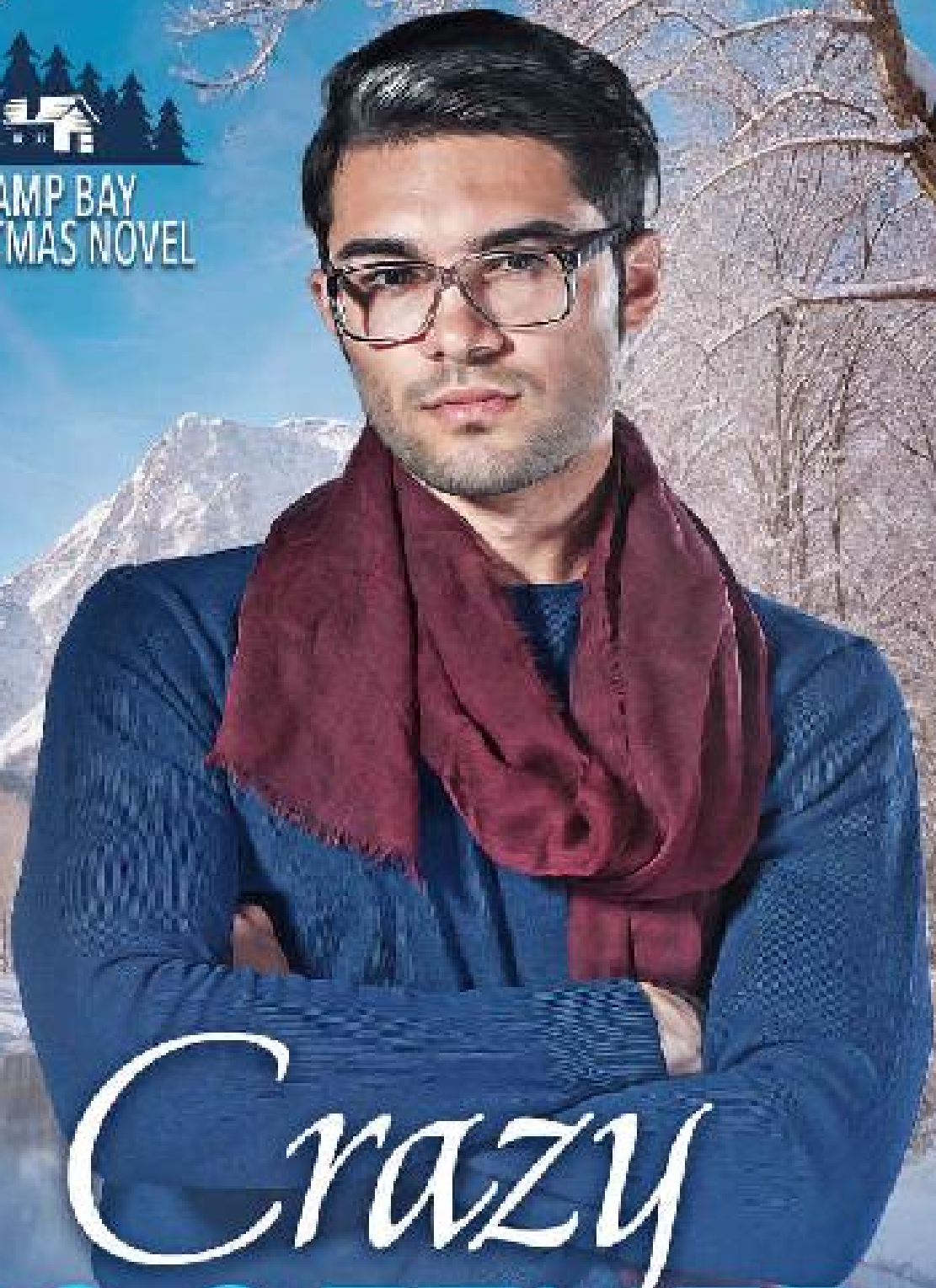




A CAMP BAY
CHRISTMAS NOVEL



Crazy

TOGETHER

MARIE SEXTON

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Crazy Together

By Marie Sexton

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Crazy Together

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BRYAN

The man who drove me to the airport was a complete stranger to me.

He was also my best friend.

Sometimes I marveled that both things could be true, but this was what my life had become—a strange play I acted in, surrounded by people I knew but who didn't know me at all.

Dustin slowed as he neared the drop-off zone of Grand Junction Regional Airport. He did that thing I'd become so familiar with over two years of friendship—giving me a side eye as he cleared his throat, tugging at his short but bushy beard with his free hand as he tried to decide whether to speak and what to say if he did.

“Are you sure you want to spend Christmas with your father?” he finally blurted out.

I was quite sure I *didn't* want to spend Christmas with any member of my family, but I nodded. “It'll be fine.”

He slowed to a crawl, seemingly looking for the perfect place to pull over amidst the other cars. In reality, he was buying time. “You could stay here with us.”

“Us” meant him and his two best friends, Chase and Lance, but I knew them even less than I knew him. They'd only come to Colorado to help him run the bar while I was busy watching my husband die. It seemed like they'd decided to stay, which made Dustin happy, but I could hardly stand being around them, not because they were unfriendly, but because to them, I was still “the widower.” I was the guy who'd basically lived at the hospital for six long months while they managed the business I didn't even want. To every single person I knew, I was still the guy in mourning.

I wondered when I'd get to *stop* being that guy.

“Bryan?” Dustin prodded, and I realized he'd stopped the car at the curb and I was still sitting there, staring out the windshield at the pale blue winter sky, wondering how this had become my life.

I shook myself out of my self-pity. Or at least I hoped I did a decent job of pretending. “Thanks for driving me.”

“Not a problem. You know that.”

I hoped he’d leave it at that. Just let me retrieve my carry-on suitcase from the back of his 4Runner and drive on, but of course that wasn’t his way. Dustin may have looked like an extra from *Sons of Anarchy*—all tattoos, piercings, and muscle—but at heart, he was a gentleman through and through. He climbed out of the car and pulled my suitcase out, but stopped short of handing it to me. He wore no coat, even though it was only 45 degrees outside. Only a t-shirt made for somebody half his size, but the cold never seemed to faze Dustin. He didn’t even shiver. Just stood there with his bulging biceps, my suitcase looking tiny in his hand.

“Thanks,” I said again, reaching for the bag. “Really, I appreciate it.”

He almost pulled it away. I swear I could see the gears in his head turning as he debated how much to say and how much to let lie. Holding my suitcase hostage would have given him time to decide, but he let go of it with a sigh.

“I’ll see you in five days,” I said.

He let me turn and take one or two steps before saying, “Hey, Bryan?”

I turned back. “Yeah?”

“I’m still your sponsor.”

I almost smiled. “I think I’m yours, actually.”

“Just promise you’ll call before you do anything you’ll regret.”

He didn’t mean “anything” I might regret. He meant one very specific thing. “I promise I’ll call before taking a drink.”

He nodded, his jaw tight with things he still wanted to say but knew I didn’t want to hear. I left without looking back. I wasn’t checking a bag and already had my boarding pass on my phone, so I headed straight for the mercifully short security line.

Once I was through the TSA checkpoint and had my shoes back on, I found my gate.

Right next to the bar.

Of course. The entire airport only had three gates so where else would it be?

I sat at one of the stools, my suitcase at my feet.

My hands shook as I ordered a gin and tonic.

And then I sat there, staring at it. Debating whether I really wanted it or not.

It wasn't too late. I could walk back out. Call Dustin and tell him to turn around and come get me. He wouldn't even be annoyed. Knowing him, he'd be relieved that I'd decided to stay in Colorado, where he could keep an eye on me. I could spend Christmas with him and his friends, all of them trying not to have too much fun lest they offend the guy in mourning. I could deal with Dustin trying to play Mother Hen. And Chase, still quietly pining for his ex. I could put up with their unwavering, never-ending sympathy. The problem was, I couldn't bear spending the holiday with Lance. He reminded me way too much of the only man I'd ever truly loved.

Or I could get on the plane as planned. Fly to Houston. Spend Christmas with my father, recently liberated from his third marriage. My brother would stop by with his wife and two perfect sons. My sister would be there too, with whichever of her three kids weren't with their respective deadbeat fathers. My siblings would quickly devolve into petty bickering. My dad would try to solve it all with a bottle of good ol' Kentucky bourbon. There'd be all kinds of questions about how I was holding up now that Greg was gone.

Which brought me back to the drink in front of me.

If I spent the holiday with my family, I'd end up drinking. So maybe it was better to just start now.

Or I could call Dustin. Tell him he was right. Tell him I was struggling more than I wanted anyone to know. The problem was, my struggle wasn't one any of them could understand.

“I don’t think you actually want to do that.”

The voice came from just over my left shoulder—deep and as southern as the Houston men my father played golf with every other Thursday. I jumped, turning to face him. Given the voice, I halfway expected to find the actor Sam Elliot standing there, and wouldn’t *that* be a great story to tell whoever I decided to spend Christmas with? But no. The man I found watching me was tall and fit, probably at least five or even ten years younger than me, with piercing blue eyes. He stood with both hands shoved into the pocket of a ragged hoody that had probably once been red. His shoddy clothing seemed to contradict his perfectly styled dark blond hair. He looked like a model who’d missed his wardrobe change.

“There are a lot of things I don’t want to do,” I said. “Which one are you referring to?”

He didn’t answer. Instead, he nodded toward the empty stool next to me. “Mind if I join you?”

I shrugged. “It’s a free country.”

He laughed as he edged his ass onto the stool in question. “I hope that wasn’t an attempt to start a political debate, because if so, I’m leaving.”

“I’d rather remove my eyeball with that corkscrew right there than talk politics.”

“Good. Then we’ll get along just fine.”

He reached for my drink with his right hand. What was left of his right hand, at any rate, and I had to force myself not to stare. He had a thumb, and the last two fingers. But the first two fingers were gone, a rope of thick pink scar tissue covering the place they should have been.

“This,” he said, pushing the glass out of my reach, “is what you don’t want to do.” He waved for the bartender, not seeming to mind that his mangled hand was on display as he did. “Hey, can I get a Sprite? And—” He turned to me. “What are you drinking when you’re not drinking?”

“Coke.”

“And a Coke.”

The bartender nodded and began tossing ice into two clean glasses.

“How’d you know?” I asked.

He shrugged. “Takes one to know one.”

“How long?”

“Two years.” He eyed me much the way Dustin had done in the car only an hour or so earlier. “You don’t want to talk about AA do you? I mean, I guess that’s preferable to politics but—”

“The corkscrew eyeball-ectomy’s still an option.”

He laughed, a big, hearty, vibrant sound that made everybody in the vicinity turn our way, and some knot deep inside me eased just a bit. When was the last time somebody laughed with me without immediately smothering it? Without ducking their head in apology, as if I was the Fun Police there to ticket them for going on with their lives? And for the first time in longer than I wanted to admit, a little spark of interest jolted to life in some dark, forgotten corner of my brain.

It wasn’t love.

It wasn’t even lust.

It was just the knowledge that this man didn’t know me at all. I could have a conversation with him that wasn’t about my dead husband. I could laugh and joke and talk about normal mundane things like Christmas and what I had planned for New Year’s without him walking on eggshells or asking if I was okay in the very next sentence.

I took a deep, cleansing breath. The weight of being “the widower” didn’t quite fall from my slumped shoulders, but it did ease, just a bit.

The bartender placed our decidedly non-alcoholic drinks in front of us.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“Bryan.”

“Good to meet ya, Bryan. I’m Noah.”

“Noah.” I clicked my glass against his. “It’s really fucking nice to meet you too.”

NOAH

I first noticed him because he was the kind of guy I *always* notice. Several years older than me, but with boyish good looks. Dark-rimmed glasses and the first hints of gray in his black hair gave him a scholarly air. He looked like the kind of man who should have been wearing a velvet dinner jacket, swirling brandy while debating the symbolism in some novel I'd never even heard of, let alone read.

Everybody has a type, and my type was definitely "hipster literature professor."

Still, on a normal day, I never would have had enough nerve to talk to him. He practically had "college degree" stamped across his forehead, the kind of guy who generally sniffed out pretty quick that I was just a big, dumb jock who'd barely managed to maintain his eligibility in high school.

But the longer I watched him stare at that drink, the more I knew I needed to step in. When you're an alcoholic, you learn to recognize the signs. You learn to help others when you can because you never know when you'll be the one in trouble, hoping some random stranger in an airport will throw you a lifeline.

The bartender took away the gin and tonic, and Bryan didn't seem sorry to see it go. Crisis averted. Now what? For some reason I couldn't put my finger on, I was reluctant to leave.

"You waiting for this commuter flight to Denver?" I asked.

Jesus, what a stupid question. The airport was tiny. There was only one gate actively preparing for departure. Why the hell else would he be here? But he nodded as if I hadn't just asked the dumbest thing in the world.

"Yep. Then on to Houston for Christmas, I guess."

I laughed. "You *guess*? Are you telling me it's still up for debate?"

He almost smiled.

Almost.

“Yeah. I guess I’m still holding out for a better offer.”

I almost asked him to come to Idaho with me instead, right then and there, but stopped myself. He’d think I was nuts. Still, I couldn’t stop looking at him. “Cute” was the perfect word. Not bad looking, but not stunning either. The ultimate guy next door. And yet, something about him intrigued me. Maybe it was only that I wanted to see him truly smile, just one time.

“How about you?” he asked. “Where are you headed?”

“Spokane.”

He nodded. I wasn’t sure he’d even heard me. “You don’t have to stay if you don’t want to.”

“What if I do want to?”

He shrugged. “Like I said, it’s a free country.”

“Do you want me to go?”

And at that, he finally looked at me. Like, *really* looked at me. This part, I was used to. Granted I saw it a lot more from women than men, but I’d learned to recognize it either way. Maybe I couldn’t play baseball anymore, but I still worked hard to stay in shape and to look good. And I knew, as he looked me up and down, he liked what he saw. It caused an explosion of butterflies in my stomach and a tingle of excitement in my heart.

“I don’t want you to go,” he said. “I’m just not very good company.”

I debated my response. Because he was right. At the moment, he wasn’t much fun. He was clearly depressed and fighting his internal demons. But I sensed something else hidden beneath the gloom.

“You remind me of a dog who’s been stuck in a crate so long, he doesn’t realize the door’s open.”

I regretted saying it immediately. Nobody wants to be compared to a dog. But to my surprise, he laughed. Not a

cynical chuckle or a sound of derision. He truly laughed for the first time since I'd sat down.

“*That* is an incredibly apt description of my life. The door may be open, but I know nobody will let me escape.”

“So what’s in Houston? Is that the crate?”

He shook his head. “No. Here in Colorado—*that’s* the crate.”

“And Houston’s the big sunny field you could be romping in?”

“God, no. I wish. But if I go to Houston...” He shook his head and pointed at the line of bottles in front of us. “I’ll end up drinking. And even though I know it’s a shitty idea, I also know it’s the only way out of this fucking box.”

“Why is Colorado the crate?” I wasn’t sure how well the analogy was holding up, but it’s what I had to work with.

He took a deep breath. Let it out. “My husband died.”

I opened my mouth to respond, but he held up a hand to stop me, looking suddenly angry.

“Don’t. Don’t fucking say it. I don’t want your sympathy. I don’t want anybody’s sympathy. I’ve had it up to here with people’s goddamned sympathy. I’m drowning in goodwill and well-meant concern and shitty fucking chicken and rice casseroles. I just want...” All the anger went out of him at once. He deflated. There was no other word for it. He changed in an instant from somebody full of passion and rage back to that dog, huddling in his cage. He shook his head. “I don’t know what I want. I just know it’s not here.”

I nodded, my mind whirling—not with the death of his husband but with my own past.

“I used to be a pitcher,” I told him. “Worked my ass off to get from the minors to the bigs. My second year as a relief pitcher, guys got hurt. Suddenly I was the starter, and it went better than I could have imagined. Played a second season as a starter that was even better. Signed a five-year extension for more money than most people make in a lifetime. Couple

months later, in the middle of the off-season, I went out 4-wheeling with some of my friends from the team.” I held up my ruined right hand. “And this happened. And it was like my life was an airplane.” I flew my hand through the air to demonstrate, and let it nosedive onto the bar in front of us. “And it crashed right into the fucking ground. And I spent the next six months being showered in sympathy.”

He watched me, his eyes thoughtful. “And before long, it starts to feel a whole lot like pity.”

I nodded. “Yep. Like everybody around you is walking on eggshells, waiting for you to fall apart at the seams.”

“Exactly. Jesus, I’m just so tired of it.”

“I get it,” I said, nodding. “I really do. But the truth is, I can’t cook worth a damn. And I really miss those chicken and rice casseroles.”

He burst out laughing, and I couldn’t help but laugh with him. Except at that moment, the speaker above us crackled to life.

“Attention, passengers. Flight 39 to Denver will begin boarding shortly...”

And all the happiness just fell away from him, like he’d been doused with a heavy bucket of gloom, and I knew right then I wasn’t ready to let this end.

“What seat are you in?” I asked.

“Uh...” He took out his phone and pulled up his boarding pass. “9B. How about you?”

“I’m gonna have them move me to 9A. I’ll be right back.”

“Wait. Are you serious?”

But I was already halfway to the little counter. Yes, it was impetuous, but I didn’t care. I wanted to sit with him a little longer. Maybe to make sure he didn’t order a drink once he was on the plane. Maybe because we’d shared something. Maybe because...

Well, maybe because I knew he was gay and I'd seen the way he'd eyed me and I'd never had such a perfect opportunity to explore exactly what that meant.

Or maybe I just liked feeling like I was doing something good.

"Can I help you?" the woman at the counter asked.

I gave her my best smile. She was in her twenties. Blond and pretty. The type of girl I would have dated in my baseball days just to keep people from asking too many questions. "I hope so. I'd like to move my seat."

She frowned. "We have a full flight. I'm not sure if that'll be possible."

"Can you check?"

"Well, like I said, it's a full flight—"

"Has the person in seat 9A checked in?"

She considered that for a second before deciding to help. She typed away on her keyboard for a minute. "Yes, she has. But—"

"I need to switch. I'm in business class right now, so maybe you can just give her a free upgrade?"

She shook her head, glancing over at her coworker by the door to the ramp. "I'll have to check. This is only my second week and I'm not sure I'm allowed to do that."

The plane we were about to board was only a little regional jet. I estimated there were fewer than sixty people in the waiting area. I knew the person I was looking for was a woman, and if she was in seat A but Bryan had B, it meant she was probably traveling alone. I pointed at the handset on the wall. "Can I use your little announcement thing?"

She could not have looked more shocked if I'd asked her to strip right there in the airport and cluck like a chicken. "Absolutely not!"

"Okay. Thanks." Thanks for absolutely nothing, was I wanted to say, but no need to be rude. Instead, I made my way

to the rows of seats and held up my hands for attention. “Excuse me folks,” I said, loud enough to be heard over the general hubbub. “Excuse me!” Conversations died as they all turned my way. “Sorry to bother you. I’m looking for whoever’s in seat 9A.” People began pulling out their phones or their paper boarding passes to check. The blond at the counter scurried over to the employee by the gate, and they huddled together, watching me and whispering, trying to decide if they should intervene, but they didn’t move to stop me. “It’s nothing bad, I promise. Nothing to worry about. I just need to find whoever has seat 9A.”

A woman I guessed to be in her sixties raised her hand, clutching a paper boarding pass. “That’s me. I’m 9A.”

“Perfect.” Everybody watched as I made my way to her seat. Luckily, the one next to her was empty so I could sit down rather than making her crane her neck to look up at me. “How would you like a free upgrade to business class?”

Of course she agreed. I hated to lose the extra leg room, but it was a small price to pay. I returned to Bryan just as they began calling for people who qualified for pre-boarding. And the look of admiration on his face was worth all the trouble I’d gone to.

“What?” I asked, even though I knew.

He shook his head in amusement. “You remind me of my college boyfriend.” And the way he said it, I knew he meant it as praise. “He always had a knack for getting people to do things his way.”

BRYAN

The plane that would take us to Denver was so small, Noah had to walk with his head bent sideways as we boarded. There were only 3 seats per row—singles to our left, and two seats per row on our right, which was where seats 9A and 9B were. Noah was easily six inches taller than me. With his long legs, broad chest, and muscular arms, he didn't look like he'd even fit there, huddled against the window, but he made it work.

I stashed my suitcase in the overhead bin and claimed my spot next to him. And as the plane taxied to the runway and eventually took to the sky, we talked like we'd known each other our whole lives. He was as easy to talk to as he was attractive. He was dynamic and charismatic and full of a fun, reckless kind of energy I found intoxicating. He was absolutely, positively miles out of my league. The kind of guy who never would have noticed me if we'd passed on the street or stood next to each other in line. And yet here he was, giving up his seat at the front of the plane in order to sit next to me. It made no sense whatsoever, but I wasn't going to argue.

He lived in Grand Junction. He helped coach a Little League team but was otherwise unemployed. Given what he'd said about being paid more money than most people would make in a lifetime, I assumed he didn't need to work. He hinted that he had "something else" in the works, but seemed hesitant to talk about it and I didn't push. He asked about my job, and my family in Houston, but never about Greg.

"So what's in Spokane?" I asked as the flight attendants began breaking out the snack carts.

"Nothing. That's just where I pick up my rental car. Then I'm headed to Camp Bay Chalet, in Idaho. Have you heard of it? It's on Lake Pend Oreille."

It was pronounced "lake ponderay," and it was this that tipped me off. "I have, actually. *Paranormal Hunters* did an episode there." I'd watched it while sitting next to Greg's bed in the hospital, in those last few days of his life, but I chose

not to say that. “They talked about the big parties they do for Christmas. You’re going up there for the holiday all alone?”

He shrugged. “A friend of mine from my minor-league days works there.” He blushed as he said it, which made me think there was more to the story. “He suggested it.”

The flight attendant handed us a little bag of snack mix. Noah smiled and easily charmed her into leaving us an extra bag, plus a full can of pop each. He was so much like my college boyfriend Cole in that regard, it made me feel nostalgic. And yet looking at him, he couldn’t have been more different. Cole had been small and effeminate. Noah, on the other hand, was exactly what you’d expect a professional athlete to be.

“I can’t believe you own Washington’s,” he said, once the flight attendant had moved on. “I totally had you pegged as a literature professor.”

“Ha! Not even close. Pretty sure I got a D on the only literature class I ever took.” I popped open my can of Coke and poured it into the cup of ice. “I majored in business management.”

“Okay, I can totally see you managing a hotel or a bookstore or a coffee shop, but Washington’s?” He shook his head as he ripped open his package of snack mix. “I was in there once, but it was nothing but college kids. I can’t even picture you there.”

“I know. It’s a dive. I hate it.”

“But you *own it*.”

I was hyper aware of his knee against mine under cover of our little seat-back tables. Not because he was trying to flirt with me but because in such cramped quarters, there was nowhere else for his leg to be.

“Greg owned it,” I said. “I was just the manager. That’s how we met.” I wondered if he had any idea what a relief it was to be able to talk about Greg as part of my past without everybody suddenly ducking their heads and lowering their voices to a near whisper. Without having them ask in hushed

reverence how I was doing now that he was gone. “He owned a lot of property, all over Grand Junction and Tucker Springs both. And now it belongs to me. Or, it will once it all passes through probate, at any rate. I just haven’t decided exactly what I’m going to do with it yet.”

I hadn’t even decided where to live. I’d given up my apartment in Grand Junction two years earlier, when I’d moved in with Greg. Now, I lived in Tucker Springs, in the house that had been his.

That had been *ours*.

Except I’d never thought of it that way. I’d never managed to think of the house as mine, even partially, or to think of the bohemian college town as home.

“Do you know where Tribute is?” I asked.

“Of course. Cute little town right in between Grand Junction and Tucker Springs.”

“You know the hockey rink they just built there? There’s a new minor-league team that’s going to start playing there in the fall.”

For some reason, this made him laugh. “I’m familiar.”

“There’s a building on the other side of that parking lot.”

He nodded. “The old dinner theater.”

“My friend Dustin thinks we should buy it.”

He winced. “From what I hear, the dinner theater didn’t have a good run.”

“No, but I think they were marketing it all wrong. They were always doing the old depressing shows, like *Miss Saigon* and *Les Mis*. They were aiming for some kind of high culture experience in little old Tribute and wondering why it wasn’t working.”

“So what are you thinking? More of a live music venue, like Washington’s?”

“Yes and no.” And so I told him about Dustin and Chase’s theory, that we needed to target people in their forties, fifties,

and sixties. They were the ones with money, way more than the college crowd. They were still young enough to want a night out, especially once the weekend rolled around, but they were also perfectly happy to be home again by eleven. And they definitely didn't want to spend hours in a standing-room-only bar, being jostled by college students, getting doused in cheap beer, being deafened by some band they'd never heard of. They wanted to sit at a table with their friends, share a bottle of wine or a few cocktails over dinner, and be entertained. Not with something drab and depressing as fuck. Something fun. Something they could sing along with and maybe even dance to.

“So would it be plays?” Noah asked, confused. “Or concerts?”

“We're thinking both, actually. There are a lot of great tribute bands in Colorado. Shakedown Street and Rumours and Crystal Visions and the Petty-Nicks Experience. But we might do some of the newer plays too, like *Rock of Ages* or *Footloose*. Or shows like *Million Dollar Quartet*. Do you know that one?”

He shook his head.

“It's a fictionalized story about the night Elvis, Johnny Cash, Cal Perkins, and Jerry Lee Lewis were all in the studio together, but the story isn't the point. It's really just an excuse to play all their biggest hits. And there's a woman—Elvis' girlfriend who was probably only written in so they could add songs with a female lead—and my friend Lance is a female impersonator.” I stopped, realizing I was stepping into territory a professional athlete might not be familiar with. Or comfortable with. “Do you know what that is?”

“Like, a drag queen?”

I managed not to laugh. Mostly I was thinking about the fit Lance threw whenever people called him that. It wasn't that he had anything against the drag community, but he didn't think of himself as one of them.

“A drag queen is all about being outrageous,” I explained. “But a female impersonator is much more subtle. It's more

about passing as a woman. If you walked in and saw Lance performing as Daphne, you probably wouldn't even realize you were watching a man."

"So you'd use him—"

"Well, her. You kind of have to think of Lance and Daphne as two different people."

"Okay. So you'd have *her* be the female lead?"

He stressed the pronoun a bit too much, but he didn't seem offended or disgusted by the idea, which I figured was a good sign. "Exactly. I think having Daphne as a central part of some of the shows would be really popular."

"Especially being so close to Tucker Springs, the Boystown of Colorado."

I nodded, feeling excited. More excited in fact than I'd ever been when talking about it with Dustin. I suddenly felt a pang of guilt that I'd never been more enthusiastic when he'd brought it up.

"You could partner with the hockey team, too," Noah said. "Do pre-game parties, or watch parties for away games."

I hadn't thought of that at all, but it wasn't a bad idea. "Assuming they'd be open to it."

He laughed. "I think they could be convinced."

A *ding* alerted us to the plane's announcement system turning on. "Attention, ladies and gentlemen. We'll be starting our descent into Denver soon..."

My heart sank. I'd somehow managed to forget that I still had to catch a plane to Houston. At that moment, it was the last thing in the world I wanted to do.

Noah and I were quiet as the plane landed. We took turns glancing awkwardly at each other as we waited to exit the aircraft. He got my suitcase out of the overhead bin without me asking but didn't say a word as he handed it to me. It wasn't until we were in the very busy terminal of DIA being jostled by other travelers that we stopped to face each other.

“My gate’s this way,” he said, hooking his thumb over his shoulder.

“Mine’s all the way in Terminal C.”

He nodded, his gaze on the floor at my feet.

I barely knew him, and yet I wanted to stay in that airport with him as long as possible. I would have hugged him, if I thought he’d allow it.

“I can’t tell you how much I enjoyed meeting you,” I finally said. “And not just because you stopped me from taking that drink. You made my day. If I could have stayed on that plane with you all week, I would have.” My cheeks burned as I said it, but it was only the truth. But then I stopped short, unsure if I dared push any further.

What I wanted more than anything was to ask for his number. Except I had no idea if he was even interested. Yes, he’d gone to a lot of trouble to sit next to me on the plane, but I hadn’t ever felt like he was flirting with me. Chances were pretty high that he was straight. And even if he was bi or gay, he was so far out of my league, he’d probably laugh at the very idea. Still, what was the worst that could happen? He could say no, and I’d feel like a fool. Fine. I could live with that, especially since I’d probably never see him again. But if I didn’t ask, I’d spend the rest of the week—hell, maybe even the rest of my *life*—wishing I had.

I took a deep breath, steeling myself for rejection. “Do you think I could have your—”

“Come with me.”

I stopped, blinking at him. “What?”

A blotch of red appeared on his neck and spread quickly up his cheeks, but he met my gaze. “Come to Camp Bay with me.”

That ridiculous giddiness I’d felt as I followed him onto the plane welled up in my chest, making me feel like I was floating above the ground. My heart pounded. I couldn’t stop smiling. It was the closest thing to an out-of-body experience I’d ever had. “Are you serious?”

“Yes. I know it’s crazy, but—”

“I don’t care about ‘crazy’! Frankly I could use some craziness in my life. But Camp Bay looks small and exclusive. They’re probably booked. I suppose maybe there’s another hotel in the area but—”

“You can stay with me.”

I had a feeling he wanted to take the words back the minute they were out of his mouth. He looked like they’d snuck out without him meaning for it to happen. Like he’d accidentally confessed to some petty crime and wasn’t sure if he should retract or just pretend it hadn’t happened. I waited for him to elaborate, but he only stood there, red-faced, mouth open, and it soon became clear he had no idea what to say next.

“Are you inviting me to share a room with you?” I asked.

“Uh...” He stared resolutely up at the ceiling. “Yeah.”

“To share a *bed* with you?”

What had started as a cute blush now looked more like a near-fatal case of heat stroke, but he managed a stiff, awkward nod.

“Are we talking platonic roommates here, or something more?”

“Well, uh... I don’t know. I’m not sure, you know? It’s just, well, I’ve never really done this so—”

I laughed without meaning to, cutting off his awkward explanation. “You know what? I don’t care,” I said, and I meant every word of it. “I don’t care if we have sex or not. I don’t care if I have to sleep on the floor. I don’t care if I end up in a Motel 8 in Spokane. You just opened the door to my crate, and as long as the offer still stands—”

“It does.”

“Then I’m in.”

The next couple of hours were frantic. We started out trying to do it all on our phones but the airport’s public wifi

was crap and we quickly decided it'd be a lot easier to go to the customer service desk and let a professional handle it. Once we reached the front of the line, I canceled my flight to Houston, plus my flights home, then booked seats on the same flights as Noah, both to Spokane and then home again the day after Christmas. I hoped he wasn't sick of me by the time we flew back to Colorado because if he was, it was going to be damned awkward.

By the time we finished at the customer service desk, we were both starving but only had a few minutes left before our flight boarded. Noah went in search of sandwiches we could eat on the plane while I called my dad.

"Something's come up," I told my dad. "Dustin needs me to stay in Colorado."

"What happened? Did they find his sister?"

I didn't remember telling my dad that Dustin had come to Colorado to look for his missing sibling, but apparently I had. "No, it's not that. It's just work stuff."

To my relief, he didn't argue. My dad and I certainly weren't estranged, but we weren't exactly close, either. I was still resentful about the affair that had caused him to leave my mom high and dry when I was fifteen years old. And although he said all the right things these days, I knew he still hated that I was gay. I was sure any disappointment he felt at me canceling was probably tempered by a fair amount of relief. We swapped bullshit lies about maybe getting together in the summer. Then I hung up and debated what to do about Dustin.

I should call him. I knew that. But I also knew he'd absolutely flip if he knew what I was doing. He'd lecture me about reckless behavior and human trafficking and god knew what else. Having an outright coronary on the phone or flying to my rescue whether I needed it or not weren't outside the realm of possibilities. Our flight was due to board in less than ten minutes, and I'd need a lot more time than that to convince him I was fine. He'd think I'd lost my mind. And hell, maybe I had, but it was the most exciting thing to happen to me in

decades. I didn't care how irrational it was. I was determined to run with it.

I put my phone in airplane mode and stuffed it in my pocket just as Noah reappeared with our lunch.

What Dustin didn't know couldn't hurt him.

A strange and intoxicating giddiness filled me as I filed onto the airplane behind Noah for the second time that day. People always talk about love at first sight. Personally, I didn't believe in it because to fall in love with somebody, you needed to do more than lay eyes on them. You needed to talk to them. Spend a bit of time getting to know them. You needed some sense of their values and beliefs.

Love on the first day, though? I knew it was possible because it happened to me on the slopes of Vail when I was only seventeen years old. I was in the singles line at the lift and ended up paired with the most flamboyant, outrageous man I'd ever met. It was the only run we skied all day. Cole and I spent the next four hours in the lodge, so caught up in each other, we might as well have been the only two people in all of Vail. Two hours after that, we were in bed together. And every single minute of it felt like fate.

Sitting next to Noah twenty years later as our plane lifted off at DIA, headed for Spokane, Washington, I felt that same wild, reckless hope. The difference was, I was no longer seventeen, naive enough to believe love was enough to conquer every problem. After losing Cole, I'd learned there was more to compatibility than attraction.

Still, if I let down my guard, I could almost believe this was the moment I'd been waiting for my whole life.

The flight was two and a half hours long. We didn't talk much through the first hour. Partly it was because we were busy scarfing down sandwiches. But I also knew my question about sleeping arrangements had thrown him off.

"What'd you tell your dad?" Noah finally asked, after the remains of our lunch had been cleared away.

“I told him something had come up and Dustin needed me to stay.”

“Was he upset?”

“No. It’s possible he was even relieved. What about you?” I asked. “Why aren’t you spending Christmas with your family?”

He shrugged. “Not much of a family to spend it with. I’m an only child. My dad was career Air Force, so I grew up in Bossier City, but he died of colon cancer five years ago. My mom still lives there, but she just remarried last month. I sent her and her new husband on a trip to Hawaii as sort of a late honeymoon present so I could go do my own thing this year.”

“And your ‘own thing’ was to spend it with a bunch of strangers at a bed and breakfast in Idaho?” He blushed, and I found myself laughing. “Hey, I’m not complaining. I’m thrilled to be going anywhere that isn’t Texas or Colorado.” But he still couldn’t quite meet my eyes the way he had on the first flight. His arm sat on the armrest between us. Sitting as close as we were, it was easy to let my fingers land on his wrist. It caused his blush to deepen, but he didn’t pull away. “Look, I know you’re freaking out about the bed thing, but you don’t need to.”

His head jerked in the semblance of a nod. “You probably think I’m being silly.”

“No. I think we’ve known each other for, what, five hours now? And not being ready to jump into bed with somebody after five hours isn’t silly.”

That seemed to make him feel better. Some of the tension left his shoulders and he gave me a hesitant smile. “You know what my nickname was in the minors? Prude. They called me Prude Porter because they had to explain to me what Tinder was. And because I never slept with any of the girls who hung around our hotel or slipped guys their number at home games.”

I wanted to ask more about that. I wanted to know if he hadn’t slept with them because he wasn’t into casual sex or

because he wasn't attracted to women, but I was trying to put him at ease, not wind him up even tighter than he already was. So I went a different direction.

"Porter? Is that your last name?" Because suddenly it seemed weird that I didn't know it already.

"Yeah. Noah Allen Porter."

That made me laugh. "I'm an Alan too. Bryan Alan Nantel. And as far as sleeping arrangements, I meant what I said back at the airport," I assured him. "I have zero expectations either way. I'm perfectly happy to follow your lead."

"You won't be disappointed if I turn into Prude Porter again this weekend?"

"Noah, listen to me." I waited until he finally met my gaze again. "You've already given me the best day I've had in months. Maybe even years, if I'm being honest." And yeah, getting laid—especially with a guy as attractive as him—would absolutely have been the cherry on top. But the last thing I wanted was for him to feel pressured or uncomfortable, so I kept that part to myself. "Whatever happens, I can absolutely guarantee that I will *not* be disappointed."

And it seemed like that was what he needed to hear because he smiled, squeezing the fingers of my right hand quickly before letting them go.

And we talked the rest of the way to Spokane.

NOAH

Once I quit worrying about what would happen when we got to Camp Bay, I began counting how many times I wanted to kiss Bryan.

The first had been on the flight from Grand Junction to Denver. The second had been as we'd stood in the DIA terminal and he'd agreed to come to Idaho with me. The third time was when he told me he wouldn't be disappointed if we didn't have sex. By the time we collected my suitcase in Spokane and climbed into my rented Jeep, I'd hit seven. And yeah, the sex still worried me. But mostly, I was doing my best not to think that far ahead.

One thing at a time.

The drive took an hour and a half, and the whole time, he watched me more than the passing scenery. It made me self-conscious. On the other hand, I would have been watching him the whole time too, if I didn't have to worry about watching the road instead. I loved the brightness of his eyes, and the openness of his smile, and how matter-of-fact he was about life. And more than anything, I loved that he was the kind of guy who'd run off on an uncharted adventure just because he could.

"So you hinted on the plane that you have something else 'in the works,'" he said as we crossed the state line from Washington to Idaho. "Are you willing to elaborate on that?"

I grinned, thinking about it. "You know the minor league hockey team that's moving into the new stadium by your dinner theater?"

"I've heard about it," he said. "The Grand Valley Golden Eagles, right?"

"Right. Well, I'm one of the owners."

He laughed. "So that's why you're so sure they'll be willing to partner with us!"

I shrugged. It was hard to explain how excited I was about it. "We had the same thought as you—we could draw from

both the Grand Valley area and Tucker Springs. I don't really know shit about hockey," I admitted. "I know it's fun to watch. I know it's more popular right now than it's ever been. I know there's a minor league team in Loveland that's been selling out their barn for twenty years straight—"

"Wait. They play in a barn?"

I laughed. "Stadium. Arena. You know. They call it a barn. I don't know why. But I just mean, I think it can work, if we don't fuck it up."

"How did you end up with a hockey team, rather than baseball?"

"There's already a minor-league baseball team in Grand Junction, so that niche has been filled. But the summer before last, I played in this charity golf tournament, and I just happened to end up on a team with a land developer and a former NHL player. Shane coached in the ECHL and AHL and said he thought Grand Valley would be a good market for a team. And by the time we played eighteen, we had a plan."

"Huh." The plains of eastern Washington had fallen behind us. Now, we were entering the forested section of Northern Idaho. Bryan leaned his forehead against the window and watched the trees rush past. "I keep thinking I should call Dustin and tell him that he's right, we should buy the theater."

"You could do it now."

"I could." But then he laughed. "Except if he finds out I'm not in Texas, he'll flip." Sunlight flashed off the lenses of his glasses as he shook his head. "It's better if I wait and tell him once we're home."

By the time we turned onto the road that took us to Camp Bay Chalet, my kiss count had reached ten.

"Oh my gosh," Bryan said as we pulled into the small parking lot. "It looks like something out of a Hallmark movie."

He wasn't wrong. A towering, snow-topped pine tree stood to the left, fully decorated for Christmas. Behind it sat a three-story log building with pine garland hanging from every

available space. Twinkling white lights outlined the edge of the snow-covered roof. Beyond that, Lake Pend Oreille shimmered in the sunlight. On the far side of the narrow lake, mountains rose to kiss the deep blue sky.

“I was going to say it looked like a Christmas card,” I said, “but I guess it gets us back to Hallmark either way.”

It was damned chilly getting from the car to the oversized log cabin. I hadn't pulled my coat out of my suitcase yet. Bryan wore only a light jacket. I suspected it was the only coat he'd brought since he'd expected to end up in Texas, not Northern Idaho. We pushed through the inn's front door into the lobby, stomping snow off our feet. A giant floof of a golden retriever rushed over to greet us, tail wagging wildly. Bryan laughed and bent to pet her while I looked around.

Camp Bay Chalet was as picturesque inside as out. Christmas lights and pine garland hung absolutely everywhere. On the far end of the room, three couches formed a box around the enormous fireplace. A squat pit bull mix lay snoring, sprawled on her back in front of the roaring fire. Guests lounged on the couches, most with drinks in their hands. A few of them turned our way as we entered, red-cheeked and cheerful, waving hello to the new arrivals.

Immediately to our right was the check-in desk, and a skinny twink of a man in his late thirties. “Well, hellooo, my lovelies,” he said, waving us forward. “You must be Noah. You're our last guest to check in for the weekend. Although I had you down for single occupancy. No worries, though. Single, double, it's all good. Although if you decide to add a third...” He winked at us. “Do call me, won't you?”

I blushed, uncomfortable with such a blatant come-on, even in jest, but Bryan laughed. The man, whose name tag said “Sal” had us sign a rental agreement, then gave us each old-fashioned keys on a plastic keychain.

“We advise that you lock your door any time you leave your room. I'd like to say you don't need to worry about it, but there was a bit of a fuss last year. Anyway. Jerome said to let him know when you got here.” He turned toward the giant

room behind him, which appeared to be the dining room.

“*Jero-ome!!*”

I tried not to fret as we waited for him to appear. Jerome had always been ridiculously attractive. I halfway hoped he’d let himself go in the intervening years, but no. He came striding into the lobby looking as sexy as ever, fit and swarthy and handsome. Bryan’s smile wilted a bit as he watched Jerome pull me into a tight hug that was way too full-body for my comfort level.

“Man, you look good, Noah,” Jerome said, still holding me. “I’m so glad you came.” Then, he pulled back and kissed me on the lips, one hand on the back of my neck. “I’ve been looking forward to this all month,” he said, his voice low and suggestive. “Maybe we can finally finish what we started all those years ago.”

“Jerome,” Sal said pointedly. “You’re completely ignoring our *other* guest.”

“What?” Jerome turned toward Bryan, which allowed me to extricate myself from his embrace. “Oh.” If Jerome was annoyed or confused, he didn’t let it show as he shook Bryan’s hand. “I’m sorry. I didn’t realize Noah was bringing anybody with him.”

“It was kind of a last-minute decision,” Bryan said.

“Well, welcome to Camp Bay. I suppose having Noah all to myself was a bit too much to hope for.” He pulled us both close, one arm around each of us, although it was Bryan he leaned closer to. “But I’m totally down for sharing, if you are.”

Sal had made a similar offer, but from him, it had clearly been a joke. With Jerome, there was a sincerity behind the words that made me uncomfortable. I blushed, pulling away, and he laughed. I halfway expected him to call me Prude Porter again. I wondered how I’d handle it if he did.

“We’ll keep that in mind,” Bryan said, perfectly polite as he disentangled himself from Jerome. He turned to me. “Should we go up and drop off our bags?”

I nodded stiffly and followed him, feeling Jerome's eyes on my back the whole way. Bryan opted for the stairs to the second floor rather than waiting for the elevator. We reached room eight, and he unlocked it and went in. He acted as if the horrible scene in the lobby had never happened. And the entire time, I felt like the world's biggest asshole.

"Wow, this is adorable," he said, taking in the room.

"Adorable" maybe. But it was also tiny. I'd been hoping for a queen-sized bed at least, but this one was only a double, and the way it was shoved into the corner meant whoever was on the inside would have to climb over whoever was on the outside every time they wanted in or out.

"I think they might have shown this exact room on Paranormal Hunters," Bryan said. "It may or may not be haunted. You're not afraid of ghosts, are you?" I shook my head, but he wasn't looking my direction. He went to the window and shoved the curtains aside. Sunlight streamed in, lighting up his dark hair. Somehow, those hints of gray at the peak of his forehead had become my new favorite thing. "It's beautiful. I think they said on the show that they have fireworks over the lake on Christmas Eve. We'll have a perfect view from here, if we want to watch from our room."

I took a deep breath. "I don't blame you if you're angry."

"Not angry," he said, shaking his head and turning to face me. "I'll admit to 'confused,' but—"

"I owe you an explanation."

"No, you don't. I said I'd follow your lead, and I meant it."

"And I appreciate that, more than you'll ever know." But I was being a fool. And worse than that, I was being a coward. "I've been expecting you to blindly feel your way through this situation when what I really need to do is just, you know, step up to the plate and tell you why I'm here."

"I don't want you to feel pressured."

I almost laughed. He was so careful of not pushing me. But it was time for me to man up, so to speak. "I actually think

I'll feel less pressured once I get it all out."

"Okay." The room had one tiny round table near the window, with two wood-backed chairs tucked underneath. He turned one of them around so he could face me and sat down. "I'm listening."

God, I loved him in that moment. If he'd been standing in front of me instead of seated in a chair on the other side of our little room, I think I could even have kissed him.

Eleven. That made eleven times.

Instead, I sat down on the bed and started talking.

"I've known since I was sixteen that I'm—" I had to clench my hands together and force the words past my lips. "That I'm gay." And if he suspected that I'd never said those words out loud to another human being before, he didn't let it show. "But I also knew, since long before sixteen, that the only thing I wanted to do was play baseball. I wasn't one of those kids who's naturally gifted with all the talent they need, but I had enough to get by. And I had drive and motivation. And I was willing to work my ass off, and that's what I did."

He nodded, willing me to go on. But baseball was a tangent—a tangent I could get lost in if I wasn't careful. I needed to stick with the real issue—my sexuality.

"The thing is, it may be different now, but back then, I knew I had a choice to make."

I watched him think about it, and finally come to the same conclusion I'd come to back then. "You couldn't come out and play professional baseball, too. It was one or the other."

I nodded. "And that was an easy choice for me to make. Coming out would have horrified my parents, and it would have been the end of my career. I never even considered choosing that option."

"I guess I can understand that."

"When I was with my first minor-league team, right out of high school, I dated a Mormon girl. She was saving herself for marriage, so it was perfect. She was happy I never pressured

her for sex. I was happy because nobody asked me uncomfortable questions. But after a couple of years, she figured out I wasn't ever going to propose, and she dumped me. And then I got called up to triple-A, which is where I met Jerome. But I wasn't there long enough to date anybody. When I first started playing with the Padres, I dated one of the team's medical trainers. She was gay, too, so that worked out well."

"You were each other's beards," he said.

I nodded. "Right up until she met a girl she liked enough to come out for."

"Were there ever men?"

"Twice. Once with Jerome. Once with a guy I met in a bar." Even now, I could remember the excitement and the sense of liberation that came with it. "I was drunk, both times. And it was all so quick and frantic. And not..." I knew I was blushing, but I made myself keep talking. "Not sex, really. Just hands, and kissing."

But now, we'd come to the hard part. I stared at my ruined hand and willed myself to push through it.

"My last season with the Padres, I started dating a girl named Hannah. I didn't love her, really. But I liked her well enough, I guess. And... well, I actually ended up sleeping with her. I mostly had to be drunk for it to happen, but it did happen, a few times, at least."

"Did she suspect the truth?"

"In hindsight, yeah, I think she did. But she didn't care."

"She didn't care that you didn't love her?" he asked, incredulous.

I shrugged. "There's a certain amount of prestige that comes with dating a professional athlete. You get to meet famous people, hang out with local celebrities, go to extravagant parties. It's a whole lifestyle, and she loved that. Being part of that scene was more important to her than love. And if things had gone the way I expected, I probably would have married her. We probably would have had a perfectly civil, mostly sexless marriage and been happy enough."

“But that’s not what happened,” he said gently.

“No.” I took a deep breath. “There were three other guys on the team I hung out with on a regular basis. Them and their girlfriends, me and Hannah—we did everything together. And that winter, we all bought Jeeps, and the eight of us took them to Utah to go four-wheeling. And yeah, we were drinking, but not the way the press made it sound. They made it sound like we were all shit-faced or something. But we weren’t. I’d had three beers that day, over the course of maybe five hours. But we were used to sea level, and here we were at eight-thousand feet, and it hits you a little harder. Well, one of the guys, Carlos, he rolled his Jeep. Which was fine. I mean, we were going at a crawl. Everybody had roll cages and seatbelts. Nobody got hurt. We were actually pretty excited about it, to be honest. Jed had a winch on his Jeep that he was dying to use. So I was hooking up this winch to the front of Carlos’ Jeep.” I held up my hands, trying to demonstrate, remembering how it had felt, pulling the hook at the end of the line with my left hand, holding the line steady with my right. “And Jed said, ‘Have you got it?’ And I guess I thought he meant did I need help, so I said, ‘Yeah, I got it.’ But what he really meant was, was I ready?”

“Oh no,” Bryan said quietly, seeing where this tale was going.

I nodded. “Yeah, you guessed it. He turned on the winch, and that steel cord just ripped right through my hand. I remember the snow at my feet instantly turning red. And my fingers...” I had to fight back a hysterical burst of laughter, because it wasn’t funny.

Or maybe it was.

“You know that saying about knowing something like you know the back of your own hand? I learned that day that it’s true because I looked down and I clearly remember thinking, ‘Hey, those are my fingers on the ground.’ And then...” This time, I laughed before I could help myself. “I tried to pick them up.” I squeezed my hand, trying to demonstrate how confounding it was to have your own fingers slip through your grip. I remembered so clearly the confusion and sudden alarm

when I realized I needed my fingers in order to pick up my fingers.

“After that... I don’t know. There was a lot of noise. Everybody was freaking out. One of the girls threw up. One of the guys did too. Hannah had this bag of Chex Mix with her, and she dumped it out. That’s the next clear memory I have, of the wind catching this Chex Mix, scattering it across this sparkling, virgin snow, and me thinking, ‘Wow, the birds are really gonna love that when they find it.’ She put my fingers in the bag with a bunch of snow. Somebody wrapped my hand up in a scarf, and Jed got me into his Jeep, and we raced down the mountain.”

Bryan watched me with huge eyes, one hand over his mouth as if he had to force himself not to speak.

“All I could think about as we went down the mountain was not getting blood on Jed’s upholstery. My hand hurt, but not as much as you might think. And I remember thinking, for some reason, that that was a good sign. I remember thinking the damage must not be that bad.

“And then we got to the hospital and Hannah handed the doctor this fucking Chex Mix bag. And by that point, we’d been in the car with the heater on for twenty minutes or more. There was no snow left. It was just a bag of bloody water with my severed fingers floating in it. And the doctor took one look at them. And he kind of shook his head...” I was surprised to find that there were tears in my eyes, and I hurried to wipe them away. For better or worse, drying my eyes with my mangled hand had now become second nature. “That’s when it hit me that my life was over. That everything I’d been working towards since I was eight years old was gone.”

“Jesus, Noah,” Bryan practically whispered. “I know you don’t want to hear the words ‘I’m sorry,’ but I don’t know what else to say. I can’t even imagine how that must have felt.”

“It was definitely the worst day of my life.”

“When was this? How long ago?”

“Three years, almost to the day.” But most people just couldn’t understand how devastating it had been. How could they? “Have you ever been part of a team?” I asked.

“I was on the golf team one year in high school,” Bryan said, “but I’m not sure that even counts.”

“Not even close,” I said. Not to be mean, but because it was true. “Once you get to the competitive leagues, it becomes your whole life. Depending on the league, you’re playing between 138 and 162 games each year and almost every hour of every single day is dictated by the team. You don’t get to be home in time for dinner. You don’t spend Memorial Day or Labor Day or the Fourth of July with your family. You don’t get weekends off. You have no free time at all until the season ends, and in the off-season, you have more free time than you know what to do with. You spend half your life in hotel rooms. You barely see your family. And through it all, your teammates are there. Every single place you go, everything you do, they’re there with you. They become your family. No. I mean, they become *more* than family. They become your whole *world*. You love some of them and you hate some of them and you celebrate every win and mourn every loss and it’s always, *always* done as a team. They’re part of you and you’re part of them, and together, you’re part of something bigger, you know? And in the blink of an eye, that was gone.” And even though I knew he’d try, I also knew he’d never, ever understand how devastating it had been. “Over the years, I’d had teammates out for months at a time rehabbing injuries. They told me how lonely and isolated they felt, suddenly not traveling with the team and not seeing their friends every single day. But I hadn’t realized how brutal it is to be dropped like a bad habit and left behind. To just watch that bus roll on without you. And knowing no amount of rehab would ever get me back there...” I shook my head, trying to hold myself steady, but I couldn’t face him.

“Is that when you started drinking?” he asked.

I nodded. “I spent an entire year being shitfaced drunk and absolutely miserable. Hannah ghosted me a month after

the accident, and I didn't even blame her. Eight months later, she married one of my teammates."

"That had to hurt, whether you loved her or not."

"It definitely felt like a kick in the balls. But it was also a wake-up call. I realized the world keeps turning, one way or another. I could spend the rest of my life wallowing in self-pity, but the only person I was hurting was myself. So I sobered up. Got back into my exercise routine. Decided to get the fuck away from San Diego. One of the guys I knew from my double-A days was working for the short-season team in Grand Junction, and he offered me a job, so I moved there. It wasn't that I needed the money. I just, I don't know, I needed to be part of a team again, I guess."

"I can understand that."

"It only lasted one season because MLB revamped the whole Minors system, but I'm glad I did it because it got me off my ass and back on track." I breathed a sigh of relief. I'd nearly reached the end of this horror story. Except now we'd come to the crux of the issue, which had nothing to do with my hand or baseball and everything to do with the two of us together in this tiny room with one not-very-large bed. "About a year ago, it finally occurred to me that I didn't need to stay in the closet. Except I'm thirty years old and practically a virgin! You have no idea how intimidating it is trying to meet somebody, knowing every single guy I might date has more experience than me. I'm afraid to even go to dinner with somebody because I worry they'll expect something in return that I don't even know how to give. It's like..." I scrambled for a way to sum it all up. "It's like how you need work experience to get a job, but you need a job to get work experience. There's a name for situations like that, right?"

Bryan nodded. "A catch-22."

"Yes! A catch-22. That's exactly what it is. I'm afraid to date anybody because I'm a virgin, but I can't lose my virginity until I've dated someone."

Bryan's smile was sympathetic. "And when it comes to gay men, dating without sex can be hard to find."

I nodded, relieved he understood. “Exactly. So then, a few months ago, Jerome sent me a friend request on FB. We started chatting a bit on DMs, and he invited me up here. And you have to understand, Jerome will sleep with anybody, regardless of gender. We called him Dog because he was always sniffing after his next piece of ass. He kept the flings with men on the down-low back then, but once he quit baseball, he quit pretending. He’d fuck anybody. He’s the most promiscuous person I’ve ever known. And so yeah, when I accepted his invitation, I knew it meant having sex with him. And on one hand, I wanted that. I mean, I’m sick of being a virgin, and I really, *really* wanted to get over this first hurdle, you know? On the other hand, I didn’t necessarily want it with *him*. He’s been with so many people, and as inexperienced as I am, that scares the crap out of me. And I was worried I’d have to be drunk to go through with it, like with Hannah, but I don’t want to start drinking again.

“And then I met you, and when I found out you were gay and single, it just... god, I’m going to sound so fucking stupid, but it felt like fate, you know? It felt like it was meant to be.”

He clapped one hand over his mouth, and for half a second, I thought he was going to burst out laughing. But then he pulled himself together. He rose from his chair and took one hesitant step in my direction. I rose to my feet as well, suddenly feeling like I wanted to back away, except I had nowhere to go.

“Are you telling me,” he said quietly, “that you came up here for some kind of gay sexual awakening. But sitting in that podunk airport, you decided you’d rather have it with me than with that gorgeous hunk down there?”

I forced myself to nod. “Yes, that’s what I’m trying to say. Why? Is that crazy?”

“Ha! Jesus, are you kidding? Yes, it’s crazy. It’s absolutely fucking insane! Anybody in their right mind would choose him over me!”

I shook my head. I knew what he meant—he meant because Jerome still looked like some kind of Adonis. And

Bryan looked...

Well, he looked like a regular guy. I'd learned on the plane that he did a lot of mountain biking in college. Since then, he'd traded the mountain bike for a hybrid bicycle—whatever that was—which he rode at least twice a week. That meant he was in decent shape, but he wasn't the type of guy who spent hours in the gym trying to perfect his six-pack. But that only made him more real in my mind.

More legitimate, somehow.

"I don't even really like him that much. But you?" I took his hand and pulled him a bit closer. I felt like an idiot, but made myself keep talking. "I like you a lot, Bryan. I know I sound like a stupid teenager saying it, but—"

"You can sound like a stupid teenager all weekend, as far as I'm concerned."

That gave me courage to look into his eyes. "I've always been so intimidated by the idea of casual sex. But with you, it doesn't feel casual. It feels... Hell, I don't know." I shook my head, frustrated by my inability to put things into words. "It feels *right*, I guess. And so whatever happens while I'm up here, I'd rather it be with you."

"Holy shit," Bryan laughed. "I've never believed in God until this very moment. And now I find out the bastard's not only up there, but he's apparently on my side? Jesus, I have a feeling I'll have to pay some serious penance down the road, but I don't care." He leaned into me, his hands on my chest. "I said I'd follow your lead, and I will."

"I'm afraid if you do that, we'll never get anywhere good."

He laughed. "If we did it my way, you'd already be naked."

I wondered if he saw the alarm in my eyes when he said that. "I'm not quite ready for that."

"I know." He moved his hands lower, a gentle caress on my stomach, and I tried to tell myself I didn't have to be embarrassed about how quickly I responded to his touch. He

kissed the sensitive spot under my ear. “You’re going to have to tell me when to slow down and when to speed up,” he said, his voice a husky whisper.

Part of me wanted to throw caution to the wind and tell him to go as fast as he wanted, but I felt like I was strapped into the front car of the world’s scariest roller coaster, just starting the climb to the top of that first hill, unsure whether what I felt was excitement or sheer terror. Plus, it was all so new to me, and the stupid romantic teenager in my heart wanted to drag it out for as long as we could.

His arms snuck around my waist. He settled a little closer, looking up at me, waiting for some kind of sign.

My whopping two times fooling around with other men had been rushed, both of us drunk and desperate and fumbling. They’d also been the best two orgasms of my life. But suddenly now, here with him, I saw an endless road of possibilities in front of me. I put my arms around him, pulling him close. I lowered my head. He rose on his toes to meet me.

Twelve times now I’d wanted to kiss him.

Turns out, twelfth time’s a charm.

BRYAN

The kiss was the sweetest thing I'd experienced since I was seventeen and first learning about sex. Noah was gentle and hesitant and so perfectly *careful* about it all, and it was all I could do to keep my hands above his waist.

But I did.

I put my arms around his neck instead, and he whimpered, pulling me tight against him. Just a simple kiss, and yet he was fully erect, his cock hard against me. I sensed how torn he was, waffling between unexplored desire and fear of the unknown. Kissing him without touching the rest of him was like being behind the wheel of a sports car and trying to idle through a school zone. I desperately wanted to push the pedal to the floor.

And I would.

Eventually.

But for now, I just let him kiss me until he pulled away, breathing hard. His hands shook as he tried to put some distance between us, shifting his hips so I wouldn't feel how turned on he was.

"Don't," I said quietly, holding him tighter. "Don't be embarrassed with me."

He closed his eyes, resting his forehead against mine. "I can't help it. I feel like everybody else went through this when they were in their teens. I'm thirty years old and just now figuring out what I've been missing. I had to stop before I ended up coming in my pants."

I laughed, and hoped he knew I wasn't laughing at him. I was laughing in sheer delight. I couldn't believe how young and giddy and alive I felt.

"If it makes you feel any better, every single thing about this reminds me of my teens too," I assured him. "And you know what? It's amazing! When Dustin finds out, he's going to say throwing away my Christmas plans to follow a guy I barely know to Idaho is spontaneous and irrational and

absolutely crazy. And he's right! But it's also the most fun I've had in ages." I touched his cheek and stared into his blue eyes. "I really like being crazy with you."

"Jesus," he whispered. "If we're gonna do it, might as well do it together, right?"

I smiled and kissed him. "Absolutely."

"Bryan, I'm so—" He stopped short and shook his head, clearly opting to change directions mid-sentence. "I'm really glad you came with me."

"Me too." This time, I let him pull away. I gave him space to get himself back together. "I think dinner's in about an hour. You want to go down and meet the others?"

"Yeah, we probably should."

First, we took a few minutes to clean up and change clothes. Except after a minute of digging through my suitcase, I had to admit I didn't have anything that felt appropriate for dinner at Camp Bay Chalet.

"I really didn't plan for a social occasion," I told him. "All I brought is jeans."

"So? That's what I'm wearing."

I'd fully intended to outright ogle him while he undressed and I was a bit disappointed to realize I'd missed the show. He'd swapped his ratty jeans and faded red hoody for much nicer jeans and a plain black T-shirt that accentuated his athletic frame. It wasn't exactly "dressed up," but nobody would ever complain. Not when he looked as good as he did.

Me, on the other hand? Given what I had in my suitcase, swapping my T-shirt for a golf shirt was the best I could do.

A few minutes later, he followed me downstairs. Several guests mingled in the lobby, most of them on the couches around the roaring fireplace, taking turns petting the golden retriever who was soaking up all the love she could get. To our left was the dining room, which held a Christmas tree and four long dining tables, each of them set for ten. To our right was a cozy library with a second Christmas tree. The fireplace

between that and the lobby was open on both sides, allowing it to fill both rooms with its light and warmth. Through the library, we found a large sunroom with a third Christmas tree, this one decked out all in white and silver. A small stage and a dance floor occupied the far end of the room. The near side held chairs and several cocktail tables. Floor-to-ceiling windows made up the outer wall, allowing a view of a cobblestone patio, which also held cocktail tables and chairs, along with several standing heaters. And beyond that, the splendor of Lake Pend Oreille shimmered in the waning sunlight.

“Wow,” I said. “This is so much better than Houston.”

We retraced our steps back the way we’d come, trying to figure out where to insert ourselves into this makeshift party. I didn’t know how Noah felt, but I found myself searching for any group who didn’t all have drinks in their hands. I could be surrounded by people drinking alcohol all day at Washington’s and never be tempted because there, I was the boss, and it was work. It was a completely different mindset than a social gathering. But occasions like this, where I was expected to mingle with complete strangers, were one of my biggest triggers.

I stopped in the library. Seating here had been set up to allow for intimacy rather than large numbers. All the chairs were either single, or in pairs. One loveseat sat directly in front of the fireplace. Luckily for us, its occupants left just as we arrived.

“Let’s sit down,” I said to Noah.

We did, me on the right, him on the left.

And then we both sat there for a minute, lost in our own thoughts.

I hadn’t considered the reality of being one of the only sober people at a four-day long Christmas celebration with complete strangers until now. I wished stupidly that Dustin was with me because he was good at socializing and putting me at ease. Even having Chase along would have helped. He was an introvert at heart and unless there was music involved,

he'd be perfectly happy to linger on the periphery with me. But now, I felt somehow obligated to mingle. And a little liquid courage went a long way in situations like this.

Next to me, Noah sat, stiff-backed, his face unreadable. "Are you wanting a drink right now as much as I am?" I asked.

He jumped, as if he'd forgotten I was there. But then he shook his head. "No. Social events don't bother me. I drink when I'm feeling sorry for myself." He grinned at me, his cheeks turning the slightest bit pink. "And I'm definitely not feeling sorry for myself today." And yet, he clearly wasn't comfortable either. I wondered if I should ask, but this didn't seem like the right time. Maybe if we'd been upstairs in the privacy of our room, but not here in such a public place.

I glanced around at the few guests in the room with us. Two men, clearly a couple. One straight couple. Two women who looked like sisters. By peering through the fireplace to the sitting area on the other side, I made out three more couples—one guy/guy, one guy/girl, plus the lesbian couple who I recognized from *Paranormal Hunters* as the owners of Camp Bay Chalet. There was also a second pair of women who I guessed to be mother and daughter. As we sat there, another gay couple walked through the room, holding hands on their way to the sunroom.

They'd mentioned on *Paranormal Hunters* that the inn was LGBT friendly, but I still hadn't expected quite so many gay men. Not only that, this was clearly a space where they felt comfortable showing affection—holding hands, or even sharing a kiss. But unlike gay bars, it wasn't a highly sexualized kind of intimacy. These were just men who cared for each other in a space where it was acceptable to let it show. In this one little corner of the world, they could act like any other couple and not worry about somebody glaring at them or making a rude comment. And the knowledge that we were afforded something we were so often denied seemed to give the entire group a feeling of camaraderie I'd never experienced anywhere else before.

Greg would have loved it.

I felt a sudden, deep pang of sorrow, like a punch to my solar plexus. I'd never loved Greg the way he'd loved me, but I'd still cared for him. And sitting there in front of that fire, only three days before Christmas, barely a month after burying him, I felt true grief for the first time. His illness had drawn on so long, and there hadn't even been any hope to hang onto. I'd offered to take him home so many times, figuring he may as well spend his final days there, but he'd refused. He'd said he didn't want our home to forever remind me of his death. And yet, how could it not? I lived in a house that wasn't mine, surrounded by things that had belonged to him. He assumed I'd keep living there after he was gone and I hadn't had the heart to tell him otherwise. We'd been together more than two years, and we'd never even had a vacation together. Until his illness, he'd worked sixty-hour weeks and never taken time off. He'd been busy buying property and businesses, building a hefty nest egg in the process, saying there'd be plenty of time for travel and relaxation after he retired—an eventuality he never got to experience.

I was surprised to find tears in my eyes, and I quickly wiped them away. I'd done most of my grieving in an inpatient hospice room as he'd slowly slipped away. At his funeral, I'd been sad of course. But the emotion that overwhelmed me back then wasn't grief or loss. It was relief. If there'd been any chance of him living, it might have been different. But six long months of watching him grow weaker and weaker had exhausted me in a way nobody fully understood.

But now, for possibly the first time, I was sad for everything he never got to experience.

“You okay?” Noah asked quietly.

People asked me that a lot, and most of the time, it drove me nuts. I always felt like they were waiting for me to fall apart right in front of them. But this time, coming from Noah, I didn't mind. It didn't feel like he was trying to coddle me or gauge my mental stability or be nosey. He was just letting me know that he cared.

And although I didn't understand it, that simple thought only made me want to cry more.

NOAH

I'd been to gay nightclubs exactly three times in my life. I never danced. All three times, I'd stood off to the side, practically hiding in the corner, trying to blend in. I didn't want to be singled out, or even worse, recognized as Noah Porter, the starting pitcher for the San Diego Padres. But seeing the blatant sensuality on the dance floor had turned me on more than any porn.

But walking through Camp Bay Chalet behind Bryan, I was surprised at how uncomfortable I felt.

Roughly half the couples there were gay men. As I followed Bryan through the lobby, I saw one man reach over and take his partner's hand, and I nearly stopped in my tracks. I had to remind myself to avert my eyes and keep walking. In the next room, two men kissed under the mistletoe, and I found myself blushing as if I'd just walked in on two people naked. Their casual intimacy threw me completely off guard. I knew I was being stupid, especially since I'd just been kissing another man myself less than thirty minutes earlier. If a straight couple kissed in front of me, I wouldn't bat an eye. So why was I bothered by this?

Bryan finally settled on the loveseat in the library, and that's when my discomfort reached a whole new level.

I had no idea how to behave with him.

For most of the day, it hadn't been an issue. We'd been in public. Besides, we'd only been two guys who started up a conversation in the airport, nothing more. Of course there hadn't been any caresses or kisses. In the car, I'd been busy driving. There was no opportunity for intimacy. But in our room...

Well, everything had changed up there. We'd crossed that line from "two random guys" to "two random guys who had every intention of getting naked together." Not to mention that in the intervening hours since we'd met, I'd become completely enamored of him. I loved his patience. I loved the way his smile lit up his face. I loved the way he listened

without judgment, and the glint in his eyes when things turned romantic.

I really wanted to see a lot more of that last one.

But now, sitting on a couch in a very public place, I didn't know what to do. Should I sit closer? Or was I too close already? Should I hold his hand? I was sitting on the wrong side for that. He'd be forced to hold my ruined right hand, which would only make us both uncomfortable. Should I ask to trade places? No, the only reason to do that would be if he *wanted* to hold hands, and I wasn't sure he did.

"Are you wanting a drink right now as much as I am?" he asked suddenly, startling me out of my thoughts.

It didn't take me long to understand what he meant. This type of situation triggered a lot of alcoholics. "No. Social events don't bother me. I drink when I'm feeling sorry for myself. And I'm definitely not feeling sorry for myself today." How could I, after meeting somebody who made me feel the way he did?

We both fell silent again. He seemed lost in thought as he glanced around the room. The space underneath the mistletoe was empty now. I thought about how it might feel to take his hand. To lead him to that stupid hanging bit of plant. To kiss him, right there for the world to see. Part of me wanted that, more than anything.

Part of me never, ever wanted to let that happen.

I hoped whoever was keeping score at least gave me points for recognizing my own hypocrisy.

Next to me, Bryan sniffled, and I turned to check on him. All my petty worries disappeared when I saw the tears in his eyes. Since agreeing to come to Idaho with me, he'd been nothing but smiles and laughter. I'd almost forgotten that he was also a grieving husband.

"You okay?" I asked.

He nodded, and I almost reached for him. Never mind that we were in public. If he needed me, I wasn't going to let my

stupid misgivings about public displays of affection get in my way, but Sal chose that moment to pop his head into the room.

“Dinner, everybody!” he yelled. “Time to eat!”

The room emptied around us, but Bryan stayed right where he was, and I stayed too because it was the only thing in the world I wanted to do.

He didn't sob or lose control or devolve into a sloppy, shuddering mess as I'd done a billion times after losing my hand. But he didn't try to hide his tears from me, either. He just sat there, lost in his past as tears ran down his cheeks. The hubbub of multiple overlapping conversations reached us from the dining room. I clearly heard somebody say, “Molly! Meatball! You know you're not allowed in here!” This was followed by lots of laughter and a few sympathetic “oh, poor doggies,” as chairs scraped on the wooden floor. Silverware clinked against flatware. A few seconds later, both dogs appeared in the library, nails clicking on the hardwood floor, tails wagging as they realized they weren't the only ones not in the dining room. The pit bull mix collapsed with a huff in front of the fire. The golden retriever stuck her head into Bryan's lap as if offering sympathy, which seemed to shake him from his reverie.

“You don't have to wait for me,” he said quietly as he scratched her ears without really seeing her. “You can go in and eat, if you want.”

“I'm not going anywhere.” Except maybe that was his way of trying to get rid of me. “Unless you want to be alone.”

He shook his head. “Not really, no.” He tried to chuckle, although it came out more of an exasperated sigh as he removed his glasses and wiped fruitlessly at his cheeks. “Although I could really use some Kleenex right about now.”

“I'm on it.”

Luckily, I didn't have to look far. Cold, snowy places are used to people needing tissues after coming in from the winter weather. I found a box on the check-in desk before returning to my spot next to him on the loveseat.

“Thank you.”

I waited while he went through a couple of them, drying his eyes and blowing his nose. The golden retriever got bored now that nobody was petting her and wandered off. The pit bull mix continued to snore away on the carpet in front of the fire, looking utterly content as only a well-loved dog could.

“I’m sorry,” Bryan said at last.

“You don’t need to be.”

“I know my timing was absolute shit, but that’s the first time I’ve cried since it happened.”

“And when was that?”

“Last month.”

That surprised me. I’d assumed it was longer ago than that, although it didn’t change the way I felt about him. “Do you want to talk about it?” I asked. “Because I’d like to hear about him.”

He turned to look at me, searching my eyes as if trying to decide if I was serious or not. “The crazy thing is, I think you actually mean that.”

I reached for him just as he leaned my way, and I found myself holding him tight as the fire crackled, warming us, throwing shadows on the rough-hewn log walls. The discomfort I’d felt about public displays of affection a few minutes earlier was gone. Maybe it was because there was nobody else in the room with us. Maybe it was because I cared a lot more about helping him than about what others thought. Or maybe it was only that it felt really good having him in my arms. I rocked him a little, stroking his hair, loving how natural it all felt.

“Thank you,” he said against my chest.

“I didn’t do anything. Unless stealing Kleenex counts.”

He laughed quietly, his arms sneaking around my waist. “You’ve done so much more than that. This day has been more therapeutic than you’ll ever know.”

“I’m glad.”

He finally sat up, pulling away, trying to put himself back together. A burst of laughter reached us, causing the pit bull to lift her head, perking her ears toward the dining room, and Bryan sighed. “I’m sorry I’m being a downer—”

“You’re not.”

“—and I promise, I won’t be this melancholy the whole weekend—”

“I know.”

“—but I can’t face that scene in there tonight. I’m going to go up and take a shower and put on my sweats and...” He shook his head. “I don’t know what happens after that. That’s as much planning ahead as I can handle right now.”

I pulled him close and kissed his forehead. “You go ahead. I’ll be up in a few minutes—”

“No, you don’t have to miss out on the fun because of me.”

I very nearly kissed him. I wanted to. The thought of it took my breath away, but what kind of an asshole would I be to make a move on him when he’d just been crying over his dead husband?

“I’m not missing anything,” I said. “I came here to be with you, and that’s what I’m going to do. I’ll check with the kitchen and see if they offer a to-go option for dinner.”

He nodded. “Okay.”

Once he’d gone, I took a deep breath and walked into the dining room, looking for Jerome. By this point, the meal was wrapping up. People were mostly talking and drinking and taking their time over dessert. Jerome sat at a table with at least six other guests, at least half of whom seemed to be fighting for his attention, but his gaze fell on me almost immediately. He gave me a killer smile, but I was sure I saw a flash of anger in his eyes.

“Hey, Noah. There’s still some food left, if you’re hungry.”

I was uncomfortably aware of everybody at his table watching me. “Actually, can I talk to you for a second?”

He hesitated half a second too long before restoring his smile. “Of course.”

He rose and followed me back through the lobby to the library, far away from whoever might try to listen. I made sure I wasn’t standing under the mistletoe before turning to face him. Being Jerome, he didn’t give me anywhere near as much personal space as I would have liked. He was close enough to kiss, although no longer smiling.

“What’s going on?” he asked. “Where’s your friend?” The word “friend” was tinged with bitterness.

“He went upstairs.” I took a deliberate step away from both him and the mistletoe. “Look, I’m sorry. I know when you invited me up—”

“I specifically asked if you were single, and you said yes.”

I held up my hands, as if I could settle all his anger that way. “I know. Because I was single, at the time.”

“We talked again two or three weeks ago—”

I raised my voice enough to talk over him. “I just met him recently.” I wasn’t going to admit that by “recently,” I meant roughly twelve hours earlier. “We’ve hung out a bit, that’s all. We haven’t even— well, I mean, it’s just really new. I decided on a whim this morning to invite him. I wasn’t even sure he’d say yes, because we haven’t known each other that long. But then he *did* say yes and...” I took a deep breath. “It’s been a bit of a whirlwind, to be honest.”

I felt like an idiot, and I knew I was blushing like mad, but my babbling explanation seemed to be working. Already, his anger was gone, replaced by bemusement. “So you haven’t slept with him yet, and now you’re sharing that tiny bed in room eight?”

“Uh, yeah. And I know you’re probably mad—”

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “It’s okay. I’m not mad. Terribly disappointed, maybe. But only because I wanted to

show you a good time.”

“I know. And that’s what I wanted too. Right up until I met him.”

He smiled—a real one this time, friendly and warm rather than forced and angry. “Well, if I’m being honest, I was a little afraid you’d get the wrong idea this weekend and suddenly expect me to be exclusive or something. I know you’ve never been one for casual sex.”

“No,” I said, trying not to sound resentful. “Still Prude Porter at heart, I guess.”

His friendly smile turned into something gentler, and he shook his head. “Don’t hang onto that stupid nickname, Noah.” He put his one hand against my cheek, a caress that somehow felt more friendly than romantic. “You follow your own moral compass, that’s all. And there’s nothing wrong with that.”

“Really?” I asked, stunned. “You’re gonna be nice about it? Because I fully expected you to make fun of me.”

He laughed. “Oh, I’ll probably still do that too, don’t worry.” One hand snuck around my waist, then slid down to grip my ass. I was both surprised and relieved to find that I didn’t respond to his touch the way I did to Bryan’s, not even when he leaned close enough to whisper in my ear. “I admit, I’m little bit jealous he gets to be the one to pop your cherry. God, I was looking forward to that. But I’ll settle for imagining it in my room tonight while I jack off. You know.” He gave me a comically pouty look. “All sad and alone.”

I laughed, pushing him away. I was relieved when he let me go. “Give me a break. You won’t be alone. I’m sure you have at least two more people in your sights this weekend.”

He grinned. “Three, actually, but who’s counting?”

“You are, apparently.”

“What can I say? Working here has its benefits. So where is Bryan, anyway?” He glanced around as if he expected Bryan to pop out from behind a chair or something. “I hope he’s not avoiding the dining room on my account.”

“No. He wasn’t feeling well.” Which brought me to the second thing I needed to talk to him about. “Is there any way I can take food up to our room for him?”

“Of course. We always have sack lunches on hand.”

“I was hoping for something a bit more... “ I blushed, but made myself say it. “Romantic, I guess.”

“Of course you were.” He smiled at me and squeezed my shoulder. “I’m sure we can come up with something. Come on.”

He led me into the kitchen where he and Sal helped me load up two plates with roasted chicken, mashed potatoes and gravy, glazed carrots, caramelized Brussels sprouts with cranberries and almonds, and some kind of fluffy-looking green jello salad.

“You’ll want wine too,” Sal said. “Do you prefer red or white? Or we have champagne.”

“We don’t drink.”

“No problem, honey.” He reached into the enormous, industrial-sized refrigerator and produced two bottles of sparkling cider.

“Apple, or pear?”

“Uh—”

“You know what? That was a stupid question. Take the pear.”

“You keep this on-hand?” I asked, surprised.

“Of course. There are plenty of guests who don’t drink, but we don’t want anybody to feel left out when it’s time for toasts or champagne brunch or breakfast mimosas.”

I suddenly felt stupid for thinking they wouldn’t have a non-alcoholic option. Sal added two champagne flutes to the mix, and they loaded everything onto a tray for me.

“There are candles and matches in every room, too,” Sal told me as I carefully picked up the tray and turned to leave. “Don’t be afraid to use them.”

BRYAN

I probably should have been embarrassed about crying so openly in front of Noah, but I wasn't. The only thing I felt was relief. Like I'd been living in a darkened room, and somebody had finally opened the curtain and let in some sunlight. The dim, shadowy corners of my mind had somehow been swept clean. In the privacy of our cozy little room, I undressed. I climbed into a scalding hot shower.

And I let it all go.

My dead husband. My friends, who meant well but had never understood me. My job managing a bar I hated. The years of searching for something I'd only ever felt with Cole, and my certainty that I'd never find it again.

I let it all wash down the drain.

And when I was done, I felt...

Not reborn. That word was too big and poetic for what I felt.

But I felt better.

I felt normal.

For the first time in years, I felt utterly at peace.

Noah's offer to let me talk about Greg had surprised me, not only because he'd made it, but because I'd almost taken him up on it. So many times, my well-intentioned friends had asked me those same words. "Do you want to talk about it?" And each time, I'd wanted to punch them in the face. No, I didn't want to talk about it. I felt like Greg was the only goddamned thing anybody ever wanted to talk to me about, but they didn't understand. They had no idea what a sham our marriage had been. They'd never look at me the same if they knew how I really felt.

But I knew instinctively I could tell Noah the real story. Not only that, I knew he wouldn't think any less of me for it. What happened at Camp Bay could stay at Camp Bay, and that thought comforted me.

Which of course left me thinking about Noah.

What would happen when this magical getaway ended? Would we each go our own way, like allegorical ships in the night? Or would we try to make something work? I had no idea, and at that moment, I didn't care. I wasn't ready to think that far ahead. For this one weekend, I was just a guy who'd somehow hit the meet-cute jackpot, and I intended to make the most of it. I could hear Noah bustling around our little room, waiting for me.

And that brought me back to reality.

At that moment, my reality boiled down to one embarrassingly awkward scenario: me, pale and scrawny and pushing forty, standing naked in the bathroom because I'd forgotten to bring any clothes in with me.

And on the other side of the bathroom door, Noah, who was nearly ten years younger than me and looked like a model straight out of a perfume ad in a magazine.

Why hadn't I brought my sweats into the bathroom? For that matter, why hadn't I been to the gym any time in the last decade? And why did I have to be the palest shade of fish-belly white known to man? I stupidly wished the inn was like some posh hotels and had bathrobes for its guests to use, but no such luck.

"Everything okay in there?" Noah called. "Or do you need to be rescued?"

"I'm coming," I said.

Then I wrapped a towel around my hips, took a deep breath, and made myself open the door.

He'd been busy while I was having my moment of shower zen followed by my little nudity crisis. The room was lit only by candlelight. Two plates of food waited on the room's small table, along with flute glasses and a bottle of sparkling cider. Noah stood looking out the window. He turned when I exited the bathroom, although my glasses were on the bedside table rather than on my face, so his expression was hard to read.

“This is the to-go option?” I asked, gesturing at the table. “I assumed they’d give us sandwiches.”

He grinned, tilting his head in a half-shrug. “I might have persuaded them to give us an upgrade.”

“Of course you did.”

And then we both stood there staring stupidly at each other. My cheeks burned as he looked me up and down. This was a man who’d spent much of his life amongst athletes. What in the world would he see when he looked at me? An aging, skinny, pale loser he’d for some reason taken pity on the airport. He had to be wondering why in the world he hadn’t picked somebody younger. Somebody better looking. Somebody who didn’t have to be embarrassed at how utterly mediocre they looked nude.

“If only one of us is going to be naked,” I said, my voice shaking with nerves, “it should definitely be you.”

He shook his head, moving closer. Part of me wanted to make a dash for my suitcase and the comfort of a pair of sweats and T-shirt except he’d already closed the distance between us. I’d have to bodily push him out of the way. No way that was going to work when he outweighed me by a good thirty pounds. I opted to hold my ground instead.

“Can I talk you into wearing a blindfold?” I asked.

“Stop,” he said, his voice husky. He took one more step, bringing him close enough to kiss me. His hands found my hips. His right hand stayed there, but his left hand moved up my arm, over my shoulder, raising good bumps on my flesh until his hand found the back of my neck. He leaned closer, his lips inches from mine, his breath shaky and ragged. “Jesus, Bryan. Give me a sign here. Half of me feels like I’m being an insensitive asshole, but the other half of me is dying to get that towel off of you.”

I laughed, stunned and a bit confused at his hesitation. I unwrapped the towel from my hips and let it fall to the floor. He moaned as I pulled him close, standing on my toes to kiss him.

He needed a sign? Well, I hoped ripping his clothes off was clear enough. The shirt was easy enough. The pants were a challenge. I groaned with impatience as he tried to rid himself of shoes, jeans, and underwear all at once without letting go of me. And finally, we were naked.

Both of us, this time.

I pushed him down on the bed, climbing on top of him, kissing him with a hunger that surprised me. It's been a depressingly long time since I'd felt such unabashed desire. I wondered for half a second if I should slow down, but when I started to pull back—to ask if he was okay—he only pulled me back into his arms, kissing me harder and I decided that was permission enough for me. When my hand found his erection, he gasped, his fingers digging into my back, every muscle in his body tight and tense as he ducked his head into my neck. I recognized the signs easily enough. He was already fighting not to come and I almost laughed with delight. The only thing that stopped me was the fear that he'd take my laughter for mockery.

I slowed down, lightening my touch until he submitted with a groan, falling back on the bed, too lost in his newfound pleasure to kiss me. If he hadn't been a virgin in just about every way that mattered, I would have straddled him and ridden his cock fast and hard as the candles burned away and the moon rose over Lake Pend Oreille, but as far as I knew, we didn't have condoms or lube and he'd probably come before I even found my rhythm. Besides, watching him and listening to his desperate cries while I stroked him was the best aphrodisiac in the world. I felt like some kind of god, seeing the way my touch drove him so easily to the edge. I explored his length, circled the head of his cock until he nearly screamed, fondled his testicles, gauging his reaction to each new touch. I teased his nipples with my tongue and teeth until he was panting, groaning, thrusting through my fist. Finally, when I knew he was close, I moved down.

He groaned, tensing as he realized my intentions. "Oh Jesus, Bryan," he groaned, and I knew he was bracing himself, worried he'd come too soon. The minute I wrapped my lips

around him, he bucked, gripping the back of my head, thrusting on instinct. Once. Twice. And on the third thrust, he came, crying out so loud our neighbors had to hear. With any luck, they were still downstairs, not on the other side of the wall laughing. Noah groaned as a second wave tore through him, and I did my best to keep swallowing. I didn't even care that he was damned near choking me with his cock. I couldn't remember the last time I'd felt so wonderfully, blissfully alive.

“Oh my god,” he finally gasped. His grip on my head became a caress. “Jesus. Holy shit, that was so fast I'm sorry but oh my god that was fucking amazing and I feel like such an asshole, I can't believe I couldn't last longer than that.”

The words came out in a breathless rush, and I laughed and moved up to kiss him, feeling like I'd just won the fucking lottery. I still didn't understand how a guy like him could choose me, but I was done questioning it. “You're not an asshole,” I assured him, smiling. “And you don't need to apologize.”

“I really didn't mean for it to be that one-sided,” he said, touching my cheek.

“I know.” But I sure wasn't going to complain about having a man like him come undone the minute I touched him. It was the greatest ego trip in the world. “How about if you make it up to me after dinner?” I asked.

He smiled and pulled me into a kiss. “Deal.”

NOAH

I'd been hesitant when Bryan emerged from the shower. Before coming upstairs, he'd been crying over his husband. Pushing for sex or even a kiss after that felt like a dick move, but I'd asked for a sign, and he'd given me one, loud and clear. Too bad I was a clumsy, inexperienced fool who'd barely lasted five minutes naked with him. I wondered if he had any idea how hard it had been for me to last all of thirty damned seconds when he went down on me.

As pathetic as it was, that thirty-second blowjob had been one of the most intense sexual experiences of my life. I was just glad he was nice enough to not laugh at me. And given how much he was smiling, I figured he wasn't too upset over being left with a temporary case of blue balls.

I was a bit disappointed when he opted to put on sweats and a T-shirt before sitting down to eat, but I followed suit and did the same. I knew he was self-conscious about his body, but he didn't need to be. I'd always liked guys a bit older than me, and I thought he looked great for being almost forty. His legs were thick and muscular from riding his bike. His upper body wasn't ripped, and no, his belly wasn't as perfectly flat as it had probably been in his twenties, but I loved the smoothness of his skin and the simple warmth of it against mine. I loved the dark hair on his chest and legs and the way it felt under my hands. I loved the way he looked at me—not just admiration for my body and my looks, which I'd seen often enough in my life, but a look of gratefulness and appreciation that made me feel like I was a lot more than a big, dumb jock. And more than anything, I loved the sparkle in his eyes when he smiled at me. The only thing in the world I wanted to do was make that smile appear a bit more often.

Well, okay. I also wanted to get naked with him again as soon as possible, and hopefully last longer than five minutes this time. But first, a bit of nourishment.

He took one chair at our tiny little table, and I took the other.

“It’s probably cold by now,” I said.

Bryan only shook his head, still smiling. “I couldn’t care less.” He reached across the table and touched my hand. “Thank you.”

“Jerome and Suzanne did the cooking. All I did was bring it up.”

“Then thank you for bringing it up while I was hiding in the shower.”

I popped the cork on the faux bubbly and filled our glasses. Faint sounds of the festivities reached us from downstairs but didn’t detract from the romanticism of it all. We ate in an easy, companionable silence until my phone *dinged* with a text alert.

It took me a second to find it on the floor underneath my jeans, which were mostly inside-out after my mad scramble to get them off as quickly as possible.

“It’s my mom,” I told Bryan. I wondered if he detected my sudden anxiety. “She just wants to make sure I got here and to ask how Camp Bay is.”

“And what will you tell her?”

“That it looks like a Christmas card, and the food isn’t bad either.”

What I actually typed was, *Made it here no problem. Really nice but lots of snow. Glad I rented a 4WD.*

I stared at the three little dots while she typed her reply, and when it came through, my heart sank. *Any lovely single ladies there for you to charm?*

“What’s wrong?” Bryan asked. “You look like she just told you you’re not getting the pony you asked for.”

I forced myself to smile. “No, everything’s fine.”

Haven’t met any so far, I typed.

Bryan frowned, suddenly thoughtful. “I’m surprised Dustin hasn’t texted me yet. Or maybe he did and I missed it.” He left the table to retrieve his glasses off the nightstand, and

then his phone, still tucked into the pocket of the jacket he'd been wearing when we arrived. "Huh," he said, sitting back down across from me. "You have service?"

"Yeah. Only two bars, but apparently, that's enough."

"I have no bars. Guess that's what I get for going with a discount company. Hope Dustin isn't freaking out."

"Why would he be?" I asked. "He thinks you're with your dad, right?"

He sighed, setting his phone aside. "Dustin's a worrier, that's all. He thinks he has to take care of everybody. Me, Lance, Chase, his sister. He's everybody's big brother."

"And that annoys you."

He winced. "I wouldn't say 'annoys.' He'd do absolutely anything for me. For any of us, really. But I'm six years older than him. I'm his boss, for fuck's sake. And his sponsor in AA. I know he means well, but I don't need a babysitter."

I looked down at my phone, still in my hand. Nothing else from my mom, thank goodness, but the text had been a stark reminder of how very short this reprieve in Idaho would be. When I'd first decided to come to Camp Bay, my only goal had been to lose my semi-virginity. I'd counted on a quick and meaningless tryst with Jerome before going back to my normal life in Colorado. It wasn't that I planned to stay in the closet forever, but I had no imminent reason to come out, either. I always figured I'd cross that bridge when I came to it.

But having met Bryan, that metaphorical overpass suddenly seemed a lot closer than it had before, and the chasm it spanned was as terrifying as ever. We'd known each other all of twelve hours now. Only an idiot would go sprinting across life-changing bridges for a man they'd known less than a day. But what about a man they'd known less than week? Because that's what I'd be facing the day after Christmas when we flew home to Colorado. Technically, we lived in different towns, but they were both in the Grand Valley region. It took only an hour to get from one to the other. Assuming we didn't hate

each other by then, there was no reason to assume we wouldn't keep seeing each other.

Was I ready for that?

My fear of coming out wasn't so much about being Noah Porter, former pitcher for the San Diego Padres. I was a short-lived has-been, at best. A handful of professional athletes had come out in recent years, and as far as I'd seen, most had received overwhelming support. But I was also now a part owner in a minor-league hockey franchise. I hoped to be actively engaged with the Grand Valley Golden Eagles as much as I could, but would the players still respect me if I came out, or would they smile to my face and snicker behind my back? I also helped coach a local Junior League team. Would those young players and their parents still feel the same way about me if they knew I was gay?

And what about my mom?

My dad had been casually Catholic, only dragging me to church on Easter and Christmas. My mother was a lapsed Mormon. She occasionally tried to make church-going a weekly ritual but after two or three months, she always decided she had better ways to spend her Sundays. They hadn't been Bible-thumpers by any stretch of the imagination, but they'd instilled certain traditional values in me, including the belief that sex should only be enjoyed in the bonds of marriage. It had been reason enough for me to stay safely in the closet back in high school.

As an adult, I'd realized my belief in God was tenuous at best, and any faith I had left in the Big Man upstairs had been shredded along with my right hand. It wasn't God keeping me in the closet. It was my periodically religious family. I had no idea how my mom or my aunts and uncles and cousins would take it. My mom's new husband was something of a good ol' boy from Texas with the heads of multiple dead animals mounted on his walls. I'd never asked his view on homosexuality, but I was betting no rainbow flag had ever flown from his Ford F150. What if my mom supported me but her husband didn't? Would I be throwing a Molotov cocktail into the middle of her brand-new marriage?

“Hey,” Bryan said, reaching across the table to touch my hand. “You okay?”

“Yeah.” I shook my head, trying to break out of my sudden funk. “Sal said we can put all the dishes on the tray by the door and they’ll collect it later.”

“Sounds easy enough.”

It only took us a few minutes to get everything cleared away, but I spent every second of it contemplating the pros and cons of coming out. How would my mom take it if I called right now and told her that yes, I’d met somebody, but it wasn’t a woman? Would she be heartbroken when I told her she’d probably never have grandkids? And what about my more public persona? Would the sports world even notice if I posted a statement admitting I was gay, or would I end up front page news like when my hand got torn apart? And there were still my business partners Jack and Shane. Should I have told them I was gay back when I signed on? Would they worry that my sexuality would endanger our investment?

And was any of this even worth fretting about when I’d known Bryan less than a day?

I stared out the window as if the lake could give me answers. As if it could tell me the best way to finally share the secret I’d been carefully guarding since I was sixteen. But Lake Pend Oreille was lost now in darkness, only made visible at all by the moonlight reflecting off its surface.

Bryan edged into the space between me and the window, forcing me to meet his gaze. “Tell me what has you so worried.”

Looking into his eyes, it was easy to let my doubts fall away. I could almost believe coming out would be a piece of cake. “What makes you think I’m worried at all?”

“You’ve been awfully far away since that text came in.” He touched my cheek, his eyes searching mine. “I know we only met a few hours ago, but I feel like I can tell you anything.”

“You can.”

He almost smiled. “It goes both ways, you know. You don’t have to pretend everything’s okay if it isn’t.”

I debated my answer. It wasn’t that I didn’t think he’d understand. It was more that telling him would give away how I felt about him. I barely knew him. He’d think I was nuts if he knew I was suddenly ready to risk everything for him.

Right?

But so far, we’d been honest with each other. And I didn’t want that to change.

“I guess I’m just realizing what it might mean to come out after all this time,” I finally said. “I kept telling myself it was something I could put off. I never had any reason to rush it. But at some point, I have to stop hiding.”

He frowned, tipping his head in a way that wasn’t quite agreement but wasn’t disagreement either. “There’s no reason it has to be today.”

“I know,” I said, my heart suddenly pounding. We’d so far managed to avoid any mention of what might happen after Christmas, but being honest meant telling him how much it weighed on my mind. I took a deep breath. “But what about when we go home?”

Behind his glasses, his gaze shifted to something far away while he thought about it. “There’s no reason it has to happen then, either.”

My heart sank. “Are you saying you don’t want to keep seeing each other after this weekend?”

His smile was gentle. “That’s definitely not what I’m saying.”

“It probably seems silly to you to still be so scared about coming out in this day and age—”

“No. Especially knowing about your baseball career. Most of us don’t have to worry about our personal lives trending on Twitter.” He stopped, but I knew he had more to say.

“You can’t be advising me to stay in the closet forever,” I said.

He laughed, more at himself than me. “Of course not. But as far as coming out in the next few days or weeks?” He shrugged. “I understand wanting to keep some things private. In some ways, I’m in the same boat, more than you realize. Obviously my friends and family know I’m gay, but...” He sighed, his expression suddenly grim. “It’s barely been a month since Greg died. And I can’t help but worry what Dustin and Chase and Lance will think if I come back from Christmas acting as if it never happened, you know? They expect me to still be in mourning. If they knew how stupidly happy I’ve been these last few hours, they’d probably think I was a sociopath or something.”

He was trying to make light, and I understood his concern. But the one thing that stood out to me was the words “stupidly happy.” That simple phrase warmed my heart. It told me that maybe I wasn’t as alone in this as I’d thought. “So you’re saying you’re not ready for your friends to know about us either?”

“Right at the moment? No.” He frowned, thinking about it. “It’s not even so much that I don’t want them knowing. It’s more that I don’t want them intruding, you know? This day has been...” He shook his head, smiling. “I don’t even have a word. It’s been—”

“Amazing?” I offered. “Surprising? Exhilarating?”

“Yes,” he said, suddenly earnest. “All of those things. But the word that comes to mind for me is ‘magical’. It’s like we’re hidden away in this secret place where nothing can touch us. Where the real world has no power whatsoever. You’re not a famous athlete. I’m not a grieving husband. We’re just two guys who don’t have to pretend anymore.” He put his arms around my waist, settling closer. “You and me in this little fairy tale is the only thing I care about. I don’t want to worry about tomorrow or the day after that or the day after that. I just want to focus on this one night here with you.”

I damned near told him I loved him right then and there, but I didn’t.

I kissed him instead.

This time, we didn't rush. The flickering candlelight made everything beautiful and strangely surreal, and we undressed slowly, one item at a time, exploring each other's bodies, savoring each tender caress and each breathless kiss. Finally, we found ourselves back on the bed, this time with me on top. I'd been too overwhelmed by it all the first time to reciprocate in any meaningful way, but I was determined to remedy that now. I'd had an orgasm only an hour earlier, so my urgency was replaced by something that bordered on reverence. I wanted to know not just what it felt like to be touched by another man, but to truly touch him back. I shivered at the simple pleasure of our cocks rubbing against each other as we moved, at the strength of his legs wrapped around my hips, at the response I got when I teased his nipples as he'd done to me. I lost myself in the feel of his cock slipping through my hand as I stroked him and the passion I saw in his eyes when he looked at me.

Eventually, he turned in my arms, putting me behind him, my erection wedged between his cheeks. I'd never made love to a man before, but the very thought of it nearly made me come. I reined it in, kissing the back of his neck as I thrust against his ass. My right hand found his erection. I worried it felt wrong to him, given that I only had half my fingers, but he didn't seem to mind. Before long, we were rocking, the bed creaking as I ground against him, his hips moving with mine as I stroked his erection. I desperately wanted to know what came next, but I was stumped. I had no idea what the protocol was for initiating sex. Was this an invitation or was I being presumptuous? Should I ask, or would that ruin the mood?

"Jesus, Noah," he moaned. "Tell me you brought condoms."

I froze, feeling like an idiot, and he groaned, sensing my dismay. "Damnit, I had a feeling that would be your answer."

"Didn't you bring any?" I asked.

"You're the one who came up here to get laid," he said, amused but exasperated. "I thought I was going to visit my dad, remember?"

“Should I go ask somebody—”

“God, no. I’m way too close for that. Just keep going.” He pushed his hips back against me, reminding me how good it felt just grinding against him. “Oh my god,” he moaned, his voice going from teasing to desperate. “*Please* keep going.”

That simple request and the deep, throaty growl of his voice made me resume my attack with a newfound purpose, intent on giving him as much pleasure as I could despite my severe lack of experience. I wanted him to come more than I wanted my own orgasm. I was desperate for it in a way I’d never experienced before, wanting that confirmation that I turned him on as much as he did me. The thought of him ejaculating in my hand made me groan in anticipation. My fist was still around his cock and he put his hand over it, urging me to continue stroking. His breathing sped up, his hips moving fast, his urgency for once greater than mine. The bed creaked. The candles sputtered. His cries grew louder.

And finally, he bucked against me, straining as he ejaculated, his groans deep and guttural, and I lost control. I spent myself against his backside, reeling at how good and pure and natural it felt. Once again, I had the insane, ridiculous urge to tell him I loved him, but I kept my mouth shut. I held him tight instead, both of us still breathing hard, shuddering with the aftershock of our orgasms.

“I’m finding a condom tomorrow,” Bryan said. “I don’t care if I have to ask every man in this inn.”

I laughed, and he laughed too. Except the very next second, he sniffled, his breath catching in his chest, as he fought not to cry.

“I’m sorry,” I said, my heart sinking. “I didn’t mean to—”

“No. Don’t apologize. I’m not upset. I’m overwhelmed and emotional and yeah, I guess I’m freaking out in the best possible way, but I’m not upset. Not anymore.”

“Then what?” I asked, confused.

“I just…” Even now, he seemed torn between smiles and tears. “I can’t remember the last time I felt like this. I’m

terrified of falling asleep tonight because I know I'm going to wake up back at home in my own bed and realize none of this was real."

His confession stirred a tenderness in me that made me want to hold him all night and never let go. Except of course we were in serious danger of being glued together if we didn't get ourselves cleaned up sooner rather than later.

"You're not dreaming," I assured him, kissing the back of his neck. "I promise you, it's all real."

Later, we climbed back into bed, still naked and warm from the shower we'd taken. The double bed had seemed big enough the two times we'd fooled around on it. But now, as we climbed under the covers and maneuvered for space, I realized just how tiny it was. If I'd been by myself, I would have slept diagonally on it. Even then, my feet were likely to hang off the end. With both of us vying for room, it felt a bit like trying to cram five people into the back seat of a car. We started off with Bryan on the side near the wall, but it only took a minute for him to decide that wasn't going to work.

"The wall on one side and you on the other," he grumbled. "I have a new understanding of the phrase 'between a rock and a hard place.' At least if I'm on the outside, I can roll out of bed rather than being crushed between you."

So we swapped and tried again. "It seemed bigger before," I said as I snuggled up against his back and tried to find room for my legs.

"I can always go ask for a pillow and extra blankets and sleep on the floor."

"Not a chance," I told him. "I have faith we can make this work."

I heard his soft exhale as he smiled, and I wondered if he knew I was talking about more than the bed. I closed my eyes, marveling at how my feelings for him seemed to grow minute by minute. I barely knew him, but at that moment, I would have done anything in the world for him.

Just as I was drifting off to sleep, he stirred in my arms.

“Noah?”

“Hmm?” I responded, my eyes still closed.

“Just in case I’m right and every bit of this is in my head, I want you to know you’re the best dream I ever had.”

I chuckled and held him tight. “It’s real,” I said again. “Just wait and see.”

BRYAN

I'd worried about waking up in the morning only to find I'd dreamt the whole thing. What I hadn't considered was that I'd barely get any rest at all. I never slept well the first night away from home. Plus, neither of us could move without jostling the other. And Noah was so big, every time he turned over, the entire bed shook. And yet I didn't mind one bit. Each time he bumped me, I was reminded he was there. Every time the bed creaked and quaked as he rearranged his massive body, I remembered I wasn't alone. It was simultaneously the worst sleep I'd had in ages and the most wonderful night I'd had in almost twenty years.

Sometime around five in the morning, we finally found the perfect position—my face against the hollow of his throat, one of his legs thrown over my hips—and I had three hours of blissfully uninterrupted sleep. I woke to his arms around me, his breath ragged in my ear, his naked erection bumping mine.

“I wanted to let you sleep,” he whispered as his hand slid down my back. “But I also wanted you to wake up in the worst kind of way.”

I laughed, still more asleep than not, and simply gave myself over to his intentions. I let his urgency carry me, my own arousal burning through my foggy dream state until I was lost in his touch. He was slow and gentle and careful. He caressed me as if I were the one with the gorgeous, perfect body. He whispered my name as if I were some kind of angel beyond his reach. He kissed me as if he'd never have another chance. And as we both finally peaked and I fought to muffle my cries, he might even have told me he loved me, the words a hushed, quiet whisper in my ear.

And once again, I found myself blinking away tears when it was over, too overwhelmed with joy to put any of it into words, wondering how in the world I'd gone so long without feeling this alive. Maybe I should have felt guilty about it so soon after Greg's death, but I didn't. Not too much, at any rate. Noah was granting me an escape from my lonely, miserable life. There was no way in hell I was turning my back on it. I

halfway hoped I'd die before we had to go back to our real lives.

"I'm starving," he said. "We have just enough time to shower before we go downstairs for breakfast."

And that's exactly what we did.

The dining room held four long tables. Each one had been set to hold up to ten people, but about half the seats were still empty. Jerome sat at one of the tables already, and I was relieved when Noah chose Sal's table instead.

"Where is everybody?" Noah asked as we took our seats across from another pair of men.

"A lot of guests over-imbibe the first couple of nights," Sal said. "Which means a lot of people miss breakfast the next morning."

"Come on, now," the woman across from him said. She was tall and slender, with short, spiky black hair. I recognized her from *Paranormal Hunters* as one of the owners, although I couldn't remember her name. "Some people have other reasons for staying in bed. *Better* reasons."

"I'm afraid I wouldn't know anything about that," Sal said, dramatically melancholy. "Not for a depressingly long time, at any rate."

Two more men took seats across from each other at my end of the table. If anybody had asked me to guess their professions, I would have said the one next to me, who had sandy blond hair and a tidy beard, was an accountant. His partner was tall and burly, wearing a red flannel shirt over a thermal. I wasn't sure if lumberjacks still existed but if so, they probably looked like him.

"Welcome, everybody!" the woman at the end of the table said. "Lots of people haven't met yet, so we'll do quick introductions. I'm Rhonda." She pointed to a petite blond at one of the other tables "That's my partner Suzanne over there. Wave, honey!" Suzanne waved and we all dutifully waved back. "For those who don't know already, we're the owners of Camp Bay Chalet," Rhonda continued. "And you've all met

Sal.” Next, she put her hand on the shoulder of the man beside her, who sat directly across from Noah. “This is my kid brother Eric.” Eric was solidly built, with short-cropped dark hair and rough, calloused hands. Despite having been named as her brother, he didn’t look entirely comfortable as he said hello. “And that’s Max, sitting next to him. He’s a pediatrician.” Max sat across from me. He was the kind of guy Noah should have been chasing after—clean-cut and casually handsome, dressed better than every single other person at the table, with the possible exception of the accountant. “This is Noah. He and Jerome used to play triple-A baseball together. And that’s Bryan. I’m afraid I don’t know anything about him at all.”

She worded it like a question, implying I was supposed to help her out.

“I manage a bar and live music venue,” I offered weakly. “It’s a shithole. Just ask Noah.”

“Two stars,” Noah said. “Do not recommend.”

“And way down there at the far end of the table,” Rhonda continued, “that’s Phil. He’s a pharmacist.” The one next to me, who I’d assumed to be an accountant gave a half wave, which left only the lumberjack. “And that’s River. River’s a doctor too, Max. You guys can talk shop.”

“You clearly haven’t spent enough time around doctors,” Phil said, deadpan. “Never invite them to talk shop, especially at the dinner table.”

“I second that,” Eric grumbled.

Everybody laughed as Sal and Rhonda stood. Eric did the same, as if on cue, and Rhonda waved him back down. “You’re a guest this year, Eric. Sit down.”

He ignored her completely, and the three of them, along with Jerome and Suzanne, began bringing out the food, which was served family style. For the next little bit, there wasn’t much talk other than exclaiming how good everything looked as we passed plates of bacon and sausage, two kinds of quiche, fresh fruit, and an impressive assortment of breakfast pastries.

There was also coffee, tea, juice, and mimosas, some of them nonalcoholic. I noticed Phil also passed on the alcohol, but River ordered a Bloody Mary.

“Are the two of you from Colorado?” Phil said to me, as we ate.

“How’d you know?” I asked.

It was River who answered. “We were on the same flight as you guys from DIA. Do you live in Denver?”

“No. We’re in the Grand Junction area.” Technically, the house I lived in was in Tucker Springs, but I didn’t plan to be there much longer.

Despite Phil’s admonition about talking shop, he, River and Max quickly devolved into medical horror stories. As the meal wrapped up, Sal took pity on us all and changed the subject.

“Here’s one of my favorite icebreakers,” he said. “How did you all meet? Phil, you and River start.”

“I was working the ER one night,” River said. “And some asshole of a pharmacist refused to fill my order for Bactrim. So I went downstairs to tell him what an idiot he was.”

“Oh, no,” Max laughed. “As a doctor, I’ve been there myself. Let me guess which one of you was actually being the idiot.”

Phil didn’t quite smile, but it was easy to see the fondness in his eyes as he looked at River. “I figured curing the patient’s UTI would be moot if she developed life-threatening cardiac arrhythmia due to a category X drug interaction.”

“Show off,” River said.

Sal turned to Noah and me. “How about you?”

Noah and I exchanged a glance, trying to decide what to say and which one of us was going to say it. Did we want to admit we’d known each other for approximately twenty-six hours? I decided to go with the truth.

Mostly.

“We met at the airport,” I said simply, smiling at Noah, and he laughed.

“Yeah, Bryan was just sitting there, looking miserable. I thought he looked like he could use some company. So I started up a conversation.”

“And then when it was time for our flight to board, he tracked down the woman who was supposed to sit next to me on the plane,” I said, “and convinced her to trade seats.”

“Oh my gosh, that’s so sweet,” Rhonda said.

“Yes, it was,” I said, squeezing his hand under the table. “He was a lifesaver that day.”

“Rhonda and I know how you two met,” Sal said to Max and Eric. “But the others don’t, so you still have to share.”

Max and Eric exchanged a look much as Noah and I had, debating who was going to answer. Although based on what I’d seen so far, Max always did the talking.

“We met here at the inn,” Max said to the table at large. “My husband and I used to spend every Christmas at Camp Bay, and Eric worked here. And then, after Wilson died, I kept coming. Although it took me two years to get up enough nerve to make my move.” He elbowed Eric playfully. “And another year after that for Eric to figure out how I felt.”

Eric elbowed him back. “Maybe if you’d just told me instead of throwing towels out the window.”

Max laughed. “It’d been a long time since I’d tried to flirt with anybody. It’s possible my methods were—”

“Completely confusing?” Eric offered.

“A bit clumsy, at the very least,” Max conceded.

The conversation moved on, although I had a hard time focusing on any of it. I had to force myself to quit staring at Max.

I wasn’t the only widower here. I wasn’t sure why that mattered, but it did. Here was somebody else whose husband had died. And yet Max didn’t look devastated or contrite. On

the contrary, he and Eric were clearly giddily, stupidly in love with each other.

How had Wilson died? Of an illness? Maybe in an accident? Had Max sat by a hospice bed for hours, or slept on a cot in the ICU so he wouldn't miss his spouse's final moments? Or had it been sudden—maybe a knock on the door in the middle of the night, a cop waiting in the porchlight with the worst news possible? I wondered how long ago it had happened and how long he'd waited before sleeping with somebody new. I wondered if his friends liked Eric, or if they resented him. Did they respect Max's decision to move on with his life, or did they think he'd rushed things?

I sat there, a thousand questions bubbling up in my mind until Noah nudged me with his elbow.

“What do you think, Bryan?”

I shook myself, glancing around to find everybody watching me. “I'm sorry. I was zoning out. What do I think about what?”

“Sal asked if we wanted to reserve a spot for a horse-drawn carriage ride tomorrow night.”

“That sounds great,” I said, before glancing out the window at the piles of snow. “Except I didn't pack for this kind of weather. Is there somewhere in town I could get a hat and gloves, at least?”

For some reason, this made River laugh, and Phil hurried to explain. “You're not the only one who forgot stuff. We're going into Sandpoint today for that exact purpose. Should we ride together?”

I turned to Noah, who only shrugged and said, “Whatever you want to do is fine with me.”

“I think a trip to town sounds great.”

NOAH

The blue sky and bright sunshine made it look like a nice day from the comfort of our room, but as we hurried to Phil and River's rented Rav4, I realized I'd been duped. According to my phone, it was only 27 degrees out, but thanks to a frigid breeze, it felt cooler. A carriage ride on Christmas Eve sounded cute and romantic, but given how cold it was outside, I had to wonder if we'd end up regretting our decision.

"So what's your excuse, Bryan?" Phil asked from the driver's seat as we left Camp Bay Chalet in the rearview. "How'd you end up in northern Idaho in December without a coat?"

Bryan laughed, giving me the same look I'd probably given him at breakfast when Sal asked how we'd met. He was clearly trying to decide whether to admit we'd known each other barely more than a day. He'd opted to wear my faded red hoody over his jacket for our trip to town. It was two sizes too big for him, making him look like a kid dressed up in his big brother's clothes. I had no idea why I found that so sexy, but I was already thinking about when I'd get to take it off him.

"I guess I just didn't plan ahead," he said. "How about you guys? What's your excuse?"

"We packed in a hurry," Phil said. "We didn't think we'd be coming here until summer."

River, who sat halfway turned around in the passenger seat so he could see us, must have sensed my confusion because he hurried to explain. "I fish, so I'm in this subreddit for gay hunters and fishermen. Somebody there recommended Camp Bay, but when I called for a reservation, they were booked. They put us on a wait list. I halfway forgot about it, but then they called us two nights ago to say they had a cancelation, but that meant we had to leave the very next morning."

"We were scrambling to pack and book flights," Phil said. "Plus River just got a puppy a few weeks ago, so we had to find somebody to watch her."

“Technically, I remembered to pack everything I needed,” River said. “My hat and gloves were in my backpack, along with my laptop. And I set it right by the front door so I wouldn’t forget it.”

“Let me guess,” Bryan said. “It’s still sitting by your front door?”

“Either that or with the dog at our friend’s house. All I know is it wasn’t in the car when we got the airport. Plus *somebody* who shall remain absolutely nameless forgot to pack pretty much everything from our bathroom.”

Phil laughed. “I’m used to all our trips being in River’s camper. I didn’t realize how much stuff I never have to worry about because he’s already packed it.” He reached over and touched River’s wrist as he said it—a simple little gesture that spoke of gratitude and made River smile before continuing the story.

“The inn was able to help us out with some of the necessities,” River told us. “But we’re still missing *certain things*.”

“By the way,” Phil said, “Eric told me about a place in Sandpoint called Panhandle Cone and Coffee. He said it’s the best ice cream you’ll ever eat.”

“Changing the subject won’t stop me from giving you a hard time about forgetting stuff.”

“Are you saying you don’t want ice cream?”

“Definitely not.”

I looked back and forth between them, confused. “So does that mean we’re getting ice cream or not?”

“We are,” River said.

“That’s a rather unilateral decision.” But I could tell by Phil’s tone he was only saying it to tease River. “Our passengers should probably get a vote, too.”

“Only if their vote is yes,” River said.

“I’ve never turned down ice cream in my life, and I don’t intend to start now,” I assured him. I glanced over at Bryan. “How about you?”

“I’m not sure I see the appeal when it’s freezing outside,” Bryan said. “But I could definitely go for a latte.”

We fell silent for a bit, all of us turning to look out the windows. Lake Pend Oreille was long but not wide. The far shore was easily visible, rising quickly to towering mountains. The water shimmered in the light, reflecting the deep blue sky. The road we were on turned into a long bridge spanning a narrow northern branch of the lake before dumping us out into the quaint little town of Sandpoint.

“Do you have a signal now?” I asked Bryan. “You could call Dustin and let him know where you are.”

Bryan smacked himself in the forehead. “Shit. I should have thought of that.”

“You didn’t bring your phone?”

“I don’t have a signal at Camp Bay, so I left it in our room.”

“Do you want to use my phone to call him?” I asked, holding it out to him.

He laughed. “Sure, if I knew his number. But I need my phone for that.”

“Ah, the wonders of modern technology,” River said. “Speaking of which, do you know where you’re going?” This question was clearly directed at Phil. “Or do you need me to map it?”

“I already scouted out our options,” Phil said.

“Of course you did,” River added.

Phil smiled but otherwise ignored him. “There’s a sporting goods store right across the street from Safeway. I figured we’d take care of necessities first. Then we can go down to the little touristy section and have lunch.”

“And ice cream,” River added.

“And ice cream. Plus maybe get a few souvenirs.” River groaned, and Phil laughed. “We have to take something back for Taylor, at the very least.”

“I know,” River said. “I just hate shopping.”

“Since when? It took me an hour to get you out of Scheels the other day.”

“That’s not the same thing and you know it.”

Phil found the sporting goods store and parked, and we all climbed out of the car, zipping our coats up against the chilly, gusty weather. All except for Bryan, who hugged his arms around himself in my hoodie.

“While you guys are doing this,” Phil said, flipping his thumb over his shoulder, “I’m going to run across the street to Safeway and get the other stuff we forgot.”

“Okay,” I said, but Bryan poked me in the arm, pointing after Phil.

“Go with him,” he said.

“What?” I asked, confused. “Why?”

He leaned close and lowered his voice to a whisper. “Condoms.”

I felt my cheeks turn bright red. While I was as anxious as he was to have them, I’d been a lot more comfortable with the idea of him buying them.

Yeah. Time to do some adulting, Noah.

“Wait,” I called, hurrying to catch up with Phil. “Looks like I’m coming with you.”

Although as I fell into step next to him, I immediately felt awkward. I might have been able to talk to River, who seemed outgoing and athletic, but I definitely had no idea what to say to a quiet, introverted pharmacist. Luckily, he broke the silence as we crossed the parking lot.

“So, you were a baseball player. Where at?”

I almost asked how he knew that before remembering Rhonda had mentioned it at breakfast. “Several years in the minors in Texas, and then three years with the San Diego Padres.”

He eyed me sideways. “Were you out?”

“No.”

“Are you out now?”

I sighed. “Not really, no. Although it’s starting to feel like I need to be.”

He nodded but didn’t say anything else. We reached the main road and stopped on the sidewalk, waiting for a chance to cross the street. I scrambled for something to talk about that didn’t involve my ill-fated career or my quickly shrinking closet.

“River wanted to come here to go fishing, right? So why come in December?”

He didn’t quite wince, but I had a feeling he wished I hadn’t asked. “He left out part of the story on my account.”

He fell silent as the traffic cleared and we crossed the street. I was about to say never mind, it didn’t matter. I’d only been making conversation. I didn’t mean to intrude on anything personal. But before I could formulate my response, he started talking again.

“We have reservations to come up next summer. We never planned to be here for the holidays too. But then my grandfather died about six weeks ago and...” He took a deep breath, clearly trying to steady himself as I followed him through the Safeway parking lot. “River knew I was dreading this first Christmas without Pops. He thought it’d be good to get away for a few days. Of course then they were booked, so we’d kind of resigned ourselves to staying home, or maybe just taking River’s camper somewhere. And it’s not like we didn’t have other options. We have friends, or we could have gone to Minnesota to be with his family. But he wanted to do something totally new and different, just to distract me from how much I miss Pops.”

I debated what to say. What I settled for was “I’m sorry,” although I was painfully aware of how much Bryan hated hearing that. “Bryan’s husband died a while back.” I hoped he wouldn’t mind me telling Phil, but I didn’t think he would. “I think he felt like going absolutely anywhere was better than staying home, surrounded by memories.”

Phil nodded. “Exactly.”

Once inside Safeway, we each grabbed a hand-held basket and went our separate ways. I figured condoms would be by the pharmacy, but we had plenty of time, and hey, if a couple of chocolate bars and bottle of kombucha ended up in my basket along the way too, so be it. Although once I reached the pharmacy, I didn’t find what I was looking for. I forced myself to ask the pharmacist where they were.

“Aisle 13,” he said. “Next to the tampons.”

Awesome. Condoms and tampons, two things I was completely and totally comfortable with right next to each other. How convenient. At least I only needed to buy one of them. I thanked him and headed for aisle 13. I was a bit taken aback when I turned the corner and nearly ran right into Phil.

“Well, this is awkward, isn’t it?” he said, not quite smiling. He pointed at the shelf in front of him. “They’re out of our brand. You have a recommendation?”

“Uh...” It took me a second to realize he was shopping for lube, at which point my face began to burn. “Not really, no. Sorry.”

He shrugged and grabbed a box off the shelf to drop into his basket. “Okay. I still have a couple more things to get. How about you?”

“Yeah, me too.”

He left, searching for whatever else he needed.

And I stood there facing a wall of condoms.

Colored condoms. Flavored condoms. Tingly condoms and condoms with spermicide. Glow-in-the-dark condoms. Condoms ribbed “for her pleasure.”

So.

Many.

Condoms.

And here I was, basically a fucking virgin, trying to figure out what to buy. I figured I didn't need anything fancy. Just plain old rubbers, right? The problem was, I couldn't tell which ones those were.

I took a box off the shelf. Turned it over without really knowing what I was looking for. Caught the words "for her pleasure".

Put it back.

Shit.

I scanned the choices again, looking for some kind of sign. Maybe the words "for gay sex" in big, bold letters, but no such luck. Did that mean it didn't matter? Or did the many specific references to "her pleasure" mean there was a difference? I wished I could call Bryan and ask for help, but he didn't have his phone with him and I didn't know his number anyway.

And how fucking weird was *that*?

"Still here?" I turned to find Phil grinning at me. "Does Bryan have a latex allergy or something?"

Jesus, a latex allergy? Was that something I needed to worry about? "I don't think so," I managed to say.

His grin faded. I had a feeling he was trying to decide if he should offer help or mind his own business. I would have preferred the assistance over my privacy. I just had to figure out how to ask without feeling like Prude Porter all over again.

"The girl I was dating before Bryan was on the pill," I finally said. "And I'm just, uh, I'm really new to all of this, you know?"

For a moment, he only stared at me, his face so expressionless I made a note to never play poker with him. He was undoubtedly shuffling through the few things he knew

about me. I used to play baseball. My last relationship was with a woman. I was in the closet. I was obviously planning on having sex with Bryan.

Oh. And I was a complete bumbling idiot.

“I see,” he said at last, his smile returning. “In that case...” He turned to survey the options. “Would you say you’re average size?”

“What?”

“This isn’t the time to exaggerate. Be honest. Because if you buy the extra-large and don’t need them, they won’t do you any good.”

Semi-virgin or not, I’d seen enough naked men in locker rooms to know how I compared. “Yeah. Just, you know, normal.”

“Okay, then.” He chose a box and handed it to me. “I’d go with these.”

“Thanks.” I dropped it into my basket and breathed a sigh of relief as I turned to leave.

“Wait,” he said. I had a feeling he was fighting not to laugh. “Do you already have lube?”

I just stood there, staring at him dumbly, my cheeks burning.

Phil took another box like the one in his basket off the shelf and handed it to me. “Trust me. You’re going to want it.”

“Okay.” Then I stood there, waiting, just in case there was some third item that branded me as a total virgin.

“Is that everything you need?” Phil asked, clearly fighting not to grin.

“Well, uh, I don’t know.” If I blushed any more, I’d probably faint dead away right there in the Aisle of Uncomfortable Necessities. “Is this everything I need?”

This time, he did smile. “If I were Bryan, I’d be dying to put you in a humbler, but I don’t think they sell those at Safeway.”

I nodded, pretending I knew what he was talking about. “Okay then, I think I’m ready to check out.”

He laughed, although it didn’t feel like he was making fun of me. It was friendlier than that, and I found myself feeling a bit less embarrassed as I followed him to the registers and bought my items. It wasn’t until we were waiting to cross the street again, the bitter wind gusting against us, that he spoke.

“Just out of curiosity, how long have you guys been together?”

Bryan and I had been dodging this exact question all morning, but I decided to be honest this time. “You know at breakfast when Sal asked us all how we met, and we said at the airport?”

His eyes widened. “You mean, you just met yesterday?”

“Approximately twenty-eight hours ago, yeah. I know maybe it seems really rushed to be buying condoms when we’ve only known each other a day—”

“Ha! Trust me Noah, twenty-four hours is a pretty long courtship in my world.” Our conversation paused while we darted across the street, but he picked it back up again on the other side. “I’m surprised, though. The two of you are so comfortable with each other, I never would have guessed you just met. You must have real chemistry.”

I wondered if he could tell how that simple proclamation warmed my heart. “That’s how it feels to me, too. Like this is the guy I’ve been waiting for.” I stopped short, feeling like an idiot. “I sound like a cheeseball saying that, don’t I?”

“Maybe a little bit, but who cares? Mostly, you sound like a guy who knows a good thing when he sees it.” He shrugged, grinning. “I think it’s kind of adorable, really.”

We stashed our bags in his rental car before heading to the sporting goods store. After being outside in the sunshine, the inside of the store seemed dark and gloomy, although the distinct lack of wind was a nice bonus. The coats and other winter clothing sat near the front, and based on the people shopping around us, we weren’t the only tourists who hadn’t

brought the appropriate attire. One group appeared to be a family—a mom and dad, both wearing Houston Astros hoodies, a teenage daughter who stopped texting to watch me pass, and a nearly grown son wearing a University of Texas at El Paso T-shirt. Being from Texas, I figured they probably didn't even own heavy enough gear for Northern Idaho.

We found Bryan with a hat and mittens tucked under one arm as he flipped through a rack of coats. River was nowhere to be seen.

“Let me guess,” Phil said. “He went off to look at fishing and camping gear?”

Bryan laughed. “I think so, yeah.”

“I better go find him or we'll be waiting all day.”

I took the mittens and hat from Bryan, freeing up his other hand while he shopped. “Part of me thinks I should get a coat,” he said to me. “And part of me just wants to wear your hoody all day.”

“Not *all* day, I hope.” He laughed, but I found myself thinking about my trip to Safeway with Phil. I moved closer so I could lower my voice. “Can I ask what might be a really dumb question without you laughing at me?”

“I have a feeling we're about to find out.”

“What's a humbler?”

He turned to me, clearly confused. “A what?”

“Something Phil said. I, uh, well...” I moved even closer, lowering my voice to a whisper. “I think it's a sex thing.”

“Ah.” He nodded, glancing around to make sure they weren't close enough to hear our conversation. Seeing no sign of them, he turned back to me and touched the hollow of his throat. “Did you notice the collar River wears?”

“No.”

“Or the fact that he never meets Phil's eyes?”

“No. Why?”

“I think they’re into BDSM.”

I felt my cheeks turn bright red. “Oh.” I was vaguely aware of BDSM, of course. I didn’t live in a cave, after all. But it wasn’t something I’d ever given much thought to. Even in porn, it made me uncomfortable. “And so a humbler is what, exactly?”

He shrugged, smiling. “I have no idea. I’m afraid I’m rather vanilla, in that regard.”

I laughed, stupidly relieved by the confession, and leaned close enough to kiss him. My ruined hand found the back of his neck. “I happen to love vanill—”

“Oh my god, you’re Noah Porter!”

I turned to find the Texas family all staring at me. And they weren’t the only ones. Several other shoppers and a random store employee also turned to watch the spectacle.

“You are Noah Porter the pitcher, right?” the daughter asked.

“Uh, yeah,” I said, taking a deliberate step away from Bryan. “That’s me.”

“I knew it,” the daughter said to her father. “I told you it was him!”

“We’re such huge fans,” the mother said, almost apologetic. “We used to watch you when you were with the Chihuahuas. Do you think we could we get a picture?”

“And an autograph?” the daughter added.

Damn, it felt good to have somebody ask that again after all these years. It was rare for me to be recognized at all, but this was the first time since leaving Texas I’d been recognized for my minor league days rather than my time with the Padres. On one hand, it was a bittersweet reminder of everything I’d lost. But on the other hand—and wasn’t that a heck of a saying, since my other hand was a ruined mess?—it felt pretty damned good knowing I hadn’t been completely forgotten.

“Sure,” I told the smiling family. “I’d love to.”

Several selfies and a couple of autographs later, they went on their way and so did we.

I had no idea how much trouble that little run-in would end up causing me.

BRYAN

As planned, we headed to Sandpoint's tourist section next, where we ate lunch and wandered through shops and eventually ended up at Panhandle Cone and Coffee, which boasted some of the most original ice cream flavors I'd ever seen. River and Noah each ordered three scoops, I ordered an affogato, and Phil baffled us all by ordering a single scoop of plain old vanilla.

On the way back to Camp Bay, Noah encouraged me to tell them about the dinner theater in Tribute, and as I explained the kinds of shows we hoped to do, Phil and River looked at each other in surprise.

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" Phil asked.

"Avery," River said.

"What?" Noah and I asked together.

"Do you have video?" Phil asked, the question clearly directed at River, who was already scrolling through his phone.

"Yeah, I'm looking." And then to me, "We have these friends who do a dueling piano show. You have to see them. They're amazing."

He eventually handed me the phone, and I watched a video of two men—one young, with bright purple hair, and the other older and dressed like a funeral home director—playing through a rocking set of classic rock songs while the audience around them sang along, dancing and cheering.

"The energy they create is hard to capture on video," Phil said, his eyes meeting mine in the rearview mirror, "but they've built quite a following in Denver."

I could see why. The younger one was cute and charismatic and wildly talented. "Do you think they'd come all the way to Grand Junction?"

"They don't get a lot of chances to travel," Phil said. "They'd probably love an excuse to take a little vacation."

I'd hoped Noah and I would have time after returning to the inn to burn through one of the condoms he'd bought, but by the time we walked in the door, we only had ten minutes to kill until dinner.

Not nearly enough time for what I had in mind.

Despite my impatience, we ended up hanging around the fireplace in the lobby after the meal, talking to our fellow guests. There was something fun and surprisingly sexy about chatting casually with strangers when we both knew we were only biding time before having sex. Every blushing look Noah threw my way made me giddy. Every casual brush of his arm against mine practically made me shiver. The thought of what would happen when we finally made it upstairs had me thrumming with excitement. It was like being with Cole all over again, seventeen and brimming with hormones, the air between us practically crackling with erotic energy. It was the greatest feeling in the world. I knew I was smiling like an idiot the entire time, but I didn't care. If I could have frozen time and lived in that moment forever, I would have.

Finally, Noah leaned close, one hand on the small of my back, his lips against my ear. "Please tell me I can take you upstairs now."

Just a whisper in my ear, and I had to shift in my seat so nobody would see my growing erection. I nodded and stood up, but of course there were pleasantries to be made as we said goodnight to our new friends, and reminders from Sal about what time breakfast would be served the next morning. And then, just as we were about to start up the stairs, I spotted Max and Eric coming down, along with the fat pit bull mix who Eric called Meatball, although I was quite sure I'd heard Max call her Lucy. My mind immediately went back to that morning when Max had mentioned his deceased husband, Wilson. Despite being a widower, Max was laughing happily with Eric as they passed us on the stairs, seemingly unperturbed by whether or not he should still be in mourning.

It had nothing to do with me.

And yet somehow, it had *everything* to do with me. I froze, one foot on the next step, debating.

“What’s wrong?” Noah asked.

Whether it made sense or not, I’d made my decision. “I need to ask Max something. I’ll be up in a minute.”

He nodded and headed up the stairs, and I turned around, hurrying through the lobby to catch up with the other couple.

“Excuse me, Max?” Max stopped in the doorway to the library, turning to face me.

Unfortunately, so did Eric.

And Meatball.

The dog didn’t matter, of course—she looked like an open-minded mutt—but I wished there was a polite way to ask Eric to leave us alone for a minute. Already, I was regretting my decision, but I took a deep breath and plowed on.

“I’m sorry. I just, I wondered if I could ask you...” Ask him what, exactly? Jesus. What the hell was I doing, thinking I was going to ask this complete stranger about what might have been the worst experience of his life? “Never mind. I’m sorry. Forget I—”

“It’s okay,” Max said, amused but patient. I remembered Rhonda saying he was a pediatrician. I had a feeling I was seeing his impeccable bedside manner. “Whatever it is you want to ask, go ahead.”

“I wondered...” I sighed, staring up at the bare wood of the ceiling. Maybe I was going about this all wrong. He was a doctor, after all. Maybe instead of trying to ask a question, I should just tell him what was bothering me and let him diagnose the problem. Which would have been easier if Eric had moved on, but he seemed disinclined to leave without Max. “The thing is,” I finally said, “my husband died too.”

The words hung there for a moment, and I waited for the usual words. *I’m sorry. How awful. That must have been terrible for you.* But instead of saying any of those things, Max turned to Eric and said, “Maybe give us a minute.”

I didn't know Eric from Adam but even I could see he was relieved to be given an excuse to leave. I imagined his lover's dead husband couldn't be his favorite subject. "Sure. I'll take Meatball for a walk down by the lake."

Once he was gone, and Meatball with him, Max gestured toward the library. "Do you want to sit down? Although if I'm going to talk about Wilson, I'm going to need a drink. You want one?"

I shook my head. "No. I don't want to take up that much of your time. Especially not at Christmas. Especially for something that's none of my business anyway. I just have one question, really."

"That sounds easy enough."

"How long did it take for people to stop treating you like a grieving widower who might fall apart at the drop of a hat?"

"Ah." His smile spoke more of understanding than amusement. He shoved his hands in his pants pockets, rocking back on his heels as he thought about it. "Honestly, I think they stopped treating me like a grieving widower when I stopped acting like one."

I wasn't sure what answer I'd been expecting, but it wasn't that one. And even though I'd said I only had one question, I found there was one more I had to ask.

"And your friends..." I glanced toward the back patio, where Eric had gone. "Did they accept your decision to move on?"

"Mostly. There was one who ghosted me, but he was always more Wilson's pal than mine. My real friends have been great. They love Eric. Mostly I think because they know how happy he makes me."

Could it really be that simple?

I nodded, already feeling I'd taken up too much of his vacation. "Thanks. I'm sorry. I appreciate your time—"

"Wait." He reached out but stopped short of touching my arm. "Since we're on the subject, can I ask you a question

too?”

I was oddly relieved at the request. It made me feel like less of an asshole. “It only seems fair.”

His cheeks turned red, but he didn’t hesitate. “Did you have a complete emotional breakdown after the first time you, uh—” he pointed toward the stairs, where Noah had gone “—with somebody new?”

I laughed. “No. I had my breakdown before we even got that far.”

“Huh.” He nodded, thoughtful. “Yeah. In hindsight, that probably would’ve been better.”

I went slowly up the stairs to our room, so lost in thought I accidentally went all the way to the third floor and had to turn around and go back down one level to reach our room.

Of course I’d known on some level that my friends only walked on eggshells around me because they cared about me and they wanted to be respectful. What I hadn’t considered was how my sullen hostility may have looked from their point of view. If I showed up after Christmas smiling and happy, would they run with it? Would they be happy for me and leave it at that? Or would they think I’d lost my mind?

I couldn’t blame them if they did. I wasn’t so sure myself. But what I did know with unwavering certainty was that I didn’t care. Being with Noah made me happier than I’d been since Cole, and I was determined to make that last as long as possible, even if that only amounted to a few days.

I found Noah at the small table in our room, staring at his phone, his face white.

“Everything okay?” I asked.

“That girl from the store? The one with her family? She tweeted photos of me.” He swallowed, holding his phone out to me. “Of us.”

I took the phone and looked. The tweet was simple enough.

OMG guys, I'm so excited I met @NoahPorterPitcher and he's so nice and still my favorite @epchihuahuas pitcher ever! #FearTheEars

Most of the photos were ones he'd posed for at the sporting goods store, but two were candid. One was simply him standing next to me, with a rack of coats between us and the camera. But the final photo was more of a close-up, me looking up at him, him leaning in close so we were practically nose-to-nose. His injured hand could be seen on the back of my neck. It wasn't quite the money shot, but it probably would have been if she hadn't chosen that moment to interrupt us.

"You could message her and ask her to take it down," I suggested.

"I'm afraid that might draw even more attention to it than if I ignore it."

I chewed my lip, thinking about it, but he was probably right. I looked closer at her profile. Her screen name was KaliK. Her bio said, "Just another high school senior. #seniorsrule she/her." Most of her tweets seemed to be about somebody named Ben Platt. "She only has 64 followers," I said.

"Wait. What?"

I handed the phone back. "Based on her profile, I'd say most of them are other high school kids."

Noah slumped with relief as he looked closer at her profile. "You're right. Okay, I feel stupid now. I mean, nobody's even hit like on it yet or anything. What are the chances anybody even notices?"

I shrugged. "I have no idea." I ruffled my fingers through his thick, dark blond hair. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be," he said. "None of this is your fault. I just..." He rose and began pacing the length of our tiny room. "I'm trying to do what you said last night. Just stay in the here and now. You and me in this crazy fairy tale, right? I'm trying not to think about what happens when we fly home. About whether or not I tell my mom. I'm trying not to freak out

because I don't want *you* to freak out and decide I'm too fucking wishy-washy to bother with—”

“That isn't going to happen.”

“And what if Shane and Jack don't want me to be a partner on the team anymore and what if the parents don't want me coaching their kids anymore and what if my mom cries when I tell her and what if her new husband is a total homophobe?”

I didn't answer because I didn't have an answer to give. He stopped his pacing, turning to face me.

“You don't have anything to say about it?” he asked. It came out like a challenge, but I knew it was only because he was scared.

“Maybe,” I said, thinking about my conversation with Max. About the surety I'd felt when I'd first walked into the room. “Actually, yeah. It's not really related. Or, maybe it is. I don't know. But I do have something I want to tell you. And I don't know if it'll make things easier or only complicate them more, but we said we were going to be honest, right?”

“Right.” He set the phone on the nightstand, face down, as if that could stop the tweets from happening, then perched on the edge of the bed. “Go ahead. I'm listening.”

I took a deep breath. I'd opened the door on this conversation. Now I just needed to go through.

“I want to tell you about my college boyfriend, Cole. And that means I need to tell you about Greg, too. But really, it's about Cole. And maybe it's about you and me, too.”

“Okay.” His tone was encouraging, but I could also tell he was confused as to why I wanted to talk about this now.

“Cole was...” I shook my head, trying to figure out how to explain the most complicated man I'd ever known. “He was wild and funny and charismatic. He just had this way of making people want to be his friend. Or at the very least, of making people do things his way. You remind me of him a lot, actually. Except if you met him, you'd probably be offended by the comparison. Because on the surface, you're nothing like

him at all.” But I was babbling, avoiding the real reason I wanted him to know all of this. “People laugh at the idea of love at first sight, but I know it’s real because it happened to us. We were only seventeen at the time. We met in the lift line, of all places, and it was like nothing I’ve ever experienced. It felt like fate. Like the entire universe had conspired to bring us together. Six hours later, we were making plans for after graduation. He changed colleges so we could be together. I came out to my family because I was so determined to be with him. We were just wildly, stupidly in love.”

“Except something went wrong?”

I threw up my hands. “Everything went wrong.” Except that wasn’t true. It wasn’t true at all. I slumped onto the bed next to him. “I was an idiot. I thought he was cheating on me, and so I cheated on him, as if an eye for an eye has ever solved anything.”

“Was he cheating on you?”

“I don’t know.” To this day, I still wasn’t sure. Our mutual friend Jared had sworn it wasn’t true, but I couldn’t quite believe it, maybe because accepting that Cole had been faithful all along would make my own betrayal that much worse. “It doesn’t matter, because the truth is, we weren’t compatible. He was rich and spoiled and used to doing whatever he wanted to do the very minute he wanted to do it.”

“Uh... okay. I hope that’s not the part that reminds you of me.”

I laughed, shaking my head. “No. But stupid as it sounds, his money was a big part of the problem between us. He told me he could support me, but I couldn’t stand the thought of being a kept pet, you know? Of being completely dependent on him for every single thing and having no independence whatsoever. I needed my own job and my own money and my own life. Maybe it sounds stupid—”

“No. It sounds realistic, that’s all.”

“I guess,” I agreed, amazed at how much I could still hurt from a breakup that had happened almost two decades earlier.

“We loved each other so much, but it wasn’t enough to keep us together.”

“So how does Greg fit in?”

I sighed, mentally shifting directions. “I was seventeen when Cole and I met. Twenty when we broke up for the last time. But I never got over what I had with him—that wild giddiness that turns your whole world upside down. I spent years waiting to feel it again. Dating, and hoping, but never even coming close. And the longer I waited, the more I drank.” I hated to talk about my decision to quit drinking, but it was part of the story. “I never really felt like an alcoholic. I mean, I know a lot of alcoholics say that. But I didn’t hit rock bottom or anything like that. My life wasn’t falling apart because of alcohol. But I drank when I was unhappy. And I was unhappy all the time. Every single day. And at some point, I realized the drinking didn’t help. I was drunk and unhappy instead of sober and unhappy, but it wasn’t exactly a win. So about six years ago, I started going to AA. And then two and a half years ago, I met Greg. And it wasn’t love at first sight. It was nothing compared to what I’d felt with Cole. But I was so tired of being single. And it wasn’t like I *disliked* him. He was cute and attentive and funny. We got along well. We had a lot in common. The sex was fine. And so—”

“‘Fine’?” Noah asked, laughing. “The sex was ‘fine’?”

I chuckled despite myself. “‘Fine’ seemed like enough.”

“Enough to get married?” He couldn’t quite keep the bemusement out of his voice.

“No. But enough to keep seeing him.” Laughter reached us from the hallway, seeming to taunt me as I remembered how empty I’d felt back then, resigned to never falling in love again, sure the universe was punishing me for screwing things up with Cole. “The thing is, I knew Greg was way more into me than I was him. But frankly, it felt good to be wanted, you know? And I thought, maybe if I just go along with it, just give it some time, it’ll develop into more. I figured if I told myself to love him, maybe eventually I would.”

“Fake it ‘til you make it?”

“Basically, yeah.” And somehow, the way he said it, I didn’t feel quite as foolish as before. “Six months later, he asked me to move in with him, and I thought, why not? Things were fine—” I stumbled on the word as I said it, almost laughing. “Good, I guess. Good enough, at any rate, and his house was closer to work than mine. Which is a stupid reason, I know, but it cut my commute in half.” I shook my head, remembering. “He was just so *excited* about it all. And I guess seeing that excitement made me feel good, even if I didn’t feel it myself. It was easy to let myself get caught up in it. So I moved in. But the longer we lived together, the more I felt like a fraud. And then one day, he blurted out those three little words, and it just hit me that I didn’t love him back. That if I didn’t love him by that point in our relationship, I probably never would. And so I decided I was going to break up with him.”

And I really had planned to do it. But I worked for him. I lived with him. I didn’t love him, but I wasn’t in a hurry to blow up my entire life by dumping him, either. And it wasn’t as if things between us were *bad*. Mundane and unexciting, maybe. But also easy, and familiar.

“I take it you didn’t follow through?” Noah said.

“The timing just never felt right. Plus I was a coward, and I didn’t want to hurt him. And then one day, he got sick.”

In truth, Greg had been sick off and on since the day we’d met. There always seemed to be a lingering cough, and climbing a set of stairs often left him sweating and out of breath, even though he wasn’t an unhealthy person. “Just bronchitis again,” he’d say every time. But this time, it hadn’t gotten better. On the third day, when he could barely breathe, I’d convinced him to go to the hospital.

“Was it cancer?” Noah asked, jolting me back to the present.

“No. Cystic fibrosis. These days, they screen for it at birth, but not when we were born. They told us a diagnosis at his age was rare but not unheard of.”

Noah moved a bit closer to me on the bed. “So what happened?”

“He didn’t have anybody else. His mom was dead. He hadn’t heard from his father in twenty years. He has a half-sister, but she’s fifteen years younger. They barely knew each other. We had friends, but I could almost feel them all backing away. Nobody knew how to handle it.”

“So you stayed?”

“Of course. I didn’t even think about leaving after that. Maybe I didn’t love him the way I should have, but I wasn’t going to abandon him when he needed me most.” And the next time he’d said, “I love you,” I’d said it back. I’d lied, because it was kinder than the truth.

“And the wedding?” Noah asked.

“At first, he’d have good spells—a week or two or even three where everything seemed fine—and then he’d suddenly not be able to breathe again and end up back in the hospital. They put him on the list for a lung transplant, but those last couple of months, he was sick more often than not. He was hopeful right up until the end, but I had this feeling, you know? This intuitive voice in my head saying he wasn’t going to make it. That he was running out of time. So one day, I asked him if there was anything he wanted to do the next time he had a good day.”

“Like a bucket list item?”

“Exactly. I was thinking along the lines of a quick trip to the Grand Canyon or one last drive up Trail Ridge Road, or maybe skydiving. I don’t know. But he said, ‘The one thing I regret is that I never got around to proposing.’”

“And so you said yes?”

I nodded, unable to look at him for fear of what I’d see. I stared out the window instead, seeing only velvety blackness hanging over the lake. “It was the one thing he wanted, and it seemed like the least I could do. And honestly, it made things easier. The doctors and the hospital staff, they’d never listen to me because I was just ‘the boyfriend.’ They kept asking when

his family would arrive. Getting married meant they had to listen to me when I told them what he wanted. It meant they had to let me be in the room with him when he had his treatments. And so, yeah, maybe my reasons weren't great, but I still think it was the right thing to do."

He put a hand on my back, a warm bit of comfort between my shoulder blades. "Of course it was. Giving somebody a bit of happiness before they die can't be wrong."

"Except that I lied to him from the very beginning. I never really loved him. Not the way I should have. And maybe that part doesn't matter so much. He died thinking I did, and that made him happy. Sometimes I feel guilty about my dishonesty, and yet I know I'd feel even worse if I'd left him to die alone."

"Okay," he said, his voice hesitant. "I don't want to sound like an asshole here, but I'm not sure what the issue is."

I laughed, more at myself than at him. I stood up, suddenly restless, and found myself pacing much the way he had a few minutes earlier. "The problem is my friends. I feel like I've been lying to them this whole time too. Dustin basically took over Washington's and had two of his friends move to Colorado from Oregon to help him just so I could spend more time with Greg before he died. They threw this big party for us when we got married. And now, they're falling all over themselves trying to make sure I'm okay. And it's not that I don't appreciate it. I do. Believe me, I do. But Greg's only been gone a month and I'm ready to move on with my life and that makes me sound like a friggin' psychopath. And I guess it's a lot harder to face than I anticipated."

"That's why you said yesterday that you're not sure you're ready for them to know about us."

"Yes. But everything's changed now." I stopped, facing him, my heart pounding. I knew what I felt, but suddenly the idea of saying it out loud felt like way too much. It felt stupid and childish.

It felt crazy, but that was the point.

“Are you saying you want to tell your friends about us after all?” he asked.

“No. I mean, maybe. Not necessarily.” I sighed, frustrated at my inability to be clear. “I felt like I needed to tell you about Greg—”

“I’m glad you did.”

“—but he was never the issue. The issue for me has always been Cole. When he and I met... I don’t want to say it was instant. It wasn’t quite that fast, but it was close. It was just after ten o’clock in the morning when we got paired up in the lift line, and by dinnertime, my entire world had shifted on its axis. It was completely nuts. My friends thought I’d lost my mind, like he’d brainwashed me or something. And I understood why they thought that, but when it happens, you can’t fight it. It’s like an energy that changes everything, and suddenly the craziest ideas make sense, and the things you thought you cared about just fall by the wayside.” I held up my hands, searching for a way to describe it. “It’s *madness*. That’s the only word I have for it. Some kind of indescribable *madness* that fills you up and changes everything about the way you see the world. The only thing you want is to feel more of it.” I stopped again, searching his eyes, trying to decide if I was about to make a giant fool of myself. “I’ve spent twenty years waiting to feel it again.”

He stood suddenly, grabbing me by both arms and pulling me close, almost shaking me. “Jesus, Bryan. Please, *please* tell me you feel that madness now. Tell me I’m not the only one.”

And the joy that exploded in my chest at those words was undeniable. “Since the moment you asked me to come with you.”

“Thank god,” he laughed, hugging me tight. “I’ve spent the last two days worrying I was the only one feeling it. I wanted to tell you but I was afraid you’d laugh and say it was nothing but a weekend fling.”

“It feels like so much more than that to me.”

“Thank goodness.” But he must have sensed my elation didn’t match his. He immediately stepped back again, his hands on my arms. “Why do I feel like there’s a ‘but’ coming?”

“Because it’s not the same, the second time around. When I was seventeen, I let myself drown in it. I threw myself in head first and lost sight of everything. Back then, it was easy to believe it could last forever.”

His smile faded a bit. “But now you don’t think it can? Is that what you’re saying? That it’s not even worth trying?”

“No, that’s not what I mean. I don’t know if it can last forever or not. But my point is, I don’t need it to. I’m not saying I don’t *want* it to,” I hurried to explain. “But whether you come out or not, whether I tell my friends or not, none of that matters to me. Maybe it should, but doesn’t. If you tell me you want to shout it from the rooftops, I’m with you. If you tell me we have to keep it on the down-low, I’ll be with you there too. But I know how rare this madness is. And how precious, I guess. I know firsthand how hard it is to find, no matter how much you look. So whether it lasts a day or a week or a year... it’s still worth having. No. Not just *having*. It’s worth *fighting for*, Noah. Whatever that means. Whatever it takes.” I finally stopped, my hands on his chest, his arms around my waist. “I just want this fucking fairy tale to keep unfolding.”

“So you’re saying yes, this is crazy. But you want it anyway?”

“I want all the crazy I can get.”

“You have no idea how happy I am to hear that.”

And then he was kissing me, both of us desperately pulling at each other’s clothes. He might have been tender or careful about it if I’d had the patience, but I was done waiting. I laid him down on the bed and got the condom in place before straddling him. The lights stayed on, and even though I was still pale and scrawny and nearly ten years older than him, I didn’t care. I felt young and gorgeous and wild and more alive than I had in twenty years. I rode him until my thighs burned

and he finally flipped me onto my back, taking control. He fucked me like a man possessed until we were both spent and breathless, so sweaty from the sex that our only choice was to head for the shower. But first, he pulled me close again, hugging me tight, his voice shaky in my ear.

“Crazy together, right?” he asked.

“Crazy together,” I agreed. “For as long as we can manage.”

NOAH

My first thought the next morning was that I couldn't wait to have sex with Bryan again.

I immediately wished it had been something sweeter or more romantic, like waking up thinking my life had never been so wonderful, or the sunrise over Lake Pend Oreille was more beautiful than ever before, and it was all because of him.

But no. My thoughts were decidedly more carnal. The memory of the night before was still strong and fresh in my mind—him straddling me, leaning back with his hands on my thighs, the way his cock had bounced up and down as he'd chased his pleasure. It had been like nothing I'd ever experienced before. It had literally felt life changing.

Of course, given my distinct lack of sexual experience, that wasn't exactly a surprise.

But man, I was nuts about him. Was I really falling in love with him, or was it only a natural reaction to finally losing my virginity? We'd all teased my friend Tom in high school when he'd quit the baseball team so he could spend more time with his girlfriend. "Pussy-whipped," one of our teammates said afterwards in the locker room. "Tom finally gets his wick wet and now it's the only thing he cares about. He thinks sex is more important than baseball."

Almost fifteen years later, I finally had some sympathy for Tom. I would have followed Bryan anywhere at that moment. And no, it wasn't *only* because I was apparently insatiable. There was more to it than that. But yes, having sex again was admittedly at the very top of my Christmas list. And if that meant I was whipped...

Well, so be it. It felt pretty damned good to me. Bryan was right. Whatever this madness was, I was ready to run with it, for as long as possible. Who cared if it made sense or not?

Outside our window, the sky was just beginning to brighten as dawn snuck over the mountains and into the valley. Bryan was still sound asleep, practically hugging the edge of the mattress because I was taking up too much of the bed. I

moved closer, cuddling up to his back, telling myself I wasn't going to wake him for sex two days in a row. Except he stirred almost immediately, leaning back against me.

"What time is it?" he mumbled.

"No idea." I kissed the back of his neck and forced myself to keep my hand on his stomach rather than letting it stray further south. "I should probably let you sleep but—"

"To hell with that," he said. "It's Christmas Eve. There are eleven condoms left in that box and we leave the day after tomorrow. I can sleep when I'm dead."

I laughed. "Good plan."

But we didn't hurry. For a long time we stayed in that position, him pushing his hips back against me, and my right hand on his erection. I loved listening to his labored breathing and his soft moans as I touched him. I had no reason to doubt his arousal or to question his response to my touch.

Except all I could think about was how weird it must feel to him.

"Do you want to change sides?" I finally asked.

"What do you mean?" he asked, sounding halfway annoyed with my interruption. "Like, switch places? Are you saying you want me behind you?"

"No!" I said, probably a bit too emphatically. I figured I'd have to learn to be on the receiving end eventually, but I wasn't ready for that yet. "No," I said again, trying to pull back from the horror he'd probably heard in my voice. "I just mean face the wall instead, so I can use my other hand."

He froze. "Why?" he asked, and I heard laughter in his voice. "You're right-handed, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Is this because it bothers you, or because you think it bothers me?"

I debated how to answer that. "I worry that it feels wrong."

He put his hand over mine, urging me to continue stroking. “It feels different from every other man who’s ever touched me,” he said. “And there’s nothing ‘wrong’ about that.”

I ducked my head into his neck, holding him tighter than ever as tears stung the back of my eyes. I could never be thankful for the accident that had robbed me of my career, but right at that moment, I was damned close.

“Did that sound as cheesy as I think it did?” he asked.

“No,” I said, and he had to hear the emotion in my voice. “No, it was perfect.”

He turned in my arms, pulling me into a kiss. “You’re perfect, Noah,” he whispered. “Just keep going.”

The night before, our lovemaking had been somewhat frantic. He’d been driven by some need that I suspected had nothing to do with me and everything to do with reclaiming his life. But now, we were slow about it, simply kissing and grinding together. We had all the time in the world to explore each other, to marvel at our feelings for one another, to let our passion build and build until time seemed to stop around us, the world outside our room grinding to a halt, blinking out of existence. There was nothing left but him and me and a glorious, agonizing anticipation I’d never known to dream about. Eventually, he slipped a condom onto me and guided me into place. And for the first time in my life, I lost myself completely in another person. I stopped worrying about whether I was doing things right or wrong. I stopped worrying about my lack of experience. I thought of nothing at all except how good it felt to make love to him. His quiet whimpers as I thrust and his fingers digging into my back were all the guidance I needed as we moved together. It was the most perfect, natural thing in the world, a symphony of sensation building into a sweaty, desperate crescendo that left us clinging to each other as we fought to catch our breath.

“Jesus, I’m glad you bought those condoms,” he finally said, and I laughed.

“That makes two of us.”

I left him in bed while I cleaned up, then brought him a towel. I finally checked the time and found it wasn't quite eight o'clock.

"I think I might go for a run," I said as he finished with the towel. "You want to come?"

He laughed and turned onto his side, pulling the covers up. "That's adorable that you think I've ever jogged in my life, but no." He nestled down into the bed, his eyes already closed. "Just for future reference, you never need to ask me that again."

"I thought you said you'd sleep when you're dead."

"I lied. I'm not that much of a badass. I'll sleep while you jog instead."

By the time I slipped out the door ten minutes later, he was snoring quietly. Downstairs, I found the inn's employees setting the tables for breakfast. A few guests sat around the fire, many of them still in pajamas as they drank their morning coffee and took turns petting the dogs. In the library, the bit of mistletoe that had tempted me on our first night still hung, the spot underneath it empty. If Bryan had been with me, I would have taken him straight there and kissed him. But he was upstairs, and the only person in the library was Phil, seated in one of the armchairs. He looked up from the paperback he was reading and raised his eyebrows at me.

"It must be single digits out there, and you're going jogging?"

"I love running on mornings like this. Want to come?"

"You heard the part about single digits, right?"

"Yeah. So?"

"Hard pass," he said, returning his attention to his book, "but you have fun."

My breath formed moist clouds in front of my face as I stepped outside. It was brisk, no doubt about it, but the sky was robin's egg blue, the lake glimmering in the soft, silver light of morning. I meant what I'd said to Phil. I loved the

exhilaration of jogging on days like this, no sound at all except the snow crunching under my feet and the occasional bird chirping in the trees. And today more than ever, I felt nothing but joy as I ran. I found myself smiling, remembering the morning and the night before. I found myself daydreaming about what might happen when we went home, imagining a world where I woke up next to Bryan each and every morning—not in a bed that could barely hold us, but in my king-sized bed with Cozy Earth bamboo sheets and thick, luxurious quilt. I imagined making love before going downstairs to a kitchen that was way too big for me but the perfect size for the two of us. In the evenings, we'd drive to work together—him to the dinner theater he'd be running with Dustin, me to the hockey rink to support the Golden Eagles—and then get home again sometime around midnight. Maybe we'd go straight to bed, or maybe we'd spend a while cuddling on the couch in front of the fireplace, maybe making love as the flames crackled away, the heat caressing our flesh as we caressed each other.

I wanted that. I wanted it with a desperation that took my breath away.

By the time I returned to the inn, breakfast was in progress. Most of the tables were full this morning, everybody chatting and laughing as they finished their meals, but I didn't see Bryan. It didn't look like he'd come downstairs yet. Maybe he was still sleeping. Would it be rude to wake him twice in one day?

Probably.

But it turned out he wasn't sleeping. The bed was empty, and the door to the bathroom closed, the shower running.

Perfect. I needed a shower after my run anyway. But before I could even strip off my sweaty shirt, my phone dinged from its spot on the bedside table.

One look at the screen and my heart sank.

So many alerts.

All of them from Twitter.

I sank down onto the bed and opened the app, my heart pounding.

As I'd been making love to Bryan and basking in the afterglow while I ran, KaliK's tweet from the day before had somehow found some traction. The first few replies were simple and innocent.

Very cool!

OMG, you're so lucky, and he's still HOT!

Wow, all the way in Iowa? And you thought it would be boring!

I'm in Idaho, not Iowa! KaliK had tweeted back. Big diff! Check a map, girl! Lol

But then the Chihuahuas had retweeted KaliK's tweet. Their caption read, *Chihuahua alumni and fan favorite Noah Porter spotted in the wild! #FearTheEars*

Most of the replies were mundane enough, and on a normal day, seeing so many people say they remembered me and would always be a fan would have been the highlight of my week. But not all of them were positive. A few made my chest tight with anxiety.

One said, *Is it just me, or does he look like he's about to kiss that guy?* Another said, *OMG, I didn't know he was gay. That's cool though, glad to see he's moved on after his accident.* And a third said, *Always knew that guy was a fag. Here's the proof.*

Only a few tweets, nothing more. Nothing was trending. Hell, I wasn't well known enough for that. Still, there were enough people talking about it to make my gut clench with fear. Then, as I sat there trying to tell myself it didn't matter, two more alerts popped up. One was a Chihuahua's fan blog. I recognized the name as one that had reported a great deal on the "scandal" when I'd injured my hand, making it sound as if we'd been shitfaced drunk while four-wheeling in the mountains of Utah. Back then, they'd published multiple stories about how irresponsible it was for me to be out and about using my hands for dangerous things, as if I should have

lived the off-season in a bubble just to protect my pitching ability. This time, their approach was as unsubtle as ever. They retweeted KaliK's photo. The caption read, *There have always been rumors, but now we have confirmation. Former Padres pitcher Noah Porter is gay.*

The second alert was Ansel Farmer, a reporter from a much bigger sports media site in San Diego who I remembered from my days with the Padres. He'd been one of the good ones, always kind and respectful of the athletes he covered. *Hi KaliK! We'd like permission to use your photo. Please check your DMs.*

A moment later, Ansel Farmer sent me a DM too. *Hi Noah. I don't know if you remember me from your days with the Padres. I wondered if you have a comment on the photo? Those of us at Padres News are proud allies of the LGBT community. We want to be respectful of your privacy, but we'd be honored to provide a platform if you have any statement to make. I won't publish anything without your permission, but I'd sure love to talk, if you're willing to grant me an interview. Call me anytime.* The DM ended with his phone number.

My heart pounded so hard I could feel it in my throat and ears, and a cold sweat prickled under my arms. What in the world was I supposed to say? I appreciated that he was trying to do things the right way and get permission, unlike the fan blog. But was I ready for this?

No, definitely not.

It wasn't even so much that I didn't want the world to know as that there were people in my life who deserved to hear it from me, not see it on Twitter. The only silver lining was that my mother didn't have a Twitter account. She barely even used Facebook. Still, how long would it take before somebody pointed it out to her.

I went back to the original tweet, wanting to see if anything else had been said, but it seemed to have disappeared. Retweets of it now showed only a little rectangle that said, "This tweet has been deleted by the user."

And then, a new alert. This time, a DM from KaliK.

OMG I'm so sorry I didn't even realize that's what people would think and I'm sorry I was just so excited to meet you and I hope you know I wasn't trying to out you I just wasn't thinking and so I deleted the picture

The lack of punctuation made me smile, and any anger I'd felt toward her evaporated immediately. She was just an excited fan, not a malicious attention-seeker. *It's not your fault*, I typed back. *But thanks for deleting it.*

The band of pressure around my chest eased a bit. It wasn't that my anxiety went away, but I could breathe again. My panic and the crisis itself both felt manageable. The tweet was gone, and hopefully that would be the end of it. Deleting things from the internet wasn't so simple, of course. I knew that. But I wasn't a huge celebrity with millions of eyes on me, and KaliK had less than a hundred followers. The fan blog in El Paso probably had more, but how many people could have seen it in the couple of minutes between them posting it and KaliK deleting it? Not many, I was sure. A few hundred, at most. In the world of professional sports, that was nothing.

Still, I wished I could go back to the perfect bliss I'd felt when I was jogging and hadn't known about the tweet going low-key viral. I was suddenly envious of Bryan's bad coverage. In this case, ignorance really was bliss.

And then it hit me.

What if we went somewhere where neither of us had coverage?

Bryan emerged from the bathroom with a towel around his hips and a cloud of steam at his back. Water dripped from his thick black hair, beading on his shoulders. "You're back," he said. "Why didn't you join me?"

"I should have," I said.

"I'm not sure I left you any hot water."

But my thoughts were elsewhere.

You and me in this little fairy tale is the only thing I care about. That's what he'd said to me the day we'd arrived, and suddenly I wasn't sure why the fairy tale had to end the day

after Christmas. I knew we could manage a lot longer than two more days.

I dropped my phone and rose to meet him, pulling him into my arms so I could look into his eyes.

“Let’s not go home on the 26th.”

He blinked at me, a smile tugging at his lips. “What do you mean? You want to stay in Idaho forever?”

“No, I want to go someplace new. I don’t have to be back until Little League starts in March. And you said Greg’s estate would be in probate another month or two, right? There’s nothing you need to do until that’s finalized?”

“Right,” he said, his smile growing.

“So why go home on the 26th at all? Why not make this vacation last as long as we can?”

“Are you serious?” But he liked the idea. I could tell by the tone of his voice and the excitement in his eyes. “What about your hockey team?”

“I’m mostly an investor, and nothing will really start happening until summer anyway. Anything they might need me for in the next couple of months can be done over Zoom.”

“Where would we go?”

“I don’t know. Hawaii, maybe. Or Mexico. Someplace warm and sunny. You said you golf, right?”

“Not much these last few years, but yeah, I know how.”

“That’s fantastic! We’ll golf during the day, and walk on the beach in the evenings, and—”

“Spend the nights burning through more condoms?”

“Yes! We could go to Belize or... I don’t know. The Bahamas, maybe?” I wasn’t even sure I could point to either place on a map, but I knew they existed, and they weren’t renowned for snow.

His smile faded the tiniest bit. “We can’t leave the country. I don’t have my passport with me.”

I felt like an idiot for not having thought of that. “Me neither, but so what? We fly home just long enough to grab those and swap our hats and mittens for shorts and swim trunks and we head back out.”

“I don’t know if I can afford it. A week or two, sure, but beyond that—”

“I’ll pay. I have plenty of money.”

“I’d be able to pay you back after the will goes through.”

I laughed, resisting the urge to shake him. “Bryan, I don’t give a shit about any of that. I just want more time with you. Tell me you’ll come with me.”

He only thought about it for a second before laughing and throwing his arms around my neck. “I love being crazy with you.”

BRYAN

By the time we made it downstairs, there was one less condom in our nightstand. Rhonda and Jerome were setting the tables for lunch, and I was absolutely ravenous. I was also riding a wave of excitement and giddiness that left me lightheaded and dizzy. I almost felt drunk, and had to remind myself more than once that I hadn't had any alcohol. On one hand, I knew running off to Mexico or the Bahamas was irrational and irresponsible. My friends would think I'd gone bonkers, and it was possible they were right.

On the other hand, I couldn't think of a single solitary reason not to do it. I was my own boss and my own landlord. Anything the lawyers might need me for could be done by email or over Zoom. I didn't even own a pet. I had absolutely no obligation to anybody. And the simple truth was, I wanted more time with Noah. For the first time in years, I felt young and alive, my heart full of optimism and excitement for the future. A future with him, for as long as we could make it work. There was no way in hell I was saying no to any of it.

As for traveling, I had plenty of money in the bank for a few weeks, and if things went longer than that, I'd let Noah pay my way, as long as he was okay with that. A voice in the back of my mind reminded me that this was why things had ended with Cole two decades earlier—because he wanted to pay my way, and I'd refused to let him. But this was different. Back then, I'd had nothing of my own. No job. No experience. No savings. Not even a car in my own name. If and when we broke up, it would have meant crawling back to my parents for help. But I was no longer twenty years old, young and clueless. If Noah and I crashed and burned, I wouldn't be left high and dry. I still had my own savings, plus the inheritance from Greg to fall back on, once the lawyers did whatever the hell it was they needed to do.

Yes, Noah might choose to pay my way for part of the trip, but I wasn't dependent upon him in the long-term. And that made all the difference. Part of me felt guilty using my dead husband's money to run off with another man, but I just

had to hope that if Greg was somewhere watching me, he understood.

But if I wasn't going home the day after Christmas, there were people who needed to know. And so once we'd finished lunch, I decided it was time to deal with the one thing I'd been avoiding.

"I have to call Dustin," I said to Noah.

We were on one of the couches in the lobby in front of the roaring fire. It was such a perfectly picturesque little scene. I hated to leave, but I'd already put it off too long.

"Do you want to use my phone?" Noah asked, pulling it from his pocket.

"No, calling from a number he doesn't recognize will only freak him out more. Do you mind if I take the Jeep? I'm just going to go up the road until I have service again."

"Of course you can take the Jeep. You want me to come with you?"

I shook my head. I had a feeling Dustin was going to have a minor meltdown, and I didn't need an audience for that. "No, I'll be fine."

After retrieving my coat and the car keys from our room, I hopped in the rent-a-car and headed toward town, marveling once again at the scenery. I'd lived in Colorado long enough to be somewhat immune to spectacular mountain vistas, but the lake added a whole new layer of beauty. Maybe Noah and I could come back again in the summer. We could rent a boat or some canoes, or even just lie on the beach in the sun with the mountains towering over us. I imagined watching the fireworks with him on the Fourth of July while sipping a virgin daiquiri.

Maybe it was foolish to plan on something months away with a man I barely knew, but I did it anyway.

Five miles later, I didn't have to look at my phone to know I suddenly had service again. It dinged and buzzed multiple times as it caught up with everything I'd missed since arriving in Camp Bay. There were pull-outs every few yards

on the lake side of the road, so finding a place to pull over was easy enough. I took the next one I saw and put the car in park. Then I picked up my phone to see what all the alerts were for.

I had multiple texts each from Dustin, Chase, Lance, and my dad, plus three voice mails. Dustin had sent the most texts by far, and the last two were in all caps. As I sat there, my heart pounding and my mind reeling, another text came through, this one from Chase.

I know maybe you want to be left alone, but Dustin's losing his mind. Please call or text or something to let him know you're okay.

My heart sank. Yes, I'd known on some level that Dustin would freak out if he knew I hadn't gone to Texas, but still, this felt like overkill. I took a deep breath and dialed his number.

He picked up almost immediately. "Jesus Christ, Bryan! Are you all right?"

"I'm fine."

"Where the hell have you been? And don't bother saying you're in Texas with your dad because I know you aren't! He called here looking for you! Imagine my surprise when he told me you'd stayed in Colorado because I needed you here. What the actual *fuck* is going on?"

"I'm in Idaho."

"Idaho? What the hell's in Idaho? Goddamnit! Do you have any idea how worried we've been?"

I took a deep breath, trying to will my heart to stop pounding. I told myself there was no reason to feel defensive. "I didn't mean to upset you. I just... I needed a break. I needed some time to myself."

"Why haven't you answered your phone for three days?"

"The B&B I'm staying at is up in the mountains. I don't have cell service."

"Even if that's true," he said, his voice rising to a shout, "it doesn't explain why the fuck you're in Idaho!"

I debated telling him about Noah, but I knew he'd freak out even more if he knew. After the disappearance of his sister, he'd done a stupid amount of research on human trafficking. Telling him some random man who was by all rights miles out of my league had convinced me to run away without telling anybody where I was going would send him into an absolute tantrum. Never mind that 39-year-old white men weren't exactly an at-risk demographic. Besides, my husband had barely been dead a month. Part of me was ashamed to admit how much happier I was with a man I'd known all of three days than I'd ever been with the one I'd married.

"Dustin," I said, feeling calmer than I had a few moments earlier, "I appreciate everything you've done for me these last few years. I really do. You've been the best friend anybody could ask for. I'll always be grateful for that. And I'm sorry I've been such a pain in the ass. But I'm fine now. You don't need to worry about me anymore, okay?"

"Listen, I know things have been hard since Greg died—"

"I don't want to talk about Greg!" I practically shouted. "I'm sick and tired of everything being about Greg! That's why I left! That's why I didn't want to go to Texas!"

"So you went to Idaho instead?" he said, his voice rising again.

I took a deep breath, reining in my anger. It would only serve to amplify his. "Yes, I came to Idaho. I'm staying at Camp Bay Chalet. You can Google it. It's a nice place, but I don't get cell service there. I didn't get any of the messages you left until today when I came into town. And once I go back, I'll be out of range again. I'm sorry you were worried, and I'm sorry you're upset, but I'm fine, okay? I don't need to be saved."

"Damnit, Bryan! This isn't rational! Have you been drinking?"

"No."

"Then why would you do this? Why would you make us all think you were going to Texas—"

“Because that was my plan! I wasn’t lying! I planned to go visit my dad. But then I got the airport, and I changed my mind. That’s all.”

“And you decided on fucking *Idaho*? Without telling any of us? Are you out of your goddamned mind?”

“You know what? Maybe I am. And I’m fine with that. I’m hanging up now, Dustin. Goodbye.”

“Wait!”

I sighed but relented. “What?”

“What time do you get in on the 26th?”

“I’m not coming home on the 26th.”

I could almost hear him clenching his teeth. “*What?*”

“I’m going to Mexico after this. Or maybe Hawaii. I haven’t decided.”

“For how long?”

Good intentions or not, his helicopter parenting was starting to drive me nuts. “Until I’m ready to come home.”

“What the hell does that even mean?”

“It means I’ll be gone a month. Or two. Maybe even three. Hell, maybe I won’t come home at all.” Although I mostly only added that last line to goad him.

“This makes no sense, Bryan. You know that, right? You can’t just run away from whatever’s bothering you!”

“Why not? There’s no reason for me to rush home, especially since it’s the last place in the world I want to be right now. I’ll let you know when I’m back in town, but until then, you can stop worrying, okay?”

“And what about Washington’s?”

“Frankly, I don’t care. It’s your call. You can close it down if you want, or you can keep it going. If you choose to keep it open, go ahead and give yourself a raise. You deserve it.” I knew I’d have to deal with the bar eventually, but I also

knew it wouldn't be today. "I'm hanging up now, for real this time. Have a good Christmas, Dustin."

I ended the call and sent one quick text to Chase, Lance, and my dad.

Had a last-minute change of plans and came to Idaho for the weekend. There's no cell service at my B&B. I'm sorry I worried you all, but I'm fine. Merry Christmas.

Then I tossed my phone into the passenger seat before turning the Jeep around and heading back to Camp Bay.

My phone immediately began to ring again.

Dustin, of course.

I let it ring until I lost service, and then breathed a sigh of relief.

I was done worrying about what other people thought. Maybe Dustin was right. Maybe I'd lost my mind, but I didn't give a single solitary fuck either way.

I was so lost in my fairy tale world when I arrived back at Camp Bay Chalet, I nearly ran over a young man as I parked the Jeep. I hadn't met him yet, but knew he was the singer for the band that would be playing later that night and again tomorrow. He held a cable in one hand as he hurried across the parking lot. Luckily, he accepted my hurried apology as I rushed inside, looking for Noah.

He'd clearly been waiting for me. He practically pounced on me in the doorway of the library.

"So?" he asked, grabbing me by my arms. "What happened? What did he say about you running off with a guy you just met?"

I sighed, shaking my head. "I didn't tell him. He already thinks I've lost my mind. I didn't want him freaking out anymore than he already is. But I did tell him I'm not coming home. Not right away, at any rate."

"So we're doing this?" he asked, grinning.

"Yeah," I assured him, laughing. "Yeah, we're doing this."

Noah kissed me, then pulled back to search my eyes.
“What about when we get back?”

I tried not to slump. Tried not to let the thought of dealing with Dustin eventually deflate the bubble of joy I’d been walking around in. “I’ll deal with that when we get to it. For now? I don’t want to spend another minute worrying about it. I just want to enjoy this time with you.”

I suddenly became aware we had an audience. The young man I’d nearly ran over was waiting patiently for us to get out of the way, cable in hand.

“Oh, shit. I’m so sorry,” I laughed, pulling Noah out of the way. “Here we are in our own little world, blocking the doorway.”

“No worries.”

But despite us moving, he didn’t seem in a hurry. If anything, he seemed to be on the verge of asking us something, as if he was working up his nerve. I imagined he felt like I had when I’d chased Max down the day before. I decided to take pity on him and give him an opening.

“You’re the singer, right?” I asked. “We’ve seen you at meals but you were always at another table. I’m Bryan.”

“Adam,” he said, shaking my hand.

Noah introduced himself next, and Adam didn’t even bat an eye when he shook Noah’s ruined hand. I liked him for that.

“I run a live music venue in Colorado,” I told him. “I’m looking forward to your show.”

“Thanks.” Although it was obvious Adam’s mind was on something other than making music. He was clearly preoccupied. He made it only a few steps before turning back to us. “Okay, I’m sorry, I was totally eavesdropping and now I have to know. You guys really just met?”

I glanced at Noah. We’d mostly been dodging this question, but there didn’t seem to be any reason to deny it now. “Yeah. We ran into each other at the airport, and something just—”

“Clicked,” Noah finished for me.

“So I changed my flight and came here with him on a whim.”

“And we realized we didn’t want it to end with this trip,” Noah said, “so we’re going to take some more time and see what happens.”

I watched Adam debate that, rolling it over in his mind, looking for the cracks. “But what if it doesn’t work out?” he asked.

“It will,” Noah said, quick and confident in a way I could never be.

“But what if it doesn’t?” our new friend pressed, his eyes on me.

I debated my answer. When I thought about it logically, I knew odds of it working out long-term seemed slim. But logic held no sway. Not with me, and clearly not with Noah either. We knew what we felt, and that madness in our hearts couldn’t be denied. But how to put that all into words for a stranger?

“All I know,” I told him, “is that we’re happy right now. And I’d rather have a few weeks of bliss than a lifetime of wondering what might have been.”

“Hey,” somebody called from the other side of the library. We turned to find one of the band members who’d clearly been looking for their singer. “There you are. You coming?”

“Yeah. Be right there.” But Adam waited until his friend left, then gestured with the cable he held. “Sorry. I’ve gotta go.”

“Do you need help setting up?” I asked. “I’ve done it a hundred times.”

“No, we got it, but thanks.” He shook my hand again. “It was nice meeting you.”

“You too,” I said. “Good luck tonight.”

“Thanks,” he said, smiling. “Good luck to you guys, too.”

“Luck,” Noah scoffed playfully after Adam was gone.
“We don’t need luck.”

“I’d say we already had our share when we met.”

“Good point.”

Later that night, the inn served a big Christmas dinner. Afterwards, the party officially began in the event room when the band started to play. The dance floor quickly filled with people. Noah and I stood at one of the cocktail tables, sipping our way through cups of hot chocolate, happy to be spectators for now.

“They’re good,” Noah said about twenty minutes into the band’s first set.

“They are.” They were playing the perfect mix of classic rock, Christmas tunes, and original songs, punctuated here and there with slower numbers so people had an excuse to get close. I’d seen a lot of live music in my days at Washington’s, and while the band itself was fine, it was Adam’s singing that took them to a whole other level. If I’d been planning to keep Washington’s going, I might even have asked for their info. Hell, maybe I’d do it anyway, in case they ever wanted a tour stop in Colorado.

Except no matter how hard Adam tried to be cheery and jolly, I sensed a bit of heartache whenever he stopped singing.

“Is it just me, or does it feel like Adam’s heart isn’t quite in it?” I said to Noah.

“Pretty sure his heart ditched the party,” Noah said.

I turned to him, confused. “What do you mean?”

“The guy he’s here with.” He gestured around us at our fellow guests. “The guy I saw him with the first night? He isn’t here.”

My first instinct was to feel bad for Adam. I knew how he felt. Cole had always been rushing off for weekends in New York or holidays in Paris, leaving me behind seemingly without a thought. I could remember all too clearly how betrayed I’d felt knowing I wasn’t his top priority. For just a

moment, I was that sad, heartbroken person all over again. But then I looked at Noah and remembered that I'd finally rediscovered that elusive madness. It occurred to me that this really might be the guy I'd be with forever. That just maybe, my days of dating and hoping were over for good.

“What?” Noah asked, seeing the goofy grin on my face.

“Nothing,” I said. “I’m just glad we’re here. Together, I mean.”

An hour later, a light snow began to fall as we climbed into an open carriage on old-fashioned sleigh runners, making it easier for the enormous draft horse to pull us across the snow. It was like something out of a fairy tale. I could almost believe we were in Narnia. I'd worried we'd freeze on the sleigh ride, but the carriage came equipped with plenty of blankets and a fresh thermos of hot chocolate. We didn't talk as we dashed through the snow. We didn't make out like horny teenagers either, although I was tempted. Instead, we simply reveled in our shared warmth until our time was up and we were deposited back at the inn. We hurried to our room, red-cheeked and shivering.

“Shower with me?” Noah asked as we stripped out of our cold, damp clothes.

“You go ahead.”

Instead, I wrapped myself in the quilt off the bed, waiting by the window for the fireworks to begin. Outside, the spectacular view was lit by moonlight through the clouds, and Christmas lights and space heaters on the patio, all of it reflecting off the dazzling snow. Inside the room, it was pitch black, and utterly silent other than the beat of the music reverberating through the floor from the party downstairs. It nearly brought tears to my eyes. This really was a magical, secret place where nothing could find us.

Nothing could touch us.

Our carriage never had to turn back into a pumpkin.

Less than a minute after Noah emerged from the shower, we were kissing again, his flesh warming mine until he sank to

his knees in front of me, hidden from view by the blanket if anybody bothered to look, but I knew they wouldn't. He started out so slow and careful about it all, I could tell he didn't expect to enjoy it. He was satisfying his curiosity more than anything, but before long he was moaning as much as me, his fingers digging into my hips as he sucked. When he stopped, I knew it was only because he was fighting his own orgasm.

Once he caught his breath, he rose and retrieved a condom from the bedside table. We rearranged the quilt I still wore so it wrapped around us both like a shared cocoon, with him behind me.

“Should we move away from the window?” he asked, his voice husky in my ear.

“Nobody can see us.”

I rested my forehead against the ice-cold glass as his warmth pushed into me from behind, his injured right hand wrapped around my length. I didn't know how it was possible to feel so wanton and so utterly cherished at the same time, but I did. It was sexy and sensual and exhilarating being in plain view and yet hidden from sight. Everything about it was like a dream—my breath fogging the window, the slow, deliberate movement of his hips as he thrust, the way he touched me, the quiet desperation in his voice when he whispered my name.

Fireworks exploded both inside the room and out.

Fairy tale or not, I was sure Cinderella never had a night like this.

NOAH

By Christmas Day, I probably should have been used to how truly lecherous my thoughts were first thing in the morning, but it still took me surprise. Waking up naked in that tiny bed with Bryan pressed up against me was enough to have me hard and ready before my eyes were even open. Plus I'd discovered the night before just how much I loved being on the giving end of a blow job. I hadn't expected to enjoy it, but having my nose pressed to his groin and his fingers laced into my hair as I sucked him was the biggest turn-on I'd ever experienced. And so when I woke up and found him still sleeping, I decided it was the perfect way to wake him up.

I slid down under the covers, even though it meant my legs hung off the end of the bed. Being sound asleep, he was still flaccid, and I wrapped my mouth around him, finding an erotic thrill in feeling him slowly begin to harden against my tongue. He moaned, rolling onto his back and spreading his legs to give me better access.

"Best. Christmas. Ever," he mumbled, one hand finding the back of my head.

And for the longest time, I stayed there, grinding against the mattress as he had his way with my mouth. I couldn't get over how fucking hot it was, smelling his musk as his length slid through my lips. I was already fighting not to come when he used a handful of my hair to guide me back up the length of his body. There was a moment of mad, messy scrambling with condoms and lube, and then I was pushing into him again, his legs around my waist as I crushed his lips under mine, muffling his moans. I felt driven by some deep, insatiable need I'd never felt before—some hunger that drove me to fuck him harder and faster. I found myself pounding into him, the headboard slamming against the wall with each thrust. I might have worried I was hurting him, but there was no mistaking his response—his breathless gasps and his fingers digging into my back. By the time we both came, we were scrunched up against the headboard, the sheet had come off the mattress, and the blankets were lost somewhere on the floor.

“I could really get used to waking up like that,” Bryan said once he’d caught his breath.

I laughed and kissed him. “You and me, both.”

We ended up in the shower where we soaped each other and made out and soaped each other again until the water ran cold, by which point, we were ready for another round. Part of me was a bit embarrassed at how insatiable I’d apparently become, but his permanent smile when we were finally finished told me he didn’t mind my suddenly uncontrollable sex drive.

It was as we were getting dressed that I finally checked my phone and was reminded of KaliK’s photo from the day before. I also realized how wrong I was about it having been deleted. Sure enough, somebody had taken a screen shot of it, and the fan blog in El Paso was still circulating it along with a blog post about my lack of girlfriends over the years and a rehash of my “careless” accident. It was only a handful of tweets, but it seemed to be gaining momentum rather than fading away.

“Everything okay?” Bryan asked.

“Just that photo,” I said. “It’ll be fine.”

I hoped like hell I wasn’t lying.

We made it downstairs just in time for the big Christmas Day brunch. The only seats left were with Jerome. I’d been avoiding sitting at the same table as him on Bryan’s behalf, but Jerome was as good-natured and flirtatious as ever, seemingly holding no ill will for me flaking out on our sexual tryst, and Bryan was just as happy and smiley as always, secure in the knowledge that Jerome was no threat to him.

Toward the end of the meal, Jerome explained to everybody at the table that although the night before had been for guests only, the party on Christmas Day was open to townspeople and former guests as well, and that the small chalet would likely be packed for most of the afternoon. He also informed us that some of their guests were low-level

famous and that no pictures should be shared on social media without the express permission of everybody in them.

A simple courtesy that meant more to me than ever before.

And sure enough, shortly after we finished eating, guests began streaming in. Bryan and I were still sitting in the dining room talking to Phil, River, and Jerome when two local celebrities arrived, causing a bit of a commotion.

I'd known that the actor Jadon Walker Buttermore, more commonly known as JayWalk to his fans, lived in Idaho. And any fan knew he and fellow actor Dylan Frasier had been best friends for years, and lovers for at least part of that time. Years earlier, Jadon had been a particular favorite of the tabloids, hounded mercilessly by photographers. He and Dylan had been publicly outed in the worst way. I could still remember standing in the checkout line at a grocery store and seeing the grainy photo of the two of them kissing on the cover of *StarWatch*. I remembered talking about it with my teammates, many of whom had laughed and said they'd known all along the two were fags. For myself, it had only underscored my need to stay in the closet. Coming out felt like career suicide. And at first, it had seemed that Jadon and Dylan's careers might be over too, but over the past couple of years, they'd both reinvented themselves, to some extent at least. And these days, they were open about their homosexuality, as evidenced by the fact that they each had another man with them.

In other words, here were two people who knew what it meant to be famous and to be outed by a photo going viral.

And I decided right then and there I was going to talk to them.

Except of course everybody wanted to talk to them. A small crowd had already surrounded them. Dylan clearly loved the attention. Jadon, on the other hand, seemed determined to escape the mob as quickly as possible. Meanwhile, their boyfriends—who were undoubtedly used to this kind of circus—had long since made their escape and disappeared into the library.

“JayWalk and Ben come here two or three times a year,” Jerome said. “I had a feeling they’d show up. They’re practically family, and Ben’s just the sweetest little thing you’ll ever meet. Everybody here adores him. I’m surprised to see Dylan, though. He came here with them once, years ago, and I’m pretty sure he hated it.” He winked at me. “Everything but the sex, of course. He must have seduced half the people in the inn.”

“Isn’t that your job?” I asked.

He laughed. “Normally, yeah. But not that weekend! I’ve always thought of myself as an expert on seduction, but he made me feel like an amateur.” He shook his head, bemused. “Anyway. Ben told me last summer that Dylan had met somebody and settled down. I didn’t think it’d last. He didn’t strike me as the monogamous type, but looks like they’re still together.”

I must have been staring a bit too intensely, because Bryan elbowed me. “Okay, I’m suddenly feeling a little jealous.”

I blushed, ducking my head. “It’s not like that.” Although it kind of was. They weren’t exactly hard on the eyes. Jadon had wavy blond hair and casual, boy-next-door good looks. Dylan was tall and dark-haired, with a smile that could make anybody weak in the knees. I couldn’t deny daydreaming about them once or twice, especially when watching Dylan’s show on HBO, where he always seemed to be sweaty and only half-dressed. “You’re not a fan?” I asked Bryan.

He shrugged. “They’re so young. I still think of them as kids.”

“They’re my age.”

He laughed. “Yeah. Somehow this is the first time our age difference has mattered.”

We went and joined the party, but I kept my eyes on Jadon and Dylan, biding my time, although I at least let Bryan know why I was so anxious to talk to them, lest he think I was just a starstruck idiot. And finally, I saw my chance. They were

sitting on one of the couches in front of the fireplace in the lobby talking to Rhonda and Suzanne. Eventually, the two women got up, saying they had work to do in the kitchen.

And I took a deep breath and made my approach.

“Hi. Excuse me. Sorry. Listen, I really hate to bother you both, but can I ask your advice on something?”

I was standing and they were both sitting, but I had the impression that each of them took a mental step back, putting distance between themselves and me. Jadon in particular seemed suddenly wary.

“Are you an aspiring actor?” Dylan asked.

“Because if so,” Jadon cut in, “I’m the last person you want to ask for advice.”

“And honestly,” Dylan said, “we don’t have the kind of connections you probably think.”

I felt like an idiot for introducing myself the way I had. Of course they’d assume I wanted advice on making it in Hollywood. “No, I’m not an actor. Not even close.” I went ahead and perched on the couch adjacent to Dylan, putting him between me and Jadon. “My name’s Noah Porter. I used to be a pitcher for the San Diego Padres.” I held up my hand. “Before this.”

Jadon’s unease immediately fell away, his shoulders relaxing. Next to him, Dylan smiled. “That’s awesome! I mean, well, not this part.” He pointed at my hand. “I just mean that you played baseball. Although I certainly can’t give you any advice about sports.”

“No, I know. I actually wanted to ask you and Jadon—”

Hearing his name, he sat forward. “My real name’s Jason.”

“Oh. I’m sorry. I thought—”

He waved off my apology. “The agent my parents hired when I was a kid billed me Jadon because he thought it sounded cooler than my real name, but my friends call me Jason.”

“Oh. Okay. Well, I realize this may be a touchy subject, but I wanted to ask you about a few years ago, when you guys were outed by *StarWatch*.”

Jason groaned and fell backward, scrunching down in his seat. Dylan, on the other hand, sat forward, elbows on knees to meet my gaze. “What about it?”

“Look, I’m nowhere near as famous as you guys, but I’m in a similar situation. Or at least, I worry that I might be...”

I gave them a quick rundown of the situation. And when I was done, Dylan said five words.

“Get in front of it.”

“What?” I asked, confused.

“Do you have a pap you work with?” he asked.

“A pap? I’m not sure what that is.”

“He means a paparazzi,” Jason said to me. And then, to Dylan, “Why would anyone work with one of those shitbags?”

Dylan chuckled. “You’ll have to excuse Jason. He’s touchy when it comes to the press.” Jason rolled his eyes but didn’t say anything, and Dylan kept talking. “Back then, when Jason and I were outed and photographers were chasing him around, hiding in his bushes get pictures of him? That was kind of the golden age of the paparazzi.”

“Paparazz-o,” Jason said. “The plural form of the word is ‘paparazz-o.’”

Dylan gave him an exasperated look that made me laugh. “Whatever.” He turned back to me. “Back then, a good photo could spark a bidding war and sell for thousands of dollars. Hell, the right photo of the right star could sell for a million, even. And when that kind of money was on the line, they’d do anything, no matter how shitty, to get the shot. But that’s not how it is anymore. The rise of social media and the number of celebrities sharing their lives on Instagram has completely changed the way they work. I suppose there might still be a few old timers around, but big money like that just doesn’t exist anymore. A lot of them are barely scraping by. These

days, most of them work directly with the celebrity, and they only come when they're called."

"Really?" Jason asked.

Dylan shook his head, chuckling. "It's disgusting how bad you are at being famous. Did you really think those guys who always showed up right when filming ended on your Netflix special just got lucky? I guarantee one of your costars tipped them off."

"But why?" I asked. "Why would anybody want that?"

Dylan laughed. "Are you really asking why people would want to be famous? You were a pro athlete. Is that really any different?"

"No," I admitted. "That part I understand. But why would they want to have a paparazzi show up when they can just post things themselves?"

"Oh. Because it gets more attention that way."

He said it as if it was the most obvious thing in the world, but I still didn't get it. How would letting some photographer take the picture make a difference?

He must have seen it on my face because he kept talking. "Okay, let me give you an example. Did you see my Instagram post yesterday saying Connor and I got engaged?"

"Wait," Jason said, suddenly coming to attention. "What?"

Dylan grinned at me, flipping his thumb in Jason's direction. "See? Even people who follow me might miss it. I have 532 thousand followers—not that I'm keeping track—"

"Sure, you're not," Jason mumbled.

Dylan pretended he hadn't spoken at all. "—and only about a quarter of them will see it. That's not enough to get anything trending. Now, if I call up my favorite pap and I tell him we'll be at this certain jewelry store at this certain time, and I just *happen* to make sure we can be seen through the window of the shop as we try on rings, and my pap just *happens* to get pictures, and those photos just *happen* to break

on E! News or Daily Mail Online, and *then* I do an ‘Oops, the cat’s out of the bag, but yes, we’re engaged’ announcement, I’ll get ten times more exposure. And *that* is how you end up trending on Twitter.”

“Oh my god,” Jason said, “please tell me you didn’t do that.”

“Give me some credit, Jase. I’m not a total attention whore.”

“Yes, you are.”

Dylan laughed again. “Okay, fine, I am. The truth is, Connor told me if I did it that way, the engagement was off.”

“Now *that*, I believe.”

“But my point is,” Dylan said to me, seemingly ignoring Jason, “it’s all about controlling the narrative. Don’t let some lowlife hack decide what the headline will say. Work with a pap you know who’ll spin it exactly the way you want it spun.”

“Wow,” I said, stunned at the simplicity of it. “That actually makes a lot of sense. Thanks.”

“No problem.” He beamed. “I really do give great advice, don’t I? Jason, listen to Noah talk about how smart I am.”

“No thanks.”

“Do you have a pap?” Dylan asked me. “I don’t know if my guy does athletes or not, but I could text him—”

“No,” I said. “I think I know exactly who to contact.”

I thanked them again and left, my mind spinning.

Control the narrative.

That’s all I needed to do. No, in the grand scheme of things, it wouldn’t change the minds of the bigots out there. But as far as the people who mattered to me, it meant everything.

And that decision calmed my nerves immensely. I was reminded of the many times I’d prepared for important

baseball games. In the hours leading up to each one, I'd be a nervous wreck, my stomach clenching every time I thought about being on the pitching mound. If I thought about it too much, I'd literally be sick to my stomach. I learned to distract myself rather than think about it.

But once I walked onto the field with my team, those nerves fell by the wayside. The anticipation was over. Stepping onto the mound and finally throwing that first pitch was far less horrifying than the images my imagination had conjured up earlier in the day.

Deciding to come out felt much the same. No more waiting for the game to start. It was time for me to do my job, and today, my job was dealing with the secret I'd been keeping my whole life. Yes, I was still terrified of the consequences, and of the responses I'd get, but much less so than I had been before.

In short, taking action was far easier than sitting around wondering when the shit would finally hit the fan.

I went out the inn's front door to the covered patio and perched on one of their porch swings. Sunlight sparkled off the snow, practically blinding me. I wished I had my coat and a pair of sunglasses, but if I went back inside for them, I'd lose my nerve, or I'd be distracted by Bryan, or maybe another guest. I'd make some convenient excuse to put things off even longer.

I was done procrastinating.

First, I sent a DM to KaliK telling her she should feel free to share the photo with the reporter from Padres News if she wanted to.

Are you sure? she asked.

I'm sure, I replied.

I watched the three little dots while she typed back. *Cool he said he'd pay me \$40 but I wasn't going to do it but if you're sure then maybe I will. I didn't mean to make trouble for you I'm so sorry I did but don't listen to the haters. You guys make a really cute couple and you shouldn't be ashamed*

or anything because love is love, right? This was followed by a rainbow flag emoji, a red heart emoji, a smiley face emoji, and two fingers making the peace sign.

I couldn't help but laugh. *Thanks*, I said. *But tell them you'll only sell them the picture for \$50.*

This time, her reply was fast. *Good idea! Thanks! Merry Christmas!*

Next, I sent a DM to Ansel Farmer. Why was I tackling two people who didn't even know me first? Because once I agreed to Ansel's interview, I'd have no choice but to follow through with the people who mattered most.

If you still want an interview, I typed, *I can do it tomorrow morning.*

Then I sat there fidgeting, staring at my screen, hitting refresh, hoping he responded quickly because if it ended up taking hours...

Well, I wasn't sure what I'd do then.

But luckily, it only took a few minutes before I saw that he'd read the message. And less than a minute after that, his reply came through.

I'm glad to hear it. Can I just ask now, so I know how to frame the questions, are you confirming the rumors, or denying them? Or is it more complicated than that?

Not complicated, I said. *I'm gay. I think I'm ready to come out.*

That's fantastic! I'm so honored you've chosen us for this. I promise, we'll handle it the right way and you'll have the full support of our organization.

We agreed on a time to talk by phone first thing the next morning. A day or two after that, my sexuality really would be front-page news, albeit only on a San Diego sports blog. Whether it spread beyond that was out of my hands, and I was okay with that. The possibilities didn't scare me nearly as much as the phone calls I planned to make next.

First, I called Jack, the land developer who was the primary financial backer and official owner of the Golden Eagles. He was in his early sixties, a big, gruff, bull of a man who had probably rarely heard the word “no” in his life. Once I had him on the line, I added our third partner, Shane, the former NHL player who would serve as our general manager and head coach, to the call. Shane was in his early fifties. As a hockey player, he’d been known as a hard-nosed brawler on the ice and a soft-hearted teddy bear off it. These days, he was a family man, first and foremost, but I also knew he was dying to get behind the bench again.

“What’s up?” Shane asked.

“I’m really sorry to bother you guys on Christmas,” I said. “But there’s something I need to tell you.”

“You better not be calling to say you’ve been arrested,” Jack said.

“No!” I said, shocked. “Why would you even think that?”

“I couldn’t think of any other reason you’d be calling us on Christmas Day. Especially when you’re on vacation.”

“It’s not that,” I said. “Listen, I probably should have told you this right from the start. And if you want me to pull out of the deal, I will. But—”

“Jesus, Noah,” Shane said. “What did you do?”

“Nothing! But I need to tell you guys the truth about something. And I hope you can forgive me for not mentioning it right at the start.” I took a deep breath and finally said the words I’d only ever said out loud to Bryan before now. “I’m gay.”

For a moment, there was nothing but silence on the line, and I immediately feared the worst. But then Jack said, “Is that it?”

“Yeah,” I said. “That’s it.”

“You haven’t been accused of anything inappropriate, right?”

“No! Why are you assuming the worst?”

“So you called us up on Christmas Day just to tell us you’re into guys?”

“Yes. I realize I should have told you both right at the beginning, and I’m sorry for that, but I was single at the time and it didn’t seem to matter.”

“Why do you think it matters to us now?” Shane asked, and I suspected he was trying not to laugh.

“Because I met somebody. And I decided I didn’t want to lie about it anymore.”

“And this guy you met,” Jack said, “the one who inspired this sudden confession—he’s over eighteen, right?”

“Of course.”

“Then I don’t give two shits. Shane, you owe me two hundred dollars. I’m hanging up now. Merry Christmas, boys.”

He clicked off the line, leaving me stunned. “You guys had a bet?” I asked.

Shane laughed. “Sorry, Noah, but yeah, we did. The truth is, he suspected all along.”

“He did?”

“Do you remember the college girl who was running the beer cart at that golf tournament where we all met?”

“Who? No. Why?”

“The fact that you don’t remember her is all the ‘why’ I need. Every unmarried man at that tournament was trying to flirt with her, and a few of the married ones too. But she only had eyes for you, and all you wanted to do was talk business.”

“Really?”

He laughed. “Really.”

“And what about my involvement with the team? Does this worry you?”

“No! I think it’s fantastic, to be honest!”

“What?” Not that I wanted to argue, but I couldn’t figure out why he’d call it “fantastic.” “Why?”

He sighed. “Look, I don’t want to sound like a money-grubbing pig here, but we’re trying to market a brand-new minor-league hockey team in the gayest town in flyover country. Now we can say one of our owners is part of the LGBT community. When we host Pride night, or when we say ‘hockey is for everyone,’ we won’t just be going through the motions. We’ll mean it. And I think that’s great.” He chuckled. “As long as you’re comfortable with that, I mean. There’s no reason you have to be. We can keep it on the down-low, if you prefer your privacy. But I don’t think there’s any reason you should feel like you have to.”

“And what about the players?”

I practically heard him shrug. “Most of them won’t care, especially once they get to know you. If there are any who do, they’ll know to keep it to themselves. I mean, if you were in my place and were going to be the head coach, it might be a bit harder. But mostly they’ll just know you as the guy who signs their paycheck. If they’re not smart enough to treat you with respect based on that alone, they’re not the kind of player we want on our team anyway.”

In the background, I heard a woman’s voice. I couldn’t quite make out the words, but it was clearly along the lines of “It’s Christmas Day, get off the phone and come be with your family.” I heard him cover the phone with his hand, muffling his reply, and then he was back.

“Listen Noah, I gotta go. My daughter just arrived. She’s four days past her due date. Poor thing can barely waddle through the door. Cross your fingers this baby comes today because I’m ready to be a grandpa like you wouldn’t believe.”

“Will do,” I said, wiping tears from my eyes.

“Have a great Christmas, all right?”

“Thanks, Shane. You too.”

The next person on my list was Wayne, the man I coached Little League with. It was easier this time. I told him I’d understand if he didn’t want me coaching with him anymore

since some parents might not approve. But that conversation was about as anticlimactic as the one with Jack and Shane.

“Noah,” he said. “You don’t get paid to coach these kids. You do it out of the goodness of your heart. And broken hand or not, you know more about pitching than any other coach in the area. If some parent is dumb enough to take their kid to another team just because you’re gay, then to hell with them. It’s no skin of my nose, and it shouldn’t be any skin off yours either.”

That left only my mother.

The hardest one of all.

As I sat there trying to work up my nerve, the door to the inn opened, and Bryan emerged wearing his new coat and carrying mine. “It took me a bit to figure out where you’d gone. What are you doing out here? Aren’t you freezing?”

“Not as bad as you might think.” But it was still a relief to slip into my nice, warm winter jacket.

“Is something wrong? Why are you sitting out here all by yourself?”

I explained Dylan’s advice, and my decision to run with it. “I’m trying to decide if telling my mom over the phone is a cop-out. I keep thinking we could go there tomorrow and I could tell her in person. But I’m afraid I’ll chicken out. Or even worse, that she’ll find out before I get there. And that’s what I keep coming back to, you know? I’m not ready to tell her quite yet. But telling her now is still better than having her find out some other way.”

“How would she find out at all?” Bryan asked.

“I didn’t tell you yesterday, but that picture? The one the girl tweeted? It didn’t exactly go viral, but it didn’t exactly fly under the radar, either.”

His shoulders fell, his smile wilting a bit. “Oh, no. It’s causing trouble?”

“Not as bad as it might have, but people saw it. And several of them started jumping to the obvious conclusion.”

“I’m sorry.” He sat down next to me, close enough that I could feel the warmth of his body against my arm. “If it weren’t for me—”

“No. Please don’t apologize.” Sure, if I hadn’t met him, I wouldn’t be in this position now. But I didn’t regret one minute of our time together, viral photo or not. “None of this is your fault.”

He shrugged, looking about as miserable as I felt. “Maybe not. But it sucks that one innocent picture is forcing your hand before you’re ready.”

“I just keep thinking how she deserves to hear it from me, not see it online. And I feel like I shouldn’t do it over the phone, but I also feel like it’s my best option.”

He leaned close, and I put my arm around him, finding comfort in his nearness. “Do you want me to stay?” he asked.

I shook my head, hoping it wouldn’t hurt his feelings. “No. I think that will only make it harder.”

“I understand.” He kissed me on the temple and rose to leave, but then stopped at the front door of the inn. “Just out of curiosity, is there a reason you have to do this out here in the cold? We have a perfectly warm, private room right upstairs.”

I chuckled, shaking my head. “All I can say is, it seemed like a good idea at the time.”

“Okay,” he said. “Good luck.”

He was right. I should go inside, but somehow, my nervous energy seemed to be keeping me warm enough, especially since I now had my coat, and the sunlight reflecting off the blinding snow was oddly comforting. But I was also right by the front door. People might come out at any point, or new guests might arrive. I didn’t want to be in plain sight for this conversation, so I went around the corner of the building where I found several picnic tables. In the summer, they were probably in the middle of a grassy lawn. Now, snow surrounded them. The wind was gustier here, since I wasn’t sheltered by the building, but the sunlight was warm on my

back, and my new vantage point included a view of the lake shining in the sunlight.

I hit the button for a video call with my mom, my hands shaking and my heart pounding.

My mom appeared on my screen, her face bright, her short, dark gray hair in a neat bob. She wore a stereotypically ugly Christmas sweater covered in what I at first thought were misshapen reindeer. Upon closer inspection, I realized they were Imperial walkers from *The Empire Strikes Back*, a row of X-wing fighters flying over them and TIE fighters underneath. Her earrings were baby Yoda wearing a Santa hat.

Yeah. My mom's a bit of a *Star Wars* geek.

"Hi, honey!" she said. "Merry Christmas!"

"Merry Christmas, Mom. How's Hawaii?"

"It's perfect! We've been having so much fun."

"Is that Noah?" Chris called in his deep Southern drawl from somewhere off-screen. He always sounded like he'd just stepped off the set of *Duck Dynasty*. "Show him the view!"

"Oh, yeah. Honey, look at this view." She turned the phone to show me their balcony overlooking the ocean, the sun shining overhead. Then everything whirred past as she flipped the phone, and her face popped back into view. "Isn't it perfect?"

"Pretty different from here," I said, turning the phone to show her the snow.

"Oh, it's beautiful. It looks like a Christmas card!"

"It does, doesn't it?" But that made me think of the discussion I'd had with Bryan when we first pulled up to the inn, which brought me back to the original purpose of my call. "Listen, mom. I need to talk to you."

"Okay." She settled on something, although I couldn't tell if it was the bed or a couch of some kind. I could see only her face with a pale-yellow wall in the background. "What is it?"

“Listen, mom. There’s something I’ve needed to tell you for a while. And I’m sorry that I’m telling you now, over the phone, but something’s come up. And even though it’d be better to have this talk in person, I think we’re going to have to settle for FaceTime.”

Her smile fell away, her expression turning grim.

She was expecting bad news.

And in that moment, I was positive she knew exactly what I was going to say, but I took a deep breath and said it anyway.

“Mom, I met somebody.”

Her head fell, her eyes filling up with tears. “Oh, no,” she whispered.

“His name’s Bryan.”

She shook her head, as if denial could stop me from saying the rest, but I plowed forward.

“I wanted to come there and tell you in person, but somebody took a picture of us. Not anything too bad,” I hurried to explain, lest she think I meant some kind of embarrassing sex tape. “But I knew there was a chance you’d see it online, and I didn’t want you to learn about it that way.”

“Oh, no,” she groaned. “No no no no no.”

She practically crumpled in front of me, the view from her phone falling so I was mostly looking at the top of her head as she cried, and my voice caught, my own eyes filling with tears. After telling Jack and Shane and Wayne, I’d started to believe that maybe telling my mom wouldn’t be so bad after all, but so far, this was going worse than I expected.

“Mom,” I said, wiping tears off my face. “We can fly out there tomorrow, Bryan and I together. I want you to meet him. I think if you give him a chance—”

“No,” she said, suddenly sitting up and facing me again. “No! You’re just being cruel, Noah, saying these things to me on Christmas! Why would you do that to your own mother?”

“Jen,” I heard Chris say. “We talked about this.” And suddenly he was there, taking the phone from her. “Just a minute, Noah,” he said to me. I heard his muffled voice but couldn’t make out the words as he talked to her, but her crying continued. The picture on my screen swung wildly, showing only blurs of color. But I heard their sliding door open. The sounds of the ocean drowned out my mother’s tears as the door slid shut again. And then there was Chris, looking a bit sunburned, a Dallas Cowboys baseball cap hiding his bald head, staring at me while the waves crashed behind him. His face was grim, but to my surprise, I saw no judgment there. If anything, he looked compassionate.

“Listen, son,” he said. This wasn’t his way of pretending to be my dad. Chris called just anybody under the age of forty either “son” or “young fella’.” “Despite how it looks, I think deep down, your mom’s known this for a long time now. She and I’ve talked about it several times.”

“You have?”

“Sure. I mean, look at you. You’re a good kid. A handsome boy, and a pro athlete. I know your career ended in a bad way, but still, that’s a level of awesome most men never achieve. Women go nuts for that shit. And for you to not have a girl?” He shrugged. “I told your ma a long time ago, boys like you don’t have a hard time finding girlfriends. I said, ‘The only reason Noah don’t have one is because he don’t want one.’” His eyes moved away from me, and I was pretty sure he was looking back into their room at my mother.

“Are you...” I wasn’t even sure how to ask what I wanted to know. “How do you feel about it?”

“I think you have to be true to your own heart, Noah.” He shook his head. “I had an uncle like you. My favorite uncle, as a matter of fact. Used to take me fishin’ when I was boy. He hid it from everybody for a long time, but when his parents finally found out, they disowned him. Wouldn’t even say his name.” He winced, and for a second, I thought maybe he was fighting tears. “He died of AIDS back in ’89, I’m sorry to say, and I’ve always thought that if they’d just handled it better, not

pushed him away and sent him runnin' off to San Francisco, maybe things would've turned out better, you know?"

I wiped tears from my eyes, sad now for a whole new reason. "I had no idea."

He chuckled grudgingly. "Well, it ain't something that comes up often now, is it?"

For a few seconds, we both fall silent. The only sound was wind on my end, crashing waves on his.

"I'm sorry I've ruined your Christmas," I finally said. "I would have put it off if I could have, but I didn't want her seeing it online."

"I know." He sighed, his gaze once again drifting away. To my mother, I was sure. "You have to understand, Noah, it's not that she hates gays or anything like that. Hell, she loves that guy who played Doogie Howser. It's just..." He shrugged again. "She's had this picture in her head for years of being a grandma someday. Of having two or three or even four grandkids she could dote on. She wanted to take them to monster truck rallies and build Legos with them and introduce them to the Force one day." He offered me a weak smile at this reference to my mother's geekiness. "She wanted them to call her Grammy J."

Now I was the one crumbling, bending forward to hug myself to stop from hurting so much. "I'm sorry," I whispered.

"No, this ain't your fault, now. The way I see it, that's her issue, not yours, having her own expectations and assumptions about *your* future. I told her that, too. I said, 'Jen, he can't live his life for what *you* want. He's got to live his life for what he wants.'"

I wiped my eyes, feeling completely miserable. "But I wish it didn't have to hurt her so much."

He tilted his head in a kind of one-sided shrug. "She'll get over it, son."

"What if she doesn't?"

He nodded. “She will. Probably a lot sooner than you think, too. Like I said, she’s known for a while now, even if she wasn’t quite ready to accept it. But she wants you to be happy. Granted, she hoped that happiness would include a baby or two someday.” He narrowed his eyes at me. “Any chance you might adopt? This Bryan guy you’re with want kids?”

I found myself laughing through my tears. “We really haven’t gotten that far yet.”

“Well, that ain’t a ‘no.’” This time, his smile felt less forced. “It’ll be okay, I promise. She’s already starting to pull herself together.”

“Should I talk to her again or—”

“Not yet. She’ll just want to argue with you right now, and that ain’t gonna help neither of you. You go on and try to have a bit of fun, and I’ll see if I can’t cheer your mom up. Get her to look at the bright side.”

“Okay.” I said, nodding. I wasn’t sure there was a bright side to this situation, but I appreciated that he wanted to try. “Thanks, Chris. I appreciate it.”

He smiled. “Least I can do after you was nice enough to send us to Hawaii. Merry Christmas, Noah.”

“Merry Christmas to you too.”

I dried my eyes and took a deep breath of cold mountain air, taking stock of my emotions. My heart hurt a bit, after watching my mother devolve into tears. But as I sat there, surrounded by the spectacular Idaho vistas, thinking about what the next few days might bring, my heartache faded a bit. A new feeling bubbled to the surface.

Relief.

I’d finally shared my deepest, darkest secret with the people who needed to know, and for the most part, it hadn’t gone too badly. Yes, I wished my mother had taken it better. But the fact that Chris seemed to be on my side helped. He said they’d talked about it before. If he thought she’d come around sooner rather than later, I chose to believe him.

More people had arrived for the party while I'd been hiding around the side of the building. A long coat rack had been placed by the front door, and I hung my jacket there before looking around for Bryan. The lobby was packed, as were the dining room and library. I found Bryan in the sunroom, where it appeared the band was getting ready to play again. Looking at him, I was overwhelmed by that madness we'd talked about in our room. I was steadfast in my surety that I wanted to be with him, and if that meant coming out, so be it. I took his hand and led him through the French doors to the cobblestone patio overlooking the lake. I pulled him into my arms and for the longest time, we simply held each other. I felt calmer and confident in my decision, like I could do anything as long as I had him by my side.

It felt way too early to say "I love you," but if this wasn't love, I didn't want to know.

BRYAN

When Noah first pulled me into his arms, he was trembling. So I simply held him, and let him hold me, his embrace so tight it constricted my breathing. Eventually, I felt him grow steadier.

“How’d it go with your mom?” I finally asked, fearing the answer.

“Not as well as I’d hoped, but not as bad as I’d feared.”

“I’m sorry.”

His grip on me eased, and he pulled away just enough to look into my eyes. “I’m not. It’s done, and I feel...” He shook his head, searching for the word, but I knew the one he was looking for.

“Liberated?” I suggested.

“Liberated,” he agreed, nodding. “And a little bit drunk, in the best kind of way.” He grinned, leaning his forehead against mine. “You’re still with me, right?”

“One hundred percent.”

“Then let’s go dance.”

He led me by the hand into the crowded sunroom, where the Christmas Day party was in full swing. Whatever sadness had plagued the band’s lead singer Adam the night before seemed to have disappeared. He was all smiles as he belted out a comical mashup of Nirvana’s “Smells Like Teen Spirit” and Rick Astley’s “Never Gonna Give You Up.”

“I don’t know how to do this,” I shouted over the music as Noah spun me onto the dance floor.

“Neither do I.”

But he did a good job of faking it, swinging me back and forth, sometimes using one hand to spin me away, then back into his arms. I went where he led, and before long, I found myself laughing, relaxing even though I had to look ridiculous. He pulled me close, one arm around my waist, our feet almost

moving to the beat. “See?” he said, his lips close enough I could easily have kissed him. “Dancing’s easy.”

I laughed and let him spin me away again. Who cared if we looked ridiculous? I’d learned with Cole that embarrassment was nothing but a means of self-confinement. The best way to feel free was to simply not give a fuck what others thought.

And god, it felt amazing.

By the third song, we were out of breath and sweaty. I was relieved when the band shifted gears into a slow song. I was still laughing when Noah pulled me close, barely registering a slight commotion near the door of the room.

The rise of alarmed voices coming nearer.

And then, a hand grabbed my arm and spun me around, yanking me away from Noah.

And I found myself face-to-face with one very red-faced Dustin.

“What the fuck is going on, Bryan?”

But Noah didn’t like seeing me manhandled, and he immediately shoved Dustin backwards, making him run into the guests behind him. “Get your hands off him!”

And suddenly I was stuck between two very large, very angry men, both of them doing the macho-guy thing—puffing up their chests and yelling in each other’s faces as I tried to hold them apart. The music stumbled to a halt. Dustin’s accusations were along the lines of “who the fuck are you and what have you done to make Bryan forget all common sense?” whereas Noah’s threats were more of the “try me and find out” variety.

“Stop,” I tried to say, but they were too busy posturing to hear me. A moment ago, I hadn’t cared about embarrassment, but now, with everybody in the room watching us, I was mortified. I spotted Chase near the edge of the dance floor, looking like he wished he was absolutely anywhere else.

“A little help?” I tried to say, although I was sure he couldn’t hear me.

“Excuse me, gentlemen!” Sal yelled, pushing his way through the crowd to join me between the two hulking men, one hand on each of their chests. He raised his voice loud enough to be heard over all the hubbub. “If you’re going to fight, you have to be nude. Camp Bay rules, I’m afraid. Go ahead and disrobe right here on the dance floor, if you like. I dare say we’re dying to see how all this *shakes out*, so to speak.”

The other guests laughed. A few cheered their support for this idea, all of which had the intended effect of lightening the tension. Noah and Dustin each took a step back. Noah didn’t stop scowling, but Dustin held up his hands in surrender, mumbling an apology.

“Give me a minute,” I said to Noah. Then, I took Dustin’s arm and led him off the dance floor, out of the room. Chase followed, hanging back, clearly not wanting to be caught between Dustin and me. I led them to the far end of the library. There were still more guests around than I might have liked, but they were all engrossed in their own conversations. I found a corner that afforded us a tiny bit of privacy before turning on Dustin.

“What are you doing here?”

“What do you think I’m doing?” he snapped. “I came to find you! To make sure you’re okay! After that phone call—”

“I told you I was fine.”

“*Fine?!?*” I’d never seen Dustin so angry. I had a feeling it took all his restraint to not grab me and shake me. “You basically said, ‘Hey, thanks for being my friend, Dustin, but I’m sick of my life so I’m leaving and I don’t know when or if I’m coming home.’ And then you handed me the reins to your entire fucking business before hanging up and *turning off your phone!* Do you not see how just maybe that might alarm me?!?”

I fell back, torn between astonishment and laughter. I hadn't meant to make it sound like I hated my life and was going off on some kind of aimless, soul-seeking journey from which I might never return. Which, unfortunately, was exactly what had happened to Dustin's sister three years earlier. If I'd been using my brain at all, I would have realized that everything I'd said to him on the phone the night before was only going to make him worry more.

There was too much that needed to be said, and I was acutely aware of Chase watching us like we were some kind of spectator sport. It wasn't his fault. He'd clearly only come to support Dustin, but the truth was, I hardly knew him.

"Can you give us a minute?" I asked.

He looked more relieved than annoyed and quickly retreated the other direction, into the lobby.

I turned my attention back to my best friend in the world, even if I'd been pretty lousy at holding up my end of the arrangement.

"I'm sorry," I said, moving close enough to put my hand on his bulging arm. "I'm really, truly sorry I scared you, and that I wasn't more up-front about what was happening. The truth is, when you dropped me off at the airport, the first thing I did when I got to my gate was go to the bar and order a drink. But then Noah..." I gestured toward the sunroom. Noah stood in the doorway watching us, looking so scowly I almost laughed. "He's sober, too. He recognized what was happening. He sat down next to me and talked me out of it." That fact alone was enough to make Dustin glance in Noah's direction, as if reevaluating what he thought he knew. "And then we sat on the plane together and when we got to Denver, he asked me to come here with him. And I knew it was nuts. I knew it was reckless and maybe even dangerous and I knew you'd never approve if you knew, but..." I scrambled, trying to think of how I could possibly explain it. "I was drowning, Dustin. And when he threw me a lifeline, I grabbed on tight with both hands and I just didn't want to let go."

He sighed, slumping a bit as his anger finally waned. He glanced grudgingly Noah's way. "Why didn't you just tell me you'd met someone?"

"Because I knew it was crazy to run off with a guy I'd known all of three hours! And because..." I had to finally tell him the whole truth. There was just no other way. "Because Greg's been dead less than a month. I was worried about what you'd all think of me. I'm basically betraying the man I was supposed to love." I slumped, feeling miserable now that I'd said it out loud. "If our marriage had been as perfect as everybody thinks, I'd still be in mourning, not falling for somebody new."

He shook his head, looking hurt now rather than angry. "Do you really think I didn't know that your marriage was more about convenience than love?"

I blinked at him, thrown off-track, but he kept talking.

"Chase and Lance don't assume anything. By the time they moved to Colorado, Greg was in full-time respite care, and you were barely around. But me? I knew all along that Greg was a lot happier with you than you were with him. And I knew you never would have married him at all if he hadn't literally been on his death bed."

"You did?"

"Of course. When you and I met, you'd just moved in with Greg. And I guess at first, I assumed your relationship was good. But over the next year or so, I realized the quickest way to bring you down was to say his name. And Greg? He was a nice enough guy, but he was a workaholic. His primary concern before he got sick was making money. I think half the reason he loved you so much was because you enabled that. You never demanded more from him."

"I never cared enough to want more."

"Maybe not." He put one heavy hand on my shoulder and hunched down so he could look into my eyes. "Maybe you didn't love him the way he thought. But you cared enough to stay when it mattered most, Bryan. You gave up a lot to make

his last few months as good as they could be. I admire you for that, more than you'll ever know. But I never expected you to be in mourning forever. I'm sorry if that's how it seemed." He squeezed my shoulder. Dustin had no idea how strong he was, and it took real effort to not wince at his expression of love. "I wish you'd just told me how you felt."

"I should have," I conceded. "But I was afraid you'd all think I was a heartless asshole."

He laughed, a deep sound that filled the library. "An asshole, maybe. But heartless? Not ever."

He pulled me into a hug, and I was happy to find myself wrapped in his huge, tattooed arms. "I'm sorry," I said again.

"Me too." He kissed the side of my head and let me go. "You know, when I first walked in here, I couldn't see you. And I don't mean because you were somewhere out of sight. I mean, I was looking right at you, and I didn't recognize you. Chase had to point you out to me."

"Really?"

"Yeah, really. And at first, I couldn't figure out how I'd missed you. And then I realized it was because in the two years we've been friends, I've never seen you as happy as you were on the dance floor with him."

My heart swelled. Looking over at Noah, who looked a bit less threatening now that Dustin and I had made up, I found myself smiling so big my cheeks hurt. "I know I sound nuts," I said, not for the first time. "I've only known him a few days, but I can't even tell you how perfect those three days have been. He makes me feel like I'm seventeen again."

"I'm glad. You deserve that." He clapped me on the back. "I'm gonna go apologize."

"I'll introduce you—"

"No. Chase has been telling me since last night that I'm an overprotective, over-reactive idiot and that I should give you your space. The least I can do is let you tell him he's right."

He left, crossing the room to Noah, and Chase approached cautiously. Chase was the oldest of our little group, but also the one with the least confidence. I wasn't sure if he'd hit fifty yet, but he had to be close.

"I'm really sorry we interrupted your holiday," he said, "but you know how Dustin gets."

"I do. Did he make you come to help talk sense into me, or did you come along to make sure he didn't go off the deep end?"

Chase laughed. "A little of both, I'd say. So now that you've made up, can you please explain why you're in Idaho, of all places?"

"Well," I said, resigned to telling the whole story a second time, "I met Noah in the airport and he invited me here and it was too good of an offer to pass up."

"So, this random guy from the airport invited you to Idaho, and you said yes?"

"I did. Do you think I've lost my mind?"

Chase laughed, his eyes on Noah. "Maybe a bit. For what it's worth, if a guy that good-looking asked me to run away with him for the weekend, I'd say yes, too."

I shook my head. "I'll never understand why he picked me, but I'm not complaining."

He didn't answer for a second, and when I glanced his way, I found him watching me, seemingly amused. "What?" I asked.

"Don't sell yourself short. You're a great catch." He leaned a little closer. "You know Dustin and I were both just biding our time, right? If one of us asked you out too soon, it'd seem insensitive, but if we waited too long, the other one might beat us to the punch." He shrugged good-naturedly. "Looks like Noah ended up beating us both."

I could only gape at him, stunned. How much different would things have been if one of them had asked me out? Would I have said yes? Probably. I probably would have let

them take me to bed, too. But I also knew I never, ever would have felt the kind of reckless joy with either of them that I felt with Noah. It might have been enough to break me out of my funk, but I'd still be waiting to feel the madness again.

This way was infinitely better.

NOAH

For a mercifully brief moment, it had seemed like Dustin and I were going to beat each other to a pulp the minute we met, but an hour later, it was like the whole thing had never happened. As Bryan had told me on the first day, Dustin was everybody's big brother. I couldn't blame him for wanting to look after his friends, and I was glad he'd apparently decided I wasn't a threat after all. And once Bryan told Dustin and Chase that I'd talked him into buying the dinner theater, they seemed to decide I was some kind of miracle worker. I didn't think I'd done that much to change Bryan's mind, but hey, if it meant his friends thought a little better of me for it, I wasn't going to argue. The four of us found an empty cocktail table to occupy, all of us drinking soda.

That was when my phone pinged.

A glance at the screen made the smile fall from my face. Three hours had passed since my disastrous call to my mother, and now she was texting.

Can you send me a picture?

I stared at the text for a few seconds, my heart pounding and my hands shaking as I tried to make sense of it. *A picture of what?* I finally asked.

Of this boy you met.

I had no idea why she'd want that, but I quickly scrolled through the selfies I'd taken of us. One taken in town, in front of Panhandle Cone and Coffee. One on the patio of Camp Bay Chalet, with the lake behind us. One on the sleigh ride the night before, our cheeks and noses bright red from the cold. In all three, we were smiling and happy. I couldn't decide which one was best, so I sent all three.

Then I waited, my heart thundering in my chest.

"Everything okay?" Bryan asked.

"It's my mom."

“Oh.” He glanced at Dustin and Chase, and I knew he was debating how much to say.

I stared at my texts, waiting for an answer. But instead of a text, she initiated a video call. It was too loud in the event room to take it there, but I didn’t think I had time to get all the way upstairs. I excused myself and escaped onto the cobblestone patio. The wind had stopped and the sun shone brightly, making it seem warmer than it had been earlier in the day. There were several other people outside, but they were all engaged in their own conversations. None of them paid any attention to me as I found a spot where I wasn’t too close to anybody and accepted the call.

“Hey, mom,” I said, my voice shaking.

“Hi, honey.” Her eyes were still red, but she wasn’t actively crying, so I counted that as a win. “These pictures,” she said. “They were all taken this weekend, weren’t they?”

“Yes.”

“Is that why you sent me to Hawaii for Christmas? So you could spend the holiday with him?”

I debated my answer. Partly, I’d sent her to Hawaii because I thought she and Chris deserved a great holiday together and I knew they couldn’t afford it on their own. And yes, I’d also planned on losing my virginity. Of course, I’d assumed it would be a quick fling with Jerome. I certainly hadn’t expected to meet some guy in the airport and end up becoming completely infatuated with him. But in the end, I didn’t think she needed to know all that.

“I wanted you and Chris to have a late honeymoon, mom. That wasn’t a lie. But after I met Bryan, yeah, I also wanted this weekend to be with him.”

“How long have you been seeing him?”

“Not long. We met a bit before Christmas.” All of which was true. Granted, I was wording it so she’d think it had been longer than four days. But I felt like I was still mostly in the realm of truth.

To my surprise, she looked relieved. “So it’s not like you’ve been seeing him and hiding it from me for months or years or anything like that?”

“No, mom. It’s pretty new.”

“Were there other boyfriends before him?”

“Not really, no.”

“So why now? Why date women and then suddenly switch to men?”

I glanced around again at the other guests on the patio, making sure nobody was listening, but they were all intent on their own conversations. “I only dated the women so nobody would figure out I was gay,” I explained. “Because playing baseball meant more to me than coming out. But now that I can’t have my career...” I shrugged. “I have no reason to keep lying.”

She nodded. “I see.” She took a deep breath. “My first thought when I looked at these pictures you sent was that I haven’t seen you so happy in years.” Her eyes filled with tears, but she brushed them quickly away. “Not since your accident.”

“That’s how it feels to me too, mom. Like I said, it’s all pretty new, but...” Through the glass doors, I could see Bryan still talking to Dustin and Chase, but watching me at the same time, and I couldn’t stop the smile that blossomed on my face. “I’m kind of nuts about him.”

“So, tell me more. He looks older than you?”

“A few years older, yeah. He lives in Tucker Springs, but I think he wants to move.”

“Move in with you, you mean?”

“We haven’t really talked about that yet. I just know he doesn’t like where he’s living. It was his husband’s house.”

Her eyes widened in alarm. “He’s divorced?”

“No. His husband died. That’s not really his favorite topic.”

She relaxed again. “I can relate,” she said, smiling. It wasn’t a big smile, but it was a start.

“He and his friends are buying a dinner theater. They’re really excited about it. It’s right by the hockey rink, so we’re talking about doing some promotions there together. Like maybe watch parties for away games? But he has a lot of great ideas for it. Maybe once it’s up and running, you guys can come visit and I’ll take you to one of their shows?” I couldn’t help but be excited about it too. The idea of sharing our future—mixing my world with his—made me almost giddy. “I know this isn’t what you wanted, mom. I know it’s not what you pictured for me. But honestly, you’re right. This is the happiest I’ve been since my accident. And I don’t want to have to hide that from you.”

She shook her head, although not as if to say no. It was more a look of resigned comprehension.

“What?” I asked.

She shrugged, her cheeks slowly turning red. “I’m just realizing that I’ve never seen this before.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve never seen you in love.” I didn’t really know what to say to that, but I couldn’t deny the lightness in my chest, or the smile that spread across my face. “When you were dating Hannah, I think I knew in my heart something was wrong, but I still hoped it would mean marriage and kids. But now that I’m talking to you, hearing you talk about him, seeing how you’re looking at him in these photos, how just saying his name lights you up from the inside, I realize you never loved Hannah at all, did you?”

“Not really, no. Not the way I probably should have.”

She nodded. Took another deep breath. “Is he there?” she asked. “Can I meet him?”

“Now?” I asked. “Over FaceTime?”

“Why not?”

“Uh... sure.” I waved at him, gesturing for him to join me on the patio. He looked surprised but didn’t hesitate. The noise from the party rose and fell as he slipped out the door and closed it behind him.

“Everything okay?” he asked, his voice low enough that my mom probably couldn’t hear him.

“She wants to meet you.”

“Oh.” His alarm only lasted a moment, and then he smiled and moved next to me to face my mom on the screen. “Hi, Mrs. Por— Oh.” He glanced at me, then back at her. “I just realized Porter probably isn’t your last name anymore. Sorry.”

“It’s Mrs. Petty now,” she said. “But you can call me Jen.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Jen,” he said. “I’m Bryan.” I couldn’t believe how casual he sounded. As if this was totally normal and not uncomfortable as fuck. “I’m sorry if this has all been a bit of a damper on your holiday.”

Her smile was a bit forced, but at least she was making an effort. “I suppose it had to happen eventually.”

“Well,” he said, “I’m sorry nonetheless.”

And then we stood there, suddenly awkward. What exactly were any of us supposed to say now?

“Noah,” my mom finally said. “You said maybe you’d come to Hawaii tomorrow so we could meet in person. Is that still an option?”

“Oh,” I said. I’d mentioned it to Bryan in passing on the porch, but we hadn’t actually talked about it in any kind of serious way. But Bryan answered her before I could say anything else.

“Of course,” he said. “If that’s what you want.”

“Wait.” I turned to him, wishing my mom wasn’t watching us over my stupid cell phone. “Are you sure? We hadn’t really decided where we wanted to go yet.”

He shrugged, smiling. “I’ve never been to Hawaii. I’m game if you are.”

I loved him so much in that moment. He was ready to drop everything and run off with me just to make my mom happy. I wanted to kiss him, but my mom was still watching so I settled for a quick peck on his forehead. Even that made her turn red, and I stifled my laughter at her embarrassment.

She'd get past it. Chris was right. It might take her a few weeks or even a few months, but in time, she'd realize how good Bryan and I were together. She'd see he was the kind of guy who'd give up a vacation in the Bahamas just to appease a woman he didn't even know.

Because he knew it mattered to me, and that was all the reason he needed.

"I'll get the flights changed tonight," I told her. "I'll text you so you know when we're getting in."

We ended the call, and then it was just me and Bryan.

Well, me and Bryan and at least ten other people on the patio. But they still weren't paying any attention to us, so I pulled him close. I put my hand against his cheek.

Except this wasn't the kiss I wanted.

Not quite.

"Wait," I said, stepping back and taking his hand. "Come with me."

"Okay," he said, amused but compliant.

I led him back into the inn. Past Dustin and Chase, who watched us pass without saying a word. Into the library.

To the mistletoe that I'd watched two men kiss under on our very first day at Camp Bay.

The mistletoe that had been taunting me ever since.

"Excuse me," I said to the man and woman currently standing underneath it. "Do you mind?"

"Really?" Bryan asked, laughing. "There's mistletoe all over the inn. Is there something special about this one?"

"There is, actually."

The couple laughed but moved aside, and I gathered Bryan in my arms, there underneath that stupid hanging bit of greenery, with at least ten other people in the room, all of them watching now that I'd insisted on having this exact piece of real estate. And at that moment, looking into his eyes, I knew with a surety that took my breath away that this was the man I wanted to spend the rest of my life with. He was right. It was some kind of madness. And knowing his history, I understood why he was afraid to believe in what we felt. I could accept that he needed to be cautious. But I knew what was in my heart, and I knew it was real.

“Would you think I was crazy,” I asked, my voice shaking, “if I said ‘I love you’?”

For a second, he only blinked at me. But then a smile spread across his face, making his eyes sparkle. “You should know by now I’m one hundred percent on board with your particular brand of crazy.”

And once I finally claimed it, that kiss under the mistletoe was every bit as perfect as I’d hoped it would be.

Crazy together.

And I intended to make sure it lasted forever.

#

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