatedly, the burning itch to respond still present. Then I heard all the terrible things I'd said to him. Words I hadn't meant, but ones I knew would cut deep and leave scars.

Because that was the kind of jerk I was. I played dirty. I went for the throat.

I could go back. Right now. I had a good sense of where Fish was heading. I didn't have to be here anymore. It wasn't like I planned to get on the train with him. But what if he changed his mind? It was stupid—maybe it was an excuse—but my overactive brain conjured scenarios of some unsuspecting rider showing up and Fish smooth-talking his way into company.

On the inside of my eyelids, I saw the remains of the rider I'd almost tripped over, and my stomach lurched. I swallowed bile and did all I could to eject the image from my brain.

My finger hovered over Brady's number. I could call him. Maybe if I reassured him I was safe and not in danger we could work through this bump in the road like we had the others. Would he still be around? Had he gone to Surrey and the RCMP?

Would he answer his phone?

I removed my glasses and scrubbed a hand over my face. I was an idiot. This had nothing to do with reassuring Brady I was safe. It wasn't even about Fish anymore. If I was honest with myself, I couldn't connect the call because I knew I'd fucked up big time, and I didn't know how to make it right. Mostly, I feared he'd tell me it was the last straw, and we were done.

It was also why I hadn't turned my ass around and gone back already.

I pulled out my pack of cigarettes and lit one, smoking and letting the stress of the past few hours dissolve. Then I smoked another. It barely worked. By the time I'd gone through three smokes, I was wound tighter than a spring and a little nauseous. I drew up my contacts on my phone and tapped Willow's name. I was in so much trouble. She was going to drag my ass through the coals, but I needed help, and she was always the voice of reason.

It rang and rang and rang, but she never answered. Frustrated, I scanned the other names in my list and tapped Leo's. He was about the next best thing.

He answered on the second ring.

“Dodger? We just talked. Do you miss me already?”

It had only been hours since I'd officially introduced the gang to Brady over a video call. So much had gone wrong in that short amount of time.

“Hey. Are you alone?”

He giggle-snorted, a noise I was beginning to realize was all Leo. “I'm never alone. Ever. It's a revolving door around here. Always a full house... or rather apartment. Everyone's still here. Why? What's up?”

It was then I registered the commotion and noise in the background. It sounded like a lot of people talking over top of one another, laughing and shouting. I knew those noises. I'd been part of them for years. It was familiar. The sound of comfort. Of family.

“Is Willow there too?”

“Yeah. She's busy beating the snot out of Killian for suggesting she should dye her hair pink. Apparently, that's not a color she's a fan of. Do you want me to get her? Killian would thank me.”

“No. Put me on speaker. I'd rather talk to the whole lot of ya.”

“You’re awfully needy today. Aren’t you having fun with the boyfriend?” There was a smile in his voice, and he singsonged the word boyfriend.

“Just put me on speaker,” I snapped, then cringed because I’d gotten barky again, and Leo didn’t deserve that. What the fuck was wrong with me?

“Wow. Okay. Hang on.” His voice was more subdued, and I felt bad. We’d come a long way, him and I.

Leo must have covered the phone because his voice was muffled when he shouted for everyone to shut up. The commotion seemed to calm, and Leo’s soft voice said something else. A second later, there was a distinct change in the quality of the reception, and Leo said, “You’re on speaker. Would you rather video call?”

“Can’t. It’s pitch black where I’m at. You won’t see me. Who is everyone? Who am I talking to?”

“Everyone. You know, Killian, Ty, Elian, and Willow,” Leo said. “The whole gang.”

“What’s up, lover boy? You sound grumpy.” It was Willow who spoke. She always could read me like a book. “Hi, Brady,” she called out a little louder. “What’s up Dodger’s ass?”

“He’s not with me, and I’m not good. I need your help, and if you could all do it without lecturing me, that would be fan-freaking-tastic.”

My comment was met with silence.

I guessed it was up to me to fill it. “I fucked up.”

As I was deciding how to explain, Leo asked, “Where’s Brady?”

“Gone.”

“Ugh. What did you do, Troy?” Willow again. The exhausted sigh that had preceded the statement wasn’t hidden.

I chuckled humorlessly. “Well, shocking, I know, but I’ve got a big fucking mouth that gets away from me all the time, and I don’t seem to know when to bite my tongue and shut up. We had a disagreement. A big one. I said some things. Nasty, mean, hurtful things that I swear to god I didn’t mean, and I don’t know how to fix it.” Emotions clogged my throat, but I pushed through and added, “Please help me. I... Shit... I fucking love him, okay. I told him I never wanted to see him again, which is obviously a load of crap, and I didn’t mean it. What do I do? This is not my area of expertise. I’m lost here. I haven’t had a relationship since high school, and the only reason I dated back then was because it was easier to convince girls to sleep with me if we were going out. Which is low. I know that now, so shut up. Fuck. What am I going to do?”

Once more, I was met with silence. Someone coughed. There was shuffling. A resoundingly loud crash of coupling cars came from the yard in the distance, making me jump. My nerves were shot. The squeal of brakes from an incoming train rang in the air, and the pungent scent of rotting cedar, pine sap, and diesel drifted on the breeze. The air was thick with humidity, and my shirt stuck to me.

“Hello? Are you guys there?”

“We’re here.” It was Tyler. “How about you tell us what happened.”

“He opened his mouth is what happened. Surprise, surprise,” Willow said. “I’ve told you a hundred times, you need a filter for that thing.”

I braced my forehead on my drawn-up knees. “I know.”

“Let it out,” Leo said. “Tell us about it.”

So I told them everything that had happened that afternoon from me running into Fish, the growing suspicion that he was the CP Rail killer, and ending with the argument I’d had with Brady.

“Whoa. Stop. Time out. First of all, are you out of your freaking mind?” Willow shouted. She had clearly leaned over the phone, and I had to draw mine away from my ear because of her elevated volume. “Tell me you aren’t chasing down a serial killer right now because I swear to god I will hop on a train and beat your fucking ass into next year.”

“Dude, where are you?” Killian asked, his tone only slightly more level than Willow’s. “For real, are you going after this guy?”

“I’m not chasing him. Yes, I followed him. I needed to know what train he was planning to get on because—”

“You’re a dead man, Troy. Dead, do you hear me? I’m going to tear your fucking balls—”

“Relax, woman. You tear my balls off and Brady might have something to say about it.” I paused. “That is if I still have a boyfriend.” I pinched my eyes closed. “Look, I’m not going to get on a train with Fish. I’m not an idiot.”

“I beg to differ. You are a class-A fucking idiot.” Willow was seething, and I didn’t have the energy to argue. My stupid decision had cost me enough already, and I hadn’t called my best friends to get into a fight with them too. Besides, Willow was right, and like me, she was protective of the ones she loved.

“I shouldn’t have followed him. I should have stayed with Brady.”

“Yeah, you should have,” Willow mumbled, but her words were abruptly cut off like someone had elbowed her in the gut. Then there was a mumbled reply not meant for me. “Don’t. He’s being stupid.”

“Just chill out,” someone said to her. I couldn’t tell who. Tyler maybe.

“Where is he?” Killian asked. “Brady, not this Fish guy.”

“I don’t know. I left him hours ago. I imagine he went to Surrey and the RCMP. He wanted to make a report. He said it was the proper way to handle this.”

“Then get your ass over there right now,” Willow said. Her voice trembled. “I don’t want you near this Fish guy.”

“Hey, pretty lady,” I said, doing all I could to soften my tone. She was really upset.

“Don’t.”

“I’m not in danger. I swear to you.”

“You don’t know that. Please get out of there.”

“Wait.” The timid, quieter voice that spoke could only have belonged to Elian. Everyone else hushed as he continued.

“You said you have this Fish guy in your sight?”

“Not at the moment. I hiked away so I wouldn’t be overheard, but he didn’t look like he was going far. I think he was sleeping, waiting for his ride.”

“You... need to confirm he gets on that train.”

“What?” someone said. I couldn’t make out who’d spoken.

An eruption of voices came through the line as everyone talked at once, cutting off whatever else Elian was about to say. The connection was poor, and it crackled and cut in and out a few times.

“What are you saying?” Tyler asked—I assumed to Elian.

Willow and Killian broke in, something to the effect of getting my ass as far from Fish as possible. I caught the words *dangerous* and *moron* in the mix. Willow, if I had to guess. Then there was arguing. Lots of arguing.

Only when Leo shouted, “Guys, shut up. Let Elian speak,” did the volume go back down. I was secretly proud of Leo. He was finding his feet among our group and learning how to speak up and stand his ground.

A hush settled over the line, and Elian cleared his throat. “Um...” I could almost see him obsessively licking his lips, gearing up to speak. “All I’m saying is, if Dodger’s gone that far, if he knows where the guy is, the least he could do is confirm what train he takes and relay it to the police. It will give them a direction if nothing else.”

I sensed something in Elian’s tone. Desperation. An understanding. An emotion I knew all too well. He may not share close bonds with other people in the community, but they were still *his* people. Just like they were mine. Elian had spent years as a loner on the rails, traveling the country, doing his own thing. And I’d spent years worried he’d become a victim of the infamous killer.

I’d been wrong—thank god—but the risks he’d taken flying solo were real.

“Whatever apologies Dodger needs to make to Brady won’t be any more or less effective if he stays another hour or two at the tracks to confirm where Fish goes. If he doesn’t, this guy will be in the wind again.” Elian paused, then quieter still, he added, “And he’ll keep right on killing riders.”

“Thanks, Silent Bob.”

Elian made a noise I thought was meant to mark our unity, but I couldn’t tell for sure. He was an odd cat, and I was still getting to know him.

“Whether I stay here or go to the station now is moot. That’s not why I called, and I’ll figure that part out on my own. Although, Elian makes a valid point. The question is, how do I

pry my size-eleven boot out of my fucking mouth and make things better with Brady?”

Someone snorted. Killian, I thought.

Willow muttered under her breath, “Like I’ve always said. Boys are so stupid.”

A pregnant pause followed before Tyler asked, “Do you really love him?”

Someone made a gushy, lovey-dovey noise I didn’t appreciate. I was more and more certain it was Killian, in which case, he was going to get his face pounded the next time I saw him because I wasn’t ready to be teased about my new relationship.

“Answer the question,” Killian said.

“Don’t pressure him,” Leo hissed.

“I’m not.”

“You are.”

“Guys, shut up.” Willow again. “Answer the question, Troy.”

“Yeah. I... I do. I love him. In fact, I was getting ready to tell my dad I wasn’t coming home this winter.” I swallowed around a lump in my throat. “I was ready to hang up my riding gear.”

“Holy sh—” Killian *oofed* and then came a muffled, “What?” like someone had covered his mouth so he couldn’t speak.

“You’re being rude,” Leo whispered, not very quietly. To me, he said, “People make mistakes.”

“Dodger’s mouth makes colossal mistakes,” Willow said.

“Be honest with him,” Leo continued. “I’m sure you hurt him, but I’m also sure he knows you didn’t mean what you said. We all say things we don’t mean in the heat of the moment.”

“It was still nasty,” Willow said. “You are one cruel sonofabitch sometimes.”

“I know.” I was miserable, but I couldn’t argue.

“Do it face-to-face,” Tyler said. “No apology was ever productive through text. There is too much room to misread someone’s honesty.”

“Agreed,” Leo said.

“They really need to invent an emotion-based color system for texting, don’t you think? Like, when you’re angry, maybe you type in red. If you’re sad, it can be blue. Green might be jealousy. No, wait. It should be sarcasm. Yellow is honesty. Yeah, he could use yellow. Holy shit, I just invented something.”

“Shut up, Killer. What is wrong with you today?” Willow asked. “Troy, you’re gonna have to grovel your ass off.

“I know.”

“I don’t think you do. I mean, seriously grovel. Like, get down on your knees and—”

“Yes!” Killian said. “Blow jobs are the best apology ever. She’s right.”

“Killer, I swear to god—”

“That wasn’t what she was going to say, dummy,” Leo said. “Seriously, what *is* wrong with you?”

“I have a list,” Willow said. “Give me a second. It’s on my phone in a spreadsheet, organized from most annoying to least. Let me just—”

“Guys,” I shouted over the commotion. “Can we focus? I’m in the middle of a crisis, and it’s like talking to a bunch of circus freaks. Help me.”

“Can I finish what I was saying?” Willow asked.

“Go. Speak.”

“If he’s important to you—”

“He’s everything to me. *Everything*. Do you hear me? I’ve never had this in my life. I can’t lose him. I fucking love him, and I’m the worst kind of boyfriend on the planet because I hurt him. Not a little. I went for the jugular. I said the worst possible stuff imaginable. What do I do?”

Silence.

“I’ve been saying it for ages,” Willow said. “You have got to control that mouth of yours. It’s like a runaway train most days.”

“I know. I know, I know, I know. Stop pointing out the obvious.”

“Hold up.” It was Leo who spoke. “Time out. Back up the train. I don’t know about you guys, but I feel like we just completely dismissed some very valuable information.”

“What are you talking about?” Tyler asked.

“Hello. Is no one paying attention? Dodger just disclosed he is not only madly in love with a guy but is hanging up his riding gear and settling down. Am I the only one who caught that?”

I groaned as everyone spoke at once, their exclamations of excitement growing in volume. The whole conversation took a one-eighty until all my friends were harassing me about my new love life. Wanting *all the deets*. Fucking Killian was a piece of work. My relationship with Brady felt too fragile to discuss, but talking about him and all we’d experienced over the summer, including our minivacation to the ocean felt necessary. It was a balm to my wounded soul.

So we talked. And talked, and talked, and talked.

When I checked the time on my phone, I was shocked to see it was long after three in the morning. Also, my battery was at eight percent.

“Oh shit. I have to go. I was going to check up on Fish and be sure he didn’t take off, and you idiots distracted me. That freight is leaving within the hour.” I scrambled upright.

“You better keep us posted,” Willow said, and I knew she meant about Brady as much as she did Fish.

“I will.”

“Stay safe,” Tyler added.

“Don’t do anything stupid,” Leo said.

“I won’t.”

“Don’t forget, nothing says I’m sorry like a good blow job,” Killian said.

“I’m not going to respond to that. You have problems, Killer.”

“Dude, we all have problems.”

I couldn’t fight the smile. “Don’t I know it. I love you guys.”

“We love you too,” Willow said.

After a round of goodbyes, I hung up. I’d been on the phone with them for hours. I should have known better. I’d needed my friends. I’d needed the distraction, but I hadn’t meant to get lost in the conversation for so long.

I hitched my pack over my shoulder and slinked back to the spot where I’d last seen Fish, hoping and praying I hadn’t missed my one and only chance to confirm where he was going. If he was gone, this whole debacle would have been for naught.

Luck was on my side, if you could call it that.

Fish was not only where I’d left him, but he was alert, scoping the line and clinging to a scanner. Old-school ways my ass. I knew the guy was a lying sack of shit the minute I’d met him. The chirping and static were too faint for me to make

out what was being said, but the freights' movements weren't my concern. Not tonight.

I hung back, staying wedged out of sight under the cloak of darkness as I watched and waited. Fish was alone, and I was grateful. If I'd caught him ready to catch with some young, unsuspecting rider, I wouldn't have been able to stay silent. The thought of how many times the guy had done that made me sick. I flashed back to all the abandoned stations Brady and I had been to. To the two bodies we'd discovered along the tracks. To the images of all the still missing riders we'd never found.

Shortly after four, the heavy rumble of a freight moving down the nearby line vibrated the ground under my feet. Fish was ready to spring into action, pack on his back and balaclava covering his face. We were a good twenty or thirty yards from the tracks, but I knew once the freight arrived, he'd bounce.

I didn't have to wait long. I checked my phone as the heavy engine emerged from the direction of the yard. It was thirty-seven minutes after four. Based on its slower speed, I got the sense it had been in the yard having its cars shifted around and was only now departing, which meant Fish had more than enough opportunity to find a decent place to hide.

I crept closer so I wouldn't lose him, keeping a mental tally of how many cars passed us by. When he tagged a gondola, I frowned. "What the fuck are you doing?"

Those were the shittiest rides, and any rider worth their salt wouldn't take one unless they were in a pinch. Either way,

regardless of his reasons, Fish had hopped over the edge and vanished inside the gondola. If my calculations were correct, he was approximately thirty-seven cars back from the front.

I waited until his chosen car was out of sight, watching and being sure he didn't reemerge. He didn't. Fish was gone. The freight continued along the line, picking up speed as it went. Once the tail end of it vanished into the darkness, I let out a breath. Although the weight on my chest lessened, I couldn't help feeling like I'd let him get away.

I tugged my phone from my pocket and cursed. The battery was at six percent, and I couldn't charge it until morning since my solar charging panels were useless in the dark.

I bit my lip and sent Brady the information. If he was with the RCMP, maybe they could get this guy. Maybe they would go after him.

Dodger: 4:37 freight leaving VC RY heading N along the commercial line. 37 cars back. Gondola.

I wavered, wanting to send a second text to unload everything inside my heart, but I was still unsure what to say or how to say it. A simple apology didn't seem efficient. Not after the cruelty I'd spewed. Like Tyler had said, it would be better if I made apologies face-to-face. I wanted him to know I meant it. I wanted him to understand how devastated I was and how much I hated myself. I couldn't do that through text.

In the end, I powered down my phone to conserve the battery and hiked a wide berth around the railyard, aiming for the train station a few kilometers away. I would head to Surrey

since I was convinced that was where I'd find Brady. I couldn't imagine he'd gone anywhere else.

While I walked, I composed a hundred apologies in my head, playing through dozens of random scenarios of how I might beg for Brady's forgiveness. Twice, I considered Killer's blow job suggestion, then I shook it off. He was an idiot, and I couldn't fix this by offering sex. Brady would probably find it insulting. My inner turmoil and tangled thoughts stole my focus, which meant I wasn't paying attention to my surroundings and walked right into the path of a team of bulls.

The bright beams of their flashlights hit my face, blinding me at the same moment one of them shouted, "Don't move. Stay where you are."

I pivoted, intent on running in the other direction and disappearing into the dark, but more bulls moved in behind me.

I was trapped.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Brady

I ended up on standby for a flight to Toronto, leaving early that afternoon. Slumped in a seat by my gate, I stared at my phone, defeated and hurt. In the past twelve hours, I'd received only one text from Dodger. One. Instructions for where the police might find the suspected CP Rail killer. No follow-up to my frantic questions. No apology. I didn't know where he was or if he was safe.

I couldn't even be certain the RCMP had done anything about the information Dodger had passed on.

"We made some calls," Inspector Ramone had said. Whatever that meant.

It was likely something to say so I'd stop asking questions. I knew the drill.

I shut down my phone and tucked it away in a pocket. The constant drone of overhead announcements coupled with the steady murmur of flight traffic out on the runway lulled me into a half sleep. Someone in a nearby seat was eating Indian

food from a cardboard container, and the rich scent of curry and spices was making me nauseous. A pair of little kids squealed and ran in and out of the rows of seating as a mother shouted at them in French. I didn't understand what she said, but she sounded annoyed. On one of their rounds, the older boy tripped over my rucksack, which I'd tucked away near my feet. He didn't howl. Instead, he got to his feet, giggling, and took off again just before his sister caught up.

A man in a suit wearing a choking amount of cologne sat beside me and hitched an ankle over his knee, talking loudly on his phone like he wanted to give everyone within a five-mile radius the impression he was important.

I made myself as small as possible and tried to block out the world for a bit.

It was only when I heard my name over the announcements that I jerked awake, unsure when I'd fallen into a doze.

“Oh, thank god,” I muttered to myself.

I'd secured a flight home.

I should have felt happy, but as I ambled to the counter to collect my ticket, all I felt was miserable.



After midnight, I stumbled through the front door of my apartment. The flight had been just over five hours, but with the time change, it was far later in Ontario once I'd landed. I

dropped my rucksack on the ground by the door and flicked on the light in the living room.

The air was stale and hot. I'd shut off the air conditioning when I'd left, and the stagnant summer heat had gotten stuck within the four walls of the apartment. There was an unpleasant odor in the air, a tinge of garbage, and I cursed, knowing I must have forgotten to take it out before we left.

The signs of our chaotic departure were everywhere. A heap of notes covered the floor where we'd gone through them, picking out the ones we'd thought were important before taking pictures and cataloging them on our phones. The clipboards that had once hung in an orderly fashion on the wall were stacked on the couch. Textbooks were lying about, some open to relevant pages, others stacked five and six high on the end tables and floor. The contents of the banker boxes were strewn about. My laptop was where I'd left it, on the dining room table, the cord running to the wall. Throwaway paper cups from the coffees Dodger had bought sat beside it.

On the coffee table, beside more file folders, was a red lighter I knew belonged to Dodger.

I looked away.

Ignoring the mess, I stripped out of my clothes—intent on burning them later since they were not fit to be worn again—and headed for the bathroom and shower. I spent an inordinate amount of time under the hot spray, washing and scrubbing with my favorite body wash, cleaning every crease and crevice

twice. We'd showered at random motels on our journey, but it never felt the same as when I showered at home.

When I finished, I took time moisturizing—something I hadn't done in months—and stared at my overly tanned face in the mirror. I needed a haircut. Badly. My blond locks were bleached out by the sun, wavier and messier than they had ever been. I looked like a hipster—or rather, my definition of a hipster.

I threaded my fingers through the long strands, pushing them back off my face as I leaned closer to the mirror. My eyebrows were getting out of control, so I plucked them, ignoring the despondent look in my eyes as I reflected on the teasing remarks Dodger used to throw at me when I expressed concern over my unibrow.

There was a distinct purple mark low on my neck, just above my collarbone—a hickey Dodger had put there with pride, claiming me as his boyfriend. Over my ribs was a small bruise, a spot where he'd playfully bit me. I'd howled, rolled him to his back, and bit him back. The mark near his left nipple was much more distinct than my small bruise—or it had been the last time I'd seen it.

My chest ached, and I looked away from the man in the mirror with the sad eyes.

The tide had turned, and I guessed Dodger had changed his mind.

After all, I was nothing more than a wannabe profiler. An amateur detective who hadn't written his thesis.

I left the unpacking and cleaning for the next day. After cranking the air conditioning, I found my way to the bedroom. It was there I stalled. Above my bed hung the painting I'd bought at an art show. The ocean. The place I'd long ago dreamed of visiting. Reality had vastly outshone the artwork. Unsurprising.

It had been the most romantic thing anyone had ever done for me.

Memories flooded my brain, and I had to blink several times to stop tears from surfacing. I could still feel the soft kisses Dodger had planted on my neck as he'd wrapped his arms around me from behind and we'd stood in the water with the waves lapping at our shins.

I wouldn't cry.

I shut off the lights, draping the room in darkness so I couldn't see the painting anymore. I crawled into bed, staying on top of the covers while the room cooled off, pinching my eyes closed as tight as I could and wishing I could forget the past summer.

It had been an exhausting few days, so I wasn't surprised when I fell asleep right away.

However, the following morning, I woke up tired. I'd tossed and turned all night, hearing trains in my head, having arguments with Dodger, searching decrepit buildings for evidence, and taking pictures of dead bodies along the railroad tracks.

I was too unmotivated to drag my ass out of bed and start the day. Everything that had happened in the past seventy-two hours felt like a dream. A nightmare.

Where was Dodger? Was he safe?

Where was Fish?

Had the RCMP gone after him? Had they caught him?

If I called the number Inspector Ramone had given me, would anyone tell me anything?

Probably not.

Had Dodger bothered responding to my texts? I was too afraid to get up and check my phone to find out.

I was home, thousands of kilometers from Vancouver. Alone.

And I was wretchedly unhappy.

My chest ached, and the emptiness I'd gone to bed with the previous night had turned into a great hollow void. I wanted to throw the covers over my head and forget every heartbreaking detail about Dodger and the visions I'd naively had for a future we might share together.

I ended up falling back asleep. At noon, I stumbled out of bed and stared at the mess in my apartment, still unmotivated to do anything about it. I should take the day and organize my notes, maybe write an outline for my thesis and start it once and for all. After the excursion across the country, I had a

better idea of how to proceed. It was time I buckled down and made it happen.

In the kitchen, I found the empty box of donuts Dodger had purchased before we'd left. There was rock-hard icing stuck to the inside of the cardboard. I had forgotten to get rid of it, and I was grateful it hadn't attracted ants. The garbage under the sink made me wrinkle my nose, so I tied the bag and walked it to the garbage chute down the hall.

Back in the apartment, I didn't know where to put myself.

In the end, I found my phone where I'd left it plugged in by my laptop the previous night. Reluctantly, I powered it on and saw a single text message from Dodger. It had been sent at four o'clock that morning—one Vancouver time.

Where are you? Can we talk?

I blinked at the six words, reading them again and again. Then I huffed a laugh as my vision blurred. *Can we talk?* After informing me he was chasing down a killer, leaving me alone by the railyard, then ignoring my incessant pleas for more than twenty-four hours asking if he was all right and safe, he wanted to chat?

Rage burned my core. On a shout, I launched my phone against the nearest wall. "You asshole."

Then I collapsed on the ground, a mixture of laughter and sobs escaping me.

For as angry as I was, a tidal wave of relief washed over me. Dodger was okay. He was alive.

I hadn't realized how frightened I was for his safety until that very minute.

In the end, I left my phone on the floor, uncaring if it was in one piece. I sat at the small dining room table, drawing my laptop closer, and opened it. I was used to getting lost in schoolwork, and today, I needed the escape.

I started my thesis, and I didn't care if I ever came up for air.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Dodger

For the first time in my life, I had been arrested. It didn't matter what I said or how many times I argued that I was not hopping freight and was simply circling the yard to get to the train station on the other side, the bulls didn't believe me or listen.

After overhearing several of their hushed conversations as we waited for the police to arrive, I got the sense they'd been out in droves, looking for Fish after receiving a call about a suspected hopper.

Idiots.

That hopper was long gone, and if they had followed the information I'd given Brady, they would have known where to look.

A cruiser with two police officers came and collected me from the railyard. They took possession of my rucksack, cuffed me, and put me in the back of their cruiser where I sat for the following hour as they talked to the bulls.

I tried not to panic. They couldn't technically charge me with freight-hopping. They hadn't pulled me off a train or caught me in the act. The best they could do was charge me with trespassing on their property.

It still wasn't good.

My wrists ached where the cuffs pulled and dug into my skin. I couldn't get comfortable, and I wanted to know what was being said about me. I'd been so stupid. Instead of being careful, I'd let thoughts of Brady distract me. I hadn't even had a chance to get away.

The sun had risen above the horizon when we got to the police station. A wash of diffused light shone through a haze of clouds. There was a tranquil silence to the morning like the world was still asleep, and those who were waking knew enough to keep the volume down. Even the traffic zipping down the road seemed muffled.

The police station was an old brick century building that looked in dire need of restoration. A handful of pigeons sat along the roofline, a golden halo of light surrounding their dark frames.

The two arresting officers hadn't said anything during the ride. When I'd tried to tell them I wasn't who they were looking for, they'd refused to respond. When I'd asked if they'd been in contact with the RCMP, they'd kept right on ignoring me. When I'd called them a bunch of brain-dead pigs, they'd warned me to watch my mouth.

I decided to shut up.

The woman cop, unhealthily skinny and with a face like a mouse, guided me into the building and brought me directly to a small room. She uncuffed me and turned to walk out. I shouted before she vanished, asking her why she didn't just book me and get it over with. I was rewarded with the door slamming closed and the lock engaging.

“Motherfucker.” I flopped into one of the hard plastic chairs positioned at a folding table and waited.

It turned into a day-long, bullshit affair. My ass went numb after a while, so I got up and paced. No one had told me to stay seated. No one had told me anything.

A male officer in his midfifties paid me a visit long after I'd lost track of time. It felt like I'd been waiting for hours. For all I knew, it had been twenty minutes. He asked me my name, date of birth, where I lived, and why I was slinking about CP property in the predawn. When I explained about the rail killer and how Brady had gone to the RCMP to make the report—which I didn't know for a fact if he'd done or not—the officer narrowed his eyes with skepticism. He asked a few more questions, and I was left alone again for an indeterminate amount of time.

At some point, someone brought me coffee and a donut—which felt odd since I thought I was under arrest, and I didn't think it was a common courtesy given to everyday criminals. I stared at the donut—chocolate glazed—and at the steam coming off the paper cup of coffee. My heart pinched as I recalled Brady with his sugar-coated fingers, groaning at every

bite he took of deep-fried dough, giving me a show as he licked each digit clean with that dangerous tongue that could do things I'd never imagined possible.

In my head, I could hear his caffeine-induced babble and feel his energy as it rippled around him. It was infectious.

I was such an idiot, and now I was stuck in a police station and couldn't get a hold of him to tell him what was up—not that he probably wanted to talk to me anyhow.

I didn't know what time it was when a tall Black woman entered the room. She was dressed in slacks and a white blouse with a fancy scarf around her neck. She was pretty and commanded attention with her stern, dark-eyed gaze.

“Troy Valmai?”

“Yeah.” I couldn't keep the irritation out of my tone.

She eyed the donut and cold coffee I couldn't bring myself to touch. “Did you want water or something?”

“No. What's going on? If you're arresting me, fucking arrest me and get it over with. I don't know what else you want from me. I was trespassing. So what? I admit it. I was not hopping fucking trains. Can we get this over with?”

The woman sat in one of the chairs at the table and waved for me to take the other. “They said you were a bit of a mouthpiece.”

“It's been a long night.” I sat in a manner that showed my irritation, then crossed my arms over my chest.

She pursed her glossy lips and examined me. “I would have never pegged you two as friends.”

I frowned, but before I could speak, she held out a hand.

“My name is Diana Marseille, and I’m an inspector for the RCMP. I met with Brady Thompson earlier.”

I sat up straighter, my indignation replaced by anticipation and curiosity. I ignored her outstretched hand. “He made the report?”

“He did.”

“You believe us?”

“We’re looking into it.”

“What does that mean? Did you get my message about Fish? He was heading up the commercial line, probably to the abandoned station near Prince George. There’s gonna be a body out there. Did Brady tell you about the abandoned stations? The bodies? Did he—”

Inspector Marseille held up a hand, hushing me. “Slow down. Yes, Brady communicated with us about your suspicions and this Fish character. Yes, he shared about his last known location, and that’s part of the reason you’re here, Mr. Valmai. Mistaken identity.”

“I told those assholes that. No one listened.”

“Take it down a notch. If you want to help yourself, I suggest you cooperate. Regardless of why you were brought in, you and your friend have been partaking in illegal, not to

mention dangerous activities this summer. There is no point denying it since your friend already shared everything with us. And you were still trespassing, so your arrest was warranted.”

I kept my mouth shut for once. Maybe I was learning a lesson. Maybe there was hope for me yet.

“Now, it is my understanding you and your friend met due to a mutual belief that there is a serial killer targeting riders countrywide along the freight lines. Is that correct?”

“Yes.”

“I’d like to hear your version of things.”

“What do you mean? I don’t have all the pictures and documentation. Brady has it.”

“Let’s not worry about that. Tell me about how you came to suspect this theory about a serial killer, how you wound up meeting Mr. Thompson, and all the things you found while traveling on the rails this summer.”

“You want to corroborate our stories.”

She didn’t respond.

Sighing, I nodded, understanding, and told her everything. I wasn’t a super smart university student like Brady with all the right terminology and multiple degrees under my belt, but I gave her the amateur perspective of my studies into the CP Rail killer and how I’d gone about collecting information before Brady had contacted me. I told her how we’d met, how we’d pooled our information, and how I’d convinced him to

come with me across Canada to learn the truth once and for all.

By the time I'd gone through everything, the old stations, the dead bodies, the anonymous calls, the random encounter with Fish, I shrugged. "That's it."

She studied me long and hard, her eyes narrowed, her mind visibly spinning. A hint of exhaustion showed in the pinched skin around her mouth and the tight pull of creases beside her eyes. She looked tired, and I wondered how long she'd been at it.

"Do you think you can give a comprehensive description of this man you call Fish to a sketch artist?"

"Absolutely. You believe us then?"

"I'm just covering all bases, Mr. Valmai. We will need to open a proper investigation and look into all that's been brought to our attention, but it couldn't hurt to have you sit with someone and share what you remember of this man."

"Okay. I'll do it if it helps. Where's Brady?"

"Your friend left our headquarters earlier this morning. I believe someone drove him to the airport at his request."

"Oh. The airport?" A wave of sadness hit me, and I looked away from Inspector Marseille's analytical stare so she wouldn't see how much those simple words hurt. The airport. He was leaving. I'd made a bigger mess than I'd thought. "What time is it?"

"After six."

“Jesus. At night? Already?”

She offered a tight smile and got up. “I’ll be back in a few minutes. Are you sure I can’t get you anything else?”

“No.” She moved to leave. “Wait. Am I going to be arrested for trespassing?”

For the first time, Inspector Marseille gave me a soft smile. “I’ll see what I can do about that. Sit tight.”

I was at the police station for more than twelve hours before they released me. I was not charged, which was a relief, but I was directionless, standing on the street in the heart of downtown Vancouver with a dead phone and no idea if Brady was still in the province.

The airport. He’d been heading home. He was leaving me.

“No. I left him,” I muttered.

An orangey-yellow hue hung over the city, light pollution at its finest. My hometown wasn’t huge, but I’d spent a lot of time in major cities across the country. Vancouver was no different from all the rest. Steel and concrete. The steady hum of noise. The distinct odor of pollution and overpopulation around every corner. You couldn’t get away from it. The traffic was light, considering. I wandered aimlessly for a few blocks until I came to a cheap motel with a flashing sign announcing *Vacancy* and paid for a room. It was nearing one in the morning.

The first thing I did was find a charging cord in my rucksack and plug in my phone. Once I had enough juice, I

sent Brady a text.

Where are you? Can we talk?

I waited expectantly for a response, but when one didn't come, I wasn't altogether surprised. It was late, later still if he'd gone back to Toronto. The time difference was three hours.

Toronto. The thought made my stomach clench. I ditched my phone on the end table, showered, and rolled into the queen-sized bed with its bleach-scented, starchy sheets and overly soft pillows that were anything but comfortable. My mind spun and spun. At some point, I slept, but it wasn't peaceful.

I woke up exhausted at eleven the following morning. The first thing I did was check my phone to see if Brady had responded.

Nothing.

I hit the call button and listened to it ring endlessly. When his voicemail picked up, I hung up and tried again. Still no answer.

Instead of leaving a message, I texted.

Dodger: Did you go home? I was arrested yesterday morning in the railyard. I spoke with that inspector you talked to. She said you went to the airport. Can I come see you, or are you done with me? Please let me apologize. Please don't shut me out.

I hit Send and stared at my phone until the screen timed out.

After an hour with no response, I swore and pulled up my bank account information. I was usually stingy with my money. What I earned working over the winter with my dad was meant to last me until I returned home in the fall to start over again. It was the beginning of August, and I'd burned through more than usual since Brady and I had been a bit frivolous on our trip, taking hotel rooms with more frequency—mostly since I knew Brady had needed the break—and eating out as much as we could instead of scraping together cheap food from a grocery store. Our trip to Victoria had been pricey too, and although Brady had split all the costs with me, our adventure this summer had taken a huge chunk out of my savings.

But I did have enough for a plane ticket home. Barely. Flights out of Vancouver were stupidly expensive, and I cringed when I looked them up. It went against my moral grain to fly anywhere, but I couldn't spend weeks on the rails without knowing if I could fix this thing with Brady or not. Especially when he wasn't taking my calls or answering my texts. I needed to know where we stood. I needed to make things right.

I wished I could turn back time and erase everything I'd said.

I booked a flight—which wasn't leaving until the following morning—and collected my things before calling a cab to take me to the airport. I couldn't afford another night in a motel and figured I might as well head there immediately since I had nowhere else to be.

As I waited for my ride, I called Willow and let her yell at me for the following hour. It was ass-backward, but it made me feel better.

In the end, by the time I got off the phone, I'd talked to each of the gang separately, and they'd all given me their personal advice on how to win Brady back. Some of it sounded ridiculous, but since I was new to this whole relationship thing, I wasn't in a position to judge.



I landed at Pearson the following afternoon. It was a blistering hot August day. The humidity made the air feel like soup, and there wasn't a single cloud in the sky. However, instead of a vibrant blue overhead like we'd seen so often in our travels, the sunshine was filtered through yet another milky haze of pollution.

I had an agenda, so it took several hours of detours and little stops before I was ready to head to Brady's apartment complex.

Outside the front door to his building, I dropped my rucksack on a bench and lit a smoke since my nerves were shot. At the end of May, I'd stood in this exact spot, doing this exact thing before meeting Brady for the first time. I'd had no idea how much meeting him would change my life.

At the time, I'd asked myself if the answers to everything I'd been seeking were just a few feet away. I'd been referring to the CP Rail killer at the time, but reflecting back, I realized

I'd not only gotten those answers, but I'd found answers to questions I hadn't even asked.

Meeting Brady had altered me on a cellular level, and I didn't want to go back to who I was before. I didn't want to be Dodger the rail rider. I wanted to be Troy, the guy who finally grew up, settled down, and made a life with the most exceptional man on the planet.

Brady made me want to be a better person.

I flicked the remains of my cigarette to the ground, stomped it out, then ditched the rest of the pack into the garbage bin. No more smoking. I had to quit. Today. He'd never asked me to, but it was a change I wanted to make for myself.

I stuffed a few pieces of gum into my mouth, went into the lobby, and rang Brady's apartment number.

This was it.

When the locking mechanism clicked without him even asking who it was, I was confused. Brady couldn't possibly have been expecting me at this exact moment. He hadn't responded to any of my texts—and I'd sent a few. The first time I'd been to his place, he'd been wary of answering the door to a stranger, so it seemed odd he would readily let someone in without knowing who'd buzzed.

I didn't ponder long and caught the door before it locked again, then I headed to his floor.

As the elevator rattled and clanged, I studied the bundle of items in my arms, debating if Leo's apology suggestion had

been a tad overzealous. When I'd asked him if guys really like this kind of thing, I'd been told adamantly that yes, they did. Then Leo had spent the following ten minutes arguing with Killian in the background, effectively putting him in his place when he'd disagreed.

The elevator doors rattled open, and I was met with the stink of feet, cabbage, and old stale cigarettes. Music thumped from behind one of the doors. A dog barked when I walked past another. When I reached the end of the hall, a woman in another apartment shouted something in a foreign language, then a clatter of what might have been pots and pans crashed.

I let out a long breath at Brady's door and knocked without hesitation.

The door immediately swung open, and I was met with a frazzled-looking Brady who flinched. He wielded a bank card in one hand like he was about to pay for something.

"Oh." He dashed a glance down the hallway then back. Someone had turned their TV up, and the theme song from *The Simpsons* bled through the door.

"You aren't my pizza," Brady said, shifting his weight between his feet. He wore loose joggers that hung off his hips, an inside-out T-shirt, and mismatched socks. I almost smiled at the discombobulated Brady on the other side of the door. He was the opposite of the man who'd answered it back in May. That man had been put together. This one was a mess.

His attention slid to the bundle of roses and small teddy bear in my arms. His lips parted as he took in a tiny gasp of air, but

he didn't say anything.

I held them out. "These are for you. Leo swore up and down guys liked flowers and teddy bears too, so if this is insulting or weird, blame him."

Brady didn't take the flowers. He stared at them for a long time. A deep sadness pulled at his eyes. They were almost flint-gray today, a color that matched the mood perfectly. It was then I noticed the dark shadows underneath his eyes and the scruff on his face he normally was adamant about shaving daily. Brady looked how I felt. Tired and worn out.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, his voice low.

"I came to apologize because I'm the biggest asshole on the planet, and I said so many things I didn't mean. If you never want to see me again, I understand, but if there's even the slightest chance I can make things better, I'd like you to hear me out as I fumble and grovel and beg for forgiveness in every way possible. Even though I know I don't deserve it or you."

The pain behind Brady's eyes made me feel like shit. I'd put it there. He stared at the bundle of flowers, lost in his head.

When I was sure he would send me packing, his door buzzer buzzed, making us both jump. Brady snapped to attention and fumbled for the button on the intercom. "Yeah," he croaked. "Who is it?"

"Pizza."

"Oh. Right. Come on up."

He hovered on the threshold for a few more minutes, saying nothing as the delivery guy made his way to Brady's floor. The commotion from the other apartments hung in the air. Homer was having a fit, the dog down the hall was barking anew as the elevator door slid open, and the woman who'd been screaming was now talking loudly to a man who had a low rumbly voice.

Brady paid for the pizza, and the guy left. Once the elevator doors closed behind him, Brady cleared his throat and spoke. "Might as well come in. Are you hungry?"

"Um... yeah." Since leaving Vancouver, I hadn't eaten much, but my stomach was wonky with nerves. I wasn't sure I could eat, but I'd make an effort if it meant spending time with Brady.

He brought the pizza to the kitchen. As I followed, I noticed his apartment was in the exact same state of disarray as it had been the last time I'd been there. Except this time, it lacked the organized-chaos feel and was simply in a state of chaos. Nothing had been tidied. If anything, there seemed to be a bigger mess around his dining room table. His laptop was open, and a mountain of notes and stray papers surrounded it along with several empty energy drink cans. My eyes widened when I saw them. Brady and energy drinks seemed like a bad combination if his reaction to caffeine and sugar were any indication.

In the kitchen, he shoved aside dirty plates and abandoned takeout containers to make room for the pizza box. The sink

was full of dishes. The air held the lingering scent of old Thai food. I hovered by the door, clutching the roses and teddy bear, unsure what to do with them and feeling stupider by the minute.

When he turned around, a roll of paper towels in hand, he eyed them again.

I held them out hopefully. “Do you want them?”

He put the roll of paper towels down, and that time, he took them. “Thank you. They’re beautiful.”

“It’s not weird? Killian said it was weird, but he’s not reliable. Leo assured me it wasn’t.”

A sad smile—a non-Brady smile—came and went. “No. It’s thoughtful. No one has ever bought me flowers before.”

“I’ve never bought anyone flowers before.”

The despondent expression on his face about did me in. He ran a finger over a petal, leaned forward, and inhaled with his eyes closed. He wouldn’t look at me and busied himself searching for a vase to put them in. As he filled a tall glass with water and arranged the bouquet inside, I brushed my fingers over his arm.

“Brady, can we talk?”

His jaw tightened. “I’m mad at you.”

“I know. I’m mad at me too.”

“You were a real jerk.”

“I was, and this isn’t me making an excuse, but this is all new for me. Dating. Relationships... Loving someone. Before I met you, I never thought those things were for me. I didn’t think I had the personality for it. Maybe I don’t. Maybe that’s why I keep messing up. I have a bad habit of sticking my foot in my mouth. I get easily combative. I don’t know why. It’s reflexive, and I hate it. I’ve been like that all my life. The minute shit slips out, I hear how awful it is, and all I want to do is take it back, but I can’t. It’s too late. I don’t know if I can change, but believe me when I tell you I want to. Sometimes I wish you were more like Willow. She puts me in my place if I even think of being a mouthpiece with her. Legit, that woman would kick my ass and make me cry without blinking an eye.”

“I’m not like that.”

“I know. Brady, I never, *ever* want to hurt you again like I did back in Vancouver. Maybe you don’t believe me, but I swear I didn’t mean any of those things I said. It’s not how I feel. I have a world of respect for you, even if it doesn’t show. Everything about you amazes me. You’re brilliantly smart, wholesome, honest. Beautiful. Am I allowed to call you that, or is that word reserved for women only?”

“Men can be beautiful.”

“Well, I think you’re beautiful. Inside and out. You’re everything I’m not. I love your ambition. I love your passion. I love your commitment to your studies. The way you eat donuts. The way your eyetooth sticks out when you give me a real Brady smile. I love your laugh. I love the way your mind

just won't shut off no matter what. I love the way you talk with your hands. I could write a book about all the things I love about you." I gave a soft, sad chuckle. "I even love the way you tried so hard every day to get better at freight-hopping even when you weren't that good at it."

A tiny smile formed on his lips. "I really couldn't do it."

"But you never gave up. You gave it a hundred and ten percent every single time. You're strong-willed and determined. You're a fighter, Brady."

"Maybe I just wanted you to be proud of me. Maybe I just wanted you to see me as one of your people. Your rider friends. Maybe it was about being included for once."

He hadn't turned to look at me, so I removed the flowers from his hands and set them aside. I tipped his chin, angling it toward me. He warily met my eyes.

"I don't need you to excel at riding freight. That's not important to me."

"No? But it's what you do. You've said a hundred times, it's the single most important part of your life. It defines you. You've told me that. If I can't be part of that world, I don't know where I fit in. Maybe I was kidding myself that we could work. I mean, I'm just an amateur, wannabe detective slash profiler with big dreams and a lot of wasted ambition, aren't I?"

The words sliced through my heart. My eyes stung. "I didn't mean any of that. It was the worst possible thing I could have

said.”

“But you did say it. I heard it, and I can’t unhear it. You hurt me, and flowers don’t make it better. Tell Leo it was a kind gesture.”

“It was better than Killian’s suggestion, believe me.”

Brady’s steely gray eyes pierced my soul. He was not interested in joking around.

I stepped back, my legs wobbled, and I braced a hand on the counter. “It sounds like I can’t make this better.” The grease wafting from the box of pizza made my stomach churn.

I was reluctant to leave, but the distance Brady had put between us grew by the minute.

“You abandoned me out there.”

I said nothing.

“It was one of my biggest fears, and you walked away.”

A lump grew in my throat. “I know. I’m sorry.”

“Why did you ignore all my texts?” he asked when the tension in the room reached its snapping point.

“Initially, because I was pissed at myself, and I didn’t know what to say to make it right. I knew I’d fucked up. I knew I’d said horrible, unthinkable things and made the wrong decision by walking away. I figured a face-to-face apology would be better, so I waited. Then I got arrested, and—”

“What? You got arrested?”

I frowned. “I texted you about it. After I sent you the information about where Fish went. I was heading to the train station to catch a cab to Surrey, and the bulls got me.”

Brady’s brows met in the middle, and his jaw hung slack as his mind whirred. “I... had no idea.”

I shrugged. “It was my own fault. They got a call about Fish and were all over the place. I got pulled in and thrown in a room for ages. I met with that Inspector you talked to. Marseille? Something like that. She made me go through everything. I didn’t get out of there for over twelve hours. I texted you half a dozen times once I got out, but you never responded.”

Brady glanced into the living room, a faraway look in his eyes. “I had a,” he rolled a hand like he was looking for the right word, “disagreement with my phone.”

“What does that mean?”

He made an adorable scowly face and crossed his arms. “Never mind. It’s not important. Let’s just say I need a new phone, and I didn’t get those texts.” He shrugged. “I was due for an upgrade anyhow.”

The silence swelled between us once again. I got the sense I should leave, but I couldn’t convince my feet to take me to the door. Brady had taken a stance with one arm hugging his waist and the other covering his mouth. I hadn’t seen the posture since I’d been here back in May. It was what Brady did when he was deeply worried and thinking hard.

“Is there no saving this?” I asked, waving a finger between us. “I don’t want to lose you, Brady. For all my life, riding was the single most important thing. Like I told you. It gave me freedom and joy I couldn’t find anywhere else. But since meeting you, it’s taken a back seat. I don’t give a fuck about riding. I give a fuck about you and me. *You* are the single most important thing in my life now. *You*, Brady Thompson, give me a greater sense of freedom and joy than I could ever find on the rails. I don’t care if I never get on another train for as long as I live. I’ve never been happier and more at peace with who I am than when I was with you this summer. I won’t always say the right thing. I’m a jerk, and my mouth is gonna get away from me again. I know it is. It’s inevitable, but I love you. I love you so fucking much that the last few days without you have been killing me. I’ve never felt this way in my life, so believe me when I say I will do anything to keep us together.”

He looked at me for a long time, one hand still covering his mouth. I couldn’t read his thoughts. He’d put up a wall and shut me out. I squirmed under the intensity of his stare.

“Brady,” I said after a few minutes. “Please say something.”

He gestured at my face. “Your glasses are smudgy.”

I choked on a sob, unsure if I wanted to laugh or cry.

Brady reached out and gently removed them from my face. He was a blur as he went about finding a clean cloth in a drawer and Windex from under the counter. He cleaned them

like he'd done a hundred times over the summer, then he came back and set them carefully on my nose.

“Better?” he asked.

“Now you're even more beautiful.”

“Flatterer.”

I took hold of his hand and wove our fingers together. He didn't pull away. “Will you give me another chance? I have a poem. I can... It's terrible, but I wrote it for you. Willow told me poetry was a good way to apologize. I thought she was joking at first, but she said she wasn't, so I spent the whole flight here trying to write you something. Tyler and Elian thought I should take you out on a proper date and pamper you. Dinner and a movie or something. We could go see a rom-com. You like those. I won't even make fun of it.” I shrugged. “I'm bad at this.”

“What did Killian suggest?” Again, a hint of a smile tickled the corner of his lips.

I rolled my eyes. “You don't want to know.”

“Tell me anyway.”

“He said I should get on my knees because a blow job is the ultimate way of saying I'm sorry. He said it would make everything better, but he's kind of an idiot.”

Brady tried really hard not to smile, but it was a losing battle. I got a tiny peek of the eyetooth I adored before he ducked his chin.

“If it wins me any points, I told him you were a civilized adult who would not simply forgive me after a blow job. No matter how great it was.” I cleared my throat and added, “And we both know my skills in that department are less than stellar. I’m a real beginner, so...” I shrugged.

“I’ve had some horrendous blow jobs. Believe me, you’re not that bad.”

I huffed a laugh. “Now who’s the flatterer?”

Brady squeezed my hand and met my eyes again. “I don’t want any of those things. I mean, don’t get me wrong, I will never turn down a blow job, but as a form of apology, I’m not interested.”

I held my breath, doing all I could to hold my wounded heart at bay and prepare myself to be let down. “Okay.”

“I am curious about the poem.”

“It’s terrible. I should burn it. You don’t want to—”

“But...”

I clamped my mouth shut.

“Honestly, you being humble and admitting your mistakes means more to me than dinner and a movie—even a rom-com—or flowers or poems or whatever else your friends thought might work. Baring your heart and soul, admitting you aren’t perfect and acknowledging your flaws, those are things I admire in you the most.”

“I’m so far from perfect, Brady.”

“No one’s perfect. I don’t want a perfect boyfriend. I want an honest one who can admit when he’s made a mistake and comes forward to rectify it. It doesn’t mean I won’t still be mad. Admitting faults doesn’t make it hurt less, but it is the groundwork for a grown-up relationship, and I kinda want one of those.”

“Me too. But I am sorry I hurt you. I’m sorry I said those things.”

“I forgive you.”

My lower lip quivered, but I fought to get my emotions under control. I didn’t feel worthy of his forgiveness. “I was so scared I lost you.”

“I kinda love you too, you know. Even when you’re a complete and utter douchebag who doesn’t know when to shut his damn mouth.”

“I’m gonna work on it. I swear.”

Brady kissed me then. It was soft, sweet, and all-consuming. I sighed against his mouth, taking it deeper, holding his face and doing all I could not to break down with relief. I thought I’d failed. I thought I’d lost him.

“You know,” he said into our kiss. “If your mouth starts getting away from you and needs a distraction...”

I groaned as he brought my hand to the swell in the front of his pants.

“Killian’s idea wasn’t all bad,” he said. “Practice does make perfect.”

“Oh yeah? Would it be super shallow of me to take you to bed immediately after you’ve forgiven me?”

“I needed a break from working anyhow.”

“Oh shit,” I said, glancing at the pizza box. “You were going to eat.”

Brady dragged me by the hand from the kitchen. “Still am. Just not pizza. Let’s go.”

Epilogue

Dodger (Late September)

I poked my head into the bedroom to see how Brady was making out. A duffel bag sat on the bed, a few pieces of clothing neatly folded beside it. There was a small collection of folders next to his laptop with a tangled mess of charging cords on top, but Brady was nowhere to be found.

I'd just returned from a run to the store where I'd replenished my stockpile of nicotine gum for the trip. Quitting smoking hadn't been easy, and I'd caved a few times, but my determination was still strong.

I shifted the phone to my other ear, half-listening to the incessant ringing while looking for my boyfriend. The apartment wasn't that big, but I didn't think he'd left. We'd been up and down the hall doing laundry all morning, so he could have snuck down to the laundry room while I was gone.

The voicemail picked up on the other line, and my father's boisterous voice sounded. I hung up and hit redial. "Brady?"

"Yeah?"

I followed the sound of his voice and found him in the bathroom, scrutinizing his eyebrows in the mirror. The air was moist and steamy, smelling of sandalwood. He wore nothing more than a towel around his waist. On the counter were a mess of products whose purposes eluded me. I'd learned a whole different side of Brady since we'd settled in after our summer adventure. I'd already known he was a bit vain—but not in a bad way. Brady wasn't conceited nor did he have an over-inflated ego like me. He simply cared about his looks and his skin. How he presented himself to the world was important. He groomed and primped and plucked and shaved religiously. Being on the road had been a challenge, but since he'd come home, he'd found his groove again.

And it was just one more thing I adored about him.

"We're only going to be gone a couple of weeks," I said when he caught my eye in the mirror. "It's not like last time."

"I know, but you've seen the disaster a couple of weeks can do to this face."

"I love that face. Even sun and wind burned. Even with rogue eyebrows and nose hairs."

"Oh god." He tilted his head back. "Do I have nose hairs?"

"No. You couldn't be more beautiful. Trust me."

Brady beamed but resumed plucking and checking up his nostrils—just in case.

"You aren't packed yet."

“Waiting on the last load to dry. Figured I’d shower first, then I got distracted.” He set the tweezers down and tilted his head side to side, examining his face.

My dad’s voicemail picked up again. “Dammit.”

“No answer?” Brady asked when I scowled at my phone.

“Nah. He’s working, so he doesn’t always pick up right away. He can’t ignore me forever. I’m annoying like that.” I hit redial and waited again.

“Don’t I know it.”

“Did you find the outfit you wanted?”

Brady sighed. He’d been stewing over sweaters and shirts and slacks for over a week. Nothing made him happy. “Yes, but I don’t know if it’s the *right* outfit, you know? I want something that says, ‘Look at me. I’m professional,’ but also, ‘I’m young and ambitious, and I’ll work hard for you.’ I feel like everything I own says, ‘I’m gay.’”

“I don’t think your clothes say that, and if they do, why is it a problem?”

“That’s the thing. I hope it’s not a problem. I want them to look at my intelligence and what I can offer, not judge me otherwise.”

“I’m pretty sure what’s-her-face knows you’re gay already and doesn’t care. Besides, in this day in age, people know better than to discriminate.”

“I should hope so.”

The ringing in my ear stopped, and a gruff voice came on the line. “Valmai Electric.”

“Hey, Dad. You didn’t check the caller ID?”

“Troy?”

“Yeah. I thought you were screening your calls.”

“Nah. Just a busy morning.”

“Sorry to call while you’re working, but Brady and I are heading out in about an hour, and I wanted to be sure to touch base with you before we left.”

“So you aren’t calling because you changed your mind?”

I chuckled. “No.”

“Good, I already filled your position. I don’t want ya back.” His teasing tone rang through loud and clear. “Tom was over the moon when I gave him your full-time position.”

“Good for him. He’s a good fit.”

“Darn right. Did that guy from K&G get back to you? I talked to the owner for almost an hour on the phone.”

“He did. Thank you. I went for an interview last week. The job’s mine if I want it.”

“And you took it, right?”

“I did. Tentatively.”

“Tentatively? What’s that mean.”

I grinned at Brady who was half listening as he collected a few toiletries. The asshole wiggled out of the towel and let it

fall to the ground, kicking it aside before strutting naked down the hall to the bedroom.

I watched his perky ass the whole way.

“Did I lose you? Troy? Hello?”

I snapped my attention back to the conversation. “I’m here. Sorry.”

“Tentative?”

“Yeah. Well, I told you I was settling in with Brady here in Toronto, right?”

“That’s what I understood.”

“That might have been premature. Things could be changing.”

Dad paused, then cautiously asked, “Is everything okay with you and the... Is your... Are you guys doing all right?”

I chuckled. Dad still danced awkwardly around the right word to use when referring to my relationship with Brady. He wasn’t sure what to call us. Partners? Boyfriends? He was about as cool as I could have hoped about the whole thing but still unsure of the right terminology, and his discomfort showed.

“We’re great, Dad. Actually, Brady got a conditional job offer out in Vancouver.”

“A what now? Say that again. Vancouver?”

“The RCMP offered Brady a job, conditional on him completing his doctorate. It’s not exactly what he wanted to do

—and fuck if I can explain it—but it’s a step in the right direction. We’re heading out there for a couple of weeks. He did a bunch of online interviews, but they want to see him face-to-face and go through more... technical stuff. I don’t know. It’s all over my head.”

“So you’ll be moving to BC?”

“Quite possibly. And if it all works out, then likely soon.”

“What about the job with K&G?”

“There are other jobs in BC. You know what it’s like for electricians.”

“Run off our goddamn feet.”

I chuckled. “Exactly. I’ll figure something out. I just wanted to give you a heads up. You might be getting more calls for references. I’ll be doing some job hunting while we’re out there. Seeing what there is.”

“You’ll find something. You know your old man will talk you up.”

“Thank you.”

“You should stop in on your way home. See your mother. She likes your new... Brady.”

“Boyfriend, Dad. You can call him my boyfriend.”

“I know I can.”

“We won’t be in the area. We’re flying this time. There’s no stopover in Moose Jaw.”

“Flying?” His tone suggested I about bowled him over.

“Yeah.” I laughed. “Shocking, I know. No freight-hopping.”

“Well, I’ll be...”

I chatted with my dad for a few more minutes, checking in on Brady once more to ensure he was packing and not distracted by something else. I’d packed the previous day, but it was an event for Brady. Our plan was to take a bus to Montreal and stay at Leo and Killian’s pad for a few days before flying to BC for Brady’s kinda-sorta interview—or whatever they were calling it—on Tuesday morning.

Our bus was leaving soon, so I cut the conversation short and decided if I didn’t help Brady fill his duffel bag, we’d be going nowhere fast.



“What if they don’t like me?”

“They’ve already met you. I don’t know why you’re worried.”

“They met me on a video call. It’s not the same.”

I turned to face my boyfriend as we waited for the elevator to take us to Killian and Leo’s apartment. It was the end of September, and the cooler weather had moved in. Brady wore a cream-colored collared shirt under an argyle sweater vest. It had taken some convincing to get him to pair it with nice jeans, but when I’d told him how incredible they made his ass look, he’d relented with a grin. Over his shoulder, he carried a

black duffel bag and a laptop bag. He'd ditched the rucksack at the end of summer and swore he'd never use it again.

Brady did not look like a rider anymore. He looked like a ridiculously hot, preppy university student. It had been a challenge keeping my hands off him on the long bus ride to Montreal. More than once, I'd caught other guys and girls checking him out. I may have sneered in their direction.

On the other hand, I carried my old, tattered rucksack on my back. And although I'd found jeans and a T-shirt for the trip, I couldn't compare to the man beside me. Some days, I wondered how I'd ended up with Brady at all. We were night and day, yet we worked.

I fixed his collar, smoothing the edges. "You look good enough to eat."

"You're not too shabby yourself."

I snorted. "Sure. Are my glasses clean?"

He narrowed his eyes as he studied them. He'd already buffed them once on the bus, but I entertained his touch of OCD.

"You're good."

The elevator doors opened, and we got in, riding up to the apartment where Leo and Killian had planted roots. It was my first time getting to see their new pad. I'd heard from Willow it was okay but nothing glamorous. Killian insisted it was glorious.

At present, five of them were sharing the two-bedroom space. I'd heard Tyler and Elian had found jobs in Montreal for the season. They'd organized a short excursion on the rails, planning to travel to one of their spots for a little getaway, but otherwise, they were sticking around this winter. Willow hadn't said much about her plans, but I got the sense she was a bit torn up at the thought that Killian was once again not heading with her to LA.

She'd withdrawn since I'd announced my plans to settle down and stop riding. Things were changing, and Willow was pulling away. She was hurting, and when Willow hurt, she shut down. I was hoping to get a chance to talk to her before Brady and I skipped town. She was my girl and always would be. I loved her as much as was humanly possible. She was the sister I'd never had, and if she wasn't okay, I wasn't okay. I had to be sure she knew my decision to quit riding wouldn't change anything.

When we reached the right floor, the doors slid open. I wove my fingers with Brady's and gave a squeeze. "Ready?"

"As I'll ever be."

"I'll apologize in advance for what you are about to endure."

"That's not reassuring."

"You'll be fine."

The commotion inside the apartment bled through the door. Loud voices talked over top of one another. Killian's was the

loudest of all. They'd been waiting for us, so the minute I rapped on the door, a squeal came from the other side.

A moment later, the door flew open, and we were met with Leo's grinning face. He spared me a quick glance before focusing on Brady. Leo thrust out a hand. "Hi, I'm Leo. And you're Brady. Troy's boyfriend."

"Hey, Troy," Killian yelled from inside.

"Hey, Troy," Tyler and Elian both shouted.

"What the hell is wrong with you people?" I asked.

Brady shook Leo's hand, side-eyeing me with a smirk. "I think you lost your title, sweetheart."

I flinched at the pet name. "Sweetheart? What the fuck is happening right now? I feel like you're all in cahoots."

"Cahoots," someone snorted from within the apartment.

"Nice to meet you, Leo," Brady said.

"Hey, Brady," Tyler and Killian called out.

"Hello." Brady glanced around Leo and waved.

"Are you gonna stand there and block the door, or can we come in?" I asked Leo.

"Please, come in. *Troy*." I did not like the emphasis he put on my name and narrowed my eyes.

Leo showed us in, and we found everyone gathered in the living room. Willow was right. It was a bit of a shithole. Mismatched furniture, worn carpeting, and no decorations on

the bland walls. But I'd come to see my friends, so I didn't give a shit.

"Troy," they all shouted in unison again.

"You can all eat shit and die."

They hooted and howled and laughed.

"Sorry, dude, the infamous bull dodger was caught and arrested. We took a vote and decided to revoke all your licensed rights to the name Dodger. You are officially Troy from here on out," Killian said.

"I hate you all."

Five faces grinned back at me, unaffected by my protest—mostly because my indignation was an act. I didn't give a shit anymore what they called me. Brady never called me Dodger anymore. My parents never had, and the more time that passed, the less it mattered.

"Where's Willow?"

A few smiles faltered, and Killian said, "She'll be back in a bit." No explanation.

"So," Leo said, clapping his hands. "We need to make official introductions." He faced Brady.

"You've already officially been introduced," I said. "Knock it off."

"Sit," Tyler said, waving us to the couch where two spots had been left open for us. "We want to hear all about the summer."

“Did they catch him?” It was Elian’s soft voice who asked. He sat close to Tyler, a wary expression marring his brow.

Brady and I sat.

Leo got everyone drinks—beer, which was a rare treat for our group since we never drank alcohol when we rode—then we told the gang all about our adventure over the summer.

At one point, Willow snuck in and sat beside Killian, who wrapped an arm around her. She rested her head on his shoulder, her expression neutral as always, but there was a vacancy to her stare that bothered me.

“So, to answer your question, E, no, they haven’t caught the fucker yet.”

“But they are working the case now,” Brady added.

“And Brady’s going to be part of it.” I rubbed his arm, grinning.

“We don’t know that for sure,” he said, patting my knee.

“Probably. They were impressed by everything you brought them. They said your profile was spot on.”

“Didn’t they stop the freight after you told them where he was?” Killian asked.

“They did, but he must have bailed. They found evidence he was squatting at that old station out near Prince George too, but he’s in the wind.”

“They also found three more bodies,” Brady said.

“Riders who were missing?” Elian asked.

“Yeah. We were able to identify them. First names only, but it was something. They might be able to hunt down parents now. All the locations fit within Brady’s... What did you call it? The pattern or projected path the guy would take. They were all there, along the tracks, just like Brady said.”

Brady ducked his head, smiling shyly. “Stop fluffing my feathers. It wasn’t all me.”

“It was so. I was just a sexy sidekick. I’m proud of you. This is huge. None of this would have happened without you.”

I pecked his cheek, earning a sexy whistle from Killian. I gave him the finger and brushed my nose along Brady’s jaw to his ear. “You’re amazing. They’re going to close this case, and you’re going to be there when it happens.”

Brady didn’t believe it. I thought he was afraid of getting his hopes up, but I sensed what was happening, and I didn’t think I was wrong. He’d made an impression, and the RCMP had sought him out. The more times they touched base with him, bouncing ideas around, looking for input about his findings, the more I knew he was going to end up working on this case. They were pulling a lot of strings to get him to Vancouver. They were pushing him to finish his schooling remotely.

Brady was going places, and I would be beside him the whole time.

My parents had been hounding me for years to grow up and settle down. I hadn’t been ready before.

I was ready now.

Continue with Willow and Billie in [*On the Fly*](#).

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Buried Truths

Secrets Best Untold

About the Author

Nicky James has been writing stories since she was old enough to hold a pencil. As a child, her parents always said she had an active imagination.

Nicky lives in the small town of Petrolia Ontario Canada with her husband and three cats.

She can often be found hugging a cup of coffee with her nose in a book when she isn't writing.