

'A delectable holiday treat'

RJ SCOTT

# PLANES, TRAINS, AND HURRICANES

A Christmas road trip romance



ELI EASTON

**PLANES,  
TRAINS,  
AND  
HURRICANES**

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***Joe knows where he is going in life. But one crazy road trip just might change everything.***

Joe Blankenship knows where he's going. He's on track to marry the boss's daughter and become heir apparent to a multi-million dollar medical supply business. The financial security he never had growing up is within his grasp along with a glitzy Manhattan lifestyle. All he has to do is get to New York by Christmas Eve for his engagement party.

Joe didn't count on getting grounded in Florida thanks to a hurricane. He couldn't have anticipated having to rent a broken-down car for the long drive north. And he certainly never foresaw being stuck with a passenger like Remy Guidry, a sweet-natured Cajun boy, social worker at a children's home, and free spirit. Remy is the opposite of everything Joe has worked for. But he just might teach Joe, not only the spirit of Christmas, but what's truly of value in life.

Planes, Trains, and Hurricanes is a Christmas road trip, forced proximity, opposites attract romance.

For my sister, Marcia. Merry Christmas.

# Acknowledgements

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This story was inspired by the film *I Know Where I'm Going* (1945), one of my husband's favorites. Thanks for introducing me to the film, hon.

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Cover Art by Anna Tif Sikorska

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# Chapter One

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## **D** *ecember 22*

The day I met Remy Guidry, there was an apocalypse. Not the apocalypse with a capital A but the lowercase kind that hits Florida on a regular basis.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Blankenship.” The woman at the Delta counter didn’t sound sorry. Nor did she look cheery despite the green wreath that was pinned to her chest. “All flights are grounded due to Hurricane Jack. No plane is leaving Miami today. Or tomorrow. Possibly the next day either.”

This dire information matched the board of CANCELED flight designations that was visible just to my right. But I was deep in denial. “Seriously? We’re just seeing the outer bands of the storm. And there’s an evacuation notice. Surely, you’d want to fly out as many people as possible before it gets bad.”

She arched an eyebrow and her gaze shifted to look over my shoulder. I turned my head and saw the lights of a few dogged taxis outside in the passenger arrivals area. They were blurry through the sheets of rain pelting down the glass windows. One of the taxi drivers held his hat as he fought the wind to get to the driver’s door.

“Sorry,” the woman said flatly. “As you can imagine, everyone wants to get home for Christmas. But we can’t control the weather, sir.”

“What about other airports? Can you get me a flight out of Orlando?”

She shook her head. “Orlando is down too. So is Tampa. I suggest you grab a hotel room while there’s a taxi left to take you there. Oh, and I’d recommend one on higher ground.”

She put up a plaque that said CLOSED. Her wreath pin blinked sadly as she walked away.

I dragged my roller bag through the airport, which was growing less populated by the minute. By the time I reached the rental car counters, it was as if humanity had never existed. Or, at least, that it had never wanted to travel anywhere. All of the counters were closed except for Budget where cheerful fairy lights threw disco vibes onto the lone employee at the counter. She was a middle-aged woman with a shellacked blonde beehive. I ran over and stopped in front of her, panting.

She smiled. “You look like a man who needs to get somewhere.”

“God, yes...” I checked her name tag. “...Bridget. Bridget from Budget, that’s cute.”

She winked. “That’s me.”

I gave her my most dazzling smile and ran a hand through my blond hair—short on the sides, long on top, with cut-edge layers thanks to lots of product. If my looks could help me get out of Miami, I wasn’t above using them. “Well, Bridget, I need to get to New York for an engagement party. My fiancée will have my, er—” I was going to say *balls for breakfast*, but no, “—guts for garters if I don’t make it.”

“Oh my.” Bridget’s eyes widened.

“So I’ll take anything you’ve got.” I put my credit card on the counter.

Bridget grimaced. “I’m afraid I don’t have anything. We’ve been sold out for hours. I’ve been calling around to other agencies for our customers, but I’ve pretty much tapped out that well, too. I’m sorry.”

My heart did a nosedive—straight down, tail spinning, like a plummeting bi-plane. “Please. There has to be something.”

“Well.... There are one or two rental places I haven’t tried yet. But they’re way, *way* down market and not close to the airport.”

“I’d appreciate if you’d check. I’ll take anything!”

“All right. I’ll try.” She gave me a sympathetic smile and got on the phone.

I waited, fists clenched.

This was all my boss’s fault. The news had been talking about Jack for a week now. It was supposed to make a direct hit on Southern Florida and then move up the eastern seaboard. I’d wanted to fly home days ago. But, no. Simon Schubert, founder of Schubert Supplies as well as my future father-in-law, was an old-school salesman who believed that if you walked out the door without a signed contract in hand, the deal would never happen. He insisted I stay until Mason, the biggest hospital conglomerate in Miami, had signed on the dotted line on a deal for nearly a hundred-k worth of medical supplies. The red tape had been endless, and I’d had to be a lot

pushier than I was comfortable being. The Florida people wanted to postpone sign-offs until the hurricane was over. Hell, the contract review had finally been accomplished by Mason's lawyer while he was on a flight to Los Angeles. Because, *evacuation*.

But not me. Oh, no. I was still here.

Bridget put a hand over the phone's receiver. "I found a car, Sir, but it's with Rent-a-Heap in Miramar. A Ford Fiesta."

"I'll take it," I said immediately, nudging my credit card closer to her.

Rent-a-Heap. A Ford Fiesta! Oh how the mighty have fallen. I thought of my Porsche in New York with longing. But, at this point, I'd ride an e-scooter if it came with an umbrella.

"You've been a gem, Bridget, really," I said to the woman when she completed the call. "Great customer service. I'll leave a review."

"It's Christmas," Bridget said with a smile and a shrug. "Safe driving, sir. And Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas to you!"

The words felt strange as I said them. *Christmas*. It was, in fact, that time of year, as the many bedecked and bedazzled decorations at the airport, and at Mason HQ, where I'd spent the past two weeks, assured me. But I'd been so wrapped up in work, in the stress of trying to close the deal, I'd had no head space for the holidays. And with all the stuff Allison had

planned, it wasn't going to be any more relaxing once I got to New York either.

The only taxi I could find was about to knock off for the day. I had to give the wizened taxi driver a hundred-dollars in cash to take me to Miramar, on top of the fare.

"You leaving town?" he asked me as he pulled out of the airport.

"As fast as possible."

"Where you goin'?"

"New York."

He shook his head. "A word of advice? Don't try to take 95 north from here. It's a parking lot. Our dispatcher told us to avoid it."

My heart did another nosedive. This time the plane's tail was smoking. I hadn't thought of that. Yet another reason not to wait until the *last damn second* to evacuate.

"This is a nightmare." I covered my face with my hands.

"What you want to do," the driver went on calmly, "is cut over to 27 from Miramar and then take 441 up nearly to Orlando. You can cut back over to 95 from there and avoid the worst of the bottleneck out of Miami. Hopefully. Anyway, it can't be any worse."

"Oh yeah?" I took out my phone and brought up a map. 27 was west of Miramar, so a bit out of my way since I was



headed north. But he was right. It was probably faster than the I-95 bottleneck.

“I’ll do that. Thanks for the tip.”

“De nada. Hope you make it out of the area okay, man. This hurricane—it’s supposed to be a walloping SOB.”

I sighed and rubbed my temple. No shit. Every cell in my body was urging me to get away. Though how much that had to do with the storm, and how much with what I knew would be Allison’s wrath—far scarier than Jack’s—was debatable. At least I had a plan now. I gave in to the inevitable and called her on my cell.

“What do you mean, you won’t be home tonight?” Allison gasped. “Tomorrow morning is brunch at the club. You need to be there!”

I stared out at the pouring rain. The wet *swip-swipe* of the windshield wiper blades was audible over the wind. “Babe, every flight out of Miami is canceled. I managed to get a car, but it’s a twenty-hour drive. I should be home by tomorrow night.”

“But you’ll miss the brunch! Can’t you get a flight out of a different airport? What about a red eye?”

I grit my teeth. “Orlando’s shut down too. And any flights from Florida that are still leaving are likely to be full given the evacuation notice. I’m driving home.”

“But the club’s putting on a special menu! And we were going to tease the engagement ahead of the party. You *know*

this.”

The party on Christmas Eve, at her parents’ mansion, was the gala where our engagement would officially be announced. Somehow, that one event had accumulated other mini-events around it like children huddled around Mother Goose. Or maybe like the tormented spirits when the Ghost of Christmas Future opens its cloak. These festivities extended through the entire Christmas and New Year’s season.

“Allison, I’m doing the best I can. There’s a *hurricane*. I’ll be there tomorrow night, in plenty of time for the party on Christmas Eve. I’m sorry to miss the brunch. All right?”

“As if you leave me any choice,” she grumbled. “Just don’t be *any later*. Do not fuck this up, Joe. I’ve spent a lot of time planning this. You know how important it is to me.”

“Swear. Love you. Gotta go. I’ll text you when I’ve made some progress.” I punched the END button on my phone before she could argue.

My gut ached and I popped a few of the antacid tablets I always carried in my pocket. I was too young for this shit, but my stomach had been acting up for the past few months. Probably the stress of the job. Simon was the type of boss who was never satisfied for more than five minutes, and I’d been traveling constantly. Plus the conversation with Allison left me feeling sour, upset, and weirdly off-kilter, like things were spiraling out of control. And if there was one thing I hated, it was losing control. I reminded myself that engagements, weddings, all of that jazz, were a huge deal to most women.

Bridezillas really were a thing. Of course, Allison had big plans, and of course, she wanted me there. Once we were married, everything would calm down.

My phone buzzed. I plucked it back out of the breast pocket of my suit jacket assuming it would be Allison, maybe with an apology, maybe with, I dunno, some concern for my actual safety and wellbeing. But the screen said BORIS EVANS. He was the CEO of Mason. Oh God. Don't let there be a problem with the contract.

“Hi, Mr. Evans! What can I do for you?” I answered with my upbeat salesman voice.

“Joe? Did I catch you before you left town?”

“You did, sir. Though I'm doing my best.”

“Flight grounded?”

“Unfortunately, yes. But I'm on my way to pick up a rental car. So...”

“Oh, good! When I saw on the news about all flights being canceled, I hoped you might be driving.”

“That's the plan. I think I got the last rental car in Miami.” I chuckled in a self-effacing way.

“Then you're just the man I need.” An alarm bell dinged in my head, but it didn't have time to build steam before he came right out with it. “I need a favor, Joe. It's a big one, but I wouldn't ask if it weren't important.”

“Uh... okay. If there's anything I can... sure.”

“There’s a young man who works at a home where my wife volunteers. He just found out his mother has cancer and this is probably her last Christmas. She’s in Manhattan, and he needs to get there. As you know, he’s not gonna get a flight.”

Oh. Oh shit. “Uh-huh.”

“I thought, if you were driving, maybe he could go with you. It would mean a lot to me, Joe. He’s a stand-up young man and, well, obviously this is urgent.”

I saw my plans for a speedy getaway melting—much like the dime-sized hail that was currently hitting the taxi’s windshield was destined to do. Fuck a duck.

There was no way I could say no to Boris. Not after I’d twisted his arm to get this deal closed. And he’d remain an important client. This deal was only the first of many. I hoped.

“Of course,” I said with a hiccup of hesitation. “Where, um \_\_\_”

“Perfect! Thank you so much, Joe. His name is Remy Guidry. I’ll text you the address of where to pick him up. It’s in Homestead.”

After Boris hung up, I banged my head on the window. Homestead was south of Miami, and the car rental place was north. So it would be at least a two-hour trip out of my way to go to pick up this *complete stranger*. And then I’d be stuck in the car with the guy all the way up the continental US. In a freaking hurricane.

“It’s the happiest time of the year!” the radio opined.

I caught the cab driver eying me in the rearview mirror. “You got a passenger, huh?”

“Yeah. Lucky me.”

“Look at it this way, man. At least you’ll have someone to share the driving with.”

That was true. But with the way my luck was going, the guy wouldn’t even be able to drive.

## Chapter Two

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**B**y the time I arrived at the pickup address in Homestead, the rain had gone from pelting to a needle-like drizzle. It wasn't over, however. No, Jack was just getting started. The sky was an ominous purple-black that looked like a bruised eye, and the barometric pressure pushed at my eardrums. The rental car was indeed a red Ford Fiesta complete with a nifty white racing stripe. Its cloth interior was patched and smelled heavily of lemon disinfectant over god-knew-what. The wind buffeted the ridiculous little car like an evil cartoon cat batting a mouse. Oh, and it refused to go over 65-miles-per-hour on the freeway, so there was that. But beggars can't be choosers. All I wanted was to head north as fast as possible—which happened to be sixty-five miles-per-hour—get away from Jack, away from this whole Florida misadventure, back to my own Porsche.

And to Allison. Of course.

Yet here I was, pulling up to an open gate in a brick wall. A brass plaque surrounded by a wreath read: "High Hopes Children's Home".

Children's home? Oh yea, Boris said something about his wife volunteering here. I hoped to God the person I was supposed to be transporting wasn't a minor. I wasn't up for playing babysitter. I pulled in and continued down a long driveway. The palm trees that lined the asphalt whipped their fronds like a rapper queen tossing her dreads on stage.

I hoped my passenger would be waiting out front with his bags, but no. I parked in front of the massive white house with

red Christmas lights and jogged up to the double doors, rang the bell. No one answered, so I tried the door—unlocked. Inside was a large foyer with worn linoleum, doors on either side, a hallway just ahead, and what might be called a grand staircase heading up. This place might have been a private home once, and a grand one, but now it had an institutional wear and smell. There was something homey about it though. A large Christmas tree decorated with children’s homemade ornaments stood near the stairs. A rack near the front door held thirty or so coats and as many rubber boots and shoes, in all sizes, on a mat underneath.

*Lots of kids. Wow.*

I was about to call out a *hello!* when a woman, in her fifties and around two-hundred pounds with bristly gray hair, bustled down the hall. She gave me a harried smile. “I’ll be with you in a moment.” She started up the stairs.

“Wait. I’m here to pick up Remy Guidry?”

“Oh!” She stopped to look me over. “Are you Remy’s ride? I think he’s still packing. Let me go get him.”

“Thanks. It’s just that... the storm.” I motioned at the door with my thumb.

“Oh, my, yes. Most definitely the storm.” I wasn’t sure what the lady meant by that, but she bustled up the stairs looking surprisingly spry.

I waited, resisting the urge to check the time on my FitBit. I made myself breathe. My flight had been an early-morning



one, so it was just now eleven a.m. If we could get out of here in a timely fashion, we might be clear of Miami proper by noon. Out of Florida by sunset? I checked the weather map on my phone. Jack's eye still hadn't come on shore in the Keys, but it was close. The bands were right over Miami, but the outer edges were still south of Jacksonville. If I could hustle, we just might beat the hurricane's northern trajectory.

We *would*, I vowed. I visualized the moment I crossed the state line into Georgia. Oh happy day! It would happen. And very soon, I promised myself. I'd allow myself a big sigh of relief once I crossed that state line. It would be smooth sailing from there, for sure. And then I'd be home.

To all the craziness of a Christmas engagement. From one storm to another.

Okay, so the holidays Allison had planned weren't exactly my idea of a family Christmas. But that wasn't the point. I was securing my future; that was the point. I was on the cusp of achieving everything I'd always wanted by marrying into the Schubert family—stability, security, wealth. I'd never again have to worry about money. No struggling for every dime and existing on ramen noodles, the way I'd done all through college. I was certainly looking forward to *that*.

I popped another antacid and checked the time on my FitBit. It was all good. Only, I wished this Remy person would hurry.

A pale-faced redheaded boy of about seven ran into the room chased by another little boy with dark skin who was maybe a year younger. The first one was looking over his shoulder and

didn't see me. I issued a "Careful!" but he plowed into me. With a grunt, he stumbled back and blinked up at me in confusion.

"Sorry!" he yelled, louder than necessary and in a flat voice. The younger boy tapped him on the shoulder, which set off the chase again and they ran from the room, squealing.

The red-headed boy was deaf, I realized. Was this a home for the deaf? I was mildly curious, but not, like, if it delayed my departure. I looked around for information since I was waiting anyway, but didn't see anything. I tapped my foot. Looked at my FitBit. Where was this guy?

"I've got it!"

A man's voice, young and pleasant, came from upstairs. I glanced up to see its owner appear, dragging a ginormous green suitcase across the upstairs landing.

The older woman I'd spoken to earlier hurried after, trying to grab the handle. "Let me help you! It's so heavy. What did you pack, the Miami Dolphins?"

The guy grinned. "God knows I tried, but they canceled at the last minute."

The two of them awkwardly wrestled the massive suitcase down the stairs. And I got my first good look at Remy Guidry.

My initial impression was that he was a quintessential *Florida man*. He wore cut-off jean shorts, a button-down, short-sleeve tropical shirt in blue, and flip-flops. He was alarmingly tan for December and his dark hair was curly and

looked like it hadn't been combed today. Still, he was... cute. Young-looking. Early twenties? At least he wasn't a child.

They reached the bottom of the stairs and stared at each other, suitcase parked between them. Then he grabbed her in an enthusiastic hug. "This is nuts, cher. Just say the word, and I'll stay."

"No, now, go on. You need to do this." She pushed him firmly away.

"But the hurricane! You need me here."

She made a face. "Me and this old brick house have ridden through more hurricanes than you have eyelashes, bucko. Plus Steve and Ilene are coming over. They'll help with the kids. You're the one I'm worried about, driving in this mess."

That reminded her, apparently, that I existed. Because she looked over at me. "Speaking of which, your knight in shining armor is here. Don't keep him waiting."

This was a sentiment I could wholeheartedly endorse, and I forced a smile as the guy turned and his gaze met mine. Even from across the foyer, his blue eyes startled a little gasp from me. I coughed to cover it up as he strode over and stuck out his hand. "Hi! I'm Remy."

"Joe Blankenship." I shook his hand.

I tried to discern if he was wearing colored contact lenses? But, no, those baby blues were real. They were the sort of eyes that socked you in the gut—Elijah Wood eyes, Paul Newman eyes. The center of the iris was a light turquoise blue

surrounded by a navy rim, and lit up from within like they were powered by GE. Christ. They didn't seem to fit in what was an otherwise unremarkable face, rather square-jawed, with an ordinary nose and mouth. Then he smiled. His teeth were even except for one in the front that slightly overlapped the next, giving him a quirky look. It was one of the sunniest smiles I'd ever seen, the glow in his eyes spreading to his whole being and somehow, maybe through our joined hands, to my gut too.

“Hey,” I said awkwardly. “I’m Joe.”

“So you said.” He dropped my hand. “Thanks for doing this. It’s really kind of you.”

Little did he know that if Boris weren't an important client, I wouldn't have agreed in a million years. “No problem. But. Er, we should get going. I was hoping to get ahead of Jack.”

“What, and miss being washed away? Where’s your sense of adventure?”

That smile again. I chuckled lightly at his teasing and was about to reply, but the boys I'd seen earlier ran back into the room.

“You’re leaving?” wailed the younger boy.

The red-haired boy signed something frantically and Remy signed back, making the boy's face fall with disappointment.

“I know, right? It’s a disaster. But you guys take care of Mimi while I’m gone. Okay? Love you.” He hugged them

both, singly, then together—real hugs, not the one-armed deals.

I looked at my FitBit again, though I didn't really see it. I pulled the huge suitcase to the door to hurry things along. But more children appeared, and Remy hugged them, and there was much wailing and lamentation. I stood awkwardly. What was with this guy? He appeared ready to cave at any moment and not go with me to New York. Which, *fine*, you do you, man, I don't need the hassle. But I'd be pissed to have driven down to Homestead in a storm only to be blown off. And the *drama!* I mean, come on.

No one was that well-liked. They just weren't.

About the time I thought Jack would be over—and, indeed, Christmas would be in the rearview mirror—before we ever made it out of Homestead, Mimi intervened and shooed the children back. “Okay! That's enough. Remy needs to get going. He'll be back soon. Say bye! No, he can't stay for lunch. Go on, Remy. Don't keep the man waiting! Go, go!”

With an iron will, the woman shoved Remy, me, and that green suitcase outside.

The door slammed behind us, and I heard it lock. And there we were, standing on the stoop. The rain had picked back up and hit us sideways. The droplets were like tiny missiles under the force of the gale and they stung my face.

“That's me.” I gestured at the car. I had to raise my voice to be heard over the wind. “It's a rental. The only thing I could find.”

He barely glanced at it. “Cool.” He looked longingly at the house.

“We need to go!”

I ran for the driver’s side, over this whole indecision thing. The car was so old, the key fob didn’t have a LOCK/UNLOCK function, but I’d left it unlocked. I got in the car only to realize my goof as I saw Remy struggle with the suitcase, heading for the back of the vehicle. Shit. I searched for the trunk release and pulled it, then got out and helped Remy hoist the bag into the trunk.

“Sorry. Guess I’d never make a taxi driver,” I said.

“It’s fine.”

I closed the trunk lid and ran back to get in the driver’s seat. It took a moment before the passenger door opened and Remy climbed in.

And, finally, we were on our way.

# Chapter Three

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Neither of us said a word for the first hour as I navigated the rental car around puddles and through back roads, following the GPS directions to get to 27 North, the route the taxi driver had recommended. It was excruciatingly slow, and the wind howled and rocked the little car. I had to skirt downed palm fronds, empty trash cans, and other debris in the road.

Shit. Why the hell was I driving in this again? My hands were white-knuckled on the wheel and all I could do was tell myself that if I kept driving north, we'd get past it.

If I'd been the passenger, I'd want to know where we were going and why we didn't get on the freeway. But Remy never asked. He seemed lost in his own thoughts and, anyway, I had to focus on the road. It wasn't until we were on 27 and driving at a decent clip that I could take a deep breath and relax a little. The rain still swished and swirled on the road and against the windshield, but at least I had a bigger road I'd be on for awhile. I wadded up the antacid wrapper from the roll I'd finished and shoved it in the side pocket of the driver's door.

"You have problems with your stomach, cher?" Remy asked, his tone sympathetic.

"Not really," I lied. What was with the *cher*? Was that like *dear*? Or more like *dude*? And his voice had a melodic lilt. "Where are you from?"

"Louisiana."



“Ah. Cool.” I knew exactly nothing about Louisiana other than the fact that New Orleans was there. Oh, and Hurricane Katrina.

“So you’re used to hurricanes, then?”

“Used to them, yes. Like them?” He clicked his tongue. “The way a baby chick likes a gator. But I can drive if you want. I don’t mind the rain.”

“Maybe later.”

Knowing he was willing to take the wheel made me relax though. If we spelled each other, we could drive straight through. That would make up the time I’d wasted picking him up. I looked at my FitBit. It was almost one, and we hadn’t even gotten out of the sprawl of Miami.

“Seems like your pants are on fire,” he said.

I looked down, alarmed.

He laughed. “No, I mean, you’re in a hurry. You got somewhere nice to be?”

*Nice* didn’t seem like quite the right word. “Um...”

“Family?”

“Family-to-be, actually. I’m getting engaged this Christmas. It’s kind of a big deal.”

Those blue eyes went wide. “Congratulations! Choosing a partner for life...” he whistled. “Big step, cher. Huge.”

I shifted uneasily in the driver’s seat. “Yeah, so.... What about you? I heard about your mother. I’m sorry.”

His smile faded. “Yes. Me too.”

“Are you guys close?”

He shook his head. “I haven’t seen her in person since I was ten.”

Really? He hadn’t seen his mother since he was ten and now he was traveling all the way to New York in a hurricane to be at her bedside? There was a story there, but I decided I didn’t need all the dirty deets. Just because we were stuck in a car together for the next twenty hours didn’t mean I had a license to pry. Or that we were going to be besties.

Obviously, Remy Guidry and I had nothing in common. Me, I was going places. I’d just closed a deal worth a hundred grand. I was about to marry a millionaire’s daughter! Remy dressed like a surfer dude and worked with kids. Or something.

Did he even have a pension plan? I shuddered.

I turned on the radio. The little Ford Fiesta might be a shit car, but the radio worked well. Strains of “Santa Claus is Coming to Town” rang out loud and clear. Remy had brought an old canvas satchel as well as the suitcase and he rummaged in it now.

“Want some crackers?”

“No thank you.”

“M&Ms? The kids got me a family-sized bag. They thought it was hilarious.”

His tone was so fond. And when he dragged the candy bag from his satchel, it was sort of funny. The bag was the size of a bed pillow. Like, seriously, you could have rested your head on the thing and dreamt of Willy Wonka all night.

“No thanks,” I repeated.

“Ah.” Remy’s blue eyes sparkled. “Are you one of those people who have an addiction to sugar? Sorry I mentioned it. I can toss this if it’ll bother you.”

“I don’t have an addiction to anything.”

“Mimi is like that. She’s all, *Don’t keep that stuff in the fridge. If you eat it, I don’t want to see it! It doesn’t exist in my reality.* She said the last time she politely took a bite of birthday cake, she was on a sugar bender for two months and gained thirty pounds.”

“I’m not addicted to sugar.”

“You sure? It’s a loong drive. This might haunt you. I can toss it.” He danced the M&M bag to and fro, then rolled his window down a little.

I had a horrifying vision of the bag bursting on the road and the wind sending little pellets of colored candies everywhere, hitting windshields and causing a massive pileup. Being jailed for manslaughter by M&Ms would be the perfect ending to this day. “No, stop! Don’t!”

Remy grinned. “I’m kidding, cher. I wouldn’t really throw it out. That’s littering.” He stuffed the M&Ms into his satchel.

“Out of sight. Out of mind. You just forget those M&Ms are there.”

“Give me some of those,” I huffed before realizing I was going to. But now I wanted some. Badly. Was it the vision I’d had of them causing mayhem? If so, I was more perverse than I thought.

Remy grinned. “Whatever you say. You’re the driver. I am here to serve.” He opened the bag and carefully measured out a handful. He passed them to me and it was awkward passing them off using his left hand to my right and trying to make sure none spilled. The side of his palm met my hand for several long seconds. Its electric warmth made me shiver.

The sweet taste of the chocolate paled in comparison to that tingle.

“Want some more?” he offered.

“I don’t want to eat all your candy.”

“That would be a challenge given the size of this bag, but anyway, I don’t mind. It’s the thought that counts. The candy is just candy.” He poured another handful and passed it over. I took it. He popped a few in his mouth.

“So what do you do, Joe? You dress like a banker.”

“I don’t dress like a banker,” I huffed. Though, I was wearing a white button-down shirt and blue tie. It’s just that I’d gone to Florida on business, and Allison had been sitting on the bed as I packed. If I’d packed casual clothes, she’d have grilled me about my plans to go out, so I’d packed only

business attire. As for super casual stuff like sweats—the Schuberts didn't believe in wearing things like that. Ever.

“Accountant?” Remy guessed. He made an *I've-got-it face*. “A politician!” He shook his head. “No, that can't be it. The politicians in Florida wear white hoods and politicians who aren't from Florida wouldn't be caught dead in the state.”

”*Ouch*,” I said with admiration.

“Lawyer? Stock broker? Undertaker?” he guessed. “Men's Warehouse model?”

I rolled my eyes. “I broker medical supplies.”

“Broker? You mean you're a salesman.”

“Sales executive,” I corrected.

“Oooh!” He feigned an impressed face. “All right. I hear you. Got it.”

“We sell to hospitals. Nursing homes. Things like that.”

“What kind of medical supplies. Like, bedpans?”

We did, in fact, sell bedpans. But I wasn't going to admit it. “Everything. From syringes and gauze to hospital beds.”

“Wow. Do you enjoy that? Does it feed your soul?”

I glanced at him, thinking I was being punked, but his expression was sincere. “It feeds my bank account.”

He shrugged. “That's important too.”

“Medical supplies are a big business. And I work for the number two company in the industry.”

“Oh, I’m sure,” Remy agreed. “The poor will always be with you. The sick too, huh?”

“Exactly! Especially with the aging population. The medical field is only going to grow.”

“Job security,” Remy dug into his satchel again.

“You know it. What about you? Do you teach at that Home or....”

He shook his head. “It’s not a school, it’s a residence. I’m a social worker. I work there and I live on the premises. Convenient, no?”

A social worker? Huh. I’d never met anyone who did that. Didn’t sound financially rewarding.

He brought out a cell phone. “Speaking of High Hopes, I’m just gonna check with Mimi and make sure they’re okay.”

“We’ve only been gone a little over an hour.”

“I know. But I bet the eye’s getting close to them.” He shot off the text and then brought up a radar weather app.

I glanced from the road to the screen and back again. “What’s it say?”

“Hum. The eye is still south of Homestead, and a little east. But they’re in this thick band here. He pointed a finger at the thick red band just outside the eye, which was now over Miami.

“What about us?”

He scrolled. “We’re about here. Yellow band.” He showed me the screen and looked out the window. “Sounds about right.”

He had my attention now. “Can you get the estimated trajectory on that app? I have one on my phone, if not.”

“I’ve got it.” Remy went to a different screen. “Jack is still most likely to head northeast and hit Jacksonville by... 8 p.m.” He checked the clock on the dash. “Think we’ll be through there by then? Or should we head inland?”

“God, I hope we’re way past Jacksonville by 8 p.m. Then what does it do?”

“The eye heads offshore, but... man... Georgia and the Carolinas are gonna be walloped by rain.”

“When?”

“Early tomorrow. Starting around 5 a.m.”

I nodded. The forecast hadn’t changed much then.

“We’ll be north by then.”

“Says the man with the plan. Speak your truth, cher.” Remy gave me a wink, which softened what otherwise might have sounded like doubt on his part.

The wink did something funny to my insides. Remy Guidry was freaking adorable, I realized. And funny. And sociable. Not that it mattered. But I supposed it was more pleasant than spending a long and stressful drive with an asshole.

“It’ll happen,” I said confidently. “You’ll see.”

“Hell yeah.” Remy agreed without much conviction.

But he put his head back on the seat rest and looked out the window, his expression worried. I already knew Remy Guidry well enough to know that worry was not for us but for the big white house in Homestead.

“They’ll be okay,” I said.

He gave me a tight smile. “I know. They’ll be fine.”

I turned up the volume on “Santa Baby” and we drove on through the rain.



# Chapter Four

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We took 441 in the direction of Orlando. Then, finally, we merged onto 528. That was a four-lane highway heading directly east, and it would take us back to the coast and 95 north. Eastbound—the direction we were headed—there was very little traffic whereas the westbound lane across the median was jam-packed and barely moving.

Not many people were dumb enough to head toward the coast in a hurricane, apparently. But that was okay because I was the man with the plan. And now I could open up the Ford Fiesta to the luxurious speed of sixty-five.

The rain lashed the windshield like Christopher Lee in *The Whip and the Body* and wind fought to push the little car off the road. I held firm and kept the pedal to the metal.

“How far to I-95?” I asked. “Google Maps usually has a pretty good estimation of traffic.”

Remy checked on his phone. “Fifty-three minutes. There’s not a lot of traffic until we’re nearly there.”

“That’s good.”

“But... wow. I-95 is red. Like, seriously red.”

Shit. “Red for how long?”

“Hang on. There’s an alert thingy.” He pressed something with his thumb. I knew from his face it wasn’t good news.

“What?”

He gave me a regretful grimace. “This is the alert: All travelers are advised to avoid I-95 from Port Orange, Florida

to Brunswick, Georgia due to heavy traffic and storm conditions. Northbound travelers should reroute inland to I-75.”

“Fuck!” That explained why no one was headed east.

“Yeah, pretty big hiccup.”

“Where even is I-75?”

Remy scrolled on the map. “You could pick it up about... fifty miles *west* of Orlando. Wow. I-75 goes all the way north to Cincinnati.”

“We’re not going to Ohio,” I grit out, the frustration making my voice sharp. I wanted to pound my head on the wheel and my stomach folded in on itself. I reached for my antacids before realizing I’d eaten the last one.

“No, I gotcha,” Remy said easily. “But it looks like... yeah, we could take I-75 to Tifton, Georgia, and cut back over to I-95 from there. The junction’s at Brunswick. The alert made it sound like it’s clear after that. Or we could take our chances with I-95. Up to you, cher. You’re the pilot of this here magnificent vessel.”

A surprised snort of laughter escaped me. I glanced at him, and the soft smile and warm twinkle in those blue eyes calmed me. I took a deep breath. “Fuck.”

“Fuck ten million ducks,” he agreed solemnly.

That made me laugh again. “Okay. So. Sounds like we should go back and take I-75.” I eyed the westbound lanes

despondently. “But I don’t think we could go that way even if we wanted to.”

“Lemme see.” Remy consulted the map on his phone. “Do you trust me to navigate?”

“My life is in your hands,” I said, getting in the spirit of his teasing. And that earned me another wink.

Lord. Less of that would be good. He really was cute, and I didn’t need the distraction.

Remy had us get off at an exit called Innovation Way and he directed me on a back route to I-75. There were suburbs and shopping malls and red lights. And the rain was incessant. But traffic was light because no one in their right minds was out in this shit. It took over an hour, but we merged onto I-75 north. And suddenly I realized the rain had slowed to a light drizzle and the wind no longer rocked the car.

Oh, yeah. One advantage of heading west was getting away from Jack. Duh. Why had I been so desperate to get on I-95 in the first place? Because it was the route I knew, I supposed. And, of course, it was the fastest way to New York. But I-75 was finally taking us to the north, and the traffic wasn’t awful, either.

For the first time in what felt like days, I took a deep breath. “We did it. We’re clear of Jack, right?”

Remy reached over and rubbed my shoulder. “For now.”

I gave him a dirty look.

He laughed. “Okay, we’re clear of Jack. It’s been a day, huh? Want me to drive?”

It was tempting. But we were finally making progress, and I didn’t want to pull over. “Maybe the next time we stop for gas.”

“Whatever you say. I am a lump of clay, cher.”

He dropped his hand and went back to studying the map. A tingle of disappointment at the loss of his touch took me by surprise. Only that gentle hand had been nice after all the stress. And it was nice, too, having someone along who was helpful and positive. Someone who could come up with solutions and actually contribute instead of complain. For a moment, I pictured Allison in the passenger seat. God, she’d be a basket case. I had a flash of memory of the time we’d been stuck in traffic and late to her friend’s gallery show. Allison had lost her shit and yelled at the taxi driver.

I swallowed against a sudden pain in my gut. So? Maybe Allison didn’t handle challenging situations well, but she could be a lot of fun. Like that time we went to her college roommate’s wedding and she pulled me out on the dance floor. Or when we went to performances in the city. The opera. The symphony. Plays. Her family was big on that, and I enjoyed it too. The gorgeous venues, the fancy clothes, the world-class performances.

I remembered being so impressed the first time they’d taken me to the opera. Me, Joe Blankenship, who’d grown up in a crappy one-bedroom apartment in small-town Pennsylvania. I

remembered my inner conviction that that was the life I wanted. It still was, I reminded myself firmly.

I turned up the radio on “Ave Maria.”

Remy hummed along while he texted with someone—Mimi, I assumed. Or maybe the kids. His thumbs flew. When “Silver Bells” came on, he put the phone away and sang. He’d never win American Idol, but his voice was pleasant. He shimmied a little in his seat and elbowed my arm. I gave him a wry look.

“It’s Christmas, Joe. Aren’t you glad to be headed home?”

“I’ll be glad to get there,” I admitted.

“I feel you. You can put your feet up, have some pie....”

Yeah, that was not what it would be like at the Schuberts’. He continued to sing along with the radio. He sang “Jingle Bell Rock,” “O Holy Night” and “It’s Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas.” He passed me handfuls of M&Ms.

It was, in fact, beginning to *feel* a little—maybe?—like Christmas in the car. Something about Remy’s holiday spirit made me recall the anticipation I’d had driving home from Boston at Christmastime when I’d been in college. I’d so looked forward to the downtime and turkey and cookies and having Mom fuss over me. We’d watch Christmas Day NFL games together, one of our traditions, and she always made a big pot of slow-cooker chicken chili. Every year, we went to the Christmas festival in Bethlehem, about an hour drive from us. And unless the weather was awful, we’d go for a hike at the Lehigh Parkway. Those were good times.

I felt bad I wouldn't be seeing Mom this Christmas. But she'd declined the invitation to the Schuberts' gala. She said she wouldn't feel comfortable at something like that, and I hadn't tried to talk her into it. I'd gotten the impression Allison was worried about how she'd fit in as well.

When "Little Drummer Boy" came on, Remy said, "You take Bing, and I'll do Bowie."

I laughed. "Uh... no."

"Come on! You've been humming along. I heard you."

"Was not," I said. But yeah, I probably had been.

Remy gave me a big blue-eyed pleading look. "But it'll be fun."

"Nice puppy-dog eyes. Very effective. But you're doing fine singing without me."

So he sang Bing and Bowie in different voices and, when it was over, I applauded.

It was 7 p.m. and fully dark when we crossed the state line. The "Welcome to Georgia" sign appeared to the right of the highway like a blessed mirage.

I pointed to it and whooped.

Remy grinned. "Bulldog fan, are you?"

"No, it's fucking *not Florida*," I said with a laugh.

He smiled a secret smile. "You know it. We escaped." He pulled one hand and then the other with sucking sounds, like a fly detaching from fly paper. I laughed.

“It’s smooth sailing now,” I ventured.

“Sure.”

“And it only took me...” I looked at my FitBit. “Twelve hours. Jesus Christ.”

“And a tank of gas,” Remy said, glancing at the dash.

Good thing he’d noticed. I’d been so focused on pushing forward, I hadn’t been paying attention. The red gas light was on. “Shit.”

“Take this exit. There’s a Shell.” He pointed, and I veered to take the exit at the last minute.

There was no rain at all as we pulled up to the gas pump and we both got out to stretch. A light breeze foretold a possible change in the weather, but it was night and hard to tell what the sky looked like other than the fact that it was overcast. Not a single star was visible above me as I stretched my arms overhead and bent backward a little.

Damn this shirt and tie. I wished I had something more comfortable to wear. I took off the tie, at least, and tossed it in the back seat. Allison would have something to say about that, but fuck it. I was beat.

“I’ll gas up,” Remy said, already at the pump. “You take a break, cher.”

I filled up my lungs with the crisp night air. “Okay. Thanks.”

He really was a nice guy. And useful. If not for Remy, I’d probably be at a standstill on I-95, stuck in the fury of Jack. Or



maybe out of gas on the side of the road. I wandered over to the mini-mart. A bathroom was very much in order. After I'd used it, I picked up a new roll of antacid tablets, bottled drinks, and snacks. We'd gone through about half his bag of M&Ms, but there was plenty left so I picked up salty things like nuts and chips. I was hungry. Had I even had lunch? That was a negative. I grabbed us a couple of sandwiches.

I hesitated in the doorway of the mini-mart, hands full. I should text Allison with a progress update. But the mere idea brought a wave of dread. I was finally feeling more relaxed. I'd turned the corner on this whole god-awful day. I didn't want to deal with a million *why-didn't-you* and *why-can't-yous* right now.

I watched Remy put the gas hose back on the pump. He grabbed the windshield cleaner and started cheerfully scrubbing the front windshield. Even from inside the mini-mart, I could hear him singing "O Come All Ye Faithful."

I'd text her later. I smiled and went out to join him.

# Chapter Five

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“O h my God!” Remy gasped.

He was behind the wheel and we were cruising north on I-75. I looked up from where I’d been perusing Hurricane Jack bulletins on my phone. “What?”

“Wild Adventures!”

We were approaching a huge billboard that advertised an amusement park. A Times Square type live feed across the bottom read: *We Don’t Know Jack Special: \$20 entry til midnight.*

“I’ve wanted to go there since I was a kid!” Remy enthused, his eyes shining. He looked at me pleadingly.

“Uh... no.”

He made that exaggerated pouty face. “But it’s only twenty bucks to get in! And we need a break. Why don’t we go for two hours? You’ll still be ahead of schedule because, afterward, I’ll drive through the night, and you can sleep. I promise!”

I took another look at the billboard as we drove past it. It featured a roller coaster, a lion—apparently there was a zoo—and “Christmas Wild & Bright” with a waving gingerbread man. A huge slice of pumpkin pie was at the bottom. *Next exit,* it said.

My heart battled my head. I’d never been to a big amusement park, only the county fair a few times. We didn’t have the money for trips to Disney World when I was growing up. Since then, I’d been focused on my schooling and work.

And it was too low-brow to ever be an Allison thing. She was strictly an art-gallery-cultural-event kind of gal.

There was still, apparently, enough of a kid in me to get excited at the idea. But I really had to get to New York. I mean, it was out of the question.

Remy must have sensed my hesitation. He said, “Look, we’re clear of Jack. That deserves a *lagniappe*, non? A little something. And when will you ever be driving past Wild Adventures again?”

“Never.”

“Exactly! So what do you say, Joe?”

The exit was coming up fast. Maybe because I didn’t have time to give it much thought, I blurted. “Fine! But two hours. That’s it. And only if you swear we’ll drive through the night.”

“Yes!” Remy swung the wheel and took the exit.

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The huge parking lot at Wild Adventures was a vast, open space with a littering of cars near the entrance. No wonder they were having a special. Everyone must be locked up tight tonight. But there were no signs of a hurricane here. Well, if you didn’t count the overcast sky, brisk breeze, and eerie quiet.

“Two hours,” Remy said, looking at his watch after parking the car. “At 8 o’clock, the Fiesta will turn into a pumpkin if we’re not on the road. Agreed?”

I laughed. “Sounds like appropriate motivation.”

“Right? So let’s go dive-bomb this beast.”

If he was willing to be his own timekeeper, I was glad. I didn’t relish the idea of dragging him away.

I still felt guilty as we walked up to the ticket booth. Were we even any closer to New York than I’d been this morning? We were barely in Georgia and well west of the coast now, so there’d be the time it took to drive back east. Today had been all back roads, traffic, and delays. Rerouting and pouring rain. It was like trying to make progress in quicksand.

Remy grabbed my wrist. “Come on, cher! Snap to. I mean to see everything, and you’re coming with me.”

I shook off my worry. We’d make good time from now on, for sure. And, meanwhile, I was going to enjoy this. I’d probably never go to another amusement park in my life, after all.

Remy insisted on paying for me, and he hadn’t been kidding when he’d said we’d “dive-bomb” the park. After we got our hands stamped, he set the speed, pulling me along. We ran to a big map of the park.

“What do you want to see?” Remy asked breathlessly. “I’m more about rides than the zoo portion. And I’d like to at least go through some of the Christmas stuff.”

I hesitated. “That’s fine.”

Remy studied me with those incredible blue eyes, which were deep turquoise under the big fluorescent lamps that lined

the park path. “There’s something else you wanna see. What is it?”

“It’s nothing.”

“You have ten seconds to answer me or face the dreaded tickle torture.” Remy held up crooked fingers and waggled his eyebrows suggestively.

I gave a little gasp. “What? I’m not one of your students! In case that’s not obvious.”

“Nine-eight....”

The idea of being tickled by Remy Guidry was horrifying and thrilling and not something I was prepared for either mentally or physically. “Fine! I was just going to say I’d never been to a zoo. But—”

“Oh my God! Never?” Remy’s eyes went wide.

I shook my head.

“Okay, recalculating... let’s do the zoo.” He grabbed my wrist again.

“No, wait! I want to do the rides too. But I would like to see the big cats.” I looked at the map. “If we go around this way, we can hit all these rides, see the lions here, then the Christmas display over here.”

“Deal.” Remy held up his hand and, just to get things moving, I high-fived it. Then we were off.

We got on most rides immediately and had to wait only a few minutes at the most popular. I guess if you’re ever going

to go to a huge amusement park like Wild Adventures, going a few days before Christmas, at night, with a hurricane lurking nearby is the time to do it.

We did the Pharaoh's Fury, an Egyptian-themed ride that was like a huge ship that swung back and forth. We did the Rattler, a circle that spun around. Then the Swamp Thing, the Swampwater Snake, the Aviator, and the River Rapids, all of which involved hurling our bodies through space. River Rapids also got us a little wet, but it was fine since we were both wearing raincoats. We got off that and dropped onto a bench, breathless and laughing. I needed a moment to realign my brain, body, and balance, and we sat there, panting.

Remy was the first to recover. He sat up and checked his watch. "We're doing great! Only thirty-five minutes in. We could do it all again."

"Uh, no. Not without puking."

"Wimp," he teased, jabbing me with an elbow. He let out something that was half laugh, half satisfied sigh. "Thanks for agreeing to this. Sincerely. I know you were hesitant."

I shook my head. I felt a lightness I hadn't experienced in a long time. Maybe the rides had shaken me loose a bit. "This is a blast. I really needed this. And at least I'll have done one fun thing this Christmas."

He looked at me, nose wrinkled. "Aren't you getting engaged this Christmas?"

Oh. Yeah. “Well.... that will be fun. Sure. Only Allison has all these fancy parties and get-togethers planned, and I’m not exactly excited about that. You know how brides are. So.”

His face relaxed. “Ah. I’m sure it’ll be more fun than you think.”

He stretched contentedly, leaning back on the bench. I couldn’t help looking him over. He had a trim physique, maybe 5’6” at the most, and unremarkable in those casual clothes. But he was nicely put together. Fit. His face was the real standout though. It lit up in a way I don’t think I’d ever seen anyone’s face light up. Because life was hard. Only, apparently not Remy Guidry’s life. At least, not tonight.

But, no, it wasn’t just the amusement park; he’d been all relaxed positivity since I picked him up. I was so used to people who were largely unhappy that I kept waiting for the shoe to drop and for him to do or say something snarky. My mother had had her crying jags and forced smiles. Simon Schubert, boss-and-future-father-in-law, was always ranting about something or other, usually sales figures. Even when sales were way above quota it was, *Last month was good, but it could be better. We have to prepare for the down times.* Or he’d complain about that one deal we didn’t get or that should have been bigger.

Allison had picked up this tendency from her father—whether by nature or nurture—and always had something to fret over. Something that was not going her way *enough* or was not satisfactory *enough*.



Remy, though, he was just a ray of fucking sunshine, wasn't he? He was still wearing those cut-off shorts, blue tropical shirt, and thin yellow raincoat, wide open. His dark hair had given up the fight with curls and was riotous around his face. His shapely tan legs glistened—and, oh fuck, it was raining.

It was only a light drizzle, but I shivered. “Aren't you cold?”

Remy jumped up. “I won't be if we move. Time's awastin', cher. Ready to see the lions?”

I was, and it wasn't far to run to get there. Before I knew it, the green shrubbery at the side of the main path stopped and fencing began, and... there they were. *Right there.*

The enclosure seemed too small to my eyes, and part of it bordered the major park thoroughfare. I supposed they were a big draw, but that many eyes ogling me constantly would be irritating. Maybe the lions were pleased with the night, with the cool drizzle, and the light crowd, because three of them were out—a magnificent male with his imperial mane and two females. They prowled around the enclosure restlessly. The male and one of the females brushed against each other affectionately as their pacing circuits crossed each other.

“Wow,” I said. “They're huge.” That was a dumb thing to say, and the wonder in my voice was hardly dignified. I frowned and tried for something more neutral. “Interesting.”

“It's okay to be impressed, cher.” Remy bumped against me in a gentle reproach. “They take your breath, non? They're beautiful. And fearsome too.”

He didn't add *sad*, though his tone did. And it was sad that they were so far removed from living the life they were meant to live. Caged. Had they ever known what it was to be free?

We stood there watching the lions for what felt like a long while. Remy didn't push to leave, but I was aware of the ticking clock. And no amount of time looking at them would be enough. Or make any difference in the end. It was a special thing, though, seeing them so close like this. How marvelous was the world that these creatures existed? I wanted to take Remy's hand—because he was standing next to me. It was normal to want human connection at a moment like this. I resisted the impulse.

“Okay. Let's go,” I said.

We walked away slowly, but Remy danced out ahead of me and checked his watch. “An hour to go. Are you up for more rides?”

“Definitely.”

“Then let's go!” He took off running, and I chased after him.

We did the Whirling Wildcats and the Blaster Blast-off. Then, the big daddy, the Twisted Typhoon. The experience was reminiscent of spinning in a tornado—which was a bit too on the nose tonight. Next to me, Remy alternatively laughed and screamed, and I laughed and screamed, but when we got off, I stood panting, hands on my knees.

“Is it possible to permanently scramble your brain on one of these things? Damn. Last ride for me tonight,” I said.

“I’m right there with you.” Remy sucked in a deep breath, let it out. He checked his watch. “We still have forty minutes. Hit the Christmas stuff and grab something to eat?”

“Sounds like a plan.”

There’d been Christmas decorations throughout the park. One sign had said “over two million lights!”, and that was entirely possible. There were lots of narrow pyramid trees made out of colored lights with animals or Christmas icons projected onto them. Multicolored strands of bright bulbs wound around all the metal railings leading up to the rides. And the park employees wore Santa hats. Some were fully decked out as elves in green costumes. There were also Christmas-themed treats like *peppermint brownie sundae* advertised at every food cart.

But the true Christmas gold was near the end of our circuit and included a lake with thousands of sparkling lights, a walk-through tunnel where the illuminated walls danced and pulsed to Christmas music, the Candy Cane Express ride, and... a gingerbread village.

I freaking loved it—every gaudy, sappy inch. The truth was, I secretly loved Christmas. Even well before I’d been a college student driving home for the holidays, I’d been a little kid who thought it was the best time of the year. How could it not be? There was no school, for starters, and my mom enjoyed herself and always made an effort to make it special. We’d go to pick out a tree at the local tree farm—one of the smaller, less expensive ones, but that didn’t matter. When we got the tree

home, Mom would put on her old Christmas vinyl records—Bing Crosby, Pat Boone, Elvis. A precious box of ornaments and lights would be retrieved from the back of her closet. Mom liked to take her time decorating. Putting on the lights and adjusting, admiring. Each ornament was looked over and hung with deliberate care on her part, and I'd learned to do the same.

The box of ornaments contained ones her mother had collected. Not expensive ones. Not like the blown-glass German ornaments that were all over the Schuberts' massive tree. But there were plastic carousels with little fans inside that would spin if you positioned them just right over a light bulb, glass balls, some with chips or dark spots, and elf-on-the-shelf felt dolls that had clips on their butts so they could sit on tree branches. Silver tinsel was collected in a paper bag and reused every year. The tree made the apartment feel brighter, warmer, happier.

When I was old enough to get my first job—washing dishes at a truck stop when I was fourteen—I started buying my mom a new ornament every year. Sometimes a silly one. Sometimes a gushy one. Maybe she would like one from Wild Adventures.

“Come on!” Remy took my hand and pulled me into the illuminated tunnel. He tried to release me as soon as we'd entered, but I didn't let him. I stopped and pretended to look up and around at the lights while I gripped his hand.

We half-turned and looked at each other, smiling. “Let it Snow” came over the speakers, sung by a young-sounding male and female. *And since we’ve no place to go. Let it snow....*

There was no one else in the tunnel. Blue and purple lights danced around us along with a glittering shower of digital white snowflakes. Remy’s face was so beautiful in this light. Skin soft. His eyes flashed from purple to navy to aqua blue with the hues in the tunnel, but always warm and getting warmer.

My heart pounded. My skin felt like it was about to take flight off my body. All those rides must have shaken something loose in my brain, because I admitted to myself what I’d ignored since first seeing him. I was attracted to Remy. Very.

When was the last time I’d been this attracted to a male? Maybe never? I was bi, but the male side of the equation had always been an opportunistic, physical thing. Never romantic. Never soft and downy like this, heart hot in my chest, bluebirds singing in my ear.

*It could be romantic with Remy.*

The tunnel was not a ride, didn’t tilt and sway, but the world shifted under my feet nonetheless. I had the distinct sensation of falling.

*Stop. Stop this right the fuck now.*

This couldn't be happening. I could not allow this to happen. I was days away from getting engaged, for fuck's sake. I knew where I was going. I had plans. I had it all worked out!

I pulled my hand away. "Help me pick out an ornament for my mom?" I asked, voice raspy.

Remy blinked as if he, too, was off-kilter. Then he smiled. "Yeah. Yeah, absolutely. Maybe there'll be something in the Gingerbread Village."

Naturally, Gingerbread Village had not just a few ornaments for sale but *oodles* of ornaments for sale. Because capitalism. There were resin gingerbread houses and cookies galore. There were Santas and animal heads inside wreaths, park-themed ornaments and dated ornaments and endless gator ornaments because that seemed to be a Georgia thing. I picked out a poinsettia-shaped glass ornament and had it wrapped.

I wondered when I'd have the chance to give it to her. I wouldn't have time to travel home to Pennsylvania because Allison had us scheduled to do something every day 'til New Year's. I'd known this, and had regretted it in a vague way, but now, taking Mom's gift box in hand, I felt bad.

Mom had friends, but I was her only family close by. Her only child would not be seeing her this Christmas. That sucked. I promised myself that would not be the case in the future. No matter how much Allison wanted to pack the schedule, or how uneasily the two of them got along, Mom would be part of my life. I'd insist on it.

We left the gift shop, bought two huge gingerbread men and hot chocolates, and sat down at a table in Gingerbread Village to soak in the ambiance. There were various gingerbread buildings, and giant sparkling colored lollipops, and gumdrops, fake snow everywhere, and lights, lights, lights.

“Are you close to your mother?” Remy asked, as he sipped his hot chocolate.

“It was just her and me growing up.” I hesitated. “It was rough. She worked a lot of odd jobs, sometimes with weird hours, sometimes two at a time. We still never had money. It was hard as a kid, you know? Seeing your mother so stressed and worried and overworked, and not being able to do anything about it.”

I didn’t tell him about the times I heard her crying at night. I didn’t tell him how I’d vowed I would someday have the money to take care of her. How I’d never allow myself to be poor.

“You must have been a sensitive little guy,” Remy said.

I gave him a befuddled look. “I don’t think so.”

“Of course you were. A lot of little kids wouldn’t be so aware of what their parent was going through or wouldn’t be as affected by it. And what about your dad?”

I turned the hot chocolate cup around and around on the table. “He and mom weren’t married long. Only a year. She got pregnant, he didn’t want a kid, and she didn’t want an abortion, so they divorced. Mom says he was an asshole, so I

didn't miss much not having him in my life." I grinned, but it felt fake, so I let it slip away.

"Sorry," Remy said.

I shrugged. "I honestly don't give a shit about him. He never did about me."

Remy wrinkled his nose and looked into the distance. "Sounds familiar. Only it was me and my dad. My mom left us when I was ten, like I told you. She had big dreams of being on Broadway. I got letters and cards from her a few times a year, usually if she had some handbill she wanted to send me with her name in the chorus or something." He grimaced. "She never hit it big. Guess she never will now."

Jesus, that was tragic. Giving up a life with Remy—he must have been adorable as a kid—to chase stardom and never making it? Phew.

"And now she's sick?"

"Now she's in hospice," Remy confirmed.

"Oh my God. I'm sorry. I didn't realize."

Remy sighed. "I didn't want to go, but she asked to see me, and Mimi said I'd regret it forever if I refused."

Would I go if my dad called out of the blue and said he was dying? Probably. But mostly to give the old fucker a piece of my mind, to yell at him for the way Mom had struggled so hard to make it alone with a baby.



“Abandonment issues,” Remy said solemnly. “It really is a thing.”

I blinked at him. “Yeah. I never knew my father, and you can’t miss what you didn’t know. But I missed not having *a* father.”

“Of course you did, cher.” Remy’s blue eyes were all sympathy.

I cleared my throat. “Is that why you work with kids?”

Remy gave a bark of a laugh. “You’re not the first to suggest it, Mr. Freud.” But he considered, as if really thinking it through. “I know what it’s like to feel like you don’t belong to anyone. My dad did his best, but.... Well. Anyway. I know what it’s like. If that makes me empathetic to the kids, then I guess I am. But that’s not all it’s about. The kids themselves are great. They’re worthy of being loved, worthy of time and attention. Funny. Bright. So *smart*. They just want to be loved, to feel like they belong. And that has nothing to do with me or my abandonment issues.”

His eyes shone with passion as he talked about them. And I thought maybe it had everything to do with Remy. At least, that he could see those qualities in the kids. That he made the effort to see them. Not for the first time, I thought he was a good person. But it was less *annoyingly good* now and edging toward admiration.

But, I mean, that worked for him. Some people enjoyed being teachers or counselors and all that. But it wasn’t me. I had ambition, drive. There were things I wanted, goals I’d set

for myself. And there was nothing wrong with that. Someone had to make the world go around.

*Someone has to sell those bedpans*, the jackass in my brain supplied dryly. I told it to shut up.

Remy looked at his watch. “Ut. Time to go, cher. It’s five to eight.”

I didn’t want to go. This had been one of the best nights I could remember. And Remy’s joy was so infectious.

“We, uh, could stay one more hour. Since we’re driving through the night.”

Remy looked at me doubtfully, as if not trusting it. “I don’t want to make you late.”

“We’ll still get there tomorrow, on the 23rd. That’s fine.”

“Really?” Remy looked so hopeful.

“Well we haven’t done the Ferris wheel yet. And they’ve got tigers.”

Remy smiled wide and jumped to his feet. “Race you!”

# Chapter Six

---

**A**fter we left Wild Adventures—exactly at 9 p.m., Remy drove. We had a full tank of gas and an open road on I-75. The plan was to continue north to Tifton, then take 82 back to the Georgia coast and pick up I-95 at Brunswick.

I tried to sleep in the passenger seat. I needed to get some shut-eye so I could take over driving in the wee hours. But it wasn't yet ten o'clock, and my brain was wired from the sugar and all the rides. I finally abandoned the attempt and sat up, sipped some water from the bottle in the center console.

“Not happening, eh?” Remy said.

“Nope.” It was raining again, hard, and wind lightly buffeted the Fiesta. I checked the weather tracker app on my phone, hissed in a breath. “Shit.”

“What is it?” Remy glanced over at my phone.

“Jack's jamming to the north.”

“Ooh. I love that for a band name.”

I snorted. “I'm serious. Damn, it's ahead of schedule. The eye is already over Jacksonville and the outer bands are pretty much covering Georgia.” I looked out the window. “That's what this is. We're in it right now.”

Back in Jack. It wasn't a good feeling.

“What about Homestead?” Remy asked anxiously.

I checked. “Looks like Miami's in the clear now.”

“Yeah?” Remy's voice hitched with excitement. “I should check in with Mimi. Could you...”

“I’ll do it.”

Remy gave me the four-digit code to unlock his phone—he was far too trusting. I found the message thread with Mimi. Easy enough since her name was on it. But I noticed that he had various messages from what looked like kids at the home too.

*Where are you, dude?*

*I’m bored. This hurricane shit sucks.*

*Are you in New York yet? Have a hot dog for me. Xxoo!!!*

I ignored those and texted Mimi. *This is Joe texting because Remy is driving. He wants to know how you guys are doing. Looks like you’re out of the hurricane?*

There wasn’t an immediate reply.

“It might take her a while,” Remy said. “Her motto is: the people in front of you are always more important than the phone.”

“She’s a sage, that woman,” I deadpanned.

Remy giggled. “She is.” Then he sobered. “Hope they’re okay.”

To assuage him—he was, after all, driving, and I didn’t need him all distracted—I checked the news for Miami. “There’s flooding in downtown Miami—”

“Always,” he interjected.

“—but Homestead’s a bit inland. I’m not seeing any news about that area.”

“Good.” He relaxed a little.

“Op. Here’s a text from Mimi. We lost some roof shingles and the cover on the patio. But no flooding here. Are you two okay?”

“Yay!” Remy looked delighted. “I was so worried. Tell her we’re golden.”

I replied, assuring her we were fine. But after I tossed down the phone, I felt like a liar. The rain was getting worse, and now that it was dark, it felt more dangerous to be driving in it.

Remy shifted in his seat. “Do you want to keep heading east?”

I consulted the radar map again. The bands over Georgia were dense and the color code said “10-12 inches”. Which was a lot. There was also a yellow warning triangle with a “!” that said potential flooding alert. But it was only an hour to Brunswick, then we’d head north on the much-longed-for I-95, and we’d drive out of it. Jack must have moved this far north only recently. Flooding came later, didn’t it? How bad could it be?

*It’s just rain,* I told myself. I checked Google maps.

The alternative was to do another U-ey, and take I-75 north all the way to Macon. But then cutting over to I-95 from there—a route which would land us in Savannah—involved curving well south again. Backtracking upon backtracking. No.

“We’ll be okay,” I decided. “The rain’ll be heavy for a while, but this is still the best route.”

“Okay.”

“If you don’t want to drive in the rain, I will.”

Remy glanced over with a wry look. “Cher, I’m a Cajun boy from *Louisiana*.”

I smiled. “Lucky me.”

I didn’t even try to sleep after that. Every mile we went, the rain and wind got worse. Remy reduced the speed to about fifty, then forty-five. There was still traffic on the road, including eighteen-wheelers, and their big back tires sent sprays of water up onto the poor little Fiesta’s windshield that blinded us for several seconds. It felt like we were creeping along. I started to second-guess my decision to continue east, but it was too late to turn around now.

I decided talking would help cut the tension. “So... how’d you get involved with the children’s home? Is that like an orphanage, by the way?”

Remy shook his head. “Orphanages pretty much don’t exist now. They were dismantled in the 50s. Lots of institutionalized abuse and a few big scandals that put them out of favor. They were replaced by the foster care system, which isn’t great either.”

“Hmm. Yeah, I haven’t heard good things.”

“There are some amazing foster parents out there,” Remy said passionately. “This one family in Florida takes in disabled

kids. They've had ten of them. They're bonafide saints. But a lot of fosters do it for the monthly check or worse." His mouth pinched tightly. "Anyway, there's always a need for group homes. If fosters can't be found. Or for various other reasons. High Hopes is one of the best."

He sounded so proud. Given my brief observations there, it did seem like a good place. "So how'd you get involved with it? I mean, you're pretty saint-like yourself, you know." I said it in a jokey tone, but I wasn't entirely joking.

Remy gave me a confused glance. "Me?" He laughed bitterly. "Cher, you don't know the first thing about me."

Yeah, I was talking out of my ass. What did I really know about Remy? I looked out the window. "Guess not."

Remy's fingers touched my thigh for just a moment before moving away. "Sorry. Didn't mean to be an ass."

"No worries. Just trying to pass the time."

He let out a long sigh. "It may seem like I've got it all together now. But, believe me, there was a lotta bad road that came before."

"You're, what, twenty-five? How much bad road could there be?"

"Twenty-six. But lots," he emphasized. "I started young."

I didn't figure he'd tell me anymore. A semi went by us to the right, going too fast. It buffeted the Fiesta and inundated the windshield. Remy slowed and it took him a moment to get the car back under control.



“Shit,” I breathed.

“We’re okay, cher,” Remy said easily.

We were. But the rain would only get worse from here. At least for a while. My hands gripped the passenger door and seat on either side of me.

“You’re right. It passes the time,” Remy said. “I’ll tell you all about Remy Guidry. But only if you promise to tell me about the real Joe Blankenship.”

The real me? It wasn’t much of a story. I was pretty much just as I appeared. But I nodded because I wanted to hear Remy talk.

“I told you my mom left when I was ten,” he began. “My mom and dad both were born in Louisiana, but she had the stars in her eyes. He just wanted to stay put. After she left us, he got even more involved in the parish. He’d preached some before, but he went all in on that. Evangelical stuff. Did a lot of visiting around to the sick and shut-ins. Volunteered for everything there was. Maybe it was his way of coping. But I was alone a lot. And I resented it.”

I made a sympathetic noise to encourage him to go on.

“Like, first my mom left; then my dad was never around. It felt like everyone else in the parish was more important to him than me.”

“I can see that.”

“Plus I figured out I was gay, and I hid it from my dad, which made our relationship even more tense.” He shrugged.

“Long story short, I found my home with a bunch of other kids who had more rebellion than common sense.”

Warmth curled in my belly. Remy was gay. I’d gotten that vibe. The way we’d looked into each other’s eyes, held hands in that tunnel.... But it still invoked a physical reaction hearing him say it. I cleared my throat and focused on what he was saying.

“So you were a rebel in high school? I remember those kids. I’m afraid I was one of the straight-laced ones.”

He eyed me. “You don’t say.”

I laughed.

“Yeah. I was trouble. I had a friend who was a classic bad influence. Got arrested for shoplifting when I was twelve.”

“You did?” I was surprised.

He nodded. “Spent the night in a juvie jail. Scared me straight, cher. Never took anything again. They let me go because of my dad. Everyone respected him in our county.”

“So you avoided a record? That’s good.”

“For that, yes.” He stared straight ahead for a few moments, took a deep breath. “I was hooked on opioids by the time I was sixteen.”

Oh. Oh God. “That’s awful.”

He nodded. “It is. But I had *bonne chance*, cher. I was lucky.”

I noticed that Remy usually had very little accent. But as he spoke of that time in his life, his tone grew more Cajun and he used more French words.

“One night, my best friend brought some junk over. We were celebrating high school graduation. Only those pills? *Sacrément mauvais*. They were contaminated. My best friend died. But me, I woke up in the hospital. I came this close.” He held up his finger to reveal the barest sliver. “In fact, docs say I died, but they got me back. No brain damage. Believe it or not, I’ve always been a *couillon*.” He glanced over and smiled at me then. But the edges were sharp.

I was having a hard time reconciling any of this with the Remy I’d been with all day. He seemed so damned *happy*. Easygoing. Content. Sweet-natured.

“You seem to be doing really well where you are now,” I said.

He nodded. “Oh oui, cher. I’m great now. High Hopes saved my life. After I got out of the hospital, I went to rehab. And as soon as I got out of there, my *pere* sent me to live with Mimi. She’s my great-aunt. I guess you could say it was the down-home Cajun version of military school.” He chuckled. “Believe me, nothin’ and no one gets past Mimi.”

“So you were a student there? At High Hopes?”

“It’s not a school, cher,” he reminded me. “And I wasn’t a resident, either. I went there to work. Did odd jobs around the place for a little money and room and board. But mainly to get my head out of my ass.” He bit his lip. “I resented it at first, to

speak true. Didn't want anything to do with the kids. But then Johnny came along. He latched onto me like a little brother." Remy chuckled. "He wouldn't take no for an answer, that one. And he opened my heart, cher. And then I remembered...."

I waited, but he didn't go on. "Remembered what?"

He shook his head. "I've yakked enough. You don't need the sauce on the sandwich."

I grinned. "But I like sauce on my sandwich. What, even, is a sandwich without the sauce?"

He rolled his eyes. "I'm beginning to think you have a lot in common with Johnny."

Was that a good thing? "Come on, Remy."

He wiped at his eyes as if he were getting emotional. He spoke hesitantly. "When I was dying... when I OD'd... I didn't exactly have what they call a near-death experience. But I remember thinking that I hadn't done anything with my life. Rien. I hadn't even been good to my dad. And I hated that. I couldn't accept dying like that. Maybe that's why I came back. Because I didn't want to leave without doing something that made the world at least a tiny bit better? Like, *Remy was here*. I needed to know that *Remy was here* would mean something, and not be a curse. Once I opened my heart to High Hopes, to the kids, it became a way to do that. *Be* that. It's everything to me now. Seeing those kids smile? It's better than any high you can imagine."

His voice thickened and he stopped talking. We drove on in silence for a while. I didn't trust my voice either.

*Remy was here.*

Would *Joe was here* mean anything? I guess I wanted that too, only in my version I wanted my name in lights on Wall Street. Or on the cover of Fortune magazine. And that wasn't actually the same thing, was it?

"I almost went to medical school," I said.

"You did?" Remy sounded surprised.

"Yup. That was the plan. Got my undergrad in pre-med. I was all set."

"What happened?"

I grimaced. "I was accepted to a couple of med schools. But I paid for my undergrad myself, and I was already in debt for that. When I looked at the figures of how bad it would be if I continued on to get my MD, I realized it wasn't going to happen." I shook my head. "Most of the people in those programs come from money or have some kind of safety net at least."

"That must have been disappointing," Remy said.

"I dunno. When I see what doctors had to go through during Covid, and how the insurance system regiments treatments and all that, I'm just as glad I got out."

"That was a hard time," Remy agreed. "Covid. Still. You'd be a great doctor, Joe."

I looked at him in surprise. I wasn't sure why he'd think that. I'd wanted to be a doctor because it sounded prestigious. And academically challenging. Like, it was the hardest thing I could choose to major in, and I was ambitious like that. Also, doctors made a lot of money. The district of lovely homes on the lake in the small town I grew up in—they were all owned by doctors and lawyers and the like. It had never been about *Joe was here*.

“Yeah, I don't think so,” I said.

“You would,” he insisted, giving me an admiring glance. “You're super intelligent, meticulous, logical. And you have a good heart.”

I scoffed and made a face.

“You do, Joe. I see it. If you ever learned to trust it,” Remy said quietly.

I shook my head adamantly. “Well, I'll never be a doctor, so it doesn't matter. I needed to get my ass out into the real world and start earning a salary, so I did. That's life.”

Remy gave me a knowing glance. “I see.”

What did he see? But I wasn't sure I would like the answer, so I didn't ask.

“So you got your, what, Bachelor of Science? And went into selling medical supplies,” Remy prompted.

“Basically. What about you? You said you were a social worker. Did you get a degree for that, or—”

“You know it. I took classes at FSU and got my bachelors while working at High Hopes. I want to get an MA in social work, but it’s hard to find the time. Someday, for sure. What about your fiancée? Tell me about her.”

“Allison? She’s...” I pictured her headed out the door to one of her classes. “She’s really into fitness. She does tennis, golf, modern dance, Pilates, yoga... She’s passionate about it. She got me into tennis and golf, when I have time. It’s good exercise.”

He nodded. “Sounds healthy. Does she have a career?”

I hesitated. “She got a degree from Smith in Art History, but she hasn’t found anything she really wants to do in that field yet. Fortunately, she doesn’t need to work. Her family is wealthy.”

Remy made a thoughtful sound. “I see. And do you love her very much, Joe?”

“Hey, look at that,” I pointed to a sign emerging from the darkness. “We’re almost at I-95.”

Saved by the mother-fricking bell.

# Chapter Seven

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When we pulled onto I-95, I raised my hands to the sky.  
“Hallelujah.”

“We made it!” Remy said. “Traffic isn’t even awful.”

That was true. It was pitch dark out there now, and still a deluge, but there weren’t many car taillights visible.

“It’s smooth sailing now,” I ventured. “All the way to New York.”

“Sure.”

“Like butter!” I crowed. The wind took that moment to thrash the Fiesta, making it shudder, but I refused to let go of my optimism.

I checked the weather radar again. “Another hour heading north, and we might be clear of this.”

“Knock on wood, cher,” Remy said, but not enthusiastically.

“I can drive if you want,” I offered. “We could pull off at the next exit.”

“No, I’m good,” Remy said, then, shakily. “Driving gives me something to focus on.”

I checked my watch. It was about eleven thirty. “Okay. I’ll take over at midnight.”

“If you want.”

The rain came and went in bursts, but with every mile that passed, taking us north, north, north, I imagined it was getting clearer. Any second now. But visibility was low and we had to go slowly.

I turned on the radio and found Christmas carols. This time, I didn't prevaricate. Maybe I knew Remy better. Or maybe any port in a storm. We sang "Up on the Rooftop," "Most Wonderful Time of the Year," and, yes, "The Little Drummer Boy" with me singing Bing and Remy doing Bowie. Which was surprisingly moving in Remy's clear tenor. It was all going swimmingly.

Then we passed flashing lights on road signs that said SLOW. Remy slowed down further.

"There can't be construction going on," I said in disbelief.

"Maybe one lane is closed?" Remy suggested.

We passed more flashers. Then a red blinking sign—STOP AHEAD.

I saw the roadblock then—red and yellow lights blinking through the rain from the middle of the road. It wasn't until Remy hit the brakes that I realized how much water was on the highway. The Fiesta hydroplaned across the asphalt for a few dread heartbeats, water flying, rear end of the car fishtailing left while the front skidded right. But Remy tapped the brakes, gripped the wheel, and the car righted. A sickening beat later, we stopped. Orange and white barricades had been placed across the road with police cars parked off to either side. There were two cops, both wearing heavy gray rain ponchos, hoods up against the storm. One of them headed for the driver's window, his boots sloshing. Off to the right, I could see water—like actual ocean. Or an inlet, more likely. I hadn't realized we were right next to the coast.

Remy rolled down his window. “Hi, officer. What’s going on?”

The officer, a Black man with a heavy sodden face, shook his head. “Road’s closed. It’s flooded up ahead. You’ll have to turn around!” He was shouting, which made me realize how loud it was outside. Not so much howling wind as the endless beat of rain.

I leaned over to look at him. “Can we get back on 95 up ahead? I didn’t see any detour signs back there!” I felt my temper rise. This couldn’t be happening. Not when we were finally getting somewhere.

The cop made a click with his tongue as if the question was absurd. “Mister, the South Brunswick River *and* the East are flooding. There is no detour. I suggest you drive back to the next exit, find yourself a hotel room, and get out of this mess. No one’s going nowhere tonight.”

“No. No!” I groaned. “Look, we have to get to New York. It’s urgent. You can’t just say *there is no detour*. That’s absurd.”

“There is no detour,” the cop said flatly. “Not one that doesn’t involve swimming with the fishes.”

“It’s okay, Joe,” Remy said quietly.

But it wasn’t. It so wasn’t. “That’s not...! Fuck. Look, I bet I can drive through it. Just let us pass.”

The cop looked the Fiesta over and snorted. “Son, I wouldn’t cross a puddle in this thing. Now go on and get off the road

before you hurt yourself. And your friend too.” He looked at Remy. “Don’t be foolish, son.”

“No, I get it,” Remy said. “We’ll do that. Thank you, Officer!” Remy placed a hand on my arm as if to tell me to chill. He gave the cop a smile. “Hey, thank you for doing this. It’s no fun being out in this storm. You guys are gonna be working hard tonight, huh?”

“You got that right. Lord.” He shook his head. “Now you listen to your friend—” He jabbed a finger at me. “—and you boys turn around right here.” The cop stood back and gestured to the left side of the road where there was a muddy-looking gravel drive across the median. He made a classic turning gesture with his hand.

“I don’t believe this!” I complained.

“It must be real bad up ahead, or they wouldn’t stop traffic,” said Remy, his voice calm. “Look, we tried. Let’s go find a hotel room. This storm is bad juju. I’ve been feeling it in my bones, but I hoped we could get through. The situation is not good, cher.”

“This sucks!” I insisted. But his words worried me, so I didn’t argue as he made the turn and headed back the way we’d come. I guess I had been in denial. It was one thing to risk myself, but Remy knew more about hurricanes than I did, and it wasn’t fair to risk him too. The driving *had* been pretty damn hairy.

The next exit was a commercial travel hub. The usual lineup of fast food joints, gas stations, convenience stores, and hotels

were joined by a huge RV park. It could have been nearly anywhere in the country, it was so generic. All I knew was that it wasn't where I was supposed to be.

“Look at the bright side,” Remy said. “It’s not Florida.”

I huffed in reluctant amusement and gave him a side-eye. He suggested a plan of attack that made sense, so I ran into a 7-Eleven store to stock up on essentials while he stayed in the car and called the hotels whose signs were visible nearby. By the time I returned to the Fiesta with a case of bottled water, bags of pretzels and chips, a few easy canned meals, beef jerky, and stuff for sandwiches, he had scored.

“La Quinta. I got us a room on the 4th floor. It’s about a half-mile that way.”

“Great.” I settled the bag of food at my feet while he started the engine. “That’s one piece of good news, at least.”

“I’ll pay for the room,” he said.

“Room?”

I could swear he blushed though it was too dark to be sure. He stared out at the rain. “It was the third hotel I tried, and they only had one room available. It has two double beds. But I can keep checking around, if you want.”

“No. That’s... fine.”

“They had a handicapped-slash-smoker room on the first floor, but I figured that was a pass.”

“Agreed.”

“Though why they have a room that’s both for handicapped *and* smokers, I don’t know. If I needed a room for a wheelchair, the last thing I’d want is a smoky one. Is the theory that smoking can make you disabled?”

I let him ramble. How weird was it that I already knew Remy enough to recognize that he was covering up nerves about the single room? In the same way my knuckles were white on the passenger door handle and my insides felt a little shaky.

Two dudes should be able to share a room without even thinking twice. So what did it mean that we were both thinking pretty damn hard about it?

This was not good. This was definitely not good. This was way more dangerous than the hurricane. But I could handle it. One night, and I’d be on my way to New York, I promised myself. I just had to keep it together for one night. I had to remember where I was going.

The room at the La Quinta was clean and generic. There were two double beds, as promised, with those itchy polyester floral bedspreads. We made sandwiches. It was midnight, but I was starved. We ate them at the big window and watched the water creep up on the road and parking lot down below. It looked like no big deal at first. Maybe an inch or two of the wet stuff. Then it reached the hubcaps—including the ones on our Rent-a-heap.

“The car’s gonna be toast,” Remy said solemnly. “Hope the rental contract provides insurance.”

We were standing side-by-side, noses practically pressed to the thick safety glass. I turned my head to give him a death glare. “Don’t say that. Nothing’s gonna happen to the car.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Voicing your intentions. Very powerful. Go on: say it again.”

“The car will be fine. We’ll be on the road in it by 8 tomorrow morning.”

“And?” He raised an eyebrow.

“And we won’t have another hiccup on this trip. We’ll be in Manhattan by 8 tomorrow night.”

Remy nodded. “Cool. Now me. That car’s gonna be submerged in the next hour. And flooding’s gonna keep us here at least another day.”

“No! What are you— you can’t set that as an intention!”

”*But,*” Remy added, his eyes twinkling. “We’ll be safe and dry. This room is well above any potential flood level, and we’re safe as bugs in a rug. We’ll be fine. We’re lucky, you know. *Bon chance, mon ami.*”

“I’m feeling sooo lucky,” I said sarcastically.

He chuckled. “You should. But you must be exhausted. I know I am. I’m gonna try to sleep.”

I grumbled as he went to one of the double beds, kicked off his shoes, and stretched out. We’d brought up our bags, but he didn’t even bother to change. I stared down at the parking lot as the water crept up to the middle of the hubcaps and thought

maybe he was right about being lucky. What if we were still on the road in this? In the car when it got swept away? It was a horrifying thought. People died in floods like this. I suddenly felt guilty and a little foolish for how hard I'd pushed today and especially the past few hours in that awful rain. Me trying to outrun a hurricane. I was grateful for those cops and their barricade. But, of course, I'd been obnoxious and had given the cop shit. At least Remy had tried to make up for it. I sighed. He was such a better person than me.

I was suddenly dog tired myself. Hell, I'd gotten up at five that morning to get to the airport. And then all the crazy shit that had happened since, including three hours of running around at an amusement park. Now that I'd finally been forced to stop, the long day hit me in the head like a dropped piano.

I looked at Remy. He was lying on his stomach, stretched out on the bed, arms over his head. He might already be asleep.

I had the strongest urge to crawl onto the bed next to him, throw my arm around him, and go to sleep with my nose in those black curls.

Jesus. Tomorrow I had to get home tomorrow. To Allison. To my future.



# Chapter Eight

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**D**ecember 23  
“Joe? Joe?”

I startled awake from a dream in which I was running and jumping, trying to fly, flapping my arms like crazy, but never able to successfully take off. I sat up, momentarily confused. Oh, right. Hotel room. Somewhere off I-95 in Georgia. Outside the window, it was daylight but only dimly. Rain poured down, and the bedside lamp cast a low-wattage glow in the room. Remy was standing next to the bed looking anxious. He'd freshened up, brushed his hair at least, and he had on long jeans and a thin blue sweater that fit him nicely, I couldn't help noticing.

“What's up?” I mumbled.

“Sorry to wake you. But the hotel is having a meeting to discuss the flooding situation, and I thought you might want to go.”

“Flooding? Do we need to leave?” I sat up, alarmed.

Remy held up his hands. “No, no. We're fine. It's just an update, I think. If you want to sleep, I can go down and get the info for us.”

“No. I'll go.” I looked at my watch. 6:45 a.m. Wow. Early for a meeting, but okay. If there was someone in charge there, I wanted to hear from them myself. I needed to know when we could get out of here.

I grabbed some fresh clothes from my roller bag and went into the bathroom to change, brush my teeth, and splash water

on my face. Unlike Remy, I'd changed into a pair of sleep shorts and T-shirt last night before crawling into bed. I wondered if he'd slept through the night.

Unfortunately, I had nothing that comfortable for day clothes, so I put on another white button-down shirt and gray slacks. I skipped the tie.

When I walked back out into the room, Remy was at the window. He glanced over his shoulder. "Before we go, you might want to see this." His tone was ominous.

I walked over and looked out. Gasp. "Holy shit."

It was a scene from a nightmare. The four-lane commercial road the hotel sat on was gone, replaced by open water. In the parking lot below, three cars were jammed up against an 18-wheeler, none of them red and thus none of them ours. You could see only the top of the truck's cab and silver trailer. The rest of the cars in the lot, including the Rent-a-Heap Ford Fiesta, must have floated away. It was barely daylight, but the tall street lamps were still on, reflecting off the surface of the water. The dark tide moved in choppy little waves, like a river.

"Yeah," Remy said shakily. "I've been watching it for about an hour. The first floor of the hotel is flooded. I went out to see if I could learn anything, and that's when I heard about the meeting. It's on the third floor. They said not to take the elevators, even though we have power. For now."

*For now.* I shuddered. Being stuck in this hotel room for days without power or emergency supplies would be a special kind of hell. "Okay."

Remy put a hand on my arm. His blue eyes swam with worry and his expressive face was a picture of regret. “Joe, I’m sorry I talked you into Wild Adventures yesterday. If we’d gotten here three hours earlier, we might have made it past the flood. Now you might not make your big engagement party on Christmas Eve. I really am sorry.”

He was so sincere, my heart did an odd little hop. When was the last time anyone had cared that much about my business? But this was too much emo for first thing in the morning, especially without coffee. I shook my head. “Hey, I’m an adult. I wanted to see the park too. And it was a blast. Besides, who knows where we’d be if we hadn’t stopped. We might have gotten here before the police set up the barricade but just in time to be swept away.”

He didn’t look convinced, but his brow cleared a little. “I don’t know.”

“Exactly. No way to tell. Let’s go find out what’s going on.”

As we took the stairs down a flight, I knew with certainty that we weren’t driving to New York today. Or probably tomorrow either. Maybe not even until after Christmas. I’d done everything I could, tried as hard as I could. But this was Mother Nature, and she had zero interest in my puny human concerns. This flood was bigger than me. I was stuck here, and that was that.

Surprisingly, that realization brought with it a kind of peace. I could give up the fight. And, maybe, possibly, there was a small part of me that was relieved to avoid the whole dog-and-

pony show Allison had planned. Was glad to have more time to just chill and hang out with Remy. Maybe not so small a part.

And that was bad. Unforgivable even. Guilt was also not something that went well with early morning, pre-coffee fuzz-brain.

We came out onto the third floor.

“This way,” Remy said. “We’re looking for Room C, which I think is a conference room.”

I strode after him and prayed to God they were serving caffeine.

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“What do you mean, there are no available helicopters? This is obscene. Do you know who I am?”

There were around twenty people in the conference room as we stepped in the back. A belligerent man with a full head of white hair and wearing a black suit jacket, white turtleneck, and flashy gold rings on his fingers was berating the three people who stood at the front.

At the back of the room was a white cloth-covered table with big silver urns. Coffee. I made a beeline for it and poured myself a cup.

“I apologize, sir.” A thickset dark-haired man in the yellow coat and hat of a fireman responded politely. “I’m sure we all

would prefer to be somewhere else enjoying the Christmas season. But Jack had other ideas. The few helicopters we do have are busy with search and rescue, trying to save lives.”

“Good! My wife and I need a rescue! We were on our way home to Kingswood when we were diverted off the highway to this... *place*.” The sneer in his voice made clear his opinion of the lowly chain hotel. “We need to get home to our property immediately!”

The other two people at the front were dressed in the green polo shirts of La Quinta Inn employees. One was an older woman with an auburn pageboy—her nametag read *Ellen*, and the other was a guy in his early twenties who looked Latino—his nametag read *Jesse*. I knew his face. He’d checked us in last night.

“Seats,” Remy whispered, nodding his chin at two empty chairs near the front. He walked forward and I followed, though I’d have preferred to stand at the back. We scooted past a young couple with a baby to take the seats.

“Sir, everyone at this hotel is safe for the time being,” the fireman said. “We need to focus resources on those who are out in this flood. People are in serious danger.”

“Well, my wife and I can’t say here!” the man insisted. “If it’s a matter of paying for the helicopter—”

“It isn’t,” the fire chief said firmly.

“What about us, are we safe here?” the woman with the baby asked.

Ellen, the female La Quinta employee, stepped forward. “We’re fine. Don’t worry. Fire Chief Menendez here has assured us that the hotel can withstand the flood. We’ve evacuated the first two floors and everyone on the higher floors is safe.”

“How long is this going to last?” a dad-type asked.

“We’re not sure at the moment,” Fire Chief Menendez said with the kind of competent honesty that I appreciated. “Jack’s eye has moved offshore, but, until the rain stops, there’s unlikely to be any improvement in the flooding. Meanwhile, we’re working on full-scale evacuation plans.”

“What about food and water?” someone asked.

“What if the power goes out?” I asked.

“We’ve got emergency candles to pass out,” Ellen said, giving me a harried smile.

The younger La Quinta employee, Jesse, picked up a box and started working his way through the aisle. Every room got two thick white emergency candles and a pack of matches.

“As for food and water,” Ellen said, “we’ve got cases of bottled water. Fire Chief Menendez has recommended that we don’t drink the tap water. The restaurant is closed because it was on the first floor, but we’ve moved up supplies so we have non-refrigerated items like crackers, bread, fruit, cheese. We’ll put food out in this room twice a day.”

The fire chief nodded. “FEMA and other emergency response groups will be arriving in the next twenty-four hours.

They'll bring supplies as well. I guarantee you, no one will starve."

"My baby needs formula," the woman next to us said, sounding panicked. "We only have enough for another day."

"Come see me after the meeting," Ellen said. "We'll do whatever we can to get you what you need. Is there anyone else who has special needs—medical issues, dietary requirements?"

One elderly man raised his hand. "I'm diabetic."

"Do you have any insulin with you?"

"Some," he said. "But not enough for an indefinite stay."

"All right. Come see me after this meeting too. For now, we're asking you not to use the televisions in your room. We need to preserve the generator for as long as possible."

"What are we supposed to do?" a teenage boy complained. His dad leaned over and whispered something in his ear, but the boy's sullen look remained.

"There's a game room at the other end of this floor," Ellen said. "There are cards, board games, and books. Go ahead and charge your phones and iPads if you have them. You can use those."

This seemed to reassure most people including the teenage boy, who smiled. But the rich guy stood up again. "Are you telling me we have to stay in this dump for god-knows how many days and we're supposed to be happy with *board games*?"



“I’m sorry, sir,” Ellen told him. “We’re doing the best we can under the circumstances.”

“Clearly, that’s not good enough!” the man snarled. He reminded me of Simon Schubert, and it wasn’t a good look.

“Listen, folks, I need to get back out there,” said Fire Chief Menendez. “I just wanted to let everyone know to stay put. You’re safe. You’re in good hands.” He nodded to Ellen. “Unfortunately, there are hundreds, maybe thousands of people out in this flood who aren’t so lucky. We only have so many boats, helicopters, and, most importantly, personnel. Until we can get reinforcements, we need able bodies. That’s why I took the time to stop here and address you folks. We’re looking for volunteers to help with search and rescue. If you’re healthy, and can work, we could really use you.”

The older rich guy with the attitude sat down with a grumble. A woman to his right with coiffed blonde hair leaned over to whisper something in his ear.

“I’m not goin’ out there,” one lady muttered.

Remy abruptly raised his hand. “I will! I volunteer. I can help.”

I inwardly cursed. Because of course he would.

A big guy with a beard stood up. “Me too.”

A younger athletic-looking woman raised her hand. “I’m in the National Guard, but it doesn’t look like I’ll be able to get to my unit, so I can work.”

“Great. Thank you.” The fire chief smiled gratefully. He waited for a moment, looking around, but no one else stood up. “Okay. You three follow me.”

This seemed to be a signal for the meeting to break up, because people stood and pockets of conversation began. Remy got to his feet but I grabbed his arm. “Wait.”

He turned to look at me.

“This isn’t a good idea,” I told him in a low voice. “It’s dangerous out there. Like, really dangerous. That flood water looks nasty.”

He gave me a little smile. “Pretty sure that’s why people need help, Joe.”

“But you don’t know this area at all. What can you do?”

“The first responders will direct us where to go and what to do.” The sense of purpose in those blue eyes told me I’d never talk him out of it. He must have mistaken my concern because he added. “If you get a chance to get out of here, and I’m not around, just go ahead and go. I’ll be fine.”

“What? Of course I’m not going to leave without you.”

“Well, don’t worry about it if you need to. I know you have to get to New York.” He pulled away with a gentle tug and walked over to the fire chief.

As I watched him go, an invisible anchor settled on my chest. Ugh. What was this terrible feeling?

Guilt. Round two knockout punch this morning, and it wasn't even 8 a.m.

Because I, also, was a perfectly healthy twenty-six-year-old. Fit. I could easily run six miles. I could be out there helping, too, not sitting on my ass in a hotel room. And what was there to do here anyway? Stare at a candle? Play solitaire?

But going out there in that shit wasn't my job. Emergency responders were paid to do that razzle-dazzle. I was sure it truly was dangerous, and I wasn't trained for it. I'd probably be more trouble blundering around out there than I'd be of use to a living soul. Right?

Also, a little voice in my head said it would be a good thing if I didn't spend more time around Remy. Let him go do something else. For the love of God. Because what I should be doing was thinking about Allison. I should be on the phone groveling to her, saving my future. I needed to get away from this whole Remy exposure before I... Shit.

*Me, me, me.* I sounded like that rich asshole with the rings.

And Remy... he'd raised his hand, just like that. Because despite everything he'd told me about his past, or maybe even because of it, he really was a fucking saint.

Guilt. Ugh.

I went up to volunteer.

# Chapter Nine

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We were instructed to go put on warm clothes and report back to the conference room. Remy was in a rush and totally focused, so we didn't talk as we got ready. I once again lamented my business attire, but thank God I ran religiously because at least I had my running gear. The shorts wouldn't be of any use today, but I put the running shirt, unfortunately dirty, on over my white button-down and gray dress slacks, laced up my Nike running shoes, and dug out my heavier coat. It was a gray parka with a hood, the kind that squeezed down into nearly nothing for travel. Not the best material for pouring rain, so I tugged my raincoat on over it. Remy took off his thin blue sweater—I swear, I didn't look—and pulled on two long-sleeved T-shirts, then topped them with a fleece pullover.

It was the first time—since having coffee and becoming fully conscious anyway—I'd taken a good look at him wearing something other than his shorts-tropical-shirt-and-flip-flops combo. I stared. He looked so comfortable and outdoorsy. He looked cuddly in that fleece. The reddish color set off his dark hair and those gut-punch blue eyes.

Fuck. Why did he have to look so good on top of being such a nice guy? I could have handled one or the other. Both was not playing fair.

“You ready?” he asked me.

“Um. Yeah,” I lied, because I wasn't at all ready. “Look, are you sure this is a good idea? We were lucky to get diverted from the flood and find a room, like you said. Seems like

tempting fate.” We could die out there. I didn’t add that, but I thought it.

Remy touched my arm, his expression soft. “Don’t worry, Joe. We’ll be working with experienced personnel. If there’s anything you’re uncomfortable with, just say so. I’m sure they need help at the shelters too.”

“Right. Yeah. Okay. Sure.”

“Come on.”

I’d noticed he’d started calling me *Joe* instead of *cher*. Was that an upgrade or a downgrade? It was definitely more personal.

We went down the stairs again to the conference room. The crowd was gone and only the fire chief, the bearded man, and fit woman who’d volunteered remained. Fire Chief Menendez led us down another flight and we emerged onto the second floor where two feet of water sat over the carpet. The fire chief waded right in and so did the others. I couldn’t look like a wimp already, so I reluctantly followed, sacrificing my Nikes with regret. He opened a heavy emergency exit door to the outside where a motorboat was tied to a pipe on the side of the building. We all got in—me awkwardly balancing against the rocking motion—and he started the motor, steering us away from the hotel.

A few blocks away a command center had been set up under a covered parking area on top of a large flat-roofed building. The fire chief got us unloaded and passed off to a woman who looked like a Southern beauty queen in her 40s with big, *big*

blonde hair. She wore a yellow rain jacket from the neck down, but on her magnificent 'do she wore a clear plastic tie-on kerchief-type thing that I'd only ever seen in movies.

"Thanks for showin' up, darlins," she said. "My name's Susanna, and I'm gonna figure out where best to put ya'll to work. Anyone with experience with search and rescue?" She raised her hand as though demonstrating how to respond to kindergarteners.

The fit young woman waved her hand. "Emily Brant. I'm in the National Guard. We had flood response training."

"Wonderful!" Susanna exclaimed.

The bearded guy raised his hand. "Steve Korman. I used to be a volunteer fireman."

"You sure look strong, Steve! Thanks for helpin' out."

She looked at Remy. "And you, cutie-pie?"

"Remy Guidry. My dad and I were in the Cajun Navy. We did boat rescues in quite a few hurricanes when I was growing up."

He did? I was so surprised by this, Remy had to nudge me to remind me to answer. Susanna was looking at me, eyebrows raised.

"Oh. Uh... I'm Joe. I haven't done this before. I'm with him." I pointed a thumb at Remy, feeling like an idiot.

"Well bless your heart!" Susanna chirped. "Okay then. Let's get ya'll out there doin' the good Lord's work."

Remy and I were given yellow vests and assigned to an aluminum motorboat with a search-and-rescue guy in his fifties named Frank. The boat wasn't huge, but I figured it could fit six or so others besides the three of us. It was still raining hard as we set out, Frank at the tiller, and me and Remy at the front looking out for anything in the water that could damage the craft. The morning light was flat and gray thanks to the storm clouds. Around us the water churned, dark and oily and littered with debris. My stomach sloshed uneasily with every bounce.

It was an eerie ride. I'd never been in a flood like this. Frank steered us down waterways that had been major roads, past green street signs and stoplights that were only a few feet above my head, their red and yellow and green now dark. We passed taller commercial buildings, empty and lifeless, and one-story fast-food joints and pharmacies that were almost completely submerged. The Golden Arches had never looked so forlorn.

Frank navigated away from the bigger streets into an area of one-story bungalows and ranch homes. They were underwater, only the tops of their roofs sticking out like the tips of icebergs. Many homes appeared deserted. Maybe the owners had evacuated in time. But people perched on the rooftops every few houses or so. They waved flashlights and called out for help.

"We'll be back," Frank kept telling them. "Hang tight. We'll get to you as soon as we can."



“Will the waters get any higher?” Remy asked worriedly.

“God, I hope not,” Frank muttered, shaking his head.

He seemed to have a destination in mind. When we arrived, it became clear why it was a priority. A sprawling one-story nursing home was surrounded by dark water with only a steeply pitched roof visible. A few dozen seniors, in pajamas or sweats, sat on the roof while a handful of attendants dressed in white uniforms moved among them. The elders were frail and scared. One old man kept trying to get up, as if he didn't know where he was, and a male attendant was struggling to keep him seated before he fell into the water.

How long had they been out here? And how many residents had not made it onto the roof?

“Jesus,” I breathed.

Remy gave me a look, his eyes wide. He didn't say anything, but I knew what he was thinking. *This is why we came, Joe. This is why you help.*

And yeah. It was one thing not to know, not to see. To refuse to see. I was glad Remy was a better human being than me, and that he'd dragged me out here. Well, not dragged. It had been my call. But I was glad he'd led the way.

Frank putt-putted closer, and Remy scrambled to the side. He sank his arm in the water up to the elbow and must have found something to hang on to because he deftly pulled the boat so it was parallel to the roof. Frank killed the motor.

“We can take six in this boat,” Frank called out to the attendants.

I looked at the steep roof and then at Remy.

“I’ll go,” he said. “Can you hold the boat here?”

“Sure.” I got close, trying to see what he was holding on to.

“The edge of the roof’s about a foot down,” he said, inches from my face.

I pushed down the flutter of... something... and plunged my arm into the frigid water. I found his hand, and the edge of the roof, a gutter.

“Got it?” he asked.

“Yup.”

He let go. “Thanks.” His smile wavered and his eyes stayed on me a beat too long before he moved away.

Christ. I was gonna drown today one way or the other, wasn’t I?

Remy put both hands on the roof and levered himself up.

He guided down an older white woman in a pink robe, her hair permed into tight little curls, by holding both her hands and walking backward. They baby-stepped down to the water and he helped her sit down on the roof then handed her off to Frank, who helped her get into the boat. All I could do was hang on to the roof in the freezing water, try not to think about snakes, and keep the boat as close to the building as possible as Remy scrambled back up the slope.

He came back with a frail-looking older Black man who had the tremors—though whether from a neurological condition or the cold wasn't clear. Next came a very large white woman who was sobbing. She kept saying, "It's okay. It's okay. It's okay," as Remy carefully led her down.

"You've got it," Remy told her. "Almost there."

His next charge was a tiny woman, her thin white hair plastered to her head and blue veins appearing through her paper-thin pale skin. She slipped, both feet going out from under her, and my heart stopped. But Remy had her hands, and his feet were firmly planted on the roof.

"I've got you, cher. You're safe." He lowered her to the shingles, then helped her sit and scoot the rest of the way down. Next, Remy and a male attendant helped the confused old man down. The old guy kept asking what was happening in an anxious voice.

Never once was Remy less than positive, reassuring, and gentle.

Me, I did nothing but hold onto the roof, but it was hard work. The gutter was slippery, and the water was cold enough to make my fingers numb. Plus the current kept trying to pull the tiller end away. It took a lot of muscle to keep the vessel alongside the roof and not drifting, but it was the least I could contribute.

After the sixth passenger was loaded, Frank declared the boat full and gave Remy a hand to scramble back aboard.

“We’ll return in a jiffy!” Frank called out to the attendants. “Hang tight, folks! There’s blankets and hot coffee waiting at the shelter, and I promise we’ll get you there.”

“Thank you”, “Thank you for helping!”, “We appreciate you!” came a chorus from the people still on the roof as we powered away.

Remy fussed over the passengers, pulling heavy green blankets from the bottom of the boat and tucking them around. I dried my arm as best I could and went to help. The seniors were all freezing cold and wet. God knew how long they’d been on that roof. Maybe since the middle of the night? We offered around a bottle of water, which everyone sipped.

The old folks were so grateful. Several of them kept apologizing, as if they’d been a bother. That upset me. I thought about the entitled rich dude at the hotel and thought it would be nice if all our elderly people could be somewhere in between that asshole and these folks, who seemed to believe they didn’t deserve anything, not even rescue in a flood.

“You’re a godsend, young man,” the large woman said, leaning over to pat my hand. “Thank you so much.”

“God bless you,” said the man with tremors.

“No problem.” I said. “Glad you’re okay.”

I had to look away, unable to stand the gratitude in their eyes. Talk about undeserved. If not for Remy, I’d be lounging in the hotel room. Hell, I’d probably be in the face of the La

Quinta employees complaining about how I had to get to New York.

The thought made me feel sick. I didn't want to be that guy. It was so easy to get caught up in your own shit, wasn't it? All caught up in getting somewhere and doing something even if you didn't want to go there and didn't especially want to do it.

Why was I like that? I guess there was something to be said for that footballer holding the ball and just running hell-for-leather for the goal line, ignoring all else. That kind of drive made things happen. But, on the other hand, it was a good way to stumble and break your neck.

I told myself I'd be more aware, after this, less self-absorbed. I'd try, anyway.

Frank steered us to a Sheraton hotel with at least twelve floors. An emergency shelter had been set up there. The entry point was a large window where the glass had been removed. Two guys in rescue gear helped us unload the passengers. When the last one was inside, Frank stood up at the tiller. "Remy, Joe, you guys know what you're doin', so I'm gonna leave you the boat and take out another one. As you can see, we need more boats, more passenger capacity."

"Sure," Remy said brightly. "We can manage."

"You know how to get back to the nursing home?"

"I know."

"Good. Help there until everyone's evacuated. After that, bring in the people in that neighborhood we passed through.

Pick ‘em up, no more’n six passengers at a time. Infants don’t count, but if they’re over two-years-old, they count as a seat. Regulations. Got that?”

“Got it.”

“Bring everyone here. Ask the crew here for gas when you get low. And if you finish all that, someone will know where else you’re needed.”

“Will do,” Remy promised. “Thanks, Frank. Row with the flow out there.”

Frank shook both our hands. “Will do. You boys keep it hangin’ high.”

“Thanks, Frank,” I said. “Good luck.”

Remy sat at the tiller, and I remained in the front of the boat. He hesitated. “Joe, you can stay here if you want. They probably need extra hands serving food and whatnot,” Remy offered, his face serious.

“And let you have all the fun? Hell no. Let’s do this.”

That earned me a smile.

We worked through the morning, cleared the nursing home roof, then started on the neighborhood of bungalows. We rescued a lot of families. Young parents with little kids. Babies. There were people keeping their grandparents safe, and grandparents keeping little kids safe, and young dads keeping everyone safe, and moms being extra cheerful and hopeful so kids didn’t cry. There were people huddled for comfort with their dogs or with cats tucked into their coats.

They wouldn't leave their animals behind and, of course, they didn't have to. We took them all.

It struck me that these people had lost everything. Their homes were flooded, and, given how crazy expensive flood and fire insurance was these days, they might not get any compensation. Even if they did, all their personal possessions were gone. Yet, what mattered to them in that moment, that moment of crisis when it really was *life* or *death*, when the flood waters might continue to rise, when they had no food or clean water, when another night of cold and wet was approaching... what mattered was each other, their loved ones, furry or otherwise.

It was humbling. And it made me think about who would be that person on the roof with me. I couldn't even begin to visualize any of the Schuberts in that situation, but my mom would be a trooper.

As for Remy, I'd pick him in a crisis any day. He worked tirelessly, was positive and reassuring. He never freaked out, whether we got into a spot of rushing water or saw a downed powerline snapping and sparking, but always seemed to know what to do. Personally, I had no clue. I'd been in exactly one boat in my life—a ferry—and I was a fish out of water. Or maybe a deer *on* the water. Or whatever.

Besides steadying me, Remy was a touchstone for everyone who got into our boat. It was like they took one look at him and knew they were in good hands, that they could relax. He and I couldn't talk much because, even when we didn't have

passengers, the boat's motor was too loud. But I took over the tiller so he could help the passengers aboard. And, after the first few stops, we operated seamlessly, as if we'd always been a team.

The crew at the Sheraton handed us a couple of sandwiches at one point, and we ate them as we steered the boat away again. Remy didn't have to ask, and I didn't have to say. As long as there were people who needed to be picked up, we would keep going.

Around 2 p.m., the rain stopped. The sky overhead brightened and the clouds faded from the color of coal to aluminum. The water level did not improve but instead rose, but only by an inch or so. And we kept going.

Dark came fast and by 7 p.m., it was too dark to see. We offloaded two young couples and an elderly man and his daughter at the Sheraton, and Remy asked the crew there if they had a spotlight we could use.

Susanna, the woman with the big blonde hair who'd given us our assignments that morning, stuck her head out. "Hey, boys! It's Remy and Joe, right? Ya'll come in and get warm, have somethin' to eat. The calvary's arrived. The National Guard's here and volunteers from a buncha fire departments. Atlanta. Little Rock. We even have a gang here from Ohio! So come on in, come on! I'll meet you in the hall."

I'd been ready to continue, but at Susanna's words, I suddenly felt the cold and the aching muscles. Remy and I looked at each other. I almost expected him to insist on



working, but he just said “Hallelujah!” and scrambled in the window. I followed with relief.

A food line was set up in a banquet room down the hall. As we walked in, the tantalizing smell of meat and baked goods made my mouth water. Susanna hustled us to the front of a line of evacuees. “Coming through! Coming through!” she said brightly. “These boys have been bustin’ tail on a motorboat all day.”

The people in line stepped back for us with nods and smiles. Remy picked up a tray with a sigh. “I don’t know about you, cher, but I could eat a horse.”

“God yes.”

There was hot turkey and gravy, baked potatoes, green beans, and white bread with pats of butter. We loaded up our trays and found an empty table. The banquet hall was full of evacuees and I’d glimpsed another huge room with cots down the hall. It was warm here, and dry, and the clean tables, chairs, and patterned carpet were a shock to the system after being out in the filthy water of the flood all day. It felt good. Really, really good. And it was nice to appreciate the simple things.

I put down my tray and took off my raincoat and parka. Both were soaked through, as were the clothes beneath. My skin felt cold and clammy and the sensation of sitting down in the chair in wet underwear wasn’t fun. But food was the priority.

I inhaled my meal in embarrassingly short order. Remy scarfed his too, licking his knife clean and then laughing at

himself about it. I grinned. Bellies full, we both sat back and looked at each other. I wondered if the smile on my face looked as tired and satisfied as Remy's.

But something in Remy's face changed as he gazed at me, studied me. His smile fell away and his blue eyes seemed to darken.

"What?" I asked.

He hesitated. Then said. "You look beautiful at this moment, Joe. Incandescent. I'm trying to figure out why. And, yeah, the storm-blown look is kinda smokin'."

"You mean the drowned rat look?"

He laughed. "Yeah, that. But that's not it. You look... happy. Relaxed. No, that's not right either. *Content* is a better word."

"Exhausted is even better," I joked, but I felt heat come into my face and knew he had to see me blush. His words warmed me from my cheekbones to my toes. He thought I looked beautiful?

The thing is, I knew exactly what he meant, because he looked beautiful. too, at this moment. Glowing. But then, Remy often did. Was that because he was *content*? At peace with himself? Maybe that's what was so goddamn attractive about him. Nigh on irresistible.

Who isn't attracted to that kind of warmth? *It can be a cold world out there, cher*, Remy's voice said in my head. So true. And I longed to warm myself in his light.

Christ. I was so tired and cold, I was starting to hallucinate in poetry.

“Anyway.” Remy stood up awkwardly. “I could use a hot shower. I’ll go see if someone will give us a ride back to the La Quinta.”

After he strode away, I took out my phone. My screen was full of texts from Allison and even a few from Simon. Each notification showed just the first line. They were all on the order of *where are you?*, *what’s your eta?*, *You HAVE to be here for the party!*, and *why aren’t you answering?!!*

I put my phone back in my pocket without opening up any of them. But even the brief glance reminded me of my real life—a life I had to get back to. I folded my arms on the table and thunked down my head. The turmoil inside me had sharp edges and was as impenetrable as the murky floodwaters.

What floated to the top first was *What am I doing here?*

Followed by, *Fuck, I want to keep doing it.*

“Joe?”

My head jerked up.

“Frank’s waiting outside,” Remy said. “He’s gonna drop us off.”

# Chapter Ten

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Remy insisted I shower first while he called his mom's caregiver and gave her a status update. I stood under the hot water until the clammy chill was gone and the last of the flood water smell had been washed away. Then put on my sleep shorts and T-shirt.

When I came out of the bathroom, Remy was sitting on his bed and staring at his phone.

"Everything okay?" I asked him.

He gave me a bleak look. "The end's real close, the nurse says. I talked to my mom. In case I don't make it."

"Oh, no. I'm so sorry."

"Me too."

I wanted to hug him but wasn't sure if he'd want that. Then he got up and disappeared into the bathroom. I heard the shower run.

It was my turn to face the music. I stood by the window and responded to my texts. I texted my mom first since that was the easy one. I told her we were holed up in Brunswick, Georgia, in a flood but were perfectly safe.

*The guy I'm traveling with, Remy, he worked with search and rescue before, so I went out with him today. We picked up people with a boat and took them to a shelter. It was sad. But*

---

I searched for the right word. The ones that came to mind were too sappy or too trite. I finally finished with *But I'm glad*

*I did it.* I sent it off.

*YOU did that?* she replied, followed by a whole line of exclamation points.

I wasn't sure her shock was flattering.

*Yeah. Remy is a good guy, Mom. You'd like him.*

I waited for a reply, but when none came, I went to the message thread with Allison. She'd described the brunch I'd missed and all the important people I didn't get to meet. She was frustrated and demanding in turn. I had a physical reaction to reading her texts, a feeling of cold dread along with an iron band pinching my stomach. For the first time in days, I needed an antacid.

It wasn't right to feel this way. I'd *chosen* this path. I closed my eyes and tried to think of the Allison I'd agreed to marry.

I remembered the day Simon invited me to his home for his and his wife's anniversary party. I'd been blown away by their estate. The huge, perfect green lawn, the sprawling Tudor mansion with a stone entryway, like something out of a movie. The interior was even more impressive with black and white marble tiles in the huge foyer and central hall. The classic library with walls of books, the formal dining room with a table for twenty and built-in display cases containing china, silver, and Asian figurines. Guests in formal attire. Catering help wandering around dressed in black and white as if to match the marble tiles.

I'd met Allison that night. She'd worn a slim-fitting black satin dress, her long brown hair smooth and perfectly straight, cut bluntly a few inches below her shoulders. Tasteful makeup on her pale face. Assessing brown eyes. She'd spoken to me early at the party and never left my side all evening. I figured her father had talked me up to her, that it was a setup. I didn't mind. Hell, I was flattered, eager to please. I did my best to impress the boss's daughter.

I thought of all the dates since then. Allison kept a very busy schedule. She always had three or four classes a day from Pilates to pottery, but we sometimes had dinner together someplace expensive where she had a salad or fish. On summer weekends, it was her country club for golf or tennis, and I enjoyed playing those with her though her friends at the clubs were rather full of themselves and even obnoxious at times. In the winters, it was skiing, which necessitated expensive weekends away for which her dad footed the bill. She and her parents attended endless cultural events too. The opera, symphony, Broadway. There was always an art gallery show going on. I'd seen Allison in a parade of glittering gowns and sophisticated dresses. She was rail thin and only 5'2", a delicate little thing. But she knew her own mind just as her mother did. Hated politics, loathed TV, ate like a bird, read the French philosophers, *adored* Europe, had no patience for anything that she didn't consider sophisticated. She'd exposed me to a lot of things I'd never been exposed to before, and I liked that.

Her mother once said to me at the dinner table, “I think it takes someone who comes from nothing to know what it means to work hard and appreciate the value of money. So many of my friends’ sons and daughters have no ambition whatsoever!”

That was meant to be a compliment. I think. Then again, it could have been a dig at Allison, who was absolutely not ambitious.

Did I *love* Allison? No. And I knew she didn’t love me. We suited each other. Before us was a path in which we both got what we wanted as long as I continued to excel at her dad’s company and was his heir apparent.

But wasn’t that what it meant to be an adult? Setting a plan for your life and working toward your goals consistently? What’s love got to do with it? As the song says.

I hadn’t believed in love. Infatuation maybe. Lust. But those were fleeting and not worth fucking up your life for. That’s what I’d thought. In the past 48 hours, Cupid had stuck out his tongue at me and given me a big ol’ kick in the balls.

My thumbs hovered over the keys, and I finally texted Allison.

*Sorry. Cell service spotty here. Still stuck in the flood in Brunswick GA. I should hear something in the morning about when we can get out. I’m sorry about all this, Allison, but there are lots of people less fortunate than me out there tonight. Thinking we should put plans on hold til I get home and we can discuss. Fill in your dad for me.*



SEND.

It was wishy-washy, and I knew it. I didn't have the guts to say what I really wanted to say. But maybe Allison would be so pissed off, she'd break up with me. The thought caused a surge of giddy hope but also panic. I shouldn't act impulsively. I'd worked too hard for this.

I was about to toss the phone down when I saw my mom had replied.

*Then maybe you should keep him, Joe.*

I blinked at the message, not sure what she meant. Then I read the last thing I'd sent to her.

*Yeah. Remy is a good guy, Mom. You'd like him.*

*Then maybe you should keep him, Joe.*

My heart did something hot and squishy, but I simultaneously marveled at her brass balls. She wasn't a fan of Allison but... really, Mom? I rolled my eyes and threw the phone on the coffee table.

The world was conspiring against me.

Remy came out of the bathroom in a cloud of steam, still toweling off his dark curls. He wore black sleep pants with red Santa hats on them—another gift from the kids at the Home? His chest was bare, skin downy soft. Slim but with defined arms and shoulders. My mouth went dry; my rational mind tumbled off into outer space.

He picked up his phone from the bed and laughed. “Jamie beat Kyle again at chess. I can just picture her victory dance. That girl is *fierce*.”

He texted something, presumably to the fierce girl, then dropped his phone and walked over to me. “All caught up with your texts?” he asked with a smile.

I stood up, took his face in both hands, and kissed him.

Apparently my defenses against temptation were exhausted too. Maybe the rides at Wild Adventures had unglued them and the hurricane had drowned them because I just went for it. He froze for a moment, then I heard the shush of the towel dropping to the floor and he put his arms around my neck, warm damp skin against my T-shirt.

His mouth was hot and tasted sweetly of mint toothpaste. I swooned and fell down the rabbit hole. I never wanted to stop falling.

But Remy pushed back gently. I abruptly let him go.

His mouth was red, his blue eyes dark and confused. “Joe?”

“I’m sorry,” I muttered. I tried to take a step back, but I was already up against the love seat. I ran my hands through my hair. “That was... sorry.”

Remy’s throat bobbed as he swallowed. “I don’t— you’re engaged. To a woman.”

”*About* to be engaged,” I clarified. But that sounded so self-serving and slimy. I closed my eyes and shook my head.

“What a stupid thing to say. And yeah, to a woman. I’m bi. I’ve dated men and women before. Not that it matters. Shit.”

“It matters,” Remy said softly.

I opened my eyes to look at him. “I’m sorry.”

A smile played around Remy’s mouth. “It’s okay, Joe. I get it. After an experience like we had today, you need to feel alive. To feel a connection. It’s normal.”

I shook my head again. “No, that’s not it. I really like you, Remy. I like everything about you. And it confuses the hell out of me, if you want to know the truth. This wasn’t supposed to happen. You. You weren’t supposed to happen to me.”

Remy gazed at me seriously for a long moment. Then he put a warm hand on my cheek. “I really like you too, Joe. I guess this is one of those star-crossed lover things. Non? Ships in the night.” He gave a little laugh, but it was not a happy sound. “Just my luck to meet someone like you, and you’re already taken.”

All I could think was: *God, I don’t want to be ships that pass in the night.*

Remy’s gaze dropped to my lips, and I noticed the pink flush on his throat. It was so warm in the room, and we were standing so close.

“I think...” he said softly. “...since we only have this one night, maybe we should make the most of it. Like you said, you’re not engaged yet.” He met my gaze, his blue eyes grave. “I’ll never forget you, Joe.”

“I’ll never forget you.” I felt it in my soul.

Remy cocked his head and smiled. “And I did tell you—I’m no saint.”

“Remy—”

This time, he kissed me.

Somewhere inside me, in a heretofore unused corner of my heart, sadness bloomed. Because Remy felt so exquisite in my arms, because his kiss was so sweet, because he was Remy. And because he said it was just one night, and I knew it had to be, and I didn’t want to know it.

But that pain was an undercurrent that made the pleasure that much sweeter. It had been a few years since I’d been with a male lover, and it had never, ever felt like this. His body was perfect to me, its firmness, its slender contours, perked peach nipples, his generous hardness. I wanted to cry, it felt so sweet. I wanted to ravish him until I expired from pleasure.

We made it to the bed. I pushed him down and crawled on top of him, exploring the soft places of his neck, the sensitivity of his ears, the moans I could elicit when I licked his nipples. I learned the way his eyes turned so dark navy with passion they were nearly black. I discovered the pink patterns lust made on his skin. I tested his heft and girth against my own, then with my hand, then with my mouth. His pre-cum tasted like oysters.

“Joe,” he said, “what are you doing to me?”

*I’m loving you*, I thought. And the pain in my heart sang again. I kissed him deeply and let him roll me over so his

weight would force any trace of sadness away.

We touched each other everywhere, tasted each other everywhere, but the mechanics blurred together and didn't matter. What mattered was Remy's skin on mine. What mattered was the endless depth of his eyes, the way he was completely present, completely open. What mattered was the way I felt so sublimely aware of everything—every breath, every goose bump, every throb. What mattered was that it not end. Not ever.

But it had to and it did. We lay face-to-face with my hand wrapped around us both and his hand over mine. I was kissing Remy, but when I heard his moan and felt him jerk in my hand I had to pull back to watch him. The universe was in his eyes as he came and my name was on his lips. I came too, couldn't stop myself, but when the pleasure finally ebbed, the pain was waiting for me.

It was over. Ships in the night.

I saw it in Remy's eyes too. He gave me another quick peck, mumbled something about cleaning up, rose, and went into the bathroom. He stayed there for a long time.

I wiped myself down, tossed the tissues, and lay on my back, arms behind my head.

*There'll be more time*, I told myself. Hadn't I just been out in the flood waters a couple of hours ago? It would take a long time for them to recede. We'd be stuck here for another day at least, probably two. Tomorrow was Christmas Eve. We'd spend the day together. And Christmas day, too, maybe. Two

days in this room with Remy might be hiding from the world, and it might only make things harder in the long run. But right now, it was all I wanted in the world.

*All I want for Christmas is to stay here. Please, Santa.*

I snorted at my own stupidity.

Remy came back to bed. He lay facing me, head on his hand. “Tired?” he asked.

Was his face guarded? Maybe a little.

“It’s still early.” I glanced at my watch. It wasn’t even eight o’clock.

“We could watch a movie,” Remy said hopefully.

I smiled. “Yeah? What kind of movies do you like?”

“All sorts.” He frowned. “Only we’re not supposed to watch TV.”

“Laptops are okay, right? I have movies on my laptop.”

“You do?” He looked delighted.

“Yeah. I download them to watch when I travel. Allison doesn’t like movies.” I didn’t add that she thought they were a waste of time. She had no patience for any activity that involved sitting at home.

Remy sat up eagerly. “What do you have?”

I winced, feeling embarrassed. “Er—all I have right now is a set of Universal monster movies from the 30s and 40s. I got it in October for Halloween, and I haven’t watched them all yet, so I haven’t deleted—”

“Oh, cher!” Remy did a happy little leap. “You know the key to my heart!”

“You like those?” I asked doubtfully.

“Horror and sci-fi from the 30s, 40s, and 50s are my absolute favorites. I love the old black-and-white stuff.”

Damn it. The world was definitely conspiring against me. How the fuck could he be so perfect? I said nothing as I got up, put on my sleep shorts, and grabbed the laptop. We settled down sitting against the headboard with my laptop spread across his knee and mine and a bag of pretzels in hand.

It was even better than Wild Adventures.

# Chapter Eleven

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## **D** *ecember 24*

The next morning, we went down to the third floor conference room seeking coffee and breakfast. Bagels, cream cheese, fruit, toast, and lots of dark brew awaited us. We'd just made up plates and sat down when Ellen bustled in. She had signs in her hands and she stuck one to the door.

“Great news, everyone! Because it’s Christmas, Fire Chief Menendez has worked with FEMA to organize transportation out of the flood zone. Starting at 10 o’clock, there’ll be boats leaving from here. They’re gonna take you to buses, and those’ll take you to Atlanta where you can pick up flights, Amtrak, or Greyhound. Isn’t that wonderful news? It’s a Christmas miracle!” She was so happy.

Happiness... was not my first emotion. I couldn’t look at Remy. I stared down at my bagel.

“This is great, Joe!” Remy enthused. “Maybe you’ll get home for your Christmas Eve party after all. Or at least for Christmas.”

I glanced up at him. Maybe he was just putting a brave face on things, the way he always did. But he seemed to mean it.

“I was hoping we’d have a few more days,” I croaked.

His smile fell and he started to spread jam on a bagel. “That would have been sweet, cher.”

I almost suggested we ignore the offer of an escape route. After all, Simon and Allison would never know I’d had that option.

That would be a crappy thing to do to Allison. But so much had happened in the past few days. All the things I thought I knew for certain had been knocked askew. If it took a few more days to get my head straight, that would be worth it, in the long run.

I was about to open my mouth to suggest it when Remy suddenly took out his phone. “I need to call my mom’s caregiver and let her know.” He got up and left the room.

Crap. Right. This wasn’t just about me. Damn, I could be a myopic jerk. Remy had to get to New York, like yesterday.

But maybe while we were both in New York we could see each other. Besides, the journey itself would take time. We were still in freaking Georgia. Flights would be impossible between it being Christmas Eve day and the hurricane evacuations. Wouldn’t they?

I took out my phone to check. Yes, getting a flight out of Atlanta today was impossible. But the Amtrak option looked intriguing. The train from Atlanta to New York took over 18 hours, and it didn’t leave until midnight tonight. That would give Remy and me the rest of today and most of tomorrow on the train. I smiled. I’d always wanted to travel by rail. If I could get a sleeper car... but no. The sleeper cars were sold out. I went ahead and booked us two economy tickets. Maybe we could find somewhere on the train to get a little privacy.

The tightness in my chest eased. It wasn’t over yet. We had time.

Remy came back to the table. He looked pale and his usual smile was miles away. I thought maybe he was upset about leaving too.

“Hey. I checked out our options. There are no flights available because it’s Christmas, but I got us two tickets on Amtrak. The train leaves tonight at midnight, and the trip takes 18 hours. Could be fun.”

Remy dredged up a half-hearted smile. “Thanks, Joe.” He appeared distracted.

“Is everything okay? With your mom?”

Remy pushed his plate away. “No. But that’s life, cher. I’m gonna go pack.”

He left the table. I considered following him, but maybe he needed a few minutes alone. Was he upset about his mom? Or was it the sudden reality of our journey’s end coming so soon? Or maybe something about last night was freaking him out.

Maybe it had affected him as much as it had affected me.

I ate my bagel slowly and hoped I could cheer him up once we were on the train.

What followed breakfast was hectic. Remy was done packing by the time I got up to the room. He said the green suitcase was too big to take on a boat, so he stuffed the few items he couldn’t live without in his satchel. He offered to go check on the boat while I packed. Within the hour, we were pulling away from La Quinta Inn in a green National Guard boat along with four other guests.

The day was sunny and cold. The blue sky was absolutely clear and the sunlight glittered on the acres of dirty water. The flood waters hadn't receded one bit as far as I could tell. And yet, the holiday spirit was bright. The two-man National Guard crew, a man and a woman, both in their twenties, wished us a merry Christmas as we got onboard.

"We're gonna get ya'll home to your families for Christmas," the National Guardsman assured us.

"And Santa stopped by to drop off some treats," said the woman. She handed around mylar bags with holly printed on them. Inside were cookies, a candy cane, and a large square of chocolate fudge.

Remy smiled when he opened his bag. "Look, Joe. These are homemade. The fudge too." He pulled out a large snickerdoodle. "Someone took the time to make these for flood victims. Isn't that a sweet thought?"

"Literally." I pictured my own mom in the kitchen baking cookies as she always did at Christmas. Now that would be something nice to go home to.

I started to take a bite of the fudge when Remy put a hand on my arm, his face concerned. "You sure you aren't addicted to sugar, cher? I can eat that for you if it'll help."

The call back to one of our first conversations made me laugh. "You can try, Squirt." I clutched my bag harder and popped the fudge into my mouth.

He laughed and ate his snickerdoodle. “Don’t worry, Joe. I know a good 12-step program I can recommend.”

I was relieved to see him in a lighter mood, and on impulse, I took his hand. He gave me a warm smile and squeezed back. I didn’t let go.

The transport boat headed inland beyond the area where we’d been working yesterday, and we saw devastation to farms, bridges, homes. I-95 was absolutely buried. It was shocking, even though it shouldn’t be by now. So tragic. We were dropped off in an area with only a few inches of standing water. There were two big Greyhound buses waiting to take evacuees to Atlanta. Remy and I got seats, and within minutes, we were on the road along with other bedraggled-looking folks.

It was a friendly group. After passing around merry Christmases, people talked about holiday plans. It seemed everyone was traveling home to points East, North or South.

“I’ve never been involved with anything that called out the National Guard,” said a middle-aged woman. “It’s nice to see how organized they are.”

“This is the safest I’ve felt in three days,” said an older man. “God bless our troops.”

“And those kids had to abandon their own Christmas to help out,” said a white-haired lady.

I had that same sensation I’d had when we’d been rescuing families from rooftops the day before. I suppose a crisis can

bring out the worst in people or the best in people. I was frankly surprised that, in fact, it wasn't like *Lord of The Flies* but more like an idyllic *Star Trek* episode. Maybe people weren't so bad after all.

It was a long drive to Atlanta—about five hours. We slept through most of it, Remy's head on my shoulder. The first stop when we arrived was the Amtrak station and we got out, still holding hands.

When we got into the terminal, I pulled up the reservation on my phone. "I don't think we need to get the tickets printed. I have the bar code on here. But the train doesn't leave 'til midnight and it's 4 p.m. Maybe we could go walk around downtown a bit and see the Christmas lights."

But Remy was looking away, his expression tense. "Can you wait here a minute, Joe? I need to go check on something at the ticket counter."

"I have your ticket."

"I know. I'll be right back."

He took off across the lobby, head down. Maybe he was going to look into a return trip from New York? I sat on a bench where I could see him when he got back. Then I got distracted by my phone. My mom had sent me a quote. *I saw this today and thought of you. Be safe!! "They say you need to travel with someone to know what they're really like. I say make it a terrible trip. Lost luggage, stolen credit cards, canceled reservations, angry locals, food poisoning... Then you'll really see your travel companion's true nature."*

I read it a few times. It was true. Remy had been the best companion I could hope for in this situation. But part of me wondered if Mom was still pushing an agenda. Did she really dislike Allison that much that she was rooting for a total stranger?

No, I was being paranoid. I sent her an update on my plans. Then I started to forward my Amtrak reservation to Allison. Hesitated.

Was that wise? The moment Allison knew I was back in New York, I'd be swept up in her maelstrom again. The thought was depressing. It would be nice just to have one quiet night at my apartment first.

Besides, the train would get in to Grand Central around 5:30 p.m. on Christmas Day. She'd be busy, and I didn't want to interrupt her family's holiday.

I decided not to tell her and put the phone away. My stomach gave an angry pang. I patted my pockets for my antacids and brought out a new unopened roll. It struck me that I'd bought this at a gas station before we'd gone to Wild Adventures, and I'd never opened it. Hadn't needed it, not once. It had been two days and those two days were filled with the stress of being in a flood and doing search and rescue. But my stomach hadn't hurt at all.

I popped a tablet, not willing to pursue that line of thought. There'd be time at the end of the train journey to do some deep thinking. Right now, I just wanted to go out and see the lights in downtown Atlanta with Remy.

He reemerged from the crowd, satchel slung over his shoulder, face slack. He looked around where we'd been standing, and I called his name and waved. Something bleak crossed over his face as he walked toward me.

“What’s up?” I asked.

He didn’t sit down but stood in front of me, eyes downcast. “I decided not to go to New York, Joe.”

“What?”

He raised his eyes and met my gaze. Those expressive blue orbs were filled with pain. “When I called my mom’s caregiver this morning, she said my mom passed last night.”

“Oh my God.” I stood up and hugged him. “I’m so sorry.” He was stiff in my arms. After a moment, I let go. “Are you okay?”

He shook his head. “Not really. I told you we weren’t close, but I guess I’d been counting on seeing her before... you know.” He sighed. “Guess it wasn’t meant to be. At least I got to talk to her last night. I told her I forgave her. Told her I loved her. So.” His voice choked off, and he swallowed hard and nodded. “I thought about going up there anyway, but she’s got a friend she named executor of her will. I don’t think there’s any point. If they hold a funeral, I’ll go up for that.”

“I’m so sorry we couldn’t get there in time.”

“It’s okay, Joe. You did everything you could. And I’m grateful to you. I really am.”



Grateful? That word felt wrong, as if everything we'd been through was only worth gratitude?

“Anyway.” Remy straightened up. “I decided to go home.”

I swear my heart stopped beating. “You mean... back to Homestead?” The words came out funny. My lips were numb.

“No. St. Francisville, where I grew up.” He looked away. “These past few days, especially with the search and rescue, made me think about my dad. I haven't been the best communicator lately. I need to go home and spend some time with him for real.”

“Oh.”

I should say that sounded like a good idea, that Remy should absolutely reconnect with his dad. From what I'd heard of him, he was a good guy. But I couldn't quite find the words.

“Anyway, Joe...” Remy took a step closer to me and put a hand on my arm. “This is for the best, non? You have your life to get back to, and I know this is a complication you don't need.”

“No, I—” my voice cracked. “I thought we'd have more time.”

Remy shrugged. “Sometimes we have forever. And sometimes we only get one night. You need what you need. Security. Stability. Your Allison will give that to you. As for me, I need someone I can count on to be there for me, always.”

I shook my head, totally in denial. “Wait. I’m not ready for this to be over. Maybe....” But I didn’t know how to finish that sentence that wasn’t horribly selfish.

Remy smiled. “What’s that saying? We’ll always have Paris.”

“No. Remy—”

“My train’s leaving now, cher. I have to go.” He put a hand on my neck and kissed me fiercely. When he pulled away, his eyes were full of tears. “Goodbye, Joe. And Merry Christmas.”

Then he was gone.

# Chapter Twelve

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I sat on a bench in the Amtrak terminal and tried to get my shit together. I failed.

In the snap of a finger, Remy Guidry was out of my life, probably forever. He'd blown in with Hurricane Jack and had left when the blue sky returned. There was something metaphorical about that, but I was too upset to pin it down. All I knew was that I'd take Jack back in a heartbeat if it meant Remy came with it.

I went to a coffee stand, feeling achingly alone. Paid for a double latte, still alone, and took it to a chair next to a window. I stared out at the cool sunny day, and the holiday decorations. The station had multicolored fairy lights up and big wreaths and bows were on every street lamp. Some of the taxis even had decorations in the windows—including a “Happy Hanukkah” and Kwanzaa sign.

It had to end sooner or later, like Remy said. What did I expect him to do? I'd told him as soon as I met him I was about to be engaged. In fact—I checked my watch—if not for the hurricane, at this very moment I'd be dressing in a tux for the Schuberts' big holiday party where my engagement to Allison Schubert would have been announced.

Remy said all he wanted was someone who would truly be there for him. Unlike his mom. Unlike, apparently, his dad, who had always been busy with other things. And here I was messing around with him while I was about to get married to someone else. I was a toad.

Only... we'd only just met two days ago. How was I to know there was a Remy out in the world or that he'd come along just when I had my life all set?

I sat there sipping my coffee and nudging around the huge hole in my heart the way you feel with the tip of your tongue around a sore tooth—finding the edges and probing for the level of pain.

I felt *horrible*. Empty. Despairing. Scared. Bewildered. Conflicted didn't begin to cover it.

My phone dinged. I looked at it hoping it was Remy. But no, it was a text from Allison.

*I'm still pissed you won't be at the party tonight. Or at Christmas brunch. We made SO many special arrangements. They're talking about evacuations online. Does that mean you're finally on your way? God, I hope so. We have the Monthaven dinner tomorrow night. PLEASE let me know.*

I read the message a few times. Talk about cognitive dissonance. The thought of crashing back into that world at the Monthaven party was unreal.

*That's what you need, Joe. Security. Stability.*

Was Remy right? I could slip back into the Schuberts' world and never see him again. It was the right thing to do, strategically. I'd worked hard to become Joe Blankenship, the ambitious, hard-working young businessman with a supernova future. I'd worked so diligently creating that guy, I'd forgotten who the real me was. I'd forgotten about amusement

parks, and watching old movies with someone who loved them too, about football games on Christmas Day with my mom, and about how good it felt to hold someone you really wanted.

But that's how it was done, wasn't it? *Fake it 'til you make it.* And then one day you wake up, and you *are* that person you've pretended to be. The ruts of your life are so deeply grooved by then, there's no question of turning off the path.

Only... if that was the life I truly wanted, why had I fallen for Remy so hard? And why did it hurt so badly now that he was gone?

That wound inside me throbbed and ached so badly I couldn't stand it. I took out my phone and punched one of my contacts.

"Mom?" I said, my voice shaky. "I need to talk."

\* \* \*

"Hey, Joe," she said. "Where are you?"

"I don't want to move to Florida!" I croaked out. "And I don't want to go back to med school, and get in debt, and end up getting screwed by a healthcare system in disarray!"

"What on Earth are you talking about, Joe? Who says you have to move to Florida or go back to— Oh." My mother's voice went up in surprise. "This is about the man you're traveling with, isn't it? What's his name?"

"Remy Guidry." Saying his name squeezed a hand around my heart. "And he's a *social worker.*"

“Oh, Joe.” Mom sounded fond and slightly amused. I resented that amusement. “It sounds to me like you’ve had quite a shakeup. I had a funny feeling when you texted last night. Moms know these things.”

I scoffed. “A shakeup? More like a nuclear detonation. He’s such a good person, Mom. Kind and funny and smart. I’ve finally met someone who makes me feel... I don’t know, like you’re supposed to feel. Lightning bolts included. Only I have an engagement party to get to.” I gave a dark little laugh. “Do I have good timing or what?”

“Maybe you do, Joe,” Mom said seriously. “Maybe this will prevent you from making a huge mistake.”

I blinked. I knew Mom wasn’t a fan of the Schuberts, but she’d never put it quite so strongly before.

“Where is he now? This Remy?” she asked.

I clutched the phone harder. “He took a train to Louisiana to see his dad. He ended up not needing to go to New York after all. His mom passed last night.”

Mom gasped. “Oh, the poor thing! And you let him go off on his own when he just got hit with that news? Shame on you, Joe.”

“He didn’t give me a chance to think. He just bought a ticket and left.” My voice broke. “He’s gone. And Allison is expecting me to get to New York ASAP. What am I going to do?”

“Oh honey. Just take a breath, Joe. This isn’t a situation that needs to be resolved in the next hour.”

“Yes it is!”

“No, it’s not,” she replied firmly. “There’s time to reflect and get it right. This is too important to rush. If you need to stay in Atlanta for a night to get some perspective, it won’t be the end of the world.”

I sighed. Maybe she was right. I didn’t *have* to get on that midnight train. And that did help a little.

“Now tell me what’s going on in that head of yours... you say you don’t want to go back to medical school. What has that got to do with Remy? Is that something he would expect?”

“No.”

“But if you break up with Allison, you’ll have to leave Schubert’s. Is that what you mean?”

“Of course I’d have to leave. Allison will not take it well, and Simon gives Allison whatever she wants.”

“Okay. But, Joe, you can’t commit to something as important as marriage just because it will be temporarily inconvenient to break it off. I’m sure you can get another job, with a different medical supply place or something totally new. You’re young, you’re bright, you’re personable... you have lots of options, honey.”

“Maybe,” I allowed.



“You say you don’t want to go back to medical school but, honey, I think maybe part of you does. You know, when you were little, your Aunt Louise sent you a play medical set, and you loved that thing. You used that stethoscope on every doll in the neighborhood.”

“I did?” I had zero memory of that.

“Yes, Joe. You always said you wanted to be a doctor. If you decide to go back to that, at any point, you’ll do great. You can work out the money. But either way, that’s not part of this decision, is it? So what are you really afraid of?”

What was I really afraid of? It wasn’t a hard question. I swallowed a hot lump in my throat. “I don’t want to struggle and suffer the way you did. I need to be able to take care of myself, because no one else is going to do it. And I need to be able to take care of you, too, someday. You can’t work forever.”

She was quiet for a beat. “I know it was tough on you growing up without a father. And I know I couldn’t give you everything you wanted. But we did okay, didn’t we? We never starved.”

I gave a bitter laugh. “What are you talking about? I heard you cry yourself to sleep on many a night.”

She gasped. “You heard that?”

“Of course I heard it. I was just a little kid. I didn’t want you to be so sad, and there was nothing I could do about it. I don’t

ever want to be that miserable. Or have someone I love be that unhappy and depressed. I can't live like that."

"Joe," she whispered. "I'm so sorry you felt that burden as a little boy. But I wasn't crying because we didn't have money."

I was so surprised that my tears of frustration dried up immediately. "You weren't?"

She sighed. "No. I guess it was loneliness. Regret. I was upset when your dad remarried. I felt guilty for not being able to give you a father who was there for you. And I was... this is embarrassing, but I spent a lot of years mooning over a boy I once loved."

That was new. "Really? What boy?"

She made a disgruntled sound. "My high school sweetheart. He asked me to marry him, but I got accepted to college and I didn't want to give up a potential career for a *man*. So I went off and we grew apart and he married someone else, had a nice family. I used to follow him on Facebook and torture myself with all the pictures he posted when I was feeling low. During those years when you were young, I had a lot of *what-ifs*, Joe. That's no way to live, trust me."

All these years, and I'd gotten it totally wrong. Wow. That was a head trip.

"Listen, sweetheart, you've always worked hard, and I admire you so much for that. But money isn't everything. If you don't *truly* love Allison, with your whole being, don't do

it, Joe. Have a little faith in yourself. You don't need to sell your heart and soul for your place in the world."

Didn't I? Maybe not for *a* place in the world. But I'd wanted more. I'd wanted, not just to get by, but to grab the brass ring. I'd wanted to have *so much* that no one and no amount of hardship could take it all away. That had been just, like a week ago! Funny that I couldn't find that desire inside me anymore.

Maybe the flood had swept it away. Or maybe I'd met a light that had warmed the most cynical and fearful places inside me without me even knowing it was happening. Without Remy, all the money in the world would be cold comfort. It would be like sitting down to a fancy banquet and realizing I couldn't taste a thing.

The truth was, Remy Guidry was a thousand times more important than any of that.

I covered my eyes with my hand. "Mom," I whispered.

"Don't let him go, Joe. Follow your heart."

# Chapter Thirteen

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I waited anxiously in the New Orleans Amtrak station. The announcement came on— *The Crescent train from Atlanta, Birmingham, Tuscaloosa, and Hattiesburg now arriving on Platform one.*

A crowd waited anxiously for this Christmas Eve train, despite the late hour. Some bore flowers or brightly-colored packages. One little girl who was there with her mother wore an adorable Mrs. Claus costume. We all crowded out onto the platform at the announcement. Moments later, the train pulled in and passengers began to disembark from all the cars on the track. Greetings were shouted, hugging commenced, and the holiday spirit was thicker than the scent of roasted chestnuts coming from an opportunistic cart vendor.

I clenched my fists as I scanned the crowd. What if I'd guessed wrong, and he'd gotten off in Slidell? But, no. I saw a head of curly dark hair descend the steps of a car. I walked toward him, my heart thumping hard.

He almost walked past me, his blue eyes lost in thought.

“Remy?”

He turned and saw me. His face lit up with surprise, then confusion. “Joe?”

I swallowed hard. “Hey. Bet you’re wondering what I’m doing here.”

“Joe!” He grabbed me in a full-body embrace and I held him tight. So tight. I was relieved that he gripped me back just as strongly. “I’m so glad to see you! It hurt leaving you in

Atlanta, cher. I... I thought I was doing the right thing, but it about killed me.”

“Oh God. Me too.”

Remy pulled away. “But how did you get here? How did you even know where I’d be?”

“There was only one train out of Atlanta that went all the way to Louisiana. I rented a car and took a chance I’d find you once I got here.”

“You rented another car?” His eyes sparked with laughter.

I chuckled. “Yup. A real one. It went all the way up to seventy-five.”

Remy gasped. “You speedster!”

“Right? Still took me over six hours. But I had plenty of time to think, so that was okay.”

“Oh, Joe. I can’t believe you followed me. I thought I’d never see you again.” His blue eyes brimmed with hope—and doubt. “But what about... what about your girlfriend? And your engagement?”

I felt a pang in my gut. “I called Allison on the way. I broke it off.” Yeah, that had not been a fun phone call. In fact, between Allison telling me she hated me and informing me that I was making a huge mistake, it had pretty much been the worst of my life.

“Oh, poor thing,” Remy said sympathetically.

“I know. I feel awful about it. But I truly believe Allison and I both avoided a train wreck in the long run.”

Remy glanced uneasily at the passenger car behind us. “After the past few days, maybe you shouldn’t use phrases like *train wreck*.”

I laughed. “Don’t worry. I can drive to your dad’s place in my car.”

“And not go anywhere for at least a week,” Remy pressed.

“Sounds perfect.”

I took his face in my hand and stared into those gorgeous eyes. I leaned in to kiss him, but he pulled back slightly, his expression wary. “Are you very sure, Joe? We only just met. I don’t want to be the obstacle that threw you off course in your life. I don’t want you to regret this. I only want the best for you, truly.”

I sighed. This was not the place to describe every insight I’d had on the long drive alone, or the way in which my heart told me, without question, it was Remy I needed. So I focused on logistics. “I don’t know how this is going to work, with me in New York and you in Homestead. But what I do know, with everything in me, is that I want to try. I don’t want to be ships that pass in the night, Remy. And I don’t want to always have Paris.”

He let out a sound that was half-laugh and half-cry. “No?”

“Nope. I want today, and tomorrow, and the day after that, and the day after that.”

He threw his arms around my neck and hugged me again. “I want that too, so much. Merry Christmas, Joe.”

“Merry Christmas, cher.”



# Epilogue

## **C**hristmas Day, One Year Later *St Francisville*

The sunlight coming in through the windows was bright and warm as honey. In fact, the day was so warm, it might have been summer. But the twinkling Christmas tree, cups of hot cocoa, and, most importantly, Remy in a red Santa hat, conjured up the holiday spirit well enough for any man. Or, in this case, well enough for any man, his mother, his boyfriend, and his boyfriend's father.

Remy checked the tag on the silver-wrapped gift in his hand. "This one is for Carol from Joe and me." He handed the package to Mom who was ensconced in a plaid recliner.

"Thank you, pumpkin." She held out her cheek for a kiss.

He happily gave her one. "Merry Christmas, Mama."

"Oh, goodness, what can it be?" Mom's face flushed prettily as she carefully worked open the wrapping paper so it could be saved.

It had only occurred to me in the past twenty-four hours that my mother *was* pretty. I'd known it as a kid, but I'd forgotten. When she arrived at the New Orleans airport yesterday morning, she'd stepped out of baggage claim like a shiny Christmas bauble in her red wool coat, her smiling face, and her blonde hair coiffed with a new cut and color. Remy's dad, Duc, had stumbled over his greetings and hurried to take her bag.

Since then, the two of them had danced around each other less like prospective in-laws and more like strangers do when they're attracted to one another and don't know how to handle it. I was glad they were getting along, but if they actually got together, it might be weird? Though I was so happy, it was impossible to begrudge anyone else their happiness.

“Oh, I love it!” Mom held up a white ball ornament hand-painted with a wreath and letters that read “St. Francisville 2023”.

“Just something for your tree,” I said. “That’s not your real present.”

“My real present is you two.” Mom got up and hugged me then Remy. “And, of course, Duc’s gracious hospitality, and a chance to see St. Francisville and New Orleans at Christmastime. What a treat!”

Duc, who was a taller, bulkier version of Remy with the same dark curly hair and blue eyes, shyly muttered something about being blessed to have us here and went to fetch another plate of cookies for the coffee table.

He was, as I’d expected from Remy’s description, a good guy, and he’d welcomed me without hesitation despite the fact that he was a sometimes preacher. It seemed everything was more laidback in Cajun country.

After Remy finished passing out presents, and we’d all opened our gifts, we went out for a walking tour in the sunshine. Duc had given tours of St Francisville for years, and he swept into a practiced and confident spiel. He looked the

part too in a black suit jacket over a white T-shirt, and a black top hat.

Funny, I'd pictured St. Francisville as an unremarkable small town in my head, sort of like the town I grew up in. But nothing could be further from the truth. Duc's little house was in an ordinary neighborhood on the edge of town, but downtown St Francisville was a historic district, filled with gorgeous old homes and shops. Duc gave us the lowdown on some of the town's more colorful residents and walked us past the buildings that were best-dressed for the holidays. We even ran into a bus tour group from New Orleans. We'd be returning the favor tomorrow, when we all went into the city for the day.

It felt great to walk with Remy on one side, holding my hand, and my mom's arm linked through mine on the other.

"Tell me about your class schedule," Mom said, as we followed Duc down the sidewalk.

"It's not bad this first quarter. I have classes three mornings a week from eight 'til noon. Fortunately, Mason is allowing me a flexible schedule, so I won't have to cut my work hours." Or my paycheck. Big win.

"And you won't be busy at all." Remy laughed. He leaned forward to look across me at my mom. "There's such a shortage of doctors right now, Mason is happy to help Joe get his MD. As long as he gives them the first dibs for his internship. Right, Joe?"

"Boris has been great about it," I agreed.

Last New Year's, after I'd found myself out of a job, less one fiancée, and in a stupidly expensive Manhattan studio apartment barely bigger than a coffin, I'd sent out dozens of resumes. It was frightening being out of work. Simon, indeed, did not want to know my name after Allison and I broke up, and I couldn't blame him.

Fortunately, I wasn't unemployed for long. I'd emailed Boris Evans, CEO of Mason, to thank him for introducing me to Remy and to ask him to pass along any contacts in Florida looking to hire. It turned out he'd been planning to find a purchasing manager himself, and he offered me the job.

It was a good fit. Because I'd worked on the other side of the table, I knew what medical supplies should reasonably cost and what items had the bigger markups, so I was able to make good deals for Mason. Also, it allowed me to work closely with the hospitals under Mason's umbrella and learn the inside scoop on each one—not to mention make contacts. That'd be helpful once I got my MD.

“And your classes aren't too far a commute?” Mom asked.

I shook my head. “Not at all. University of Miami is right in downtown, so it's only about a half-hour drive. And close to work.”

“Good.”

“It's a great school,” Remy put in. “And a nice campus.”

I just smiled. When I was an undergrad, I'd been so myopic. I'd only applied to the top med schools in the nation—

Harvard, John Hopkins, Stanford. I was so driven because I was terrified of not making it. But Remy had taught me there was more to life than reaching for brass rings just because somebody had put them there. Being able to keep a paying job with a boss I liked at Mason, having reasonable tuition, and Remy close by, all made the Miller School of Medicine a dream come true. I was thrilled with it. I was thrilled with everything in my life.

The only ring I wanted these days was the one I would put on Remy Guidry's finger—someday soon. Making him mine was the smartest thing I'd ever done in my life.

“And you'll still be able to spend a few nights a week with Joe, even with the new schedule?” Mom asked Remy.

“Mom!” I hissed.

She gave me a look. “What? You're not teenagers, Joe. You're adults.”

Remy laughed. “Yes, ma'am. I get two nights a week off at High Hopes, so those are Joe nights. Or, as the kids call them, my booty-call nights.”

I gasped. “You let them call it that?”

Remy gave me a look. “Have you ever tried to talk kids out of anything? Anyhow, they're not wrong.” He squeezed my hand. “They say it with great fondness, cher.” To my mom, he said, “They love Joe. But I do get teased within an inch of my life. All the girls think he's hot.”

I grumbled. It was a conspiracy to get me to blush, I swear. And it was working.

Duc stopped at a gorgeous white Southern colonial with big columns and boughs of holly and berries. He told us a funny tale about the pirate who built it and the debutante he was in love with, adding well-worn jokes into his patter. He was such a character. He couldn't be any further from the father-in-law I'd almost had. Duc's house might be small and his clothes a little threadbare, but he was worth ten Simon Schuberts. Like his son, he was kind and had a good sense of humor.

It was warm in the sun, and as we moved away from the colonial, we passed a group of young carolers dressed in shorts and T-shirts. It didn't quite jibe with the idea of carolers in my head, but that was okay. I could get use to a Southern-style Christmas.

"Have you heard anything about Allison?" Mom asked, lowering her voice.

I grimaced. "A mutual friend told me she's engaged to Ben Hoffman, one of her tennis buddies from the country club. They're way better suited than we ever were."

"Oh, I am glad to hear that! I feel a little guilty that I never liked her," Mom admitted. "But Remy..." She sighed. "He's a gem."

"Thanks, Mama," Remy said, obviously having heard the whole thing.

I kissed his cheek. "She's not wrong, cher."

We reached a busier road and Duc stepped back to offer my mom his hand. “Allow me, Carol.”

“Thank you, kind sir,” Mom gave him her hand with a giggle.

*A giggle.*

Remy and I looked at each other. He shrugged. “Que sera, sera.”

“Old people flirting. There oughtta be a law,” I grumbled.

Remy laughed. “We’ll be old someday too. So I can’t flirt with you then?”

“I’ll make an exception just for you.”

On the other side of the intersection, Remy’s dad spoke up. “We’re almost back to Cafe Petra. We could stop in for a little something.”

“Sure,” I said.

“Sounds delightful,” said mom.

“Oh, and, boys—did you see the news about Hurricane Petunia?” Duc continued. “It’s downgraded to a one, but now they’re sayin’ it’ll brush by us here in Louisiana. Beaucoup rain, for sure. If you boys wanna play it safe, you might wanna leave Thursday mornin’.”

Remy and I looked at each other. His eyes sparkled with humor. “What do you think, cher? Should we leave early to avoid Petunia?”



Getting stranded again in a hurricane with Remy? “Are you kidding? I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

**THE END**

Dear Reader

Thank you for reading *PLANES, TRAINS, AND HURRICANES*. I love writing a Christmas story every year, and I'm so grateful that many of you look forward to them and have made them a part of your holiday season.

As always, I very much appreciate my readers posting recommendations for my books on social media and reviewing on Amazon and Goodreads. Thank you! Your reviews truly make a difference in drawing other readers and that helps me continue writing full time.

It is awesome to hear from you and to know that I made someone smile or sigh.

You can also visit my website and submit a contact form at: [www.eli-easton.com](http://www.eli-easton.com). I have first chapters up for all my books and some free stories too. And you can sign up for my newsletters to get emails about new releases and sales. (<https://www.subscribepage.com/ElisNewsletterSignup>)

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## About the Author



ELI EASTON has published over 50 gay romance books since 2013. Her stories always contain a lot of heart and aim to spread oodles of feels and a message of love. She won the Rainbow Award for “Best Gay Contemporary Romance” in 2013 for *The Mating of Michael* and in 2016 for *A Second Harvest*, as well as “Best Gay Paranormal Romance” in 2017 for *How to Save a Life*. She has had a number of #1 bestselling gay romances on Amazon. She currently lives on Puget Sound with her husband, two dogs, and lots of very large trees. When not writing and dreaming, her passion is hiking, quilting, and vegan cooking.

Her website is <http://www.elieston.com>.

Twitter is @EliEaston